

BOOK REVIEW

Pandemics in the Age of Social Media: Information and Misinformation in Developing Nations

Kumar, V. & Rewari, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Pandemics in the Age of Social Media: Information and Misinformation in Developing Nations*. Routledge. ISBN 9781032323930. 210 pp.

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The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was a tumultuous time in which there were many unknowns and people experienced varying degrees of isolation. As a result, people turned to social media to connect to others and get information on the virus. Even four years after its onset, scholars are still making sense of the effects of the pandemic. This research seeks to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the spread of information and misinformation, public discourse, and education via social media.

At the core of this book are the themes of information and misinformation. It encompasses research done primarily in Asia but includes Africa and Europe. The book details how reliant the public has become on social media, as well as the role it played during the pandemic. Bhardwaj and Kumar point out that, unlike traditional media, those publishing or sharing information on social media do not have protocols or a reviewing process, which can lead to false information being spread (p. 4). Building upon that, a study from Indonesia explains the hurdles scientists encountered as they tried to communicate information about the virus and the various scientific protocols to the public during the pandemic. Maulana explains, “to many people, having a full narrative without any gaps is more important than having an accurate but incomplete explanation of the

situation” (p.18). This is also reinforced by Mata and Mittal, who add that “the public was looking for maximum information, but they became more vulnerable to risky information” (p. 125). Furthermore, like traditional media, science has its own protocols and procedures that studies and findings go through before they are determined true and shared with the public. The lack of understanding from the public on these protocols further led to misinformation and a lack of trust in vaccines, health officials, and scientists (p.29).

As the world saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation that spread on social media spread quickly and would often lead to confusion and mistrust. Several chapters talk about the relatively new research discipline of “infodemiology” and the resulting infodemic that arose out of the pandemic. A highlight of this book is an excellent case study of how the India’s government used social media to keep the public engaged and informed and reinforced the importance of adhering to policies such as the “Janta curfew” (p. 95). An emerging theme that came from this study and others is the concept of trust, and how it can help combat misinformation. Trust models are discussed in detail and show how emergency management organizations utilized social media during the pandemic (p109). Ogunmola and Das shed light on how these models can build trust between an organization and the public (p. 115). In addition, Latta and Mittal’s research on building trust on social media reads similarly to that of a business management marketing strategy. They emphasize utilizing platform features to reach out to users, using influencers to share information, and creating engaging content (p. 130-132). As the public becomes more reliant on getting information from social media, organizations need to learn how to engage and inform.

The book includes a systematic literature review of social media usage for knowledge sharing with a detailed overview of various literature on the topic from around the world. One of the key findings is that there is a lack of research on the negative effects of knowledge sharing through social media (p. 79). This ties into the last three chapters of the book that discuss how social media can be used in education and the potential benefits of student learning. The chapters provide analysis on the benefits of various social media platforms for education, highlighting an array of applications such as Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. However, there is little said in these chapters about the disadvantages and dangers of social media on the mental well-being of students.

Muhkter, et al. provide balance to the discussion and include a detailed list of the cons for young people on social media, in which they recommend that social media be used for teaching in a higher education setting (p. 184).

One thing that may stand out for the reader is how social media and technology are constantly evolving and changing. Some of the recommendations may be difficult to implement if platforms change policies (as has happened in the United States). Bhardwaj and Kumar outline a three-step approach to combating misinformation and the process relies, in part, on the work of platforms to play an active role (p.10). Although social media platforms may have varying protocols to operate in different parts of the world, there is a possibility that these rules can be changed or enforced differently. Furthermore, with the recent advances in artificial intelligence, it may be even harder for the average user to identify if something posted through social media is misinformation in the first place.

Overall, the information in *Pandemics in the Age of Social Media* provides a robust overview of how both information and misinformation spread on social media during the early stages of COVID-19. The information it provides is invaluable, as it shares the perspectives of countries and communities which are underrepresented by the media and not at the forefront of the global stage. The compilation offers an optimistic tone, focusing on lessons learned from the pandemic and the approaches that can work moving forward. It identifies some of the gaps that remain in the studies that have been done providing a guide for those continuing research in this area. I recommend this book to those interested in the topic, including scholars, educators, students, government officials, scientists, and public health officials.