

Contamination by fake news distributions during the Covid pandemic

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Abstract

In the wake of the worldwide internet, people across the globe are now facing additional malice that has the power to wreak havoc on society. This malice is the spread of fake news and hoaxes that has almost taken pace post imposition of the nationwide lockdown by the Indian Government. In addition to social media, numerous websites, and apps, mainstream media such as newspapers, television, and radio also contribute to the proliferation of fake news. Despite the extensive coverage of the pandemic, there is some information that represents the outbreak, its severity, spread, and other false claims. In the following paper, we will discuss some crucial aspects of the fake news agenda that will determine whether people are aware of fake news or not and whether they have the skills to deal with the situation, especially in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic. In this paper, we intend to educate readers about fake news and hoaxes, as well as how to protect yourself from spreading them.

Keywords: COVID 19, Fake News, Social Media, News Agenda, Main Stream Media

Introduction

Globally, governments have quickly turned to desperate measures in response to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, while the Indian government tried to mitigate the virus through an outsized set of activities. The emergence of worldwide internment poses an additional threat to humanity, potentially threatening to wreak further havoc on society. It is this malice that has begun to spread since the Indian government imposed the nationwide lockdown. In addition to social media, several websites and apps are also part of this fake news ecosystem, as are mainstream media outlets, such as newspapers and television stations. In this part of the article, it is pertinent to note that false information about the pandemic, its severity, its spread, or any other aspect involved is known as “fake news”. The “Ethical Journalism Network” has compiled the most comprehensive definition of “fake news” by far; there is no universal agreement on the concept. The report defines

fake news as “Information that has been consciously fabricated and disseminated with the intent of deceiving others into consuming falsehoods or doubting the veracity of facts”.

Hence, ‘fake news’ must satisfy the following criteria to be regarded as such:

- Be made up of false information or decorations
- Be deliberately designed to lead the recipient into believing in things that are not true, or into doubting verifiable facts, and finally
- Create an appearance that is so much like traditional news that it cannot be discerned from it, thus manipulating the recipient’s sense of trust to the fullest.

Recent outbreaks of the novel Corona virus that have killed hundreds of thousands of people globally indicate that the fake news factories are on steroids. There is nothing unusual or new about fake news spreading and unfolding specifically through social media like Face book and WhatsApp in the country with approximately 200 million WhatsApp users and is also its largest market. People belonging to specific communities, such as Muslims and transgender people, were mentioned in some fake news content. News like this has exacerbated hatred and violence against minority communities and sometimes led to the denial of medical aid. Some videos also became viral on Facebook and Twitter, which showed Muslims spitting on food, supposedly on purpose.

Objectives

- To determine whether people are aware of fake news.
- Check to see if they know how to deal with the situation.
- Educate them about fake news and hoaxes, how to protect themselves against them, and how to stop spreading them.

Methodology

The researchers used a fixed methodology to conduct this research, “Fighting Fake News amidst Covid Pandemic and Fact-checking Guidelines.”.

1. Qualitative method

- Secondary data on fake news
- Focused Group Discussion
- Interview

2. Quantitative method

- Field Survey

Conceptualizing “Fake News”

The term “fake news”, typically made public as “false, sensational data disseminated below the duvet of news reporting”, gained such a lot of attention that it was named the Collins Word of the Year 2017 because of its increase in usage to 365% within the Collins Corpus. Fake news is but nothing but a typical false story that appears to be spreading on the web or other media as news, generally created to influence views and thoughts and in some cases as a joke. It is a form of information that consists of deliberate information or hoaxes that unfold through print, broadcast, or online media. Fake news is written Associate and printed with the intent to misguide to cause interruption or harm to an entity, person, or organization, manufacture disturbance, and unrest through exploitation, and by using attractive dishonest and decorated headlines to increase audience, online sharing, and net-click revenue. The term “fake news” was first accustomed to describe satiric shows and publications (i.e.: Daily Show, The Onion). For creators of such content, the idea meant made-up news, with the pursuit of amusing others, and not for informing or spreading information. Some students claim that humor ought to be disregarded as the “new definition of fake news” due to its “unlikely to be misconstrued as fact, and it has no intention to inform audiences (Alcott and Gentzkow, 2017). While it is legally protected speech, it might appear to be telling the full truth. For example, in 2017, a satire website run by Christopher Blair agreed to give an apology for creating their story “too real,” when several viewers were unable to notice its sarcastic nature (Funke, 2017).

