



Fake news: Credibility of social media under scanner and need for stringent policy

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Abstract

Social media has been playing a significant role in every sphere of our lives. In fact, the use of social media has increased to the extent that we cannot imagine personal and professional growth without it. One can understand the importance of social media platforms from the fact that many of us are spending hours every day on different platforms for various activities. Any significant information can be disseminated to the masses at an enormous speed across the world.

However, social media platforms have also become a major source for many to spread fake news. The threat of fake news on social media can be evaluated by the fact that it has been used as a weapon to spread different types of false news during the US Presidential elections, the Ukraine-Russia war, the COVID-19 pandemic, riots, and conflicts.

According to a recent study, the speed and reach of social media can be gauged from the fact that because of the nature of fake news either being fear, or disgust, or surprise, it spread faster than truth.

There is nothing new as far as fake news is concerned. It has always been there in the traditional media. But now with the rise in the use of social media, the threat of damage that such content can cause has increased manifold. The reason: the speed and scale at which social media can spread any content. The same goes for fake news, as it can be disseminated to people across the world within split seconds and can cause irreparable damage of huge magnitude.

So, random review of available literature vis-a-vis some major events related to fake news has been done to find out the extent such content can be damaging and also what needs to be done to prevent it.

Keywords: Social Media, Fake News, Journalism, Media, US presidential elections, Ukraine-Russia war, COVID-19 pandemic

1.0 Introduction

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool to communicate with the masses because of its speed, reach and the power to influence. Keeping in view the rise in the use of social media platforms by people, instead of organizing press conferences, many personalities are preferring social media platforms to deliver their message directly to people to have an immediate impact, to avoid questioning, and without incurring any cost. Infact, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have become so quintessential that today, live telecast of all the major events is being done on social media platforms.

With the amazing feature of live telecast, politicians and party workers are doing Facebook lives of elections rallies and campaigns regularly on their social media platforms to reach their target. Besides politicians, powerful personalities from every sphere are using social media platforms to reach their target audience to convey their message. Besides, activists are not banking on mainstream media for their coverage; they are exploiting the reach of social media platforms to convey the message with impact.

2.0 Need for Study

Fake news spreads faster than truth

According to the Online Cambridge dictionary, fake news is “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or a joke”.

(Waisbord, 2018) suggested that fake news has been primarily used to refer to “content featuring the style of conventional news intended to deliberately misinform. Massive amounts of newsy fiction were distributed online, particularly on social media, during electoral contests in several countries. Understood as information divorced from reality, fake news is not new”.

(Vosoughi et al., 2018) study concluded that,

“false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust. Contrary to conventional wisdom, robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate, implying that false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it. We investigated the differential diffusion of all of the verified true and false news stories distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. The data comprise 126,000 stories tweeted by 3 million people more than 4.5 million times.”

A report published in The Telegraph in January 2021 highlighted that, “the 2016 US election has been seen as providing a fertile breeding ground for fake news. Some credit Mr Trump’s anti-establishment rhetoric and distrust of the mainstream media. Others blame widening partisanship, which meant readers were more prone to believe and share stories that fit their beliefs”. Trump’s Twitter account became a hub for fake news and misinformation with the social media site making the decision to label his tweets last year. In May, Jack Dorsey’s tech giant labelled Mr Trump’s tweets as showing manipulated media. It also limited his posts for “glorifying violence” when he tweeted “when the looting starts the shooting starts” during the Black Lives Matter protests”.

The Guardian reported on November 15, 2016, that,

“in the era of Donald Trump and Brexit, Oxford dictionaries declared “post-truth” its international word of the year 2016. Defined by the dictionary as an adjective, “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

According to The Tribune editorial “Dangerous Gullibility” published on December 27, 2016, fake news can lead to serious international and national crises. Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif was upset after getting information on social media that Israel had threatened a nuclear strike for Pakistan’s role in Syria against ISIS. Without verifying the facts, the Pakistani minister threatened Israel that his country, too, possessed nuclear weapons. Thank God Pakistan and Israel are separated by distance. But if a similar thing happened between India and Pakistan, it has the potential of leading to something serious on the ground.

