The Role of Social Media in Spreading Rumors in Bangladesh during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Rumors have harmful effects on society. With the advent of the internet, social media have emerged as the most respected platform for infotainment, democracy, and free speech. By using a qualitative research design, the researchers in this study have attempted to determine whether social media is accurately or inaccurately educating the public about the COVID-19 epidemic. The results of this investigation will help determine whether the public is receiving accurate or false information about the COVID-19 epidemic from social media. The results suggest that over a 150-day period, from March 1 to July 30, 2020, social media generated about 100 fake information about COVID-19. The findings also indicate that 64.6% of respondents obtain information on COVID-19 from social media. Facebook has a big part to play in this. A whopping 53.0% of social media users admitted finding false information about COVID-19 on Facebook. Facebook is the fastest means to propagate fake news in a short amount of time, spreading fake news at a rate of 63.0%. Text and video together make up the majority of false news (50.9%). So, social media is a significant source of knowledge about COVID-19. Nearly 47.6% of those surveyed never attempted to independently verify any rumors or facts about COVID-19. Less research, however, has been done on the dissemination of incorrect and unsupported information during medical emergencies. In order to examine how false information was disseminated, the current study attempts to shed new light on the types of fake news that were shared on social media during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords: COVID-19; Infodemic; Social media; Fake news; Facebook; Public health

1. Introduction

A recently discovered distinct strain of the Corona virus causes an infectious condition known as Corona virus disease (COVID-19). The World Health Organization claims that false news is nearly as harmful as the Corona virus. In modern society, there is a lot of false information about COVID-19. Social media is where the majority of false news is disseminated. With the advent of the internet, social media have emerged as the most respected platform for infotainment, democracy, and free speech. Eke et al. (2014) claim that social media technology is a double-edged sword that users can wield for good or harm. Because most of the material's sources are unverified, using social networks excessively to distribute information about COVID-19 may have a harmful impact on people. False news or misinformation are other names for disinformation. An "infodemic" is what the World Health Organization refers to as "false news." Recent years have seen a significant increase in the use of the term "fake news," particularly in relation to the 2016 US presidential election (Quandt et al. 2019). However, we shall use the term "false information" to refer to any sort of untruth, including shared or published content that is deceptive or inaccurate, as well as hoaxes, myths, conspiracy theories, and other rumors. "Fake news" is characterized in a variety of ways because few academics have come to a suitable consensus (Higdon 2020). According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), "fake news" is information that is knowingly and substantiatedly false and that can deceive people. However, Jaster and Lanius point out that fake news isn't always inaccurate and can fool individuals even when it delivers accurate facts (2018). On the other hand,

Muigai (2019) defined false news as inaccurate or manufactured information that leads to people being deceived. It is difficult to assess the authenticity and validity of information concerning the pandemic because of an "infodemic" that is accompanied by the dissemination of incorrect COVID-19 material. Cinelli et al. (2020) define the term "infodemic" as "the dangers of disinformation phenomena during the control of disease outbreaks." Hua and Shaw (2020) referred to the COVID-19 outbreak's infodemic as "information overload." According to the WHO, disinformation is a hallmark of infodemics and "makes it difficult for individuals to obtain trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (2020). The infodemic, according to the Pan American Health Organization (2020), is the abundance of information, "some genuine and some deceptive," that makes it difficult for people to find reliable sources and helpful resources when they need them. By alarming and confusing the public, growing pandemic misinformation also affects healthcare services. There are 0.1 billion online users in Bangladesh, yet many of them lack adequate digital literacy (Hossain, 2019). Additionally, like many other South Asian countries, Bangladeshi internet users turned to the web for health-related information throughout the pandemic (Mayhew, 2020). Due to the propagation of misleading information concerning COVID-19, the situation surrounding the disease has gotten worse. Misinformation, disinformation, rumor, and fake news are all used interchangeably in scientific literature due to their conceptual resemblance and yet have the same negative effects (Duffy, 2020; Tandoc, 2019).

2.Objective of the Study

This study aims to determine whether or not fake news about the COVID-19 epidemic circulates on social media. The findings of this study will help determine whether social media is disseminating accurate or false information to the public regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. The speed at which information flows on social media is unbelievable. Falsehood is spread on social media much more frequently than information backed by facts. This research investigates all types of false information that circulates on social media. This study identifies how false news during the COVID-19 situation affected society. It also discusses how concerned authorities might lessen the spread of false information.

