Challenges of Fake News and Its Impact on Society in the Digital Era: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Accuracy, objectivity, authenticity and truthfulness are the essential hallmarks of news, which make it credible in the eyes of readers, viewers or even those people, who receive news indirectly. It is this sacredness which gives news a distinct place in society. But the phenomena of fake news target the core values of news, which nurture the personal interest of unsocial elements, rumor mongers or of those high and mighty, who put forward their personal agenda in the garb of news. And when fake news gets digital wings, it turns into viral journalism. If misused, it can spread violence and hatred, wreak havoc and prove to be disastrous for the civil society. Nowadays, fake news has become a big challenge for the news industry as well as the society.

The internet revolution has provided a soft ground for spreading fake news and has become the primary cause of misinformation, inaccuracy in news, misleading news stories, half-truths and sometimes highly sensational reporting, done to grab attention of the masses and mislead them. Information on social networking sites gets speed at such a fast pace that distorted, inaccurate or false information acquires a tremendous potential to cause real world impacts, within minutes, for millions of users. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and messaging App like WhatsApp have become fertile platforms to spread fake news.

Against this backdrop this paper intends to evaluate the challenges of fake news, its impact on the society, government's role in regulating digital platforms used for spreading fake news, social media's self-regulation and above all the responsibility of the citizens and the youth, who are the future of the country.

Keywords: Fake news, Infodemic, digital media, news industry

INTRODUCTION

Fake news refers to intentionally and verifiably false stories largely disseminated particularly through social media networks. This type of news is designed to manipulate people's perceptions of facts, events, and statements. Presented as the news, it doesn't pass through the editorial processes of news industry and that's why it lacks accuracy and credibility. Misinformation and disinformation are its characteristic features. Fake news has taken various forms online, such as WhatsApp forwards, news with click bait headlines, and after the spread of Covid pandemic, it was termed as "Infodemic", a plague of fake news.

Fake news is classified into several forms i.e. degree of factuality, motivation of deception and form of presentation, which includes satire and parody that have a basis in facts but can mislead when

de-contextualised. The UNESCO *Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* provides an additional distinction of two forms of fake news, one that is deliberately created with the intention of targeting and causing harm to a social group, an organisation, a person or a country, described as disinformation and the other being simple misinformation that wasn't created for the purpose of causing harm. And in this era of digital revolution, social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp provide a fertile ground for the generation and circulation of fake news. Drawing attention to its seriousness, former President of India Ram Nath Kovind said, "fake news has emerged a new menace, whose purveyors proclaim themselves as journalists and taint this noble profession."

Increasing use of mobile devices and easy access to internet have turned the popular sites --- Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter into powerful platforms for providing news and entertainment. Top political leaders of the world including Prime Minister of India and the President of USA are using social media to engage with their voters and supporters. Online communication has also promoted citizen journalism. Thanks to all these factors, social media is scaling new heights of popularity with each passing day. But this popularity also lures people with vested interests. Social media provides wrongdoers and unsocial elements an easy platform to spread fake news and nurture their agenda. Every celebrity or institution of repute is on the target of fake news makers.
The institutions like CBSE and the Election Commission of India have been a soft target for such elements for many years. Several rumors on examination paper leak and misinformation about election commission came to the fore on social platforms in past few years.

In recent years, incidents of mob attacks, rumor mongering, false allegations, defamatory messages, political propaganda and religious hatred are rising noticeably on social media. Memes, morphed images and doctored videos are adding salt to the injury.
Fake news on social media caused the death of more than forty people in various parts of the country between 2014 and 2019.
It has also been observed that fake news spreads faster when it provides misinformation that is aligned with the audience's point of view because such content is not questioned or
discounted. These facts loudly profess that fake news on digital platforms pose a big challenge to the society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CONTENT ANALYSIS
ELEMENTS OF FAKE NEWS
Lots of things we read on social platforms may appear to be true, but they are not**.** They are false information or fake news.
The findings of study say that fake news is usually related to a sociopolitical issue, and that social media has become the favorite platform for generation and circulation of fake news, particularly because of its wide reach, interactive feature and cost effectiveness. Misleading and imposter content with made up sources and false context are the key elements of fake news.
According to Martina Chapman, an independent *specialist* in *media literacy*, fake news has three elements. They are Mistrust, misinformation and manipulation; and these elements get wings when fake news is circulated on social media.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR CIRCULATION OF FAKE NEWS

There are a number of factors responsible for the circulation of fake news on social media. Prominent among them are social factors, cognitive factors, political factors, financial factors and malicious factors.

Social Factors: Concocted stories are being promoted on social networking sites or messaging apps to deceive the public for ideological gain. Research says that like-minded people are soft targets of rumor mongers.

Cognitive Factors: Finding authentic information is an uphill task and common man doesn't have the capability to distinguish between the genuine and the concocted information. Mischief makers take advantage of it..

