

Social Media, Democracy and Fake News in Pakistan: An Analysis

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Abstract *In this study, the researchers examined the prevalence of fake news in the social media debates on Pakistani politics and society. The content analysis showed that both Twitter and Facebook carried a sizeable number of fake news relating to the politics and international affairs, military, economy and religion. Though more fake news was posted relating to politics and politicians, fake news stories relating to international relations got more likes and share as compared to other topics. Interestingly, even though the fake news was busted as fake and not genuine, these continued getting attention of people. This indicates the influence of cult following and populism on the Pakistani social media users. The findings of this study support the available scholarship on the prevalence of fake news, its popularity and spread in the Western world.*

Key Words: Fake News, Pakistan, Politics and Democracy, Cult and Populism, Algorithm.

Introduction

While social media is generally credited for promoting democratic debates, researchers and analysts have also cautioned against its undemocratic potential by promoting fake news especially in the pre and post-election scenarios (Faris, 2017; Gentzkow, 2017). The issue of fake news in the social media platforms first came to the limelight during the 2016 presidential elections in the US when Donald Trump was accused of generating a massive amount of fake news (Berinsky & Yamamoto, 2017). Researchers have analyzed the extent of fake news during the Brexit referendum, elections in Spain, Canada and France and found preponderance of uncorroborated information for political purposes (Greenhill, 2017; Berinsky & Yamamoto, 2017). During hearings in the US congress and EU parliament, Facebook and Twitter's top management revealed that Pakistan was a target of fake news industry (BBC, 2018). This study has been undertaken to investigate the nature, extent and spread of fake news in Pakistan.

Defining Fake News

The phenomenon of Fake News is usually defined as spreading misinformation for political and economic gains in the form of propaganda entertainment (Khaldarova and Panti, 2016), blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction (Berkowitz and Schwartz, 2016) and using satire to discuss public affairs (Berinsky and Yamamoto, 2017). Claire Wadle has divided fake news into seven categories. These include (a) false connection among visual and captions, headline and news content, facts and figures (b) false context—genuine content is presented in false context to confuse viewers (c) manipulated content—genuine

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information is used to deceive audiences (d) misleading content—use of information for misleading purposes through framing (e) imposter content—impersonation of genuine sources (f) fabricated content—false or incorrect content is designed in a specific way to deceive or harm and (g) satire/parody—use of folk-content to fool audiences but no intention to harm anyone (Wadle, 2017). Political communication researcher Bounegru (2017) argues that fake news can be entirely incorrect or containing misleading information that gets huge circulation due to its inherent persuasiveness.

On the other hand, Miller and Dinan (2008) relate the concept of fake news with the five features of social media ecology. These include (a) the instant circulation of disinformation and misinformation via propagandist and user-generated content (b) increasing immediacy of news cycle (c) emotionally saturated online discussions (d) financial decomposition of legacy news and the (e) massive use of algorithm by the social media platforms.

Fake News is not Restricted to Social Media

While majority of researchers have investigated the presence of fake news in the social media platforms, the phenomenon is wide spread in traditional media as well (Leveson (2012). In fact, the fake news industry can be traced back to the history of journalism itself (Mcstasy, 2017). Journalism historians have documented the propagandistic and jingoistic trends in media from the Two World Wars to the ensuing war on terror instead of doing objective and impartial reporting (Carruthers, 2011; Youngblood, 2017; Iqbal and Hussain, 2018). Similarly, President Trump has continuously criticized CNN as fake news and producing fabricated information against him (Mcstasy, 2017).

In the case of Pakistan, two prominent TV anchors Dr Shahid Masood and Dr. Amir Liaqat Hussain were indicted by the Supreme Court for promoting false news. Dr. Shahid Masood while hosting a arrange of programs on the rape case of a teenage girl exhorted the Chief Justice to take notice of the group of organized crimes having links with the government. When the Court took action and asked the anchor to present evidence, he could furnish a single event. The court accused him of spreading fake news and the anchor was barred from hosting the TV show. Likewise, the televangelist Dr. Amir Liaqat Hussain accused his former employer Mr. Shakeel Rehman, owner of Jang Group of blasphemy and conducted a series of programs in which the anchor claimed he had enough evidence. When Mr. Rehman sued him in court, the anchor could not furnish evidence and was sentenced to jail.

