

Says Who? Challenges of teaching News Literacy in a society with little on record

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Thursday, May 18, 2017. Seven men were lynched in the north-eastern Indian state of Jharkhand. Four were a group of cattle traders passing through a village; three were young men passing through another village. About a month earlier, rumours had been circulating on What'sApp that child lifters were roaming the area. The messages in Hindi said, "Suspected child lifters are carrying sedatives, injections, spray, cotton and small towels. They speak Hindi, Bangla and Malyali. If you happen to see any stranger near your house immediately inform local police as he could be a member of the child lifting gang."¹ The messages were accompanied by photographs of dead children.

Villagers and tribals who saw these messages circulated them further and soon there was a kindling ready to be lit. Catch fire it did, leading to the death of seven people.

It might be the world's largest democracy, but India is still fraught with challenges that plague the under-developed world. Literacy levels are low, poverty is rampant as is disease. A severe lack of basic facilities like water and sanitation leads to simmering tempers and a constituency that is easily instigated.

The ability to receive information in almost real time through mass media and to make one's voice heard through social media² has resulted in complex consequences for the country. The complexity and seriousness of these consequences is apparent in the story of the lynchings.

The area in which this took place is poorly developed and literacy levels are low. Smart phones and social media are relatively new phenomena, and the tendency to believe something visual is naturally instinctive in most people not exposed to the technologies of make-believe.

Though this might be an extreme example to point out the need to educate people on news literacy, other everyday instances only underline the extent to which digital, random media has replaced good old fashioned journalism as a source for news.

¹ The Wire Staff, (2017 May 22) Two Arrests, Protests Follow After WhatsApp Rumours Lead to Lynching of Seven in Jharkhand. <https://thewire.in/138667/whatsapp-message-turns-tribals-violent-leaves-seven-dead/>

² Jaishankar, Dhruva, (2016 June 29) Brexit: The first major casualty of digital democracy. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/06/29/brexit-the-first-major-casualty-of-digital-democracy/>

Messages, ‘news’, circulated on What’sApp, Facebook and Twitter are considered as sacrosanct as the printed word was about half a century ago. Let’s face it, people are gullible, or, if one wants to be kind, believing.

Social media, especially What’sApp in India, is being used in a post-fact environment by people who want to influence public opinion to serve their own ends. Every day you hear of outright lies being circulated with impunity. And, nearly always, they are believed, at least for a while. From plastic rice to fake eggs, videos, photographs and text messages are circulated, believed, and further sent on to a geometric progression of people. What’s App seems to have become India’s vehicle of misinformation.³

Then, there is the building of agenda. In a country where ‘nationalism’ is becoming the trend, outrageous incorrect information is circulated without a thought. Even the Press Information Bureau, the government’s spokesperson, so to say, photoshopped a photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi surveying flood-hit areas from an aircraft.⁴

We had a rumour about how the prime minister of the country had been declared the best prime minister by UNESCO, another on how the country’s national anthem was best, again by UNESCO. A day or two later, mainstream media did stories, debunking the messages, but as the old adage goes, a lie travels half way through the world before the truth even has the time to put its pants on.

There lies the problem of journalism and verification. It takes a bit of time, and few people care to cross check what they receive on social media, and worse, what they forward. And, we are not even talking about trolls ‘employed’ by political parties.⁵

Social media serves the purposes of the trolls and propagandists well, for instead of exposing people to diverse views, as it is meant to, it merely creates an echo chamber—you receive messages from friends on your What’sApp or Facebook groups, and you send them to friends on your What’sApp and Facebook groups. Nothing comes in from the outside.

In such circumstances, it becomes imperative to ensure that citizenry are taught to differentiate between a rumour and verified information/news.

In normal circumstances, Journalism would provide that distinction. In the MOOC on News Literacy, [Making Sense of the News](#), Masato Kajimoto talks about Source Evaluation Questions. The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University, too, emphasises the

³ Dixit, Pranav (2017, January 19) Viral WhatsApp Hoaxes Are India’s Own Fake News Crisis. https://www.buzzfeed.com/pranavdixit/viral-whatsapp-hoaxes-are-indias-own-fake-news-crisis?utm_term=.idNXZ50oy#.wo7qzDQM9

⁴ Iyengar, Rishi (2015 December 4) Officially doctored image of Prime Minister Modi at Chennai floods causes scorn in India. <http://time.com/4136096/modi-chennai-floods-pib-photoshop-twitter/>

⁵ Sanghvi, Vir, (2016 December 29) I am a troll: Inside the secret world of BJP’s digital army. http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/i-am-a-troll-inside-the-secret-world-of-bjp-s-digital-army-116122801182_1.html

need for evaluating sources. In a lesson plan it says: “The most reliable stories relate facts provided by informed, authoritative sources with no reason to withhold or distort information. That means the most important question news consumers can ask is: Says who?”

