



A Study of Fake News and select Fact-Checking Sites in India

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Abstract

Fake news refers to incorrect information presented as news, whether on social media or through mainstream media. The rising prevalence of fake news, particularly with the advent of social media, underscores the need for effective fact-checking. Fact-checking is a process involving the verification of facts and debunking fake information. The study analysed the working style of four fact-checking sites in India (AltNews, BoomLive, TheQuint (Webqoof) and The LogicalIndian), dissecting 805 stories into elements to determine their accuracy. The study provides an insight into how fake news is debunked. It has been found that fake news outweighs genuine news, as consumption of viral content is higher. The main reason behind this is people's shortened attention span. Those spreading fake news exploit this vulnerability. Besides, mainstream media nowadays picks up news from social media, which is a hub of fake news. Fact-checkers have consistently debunked such cases. Much like traditional news reporting, the fact-checking process is guided by news values and ethics.

Keywords: Disinformation, Fake News, Fact-Checking, Misinformation

Introduction

Fake news has been around since digital media entered the news world. Digital media has given space to multiple online sources, non-affiliated websites and portals. In the race to break news every minute, news values and ethics are compromised. Three MIT scholars find that people fall prey to fake news as it comparatively spreads more quickly, by a substantial margin, on social networks like Twitter than real news (Dizikes, 2018).

Fake news is an inaccurate, sometimes sensationalistic report created to gain attention, mislead, deceive or damage a reputation ("Fake News," n.d.). Fake news intentions are like bias, but often more calculated to match news organisations' narratives; it is news but fake ("Fake News Intentions," 2023). The term 'fake news' gained prominence following the 2016 US presidential elections. Donald Trump popularised the term; before that, it was hardly used. In that election, hundreds of websites published falsified or heavily biased stories ("Fake News in the 2016 US elections," 2023). According to Stanford economist Matthew Gentzkow (as cited by "Stanford University," 2020), the fabricated stories in Donald Trump's favour were shared 30 million times, nearly quadrupling the pro-Hillary Clinton content shared in the elections.

Understanding how the fake news system operates is crucial due to its profound societal impact. In India, a survey by Microsoft released on February 5, 2019, exhibited that India has more fake news than any other

country. Microsoft ranked India seventh in Microsoft's Digital Civility Index Survey, which found that Indians were most likely to encounter fake news and internet hoaxes, with seven points higher than the global average ("Microsoft" 2019). Fake news has proven life-threatening in India (Kachari, 2018). Therefore, in the era of information overload, fact-checkers can be saviours for audiences. Fact-checking sites verify facts and inform the audience that not all news that reaches their screen is trustworthy. Fact-checking is the method used to verify the integrity of unsettled reporting and statements (Parker, 2023).

The current study is thus imperative to evaluate the problem of fake news in India. The research on fact-checking sites can offer comprehensive insights into India's fake news landscape, revealing the sources and methods behind the creation of such misleading information. Research in this area is vital for understanding how individuals can identify and counter fake news in their daily lives by adopting fact-checkers' techniques.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have explored the realm of fake news, with recent focus shifting towards the emergence of fact-checking globally. In India, this field of research is slowly gaining attention, presenting numerous unexplored areas.

Gomez et al. (2022) observe that fact-checking as a thriving journalistic discipline has gained significant importance since 2016. In over 50 countries, fact-checking initiatives have been certified with IFCN. *Twitter* and *Facebook* are the most used channels by fact-checkers, followed by *Instagram* and *YouTube*. Users also prefer these networks for searching for news.

Porter and Wood (2021) conducted fact-checking experiments simultaneously in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom to determine whether fact-checking can reduce belief in misinformation. They observed that fact-checking can help mitigate the threat of misinformation to factual accuracy. However, fact-checking alone is likely insufficient to address the scope of misinformation.

Lim (2018) concludes that fact-checkers rarely fact-check the same statements, and when they do, the rate of factual agreement on their factual accuracy is quite low. The author suggests that fact-checkers should improve consistency, making fact-checking more effective.

