

The COVID-19 aka Coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China, in late December has now spread to 212 countries, areas and territories in the world.¹ In India, the first case reported on 30 January 2020, in Thrissur district of Kerala. The WHO (World Health Organisation) announced the outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020; and in India, it was announced as an epidemic in more than a dozen states invoking the Epidemics Diseases Act, 1897. On 22 March, India observed a 14-hour voluntary 'Janta Curfew' or public curfew, which was followed by a 21-day lockdown of the entire nation as announced by the Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. As on 30 April 2020, India has 23,651 active cases and has reported 1,074 deaths.² It is essential to look into government efforts and how the media has helped in reaching out to millions of citizens with minute-to-minute updates in this regard.

Government's Efforts Against Coronavirus

"Extraordinary times require extraordinary solutions", are the words of the Indian PM Modi, which resonates, with the current situation of the country where every individual has to participate in fighting it. One of the first efforts was to reach out to the most affected countries and learn from their experiences of dealing with the COVID19 pandemic situation. In this regard, PM Modi held interaction with the Heads of India's Embassies and the High Commissions worldwide via Video Conferencing on 30 March 2020.³ As one of the primary precautionary measures, the WHO guidelines suggest that people maintain social distancing and ensuring a complete lockdown. To get the feedback on the follow-up of the WHO guidelines, PM Modi interacts with various stakeholders, including the Governors of the States, the Chief Ministers, and the Health Ministers via telephone as well as Video Conferencing, daily.⁴

On the rise in the number of cases, the Ministry of Railways and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has come forward to provide health care infrastructure. The MoD reviewed separate hospitals and identified few to exclusively deal with the COVID-19 and ensured the availability of more than 9,000 such hospitals. Over 1,000 evacuees from different countries are kept in quarantine at different facilities in Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Chennai, Manesar, Hindan, and Mumbai, till the end of their quarantine period by 07 April 2020.⁵ To meet the requirements regarding the healthcare infrastructure facility, the Ministry of Railways came out with one of the most innovative solutions by converting the passenger coaches into the isolation coaches within the phased manner. Out of 20,000 coaches, such conversion of the first batch of 5,000 coaches has started. The Indian Railways has been running the "Special Parcel Trains" to ensure the continuous supply of essential services like edibles and medicines.⁶ Similarly, on 01 April 2020, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has transported

approximately 25 tonnes of medical supplies from Delhi, Surat, Chandigarh to Manipur, Nagaland, and the Union Territories (UTs) of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and Ladakh.⁷

Individually, all ministries have been making efforts to contribute to dealing with the situation of COVID-19. For instance, the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (MoH&FW) has collaborated with the Ministry of Textiles, and different stakeholders to monitor the requirement of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), masks and ventilators. Also, through collective efforts with various stakeholders, the MoH&FW is tracing people who came in contact with the COVID-19 affected individuals, ensuring not to miss any case as per the containment strategy. In the endeavour to ensure timely redressal of grievances during the times of COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of State for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions has launched Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievance's (DARPG) "National Monitoring Dashboard or NMD" on "COVID-19 Grievances" on 01 April 2020. The NMD would record COVID-19 related grievances received on CPGRAMS⁸ linked with all Ministries/Departments of States/Union Territories (UTs). The DARPG has developed this dashboard in pursuance of the recommendations of the Empowered Group of Officers 10 constituted under the Disaster Management Act (DMA) 2005 on the Public Grievances and Suggestions to ensure timely implementation of COVID-19 Response Activities.⁹

Media's Role during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amidst of lockdown situation and social distancing, the role of media, including print media, is immense in every form. The media has formed various public discussions on COVID-19 and helped in disseminating information to a broader section of the people. The media has ensured that the discourse shall focus on the concerns related to the current situation and trends. Through various mediums, it ensures to give awareness to the public on the spread of Coronavirus, and the measures being undertaken by the government against its transmission.¹⁰ For example, through several effective mediums, such as the airing of PM Modi's *Mann ki Baat*, addressing on issues related to COVID-19 and current situation, which are thus accessible to the remotest and rural areas.¹¹ It gathers, processes and disseminates the information in the form of news as the "one-way" daily delivery system. However, as the flip side of the coin, each media house has the preferred audience to reach out. Therefore, there are differences in reporting of COVID-19 related issues by several media platforms.



Image 1. PIB’s dashboard displaying information on COVID-19 [source: pib.gov.in]

The media wings of various ministries have a task to create immediate content and therefore act on minute-to-minute events. For example, information dashboards are placed on to the several government website/web portals such as “My Government” *mygov.in*, Press Information Bureau’s *pib.gov.in*, which provides necessary information on the situation of COVID-19.

