Social Media "Infodemic" : Misinformation and Racism

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1 Introduction

Technology in the form of websites and applications that enable people to network socially and share information is broadly termed as "social media". Social media is an integral part of our everyday life and is an important factor in how we spread and consume information. It has the potential to spread information at an astonishing speed, much like a viral infection that can spread from person to person. This viral nature of the spread of information on social media has significant positive and negative impacts on our lives. The coronavirus situation has triggered a unique phenomenon on social media called an "infodemic". This term refers to an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not. This infodemic has allowed misinformation to flourish, creating an environment of heightened uncertainty that has fuelled anxiety and racism in person and online [1]. Social media can be described as a digital space comprised of an assemblage of algorithms, software, hardware, humans, and institutions. This complex assemblage shapes how we consume and circulate information, and these patterns of consumption and circulation affect a variety of social groups in different ways. In this essay, I analyze how the patterns of consumption and circulation of information on social media affect certain racial and ethnic groups, and what role these cultural practices of consumption play in the spread of hateful and false information. Several Asians are facing outright racism and harassment. The racism fuelled by misinformation has resulted in discrimination against Asians in very ridiculous circumstances. I essentially adopt a sociological imagination in order to effectively analyze both individuals and society. C. Wright. Mills defined sociological imagination as "the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society" [2]. History is an important element of sociological imagination. Hence, a study of the social structures and norms that existed during outbreaks in the past, and their evolution, would prove insightful. I also examine how the infodemic has indicated the need for us to revisit some social norms which constitute the digital culture of social media, and their differences with the physical culture of expression and information sharing.

2   Social Media as a Digital Space

A "space" is where various actors come together and interact. A digital space is one that exists on the internet. Social media provides a virtual space on the internet for actors to come together and interact. Thus, social media is a digital space. This digital space is an assemblage of various components such as computer algorithms, electronic devices, human beings, and their acts of communicative behavior, and institutions. Each of these components interact with one another giving rise to the experience of social media technology that we know of today. The computer algorithms that are deployed in social media technology require information as an input. Much of this information for the algorithms is generated by the users, through their activities and interactions on the platform. Users also share information among themselves. Thus, information can be considered as an underlying element of the social media digital space. Similar introspection into the actors of any space will reveal that information is an underlying element of all spaces [3]. The social and material components of the assemblage such as social norms and electronic devices give rise to socio-material practices. These socio-material practices impact the communicative behavior, sharing, and consumption of information. Social media as a digital space, and its role in the spread of misinformation can be fully understood by analyzing its various components, and their interactions.

In a digital space, there also exists a "digital culture". The digital culture is the way of life of people in the digital space [4]. The set of values, practices, beliefs, and behavior constitute the digital culture. The digital culture of social media has evolved out of the complex interactions between the various elements of the assemblage [4]. A very good example is the "like" culture on Facebook. The algorithms that implemented the "like" feature enabled people to effortlessly express their liking for information shared by others. This straightforward manner of expression was very encouraging, and it soon developed into a culture of "liking" each other's information. However, the tendency of people to express like or dislike about certain information is not new. People share and express opinions even in physical spaces. Social media provides a space for the kind of interactions that also occur in physical spaces. But, since social media provides a platform for expression and opinion that can have a far greater outreach, it is now a primary choice for sharing expression and opinion. The culture of "liking" has thus emerged from both offline and online spaces [5]. The digital culture of social media plays an important role in the socio-material practices of consumption and sharing of information. The coronavirus infodemic highlights certain aspects of the social media digital culture, such as the social norms of how and why people should be held accountable for what they say. These norms and their implications are examined in Section 6.

3   A Technological Perspective

The computer algorithms, software, and hardware that drive social media are an important component of the assemblage which forms the digital space. From a purely technological perspective, an important factor that contributes to the spread of information on social media is its architecture, and the algorithms that drive it. Professor Bergstrom, a biologist

at the University of Washington aptly says, "What goes viral does not have to do with what is true, but rather what is 'shocking'. On the one hand, kudos to them for doing that. On the other hand, the problem exists in an ecosystem of their making" [6].