Robertson et al. (2020) state that the audience relationship with fact-checking sites is dependent on three stages—awareness, attitudes and visiting behaviour. Liberals in the United States are more familiar with fact-checking, and those who consume news from outlets such as CNN and MSNBC outlets, as they fact-check regularly.

Rashkin et. al. (2017) underline that fact-checking is a challenging task. However, its lexical features can contribute to understanding the differences

between more reliable and less reliable digital news sources.

Vlachos and Riedel (2014) mention that fact-checking assigns a truth value to claims made in a particular context. Time, speaker, multiple sources and interpretations are part of the fact-checking process to debunk fake information.

Research Objectives

- a) To assess the flow of fake news stories busted by fact-checking sites.
- b) To identify the themes that are common in fake news stories.
- c) To find out through which type of content fake news is spread more.
- d) To analyse tools and techniques used by fact-checkers to debunk fake news.

Research Questions

- a) What is the frequency of fake news stories in contemporary times?
- b) In which beat of reporting fake news is spread more?
- c) How do fact-checking sites debunk fake news?

Research Methodology

Content analysis was used to achieve the research objectives, an appropriate method for the current study. The fact-checking websites have been examined over a specific period to understand their working style and the prevalence of fake news.

To achieve the first objective, the study analyses the number of stories produced by each website each month during the reference period. Subsequently, a meticulous reading was done to understand every story comprehensively. For the second objective, content has been closely examined; themes were identified and coded, serving as the basis for later categorisation. A six-step thematic analysis given by Braun and Clarke (2006) has been used to analyse the themes in debunked stories. It begins with collecting data from the sites and proceeds to identify common elements (codes) within the data. These codes are then grouped to generate themes. Each theme is precisely defined to provide a clear understanding. In some cases, when multiple codes are present in a story, the dominant code is selected, which aligns more with the narrative. Finally, the data has been organised and presented, facilitating a comprehensive examination of prevalent themes in fake news debunking.

Furthermore, for the third objective, different types of fake news content have been recognised as fact-checkers clearly outlined in their reports, from where fake news was poured via photos, text, videos or audio. Lastly, tools have been identified that are used to debunk fake news in each story to achieve the final objective. The units of analysis included news stories in the form of texts, videos, photographs and audio.

The study encompasses a sample of four distinct, independent fact-checking Indian websites, namely *TheLogicalIndian*, *TheQuint (Webqoof)*, *AltNews*, and *Boomlive*. *AltNews* and *Boomlive* operate as standalone fact-checking websites, while *TheQuint (Webqoof)* and *TheLogicalIndian* host dedicated fact-checking sections within their digital media organisations. These websites have been chosen based on preliminary research, indicating their prominence, consistent engagement in debunking various stories, and substantial audience reach across social media. The study examined 805 stories covered by the selected fact-checking websites from January 1, 2023, through April 30, 2023, to ensure access to recent and readily available data.

Findings

The study analyses a total of 805 stories from four fact-checking sites.

Monthly Data Analysis

AltNews has debunked 92 stories, with the highest in March (27) and the lowest in February (18). *Boomlive* has debunked 261 stories, with the highest in February (72) and the lowest in March (58). *TheQuint* has debunked 290 stories, with the highest in April (76) and the lowest in March (69). *TheLogicalIndian* has debunked 162 stories, with the highest in January (50) and the lowest in April (28).

Overall, during the study period, *TheQuint* has debunked the highest number of stories (290), followed respectively by *Boomlive* (261), *TheLogicalIndian* (162), and *AltNews* (92).

Table 1: Monthly Data Analysis of sample fact-checking sites

Fact-Checking Sites	January	February	March	April	Total
Alt.News	26	18	27	21	92
Boomlive	60	72	58	71	261
The Quint	75	70	69	76	290
The Logical Indian	50	46	38	28	162

Thematic Analysis

Using the six-step thematic analysis given by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes are extracted from the stories and are added to the analysis. Table 2 lists six main themes most common in fake news content: Politics, Religion, International Affairs, Entertainment and Sports, Conflict and Crime, and a Miscellaneous category.

