



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Combating Misinformation, Disinformation And Fake News In The Course Of Conflicts: In Reference To North-East India

Author 1: Mr. D Kayideluo Pfoze

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication,
St. Joseph University, Chumoukedima, Nagaland

Author 2: Ms. Heli

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of Political Science,
St. Joseph University, Chumoukedima, Nagaland

Abstract

The use of social media which initially thought to have a positive effect on democratisation but this has intensely become a threat to democracy today. Social media platforms have merged as new configurations of modern technology. The availability of content on social media in a wide range allows for the rapid dissemination of fake news and rumours that often elicit naïve social responses just as in the context of the conflict between Meiteis and Kukis in the present context. The crisis between the conflicting parties can escalate to severe when it is fueled by the rampant spread of false news and rumours. Many of the misleading videos and fake pictures incite more violence in the course of any conflicts. The spread of Fake News is accomplished by tapping into an existing narrative, then amplifying that message with a network of automatic “bot” accounts to force the social media platform algorithm to recognize that message as a trending topic and that escalates more fuel to the ongoing crisis. Social media can be a tool for modern-age conflict distinctively social networking, propaganda, and news information sharing yet it can also escalate to a severe crisis if not used in the right realm.

There are many innovative ways of dealing with the combated misinformation or fake news. However, to thoroughly understand, the paper seeks thorough research on how to bring in a suggestive measure such as Media Literacy among Journalists as well as the general public, minimizing social media in the course of Conflict, etc., while combating misinformation and the detection of Fake news.

Keywords: Conflict, social media, Combating Misinformation, Disinformation, fake news

Introduction

The concept of fake news has a commonly understood meaning, while misinformation and disinformation can be understood from many perspectives depending on the nature of the situation and conflicts. Today, in many conflicts and political contestations, journalism as a communicator is being influenced by fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, leading to distrust and violence among the general population. During conflicts, the term 'fake news' is sometimes used to characterize reporting that many readers disagree with. The phrase false news itself combines two concepts: misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is false information that the person delivering it believes is true. Disinformation is false information, and the individual disseminating it is aware of it. It is a deliberate, intentional deception that demonstrates how harmful actors actively misinform people.

(Karlova and Fisher, 2012)

Social media use during a dispute can have both positive and harmful consequences. Social media is the quickest and cheapest means for a person to consume and disseminate bogus news, particularly during times of conflict. Though social media provides a venue for healthy debate, information dissemination, and the spread of such times, it is often difficult to determine the trustworthiness of the source of information and news. The worry that confronts us is that many social media users propagate such fake news without verifying its reliability, causing misinformation about an individual, a group of individuals, or a community. At its worst, some individuals exploit a situation by spreading fabricated and non-existent facts in order to gain public support and advocate their propaganda, which exacerbates existing disputes; as a result, social media can be a dangerous weapon in the course of violent and conflict situations. Fake news and rumours can quickly spread on social media, leading to naive responses, as seen in the conflict between Meiteis and Kukis in Manipur (present context) and other conflicts in North-East India.

The influence of fake news is extremely dangerous as it not only creates fear, hatred, and violence but at the same time psychologically disorients the concerned individual. One should use various social media platforms cautiously based on the content it is circulated in any digital format received by the recipient. However, in the context of conflict, there can be many reasons for the spread of Fake news, misinformation or disinformation. Some of the reasons could be the ignorant general public, people who are part and parcel of advocating groups, supporters, and followers of conflict groups, and apathetic sections of groups not involved with the conflicting groups. On this note, the current impact can be categorized into different levels- psychological and emotional, 'ism' between different groups or sections of society, issues of governance, administration, policing, and centrism politics in Indian politics. Fake news and

misinformation are quite influential in the course of conflicts as they may break or unite an alliance or they may break or boost the morale of the fighting groups.

