RESEARCH ARTICLE

MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS, AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS: A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE LIGHT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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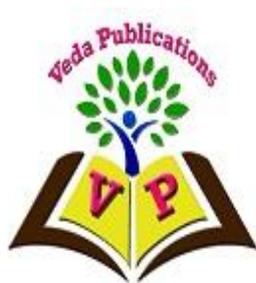Email- abhishekx92007@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT

The concepts of fake news and rumors in communication are not new. The practice of spreading propaganda for the benefit of the dominant has been around us for several centuries with the rise of societies and power structures. But the mediums through which they are spread have changed over the years. The oral mode has given way to media and the cyber world. All social media platforms are participating in this process. As information is power, that is why every individual using social media platforms is powerful in his/her domain. This power becomes a menace when the information is manipulated from the source. The destructive power of this phenomenon is evident in this COVID-19 scenario as well. The modes of communication are being distorted and as a result, the information is becoming beyond recognition by common people. Here the manipulation is not only caused by the governments and their ideologies as stated by Louis Althusser, but also by a group of cybercriminals. Amidst this pandemic situation, sound information is the key to restrain the panic and confusion of the masses. WHO's Director-General Dr. Tedros has said that miss information causes confusion and spreads fear. It hampers the response towards the outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic remains a silent example of how social media has bred a multitude of falsehoods. In the first few months of 2020, information and news reports about coronavirus (COVID19) disease were rapidly published on social media and social marketing sites throughout the internet. In this pandemic situation, there are thousands of people who are spreading information, rumors, and misinformation making it critical for the governments to control. At the same time, it continues to harm the mental health of every individual. The paper aims to analyze the causes and effects of the spreading of fake news and misinformation.

Keywords: *Fake news, COVID-19 pandemic, Ideology, Social media, Communication.*

INTRODUCTION

The word 'fake news' may not be of recent origin. It exists for a very long time, nearly the same amount of time as news began to circulate widely after the printing press was invented in 1939. When the term fake news came into public notice, they were simply perceived as social media posts with rather incredible stories. Fake News on social media indeed is not just a post that been liked, shared, or followed, rather it is a powerful technique for spreading mission for motion with its dominant and for reaching effect. Later it has created the greatest threats for democracy, free debates, and discussions.

In recent times, the biggest news on social media is COVID-19. COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered novel strain of coronavirus. SARS.COV-2 (WHO, 2020). This virus is responsible for a considerable proportion of upper respiratory tract infections among children. With no vaccine against the infection, efforts to control it worldwide are very much limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions that include good personal hygiene, isolation, quarantine, and avoiding public gatherings. Giant social media platforms have subsumed many methods to share information with incredible speed, reach, and penetration. They have become polluted with the inadvertent spread of misleading news and misinformation in the form of images, voice messages and videos. Individuals, knowingly and unknowingly, spread information at an alarming rate, which could be dangerous or misleading. Misinformation on social media can influence public opinion and behaviors with an intense consequence, positively or negatively manipulating the perspective of those who consume it.

MASS MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Mass media holds an important role in the growth and progress of communication and it is used for more than just passing on information from one person to another. Mass media is a social institution that caters to the social and economic needs of wider social groups and it has been playing an important role in developing countries. Such a form of communication is known as development communication (Choudhury, 3). According to Everett Rogers, "Development communication refers to the users to which communication is put to future development". Development communication can be categorized into two terms- communication and development. Development communication has two primary roles, Transforming role and Socializing role. Transforming role, as it seeks social changes for higher quality for life and socializing role, by seeking to maintain some of the established value of the society. Thus media is used as an empowerment tool, i.e. it is used as a tool to facilitate and encourage the participation of people in developmental activities such as programs for the rural audience, educational program, family welfare program, and countrywide classroom, etc.

