News Sharing on Social Media during Health Crises: Between Awareness Raising and Misinformation to Promote the Role of Facebook in Health Education

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Abstract:

Facebook is a platform used for sharing news and information unceasingly, mainly the societal issues, including the health issues and crises. In this regard, some news are facts, others are fake, while others are partially true. Since Facebook takes much of our time and is an integral part of our routines, it directly affects our perceptions and view of events through its educational, and most of the time misleading, news. Amateurs who have no relations with official parties or media agencies manage most of the pages and accounts. Therefore, we question the credibility of news and information shared on such pages. Since information on public health is very sensitive, it is virally spread on social media regardless its reliability. Thus, it is necessary to shed light on the method of news and information sharing on Facebook to find out its advantages and gaps. Based on what was said, this paper provides suggestions to rationalize the use of Facebook in dealing with health issues and improve the quality of shared news to maintain the health security and citizens' safety. Besides, the paper goes beyond the theoretical information to suggesting practical measures that facilitate the process of examining the truth of the health news before sharing them and influencing the users who lack information and health awareness, taking some Facebook medical pages as examples.

Keywords: Facebook; health crisis; misinformation; awareness raising; user; suggested view.

Introduction:

Since the last decades, the world has been witnessing many human crises (wars, struggles, massacres, epidemics, famines, natural catastrophes, etc.) that affect life and increase suffering. Such crises are caused by man against man, because "Homo homini lupus", as Hobbes puts. In the era of technological speed, the human life, struggles, wars, and crises are electronic based on ideologies, agenda, interests, and even human whims. Such crises include health, mainly after the spread of viruses and epidemics that threaten the human life and cause economic, political, and psychological troubles, as was the case of Covid-19. During this crisis, emergency states were declared, pushing societies to understand and limit the crisis and find vaccines. At the same time, social media were a space for misleading information that increased the crisis and hindered the application of the health organizations' plans.

The lack of official information scared people and pushed them to accept social media news without credibility examination (supposed scientific studies, fake experiences, dangerous preventive methods, fake treatments, etc.). Thus, fake news on social media were the biggest obstacle to the international and domestic health organizations. Based on what was said, this paper sheds light on news and information sharing during crises on social media, mainly Facebook, to examine the binary of "misinformation VS awareness raising" and suggest a view to deal with the health digital content. We shall focus on Covid-19, as it is the most dangerous health crisis in history, whose health, psychological, economic, and political repercussions still affect the world so far.

Questions:

- What is meant by the health crisis?
- How are news and information shared during health crises (based on the experiences and future predictions)?
- Why do fake news spread during health crises? Why are social media, mainly Facebook, the best environment for the cyber crisis?
- How can misinformation (production/ publication/ sharing/ fake news) affect behaviors during health crises?
- How can we distinguish the facts and fake news on Facebook?
- How can we limit Facebook to awareness raising instead of misinformation?

First: Conceptual context:

Health crisis:

It is any threat to the health declared by the state due to the potential risks and viruses, such as H1N1, Covid-19, Ebola, and Spanish fever; due to famines and malnutrition, (famine in Somalia, malnutrition in Yemen, humanitarian crisis in Gaza); or due to natural and industrial catastrophes (the earthquake in Turkey and Syria)[1]. Health crises are sudden, rapidly developing, and have wide effect on the society, including psychological and economic issues due to the resulting stress and fears.

Fake news:

Keith Ablow sees that sharing and believing fake news is deeply rooted in history. However, social media aggravated the situation and do not allow users to examine their credibility due to their density and speed[2]. Therefore, fake news raise a complicated phenomenon with technological, communicative, cyber, scientific, security, and intelligentsia dimensions. In this context, creating and sharing fake news on social media is an infinite process with many phases to mislead the public opinion and limit the activities of individuals, groups, institutions, and states. It is divided into:

- A communicative industry managed by political entities (parties, states…etc.), or security, intellectual, and research organizations.

- An industry managed by individuals who have no political affiliations, but have social, psychological, and even racist motives; they are known as the electronic armies or flies[3].

During the health crises, the fake news turn into a cyber epidemic due to their speed and the fears and psychological issues they leave. In addition, they may affect the therapeutic schemes that aim at limiting the crises.

Second: News and information sharing during health crises (Covid-19: a test for the world).

