

Misinformation and Society

During the end of 2019, the novel coronavirus was a trending news item for most of the countries in the world except for China. It seemed like a localized epidemic that had befallen upon a small region of a country and the concept of lockdown was a reality for only a small region, but not for us. By spring of 2020, lockdown was suddenly a global reality. The mere thought of lockdown caused by a global pandemic sent shivers down the spine for the common man, who for the first time in life was forced to stay home and refrain from work. As the reality of 'no work, no pay' sank in, fear amplified into a threat and this threat caused immense panic among the masses.

As a nursing professional, I was at the epicentre of where the reality called COVID-19 unfolded – the hospital. As the disease spread through densely populated urban areas, hospitals in these areas witnessed a surge of masses desperate for a cure (Freyer, 2020). The pandemic was not just making the affected people desperate; those who remained healthy and at home also had a lot of mental trauma to deal with. The primary reason for this was misinformation and astute over-emphasis of the corona crisis in the media (The Economist, 2020). The media instilled a deep fear in the minds of people as well as aroused insecurity among masses that were battling the psychological challenges posed by the lockdown (Brahmi et al., 2020).

In most cases, this fear was instilled by political groups that wanted to benefit through communalism. For instance, in UK, the public witnessed a prolific amount of posts on Twitter and Facebook which inspired anti-foreigner sentiments in many regions (Chadwick, 2020). The Chinese population was targeted as coronavirus is known to have originated in Wuhan. Anti-semitic and anti-muslim sentiments were also inspired through social media (Macguire, 2020). In India, the mainstream media clearly sided with the government to push the agenda that turned the public attention away from real and pressing concerns. For example, during April and May, the Indian media vilified the nation's Muslim community and held them responsible for the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the country (Vetticad, 2020). It gave the government a smoke-screen, thus enabling them to sidestep their accountability towards crises like massive movement of immigrant population and the hard-hitting economic conditions caused by the

government's bad policies and imposition of a very harsh and crippling lockdown in the country.

The pattern across the world is that governments have been trying to shirk their responsibility of being accountable to people by inciting adversity among various ethnic groups (Raju, 2020). However, the society at large strives for the common good. People prefer tolerance over spite and civil harmony over groupism. Thus, on social media, sentiments of hate have been countered with sentiments of brotherhood, empathy, and overwhelming concern for fellow human beings. An example of this is the 'Black Lives Matter' movement which was triggered by the unfortunate killing of George Floyd in an act of racism-inspired bias (Buchanan et al., 2020). This movement was widely supported by the American public comprising of all ethnicities who called for an end to racial bias by authorities (Maqbool, 2020). It is interesting to note that racial bias is commonly propagated by right-wing politicians. However, the collective conscience of the society restores the equilibrium of tolerance, harmony, and brotherhood.

It has been observed that educated people such as lawyers, artists, and IT professionals play a pivotal role in countering negative propaganda, hate speech, and communal tension. Through their education, such people are empowered to see through blatant propaganda and identify the attempt at social mind programming through which politicians or groups strive to shift the dynamics of the society. The educated people enable the common denominator to understand the trap of propaganda and they make the society aware of what is really happening (Press Trust of India, 2020).

In conclusion, the COVID pandemic situation has been a period of time where deliberate misinformation has been propagated to bring about social unrest. But the general nature of the society rests on firm grounds of equality, tolerance, and concern. Thus, the society always swings back into equilibrium and the educated class of the society always tends to take a leadership position in bringing about this change.

References

- Brahmi, N., Singh, P., Sohal, M., & Sawhney, R. S. (2020). Psychological trauma among the healthcare professionals dealing with COVID-19. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 102241. doi:10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102241
- Buchanan, L., Bui, Q., & Patel, J. (2020, July 03). Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>
- Chadwick, J. (2020, June 12). Social media is 'fuelling prejudice' against Chinese people during pandemic, study claims. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-8414537/Social-media-fuelling-prejudice-against-Chinese-people-pandemic-study-claims.html>
- Freyer, F. (2020, July 10). Worst-case scenarios predicted Mass. hospitals would be overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients. Here's why that didn't happen - The Boston Globe. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/07/10/nation/worst-case-scenarios-predicted-mass-hospitals-would-be-overwhelmed-by-covid-19-patients-heres-why-that-didnt-happen/>
- Macguire, E. (2020, April 05). Anti-Asian hate continues to spread online amid COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anti-asian-hate-continues-spread-online-covid-19-pandemic-200405063015286.html>
- Maqbool, A. (2020, July 10). Black Lives Matter: From social media post to global movement. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53273381>
- Press Trust of India. (2020, March 21). US senators urge Twitter to ban Chinese Communist Party from platform. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-senators-urge-twitter-to-ban-chinese-communist-party-from-platform/story-8CYrGUPxV8VaAezJ5GPI3K.html>
- Raju, S. (2020, April 27). Lacking in transparency. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/lacking-in-transparency/article31447809.ece>
- The Economist. (2020). How to reduce the mental trauma of covid-19. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/08/29/how-to-reduce-the-mental-trauma-of-covid-19>

Vetticad, A. (2020, May 15). Indian media accused of Islamophobia for its coronavirus coverage. Retrieved September 10, 2020, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/indian-media-accused-islamophobia-coronavirus-coverage-200417064109353.html>