



Pandemic & Infodemic Relation

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This article is based on “In a pandemic, the power of the rumour” which was published in The Hindustan Times on 26/05/2021. It talks about the challenges put forward by the combined effect of Covid-19 pandemic and infodemic.

Covid-19 is the first pandemic in history where technology and social media are being used on a massive scale, and widespread dissemination of health rumours has been rampant, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to also call the pandemic and “infodemic”.

Infodemic is an overabundance of information that makes it difficult for people to identify truthful and trustworthy sources from false or misleading ones.

In the present state of emergency, health information specifically on social media, is often published, shared, and re-shared. Irrespective of its veracity, the fake news frequently leads to the spread of misinformation and rumours under the guise of truth.

One such fear misinformation is about the Covid-19 vaccine. Due to this, Vaccine hesitancy was named as one of the top 10 threats to global health by WHO.

Pandemic & Infodemic Linkage

- **Paradigm Shift:** There is a paradigm shift from the 20th-century ecosystem dominated by print and broadcast media to an increasingly digital, mobile and social media dominated ecosystem.

The lack of filtering on online platforms negates any authentication mechanisms.

- **Cognitive Overload of Information:** The pandemic gives rise to confusion, ambiguity, anxiety, and uncertainty, which, in turn, may lead to increased transmission of health rumours.

The accuracy, veracity, and perceived credibility of the source are ignored, more so on social media where users are already cognitively overloaded with too much information.

- **Public's Coping Mechanism:** Many studies have found that during a crisis (e.g. natural disaster, terror attack, global pandemic), sharing rumours works like a coping mechanism.
 - People draw a false sense of relief, such that anxiety or fears associated with the uncertain situation is momentarily reduced.
 - However, in the long-run, during a pandemic, prior research finds that health rumours, exchanged in a community, can instil fear.
- **Systemic Baggage:** In a developing country like India, the rumor-mongering stems from distrust in health institutions and experts, misunderstanding related to herd immunity, fear related to rapid vaccine development.
 - These factors reinforce the conspiracy theories and misinformation circulating widely on social media.

Way Forward

- **Leveraging Positive Role of Social Media:** Though social media is acting as a fertile ground for dangerous rumour-mongering, it can act as an indispensable source of vital information.
 - Thus, governments and health agencies must establish an engaging web presence to debunk misinformation and fill the knowledge gaps.
 - Further, engaging celebrities and social media influencers can motivate people who are less eager to take the vaccine.
- **Responsibility of Social Media Platforms:** Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp should be proactive in adding features that allow users to access verified information
 - Also, they must double their efforts in flagging misinformation and rapidly removing health rumours.
- **Information Hygiene:** Though Covid-19 and social media have highlighted the importance of maintaining personal hygiene, the conversation about information hygiene must now happen in the society. Information hygiene includes:
 - Verifying the authentic source of fact.
 - Double checking with some fact checking website.
 - Asking some expert opinion on that particular issue.
 - Applying rational thinking while going through a forwarded news on social media.
 - Applying these ideas before sharing the same.

Conclusion

While India's core crisis today is vaccine shortage, and data on hesitancy is inadequate, it would be a mistake to ignore the role of the latter as supplies shore up.

The challenge will not be in supply, but ensuring that citizens understand that a vaccine is the most effective protective mechanism that is currently known and available. Putting the rumours to rest is a national imperative.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the challenges presented by pandemic and infodemic linkage.
