

The Wild West of the Digital World: Fake News Discourse in Social Media

With a range of platforms available to create, share and re-share content, the authenticity and credibility of what is shared is increasingly being compromised in an age of instant gratification. With no restraint and accountability, more and more lies, prejudices and distortions are broadcast on social media and presented as 'news'. No wonder, social media have become the wild west of the digital world. As Wifi and broadband connectivity become more accessible and mobile phones more affordable, more people are using smartphones to access and distribute content without any filters. Consequently, the values, ethics and professional practices are conceded to indulgent and phony content with a single aim to attract more likes in a digital world where everyone who owns a device has become a broadcaster.

The effects of this digital disarray are enormous as rumors and hearsay replace sourced, and authentic news. In many parts of the world, with little or no media literacy, irresponsible social media posts have led to social disturbance, violence even lynching of innocent people.

The misinformation around the Covid-19 pandemic is a horrifying example of how ill-informed opinions, half-baked truths, conspiracy theories and prejudices have led to public disinformation, impacting the lives of millions of people across the globe. Be it the right-wing propaganda against the use of face masks in the United States or the propaganda against vaccination in France or the promotion of potions and magic to treat covid-19 in Africa or the blatant lies being peddled in India to accuse people of the spread of the infection or the rumours that the ferocity of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy has been due to arrival of illegal immigrants from the Middle East, inexorable use of social media has already created havoc in many communities and countries across the world. If this was not enough, some celebrities and politicians, using their social media handles to increase popularity, publish and recycle implausible claims, post controversial content and share fake news. Ordinary people, who follow these public figures, easily fall victim to the falsehood their heroes spread. In many parts of the world where these public figures are worshiped, the consequences of the irresponsible use of social media by these 'icons' are anybody's guess.

It is not the technology but the mind behind it which makes it a disinformation tool rather than a device of informing, educating, and instructing people during the covid-19 pandemic. People, of course, need access to information that is reliable and timely to help them prepare and prevent this infection. Keeping in view the focus on standard operating procedures like use of masks, social distance and body hygiene, especially washing hands regularly, it is imperative to educate people and reinforce the expert advice. But, many unscrupulous elements are using popular social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikT ok, WhatsApp, etc. to peddle incorrect information and unconfirmed reports which not only put lives at risk but also put a question mark on the journalistic practice and ethics. No wonder, social media platforms in many parts of the world have become the vehicles of fake news and fodder for rumor mills. The snowballing effect of social media makes a rumour, a joke or a meme go viral as people, without ascertaining the authenticity, share and recycle these lies among millions of people.

Conventionally, every media institution would verify the news it would publish or broadcast, and there was a process in place to ensure the information received conforms to the basic principles and values of news. As Newspapers, Radio stations and Television networks lose ground to instant and omnipresent social media, all filters and checks to scrutinize the authenticity of news are becoming redundant. Though in some high profile cases, the technology giants owning the social platforms have taken action by suspending or even canceling social media accounts of some popular politicians and celebrities for spreading

lies and hatred, it has become almost impossible to detect and prevent fake news from being spread by people who do not comprehend the consequences for such irresponsible actions. While legislation and laws can be used, the real solution to the misuse of social media is in education rather than punishment.

Social media are with us and their use is going to increase as more and more people are getting access to wifi and mobile devices. This is the time to develop a comprehensive strategy to include media literacy into the core curriculum starting from the primary level. During times of emergencies and health crises like the one humankind is facing at the moment, correct, clear and clean information is indispensable in alleviating the sufferings, and helping people to better cope with this disease.



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