

The Story

In the north-eastern region of India, internet and messaging services were halted due to deaths induced by fake news spreading on WhatsApp (The Guardian, 2018). It was reported that a string of lynching to death incidents was caused by fake news circulating on WhatsApp (The Guardian, 2018).



The ethical dilemma is about deaths being caused by irresponsible sharing and transmitting of fake news on the media platform. According to The Guardian (2018), a significant number of deaths caused by fake news on WhatsApp started on 6 May 2017. Six men rumored to be child kidnappers on WhatsApp were lynched to death as people believed it was an authentic news (The Guardian, 2018). In February 2018, there were observations of similar kind of fake news being spread, which eventually led to a brutal death of a migrant worker (The Guardian, 2018). Subsequently, more occurrences of people lynched to death as a result of fake news start to surface.

As a measure to combat fake news, the India government sent individuals to warn the public about fake news, however, it was not very successful. Sukanta Chakraborty who was tasked by the government to warn the public about fake news was almost instantly and brutally killed in Tripura while trying to fulfill his duty. The police were only able to save his chauffeur. The news report highlighted a trend whereby videos containing a child being kidnapped was used to mislead others into thinking the fake news is authentic, generating anxiety and unrest among the public (The Guardian, 2018). Furthermore, the fake news was used to frame and

defame innocent individuals and subsequently caused their deaths (The Guardian, 2018). In conjunction with the fake news targeting mostly foreigners or immigrants, it makes it difficult to think of effective measures to aid the situation.

Background

WhatsApp was meant to be used as a messaging application to facilitate easy and cheap communication with others through sending messages via the internet. According to WhatsApp (n.d), WhatsApp was first created as a substitute for the SMS function in smartphones. It was intended to be used as a secured means to allow people to send messages from any place in the world through the internet connection (WhatsApp, n.d). However, in recent times, people have been misusing this messaging tool to spread fake news. According to Telegraph (2018), there were about 20 people who have been killed as a result of fake news being spread via WhatsApp in India. To make matters worse, according to FinancialExpress (2018), there are about 200 million active WhatsApp users in India. This meant that through the WhatsApp application, fake news has the potential to reach out to a large number of people in India.

The popularization of the terminology “Fake News” started during the 2016 U.S presidential election, where it demonstrated its impact through the viral spreading of made up stories among different social media platforms by the users (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2017). According to Wendling (2018), Hillary Clinton claimed that fake news has destructive prowess, and has the ability to disrupt or even claim lives. The “Pizzagate” exemplified the destructive potential fake news has, which could put innocent people in fatal danger (Hagg, M & Salam, M 2017). In the Pizzagate incident, a rumor about Hillary Clinton prostituting



young children was spread through Twitter, and it eventually caused a gunfire to erupt, which could have resulted in casualty (Hagg, M & Salam, M 2017).

The citizens of India are apprehensive towards child kidnapping (PTI, 2018). In India, child kidnapping is a heavily prevalent crime. According to Nigam (2017), there are about 20 children kidnapped daily. The Ministry of Home Affairs for India has also observed a shocking amount of about 41,000 children kidnapping cases in 2015 and 54,000 children kidnap cases in 2016 (PTI, 2018). As a result, people in India might react more strongly and swiftly to any kind of child kidnapping news on social media.

Critical Analysis.

The News Article exhibits the ethical dilemma of spreading news on digital media platforms irresponsibly. It highlights the potentially fatal dangers of fake news, especially when disseminated to reckless people who have low media literacy. Furthermore, it features how normal users of WhatsApp are contributing to the lynching tragedies in India.

One of the of the reason why fake news regarding child kidnapping in India is so convincing and even caused the outrage of the public is partly due to the frequent kidnapping cases. As a measure to fight against child kidnapping in India, experts suggest that quicker reporting through social media could improve the situation (Nigam, 2017). WhatsApp allows information to be disseminated faster, and having a large number of users on WhatsApp means that information can be more widely spread. This would allow more people to keep a lookout for the kidnappers. Although social media tools such as WhatsApp is a good measure that can impede the frequent kidnapping situation in India, however, it has proven to be a double-edged sword which can indirectly cause the death of innocents. Instead of using WhatsApp as a

platform to help the community, people started to use WhatsApp to spread fake news and rumors. As fake news spreads through WhatsApp in India, it incites recklessness in people, resulting in deaths of innocent bystanders (Telegraph, 2018).

However cutting the internet in India or bans on WhatsApp, would not be a good long-term solution. The fake news could move to other social media platforms such as facebook and youtube. In order to resolve or improve the situation, there is a need to solve the roots of the problem, which can be done through; **(1) Improving media literacy (2) Media laws - Libel**

(1)Improving Media Literacy

The nature of fake news on WhatsApp is very swift and could be deadly (Dwoskin & Gowen, 2018). As a result, WhatsApp users need to be mindful of what kind of news they are circulating via the platform. It is advised and recommended that users first check their news sources and only share news that is credible. In modern society, there is an overload of information everywhere, and thus media literacy is a necessary skill in order to help one evaluate the motivation and credibility of the news (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2017). It is also advised that every individual consider the impact of their actions on social media, as the aftermath could be very disastrous from an insignificant share or post (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2017). Individuals who share and forward fake news are unethical and equally as guilty as the creators. Both the creators and individuals who spread the fake news play a tremendous part in sparking the lynching incidents. In light of this, if we are able to stop fake news from going viral, it would lower the chances of lynching incidents.

According to Pavlik & McIntosh (2017), Williams Bryan Jennings in 1896 warned the public about how deceiving the media can be. In today's society, with social media's nature,

anyone can produce content and information including deceiving or misleading ones and share it with others. Furthermore, the ability to make information viral via the element of sharing the content with the masses in mere seconds only makes dealing with fictitious news on social media an uphill battle. In determining a news authenticity, individuals can start by observing the grammar and sentence structure they use; the credibility of the information source and the motive behind it (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2017). After individuals develop a basic level of media literacy, they should be able to differentiate between fake and authentic news through source checking, news agenda evaluation, and information presentation evaluation. This would eventually lead to lesser people believing in fake news and would subsequently decrease the amount of forwarding and sharing of fake news, which could in-turn impede the viral spread of fake news.

(2)Media Laws - Libel

According to Pavlik & McIntosh (2017), fake news becomes exceptionally dangerous when individuals decide to act recklessly and independently, trying to deal with the issue by themselves. Thus a good solution would be to eliminate the root of the problem, by discouraging people from defaming someone through spreading misleading or false information about an individual. This would give individuals lesser chances to act recklessly. The government could stop the spreading of fake news and rumors by punishing the rumor spreaders and defamers. They can tighten the laws regarding libel and make punishments harsher to deter the public from sharing or forwarding misleading or fictitious claims that are not proven on an individual. Secondly, assuming the government is supportive in ending the lynchings, the authorities reaction timing and speed should also be taken into consideration. The authorities in India should cooperate with the media, by acting fast and inform the public of unverified claims, especially

regarding rumored child kidnappers through main media and social media platforms. With quicker and more accurate information being disseminated to counter the fake news, there would be lesser chances for individuals to act on impulse.

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