

The COVID-19 Pandemic – Changing Communication & Learning Paradigms

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live and conduct our business. With around 8 million infections causing more than 4 lakh deaths in more than 200 countries till date very few can boast of having experienced the likes of such an event ever in their lifetime. Even though the initial scary uncertainty is gradually being replaced with optimism with more and more patients recovering in hospitals around the world and lockdowns being eased, there is still no drug or vaccine in sight that could halt the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The need for lockdowns, physical distancing, and maintaining strict hygiene have completely altered the way we conduct offices and businesses and schools, travel, shop and even communicate. In fact, in the initial days of the pandemic, communication was a greater casualty with misinformation, rumours, unscientific and unverified information flooding the media, social media to be precise. The WHO went so far as to call it an ‘infodemic’ that could do more harm than the pandemic itself.

The articles in this issue focus on the essentiality of authentic and right communication at the right time, the ramifications of miscommunication, how communication over the years by various stakeholders has brought about change in scientific perspectives of the masses, and also the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on school learning.

The scale and tenor of fake and unscientific information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic forced WHO and other tech leaders to actively promote actions and initiatives that could take on the menace of fake news on social media. In India one such endeavour was the setting up of a hoax-busting team under a voluntary, pan-India effort — Indian Scientists’ Response to COVID-19 (ISRC) — an online platform with more than 500 scientists from over 20 scientific and research institutes in the country.

Fake news and misinformation did play a major role during the initial part of the pandemic when the right information was scarce to

come by. However, as Gauhar Raza and Surjit Singh report in the preliminary results of the survey they carried out in their article “Scientific Knowledge, Perception and Attitudinal Changes during Corona Pandemic”, respondents by and large did make efforts to source their knowledge from credible sources of information rather than believing in rumours and misinformation. They point out that an overwhelming majority of people adopted measures suggested by the scientific community. They willingly gave up age-old religious practices and there was no resistance when the government suggested that all religious places should be immediately closed down. The ground for this attitudinal change had been prepared by information that the pandemic could be fatal and spreads through physical contact.

In his article in this issue, “Beliefs and Superstitions about COVID-19: Observations in India under Lockdown”, Ankuran Dutta talks about another awareness campaign launched by the Anamika Ray Memorial Trust (ARMT) which highlighted several instances of misinformation and attempted to set the record straight. He says, ‘a sea of misinformation and fake news has been generated over the pandemic; in particular, social media has been rife with misbeliefs and superstitions galore.’ This has been further exemplified by the fact that the Digital India initiative of the Union Government has tremendously increased the penetration of the internet with India currently having about 63 crore active mobile phone internet users — among them, 40 crore are also active on social media. The reach of fake and mischievous news has thus widened and expanded as never before.

Misinformation floating around on social media, often picked up by conventional media channels as well, has the potential to inflict great harm. Not only does it mislead the public, it may also ruin international relations between countries, while on the contrary it is necessary for scientists around the world to work together to eradicate the virus causing the pandemic, writes Surjeet Singh in his article “Social Media and COVID-19 Pandemic: Information or (mis)information”. He says such false pieces of information find their way to people also when there is an ‘information vacuum’, as in the case of this pandemic initially.

In fact, authentic and scientific information can greatly alter the impact of epidemic diseases, as Manoj Varghese points out in his article “Impact of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Activities on Malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS”. He points out to studies

conducted in different countries, which revealed that ‘patients with low knowledge about the symptoms of these diseases are more likely to delay the testing and treatment.’ He writes further that to reduce infection rates effective and appropriate communication is the fundamental key.

However, not just communication, the right communication too matters. Episodes of such worldwide pandemics, which might become a normal in the times to come, need to offer communication models that relay positivity and promote harmony among the populace. In his article, “Tale of two videos: Frame and narrative structure analysis of two COVID-19 communication social media messages”, T.V. Venkateswaran evaluates two public health messages relating to COVID-19 to say that ‘public health & risk communication during the pandemic must consciously choose frames that would promote harmony over the ones that would engender othering, frames that would promote prosocial mindset rather than just the self-interest.’

Scientific and targeted communication has the potential to alter mindsets to the benefit of the masses. As Gauhar Raza and Surjit Singh detail in their article “Cultural Distance Between Science and Society: Empirical Evidence of Past Thirty Years”. Through their studies based on the analysis of responses to the scientific questions posed by them during Kumbh Melas over a period of thirty years, they note with some satisfaction that efforts of science communicators over the years have yielded positive results.

An area also impacted greatly by the long-drawn lockdowns is school learning. Although schooling during the pandemic has gingerly tried to step into the online learning model, there are many challenges and a lot to learn, as Arul Aram points out in his article “Online Learning in the Post-COVID-19 Scenario”. In fact, he says ‘online teaching should continue at least as a supplement to classroom teaching to reinforce learning, or as an additional mode of teaching’ even though ‘it should never replace the role of a classroom teacher’.

There’s a lifetime of lessons that the current pandemic has taught us. The most prominent message, however, is loud and clear – there is no substitute for authentic, targeted communication that enables the audiences to reason, evaluate, assess and take the right decisions. This ability is most called for in times such as the current coronavirus outbreak, one of many to come, perhaps.

Hasan Jawaid Khan