

THE PICTURE IS CLEAR, IT IS TOP-DOWN MISINFORMATION

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Biotechnology, Genetics & Health related developments

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When asked what source of false or misleading information about the novel coronavirus they are most concerned about, many more Indians highlight domestic political actors than worry about activist groups, foreign governments, or journalists.

Nearly one in four (23%) in our recent survey say that the Government, politicians or political parties are the source they are most concerned about. That is more people than worry about misinformation from platforms such as Facebook (16%) or YouTube (14%). Among platforms, only messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp) generate more widespread public concern among our respondents. They are named by 28%.

Meanwhile, Indian authorities often seem mostly interested in going after alleged misinformation from activists (only 9% of our Indian survey respondents identify activist groups as the most concerning source of false or misleading information about the coronavirus), select journalists and news organisations (named by 13%), or on Twitter (which just 4% identify as the platform they are most concerned about).

Our [survey](#) only covers English-speaking Internet users in India, so while it captures an important minority, the data are not representative of India's overall population. Still, it provides insight into how many Indians see the “infodemic” that has accompanied the pandemic, an immense wave of information that, unfortunately, also includes some false and misleading material, rumours, and attempts to exploit the crisis for propaganda or for profit.

The picture is clear — many Indians think that misinformation about the pandemic often comes from the top.

Are they right? Both academic research and independent journalism suggest that they might well be.

Study after study around the world has found such “[network propaganda](#)”, where misinformation is spread by some top politicians, nakedly partisan news media who cheer them on, and well-organised communities of political supporters active on social media and messaging applications.

Top-down misinformation from politicians, celebrities, and other prominent public figures are a small part of the false and misleading claims one can come across online in terms of raw volume, but [our research](#) during the pandemic shows it accounts for a large share of social media engagement.

Even when political actors are not busy drumming up outright propaganda in the media and on digital platforms, authorities also sometimes risk misleading the public in other ways.

In country after country, reporters have found that official COVID-19 death tolls are far lower than the actual excess deaths recorded during the pandemic – as [The Hindu found in Tamil Nadu](#) by comparing Civil Registration System data with the officially reported figure.

Coronavirus | Spike in excess deaths during pandemic

And politicians have sometimes promoted supposed coronavirus remedies with no scientific basis. Former President of the United States Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro are prominent international examples. In India, some politicians have, for example, claimed that cow urine can protect people against COVID-19, even as the Indian Medical Association (IMA) pointed out there was absolutely no evidence for this, just as the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare last year came under severe criticism from for recommending a range of unproved, alternative remedies to prevent or treat the disease.

Some misinformation circulates peer-to-peer on social media and on encrypted messaging services as people share supposed miracle cures and ineffective alternative health tips in good faith or carelessly. This can create problems. But arguably, far more problematic is when people in positions of authority and prominent public figures promote measures that have no scientific basis in the middle of a deadly pandemic.

One prominent example is the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Haryana State government announcing last month that it would hand out one lakh Coronil kits to COVID-19 patients for free.

The ayurvedic remedy was launched in June last year by Baba Ramdev's company, Patanjali Ayurved, and at a press conference the yoga guru claimed (<https://bit.ly/3gKUPCI>) the remedy guaranteed "100 per cent recovery from COVID-19 within seven days of consuming the medicine". Hours later, the central government [asked Patanjali Ayurved to stop advertising the drug](#) and the Uttarakhand Ayurveda Department responsible for licensing the remedy pointed out the licence was for an immunity booster, not a cure.

In February this year, Ramdev's company falsely claimed Coronil was certified by the World Health Organization (WHO) — a claim WHO immediately pointed out was untrue. And the yoga guru appeared at an event with Union Minister of Health Harsh Vardhan promoting alternative medicines for COVID-19 patients, [leading the IMA to ask the Minister](#) how ethical it is "to promote the product in unethical, wrong and false ways to the whole country?"

The promotion and provision of what the IMA describes as an "unscientific medicine" marketed with "false and baseless" claims is an example of how misleading information from prominent public figures and people in positions of authority can lead to bigger problems than random falsehoods spread by ordinary people online and offline.

If authorities in India are serious about addressing misinformation, they might take a cue from the fact that much of the Indian public clearly recognise that misinformation often comes from the top, and spend less time worrying about activists, journalists, and Twitter, and more time thinking about how to ensure that citizens can trust that the health remedies promoted by their own governments and by prominent political figures are actually safe and effective.

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