

COVID-19-related online misinformation in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to understand the popular themes of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)-related online misinformation in Bangladesh and to provide some suggestions to abate the problem.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper discusses online COVID-19-related misinformation in Bangladesh. Following thematic analyses, the paper discusses some dominant misinformation themes based on the data collected from three fact-checking websites of Bangladesh run by media professionals and scholars.

Findings – COVID-19-related online misinformation in Bangladesh has six popular themes: health, political, religious, crime, entertainment and miscellaneous. To curb misinformation, many initiatives have been taken so far that have produced little success. This paper briefly proposes the implementation of an experimental two-way misinformation prevention technique for a better result.

Originality/value – Acknowledging previous initiatives, this paper discusses the major themes and offers additional solutions to reduce online misinformation which would benefit academics as well as policymakers.

Keywords Misinformation, COVID-19, Public health communication, Bangladesh

Paper type Commentary

Introduction

“Highly concentrated alcohol could disinfect the body and kill the virus.” This single piece of misinformation claimed at least 800 lives worldwide. Additionally, 5,876 people were admitted to hospital and 60 more developed complete blindness caused by another source of misinformation related to a *cure* for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) [1, 2]. Both incidents hint at how misinformation can make public health conditions more critical during the pandemic. The health-care system in Bangladesh has been suffering from inadequate medical facilities and health-care corruption for the last few years, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this problem [3–6]. Increasing pandemic misinformation also impedes health-care services, producing anxiety and misleading the public. Bangladesh is a country with 0.1 bn Internet users, and a large share of them has a lack of proper digital literacy [7]. Further, like many other South Asian countries, the netizens of Bangladesh rely on the Internet for health-related information during the pandemic [8, 9]. Therefore, COVID-19 misinformation reached a greater audience, making the COVID-19 situation more critical. Misinformation, disinformation, rumor and fake news are used interchangeably in scientific literature due to their conceptual proximity [10–12] but result in the same negative consequences.

In this viewpoint piece, following a thematic analysis, the author discusses a few dominant themes of COVID-19 misinformation, drawing from the data of BD FactCheck, Rumor Scanner and Jachai, three leading Bangladeshi fact-checking websites.

Themes of online misinformation in Bangladesh

Theme identification of misinformation is difficult because topics of public interest may vary from region to region, causing a generalization problem. For example, religious



misinformation in India is more common during the pandemic [13], whereas medicine- and policy-related misinformation is more common in many other countries around the world [14]. Popular online misinformation in Bangladesh is mostly native, produced by locals. Based on the relevant misinformation data from three fact-checking websites, a thematic analysis of popular COVID-19 misinformation produced six dominant themes: health, political, religious, crime, entertainment and miscellaneous (Table 1). Health-related misinformation deals with medicinal and health-care issues, such as fake prescriptions, misleading measures and pandemic denial. Of them, fake medicine can cause health hazards, while pandemic denial hinders proper protective measures against viral transmission. Political misinformation mainly deals with political figures and events that are somehow related to the pandemic, such as a political leader's fake speech about COVID-19. Religious misinformation instrumentalizes people's faith and sentiment, often to serve political purposes. The first COVID-19-related online misinformation in Bangladesh was a religious one that claimed that eating *Thankuni* (Indian pennywort) three times a day uttering *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah) would be a protection from COVID-19 infection [15]. This misinformation went viral instantly through Facebook and YouTube, and many believers started searching their surroundings for the mentioned plant. Addressing COVID-19 as a curse of Allah, a few Islamic clerics also incited Muslim devotees to protest the shutdown of mosques in March

Themes and claims of misinformation

Health

"*Kalazira* (fennel flower) prevents coronavirus"

"Hot water mixed with salt-vinegar can cure corona infection"

"A medical team of 37 Chinese has arrived in Bangladesh"

"Coronavirus is a myth mainly to control people"

"Drink boiling water to prevent corona infection"

Political

"Italy's PM says: 'The only solution of the pandemic is in the sky'"

"Putin deploys 800 tigers and lions in the street of Russia to force people to stay at home"

"86 countries will file a case against China for spreading coronavirus"

"Rizvi dreamt that coronavirus will vanish from Bangladesh if Khaleda Zia is released"

Religious

"Quarantine was first invented by Mohammad (SM): US researcher"

"Saudi government canceled the Hajj this year due to the pandemic"

