

Use of Fake News and Social Media by Main Stream News Channels of India

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Abstract— This paper discusses the use of fake news and social media by mainstream news channels of India and how they're using social media and fake news to fuel nationalism and create division between communities to avoid important issues of the country like employment, health care, education, infrastructure, crime against women and children, economy etc.. This pilot study highlights the type of topics mainstream news channels discuss on their prime-time shows and shares on social media to create division, distraction and animosity between the citizens to keep citizens away from the real issues of the country.

Keywords—fake news, social media, mainstream news channels, news

I. INTRODUCTION

Fake news on social media is a problem; the spread of fake news and misinformation online is one of the top ten perils to society[1]. Any news content which has false, fabricated, biased, slanted, and factually incorrect information is called fake news. The problem of Fake news on social media came to light right after the United States' 2016 presidential election. Many reports and researches suggested that fake news on social media might have influenced social media users' decisions [2].

In the past few years, the use of social media to spread fake news has grown at a rapid pace. From individuals to corporates companies, from political parties to extremist groups are using social media to promote fake news [3]. In countries; where political parties or governments control mainstream news channels directly or indirectly, they have seen a surge in fake news produced and published by mainstream news channels, and they are using social media to reach the masses. India is one of the examples of such countries.

A country like India, where media and press were given the status as the fourth pillar of the democracy, is struggling with fake news. Moreover, one of the main contributors of fake news is the mainstream news channels of India itself [4]. A large section of mainstream news channels in India is controlled directly or indirectly by the ruling government and its supporters. From the past six years, a large section of mainstream news channels that includes the channel, editors, anchors, and reporters are using social media to promote fake news [5]. According to a BBC research done in 2018 and a report by SCMP in 2017, fake news in India is being used to promote and fuel India's Hindutva nationalism [6][7].

Hindutva nationalism or Hindu nationalism is an extremist ideology that aims to dismantle India's secular edifice and transform the country into a Hindu Rashtra [8].

II. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MAINSTREAM NEWS CHANNELS

Indian has the world's second-largest internet user base with over 560 million active internet users and 310 million active social media users. Large social media users base presents an opportunity for anyone to reach a broad audience very quickly; mainstream news channels companies are doing precisely that [9].

In the past six years, mainstream news channels are working relentlessly to increase their social media presence by investing time and resource into it. Every mainstream news channel in India is uploading articles, videos, and audio on their social media channels on an unprecedented scale daily. More often than they have been found spreading fake, slanted, biased, sloppy, fabricated and factually incorrect stories on social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

List of top fake stories shared by Indian mainstream news channels between 2017-2019

i. News Channel: Republic TV

Platform: Twitter

Story: Imam Bukhari has money to buy luxurious cars but cannot pay the electricity bills? [10]

ii. News Channel: Aaj Tak

Platform: Facebook

Story: "Men can eat their wives if they are hungry" Fatwa in Saudi Arabia Figure 1 [11]



Figure. 1 Screenshot of news shared by Aaj Tak on Facebook

iii. News Channel: Times Now

Platform: Twitter

Story: Caliphate puts a price on your faith Conversion rate card accessed Figure. 2 [12]



Figure. 2 Screenshot of news shared by Times Now on Twitter

- iv. *News Channel: Republic, Zee News, Times of India, Economic Times, Financial Express*
Platform: Twitter
Story: President Ram Nath Kovind makes a Twitter debut, gains 3 million followers in one hour [13]
- v. *News Channel: Aaj Tak, India Today, Zee News ABP News, and India TV*
Platform: Twitter
Story: Indian Army retaliation after beheading on the Indian soldier [14]
- vi. *News Channel: Republic TV and Times Now*
Platform: Twitter
Story: Undated photo of Rahul Gandhi posting with Chinese envoy Luo Zhaoui [15]
- vii. *News Channel: Zee News*
Platform: Facebook
Story: Nostradamus had predicted the rise of supreme leader Narendus (aka Prime Minister Narendra Modi) Fig. 2. [16]
- viii. *News Channel: India Today*
Platform: Twitter
Story: Paresh Mesta Case Figure 3 [17]

