Online Fake News During Lockdown: A Study of Perspective and Impact on Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students of India

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Abstract:

In this article, attempts are made to understand the perspective of undergraduate and postgraduate students of India about the fake news on the Internet and various social media platforms during COVID-19 lockdown period. It has been tried to discover through the study, why fake news gets circulated and what impacts these fake news have on these students. In this article, it has been shown, different kinds of fake news that had been circulated on the Internet during COVID-19 lockdown and how those false rumours affected the lives of people. Also, this article throws light on the political and religious fake news that have been circulated in online platforms during the lockdown. Attempts are made to understand the perspectives of these students about religious and political fake news and their impacts on them. This article focuses on what action should be taken against fake news and how these students are dealing with false information in online platforms.

Keywords: Fake News, Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Students, COVID-19; Lockdown; Social Media

Introduction:

In 2020, the world had witnessed the curse of COVID-19 which globally took the lives of millions of lives. Many countries in the world had to go through complete lockdown. In this phase of lockdown, the global usage of the internet and social media had increased. In this lockdown period, the increase of fake news is a cause of concern for everyone around the globe. India is not an exception in this scenario either. As India's internet users have crossed the mark of 500 million in 2019 [1] and more than 375 million people use social media as of 2019, (Source- https://www.statista.com/statistics/278407/number-of-social-network-users-in-india/) there is no doubt that, there would be the circulation fake news in online platforms to some degree. In All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) in their study suggests that, India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is only 27.4%. It is important to note that, GER is the ratio of the population between 18-23 and the people who obtained for higher education. [2] As there is a limited number of people in India get the chance to receive higher education in different colleges and universities, it is important to get an overall perspective of undergraduate and postgraduate students of colleges and universities of India regarding online fake news during the lockdown and how they are impacted by it.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objective of the study is to understand how the undergraduate and postgraduate students of various college and universities are affected by online fake news on the Internet during this COVID-19 lockdown. In this study, attempts are made to explore the perspective of the students of higher education on false information. Also, through the study, attempts are made to understand what kind of steps these educated young generations take to deal with online fake news.

Methods of the Study:

A mixed research method is adopted for the study which means a mix of qualitative and quantitative research method was followed. Initially, a qualitative research method is followed as several articles, books, research works and news reports were studied on this issue. After an extensive literature review, a survey among 40 Indian undergraduate and postgraduate students from different universities and colleges is conducted to get a better idea about their perspective on fake news and the impact of it on them during the period of lockdown. Also, as it is mentioned earlier due to COVID-19 and lockdown fake news have increased, through survey, attempts are made to find out, in the lockdown phase, whether the students have got any kind of fake news that can trigger panic about COVID-19 or not. A Google Form with different questions to get an understanding of

the perspectives of these students were given, in order to conduct the survey. Among the respondents, 31 were postgraduate and 9 were undergraduate students.

Literature Review:

There are some differences in fake news and disinformation. According to Serena Guisti and Elisa Piras, the idea of misinformation derived from the idea of propaganda. [3] Propaganda, as C.V Narasimha Reddy believes, is the deliberate manipulation of human behaviour, attitude and belief. [4] Guisti and Piras think that, although disinformation talks about true facts but those are spoken in an incomplete vague, misleading way which ultimately is a part of a plan for a larger agenda. [3] On the other hand, fake news is nothing but manipulated information. But there are several cases where news media reports turn out to be false. Does that mean, those are also fake news? Griefender et al. have pointed out that, what sets apart a piece of false news and fake news is the mere intention to deceive people. [5]

But if the problem of fake news is just the dissemination of wrong information, then in this era of technology, there must be a remedy for this problem. According to M. Mitchell Waldrop, although the problem is clear but its solution is not. Despite knowing particular information is untrue, the websites can not generally take it down as, according to Waldrop, every information is presented from a particular perspective, hence, the websites can not draw the line on the fact of what one can post and what he or she can not. If they do that then it would be an infringement of his or her right to free speech. [6]

