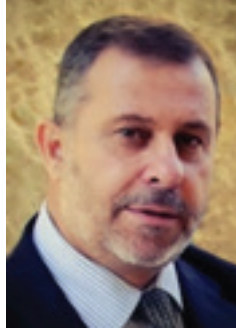


## 2- MEDIA APPROACH TO THE COVID19 RUMORS INFODEMIC

(AN ISLAMIC- CULTURAL PERCPECTIVE)



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Allah states in the Quran (what means):

“O you who have believed! Avoid much [negative] assumption. Indeed, some assumption is sin. And do not spy or backbite each other. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his brother when dead? You would detest it. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Accepting of repentance and Merciful.” [Quran 49:12]

### **ABSTRACT:**

One of the main challenges of the (COVID-19) coronavirus pandemic was the unprecedented challenges to the health systems all over the globe; another pandemic has become viral and epidemiologic, and that is infodemic. What made the situation even worse is the fact that when information is rapidly changing, myths, rumors and misinformation empowered the surge

of numerous hoaxes and misinformation, regarding origins, outcomes, prevention and cure of the disease .That wild spread of false information over the Internet and social media, together with the fabricated material published in unknown and unauthorized sites, was a very fundamental challenging element in the basic activities used in the virus battle. The current pandemic and the measures taken to address it, on a global scale, are unprecedented since it is the first time throughout human history that the whole world is depending on the social media platforms as the key foundation for the dissemination of information. Apparently, this phenomenon also sparked a great deal of research efforts more than ever before devoted to the detection of fake news and the spread of misinformation activities, which were spreading xenophobia and panic. This study is capable of increasing our knowledge regarding misinformation during the current pandemic.

The approaches to studying and investigating the phenomenon were varied in social and public media, as well as in economic, political, medical, and religious based construal and understanding. One of the main core objectives of this paper is focusing on the Islamic methodology applied in clearing up and dealing with rumors. The paper's approach will be digging deep in the Islamic history in an attempt to highlight the Islamic plan of the tackling the problem of infodemics, with a reflection to similar cases in the Islamic history in order to draw lessons and build solid generalizations.

**KEY WORDS:** COVID-19, Coronavirus, Misinformation, pandemic, Rumors, Infodemic, Islamic Approach, Information Dissemination.

### الملخص:

تؤكد القراءات التحليلية، والدراسات الموثقة أن التجربة غير المسبوقة عالمياً مع جائحة فيروس كورونا، وما رافقها من ظهور خطير لهذا الكم الهائل من الأخبار غير الموثقة، والشائعات المرسلّة، ورسائل التواصل الاجتماعي غير المنضبطة، لا تقل أهمية وخطورة عن انتشار الفيروس بحد ذاته، إذ تتطلب مكافحتها جهوداً لا تقل عن جهود مكافحته. ومسألة انتشار الشائعات والأخبار الكاذبة أمر لا يمكن أن يتم التعامل معه بحسن نية أو بسطحية، إذا إنه من المعروف في علم الإعلام والتواصل، أن انتشار الشائعات في مجتمع ما، غالباً ما يؤدي إلى إحباط الجهود والإمكانات الهائلة التي تقدمها الدول والمجتمعات للحفاظ على سلامة المجتمع ومناعته. وما تسمية هذه الظاهرة «بفيروس الشائعات» إلا دليل، واعتراف عالمي، بخطورة هذا النوع من التجاوزات الاتصالية. وخلال الأشهر القليلة الماضية نشرت آلاف الدراسات والأوراق العلمية، ونظمت المؤتمرات والندوات التي تتوسع وتنتقب وتغوص في تحليل ودراسة هذه الظاهرة في مجتمعات محددة، أو على المستوى العالمي، من أكثر من منظور وزاوية.

ورقنتا البحثية هذه هي دراسة في الأدبيات المنشورة ومحاولة تأصيلية للرؤية الإسلامية، وتحديد المنظور الشرعي، لقضية الشائعات في إطارها العام، وفي حالة فيروس كورونا على وجه التحديد،

وخطورة انتشارها، وتأثيراتها السلبية والسيئة على جميع الصُعد: الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية والعلمية.. وحتى الرياضية... من خلال استقراء المعالجة والتجربة التاريخية والحضارية في التعامل مع الشائعات، وكيفية التصدي لها، إلى جانب تأصيل الرؤية الشرعية للأحكام والفتاوى التي تتعلق بنشر الشائعات، وإمكانية إسقاط هذه الأحكام على واقعة نشر الشائعات في زمن الكورونا. وقد أفسح القرآن الكريم، والمصادر الشرعية المعتمدة في المجتمعات المسلمة لهذه الظاهرة (الشائعات) الحيز الكبير من الاهتمام إقراراً بخطورتها، وتأكيداً على ضرورة التعامل معها بكل وعي وصرامة. والمعروف أن الإسلام له موقف واضح وحازم من مطلقي الشائعات، حيث سماهم القرآن الكريم بالمرجفين، وقد حرم الإسلام الإرجاف والتسبب في الاضطرابات والفوضى المجتمعية، والخوض في الأخبار السيئة غير الموثقة، كما تعامل بشدة مع المتورطين في هذا العمل.

#### Introduction:

As the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic continues to occupy the headlines in today's news stories and world media coverage, highlighting the significant challenges for the health system all over the globe, that outbreak has affected the lives of global citizens across 221 countries<sup>86</sup>. Another pandemic has become viral and prominent; that is **infodemic** as it was labeled by the World Health Organization; other sources called it "Parallel Pandemic"<sup>87</sup>. "We're not just battling the virus," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "We're also battling the trolls and conspiracy theorists that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response."

