

Effect of Fake News on Government Action in Combating COVID-19: The Case of Bhutan

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Abstract

This research focuses on the spread of fake news about COVID-19 in Bhutan with a particular emphasis on how fake news has impacted the government's response to the pandemic. The growth of misinformation on social media has made the government play a strategic role by using its official social media pages as a legitimate source of information during the pandemic. The study found that fake news affected the government's actions both positively and negatively. While time and resources were diverted from the pandemic response into addressing the issues posed by fake news, the same issue enabled the government to collaborate with various stakeholders whilst gaining the people's trust.

Keywords: Communication; Coronavirus; COVID-19; Fake news; Government action; Health; Misinformation; Social media

Introduction

Five days before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, Bhutan saw its first positive case on March 5, 2020. The government immediately took measures to contain the spread by imposing travel restrictions, compulsory quarantine for travellers entering Bhutan and earmarking resources for the health sector. However, the fight was not just against the disease; a greater battle had to be fought against what the WHO Director-General remarked as an 'infodemic', a combination of 'information' and 'pandemic', referring to fake news, which, he said, spreads faster and easier than the COVID-19 virus.

Since the onset of the pandemic, social media has become a fertile ground for breeding misinformation and fake news, and distinguishing them from legitimate facts has become more challenging (Huynh, 2020). Waszak et al. (2018) claim that while the issue is not new, the social media that permits people to share information without restriction intensified the proliferation of false information about health issues. As a result, fake news fuelled panic

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among people and prompted government authorities to take measures to curb the concern (Huynh, 2020).

This study reviews literature on fake news and public health, and explores approaches taken by different national governments and Bhutan's journey in fighting the 'infodemic'. It specifically presents how fake news has affected the government's effort to contain the pandemic. The study used a mixed-method consisting of online surveys, semi-structured interviews and content analysis of secondary data.

Literature Review

Background

The internet, with its vast source of information, has the capacity to influence its users. While the internet and social media are benefiting people across the globe, they have also become a favoured tool for spreading fake news (Oyeyemi et al., 2014; Venkatraman et al., 2016). The literature presents a comprehensive review of research on fake news where fake news has been defined, followed by its overall impact, and on public health and on COVID-19. This is followed by the comparison of approaches taken by various governments, and presents the case in Bhutan.

Definition of Fake News

McGonagle (2017) defines fake news as deliberately made-up information that is spread to misinform and deceive individuals into accepting unverified facts and lies. Coherent with this claim, Duffy et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2019) classify fake news as any information that imitates genuine and legitimate news stories, but has deceiving and false content. In this paper, fake news has been viewed as false information including rumours, myths, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and deceptive content circulated on social media sites intentionally or unintentionally. This definition was chosen for the following reasons. First, any technique for fact-checking that applies to a narrow idea of fake news can be applied under this broad definition. Second, this definition enabled the exploration of a wide range of fake news existing in the Bhutanese context, which has never been studied before.

The 2016 US presidential election drew a huge research interest for misinformation on social media, which is said to have affected the election results (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Bakir and McStay (2018) and Lazer et al. (2018) further posits that false news impacts various public affairs and has proven to pose a potential threat to democratic institutions and people since they can manipulate people's emotions and sentiments. This can

consequently increase apathy and polarization among people, even leading to violent behaviour (Lazer et al., 2018).

Fake News and COVID-19

Misinformation can also elicit serious public health risks and should be regulated by concerned authorities without censoring (Cuan-Baltazar et al., 2020). Especially in a situation of widespread disease outbreak, fake news can cause panic and hysteria, and tip the public to resort to unprescribed and unrecognized treatments. The unprecedented outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has been accompanied by an upsurge of misinformation about the disease. Social media sites emerged as important avenues for socializing, and information-seeking and sharing about the pandemic (Frenkel et al., 2020; Huynh, 2020; Russonello, 2020). As a result, unchecked information and misinformation went viral with the surge in social media use by 20-87 percent globally during the pandemic. Italy alone recorded an average of 46,000 news posts about COVID-19 on Twitter every day, which were misleading and deceiving (Bruno Kessler Foundation, 2020 cited in Naeem et al., 2020).

This was not the first time a public health crisis has to deal with fake news. A case study on the Zika virus of 2016 showed that among the top 10 news stories about the Zika virus, half were classifiable as rumours (Sommariva et al., 2018). During the outbreak, misinformation about the spread of the Zika virus in Brazil from the mass release of sterilized male mosquitoes was widely circulated despite being disproved by fact-checkers. Sommariva et al. (2018) contend that false information on social media about the seriousness of the Zika virus may have hampered the implementation of disease prevention efforts and behaviours, as the public might not have perceived the disease as a public health emergency. Similarly, a deadly combination of fake news and an epidemic was also reported during the Ebola outbreak (Oyeyemi et al., 2014).

Tasnim et al. (2020) claim that during pandemics, fake news conceals healthy behaviours and promotes erroneous practices that increase the spread of the virus. Hence, Wong et al. (2020) and Shaw et al. (2020) assert that the dissemination of clear, accurate and timely information from trusted sources is pertinent for short-term containment and long-term recovery efforts. Recognizing the adverse impact of fake news, research has been done to study the rationale for people to share fake news about COVID-19 on social media. Pennycook et al. (2020) argue that many people shared false information related to the virus because they were unable to reason if the contents were genuine or not before sharing. A study in Nigeria found that altruistic motives influenced the dissemination of COVID-19 information on social media, where people unknowingly reshared false content with the intention to help

others (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Ma and Chan (2014) agree that altruism is positively associated with voluntary gathering and dissemination of information, suggesting that social media users would assist without expecting a reward. Supporting this, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) claim that fake news sharing may be unintentional, but its creation could be highly intentional.