With the advent of Web 2.0, the trend of dissemination of online fake news has started. In Web 1.0, the websites were not interactive. There were limited provisions for giving feedback. According to Borges, web 1.0 was read-only but Web 2.0 was read-write. Borges has further noted, in Web 2.0, visitors can comment on a content, contribute in it as well as there are provisions if sharing the content. Social Medias like Facebook, Instagram are prime examples of Web 2.0. [7]

According to Manas P. Goswami, with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, more and more people had started to use social media. With the increase of its usage, the 21st century mediascape came under the threat of falsehood and hoax. Although social media are meant to give free speech to the mass, but Manas P. Goswami like Waldrop feels that, these social media platforms have emerged as a medium to abuse the right for free speech. [8]

The report 'India Digital News Report 2019', published by Reuters Institute indicates that, nearly 68% of Indians consume news via smartphones. The study also indicates, more than the majority of audiences use 'side doors' like search and Facebook to get the news rather than going to authentic news sources. [9]

In India, according to Hammerkopf Consumer Survey in the first week of lockdown (March, 2020), the usage of social media had increased more than 87% than the week before the lockdown was announced. Prior to lockdown, the average usage of social media of Indians was nearly about 150 minutes per day, but in the first week of lockdown, it had increased to nearly 280 minutes per day in social media. [10]

It is needless to say, fake news has amplified with the rise of COVID-19 and lockdown. In a survey conducted by Social Media Matters (SMM) and Institute for Governance, Policies and Politics (IGPP) it has been shown that, nearly 69% respondents who had participated in the survey, receive fake news. According to the same survey, 88.4% of the respondents think, WhatsApp is the major source of fake news which is followed by Facebook and Instagram. [11]

In fact, often mainstream news media became the victim of misinformation and ended up spreading fake news. As Kuldeep Nagi has shown as an example, the online edition of The Indian Express, a famous Indian daily newspaper, had fallen into this trap during 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting. There was a rumour on ISIS link in that shooting and based on that, they had published an article on their online edition under the headline, 'ISIS claims Las Vegas shooting'. But after 7 hours, they changed the headline and said, 'Las Vegas Shooting Live Updates: Death toll 59, Police says, no evidence to back IS claim on the attack'. [12]

Now it is important to assess, the perspective of the Indian undergraduate and postgraduate students of colleges and universities about fake news during the lockdown and their likely impact on these students.

Why Fake News Gets Circulated:

There are many reasons for the circulation of fake news on the internet, particularly in social media. Individual Differences Theory of Mass Media suggests that, people expose themselves to selective amount of channels to get the information. The information and messages provided by the channel are in accordance with their beliefs and they tend to avoid the information and messages coming from different channels which are contrary to their pre-existing beliefs. After exposing themselves selectively, they tend to read or watch those messages which are in accordance with their preference. If a part of the message is not in accordance with his or her preference, he or she either avoid it or misinterpret it. In the end, this theory talks about selective retaliation which means people remember only those messages which are in accordance with their pre-existing beliefs. [13] According to the studies of Moravec et al, people in social media tend to believe those information which are in accordance of their pre-existing beliefs, even if that is flagged as false information. [14] So, it can be seen from the angle Individual Differences Theory, how fake news in social media and the internet get circulated and eventually get popularised.

