COVID-19 rumours in historical context

Professor Jo Fox (PI, School of Advanced Study, University of London), Dr David Coast (Co-I, Bath Spa), Professor James Smith (Co-I, Durham), and Martin Steer (Co-I, School of Advanced Study, University of London)

Summary of research

The COVID-19 outbreak has been accompanied by a pandemic of rumour and disinformation in the UK. Despite the apparent novelty of fake news and its circulation online, there is little that is new about these rumours, all of which have historical precedents. The Covid-19 Rumours in Historical Context project analyses how and why similar rumours have spread in the past, how previous governments have responded to them, and how successful these efforts were. It also tracks rumours (through international English language twitter data) relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccination programme as they develop and compares them to historical precedents.

Policy recommendations

- Policy-makers need a wider range of data (and new tools) at their disposal to better understand mis- and disinformation and its impacts;
- Pre-emptive counter-disinformation campaigns, building on historical trends, may be able to curb the deleterious effects of rumour at times of crisis;
- Solutions to current issues with mis-and disinformation will need to be multi-faceted (ranging from. e.g., tighter controls on the operations of social media to longer term education in Schools as to how to recognise disinformation and understanding the info-sphere and how to navigate it responsibly).

Key findings

- Many of the key strands of conspiracy theory and rumours were in circulation prior to the pandemic – COVID-19 mis-and disinformation worked within these strands, confirming the importance of pre-existing beliefs in explaining why some rumours take-off and others do not;
- Almost all rumours relating to the pandemic and vaccines have historical precedents, providing insight into the particular characteristics of health-related mis-and disinformation, regardless of specific contemporary circumstance;
- There are linguistic and category-based patterns in our data (historically and now) that enable us to identify the anatomy of health-related mis-and disinformation;
- Further investigation is needed to determine motivated reasons for rumours shifts and the anatomical structures we have identified;
- The scale of mis-and disinformation is unprecedented, as its ability to travel rapidly through social media, with potentially dangerous outcomes for public health globally.

Contact details

Jo.Fox@sas.ac.uk

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