One of the defining characteristics of this pandemic has been the massive spread of misinformation. The term, infodemic, had been used to outline the risk(s) of misinformation occurrences. The whole world was desperately trying to control the disease outbreak since it could even speed up the epidemic process by influencing and crumbling social response<sup>88</sup>. This infodemic had fueled the surge of countless rumors, frauds, and misinformation, regarding the origins, outcomes, prevention, and cure of the disease<sup>89</sup>. In such a vital situation, where information is rapidly changing, unreliable data and misinformed messages empowered the surge of numerous hoaxes and

86 Worldometer . (2021). COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

87 Song Y, Kwon KH, Lu Y, Fan Y, Li B. The "Parallel Pandemic" in the Context of China: The Spread of Rumors and Rumor-Corrections During COVID-19 in Chinese Social Media. *American Behavioral Scientist*. March 2021. doi:10.1177/00027642211003153

88 Cinelli, M., Quattrociocchi, W., Galeazzi, A. et al. The COVID-19 social media infodemic. *Sci Rep* 10, 16598 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>

89 Samia Tasnim, Md Mahub Hossain, Hoimonty Mazumd, Impact of Rumors and Misinformation on COVID-19 in Social Media, *J Prev Med Public Health*. 2020 May; 53(3): 171–174. Published online 2020 Apr 2. doi: 10.3961/jpmph.20.094 - PMID: PMC7280809

deceptions. A striking particularity of this crisis is the coincidence of not only the rapid speed of the virus itself, but also the information – and mis-information– about the outbreak, and thus, the panic that it created among the public... “The pandemic of social media panic travels faster than the COVID-19 outbreak”<sup>90</sup>.

The internet has become the greatest source of health information world-wide due to the use of a huge number of mobile devices and easy and low-cost connectivity with the internet across the world. The extensive development of the pandemic disease has challenged researchers all over the world; it is a scientific fact that the infectious diseases had killed more people than any other cause throughout history. Some of these investigators are working to invent its cure while others are applying computing technologies to stop its spread by analyzing and identifying patterns for prediction and forecasting.

The epidemic outbreak of the rumors’ phenomenon had triggered much panic around the world because of the inaccurate figures and excessive number of multi-form rumors distributed, especially through the social media due to lack of awareness by the said social networks may have proved to be far more frightening than the virus itself <sup>91</sup>. Governmental official bodies, as well as the well-established mass media platforms, health care organization, community-based organizations, and other important news providers, tried to form strategic partnerships and launch common podiums for disseminating authentic public health messages .As the pandemic evolves, the need to report relevant information to frontline providers remained crucial. The stream of important information from multiple sources was constant and always changing.

With all the criticism and blame of the role played by a considered number of the social media platforms, several studies and observations have indicated that the social media were very effective in the process of providing essential health-related information to the global community. This highlights that the social media had raised the challenges that health authorities had faced in delivering accurate information to the public, in precedence to the proliferation of misinformation and the need for new strategies to build

90 Anneliese Depoux, Sam Martin, Emilie Karafillakis, Raman Preet, Annelies Wilder-Smith, Heidi Larson, The pandemic of social media panic travels faster than the COVID-19 outbreak, *Journal of Travel Medicine*, Volume 27, Issue 3, April 2020, taaa031, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa031>

91 Rostam Jalali & Masoud Mohammadi , Rumors and incorrect reports are more deadly than the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), *Antimicrobial Resistance & Infection Control* volume 9, Article number: 68 (2020)

awareness against future infodemics<sup>92</sup>. In this regard, it is important to point out the differences between these two terms: misinformation and stigma. While misinformation or rumors distribution are the distinctive form of improvised news, the social stigma is a process of separating, stereotyping, labelling and discriminating individuals<sup>93</sup>.

Despite the widespread misinformation, social media also played an effective part in stopping the spread of misinformation since social media is a community institution and dominant factors that can positively influence the people's behavior towards the virus and the misinformation. Although social media platforms have introduced false information checking systems, some many posts and claims are still false and need more consideration<sup>94</sup>.

Imposing lockdown and social distancing has disrupted the daily life of nearly everybody in the globe and called for new and creative ways to make sense of the situation and adapt to it. In this context, social media became more influential for connecting and linking with the world around us, sharing experiences and generating new ways of understanding the experience of others<sup>95</sup>. That paved the way for the rumors and misinformation to become easily distributed worldwide during the crisis.

The spread of false information on the Internet and the social media, together with the fabricated information published in unknown and unauthorized sites, was a very fundamental and real challenging element in the groundwork activities for the battle against the virus. It is worth mentioning here that the number of papers devoted to detecting fake news is ever growing. For instance, on the Google Academy website, upon request "fake news detection" in 2020, we will see much more research than ever before

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92 Lee, J. J., Kang, K. A., Wang, M. P., Zhao, S. Z., Wong, J., O'Connor, S., Yang, S. C., & Shin, S. (2020). Associations Between COVID-19 Misinformation Exposure and Belief With COVID-19 Knowledge and Preventive Behaviors: Cross-Sectional Online Study. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 22(11), e22205. <https://doi.org/10.2196/22205>

93 Tasnim S, Hossain MM, Mazumder H. Impact of rumors or misinformation on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in social media. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health*. 2020.

94 Ali, Sana. 2020. Combatting against COVID-19 & misinformation: A systematic review. *Human Arenas*, published online 7 October 2020. 10.1007/s42087-020-00139-1.

