How Disinformation Erodes the World's Largest Democracy

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Abstract

India, despite being the world's largest democracy, is facing a significant disinformation crisis, with a surge in fake news reported during the early pandemic period. Recently, over half the population has been exposed to disinformation, amplified by the country's vast internet user base. The proliferation of fake news is significantly driven by right-wing influencers, supported by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who use digital platforms to spread divisive narratives and target political opponents. This has not only heightened domestic tensions, especially hatred against the religious minorities, but also undermined democracy in India. Despite certain countermeasures by fact-checkers and the government, the challenge of combating disinformation in India remains formidable.

Introduction

Recently, a prominent social media analyst called India the disinformation capital of the world. This is corroborated by many recent surveys and reports. According to a recent study, the country saw a record 214 percent rise in fake news/misinformation during the pandemic years (2020-21). A leading researcher from University of Alberta (Canada) who examined disinformation trends in 138 countries named India as the biggest source of COVID-19 related disinformation (1 in 6 pieces of fake news originated from India). A more recent report found that as many as 57 percent of people in India are exposed to fake news or misinformation. In numerous instances, doctored videos and fake messages are shared on popular tech platforms, with WhatsApp and Facebook apps often triggering polarization, hatred among communities, communal riots, lynchings and systematic targeting of individuals and groups, particularly vulnerable minorities. Importantly, political actors and parties are increasingly weaponizing fake news and disinformation to effect polarization among groups and reap electoral dividends in a deeply diverse and ethnically fragile country with a long history of communal tensions.

What Makes India the Disinformation Capital?

With an explosive increase in the number of online users and a drastic drop in the cost of mobile phone data services in the last few years, India has witnessed a massive surge in fake news and disinformation. With a population over 1.4 billion, India has a staggering number of social media users who employ a range of media to communicate. According to the latest figures, the country has more than 830 million active internet users. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. As per the latest data, India is the largest market for Facebook (with more than 400 million active users) and WhatsApp (a record 500 million avid users). With more than 800 million people having smartphones and cheap internet data, India is experiencing fake news and disinformation at an industrial scale, not seen in any other large nation.

However, the numbers tell only half the story. A major reason for disinformation is right-wing social media influencers. While political ideologies of every shade use fake news and disinformation for promoting their narratives and pushing their agendas, at the heart of India's disinformation epidemic lies the rapid rise of right-wing nationalism. Of

course, this is increasingly a global phenomenon where social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit have dramatically empowered the extreme right to aggressively broadcast motivated content both globally and locally. In the case of India, right-wing nationalists have come into prominence since the electoral sweep at the national level by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The party, which mounted an impressive social media campaign in the 2014 elections to tap a growing online population, and especially youth, has gone on to invest heavily in creating an enviable IT infrastructure, deploying thousands of trained cyber professionals to connect with supporters and target opponents at the same time. The party has been nurturing and supporting thousands of social media influencers and supporters who thrive on peddling fake news and divisive narratives to help the party reap electoral dividends.

Studies in recent years have found that such disinformation and polarizing campaigns help the party to stay ahead of its opponents in electoral domination. Its IT Cell uses use memes, funny gossip, trolls, sarcasm, write-ups, and often fake videos to target political opponents, specific groups, and individuals who are critical of the party on the internet. Then its supporters, many of whom are social media influencers, load this content on popular tech platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Disinformation put out by the right-wing ecosystem focuses on the main opposition party (the Congress Party), Islamophobia, anti-Pakistan views, and spreading insecurity among the majority community (Hindus), among other targets. While other parties and groups also indulge in spreading fake news and conspiracy theories, the right-wing nationalists' ability to spread disinformation is unmatchable. According to a study of thousands of accounts by Reddit, while a record 17,779 pro-BJP accounts were identified as sources of misinformation and propaganda, the Congress Party had only 147 such accounts. In short, the right-wing ecosystem overwhelmingly dominates the production and distribution of fake news in India. It needs to be noted that right-wing groups' disinformation war is not limited to India alone. Over the years, it has spread among the Indian diaspora situated across Europe and in America.

Further, the Hindu right has made common cause with many far-right or anti-Muslim groups across different countries including Israel. A clear demonstration of this has been seen in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Soon after Hamas's brutal attacks on Israel on October 7, social media particularly X (formerly Twitter) was flooded with fake news and misinformation, and the

usual fog of war soon reached the highest levels of government in many countries. However, some of the most explosive disinformation examples of the conflict had their roots in India, particularly the right-wing social media influencers and activists. According to Boom, a popular fact-checking app, as soon as the Israel-Palestine conflict became full blown, dozens of blue-tick accounts from India started funneling totally misleading messages on X. A popular journalist with close right-wing links posted on X about crimes committed by Hamas including the alleged dissecting of a pregnant woman, killing the unborn child. The fake video post was quickly shared more than 20,000 times and was viewed by more than 10 million people. Another blue-tick verified handle with close proximity to the right-wing ecosystem posted a video on X featuring a well-known Pakistani politician threatening to obliterate Israel with a nuclear bomb. This post which received nearly a million views turned out to be a post from 2021. An endless number of fake posts (even after four months of conflict) continue to be published by social media influencers with close links to right-wing ideology.

