

How social media plays a big role in global panic-buying

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Social media plays a forefront role in disseminating news and latest information amid the outbreak of Covid-19 around the world. However, as the spread of Covid-19 continues globally, the amount of fake news across social media has risen as well.

International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) said on last Thursday (5 March) that the #CoronaVirusFacts / #DatosCoronaVirus alliance, which is the group that gathers 91 fact-checkers from 40 countries, found at least 20 cases of "false positives", between 27 Feb and 2 March, spreading panic on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp.

On 6 February, Poynter published an article stated that 221 fact-checks about the Covid-19 have been published, between 22 January and 5 February, by 41 fact-checking organizations around the world. Of the 221 fact-checks that published in 15 languages worldwide, 199 alerted audiences about content considered false, partially false, mostly false and, or inaccurate, while only 12 were about true claims, photos and videos spread on the internet.

Responding to the large numbers of false information being spread across social media, IFCN Associate Director Cristina Tardaguila said, "How far can fear of this new disease fuel the spread of misinformation? And can panic limit human reasoning in times like this?"

Ms Tardaguila said that the fake news was created by manipulating documents and images in order to make people believe the information comes from serious entities or from well-known media.

During the interview with IFCN, Laura Del Río, who coordinates the team of fact-checkers in Madrid, said that misinformers will manipulate images or modify the HTML code of a certain website about Covid-19 to deceive people.

"The change may begin as a joke. The results, however, are panic and anxiety," she added.

Concerned over the issue of spreading fake news through social media, Adjunct Associate Professor Vernon Lee, who spoke at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPC) forum on 25 Feb also noted that social media is a powerful tool with its huge impact on people's social lives while saying that it could spark undue fear or panic if it was misused.

Rumours of factory closures in China affected supply chains, subsequently led to toilet paper hoarding

At the same time, one such significant rumours that emerged has caused social media flooded with images and videos from across the world showing the panic-buying crisis with empty

shelves in the shops, long queues and crowds of shoppers stocking up goods in several countries that have confirmed Covid-19 cases.

Hong Kong was among the countries that first hit by “panic-buying” due to the spreading rumours on social media that toilet paper will run out in Hong Kong amid the coronavirus outbreak. Subsequently, it led to people rushing to stock up the toilet papers as well as facemasks, rubber gloves, sanitary products and other daily necessities.

According to The Sydney Morning Herald, the rumours that factory closures will cause a shortage of toilet paper has sparked fear among the public and led to Hong Kong citizens stocking up on toilet paper as the city’s good supplies highly depend on China.

Noting “troubling online rumours causing a sudden surge in demand for toilet paper”, a Hong Kong political journalist Alvin Lum shared a video of people carrying multiple bags of toilet paper rolls in their shopping cart and supermarket shelves clearing up.

In response to the panic-buying chaos, the Hong Kong government issued a statement asking the public to stop panic-buying while condemning the “rumour-mongers with evil intentions” for carrying out “malicious act of spreading rumours”.

South China Morning Post (SCMP) quoted Associate Psychology Professor of Hong Kong University Dr Christian Chan, saying, “The question of where you get your information from, who you trust, is something we’ve been dealing with for the past few months, we’ve already seen people fall into the trap of dubious new sources.”

Dr Chan added that people need to be savvier about how they receive information during the crisis and schedule the news intake to avoid feeling overwhelmed by it.

The social psychology professor of the University of Sussex, United Kingdom John Drury told SCMP that the media mobilises the ‘panic’ cliché even more than politicians to describe consumers queuing and stockpiling.

“When the government and the mass media tell us that our neighbours are ‘panic-buying’, we imagine those around us acting individualistically, rushing to hoard goods for themselves.” Mr Drury said.

Global panic-buying stemmed from “rumours”

Panic buying has taken place at a number of supermarkets in Australia following warning from experts that people should prepare for a coronavirus outbreak as reported in SBS.com.au. Shoppers shared photos of shelves being cleared of products such as toilet papers, canned goods, rice and bottled water.

On the other hand, some of the netizens tried to find humour in these circumstances by sharing their top ten essential items on social media.

Last Saturday (7 March), video footage showing three Australian women fighting over a pack of toilet paper went viral online.

The emergence of Australians hoarding toilet paper was likely linked to Australians believing that a similar shortage would happen after they saw the image of empty supermarket shelves in Asia that were circulating online, said University of Newcastle Assoc Professor David Savage in The Sydney Morning Herald.

“Australian shoppers’ stockpiling may be misguided. The surge could be fuelled by misconceptions—similar to those reportedly circulating on social media in Hong Kong—that toilet paper was imported and coronavirus could interrupt supply chains,” The Sydney Morning Herald reported.

The stockpiling incidents that happened in Japan were also sparked by the same rumours in social media that said stores will run out of stock due to the disruption of supplies in their main export county, China.

CNN also reported that the supermarket shelves were empty in Milan with residents rushing to stock up on food, surgical face masks and hand sanitizers following the first major outbreak of Covid-19 in Italy.

Similarly in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New Zealand, media reports and social media posts revealed photos of empty shelves in supermarket showing that panic-buying has begun to spread worldwide.

Apart from that, Singapore has not escaped either from the panic buying crisis. In earlier of February, following the raising of DORSCON level, the news and photos of stores shelves being emptied out by panicked residents have been circulated in media reports and social media.

Quality of information important to prevent spreading of rumours

Speaking about the global panic-buying, the professor and clinical psychologist of the University of British Columbia Steven Taylor described the situation as a “snowball effect”.

Mr Taylor said, “[Panic buying is] getting excessive play in social media and news media, and that amplifies the sense of scarcity, which worsens the panic buying. There’s these snowball effects of a further increased sense of urgency,” reported by BBC.

He added, “If everyone else on the Titanic is running for the lifeboats, you’re going to run too, regardless if the ship’s sinking or not,” implying the people with the “monkey” behaviour.

BBC writer Bryan Lufkin noted that it is important for quality sources of information to avoid rumours and falsities which can prevent possible crises.

Meanwhile, Senior Research Fellow of Institute Policy Studies Dr Carol Soon suggested that the government should work together with multi-stakeholders and mainstream media in order to fill the information gap and help people make sense of the current situation.

“Where possible, we should not leave the members of the public to do their own interpretation, but really to be very clear in explaining what many of us who may be studying the field take for granted should be understood,” Dr Soon added.

Besides fear over contracting the virus, it also worth mentioning that panic-buying situations could be driven by other factors such as price hikes of household items.

In 2018, the announcements that prices of toilet paper would rise in Taiwan supermarket due to rising cost of raw materials-pulp sparked panic-buying among the Taiwanese and led to the hoarding of toilet paper.

Rather than worrying about the overpricing of toilet paper, Taiwanese shoppers bought toilet paper in bulk over fears that the product may run out, reported by BBC.