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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS ON COVID-19: A STUDY ON THE YOUTH OF KOLKATA

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Abstract

Fake news or false information is not new; it has become a trending topic since 2017. Traditionally we got our news from trusted sources, journalists and media outlets that are required to follow strict codes of practice. However, the internet has enabled a whole new way to publish, share and consume information and news with very little regulation or editorial standards. This is an inaccurate, mostly sensationalistic report created to gain attention, mislead, deceive or damage a reputation and is different from misinformation on the account that here the reporter has lack or confused facts. Furthermore with the advent of Covid-19 the internet is flooded with umpteen number of misinformation putting the users into paradox. This paper tries to gauge the impact of these types of news on the youth of Kolkata city. The methodology adapted is surveying a section of the youth of the city and analysis the results to a conclusion.

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Introduction:-

Fake news is an inaccurate, mostly sensationalistic report created to gain attention, mislead, deceive or damage a reputation. It is quite different from misinformation on the account that here the reporter has lack or confused facts. Fake news is created with the intent to manipulate and can spread very quickly when disinformation is provided which is aligned with the audience's viewpoint just because in this case such content is not likely to be questioned. According to Martina Chapman (Media Literacy Expert), there are three elements to fake news; 'Mistrust, misinformation and manipulation'.

Fakes:

In a recent article on media literacy, Hugh Linehan noted; "Media is no longer passively consumed – it's created, shared, liked, commented on, attacked and defended in all sorts of different ways by hundreds of millions of people. On a worldwide scale, the way people consume information is changing. While they once relied on trusted publishers and content brands, today, aggregators and social networks are claiming the majority of the public's attention. In recent years; the internet has provided a low-cost option for fake news. Many people now get news from social media sites and networks and often it can be difficult to tell whether stories are credible or not. As a result, sensational content and fake news stories, covering celebrity-driven updates and political commentary alike, are spreading like fire. Posting fake news in different forums of discussion, website comment fields, blogs and social media websites requires little, if any, technical know-how. Social media websites in particular have proved to be an easy venue for distributing fake news. Bogus stories can be tweeted or posted from a mobile smart phone and quickly distributed to a large audience through retweets and sharing. Along with these, information overload and a

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general lack of understanding about how the internet works by people has also contributed to an increase in fake news or hoax stories.

Most of the creators and distributors of fake news have political or social agendas, though there are few others who are more entrepreneurial, using fake news that appeals to recipients on an emotional level to make money from digital advertising placed around the content. It becomes a dangerous phenomenon when fake news is used for propaganda. In addition to shaping public opinion and behaviour, it can also cause mistrust, encourage dissent and deflect attention from real news.

One of the most ominous sign is that fake news wouldn't have grown at its current rate without unwitting support from media and technology brands. Google and Face book have come under fire as their algorithms bring fake news to the surface and extend its popularity. Particularly during the 2016 US presidential elections last three months, fake stories about the candidates were generating more engagement on Face book than reports from main media news platforms. At the same time, participants around the world admitted to journalists that they had been creating and circulating fake news for easy financial gain, while Google algorithms were giving prominence in results to stories that hadn't been editorially confirmed. Such reports shed light on the role of consumer trust in successful journalism – and as readers are realizing they may have been deceived at one point or another, and therefore country's collective trust is becoming strained.

Social media companies have been under tremendous pressure since the 2016 presidential election to do something about the proliferation of misinformation on their platforms. Companies like Facebook and YouTube have responded by applying anti-fake-news strategies that seem as if they would be effective. As a public-relations move, this is smart: The companies demonstrate that they are willing to take action, and the policies sound reasonable to the public. They have formed a coalition called First Draft and are working with major media outlets to educate Internet users about how to spot fake news. They are also working with third parties to create independent fact-checking websites and are exploring ways to identify and label news stories that cannot be verified, much like the way Wikipedia editors label entries they feel should be questioned.

On the internet, news that is created with the intent to deceive often has poor grammar and misspelled words; it may use racial language or have an excessive number of capital letters and exclamation points. To verify the accuracy of a news story, it can be useful to query a search engine in order to confirm that legitimate, traditional news sources are also covering the story; fake news stories often have only one source. Another strategy for identifying fake news is to check the host site's domain name and URL. Often, fake news appears to have a legitimate-sounding domain name, but will have a URL that ends in '.com.co' or another unusual suffix.

Types of Fake:

There are differing opinions when it comes to identifying types of false information. However, when it comes to evaluating content online there are various types of false or misleading news we need to be aware of. These include:

Clickbait:

These are stories that are deliberately fabricated to gain more website visitors and increase advertising revenue for websites. Clickbait stories use sensationalist headlines to grab attention and drive click-throughs to the publisher website, normally at the expense of truth or accuracy.