Typology of Fake News

Naeem et al. (2020) classifies fake news during COVID-19 into different typologies, which are also used in this paper for analysing data findings. Fact-checking and myth-busters do not follow a specific framework to check the authenticity of the information since the type of information varies from scientific claims to government actions. Amid others, Naeem et al. (2020) classify fake news into false claims, conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific health therapies.

First, false claims about transmission, treatment and prevention were rampant across the globe. Some examples of false claims are that coronavirus can be transmitted through mosquito bites or houseflies. Many false claims were made about the cure of the disease through the intake of chloroquine, drinking cow urine, alcohol, or hot water. Rumours that consumption of neat alcohol can cure COVID-19 resulted in hundreds of Iranians dying from alcohol poisoning (Trew, 2020 cited in Naeem, 2020). The rumour started in a UK tabloid paper in February that a schoolteacher and others in the UK recovered from the disease with whiskey and honey. Other false claims about the development of vaccines for COVID-19 by Israel and Tunisia were also made.

Studies on the issue of fake news were triggered in the African subcontinent particularly in Nigeria after there were widespread claims that the virus cannot harm Africans (Lampos et al., 2020), while on the other hand, a voice clip forecasting the death of about 45 million Nigerians due to the pandemic was made viral by an alleged WHO worker (Hassan, 2020 cited in Apuke & Omar 2022). Naeem et al. (2020) found false claims made against certain ethnicity or religion such as Muslim communities in India who were blamed for spreading the virus in India.

Second, misinformation became viral due to conspiracy theories stimulated by world leaders and assertions of conspiracy theorists. For instance, there was a chain of accusations made by the US president Donald Trump and Chinese authorities against each other. Trump accused China of hiding their actual number of cases and of manufacturing COVID-19 in Wuhan laboratory as a bioweapon (Lampos et al., 2020). While China rejected all accusations, Chinese officials accused the US Army of bringing the virus to

Wuhan and allegedly hiding their COVID-19 response (Naeem et al., 2020). Such information not only promoted hate and racism but also posed a threat to public health while undermining the efforts of government authorities in implementing preventive measures (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Conspiracy theories were also endorsed by conspiracy theorists such as David Icke, who suggested that 5G technologies have caused the pandemic and as a result, some of his followers destroyed telecommunication towers across Europe (Apuke & Omar, 2020).

Third, since the onset of COVID-19, pseudoscientific health therapies that suggested cures and tips on how to treat the virus have also increased on social media (Pennycook et al., 2020). In Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran and Bangladesh, practices such as homeopathy, alternative medicine, herbal medicines and old-fashioned quackery became common (Naeem, 2020). So called 'health experts' and 'practitioners' promoted home remedies, unproven pills, potions, therapies and advice as treatment or preventive measures to boost the immune system against the disease (Caulfield, 2020). None of the claims were medically proven but were continuously disseminated on social media.

Measures

Social media has been useful for public authorities and governments of social media in disseminating information, which includes conveying the importance and need for social distancing, support for healthcare workers and providing emotional encouragement to the people during the lockdown (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020). International organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and WHO have taken various measures to curb fake news by using social media. In collaboration with various digital companies, steps were taken to monitor and debunk misleading information. For instance, YouTube has launched COVID-19 alerts and blocked several channels of the conspiracy theorists, including David Icke (Naeem, 2020). Facebook has pulled down, 'Interested in pseudoscience' ads, and directed users to trusted pages for COVID-19 information.

Avaaz (2020), however, argues that despite the WHO's effort in partnership with digital companies to contain the spread of misinformation, the problem continued to persist. The same study explains that Facebook has not removed Italian-language misinformation uniformly and that the harmful content that Facebook had committed to removing was present even after a few months (cited in Lovari, 2020).

The Italian government, on the other hand, shares its success story in tackling fake news on social media. Italy had the highest percentage of people accessing news and information about COVID-19 on a daily basis (58%),

overtaking South Korea, Japan and the US (Edelman, 2020 cited in Lovari). The Italian Ministry of Health took the lead role in tackling fake news by actively engaging citizens through their official Facebook page and disseminating information about COVID-19 to the public (Lovari, 2020). One measure that the study claims to have worked for the government was that the contents by the government did not feature politicians, rather involved famous people and digital influencers. This effectively reduced the risk of politicization of the virus, which has been a concern for the government (Edelman, 2020 cited in Lovari, 2020).

Conversely, Baron and Crotoft (2017) claim that despite the potential effectiveness of these actions by government authorities, they may raise concerns about the protection of free speech wherein government intervention could be seen to favour certain points of view (cited in Hartley & Vu, 2020). The Government of India for instance resorted to a similar measure like the Italian government. India's prime minister set up a chatbot to provide information related to COVID-19 to the users on WhatsApp (Singh, 2020 cited in Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). Moreover, the prime minister personally asked 220 news media companies to publish positive stories about COVID-19 and also approached the Supreme Court of India to stop news channels from circulating COVID-19-related news without the government's approval on the ground that misinformation might cause panic among people. The Supreme Court denied the request, but news outlets were directed to use the official version of COVID-19 information in their news reports. This led to an uproar among the journalists claiming that the government had crossed the line to authoritarianism (CPJ.org, 2020 cited in Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). Therefore, Rodrigues and Xu (2020) claim that the circulation of fake news, rumours and misinformation during COVID-19 has pushed each government to steer the complex trade-off between state power and the freedom of speech of its citizens.

