



# Infodemic- A Bigger Problem Than COVID 19- A Study On Government Measures To Lock The Spread Of Misinformation In India

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## Abstract

As we all battle one of the most crucial times in our lives, with this Pandemic of Covid-19 that has spread like wildfire across the world, the pandemic is alone not the problem that the world is facing but Infodemic as coined by the World Health Organization, is much more scarier than it appears. According to popular statistics website, Statista, about 88% of the first-time voters in the 2019 elections said that fake news was a real problem. In a country like India, which is a home to the second largest population, spreading of fake news, especially among the illiterates is worrisome as they lack decision making or judgment of the news consumed or circulated before making a decisive choice to believe in them. More than 300 million people consume the internet in India and so are the active consumers of fake news that spreads among the social media channels which gain much attention, the more it is shared, the more likely they believe in that information.

The Indian Government has taken measures to curb the fake news menace that had led to many killings and hate mongering in the past. PIB Fact Check, by the Press Information Bureau, has set up a fact check online portal where anybody can post a picture or a message, they have received via social media to check if it is indeed true. With its presence on Social Media platforms, PIB Fact check is making sure that the fake news is curbed right there before it is spread beyond the control and helps to encourage media literacy among the users.

In this study, the researcher's aims to analyse the fake news that were circulated during the COVID-19 Period i.e. from 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020 to 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020, with the help of content analysis in order to understand the types of fake news being spread and how effectively it was taken down by the PIB Fact Check.

### **Key Words-**

Infodemic, Fake News, Covid-19, Media Literacy Digital Media, PIB Fact Check.

### **Introduction:-**

News and fake news have existed with us ever since mankind. During ancient times, news was spread or told when a group of people met at a well. It slowly moved from small people gatherings to traditionally informing people about the happenings of the royal court and the laws that were passed by mouth or word. Along with the news, existed Fake News or what were called gossips in the earlier days. It was a way of spreading false information with an intention to taint an individual or a group of people in an area.

There's lots of examples of false news throughout history. It was used by Nazi propaganda machines to build anti-Semitic fervour. It played a role in catalysing the Enlightenment, when the Catholic Church's false explanation of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake prompted Voltaire to speak out against religious dominance. In the 1800s in the US, racist sentiment led to the publication of false stories about African Americans' supposed deficiencies and crimes. (Centre for Information Technology and Society)

In modern India, News became more prominent with the first Newspaper coming into existence in 1780 called Hickey's Bengal Gazette. With technological advancements, television came into existence in 1959 and led a change in the way news and entertainment were consumed in India. The Birth of National Channel DD has played a major role in the way we receive our communication today.

The world of the Internet and the explosion of Digital world changed the way we consume news and entertainment today. With over 700 million Internet users, India has the second most internet users in the world after China. the expansion of the internet and the digital world gives more ways to reach at large. With the adaptation of social media, India has over 324 million Facebook users, 400 million monthly active users on WhatsApp making it the most popular and used social media platform with 93% of the internet users using the app in India. (Statista)

With the vast number of users in a country with 1.3 billion people, it is not a surprise that it is also the most popular app for spreading fake news. BBC went on to call WhatsApp "the black hole of fake news" during the 2019 Indian Elections. (BBC News Corporation)

In a country like India, where every second a forward message is either sent or received, it is highly difficult to tackle the problem of fake news. However a governing body that restricts the spread of fake news and educating the people about the danger of fake news that can monger hate and incite riots in the country can be more dangerous than that of a pandemic the world is seeing.

It is highly important for the government to take measures to educate the public about the facts and factual information and set up more easily accessible fact checking sites that enables the users to verify the authenticity of the piece of information received.

Just months after WHO declared a world health emergency on the Covid-19, it also announced on the “Infodemic” that the world was capturing into. WHO observed that the fake news, misinformation, mal-information on the measures to control COVID 19, medicines and vaccines to curb this pandemic is spreading more than that of the virus itself and there is an urgent need to control these false information that has led to panic among the public.

### Review of Literature

**Banejee and Haque(2018,)** studied if indeed fake news was real in India, to which they explored that varsity of dissemination of news that were being spread during the Election period both in India and in the US during the Donald Trump’s Win and how people blindly rely upon the news rather than fact checking authenticity of the news or piece of information received. The researchers mention examples of how a certain dissemination of information has led to major riots and religious clashes in India. Social Media Channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter play a major role in helping to spread news and information about everything and anything. Political parties, supporters of a certain ideology and simple troll have impacted the reality of news or information that were circulated with random videos being circulated across platforms, one such instance, a Video showing a women being dragged and murdered were circulated as a new murder that happened on a the streets on broad day light, however, the videos originally was that of a street play showing a murder of a Journalist.

