Moroccan Social Media Platforms and COVID-19 Misinformation

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a massive 'infodemic' and an over-abundance of disinformation that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. Young Moroccan internet users resort to social media for their news, and easily fall prey to the misinformation and fake news they encounter online. When it concerns public health, disinformation can turn into a lethal weapon. This is further exacerbated at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. To tackle this, the present research paper answers the research questions using a qualitative method, particularly semi-structured interviews preferable in exploratory research where the purpose is to gain an understanding of spreading online misinformation in the age of COVID-19. Semi-structured Interviews are conducted via "Google Meet" and "Zoom" using video-conferencing among 12 young Moroccan social media activists and professionals. The main research findings have shown that young Moroccan social media users have been consuming fake news about the Coronavirus, which has been especially prevalent on the most popular platforms, Facebook, Whats App and YouTube. Other results have shown that the mainstream media failed to debunk misinformation by subjecting them to rigorous fact checking experiments, lack of Media Information Literacy research in the form of crisis audits and crisis planning, Moroccan social media are ill prepared for crisis manual and conducting crisis training. These ensure that media regulators are not better equipped to handle any misinformation in health crisis situations. Therefore, media literacy is not only about how to use the computer and do an internet search, it also involves helping young Moroccan people to deal with disinformation in crisis situations, and realize that anyone anywhere can put up a very official-looking websites. These websites masquerade as high-credibility sources that have been spreading misinformation about COVID-19. Therefore, the government needs

1. INTRODUCTION

Switching to social media for getting news is not a new issue; however, the disastrous cumulative effect of the way different media platforms disseminate misinformation during Covid-19 pandemic to the publics is a recent topic that needs further investigation. In fact, due to the ubiquity of different social media outlets, people now turn to social media to get

information about Covid-19 as a new virus, learning about its treatments, and share what they find. Therefore, they get misinformation they on online environment. Therefore, spreading misinformation on social media during Coronavirus health crisis has disastrous cumulative effect on public health.

There's a lot of information about Covid-19 on social media, and Moroccan internet users resort to these platforms to get information about Coronavirus. Unfortunately, they are often receiving misinformation and sharing it with their contacts via computers, smart phones and the Internet. However, these new communication technologies have played a powerful role in informing, educating and connecting people around the world. Disinformation, which can be made easily available on the web, has become a dangerous virus when it is hazardous to publics' health. The availability of fake news, rumors and misinformation from different parts of the world during Covid-19 crisis has made it easy for individuals to acquire false knowledge about the new virus that may cause significant harm. Disinformation denotes information that is spread deliberately in order to influence and deceive the publics (Renée DiResta, 2020). Disinformation is usually used to achieve a particular political objective (Renée DiResta, 2020).

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recently, there has been a flood of misinformation about the Coronavirus spreading through the internet, which the World Health Organization (2020) called a "massive infodemic". Despite their efforts to both detect and label websites and posts that spread serious misleading information about the new Coronavirus, media professionals haven't stopped this sudden forceful flow (Benson, 2020). Receiving accurate information from trustworthy source in time of crises on health issue is of paramount importance. It's easy to say that what happened in Morocco as in many other countries is spreading misinformation about both the new virus about the government's management of the health crisis. This happened because of Facebook and other social networking sites. However, technology, satellite television, computers, mobile phones and the Internet, has played a powerful role in informing, educating and connecting people in the region.

Since Covid-19 is a new disease, many theories have been reported out as fact, and people around the world are looking for information about the disease. Professional and official communications have changed topics and tips on masks as new information has emerged (Renée DiResta, 2020). It has been shown that disinformation and misinformation thrive in health crises, as past experiences of disinformation concerning HIV and Ebola, for instance

have demonstrated (Renée DiResta, 2020). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, disinformation has spread among the population all over the world, just like Coronavirus itself. According to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, stated at the Munich Security Conference in February (2020), "we are not only fighting an epidemic; we are also fighting an infodemic".

The majority of popular media platforms, especially Facebook and YouTube, which are distributing fake news about the coronavirus, are used as the main source of information by many social media users. In fact, researchers and lay people have challenged the problem of disinformation, which has become almost impossible to control, reduce, or limit. More than that, fake news and misinformation on Covid-19 have certainly become a serious danger and threat (Panke, 2020), since it may affect people and believe that the news is true, and therefore take extreme measures. For instance, in Iran fake news, such as "Alcohol is a cure for COVID-19" led to many hospitalizations and deaths (Karimi and Gambrell, 2020). Therefore, many actions like these take place in different parts of the world, and have even led to death. In fact, this demonstrates how vulnerable the publics is to fake-news in crisis situations, particularly when it comes to publics' health issues, and how dangerous the results can be, when we ignore them (Patwa, Sharma, PYKL, Guptha , Kumari, Akhtar, Ekbal, Das, Chakraborty, 2021).

