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Role of Misinformation in Migration

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Abstract

While there is a large literature on misinformation, disinformation and its harmful effects, and also a separate set of literature on migration and anti-migrant groups, this research paper exhibits a roadmap combining the two sets of literature. Using research papers, news articles, correlation is explored between misinformation and migration, the paper analyzes two significant migration crises - The Rohingya Crisis and The Central American Migrant Caravan. The analysis is further bifurcated into Pre-migration Misinformation and Post-migration Misinformation to plot the instrumentalization of misinformation. Additionally, special focus is done on the migration due to misinformation in the context of Covid-19. Decoding the traits from the analysis, sustainable, feasible, and justifiable solutions are sought out to tackle the issue.

Keywords: *Misinformation, Migration, Covid-19, Migrant Protection Protocol, Rohingya Refugee Crisis, Central American Migrant Caravans*

1.0 Introduction

From the perspective of citizens, human migration has always been perceived as a black and white scenario: a group of people leaving one country (usually an underdeveloped country) for another (developing or developed country). The realization that human migration is a whole spectrum arose only in the last five to ten years. For example, there are many forms of migration. It could be internal i.e. within the same state or country, or it could be external i.e. outside the country. It could be either voluntary, for education or employment, or it could be involuntary, such as migration due to invasion, conquest, colonization, natural disaster, etc. The latter makes the headlines more often especially when the migrants are in large numbers.

Even though the range of migration is now a perceived knowledge, it is still held back by the outdated migration process, systematic discrimination, and misinformation. These include official information that is inadequate or presented inadequately, outdated information, misinformation via gatekeepers and other mediators, information giving false hope or unrealistic expectations, rumours, and distorted information. Such information fabrication is not new but with time, its effect on migration and the resultant catastrophe keeps increasing like heat on a Scoville scale. Misinformation is no longer hidden or subtle but weaponized by either the government or the agents of government such as the media, entertainment industry, etc.

‘A short guide to the history of ‘fake news’ and disinformation’ by Julie Posetti and Alice Matthews shows, as the name suggests, a detailed history of disinformation or propaganda through significant events from the 44BC until the current decade. (Posetti & Matthews, 2018)

Highlighting a couple of notable events where disinformation led to migration crises:

1. 1914-1918 – World War I:

Propaganda played a crucial part in the recruitment effort, appealing to nationalism and patriotism: “Your country needs YOU”; “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?”

2. 1933 – Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda established:

With the rise of Nazism, Joseph Goebbels established the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda to spread Nazi messages of hatred-inciting violence against Jews, using all mediums - including theatre and the press.

According to a New York Times article (Roose, 2018), one post which was shared thousands of times was a false, mislabeled photo of injured Mexican police officers to claim that the caravan migrants were hostile against the law enforcement. This graphic picture sparked a strong rally and outcry of anti-immigration sentiment against the caravan migrants leading to a fight in Tijuana between the residents and migrants. This is just one small example of many highlighting that even though Facebook has undertaken efforts to curb misinformation, more stringent work needs to be done.

This paper examines two major migration crises from the 2010s, mapping out their similar traits and special mention of the misinformation and migration during Covid-19. The recommendations suggested resonate with the words of the former Director-General of the International Organization of Migration, “The Global Compact is a historic opportunity to achieve a world in which migrants move as a matter of genuine choice. It's time for the international community to come together to more responsibly and humanely manage the movement of people”

2.0 Linking the roadmap between Migration and Misinformation in the Rohingya Refugee Crisis and the Central American Migrant Caravan- A comparative analysis

2.1 The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis refers to the forcible displacement of Muslim nationals from Myanmar to its neighbouring countries, with over one million taking refuge in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. In 1982, a citizenship law resolution was passed which effectively curbed the Rohingya as stateless residents. The law outlined three levels of citizenship and to obtain the most basic level (naturalized citizenship), people must produce proof that the person's family lived in Myanmar before 1948 and was fluent in one of the national languages. But unfortunately, the Rohingyas didn't have such proof and thus legally lost their rights to study, work, travel, marry, practise their religion, and even access to health services have been and continue to be restricted. Being treated as foreigners the Rohingya couldn't even vote. This new law officially erased the Rohingyas from the country's 135 ethnic groups, thus making the persecution against the stateless residents easier. The crisis was initiated when a Rohingya separatist group, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), attacked more than 20 police posts in August 2017. The Myanmar Armed Forces, under the command of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, responded to these attacks with a widespread assault. The Cox's Bazar District was still hosting more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Those fleeing attacks and violence in the 2017 exodus joined around 300,000 people already in Bangladesh from previous waves of displacement, effectively forming the world's largest refugee camp (*Rohingya Crisis*, n.d.)