While the thought itself is not new – false information and mistruths have been circulating for as long as stories have been told – smartphones, the internet, and social media have encouraged it a new lease of life and a new high-speed distribution mechanism. In our hyper-connected world, false information can spark “Digital Wildfires,” according to the World Economic Council’s Global Risks Report from 2013. Things are more complicated than it seems since not all of the information shared online is total fiction. Fact-checking website Snopes.com founder David Mikkelson presents a distinction between “fake news” and “bad news” – a thing he defines as “shoddy, unsearched, error-filled, and deliberately dishonorable coverage.”

Fake news is often as slippery to outline as it is to pin down. Stories can also be factually inaccurate and deliberately published to underscore a particular viewpoint or drive countless guests to a website, or they could be partially true but exaggerated or not properly fact-checked before publication.

Sub-categories of spreading of fake news

There are several subcategories of fake news: -

- **Conformity and Peer influence-** This is the desire to adhere to the norms of a particular social group. Social media users may blur the distinctions between authentic and false information due to their desire to portray themselves better on social media platforms. The message or content on social media platforms, such as Twitter, gains amplification when connected to specific users or influencers. The exchange of information depends on the reputation and credibility of those associated with the knowledge. All sorts of data are propagated and made more impactful by social media users and their influence among peers.
- **Social Comparison-** Comparing members of similar social environments who hold similar views and beliefs. A significant problem associated with fake news is that the newsfeed on social media platforms, like Facebook, is often populated with their likes and opinions, providing an opportunity for users with the same beliefs to spread false information amongst themselves.
- **Satire and Humorous Fakes-** Some of the content on social media aims to amuse users and deceive them into thinking that the content is genuine. The purpose of satire or sarcasm is to mock or criticize the ideas or opinions of people in an amusing manner. In most cases, sarcasm seeks to mislead or instruct a particular group of people. Some social media users may realize that the data is accurate and can therefore share it with others.
- **Cognitive Factors-** As social media users receive an increasing amount of content, it may be challenging to determine which content is closer to the primary and original source of knowledge. Most social media users rarely investigate the information they read or share. The problem of people not having the power to differentiate between real and pretended news will thus cause the fast sharing and spreading of almost unbridled data across social media platforms.
- **Knowledge and Edification-** When surfing social media, social media users must distinguish between what is real and fake. The authenticity of a particular article relies on the extent of exchange of the articles. Social media users build purportedly reasonable justifications to see the legitimacy of the data provided.
- **Political factors-** The spreading of false political data has multiplied the emergence of streamlined media environments. By making false political statements, voters are convinced or persuaded to alter their opinions. Several techniques are accustomed to the modification of public opinion. These techniques include repeatedly retweeting or sharing messages, usually with the aid of bots or cyberpunks. It conjointly includes dishonorable hyperlinks that lure the social media user to a lot of false data.
- **Political Click baits-** These sites usually offer information and sensationalism as a

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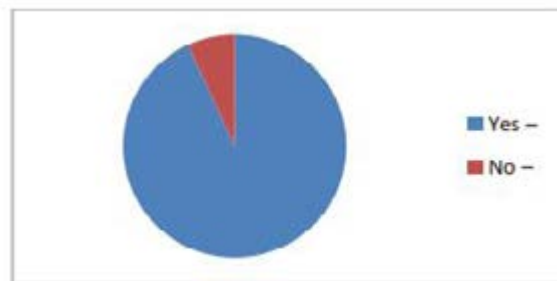
way to attract readers. For political purposes, some web pages pretend to appear like genuine web pages. News sources with URLs almost identical to the actual website are familiar with the unfolding and spread of political fake news items that may influence public opinion.