Identifying and recognizing the fake news is the first step towards tackling and managing it. Few studies have investigated the content of social media and its relation to COVID-19 health crisis (Patwa, Sharma, PYKL, Gotha, Kumari, Akhtar, Ekbal, Das, Chakraborty, 2021). Scientists have also been trying to discover different techniques to deal with 'infodemic' of misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic on social media platforms. Shahi and Nandini (2020) presented multilingual cross-domain dataset of 5182 fact-checked news articles for COVID-19. They collected the articles from 92 different fact-checking websites. Kar et al. (2020) proposed a BERT based model augmented with additional features extracted from Twitter to identify fake tweets related to COVID-19. They also used BERT model for multiple Indic Language. Vijjali et al. (2020) developed an automated pipeline for COVID-19 fake news detection using fact checking algorithms and textual entailment (Patwa, Sharma, PYKL, Guptha, Kumari, Akhtar, Ekbal, Das, Chakraborty, 2021).

In Morocco, The mainstream media have not succeeded in exposing false claims and fake news by either controlling them or examine them using rigorous fact checking. There has been many attempts to experiment information via fact-checking devices, which have recently been launched, however they have not yet influenced the generation of contents online (Alami &

Lemaizi, 2020), and therefore reduce the spread of fake news. The only strategy that Moroccan authorities resorted to reduce the spread of disinformation on social media is that they responded by introducing a crackdown in order to target internet users who have spread fake news and misinformation during a serious health crisis. Another rigorous strategy that Moroccan government resorted to limiting the spread of false news about Covid-19 arresting and prosecuting dozen of Moroccan citizens among them influencers on social networking sites (Alami & Lemaizi, 2020).

In the same vein, there has been a deficiency in providing a detailed report by Moroccan media on the consequences of covid-19 pandemic (Baumann & Hoffmann, 2020). Therefore, Moroccan young people get the information from social media, which includes plenty of disinformation. We are bombarded by fake news and disinformation which are omnipresent on social media platforms. As a result, this influences Moroccan citizens, who believe in fake news and take some false measures which have caused significant harm. This is further exacerbated during Coronavirus pandemic along with the failure of public authorities in managing crisis communication. Although it is essential to invalidate such information, criminalizing it is less expedient (Baumann & Hoffmann, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research study requires first hand experience and perspectives from the practicing social media users; so semi-structured interviews have been selected as a suitable research method to collect data from the participants. Personal interviews have been conducted online via Google Meet with ten social media activists and users to provide deeper insights in to the present area of research. This research paper provides an answer to these research questions including, what is the real interplay between the spread of fake news during coronavirus pandemic and social media platforms? Who is behind the screen creating fake news and sharing it on Moroccan social media? What are the strategies that might be adopted to control the amount of disinformation and limit fake news we are reading on social media platforms? How do young Moroccan people deal with online disinformation in the age of COVID-19? What principles and strategies should regulators teach young people to combat the infodemic and help enhance their media information literacy?

As a qualitative method, semi structured interviews is chosen for this study. It is selected in this exploratory research wherein the main research objective is to explore the use of disinformation on social media during a limited period of time, particularly during the lockdown on this basis on allegations of Covid-10 pandemic, and how Moroccan young people

have dealt with it. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with respondents to gain an in-depth understanding on social media practitioners' practices, attitudes and perceptions and practices generating and sharing media content online. In the interviews, the researcher is using a purposive sampling technique to target a desired population and pick a small number of cases that yield the most information about the disastrous cumulative effect of spreading misinformation on social media platforms during Coronavirus health crisis is a key challenge. Thus, the upcoming data resources encompassed meticulously sought after populations that have a direct coherency and relationship with the phenomenon.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative or open-ended data, which have been collected from the respondents' information, are analyzed for categories, themes and perspectives, and reports themes. This process of collecting and analyzing data is essential to qualitative approach, since it resorts to a method of analysis on semi-structured interviews called thematic analysis (Creswell, 2009).

Research Q1: what is the real interplay between the spread of fake news during coronavirus pandemic and social media platforms?

