



FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Social Media and the Issue of Fake News

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ABSTRACT

The nature and extent of the interaction between the government and the other players defines the nuances of democracy claimed in any country. Just like government to citizen, government to business and government to government, government to social media is also a new emerging paradigm which powerfully affects the outcomes in a democracy, thereby the quality of life for the citizens. The 'Frankenstein Monster of fake news' intentionally or unintentionally spread over the social media and consequently etched on the hearts and minds of millions of gullible and innocent people has played havoc with human lives only to endanger the Indian contest for joining the extraordinary league of superpowers. The sensitivity and the explosiveness of the issue involved here has rendered the relationship between the government and the social media somewhat tense where cease fire is mirage as neither party is willing to concede considerable grounds on account of their claimed principled positions. The article shall go into the details of the issues involved whereby exposing the sides of both the powerful players in the context of India's much debated contradiction between her rising democratic aspirations and her most anticipated rise to the club of superpowers.

Keywords: *democracy, government-to-social media, outcomes, Frankenstein Monster, gullible, superpowers, principled-positions etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

The menace of fake news has been in existence since the beginning of the human civilisation. The production of fake news is linked to human psychology and the nefarious designs of certain people. As per their selfish interests, the tool of fake news has been very handy for the bearers of political, social, economic and religious power. Alongside, the creation and spread of rumours by the common man was also no less common which was often done for fun, entertainment and play. However, in the past the extent and reach of such fake news was limited and the impact was often harmless, unlike in today's digital age which has provided wings to the fake news and the reach is instant and enormous. The directed, selected and targeted fake news driven with hidden agenda leads to dangerous consequences for the society as a whole.

In 1835, New York Sun, a prominent newspaper published unbelievable fake news that a sort of civilisation of strange creatures exists on moon and evidences have been collected via an observatory located in South Africa. It created mental tremors among the people leading to skyrocketing sales of the newspapers in a very short span of time. However, the motive was only commercial instead of any political one but it was tremendous success story of the newspaper reaping the benefits of the typical human psychology which makes sensational news far more receptive among the people (Tom, 2017) . In the recent years with deepening of social media such newspaper sponsored fake stories have given way to computer crazy youth who look to secure "clicks" to their outrageously absurd news for advertising/political or a combo of both the motives. The internet age has allowed resurfacing of such fake stories with unparalleled reach and much more dangerous consequences for human conscience.

On top of all this, the response or the approach of governments is of critical importance on such pressing issues of the contemporary times. If the governmental response smacks of political considerations regarding the issue of fake news then this problem gets longevity in the society at the expense of weakened democratic roots. In the means vs. ends debate, the Kautilyan or Macaulayan logic wins enabling the political parties to freely engage in the enterprise of fake news to reap political advantage. The recent trends clearly conveys the use of rumours, distorted facts, misinformation campaign in the electoral arena capitalising on the massive platform of digital and social media communication.

FAKE NEWS: DEFINITIONS AND EFFECTS

According to Forrest Stroud "Fake news or hoax news refers to false information or propaganda published under the guise of being authentic news. Fake news websites and channels push their motivated news content in an attempt to mislead the consumers of the content and spread misinformation via social networks. In other words fake news is made up of stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word (Tom 2017). Another definition portrays fake news sources deliberately publish hoaxes, disinformation, and propaganda designed to deceive readers for the purpose of political or financial gain. Fake news sources often follow designs conventions of reputable news media sites to make the story seem more credible, making them more likely to be shared on social media.

In essence, false news makes our world less informed and creates a tendency in the human mind to rationalise illogical or 'out of the thin air' news items. It erodes our questioning spirit and the minds become numb thereby greater exposure of fake news alters the patterns of human brain which creates a tendency in mind to easily believe in plethora of fake news without any inner qualms. Human beings become slaves to modern manufacturing units of political, social, religious and cultural propaganda. The efficacy and potency of human mind to distinguish the right from the wrong is eroded drastically therefore in the battles between 'means' and 'ends' the former is unequivocally victorious. It nudges the human civilisation towards the worst by reversing the mental progress we have achieved since the days of Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Bhakti/Sufi Movements. The hallmarks of these golden ages were rationality, spirit of questioning, spirit of enquiry, scientific investigation, only "due" emphasis on religion, separation of church from politics, universal brotherhood, communal harmony etc. all of which are pushed in "critically endangered" state on account of widespread, unchecked network of fake/propagandist news. In this way we are hurling our civilisation some hundreds years back by nullifying the fruits of Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Mahatma Gandhi said-"fake news is a crime against humanity. If truth is incompetent then young India will be feeble". In essence it means that the dangers of fake news are far more devastating which otherwise looks innocuous. It can erode the strength of young India and direct the youth towards quarrels, riots, chaos, mayhem etc. which only ensures shifting of youth energy from productive to completely negative misadventures. The extent to which the menace of fake news is prevalent, the youth will invariably be misguided towards destructive thinking. This situation has the potential to make our nation's democratic roots hollow. Our father of nation was well aware of the risks of fake news because in many cases the causes behind the worst communal riots during British days were fake news. It was rightly perceived by him as a threat to Indian unity disturbing social and religious brotherhood.

