FAKE NEWS!

SIFTING TRUTH FROM LIES IN THE AGE OF #FAKENEWS

News media is under attack from all directions in today's world. A very specific phenomenon has manifested in this epoch that is haunting journalism worldwide like a spectre. It's called 'fake news'. At times, the term 'fake news' is used to refer to the spread of disinformation with an intent to deceive. At others, it is used as an accusation to attack and discredit mainstream media or political opponents. Our study aimed to understand the two-pronged nature of this information disorder in the context of Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

As there is little factual evidence to examine the extent of the pervasiveness of the 'fake news' phenomenon, we designed an online survey to take a preliminary look at fact-checking practices in the industry. The survey was circulated in online communities of journalists, including the Digital Journalists of Pakistan Facebook group. Questions were designed to examine the respondents' familiarity with fact-checking methods and also to simultaneously educate them about the mechanisms of news verification. A total of 152 journalists based in Pakistan participated in the survey. Structured interviews were further conducted with 10 Pakistani journalists in editorial positions and those with some expertise and experience of sifting truth from lies. This was done to evaluate the impact of fake news on reporting.

KEY FINDINGS

- Journalists are not comfortable using the term 'fake news' to describe news that is not true as it has increasingly been used in Twitter campaigns for partisan propaganda and discrediting credible journalism.
- Frequent accusations of 'fake news' led to an increase in interest in fact-checking in newsrooms.
- False news is more likely to be believed if it validates a preconceived bias, feeds into an
- already established narrative and/or is shared by public figures or people perceived to be credible.
- The more a topic is politically contentious, the higher its chances of being susceptible to fake news.
- Social media, particularly WhatsApp, is a hotbed for spread of false information
- Twitter is emerging as a fake news ecosystem parallel to WhatsApp. According to participants of the study, fake news spread on Twitter via seemingly fake, hyper-nationalist accounts. Others use doctored screenshots of major news outlets as 'documentary evidence'. Fake Twitter profiles to impersonate well-known figures and disseminate false information using these profiles are also common.
- There is a dearth of media literacy training in Pakistan. Only 17 per cent of the respondents said they have attended fact-checking training. There are no dedicated fact-checkers or fact-checking organisations based in Pakistan.

FOR JOURNALISTS & MEDIA PRACTITIONERS

- Be sceptical
- Source the source
- Engage in accountable, ethical journalism practices and evidence-based reporting
- Prioritise fact-checking and the calling out of disinformation and misinformation
- Practice verification of data, sources, digital images
- Utilise online training resources on fact-checking and introduce them in respective newsrooms
- Participate in trainings regarding face-checking and exchange resources
- Question everything you find/receive online
- Invest in fact-checking desks within newsrooms
- Prioritise fact-checking and the calling out of disinformation and misinformation within
- news organisations
- Allow space to debunks and busting the myth, and fact-check stories
- Educate your audience through awareness campaigns and reporting on specific instances of fake news

FOR NON-PROFITS, NGOS, THINK TANKS WORKING ON MEDIA

- Organise fact-checking trainings and media literacy workshops with media practitioners
- Engage with the communities of journalists (press clubs, unions) to introduce media literacy concepts
- Create opportunities for open dialogue on information disorder, both within the journalist community as well as multi-stakeholder dialogue
- Research on the dynamics of fake news in Pakistan to devise workable solutions and policy recommendations in line with concepts of free speech
- Engage government officials on information disorder and introduce the vocabulary and human rights-centric approaches to discourage bad laws/regulation

FOR MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND PRESS CLUBS

- Invest in fact-checking training and verification tools for staff
- Conduct regular, hands-on digital security exercises
- Encourage collective dialogue within the organisation on identifying and fighting information disorder
- Initiate public literacy campaigns, projects
- Organise and facilitate dialogue on ethical journalism

FOR GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

- Develop consensus on which regulatory authority is tasked dealing with social media matters (as of now, interior ministry, information ministry, National IT Board and IT ministry are all involved)
- Involve stakeholders, including civil society, media practitioners, press clubs, journalists' unions and news organisations, in legislation plans to regulate media and information disorder
- Initiate social media literacy training in government departments

RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERVIEW

Our study points towards the urgent need to promote media literacy in the country. All stakeholders involved – platforms, media organisations, government, civil society – must come together to tackle the problem that has compromised confidence in credible gatekeepers of information. The spread of fake news cannot be contained with bad laws. Instead, a collective, more inclusive strategy based on media literacy is the need of the hour.

Finally, the study includes helpful resources that enable media practitioners to report responsibly in the digital age. With the help of this study, the Digital Rights Foundation hopes to lay the groundwork for a nuanced conversation around fighting fake news in Pakistan.