



**FAKE
NEWS &
RUMOURS**

Weekly Bulletin | November 23–December 15, 2020



Institution for Disasters, Emergency & Accidents (IDEA)

CONTENT

COVID-19.....3

Overview.....3

Misleading Information.....4

Fake News 1: India Today – WHO Team investigating mystery disease in Eluru..... 4

Fake News 2: Cyber Crime en-cashing COVID-19 Vaccine excitement.....5

Fake News 3: Will COVID-19 vaccine alter human DNA?.....6

Fake News 4: Rejection of emergency use of the vaccine by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech. 7

Fake News 5: COVID-19 Vaccine to inject people with chips?.....8

COVID-19 Vaccine’s myth-busters.....9

Conclusion.....10

Citation.....11

COVID-19

Overview

We are currently in a phase characterized by relentless worldwide endeavors to create an effective and safe vaccine for a pandemic that has unprecedentedly changed the entire landscape. As we approach towards the end of the year, these attempts are slowly beginning to bear fruit. Few of the COVID-19 vaccines now have been authorized around the globe (like Pfizer's vaccine, Sputnik V etc.), while the others are still in the development phase. The first slot of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine was shipped from Michigan on December 13, 2020, marking the commencement of the biggest vaccine drive in the history of America.

While the concerns regarding the side effects of the vaccines are still there, research on the efficacy rate of the COVID-19 vaccine has started. The Gamleya Research Centre expects that the Sputnik V vaccine against Coronavirus would be more effective as compared to Pfizer's Vaccine in terms of immunity period.

Also, there have been fake messages as well as fake calls, emails and social media messages which are propagating the prioritisation and immediate availability of vaccines to common citizens. And are encouraging a form of money laundering and cheating related cyber-crimes, this is being carried out by sending messages and posting on social media.

These posts are psychologically quite attractive, but they contain falsified information and thus innocent civilians can easily become the victim of these frauds by sharing their CVV number or bank details. In various states the cyber-crime taskforce of police have taken the cognizance and are creating a framework to deal with such fraudulent crimes. A massive awareness campaign and Risk communication campaign needs to be built around such rumors and myths related to COVID-19 vaccination.

The World Health Organization is being targeted by Fake News spreaders by inventing "hyper-news" and seeking validation from the creditable institutions like WHO, to bring genuine in the news piece. Hence national publication like India Today, also carried the piece seeking the "WHO intervention" such actions need to be checked and an "information verification behaviour/ culture needs to be adopted by the media as well".

India's COVID-19 tally of confirmed COVID-19 cases stands at 9.91 million cases with about 22,065 cases in the last 24 hours as of December 15, 2020. India's COVID-19 candidate, Covaxin jointly sponsored by Bharat Biotech and the National Institute of Virology, is in the third phase of the trial. The government of India has recently issued guidelines for the COVID-19 vaccination drive. Some of these include the vaccination of about 100-200 people per session in a day, monitoring the beneficiaries for about 30 minutes after the intake of shots, and permitting only one beneficiary at a time. To track the enlisted beneficiaries on a real-time basis, COVID-19 Vaccine Intelligence Network (Co-WIN) system will be employed allowing only the pre-registered beneficiaries with no facility of on-the-spot registrations.

Ongoing vaccine breakthrough in the world, decrease in the COVID-19 cases symbolizes a ray of hope for all of us. However, this should not bring laxity in our COVID-19 response efforts. COVID-19 precautions and safety measures need to be inculcated in our daily lifestyle. A more focused and equitable approach for the distribution of vaccines needs to be implemented without leaving anyone behind!

Misleading Information

The social media platforms are continuously working on sharing credible coronavirus updates and have launched sections collating all the latest facts for the widest possible audience. False claim and misleading information for the November 23 to December 15, 2020 duration is as follows:

Fake News 1: India Today – Fake News on two member team investigating mystery disease of Eluru district.



The screenshot shows the India Today website header with navigation links: NEWS, LIVE TV, INDIA TODAY, APP, and a menu icon. Below the header is a red navigation bar with links: HOME, MY FEED, MALAYALAM, INDIA, AQI, HEALTH, CORONA, GAMING, FACT CHECK, MOVIES, and SPO. The main article title is "WHO adds bleaching, chlorine used in Covid-19 sanitisation to Eluru's mystery sickness suspect list". Below the title is a sub-headline: "A two member WHO team, which arrived in Eluru on Tuesday, surveyed the affected areas, collecting the food intake habits, health details of the victims." Below the article is an advertisement for the Indian government's youth employment scheme, featuring the text "3.80 लाख से अधिक युवाओं को सरकारी नौकरियां" and "युवाओं के साथ योगी सरकार" along with a photo of a man. At the bottom left is the India Today Web Desk logo and contact information: "India Today Web Desk, New Delhi, December 10, 2020 UPDATED: December 10, 2020 09:54 IST". At the bottom right are social media sharing icons for YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Messenger.