Propaganda:

Stories that are created to deliberately mislead audiences, promote a biased point of view or particular political cause or agenda.



Satire or Parody:

Lots of websites and social media accounts publish fake news stories for entertainment and parody. For example; The Onion, Waterford Whispers, The Daily Mash, The Telegraph (India) etc.



Sloppy Journalism:

Sometimes reporters or journalists may publish a story with unreliable information or without checking all of the facts which can mislead audiences. For example, during the U.S. elections, fashion retailer Urban Outfitters published an Election Day Guide, the guide contained incorrect information telling voters that they needed a 'voter registration card'. This is not required by any state in the U.S. for voting.



Misleading Headings:

Stories that are not completely false can be distorted using misleading or sensationalist headlines. These types of news can spread quickly on social media sites where only headlines and small snippets of the full article are displayed on audience newsfeeds.

**Biased or Slanted News:**

Many people are drawn to news or stories that confirm their own beliefs or biases and fake news preys on these biases. Social media news feeds tend to display news and articles that they think we will like based on our personalised searches.

**Social Media Response:**

Google and Facebook have announced new measures to tackle fake news with the introduction of reporting and flagging tools. Media organisations like the BBC and Channel 4 have also established fact checking sites. Considering these as welcome developments, digital media literacy and developing skills to critically evaluate information are essential skills for anyone navigating the internet and especially for the youth.

The vast amount of information available online and rise in fake news highlights the need for critical thinking and logical sense of judgement. Children need to develop critical thinking from an early age. This will be a key skill for young people to develop as they enter into third level education and prepare themselves for the workplace. In the current scenario of corona virus crisis Sylvia Brand, the WHO officer blamed social media for amplifying fake Corona virus related news. Quartz journalist Ephrat Livni provides suggestions where she says that “we should behave online the way we do in the physical world and slow down our response time”. A society can only harp on morality when the individuals are thinking properly. Whatsapp has decided to restrict forwarding with regards to Covid-19 stories which are mostly fake.

Some of the corona virus hoaxes and fake news stories:

The spread of false information during the corona virus outbreak has been rapid with well-meaning friends and family sharing messages on messaging platforms including WhatsApp warning of everything from the army closing London to beating the virus by drinking hot drinks.

This is not just annoying spam; it can be dangerous. Here, we debunk some of the most circulated Covid-19 messages that have spread at speed. We will update this article when there are new false stories being circulated.

London is going into lockdown:

The claim: Towards the end of last week (18/19 March), messages started to circulate on WhatsApp that it would be announced on Thursday night that the capital was going into lockdown from Friday for 15 days. The message also claimed supermarkets were going to open with restricted hours and the police would be "everywhere" monitoring people's movements and guarding supermarkets.

The truth: Talk of a lockdown was quickly dismissed by the government and, as of Monday, no such measures have been introduced. On Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson did not rule out tougher measures after crowds of people were seen ignoring social distancing advice as they congregated in some of the UK's beauty spots, parks and beaches in the spring sunshine. Some UK supermarkets have been operating slightly shorter trading times amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis in order to allow staff enough time to refill the shelves, but no orders have been given to restrict access. The lockdown was finally announced in April, 2020.

'If you can hold your breath for 10 seconds, then you don't have the virus':

The claim: This long message began circulating early on in the crisis and the claims have been shared more than 30,000 times on Facebook in over a dozen countries, including India, Nigeria and the USA. The message contained several pieces of false information including fake advice on how to detect whether you have the virus, telling people to "breathe in deeply and hold your breath for 10 seconds." It goes on to say: "If this can be done without coughing, without difficulty this shows that there is no fibrosis in the lungs, indicating the absence of infection. It is recommended to do this control every morning to help detect infection." The message was usually forwarded from a friend citing a seemingly reliable source ie "Jenny who works with Royal College of Surgeons who received it from the member of Stanford hospital board".

The truth: Dr Sarah Jarvis, GP and clinical director of patientaccess.com debunks this: "Fibrosis is not a feature of coronavirus and you cannot tell... if you've got COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) you won't be able to hold your breath for 10 seconds anyway. "And some people who have coronavirus the only symptom they've got are a fever and not a cough."

The virus spreads through petrol pumps:

The claim: This hoax social media message appeared over the weekend of 21/22 March and was shared on WhatsApp. The message claimed the virus was "spreading quickly via petrol pumps". It went on to say people should "wear gloves when filling up or use paper towel and bin straight away."

