Chapter 22
Countering Fake News:
A Study of People's Attitudes and Strategies to Offset Disinformation in Smart Cities in India

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine people's attitudes towards fake news and tactics to counter disinformation in India. A national survey through an online questionnaire was conducted through which 200 respondents recruited in the study through snowball sampling technique. The results of the study disclose that more than 90% of the participants perceive that fake news poses a threat, and 78.5% see fake news as harming democracy. Religious harmony and voting decisions are the topmost areas of public life which are mostly targeted by fake news in India. Conspicuously, the top three agents creating and disseminating fake news are politicians, political parties, and journalists. The study's findings provide an insight into countering fake news in India. This study is useful to government agencies in formulating policies related to fake news.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, there has been an escalating growth in the incidents of fake news that ultimately pose a significant threat to democracy, justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity (Zhou &Zafarani, 2020). In the present scenario, fake news has become a terrible catastrophe because many people lost their lives due to the spread of misinformation across the world. Specifically in India, dozens of people have been killed by the mob due to child abduction rumors propagated through social media platforms viz. WhatsApp (Samuels, 2020). Conspicuously, the reach of fake news cannot be underestimated during the

critical months of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign when hundreds of websites published falsified or heavily biased stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Geeng et al., 2020.). Quintessentially, fake news is changing and even distorting how political campaigns are run, ultimately calling into question the legitimacy of elections, elected officials, and governments (Tong et al., 2020). While propaganda, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories are being proliferated online and on other social media platforms (William and Mary Law School, n.d.), it is crucial to understand how people assess and interact with fake news. In the context of the present study, fake news is to be considered as all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to cause public harm intentionally or for profit.

To better understand how people react to disinformation on social media and in countering fake news, this study tries to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ 1: What attitudes do people have towards fake news?
RQ 2: How do people react to disinformation posts on their social media platforms?
RQ 3: How do people examine whether a post is authentic and reliable?

The present study has implications both for research and the day-to-day life of the general public. The literature review indicates that no study has been conducted in the Indian context on the subject of fake news. It is nevertheless to say that; this piece of research certainly opens new avenues on the discourse of fake news in research and practice. The study's findings provide an insight into countering fake news in India. This study is also valuable for government agencies in formulating policies related to fake news.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

It emerges from the review of related literature that the subject of fake news has gained significant attention across the world over the last few years. McNair (2018) investigated the role of media in spreading fake news from the 1800s and 1920s, providing historical background of the term's usage and development over the period. Weiss et al.(2020) explored the concept of fake news among the faculty members at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). The findings demonstrate that 88 percent of faculty members felt that fake news is a matter of concern and affecting everyone regardless of demographics, rank, and discipline in higher education. Barthel et al. (2016) surveyed 1,002 U.S. adults, and the results of the study reveal that about one-third (32%) of U.S. adults perceive that political news stories being disseminated over the internet are made and caused confusion about the basic facts. Sängerlaub (2017) surveyed 1,037 individuals shortly after the German parliamentary elections in 2017. The findings indicate that 61 percent of the respondents had the impression that there were many cases of fake news during the election campaign. Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) gathered fake news headlines circulated during the U.S. presidential elections. The researchers further asked 1,208 survey participants whether they had seen those headlines during the election campaign and accepted them as true. They disclosed that 15 percent of the respondents reported that they had seen those fake news headlines, whereas 8 percent of the respondents also believed them. In the same line, Tong et al.(2020) examined the opinions of the general public about fake news using a national survey of U.S. adults. The results reveal that the general public considered fake news as a weapon to criticize and delegitimize political opponents. Furthermore, Del Vicario et al. (2016) found that fake news propagation usually occurs within homogeneous groups of users having similar ideologies. McGivney et al. (2017) suggested that information literacy should be

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