

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING INFORMATION QUALITY AND MEDIA LITERACY

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Abstract: Social media has taken center stage as the primary means of interpersonal communication, serving as a platform for disseminating concepts and knowledge among wider audiences. Millions of users today rely heavily on the swiftly growing online social networks as a key source of national and worldwide news. On the other hand, there are two sides to online social networks. Despite the many advantages they provide, such as boundless, straightforward contact and quick news and information, they can also have a lot of disadvantages and issues. One of their most challenging issues is the rapid propagation of false/fake news. Fake news identification is still a difficult problem. Furthermore, creating a solution is anything but straightforward due to the characteristics and challenges of identifying bogus news on online social networks. False or incorrect information leads to fake news, which consists of untrue reports with no credible sources, facts, or quotes.

This research seeks to give a thorough and systematic analysis of fake news research as well as an overview of the main techniques currently employed to identify false news and stop it from spreading via Online Social Networks.

Keywords: - Fake news, Disinformation, Misinformation, Media Literacy, and Information Quality

1.0 Introduction

1.1 What is social media?

“Social media refers to digital platforms and websites that enable users to create, share, and engage with content, as well as connect with others in a virtual environment. These platforms often involve text, images, videos, and other media formats, enabling communication, networking, and information sharing among individuals and groups”. Consumers use apps or web-based software on computer, tablet, or mobile phone to access social media. Social networking sites on the Internet make it simple to speedily and simply trade private documents, downloads, videos, and photographs.

The internet gave rise to the social media sites we use today. Simply, social media cannot be accessed without an internet connection. While there were print media outlets like newspapers, radio, and television in the past, individuals can now generate their own content on social media sites. Social media has emerged as the main medium for interpersonal communication, whether it be for purely amusing reasons, professional purposes, or related to academics. It also holds our personal information, thus the government must regulate it to shield the public from cybercrime.

Social media works efficiently because it makes relationships possible and allows for rampant information sharing with everyone on Earth. It is the network of individuals and groups interacting with one another. They can be used with the aid of PCs, laptops, and mobile phones and are also used to exchange their contents between people who share the same interests. On these forums, individuals used to work together to promote public awareness of various issues and their own points of view.

About 3.8 billion people all over the world use social media. Social media is an area that changes all the time. Almost every year, big social networks like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram are joined by new apps like TikTok and Clubhouse.¹

The most important prerequisite for a business is social networking. Business organization use the platform to lure potential customers and connect with customers, increase sales through marketing and advertising, track consumer trends, and aid or look after customers.

1.2 Types- Social Mediaⁱⁱ

Social media platforms are classified into four major classifications:-

1.2.1 Social networking platforms: These type networks are used by people to share knowledge, ideas, and opinions. These networks frequently put the user first. Finding others with similar interests or concerns is made easier through user profiles. Examples: LinkedIn and Facebook.

1.2.2 Media transmission systems: These channels give content first priority. For example, user-generated movies are what encourage interaction on YouTube. Additional websites for sharing media are Instagram and TikTok. Twitch and other streaming services are included in this category's subgroup.

1.2.3 Community-based networks: This social network prioritises in-depth debate more than a blog forum does. Users create conversations that are off-topic and turn into lengthy comment threads. Communities frequently emerge around particular subjects. These forums allow users from across the world to debate a wide range of subjects. Reddit and Quora are two of the top examples of discussion networks.

1.2.4 Review board networks : Usually, the purpose of these networks is to review a product or service.

1.3 What challenges do social media platforms pose?

Individuals may encounter issues as a result of social media in the following ways:

- Brain-related issues- Using social media apps excessively might lead to social media addiction, fatigue or exhaustion and other problems.
- Polarization- In a filter bubble, one can get stuck. In a virtual community that appears to be an open forum but was actually created by an algorithm, the individual is alone themselves.
- Disinformation- People who seek to distribute incorrect information can more easily do so when there is a lot of disagreement.

2.0 Impact Of Social Media

Every single person on the planet uses social media in some capacity. Social media therefore naturally affects people's daily life, especially young ones. People's eating and drinking habits, fashion and lifestyle choices, thinking and behavior, interaction styles and relationship values, knowledge and information levels, and other behaviors have all changed as a outcome of social media.

