Lecture Notes in Computer Science

Understanding the Impact of and Analysing Fake News About COVID-19 in SA

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Abstract

The topic of fake news is not new but its rise is fueled by the digital age era. The increased proliferation of fake news has been observed since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) started, thus introducing controversy regarding its origin, conspiracies about 5G causing COVID-19 and COVID-19 home remedies or prevention methods. This information may be harmless, or could potentially pose a threat by misleading the population to depend on unjustified and unsubstantiated claims. Several studies worldwide are investing towards this topic, however, very little has been done in the South African context. Therefore, this study aims at analysing fake news about COVID-19 spread during the South African national lockdown on social media platforms and news outlets; together with the measures put in place by the government i.e. social relief funds and food parcels. This study took place between March 2020 and October 2020 whereby a Google form was used to collect data. The collected data was verified using fact-checking websites like Africa Check and techniques such as Google reverse image for image verification. Thereafter, the data was coded according to these categories, namely; misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, propaganda and scams, and annotated according to 11 annotation classes. The analysis showed that Twitter was the leading source of fake news at 59% followed by WhatsApp at 22%. In addition, most discussions were in reference to COVID-19 cures and treatments. Overtime, a correlation was observed between events (e.g., change in regulations) that occurred and the spread of fake news. To dispel and delegitimise the sources, a publicly accessible dashboard was created where all verified fake news were shared for easier access. This study has established an understanding of the nature of fake news and draws insights that offer practical guidance on how fake news may be combated in the future.