

Countering Misinformation (Fake News) In India

Solutions & Strategies



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About this report

This report is a collaborative effort by

Factly Media & Research (Factly) and The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI).

Factly works towards making public data & information more accessible to people through a variety of methods. IAMAI is a young and vibrant association with ambitions of representing the entire gamut of digital businesses in India.

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Thank You,

Tejeswi Pratima Dodda & Rakesh Dubbudu.

FOREWORD

The countdown for the 2019 General Elections in India has begun and immaterial of which party wins, the role of data, social media networks and messaging platforms will potentially impact and influence the outcome of this election. It also places the debate around misinformation front and center with the possibility of false and misleading information swaying the election.

The term fake news was once a useful phrase. It described the phenomenon of professional-looking news sites, created simply to make profit, with pages full of false stories. As the scale and complexity of our polluted information streams became clear, the term became useless, and more significant, weaponized, as politicians around the world used the phrase as a way of describing reporting they didn't like.

Globally, the biggest threat is not political disinformation, it is health misinformation and rumors driving ethnic and religious divisions. And while the debate in the US is hyper focused on the Facebook newsfeed, globally, the real challenge is closed messaging apps like WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram and FB Messenger.

This report by Factly is incredibly well timed and necessary. So much of the research and landscape reviews on this subject have been written in the US, and from the perspective of the US. In contrast this report provides much needed detail and context about this phenomenon, through the lens of the world's largest democracy.

The authors have interviewed some of the most important voices in this space, from the research community, civil society and the technology companies themselves. It is also bursting with relevant case studies, useful readings and recommendations.

I would urge anyone interested in this subject to read this report, and I hope it provides a template for researchers in other parts of the world to describe the challenges and impact of information disorder on their communities. The complexity of this subject means we need as many perspectives as possible, from all corners of the globe.

Claire Wardle, PhD

Executive Director - First Draft News

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INDEX

<i>Executive Summary</i>	01
<i>Introduction</i>	11
<i>Literature Review</i>	19
<i>Online Survey- Perception of News & Information</i>	31
<i>Understanding Information Disorder: A Multi Stakeholder Approach</i>	49
<i>Measures & Recommendations</i>	72
<i>References</i>	113
<i>Annexures</i>	121

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Executive Summary

As India braces for the upcoming General Election in 2019, recent election experiences from countries like Brazil and United States have highlighted new challenges in information flow, access to data and the critical nature of misinformation in the context of technology and human behaviour. This is a relatively new and evolving subject with very limited research in the Indian context. This report strives to understand information disorder and ecosystem in India by consolidating facts, indicators and opinion from multiple stakeholders. The report examines the use of the term 'fake news' and the large spectrum of different kinds of information issues that arise.

The report gives an overview of the history and implications of misinformation from global scenarios and specifically from the Indian context.

The report has three main components:

- A web survey that collected data to understand the patterns of information consumption in India and if there is a correlation between beliefs, attitudes, bias and motivation to share information.
- Consolidated opinions of multiple stakeholders extracted from semi structured interviews.
- Extensive section on recommendations, case studies and best practices for tackling misinformation.

Web Survey

Web Survey for this report was hosted on Survey Monkey for two months - September & October 2018. The survey was designed to understand the patterns of information consumption in India, perception and sources of news along with any possible correlations.

The following Information was collected:

- Information about the respondent
- Respondent's use of media/social media/technology platforms including in their trust in various categories of media
- A series of eleven (11) statements were given and the respondents were asked to identify the statement as true or false including the reason for their choice.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the responses to the survey lead to the following conclusions:

- This suggests that the young (below 20 years) and old (above 50 years) that may be most susceptible to fake news.
- Those who are relatively new to use of technology/ internet & smartphones may be more susceptible to fake news than others.
- Newspapers still remain one of the top sources of information for people across age groups.
- Connecting with friends & family, exchange of information related to work/study and news are the greatest drivers behind people using social media.

- As age of the respondents increased, Friends or Friend Groups and groups based on political/social/cultural beliefs of the person was chosen by a greater proportion of respondents as their main source of information on social media.
- Background evidence and trust in organizations/persons are what make most people to believe in the information they receive on social media.
- Benefit to others and the lack of trust on mainstream media are what drive people to forward information on social media. This is inline with global observations that most people forward/share information without knowing they are spreading fake news.
- People trust neutral media and fact-checking organizations more than others.
- A substantial percentage of people are not aware of the existence of fact checking organizations.
- People verify the information they receive when they are pushed to do so.
- Fake news has a greater probability of being correctly identified when it is fact checked/debunked by multiple organizations.

Semi Structured Interviews

This method allowed the researchers to collect in-depth information from different stakeholders in the information ecosystem in India. Following categories and sub groups were contacted in order to to have representation and opinions of all stakeholders:

- Technology & Internet Service Providers
- Government - Policy
- Law Enforcement
- Media & Influencers
- Fact Checkers & Verifiers
- Academia
- Political Parties

76 interviewees from the above categories were contacted between August - November 2018. Out of the 76, thirty (30) of them gave consent to be interviewed. Two out of the 30 have requested to be quoted anonymously. Below are some highlights from these interviews:

- Urgent need to terminate the use of term fake news and develop standard glossary that defines specific types of information manipulation, interpretation and context.
- Moral outrage and bias are a huge factor in people having an uptake for information that is unverified. The need to be part of a group and social acceptance within their networks also drives people to share unverified information.

- The main distribution platforms for unverified information in India are Whatsapp, Facebook and Twitter. Google Search, Facebook and other digital platforms limit content that can be viewed, creating an atmosphere that is polarized and partisan.
- Political parties are leveraging the pace of digital content production and grooming an informal base that creates and spreads messages to suit their campaign agenda regardless of whether said messages are factually accurate. This is enabled by the resources they hold that are not transparent.
- A large majority of people share and spread unverified information because of the availability of the information they have. These are driven by the social groups which they are a part. The extent of information verification is limited by cellular data and digital literacy. In spite of growing technology penetration, there are no structures or curriculum at the ground level to create awareness and understanding of digital content.
- A small percentage of people spread and share messages as part of propaganda and it might be directly related to their bias, revenue generation and easy access to technology. A large number of messages circulating are politically and religiously charged messages.
- Media groups amplify messages by creating content that is one sided and suitable to their business or other interests. This creates a disillusionment with mainstream media work and people might prefer information from other sources including those which peddle misinformation. Media also reports information without verification increasing the virality of the message and adding authenticity.
- Mainstream media outlets, especially on their digital platforms rely on content that is created outside the agency like social media influencers. It's important to understand that these people might not have any legitimacy beyond having a follower base. The immense pressure of constantly reporting fresh news and deadlines makes it easier to integrate third party contributors and simply including a disclaimer that the views do not belong to the publication. These contributions largely do not go through a due diligence process, saving news agencies time and money.

Measures & Recommendations

Government

Digital Literacy

It is important to create a standardized and comprehensive definition of digital literacy that can be adopted by all stakeholders - public and private sectors to implement campaigns. It is important to widen the scope to be inclusive of the cognitive perspective of processing digital information and not create a framework based purely on the technical accessibility of services like payments

Capacity Building-Governance

The most immediate need in tackling information disorder is to identify and cultivate political and bureaucratic leadership that understands the complexities, consequences and those who can take into account the future of digital engagement in the country. This is central to taking forward any policy, regulation, campaign or laws.

Criminal Justice

Integrating an exclusive section of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that allows law enforcement to collect, report and follow criminal proceedings that address the aspect of hate related violence in an isolated manner. Using Internet Shutdowns as an instrument to control polarization or hate is not a solution but an indication that the government is not equipped or does not have the capacities and procedures in place that could implicate bad actors.

Data Protection & Accessibility

It is important to quickly move towards a new framework for data protection and privacy. At a time when agencies are amassing personal data at every point of accessing services and laying digital footprint, data centralization is a huge risk as well as make s it vulnerable for manipulation during democratic processes as security breaches.

Technology Platforms

Capacity Building

Digital platforms need to invest in large scale capacity building efforts to staff their offices in India, in particular, their country specific public policy and grievance teams. By appointing an officer for the sake of it but stationing them elsewhere could be a legal move from the platform. However, it is important that a team is functional in India to work swiftly with user complaints, law enforcement and the government if necessary. The location itself makes it inaccessible and defeats the purpose of the appointment.

Accountability

Social media and digital platforms are no longer private networks of known people but platforms that are allowing broadcasting and sharing of content that is unverified. They have huge user base for each of them, more than any single newspaper or television channel in India equating them to be a media platform in the real sense.

With such massive influence and power, it is important to be accountable to the consequences that follow. While majority of our respondents favoured self regulatory measures, a lot of them felt that examining of individual country's press laws could be extended to the platforms upon modification, taking into consideration that they are hosting services.

Transparency

It is the responsibility of the platforms to be open about the processes and procedures containing user data and protection. An engagement process that is insightful and consultative with other stakeholders working to counter information disorder is required. Transparency in interactions with law enforcement and government about strategies and challenges is essential because technology expertise can no longer solve

Compliance

Digital platforms must collaborate an 'ethics of operations' tie-up with governments, to ensure that the bare minimum compliance with national and regional administrative bodies.

Helpline/Reporting

Platforms should consider setting up a localised telephonic helpline that users call, report and pose questions about services, instances of abuse, or to fact check.

Local Language Access & Moderation

A lot of misinformation is created in local languages in India and other linguistically diverse countries. It is important to integrate language access into platform moderation, grievances and user education. This would mean extensive hiring of resources in local languages to moderate or examine content.

Media

Organization Architecture & Affiliation

When media groups and publications are directly owned and affiliated with specific political ideologies, they are at risk of reporting information that supports a particular ideology without evidence . While everybody has the right to freedom of expression, there is a certain responsibility that needs to be assumed when working with public information, especially considering the potential of such information to incite hate, violence and polarization when broadcasted on a platform.

Staff Capacities

With the growing use of digital platforms to reach audience by media houses, it is critical to hire staff that is well versed and literate about digital technology, challenges and limitations of the platforms that they will be using. Additionally, all staff should be involved and trained in fact checking exercises to be able to ensure quality of information over volume. This could even extend to staff filing complaints with platforms for content that they might have come across that have unreliable sources and potential to cause public harm.

Robust Editorial Systems

Recreating robust systems of verification and multiple levels at the desk level before publishing information will go a long way in weeding out inaccurate information. Looking at traditional models of media houses in terms of emphasis on quality control more than volume control is essential.

Diversity

Encouraging diversity in the media, both in terms of people and opinions. Encourage diverse forms of media ownership and practices, in order to account for the plurality of people, opinions, and location across the country will inculcate healthy competition to report with right sources and verify each other's information

Self-Regulation

Strengthening representational and self-regulatory bodies like editors' guilds, press councils etc. to actively involve and deliberate challenges of daily news and not limit their participation to attacks of the freedoms of expression and opinion.

Academia, Civil Society & Discourse

Research

Commissioning research in the area of information processing at the intersection of human behaviour and technology can be used to develop literature, guidelines that can be piloted on the ground to combat information disorder. To enable behavior and social sciences to study and give insights into the issue than to purely treat it as a problem that is a product of technology.

Fund Allocation

Universities, think tanks, foundations and agencies working on information and human behaviour should mobilize and allocate funds to provide the support system for reports examining information disorder

Training

Journalism schools should make training on tools and methods of verifications mandatory. Moreover, they must introduce fact checking networks and resources to students to underscore the importance of the burden of proof and responsibility in the digital context. Fact checking agencies can be integrated into these workshops to allow students in training to understand the process and importance of fact checking

Conclusion

We conclude that the findings of the report indicate the need to re-evaluate and define the problem of fake news and collectively take responsibility for the information crisis looming over the country. The goal of this report is to provide information and understanding of the narrative around unverified information and the different aspects that influence, sustain and motivate sharing of the same. The report is an attempt to constructively layout best practices and in depth understanding of the underlying challenges that information disorder creates.

Our exhaustive recommendation section was consolidated by integrating our survey results in the context of stakeholder opinions. We strongly believe that several aspects of the report could be used as markers to initiate discourse and debate the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders that could change the ecosystem of fake news in India. We hope that the goal of setting a precedent of research findings that can be applied in real time motivates other institutions, agencies and people to engage in this field of study by looking at it from an intersection of human behavior and technology point of view and not engage in tunnel vision being a problem of either or.



Introduction

Digital technologies around the world have revolutionized the way people are connected and participate in their political, civic and social lives. In India, cheap mobile data and smartphones have drastically altered the flow of information, sometimes with toxic consequences. The last two years have been particularly difficult for India, with social media and messaging platforms acting as vectors leading to deaths and lynching.

Historically, India has a rich tradition of intergenerational knowledge and information transfer. Oral traditions play a important part in all spheres of life. India is a collectivist society; large number of people tend to define and identify themselves in relation to a group or a collection of beliefs rather than emphasizing on purely individual basis. In current times, these characteristics seem to have created an opportunity for an ecosystem that feeds on misinformation, fabrication and this is further amplified with technology.

The creators of ‘misinformation’ in India widely exploit the strong echo chambers that are in place because India provides the context for existing and dependable interpersonal and intrapersonal communication patterns, structures and close human relationships. With access to internet and mobile penetration increasing exponentially, these communication patterns have become online channels of massive information share. This is used as a fertile ground for planting information by creators who might have varied motivations including polarization and creating a fear based anxiety that violates accepted belief and value systems. News platforms portraying information that is aligned with their affiliations and ordinary citizens who share information intentionally or unintentionally only aggravates the consequences of unverified information.

Like everywhere else in the world, most misinformation is created, disseminated and operated largely on the internet. In India, mobile phones are one of the top entry points to access the internet. According to a report by the Omidyar Network, an average Indian user spends three hours on their mobile phone per day in close proximity to users in the United States who spend three hours and 20 minutes on non-voice mobile communication. In India, the top two reasons for internet mobile usage is for social communication and entertainment.

Telecom giant, CISCO’s VNI forecasts for India tells us that the ‘fake news’ menace is only going to get worse and more complicated in the coming years :

In India, IP traffic will grow 4-fold from 2016 to 2021, a compound annual growth rate of 30%	In India, Internet traffic will grow 4 fold from 2016 to 2021, a compound annual growth rate of 32%
In India, busy hour Internet traffic will grow 6.3-fold from 2016 to 2021, a compound annual growth rate of 45%	India's Mobile was 22.9% of total Internet traffic in 2016, and will be 42.0% of total Internet traffic in 2021
In India, mobile data traffic will grow 7-fold from 2016 to 2021, a compound annual growth rate of 49%	In India, Internet video traffic will grow 5-fold from 2016 to 2021, a compound annual growth rate of 40%

This report explores the consequences of the exponential growth and existing systems in place to facilitate the transformation in the context of misinformation in India. The last two years have seen a spate of lynchings in India, with viral Whatsapp videos, images, and messages being disseminated with an urgency and virality never seen before. Technology and its use have rendered such speed of message transfer and reaction possible.

This report presents literature, results of a web survey, important perspectives from multiple stakeholders and recommendations in order to propel future efforts in dealing with digital inclusion.

Scope & Objective of Report

The core objective of the study is to map the ecosystem of misinformation in India. The report aims to identify patterns and motivation in the Indian context. The report engages multiple stakeholders to understand the various points of view, contention and consensus on this evolving subject. The report presents case studies that record the intersection of information, human behaviour and technology.

The scope of this report explores and outlines the pressing problems in the information order and recommends socio- technological interventions. It extends to identify the steps that can be supported to help contain misinformation in India.

Methodology & Limitations

The study of information disorder is a newly emerging area of research that is vast and varied. This report might not be able to incorporate every incident, shift or emergence of newer aspects. However, all efforts have been made to ensure that the report is as current as possible.

Every method of scientific inquiry has limitations and it is with that premise that multiple research methods have been chosen by social scientists to draw substantive conclusions taking into scrutiny the strengths and weaknesses of each method. Considering the nature and scope of the report, multiple research methods were chosen to understand various aspects of the information disorder in India.

The following research methods were used :

- Web Survey
- Semi - Structured Interviews

Web Survey

Survey research can be used as a qualitative and / or a quantitative method. The most important characteristic of this research method is that the data is direct observations, thoughts or behaviours of the people being surveyed. For the purpose of this report, survey was administered on the Internet. The primary reason for implementing the survey online was the fact that the subject of the research is closely related to the use of internet itself and the intersection of technology and human behavior. The survey was shared via email, Facebook, WhatsApp groups and participation was voluntary. The advantage of administering web surveys is the fact that respondents can answer them at their own time and pace without interviewer administered bias.

In spite of the many advantages, survey as a research method could be subject to different kind of errors like sampling error, nonresponse error and measurement error. Sampling error arises when a sample of the target population is surveyed. It results from the fact that different samples will generate different survey data. Roughly speaking, assuming a random sample, sampling error is reduced by increasing the sample size. Nonresponse errors occur when data is not collected on either entire respondents (unit nonresponse) or individual survey questions (item nonresponse). Groves (1989) calls nonresponse 'an error of nonobservation'. The response rate, which is the ratio of the number of survey respondents to the number sampled, is often taken as a measure of how well the survey results can be generalized. Higher response rates are taken to imply a lower likelihood of nonresponse bias. Measurement error arises when the survey response differs from the 'true' response. For example, respondents may not answer sensitive questions honestly for a variety of reasons, or respondents may misinterpret or make errors in answering questions (Fricker Jr, 2008)¹.

Web Survey for this report was hosted on Survey Monkey for two months- September & October 2018. The survey was designed to understand the patterns of information consumption in India, enquire if a correlation between beliefs, attitudes, bias and motivation exists in order to share information.

Information was collected in the following aspects:

- Information about the respondent.
- Respondent's use of Media/Social Media/Technology platforms including in their trust in various categories of media
- A series of eleven (11) statements were given and the respondents were asked to identify the statement as true or false including the reason for their choice

All the responses were anonymized for the purpose of analysis. Responses of those who did not complete the survey were also considered, but only in cases where a response was provided

- The survey was attempted by 1286 respondents, of which 891 completed the entire survey
- 38 % of the respondents belonged to age group of 21- 30
- 32.4 % of the respondents belonged to age groups 31-40
- In terms of gender, 80% of the respondents were male and the remaining 20% female
- On average, each respondent spent 13 minutes on the survey. All the respondents together spent more than 278 hours on the survey. The objective of the survey was to collect comprehensive information and respondents had to answer 36 questions. The length of the survey and the amount of time it took to complete had an impact on the number of respondents who took the survey and the number that completed the survey after starting

It is important to note that this is a representational sample with limitations. Estimating that India's population is about 1.32 billion and the size of our sample is 891, there is a margin of error of about 3-5 %. The margin of error might be higher due to the following:

- It was web survey, limiting respondents to people who have access to internet and in specific - Email, Facebook and WhatsApp
- The language used for the survey was English, limiting the respondents to people who could read,write and comprehend english
- No specific efforts were made to have control mechanisms about age groups and gender of the respondents. Hence,the percentage of people under each category is varied
- A series of eleven (11) statements were given and the respondents were asked to identify the statement as true or false including the reason for their choice. These statements included pictures as well as videos. This part of the survey was to understand the respondent's ability & their reasoning in identifying fake news. All the responses were anonymized for the purpose of analysis. Responses of those who did not complete the survey were also considered, but only in cases where a response was provided

Semi Structured Interviews

Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to examine the quality and nature of how people behave, associate and identify themselves. Interviews and questionnaires are popular methods that will allow the same. For the qualitative aspects of this report, a multi-stakeholder purposive sample was drawn up to ensure that adequate representation of the various stakeholders in the information ecosystem in India. In total, 30 stakeholders were interviewed. All the stakeholders were contacted via email, telephone or LinkedIn with an explanation of the research endeavour and a request for an

interview in person, over email, or via telephone. The stakeholders who responded were then interviewed, using a set of questions thematically grouped under broad headings. Common ethical protocol of procuring interviewee consent for the research and attribution was followed. Since the focus of the report is India, most interviewees contacted were based out of India, barring a few, who were well-acquainted with the issue in spite of being located outside.

Semi-structured interview method was used to collect information. In semi-structured interviews, same set of questions were answered by all interviewees. At the same time, additional questions were asked to clarify/expand on certain issues. This method allowed the researchers to collect in- depth information from different stakeholders in the information ecosystem in India.

Following categories and sub groups were charted in order to to have representation and opinions of all stakeholders:

- Technology & Internet Service Providers
- Government - Policy
- Law Enforcement
- Media & Influencers
- Fact Checkers & Verifiers
- Academia
- Political Parties

Seventy six (76) interviewees from the above categories were contacted between August - November 2018. Out of them, the thirty (30) of them gave consent to be interviewed. Two out of the twenty-nine have requested to be quoted anonymously. An annexure with the names of individuals contacted has been listed at the end of the report. This report is based on the interviews of the respondents who agreed to be part of our research. All measures and efforts were taken to make sure that selection of people for the interviews were representational and had extensive experience in their field of work.

In spite of a large number of stakeholders being contacted in the categories of political parties and technology providers, researchers observed a very low response rate. No single person affiliated to political parties agreed to be part of the research. At the same time, representatives from several technology companies were contacted at multiple levels of leadership but have not given consent to engage in the study except one who agreed to be interviewed but wished to be anonymous.

All interviews were conducted in English because of the varied linguistic diversity among the stakeholders that were interviewed. The primary goal of the qualitative research was to consolidate all opinions and varied viewpoints of stakeholders in the context of misinformation and consequences for India. Insights from the interviews allowed researchers to explore many aspects of the information disorder and the ecosystem in India. The interviews allowed the research team to draw up recommendations and conclusions for each category of stakeholders in order to contain and combat the growing menace of information disorder.



Literature Review

GLOBAL EFFORTS AT COMBATING FAKE NEWS



Brief History

The phenomenon of fake news is not a recent one, and can be traced back in time. Even before the advent of the modern press and digital media, the world saw ruminations on the possibility of using propaganda and misinformation being used in the context of war to exercise power over groups of people. Ranging from Chinese philosopher Confucius, who wrote on the political power of good rhetoric, to the Indian master of statecraft, Chanakya, who wrote on propaganda and warfare, the ancient history of combining and shaping of information to suit political and economic agendas is well-documented.

The spread of printed copies containing fake news, can be traced to the beginning of the Gutenberg Printing Press (Sarkhel, 2017). French Revolution in Europe also saw the deployment of information for political scoops. Further, the era of Industrial Revolution and enlightenment did not curtail the spread and hold of fake news of that age.

The coming of modern technology saw mass communication take a new turn. With it, the phenomenon of fake news took new shapes as well. Posetti and Matthews (2018) write about The Great Moon Hoax of 1835, which was the first large-scale news hoax. An American newspaper carried a six-part series on the discovery of life on the moon. Recent studies that seek to define and historicize fake news, also trace it to the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the German Propaganda machine initiated prior to the Second World War, in the mid-1930s. Further, in 1938, the broadcast of a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's drama *The War of the Worlds*, allegedly frightened over a million listeners (Cantil, 2005; Tandoc Jr. et al, 2017).

Throughout the 20th century, various wars have been accompanied by propaganda campaigns by the involved parties, spreading fake news and spurious information to influence the masses. The two World Wars saw extensive use of propaganda, to spread stories and information, in an effort at image management and manipulation. The German Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels' efforts could certainly be regarded as a high tide in this phenomenon of the circulation and the institutionalization of fake news.

Over the next half a century, the world saw rapid advances made in technology. The spread of radio and television only transmitted fake news onto those media. Further, tabloid journalism of the 1980s and 1990s saw the return of fake news in a big way, intertwining with business interests in the media. Partisan reportage only contributed to further enmeshing of political agendas with the generation of fake news.

With the advent of the internet, email, and social networks, the spread of fake news has assumed larger proportions, due to the interactive element inherent in Web 2.0 and virals. Email hoaxes became a new aspect of the internet, to contend with, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In recent times, the world has seen the mobilization of fake news in times of crises and conflicts, especially during the Syrian war and the Ukrainian conflict. We have also witnessed the utilization of fake news during the 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States, and the United Kingdom - European Union membership vote.

The history of fake news has registered, in recent times, numerous data points owing to the rapid spread and viral dissemination of fake information. Digitization of news is a prime reason behind this rapid spread, with the networked nature of the Internet only adding to the potential for duplication, replication, and manipulation. The term has also been used to discredit genuine sources of news and information, thereby adding to the murkiness of the information ecosystem. Today, we continue to witness the adding of pages to the history of the phenomenon of fake news, aided heavily by the technological impetus of the Internet and social media.

Conceptualizing and Understanding Audiences

The audiences and those who interact with fake news have been written about, and conceptualized in numerous ways. Audiences form an important aspect of any effort to understand the phenomenon of fake news, since they are the ones who are involved in being affected by, spreading, actively colluding to increase the veracity of, and rejecting fake news. As such, audience form an integral part of the fake news ecosystem.