a. Pre-Migration Misinformation

- b.** Even though the attack from ARSA was the tipping point for the armed forces to retaliate that does not justify over 1000 people being killed in the violence. An article from the New York Times, 2018, suggests that this was not spur-of-the-moment anger and retaliation but a deep sense of hatred already clouded in the minds of the armed forces and citizens over the years. It indicates how more than 700 military personnel were involved in turning Facebook into a tool for ethnic cleansing through hundreds of fake accounts, troll accounts, news and celebrity pages on Facebook (Beech, 2018). For example, the military had disseminated fabricated pictures from the past to accuse the Muslims of mass killing Buddhists and thus justified its inhumane treatment to the Muslims as a form of retaliation. Facebook managed to remove accounts spreading propaganda but the damage had already been done since one of the accounts had over 1.3 million followers. This does not include the shadowy fake accounts whose sole purpose is to spread the disinformation started by the military personnel. Due to facebook's engagement drive algorithm, a user would see those posts on their timeline related to what they would like and read, what their friends would like or share generating an echo-chamber (Winnie, 2020) that affirms the stance that the user had previously committed to, regardless of its authenticity and validity. Such affirmation is dangerous because it makes one wrongly think that the misinformation accurately reflects the reality when it does not.

c. Post-Migration Misinformation

The straws of misinformation were brewing over the years before it ultimately broke the camel's back and gave advent to the crisis. Pre-migration misinformation is limited and is only in effect until the eventual breakout of a crisis, primarily acting as the unnoticed, shadowy cause to the catastrophe; this however is not the case with post-migration misinformation. In this type, the effect of the misinformation would last longer and impact much more areas such as aid from world organizations, acceptance of refugees by other nations, going back to their home countries, etc. Also, the source of pre-migration misinformation is primarily by anti-Rohingya Myanmar citizens attacking the sentiments and livelihood of the Muslim majority. Over here, the source of misinformation is not just the Myanmar citizens but an international hate sentiment for the reasons mentioned earlier. For example, there was a sudden surge of misinformation rapidly spreading on all international social media platforms targeting how the refugees must not be allowed in other countries. Posts stated the refugees arriving from other countries would resort to looting, killing and creating havoc in host countries. Citizens of host countries, caring for their friends and families, spread these posts and pressure their governments to not grant asylum. Thus some EU member states act on this misinformation and pressure, keeping the migrants in detention for long and subject them to ill-treatment and torture.

In a study conducted, migrants attempting to cross the border between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia were kept in detention centres where: 98.14% reported experiencing multiple forms of torture, 81.5% reported having their property looted, and 70.4% stated that they had been physically harmed during migratory transit (Rubio et al., 2020). On the other hand, using the 2020 new pact on migration and asylum (*A Fresh Start on Migration*, 2020), member states have opted out from accepting refugees and only provide financial assistance.

2.2 The Central American Migrant Caravans

Since 2014, the United States saw a dramatic spike in migration from Central America, creating a humanitarian crisis along the US-Mexico border. The migrants were mainly from The Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), a region comprising El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, due to the increasing gang violence, threats, extortion, persecution and sexual violence. 890,000 people from the NTCA and Nicaragua have been uprooted from their homes. The displacement in Nicaragua is due to political turmoil and persecution triggering a massive exodus in the region. The BBC reported that on 12 October 2018, around 160 people gathered at a bus terminal in the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula, ready to begin their long journey north toward the US-Mexico border. By the time the group set off in the early hours of 13 October, more than 1,000 others had joined them. The group swelled in size and entered Mexico on 19 October. On Nov 13, thousands of migrants had arrived at the US-Mexico border after travelling more than 4,000km (2,500 miles) from Central America. The total count of migrants, including all the smaller groups, was around 10,000.

a. Pre-Migration Misinformation

Just like Myanmar used Facebook to incite hatred and genocidal violence against the Muslim Rohingya minorities, the same pattern is seen in Ethiopia where disinformation (Bouie, 2020) shared on Facebook helped incite violence that claimed 86 lives in Ethiopia's Oromia region.

