

Navigating Misinformation: The Toll of Fake News on People and Communities in Crises

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the origins of fake news, rumors, and baseless hearsay, and their impact on individuals, their social circles, and crisis cells during periods of crises and emergencies. Using qualitative tools such as participant observation, analysis of virtual content on social media, and semi-directive interviews, we examined the effects of fake news during the Coronavirus pandemic (2020-2022) and the 'Al Haouz' earthquake, which struck rural areas of Marrakech and Taroudant in southern Morocco on September 8th, 2023. The results revealed a significant negative impact from consuming fake news on individuals, their social circles, and crisis cells during these two events. This highlights the necessity to invest in human capital by providing training on how to behave during unexpected events, improving digital rationality to filter fake news, and reinforcing the safety of social media users.

KEYWORDS: Fake news, misinformation, gossips, hearsays, social circle, Social Media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rumors and fake news are common in every aspect of daily life; they are human-made phenomena with many different dimensions and goals. In the modern age, the social practice of spreading rumors and fake news has only increased, especially during periods of crisis and emergency. This rise is largely due to the technological revolution and the free access to information via various communication channels such as the web, TV channels, unreliable news stations, and social media platforms. Some rumors originate from unknown sources, particularly when they aim to guide, influence, or even distort public opinion on a specific issue.

The circulation of rumors and fake news in our social, economic, and political lives is significant because they impact individuals and can mislead them. This is especially true when they are spread during difficult times—such as economic crises, political upheavals, wars, natural disasters, or pandemics. In these situations, the need for trusted information is often compromised by a large volume of fake news, baseless gossip, and illogical hearsay, which many in the community, still reeling from the shock of unusual circumstances, may accept as absolute truth.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the impact of various types of fake news on social life and on the victims of two specific events: the Coronavirus pandemic, which spread nationally in Morocco between 2020 and 2022, and the "Al Haouz" earthquake, which occurred locally on September 8th, 2023. These were two distinct ordeals experienced by Moroccans, resulting in varied social, psychological, and economic consequences.

1.1 Overview on previous studies

In this section, we would like to present some of the most relevant studies related to the construction of fake news and rumors and their impact on the community. Our target is twofold: first, to demonstrate how misinformation is fabricated in several domains, and second, to limit the framework of our study based on the chosen samples and field.

In 2020, Jennifer Jerit and Yangzi Zhao published a review paper titled "Political Misinformation" in the Annual Review of Political Science. The two researchers identify misinformation as an adopted incorrect factual belief. They also assess the empirical literature on political misinformation in the United States, questioning the psychological approach to studying political misinformation and how to correct it. Finally, the study suggests investigating people's factual beliefs to check whether they are genuine or a simple form of partisan patronage in the context of representative democracy.

Eric Mwangi (2023) studies the relationship between technology and fake news, and their role in shaping social, political, and economic perspectives in the advanced age of digital platforms and the democratization of information. The researcher questions the implications of social media algorithms, echo chambers, and information manipulation in spreading fake news. He also discusses

the serious consequences of this practice, such as the erosion of trust, political polarization, and many other economic repercussions. These include how the pursuit of advertising revenue and website traffic can incentivize the production of inaccurate content, which in turn affects market fluctuations, as misinformation is often created to shape the consumptive behavior of customers.

The third suggested study, released in 2022 by Femi Olan, deals with the virtual context. The author investigates fake news on social media and demonstrates its social impact, starting with the 2016 United States presidential election. He examines how fake news affects social values and contributes to changing opinions on many critical issues. According to the researcher, the spread of fake news is implicated in redefining facts, truths, and beliefs, based on a novel conceptual framework. This framework is derived from the literature on fake news, social media, and societal acceptance theory, and is used in combination with a comparative analysis to show a societal divide in the ability to differentiate between fake and true news, as well as differing perspectives on societal values. Finally, the study explains how content on social media can disintegrate society and replace true news with fake news for various reasons and goals.

These proposed studies deal with the theme of fake news on three levels: political, economic, and social. The common issue is the significant impact of the social practice of creating and spreading misleading news and distorting facts to change a political situation, achieve an economic gain, or shape public opinion regarding a particular social issue. Our current work links the creation of fake news to its potential impact on individuals and their life trajectories, especially during periods of crisis and emergency, when the threat from fake news can be a matter of survival for victims.

2. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

2.1 Context of the study

The period of Covid-19 spreading in Morocco was a critical health emergency, marked by an unprecedented increase in fake news circulation regarding the pandemic, its possible complications, and its therapeutic and preventive protocols. In contrast, the “Al Haouz” earthquake was a natural disaster that occurred in remote areas, where the rural population was also affected by fake news, which made their ordeal more difficult to navigate. These two contexts will be studied as models illustrating how fake news impacts individuals and settings during crises and emergencies.

2.2 Methods and Data gathering tools

To study the impact of fake news on individuals and their social circles during these two periods, we have opted for a qualitative approach using three main data gathering techniques: participant observation, analysis of virtual content, and semi-directive interviews.

The participant observation

Participant observation was used as an effective data-gathering tool during the “Al Haouz” earthquake to study the impact of fake news in the context of a devastating natural disaster that resulted in approximately 3,000 deaths and 6,000 injuries. In contrast, this tool could not be applied during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the critical epidemiological situation and lockdown measures.

The analysis of virtual content on Social Media platforms

This tool was used as an alternative because participant observation was not feasible during the Coronavirus pandemic. The analysis examined electronic data (publications, Reels, group chats, photos, stories, user feedback, and interactions) on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. This data covered the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (2000-2022) in Casablanca, Morocco, and the first three weeks of September 2023 following the “Al Haouz” earthquake in the rural areas of Marrakech and Taroudant, Morocco.

The semi-directive interviews

We managed to interview three main categories of participants. The first category included 20 victims of the “Al Haouz” earthquake who had lost at least one family member and suffered serious material damage. The second category consisted of 10 rescuers and members of non-profit organizations who participated in coordinating and organizing rescue operations after the earthquake. Finally, the third category comprised 10 medical staff who were on duty during the COVID-19 pandemic in three different public hospitals in Casablanca.

3. RESULTS PRESENTATION

To present our findings more clearly, we've structured our analysis into two main areas: the origins of fake news during the studied crises and its impact on individuals, their social circles, and crisis response teams.

3.1 The origins of fake news in the periods of crises

Spreading fake news is a social phenomenon with various functions and goals, often focusing on specific or multiple aspects of an ongoing event. The severity of its impact often depends on the significance of that event. Our results indicate three main types of fake news during periods of crisis:

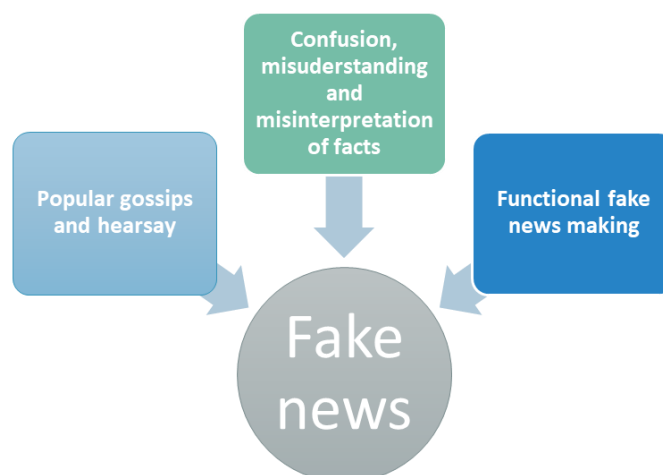


Figure 1: Fake news construction layout

3.1.1 Popular gossips and hearsay

Popular gossip and hearsay are culturally embedded, linked to the local way of life and unique social characteristics. Moroccan society, known for its strong emphasis on socialization, features complex social and familial relationships. These complexities stem not only from the close connections between individuals but also from deeply rooted religious values such as ‘solidarity’, ‘brotherhood’, ‘hospitality’, and ‘religious unity’.

Indeed, these values become particularly visible during times of hardship, when communities feel a strong urge to act on them, often by amplifying news about people in need. This is where the spread of hearsay, frequently shared orally multiple times, often begins. Our results establish a correlation: the more a piece of hearsay is retold, the more errors tend to accumulate. These modifications can be influenced by linguistic practices, the narrator's psychological state, and the receiver's level of engagement.