Majority of the social media users who are interviewed are tech savvy, and use Facebook and YouTube for getting news and information about Covid-19. Participants who are interviewed via Zoom and Google Meet state that with the introduction of new communication technologies and social media to peoples' personal lives have made them almost addictive to social networking sites. Thus, electronic newspaper, blogs, and Journalists' or activists' Facebook pages provide an easy access to information online. A social media activist claims, "Since, we have access to Facebook on our smart phones today, I keep checking Facebook status updates and feeds frequently, which indirectly helps me to get information in front of the public on Covid 19 as I get story opportunities from Facebook via feeds on my Facebook account instantly"

Research Q2: Who is behind the screen creating fake news and sharing it on Moroccan social media?

Social media activists have been interviewed and agree upon the idea that "during crisis situation such as Covid 19 health crisis, there has been an increased need for reliable information; therefore, the weakness of the mainstream media, which are not capable of meeting Moroccan citizens' increased need for reliable information is partly to blame for the

rapid dissemination of false information". Another reason for the increase of fake news during Coronavirus pandemic is the increase in the consumption of social networking sites and the dominance of the big tech platforms in the country. An interviewee states "There has been an increase of social media users in Morocco, and we, internet users, spend several hours a day on media platforms owned by the "Gang of Four" tech companies ,Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Amazon (GAFA)".Moreover, "80% of digital media consumers access information via various social networks, with Facebook being the favorite".

 Besides, interviewees agree on the idea that "anyone can produce content, be it a video, image or text with selective editing, so it is of paramount importance to notice that the value of content generation and creation value doesn't translate into the ideas in the content with trustworthy and transparent information. According to a research participant, "It is almost impossible to determine exactly who is responsible for all those misleading posts shared on Moroccan social media; there are so many micro-media sites on the internet, including many publications that are rather surreptitiously funded". Therefore, it is interesting to teach Moroccan young people how micro-media operate, and learn about and get different skills media information literacy (MIL).

 Therefore, media information literacy provides people with the necessary skills to deal with fake news and manage disinformation online. It also helps internet users and media practitioners to be conscious about posts that are shared online, and that that anyone ca create official-looking websites. These websites may masquerade as high-credibility sources that are generating content that is based on impressions rather than research studies about COVID-19.

 Therefore, the government is supposed to resort to professionals and tech-savvy people to recognize and find out the media platforms that have been spreading disinformation and fake news. The majority of interviewees revealed that several social media platforms are more concerned in gaining as many likes and followers as possible without taking into the consideration the risk of spreading misleading messages and misinformation during covid-19 pandemic, and its big influence on public health.

 Research Q3: What are the strategies that might be adopted to control the amount of disinformation and limit fake news we are reading on social media platforms?

Several social media users have stated that they have been misused. One of the budding social media activists felt "social media are exploited to promote their personal web pages". An interviewee argues, "fake profiles posting news about Covid-19 that didn't exist in reality,

obscene comments and ego clashes on Facebook". Social media are used for their disseminating disinformation by internet users. "What we're seeing with COVID-19 is primarily misinformation; people are looking for information about the disease, treatments, latest developments, and sharing what they find, but the intent is usually to try and help their friends and loved ones stay informed, and stay safe".

Based on the findings of online semi-structured interviews with social media activists and young Moroccan internet users, this research paper has revealed that Moroccan government has tried to generate a legal basis to stem the spread of fake news on social media. However, social activists, journalists and media practitioners believe that those in authority and in power, who have not yet called on a public debate, have reinforced the restriction of the right to freedom of information and freedom of thought by exploiting this health crisis situation of coronavirus pandemic (Baumann & Hoffmann, 2020). Besides, many people, including social media influencers, who are followed by Moroccan internet users on their Facebook accounts or their YouTube channel, have already been imprisoned because of distributing fakes news, and most importantly they have been arrested because they dare to speak publicly against the measures that have been taken by the government to reduce the spread of misinformation about Covid-19 pandemic.

An interviewee states that, "Although some fact-checking experiments have been launched, they have not been stopped the dissemination of fake news about the virus and have not had made much impact". Interviewees revealed that electronic press that are not professional along with social media activists who are followed by many young Moroccan internet users distribute fake news and misinformation about either the prevention or cure from new virus, and this has influenced infected people to take a risk in the hope of a favorable outcome and recovery. The findings have also showed that Facebook pages, YouTube, Twitter, and other social networking sites have been functioning in "a coordinated fashion" to magnify misleading messages in people's mind, and enlarge beyond bounds and truth. Misinformation is simply alarming on social media platforms.

