



# The Second Wave of **Covid-19** Misinformation

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# The Second Wave of Covid-19 Misinformation

## Introduction 2nd wave of COVID

Last year in 2020 when COVID-19 ran havoc all around the world, scientists and doctors had warned of a second wave and soon enough countries after countries saw a second wave. European countries like England witnessed the second wave in January 2021. From September 2020 to early February 2021, India saw cases drop almost every day until it started rising again marginally in the middle of February. The writing was on the wall, a second wave was on its way. When the COVID first hit, a benefit of doubt was given to governments all around the world since most people argued nobody could have expected a crisis of this level but it is a matter of fact that governments and administrations were found wanting second time around as well, perhaps even worse than the first time. The desire to attain normalcy among policymakers or to claim that everything is normal has been culpable. The rise in the cases has been unmatched and out of control. India's daily cases hit 400,000 per day in the first week of May. India is almost accounting for half of the world's new cases in the last couple of weeks showing how dire the situation has been in the second wave. While the cases have started to come down but the death toll is already high and is not slowing down at the moment.

## Reflection of the misinformation and fake news surrounding 1st Wave

As we write, cases of Covid-19 are surmounting at an unprecedented rate. It looks as if the clock has turned as we find ourselves dealing with the same menace that created havoc last year with the only change that new cases of misinformation and fake news have arisen around newer problems that the community has been specifically facing in this new wave. In the previous wave the series of misinformation started with calling [Covid-19 virus a Chinese conspiracy](#) or blaming Tablighi Jamat as a super spreader creating wide scale [Islamophobia](#) at a time when the problem at hand was the virus and not religious differences.

The saga of misinformation continued and seeped into various categories such as healthcare. WhatsApp forwards, videos and fake advisories were issued urging people to get ayurvedic treatment and unscientific ways of treating the virus, boycotting meat and poultry and consuming cow urine. Many people especially from North-Eastern states were made to vacate their houses which they rented, they were radically profiled and discriminate, Muslim vendors were boycotted and lastly we all saw thousands of people queuing for going back home because of fake news that countrywide lockdown had ended, or government was withdrawing cash benefit once credited in the accounts of beneficiaries.

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This new wave of crisis not only has brought new cases of misinformation but also has been spreading previous cases such as fake news around the imposition of lockdown. WHO issued an advisory stating that WhatsApp message on lockdown in India getting widely circulated was false and WHO had not issued any such advisory or protocol.

As a result of the quantum of fake news and misinformation that was circulated across the world about Covid-19, a term called *Infodemic* gained prominence signifying the extent and reach of both accurate and inaccurate information during a pandemic.

A report titled [Coronavirus Misinformation in India is Not Limited to Health Misinformation](#), showed that misinformation around Covid-19 increased in the March 2020. This period was dominated by misinformation about the disease and this period also coincided with the rise in cases. The report has analysed the misinformation by dividing it into two parts a) Communal misinformation and b) Medical misinformation. Even, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) published a survey report titled, '[Chronology of Rumors and Misinformation During Covid-19](#)', that aimed at understanding the types of misinformation that was circulating on the ground by undertaking a ground survey in 15 states of India.

The analysis of the data identified five themes under which rumors and misinformation were being circulated.

- a. [Fake Medical Advice](#) which involved urging people to drink alcohol, as it would prevent the virus from entering the body, or taking steam would kill the virus.
- b. [Islamophobia](#) gained immense media coverage and gave the pandemic a politico-religious angle. The media channels portrayed Muslims, a minority community in India as ones spreading the virus. This religious profiling of the diseases led to wide circulation of Islamophobic fake news. People started boycotting Muslim vegetable vendors, there were fake social media posts of Muslim men spitting on vegetables and currency notes that started making rounds. This even resulted in creation of Twitter Hashtags such as #CoronaJihad and #Corona Terrorism trending on Twitter.
- c. [Food and Poultry](#) was another thematic area under which a lot of misinformation and fake news were circulated. There were viral messages which encouraged people to boycott poultry items such as chicken on the false pretext that consuming chicken causes Covid-19. This fake news severely impacted the poultry industry.
- d. [Blind Faith](#) such as keeping fast would keep away the virus or the literary epic Ramayana predicting Corona Virus were widely popular in the first wave of Covid-19.
- e. [Conspiracy Theories](#) of calling Covid-19 a Chinese conspiracy which involved various tweets which said the virus being was prepared in Chinese labs and it is a world war conspiracy. These fake news were being circulated on social media platform, but their effect managed to glide in the real world. Many tenants from Northeastern states of

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India were threatened to vacate their flats. There were news about racists attacks on people from North east, one such incident came from Delhi, where a man spat on a Manipuri women and even called her Corona.

