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Countering Fake News in Media: A Study on Journalists Based in Mardan and Nowshera

Abstract: *This research focuses on fake news and how journalists understand and counter fake news. The researchers used purposive sampling and collected data through in-depth interviews. Members of Mardan and Nowshera press clubs were interviewed regarding how they counter fake news. All the respondents agreed that fake news must be discouraged and that not only the media persons but the government should also take action against media organizations that publish or on-air fake news. Most of them said that social media is the main source of fake news and that there should be some kind of regulations on social media to discourage fake news. Some called for training for journalists on how to counter fake news.*

Introduction

Fake news has become widespread in the media in the present-day era. The audience listens to and reads the news with the firm belief of it being true. The interest in the news is derived from the fact that in the 21 st century's information age, the public wants to become aware of whatever is happening around it or in any part of the world. The topic of this research is to study how journalists in Mardan and Nowshera districts define fake news and what ways and measure that take to counter it.

Definitions

The term "fake" refers to changing or treating information in a way that affects its truthfulness, and it comes in a variety of forms. Similarly, the term news is defined as the information that is

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published in a newspaper and broadcast on radio and television about recent events either in any part of the world or related to any particular field of life.

Fake news is the false and incorrect information which are forwarded and spread with the intent to mislead the public. These are also known as junk news, pseudo-news or hoax news. It is a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional media as well as online social media.

Types of Fake News

The scholars have divided the fake news into several different types. These types are given in below lines. Fake news disturbs the society having bad effects on the psychological as well as economic aspects of human life. Fake news is in no way beneficial for the society that is why it is strongly denied even in the teachings of Islam.

Propaganda

This type of fake news is defined as "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause.

Disinformation

This is a type of fake news and includes false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to mislead others.

Misinformation

A type of false news and information that is shared unintentionally.

Malinformation

A kind of information, which is incomplete. It means a full picture is not given to the reader, thus confusing and deceiving him/her.

The media industry is helping in the awareness of society. However, the fake news, which forms a major part of the print, electronic and social media, are resulting in harming the community at large by affecting the strong units of family, economy, social norms and values along with religious and moral standards. This study intends to provide some useful insights and techniques to counter fake news circulating on social media as well as in conventional media. This study also explores how local journalists of Mardan and Nowshera define fake news and how they counter it.

Research Question

Q 1: How do journalists in Mardan and Nowshera counter fake news?

Objectives

- To find out how the journalists explain fake news.
- To explore what measures the journalists take to counter fake news.

Literature Review

Literature review is a key part of any research study, and it discusses the relevant studies done on a subject in various parts of the world. These scholarly works broaden the vision of researchers, and thus they can better conduct research if they already know about the relevant literature.

Lima (2019) covers the last US Presidential Election in which media was providing full coverage to Hilary Clinton. The research defines fake news based on an analysis of 34 academic articles and using six different ways to characterize fake news. This article divides seven types with mis- and dis-information to define fake news. The author used the qualitative method of research in which he studied different articles, books and papers. After that, the author started working on fake news and how she found and experienced the fake news during coverage of the US elections' contest between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton. The research failed to point out the effect of fake news on society.

Brun and Roitman (2018) studied fake news in electronic media and how news becomes fake. They say disinformation campaign undermines national security whereas, behind misinformation, there is often domestic political agenda involved. Similarly, falsehood is triggered by financial fain. The fourth element is non-political misinformation that goes viral, and the fifth and final step is a falsehood for entertainment. This is, the authors elaborate, how fake news is produced.

Vasu et al. (2019) describe the term fake news and discuss how it came in media and English literature. In this article, they studied how fake news affects the public & democratic process. The findings of the research show how the term 'fake news' entered the media. Further, the study discusses the bad effects of it on the society and environment and also upon the electoral process, which results in loss to the credibility of the elections and the elected government too. The research method the authors used was a survey to find out how fake news adversely affects the public. The research article, however, did not mention the social media role in fake news.

Different countries have different approaches that are mostly based on nature of Fake news that affects them and to their respective domestic & geographical consideration. To counter fake news, websites are set up by independent groups or state as a mechanism to expose the falseness of news that will contribute to information or untrue information. The authors use the qualitative method of research to counter fake news. They studied different books, research articles and newspapers.

