



# MISINFORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

The term “misinformation” refers to the passing of wrong/incorrect information within the social network of humans. In the contemporary lingua, it is referred to as “fake news”. This social phenomenon has historical roots, with different forms of expression in the larger social at different times in history. However, we shall particularly investigate its contemporary manifestation in the Indian social context.

With the advent of information and communication technology at a large scale in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and even further to present-day (rapidly evolving) artificial intelligence, the extent of geospatial and diverse (in terms of the targeted audience) outreach of fake news is increasing day-by-day. The Indian society, being so complex and diverse both in qualitative and quantitative aspects has given this phenomenon fertile grounds to proliferate. Evidently, we can observe the manifestations of misinformation and disinformation in the various dimensions of Indian society, namely political, economic (financial), cultural (including religious matters) and so on.

**Keywords:** misinformation; fake news; artificial intelligence (AI); social media applications; proliferation; propaganda; deepfake; speech synthesis.

## INTRODUCTION

Merriam Webster describes misinformation as “incorrect or misleading information”. Cambridge Dictionary defines misinformation as “wrong information”. Disinformation, on the other hand, refers to “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth” - (Merriam Webster Dictionary). A nearly identical definition is provided by the American Psychological Association - “false information which is deliberately intended to mislead”.

The concept of “fake news” has been increasingly associated with the false/inaccurate/misleading reports which today are largely spread through social media platforms or applications. The rise in incidents of fake news and misinformation, spreading through social media platforms can be primarily linked with a surge in the users of social media applications, i.e. more and more citizens have become active users of social media applications as well as the various segments or features within these applications (including news reports).

Inaccurate and misleading information in India through fake news is spread for various purposes, many of them being fulfilment of political motives. Political misinformation has been widely disseminated on social media in recent years, particularly in the wake of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India. The dissemination of inaccurate and false material on social media platforms has grown, frequently with the intention of swaying public opinion and influencing election outcomes.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, people believed and spread everything linked to illness without evaluating its veracity because of the widespread hysteria. It has thereby increased the false information about the illness that was being disseminated on social media platforms.

Social media and dissemination of information also affects the functioning nature of markets. Commodities are dominated by extremely knowledgeable, professional traders who are generally more adept at identifying and processing accurate information faster than equities markets (Ashok et al., 2022). Conversely, commodities are anticipated to be susceptible to news movements and reflect shifts in geopolitical sentiment and uncertainty (Corbet et al., 2020).

Artificial intelligence (AI) that can produce content that resembles that of a human is known as generative AI [9]. However, generative AI has the potential to generate false news in malicious applications. While the issue of fake news and deepfakes is not new [40, 43, 45], recent developments in generative AI, like GPT-4, have made it simple to create highly realistic fake news that is difficult for people to identify [39]. Therefore, fake news produced by AI poses an urgent threat to society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The findings of Banerjee and Haque's (2018) investigation into the spread of false information in India and how the political elite utilised it to further their own agendas revealed that Indian politicians had been using fake news to incite hate speech throughout the nation. For instance, a video footage of a sizable gathering of Pakistani cricket supporters celebrating their team's victory in an Indian cricket match went viral in 2018. The letter charged Indian Muslims of treachery for endorsing their principal adversaries. In the meantime, the video was taken by Pakistanis themselves, who shared it on social media multiple times. Nonetheless, it attracted a lot of attention and gave the idea that Muslims in India are hostile to the country.

Oxford Internet Institute research verified that social media accounts and "junk news" websites were well-known for feeding false information to thousands of users during the US election in 2016. presidential election, emphasising the challenge's worldwide reach.

Accordingly, overly broad interpretations of the phrase "fake news" may even be dangerous, since people find it difficult to tell the difference between real news and fake news in the age of digital information (Allcott & Gentzkow, Citation2017; UNESCO, Citation2018).

A supply chain system is impacted by the dissemination of false information because it increases uncertainty in the process (Baabdullah et al., 2021; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Sommariva et al., 2018).

Tagliacozzo (2018) investigates a combination of quantitative (multiple choice surveys) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) research methodologies. It examines how social media both supports and impedes government-to-citizen (G2C) contact during post-disaster reconstruction, highlighting possible obstacles such as security concerns, a lack of rules and regulations, legal concerns, etc.

