

# Fake News Travels Fast: Exploring Misinformation Circulated Around Wu Lei's Coronavirus Case

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This commentary analyzes how misinformation related to a coronavirus case of a star soccer player (i.e., Wu Lei) was spread widely on Chinese digital media and accepted by sports fans as the truth. The paper first examines the mechanisms by exploring how misinformation emerged and was disseminated. Then, the paper explores how social media and the fast-growing self-media in China exacerbate tendencies toward misinformation during the news production process, which poses a new threat to legacy media and journalists' profession. The paper concludes by discussing new challenges faced by Chinese sports journalists in the new digital era after COVID-19.

**Keywords:** China media landscape, crisis communication, self-media, Weibo

The spread of misinformation or fake news has typically had its focus in politics. In particular, how politicians use false information to gain support from voters via spinning stories or claiming that other stories are fake has been explored. For example, misinformation around the 2016 U.S. presidential election brought the notion of “fake news” to a global audience (Neilsen & Graves, 2017) and increased society's knowledge of this concept. While much of the discourse around fake news has centered on politics, many other areas have experienced fake news, such as crisis communications and the coronavirus.

During the coronavirus crisis, both the virus and misinformation spread widely in China. Fake news created confusion for people and also shaped people's perceptions of this pandemic. Some fake news stories provided incorrect health information; one such example was that consuming alcohol could reduce the coronavirus risk. Fake news can also lower the reputation of prominent individuals and raise public concern about the coronavirus. For example, several well-known celebrities, such as actor Daniel Radcliffe and Houston Rockets' General Manager, Daryl Morey, were reported to have been infected with the coronavirus, but they denied it later, after misinformation was reported extensively in the mass media.

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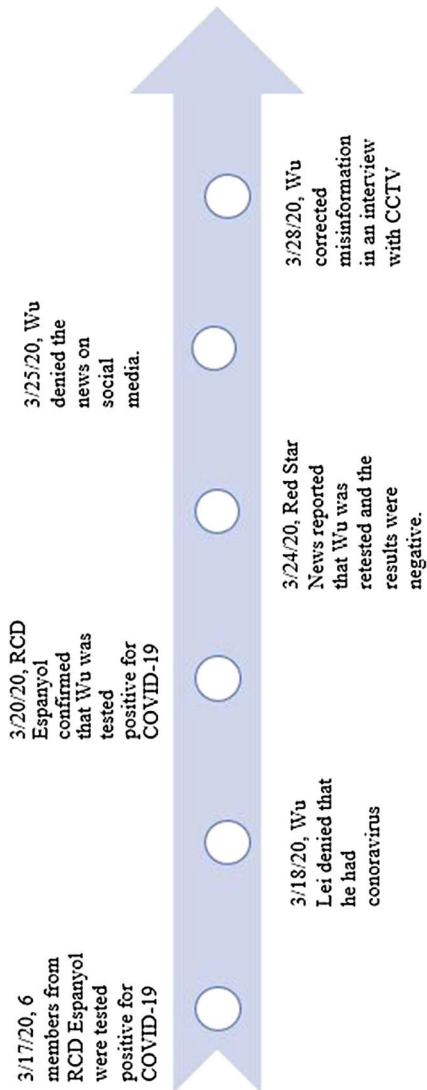
The spread of misinformation during the coronavirus pandemic is no exception in sports reporting. Chinese soccer player Wu Lei's coronavirus case is one of the examples that illustrates how professional athletes who are followed and modeled by millions of people were the subject of misinformation shared on all media outlets.

