The Global Implication of Covid-19 Social Media Misinformation Campaigns

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Abstract

Social media misinformation campaigns are pervasive in society today. Across the world, misinformation affects the way people navigate through society. In this article, the Spiral of Silence Communications Theory is analyzed to better understand how social media affects public perception and the way people communicate. The research shows that applications like Twitter play a significant role in the dissemination of false information. Additionally, social media platforms that perpetuate false news amplify the voice of the minority to appear as the majority opinion. This phenomenon perpetuates a spiral of silence where the silent majority are muted in fear that expressing their opinion will have a detrimental effect on their social reputation. Lastly, on a global scale, a country's ability to sensor communication networks affects the public's ability to receive information in times of crisis such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19; Misinformation Campaigns; Social Media; Spiral of Silence Communication Theory

Introduction

Social media has become a catalyst in the growing misinformation campaigns that are seen today. Misinformation will continue to change the landscape of the world if nothing is done to combat the challenge it poses. Now more than ever before, researchers must examine the problem in order to bring forward viable solutions against the threat.

Despite the millions of lives lost as a result of the global pandemic, misinformation continues to run rampant in society at a time when legitimate scientific information is most needed. Today, many studies examine what process people go through to discern the accuracy of information. There were two studies conducted to better understand this phenomenon. Both studies included a sample size of 1,000 and the materials for the study were obtained through a partnership with Harvard Global Health Institute, which provided the researchers with 15 false and 15 true news headlines that pertained to Covid-19. Findings from the first study indicate that when deciding what to share on social media, participants struggled to decipher which information was true and which was false. Based on this, Pennycook et al. (2020) concluded that participants who were more discerning when choosing headlines were also likely to be more knowledgeable about science and exhibit cognitive reflection. In their methodology, the researchers found that there was a positively related correlation between cognitive reflection and accuracy discernment. In their second study, the researchers found that by implementing an accuracy reminder at the beginning of the survey, respondents were likely to be more discerning when choosing which news headlines to believe as legitimate.

The information articulated by Pennycook et al. (2020) aligns with some of the ideas expressed in the spiral of silence communication theory [1]. In this theory, the silent majority are often not open to sharing or changing their opinion if they feel that it deviates from the dominating opinion. People receiving the message are also influenced by the point of view of others. Even for individuals that did not believe in false information and conspiracy theories about Covid-19, it is much easier to stay silent than speak out against institutions such as the government and major media corporations. The researchers highlight how in study one, participants were willing to share inaccurate information about the Covid-19 virus because they were not specifically asked to give accurate responses. This speaks directly to the spiral of silence because it shows that participants know right from wrong. In this case, the public perception on Covid-19 was convoluted with falsehoods and conspiracies which may have played a role in an individual's desire to share their honest opinion when not being forced to.

Similar to the Covid-19 misinformation campaigns, many false-news stories propagate through social media platforms. Vosoughi et al. (2018) examined approximately 126,000 stories that were tweeted by around 3 million people more than 4.5 million times. Six independent fact-checking organizations fact-checked the stories by analysing "the title, body, and verdict (true, false, or mixed) of each rumor investigation reported on their websites and automatically collecting the cascades corresponding to those rumors on Twitter" (p 2). The results showed that the top 1% of false-news stories routinely reached between 1,000 to 100,000 people. On Twitter, false news stories were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth. Data also showed that false news on Twitter increased during key events such as the 2012 and 2016 United States presidential elections [2]. The findings suggest that social media is a key component in the battle to combat misinformation.

Today, applications like Twitter drive public perception on topics such as the Covid-19 global pandemic. From these opinions come contrasting perspectives, some of which contribute to the spiral of silence theory [1]. Researchers examining disinformation as it pertains to content posted on Twitter found that a small number of accounts are responsible for the majority of misinformation that is on the web today [3]. Despite the size of the minority, their voice is amplified as a result of the power social media has to reach global populations. A user's number of followers, retweets, likes, and other types of shares affect how the message of the minority is perceived. When this occurs, there is a misconception about what the majority believes to be true. This relates to the spiral of silence because according to [4], when the perception of the majority point of view becomes flawed, this creates a pluralistic ignorance which is "a situation in which the majority of members of a group privately disagree with a certain opinion or social norm, yet (incorrectly) believe that the other group members accept it" (p 2). People believe that speaking up against accepted opinions will have a detrimental effect on their social reputation or that they will receive negative reactions from members of their group. As a result, people would rather stay silent than be seen as combative.

