

Pattern of information disseminated by news portals regarding covid-19 pandemic in Guwahati

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Abstract

With the advent of digital network, news portals of regional media are gaining momentum. These portals started gaining popularity through its social media connects like Facebook and Instagram earning good reach of followers. In this global pandemic, the e-portals have been very active in disseminating information related to Covid-19 in the region through its websites and Facebook pages. This study is aimed to understand the impact of the news circulated by two news portals of Assam namely, G-Plus (English) and Pratidin Time (Assamese) among the masses. It focuses to examine the extent to which people of Assam had been influenced by the information forwarded by these portals. To conduct this study, contents regarding the pandemic situation in the region dispersed by these two e-portals were analyzed for the month of September 2020. The study intended to analyze and differentiate the impact of news related to Covid-19 by examining the responses of the audience both these e-portals. The results of the study show that news circulated by these e-portals has impacted the minds of people in both positive and negative ways.

Keywords: covid-19, news portals, facebook, information and social media

Introduction

In the present era digital communication and social networking has reached a new momentum globally. Social media network sites are online platforms through which individuals, groups and organizations create presence and share information through texts, photos, music videos etc. Social media platforms are also one the fastest mode/medium of public health awareness, and twitter # tag information provided (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020) what's going on all over the world in the fastest mode. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc. are popular social media platforms for sharing through messages, events, video and photographs with the public about the latest updates of the situation going around. As per the current situation, the outbreak of Covid-19 has shaken the entire world and is in grief with half a million dead. The deadly virus was first detected in the city of Wuhan in December'19 and it was entitled as COVID-19 on 11th March'20. On 30th January'20 it was officially declared as a pandemic by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) (Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, 2020). As per the records 34,291,382 people have been infected with the virus causing 1,026,097 deaths globally till 30th September'20 (Worldometer, 2020) [18] India ranks world's second with highest number of Covid-19 cases with 6,310,267 total cases, 941,552 active cases and 98,708 deaths till day. This month has witnessed a sudden spike in the number of Covid-19 daily cases from 78,169 to 86,748 to the end. Assam itself records rise in the number of coronavirus cases with 180,811 total cases, 36,112 active cases and 697 deaths (Assam Covid-19 Dashboard, 2020). The amount of information flowing about Covid-19 is quite overwhelming as this entails extra care in order to curtail the risk of the crisis. Thus, it is the need of the hour to report the pandemic in an appropriate

way that helps to drench the risk of the crisis rather increasing it. Massive actions are to be taken by the government abruptly in order to connect with the public to change their behaviour and attitude in combating the rapid spread of a new disease like Covid-19. The local health authorities have been communicating with preventive measures to the masses with the aim of minimizing the rate of the infection. The local media has been quite effective in the public communication regarding the pandemic plays a crucial role in providing information about the latest updates of the virus, motivating them to adopt preventive measures minimalizing its transmission and reassuring them government's role in safeguarding their health.

The media has remained an essential agent in the event of a health epidemic in the 21st century. This was witnessed during the Ebola, SARS, MERS, and now COVID-19 pandemic. A new term named Infodemic, which combines information and pandemic, has been newly introduced to describe this phenomenon. In practice, Infodemic has already heavily impacted on society (World Health Organisation, n.d.). The role of the Internet and social media alongside that of mainstream press outlets creating awareness regarding the pandemic cannot be underestimated, as international mechanisms of surveillance regulated by the WHO are now open to receive alerts from these new media, alongside communication issued from official channels for the public. With the purpose of creating awareness for the situation innovative modes of operationalizing data gathering from tweets, blogs and Social media micro post sources are being used with a sight to detect in near-to-real-time the emergence of a crisis. Thus, it gets easier to investigate and observe public views, opinions, feeling, and emotions shared during such outbreaks using the data provided by the social media platforms. The popularity of new media during the

lockdown has enabled the E-portals to reach the public easily for dissemination of news about Covid-19 which has been momentous in causing political, social and economic disruption along with mortality and morbidity.

G-Plus

G Plus – Guwahati’s foremost media network caters to over 25 million people each month using its various social media handles, website, Android and iOS application (Facebook). Guwahati Plus (G Plus) initially emerged as a weekly English Tabloid in 21st June 2013 and soon established over digital platform launching its website for E-news portal. It has gained immense popularity among the masses of the region through its social media handles i.e. Twitter, Facebook, You Tube and Instagram as it can be accessed in both English and Assamese language. Over the Facebook page it has 202,980 followers (as of November end 2020) for the well-researched and creative stories, opinions along with analytical and incisive insights besides interesting features and snippets from segments like news analysis on city, Vox Populi, business, space, fashion & lifestyle, society, events, careers, life, reviews, travel, etc.

Pratidin Time

Pratidin Time is a 24-hour Assamese satellite news channel. It is a sister concern to the leading media network of Assam, which has the highest circulated weekly newspaper Sadin, highest circulated daily newspaper Asomiya Pratidin, highest circulated women’s magazine Nandini. Pratidin Time works with an objective to create a fine mix of investigative journalism with technological innovations to enhance social awareness. Our program mix cuts across all age groups and all sections of society. The channel is a mix bag of programs varying from genres such as infotainment, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, showbiz, fashion, education, etc. (Facebook). It has 1,918,022 followers over its Facebook page.

The current study seeks to understand how public communication has been framed through the transmission of information by the News portals in creating awareness regarding the pandemic in the region. Therefore, the researcher selects Facebook pages of G-Plus and Pratidin Time as a surveillance system to analyze the contents and response of the people. The primary goal of this study is to analyze the responses of the public to the information and contents shared by these portals in creating awareness among the people of the region. The study applied a qualitative approach to analyze and differentiate the impact of news related to Covid-19 by examining the responses of the audience through comments and reactions posted in the Facebook pages of both these e-portals for the month of September 2020.