3.Literature Review

False information is fueling a parallel epidemic to the COVID-19 outbreak that is already underway. As this is happening, a few academic papers have already come to light in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic that deal with fake news produced by social media. On COVID-19, Laato et al. (2020) create and evaluate a study model to investigate why people distribute fake news on social media. "A person's trust in online information and perceived information overload are substantial predictors of unverified information sharing," according to their findings. Cinelli et al. (2020) examine the patterns of knowledge dissemination about COVID-19 using data from five social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Gab. The findings demonstrate that while false news is present on all platforms in varying degrees, Gab is more prone to it. However, the study's author discovered that Facebook and Messenger were mostly responsible for the propagation of false information in Bangladesh.

Social media was utilized for group discussions, amusement, and information access during COVID-19, with a focus on the initiatives taken by the government, health organizations, and corporate entities to combat the pandemic (Brennen et al., 2020). Social media is a powerful tool for disseminating information about COVID-19 as well as other crucial national and worldwide topics (Hua and Shaw, 2020). People are looking for information about general government announcements, figures on confirmed cases and fatalities, trustworthy sources, online courses, regional and global news, how to find patients, and clinical care of the diseases during COVID-19 (Pan American Health Organization, 2020). However, young people use social media for casual leisure, which includes viewing movies, accessing pornography, meeting new people, communicating with existing acquaintances, and remaining always approachable (Ezeah et al., 2013). This has raised concerns about the efficiency of using social media and its short- and long-term effects. The majority of the news and article forms concerning COVID-19 that you may discover online are not based on any facts or real-world occurrences (Brennen et al., 2020). Through social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram, among others, people are currently inundated with

information on COVID-19, a strictly medical problem (Lima et al., 2020).

In two studies involving more than 1,700 US citizens who were chosen online, Penncook et al. (2020) revealed that people are more likely to trust and disseminate incorrect information about COVID-19 if they are more intuitive or less aware about science. They also discovered that people are more inclined to believe and disseminate information about COVID-19 if they are more intuitive or less knowledgeable about science. The interrelated ways that information is exchanged and used on social media platforms amplify and widen the worldwide breadth of the information crisis (Merchant and Lurie, 2020). According to fact-checkers, 225 instances of inaccurate or misleading material were published in English between January and the end of March 2020 and were evaluated by Brennen et al.'s (2020) study. The sample was selected from a database of fact-checks performed by First Draft News on incorrect information pertaining to COVID-19. The findings revealed that multiple sorts of reconfiguration, in which already-existing and frequently valid material is spun, twisted, reframed, or otherwise transformed, accounted for the majority (59%) of the misleading information in the sample. Only 38% of the incorrect information was totally fabricated. 87% of the social media interactions in the sample are made up of repurposed false information, while 12% are made up of produced content.

The Pan American Health Organization (2020) underlined that people can feel overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, or emotionally exhausted and that this might prevent them from achieving their objectives. It can have an impact when decisions must be made quickly and there isn't enough time to thoroughly analyze the data.

According to a study by Ahmad and Murad (2020), social media use and the propagation of the COVID-19 panic are positively correlated in a statistically significant way. At the moment, 75.7% of the total variety is present. This demonstrates that social media has been utilized to investigate 75.7% of the variance of COVID-19 fear spreading, with the remaining variables (24.3%) being the result of random error. This suggests that 75.7% of the factors impacting the COVID-19 pandemic's propagation are social media-related.

In terms of disseminating accurate, trustworthy information about the pandemic, social media, which the vast majority of people use in the present era, does more harm than good. As a result of the COVID-19 infodemic, it is challenging to believe the sources of information (Adekoya &Fasae, 2021). According to Al-Zaman (2021), some potential and immediate remedies include launching a national information literacy campaign to educate people on how to choose reliable sources of information, distinguish between fact and fiction, and help others by sharing reliable information; combining media to disseminate reliable information given that each media has its own advantages and limitations; and maximizing social media's reach for well-planned digital campaigns.

4. Background of the Study

Social media becomes the most often searched source of information during a pandemic, such as the COVID-19 outbreak. However, thousands of individuals are disseminating information, sensationalism, rumors, misinformation, and disinformation; thus, it is imperative for authorities and specialists to combat both the pandemic and the infodemic.

