

MAKING SENSE OF MEDIA LIES

Deconstructing Fake News to Understand its Genesis

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Sample this: In 2017, *PTI*, the largest news agency in India, uploaded a photograph showcasing a flooded Ahmedabad airport. The evocative image was used by several media outlets and splashed across the front page of *The Indian Express*. Finally it took wing when numerous individuals posted it on their social media handles. Only, the photograph was not of an Ahmedabad airport at all, but that of a flooded Chennai airport, that too way back from 2015. When the then Information and Broadcasting Minister Smriti Irani called out the error on Twitter, *PTI* apologised for it.

In the same year several videos surfaced on social media showing people bouncing rice balls against hard surfaces. The bouncing quality of the cooked rice was attributed to its plastic content. Apart from generating an ecosystem of fear and anxiety, this internet hoax managed to be picked up by a battery of national and regional news outlets. What's more, TV news channels conceptualised programmes on the topic of plastic rice, lending authenticity to the myth.

India has watched aghast as these nuggets of fake news went viral, spiking distrust, concern and widespread confusion.

To study the distorted media realities in our country and the world, and how it manages to shake up the citizen's ability to process his/her immediate environment, the author conducted an academic research titled *Deconstructing Media Lies*, last year. The research paper was submitted to the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Savitribai Phule Pune University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Media and Communication Studies.

The research is a telling commentary on how unconfirmed, often tendentious, information is now a part of the news narrative in India. Of course politics takes centre stage in the fake news discourse. Out of the 100 fake news items studied as part of this study, the 'politics' category scored the highest, featuring 43 fake news items. This section, dealing with subjects related to politicians and intra-party or governance matters, leads the pack for being the most vibrant space housing divergent ideologies, self-interests of politicians and myth-making.

Close at its heels was the category of 'religion' that registered nearly 25 fake news items. It clearly ranks pretty high among subjects of misinformation, and is deemed

capable of manipulating huge swathes of the population. For instance, on July 22, 2017, a tweet from *News18India* went out like this: 'Uttar Pradesh, Gonda: Pakistani flag hoisted on an electricity pole, created tension.' It was accompanied with a picture of the flag. The response, however was immediate. Twitter users pointed out that it wasn't the Pakistani flag but an Islamic one. The amplification of this bogus information was also stalled owing to prompt neutralisation attempts by the UP and local Gonda police, who gave necessary clarifications. This was no solitary case of fact distortion. Earlier *Times Now*, *The Times of India* and even *ANI* mixed up other green flags with the Pakistani flag.

Other categories ('business and economics,' 'personal affairs of non-political people,' 'terrorism' and 'calamities/disaster' as well as 'science and technology') set up to gauge popular themes of fake news, fared poorly in terms of numbers.

Traditional Media vs Social Media

Often the prosumer (producer who also is the consumer and vice versa) market culture of social media platforms, along with their lack of strong editorial

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policies, are held responsible for the misinformation epidemic. Though the role of social media in spreading the misinformation is quite evident, this doesn't mean traditional media is completely innocent and one should not let them off the hook.

'We have a bad news problem, not a fake news problem,' says David Mikkelson, journalist and founder of renowned fact-checking organisation Snope. In case of India, the first concern is about media organisations and journalists going for, or rather falling for, fake news and half-truths propagated by post-truth era politicians and partisan groups mainly through social media platforms.¹ But one can't blame only social media platforms and politicians or partisan groups because media organisations have likewise acted in an irresponsible manner by publishing fake news. While corrections are a usual practice in such cases, many Indian media houses never bother to issue an apology or correction if fake news is published.²

This not only questions the editorial position taken by media organisations but also demands an enquiry on their role in the creation and dissemination of lies hence, the research mainly focuses on 'fake news' detected by fact-checking websites from media organisations. The research has been divided into two parts. Looking for attributes of fake news that's spread by conventional media organisations is the first part of the study. That's because it

is important to examine how outfits that label themselves as media organisations (print, electronic and online), despite having a strong editorial set up in place, often peddle a distorted discourse in India. The attempt has been to use content analysis to examine fake news detected by self-proclaimed Indian fact-checking websites.

The second part of the research is studying the process undertaken by fact-checking websites to debunk myths and malicious content. In a battle between facts and lies, a majority of fact-checking websites are using something called the delegitimising logic, or a complex web of sources that can be cited to debunk fake news on the basis of truth and evidence.

