

Original Paper

The Mystification and Demystification of Shared Information on COVID-19 across Cyber Mediated News Networks: A Sociological Approach to Solutions for Vulnerable Populations

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Received: June 4, 2020

Accepted: June 14, 2020

Online Published: June 19, 2020

doi:10.22158/csm.v3n3p47

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v3n3p47>

Abstract

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) hit the news headlines as a pandemic bound to affect millions of people around the world, and news media took responsibility to warn people, country heads, businesses, and private and non-governmental institutions about the virus. However, stories swirling on social media platforms about the origin and nature of Covid-19 as well as questionable reporting by established news networks have left the public questioning the integrity of the real causes of the virus, how it spreads and whether treatment standards equate the hoopla about the genesis of the “pandemic.” This paper reviews narratives about the mystification and demystification of Covid-19. It departs from the premise that the media frames ways in which people consume and use news. The paper then suggests how policymakers should handle newsflows on Covid-19, how consumers should screen news, and how journalists should report Covid-19 ethically.

Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, demystification, fake news, policymakers, media framing, social media, cable news, poor

1. Background

Social media networks are adept at sharing large volumes of data to known and unknown groups about news in their locale and elsewhere, without recourse to their immediate or long term impact on recipients. Audiences, (henceforth used interchangeably here as “consumers” or “users”) typically do not bother to check the authenticity of the news or its source. News consumers are not only social

media users; they include billions of people around the world who own or have access to one or more media gadgets. But the new envoys (social media gadgets)—and their master—social media companies are bearing the brunt of criticism from consumers who want facts and useful information to help them make informed decisions. Users distrust social media companies and cybercriminals, citing Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of platforms as contributing to their lack of trust. A survey of online users conducted globally in 2019 by the Global Survey on Internet Security and Trust shows global distrust of social media information. The Center for International Governance Innovation, a global research think-tank in a study published June 10, 2019, revealed that 89% of people in Canada, 88% in Nigeria, 83% in Australia, 63% in Hong Kong, 64% in Korea, and 88% in North America who distrust the Internet cited social media as responsible for their distrust (www.cigionline.org/internet/05/30/2020). Information shared on social media platforms has consequences on the economic, political, and diplomatic futures of nations. Governments also explore ways of utilizing digital media to pursue their foreign policies because such media can indeed offer opportunities and challenges for strategic operations. Countries with advanced digital technology use public diplomacy to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior, build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values (Melissen, 2013, p. 436). That statement is at the epicenter of subsequent discussions in this paper as it navigates the nuances of nations feeding their people with life-threatening information through social media platforms and cable media networks.

Decision-makers in countries know how best to use digital technology to promote their national and transnational agendas. Nevertheless, it is troublesome to postulate that social media networks—news and information sharing channels—are uniquely responsible for how we should treat data recipients. Network users also share data to bring valuable and entertaining content to others, to (1) inform others of products and services people care about that can potentially change opinions or encourage action; (2) enlighten others about our personality; develop our relationships by staying in touch with them; (3) share information to allow others feel important and get more involved in our community and the world; (4) or advance causes we think they also care about. That sense of belonging is what makes us human. As part of our humanity, we invariably nurse a desire to belong to a small group or community or operate in intangible or ultra-terrestrial space. Based on that framework, we examine how information about the Corona Virus (Covid-19) has been managed in the media.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

For this paper, we apply the issue agenda-setting and media framing theories that describe how audiences get to see or hear information with novel ideas about the way the world works, why they face difficulties, and the mechanisms available for solving challenges. Framing is when data is highlighted to be noticed as the most important. Framing is used in many ways to assess how media content frames

events and objects (Dorman and Krasnow, 2014). Framing describes the practice of thinking about news items and stories within a familiar context. 'Framing' focuses on public issues at hand rather than on a particular topic. It has been used to explore newspaper coverage, how good the articles were, and whether or not solutions were there surrounding the issue (Gordon et al., 2010). Typically, news discourse involving public policy is carefully constructed because public figures and interest groups take a proactive approach to 'frame' their views of the issue. For Dorfman and Krasnow (2014), framing is the process of reconciling new information with a dose of prior understanding. This means that people consciously or unconsciously weigh further information against well-formed ideas that have been reinforced in their thinking over time.

This paper follows the socio-cognitive process of news and information management wherein three agents—the news source, media, and audience members—play the same roles and enjoy the same outcomes. The basis of the framing theory is that the media focuses attention on specific events and then places them in a general context. This paper grows from the underlying issue agenda-setting theory, which speaks to the media's attempts to influence audiences and establish a hierarchy of news and information prevalence to such audiences.

In that same framework, we contend that sociological thought processes help us to explain and predict the social world. Sociologists have identified two types of functions: manifest and latent. The functionalist perspective emphasizes how parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability. Sociologists agree that a process may disrupt a social system or lead to a decrease in instability in any community. To understand how information is received and perceived around the world or consider plans to use information that can help the population succeed, we have to invoke the uses of gratifications and issues agenda perspectives and how the media frames messages to convince us. Our locus for using those principles is premised on the fact that people do not typically react to a phenomenon in a vacuum; instead, they act based on what they know, meaning that information can provoke emotions.

In this study, we define vulnerable populations as poor persons and groups living in densely populated regions with limited access to social media gadgets and low capacity to assess news and information or differentiate fake messages from accurate messages. Vulnerable groups include people who depend on their government to get access to resources.