Consequently, popular fake news can arise from the accumulation of these changes as a message is passed along, as well as from narrators embellishing the news to give it more importance. The following diagram depicts examples of popular gossip and baseless hearsay during the Coronavirus pandemic and the Al Haouz earthquake.

Periods/ Contexts	Gossips and Hearsay ¹	Their classifications	Their purposes
Coronavirus	<i>“...Covid-19 is but a western conspiracy”</i>	Ideological	Canalizing the situation to universal struggle.
	<i>“...Covid-19 is a Godlike punishment”</i>	Religious	Exploiting the ordeal to Reinforce faith and spirituality.
	<i>“...Alternative medicine and substances are an efficient cure”</i>	Cultural	Commercial (Creating the need for demanding alternative medical practices)
“Al Haouz” earthquake	<i>The quake is a manifestation of God's anger.</i>	Religious Social	Combatting immorality
	<i>“...The quake victims are chosen to join heaven”</i>	Occult Religious Cultural	Consoling the families Showing solidarity
	<i>“...Animals anticipate the quakes”</i>	Cultural	Reinforcing the mythical dimension

¹ All the listed fake news, gossips and hearsay are mentioned in the participant observations, included in the analyzed virtual content on social media and pronounced by the interviewed members.

3.1.2 Confusion, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of facts

Confusion, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of facts often stem from a difficulty in correctly reading and perceiving news, especially when it's presented formally. The level of formality significantly impacts how ordinary people receive, decode, and understand the message. Our findings indicate that individuals with lower educational levels, who struggle to grasp official government communications, are often forced to either seek alternative, clearer explanations or make a considerable intellectual effort to process the official versions. Fake news can then emerge as a social construction, born from the cognitive gap between official announcements from trusted channels and the simpler, sometimes less informed, understanding of individuals.

Periods/ Contexts	Cognitive fake news	Their origins	Their purposes
Coronavirus	<i>"...Covid-19 is a fabricated virus"</i>	Misunderstanding of the genetic structure of the virus.	Spreading chaos and frustration.
	<i>"...Covid-19 is an illusion"</i>	The alternative electronic sources.	Reinforcing the conspiracy theory
	<i>"...The invented vaccinations have deadly side-effects or contain spy chips"</i>	Misinterpretation of the revealed laboratory researches about the virus and the possible cure.	Perturbing the researches. Creating panic. Spreading uncertainty.
	<i>"...The victims far outnumber the official announcement"</i>	The confusion regarding statistics.	Spreading chaos and frustration.
"Al Haouz" earthquake	<i>"...The aftershocks are more powerful than the first quake"</i>	Misunderstanding of the archeological explanations.	Urge population to leave the areas for no valid reasons.
	<i>"...The quake is human made disaster"</i>	Misinterpretation of the religious explanations.	Spreading panic.

3.1.3 Functional fake news making

Separately, the deliberate creation of 'functional fake news' is a common tactic to control attitudes towards a specific situation. Here, information is modified or fabricated to suit a particular person, organization, or viewpoint. This practice is widespread in various fields where information is considered a powerful tool for exerting control. In the context of this study, such functional fake news serves two main types of benefit: one personal, and the other organizational.

Periods/ Contexts	Functional made fake news	Their origins	Their purposes
Coronavirus	<i>"...Covid-19 cure is available in the form of some natural mixtures"</i>	Private stores / Traditional healers / E-commerce.	Commercial gain.
	<i>"...There is an available private and safer vaccination for the virus for sale"</i>	Fraudulent content / scam advertising on social media.	Luring clients for potential con transactions.
	<i>"...The virus was fabricated in the Chinese laboratories to destroy the world"</i>	Individuals. Insurance companies.	Political accusation exchanges. for possible financial compensations.

	"...The (X) ² vaccination is the safest one"	The pharmaceutical companies.	Digital marketing.
"Al Haouz" earthquake	"...we are gathering money for the victims, please make a donation to help"	Individuals / non-recognized association / fake charity campaign.	Fraud.