Communication and media studies theorize audiences in varied ways --- as passive recipients, as active recipients, as active shapers of news and information, as producers, and most recently as prosumers. The early uses and gratification approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973) highlights utilitarian aspirations of audiences, who use and attain gratification from media. Motivations and behavioural tendencies of audiences were highlighted, in such studies. Other researchers (Ruggiero, 2000) have conceptualized the audience in more passive ways. Audiences have been seen as consumers of news. Theories of cognitive dissonance, selection bias and choice theories have been articulated from the vantage point of the consumer. These theories and try to understand how choices of viewership or audience interaction are made, how they select certain visuals over the others, and how certain kinds of information finds favour among them. Research on audiences as passive or active has, in some ways, been hinged on conscious and preconscious relatability to viewed content. Empirical research carried out on television audiences considered at the manner in which audiences were bound by the medium in question. McLuhan's famous idea that the medium is the message, is a case in point. The media ecological perspective was deterministic, and posited the medium's special properties, in influencing audience perception and interaction. The cognition of the individual, when conceptualized as a passive audience, is based on the affordances of the medium in question. Where the audiences are conceptualized as (a) active recipients and (b) active participants, their cognitive influences, biases, perceptions, discretions, are taken into account.

Cultural theorists like Stuart Hall have tended to focus on the larger mediating structures, bringing in a sociological understanding. Fiske (1987), in writing about television audiences, talks about television's 'semiotic democracy'. In other words, the freedom of interpretation is presented to the audiences. Further, audiences have been conceptualized to highlight effect and emotion in view in everyday viewing habits. This overview of the various conceptualizations of audiences is useful in arriving at an understanding of the audiences of fake news.

Research on Fake News

The March 2018 issue of *Science* carried MIT's large-scale study on misinformation and fake news (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018)². The study looked at a sample of some 126,000 bits of news tweeted by 3 million people more than 4.5 million times between 2006 and 2017 (Galeon, 2018)³. Studying the spread of truths and untruths by bots, the report concludes that bots spread both kinds of information at an equal ratio. The rapid spread of untruths, therefore, was a result of human behavior. The report puts the onus of curtailing the spread of fake news, on humans.

Another study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism looks at audience perspectives on fake news. The Factsheet synthesizes data from eight focus groups and a survey of online news users, to arrive at an understanding of the audience viewpoints on fake news (Nielsen & Graves, 2017)⁴. The Factsheet suggests that the audience distinguished between truth and fake news, as a matter of 'degrees', instead of in absolute terms. Their perceptions of fake news is mediated by an implicit mistrust in the media at large. The report also suggests that many people confused fake news with low quality journalism and even advertising, instead of correlating it with false information. The usage of the term by politicians to discredit any kind of news, also played on their minds.

The Centre for Media, Data, and Society, at the Central European University, released a report⁵ in August 2018, which focuses on Public Service Media, and its role in the larger media system in countering fake news and propaganda. The report cites the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and 'Fake News' Disinformation and Propaganda of March 2017, by Special Rapporteurs of several intergovernmental bodies, and the Council of Europe's current 'Introductory Memorandum' also takes cognizance of the role of Public Service Media in "Developing specialised/targeted programmes containing analysis and comments regarding fake news and propaganda (counter discourse)".

The 'Fighting Fake news Workshop'⁶ organized by The Information Society Project and The Floyd Abrams Institute for Freedom of Expression, highlights the definitional problem, the manner in which misinformation spreads, while identifying pressure points, and providing some solutions. The report flags astroturfing, or the creation of false grassroots movements, as an important deviance to take note of, in the current information and news ecosystem (Baron, Crootof, & et al, 2017).

The Hewlett Foundation's report on the future of truth⁷, identified changes in international influence, upheavals in the media landscape, the emergence of new technology platforms, and big data as causes of changes in the information and news space across the world. In order to combat fake news, the report recommends a renewed focus on information production, with a focus on improving journalistic quality and deterring purveyors of fake news. Further, the report talks about information distributors like Twitter, Facebook, Google, Reddit, etc. and shifts brought about in those spaces, to make them more responsive. Finally, the report flags information consumption, and talks about practices like news literacy, fact-checking, as measures on that front (Born & Edgington, 2017)

Around the World – A Glimpse

In late 2017, Germany became the first country to pass an anti-fake news legislation. The Network Enforcement Act implicates companies like Facebook, Twitter, etc. to take down inflammatory and flagged content within 24 hours, or a week at the maximum in case of complex cases. In France, a law passed in November 2018 provides a definition of fake news as “Inexact allegations or imputations, or news that falsely report facts, with the aim of changing the sincerity of a vote.” It’s designed to enact strict rules on the media during electoral campaigns and, more specifically, in the three months preceding any vote. The law was validated and enacted in December 2018. The law would allow judges to make pronouncements during elections, asking companies to take down fake news.

In considering the ramifications of fake news, British lawmakers took 18 months to delineate ideas to counter fake news. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee of Parliament presented recommendations for curbing the spread of misinformation, and listed them out in a special report. Among other things, the report eschews the term ‘fake news,’ for misinformation. The report seeks to implicate technology companies, going beyond categories of ‘publisher’ or ‘platform.’ The report mentions a white paper that is scheduled to be presented by the government later this year. The report seeks to tighten norms of online conduct, extending radio and television norms to the online space. Further, it also seeks to implicate political campaigning as a contributor to the spread of misinformation, and intends to change its nature.

On the other side of the world, Malaysia became the first country to rollback legislation on fake news. The country had introduced a law to tackle fake news, imposing fines of up to 500,000 ringgit, and imprisonment up to six years for spreading information that the government termed as fake news. The move invited widespread criticism, with civil society organizations calling the move a retrograde step against freedom of expression.

In neighbouring Singapore, after the release of a green paper on the challenges of online falsehoods earlier this year, the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods presented a report drawing attention to the spread of online falsehoods, the various kinds of actors involved, and the impact of such a spread on society, politics, and economy. The report calls for criminal proceedings and penalties for those who indulge in causing serious harm such as election interference, public disorder, and the erosion of trust in public institutions (House of Common, 2018)⁸.

China launched a platform called Piyao, inclusive of a mobile application, which lets the public report online rumours. Chinese laws also implicate rumour mongers for defamation, who could be imprisoned for seven years. Operating under the guidance of 27 departments, Piyao is hosted by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and is affiliated to the Xinhua news agency.

Indonesia has experienced the proliferation of online misinformation and fake news, especially during the 2012 electoral season. Prominent social media personalities were arrested for the spread of hate speech against certain candidates, and fake news syndicates were seen as indulging in mudslinging and the spread of rumours. The Electronic Information and Transaction Law governs online spaces in the country, and arrests have been made utilizing the law. Further, the country has also seen the blocking of websites that contribute to, and peddle hate speech.

The Philippines has seen the spread of online disinformation on a large scale, especially around the election of the current President Rodrigo Roa Duterte. In the run-up to the 2016 elections, the country saw hyper-partisan messages and campaigns spread on behalf of Duterte's candidature, indulging in massive spread of hate speech and fake news. Researchers have called this an organized focused strategic campaign of sorts. There exist no legal frameworks to counter disinformation, at this point. However, non-governmental institutions, educators, and members of civil society have taken to educating people and blocking spurious websites.

The summary of regulatory or other actions being contemplated or taken by various countries is provided in the recommendations.

Fake News in India

The phenomenon of Fake News in India is not new, and has been prevalent as propaganda and rumour-mongering across media. However, the coming of digital technologies has only exacerbated the speed with which it is done. In a prominent way, the 2014 elections saw social media being used extensively, for propaganda, spread of misinformation and disinformation. The "Indian Internet" has seen the explosion of fake news on social media, with even dedicated sites that peddle such information. Further, the use of WhatsApp has taken such occurrences up by a few notches.

Numerous instances of the spread of fake news have come to light in the recent past, shifting from solely the political realm to the social and the everyday. These instances range from harmless jokes to dangerous life-taking rumours that spread hysteria and anger. For instance, in late 2016, there were rumours surrounding the demonetization process by the government, suggesting that the currency notes contained GPS chips. Similarly, another rumour was the Taj Mahal being a Hindu temple Tejo Mahalaya. Rumours about India winning UNESCO awards on a few accounts were the other string of rumours. These rumours have been passed on unabated on WhatsApp and social networking sites, and have been precursors to more dangerous peddling of false information.

One piece of news that has been relayed and replayed in various parts of India, especially over the last year, is that of child kidnapping. For instance, 7 men were lynched due to these rumours. Our interviews revealed such instances in rural and semi-urban districts of Maharashtra, Telangana, and Kerala. Interviewees suggested that such rumours strike at the root of an individual's emotions, especially since they deal with one's child. They often take an ugly turn, with rage and fury taking over rationality.

Fear-mongering is a psychological tool is used to a large extent in the spread of such news. Another controversial spate of lynchings have been over suspicion of the possession of beef. Ideological politics plays out in this realm, often seeing visceral reactions leading to hate crimes based on suspicion. The element of mapping suspicion with facts is missing, to the extent that lives are taken in the process.

Politics and propaganda websites, more so of the far right, are another manifestation of this tendency. Appropriation of ideas beyond their contexts, forged documents, photo shopped images etc. are used in abundance, for this purpose. For instance, numerous photo shopped images of the Prime Minister Modi were circulated, to establish his life story. Similarly, images of leaders visiting flood-prone areas, or social events have all become a part of the Internet experience of the average Indian today.

WhatsApp groups and messaging have emerged as information and news distribution platforms, instead of being restricted to personal messaging services. Viral videos circulated over WhatsApp also lead to voyeuristic viewing,

leading to a desensitized viewer base. Constant exposure to such news often normalizes these instances. Interestingly, even the official Twitter handles of prominent political leaders, journalists and even media houses, have fallen prey to fake news, with them circulating and retweeting them. This increases the ambiguity between fact and fake news. Even the Press Information Bureau run by the Government of India retweeted photo shopped images of the Prime Minister⁹. Dedicated websites like Postcard.news have been allegedly involved in the spread of misinformation, for the sake of profit-making (Kajimoto and Stanley, 2018)¹⁰.

Kaur and Nair (2018) contend that Indian law is not clear on misinformation. In the last couple of years, the country has witnessed internet shutdowns in various instances, in response to the monitoring and control over the spread of news that is seen as contorted or not in tune with the state's viewpoint. The line between actual misinformation and disinformation, and inconvenient information that challenges the status quo but is actually true, is rather fine when it comes to practice. The spate of Internet shutdowns in Kashmir and other places are a case in point (Sarkhel, 2017)¹¹. Further, there were orders to suggest that misleading information spread on social media could lead to arrests in the city of Varanasi. However, reports suggest that no such arrests have been made.

Most recently, the government has been in talks with platforms like WhatsApp, which has a huge user base in India, to figure out a way to curb the spread of fake news via its platform (Sushma, 2018)¹². The government sought to place the onus on WhatsApp to aid the tracing of fake news to the origin, in order to curtail it.

However, WhatsApp has denied aiding traceability of messages, citing privacy concerns and the encrypted nature of its services. Instead, the platform has now sought to work with Digital Empowerment Foundation, to create awareness and work with community leaders in around 10 states in the country, including Assam, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tripura, Jharkhand and West Bengal. The founder of Digital Empowerment Foundation, Osama Manzer (Gupta, 2018)¹³ has said:

We at WhatsApp and DEF hope these training workshops will help build an empathetic and conscious community of WhatsApp users who learn to respond rather than react to every message they receive

Further, WhatsApp has also taken the following measures: In July 2018, it introduced the “forwarded” symbol, to identify messages that are forwards. Similarly, it has restricted the number of times a message can be forwarded, to five times. Moreover, the platform company has also removed the quick forward option, for media messages. The company’s representatives have stated that they intend to help keep WhatsApp as it was meant to be – a private messaging application.

In light of the spate of lynchings in the country triggered by WhatsApp forward, WhatsApp started issuing full page advertisements in leading newspapers in India to combat the menace (Reuters, 2018)¹⁴. The advertisements have sought to create awareness about spotting fake news and rumours. The platform company also seeks to place similar ads in regional languages in states in Northern and Western India, to reach out to their users. In total, India has about 200 million users of WhatsApp, and is their biggest market.

The legal terrain often battles the juxtaposition of two key aspects: freedom of expression, and the extent of regulation. The fine line that balances the intersections of liberty and duty is inherent in the seeking of legal remedies, to keep pace with advancements in technology. The danger of censorship and curtailing freedom of speech and expression is a real threat. Any real effort at combating the undesirable ramifications of the combination of technology and human application, ought to be rooted in an ethical approach that preserves the norm of human rights and free speech.

Global efforts at combating fake news

Curbing and combating Fake News have taken numerous forms, from creating literacy campaigns, to fact-checking initiatives, and to figuring out the intricacies of punitive measures to deter its spread. This section looks at the measures that seek to counter and curtail fake news.

Pre-emptive Collaborations

Pre-emptive collaborations refer to the measures put in place prior to the possibility of an event that could trigger the avalanche of fake news. In other words, efforts aimed at reducing the possibility of the spread of misinformation before a scheduled or marked event in many a case, could be said to be preemptive in nature. Collaborative efforts at various levels aimed at reducing the impact and the spread of fake news enable its curtailing. For instance, before the recent French and German elections, numerous efforts were made by diverse organisations to educate the masses and contribute to literacy on the spotting of fake news. Working with fact-checkers to check news veracity, and social networking platforms to counter false information from spreading, was done before the elections, in a pre-emptive fashion.

Media Literacy

Aimed at improving the ability of citizens and groups to analyze the information that they are exposed to, and to approach it with a critical eye. Media literacy campaigns focus on improving the ability of lay people to be self-reliant when it comes to using their technology devices, and media interactions. They are taught how to be vigilant, how to read media, and how to pace and position their responsiveness to media exposure. Media literacy campaigns have been put in place by various organizations, including the social networking platforms, in their bid to cater to the social and ethical dimensions of their work. For instance, WhatsApp and Facebook have both been involved in media literacy campaigns.

Fact-Checking Movement

Globally, the fact-checking movement has been gaining momentum, especially in recent times, with growing partisanship dictating media reportage and journalism. Fact-checkers aim to dispel myths and rumours, and put out fact-based stories that help present the state of affairs in a non-partisan form. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), housed at Poynter Institute, is an affiliate umbrella body of fact-checkers. The number of fact-checking avenues globally have gone up in the last half a decade.

Some of the ground rules of fact-checking are enlisted below:

<h3>Accuracy & Impartiality</h3> <p>Under this aspect, it is important that the context is provided and the quote is verbatim. Similarly, it is imperative that the selection is balanced but not falsely equivalent. Further, only claims are meant to be believed, and not predictions, opinions, hyperbole, satire. In addition, claims can be objectively verified against reliable evidence.</p>	<h3>Public service</h3> <p>It includes a clear explanation of the selection criteria. The audience asked for verification. There is an understanding that the consequences, if the claim goes unchecked are not trivial. Further, the facts are at the heart of a public dispute.</p>
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Norm Evolution

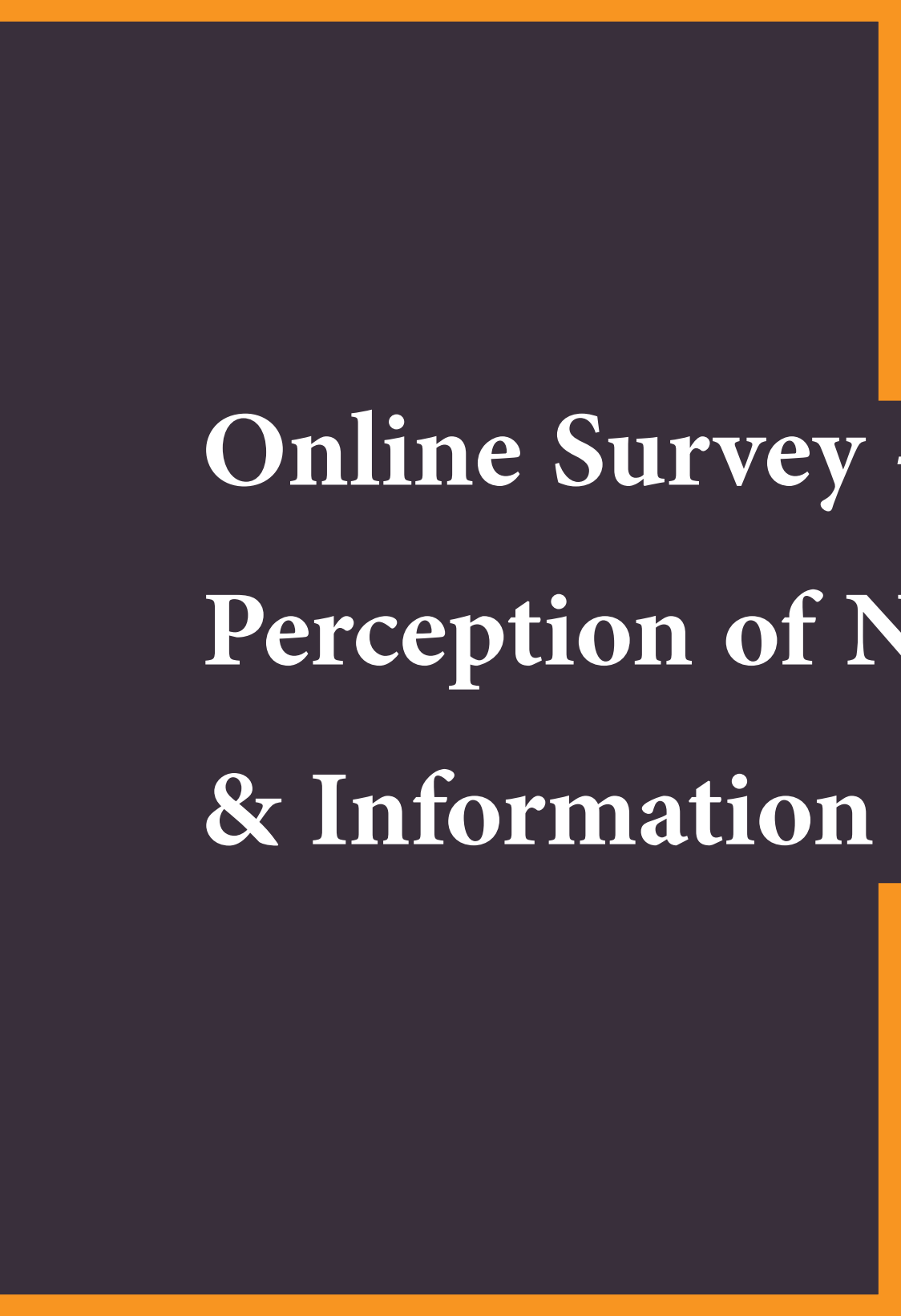
Norms are commonly held standards and practices that get stronger, accepted and followed over time. In the world of fake news and misinformation, many have called for the evolution of norms in the online space, especially in chats and messages. Norms that dissuade certain practices of forwarding fake news, or generating discussion pointers using them, on social media platforms, can help reduce the impact of such news. By defining norms around fake news, the tone for information sharing practices is set. It also leads to the exclusion of those who do not stick to these evolved norms.

Legal Recourse

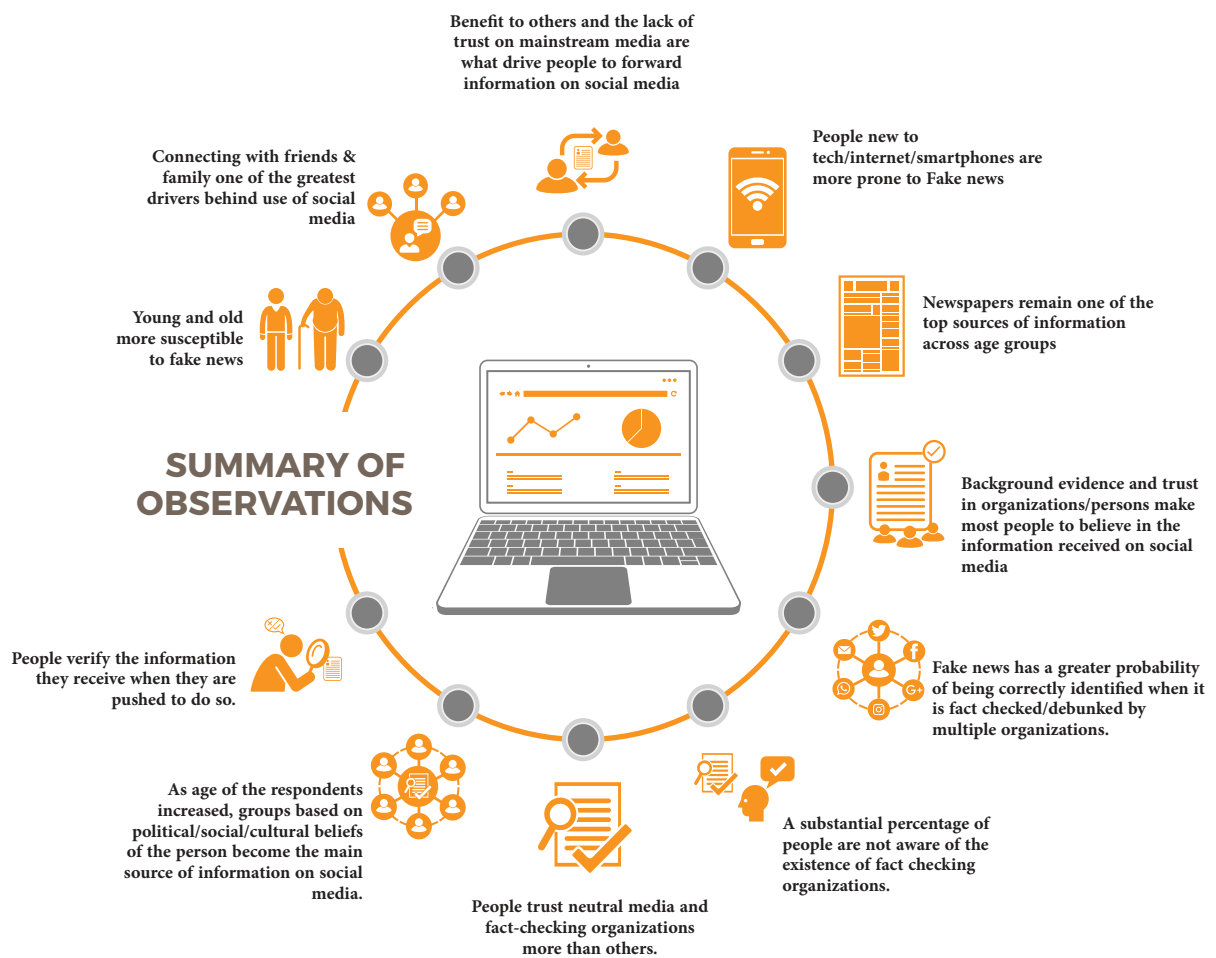
Legal recourse is the legislative route to tackling the fake news problem, and this becomes a difficult task in the online world, given the ambiguity of correlating offline and online legal frameworks. Further, localization of the online space becomes a problem, and need to be well-defined, when it comes to laws to be applicable to fake news.

Technological Solutions

Technological solutions to combat fake news online have been proposed time and again. For instance, a very recent news report suggests that researchers at MIT have developed a machine learning-based solution to combat fake news. Similarly, there have been proposals and efforts to utilize bots and Artificial Intelligence to combat the virality of fake news online. These technological solutions offer interesting prospects. However, they may compound the problem if they turn erroneous and lack the human element.



Online Survey - Perception of News & Information



An online survey was carried out for the purpose of quantitative research. The survey was attempted by 1286 respondents, of which 891 completed the entire survey. The respondents were contacted through email campaigns and social media posts. The respondent sample included persons from across the spectrum in terms of age, education, beliefs. The survey was designed to understand the patterns of information consumption in India and attempted to understand if a correlation exists between beliefs, attitudes, age, education, experience in the use of internet/technology, bias and motivation to understand and share information. On average, each respondent spent 13 minutes on the survey. The respondents together spent more than 278 hours on the survey.

