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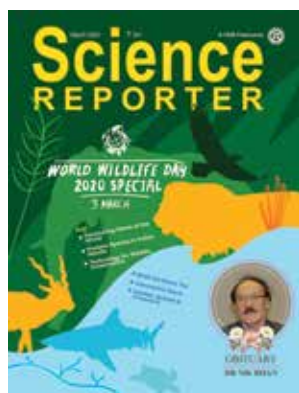
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Battling a Deadly Virus...and Misinformation

THE death toll in China due to the coronavirus outbreak has crossed 2000, as per recent reports. The World Health Organisation has warned that the disease is undoubtedly an emergency for China but could also pose a grave risk to the rest of the world. With the number of those infected crossing 75000 in 25 countries and all those coming out of China being regarded as possible carriers of the infection, the scare is palpable throughout the world.

Coronaviruses are responsible for the common cold and most of them are not dangerous. But some coronaviruses sometimes turn deadly leading to complications and even death. Two of these severe coronavirus outbreaks in the past include the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) which caused the death of about 858 people and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) which proved fatal for 774 people. The recent 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has already surpassed the death toll due to MERS and SARS making it a grim situation.

But making the situation even scarier is the widespread misinformation that has swept through predominantly social media channels. A host of unverified videos and unscientific health advices are being forwarded widely.

While several channels have been airing conspiracy theories, a claim that has been shared 16,000 times on Facebook calls on people in the Philippines to keep the throat moist, avoid spicy food and take overdoses of vitamin C to keep the disease away. Another advice is to avoid cold or preserved food and drinks, such as ice cream and milkshakes, for 90 days.

A video of a parasite being removed from a person's lips, suggesting the procedure was somehow related to the new coronavirus, has been shared widely. And so has another video clip allegedly shot in Wuhan in China and showing a smiling Chinese woman holding a cooked bat on camera and admitting it tastes "like chicken meat". The video provoked several reactions with users blaming Chinese eating habits for the outbreak. However, fact checkers cleared the air pointing out that the video was shot in 2016 and pertained to a popular blogger and travel show host during a trip to Palau, an archipelago in the western Pacific Ocean. Fake videos and photos of several coronavirus victims lying dead in the streets of Wuhan in China have been shown to be false.

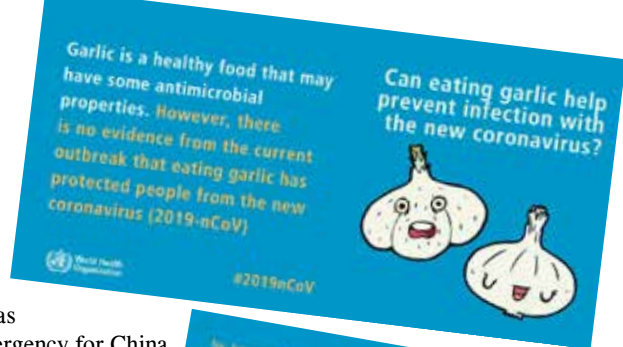
The situation has turned so grave that social media networks are actively taking steps to address false information about the coronavirus on their sites. For instance, Facebook says it is using fact checkers to review information about the coronavirus and that it is removing "false claims or conspiracy theories". It also said it would notify individuals who had shared or were trying to share information that had been flagged as false.

With the number of tweets about the coronavirus reaching well over 15 million in four weeks, Twitter says it has launched a prompt that appears when users search for coronavirus encouraging them to use official channels – the World Health Organization or Centres for Disease Control – for information. When Twitter users search for coronavirus a large headline with the title "Know the facts" appears.

Video sharing network TikTok has given a link to the WHO's website and calls on users to report information they think might be harmful. For coronavirus searches, YouTube said it was showing previews of text-based news articles and also promoting videos on it from credible sources. Reddit has put a banner at the top of its home page directing users to authoritative resources about the outbreak. Google has started displaying information from the WHO about the virus in search results.

While the scientific and medical community is busy finding ways and means to combat the outbreak of the deadly virus, it is equally important for all of us to fact-check information before forwarding on social media platforms.

Hasan Jawaid Khan



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