

DISTORTION AND IDEOLOGY: A MACRO STUDY OF THE COVERAGE OF DOKMOKA MOB-LYNCHING

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Abstract. The paper analyses the ideological representation and distortion of the news coverage of the Dokmoka mob-lynching incident in the daily newspaper *The Sentinel*. The theoretical framework taken for the study is Allan Bell and Teun van Dijk's discourse analysis model. Through this study, the paper highlights the role of the government, the administration, the police, pressure groups, political parties and the civil society in terms of its ideology and repression. The study analyses the level of distortion in the principles of journalism and the function of the ideological state apparatus as reflected in the coverage of the incident. In terms of the distortion, the news reports the story as a case of moral policing rather than as a case of circulation of fake news on social media. Moreover, when we look at the state apparatus namely the police and the head of the state, two branches of the same institution (government), the coverage of the news report shows them as connected, playing the role of authorisation and obedience to power. This duality of function was imposed to control the tense situation that prevailed in Dokmoka after the lynching of the two youths. The ideological state apparatus and the Opposition also find their representations in the news.

Keywords. *Distortion, Discourse Analysis, Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive State Apparatus*

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Introduction

The study on fake news is significant as fake news has witnessed a tremendous proliferation of manipulated misinformation and disinformation that seems to shake the very foundations of democracy (Edson C. Tandoc et al., 2017). Media being considered as the fourth pillar of democracy is infested with such spreading of propaganda and hate messages at an alarming rate. The occurrence of misinformation in the media is as old as the development of the earliest writing techniques. A classic example has been the spread of misinformation dating back to 1938 when the radio adaption broadcast of H.G. Well's drama 'the War of the Worlds' frightened an estimated one million residents. Now, that online platforms are forming a majoritarian function of the news media, social media, in particular, are becoming the primary sources of news for a growing number of news consumers, with misinformation finding a new channel (Edson C. Tandoc et al., 2017).

Scholars have already made clear distinctions between fake news, misinformation and disinformation and have also devised solutions in identifying such falsehoods. However, the bigger picture invites us not to merely look at creating awareness and identification of fake news but also invites us to look into deeper issues of repairing political institutions and democratic values (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018).

Fake news and Mob Lynching

In India too, fake news took an unprecedented turmoil through the spread of false information via many social media apps and more particularly through WhatsApp. The year 2018 is significant because of the larger number of cases of mob lynching occurring throughout the country as a result of the spread of fake news. Media, especially the digital media platform, played an enormous role in these lynchings because of the free movement of information to several people at a time irrespective of time, place and space restrictions. The Dokmoka lynching in Assam well reflected the present digitized mediascape of misinformation and digital media illiteracy. As the news report on Indian Express reported that the two victims, a sound engineer, and an engineering dropout, were bludgeoned to death on June 8 by a mob at Panjuri Kacharigaon under Dokmoka police station, around 200 km east of Guwahati. The mob pulled them out of their vehicle at Panjuri in Karbi Anglong district and lynched them to death. They were suspected to be child-lifters, following the dissemination of fake news on social media (Indian Express, July 2, 2018).

Lynching and lynch law had originated during the American Revolution, when Colonel Charles Lynch of Bedford County, Virginia presided over extra-legal courts claiming to fight lawlessness in general and Loyalists in particular. Several countries including Mexico, Italy and China learned about it only when American mobs lynched their nationals. A striking similarity of the American lynching can be pointed towards Russian peasants who were notorious for

their cruel punishments of horse thieves, operated in large gangs and terrorized entire regions. Even imperial Germany was no stranger to mob lynching and communal justice (Berg & Wendt, 2011). In the Indian context, mob violence was widely seen during the partition of India where Hindu and Muslim religious groups lynched each other. However, there is little evidence on the historical account stating its origin and evolution in the Indian context. Aparna Vaidik, a noted Indian historian in her book *My Son's Inheritance: A Secret History of Lynching and Blood Justice in India* writes how mob justice in India is thoroughly connected to the Indian myths and the sacredness of the cow and the movement associated with it. Well-documented narration in the context of North East region in general and Assam, in particular, reflecting the historicity of lynching is unavailable making it difficult to navigate the terrain of lynching movement in Assam particularly.

