

Tackling fake news

Indians and the 'Indian National Anthem' being adjudged the best by UNESCO is probably the most common fake news going around the Internet. While this false information may have been innocuous, it captures the larger menace we face today. With the advent of new age digital and social media, fake news has pervaded all spheres of life, political and social.

Claire Wardle of First Draft, a UK-based non-profit organisation which is now part of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard, categorised misinformation into seven categories, namely satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false content and manipulated content.

While all these forms exist in India, fabricated and manipulated content are gaining steam, leading to the possibility of potential violence and impacting society. The rise of digital and social media as powerful platforms has only magnified the effect of fake and false news. Umpteen number of news/information portals are being set up as there are few entry barriers unlike in the traditional media. In addition, growing polarisation of society on ideological lines has made the job of spreading fake news easier. Content that denigrates leaders/groups of the opposite ideology based on falsehoods, deepens communal polarisation or incites hatred have gained traction in the last few years. In the past, communal violence in India was a localised affair. Today, it is extensively being fed and triggered through the Internet. Provocative content, inaccurate information, doctored videos, and pictures are being disseminated through various online and mobile platforms. The platforms serve like nodal agencies distributing unverified information.

While media researchers around the world are investigating the fake news scene, little credible information is available on the creators and the intention behind it. But if what has been found is true, it is purely a way to make advertising money through click baits, enticing people to click and continue reading, and is organised by political or other social groups. In India, numerous sites are set up to peddle fake news with click bait headlines. They are also very well organised with multiple linked pages on social media platforms that are used to make the content go viral.

Both Google and Facebook, as the largest platforms for content distribution, are said to be creating systems that will filter fake news. But these efforts are relatively new. The biggest vector of fake news in India — WhatsApp — is still grappling with compromising mechanisms for privacy like encryption and the urgent need to weed out fake news spread through its application.

The advent of fake news is not new or recent, only its potential to reach people has amplified due to online platforms and applications that are free. Users creating hate content and sharing it can be booked under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). But the sheer expanse of the Internet and the anonymity it grants makes it difficult to track down people. Unlike mainstream media that falls under comprehensive regulation, online platforms have scope for wrongdoing due to the lack of binding rules, and the ability to keep owners and editors private like in the case of fake news sites. In the absence of such crucial information, there is no understanding of the liability and the credibility of the information that is being hosted on their respective sites. This is the main strength of the creators of fake news, the ability to remain anonymous in the guise of a media outlet. Most digital media outlets do not have basic information regarding editors, publishers or the physical address of the registered entity. We could do well to begin with some basic regulation for digital media outlets like compulsory and online registration of details.

In the past few months, people have been booked in isolated incidents in different States for the content they shared on messaging and social media platforms. On some occasions, the Internet has been shut down on the pretext of inciting violence and to stop the spread of doctored videos.

But treating every symptom in a localised way is not an efficient or productive way to tackle the disease.

The lack of uniform guidelines, regulation and policy regarding such fabricated content needs to be addressed urgently. Considering the rapid penetration of mobile phones and the rise in use of social media in India, the dissemination of fake news is no longer a problem limited to the online world, especially because it has political, social and economic ramifications on the ground.

Rakesh Reddy Dubbudu and Tejeswi Pratima Dodda head a Fact Checking initiative, Factly

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