While Boom fact check has analysed the messages and videos circulating on various media platforms, DEF has analysed first hand data collected from people of misinformation that they heard/saw. Both of these studies parallely show that last year health and communal misinformation dominated the universe of misinformation in the country. The mayhem created due to circulation of unverified news caused substantial damage, endangering the public at large by flouting laws of lockdown.



# Misinformation/fake news of the 2nd wave- what's new?

The second wave has surpassed the first wave not only in terms of human loss but in the rise of misinformation and fake news as well. As discussed the first wave majorly focused on religious and medical angle. The share of misinformation on medical matters has increased in the second wave. The religious and political fake news are doing the rounds still.

The sudden exponential rise in cases resulted in highlighting the glaring faults in our health infrastructure. This led to people asking for medical help on social media such as searching for beds, oxygen cylinders and medicines. A lot of misinformation going around is about availability or lack of ICU beds, oxygen cylinders and medicines. There have been cases where people created [fake resource websites](#) and posed as medical staff and ask people to make advance payment for ICU bed or medicines require for the treatment of Covid-19.

Social media posts about fake medicines or fake numbers promising oxygen and beds are occupying the social media. A number of people are getting [financially duped online](#) as social media is becoming a tool for people taking financial benefit of the misery of others. These [fake news](#) include selling fake medicines, taking advance payments and promising beds and oxygen. There is a lot of misinformation by self-proclaimed experts with no medical evidence in context of impacts and usages of different medicines and medical equipment. Like a number of social media posts are about telling the audience to take certain medicine, or methods of using oxygen cylinders. In a [viral video](#) posted on 23<sup>rd</sup> April a person appearing to be doctor claimed that nebuliser - a small medical device for delivering a fine spray of a drug to patients - can be used in place of an oxygen cylinder. The hospital mentioned in the video had to issue clarification about it. It was later proved that it had no medical basis.

Once again there is a lot of misinformation around home remedy. Social media is filled with posts suggesting consumption or avoiding different home remedy items based on no real medical evidence. In a video posted on 20<sup>th</sup> April, again a [person appearing to be doctor](#) claimed that mix of camphor, clove, carom seeds and eucalyptus oil will be beneficial in maintaining oxygen levels while suffering from the virus. This not only was misinformation, it in fact can fatally harm a person if consumed.

There has been a plethora of misinformation and fake news around vaccination from the beginning stemming from the comments of political leaders especially. An Uttar Pradesh leader had commented that [vaccination might make one impotent](#) which is absolutely incorrect. Similarly another claim was that [vaccination carries pork](#) and hence Muslims should avoid it. There were claims of [vaccine carrying microchip](#)

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as a strategy by the government to spy, all of these claims were debunked as fake and had no connection to reality.

The impact of misinformation was visible recently when people in a village of Barabanki district of Uttar Pradesh, jumped in the river to [avoid vaccination drive](#) put by the government in order to vaccinate people. These people fled their homes as government health officials approached them. This indicates the inhibition that people have regarding vaccination, which is once again based on false claims being circulated around social media groups and platforms.

As the government opened vaccination for 18 to 44 age groups from 1<sup>st</sup> May, a misinformation traveled on social media that [women should not take vaccination five days before and after their menstrual cycle](#). The social media posts surrounding these claims, falsely claimed that immunity is very less during periods and women should avoid getting vaccinated. Again this had no medical basis. An opinion article published in [New York Times](#) claimed that there was no data linking the vaccine to the changes in menstruation.

From the time second wave started peaking, another main subject of misinformation was again the details of lockdown. In the last week of March, the [rumor of lockdown](#) spread in Delhi which resulted in lot of people trying to leave the city. The claims had no truth to them.