Social media is an important venue for users to exercise freedom of speech in the digital space. Social media companies themselves have recognized their role in providing platforms for free speech. For example, in a September hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, referred to Twitter as a "digital public square", emphasizing the importance of "free and open exchange" on the platform [7]. However, social media as a free-speech platform can be misused for sharing hateful and false information. In response to false speech, social media platforms have certain content removal policies. But at the same time it is possible that platforms unfairly remove potentially valuable and legitimate speech. To complicate matters, what is appropriate and inappropriate is subject to various cultural and political factors. The coronavirus infodemic has revealed the urgent need for better technologies to proactively identify and remove inappropriate content.

4   The Evolution of Information Sharing Practices

C. Wright Mills argued that history is an important element in sociological imagination. The different historical events have shaped modern society as a whole and each individual within it. It allows a person to see where their life is compared to others, based on past experiences. Mills argues that one can only truly understand themselves if they can truly understand their circumstances [8]. Thus, I shall venture to examine the mediums and culture of information sharing in the past, how they differ from the present, and how the present digital culture is shaped by past experiences.

Discrimination against certain populations during outbreaks of disease is not new. Disease, after all, instills fear, and this fear fosters discrimination. During the 1853 yellow-fever epidemic in the United States, European immigrants, who were perceived to be more vulnerable to the disease, were the primary targets. During the SARS outbreak, which originated in China, East Asians were the targets. When the Ebola outbreak emerged in 2014, Africans were targeted [9].

4.1   Social media and Sociality

There is an obvious difference in how information was circulated in past outbreaks compared to the present. In the past, the modes of communication were word of mouth, letters, and newspapers. Information spreads by word of mouth only when people physically get to meet each other, and hence, it was highly unlikely for a person in China to share some information with a person in the USA, in a short period. However, present digital technology has revolutionized the mode of communication and introduced new mediums that create new communication patterns and rules. These changes impact the social spaces within which we interact, and introduce different kinds of sociality [10]. Sociality is the tendency of individuals to form groups and interact [11]. The way we make friends and form groups on social media is different from physical spaces.

Social media is the primary platform in which news of local and world events is gathered and shared. Our knowledge of the world is now digitally mediated. We share and receive news in a multitude of ways - online news platforms, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and Whatsapp messages [12]. Although information sharing has always occurred, these platforms enable the sharing and consumption of information at an unbelievable rate and in enormous quantity. More importantly, they have introduced new ideas of what it means to be social. Jeffrey explained how social media gives rise to practices of communication and coordination across different actors. The actors can participate in networking and mobilization, in spite of being in different circumstances and situations. Jeffrey called this the "Logic of Networking" [13]. Such rapid networking enables organized misinformation campaigns that can quickly enlist a large number of people even though its beliefs and claims are questionable. For example, a viral WeChat rumor claimed that a particular Chinese restaurant in Canada employed someone with COVID-19 and that health officials had closed the restaurant. The restaurant lost 80 percent of its revenue [14]. However, the claims were false and the restaurant owner and staff were badly affected. It got so bad that the owner asked for special permission to post articles around the mall hoping to fight the lie [15].

The practices of consumption and the spread of information in the present world is indeed very different from the past. Even though prejudice exists in both times, social media facilitates a collective sense of prejudice which can spread farther and quicker. The technology of social media has thus provided a new way of interaction, and information sharing, which magnifies the spread of stereotypes and social divisions.

4.2   History's role in the acceptance of information

It is interesting to observe how past events shape the present practices of consumption and acceptance of information. Mills had argued that different historical events have shaped modern society as a whole and each individual within it [8]. Certain claims and beliefs may seem more likely (though not necessarily true), due to certain incidents and prejudices in the past. For example, since there have been disease outbreaks that originated from China in the past which severely impacted several countries including the USA, many people are hasty in laying blame on China for the COVID-19 situation. The US National Security advisor said, "We've had five plagues from China in the last 20 years. We've had SARS, avian flu, swine flu, COVID-19 now, and how long can the world put up with this terrible public health situation that you've got in the People's Republic of China that is being unleashed on the world"[16]. Although the fact that the coronavirus originated from China may be true, the past circumstances and experiences play a role in what kind of information we choose to believe. The stereotypes that prevailed during past outbreaks re-emerge and very quickly mobilize a large number of people on social media. Donald Trump, the president of the U.S.A repeatedly called the coronavirus a "Chinese Virus". He later made it clear that he had no intention of being racist, and that he only wanted to be accurate that the virus geographically comes from China [17]. However, when the terms that are used directly connect a particular racial or ethnic group with a disease, the link between the two entities is reinforced. If these links are already based on existing historical tropes, then they are very easily reinforced and maintained [18]. For example, in 1884, the Royal Commission on