China took various 'anti-online-rumour' actions in collaboration with local governments, propaganda departments, health commission and police bureau during COVID-19. According to China's local news channels, fake news was promptly removed, accounts that spread the misinformation were shut down, major news apps were required to provide dedicated sections for rumour detection and fact-checking and rumour-mongers on social media were apprehended by police in accordance with the Security Administration Punishment Law (Chinanews.com, 2020 & Sina.com, 2020 cited in Rodrigues and Xu, 2020). As a result, China was successful in controlling the dissemination of fake news during COVID-19 whereas, the Indian government witnessed a backlash for its effort to tackle fake news during the pandemic.

Jang and Baek's (2019) argument that the efficacy of the response to restrain misinformation and fake news varies from country to country and it depends on the public confidence in the authorities and the political system of each country holds true with China and India's examples, and it therefore challenges Rodrigues and Xu's (2020) argument. Jang and Baek (2019) also argue that the information from public health officials could be untrustworthy. Due to some sources of fake news being politicians and world leaders, people tended to rely more on online news outlets and communicate more via social media. This was proven by a survey with 300,000 online panel members in South Korea during the MERS outbreak in 2015.

Case in Bhutan

Very little has been studied on the topic in relation to Bhutan. Therefore, the policies to support the fight against misinformation in Bhutan were studied to crosscheck the government's action with the laws of the land.

Section 437 of the Information, Communication and Media Act of Bhutan 2018 states,

Any person who by means of a public ICT system, or attempts to send, any message which, to the person's knowledge, is false or misleading with the intent to prejudice the efficiency of any emergency services, cause alarm or endanger the safety of any person or of any vehicle, vessel, aircraft, or spacecraft shall be guilty of an offense of fourth-degree (MoIC, 2018, p. 137).

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) like Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) claims that most citizens in Bhutan are exposed to a variety of media outlets before learning how to read and write, thus undermining their ability to assess information on social media (Zangpo, 2019). In a similar vein, Arechar and Rand (2020, cited in Pennycook, 2020) claim that believing in fake news is related to cognitive science which proves that the lower the ability to engage in analytic or reflective thinking, the more likely will be the person to share less trustworthy information on social media. Various local newspapers and media houses reported on fake news and its implications on the nation as a whole. From spreading false information on the COVID-19 cures to prank calls to the Ministry of Health's (MoH) hotline numbers, the spread of fake news escalated (Yuden, 2020). In this connection, the Media Council of Bhutan issued a notification to urge the general public to refrain from spreading fake news and to warn that spreading fake news carries a fourth-degree felony with a prison term of 3-5 years (Yuden, 2020).

Zangpo (2020) claims that in this digital age Bhutanese are exposed to social media whereby gossiping, spreading misinformation and defamation have come as part and parcel of the exposure. He explains that Bhutanese have

become more active citizens, engaging in public and political discourse online. Misleading medical information should be identified through social media analyses, and authorities should be urged to put warnings (Waszak et al., 2018). De Abreu (2019) posited that teaching media and information literacy skills are vital in today's scenario and is the single best method to prevent sharing and believing misinformation on social media and on the internet as a whole.

Lazer et al. (2018) group political interventions into two categories: first, by empowering individuals to evaluate fake news through training, fact-checking and verification mechanisms. Second, by controlling the dissemination of fake news through algorithms and strict law control over those who share fake news online. This model and approach are used in the current study to analyse the measures taken by the government in Bhutan to tackle fake news.

So far, research on fake news has been limited to the effect of fake news during events such as elections and public health crises including COVID-19. Motivations behind sharing fake news and the various approaches taken by governments in different countries during the pandemic were also studied. Drawing on the existing body of literature, this research studies the effect of fake news on how the Royal Government of Bhutan has tackled COVID-19 in the country and the approach adopted to address the issue of fake news.

Research Design and Methodology

The study used a mixed-method design where three different methods were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. First, the online surveys were carried out to gather quantitative data on the frequency of fake news on social media in Bhutan. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and through phone calls with the officials from various ministries and CSOs involved in addressing issues related to fake news during the pandemic. Third, the content analysis of various fact-checks done by individuals, government agencies or organizations in Bhutan between March and November 2020 was carried out.

Online Survey

Participants

The online surveys were conducted through Google Forms, and a convenience sampling was carried out since the survey was floated through the Messenger app to the researcher's social media contacts. Participants were invited to fill out the online surveys and forward the survey link to others in their social media network.

Procedure

The survey questionnaire was divided into seven parts or themes. The first part gathered general demographic information such as sex, age, Dzongkhag, education and occupation. The second part collected information on general social media sites they used. The third part asked questions on the usage of social media, particularly for COVID-19 news and information. The fourth and fifth parts gathered data on the perceived effect of fake news on participants' reactions towards fake news and the sixth and last part gathered information on how participants thought the government was handling the pandemic situation in Bhutan.

Semi-Structured Interview

Participants

One official each from MoH, Ministry of Information and Communication (MoIC) (Department of Information and Media), Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) were interviewed. The sampling for the semi-structured interviews was snowball sampling since the officials recommended other participants who were a part of the National COVID-19 Media Team (NCMT), solely responsible for disseminating information during the pandemic in Bhutan. On the recommendation of one of the respondents, the Executive Director (ED) of the Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB) was also interviewed. The interviews were recorded with permission from the respondents and transcribed for analysis.