2.1 Interpersonal Relationships: - Social media has an impact on interpersonal interactions because young people utilize it to meet alleged social needs. However, social media cannot satisfy all needs, such as the following. Compared to kids who are not lonely, the lonely young population is more prone to use social media for emotional support. Anxiety and stress can occasionally be brought on by using social media or engaging in online activities. This is brought about by a number of things, including online posts, privacy concerns, organizations looking into social media profiles, etc. By using social media, children and young people can interact with more people, participate in community programmes and activities, connect with like-minded individuals, stay connected with friends and family, and do a variety of other endless chores.ⁱⁱⁱ

2.2 Privacy: People have some influence over how they are protected, but they have no control over what other people may post about them. This is beginning to raise serious concerns as businesses look for information about new and potential employees.

2.3 Fraud: On occasion, a user might not be who he claims to be. People make phoney social media profiles in order to trick other people. It has been discovered that many people are making money from it. Their money has been stolen, and other crucial information that they provided is also in risk.

2.4 Health Issues: Excessive social media use has a detrimental effect on people's health. Obesity, fatigue, and a reluctance to get outside result in major health problems.

2.5 Cyberbullying: One of the worst side effects of social media is cyberbullying. People mock and troll one another for content they find offensive, such as undesirable images, videos, or viewpoints.

2.6 Spreading Fake News: Fake news quickly picks up steam on social media. Online, false news and information are posted and spread quickly. Nobody investigates the accuracy of the report; they simply begin spreading it.

2.7 Hacking: Hacking is one of the most major problems with social media. Hacking is forbidden everywhere since it allows users to access your private information that is limited.

3.0 Misinformation And Disinformation On Social Media

The availability and promptness of social media have significantly facilitated the creation and dissemination of incorrect information, such as rumours, spam, and fake news. Recent cases of misinformation have highlighted how important it is to know how to recognize false information on social media.

The term "misinformation" refers to information that has been generated, distributed, or used purposefully, unintentionally, or both. Rumours are unsubstantiated reports that may or may not be genuine, fake news is untrue material that is presented as news, and spam is unrelated information that is disseminated widely. Accurate information that is intentionally misleading is referred to as disinformation and is often distinguished from misinformation.

The key distinction between disinformation and misinformation is whether the information was created with the intent to deceive. While disinformation refers to situations when the material was purposefully produced to deceive, misinformation frequently refers to unintentional events. Throughout our discourse, we will use the word "misinformation" to describe any false or inaccurate information that is circulated on social media.

4.0 Fake News/Information

We can't always rely on social media, even if it is already almost a given in our culture. Every day, we read a lot of content on social media, some of which may or may not be true. Fake news, which is made up of bogus stories without any references to reputable sources, facts, or quotes, is the outcome of this inaccurate or misleading information. These tales are made up in an effort to deceive or sway readers' perceptions. The problem of false news raises questions about what constitutes reliable news.

Fake news typically combines the three ideas of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. Misinformation is false data that is disseminated by those who genuinely believe it to be true. Disinformation is the purposeful transmission of incorrect information by someone who knows it to be true. On the other side, false information is information that is based in reality but harms a person, a group, or a country. When we put them together, we call it fake news. Satire, misleading links, factual misrepresentation, imposter content, manipulated content, produced content, and memes are just a few examples of the various sorts of information disorder that exist.

On social media, spreading fake information is often done for two reasons. Some people spread it because they are motivated by political, ideological, or business reasons, while others do it merely for fun. But they deliberately do it. But some people still share untrue information on purpose and with understanding that it is untrue. Everybody has a distinct motivation. Few of them think that feeling of pride that comes from being the first to communicate the information. While some do it for entertainment, others feel compelled to let people know how important the news is.

Various COVID-19-related false news stories were in the recent past very quickly circulating on social media and among the general public. Indians' phones are inundated with false material, from selling generic home cures to combat the illness to disseminating bogus warnings urging people to stay away from foods like ice cream and chicken and sharing conspiracy theories. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked the populace to disregard the Covid-19 allegations.^{iv}

5.0 Effects Of Fake News/Information

In the current digital era, the prevalence of fake news on social media has become a major worry. False or misleading material that is presented as true news content is referred to as fake news. The implications of this phenomenon on people, society, and even democratic processes are extensive. We shall examine the several impacts of fake news on social media in this essay.