Mob lynching and India

Post Truth and fake news applies equally well in the Indian context but with a different approach when it comes to mob lynching and the rumours leading to the lynching. While in most parts of mainland India, rumours and fake news have resulted in a number of deaths due to miscommunication, half communication, misinterpretation yet, most of these cases were caste-based and religion-based. The northeastern part witnessed a different aspect of the fake news repercussions. The mob lynching offered a different view. It was not caste-based and religion-based but related more to a specific culture. The insider's and outsider's perspective played a primary role in the lynchings of northeast India. Relating to the case of the Dokmoka mob lynching, we have seen this perspective of insider-outsider come into play which actually resulted into the deaths of the two youths.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to find out the news representations of the Dokmoka incident in the selected daily newspaper through the ideology of the selected state machinery and the level of distortion in its coverage.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How has been the news report on the Dokmoka incident represented in relation to the government, the administration, the police, pressure groups, political parties and the civil society?

RQ2: How has the social media in relation to fake news been represented and its relation to distortion of the news story?

Conceptual Framework

The study is based on the framework of Teun van Dijk's Discourse Analysis to find its association with the representation of the government, the administration, the police, pressure

groups, political parties and the civil society. While studying the representation of the government and the state administration the study deals with the concept of ideological state apparatuses and repressive state apparatuses. The concept of ideological state apparatuses and repressive state apparatuses finds its theorization to Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall. Louis Althusser argued that individuals in capitalist societies are governed by ideological state apparatuses in the form of schools, legal and judicial systems, media communications and the like. These ideological state apparatuses espouse the ideologies of the powerful institutions in implicit ways. This is true not only in capitalist societies but also in democratic societies alike. Treading along similar lines is Foucault's concept of discourse which states how discourse unlike hegemony and ideology (which are forms of power external to individuals) are injected internally into individuals in an invisible manner, sometimes even without their knowledge. Media institutions, the government, judiciary, and other state apparatuses ritualize dispersion and distribution of power through discourses which are internalized and accepted as "the truth" (Laughey, 2007). The present study also incorporates this concept while analyzing the role and representation of the state machinery and the pressure groups through the selected news story. Through discourse analysis, the study would seek to analyze the relation of social media with that of fake news and its level of distortion as is represented in the selected news story.

"The concept of semantic macrostructure was introduced to represent that important aspect of discourse and discourse processing: it makes explicit the overall topics or themes of a text and at the same time defines what we could call the overall coherence of a text as well as its upshot or gist. Notably, many words in English render more or less this same notion of most important information, and this suggests that language users frequently rely on such macrostructural information. Macrostructures are derived from sentence meanings of a text by a set of rules by means of selection, generalization and construction. In a cognitive theory of discourse processing, these rules operate as tentative but effective macrostructures that enable readers to derive the topic from a sequence of sentences.

These operations depend heavily on our knowledge of the world (Dijk, 1988). Macrostructures also help in explaining how newsmakers continuously and routinely summarize the myriad of source texts from other media messages, wires, interviews, reports or press conferences) that are used in the production of a specific news report. Without a theory of macrostructures, it would be difficult to account for the special properties of headlines and leads, which objectively summarizes the rest of the news report. And finally, macrostructures explain why most readers usually only remember the main topics, that is, the higher levels of the macrostructure of a news report". (Dijk, 1988)

Research Methodology

The selection of news reports is from the month of June 10th, 2018, from the daily English newspaper The Sentinel, Guwahati. The incident had taken place on the late evening of 8th of June, 2018 but there were no news reports on 8th and 9th June, 2018. The news report under analysis is the first report filed by the newspaper on 10th of June, 2018.

