E-Rumours and April Fools' Day: Misleading News and Normatively Tolerated Deception in Digital Space

Sayeh BOUSSAHIA *
Echahid Cheikh Larbi Tebessi University, Algeria
sayeh.boussahia@univ-tebessa.dz

Ismahane AOUN
University of Tunis El Manar, Tunisia
ismahane.aoun@yahoo.com

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Abstract: April Fools' Day has, in Western societies and certain other cultures, developed into a media custom practised by newspapers, channels, and platforms. The migration of this falsehood into the digital sphere, through social networks, electronic news websites, and even corporate accounts by publishing satirical or fabricated "*news*" on that day, has made such electronic hoaxes a source of public confusion, especially within an informational environment in which playfulness is intermingled with seriousness and accurate subject matter with misleading data.

Recent reports have pointed to the difficulty of distinguishing truth from falsehood online on such occasions, where stylistic similarities arise between such hoaxes and electronic rumours, thereby necessitating the establishment of legal and ethical constraints for both.

Keywords: e-rumor, April Fools' hoax, constraints, criminalization, code of ethics, digital space.

*** Corresponding author: Sayeh BOUSSAHIA**

Introduction:

The rapid development of modern communication technologies has transformed the production, circulation, and reception of news and information. Digital platforms have made it possible for messages to move instantly across wide audiences, often without prior verification or institutional control. Within this context, the ***electronic rumour*** has emerged as one of the most serious digital phenomena because of its ability to mislead public opinion, disturb social stability, and affect political, economic, and security interests. Studies on social-media rumours define them as pieces of information that are ***unverified at the time of circulation***, especially in fast-moving events where information is shared before confirmation by reliable sources.

The subject of this research is the relationship between the electronic rumour and ***April Fools' Day*** as a social and media practice. April Fools' Day is traditionally associated with humour, satire, and temporary deception. However, in the digital environment, the distinction between harmless joking and harmful misinformation becomes less clear. A fabricated message presented as a joke may be reproduced, detached from its humorous context, and transformed into a widely circulated rumour capable of misleading individuals or provoking public anxiety. Research on April Fools' hoaxes has shown that such texts may resemble fake news in their linguistic and structural features, which makes them an important model for studying deception in digital communication.

For the purposes of this study, the ***electronic rumour*** may be defined as unverified or inaccurate information circulated through electronic media and digital communication platforms, concerning a matter of public interest, and capable of rapid rebroadcast and wide dissemination among users. This definition distinguishes the electronic rumour from the ordinary rumour by the speed, scale, and technical means of circulation. It also distinguishes it from fake news insofar as the electronic rumour may remain uncertain or unverified, whereas fake news usually refers to deliberately fabricated content presented as factual. The danger of electronic rumours is intensified by the dynamics of digital platforms, where false news has been shown to spread faster, farther, and more broadly than true information.

The research problematic therefore arises from the ambiguity surrounding April Fools' Day in the digital space: although it is socially recognised as a day of joking and playful deception, some April Fools' messages may exceed the limits of acceptable humour and become electronic rumours with legal, social, or security consequences. The central question of the research is: ***To what extent does April Fools' Day contribute to the entrenchment of electronic-rumour patterns and the dissemination of false news in digital space, and where should the boundary be drawn between an acceptable prank and a legally punishable rumour?***

This main problem gives rise to the following sub-questions: What is the conceptual framework of the electronic rumour? How does the April Fools' phenomenon operate within digital platforms? What are the similarities and differences between April Fools' hoaxes, electronic rumours, and fake news? What criteria may be used to distinguish lawful humour

from harmful misinformation? And what legislative, regulatory, and educational mechanisms may reduce the risks resulting from such digital practices?

The study proceeds from the following hypotheses. ***First***, April Fools' Day may, in the digital environment, provide a favourable context for the spread of electronic rumours because users may circulate fabricated information under the cover of humour. Secondly, the distinction between permissible joking and punishable rumour depends not only on the intention of the publisher, but also on the content of the message, its context, its likelihood of causing harm, and the extent of its dissemination. Thirdly, legal mechanisms alone are insufficient to confront this phenomenon unless they are supported by digital monitoring, media awareness, and a critical digital culture capable of enabling users to verify information before sharing it.

The ***objectives*** of the research are therefore to establish the conceptual framework of the electronic rumour and distinguish it from the ordinary rumour and fake news; to trace the historical and contemporary development of April Fools' Day and its manifestation on digital platforms; to analyse the points of convergence and divergence between April Fools' hoaxes and electronic rumours in terms of structure, discourse, intention, and effects; and to identify the legal and educational safeguards that may help distinguish acceptable humour from punishable misleading information.