5.1. Misinformation and Misinterpretation: Fake news proliferate rapidly on social media platforms due to their wide reach and fast sharing capabilities. Users often encounter misleading or false information before accurate sources can debunk it. This can lead to individuals making decisions based on inaccurate information, causing harm to themselves or others.^v

5.2. Erosion of Trust: The repeated exposure to fake news can erode trust in reliable sources of information. When users are unable to differentiate between authentic and false information, they might start questioning the credibility and reliability of all news sources, including reputable ones. This erosion of trust can lead to a climate of skepticism and cynicism.

5.3. Polarization: Fake news often caters to specific ideologies or beliefs, reinforcing existing biases and creating echo chambers. This can further polarize society as individuals are exposed to one-sided narratives that amplify their preexisting views. Polarization can hinder productive conversations and collaborative problem-solving.

5.4. Manipulation of Public Opinion: Fake news can be strategically used to manipulate public opinion. Malicious actors, including foreign governments and special interest groups, exploit the viral nature of social media to spread divisive content that serves their agendas. This can sway public sentiment on important issues or events.

5.5. Impact on Democratic Processes: In democratic societies, informed citizen participation is crucial. However, the dissemination of fake news can manipulate public perception during elections or referendums. False information can sway voters, influence electoral outcomes, and undermine the integrity of democratic processes.

5.6. Economic Implications: Fake news can have economic consequences. Brands and companies might suffer if their reputations are damaged by false information. Moreover, fake news can distort financial markets by spreading rumors that affect investor decisions.

5.7. Public Safety and Health: False information on health, safety, or emergencies can have dire consequences. For instance, during a public health crisis, fake news about potential treatments or preventative measures can lead to ineffective or harmful actions. Similarly, misinformation during emergencies can impede timely and appropriate responses.

5.8. Media Literacy and Critical Thinking: The prevalence of fake news underscores the importance of media literacy and critical thinking skills. Educating individuals to evaluate sources, fact-check information, and critically assess content can empower them to make more informed decisions online.

5.9. Legitimization of Falsehood: When fake news is shared widely, it can gain credibility merely through its visibility. Even if it is later debunked, some individuals might continue to believe the falsehoods due to the initial exposure.

5.10. Psychological Impact: Fake news can evoke strong emotions, including anger, fear, or anxiety. These emotions can cloud rational thinking and lead individuals to make impulsive decisions based on false information.

Promoting critical thinking and digital literacy can help people learn to discriminate between reliable information and false information. In conclusion, fake news on social media has wide-ranging effects that extend beyond the digital realm. From misinformation and erosion of trust to impacts on democracy and public safety, the consequences of fake news are profound. Addressing this issue requires collaboration among technology companies, governments, educators, and individuals to ensure that accurate and reliable information prevails in today's digital age.

6.0 Media Literacy And Information Quality

In our modern era, where information flows freely and swiftly through digital channels, the concepts of information quality and media literacy have gained new significance. As we navigate a vast sea of data, it becomes essential to not only consume information but also to discern its authenticity, credibility, and significance. This is where information quality and media literacy come into play.

6.1 Information Quality:

The quality of information mainly refers to its accuracy, meaningful, and reliability. In the digital age, anyone can publish content online, blurring the lines between credible sources and misinformation. Therefore, evaluating information quality is paramount. Fact-checking and cross-referencing are practices some that help ensure that the information we come across is backed by evidence and verified sources. Additionally, being aware of the context in which information is presented can shed light on potential biases or hidden agendas.^{vi}

6.2 Media Literacy:

Media literacy incorporates skills that entitles individuals to critically analyze, assess, and interpret messages shared through media. This includes differentiating between different types of media (news, opinion, satire) and thorough understanding of the techniques used to convey messages. Media literate individuals are proficient at identifying biasness, be aware of propaganda, and decoding the visual as well as textual elements that influence perception. Moreover, they can navigate complex digital landscapes, spotting manipulated images and discerning credible sources from unreliable ones.

6.3 The Intersection:

Media literacy skills enable individuals to apply critical thinking to information, raising questions about its origin, intention, and accuracy. This, in turn, contributes to the overall quality of the information consumed and shared. Media literacy also encourages healthy skepticism, prompting individuals to question information that seems too good (or too alarming) to be true.