Chinese Immigration claimed, "The Chinese quarters are the filthiest and most disgusting places in Victoria, overcrowded hotbeds of disease and vice, disseminating fever and polluting the air all around". Yet, the commissioners were aware that such conditions were caused by poverty and had nothing to do with race. Despite this, the public continued to connect the disease with the race. The commission even accused the Chinese of spreading leprosy in the region, but physicians interviewed by the commission declared never to have seen a case of leprosy amongst them [19]. During the coronavirus pandemic, these stereotypes of the Chinese being dirty and uncivilized have re-emerged, this time on social media [20].

In most circumstances of discrimination, Asians who were victims of discrimination had not even traveled to China or Asia. In an incident in California, an Asian American student was attacked by bullies at school who accused him of having coronavirus. The student was accused of carrying the coronavirus simply because he was Asian-American [21]. Robin Toma of the L.A. County Human Relations Commission referred to this incident and said, "Many may be quick to assume that just because someone is Asian or from China that somehow they are more likely to be carriers of the virus"[21].

5   Through the Lens of Race and Ethnicity

Participation and interaction on social media platforms are shaped by various societal factors. One of the first steps towards social media participation is creating an identity (profile) on the platform. According to Boyd and Ellison, social media users deliberately construct online representations of themselves and engage in impression management [22]. These identities are, if not directly, indirectly related to physical identities. Since one's physical identity is inevitably tied to social markers such as race, ethnicity, caste, class, etc, the corresponding online identities also develop a similar overtone. However, as Foldy explained, online identities are not constant. They are fluid and frequently change with experiences and interactions in the digital space [23]. Social media provides a platform for people to project their identities to other participants. Identity is primarily conveyed by posting images, videos, etc which are accessible to a chosen group of participants [24]. Social media offers users a choice of who they can share information with and how. For example, Facebook users can select who can see their posts - Everybody, friends of friends, friends, or a particular set of people. These choices determine the flow of information through the network of users. But what are the grounds on which these choices are made? And how do these choices determine the formation of networks on social media?

Initially, networks on social networking sites are formed from pre-existing social relations, and are used to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections [22]. Almost every user can recall searching for someone they know on social networking sites. These relationships may be weak ties, but typically there is some common offline element among individuals who friend one another, such as a shared class at school or a colleague at work [22] [25].

The choice of friends however is not random. As Boyd explained, personal social media networks tend to be rather homogeneous as people are more likely to befriend those like them. Taste and aesthetics play a major role in like-mindedness. People who have similar tastes are more likely to become friends [26]. Social networking sites provide many ways

for users to express their tastes - sharing pictures, videos, music, and mentioning details on their respective profiles. By expressing their tastes on the platform, users reach out to like-minded people and build networks.

Sociologists refer to the practice of connecting with like-minded people as "homophily". Homophily is strongly visible in the U.S.A along racial and ethnic lines. Boyd studied the factors of race and class which contribute to choices made on social networking sites and explained that tastes are not developed randomly, but are shaped by race and class. They serve as a marker of distinction [26]. Thus, when participants on social media self-segregate based on taste, they invariable self segregate based on race. This self-segregation results in the formation of homogeneous networks in terms of race [26]. Thus, some information that is shared and consumed in such a network is shaped by race.

Jeffrey's Logic of Networking is a good explanation for the spread of information in these networks [13]. People from different physical locations can contribute to the spread of misinformation. When different networks are formed based on race, there is the possibility of sharing information (within the network) regarding that particular race, or a particular race that is disliked by the members of the network. This pattern of organization makes it possible to spread information against a particular community. For example, misinformation that Asians are more likely to carry the coronavirus just because of their race, and that they must be dealt with could spread in groups mainly comprising of non-Asians. This leads to a collective sense of prejudice that can mobilize non-Asians against the Asian community.