3.2 The impact on the individuals and their social circle

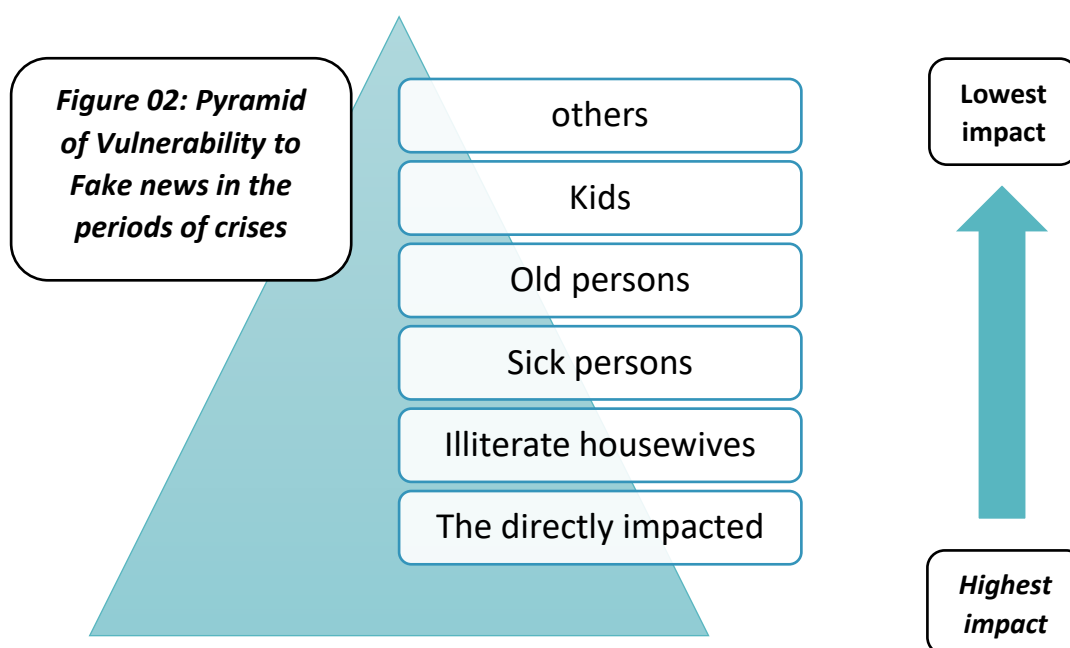
The results have shown a significant negative impact on the individuals, their social circle and the crisis cell as follows:

3.2.1 The impact on victims

The period of these two crises was marked by shock and post-panic, which are entirely natural, human-like emotional responses. However, a lack of certainty about the future, combined with the spread of fake news, gossip, and baseless hearsay, boosted negativity and mistrust between victims and authorities.

The sheer volume of fake news concerning the number of Coronavirus victims is a clear example of how such misinformation can fuel frustration, especially as the reported number of victims changed over time. During the Coronavirus pandemic, the impact of fake news was particularly severe for individuals struggling to get accurate information about their relatives' health status, the duration of lockdowns, and the effectiveness of quarantine measures for the most vulnerable infected people.

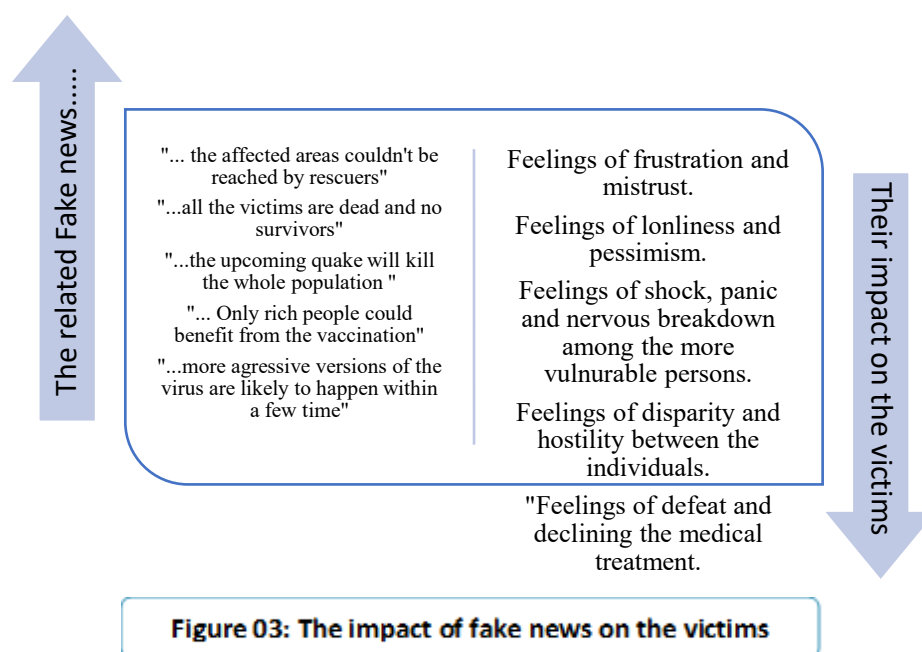
According to the interviewed medical staff, the manifested effects on victims varied depending on gender, age, and cultural level, as illustrated in the following diagram.