Political Factors: Research says that fake news often have deep influence on the political environment. Voters are influenced by politically motivated audio and video clips.

Financial Factors: Fake news is often circulated with the objective of monetary gains. Fake news accounts generate traffic to their specific website. Various types of write ups and articles with attractive headlines lure people to share false information. Moreover, many companies use social networking sites to influence the targeted customers.

Malicious Factors: There is a section of social media users who share information with malicious intent. Malicious users, also called "trolls", often engage in online communication to manipulate other social media users and to spread rumors.

 According to a research published in a US journal, older people are prone to spreading false information. Since fake news exploits people's emotions and propagates a particular ideology on social media at large scale, caring little for the well-being of the society, it has become a challenging task to control it.

CHALLENGES OF FAKE NEWS

We are living in information age; and social media has become an inseparable part of our life. Thanks to its features like wide reach and immediacy, any information circulated on social platforms spreads at the lightning speed. Fake news makers take undue advantage of these features of social media and circulate distorted, inaccurate or false information on these platforms. with vested interests. These contents could prove to be disastrous.

- Fake news is often used by political leaders to influence public opinions and gain popularity.
- It's a tool to malign the image of certain individuals or opponents or to defame them. Particularly at the times of elections we come across a flood of fake news on social platforms.
- Fake news is a big threat to social and communal harmony. A study of communal violence in recent years reveals that social platforms were used at large scale to circulate extremist ideologies. This type of content sparks communal tension and incites violence in sensitive areas. Common man believes fake news to be true and unknowingly starts working as a tool of the conspirators.
- Fake news is used for commercial gains. It is often used as part of sensational headlines, which aims to attract people to click through to linked websites and generate advertising income.
- Fake news abuses the trust of internet users. There are a number of examples when authentic contact forms were used to collect personal user data and these data were misused.
- e mail hoaxes are also used to threaten recipients in case they fail to share an e mail.

A BIG CHALLENGE FOR MEDIA

The rise of fake news on social platforms has emerged as a major challenge for the mainstream media, which is largely dependent on social media for developing and breaking news. The task for journalists has become much more tough. They have to keep a watchdog's eye on every news fall and make sure that their source on social media is not fake news.

People's trust is the biggest asset for any news organization or news man. But the rising trend of fake news has made people suspicious. No longer they believe a news simply because it has been published in a newspaper or aired on some TV Channel. So the credibility of mainstream media has come under question mark, which is a major setback for the media. So media persons have become far more alert.

The findings of a survey in UK reveal that 81% British journalists give top priority to accuracy of content and they make sure that their content is 100% accurate. Some 37% journalists believe that social networks and search engines bypassing traditional media has become the biggest test for journalism. This study also finds that 51% of the British journalists are of the view that fake news makes readers/viewers more skeptical.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Misinformation and disinformation campaign on social media poses a serious challenge to the society. It causes communal tension and riots in the society. Mob lynchings and vigilante violence in various parts of coutry are directly associated with the circulation of fake news on social media. Morphed images, click-baits, motivated stories, unverified information and planted stories with vested interests easily spread on this media, causing major harm to the society. There are scores of examples of fake news disturbing communal harmony, misleading people, giving wings to rumours and instigating mob lynchings in various parts of the country.

Muzzafarnagar riots of 2013 fuelled by fake video, UNESCO's declaration of 'Jana Gana Mana' thr best national anthem in the world, seizure of Dawood properties in Dubai worth Rs 15000 Cr   former President Ram Nath Kovind making Twitter debut and gaining 3 million followers in one hour, GPS tracking nanochip in 2000 Rupee notes, Salt Shortage rumours and Child kidnapping rumours leading to mob lynchings are prominent examples.

Of late when Covid pandemic spread across the world, the plague of fake news called infodemic also became a deadly menace for the society. The infodemic proved to be more contagious than ongoing pandemic. Director-General of the World Health Organisation, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, remarked, "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic"

In short, in this era of social media fake news has deep impact on the society.

REGULATION OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Government of India has been taking steps time to time to regulate the social media. Recently in 2021 government framed guidelines for social media intermediaries amidst growing concerns around lack of transparency, accountability and rights of users related to digital media. In the guidelines rules about digital media and OTT focused more on in house and self-regulation mechanism whereby a robust grievance redressal mechanism was provided while upholding journalistic and creative freedom. The guidelines also require social platforms to remove objectionable content in a given time and establish a mechanism for redressing grievances. They will also have to cooperate in investigation.

Just few days ago Centre notified the establishment of a state-appointed body to fact-check all government-related content online deemed as misinformation or disinformation, a move that drew sharp criticism from internet and free speech activists who said it will lead to censorship. , The minister of state for electronics and IT, Rajeev Chandrasekhar countered the criticism and said that the government fact-check body will be responsible only for information related to central government schemes and will send relevant notices informing intermediaries of content that has been deemed misinformation or disinformation by it.