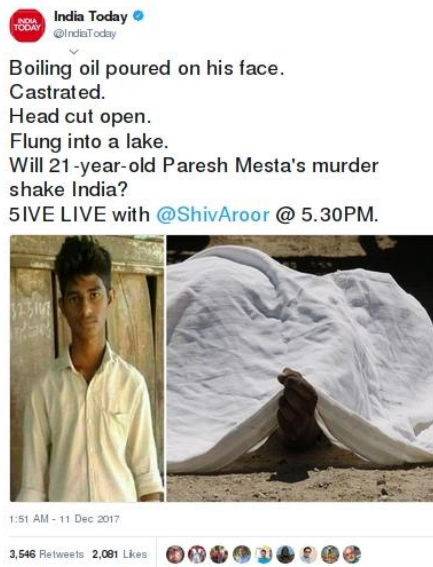


Figure. 3 Screenshot of news shared by India Today on Twitter

- ix. *News Channel: Zee TV and Aaj Tak*
Platform: YouTube
Story: Nano GPS Technology in new 2000 rupees Indian notes [18]
- x. *News Channel: Aaj Tak and ABP*
Platform: YouTube
Story: Good news coming from Jharkhak for BJP. BJP wins both Rajya Sabha seats in Jharkhand [19]

Below is the list of last 262 debates across major Indian news channels Zee News (Table I), India TV (Table II), Aaj Tak (Table III), News 18 India (Table IV), Republic Tv (Table V) shared on social media till October 23, 2019

TABLE I. ZEE NEWS DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	16
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	20
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	13
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	4
Bihar Floods	1
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	0
Rape Case	0
PMC Bank Scam	1
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	55

*Last 55 episodes of zee news show taal thok ke until October 23, 2019

TABLE II. INDIA TV DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	31
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	13
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	11
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	0
Bihar Floods	0
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	1
Rape Case	0
PMC Bank Scam	0
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	56

*Last 56 episodes of INDIA TV show Kurukshetra until October 23, 2019

TABLE III. AAJ TAKE DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	21
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	13
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	5
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	6
Bihar Floods	2
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	1
Rape Case	1
PMC Bank Scam	0
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	49

*Last 49 episodes of Aaj Tak show Dangal until October 23, 2019

TABLE IV. NEWS18INDIA DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	19
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	26
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	7
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	5
Bihar Floods	0
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	0
Rape Case	0
PMC Bank Scam	0
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	57

*Last 57 episodes of News18India named Aar Paar until October 23, 2019

TABLE V. REPUBLIC TV DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	4
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	24
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	9
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	4
Bihar Floods	1
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	0
Rape Case	0
PMC Bank Scam	3
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	45

*Last 45 episodes of Republic TV show The Debate until October 23, 2019

TABLE VI. SUMMARY OF ALL NEWS CHANNELS DEBATES

Topic	Number of Debates
Attacking Pakistan	91
Attacking Opposition (including Article 370, Muslims, Political parties)	96
Praising Current Govt. & It's Affiliates	45
Ram Mandir & Babri Masjid	19
Bihar Floods	4
Chandrayaan-2 (Moon Mission)	2
Rape Case	1
PMC Bank Scam	4
Economy	0
Unemployment	0
Education	0
Healthcare	0
Public Infrastructure	0
Farmer's Distress	0
Poverty & Malnutrition	0
Women's Safety	0
Environmental protection & pollution	0
Mob Lynching	0
Question governments decision	0
Total	262

* 262 debates of major news channels prime show until October 23, 2019

Analysis of 262 (Table VI) debates shared by mainstream media news channels shows that the topics covered in the debates were supporting the ruling government, and it is ideology directly or indirectly.