According to the medical staff investigated, fake news and misinformation are responsible for slowing down the treatment process. They cause a significant deterioration in the psychological state of patients and victims, who are already dealing with trauma and are further impacted by believing these rumors. This, in turn, complicates the work of doctors and the psychological follow-up required for these individuals.

A similar impact was observed among victims of the Al Haouz disaster. Circulated fake news regarding victim statistics, affected areas, the lack of necessary equipment and rescue teams, and the severity of potential aftershocks all contributed to this. Fake news during crises activates and intensifies various negative feelings, which can lead to serious psychological distress for the victims involved.

² A code for the name of a private vaccine and its company.



3.3 The impact on the victims' social circle

The social circle of victims can also be significantly affected by fake news circulated during periods of crisis. Family members, relatives, and close friends are often the most impacted, as they share the same concerns as the victims. Our results show that these groups actively try to stay updated on the crisis and communicate any news to the victims. However, this behavior can sometimes backfire, as they may rush to obtain and transmit information without sufficiently verifying its reliability.

Guilt is a very common feeling manifested by the victims' social circle during our data-gathering phase. After encountering fake news, they often feel guilty—either for not being able to adequately help their loved ones affected by the crisis, or for inadvertently leading them to wrong solutions based on the misinformation. This, in turn, contributes to the severity of the situation, as the social circle can become worried and skeptical, struggling to distinguish between reliable news and baseless information.

The social circle is often the primary context where victims first express the impact of circulated misinformation. Crucially, it also serves as a potential channel for spreading it further. Popular gossip about the ongoing crisis frequently originates within this social circle, as individuals and their families exchange personal experiences and interpret those of others. The interpretation of these personal experiences can then fuel further misinformation, particularly due to the overgeneralization of individual accounts, especially when they are related to health issues.

3.4 The impact on the crisis cells

Crisis cells are specialized organizations, established and directed by experts, with the primary goal of managing crises effectively using available resources. Within the context of this research, two distinct governmental crisis cells were examined: one for the Coronavirus pandemic and another for the Al Haouz earthquake. The participants investigated, who were direct or indirect members of these cells, were primarily involved with medical care and rescue teams. Analysis of interviews conducted with these individuals reveals a particularly serious impact of fake news during both the Coronavirus period and the Al Haouz earthquake.

All forms of fake news, popular gossip, and baseless interpretations seriously threaten efforts to help victims and minimize crisis damage. Examples range from rumors about hospital inefficiency and shortages of equipment or qualified medical staff, to miscalculations of the needs in areas impacted by natural disasters. Such misinformation forces crisis cells to expend considerable extra effort to control the critical situation and counteract these destructive narratives, on top of their regular duties.

Interviewees also consider combating misinformation one of the most serious challenges they face, particularly during health crises and natural disasters. This is because the population often gets confused between limited official factual announcements and the vast amount of randomly circulated information. The complexity for crisis cells lies in maintaining a balance between communicating reliable data, correcting false interpretations, and actively combating the deliberate creation of 'functional fake news'.

4. FINDINGS DISCUSSION

The obtained results can be interpreted at two different levels, the first one is related to the understanding of the fake news construction as a social practice, the second one deals with how to minimize their impact, particularly in the period of crises.

