



Role of social media & communication during the period of Covid-19 pandemic

Kanishk Singhal

Student of 4th Semester of LL.B, Manipal University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

The 1918 Flu pandemic, which the CDC (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) had estimated that it infected one third of the World's population, and during that period the people didn't have the proper source of communication and information. However, now in the 21st century, we are having advanced sources of communication for quick sharing of news and information to the public.

Keywords: pandemic, estimated, communication, CDC

Introduction

In the present phase of COVID-19, popularly known as Coronavirus, the social media is a great way for individuals and communities to stay connected even while physically separated.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created havoc across the World, putting extraordinary pressure on not just public health systems, but also on crisis communications. With social media being the primary medium for information exchange, therefore clear & end-to-end crisis communication with diverse target groups becomes key in dealing with such a pandemic.

With the advent of social media in the 21st century, not only are we learning the latest news updates, but we're also using platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Twitter to provide personal and business updates. For businesses, this means leveraging social media to support employees and customers like never before. For the government, it is not just the means of doing its best to efficiently share factual and up-to-date information but a tool track the infected and potentially exposed persons. Indian Government's social App Aarogya Setu App has become the world's highest downloaded Application within few days of its launch.

Taking a look at how individuals, businesses, and Government agencies have been sharing information and interacting with others on social media in the past few weeks, here are four primary roles that social platforms are playing during the COVID-19 outbreak:

1. A source of information (and also misinformation)

Now, we had more real time information available at our fingertips in the face of a worldwide events. Such information can help us in keeping safe, providing us with a better understanding of what is occurring and how it might impact us and our near & dear ones. Yet, social media can also spread falsehoods, including misleading preventative measures, false claims about the implementation of martial law, conspiracy theories, and more. Finding trusted sources of information regarding COVID-19 is extremely important. Social media companies are working to combat misleading information on Covid-19.

At the time when many of us are grappling for as much information as we can get our hands on, the public is especially susceptible to false and sometimes hazardous claims, which are then passed on to others. According to a news, the Indian Government has written to top social media companies including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, ShareChat and Twitter, to control the spread of misleading information on COVID 19. All social media companies are working closely on the issue but Government want them to be particular about removing misinformation and to promote authentic content and remove fake news. The Government in its advisory said that the coronavirus the outbreak has become a global concern and it has been reported that there is a trend of circulation of false information and sharing anonymous data related to the virus, creating panic among the public. It urged social media platforms to initiate awareness campaigns on the platforms for users to not upload or circulate false news concerning coronavirus, which is likely to create panic and disturb social tranquillity.

2. An influence on public response to the outbreak

Billions of people are free to publicly share their opinions on COVID-19 across various social platforms. In the past few weeks, we've seen individuals, organizations, and businesses used social media to spread awareness of COVID-19, as well as the public actions that can be taken.

Here are a few of the most distinct ways by which social media has influenced the public since the virus reached epidemic and pandemic levels:

a) Social Distancing and Home Quarantine ^[1]

Until a few weeks ago, many of us hadn't even heard of "social distancing," which refers to staying at least 6 feet away from others to help in preventing the spread of infection. Now, social media users, from friends and family to celebrities and Governments, are regularly advising for social distancing.

Home Quarantine is also new concept which people have learnt from this pandemic. Quarantine separates and restricts

¹ Section- 35 of The Disaster Management Act, 2005 available at <https://www.ndmindia.nic.in/images/The%20Disaster%20Management%20Act,%202005.pdf>

the movement of people who were exposed to or came in close contact with an infected person having contagious disease or who are having a recent foreign travel history, to see if they become sick during quarantine period of 14 days. These people may have been exposed to a disease and do not know it, or they may have the disease but do not show symptoms. To fight with the Covid-19, system of Home Quarantine is also implemented and the home quarantined person should stay in a well-ventilated single-room preferably with an attached/separate toilet. If another family member needs to stay in the same room, it is advisable to maintain a distance of at least 1 meter between the two. Such home quarantined person needs to stay away from elderly people, pregnant women, children and persons with co-morbidities within the household. Such person should also restrict his/her movement within the house and under no circumstances attend any social/religious gathering e.g. wedding, condolences, etc.

b) Boasting and Shaming panic buying

Many people have been excessively purchasing household goods, sanitization products, and food in fear that necessities will no longer be accessible — just like they do when there is a hurricane or some other natural disaster. This over-purchasing has become so commonplace that social media users have coined a phrase to describe it: panic buying. On social media, panic buying is being discussed in two distinct ways:

- People are posting about their own panic buying, showing images of carts filled with toilet paper, water bottles, and frozen meals.
- People are posting pictures of empty shelves or other people's carts as a way to shame supposed panic buyers.

3. Marketing Platform including Socially responsible product marketing

The COVID-19 outbreak presents a defining moment for many brands in how they choose to market their products.

Unfortunately, we're going to see people who are selling various oil-type and other products by claiming these will enhance immunity. Some businesses will prey on mass hysteria, especially businesses putting extra money behind social media ads, selling products like hand sanitizer, facemasks, soaps, food products etc.

Popular hashtags popping up related to social distancing and quarantining include #social distancing, #quarantine and chill, and #my pandemic survival plan.

