



Fake News

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This article is based on “Shaking the foundation of fake news” which appeared in The Hindu on 19/09/2019. It talks about the causes and solutions of Fake news.

Combating fake news is a growing narrative of the technology platforms like Facebook, Google, the news media, the government and an informed citizenry.

Fake news affects free speech and informed choices of the subjects of the country, leading to the hijacking of democracy.

What is Fake News?

- Fake news is news, stories or hoaxes created to **deliberately** misinform or deceive readers.
- Usually, these stories are created to either **influence people’s views, push a political agenda or cause confusion and can often be a profitable business** for online publishers.
- Fake news is **not a new phenomenon** which is linked to the rise of social media, on the contrary from the times of ancient Greece, the governments and political actors (anyone in the business of mobilising public opinion) have always invested in disinformation campaigns to build narratives of their choice.

Causes of Spread of Fake News In India

- **Erosion of Media Ethics:** News media is no longer seen as an arbitrator of the ‘real news’. Media is alleged to be **echo-chamber** of the dominant political class.
Thus News Media have lost credibility due to complicit and motivated reporting, which has become a source of fake news.

- **Social Media:** The advent of social media has **decentralized the creation and propagation** of fake news.

The sheer vastness of the internet (over 35 crore users in India) and social media users (an estimated over 20 crore WhatsApp users alone) makes tracing the origin of fake news almost impossible.

- **Polarization of society:** Increasing divide in the society on ideological lines has made the job of spreading fake news easier.
- **Lack of legislation:** There is **no specific law** to deal with fake news in India.
Free publication or broadcast of news in India flows from the fundamental right to freedom of expression as enshrined under Article 19 of the Constitution
- **Confirmation Bias:** Studies have confirmed that people don't care about finding the 'truth' behind a news item and instead look for evidence to support their preferred narrative.

How to deal with fake news?

The current response to fake news primarily revolves around three prongs — rebuttal, removal of the fake news item and educating the public.

- **Rebuttal:** It is a form of fact-checking wherein the fake news is debunked by pointing out errors like mismatch, malicious editing and misattribution.
- **Removal of Fake news:** Technical companies like Facebook and YouTube uses algorithms to proactively remove fake news from their platforms.
Also, WhatsApp has put a limit on forwarding messages, so as to limit the spread to fake news.
- **Educating the end-users** to be more discerning consumers of news by informing them of verification tools so that they can ascertain the accuracy of a news item before sharing it.
- Another method that is propagated by the government, concerns **tracking the 'source' of fake news**. For this government proposes to **de-anonymise all social media accounts**.
However, this provision is criticized on account of the invasion of privacy, curbing of free speech, and creation of surveillance state.

Way Forward

While above-mentioned steps are necessary measures, it is not apparent that they are sufficient in themselves to address the larger 'political' problem posed by fake news, as:

- It is **impossible to completely 'remove'** fake news even after rebuttal, given the decentralised nature of dissemination.
- It may be possible to rebut fake news but the **'fake news factory'** inspired by political agenda, will keep churning out similar stories to advance its chosen narrative.
- The very act of **rebuttal reinforces the fake narrative** that is being pushed. Since the act of rebuttal gets confined within the original framework of the fake news.

Drishti Mains Question

Fake news affects free speech and informed choices of citizens of the country, leading to the hijacking of democracy. Comment.