4.1 Understanding the fake news construction as a social practice

In the previous section, we showed the three different classifications of fake news, along with their dimensions and goals. The challenge here is to clarify and explain the process by which fake news becomes enmeshed with social structures to achieve its strong impact, especially during unstable periods when calming public opinion is a crucial step in crisis management. In the practical phase, we observed how individuals interact with virtual content on various social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram). We noticed that news consumption significantly increases during crises, as the public's need for detailed information becomes more pronounced. For example, during the lockdown—a preventive measure against the pandemic's spread—individuals accessed social media networks for three main reasons: first, to get detailed information about the pandemic, its severity, and instructions to prevent further infections; second, to express and share their personal experiences with the lockdown, its drawbacks, and their health conditions; and third, simply to pass the time, as they had little else to occupy their free hours and thus replaced face-to-face communication with virtual interaction.

After analyzing virtual content related to both the lockdown periods and the Al Haouz earthquake, we found that circulated myths about the pandemic and the natural disaster increased significantly as users spent more time sharing and interacting with every single publication on these two subjects. By analyzing these publications (posts, Reels, group chats, photos, stories, users' feedback, and interactions), we established a connection between the encountered myths about the two subjects (the pandemic and the earthquake) and the degree of language formality. Essentially, the lower the language formality, the more problematic or inaccurate the myth tended to be. This suggests that the creation of fake news and misinformation is closely linked to the users' literacy and educational levels.

4.2 Investing in the human capital

Human capital is the central issue in this study. Humans are the ones who create, consume, and spread news. Individuals lacking critical thinking skills cannot be positive actors in combating fake news or establishing a personal intellectual shield against falsified news and misleading opinions. Worse, they can become negative actors during crises—precisely when the community needs them most to help establish a peaceful and appropriate atmosphere for crisis cells to operate effectively.

Investing in human capital begins with combating intellectual ignorance. This involves not only enhancing formal education but also boosting the development of social critical thinking. Efforts should focus on social organizations such as non-profit organizations, youth centers, and associations. These entities typically engage with children, teenagers, and young people. The methods adopted must aim to develop social skills in parallel with personal ones. By incorporating effective social interactive strategies, individuals can learn to behave differently, equipped with instructions on how to process information, analyze it, and critique it according to different circumstances. The activities of these social organizations must also include training on how to deal with crises at all levels, particularly the communicative and psychological ones.

✓ Communicative Level:

Training at the communicative level can include developing skills such as discourse deconstruction—understanding its various dimensions and classifying it according to its current context. This would build better immunity against the creation of fake news during crises and minimize the effects of circulated misinformation by hindering its spread. Furthermore, it would help the social circle dispel myths related to unexpected phenomena. Instructed members could then help raise community awareness about the necessity of being skeptical of illogical interpretations and baseless opinions while seeking more detailed and reliable sources of information.

✓ Psychological Level:

Psychological training can focus on individual self-reinforcement by building self-confidence, boosting optimistic thinking, and teaching ways to provide psychological support to one's social circle. Individuals' behavior would certainly be more aligned with the demands of a crisis if they are better prepared to stay calm, focused, and capable of making appropriate decisions for themselves and for the more vulnerable members of their social circle. This can only happen if training targets the development of stronger psychometric capacities, specifically on how to proceed during difficult times.

4.3 Suggested ways of dealing with fake news

In this section, we will present three main strategies for addressing disinformation, baseless rumors, and hearsay during pandemics and natural disasters. These strategies are based on key conclusions drawn from our investigations.

The most dangerous aspect of fake news is that it acts like a 'snowball': once a piece of fake news is created, its interpretations, modifications, and extensions generate further misinformation, hearsay, and gossip. This ultimately leads to the creation of myths and misleading concepts. Individuals are often victims, but they can also become unintentionally involved, either by creating myths or by reinforcing them through belief in their reliability.

Therefore, investing in human capital and fostering what could be termed 'intellectual digital rationality' appears crucial. This is essential for combating the acceptance and spread of fake news. Simultaneously, improving the safety of social media users by developing and strengthening algorithms designed to filter potentially dangerous fake news is also vital.

The second significant point is that the majority of users perceive circulated virtual content as correct and reliable, especially videos and Reels, which receive record levels of interaction and sharing—often without much attention paid to their reliability or credibility. Our interpretation suggests that the ongoing transition from traditional, official sources of information (mass media) to new-age digital platforms is a key reason why user-created social media content is often accepted as official or reliable.