95 Glăveanu VP and de Saint Laurent C (2021) Social Media Responses to the Pandemic: What Makes a Coronavirus Meme Creative. *Front. Psychol.* 12:569987. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.569987

devoted to the detection of fake news.<sup>96</sup> That could highlight the amount of concern and consideration paid in order to understand and evaluate that problematic outbreak. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook provided an unstoppable direct access to an unprecedented amount of content and surely intensified the spread of rumors and doubtful information.

As early as 1944, a study by Robert h. Knapp, entitled "The psychology of rumor", published in public Opinion Quarterly, introduced a taxonomy of three types of rumors: (a) "pipe-dream" rumors: rumors that lead to wishful thinking, (b) "bogy" rumors: dread rumors that increase anxiety or fear, and (c) "wedge-driving" rumors: those that generate hatred<sup>97</sup>. The covid19 case has proved that these three types of rumors are frequently used and adopted.

#### THE INFODEMIC PHENOMENON:

The inexpensive access to the internet along with the presence of a significant number of users has made the social media one of the easiest and effective methods for disseminating information. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the response of people was a greater search for information related to the coronavirus outbreak. Social media platforms have played both positive and negative roles during the pandemic (Google has analyzed the billions of search requests it processes every day and has identified the terms that have had the highest spike this year compared to 2019. Unsurprisingly, "coronavirus" topped the overall list).<sup>98</sup> Social media has become a helpful tool for individuals to communicate with friends and families during quarantine periods to minimize the negative effect of isolation, which has been associated with anxiety, stress, and fear<sup>99</sup>.

Observers, expert and recent research findings made it clear that there are multiple factors that have elevated the risk and contributed to the fast spread

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96 Vitkova L., Valieva K., Kozlov D. (2021) An Approach to Detecting the Spread of False Information on the Internet Using Data Science Algorithms. In: Radionov A.A., Gasiyarov V.R. (eds) Advances in Automation II. RusAutoConf 2020. Lecture Notes in Electrical Engineering, vol 729. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71119-1\\_43](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-71119-1_43)

97 ROBERT H. KNAPP, A PSYCHOLOGY OF RUMOR, Public Opinion Quarterly, Volume 8, Issue 1, SPRING 1944, Pages 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1086/265665>

98 Coronavirus and sourdough - this is what we searched for online in 2020, 22 Dec 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/google-most-popular-search-2020/>  
99González-Padilla D.A., Tortolero-Blanco L. Social media influence in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Int. Braz J. Urol. 2020;46:120–124.

of the Corona virus. Unsolicited rumors and social stigma are believed to have formed barriers and played negative role in reducing the effectiveness prevention of the disease. Research findings have confirmed that rumors, and social stigma, “might have fueled the risk and rapid spread of COVID-19”<sup>100</sup>. One of the reliable recently published studies’ findings showed that “...credibility evaluation of misinformation strongly predicts the COVID-19 individual responses, with positive influences, and some religious misinformation beliefs, as well as conspiracy philosophies, and general misinformation beliefs, come next and influence negatively. The findings and general recommendations will help the public, in general, to be cautious about misinformation, and the respective authority of a country, in particular, for initiating proper safety measures about disastrous misinformation to protect the public health from being exploited”<sup>101</sup>.

International bodies and organizations, such as World Health Organization, and other public health organizations had been engaging in a severe full-scale battle against the infodemic dispersal in all forms of expounding activities, such as conducting campaigns against misinformation activities, working together with social media platforms, and regularly providing evidence-based information to the public through press releases; however, the spread of misinformation worldwide had remained flourishing. It is worth highlighting in this regard that ‘misinformation’ is described as “any false information shared unconsciously (without having sound knowledge of its authenticity and without any purpose to harm anyone) while ‘disinformation’ is any false information that is consciously shared to harm others”<sup>102</sup>, according to Wardle and Derakhshan article.

Social media platforms were flooded with examples of “news” and “tales” and claims of finding the cure for the disease through using inconvenient traditional and unreliable medicine (treatment), such as cow urine and dung

100 Huda MN, Islam R, Qureshi MO, Pillai S & Hossain SZ. Rumours and social stigma as barriers to the prevention of coronavirus disease (COVID-19): What solutions to consider? *Global Biosecurity*, 2020; 1(4).  
<https://jglobalbiosecurity.com/articles/10.31646/gbio.78/>

101 Barua, Z., Barua, S., Aktar, S., Kabir, N., & Li, M. (2020). Effects of misinformation on COVID-19 individual responses and recommendations for resilience of disastrous consequences of misinformation. *Progress in Disaster Science*, 8, 100119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2020.100119>

102 Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. 2017. Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe, 27 September 2017. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>.

(China). Such practices may drive people to erroneous treatment and prevent them from looking for appropriate health guidance and attaining evidenced-based medical suggestions and treatment, thus potentially, costing lives<sup>103</sup>.

"Conspiracy in the Time of Corona: Automatic detection of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Social Media and the News" was the title of a reliable study which examined the spread and limitation of the long-term social and economic ramifications of the pandemic<sup>104</sup>. Among the stories currently circulating are ones suggesting that the 5G network activates the virus, that the pandemic is a hoax perpetrated by a global cabal, that the virus is a bio-weapon released deliberately by the Chinese, or that Bill Gates is using it as cover to launch a global surveillance regime.

