

Fake News in Present Times and Ways to Curb It

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Abstract:

Fake news has its roots hundreds of years back but with rapid penetration of internet in all walks of social life has made it extremely difficult to detect and differentiate fake news globally and particularly in Indian context. Fake news has several classifications and divisions which are to be understood. Rampant use of digital gadgets and indiscriminate sharing of random information on social media like Facebook, X, WhatsApp etc. without having basic knowledge to pinpoint genuine news and arrest the flow of fake news is sure to bring catastrophe to the society. Citizen journalists without media literacy are a dangerous combination. Therefore, basic media literacy along with digital literacy to train the masses to differentiate fake from the real is the need of the hour. Immediate enactment of laws to curb fake news in Indian context is of vital importance.

Keywords: Fake News, Misinformation, Disinformation, Mal-information, Citizen-journalists and Media Literacy

Introduction:

The origin of fake news can be traced hundreds of year back if not more. It was mainly used as a deceiving tactic particularly used during wars. Fake news has the capability to change public opinion towards one's own favor. This was the reason many countries had established media or propaganda cells whose work was to spread intentional fake news to misguide the enemy and give a much needed moral boost to one's own army in face of inevitable defeat. The classical example of propaganda cell was highlighted in the Jude Law, Ed Harris starrer Hollywood film "Enemy at the Gates", where allied forces and the Nazi Germans were seen using fake news as a weapon against each other to gain an advantage in the historic Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-1943. In Indian perspective who can forget the euphoria created by the news of deity of Lord Ganesha drinking milk, which took the entire nation by storm.

The topic of fake news came into lime light worldwide from the 2016 US Presidential Election where Donald Trump allegedly won by the help of fake news in the social media. Dautrich & Hartley (1999) showed that Americans received their political information from various media agencies, such as talk radio, print, and television journalism. (Karmvir Padda, November, 2020)

Unlike India, people in the US give importance to attach to an issue from the amount and position of coverage of the issue in social media. Hence it is considerably easy to influence public opinion in America and this is what exactly happened in the 2016 Presidential Elections. Fake news according to (Allcott & Matthew Gentzkow, 2017) is defined as news articles that are "intentionally and verifiably false". Generation of fake news generally mislead readers into believing that false news content is true and it is motivated by financial or ideological gain.

Fake news can be defined as “false, often sensational information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” (Collins-Dictionary, 2017)(Greifeneder et al., 2021). According to (Lanius, November, 2018.)Fake news is news that does mischief with the truth in that it exhibits both (a) lack of truth and (b) a lack of truthfulness. It lacks truth in the sense that is either false or misleading. It lacks truthfulness in the sense that is propagated with the intention to deceive. Fake news is differentiated from normal news reporting in its intention of deceiving the receiver of the said news and making him or her to believe a false news which he or she will not believe under normal circumstances. Both national and international media has committed many mistakes when it comes to reporting news that has not been verified which was later found to be incorrect and created societal turbulences. The responsibility here falls on the media outlets that have fallen in the trap of publishing news and fabricated fictional information to serve various agendas and purposes in their pursuit of a scoop. In present circumstances where our life and society is highly influenced by the impact of social media, every human being is knowingly or unknowingly controlled by the social media where every person with a smart phone has become a “citizen-journalists”(Jasna Licitar, 2018). Nowadays citizens are both producers as well as consumers of news. New information is continuously disseminated through mobile phone photos, YouTube videos and WhatsApp of citizens. Some citizen use the same tool as professional journalists though very few of them are media literate. According to CitizenJournalismAfrica.org “Citizen Journalism is community news and information shared online and/or in print. The content is generated by users and readers. It can be text/blogs, digital storytelling, images, audio file, podcasting, or video. Feedback and discussion on issues raised is received in the same way.” Citizen journalism allows individuals to write and or comment on issues they feel are left out of the mainstream media. Blogging has become a powerful and non-expensive tool for non-journalists to share their stories and views.(Moeller, 2009). Access to technology without proper knowledge about the authenticity of the sources of news is sure to lead to catastrophe. This article tries to focus on the concept of fake news, fake news in social media, its generation, dissemination and laws to curb its menace in Indian context.