1- Back to the events' context: a health crisis and a cyber crisis:

We cannot discuss the binary of social media and fake news without reference to Covid-19 and its psychological, health, economic, political, and cyber effects, as the scene was open to all narratives and lies with different ideologies and strategies. All the media outlets focused on Covid-19 news; some denied the virus, others spread fears, others justified the shutdown, others warned of poverty, others called for vaccination, others warned of vaccination…etc. Besides, there were contradicting news on the tolls, on different prescriptions, and on scarcity and crisis, making people worried. Amid fears, worries, and the need for official information from laboratories and authorities, people accepted all information regardless its credibility. Therefore, many health and governmental organizations warned of the effects of the cyber

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[1] Toufik Bouras & Assia Belkhir (2021), the management of health crises in Algeria: Cholera and Covid-19, the Algerian journal for security and development, Vol. 10, issue 03, p. 36.

[2] Delimi Abd al Razak (2018), restrictions on social media: policies and aims, report published on 02/01/2021, URL: https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/mediastudies/2019/01/190102094150980.html, p. 03.

[3] Mohamed al Rajehi (2018), fake news industry and the cyber embargo on the public opinion.

epidemic the humanity experienced during the health crisis, and called for thinking critically when dealing with online information, mainly on social media, and not sharing what is not confirmed by experts.

2. Covid-19, the 21st century crisis...a multidimensional cosmopolitan crisis:

The French Edgar Moran described this crisis as cosmopolitan due to the overlapping political, economic, social, environmental, national, and international policies. Such crisis manifests in the wide scope of the ideological viruses, fake news, conspiracy theory, and racist explosions. In this context, Morgan recommended liberating the minds. Besides, Slavoy called for the use of mind to take difficult decisions that lead humanity to safety, as Kant put[4]. Under the emergency state and the health war declared by many states against Covid-19, a parallel unconventional war was launched and covered the ideas and perceptions; it was called the symbolic struggle, symbolic war, or ideas war, as Michael Walzer, the international security researcher, put. This war targeted establishing narratives that identify the genetic structure, origin, and the party that created the virus to biologically fight its enemies, controlling the public discourses on the pandemic, influencing the local and international public opinion, and blaming the material, human, social, and psychological effects on a given party[5].

Fake news under the health crisis is the outcome of overlapping interests and different ideologies... the fake news is the outcome of the symbolic struggle and the ideas war:

3. Media and Covid-19 between the binary of manufacturing/misleading the public opinion:

Media outlets had a vital role during Covid-19, as they were a main source for information and raising awareness on the virus risks to convince people to follow the precautions to control the situation and limit the crisis. This is known as manufacturing the public opinion during crisis based on interaction and complementarity between media and audience, mainly in the digital era that has no physical boundaries. In order for the media outlets to shape the public opinion, it is necessary to:

- Tell audience about the crisis through all the modern and traditional outlets to achieve a comprehensive and continuous coverage and interaction with the audience.
- Embracing the crisis: the outlets are divided into opponent, partisan, and neutral according to their agenda and interests.
- Argumentation: this covers all the arguments used by the media outlets to describe the crisis, in addition to the arguments of the causing party to defend itself, and the arguments taken by the audience to take attitudes.

As for the interaction between media and audience, it is the outcome of digital environment that allowed the audience to be an active party in creating media content; the complementarity is between the media activists and social activists[6].

4. Coverage ideologies...the game of hiding and unhiding (soft lies):

In information and communication sciences, any content conveys the ideology of its maker and publisher. In this regard, even the media coverage of Covid-19 was not neutral, as it was based on political agenda and strategic goals. In his study of the determinants of the TV Channels' coverage of Covid-19 in the digital era, Mohamed al Amine Moussa found out that the media coverage was diverse in the channels he studied, namely Sky News Arabia, CNN, Fox News, and al Arabia. For instance, CNN adopted the media emergency and provided a comprehensive and continuous coverage of the pandemic through dialogues and talks and through shedding light on the health staff and depicting them as frontline warriors who

[4] Slavoy Gejec, Covid-19 shakes the world, the reading of al Hadj Mohamed al Nassek, journal of Labab for strategic and media studies, al Jazeera studies center, Doha, issue 07, 2020, pp. 218-227.