- **Malicious Bots/ Cyborgs-** Malicious users, with the assistance of bots, target absent-minded people who won't check the article's facts or the source of information before sharing it on social media. These AI high-powered bots are designed to mimic human behavior and characteristics and are misused to create corruption by indulging unwanted and dishonest advertisements in online conversations.
- **Hate Propaganda-** Some contend that sharing false information stimulates vengeful behavior among social media users. Some hoax-sharing websites or pages exist specifically to hurt a particular individual's name. Fake news creators specifically target users with false knowledge. This misleading info aims to deceive and manipulate social media users.

Data collected from field survey

➤ Are you a regular user of Social Media?

Out of 102 responses, 93% of our sample size does use social media regularly.

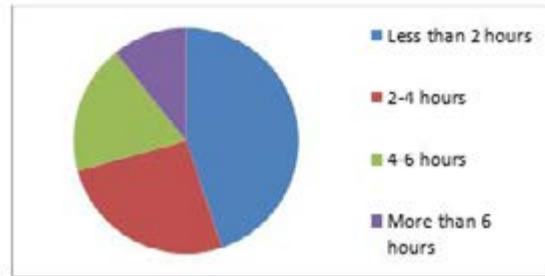


➤ How much time do you spend on Social media sites?

The responses received from 102 responses is listed below.

Less than 2 hours	45%
2-4 hours	26%
4-6 hours	18.60%
More than 6 hours	10.80%

As seen in chart below, 45% of our sample does use social media for less than 2 hours, 25.5% of them uses for 2-4 hours, 18.6% use or 4-6 hours and 10.8% of them use social media for more than 6 hours.



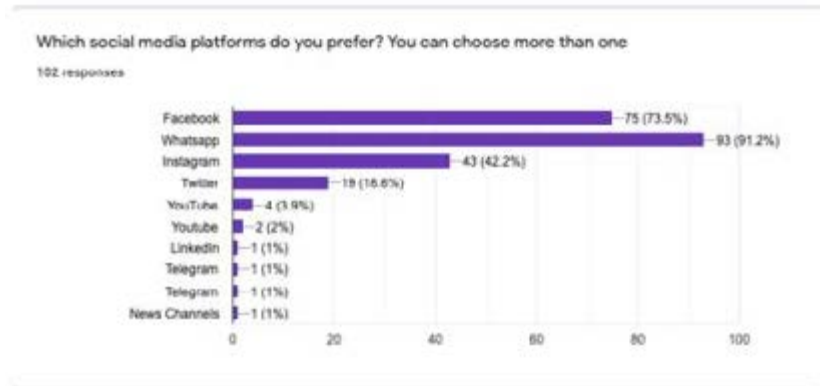
➤ **Which Social media platforms do you prefer? You can choose more than one?**

The responses received form 102 responses is listed below

Range	0-20	20-40	40-60	60-80	80-100
Facebook					75(73.5%)
Whatspp					93(91.2%)
Instagram				43(42.2%)	
Twitter	19 (18.6%)				
Youtube	4 (3.9%)				
Linkedin	2 (2%)				
Telegram	1 (1%)				
News Channel	1 (1%)				

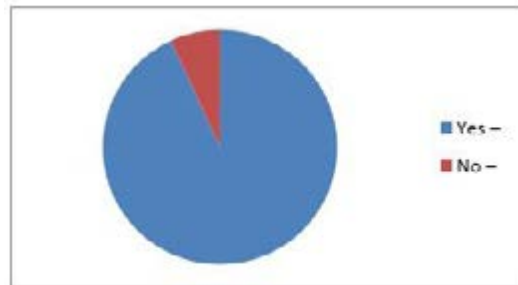
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As we can see in chart below, 91% of our sample does prefer Whatsapp and 73.5% of them prefer Facebook just after whatsapp and others respectively.