Media Literacy

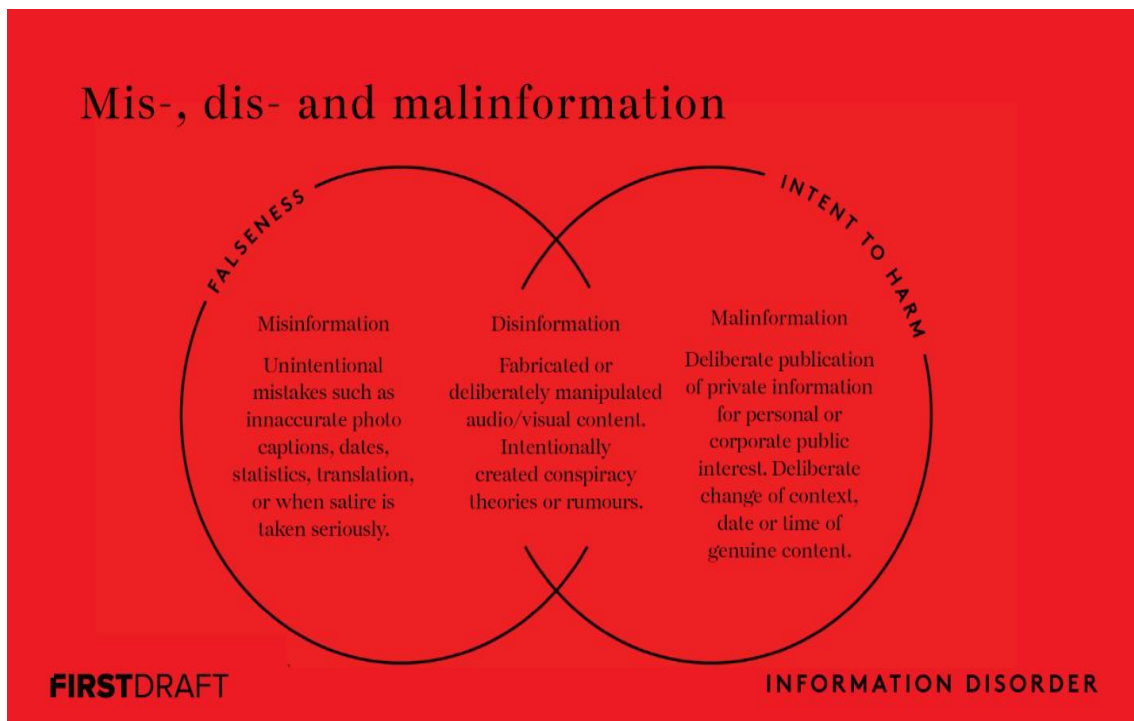
Media literacy is the term used to describe the skills and abilities required for conscious, independent development in the new communication environment- digital, global, and multimedia-of the information society. Media literacy is taken as the outcome of the media-education process. Since new media is coming up now and then, training of the same is of utmost importance. Alternatively media literacy is generally understood as an informed, critical understanding of the prevalent mass media, and it involves examining the techniques, technologies and institutions involved in media production; being able to critically analyze media messages; and recognizing the role audiences play in making meaning from those messages.(Malik, 2008)

Literature review

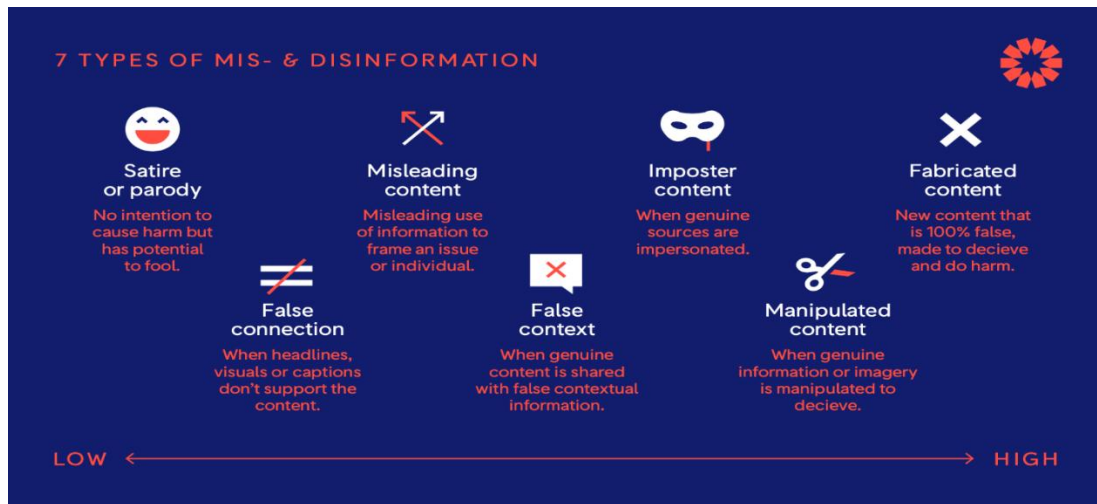
Though fake news is an old phenomenon, it study has gained momentum after 2016 US Presidential Election. There is quite a bit of literature available internationally but surprisingly not as much as in Indian context. Therefore the paper takes into account both journals published

nationally and internationally, reports, theses and bills placed in the parliament to gain an insight into the issue of fake news.