Procedure

During the interviews, the respondents were asked in-depth questions concerning the issue of fake news in Bhutan and specifically regarding how the government is handling the issue during COVID-19. Each question from the semi-structured interviews is justified below:

Questions 1 and 2 asked about the organization they work for and their designation in the organization.

Question 2 asked about their roles in the organization and how they are involved with the issue of fake news in Bhutan.

Questions 3 and 4 asked their opinion of what fake news means and whether or not it is a serious issue in Bhutan.

Question 5 asked whether or not they have heard any fake news related to COVID-19 in Bhutan and to provide examples if they have. This question helps in validating the survey data about the types of fake news prevalent on social media in Bhutan.

Question 6 asked how the respondents and their agencies knew whether the news was fake or not and also how their organization checks their facts.

Question 7 asked some of the known sources of fake news on COVID-19 in Bhutan to check whether the government had approached the sources directly or not.

Questions 8 and 9 asked about their roles in dealing with the issue of fake news in Bhutan during COVID-19, particularly with disseminating information and the actions taken by the government to do so effectively.

Question 10 asked about the issues the government has faced so far because of fake news, which may or may not have been during COVID-19 in Bhutan.

Questions 11, 12 and 13 asked about the various reactions from the people caused by fake news and actions taken by the government to tackle the issue of fake news in Bhutan.

Question 14 asked about the particular policy interventions that the government has or is working on to tackle fake news on social media in Bhutan.

Question 15 asked the role of fake news in tackling COVID-19 in Bhutan, which could be both positive and negative.

Question 16 asked about the other challenges faced by the government in Bhutan while combating public health crises like COVID-19.

Question 17 asked their opinion on how they think the government has handled COVID-19 in Bhutan and ended by asking for any additional remarks.

Content Analysis of Secondary Data

Third, thirty-four pieces of fake news and their respective fact-checks which were posted on official pages of various government and non-government agencies between March and November 11, 2020, were gathered and analysed. The government agencies were the PMO, MoH, MoIC and Ministry of Education (MoE). Fact-checks from pages of corporations such as BBS and Kuensel, CSOs such as BMF and JAB and other media houses such as *The Bhutanese* newspaper were also gathered, including fact checks from WHO which were also referred to cross-check fake news that was internationally viral. These agencies and sites were selected since they were particularly mentioned in the online surveys and during the interviews.

Procedure

The different fake news and their fact-checks were gathered and chronologically arranged to study their frequency and trend in Bhutan over time. The fake news was then categorized into prominent themes and types which are presented in the data findings. The content analysis was also compared and contrasted with data from online surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Analysis of Data and Findings

Data findings are presented in terms of major themes, identified from the three methods. Each section compares and contrasts data found from each method.

Participants

A total of 435 respondents from 18 Dzongkhags in Bhutan (except Gasa and Tsirang) participated in the online survey, out of which 227 (52.2%) were female and 208 (47.8%) were male. The average age of the participants was 25 years. The occupation of the participants ranged from middle school (class 7-10), high school (11-12), diploma, bachelor's degree to master's degree.

Frequency of Fake News Between March and November 2020

As shown in Figure 1, the number of fake news on social media was highest during the onset of COVID-19 in March with 14 cases, followed by April with 12 cases. The number of fake news declined drastically over time. There was a minor surge in August with 2 cases and September with 3 cases. Comparably, data from semi-structured interviews validated that frequency of fake news decreased over time but escalated again during and after the first nationwide lockdown in August and September 2020.

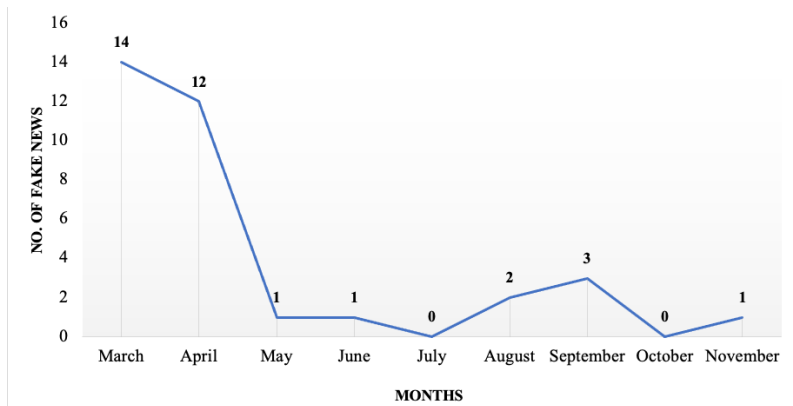
Diverse types of fake news on social media were found through online surveys, semi-structured interviews and content analysis. The ED of JAB during the interview said that no particular frameworks were used to fact-check fake news on social media, mainly because of the nature of fake news circulated. Different types of fake news required BMF and JAB to verify with different agencies in Bhutan and international organizations.

Content analysis of the fact-checks showed that various sources were used to verify the fake news depending on the nature of the information. For instance, fake news regarding false lockdown or the number of COVID-19 positive cases in Bhutan were cross-checked with the PMO and MoH. Similarly, fake

news on the treatment and transmission of the virus were cross-checked with the WHO and the Centre for Disease Control in the US.

Figure 1

Frequency of Fake News Between March and November 2020 According to the Content Analysis



Typology of Fake News on Bhutanese Social Media During the Covid-19

Based on the data from the three methods, fake news during the pandemic in Bhutan was classified into three types: 1) Pseudoscientific health claims, 2) Conspiracy theories, and 3) False claims about the actions of the government authorities.