AltNews has debunked 43.47 per cent of Political news, 19.56 per cent Religion, 18.47 per cent International Affairs, 10.86 per cent Miscellaneous, 4.34 per cent Entertainment and Sports, and 3.26 per cent Crime and Conflict.

Boomlive has debunked 32.95 per cent Politics, followed by International Affairs with 28.73 per cent, Miscellaneous 14.17 per cent, Religion 10.72 per

cent, Entertainment and Sports-8.81 per cent, and lastly Crime and Conflict with 4.59 per cent.

TheQuint has debunked 31.37 per cent politics, 26.55 per cent International Affairs, Miscellaneous 16.55 per cent, religion, Entertainment and Sports 9.65 per cent, and Crime and Conflict 6.20 per cent.

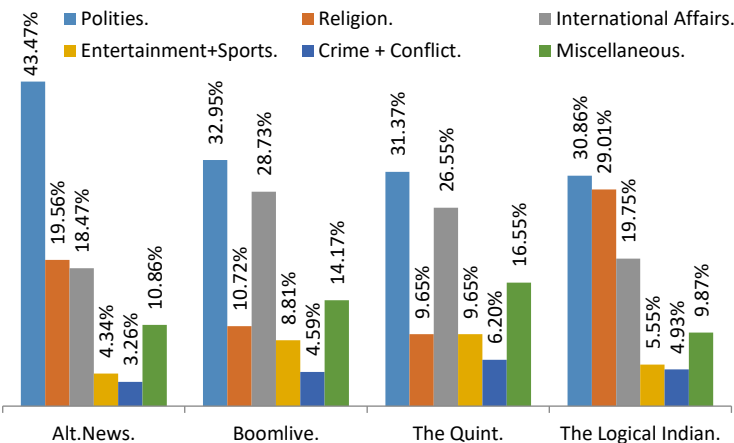
TheLogicalIndian has debunked 30.86 per cent Politics, 29.01 per cent Religion, 19.75 per cent International Affairs, 9.87 per cent Miscellaneous, 5.55 per cent Entertainment and Sports, and 4.93 per cent Crime and Conflict.

Overall, Political theme is the most dominant, while as Crime and Conflict stories are less prevalent.

Table 2: Thematic definitions extracted from sample fact-checking sites

Theme	Definition
Politics	Stories that mention the names of political leaders, political parties, or issues directly or indirectly related to them.
Religion	False information and claims targeting religious identities, myths and misleading impressions.
International affairs	Stories concerning international territories and issues.
Entertainment and Sports	Content made out of entertainment, issues around actors/actresses.
	The sports theme is concerned with sports personalities and related issues.
Crime and Conflict	Crime is any harmful activity punishable by law.
	Conflict involves disputes between individuals or groups.
Miscellaneous	This theme is combination of different subject matters.

Fig. 2: Overall Thematic Analysis of Sample Websites

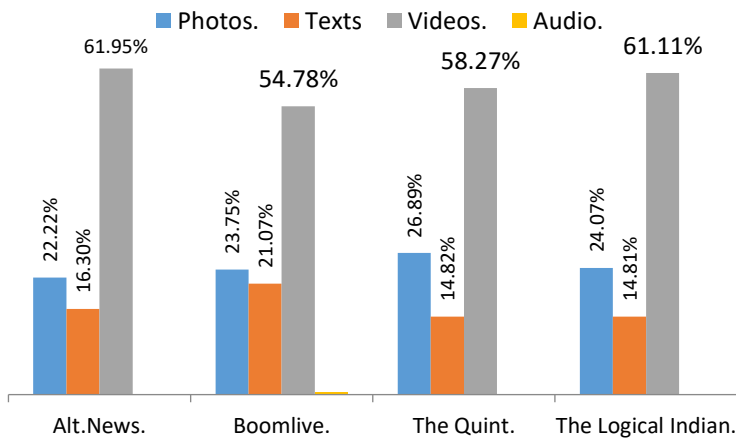


Fake News Content Types

Fact-checking sites are interpreted to understand the channels used to disseminate misinformation. As observed from Fig. 2, *AltNews* has debunked 61.95 per cent videos, 22.22 per cent photos and 16.30 per cent text stories. *Boomlive* has debunked 54.78 per cent videos, 23.75 per cent photos, 21.07 per cent, texts stories and audio 0.38 per cent. *TheQuint* has debunked 58.27 per cent videos, 26.89 per cent photos, and 14.82 per cent text stories. *TheLogicalIndian* has debunked 61.11 per cent videos, 24.07 per cent photos and 14.81 per cent text stories.