Scientific research findings indicated that people who are living in quarantine, isolation, or at risk of an infectious disease outbreak are more likely to experience psychosocial stress and adverse health outcomes, which may provoke their interest in learning more about the disease. However, such situations require assurance complemented by a flow of correct information. This need has been acknowledged by the World Health Organization, which has partnered with several social media platforms and seven major tech companies—namely, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube—that agreed to stamp out fraud and misinformation, and to promote critical updates from healthcare agencies<sup>105</sup>.

The feeling of Depression and Despair was one of the many outcomes of rumors spreading and affecting all sides of our lives. More than 264 million people suffer from depression<sup>106</sup>. Depression can cause the infected indi-

103 Carter SE, O'Reilly M, Walden V, Frith-Powell J, Umar Kargbo A, Niederberger E. Barriers and enablers to treatment-seeking behavior and causes of high-risk practices in Ebola: A case study from Sierra Leone. *Journal of health communication*. 2017;22(sup1):31-8.

104 Shahsavari, S., Holur, P., Tangherlini, T.R., & Roychowdhury, V. (2020). Conspiracy in the Time of Corona: Automatic detection of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Social Media and the News. ArXiv, abs/2004.13783.

105 Statt N. Major tech platforms say they're 'jointly combating fraud and misinformation' about COVID-19. *Verge*; 2020 Mar 16 [cited 2020 Mar 28]. Available from: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/16/21182726/coronavirus-covid-19-facebook-google-twitter-youtube-joint-effort-misinformation-fraud>.

106 Malakeh Z. Malak, Ahmed H. Shuhaiber, Rasmieh M. Al-amer, Mohammad H. Abuadas, Reham J. Aburoomi. (2021) Correlation between psychological factors, academic performance and social media addiction: model-based testing. *Behaviour & Information Technology* 0:0, pages 1-13.



viduals to suffer greatly in their everyday life, and it mainly affects their daily routine activities, such as studying, working and household chores whereas the severe level of depression can lead to suicide. Around 800 000 people commit suicide every year where suicide is identified as the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15–29 years, according to World Health Organization (WHO).

The unprecedented case of this epidemic shows the critical impact of this new information environment. The information spreading can strongly influence people's behavior and alter the effectiveness of the countermeasures deployed by governments<sup>107</sup>. While some may be quick to dismiss these stories as having little impact on real-world behavior, recent events showed uncontrolled reactions, including the destruction of property, racially fueled attacks (against Asian Americans as an example), and demonstrations espousing resistance to public health orders revoke such conclusions.

#### EXAMPLES OF THE RUMORS SPREAD IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA:

1. Drinking water, or hot tea with salt, and eating soap, ... were recorded, as home-remedies that were suggested as cure to Covid-19.
2. A more unusual rumor documented was the spread of the belief that animal waste can be used to cure the virus.
3. Many social media accounts fueled conspiracy theories about COVID-19 as a biological weapon.
4. Common rumors went viral in August "Insisted" that Africans cannot be affected by the virus (the race game)..
5. The origin of Covid-19 – The belief that the virus was manufactured by (certain) foreign powers in order to kill a huge number of the "earth population" was the most common bioweapon conspiracy.
6. Among rumors relating to transmission, the belief that Covid-19 is transmitted by those who have poor personal hygiene was mentioned most frequently.
7. The most common transmission rumor expressed the belief that animals can spread the virus.
8. The conviction that the government is exaggerating the risk of the virus to support their own political agenda was the most popular reason

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107 Kim, L., Fast, S. M. & Markuzon, N. Incorporating media data into a model of infectious disease transmission. PLoS ONE 14, 1 (2019).

people gave for believing that Covid-19 does not pose a credible health risk. Elisa Granato was one of two people injected in Oxford, England, for the first human trial in Europe of a potential vaccine. Rumors swept social media that she had died, but Ms Granato and the British government debunked the news. The link to the fake story was posted on some Facebook group pages that opposed vaccination. "I'm very much alive, thank you," the microbiologist said in a video posted by the BBC. "I'm having a cup of tea"<sup>108</sup>.

9. Bats and fish are specifically mentioned animals, which are believed to be spreading Covid-19.
10. In terms of specific groups of people believed to be transmitting the virus, white people, Chinese people, and Congolese refugees were explicitly mentioned.
11. CNN has anticipated a rumor about the possible lock-down of Lombardy (a region in northern Italy) to prevent pandemics, publishing the news hours before the official communication from the Italian Prime Minister. As a result, people overcrowded trains and airports to escape from Lombardy toward the southern regions before the lock-down was put in place, disrupting the government initiative aimed to contain the epidemics and potentially increasing contagion<sup>109</sup>.
12. Other type of stories and rumors had come up with cultural, religious and conservative approach, to form theories on the origins of Covid-19 as a **punishment from God** and that it signals the end times. This category of rumors are the core discussion in the coming sections of our study.

#### THE ISLAMIC APPROACH:

It is rather commonly believed that during the stressful life events, adversities, and worries, religion offers a source of relief as a means for coping with uncertainty. Religious coping involves relying on one's faith, not only for refuge and comfort but also for possible explanations. Empirical evidence suggests that during tragic events, much emphasis is placed on prayer, scripture readings, and closeness to God as the way out of the crisis<sup>110</sup>.

108 UK: Rumour of death in coronavirus vaccine trial is fake news, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/uk-rumour-of-death-in-coronavirus-vaccine-trial-is-fake-news-1.1011279>

109 Sharot, T. & Sunstein, C. R. How people decide what they want to know. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 2020, 1–6 (2020).

