

## Understanding Hoax News during the Covid-19 Health Crisis from the Perspective of Information Behavior: The case of India

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The role of communication in the promotion of public health is vital. Especially in crises such as Covid-19, its significance has increased manifold. Now regardless of whether it is to clarify the advantages of immunization or to keep hands clean, or to take the individual measures, the significance of health reporting can't be denied. In this regard, where the traditional media like newspaper and television is assuming its part, the significance of online media has likewise expanded colossally. **Method:** Analysis of current trends shows that messages emerging from mass media are expanding and gaining popularity through digital outlets and social media. This has given rise to a new phenomenon called Infodemic. This is actually an abundance of information that includes both true and false in nature. The article examines the role of mass media at the time of epidemics with regard to Infodemics. **Result:** The analysis shows that in a country like India where media utilization has soared, the need to promote quality health journalism has increased as health literacy levels are still extremely low. **Conclusion:** It's time to frame a strict law in our parliament against fake news and those who spread fake news.

**Keywords:** Pandemic Communication, Health Communication, Infodemic, Fake news, COVID 19, Quality Journalism.

### INTRODUCTION

Mass media refers to a diverse array of media technologies that reach a large audience via mass communication (*Mass Media - Wikipedia*, n.d.) The technologies through which this communication takes place include a variety of outlets such as print media, publishing, the news

media, photography, cinema, broadcasting (radio and television), digital media, and advertising. Media scholar Wilbur Schramm defined Mass Medium that it is actually a working group organized around a tool through which they circulate the same message among a large number of people at the same time (Swindler & Schramm, 1955).

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This means that mediation is done through a device or medium such as a newspaper, radio, television screen, mobile phone or any digital screen. Social media platforms have added a new dimension to the media landscape, although social media, by its very nature, cannot be integrated with traditional media such as newspapers or television. Social media has brought forth a groundbreaking thought called Citizen Journalism. The medium is participatory in nature and there is no gatekeeper like the editor. The content here is set up by the public in general and not by professionals. Despite this, there are many similarities between social media and mainstream media.

Mass media is an important source of information on the political, economic, culture, health and progress of society. The topics and issues that are prominent in the media are also prominent in the minds of the people. Therefore, the mass media is considered to be an important source of health information for the general public. A study led by the Pew Research Center for the Public and the Press has revealed that the popularity of health news positions sixth among the other news topics. It ranks after weather, crime, the environment and politics (Kohut et al., 2008).

While mass media is a source of health news, it can also create a general understanding of health. At the same time, experts believe that mass media can be helpful in promoting public health (Oliver Mary Beth, 2010). According to Wallack, media can be a source of information for the right people at the right time to promote personal change (Wallack et al., 2000).

That is why all forms of health communication emphasize messaging through mass media but here health coverage and its quality becomes very important. Research warns that inadequately misleading or incomplete news reporting can endanger public health. Such reporting can be a source of misleading choices for people that could endanger their health. At the same time it can affect policy makers and as a result they can formulate harmful laws (Voss, 2002). If the

media ignores health issues or provides inaccurate information, it can affect the implementation of public policies designed to have a positive impact on health. The principles published by the Association of Healthcare Journalists states that journalists have a special obligation for publishing medical news. The members of the association know that readers and viewers may settle on significant medical services choices dependent on the information given in their accounts (Schwitzer et al., 2005).

### **Quality of Health Coverage in India**

The main purpose of health communication is not only to inform but also to enable people to make better decisions and choices about their health and quality of life. People's understanding of health and health policies is not based directly on their experience but on what they read or see in the media (Bates, Benjamin & Ahmed, 2020). Health news informs them about the disease and precautions, encourages them to change their behavior and builds understanding of health policy and public health. Thus health journalists mediate between the public and doctors. In fact, health writers are the source of providing scientific information about diseases and health in society. Therefore, both the quantity and quality of news published in mass media i.e. radio, television and internet are important because health communication has a direct impact on disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life (Rimal & Lapinski, 2009).

In recent years, the quality of health coverage has become a major concern, especially in India. For example, research on obesity news coverage in Indian newspapers by the Hyderabad National Institute of Nutrition has shown that most obesity Related news coverage was thrilling (Sandberg, 2007). Some articles on obesity were contradictory in themselves. Sources of information were not mentioned in numerous reports. In almost all of the stories, however, journalists ignored the research methodology and rarely discussed design flaws. A study of the H1N1 outbreak coverage in the Times of India found that the

newspaper portrayed H1N1 as a deadly disease and mentioned death from the disease in its coverage which spread panic (Krishnatray & Gadekar, 2014). The paper explained the number of deaths or the number of people who have recovered without providing contextual information in such a way that the disease appears in a terrible form and creates a sense of uncertainty, anxiety and panic. In contrast, a study in the UK found that coverage of swine flu between 2004 and 2010 was based on measurements as opposed to coverage of swine flu in other parts of the world (Hilton & Hunt, 2011).