Despite the uptick in alarmist-focused media spend, there are many businesses providing powerful and empathetic responses to COVID-19. The main responsibility of brands right now is to provide for the safety and well-being of their employees and customers. That said, there are certain business models that lend themselves particularly well to providing relief for many people during this time. Streaming services, for instance, are providing entertainment for those bored at home. Markets and restaurants with delivery services are able to safely provide groceries and meals to those unable to venture out. Online courses are being offered for free and at reduced prices. All in all, we're seeing many businesses do the best they can to ease the fear and discomfort being experienced by so many.

4. A powerful way to bring positivity to a scary time

No platform is perfect. But where there has been

misinformation and fear on social media, there's also been an abundance of vital, lifesaving information, connection with others, and global unity. The ability to share experiences with family and friends helps to combat both literal and emotional isolation while also reminding us that we're all in this together. Lots of e-reunions of old schoolmates, college groups and past colleagues were also witnessed by these social platforms in the Lock down period of pandemic.

Here are a few of the ways that social media has made positive impacts during COVID-19:

a. Fundraisers organized and distributed on social help raise money for those in need

COVID-19 has put many people, especially the elderly, those with disabilities, working parents who are losing childcare, and those who are losing their jobs, in challenging situations. Communities are rallying together to support organizations and individuals by sharing fundraisers with large audiences on social media. People are also taking to social media to offer support in any way they can, such as picking up groceries for individuals who are unable to leave home or sharing information on how to support local businesses who are struggling to pay their employees.

b. People are posting pictures and videos to share their experiences

Posts from people quarantined at home have ranged from videos of living room yoga to pictures of snuggly pets who thrilled their owners and are with them 24/7. Videos of people who have recovered from Covid-19 disease are also posted, where these people have shared with public their good as well as positive experience. Many videos from Indians living across Globe (including at Wuhan) are also posted, where they have shared the mistakes these countries have made while dealing with Covid-19 so that Indian people should not commit such mistakes. These are just a couple of the millions of examples where people have shown their support and empathy on social media. And while the tone and delivery vary, the message from one user to another remains constant: you are not alone in this pandemic, there are silver linings to be enjoyed, and it's okay to experience this in any number of ways.

c. There is still a lot to learn

This is the first time any living generation has experienced a pandemic of this scale, and we are just beginning to understand social media's ultimate role. In years to come, it will serve as an incredibly precise case study in the ways the public and businesses alike respond to such an unprecedented global event, and how those responses on a public platform influence not just the actions of individuals, but of Corporations and Governments.

What impact has social media had, good or bad, on the coronavirus pandemic to date?

a. Social Media and COVID-19: The Good!

Social media is one of the best ways to share news nowadays (it may be the only way for some people), especially if you are trying to alert people of something serious in a very, very quick manner. Whether it be COVID-19 news from individual States or news on a National coverage, social media gets the message where it needs to go.

We have seen pretty much everything in terms of the coronavirus over the last few days to weeks. The number of people being affected by the illness in States, Countries, and specific Cities and Towns come to mind. This news has made people aware of how the situation has been constantly deteriorating the sense of normalcy across the Nation. Social media has also educated us about the symptoms of COVID-19—in turn, perhaps saving lives!

Safety tips are another ENORMOUS thing spreading through social media. One, in particular, is the term “social distancing.” According to John Hopkins Medicine, the act of social distancing involves “deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness.” It is also suggested to stay at least six feet away from other people to lessen your chances of catching COVID-19.

Maybe the best thing that has happened across a variety of social media platforms is the number of sports persons, film stars, politicians, celebrities, and influencers that have spoken up urging people to take everything they see about COVID-19 seriously and follow suit. Whether it was clapping or clanging utensils from balconies or terraces as desired by our PM Modi to salute and express gratitude to those providing essential services amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the social media played a very positive role in spreading the people’s action covering the sports persons, film stars, politicians, celebrities, and influencers, which boosted the public morale and confidence. United Kingdom PM Boris Johnson who suffered from the illness himself or other high-profile figures quarantining themselves, people are more inclined to listen and follow discipline when one of these figures speaks out or shares a message through social media.

b. Social Media and COVID-19: The Bad...

Unfortunately, and in many instances, social media can do just as much bad as it can do good. To contrast the first point made in the section above, social media is great for spreading information and news, but some of that can be misinformation or “fake news.” Misinformation, especially about COVID-19, can cause panic. People who see misinformation on social media may think what they are reading is actually true. For instance, many fake videos have been uploaded on the social media which are not in good taste more particularly against the communal harmony of India. If it’s something as important or serious as a worldwide pandemic, you should do a little research to see if what you are reading is actually factual. Otherwise, you may be inclined to share the misinformation and fuel the fear of something that isn’t necessarily true.

You don’t just have to worry about the spread of false information, but possibly having your posts marked as spam and taken down. Facebook recently had a “bug” that marked posts with reputable news articles as spam. According to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, it was an error caused by the platform’s spam detection system.

This next thing is more of a tip than anything...

Whether it’s a business or a personal profile, you should refrain from posting anything that makes fun of, spreading ideas against secularism, ridicules, or minimizes the situation. It could spell trouble for you, especially as a business. If you are going to post about COVID-19, be informative and make sure your followers know what’s happening with you, your business, or the situation overall.

References

1. Section- 35 of The Disaster Management Act, 2005. available at <https://www.ndmindia.nic.in/images/The%20Disaster%20Management%20Act,%202005.pdf>