The truth: "A petrol pump is a hard surface," Dr Jarvis says. "The handle of petrol pump is a hard surface. The best evidence we have, and we don't know, is that on average we think the virus can survive on a hard surface for up to three days, on metal or glass, possibly on plastic. Perhaps one day on cardboard. "What that means if you touch a petrol pump that a lot of other people have touched before, in exactly the same way that if you've touched a ATM or if you touch a lift button or if you touch supermarket trolley. Yes, it can spread. But because it is a hard surface, you're not going to get it through the fumes."

Public Health England reiterated that on Monday with a statement that read: "Petrol pumps are no worse than other surfaces, although we do recommend people use gloves and wash their hands after using them."

Beat the virus with hot water:

The claim: Another part of the message that encouraged us all to hold our breath for 10 seconds also claimed the virus "hates heat and dies if it is exposed of temperatures greater than 27C." It told us to "abundantly" consume hot drinks "such as infusions, broths or simply hot water" during the day. "These hot liquids kill the virus and are easy to ingest," the viral message stated.

The truth: "Technically, the virus is destroyed by 60C but the virus, don't forget, lives in an awful lot of places where hot drinks don't get to, like the back of your nose," Dr Jarvis explains. "You also run the risk of scolding yourself."

5G Masts causing Coronavirus:

In UK some 5G masts were burned down due to a mistaken belief that they were a cause for Covid-19. People correlated the introduction of 5G Masts in Wuhan with the emergence of the virus and there were also rumours that 5G waves suppress the immune system. There was another theory that the viruses use 5G networks to communicate with each other and choose whom to infect.

The truth: The virus has spread rapidly in Iran which does not have 5G and they work at only 1.5% of the international safety limit for radiation.

Checking fakes:

1. Are there spelling errors and strange punctuation? Lots of capital letters are also a giveaway. Information from reputable sources will be written in clear, grammatically correct English.
2. Where did the article come from? If it popped up in your social media feed proceed with caution. If the information was shared by a friend do not assume it is accurate. Vet the information and double check it against official advice before forwarding it to one of your contacts.
3. Is the information on credible news sites, or the government or NHS websites? If not, it is unlikely to be true.
4. Play detective and look at fact-checking websites.

Examples :Poynter.com,Snopes: snopes.com/,PolitiFact: politifact.com,Fact Check: factcheck.org/,BBC Reality Check: bbc.com/news/reality-check,Channel 4Fact,Check: channel4.com/news/factcheck
Reverse image search from Google: google.com/reverse-image-search

Survey & analysis:

A survey was conducted with 50 youths, all of them students of undergraduate and post-graduate level of Kolkata city vide a questionnaire containing 7 questions on the impact of Fake News with regards to the Coronavirus pandemic on them. The respondents are in the age group of 18 to 25 years.

Out of the 50 respondents 23 are male, 26 female and 1 did not disclose gender. In response to the question about the term "Fake News" 49 respondents knew this term and were aware of it. With regards to the term 45 of the respondents said that this is associated with social media (90%), while 8% felt that it was with stories from internet.

40 respondents were aware that there are lot of fake news circulating about the Covid-19 virus, interestingly 10 respondents i.e. 20% were not aware of any kind of fake news about Covid-19. As an examples the stories they felt were fake are 'Tigers roaming in the streets of Russia (16 respondents), Covid-19 virus not effective in heat (15 respondents), Do not eat chicken of fish: it can cause Coronavirus (5 respondents), Cure has already been found (3 respondents) and Newspaper is a medium for the virus (1 respondent).

42 respondents felt they have enough sense of judgement to determine whether the news is fake or not. Also 48 respondents were on the view that they are not influenced by the social media with regards to fake news and refrain from forwarding without verification. 90% Of the respondents felt that fake news has a negative impact on the society.

Analysing the survey, it would be justified in saying that fake news has a negative impact on the society. Also the respondents being students they mostly have a sense of judgement to understand the content of news to determine whether the news is fake or false. But since this scenario is not applicable to all sections of the society it is very likely that fake or false news will spread like fire with maximum forwarding which has happened to the false news on Coronavirus resulting in more and more pandemonium across the globe.

Conclusion:-

The obvious conclusion to draw from all this evidence is that social media platforms should rigorously test their ideas for combating fake news and not just rely on common sense or intuition about what will work. We realize that a more scientific and evidence-based approach takes time. But if these companies show that they are seriously committed to that research — being transparent about any evaluations that they conduct internally and collaborating more with outside independent researchers who will publish publicly accessible reports — the public, also should be prepared to be patient and not demand instant results.

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