**Carley and Huang (2020)**, studied the **Disinformation outbreak on CoronaVirus on Twitter**.

The researchers examined public discussion concerning Coronavirus on Twitter Platform between January 29th 2020 to March 4th 2020 with over 67 million tweets from 12 million users. The users were categorized according to their home country, Political orientation and Social identities. In this study, researchers tried to address the questions, such as types of users sending influential tweets, who were discussing disinformation stories, where do they hail from, and a global network for discussing low credibility information. In their analysis, they found that news agencies, government officials, and individual news reporters do send messages that spread widely, and so play critical roles. However, the most influential tweets are those posted by regular users, some of whom are bots. Tweets mentioning “fake news” URLs and misinformation stories are more likely to be spread by regular users than the news or government accounts. The distribution of users mentioning the URLs of less credible news sites across countries is different from the distribution of users mentioning real news URLs. More users mentioning these less credible sites and/or the disinformation story-lines come from the United States. Unlike messages that mention real news URLs or don't discuss these disinformation story-lines which often spread between countries, these “fake news” discussions typically spread within a country.

**Matamoros and Elías (2020)**, studied on the **“official” fake news which gave rise to alternative news sources like WhatsApp and other media outlets in Spain on the Pandemic**, where the researchers analysed, the government control of coronavirus communication in Spain against the raise of information on Social Media and some Television channels thriving to “tell the truth” in opposition to the public sources and official announcements. In Spain, the incidents of the government suppressing the truth and denying the pandemic situation in the country, has led to its citizens turning into social media and other alternative sources or channels to get the information about the actual situation. The Spain government restricts its university scientists to speak to the media who are appointed as State speakers, however, an incident of doctors explaining the pandemic situation and how there were minimal protection to them at the hospital through a video which was circulated among WhatsApp gave way for the citizens to more believe in these information's spread among the individual publishers that that of the official announcements from the government. Restrictions levied by WhatsApp in forwarding the messages, especially on the government, received much lash from the people of Spain calling it unfair and unjustified.

**Pulido, Carballido, Sama, Gómez(2020)**, researched on the **COVID-19 infodemic: more retweets for science based than false information on Twitter.** In this research study, the researchers analysed over 1000 tweets that were tweeted with more Retweets in 2 days i.e. 6th and 7th February in all available languages on the #coronavirus. Of the 17988 exported tweets for the two days, the sample was selected based on the top 1000 which had more RT for the analysis. These tweets were later classified into 7 categories namely, False Information, Science-based Evidence, Fact Checking Tweets, Mixed Information, Facts, Others and Not Valid. Of these only 942 samples were selected for further analysis which showed that of 100 tweets related to False Information or Mixed Information, 92% of the tweets and RTs contained messages of included fake-news, rumours, myths and conspiracy theories. In their conclusion, they said that false information was more likely to be tweeted but less likely to be retweeted than science-based evidence or fact-checking tweets.

**Raj, 2020**, analysed whether **spread of fake news around Covid 19 and the perspective of people on controlling the same in India.** In this study, the researcher looked at why people tend to forward fake news without fact checking and how the spread of fake news can be controlled on Social Media. The researcher conducted a quantitative analysis to understand the perspectives of the people in consuming the fake news and spreading the same on Social Media by conducting a Survey with 33 questions for over 300 social media users across India. It was found that, Indian's who are above 34 years of age tend to spread fake news the most. This can be due to lack of media literacy among Indians and the delayed technological advancements in India. It is interesting to note that the ones who are above 34 years of age think it is lawful to share fake news and they also think it is normal to create and share fake news during emergency situations like Covid 19. A further interesting finding is that even when the people believe that it is the responsibility of an individual to fact-check an information before further sharing, the majority of the respondents didn't do a proper fact-checking. The researcher also suggested that it is high time, the government brought in policies to regulate fake news to a country for a huge number of population, to regulate the spread of fake news and educate the importance of fact checking before believing in a certain news or information.

## Objectives-

- To understand the preparedness of the government entity to curb the spread of fake news around Covid-19 in India.
- To identify the main source of platforms that were used as a tool to spread fake news around Covid-19 in India.
- To analyse the government involvement and measures taken to reduce fake news and bring awareness about the factual information to the public around Covid-19 in India.

