

Podcast Orange – Episode 9

Lockdown : how coronavirus fake news is causing an “info-demic”

De : Spintank
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Introduction

- Joe:

Let me tell you a story: about a week ago, I called my grandmother. She's well over seventy, widowed and lives alone in a residential area just outside of Nantes. She loves ballroom dancing. The local dance hall is where she usually meets all her friends on weekends. I was quite stern with her: I told her she'd have to give that up. “You can't go out anymore. It's complicated, but I promise to call as often as possible...it's for your own good.” I think she understood, because she didn't go dancing. At least, that's what she claimed when I called again.

She's even started taking the virus more seriously. She's been following the news, and taking care of herself. The virus has even rekindled her passion for herbal remedies. Could be worse. Her favorite sentence at the moment is: “A friend of a friend who's a doctor said...”

She has an elaborate plan for beating the crisis: she drinks herbal tea to keep her stomach virus-free and hangs her laundry in the sun because everyone knows COVID hates the heat...When last we spoke, I tried to convince her that tea would not, in fact, solve the pandemic, but it was no use. I hung up, defeated, and went to wash my hands.

Hi Chloe!

- Chloe:

Hi Joe!

- Joe:

Welcome everyone to the first episode of the Memo, re-adapted to our pandemic times. You might notice our sound is a little different, and that's because Chloe and I are self-isolating in our homes. We're recording this from a distance.

In upcoming weeks, we'll be here to help you unpack the latest digital news around the virus. And there's a wide range of topics to choose from: working from home, the latest digital tools being used to fight the virus, distance learning for students and children, and more...But today we're interested in something prevalent in our society whenever we face a crisis: and that's misinformation. The spread of fake news is just about as exponential and staggering as the virus itself.

Chloe, who is this friend of a friend who's a doctor and what does he have to say?

- Chloe:

Yes, it's always a doctor, or someone who works in government, or sits on a scientific committee researching the virus...they're always someone else's friend, and usually you hear from them through Whatsapp or Messenger or some other texting service. According to the French radio station, France Inter, messages of this kind spread at incredible speed, and the worrying thing is that they contain faulty information on the virus and on how to stay safe. You mentioned herbal tea--and it sounds harmless enough, you can drink as much as you like, but let's be clear: no tea has ever killed a virus. As yet, research is inconclusive on whether the virus is heat-resistant, so for all we know, it could outlast the summer. No point fighting over that patch of sun on your balcony to try and get rid of it.

Plenty of unfounded rumors about symptoms are also going around: for instance, that the virus won't give you a runny nose...even though it can!

- Joe:

How come fake news travels so fast?

- Marine :

To find out, I recommend a highly interesting column in the Guardian: the piece reminds us that whoever's spreading false information may not be ill-intentioned. Fake news can fall into one of three categories: first, there's information based on truth. Like: Children are immune. Now, it's true they're less prone to falling seriously ill, but they can still carry the virus and pass it on to others. Then, there's information resulting from a misconception. Like: coronaviruses have been around since the 1960s, and there are shots against them. Not quite: there's no vaccine available yet for this particular version, COVID-19...These kinds of misconceptions are fodder for conspiracy theorists. And then there's the third kind of fake news: the kind that deliberately imitates official communication from, say, NHS, the British healthcare system.

- Joe:

These false claims have caused significant panic...

- Chloe:

That's right, I read about it in Le Monde. The claims are always fairly similar, regardless of the country. In France, it was about a total lockdown to come, enforced by the army. In the United States, it was the news that New York would be in citywide quarantine. In Germany, a rumor about the closure of the supermarket chain ALDI. A hospital in Lausanne, Switzerland, had to issue reassuring statements after rumors about its intensive care unit swirled on social media.

- Joe:

Why is healthcare such rich terrain for fake news?

- Chloe:

The Director of the French school of public health, EHESP, explains why in an article on The Conversation and the Digital Society Forum. Laurent Chambaud writes that anything relating to health is “particularly sensitive because it touches on the intimate, the vulnerable when facing illness or death. It’s fertile ground for hooking readers and spreading theories in the hope of reaching a wide audience, indeed, in the hope of going viral.” That said, we’re also collectively aware of recent health scandals that give us reason to be wary.

