



CERT-MU Security Alert

COVID-19: Spotting of Fake News



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Description:

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only putting a great strain onto our health system, but it is also testing our ability to distinguish important news from false and misinformation. Since the Covid-19 outbreak began in China's Hubei province, social media has spawned countless fake news stories and hoaxes, including promises of false cures that have caused panic among everyone.

As a countermeasure, the Minister of Information Technology, Communication & Innovation, Honourable Deepak Balgobin, launched an application on the 26th March 2020. This application has been developed by the 'Innovation' team of Mauritius Telecom and is called "besafemoris". It has been developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Wellness and Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation. It contains all the necessary information

concerning the Covid-19 virus. Moreover, the Honourable Minister has also announced the launch of the besafemoris.mu website where additional information and official communiqué from the Government are available.

What is fake news?

Lots of things that we read online especially in our social media feeds may appear to be true, but it is not. Fake news is information, stories or hoaxes created to deliberately misinform or deceive readers. Usually, these stories are created to either influence people's views, push a political agenda or cause confusion and this can often be a profitable business for online publishers. Fake news can deceive people by looking like trusted websites or by using similar names and web addresses to reputable news organisations.

According to Martina Chapman, a Media Literacy Expert, there are three elements to fake news:

- Mistrust
- Misinformation &
- Manipulation

The Rise of Fake News

Fake news is not new; however, it has become a hot topic since 2017. Traditionally we got our news from trusted sources, journalists and media outlets that are required to follow strict codes of practice. However, the internet has enabled a whole new way to publish, share and consume information and news with very little regulation or editorial standards.

Many people now get news from social media sites and networks and very often it can be difficult to tell whether these stories are credible or not. Information overload and a general lack of understanding about how the internet works, has also contributed to an increase in fake news or hoax stories. Social media sites can play a big part in increasing the reach of these type of stories. We have seen the extent to which this fake news can go just few months back with the spread of the Covid-19 virus around the globe. Social media sites were overloaded with fake news and this gave rise to panic shopping and fear amongst the citizens of Mauritius. Furthermore, posts concerning medication against Covid-19 virus also ignited the social media platforms in Mauritius. This caused people to start stocking medicines at home without realizing that there has not been any cure for Covid-19 virus till now.

It is very crucial to fight fake news in this time of Covid-19. A piece of fake news, a photo or a status could easily provoke the public to panic. We are all together during this critical time. We need to unify to fight together. Fake news could lead to instability in the country and the result could be bad for every citizen.

It is advisable that all social media users think carefully before they post or share something on social media. Recently, it was found that some fake news about the virus have been shared among the population of Mauritius concerning how many people have died due to Covid-19. Many people shared this fake news without knowing that this information was not correct. Also, some users are sharing posts that mix real and fake information. These posts come with the UNICEF or WHO logo to get more attention.

How to spot Fake News?

There are a number of things to watch out for when evaluating content online.

1. Take a closer look

Check the source of the story, do you recognise the website? Is it a credible/reliable source? If you are unfamiliar with the site, look in the about section or find out more information about the author.

2. Look beyond the headline

Check the entire article, many fake news stories use sensationalist or shocking headlines to grab attention. Often the headlines of fake news stories are in all caps and use exclamation points.

3. Check other sources

Are other reputable news/media outlets reporting on the story? Are there any sources in the story? If so, check whether they are reliable or if they even exist!

4. Check the facts

Stories with false information often contain incorrect dates or altered timelines. It is also a good idea to check when the article was published, is it current or an old news story?

Fact Checking Sites

- Snopes: <http://snopes.com>
- PolitiFact: <http://politifact.com>
- Fact Check: <http://factcheck.org/>
- BBC Reality check: <http://bbc.com/news/reality-check>
- Channel 4 Fact Check: <http://channel4.com/news/factcheck>

What does the Mauritian Law say about Fake News?

As per the ICT Act 2001, Section 46 (na); where a person knowingly provides information, which is false or fabricated, shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine not exceeding 1,000,000 rupees and to penal servitude for a term not exceeding 10 years.

CERT-MU advises that in this time of confinement and total lockdown, Mauritian citizens should be more responsible online. Posting or sharing fake news is an offense and at this particular time where the whole country is fighting against an invisible enemy, Covid-19, we should all unite as one people, as one nation to fight against this virus. Fake news will only create panic in the country and might make people come out of their houses which is certainly not advisable if we want to break the contamination chain of Covid-19 virus.

For any information on the Covid-19 virus please download the application 'besafemoris' from Apple Store for Apple Phones and Play Store for Android Phones. You can also visit the website <http://besafemoris.mu> for official communiqué by the Government of Mauritius on this pandemic.