

Strengthening Media Literacy to combat Fake News: Analysis of Case Studies from India

Sheel Nidhi Tripathi

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
Bharati Vidyapeeth's Institute of Computer Applications and Management
New Delhi, India
sheel.nidhi@bvicam.in

Abstract— In the 21st century, the enormous incursion of information and various communication channels have revolutionized the way people socialize. The increased use of technology has resulted in people relying more on virtual communication. Social media has emerged as one of the preferred means for people from all walks of life to exchange information, connect with others, entertain themselves, and pass their leisure time. The internet and social media platform has become the new public sphere. In this context, this paper explores the importance of media literacy and its role in identifying fake news. It provides a complete outline of the notion of media literacy and its application in India, specifically in the context of fake news. It further reviews case studies of fake news in India, including recent examples of Covid-19 related misinformation. The paper concludes that media literacy is an important tool to combat fake news and its consequences, and highlights the need for increased media literacy education in India.

Keywords—Communication, Media, Media Literacy, Fake News, Mis-information

I. INTRODUCTION

Lack of media literacy, Political polarization and Social Media are some of the reasons for the spread of Fake News. As many of us are dependent on social media and different messaging apps as main source of news, which can make it challenging to verify the accuracy of information, contributing to communal violence, political polarization, and public health misinformation. This way Fake news has become a noteworthy problem in India, with the widespread diffusion of false information through various media channels, including social media, messaging apps, and traditional news media. The present review of the literature provides an overview of the key themes, theory, and findings on fake news in India.

According to UNESCO, media and information literacy empowers individuals to comprehend the role of media and other sources of information, assess their content critically, and make informed decisions as both are the consumers and producers of information and Media. This involves the

capability to know the production process of information, comprehend the language and codes of a message, interpret its meaning, identify its values and perspectives, and understand how reality is constructed. The ultimate goal is to transform information into knowledge. Therefore, Media Literacy encompasses a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are necessary to determine when and what information is needed, how to access it and evaluate it critically, how to organize it, and how to use it ethically. Media and information literacy comprises a cohesive collection of abilities that empower individuals to optimize advantages and reduce negative impacts in the modern information, digital, and communication domains. Such competencies encompass the capability to evaluate information critically and efficiently, as well as to use digital tools judiciously. These proficiencies are essential for every individual, irrespective of their age or background [1].

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The internet and social media platform has become the new public sphere. In this context, based on the Qualitative Analysis, this paper tries to explore the importance of media literacy and its role in identifying fake news through Literature Review. It provides a comprehensive overview of the Media Literacy concept and its application in India, specifically in the context of fake news. It further reviews case studies of fake news in India, including recent examples of Covid-19 related misinformation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section includes work related to media literacy, its theoretical approach, education and fake news.

A. What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy refers to the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and understand the messages conveyed through various forms of media, including printed, digital, audio, and visual media. It is an essential in today's information age,

where we are constantly bombarded with a vast amount of information from various sources. The following literature review provides an overview of central topics, theories and findings on media literacy.

B. Theoretical Approaches to Media Literacy

Media literacy has been approached from different theoretical perspectives. One of the most influential theories is critical media literacy theory, which emphasizes the importance of empowering individuals to question the dominant narratives presented in the media and to resist media influence on their attitudes and behaviors. By incorporating a critical approach into media literacy, individuals can attain a more profound comprehension of media culture in relation to its affiliation with power dynamics. Critical media literacy empowers individuals to analyze media messages as intentionally constructed texts that reflect societal issues, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and the fight for control. Integrating critical media literacy into media education curriculums is crucial, as it equips students with the ability to interpret and form informed judgments, consequently fostering civic responsibility[2]. Another approach is the media ecology theory, which focuses on the interplay between different forms of media and how they shape our understanding of the world[3]. Finally, the social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of media in shaping our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through observational learning[4].

C. Media Literacy and Education

Media literacy education is increasingly recognized as an important component of education, as it equips students with the skills to critically analyze media messages and therefore become competent in making informed decisions. Several studies have shown that media literacy education can lead to positive outcomes, including improved critical thinking skills, media literacy skills, and responsible media consumption [5].

D. Fake News:

Fake news refers to a form of internet disinformation that comprises inaccurate and/or deceptive claims, which may or may not be associated with actual occurrences. It is intentionally fabricated to deceive a targeted or hypothetical audience by adopting the guise of a news format and/or exploiting a strategic layout (such as a headline, image, or content) to capture readers' interest, thereby generating more clicks and shares and consequently increasing advertising revenue and/or advancing a particular ideology. Fake news can take various forms, including fabricated stories, doctored images or videos, and manipulated content. Fake news is often spread through social media and messaging apps, which allow

for the rapid dissemination of information without any fact-checking or editorial oversight[6].

IV. CASE STUDIES WITH ANALYSIS

This paper presents case studies in the form of Examples of fake news incidents in India, highlighting the impact of false information on Indian society.

A. Case Study 1: Lynchings linked to WhatsApp rumors

A series of examples of lynchings in India, with mobs attacking individuals based on false rumors spread through WhatsApp. The rumors typically related to child abductions and organ harvesting, with the rumors often targeting individuals from minority communities. The lynchings are generally linked to a spate of fake news incidents, with WhatsApp being identified as a major source of false information.

A WhatsApp text circulating in some districts of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh helped incite a mob of 50-60 villagers to brutally beat up two innocent men over the past week, suspecting that they were Murder people and sell their body parts [7].