SOCIAL MEDIA'S SELF REGULATION

Social media intermediaries are claiming to have taken a number of measures to curb the circulation of fake news.

Facebook claims, since 2016, it has been practicing a strategy called "remove, reduce, and inform" to manage problematic content..

In April 2019, Facebook, the most popular Social Networking Site announced a slew of measures to combat false news stories, images and videos. The major steps included:

➢ curbing the reach of objectionable groups
➢ Exploring user's perception about trustworthy news platforms
➢ Informing users about the content

Facebook has instituted a slew of new policies around the electoral process and misleading claims by politicians. The measures also apply to Instagram which is owned by Facebook. Besides, in India Facebook has partnered with fact-checking websites such as BOOM and Webqoof by The Quint.
 Twitter has also instituted measures to combat misinformation including deleting accounts.

Social media giants Facebook and Twitter have also started to flag content that is unverified or otherwise misleading.

From time to time, WhatsApp has also been taking measures to curb the spread of false information. In April 2020, the company imposed new limitations on message forwarding. Before 2018, a message could be forwarded to 250 groups at a time, in 2018 to 20 and in 2019 to 5 only. . According to WhatsApp these steps impacted message forwarding which got reduced by 25%. Across the globe.WhatsApp introduced a tip-line among other measures such as suspending accounts and sending cease-and-desist letters. WhatsApp also added a small tag, *forwarded,* to relevant messages. They also started a course for digital literacy and came out with full page advertisements in newspapers in multiple languages

Besides, in 2018, Google News launched a program to train 8000 journalists in seven official Indian languages including English. It was Google's largest training initiative in the world,The objective of the program was to spread awareness of fake news and anti-misinformation practices such as fact-checking.

EMERGENCE OF FACT CHECKING INDUSTRY

In recent years fact checking industry have come to fore to cope with the challenges of fake news They range from self-motivated persons, to organized divisions within mainstream and online news media, to digital media outlets solely dedicated to fact checking and online myth busting. This includes a video series 'Fake Bole Kaua Kaate'), India Today's *Anti Fake News War Room*, Times of India's 'Times Verified' sections in digital news outlets (*Webqoof* on Quint, *Hoaxposed* on The Print) as well as initiatives solely dedicated to busting and exposing fake news online such as SMHoaxSlayer, Altnews, and Boomlive. Amidst rumors and fake news related to Coronavirus pandemic, Government of India also constituted a COVID-19 FCU in PIB. It receives messages by email at pibfactcheck@gmail.com.

Today India has the highest number of ceritified fact checkers in the world. Fact checking has become a global issue of concern. The first fact checking organization came up in United States in 2000s and recently, *The New York Times* added a "daily distortions" section to its news site to combat such falsehoods. Today every major US news outlet has a fact checking unit. Over the past few years, independent fact-checkers have emerged in more than 50 countries spanning every continent. According to the most reliable global count, 113 such groups are active today and among them more than 90% were established after 2010.

CONCLUSION

The menace is so grave and challenging that persons at the helm of affairs of the governance have expressed deep concern over the increasing trend of the circulation of false information and fake news. Recently in March 2023, while addressing IIS officers in New Delhi, President Droupadi Murmu said that in the era of social media the challenge of fast spreading fake news has also come to the fore. She urged them to use technology to curb the tendency of misusing media, especially social media to create fake narratives.

Echoing the same concern at a gathering of Home Ministers of states in Haryana in October 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that a single fake news has the capability to snowball into a matter of national concern and he emphasized the need to come up with technological advancement to put a check on this problem. PM stressed on the need to educate people about analysing and verifying any piece of information before forwarding it to others.

"One should think 10 times before forwarding any information and verify it before believing it. Every platform has tools to verify any information. If you will browse through different sources, you will get a new version of it," the Prime Minister said. So mass education, sensitization programs and large scale awareness campaigns are the need of the hour. At the same time it is also the responsibility of common man to remain vigilant against becoming a tool in the hands of mischief makers and people with evil designs.

So far the regulation of social platforms is concerned, it is a major challenge for the government because taking steps to curb the circulation of information may violate one's freedom of speech and expression, which is a constitutional right. But here the question arises, if any right is absolute ? Can any right exist without duty ? Certainly not. Each right is subject to restrictions. Therefore the government will have to come up with strict regulations and opposition parties will have to understand the gravity of the issue and support the legislation after objective analysis.

In this era of 'fake news' the responsibility of journalists increases many fold. It is the need of hour that they use their sixth sense before picking any news item from the din of information. They must double check facts and verify the contents available on social platforms through multiple sources before framing their stories in the mainstream media.

If society as a whole takes pledge to curb the circulation of fake news and different stake holders take the suggested measures, the unbridled horse can be tamed. Needless to say that it would be the golden era of social media.

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