

## **CORONAVIRUS 2019-nCov – What is true? What is False and what is Misinformation?**

We are now experiencing a new Coronavirus outbreak, and whereas as the focus has been on identifying how it is transmitted, containing its spread, developing a vaccine and treatment – there is an equally sinister side – False information.

Accurate, clear and timely communication has never been as important as it is today in dealing with this crisis.

People collapsing in the streets of Wuhan, cover-ups of unreported deaths and travellers "escaping" quarantine in China at risk of spreading the coronavirus.

If you've been following the outbreak on social media, you may have seen some, or more, of these types of claims.

But the truth is, they're completely unverified – and in most cases, untrue.

Social media has completely changed the way in which information about a disease outbreak travels around the world and experts say it's not for the better.

"When there's a lack of information and there's fear, rumours come in to fill that gap," said Alfred Hermida, professor and director of the journalism program at the University of British Columbia.

"The reason people are sharing this is because they're trying to make sense of what is a really complicated situation and also something that is potentially worrying. The danger is that it spins out of control, because fear then takes over."

### **In Portugal**

In Portugal so far we have "so far" escaped the effects of this latest virus, which at the time of writing, has infected some 4500 people worldwide (confirmed) and resulted in 106 deaths, in China.

There appears to be little concern in Portugal at the time of writing, but recently social media globally is getting much hotter on the topic. Obviously panic spreads faster than disease and for me this is an even worse threat in big cities than the virus itself.

In Portugal, there are some Facebook groups with little or no Admin monitoring where instances of false or misleading information have previously appeared, remaining for some time or indefinitely, perhaps reaching thousands of people.

### **Fear driving misinformation online**

"Anything that's health-related, the challenge online is that it's so emotional," said Ramona Pringle, director of the Creative Innovation Studio at Ryerson University.

"It speaks to our primal instincts about survival that people panic, people have an emotional reaction to it." Pringle said a pattern with misinformation that goes viral is that the verified and accurate information never gets the same traction online. "It doesn't have the stuff that makes people want to share it. It doesn't have that shock and strong emotion," she said.

"Maybe people end up seeing it, but if they see it, they're not sharing it. They're not spreading it, unfortunately."

These statements are so true. Safe Communities and various legitimate organisations can post a legitimate and validated post on Facebook, but an unsourced, unverified and speculative piece of gossip framed in a way to attract many likes or shares, regardless of the consequences of the content, can go viral, causing unnecessary fear or panic or even worse.

In my view anyone who has a responsibility as an admin of a site, should do his/her best to monitor misinformation or fake news and report it to Facebook or delete it as soon as possible. It is appreciated however that this may be difficult with a high number of comments and replies from such posts.

### **Examples of misinformation**

One example of this was a tweet that had huge engagement in the Philippines.

"Why is no one talking about the #Coronavirus and how it has already claimed 4 lives a twitter user wrote.

Kurasawa, at York University in Toronto, says social media can amplify the fear that people have during an outbreak and decrease their ability to filter inaccurate information.

That can lead to a type of "vigilantism," where people share personal information online, as well as the targeting of people from specific ethnic or racial groups as a result of this, as potential carriers of a particular in this case of coronavirus," he said. "And that's very worrisome."

Just as Asian nations are scrambling to cope with the quickly-spreading new coronavirus thought to have originated in Wuhan, China, some unreliable news reports are complicating their efforts to contain the illness.

Singapore's health ministry said Monday it had issued a correction directive to a website that reported a 66-year-old man had died from the Wuhan coronavirus in Singapore. It was the latest use of the country's "fake news" law, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act.

Apparently Technology giants Facebook, Google and Twitter are desperately trying to stop misinformation about the Wuhan coronavirus spreading online.

Viral posts have been doing the rounds on Twitter, including claims the killer condition can be treated with oregano oil and people calling it a 'fad disease'.

Other outlandish hoaxes doing the rounds on social media include the implication the US government has patented coronavirus.

Fact-checkers have found this to be completely untrue and the Silicon Valley tech firms are battling to stop such claims from spreading to avoid mass hysteria.

Twitter is also trying to guide users away from nonsense posts that could threaten people's safety, and towards legitimate sources.

In the US, this includes the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Google-owned YouTube said its algorithm also prioritises more credible sources.

Despite these efforts, false information is still getting a lot of traction in dark corners of the sites, with some videos racking up hundreds of thousands of views.

For example, a prominent Twitter user called coronavirus a 'fad disease' and alluded to the claim of the government buying a patent. Fact-checkers comprehensively disproved this, but the tweet still received 5,800 likes.

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