Tackling 'bias' and fake coverage in the Indian media

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With a population over a billion, the Indian 'republic' has 29 states (and seven Union Territories), 22 official languages and a few hundred dialects. The country has about 100.000 registered publications, 1000 television channels, few hundred FM radio stations and 500 million internet users – and the numbers are growing.

In a free democratic set up like India without a proper media regulatory system in place, there remains the danger of creating a 'babble' out of all the content created through so many media outlets. A strong propaganda machinery, on the other hand, can mould the masses the way it wants to, as we now increasingly seem to witness in successive election campaigns. Both are in fact true today in the Indian media scene – an unregulated social media and an apparently 'controlled' mainstream media. Attempts are made to control the social media too.

In 1975-77 the Indian government made the mistake of declaring an emergency and gagged the press. Mrs. Indira Gandhi lost the elections. Today, under Narendra Modi, the general public is of the opinion that there is a 'super emergency' in India (a statement, in fact, made by a chief minister of a state) where there is no official announcement of gagging the press, but a strong invisible 'control' seems to exist, in a number of ways.

Indian media has suffered through the phase of 'paid news' in which advertisement was masquerading as news. There was a loud uproar; the courts and the Election Commission disqualified a few politicians for adopting this method and a few editors lost their jobs. But today, with social media becoming so popular, the line of distinction between paid news and unpaid news has disappeared. Everybody is a publisher. Added to this is the new phenomenon of 'fake news'.

The present BJP government has hired a group of professionals for propaganda and, behind the scenes, created a machinery to control the media. The Prime Minister himself delivers a monthly radio programme "Maan Ki Baat" which has been made compulsory transmission for all radio stations. Not that earlier attempts were not made to control the media (the public broadcasting system in India has remained with the government since inception). But the campaigns today are more focused and deliberate. This focused attempt to 'guide' the media came to surface, in particular, during the Lok Sabha (Parliamentary) election of 2014. The advertising guru (Piyush Pandey) who masterminded the BJP campaign said "the brief we got from BJP said that Mr. Modi's popularity was higher than the party and therefore they wanted to play it like a

presidential campaign. There is a grassroot way of looking at life and then is an intellectual way. Baggage is in the minds of the intellectuals"(The *Economic Times*, May 19, 2014). He disclosed how he and his team created 125 artworks every single night for two months, 10 films every night. "If you do 200 commercials and I have lost the count of the print ads for every nook and corner of the country, it ought to be the toughest campaigns," he added.

A collaborative research project was conducted by NSHM Institute of Media and Design and the students of the Mass Communication Department of Burdwan University to assess the 'bias' and consequently the 'credibility' of the media coverage just after the Indian parliamentary elections of 2014. It was research done on the coverage of local newspapers, television channels and social media in the state of West Bengal. Unfortunately, most media departments in colleges/universities in India are not geared toward conducting such surveys and this project was certainly an exception. We hardly have organisations like Pew Research Institute to do serious analysis of media trends – which media institutes in India could have collectively done.

The research project revealed that the entire gamut of the media – print, television, radio and the social media – has been, especially during the elections, put to a severe test on its objectivity. The report quotes a professor at Chicago University (Mathew Gentzkow), who in an article in The Hindu (April 25, 2014), compares the Indian election with that in the US: "Just as ice cream makers give customers the flavours they want, newspapers give readers the stories and slant they want. It's a market phenomenon … Applied to cable and news channels and the Internet, these same forces polarize politics. This is most apparent on cable, where MSNBC and Fox news have staked out Liberal and conservative turfs. Similar pressures affect the Internet: Conservatives favour the Drudge Report; Liberals, the Huffington Post. By contrast, the shrinking mainstream media (newspapers, network television and news magazines) competed for more centrist audiences. Today technology contributes to political polarisation".

The social media in India, as in the US, aggravates this political polarisation through biased comments and by generating 'fake' news. The newspaper houses and the television channels in India are privately owned (except the Doordarshan, the public sector broadcaster) and they are, as in the US, market-driven. But in recent times the trend is that many of these ailing media houses are being taken over by the big business houses (like the Ambanis and Adanis) who are 'close' to the ruling party. Hence the 'bias' is becoming predictable. In fact, some of the media owners have developed political ambitions and have become members of the parliament.

The report also reveals that the opinion polls and exit polls carried by almost all the print and TV media were been proved wrong when the results were declared. On one hand it reveals that the mainstream media is losing touch with the common man; and on the other raising suspicions about the media's alignments with political parties. The research project reveals clear 'biases' in the media coverages. Contents of five regional newspapers and four television channels were analysed by a team of eight faculty members (from two institutions) and about fifty students

gathered the data. About 60 percent of the respondents (about 3000 in number and spread over three regions) said that the media was 'biased' while about 30 per cent said it was 'neutral'.

