Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life

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Image 1. Clear waters by gondolas in a Venice canal in Venice, Italy, on March 18, 2020. Viral social media posts claimed swans and dolphins were returning to the waters. It wasn't true. The water has been more clear lately as a result of the decrease in boat activity. The traffic stopped after Italy went on lockdown because of the new coronavirus crisis. Photo: Andrea Pattaro/AFP via Getty Images

In the middle of endless news about COVID-19 case surges, quarantine orders and medical supply shortages on Twitter the week of March 23, 2020, some happy stories softened the blows. Swans had returned to deserted Venetian canals in Italy. Dolphins, too. Also, a group of elephants had sauntered through a village in Yunnan, China, drank a corn drink and passed out in a tea garden.

COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus, is a flu-like illness that causes mild symptoms in many but can make some such as the elderly or those with existing health conditions very sick. The illness is now spreading quickly across the world.

These reports of wildlife triumphs in countries hard-hit by the coronavirus got hundreds of thousands of retweets. They went viral on Instagram and Tik Tok. They made news headlines. If there's a silver lining of the pandemic, people said, this was it — animals were bouncing back, running free in a humanless world.

However, it was not real.

The swans in the viral posts regularly appear in the canals of Burano, a small island in the greater Venice metropolitan area where the photos were taken. The "Venetian" dolphins were filmed at a port in Sardinia, in the Mediterranean Sea, hundreds of miles away. No one has figured out where the elephant photos came from, but a Chinese news report debunked the viral posts. While elephants did recently come through a village in Yunnan Province, China, their presence is not out of the norm, they are not the elephants in the viral photos, and they did not drink and pass out in a tea field.

Feel-Good Rumors In Times Of Crisis

The phenomenon highlights how quickly eye-popping, too-good-to-be-true rumors can spread in times of crisis. People want to share posts that make them emotional. When we are feeling stressed, joyous animal footage can be an irresistible salve. The spread of social phenomena is so powerful, 2016 research shows, that it can follow the same models that trace the spread of diseases.

Kaveri Ganapathy Ahuja's controversial tweet about the swans that "returned" to Venice canals has hit a million "likes."

Ahuja, who lives in New Delhi, India, says she saw some photos on social media and decided to put them together in a tweet, unaware that the swans were already regulars in Burano before the coronavirus tore across Italy.

"The tweet was just about sharing something that brought me joy in these gloomy times," she says. She never expected it to go viral or to cause any harm. "I wish there was an edit option on Twitter just for moments like this," Ahuja says.

Still, she has not deleted the tweet and does not plan to, arguing that it is still relevant because waters in Venice are clearer than usual as a result of decreased boat activity. She has also tweeted about the "unprecedented" number of "likes" and retweets she has received on the tweet. "It's a personal record for me, and I would not like to delete it," she says.

Paulo Ordoveza is a web developer and image verification expert who runs the Twitter account @picpedant, where he exposes fake viral posts and calls out the fakers. He sees firsthand the "greed for virality" that may drive the impulse to pass around misinformation. It is "overdosing on the euphoria that comes from seeing those 'like' and retweet numbers rise into the thousands," he says.

Getting a lot of "likes" and comments "gives us an immediate social reward," says Erin Vogel, a social psychologist and postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University in California. In other words, they make us feel good. Studies have found that posting to social media gives one's self-esteem a temporary boost.

The need to seek out things that make us feel good may be exacerbated right now, as people try to come to grips with a pandemic, a collapsing economy and sudden isolation. "In times when we're all really lonely, it's tempting to hold onto that feeling, especially if we're posting something that gives people a lot of hope," says Vogel. The idea that animals and nature could actually flourish during this crisis "could help give us a sense of meaning and purpose — that we went through this for a reason," she says.

It was the running theme of many of the viral tweets. "Nature just hit the reset button on us," read a tweet celebrating the dolphins supposedly swimming in Venetian canals.

People Want To Believe In Power Of Nature To Recover

"I think people really want to believe in the power of nature to recover," says Susan Clayton, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at the College of Wooster, in Ohio. "People hope that, no matter what we've done, nature is powerful enough to rise above it."

About half of Americans say they have been exposed to made-up news or information related to coronavirus, according to a new Pew Research Center survey. While a fake happy news story about dolphins in a canal may not be all that problematic, relatively speaking, there can still be harm in spreading false hope in times of crisis.

These fake feel-good stories, Vogel says, can make people even more distrustful at a time when everyone already feels vulnerable. Finding out good news is not real "can be even more demoralizing than not hearing it at all."

Spots of hope on social media are likely to play a key role in keeping spirits up in the weeks and months ahead, as people self-quarantine in their homes and connect with each other through screens. "I'd encourage people to share positive things," says Vogel. "But it doesn't have to be anything dramatic. It just has to be true."

Quiz

1   Which of the following sentences from the section "Feel-Good Rumors In Times Of Crisis" BEST develops a central idea of the article?

     (A)   The spread of social phenomena is so powerful, 2016 research shows, that it can follow the same models that trace the spread of diseases.

     (B)   He sees firsthand the "greed for virality" that may drive the impulse to pass around misinformation.

     (C)   "Nature just hit the reset button on us," read a tweet celebrating the dolphins supposedly swimming in Venetian canals.

     (D)   Getting a lot of "likes" and comments "gives us an immediate social reward," says Erin Vogel, a social psychologist and postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University in California.

2   Which answer choice provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?

     (A)   The majority of people who post false or misleading information on social media do so intentionally in the hope that it will go viral. Unfortunately, people's desires for positive news amid the spread of coronavirus have increased the spread of misinformation.

     (B)   Many recent viral social media posts illustrating the return of wildlife to long-abandoned habitats have proved to be false. Most people, however, do not feel that spreading this type of feel-good misinformation is a serious problem.

     (C)   Recent stories about swans and dolphins returning to Venice's canals during the coronavirus quarantine were actually false. Their popularity, however, illustrates how people's desire for positive news could increase the spread of misinformation on social media.

     (D)   Kaveri Ganapathy Ahuja, who originally posted the viral tweet about swans returning to Venice's canals, did not know that the information was inaccurate. All the same, she says that it was still worth posting because the quarantine has made the canals cleaner.

3   Which of the following statements BEST represents Kaveri Ganapathy Ahuja's approach toward her viral post in the article?

     (A)   She regrets that it was not true, but is happy it was so popular and believes it is still relevant since Venice's canals are clearer now.

     (B)   She did not know that the information was inaccurate when she posted it, and plans to delete the tweet soon.

     (C)   She knew the story was not true, but thought it was worth sharing because it would help people to feel better.

     (D)   She wishes she could edit the post to correct the mistake because she did not think people would discover it was false.

4   Why did the author conclude the article with a psychologist's thoughts on social media sharing?

     (A)   to outline some negative consequences of sharing misinformation on social media

     (B)   to encourage readers to share positive stories on social media, as long as they are true

     (C)   to illustrate the most common motivations people cite for posting misinformation on social media

     (D)   to summarize most psychologists' reactions to the news that recent viral wildlife posts were false