COVID-19 Infodemic: Media Ethics and the Challenges of Fake News

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Abstract

This study investigated one of the main ethical challenges regarding the legitimate role of media in maintaining professional standards and ethics during the COVID-19 outbreak, with a focus on the case of Moroccan media. It principally deals with the conundrum of fake news spread in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it is apparent that there seems to be hardly an area left untouched by fake news regarding pandemic propagation. One should know that more attention has been drawn to the vulnerability of democratic societies to fake news and the ethical challenges brought by the pandemic to people across the globe.

*Keywords***:** Social media, Morocco, pandemic, false information, freedom of expression

Introduction

The popularity of social media has largely increased over recent years, allowing millions of connected people to easily create, edit, or share content. With no end of platforms becoming inundated with a massive 'infodemic', or an overabundance of information– about the virus, COVID-19 has forever changed social media landscape. The easy accessibility of social media platforms has abundantly facilitated the creation and dissemination of false information. The spread of false information has been a pressing concern for most countries all over the world. It has swept through societiesvia the invention of new technologies, which allowed for the rapid dissemination of false information. More importantly, modern technology has enabled fake news to proliferate like wildfire, assisted by the spread of social media, which has created a propitious environment for the false news explosion. The increase in use of social media exposes users to misleading information which appear to challenge an essential foundation of ethical media. The right to freedom of expression has unequivocally been abused by many governments using fake news as a pretext. While freedom of expression is undoubtedly a

fundamental right, it is argued that it needs to be driven and bound by societal duties and ethics. In actuality, ethics and standards constitute a correct conduct and a responsible practice (Plaisance, 2013). In times of crisis, responsibility serves as a foundation of ethics (Rendtorff, 2014). When responsible action is required, there is a need for credible information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, "fake news" has found fertile ground to constantly boom. Similarly, fake news on COVID-19 has rapidly spread on social media. In fact, the pandemic has not only produced momentous challenges for health systems all over the world, but also brought about incalculable occurrences of dilemmas (Tasnim et al., 2020). Given the threat presented by fake news during COVID-19, the crisis has sewn confusion in how governments should respond to the pandemic. Many countries presented emergency rules to combat the Covid-19 outbreak, which resulted in the restriction of media rights by their governments. The situation has brought to the forefront the debate on a number of ethical issues, mainly the proper conduct of media, and the protection of media freedom. Given this, the current study addresses some of the main ethical challenges likely to arise during this pandemic. The crisis resurfaces the question about the margins of media conduct and practice, including its responsibilities and rights.

Literature Review

The challenge of fake news arises from its definition; it can have very different meanings depending on the speaker and the context in which it occurs. The term "fake news" has remained a controversial concept in the field of media studies due to its convoluted and ambiguous aspect that covers everything, including media both-sides-ism, propaganda and disinformation (Zuckerman, 2017). Albeit the absence of a noticeable academic consensus on the concept, it may have a connection with other related terms such as "yellow journalism, propaganda, satirical news, and entertainment news reports, but none of these definitions completely encompass fake news (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019, p. 139). However, much research jointly agrees that "fake news is fictitious information presented to the public under the guise of being factual information, with the intention to mislead or misinform the reader" (Chong & Choy, 2020). In this regard, fake news may refer to any type of misleading content spread by media either intentionally or unintentionally to mislead people.

Likewise, the term has been used to define some associated concepts such as satire, parody, clickbait, propaganda, hoaxes and others (Sitek et al., 2020). Earlier studies considered the label "fake news" as a fresh addition to the news media terminology (Martens et al., 2018). Some studies have avoided handling the term "fake news "with a straightforward acceptance for the reason that "news" is supposed to give accurate information shared in the interest of the public and any information which doesn't meet this criterion is not worthy of the label news. In this view, 'fake news' is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – i.e. real news (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 7).

In examining information, much of the discussion on 'fake news' conflates three main terms: disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. The different types have been suggested by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) to "examine information disorder". In the

suggested typology, misinformation refers to "information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true" whereas "disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors". According to Sitek et al. (2020), misinformation is "when false information is shared, but no harm is meant" whereas disinformation is "when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm". Mal-information, on the other hand, refers to "genuine information which is shared to cause harm."

The term "infodemic" is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as "an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people" (UN, 2020). This clearly shows the perils of Infodemics as they can terribly shake the foundation of communities, across the globe, especially going through contagious diseases and/or pandemics.

Methods and Procedures

Given the qualitative and quantitative nature of the current study, the data used was sourced from news articles dating between April 2020 and June 2020. Almost 214 pieces of fake news were sampled from two main Moroccan online platforms: The Moroccan National News Agency known as MAP (Maghreb Arab Press) and Medi1 TV. The two news media platforms have launched fake news services through their electronic portals where they focus on content rated false or misleading and communicate verified information about COVID-19 intended to disprove fake news coming from other media platforms.