The findings indicate that the video medium spreads more fake news than other media.

Fig. 3: Overall Analysis of Content Types



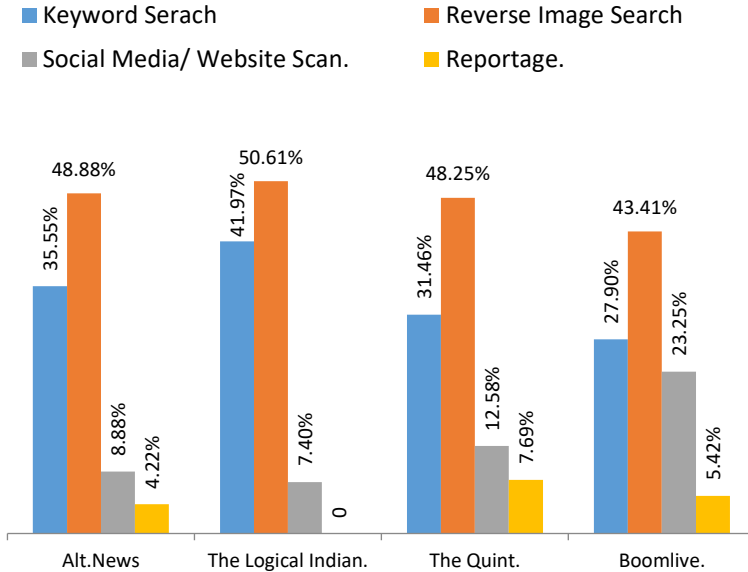
Fact-Checking Tools

It has been observed that select fact-checking websites mostly use four tools to unearth fake news: Keyword search, reverse image search, social media/website scan, and Reportage.

As evident from Fig. 4, *TheLogicalIndian* site has used 50.61 per cent Reverse Image Search, 41.97 per cent Keyword Search and 7.40 per cent Social media/ website scan to debunk fake news. *TheQuint* has used Reverse Image Search 48.25 per cent, Keyword search 31.46 per cent, social media/website scan 12.58 per cent and done reportage 7.69 per cent. *AltNews* has used Reverse Image Search 48.88 per cent, Keyword Search 35.55 per cent, Social Media/ Website Scan 8.88 per cent and Reportage 4.22 per cent. *Boomlive* has used 43.41 per cent Reverse Image Search, 27.90 per cent Keyword Search, 23.25 per cent Social Media/ Website Scan and 5.42 per cent Reportage.

Overall, the *Reverse Image Search* bar is higher in percentage for all the fact-checking sites, and *Reportage* is the lowest.

Fig. 4: Overall Analysis of Tools



Discussion

Beyond the traditional reporting, which demands gathering facts to construct a story, fact-checking dissects stories into elements to determine their factual accuracy. It focuses on reading the channels through which false news is disseminated. When inaccurate information is presented in a news format, it transforms regular news into fake news. This umbrella term covers various forms of false information circulated with different intentions, including the content that surfaces on social media platforms.

The sample websites are readily accessible to the public; however, some content is behind a paywall. The present data is exclusively gathered from the official websites of these fact-checking platforms, without referencing any other sources.

AltNews is a dedicated fact-checking website that runs in English and Hindi. The data, however, has been gathered from English fact-checks only. Its sole purpose is to identify and debunk false information that can be misleading. They typically debunked 1 to 3 stories on most of the days, while on some days, there has been no flow of debunked stories. In January, *AltNews* debunked a total of 26 stories covering various subject matters. In February number was 18, in March (27) and 21 in April, which sums up to 92 stories in

period of four months. *AltNews* gets flow of news by actively tracking both social and mainstream media. They focus on tweets of politician, official, suspected accounts, and viral content. Additionally, they regularly identify and scrutinise any news stories or claim that lack sufficient verification and is carried by mainstream media. They encourage people to send them messages for verification of news. Then they select those stories to debunk which has viral nature and societal impact.

