

# Social Media literacy can address misinformation

**Annu Anand**

In June 2018, two Assam youths, an audio engineer and a digital artist, were killed brutally in a mob lynching while they were heading for a vacation, due to a misleading social media post. Local people believed a post about child kidnappers moving in the region, and thought that the two were kidnappers. This wasn't an isolated case. The rumors about child abduction spread through WhatsApp messages were connected to at least 17 murders across India in 2018. Such lynching incidents in several parts of the country due to social media posts shook the nation and demonstrated the devastating impacts of misinformation.

During the pandemic social media has emerged as a major source of misinformation. India emerged as the biggest source of COVID misinformation as one out of six posts about the pandemic is based on fake information, according to a study by the University of Alberta. It found that social media is the biggest producer of misinformation accounting for nearly 85% of it. Internet-based sources make up 91% of all COVID-related fake news. Among the countries, India was found the biggest source of misinformation (18%) followed by Brazil 9% and the USA 8.6%. The amount of misinformation was also the highest in India.

## **Indian social media is more vulnerable**

In fact, misinformation is the emerging problem in the media landscape dominated by social media in India. More than 400 million Indians have access to the internet on digital devices like smart-phones. People with affordable phone and broadband connections have access to news and information flowing from different digital sources but are not

equipped to assess the veracity of claims usually made in these messages.

As per the latest data, Indians on average spend about 2.36 hours on social media every day. The number of

social media users in the country has grown due to deep penetration of internet connectivity. The number of Internet users has grown to 658 million which is roughly 47% of the total population. of this, mobile internet users are about 600 million. The falling price of smartphones has driven the massive increase in the usage of mobile phones. The availability of internet connections at very low prices is another factor for a large scale rise in internet subscribers.

The country's higher internet penetration rate, increasing social media consumption and users lack of digital literacy and regulation has led to an increase the vulnerability of social media misinformation. The pandemic has amplified the circulation of unverified information — both unwitting (misinformation) and deliberate (disinformation).

## **More vulnerability, more impact**

The spread of misinformation poses a considerable threat to the life and lifestyle of the common people as evident from various studies. During the pandemic, misinformation related to false cures and conspiracy theories caused panic, anxiety, false hope, mental trauma and fear as the virus was spreading. Due to the spread of health misinformation, the business of fake healthcare services and



fake medicines also increased. The most prevalent impact of misinformation that was seen during and after the lockdown-suffered a different kind of socio-psychological impact in different parts of the country. Multi-language and the diverse socio-cultural environment have made it more critical to address the problem.

A top World Health Organization official during August month noted that misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines is keeping people from getting the shots, driving an increase in cases around the world.

Digital media literacy is one way to help internet users in India identify and disregard misinformation and disinformation, especially in regional languages and rural areas.

One such media literacy training program run by the FactShala India Media Literacy Network was conducted across 28 states of the country. In early 2021 the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), an independent social and media research think tank, conducted a comprehensive impact evaluation of FactShala's training program. This evaluation study also tried to find out the impacts of the misinformation floating on social media.

Many respondents in the study recalled how misinformation impacted their health and communal harmony in some parts of the country and also generated fear, anxiety and false hope among many of them. The spread of misinformation makes many people feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally exhausted. The respondents cited examples of posts that impacted their physical and mental health due to believing in wrong information on social media.

A young woman explained that she didn't isolate herself for many days even after testing positive for Covid-19 because she read a post claiming that 'if you can hold your breath for 30 seconds you aren't Covid positive.' The study found many such cases where either the treatment or the preventive measures were delayed or stopped after reading misinformation or

disinformation appeared on social media. Many posts were spreading information against vaccination. Few respondents admitted that they had read the posts that one can die also after vaccination. It created fear among some people and boosted vaccine hesitancy.

Communal disharmony was the other major impact reported by respondents from Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. Posts carrying misinformation related to employment or cancellation of exams or promotion of next class created false hope and anxiety among students and job seekers. After reading and believing the post appeared on different platforms of social media many people suffered financial loss. During the interviews many respondents admitted that they were duped and suffered financial loss after reading the posts about money laundering or cheap tickets for the flights.

### **Need for digital media literacy**

As there is so much information on social media and online in general, identifying useful and accurate sources is deceptively difficult for average users. Media literacy interventions have an important role as citizens are not checking online information for accuracy and authenticity, largely because of the sheer volume of messages and low levels of awareness about misinformation-and disinformation and, fact-checking.

Small, standalone interventions targeting school students or institutions exist but they tend to focus either on fact-checking and verification training, or critical thinking. To make people knowledgeable and secure online an effective mechanism for increasing information literacy and building resilience to misinformation and disinformation within communities is required.

***Director Advocacy, Centre for Media Studies.***

***The article was first published in Pioneer on 16 April, 2022***