



## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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# Ethical issues surrounding false information about coronavirus disease 2019

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**Dear Editor,**

For many countries, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has undoubtedly been the worst health crisis in recent decades. As of January 23, 2021, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has spread globally, infected more than 99,016,442 people, and caused more than 2,122,963 deaths worldwide.<sup>1</sup> This is the first time that humanity is witnessing the evolution of a global pandemic of such magnitude in real-time. As such, a staggering amount of information regarding COVID-19 is constantly circulating. The World Health Organization (WHO) expressed its fears that an pandemic of false news could generate confusion among the population, to the detriment of the dissemination of true information from official publications by health authorities based on the best available scientific knowledge.

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) recently launched a collaborative project on COVID-19-related fake news. As of March 27 2020, this project, which includes more than 70 fact-checking media organizations from around the world, has already debunked more than 1,500 fake news stories circulating in 61 countries.<sup>2</sup> False information about coronaviruses is so abundant

and widespread that journalists and fact-checkers can no longer meet the demand. The fact that this pandemic is marked by disinformation raises several ethical issues, including a crisis of confidence in institutions. False news affects the spread of the virus and is propagated by social media platforms, governments, and citizens

### *The confidence in public institutions*

In a health crisis, confidence in public institutions is critical, as the success of most measures depends on the citizens' cooperation and, by extension, their confidence that the decisions of the authorities are justified. According to some, the climate of mistrust in political institutions is both a cause and a consequence of the widespread dissemination of false news. Some experts believe that the loss of public confidence in political authorities and traditional media is partly responsible for the circulation of false information on social networks. Conversely, false news and rumors may well increase distrust of governments, health officials, and reliable sources of information. The social media environment is deteriorating to the point where speculation, rumors, and conspiracy theories now dominate and overshadow factual information.

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**Participation of co-authors:** A – Author of the concept and objectives of paper; B – collection of data; C – implementation of research; D – elaborate, analysis and interpretation of data; E – statistical analysis; F – preparation of a manuscript; G – working out the literature; H – obtaining funds

Received: 24.01.2021 | Accepted: 12.03.2021  
Publication date: June 2021

### *Public health and the common good*

Maintaining the quality of information is essential to achieve the common good, especially when it has potentially disastrous consequences. Therefore, it is paramount that we are provided with the best available health information and knowledge to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and to protect people who may be more vulnerable to the disease. In recent years, the effects of false news on the proper function of political and electoral processes and financial markets have been demonstrated. However, their impact on public health has yet to be studied in-depth. Recently, researchers have been interested in the impact of disinformation on public health in a pandemic situation. They modeled the dissemination mechanisms of norovirus (gastroenteritis), influenza, and monkeypox according to the speed at which true and false information spreads on the social network “Twitter”.<sup>3</sup> Their observation was unequivocal: false news accelerates the spread of infectious diseases. This research also showed that it is possible to fight back against false news, particularly in two ways: by disseminating quality information and providing education on disinformation in social media. These methods confer various responsibilities to social media platforms, public authorities, and citizens.

### *Ethical issues associated with media freedom during COVID-19*

COVID-19 made everyone to start conversation about media profession, opportunities and issues of rights two-fold times. Globally, COVID-19 gave opportunities to governments to exploit the existed laws for criticizing the transmission of “counterfeit news,” “misinformation,” and “false news” to actualize original news.

The violations tracked by the International Press Institute range from restrictions on access to information to physical attacks and charges against journalists.<sup>4</sup> Access to information for journalists has been restricted before, now it is near impossible to get a response from government officials for journalists who do not work for pro-government media, regardless of whether the questions concern COVID-19 or not. Media organisations already in a fragile financial state are hit by an economic crisis and journalists are working under increasingly precarious conditions.<sup>5</sup>

In India, columnists publishing articles on the COVID-19 are brought to police station and asked to clear their accounts, including Peerzada Ashiq, a senior writer (The Hindu, Kashmir), and Siddharth Varadarajan, editorial manager (The Wire, Uttar Pradesh).<sup>6</sup> Moreover journalists reporting about human rights mistreats associated with the pandemic, and police abuses or prison conditions, were endangered, terrified, attacked and charged. Officials from many countries stopped paper publication and circulation to control the COVID-19

transmission and at some places, media controllers had blocked sites or evacuated articles.