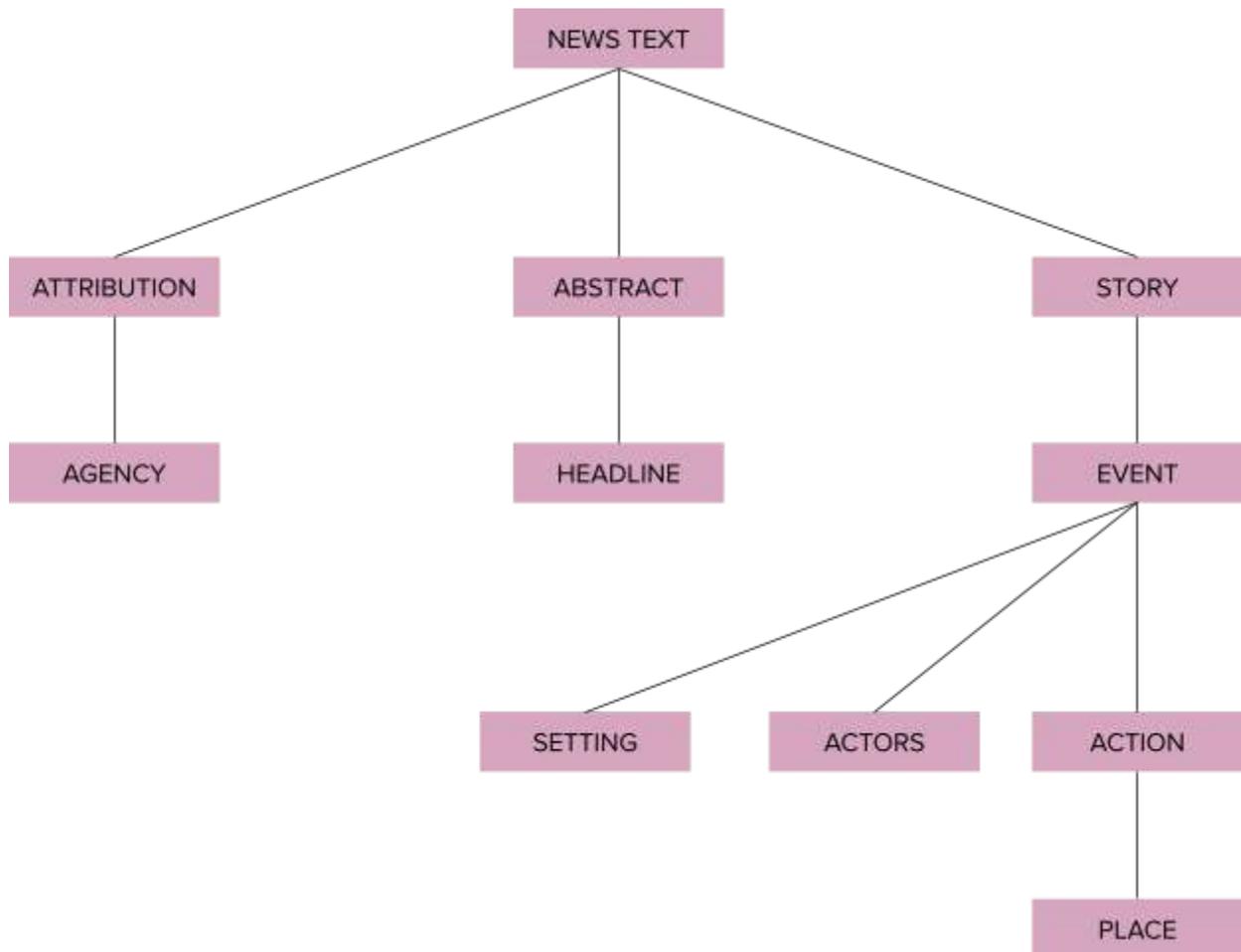
This is the single report in the entire newspaper and thereby becomes more important for our study being the first coverage of the Dokmoka incident. Its representation paves the way for the follow-up news stories on this incident in the later issues. So, the first coverage analysis of the incident holds greater significance than the rest of the stories that followed which were mainly of condolences and sympathies.