Hasnain (2020) discusses the story of a person who was not getting admitted to the hospital after testing positive for coronavirus. He says the man was read fake news on Facebook that people were deliberately being put on ventilators and killed. Dawn (2020) states that at a time when fear

and panic is stemming from the virus, mobile phone and social media users are particularly being constantly bombarded with misinformation, and a vast number of people were sharing unverified claims, thus compounding the issue. There is a potential danger in falling for those unscientific cures, presented by some people on social media for treatment of coronavirus. In Iran where alcohol is illegal, 44 people died, and hundreds were hospitalized after drinking homemade booze as advised by such messages.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a conceptual model of how one theorizes or makes logical sense of the relationships among the several factors that have been identified as important to the problem. For this study, the researchers have taken a known theoretical area in psychology, known "confirmation bias", coined by an English psychologist Peter Wason.

Confirmation biases impact how we gather information, but they also influence how we interpret and recall information. For example, people who support or oppose a particular issue will not only seek information to support it; they will also interpret news stories in a way that upholds their existing ideas. They will also remember details in a way that reinforces these attitudes (Casad, 2007).

Confirmation bias is a trend in which decision-makers have been proven to actively seek evidence and assign more weight to verify this evidence and ignore or disprove the evidence to substantiate their assumptions.

In reality, humans are susceptible to this tricky problem called "confirmation bias". Our beliefs are often based on paying attention to the information that upholds them, while at the same time tending to ignore the information that challenges them.

It is a tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one's existing beliefs. Existing beliefs can include one's expectations in a given situation and predictions about a particular outcome. People are especially likely to process information to support their own beliefs when the issue is highly important or self-relevant.

Relevance of 'Confirmation Bias' to the Study

The researchers have based this study on the "confirmation bias" because fake news is also related to this biased approach towards decision making, and it results in ignoring inconsistent information. The users and producers of fake news would even share and support such false information on social media platforms if that [fake] information and news support their beliefs and do not challenge their beliefs and prejudices.

Confirmation bias is a psychological phenomenon in which a person tends to accept those references or findings which confirm his/her existing belief in things. Confirmation bias leads to statistical errors, as it influences the way people gather information and interpret it.

Research Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative method, in-depth interviews, for data collection. An interview is a research method in which researchers collect data directly from participants. Combined with most research methods such as surveys, focus groups, etc., interviews are important in various other aspects of the population under thinking opinions, experiences, values and studies.

In-Depth Interview

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting in-depth individual interviews with a specified number of respondents to find their point of view on a particular research problem or situation.

Compared to other methods, the researchers can get detailed answers in interviews and can also build relations with participants, which can produce more insightful responses, especially on sensitive topics.

Interviewers have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, investigate additional information, and gain a better understanding of attitudes, impressions, motivations, etc.

However, the interview methods employ a small sample size compared to other methods. Also, it is a time-consuming method, as in-depth interviews are conducted on a one-to-one basis (Allmark et al, 2009)

Sampling

The researchers used purposive sampling for this study. A purposive sample allows researchers to approach those respondents who can serve their purpose.

A purposive sample also referred to as a judgmental sample, is a type of nonprobability sample.

The main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a nonrandom manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population.

Because the researchers wanted to know how the journalists counter fake news, they approached the press clubs of Mardan and Nowshera and interviewed the respondents there.

Data Analysis

Following is the summary of the analysis of data gathered through answers to the researchers' questioning:

How to Understand and Define Fake News?

According to the respondents, fake news is untrue information presented as news. Once common in print, the prevalence of fake news has increased with the rise of social media, particularly

Facebook. Also, we can know the fake news if we talk to relevant sources and come to know about the facts. One respondent in Takhbhai said that fake news is often spread by government authorities for their own interests. Fake news is information that is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to gain some financial or political ends, with sensationalist, exaggerated, or patently false headlines that grab attention. Some said any news not based on evidence would be considered fake news. Also, one kind of fake news is funny and mocks any individual, organization, etc. on the basis of false information. Fake news is sometimes sensational reports designed to distract, mislead, deceive or damage one's reputation. Such news is often used to tell a political story that is considered harmful to an agency, entity or individual. However, as seen in the last of the above three references, it is by no means limited to politics and seems to have its currency in terms of general news. Some said it means sharing of any misinformation or disinformation through a mass medium.

In what Ways have you Seen or Read Fake News in Media?

It may be mentioned here that the local journalists did not categorize fake news as we do it theoretically, such as disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, etc. However, they said that fake news is false information spread through social media. It can be a parody. Fake news is information spread by some people to achieve their objectives. Some said it is meant to earn money.

