



Sanctions, Misinfodemics, and Polinfodemic During COVID-19: The Need for Global Collaborations

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Coronavirus outbreak created a social anxiety worldwide in a risk society (1). Sharing information is a way to understand the world around us and its challenges and how to survive in this risk society. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 revealed that it is not only the viral epidemic itself but also the "information epidemic" that can generate a global crisis (2). Since then, the flow of information has gained a much greater speed and scope. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic was accompanied by a free flow of information through social media and satellite channels. Unfortunately, this information mostly came from nonprofessional sources without scientific evaluation. The misinformation was about all the aspects of the pandemic, from the number of infected and dead individuals to the conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus, therapeutic measures, and recently the vaccine.

On 15 February 2020, just at the beginning of this global crisis, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Munich Security Conference warned about the rapid surge of fake news and the so called misinfodemic (3). As said, fake news can spread quicker than the virus itself without any boundaries. Misinfodemics can hamper effective public health responses and create panic (4), confusion, and distrust among people (5).

Fetzer (2004) differentiated between three terms: information, misinformation, and disinformation (6). Information is when the true and accurate facts based on the best of our current knowledge is announced. But misinformation is false information, and disinformation is the false information created with the intention of profiting from it or causing harm (7). We believe that a specific type of disinformation at the political level has occurred

during this pandemic, for which we propose the name "polinfodemic". In our view, polinfodemic means generating fake or distorted information or manipulating some information against a nation by another government directly or through opposition parties in order to manipulate the mental health of that nation, distort the trust between the state and nation, and halt the interventions that are launched in controlling the epidemics. The main purpose of this fake or distorted news generation, along with other activities, is to exterminate the state and replace it with a figurehead one. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this type of polinfodemic could be clearly seen against some nations, including China, Venezuela, and Iran.

Iran faced the toughest sanctions imposed by the previous administration of the US before the pandemic. The sanctions were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are still a major obstacle in importing necessary medicines, vaccines, and medical equipment; the sanctions restrict non-US companies conducting business with Iran (8). These crippling sanctions have affected all economic and social institutions of Iran. In addition, it has been a serious hindrance to the entry of international aid into Iran. Along with these economic sanctions, Iran also was faced with major polinfodemic. Large amounts of manipulated and fake information were generated and rapidly and systematically circulated, and even became viral by robots in some social media. While the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths was increasing in many western countries, the fake news proposed that Iran witnessed the highest health impact in the world, blaming the Iranian government for killing its citizens.

Reviewing the content of many of these media in the past 14 months shows hundreds of fake scenarios proposed

at international and local levels against Iran. The sarcastic part of this disinformation is that they were generated by some states which were in much worse situation than Iran.

Sanctions and polinfodemics would not only hamper the control of the infection in countries like Iran but also could have a disastrous effect on global health. As it has truly been said, viruses do not discriminate, nor should humankind. There is an urgent need for collective action by all countries. It is good news to hear that the US is going to rejoin the WHO. The hegemonic approaches would not help even the superpowers. The false belief that the powerful states could handle this crisis solely without international collaboration and global action has led to the loss of many opportunities in controlling this pandemic in the past 14 months. Now, it is the time to exchange and collaborate. Every nation has something to present to the world in this pandemic.

Footnotes

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