Mass media can bring about radical challenges and improve social situation as influence our social, civil, cultural, political, economic outlook. Consciously or unconsciously mass media has become an important part of community life. This is because the mass media can deliver information effectively. Mass media play many roles like: -

1. Mass media is used to focus attention. Traditional society, moving towards modernism little by little, begins its progress by developing its knowledge on the mass media. As a result, over time, people begin to live the customs and assume that culture as modern. But they need to understand the negative effects. (Paul, 34)

2. It can raise the aspiration of the community. The important thing to realize and note that sometimes aspiration will go for the risk and negative things will not be considered as a fault (Paul, 34).

GOOD EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA

The influence of media on society has been growing fast. Media influence is related to other aspects such as the media itself, as well as response from the community. The mass media is gradually bringing in societies into new cultural molds and is establishing the cultural mindset and behaviors of the people. The purpose of mass media in delivering the information tends to trigger a change and an impact on establishing the structure of community life. Slowly

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but effectively the media shapes public views on how a person shares his views and how one should be related to the everyday world. The impact of mass media can include a wide range of behaviors that deviate from cultural norms. In modern time, people generally assume that it is not something that violates the norms but is considered a part of the mass. The development of social media is very fast and it can be accessed easily because people tend to think logically. (Wu, 2)

At present media has to face many challenges to bring social changes. In agro-based society, like in India, it can educate people to bring awareness regarding sustainable development. In India, social-economic development programs are more in numbers but their faster implementation alone can bring change. Mass media, in India, have to bridge urban-rural gaps, because the truth of development is not equally shared by people in villages. To fulfill the necessities of millions of people in India, the media has to represent their desires. In the British period very limited transfer of power was made. In so-called decentralization, it was nearly an arrangement suit for their imperial requirement. (Choudhuri, 4)

Media can be a vehicle of social and cultural change. Nair and White said that "socio-cultural change is the goal of development communication". (Choudhuri, 2).

BAD EFFECTS OF MEDIA

Media is all around us- in our homes, ears, educational institutions. Television was and still is the most popular form of media and a major part of every household. In the new era of technology social media has taken the lead in dictating how people should live today. It makes people act differently in front of others to gain attention. The media is responsible for negative influence on people's life because it is developing dissatisfaction with body images depicted as beautiful when often issues are arising about people suffering from anorexia and bulimia disorders, creating addiction among the young population especially and harms the interpersonal relationships with friends and family. (Patwal, 6)

i) **Media instill wrong perceptions:-** Media often portrays a grown-up to be cool if they eat junk food, smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, etc. All these presentations of adult life can influence a tween or teen, making them emulate their favorite actors.

ii) **Might develop wrong belief: -** Social platforms sometimes are used to spread biased information and fake news. A teen may start believing the provided information, thus causing a shift in their attitude and behavior.

iii) **Can develop unrealistic body image: -** Media has a sharp effect on how teens interpret the beauty and positive body image. For instance, media usually creates an impression that "thin and fair" is beautiful. Such misleading messages can harm a child's self-esteem.

iv) **May develop mental health concern: -** Tween and teens often get exposed to bullying, rumor spreading, unrealistic views of people's lives all these factors can cause a ripple effect on the teen's mental health. They might get depressed, anxious, isolated, and may become suicidal too.

v) **Might develop violent behavior: -** A study showed that watching violent shows and an increase in children's violent and erratic behavior are positively correlated.

FAKE NEWS AND RUMORS

Fake news and misinformation are the worst manipulative devices that are borne out of the misuse of mass media. Fake news, intentionally, spreads misinformation in the format of news. Misinformation refers to the false information that is deliberately created and is intentionally or unintentionally propagated [Wu L.]. For example, misinformation also refers to inaccurate information which is usually distinguished from misinformation by the intention of deception. Fake news refers to false information in the form of news, which is not

necessarily disinformation since it may be unintentionally shared by innocent users. Without the presence of ingredients, fake news is not likely to get spread and reach its target audience.

The motivation for spreading fake news is based on a propaganda campaign that always comes with the question – "why". Irrespective of the motive, the ultimate success of any fake news depends on the effect it produces in the real world.