Fake news is differentiated from normal news by its intention to deceive. Seven types of fake news were identified by Claire Wardle of First Draft News (Višňovský & Radošinská, September, 2021), which include the following; *Satire or parody* (this has no intention of causing any harm although it has potentials to fool), *False Connection*, (this is when headlines or captions do not support the content), *Misleading Content* (here misleading information is used to frame an issue or an individual), *False Context* (this is when authentic information is shared with false contextual information), *Imposter Content* (this is when authentic sources are impersonated with false, made-up sources), *Manipulated Content* (this is when authentic information or imaginary is manipulated to deceive, as can be related in the case of a doctored photo) and *Fabricated Content* (in this case, the content is 100%new, yet false, it is designed to deceive and do harm). Fake news is an umbrella term which encompass terms like disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. The term “disinformation” refers to false information that is created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country, it is done deliberately (e.g. conspiracy theory or rumors) whereas “misinformation” is merely false but not intended to harm (e.g. inaccurate photo, captions, dates, statistics, translations etc.) Whereas mal-information is information that is true but is of private nature for personal or corporate public interests which is intentionally published to tarnish reputation, cause damage, or lead to negative outcomes.



(Wardle, 2019)



Major characteristics of fake news are as follows:

- 1) Authenticity of the claims or authorship of fake news cannot be verified.
- 2) Fake news appeals to emotion. (i.e. tries to target the audience's emotion)
- 3) Author of fake news are not domain experts.

Checks for locating or pinpointing fake news:

News can be checked for its authenticity by judiciously using the following check points:

- 1) Texts which are authored by anonymous authors are often fake in their nature.
- 2) Excessive exclamation points in another indication of fake news.
- 3) Indiscriminate use of capital letters in the text may be a sign that it may be fake.
- 4) Numerous misspellings in the text can be an example that the mentioned document is fake.

Fake news in the digital age

Fake news was there from time immemorial but there were several reasons why it is of growing importance and concern in the digital age.

Firstly nowadays websites can be easily set up and influenced by aggressive advertising. Regarding the process of spreading fake news, the expenses associated with getting on social media are very limited. This increases the viability of short term strategies involving establishing a social media presence for a particular fake news campaign, and reduces incentive for establishing long-term presence associated with quality journalism. Secondly spreading of fake news is extremely easy in social media. Anybody can upload almost anything on social media and it is impossible to judge the authenticity of these shared news. Thirdly there has been a constant decline of trust in mainstream media because of several reasons including biasness, lack of information education of the potential receiver of news, time constraint and long duration of time taken in reporting particularly by the print media, on the other hand

interactive nature and lightning speed of social media has made it an appropriate candidate for disseminating both genuine and fake news.

In this backdrop it can be stated that Social Media is made of two main words, the word Social means the information shared by people and the word Media means the means for sharing information like WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, X Handle, LinkedIn, Snapchat etc.

India is vast market for social media companies. India has sixty crore WhatsApp users. At the same time, 240 million Indians are using Facebook while 45 million Indians are using X Handle accounts. In India, WhatsApp has become the major platform for the exchange of true as well as false news. But compared to X Handle, WhatsApp is a private messaging service and is a powerful medium of building public opinion. There is no doubt that internet media has emerged as a powerful medium of learning and reading along with freedom of expression. However, it is also very important to understand whether the news shown on social media or any other platform is true or false.