The real question is why there are so many misleading or fake posts with strong pro-Israeli support from India. This should come as no surprise, given that while India has a longstanding stance on the two-state solution, the right-wing Hindutva groups have long maintained a strong support for Israel and a strong aversion to Palestine. The right-wing supporters see Israel as an ideal, a role model to be followed in dealings with Muslims. In short, it is Islamophobia which binds together the Hindu right and Zionists. Thus, a volcano of anti-Palestine and pro-Israel posts, mostly fake ones originating from India, should not surprise anyone. However, the scale and intensity of disinformation with trending hashtags like "#IslamisTheProblem" has pitted democracy against Islam, with implications for free speech. For instance, while pro-Israel rallies were welcomed, many state governments either banned pro-Palestine rallies or police used strong-arm tactics to suppress any such expressions of solidarity.

However, the volume and extent of misinformation displayed by the right-wing influencers in the initial days of the Israel-Hamas conflict represents just the tip of an iceberg. On innumerable occasions, right-wing social media users have openly peddled fake and malicious content, especially against minorities (in particular Muslims), with grave consequences.

COVID-19 and the Deluge of Disinformation

While the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 witnessed a deluge of fake news and misinformation making India the leading country for COVID disinformation, the most worrisome aspect of this disinformation war was that a lot of posts were directed against the Muslim minority, blaming them for the spread of the virus. This was related to the controversial gathering of Islamic missionaries called Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi in March 2020, which many analysts claimed led to sharp rise in COVID-19 cases across many parts of India. Once the news about the controversial religious gathering was splashed by print and electronic media, a torrent of fake videos, malicious stories, messages, and conspiracy theories were circulated by right-wing social media users. A thousand WhatsApp groups began depicting Tablighi Jamaat as a vector for the virus.

Further, a flood of doctored videos began depicting Tablighi members in quarantine spitting on doctors, nurses, and other health workers with the intention of spreading infection. However, fact-checkers found this footage had been doctored by a well-known political party handle to depict the minority community as a vector of disease and thereby to increase Islamophobic tendencies among the majority community. Nonetheless, the fake news prompted many social media influencers and even celebrities to run hashtags like "CoronaJihad" or "CoronaVillains" that maligned an entire community for the mistakes of a few. Even worse, many doctored videos and spurious messages were deliberately flooded among the Muslim community suggesting that the officials were plotting to infect Muslim youth with the virus in quarantine centers. These messages, coupled with relentless attacks on Muslims, led to violence against healthcare professionals in Indore and other cities.

Disinformation and Rising Hate Crimes

Among the major fallout of disinformation spread by the right-wing ecosystem is a rising tide of hate crimes against religious minorities and other marginalized sections of the population in India. The ecosystem, which spreads mis- and disinformation (communal hatred and bigotry) at an industrial scale through millions of its supporters and ideologues, has led to increased cyber-bullying and in several cases hate crimes against minorities. Hate speech, misinformation, and divisive rhetoric are leading to frequent communal clashes, lynchings, and other forms of violence at a regular

frequency. A dataset on VIP hate speech completed by NDTV found that over a span of four years starting from 2014 (after BJP came to power at the Centre), the use of hateful and divisive language by high-ranking politicians has increased by almost 500 percent. Not a day goes by without some senior politician – a Member of Parliament, minister, MLA, or even Chief Minister – making a hateful comment, be it in the language of bigotry or calling for violence. What has clearly added to this is the unchecked peddling of fake news and misinformation through multiple social media and television channels by the right-wing ideologues and their followers.

Conclusion and Way Forward

To conclude, India's civic and democratic space is contaminated by a deluge of mis- and disinformation. This has severely damaged the social fabric and fraternity of a deeply diverse and multi-ethnic society. Unchecked circulation of fake news and conspiracy theories including dangerous narratives that scapegoat and vilify religious minorities is increasing animosity among social groups. A major outcome of this is rising hate crimes against the minorities. With the emergence of disruptive technologies such as generative AI and deepfakes, mis- and disinformation will continue to impact the health of India's democracy and the trusts in key institutions.

Given the challenge, fake news and disinformation have become a major public issue for governments in India. Taking a serious view of the menace, recently the Chief Justice of India slammed the troll armies and fake news peddlers while calling for effective laws and stringent actions to rein in such destabilizing tendencies. While there is a growing recognition among the government and other key stakeholders about the challenges posed by unchecked tides of misinformation, concerted actions (including laws) are far from the current reality. State agencies have mostly been issuing advisories, clarifications, or sporadic warnings intended to keep people from falling prey to fake news. In some instances, state authorities including the Central government have used provisions of the Indian Penal Code and even sedition laws to penalize and arrest people believed to be spreading motivated news and creating communal disharmony among certain sections of the population. In fact, the Cyber Crime Portal of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued repeated advisories to state authorities to rein in fake news. However, these measures have not deterred the violators. Many structural factors leading to fake news remain unaddressed. Much of this is supposed to be covered by the existing Information and Technology (IT) Act.

Taking a serious view of disinformation and recent instances of deepfakes, the federal government has tabled new IT Rules to curb misinformation.

However, some hope has come from fact-checking vigilante efforts largely undertaken by public spirited individuals and media platforms. This fact-checking ecosystem comprises dedicated shows on television, sections within mainstream media such as the Times Fact Check initiative (a The Times of India group venture), India Today's *Anti Fake News War Room*, or initiatives such as Altnews, Quint, and Boomlive that compiled an impressive body of work during the COVID pandemic. However, these efforts represent just a drop in the bucket of the disinformation drowning India's democracy and society. Granted, the scale of disinformation coupled with diversity of language, culture and politics complicates the task of fact-checking. Nonetheless, the rising menace calls for multi-pronged governmental and societal actions at an unprecedented scale.

Niranjan Sahoo profile

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