On March 20, 2020, Spanish La Liga team RCD Espanyol confirmed that six members of the team (one coach and five players) had tested positive for COVID-19, including Chinese striker Wu Lei. The news suddenly became one of the breaking topics on Weibo, also known as the Chinese version of Twitter, and there were more than 365,000 comments on the story on the service (Tang, 2020). On March 24, Red Star News, a Chinese digital news app, reported that Wu had recovered from COVID-19 and the result of a retest was negative (Hu, 2020). The journalist mentioned that the source of the news came from experienced Spanish sports journalist, Thomas Guasch. However, that news was denied quickly by Wu's team on social media. His agent noted that "a series of news from Spanish media about Wu Lei's coronavirus-related content, including the time of his diagnosis, symptoms, recovery process, and negative test results are not true. Wu is currently in good condition but is still in isolation and has not been tested again" (Xinhua, 2020). Two days later, Wu spoke to CCTV, the national broadcaster in China, and commented that he had not recovered and had also not been retested because of the lack of test kits in Spain (see Figure 1 for a timeline of Wu Lei's coronavirus reporting). This news created confusion regarding whether Wu had fully recovered from the coronavirus.

Even though social media research and correcting misinformation studies are growing areas in communication studies (Bode & Vraga, 2015), there has been little research on the spread of misinformation in sports reporting. Fake news is also a common problem in sports (Curtis, 2017), where sports fans may encounter everything from unchecked rumors to false information that was deliberately shared by agents to drive competition for an athlete's services. In this scholarly commentary, the authors used Wu's coronavirus case to illustrate the process of how misinformation occurred and was quickly disseminated in China. Furthermore, the authors explored the roles that social media and self-media played in exacerbating the spread of misinformation during the news production process. This scholarly commentary aimed to show how these new emerging media are impacting the media landscape in China.

## Fake News and Its Sources

Fake news is "news that does mischief with the truth in that it exhibits both (a) a lack of truth and (b) a lack of truthfulness" (Jaster & Lanius, 2018, p. 207). The term has been politicized by politicians, and it has been used as a weapon against media reporting, as politicians attempt to undermine the credibility of media that they do not like (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). "Fake news" consists of three categories: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (Wardle & Derakhshan). Misinformation refers to information that is false, but it is believed to be true by individuals disseminating the news. Disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of information known to be false. As noted by Wardle



**Figure 1** — Timeline of Wu Lei's COVID-19 case.

and Derakhshan, mal-information is the intentional use of true information to cause harm on a person, organization, or country. Notably, fake news can significantly jeopardize the credibility of news organizations and journalists reporting on events and also have a negative impact on a sports brand's image.

Misinformation can emerge from many sources, from deliberate campaigns to careless coverage, and even social and work pressures (Thorson, 2016). With the pervasiveness of digital media, sport journalists face unprecedented challenges and pressures when it comes to media reporting (Li, Stokowski, Dittmore, & Scott, 2017). On social media, traditional media outlets have less control over the distribution and gatekeeping of the information, so it is easier for readers to obtain false and fabricated information (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Scott, Hill, & Zakus, 2014). For media customers, traditional news organizations are no longer the only news sources from which consumers can gain knowledge. Consumers can easily gather news from other channels, such as online news media and social media, especially with the uptake of smartphones and tablets. In addition, there is now an increasingly intense competition between news organizations and websites fighting for viewers and advertising revenue, which also pressures sport journalists to publish news first, often without adequate fact-checking (Li et al., 2017).

Wu Lei's case is a good example to indicate how the lack of fact-checking enabled misinformation to spread widely in a variety of news reports. The published news story about Wu Lei's COVID-19 diagnosis was based on one journalist reporting, and the source she used was not a firsthand source from Wu Lei or his team; instead, the source was a second-hand source from another journalist. Without having another source to fact-check, the story caused the spread of misinformation and confusion.

## Characteristics of Misinformation Spread

Although there was misinformation contained in the news reporting about Wu Lei's COVID-19 recovery, fake news still quickly caught Internet users' attention, resulting in the story becoming one of the top trending topics on Weibo. The Chinese search engine Baidu showed that more than 177,000 articles in China reported on this story. Many of those articles cited the source from Red Star News, which is a mobile mainstream news app established by Chengdu Economic Daily, with 70 million users (Crismundo, 2019).