Another 'local touch' that was revealed through the survey was the fall in the quality of the language, especially in the vernacular media. The 'unparliamentary' languages that political leaders used in the campaigns were being published directly without any screening. The editorial rigour is being broken – possibly, one step away from the entry of false or 'fake' news that is flooding all media outlets.

Western researchers (as in *A Field Guide to Fake News*) have organised efforts not just to teach the methods of identifying fake news - and their sources - but also to understand the 'ecology' of the consumers of news. Fake news goes viral in social media because certain groups or political organisations want such news to thrive. Certain social situations make these examples of fake news believable - at least for sometime till the myth is exposed. Researchers have developed 'generative adversarial network' (GAN) - a type of machine-learning algorithm - that challenged the original image. "The adversarial software, knowing what the real world looked like, provided meaning and boundaries for its generative kin" (The *Economist*, July 1, 2017)

In the Indian context, the researchers are yet to be so well versed with the software to detect fake news, but they are working in their own indigenous ways to tackle the problem. A new website AltNews.in has been doing a commendable job of trying to identify the sources of fake news and analyse how they have been created. "Some of the techniques he uses are to break up videos into frames and then search for those images online, until he can zero in on the original sources. Sometimes a simple web search describing the actions in the video will often take a vigilant user to a news story about the video" (*The Wire* 4/2/2017).

In his own blog, the originator of AltNews.in, Pratik Sinha, describes how "an epidemic of fake videos (has) hit the Indian social media ecosystem" and gives several examples of how he has painstakingly detected them. His own political 'slant' is obvious; but his efforts to detect fake news are worth noting. A video circulated for quite some time with a caption saying that "a Hindu girl from Andhra Pradesh married to a Muslim was beaten up and burnt alive by a few people belonging to a certain community for not wearing burkha". According to AltNews.in research, the video is not from Andhra Pradesh but taken from Guatemala. The main aim of circulating such fake videos, says Sinha, is to portray an individual, a community, a political entity, or people of a particular ethnicity in bad light.

India is fast getting polarised, not just politically but socially as well, on religious and ethnic lines. Not that these divisions did not exist before; but since Narendra Modi and his political party BJP came to power in 2014, these fissures are getting wider with the help of trolling in social media. Fake news and videos are being circulated in social media with a deliberate plan – just in the way ad agencies were employed to develop an election campaign with a clear

mandate. Countering criticism of Modi on social media and running down the opposition is evident everywhere, apparently by a team with a hidden agenda.

The southern state of Kerala, a bastion of left forces, is always in conflict with the rightist parties like RSS. A video was circulating in the mainstream media showing a RSS man being stabbed by a member of the left. AltNews.in showed (March 2017) that the video was from Mexico where a gang member was stabbed to death. It had nothing to do with Kerala.

A student of Delhi University, Gurmehar Kaur, posted a video (March 2017) in her facebook page seeking peace between India and Pakistan. Multiple people, including film and cricket stars, launched a misinformed attack on the student based on a video which had gone viral showing a young woman drinking along her friends in a moving car - and the video claimed that it was Gurmehar. Indian society still looks down upon a woman drinking in public. AltNews.in showed that the video was available on YouTube long before the controversy broke out and it was not Gurmehar's.

Indian society is now in turmoil on the issue of the holiness of the 'cow'. The central government has already issued an ordinance banning the slaughter of the cow. The political 'volunteers' called 'gau rakshak' (protector of the cow) are on the prowl and several cases have been reported where beef eaters have been assaulted and even killed. As if to counter the indignation, a video became viral in the western state of Rajasthan where a Hindu was shown to be killed by a Muslim in the eastern state of West Bengal. Again, Alt News came to the rescue showing that the video was from Bangladesh and the incident happened in the Comilla district of Bangladesh (on April, 2017) where an Awami League supporter was attacked and killed by his rivals.

Kashmir is another area of turmoil. News on border conflicts between the Indian and Pakistani armies and internal fights between army personnel and rebels within Kashmir are stuff for daily 'breaking news' in the Indian media. Trending stories usually lead to fake videos, and at least sometime they seem to be convincing. For example, soon after a real event of two Indian jawans were reported to have been beheaded by Pakistani soldiers, a video depicting the beheading of a Brazilian bank robber was circulated as the beheading of the Indian jawans. When Pakistan won the Champions Trophy, misleading videos - as old as a December 2016 one from Gujarat, another from Bihar and another from Pakistan - were circulated as showing Indian Muslims celebrating Pakistan's win.

In the race for 'trending' contents, news editors of mainstream media are also misled and they in their eagerness to compete with rivals pick up fake news without a proper check. The classic case in the Indian media occurred when several news channels simultaneously ran footage, which was not shot by their own reporters, on students of JNU chanting 'anti-Indian' slogans. It was unverified footage and on these grounds a student leader was jailed. The video was later found to be spliced, with audio from some other clip, overlaid on the JNU clip. The 'splicing' activity was revealed in detail by another rival channel which apparently lost out in the 'race' for

news. Channels did not run the disclaimers that they had carried unverified reports nor did they offer an apology after the splicing incident came to light.