## Methodology and Data Collections.

In this study, the researcher has adopted content analysis, collecting fake news that were circulated on social media and other media outlets, which were fact checked by the Press Information Bureau. **The PIB fact check** and **Karnataka Police fact check**(official website) on Twitter published posts along with the fake news and gave the veracity of the factual information. A total of 100 tweets from PIB Fact check were collected as samples and a total of 31 fake news reports were collected from the Karnataka Police Fact Check Website between the period March 22nd 2020 to July 2nd 2020. These do not necessarily be Tweets, but also, news articles on prominent news websites and social media forwards on WhatsApp. These samples were categorized into, Financial Aid, Medical Aid, Covid 19, Health Workers, Migrant Crisis, Education, Lockdown, Community Targets and Others.

For this study, researcher has adopted the Gate Keeping Theory. Gatekeeping is the process of selecting, and then filtering, items of media that can be consumed within the time or space that an individual happens to have. This means gatekeeping falls into a role of surveillance and monitoring data. These gatekeeping decisions are made every day to sort out the relevant items that audiences will see.

The gatekeeping theory of mass communication is a method which allows us to keep our sanity. By consuming content that is most relevant to us each day, we can ignore the billions of additional data points that are calling for our attention.

In this study, the researcher observed that Associations like PIB Fact Check and Karnataka State Police Fact Check, have been keeping on telling the people what to believe and what not to. In this era of new media taking over all the world, over 500 Million people use Smartphones in India alone, with over 77% of them being active internet users. This data clearly shows that information

dissemination can happen at a faster rate in India, where there are constant religious clashes and Political classes between the two prominent parties.

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, the WHO said Infodemic, which is much more rapid and causing serious panic all over the world. Infodemic, as defined by the World Health Organisation, Infodemic are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemic can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.

## **Results**

It was found that of a total 131 news articles, social media forwards and reports of false information, were collected in a manner that were published as Fake news by the Press Information Bureau on Twitter and Karnataka State Police Fact Check department on their website. These included news stories from prominent news channels such as ABP News, Scroll Media, Caravan, Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and The New Indian Express to name a few.

## **Press Information Bureau of India-**

The Press Information Bureau (PIB) is the nodal agency of the Government of India to disseminate information to the print and electronic media on government policies, programmes, initiatives and achievements. PIB disseminates information through different modes of communication viz. press releases, press notes, feature articles, backgrounders, photographs, database available on Bureau's website. Information disseminated is released in English, Hindi and Urdu and subsequently translated in other Indian languages to reach out to about 8,400 newspapers and media organizations in different parts of country

The Press Information Bureau functions as a bridge between the government and the Media to provide any information related to the government policies and other important achievements of the government. In the light of Novel Coronavirus- COVID-19, spread across the world, Mis-information, Fake News, Dis-information spread rapidly causing more panic among the people than the disease itself. Fake news acting as one of the main reasons for creating panic buying, discrimination of the people who were affected by the Covid-19 by a certain group of people, religious discrimination causing quite a stir in a country like India have proven to be more

dangerous than that of the battle with the invisible virus. In order to disseminate right information, to tackle the problem of Covid-19 related fake news, PIB has taken active initiatives to curb the spread of fake news by putting the message with the facts and figures on popular social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

**During the period of March 24th 2020, to 2nd July 2020**, there were around 100 Fake news or mis-information or mis-representations of factual news that were spread across Social Media Channels like WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, to the extent that even some popular news channels ran the news on their breaking news scroll. The Media websites, such as Scroll.in, Caravan.in and many others were also subjected to fake news for reporting factually incorrect information in their articles.

A total 100 News sources or information were collected from the PIB Twitter Site, that were published between the date 22nd March 2020 to 2nd July 2020, that were either Covid-19 related stories or stories that were indirectly related to Covid-19. These were later categorised into three categories, Fake, Factually Incorrect or Misleading and True.

Sl.No	Category	No.
1	Fake	91
2	Factually Incorrect and Misleading	8
3	TRUE	1
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows the number of fake news and the categories associated with

With the above data, we can clearly see that 91% of the news or information that were circulated were reported as fake news. out of 100 samples, 71 were circulated from Social Media channels, like WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook for topics related to Financial Aid (9), Migrant Crisis (8), Lockdown (8), Medical Aid (5), Vaccinations/ Medications (4), Covid-19 (4), Digital Monitoring/snooping by GOI (4) and many others.