The two-forked approach of this study is also an effort to underscore the serious threat faced by liberal democracy and its institutions in era of lies, deceit and conspiracy theories. Mounting pressures on these institutions, and an overall reliance of citizens on alternate realities have compelled fact-checking websites to intensify their work in recent months. Therefore, studying the methods adopted to stem the flow of misinformation could broaden the discussion on fake news in India as well.

Facts and the Future: Research Methodology

We have analysed in this research all the fake news detected by dedicated fact-

checking websites (factchecker.in, check4spam, SM HoaxSlayer, Alt News and BOOMLive). The first incidence of fake news detection can be attributed to India's first fact-checking website 'factchecker.in,' which in April 2015 debunked an inaccurate claim. It was against a minority community and was published in Marathi newspaper *Saamana's* editorial.

Fake news poses a new and relentless challenge for the contemporary information space, one that threatens to undermine the basic tenets of democracy. From April 2015 to August 2017 all the prominent fact-checking websites in India have managed to detect a total of 741 false stories. Make no mistake. This deluge of misinformation includes everything from spams and misleading tweets to Facebook posts and news given out by media organisations. However, in this research, only fake stories put out by news outlets and detected from their official websites or social media handles have been considered.

A total of 111 (14.97% or approx. 15%) such news items, out of the entire bulk of 741, have been identified. And out of this 111, 10 fake news items have been detected by multiple fact-checking websites, nine by two and one by three different fact checking websites. Therefore, a total of 100 fake news items detected by fact-checking websites have been taken into account for the purpose of this study.

Misinformation and its Source

The overall apathy to fact-checking has been resonant across Indian newsrooms. Rather than playing an aggressive role in debunking false narratives Indian media has occasionally been guilty of giving untruths a larger audience. As a result, the focus on media organisations as transmitters of fake news is important in this study.

News outlets have been divided into three main categories. – Newspapers, TV news channels and online news portals (ONP). Out of total 100 fake news items, almost half of the fake news (49) have been detected from ONP. Newspapers are also equally responsible for spreading lies, as 42 such news items have been detected from their print copies, official websites and social media handles. As many as 29 fake news items have been detected from TV channels. As these numbers suggest, some of the news items have been used by multiple news outlets. It is important to understand that a news published by a news outlet in a particular format becomes available on all media platforms in no time, mainly because all news outlets currently have their own websites and a strong presence on all leading social media platforms.

A total of 23 newspaper outlets have been revealed to have put out fake news stories. This figure includes all the (circulation wise) top national English as well as Hindi dailies.

It also encompasses in its ambit popular regional newspapers like *Sandesh*, *Rajasthan Patrika* etc. In the newspaper category, *The Times of India* has been found to have put out the maximum number of fake news items (11), followed by *Financial Express* (3). Like newspapers, the TV news channels category features all the popular (highest TRP ratings) English and Hindi news channels. In all, 16 TV news channels have been found to have peddled lies by fact-checking websites, with *Zee News* topping the list with 10 fake news items, followed by *Times Now* with nine.

In the post-truth era, unsubstantiated allegations have pushed out facts to the margins, rendering empirical evidence inconsequential. And with the multiplication of channels of communication, the real menace of fake news seems to be posed by the ONP category. The maximum number of news outlets to have disseminated fake information are in the ONP category, with a total of 36 such portals identified by fact-checking websites. Making the threat more real is the fact that most of these online news portals have been formed recently and have no details regarding their

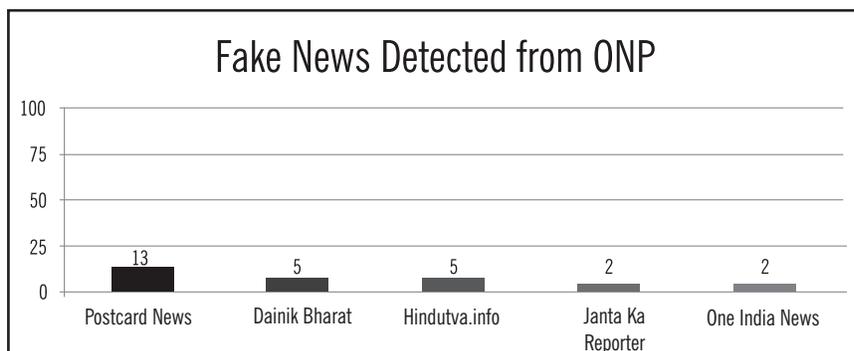
ownership or editorial policy.

