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Fake News in the Era of Covid-19: The Indian Context

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Abstract. Fake news has become a major misery in India during this Covid-19 pandemic period, possibly threatening the lives and safety of millions of people, necessitating a comprehensive investigation into the nature and scope of the problem. This paper examines the nature, medium, motivations, sources and themes of Covid-19-related fake news in India. As many as 119 fake news circulated on social media are sampled and content analysed. Study findings imply that fake news on Covid-19 is primarily circulated as videos, followed by images and text. We find Twitter as the key platform for fake news circulation followed by Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. Major motivations identified are propaganda, financial, publicity, satire and defamation. Another alarming finding is that fake news sources include media organisations, apart from celebrities and political leaders. The major themes identified are public disorder, politics, religion, virus spread and medical.

Keywords. *Fake news, Covid-19, content analysis, health communication, misinformation*

Introduction

Fake news is not a new term: it has roots deep in the histories of humanity (Tandoc et al, 2018). One of the historical examples of fake news is the “Great Moon Hoax” of 1835, in which ‘The New York Sun’ newspaper published a series of news articles concerning the discovery of life on the moon (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The term ‘Fake News’ was first coined in 1925 in an article named “Fake news and Public” in Harper’s magazine (Wang, McKee, Torbica & Stuckler, 2019). Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”. The concept of fake news has a close association with misinformation and disinformation (Wang et al, 2019). “Misinformation is false information that is communicated without deliberate malice; disinformation is false information that is communicated with the intent to deceive” (O’Connor & Murphy, 2020).

With the massive expansion of the internet, the viral spread of fake news has become a common phenomenon. The substantial hike in the use of social media enables the wide spreading of fake news (Shu et al, 2017). Online media, especially social media, have the capacity not only to spread fake news, misinformation and disinformation but also to spread awareness and knowledge about various issues (Kadam & Atre, 2020). Indian social media is no stranger to the phenomenon of fake news (Bhaskaran et al, 2017). In India, the availability of low-cost internet through mobile networks has led to a substantial increase in the number of social media users (Banerjee & Haque, 2018). Now India has emerged as a large market for social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube (Aneez et al, 2018). Banerjee & Haque (2018) pointed out the superfluous outspread of fake news through social networking platforms in India. It is also becoming torturous to the public; fake news and

misinformation through social media have entailed many lives in India (Khan et al, 2019). For example, consider the case of Muzaffarnagar Riots, “a viral video of the mob lynching of two teenaged boys in Sialkot, Pakistan, was circulated on social media platforms as an incident occurred in Muzaffarnagar, India”. This ignited a deadly communal riot, which leads to the death and displacement of many people (Bhaskaran et al, 2017).

Health misinformation has always been a problem during a health crisis. Health misinformation can be explained as a health-related claim or fact that is currently not true due to a lack of scientific evidence. It was widely seen during the early years of the HIV epidemic (Mian & Khan, 2020). Conspiracy theories, rumours, misinformation regarding HIV had a negative influence in combating the epidemic. It even influences government policy, which has the potential to be fatal (Mian & Khan, 2020). Mian & Khan (2020) also pointed out the example of the South African government's denial of HIV, which costs more than 300000 lives. Ebola outbreak in western Africa also accompanies lots of misinformation which can potentially harm the preventive measures taken by the government agencies as well as created panic among the public (Oyeyemi et al, 2014).

Even in the present Covid-19 pandemic period, fake news and misinformation are creating lots of problems and panic among the public (Kadam & Atre, 2020). With the widespread increase of internet users, the majority of people uses the internet to get information about the coronavirus pandemic and this increases the magnitude of the issue of fake news. However, the information we get from the internet sometimes creates obfuscation. (Cuan-Baltazar et al, 2020). There is much misinformation coming in many forms like the virus is created by the Chinese as a biological weapon, coconut oil kills the virus, new vaccine released for Covid-19 (Pennycook et al, 2020). These types of fake news and misinformation amidst health news in social media is a potential menace as far as public health is concerned (Waszak et al, 2018).

In fact, on February 15, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the new coronavirus pandemic was escorted by an 'infodemic' of misinformation, which spreads faster than viruses (Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020). “Infodemic is an excessive amount of information concerning a problem such that the solution is made more difficult”. WHO is mentioning the drastic rate of spread of fake news or misinformation during the time of Covid-19. Cristina Tardáguila, Associate Director of the International Fact-checking Network (IFCN), has referred to Covid-19 as “the biggest challenge fact-checkers have ever faced” (Brennen et al, 2020). Most studies on fake news have concentrated on three significant notions: the definition and the scope of the problem, the potential causes of fake news and the impact of proposed solutions to fake news (Tandoc, 2019). For instance, Tandoc et al, (2018) conducted a study about the various definition of fake news given by academic experts. Khan et al (2019); Tandoc et al (2018); Kadam & Atre, (2020) studied the impact of fake news. Numerous research has been conducted based on the type, forms and sources of

fake news. According to Tandoc et al. (2018), there are mainly six categorisations of fake news, namely news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo manipulation, advertising/public relations and propaganda. Sadiku et al (2018) pointed out that the main reasons for fake news are clickbait, propaganda, opinion and humour.