In addition to the obvious physical illnesses and deaths, the COVID-19 epidemic has also caused a great deal of fear of an invisible murderer. As a result, people are less likely to temper their fears with reason, their panic with patience, and their uncertainty with knowledge. Fake news is prevalent. The pandemic was generated by 5G networks, children are immune to COVID-19, the virus could have been created in a lab with China and Iran in mind, etc. These messages might contain false, damaging, or unreliable information. The WHO proclaims the spread of fake news to be the first "infodemic" in human history due to the volume of it and warns that it is almost as deadly as viral transmission.

Six times more quickly than a truthful story, a fraudulent one spreads among individuals. As a result of an emotional response to fear, there is a propensity for a portion of the populace to believe rumors more often than official information, especially during times of crisis. The majority of people who spread this information do so without malicious intent but rather because they lack the knowledge necessary to recognize unsubstantiated information, which can have substantial negative effects on society as a whole. The underlying risk is that actual information based on the truth will have little influence when false information is spread widely and often.

The effects of fake news on society are detrimental. It occasionally results in a person's death. A garment worker in Joypurhat, Bangladesh, committed suicide as a result of false information. The majority of the locals began to protest that she was Corona affected when she returned from Dhaka. And the data was false. She was subjected to mental suffering to the point where she resolved to end her life. Her coronavirus result was negative after she passed away (Jagonews24.com, April 29, 2020). Around midnight, a bus passenger from Bangladesh's Naogaon district believed Corona had hurt his mother. However, after testing, his Corona report was negative. Thus, this tragedy likewise occurred as a result of false information (Jagonews24.com, May 12, 2020).

In order to combat fake news, WHO has established a section on its website devoted to dispelling myths and disproving misleading information (World Health Organization, 2020), and it also publishes daily updates to give the public accurate information. Additionally, social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, as well as search engines like Google, are putting in place procedures to both stop the spread of misleading information and point users to trustworthy sources. In other cases, attempts to stop the spread of false information have had varying degrees of success. For instance, Allcott et al. (2019) looked at how misleading information propagated on Facebook and Twitter between 2015 and 2016 as a result of algorithmic and policy adjustments that both social networks had made in an effort to curb the spread of such content after the 2016 US presidential election. Their research revealed that contacts with fake news were steadily increasing in the run-up to the 2016 election.

However, a month later, interactions with fake news on Facebook had decreased by more than half, while such interactions on Twitter had increased. The purpose of the current article is to respond to this infodemic by putting fresh light on the spread of misleading information on social media in relation to the COVID-19 health emergency. It also attempts to reveal new insights into how both false and factual information are disseminated in this network. Our aim is to find out how much false news was circulated during a specific time period.

5. Methodology

From March 1, 2019, to July 30, 2020, the researcher gathered data for this study from a variety of daily newspapers and online platforms. A codebook was utilized by the researcher to collect various kinds of data. Only false news and related data were used by the researcher in this study. Additionally, information was gathered from respondents utilizing a Google Forms-based online interview. To facilitate data analysis, the data have been modified, coded, tabulated, and organized in accordance with the goals of the study. Broad patterns like qualitative, temporal, or geographic disparities have been used to systematically arrange and categorize the recorded data in accordance with preset characteristics. Qualitative kinds of classification have been used to group respondents' age, sex, education, occupation, and other factors. The generated data was investigated using descriptive (frequency count) and inferential (mean) statistics, which are displayed in tables.

6.0 Results and Discussion

Data from 150 participants in the study was used in the research. The results suggest that over a 150-day period, from March 1 to July 30, 2020, social media generated about 100 fake information about COVID-19. Researchers found a lot of fake news during the COVID-19 issue, much of it disseminated on social media. Social media and the internet are seen as resources for finding health information. In the era of social media, the coronavirus outbreak is not the first pandemic to be reported. In the past ten years, at least three more pandemics have taken place: the H1N1 virus (swine flu in 2009), the Ebola virus (Ebola in 2014), and the Zika virus (Zika virus disease in 2015). All of these outbreaks were widely publicized and documented, and they had a significant impact on social media.
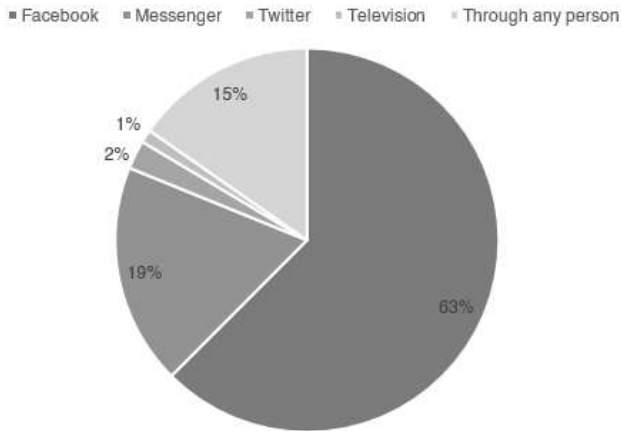
Fig. 2. *Sources of Misinformation*