Understating the Mechanism of Fake News

Algorithms determine the functioning of social media. Algorithms are computerized based programs that record the online history of social media users and decide on the basis of a set of ranking standards which options to prioritize to over others (Ghonim, 2017). Due to the huge amount of information on the social media networks with millions of posts uploaded every second, algorithms determine which content to present to the particular user. The online activities of the three billion social media users hailing from all parts of the world are monitored, recorded and sold to big corporations who use it for strategic, economic and political purposes (Ghonim, 2017). These algorithms are very much integrated to the needs and requirements of modern life and keep data about political and societal beliefs, our social interaction, financial management, our shopping and selection options and information gratifications.

These data storage algorithms identify the target groups and bombard with a lot of information. Since most of the individuals usually keep like-minded people as friends in the online platforms to retain cognitive consistency, the incoming information is assessed through the perspective of group-level shared narratives rather than to be put to critical analysis (Menczer, 2016). In this scenario, the available online climate of opinion determines the relative falsity of information. Since all the members of a group behave almost identically, the fake news are usually construed as true. In a more detailed analysis, Swire (2017) studied the two basic properties of human receptivity and interpretation: First, source credibility has strong impact

on social interpretation of specific information related to any event. People trust the information coming from well-known and familiar sources, more specifically, they accept the information coming from the sources align with their world-view. Second, humans seek only biased information: humans receive information only from the sources, which confirm or comprehend their existing beliefs. Individuals accept only that information, which confirms their prior views and ignore information coming from unfamiliar or opposition sources ([Sunstein & Bobadilla-Suarez, 2016](#)).

Fake news spread from sources to the end users through a strong ecosystem of social media bots and websites. Significant features that keep the individuals engaging on the social media are including ease of sharing content, reproducing parallel content, tagging a large number of people, sharing viewpoint frequently and getting instant feedback, extensive outreach and many more factors facilitate the manipulation of information and become the powerful source of spreading misinformation across the world (Menczer, 2016). Once the fake news producing individuals and organizations get approval from the target audiences, they intensify their activities to attract even larger audience ([Oliveira et al, 2017](#)) which often lead to overpowering the temporal content and making the consumers laggard to the social bots ([Ferrara & Varol, 2017](#)). The social bots are structured to amplify the outreach of fake news ([Shao, 2016](#)) and extensively exploit our defenselessness that stems from our social biases and cognitive processes ([Ratkiewicz, 2011](#)).

Contrary to the above more technical explanations, [McStay \(2016\)](#) takes a more psychological approach to discuss the phenomenon of fake news. He argues that fake news is directly concerned with the economics of emotions. Human emotions are used to grab attention that generates advertising revenues. The ability to understand moods, emotions and feelings in ecosystem of communication is rapidly growing through biofeedback and online technologies that store, observe, record and assess our emotions. Mcstay (2016) terms it empathetic media because it has spawned many aspects of virtual life and has raised mediated emotional standards of human life—which is increasingly controlled by virtual reality, voice analytics, biosensors, augmented reality, facial coding and sentimental analysis.

According to [Metzger and Flanagan \(2010\)](#), producers of fake news usually present an abundance of information irrespective of their popularity. The false information is mixed with accurate content to give evidence of complete accuracy and complicate the process of distinguishing misinformation from valid information. Though oblivious, the more one is politically active on social media, the more he or she is sharing fake news (Metzger & Flanagan, 2010).

Democracy, Social Media and Fake News

While there is almost an academic consensus on the crucial role of media to promote democratic culture, researchers have cautioned against the media conglomerates whose financial interests were eroding the quality of democracy (Herman and Chomsky, 2010; Lynch and Galtung, 2010; Youngblood, 2017). With the advent of social media, there was a sigh of relief that power structures that dominated the traditional media would not be able to pressurize the people-driven media. This optimism has now been put to test in the face of cyber-attacks and the fake news industry that was first identified in 2010 but proved in 2016 during the US presidential elections. Political communication researchers like Gentzkow (2017) and Faris (2017) in their detailed studies have shown that despite presence of huge amount of quality information on the social media, fake industry has successfully penetrated the public domains. They lament that in this maze of information, the common people are in disarray to find facts separated from fiction and misinformation. Berinsky and Yamamoto (2017) argue that there hardly exists a public forum and opinion which is not adulterated by fake news which obviously has negative effects on quality of democracy.

Building on the same argument, another political communication researcher Greenhill (2017) noted that out of the three billion people using social media, majority of them were victims of fake news. He maintains that the proliferation of misinformation posed serious threats to political discourses in the democratic societies. Social media networks provide open-mic options to anyone who wants to attract his

followers which obviously allows small number of people who were technically equipped to proliferate a huge volume of false information and “fake news” ([Fernbach, 2017](#)). Swire (2017) believes fake news are very effective in making the opinion of the people because of the propensity to follow informative and like-minded people which facilitate the algorithm, filter-bubble, and echo chamber. In social media isolated groups people tend to combat conflicting ideas with the help of content coming from the like-minded individuals sharing the same bias. These strategies enable discriminatory and inflammatory information to go viral and enter in the public discourses (Swire, 2017).