Topics such as:

- i. The economy which is in free fall from Q1, 2019 [20]
- ii. Healthcare, education, public infrastructure which is in bad shape [21]
- iii. Farmer's distress and suicide [22]
- iv. Unemployment which is at 45 years high [23]
- v. Poverty and malnutrition – India ranks 102 out of 117 Global Hunger index [24]
- vi. Pollution in India which is at an unbearable level [25]
- vii. Mob-lynching and attack against minorities in the name of cows and religion [26]
- viii. Women's safety in India [27]

Topics listed above were not discussed at all and the ones where were discussed like:

- ix. Rape case involving the current ruling government leader [28]
- x. A billion-dollar PMC bank scam [29]
- xi. Bihar flood [30]

Only amounted to 3.46% of 262 debates shared on social media by the mainstream news channels.

Over 95% of the debates shared on social media by the mainstream news channels of India were either pro-government or attacking the opposition, minorities, especially Muslims, Pakistan, Hindu vs. Muslims, Temple vs. Mosque and most, if not all, were either biased, slanted and misrepresented the data and the facts. The remaining less than 5% of the debates covered, flood in Bihar, PMC bank scam, rape case, and moon mission of India were biased to some extent.

III. THE IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

Before social media, mainstream news channels had limitations with television, radio, and print publications. However, because of growth in the internet and social media user base, it enabled them to reach a larger audience in a matter of seconds and minutes. Social media has made it easier for news channels to share their content efficiently and effectively, and the consequence of it has been and is very concerning. In the last five years, the type of content produced and shared by mainstream news channels are promoting hyper nationalism, divisive politics, targeting minorities, targeting the opposition, and presenting biased, slanted, fabricated, and incorrect facts and data and the consequence of it has been dangerous and in some case deadly. Issues like education, economy, jobs, healthcare, women's safety, crimes against women, pollution, poverty, malnutrition, farmers' suicide, rape are deliberately hiding behind by topics like Hindu vs. Muslim, nationalist vs. antinational, temple vs. mosque, Hinduism vs. Islam, India vs. Pakistan.

Furthermore, these things are fueling hyper nationalism and hatred between citizens for each other based on their political and religious beliefs. Because of that, the crime against minorities in India has increased. People are being lynched to death by mobs in the name of cow and religion, especially Muslims. Anyone questioning the government is termed as anti-national by news channels and the supporters of the government. Minorities are living in fear as they are being targeted day and night by news channels in their prime-time debate and are asked to prove their nationalism. People are being forced to prove their love for their nation even if it goes against their religious values and the constitution of India.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this pilot study we used a quantitative survey where we chose top 5 main stream news channels of India based on their TRP and analysed their show flagship prime-time show for 60 days (last watched episode October 23, 2019). Topics of the debates were categories based on the "news category" listed by the top 5 news channels on their website and the news that they cover.

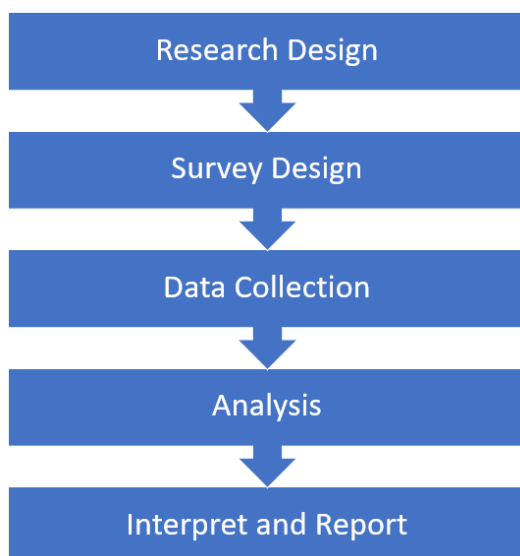


Figure. 4 Pilot study work flow chart

V. CONCLUSION

The problem of fake news is growing at an uncontrollable speed. Government and mainstream news channels, which are supposed to solve the problem of fake news, are part of the problem. The number of unbiased news channels is far less than the biased one. Controlling fake news on social media is not going to be an easy thing to do. Social media companies need to come forward and work fixing the problem by crating strict content policy guidelines and content filtration system, the problem will continue to grow.

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