This paper also grows from the stance that misinformation has a powerful effect both on the receiver(s), the generators of fake news, and the established/professional news media agencies. The challenge of fake news has emerged as a new caveat to measure credibility and trust in journalism as a profession. Studies show that journalists and professional news agencies are increasingly struggling to compete with social media networks in serving their audiences with the product—news. Cable news networks and social media groups around the world are locked in a perennial battle to reach more people, keep

and feed them with news about happenings in the locale, and around the world. So, television journalists source and receive news from sources with ulterior motives, aware that specific sources give information for their benefits; for example, during political competitions, rival candidates and their supporters want to slant the news to settle political scores. Others give unverifiable information for economic benefits where competing businesses seek advantages over their competitors to sway perceptions of customers.

Editors and reporters on television stations face a myriad of challenges in spotting fake news (Ngwainmbi, 2019). Established cable television and radio news networks have lost viewers to competing media channels because they lack authoritative contacts to confirm the authenticity of the news. Mutagen, Nyambuga, and Mate (2020) have found that television stations trusted as new gatherers in specific locations also become a challenge when they develop the urge to make quick and more cash.

3. Analyses

3.1 The Psychology of Creating, Managing, and Vitalizing Fake News

Fake news is frequently well-orchestrated and timely, making it appeal to preconceived thoughts and ideas in the minds of the target consumers. This practice is equally a challenge to news teams, particularly the editors waging war against fake news. When a false story camouflages real news, it becomes a virus; therefore, spotting it is made more difficult. By the same token, when unmonitored activities on social media platforms undermine fact-based reporting, we must expect researchers to respond. Moreover, depending on a country's media laws, there may be legal consequences for established news networks that disseminate fake news while competing with other news networks for higher ratings.

Looking at it from the gatekeeper stance that conceptualized this study, we acknowledge that editors spot fake news at the filter gates of all news. News sharing is a psychological gem in that people are naturally more interested in spreading rumors and dangerous information than receiving good news, unless such news is of some benefit to the receivers. Psychologists inform us that determined people start rumors to feel superior to the receiver, get attention, or take control of the receiving group. People feel better about themselves if others feel worse. If someone knows something others do not know, he/she becomes the center of attention, although constant rumor-mongering may ruin one's reputation. People who want to be in control are adept at spreading rumors. Typically, people who believe they are more popular or have accomplished within their community tend to spread rumors (false news). Those with social media tools are more likely to forward fake news because they feel they would be appreciated or acknowledged by recipients.

Rumor consumers feel a desire to belong—the pressure to do the same when everybody else in the group is gossiping. People may also spread rumors when bored and need excitement. Rumor mongering, the synonym for 'fake news' has become the desired means of getting informed. In the context of morale and national safety, rumor can cause needless alarm, raise extravagant hopes, or unpleasant consequences, as Allport and Postman (1947) found in the study of the American society during the Second World War II.

Fake news is a fast-growing trend in the 21st Century in almost all aspects of life. It continues to distort people's beliefs even after it has been debunked. A 2017 study published in the *Journal Intelligence* suggests that some people may have an especially difficult time rejecting misinformation. As Matugi, Nyamboga, and Matu found in a study (2020), the population in Kenya has also been a victim of fake news with misinformation on politics, political leaders, judiciary, and universities often broadcast of television as real news. Consequently, some television stations in that country have been sued for disseminating fake news. In a rush to scoop stories on TV as breaking news ahead of their competitor, such media are guilty of spreading false claims, a practice that contradicts the normative principles of journalism and mass communication. This is troublesome because repeating a false claim increases its believability and subsequently makes a claim appear to be truthful, just as a pathological liar believes that by always telling lies and to a willing listener, he starts thinking he is trustworthy. The key message here is that our longevity and consistency in receiving information shape our worldview; the longer we consume information in the same style and format, our vulnerability becomes predictable.

Through education, people may develop meta-cognitive skills—strategies for monitoring and regulating one's thinking—that can be used to combat the effects of misinformation. There exists a connection between cognitive ability and our vulnerability to fake news. Among adulthoods, for example, this ability declines considerably with advancing age, suggesting that older adults are more susceptible to misinformation (Hambrick & Marquardt, 2018). Princeton University and the New York University's Social Media and Political Participation Lab researchers claim that people aged 65 and older are four times more likely to share fake news on popular social media platforms than younger people. U.S. News staff writer, Alexa Lardieri on January 9, 2019, reported that older people were not only more susceptible to fake news, but they also shared fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

To further understand why fake news goes viral online, we should assess the connections between the sender's intentions and how we perceive the receiver's intentions. News spreads through secondary sources, what is known as the two-step flow style. Social media consumers typically get their news from public figures, political activists, and opinion leaders who pick information from the mass media or create their own. The two-step flow style reminds us that we, the wider population get information from opinion leaders who interpret information and add original media content. So, persons with no

direct access to news technology are most likely to rely on the interpretations of news shared by opinion leaders than getting news firsthand. This can be dangerous because opinion leaders and firsthand news receivers may not/do not necessarily have full knowledge of the story, that is, its origin and its components. Some “news accessors” do not have the intellectual acumen to package and deliver key news components with consistency as trained journalists. That is common practice with social media users who play the dubious role of opinion leader and news-setter and distribute it based on how they think the receiver would value it. To summarize, the way information is packaged and shared, and the sourcing of the information determine its news value. To that end, we discuss next the sociology of news and information and how news spreads.

3.2 Sociology of News and Information and How News Spreads

Information is the tree from which news grows and yields fruits. The news media, by default, is the fertilizer because it gives the population news and information to meet needs. These include enlightening oneself, entertaining, instructing, understanding the world, making informed decisions, or rethatching emotions.