The role of Fake news, Misinformation and disinformation in the course of Conflicts

Fake news in the course of conflicts can be intentionally false which are designed to manipulate people's perception of the reality of the conflict. It can be an influential tool to promote hatred, violence or even influence politics. It can also stir and intensify conflicts by misleading public with stories that are not true which only grows mistrust specifically among the conflicting groups. In some cases, it leads to severe violence just as in the case of Manipur ethnic Violence at present context. There also things to be considered in the course of conflicts that people with ill-intentioned can use fake news as their weapon to intense conflicts. Any conflicting group can use Fake news as their weapon to win over their rivalry group. The prevalence of fake news and misinformation on social media creates racial and political divides among the conflicting groups.

The internet makes it possible for delivering fake news and misinformation to a larger audience and that escalates more to the conflicts. There are many ways that facts can be distorted, resulting in altered perceptions, but there are a limited number of ways that facts can remain faithful to their original creation. In today's generation, the Internet usage have introduced a feature that rapidly disseminate the rumours or fake news especially in times of conflicts and violence and while in the course of conflict, the volume associated with Fake news and misinformation is problematic as it becomes difficult for the readers to validate the fake narratives of rumours and misinformation. In some instances, due to unsettled conflict among the conflicting groups, media is often used as a tool to gain over public consciousness and while in the midst of gaining public's conscious, it leads to the spread of fake news and misinformation. Of course, not all the conflicts that happens in and around us is reflected in news agenda but when conflicts are reflected in news, people often inclined to spread rumours without validating the truth of the news which often escalates more to conflicts and violence. Often in the conflicts, the fabricated misleading contents escalates to more conflicts that only evokes violence and not reconciliation. The fake news which is a fabricated misleading content often confuses the recipient (Public or any conflicting opponent groups) becomes critically topical and the increase of Fake news through social media does not contribute transparency to the facts. The fake news in the conflict becomes a tool of manipulation rather than evidence of unprofessionalism and ignorance of the sender. (Alexender et al, 2021)

Again, the manipulative information can be a potential source of deteriorating the quality of news in the course of conflicts. Manipulating and spread of fake news is often motivated by making money, spreading ideologies and gaining status. The various tactics used among the conflicting groups such as forged documents, photo manipulation, choice of words, etc., are often used in the spread of fake news in achieving their objectives. The creation of Fake news is relevant in the course of conflicts to attract wider publicity or increase reach and cause controversy and this phenomenon often used by the conflicting groups as their goals in the condition of conflict escalation. However, in some conflicts, the creation of fake news usually involves the ideas of mimic news and so therefore fake news sources does not ensure the accuracy and

credibility of information about the conflicts (Lazer, 2018). The essence of fake news is that it is 'news' that is unreliable to a certain degree with evidence of sensationalism, and that often exploits human instincts (Krasovskya 2019). The challenge that people face because of fake news is linked to the fact that this phenomenon is widely used during the course of conflicts.

All social media users have been a victim of fake news and misinformation at one time or the other, and during conflict, people's minds become even more vulnerable to be victims of such fake news because people are more sensitive and protective during such times. This may make fake news and misinformation more effective during conflicts. The influence of fake news in the course of conflicts is extremely dangerous as it not only creates fear, hatred, and violence but at the same time psychologically disorient the concerned individual. One should use various social media platforms during the course of conflict cautiously based on the content it is circulated in any digital format received by the recipient. Misinformation, disinformation and fake news can incite many people to violence during a volatile situation. But information can easily be cross-checked, validated, or negated. Sometimes, all it takes is a phone call to confirm or deny information.

Evidence and examples of fake news in the course of conflicts in North-East India

Ever since the conflict erupted in Manipur, the spread of fake news has still not stopped and this spread of fake news has escalated to further violence among the conflicting communities in Manipur. As published in the fact-finding report by the Editors' Guild of India, "fake news finds space in Imphal media which continuously deepening the ethnic divide in Manipur". It further reported that the state's media outlets, which are concentrated in Imphal valley, have seemingly become Meitei media which listed out several fake news. There are viral claims that have been debunked in the course of Manipur conflict and some of which are interpreted in this paper. (news laundry, 2023)

As stated, in Manipur's Ethnic violent conflict, some rumours have led to the violence and even to the extent of brutalities of women of both conflicting communities which also divided them more. There are certain examples such as to promote their propaganda and strengthen public support. One instance is where Militant Meitei groups circulated the fake news that the Kukis were raping Meitei women in Churachandpur district. The Director General of Police (DGP) of Manipur, P Doungel, clarified there were no cases of rape of Meitei women in Churachandpur. (News click, July 2023)