A total of one-week newspaper stories were collected. There were a total of 23 news stories reported on this incident in this one-week study. The reason for selecting the newspaper is that as per the records of the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR), Guwahati, the circulation of The Sentinel is the highest in the year 2018 in the state of Assam.

The selected news story under analysis holds significance due to the timeliness of the issue. It is the only news story that was reported after the occurrence of the incident. The following news stories on the succeeding days are on the protests held by different organizations, political parties and pressure groups, condolences poured from all across the state, the culprits being booked, the government's role on it and the blame on the ruling government by different students' organizations and civil organizations. All these news stories on the incident adds to the strength of the first news story that was reported on 10th of June, 2018. A microanalysis on the seven days news stories on all the 23 news stories have already been undertaken and it reflects the connection to the first news story that was reported on the 10th of June, 2018. The news stories of all seven days show the distortion and role of the ideological state apparatus. As Teun Van Dijk has explained in the book *Discourse Studies* that the analysis of a single news story opens up a subtext of the news, the implied linkages and leads closer to what the news story actually says happened. The detailed analysis of the news story presented in this paper has told us a lot about the character of the stories - indications of how they were made, evidence of discrepancies and gaps, and manifestations of the news values behind them. At the same time, Dijk has stated while analyzing his text story that "a discourse analysis for a single news story makes it difficult to determine exactly what were the persons, places and events involved from one single text alone (Dijk, 2007)". He furthermore writes that how the routinely jumbled time structure and lack of cohesion between sentences make some things unclear, and the repercussions that may have for comprehension of news stories. But having said that, Dijk writes how "a single news text story assesses the validity of the headline, and the reliability of evaluations put forward in the story (Dijk, 2007)". While analysing a single text news story Dijk also puts forth how "the analytical work involved in his framework was not small. The demand is in fact for a true reflection of the real complexity of texts such as news

stories, which sometimes appear deceptively simple. In doing such work, it is essential to move systematically, picking off the analysis point by point. Yet while we need to be selective in our analyses and know what is an appropriate point to cut off at, it is evident that many of the insights yield only near the end of detailed work following a pattern. Because the analyses are time-consuming if undertaken at all comprehensively, it is required to complement full-scale work on a few texts with more piecemeal, specific analyses on larger samples. But the reward of such work is a better knowledge of what the stories of our time are saying, and an understanding of the way they may be produced and received” (Dijk, 2007).

Fig. 1. Discourse structure of one sentence story (Dijk, 2007)



Data Analysis

The discourse model that is followed for this study was developed by Allan Bell in 1991. It drew on elements from the general frameworks of analysis of news stories particularly from Labov's and Van Dijk's framework for analysing news stories. T₀ is the time sequence of the event and S₁, S₂, S₃, S₄, etc. are the sentences that have occurred in sequences in the news report. T₊₁ is an action that took place after the main event of the story described in the lead (as T₀) and T₋₁ relates to the background of the story in a chronological manner.

What

Headline

Blame it on the social media, two youths lynched (The Sentinel, 8th June, 2018).