Pseudoscientific Health Claims

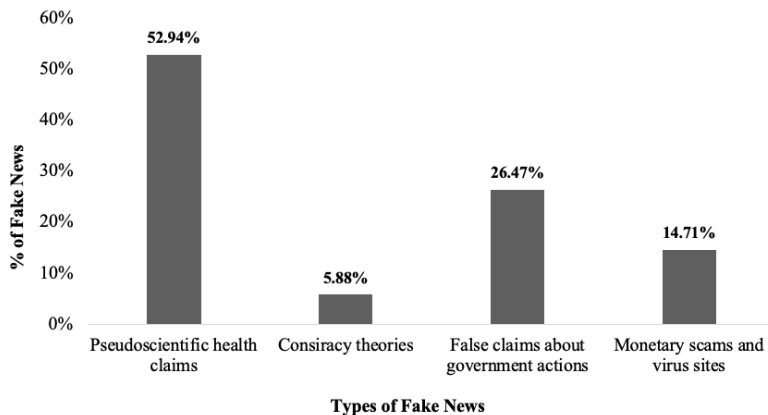
As per the content analysis of the fact-checks, pseudoscientific health claims such as misinformation about the spread and treatment of the virus were the most prominent type of fake news on social media in Bhutan. As shown in Figure 2, 52.94 percent of the fake news was about the treatment and spread of COVID-19. These claims include false information about the discovery of vaccines, unverified methods of cure as home remedies, unproven pills, and preventive measures to boost immune systems against the virus. The government officials from MoH confirmed that pseudoscientific health claims were common, but claims on false lockdown were more widespread on social media in Bhutan. Pseudoscientific health claims in Bhutan were in terms of so-called traditional medicine practitioners distributing pills without verifying

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their contents and people ordering those pills in large amounts for consumption and distribution.

Figure 2

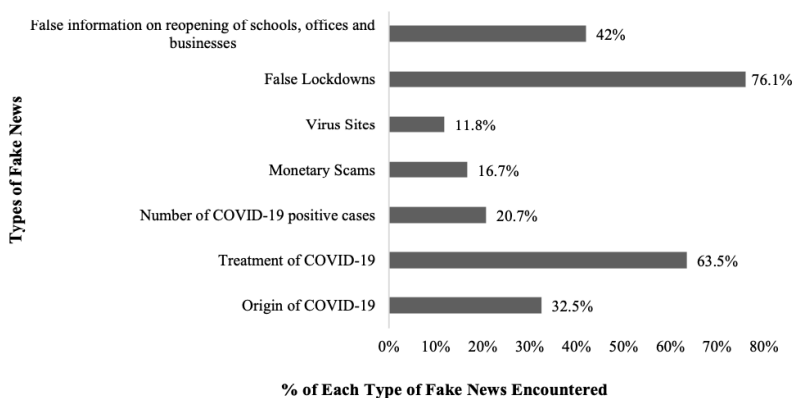
Typology of Fake News on Bhutanese Social Media According to the Content Analysis



Online survey data as depicted in Figure 3 also showed that misinformation about false lockdown was more widespread (76.10%) than the treatment of COVID-19 (63.50%) in Bhutan.

Figure 3

Types of Fake News on Bhutanese Social Media During Covid-19 According to the Online Surveys



Conspiracy Theories

According to the content analysis, the third type of fake news spreading on social media in Bhutan was conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories, although in lesser frequencies (5.88%), were internationally widespread. So was the case in Bhutan. It claims that the coronavirus was created as a biological weapon by the Chinese government to eradicate their older population.

Executive Director of Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB), through an interview, confirmed the finding from the content analysis. ED further added that another conspiracy theory circulating on social media was that flu vaccines were trials for the actual COVID-19 vaccine and that people should not get them.

While online surveys could not get the details of what could be conspiracy theories, false information about the origin of COVID-19 scored 32.5 percent among other types of fake news, which may have included conspiracy theories as well.

False Claims About Actions of Government Authorities

The third type of fake news is categorized as false claims about government actions to contain the virus. Lockdowns, closing and opening of schools, offices and business entities, and also the number of COVID-19 positive cases are put under this category since the information was disseminated by the government in Bhutan.

According to the finding from content analysis, false claims about government actions and policies were widespread (26.47%) in Bhutan (Figure 2). Supporting this finding, the MoH official mentioned that people contended that the government was under-reporting the actual number of COVID-19 cases. However, the most common false information on social media was regarding false lockdowns according to the NCMT. Data from online surveys show that the most common fake news was about false lockdowns (76.10%) and people also encountered fake news about statistics on COVID-19 (20.70%), which supports NCMT's claim. Monetary scams and virus sites related to COVID-19 were additionally reported among other false news.