As for the research methodology, the study adopts a ***descriptive-analytical method*** in order to define the relevant concepts and analyse the features of electronic rumours and April Fools' hoaxes. It also relies on a ***comparative method*** to distinguish between electronic rumour, fake news, satire, and April Fools' deception. In addition, the study uses a ***legal-analytical method*** to examine the limits of criminal liability and the legal criteria that may justify intervention when digital humour causes public harm. Where necessary, the research also draws on a ***content-analysis approach*** to examine examples of April Fools' digital messages and identify their linguistic, communicative, and deceptive characteristics.

Through this approach, and in two chapters, the research seeks to clarify the legal and communicative boundaries of April Fools' Day in the digital age. It argues that the phenomenon should not be treated merely as innocent humour or automatically as criminal misinformation. Rather, it requires a balanced approach that protects freedom of expression and satire while also preventing the use of humour as a cover for harmful electronic rumours.

Title 1: The Conceptual Framework of the E-rumour and April Fool's Day

This section addresses the theoretical framework of the electronic rumour in terms of its definition, characteristics, and mechanisms of diffusion in digital space, while highlighting its social, security, and legal effects on societies and states. It further explains how the electronic rumour has become one of the forms of "soft weapons" [that is, soft-power instruments] targeting political, economic, and social security in circumstances where traditional means of control remain limited.

A separate part is devoted to analysing the phenomenon of "April Fools' Day" as a media and social phenomenon based on playful deception and its migration into digital space.

Texts associated with April Fools' Day intersect stylistically and linguistically with fake news, thereby raising the problem of how to draw the line between jest and deception in the digital environment.

First Subtitle: The Nature of the E-Rumour

The digital rumour is described as unverified or fabricated information or news circulated through electronic media, social media platforms, and the internet. It spreads with exceptional speed owing to the ease of distribution and republication, which may lead to the misleading of public opinion and the stirring of disorder within society.

The digital rumour is marked by its capacity to reach vast numbers of recipients in a short time, which magnifies its danger by comparison with conventional rumours, especially where sensitive political, financial, or social matters are concerned.[1]

The electronic rumour is likewise classified as a disruptive communicative pattern transmitted through emerging technological media. It may contain an element of truth or may be entirely false, which makes it a subject of circulation in virtual communities without proof of its accuracy.

E-Rumour differs from the ordinary fake report in the speed with which it reaches the recipient and in its massive spread through digital platforms, often without proper scrutiny of the sources or confirmation of their reliability. It frequently contains distortion or omission in respect of developments or facts, thereby misleading public opinion and destabilising social and security order; accordingly, it is regarded as one of the gravest digital afflictions because of its capacity adversely to affect nations, as numerous studies have shown.[2]

Firstly: Definition and Characteristics of the E-Rumour

As noted above, the digital rumour may, in general terms, be understood as news or information lacking a verified source, circulated through electronic media and communication platforms and transmitted rapidly among the public regarding an issue of concern to public opinion, coupled with a high potential for rebroadcast and wide dissemination.[3]

E-rumour most salient characteristics include extraordinary speed of spread, the absence or obscurity of the source, the difficulty of verifying its correctness in the initial moment, and its inflammatory or emotionally provocative quality, together with the possible consequences it may produce for the social, economic, and political security of societies.[4]

Endnotes:

1- Allport, G. W., & Postman, L., *The Psychology of Rumour*, Henry Holt & Company, 1947, New York.

2- Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, & Sinan Aral, The Spread of True and False News Online, *Science Journal*, Vol.359, N°.6380, 2018, pp.1146-1149.

3- Arkaitz Zubiaga & al., Detection and Resolution of Rumours in social media: A Survey, *ACM Computing Surveys*, Vol.51, N°.2, 2018, pp.1 to 6.

- Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumours: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*, Transaction Publishers, Routledge edition, pp.14-15.

4- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S., The Spread of True and False News Online, *Science Journal*, Vol.359, N°.6380, 2018, pp.1146-1150.