News, by definition, is something that is newly received; it is noteworthy information about important events. If individuals were to pick an important event, each piece of information would be remarkable and such individuals would convince everyone else to believe the information is newsworthy. However, that is impossible because the individual must have resources to identify and collect information and make it newsworthy to everyone else. What is possible is that resourceful parties pick information that can be delivered as news. They do so to get fulfillment.

Conversely, the absence of knowledge does not create the curiosity to know. Fazio et al. (2015) have aptly stated that knowledge neglect, or the failure to apply stored knowledge appropriately, occurs in tasks other than those involving judgment of truth. By the same logic, the knowledge that flows in one direction can easily influence one's decision, even if he/she already possesses stored knowledge. That view is supported by a 2015 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, where Lisa Fazio and her colleagues found that people rarely engage in source monitoring when evaluating information from their knowledge bank.

When people get information, they look for ingredients like truth, the illusion of reality, stored knowledge neglected, among others. In short, information breeds curiosity. The normative meaning of the term, “curious” explains why news of any kind, including COVID-19, can kindle feelings of fear and awe, no matter what its existing linguistic, historical, socio-ethnic, religious, educational, political or socio-economic origin. For the adjective “curious,” culled from the root Latin term, “curiosus” synonymous to “eagerly inquiring,” “diligent,” “careful,” “meddling” speaks to an innate desire to teach knowledge. Even in Medieval French culture, specifically, the 14th Century, the term “curios” (among the British, “curious”) meant ‘inquisitive,’ “odd,” “strange,” which makes you anxious.

Consequently, anything one doesn't know is 'news' because it makes one curious, anxious.

The sourcing of things new is guided by four factors--the social currency of the message, its value, ability to understand the mental state, of oneself and others (mentalizing), and intention. If the message carrier believes the message has value, the carrier then takes into account the needs of the receiver. Our senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, and assess—are always ready to manage messages we receive. We are, inherently, curious to know what is happening around us to satisfy our desire to be included. The more one values an idea he/she is more likely to share it. Thus, we can predict which messages will go viral and which ones will not, based on how we process the value of the words we share and how we perceive the receiver's potential reactions to our message. Srin Pillay, NeuroBusiness Group CEO, has advanced that two circuits operate in the sender's brain: the “reward” circuit, which registers the value of the message to the sender, and the “mentalizing” circuit, which activates when the sender sees things from the person who receives the message. Let us not be preposterous here, for the receiver executes curiosity differently. Our perceptual curiosity—feelings—can differ when we see something that surprises us, puzzles us, or does not match up with something we thought we knew. Perceptual curiosity may vary from our natural desire to learn—what neuroscience calls “epistemological curiosity.” Even the Romanian-born internationally recognized Israeli-American astrophysicist Mario Livio (2017) has professed that we allow ourselves to learn everything to cope with our environment and make fewer mistakes as young learners. Our curiosity diminishes as we learn more of the same thing or get older learning it. Tied to such telescope space science is the fundamental logic behind people’s choice to share or receive factual and fake news through the media.

Networks can also use it to promote their agenda within the community. In the next segment, we attempt to diffuse what prompts people to create and distribute fake news and information to recipients they know and people they do not know.

3.3 How COVID-19 Became News

News is generated by persons with trained eyes, ears, and brains to find and deliver information differently. They pick an event among others occurring in the community. They write about it on their platform, interview people about the event, report information to readers and viewers they believe might be interested in it, and monitor people who have exhibited an interest in the event. If that procedure is not followed, we may consider the event to be a cluster of information, not news. Monitoring is done to determine the extent of the audience's interest in the news. To know why COVID-19 became news, and why there is so much mystery, panic, and special attention around Covid-19, we need to understand what the virus is, and how it was presented to consumers as news, not information. Reports produced by health experts show that people with Covid-19 (Coronavirus) symptoms may have a persistent cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fever, chills, muscle

pain, sore throat, or loss of taste and smell. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus. If it is not treated promptly, the patient may become sick, have antibodies that fight the disease, or die. Based on that information, coronavirus symptoms are similar to those detected in flu patients. Literature recorded so far has elevated information about the coronavirus to the level of news. Here are some reasons why the coronavirus is newsworthy.

Chinese authorities reported the first case of coronavirus disease 2019 on November 17, 2019. According to *The Guardian* newspaper (November 17, 2019), unpublished data with the Chinese government showed that the disease had been detected weeks before the media and Chinese authorities announced the emergency. The *South China Morning Post* reported that Chinese authorities had identified at least 266 people who contracted the virus and came under medical surveillance

The most powerful news agencies around the world simultaneously reported the rapid spread of coronavirus around the world, and various social media networks redistributed the reports in mid-January 2020. Coronavirus became big news after information about its origin, and its potentials had been shrouded in secrecy, creating a vacuum of knowledge and fantasies in social media networks and the cable news media all over the world. After Chinese journalist, Chen Qiushi, published an article in the *Washington Post*, February 9, 2020, offering chilling glimpses of patients' conditions in hospitals in Wuhan, China, the zone identified for the first cases, the Chinese government adept at censoring the press in China arrested the journalist. The event coincided with cruise ships arriving the Italian, Spanish, and U.S. shores with infected patients. Next was the rising death tolls in Italy, Spain, and the U.S. Then, *New York Times* reported that the government of Wuhan, China, had confirmed that health authorities were treating dozens of cases after researchers identified a "new virus" that had infected dozens in Asia. Another *New York Times* article published January 11, 2020, announced the first known death from the Coronavirus in China. The same newspaper on January 20 reported that U.S., Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and other countries had confirmed cases. On January 30, 2020, the Director of the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency, and the U.S. State Department warned U.S. travelers to avoid going to China. The Trump administration closed its borders to travelers from China on January 31. On February 11, the virus was officially named Covid-19, and 24 countries had infected people. This was followed by 443 quarantined passengers released from Diamond Princess Cruise ship, followed on February 23, by a significant surge in infected cases in Italy and infection hikes in Europe and the U.S. Those reports were invariably broadcast by the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse, and United Press International. Independent news agencies around the world also picked up the story and disseminated versions in major world languages like Swahili, Portuguese, German, Mandarin, Hindustani, Arabic, Russian, Malay, and Bengali. The story about how, why, and where the virus was spreading had been shared in more than 190 languages in millions of network groups, giving it high relevance as the biggest story on mainstream media around the world.