The online survey was divided into the following three (3) parts

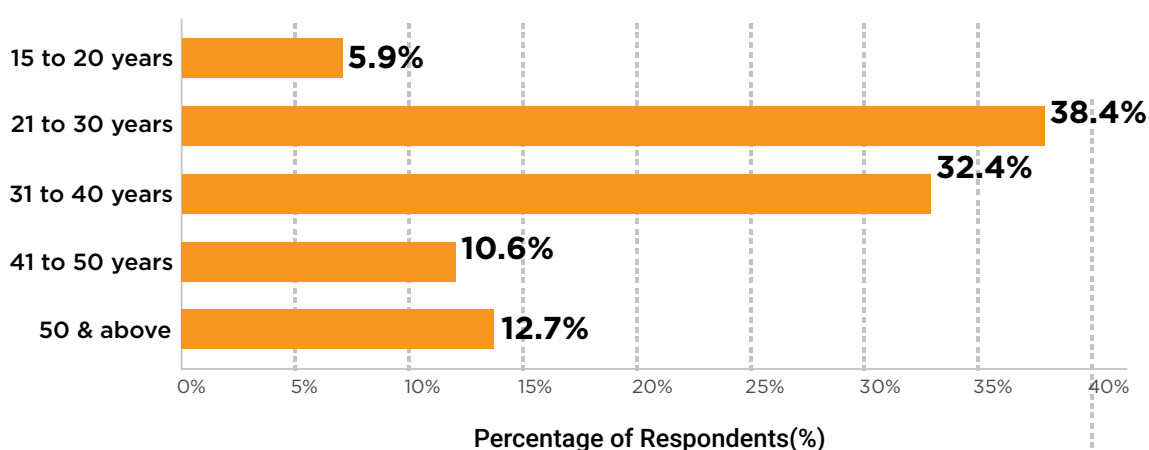
Information about the respondent	A series of eleven (11) statements were given and the respondents were asked to identify the statement as true or false including the reason for their choice. These statements included pictures as well as videos. This part of the survey was to understand the respondent's ability & their reasoning in identifying fake news
Respondent's use of Media/Social Media/Technology platforms including in their trust in various categories of media	

All the responses were anonymized for the purpose of this analysis. Responses of those who did not complete the survey were also considered, but only in cases where a response was provided to that specific question. The observations based on the analysis is presented in the following pages.

Respondent Profile: 70% belong to the 21-40 Age Group

Of all the respondents, more than 38% belonged to the 21-30 age group followed by 32.4% in the 31-40 age group. Together, these two age groups represented 70% of the respondents. (refer Chart 1). In terms of gender, 80% of the respondents were male and the remaining 20% female.

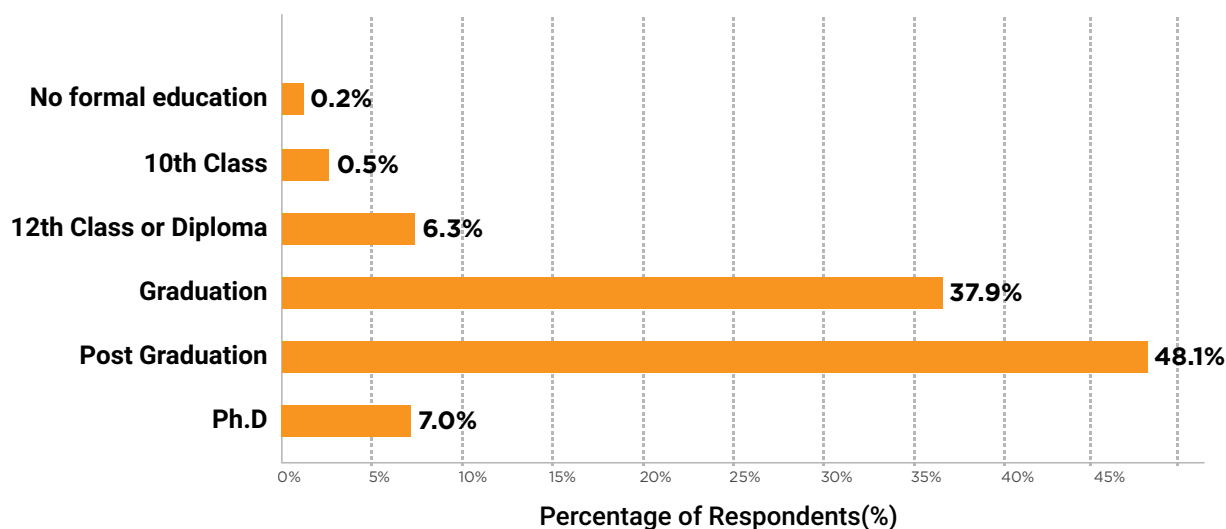
Chart 1: Percentage of respondents by age group



More than 90% of the respondents are Graduates

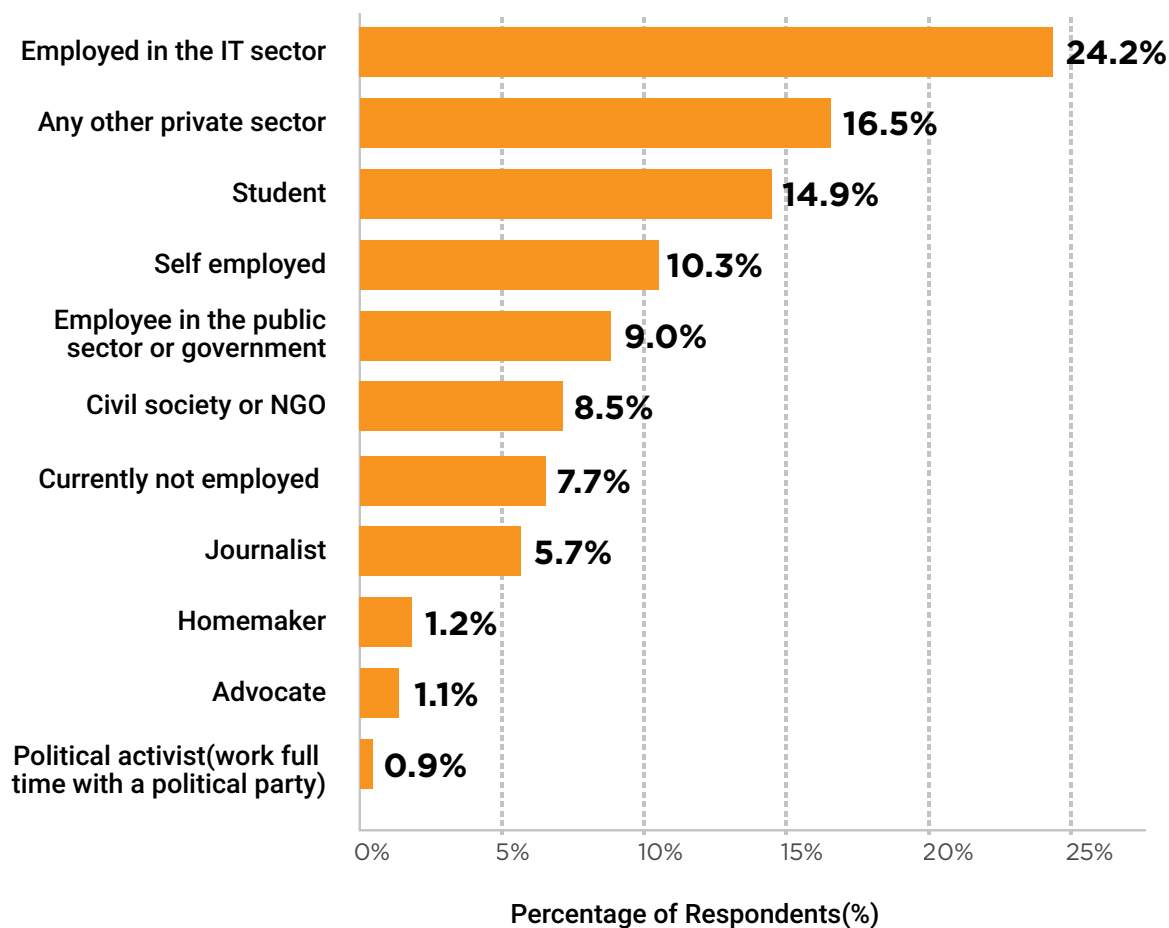
In terms of the highest level of education completed, 48% of the respondents did Post Graduation followed by 38% who completed Graduation. About 7% of the respondents were PhDs while about 6.3% completed only 12th Class/Diploma. (refer Chart 2).

Chart 2: Percentage of respondents by highest level of education completed



Out of all the respondents, majority (24.2%) are employed in the Information Technology (IT) sector followed by those who are employed in other private sector (16.5%). The next big set of respondents (about 15%) are students. In addition, at least 5% of the respondents are employed in Media, Civil Society/NGOs and Public Sector. About 10.3% of the respondents are self-employed. (refer Chart 3)

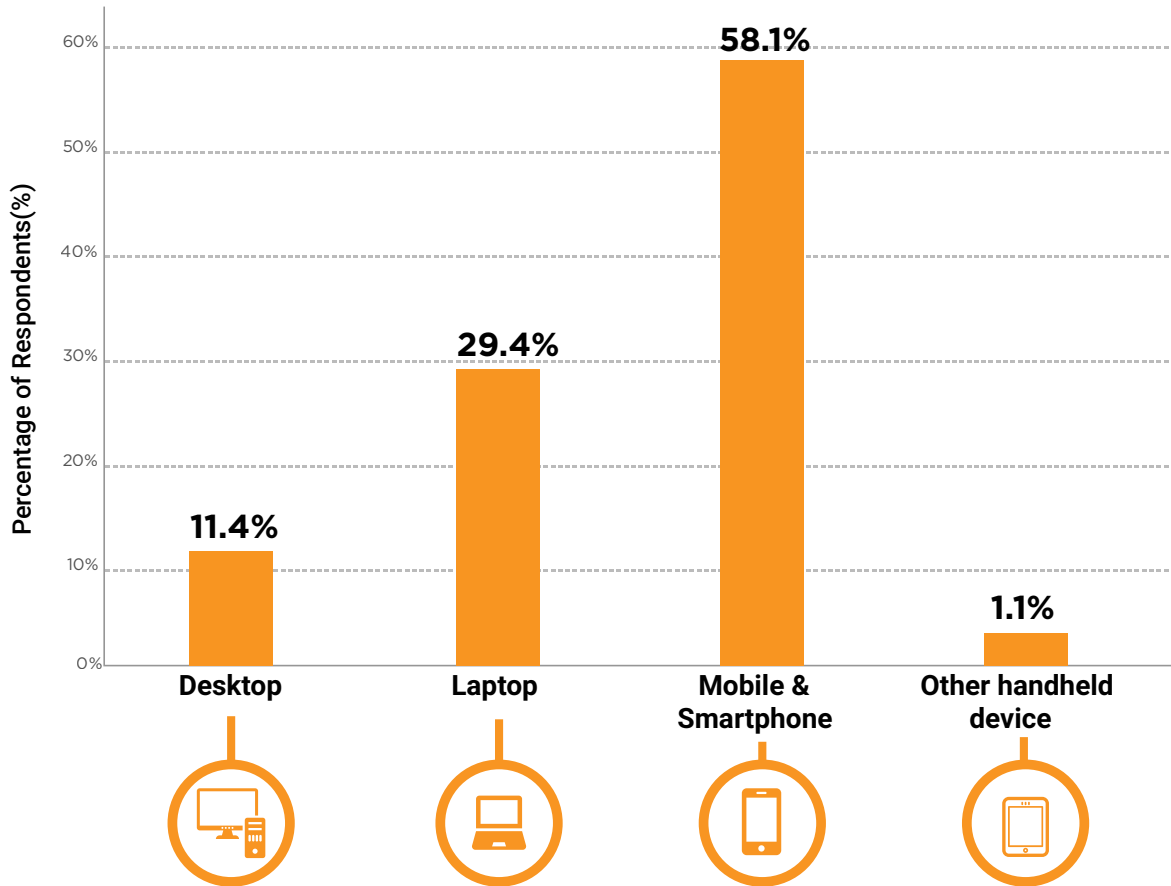
Chart 3: Percentage of respondents by Employment/Occupation



Majority access the internet through a Smartphone

Of the respondents who chose to specify their preferred device to access internet, 58% mentioned Smartphone, 29.4% mentioned Laptop and 11.4% mentioned Desktop as their preferred device to access internet. (refer Chart 4)

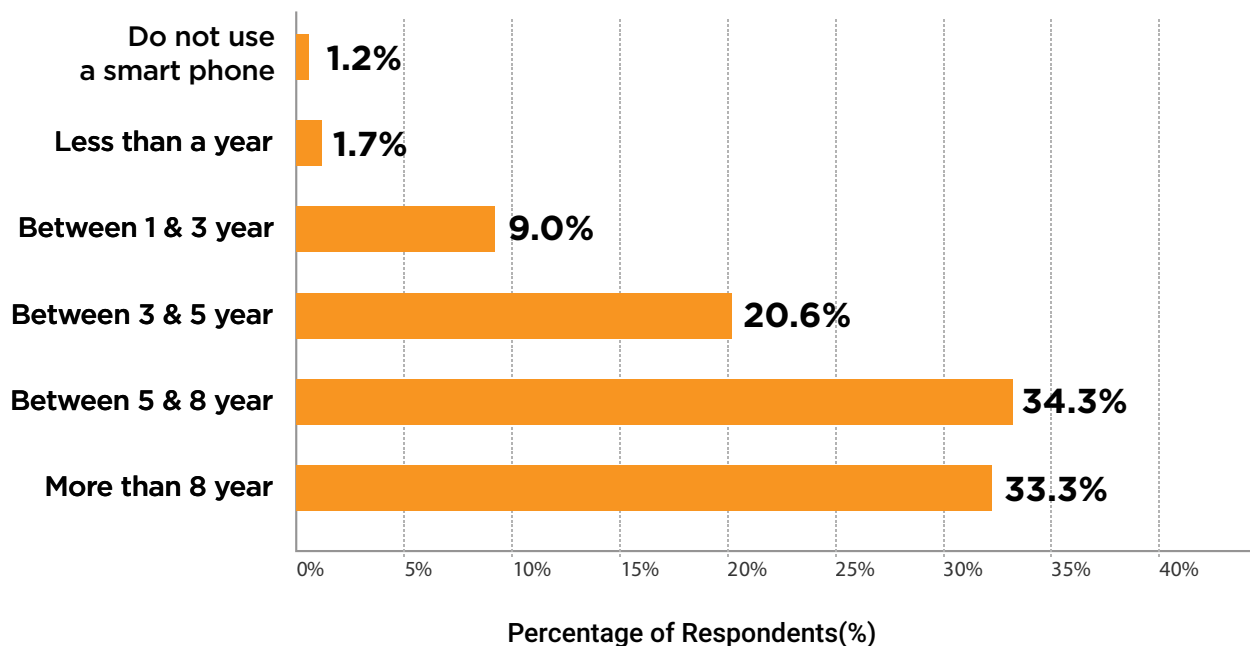
Chart 4: Percentage of respondents by preferred device to access internet



More than 95% of the respondents have used a Smartphone for at least a year

Of all the respondents, 1/3rd have been using a Smartphone for more than 8 years while another 1/3rd have been using it between 5 & 8 years. Overall, more than 95% of the respondents are using a Smartphone for at least an year. (refer Chart 5). Variations are also observed within age groups. For instance, more than 75% of the respondents are using a Smartphone for at least 5 years in each of the 21-30, 31-40 and 41-50 age groups whereas only 62% in the '50 & above' age group have been using it for more than 5 years.

Chart 5: Percentage of respondents by number of years of smartphone usage



Identifying 'Fake News'

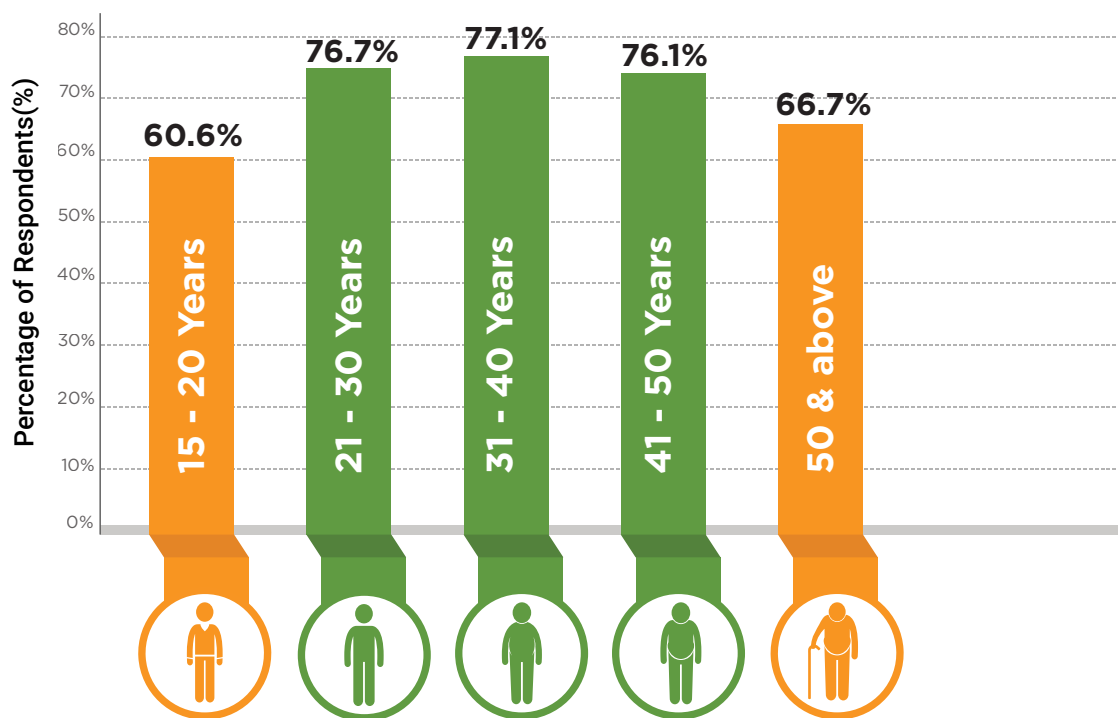
Part 3 of the survey had eleven (11) statements and the respondents were asked to identify the statement as 'true' or 'false' including the reason for their choice. These statements included pictures as well as videos. The eleven (11) statements were categorized into three groups viz., 'Widely believed to be fake/debunked', 'Perception based', and 'others'. Statements in the first category were widely debunked and shared as fake news by multiple organizations. Statements in the second category include those that have to do with perception of the respondents. The other statements which belonged to neither of the above categories were grouped as other. For instance, the statement 'India never accepted aid from other countries for Flood or Disaster relief' was included in this category.

It is observed that statements that are fact checked/debunked by multiple organizations and are widely believed to be fake are the ones that the respondents most correctly identified. In all, 86% of the respondents correctly identified these statements. It is also evident from the comments that a significant section of the respondents has verified the statements for the first time before submitting the answer as there is no 'Do not know' option to choose from.

With Age Group

If all the eleven (11) statements are considered, more than 75% of the respondents each in the age groups of 21-30, 31-40 & 41-50 correctly identified the statements compared to 60.6% in the 15-20 age group and 66.7% in the above 50 age group. (refer Chart 6). This suggests that those in the age groups of 15-20 and above 50 may be more susceptible to fake news than those in the other age groups.

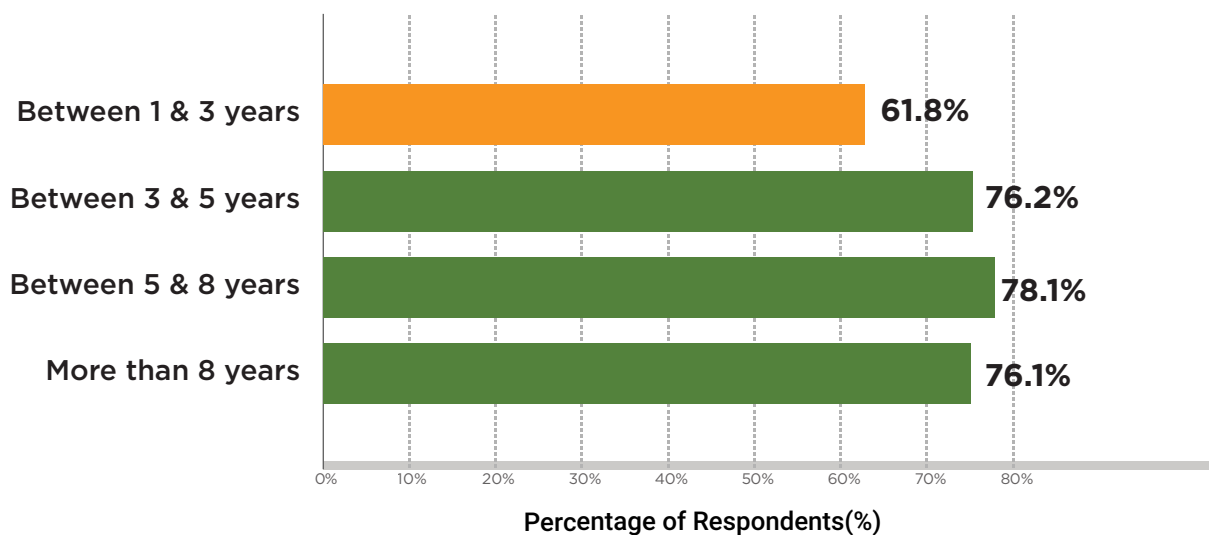
Chart 6: Percentage of Respondents who ‘CORRECTLY’ Identified the statement based on age group



With Use of Smartphone

If all the eleven (11) statements are considered, more than 75% of the respondents who have been using a Smartphone for at least 3 years correctly identified the statements compared to only 61.8% of those who have been using a Smartphone for less than 3 years (refer Chart 7). This suggests that those who are relatively new to use of technology/internet and smartphones may be more susceptible to fake news than others.

Chart 7: Percentage of Respondents who ‘CORRECTLY’ identified the statement based on number of years of Smartphone usage



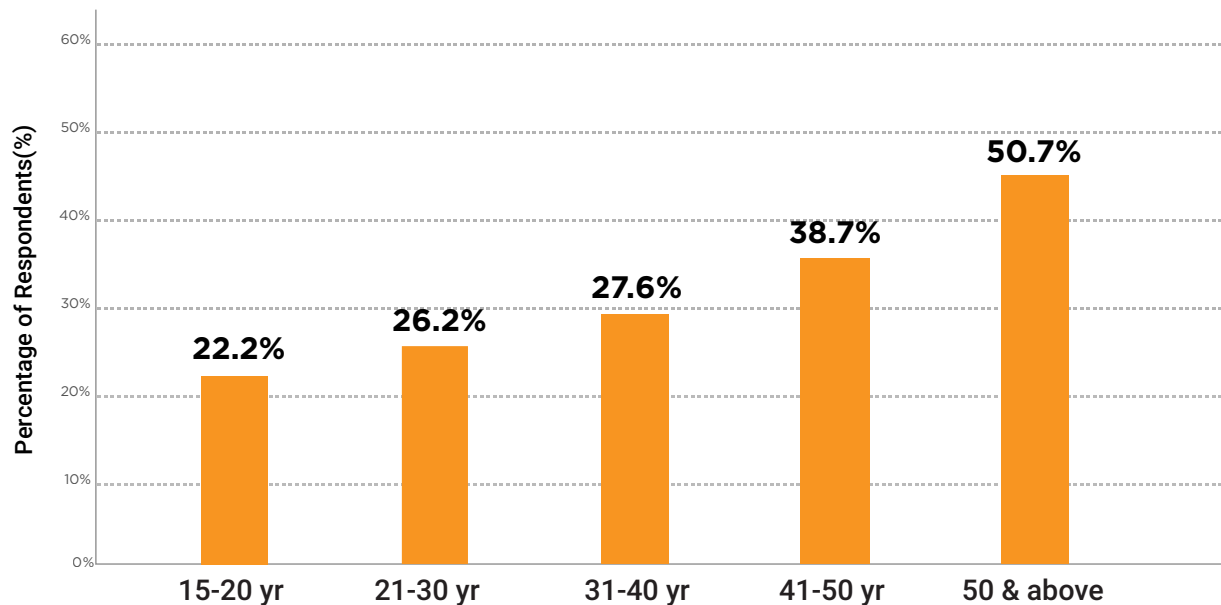
What is the top source of Information/News?

The respondents were asked to indicate their top source of information/news (only one) from the given options such as Newspapers, Websites, Facebook, Television Channels, Twitter, WhatsApp. It was observed that the top source of information varied with age group, education & occupation.

With Age Group

Newspapers & Websites are the two most chosen sources of information across all age groups. It is observed that the proportion of respondents who chose Newspapers as the top source of information increased with the increase in the age of respondents. While Newspapers are chosen by only 22.2% of the respondents in the 15-20 age group, it increased to 50.7% in the above 50 age group (refer Chart 8). In the above 50 age group, websites are chosen by only 17.7%, which is less than half of this choice in other age groups.

Chart 8: Newspaper as the 'TOP SOURCE OF INFORMATION' by age group



At least 5% of the respondents chose WhatsApp as their top source of information except for those in the 21-30 and 31-40 age group (it is around 2% in these age groups). In the case of Facebook, it is chosen as the top source of information by at least 10% the respondents in all the age groups except for those in the 41-50 and 50 & above age groups (it is around 5% in these age groups).

With Education

It is observed that Newspapers are chosen by a greater proportion of respondents with increasing education. While newspapers are chosen as the top source of information by 25% in those who completed only 12th Class/Diploma, it increased to 40.5% in the respondent group with PhDs.