Effect on Public Behaviour and Government's Approach

This theme presents the effect that fake news has had on people's behaviour and how the government had to handle the situation. The data from content analysis were not sufficient to analyse the possible effects of fake news on

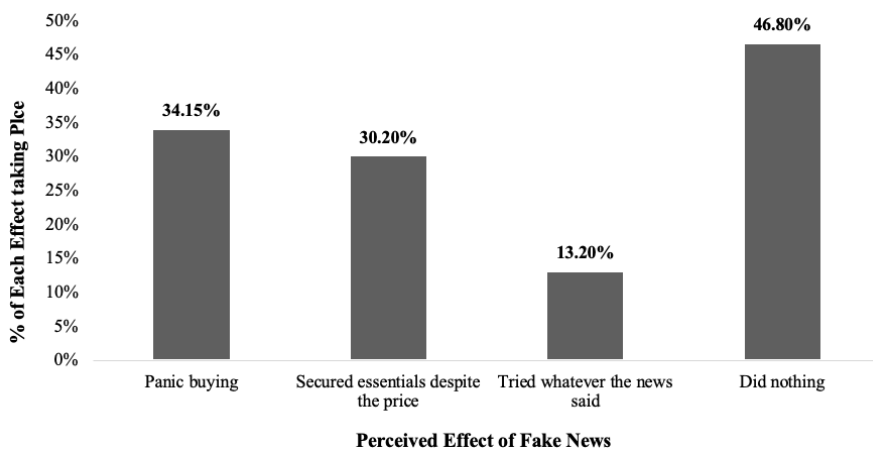
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people's behaviour in Bhutan during the pandemic. Therefore, data on content analysis are presented in the remaining two themes.

The online survey (Figure 4) found that 55.1 percent of the respondents believe that they believed in fake news on social media. 17.4 percent of the respondents did not know whether or not they believed in fake news and 27.5 percent claimed that they did not believe in fake news. Panic buying, securing essentials despite the price, and trying whatever the news suggested were some of the perceived results of believing in fake news. When asked to choose applicable responses, 46.8 percent claimed that they did nothing even if they believed in fake news. Online survey data also shows that a small portion (7.79%) of the 435 respondents had signed petitions related to COVID-19 and only 8.99 percent were against the government.

Figure 4

Actions Taken by People as a Result of Believing in Fake News According to the Online Surveys



The officials during the interviews validated that no major behaviour changes were seen among Bhutanese due to fake news. However, the official from OCP claimed that there were incidents where people rushed to buy essentials such as groceries, after hearing false news about lockdowns. The OCP also noticed that people hoarded fuel and shops ran out of grocery stock. Accordingly, OCP had to monitor the market for unfair trade practices, such as controlling the price hike, correcting weights and measures, and creating awareness on unethical business practices and penalties, among others. The

OCP also penalized a few business entities for overcharging for essential goods but claimed that no major issues were witnessed.

MoH and MoIC claimed that in the beginning, there were many hate comments posted on government posts on Facebook, most of which were targeted towards politicians such as ministers and political parties. The officials said, “The government agencies were prompt in taking measures to curb fake news and its effect before it intensified, which left no room for people to complain”.

ED of JAB believed that Bhutanese people can be influenced by the right practices and information as well. For instance, the fact-checking that the JAB and BMF started influenced other media houses and individuals who also started checking facts and questioning information regarding the virus.

The interview respondents said that fake news has not caused adverse effects on people or the government in Bhutan. However, MoH claims that much time was spent on explaining to people about the misinformation that was circulated on social media, which should have been used for the pandemic response. The ministry further explained that media houses were initially competing with each other for news and there were instances of them reporting unassessed information, which posed challenges for the government. The Jomotshangkha case provides one such instance. A man was awaiting the confirmatory test result after testing positive on the rapid test when one of the local newspapers had reported that the man had tested positive for COVID-19. People started to make inquiries and began to panic about an ensuing lockdown. However, the man tested negative on the confirmatory test. Another rapid test resulted in the man testing positive for antigens but not on the confirmatory test. While the English version of the newspaper article was clear, the news was distorted while translating into Dzongkha, thereby conveying the wrong message. Accordingly, the health minister had to conduct multiple press briefings to clarify information. Other respondents also said that translating information from English to Dzongkha was time-consuming and required a lot of effort.

However, respondents claim that no citizen was penalized or punished for spreading fake news on social media during the pandemic so far. The official explained that people may not be aware of the sections in the Penal Code of Bhutan that states that spreading any unsolicited news having the potential to cause harm to others or the nation is a fourth-degree felony and punishable by law. The MoH official said,

If people are punished for spreading false information, the whole nation would be put behind bars. The nature of fake news is such that they appear genuine and people share with good intentions, in the present circumstances, to keep other

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people informed and safe. Therefore, punishing people would be 'pure dictatorship' and dictatorship has not worked anywhere.

In the interviews, all the respondents argued that media and information literacy is the only solution to this problem. The MoIC official argued that "literacy does not equate to media literacy. There are people with PhDs and Master's Degrees who believe and share fake news".

The online survey showed that 65 percent of the respondents had a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's Degree but 72 percent of the respondents believed in fake news during the pandemic in Bhutan. CSOs such as Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, BMF and JAB also conducted media literacy workshops to their members and interested public according to the ED of JAB to educate people distinguish fake news from the pool of information.

Measures Taken to Address the Issue

The officials from MoH and MoIC believed that fake news thrives when there is a lack of reliable information sources. They claim that the government in Bhutan took several measures to curb the issue early on and took the role of a primary information disseminator. The government agencies particularly used the same social media platform to disseminate credible information. MoH gave daily press briefings to update on the national COVID-19 situation and made timely posts on their official Facebook page regarding the number of cases, precautionary measures and travel advisory within the country. The NCMT also created a separate website for any information and to help people who seek information on COVID-19 in Bhutan, including Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu and other support by the government.

