

The Need for Stricter Control of Social Media by the US Government During the COVID-19 Epidemic

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INTRODUCTION

“Spraying chlorine or alcohol on skin kills viruses in the body!” “Hand dryers kill coronavirus.” “Coronavirus kills everyone.”^[i] These are just some examples of misleading content that are being spread during the COVID-19 pandemic. With fear around the virus building as the number of cases grows, people are taking advantage of the internet for research. Many posts are drowning out the scientific facts and evidence that others depend on for essential health information, such as prevention methods or symptoms of the disease. Major social media companies have stated that they are working toward limiting the spread of false and deceiving misinformation like fake news because social media platforms are the medium predominantly responsible.^[ii] However, this strategy of allowing the corporations to bear the responsibility for taking down misleading content is having limited success. Given that social networking companies can only do so much, the U.S. should consider imposing more stringent regulations and consequences relating to fake news and false information, especially during times of an epidemic or disaster. Health claims should not be restricted unless they would cause imminent harm or have been thoroughly researched and disproven. This article’s firm stance refers to dangerous claims and claims proven to be false.

ANALYSIS

The number of COVID-19 cases has been increasing at a wild pace, especially in the United States.^[iii] Unfortunately, the amount of fake news relating to the disease has also been spreading like wildfire. Disconnect between scientific consensus and members of the public is increasingly on the rise in the divided political climate of today.^[iv] A study using trending Twitter hashtags found that 24.8 percent of Twitter posts included fake/false information and 17.4 percent included unverifiable information, demonstrating a significant amount of content found on social media platforms is unreliable.^[v]

Unfortunately, fake news or misinformation on social media is allowed to propagate without constraints, does not entail any curation or peer review, and does not require any professional verifications.^[vi] The lack of oversight and government action makes the spread and amplification of misinformation by the

“information silos and echo chambers of personally tailored content on social media ideal” for those posting it, particularly during times of public tension like the current COVID-19 epidemic.^[vii]

As a result, people are starting to follow “unfounded recommendations to prevent infection by taking in excessive amounts of Vitamin C and avoiding spicy foods.”^[viii] While suggestions of taking Vitamin C and avoiding spicy foods are relatively harmless and not worthy of censor, some unfounded suggestions, such as snorting cocaine to battle the effects of the virus, are harmful. A prime example of the potential negative impact of misinformation on social media involves mixing sodium chlorite solution with citric acid, generating chlorine dioxide solution. The instructions then state for this powerful bleaching agent to be consumed, promising antimicrobial, antiviral, and antibacterial actions. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has previously served severe warnings that chlorine dioxide causes severe vomiting, life-threatening low blood pressure, and acute liver failure.^[ix]

The world's largest social media platforms are said to have been pulling out all the stops to “combat the wave of false reports, hacking attempts, and outright lies about COVID-19.”^[x] In an effort to combat fraudulent and harmful content on their platforms, companies signed a joint statement which states that they will “elevate authoritative content on our platforms, as well as share critical updates in coordination with global government health agencies.”^[xi] As a result, Facebook and Twitter stated that they will work to ban content about coronavirus that can cause harm. Google is imposing similar actions stating that the company formed a response team that would work to remove misinformation and promote accurate information from health agencies. However, there are doubts as to whether companies are able to handle the so-called “infodemic.”^[xii]

According to Newsguard, a site that ranks websites by trustworthiness, “health care hoax sites” received more than 142 times as much social-media engagement in the past 90 days as the websites for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) combined.^[xiii] In other words, posts from the WHO and the CDC were considerably eclipsed by hoax and conspiracy theory sites: several hundred thousand engagements versus over 52 million.^[xiv] Of course, the degree to which the truth is eclipsed might be overstated because people can get access to information from the CDC and WHO through other websites such as online newspapers, university websites, or even good-willed social media posts. However, people visiting the websites that are not trustworthy likely follow links to more of the same and are not in the habit of verifying with legitimate sources putting them at risk. The abundance of online platforms that make use of information from the CDC and WHO to slightly tweak the information can lead people to false content as well. The sheer amount of information makes it impossible to track down all such content, especially since some are in private social media groups which are much harder to track. Simply put, spreading more factual information and taking down other content is not enough to prevent the extant “infodemic.”

Currently, other nations such as South Korea are imposing strict guidelines relating to fake news being spread about COVID-19. In South Korea, the cyber unit of a national police agency is “stamping out” false information and is stating those spreading fake news relating to COVID-19 will be prosecuted.^[xv] The Korean National Police Agency stated that it planned to conduct investigations including arrests. The prosecutor’s office also stated that it would respond.^[xvi]

Singapore and Germany have been taking part in investigations relating to fake news and misinformation. Germany passed a law in October 2017 that requires social media to remove fake news promptly.^[xvii] Part of the US public health sphere is at a high risk of being misinformed and harmed as a result fake news and misinformation.

When we discuss imposing restrictions on any type of information including misleading information, we consider whether our first amendment rights -- freedom of speech and freedom of the press -- are violated. A recent study on fake news under the First Amendment states that “permitting the government to tell society what is and is not true is treacherous, for it vests officials temporarily in charge of the country with the power to twist narratives to serve their own purposes. That is disturbingly akin to the function of the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Its purpose was to dictate and protect the government's version of reality.”^[xviii] In other words, the First Amendment exists to allow free exchange of opinions and facts whether the government verifies them or not. It also permits the people to have a say about the government and its officials. Government stepping in to force social media to pull content must be narrowly construed to pull only those claims that are dangerous or proven false.

One may argue people just need to be more responsible and more cautious about the information they collect from the internet. However, it is important to note that fake news and/or misinformation, especially during times of an epidemic, can cause people with clouded judgment to engage in actions that put them at a great risk. These examples include panic buying that can prevent other people who are in dire need of supplies from retrieving them or a dangerous intake of bleach that can result in poisoning.^[xix] As seen by the misleading content on social media, it is simply not enough, and seemingly impossible, to just take down the content. There must be a threat of consequences that will discourage people from posting potentially harmful content. Otherwise, there will be a continuous production leading to an increase in fake news, and even wiggle room for politicians to politicize a pandemic. False harmful publications are actionable if they were made with “knowledge of falsity or with reckless disregard for the truth.”^[xx]

CONCLUSION

With the increasing presence of COVID-19, we as a community must take every precaution and step necessary to prevent further damage. A good starting point is to prevent fake news and other misleading content that can inflict harm on individuals’ and the general public’s well-being. The current methods set forth by Google and Facebook are strictly limited, leaving room for malicious internet users to spread fake information. Imagine, for example, the spread of news such as the government giving the ‘OK’ for people to go out in the public. The news would put the public at risk of getting infected, further spreading the disease, and slowing down efforts to contain the pandemic. The US, which currently lacks a specific legal action to prevent the spread of deceiving and potentially dangerous information through social media, needs to take a more rigorous role in protecting its citizens during serious public health disasters. Heraclitus once said, “justice will overtake fabricators of lies.” There seems no better time than now for justice to protect the American public.

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