Khan et al. (2019) identify five types of fake news content: clickbait content, satire and parody content, propaganda based news content, sloppy news content, biased/slanted news (partisan). Brennen et al (2020) studied the claims, types, engagement of fake news in the context of the United Kingdom. One of the similar studies conducted in the Indian context is done by (Al-zaman, 2020) which discussed the themes, types, intentions, coverage and sources of fake news. However, the extensive magnitude of the problem demands an in-depth understanding of the problem and substantial research in the areas concerned. Besides, these academic studies mainly focus on fake news problems on social media from a more behavioural, technical and political perspective. Moreover, most of the studies are conducted in the United States and other western countries. In contrast, no other study addresses the requirement to identify and explore the compact nature, sources, motivations and themes of Covid-19-related fake news in the Indian context. In addition, the vulnerability of mainstream Indian media to fake news is less studied in Indian academia. To bridge this gap, we try to examine the basic facets of social media-related fake news circulated among Indian social media users.

Objectives of the study are:

- To find out the nature of fake news content related to Covid-19.
- To find out social media platforms in which fake news about Covid-19 propagates.
- To understand the motivations of fake news about Covid-19.
- To understand the sources of fake news about Covid-19.
- To analyse the themes of fake news related to Covid-19.

Research question

What are the nature, medium, motivations, sources, and themes of Covid-19 related to fake news in India?

Research methodology

Fake news items are collected from a fact-checking website <http://altnews.in> from March 25 to July 31 with the keyword search of corona and covid-19. All the fake news fact checks, including these keywords, were taken as our sample. One hundred and nineteen samples (N=119) were thus collected. A manual content analysis is chosen as the method of study to code the content for the chosen variables with predetermined categories. Content analysis is used to find out the nature, social media, motivations, sources and themes of fake news. We systematically checked each sample and coded it for the nature of fake news, the social

media platform through which fake news propagates, the apparent motivations behind it, sources through which fake news propagates and themes of the fake news content.

Altnews is a unit of the Pravda Media Foundation, a non-profit organisation, which is administered by dedicated media specialists. The alt news website is an archive of fake news/misinformation all over the country. Altnews consists of details of fake news like the date of publication of fake news, which platform it appears, who posts the fake news, the actual truth behind the fake news and the details of fact-check done.

Data analysis and discussion

A qualitative study using a content analysis approach was undertaken on 119 fake news fact check collected from <http://altnews.in>.

Table 1. **Nature of fake news content**

| Nature | Percentage |
|---------------|-------------------|
| Video + Text | 46 |
| Image + Text | 30 |
| Audio + Text | 4 |
| Text only | 20 |

Table 1 represents the proportion of the sample (N=119) that includes the nature of the fake news content.

Misleading videos and images as the core forms of fake news

Fake news relating to Covid-19 disseminate mostly as videos with text and images with text. Our analysis recognised that fake news comes mainly accompanied by video and text (46%). It usually appears as a video with misleading text. For example, a video from a film is shown as a recent video of the pandemic situation. Besides, some occurrences that happened in foreign countries is misrepresented as it happened in India. This type of video accompanied by fake text messages can be observed on all social media platforms. The second typical nature of fake news is image and text accompanied (30%). For instance, an image of medicine was published as the Covid-19 vaccine. Old images which happened before circulated as new. It is also prevalent in all forms of social media. The third most disseminated fake news is text-only (20%), for example of WHO's new guidelines released. These types of text-only fake news are popular in WhatsApp. The least common nature of fake news is audio, accompanied by a text (4%). For instance, it may relate to the fake spread of the virus. It is also prevailing mostly in WhatsApp.

Table 2. **Social media platforms on which fake news were circulated**

| Social Media Platforms | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Twitter | 42 |
| Facebook | 31 |
| WhatsApp | 17 |
| YouTube | 4 |
| Others | 6 |

Table 2 shows the proportion of the sample (N=119), which includes different social media for the spread of fake news. Pieces of misinformation may be propagated through more than one social media platform.

Fake news circulated mostly through Twitter

Analysis recognised that fake news associated with Covid-19 circulated mostly on Twitter (42%). Facebook (31%) is the second most fake news dispersed platform regarding Covid-19. About (17%) of our samples were disseminated through WhatsApp followed by YouTube (4%). Other social media platforms all together published (6%) of the fake news.

