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DIGITAL MEDIA: DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION DURING PANDEMICS

Authored By-Niraj Kumar Seth

“Satyamev Jayate”
(From the Indian Emblem, meaning “Truth alone triumphs”)

Introduction To Digital Media

Digital Media has proliferated at an exponential pace in the 21st century. It offers a multitude of advantages by seamlessly connecting people at an affordable cost. Facebook and Twitter have made social or digital media the new buzzword for communication. Even official announcements of governments and international organizations like World Health Organization, are published over twitter these days. WhatsApp has become a household name for messaging and video calling. Falling cost of internet data, proliferation of smartphones, widespread digital literacy among masses and popularity of social media sites have spurred a digital media revolution. While digital media offers many benefits, it also poses certain challenges to the governments all around the world over content regulation. Misinformation and Disinformation is the single biggest threat that digital media brought with it in our lives.

Misinformation Or Disinformation

Misinformation basically means an information that is misleading and false, at least in some respect. Disinformation on the other hand is the deliberate act of spreading fake information. In recent times, there is a raging debate over fake news and misinformation being proliferated over social media in public domain. Doctored videos with superimposed audios and manipulated graphics have become a law & order issue, especially during times of elections. False narratives are created to alter public opinion to one’s favor. Cambridge Analytica is a case in hand. It carried out profiling of millions of users of social media site, Facebook. Such organized data on user profiles are then used to feed them with misinformation and disinformation. Biases and prejudices of individuals are exploited to create a suitable narrative which favors the perpetrators of such misinformation campaign. Women, marginalized sections of society, children are at a higher risk of

being targeted by such malignant elements. Reputations could be tarnished overnight with lethal consequences. False and misleading videos and information, emanating from doubtful sources with no credibility can trigger crimes or change the fate of an election in a short span of time. The effects are devastating on the society as a whole.

Digital Media V. Traditional Media

Lately, traditional media outlets like newspaper, radio and even Television, are shrinking in size, reach and presence. The reason is obvious, social media and digital news, available at click of a button, are technologically superior and much more convenient to viewers than traditional media. They are much more affordable and offer more flexibility. Traditional media are losing touch with common folk. Advertisement revenues are declining with fall in viewership/readership. This has only fueled the ability of digital media to amplify the effect of misleading news on public. With readership or viewership as large and diverse as traditional media, digital media has a vast disinformation potential. Any fake news that is posted over internet, doesn't get verified and crosschecked as has been the rule in traditional media. As a result, the unverified information gets forwarded and shared among huge number of people at a lightening pace. Print media has virtually become economically unviable and there is an increasing number of newspaper outlets, adopting digital platform to publish their news content.

Misinformation During COVID Over Digital Media

COVID 19 was the latest theatre of misinformation and fake news over digital and social media. The pandemic caused by novel coronavirus has caused around 3 million deaths till date. It had brought the government and administration to its knees. There was an acute shortage of medicines, oxygen supply, ambulances and even hospital beds. People were struggling to get space in crematorium for their loved ones who succumbed to COVID. At such a moment of time, the least we expected was some credible information relating to COVID, medical facilities and vaccination drives. But that wasn't the case. Misinformation had been the rule and credibility an exception. The most shocking instances of misinformation include the rumors about use of cow excreta or urine as an effective alternative to allopathic medicines. The most dangerous fake news situation was created at the inception of pandemic when a particular community was being targeted for spreading COVID 19. Fake news and disinformation propagated by certain mischievous sections portrayed a community as the cause of explosion in COVID cases, with an aim to polarize the public opinion against them.

Policy Recommendations

Governments all across the world are baffled on the issue of misinformation over digital media. Regulating activities over internet is not an easy task. Even the US government couldn't prevent misinformation campaigns that led to the victory of Donald Trump and polarization in American society. How should India deal with misinformation and disinformation on COVID like pandemics in future? Policymakers need to design a uniform and effective policy to curb the menace, which may include the following measures as its core –

- As a start, education and awareness about disinformation and misinformation among public should be prioritized.
- A regulator should be established with exclusive jurisdiction and responsibilities to look into cases of misinformation or disinformation and to regulate activities of digital media outlets.
- Digital media outlets must be asked to get themselves mandatorily registered and disclosure regime on periodical basis should be laid down.
- Every digital media outlet should have an officer dealing with complaints about fake news or misinformation over its platform.
- Stringent internal review and validation should form part of self-regulation.
- Government should immediately enact a law regulating digital media, penalties and punishment for perpetrators of misinformation, prosecution of offenders and their black listing.
- Misinformation campaign targeting individuals, especially children and women should be dealt with strictness.
- Right to Privacy is now a fundamental right after the judgement of supreme court in the case of K. S. Puttaswamy. Rights and privacy of patients should be particularly protected.
- Any misinformation on availability, efficacy and price of drugs should be dealt as criminal offence.
- Unlicensed and untested products, posing as ayurvedic or homeopathic medicines for COVID 19 like pandemics should be seized and their manufacturers and sellers shall be penalized.
- Any misinformation targeting a particular community or religion should be dealt strictly, as it may have law and order ramification.

- A war room should be created at central, state and district level to identify each such instances of disinformation and label them as such.
- Volunteers from universities and colleges may be engaged in this activity.
- Citizen participation is of utmost importance, as they are the ultimate audience and consumers of such toxic news.
- A portal shall be created to report cases of disinformation by citizens. Awareness drives in rural areas with involvement of trained ASHA workers can make people more vigilant about risks of misinformation.
- Social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, etc. should be made more accountable for any misinformation related to COVID like pandemics on their platform.
- Online marketplaces like Amazon and Flipkart must delist any product that falsely claims to be effective against COVID like pandemics or misrepresentations about approval or certifications.
- Vaccine hesitancy caused by disinformation over side effects of vaccines must be immediately countered with authentic and credible information through televised press conferences of medical experts.

Conclusion

Misinformation during pandemic may act as fuel to fire. Government needs to devise effective policies to curb misinformation and disinformation. Regulation and oversight over misinformation should no longer be left upon digital media outlets. Right policies, timely implementation and community participation should be the way forward.