Fake news are spread in social media in the following ways:

- 1) Posting intentional false news regarding famous celebrities with an intention of increasing views and likes on such posts.
- 2) Alluring people to click on links with false promise of discounts, gifts and prizes.
- 3) Posts falsely using voices of celebrities promoting dubious products.
- 4) Posts made with the help of artificial intelligence created exclusively with harmful intention of creating communal tension.
- 5) Posts providing unsolicited (share market) tips which have caused financial havoc in many lives.
- 6) Posting old video or audio clips of different context and claiming them to be relevant in an entirely new context.
- 7) Sharing or posting of fake websites of renowned news channels catering false news, thereby making it almost impossible to distinguish it from the original ones.
- 8) Paid promotion of individuals or products made with an intention of creating a false image.
- 9) Rival companies in the corporate world often resort to spreading fake news about its competitor as a part of business strategy.
- 10) Social media posts alluring people to download gaming app to earn easy money is another dimension of fake news.

Factors that make detecting fake news extremely difficult

- 1) Not all people in India speak in English, there are 22 official languages and among these only 10.67% speak in English. Current fake news detection solutions are in English and they fail to detect fake news in regional languages.
- 2) New mobile connections has grown leaps and bounds but digital literacy of the masses is lagging far behind.
- 3) The role of WhatsApp in forming and mobilizing online public opinion cannot be undermined. As WhatsApp is end to end encrypted, it is very difficult to check on any fake news being shared.
- 4) Striking a balance between preventing harm and avoiding censorship remains a challenge.
- 5) The absence of a precise legal definition of “fake news” creates ambiguity and potential misuse.
- 6) The use of AI-generated misinformation, and encrypted communication complicates enforcement efforts.
- 7) Existing laws have been criticized for being applied inconsistently, raising concerns of political bias.

Often media is considered the fourth pillar of democracy because it disseminates information, facilitate interaction of public with government by providing meaning to formal democratic institutions and enable opinion making in mass scale. Media educates the masses about various socio political and cultural issues. Media helps the masses to be the part of the machinery initiated by the government and it also makes the government answerable to the masses by bringing the pros and cons of the government in the limelight. According to Press Commission, “Democracy can thrive not only under the vigilant eye of the Legislature, but also under the care and guidance of public opinion and the Press is par excellence, the vehicle through which opinion can become articulate.”(Sharma, 2021)

Laws to curb fake news

Though India does not have any explicit rules dedicated exclusively towards fake news, yet we use existing laws in curbing and restricting fake news.

- 1) Key provisions of IT Rules, 2021 amended in 2023

Rule 3(1) (b) (v): Intermediaries (eg. Social media platforms) must make reasonable efforts to not host or publish fake news.

- 2) In April 1923, the government amended the IT Rules to state that any information identified as “fake or false” by the Press Information Bureau (PIB) or any other notified fact checking unit of the government must be taken down by platforms.
- 3) Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860

Section 499 and 500 – Criminal defamation if fake news harms reputation.

- Promoting enmity between different groups through false news.
- Section 505(1) (6)-Circulating rumors or false information that could cause fear or alarm to the public.

4) Indian Evidence Act, 1872

Courts can consider digital evidence (like screen shorts, videos or web archives) to prove the authenticity or falsehood of news.

5) Press Council of India and News Broadcasting Standards Authority (NBSA)

The above mentioned bodies are self-regulatory in nature and is meant for print and broadcasting media respectively. These bodies issue guidelines against fake news but their scope is voluntary in nature and they are not legal entity.

The Prohibition of Fake News on Social Media Bill, 2023(The Prohibition of Fake News on Social Media Bill, 20th January 2023)

This bill was introduced by a member (M.P.) of Lok Sabha as a private bill, but unfortunately the bill was not passed in the House. The bill was not supported by the ruling party in the Parliament. Though the bill didn't see the light yet it touched upon some crucial points as the following:

Clause 4 (1) The Central Government shall, by notification in the official Gazette, constitute an Authority to be known as the Fake News on Social Media Regulatory Authority for carrying out the purpose of this Act.

4 (1) (c) Two representatives from social media platform to be appointed by the Central Government in such manner as may be prescribed-as member; and

(d) One Indian Administrative Service Officer who shall be the Secretary to the Authority

Conclusion

Fake news is a menace faced by the world today. India is no exception to the phenomenon as number of internet connections along with number of social media users are on constant increase. Indiscriminate use of social media by the masses without proper information literacy is sure to create havoc in our society. Religious fanaticism and hatred along with other unwanted content is on ever increase and masses especially the young minds are falling prey to the designs of mischievous politicians. Therefore the executive must soon come up with stringent laws to counter fake news. A council like PIB (Press Information Bureau) can be set up to counter fake news along with introduction of basic information literacy from the elementary school level can also restrict fake news to an extent if not completely.

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