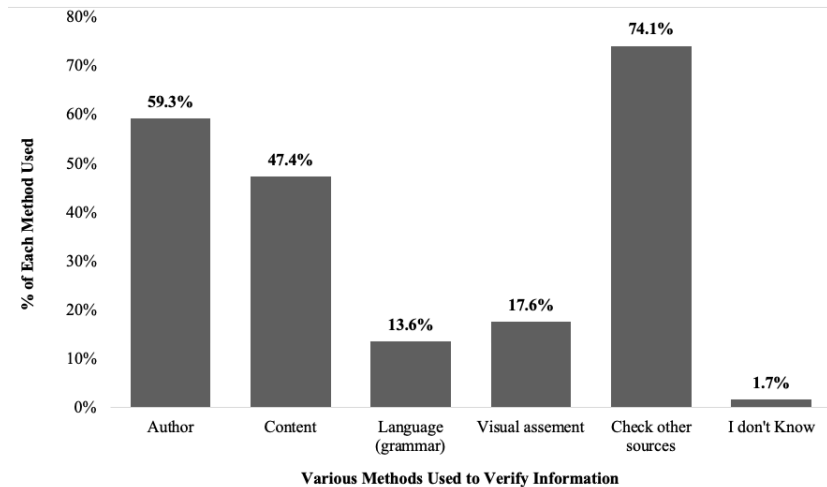
ED of JAB also claimed that the issue of fake news was tackled early in Bhutan through prompt actions of the government agencies, supported by media houses, and by censoring people. ED further explained that there was a clear flow of information regarding COVID-19 where the government disseminated information through press briefings and through their official pages. Media houses disseminated the same information to the public. To ease communication with the local governments, group chats on WeChat and WhatsApp were also created, involving the Prime Minister, ministers, dzongdags, gups, civil servants and other officials.

MoH formed various teams to tackle the issues where NCMT was in charge of the overall risk communication during the pandemic. The technical team under the NCMT conducted media scanning where all social media sites were scanned for misinformation and fake news. The team then assessed, researched and fact-checked any information that came from unsolicited

sources and made counter-posts and announcements on official government pages.

Figure 5

Percentage of Various Methods Used by Survey Respondents to Verify Information Online



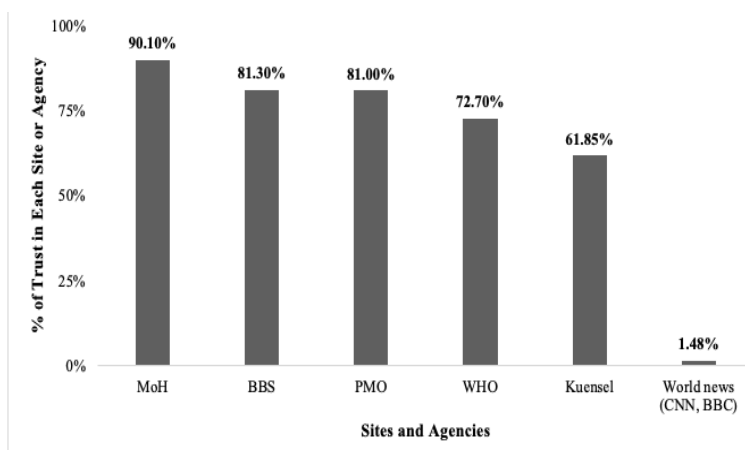
Data from online surveys as shown in Figure 5, showed that 90.6 percent of the respondents check if the news or information on social media is true or not by checking other sources (74.10%), verifying the author (59.3%) and by the content of the news (47.4%).

Accordingly, respondents were asked to rank the sites and agencies they trusted with information on COVID-19 in Bhutan. As shown in Figure 6, the most trusted agency for COVID-19 related news and information in Bhutan was MoH, followed by Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), PMO, the WHO, Kuensel and international media like CNN and BBC.

Data also indicated that collaboration among various agencies, sectors and even individuals was deemed most critical in addressing the issues and minimizing the effect of fake news. MoH coordinated with various media houses, social media influencers such as Namgay Zam, Denkar's Getaway and Wangcha Sangey to disseminate credible information to the public because they have a greater number of followers on social media than government agencies. "Media, which would normally function as the watchdog for the government, was working with the government for the first time", said the official from MoH.

Figure 6

Most Trusted Sites and Agencies as a Source of Covid-19 News and Information by Bhutanese



MoH also ensured that the fact-checks done by other CSOs and individuals on social media were cross-checked, especially those fake news that required clinical and medical expertise. The ministry mobilized financial and human resources to translate and disseminate information in all the local dialects to ensure that all citizens were reached and understood credible information. Members of the Parliament were also encouraged to travel to their respective constituencies and convey information to the public. MoH conducted a health journalism course for at least two journalists from every media house, so that their capacities to disseminate health news and decode technicalities were enhanced.

Respondents during the interviews mentioned that all the activities and measures were advised, guided and supported by His Majesty the King and claimed that without a visionary and compassionate leader, none of the government measures would have been successful.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings already presented and compares them with the literature as follows:

Typology of Fake News

Naeem et al. (2020) classified fake news during COVID-19 into false claims, conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific health therapies, which are relevant

to Bhutan. As indicated by the data from the three methods, Bhutan saw similar types of fake news on social media. Trew (2020) claims that pseudoscientific health treatment caused an adverse effect on people such as deaths due to alcohol poisoning in Iran. Such cases were not seen in Bhutan. Promotion of homeopathy, alternative medicine, herbal medicines and old-fashioned quackery which are practiced in south-east Asian countries were also seen in Bhutan.