What is the biggest motivation for using Social Media?

Respondents were asked to choose their biggest motivation for using social media. The following options were provided.

- Personal updates
- Connecting with friends and family
- Exchange information on religion and spirituality
- Exchange of information on government and politics
- Exchange of information related to field of study/ work
- Sharing jokes & important information
- News
- Others

When the top sources of information are listed for each of the categories of age group, highest education completed & occupation, the following is observed (it has to be noted that a source is listed only if it is chosen by around 20% of the respondents in that specific sub-category).

- 'Connecting with friends & family' was chosen by around 20% respondents across all age groups.
- 'Exchange of information related to field of study/work' was chosen by around 20% respondents in all the age groups except for the age group of 31-40.
- 'News' is another major motivation for respondents across age groups except the 15-20 age group.
- It is also observed that the proportion of respondents who chose 'News' as a motivation for using social media increased with increased education level.

What is the main source of information on Social Media platforms?

Respondents were asked to choose their main source of information on social media platforms.

The following options were provided:

- Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp is not my primary source of information
- Friends or Friend Groups
- Family Members or Family Groups
- Groups based on my Political/ Social/ Cultural beliefs
- Colleagues at work
- Others

The following are observed based on the analysis of the responses:

- More than 40% of the respondents mentioned that Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp is not their primary source of information.
- As age of the respondents increased, Friends or Friend Groups was chosen by a greater proportion of respondents as their main source of information.
- Groups based on Political/Social/Cultural beliefs of the respondent was chosen as main source of information by most respondents in 15-20 and 21-30 age groups.

Do people completely read & understand the messages they send or receive on Social Media?

The respondents were asked to choose from the following options:

- All the times
- Most of the times
- Only sometimes
- Very rarely
- Not at all

More than 78% of the respondents mentioned that they read & understand the messages they send or receive 'all the times' or 'most of the times'. Only 9.3% of the respondents mentioned they 'very rarely' or 'never' read & understand the messages on social media. Surprisingly, this had no bearing on the ability of respondents to correctly identify the statements in the survey. More than 70% of the respondents correctly identified the statements in each of the groups categorized by their response to this question. This suggests that the respondents may not have genuinely answered this question.

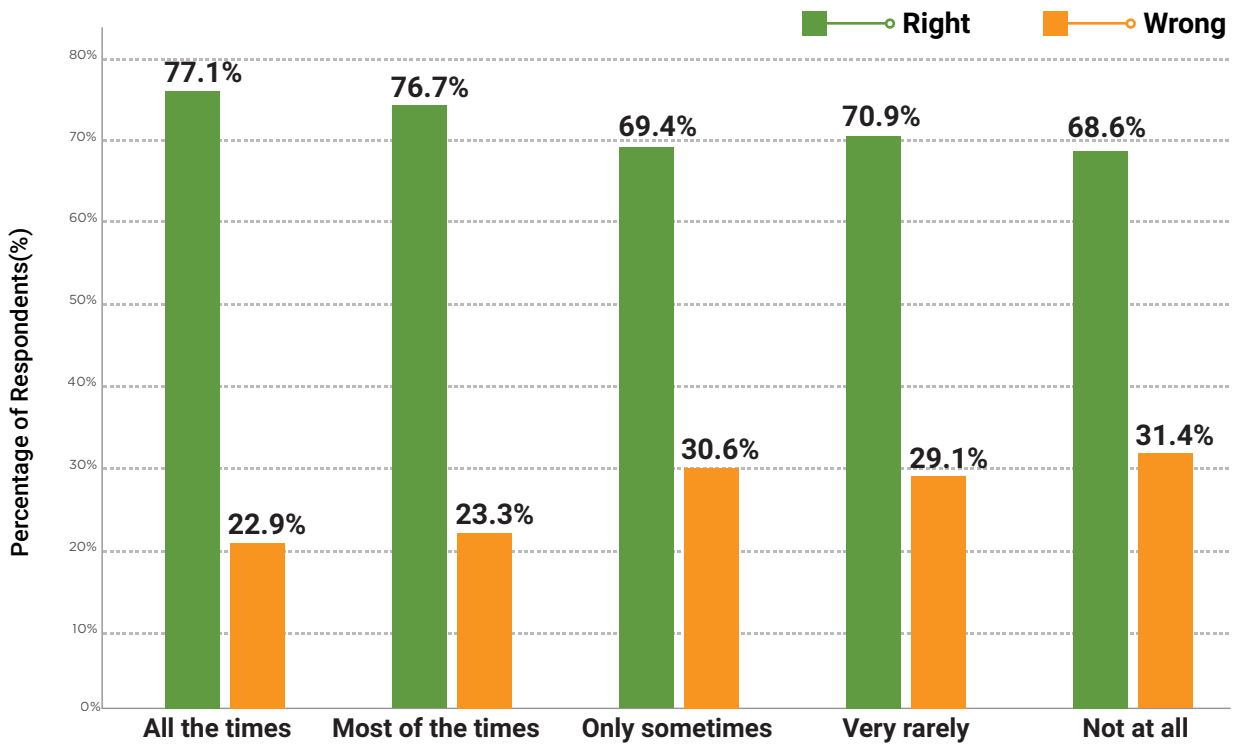
How often do people verify the information they receive or forward?

The respondents were asked to choose from the following options:

- All the times
- Most of the times
- Only sometimes
- Very rarely
- Not at all

About 74% of the respondents mentioned that they verify the messages they receive for forward 'all the times' or 'most of the times'. Of all the categories, the ones who mentioned they never verify the information they receive or forward were least successful in correctly identifying the statements. (refer Chart 9)

Chart 9: Percentage of respondents who ‘CORRECTLY’ identified the statements by Verification Action



What factor makes people believe any information as true?

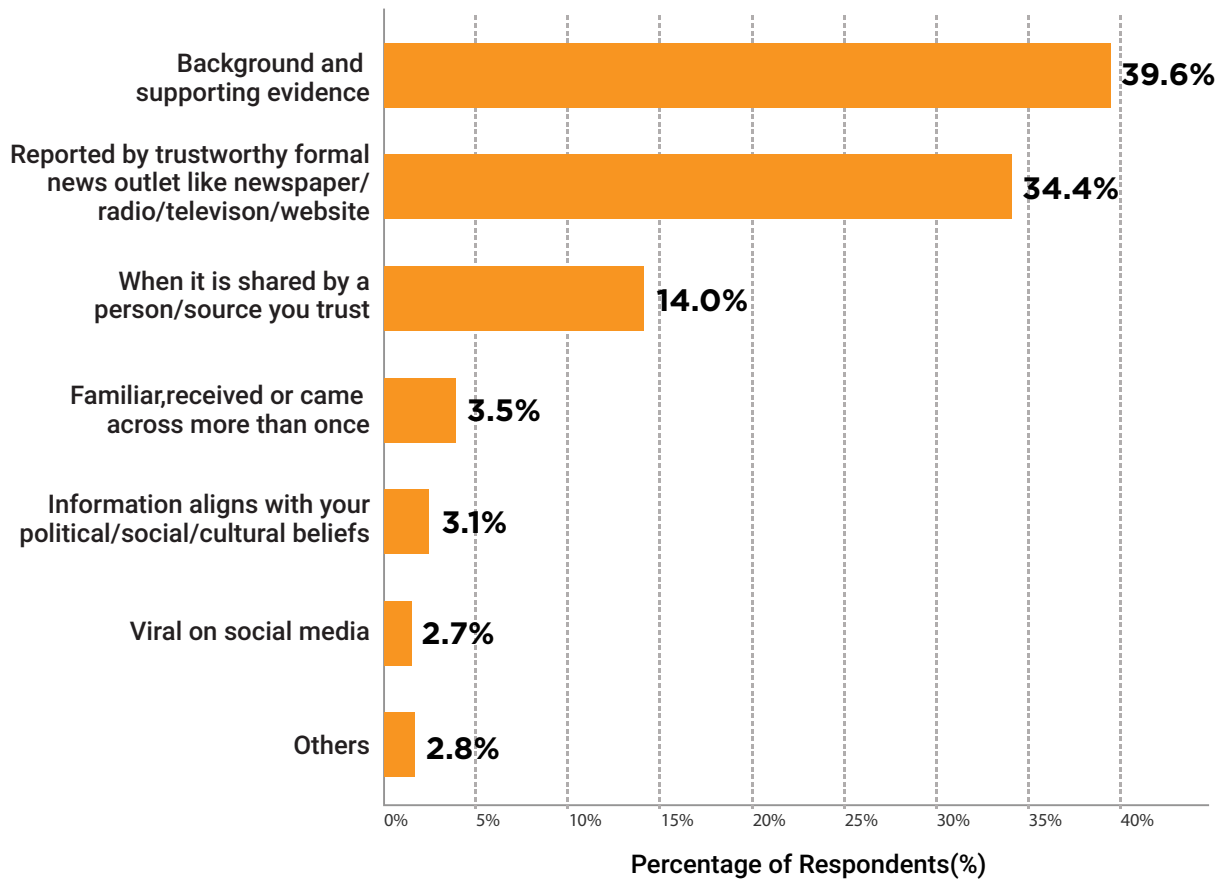
Respondents were asked to identify the factor that most influences their perception of information/news received on platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp as true.

The following choices were provided:

- When it is shared by a person/source you trust
- Familiar, received or came across more than once
- Viral on social media
- Information aligns with your political/social/cultural beliefs
- Background and supporting evidence
- Reported by trustworthy formal news outlet like newspaper/ radio/television/website
- Others

Close to 40% respondents’ belief is based on background or supporting evidence while 34% of them believe the information when it is shared by a trustworthy organization. This is followed by 14% of the respondents who believe when it is shared by a person or source they trust. In other words, 48% of the respondents’ belief is based on trust, either in an organization or a person. (refer Chart 10)

Chart 10: Percentage of respondents by factor that most influences people to believe any information as ‘TRUE’



Why do people forward information on social media?

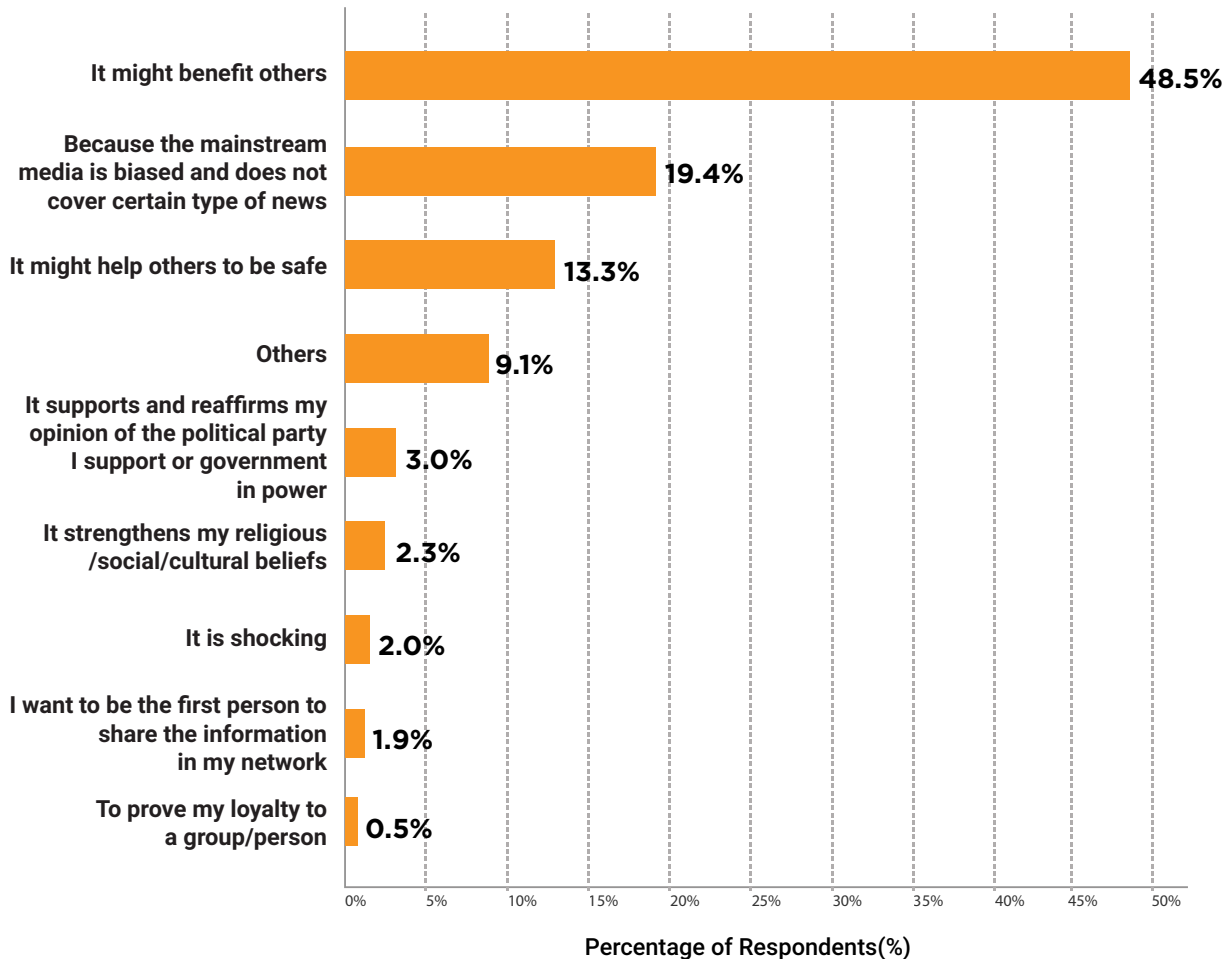
Respondents were asked to identify the factor that motivates them the most to share or forward information on social media platforms.

The following choices were provided:

- It supports and reaffirms my opinion of the political party I support or government in power
- It strengthens my religious/social/ cultural beliefs
- It is shocking
- It might help others to be safe
- I want to be the first person to share the information in my network
- To prove my loyalty to a group / person
- It might benefit others
- Because the mainstream media is biased and does not cover certain type of news
- Others

The dominant factor that drives people to share/forward information is found to be their belief that it might benefit others & help in their safety. A total of 62% of the respondents chose this option. Almost 20% of the respondents mentioned they forward information because they believe mainstream media is biased and does not cover certain types of news. (refer Chart 11).

Chart 11: Percentage of Respondents by factor that most motivates to share/forward information on social media



Trust in Organizations & Platforms

Respondents were asked to choose from one of the following options for a total of 27 organizations/platforms to understand their trust in these organizations and awareness of such organizations.

- Haven't heard of this
- Do not Trust
- Trust somewhat
- Neutral
- Trust completely

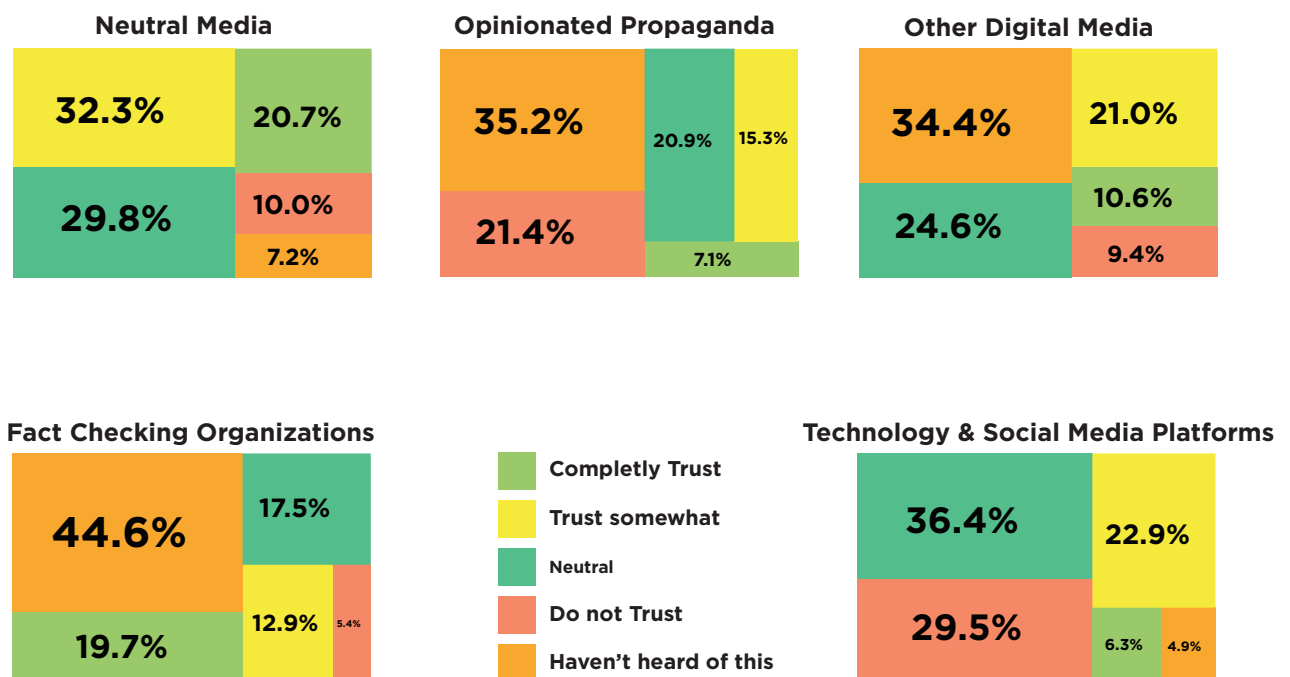
For the purpose of the analysis, the 27 organizations/platforms were organized into the following groups:

- Neutral Media organizations (media organizations that are perceived to be neutral)
- Opinionated Media (media organizations that are perceived to be biased)
- Other Digital Media (digital media organizations that publish other information and not news alone)
- Fact Checking organizations (organizations that debunk or fact check claims)
- Technology & Social Media Platforms

From the analysis, it is observed that (refer Chart 12):

- Respondents most trust (trust completely & trust somewhat) the neutral media (53%) followed by fact checking organizations (33%). This is followed by trust in technology & social media platforms (29%).
- Close to 30% of the respondents do not trust technology & social media platforms, the highest for any group. This is followed by 21% for the opinionated media.
- Close to 45% of the respondents haven't heard of the fact checking organizations, the highest for any group. It is as high as 66% for one such organization.
- Further if we consider only those respondents who are aware of these organizations, the trust (trust completely & trust somewhat) in fact checking organizations has seen a significant increase to 59% followed by neutral media (57%).

Chart 12: Percentage of Respondents by Trust in Organizations or Platforms



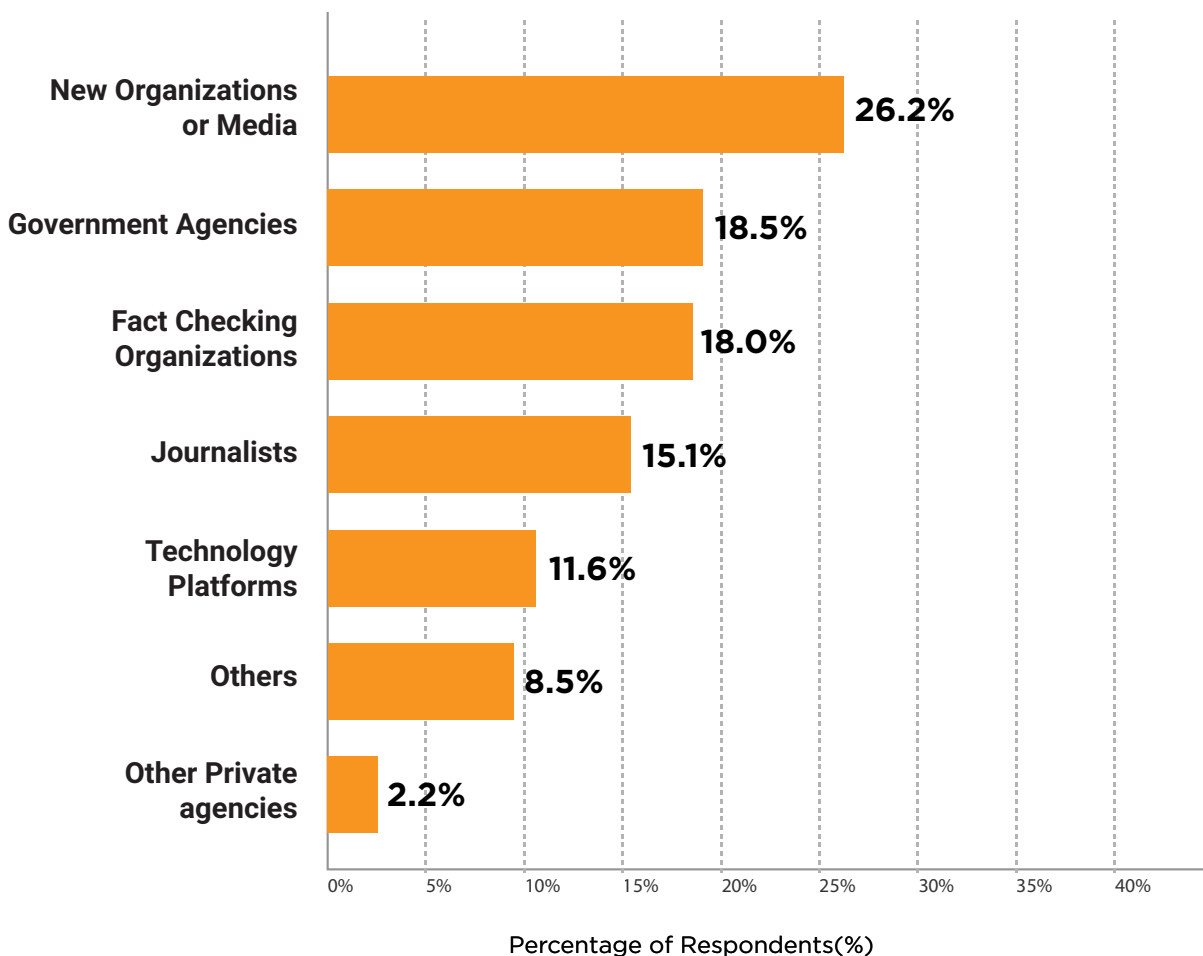
Who is Responsible for Curbing or Identifying Fake News?

Respondents were asked to identify the agency that they believe is responsible for curbing or identifying fake news from the following options.

- Journalists
- News Organizations or Media
- Fact Checking Organizations
- Government Agencies
- Other Private Agencies
- Technology Platforms
- Others

26% of the respondents (highest for any option) believe it is the responsibility of the media to curb or identify fake news. Government agencies are chosen by 18.5% of the respondents. Incidentally, technology platforms are the choice of only 11.6% respondents. Many respondents also put the responsibility of curbing/identifying on individual/self (the others category) (refer Chart 13)

Chart 13: Percentage of Respondents by choice of Organization to Curb/Identify Fake News



Conclusions

Notwithstanding the limitations, the responses to the survey lead to the following conclusions:



This suggests that the young (below 20 years) and old (above 50 years) may be most susceptible to fake news.



Those who are relatively new to use of technology/ internet & smart-phones may be more susceptible to fake news than others.



Newspapers still remain one of the top sources of information for people across age groups.



Connecting with friends & family, exchange of information related to work/study and news are the greatest drivers behind people using social media.



Fake news has a greater probability of being correctly identified when it is fact checked/debunked by multiple organizations.



Background evidence and trust in organizations/persons are what make most people to believe in the information they receive on social media.



People verify the information they receive when they are pushed to do so.



People trust neutral media and fact-checking organizations more than others.



A substantial percentage of people are not aware of the existence of fact checking organizations.