[Medical misinformation](#) has spread through the statements of personalities like Baba Ramdev who called medicine like Remdesivir a reason behind the death of people. He also said that people could just do simple yoga techniques to increase their oxygen level and he claimed that according to WHO, Patanjali's Coronil was most effective against Covid-19 which [WHO publicly denied](#). Even the [Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan](#) said that comments like these weaken fight against the pandemic and the morale of health workers. Repeatedly BJP politicians have claimed that cow dung and urine works against the corona virus. On 17<sup>th</sup> May in a viral video MP Pragya Thakur claimed that because she drinks [cow urine daily](#), she does not have COVID. Earlier this week a BJP leader carried out [mobile hawan](#) in streets of Meerut to end coronavirus ignoring social distancing norms. Another BJP MLA from Uttar Pradesh, Surendra Singh claimed that [drinking cow urine with cold water](#) works against Covid-19. All of such statement that come from influential people spark up the misinformation and amplify its impact and give it a political and religious colour.

The [number of Covid-19 cases and death](#) both have been part of misinformation. Since a lot of media reports are rejecting the official numbers stating them false. This creates panic for the normal audience and it is based on the fact that one of these two claims is definitely misinformation leaving it to the audience and their own judgement to figure out which one to trust.

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# How far have we come in battling health related COVID misinformation

Misinformation and fake news in India and all around the world is a serious problem. We are living in an information society where the flow of information is fast paced. The information or misinformation in today's age comes with timeliness. Most misinformation needs to be debunked as soon as possible. Longer they go in public domain without being flagged, the larger negative impact they have on the audience. During the first wave of COVID-19, there were platforms established to spread information and clear out misinformation regarding the pandemic such as [PIB Factcheck](#). At that point of time while the cases were relatively low but the misinformation was high. This time around both the cases and misinformation are high and the extreme number of cases has led to all focus being shifted on cases for now. High misinformation is something that has gotten pushed down under the rubble of disaster. Misinformation still needs to be tackled in the same intensity since it only adds to the existing problems.

Looking at the furor misinformation and fake news have managed to create even in the second wave of the pandemic, it is amply clear that the struggle is far from over. While the society on one front is battling the pandemic, it also is dabbling with fake news at every point. The [surge of misinformation](#) has made the task much more difficult in finding emergency relief material such as verified phone numbers for finding availability of hospital beds, oxygens, ventilators, ICU wards and agencies for refilling oxygen cylinders among other services. Not only this creates frustration where the person or their family are in an urgency to find help/service in minimum time possible, and at the same time they have to cross the moat of misinformation, personally verifying every information or leads possible.

Not only does this require precious time, where every minute for the patient is critical but the entire process is draining and creates further stress if the information is not found. In the wake of misinformation being peddled across social media platforms, the IT ministry issued orders for [social media platforms to take down URLs](#) (Uniform Resource Locator) that were alleged to contain "old and out of the context images or visuals, communally sensitive posts and misinformation about Covid-19 protocols".

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# Conclusion

We still are battling Covid-19 pandemic as well as the infodemic, both of them are far from getting over. In the second wave of the pandemic, people are far more reliant on social media, mainly because the health infrastructure is already loaded with cases and hence people are flocking to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in search of information. In this process the spread of misinformation has paced up, and fake news along with misinformation is getting mixed up. The process of squeezing verified information is strenuous work and we still are grappling with finding authentic and useful information in these desperate times.

## What still needs to be done

- a. A decentralized platform should be established that is solely focused on collecting information and clearing misinformation. It can be established through the support of government, corporates, civil society actors and volunteers. It will allow people to be able to come to one platform in order to find information rather than finding their way through search on social media.
- b. Hyperlocal nodes for verifying information should be created at village, block and district level. This will help in aggregating and passing clean information at state level which can further have fact-checking units within municipalities and lastly a state and national body which facilitates creating new advisories and notices regarding misinformation spreading at a larger level.
- c. Programs to debunk misinformation should be kept running and refocused on. These programs can successfully create awareness as they have done and prepare the people.
- d. One of the reasons behind the second wave is that people started being complacent when the first wave was slowing down. This gives way to misinformation overpowering the facts. Hence a strategy needs to be established to prepare for any further spike in waves. A platform for debunking misinformation or collecting information should remain there irrespective of slowing of wave. Rather than retrospectively creating a platform when the pandemic takes over, a futuristic plan shall be put in place.
- e. Existing government bodies or a new independent body which has medical experts and people experienced in dealing with misinformation, can work as a channel where any citizen can come directly if they require information.

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