"Two million Chinese people accepted Islam in six months because of coronavirus"

"'Allahu Akbar' is written on the roads of Europe to avoid corona"

"Coronavirus is a curse of Allah for the infidels and real Muslims will be exempted from it"

"Life and death, both are in the hands of Allah, coronavirus can do nothing about it"

Crime

"More than 20 million people are missing in China during the pandemic"

"COVID-19 positive dead bodies are found in the street of Italy"

"Local public vandalized a Saudi immigrant's house suspecting corona positive"

Entertainment

"Due to COVID-19 Netflix will give out three months free subscription"

"COVID-19 positive vs COVID-19 negative football match in Mymensingh"

Miscellaneous

"Italy's doctor couple kiss in the public place during the pandemic"

"Bank and NGO's three-month loan installment is deferred for COVID-19"

Note(s): The claims of misinformation were collected from three Bangladesh-based fact-checking websites: BD Fact-check (<http://bdfactcheck.com>), Jachai (<http://jachai.org>) and Rumor Scanner (<http://rumorsscanner.com>) and translated from Bangla to English afterward

Table 1.
Major themes of
COVID-19-related
online misinformation
in Bangladesh

2020 [16]. Crime misinformation mainly circulates false claims related to COVID-19 death tolls, health-care corruption and lockdown crimes. Fake high death tolls may create panic among the people. Entertainment misinformation refers to fake events and celebrities, and miscellaneous misinformation refers to business, consumerism and other issues. As the COVID-19 pandemic is accompanied by an *infodemic*, it is normal for netizens to be bombarded and deceived by unverified as well as false information. In such cases, it is important to devise appropriate solutions to this problem.

Online misinformation prevention strategies

Previous research suggests various online misinformation prevention techniques, such as preparing myth busters, digital surveillance, reliable information circulation, medical information dissemination, accuracy nudges and the use of artificial intelligence [17–21]. Furthermore, strict implementation of the law brings success in some countries [22]. In Bangladesh, law enforcers have been arresting online rumor spreaders throughout the pandemic but with little success [23]. Among other governmental and voluntary initiatives to curb online misinformation, some include creating COVID-19 information hubs like National Corona Portal, corona chatbots like COVID-response Bangladesh, mobile applications like Corona Tracer BD and fact checkers like Rumor Scanner [6, 24]. Despite their potential to reduce misinformation, these initiatives nevertheless struggled to effectively contain online misinformation. As a result, COVID-19 misinformation is still a routine phenomenon in Bangladesh [25, 26] that remains unacknowledged in many previous studies [6, 24]. Observing this, the government now plans to launch a countrywide anti-misinformation campaign *Asol Chini* (Let's Know the Truth) to counter the ongoing monsoon of COVID-19 misinformation [25]. It also requested Facebook to close down more than a hundred Facebook pages that were actively spreading COVID-19 misinformation [27]. Along with previous and upcoming measures, a two-way misinformation prevention technique was also thought to lead to a better result. In this process, sources of misinformation were first identified with their production and dissemination processes and channels. Second, curtailing this misinformation would create an information vacuum that had to be filled by verified information, otherwise unreliable information would replace the vacuum once again.

To identify both misinformation sources and information vacuum, a form of surveillance over social media platforms may be needed, as suggested in previous studies [18, 21]. This paper provides a brief overview of misinformation themes, issues of public interest and examples of prevalent misinformation in Bangladesh, which may be a guide in this process. In this case, however, the notion of *free speech* and the necessity for surveillance may be viewed as contradictory. For example, to what extent can the surveillance be enacted? Who should have the right to patrol online media? What would be the *modus operandi* of online surveillance as well as its probable consequences? Contentions between ideals would linger on. Many may argue that the “Digital Security Act 2018” has already curbed the online community’s freedom of speech to a certain extent [28]. Additionally, a few recent and controversial arrests in the name of rumor prevention [29, 30] could lead to distrust of the government’s control over online communication.

Conclusion

With the increase in the numbers of netizens, online misinformation becomes commonplace in Bangladesh, having a potential threat to public health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although online misinformation is a global phenomenon, its impact could be more intense in countries like Bangladesh that have comparatively less efficient communication infrastructures and/or more digital illiterate netizens [7]. Therefore, controlling misinformation production and simultaneously supplying a reliable information flow would help to effectively reduce the extent of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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