Anatomy of Fake News: On (Mis)information and Belief in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of technological and digital communication boom in India, the concern of fake news and misinformation plays a muted role in democratic and social welfare process; the current research focuses on narratives of social media users from *Achrol* and *Chandwaji* villages (Jaipur, Rajasthan). This paper tries to understand the logic of social media engagement and participation of users within the framework of understanding cultural turn in fake news and belief among the users. The paper tries to argue that the fakeinformation disseminated in form of news becomes more complicated when it passes through filters of anonymity and identity misinterpretation in social media. The logic of information consumption and dissemination should be studied with the changing communication patterns and business models of modem India. The current research is part of social research project carried over after 2016 Indian banknote demonetization to understand the derivations of fake news and its evolution in daily life of Indian users.

Keywords: Fake news, Social Media, Opinion, Belief, Daily life, Narrative Analysis, Public Communication.

Introduction

In midst of high-speed 4G revolution and technological turn in Indian communication, the number of first time Internet users are rising drastically. Unlike their previous generations, the newcomers of digital India are exposed to massive load of information in form of various digital contents. The users – who are in between misinformation and disinformation becomes victims of social media exploitation. When misinformation targets soft victims who disseminate a false information believing it is true and on other hand, disinformation which is more dangerous where the person disseminate the false news deliberating knowing it intentionally lie.

The information disseminated is often covered with "news" angle as the boom in online news portals with visual and graphic contents. Such contents are being further disseminated through social media applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. calculatedly by opinion leaders and acquitted users. In case of Indian users, these social media platforms and instant messaging applications are used more at level of consumption than communication or messaging (Nugent, 2018). The responsibility of distortion and deception of message is well understood by the messaging platforms and trials has been taken for further action (McLaughlin, 2018; Rajawat, 2018, Nugent, 2018; Biswas, 2018) for fair use of platforms. On other hand, the blame on politicians and policymakers for creating "fakeness" in information (Anicca, 2018) is also been observed by Indian media and public. Even though, the fake news and associated degrees are

universal, the cultural and linguistic differences in Indian society needs to be studied closely to understand the velocity of fake news in Indian daily life.

Talking about 'post-truth', Visvanathan (2016) described that "[it] may be one such word, symbolizing the birth of a politics that returns to the primitive, the primordial and the irrational". When democracy and state governance is controlling and directly involved in knowledge and power, the control and distribution of knowledge routes are vital. The recognition of online medium, especially social media engages the discussion and disclosure of big data and post – truth. This paper is an attempt to narrate the experiences of rural Indian social media users. The study is carried over selected individuals of *Achrol* and *Chandwaji* villages of Jaipur (Rajasthan, India). An earlier analysis of this research project focusing only on *Achrol* village was published focusing on "relevance amidst the discussion and disclosure of big data and post – truth and devoting the space for understanding how the information are conceived by the individual social media user and how they consider them as an entity of the digital age" (Kalorth and Verma, 2018). The current paper uses narrative analysis of selected participants encounters with anatomy fake news and information on social media. Few interviews used in formerly published research has been used here for correlation and validation of analysis. The sharing of digital narratives propagates 'the power of story to foster and promote community bonds through the exchange of narratives of life experience' (Poletti, 2011; Halfpenny and Procter, 2015; Romney et al., 2017). The narrative recording of selected participants through in-depth interviews and

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focus group interviews were done after 2016 Indian banknote demonetization. The data were collected during December 2016 to March 2017 at various phases. All the interviews were originally collected in Hindi and translated in English.

Data Consumption: Information and Fact

The data consumption increased in India never like before and the shift is to fourth screen – smartphones. The first-time users are compatible with smart phones with digital application with lack of proper media training and news literacy (Watkins et al., 2012). Two months before Indian banknote demonetization, Reliance made Jio (mobile network) made commercially available with unlimited telephone and data packages at low cost. With 16 million subscribers from initial month, Jio done breakthrough in Indian data life. As per official press release on Ericsson mobility report "the total mobile data traffic per month in India is expected to grow 11 times during the forecast period (2017- 2023) from 1.3 EB (exabytes) to 14 EB by 2023" (PIB, 2017)[1].

> *"When the facts and figures turn to be constructed as social media text, the conception and understanding of the information also changes. 'It is easier now. Everything comes on my mobile. Sometimes, though friends or sometimes through people concern itself'. This affirmation from ShyamLalGurjar – a tea stall owner of Achrol village – regarding how he gets the news and updates on demonetization ignited the flame of this study"* (Kalorth and Verma, 2018).