'Bot' software has gained popularity in the recent past. 'Bot' software can spread information rapidly in social media. These software are generally used to make contents with 'low-credibility'. [15] Not only these machine-generated messages, but media literacy is also a factor in spreading fake news. The research of Guess et al have suggested that, people over the age of 65 are mainly involved in the dissemination of fake news. [16] However, there is a striking difference between the study of Guess et al and the survey conducted for this study. According to the majority respondents of the survey, they receive fake news mainly the age group between 18-39. Only 1 respondent believes that, he gets the false information mainly from the group of 60 or above. (See- Chart-1) However, this difference is not a very uncommon phenomenon because variables change on the basis of the nature of the survey.
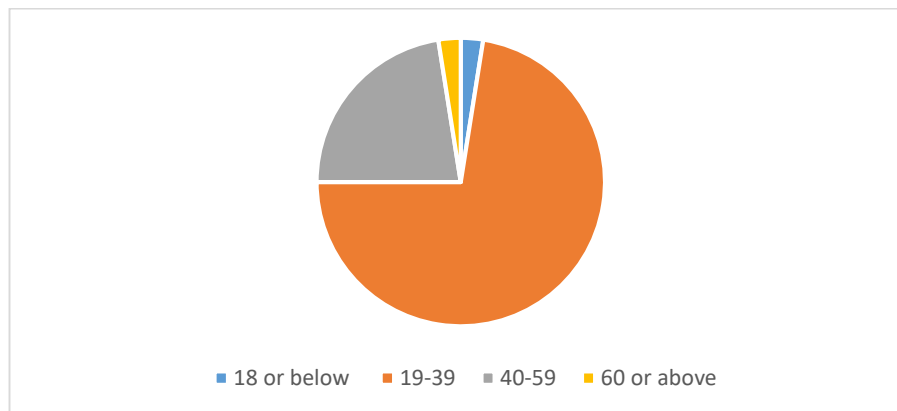

18 or below   19-39   40-59   60 or above

Chart-1: Age Group responsible for spreading Fake News

'Infodemics' During the Period of COVID-19: Students' Perspective

This increase of usage of social media and internet has connected people even during the depressing lockdown phase, but this increase of usage of social media leads to another problem: fake news and misinformation. The Internet opens up a massive horizon of knowledge. Despite getting the updates about the world, it also brings in the threat of circulation of fake news and misinformation. During COVID-19 pandemic, this threat is amplified. There are several misinformation about the disease itself. Not only that, there are several political fake news on the internet. The experts have called this phenomenon of circulating fake news and misinformation as 'Infodemic'. According to the definition of World Health Organization, Infodemics is the abundance of information which deliberately attempts to disseminate wrong information regarding public health. WHO thinks, there are certain groups or people who undermine public health in order to advance their agenda. [17]

In India, fake news had not only affected the awareness about the prevention of COVID-19, there were fake news against eating meat. According to an article published in BBC News in 30th June, 2020, a piece of fake news was circulated in India, claiming that, COVID-19 was being circulated from eating meats and eggs. Also, it claimed a vegetarian diet would help to prevent the infections of COVID-19. Indian authorities believe that, in April, this fake news had impacted the sale of non-vegetarian products and poultry industry had to suffer a loss of nearly Rs. 130 bn. [18] Apart from that, there are cases where fake videos where it was shown famous Indian doctor Devi Shetty recommending mass to drink hot water with lemon juice to prevent COVID-19 from spreading. Even on the basis of fake news, lots of people started drinking cow urine or 'Gaumutra' for the remedy of the deadly disease. Despite, several appeals and awareness campaigns from Government and media, the fake news could not be stopped, even during the crisis period of the pandemic. [19]

Also, in India 12 people which include 5 children became sick for drinking a juice which was made out of the seeds of 'datura' (thorn apple plant). Locals regarded it as a probable cure for COVID-19. [20]

