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SHRI DHARMASTHALA MANJUNATHESHWARA LAW COLLEGE, CENTRE FOR POST GRADUATE STUDIES & RESEARCH IN LAW, MANGALORE, D.K.

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SHRI DHARMASTHALA MANJUNATHESHWARA
LAW COLLEGE

CENTRE FOR POST GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN LAW,
MANGALURU, DAKSHINA KANNADA
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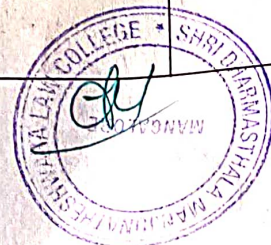# FREEDOM OF MEDIA IN INDIA

(Peer Reviewed)

CONTENTS

Navigating Misinformation: Addressing the Challenge of Fake News in Indian Media

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Abstract

The Indian Constitution guarantees all citizens freedom of speech and expression; however, this freedom is not absolute and must not disrupt societal harmony. In the digital age, the proliferation of fake news on social and mainstream media in India has become pervasive. This phenomenon has serious consequences, as fake news spreads rapidly without verification, leading to societal crises such as animosity, communal violence, and various criminal activities. This paper delves into the dynamics of fake news and its impact on Indian society and proposes strategies to combat misinformation. Additionally, it explores how other nations are addressing the menace of fake news, shedding light on potential solutions for India.

Keywords: Fake news, India, strategies, misinformation

Introduction

Fake news poses an escalating challenge within the Indian media landscape. The dissemination of inaccurate and deceptive information erodes trust in news outlets and can harm individuals and society. Fake news entails deliberately circulating false information by deceptive news sources, typically with political or commercial motives.[4] According to the Press Council of India, fake news is "news, stories, information, data, and reports that are wholly or partially false." In this era characterized by a disregard for objective truth, the proliferation of fake news has extended its grip globally, affecting emerging economies like

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[4] Fake News in India: Scale, Diversity, Solution, and Opportunities | November 2022 | Communications of the ACM
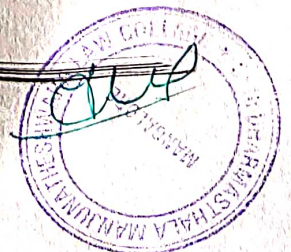
India.[5] While this issue is not entirely novel, it has garnered increased attention in recent years due to the extensive use of social media platforms, which facilitate the rapid dissemination of erroneous information. Erroneous news can induce panic, bewilderment, and even violence. India has experienced a pronounced issue with fake news, with instances of lynching and communal violence associated with disseminating false information. It highlights the imperative for media organizations to exercise responsibility in reporting and for individuals to exercise discernment when consuming news.[6] The propagation of fake news carries substantial repercussions, underscoring the necessity for individuals to recognize the potential harm that may arise from accepting and disseminating false information.

Effectively addressing the issue of fake news in India requires a comprehensive approach. A 2019 survey unveiled that 88 percent of first-time voters nationwide recognized the prevalence of fake news[7]. Various strategies have been employed in the battle against the dissemination of false information, including fact-checking campaigns, educational programs aimed at enhancing media literacy and implementing governmental regulations. Notably, Fact Drill, a repository dedicated to archiving fact-checked social media narratives is an illustrative initiative facilitating the analysis of fake news incidents in India.[8] Despite these commendable endeavors, the fake news persists. Consequently, the responsibility for addressing this issue lies with individuals who must exercise vigilance and responsibility when consuming and sharing news.

Causes for the Spread of Fake News in Indian Media

One of the leading causes of the spread of fake news is political propaganda. Political parties and their supporters often use social media and other platforms to spread false information and propaganda to influence public opinion and gain support.[9] It is particularly prevalent during elections when political parties use fake news to discredit their opponents and promote

[5] www.aipor.org/article/19049-social-media-fake-news-in-India
[6] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8502082/
[7] www.theatlantic.com-international-archive-2019
[8] In India, Debunking Fake News and Running Into the Authorities - The New York Times (nytimes.com
[9] www.statista.com/topics/5846/fake-news-in-india/

their agendas. The spread of fake news through political propaganda can have severe consequences, including inciting violence and causing social unrest[10].