He was mentioning the updates on Facebook and pictorial and textual forwards from his friends. Such information framed as news gratifies their collective political and social consciousness. On asking on consumption of news on newspaper and television, Aman Kumar who runs a retail vegetable shop at centre of *Achrol*market no longer follow mainstream media. According to him, "The mainstream media are owned and operated by corporate houses with special political and economic interest. They are behind editorial biasness of sensationalism and building readership with manufactured narratives". The trust in mass media is a vital point in calm and valued process of fairness in democracy. When the manufactured news – which losses the credibility – becomes standpoints of fake news. Here comes the part of social media as Joe Walther, director of UC Santa Barbara's Center for Information Technology and Society notes "Today, fake news is increasingly sophisticated

and global, a digital pathology infecting social media that's designed to foment discord and distort perceptions. Indeed, it's become so pervasive that understanding its complexity is crucial" (Logan, 2018). When users, replaces social media to mainstream media – to pinpoint – from traditional way of consumption of print and television to Smartphone, the content also comes without interrogation. It is known that social media often act as echo chambers of mainstream media, but it interprets the message from and divert it into new form of (mis)information.

"When news [on demonetization] came, people ran towards ATM for collecting currency. All television news channels were engaged in showing speech of Prime Minister. At home, we even believed it's a fake news. That's how the media was behaving for quite some time. WhatsApp and Facebook feeds were running with non-stop messages with details of news". These words are from Sarath Chandra, a part time computer assistant at local college who also runs a private tuition center in *Chandwaji*. He was talking on how news on traditional media and social media differs in content. "I feel convenient in receiving news and updates on mobile, which are often customized versions of news. But however, the trust intricated in television is losing as it also provides a high rate of fake news" (Sarath Chandra). Same as, the narratives from both villages indicated that confidence and trust in the mainstream media became lesser, which means they're very vulnerable to fake news. This is not to mean that mainstream media is losing the plot as there are cases of media who got themselves in misinformation and later regretted as it came to notification. A well noted case of The Hindu's news (Dying woman molested, video shows on 2017, October 1, Mumbai edition) which was later removed, and editor published an apology (Editor, 2017). Here social media worked as fake busting as the narratives combined prove the news report formed from the video footage was wrong (The Logical Indian Crew, 2017; NL Team, 2017). Such instances prove the capacity of social media in shared journalism (Singer, 2014) where journalist takes help from citizen and users from their content for data verification. However, on conflicting degree, the social media platforms mutely circulate the information with limited control over distribution.

India and Digital Turn

It was evident that demonetization reformed India's collective economic realization in various dynamics. Chatterjee (2017) calls it as "financial digital awakening" but what we here argue is that it was not just a financial and radical

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[1]*As per official PIB release.*

technological shift, but also a cultural change. This was the motive force in selecting the period of the research. When we conducted the interviews almost 18 months back, the site we covered were also in transactional period. On one hand users were enjoying the liberated technological and adapting to new data culture. On other hand, the reformed economical means challenged them to cope up with imagination of new digital awakening. The users gradually adapted to this "cultural shock" within the context limited digital awareness. The question of news literacy and critical thinking were also a concern during our course of data collections as we found many soft targets of fake news. They were in influence of planned and deliberate disinformation. It will be difficult to term it as cultural shock in context of India's urban population, but the scenario of Indian rural area provides alternative narratives (Kalorth and Verma, 2018).

People throughout the world are steadily going the digital way and combining ways of life with regards to personal and professional lives. Advances, for example, Mobile Internet and cloud, are being embraced at a fast pace to intersect any barrier between the two. With the Indian government driving the path to a digital India projects and schemes (Thomas, 2012), the concentration of this activity would be around enhancing personal satisfaction (Katz, 1959). With an attention on creating applications that are anything but difficult to use for a bigger arrangement of people in India, digitization holds the best potential to affect the economy. It is difficult to unlink digital transformation with economy, politics and cultural references (Kaur, 2017). When this digital boom is opportunity for growth but on the other hand questions arises on its control and relation with the mass communication patterns.

The digital literacy and awareness in consuming data and production of content is also a main concern when users spend more time of Internet and their choices changes the pace of life. When the online (virtual) change is not corresponds the offline (physical) life problems related to technology and information happens. To extend this view digital life beyond fake news, Suman (a salesperson in stationery shop in *Achrol*) started using her smartphone for digital transactions. She uses cashless outlets like money wallets (Paytm), UPI (Bhim) and cash cards. Initially she ignored to use digital payment method as she "afraid and hesitation" about losing money in digital transaction. "I was trained by representatives of cashless wallet agencies to use smartphone for transaction. This became urgent as people ran out of currency and business was going done when rejecting digital payment" (Suman). During study we encountered many users like Suman who were using digital platforms beyond news. Nevertheless, interestingly they consume news in form of message forwards and social media news feeds. The main reason behind hesitation of using digital payment method created because of such messages which warn them of side effects.

The level of usage in digital media has also found increase during this period. Users started using smartphone for entertainment (Tuten& Solomon, 2017) and commercial purpose. Here the mobile device switched from a communication device of mode or site of participation in process of governess.