In Western scholarship, the electronic rumour—or, in the source's non-standard metaphor, the "***digital cloud***" is the dissemination of false or misleading information through digital media, usually aimed at influencing the public sphere or undermining the social and political order.[5]

Such "***clouds***" are marked by rapid diffusion and ease of repetition, in addition to their capacity to exploit social networks and communication platforms for broad and difficult-to-control dissemination. The digital rumour also relies upon emotional stimulation of recipients, which increases the likelihood that they will accept and recirculate it without scrutiny, thereby intensifying its harmful effects upon virtual communities.[6]

Secondly: Means of Disseminating the E-Rumour

The electronic rumour spreads through a range of digital tools that permit content to circulate with extraordinary speed and on a wide scale. Foremost among these are social media platforms, which play a pivotal role in transmitting false allegations and groundless claims among individuals and small groups, thereby making them harder to track and transforming unconfirmed information into viral content within a short time.[7]

The interactive architecture of certain media, and the high capacity it affords for reproduction and amplification, facilitates the transformation of a false report or doubtful narrative into a widely circulating rumour that is difficult to contain or to trace to its original source.[8]

Media thereby accelerates the flow of rumours, especially during crises and fast-moving events, when social demand for information rises and critical source-verification weakens. The danger of such media is heightened when they are combined with emotional appeal and with the ease of clicking and sharing, thus increasing users' readiness to circulate content without sufficient scrutiny.[9]

Second Subtitle: The Concept of April Fools' Day and its Distinction From E-rumour

An April Fools' prank is an annual tradition consisting in the dissemination of a mere "***joke***" or "***trick***" by way of banter, transient deception, amusement, or surprise, rather than

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- Bakir, V., & McStay, A., Fake News and the Economy of Emotions: Problems, Causes, Solutions, *Digital Journalism*, 2017-2018.

- Singapore Ministry of Law, *Green Paper on Deliberate Online Falsehoods : Challenges and Implications*, 2018, pp.3 to 9.

5- Smith, J., Digital Rumors and Social Stability, *Journal of Communication Studies*, Vol.15, N°.3, 2020, pp.45-60.

6- Kumar, S., Emotional Triggers in the Dissemination of Online Misinformation, *International Journal of Digital Media*, Vol.12, N°.1, 2021, pp.78-89.

7- Del Vicario, M. et al., The Spreading of Misinformation Online, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol.113, N°.3, 2016, pp.554-559.

8- Zubiaga, A., et al., Detection of rumours in social media, *ACM Computing Surveys*, Vol.51, N°.2, 2018, pp.1-36.

9- Meel, P., & Vishwakarma, D. K., *Fake News and Rumour in social media*, Expert Systems with Applications, 2020, p.153.

with the purpose of producing a lasting social effect. It is assumed not to cause real harm and to rest upon an implicit social consensus, or social framing, that tolerates such conduct.[10]

April Fools' prank differs from electronic rumour-propagation in that its premise is supposed to be that of a momentary joke from which no actual harm is expected and which depends upon an implied social agreement to engage in "***playful deception***" on that day.

By contrast, electronic rumour-propagation is based on disseminating unverified or false news through digital media without disclosing its humorous purpose, and often aims to influence public opinion or harm the interests of individuals or groups. Nevertheless, research has shown a stylistic resemblance between the texts of April Fools' tricks and certain models of false news and digital deceptive promotion.[11]

April Fools' hoaxes are deliberately broadcast for purposes of amusement and edification, and their falsity is usually exposed quickly, so that they remain within the bounds of a social or media joke.[12]

Unlike the electronic rumour, which seeks to disseminate false data with the intention of influencing public opinion or causing disturbance, the April Fools' prank does not ordinarily involve an intention to sustain deception or to inflict social harm.[13]

This form of humour is characterised by its transient nature and by the fact that it is subsequently withdrawn, whereas electronic rumour-propagation persists in circulating falsehoods and leads to negative consequences for both individuals and groups.[14]

Firstly: Definition of April Fools' Day and Its Historical Origin

From the foregoing, April Fools' Day may be understood as fabricated news or an invented claim circulated on the first day of April with the intention of jest or of luring others into a fleeting hoax, without the underlying traditional purpose of causing grave harm or permanent deception.[15]

As to its historical origin, although researchers generally acknowledge the absence of settled certainty as to its true beginnings, the most common explanations connect it either to spring festivities in Roman civilisation, such as ***Hilaria*** (a Roman spring festival), or to the

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10- Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d., *April Fools' Day*, on: https://www.britannica.com/topic/April-Fools-Day

11- Dearden, E., & Baron, A., *April Fools hoax stories could offer clues to help identify fake news*, Lancaster University, 2019, on: https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/april-fools-hoax-stories-could-offer-clues-to-help-identify-fake-news

12- Martin, J., April Fools' Day: The Social Function of Media Pranks, *Journal of Media Studies*, Vol.22, N°.1, 2017, pp.34-47.