Boomlive is a fact-checking site, similar to *AltNews*, with a committed focus on fact-checking and providing explainers. *Boomlive* operates in multiple languages, including English, Hindi, Gujarati, and Bengali, and it has branches in Myanmar and Bangladesh. It boasts their news flow and built a larger newsroom for their fact-checking endeavours. The current data is analysed only from their English language content and fact-checks from India. They follow a similar pattern to *AltNews* when it comes to their approach to identifying fake news. Also, they have a WhatsApp helpline number where people can send suspected content for verification. In selected four months, they have debunked 261 stories, in which 60 from January, 72 in February, 58 in March and 71 in April.

TheQuint is a digital media platform that extensively covers a wide range of issues from across India. They have established a dedicated unit known as “*WebQoof*” focused on fact-checking. The platform regularly debunks fake news in text and video formats. They also do explainers, where they define the reasons behind the spread of any particular fake news. Notably, *WebQoof* has debunked higher number of stories compared to other selected websites using the same way of establishing fake news out of different content. They debunked 290 stories, 75 in January, 70 in February, 69 in March and 76 in April.

TheLogicalIndian is again a digital media organisation with a dedicated fact-checking unit. The section maintains a consistent output, debunking 162 stories with 50 in January, 56 in February, 38 in March and 28 in April. They also follow the same style of spotting fake news via social media, messages from people and mainstream media.

All these websites regularly monitor specific social media accounts known for sharing false information that sometimes goes viral.

Themes of fake news content

The data analysis revealed six main themes of fake news content, viz., Politics, Religion, International Affairs, Entertainment and Sports, Conflict and Crime, and a Miscellaneous category. The research found that the Political fake news is debunked the most by sample websites. India has one of the most extensive political landscapes, and parties invest greatly in their publicity efforts. Politics considerably influences communication channels; they often disseminate misinformation, disinformation, misinterpretations,

and baseless praise for their party. To show support for their political party, people believe whatever is shared by them and quickly share it forward, as revealed by research.

The study has found that religion-based fake news is a growing concern. The dataset reveals that religion-based false information often targets religious identities that include instances where a religion is falsely praised and connected to certain achievements, creating a misleading impression. Additionally, there are efforts to debunk recurring religious myths by fact-checkers that often make headlines.

The study shows that fact-checkers tend to debunk international false information, especially when it goes viral from India and garners significant attention. International Politics ranks among the most frequently debunked topics on fact-checking websites among other sorts of international areas. International affairs exert their influence on India, whether it's about global personalities or issues. Hence, it becomes imperative for fact-checkers to ensure that the public is well informed with accurate facts.

For instance, when an earthquake struck Turkey and Syria in February 2023, the world was traumatised by the harrowing visuals emerging from the affected regions. Unfortunately, in such critical situations, the spread of false information remained rampant. The earthquake in Turkey became focal point for debunked news throughout February for selected fact-checkers. Regularly, there was a deluge of false videos, photos, and text circulated on social media and at times carried by mainstream media of India, according to data. These misleading pieces of content were swiftly disseminated by people, eager for accurate information about earthquake, were navigating a sea of misinformation.

With the vast population, India boasts a large market for both Entertainment and Sports. Any news related to these topics captures the attention of the public. Fact-checkers have debunked a significant amount of false information circulating in these domains.

For instance, the movie '*Pathaan*' was plagued by a wave of fake news even before the release of its posters, and this trend persisted even after the film's release. The movie was released on January 25, 2023. The main leads were Shahrukh Khan, Deepika Padukone and John Abraham. The movie faced political criticism, which only amplified the circulation of misinformation. Fact-checkers debunked numerous false stories surrounding it.

