

# Infodemic: A Threat to Digital Information Age

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## ABSTRACT

Information has become a basic need in the digital age, where infodemic has become the threat to the digital age. Availability of a variety of information in huge quantities on a particular topic leads to incorrect information rather than useful one. As a result daily life gets affected due to misinformation, disinformation and rumors. Present paper tries to study how information explosion impacts an infodemic situation, and how to get rid of an infodemic situation.

**Keywords:** Infodemic, Misinformation, Disinformation, Rumors, Information Explosion.

## Introduction

Digital information can be defined as the information in electronic format. Information is the most important tool to deal with the present life. Existence of digital information made life easier than before and the digital age made it possible to access information according to the need in a much easier way. As the digital age has given us a new arena of life, on the other hand it has encouraged the situation of information explosion with misinformation, disinformation and wrong information which can be termed as an infodemic situation.

Basically the term 'infodemic' was coined by the World Health Organisation in 2020 during Covid 19, to describe the spreading of false information about the virus and its origin. But the term 'infodemic condition' is still relevant in almost post covid era or crisis situations like covid.

An infodemic occurs when there is an excessive amount of information, much of it inaccurate or misleading, that makes it difficult for people to find accurate and reliable information. And at this present time where information can be spread easily using social media platforms, spreading misinformation and creating an infodemic situation is just a blink away. During an infodemic, false information can spread rapidly through social media and other channels, causing confusion and panic among the public. This can lead to people making poor decisions about their health and safety, and can undermine efforts to control the crisis or emergency.

So it can be said infodemic is not limited to COVID 19 pandemic situations, the term can be applied to any situation especially in the digital age where there is an excessive amount of digital information which are mostly misleading and inaccurate in nature.

## Origin of the term Infodemic

The term Infodemic is not a new concept and was coined by David Rothkopf in 2003 in an article posted in the Washington Post. As we are already dealing with an information explosion and the spread of misinformation along with this caused a real worst situation to communicate the authentic information.

If we break the term Infodemic it's the combination of information and epidemic. Infodemic is a very common situation caused during crises like COVID19 outbreak. During February, 2020 Tedros Adhanom

Ghebreyesus, director WHO, declared that 'We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic.'

### **Few Concepts Related to Infodemic**

#### **Misinformation**

It refers to false or inaccurate or misleading information which tends to mislead often unintentionally through various mediums available in the digital age such as social media platforms, news outlets, and word of mouth. It can be created and spread by individuals or groups with different intentions which includes political, financial or social gain.

#### **Disinformation**

It refers to false information deliberately spread to mislead people to achieve a particular goal. Therefore it can be said that disinformation knowingly spread and designed to be believable and can be difficult to identify

#### **Rumors**

Rumors are often circulated over social media through unverified accounts and it is very difficult to identify. They can contribute to spreading misinformation by creating confusion and panic.

### **Scope of Infodemic**

The scope of infodemic is quite broad, which includes different area as discussed below:

**Economy:** Economy can be affected through the spread of misinformation and rumors by creating panic and weakening the confidence in the financial market.

**Education:** An infodemic can build huge distrust among students by providing misinformation and wrong information related to their education and as a result the education sector can be impacted.

**Public Health:** An infodemic make the situation worse during a health crisis, misinformation can make it difficult to take right decisions and actions to protect oneself from health hazards, which can have serious public health consequences.

**Social Issues:** An infodemic can cause social issues by disseminating misinformation or wrong information about marginalized groups.

**Politics:** Infodemic through spreading false information can fuel polarization and division and can cause conspiracy theories as well. As a result people of a democratic society may suffer from taking informed decisions and can abrade trust in democratic processes.

**Science and Technology:** Infodemic situations can have an impact on science and technology through building up conspiracy theories and distrust in scientific research and developments, and slowing down progress.

### **Reason behind Infodemic**

Infodemic can occur due to several reasons in the digital age, few reasons are discussed below:

**Rapid spread of information:** In the digital age where social media and the internet has become a pivotal part of daily life, information can spread faster and quickly to reach the mass population. This is a positive situation when the information is correct, but can be lethal when false and misinformation is being spread.

**Lifestyle:** Natural tendency of people is to find a quick solution in any circumstances. In the digital age people are more susceptible to false information that promises easy answers or quick solutions.