During different events in US, UK, France, Spain and India, researchers have found that populist leaders effectively engaged the common people through rhetoric, emotional appeals and fake news (Metzger and Flanagin, 2017; Sunstein and Bobadilla-Suarez, 2016; Greenhill, 2017). These researchers believe that the ubiquitous social media has facilitated targeting the required populace for lobbies, advertisers and politicians through fabricated and orchestrated political strategic campaigns to achieve political and military goals. Taking cognizance of the immense news industry in the US, which thrived during the US presidential elections and facilitated Donald Trump ([Silverman, 2016](#)), the governments in UK and Germany took a number of steps to stem its flow in their countries. German government came up with legislation for fine of up to 50 million Euros to those social media organizations, which refuse to remove hate speech, fake news and other hateful or illegal content. Similarly, European Union imposed a fine of 4.3 billion dollars on Google for violating EU competition rules and monopolization of Android-based operating system ([Xinhua, 2018](#)).

Other researchers like ([El-Sharawy, 2016](#); Miller & Dinan, 2008; [Kirby, 2016](#); [Tynan, 2016](#)) believe that the real motive of fake news industry is not the political gains rather the commercial interests are supreme. These researchers argue that the fake news industry is like public relations firms and campaign specialists who specialize in utilizing social media to persuade the common people. However, they agree that false information, misinformation and propaganda are dangerous for public discourses and opinion—the bedrock of a democratic culture.

In a seminal study, Mcstay (2017) attacked the prevalence of fake news which she argued was democratically and socially problematic on different three fronts: First, it produces wrongly informed public opinion because it goes uncorrected across the network and lead to present biased and misinformation. Second, the citizens are most likely to remain poorly informed in echo chambers—it happens because the misinformation is fed into the self-reinforcing automatic cognitive system. Echo chamber exists where beliefs, information and ideas are amplified by repetition and communication inside a system where opposite ideas do not exist. Third, the most vulnerable citizens become emotionally outraged as a result of continuously being fed fake news. Fake news most effectively circulates in closed communities (like in social media groups or pages) where inflammatory points are added to create hype against the factual news.

Once created, fake news is extensively spread through social media by common people who believe in its veracity and share them with the massive public. Facebook is criticized most for spreading fake news. In UK in the 2017 general elections Facebook removed tens of thousands of UK-based accounts for suspicious activities. The social network companies also pledged to hire an extra three thousand moderators to view videos shared across its pages. This initiative came in response to rising concerns of British politicians claiming that social media provided different outlets where anybody can publish something without making cross check ([Williamson, 2016](#)).

In Pakistan alone this year (2018), as many as 17 Satellite TV channels have been issued show cause notice by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) for airing fake news. Similar to the other regions of the world, Facebook and Twitter are the two most used platforms. A Global Digital Report published by *The Express Tribune* (2018) stated that as many as 3.2 billion people worldwide are using social media such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter. Whereas in Pakistan alone, 35 million people which is about 18 percent of the total population, are using social media.

This study attempts to analyze the number of fake news between July 2018 till September 2018 in the post elections times when political parties, activists and other groups massively used social media. Unlike the Western country, in Pakistan we do not have a systematic mechanism to sift the fake news from genuine news. Facebook authorities have recently launched fake news literacy campaign guiding the users how to fight fake news. In this regard, artificial intelligence is utilized which works on the basis of algorithmic technology while analyzing texture information in different dimensions. In this study, the researchers identified the fakeness through officials' denials and newspaper reports. The following core research question is posed on the basis of fake news literature.

R.Q.1: What is the extent of prevalence of fake news in Pakistan across a range of issues like politics, international relations, judiciary, military, economic and religion in the selected time period?

Research Methodology

In this study, the researchers have applied content analysis technique to know the frequency of fake news on Facebook and Twitter for three months from July 2018 till the end of September 2018. All the fake news stories that were declared fake by the officials by presenting documents, by the source or by the mainstream media were considered fake. Once a news story was established as fake, key words were identified for it searched through Facebook pages and Twitter posts. The stories were retrieved from the first hit of search by one of the researchers of this study. For a given topic, one search on a specific day was made in the search engines of Facebook and Twitter to avoid repetition.

