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Social Media and the Spread of Rumours: A COVID-19 Case Study

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Abstract: Social media is a digital platform that enables users to share ideas, information, and content—such as photos, videos, and documents—through virtual communities. Accessible via smartphones, tablets, or computers, platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become powerful tools for public expression. Social media allows users to voice opinions on various social issues, often leading to what is known as a media trial—a controversial phenomenon that can either aid justice or spread societal harm. While it empowers individuals to highlight injustice, it also contributes to a "delusion world" where misinformation can flourish. This chapter explores the role of social media in shaping perceptions of crime, justice, liberty, equality, and freedom of speech, while also addressing the implications of information and misinformation in today's digital age.

Keywords: media, society, world, age, family.

INTRODUCTION

I

Social media does not merely provide us with information—it shapes perceptions about individuals, families, societies, companies, political parties, and more. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a prime example of social media's influence. While it created awareness, it also spread widespread fear and misinformation.

Between January 2017 and May 2018, at least thirty-three people were killed across India in incidents of mob lynching fueled by rumors that child-lifters were on the loose. On June 28, 2018, three people were killed in Tripura on suspicion of being child abductors. According to the rumors, they had allegedly killed a child and removed his kidneys. Ironically, one of the men killed was a 36-year-old who had been hired by the local administration to travel from village to village, making announcements to dispel these very rumors. These killings were directly caused by misinformation spread via social media platforms, especially WhatsApp.

A 2014 study found that amidst growing political polarization in the U.S., "there is little overlap in the news sources" used by liberals and conservatives. Americans are being exposed to vastly different political narratives, which only serves to deepen ideological divides and generate hostility toward opposing viewpoints. People are less influenced by the content itself and more by the source. Credibility is judged based on how compatible the information is with an individual's existing beliefs and emotions.

Mainstream media has significantly contributed to this polarization—either implicitly, through editorial biases, or explicitly, by supporting particular political candidates during elections. As trust in mainstream media declined, the internet empowered those previously silenced or ignored. The controversial *Breitbart News Network* is a prime example of how public distrust in traditional media has been exploited for ideological gain.

The near-universal adoption of social media in democracies has further amplified personalized media consumption. A 2017 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that two-thirds of Americans received their news via social media, including more than half of users over 50. Social media platforms use complex algorithms that subtly trap users in echo chambers, reinforcing their existing worldviews.

II

Fake news often blends real incidents with misinformation, feeding people's pre-existing biases. For example, crimes committed by individuals from different religious communities are selectively reported or exaggerated to fit a communal or political narrative. Real incidents lend credibility to fake stories, reinforcing prejudices built over months of online propaganda.

These fake narratives are circulated within insular networks where few challenge their validity. Meanwhile, corrections or factual counter-narratives circulate within separate, disconnected communities. As a result, one group believes it has debunked misinformation, while the other continues to act on it. In truth, fake news often achieves its impact even after being identified as false.

Social media platforms, through options like blocking dissenting users or removing them from groups, limit exposure to contrary opinions. Most

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people end up seeing only the kind of content they are already inclined to believe.

Algorithms used by Facebook and Google further exacerbate the issue by offering content based on past user activity. If someone frequently engages with right-wing content, they will continue to be fed more of the same, and may never encounter corrections or left-leaning viewpoints.

Though this section focuses on right-wing misinformation, similar tactics are also used by other political and ideological groups. For instance, in August 2018, Congress leader Brijesh Kalappa shared a photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi smiling, insinuating he was laughing after the death of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. However, it was later confirmed that Modi had visited Vajpayee at AIIMS before his death.

Likewise, a misleading video circulated claiming that the UP police had lathi-charged unemployed youth staging a peaceful protest. In reality, the video was from Aligarh and involved members of the Hindu Jagran Manch, a Hindutva organization.

III

As of January 2021, the most popular social media platforms included:

1. Facebook (2.74 billion users)
2. YouTube (2.29 billion users)
3. WhatsApp (2 billion users)
4. Facebook Messenger (1.3 billion users)
5. Instagram (1.22 billion users)
6. TikTok (689 million users)
7. QQ (617 million users)
8. Douyin (600 million users)
9. Weibo (511 million users)

These platforms are used to shape public sentiment according to the needs of politicians, corporations, and nations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media gave rise to numerous rumors far removed from reality.

A rumor is an unverified story or piece of information that spreads through word of mouth or digital networks. Psychologist Jamuna Prasad, a pioneer in the study of rumor psychology, found that heightened anxiety greatly facilitates the spread of rumors. During crises, people often resort to speculation and scapegoating, targeting already marginalized or distrusted groups.

In polarized societies, rumors strengthen in-group solidarity while vilifying "outsiders." These emotionally charged and often fabricated stories spread rapidly, especially when they contain a mix of factual details and fiction.

IV

The Indian government, along with police and social media companies, has attempted to curb the spread of misinformation. Fake treatments and rumors about government actions during COVID-19 caused widespread panic. For example, a fake letter claiming all Mumbai restaurants would remain closed until October 15, 2020, circulated widely before being debunked by the Ministry of Tourism, which also lodged a complaint with the cyber police.

Other instances of fake news include:

- A video of a man licking bread wrappers, falsely claimed to be an act of "spit jihad" in India. It was later proven unrelated to India or COVID-19.
- A video of Canadian PM Justin Trudeau packing food during Ramadan was falsely circulated as his response to COVID-19, contrasting with Modi's symbolic gestures. The video was from 2017.
- A viral post wrongly claimed a 28-year-old doctor named Maneesha Patil died of COVID-19. The woman in the image was actually Dr. Richa Rajpoot from Kanpur, who confirmed she was alive and not treating COVID patients.

Another hoax reported that Elisa Granato, the first volunteer in a UK vaccine trial, had died. She later confirmed she was healthy. A post by Sujata Mondal Khan, wife of BJP MP Soumitra Khan, also went viral with claims she flew during lockdown. SpiceJet clarified no such civilian flights operated during that time.

V

In conclusion, not all news shared via social media is reliable—some are part of a delusional or misleading ecosystem. During times of election, social conflict, and pandemics like COVID-19, misinformation has the power to incite fear and disrupt society. Social media is accessible to all, including emotionally driven individuals who may not verify the facts.

Rumors circulated during COVID-19 included claims about infected fruit vendors, vaccine-related deaths, and community conspiracies. These stories reflect a deeper psychological tendency to find explanations during crises—even if they are false.

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This is not just the "information age"—it is the age of *misinformation*. We must critically evaluate every story, consider the source, and verify facts before accepting or sharing anything online.

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