3.0 Power of social media and rising threat of fake news

An article by Anuradha Rao in Economic and Political Weekly, “How did Social Media Impact India’s 2019 General Election?” suggests that “social media played a prominent role during the 2019 Indian general elections as political parties, politicians, and supporters (real or otherwise) used it extensively for political campaigning and communication. Following the global trend, social media has been increasingly used by Indian political actors for routine political communication between elections to provide unmediated and direct communication to connect leaders and citizenry, and to re-energise the political landscape in the country.”

(Paulussen, Steve; Harder, Raymond A. & Johnson, Michiel, 2017) concluded that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, give journalists quick and easy access to a range of sources. In addition, the news stories and headlines are presented in a different way to increase their sociability and virality and it leads to concerns about the intensification of the commercial pressures on journalism.

Highlighting the importance of social media in 2014, in a chapter in her book “More News is Good News” titled “NDTV’s Online Newsroom: Who’s really in Charge Here?”, Suparna Singh says “by the time 2014 rolled around, there was much talk of how this would be the first Indian elections with a sizeable Fifth Estate. Too soon, it became clear that the Fifth Estate would, in fact, be the prime and not peripheral turf, and that if you were not going to partake, you better just get out of the way. We spent months training a very young, relentlessly bright and, gauging by the food deliveries, perma-hungry newsroom on the portended law of the land. As a result, NDTV.com registered over 13 billion hits on May 16, 2014, election results day, a new record for the highest traffic on any Indian website in a single day.”

(Bouvier, G., 2017) the study concluded that erosion of some of the basic former aspects of journalistic practice related to verification and provision of context as what is “trending” becomes a news definer. Yet those with the skills to understand how it is integrated into news production may use this to disseminate their own ideology.

(Mhamdi, C, 2016) suggested that “citizen journalists” do not always provide accurate or reliable information which, in many instances, can spark false rumours that negatively impact individuals and groups.

(Egelhofer et al., 2019) suggested that fake news is a two-dimensional phenomenon: there is the fake news genre, relating to the intentional creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation, and there is the fake news label, describing the political instrumentalisation of the term by political actors to delegitimize journalism and news media.

(Rocha et al., 2021) study concluded that social-media platforms have contributed to the spread of false news and conspiracy theories during the coronavirus pandemic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the disposition to spread incorrect information or rumours is directly related to the development of anxiety in populations of different ages.

(Modgil et al., 2021), the study highlighted that there is a reciprocal, reinforcing relationship between confirmation bias and echo chambers that accelerates SMIP, as opposed to just the social media platforms itself.

Highlighting the threat of fake news, the annual report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism released in 2017 suggested that fake news was being outlined as a key area of concern. Authored by researcher Nic Newman, the report outlines the predicted trends in media, journalism, and technology for the coming year. Fake News, Algorithms, and Guarding against the Filter Bubble Fake news is not new but as Mark Thompson points out in his new book “Enough Said”, “Our digital ecosystems have evolved into a near perfect environment for distorted and false news to thrive”.

In the last weeks of the US Presidential election, according to an analysis by BuzzFeed News, fake stories such as the Pope endorsing Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton selling weapons to ISIS outperformed real news on Facebook with more shares, reactions, and comments. There is a danger of exaggerating the extent of fake news”.

One can gauge the seriousness of the spread of misinformation from the fact that even the Indian Prime Minister recently said that the country was under constant attack through disinformation, and false propaganda. According to ANI report about the Prime Minister's statement published on July 18, 2022, “Highlighting the challenges of national security and new forms of warfare”, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said as India is establishing itself on the global stage, there are constant attacks through misinformation, disinformation and false propaganda. Addressing the gathering at Naval Innovation and Indigenisation Organisation (NIIO) Seminar ‘Swavlamban’, Modi said, “Now the threats to national security have also become widespread, the methods of warfare are also changing. Earlier, we used to imagine our defence only till land, sea, and sky. Now the circle is moving towards space, moving towards cyberspace, moving towards economic, social space”. In such a scenario, the Prime Minister said that the country has to move to anticipate future challenges and bring changes accordingly. He said self-reliance will help the country a great deal in this regard”.