This survey's findings indicate that social media is the main source of false information. Facebook is crucial in the propagation of false information. According to Figure 2, 63.0% of fake news is disseminated via Facebook. Many Facebook users utilize Messenger instead of Facebook; they do not use Facebook. According to this analysis, messengers are used to distribute fake news in 19% of cases. Furthermore, it is the quickest way to spread false information. Twitter has contributed to the propagation of false information. Twitter is responsible for 2% of all fake news. Therefore, it can be claimed that social media is crucial in the propagation of any kind of false information. Our civilization is negatively impacted by fake news. In this study, it was discovered that 44.4% of participants thought fake news had a negative impact on society, 23.8% thought it had a less negative impact, and 12.7% thought it had no negative impact on society. Therefore, it may be claimed that in the COVID-19 period, false information and rumors are detrimental to society.
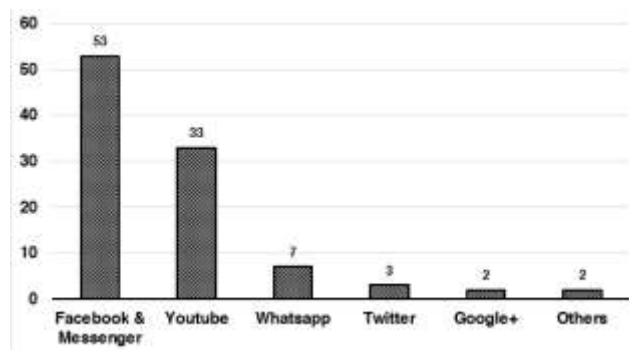

Fig. 4. *Information About the use of Social Media Platforms*

Social media is being used extensively during the COVID-19 epidemic, as seen in Figure 4. After YouTube (33.0%), Facebook (53.0%) was the most widely used social media network. Additionally, this study discovered that 7% of Bangladesh's population uses WhatsApp.

This study reveals that five main types of content on social media are associated with fake news: text and video, text and image, text, image/graph, and audio. The most common fake news combinations are text and video (49.0%), followed by text and image (31.0%). Of the material kinds on the list, photos are the least frequent. Text (15.2%) and audio (1.8%), the other two key content forms, are similarly less prevalent.
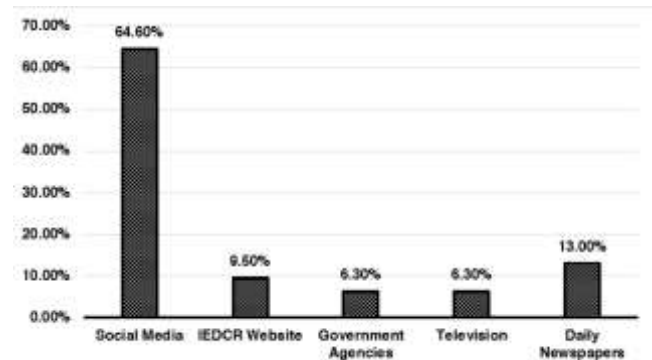