[5] Mohamed al Rajehi, the symbolic struggle and the psychological war during Covid-19, reports, al Jazeera studies center, 2020, p. 2, URL: https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4654.

[6] Mohamed al Amine Moussa, media and the other opinion and crises: complementary-interactive approach, journal of Labab for strategic and media studies, al Jazeera studies center, Qatar, issue 01, 2019, pp. 136-138.

save patients. In addition, it regularly and extensively introduced the declarations of officials, mainly Donald Trump's that raised much debate. Besides, the channel shed light on the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic[7]. On the other hand, Fox News privileged the political agenda to the health agenda in its coverage in USA, mainly that the pandemic coincided with the elections in USA. Moreover, it resisted the calls for intensifying the shutdown and reducing the economic activities, and did not give the health crisis its merits despite its importance and the economic effects of the pandemic on USA and the world[8].

Third: Social media besiege people during health crises (back to the pandemic):

The shutdown decisions increased the use of social media to alleviate the social isolation, communicate with others, and follow the news. The researches of Global Web Index on social media use show that websites and social media use increased with almost 50% in the Western states to find news on the virus and its dangers.

 1. News sharing on social media: the binary of misinformation and awareness raising:

- Social media are the best environment for the spread of the cyber epidemic (the spread of fake news):

- The specificities of the digital environment (social media) as a space for lies industry:

- It is necessary to focus on the specificities of the digital environment, mainly social media that can be an explanation for the spread of lies.

- The production and distribution of content on social media is different, as the news producer and poster is the user (from everybody to everybody).

- The attraction makes social media a space that allows the entities and organizations to know the people's perceptions of the events and the types of values and symbolic struggle.

- The media/cyber fluidity due to the fast spread of information, narratives, and alternative narratives.

- The lack of censorship, as the user is the producer, sender, recipient, decision maker, etc.

- The anonymous sources and fake accounts help violate the social and ethical restrictions.

This makes social media a space for fake news and data, mainly in political, economic, social, and health crises. In addition, they may be an active party in creating and directing the crises based on given agenda and interests.

2. The health crisis…the best topic for lies on social media:

The lies industry flourishes on social media due to their specificity (as we previously mentioned) and the nature of the health crisis that obliges people to look for relevant information. In this regard, Oxford University showed that 33% of social media users in USA, Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, and UK watched misleading or fake information, including 2311 reports on conspiracy theory and rumors in 25 languages from 87 states, on social media and electronic newspaper from December 2019 to April 2020.

3. The causes of the fake news spread on social media during health crises:

- The technical specificities of social media facilitate the rapid transmission of news and information. The study of MIT, which was published in Sciences Journal in 2018, showed that the speed of fake news spread exceeds the speed of real news 06 times, and that the number of social media users increased during that crisis. In this regard, Facebook is the best space for fake news. In 2020, Afaza Company published a study revealing that Facebook algorithms threaten the public health. Besides, an article on al

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[7] Mohamed al Amine Moussa, the determinants of the TV channels' coverage of Covid-18 in the era of digitalization, al Jazeera studies center, 2020, p. 15, URL, https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/464.
[8] Ibid., p. 19.

Jazeera website in 2022 criticized Facebook for allowing for the spread of misleading medical information.

- The lack of critical thinking when receiving information and data on social media comes from the low skills and unmastery of the technical tools.

- The conspiracy theory resurfaces in every human crisis, mainly the health crises, such as Covid-19, where US quasi-official parties indicted China of producing the virus in its sake to develop biological weapons. In return, China indicted USA of creating the virus and deliberately spreading it in Wuhan. In addition to the predictions before the appearance of the virus, including the forecasts of Martin Reus in 2003 in his book "Our Last Hours" about a catastrophe that would destroy the world (nuclear terrorism, genetically modified viruses, genetic engineering that changes the nature of humans, etc.), in her "the End of Days" (2008), Sylva Brown predicted that 2020 would witness an epidemic[9] and people would doubt and warn of vaccination. The development of media outlets and the diversity and speed of information channels helped the spread of such perceptions, views, and analyses. In return, a study in 2019 pointed that conspiracy theory partisans believe fake sciences, supernatural phenomena, and fake news (herbal treatment, witchcraft[10],...etc.).

- The health crisis raises many questions and fears, mainly under the lack of official information from experts (doctors, health experts, governmental bodies, etc.). This pushes people to resort for different sources without examining credibility. The need for information on the symptoms, causes, factors of spread, prevention method, and effects influences how people choose information from different specialized and unspecialized sources[11].

