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How Social Media use for Risk Communication during the Covid -19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT : Social media as a crucial tool in Risk communication has become a robust area of research as its use has mushroomed across the globe. During the Covid-19 in Sri Lanka, Facebook became a critical conduit for the communication of vital public information. This study analyzed the communication flow that emanated from specific Facebook accounts during the six month period, the initial period of the Covid-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka, when the need for information regarding the disease was arguably most profound. Objectives of this study were, to study the impact in the dissemination of information on Facebook pertaining to the Covid-19, to understand the challenges in communicating risk on Facebook users in Sri Lanka and to examine the problems contribute to the delay of ending the covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative and Quantitative research aimed at indicating a target audience's kind of behavior and the views that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues. This study chooses a non-probability sampling technique. Consequently content analysis and critical discourse analysis used as the methodologies to thoroughly analyze. Facebook messages categorize as: updates; education/precaution; international response; denial/stigma; protests/riots; and other miscellaneous themes. It is prudent to note that the magnitude of an epidemic can be drastically reduced with appropriate risk communication strategy. The increasing use of the internet and the availability of mobile phones offer the possibility to go a step further than the official traditional media. Researcher observed that the public has become a crucial player in situations of risk communication, especially during cases of epidemic. Their involvement from its inception can largely contribute to the assessment and management of risk. It showed the effectiveness of the public in disseminating messages. Finally, there was a huge challenge of spreading rumors on social.

Keywords - Covid-19, Facebook, Risk Communication, Social Media, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Research Council (1989) says risk communication is "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions." This definition implies that a careful study of risk communication should acknowledge the importance of understanding the role of receivers, messages, and sources. In communicating about risk, sources need to pay special attention not only to what they say, but also to how their messages are formulated and framed, and how those messages affect receivers differently, depending on the receivers' characteristics, perceptions, and beliefs (01).

However (01), social media played an important role as an covid-19 outbreak information source. Millions of people are talking about # covid-19 online. Millions of tweets, Facebook and Whatsapp posts had been shared online; and organizations like WHO and the UN are using info graphics to issue advice (02). It is the view of the researcher that the magnitude of the epidemic triggered the need for faster information sharing in order to retard the rapid spread of the epidemic among affected countries and people. One of the most accessible and easiest ways to transmit relevant information is via the Internet; using social networking sites like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Wechat, etc. We would further mention that the active involvement of individuals in this age of media transition or the shift in media power from few to many, thereby democratizing the media, has widened the space for public opinion; thus providing an increase on societal influence.

The (03) new social media have not only changed the perception of risk and crises, but also citizens' expectations towards emergency response officials, the private sector, organizations that are volunteerism among others since the late 1990's. Society and the publics have been widely using social networking sites

like Facebook, Twitter among others, to communicate about risks and crisis situations. This transformation is widely connected to the rapid development of the Web 2.0 and its applications. Social media usage such as Facebook and Twitter is increasing even more rapidly.

As a result of this transformation in media, the public has become a crucial player in situations of risk communication. Their involvement from its inception can largely contribute to the assessment and management of risk. Their participation significantly impacted the ways in which scientific assessment and management are performed. The period in which experts determine the right evidence is no longer justifiable, and should be replaced by a more clear and far-reaching form of science and governance. Involving the public as stakeholders helps make communication an exchange of information in an effort to find innovative solutions, thus moving away from the previously utilized one-way communication (04).

This research assessed how Sri Lankan was participating in risk communication on Facebook, during the covid-19 epidemic. This study investigated how messages concerning covid-19 were shared among Facebook and assessed the significance of such information on the wider public. Using content and discourse analysis, and categorize the messages into different themes will aide better understanding of the research. Looking at a wider perspective of such research, information on social media like Facebook can be a way to better understand more accurately what is happening through a far-reaching flow of information during the period of an epidemic. This can be a way to provide information and guidelines, with real time alerts and warnings in the country.

II. RISK COMMUNICATION

Risk communication can be defined as 'communication with individuals (not necessarily face-to-face) which addresses knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and behavior relating to risk' (05). (Covello 1991) distinguished between four areas in which risk communication is applied: informing and educating; stimulating behavioral change and taking protective measures; issuing of disaster warnings and emergency information; and exchanging of information and a common approach to risk issues. Similarly, (06) noted that risk communication can serve a number of purposes ranging from the development of risk management policies to informing people about the various risks to which they are exposed.

Thus, according to that, risk communication includes:

- Statutory requirements to inform the public and other bodies about certain large-scale technological risks;
- Communication of technical information among scientists, policy makers and risk managers to inform decision making;
- Communication among all stakeholder groups to inform decision making;
- Provision of information which allows individuals to make informed decisions about whether to accept a risk or not, and to take certain risk reducing actions.