FAKE NEWS: THE PAST CONNECTIONS

Just like in the present, our past rulers never felt any qualms to utilize the tool of fake news for their geo-political and economic interests. Certain examples can be quoted from world history where the use of distorted information was rampant to score brownie points. However, the reach and the extent of such false propagandas were much narrower in the past and it could not impact the society in any significant way. In the context of Unification of Germany in the 19th century, Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia wanted to instigate the French to attack Prussia. The talks were arranged between the king of Prussia William 1st and the ambassador of France in Ems city. The Prussian king sent the description of the talks to his Chancellor Bismarck by 'Ems Telegram' and the later published the contents of the telegram in such a way that the description unequivocally portrayed that the two dignitaries in the talk were fiercely insulted by each other. It served the purpose of Bismarck precisely in instigating the people of both France and Prussia to clamour for war. Indeed, this distortion of information was strategically rewarding as in the consequent war declared by France against Prussia, the later routed the former (Tom 2017).

There is another example of fake news used for military advantage in medieval age of India. During the clash of Mewar and Marwar against Aurangzeb, the Rathores secured the defection of Prince Akbar, the eldest son of Aurangzeb. When Prince Akbar was marching along with the Rajput contingents to fight

against the Mughal emperor, the later foisted false letters stating the 'congratulatory note' from father to his son on his success in a secret mission to bring Rajput army out in the open for massacre by the Mughal army. These letters were arranged in a way so that Rajput men could access it easily. This distorted news created confusion between Prince Akbar and Rathores which speeded up the failure of alliance against the Mughals.

The above incidents make the bottom-line very clear that the use of fake news has been an acceptable and popular choice among the ruling clan in the past. Gandhian vision of using only ethical means for ends was given a sad burial for the attainment of political and economic power. The using of manipulated contents was deemed as a diplomatic victory if it was handy in geo-political scenario. According to Ruchi Gupta "Political actors, governments and people in the business of mobilising public opinion have always invested in disinformation campaign to build required narratives. Institutional news media is no longer seen as an arbitrator of 'real news' as they have lost credibility due to complicit and motivating reporting."

However, our past was bereft of any democracy and the rule of law was not prevailing in ancient and medieval societies. It made acceptance of such choices out of norms. But continuing replication of such strategies in the era of modern democratic electoral context is far more serious sin. In the past barbarian age the utmost essentiality was to secure military wins for which fake news were employed, and in our current democratic set up, the desperate essentiality is to secure electoral wins for which no political party hesitates in manufacturing fake news for garnering votes. What has changed through the course of civilisation? At least the use of wrong means by keeping conscience at ransom especially by the bearers of political authority has not stopped. Power mongers know no restraints specifically because being at the helm of authority they can selectively use the law making power by keeping their political play safe. In other words, meaningful political reforms in a developing country like India are really an onerous battle.

FAKE NEWS: THE CHALLENGES

The issue fake news will exist for a long time to come. The challenges regarding this subject are multidimensional.

To fight the menace of fake news we have to understand the complexities involved on account of the use of social media platforms like Facebook, twitter, Whatsapp, emails etc. The web network is globally connected therefore the extent of viral news is at global scale which turns this adventure a borderless activity. Global level problems can always be solved by global cooperation therefore greater coordination between the server hosting nations of these platforms and other nations is a must. Today only U.S. is hosting the critical servers of most of the social media applications which ensures that the key to unlock the tragedy of fake news lies in that nation. The demand of data localisation by developing countries like India has been met with no response from the social media giants.

The approach and principled positions of the two important actors i.e. the government and the social media platform are equally valid. The authority has reasons to believe that these cyber platforms are not doing enough to reduce the misuse of the platform. The creators of the mischievous messages remain anonymous and unpunished in spite of inflicting heavy toll on the society. The typical fake news of child abductions, communal hatred have often led to riots like situation and posed great challenge to law and order machinery. However, while social media companies have taken few steps like limits on the forwarded messages, auto filters by Facebook, they are largely reluctant to reveal the generator of the unwanted messages. They argue that the messages have end to end encryption which ensures even Whatsapp itself doesn't know the originator. Besides, the post or the message may not be offensive for all the people and there is element of subjectivity in pronouncing judgement. It also curbs freedom of speech and expression besides putting forth a threat to online privacy which has been recognised by Supreme Court.