In February 2023, a claim was shared on *Facebook* and *X* (formerly *Twitter*) about the Women's Premier League: the two commentators were banned because they made sexist remarks during a match. *Boomlive* and *TheQuint* found out that it was satire post originally, which the creator of post confirmed but it went around as real news. Fact-checkers didn't find any evidence of this claim.

Fake news content format

The examples of fake news discussed earlier were disseminated through various media. It was observed that the video format is prominent in spreading fake news, followed respectively by photos and texts. Sundar et al. (2021) noticed that audiences consider the video more credible than audio and text. People with less knowledge of issues are more convinced that the video is real than those who are involved in the issue. The realism heuristic (seeing is believing) is one of the psychological factors that promotes fake news content through video more.

The photos follow the same rule; they are easy to share, and people are interested in viewing multimedia content more than basic text-based stories, as it's eye-catching and needs no hard work or attention like text. It's important to note that fake news isn't limited to one form in a story but often involves combinations of these formats to convey deceptive messages. For example, both photos and videos are incorporated with text; sometimes, all three are combined simultaneously.

Photos

Photos serve as powerful windows into moments and narratives. However, they have been susceptible to manipulation and misrepresentation. Photographs themselves were found to be generally reliable, but the accompanying textual information introduces inaccuracies, such as misdated or misconstrued context.

With the rapid evolution of technology, fake photographs have undergone extensive alterations, including morphing, AI-driven transformation, and straightforward cropping, all of which lead to disinformation. It is making things more straightforward for fake news spreaders. However, they can be recognised with the proper understanding of such things, and the fact-checkers are doing the same.

For instance, in January 2023, a photo of girls went around on social media, wearing hijabs and holding up certificates at the Malabar Gold and Diamonds charitable event. The problem here was not that the photo (which was correct), but the superimposed text claims. Social media users claimed that this scholarship is given only to Muslim girls and questioned why it is not given to Hindu girls. According to reports of *TheQuint*, *TheLogicalIndian* and *AltNews*, this claim is completely false because on the website of Malabar, there were many such group photos where girls from other religions were seen receiving scholarships.

Videos

Videos are often more captivating than photos. Data has concluded that they are more susceptible to misinformation. It has been found that, like photos, videos are also not always edited; the text accompanying the video creates false information. Sometimes, videos are edited by clipping, creating false narratives from selected clips. Furthermore, technology like deep fake uses

AI to manipulate videos and change content and context.

For example, in January 2023, a video was shared by social media users with a wrong claim. The video was taken from a reality TV show called 'The Carbonaro Effects', which shows the performance of a magic trick. While people shared it on social media, they claimed that there is a new kind of phone in the market, which is made of paper and can be disposed of after calls and texts. *Boomlive* found its extended video, which makes it clear that it was a prank and that nothing like paper phones is on the market.

Texts

The research found that text-based content can be misleading if it contains inaccuracies. Such content may involve altered words, morphed messages, or the circulation of old messages with false claims.

For instance, a Hindi advertisement of newspaper *Dainik Jagran* went viral in March 2023, with the claim that says, "*Ek Mohalla Ek Bakra (one locality- one goat) this time on Bakraeid sacrifice one goat in whole locality to increase affinity and reduce bloodshed*". *AltNews*, *Boomlive* and *TheLogicalIndian* debunked the claim and found in their enquiry that the advertisement was morphed, words were changed. The actual words were - "Ek Mohalla, Ek Holika". The ad was not about Bakra Eid, but it was urging people to play a safe Holi and, based on that, gave a list of steps.

Audio

In the entire dataset, only audio-related fake news was debunked by *Boomlive*. The finding was that providing an incorrect context for audio content can lead the audience to misinterpretation.

For instance, in February 2023, a 4-minute and 9-second audio clip went viral on social media sites with a photo of Lakshmi Mittal, an Indian steel tycoon. In the audio, the speaker blamed India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, for declaring India a secular nation. In 2019, *Boomlive* debunked the audio; that year Lakshmi tweeted and stated that he was falsely associated with this audio. After years, audio again did the rounds and created a false narrative.