- The lack of official medical information on the pandemic, its spread, prevention, and losses.

- The irrational quest of information and the fears of any crisis that threatens life affects how people receive and filter information and examine its credibility, making them lost between real and fake news.

- The audience turns into a content creator during crises, as they share information, advice, and news without verifying their validity in order to gain more followers[12].

- The political/ economic employment of the health crisis to justify the government efforts and show its control of the situation. In so doing, the government minimizes statistics while opposition parties give the real numbers or even maximize them and spread rumors to diminish the efforts of the official authorities (decline of the health system, overcrowded hospitals, lack of vaccination, etc.). On the economic side, the medical laboratories increase their sales and make more profits.

4. The strategies of fake news industry on social media during health crises:

- The use of fears and emotions.

- Falsification of scientific studies and publication of fake news on treatment and prevention.

- Publication of fake images and videos to frighten people.

- The economic exploitation of the crisis.

- The use of the crisis to increase the number of followers.

5. The methods of fighting fake news on social media during health crises:

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[9] Hamid al Hachemi (2022), the conspiracy theory during Covid-19, center of research in social and cultural anthropology, Oran, Algeria, p. 64.
[10] Ibid. p. 67.
[11] Hassina Ben Rokya, the cyber epidemic resulting from Covid-19, study of the causes of spread and effect size, p. 796.
[12] Lobna Rahmouni & Amina Allag (2021), Covid-19 and the spread of fake news on Facebook in Algeria, analytical study, journal of human sciences, University of Oum el Bouaghi, Vol. 08, issue 02, p. 313.

- The efforts of states and organizations: In 2020, the UN confirmed its commitment to fight the fake news by cooperating with local partners, providing health information, fostering journalistic and professional ethics, and fighting cyber illiteracy[13]. In addition, WHO launched the initiative of ending the fake news to ensure and spread true information. Besides, some states imposed sanctions and fines on fake news publishers. In this context, the Algerian Ministry of Health warned of the fake news on Covid-19 and took legal measures against their publishers.

- The role of internet users: People must think critically when dealing with health contents during crises to understand, analyze, and interpret the contexts of producing and receiving information. Besides, they should be aware of the dangers of sharing fake news that may foster fears and worries and affect the state efforts.

- The efforts of the big communication companies: During Covid-19, specialized groups from Facebook and Google used AI to reveal fake news and direct the users to the contents of WHO and the official local authorities[14]. In this regard, Good developed SOS-Alert system that shares information issued by WHO.

- Designing programs and applications that detect fake news, including Detector BS that finds the doubtful websites, Geofedia that allows for controlling social media contents according to the geographical position, and Google Reverse Image Search that allows the users to upload an image, enter URL, and find a similar image[15].

Fourth: The role of social media in raising awareness during health crises (Facebook/Meta):

The use of Facebook increased with 11% in March 2020 compared to the year before, in addition to Messenger and Whatsapp, mainly in the most affected regions. After the shutdown, Facebook initiated Facebook Shops to help people shop electronically, and provided correct information on the pandemic from official parties. In addition, TikTok reached a record in the first quarter of 2020, with 315 million downloads, to reach 02 billion users all around the world. In addition, Twitter reached 166 million users[16]. On the other hand, experts, virologists, and cyber scientists used social media to unify the efforts that aim at ending the crisis. In addition, WHO used social media to fight rumors and lies shared on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Pinterest[17], and recommended avoiding the cyber epidemic.

1. The role of Facebook during the health crises (Covid-19):

- Raising health awareness via official pages, such as WHO page and Ministry of Health page to allow for the continuous updates about the development of events. In addition, Facebook launched many initiatives, including:

- An information center that shows all the news and advice of the international and local health organizations to get recent information and limit the fake news.

- Healthathome Hashtag to encourage the users to stay home and keep distances.

- Granting WHO a free advertising space to raise awareness.

- Linking WHO and the national health ministries with the developers who deal with Facebook to develop an automatic system on Messenger that provides automatic replies with information on the pandemic.

- Participating in WHO campaign of raising funds to fight the pandemic with 10 million USD.

