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**Social media and proliferation of fake news, dodgy health advice and fake cures of Covid-19**

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Scientists have known of the human coronavirus since the 1960s. But only rarely has it garnered wider recognition over the past half a century.

One example was in 2003, when the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) caused an outbreak of the disease severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in mainland China and Hong Kong. Another was in 2012, when the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) led to an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Korea, among other countries.

In both cases, the coronaviruses were new to science. Happily, both outbreaks were contained thanks to a combination of human intervention and still unknown natural circumstances.

In 2020 coronaviruses became a household name all over the world. Most people by now have heard of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), or COVID-19. But some may not be aware that SARS-CoV-2 belongs to a family of viruses. And the family is, we fear, expanding.

Since its outbreak in December 2019, coronavirus (SARS- Cov-2/COVID-19) has affected over 1,783,724 people in over 200 countries across the globe. The virus has also caused the death of over 108,907 as at Sunday April 12.

About 318 had been confirmed in Nigeria in 19 states by Saturday April 11 and the country has also recorded 10 deaths.

WHO has been working with governments and partners around the world, across many areas of activity: conducting needed assessments, providing hand sanitizers and masks for health professionals, providing training on the clinical management of patients with COVID-19, collaborating with local media outlets and conducting awareness raising activities, delivering test kits, conducting simulation exercises, and shipping personal protective equipment through WHO logistical hubs.

Social media sites shoulder the huge responsibility of stemming the spread of counterproductive rumours.

In 2014, while the devastating Ebola epidemic raged in parts of West Africa, a viral WhatsApp broadcast prescribed bathing with or drinking salt and hot water mixtures as a “cure” for the dreaded disease. Even though there was no medical basis for it, the “prescription” went viral enough for the government to have to officially debunk it. But that ultimately proved futile, as at least two people died and several others were hospitalized over excessive salt consumption.

False claims can even come from government sources too: in 2014, Nigeria’s former information minister claimed the government had acquired Ebola vaccines in preparation for an outbreak even though no vaccines existed at the time.

Given the increasingly global scale of infections with 1,783,724 cases in over 200 countries, the possibility of similar bogus claims making the rounds and being adopted out of desperation is very real. To be clear, such misinformation episodes are not exclusive to Nigeria or even Africa, as anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists in the United States and Europe show. But the threat of more damaging after-effects are more pronounced here given traditionally weaker and under-equipped health systems.

When chaos exists, there also is a vacuum and a wrestling match to fill it. Anytime there is a national anxiety, it’s not uncommon for solutions to start popping up. Humans share news, the same way they share viruses, sometimes unknowingly and sometimes knowingly. A study by The Conversation among media consumers in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa showed that 28% of Nigerians acknowledged having shared stories that turned out to be made up. In fact, 20% felt it was made up at the time they were sharing it.

Ultimately, the fight against both the virus and false information is in our hands. Covid-19 does not spread, humans spread it. Similarly, false information needs agents to gather velocity.

Here are some fake news that were spread through social media but have been debunked by WHO, CDC, NCDC, amongst others.

**Malaria vs COVID-19:**

The Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity to President Muhammadu Buhari, Garba Shehu, condemned Nigerian newspapers for ‘over-reporting’ of Coronavirus rather than other illnesses killing Nigerians.

He claimed that malaria kills 822 people on a daily basis and this made headlines in major Nigerian newspapers. The tweet, in less than 24 hours, gathered over 2,400 likes and 716 retweets.

A fact check later debunked Mr Shehu’s claim. The World Health Organisation (WHO) data shows figure on malaria fatality that is three times lower than that put forward by the presidential spokesperson.

Findings reveal that only “260 deaths are recorded daily due to malaria.”

**Saline Solution:**

A viral Facebook post claimed a Saline Solution of warm water and salt or vinegar is a remedy to Coronavirus, a claim that has not been corroborated by any health institution.

However, a fact check debunked this. NHS recommends gargling with warm saline water for adults suffering from sore throats but not a solution to cure COVID-19.

Also, the WHO in its Question and Answers session about coronavirus on twitter debunked a similar question of whether gargling mouthwash can protect one from COVID-19.

The organisation says there is currently “no vaccine and no specific antiviral medicine to prevent or treat COVID-2019.” Clinical trials are, however, ongoing to find a solution to the disease. The explanation is rather that gargling with warm water could help kill the virus at the early stages before it reaches the lungs.

**Zimbabwe video**

A video (Twitter), on Saturday, showing police officers beating Christians who visited a church in Zimbabwe generated a lot of retweets.

The video was viewed by over 80,000 Twitter users, gathered over 2,500 retweets and liked by over 3,000 persons with many hostile comments capable of inciting the public against security operatives.

Meanwhile, a check later showed that the video was old footage from an event in November 2019, in Zimbabwe against the political opposition.

The person who attributed the video to Coronavirus, Segun Awosanya (Sega Link), must have read his comment section because he subsequently released a rejoinder but this came after the video had got to nearly 100,000 persons.

**No Coronavirus in Nigeria?**

A viral picture went online suggesting that Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria, said that there is no coronavirus in Nigeria and that the minister of health lied.