In Honduras, fake accounts were used in favour of president Juan Orlando Hernández to draw out negative comments to the government, only retweeting the president and news outlets favourable to his administration. This boosted the need to migrate from Central America since even though there were obvious violence, journalists and media organizations were silenced or crushed under the administration (Kinosian, 2018).

b. Post-Migration Misinformation

While the caravan migrants were in transit from their home country to the host country, mislabeled and doctored photos started spreading. One post, which was shared 80,000 times claimed that the migrants were not travelling on foot but instead boarded buses. The post however turned out to be taken in 2013. Another post claimed to show photographs of migrants burning the American flag which turned out to be an old photo of protestors burning a Trump banner at an anti-Trump rally (Roose, 2018a). Since the migrants' ultimate destination was America, it is not surprising that there was an anti-USA pattern in all the misinformation and fake news. During President Trump's tenure, his administration was called out by prominent news organizations for building an anti-refugee sentiment in the country through his speeches and tweets. However, the Trump administration, backed by their supporters, enacted "zero tolerance" policies such as family separation (Ayón, 2018) and a stricter regime at the detention facilities.

3.0 Special focus on the misinformation causing covid-19 related migration

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most, if not the most, groundbreaking health crises in the 21st Century. It also completely revolutionized the health sector, education sector, media sector, employment sector and most importantly, the government sector. The pandemic pointed out the devastating social, economic and political issues in all the countries Covid-19 has spread to. It also acted as the new benchmark in comparing the ready recovery measures, government's response to people's issues, and corporate thinking in terms of their employment benefits, etc. Migration was one of the most concerning issues for the governments as there were mass hysteria and panic amongst the citizens causing them to move back to their home states or countries. It was the role of the government and the media to provide ease of comfort to its citizens via proper communication and information, steering away from "information pollution" to avoid adding on to the already existing uncertainty and panic about the virus and lockdown. Research shows that distress and panic during pandemics can propagate and promote misinformation in various ways along with increased digital screen time and unhealthy use of technology.

On March 24, 2020, due to the rapid increase of the coronavirus, the Government of India implemented a lockdown with strict restrictions on commerce, mobility and transportation links with just four hours of notice. According to data provided by the government, out of India's 4 crore migrant workers, over 25% per cent (Pathak, 2020) have migrated back to their home states due to the lockdown. However, the number could be higher as the data has not considered states like Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Goa.

Since Covid 19 originated in Wuhan, it has been termed as the "Chinese virus" and thus beginning racist attacks globally. The pandemic gave rise to Xenophobia and Asian citizens have been verbally and physically abused, for example, a Singaporean student being attacked in London. On March 4, the New York Times was called out over a post about the first coronavirus case in America. The woman had likely become infected on a trip to Iran yet the NYT used a picture of Chinatown (Bauomy, 2020) and Asian people with masks on. The picture was quickly swapped out with a generic picture of New York traffic without comment. As a world-renown news organization, that would have had a universal effect on the minds of people if it wasn't replaced. In Guangzhou, Guangdong province, which has China's largest African community, the Chinese authorities began a campaign to forcibly test African for the coronavirus. Landlords then evicted (Human Rights Watch, 2020) African residents, forcing many to sleep on the street, and hotels, shops, and restaurants refused African customers.

One of the biggest **takeaway points** from the 2020 year of coronavirus and misinformation is the structural challenges that migrants face. Primarily, there is a lack of representation and inclusiveness for migrants in healthcare while also facing obstacles such as language barriers. Migrants often experience crowded and unhealthy living conditions, especially in detention and reception contexts. Thus, keeping in mind the possibilities of another pandemic, the most urgent matter would be to provide temporary citizenship to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, enabling them to access healthcare facilities (Gruer et al., 2021).

4.0 Was misinformation influential in drafting immigration policies?

Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP)

Even though on March 12, 2021, the newly elected President of the United States of America, Mr Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. dismissed the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), it is still worth noting its implementation from 2019-2021. The MPP, known as the “Remain in Mexico” program, dealt with the foreign individuals seeking admission into the US but were sent back to Mexico with notices to appear in immigration court. The problem with the notices were two folds; firstly, no confirmed date was mentioned in the notices for the asylum seekers to appear in court and second, even if they did manage to appear in court, there was barely any legal representation. Only 7.5% of individuals subjected to MPP ever managed to hire a lawyer(American Immigration Council, 2021). The refugees were repeatedly misled by the border patrol authorities, and then the pandemic postponing the court dates indefinitely. Not only that, as of February 19. 2021, there are at least 1,544 publicly reported cases of kidnapping, torture, murder, rape, and other violent assaults against asylum seekers and migrants forced to return to Mexico by the Trump Administration under this illegal scheme (Human Rights First, 2021).

