An Epidemic of Wuhan Virus Misinformation Is Spreading Online

Social media giants are finding it hard to quarantine fake news.

A young boy reacts as he and thousands of others line up to purchase face masks from a makeshift stall after waiting for hours in Hong Kong on Feb. 5. ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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he outbreak of the new coronavirus, which originated in Wuhan, China, with all the misinformation and conspiracy that has followed it, has put the major social media companies to the test as they try to combat panic and paranoia.

The big U.S. companies have moved quickly to try to quell criticism that their platforms are turning into cesspools of bad information and fear. So have their Chinese counterparts—which are also under considerable government pressure

as Beijing faces its worst legitimacy crisis in years. As the virus has spread, their platforms have played host to theories that the deadly virus is a lab-made bioweapon and that the streets of Wuhan are littered with thousands of dead bodies.

Some are responding better than others.

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Anyone searching for "coronavirus" or "Wuhan" on Twitter will be met with a message encouraging them to "know the facts," with a link to a local health authority, and the platform is prioritizing countries' health authorities in the search results.

Twitter has also moved to ban certain accounts spreading conspiracy theories—most prominently the long-running conspiracist site ZeroHedge. Twitter said in a statement that there was no evidence of coordinated efforts to spread disinformation on the platform but added: "[W]e will remain vigilant and have invested significantly in our proactive abilities to ensure trends, search, and other common areas of the service are protected from malicious behaviors."

Google has taken a similar approach. Users using the search giant to look up information on the virus receive information from the World Health Organization, including details on how the virus is transmitted, as well as sensible precautions people can take, such as hand-washing tips. Google is generally cagey about how and when it removes or deprioritizes search results from its service, but searches for various coronavirus conspiracy theories turn up news agencies debunking those claims ahead of unreliable sites like Infowars and ZeroHedge.

On Reddit, where several communities dedicated solely to the coronavirus have popped up, there have been mixed results. The two largest virus-related subreddits, with about 50,000 users apiece, both have official rules asking users

to use reliable information and to avoid sensationalism. On r/China_Flu, which sprung out of the long-standing r/China subreddit, moderators have been judicious about ensuring those rules are followed. On r/Coronavirus, the community is lousy with moderating posts stoking fears of a government-made biological weapon and making claims of a mass cover-up.

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What's more, the company has put a banner ad on its homepage directing users to a megathread on r/AskScience where people can talk to real researchers and public health professionals.

Facebook has deployed its fact-checkers to rate information being shared in its news feed, limiting information deemed to be inaccurate or false. It has also leveraged reliable public health information and provided free advertising credits to health agencies.

But a quick Facebook search shows the limits to that work.

The top two hits for the coronavirus on Facebook are private groups, which require approval to join. The groups are rife with unverified videos, conspiracy theories, and general panic.

On joining one of those groups, you may be welcomed by a post asking: Is it true that the United States invented the coronavirus to destroy China's economy? The top comment: "True." (Facebook did not respond to a request for comment.).

Chinese sites are following similar models to their Western counterparts. Searches for "coronavirus" on Baidu, the country's most frequently used search engine, bring up health information, official statistics, and other tidbits, while the site's main banner links to a hub page on the topic. (Baidu has gotten into hot water for promoting shady health information in the past.) Many sites are partnering with Dingxiang Yuan, an online physician-orientated information site

known for reliable information; its tracker of virus numbers has reached 1.3 billion page views.

For Chinese sites, of course, there's little choice but to remove supposedly false information—even if it's just stories the government doesn't like. With around a third of personnel devoted to self-censoring content even in normal times, removing stories and links is par for the course. Nevertheless, some scandalous stories have broken through, such as the death of a disabled child under quarantine, and some state-backed claims have seen significant and successful pushback. Overseas Chinese groups on uncensored apps such as WhatsApp, however, are full of wild claims about the extent of the virus.

That raises a difficult issue for Western social media apps—coping with misinformation in languages other than English. Googling in languages other than English for the coronavirus, for instance, often doesn't bring up the extra information. Facebook, in particular, has a record of dealing poorly with the range of countries the site dominates, while WhatsApp has had significant problems with dangerous rumors in India and elsewhere. Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia are all seeing a flood of misinformation about the virus, much of it directing hate at ethnic Chinese citizens or visitors.

One particularly virulent conspiracy theory shows just how difficult stemming the flow of fake news can be—in any language.

On Jan. 31, researchers from the Kusuma School of Biological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi published an article noting an "uncanny similarity" between certain protein chains found within the coronavirus and those found in HIV. The paper clearly explains that the "exchange of genetic material among the viruses is well known" and their preliminary discovery proved "the need to investigate the relations between seemingly unrelated virus families."

The report was preliminary, meaning it was not peer-reviewed. The scientific archive hosting the paper, bioRxiv, added a disclaimer warning that it "should not be regarded as conclusive, guide clinical practice/health-related behavior, or be reported in news media as established information."

The same day the paper went online, it was shared by the Indian author and columnist Anand Ranganathan, who tweeted that the authors "hint at the possibility that this Chinese virus was designed." Later that day, after checking

with researchers, he opted to delete the tweet. Ranganathan's original tweet, however, had already propelled the fringe study to go viral.

Amid concerns with the underlying science, the paper was even withdrawn. It, however, still lives on the bioRxiv website—and has spread widely.

The social media analytics platform CrowdTangle reports that the paper has been shared thousands of times across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram in an array of different languages. Many of the most popular shares are still live, save for Reddit, where the link has been removed and a disclaimer has been added to the post, warning that the information came from an unconfirmed source.

The preliminary paper, however, found pickup on ZeroHedge, which has been known to peddle Russian propaganda. On Saturday, the site's pseudonymous manager, Tyler Durden—a group identity, one member of which is the former investment banker Daniel Ivandjiiski, according to *Bloomberg*—posted a link to the study, with the supposition that the coronavirus "might have been genetically engineered for the purposes of a weapon, and not just any weapon but the deadliest one of all." (The post was updated to acknowledge that the paper was withdrawn, even as it continued advancing the conspiracy theory.) It followed up with a post claiming to identify the Chinese researcher behind the virus.

The ZeroHedge posts racked up more than 15,000 shares on Facebook and have been shared extensively in the two most popular private groups dedicated to following the virus. On Twitter, the articles earned ZeroHedge a ban from the platform—that didn't stop the articles from being shared thousands of times, however, including from Infowars host David Knight. (Infowars is also banned from the platform.) The ZeroHedge posts were also shared, albeit not as widely, on Reddit and Instagram.

This most recent proliferation of fake news lays out just how tricky tackling misinformation can be online, but it also shows that certain strategies are more effective than others. Facebook continues to be the most fertile ground for conspiracy theories and bad information, but Twitter continues to be a prime incubator for fledgling conspiracy theories.

Justin Ling is a journalist based in Toronto.

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