- Joe:

How to make sure whether something is actually true?

- Chloe:

First of all, you need to be wary of second-hand information: a friend of a friend of a friend...is bound to be suspicious. Check if the information is coming from a reliable source, like a well-known media outlet. Politifact, a website run through the Poynter Institute, a US non-profit dedicated to journalism, regularly checks fake news and reports every piece of virus-related misinformation to be found on social media.

And make sure you’re following instructions communicated on official government websites. The French media France Info also has 7 useful tips for avoiding fake news.

- Joe:

But it’s not that easy: some of this fake news comes in the form of serious-looking scientific articles that even experienced journalists have trouble weeding out.

- Chloe:

That’s right. The French radio journalist Nicolas Martin dedicated his airtime last Monday to an article published on Medium, a blogging platform. The author was called Tomas Pueyo and his article, translated into several languages, was full of impressive scientific jargon and complicated graphs...turns out, it was also full of conjectures and misapplied terms. The author isn’t a doctor or a health professional, but an engineer, and his publication history is entirely unrelated with previous articles titled How to Deliver Your Funny Speech, and What the Rise of Skywalker Can Teach About Storytelling.

- Joe:

So take care when reading articles that look scientific...We know that social media platforms are aware of this issue and have been implementing certain measures...what are they doing?

- Chloe:

It’s fairly unprecedented. TechCrunch reports that Facebook, Google, Reddit, LinkedIn, Microsoft, and Twitter have all published a shared communication policy. They’ve announced that they’ll be collaborating with health care authorities in affected countries to fight against the spread of fake news. But the kind that’s hardest to fight against is misinformation coming from the highest echelons of government...like Donald Trump.

- Joe:

What do you mean ?

- Chloe:

Media Matter is a political, anti-conservative non-profit so take this with a pinch of salt, but they've been monitoring the kind of fake news Donald Trump has been spreading: at the start of the crisis, for instance, he told Americans that the epidemic was fully under control and that there were only 15 cases within the country...

- Joe:

But social media moderators are also having to work from home, aren't they? How are they handling that?

- Chloe:

Wired just reported on this: On Tuesday, March 18, in the evening, some people reported seeing strange things on their feeds. Some of their posts were deleted even though they weren't infringing on any rules. According to experts, this is because with the crisis, moderating has increasingly been handed off to algorithms while the humans have been temporarily laid-off...it's a complicated job that is nearly impossible to do alone, at home...According to a law professor quoted in Wired, the problem is that these bots may make mistakes and accidentally delete posts and links that are perfectly legitimate.

- Joe:

All this during lockdown, just as we're all using social media more than ever...Thank you, Chloe, and thanks to all our listeners. We'll be back next week with the next episode of The Memo, adapted to the lockdown. Until then, take care, stay at home and don't forget to wash your hands!

Sources :

["Message d'un ami médecin..." : ces conseils reçus par WhatsApp sur le coronavirus sont pleins de fake news](#) (France inter)

[Coronavirus misinformation is dangerous. Think before you share](#) (The Guardian)

[Le coronavirus à l'heure des rumeurs par messagerie instantanée : « C'est la mère de ma femme qui me l'a dit »](#) (Le Monde)

[Santé et fake news : les liaisons dangereuses](#) (Digital society forum)

<https://www.politifact.com/coronavirus/> (Politifact)

[Coronavirus : 7 conseils pour se protéger de l'épidémie de « fake news »](#) (France info)

[Coronavirus : une épidémie de faux articles scientifiques](#) (France culture)

[Facebook, Google, Reddit, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Twitter et LinkedIn have issue joint statement on misinformation](#) (TechCrunch)

[Why can't mainstream media stop echoing Trump's coronavirus misinformation?](#) (Media matters)

[Coronavirus Disrupts Social Media First Line of Defense](#) (Wired)