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

**What is Social Media?**

Social media is a collective term for websites and applications which focus on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Different types of social media are normally dedicated to forums, micro blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social curation, and wikis.

Many individuals will use social media to stay in touch and interact with friends and family, while others use it to communicate with different communities. Social media has become larger and more accessible thanks to access to mobile applications, with some examples of social media including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn.

**What is Fake news?**

Fake news is fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).

Fake news (also known as junk news, pseudo-news, or hoax news) is a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social. Digital news has brought back and increased the usage of fake news, or yellow journalism. The news is then often reverberated as misinformation in social media but occasionally finds its way to the mainstream media as well.

Fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership. Similarly, clickbait stories and headlines earn advertising revenue from this activity.

**COVID-19 virus**

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. At this time, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments.

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

In times of crisis, misinformation, Unreliable and false information is spreading around the world to such an extent, that some commentators are now referring to the new avalanche of misinformation that’s accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic as a ‘disinfodemic’ and fears are growing that this phenomenon is putting lives at risk, prompting some with symptoms to try unproven remedies in the hope of curing themselves.

Before the outbreak of the virus, UNESCO was issuing warnings of the impact that technological and social transformation has had on how we exchange information in recent years, referring to the contamination caused by some orchestrated misinformation campaigns, which pose a threat to fact-based journalism and, particularly during the current pandemic, people’s lives.

Researchers and journalists have documented a growing number of cases of misinformation about the virus, ranging from racist explanations for the disease's origin to false claims about miracle cures. Conspiracy theorists, trolls and cynics hoping to use the panic to boost traffic to their own accounts have all contributed to the cloud of bad information. Coronavirus is emerging in more countries around the world and there's currently no known cure. Unfortunately, that hasn't stopped a slew of health advice, ranging from useless but relatively harmless, to downright dangerous.

We've been looking at some of the most widespread claims being shared online, and what the science really says.

1.**Onions**: One old wives’ tale currently circulating on the platform is that you can protect people from COVID-19 if you leave raw onions in the corners of a room, which has led to a number of parents doing just that. One 19-year-old whose mum was sucked in by the claims, Temiloluwa Oseni from Ashford, was shocked to find that her mother, Abiola Oseni, 46, had placed raw onions in every corner of their house, believe it would ‘absorb’ bacteria from the coronavirus and prevent her family from getting it.

Abiola has even been peeling a layer off the onions each day to help the smell from the vegetables flow around the home and work its magic.

2. **House hold cleaning supplies**: A man has died and his wife was left fighting for her life after the pair took fish tank cleaner in an attempt to self-medicate for coronavirus.

The couple, from Phoenix, Arizona, took chloroquine phosphate, an additive commonly used in aquariums, it is approved by the Food and Drug Administration in its medicinal form for treating malaria, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. However, they did not take it in its medical form.

President Donald Trump has suggested the additive as a potential treatment for Covid-19, but the FDA has not approved it as a medication for the deadly disease. Experts from Arizona-based non-profit health system Banner Health have urged people not to take the substance or any other "inappropriate medications and household products" in an attempt to counter the virus.

3**. Garlic**: Lots of posts that recommend eating garlic to prevent infection are being shared on Facebook. The WHO (World Health Organization) says that while it is "a healthy food that may have some antimicrobial properties", there's no evidence that eating garlic can protect people from the new coronavirus. In lots of cases, these kinds of remedies aren't harmful in themselves, as long as they aren't preventing you from following evidence-based medical advice, but they have the potential to be.

The South China Morning Post reported a story of a woman who had to receive hospital treatment for a severely inflamed throat after consuming 1.5kg of raw garlic. We know, in general, that eating fruit and vegetables and drinking water can be good for staying healthy. However, there is no evidence specific foods will help fight this particular virus.

4. **Miracle minerals**: YouTuber Jordan Sather, who has many thousands of followers across different platforms, has been claiming that a "miracle mineral supplement", called MMS, can "wipe out" coronavirus.

It contains chlorine dioxide, a bleaching agent. Sather and others promoted the substance even before the coronavirus outbreak, and in January he tweeted that, "not only is chlorine dioxide an effective cancer cell killer, it can wipe out coronavirus too".

5. **Home-made hand sanitizer**: There have been many reports of shortages of hand sanitizer gel and as these reports of the shortages emerged, so did recipes for home-made gel on social media.

These recipes, alleged dupes for one of the country's most popular brands, were for a disinfectant better suited for cleaning surfaces and, as scientists pointed out, not suitable for use on skin.

Alcohol-based hand gels usually also contain emollients, which make them gentler on skin, on top of their 60-70% alcohol content. Professor Sally Bloomfield, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says she does not believe you could make an effective product for sanitizing hands at home, even vodka alone contains 40% alcohol.

6. **Drinkable silver**: The use of colloidal silver was promoted on US televangelist Jim Bakker's show. Colloidal silver is tiny particles of the metal suspended in liquid. A guest on the show claimed the solution kills some strains of coronavirus within 12 hours (while admitting it hadn't yet been tested on Covid-19). The idea that it could be an effective treatment for coronavirus has been widely shared on Facebook, particularly by "medical freedom" groups which are deeply suspicious of mainstream medical advice.

Proponents of colloidal silver claim it can treat all kinds of health conditions, act as an antiseptic, and state it helps the immune system. There are some occasional uses of silver in healthcare, for example in bandages applied to wounds, but that doesn't mean it's effective to consume.

There's clear advice from the US health authorities that there's no evidence this type of silver solution is effective for any health condition. More importantly, it could cause serious side effects including kidney damage, seizures and argyria - a condition that makes your skin turn blue. They say that, unlike iron or zinc, silver is not a metal that has any function in the human body. Some of those promoting the substance for general health on social media have found their posts now generate a pop-up warning from Facebook's fact-checking service.

7. **Drinking water every 15 minutes**: One post, copied and pasted by multiple Facebook and WhatsApp accounts, quotes a "Japanese doctor" who recommends drinking water every 15 minutes to flush out any virus that might have entered the mouth. A version in Arabic has been shared more than 250,000 times.

Professor Trudie Lang at the University of Oxford says there is no biological mechanism that would support the idea that you can just wash a respiratory virus down into your stomach and kill it. Infections like coronaviruses enter the body via the respiratory tract when you breathe in. Some of them might go into your mouth, but even constantly drinking water isn't going to prevent you from catching the virus.

Nonetheless, drinking water and staying hydrated is generally good medical advice.

8. **Heat and avoiding ice cream**: There are lots of variations of the advice suggesting heat kills the virus, from recommending drinking hot water to taking hot baths, or using hairdryers.

One post, copied and pasted by dozens of social media users in different countries and falsely attributed to Unicef claims that drinking hot water and exposure to the sun will kill the virus, and says ice cream is to be avoided. A representative of Unicef issued out a statement on coronavirus misinformation, says: "A recent erroneous online message...purporting to be a Unicef communication appears to indicate that avoiding ice cream and other cold foods can help prevent the onset of the disease. This is, of course, wholly untrue."

We know the flu virus doesn't survive well outside the body during the summer, but we don't yet know how heat impacts the new coronavirus. Trying to heat your body or expose yourself to the sun is completely ineffective. According to Professor Bloomfield “once the virus is in your body, there's no way of killing it, your body just has to fight it off”.

In conclusion, during this moments of crisis it is important to fact-check the credibility of news especially news circulated through social media before ingesting or circulating such information, this fake information is potentially harmful during delicate times in human history such as now.

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