Attribution very clearly indicates whether the news has been received from an independent, credible authority, and corroboration of the statement with other sources or documents would provide verification. Attribution, therefore, is the first step toward verification. The reader will know a story has been verified only when it has been attributed. There, in a country like India, lies the catch.

You can attribute, and therefore verify, only when your source comes on record. This is increasingly becoming a challenge in a country where journalists are taken to task at the slightest hint of speaking truth to power,⁶ and bureaucrats and officials have been told not to speak to the media.

Even in the mainstream media, not all stories are attributed clearly. This is especially the case with stories that lend perspective, or deal with issues that might be controversial. Journalists in India have for long learnt to hide their sources behind nomenclatures—an official who belongs to the ruling party, a veteran journalist who covers the BJP⁷, etc.

Most journalists will tell you that a majority of police officers and bureaucrats refuse to be quoted. “You have spoken to the investigating officer of a case, you know through experience that what he is saying is right, but you can’t quote him, he refuses to be quoted,” says Imran Qureshi, a regular contributor to BBC Hindi Radio and who previously headed the Southern India bureau of India Today’s television network and the News Bureau of the Times of India, Bangalore.

K.S. Dakshinamurthy, an independent journalist who has formerly worked with Al Jazeera and the Hindustan Times, among others, agrees. “Sometimes, it is a tricky situation, it becomes necessary for me to choose between [not doing] a story and [not naming] a source.” In such cases, he says, he exercises his judgement. “I’ve done my homework, I’ve cross-checked the information given to me by the source and I bring authenticity,” he says. Dakshinamurthy says that he ensures that the reader gets all points of view, even if these points of view are not quoted.

Arun Subramaniam, another independent journalist who has worked with the Far Eastern Economic Review and India Today said that in order to persuade the reader, you all but reveal the source. “You describe him in a manner that the reader is left in no doubt that the source in is a position to know.”

It’s not just the authorities, ordinary people are not willing to talk, either. Qureshi relates this experience. He went to the northern part of the Indian state of Karnataka to cover the story of

⁶ Ninan, Sevanti, (2017 March 9), Rajeev Chandrasekhar censors The Wire. But why?

<http://www.thehoot.org/free-speech/media-freedom/rajeev-chandrasekhar-censors-the-wire-but-why-9972>

⁷ Mohan, Rohini (2016 November 1) Role of a Lifetime: Smriti Irani’s rise from soap start to union minister <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reportage/role-of-a-lifetime-smriti-irani>

the murder of a pregnant Muslim woman who had married a Dalit man.⁸ “Not one of the neighbours was willing to talk,” he said. “They had all known what happened, but no one was willing to say a word on record.”

He says that this comes out of a culture of not wanting to make enemies. “Why should we be concerned with their problems,” is what he was told, ‘their’ referring to the two families.

In a lot of other cases, too, publications tend to start with a disclaimer that ‘names have been changed to protect the identity of those mentioned in the article.’ This, says Dakshinamurthy, is a problem. He believes that this is done because newspapers are under the impression that there is a readership for certain kinds of stories. According to Dakshinamurthy, however, this is “lazy, unethical journalism.”

Yet, the fact remains that several large, impactful stories do not have attribution.

This could be due to several reasons, a big one being the culture of the country. “We lack academic rigour,” says Dakshinamurthy, giving one explanation. “This is part of a larger laxity that you see in the country—whether it is attributing an article precisely or packaging biscuits. We often just let it go.”

Another explanation that Dakshinamurthy has is that as a civilisation, as a society, India has largely had an oral tradition. “We are not taught well enough to document,” he says, adding that this is a shortcoming in the pedagogy in Indian classrooms. People don’t realise, he says, that what journalists write might be part of a larger context, and therefore has to be accurate and precise.

Further, India has a culture of secrecy. This could be a legacy of the Big Brother, pre-liberalisation era, say some. “It comes from a culture of subservience,” says Arun Subramaniam. “Speaking truth to power is only in name. It’s more like conniving with power.” He also feels that editors do not push hard enough for attribution.