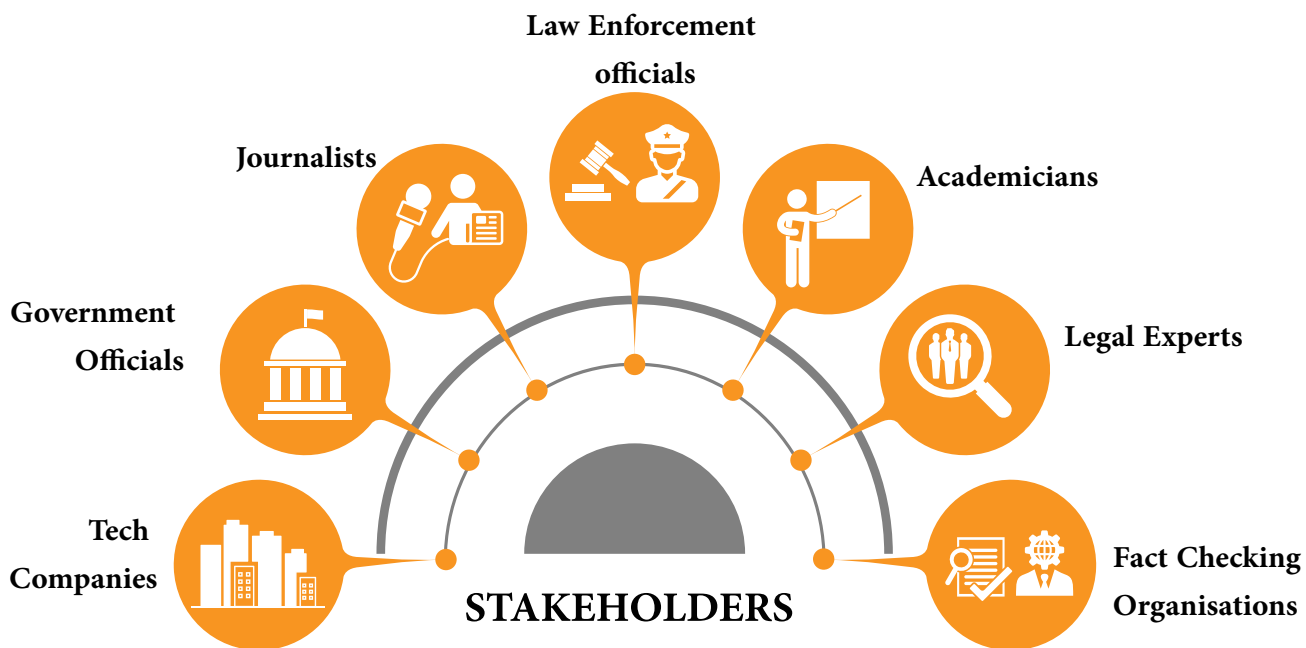
Benefit to others and the lack of trust on mainstream media are what drive people to forward information on social media. This is inline with global observations that most people forward/share information without knowing they are spreading fake news.



As age of the respondents increased, Friends or Friend Groups and groups based on political/social/cultural beliefs of the person was chosen by a greater proportion of respondents as their main source of information on social media.

An orange L-shaped frame is positioned on the left side of the slide, consisting of a vertical line on the left and a horizontal line at the bottom, both extending from the left edge towards the right.

**Understanding
Information Disorder:
A Multistakeholder
approach**



For the purpose of this report, we interviewed a range of stakeholders across sectors and work areas, in varied capacities and with diverse interests in relation to the phenomenon of information disorder (fake news). They ranged from journalists from mainstream and digital media, academicians, fact-checking organisations, law enforcement officials, the state machinery, representatives of technology platforms, and legal experts among others. We tried to elicit opinions, reactions, and insight on a range of aspects related to the spread of misinformation and fake news, specific to India.

Definitional Conundrum

In order to limit or contain the information disorder, it is important to build a consensus and formulate a clear definition of what is referred to as fake news. Defining fake news or misinformation is often fraught with ambiguity, especially due to the divergences when it comes to defining it theoretically, versus how it pans out in practical terms.

Claire Wardle, who leads First Draft, the world's foremost nonprofit that focuses on research and practice to address misinformation believes that 'fake news' is an inadequate term. She explained that she prefers the terms 'Disinformation Ecosystem' or 'Information Disorder' because there are a number of different elements in a spectrum and the ecosystem itself is vast. It is also a very misleading term because audiences tend to think that it refers only to mainstream media or news reporting because political influencers have reduced it to journalistic bias.

Prasanna Viswanathan, CEO of Swarajya Magazine said there is a need to structurally understand the phenomenon to define it.

Firstly, it is an elementary problem of misreporting facts, distortion of truth like using an image that is not representative of the content. This kind of fake news does not require technological sophistication and is not a big problem. This level of problem can be addressed and fixed. The other kind of fake news is far more sinister which peddles a certain kind of narrative. They use mainstream media as well as digital distribution platforms to escalate rhetoric without proper correlations on the behest of political or some other patronage.

The definition is seen differently in terms of its practice in journalism and on social media. Jency Jacob, Managing Editor of BOOM, a digital fact checking platform spoke about this distinction and how it has contributed to the rise and spread of unverified information. He opined that in journalism while reporting news, if news channels report something wrong, there's a protocol wherein they say that it is incorrect reporting but social media is a live narrative machine. However, it is true that both media houses and digital content creators seem to be in a hurry to churn out volume than concern themselves with the actual quality of the information itself.

Maya Mirchandani, a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation and Assistant Professor of Broadcast Journalism and Media Studies at Ashoka University believes that the line between fact, news and opinion have diminished and so other factors need to be considered while defining fake news. She said :

I am not saying that all opinion is fake news but opinion is not news or facts. It might be based on facts, it might be based on a certain arrangement of facts. The ability to distinguish one from the other is certainly more blurred today and that is because I think we live in this age of hyper-connectivity and hyper-information where we are constantly being bombarded by opinion and information. To be able to sift through all of it in real time is a huge challenge. There is a need for 24-hour fact checker in the newsroom. Defining and identifying both need to be taken seriously.

Nupur J Sharma, Editor of digital news platform 'Opindia' said that the general perception of fake news is limited to digitally modified images and content which is inaccurate but that giving a reader incomplete information or partial context also completely alters the message that gets conveyed. She advocated that besides misinformation itself, half- information and misinterpretation of information also need to be identified as fake news.

An accusation that something is “fake news” seeks to be associated with striving to maintain truth, objectivity and critical thinking – but the effect of its repeated use is to undermine those very values. This undermining has several mechanisms: allegations of fakery sap public trust in legitimate news institutions and intellectual insults crowd out reasonable discourse. Despite its anti-democratic effects, the association of “fake news” with democratic values makes it a honeypot for establishment figures, who have eagerly taken it up, putting on conferences and calling for a “science of fake news”. This attempt at appropriation is problematic. Trying to use “fake news” in a precise way mires the defenders of democratic values in definitional wrangles that could have been avoided by just using everyday terms. Using the term also lends legitimacy to its propagandistic uses, making them look like reasonable contributions to public discourse. We might also worry that well-intentioned users of “fake news” will be tempted to use the demagogue’s tools to engage in intellectual policing, undermining their own commitment to open public discourse¹¹. (Habgood-Coote, 2018)¹⁵

The usage of term including for this report is purely because the majority of the population identifies with it as information that has been manipulated in some way. It will be very important to develop and associate specific categories of information. One of the existing glossaries was created by First Draft.

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations. Instances of disinformation range from hoaxes to fabricated stories via websites that thrive on utilizing its reach and the propagation of disinformation for money or political purposes.

Fact-checking (in the context of information disorder) is the process of determining the truthfulness and accuracy of official, published information such as politicians' statements and news reports. Fact-checking emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s, as a way of authenticating claims made in political ads airing on television. There are now around 150 fact-checking organizations in the world, and many now also debunk mis- and disinformation from unofficial sources circulating online.

Malinformation is genuine information that is shared to cause harm & includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation. A lot of times, malinformation leads to defamation suits that underscore the harm done.

Misinformation is information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who don't know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful. A lot of the messages carrying misinformation on health and medicine are often reposted or forwarded since those who resend them feel that they help their community members.

Propaganda is true or false information spread to persuade an audience, but one has a political connotation and is connected to information produced by governments. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity, and propaganda are unclear. Websites and party mouthpieces that support a particular ideology and spread it without critical reasoning, are often considered to be part of propaganda machinery.

Satire is writing that uses literary devices such as ridicule and irony to criticize elements of society. Satire can become misinformation if audiences misinterpret it as fact. It is a known trend of disinformation agents labelling content as satire to prevent it from being flagged by fact-checkers. For instance, the Onion is a good example of satirical writing that aims to poke fun at various aspects of politics and society¹⁶.

While diverse opinions exist on the scope, nature and usage of the term 'fake news', it is not primitive to say that the term causes more harm than good. The amorphous nature of the term itself is contradictory and not indicative of the kind of alteration or inaccuracy that exists. Developing specific glossaries for terms in the information ecosystem and identifying every kind of alteration of information instead of the term fake news will help reduce the ambiguity associated with the term.

Psychology and Motivation

The importance of the link between psychology and news consumption (and even production) is not a new area of interest in research and the study of media consumer behavior. Our questions posed to the respondents tried to arrive at the psychology behind those who spread and consume inaccurate information.

Bedavyasa Mohanty of the Observer Research Foundation, spoke about how human beings have always believed and shared unverified information. He says:

It is just that the internet has enabled sharing it faster and to a lot more people. Especially today, it is product of attention economy where people don't have the time to verify all of the facts but seem to have an opinion on everything. So, they find something easily shareable and make it a part of their perspective. It is far easier to spread disinformation than factual narratives. Something that is provocative, fake and instills a sense of urgency is likely to spread faster than a paragraph of facts correcting it.

On the basis of information that has been circulating in digital media platforms in India, it will not be an exaggeration to conclude that political, religious, social and cultural information are the categories of information that garner most interest. H R Venkatesh, John.S. Knight Journalism Fellow, Stanford University and Founder of the Ekta News Coalition shared:

Those who create fake news and enthusiastically participate in the dissemination of this fake news are a relatively smaller group of people. They have political or social ends and they intend to manipulate people. However, most people who spread fake news don't necessarily have a malicious motive. The psychology of fake news is that when it particularly appeals to your anger or your fear, or anything emotional, it pushes you into sharing it, even if you're a mostly a rational person. In addition, everybody has cognitive bias and they are likely to share information that they already believe to be true. For example: Let's say you receive a piece of fake news about a reasonable action by a political party that you dislike. You're a reasonable person and may not fully believe that piece of news, but you are still tempted to share it. In the sense that every person has beliefs to which they attach a moral value of approval and disapproval. If the content received confirms or reinforces their belief, they are more likely to share it.

Jay Van Bavel, Associate Professor in Psychology and Neural Science says

That according to his research on political identity and the brain, there is extensive evidence that people engage in motivated political reasoning, memory, implicit evaluation, and even perceptual judgments. Thus, if people are highly identified with a particular politician, political party or ideology, they will be motivated to distort the evidence to support their identity. Since political identities are often linked to moral issues they are prone to express moral outrage about political issues.

The below incident from the state of Maharashtra, India is a good example.

The Maharashtra state administration is still trying to come to terms with the shocking lynching on 1 July in Dhule district in northern Maharashtra, where a restive mob of 3,500-plus villagers gathered outside the gram panchayat office in Rainpada village, broke open the locks, and killed five agricultural labourers on the suspicion that they were 'child-lifters'. There have been 14 incidents of mob lynching and vigilante justice fuelled by rumours spread on social media in Maharashtra alone in less than a month since 8 June (Khanna, Ghadyalpatil & Das, 2018)¹⁷.

Videos warning villagers about child kidnappers roaming in neighbouring villages had been circulating on messaging platforms prior to the above stated incident. The villagers mistook the five agricultural labourers as kidnappers and killed them. This incident took place even after the local police had issued warnings about rumours regarding the same. The sense of moral outrage people experience when their beliefs and securities are violated can have dangerous consequences.

Moral outrage is a powerful emotion that motivates people to shame and punish wrongdoers. Moralistic punishment can be a force for good, increasing cooperation by holding bad actors accountable. But punishment also has a dark side it can exacerbate social conflict by dehumanizing other escalating into destructive feuds. Research on virality shows that people are more likely to share content that elicits moral emotions such as outrage because outrageous content generates more revenue through viral sharing, natural selection-like forces may favour 'supernormal' stimuli that trigger much stronger outrage responses than do transgressions we typically encounter in everyday life. Supporting this hypothesis, there is evidence that immoral acts encountered online incite stronger moral outrage than immoral acts encountered in person or via traditional forms of media. These observations suggest that digital media transforms moral outrage by changing both the nature and prevalence of the stimuli that trigger it (Crockett, 2017)¹⁸.

Groups curating content to propagate certain ideologies take advantage of this kind of emotional responses to further their beliefs and agenda. In the Indian context, people might not have the digital literacy to investigate the information they receive and if they receive a similar message repeatedly, they are likely to believe it is the truth. Mishi Choudhary, a technology lawyer and legal director of the Software Freedom Law Center says:

Political parties have learned how to use technology for targeted political messaging. They know that it's difficult to embed an idea into someone's conscious mind but far easier to feed agendas into an unconscious one. During the 2017 UP elections, a taxi driver shared that he had been receiving WhatsApp messages talking about issues for his region, in his dialect and ending with a political message. He explained that when he receives a message about a particular community being bad again and again, his conscious brain does not believe it. But his subconscious brain starts thinking that there must be some truth to this, if it is being shared multiple times.

Dr. Keshava Rao Devulapalli of Telangana Psychiatric Society shared insights about how the believability and uptake for fake news comes about. He opined that:

There is a certain category of people who share and spread fake news because they have a desire to be attractive within their group. People want to feel accepted, liked and have positive image within their social group. It is of course human nature to be approved in the social group and be higher up. People are falling for fake news as a means to get accepted in their social groups.

Our research and interviews with respondents indicated that there is a very close connection between the categories of people who engage in sharing fake news and the psychological factors like moral outrage, social ingroup/outgroup and repetitive messaging with premeditated goals influence people to react emotionally which creates a volatile atmosphere. With easy access to social media people share widely and proliferate the volatility beyond a specific location. In many cases, the outrage might not be reasonable and information might be inaccurate.

Form and Format

On the evening of June 8, a 29 year-old sound engineer and a 30-year-old business man were on their way to a picnic spot in India's northeastern Assam state when they stopped at a village to ask for directions. The villagers had been told, in a video circulating on the messaging app WhatsApp, that child kidnappers were roaming the country. Believing these strangers were the ones they'd been warned about, the villagers formed a large mob, and, before the men could convince them otherwise, beat them to death. The video they had seen was actually an instructional safety video made in Pakistan, but was shared with some text warning about kidnappers in the local area, causing fear and anger among the community. After the killings, police arrested 16 people and demonstrations took place in the victims' hometown of Guwahati, the largest city in Assam (Nugent, 2018).¹⁹

Technology penetration has changed how information is being shared and spread. Claire Wardle who leads First Draft believes:

the critical mass that technology has received in the last few years in India has made it the number one way to spread misinformation. India has a high level of WhatsApp usage, the numbers and the scale of users on platforms is mind boggling. She says that for people in Western Europe and America, it is very hard to understand because these countries are more likely to find false or misleading information on websites, Facebook or Twitter. But in India and Brazil, it is more screenshots, images and audio. These formats are shared without having to use much data, that incentivizes them to continue to stay on the platform..

An unprecedented number of people are using the internet in past 24 months in India and a lot of them are first time technology users with mobile phones as an entry point. This makes it very hard for them to draw a line, critically think about content that they are receiving or even using other resources on the internet to check facts. The form of the information is largely memes, crafted text messages, pictorial representations, static images like post card with content and videos. Trushar Barot, Digital Launch Editor - BBC Indian Languages spoke about the various kinds of content available. He said:

videos tend to be more viral than text messages. Images and infographics are also popular formats for fake news content. These formats make the content look more authentic and can include logos of well-known organisations to add credibility. One example that periodically ends up going viral is a fake image claiming to be a BBC survey of the most corrupt political parties in the world. Depending on the version of the image, it purports to show the Congress or BJP party near the top of the list. The BBC does not carry out such surveys, but a lot of people end up thinking it is real. Audio files are also now getting a lot of traction, with fake health warnings or inciting violence against particular communities.

It's a free lunch of information but it is hard to know who is feeding you and which food is artificial (and how to avoid obesity). It's natural that we tend to prefer unpaid sources of news, but with the tremendous proliferation of free information came the degradation of its quality, the overflow of data and views, and a growing risk of falling prey to false information — fake news. The free lunch scheme also corrupted some of the cooks as some journalists started to just share news found on the internet rather than research their own. Finally, social media, in a way, made everybody a journalist – which is good in terms of the democratization of information and opinions, but makes it even easier for fake news to spread (Iwanke, 2018)²⁰.

Depending on what the source of information is, the nature and the effect is slightly different. While mainstream media - newspapers, television and radio have also carried unverified information, the largest volume of unverified information is consumed on social media platforms. Google Search, Facebook, Twitter, personal messaging platform WhatsApp are most used in the Indian context.

WhatsApp is very different than Facebook, making it a foil to the company that ingested it. To use the language of growth marketing (popular at both Facebook and WhatsApp), they're an 'A/B test', a side-by-side experiment of differing conditions that (in this case) led to similar results. First, a WhatsApp primer, largely for Americans who by and large don't use the service. In countries where WhatsApp reigns, the app is synonymous with phone messaging, and it is the way people talk to each other. How did such global dominance result from such a basic app? The founders of WhatsApp seized an opportunity created by most non-US phone carriers, who charged high rates for texts. They created an app that routed texts over cheaper data connections instead. In effect, what Skype did to international calling, turning expensive calls into essentially free internet usage, WhatsApp did to SMS. And once it created a network-effect moat, there was no stopping it. One key feature of WhatsApp is group messaging. Join any group activity, and you're added to a growing group chat whose snowballing messages make your phone buzz constantly in your pocket until, in a fit of frustration, you leave the group or toggle notifications off. The feeling is that of being inside a loud bar or club where everyone is screaming at everybody. Yet, from WhatsApp's astronomical and sustained usage, many users like living inside that noisy bar (Martinez, 2018)²¹.

There are several reasons for WhatsApp's popularity in India, the foremost being economically accessible, it is free and that being the largest motivation to use the service. Unlike Facebook, it does not have a newsfeed or ads but it allows users to create groups - both public and private where users can share and engage innumerable messages on a daily basis. In the recent past, due to violence that has been spanned out due to the content that was shared on the platform, the company introduced the 'forwarded' label to make it easier for people know if it was originally composed or forwarded. This is very important because research has shown that forwarding activity in India was very pronounced and people were doing it very quickly. Instead of being able to send the same forward multiple chats, the limit was set to 5 - individuals or group. The company also changed the groups structure allowing people to make it announcement only group where only admins can talk or an interactive group.

Our Sources from the company that did not wish to be named shared

WhatsApp was designed to be a personal and private messaging service, 90% of the messages today are still one to one messages and the average group size is about 6 people. That If you tried to reach a million people, you have to manage a large number groups which is very broad, difficult and cumbersome to broadcast premeditated messages because it was never built as a broadcast platform unlike Facebook. Since the Company is unable to monitor the content due to the encryption, they use an advanced spam detection system that relies on signals related to human behaviour that might be erratic, abnormal or problematic. For example, a user that is sending a 1000 messages per minute, an account that is sending information/messages to people that are not in his/her contact list, or number combinations that are strange in the local context and co-relate them to their existing directory of spammers or bad actors.

Considering the magnitude of the problem itself and the number of WhatsApp users in India, there is a work around for many of the measures that have been taken in the last couple of months.

There is a huge need to understand how different behavioral signals are interpreted by technology platforms and how adequate they might or might not be in order to create a less volatile climate on the internet. In the case of Google Search, Facebook and Twitter, the problem is twofold. It is not only the unverified content that is available from various users but how the platforms itself algorithmically control what information appears on your search feed, news feed and limiting your access to information in a way that you might not be aware and want.

It's that we have all, quite voluntarily, retreated into hyper partisan virtual corners, owing in no small part to social media and internet companies that determine what we see by monitoring what we have clicked on in the past and giving us more of the same. In the process, opposing perspectives are sifted out, and we're left with content that reinforces what we already believe.

This is the famous “filter bubble,” a concept popularized in the 2011 book of the same name by Eli Pariser, an internet activist and founder of the viral video site Upworthy. “Ultimately, democracy works only if we citizens are capable of thinking beyond our narrow self-interest,” wrote Pariser. “But to do so, we need a shared view of the world we co-inhabit. The filter bubble pushes us in the opposite direction—it creates the impression that our narrow self-interest is all that exists (Piore, 2018)²² .

These unintended consequences make digital platforms from search engines, social media networks, messaging platforms to online shopping an actor to the polarization and partisan views leading to moral outrage and high volume of supporting information that is unverified and untrue. In the Indian context, these platforms are accessed by a large population that is purely on the internet for social consumption and conservation. Majority of our respondents agreed that the content that has led to large scale polarization and has been political nature, followed by religious content. Pratik Sinha of fact checking website Alt News, suggested that the nature of the content is often political, like the Hindu-Muslim divide. The narrative is highly provocative, and is meant to numb the critical sense of the audience. People fall for such narratives in extreme emotion.

Jency Jacob, of BOOM highlighted how these images and messages are kept in circulation continuously. For instance, some images that had gone viral two years ago, and were repurposed, with the intent of communal trouble-making. People can easily remember these images, he stated. Narratives are made in such a way that they give rise to echo chambers. Several instances of viral messages on social media have resurfaced days and months later speaking about a new geographical location and warning viewers about the consequences if they did not take the advice being given in these messages.

Abhinandan Sekhri of News Laundry said, “the the form and format are constantly changing, evolving and may be different depending on the platform. There is no standard form or format for spreading false news. From ‘did you know videos’ to texts, the messaging changes. All pipelines have their unique issues, while whatsapp has the widest reach and impact and can't really be tracked, youtube, twitter and facebook can at least be tracked.”

Bal Krishn Birla, Co-Founder of Check4Spam, a website that helps people sift and identify fake news said:

technology and law often do not go hand in hand. It becomes difficult to tackle the legal aspect for fake news, since it requires some amount of political will. It is fairly well documented that a large number of political parties have access to a large number of WhatsApp and Facebook groups. It is their own internet real estate where they connect to people who believe their content. They will create a network of WhatsApp groups that gives them live reach. Law can do somethings but has a lot of limitations and the will has to come from the same stakeholder that is probably thriving on the spread of fake news.

All the respondents agreed that while WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Google Search are platforms that are used as a distribution network and have large influence on the kind of information is available and viewed, the format is not always consistent. The tools that are being used to fabricate/distort or create information that is not verified are not very advanced or sophisticated. They opined that videos tend to be more viral than text messages. Series of images and infographics are more popular format for fake news. It makes the content look more authentic, logos of well-known organisations are added. For example: there is a media file in circulation that asks to vote between Congress and BJP and claims to be a BBC survey. It is created in a way that it gives an impression of authenticity. Audio files are also getting a lot of traction in spite of the entire file being fabricated. An anonymous source working at the intersection of technology and policy summarized that it is not really a standard format that makes spreading of unverified information work. Whether it is political or religious, it is created by people who have something to gain. The biggest problem with it has also been that it is per se not a very coordinated effort. There might not be any top down commands that guide you to generate content in a certain way but is much closer to guerilla warfare tactics where everybody has enough autonomy (individuals in different places) to generate news that is capable of being chaotic and causes polarization.

Resources and Sustainability

In the digital economy, producing and distributing content in form of blogs, music, pictures, videos and lists, has become quick, easy and cheap. People are writing millions of blogs and uploading videos on YouTube. Moreover companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter act as catalysts that aggregate information from millions of sources to distribute it to billions of people. Day by day, while smartphones and data is getting cheaper, enabling people to consume and distribute information as and when they find time (Pamnani, 2018)²³ This creates a relatively easy and accessible model to generate information that is unverified.

In the global context, the 2016 US Presidential election shed light on revenue generation from ads and page views that endorsed unverified information and tailor made information to polarize a specific group with common beliefs and bias. In the Indian context, it is not so much specific websites itself, but content that uses social networking sites and messaging platforms to act as distribution channels.

This model has a wider reach in India because a huge population that owns smartphones might limit their information consumption to these digital platforms and they might not have the resources in terms of unlimited cellular data and the digital literacy to go on to multiple websites.

Trushar Barot, Digital Launch Editor - BBC Indian Languages said:

it has become harder for people who are spreading fake news to generate income from this activity because of the changes that the platforms have implemented. However, the challenge comes from those people who want to spread fake content to shape attitudes, beliefs and ideology of people for non-commercial reasons, such as influencing votes in an election.

Even though it is not the popular way fake news is distributed, there are a handful of websites that engage in a fake narrative. A good example of it is Postcard News. Its founder was arrested earlier this year for allegedly peddling inaccurate news but is out on bail and the website continues to function with new stories and ads (Co-founder of Postcard News Mahesh hedge arrested by CCB, 2018). If people receive the content this website creates from their social circles, they are likely to believe it because of availability bias. Same can be said about another popular facebook group called 'Viral in India' whose website was taken down after abuse complaints. According to conversation of the website founder Abhishek Mishra with fact checking organisation Boom Live, his aim is to bring news that is not reported by mainstream media houses. Abhishek Mishra was also arrested by the Delhi Police in late January 2019. Both Postcard News and Viral in India's content have opposing political leanings but have the same modus operandi.

H R Venkatesh, John.S. Knight Journalism Fellow, Stanford University and Founder of the Ekta News Coalition believes that these websites and content curated by them becomes sustainable because of technology, commercial interest and lack of awareness. He believes:

most of the people who share fake news do so without fully knowing that it is fake. But what makes that viral is frictionless technology, and the ease of sharing through messaging apps and social media. For example: The piece of news about kidnapers in villages. Residents of that villages who received the fake news are perfectly primed to share it on, let's say, WhatsApp because it speaks to their fears and anxieties. That's how fake news gets sustained.