Clickbait and sensationalism are other factors contributing to the spreading of fake news in Indian media.[11] Many media outlets use clickbait headlines and sensationalized stories to attract more readers and increase revenue. It often leads to the dissemination of false information, as the focus is on generating clicks and views ,rather than verifying the information's accuracy. This practice not only undermines the credibility of media outlets but also has the potential to misinform and mislead the public. The lack of fact-checking and verification is another significant cause of the spread of fake news in Indian media. Many media outlets do not have a robust fact-checking process, allowing false information to be published and disseminated. It is particularly concerning in the age of social media, where false information can spread rapidly and widely. The lack of verification also allows the propagation of fake news through traditional media channels, such as television and newspapers, which can significantly impact public opinion. Therefore, media outlets need to prioritize fact-checking and verification to ensure the information's accuracy and credibility.

The Impact of Fake News on Indian Society[12]

The proliferation of fake news within Indian media has recently emerged as a pressing concern, causing misinformation and perplexity within society.[13] Social media platforms have emerged as a predominant channel for disseminating fake news, resulting in widespread perplexity, and eroding trust in media outlets. According to a 2019 study by Rocha et al., fake news can substantially influence people's perspectives and convictions, engendering the spread of false information. The extensive dissemination of fake news has created a predicament where individuals frequently struggle to differentiate between reality and deception, leading to a breakdown in interpersonal communication and trust among various segments of society[14]. Another consequence of fake news in Indian society is its role in fomenting polarization and discord. Fake news often targets specific groups or communities,

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[10] www.ncbi.nlm.gov/pmc/ articles/PMC9771845
[11] Anurag Thakur Cautions Against Clickbait Headlines, Fake News (outlookindia.com)
[12] https://researchguides.austincc.edu/c.php?g=612891&p=4258046
[13] Social Sciences | Free Full-Text | Understanding Fake News Consumption: A Review (mdpi.com)
[14] (Why) Is Misinformation a Problem? - Zoë Adams, Magda Osman, Christos Bechlivanidis, Björn Meder, 2023 (sagepub.com)

fueling the dissemination of hate speech and the endorsement of divisive ideologies. Which, in turn, can precipitate social unrest and violence, as evidenced in recent years. Fake news fosters an "us vs. them" mindset, corroding social unity and propagating intolerance and prejudice.[15] Consequently, fake news represents a significant menace to the social cohesion and fabric of Indian society.

The spread of fake news in Indian media also poses a significant threat to democracy and free speech. Fake news can manipulate public opinion, leading to the election of officials who do not have the people's best interests.[16] It can also silence dissenting voices and stifle free speech, as seen in several instances where journalists and activists are targeted for speaking out against the government or powerful individuals. Thus, the spread of fake news in Indian media seriously threatens the democratic principles of the country.

Examples of Fake News in Indian Media[17][18]

➢ One common area where fake news has been particularly problematic is concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.[19] For example, there have been reports of fake news about cures for the virus and conspiracy theories about the pandemic's origins. Such misinformation can have serious consequences, leading individuals to engage in unsafe behaviors or to distrust public health officials and medical advice[20].

➢ Arundhati Roy was falsely attributed with a statement claiming that "seventy lakh Indian soldiers cannot defeat Azadi gang in Kashmir." This fake statement originated from an obscure Pakistani website called timesofislamabad.com. It was circulated in India by Postcard News, Republic TV, and CNN and launched prime-time debates attacking Roy based on this fake news. However, the investigation by The Wire revealed the truth behind the fake outrage, and the news laundry apologized for its editorial oversight and retracted a piece related to the incident. Republic TV and CNN did not issue retractions or apologies.

➢ In another instance, a report was that President Kovind gained three million new Twitter followers in an hour. In reality, he had inherited the followers of his

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[15] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/ PMC8604707/
[16] www.bbc.com/news/world-Asia-India-47878178
[17] Top 12 fake news stories circulated by mainstream media in 2017 (newslaundry.com)
[18] Here Are the Biggest Stories the Media Got Wrong in 2020 (thewire.in)
[19] www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23736992.2022.2056038
[20] www.mdpi.com/2673-5172/2/1/7

predecessor as Twitter follows a strategy for the digital transition when a new occupant takes office, preserving the digital history of the previous occupant. Indian media outlets failed to fact-check and reported this as a significant event.