Postcard news (13) has been revealed to have propagated the highest number of fake news, followed by *Dainik Bharat* and *Hindutva.info* (5). Interestingly, all these online news portals are known for their pro-rightwing ideology. Earlier this year, Facebook took down *Postcard's* official page for spreading lies, while its founder-editor Mahesh Hegde was arrested for deliberately creating communal hatred with the help of a wrongly-attributed image.³

It is also important to note that several ministers from the current government follow *Postcard news* on Twitter and have even shared a number of fake news items created by this portal. In addition, BJP lawmakers strongly protested against the arrest of Hegde, calling the arrest 'attack on freedom of speech and expression.'⁴

News about Public Figures and Controversial Places

Nothing grabs more eyeballs than systemic disinformation campaigns featuring reputed personalities. Hatred, prejudice



and polarisation get amplified when individuals idolised by many or with mass followings are dragged into the picture. Data shows that 48 out of 100 fake news items are in a way related to some celebrities/public figures. Politicians have a larger share in this as 31 out of 48 (64.58%) news stories are about politicians from different parties. As many as 16 of these news items are about PM Narendra Modi and nine are about people from the field of media and entertainment. Almost 60% of these fake news items have been propagated by online news portals.

Gujarat, West Bengal and Kerala -the three politically volatile states have been on the radar of fake news peddlers and have been subjects of the maximum number of fake news items. These nuggets of misinformation, either praising or criticising the three states, have been detected by fact-checking websites. Interestingly, eight out of 10 fake news items about Pakistan and seven out of eight news items about Jammu and Kashmir are put out by only TV news channels.

Taking the Visual Mode

Tackling the media malaise called fake news is not easy, doubly so when the ways in which it is disseminated is mindboggling. In present times misinformation is a shape shifter that can take on any form to enhance its persuasive power. This study has therefore put the spotlight on news mode, the specific manner in which a fake news item is

presented by news outlets. It has been divided into three broad categories - Text only, Audio-Visual and Image. Most of the news items featuring audio-visuals or images are supported by text. All such news items are added in respective categories and no separate (audio visual + text and image + text) categories have been created.

As the pie chart reveals, a majority of fake news items appears in 'image' form (42), followed by 'text only' (39). Almost 61% fake news stories are either in audio visual or in image form. This finding goes on to underline how pictures and other visuals are quite central to manipulating readers into believing in lies and subsequently, getting influenced.

Politics and Religion: All-time Favourites

Not surprisingly, fake news comes in all shapes and colours. Political parties use it to churn out absurd quantities of promotional material, others adopt the form to stoke religious sentiment, while still others make use of the format to spread any kind of falsehood at lightning speeds. In this research, categories for 'Fake news subject' have been formed based on popular themes. As stated earlier, the highest number of fake news items have been found to fall under the umbrella of 'Politics,' adding up to a total of 43. Religion comes a close second, with a tally of 25 fake news items. Highly

convincing doctored capsules of misinformation in other categories such as 'business and economics,' 'personal affairs of non-political people,' 'terrorism,' 'calamities/disaster,' as well as 'science and technology' fall way behind in the numbers game. However, it is crucial to understand here that most of the fake news items fall under multiple categories, mainly because most categories cover more than one subject.

'No Source' is the Best Source

Journalism is not seen as watchdog reporting by many in the industry today. Holding authorities to account and boosting newsroom environments with resources and talent, are also practices held in high esteem by only a handful. Simultaneously, journalistic ethics and principles of integrity often get a raw deal in an age of social media explosion.

The first casualty in this landscape of information chaos is often the news source, arguably the most important attribute for any published news item, and an important element to measure its credibility. Old school journalism still dictates that the worth of any news is based on the trustworthiness and reliability of its source/s. Taking a cue from these core values, this study has focused on 12 types of news sources, including involved persons, witnesses, own correspondents, official sources, government documents, experts,



press releases, other reports, other media, social media, tools and technology, and of course, no source.

As the graph below shows, most of the fake news items (46) have not mentioned any kind of source to justify their claims. Ten news items have cited reports from social media platforms while nine have alluded to other media reports as their source of information. Online news portals have disseminated the highest number of fake news items without citing any kind of source. In fact, 27 such fake news items have been found to be from online platforms.