Those activities equally brought the spotlight on the story, prompting world-renowned journalists Wolf Blitzer, Christiane Amanpour, Rachel Maddow, and teams of reporters worldwide to report on the origin and spread of the virus. On May 30, 2020, the *New York Times* reported the arrest of Chen by Chinese authorities and the death of the Chinese whistleblower doctor, Li Wenliang, who tried to warn the public about coronavirus, following conflicting reports about his condition on state media. The report incited the press to probe reasons for the happenings. The secrecy around those events raised media interest in the story as reporters went to Wuhan to expand coverage of the incidents.

Country leaders then joined the media to make the public more aware of the pandemic. The Trump administration and its team of health experts started daily press conferences about the pandemic and related government measures, carried by major news networks. News consumers tweeted and retweeted rumors about root causes of the pandemic, treatments, infection rates, and death tolls, giving more attention than other broadcasts. The messages were redistributed at least twice from February through June 2020 in networked groups as cable news television stations provided lengthy daily coverage of stories about the pandemic.

3.4 Public Opinions in Support and Denial of the Mystery behind the Pandemic

Stories about the political history, existence, and spread of coronavirus can be traced in growing literature published in refereed science journals, media broadcasts, blogs, and online postings from real medical professionals informed reporters, opinion leaders, government leaders, unverified sources and religious bodies. A U.S. Senator complained in a Fox News program broadcast in May 2020 that the pandemic started in a Chinese lab in Wuhan, leading to a cultural politics war.

Public relations and advocacy wars have been flaring among religious and non-religious bodies determined to shape world opinion on whether to authenticate the virus as a threat to human life or the manipulation of the world population for socio-economic benefits. For example, a group of senior conservative Catholic Clergy described Covid-19 as a pretext for governments to deprive people of their freedom and track their movements.

Similarly, the right-wing populist combative rhetoric considers global efforts to contain the pandemic as a pretext to erase Christian civilization and create a hate-filled technocratic tyranny. The fact that German Bishops dismiss the clergy's widely disseminated complaint as a conspiracy theory in a press release published in the Catholic News Service (KNA), May 12, 2020, reminds us that facts about the virus are more necessary than conspiracies and theories.

Whatever the media platforms, faith-based institutions have used to present their impressions of the sociopolitical and economic impact of the virus on human communities, those persons serving on the frontlines of the pandemic such as bus drivers, lab technicians, and hospital personnel have shared experiences we must not ignore. Autopsy reports, lab tests, and other serological experiments show a direct link between Covid-19 infection rates and race-based socially induced health conditions such as

diabetes, high blood pressure, leukemia, heart conditions, older people, and high death rates. In particular, a nurse practitioner treating patients in California analyzed the causes of their death as follows:

“The government and the church may reopen when they want. They can come up with conspiracies as they choose, but one thing I know is that Corona is real, there is no proven treatment for it, no vaccine yet and the only thing I can do is wash my hands, wear a mask and limit the frequency of interacting with big groups of people. I say, let them open churches, schools, and businesses. Was it a hoax when 700+ coffins were churches in Italy every day, and all those people dying in N.Y. City and elsewhere pretended to die? I hope the people who are making all those declarations never have to die of Covid-19” (Personal WhatsApp interview, May 23, 2020).

There is extensive evidence that the virus emerged from animals and transmitted to people. Research conducted by national and international agencies in state-sponsored labs and labs funded by big donors operating under the pretext of serving university research centers continues to publish reports about diagnostic techniques, transmission methods, and criteria for identifying people at high risk of contracting the virus. The Center for Disease Control, the Johns Hopkins University, Babraham Institute, and the University of Cambridge, England, together have repeatedly encouraged people to wear face masks in public and wash hands to reduce infection rates.

3.5 How Social Media Is Reshaping News about Covid-19

Scientists and established cable news networks have debunked most stories circulating on social media networks about COVID-19 as conspiracy theories. We know that a conspiracy theory is when powerful groups, often in political motivation, push forward an explanation for the existence of an event or a situation when other examples are more probable. In the turbulence of news about coronavirus pandemic, it might be challenging to differentiate a scam or rumor from vital information.

Social media’s primary advantage over the traditional news network is its ability to make news a social entity. Social media groups make it increasingly difficult for established cable networks to provide up-to-date news and information to their respective audiences partly because cyber communities are more aggressive in producing and disseminating news than established news organs. News organs take time to fact check, verify sources, and edit news before broadcasting it. At the same time, social media users simply write and share stories they feel others might be interested in reading. This leads to misinformation.

