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**SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROLIFERATION OF FAKE NEWS, DODGY HEALTH ADVICE AND FAKE CURES OF COVID 19**

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The COVID-19 outbreak has been accompanied by a massive ‘infodemic’ - an over abundance of information, making it hard for people to access accurate information and reliable guidance when they need it (WHO, Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCOV) Situation Report - 13, 2020).

The spread of the novel disease has created panic, causing individuals to seek solutions and consume whatever information they receive, especially when such information is disseminated by an authority, ( forwarded broadcast message from a perceived true sources) without a fact check verifying the authenticity of such information.

Asides the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is faced with a more dangerous threat; the proliferation of fake news, dodgy health advice, and fake cures for COVID 19, which the World Health Organization terms an “Infodemia”.

The infodemia has proved pervasive over the years during cases of global concern. It has eaten deep into the affairs of the world especially in the media sector confusing people with misleading information and causing doubt on the efficacy of information as they are not able to differentiate right from wrong and true from untrue.

The media is saddled with the responsibility of sourcing and disseminating information from veritable sources to the masses. This responsibility is upheld and undertaken by media professionals - journalists and reporters - who know that objectivity and factuality are the core ethics of the media profession.

However, globalization and the new media have made it possible for non professionals to engage in social media activities that include connecting with people all over the world from any location for the purpose of interaction, as well as, sharing ideas and information, thereby making it difficult to check the intrusion and activities of untrained persons and curb the menace of fake news and information.

Social media is a product of the new media that has prevailed due to globalization. It can be defined as the inter-connection of individuals through applications powered by the internet and wireless networks, creating a virtual community that facilitates the creation and sharing of information and ideas.

The Social media plays a significant role in the spread of false information, dodgy health advice, and cures - about the COVID 19 pandemic. This is because information (both verified and unverified) is transmitted by various social media users on their various platforms without checks on the validity and veracity of such information.

Statistics from Digital 2020 Global Digital Overview show that more than 4.5billion people used the internet at the start of 2020. Active social media users have passed the 3.8billion mark with this number increasing by more than 9 percent (321 million new users) since this time in 2019. Nearly 60 percent of the world’s population is already online; and trends suggest that more than half of the world’s total population will use social media by the middle of this year.(Chaffey, 2020). This report gives an insight to the extent the spread of fake news and information can have on the virtual community and also non social media users worldwide.

Health misinformation is not new to Nigeria. At the height of the Ebola epidemic in 2014, false news swirled around the country. This included advice allegedly from the Atta of Igala, that bathing in and ingesting saltwater could stop anyone from getting the disease. This false information led to two deaths. Ebola itself killed eight people in Nigeria. (Hassan, 2020)

The menace of false information has already re-emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Lagos health officials, three people were hospitalized after  taking an overdose of chloroquine. This followed rumors, publicly endorsed by US President Donald Trump, that the drug could treat the coronavirus.

A fear of the unknown and a deluge of information in the digital space create fertile ground for fake news. Nigerians may be particularly vulnerable not because they are uniquely gullible, but because of weak communications between the government and the governed, high reverence for “miracle healing” and a dilapidated health care system.

Moreover, the threat of fake news is even greater in 2020 than in 2014. False information is more sophisticated than ever and its potential for damage spread much wider because of the number of persons that consume the wrong information. In 2015, Nigeria had 76million internet subscribers. By 2019, this number had increased to 122million.

Social media activists, influencers and self-styled warriors are using their social media platforms and fringe websites to proliferate misinformation, propagate conspiracy theories and promote the denial of COVID-19. Sometimes their motivation is simply to grow their online followership. For instance, 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.

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. Other so-called experts have proffered cures such as constant sex or sitting in the sun, or have claimed that African blood is immune to the Coronavirus. None of these have any medical basis.

Finally, there are also political ideologues who have been trying to exploit the pandemic to influence public opinion along partisan lines. Supporters of the opposition People’s Democratic Party (PDP) have sought to create a narrative that it handled the Ebola crisis far better than the current government is dealing with COVID-19. The recent confirmation that Abba Kyari, the president’s chief of staff, has tested positive has given the opposition new ammunition, though this has been complemented with unsubstantiated rumors that ventilators have been moved from the isolation centre in Abuja to Aso Rock for Kyari’s personal use.

For their part, supporters of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) have sought to politicize the crisis by focusing more on the irresponsible action of individuals linked to the opposition. Confirmation that the son of Atiku Abubakar, the PDP’s 2019 presidential candidate, had contracted the virus was followed by fake photos and videos of the son dancing in clubs, ignoring government isolation advice. (Hassan, 2020)

According to the Africa Report (Glez, 2020), ten popular fake news items on COVID 19 include:

* **Transmission via mosquito bites**

Although it’s always appropriate to keep a safe distance from the insect that spreads paludism and dengue fever, respiratory viruses don’t seem, at this stage, to be transmitted by mosquito bites, but by droplets of saliva or nasal secretions expelled by an infected person when coughing or sneezing. Speaking of animals, no house pets seem to have been infected by the new coronavirus.

* **Some plausible, but useless, remedies**

Antibiotics work against bacteria, not viruses. Taking antibiotics to treat or prevent corona virus 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 doesn’t look particularly promising.

* **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.

### 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.

### 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.

### Youthful Immunity

The virus doesn’t just impact the elderly, although being in a fragile state influences the body’s ability to fight infection.

### A Conspiracy Brought To You by Big Pharma

According to this theory, pharmaceutical giants that have made a fortune off of drugs are hiding sample effective corona virus treatments so that they can profit from the sale of a future vaccine. The anti-vaccine movement piggybacks on the delayed treatment conspiracy.

* **Bio weapon Rumors**

Just as conspiracy theories proliferated about HIV, theories surrounding the corona virus posit that the disease is a bio weapon engineered by the Chinese government, the US government or Bill Gates’ foundation and that it was either deliberately or accidentally released. These rumors overlap with tall tales of former Soviet bloc countries supposedly carrying out secret geopolitical operations to weaken democracies via massive viral propaganda campaigns.

* **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 corona virus 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.

Globally, World Health Organization (WHO) has partnered with Twitter, Facebook, Tencent and TikTok to try to ensure content on their respective platforms is accurate and helpful.  In January, WHO and Google joined forces to launch an SOS Alert on COVID-19.  Now, when people search for information on Coronavirus on Google, it is information from WHO’s SOS alert that appears at the top of the page. Videos on YouTube purporting to be useful updates on Corona virus are framed by a banner redirecting users to the WHO web portal.  Also, if someone were to search for ‘corona virus’ on Facebook, the first result directs web users to their national WHO office’s page.

Fighting fake news alongside WHO is the international press agency, Agence France-Presse (AFP).  The news agency has brought its fact-checking and information gathering expertise to bear on this global public health crisis, partnering with major tech firms along the way to help disprove viral stories circulating on the net.

While disinformation is a global phenomenon, the way it spreads can vary from country to country.  In Africa, news is often spread via WhatsApp groups or local radio, sometimes more than on Facebook or Twitter.  Traditional journalism skills are still extremely important for correspondents and stringers who monitor these WhatsApp groups and traditional media for outlandish or unverified stories.(WHO, Inoculating Against the Infodemic in Africa, 2020)

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