On the official page of Homeland Security, migrants have been addressed as aliens throughout the MPP content. Governments must refrain from calling migrants aliens, floods, swarms, etc as this creates an image of ‘outcasts’ for the American citizens. In the defence of the MPP, the Trump administration had claimed that only 3 per cent of asylum seekers and 2 per cent attended immigration court, however, stats confirm that ninety-two per cent of asylum seekers appeared in court to receive a final decision. One of the draconian loopholes in the MPP is that since its implementation, migrants have been sent back to the most dangerous cities such as Tamaulipas (a recommended no travel zone according to the U.S. State Department), and Ciudad Juarez (one of the world’s most violent cities) subjecting them to attacks, rape, kidnapping, and torture.

5.0 Decoding motivation and instrumentalization of misinformation from the above comparative analysis

5.1 Stigma against migrants

One of the most prevalent themes in all migration crises is the stigma and discrimination against migrants. Whether it be migration due to the partition of India, migration due to World War I, migration due to the Iraq War, or the migration of workforce from southern and eastern European countries to northern and western European countries in the twentieth century, over time there has always been prejudice against the migrants; only additional point is that in the twenty-first century it has been more easy & vocal to spread the discrimination against them. (Esses, 2020)

One of the reasons could be that immigration is perceived as a threat and competition to one's group & one's nation concerning safety and security, cultural threat, employment threat, etc. Research suggests the perception of cultural threat is likely high when immigrants are perceived as not adapting to the host society's culture and identity or are seen as bringing in and retaining cultural norms and practices that are fundamentally in conflict with those of the receiving society. Stigmatization is also affected by how your country perceives migrants, for example, Canada, Australia & the United Kingdom see migration as a strength rather than a burden, unlike Hungary & Greece. In the current context, the coronavirus has generated stigma against migrants perceived as bringing the virus to the communities. There are other factors as well which affect the stigmatization against migrants, such as what type of migrants are they, their purpose, home country, etc.(International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2020).

5.2 Political Climate and National Ideologies

Government ideologies and political consciousness will always have an impact on the citizen's collective and majority stance on social issues. A study (Gaucher et al., 2017) was conducted, over 18 months, to understand the role of political ideologies on migrant stereotypes in Canada. During this time, there was a shift in the federal government's position about accepting migrants into Canada.

The Wave 1 data was collected in June 2015 under the conservative government led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. This government introduced several high-profile public policies relevant to immigration. These included the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act, mandated detention of any person classified as “irregular arrival” and the required removal of woman’s face coverings when taking the citizenship oath. Waves 2 and 3 were collected after the 2015 federal election of a new government. The new Liberal government, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, brought in additional 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada. Government statements tied immigration to dominant ideologies such as framing being welcoming to migrants as the “Canadian Way”. In recent years, there has been a surge in international migrants rising from 155 million in 200 to 258 million people in 2017. This burden of international migration is the reason for the rise of an exclusionary form of nationalism in migrant host countries, thus creating major challenges for the protection of host countries (Swain, 2019).

5.3 Role of Media

Harding in “Pandemics, Plague & Panic” explains how the flow of information can influence the spread of an outbreak and human behaviour (Harding, 2009). This phenomenon was witnessed during Covid-19 when garlic, a well-known antiviral herb, was generalized to be the antidote to the virus which was false. “This health-related misinformation becomes all the more crucial during a pandemic like COVID-19 when the “fear of an unknown infection without a definitive cure” mixed with “an anxious mind” tends to easily accept “fast solutions and theories,” irrespective of visible loopholes in their logic and reasoning (Banerjee & Rao, 2020). In every migration crisis, the media fails to distinguish between refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, etc. This large number of individuals seeking resettlement opportunities in new countries may be overwhelming leading the media and political elites to portray these individuals as marauders, swarms, and waves who threaten to flood or invade Western countries. The media also dehumanizes the crisis by using metaphors such as aliens, floods and swarms. While covering the crisis, the media focused on the disparity between the two governments or more instead of providing an international perspective of the displaced communities.

On the other hand, during the Rohingya (Cook & McGonigal, 2017) & Caravan (SIMMONS, n.d.) crisis, the media captured the emotional and hardship-filled journey of the displaced people. These photos and videos acted as a testimony against the lies and misinformation spread by hateful groups and government organizations.

5.4 Anti-migrant groups

Anti-migrant sentiments can be found in every migration crisis either as a silent or as the most key factor. There are various kinds of anti-migrant sentiments such as xenophobia, nativism, racism, etc. Xenophobia refers to the prejudices that reject, exclude and often vilify people, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society, or national identity. It can be expressed in various ways such as discriminatory policies and practices by government and private officials, assault and harassment by state agents, particularly the police and immigration officials, etc. According to the Consortium (Misago et al., 2015) for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, the May 2008 attacks — mostly on migrants — ultimately left “62 dead, 670 wounded, dozens raped, more than 100,000 displaced. Millions of Rands worth of property was also looted, destroyed, or appropriated by residents in just over two weeks”.