Study gap

The researcher after thorough review of various literature identified that no such study has been conducted analyzing the impact of information disseminated by news portals during emergencies like Covid-19. The researcher opted the area as communication strategy analysis helps understanding the motive of media owners and gatekeepers. Media message design process and its impact study during emergencies helps understanding the social situation better.

Objectives

- To understand the impact of information disseminated related to Covid-19 on Guwahati audiences
- To identify the pattern used by media owners to disseminate the information related to Covid-19
- To understand the feedback of the audiences on the information provided by the media units

Methodology

The present study employs qualitative techniques and uses critical discourse analysis method to study the objectives. The study takes into consideration for analyzing the information related to Covid-19 as disclosed in the social media pages of two new media news channels. In an era dominated by new media and its various tools, news audience make vehement use of new media tools to gather information and accordingly the news channels utilize the media to connect with the minds and souls of various members of the masses. The current study aims at analyzing the information pertaining to Covid-19 of the select companies and the impact on the readers by studying the pattern of feedback.

Sampling and Justification

The researcher has selected Facebook pages of two new media news channels after following the Alexa rankings which found G Plus and Pratidin Times as popular web channels. G Plus has a page view of 11 million per day and Pratidin has a page view of 7 million per day. According to Alexa G Plus received 6.5 lakh unique users per day and Pratidin witnesses 3 lakh unique users every day. Thereafter a small survey was conducted to study the impact on the audiences, therefore 100 samples who were followers of above-mentioned pages were interviewed. Simple random sampling method was used to connect with the samples. Universe for the survey is the followers of G Plus and Pratidin Times.

Data Source and Analysis

The study has been exposed to qualitative method and uses critical discourse analysis. Since the nature of data is triangulation (both quantitative and qualitative), it has not been exposed to inter-coder reliability. Since the views of the followers are also taken through a survey, it is a critical analysis.

Sources of Data

The research work involves secondary and primary data as the data has been collected from Facebook pages of the select media houses and from the followers of those media houses. The content of the news channel has been analyzed by applying certain yard sticks. Since achieving legitimacy is an important compulsion for uploading data on the websites, it has been considered as a parameter. Disclosure as a parameter has also served the purpose to measure the willingness of the media houses to communicate the information. The feedback of the audience is studied through the survey.

Each single post related to the pandemic for the month of September was the unit of analysis for this study. Based on the criteria, our sample included 103 posts related to Covid-19 for the month of September 2020.

Data analysis

The study evaluates the information about Covid-19 shared for the public by plotting the daily number of post shared by both E-portals against the given time frame. The given figure depicts the number of daily posts informsssing the public about the issues related to Covid-19.

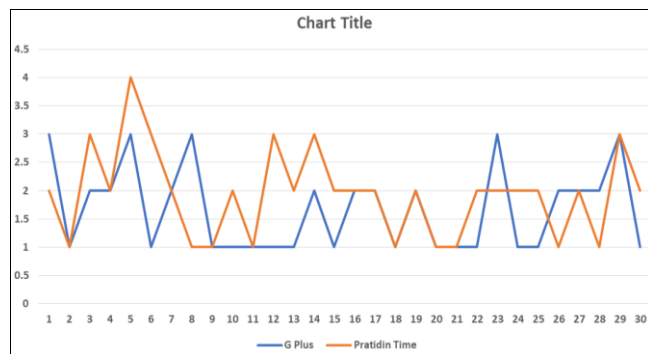


Fig 1

It has been found that G plus has shared 50 posts and Pratidin Time has shared 58 posts related to Covid-19 for the entire month of September. All these posts contain information related to Covid-19 and the steps taken by Government of Assam and India as well with the necessary public communication strategies and measures.

The study seeks to explore the dynamic nature of responses in social media that is related to COVID-19. It has been found that the posts shared by both portals receive reactions and comments from their followers on large scale on daily basis. Amongst the reactions available on Facebook for the posts: Like (👍), Love (❤️), Care (🥰), Ha-ha (😂), Wow (😲) and Angry (😡) is the mostly used reaction by the people. The analysis of the posts proves that maximum post received positive reactions and the information disseminated by the news portals followed a pattern. It was observed by the researcher that whenever there is a press release issued by the government, the news portals convert the piece of information into news and disseminate the message.

After conducting the survey, it was observed that maximum followers of the pages reacted not because of the perspective of the news but because most of the news were government announcements. It was also identified that the vernacular news portal (Pratidin Times) sensationalized many messages, whereas the English (G Plus) news portal just reported whatever the press release said.

Findings and conclusion

60% followers of both the channels agreed that the news portals mostly disseminate information, but exclusivity of the news is not seen. 80% audiences feel that the information provided helped the audience to gather many information related to Covid-19.

The pattern studied from the Facebook pages of the portals explained that the portals followed a pattern where they converted the press releases of the government into news.

The vernacular portal sometimes even sensationalized the news whereas the English portal disseminated whatever was informed by the government through press releases.

The news related to COVID-19 impacted the audience as many took decisions looking at the news.

The researcher though evaluated that the new portals lacked exclusivity in the content related to Covid-19. Most of the

reactions of the audiences were found to be positive and the content related to Covid-19 was shared by many followers of the pages. To conclude the researcher expects that during emergencies, the news portals could be more exclusive and share information with evidence and investigation rather than just becoming a mouth piece of the government. It is also recommended that vernacular news portals can be more objective and avoid sensationalizing of information.

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