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**DISINFORMATION
AND FREE SPEECH
ARE TWO SIDES OF
THE SAME COIN.**

“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still lacing up its boots.”

Mark Twain never actually quoted this famous witticism often attributed to him—which makes it in itself is a form of disinformation. However, the concept could not be more apt to the current state of affairs when it comes to the lightning-fast spread of misleading content online. Recently, we have seen how disinformation – the deliberate use of untruths or half-truths to confuse, incite, or inflame – have been increasingly spreading, affecting the people and the country in many adverse ways.

Disinformation is spread wrapped up in various forms like misleading content which includes misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual, imposter content where genuine sources are impersonated, fabricated content where the new displayed content is 100% false and is used to harm and deceive, false connections where the headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content, and manipulated content where the genuine information and imagery is manipulated to deceive. Disinformation is a profitable business. Its creation and promulgation across platforms including social networks and news websites generates a significant amount of revenue for many parties.

While the spread of disinformation through social media presents a general crisis for our democracy, the online spread of disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that it also presents threats to public health. Duncan Maru, an epidemiologist and physician in New York City, said it seems as though doctors, nurses and other health care workers are currently fighting two pandemics—the spread of the virus causing COVID-19 and the spread of disinformation online. He said a number of dangerous rumors spread online have had serious impacts on health outcomes for patients including those who alleged that the government created the virus,

claimed black people were immune, discredited the effectiveness of social distancing and wearing masks, touted home remedies such as bleach as cures and asserted that people of Chinese descent were more likely to get the disease.

Now we know what exactly disinformation is and how it affects the entire well being of the human race. But what is the reason that stands at the core of the origin of such false facts reaching and making a difference among billions of people of the world?

Disinformation and free speech are two sides of the same coin.

The freedom to speak our minds is every individual's right. Freedom of speech allows the people of our country to express themselves, and share their ideas, views and opinions openly. As a result, the public and the media can comment on any political activity and also express their dissent towards anything they think is not appropriate. But "with great powers, come great responsibilities", similarly, it is our duty to protect and wisely practice the rights we have been entitled to. The right to free speech is, nowadays, being misused to a great extent at various levels of the country, while people behind it, don't even consider what adverse effect it might cause.

"Free speech is this mantra people repeat over and over to justify all sorts of terrible things they say," stated Jen Golbeck, a professor at the University of Maryland's College of Information Studies. The freedom to speech, being taken for granted, has become a way to influence people's opinions by spreading disinformation in various forms for business or political aims, thereby violating a person's right to expression, by restricting him/her to the correct piece of information. The members of the Global Network Initiative, including Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn, said they shouldn't be pressured by governments to change their terms of service or restrict content.

But with the rise in circulating disinformations and fake news, it gets doubtful to let them do so. Recently, presenting his idea to buy Twitter, Elon Musk stated "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated." Musk has a history for controversial tweets, but one of his recent posts on his company's legal head, made a part of the common folk doubt his implementation of the idea of free speech- was that going to be implemented on the cost of protecting twitter users from abuse, cyberbullying and extremist content?

There is a fine line between practising your freedom of speech and misusing it. The championing of free speech must not privilege any immutable notion of the truth to the exclusion of others. But this doesn't mean that free speech proponents should be indifferent to the quest for truth, or to attempts to deliberately undermine the public's ability to distinguish fact from falsehood. Therefore, free speech should be used wisely.

To counter the disinformation industry wherever it emerges, governments, media and the public need to understand not just the who and the how, but also the society's controversial ideologies and collective memories. These are the most valuable currency in the disinformation marketplace. The "main threat to free speech" is the censorship of " suppressive states," and that "ill-informed or malevolent speech" can and should be overcome by "more and better speech" rather than censorship. One should be cautious of their rights and use it wisely. "Ill-informed speech is not free speech." Media, government and individuals should realize an individual's right to correct and safe information, and not try to manipulate the way they think in accordance to their own convenience. "Speak facts, speak truth, speak something capable enough to influence people to be the change the world deserves to have."