### *The responsibility of social media platforms*

False news and rumors are not new; however, their rapid expansion has been widely attributed to social media. Social media outlets have been accused of presenting information, regardless of its source and accuracy. According to some studies, social networks favor the circulation of fake news over verified information. In the face of mounting pressure and concerns from various organizations, governments, and users, the social media outlets Twitter and Facebook recently decided to take tougher measures and develop policies to ban and censor false information.<sup>7</sup> Twitter has adopted new measures to strengthen its content rules such that any information that may harm ethnic and national groups, go against the messages from official sources (such as health authorities), and contributes to the transmission of COVID-19 will be removed. This strengthening of content rules is not limited to regular citizens. It also applies to world leaders. Indeed, Twitter removed a video in which the President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who is known for his opposition to SARS-CoV-2 containment measures, praised the merits of treating COVID-19 with chloroquine, a drug for which the safety and effectiveness are presently not supported by the scientific community.<sup>8</sup> Facebook has also asked the Brazilian statesman to withdraw his video. ABC News telecasted a poll results of anxiety about the COVID-19 transmission is faster than the COVID-19, resulting in public panic worldwide, and social media is also a practical platform for the transmitting of information to the common people.<sup>9,10</sup>

Visual data is useful for people for easy and significant understanding most of the important information about COVID-19, just like Johns Hopkins University developed interactive data as per crowdsourcing information, which demonstrates data-driven visuals such as global cases map, critical data trends, and latest news about COVID-19 situation in all countries, enabling the citizens and scientists to access, understand and monitor the COVID-19 situation in 24 hours.<sup>11,12</sup> In China, WeChat (messenger app) introduced a location-based “Cases Nearby” feature as per confirmed cases surrounding the location by visual footprint for users by maintaining data privacy of all information and warns users to take safety measures in high-risk areas.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Prince of Wales Hospital (Hong Kong) developed an infographic on the principles of airway management was introduced in 17 languages and shared in many online social networking sites and apps, helpful to medical hospitals to consider easily understandable prevention and control measures to decrease the spread of COVID-19.<sup>14</sup>

### *The responsibility of the government*

Social media outlets must have procedures in place to remove news that were fake. However, they are unlikely to be able to remove all such contents, even when using artificial intelligence algorithms. The same fake news stories circulate the world and in different languages. In this age of social media, it is important for governments to ensure that quality information is released and to promote awareness of disinformation. Political figures and institutions have an important responsibility in this regard. An important concept to teach the public is cyber-citizenship, which involves the development of digital capabilities that improve the critical judgement of citizens concerning false information. To this end, the government of the United Kingdom launched an advertising campaign entitled “Don’t feed the beast” that presents a list of criteria, the source of information is credible, the authenticity of images and facts, and the identification of errors.<sup>15</sup> Widespread human rights law confines censoring sham explanation, and this is a problem because of general prosperity. States should preferably expand their assurance to ensure that they transmit potential, verification based and solid information.

### *An individual’s responsibilities*

A study from Iraq showed that social media has a potential effect on developing panic about the COVID-19 outbreak, with a significant negative impact on psychological well-being and facebook has been widely used social media network for developing panic.<sup>16</sup> There is a significant positive statistical correlation between self-reported social media use, the development of panic about the COVID-19 ( $R=0.8701$ ) and majority of participants aged 18-35 years are having psychological anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

In return, the citizens also have a responsibility for their use of social media. Our civic duty is accomplished, in particular, by cultivating one’s critical sense, by checking the quality of our information sources, and by not sharing false news that did not meet the basic standards of journalism. However, this is sometimes easier said than done. Therefore, we have to be particularly vigilant. Research on cognitive development shows that much remains to be done to fully understand our cognitive biases, as well as our resistance to the intentional modification of our false or unverified beliefs.

### *Conclusion*

Recent research on the subject shows that, regardless of its veracity or logic, we tend to prefer information that reinforces our own beliefs, attitudes, and aligns our beliefs with those of the people around us. Access to information for journalists should not be restricted by governments and in this age of social media, it is import-

ant for governments to ensure that quality information is released and to promote awareness of disinformation. Citizens and users should also be made accountable for the propagation of fake news in social media. Doctors should also initiate communication campaigns for restructuring routine behaviors by introducing healthy activities that can decrease loneliness of social distancing measures.

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