Piyush Ghasiya conducted research on the Tablighi Jamaat controversy and the rapid sharing of hateful content that is Islamophobic on Facebook. Piyush outlined the history of anti-Muslim propaganda on Facebook and other social media platforms. The results of this study will help the writers add to the available information. (Ghasiya, 2022)

## GAP ANALYSIS

The topic of my research is "Misinformation and Contemporary Indian Society. In the research I have delved deeper particularly into the contemporary aspects of the phenomenon of fake news and its multidimensional transmission in the society. The reason I find myself connected with this topic is due to my active interest in the daily happenings of my country (India). After studying the existing literature on the topic, I felt intrinsically motivated to contribute to the subject matter. With the help of primary and secondary research methods, I shall add novel content to the existing literature.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One method that aims to explain how society has advanced to a time after modernity is called postmodernism. Since traditional metanarratives can no longer adequately explain postmodern life, people in this era are more likely to place a higher value on science and reasoned thought. Furthermore, a postmodern civilization will typically have undergone globalisation, which means that new religions will be assimilated. People will therefore choose a religion that best fits their lifestyle and preferences.

Media pluralism is acknowledged by postmodernists. They contend that greater lifestyle options brought about by globalisation have given people everywhere the chance to explore and realise new identities. According to Baudrillard, our society is so saturated with media that it has become more difficult to tell the difference between reality and media images because they rule and skew how we perceive the world. This was referred to by Baudrillard as hyperreality—a world in which media images dominate to the point that they are taken to be true. For instance, Baudrillard contends that it might be difficult to tell which graphics in computer games are real and which are from newsreels. Hyperreality is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality," according to Baudrillard. Hyperreality is the state in which awareness, particularly in developed postmodern society, is unable to discriminate between reality and a simulation of reality. Hyperreality is defined as a state in which the lines between reality and fiction are blurred, making it difficult to tell where one stops and the other begins. The post-modernist approach on the evolving nature of media and its relationship with humans thus forms a decent framework for this research.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Misinformation and fake news in 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian social context can be thoroughly studied and analysed with the help of various methodological tools. Quantitative methods like compilation of statistical data on the rising issues of fake news (in the last two decades), as a form of secondary research, can be coupled with tools like surveys and questionnaires on current population (subjects/respondents), with forming target groups for the same as a form of primary research, would help create more refined research.

Similarly, qualitative methods like analysis and review of current body of scholarly literature on the contemporary manifestations of misinformation in India (secondary research) can be combined with the use of open-ended interviews with target groups or individuals along with conducting case study on a specifically affected geographical region or communal populace with fake news would help adding depth to the pool of knowledge on the same. Mixed methods would then assist in diversification of the acquired content.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

- Circulation of misleading and inaccurate/fake news reports through different modes of media, especially social media is driven by the vested interests of political actors/groups as well as economic (market) factors and financial/capitalist actors and entities.
- Advancements in information and communication technology as one proceeds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian (globalised) society, especially with the evolution of AI (artificial intelligence) has also speeded as well as increased the outreach of fake news in India to a very advanced level.

## **OBJECTIVES**

With the use of a particular set of methodological tools, the research aims to throw light on the increasing role of misinformation and fake news in influencing public attitudes and behaviours that transcends in the form of prejudice and stereotype formation, formation of biased opinions, and goes as far as fuelling mob lynching and violence in some cases.

The research also seeks to investigate into the relationship between changing political and economic (capitalist) landscape in the society with the rise in the undesirable cases of fake news at a macro level in India. Analysis of statistical data since 2000s (especially in the last decade) reflects the ever-increasing role that politics has played in the information domain evident in the various instances of use of censorship tools in filtering critical content against the government.

Through interviews and open-ended questionnaires with a reliable target group of respondents, there was an attempt to delve into subjective insights of the public, especially the educated youth, about the current scenario of fake news in India and how they much are they themselves affected by this.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Surveys are vital research instruments for identifying cases of misinformation and fake news and to identify a pattern of their proliferation through various forms of media, especially social media. They assist in locating resources, therapy modalities, and referral sources. When creating surveys, statisticians and business specialists should be included, considering the goals, sample size, and response rate.

To guarantee that responses are fairly represented, pre-testing and coding are essential. Data analysis requires the establishment of procedures for handling different elements and coding replies.

## CONCLUSION

Content-checking businesses (CCOs) have assumed a more critical role in reversing the spread of political disinformation by actively guiding people towards more informed decisions. These CCOs employ a variety of tactics, including fact-checks, articles that dispute assertions, and providing explanations on different social media platforms. Additionally, they conduct extensive research and analyses to provide light on the intricate pathways via which false information propagates and sways voter. There is an urgent need to not just reviewing and re-checking of information but also to minimise and thwarting such fake reports and unverified news at its source itself.

Apart from political disinformation, there are various domains where disinformation thrives. Some of the examples for the same include health and disease (Covid 19), environmental disasters like tsunamis, cyclones especially along the coastal plains of India, and so on. Digital literacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century is crucially important especially among the youth of India to promote awareness about investigating into sources of information and news reports that they come across everyday in order to prevent the proliferation and break the network of the outreach of any such news.

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