13- Lopez, R., & Chen, Y., Differentiating Humour from Misinformation, *Communication Research Quarterly*, Vol.38, N°.2, 2021, pp.89-102.

14- Davies, S., The Impact of Electronic Rumours on Public Opinion, *Digital Communication Review*, Vol.16, N°.3, 2019, pp.145-160.

15- Edward Dearden & Alistair Baron, *Fool's Errand: Looking at April Fools Hoaxes as Disinformation Through the Lens of Deception and Humour*, CICLing, Springer LNCS, 2019, pp. 451-467.

- Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025, *April Fools' Day*, on: https://www.britannica.com/topic/April-Fools-Day

shifting of New Year observances in Europe following adoption of the Gregorian calendar in the sixteenth century, when some individuals continued to celebrate the New Year in late March and early April and thus became known as "***April fools***" or "***simpletons***". Historical sources also mention early traces of the custom in sixteenth-century France and, in England, in the writings of John Aubrey in 1686.[16]

Secondly: Points of Similarity and Difference Between April Fools' Day and the E-Rumour

1. **Points of similarity:**

- April Fools' Day and the electronic rumour both involve the circulation of information that is false or unverified.
- Both affect the recipient's perception and induce belief in false content.
- Both employ similarly forceful framing and language through relatively simple expression and a paucity of precise detail.
- Both exploit the recipient's trust in the platform or publishing entity.

2. **Points of difference:**

- The fundamental difference between them lies in intention and outcome.
- They differ in purpose, context, and effect.
- April Fools' Day is usually bounded by a particular time, event, and occasion, whereas the electronic rumour exhibits a far greater capacity for recirculation and amplification, obscurity of source, and difficulty of containment in the networked environment.[17]
- The electronic rumour carries legal and ethical dimensions that may extend to criminalisation, whereas April Fools' Day is generally viewed as an accepted social custom, though it too may become criminal in certain cases.[18]
- There is variance in the scale and character of the resulting effects.

Title 2: The Relationship Between E-rumour and April Fools' Day in Terms of Effects and Responses

April Fools' Day may be regarded as one of the forms of digital rumour which, despite its humorous aspect, may produce serious consequences for persons and communities through the dissemination of false news and the erosion of confidence in news outlets. This

16- CBS News, *How did April Fools' Day start and what are some famous pranks*, 2024, on: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-did-april-fools-day-start/

17- Belghoul, Y. & Medjdoub F., Electronic Rumours and the Technical and Legal Prevention, *Journal of Law and Political Sciences*, Vol.24, N°.2, 2025.

18- Garcia, M., & Lee, S., Intent and Impact : Differentiating Pranks from Harmful Rumours, *Journal of Digital Ethics*, Vol.5, N°.1, 2021, pp.45-60.

phenomenon affects public opinion and creates social, psychological, and media-related challenges; it may also be exploited for political or financial influence.[19]

The two phenomena converge in their collateral effects. A humorous item may begin as light content circulating electronically at very high speed, yet it may turn into deception that affects public opinion, provokes anxiety, or alters perceived facts.

Confronting this problem requires the strengthening of digital knowledge and media acuity so as to distinguish joke from deception, alongside electronic monitoring techniques for early detection and assessment of disguised content.

Studies show a need for specific legislation defining the limits of digital humour in order to prevent its transformation into false news, while also emphasising the responsibility of platforms to reduce the overlap between these two matters in digital space.[20]

First Subtitle: The Effects of E-Rumor and April Fools' Day

The electronic rumour produces a number of harmful effects, including the misleading of public opinion, the destabilisation of trust in media and governmental institutions, and the stirring of social and political disorder.[21]

This kind of rumour may also cause psychological and social harm to targeted individuals, in addition to negatively affecting the stability of digital communities.[22]

As for April Fools' Day, despite its entertaining nature, it may on occasion create temporary confusion or embarrassment for individuals and institutions if it is not quickly exposed, which reflects the importance of distinguishing acceptable humour from dangerous deception.[23] Accordingly, both the electronic rumour and April Fools' Day require critical public awareness in order to reduce their harmful effects.

Recent literature on misleading information in the networked environment[24] confirms that April Fools' Day may likewise produce confusion, embarrassment, or misunderstanding, especially if it exceeds the bounds of harmless joking or migrates into electronic space, where it becomes more susceptible to recirculation and amplification.[25]

19- Meel, P., & Vishwakarma, D. K., op.cit.

20- Verstraete, M., Bambauer, D. E., & Bambauer, J. R, *Identifying and Countering Fake News*, University of Arizona, 2017, pp.1-9.