Lastly, revelation of the creator will open up a Pandora Box thereby the ruling government will soon look to misuse this power to derive details about the political opponents to quell dissent of every sort. Our democracy has witnessed low tolerance of the ruling government leading to quick and strict actions to curb freedom of speech in the online sphere. Keeping in mind the events in India such a scenario will be very likely if social media giants concede this right to the authorities. To quote one example, in Sreyas Singhal Case, Supreme Court mandated that take down request for removal of objectionable contents from social media can be made by the government only after the court order. But this decision is not being followed (webopedia.com).

The social media platforms are often selective, late responders or very quick responders keeping in mind the interests of their parent nation. They have hosted their servers in U.S. and are bound by the U.S. rules and regulation. There is always great temptation to pay the *debt of patriotism* by holding on to the U.S. foreign policy interests in international regions. The operations of Facebook, Whatsapp are truly at global

scale which acts as trump card for them. Recently, during Hong Kong protests for democracy geared against China, there were some dubious rumours maligning the image of protesters. However, Whatsapp was very quick to take action against the fake news. Facebook also suspended 10 anti-violence Whatsapp hotlines of Hong Kong Police to report incidents of violence and for local intelligence gathering just three days after their operations started, citing that this messenger app was meant only for private chat. It's not difficult to smell the foreign policy interests of U.S. and the souring relations between U.S. and China which were primarily the source of Whatsapp's agility and promptness in this specific matter (Rajeev and Gowda, 2019).

Another debatable issue is the frequent resorting to internet shutdowns by the government to curb the incidents of violence in riot hit area. In India, it has become a knee jerk response by the authority if there is any slightest indication of violation of law and order norms. The effect of this measure is certainly positive in short term, however it can't be a substitute for concrete method for reducing violence erupted due to fake news. Repeated and long term shutdown can be counterproductive as essential services are hit in internet blackouts. In Jammu and Kashmir, netshutdown for long durations can erode even further the support base of India. If few persons are hurling stones than the entire population of the region is made to suffer. It also hits trading activity as most of the transactions are done online jostling the trading community which otherwise have pro-peace and pro- stability approach in the disturbed regions like J and K. Internet blackouts can't be a panacea for all the ills of legal delinquencies especially in a democracy like India because the rights of the citizens get affected.

The three most common responses i.e. Rebuttal, Removal and Education to curb fake news are also fraught with dangers and they do not address the larger problem posed by fake news. Rebuttal means fact checking, exposing malicious editing, misattribution and deliberate misrepresentation of facts. However, it may seem to be an effective tool to counter fake news but it is an onerous task almost equivalent to hitting the target in a moving train. We may expose some but the *fake news factory* will keep on churning even more. Thus, we may treat the symptoms but the real malaise will be intact. The roots of the fake news lie in the patronage it receives from the powerful players in our nation who benefit the most from this dirty game of misinformation. Another issue with rebuttal is that it may reinforce the fake narrative among the willing receivers because they often have confirmation bias. Such mental malaise can allow the persons to happily ignore the truth if the given misinformation feeds their age old mental biases (Forrest,-webopedia.com). It becomes a battle of desperate ideologies where facts of the matter cannot bring any change in mind among the players. In words of Ram Gopal Ghosh of Yong India newspaper who once remarked- "He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot is a fool and he who does not is a slave (Brian, 2017). Thus, rationality is the first casualty when the demon of confirmation bias strikes.

Removal of fake news can be done by using filters and appropriate technology as employed by various social media applications. Through take down request by the government, or on complain by the app users, often piece of misinformation is removed. However, it can't work as deterrence to the crafters of fake news as they already know that sooner or later that post will be removed, but the high can be obtained by spreading the news to the target audience as per the nefarious designs of their employers. After all it's not possible to completely remove any piece of news given the decentralised nature of dissemination. Content meant to be removed will be removed but before the closure that will have had its due toll (Gupta, 2019).

Another issue in specific Indian context is that the majority of people in remote rural regions are illiterate in addition to availability of cheap smartphones due to Telecom revolution. Spreading of fake news like child kidnapping gang, cow slaughter news, inter-state gang of thieves etc. have led to fear psychosis among them as they often lack the mental calibre to verify or check the news on Whatsapp. In India we have more Whatsapp users than any other nation which has compounded the problem. Besides, the uses of altered pictures, out of context videos have become an effective weapon to target those who cannot read. Visuals always appeal instantly if compared with the written part besides being forwarded by the relatives, acquaintances, family members which creates heavy dose of emotional effect on the receivers leading to quick reaction. India's high rate of illiteracy is also a catalyst for heavy toll on account of fake news (Khurana, 2018).