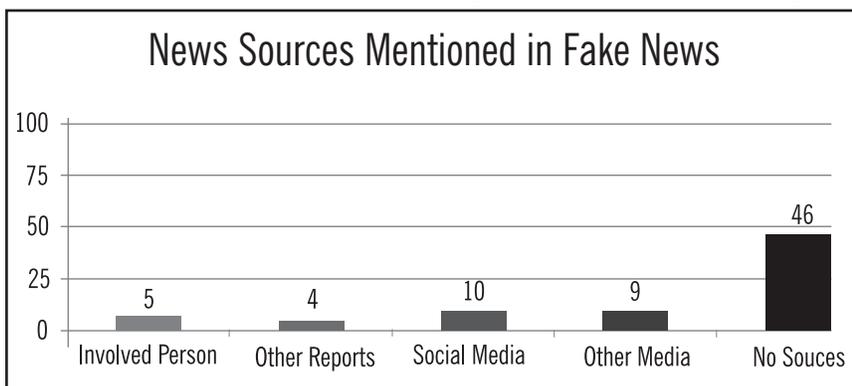
Delegitimising Logic

Making the truth accessible to the public is no mean feat. Fact

checkers often use an array of devices to investigate false claims, including weighing the evidence put forward in support of lies and misinformation.

Delegitimising logic is the term referring to all the news sources listed by fact checking websites while debunking fake news. As part of this analysis, the researcher has scrutinised all the 111 fake news items identified by fact checking websites owing to a single reason. That's because it has been observed that delegitimising logic used by different fact checking websites for the same news item is different.

In order to get a perspective on the delegitimising logic and figure out how fact checking



websites employ it to get to the bottom of the story, the same list of news sources cited in fake news items has been used for the former. It includes involved person, witness, own correspondents, official sources, government documents, experts, press release, other reports, other media, social media, tools and technology, no source.

In 41 fake news items, fact checking websites have used other, more credible media reports to debunk them and unearth the truth. Fact-checkers have also used technological tools like Google reverse image search and the Photoshop software to divulge falsehood. They have called out 16 such news items with the help of technology. Interestingly, nine fake news stories have been debunked without citing any sources.

Conclusion

The study attempts to take the pulse of the fake news from media outlets scene in India, and the modus-operandi of the fact-checking tribe. Some of the crucial findings that emerged during the course of the analysis include the following:

- All the newspapers found to be disseminating the maximum number of fake news items have the highest circulation figures in their respective languages. (i.e. *The Times of India* in English, *Dainik Bhaskar* in Hindi, *Sandesh* in Gujarati) Similarly,

all the news channels revealed to be propagating the maximum number of fake news items have the highest TRP ratings in their respective languages. (E.g. Zee News in Hindi, Times Now in English).

- The strong persuasive power of visuals has been optimised by the creators of fake news. Interestingly, 61% of fake news detected by fact-checking websites are either in image or audio-visual formats.
- New media has made dissemination of fake news much easier, safer and most importantly, faster. Like most countries, new media has been used widely to spread lies in India as well. It has been revealed that 49% fake news items were being peddled by 36 online news portals. Most of these portals have started their operations in the last few years and most of them have a clear inclination towards certain ideologies. (E.g. *Postcard News*, *Hindutva.info*, *Dainik Bharat*, *Muslim World* etc.)
- Politics and religion were found to be the most prevalent subjects of fake news. Most of the fake news items were about important person/public figure. These news capsules have been created to either defame or unnecessarily praise the person.
- Use of false narratives to create a strong sentiment of

nationalism for hefty political gains is a phenomenon observed in the 2016 American election. This trend perfectly fits in the Indian context too and like the USA, new media also plays a decisive role in India.

- While half of the fake news creators have chosen not to cite any sources, fact-checking websites have preferred to prove their stand with multiple number of examples. While on one hand social media has been used as a tool to propagate fake narratives, on the other fact-checking websites have been using the same medium to ferret out credible, accurate information.
- The process of debunking has not been bound by time, place or any other constraints. Most owners of fact-checking websites do not have a journalism background and this fact is underscored time and again through the delegitimising logic employed by them.

Limitations

**Selection of fact checking websites is completely based on secondary data and only fact checkers whose work has been widely covered by mainstream media organisations are taken into consideration for the study.⁵*

**Though codes generated for the study are operationally defined*

by taking all possible measures, the lines separating multiple codes in many categories are very thin. Hence, assuring complete objectivity in such cases is difficult.

Endnotes

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