Some said that social media platforms allow everyone to publish their thoughts or share stories to the world. The trouble is that most people do not check the source of the material that they view online before they share it, which can lead to fake news spreading quickly. One participant said that recently ARY broke the news about the arrest of the motorway rape incident, but later the police chief of Punjab denied it. Some websites promote fake news just to attract traffic and readers, while many people just share what they see on social media. Also, fake news can be in the forms of pictures, videos, text, and audio, and though it is mostly seen in social media, it can also appear on traditional media.

What are the main Sources of Fake News?

Activists of various organizations sometimes promote fake news just to promote their cause, while the marketing and businesses persons can also do so. Also, there are websites that use click baits by presenting fake news to attract traffic. Government authorities also sometimes spread fake news, just like propaganda. Social media is a major source of fake news. Besides social media, some local newspapers also sensationalize the news to the extent where it can fall into the category of fake news.

The sources of fake news can be WhatsApp, Facebook and all other social media apps and even traditional media and even the source, which gives you information, could be fake.

What are/can be the Consequences of Fake News?

Fake news can damage one's credibility as a journalist or PR professional. Fake news can also result in emotional or physical harm. It can mislead or emotionally blackmail someone. Fake news can affect behavior. It encourages people to invent excuses, to dismiss others' ideas, to exaggerate the truth, and to spread rumors. It may also result in anxious workplaces where people are cynical and unsure of whom to trust. It also has an adverse effect on society- It creates misconception, misunderstanding, miscommunication, defamation, misinformation, negative/black/grey propaganda, tension, conflict or clash in some cases.

What are your Remedies and Suggestions to Counter and Discourage Fake News in Society?

There can be a number of remedies, such as one should assess evidence for some information, search Google to confirm information, speak to relevant sources. In order to prevent fake news in society, it is necessary to set a punishment for it or send a notice to a newspaper, radio or TV that carries fake news. When society as a whole promotes professional ethics of journalism, the fake news can be countered this way. One respondent said that while getting a story, one should see who else is reporting that story, and examine the evidence. Also, there is a need for coordination between the relevant institutions and the media organizations and journalist unions to make strong laws and codes to prevent fake news.

There should be media literacy training while journalists should have the habit of crosschecking the fact and information and also understand the ethics of journalism and reporting

What Role do you Think Journalism-Related Organizations, NGOs and Government can Play to Counter Fake News?

There is no simple remedy to deal with the issue of fake news. The teaching of media literacy in educational institutions can also help counter fake news. Also, the users of social media can be warned through notices if they are found sharing fake news. The government can also take measures to encourage independent professional journalism. NGOs should not just play their role to the extent of conducting projects, but they should really care for media literacy trainings to counter fake news.

Training workshops by media houses, NGOs, and the government can help. Some respondents said that the government could take measures, but it is not interested in this task. Making social media platforms liable for third-party contents can counter fake news. Also, one should swamp fake news with the truth.

The NGOs and organizations should conduct seminars, workshops and basic media literacy sessions not only for the journalists but also for the public, who use various social media platforms.

Conclusion

Most of the journalists in Mardan and Nowshera districts defined fake news as any information that is not known to the source, to which that is linked. Some media channels even broadcast such kinds of news sometimes in order to increase its popularity, although it can damage their credibility too.

The study answered the question: how journalists in Mardan and Nowshera counter fake news? The journalists discussed different ways on how to counter fake news. Some said that they directly call a source when they come to know about news linked to that source; if the source rejects it, it is definitely fake news. Some said that news related to politics could easily be confirmed and tested, as politicians can be contacted on the matter. Also, some journalists said that they try to expose the fake news by sharing it on social media along with the truth, thus letting others know that it is fake. Some said they report the fake news by clicking the "report" button on social media.

Also, the study achieved the set objectives, i.e., "finding our how journalists explain fake news" and "what measures they take to counter fake news". It merits a mention here that the respondents did not define and explain the different kinds of news as we do in theory, such as disinformation, misinformation, mal-information and others. However, they had a thorough understanding of how they have seen fake news in various forms. Also, they discussed how they counter fake news. They discussed various measures such as by swamping fake news with true information, reporting it on social media, speaking to relevant sources to confirm if a news is fake or truthful, etc. They also said the government NGOs would hold training workshops to raise awareness on how to counter fake news. They also called for punitive measures by relevant government authorities of the country to discourage the trend of fake news such as issuing notices to the media organization concerned or imposing fines.

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