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TikTok, Lies, and COVID-19

One year ago today, if you walked up to a stranger on the street and attempted to explain to them how TikTok has served as a method of communicating information about the coronavirus pandemic as the world is practicing social distancing, they would have no clue what you were talking about.

Nevertheless, the world has changed drastically in the past few months, and there is no entity on earth that adapts faster than social media. As millions of people adopt social isolation in the midst of a global pandemic that society was massively unprepared for, many people are seeking comfort, information, and human connection on social media. While the population is forced to stay home, social media apps like Instagram and TikTok have become a valuable resource for connecting, condemning, and informing.

Everyday life in the United States as of April of 2020 is nearly unrecognizable from the average person’s day-to-day from as recently as two months ago. In February, the idea of cancelled concerts, online schooling, and shelter-in-place orders was not even in the realm of possibility for most people, but today, it’s the norm. The messaging has never been clearer: stay home! However, humans are social creatures, and asking millions of individuals to stay in their houses and limit all non-essential human contact with people outside of their household indefinitely would be nearly impossible, if not for social media.

Social networking websites and apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok allow their users to communicate with millions of users worldwide, not just from people within their immediate communities and social circle. Users post about a variety of topics, from news stories to internet jokes (known as memes) to dog pictures to photoshopped pictures of Bill Clinton holding their favorite albums. When humans cannot physically connect, they virtually connect. Social media has permitted a society of socially isolated people to not only ensure that their friends and family members are healthy and safe, but also as a way of keeping one another entertained. Many of these posts are temporary—only meant to exist for twenty-four hours or less—but can go viral in an instant. Common topics of discussion on social media since the beginning of the quarantine include Netflix’s new documentary series, *Tiger King*; high school seniors lamenting at their lost proms and graduations; recent updates on the outbreak from Dr. Fauci; and memes about Zoom university. Overwhelmingly, people are using social media to uplift and support one another. When Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita Wilson, were diagnosed with COVID-19, he used Instagram to reassure fans:

Hello folks. @ritawilson and I want to thank everyone here Down Under who are taking such good care of us. We have Covid-19 and are in isolation so we do not spread it to anyone else. There are those for whom it could lead to a very serious illness. We are taking it one-day-at-a-time. There are things we can do to get through this by following the advice of experts and taking care of ourselves and each other, no? Remember, despite all the current events, there is no crying in baseball (Hanks).

However, not everybody is using social media in a way that is positive and heartening. As quarantine grows longer and society at large is growing frustrated, many are taking to social media as a way of expressing their displeasure at others who are not strictly adhering to social distancing measures. The *New York Times* calls this “corona-shaming” (Rosman). Dana Weiss from Illinois even took it upon herself to start a Facebook group called “That’s it. I’m coronavirus shaming” with over a thousand members (Rosman). The group largely criticizes people scheduling and holding social gatherings in the midst of this pandemic. To the people she condemns online, Weiss says, “I don’t think you’re a bad person…I just don’t think you should be hosting prom in your backyard right now” (Rosman).

The overwhelming public disdain for those resisting social distancing measures has only increased in the midst of protests from people who believe that they should be able to roam about in
public and gather in groups without wearing appropriate personal protective equipment. One supporter of this movement even posted on Facebook, “If you are paranoid about getting sick, just don’t go out” but that those who wish to go outside should not be prohibited from “living [their] lives” (Crow). That man, sixty-year-old John McDaniel, later died of complications from COVID-19 (Crow). These baffling protests have sparked strong emotions on both sides of the aisle. Many people are now taking to social media to express their frustration with the protestors. Twitter user @Brasilmagic tweeted a photo of a sign advertising an “End The Lockdown Rally” which publicized that no mask was needed to attend and encouraged people to “Bring your children” and “If you’re sick still come, it’s your right!” (Vote Dem for the Planet). Twitter user @beyerstein responded to this tweet, saying “Did the virus write this?” (Beyerstein). The overall tone on social media regarding these rallies includes everything from disbelief to anger to fear to humor.

However, protestors are not the only ones utilizing social media to disseminate their message. Physicians and other health care providers are now taking to social media app, TikTok, to spread medical information regarding their chosen specialties and COVID-19. TikTok is an app that allows users to post short videos to a variety of background sounds of their choosing. As of January 2020, the app had over 1.5 billion all-time downloads and is extremely popular with members of Generation Z (Leskin). In a move that has been both heavily criticized and heavily lauded, medical professionals are using the power of TikTok to educate the public.

Among those is anesthesiologist and TikTok user @balancedanesthesia, who has recently been posting updates on the COVID-19 pandemic. She recently posted a video as a “doctor mom here with some hopeful news” where she briefly described Oxford University’s progress on a COVID-19 vaccine and included references in the comments section of the video (“Can”). Another physician using TikTok to spread knowledge on the pandemic is emergency medicine resident Dr. Fayez (@lifeofadoc), who posts daily video updates on the coronavirus pandemic. On April 22nd, 2020, Dr. Fayez’s update included facts about felines testing positive for the novel coronavirus, New York’s death toll declining, the recovery of over 700,000 COVID-19 patients, and as always ended his video reminding viewers to “wash your hands & practice social distancing” (“Today’s”). Some physicians use their platform not only to educate the public on medical fact, but also on how to spot medical fallacy. Dr. Danielle Jones (@mamadoctorjones) is an ObGyn physician who posts about everything from her four children to medical information on pregnancy and childbirth to criticism of the medical misinformation that often runs rampant on social media (Jones). In a video posted as I was writing this piece, Jones responded to people who would undermine her twelve years of medical training by stating “science doesn’t care about your opinion” (“Your”).

According to The Lancet, “because many are turning to social media for information and advice, the differentiation between individuals who are qualified to provide accurate information online and so-called armchair epidemiologists is increasingly difficult” (Limaye 2). Specifically regarding COVID-19:

Unlike the litany of debunked misinformation perpetuated by anti-vaccine activists, our understanding of COVID-19 is evolving continuously. As such, what qualifies as misinformation will be sensitive to new scientific discoveries and insights, making it in turn, harder to eliminate misinformation. That is, distinguishing misinformation from legitimate information is, at present, a moving target (Limaye 1).

The novelty of COVID-19 combined with the novelty of social media make it all the more difficult to differentiate fact from fallacy.

Social media is a double-edged sword. Its use as a mode of global connection and information dispersion is unparalleled by anything previous generations have had access to, but along with that comes an ease to spreading misinformation that is also unparalleled. The phenomenon of social media is as diverse in its cruelty, honesty, positivity, fabrication, absurdity, and beauty as any aspect of humanity can be, and it is in times like this when all of these qualities shine through in screaming color.
Works Cited

Beyerstein, Lindsay. "Did the virus write this?" Twitter. 20 Apr. 2020, 12:11 a.m., twitter.com/beyerstein/status/1252087355172929538?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1252087355172929538&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fgod.dailydot.com%2Flockdown-protesters-jokes%2F.


Hanks, Tom. "Hello folks. @ritawilson and I want to thank everyone here Down Under who are taking such good care of us. We have Covid-19 and are in isolation so we do not spread it to anyone else. There are those for whom it could lead to a very serious illness. We are taking it one-day-at-a-time. There are things we can all do to get through this by following the advice of experts and taking care of ourselves and each other, no? Remember, despite all the current events, there is no crying in baseball. Hanx." Instagram, 12 Mar. 2020.


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