**Lack of regulations:** Social media platforms and other online sources of information do not follow the same regulations and standards as traditional news sources, as a result false information makes it easier to spread and cause an infodemic situation.

**Confirmation bias:** People always try to confirm their belief and habit with such information which supports their belief without evaluating them whether accurate or not. And finally they trust on the misinformation that aligns with their existing views.

**Malicious actors:** Malicious actors which include individuals or organizations, that deliberately spread misinformation and create infodemic situations by spreading false information for their own gain.

### **Does Information Explosion Play Any Role in Spreading Infodemic**

Information explosion can play a significant role in creating an infodemic situation. The rapid growth of information over social media platforms and availability of other sources of information over the internet has reached a wide audience easily but made it more difficult to distinguish between authenticated and unauthenticated information.

Growing volume of information over the internet makes it impossible to sort the accurate and reliable source of information and can lead to the spread of misinformation.

Furthermore, the algorithms used by social media platforms to recommend and promote content can contribute to the spread of misinformation. These algorithms are designed to prioritize engagement, which can lead to the promotion of sensational or controversial content, even if it is not accurate.

Therefore the information explosion can fuel up the infodemic situation by making it more difficult to differentiate between accurate and inaccurate information.

### **Does Infodemic Exist Post Covid?**

Even though the term 'Infodemic' was coined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) during Covid 19 Pandemic situation, it's not confined to the Covid 19 Pandemic and can occur in any crisis or emergency situation. Infodemics have occurred in the past during other crises, such as the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks. They can also occur during non-crisis times, such as in political campaigns or in the context of social issues.

As the paper discussed, the infodemic situation can be caused in the digital age where information explosion is fueling the infodemic situation where there is an excessive amount of information, mostly inaccurate or misleading in nature, that makes it inconvenient for people to find accurate and reliable information.

It can be said that the possibility of occurrence of an infodemic situation exists in response to a variety of events and situations where there is a lot of uncertainty or controversy surrounding a topic. Different factors like faster spread of information through social media and online sources, the lack of regulations and standards in certain online information sources and the tendency of people to seek information which confirms their existing beliefs without fact checking.

### **How to Combat Infodemic?**

Dealing with infodemic is a challenging task but there are various ways which can be followed by individual and organizations to minimize its impact:

Strive for authenticated or accurate source of information: Search for reliable sources of information such as government websites or reputable sites or news sources for accurate information.

Before sharing information check the true fact: Before sharing any information especially over social media, firstly verify whether that is true or not. Use fact checking websites or tools to assess the reliability of the information.

Be cautious of the conspiracy theory: Spreading of conspiracy theories is an obvious situation during infodemic, so there is a need to be careful about the information which may support conspiracy theories and it is essential to verify the accuracy of the information.

Report misinformation: False information shared over any website or social media platform needs to be reported immediately. Many social media platforms support reporting of misinformation.

Support reliable information sources: Consider subscribing to reputable news sources or websites or donating to the organizations which are working to combat infodemic by providing accurate information.

### **Role of Librarian to Battle Infodemic**

Promote information literacy: Librarians can teach their users how to evaluate information sources carefully and how to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information sources. Librarians can work with other institutions, such as schools and community organizations, to promote information literacy and combat the infodemic.

Guidance and support: To stop spreading infodemic librarians can provide guidance and support to their patrons on how to find required and reliable information from the sea of available information. They can also provide training on fact checking tools and evaluate information sources.

Help in collecting information from reliable sources: Librarians can accumulate reliable sources of information such as peer reviewed journals or databases and provide them to their patrons to collect credible information from them.

Track and report misinformation: Librarians can work with their communities to track and address misinformation over the social media and combat the spreading of infodemic.

### **Conclusion**

The overabundance of information, some of which are inaccurate and misleading in the digital age is the main factor for the occurrence of an infodemic situation. The spread of infodemic can be stimulated by a variety of factors such as spreading of misinformation through social media and other platforms over the internet and lack of trust on traditional sources of information.

To deal with infodemic it is important to educate people about authenticate information sources and to train them how to identify and avoid misinformation. They must be aware of reliable information sources from where they can seek correct information according to their need.

Librarians can also play a pivotal role in combating infodemic by providing information literacy skills, by providing accurate and reliable information sources, and by working with the communities to deal with infodemic.

The governments, media organizations, and other institutions must take the responsibility to combat the spread of misinformation and occurrence of infodemic.

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