➤ TV9 Bharatvarsh falsely claimed that an unidentified virus affecting tomatoes in Maharashtra was a more dangerous version of the coronavirus. They urged people to stop eating tomatoes due to this false linkage, creating unnecessary panic.

➤ TV9 Bharatvarsh, Times Now, and ABP news ran unverified videos claiming that Taiwan's military had shot down a Chinese aircraft. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence later refuted this claim, highlighting the irresponsible reporting by these news outlets.

➤ Following the death of a pregnant elephant in Kerala, several mainstream news outlets reported that the elephant had been intentionally fed a pineapple laden with explosives in Malappuram district. It led to bigoted attacks on social media. However, forest officials clarified that the incident was accidental and occurred in Palakkad, not Malappuram.

➤ Misleading political campaigns are another area where fake news has become a significant issue in Indian media. During election seasons, fake news is often spread to sway public opinion or to discredit opposing candidates[21]. For instance, in the 2019 general elections, numerous instances of fake news were circulated on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, including false information about voting procedures and election surveys. Such disinformation campaigns can significantly impact the outcome of elections and undermine the democratic process.

➤ Fake social media profiles and accounts are also a common source of fake news in Indian media. These accounts are often created to spread false information or to promote a particular agenda. For example, in the run-up to the 2019 general elections, there were reports of fake Twitter accounts being used to spread propaganda and misinformation. Such accounts can be difficult to identify, and their extensive reach makes it challenging to counter the spread of fake news.

These incidents underscore the importance of responsible journalism and fact-checking in the age of rapid news dissemination and the potential consequences of misinformation and sensationalism in the media.

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[21] www.theatlantic.com-international-archive-2019

The Role of Social Media in the Spread of Fake News[22]

Social media platforms facilitate the swift sharing of material, fostering the rapid dissemination of fake news. The inherent virality of social media simplifies the process of fake news reaching a substantial audience swiftly, frequently devoid of any fact-checking or validation.[23] The potential repercussions of such dissemination are significant, as false information can result in misinterpretations, discord, and, in some cases, even acts of violence, both at the individual and societal levels.

The rapid dissemination of fake news on social media is partially attributed to the presence of echo chambers and confirmation bias. Echo chambers represent the inclination of individuals to actively seek and propagate information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and viewpoints.[24] This behavior fosters an environment where fake news finds a more receptive audience and is more likely to be endorsed and shared due to its alignment with the established convictions of those who encounter it. Conversely, confirmation bias denotes the propensity of individuals to selectively interpret information in a manner that substantiates their existing beliefs and perspectives. This cognitive bias can impede people from recognizing and discrediting fake news, even with contradicting evidence.

Several strategies have been employed to tackle disseminating fake news on social media platforms. These strategies encompass the introduction of fact-checking mechanisms and partnerships with external organizations to validate the accuracy of content. Despite these efforts, the continued prevalence of fake news on social media poses a persistent challenge. The onus for addressing this issue lies jointly with social media platforms and individuals. Both stakeholders must adopt a vigilant and discerning approach when encountering online information. By exercising caution and verifying the information before dissemination, individuals can actively contribute to mitigating the spread of fake news and nurturing a more enlightened and responsible media environment.

The Responsibility of Journalists and Media Outlets

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[22] Social Media Fake News in India | Published in Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research (ajpor.org)
[23] academic.oup.com/book/39398/chapter/339090789
[24] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/ PMC9548403/

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Upholding the principles of ethical journalism is imperative in preserving public trust and fulfilling the media's crucial role as a guardian of democracy.[25] Journalists should rigorously adhere to stringent ethical guidelines, including source verification, avoidance of sensationalism, and practicing objective reporting. By following these principles, they can actively contribute to combating the proliferation of fake news and the dissemination of misinformation.

Fact-checking and verification play a pivotal role in stemming the dissemination of fake news. Journalists and media establishments are responsible for guaranteeing the accuracy and dependability of their information.[26] It necessitates comprehensive research and the meticulous verification of sources before publishing any news article. Furthermore, media organizations should establish robust mechanisms for fact-checking and rectifications. This proactive approach mitigates the propagation of erroneous information and safeguards the media's credibility.

