Cornell study suggests President Trump played leading role in the COVID misinformation 'infodemic'

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The Cornell Alliance for Science has just released a media analysis that identifies the hot topics and major players in the misinformation "infodemic" that has accompanied the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The study, which evaluated 38 million articles published by English-language, traditional media worldwide, identified over 1.1 million news articles that disseminated, amplified or reported on misinformation related to the pandemic. The misinformation conversation was dominated by 11 primary topics, ranging from conspiracy theories to attacks against Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"We were interested in exploring this issue because the World Health Organization has identified COVID misinformation, which it termed an 'infodemic', as a serious concern in fighting the pandemic," said lead author Sarah Evanega, director of the Cornell Alliance for Science. "If people are misled by unscientific and unsubstantiated claims about the disease, they may be less likely to observe official guidance and thus risk spreading the virus."

The most popular topic was what study authors termed "miracle cures." This topic appeared in 295,351 articles — more than the other 10 topics combined.

The study found that comments by US President Donald Trump drove major spikes in the "miracle cures" misinformation topic, led by his April 24 musing about the possibility of using disinfectants internally to cure the coronavirus. Trump's advocacy of unproven treatments such as hydroxychloroquine, as well as his admission that he was using the drug in an attempt to stave off the virus, also prompted major spikes in the misinformation conversation.

These findings suggest that President Trump was quite likely the largest driver of misinformation during the COVID pandemic to date, the study authors noted.

"One of the more interesting aspects of the data collection process was discovering the staggering amount of misinformation coverage directly linked to the public comments of a small number of individuals," said co-author Jordan Adams, a data analyst at Cision Insights.

The second-most prevalent topic was the allegation that the COVID pandemic was created to advance a "new world order/deep state." The claim that the global pandemic was a hoax perpetrated for political gain by the Democratic Party was the third most common topic, followed by conspiracies contending the novel coronavirus was a bioweapon intentionally or accidentally released by a laboratory in Wuhan, China.

"Unwittingly or unintentionally, media do play a major role in disseminating misinformation because they amplify the voices of prominent people, even if those sources are incorrect," Evanega noted. "It's important that media give prominence to genuine experts and representatives of scientific institutions."

Not all of the misinformation conversation disseminated or amplified factual inaccuracies or conspiracy theories. Nearly a third of the media coverage was termed "fact-checking" by study authors because it specifically sought to correct misinformation.

"Unfortunately, misinformation within the public health space is not unusual, but we've seen enormous volumes of false and potentially dangerous information spreading related to COVID-19 in past months," said co-author Karinne Smolenyak, healthcare sector lead at Cision Insights. "It's important that media organizations, communicators and public health professionals understand the scale of the issue so that they can pursue an informed response."

Though the study did not evaluate the entire misinformation conversation on social media, it did track users' shares of traditional media stories on social channels. The authors found that those posts elicited 36 million engagements on social media, 75 percent of them on Facebook. The "miracle cures" topic accounted for 42 percent of overall engagements.

"Findings suggest a complicated relationship between misinformation within traditional media and misinformation on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Further studies analyzing the impact of social media misinformation and fact-checking will be extremely helpful in understanding the full impact of misinformation on public health discourse," Adams said.

The study was performed using Cision Media's Next Generation Communications Cloud platform, which aggregates content from 7 million-plus sources around the world. This database was queried with an English-language search string for misinformation topics in the context of COVID-19, using an iterative cycle of different keywords.

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