

# SHAKING THE FOUNDATION OF FAKE NEWS

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of Media and Social Networking Sites in internal security challenges

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Combating fake news is a growing preoccupation of the technology platforms, the political class, the news media, and an increasing tribe of citizens concerned about democracy being hijacked. There is a perception that fake news is a new phenomenon linked to the rise of social media; however, this is only half the story. Governments and political actors (anyone in the business of mobilising public opinion) have always invested in disinformation campaigns to build narratives of their choice. In fact, it is because the institutional news media is no longer seen as an arbitrator of the 'real news' — having lost credibility due to complicit and motivated reporting — that fake news has been able to thrive now. The advent of social media has merely decentralised the creation and propagation of fake news. It is this that has led to the ubiquity of and difficulty in controlling/eliminating fake news.

The current response to fake news primarily revolves around three prongs — rebuttal, removal of the fake news item and educating the public. While these are necessary measures, it is not apparent that they are sufficient in themselves to address the larger 'political' problem posed by fake news.

Rebuttal is a form of fact checking wherein the fake news is debunked by pointing out errors like mismatch, malicious editing and misattribution. To the extent that the fake news item appears on institutional handles, attempts are made to have it removed after rebuttal. There is much pressure on companies like Facebook and YouTube to proactively remove fake news from their platforms and rework their algorithms to ensure that such content does not gain prominence. The newly introduced limits on forwarding messages on WhatsApp are an offshoot of this discourse, where accountability to address fake news is offloaded on to the technology platforms. The third leg of the response revolves around educating the end users to be more discerning consumers of news by informing them of verification tools so that they can ascertain the accuracy of a news item before sharing it.

Another emerging strand in this discourse, propagated by the government, concerns tracking the 'source' of fake news, ostensibly to address the issue at its root. However, this suggestion, when combined with another proposal to de-anonymise all social media accounts, is fraught with serious issues concerning invasion of privacy and free speech, and will more often than not be used by governments to quell dissent.

While the measures outlined are important and must be expanded upon, there are some evident shortcomings in this approach. First, attempting to rebut fake news is akin to hitting a moving target, with a steady stream of fake news getting churned out consistently. It may be possible to rebut news on one fake instance of children getting abducted or on Indian citizens toting Pakistan's flags but the 'fake news factory' will keep churning out similar stories to advance its chosen narrative.

Second, it is impossible to completely 'remove' fake news even after rebuttal, given the decentralised nature of dissemination. Propagation and virality of a news item are contingent not on its accuracy but on how well it conforms to the dominant narrative and also on the strength of the associated distribution networks that spread the narrative. Thus, the act of 'rebuttal', instead of supplanting the original fake news item, could end up vying for space with the latter.

Moreover, in India, the right-wing propagators of fake news are often better organised, especially on messaging platforms like WhatsApp, than the liberal Opposition.

However, the biggest shortcoming of this approach — the fact that the very act of rebuttal reinforces the fake narrative being pushed — goes beyond this cat-and-mouse problem. Since the act of rebuttal gets confined within the original framework of the fake news item, the political impact of the rebuttal is far less than ideal.

The average consumer relies on overall frameworks/narratives to evaluate a piece of information. The increasing complexity of issues, in conjunction with the deluge of information — with the relevant jostling for space with the irrelevant — has made it impossible for any individual to develop a well-researched stand on all the topics. When an individual piece of information (fake news or otherwise) conforms to someone's held beliefs, it is readily accepted and shared.

Studies have confirmed that people don't care about finding the 'truth' behind a news item and instead look for evidence to support their preferred narrative (confirmation bias). Therefore, debunking discrete items of fake news without addressing this battle of narratives will have only a marginal value. This is because when an individual fake news item having a reinforcement value is debunked, the purveyors simply discard it and replace it with another piece of similar fake news.

It is evident that if we are concerned about the impact of fake news, we must address the underlying narratives, instead of merely trying to rebut individual items. This needs to be done in two connected ways: first, by addressing the weaknesses that allow the fake news narrative to take root. For instance, the right wing's narrative across the world, while propelled by fake news, is premised on the loss of credibility of the liberal camp, which is perceived to be elitist and corrupt. Any way forward must involve a rebuilding of this lost credibility.

Second, we must not get sucked into a losing narrative while attempting to rebut fake news. Instead, we must mobilise public opinion around an alternate narrative that makes the fake news item irrelevant. Most people cannot hold multiple stories in their head and thus, instead of poking holes in an opponent's story, it may be more effective to replace it with a different narrative built on facts. Ultimately, all fake news is in service of a political, if not electoral, agenda. We should thus not lose sight of the wood for the trees by focussing disproportionately on individual fake news items instead of the larger narrative.

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