Looking at these choices, it is obvious that different approaches to risk communication will be more suitable for different goals. For example, a simple clear message might be appropriate for raising awareness and the participation of stakeholders' processes might also be encouraging to change behavior (07). Similarly, factors we might take into consideration for suitable processes of success vary depending on the communication purpose and target audience.

Risk communication is not about telling people what to do, but it is about providing people with information aimed at helping them make informed decisions. Risk communication seen from this angle is a multi-directional conversation between, but not limited to, risk analysts, risk managers, and decision makers about the known and unknown information regarding risks with the goal of fostering informed and effective decision making (08).

According to WHO, risk communication refers to the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being. The ultimate purpose of risk communication is to enable people at risk to take informed decisions to protect themselves and their loved ones. Risk communication uses many communications techniques ranging from media and social media communications, mass communications and community engagement. It requires a sound understanding of people's perceptions, concerns and beliefs as well as their knowledge and practices. It also requires the early identification and management of rumors, misinformation and other challenges.

III. MEDIA IN RISK COMMUNICATION

Calman observes that the mass media play an important role in shaping viewpoints of risk. His position has largely been supported by Paling (2003), who emphasizes that although experts can essentially quantify risk and attempts to pass on that information to the public, the information in most cases is sifted by various existing media, and can be understood differently by individuals and social groups. The impact of such filtering can take a positive or negative view depending on a particular situation. As in the case of the 1995

'pill scare' I earlier mentioned, it's noted that media's influence was largely disadvantageous, as a large part of the coverage was unbalanced and scandalous that led to fear in many women at the time (08).

As Bennett (1998) has however noted, the media does not usually create public interest. Relatively, they basically augment existing public interest in particular 'forms of mishap'. Consequently, public and media interest support each other. Bennett acknowledged a number of 'media triggers' that determine the degree of coverage given to a particular issue. These include: "questions of blame, alleged secrets or cover-ups, human interest, links with high-profile issues or personalities, the existence of conflict and the fact that many people are, or could be, affected by the risk in question (07).

As Jungermann (1997) has noted that is it not surprising, therefore, that risk communication is quite often a belligerent processs (09). Calman et al. (1999) noted that in relation to risk communication, we are in increasingly challenging times; recent challenges are as a result of the advancement in technology (10). As a result, Risk communicators must be mindful of the pros and cons in different methods used to generate the information they are trying to disseminate to the wider public.

Moreover, risk information he emphasizes may become worrisome and enrage the public. Evidence has shown that strong beliefs are mostly difficult to change noting that when people do not hold strong beliefs, their views and judgments can be significantly influenced by the certain ways in which message is transmitted. This presents risk communicators with a huge challenge. Sir Kenneth Calman, former Chief Medical Officer in the UK, proposed that the main purpose of risk communication is to produce an informed public that is involved, reasonable, thoughtful and collaborative (11).

Social[15] media includes using the Interest to share ideas, beliefs, and other information through text, graphics, and video on a risk significant to the public. For instance, teens with diabetes might join a social media network group to share diet and exercise guidelines and try to give each other support to achieve health goals. By means of using social media to share risk information has many advantages:

- The audience selects to participate in a discussion about the risk
- Their level of curiosity is higher
- For care and crisis situation
- Interest might transform into a willingness to change behavior that improves health and safety.

Information can be quickly posted on social media and updated when there is need. Because of an instantaneously feedback, there can be changes in opinions on different topics discussed; these are somewhat easy to track over time. (07) argue that if your aims are to participate in a discussion to determine how audience opinions shift, then social media could be a good choice.

While many see social media as an apt platform to share information on risk communication, the medium has some disadvantages. Not everyone can access social media because of technology challenges, and some demographics are less likely to use the sites than others, noting the controversies over trust in information. In addition, the fact that the information is in the audience's control can concern some institutions entrusted with the responsibility to communicate risk. So if your public does not seek information about risk in social media or your organization is reluctant to make the commitment to the medium, then the choice of social media may be inappropriate (07).

Thus, Social media are shifting the way individuals in a society communicate not only in their daily activities, but also during disasters that are potentially threatening public health (12). They argue that using social media can put a disaster risk community and doctors and public health professionals in a better situation to respond adequately to disasters. They emphasize that the fact that new media are so prevalent in communication, with more than 40 million Americans, for instance use social media websites multiple times a day, it is prudent to clearly think of the best way of using these communication channels before, during, and after disasters. I tend to support this claim, noting that Facebook which has the largest subscriber base globally can be judiciously useful and can help individuals, institutions and society to disseminate emergency plans and network solely for a given situation.