To better understand why there is too much misinformation on social media about the coronavirus, we need to know how cognitive science explains human interaction. John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky, authors of the *Conspiracy Handbook*, have argued that conspiracy theories erode public trust in government and medical institutions upon which the public itself depends on accurate

information. Cook and Lewandowsky (2020, p. 3) posit that conspiracy theories are not supported by evidence that can withstand scrutiny, but this does not stop them from blossoming. Instead of going to a neighbor with thoughts on a topic published in the newspaper, social media users instead join forums and discuss breaking news. Since January 2020, the French news agency, (Agence France Presse,) which reaches 168 countries; the Associated Press, which reaches 106 countries; Reuters, which has over 750 television broadcasts in 115 countries; and United Press International that reaches 92 countries with a Spanish version for Latin America have delivered the majority of breaking news about the virus.

Overall, the news, coronavirus, has transformed how we think, work, entertain ourselves, or treat our friends and families.

3.6 Facts and Fiction about Covid-19

Due to widespread interest in the pandemic perpetuated by social media networks, country leaders, and cable news media, people have been inundated with unconfirmed reports. People appear more confused today than when the news about the virus was first released because they do not know which source has provided accurate information. As of June 2, 2020, there were 6.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection; 371,000 deaths and 216 countries, areas, or territories with cases. Among those, the U.S., whose population is 331 million, had over 1.8 million confirmed cases, the highest in the world, followed by Brazil with half a million. The countries with the highest cases and limited recovery rates were based in the Western world (see Table 1).

Table 1. Countries most affected by COVID-19 in Early 2020

Location	Confirmed	Recovered	Deaths
United States	1.85M	412K	107K
	+16,070		+478
Brazil	531K	241K	30,079
	+11,598		+623
Russia	424K	187K	5,037
	+9,035		+162
United Kingdom	276K	-	39,045
	+1,570		+0
Spain	240K	150K	27,127

Source: Wikipedia. Retrieved June 2, 2020

From a regional perspective, the virus seems to have devastating consequences, as well as seen below.

Table 2. Statistics by Region, May 12, 2020

Regions	Infection cases	deaths (4 261)
Africa 46 829	cases (2 296) 1 449	deaths (34)
Americas 1 743 717	cases (41 266) 104 549	deaths (2 675)
Eastern Mediterranean 274 027	cases (8 863) 9 138	deaths (125)
Europe 1 755 790	cases (24 184) 157 880	deaths (1 277)
South-East Asia 105 901	cases (5 020) 3 597	deaths (116)
Western Pacific 161 872	cases (962) 6 527	deaths (34)

Source: World Health Organization. May 12, 2020

Given the current world population of 7.6 billion people, the pandemic has been spreading at a faster rate beyond the estimates provided by the US-based Center for Disease Control (CDC). The respected health organization had predicted 1.4 million would be infected with 100,000 deaths in the U.S. by June 1, 2020, giving optimists and conspiracy theorists room to criticize efforts to slow the disease. Still, for economists, the virus is spreading at a frenetic pace, and the numbers can easily quadruple by 2021 and cause a recession worldwide if an effective vaccine is not found. Since the World Health Organization and the Columbia University School of public health scientists announced that COVID-19 was a global pandemic in January 2020, social media platforms have filled 80% of their content with versions of the disease. Clinical studies with first infections in Wuhan, China, and reports from PREDICT, a U.S. funded global program investigating the virus in animals, as well as cable news media coverage, appear to have negatively influenced public opinion about the cause and nature of the illness.

We wonder whether social media networks can compete with cable news media in sharing coronavirus messages. More curiously, it would be more challenging to determine whether cable news agencies, scientists, or social media that is creating a frenzy, prejudice, or rumor about the Covid-19 that can jeopardize global collaboration to reduce the spread of the virus and find a cure successfully.

To complicate matters, the world health governing body, WHO, reportedly ignited the controversy over the source of the pandemic and the way countries were managed it when the Trump administration announced the WHO hierarchy had been slow in warning the world of the severity of Covid-19 and threatened to suspend funding the WHO. That announcement fueled rumors that the global health watchdog, heavily funded by China and other countries, was protecting Chinese interest. The U.S. President, Fox News, and a U.S. Senator in April 2020, equally threatened economic sanctions against China, accusing the country of creating the virus and destroying the world's economy. Those

allegations led 27 public health scientists in the U.S. and around the globe to present scientific evidence to questionable online information distributors in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals in China. Charles Calisher, Dennis Carroll, et al. (Feb. 2020) also debunked the onslaught of social media news flows and showed their solidarity with health professionals and scientists in China by referring to clinical studies completed by other scientists on the coronavirus.

Undoubtedly, public debates on paid cable and social media platforms about the origins and reasons for the rapid spread of the virus have piqued people's curiosity and prompted more people than usual to seek and share news and rumors about the virus on a massive scale. Never before has the world community come together to help each other defeat the virus by sharing advice on remedies.

3.7 How Media Influences Public Behavior on COVID-19

To know how the media frames public opinion on COVID-19, we go back to 2009 when Swine flu or H1N1, was recorded as one of the worst global pandemics. When Swine flu or H1N1 became a pandemic, the media played a significant role in creating a lasting impression. According to Holland, K., Sweet, M., Blood, R., and Fogarty, A. (2014), media outlets across Australia were reporting data based on what they could find and understand. Viewers used updates from media reports to create more panic in the community. The World Health Organization did not verify the information the media was passing along.

In terms of the coronavirus, ignorant people deprived of accurate information are susceptible to various forms of suffering. This is the case with minority groups experiencing economic hardship. In the United Kingdom, for example, 95% of the people infected or dying from the virus are ethnic minorities. According to the Reuters news agency, minorities who work in healthcare and other sectors are most exposed to the virus. The *Public Health Journal* in the United Kingdom affirms that ethnic minority groups are most affected because of their living standard. They have low incomes and large families living in compact areas; are obliged to work under high-risk conditions to support their families. Other vulnerable people in the UK and the US are blacks and the Hispanic workforce in big cities and construction workers.