6.4 Challenges and Benefits:

The digital age has brought both challenges and benefits to information quality and media literacy. On one hand, the democratization of information has empowered individuals to access diverse perspectives and voices. On the other hand, it has led to the spread of misinformation and the proliferation of "fake news." Discerning between reliable and unreliable sources can be challenging, requiring media literacy skills to navigate this information landscape effectively.

Enhancing information quality and media literacy skills has several advantages. Firstly, it empowers individuals to make informed decisions, whether in their personal lives or as responsible citizens participating in democratic processes. Secondly, it reduces the risk of falling victim to misinformation or scams. Lastly, it fosters a more critical and engaged society that questions information rather than passively accepting it.

6.5 Educational Initiatives:

Educational institutions and organizations are recognizing the importance of information quality and media literacy. Curriculum changes and public awareness campaigns aim to equip individuals with the skills needed to navigate the digital world effectively. These initiatives promote critical thinking, source verification, and ethical sharing of information. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of consuming information from a variety of perspectives to avoid echo chambers.

In conclusion, information quality and media literacy are vital components of our information-driven society. Developing these skills enables individuals to assess information critically, separate fact from fiction, and engage with media messages in a responsible and informed manner. As technology continues to evolve, nurturing these skills will be essential to ensure that we remain discerning and empowered participants in the digital age.

7.0 Strategies To Improve Information Quality And Media Literacy

In the modern digital world, where false information and fake news may spread quickly, improving the quality of information on social media is essential. To encourage accuracy, dependability, and responsible information sharing, it is crucial to put effective tactics into practice. Here are some methods to improve the caliber of information on social media platforms:

7.1 Educating Users: A key action is encouraging media literacy among users. Inform users on the importance of critical thought, fact-checking, and spotting reliable sources. Social media platforms and educational institutions can work together to create campaigns and tools that help users distinguish between trustworthy content and false information.

7.2 Algorithmic Adjustments: Social media algorithms play a significant role in what content users see. Platforms should prioritize showing content from reputable sources, while reducing the visibility of sensationalized or unverified information. These adjustments can help curb the spread of false information.

7.3 Verified Accounts and Labels: Verified accounts for individuals and organizations known for producing credible information can help users quickly identify reliable sources. Additionally, labels indicating the content's accuracy status (e.g., "Fact-Checked," "Verified Source") provide immediate context to users about the content's credibility.

7.4 Fact-Checking Integrations: Integrate third-party fact-checking organizations to review and flag content for accuracy. When users encounter disputed information, platforms can display fact-check results alongside the content to provide a balanced perspective.

7.5 Community Reporting: Allow users to report suspicious or false content. Implement a streamlined reporting process, and if a certain piece of content receives multiple reports, subject it to manual review by platform moderators.

7.6 Promote Original Sources: Encourage users to share information from original sources rather than relying on second-hand or re-shared content. This helps reduce the distortion that can occur when information is passed through multiple intermediaries.

7.7 Incentivize Responsible Sharing: Reward users who consistently share accurate information and penalize those who frequently share misinformation. Gamification techniques could be used to promote responsible content sharing.

7.8 Collaboration with Experts: Partner with experts, scholars, and professionals in various fields to contribute accurate and reliable information. Live Q&A sessions, webinars, and AMA (Ask Me Anything) sessions can facilitate direct interaction between experts and users.

7.9 Transparent Content Policies: Clearly communicate content guidelines and policies to users. Platforms should explicitly state their stance on misinformation and the actions they take to address it. This fosters a sense of accountability and transparency.

7.10 User Empowerment: Provide users with tools to curate their content experience. Allow customization of content preferences, filtering options, and content sources to empower users to tailor their feeds to trusted sources.

7.11 Public Awareness Campaigns: Regularly launch campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of sharing accurate information. Engage influencers and celebrities to amplify the message and reach a wider audience.

7.12 Continuous Evaluation and Improvement: Regularly assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies. Monitor metrics related to content accuracy, user engagement, and misinformation incidents. Adjust strategies based on the results to achieve optimal outcomes.

By adopting a combination of these strategies, social media platforms can contribute to a more informed and responsible online community. These measures not only enhance information quality but also foster a culture of critical thinking and media literacy among users.