Likewise, data was collected through a survey instrument to investigate the participants about their reaction and attitudes towards fake news, as well as possible ethical issues raised in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. A sample of 126 participants were interviewed using a web-based questionnaire and virtual meetings. A combined set of open-ended questions were used to prompt discussion and help the researchers explore particular themes or raise new issues.

Results and Discussion

Fake News Stories

In the time of COVID-19, the circulation of fake news has reached an extent as never before. The fake news covers a number of misleading accounts that are often related to various issues. A wave of fake news on COVID-19 floods social media platforms and cover a number of issues. Morocco is no exception. Reviewing articles, in total 214 articles relating to COVID-19, published by the Moroccan online platforms: The Moroccan National News Agency known as MAP (Maghreb Arab Press) and Medi1 TV over the months of April and June 2020, a plenty of false and unverified information has been discriminated. Examples of fake news about COVID-19 included false health guidance, fabrication of official statements,

conspiracy theories, manipulation of images or use of real images in wrong contexts and false death tolls.

As the death toll from the coronavirus continues to increase, social-media users start to advice on ways to remedy or protect against the disease. Fake news often includes false information about the virus itself regarding ways of transmission, vaccines and remedies. In this sense then, fake medicines mainly herbal products were claimed to cure COVID-19. When the Moroccan health ministry authorised hospitals to use antimalarial drugs "Chloroquine" in treating the new confirmed COVID-19 cases, rumours circulated via social media platforms in attempt to negate the ministry's claims about the efficacy of the medicine.

Misleading posts allegedly attributed to senior officials have gone viral on Moroccan social media. The posts contained fake official statements where manipulation techniques were used to constantly produce them. The statements about COVID-19 containing information were deemed fake and distorted, later refuted by official media.

A number of conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus have appeared on the social media. Many videos pushing the unfounded conspiracy - that some world countries and international organisations are responsible for creating the coronavirus to profit from a vaccine - spread very quickly and have gone viral among users of social media. These accounts send out wrong indications that the virus is not life-threatening,

During the COVID-19 epidemic, real images have been manipulated to depict completely different events. Old Photos, for example, were used to show that people were breaking the rules such as distancing rules, gathering in public places, or shots showing people packed in markets or beaches. Similarly, videos showing people wearing face masks and falling on streets circulate false news.

Posts about the amount of misleading data regarding the number of infected and dead people have overwhelmed the social media platforms. Rumours have also been about the inflation of total number declared by the government about COVID-19 death tolls.

Other false claims related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic circulate on the Moroccan media. These include claim that mosquito bite can transmit coronavirus, that products imported from infected areas can carry the new coronavirus, and that COVID-19 crisis was exploited by the government to embezzle public funds.

Fake News Impact: Media Distrust and Threat to Democracy

The outbreak of COVID-19 has created a multifaceted crisis that has had a deep impact on society at large. The new avalanche of fake news accompanying COVID-19 pandemic has been so worrying that it could have influenced various aspects of life (health, news, school, work, sociability, and so forth.).

One major concern about fake news is that it could damage the public trust in democratic institutions (Ognyanova et al., 2020). This research indicates that 90% of interviewed participants believe that fake news has caused growing mistrust among them about certain

subjects, such as news media and government policies. Exposure to fake news has cast doubt upon the efficacy of government's action, particularly in the first stages of COVID-19 crisis. Most of the respondents revealed that the extent of the trust in governments' ability to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic has declined by virtue of fake news aiming at undermining either intentionally or unemotionally the action of the government during the crisis. Some respondents also declared that conflicting stories about the same incidence from different sources can influence their confidence in the media.

Fake news has also had a considerable impact on popular anxiety surrounding this pandemic. Respondents reported that social media has a great impact on sparking fear pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. One reason for the panic is attributed to the little knowledge about COVID-19 and fear of the unknown has been worsened by confusing and disputed information about pandemic's mortality rate. Fake news feeds anxiety and fear; fear of being infected, or exposing loved ones to risks.

Challenges and Ethical Issues: Questioning the Role of Media

The phenomenon of fake news is perceived as a powerful force that has the potential to affect democracy (Ștefăniță et al., 2018). The spread of online fake news has presented a plethora of challenges to governments all over the world. At least, it has threatened the social and political stability of many countries through spreading panic and anxiety among the public and, in some cases, has brought about incivility and violence (Rainie et al., 2017).