It also turns a blind eye to the apparent connection between the circulation of fake news (based on fabricated or non-existing facts) about brutalities against women and actual instances of such atrocities. In Manipur Ethnic conflict, such fake information about rapes of Meitei or for that matter Kuki women is being used by perpetrators of both communities to justify their atrocities as "vengeance". Some Meitei protesters displayed a huge photo of a woman during a protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. They claimed it was of a Meitei woman who was physically assaulted by members of the Kuki community. While the image strengthened the portrayal of Kuki-Zo males as "hordes of rapists", the photo was confirmed to be of a domestic abuse victim from Arunachal Pradesh. (News click, July 2023)

Another one is an instance of the horrifying incident of May 4, where two women were paraded naked and assaulted in Kangpokpi district which occurred after a fake picture claiming a tribal murder in Churachandpur was circulated in the state capital. In such situation, Security agencies' analysis has also shed light on the lack of control over fake or one-sided news, even in local newspapers, further exacerbating the situation. Reports suggesting possible attacks by members of the majority community have also fueled unrest in the state.

So, each of these misinformation campaigns has damaged the communities, especially women, and the damage caused could not be undone. Many women bore the brunt of such misinformation campaigns and became victims of targeted violence and varied forms of sexual assault. The perpetrators in the conflicts, use the disinformation being circulated and consider or justify their atrocities as “acts of retribution”. Misinformation, disinformation and rumours can incite many people to violence during a volatile situation. However, information can easily be cross-checked, validated, or negated.

Sometimes, all it takes is a phone call to confirm or deny information—as this writer has sought to do. The circulation of fake news in Manipur violence has fuelled more to the conflicts. Videos and pictures of women being tortured, gang-raped and paraded naked have triggered nationwide outrage and most of these incidents have been triggered by the circulation of fake news and false rumours. In one of the instances, there are visuals showing main accused's house burnt down after horrific Manipur viral video sparks nationwide outrage. However, since the video was in the Mizo language, which is the most widely spoken of the Kuki-Chin areas, some anti-social elements took advantage and put subtitles to raise tempers in the Imphal valley where Manipuri meiteilon is generally spoken. What was actually spoken in the video was of a demand of separate administration which ended with a tribal hymn.

The internet suspension made more worse in spreading the rumours of Fake news as it led to many unchecked rumours and the media had to rely mostly on the government's narrative which had the biasness in the narratives of the news provided. In most of the conflicts, for that matter, Manipur ethnic conflict, the circulation of fake news has escalated to severe conflict. The circulation of fake videos and fake pictures in the course of conflicts should not be done at any cost, especially in times of conflict as it will further escalate the situation or make it much worse. It is not an easy solution to stop fake videos or pictures before it is circulated however the general public should be made aware of the consequences which can be done with cooperation and collective participation of the people, civil society, and government agencies. To tackle such kind of violation (fake news and misinformation in the course of conflicts, the paper seeks to bring in suggestive measures which will substantiate the findings for the research and the research gap in this context.

Suggestive measures in combating misinformation and fake news

There are many ways to deal with it and one of them is to focus on Media literacy for Journalists as well as among the General Public.

1: Media literacy: Media literacy includes human rights literacy, news literacy, advertising literacy, privacy literacy etc. Media literacy is increasingly an essential life skill. It will help an individual understand how communications interact with individual identity and social development. Media literacy can co-shape one's identity and how one can navigate information fog and avoid concealed mines with the mist. (Magda, 2018). Educating the Journalists and people in general is considered important in today's context of living. Sometimes in the course of conflict, Journalist delay messages intentionally not to escalate conflict but again delaying doesn't give truth about conflict. Therefore, in such instances, media literacy plays an important role. Only when Journalists are given adequate media literacy, they will be able to disseminate the truth of the conflicts and instances no matter how hard it is for them to reveal without any fear. Through media literacy, Journalists can also be educated about fact driven Journalism. For instance, we have Boom Live in India as an agency to detect fake news which is also considered to be India's first independent online resource to debunk fake news. Such kind of agency should be created more especially in the course of conflict. Media agency such as Boom Live help one to explore between internet and society through in-depth, investigations and stories. Media literacy again on the other hand to general public can be done through workshops and seminars. These workshop and seminars should be encouraged even to the institutions/ universities and colleges as in the course of conflicts, young adults play vital role in disseminating rumours and fake news. Through workshops and seminars of media literacy to them will help them to empower truth over misinformation and disinformation. In a way, news literacy or media literacy is the most specific ability to understand the language and conventions of news as a genre, and to recognise how these features can be exploited with malicious intent.