➤ Do you think social media is a reliable source to get Covid related news?

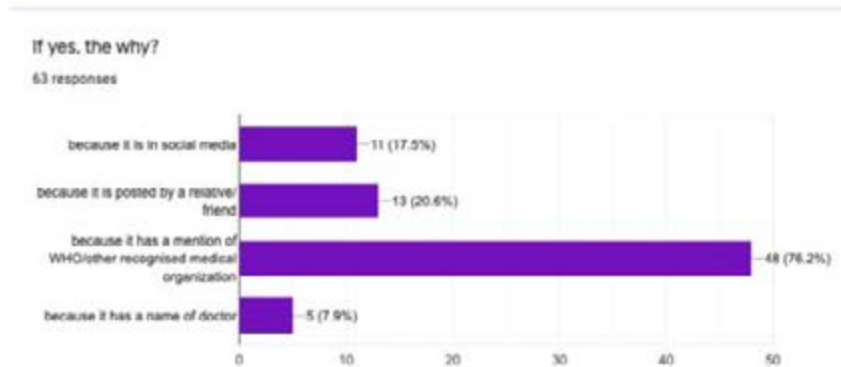
The responses received form 102 responses , the percentage is Yes – 60.8% and No – 39.2%. When we ask them if the social media is a reliable source to get Covid related information, 60.8% of them answered as ‘YES’ and others doesn’t think so.



➤ The response Yes, led the question of Why, which provided the following responses.

Answers	0 to 10	10 to 20	20 to 30	30 to 40	40 to 50
Because it is in Social Media		11 (17.5%)			
Because it is posted by a relative / friend		13 (20.6%)			
Because it has a mention of WHO/ other recognized medical organization					48 (76.2%)
Because it has a name of doctor	5 (7.9%)				

76.2% of our sample answered that ‘because some post has a mention of WHO/other recognized medical organization’ that is why they believe the social media news.

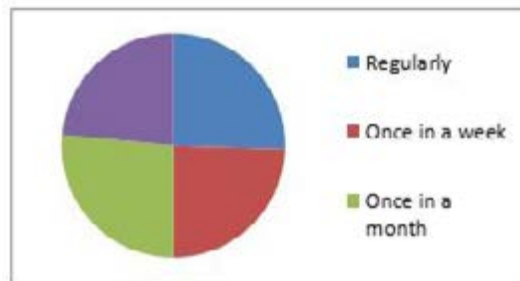


➤ How often do you share posts on Social Media?

The responses received form 102 responses is listed below

Regularly	25.5%
Once in a week	24.5%
Once in a month	26.5%
I don't share posts	23.5%

26.5% of our sample does share post once in month, 23.5% of them don't share anything at all, 25.5% of them shares posts regularly, and 24.5% of the sample shares posts once in a week.



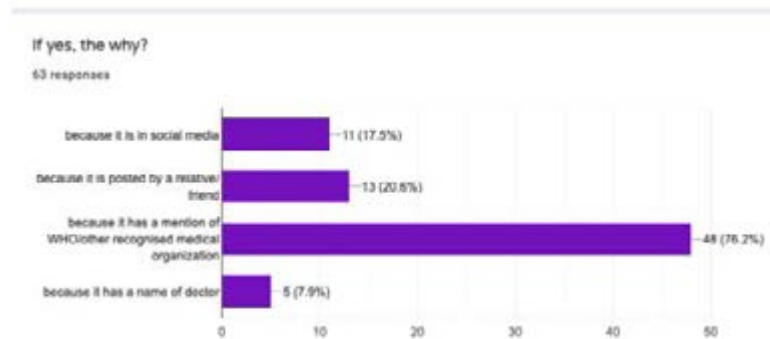
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- **What should you do if your common sense tells you that a message or post is fake or false information?**