When the students of colleges and universities were asked during the survey whether COVID-19 lockdown has increased fake news or not, then 28 out of 40 respondents have said that, during COVID-19 pandemic fake news has increased. 12 people think, it has remained the same. (Chart-2)
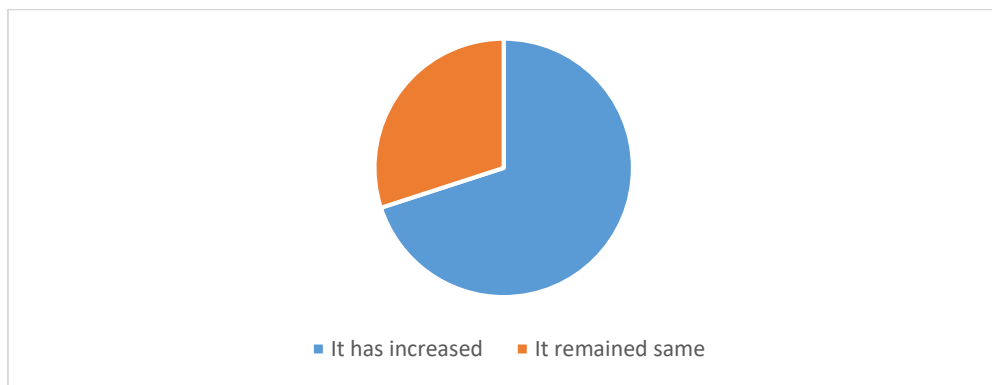
Chart- 2: Whether lockdown has increased fake news or not

Students were also asked, if they had received any fake news regarding COVID-19 which could cause panic. As a reply, 33 respondents said, they had received such fake news; only 7 claimed that, they did not receive such fake news. (Chart-3)
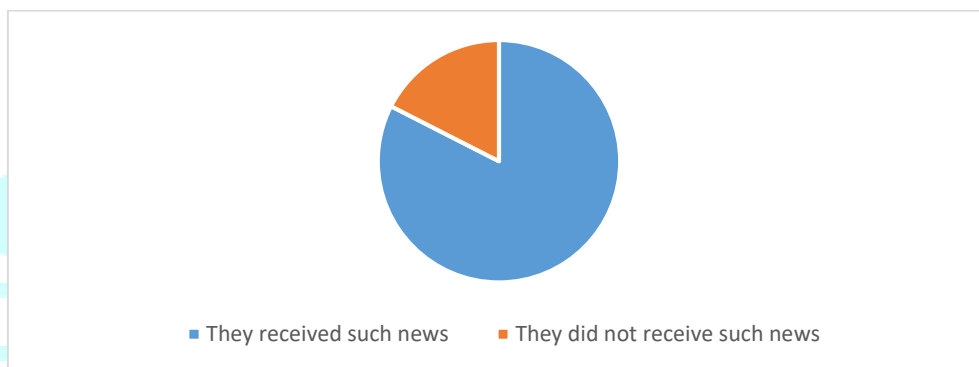

Chart- 3:Whether students have received fake news about COVID-19 that cause panic

These two survey results suggest clearly, how fake news has created the 'Infodemic' that WHO was talking about. The fake news not only has got the potential to create panic but also forces people to take unscientific measures which results in financial loses and serious health damages, as it is shown earlier in this article. In May 2020, WHO has passed a resolution WHA 73.1 in which they have asked its Member States to provide its citizens reliable COVID-19 content and take strict actions against fake news in order to prevent this 'infodemic' [17]

Religious and Political Fake News and their Impact on Students:

Syeda Zainab Akbar, Divyanshu Kukreti, Somya Sagarika and Joyojeet Pal in a study named 'Temporal Patterns in COVID-19 misinformation in India' have found out that, after 'Janta Curfew' was announced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the third week of March 2020, there is a significant amount of increase in fake news. They, in their study, have found out, there were 62 fake news regarding cultural issues like religion, ethnicity, race etc recorded in the archive of Tattle Civic Technology in the period from 23rd January, 2020 to 12th April, 2020. In that same period, they have found out, there were 54 fake news regarding political parties, administration and government works.[21] In India, politics and religion are dependent on each other on many occasions, often religious and political fake news are interrelated. So, in many cases, religion and politics overlap.