In Europe, consortiums across professional rivalries get their stories checked. *CrossCheck* is one such consortium where participants include the BBC, Channel 4, Le Monde, Agence France-Presse and Buzzfeed get their stories stamped 'true' or 'false'. Some of the stories are marked 'caution' if they are found to be suspect even after cross checking. A German organisation *Correct!v* is an investigative journalism venture which has a four member team dedicated to busting fake news.

There is no such collaborative venture yet in India among the mainstream media houses, even though the 'epidemic' of fake news in India demands such a move. The only effort so far seems to have come from the individual who set up AltNews.in, with his indigenous ways to identifying fake news. He started debunking fake news from his Facebook page but then went on to create a separate website AltNews.in just for exposing fake news. Sinha is quite frank with his alignments saying "People can disagree with me on ideological grounds, but they cannot disagree with me on my fact checks". He thinks his work is vindicated when he adds "I saw even right-wing people sharing my stories where I debunked right wing propaganda" (*The Wire* April, 2017).

Some workshops have been conducted in recent times in Southeast Asia – like in Myanmar and the Philippines – through the joint initiatives of Stony Brook University and Hong Kong University – to develop a course curriculum on "News Literacy" primarily to identify fake news - for the media students/researchers. Unfortunately, these efforts have not taken deep roots in the Indian academic structure which is very slow to change. No college or university has attempted to create a full paper on News Literacy as yet, though some stray workshop and classes have been conducted on the lines discussed at the Myanmar conference for media teachers and practitioners on how to identify fake news.

In some of the 'awareness' classes for media students and trainee journalists, attempts were made to transfer the knowledge gathered at these news literacy workshops for media teachers by defining what news literacy is as an ability in critical thinking; why news literacy is important in the changed environment of news 'consumption' (where the reader is a participant); learning to identify the different information 'neighbourhoods' (by differentiating between news from propaganda and entertainment); learning to 'deconstruct' the source of news through the "IMVAIN" principle and finally trying to identify the 'bias' because of political alignment or payment.

Given the magnitude of the 'bias' that exists today in Indian media (and that is hurting its credibility) and the incursions of fake news and videos, it is time for media professionals and academics to work together to tackle the crisis. The crisis is of no mean order: the social media, which have empowered every common man to become a publisher, can threaten the very

existence of a media teacher or a practitioner if he or she cannot justify the professionalism. The professionalism, it is hoped, will be reinforced by increasing the number of these awareness workshops both in the classroom and in the workplace. At the moment, unfortunately, these attempts at orientation towards news literacy are few and far between.

Facebook, Google, and Twitter have all pledged to help tackle fake news and videos; but as Sinha of AltNews.in complain, many fake items continue to circulate in spite of their being pointed out by several individuals from different sources. The problem has grown to become huge and it is still growing. The malevolent campaigns that run through Whatsapp and Facebook messenger and personal emails are still more difficult to track down or check. The campaign before the elections in Kenya, for example, found the use of these 'dark social' apps particularly 'harmful'. If any person or organisation is critical of the government, concerted hate campaigns are created through these personal social apps. African local media reports that President Kenyatta hired Cambridge Analytica, a company now at the centre of a controversy over the use of personal data to influence both the Brexit vote in the UK and the Donald Trump election in the US. The foreign company has acknowledged working for a "leading Kenyan political party" in 2013 to conduct and implement the largest political research project in East Africa but denied working on Kenyatta campaign for the forthcoming elections (*Quartz*, June 25, 2017)

Indian media is still to dig up how much of the 'personal data' is being used for the campaigns or whether foreign companies are being hired to make use of the personal data that lies dormant under the 'privacy code' of social media. But it is strongly suspected that the data is being used, at least indigenously.

Meanwhile India, because of the recent hate campaign against a community, is standing on a veritable tinderbox and the communal flare-ups are becoming more and more frequent across the country. And social media shoulders much of the blame in helping to polarise the country socially. After a communal flare up in West Bengal recently, the head of the state police was heard making a public appeal through the mainstream media not to circulate motivated statements or fake news through social media which might worsen the law and order situation in the state. These direct references by the administration to 'social media' as a prime mover of social unrest are something new and quite unheard of in the corridors of power. Usually, the administration avoids drawing the media into the controversy and pretends that 'it does not matter' in tackling a 'serious' issue like law and order. But the change in strategy is significant.

If the administration can change the strategy, so can the media think tanks. None will desire an outside regulator clamping down a set of rules on the media. In order to avoid such an undesirable thing to happen to the media, it should go in for self-regulation to clamp down on trolling and draw up a well planned strategy to check and weed out fake news. Here media practitioners and media academics have to work hand in hand. But so far there is no sign of such a thing happening while the crisis created by fake news has reached the tipping point.

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