Most of the news or information spread on social media or on news channels, PIB was quick enough to publish the same with factual information on Twitter and other social media platforms either on the same day or the very next day. There was rigid monitoring of mis-information being spread among the people and bringing the facts and figures to the light before it was picked or believed by many. However, some of the News Channel were not spared like this one, India TV News, a popular news channel picked a news related to a circular issued by the Home Ministry about school re-opening, which later was clarified by the Home Ministry itself that this news is fake and no such circulars were sent across by the ministry. In India, Hindi News Channels record a 43% of viewership in the Hindi Speaking States during the measured time period in 2017 (Statista).

These statistics surely gives us a fair idea about how News Channels are reached to the Indian consumers and the impact it can have on unverified news reporting.

Image extract of the News Clip from India News Hindi Channel- Source- Twitter (PIB)



Screen Grab of PIB Fact Check- Source- Twitter (PIB)

### Karnataka State Police FactCheck-

As the world battles Covid-19, personnel at the front line are the real heroes tackling problems that may induce or create that is more than a pandemic itself. In India, The Karnataka State department has taken the initiative to curb the spread of fake news that has become one of the main reasons for many mis-information's that has created panic among the people of the state. Karnataka State Police has taken this initiative in collaboration with Check4Spam to counter rumours amid the corona virus outbreak.

In this research study, a total of 31 samples were collected from the Karnataka State Police Factcheck website, that had direct or indirect impact on the Covid-19 News and Information. Out of 31 news or information that were spread, 24 were spread from Social Media Forwards on platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter among many others. 6 stories were related to Community targets, while 3 were that of Covid-19 related. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Karnataka State Police Factcheck- Social Media Forwards

Sl.No	Fake News Information	Nos.
<b>1</b>	<b>Community Targets</b>	<b>6</b>
2	Bengaluru Police targeting communities	1
3	Karnataka Panchayat Bans Muslims over COVID-19	1
4	Malicious Video In Circulation Saying Tablighi Jamaat Is Misbehaving in UP	1
5	Muslim Women Caught Shopping and Escaping During Lockdown in India	1
6	Muslims Purposefully Sneezing To Spread Coronavirus At Hazrat Nizamuddin Mosque In Delhi	1
7	Suspiciously False Message With Attribution in Circulation	1
<b>8</b>	<b>Covid 19</b>	<b>3</b>
9	Corona Positive Grape Seller in JP Nagar, Bengaluru Was Spitting on Grapes to Spread the Virus	1
10	Pathophysiological Diagnosis Error during Covid-19	1

11	The News of 4 Workers of Anand Sweets, Bengaluru Infected with Covid-19	1
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>9</b>