We[16] observe that new social media such "speak-to-tweet" (which allows brief Twitter messages to be sent through a voice connection) were made use of improve communication regarding health and safety in the first few days of the 2011 Egyptian uprising – formed by means of social media. Just after the Haiti's 2010 earthquake, Ushahidi – an open-source web platform that uses "crowd-sourced" information to help support crisis management – connected health care providers and victims stuck under the rubble, used Facebook to call for help. Also, during the 2009 influenza pandemic, within minutes after the Alexandra, Virginia, health department tweeted and texted about where vaccine to fight HIN1 influenza was available and accessible, people clustered to vaccination sites. These tools they believe have made it easier for both medics and affected people be knowledgeable about a public health situation and what is at stake as a responsive measure to save the situation.

Significantly (12), social media can be used to direct preparedness to help in the event of an emergency. Showing in the status of a social networking site, Facebook, readiness and skills both for

professionals and volunteers could be an effective measure in real time, for authorities to identify who and how to mobilize in a disaster area.

IV. INDENTATIONS AND EQUATIONS

Web-based social media mostly social networking sites (SNSs) have grown considerably in recent times. To a large extent, such significant growth removed time and space barriers for individuals on connect with one another, providing the possibility to maintain existing social ties and expand social networks. Studies in recent time have showed that social networking functions were effective in improving users' access to health information, engaging society in line with lifestyle changes among other (13). The most remarkable development in the social media space is the fast and continuous growth of Facebook. In the United States for instance, more than 65% of the internet users use Facebook to update personal statuses, follow friends, or share information. Globally, one in 7.7 people has a Facebook account and an estimated 530 million are daily active users. Facebook usage also breaks into the health domain. Among U.S. Facebook users, 23% have followed friends' personal health experience or updates, 15% have retrieved health information on the site, and 9% have started or joined a health-related group (14).

Facebook has a great potential to influence individuals' health behaviors by influencing their opinions of social beliefs and the anticipations they set for themselves, or by improving their access to individually relevant information. Latest research has looked at how users use Facebook, as a generic SNS, for health information, why they use it, and their viewpoint of the usage.

It seems that subscription accounts are not the only way for such expat news outlets to operate. There are also "news and content channels" that use personal accounts. It's bound with limitations such as 5000 accounts as the contacts limit and moments as the only option to share content with multiple people at the same time with subscription accounts having no such limitations (15).

V. CONCLUSION

The (16) advent of new communication channels like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among others epitomizes the prospect to widen warnings to different sectors of the population during periods of emergency. Technologies of such are likely to avert communication collapse through reliance on just one platform, and thus strengthen the dissemination of warning messages, but also present policy makers with new challenges. Building credibility and maintaining trusts are crucial to the advent of effective risk and crisis management for both public and private sector. Facebook enables citizens to disseminate information in real time, as well as question government actions at low cost and high efficacy.

Internet (17) now speeds up communication and raises awareness, further than that of the traditional risk communication strategy, because it allows real time communication. With emerging diseases such as Ebola, it is important to identify effective risk communication strategies for informing both the public and professionals and to support and achieve appropriate behavioral patterns that ease public health risks.

It is prudent to note that the magnitude of an epidemic can be drastically reduced with appropriate risk communication strategy. They can help reduce increasing confirmed cases of epidemic like Covid-19 in a population with larger percentage of ignorance to such disease. The increasing use of the internet and the availability of mobile phones offer the possibility to go a step further than the official traditional media.

This study explored the extent to which social media Facebook was crucial during the Covid-19 epidemic in Sierra Leone. It revealed that Facebook – which is the largest social media site globally – played a significant role in disseminating relevant information of the Covid-19 epidemic in the country, using three (3) Facebook accounts. The perspective of such research area is quite new; it explored the possibility of using Facebook for sharing risk communication as a possible remedy to the stop and prevention of the epidemic in Sri Lanka.

The study sought to carefully examine the contribution of key players/actors in information dissemination to the wider public. These were evident in the number of significant indicators of effect, found in this research, that are crucial to show how significant Facebook could be, to raise awareness in real time situations. These effects include, update, education/precaution, international response, rumor/clarity of information, protests/riots, denial/stigmatization and miscellaneous.

The period in which experts determine the right evidence is no longer justifiable, and should be replaced by a clearer and far-reaching form of science and governance. Involving the public as stakeholders helps make communication an exchange of information in an effort to find innovative solutions, thus moving away from the previously utilized one-way communication (15).

We also realized there was low level of preparedness on the side of the government to immediately contain the deadly virus. Earlier postings on the Facebook wall of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MOHS) were focused on photos of meetings of authorities, as part of government effort to stop the spread of the disease, with less focus on important short messages that should tell the public what to do and what to avoid during the epidemic. In other words, messages on education and precautionary measures were terribly

low. This we observed was one of the reasons that led to the delay in the epidemic.

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