- European Commission High Level Expert Group, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, Report of the Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, European Commission, 2018, pp.6-7.

- Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H., Information Disorder: *Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2017, pp.15-16.

21- Smith, J., & Clark, R., The Societal Impact of Online Rumours, *Journal of Social Media Studies*, Vol.14, N°.2, 2019, pp.88-102.

22- Ahmed, L., Psychological Effects of Misinformation on Digital Communities, *Cyberpsychology Journal*, Vol.9, N°.1, 2020, pp.33-47.

23- Jones, K., April Fools' Day: Humour and its unintended consequences, *Media and Society Review*, Vol.13, N°.4, 2018, pp.56-70.

24- Aïmeur, E., Amri, S., & Brassard, G., Fake News, Disinformation and Misinformation in Social Media: A review, *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 2023, p.13.

- Bondielli, A., & Marcelloni, F., A Survey on Fake News and Rumour Detection Techniques, *Information Sciences*, Vol.497, 2019, pp.38-55.

25- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). April Fools' Day, on:

The difference between them, therefore, does not negate their shared capacity to generate psychological and social effects; rather, the distinction lies principally in the fact that the electronic rumour is generally more dangerous and broader in its impact than the traditional April Fools' hoax.

Studies show that the electronic rumour has profound effects on both the individual and collective levels. It contributes to the formation of cognitively homogeneous communities—***echo chambers***—in which unreliable narratives are reinforced, thereby producing polarisation, erosion of trust in institutions, and the spread of fear and hostility, to the point that "***digital misinformation***" has been classified among the major threats confronting contemporary societies.

As for April Fools' Day, despite its humorous character, research has shown that hoax narratives published on that day, when circulated outside their original context or reproduced without clarification, may contribute to normalising patterns of false news and may confuse recipients in distinguishing serious reporting from satirical content.

At the same time, however, they have furnished an important research corpus that has helped scholars develop algorithms for detecting linguistic characteristics in misleading news and improving tools for identifying "***fake news***".[26]

Firstly: Social, Psychological, and Media Effects

Socially

- They may generate confusion, weaken trust among individuals, and distort public opinion, especially in digital environments that permit rapid circulation and wide republication.
- They may cause embarrassment and misunderstanding, and may acquire broader effects once they migrate into digital space and are transformed from a limited joke into misleading content capable of mass dissemination.
- They may spread anxiety and mistrust among individuals and may contribute to the fragmentation of social relations.

Psychologically

- They generate anxiety, stress, and confusion among recipients, especially when their content concerns sensitive or fear-inducing subjects.
- They may increase psychological stress because of the circulation of false or frightening information, and may even be associated with post-traumatic disturbance.

In media terms

- They impair the credibility of circulating content and unsettle the process of verification and the distinction between accurate reporting and misleading content.
- Rumours reduce the credibility of both traditional and digital media.

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https://www.britannica.com/topic/April-Fools-Day
26- Dearden, E., & Baron, A., op.cit.

- They weaken trust in public institutions and contribute to social polarisation and the eruption of conflict within groups and on communication platforms.

Secondly: The Legal and Security Effects Arising from the Dissemination of False News

The electronic rumour generates legal and security effects of considerable seriousness. Modern legislation frequently places it among information-technology offences where it involves the dissemination of false or misleading news likely to affect public security, public order, or reputation, thereby exposing perpetrators to criminal liability and penalties that may include imprisonment and fines, especially where actual harm is caused to persons, vital facilities, or the political stability of the state.[27]

Security agencies likewise treat the electronic rumour as a "***soft***" threat to national security because of its ability to provoke panic, disrupt regulatory institutions, and affect public confidence in official media. This has prompted many states to establish units for monitoring rumours and public-awareness contact centres, and to strengthen cooperation between security authorities and communications regulators.[28]

As for April Fools' Day, although it is originally a humorous practice, it may acquire the character of a criminal rumour if it is published in digital space in a manner that exceeds humour limited in time and place and leads to disturbance of security, harm to the interests of individuals, or disruption of public peace.