In the next segment, we attempt to show how the media controls public discourse on the coronavirus, literarily making people to operate in a “new normal” environment.

3.8 COVID-19 and the “New Normal” Lifestyle

Coronavirus has transformed how primary care physicians handle patient visits. When the World Health Organization, February 2020, announced COVID-19 as a worldwide pandemic, governments enforced social distancing to slow the spread of the virus, while medical experts from Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and the Center for Disease Control struggled to find a proper vaccine. Health experts, celebrities and other public figures, including parliamentarians and heads of state speaking on different media platforms in major world languages (French, English, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Mandarin,

Kiswahili) have joined scientists in instructing people to wear face masks and gloves, wash their hands, stay six feet apart, and avoid large gatherings in public. Shopping centers, clinics, worship buildings, petrol filling stations, and other public places remind people to apply socially distance measures to protect themselves and others. This new public order is not a law in any country, but it has impacted certain customs.

Further, family members and acquaintants are prohibited from visiting elderly patients in residential areas created for older people. Gyms have posted rules on their websites that include keeping people and machines at least six feet apart. Similarly, primary healthcare centers have introduced new ways of treating their patients. Formally, the patient would call and schedule an appointment, and the doctor would see, feel, and touch the patient.

In the wake of the pandemic, some doctors offer remedies through videoconferencing, reducing the risk of getting infected. The table below shows the advantages and disadvantages of what this paper calls “cyber doctoring.”

Table 3. COVID-induced Primary Care Patient Visit

Activity	Advantage	Disadvantage
HIPPA	Offers a new, creative way of seeing patients	Patient privacy may be easily compromised. Not all patients have access to internet/cyber doctor visits
Cost	The patient's cost of an office visit is minimal. With only a video-equipped cell phone the patient can see a doctor and get treatment	Clinics lose income when there is no in-person/office visit
Patient Diagnosis	Doctors can treat the patient from afar	The doctor can't get a full diagnosis by speaking to the patient. A patient may be deaf, have low expressive skills, etc. preventing a thorough understanding of the health problem
Satellite diagnosis	The patient feels safe as no else is in the office knows his/her ailment-privacy protected Good chance to experience the doctor's human side. The doctor can show more compassion via	Potential for misdiagnosing of health condition is greater Human emotions may not be sufficient. Satellite visits are limited to a phone conversation.

	video meeting	Patients in impoverished areas may not have Internet
Business sustainability	In-person visits which often include lab tests, mammograms, EKGs bring more capital to run the clinic as a business	-Smaller clinics may go out of business due to no in-person visits.

3.8.1 The Advantages of Social Networking and Africa's Sustainment Potential

Networked groups have been vividly engaged in sharing, receiving, and processing stories about Covid-19. Vulnerable populations, that is, people without adequate access to social media information and those being directed by their governments, are more likely to be infected than those in open societies with frequent access to news and information about Covid-19.

According to news reports from Agence France Presse published in May 2020, only 72,000 cases were recorded in Africa. This is significant in that Africa's population accounts for 17 % of the world's population. Most Africans believe in traditional methods of living, and they rely on herbal treatments and related ancestral relics. Other reasons why Africa has contained the pandemic are indicated below:

- Africa is outside the pathway of the heavily infected regions like China, the U.S., and the U.K., although Chinese citizens continue to travel to Africa and vice-versa.
- Studies show that the virus does not survive for a long time in hot temperatures. We know that Africa is very hot. And global warming has made the continent hotter than ever.
- Most African countries implemented the WHO measures as soon as the first cases were detected.
- 65% of Africa's population consists of young people, and the virus is affecting mostly older people with underlying problems.
- Africa is mostly rural- communities are adept at using herbal remedies. Through messages shared on social media platforms, more people are boiling and drinking fever grass, lemon, orange, ginger, and other roots to slow or prevent infection.
- According to Omar Sarr, a Professor of Medicine at the respected University of Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Africa has been exposed to micro-organisms compared to other regions. Further, there is a high degree of vaccine coverage in Africa, making Africans potentially more resistant to contamination (www.linkedin.com Retrieved May 18, 2020).
- Madagascar and Cameroon have invented curative treatments against the virus. Medical professionals in Cameroon offer Kledavid, also known as Seraphine Kene, to COVID patients. In Madagascar, Doctors without Borders admitted that people were drinking boiled herbs and eating lemons and ginger as remedies for the disease. While there are no clinical studies to

support their claims, social media reports and online postings indicate those remedies have cleared symptoms in patients.

3.8.2 Obstacles

- Africa and India are densely populated, and people cannot practice social distancing, making them vulnerable to the virus.
- Social norms such as handshaking, close contacts during funerals, and childbirth celebrations make it easier for the virus to spread among people.
- Social Distancing, touted and promoted on cable media as the key preventive element against the spread of the virus, is a luxury to densely populated regions where most people are poor and cannot afford the financial costs.
- Relaxed government regulations, such as allowing vehicles to deliver goods and opening bars.
- Limited capacity and the will to sustain WHO guidelines. For example, Chinese and French airline companies were allowed to fly to Central and Southern Africa only two months after the WHO advised nations to close their borders. The African authorities probably allowed the planes to fly, fearing retribution from their allies.
- Scientists may use the media as the bully pulpit to dissuade the masses in Africa from using local remedies to cure themselves. The colonial mentality is still entrenched in the African psyche so much that people cherish ‘foreign’ activities more than local initiatives. Some medical staff, hospitals, and clinics would rather wait for a vaccine or drug from Europe or America than administer local remedies such as Kledavid.