Since the main objective was to know the extent of prevalence of fake news in Pakistan, all the topics like politics, economics, military, judiciary and religion were included in the study. For ethical considerations, the researchers do not mention names of the targeted individuals and organizations about whom fake news were reported. These individuals and groups included politicians, military officials, religious scholars, judges etc.

Research Findings

R.Q.1: What is the extent of prevalence of fake news in Pakistan across a range of issues like politics, international relations, judiciary, military, economic and religion in the selected time period?

As shown in the below graph, majority of fake news is related to the international relations and politicians followed by the judiciary and military. Economy and religious topics got least fake news.

Topic wise, as many as 18 fake news appeared on different issues related to the international relation in the three months' time. These articles got 40,688 likes, 19,522 sharing and a total of 14,191 comments. One of the most trending fake news stories was about one of the federal ministers who was accused of threatening Israel to be omitted with nuclear bombs. The minister himself as well the Foreign Office had to intervene that the remark was fake. However, the news went viral and attracted a lot of international users. The second most circulated story was also relating to the state of Israel. It said that the PTI government and Israeli state have signed an agreement to address water scarcity in Pakistan. It further said that the Israeli Prime Minister has visited Pakistan several times and assured of all types of support if Pakistan agrees to accept the Israeli state. This fake news which was also busted by the Foreign Office went viral and earned a lot of criticism for the PTI led government. The third most viewed and shared fake news was about the photoshopped picture of Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi who got a standing ovation at the United Nations. The fake news story said that the whole world was happy with the outcome of Pakistani elections. This news story was busted by The News, which showed it was a photoshopped image replacing the Turkish Prime Minister. However, the story got a lot of online approbation and was widely shared and liked by the followers. The fourth most viewed fake news story in the international affairs was a purported research study that 'Pakistan is three-times more dangerous to humanity than Syria'. This fake story also got a huge number of sharing only to be busted by daily Dawn that no such study has been conducted by

University of Oxford. This fake story started a verbal battle between the troll-followers of Pakistan and India.

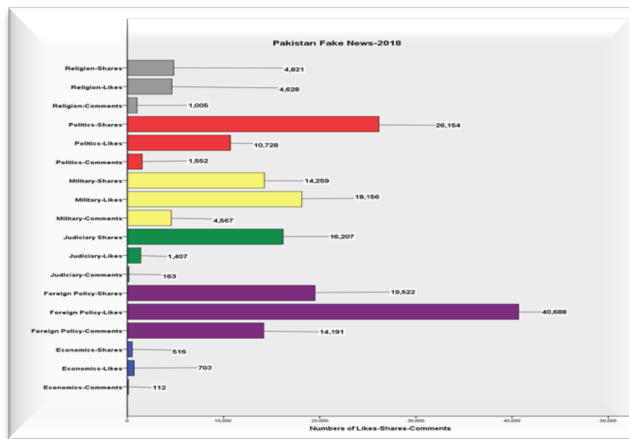
Regarding politics and politicians, a total of 22 fake news were busted by different sources including the government offices, newspapers and the politicians themselves. These stories got a total of 26,154 shares, 10,728 likes and as many as 1,552 comments. Interestingly, the number of fake news related to politicians were the highest in the three-month period of this study but got lesser attention as compared to the news related to international relations. The most circulated fake news story was about one of the key politician to have stashed billions of dollars to India to weaken Pakistan. The story got viral and ensued a verbal battle between the supporters of two main parties in Pakistan. The story was busted by The News quoting finance ministry sources that the politician had no business in India. Another widely circulated fake news was against a top political leader to have spent five million rupees on breakfast on daily basis. The story was later retreated but was heavily shared by the political opponents for political gains. Likewise, the third most circulated story was about a federal minister who was accused to have got funds from the UK government to promote homosexuality in Pakistan. This unfounded story got a voluminous post and tweets where the character and personal life of the minister were discussed, criticized and ridiculed.

Regarding the military, a total of 10 fake news went viral which were later busted by different sources in the three-month time. As shown in the below graph, these stories received 18,156 likes, 14,259 shares and 4,567 comments. The first most circulated story was about the destruction of military headquarters in Azad Kashmir by India. This fake news also claimed it was a result of the strategic strike by the Indian forces. The Pakistani military information wing had to intervene and show videos of the army installations. Then there was an unfounded story about high level conspiracy to dislodge and kill the high command. Though the story got lot of online denials but it attracted trolls from India and Afghanistan. The third most circulated fake news about the military was about its interference in the 2018 general elections. Though this story was refuted by the military on a number of occasions but it attracted online viewers and was hotly debated among people who have different perspectives.