In such a case, the hoax becomes an "***aggravating context***" behind which the actor shelters under cover of social tradition in order to evade legal responsibility. Contemporary criminal-law scholarship has begun to draw attention to this when analysing the boundary between freedom of expression and humour, on the one hand, and deliberate deception and harm, on the other.[29]

It may produce the same legal and security effects if it entails harmful deception, provokes general fear, or touches legally protected matters, especially once it moves from the confines of limited joking into widely disseminated electronic space.[30]

27- United Arab Emirates, Federal Decree-Law Nº.34 of 2021 on Countering Rumours and Cybercrimes, pp.27-28.
- Jordan, Cybercrime Law Nº.17 of 2023, unofficial English translation by Jordan Open-Source Association, articles 15-17.
- Center for News, Technology & Innovation, *Most "Fake News" Legislation Risks Doing More Harm Than Good Amid a Record Number of Elections*, 2024, pp.2 to 7.
28- El-Sayed Fettouh Mohamed Hindawy, Modern Administrative Methods to Combat Electronic Rumors, *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues*, Vol.24, Issue 1, 2021, pp.1-2.
- Axel Gelfert, contribution in *The Political and Social Impact of Rumours: Workshop Report***,** S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010, p.5.
- ASEAN**,** *Guideline on Management of Government Information in Combating Fake News and Disinformation in the Media***,** 2023, pp.38-40.
29- Sayeh Boussahia & Moussa Lassoued, Criminalizing Coronavirus-Related April Fools' Pranks, *Journal of Judicial Ijtihad*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, 2020, pp.472-491.
- Catherine J. Ross, Incredible Lies, *University of Colorado Law Review*, Vol. 89, 2018, pp.379-422.
- Mark Spottswood, Falsity, Insincerity, and the Freedom of Expression, *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal*, Vol.16, 2008, pp.1203-1279.
30- Aïmeur, E., Amri, S., & Brassard, G., op.cit.
- UNESCO, *Online disinformation: UNESCO action plan*, 2024, on:

The response becomes stricter where the electronic rumour produces grave legal and security consequences, since it may be treated as an offence punishable by law when used to disseminate false information aimed at inciting violence, destabilising public order, or damaging the reputation of individuals and institutions. From a security perspective, such rumours may provoke collective panic or cause social disorder threatening public security.[31]

As for April Fools' Day, notwithstanding its entertaining character, it may exceed legal limits if it causes material or moral harm, or if it is used as a cover for the deliberate dissemination of misleading information, which requires the establishment of controls for its regulation and for the protection of the public (Smith, 2019). Accordingly, during the coronavirus pandemic, April Fools' pranks related to the virus were said to have been prohibited and criminalised as follows:

1. Initial prohibition initiatives:

T-Mobile and Google were among the companies that moved to cancel April Fools' Day activities related to the coronavirus pandemic, stating that they had cancelled their pranks for that year because of the spread of the virus. Other companies, however, continued to engage in such conduct, and some went even further by proposing jokes, including an Australian online educational company offering a "***diploma in surviving quarantine***".[32]

- The World Health Organization initiative:

The World Health Organization prohibited all April Fools' Day pranks during the COVID-19 crisis, and the prohibition was said to have been imposed worldwide after a study by prominent scientists discovered that, in light of everything that had occurred in 2020, people had become ready to believe almost anything, thereby leading to dangerous levels of spontaneity and naivety.[33]

- Legal prosecution under the Computer Crime law in Thailand:

In a statement, the Thai government reported that violators who published rumours and jokes on April Fools' Day relating to the coronavirus would be prosecuted under computer-crime laws punishing those who import information deemed false into computer systems, with penalties of five years' imprisonment or a fine of up to one thousand dollars under Section 14, paragraph 02, of the Computer Crime Act.[34]

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https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/online-disinformation-unesco-unveils-action-plan-regulate-social-media-platforms

31- Nguyen, H., Legal Perspectives on Misinformation, *Cyber Law Journal*, Vol.8, N°.3, 2020, pp.77-90.

32- Sayeh Boussahia & Moussa Lassoued, op.cit.

33- OECD, *Good Practice Principles for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation*, OECD Public Governance Policy Papers No.30, 2023.

- World Health Organization/NCBI Bookshelf, *What Are the Historical Roots of the COVID-19 Infodemic*?, Lessons from the Past, 2022, Chapter 2.

34- Thailand Computer Crime Act, Section 14(2), *Act on Computer Crime B.E. 2550*, tentative English translation, International Commission of Jurists PDF, 2007, p.2.

- Lasse Schuldt & Pudit Ovattananavakhun, Thailand's Law on Criminal Online Falsehoods: A Critical Discussion, *Thai Legal Studies*, Vol.1, 2021, pp.150-172.