Photo for representation

The news claims that “Experts were sent from the World Health Organization (WHO)” to investigate the mystery disease in Eluru district of Andhra Pradesh. The news further claims that two member team from WHO have highlighted that usage of bleaching powder and chlorine in the sanitisation process for COVID-19 has added to the suspect list of the causes of the mystery disease spread in the Eluru district of Andhra Pradesh.

Fake News 2: Community excitement to have vaccine – leads to cyber-crime.



કોરોના વેક્સિન માટે ફોન-મેસેજ આવે તો ચેત જો, ભેજા બાજો બેંક બેલેન્સ ખાલી કરી શકે છે: સાઈબર ક્રાઈમની અપીલ

વડોદરા, તા.૯
કોરોનાની રસી આવી રહી છે ત્યારે વેક્સિનના નામે ફેક ઈ-મેલ અને મેસેજ મોકલી તથા સોશિયલ મીડિયાના માધ્યમથી પણ લોકોને



કોરોનાની રસી આપવાના બહાને સાઈબર ક્રિમિનલ્સ ફેક મેસેજ મોકલી ઝડપથી વેક્સિન આપવાના બહાને રૂપિયા પડાવી રહ્યા છે. આ પ્રકારના ઈ-મેલ અને મેસેજથી સાવચેત રહેવા અને કોઈ પણ પ્રકારની અંગત માહિતી શેર ન કરવા શહેર સાઈબર ક્રાઈમ બ્રાન્ચ દ્વારા અપીલ કરવામાં આવી છે.

કોરોના સંક્રમણનો વ્યાપ વધી અલગ-અલગ માધ્યમોમાંથી પણ રહ્યો છે, બીજા તરફ એકાદ માસમાં વાઈરસની રસી આપવાના બહાને સાઈબર ક્રિમિનલ્સ લોકોને લલચાવી સંભાવના વ્યક્ત કરવામાં આવી રહી રૂપિયા પડાવી રહ્યા છે. આ પ્રકારના છે ત્યારે કેટલાક સાઈબર ભેજા બાજોને હવે કોરોના વાઈરસની રસીના બહાને ન આપવા તથા વેક્સિન આપવાના લોકો પાસેથી પૈસા પડાવવાના કારસો બહાને જો કોઈ વ્યક્તિ તમને ફોન ફેક ઈ-મેલ, મેસેજ તેમજ સોશિયલ મીડિયાના માધ્યમથી રસી અપાવવાના બહાને રૂપિયા પડાવવાના કિસ્સા બહાર આવતાં પોલીસ સજજ

રચ્યો હોય તેમ જણાઈ રહ્યું છે. આ અંગે સાઈબર ક્રાઈમ બ્રાન્ચ દ્વારા જણાવાયું હતું કે, સાઈબર ભેજા બાજો વેક્સિનના નામે લોકોને ફેક ઈ-મેલ તેમજ મેસેજ મોકલી રહ્યા છે. આ ઉપરાંત કેટલીક વેબસાઈટ પણ જોવા મળી રહી છે, જેમાં લોકોને કોરોના વાઈરસની રસી આપવાના નામે લાલચ અપાઈ રહી છે. આ ઉપરાંત સોશિયલ મીડિયાનાં કરીને બેંકને લગતી માહિતી અથવા તો ઓટીપી અને સીવીવી કાર્ડ નંબર માગે તો આ પ્રકારની અંગત માહિતી તેની સાથે શેર ન કરવા પણ પોલીસે અપીલ કરી હતી. ઉલ્લેખનિય છે કે, જ્યારે વેક્સિન ઉપલબ્ધ થશે ત્યારે વેક્સિન આપવા માટે પણ સરકાર દ્વારા સત્તાવાર રીતે જાહેરાત કરાયે અને તેની વિશેષ વ્યવસ્થા ગોઠવાશે, તે પછી જ રસી મળશે.

Also, there have been fake messages as well as fake calls, emails and social media messages which are propagating the prioritisation and immediate availability of vaccines to common citizens. And are encouraging a form of money laundering and cheating related cyber-crimes, this is being carried out by sending messages and posting on social media.

These posts are psychologically quite attractive, but they contain falsified information and thus innocent civilians can easily become



the victim of these frauds by sharing their CVV number or bank details. In various states the cyber-crime taskforce of police have taken the cognizance and are creating a framework to deal with such fraudulent crimes. A massive awareness campaign and Risk communication campaign needs to be built around such rumors and myths related to COVID-19 vaccination.