## [SUSPICIOUS MESSAGE] Many Zones In Bengaluru To Be Sealed

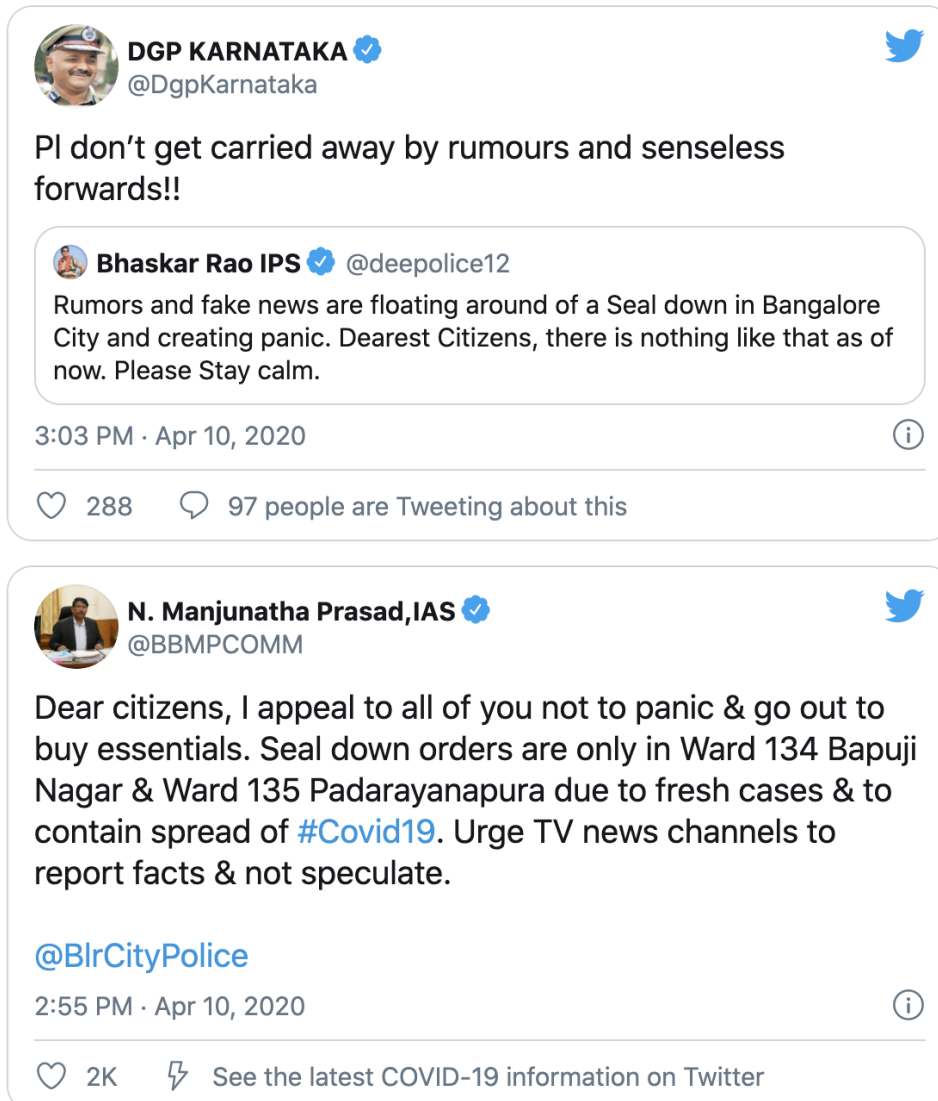


 Fact Check Partner

*Screen Grab of a popular Kannada News Channel reporting on Many Zones in Bengaluru to be sealed.* This news was spread vastly across the social media channels, specifically on WhatsApp leading to panic buying of groceries and other essentials in the city. However, Bhaskar Rao, City Commissioner of Police, issued a statement on Twitter denying any news of a complete seal down of many zones in the city.

As of now, due to fresh cases and to contain spread of Covid-19 a seal down was ordered ONLY in Ward 134 Bapuji Nagar and Ward 135 Padarayanapura. There is no reason found, as of now, to seal any other locations in Bengaluru.

We urge TV news channels to report facts and not speculate.



The image shows two screenshots of tweets from police officials in Bengaluru. The first tweet is from DGP KARNATAKA (@DgpKarnataka), a verified account, posted at 3:03 PM on April 10, 2020. The tweet text reads: "Pl don't get carried away by rumours and senseless forwards!!". Below the main text is a quote from Bhaskar Rao IPS (@deepolice12), also a verified account, who states: "Rumors and fake news are floating around of a Seal down in Bangalore City and creating panic. Dearest Citizens, there is nothing like that as of now. Please Stay calm." The tweet has 288 likes and 97 retweets. The second tweet is from N. Manjunatha Prasad, IAS (@BBMPCOMM), a verified account, posted at 2:55 PM on April 10, 2020. The tweet text reads: "Dear citizens, I appeal to all of you not to panic & go out to buy essentials. Seal down orders are only in Ward 134 Bapuji Nagar & Ward 135 Padarayanapura due to fresh cases & to contain spread of #Covid19. Urge TV news channels to report facts & not speculate." Below the text is a link to @BlrCityPolice. The tweet has 2K likes and includes a lightning bolt icon with the text "See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter".

*Screenshot of of City Commissioner Police issuing a statement on Twitter- Source- Twitter*

## Discussion

Fake News, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, False stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke. Fake News is as old as News Itself and can be traced back to centuries. In India, it can be said that the first victim of Fake News was Lord Ram's wife, Sita herself. In the final chapter of Ramayana, written by Sage, Sri Valmiki, when Shree Ram returns to Ayodhya after a 14 yearlong Vanvas, during a court proceeding, the ministers in his court report the rumours of his people talking about the character of Sita of her times spent after being abducted by the Lankadipathi Ravana in the Lanka of Ravana, now present Sri Lanka. After hearing the rumours being spread, without any verification of the news, Lord Sri Ram did not give a heed to curb this fake news, but instead, exiled Sita forever to fit into the role of the King he was to his Kingdom.