Accountability and rectification represent indispensable components in the battle against fake news. Media organizations and journalists should be subject to scrutiny and be ready to rectify any mistakes or inaccuracies in their reporting. This practice not only serves to curtail the dissemination of erroneous information but also aids in reinstating the public's confidence in the media. Moreover, media establishments should establish a framework for disseminating corrections and clarifications to their audience. By assuming responsibility for their reporting, journalists and media outlets can contribute significantly to addressing the issue of fake news in Indian media, guaranteeing the public's access to accurate and trustworthy information.

Government Regulations and Policies to Combat Fake News

The Indian government has employed various strategies to tackle the surge in fake news within the media landscape.[27] A notable approach involves introducing legal consequences for individuals disseminating false information. In 2023, the government implemented the

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[25] ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/fake-news

[26] The disaster of misinformation: a review of research in social media | International Journal of Data Science and Analytics (springer.com)

[27] blog.ipleaders.in/legal-implications-of-spreading-fake-news/
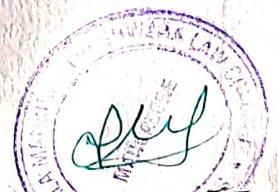
Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Rules, which place the onus on social media platforms for the content posted on their platforms and impose penalties for the propagation of fake news. This legislative intervention has demonstrated its effectiveness in discouraging fake news dissemination and holding individuals accountable for their actions.

The government has also established fact-checking agencies to verify the authenticity of news stories. The Press Information Bureau (PIB) and the fact-checking website FactChecker. are two such agencies that work to verify news stories and expose fake news. These agencies ensure that accurate and reliable information is disseminated to the public.

Alongside legal repercussions and fact-checking organizations, the promotion of impartial and equitable reporting plays a crucial role in the fight against fake news. Journalists and media establishments must deliver objective and fact-based information, free from political or commercial predisposition. It requires upholding journalistic ethics and principles, including rigorous source verification and fact-validation before publication. By championing balanced and unbiased reporting, the media can reestablish public trust and bolster confidence in the veracity of news reporting.

Education and Media Literacy

Disseminating false or misleading information via conventional and interpersonal communication channels can deceive and sway public sentiment.[28] Therefore, cultivating critical thinking skills and promoting media literacy education have assumed heightened importance in the battle against fake news. Empowering individuals with the ability to recognize and assess information sources equips them to make more informed judgments regarding the credibility and trustworthiness of news reports.

Approaches to imparting media literacy encompass integrating media analysis into educational curricula and offering accessible resources to enhance individuals' media literacy proficiencies.[29] Stoddard's 2021 study revealed that media literacy education within school

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[28] India fake news problem fueled by digital illiteracy – DW – 03/02/2021
[29] How to combat fake news and disinformation | Brookings

programs can result in heightened critical thinking abilities and more significant skepticism when evaluating news outlets.[30] Furthermore, equipping individuals with resources like fact-checking websites and facilitating media literacy workshops can enhance their capacity to distinguish genuine news from fake information.

Ultimately, individuals are responsible for combatting fake news by being more discerning about the information they consume and share.[31] It includes fact-checking news stories before sharing them on social media and being aware of the potential for bias in news reporting.[32] Fact-checking websites like AltNews have emerged in India to combat fake news on social media. By actively combating fake news, individuals can help ensure accurate and reliable information is disseminated through Indian media.

International Examples for Tackling Fake News[33]

The issue of fake news has extended its reach globally, prompting various nations to adopt effective countermeasures.[34] For instance, in Germany, stringent regulations require social media firms to expeditiously remove hate speech and fake news, with the risk of fines reaching €50 million for non-compliance within a 24-hour timeframe following notification. Meanwhile, France has enacted legislation to combat fake news during electoral periods, empowering judges to remove content or block websites when false information is disseminated.[35] These approaches have demonstrated their effectiveness in curbing the proliferation of fake news in these nations and offer valuable templates for others to consider.