Fake News 3: Will COVID-19 Vaccine alter human DNA?

A WhatsApp forward has gone viral in which it is claimed that the COVID-19 vaccine will introduce mRNA molecules in the body that will change people's DNA. The 4-minute long video of a health expert, Dr. Christiane Northrup, claimed this (Figure 1).

However, the experts debunked the claim saying that mRNA vaccines work by introducing an RNA molecule in the body which helps in the development of viral protein that helps develop immune response and no such alteration in the DNA occurs. Press Information Bureau (PIB) stated the claim as fake (Figure 2).

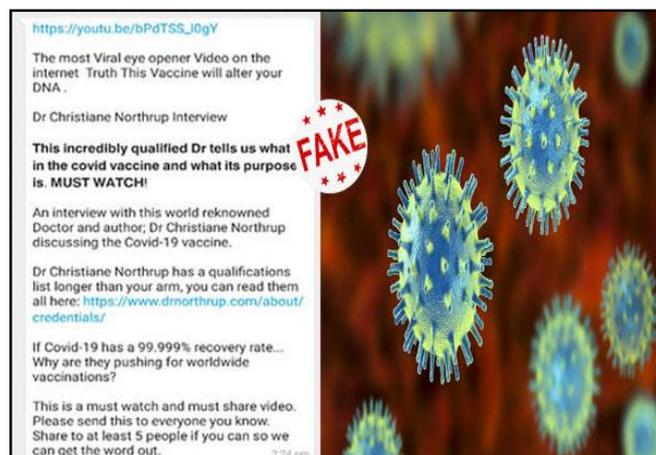


Figure 1

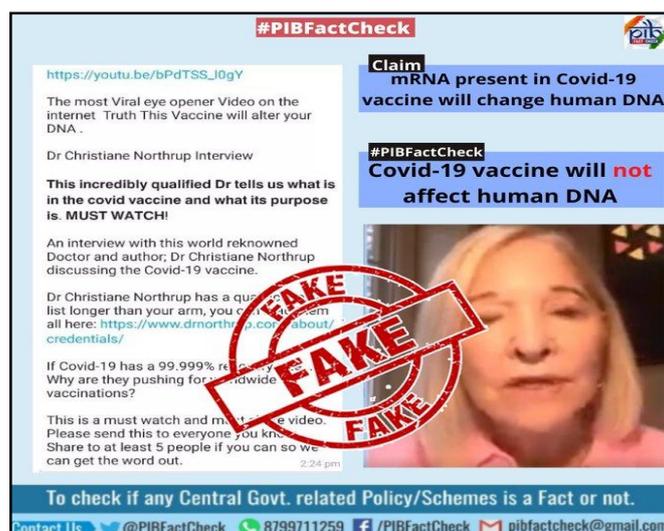


Figure 2

Fake News 4: Rejection of emergency use of the vaccine by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech: NDTV

Fake news has been widely circulated on channel like NDTV claiming that the emergency use of the vaccine by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech has been rejected. The reports claimed that the vaccines developed by these companies have not been cleared due to safety issues (Figure 3).

However, the Health Ministry, Press Information Bureau (PIB) debunked this claim of the media report about the rejection of vaccine's emergency use authorization (Figure 4).

Serum Institute, Bharat Biotech Vaccines Emergency Use Not Cleared Yet

The final call on the suitability of the vaccine will be taken by the Drug Controller of India or DCGI.

New Delhi: The requests for emergency use of vaccines being manufactured by the Serum institute and Bharat Biotech were not cleared today by a committee of health experts. Both companies have been asked to submit more data at the next meeting, the date of which has not yet been decided.

Figure 3

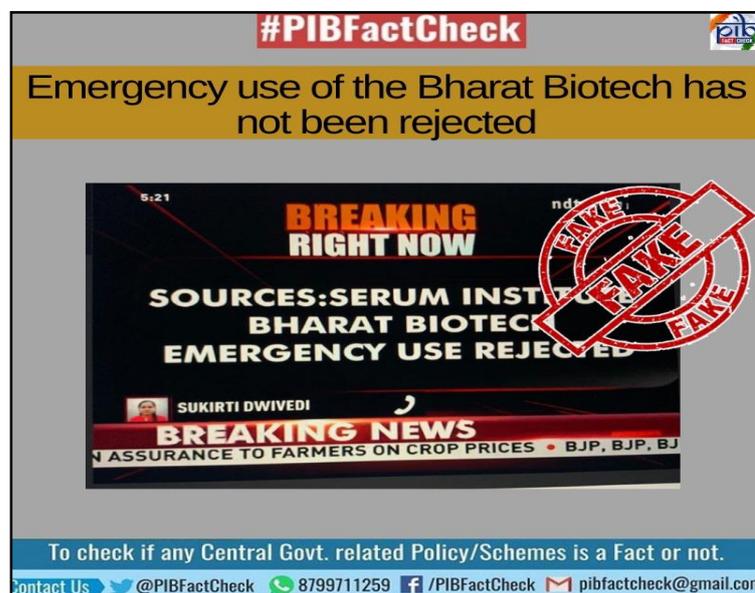


Figure 4

Fake News 5: COVID Vaccine to inject people with chips?