4. Conclusions

Covid-19 has caused dramatic deaths and illnesses, disrupted the global economy, and, most importantly, raised new challenges for globalization. From a sociological perspective, a more limited form of globalization might emerge, mitigated by the pandemic. While scientists and governments are working frenetically to limit the socio-economic and cultural impact of the epidemic on the human population, we have learned that the so-called superpowers—US, China, France, Russia, the UK, Germany, and Japan albeit renown for their economic and military prowess are gravely limited when it comes to managing a global health crisis. The high number of infections and deaths from Covid-19 around the world shows that the most economically advanced countries were not prepared to stop the virus from spreading. The risks lie in our overdependence on world superpowers for our protection, which is a colossal mistake. The whole experience with Covid-19 prompts us to reassess international interdependence and redefine the term ‘superpower.’

Also, the World Health Organization mandated by United Nations to spearhead public Health failed to promptly inform nations about the deadly virus until it became a pandemic, exposing people to more

health crises and causing harm, especially among poor people and those living in squalid conditions all over the world.

In short, the information gap and misunderstanding of what constitutes a superpower may have led to the mystification of Covid-19. Further, human beings do not automatically adjust to a brand new way of living, so they may soon abandon the so-called “new normal” of wearing masks in public and cleaning objects. Apathy, malaise, and sheer forgetfulness would cause people to return to old ways. Therefore, it is essential to consider some sociological solutions to the status quo.

5. The Way forward

5.1 Use of Social Media to Diagnose and Treat Patients

Clinical psychologists, pharmacologists, and serological workers in each ethnic group should record video messages on different prevention measures, show people how to use traditional concoctions, and disseminate them via social media networks. Within days the messages would go viral, allowing people to analyze data and consider their options. The mysterious nature in which the coronavirus spreads has led healthcare institutions in some countries to apply new initiatives to limit its ability to infect more people. Social media has been found to affect the healthcare professional and patient relationship, by leading to regular communication between the patient and healthcare professional, increased switching of doctors, harmonious relationships, and suboptimal interaction between the patient and healthcare professional (Smailhodzic et al., 2016, p. 442). Concerned that the traditional approach to treating patients (physical contact) may spread the virus, clinics in the United States have resorted to social media, particularly Zoom and online registration portals, to see and treat patients, thereby fostering the spirit of social distancing. Early results show that cyber-treatment methods are not only practical, but they also do not compromise the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) that requires the protection and confidential handling of protected health information. All patients electronically sign a document to keep their healthcare records confidential or relinquish that right. Novant Health, a healthcare provider based in North Carolina comprising a four-state integrated network of physician clinics, outpatient centers, hospitals, 1,600 physicians, 29,000 employees at 640 locations, 15 medical centers and physician clinics has successfully diagnosed and treated over one million patients online since the state of North Carolina imposed lockdown due to the pandemic. This proves that healthcare organs and patients consider social media a useful partner needed to manage Covid-19.

There may be more beneficial and potentially harmful effects of social media use to diagnose and treat coronavirus patients. However, it is probably too early to determine the effect of identifying and treating patients through video-based diagnoses until scientists carry out more clinical studies and reports from clinics over time. From a sociological perspective, it would be challenging to monitor

doctor-patient confidentiality since countries have their value system and healthcare laws. Patient privacy could be compromised if more countries do not set up privacy laws.

5.2 Implications for Ethical Journalism

Two significant problems identified from our analyses relate to information consumption; (1) that consumers do not take time to differentiate fake news sources from real news sources. As such, (2) consumers remain under-informed or misinformed—precarious, especially when there are millions of android phones in the world, and news reaches millions of people in only seconds. The fact the deadly virus spreads faster than information shared on social media platforms should incentivize established world media bodies to brainstorm creative ways of delivering accurate, useful messages to save lives. The burden of serving the human population with helpful information does not rest with social media CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg, John Legerr, Daniel Schulman, and other cohorts. Nor should we blame yellow journalism and rumor initiators for the fake news pandemic that has adulterated journalistic integrity is rendering the news and information industry more obsolete, obfuscating the management of useful information, and, in general, negatively affecting the media industry.

Governments, international organizations, foreign services departments that conduct business with local and external partners, and established news organizations should collectively take steps to protect journalistic ethics. The obstacles facing the news team consisting of journalists, news anchors, camera operators, editors, graphic artists, photographers, informants that work together to complete a story require more training in spotting fake news. Training must include acquiring knowledge of every new technology, enhancing writing skills, and recognizing fake news typology.

News industries need additional resources to train news teams to properly play the news media gatekeeper role that includes knowing news impact, prominence, proximity, bizarreness, conflict and currency, and the number of people to be influenced by the subject.

If media organs want to enhance their reputation as the news reference point, they should raise fake news education and literacy levels within their ranks. If they used reverse search engines, and fact-checking sites to screen fake news and redistribute news promptly, the media organs would become authoritative contacts for confirming the authenticity of the story, hence re-establishing public trust.

5.3 Consumer Responsibility

It is difficult to distinguish between fake news and real news, especially after Facebook and Google employees tasked with banning offensive content face reprieve due to evolving policies imposed by the government. Even in the United States where the Constitution (The First Amendment) gives people five fundamental freedoms: Freedom of speech, press, petition, assembly and religion, such privileges are compromised when the U.S. President, Donald Trump, signs an executive order giving tech companies, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and Google broad legal immunity over content posted by

their users. According to *The National Law Review* the

“Order further directs federal agencies to assess their spending on advertising and marketing on online platforms, as well as directs the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to consider enforcement actions against social media companies for possible violations of Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act” (*The National Law Review*, June 3, 2020).