Legally, India has a constitutionally guaranteed right to the freedom of the press, and journalists as conduits, as the voice of the people, can protect their sources, says Deeptha Rao of the Alternative Law Forum. There really is nothing in law that stops people, including the bureaucracy, from speaking to the press, she says, but then, internal memos and appointment letters ensure that they don’t say much on record. Some information held by the State, she points out, is legally withheld from the public through laws like the Official Secrets Act.

India is also in the process of working on a Whistleblower’s Act, but that has not yet come into existence. Even if it does become a reality, there is no guarantee that it will get people to speak to journalists on record.

Therefore, the question of attribution remains.

When there is no attribution, there is also little verification. Information taken from one source that is probably considered well-connected, reliable and authoritative, is rarely corroborated with other sources, or even documents. Again, this could be a cultural issue, or

⁸ Ram, Theja (2017 June 5), Pregnant Muslim woman burnt alive by her own family for marrying a Dalit Man in Karnataka. <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/pregnant-muslim-woman-burnt-alive-her-own-family-marrying-dalit-man-karnataka-63175>

simply a lack of initiative. Documents are not easy to come by, despite the Right to Information (RTI) Act that started off as a formidable legislation, but has since been watered down.

Bureaucrats often use the RTI to delay sending documents to journalists, or flood them with so much information that it could take a journalist years to find the relevant parts.

Having said that, there is no getting away from the fact that it is imperative in news literacy that sources are identified and information is verified. In a situation like the one we have in India, where sources are not attributed, the path to news literacy becomes a murky trail. The question that is often asked but can rarely be answered is: how does the reader know? How can the reader decide whether this information is from an independent, authoritative, reliable source?

“This is where branding comes in,” says Qureshi. “People do look at reputed newspapers to confirm the stories they see on social media, and they do look for sources.”

Dakshinamurthy adds, “There is accountability in organisations that have built credibility over several years, and people know that.”

Subramaniam says that the key element is trust between reporter and editor. Full disclosure is vital. Moreover, according to him, a competent readers’ editor could make the process transparent. “If this editor focussed narrowly on credibility, s/he would educate the reader on how the information in the newspaper/website was scrutinised before it is published.”

But, that does not really help a teacher of news literacy. News literacy lesson plans, material, all very clearly state that for a news item to be authentic and credible, information in it needs to be very clearly attributed and plainly verified. One of the tools of News Literacy is IMVAIN, the acronym for

- **I**ndependent Sources Are Better Than Self-Interested Sources
- **M**ultiple Sources Are Better Than A Single Source
- Sources Who **V**erify Are Better Than Sources Who assert
- **A**uthoritative/**I**nformed Sources Are Better Than Uninformed Sources
- **N**amed Sources Are Better Than Unnamed Sources

The last N, is what we are concerned with, for without naming the sources, we don’t know if they are independent, or whether they are authoritative and informed.

The next step then is to look for multiple sources—they are always better than a single one and they help corroborate information. That, too, might be a challenge as Qureshi found on his trip to northern Karnataka.

The teacher then suggests that readers look at more than one newspaper or television channel. That historical precedence might help. If this paper has been in the right, and usually checks its facts, then it must be right again, is a suggestion. All of this, however, is still in the realm of the vague, and not accurate and precise.

What is probably needed is a change in the culture in the country—not just for journalists, but also for people who speak to journalists. There is a need to attribute, and people must understand that.

“Indian print media has to get there, sooner or later,” says Qureshi, “if we have to maintain our credibility and enhance our authenticity. Soon, we’ll have no choice but to attribute every single word we write, or simply don’t write the story—leave it to the tabloids to put out unverified news.”

Till then, the news literacy teacher has to find ways of helping the reader find her way through the maze of anonymous sources. She can point out that news consumers ought to expect transparency from journalists, that journalists need to explain why the source had to remain anonymous. News sources that are not named ought to be clearly characterised, as pointed out by Subramaniam; you describe the source so well that readers have complete clarity on who the source may be. And, more importantly, that information provided by anonymous sources must be corroborated by other sources, and documents.

She has to work with other tools of News Literacy like Information Neighbourhoods, the Currency/Reliability/Authority/Point of view test, and Debunking and find local examples over a period of time to show what is good journalism and what the reader must expect from her newspaper.