Fig. 6. *COVID-19 Related Information Sources*

Figure 6 reveals that 6.3% of respondents acquire knowledge on COVID-19 from various government agencies, 6.3% from television, and 64.6% from social media. Of those, 9.5% get their information from the IEDCR website. So, social media is a significant source of knowledge about COVID-19. When it comes to spreading information in the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak situation, social media channels are essential. Numerous medical journals and organizations frequently update their awareness and recommendations via a variety of online channels. As online resources, social media provide platforms for the global exchange of knowledge, ideas, and opinions. They also encourage social interactions within and between groups of people. Facebook is using its newsfeed feature to refer visitors to the WHO and regional health authority websites. Leading medical journals and other websites linked to the outbreak have been recognized by Google Scholar. When people search (allowing for misspellings) for content relating to the coronavirus, social media platforms like Twitter are especially effective at directing them to reputable sources. Medical professionals, healthcare organizations, and social media influencers all drive online traffic to reliable sources. The WHO collaborates with Facebook, Twitter, and Messenger to promptly deliver accurate information to the public and get rid of false and misleading material. Rumors and fake news are new terms associated with COVID-19. According to this poll, 87.3% of respondents are familiar with these words, as opposed to 12.7% who were not before the COVID-19 era. One hundred percent of those polled had heard of COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus disease. Through social media or other outlets, they learned about these. It's crucial that the information be accurate. In this study, it was discovered that only 47.6% of respondents verified the news or information about COVID that had been

gathered, while 52.4% did not. In order to stop false information and rumors, the government can be very helpful. The government should take the required action to stop fake news, according to 98.4% of the respondents. Many people think we may avoid the coronavirus if we stay away from ice cream and other cold foods. This is a rumor that is spreading on social media as well. Because of this information, most people avoid cold foods. 21 March 2020, ProthomAlo Overall, we found that the Bangladeshi government is quite concerned about putting an end to fake news. To increase awareness among the populace, the government ought to create various radio and television shows. Bangladeshis are today quite well informed; however, they focus more on rumors than knowledge. In order to counter rumors, the actions of the people are more crucial than those of the governments. Every area should have public awareness initiatives run by the government that educate the populace on how to avoid falling victim to rumors and encourage people to confirm any information they receive. Such government actions would significantly reduce rumors.

9.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

We continue to face the COVID-19 dilemma, which is present both in front of us and all around us, and we do so without noticing it. Social media is used by businesses and the government to address crises more frequently than conventional media. Social media has changed how individuals interact globally, immediately, and without boundaries, despite the government guiding the public to trustworthy sources for verified information and updates. The misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic spreading among millions of people worldwide has outrun the outbreak of the coronavirus-caused pandemic in the new media age of interconnection. False information can have a significant negative impact on the actual world through the internet and social media since it is simple to produce and disseminate. Even after the government has taken a number of steps to influence the outbreak's conclusion in the best possible way, there are hundreds of pieces of misleading information being spread on a variety of social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, and others. False information is widely disseminated by people for entertainment purposes. Real people, not the tools or the medium, are responsible for fake news spreading significantly more quickly than legitimate news. More user-generated or user-edited content than genuine information was used to spread disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak. These platforms are unable to regulate or control the transmission of false information because it happens so quickly. Although certain materials describe the actual scenario, they are frequently contradicted by untruths or inaccurate information, leading the general public—which is ignorant of the actual situation astray. Only when a criticism has a positive outcome can it be considered constructive. To raise the necessary awareness for a successful conclusion, social media should make sure that reliable information and data are shared and promoted. People can't distinguish between social media lies and the truth. People are relying more and more on social media for information because it is the most popular, rapid, and accessible type of information source; however, there are still many questions about its reliability. However, this global movement to stop COVID-19 is predicated on independent journalism, citizen reporting, open public discourse, and the free flow of information. Concerning matters that limit freedom of expression, governments must establish policies and take action. Organizations that use social media have a part to play in the effort to combat COVID-19-related misinformation. Accurate reporting, an examination of various forms of government inequality and propaganda, and ensuring that they have the freedom to make corrections and respond appropriately are all necessary for journalists to avoid bias. Misinformation can be a significant obstacle when addressing a virus outbreak or other public health emergency. People all over the world struggled to distinguish the facts from the fiction when COVID-19 started to circulate. Some people have adopted ideas or behaviors that have increased health hazards rather than decreased them. Governments are correct to take seriously the threat posed by false information. They should develop strategies to successfully stop the propagation of different myths and thwart the dissemination of purposefully misinformed information. Misinformation can result in various human rights breaches in addition to impeding public health initiatives. Unfortunately, some states themselves have spread and propagated false information rather than taking the appropriate corrective action against false information that violates international human rights legislation. Several states have been accused of covering up the virus's spread or spreading false information for political reasons. The transmission of false information within the state is extremely risky. It undermines public trust in government agencies and causes uncertainty among health and government authorities. Even then, the government, politicians, and common people utilized it to suppress the expression of particular kinds of beliefs and to criticize dissenting viewpoints.

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