Rumor, on the other hand, is unverified information that can be either true or false. An example of a true rumor is about coronavirus disease [COVID-19]. It is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus in Wuhan, China. Most people, infected with the COVID -19, will experience mild-to-moderate fever and respiratory illness with no special statement available. As of 4th April 2020, WHO reports 9,76,249 confirmed cases and 50,489 confirmed deaths in 207 countries, area or territories and it is too late to claim unavailability of reliable information. With help from the internet, social media has become the most acclaimed tool for freedom of speech in a democracy. In a pandemic situation like the COVID-19 outbreak, social media spreading information, rumors, misinformation, and disinformation makes it crucial for the government to take steps (Duraisamy B., 2020). The speed through which information is spread on social media is unimaginable and the findings in this study will help in understanding whether social media is differing information to the public concerning the COVID-19 outbreak. Online individuals, knowingly and unknowingly, are spreading information at an alarming rate, which could be dangerous or misleading. Misinformation on social media can influence public opinions and behaviors with intense public opinions and behaviors with intense consequences, positively or negatively manipulating the perspective of those who consume it.

COVID-19 AND MISINFORMATION

From the beginning of 2020, the whole world is suffering from the Covid-19 outbreak. It has gradually taken the form of a global pandemic destroying the social harmony of nearly every country in the world. Without any vaccine or medicine in sight, the doctors and health workers are toiling hard to fight the virus with traditional methods. The weapons to battle this pandemic are quarantine and social distancing. But this requires a strict and clear public awareness. In this technology-oriented world, mass media can easily do the job and it was doing so at the beginning. But as the rampage of the virus is continuing, the information and news regarding the situation are getting distorted. The reasons behind these distortions depend on social psychology. Most of the societies were not ready to face this kind of disaster. When it went out of control, public patience also went out of the picture. As access to media is very easy, individuals stories started to spread focusing on the negative sides of the pandemic. Human psychology is always attracted to the unknown and it loves to embrace the darker side of everything (Rozin and Royzman, 296). Naturally, the individual stories gained popularity irrespective of their authenticity. As it is stated earlier that knowledge is power, the individuals thought of acquiring limelight and power at the same time without thinking of the consequences of their misinformation. It is in people's nature that they tend to follow the contemporary social trends without evaluating them rationally. The fake news and misinformation have only fueled it igniting psychological degeneration. An example can be found in an article of Times of India published on 22nd June 2020 regarding the crash in the price of poultry birds. The wrong notion that poultry birds can cause the Covid-19 outbreak devastated the poultry business crashing the price from Rs. 120/Kg. to Rs. 90/Kg. drastically. Later it was declared by the World Health Organization that poultry birds can not spread the virus. This single instance is enough to prove the destructive power of fake news and the tendency of the common people to accept then without any logical thinking.

Though Covid-19 is an infectious disease, it can be avoided by following social distancing. But some users of social media are taking the matter into such heights that people are panicking creating chaos. Many suspected Covid-19 infected people are being treated horribly by the neighbors and their relatives. Though some of them are tested negative, still they are given cold shoulder by the people.

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Another article in the Pune Mirror version of Indiatimes published on 22nd April 2020 has shown that the death of a Covid-19 patient has caused the alienation of the family members from the other people of the locality. Though the family members of the patient are reported negative, still the neighbors and local shopkeepers have ostracized them and stamped their house as 'corona house' due to their limited knowledge and excessive fear. This excessive fear is the effect of misinformation and fake news. Another report, published in Timesnow news on 4th July 2020, highlighted the story of a Covid-19 patient who recovered but committed suicide because of the pressure of the neighbors in Agartala. It is again another prime example of the destructive nature of misinformation.