Table 3. **Motivations**

| Motivations | Percentage |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Propaganda | 38 |
| Defamation | 10 |
| Satire | 8 |
| Financial/publicity | 30 |
| Unidentified | 14 |

Table 3 shows the proportion of the sample (N=119) containing each type of motivation. Pieces of misinformation may contain multiple motivations.

Propaganda, Financial/Publicity, Defamation and Satire as predominant motivations

The Fake news related to Covid-19 has four dominant motivations. The most important motivation of fake news is recognised as Propaganda (38%) which aimed to promote a cause, action or point of view. The next apparent motivation is financial/publicity (30%), which aims at reaching a large number of people for monetisation benefits. About (10%) of the fake news have an apparent motivation of defamation that includes defaming a nation or religion or person or political party. About (8%) of the sample have satire as motivation that includes some comedies to get rid of stress relating to COVID. Moreover, (14%) of the motivations are unidentified, or it does not come under the motivations specified above. We recognised that motivations are generally negative. It is usually intended to get extra reach, create political unrest, religious intolerance and defaming persons. Financial/Publicity motivation is very

common despite the pandemic situation. However, propaganda and defamation motivations during this pandemic can be vicious.

Table 4. **Sources of fake news**

| Source | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Media Organisations | 21 |
| Fake Celebrity Profiles | 8 |
| Journalists | 7 |
| Celebrities | 15 |
| Political Leaders | 11 |
| Non-entities | 38 |

Table 4 represents the proportion of the sample (N=119) in which sources are identified and categorised.

Media organisations and celebrity sources of fake news are high

Our analysis identified that about 62% of the fake news sources are either media organisations or some other notable persons. In that 62%, 21% belongs to media organisations, 8% fake profiles of celebrities, 7% journalists, 11% of verified account of political leaders and 15% of verified account of celebrities. The remaining 38% are non-entities. The major problem we perceive from the data is that celebrities, journalists, and media organisations have high integrity. Their influence and acceptability in social media platforms are significant. Therefore, if they disseminate fake news, it gets more reach and acceptance. This finding is quite alarming to us.

Table 5. **Themes of fake news**

| Themes | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------|
| Political | 21 |
| Public Disorder | 21 |
| Virus Spread | 17 |
| Medical | 17 |
| Religious | 17 |
| Others | 7 |

Table 5 shows the proportion of the sample (N=119) containing each theme of fake news. Pieces of fake news may contain multiple themes.

Public disorder, Political as dominant themes

Across the sample, the most common theme identified was the Public disorder theme (21%) and Political theme (21%), which indicates the disturbances happening among the public. For

instance, crowded places photographed before were claimed to be recent photographs during the pandemic, and wrong statements by politicians are some typical fake news regarding these themes. Other significant themes include Medical (17%), Religious (17%), Virus spread (17%) and other themes (7%). Example of medical themes includes fake medicine claims. Religious themes include blaming a particular religion for the spread of the virus. The virus spread themes include the fake spread of the virus. Others include some negligible themes, which are not included in the themes mentioned above. It is very shocking for us to find out that politics and religion have prevalence in the themes. Even in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, people are behind religion and politics. These mentalities can potentially harm government efforts against the pandemic.

Conclusion

In the present article, we discussed the nature, social media, motivations, sources and themes of the Covid-19 related fake news in India. A list of fake news N=119 is collected from www.altnews.in with keywords Covid-19 and corona between March 25 and July 31. We found out that most numbers of fake news are in the form of video and text followed by image and text, text-only and audio and text. It may support the results of Al-zaman (2020) that asserts the critical use of video and misleading text in fake news. Next, we have an interesting finding of sources of fake news: media organisations, politicians and celebrities propagate a majority of fake news. This finding is alarming. Media organisations, politicians and celebrities are expected to be accountable and act with caution and credibility. Another finding which is relevant and supports the finding of Brennen et al (2020) is the over-density of fake news on Twitter. In our study, fake news is seen as propagated mostly through Twitter followed by Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. Our study identifies four apparent motivations of the fake news propaganda; financial/publicity, defamation and satire, which partially posits the findings of (Yee, 2017; Douglas, 2018). We also find the cynical motivations of fake news which as asserted by Al-zaman (2020). Our study identifies five major themes of fake news which are public disorder, political, virus spread, medical and religion. Apart from some unique findings, our study has some limitations too. A limitation is that this study neglects the differences between misinformation, disinformation and fake news and consider these three as a single entity under fake news. Despite this, this research provides a distinct input to the Covid-19 fake news academia. It will narrow down and bridge a few gaps in the current literature. It will also help researchers in further studies.

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