110 Olagoke, A.A., Olagoke, O.O. & Hughes, A.M. - Intention to Vaccinate Against the Novel 2019 Coronavirus Disease: The Role of Health Locus of Control and Religiosity.

Congregational prayers are an indispensable part of Islamic practices. Performance of obligatory prayers in congregation is compulsory and mandatory for every Muslim adult male who has no excuse for not doing so. However, doing so during a pandemic can help in the spread of the COVID-19. Muslims look up to the Holy Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) (Hadiths) for guidance under all the circumstances<sup>111</sup>.

Lies, suspicion, backbiting, slander, gossip and rumors<sup>112</sup> are totally alien to the Islamic teachings. In fact, these acts are considered amongst the most destructive and unacceptable as major sins. That is because these acts could seed enmity, discord among the Muslim Ummah (nation) and lead to its destruction. Such acts cause hostilities among people of the same household, neighbors, friends and relatives. The indisputable words of the Holy Quran made that so clear: **“O you who believe! If a Faasiq (liar – malicious person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done.”** (49:6)

Such instructions and teachings should be observed not only among Muslims but also with all mankind, and that should be one of sincerity and responsibility. It should be one where respect for the honor, reputation and privacy of others is observed. Backbiting, attaching labels, insulting one another by nicknames, spreading rumors and suspicions about others are despicable acts in the sight of Allah. The following verses are very strong on this issue :**“O you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former; nor let (some) women scoff at other women, it may be that latter are better than the former,**

J Relig Health 60, 65–80 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01090-9>

111 Ashraf H, Faraz A, Raihan M, Kalra S. Fighting pandemics: Inspiration from Islam. J Pak Med Assoc. 2020 May;70(Suppl 3)(5):S152-S156. doi: 10.5455/JPMA.34. PMID: 32515399.

112 A rumor (American English), or rumour (British English) is «a tall tale of explanations of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue in public concern.» Literal meaning: It is mentioned in Lisan al-Arab that the Isha' (rumor) refers to circulated stories, and Mishya' means a person who does not keep secrets (IbnManzur, 1414). Intishar and dhuyou' means spread and circulation of rumor. Technical meaning: There are many definitions of rumor, including: It refers to stories, words, or news conveyed and repeated in the society without verifying their accuracy. There many objectives of rumors, such as: spreading fear, trouble, desire, and hatred, manipulate facts, and distort the opponent's image. Rumors usually used as a means of disrupting morale, concealing facts, questioning the sources of accurate stories, and distorting the reality.

**nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. How bad is it, to insult one's brother after having Faith. And whosoever does not repent (tauba), then such are indeed the wrongdoers (Zaali-meen)" (49:11)**

Namima refers to mentioning someone's words to others in order to ruin their pleasant relationships. However, it is not limited to speech and includes writing and making gestures as well. The person who mentions someone's words to another in order to ruin their friendly relationships is called "Nam-mam". In some cases, namima is accompanied with disclosing a person's secrets, slander, hypocrisy, envy, lying or backbiting. **"O you who believe! If a Fasiq (liar – evil person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done."** (49:6).

Muslims should always verify and weight the news received. Lying is the root cause behind the existence of rumor; therefore, those who know that the news come from a lying person should stop and verify it before spreading it to others. Any action undertaken on the news of a liar without any verification will definitely cause an action that a Muslim would regret in future<sup>113</sup>.

### **HANDLING THE "PANDEMIC" IN ACCORDENCE TO THE ISLAMIC SOURCES:**

**Pandemics** are not exceptional in the history of humanity. There have been several documented pandemics; among those was the plague pandemic in the mid fourteenth century, also known as, 'the Black Death' that led to a demographic decline in both the Muslim and Christian countries. While pandemics are primarily medical problems, history has shown that the responses were influenced by religion, belief systems as well as cultural values.<sup>114</sup>

Muslims view any form of affliction including disease pandemic, as a test from Allah that promises great rewards to those who face them with patience and submission. Muslims acknowledge that the ongoing disease pandemic is from Allah as mentioned in the holy Quran: "Who has created death and life that He may test you which of you is best in deed." (67:2).

113 The verdict of Islam on spreading rumors or false gossip, July 31, 2018, <https://archive.siasat.com/news/verdict-islam-spreading-rumors-or-false-gossip-1386718/>

114 Che Mohamad, Shahar M Tahir, Syed Abd. Hamid, Muslims Responses to Pandemics: Lessons from the Best Generation, International Islamic University Malaysia, IMJM Volume 19 No. 2, July 2020  
<https://journals.iium.edu.my/kom/index.php/imjm/article/download/1609/1059/4990>

A very striking example from a reliable historic reference recorded that Claiph Umar Ibn Khatab's gave a real pioneer response to dealing with the disease pandemic when he declared that measures reflected a balance approached and has set an important precedent for the following Muslims generations. He had indicated that the disease epidemic was a clear mafsadah, which needed to be banned through any permissible means. His balanced approach had set an example for other leaders to follow scientifically to the latest medical advancement when managing pandemics.

Osama bin zaid (one of the prophet's companions) narrates that Prophet Mohammed said: "If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague outbreaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place." (Al-Bukhari). Again, in the noble hadith, the Prophet Mohammed said: "God did not bring down a disease (or did not create a disease) but he sent down, or created a medicine for him" (Al-Bukhari). Islam warns Muslims, and all of the humankind that the treatment proceeds from preserving the soul, body and mind.