There seems to also exist a sub group of people who might be harnessing technology to earn revenue. These people might be on retainer from political parties or groups that might want to propagate a certain agenda, bias, beliefs or make the social climate in the country destabilizing. This is easily possible because India has a large number of people who are poorly employed in terms of wages and unemployed. This could allow them to make easy money sitting in the comfort of their own homes and using the smartphone that they own. It is not a lot of money, but easy money has a lot of takers. With the advent of the digital, people are now able to interact in a two-way format. However, this has also meant that people have been able to exploit the medium to propagate their own agendas & attempt to use the medium in many ways including social media which is less regulated and has no gatekeeping.

Uma Sudhir, Executive Editor at NDTV shared her views on technology and the landscape of information. She said:

There are two major categories that feed the cycle, both of which have an end goal and the machinery to financially sustain it. One category is corporations or lobby groups who will put out certain kind of news more to advance their interests and the other type is peddling political information to amplify the information. She says that the difference between regional political content and national political content is a good indication of how resources can amplify the premeditated content.

While national parties are financially more viable, have specific staff that oversee digital content generation and formal information and technology systems to distribute the message, regional parties do not have such resources.

Sundeep Muppidi, Professor of Communication at University of Hartford shared :

that it's not only the digital platforms that make it sustainable but some of the mainstream media picks up unverified information from digital resources as well as create their own content that suits to their ideological or business interests. He believes that a specific media group's affiliations in the current context make them a guard dog of corporate interests, or a lapdog of the government more than being a watchdog of the society.

Academician Madhavi Ravikumar of University of Hyderabad agreed that the lack of political will and media house affiliations makes it very difficult to take impactful steps in curbing fake news. She urged traditional media players to reflect on their model and go back to creating checks and balances that once existed in traditional journalism. Traditional journalism has potential to correct the narrative and be factually correct. She said:

News organisations have forgotten their core job, and are now taking news from social media platforms. They need to do their job of verifying. The number of levels of checking that used to exist has now disappeared. There is no gatekeeping at all. The reporters shoulder everything on their own, and get numerous bylines. The reporters have to own their stories, now. The editors do not take responsibility. It is a good time for traditional news media organisations to get back on track and grab the limelight. The times are such that revenues are coming down, and even editorials are being outsourced.

While it is important for mainstream agencies to do the due diligence, focussing on data driven journalism and integrating or collaborating with fact checking agencies will certainly improve the quality of information and disrupt the sustainability of inaccurate content. Rohan Venkataramakrishnan of Scroll spoke about how the focus of the new wave was data journalism, with the birth of data-driven work, like the work done by Factly etc. He said:

At Scroll, we do not do the daily myth-busting. Our work is pretty straightforward, we send reporters to cover and confirm aspects of a story. The ecosystem of fake news slayers and myth-busters is a collaborative process. To deal with the political parties, the Election Commission should be involved in a deeper manner. I would expect the EC to be involved when it comes to funding of news and propaganda from political parties. In terms of the social onus, I would place it on citizens and civil society. And online, platforms ought to be responsible. Civil society has to be very involved in pushing the contours of this phenomenon. For instance, public intellectuals and academics need to study this more in our universities.

While the role of institutions like the election commission have been highlighted in their role as a regulator, majority of our interviewees felt that accelerating on regulation without understanding all the dimensions of the problem might limit freedom of speech. Majority of them also agreed that political parties and information trickled from their affiliated contributed a huge percentage to the misinformation ecosystem. Rohit Chopra, Associate Professor of Communication, Santa Clara University, spoke about political linkages and resources to sustain fake news. He said:

There is a tacit approval from the political leadership at the top. They can, however, deny such an involvement. It all boils down to power --- to stay in power, and manipulate a system. The funds come from the powers that be. These are dark pools of money. People are paid to do this. A particular party has state-of-the-art facilities. They are given messages to send out. This party is proactive on the Internet and social media. They got a lot of money from the political classes, the ones who were miffed with the other political parties over schemes like the MNREGA etc.

The frequency and the volume of content also is influenced by the major actions, activities or upcoming public engagement like elections, volatile geographic borders, court judgments/orders that are enforcing significantly different behavior than which currently exists. However, it is clear from our research that resources that make misinformation sustainable are primarily financial, ideological and political approval to keep the messaging in circulation for their advantage.

Law and policy

Harsh Poddar, an officer from the Indian Police Service spoke about the intersections of the legal and technology in the sphere of regulation. He contended that the Content Regulations Standards on WhatsApp need to be worked on. Facebook tried something in Sri Lanka with respect to content regulation, he said. Section 505, which is non-cognizable (cannot arrest), needs to be turned cognizable, and non-bailable, he opined. The Supreme Court judgement invokes Sections 153A and 295A of the IPC. But this deals with inter-religious aspects only. Legal sections in the IPC need to be updated and mobilized, he added. The curbing of fake news needs to be a group exercise, at all levels, he said:

WhatsApp does not provide enforcement. They should provide information on how a message was spread, by tracing its origin. They have refused. In terms of our institutional perspective, we do need WhatsApp to agree, despite there being a right to privacy. For instance, in the cases of child porn, they should provide. In such cases, the social cause far overrides the Right. The mechanisms need to be legislative, and technological. For instance, with smart cities, the CCTV footage of public spaces must be extended. Mob mentality is seen in such spaces. The introduction of technology would be a natural deterrent. Local influences affect the wider society, and not just the upwardly mobile. We are more concerned about effectiveness, more than the means. We work through religious leaders, since religion inspires faith ultimately. In local areas, they trust such leaders more than the government agencies. This happens even in the case of secular causes.

Rema Rajeshwari, an officer of the Indian Police Service believes that fake news needs to be identified with collaboration of all stakeholders and each need to take responsibility in their scope of work.

WhatsApp is very sure of their traceability policy and categorically stated that privacy is non-negotiable. As I see it, if a particular content is inciting violence and unrest in the country, even to the extent of getting people killed, there needs to be some kind of platform accountability and they must have enough means in place to get to the origin or to take it down. As law enforcement officers we don't have the required capabilities in this context to go to the origin of malicious content. There needs to be some feature, some way to check the virality aspect of messages. The onus cannot be on one stakeholder alone, as this is not just a technology issue, but also an ethical media issue, law enforcement issue, social issue and a policy issue. Each one of us is responsible for this and we have to strive for a robust public agenda to fight misinformation.

Bedavyasa Mohanty of the Observer Research Foundation felt that the “measures would depend on the geography and the demographic one needs to target”. He felt that the traceability question comes into the picture only in direly serious cases like loss of lives, as in the case of lynchings. For the more generic kind of politically motivated campaigns, counter-narrative campaigns are most useful.”There is a need for gamifying it in an institutionalised manner. This would have a cascading effect. The answer does not lie in technology, but in old fashioned community engagement”.

Technology & Regulation

Technology companies and the Government of India are at loggerheads with each other in regards to combating misinformation. While the Government of India on several occasions categorically stated that the technology companies need to take the blame for the state of misinformation in the country, technology companies have argued that it is not purely a technology problem and regulation might be counter productive. While making technology companies accountable for the content on their platforms is important, regulation without digital literacy might be counterproductive.

Rohan Venkataramakrishnan of Scroll spoke about the perils of regulating speech. He said

fear of fake news often pushes for regulating speech. This would bring in the government, and this would not do much. I would implicate companies like WhatsApp who need to think about this. By taking it to the government, we are only inviting more draconian action. The incentive to fix this is probably the strongest with those who were responsible for building these platforms & those businesses who deal with information. I would draw on a market logic. With WhatsApp, traceability and privacy concerns are key. For instance, they have done good work when it comes to spam combating. They could extend this to fake news as well. Given the scale of the problem, the government won't be able to do much. When there is incitement to violence, criminalizing speech is dangerous. If someone is able to define a law well-enough, it would be welcome. However, it is slippery slope. Regulating speech is fraught with concerns.

If governments begin to develop guidelines on the framework of information and type of information it will be over stepping into 'Freedom of Speech & Expression'. I am in favour of self regulation more than anything else. People and organizations need to assume responsibility. Organisations and bodies like Editors Guild, Press Councils are namesake bodies that have no actual powers of regulation. They are like good old boys clubs.

While agreeing that technology companies as well as media agencies urgently need to focus on self regulation, interviewees felt that the need for regulation and scope needs to be more problem solving in nature than being political. Sundeep Muppidi, Professor of Communication at the University of Hartford said :

bodies like the Press Council of India are just mouthpieces. There is no actual functionality in relation to regulation, accountability, or policy in practice. Who will bell the cat? In India, the line between people in political power and ownership of media houses is non- existent. In this scenario, how do you separate affiliation and the intent to regulate? If information and content is being used to cause harm, where is the aspect of law enforcement? Is it so hard to trace the people behind the menace or the lack of political will and accountability? It is not about one political party but about accountability at all levels including technology companies and their social media platforms. The technology platforms need to apply their expertise to find innovative solutions. How is that there are alpha/beta and release versions of software and none of content? Even if it is real time, take the example of your email on how google is able to complete sentences for you - why can't similar tools and mechanisms be devised for information? It is not acceptable to separate the business side of things and the social responsibility that comes with it.

Jayesh Ranjan, Principal Secretary, Information Technology, Government of Telangana, shared that the vastness and lack of traceability of digital platforms makes it very hard to identify the creators and distribution channels of fake news

On the digital platforms, identification is not possible and this has been communicated by technology companies also. We will be wasting our time in pushing for this. Their business model is such that they will consider closing the platform altogether than sharing the traceability. It is a non-negotiable for them as a business model. What we have directly suggested to leadership of WhatsApp is that when a video is getting circulated and becomes viral and questions arise, they should be able to commission a fact checking agency to verify the authenticity and if a reliable agency conforms it to be false, WhatsApp should be able to contact every person who has received this message, they should get an official alert from WhatsApp about the verification update.

This will entail compromising some levels of encryption and the current system does not allow it but they have to innovate and invent a way to deal with this.

Large number of interviewees favoured taking more time to create any kind of regulation in this aspect because of the limited amount of information available and the need to understand an emerging issue in depth to tackle it. Many expressed that the technology companies need to be more transparent with their challenges and efforts to overcome them. Some floated the idea of co-regulation, where in the government steps in tells the technology companies to demonstrate the ability to regulate misinformation or threaten action if they fail to do so. This might prevent the government itself from over regulating and still put the onus on the companies. Considering the sweeping policy changes that the Government of India has been proposing to regulate technology platforms since December 2018, It would be ideal to do so in a parliamentary process which will allow a process of comprehensive enforcement than executive action that seems more impulsive with many open ends. Problems with existing regulations in India have ample evidence that the real problem is in creating these regulation in a way that they are clearly defined and limitations are put in place to curb any overspill into censorship or curtailing free speech.

Media & Political Parties

During the course of this report, several interviewees shared that both media and political parties have a large role in sustaining and providing resources to the misinformation ecosystem in India. It is therefore very important for each of the stakeholders to look inwards in order to combat misinformation. This involves examining existing structures, affiliations and prioritising the quality and authenticity of information.

H R Venkatesh, John.S. Knight Journalism Fellow, Stanford University and Founder of the Ekta News Coalition believes that fact-checking alone cannot solve the problem and that all stakeholders need to assume and accept responsibility to create stronger systems. He opined,

I put together a coalition of news rooms in India to do a combined effort to combat fake news. We have a group of organisations who are part of this. The idea is to fact check and distribute each other's work for a pilot project in November 2018 for one of the state elections. This is one way of doing it. Fact checks alone are not enough. I don't have research to back it up but if we assume that piece of fake news reaches 100 people, is it possible that the fact check will reach 100 people? My working hypothesis is that it does not reach so many people. Fact checking is only one quiver in a quiver of arrows. I have a 5 Ps framework - publishers, platforms, Policy, Placeholder (academics - behavioral science)s and people . Collaborative work among all the P's has potential to contain fake news.

The major limitation in participating in collaborative efforts is the innate political affiliation that media agencies have with political parties and their ideologies. Our survey respondents indicated that due to ideological leanings of media agencies, they actively seek to find alternate information sources including social media networks and messaging platforms. Like media agencies, political parties also enable the spread of misinformation to suit their narrative.

Mishi Choudhary, a technology lawyer and legal director of the Software Freedom Law Center voiced her dissatisfaction on the nexus between political parties and fake news. She said:

Many of the most significant drivers of misinformation are highly organized, persistent and continue to expand their reach before, during and well after the election. Many of them are affiliated with large and small political parties. The general public does not engage in vast scale creation of any anti-government or anti-power rhetoric without recognized support. They are busy living their lives. It is easy to blame the technology companies who do have a role to play but aren't the sole responsible actors. I have not seen any comprehensive discussion to appreciate the scale and figure out a solution to this problem which is a mix of technology and human behavior. Most meetings with technology firms are looked at as opportunities to gain mileage for respective political ideology and figure out ways for censorship. Government plays offense, foreign companies defense and domestic ones, if they show up at all, don't resist. Civil society is seen as good for photo-ops after all decisions are made. Regulation is not going to work in this scenario.

Unless media agencies and political parties willfully step into examining their existing systems and communication networks, regulating technology alone will not solve the problem of misinformation.

Stakeholder Recommendations

The respondents elaborated on the roles and recommendations for stakeholders in the ecosystem of information in India. Ranging from news media to the administrative bodies in-charge of the law and order machinery, political parties to the technology companies, the respondents implicated them as propellers of “responsible news behaviour.”

Digital Literacy

Pratik Sinha of Alt News, a fact checking agency spoke about how the administration always responds to adverse situations in a post-facto manner. He said:

The onus is on everybody, including children of 13-14 years of age. We need to see this as a broader canvas of larger questions of what is right and what is wrong. That is the kind of training that has to be given to every citizen. Media and fact-checking bodies have to join hands. Now, more and more people are doing it. Third party fact-checkers can tell the platforms and technology providers, what is true and false. We need to be part of international fact-checking networks. This ensures that we are not partisan. Once it is established, the platforms must take it down. In India, Facebook can certainly do much more, with the kind of capabilities it has. The same goes with Twitter, which has not done anything whatsoever. It is difficult in the case of WhatsApp, which is difficult to catch due to encryption.

A policy wonk with a technology company, who did not want to be named suggested,

Countering fake news on the ground can happen through media literacy. Top down process, you teach it in schools, include it in curriculum and you get the larger civil society involved. Technology can play a part in this, by having buttons for fact check or that will redirect to a website which will help you verify it. I don't think there will be a technology revolution that will fix this. Simply because it is not a technology problem but a people problem. It is a perception & believability problem.

Claire Wardle, who has extensively researched on the global context of fake news believes that issue of fake news in India has local problems, is informed by and has implications for human behavior. She pointed out:

People who have never used other forms of digital technology like email or websites, now have access to smartphones. As a result, messaging platforms are often their first entry point into digital information, but the level of awareness and digital literacy are lower. At the same time people are often unable or unwilling to search and verify information off the messaging platform as that will use more data and requires more sophisticated navigation skills. The challenge is that this phenomenon is at the intersection of technology and human behavior. In the case of Spain, which also has high WhatsApp usage, stakeholders are not concerned because of the higher levels of digital literacy and trust in the mainstream media. But in India it is very different as the linguistic, cultural, social diversity further complicates the problem. Unless comprehensive digital literacy is implemented, this will only get worse.

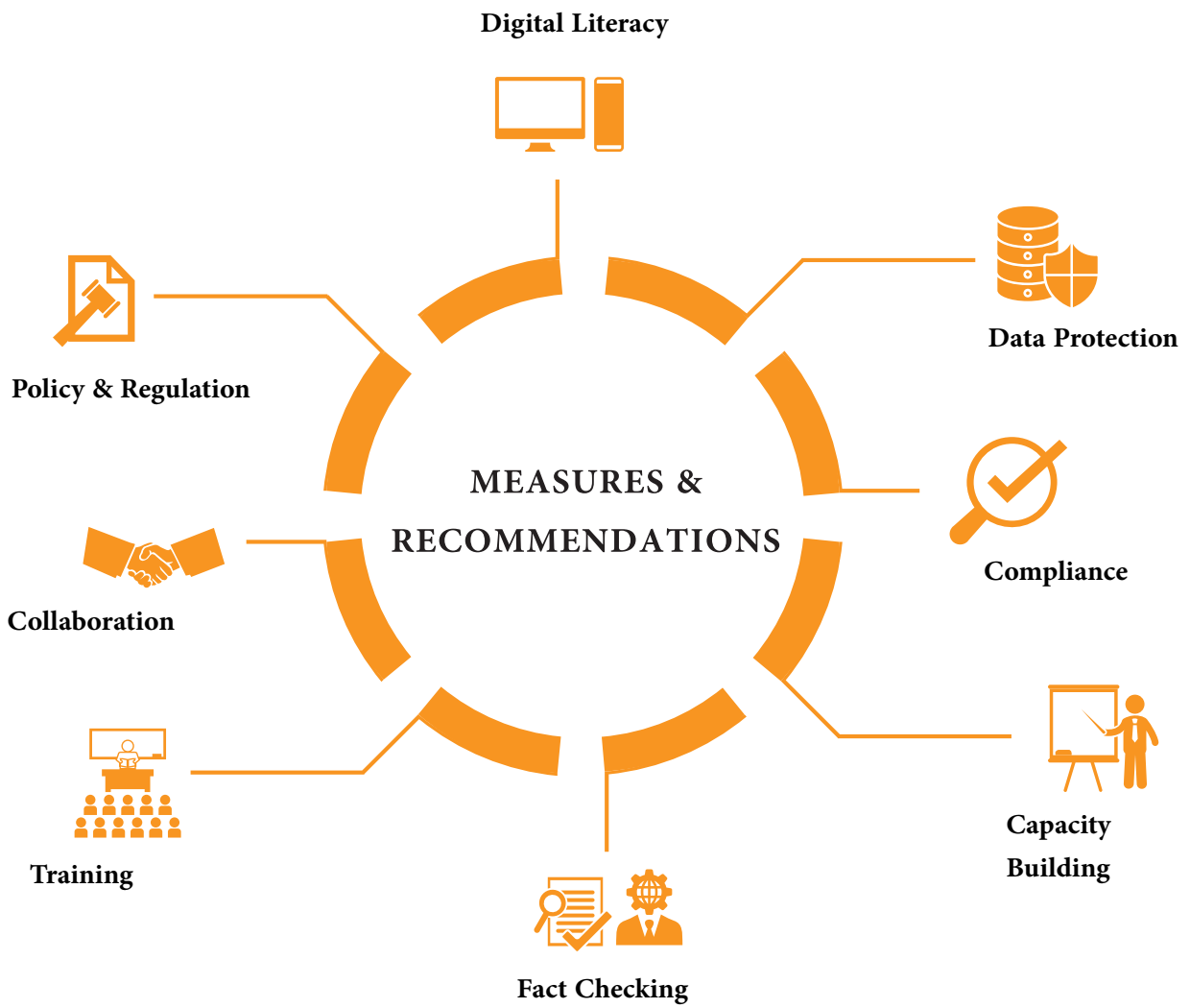
Conclusions

- Urgent need to terminate the use of term fake news and develop standard glossary that defines specific types of information manipulation, interpretation and context
- Moral outrage and bias are a huge factor in people having an uptake for information that is unverified. The need to be part of a group and social acceptance within their networks also drive people to share unverified information
- The main distribution platforms for unverified/untrue information in India are Whatsapp, Facebook and twitter. Google Search, Facebook and other digital platforms customization limits content that can be viewed, creating an atmosphere that is polarized and partisan
- Political parties are leveraging the pace of digital content production and grooming an informal base that would create and spread messages that suit their campaign agenda, even though they might not be factually accurate. This is enabled by the resources they hold that are not transparent
- A large majority of people share and spread unverified information because of the availability of the information that they have. These are driven by the social groups that they are in, limited by cellular data and digital literacy. In spite of growing technology penetration, there are no structures/ curriculum at the ground level to create awareness and understanding of digital content
- A small percentage of people spread and share messages as part of propaganda and it might be directly related to their bias, revenue generation and easy access to technology. A large number messages circulating are politically and religiously charged messages
- Media groups amplify messages by creating content that is one sided and suitable to their business or other interests. This creates a disillusion with mainstream media work and people might prefer information from other sources including those which peddle fake news. Media also reports information without verification increasing the virality of the message



Measures & Recommendations





Based on the literature reviewed, interviews with varied stakeholders and the analysis of the online survey responses, the following measures and recommendations are suggested.

Media & Digital Literacy

Media education and literacy is often fraught with negotiating some ethical considerations. While theories of top-down education suggests that individuals need to be inducted into the process of learning and advancement in the modern sense, divergent approaches to education suggest that individuals already have knowledge, and need to be seen as participants in the co-production of newer forms of knowledge. Digital and media literacy emerges as an important aspect of digital news consumption today, in order to understand the interplay of algorithms and news values ingrained. In the past few years, the world has witnessed the role of the digital sphere in influencing elections, replete with information wars and truth-altering algorithms. The US elections of 2016, and the Brexit campaign saw the rise of echo chambers with algorithms that iterated biases, influencing human perception and behaviour.

Digital and media literacy was highlighted as a prime point of focus by many stakeholders. Most of the respondents felt that the onus of identifying fake news rested with everyone, and insisted on the importance of literacy in everyday interaction with the digital media. Leapfrogging into the mobile digital space has meant that certain aspects of digital literacy have been bypassed altogether. However, it is imperative to integrate existing literacy and education to newer developments and modernization, without eschewing either. Care must be taken to ensure openness of data, and protection of traditional knowledge and know-how. Researchers have championed the cause of critical digital literacy, as a way of combating echo chambers and the numbing of the audience's mind to news factories that aid the churning of disinformation. This would mean that the audience should make informed everyday interactions with the internet, with an understanding of its production and consumption patterns, the idea of ownership of the internet, and what internet democracy means. Such a pedagogy, experts say, must inform activities of modern living, like parenting, teaching, media production, and the like. It is also worth noting in this context that a recent survey²⁴ suggested that rural Indians do not trust all messages on WhatsApp (Choudhary, 2018).

UNESCO describes Digital Literacy as a set of basic skills required for working with digital media, information processing and retrieval. It also enables one's participation in social networks for the creation and sharing of knowledge, and the ability supports a wide range of professional computing skills. However, focusing uniquely on technical aspects of digital literacy such as accessing and using tools to the exclusion of an awareness of the cognitive and ethical concerns of digital technologies poses a long term risk for users. Cognitively, a user is constantly processing content, evaluating, critiquing and synthesising multiple sources of information. Concurrently, the user must also be cognizant of what constitutes the appropriate use of such tools. Knowing how to discern what is appropriate and how to derive meaning whilst using digital technologies is equally important as using the technology itself.

Dimension	Perspective		
	Cognitive	Technical	Ethical
Information (Digital Content)	Synthesis	Access, Usage	Appropriate Usage
Computer (Hardware and software)	Evaluate	Usage	Appropriate Usage
Media (Text, sound, image, video, social)	Critique, Create	Navigation	Assess Truthfulness
Communication (Non-linear interaction)	Critique, Create	Develop and use content	Appropriate Usage
Technology (Tools for life situations)	Invent, evaluate tools	Usage	Appropriate Usage

Table 1: Simplified representation of the Digital Literacy dimensions and perspectives²⁵

What follows is a set of recommendations that emerged from the literature review and the study:

Definition & Framework

It is important to create a standardized and comprehensive definition for digital literacy that can be adopted by all stakeholders - public and private sectors to implement campaigns. It is important to widen the scope to be inclusive of the cognitive perspective of processing digital information and not creating a framework that is purely based on technical accessibility of services like payments. For instance, creating and implementation of campaigns like Digital India should first focus on literacy before empowerment through services. The current model is focussed on digitizing government services, improving access to technology including mobile phones. It has no framework to bridge the digital divide and provide resources, awareness or training to be digitally literate in all the dimensions like information, media, communication besides computers and technology. This will not only be a gain for skill development and employability but will go long way to in helping people understand and synthesize digital content and will allow them to develop critical digital literacy skills like accessing accurate sources and verifying information that they receive on social networking sites and messaging platforms.