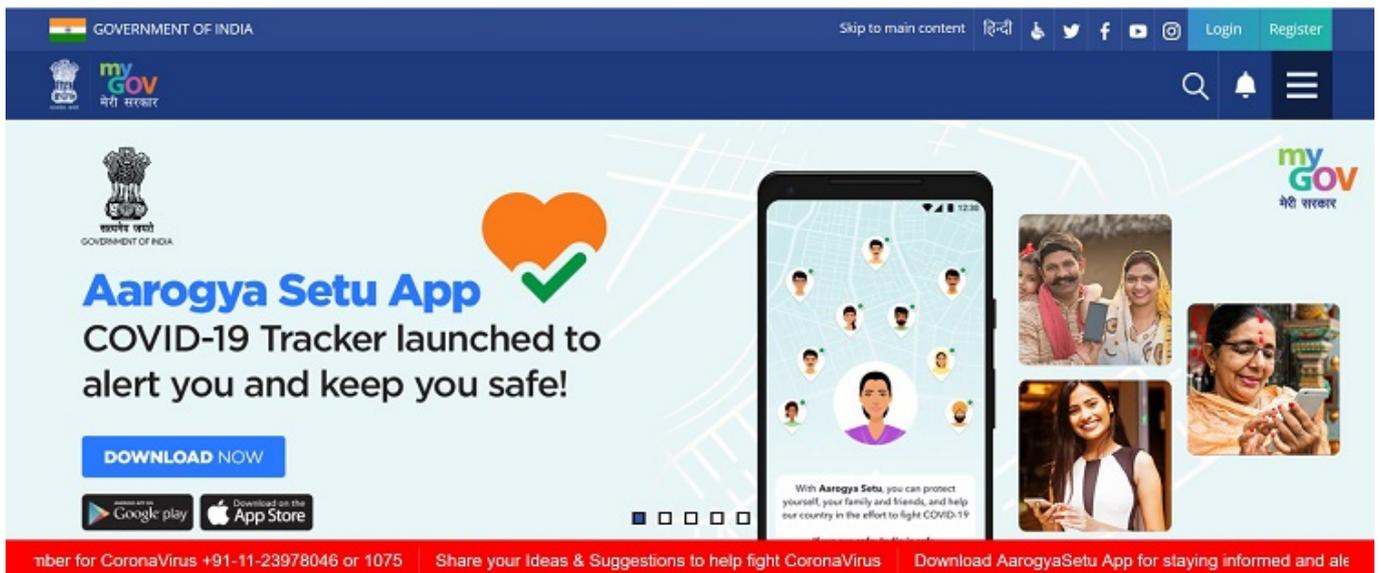


Image 2. My Gov’s dashboard displaying information on ‘Aarogya Setu App’ [source: mygov.in]

The awareness spread through the Internet (web portals), FM radio, News channels, and other means, enables people to correctly understand and effectively comply with the guidelines issued by the government to deal with the situation of COVID-19. On media platforms, many reporters talk about the current situation and project the course of actions and efforts. For example, videos titled “*How India is doing in the Battle against Coronavirus?*” and “*COVID-19 Can India Flatten the Curve?*”¹² are two of many such cases.

Media plays a crucial role about informing the audience about issues and concerns prevalent in the society as well as how one could further make predictions and work towards the solutions. It played an immense role to demonstrate acts of solidarity to ensure hope and spirit in these times. In his recent address to the nation, PM Modi had urged its fellow citizens to light candles and lamps on 05 April 2020, at 09 pm for 09 minutes, as a mark of solidarity with the healthcare and security forces who are agile on the line of duty. The message brings up hope and motivation among citizens to act and fight together against COVID-19, and enormous numbers of people acted in solidarity. The Union Environment Minister, Prakash Javadekar appreciated PM Modi’s call as a “*big message of unity in the country*”.¹³

Nevertheless, the media does not act as a homogeneous institution; it has numerous operators from national to regional levels. They work with different objectives and motivations, which, therefore, presents diverse opinions and perceptions. Few media reports strongly opposed PM’s call on the lighting of lamps and candles, as an act to hide the inefficiencies of the government concerning rising cases or migrant’s exodus.¹⁴ Another example where several media reporters projected the ‘un-real’ insecurities among Indian Muslims while covering news on the rise in the number of Coronavirus cases in India due to the gathering held by Tablighi Jamaat in early March 2020.¹⁵ The earlier role of media in delivering one-way information has changed. In the digital era, the web-enabled media interaction is a powerful tool, where both media reports and audiences are active participants. Due to the vast availability of the Internet, the interactions could easily reach a vast audience instantly and make them active participants in the interaction. Nevertheless, such interactions, at times create propaganda while representing personal opinions and beliefs.

Social Media’s Role during COVID-19 Pandemic

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, which did not exist or barely existed during the past major outbreaks, have enabled us to stay connected in these times of “social distancing”. These platforms have enabled connectivity and helped individuals

psychologically in times of isolation. Even though it cannot replace “in-person” contact, but it has helped people across the world staying more resilient and connected. Various organizations such as WHO and the initiatives taken by the Head of States of different countries on using the social media platforms are essential to creating awareness and guiding their citizens to keep safe and agile in the times of crises.

