Is Fake News Real in India?

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ABSTRACT

Fake news is not novel. History abounds with various examples of twisting the truth for material increase, popularly called lying, or flexing the truth for political gain, named propaganda. Fake news is generally assumed to be as old as journalism itself, and reputable media organisations have seldom played a role of "gatekeeper" for trustworthy information.

In the fast-moving internet age this role has been primarily challenged as rumours and false information are being viral, sometimes leading to tragic results. With the advent of digital media and the popularity of internet, the responsibility of the fourth pillar of democracy has increased several folds. The present study aims to emphasize on the role of digital media concerning fake news and the innovative face of political campaigns through social media. This research paper also highlights few cases which led to disharmony in the nation due to dissemination of misinformation through social media.

The researcher has basically picked up several examples on highlighting the massive problem prevailing in the nation for this study. This paper also discusses in general the precautions taken by social media platforms to curb the existing issue of fake news and privacy concerns in the nation.

Keywords: Fake News, Digital Era, Social Media

Introduction:

Fake news is a problem but in a populated country like India it can almost turn deadly. Video clips, memes, messages, photographs are often being used to polarize the communities and spread violence to stir up trouble. The authenticity of social media has not been accepted yet, especially in between deadlines and discussion on various stories. In today's scenario the veracity is that social media is turning out to be more influential than the traditional media. The truth is that shaping opinion and access to information is no longer the strength of traditional media. To a greater extent, new media have managed to trump traditional media.

The two words 'Fake News' popped up as a 'Word of the Year' in 2017 after Mr. Donald Trump (U.S. President) began discussing this word and the news channels started flashing the photoshopped images as well as WhatsApp forwards. Undoubtedly fake news always existed but it gained recognition in India only a few years back. Fake news turned out to be a broad umbrella with several meanings and concepts attached to it in India because of sudden dissemination of misinformation. Pankaj Jain, an active fake news slayer, commented that "*fake news can be a bit of misleading term. It can mean several things- news sowing confusion, a mistake, fabricating information, an intentional twisting of a news story etc.*"

Thus, in this super confused environment, the definition needs to be clearly understood first if one really wants to condemn and discourage the spread of half-truths. In 2018, the Press Council of India (PCI) understood the need of the hour and published a definition of fake news in the context of the nation's well-being. Justice Chandramauli Kumar Prasad, PCI Chairman quoted "*Fake News means news, story, information, data and reports which is or are wholly or partially false.*"

During the preliminary review, it was found that not many analyses have been made to understand fake news in a better way and the impact it has in Indian scenario. Therefore, it has interested the researchers to explore fake news through various examples, to understand its societal impact in a better way. The present study focuses mainly on the present scenario of this deadly challenge in the country.

Role of Digital Communication in India's Elections

Digital media is one of the most vital components for any kind of election in the nation. Political parties are spending huge amount of money, time and resources to mobilize their motives. Several political campaigns have spent high amount of money on various social media campaigns which

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has been rightly pointed out by the Election Commission of the country. After the digitization of the campaigns, the election commission has instructed the political parties as well as candidates to share the expenditure details for social media marketing along with the traditional campaigning. Candidates also need to declare their social media accounts and parties have to certify the advertisements before positing on their official websites.

Indian politicians are taking a lot of interest to promote themselves through different digital campaigns. Before, 2014 election, present opposition leaders were reluctant to be a part of Facebook and Twitter. Mr Shashi Tharoor, former State Human Resource Development Minister was an earlier adopter of Twitter among several politicians in the nation. Milind Deora, former Minister of State Communication is also considered to be one of the prolific *Tweeterian*.

The present Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi is one of the digital lover politicians who understood the power of new media very early. He has a huge number of followers on various social media platforms and many studies reveal that his popularity gained more momentum because of his digital presence. Nowadays, every political party has a dedicated team to manage their social media strategy and circulate their nationalistic and developmental views through various messengers and WhatsApp groups. The parties also have a huge database which is managed by young techno lovers. The parties have separate segments to address different age groups at the same time.

A website niticentral.com (NIT) has been launched by the present government supporters with the innovative ideas to transform India. The followers are basically trained to become '*e-karyakartas*'. It is assumed to be launched for a structured cohesive solution to the points raised by the opponents through targeted texts and video messages in different mobile applications and social pages. The opposition party is slowly becoming active on various digital platforms and they have also launched a website fekuexpress.com to counter attack the government. The portal is basically designed to highlight the promises made by the ruling party which are not being fulfilled.

Generally youngsters are hired and highly paid by various political parties/politicians to execute their digital strategies and image. They engage number of professionals like graphic designers, IT professional and communication experts to create an authentic digital communication among the public.

AAP was one of the effective users of social media and while carrying *India Against Corruption Campaign*. They basically galvanized middle class people by asking them to give a miss call to register themselves to support the campaign. The database was created by the missed calls received, which they used later to promote their party's agenda through SMS.

With the change in dynamics about propagating political views in the mindset of the Indian citizens, the dissemination of misinformation is leading to a chaotic situation in the nation. At present the country seems to be basically divided into national and anti-national groups highlighting the political agendas of various parties in the country.

Political Communication highlighting Social Media Usage

The connection of social media and politics is diversified and the success of ruling government in 2014 Lok-Sabha election is a justified example. The online campaign of the party was phenomenal. The social media transformed into a political battleground where the eminent leaders like Mr Narendra Modi, Mr Amit Shah emerged as leading warriors. It expanded to reach wider range of mass audience and regional politics also took a positive change in the recent years. The conventional method of calling, sending messages and recording calls took a backseat and social discussion, comments, shares and tweets emerged as the leading players. The communication process is still evolving in India and in turn its effects can be traced on the socio-economic-political life of the '*Information Society*'.