The Prophet did not underestimate dealing with the pandemics, nor did he panic but rather ordered the Muslim to be cautious and to deal practically with the pandemic. He stressed that preventing it is better than mourning and crying over the spilled milk as the pandemic is an enemy of man. All human beings are to put an end to it and confront it by all available scientific means, so that it does not spread and move from one place to another as the Prophet of Islam commanded<sup>115</sup>. No doubt, one of the most difficult shocks that the Muslim Ummah faced in the contemporary time is the banning of Friday prayer, which is the only Muslim prayer that has to be performed in a mosque. Banning Friday prayers on a global scale has not occurred since the time of Prophet Muhammad. An early debate in Muslim circles around coronavirus has been a theological one. However, these experiences have at least provided us with some perspectives on how Muslims value life and react in the most dignified manner amidst the pandemic chaos. Current policies on managing pandemics, including prevention of transmission and actions taken by authorities and fellow citizens are generally in-line with the teachings of Islam<sup>116</sup>.

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115 Craig. 2020. "Can the Power of Prayer Alone Stop a Pandemic like the Coronavirus? Even the Prophet Muhammad Thought Otherwise | Opinion." <https://www.newsweek.com/>. <https://www.newsweek.com/prophet-prayer-muhammad-covid-19-coronavirus-1492798> (April 6, 2020).

116 Che Mohamad, Shahar M Tahir, Syed Abd. Hamid, Muslims Responses to Pandemics: Lessons from the Best Generation, International Islamic University Malaysia, IMJM Volume 19 No. 2, July 2020

## THE INCIDENT OF "IFK" AND LESSONS FROM SURAH AN-NUR

The **Ifk** story (حديث الإفك) is famously narrated in all sources of **Seerah** (the life biography of Mohammed) and Islamic history. The story is cited in all the reliable Islamic sources although some differences could be noticed. That would make the incident and the outcome of its reflections one of the strongest lessons drawn from the seerah. Scholars of the past and present have striven to extrapolate points of benefit from it since there are many important lessons to be learned from the incident.

Upon returning from the Battle of Banu I-Mustaliq, the Prophet decided to take camp and to rest because it was night. In the early morning, 'A'ishah (the prophet's wife) went away to answer the call of nature when the caravan was resting in that place, but she lost her necklace and began searching for it. Meanwhile, the army who were not aware of her absence moved on and took her howdaj (Camel) with them thinking that she is inside it.

When Aisha returned, she found the place empty, so she became worried and started crying. She stayed there until a person called Safwan b. Mu'attal arrived, and let her get on his camel and took her to the caravan.

After the caravan arrived in Medina, Aisha became sick. When she was in her bed, she noticed the prophet's change of manner toward herself and found that some **rumors**<sup>117</sup> had been spreading about her and Safwan. These rumors caused real pain and sadness to her.

The incident led to both a domestic crisis within the household of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and a larger crisis that affected the Ummah of Muslims at the time. After a short while, The revelation (Wa'hi) of these verses of the Quran cleared the matter and introduced some Clear-Cut Guidance of the Quran in Case of Slander and Rumor introducing significant teachings in dealing with such case.. The revelation vindicated her stand and proved her innocence. **"Indeed, those who have come (to you) with the wicked slander (against the mother of the believers) are a band (of hypocrites) among you. Do not consider it evil for you. But, rather, it is good for you. Each one of them shall be charged with the sin he has earned. Moreover, whoever of them took upon himself the greater part of (spreading) it, for him there shall be a great torment (in the Hereafter). If only when you (first) heard it (uttered), the believing men and the**

117 Abdullah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul, the serpent's head of hypocrites (munafiqun) in Medinah, started a rumor by vaguely insinuating that there was "inappropriate conduct" between Aisha and Safwan. The incident was one of the most traumatic periods in the life of Prophet Muhammad

**believing women (among you) thought good of (the believers among) themselves, and said: This is clearly wicked slander!.And if only they (who uttered the slander) had produced, (under obligation from you believers,) four witnesses (to attest) to it! But since they could not produce any witnesses, it is these, in the sight of Allah, who are (to have been adjudged as) the liars (in this matter). (Quran 24:11–12–13)**

The verses of the Qur'an stipulate that adulterers must receive public punishment, an equally harsh penalty awaits those who level accusations against innocent victims without supporting these allegations with the testimony of four eyewitnesses. Not only do they receive physical punishment for spreading such lies and rumors, they must also be ostracized in their communities and are not allowed to give testimony in court.

The Qur'anic approach to the **Ifk** incident showed a clear use of angry and intimidating language to pronounce those who contribute to this form of explicit digression from good morals and condemns those who want shamelessness to pervade Muslim communities. To whom Allah promises painful punishment in this world and the day after, considering their behavior as an increased filthiness and evil is likened to walking in the footsteps of shaytan.

Allah said that this is a test of our iman and stipulates that we must immediately deny such rumors and not let ourselves become fertile ground for exaggerating unfounded allegations. It is haram not to give people the benefit of the doubt.<sup>118</sup>

Legal differences between personal opinion and defamation: There are some significant differences in defamation law between stating an opinion and defaming someone. Saying, "I think Adam is annoying" is an opinion and is something that cannot ever really be empirically proven true or false. Saying "I think Adam (just a name) stole a car" is still an opinion but implies that the person committed a crime. If the accusation is untrue, then it will defame that person. This is why the news media should be aware of using the word "allegedly" when talking about people accused of a crime.<sup>119</sup>

#### MUSLIMS INNER PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE:

Similar to argument that was heated among other religion groups, some

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118 <https://bayyinah.com/a-1-the-story-of-ifk.html>

119 Brette Sember, J.D., Differences Between Defamation, Slander, and Libel Being wronged or misrepresented is never pleasant, but not all insults are created equally. September 04, 2020.