Globally, there are several instances where many conspiracy theories are formed just for some political gains. QAnon, one of the leading conspiracy theorist groups in the world, are responsible for disseminating baseless theories like ' Deep State' in which global elites and celebrities are paedophiles, a worshipper of Satan. They also believed that, former US President Donald Trump was the one who could save them from the 'evil' 'Deep State' and those who were part of this 'Deep State' are trying to overthrow Trump from the chair of US President. Such belief ultimately resulted in a deadly attack on US Capitol Hill in 2021 after Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump in the US Presidential race. But the most alarming part of the whole story is the recent gain of the popularity of this QAnon group on Facebook after COVID-19 lockdown. Since the beginning of 2020, their membership in Facebook had grown up to 581%. According to Marc-André Argentino, this growth happened mainly after March 2020 when the US was going through a lockdown phase. [22] The reason behind incorporating the example of QAnon in this paper is to show how some deep-rooted beliefs, no matter whether it is religious, ethnic or cultural, can have an impact on the political arena.

In India, there are also some conspiracy theories but it was, to a large extent, based on religion. The divisiveness of religions in India has only been widened by the lockdown and COVID-19. There are several cases where there was a lack of trust between different religions. There were rumours about the Muslim community of India deliberately spreading COVID-19. Several manipulated videos and photos were circulated regarding this in social media. On the other hand, based on a fake

WhatsApp video where the state is injecting COVID-19 virus among the healthy Muslim people had resulted in an attack on the health workers in Indore. [23]

Apart from that, there are several cases where fake videos and posts were being circulated sometimes in favour or sometimes against the state authorities. In West Bengal, there were cases of 300 arrests in 6 months of lockdown since March for spreading fake information in social media. In many occasions, these fake information are related to politics and religion. In certain cases, the overlapping aspect of politics and religion can be seen in the nature of these fake news. [24]

Majority of the students also believe that, religious and political fake news have an impact on the election results. 90% or 36 of the 40 respondents think, fake news would impact election results. In the works of Zainab et al, [21] it has been shown, how much religious and political fake news is increased during the period of lockdown. Hence, it is a big challenge for a democratic country like India to tackle against fake news, so that, it can not influence the voting rights of its citizens.
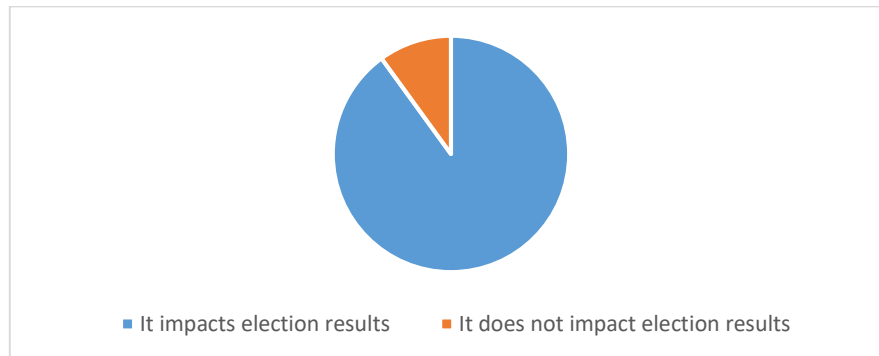

■ It impacts election results   ■ It does not impact election results

Chart-4: Fake News and its impact on Election results

Actions Against Fake News: Students' Perspective:

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions or IFLA has recommended a few ways to recognise fake news and those are: firstly, it is important to consider from which sources the information is coming. It has to be checked what exactly is the objective of that website or the person who is disseminating the information. Secondly, there are some sensationalized headlines for articles and videos which are there mainly for 'clickbait'. It is important to observe the article or the videos beyond their sensationalised titles. Thirdly, it is needed to understand the author's or video creator's motivation. Fourthly, one needs to check the date and supporting sources of that article or video. Lastly, it is important to check whether it is a joke or not.   (Source- https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174) In India, there are several online fact-checking sites like AltNews (http://www.altnews.in); Factly (http://factly.in) NewsMobile Fact Checker (newsmobile.in); IndiaToday Fact Check etc. So far as the action against fake news is concerned, 21 out of 40 report that post; 16 ignore it and 3 generally confront those who posted the fake news.