Lead

T₀ (S₁)

Event 1 (in chronological order)

T₊₁ (S₉)

T₊₂ (S₁₀)

T₊₃ (S₁₁)

T₊₄ (S₁₂)

T₊₅ (S₁₃)

Event 2 (in chronological order) Background, sympathy and quotes

T₋₁ (S₇)

T₋₂ (S₂)

T₋₃ (S₈)

T₊₇ (S₃)

T₊₈ (S₅)

T₊₉ (S₆)

T₊₁₀ (S₁₄)

Event 3 (in chronological order) Action on the consequence

T₊₆ (S₄)

T₊₇ (S₃)

T₊₈ (S₅)

T₊₉ (S₆)

T+10 (S14)

T+11 (S15)

T+12 (S16)

T+13 (S17)

T+14 (S18)

T+15 (S19)

Headline, lead, and story

The relationship between the headline and the lead has little implication to one another. While the headline starts with “Blame it on the social media, two youths lynched”, putting the onus of the death of the two victims on the social media, the lead puts a reverse statement and states “In a shocking incident of yet another instance of mob policing, two youths from Guwahati were beaten to death by an agitated mob at a remote location in Karbi Anglong district on suspicion of being child-lifters on Friday night”, thereby implying the death of the victims on mere suspicions of being child-lifters.

The second line talks very less about social media as a propagator of spreading lies and fabrication as is evident in the line – “It may be mentioned that similar cases of moral policing have been on the rise even as the social media is made the tool for spreading false and fabricated information”. Emphasis is given more on moral policing than social media as the main culprit behind the lynching incident. The headline has included social media as the main culprit behind the death of the two youths while the lead has excluded it. The lead talks more about the mob which was agitated and also of the location and rumours that were doing the rounds of being child-lifters. Inclusion of moral policing has been added to the lead which finds no mention in the headline and it is only towards the end that a general statement of social media as a tool of fabrication and falsehood finds mention.

Who

Story attribution

The story is attributed to a staff reporter.

Sources attribution

There are various attributions within the story. The headline attributes the death of the two youths to social media. While the lead holds mob policing and an agitated mob as the cause of the two youths’ death, social media is shown as a catalyst helping in mobilizing the angered mob to lynch the victims. The leader of the Opposition Debabrata Saikia attributed and blamed

the occurrence of the incident on the State Government's utter failure to secure law and administration and expressed concern at the inaction of the local administration.

- Blame it on the social media, two youths lynched (headline) - attributed to social media.
- In a shocking incident of yet another instance of mob policing, two youths from Guwahati were beaten to death by an agitated mob at a remote location in Karbi Anglong district on suspicion of being child-lifters on Friday night. (Lead) (S1) – attribution to an agitated mob.
- It may be mentioned that similar cases of moral policing have been on the rise even as social media is made the tool for spreading false and fabricated information. (Lead) (S2)- attribution to moral policing as the primary factor and social media as the secondary factor.
- Terming the murders as another instance of the State Government's "utter failure to maintain law and order" Saikia expressed concern at the inaction of the local administration. (S16)- attribution to state government and local administration to maintain law and order.

Where

Place structure

The story starts with the location of Guwahati where the victims belonged. It then takes us to Karbi Anglong where the lynching happened where both of them were hacked to death. Thereafter, the action starts with the rushing of the Additional Director General of Assam Police (Law and Order) to Dokmoka by the Chief Minister of Assam. So, a constant movement from Guwahati to Karbi Anglong takes place as per the location of the story.

The story then moves into the background of a rumour which got circulated in Nagaland's Dimapur town and some of its adjoining areas in the district. The linkage of Nagaland along with Karbi Anglong is clearly stated in the sentence - Karbi Anglong shares a border with Nagaland on the east. (S8). As the background of the story, the victims travel to the remote Kathilangso waterfalls in the district's Dokmoka area. The scenic beauty of the place of Karbi Anglong is also described when the victims were pulled out of their vehicles by the angered mob.

Altogether six places find mentions, Guwahati as the native place of the victims, Kathilangso waterfalls where the two victims had gone for travel and relaxation, Dokmoka the district where the lynching happened when the two youths were returning from the Kathilangso waterfalls and Karbi Anglong where Dokmoka district falls. Also, Nagaland and Dimapur find mention in the story due to the circulation of false news in the adjoining areas.

When

Times

It was on a Friday night (June 8th, 2018) the horrific incident of mob lynching death happened. It was on their return to Guwahati, late Friday when they were stopped by a mob who suspected them to be child-lifters.