Digital and News Literacy in Post-Truth Politics

The rural economy in India is mostly agriculture based and is very important because of its vital supply and demand links with the other Indian industries. Agriculture acts as the base-industry for several other industries predominantly as a source of raw material. When digital media enabled smartphones and social media becomes all and everything for the rural mass, the opinion and collective consciousness created, and its results are a concern to human rights. It goes to a further extent when the pieces of information available in social media impact perceptions of source credibility (Westermann et al., 2013). In the age of vast universe of social media, what people know and how they are informed or mislead becomes an important interrogation of digital human rights – or in other words critics celebrate – the result of post-truth politics.

It is true to an extent that social media provides various possibilities and opportunities for people to engage with current information rather than the traditional forms of print and broadcast media. This provides the public with a new way to understand and evaluate a new source. But this required a proficient level of digital and news literacy which often takes a back seat in the game of emotional and sentimental approach of news. SanthoshMisra (owner of a provision store at *Chandwaji*) who we met during the study and after six months (September 2017) had different opinion on the news he consumed earlier. There were rumours and hoax during demonetization which Misra believed true and followed. Later, with interference of his peer group and other users – discerned about the same. "I even had heated argument with my son based a WhatsApp message which on a strike against the demonetisation policy, due to which markets will

run dry. I asked him to collect goods from Jaipur city late night before strike come on force. However, he proved me wrong same night, there were a cloud of doubt in my next morning".

Scaramuzzo suggests that "social media is one of the fastest way to keep up with current topics however just because they are current doesn't make them true" (2017). The narrative analysis of the users' studies in this paper justifies the academic and mass media agreement on social media post-truth phenomenon- worth more than the facts - It's about how I feel about things (Waisbord, 2018; Vis, 2013; Poole, 2016; Coughlan, 2017; Bennett, 2016; Brown, 2016; McKenna, 2016).

The data for these social media comes from everywhere (Chang et al., 2014) – be it pictures and videos, online purchase records, and geolocation information. The understanding of data – the big data – should be as a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of technology, analysis and mythology (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). This shows that any critical questions on digital data and its consumption should incorporated with cultural and daily life of the social systems (users and agents). Since the current study focuses only on limited users and their narratives of social media in *Achrol* and *Chandwaji,* the validation problem on studying on online users (Rogers, 2013) could also be solved to an extent.

Oxford dictionaries defines post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influenced in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". So, the question is what is the wrong with post-truth? And who frames the beliefs in the minds of digital users through social media. Post – truth according to Speed &Mannion (2017) focuses mainly on spreading 'fake news' and circulate 'alternative facts'. Sismondi (2017) accuses US politics, like most other electoral politics, of having been a post-truth arena for a long time. While thinking cases in India, during demonetization social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp provided scope of messages to reach mass.

The following note on post-truth provided by Lockie is

> *"the way we might best counter misinformation/propaganda, however, is less obvious. When factual claims are judged accordingly to their emotional and ideological consistency, we cannot expect that lobbing more factual claims into the public domain will necessarily challenge anyone's beliefs. How many headlines and social media posts*
> *have we seen screaming that someone-or-other has dropped a 'truth-bomb' or 'destroyed' an argument?"* (Lockie , 2017).

"I am certain that demonetization policy is the best move from any government and policy makers around the world. I am convinced that Indian government has taken proper decision". Answering on his views on demonetization, Praveen Lal (a retired teacher from *Achrol*) who gathered the information of demonetization happened in India through WhatsApp. He has evidences which "claims" to be true and those are photoshopped images and fake pictorial data which represents various data on black money capture and other figures. In the age of information overload, the (mis)information and fake news can be only seen as harmful violation of human rights. The detail narratives of people we studied also gives an idea that personal histories are created, and objective facts finds a backbench in course of social media interaction. The subjective opinions of each users are validated by these social media posts which itself is based on emotional and personal interest of collective mass.

Participation and Countering Misinformation

The most interesting part is that each user during study believed they are also part of this governance process through participating on social media. The participation consists of social communication, social e- commerce, social publication and social entertainment. These four zones of social media as suggested by (Tuten& Solomon, 2017) is well identified during study.

The arguments of 'truth-bomb' and 'post-truth' are supported by the outcomes of the Brexit and 2016 US presidential election results and Allcott&Gentzkow (2017) further reconfirms it that "people are much more likely to believe stories that favor their preferred candidate, especially if they have ideologically segregated social media networks".

While taking the case of *Achrol* and *Chandwaji* before a decade, the exposure to media and events were confined to opinion leaders who read newspapers or view television news. It is a matter of that we could identify the "users" and increase in social media usages. But truth and belief generated are risky as it provides options for message senders to wrap up their idea to social media echo chambers. The problems in anatomy of fake news and misinformation in social and digital media should be countered with technology. An assessment of socio-cultural reality of fake news and misinformation should be done with help of technology. As

Berghel(2017) suggests "meta-level crap-detecting engine in the form of an add-on or app," which will help in finding and preventing fake news from mass. This work similar as fixing of email spamming and phishing. But the blame on algorithms to counter the social aspects of fake news is also problematic as micro-level linguistic and cultural diverse country like India.

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