In several viral videos, it is claimed that vaccines contain chips that will control and change the behaviour of people. These videos have been doing rounds on the social media since May 2020. One viral video with similar claims contains clips of Bill Gates, Melinda Gates and Jack talking about injecting people with chips (Figure 5)

However, it is found that the claim was false and a contract was signed to use optional Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips for the injectors of COVID-19 to check various issues like the expiry of right dose (Figure 6).



Figure 5

WHAT WE FOUND

When we conducted a Google search for “chips in vaccines”, we found a news [report](#) on the United States of America Department of Defence awarding the contract to ApiJet, pre-filled syringe maker, to manufacture injectors for the COVID-19 vaccine.

In an [interview](#) to *CBN news*, the executive chairman of the company Jay Walker explains the purpose of the optional Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips in the injectors.

“It is designed so that there is no counterfeit. It is designed so that we know the right dose hasn’t expired. It helps public health officials know when there are outbreaks, if we have vaccinated enough people in those areas,” Walker said.

Figure 6

COVID-19 Vaccine's myth busters

Raghavan Varadarajan, Professor at the Molecular Biophysics' Unit, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore busted about myths and the few are written below:

- **Myth: COVID-19 Vaccine contains harmful heavy metals such as mercury and aluminum.**

According to Prof. Raghavan Varadarajan, COVID-19 Vaccine does not contain any heavy metal that is hazardous to health. The vaccine contains only aluminum salt adjuvants and this is only for boosting the immune system and it doesn't contain any metal. And in past also mercury is used in small amounts with anti-microbial and there is no evidence of harm.

- **Myth: Vaccines can compromise health of children, eg. MMR vaccines are linked to autism.**

According to Prof. Raghavan Varadarajan, many studies show that there is no link between MMR vaccine and autism. He said vaccines are very low-cost, life- savers for children and the benefits to risk ratio for them is extremely high.

- **Myth: Like flu, Coronavirus would have already mutated by the time vaccines roll out.**

According to Prof. Raghavan Varadarajan, mutation rate in influenza is much higher than in SARS CoV-2 virus and there is a specific mutation that has occurred in the surface protein of the virus so far, but there is no evidence that it will lower the effect of any vaccine being tested.

- **Myth: COVID-19 vaccines are not safe because they were developed so fast.**

According to Prof. Raghavan Varadarajan, the trials were conducted quickly but there is no evidence that safety was compromised. He also said that there may be rare side effects in a small fraction that may not be captured in a Phase III trial; this will only be evident once the vaccine has been licensed and widely developed. But, this shouldn't be seen as a barrier to vaccination as the benefits to society as a whole far outweigh the risks.

Source: Sunday Special, The Times of India dated December 13, 2020

Conclusion

A lot of misinformation and disinformation regarding COVID-19 has been circulated over social media. Fake news covering several COVID-19 aspects ranging from political to social issues has plagued social media. However, as the world approaches towards successful vaccine breakthrough, there is an increased probability of the dissemination of COVID-19 related fake news simultaneously calling for actions to control this menace.

This calls for a collaborative effort and actions of the Information Technology (IT) sector, Health sector, Civil Society organizations etc. for controlling the spread of such news at an initial level before it spreads worldwide.

Community and media needs to be trained and sensitized on creating a culture for information verification.

Citation

S. No	Link: Fake Claim	Link: Fact Check
1	https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/-who-adds-bleaching-chlorine-used-in-covid-19-sanitisation-to-eluru-s-mystery-sickness-suspect-list-1748234-2020-12-10	NA
2	Gujarat daily (regional newspaper)	NA
1	https://www.oneindia.com/fact-check/does-covid-19-vaccine-alter-human-dna-3181245.html	https://twitter.com/PIBFactCheck/status/1331563690651385856?s=08
2	https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/serum-institute-of-india-bharat-biotech-proposal-for-emergency-covid-19-vaccine-use-not-approved-due-to-inadequate-data-sources-2336377?pfrom=home-ndtv_topscroll	https://twitter.com/MoHFW_INDIA/status/1336649294724562944?s=20
3	COVID Vaccine Fact Check No, Coronavirus Vaccine Doesn't Contain Chips to Control and Track People (thequint.com)	Same link



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