Collaborative efforts have also been successful in combating fake news.[36] For example, a coalition of media outlets in the United States, including The New York Times and The Washington Post, have joined forces to fact-check political statements and debunk false information[37]. In India, the non-partisan fact-checking website AltNews aims to curb

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[30] www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1920498117

[31] A Media Education Programme for Students in India to Challenge Misinformation - Information Saves Lives | Internews

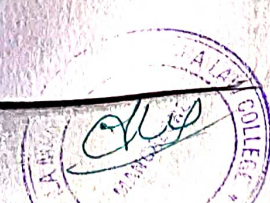[32] https://ssir.org/articles/entry/combating_fake_news_in_india

[33] https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/resrep17648.8

[34] https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/culture/fact-checking-in-germany-recognizing-fake-news

[35] https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210605-france-creates-agency-to-fight-foreign-fake-news-aiming-to-undermine-the-state-cybercrime-russia-united-states-elections-brexit

[36] https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1535&context=jmle

[37] https://libguides.lib.cwu.edu/c.php?g=625394&p=4391900

misinformation on social media.[38] These collaborative efforts have effectively increased public awareness of the problem and reduced the spread of fake news.

The United Nations has acknowledged the significance of addressing fake news and has advocated for a coordinated global effort to tackle this issue.[39] International entities like UNESCO have initiated programs to advance media and information literacy, empowering individuals to recognize and combat fake news. Embracing a global approach to address the fake news challenge can enhance the dissemination of accurate information and equip individuals with improved discernment between genuine and counterfeit news.

Identifying Fake News: [40]

In today's digital landscape, where fake news is rampant, it is essential to develop critical thinking skills to identify and avoid falling for misinformation and fake news. The following strategies can be used to navigate the news.[41]

1. **Verify the source**: Check the source's credibility before believing or sharing any news. Look for reputable news organizations that have a history of accurate reporting.

2. **Cross-reference information:** Cross-check the information with multiple sources to ensure its veracity. If a story is only reported by a single source, it is advisable to be cautious.

3. **Check for bias:** Be aware of the biases and agendas of media organizations. News reports that align with a particular narrative without presenting multiple perspectives may be biased.

4. **Scrutinize the evidence:** Examine the evidence presented in a news story. Look for inconsistencies, lack of credible sources, or doctored images/ videos.

5. **Consider the tone:** Pay attention to the tone of a news story. Sensational or clickbait headlines are often a red flag for fake news.

Conclusion

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[38] https://ssir.org/articles/entry/combating_fake_news_in_india
[39] fake news | UN News
[40] https://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/research-assistance/fake-news
[41] https://kpmg.com/xx/en/home/insights/2021/09/clues-to-help-identify-fake-news.html

Despite efforts to confront the issue of fake news within Indian media, the challenge endures, posing a continued risk to the credibility of journalism and the democratic framework [42]. Individuals must sustain their vigilance and stay mindful of the likelihood of encountering misinformation within the media landscape. It involves actively verifying information sources and exercising caution when confronted with sensationalized headlines that may lack accuracy.[43] By staying well-informed and maintaining a critical stance towards media content, individuals can play a pivotal role in thwarting the proliferation of fake news and advocating for trustworthy journalism.

Nevertheless, the prospect of fostering positive change exists in the battle against fake news within the Indian media landscape. As technology progresses, innovative tools and methodologies emerge to detect and counteract fake news. Social media platforms are actively tackling misinformation by introducing fact-checking functionalities and diminishing the exposure of false content. Through the ongoing advancement and application of these successful strategies, there is optimism for diminishing the prevalence of fake news in Indian media.

Media plays a pivotal role in keeping the public informed and ensuring transparency and accountability among those in positions of authority. Nonetheless, the proliferation of fake news poses a substantial risk of eroding trust and credibility within the media sphere. Media establishments must give precedence to precision and ethical conduct in their reporting, while individuals should endorse trustworthy information sources. By advocating for trustworthy journalism and demanding accountability from media entities regarding their reporting, we can contribute to safeguarding the enduring significance and influence of the media within a democratic society.

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42 Despite being exposed, fake news thrives on social media ahead of India polls | Reuters
43 Fake news: is media literacy the answer? | David Buckingham