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Abuse of social media during COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji

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ABSTRACT

The spread of misinformation, facilitated by social media and other digital platforms, has proven to be as destructive to global public health as the SARS-CoV-2 virus itself. Fake news adds challenges to human communication efforts, producing tension, misunderstanding, and disbelief. While social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Viber, etc. have provided a huge relief during the lockdown helping reduce mental stress and depression as well as facilitating online education, and work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has also raised concerns over the spread of fake news. In such a situation, online fake news poses a new threat to public health communication as more people now depend on the internet to get health-related information. In response, this study seeks to understand how manipulation of news on social media has posed a threat to Fijian public health. Eventually, some of these have resulted in police investigations.

Dear Editor,

The perceptive article by Al-Zaman et al. [1] and Obi-Ani et al. [2] concerning fake news during the pandemic demonstrate how the manipulation of news can pose a serious public health risk. Globally, the common practice used to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 virus is through a lockdown with limited movement. In response to the lockdown, mental fatigue, depression and stress are common during the COVID-19 pandemic, and fake news exacerbates the issues related to mass communication, posing a serious concern.

In this letter, the key aim is to present the manipulation and abuse of social media during COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji [3,4]. In 2021, Fiji with a population of 902,518 encountered the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. As a result, unprecedented challenges on medical health, social and economic activity, as well as the environment are being observed.

While fake news is nothing new and has been around for as long as mass media itself, manipulated news about the COVID-19 pandemic has increased dramatically on social media platforms. In Fiji, “three (3) people will be produced at the Suva Magistrates Court today charged with allegedly spreading false information on social media concerning the COVID-19 situation in Fiji” [3]. The accused accepted that they had been spreading false information about the COVID-19 crisis on social media, causing panic and fear among the public.

Fiji government and the Ministry of Health have been functioning well by coordinating with other health centers to vaccinate the public. Different areas were divided as zones and the vaccination programme was conduction accordingly, however, due to social distancing and quarantine, people rely on mass communication platforms more than ever before. Unfortunately, the same platforms have been used to spread fake news such as “magnet was attaching where the vaccination was carried out” [6]. To address this fake news, the acting commissioner of police Mr. Rusiate Tudravu has directed an internal investigation to be conducted concerning a video that has gone viral on social media involving a few police officers claiming to attach a magnet at the

vaccination site (see Fig. 1).

Al-Zaman et al. [1] examined the five significant findings in response to study topics.

- Firstly, health, religiopolitical, political, criminal, entertainment, religious, and miscellaneous are the seven themes of fake news. Medicine, medical and healthcare facilities, viral infection, and doctor-patient issues are amongst the most common sources of fake news (67.2%).
- Secondly, text, photo, audio, video, text and photo, text and video, and text and photo and video are the seven categories of fake news contents. Text and video are the most common types of media being used to convey misleading news (47.2%).
- Thirdly, digital media generates more fake news (94.4%) than traditional media (5.6%). Remarkably, most of the fake news is spread via four social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.
- Fourthly, because the COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide problem, the fake news has international linkages (54.4%).
- Finally, most of the COVID-19-related fake news is unfavorable (63.2%), posing a serious public health risk.

The benefits of online media and technology have been increasingly obvious as individuals throughout the world have been confined to their homes. People have used social media to find assistance and stay in touch with one another. It has proven to be an efficient means of disseminating official, reliable information about the pandemic and the government responses. The propagation of misinformation online is only one aspect of this history, and the COVID-19 pandemic could be viewed as a turning point in the relationship between online media, regulators, and normal citizens in the future. The abuse of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be addressed. The following suggestions can be used to minimize the mass communication issues.

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Fig. 1. A screen-shot from the video which has gone viral on social media [6].

- Government should take strict action against posting fake news on social media.
- Cybersecurity policy need to be strengthened and set in action.
- Awareness can be created about fake news and the ways to verify information online.

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