Similarly, a total of nine (09) fake news relating to the judges and judiciary were reported on Facebook and Twitter. These stories received 16,207 shares, 1,407 likes and 163 comments. The most circulated story was about the intension of a judge to extend his tenure. The story promoted him to declare that he was not interested in extension. However, this story got a voluminous online activity and was largely shared and commented. The second most circulated story, which was later busted by daily Dawn was about a Pak-American billionaire to have donated \$1 billion for the construction of dams in Pakistan. The supporters of government and judiciary were jubilated and expressed lot of admiration for him.

Moreover, in the specified time period, a total of seven fake news were reported relating to religious affairs. These stories got 4,821 shares, 4,628 likes and 1,005 times comments. The most circulated fake news story was a photoshopped picture of a meeting between the prime minister and the chief justice of Pakistan. The captioned said that the meeting was arranged to ensure that the death sentence of Asia Bibi is averted. This story got a huge online activity where the supporters and critics exchanged heated debates and accused each other of tarnishing the true image of Islam. Both the judiciary and the PM office have to intervene that no such meeting had taken place.

Finally, a total of six fake news were produced relating to the economic affairs which got 703 likes, 516 shares and 112 comments. The highest circulated story was a twitter post, which was also carried by Facebook that Pakistan has drastically improved its Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. This generated a lot of online activity and the government supporters attributed to the PTI leadership. Daily The News busted this fake news and came up with the interview of the official that no such survey was conducted in Pakistan. The second most posted fake news story was about the \$100 money laundering scam in Pakistan, which was started by the PTI leadership but taken back by the finance minister, that no such figures were available. This fake story attracted lot of support by the pro PTI trolls who criticized the previous government for corruption and financial misdemeanors.



Conclusion

In this study, the researchers investigated the prevalence and spread of fake news in Pakistan post elections three months' time between July and September while applying the content analysis technique. Very much consistent with the previous research, the researchers found that fake news was a rising problem in the Pakistani context. A number of European researchers (like Metzger and Flanagin, 2017; Sunstein and Bobadilla-Suarez, 2016; Greenhill, 2017) found that fake news was most prevalent in the political affairs as compared to other areas. The case of Pakistan is not different. Unlike the US where fake news is mostly generated by the fake news industry for financial purposes, in Pakistan, the political rivals usually engage in fake news against the opponents. Due to weak legislation and laws, the political parties fabricate information against the opponent parties for electoral gains.

Researchers have warned against the provision of misinformation and fake news to public discourses due to its implications for the policymakers and the common people. For a successful democratic debate, exchange of factual information is essential so that the people can know the policies undertaken by the policymakers to ensure democratic accountability (Sunstein and Bobadilla-Suarez, 2016). In this study, the researchers found that topics related to politics and international relations were mostly circulated as compared to other topics. One reason can be that the political parties having large dedicated followings mainly posted these stories. Due to the typical logic of social media use—one following likeminded people with whom one shares biases and preferences (Khaldarova and Pantti, 2016), all the sharing is accepted in toto without applying the critical lenses. Such a scenario can flare up political tension in the country with people of opposing parties following certain agendas like a cult. It has happened in Pakistan where the political groups show less understanding towards the opponent group and often indulge in verbal clashes.

Besides political and international relations affairs, economy and religious issues were also fabricated mainly for political reasons. For example, Prime Minister Imran Khan was implicated in a case that has serious sectarian dimensions. These types of fake news can stir religious tension in the country. In their case study, researchers Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016) have analyzed the conflict escalation tendencies of fake news and found that racial and ethnic divisions in Europe were heightened and polarization increased. Similarly, the PTI led government promised a number of revolutionary changes in the economic system. Failure on that account, certain groups associated with the party, started a number of fake news stories to impress the people. Though the pro-PTI followers appreciated these measures, other groups disliked this news and were jubilant when they found the news was incorrect. This is in line with the findings of Berinsky and Yamamoto (2017) who agreed that even the busted fake news is supported by the diehard supporters. This also suggests that due to the cult following tendencies and the appeals of populist leaders, social media abuse poses serious problems to the health of citizenry.

Aware of the negative effects of fake news for societies, governments around the world have undertaken steps to stem its flow. Recently, European Union imposed a fine of 4.3 billion dollars on Google for violating EU competition rules and monopolization of Android-based operating system (Xinhua, 2018). Similar steps are underway in India, Japan, Malaysia and UK to check the fake news industry that thrives on propaganda and misinformation. In Pakistan, legislation is required to stop this burgeoning problem and its negative effects on society.

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