8.0 Cyber Laws In India And Social Media

Even though social media are not specifically covered by Indian law, there are a number of provisions under cyber laws that can be used to seek redress when any rights in cyberworld, or social media are violated. The laws and pertinent provisions are enumerated in detail below.

“The Information Technology Act, 2000

- a) Computer-related offences that can also be committed through social media are punishable under Chapter XI of the Act in Sections 65, 66, 66A, 6C, 66D, 66E, 66F, 67, 67A, and 67B. These offences include altering computer source code, committing computer-related offences listed in Section 43, sending offensive messages through communication services, identity theft, cheating by personation using computer resources, violating privacy, cyberterrorism, publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form, material containing sexually explicit act in electronic form, material depicting children in sexually explicit act in electronic form, respectively.
- b) In the interest of the sovereignty or integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, for preventing incitement to commit any cognizable offence, and for investigation of any offence, “Section 69 of the Act empowers the Central or a State Government to issue directives for the interception, monitoring, or decryption of any information passing through any computer resource.”^{vii}
- c) “Section 69A grants the Central Government the authority to issue directives restricting public access to any information via any computer resource for comparable reasons.”^{viii}
- d) “Section 69B gives the Central Government the authority to issue directives authorising any agency to monitor and collect traffic data or information via any computer resource for cyber security purposes”^{ix}
- e) “Section 79 provides for intermediary liability. The intermediary is not liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link he makes available or hosted by him in Information Technology Act, 2000, section 66A.”^x

Of all of these provisions, Section 66A has recently made headlines, albeit not for the right reasons. It is preferable to first have a look at Section 66A, the provision, before delving deeper into the problem. Sending offensive messages through communication services, etc. is punishable under Section 66A of the Information Technology Act of 2000, which was added by the Information Technology (Amendment) Act of 2008, and it is stated as follows^{xi}:

Any person who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device-

- a) any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character;
- b) any information which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, or ill will, persistently by making use of such computer resource or a communication device,
- c) Any electronic mail or electronic mail message for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience or to deceive or to mislead the addressee or recipient about the origin of such messages shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine.

Explanation: For the purposes of this section, terms "electronic mail" and "electronic mail message" means a message or information created or transmitted or received on a computer, computer system, computer resource or

communication device including attachments in text, images, audio, video and any other electronic record, which may be transmitted with the message.

9.0 Suggestions And Conclusion

There are many ways to detect fake news and retain authentic/accurate information. The most important technique in this situation is verification as such content may come from shady news sources. False news must be checked using both offline and internet means for verification.

The traditional approach to verification expressly comprises consulting and verifying the primary source. It can be cited by emailing the person or business, reading numerous original papers pertinent to the story, or doing both. Then, at least one additional source must confirm the information, and this method must also be applied to online verification.

There are numerous techniques to spot false information and remember the truth. It frequently displays overt prejudice and possibly will attempt to elicit resilient emotions from the reader, such rage or hatred. Verification is the most crucial strategy in this case because suspect news sources could be the source of the article. False news must be verified using both offline and online methods.

The primary source is specifically consulted and verified as part of the conventional verification process. Emailing the individual or company, reading multiple original documents relevant to the story, or doing both are acceptable methods of citing it. The information must next be verified by at least one more source, and this process must be used for online verification as well.

For online verification operations, there are specific instruments and procedures. We can once more utilise the image to perform a Reverse picture Search on Google or any other search engine to verify the authenticity of a photograph or photo and determine whether it is real or fraudulent. If a photo has already been used, it can be determined. Additionally, it displays the image's age and whether or not it has been used in other settings. Additionally, it will be shown if a fact-checker has already written an article on the subject.

A fake news video is validated using the same procedure.

Even while there are numerous strategies for thwarting fake news, they occasionally fall short. Since there is absence of editors on social media, any content can be shared without being screened. Therefore, when sharing content, it could be beneficial for users if a checkbox asking "Is the content real?" appears. But we social media users must also make a substantial contribution. Instead of relying on the social media firms to do it for us, we may assume the job of editors by learning how to undertake the necessary research to find the truth behind the false information. Taking individual responsibility is the paramount and most crucial step in protecting our society from this bogus content.

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