The Last but not the least issue with social media is that it does not effectively empower people in rural area. On account of the digital divide, the reach and quality of internet connectivity is still not sufficient in rural areas. Often people here don't have access to local language functions in devices that restrict their capability to complain on fake news items. With high level of illiteracy and consequent lack of awareness the rural folks cant' effectively use reasoning and wisdom in processing the information churned by social media. They become vulnerable group thereby felling prey to fake news. This digital divide needs to be bridged for real empowerment of rural people through social media platforms (Christy, 2019).

FAKE NEWS: SUGGESTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

After dwelling on the various issues at length, some valuable suggestions and solutions to the menace of fake news have been put forth. Government should provide correct information via a dedicated channel so that the absence of information cannot be exploited by the miscreants. A reliable and official source of information by the authority without any *battle for perception* can go a long way in discouraging the misinformation generators. However it requires political discipline by concerned actors in our democracy as it is often said that all the pressing issues of our times i.e. in age of democracy, are political questions where the blind race for votes overwhelms all others issues. IT cells of various political parties are producing fake news at factory scale in order to win the game of perception. Unfortunately, no law has been framed to regulate such IT cells which has enabled them to have a free run. Only the *politics of character* instead of *politics of votes* can bring meaningful change in this age of misinformation. Leaving the *heart of the matter* untouched and trying to reign in Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp will be akin to fighting a lost battle.

Awareness about fake news should be enhanced. Many people in India perceive JawaharLal Nehru University at Delhi as a fort of anti-nationals. So vast is the network of fake news that gullible people have succumbed to the narrative manufactured for political gain and related ideology. This calls for examining the news through the lenses of rationality. Reporting mechanism should be easy and in local languages which should be followed by action taken by the social media platforms. Another way for tackling this problem is to include the nuances of identifying fake news in school curriculum. It will be very handy, as in urban areas internet access to children has increased. It will make our future generation far more vigilant in identifying fake news. Besides, for the purpose of fact checking many websites have emerged throughout the world turning this noble online activity into profitable venture. In India, Alt News, Boom etc. are fact checking websites which scan the viral information and expose anomaly in it. Such trends should be strengthened with greater campaign among the netizens.

Training of persons engaged in administration, police and media houses should be done to tackle the menace of fake news and its related consequences in the field of law and order. Training courses should be designed for various officers so that dealing with such fake news issues in pre-emptive manner with due regard for the right to online privacy and freedom of expression as expounded by the Supreme Court of our nation. Telanganastate has created a dedicated cadre of police to bust fake news. Reema Rajeshwari, IPS officer posted in the state has produced positive results in checking the menace of fake news through campaigning, folk singing, frequent visits of trained officers among villagers. Therefore the counter information drive is instantly launched in social media and at ground level by the Police to keep the alert level high among the villagers. Globally fake news may be called negative news but in Indian context such news leads to violence, riot, lynching on account of large numbers of illiterate people in rural areas. This young IPS officer of 2009 batch has found local antidote to this global problem (Lain 2018). Many other state police are also learning the modus operandi of Telangana Police to bust fake news.

Many social media platforms in India have been compelled by the government to appoint grievance officer. This is a positive step which will create deterrence among the fake news creators. This has eased up the reporting mechanism which can be used by alert and aware citizens to report fake news items circulating in social media (Chandra, 2011).

The crux of the matter is to convince the social media companies to allow traceability of distorted messages. Once the exact source of the troubled information is found, the responsible culprits can be punished as per law. Conviction of those creating hatred messages is a must to set an example in the society. This is the most effective way to curb the menace of fake news as it will allow the law to perform its full swing to realistically nab the needle out of the stacks of straw. However, as discussed in the article the Facebook and Whatsapp have refused to cooperate with the government on account of online privacy, confidentiality, and the possible misuse by the government in case decryption key is provided. Presently, this matter is subjudice in our country. For this to happen, government run by the political parties must be disciplined enough not to fall for the temptation of using this decryption key for political vendetta. Besides, as expected from all the actors in a democracy to do right things in right manner, government should also not be an exception especially in the game of elections. Sooner or later, the social media giants will be compelled to provide traceability of fake news, but the larger onus is on the government to set an example and *win the hearts of the people* not only votes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, complex problems always require complex solutions. The key to the crises in social media involves the interpretation of rights by the supreme court of our land. The need of safety and security will have to be balanced with the online right of privacy which is naturally a complicated task. Bigger focus on either of these propositions will be fraught with dangers that may disturb the societal and communal

balance. The stakes of the government, social media giants and the general public at large are far higher in the possible solution of this crisis. In the end, Gandhian vision of means and ends narrative can be a guiding light alongside our constitutional values.

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