The lynchings have a significant impact on Indian society, with several individuals losing their lives due to the spread of false information. The incidents also highlight the need for greater media literacy in India, as many individuals are unable to verify the accuracy of the rumors and act on false information.

B. Case Study 2: Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in false information in India, with misinformation spreading rapidly through social media and messaging apps. False information about COVID-19 treatments, prevention measures, and the origin of the virus has been widely circulated, leading to confusion and mistrust of official health advice.

A few weeks into the pandemic, mainstream media saw comments from laypeople about infectious respiratory problems. It appeared as if the entire scientific community, including gastroenterologists, nephrologists, surgeons, and neurologists, had taken to publishing statements and writing articles as if they were the primary authorities on COVID-19. The deluge of information was so overwhelming that people didn't have sufficient time to grasp it fully. Some physicians were seen expressing their opinions in the media without any scientific backing, possibly indicating a desire to gain visibility rather than provide accurate guidance. The ominous tone

adopted by certain experts led to panic buying of personal protective equipment (PPE) and alcohol-based cleaning supplies, resulting in a shortage of PPE in clinical settings and a disproportionate increase in the prices of these products[8].

The impact of COVID-19 misinformation in India has been significant, with individuals following false information putting themselves and others at risk. The incidents also highlight the need for greater media literacy and fact-checking during public health emergencies.

C. Case Study 3: False information about the Indian economy

False information about the Indian economy has also become a significant problem in recent years, with rumors about the state of the economy and government policies spreading rapidly through social media and messaging apps. In 2020, false rumors about the Indian government's plan to demonetize currency notes led to panic and confusion, with individuals rushing to banks to withdraw money.

The controversial plan to remove some Indian banknotes from circulation has sparked controversy for more than a month, and false information and conspiracy theories are making the rounds online.

"Every day there's a new rumor," a man in a Delhi cash machine line tells BBC Trending. "The most recent is that the 2,000 (rupee) note has a chip that is used to identify the location where the notes are being stored. All kinds of media, including WhatsApp, have reported on it".

Over a month has passed since India's demonetization, a sudden declaration by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that 500 and 1,000 rupee notes would be removed from circulation and replaced with new currency. However, the plan has generated protests and spread of false rumors [9].

The impact of false information about the Indian economy can be significant, with rumors causing panic and affecting the financial stability of individuals and businesses. The incidents highlight the need for greater media literacy and fact-checking in the economic sphere.

D. Case Study 4: Fake News and Indian Celebrities

False information about Indian Celebrities has also become a significant problem in recent years, with rumors about their personal and professional life, their leisure time, about their family members spreading rapidly through social media and messaging apps. In the late 2019, false rumors about the case related to late actor Sushant Singh Rajput and his death dragged the attention of the entire country. Rumors about other big celebrities involved in his murder even gave rise to the

concept of Nepotism and ended with the ugly Bollywood Boycot.

Mumbai cyber police have apprehended a lawyer from Delhi who shared videos propagating the belief that celebrity manager Disha Saliyan, aged 28, was murdered by certain celebrities and a politician from Maharashtra. Saliyan was the celebrity manager for the deceased actor, Sushant Singh Rajput. This arrest is the latest attempt to combat the proliferation of false information and damaging content on social media platforms [10].

The impact of false information about the Indian celebrities can be significant, with rumors causing panic and affecting the Bollywood as an Industry and businesses. The incidents highlight the need for greater media literacy and fact-checking in today's sphere.

V. CONCLUSION

Fake news has become a significant problem in India, with false information spreading rapidly through various media channels. The impact of fake news on Indian society has been significant, with incidents of communal violence, political polarization, and public health misinformation. The case studies presented in this article highlight the need for greater media literacy and fact-checking in India, particularly in the context of social media and messaging apps. By improving media literacy and promoting fact-checking, India can combat the stretch of fake news and ensure that correct information is disseminated to the public. Media literacy can empower individuals to critically evaluate the accuracy of media messages, identify fake news, and make informed decisions based on reliable sources of information.

Media literacy can be promoted through various means, including education and awareness campaigns, media literacy programs in schools and colleges, and collaborations between media organizations and fact-checking websites. By improving media literacy, individuals can become more discerning consumers of media and can better identify fake news. In addition to promoting media literacy, fact-checking has emerged as a critical tool in combating fake news. Fact-checking involves verifying the accuracy of media messages and providing corrections to false information. Fact-checking websites, such as Alt News, Boom Live, and FactCheck.org, have become popular sources of information for individuals seeking to verify the accuracy of media messages. Google has also taken a wonderful step to train Journalists, Academicians and Media Professional to combat fake News and further train people.

Also, Media organizations can work with fact-checking websites to verify the accuracy of their stories, and provide corrections wherever required. By working together, media organizations and fact-checking websites can ensure that accurate information is disseminated to the public. Government regulations and policies can also play a crucial role in combating fake news. Laws should be made in the form of penalties for disseminating false information and punishment basis on the seriousness of the problem.

In conclusion, media literacy plays a critical role in combating fake news in India. By promoting media literacy, fact-checking, and collaborations between media organizations and fact-checking websites, individuals can become more discerning consumers of media, and accurate information can be disseminated to the public. While there is no single solution to combat fake news, a multi-pronged approach that involves education, awareness, and regulations can be effective in addressing this growing problem

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