A number of digital literacy frameworks have been designed by various organizations and nations to suit their local populations and transform learners. These frameworks have included both technical and social dimensions with the goal of empowering individuals to develop not only technical abilities, but also life skills and access to services. They encompass universal literacy, creative literacy and literacy in multiple disciplines. eSafety is an additional important component in most frameworks. Digital citizenship expands this concept to include an understanding of rights and responsibilities as well as legal and ethical behavior. Although digital literacy frameworks are being developed throughout the world, variations based on a variety of contextual factors can be observed. Efforts in USA, for example, tend to focus on individual empowerment and educational policy while South Africa's National e-Skills Plan of Action emphasizes job skills and entrepreneurship as a path to development. The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp), which aims to build "digitally-competent citizens," describes information literacy, communication, content creations, safety and problem solving as key requirements. It also highlights the need to tailor programs to local, regional or national circumstances. Economic and cultural diversity and various national contextual factors may provide a challenge to develop a uniform European framework, and national policies may play a critical role in applying or adapting the framework.(Nedungadi, 2018).²⁶

Monitoring & Evaluation

Inclusive and composite measurement Index that can be used as a tool to assess the population's evolving understanding of the digital. The Index should be able to measure complexities and perspectives of digital literacy that are beyond the current framework of Information Communication

The digital divide is likely to widen and the gap between those that have access to information and media messages and those who do not have access is likely to weaken the democratic process. Also without such a policy another form of disparity could arise- disparity between those who have the competence to explore, understand, reflect, analyze and use information and media messages and those who do not have these competencies. Linked to these competences are the issue of democratic participation and better governance.²⁷

Curriculum Development

India's current digital literacy curriculum is based on developing capacities to digitally access services and training for employability. The Pradhan Mantri Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) which was earlier known as the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) Scheme has been formulated to impart IT training to at least one member in every eligible household including Anganwadi and ASHA workers and authorised ration dealers in all the States/UTs across the country so that the non-IT literate citizens are trained to become IT literate. This is to enable them to actively and effectively participate in the democratic and developmental process and also enhance their livelihood.

The scope of digital literacy in its current form is very narrow in scope and limited to equipping people to interact with digital technologies from a services and governance point of view alone. Including a module on Digital Civic Literacy that can address the complexities and connections of digital interactions

As the digital landscape becomes more complex and expansive, it is also becoming more difficult to navigate and easier to manipulate, as high-profile reports about the influence of “fake news” and Twitter bots reveal. The ability to navigate this landscape effectively without succumbing to the pitfalls of media manipulation requires a multi-faceted skill set often referred to under the umbrella term digital literacy. Digital literacy is more than the ability to identify misinformation or avoid bad guys online; it means being able to participate meaningfully in online communities, interpret the changing digital landscape, and unlock the power of the internet for good.(Collins & Shuster, 2018)²⁸

Creating formal modules to be included in education curriculums in schools, colleges and universities that address specific challenges and support critical skills in the world of digital content is a must. As a reference point, existing curriculums around the world that are included in their education landscape can be evaluated and adopted in the local context and local languages

Capacity Building

Our online survey has found that first time or early users of the internet/technology platforms are more susceptible to fake news than others. Hence creating a National Civic Digital Literacy Strategic plan for India taking into account the heterogeneous cultural, religious, social and political fabric of the country is very important. Building capacities for the same across the country will entail a grassroots strategy, which will be implemented at the community level. This is important because citizens who are accessing the internet through mobile phones for the first time might have many barriers like language, general low literacy and above all, trust. Efforts must be made to create information hubs in communities that have members that they trust and who can undergo a train the trainers program. This is important because people will only believe that something is false if it comes from a trusted source. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that conduct digital literacy sessions could be roped in for the purpose. The Common Service Centers (CSCs) established across the length and breadth of India could be used as information hubs at the grass root level. Campaigns that have overcome mass community resistance in public health like the Pulse Polio Campaign in India indicate that working at the grass root levels in a decentralised manner with autonomy and localized campaigns that address regional, cultural, social and religious barriers are successful. The other aspect of the polio campaign that is directly relevant to the problem at hand is the understanding that it is perception and lack of information that creates the resistance or ignorance to act at the individual level.

Social mobilization network strategy should include evidence based communication, strong outreach, micro planning at the village or sub-urban or sub-regional levels and mass capacity building efforts. The National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) or the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) should include a module on Digital Civic Literacy that focuses on digital interactions including identification and verification of information received on various digital platforms. Government skill development programs such as the PMKVY, DDUGKY, ESDM should include a capsule on this in their existing module on soft skills. Since these programs reach millions of young people in the age group of 16-25 each year, they have the potential to become vehicles of large scale change. To build capacities within the formal education

system and taking into account both public and private institutions, staff should be required to be trained. The staff in turn can implement the corresponding manuals for the respective grade levels.

Resource Partnerships and Collaboration

In the context of India, the need to invest in massive education and research projects for capacity building is essential.

The improvement of digital competencies requires extensive investment in training staff, designing curricula and providing information centres, all of which call for more in-depth international collaboration. There are several areas in which collaboration among stakeholders can contribute to the strengthening of digital competencies in countries, for instance, through public-private partnerships in delivering digital skills and building digital infrastructure, and through international collaboration among stakeholders for capacity-building and research(Economic and Social Council, 2018).²⁹

This would be an appropriate area for technology companies to invest and share their market profits. The government can utilise its existing networks, hubs and programs to disseminate the new curriculum and the technology platforms who are playing the intermediaries in providing digital content should partner to take up the financial burden. Partnerships between the government, technology companies and media organizations to collaborate, develop and implement trainings on the ground is essential. Google News Initiative (GNI), that is aimed at reaching 8000 journalists across India & WhatsApp's partnership with Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) are examples of such initiatives. These initiatives should be widespread so that they reach even the local level stringers who are often an important source of information at the grass root level.

Case Study : Kannur District, Kerala, India - 2018

Kannur is an administrative subdivision in the south Indian state of Kerala. The general literacy percentage of the population is one of the highest in India. In spite of a high literacy rate, audio clips and video clips of stories spreading false claims about vaccinating children for measles in the district were going viral. Other fake news about child kidnappings, transmission of the Nipah virus through chickens and even a three-headed snake have caused widespread nuisance in the district (Christopher, 2018).³⁰ The formats used to spread the messages were audio, video and static message formats on messaging platforms and other social media networks. Muhammed Ali, an officer from the Indian Administrative Service serving as the administrative head of the region decided to start an initiative to

In October last year, the Kannur district administration issued a directive that parents who did not want to administer MR vaccine to their children should get a signature from the district collector. To his horror, Collector Mir Muhammed Ali found many people queuing outside his office, asking for exemption from the vaccination programme. Kannur, like many other districts in Kerala, was at that time facing a low turnout for its MR vaccination drive, as the anti-vaccine lobby gained popularity. When he asked a parent why he objected to administering vaccine to his child, he came the reply: “Vaccination is harmful, I saw it on WhatsApp. “It was then that Collector Mir Muhammed realised the extent to which ordinary people blindly relied on WhatsApp forwards(Varier, 2018).³¹

The district administration facilitated a one day training workshop for 150 teachers from different government schools in the area. After the training, the teachers had to go back and conduct workshops on identifying sources of information and how to spot inaccurate information. Terms like ‘clickbait’ and ‘filter bubble’ were introduced to the students and given context and implications in digital content.

The initiative has been launched for students from classes 8 to 11, across 150 government schools. Essentially the programme aims to inculcate “the spirit of Article 51 (A) (h) of the Constitution, which aims ‘to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform’ in children” in the nascent stage of their development while also “upholding the national motto of Satyameva Jayate (truth alone triumphs)”, says Ali(Christopher, 2018).³²

For the purpose of this report, FACTLY spoke to Muhammed Ali, IAS. The following are some of the highlights

- “For instance, polio, which is a vaccination is part of our everyday vocabulary. But we found resistance to the concept after the circulation of false material. Any professional or doctor was not consulted by them before they came to the conclusion that vaccination was bad. Our team used WhatsApp and Facebook, to have multiple conversations with parents.

Then, the children were targeted. Schools with low rates of vaccination, measles were targeted. The children repeated everything their parents said. They did not say that the parents did not allow them to take vaccination. They had imbibed messages that were opposed to vaccination. They said that vaccination is unnatural, and that children faint, etc. The team had to undertake the task of explaining to the children, how vaccination was logical. After that, they started giving vaccination in schools. The team found that the kids were willing to take the vaccination. They were asking pointed questions. This anti-vaccination propaganda also reached the time we had Nipah virus. We had to book criminal cases against those who were seen spreading it vociferously.”

- “People generally “like new things”. They want to break new news, and like the excitement of it. Our workshops in schools aim at teaching the children to check anything that they receive and would like to share.”
- “Example: Fevikwik was put in a Soframycin box. Students were asked to examine, read and find factual information about what was given to them. They passed it from one person to the other reading facts stated on the box until one student opened the box and realized it was actually something else inside. This exercise allowed the facilitators to speak to the students and tell them that people often pass around messages without actually even knowing how to read or critically think. It was important to discuss it with students because ethics in real life have to be put into the internet since many of us are living half our lives on the internet.”
- “Even death by Fake news is perfectly possible. The initiative is called it Satyameva Jayate (Truth Triumphs) for a reason –Truth will not win on its own. We have to fight on its side.”

The Initiative will be extended to another 600 schools in the district after assessing the first phase and impact it has created among students and parents.

Policy & Regulation

The ambit of policy and regulation occupies an ever important space in efforts towards curtailing fake news. Besides the generic need for the spread of literacy among users and consumers, another area that emerges as vital to controlling (positively and negatively) online exposure and behaviour comes from the policy and regulation space. In addition, recent research showcases how fake news can impact public policy (Fakes News and Public Policy, 2018)³³, besides also being impacted by it. Regulatory theory looks at the levels and degrees of control and liberty involved in the regulation of online speech and activities. Along similar lines, policy is a particular stance presented or taken, in relation to an issue or task at hand. When it comes to policies in the online space, they are usually aimed at democratizing and creating representational spaces for everyone involved in the use of the internet.

When it comes to the issue of fake news, misinformation and its variants, policy becomes important in that it sets the tone for the use of internet spaces and products. For instance, if a policy process is more inclusive and representational of various stakeholders, it could create further democratization of the internet by ensuring that monopolization of spaces does not occur. This is useful in curbing the spread of echo chambers.

Similarly, on the regulatory front, if a regulation is stringent and contains clauses that strictly regulate internet spaces, it could also pose a threat to the ideal of free expression, a concern that seems to be often repeated, when it comes to government regulation and related perceptions. This has been seen in the case of Section 66A of the Information Technology Act in India, which was struck down by the Supreme Court eventually. The interpretive nature of regulatory documents only complicates the implementation of such decrees and stances. For instance, “nuisance” or “derogatory speech” could be interpreted and applied to a range of situations and attempts at diluting civil conversations online. When presented with legal sanctity, these documents can be put to arbitrary use.

Our interaction with various stakeholders allowed for acquaintance with numerous perspectives on the regulatory realm. While multiple respondents felt the need for government to step up and curb the spread of fake news, it was limited to better and swifter response from law enforcement agencies and judicial process. They felt that already existing legal instruments could be used in an effective manner to curb the spread of fake news. Creating a country specific technology regulation could be categorized as knee jerk reaction just like circular³⁴ which was retracted, about journalists losing accreditation for creating and propagating fake news. It is primitive to formulate regulation at this point without enough research or understanding of the phenomenon, long term and short term effects. Overstepping into authority could directly step into censorship and threaten free speech. The following are recommendations that could be adopted for India.

Cultivating Leadership

The most immediate need in tackling the information disorder is to identify and cultivate political and bureaucratic leadership that understands the complexities, consequences and those who can take into account the future of digital engagement in the country. This is central to taking forward any policy, regulation, campaign or laws. This is not a problem specific to India but a large number of legislators lack the understanding of the problem or the solutions. The US Senate committee hearing with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg is an example. Some of the lines of questioning senators from both parties pursued demonstrated they aren't exactly the most tech-savvy bunch, aren't entirely clear on how Facebook works, or maybe have just never used the platform. Or they included some colorful anecdotes about their own social media use. If you asked each of the 44 senators at Tuesday's hearing — let alone the entire group of 100 — chances are you would get a different answer from each about what exactly the problem with Facebook is. The hearing was, at least in theory, supposed to be about Facebook's data privacy practices and the Cambridge Analytica scandal. But lawmakers' questions were all over the place, as many tried to get in a moment for their favorite issues, and even illuminating queries sometimes didn't get much follow-up (Stewart, 2018)³⁵.

Constitute a Working Group

In order to understand the problem at hand and deliberate an effective response, the government should

constitute a working group of the lines of the European Commission.

In January 2018, the European Commission set up a high-level group of experts ("the HLEG") to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online. The main deliverable of the HLEG was a report designed to review best practices in the light of fundamental principles, and suitable responses stemming from such principles. The analysis presented in the Report starts from a shared understanding of disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term "fake news". Disinformation as defined in this Report includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit (Digital Single Market Report, 2018).³⁶

Monitoring Committee

Constituting a committee that will specifically monitor digital platforms self-regulatory strategies that are being implemented and in the pipeline. This will help ensuring and understanding that self-regulation is impactful and assure that digital information and distribution directly does not translate to hate crimes, violence and polarization. Facebook has taken that step in France in an effort to build trust with governments.

French president Emmanuel Macron announced that regulators from France will be allowed to study Facebook and its attempts to moderate hate speech on its platform, which will give French officials significant access into how the company vets offensive content. In 2019, French regulators will be given access to Facebook's content policies and how the company removes posts that may discriminate against or target minority groups or others based on gender, sexuality, or religion. "It is in that context significant and welcome that the French government and Facebook are going to announce a new initiative," Facebook's vice president for global affairs and communications, Nick Clegg, said. "That model of co-regulation of the public tech sector is absolutely key." (Dillet, 2018).³⁷

A model public consultation process should be integrated that periodically addresses and enforces transparency from the government as well as the platforms on the measures taken to combat the information disorder.

Financial Resources

In Order to implement any plan of action for the problem at hand, it is imperative to consider the financial feasibility. It is critical to create a budget in specific and partner with technology platforms and media organizations to mobilize financial resources that will be required to combat the information disorder.

Regulating Social & Civic Responsibility

Instead of treading on the path of technology regulation that might stifle fundamental freedoms, regulatory policies should be passed that regulate the social and civic responsibility of the digital platforms implementing and investing in capacity building and result oriented digital literacy considering the cultural, religious, social and linguistic diversity of India.

According to an Aspen Institute report: “the future vitality of cities is increasingly based on their ability to use digital networks in intelligent, strategic ways.” In an age of ubiquitous free Wi-Fi, smartphones and data, the social infrastructure that underpins civic participation will need to be “digital by default” if it is to engage the growing number of people—including poorer citizens—who now rely on mobile technology rather than computers to interact with government and services(Conway, 2017).³⁸

Elections in the last two years around world are indication of the growing influence of digital technologies and platforms in civic engagement. It is therefore necessary for technology platforms to move away from their comfort zone of being intermediaries who are not in any way accountable to what the platforms host. By involving them in the process of digital literacy and evolving digital citizenship, they might gain insight to what strategies might better work in realm of self-regulation to limit the spread of misinformation or disinformation.

Data Protection

Post-Cambridge Analytica expose, Justice BN Srikrishna committee identified legislative framework for data privacy and recommended establishing Data Protection Authority of India to prevent misuse of personal data in India.

Even as technology majors anticipate the next move, India’s primary IT industry bodies such as NASSCOM and Data Security Council of India (DSCI) have been advocating for stringent data privacy and protection for years now, especially since India is making rapid inroads into the global digital market. Rama Vedashree, CEO of DSCI and member of the ten-membered Srikrishna Committee, says, “The digital economy should aim to benefit citizens.

With proliferation of information and digital technologies, the technology sector should strengthen citizen safety and security in the digital environment. Moreover, user awareness towards their privacy has been on the rise. We will see consumers making more privacy-conscious decisions and associating certain brands that provide greater privacy controls as better options.” In order to help companies stay ahead of the curve, DSCI has already developed the Privacy Frameworks and Credentials program and is now developing a Privacy Assurance Framework. For greater accountability, companies processing large amounts of data might have to register themselves as significant data fiduciaries to the Data Protection

Authority—a key recommendation made by the Srikrishna Committee. Even though there is little clarity on how this will be implemented, it will increase compliance costs that include periodic company audits and the need for data protection specialists among others (Balaji, 2018).³⁹

The Government of India’s proposed amendments to the IT Act has included the above stated recommendation of the Sri Krishna Committee but it appears that the amendment itself is not clearly defined, can easily be misinterpreted and not comprehensive in nature.

Mainstreaming Digital Literacy

The government needs to consider policy on digital literacy as an urgent measure. The resources and capacities that are currently being used to increase digital engagement across the country for services and commercial purposes needs to be moved to a secondary or a parallel step because digital competencies without critical or civic literacy skills makes it unsafe, unreliable and dangerous for citizens to engage online, creating an online and offline climate that could lead to spreading inaccurate information and escalating tensions. This should be considered beyond the scope of a single ministry or department in the government, so that all avenues are utilized for literacy.

Right to Information (RTI) Act

With over six million information applications filed every year, the Right to Information (RTI) Act is one of the world’s most extensively used transparency legislations. By empowering millions of citizens across the country to question public authorities, the RTI Act has initiated the vital task of redistributing power in a democratic framework. People have been innovatively using the law to demand accountability from the government on a range of issues – from their ration and pensions to big ticket scams; from educational qualifications and assets of public servants to human rights violations. The legislation is being extensively used to seek answers from the high and mighty (Bhardwaj & Johri, 2018).⁴⁰

The RTI Act in a nutshell empowers citizens with information that can help them exercise their civic responsibilities and duties. It gives them access to information minimizing the availability bias that they might otherwise create based on inaccurate information received from other sources. Evaluating, seeking and analyzing information are critical skills that are at the core of literacy. Any attempt to create barriers from accessing information and affecting the functionality of the structures that makes it possible is a fundamental threat to citizenship. It is therefore necessary for the government to consider the legislation as a vital tool for democracy and access to information. In addition, governments should lay special emphasis on the proactive disclosure aspects of the RTI act and the Open Data policy. After all, availability of the right information has a great role to play in arresting fake news.

Reforming Criminal Justice System

According to current law, information relating to an offence has to be given orally to an officer in charge at the police station, who shall put it in writing as a First Information Report (FIR) and register a case if he deems fit. In some cases, a police officer has right to conduct a preliminary enquiry before registering a case. It has been reported that this system is largely abused and manipulated to avoid registering cases and intimidate and harass victims who want to set the criminal law in motion. Some officers might not be inclined to register the case because they might not see any personal benefit – monetary or otherwise. In certain instances, the police stations might be over burdened with existing investigations and feel that the case might not come to closure. As a result, crimes tend to be under reported and not investigated at all (Dodda, 2018).⁴¹

Considering that digital content that is inciteful or causes public harm or hate is being shared or spread digitally, this further complicates the matter. Respondents interviewed for the purpose of the report strongly recommended integrating an exclusive section of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that allows them to follow criminal proceedings in cases of incidents related to hate crime. They also suggested that specific provisions be made in the rules to demand information with a stipulated time limit from digital platforms that host information or that have been used to spread the message. Further, the assumption that nothing that is unacceptable offline like inciting a mob should be acceptable online for the lack of a mechanism in place to identify and strictly follow protocol. Using Internet Shutdowns as an instrument to control polarization or hate is not a solution but an indication that the government is not equipped or does not have the capacities and procedures in place that could implicate bad actors. This is testament to the fact that the problem is not of regulation but of implementation.

Election Commission

Ahead of the 2019 General Elections in India, it is important for the election commission to constitute an internal committee that could draft regulatory norms for media and digital platforms in the buildup to the election and during the election. Norms like disclosing sources for online advertisements, payment information of accounts that are advertising or posting politically polarizing content are essential, taking a leaf out of the experience in Brazil where information questioning the integrity of the elections by conspiracy theorists created chaos. It might support the election commission if they are able to establish prior relationships with fact checkers and agencies that can collaborate with them along with technology platforms and law enforcement. The Election Commission could also formulate guidelines that require political parties to take responsibility of the information disorder propagated through their networks. This could be done by way of relevant additions to the model code of conduct and stricter punishments for any such violations.

Initiate Stakeholder Engagement

The problem of information disorder can be effectively countered only with participation and action oriented goals from all the stakeholders involved. To institute roundtables and town halls that bring all stakeholders on a single platform and allow sharing of perspectives, strategies and build trust with each other. The Government of Telangana acknowledged the need for all stakeholders to work together and facilitated a 'Roundtable on Curbing Fake News' in August 2018.⁴²

Further, the table below showcases a snapshot of policy and regulatory instruments from across the world that are being considered or enforced.

Legislation across the world (Source: The Poynter Institute)⁴³

Country	Action	Details
Australia	Government Task Force	In June 2018, four units of the government set up a task force to identify potential cyberattacks and foreign influence campaigns targeting upcoming Australian elections.
Bangladesh	Law and Arrests	In October 2018, the Bangladesh Parliament approved a bill that allows to imprison those who spread propaganda about the 1971 Liberation War. In January 2019, it was reported that 22 people had been arrested on cybercrime charges in the past two months.
Belaru	Law	Lawmakers passed amendments to Belarus' media laws that allow the government to prosecute people who spread false information online.
Belgium	Expert group and Media literacy campaign	The government established an expert group of journalists and scholars to come up with potential solutions and launched a website to inform people about misinformation and implement a Reddit style of up voting and down voting proposed solutions from the government.
Brazil	Government Task force, 20 draft bills and Platform agreements	The Federal Police announced a task force to "identify and punish the authors of 'fake news'" first in the form of a tweeted statement in January 2018. The draft bills propose penalties that go up to R\$1,500 (\$400) to up to eight years of in prison for crimes ranging from spreading fake news on social media to publishing inaccurate press accounts. The Brazilian government has also entered into an agreement with Facebook and Google that pledges the platforms to "combat disinformation generated by third parties". However, the two-page document doesn't include any new initiatives that the companies are starting specifically in Brazil. Supreme Court Justice Luiz Fux signed a similar agreement with Brazilian political parties earlier that month.

Cambodia	Law & State Broadcasts	<p>The government passed a measure that gave it the authority to block media that it thinks threatens national security. The new expansion of the law means people could be jailed for two years and fined \$1,000 for publishing fake news. In January 2019, it was reported that the government was launching a live TV program to address misinformation.</p>
Cameroon	Arrests	<p>According to CPJ's annual census of imprisoned journalists, the country jailed four journalists for false news in 2018 — the second most in the world, after Egypt. It is reported that under Cameroonian law, it's illegal to report “any news without being able to prove either its truth or that he had good reason to believe it to be true”.</p>
Canada	Media literacy campaign & Government task force	<p>Government created a “Critical Election Incident Public Protocol” that will monitor and notify other agencies and the public about disinformation attempts. That task force will be led by five non-political officials and is an addition to a “rapid response mechanism” housed within the Department of Foreign Affairs. Government also called on social media platforms to do more to combat disinformation ahead of the election in 2019. The move comes in tandem with Bill C-76, legislation that aims to compel tech companies to be more transparent about their anti-disinformation and advertising policies. Further, the government announced it was giving \$7 million to projects aimed at increasing public awareness of misinformation online.</p>

China	Laws and Online reporting portal	In August 2018, the government launched an app that lets people report potential fakery. As an improvement on a law of 2017, the year 2018 also saw the Chinese authorities asking microblogging sites to highlight and refute fake news.
Croatia	Bills	The proposed law aims to halt the spread of hate speech and fake news on social media platforms. The bill, which primarily takes aim at Facebook, endeavors to primarily educate citizens as opposed to sanctioning the spread of misinformation.
Denmark	Task force, Media literacy campaign & Government action plan	The Danish government has set up a task force for addressing misinformation in September 2018. The group is responsible for developing responses to widespread misinformation campaigns and foreign disinformation attacks. The government is distributing brochures with tips on how to avoid falling for misinformation. The government has also come up with a plan to avoid foreign interference in the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2019.
Egypt	Law & Arrests	The Egyptian government is now regulating social media accounts with large followings in an attempt to cut down on misinformation. Under the law, which passed in July 2018, any account or blog with more than 5,000 followers on sites like Facebook and Twitter will be treated like a media outlet, which — under the country's existing laws — can be prosecuted for publishing “fake news.” In addition to punishing those who publish false information, the law requires websites to obtain a license from the Supreme Council or face suspension, fines or getting blocked altogether. In September 2018, the government also began arresting people on “fake news” charges.