Nonetheless, Bhutan witnessed a higher frequency of false lockdown news, which led people to panic-buy and hoard essential goods. The high rate of false lockdown claims in Bhutan may be indicative of the localized concerns of the citizens during the pandemic over international concerns. Conspiracy theories were also similar to claims made by Lamos et al. (2020) about the virus being manufactured as a biological weapon. Such similarity in the types of fake news indicates the interconnectedness of people across the globe through the internet.

Social Media and Fake News

Circulation of fake news on social media drove the government to take actions, which would otherwise not be a part of the pandemic response in Bhutan. The 'infodemic' needed as much attention as the pandemic did. Much of the government's attention and time was averted to explaining the public about testing processes, quarantine measures and nationwide lockdowns.

As studied by Frenkel et al. (2020), Huynh (2020) and Rusonello (2020), social media sites emerged as an important medium for information seeking and sharing about COVID-19. In line with Thewall and Thewall's (2020) claim and similar to the Italian government (Edelman, 2020 cited in Lovari, 2020), measures taken by the Bhutanese government to tackle fake news were mainly through social media sites such as disseminating information through official government Facebook pages, collaborating with social media influencers and encouraging fact-checking and validating information. Such measures as claimed by respondents have also worked to curb fake news in Bhutan. These measures have also allowed the government to employ social media as an important arena for governance, which not only worked during the pandemic but would also work for future governance and information-sharing.

Public Trust and Confidence

While the respondents during the interviews and online surveys claimed that the COVID-19 response was efficient and effective in Bhutan, people initially

signed petitions against the government and wanted the Prime Minister to resign. The first COVID-19 case was an American tourist, which people argued could have been prevented had the government restricted international travel early on.

In this connection, respondents claim that politics also played a vital role in how people reacted against the government as a result of fake news. MoH and MoIC claimed that much of the reactions against the government were targeted against particular politician and political party, not against organizations. As suggested by Zangpo (2020), the active engagement of people on social media indicates a healthy democracy where people actively engage in public discourse and keep a check on the elected leaders. Jang and Baek (2019) support that the efficacy of the response to restrain misinformation and fake news varies from country to country and depends on the public confidence in the authorities. The government of Bhutan claims that the trust of the people did not come easy and that it required the government agencies to prove their worth through various actions and approaches to curb misinformation on social media.

MoH, as the lead agency for fighting the health crisis, involved all agencies, CSOs, media and social media influencers who had the capacity to fight against the 'infodemic'. As claimed by Tasnim et al. (2020), mass media, healthcare organizations, community-based organizations, and other important stakeholders should build strategic partnerships and launch common platforms for disseminating authentic public health messages.

The effectiveness of the government was shown through the online surveys that depict that people trust government sites for COVID-19 information in Bhutan over other sources. The trust and respect people have for His Majesty the King and the support His Majesty rendered to the government, also helped the government gain people's trust and confidence.

Rodrigues and Xu (2020) claim that tackling the issue of fake news has been a complicated trade-off between state power and freedom of speech in India. Bhutan took similar measures as that of the Indian Prime Minister by refraining news channels from publishing information on COVID-19 without the government's clearance and the government taking the lead role in disseminating information. However, the Bhutanese media and public did not acknowledge those measures as authoritarian or infringement of freedom of speech. The measures taken by the government were not as extreme as that of the Chinese government, where people were penalized for spreading fake news online (Chinanews.com, 2020 & Sina.com, 2020 cited in Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). Instead, the media in Bhutan played a critical role in assisting

the government to contain the spread of news and disseminate credible information to the public.

Policy Interventions of the Government

The issues propelled by fake news during the pandemic made the government rethink its policy to address fake news in Bhutan. As mentioned earlier, the government officials did not consider penalization and controlling the media as a solution. Laws pertaining to sharing of misinformation already existed in Bhutan, but the issue escalated during the pandemic. MoIC pointed out that literacy does not equate to media and information literacy. Arechar and Rand (2020, cited in Pennycook, 2020) claimed that believing in fake news proves a lower aptitude to engage in analytical or reflective thinking, which can only be taught through media and information literacy skills (De Abreau, 2019). The interview respondents also proposed that the only long-term solution to curb fake news is to equip people with the ability to recognize fake news and validate information to change their behaviour. MoIC further pointed out that there are currently neither policies that require citizens to be media literate to use media nor initiatives to train people on media literacy. The 'infodemic' has made various agencies realize the importance of media literacy for citizens of all ages and walks of life including politicians, civil servants, teachers, parents, students, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current research explored studies on the impact of fake news during a public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Various literature on the types of fake news and measures taken by the governments in different countries to curb fake news were also reviewed. A mixed method using an online survey with the general public, semi-structured interviews with government officials and content analysis on fact-checks done by various agencies during the pandemic were carried out to study the effect of fake news on how the government dealt with the pandemic in Bhutan.

From challenging silo mentalities of the government agencies to building trust and confidence in people through policies and actions, fake news affected the government's pandemic response. Nonetheless, the vibrant leadership and guidance of His Majesty the King remained the key source of inspiration for every organization to perform its duties in the interest of the public.

Future research can focus on studying the impact of fake news on rural populations and exploring other mediums that can also spread fake news. Lastly, as Tasmin et al. (2020) acclaimed, transparency, good governance and leadership across communities and institutions should be promoted to

eliminate misleading information related to COVID-19, which is essential for the greater good of populations experiencing the health and psychological burdens of this pandemic.

Limitations

The scope of the current research is limited to social media sites, particularly Facebook for content analysis. The study, however, acknowledges that fake news can spread orally. Also, only literate social media users were able to participate in the online surveys, not illiterate social media users.

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