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Short Paper

Fake news during COVID-19: how to detect them?

Fake news durante la COVID: ¿Cómo detectarlas?

Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in millions of infections and thousands of deaths worldwide. However, it has not only become a public health problem, it is also affecting other areas, such as economic and social ones. An enormous amount of unverified information is currently being disseminated on various aspects of coronavirus disease, methods of controlling and preventing the disease, and on its consequences through various media and social networks. This pandemic has also led to a great deal of false news, causing what is known as an infodemic. This term is used to refer to the dissemination of false news about the pandemic and describes the dangers of misinformation during the management of virus outbreaks, which leads to increased panic among the population. This type of news puts the health of the population and the ability of governments to implement prevention measures at great risk. Therefore, in this work, a review has been carried out of which have been the main fake news events during the pandemic, and solutions are proposed to try to recognize this type of news, so that the problem of the pandemic is not even greater. In this way, it is necessary to use the time needed to evaluate the information that circulates through networks.

Resumen

La pandemia mundial de la COVID-19 ha ocasionado millones de contagios y miles de fallecidos en el mundo. Sin embargo, no solo se ha convertido en un problema de salud pública, sino que también está afectando otros ámbitos, como el económico y el social. Actualmente se está difundiendo

una enorme cantidad de información no verificada sobre diversos aspectos de la enfermedad por coronavirus, los métodos de control y prevención de la enfermedad, y sobre sus consecuencias a través de distintos medios de comunicación y redes sociales. Esta pandemia ha provocado también una gran cantidad de noticias falsas, provocando lo que se conoce como una "infodemia". Este término se emplea para referirse a la difusión de noticias falsas sobre la pandemia y describe los peligros de la desinformación durante la gestión de los brotes de virus que hacen que aumente el pánico entre la población. Este tipo de noticias pone en gran riesgo la salud de la población y la capacidad de los gobiernos de aplicar medidas de prevención. Por lo tanto, en este trabajo se ha llevado a cabo una revisión de cuáles han sido las principales *fake news* acontecidas durante la pandemia y se proponen soluciones para intentar reconocer este tipo de noticias de manera que se evite que el problema de la pandemia sea aún mayor. De esta forma, es necesario emplear el tiempo necesario para evaluar la información que circula por las redes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has long used the word "infodemics" to refer to the false information overabundance and its rapid spread among people and media.

The current coronavirus crisis is leading to a large spread of unverified information about the disease. Information on methods of controlling and preventing the disease, and on its consequences, is being spread through various media and social networks, and not all of this news is true.

Infodemics is a practice of spreading false news about the pandemic and increasing panic among the population. This term has been coined to describe the dangers of misinformation during the management of virus outbreaks (Mendoza *et al.*, 2010; Starbird *et al.*, 2014; Zarocostas, 2020).

In the face of this phenomenon, it is argued that when there is a health emergency, disinformation operations can put the health of millions of people at risk. Therefore, it considers that it is necessary to establish recommendations to avoid false information.

In times of emergency and disaster, urgent questions arise that require an immediate response from citizens. In our society, subjective opinions and unverified statements are disseminated more rapidly through the mass and social media than valid scientific and biomedical facts. Disinformation and fake news are generating panic and promoting misconduct during this crisis.

WhatsApp is one of the main channels for spreading fake content because it is the ideal terrain for doing so. It has no external verifiers and works on trust bubbles. People share what they get from people in their environment, and many of the stories they share are not true, leading to wrong decisions.

In order to avoid panic, hysteria and fear from taking hold of the public in these already difficult times, it is more important than ever to stop and think and run away from the impulses. If citizens want to help, the best way to do so is to be confined and not to contribute to the spread of false information.

There have been many hoaxes and fake news during the COVID-19 crisis:

• It is false that the United States has the vaccine for COVID-19 ready. On Facebook and other social networks an image was viralized where it is claimed that the US designed a vaccine capable of curing the coronavirus. However, it is a test kit developed by a South Korean company to diagnose the virus.
• The natural concoction recommended by Maduro does not cure the coronavirus. Maduro supported the statements of a so-called Venezuelan scientist named Sirio Quintero, who claims that a recipe based on medicinal plants, citrus and other natural ingredients can cure the Wuhan coronavirus.
• COVID-19 is not airborne. The WHO concluded that the Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19) does not float and is not likely to be airborne.
• Holding one's breath for 10 seconds does not identify COVID-19 infection. A message has been shared stating that a person who can hold their breath for more than 10 seconds without coughing, discomfort or congestion can rule out infection, but this is absolutely not true.
• Drinking a lot of water or gargling with warm water and salt or vinegar does not eliminate COVID-19.
• Coronavirus is not spread by the use of makeup.
• Sunbathing is also not helpful in getting better, since the coronavirus does not die from "sun exposure".
• Ibuprofen is not prohibited for aggravating symptoms of COVID-19.

It is therefore necessary that before we spread any message, we check that it is true. On many occasions, the fake news seems so real that it is difficult to identify them. To do this, it would be useful to look at these aspects:

• THE HOLDER. In the era of social networks, headlines are more important than ever, so those that refer to false news are often too conspicuous and include statements that are hard to believe.
• THE AUTHOR. If the news lacks a signature, it's an aspect that can make us suspicious. Fake news generally tend to be anonymous and never include the author's name.

- THE SOURCE AND THE MEDIUM. Fake news usually have as a source unknown media.
- EXCLUSIVITY. When the news is authentic, it is difficult for it to remain exclusive and it is very likely that it will be covered by different media. If it appears in a few media, we must be suspicious.
- THE FORMAT. To call attention, the fake news usually have a peculiar format, different from the usual, with colors and sizes too bright, the excessive use of capital letters, etc.
- THE DATE. False information neglects this aspect, with outdated dates or directly ignoring the data.
- THE EDITORIAL. A credible media story must always have an impeccable editorial staff. If it has spelling errors, it is probably fake news.
- THE LINKS. The fake news try to simulate the URLs of the habitual media to be more credible but reviewing the small details of their links, that in addition usually give error, are failures and differences.

It is important that we do not believe in recommendations that do not coincide with those of the Regional Ministries, the Ministry of Health and the WHO. Likewise, we must doubt about shocking news or that create social alarm.

I believe that now is the time for consensus on coherent strategies and policies, both health, economic and social, on the balance between the right to information and useful information. The various governments must also act and denounce this type of false news. In fact, they must be the first to transmit true news. If they are not sure of the truthfulness of a fact, they must not create confusion among the population. Some governments are not acting in the best way during this crisis. Eliminating disinformation and reducing the visibility and impact of fake news will be fundamental in order to get out of this crisis and not make it worse. Following the above recommendations will help us on this long road ahead.

References

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