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Mapping the fake news infodemic amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: A study of Indian fact-checking websites

ABSTRACT

Fake news, a term that was never heard a decade back, has established a subculture of misinformation and disinformation, whether intentionally or unintentionally, on social media by its users. The personal bias as well as unverified content sharing through the click of a button has not only led to the epidemic of fake content across the world, but in countries like India, it has also led to lynching and violence in various places. This article tries to find the rate of debunked or fact-checked content during the COVID-19 pandemic in India related to the enforcement of the nationwide lockdown, false claims of cure or immunity boost, political blame gaming, the impact of the pandemic on economy, religious polarization, as well as fake news on related issues concerning other countries apart from India. We try to discern in this article whether fact-checked items of disinformation were more on communal issues than the cure/claims of alternative medicines. We also try to unearth if there were a larger number of international items covered by the

KEYWORDS

COVID-19
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infodemic
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polarization
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fact-checking sites given the status of the COVID-19 crisis in other countries than the lockdown (issues related to nationwide lockdown declared in India). Using content analysis of two fake news debunking websites Boom Live and Alt News, for six months (March–August 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that there were a lesser number of disinformation or fake news on treatment-related fake news compared to those on polarizing issues. We also posit that there were more fake news on the nationwide lockdown imposed in India than on its impact on the economy. In a bid to map the fake news and disinformation debunked by these two select websites, we find that the genealogy of fake news works with our personal biases and fears, thereby making media literacy all the more indispensable given the reach of internet-based news. The urgent need for stringent regulations by an autonomous body of the government to curb the fake news ecosystem is recommended by us along with emphasizing digital media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Terms like ‘fake news’, ‘post-truth’, ‘eco-chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ have drawn both media and academic attentions in the last decade across the world, including India (Sunstein 2001; Pariser 2011; Solon 2016; Silverman 2016a, 2016b; Bhaskaran et al. 2017, 2019). The term ‘fake news’ refers to baseless allegations or conjectures published in the guise of a genuine story with a deliberate aim to misinform a particular section of its audience for the desired effect. These are conventionally, intentionally and verifiably false viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports/news articles to mislead the reader (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

There have been some academic engagements on the consumption pattern of the audience of fake news (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011; Barbera et al. 2015; Guess 2016). Empirical researches on fake news consumption have proven that people are more comfortable in consuming agreeable information so long as it holds onto their biases even if it is half-truth or completely false (Stroud 2008; Iyengar and Kyu 2009; Reyz 2017a). The post-truth has thus given rise to ‘information polarization remains’ (Zhou and Zafarani 2020). It has also been unveiled by researches in political science and psychology that misperceptions are closely linked to the preconceived biases towards political identities or ideologies (Flynn et al. 2017).

The concept of misinformation and disinformation in the media is not a recent phenomenon although the term ‘fake news’ has found currency after the 2016 presidential elections in the United States (Solon 2016; Silverman 2016a, 2016b; Silverman and Singer Vine 2016; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). But the transformed systems of production and consumption patterns, fuelled by internet and social media, have turned it into an epidemic of sort, often referred to as the infodemic. The universe of fake news, according to Elle Hunt (2016) and Claire Wardle (2017), has a far-reaching effect than sheer false news. There is a tendency in the fake news to reach a wider audience in a very less time compared to regular news items. The all-pervasive presence of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp has made it easier for fake news or misinformation to multiply its reach in a matter of a fraction of seconds. According to a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ‘[i]t took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1500 people