The responses received form 102 responses is listed below

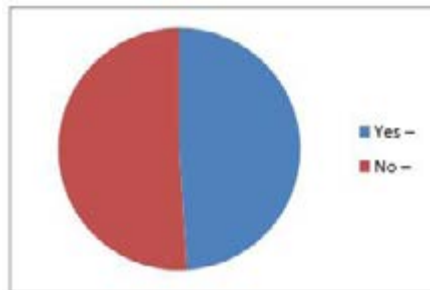
ANSWERS	0 to 20	20 to 40	40 to 60
Delete the post		31 (30.4%)	
Recheck it		22 (21.6%)	
Report it		34 (33.3%)	
Ignore it			51 (50%)

51% of our sample does ignore a post when they realize that a news can be false or fake. Only 33.3% of them report it.



- **Do you know about ‘Fact checking?’**

The responses received form 102 responses had Yes – 49% and No – 51%. Interestingly 51% of our sample does know about ‘fact checking’ and the rest of does not.



➤ Do you know about the Process?

The responses received form 102 responses had Yes – 71.6% and No – 28.4%. But when they are asked about the process 71.6% doesn't know how to and the rest does know.



Expert's Interview

Miss. Laura Unger

(Investigative and Enterprise, editor at Courier Journal, Investigative reporter at USA Today)

In the first instance, the question was addressed to Miss. Laura Unger was that her opinions about the recent fake news publishing activities by reputed news houses on their digital platform. She replied that every time she comes across the fact of newspaper organizations sharing decorated and unreal stories, she gets dismayed. The activity is unacceptable for her. She feels that people tend to believe reputed news organizations, and it's unconscionable

It is not ethical to intentionally mislead people. Media is such a body upon which the common people have blind trust. Somewhere people have a faith that anything and everything shared on social media is possibly true. Taking advantage of this belief and sharing false information on digital platforms results in hurting the sentiments of common people and manipulating them as well.

Secondly, she was asked about her suggestion to viewers and readers on how to deal with fake news on social media published by reputed sources. She answered that Readers should demand that media houses stop providing fake news. Likewise, they must realize they have to vary their news intake to gauge what is real and what is not. They should try to dive more into the news content so that they could get an in-depth verification and scrutiny. They should go for fact-checking every time they suspect any news to be real. Their urge to get clear and true knowledge can be the best way to fight the spread of fake news in digital media.

Finally, we wanted to know from her what kind of background checking does she use

whenever she finds out a piece of news to be suspicious enough. She explained that Editors need to require their reporters to do old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting as well as use available databases to do fact-checking. Reporters cannot, for example, depend on just one source for their stories. **They need to talk to several sources and check records such as police reports, government databases, court records, etc.** Moreover, all reporters should check and re-check every data they get from various sources. She follows this approach, as a reporter when it comes to fact-checking, so they don't publish everything that comes to their desks.

Mr. Sujoy Dhar

(Group editor at India, Blooms News service, India Correspondent for USA Today)

He commences the interview by saying that his whole team must carry out a background check for each content they receive from non-official sources. Every journalist should view anything they get their hands on with suspicion since that will automatically lead to background checks. For that, the main and the main thing is the 'Internet'. Their task is to find out the possible origin of the content by looking after some keywords, official social media handles, twitters, Instagram accounts, etc. For example, he mentioned the incident in Japan in which news went that Japan was blowing crackers as they couldn't host the Olympic Games this year. Mr. Dhar says that when such a story circulates, people must ensure they apply common sense as in the case mentioned here. As soon as people hear this news, it should strike in their mind that how is it possible for a country like "Reporters should not depend on just one source for getting information or checking the authenticity of the news. They should also go for records such as police reports, Japan that has been badly stricken by the pandemic can celebrate with crackers. So, the job of the Journalists and common people is to apply their common sense whenever they find any news.