The spread of fake news is also high in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war. India Today’s report published on March 8, 2022, highlighted that, “The amount of misinformation and fake news is usually high during crises, such as the present Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, the denial of the existence of the conflict altogether is outright foolish and only aids in spreading confusion among the public. Among the many images that are being shared to claim that the Russia-Ukraine war is a hoax is a photo that shows an actor being smeared with fake blood. Some netizens cited this to claim that they were Ukrainian actors putting up makeup to claim that a war is being fought in Ukraine. However, the photo, shot in 2020, is completely unrelated to the current conflict and is from the sets of a Ukrainian TV series, Contamin”.

4.0 Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

A random review of available literature include some major events related to fake news has been done to collect secondary data for the purpose of the study. Highlighting the importance of secondary data (Johnston, 2014) suggested that “The overall goal of this secondary data analysis is the same as that of others, to contribute to scientific knowledge through offering an alternate perspective; it only differs in its reliance on existing data. In a time where the large amounts of data being collected, compiled, and archived by researchers all over the world are now more easily accessible, the time has definitely come for secondary data analysis as a viable method for LIS

research.” The theories which are found appropriate to explain the spread of the fake news include Uses and Gratifications, Marshall McLuhan theory ‘medium is message’, Propaganda and Diffusion of Innovation.

While highlighting how and why people used social media during the 2016 US presidential election, (Shirsat et al., 2021) study suggested that the thematic analysis revealed people were gratified after using social media to connect with friends and family and to gather and share information and after using it as a vehicle of expression. Participants found a significant number of fake news stories on social media during the 2016 US presidential election.

(Olan et al., 2022) suggested that, “It is important for social media platform providers to continue in their efforts to understand the risks of cascading of fake news and the influence on society at large. The implementation of fact-checking tools is significant in reducing the spread of fake news and building trust and confidence in society. Social media platform providers should ensure that there is continuous monitoring of online activities triggered by the spread of fake news and also ensure periodic upgrade of fact-checking technologies to tackle new tricks and strategies used in cascading fake news”.

Lee, Terry (2019) highlighted that, “In light of the recent elections in the USA, many fear “fake news” has gradually become a powerful and sinister force, both in the news media environment as well as in the fair and free elections. The only way to combat both factual and ideological “fake news” is by educating the general public with the necessary information to come to their own deductive conclusions, increasing an individual’s ability to discern fact from fiction.”

(Tsfati et al., 2016) highlighted that mainstream news media in fact play a significant and important role in the dissemination of fake news. One reason why mainstream news media feel compelled to cover fake news stories is that other news media cover them, and for partisan media, it also matters that some of the fake news stories fit their ideological tendencies. Indeed, research demonstrated that partisan media are more influenced than mainstream media by fake news.

5.0 Findings and conclusions

Social media has become a major source of consumption of news for many people. However, there is a serious threat to the credibility of social media platforms, print, television and news websites due to the spread of fake stories in the absence of proper checking of the facts. As social media platforms have tremendous power to influence people during elections, protests, and agitations, so it has also become a major source to spread fake news. As a result, the speed and scale at which fake news can spread have also become a major cause of worry for the state and central governments.

The situation has deteriorated to the extent that there is an urgent need to take special measures to tackle the fake news menace immediately. There is an urgent need that social media literacy should be included in schools, colleges and university levels for all students. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have to take the editorial responsibility for the content these sites are publishing. Social media platforms should also be held accountable if they are found spreading misinformation or unverified content deliberately and not taking appropriate measures to prevent it.

In addition, there is a serious need to frame a uniform international policy to prevent the spread of fake news by social media keeping in view its tremendous power to cause an international crisis. There is an urgent need for strong laws in India to impose serious penalties and action against those spreading false information. There is also the need of a strong body of journalists or media organisations at the national and international levels to frame some rules and regulations to maintain the ethics of journalism and penalise organisations or journalists found guilty of spreading fake news. Journalist bodies like the Press Council of India should have more power to ensure that the ethics of journalism are followed.

There are precautions that a media organization is required to take to prevent spread of fake news. It needs to train social media editors to invest more time in factfinding, employ professional and ethical journalists, adapt to digital modification and ensure detailed understanding of the algorithms that social media platforms worked on.

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