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Combatting COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation Through Media

Most of us are guilty of mindlessly scrolling through social media at some point of our day. While browsing media, you will likely come across some form of misinformation, whether through a shared link or a post on your timeline. Recently, all forms of information about the COVID-19 vaccine have been common, whether accurate or not. The spread of misinformation and disinformation regarding these vaccines can cause a multitude of issues, including individuals' acceptance and perception of the vaccine and how big social media companies combat this issue. To combat these issues, I propose solutions at the individual level, such as putting in personal effort to spread accurate information through social media, as well as industry-level solutions, like implementing software that detects specific words and phrases and professional collaboration.

Misinformation through social media has been an ongoing issue for as long as social media has existed. In recent years, however, there has been an influx of misinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. The problems caused by this misinformation don't singly affect individuals or industries, everyone is forced to face the consequences. Individual citizens may be unknowing victims to the issues that arise. Whether intentional or not, people share information they see on social media through liking, reposting, or any other form of interaction. This cycle of receiving and spreading misinformation may cause people to form inaccurate views of the COVID-19 vaccine, possibly deterring themselves and others from receiving it. It may also cause people to lose trust in all sources of COVID-19 vaccine information, including

credible ones such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention or the World Health Organization. The constant ebb and flow of circulating misinformation puts social media companies in a difficult position regarding the monetization and regulation of information.

Social media platforms make misinformation easily accessible as well as easily publishable. Although the spread of misinformation, deliberate or not, is the fault of the individual who spread it, social media companies will take the blame. This puts these companies in a contradictory situation because they must avoid limiting freedom of speech through posts, but also must find ways to combat spreading misinformation on their platforms. In the article "Too Little, Too Late: Social Media Companies' Failure to Tackle Vaccine Misinformation Poses a Real Threat," Clair Wardle and Eric Singerman use the example of a mother posting about her daughter's reaction to the vaccine on Facebook. This post doesn't intentionally encourage people to not get the vaccine, but it could be interpreted in various ways and possibly lead to someone spreading the post to help deter people from the vaccine. It would be unreasonable for Facebook to take down the post or censor it for misleading information, so how should they tackle this post and similar situations?

There are a few different approaches we can take to combat the overwhelming circulation of misinformation on social media, both at an individual level and at an industry level. As individuals, we can have more of an effect than we think on what gets put into circulation. Every time we like, comment on, or share a post, it gets spread to our communities. Based on a study done by Sayeed Al-Zaman and his team, people on social media tend to interact with positive news-related posts. Knowing this, individuals can prioritize promoting positive information about the COVID-19 vaccine from credible sources on their timelines. Some users may use this data to disguise false informational posts with positive connotations to receive more interaction. How then do we combat this deliberate spread? We can ask questions pertaining to posts' credibility and reasoning. Having these public interactions between

individuals may cause observers on social media to begin to question posts as well. Sparking this wonder in people and causing skepticism of online posts will encourage them to conduct their own research, receiving reliable information about the COVID-19 vaccine. If we see accounts online continuously posting misinformation, we can report them. If a post or account receives enough reports, it gets flagged for review by the social media platform.

On an industry level, it's not as easy to start taking action to tackle misinformation. From the perspective of a social media company, how do we tell what can or can't be censored? To avoid having to make decisions regarding limiting freedom of speech, these companies can find alternative methods to regulate the monetization of misinformation. One approach is to implement software that detects specific words or word combinations that may have to do with the COVID-19 vaccine. As of right now, some platforms such as Instagram, have already made use of this software so when a post regarding COVID-19 or the vaccine appears on your timeline, a warning label appears informing users that the information presented may not be accurate. However, platforms like Twitter have not yet added similar warning labels, leaving these posts to be freely interpreted. Links can also be added to post warning labels or banners that lead to credible research and information, making it easier for users to immediately access accurate information. Another industry-level approach involves researchers and other professionals in the field. Rhetoric plays a significant part in how an audience interprets research published. "[T]here is evidence to suggest that narrative and perspectival persuasion can be more effective than factual-argumentative approaches," (Hughes et al.). Rhetoric can improve the audience's retention of information from research publications and decrease the chances of opposition. Professionals can use specific rhetoric through social media posts to persuade individuals to receive the vaccine. They can also publish their research in easily comprehensible ways for the public. If the audience doesn't understand what they're reading, it is likely they're not going to share the information. One study by Jeanette Ruiz and Robert Bell showed that high-quality research and information published by sources including the CDC and

World Health Organization were shared less than “information from low-value sources” (Lieneck et al.). If these big organizations were to publish information that was more audience-friendly to the common level of science literacy among individuals, there would be more positive interactions on social media, thus leading to the spread of accurate information and approval of the COVID-19 vaccine.

The remaining concern is the cost of the proposal. One of the main benefits is that for individuals, the effort is priceless. Social media users can promote reliable information about the COVID-19 vaccine for free. Individuals can post informational diagrams and pictures on their stories or repost research done by credible professionals. Another significant benefit to the proposal is that individuals can begin to contribute to the battle against social media misinformation at any time. They don’t need approval from the government or other authorities to share useful and reliable information. As individuals spread accurate information, the amount of reliable information will overshadow the misinformation. For the industry-level part of the proposal, editors can revise the tone and rhetoric of the research being published. Excess research and promotion can be funded by the government and organizations like the CDC and WHO as well as donations by individuals. Funding the release of easily accessible and understandable information about the COVID-19 vaccine could encourage individuals to donate to researchers to help them continue publishing information on social media that individuals can comfortably share with their communities.

Social media allows individuals to access an abundance of all types of information about the COVID-19 vaccine. Most of the information being published is not fact-checked by the platforms and can be left open for interpretation, creating problems for individuals and social media companies. Individuals can have a significant influence on decreasing the amount of misinformation circulating by reporting blatantly false posts or striking up conversations about credibility and research about the vaccine. While the individuals put in their effort, social media

companies can work towards implementing software to detect these types of posts and promote professional research and reliable sources on all posts about the COVID-19 vaccine. Individual contribution to the proposal is free by posting and reposting reliable information. Individuals can make more of a contribution, however, by donating to organizations and professionals to release excess research that's easily accessible and understandable to the public. Overall, everyone is going to benefit. Individuals will be exposed to more accurate information and have a better understanding of the COVID-19 vaccine, social media companies will be able to combat spreading misinformation without violating users' freedom of speech, and researchers will be able to learn more about the vaccine and how to communicate to the audience through excess research.

Works Cited

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