Mr Obasanjo, however, denied the claim. His spokesperson, Kehinde Akinyemi, said: “any statement that is attributed to Baba but did not include when and where he made it should be disregarded. Baba didn’t say it and couldn’t have said it.”

Interestingly, the image bears a Punch logo but was never reported. Indeed, all signs point to it being a doctored image. It was photo shopped.

**Far-fetched Remedies**

Some wrongly maintain that people can protect themselves against COVID-19 by washing their hands with children’s urine, applying sesame oil all over their body or consuming cannabis. These are simply examples of false advertising and/or click bait. Although people joke that consuming too much garlic will keep away potentially infected individuals due to extremely bad breath, this edible plant doesn’t boost the body’s immune system.

Some believe that takes doses of Antibiotics will protect or heal them from the virus. Antibiotics work against bacteria, not viruses. Taking antibiotics to treat or prevent coronavirus could prove harmful by reducing a person’s vigilance. Vaccines against pneumonia don’t provide protection against COVID-19 either. The potential efficacy of chloroquine is currently being studied but has not been confirmed.

**Cocaine cures coronavirus?**

A verified Twitter account owned by a Nigerian music and entertainment developer with more than 190,000 followers identified as Bizzle Osikoya, tweeted a doctored image from a television breaking news segment, proposing that cocaine can cure coronavirus.

A fact check, however debunked this as the French Government disclaimed cocaine as cure to COVID-19.

It says; “Cocaine is an addictive stimulant drug and using it can seriously harm people’s health and create undesirable effects.”

If you can hold your breath for 10 seconds, then you don’t have the virus?

This long message began circulating early on in the crisis and the claims have been shared more than 30,000 times on Facebook in over a dozen countries, including India, Nigeria and the USA.

It goes saying “If this can be done without coughing, without difficulty this shows that there is no fibrosis in the lungs, indicating the absence of infection. It is recommended to do this control every morning to help detect infection.”

However, a fact check proved this to be wrong. The check proved that “Fibrosis is not a feature of coronavirus and you cannot tell… if you’ve got COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) you won’t be able to hold your breath for 10 seconds anyway. And some people who have , the only symptom they’ve got is a fever and not a cough.”

**President Muhammad Buhari has the virus?**

The controversial blogger Kemi Olunloyo tweeted that President Muhammadu Buhari is sick with a persistent cough and that a makeshift ICU had been set up to treat him. Within hours, the tweet had been liked 3,300 times and retweeted more than 2,000 times.

President Buhari has been heavily criticised for not speaking directly to Nigerians about the coronavirus pandemic, although he has been active on social media.

This news turned out to be false as the president himself addressed Nigerians and this was shown live on ChannelsTV.

**45 million Nigerians would die?**

In other instances, sensationalist comments from supposed “health experts” have been spread widely. On 23 March, for example, an audio clip emerged on WhatsApp of an alleged World Health Organization (WHO) official predicting that at least 45 million Nigerians would die in the pandemic. The audio provoked so much attention that the NCDC issued a rebuttal. This audio clip caused a lot of panic within the people and some blindly blamed the government.

**Temperature as a cure.**

Just as the scientific community didn’t give Trump’s theories on COVID-19’s survival in high temperatures a seal of approval – hand dryers and UV lamps don’t effectively guard against the virus – the WHO has also discredited the idea that cold weather and snow can kill the new virus. So don’t bother going on an ice cream binge.

Some even said it couldn’t survive in hot weathers but that has also being discredited.

**Transmission via parcels from China**

Although their lifespan varies depending on the environment and temperature, pathogenic germs can only survive on objects such as parcels, coins and credit cards for a few hours. Products imported from China to Africa have been travelling for too long to transmit the virus. Some people cancelled their orders from China because they believed in this hoax.

**Digital Contagion**

Based mainly on the fact that the 5G network was rolled out in the Chinese city of Wuhan just a few weeks before the coronavirus came on the scene, and that infected passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise ship had been using the technology, chat groups have been fuelling suspicion towards the electromagnetic fields (EMF) emitted by wireless communications networks.

For some, 5G is the source of the virus while, for others, COVID-19 is actually as harmless as the common cold but is being used to cover up the outbreak of other diseases. . .

MTN recently introduced 5G network to Nigeria and WhatsApp, Facebook and twitter were blowing up with fake news on how it would cause more infections.

This is definitely not true as many other countries had already being using 5G long before the virus came to exist.

**Nations** around the world and the scientists they listen to are recommending social-distancing to limit the rate at which infections are increasing and flatten the curve. If a virus can be mitigated by social-distancing, then perhaps viral disinformation can be given the same treatment.

Disinformation during times of crisis requires taking similarly extraordinary measures. People also need to practice social-distancing from their main sources of false information. In other words, limit their trust in close contacts, and instead place their trust in local and international media, and relevant information from government agencies. More importantly, because trusting friends and people on twitter with a few thousand followers is the fastest way to fall into a disinformation doom loop.

In the same way, people can pass on a virus they don’t know they have, so too can they pass on information they don’t know (or don’t care) is false. At this moment, there ought to be a hierarchy of opinions. The world is fighting to save lives and it’s difficult to exaggerate the importance of kitting up with the right information. It starts from you.

Facing pressure from the WHO, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube confirmed that they have taken measures to counter disinformation about the coronavirus.

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