The circulation of fake news displays four emergent characteristics. First, a celebrity's news is often widely followed by the public. As the most well-known Chinese soccer player, Wu Lei is the only Chinese player playing in an elite soccer league, so every news story about him draws people's attention because of the emotional attachment people have with him. After joining RCD Espanyol in 2019, Wu attracted three Chinese sponsors to the team, which led the team's profit to increase by 119% in 2019 (Barker, 2020). When the news about his infection was released, Chinese fans expressed their concern with regard to how his soccer career might be impacted. As fans incorrectly learned that Wu had fully recovered from the virus, they were excited to share the information because they were glad that their favorite player had a speedy recovery from the virus. Bakir and McStay (2018) suggested that emotion-laden information is frequently shared and can be

picked up rapidly by social media algorithms. Thus, Chinese fans may have inadvertently kept the false news of Wu's recovery as a trending topic on their favorite social media platforms. Further, Pennycook and Rand (2019) claimed that laypeople care less about the authenticity of information when they share or repost information. Instead, they care more about whether the information they shared could get more "likes." Chinese fans, in this case, wanted to share this "good news" to get more attention from other Internet users.

Second, social media, including Weibo and WeChat, has become the main platform for the circulation of misinformation. After Wu was reported to have the coronavirus, the related reports were viewed 110 million times by Weibo (n.d.) users that day. All related information became trending topics on Weibo, no matter whether they were true or false stories. With the pervasiveness of social media, traditional media have less control over the distribution and gatekeeping of information, and it is easier for readers to obtain false and fabricated information (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Scholars have criticized social media (e.g., Bessi et al., 2015; Sharma, Yadav, Yadav, & Ferdinand, 2017), because it provides spaces for creating misinformation easily and stories can be hard to refute in a timely manner. It is evident that falsehood travels faster, deeper, and more broadly than truth on social media (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Correcting misinformation on social media can also be very expensive and challenging since it is hard to ensure that the correct information reaches every user who viewed or believed the false information (Southwell & Thorson, 2015).

Third, self-media accelerates the distribution of misinformation. Self-media refers to user-generated content that has been posted on media platforms by individual users (Yu, 2018). Ranging from traditional media publishers, such as the *People's Daily*, to individual news producers, millions of people and companies create content on self-media platforms, which include web portals (e.g., Sina, Toutiao, Tencent), audio media (e.g., Ximalaya FM, Qingting FM), social media (e.g., Weibo, WeChat), video media (e.g., Douyin, Kuaishou), and e-commerce platforms (e.g., Taobao Live; Bandurski, 2018; Guanyan.com, 2018). As of 2019, the total number of self-media accounts exceeded 31.55 million, and nearly three million people worked in this industry (Chinabaogao.com, 2019). Unlike the media production process for traditional media, where news must be fact-checked by journalists, editors, and chief editors before being published, individual news producers skip the rigorous editorial process before publishing content, which can result in the wide distribution of misinformation (Yu, 2018). In addition, many self-media accounts are operated by commercial companies that depend on high viewers for advertising revenue, so they often use fabricated information and create outrageous (e.g., clickbait) headlines to attract new viewers (Li, 2019).

After Wu's coronavirus news was reported, self-media took advantage of the popularity of celebrity news to "produce" a great number of stories. Some articles suggested that "Wu Lei should come back to China to treat the virus" (Guangzhouweiyinggou, 2020), and some writers commented that "the reason Wu's team refutes the news of his recovery may be a public relations strategy to protect his image" (Yiyezhiqiu, 2020). Lots of false information and analyses were published and promoted on traditional mainstream news portals in China, such as Sina and Tencent. These news portals have become "platishers" in China, which is

a blend of the words publisher and platform. In recent years, they have published news produced by their own and other media companies, and they have also distributed content from self-media. Fake information is easier to access by customers. In addition, the artificial intelligence algorithm, generally replacing human gatekeeping, is implemented on these news portals, which can accelerate the spread of misinformation. Algorithms can mine popular stories on these self-media platforms and suggest that users read more information based on their reading history (Garcin, Dimitrakakis, & Faltings, 2013). When one fake news story has been viewed by a user, it is likely that the algorithm will recommend the consumer read other related news stories related to their reading behavior, which can shape a customer's perceptions on an issue. Bakir and McStay (2018) suggested that fake news that goes uncorrected and gets widely shared leads people to remain misinformed, because algorithms keep false stories at the top of people's social media pages.