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[13] The UN fights fake news locally and nationally, 22 May 2020, URL https://www.undp.org/ar/lebanon/news/alamm-almthdt-tkafh-antshar-alakhbar-alkhatyt-walmdllt-ly-almstwyyn-almhly-walwtny.
[14] Ibid., p. 320.
[15] Ramdan Abd al Majid (2021), the governmental policies and the initiatives of media outlets in facing the fake news, al Saoura journal for human and social sciences, Vol. 07, issue 02, p. 427.
[16] How did Covid-19 change social media uses? Middle East journal, Arab international journal, URL https://aawsat.com/, accessed on 02/10/2021 at 10:00.
[17] Mohamed al Amine Moussa, op. cit., p. 27.

- Using lives to support personal communication processes and answer questions.

- Collaborating with France Press agency (an international agency that provides fast and exact coverage with video, image, sound, and caricature) to find out the truth and limit fake news.

- Limiting sending messages on Messenger to 05 people only to limit fake news.

- Banning the advertisements that sell masks, sanitizers, and wipes.

- Widening the scope of data verification to reach the Middle East via "Fa Tabayanu" platform.

- Adding a new button "Fact Check" to check the doubtful information on Covid-19[18].

2. The role of Facebook during health crises (the present):

The main role for Facebook is:

- Raising awareness and publishing true information via health ministries and organizations.
- Providing educational materials.
- The digital management of catastrophes and crises thanks to the immediacy of sharing and exchanging information and instructions, and to live posts to notify the authorities to take the necessary measures.
- Fostering interaction through the ability to detect rumors and fake news, easy use and access, use of hashtags, adjustment of messages, and replies to inquiries.
- Fighting the misleading information.
- Fostering cooperation with the official health bodies.

Fifth: A suggested view to rationalize the educational role of Facebook:

Facebook is the most used platform. In order for it to play an educational role instead of spreading misleading information, it is necessary to divide tasks between:

- The responsibility of individuals (users):

- Developing critical thinking towards what is shared on the platforms.
- Developing the use skills.
- Supporting the objective health content (health information) through following and sharing.
- Not sharing content before checking its validity.
- Relying on reliable sources and official pages of medical organizations and media outlets.
- Reporting any doubtful pages or those that post fake information.

The responsibility of the platform (Facebook/ Meta):

- Developing algorithms that fight fake news.
- Cooperating with the health organizations and the official media outlets to share true information.
- Hiding and deleting the misleading information to limit their spread.
- Blocking the pages and accounts that share misleading information.
- Using AI to detect fake news and information.
- Raising the users' awareness on how to deal with information on the health crises using videos or contents designed by Facebook.

Throughout the last decade, the world witnessed a wide spread of fact checking websites from big media institutions, such as the French news agency and Washington Post, and from independent unprofitable organizations that aim at finding out facts and increase political, economic, social, and cultural awareness and immunity against fake news[19].

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[18] Lamya Akmal al Aqili, interactivity on Facebook and its role in health awareness raising (Covid-19 as a model), the Arab journal for researches in digital information and communication, issue 05, pp. 209-210.

[19] Roba Salma, analysis of facts in the Arab world, journalists in a field of mines, Al Jazeera Information Institute, published on 19/10/2020, URL : institute.aljazeera.net/ar/ajr/article/1263.

Conclusion:

Human crises in the digital era show that the digital development is a double-edged sword that depends on the human use and will. In this regard, social media shortened distances, destroyed the spatial and temporal barriers, and facilitated communication and information. However, they turned into public spaces for different narratives and news without examination of validity. Therefore, creating content is possible for every user with no consideration of the credibility criteria and social norms, mainly during health crises. The world has experienced the dangers of social media, mainly Facebook, as they provide information when the official organizations do not. However, the lack of critical thinking made it full of fake news and rumors, what hinders the efforts of the health organizations and authorities.

On the other hand, we cannot deny Facebook's role in collaboration with the international and national organizations to fight fake news and cyber epidemic, protect true information, inform people all around the world, and share educational content. Thus, Facebook is a source of education and misinformation during health crises. The speed of information sharing makes it impossible to detect all fake information and affects all the users. In return, there are many awareness campaigns and hashtag sharing to fight fake news. To avoid misinformation during health crises, all parties (people, societies, governments, and social media, mainly Facebook) must collaborate and commit to their responsibilities in dealing with digital contents.

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