- Judicial prosecution under cyber-security and anti-electronic-crime law in India:

In India, on the occasion of April Fools' Day, an Indian state authority warned the public against publishing rumours or circulating fake messages so as to avoid spreading panic. Government authorities also stated that cases would be brought under the Information Technology (IT) Act against anyone found guilty.[35]

The cyber-security unit further stated that legal action would be taken against any person publishing false news on April Fools' Day. Indeed, Mumbai police had already registered a case against an unidentified resident who falsely claimed on WhatsApp that the army had been deployed in the city because of the spread of the epidemic.[36]

2. In the Arab region:

With respect to Arab legislation, Egyptian law addressed the matter, pursuant to the Penal Code and cybercrime legislation, as the offence of "false reporting".

As for Algerian legislation, the issue was addressed through the draft amendment to the Penal Code criminalising acts of publishing or promoting false news that harms public order and security, especially during crises or exceptional circumstances, as was observed during the spread of the coronavirus alongside false news. This was reflected in **Article 196 bis** of Penal Code Law Nº.20-06.

Second Subtitle: Means of Confronting the E-Rumour Associated with April Fools' Day

Digital rumours circulated during April Fools' Day are among the manifestations that leave a harmful effect upon society. It is therefore necessary to adopt effective means of addressing them:

first, by raising users' level of media awareness regarding how to verify the sources of data before circulating it;

second, by encouraging the use of digital verification techniques capable of detecting false reports;

third, by activating the function of websites in monitoring material and removing rumours rapidly; and, equally, by strengthening individuals' technical knowledge in order to prevent them from being carried along by fabricated rumours.[37]

The electronic rumour linked to April Fools' Day is confronted by entrenching a culture of verification before dissemination, through examination of the source of the information, cross-checking it against trusted sources, and avoiding the recirculation of sensational material merely for amusement or curiosity, since this category of content may quickly turn

35- Saurabh Vaktania, Maharashtra Govt Warns Citizens Against Spreading Fake Rumours as April Fools' Pranks, *India Today*, 31 March 2020.
36- Centre for Internet and Society, Information Disorders and their Regulation, p.20.
37- UNICEF, *Managing Rumours: Guidance to Country Offices*, 2020, pp.2-21.
- European Union, *Code of Conduct on Disinformation*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, pp.29-30.
- OECD, *Facts Not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity*, 2024, pp.35-39.

from a mere "***jest***" into widely circulating informational deception, all are practical examples of digital monitoring and rapid response.[38]

Such confrontation also requires the sharpening of users' media and digital awareness, the activation of methods for reporting misleading content, and the imposition upon digital platforms of responsibility for limiting its spread, particularly where it causes widespread confusion or social harm.

Accordingly, critical awareness, verification of data, and legal and ethical responsibility in digital use remain among the most important means of reducing this form of electronic rumour.

In this context, research proposes a shift from mere "post-spread treatment" to preventive methods such as ***prebunking*** and the strengthening of critical-thinking capacities among the public, so that they become more resistant to misleading content on such occasions.

Individuals may likewise be directed towards ***critical ignoring***,[39] that is, refraining from giving attention or engagement to rumours and provocative accounts, and employing methods such as ***lateral reading*** and checking information through other sources before entering into discussion of it.

In conclusion, reducing the noise of April Fools' Day requires coordinated action among communication platforms, supervisory bodies, and fact-checking institutions in order to launch early awareness campaigns, facilitate reporting mechanisms, and move swiftly to remove misleading content before it becomes a widely circulating "reality".[40]

Firstly: The Role of Legislation and Digital Monitoring in Limiting the Phenomenon

Legislation and digital monitoring contribute effectively to limiting the spread of electronic rumours and April Fools' Day hoaxes by establishing strict laws that criminalise the publication of false information and impose penalties on violators.

Digital monitoring also assists in rapidly detecting false content and removing it from electronic platforms, thereby reducing its effect on the public. In addition, these measures encourage the strengthening of users' digital media awareness, making them better able to distinguish correct information from misleading information. Accordingly, legislation and digital monitoring constitute a foundational pillar in confronting this growing phenomenon.[41]

Legislation and digital surveillance likewise play a central role in reducing the phenomenon of the electronic rumour and April Fools' Day by establishing legal regimes that criminalise the dissemination of false information and impose strict sanctions upon violators.

38- International Telecommunication Union, *Digital Tools and Strategies in COVID-19 Infodemic Response: Case Studies and Discussion*, 2021, pp. 25-29.
39- Kozyreva, A., et al., Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol.32, N°.1, 2023, pp.53-60.
40- Bak-Coleman, J. B., et al., Combining Interventions to Reduce the Spread of Viral Misinformation, *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol.6, N°.10, 2022, pp.1372-1380.
41- India Today, op.cit.