Finally, the traditional business model of news publishing has collapsed because of the scale of digitalization, which also restricts the media's ability to correct misinformation quickly. The rapid development of digital media poses a threat to the existence of traditional media, particularly newspapers. In 2018, 53 newspapers closed in China, and many media groups started to explore new approaches to offset the decline of traditional advertising revenue (Chen, 2019). Embracing digital platforms, creating their own news applications, and social-first publishing are common strategies employed by media outlets to combat the threats that digital media outlets pose to traditional media. Journalists are often asked to produce content for multiple platforms simultaneously, which shortens their time to produce high-quality news products (Postetti, 2018). Misinformation has become common in media reporting due to the lack of adequate scrutiny.

Moreover, the reduction of newsroom resources has also led to "less on-the-ground" reporting (Postetti, 2018), especially in international sports news coverage. Chinese media reporting on international events, such as Wu's case, is an example of how the lack of journalists following international sport resulted in poor reporting. Most stories in legacy media about Wu were either translated from Spanish media stories or reproductions of press releases provided by RCD Espanyol. When Wu's recovery story was first incorrectly reported, most related stories published on other media outlets cited the same source and repeated the same story rather than providing new information from different news sources to fact-check the story.

## Misinformation Correction

The fake news around Wu Lei's COVID-19 case could harm Wu's image and reputation. Due to a shortage of test kits in Spain, the general public was very sensitive in terms of who got tested and who did not. If Wu got retested under this circumstance, it could have frustrated the general public, because they may have thought that professional soccer players were using their privilege to get tested multiple times, while test kits were not available to other sick patients. That's why Wu and his team had to stop the outspread of the fake news quickly, as failure to do so might potentially harm Wu's reputation.

With social media, websites, and self-media generally replacing traditional media as the main information sources for customers, monitoring, identifying, and correcting misinformation has become much harder than before (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). In this case, Wu Lei and his team used two strategies to reduce the spread of the misinformation. The first was to use social media—his official Weibo account—to clarify and correct the false reporting. Previous studies showed that social media is a platform whereby the misinformation can be corrected immediately (Vraga & Bode, 2017), and its social interaction function can also facilitate observational corrections and social corrections such that users might change their opinion after seeing other users sharing information with the corrected information (Bode & Vraga, 2015).

After the information was disseminated on social media, there was still speculation about whether Wu had fully recovered from the virus. Wu chose to have an interview with a credible media outlet in China, CCTV, to reduce the spread of misinformation. Speaking to credible media or using a trustworthy source to report news is an effective method to combat misinformation. Through providing more detailed information about his current status to a credible media source, Wu Lei and his team were able to successfully minimize the widespread misinformation.

This scholarly commentary used the fake news around Wu Lei's coronavirus case to showcase how misinformation emerges, is diffused, and eventually was corrected during the COVID-19 crisis. As fake news has become ubiquitous in public discourse, there is a rising trend of introducing fact-checking in media coverage, particularly in political journalism. With the digitalization of news productions, traditional newsrooms, including sports journalists, face increasing challenges to perform their work. Although it is unlikely for them to scrutinize every dubious claim in their reports, reporters still need to be responsible by fact-checking stories from multiple sources before publishing their stories.

Social media and self-media platforms create a new opportunity for sport media professionals to promote their work and disseminate information quickly, but the speed at which stories are published poses a risk to traditional media and may also lead to the demise of the influence of legacy media. Although the COVID-19 crisis has significantly influenced traditional media's advertising income, which is one of their main revenue sources, it has also presented quality journalism with a new opportunity for enhancing their reputation. The latest poll in the United Kingdom showed that 51% of the population has seen fake news about the coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their trust in the work of scientists and health experts has also grown since they desire to learn true information (Carrell, 2020). With the increased number of misinformation stories being shared, professional journalists can take advantage of their expertise, ethics, and experience to correct these falsehoods and disseminate correct information to the general public (Beckett, 2017; Hall & Li, 2020). Future research should continue to explore how social media and self-media have shaped the Chinese media landscape and have challenged sport journalists' professionalism and ethics.

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