New research describes troubling abortion infodemic

June 26 2023, by Anna Zarra Aldrich

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, a 1973 decision which guaranteed the right to access abortion services. Immediately following this decision, there was an outpouring of

misinformation about abortion on social media.

Misinformation about [abortion](#), including health consequences of abortion for the mother; how to perform potentially dangerous, at-home abortions; the idea that the fetus experiences pain during an abortion; that abortion is never used to save the life of the mother; and other false claims have proliferated in the wake of the court's decision.

Sherry Pagoto, professor of allied [health sciences](#) at the University of Connecticut, and Lindsay Palmer, a postdoctoral fellow on Pagoto's team, recently published an article in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* outlining the current information landscape surrounding abortion in the U.S.

Currently, 13 states have enacted [a total abortion ban](#). About half of all U.S. states are expected to implement some kind of abortion ban, making the misinformation trend especially alarming.

Connecticut implemented legislation almost immediately to become a legal "safe harbor" for women seeking abortions from other states and clinicians who perform them.

In their paper, the researchers, both from the Department of Allied Health Sciences, conclude that the current information environment for abortion constitutes an "infodemic." An infodemic is when discussion around a public health topic is so filled with misinformation that it is confusing and difficult for people to access [accurate information](#), exacerbating a public health crisis.

Misinformation originates with a "disinformant" who spreads knowingly untruths. Misinformation refers to the spread of that false information by people who believe it to be true.

"You don't need very many disinformants out there, you just need them to have a big audience, because their audience produces tons of misinformants." Pagoto says. "The misinformants then share that content, getting it to spread into different corners of the population."

The anti-abortion movement has long used disinformation, particularly in so-called "crisis pregnancy centers," many of which tell pregnant women false and misleading information about abortion and pregnancy to convince them not to get abortions.

Palmer is currently working on a new study mapping out the misinformation environment on Twitter in the wake of the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization decision, which overturned Roe v. Wade.

The researchers focused on Twitter because it has historically been the easiest platform to study. Most profiles are public as opposed to sites like Facebook, where accounts can be set to private. The researchers gathered two batches of 10,000 tweets, one immediately after Dobbs, and another this spring to see how the conversation has changed.

"We want to get a sense of what sort of misinformation is going around," Pagoto says. "Because if we want to get evidence-based information out there, we need to know what sort of lies are circulating that we need to counter message and know what topics we should be targeting."

Pagoto hopes this paper, which she says serves as a "call to action," will inspire people to pay more attention to abortion issues before they come to affect them personally or someone they love.

"It's definitely a very frightening time and we don't think people are paying enough attention to this right now," Pagoto says. "I would like to see a lot more urgency behind this really pressing issue that is quickly

evolving into a very concerning public health crisis. For example, abortion bans are associated with higher rates of maternal mortality, especially among Black women."

This infodemic is particularly concerning, the researchers say, because it is coupled with proposed legislation in states like Texas that would prevent people in that state from accessing accurate information about abortion online.

"We haven't really seen something like that happening before where entire states are blocking health information about any topic," Pagoto says.

Pagoto says a ban like this could open the door for lawmakers to ban access to information on any politicized area of health care, including vaccines and transgender care.

These bans can also restrict what doctors are allowed to discuss with their patients in terms of options for an unplanned or medically dangerous pregnancy, forcing some women to carry a life-threatening pregnancy to term.

"There is a lot of legislation being passed that affects decisions you and your doctor are allowed to make," Pagoto says. "If you're a pregnant woman in a lot of states you're not alone in that room with your doctor anymore."

These bans could also impact medical school training in states with bans and even deter students at all levels from attending school in areas with bans.

"I think it's really important for people to understand that this could have a domino effect," Palmer says. "It's not just an issue of one isolated

single medical procedure, it has really far-reaching consequences."

More information: Sherry L Pagoto et al, The Next Infodemic: Abortion Misinformation, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2023). DOI: 10.2196/42582