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**Topic: Social media and proliferation of fake news and dodgy health advice and fake cures of COVID-19**

THE danger brought to mankind with the spread of the deadly coronavirus may be aggravated unless a deliberate effort is made to stop the ongoing panic, misinformation and social media abuse.

What we now have scattered around are news headlines circulating on social media regarding the viral outbreak, which can be described as fake news and mere hoaxes. These include messages like “outbreak is much worse than the government is admitting …”;

“Traditional healer finds cure …” Drink plenty of wine and cure the virus …” “The disease is punishment for sin …”. “Millions have been infected and thousands of people are keeling over in the streets of China ..”; “Foundation predicts this outbreak that it will kill 65 million people …”Rumours, falsehood and misinformation have been the side effects of viral outbreaks for as long as humans have been plagued by them since social media networks have now amplified irresponsible information. The new media is so powerful that a tweet or post with dubious information can spread to all corners of the globe within minutes. That is the power of technology.

The risk posed by the coronavirus is much, especially when there is no vaccine for it at the moment. Therefore, a potent way to curtail the danger being posed by the outbreak is through strong, planned and sustained information management. It is for this reason that adequate attention should be accorded to putting a stop to the abuse.

To date, there have been several casualties of the coronavirus, COVID-19, in over 25 countries. In many African countries, more vigilance is required for the rapid detection and containment of the virus at points of entry to prevent community transmission amid our failing and weak health systems.

Unfortunately, social media postings are just difficult to control. This is generally due to weak legislation in some jurisdiction, poor quality control measures by social network providers, and sheer mischief by users.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories spread on social media have been found to generate panic and mistrust among the general public by diverting attention away from the outbreak response, impeding health-care and workers’ activities.

Misinformation and fake news on social media during infectious disease outbreaks, including the ravaging coronavirus epidemic can seriously cost lives, and jeopardise efforts at curtailing the deadly virus, according to comments from various researchers and experts.

This is because rumours and false information about diseases such as norovirus, flu and monkeypox shared on social media were found to make people believe them with ease.

The effect is that there is a likelihood for the people to forget to protect themselves well by observing good hygiene, washing their hands frequently and keeping away from other people as much as possible. In other words, when fake news is spread on social media, it tends to make the people get easily distracted by the misinformation rather than adhering to useful and timely hints that can save lives.

Most times, the influx of irrelevances is so high on social media platforms that by the time-critical piece of information comes in, nobody ever notices it. I often pity administrators of WhatsApp and other platforms that are forced to cope with junk messages almost every second and minute.

Examples of risky habits during infectious disease outbreaks include not washing hands, sharing food with the ill, not disinfecting potentially-contaminated surfaces, reporting strange diseases to health authorities, and failing to self-isolate from those prone to such diseases. Besides, people are more likely to share bad advice on social media than taking good advice from trusted sources.

To address the proliferation, it is vital to reduce the amount of misinformation on social media as well as educating people to recognise false information that comes under the guise of authentic posts.

Recently, a controversial post quoted the Acting Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, Mr Ibrahim Magu, as allegedly saying that corruption caused COVID-19 until it was refuted. Magu had been trending on social media for his speech at the passing-out-parade of Detective Inspector cadets at the Nigerian Defence Academy in Kaduna.

In a video, which went viral, Magu had said that “Corruption is the biggest tragedy to humankind… corruption is worse than all the diseases now running about.

And I strongly believe, that even the coronavirus is caused by corruption”. The implication of this is that rather than focusing more on the disease, priority should be given to the political and economic dimension, which could be distractive for now and coming from a top official like Magu.

Showing the concerns of government on this development, the Minister of Health, Dr Osagie Ehanire has also warned against peddling falsehood on social media. This was a sequel to the report that an Italian businessman who flew into the country from Italy was rumoured to have been infected with the virus until the test report proved otherwise.

The Italian was said to have spent the night in a hotel around the airport area before leaving for Ogun State. Until the social media hoax was debunked, it was reported that many residents in the Gateway State hurriedly relocated because of fear of infection.

Aside from the agony of the deadly disease, unguarded fear and anxiety tend to create another problem for people as a result of information mismanagement occasioned by social media abuse.

Similarly, it was reported that one Adewale Olorogun, said to be an Uber driver, allegedly picked up the same Italian visitor and had equally contracted the virus and refused to be quarantined. Rather than restrict his movement, Olorogun was said to have threatened to spread the disease if the Ogun State government failed to meet his demand of N100 million.

However, the photographs attached to the fake news was supposedly that of Olorogun even though the real picture was found to belong to one Jude Ikuenobe, who left Nigeria for greener pastures and got stranded in Libya!

The recurring abuse has partly justified why members of the National Assembly once moved to pass a bill to regulate the use of social media in the country, even though their motive then was doubtful. Under the prevailing circumstance, we should exercise great caution not to create more problems for ourselves.

However

We should stop forwarding and sharing unconfirmed messages. Once a dangerous message is not reposted to others, it would naturally die and cease to exist. This is what we should be doing.

Social media are meant to make life worth living and not miserable. Today, many people are terribly addicted and abuse social media at home, in the offices, on the road, at worship places and even while trying to sleep.

Source: Vanguard News