Critical Thinking

A Way of Life

The first victim of a once-forgotten disease – measles – died recently in Serbia. He was among the 1719 cases of measles reported in Serbia since October 2017, according to a recent report from the Serbian Institute for Public Health.

Bruce Wilmot, a cancer patient, died after consuming a concoction of cabbage juice which he stumbled across on the Facebook group of Jillian Mai Thi Epperly, who expounds a bizarre and dangerous theory: that all diseases — including cancer — are caused by a fungus called candida that lives in the gut. She says her cabbage concoction will reverse all forms of illness, arrest aging, and even turn gay people straight.

The measles death was a case of extreme misreporting – the anti-vaccination movement that sprung up in the West riding on the now discredited Lancet article that wrongly linked the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine to autism found enough traction in Serbia where newspapers sell on the basis of pseudo-scientific and fake threats, which also include dramatic warnings against ‘killer’ vaccines. Bruce Wilmot, on the other hand, is among the millions who are misled by bizarre theories and diets and concoctions put forward by self-seeking individuals and groups on social media websites that have mushroomed in the past decade.

The scourge of fake news has become a worldwide phenomenon and ironically media outlets that are supposed to empower citizens with information often end up promoting and propagating anti-scientific and junk science ideas. The menace today is further compounded by the proliferation of social media sites that on the one hand enable publishing of unverified and unsubstantiated information, at the same time they also provide unhindered access to such information instantly and throughout the world.

Fake news has been playing a more pronounced role in politics in recent times, involving spreading canards and character assassinating political rivals, running down opposing ideologies, and propagating unfounded beliefs. But it has also been found to have been actively used in nutrition, health and vaccination (or anti-vaccination activism as in the Serbian case). With the breaking down of dependencies, social media outlets have turned people into writers and publishers with no editorial barriers and accountabilities.

People have also become very receptive to fake news. In an article published in Science (“The Science of Fake News” – 9 March 2018), the authors say that individuals do not question the credibility of information unless it violates their preconceptions; they prefer information that confirms their pre-existing attitudes or pleases them. This propensity to accept information that is to their liking also prevents them from checking the facts of a fake news story.

In a five-year study conducted on a wide range of Facebook users, a team of researchers tracked how misinformation is generated and spread online. In their paper, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, they note that this happens due to what they call “echo chambers”, spaces that allow people to amplify their own belief systems without obstruction. These “echo chambers” are pronounced on the Internet where “information or beliefs are reinforced by repetitive transmission inside an enclosed virtual space”. In these spaces other viewpoints are kept away and people are comfortable believing the most nonsensical information.

Is there a way out of this conundrum? Well, after Wilmot’s death, his sympathisers organised into a countermovement with newspapers and law enforcement agencies to take down the offending Facebook page, without any success though. Perhaps it is for every individual to realise that conclusions based on false and misleading information will always be wrong and, therefore, in this age of proliferating social media we need to adopt critical thinking and fact-checking as a way of life.

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