Various analysis points out the basic reason of instigation of *NaMo* waves to be social media presence. The regional parties also have received positive response with the online promotion as well. For example, in Maharashtra, the former ruling party was defeated after 10 long years. The main reason is predicted to be the political campaigns that were built through a social media presence in a more optimistic way.

Social Media-A Weapon for Fake News

Popular Social Media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook is being accused for spreading fake news in the nation. Several examples reveal the current situation prevailing in the country concerning social media manipulation programmes and campaigns being propagated by various political parties. With over 20 million active users, the strong culture of using

WhatsApp is considered a common way to connect with friends, family and community. The popularity of Facebook messenger is slightly distorted because of the easily availability of the app named WhatsApp. It is considered as one of the key platform in spreading disinformation and people rely on it before checking its reliability. During the political campaigns, a lot of strategies are being tested and applied. In this testing period, several mis-information's get disseminated. There are political parties who treats internet as a public utility and not as a source of spreading useful information. There are websites which is free and easily accessible that doesn't carry an authentic way to cross check facts and information. Creating small and personal groups to send bulk messages is one of the popular ways to spread fake information and creating spam over the time.

Examples Depicting the Dismay of Fake News

- Video of Woman on Twitter

A Twitter user uploaded a video of a woman being dragged and murdered in broad daylight. The uploader claimed that she was murdered by a particular religious group as she was a believer of another religion with different political views. In reality the clip was that of a street play depicting the murder of a journalist in the country.

- Anti-Religion Messages

Anti-religion messages are shared often through WhatsApp and Facebook without even reading those. There are at times that National News Channels have even shared these views without checking its authenticity and later on retracted those.

- Random Videos Circulated with an contradictory message

Sometimes the videos are not even political. Random videos of celebration in a different country can lead to trouble. Few months ago a video was widely circulated of a large crowd of supporters celebrating Pakistan's win in a cricket match in India. The message claimed that the Indian Muslims were being traitors for supporting their arch-rivals. In reality the video was shot in Pakistan and the people were from Pakistan itself. The video was posted on Facebook and Youtube multiple times and garnered views and propagated the idea that Indian Muslims are anti-national.

- Facebook Post Triggered Communal Violence in West Bengal

An alleged Facebook post that was offensive to a particular religion led to large scale violence, arson and communal tension in Basirhat town in West Bengal in 2017. Social media post by a 17 year old boy lead to violence and rioting and ask whether political parties are contributing to escalating tensions instead of helping curb the tension.

Fake news campaigns generally originate in India through trolls, fringe elements and groups that are often linked to a certain ideology and agenda. They are manipulating public sentiments and helping the politicians win elections in various instances and fuelling communal violence as well.

The emergence of WhatsApp and Twitter in a New Way

In India, with the launch of 4G, the emergence of social media has become a pivotal part of the Indian culture. Using WhatsApp by creating various public and private groups is one of the most common ways to connect with friends, family and broader community. The popularity of Facebook messenger was hampered because of the fame of WhatsApp. With over 200 million active users, WhatsApp is one of the most widely used messaging apps in India. Nowadays, political parties have started hiring public relation organizations especially to spread online propaganda. At present the various political parties have started strategizing their digital campaigns for 2019 elections. The various parties were reportedly seen setting up multiple WhatsApp groups to directly reach the electorate. Eminent members of the group are also a part of this campaign and help in creating popularity among the public.

During the state and central elections, there were several reports on fake news and were accused of originating trolls and fake news forwards. Disseminating misinformation from multiple social platforms has been a common phenomenon. The WhatsApp is not the only source of fake news in India, but Twitter is another popular social platform which is considered to be the major disseminator of fake news. Political parties use various ways to boost their follower counts or to retweet, like, share and comment. Sharing content in this manner creates trends which reach more audience. While supporting campaign, people doesn't recheck the authenticity of the information they are spreading instead they also become a part of the fake followers. Recently, Twitter purged fake accounts of multiple political celebrities which had a positive effect on the recent spreading of fake news.

In India, there are multiple long-term investments and annual budgets going into developing cyber troop's capacities in India. Political parties have started pouring more time and energy into the campaign. During the promotion and campaign, lots of strategies are being tested and applied across various platforms to measure the various degree of success.

After seeing the whole fake news trend, India's telecom ministry approved net neutrality rules as well which means people would be able to treat the internet as a public utility and not as a luxury. Basically people will not be able to access the internet from zero-rated plans. This restricts Indians to access few sites and this will help more users to fact check the information across the world. To continue with the best ethical practice, WhatsApp launched a new feature where a forwarded message would be marked as 'Forwarded' to avoid any chaos especially for the Indian users. Creating small and big chatting groups are considered spam and its being continuously moderated by the cyber officials as well.

The Realisation

One needs to realize at the end of the day that a particular belief is being polarized with certain motives. At the same time those who are playing this dangerous game are very mindful of the fact that this can be very insensitive for the social fabric of the society. Messaging services like WhatsApp are an ideal medium for propagating fake news in India. End to end encryption and right to policy leave no trail making it almost impossible to track down or counter the distribution of such hoaxes. The popular social platforms have in fact empowered societies massively at a grassroot level but that doesn't take away from the fact that information is spreading without anyone being able to control it. Senior political leaders are showing concern over fake news in the country but members from their own organizations are continuing to be guilty of posting, sharing and spreading such messages. Fake news in India is a catalyst for fuelling nationalism but its biggest victim is truth.

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