■ Report the post   ■ Ignore the post   ■ Confront those who post the fake news
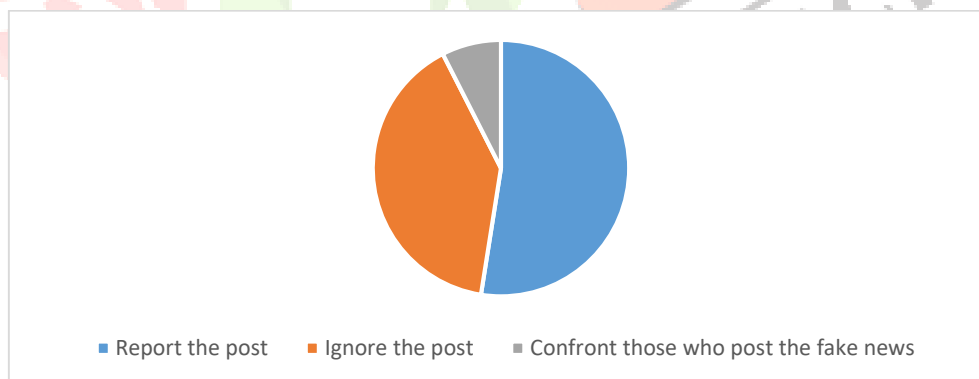
Chart-5: Action against fake news

However, so far as the fact-checking of the sensitive news content is concerned, 26 out of 40 respondents use online fact- checking websites to verify sensitive news items; but 14 do not use such websites. Although, majority of the respondents use fact-checking websites, but 35% of the respondents never use such websites which is quite alarming. (Chart-6)
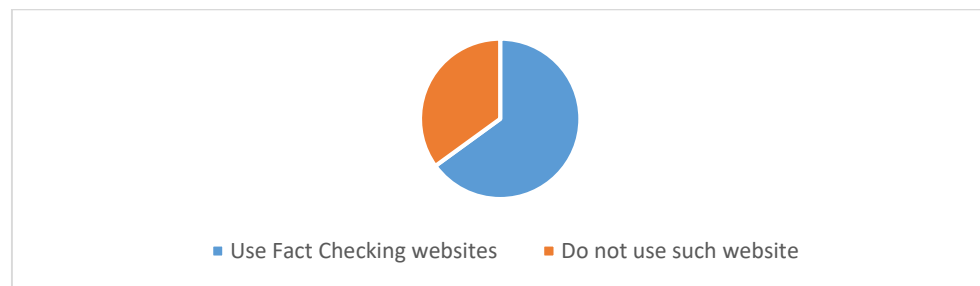
Chart-6: Usage of Fact Checking Websites

Conclusion:

Undoubtedly, fake news is a massive cause of concern for each and every individual around the globe. There is no doubt that during the COVID-19 pandemic fake news has only increased the dissemination of fake news. Government of India in March 2020 has officially told the social media platforms like Facebook Whatsapp, TikTok etc to take steps against fake news. [25] Earlier discussions suggest, how fake news can cause health hazards in this crisis pandemic situation. Based on fake news and absurd conspiracy theories many people did not use masks which is a necessary step to prevent Coronavirus from spreading. Even in the survey conducted for this study suggests that, majority of the students receive such fake news is as well. In order to prevent fake news from spreading, Whataspp has launched 'check it before you share it' campaign to educate people about fake news. [26]. But the alarming part of the survey is, it suggests, there are still a lot of educated young digitally literate people in our country who do not use a fact-checking website. Also, it is needed to remember, fake news can attack the basics of democracies by manipulating and misguiding people. Ultimately, it leads to the manipulation of the voting pattern. The survey for this study indicates, majority of the respondents are aware of the fact that, fake news can influence the election results. Although several steps were taken globally, but without the awareness of mass about the fake information. It is impossible to fight against the battle of fake news.

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