All these challenges have raised the question about the real role that media should assume to maintain professional standards and ethics. In this regard, rampant efforts have been made by many world governments and organisations to combat fake news. In many countries, varied steps have been taken to enforce the removal of fake news "by bringing in a law to restrict the usage or penalise the perpetrators" (Bali & Desai, 2019). However, some countries have taken strict measures, while others have been less prescriptive.

Morocco reacted rapidly and firmly to the threat posed by the spread of fake news, mainly on social media platforms. At first, the authorities responded by starting a clampdown targeting people who have circulated fake news. A dozen people have been arrested and prosecuted on the basis of allegations of spreading rumours about the coronavirus, including the popular Moroccan YouTube influencer known as "Mi Naima". This famous influencer has been sentenced to one-year imprisonment, after she was accused of spreading fake news in which she denied the existence of the coronavirus pandemic on her YouTube channel and incite people to ignore precautionary measures recommended by the Moroccan Ministry of Health (Mebtoul, 2020).

Amnesty International referred to another case of arrest during the COVID-19 outbreak. Nador activist Omar Naji, a member of The Moroccan Association of Human Rights, has been subjected to preventive detention as a result of his posts on social media in the context of COVID-19. Naji was accused of spreading allegations about police officers who seized goods from street merchants to redistribute to NGOs (Kacha, 2020).

Highlighting the seriousness of fake news, the Moroccan Prime Minister SaadEddine El-Otmani declared that "fake news is the first cause of panic among citizens", in a way of comparing the proliferation of fake news with the infection of the pandemic (Reuters, 2020). In attempt to mitigate the spread of fake news, the government approved decree-law No. 2.20.292 issued on the provisions relating to the state of health emergency and the procedures for its declaration. The draft law enacted special provisions for regulating the use of social media. It sets penalties for anyone breaking "orders and decisions taken by public authorities" and for anyone "obstructing" those decisions through "writings, publications or photos" (Guellali, 2020).

Fake news on the COVID-19 pandemic amplified by Media has had far-reaching ethical implications beyond the spread of the virus itself and endeavours to confine it. When Morocco, like many other countries, applied its information laws, the country has been criticised by human rights groups for what they see as a growing clampdown on free speech, including detention provisions for people who have expressed dissent on social media (Reuters, 2020).

Morocco's step to pass anti-fake law news has been seen to put basic human rights in jeopardy. However, such an action has raised the question about how to protect the public debate without affecting the exercise of fundamental freedoms.

In fact, this question poses a big challenge to all interested stakeholders since freedom of expression is protected under Article19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which highlights the importance of people's freedom to hold opinions and ideas and to share them with others without the State interfering. However, certain interferences with this right are permissible under Article 19 so that governments may justifiably enforce restrictions on the right, for instance to protect other rights or principal concerns, such as national security (United Nations, 1966, Article 19 (2)).

A severely legal approach to combating fake news is unsafe since efforts to regulate and penalise what can be regarded as "fake news can result in the infringement on the right to freedom of expression. This worrying trend jeopardises free speech and freedom of press, and discourage people of sharing information on issues of public interest. Therefore, any response to this matter must ensure the protection of free expression in any attempts to address the "fake news" question.

Conclusion

With the growing debate over how to expose and eliminate fake news during COVID-19 crisis, the issue of media ethics and proper conduct has rigorously come under fire. The pandemic has provided governments throughout the world with a new excuse to wield laws, criminalising the spread of fake news and crack down on the free media. Alarmingly, many countries have put restrictions on media freedom, either through limiting access to information or a launch of verbal and physical attacks on people reporting on the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Media users including journalists and social media influencers have

been harassed and jailed for interrogating government accounts about the pandemic, or for using social media to reveal potential unreported incidents. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the media range violently at a time when it should play a central role in providing correct information and fighting fake news about the pandemic. Media practitioners and users have increasingly seen their rights infringed while government consider emergency measures to tackle the pandemic as a reasonable pretext to censor news and information.

Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, the free flow of news is more indispensable than ever, guaranteeing an easy exchange of accurate information. However, without a responsible media reporting, vulnerable people all over the world would fall prey to fake news. Countering false and misleading information needs to ensure the ability of people to have access to accurate information, not by tossing media practitioners and users in jail for speaking up their minds and imposing a tight leash on social media. The issue of dealing of fake news is a common responsibility. The excitement and free space granted by media should not divert the enthusiastic generation from the threat posed to freedom of expression by legislation introduced by government to tackle the issue. On the other hand, any responses to address fake news need to consider global standards of freedom of expression. Governments should guarantee the presence of effectively resourced media and place measures to endorse media diversity and provide care for the creation of various reliable media content.

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