COVID-19 AND ALTHUSSER'S IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS

In this Covid-19 scenario, the governments have the leading roles to play in controlling the communities within their countries. Where social distancing is the only way out, still now, there the governments need to take full responsibility. But, there are different public opinions on the roles played by the governments in controlling the outbreak. Some are being praised and some are being criticized. The only common trait among them, according to the mass opinion, is the tendency to hide the truth from the common people. It is only natural that the governments will try to control the chaos caused by the pandemic. The source of the chaos is not only the virus but also the fake news which is spreading much faster than the virus itself. But the question is how are they controlling it? The answer is simple- by controlling the communication system. Many will argue that governments are hiding the facts concerning the numbers of Covid-19 infected people and death tolls. The Unlocking process is underway to regenerate the economies of the countries. But in this age of mass media, it is not easy to hide the truth from the common people. Voices are being raised against the information given by the government officials. But that hasn't stopped the national leaders to implement their plans. What is the reason behind these? To understand this we have to analyze it from

Althusser's point of view. In his essay '*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*' (1969-70), Louis Althusser has proposed the fact that the state uses various kinds of ideological mediums to manipulate the common people to obey the state (Althusser, 15). The funny thing is that the common people think that they are taking their own decisions free from the state's will. But in reality, they are unknowingly being subjected to the state's ideology. It is an act of willing submission but that submission is not recognized by the common people. According to Althusser, ideology is very crucial while controlling the general people. Ideological state apparatus works primarily by ideology and then by the use of force. The state ideology inspires and instigates an individual to behave in certain ways which conforms to the ideology within which he recognizes himself as a subject or simply he is interpellated (Althusser ,20). In a modern political scenario, it is nearly impossible to use the 'Repressive State Apparatus' or violence to control the people in any country. So, they naturally hide behind the shield of ideology promoted by various social institutions like 'schools', 'higher education centers', 'religious houses', 'community places' etc. Each ideological state apparatus performs its duty "in the way proper to it" (Althusser, 17). The political ISA works "by subjecting individuals to the political state ideology", where the communications ISA performs "by cramming every citizen with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism. Moralism etc. by every means of the press, the radio, and television "(Althusser, 18).

In this era of mass media, the governments are using the communication ISAs to control the general mass. When the people are thinking that the social media platforms are giving them enough liberation and exposure to understand the mechanisms of the state, ironically enough, those social media platforms are being used by states to manipulate their thoughts of free will and free voice. Every government in every country is promoting the validity of government websites and pamphlets to understand the real scenario of the Covid-19 outbreak. The news channels and newspapers are also acting as agents of the state to promote the information validated by the government. If we think

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about the information, some of them are fake news. But, here the misinformation is being introduced by the state to control its people. Though they are state induced information, there is no way to think that that information has no negative consequences. The light controlling schemes to stop public gatherings and to promote personal hygiene are becoming curses for many countries as the numbers of infected people are rising day by day. According to a report of the Hindustan Times, published on 7th June 2020, social distancing protocols are not being followed properly after the declaration of 'Unlock-I' in various parts of India. According to the Union Health Ministry, India has faced a record single-day spike of 9.971 cases and 287 deaths.

CONCLUSION

The paper has analyzed the various curves of the influence of the media on society and how they can be applied to the Covid-19 scenario. The media is not directly responsible for the promotion of false information. The persons who are using it are the real culprits. The whole is very complex as the state is also a part of it distorting the information to fulfill its own needs and objectives. But they have to understand the negative consequences that can come out of this. Incidents such as the spreading of false information are generally magnified by the uncontrollable reach and pervasiveness that social media naturally obtain. Several examples of the risk of the COVID-19 outbreak have been suppressed by the misinformation related to the spreading of infection among millions of people globally. False information spread much faster than the platforms which explain the actual situation. They are countered by a large number of false information misleading the general public who are unaware of the actual situation and thus creating social-psychological degradation. According to Dr. Tedros, WHO's Director-General, we have to fight against these 'trolls and conspiracy theories' (Martin, Preet, Karafillakis and Smith, 2) and he has also warned us, "Misinformation on the coronavirus might be the most contagious thing about it." (Martin, Preet, Karafillakis and Smith, 2).

As a community, we need to face the methodological and technical issues to detect social media abuse to secure online social platforms and at the same time try to reduce the abundant social and economical incentives by creating frameworks of media abuse.

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