One needs to include attention to raising awareness amongst individuals about how they respond to the content in receiving news. Awareness and workshops can help individuals recognise and distinguish journalism on one hand and information that purports to be journalism on the other hand. This will empower individuals to identify and recognise and resist when manipulated by fake news and misinformation. Through the media literacy, it can help individual or journalist to become professional fact-checkers where it requires a thorough investigation about the news that can be false and misleading in the course of conflicts. Thus, a media literacy can be a potential promising measure to combat with fake news and misinformation in the course of conflicts.

2: Minimising the usage of social media in conflict: When internet is shut down, it will not only help to escalating rumours and fake news but also to extend of stopping to escalate more violence. Many a times in the course of conflicts, young adults engage more in the usage of social media where they get most of the news through websites, chat applications, blogs, etc, where on many of these, there is little or nothing to flag what is reputable journalism and what is amateur reportage, let alone what is disinformation. (UNESCO. 2018). Unless the usage of social media such as Facebook are minimised in the course of

conflict, the pain in the shoulder for the journalism will continue. The social media continues to pull the plug in the news in the course of conflict, and even to the extent of getting into news production itself, competing with each other. Therefore, the usage of social media should be minimised so as to stop from disseminating the fake news in times of conflict. Social media can be negatively powerful in the course of conflicts as when news is disseminated without fact check, it can escalate more to violence among the conflicting groups. When social media are not minimised, it can be a source of conflict which leads to more chaos, misunderstanding by disseminating the fake news, misinformation or for that matter disinformation.

The general public can be ignorant to their best while receiving certain news in times of conflict and without actual verification which further circulates the news received which impact the spread of fake news and rumours in the course of conflicts. It is essential for the public to distinguish between two fundamentally different ways to conceptualize belief in true and false news. In the course of conflict, the ignorance of not able to discern between true and false news is mostly rooted in biasness (favouring as per their supporting group) where in most cases general public place their loyalty to their supporting conflicting group above the truth. At the very outset, general public likely believes the news content that is compatible and harmonious. Thus, to avoid such instances where it escalated more to violence among the conflicting groups, the usage of social media should be minimised.

Conclusion

Fake news and misinformation in the course of conflicts are often recognised as a contemporary problem and integral parts of escalating to conflicts. Concern over the problem of fake news is global. In the course of conflicts, its role comes down to discreditation of the opponents and, on the other hand, influencing one's side, to compel people to believe in the rightness of actions by politicians, and to mobilize if needed. The decreasing trust in media proves that norms and processes should be developed to ensure the accuracy and credibility of information. Prevention can be done, firstly, by educating the general public on the use of social media especially during conflict. Secondly, agencies involved in monitoring should develop high-tech surveillance equipment to prevent and curb inappropriate content in social media. Lastly, need to focus on how to institutionalize social media and its usage so that it will prevent future generations from misusing it.

Although it becomes difficult for the professional fact-checkers to detect on the actual news in the course of conflict but to some extent it also stops from spreading the fake news. The emphasise on media literacy will give each one insight into their engagements with news and other means of communication. This will help individual to recognise and distinguish journalism on one hand and information that purports to be journalism on the other. The media literacy further empowers individuals to be the master of their own identity and recognise and resist when they are being manipulated in regard to disinformation, misinformation as news. Thus, the awareness and importance on media literacy should be raised in tackling misinformation and disinformation. This inculcates the importance of avoiding promoting and disseminating untruths.

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