Laws dealing with cybercrime thus impose legal responsibility upon any person who promotes misleading information via the internet or social media.[42]

Digital monitoring also permits continuous tracking of electronic material in order rapidly to identify and remove rumours, which reduces both their spread and their harmful effect upon the public. Moreover, such measures strengthen users' digital awareness, enabling them to distinguish sound information from misleading information. Legislation and digital monitoring therefore represent effective mechanisms for safeguarding society from informational disorder.[43]

Secondly: The Role of Media Awareness and Digital Culture in Prevention

Media awareness and digital culture are among the essential components of immunisation against the phenomenon of electronic rumours and April Fools' Day. They strengthen individuals' capacity to differentiate truthful data from misleading data, and awareness programmes help users learn how to verify the sources of developments and understand the mechanisms by which rumours spread.

Digital culture also supports the construction of an informed society that uses technology responsibly and reduces the burden of false content; such efforts help curb the spread of falsehoods and protect the public against deceptive misinformation.[44]

Media awareness and the strengthening of digital culture are likewise among the principal preventive means of limiting the spread of April Fools' Day hoaxes, because they assist individuals in verifying the correctness of information before publishing or circulating it across social media.[45]

In general, media awareness and digital culture constitute the first line of defence against the electronic rumour, as they cultivate in individuals skills of critical thinking and the ability to distinguish trustworthy news from false content spreading through social networks. Studies confirm that media and digital literacy programmes increase the efficiency of the public—especially young people—in discovering false news and limiting its circulation, including satirical reports or "***pranks***" associated with April Fools' Day.

Digital-education initiatives also call for teaching users' source-verification techniques, lateral reading, and attentiveness to date of publication and the nature of the platform, so that humorous materials published on the first of April do not become misleading rumours living on outside their temporal context.

Research further highlights the role of the school, the university, and the media in entrenching a critical digital culture grounded in awareness of the dangers of deception and of

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42- Wall, D. S., Cybercrime: The Transformation of Crime in the Information Age, *Polity Press*, Cambridge, 2007.

43- Jordan Hill, OECD *Policy Responses to False and Misleading Digital Content: A Snapshot of Children's Media Literacy*, OECD Education Working Paper N°.275, 2022.

44- UNESCO, *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely!* 2nd ed., 2021, pp.15-16.
- UNESCO, *Global Citizenship Education in a Digital Age: Teacher Guidelines*, 2024, p.4.
- Council of Europe, *Digital Citizenship Education: Overview and New Perspectives*, 2017, pp.5-6.
- Spanish Office of Science and Technology, *Systemic Anti-Disinformation Measures and Platform Responsibility*, Oficina C, *Disinformation in the Digital Age*, 2023, pp.24-25.

45- Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H., op.cit.

its linguistic and communicative techniques, thereby increasing society's resilience against the electronic rumour. Investment in media awareness and digital culture therefore constitutes a necessary complement to legislative and regulatory efforts and makes the user a responsible actor rather than a passive recipient of digital content, thus, media literacy and digital culture complement regulation by strengthening users' ability to recognise false and misleading content.[46]

Conclusion:

The digital rumour, or what is otherwise referred to as the e-rumour, consists in the spread, through digital platforms, of inaccurate or exaggerated information concerning a matter that occupies public attention, and such rumours are often intended to influence public opinion or destabilise social order.

By contrast, April Fools' Day is a form of intentional deception in which a fabricated report or imaginary story is circulated on the first day of April and later revealed in its humorous capacity as a social or media practice. Recent research has shown that these hoaxes resemble false news in both structure and linguistic characteristics, which makes them a model capable of study for understanding the mechanisms of deception in the digital environment.

Contemporary studies indicate that the digital rumour has become one of the most prominent instruments of "***soft power***" capable of affecting the political, financial, and social security of states, especially with the declining effectiveness of traditional methods of addressing it.

Conversely, April Fools' Day is conceptually and practically linked to the digital rumour, particularly after its migration into digital space, where linguistic and media research has shown that April Fools' texts share many stylistic features with false news, thus raising the problem of distinguishing legitimate humour from intentional deception.

The danger posed by the digital rumour and April Fools' Day lies in their multiple effects: both may contribute to undermining the credibility of institutions, provoking panic, and influencing social and financial behaviour.

Their effects also extend to psychological and social dimensions through the spread of fear and stress, the distortion of reputation, and the intensification of social divisions. In addition, both the digital rumour and April Fools' Day may destabilise public life, affect markets and financial decisions, or weaken trust in public institutions, as numerous recent studies in media and management have indicated.

46- Jordan Hill, op.cit.