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Mis/Disinformation on the COVID-19 Virus in Mexico

As a high school teacher I am sure you have seen your fair share of "fake news", whether it's a student talking about some random story they found online or even something you find yourself, mis/disinformation is everywhere. Across the globe, fake news and false information is spread over a variety of media platforms and can directly influence the views of you as an individual. Whether it is politically or culturally, mis/disinformation can directly impact one's ideologies and even can cause them harm. Over the years, Mexico has seen a number of misinformation and disinformation problems, but the spread of false information and conspiracies over the COVID-19 pandemic is one that particularly stands out. Since the virus first appeared in Mexico, false information has been shared widely on social media, which has caused confusion, panic, and even deaths.

One major issue regarding misinformation about the pandemic is the spreading false cures for the virus. There have been reports of people consuming bleach, silver, and other harmful substances as a cure for the virus, based on misinformation spread to them online. In some cases, individuals have even died as a result of consuming these dangerous substances, believing they would cure them of the virus. In an article published in the British Medical

Journal, it was noted that “in Mexico, it has been observed that some people believe conspiracy theories and fake news about the virus, and that this could have an important impact on health-seeking behaviour” (Mello et al., 2020). With the citizens of Mexico relying on the media for information about the pandemic, they are left especially vulnerable to fake news. With such a large population relying on the media, more than half of the population is exposed to false information regularly. With such a large population of the country believing these conspiracies, the false information being spread can become extremely dangerous. The lack of access to reliable sources has revealed itself as a major issue and a major source for the spread of false information. The prominence of fake news has made the problem of a lack of access to trustworthy information even worse by causing a flood of false information. This minimal access to trustworthy information and the government's failure to control the pandemic have increased the abundance of false information in Mexico.

Another issue with misinformation in Mexico is the spread of conspiracy theories related to the origin of COVID-19. The idea that the virus was created in a laboratory by the Chinese government or that it was made as a part of a global plot to reduce the world's population have been common conspiracies that have made their way around the country, reaching a majority of citizens. These theories are not supported by scientific evidence and can contribute to the stereotyping and mistrust of certain groups, such as Chinese immigrants in Mexico. Therefore, misinformation about the pandemic has led to criticism of the government. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has been criticized for his handling of the pandemic and for providing contradictory information (BBC, 2021). In other words, the government’s response to the pandemic has been hampered by a lack of transparency, which has led to confusion and distrust among the population (Mexico Tourism, 2021). Many people believe the government is

hiding the true numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, or that they are withholding a vaccine. The abundance of harmful fake news being spread became just as dangerous as the pandemic itself. The World Health Organization recognized this issue at the beginning of the pandemic, “We are not only fighting the virus,” said WHO Mexico, “We are also fighting the trolls and conspiracy theorists who are driving disinformation and undermining the response to the outbreak” (Equaltimes, 2020). The effects of this disformation are severe, as they lead to confusion and fear, and counteract efforts to combat the pandemic.

One of the biggest sources of misinformation has been social media. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been used to distribute false information, which has caused people to doubt government statistics and health organizations. Because of this mistrust, many have disregarded health professionals recommendations and failed to follow public health regulations. According to a study done by Rocío Galarza-Molina and Carlos Muñiz from Autonomous University of Nuevo León in Mexico, “the use of social networks to obtain information about COVID-19 has a positive impact on believing in fake news, in such a way that the greater the use of these platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp) there is a greater perception of fake news about COVID-19 as real” (Galarza et al., 2020). Whatsapp in particular has been identified as a major spreader of false information as it has become one of the main sources of misinformation in the country (Mello et al., 2020). Whatsapp is free and easy to use which gives it a large appeal in Mexico and is why it is used by a majority of its citizens. According to Pascuala Vázquez Aguilar; a community health leader in Mexico, Whatsapp has been a breeding ground for mis/disinformation among those in her community, “They're influenced by lies and rumours swirling around on WhatsApp. Pascuala has seen messages saying the vaccine will kill people after two years, that it's a government plot to reduce the

population or that it's a sign of the devil that curses anyone who receives it" (BBC, 2021). An app like Whatsapp serves as the perfect breeding ground for false information as the apps policies make finding where the information is stemming from nearly impossible.

Misinformation about the pandemic has also had a large effect the health care industry, as citizens turned against health workers and institutions due to a large amount of mistrust due to false information spread through apps like Whatsapp and Facebook. These conspiracies traveling around the country have even led to violence against health workers as more extreme misinformation claims insist that health workers are doing more harming than helping. An example of this, provided by the British Media Journal, is an instance where a Colombian politician claimed that a "covid cartel" of doctors were unnecessarily admitting covid-19 patients to intensive care to receive higher payments. Another theory quickly spread on social media, accusing doctors of receiving a cash payment of £13 000 for every dead patient with a covid-19 diagnosis (Mello et al., 2020). Cancun resident Maria Menina explained how these conspiracies impacted her community, "It was widely rumored here that when you arrived at the hospital you would be killed," she says, "We know of entire families who were infected but nobody, nobody, nobody went to hospital" (Time, 2021). This misinformation is very dangerous as it caused patients to avoid seeking medical help due to fear of encountering an unethical doctor.

In conclusion, the mis/disinformation in Mexico related to COVID-19 has had significant consequences. False cures, conspiracy theories, and mistrust in the government have contributed to confusion and fear, creating an environment in which misinformation can thrive. Mexico's media landscape combined with media apps like Whatsapp allow for the quick and easy spread of false information. Along with a lack of reliable news, this makes Mexico a breeding ground

for misinformation. Since the pandemic the government has tried to take action by creating a task force to identify and combat misinformation, launching public awareness campaigns to educate people on the importance of fact-checking, and spreading accurate information on official websites and social media platforms. Even with all the actions being taken, misinformation and disinformation are still prominent today. By looking into the media landscape of Mexico, hopefully you think twice before listening to everything you hear on the internet.

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