<https://www.legalzoom.com/articles/differences-between-defamation-slander-and-libel>

Muslims argue that coronavirus was created by God to warn and punish humanity for consumerism, destruction of the environment and personal excesses. This means fighting the pandemic is futile, and people should rely (tawakkul) on God to protect the righteous. As Mehmet Ozalp, Associate Professor in Islamic Studies, Charles Sturt University, explained that the vast majority of Muslims counter this fatalistic approach by arguing that while the emergence of the virus was not in human control, the spread of disease certainly is<sup>120</sup>. They remind us that Prophet Muhammad advised a man who did not tie his camel because he trusted in God: **"tie the camel first and then trust in God"**. Prophet Muhammad sought medical treatment and encouraged his followers to seek medical treatment, saying "God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it...". Furthermore, the Prophet advised on quarantine: **"If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; if the plague outbreaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place"**. ( Sahih Bukhari – Volume 7, Book 71, Number 582)

Therefore, Allah has forbidden the Muslim community to spread the falsehood in the society as stated in the Qur'an: **"When you received it with your tongues and said with your mouths that of which you had no knowledge and thought it was insignificant while it was, in the sight of Allah, tremendous"** (Al-Nur: 15).

This is done by tracking the source of the rumor, punishing its inventors and holding them accountable because dealing with the source of rumors and exposing it could serve as the first step to stop the responses to rumors. Therefore, it is necessary to expose the hypocrites who invented the falsehood. The Almighty Allah said, **"Indeed, those who came with falsehood are a group among you. Do not think it bad for you; rather it is good for you. For every person among them is what [punishment] he has earned from the sin, and he who took upon himself the greater portion thereof – for him is a great punishment"** (Al-Nur: 11).

The Almighty Allah has warned those who repeat false rumors and thought that they are not committing an insignificant issue, but it is tremendous in the sight of Allah. On the other hand, the Almighty Allah has warned those who

120 Mehmet Ozalp, How coronavirus challenges Muslims' faith and changes their lives, April 2, 2020 AEDT, <https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-challenges-muslims-faith-and-changes-their-lives-133925>

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seek to spread atrocity in the Muslim community. He promised them punishment in this world and the Hereafter. The Almighty Allah said, **“Indeed, those who like that immorality should be spread [or publicized] among those who have believed will have a painful punishment in this world and the Hereafter. And Allah knows and you do not know”** (Al-Nur: 19).

### ISLAMOPHOBIA REVIVAL ... COVID19 VERSION:

The Coronavirus crisis has sparked online hate speech targeted Muslims and triggered an influx of Islamophobic fake news on social media sites. A research study carried out by Imran Awan, Professor of Criminology at Birmingham City University and Roxana Khan-Williams, found that Islamophobic online ‘Cyber Hubs’ were being formed which linked Muslims to the spread of COVID-19, spread anti-Muslim memes and shared fake news stories. The findings have been published in a report entitled, ‘Coronavirus, fear and how Islamophobia spreads on social media that provided a snapshot of the extent of the situation.

Analyzing posts across Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, as well as content commonly shared across WhatsApp groups showed a significant number of users across the platforms shared content portraying Muslims as a key contributor to the spread of the pandemic.

Some fake news theories shared online were:

1. Mosques are responsible for the spread of COVID-19.
2. Muslims are super-spreaders of the coronavirus.
3. Police give favorable treatment to Muslims out of fear of being accused of racism.
4. Muslims are not observing social distancing rules.

Fake news spread online included images of people attending Mosques which were taken weeks before the UK introduced lockdown measures and false claims of Mosques refusing to close<sup>121</sup>.

And another example from India, that was in March 2020, certain networks of disinformation had led to entrenched rumors that Muslims were ‘intentionally’ infecting Hindus through a range of behaviors. As a result, sev-

121 BCU, Birmingham City University, COVID-19 sparks online Islamophobia as fake news and racist memes are shared online, new research finds. <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/about-us/coronavirus-information/news/covid-19-sparks-online-islamophobia-as-fake-news-and-racist-memes-are-shared-online-new-research-finds#>

eral spaces—residential settlements and hospitals for instance – illegally and unconstitutionally denied entry and service to Muslims, resulting in further unnecessary deaths. In another incident in early March, after a wave of coronavirus cases struck a Muslim congregation in India, the hashtag #CoronaJihad went viral on Indian Twitter, and Islamophobic messages began to surge on social media. In one case, a false video showed purportedly Muslim men licking plates—allegedly to spread the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In reality, these men belonged to a community that strongly discourages wasting food. No one knows who crafted these false messages or why, but anti-Muslim attacks increased after their release<sup>122</sup>.

Other biased reactions were recorded. They showed actions of discrimination against other dogmatic groups. During the early stages of the virus spreading from Wuhan, China, mainland Chinese tourists were the main targets of hate speech of social media platforms in many countries, even in the surrounding Asian countries. There were claims about peculiar eating habits and other forms of hate speech that were flooding social media and short-messaging platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. This can be attributed as the first wave of hate speech in Asia. The swift move of collective nationalistic hate speech took a turn towards a more inward-looking domesticated version of ethnically driven hate speech amongst the three dominant races originating from the west of Malaysia<sup>123</sup>.

#### DISCUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is universally approved that Corona virus is a threatening respiratory sickness, causing various diseases and harmful sequences. The proliferation of misinformation on social media platforms is faster than the spread of Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) itself. Although the World Health Organization and other concerned bodies were warning regarding misinformation, myths and rumors are highly prevalent all over the world. According to international laws, the extraordinary situation requires extraordinary measures that mean many fundamental rights, including access to information, freedom of opinion, and freedom to impart the information and restrict the media resources to spread correct information regarding Covid-19. For this

122 Gayathri Vaidyanathan, News Feature: Finding a vaccine for misinformation, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Aug 2020, 117 (32) 18902-18905; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2013249117

123 K Fernandez, Three waves of hate speech spreading faster than the pandemic in Malaysia: An analyses of outgroup populist narratives and hate speech during the COVID-19, Geografia-Malaysian Journal of Society and Space, 2020 - ejournal.ukm.my

purpose, healthcare organizations and individuals are equally obligated to spread correct information and government resources to counteract against the impacts of misinformation<sup>124</sup>.

One of the media and communication facts of our time is that the amount of information is huge, and it is often difficult to distinguish dependable news and rational interpretations from unreliable information. In this regard, the issue of detecting rumors and fake news and countering their spread is a challenge.

The enormous number of research work and extensive amount of cited studies are all calling for firm action against the widespread misinformation. Many scientific papers and research institutes have demanded implementing cybercrime laws or initiating cybercrime services at the governmental level to remove malicious content and misinformation related to the COVID-19 outbreak from social media and to regulate and prevent rumors from circulating and provoking social stigma.

SPREADING FACTS, NOT FEAR was the aim of the communication efforts in the fight against coronavirus in Lebanon, which has focused on contributing to reducing misinformation by providing the communities, schools, health centers and the public with vital information around the symptoms, transmission, and prevention of COVID-19.

In our region, all governments in the Middle East have declared that they will have zero tolerance for rumor mongers amid the coronavirus pandemic, warning people of prosecution and hefty fines if they engage in what they have described as “dangerous” behavior. Imprisonment of up to five years and a fine of around \$1,200 could be imposed, according to a government statement carried by local Egyptian media Ahram Online. The statement has also called citizens to verify the authenticity of news they see on social media platforms – usually a hotbed for viral, misleading content.<sup>125</sup> Authorities in the UAE earlier warned residents against spreading fake information online, saying that violators will face jail sentences from three years to life in prison, in addition to a fine of up to \$816,000 .The UAE Ministry of Interior said that rumors, such as exaggerating the number of infections in the country could trigger fear and panic, and only relevant health authorities are allowed

124 Ali, S. Combatting Against Covid-19 & Misinformation: A Systematic Review. Hu Arenas (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00139-1>

125 As dangerous as the virus’: Middle East cracks down on COVID-19 rumor-mongers, Arab news, Saturday. April 03, 2021 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1649286/middle-east>

to give official numbers. Other Arab governments confirmed some similar declarations and statements.

Finally, the real challenge for all of us now is how we can unite efforts to reduce the negative effects of rumors spread as that may prevent abolishing the incalculable efforts made.

Here are some of the recommendations approved by scientifically accredited research papers and conferences proceedings in order to win the battle against the infodemic:

1. People should be cautious about misinformation and seek trustworthy sources to seek information, keeping in sight the massive amount of fabrications circulating in the air.
2. In healthcare settings, it is essential to formulate and sustain a rigorous policy for averting social stigma and people's negative attitudes towards healthcare workers. Authorities need to involve healthcare workers who have experienced stigma related to COVID-19 in developing such a policy<sup>126</sup>.
3. The mass media, health care organizations, community-based organizations, and other important stakeholders should build strategic partnerships and launch common platforms in disseminating authentic public health messages.
4. Advanced technologies like natural language processing or data mining approaches should be applied in detection and removal online content with no scientific basis from all social media platforms.
5. Those involved with the spread of rumors should be brought to justice.
6. Despite the widespread of misinformation, social media can also play an effective role in stopping the spread of misinformation since social media is a community institution and dominant factors that can positively influence the people's behavior towards the virus spread and misinformation.
7. Although social media platforms have introduced false information checking system, still some many posts and claims are false and need more consideration.
8. Social media corporations, with the help of governments, may need to

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126 Logie CH, Turan JM. How do we balance tensions between COVID-19 public health responses and stigma mitigation? Learning from HIV research. *AIDS and Behavior*. 2020:1-4.

strengthen their measures to identify and remove rumors and misinformation.

9. Gossip and rumors are not only diminishing the mental health status, but also may be interfering with the processes of diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of COVID-19. Therefore, the government and the health should consider planning strategies for coping with fake news during similar crisis authorities.
10. More research work should be conducted to identify the association of social media and COVID-19-related stress. Also, it is recommended that health authorities be more active in social media, especially during the outbreak of diseases to disseminate accurate information and factual news as many scientific references confirmed.
11. Convicting for case reporting and raising awareness may prevent health-care workers from issuing warning messages of the signs and symptoms of new and emerging infectious diseases in the future, and can potentially act as a barrier to undertaking speedy control measures for preventing large-scale outbreaks.

Studies and research works confirmed that rumors and stigma related to COVID-19 are very likely to contribute in weakening the global efforts to prevent the transmission of the disease. Otherwise, it may be difficult to stop the spread of the related rumors and social stigma, and subsequently, reduce the transmission and spread of the disease, as we have seen in the discussions of the paper. The researcher cautiously examined the gathered data and made the appropriate conclusions. Therefore, to further indorse this phenomenon, the researcher recommends more research efforts should be paid to investigate the effects and sequences of the misinformation pandemic during such crisis in our societies.

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