

# 21127 Influencers among 'key distributors' of coronavirus misinformation

Jim Waterson, The Guardian, 8th April 2020

Celebrities and politicians with large social media followings are proving to be key distributors of disinformation relating to coronavirus, according to a study that suggests the factcheckers and mainstream news outlets are struggling to compete with the reach of influencers.

The actor Woody Harrelson and the singer MIA have faced criticism after sharing baseless claims about the supposed connection of 5G to the pandemic, while comments by the likes of the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, playing down the scale of the crisis in the face of scientific evidence have attracted criticism in recent days.

Research by Oxford's Reuters Institute for the study of journalism found that while politicians, celebrities and other prominent public figures were responsible for producing or spreading 20% of false claims about coronavirus, their posts accounted for 69% of total social media engagement.

The issue has gained extra prominence as Britons began vandalising mobile phone masts in recent days amid wildly sharing baseless claims linking the virus to 5G.

Social media companies were summoned to a meeting with the culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, on Wednesday afternoon to explain what they are doing to reduce the harm caused by false health claims about coronavirus on their platforms, with WhatsApp and YouTube having made tentative steps in recent days to reduce the impact.

There is growing concern that online disinformation could be having real world health impacts. Research by Dr Daniel Allington, senior lecturer in social and cultural artificial intelligence at King's College London, suggested there was a statistically notable link between people who believed false claims about the coronavirus and people who were willing to flout the government's social distancing guidelines.

His findings, based on an experimental study conducted in coordination with the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, found that people who said they believed coronavirus was connected to 5G mobile phone masts are less likely to be staying indoors, washing their hands regularly or respecting physical distancing.

While social media platforms have moved faster than in the past to flag disinformation about coronavirus on public groups, prominent actors and entertainers with millions of followers on Twitter and Instagram have helped fan the flames of misinformation, often reaching vastly more people than mainstream news outlets.

"This small amount of people have a wide reach for the content that they are spreading," said Scott Bredden, a research fellow at the Reuters Institute. "The most common claims had to do with the policies and actions of public authorities, although we saw plenty of misinformation about the medical side."

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