Tools and Techniques used by fact-checkers

It has been found that the most crucial technique employed by fact-checkers is their meticulous reading of details. They carefully read various forms of information, whether in photos, videos, text, or audio, and this step alone accounts for half of their efforts.

As technology continues to evolve, it enables both the spread of fake news and provides tools to debunk it. Fact-checkers leverage these tools effectively. The four primary methods commonly employed by selected fact-checkers are- Keyword search, Reverse Image search, Social Media/Websites scan and Reportage. Reverse image search is the most dominant tool used by sample fact-checking sites, followed by Keyword

search. As videos and photo-based fake news are more common, the reverse image search tool enables users to trace the original sources of visual content, making it an effective way to uncover the truth.

Keyword search

It has been concluded that when fact-checkers go through straightforward information, they perform a quick Google search like all in world do. For complex false information, they deconstruct the information available, systematically crafting a multitude of word combinations, until they unearth pertinent results, which can be news reports or anything around it.

For instance, in April 2023, a circular with the name of Indian Oil Corporation went viral with a wrong claim, which says that if customers' fuel tanks reach the maximum limit, they may explode. To debunk the claim, selected fact-checkers used the keyword search tool. They found out that Indian Oil has already shared a statement on X (formerly Twitter) that the viral circular is fake, and they have not issued anything like this.

Reverse Image Search

Reverse Image Search is found to be a most vital tool for fact-checkers. When information can't be easily found through keyword searches, fact-checkers turn to reverse image searches. This involves photo uploading and searching for sources and the exact location and date. For videos, they extract key frames using various software tools like In Vid Keyframe, Chrome extensions, Google Lens, among others.

For instance, in April 2023, three photos of a woman with grave injuries went viral on social media with a false claim that she was a Hindu communist girl, assaulted by the Muslim community. To find the truth, *TheLogicalIndian* did a reverse image search and found reports by Hindustan Times and Indian Express, along with some other reports, which cleared that she was a Malayalam actress and her ex-partner has tortured her, who is Hindu. So, no Muslim community was involved.

Social Media/ Website scan

It has been found that fact-checkers regularly scour various social media platforms, with Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) being the primary focus. When false information emerges about individuals or groups, social media often serves as a repository for valuable clarification. Sometimes, individuals adept at debunking claim step in in the comment sections. Fact-checkers diligently track official tweets and announcements, recognising that false information spreads on social media, the correct information is also often available. The key is to remain vigilant and discerning.

Reportage

It is observed that the reporting and fact-checking have similar purposes but different focus points. While reporters typically research deep into stories, fact-checkers primarily focus on verifying facts. They seek primary sources and official records, press releases, conduct interviews and even access

documents like FIRS (first information reports) to debunk fake news and confirm the accuracy of information.

Conclusion

The study highlights the alarming frequency with which fake news has become a part of daily life. Seemingly, innocuous misinformation can have devastating effects on people's lives as it shapes opinions. False information leads to conflicts and violence, sometimes resulting in loss of life. The biggest reason behind the proliferation of fake news in current times is people's shortened attention span. Those spreading fake news exploit this vulnerability. They know that people are going to skim rather than thoroughly read.

In some cases, creators explicitly clarify that their content is intended as parody, but misinformation persists due to a lack of attention. The truth is always around people, but ignorance doesn't let them see it. Fact-checkers' work is to eradicate ignorance and provide facts while maintaining a code of ethics, such as hiding sensitive content and providing context and sources in their reports. Fact-checking sites are the bulwark against the spread of misinformation and disinformation. It has been observed that mainstream media nowadays picks up news sourced from social media, which is a hub of fake news. Fact-checkers have consistently debunked such cases where mainstream media has relied on information from social media platforms without prior verification. Most of the time, social media users and media organisations delete the reports debunked however, fact-checkers kept all the deleted reports and social media posts on Archive sites. The study also concludes that the sample websites mostly debunk fake news in the political beat. While all the fact-checking sites adhere to the same rules of uncovering false information in content available, the variance in the number of stories debunked primarily stems from the criteria used to determine what qualifies to be fact-checked. Much like traditional news reporting, where news values play a pivotal role, the fact-checking process is guided by similar values.

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