



ADMM Cybersecurity and
Information Centre of Excellence

UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

Issue 1/22 (January)

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

INTRODUCTION

1. There has been a growing trend of online disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, fuelling conspiracy theories, far-right extremist sentiments and sometimes resulting in violent protests on the ground.

A BREEDING GROUND FOR DISINFORMATION AND EXTREMISM

2. With various countries continuing to implement lockdowns throughout 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many people continued to spend a large portion of their time online, be it for work, play, or using social media. The pandemic has also amplified the volume of disinformation, especially anti-vax and anti-government conspiracies, on social media. These trends have created new opportunities for extremists to spread their ideologies and reach wider audiences.

3. Social media platforms such as Telegram, Facebook and Twitter are frequently used by organised criminal groups, terrorists, and even violent non-state actors to spread conspiracy theories and to cast doubts on the COVID-19 pandemic response measures taken by the government. These illicit actors make use of social media to undermine the government's credibility, sway the public's confidence level and trust, and to promote extremist narratives and values.

ONLINE MANIPULATION & PROTESTS

4. Several media agencies such as *NBC News*, *CNN*, *PBS* and *NZ Herald* had reported increase in the spread of disinformation about COVID-19 vaccination, and an uptick in the dissemination of extremist views through Telegram, a cross platform messaging application, in countries like Canada, New Zealand and the US since Aug 2021.

5. Online disinformation was spread on Telegram to manipulate people into resisting vaccination and to advocate far-right ideologies such as white supremacy. As Telegram is an unmoderated online space, extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories on the platform could be left unfiltered and unchecked, which could then lead to violence in the physical space within a short period of time.

6. The spread of disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccination had fuelled momentum of far-right extremism, triggering violent riots and protests. In New Zealand, for instance, criminal groups had used Maori language and adapted to local culture in Telegram channels to negatively portray the New Zealand government's efforts to contain the pandemic and weaken public support for their own government.

7. Similarly in Canada and the US, extremist groups stoked heated discussions on Telegram channels that were linked to far-right and anti-vaccine movements. Particularly, Telegram has become a favourite tool among far-right extremist groups as it lacks content moderation and one could easily garner a huge number of subscribers. For instance, US public broadcaster *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)* reported on an American far-right extremist Telegram channel that had a steady reach of around 400,000 views each day. *PBS* expressed concern over the existence of such channels with extremist linkages and high reach as there are indications that some have been inspired to translate their online rhetoric into actions offline.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

8. Countries like Canada, New Zealand and the US have been working on solutions to combat the spread of disinformation. The proposed solutions offered by researchers and analysts include: (a) increasing national expenditures on digital investigation services; (b) working with private agencies to analyse online trends; (c) investing in research to address knowledge gaps; and (d) holding social media and tech companies accountable for disinformation and extremist content that are spreading on their platforms.

ASSESSMENT

9. With ongoing restrictions and unpredictable complications from COVID-19, it is imperative for disinformation and extremism to be tackled promptly so that communities can remain safe.

10. Measures that could be implemented include providing timely and credible information regarding COVID-19 vaccines through reliable and respected sources. The relevant government agencies could also work with social media applications like Telegram to encourage moderators of group channels to verify their members' identities through phone numbers or a personal identification number. Ultimately, governments should guard against online disinformation as it could lead to serious offline consequences.

CONTACT DETAILS

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