When asked about the recent problem of the spread of fake news in various reputed media, he stated that people must first up all know the difference between fake news and opinionated news. Editorialized and opinionated news is not fake news. It is somebody's opinion and others may or may not like it. But if someone from the media house is like slamming a politician or questioning someone, he/she can do that because in media they have every right to do that but of course with some authentic information. Likewise, it will be helpful if they editorialize that what is good or bad to one person may not be the same to another. If a newspaper publishes anything in good faith while adhering to its editorial policy, it cannot be identified as fake news. Most of the time, newspaper organizations and television channels are responsible for what they publish, and then it isn't considered falsified. It might later be proved wrong but it can never be pointed as intentionally created fake news. He suggests that whatever people see on social media,

the easiest way to verify it is to go on the internet and track that particular content or video. Viewers and readers must always be interested in knowing when, where, and how the social media content circulates. On social media, things are posted by people and, of course, they are not accredited or verified, nor are people on social media expected to take responsibility. The first thing one should do when they see content on social media is to be suspicious, then conduct some background checks, and finally post if the source is legitimate.

Last but not least, when asked for his recommendations to viewers on dealing with fake news, he recommends that they be very cautious when believing and circulating any news. A lot of damage occurs when people believe fake news and spread it. There have been several instances in India of lynching based on fake news and messages shared via WhatsApp. **Lastly, in a satiric tone, he adds that people must take cases of sharing news and contents as arranged marriage through matrimonial sites where people check and recheck every detail before fixing the marriage.** In addition to checking and rechecking, people should follow the same guidelines.

Focused Group Discussion

Concerning the Focused Group Discussion included in the survey, it has come to our attention that most of the people participating in the survey were regular social media users (Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram). There was also evidence that the interviewees also faced some fake news during the Covid pandemic crisis like sanitization removes Covid, Side effects of Vaccinations, Vaccination can destroy human organs, Magnetic energies related to vaccination, and so on. Whenever there is a health issue, experts recommend using government websites or WHO instead of social media, since social media presents different news information, and the public cannot access reports published by official organizations. The Indian medical industry has been accused of manipulation and changing opinions through social media as it provided vitamin tablets produced in its factories to victims of the Covid outbreak, with the promise that it would cure them of the illness. WHO has confirmed that the only way to defeat covid is by developing an extremely effective immune system. Further, interviewees indicated that fake news on social media is decreasing significantly since 2020. Now, People are not aware of fact-checking, but as a substitute, they are depended on their instincts to cross-check whether the news is real or fake.

Key Findings

- All of them use social media, mostly use Facebook, WhatsApp.
- Everyone gets fake news during pandemic about COVID-19

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- 6 of them get fake news through Facebook and one of them get through WhatsApp forward.
- Few of them have the basic idea of Fact Check.
- Few of them ignore fake news and few of them report the fake news after fact check.
- People are a bit confused about what to trust and what not
- Certification of authorized organization is convincing.
- Members have no such idea about “fact-checking”

Analysis and Findings of the study

- The main and major aim of the awareness campaign was to raise awareness about fake news, how to identify fakes and provide a brief overview of the process of fact-checking, including such sites.
- The awareness campaign was conducted through the Google meet platform and there were 45 members present in the campaign.
- From the focused group discussion, it was clear that most people have encountered fake news more than once in their lifetime but their concept of dealing with them was not clear. So, the main aim of the campaign was to make them understand the ways of handling fake news.
- Most of them had no clear idea about “fact-checking”. So, the target was to explain the process of fact-checking and the various fact-checking sites easily accessible. The URLs of several sites have also been provided.
- Following the discussion campaign, participants received a survey asking whether they had a clear understanding of how fake news is handled and fact-checked.

Conclusion

By using social media platforms, you can contain the spread of fake news. Many focus groups were examining the lack of information and knowledge about fake news. Towards the end of the process, we explored questions of clarity and loopholes. In response to their feedback, they said they were on the right path to learning about fake news and had sufficient information about it. Based on the charts and figures, it seems people who once had a vague idea about false content, misinformation, and hoaxes are now savvy enough to decide what content to trust and share. So overall, the campaign can be said as a successful attempt.

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