The sentences where the time occurrence takes place are:

- In a shocking incident of yet another instance of mob policing, two youths from Guwahati were beaten to death by an agitated mob at a remote location in Karbi Anglong district on suspicion of being child-lifters on Friday night. (S1)
- They were returning to Guwahati late Friday in their SUV when they were stopped by a mob who suspected them to be child-lifters. (S10)

Background

The background of the news report describes the incident's backdrop that took place in the form of a rumour on social media that a group of sopadhora (meaning child abductor or lifter in Assamese) were on the prowl in Nagaland's Dimapur town and some of its adjoining areas district. Though the background doesn't indicate any particular ideological frame yet it tries to implicitly state the role of social media in spreading the rumour of child lifting as the reason behind the agitated mob who lynched the two youths to death.

Confusion

The news story features as the first prime story of the incident on page 1 of The Sentinel dated June 10, 2018 but it fails to narrate the entire event in a cohort manner. The headline finds no linkage to the main event or the background of the story, comments, quotes or the follow-up. The lead and the succeeding line show no association with the main headline. Only the Chief Minister's reaction and consequent action shows some linkages with the successive steps as follow up of the story. Moreover, the backdrop of the story too dissociates itself with the lead and the headline. The spreading of the rumour among the agitated mob finds no mention which makes the entire story of who, what, whom, when, where and how very disruptive. It must be mentioned that the present action of the incident is in constant sync with the backdrop of the incident. Though it creates a kind of connection among the various narratives, yet it also distorts the entire picture for the reader who reads it for the first time.

RQ1

How has been the news report on the Dokmoka incident represented in relation to the government, the administration, the police, pressure groups, political parties and the civil society?

The narration of the news story in terms of its representation in relation to the government, the administration, and the police find a place in the fourth sentence in the form of the Chief Minister's order to rush the Additional Director General of Assam Police (Law and Order) Mukesh Agarwala to Dokmoka. The sentence "The Chief Minister has also rushed the Additional Director General of Assam Police (Law and Order) Mukesh Agarwala to Dokmoka" shows how two branches of the same institution of the Government – the police and the head of the Government represented by the Chief Minister of Assam is connected and plays a role of authorization and obedience to power simultaneously. The function was done mainly to control the situation that prevailed in the area after the lynching of the two youths. The controlling mechanism of the Ideological State Apparatuses is well demonstrated through the quoted sentence. In the third sentence, even though the sentence starts with a tone of condolence, yet in the second part of the sentence, the Chief Minister of Assam condemns the brutal incident ordering a high-level probe into the incident and the circumstances that led to the brutality as seen, "While condoling the victim's families and condemning the brutal incident, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal has ordered a high-level probe into the incident and the circumstances that led to the brutality", reflecting the role of Ideological State Apparatus.

The last sentence of the entire news report i.e. the nineteenth sentence- "Further, the Chief Minister's Office has asked the public to intimate the security control rooms if any such incidents come to light at the following numbers: dg control room: 0361-2521242; mobile number: 9435215029; sb control room: 0361-2381511/2380620; whatsapp number: 8749860803," further testifies the control of the state agencies working in a positive light.

We find the Repressive State Apparatus working here in the form of an agitated mob as represented in the sentences ten, eleven and twelve.

Sentence 10

"They were returning to Guwahati late Friday in their SUV when they were stopped by a mob who suspected them to be child-lifters."

Sentence 11

"The mob then pulled the victims out of their vehicle tied them and started beating them in spite of the boys repeatedly saying that they were Assamese and had come to Karbi Anglong only to witness the scenic beauty of the place, the police said."

Sentence 12

"But the mob refused to believe the victims and beat them to death."

The ideological state apparatus also finds its representation in the news report in the form of quotation in the news story by the political parties and the leader of the Opposition who took advantage of the situation and blamed the incident entirely on the failure of the ruling government and the local administration.