In ‘A Short Guide to the History of ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation’, it is evident that anti-migrant groups have one of the key factors in spreading hate sentiments against the communities especially during Hitler’s regime and his propaganda against the Jewish people. The same was witnessed before the advent of the Rohingya Crisis wherein the army personnel acted where the anti-migrant groups were brewing hate sentiments against the minority.

6.0 Recommendations

6.1 Identifying misinformation & fake news

Misinformation and Fake news can cause panic amongst citizens and make them lose their trust in government organizations, political institutions, journalism, etc. It is critical to understand that government regulation on media is not a possible way to tackle misinformation as this would mean giving unprecedented and unchecked power to the government and be a threat to the dignity of independent journalism.

However, there are several alternatives to deal with disinformation without endangering the freedom of journalism and investigative journalism. Instead, the government should encourage independent journalism especially during turmoil where the media is looked up to. One of the most crucial ways for a news organization to call out fake news is by relying on professional fact-checkers. Non-profit organizations such as Altnews, Politifact, Factcheck.org, Full Fact, etc judge the accuracy of organizational claims and write stories detailing the truth or lack thereof of particular developments. Citizens can access a list of known and certified fact-checkers in their country through the given list (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). The government should support partnerships between journalists, businesses, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations to encourage news literacy. Citizens and consumers can protect themselves from fake news by listening to diverse organizations. People tend to accept information that is congruent with their ideological beliefs and dismiss information that is incongruent with their ideological beliefs. This can and must be avoided to not fall prey to fake news, especially during a health or humanitarian crisis.

6.2 Attitude towards displaced communities

The first and foremost role is to understand that migration is a spectrum, which is why it is important to understand the difference between migrants, refugees, economic refugees, asylum seekers, etc; This is precisely why the heading for this section says “attitude against *displaced communities*”. There is a need to understand and address the difference between them because the goals of each are different, based on which the policies must be set.

Globally, people's attitudes towards immigration are broadly in line with their government's immigration policies, although it is difficult to ascribe casually as to whether policies are determined by public attitudes or vice versa. In 2014, Gallup analysis (Dempster et al., 2020) of 136 countries found that in countries with restrictive policies, 61 per cent of adults wanted to see immigration levels decrease. The close connection between immigration and wider issues in public perceptions signals the need to engage those outside the migration space. For example, mapping a deal with the key, private infrastructure and housing sector players to build better camps for the migrants and also better housing opportunities once citizenship is confirmed. Better funding is required to conduct better grass-root primary research, polling, language courses, etc. Funding could also be used to provide teaching to the citizens of host countries about the positive effects of migration, focusing on the roles that immigrants play in the economies and societies and helping them tackle misinformation on migrants.

6.3 Reliable migrant networks

Due to the current stigma against migration, there are only a few migrant networks and they are overburdened. With more social awareness, a larger and stronger migrant network can and must be developed. Such networks would link potential migrants in origin areas with others in destination areas, or work to connect highly skilled or educated migrants with institutions or organizations in the home or host country that are looking to recruit them. Social ties are instrumental in making migration happen, regardless of the policies and restrictions of a certain country. Necessary resources, such as information, money, persuasion, influence, and aid must be exchanged within these ties to make migration possible.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper discussed the impact of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, etc on migration. The analysis so far indicates the role of misinformation in almost every crisis carries the same traits i.e. nationalistic ideologies, anti-migrant groups, etc. To tackle these traits, certain solutions are mapped that can create an impact from the grass root levels such as the role of media as to how they portray the displaced communities, changing the perspective of the people against refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, etc.

Natalie Nougayrède, a Guardian columnist, once stated in an article “The use of propaganda is ancient, but never before has there been the technology to so effectively disseminate it”. The analysis so far in this paper has proved this statement to be true and leading to catastrophic results. This analysis may also hold for any future migration crises as well. For example, it would be fair to assume that based on the current climate crises, environmental migration would be a possibility. Even though it would relatively be a new cause, the traits will be the same. There might be even new traits such as people who deny climate change, believing it to be a cooked-up phenomenon to serve the interests of the business elites, political organizations, etc. The ever-developing technology and the advent of Artificial Intelligence will expose us to new forms of misinformation which might be even a bigger substantial threat to vulnerable communities. Moreover, it will be particularly important to analyze migration and misinformation in a future context where natural resources would have either almost or completely. Thus, proper modes of information are critical now more than ever to help people understand the major underlying issues to not lose even the slightest chance to regain a sustainable world.

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