The spread of fake news has been in our society ever since and has continued to be one of the main reasons for many indications that happen in our country. A country with more than 1.3 billion people practicing multi-faith, can be easily targeted to tarnish the peace and tranquillity of the society, an organisation or an individual. Much before the episode of the Covid-19 pandemic took the world over, Fake news has existed not only in the digital world, but also in many other traditional media. In India, there have been many incidents that occurred due to the spread of Fake news on social media. one such incident, a statement that went viral that even news channels such as CNN-News 18, Republic Tv and the News laundry picked up this piece and ran over all their segments, "70 lakh Indian soldiers cannot defeat Azadi gang in Kashmir" which were claimed to be have attributed by Author Arundhati Roy. The media channels even went onto debate this on their Prime Time slots about a statement said in an non-existent interview at a non-existent location. However, after an investigation by The News Laundry, the media organisation apologies and published an op-ed about the same.

These unverified, misleading information that was easily picked up by the so called media giants who could not escape from the bait of the Fake News, it is highly unexpected that a normal citizen, can do a fact check before forwarding such malicious, scam and misleading piece of information that could lead to major turn of events that can have an devastating impact.

With over 700 Million Internet users in India with an expected number of 974 million user rise by the year 2025, news spread among unfathomable group of people or section of society, with limited access to fact checking websites or knowledge on fact checking, Fake News will only

continue to rise until there are proper regulations and laws governing these acts are brought in by the lawmakers of the country.

India has become a home for extensive spread of false news. The damage caused due to fake news on social media has increased due to the growth of the internet penetration in India, which has risen from 137 million internet users in 2012 to over 600 million in 2019 [2]. WhatsApp has its maximum users from India over 340 million. The social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, etc. are a source of spread of fake videos, images causing misleading information and even hatred among the people. (Legal Services India)

Currently, there is no specific law governing the spread of fake news. However a few sections that penalises the spread of fake news in India are, Section 124A. Sedition, 153A. Promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony. 295A. Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs, Section 499. Defamation. and others among many. (Library of Congress- LAW)

## **Conclusion**

Even when the world battles with one of its worst ever diseases that a mankind has ever come across, locking billions of people in their houses, forcing millions of people to migrate to their native due to financial shut down, loss of essential supplies such as food grains and medicines, lack of information about the dangerous situation the world has been exposed to, lack of mental health awareness that has captured the world, when survival has hit rock bottom ever since the great depression in the 1930 and the Plague Outbreak in the early 1900s, spread of false and malicious information intended to create panic has given rise to multiple incidents across the world, both good and bad. with an average smartphone user of 500 million in a country like India, it is highly impossible to completely eradicate the spread of fake news even if the government puts in all the effort to do so. The lack of literacy, rather media literacy, amongst the public which is the main worry for many, as the intentions of such spread news is almost 90% connected to an incident that has occurred in the past to make people believe in such fake news or malicious information that is sent across. In most of the cases, a fake message is made to look more real and factual than that of the factual information itself.

The announcement of lockdown for 21 days in India came in on March 22nd, a day after the country observed Janta Curfew on March 20th in the wake of rise in the number of Covid-19 cases in India. The first case was reported on 30th January, however, it gained much attention after an IT employee was tested positive for Covid 19 on March 9th 2020. The government took measures immediately by shutting down the public places such as Schools, Malls, Theatres and markets where crowds were to be seen more in numbers. Ever after the lockdown was initiated, there were many fake news that floated on the internet, either to create panic or for just as a mere joke. However, government officials spared no time to take measures to curb the fake news that were more dangerous than the pandemic itself. In India, PIB Fact Check, became more active in monitoring the social media channels such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, to identify any news or piece of information that were factually incorrect. These were immediately put forth on the public domain marking it as Fake News and giving the factual information about the same.

In Karnataka, a team was developed in the IT department cell, comprising of young individuals, like students and professionals, to work round the clock to monitor the social media activities and identify any malicious, suspicious and fake activities surrounding the Novel Coronavirus. Alongside the PIB Fact check and the Karnataka IT Cell working on identifying fake news, Karnataka State Police department also set up a Fact Check site to verify any piece of information that were circulating on Social Media, the veracity and the authenticity of the information being circulated.

When the world is consuming more of the News and other information digitally, the more it is the responsibility of both the public and the government and other media organisations to verify the authenticity of the information received before believing in them and circulating the same among the peers. This one simple step of fact checking before forwarding the information received will help in curbing fake news. The government should also make an effort to educate the public about these fake news and bring in a governing rule to ensure that those developing or creating fake news are severely punished for creating panic among the public.

### **Declaration-**

This article is original and has not been published nor submitted elsewhere for publication.

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