### Challenges Posed by Infodemic

Although overflow of information is a prominent feature of the Information Age, an epidemic called Covid 19 has given rise to a new concept called infodemic. The world health organization has called it a second disease with pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined Infodemic, saying it is in fact an abundance of information, some of which is accurate and some of which is inaccurate. That makes it difficult for individuals to discover trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (Zarocostas, 2020). The false information spread among the people is divided into two parts. One is misinformation which means false information spread for wrong purposes while the other is called disinformation. This means that wrong information that is disseminated under a malicious intent or without a malicious intent. In both cases it is extremely harmful to those who obtain such information, as it relates to human health.

WHO has started a global program on infodemiology, much the same as epidemiology of any other disease. The WHO feels that just as the treatment of a disease requires detection and prevention, there is a need to focus on infodemic and its spread. The UN agency UNESCO has observed in its policy briefing on infodemics that just as information empowers disinformation disempowers. It jeopardizes lives and prompts disarray and conflict. (New UNESCO Policy Briefs Launched Assessing the COVID-19 'Disinfodemic,' n.d.)

While there is a challenge in the media to increase the space and quality of health news, the emergence of these infodemics has become a new challenge in the practice of health journalism in India. The study shows that most of the information circulating about infodemic in social media comes from unreliable sources that are separate from certified news sources. Data scientists are using machine learning techniques to analyze the infodemic message. An analysis of 112 million epidemic messages in 64 languages by the Brunokessler Foundation found that 40 percent of the messages came from unreliable sources. Another study by the Wade 19 Infodic Observatory found that the bugs produced by the epidemic were 40% unreliable. (New UNESCO Policy Briefs Launched Assessing the COVID-19 'Disinfodemic,' n.d.) During the current health crisis, as the pace and volume of misinformation and disinformation increases, the onus is on the mainstream media to correct things, in addition to publishing authentic news and covering up fake news. The mainstream media is also responsible for exposing fake news that has grown rapidly during the epidemic.

### Ways to Improve the Quality of Health News

The epidemic and the subsequent rise of infodemics have strengthened the role of professional journalism. Certified and authentic information is the need of time and health journalists can meet this need through mainstream media. Infodemic can be an antidote to poison of infodemic. Independent media not only provides people with factual and verified news but also holds the government and the authorities accountable. Although newspapers face circulation problems but people's trust in independent media such as newspapers is increasing. A study by the Reuters Institute found that 60 percent of respondents in six countries - Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States - said it was the news media that made them aware about the pandemic. Confidence in news media is rated higher than information

received through social media (Nielsen et al., 2020). An online and offline survey conducted in India has revealed that most people rejected myths and conspiracy theories that are circulating on social media and relies on scientific information (Raza & Singh, 2020).

The Indian media needs to play its role effectively in providing authentic and verified news and information related to health for which the following steps have been proposed.

1. Hiring a professionally trained full-time reporter and sub-editor to write and edit the No. 1 health issue. Although health-related news is widely covered in the Indian media, its quality and importance Much remains to be done because of the shortage of health-trained journalists in Indian News. To make this possible, training schools need to focus more on health and science journalism and through workshops and fellowships. On-the-job training is also needed.

2. Newspapers and television channels will also have to work to check the facts, especially on health related issues such as exposing fake news and misinformation and misinformation - professional training to do so. There will be a need for a winning fact checker equipped with digital platforms as well as editorial insights - many media houses in India have started this work but they need to focus more on the two pillars of health and science. There are organizations and media houses that can collaborate with them.

Improving the quality of health news in the Indian media requires more intensive communication between media and health experts, researchers and policy makers, as well as educational institutions, medical organizations and institutions involved in science and health research. There is a need to improve our communication with the media so that the results of the research can be explained to the media people about the policies and trends - the experts of these institutions have their expert comments to expose the fake news and misinformation. Should offer Practical action is needed from both the media and the health community.

3. The hallmark of a healthy health journalism is that it presents evidence-based news and informs about both the advantages and disadvantages of newly discovered treatments and research advances - the results of medical research, many warnings and Withdrawals come with this, so research results should be reported without sensationalism with the right approach. Special attention should be paid to the training of journalists related to health.

4. It is the responsibility of the media to keep in touch with the people and empower them through news and information literacy. Such contacts are also important in that they will help find new solutions as well as involve them in health decisions and related policies.

## RESULTS

The media is one of the four pillars of a democratic society and its responsibility is to provide information and education to the people - newspapers and television channels and radio to public opinion on important issues facing the society. In this sense, both health coverage and its quality in the press become important because it is the primary source of health information for the general public. At a time when India is facing epidemic and non-epidemic diseases and trauma, health news has tremendous power to promote public health - in times of emergencies like Wade 19 and new ones like Infodemic. It is very important that the health related news provided by the newspapers is authentic and above self interest so it is very important to take initiative to improve the quality of health news in Indian media.

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