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Assignment : Submit a write up on Social media on proliferation of fake news, dodgy health advice and fake cures of Covid-19.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is happening at a time when sorting facts from fiction is increasingly difficult. In Nigeria, a tsunami of misinformation and disinformation has accompanied the virus' spread, provoking fear and exploiting vulnerabilities. Many Nigerians simply refuse to believe the disease's existence. False information in Nigeria is undermining medical advice, proffering fake cures, inciting panic and being used for political point-scoring.

Health misinformation is nothing 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 you getting the disease. This false information led to two deaths. Ebola itself killed eight people in Nigeria.

This pattern has already re-emerged during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Lagos health officials, three people have been hospitalised after overdosing on chloroquine. This followed rumours, publicly endorsed by US President Donald Trump, that the drug could treat the virus.

A fear of the unknown and a deluge of information in the digital space creates 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 spread much wider. In 2015, Nigeria had 76 million internet subscribers. By 2019, this had increased to 122 million.

This means the already over-burdened Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) does not just have to combat COVID-19 but also fake news. A review by the Centre for Democracy and Development since the virus reached Nigeria suggests that purveyors of fake news have sought to incite panic and panic buying, proffer fake cures, undermine medical advice, promote hate speech particularly individuals of Chinese origin, and promote polarization along political lines.

**Who is spreading fake news?**

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.

**How does it spread?**

The platforms used to share COVID-19 misinformation vary across geopolitical zones and demographics in Nigeria. Facebook and WhatsApp continue to be the most popular messaging platforms, whilst Twitter, Instagram and traditional media play complementary roles. There is cross-posting across all platforms.

WhatsApp, in particular, is a common conduit as it allows for the circulation of different types of media such as audio, video, text and links. For audio in languages like Hausa, listeners do not necessarily have to be literate to understand.

Trust also plays a massive role in whether messages are believed and spread. Content is more likely to resonate when it comes from religious leaders, friends, family or other trusted authority figures.

The theories have spread almost as fast as the new coronavirus: Chloroquine is a proven cure, children are immune and 5G caused the pandemic. While millions of us remain cooped up in our homes under strict lockdown laws, on WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and elsewhere, a range of bogus stories and half-baked conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19 have gained considerable global momentum.

In the UK alone, nearly half of all adults have been exposed to false claims or misleading information online about the virus, according to research published last week by the country's media watchdog, Ofcom.

Some 35 percent have seen claims that drinking more water can help flush out the disease, for example, while around a quarter have seen advice suggesting the infection can be treated by gargling salt water - both of which have been rubbished by the World Health Organization and contradict UK public health guidelines.

Among those to have personally witnessed the pernicious advance of misinformation is Ahmed Aweis, a business owner in London, itself the epicentre of Britain's coronavirus caseload.

For weeks, he has seen fake news spread freely on WhatsApp and Facebook. On YouTube, the 10 most popular 5G coronavirus conspiracy videos posted in March were viewed millions of times. Meanwhile, content linking the pandemic to mobile technology continues to spread on Twitter, and Facebook groups - still active today - are filled with misinformation of the same sort.

Towards the end of March, Aweis said, up to 25 videos a day spouting mistruths were being shared across a handful of his online groups of friends and relatives - all while COVID-19 tightened its grip on swathes of Western Europe.

Despite his best efforts to rebut the claims, "everybody was just sharing stuff left, right and centre", he said, including content that purportedly proved coronavirus was man-made, or caused by the rollout of 5G mobile technology.

"It was frightening and infuriating because you know this information is false, but the people who are sharing it have the confidence this will help or save humanity - and other people pick up on that," Aweis told Al Jazeera.

"I am very, very worried; there is so much misinformation being spouted around."

Some of the fake news spreading around are;

**Transmission via mosquito bites:**

Although it’s always appropriate to keep a safe distance from the insect that spreads palladiums 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 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 doesn’t look particularly promising.

**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 traveling 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.

**Containing**

**COVID-19 misinformation:**

To rapidly and effectively counter disinformation and misinformation, the Nigerian government must engage in a sustained two-way communication with its citizens. It must consistently and transparently provide information that responds to people's concerns. A quick review of the NCDC official Twitter handle shows that, in many instances, questions and clarifications raised by individuals have not been directly responded to.

Civil society can also be leveraged by government bodies like the National Orientation Agency to ensure that correct information is shared widely in the public domain and that false news is quickly countered.

There is an urgent need in Nigeria and beyond to counter the scourge of fake news around coronavirus. As we've seen around the world, tackling the disease requires everyone to follow advice and do their part. Accurate information is critical.

Without clear and immediate action to tackle false information, the accompanying pandemic of fake news will make the COVID-19 pandemic much more challenging.

Sources: Aljazeera news

Www.the africa report.com

Www.bbc.com.

Stay safe.