That decision overrides Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act that broadly protects internet companies from liability for the content users post on their platforms. The decision strips liability protection from companies that censor content. This means that social media news and information consumers would become more vulnerable to fake news. However, consumers must not trust any news or information from anonymous sources. They must take responsibility by identifying fake news to avoid being misled and consequently making the wrong decisions, especially as news about the Covid-19 pandemic has been spreading without a filtering, monitoring mechanism to educate vulnerable populations. News consumers should take the following steps to debunk fake news:

- If you (the news consumer) are not sure informing is accurate, do not share it.
- Check the date the story was published, for social media tends to recycle old stories.
- Question news headlines written in capital letters or sentences filled with caesuras.
- Question stories that quote other news outlets, especially websites, as their source.
- If there are no links or ways to verify quotes and references, the news is likely fake.
- Pay attention to the language of the news media. Zimdars (2020) has a list of ten steps needed to analyze false, misleading, clickbait-y, or satirical "news" sources. They include paying attention to the language the cable news media uses: "We are seeking confirmation," or "We are getting reports that..." or (name of news network) has learned." Unless there is live reporting and viewers see actual photos and assess what informants are sharing, the news is likely fake.
- Choose news from outlets close to the incident, not media from afar, and compare multiple sources.
- Beware of messages that overtly and ironically reflect conventions. Messages tweeted and retweeted that use more adjectives and action verbs are likely fake.
- The Center for News Literacy warns that 'big news brings out fakers and photo shoppers.'
- A news article with too many ads such as pop-ups and banner ads might be fake.
- Newsmongers should access <https://guides.stlcc.edu/fakenews/factchecking>
- Most important, follow the rules provided by the World Health Organization to prevent the spread of the virus that includes avoiding crowds, washing hands, wearing masks, and keeping a six-foot distance in public.
- Newsmongers should access <https://guides.stlcc.edu/fakenews/factchecking>.

5.4 *Suggestions for Country Policymakers*

We advise policymakers to take the following measures immediately based on each country's governing style, resources, international socio-economic relations, and diplomatic relations with its partners:

- Government heads (directors/ministers of healthcare) should update their population about the pandemic.
- Administrators should have a program for reopening the economy based on informed advice from top-notch scientists in their country and the WHO.
- Governments should set up a crisis intervention team of scientists, healthcare workers, media organs, and demographers to trace the spread of the virus and use trial medications such as dexamethasone or chloroquine only when it has been cleared globally as a safe form of treatment.
- Governments should liaise with international experts through diplomatic channels to compare experiences, share facts about it and treatment measures, and pick out best practices in finding a cure.
- Governments should find volunteers to share literature about the virus in their communities.
- Each government should invest in local herbalists, medical doctors, and serologists to seek remedial treatment and eventually find a cure because relying heavily on foreign intelligence could compromise a country's political, diplomatic, and economic interests.

5.5 *Making a Case for Media Buying by the Most Vulnerable Groups*

It is well established that mainstream news media are corporate-owned. Mainstream right-wing media organs frame news to meet the needs of their owners, so news editors influence public opinion by choosing stories and building narratives that make headlines and front pages of newspapers. They select news based on their perceptions of big straight news and their political, economic, diplomatic, and cultural impact on the consumer. Simply put, the news we get is the outcome of professional routines that generally focus on the activities of bureaucratic institutions. David Croteau and William Hoynes (2003) and Ronald L. Jackson, past President of the National Communication Association (U.S.), among others prove the point that the media is a powerful tool used to control minds and the economy. Jackson (2019) sees the media as "our portals to knowledge and information across the globe," and information as something steeped in the political, socio-economic, communal, cultural, and communicative complexities of the convergence media that bring us the stories about other worlds (p. v).

In terms of resource mobilization, say in the United States, Blacks are the most ignored group; therefore, they must first understand that the media's partial coverage of the coronavirus pandemic might be the reason for widespread infection and high death rates in their community. Thus, those who

have been misinformed about Covid-19 should create their media platforms to screen information and share their messages to manage the pandemic instead of relying on mainstream media, which is sponsored by powerful political and wealthy entities. For Blacks to control content about the epidemic and related economic matters in the distant future, they should buy and own more radio and television stations now. The fact that Blacks own only 10 of 12,000 cable news television stations is a case in point. In Africa and other countries where Blacks are the majority population, media broadcasts tend to favor Western socio-economic interests that are generally detrimental to them.

Grosso modo, the propensity to create and share news to millions of people, lies in a group's ability to control its economy. No matter which perspective aligns with those of a particular community, what matters is how a community manages the media content it receives. Communities that sheepishly consume information from other media sources lack political and economic influence—they do not have control over policy and financial markets in their community or elsewhere. For example, the Black population, which has approximately two billion of the world's population of 7.7 billion, needs to change the global political landscape to recognize its digital presence in the world. The 46 million Blacks in the United States (14% of the country's population of 331 million) could form their political party and put together a healthcare plan detailing how they want to be served. As such, any political party, Republican or Democrat, would ensure that their platform is included in the nation's agenda. Consequently, U.S. media, which delivers news content based on the overarching interests of the Republican or Democrat ideology, would add the Black community's plan to its reporting program. If Blacks do not own more media stations to carry their messages, they cannot control the influx of information from other sources in their community.

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Note

Note 1. World Health Organization, www.who.int. The figures vary on different websites.