Sentence 14

“Meanwhile all political parties have flayed the incident.”

Sentence 15

“Condemning the brutal incident, leader of the Opposition Debabrata Saikia has called for a judicial inquiry into the matter.”

Sentence 16

“Terming the murders as another instance of the State Government’s “utter failure to maintain law and order” Saikia expressed concern at the inaction of the local administration.”

Sentence 17

“The AGP has demanded an immediate inquiry into the matter and awarded exemplary punishment to the culprits.”

Sentence 18-

“The AIUDF has also demanded that the culprits must be brought to the book.”

The above-mentioned sentences in the news story clearly depicts the role of political parties and the Leader of the Opposition who flayed down their ideology by taking the undue opportunity. Demanding inquiry into the matter and also awarding exemplary punishment to the culprits by the AGP shows their attempt to instill their position and their political ideology. In a similar fashion, the AIUDF’s demand also represents the same position. The condemnation by the Leader of the Opposition and blaming it on the government and the local administration for their failure to maintain law and order puts forward their firm grounding as a political party who is in a better position to handle such situations and also prevent such lynching.

RQ 2

How has the social media in relation to fake news been represented and its relation to distortion of the news story?

In the news story, the term ‘social media’ is mentioned three times.

First in the headline – “Blame it on social media, two youths lynched”. Second, in the second sentence of the story- “It may be mentioned that similar cases of moral policing have been on the rise even as the social media is made the tool for spreading false and fabricated information”.

Third, in the seventh sentence, “The incident took place in the backdrop of a rumour on social media that a group of ‘sopadhora’ (meaning child abductor or lifter in Assamese) were on the prowl in the Nagaland’s Dimapur town and some of its adjoining areas in the district”.

The second sentence describes social media as a platform for the spread of misinformation and the headline attributes the death of the two youths to social media. In the seventh sentence,

social media acts as a backdrop to a rumour that was on circulation about child-lifters prowling in the adjoining areas where the lynching took place.

The distortion here occurs at two levels:

- While the headline directly states social media as the reason behind the death, the other two sentences very subtly imply the false rumours being circulated in the social media around that time and in the adjoining places. The second sentence of the lead talks about similar situations happening without mentioning the when and where of a news story and is devoid of any factual data. The story is attributed as a case of moral policing rather than a case of the fake news repercussions which the headline claims to be. Social media finds mention thrice in the entire news report giving the emphasis more on moral policing rather than social media as the reason behind the lynching.
- The rumour which was doing the round in the backdrop of Nagaland's Dimapur town and Karbi Anglong has not been explained in the context of its spread and diffusion.

Conclusion

Thus, we see in the news report that the structure of who, when and where is narrated but focusing more on the role of the government actors and their mechanisms rather than directly stating the cause of the victims' death. The who killed whom is answered only in one statement where it is pointed out that an agitated mob killed the youths without underlying the cause. Only in an implicit way through the background event, the cause is stated – 'as rumour was doing the rounds and moral policing'- the attribution of two factors listed in the news story that led to such a tragic death.

The contradictory claim of the headline is felt in the entire news report which mostly talks about the Chief Minister's words of sympathy, consolation, his ordering the Additional Director General of Assam Police (Law and Order) to move to Dokmoka to take stock of the situation as well as placing a high-level investigative committee to probe into the matter. Throughout the news report emphasis was more on Chief Minister's action and reaction rather than on the cause of the lynching. The effect of the lynching had a higher emphasis than the cause of the incident. The lynching was an independent variable and its effect was the dependent variable and as such the dependent variable had a higher coverage in terms of emphasis of words and the frequency of certain words in sentences were used to highlight the effect more than the cause of the incident. Here, the Ideological State Apparatus namely the government is represented through the actions and words of the Chief Minister of Assam. His role in the entire news report is shown to be significantly higher than the other actors' roles, their statements or their functions. This shows the level of distortion in the news story.

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