Social media misinformation campaigns affect the public's perception of the truth. Reynolds et al. (2021) conducted four mass surveys, using a sample population of Armenian Facebook users to directly examine the role the spiral of silence had on social media as it pertains to the Covid-19 pandemic. This research was cited as the first study to examine public perception of the pandemic in Armenia. The test analyzed factors such as the role the majority opinion has in determining personal choice and how Facebook is influencing Armenian citizens' method of communicating about the pandemic. Unlike the United States, the Armenian government had the power to censor media during the early stages of Covid-19 to control the flow of information. Reynolds et al. (2021) described the spiral of silence in a different way than Castioni et al. (2021). During the early stages of Covid-19, there was not much information known about the virus. The lack of knowledge and uncertainty within the global community led to a decrease in the value of information being circulated. As a result, Reynolds et al. (2021) suggested that the spiral of silence in Armenia existed because people did not know what to believe

as the majority opinion about the global pandemic [5].

Reynolds et al. (2021) found that there was a correlation between Armenian users' Facebook friends and their desire to post their own opinions and comment on posts. The researchers also found that "if the communicative environment is perceived as rather contradictory to the user's opinion and as diverse in a lesser sense, the essential part of the users surveyed prefer not to post and not to comment on others' opinion" (p 80). This directly describes the ideas expressed in the spiral of silence. People would rather keep their opinions to themselves when their opinions contrast with those of others. The exception to this expression was if users were asked their opinions in an offline environment with real friends rather than strangers on the internet [6]. The research demonstrates that the spiral of silence that exits is not specific to one country. People tend to interact and obtain information in similar ways during times of crisis. And although some countries have more control over the media and the dissemination of information, the way people interact from a social perspective seems to remain similar from one country to another.

In exploring how the Covid-19 global pandemic affected information sharing and communication across the globe, Hidayat et al. (2021) examines the impact of the Coronavirus on Sampang Indonesia's ability to maintain a green zone with little to no outbreaks. Similarly, to the Reynolds et al. (2021) research in Armenia, Indonesia was able to maintain low infection numbers due to their style of government. Government officials had to obtain permission from the Regent before traveling or attending meetings. From an information-sharing standpoint, the Regent of Sampang Indonesia disseminated a lot of messages and appeals to stop the spread of Covid-19, including assuring people not to panic and telling citizens to follow best practices such as washing their hands with soap and practicing clean and healthy living habits.

Unlike in the United States and Armenia, in Hidayat et al. (2021), Sampang Indonesia did not face much of a spiral of silence; therefore this research is a good example of how to combat the spiral. Control and censorship allowed the Regent to convey appropriate messages to his people and therefore sway public opinion in a way that kept the government in control. Leaders in the government would also meet in person with residents to convey messages about the pandemic, and the Regent had the authority to carry out mass communication through social media sites like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Additionally, village leaders were responsible for relaying messages about Covid-19 because the leaders had a strong relationship with the villagers. The idea was that messages would be well received coming from a respected figure within their community. Hidayat et al. (2021) describes a structure of communication that although can be perceived as controlled, works cohesively to build the trust of the community, decrease the spread of Covid-19, and mitigate the potential for a spiral of silence effect.

Conclusion

Misinformation from social media platforms has changed the way people navigate through life and interact with each

other. As scholars and practitioners search for ways to combat misinformation, future research should also examine the Spiral of Silence Communication Theory (Broom & Seshadrinathan, 2013) and the role it plays in silencing the voice of the majority.

Future research should also aim to find ways to improve how people discern what information is factual. Implementing these techniques may help to galvanize people around the world to spread truthful information, which may subsequently combat misinformation campaigns.

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