

FOR THE RECORD

People peddling fake Covid cures exploit our need to make sense of this crisis

India's parallel second wave contagion of forwards about alleged Covid "cures" do not surprise US-based physician and author Dr Seema Yasmin. Previously a science journalist, Yasmin is now a "disease detective"— a trained officer at Epidemic Intelligence Service at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — who has investigated the spread of misinformation during epidemics at Stanford University. In an interview to Sharmila Ganesan Ram she talks about her latest book 'Viral BS' which shows how myths spread faster than microbes

Here, in India, we are now dealing with forwarded messages that not only peddle lemon juice in the nostrils as "cures" for Covid but also deem vaccines "harmful for unmarried women". Why do people fall for such theories?

Information that is inaccurate is often packaged to appear very certain. People peddling false cures exploit our need for certainty and make claims such as "100% effective" or "guaranteed cure." They take advantage of our need to make sense of the crisis and our need to believe in something. A number of studies have found that false information travels faster and farther than the truth. There are important red flags to watch out for. Is the article you are reading making a claim that no other source is currently making? Another issue is scientific literacy, or a lack of it, so that as scientists update guidance, some interpret this as a lack of truthfulness or they might say "scientists keep changing their minds because they don't know what they're talking about." In fact, science is not a bunch of static facts but a dynamic, evolving process.

How much blame can we place on social media for the current parallel global pandemic of misinformation?

The spread of misinformation and disinformation during a crisis is not new. It dates back hundreds if not thousands of years. During wars, plagues and famines, false information has spread as people try to make sense of a scary situation. Social media has accelerated and amplified this problem and platforms that incentivise engagement with false information are a big part of the problem. The organisation Avaaz has produced sobering reports on just how powerful platforms such as Facebook are in amplifying misinformation and disinformation about critical issues such as Covid-19 and climate change.

How dangerous is the virality of fake news and half truths, especially during an outbreak?

It can cost people their lives. In the last year we've seen people write Facebook posts from their hospital beds saying they didn't believe the pandemic was real because of what they'd read on social media and now they were infected and wanted to let others know that the crisis was real.

In the introduction of your latest book, you call yourself a teenaged conspiracy theorist...

I grew up in an immigrant, Indian community in England where racism and Islamophobia were experienced on a daily basis. As a way of making sense of some of these experiences, and to make sense of power dynamics in our society, we believed in conspiracy theories even though they were patently false. There's often a kernel of truth in conspiracy theories which also makes them very believable. And there's the hugely important consideration that as much as we like to think we are rational and free thinkers, humans base their beliefs on not only facts but on belonging.

Why is the job of debunking myths and falsehoods important to you?

As a public health physician and journalist, I believe access to accurate information is a basic human right and that public health depends on an informed public that is empowered to make good decisions. We often talk about disparities in health but less so about health information inequity which is the disparity in access to credible information about health. We've seen

during the pandemic how some communities are targeted by people spreading disinformation.

Does culture influence the contagion of falsehoods?

Culture is extremely impactful because we base our beliefs on not only facts but what others in our community believe. Here in the US, I've seen an increase in false claims that vaccines oppose the American way of life and go against American ideals of autonomy and freedom. Very often, disinformation is woven into people's existing concerns about topics such as race, immigration, and economics so that very deep-rooted sentiments and beliefs are being provoked which on the surface seem quite unrelated to vaccines.

Your book 'Viral BS' ends with a useful "bullshit detection kit". Can you share a few tools from it?

Some things to ask yourself when you see a headline, social media post, or article are: who is the source of this information and are they credible? Are other credible sources also sharing this information? Does the person making the claim stand to profit from the information they are sharing? When you read something online that leaves you feeling doubtful, take the conversation offline and discuss with people you trust in your community. The toolkit offers more advice but these are some things to keep in mind.