Research Q4: How do young Moroccan people deal with online disinformation in the age of COVID-19?

Research Q5: What principles and strategies should regulators teach young people to combat the infodemic and help enhance their media information literacy?

The present research paper has found that overall, the majority of young Moroccan social media users consume and share misinformation with others, and they do not know a source is low-credibility, and there is little to do to reduce the exposure. A social media argues, "what we badly need to do in the age of Covid-19 crisis situation is to improve the average person's journalism literacy; try to teach people that there are those kinds of low-credibility sources that spread fake news online, and therefore they have to be careful". According to an interviewee who is a communication professional, "we have seen some recent studies indicating that if you tell the user what they're seeing might be from low-credibility sources, they become much more sensitive to such things. They're actually less likely to share those articles or links". Therefore, it is of paramount importance to receive trustworthy, accurate and clear information in front of the public on health issues.

Improving the average people's journalism, media literacy, and most importantly preparing them for coping with crisis situations cost time and money. Being proactive in crisis situations and preparing for a pandemic before it happens are essential tasks that are often considered to be unnecessary strategies. Though public authorities, journalists and social media activists are urged to communicate about its health crisis situation via social media platforms, they failed because of many reasons. One of these reasons is that they don't resort to experienced crisis management counsellors. Besides, the way they communicate to the media, which is critical, is ineffective.

Therefore, one of the missed issues and the most critical aspects in the research area of Media Information Literacy (MIL) is the management of disinformation during crisis situations on media platforms. This includes careful selection of spokesperson with public relations skills and media relations skills, which is a vital strategy to manage any crisis effectively, and it is basically based on consultancy experience of senior crisis managers. Hence, another interesting topic in media information literacy, which has been ignored by today's research studies, is the management of disinformation and communication during crisis situations, and Covid-19 health crisis pandemic is no exception. Moreover, communication practitioners are supposed to be both proactive and reactive in crisis situations. That is, they need to identify a crisis before it takes place so as not to get out of control. In other words, to achieve effective management of crisis communication before, during, and after crises, preparedness and predicting the future outcomes are essential strategies deal with any crisis.

In the same vein, in the age of information and communications age, it is important to notice the role communication plays and particularly the role of the internet during a crisis situation.

In fact, crisis communication management has been a reaction to the rapid development and changes in new communication technologies, wherein, according to a research participant "most people get their information from social media". At the same time several interviewees were recognizing the power of the internet in helping lay people to easily create their personal Facebook accounts and websites, and therefore it gives voice to the voiceless and empowering individuals to publicly express their opinions on social media platforms.

Although information is managed in an effective way from an operational perspective, what makes the real difference is how public authorities, journalists and social media activists communicates about Covid-19 health crisis. Besides, good communication during crises reinforces and supports the spread of high-credibility sources. However, poor crisis communication management may negatively influence the way audience understands health communications during Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this health communication has to be based on scientific information which has relied on presenting statistics and facts, and speaking precisely because accuracy is vital. This model of communication is often slow and is based on top-down approach to communicating information to the publics. Today, public health figures, political leaders and their spokespeople face the challenge of updating and renewing their communication approach which is supposed to address the publics' concerns in an accurate way, communicating authentically and transparently.

5. CONCLUSION

Crisis communication management during Covid-19 is one of the most critical aspects of modern communications in general, and media information literacy (MIL) in particular. Effective crisis management during Covid-19 limits the spread of disinformation and protects the society and its public authorities, their reputations and, at times, can salvage their very existence. The speed of spread of misinformation and news in the new communication era is well illustrated by huge number of low-credibility websites and social networking sites that are followed by millions of followers. The impact the Internet has on crisis management today is enormous. The speed with which communications can be delivered is phenomenal and available to so many people, from home computers, via internet cafés, through to workplace.

Today, it has become almost impossible to censor the internet. However, new communication technologies and social media platforms are effective tools for the dissemination of information and opinion that may masquerade as trustworthy information. Therefore, young Moroccan internet users and activists are encouraged to carefully select the content they share with their friends. In fact, internet users have become authors and content generators in the era of new communication technologies. That is, we are all part of the process of spreading either

information or misinformation on media platforms. Putting out good information and helping young people learn how to share information that will help their communities are important parts of the process. One of the main findings of the present research study is that the weak position of the mainstream media and poor quality of media information literacy during Covid-19 health crisis have favored both the dominance of fake news and the dissemination of false information.

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