Fake News and COVID-19 Pandemic

*“False stories that appear to be news, spread on the **Internet** or using other **media**, usually created to influence political views or as a joke”. - “Fake News” defined in Cambridge Dictionary¹⁶*

Amid the various measures being taken from social distancing to travel bans to self-quarantines, something has flown ‘farther, faster, deeper and wider’- the Fake News. In his address at the *Munich Security Conference* on 15 February 2020, the Director-General of the WHO— Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasised that-¹⁷

*“We are not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an **infodemic**. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus [Coronavirus], and it is just as dangerous”.*

In the on-going situation, the fake stories about Coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic are being labelled as “infodemic”. In the digital era, where social media acts as an equal participant to spread information and shape perceptions, has reported biasedly with content expressing hatred against the Chinese community and their eating habits. This misinformation and sensationalism have created fears and anxiety in the minds of millions. Amnesty International has warned against such kind of discrimination and anti-Chinese or anti-Asian xenophobia.¹⁸ In India, hatred-related incidents have also been reported. For example, a woman from Manipur was attacked in Delhi’s North Campus area, where a man spat on her and called her ‘Corona’.¹⁹

Numerous studies and projects are on board to study the rise and consequences of such information. In India, Guru Kashi University (Punjab) has initiated a project on the analysis of sentiments been expressed over Twitter accounts about Coronavirus. A Delhi-based digital lab— *Voyager Infosec* examined more than 30,000 clips circulated within a week after Tablighi Jamaat incident. The investigation suggested a pattern under which the “disinformation campaign” aimed and targeted the Indian Muslim community.²⁰ Earlier majority of fake news which talked about the false cures or expert tips did not have religious overtones, however, after the Tablighi Jammam incident, there is a sudden upsurge in

“Islamophobic” fake content on social media, according to Rakesh Dubbudu, the founder of the fact-checking website, the factly.²¹

Steps Taken to Curb Fake News both in Media and Social Media

Fake news consists of useless, incorrect, or may be harmful information, which can harm the public health response and incite a social disorder, further, leading to a law & order situation. During the lockdown period, the Maharashtra Cyber Cell registered 115 cases against individuals for their alleged involvement in spreading fake news and hate speeches. The government of Maharashtra had issued an advisory explaining ‘dos and don’ts’ regarding the fake news and rumours related to Coronavirus pandemic.²² In a similar situation of ‘infodemic’ in Assam, police registered 52 cases in which 25 people were arrested for spreading fake news over social media and instant messaging applications. The Cyber Cell and police force are ensuring that no rumour or fake newsmonger is left unpunished.²³

The Government of India (GoI) approached the Supreme Court to “prevent fake and inaccurate reporting” in media, as the spread of fake news could create further panic in these times of crises in the society. The Supreme Court, however, declined to interfere with media’s free speech and expression to discuss the various issues, but at the same time urged media to “maintain a strong sense of responsibility”. For example, due to China’s control over its media, the reporting of the initial phases of the outbreak of COVID-19 was not shared with international media partners. However, the Indian media has a more significant role in these times, as it has the broadest reach to the remotest places of the country and informed them to act wisely.²⁴

On 20 March 2020, GoI issued an advisory to top social media companies, including Facebook (parent company for WhatsApp and Instagram), YouTube, TikTok, ShareChat, and Twitter, to contain the spread of fake news or misinformation about Coronavirus.²⁵ The advisory suggests the social media platforms to spread authentic information about Coronavirus through awareness programs, identifying and removing the fake information from the respective platforms. To deal with fake news and misinformation, WhatsApp Inc introduced a feature, which will allow users to verify forwarded messages on smartphones and web as well. However, as a limitation of this feature, not all forwarded messages could be verified on the application (WhatsApp), but only frequently forwarded messages.²⁶

In another significant measure to contain fake news, the GoI on 21 March 2020, has launched a ‘ChatBot’²⁷ on WhatsApp— ‘MyGov Corona Helpdesk’ which can be accessed by

sending a text message to '+9190131 51515'. The ChatBot is enabled to address various queries and provide correct information on COVID-19 FAQs such as symptoms of the disease, precautions against contracting the virus, helpline numbers, affected cases in the region, and advisories issued by the government (including travel advisory).²⁸

In response to the rapid spread of fake news, individuals also need to share the responsibility to contain the spread of fake information. They can double-check information from other source of information such as reputable news service. An individual may also cross-check the fake news on "fact-check" websites, such as APFactCheck (<https://apnews.com/APFactCheck>) and FullFact (<https://fullfact.org/>) which highlight mostly circulated fake news or stories.²⁹ Also, a story or message can be check on a search engine (such as Google, bing, and others) if any part of it has been covered as fake news by the mainstream media. Such efforts shall contain the rapid spread of fake news through various nodes in any situation.

Conclusion

India has been declared as a global leader in fighting this outbreak through its strategy against the on-going crises. Dr Henk Bekedam-WHO Representative to India has appreciated the country's aggressive steps to -find, isolate, test, treat and trace as a crucial response to the fight against COVID-19.³⁰ It is vital to consider that in such times of crises, media must respond collectively and intelligently. It is critical to improving knowledge, perceptions and attitudes about the novel Coronavirus. The media platforms could be used to create preparedness and disseminate reliable information regarding the three 'Ws'— When, What and Where to be tested, receive care and daily updates to keep the people informed during the crucial time of this pandemic.

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