Individuals who previously obtained official information from governmental TV channels and official radio stations suddenly found themselves consuming vast amounts of online content created by ordinary people. However, for many, this content still felt official or at least reliable. This electronic transition requires more time for this category of users to learn to distinguish between official and private sources. The technological revolution has, in effect, created 'citizen journalists' out of ordinary individuals. The possession of a mobile phone and an internet connection allows everyday people to create their own content and claim it is authentic, trustworthy, and freshly recorded. These three perceived elements then encourage users to consume the content with high expectations for 'hot' or breaking information.

Technological development, particularly regarding new-age social media, has created free virtual spaces that can be easily exploited for fake news creation and the spread of myths surrounding current events. While users are actively seeking information, they often implicitly contribute to myth-making by sharing a huge amount of this unverified content.

4.4 Investing in the intellectual digital rationality

We've previously mentioned that many new media users find the rapid technological changes challenging. This difficulty, combined with digital illiteracy, threatens the benefits of open and free access to various information sources, particularly social media platforms.

According to our observations, digital illiteracy has two main negative effects:

1. It prevents individuals from developing critical thinking skills. These skills are needed to assess online content and distinguish reliable sources from suspicious ones.
2. Misinterpreting news can lead to new myths and wrong judgments. This, in turn, can mislead public opinion and cause widespread confusion.

To foster better digital understanding and rationality, a key starting point is making an effort to suggest appropriate content in users' personal timelines. This requires full cooperation from platform developers, even if it means prioritizing this over advertising revenue that might come from promoting questionable content through sponsorship. The need to prioritize user protection over the financial gains from sponsored content would certainly help prevent the spread of fake news, especially when it's embedded in sponsored commercial material during crises.

4.5 Improving the safety of social media users

Virtual safety is crucial for combating fake news on social media platforms. Developers are continually working to improve the user experience, especially for children and adolescents. However, they still need to be more effective at restricting sources of fake news that can be potentially dangerous for the user community.

We suggest developing and strengthening algorithms to filter potentially threatening content. This would only be effective if the algorithms' linguistic databases are constantly updated, particularly with words, phrases, and expressions related to current events. Algorithms must also be designed to detect tricky linguistic strategies used to convey false meanings. This includes tactics like combining or mixing special characters and numbers into the content (for example, changing "...the pandemic will last for ten years at least" to "...the pan.demic will last 4 10years @ least," or "...the new vaccine will kill us all" to "... the new vaccine wil k_i_l_l us all").

External links should also be analyzed before they are displayed on users' timelines. At the very least, platforms could consider providing a small preview of external links before users click through to potentially suspicious sources.

Finally, we suggest placing stricter restrictions on accounts that have a history of platform policy violations, especially those known for spreading fabricated news. This could include making warning labels more visible on their personal accounts.

5. CONCLUSION

The creation of fake news is a complex social practice with deep sociocultural dimensions, making it difficult to avoid entirely. However, its impact can cause irreversible damage, especially during natural disasters, health emergencies, and other unexpected events that affect the population. These situations demand a high degree of rationality to help people overcome the hardships they endure. This study focused on two major crises—the Coronavirus pandemic and the "Al Haouz" earthquake—to analyze the impact of fake news, gossip, rumors, and misinformation related to these emergencies. Our objective was to identify the origins of such baseless and falsified news, understand its impact on individuals and their social circles, and explore possible ways to prevent it or at least minimize its negative effects.

In the context of this study, we identified three main classifications of fake news:

1. Popular gossip and hearsay: These are often spontaneous and rooted in sociocultural contexts.

2. Confusion, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of facts: These are frequently linked to an "intellectual gap" or lack of critical understanding.

3. Functional fake news: This is deliberately created by individuals or organizations to serve specific political, ideological, or economic purposes.

A common issue across these classifications is the significant impact they have on individuals and their social environments, particularly during periods of crisis and emergency. In the final part of our results discussion, we outlined several potential solutions to avoid or reduce this negative impact. These include investing in human capital by providing training on appropriate crisis behavior, as well as fostering "intellectual digital rationality" to enable individuals to distinguish between reliable and irrational content. Finally, we provided useful insights to strengthen and improve the safety of social media users, such as continually updating the algorithms that process linguistic data and imposing more restrictions on suspicious accounts and inappropriate content.

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