The racial overtone of the information shared on social media is also evident in the kind of language that is used. President Donald Trump calling the coronavirus a 'Chinese Virus' is a good example. Even though he clarified that he did not intend to be racist, the term was used by many on social media, in a racist manner. As Lindman and Jerome put it, "The intent matters less than the effect" [17]. Other instances reveal that references to Chinese culture were used to convey racist intent. An analysis by Al Jazeera found more than 10,000 posts on Twitter that included the term "kung-flu" during March alone. Thousands sought to employ it to describe the virus or to antagonize users who were offended by its use. Other posts employing racist and offensive language such as "chop fluey" and "rice rabies" were also visible on social media [27].

The racism exhibited online has a significant impact on the normal functioning of physical spaces. The hostility that is created on social media has spilled out in the offline world. There have been many instances of people being misled by misinformation on social media, and carrying out acts of violence [18]. Such actions are a distraction from the actual problem, which is the coronavirus. The fear of discrimination might prevent Asians from seeking treatment immediately. The disruption of discipline and health practices makes it harder for society to fight the virus. Natalia Molina, a professor of history and American studies at the University of Southern California explains, " If you're afraid of getting sick and the race is the organizing principle for how you view the disease, then you're going to be more concerned about where you go and who you're around rather than following standard health practices. And even more significantly, for those who feel targeted, they're going to be less likely to speak out if they get sick or go get treatment. They're going to be less likely to go to a free clinic and get vaccinated. They're going to be less likely to report something that they have seen" [28]. The effects of flouting health practices and the lowering of vigilance will result in increased infection, and will have dire consequences on society. Hence, what

started as a racial slur (misinformation or rumor) on social media can significantly impact several other people who may or may not have anything to do with racism or social media. Thus, there is the possibility of the digital space impacting the physical space. This reveals the invisible connection between non-social media users and the digital space of social media. Persons who may not use social media can potentially affect, and be affected by social media. Thus, one can argue that they are also an element in the complex assemblage of the social media digital space.

On one hand, social media facilitates mobilization of people against a certain community, but on the other hand it can be used by the victims to fight back and speak up against racism. Asians are using social media to organize and fight back. #WashTheHate, #RacismIsAVirus, and #IAmNotCOVID19 are some famous hashtags that were used to fight back against racially motivated attacks during the pandemic. In this case, the "Logic of Networking" has led to what Jeffrey calls the "Logic of Aggregation". The mobilization of users of social media by the "Logic of Networking" has enabled the aggregation of people in physical spaces to protest against the ongoing racism.

6   Social Norms in Digital Spaces

The social norms, values, and beliefs in the digital space constitute its digital culture. The coronavirus infodemic has indicated the need to revisit some social norms such as how and why people should be held accountable for what they say. The infodemic has revealed a "post-truth" aspect of digital culture where subjective opinions and unverified claims rival valid scientific and biomedical facts just because of their public influence. The need for evidence to support reasoned arguments becomes downplayed, while at the same time, the social norm concerning how and why people should be held accountable for what they say is weakened [14]. Many a time, users choose to say certain things on social media which they would not say in a physical space. One of the reasons for this is the possible anonymity on social media. A person can racially discriminate on social media while hiding his/her identity. This gives them hopes of possibly getting away with what they have done. However, a person would surely be taken to task immediately for racist behavior in physical spaces. Hence, the social norm of how we hold people accountable for what they say is different in the digital space as compared to the physical space. Consequently, this reveals the differences in the digital culture and the physical culture.

7   Conclusion

The essay examined the role of social media in the spread of misinformation, racism, and xenophobia online. Social media was described as a digital space comprising of an assemblage of computer algorithms, human beings (including their interactions and communicative behavior), and institutions. This digital space was examined through the lens of race and ethnicity in the context of American society. A purely technical perspective revealed the role of computer algorithms in the spread of information, whether true or false. Social media companies are constantly modifying their policies to eliminate misinformation and hate

speech, but the coronavirus infodemic on social media shows the need to do better. A sociological imagination was adapted to effectively analyze the relationship between an individual and a wider society in the digital space. The analysis revealed how the network effects of social media can be used to effectively mobilize people on racial lines. This was explained using Jeffrey's "Logic of Networking". Lastly, the social norms of the digital culture of social media were examined, and the differences with the social norms of physical spaces were analyzed. The analysis indicated the need for us to reconsider the norms of how and why people should be accountable for what they say.

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