France	Bill	<p>The law passed in November 2018 provides a definition of “fake news”: “Inexact allegations or imputations, or news that falsely report facts, with the aim of changing the sincerity of a vote.” It’s designed to enact strict rules on the media during electoral campaigns and, more specifically, in the three months preceding any vote. The law was validated and enacted in December 2018.</p>
Germany	Law	<p>Germany’s law against hate speech on Facebook forces online platforms to remove “obviously illegal” posts within 24 hours or risk fines of up to €50 million.</p>
India	Proposed rules for Intermediaries	<p>The government put out the draft “Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines [Amendment] Rules) 2018” for public comments. Among other things, the rules seek to mandate all intermediaries like social media & technology platforms to use automated & other methods for content moderation. They also seek to enforce a time-limit of 72 hours within which the intermediaries have to provide information or assistance to government agencies. The rules also specify that any intermediary with more than 50 lakh users (5 million) has to be incorporated in India, have a permanent registered address in India and a nodal person of contact in India for 24/7 coordination.</p>
Indonesia	Government task force, Arrests & Site tracking	<p>The government appointed a head of the newly formed National Cyber and Encryption Agency to help intelligence agencies and law enforcement efforts combat online misinformation and hoaxes before nationwide regional polls in the summer of 2018. The government is reported to have formed a dedicated team to monitor social media and also made arrests in November 2018</p>

Ireland	Bill	Lawmakers introduced a bill that would make using a bot to create multiple fake accounts posing as different people spreading political messages a criminal offense.
Italy	Online reporting portal & Authority report	The government set up an online portal where citizens could report fake news to the police. In late November 2018, the country's communications authority released a report on misinformation.
Kazakhstan	Criminal Investigation	In March 2018, the Kazakh government opened a criminal investigation into two news outlets for allegedly publishing false information. It is reported that under Kazakh law, "disseminating knowingly false information" carries a maximum sentence of seven years in prison.
Kenya	Law	A new bill criminalizes various 17 types of cybercrimes including cyberbullying, espionage, computer forgery and fake news. Under the law, people who knowingly share false or misleading information in an attempt to make it look real can be fined up to 5,000,000 shilling (nearly \$50,000) or imprisoned for up to two years.
Malaysia	Law	Malaysia made it a crime in April 2018 to share fake news. It makes publishing or sharing fake news punishable by up to six years in jail and a fine of 500,000 ringgit (\$128,000). Lawmakers in one house of parliament voted to repeal the legislation in mid-August 2018 after the ruling party was defeated in the polls.
Myanmar	Law & Arrests	In mid-October 2018, three journalists were jailed in Myanmar after publishing a story about the Yangon regional government, which claimed the article was false. The journalists could face up to two years in prison and a fine.

Nigeria	Media literacy campaign & State radio broadcasts	In response to growing concerns and tensions related to misinformation, Nigeria has launched a campaign aimed at making people more critical news consumers. In November 2018, the BBC reported that the army had started debunking Facebook misinformation on a live radio broadcast. It has also set up hotlines for citizens to report misinformation, and some police officers are using their personal Facebook pages to debunk it.
Pakistan	Government Twitter account	In early October 2018, the Pakistani government started going after misinformation on a platform where it regularly appears: Twitter. Dawn reported that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting launched an account called Fake News Buster in an attempt to debunk “fake and negative propaganda” online.
Philippines	Dismissed Bill	A bill was proposed to hold government officials accountable for spreading false information. However, the measure was challenged as unconstitutional.
Russia	Bill & Joint cybersecurity group	The bill would hold social networks accountable for inaccurate comments that users post. Websites that have a commenting feature and amass more than 100,000 visitors every day will be required to remove false comments within 24 hours or be fined up to 50 million rubles (about \$800,000). In November 2018, Russia signed a pact with Spain to create a joint cybersecurity group aimed at preventing misinformation from affecting diplomatic relations between the two.
Saudi Arabia	Government threats	In the aftermath of the death of a Washington Post columnist, the authorities have threatened those who post fake news online with up to five years in prison, and heavy fines.

Singapore	Parliamentary report & Media literacy campaign	<p>Parliament voted to create a committee focused on addressing how best to address the problem of fake news online. In a 300-page parliamentary report published in late September 2018, the government laid out 22 recommendations for combating the spread of misinformation online. Key among those is a call for legislation that will halt the spread of misinformation in a matter of hours. In December 2018, Channel News Asia reported that draft legislation could be tabled by the first half of 2019. In January 2019, the government announced two new resources for religious groups to combat misinformation, the first is a seminar to help them understand misinformation more in-depth and the second is a “security advisory booklet” that includes tactics on how to respond to online falsehoods and similar threats.</p>
South Korea	Government task force and Proposed amendments	<p>The National Assembly has more than a dozen pending law amendments aimed at curbing the effect of misinformation online — about half of which call on platforms to self-regulate false content. One would criminalize the use of bots to manipulate online commenting. At the same time, the ruling party has used a misinformation countermeasure task force to file about 500 complaints against people allegedly publishing problematic content.</p>
Spain	Committee recommendation & Joint cybersecurity group	<p>In early March 2018, the National Security Commission passed a proposal asking the government to take action against fake news online. The proposal was voted down by the left-wing coalition. In November 2018, Russia signed a pact with Spain to create a joint cybersecurity group aimed at preventing misinformation from affecting diplomatic relations between the two.</p>

Sweden	Government authority	Sweden's proposed authority has a different flavor than those in other countries; rather than attempting to directly fight false or misleading information, it instead is aimed at promoting factual content. A start date for the body has not yet been set.
Taiwan	Bill	Under the new law, people who publish misinformation online could be punished by up to three days in jail or a fine of up to \$30,000 New Taiwan dollars (US\$1,000).
Tanzania	Blog licensing	The government plans to charge bloggers about \$920 a year for the privilege of publishing online. Violators will be fined a minimum of five million Tanzanian shillings (US \$2,202), jailed for no less than a year or both.
Thailand	Law & Arrests	As per reports, Thai officials have been expanding a 2007 law that punishes anti-government criticism citing "fake news". Now, instead of only focusing on statements made about the monarchy in Thailand, officials can go after journalists and bloggers who make anti-military claims. Per the law, violators could face up to 15 years in prison.
Turkey	Investigation	Government launched an investigation into practices aimed at manipulating the economy.
Uganda	Social media tax	A new tax is introduced in Uganda that charges citizens for the ability to use social media platforms. It is charging mobile phone users 200 Ugandan shillings (\$0.05) for using platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, Twitter, and Skype.

<p>United Arab Emirates</p>	<p>Government threats</p>	<p>In October 2018, a police official told citizens that sharing misinformation is punishable by law. As per the law, sharing misinformation online could merit a fine of up to Dh1 million (roughly \$272,250).</p>
<p>United Kingdom</p>	<p>Parliamentary report & Task force</p>	<p>After 18 months of thinking about how the government should address misinformation, U.K. lawmakers published a report in July 2018. The recommendations that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee of Parliament issued include: a rejection of the term “fake news,” applying existing media regulations to online news and the creation of a working group to research how misinformation spreads. The British government has also set up the National Security Communications Unit, which is tasked with “combating disinformation by state actors and others.”</p>
<p>USA</p>	<p>Proposed law, platform testimonies and State media literacy law</p>	<p>The Congress announced a bill in October 2017 that would require online platforms such as Facebook and Google to keep copies of ads, make them public and keep tabs on who is paying — and how much. Representatives from Facebook, Twitter and Google testified to a Senate judiciary committee on their role in spreading disinformation during the election. The California state government passed a law in September 2018 that bolsters media literacy in public schools. It requires the Department of Education to list instructional materials and resources on how to evaluate trustworthy media. The law was inspired by a Stanford University student who found that most students can’t distinguish between sponsored content and news stories and comes amid several current and former attempts to improve media literacy in at least 24 states</p>

Vietnam	Law	<p>In January 2019, a new Vietnamese law took effect that requires internet service providers to disclose user data so that the government can trace the origin of specific posts. It is reported that the Cyber Security Law also requires platforms like Facebook to delete content at the government's request. Per Vietnamese law, spreading false information is already a crime that can land someone in prison.</p>
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Technology

One of the most raging pieces of controversy in the delineation of regulatory roles for stakeholders of the internet, is that of the intermediaries (Gaur, 2018).⁴⁴ In other words, technology platforms emerge as a controversial component in current thinking on the spread of roles and responsibilities.

Should one seek to implicate platforms in the management of content on their infrastructure, how does one simultaneously conform of principles of competition, norms of ethics, and freedom of expression? Similarly, should one decide to leave the intermediaries out, how does one explain their role in the specific capabilities that their particular infrastructure and investment choices promote? These questions guide current debates⁴⁵ on the framing of intermediary liability. Many⁴⁶ suggest that the language of positive rights should be adopted, to safeguard intermediary interests, while also focusing on their obligations. Issues of copyright infringement, censorship, algorithmic misadventures, are aspects that are analyzed as part of these debates(Center for Internet and Society, 2018).⁴⁷

Further, efforts at curbing fake news and misinformation need to take cognizance of the newer affordances of emerging technological developments, which help accentuate the abilities of groups of people to influence news and thinking in ways that might be far removed from reality. Some of the questions we posed to the various stakeholders tackled these key aspects of internet policy-making and governance. There was broad agreement across the spectrum that technology platforms or companies are one of the stakeholders and cannot alone be blamed for what is being witnessed today. However, there are multiple areas for technology platforms to proactively change their functionality and understand the problem of information from the point of view of human behaviour.

Under pressure to clamp down on sinister messages, WhatsApp has appointed a grievance officer for India and detailed the process for users to flag concerns and complaints, including those around fake news.

Capacity Building

Digital platforms need to invest in large scale capacity building efforts to staff their offices in India . In particular, their country specific public policy and grievance teams.

Meeting one of the key demands that India had put on WhatsApp to curb fake messages that triggered mob killings, the Facebook-owned company has updated its website to reflect the appointment of a 'Grievance Officer for India'. The update mentions that users can seek help through the mobile app, send an email or write in to 'Komal Lahiri', who is based out of the US. The latest appointment is also significant as the Supreme Court, last month, had agreed to examine a petition alleging that WhatsApp does not comply with Indian laws, including the provision for appointing a grievance officer. The apex court had sought a reply on the matter within four weeks (WhatsApp appoints grievance officer for India, 2018).⁴⁸

By appointing an officer for the sake of it but stationing them elsewhere could be a legal move from the platform. However, it is important that a team is functional in India for all the platforms which can work swiftly with user complaints, law enforcement and the government if necessary. The location itself makes it inaccessible and defeats the purpose of the appointment. It is important to note that none of the top leadership in these companies are accessible and willing to engage proactively with ordinary citizens. Several people in leadership positions in Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were contacted repeatedly for the purpose of the report including India's newly appointed grievance officer. Only one person responded.

Accountability

There are reasons to believe that social media are no longer 'Internet intermediaries'. It can be argued that Facebook actively manages content the 'trending' section is the best example of this. In 2016, the company acknowledged that it uses human editors to pick and evaluate trending topics, thus meeting the Council of Europe's definition of an editorial process. Robert Thomson, CEO of News Corp., has claimed that social media platforms can no longer be considered intermediaries only: These companies are in digital denial. Of course they are publishers and being a publisher comes with the responsibility to protect and project the provenance of news. The great papers have grappled with that sacred burden over decades and centuries, and you can't absolve yourself from that burden or the costs of compliance by saying, 'We are a technology company'. Martin Sorell, CEO of WPP, the world's largest advertising company, has also argued that social media should be responsible for the content in their 'digital pipes' (Niklewicz, 2017).⁴⁹

Social media and digital platforms are no longer private networks of known people but platforms that are allowing broadcasting and sharing of content that is unverified. They have huge user base for each of them, more than any single newspaper or television channel in India equating them to be a media platform in the real sense. With such massive influence and power, it is important to be accountable to the consequences that follow. While majority of our respondents favoured self regulatory measures, a lot of them felt that examining if individual country's press laws could to be applicable to the platforms with reasonable modification and consideration of them being a hosting service.

It is the responsibility of the platforms to be open about the processes and procedures containing user data and protection. An engagement process that is insightful and consultative with other stakeholders working to counter the information disorder is required. Transparency in interactions with law enforcement and government about strategies and challenges is essential because technology expertise can no longer solve all problems that might arise from technology interactions like information authenticity. In the context of users, educating them in simple terms about what elaborative privacy policies entail along with implications without jargon. Additionally, creating a time bound procedure that is binding by internal and external legal provisions to provide information and details for grievances and escalation to necessary authorities will indicate intent in principle and practice. For example, After WhatsApp has repeatedly emphasized on end to end encryption limitations, research surfacing that tracking messages might be possible.

Based on publicly observable indicators such as WhatsApp's ability to cache popular media files and serve them to new users without requiring a re-upload, it seems likely that WhatsApp has the ability to uniquely identify at least some end-to-end encrypted messages, even if they cannot actually peer into their contents, based on various pieces of metadata," said Vinay Kesari, an independent lawyer based in Bengaluru specializing in technology law and policy. "This is not inconsistent with their assurances of not being able to 'read' user messages. It does, however, seem to open up the possibility of being able to track a message (or at least media) once it has been "reported," stop its spread, and perhaps even trace the source in some cases." We believe there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that that although WhatsApp can't read contents of the messages, it reads and stores parts of metadata of every message being sent on its platform, and can use this capability to check the spread of fake news. This assertion is based on the following evidence: First, even though WhatsApp claims to delete all messages from its servers after delivery, in an affidavit filed by the company in September 2016 the Delhi High Court the company suggests otherwise: To improve performance and deliver media messages more efficiently, such as when many people are sharing a popular photo or video, WhatsApp may retain that content on its servers for a longer period of time. In other words, WhatsApp does retain popular files on its servers in order to deliver faster file transfers, resulting in better user experience and also save internet bandwidth of users.

Another experiment reported in detail in Asia Times confirms that WhatsApp stores data on its servers long after they are downloaded, or deleted from the local handset device by the original chat participants (Gupta & Taneja, 2018).⁵

Besides, finding ways to challenge their own limitations as business model and features, it is important to have information available that is understandable and accessible to ordinary people. The transparency aspect is critical because digital engagement is no longer limited to private interactions but has been largely influenced democratic processes and public order.

Compliance

Digital platforms must work out an 'ethics of operations' tie-up with governments, to ensure that the bare minimum compliance with national and regional administrative bodies.

One main and fairly simple motivation for people to spread misinformation is monetary benefit through advertisements. To their credit, many technology platforms have already taken steps in this direction but there are innumerable advertisement groups & ad networks that still need to be regulated as they continuously find ways to game the system. More than the content that is promoted for monetary benefit, content that incites, abuses and causes harm is the challenge that has not decoded completely.

The early, utopian promise of the internet was as a decentralized network that would connect people under hundreds of millions of websites and communities, each in charge of creating their own rules. But as the internet has evolved, it has become increasingly corporatized, with companies like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter replacing individually-owned websites and forums as the primary speech outlets for billions of people around the world. As these platforms have grown in size and influence, they've hired content moderators to police their websites first to remove illegal content such as child pornography, and then to enforce rules barring content that could cause users to leave or a PR nightmare. "The fundamental reason for content moderation its root reason for existing goes quite simply to the issue of brand protection and liability mitigation for the platform," Sarah T. Roberts, an assistant professor at UCLA who studies commercial content moderation, told Motherboard. "It is ultimately and fundamentally in the service of the platforms themselves. It's the gatekeeping mechanisms the platforms use to control the nature of the user-generated content that flows over their branded spaces. "To understand why Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit have rules at all, it's worth considering that, as these platforms have become stricter, "free speech"-focused clones with few or no rules at all have arisen, largely floundered, and are generally seen as cesspools filled with hateful rhetoric and teeming with Nazis (Koebler & Cox, 2018).⁵¹

The challenge is no longer limited to the platform itself, have transcended in the physical spaces threatening safety and public order. It is important to find ways to moderate without compromising for reasons related to business model and revenue. Whether it is Google, Facebook, WhatsApp or Twitter, the climate and the spaces that these brands are expanding into seem like a tradeoff between business and security.

A lot of misinformation and disinformation are created in local languages in India and other linguistically diverse countries. It is important to integrate language access into platform moderation, grievances and user education. This would mean extensive hiring of resources in local languages to moderate or examine content.

Integrating Fact Checking Agencies

The online survey makes it amply clear that the presence of fact checking organizations is not widely known. Hence platforms could work with such organizations and ensure their work reaches the widest audience. This could mean evangelizing things such as a 'Claim Review' tag so that multiple organizations use it, fund products that could make it easier for anyone to setup a fact checking initiative confirming to 'Claim Review' etc. The availability of such low cost/free products has the potential to take fact checking to local languages and establishment of fact checking organizations that serve hyperlocal needs. Facebook's partnership with 3rd Party fact checking organizations is also a step in the right direction. While some steps in this direction have been already taken, there needs to be a more efficient and swifter process which includes dialogue and consultative meetings with fact checking agencies.

Helpline/Reporting

Considering setting up a localised telephonic helpline that users can call to report and enquire any questions that they might have related to services, abuse or to fact check. While the volume of calls might be too high, not everyone is able to comprehend pages of term of service and follow guidelines to report abuse hosted on their websites. Such a move is possible without compromising on privacy since the choice of reporting is left to the user. All such reported content should be sent to third party fact-checkers for verification on the lines of Facebook. WhatsApp could take down or notify all the users whenever a message or information they received or sent is found to be false. Digital platforms should extend a dedicated number to state/local government for the purpose of broadcasting important messages within a geofence. This could be immensely useful to contain virality and violence.

Financial Resources - Digital Literacy

Commitment and compliance to allocate a reasonable amount of resources towards grassroots digital literacy is essential. Collaborating with the government to find avenues, systems and models to disseminate and strategise digital literacy modules and bearing the financial burden could support governments to be proactive.

Media

Media emerges as a site that registers shifts in conversations, politics, and societal norms. Media presents itself in various form today, often in congruence with shifts in technology and advancements, all the while retaining certain normative values irrespective of the technological platform. The coming of the internet has been marked as a revolutionary moment in the history of media, especially with the democratic potential laden in web 2.0, with the scope for interactivity. The internet has been hailed as a space for media-making by diverse groups, often left out by the mainstream media.

In a world marked by widespread media politicization, corporatization and monopolization, with bigger media ventures taking over smaller, independent efforts, the internet stands as a space that continues to register efforts of democratization. All the same, these processes of media consolidation, as well as presentation of unilateral narratives have resulted in the marginalization of certain narratives and stories with different vantage points from the ones voiced repeatedly by the mainstream media.

The following are recommendations that will support media organisations and platforms to leverage their reach and responsibility

Organization Architecture & Affiliation

When media groups and publications are directly owned and affiliated with specific political ideologies, they are at risk of reporting information that supports a particular ideology without evidence . While everybody has the right to freedom of expression, there is a certain responsibility and critical thinking that's needs to be applied to public information considering the consequences of being on a broadcasting platform and the potential of the information to incite hate, violence and large scale polarization. There need to be internal and external checks that monitors frequent violation of public order. There is a need to take measures to win back trust of consumers that include hyperlinking source documents/data, transparency in ownership and shareholding, clear demarcation of paid programs etc.

Volume of Information Vs Quality of Information

With the advent of 24-hour television channels, digital technologies and instant publishing tools, organisations are trying churn higher volume of information that they are unable to accurately verify, cross check and quote sources. This drives them to publish information that they pick up from social media without checking the origin or the kind of source that might be behind the information.

News organisations have forgotten their core job, and are now taking news from social media platforms. They need to do their job of verifying. The number of levels of checking that used to exist has now disappeared. There is no gatekeeping at all.

The reporters have to own their stories, now. The editors do not take responsibility. It is a good time for traditional news media organisations to get back on track and grab the limelight. The times are such that revenues are coming down, and even editorials are being outsourced.⁵²

However, when the internet itself is rendered manipulated due to the spread of unverified messages and posts on various popular platforms, the onus is put back on the mainstream media. It was commonly felt that the media has an important responsibility to win back trust and in turn curb the spread of inaccurate information. Further, print media has an unparalleled reach, especially in vernacular Indian languages. This is also corroborated in the online survey in which respondents across age groups identified newspapers as their top source of information even today. Such reach could be utilized by having dedicated space and program time (in the case of television channels) to propagate debunked fake news. This could be done as a daily/weekly column in local tabloids, as special shows on television etc. It is an opportunity to not only increase their user base but also help towards spreading digital literacy in the country.

In Ukraine, an organization known as StopFake relies upon “peer-to-peer counter propaganda” to dispel false stories. Its researchers assess “news stories for signs of falsified evidence, such as manipulated or misrepresented images and quotes” as well as looking for evidence of systematic misinformation campaigns. Over the past few years, it has found Russian social media posts alleging that Ukrainian military forces were engaging in atrocities against Russian nationalists living in eastern Ukraine or that they had swastikas painted on their vehicles. In a related vein, the French news outlet Le Monde has a “database of more than 600 news sites that have been identified and tagged as ‘satire,’ ‘real,’ [or] ‘fake’ (West, 2017)⁵³

Staff Capacities

With the growing use of digital platforms to reach audience by media houses, it is critical to hire staff that is well versed and literate about digital technology, challenges and limitations of the platforms that they will be using. Additionally, all staff should be involved and trained in fact checking exercises to be able to ensure quality of information over volume. This could even extend to staff filing complaints with platforms for content that they might have come across that have unreliable sources and potential to cause public harm.

Robust Editorial Systems

Recreating robust systems of verification and multiple levels at the desk level before publishing information will go a long way in weeding out inaccurate information. Looking at traditional models of media houses in terms of emphasis on quality control more than volume control is essential.

Sensitizing readers on the intensive verification process for them to understand the value of the information that is being provided is also important. Media should invest more prime time in information than opinion and take responsibility of the information that is being broadcasted or published. Limit content hosting that is from outside resources and that does not comply with verification/ factual information.

Diversity

Encouraging diversity in the media, both in terms of people and opinions. Encourage diverse forms of media ownership and practices, in order to account for the plurality of people, their opinions, and location across the country will inculcate healthy competition to report with right sources and verify each other's information.

Self-Regulation

Strengthening representational and self-regulatory bodies like editors' guilds, press councils etc. to actively involve and deliberate challenges of daily news and not limit their participation to attacks of the freedoms of expression and opinion. To mobilize organisations and groups to debate and evaluate their internal systems and process. Additionally, to provide a platform to encourage newsroom collaboration and working with each other than against each other. These could be on the lines multiple other collaborative newsrooms across the world.

Here is an example of some best practices from Brazil on newsroom collaboration.

Comprova - Case Study from Brazil

Brazil's relationship with social media platforms has been deep and volatile. In a country of 208 million people, 130 million actively use Facebook and 120 million use WhatsApp on a daily basis. Brazil is WhatsApp 2nd largest market after India. Like India, Brazil's social fabric is asymmetric, heterogeneous and vast, making it complicated to contain misinformation. In many ways, the 2018 Presidential elections in Brazil were going to be elections that had a huge internet influence and the Supreme Electoral Court of Brazil issued guidelines on 'Advertisements on the internet' ahead of the elections.

The 2018 elections are the first in Brazilian history in which candidates, political parties and coalitions will be able to hire electoral content in platforms. Article 57-C of the law states that all sorts of electoral propaganda is forbidden with the exception of hired boosting of content on social media unequivocally identified as such and contracted exclusively by parties, coalitions and candidates and their representatives, including keywords in search engines.

According to the new regulation, the advertisement of political propaganda (ads) remains restricted to the sites of candidates, parties and coalitions, and cannot be featured in websites that belongs to individuals or private companies; apart from that the costs with online advertising have to be publicized from now on, as campaigns have to disclose which platforms received financial resources for content boosting and the amount deployed at the mandatory Campaign accountability report to be delivered to the Electoral Justice.

Allowed	Not allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online Platforms; - Candidate, Political Party or Coalition website hosted in address previously informed to the Electoral Justice; - Electronic messages to voters, granted the voter the right to opt-out from the mailing-list/ to stop receiving messages from a determinate Candidate, Political Party or Coalition (in 48 hours max); - Blogs, Social Media (profiles, fan pages) and instant messaging websites as long as the content is produced by the Candidate, Political Party or Coalition; and - Electoral content boosting on Social Media Platforms unequivocally identified as such and contracted exclusively by parties, coalitions and candidates and their representatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Electoral advertisement in legal entities websites; - Electoral Advertisement Official/Governmental websites or the ones hosted by public administration bodies; - Advertising through telemarketing, at any time; - Unfair attribution of electoral advertising - Authorship to other candidates, parties or coalitions; - Commercialization of mailing lists of emails; - Use of fake profiles and bots for posting or boosting electoral content.

In order to contain and check the spread of misinformation during the election, First Draft - leading non-profit researching misinformation created a platform for 24 newsrooms and fact checking agencies in Brazil to collaborate and work together during the election. The collaboration was formally called Comprova. After a 3-day boot camp in late May for journalists and fact checkers across Brazil worked together in a joint exercise to verify information.

For 12 weeks our coalition of 24 media outlets monitored and verified the veracity of information shared by unofficial sources in social networks and in messaging applications. On our radar were dubious contents whose ability to cause damage to the election campaigns was evident. Some of the verifications were archived because they were not conclusive. Our commitment and our goal was zero error. Even with all of these snippets, we've posted 146 stories to disprove or confirm information that has become virulent.

Of this total, 92% were false, misleading or decontextualized. Only 9 stories were true. The outcome of the Verification checks is a wake-up call to society and a reaffirmation of the need for an independent, accountable, transparent and reliable press. A good sign was the number of people who collaborated with us by submitting content suggestions to be verified only by WhatsApp were more than 67,000. At some point, we no longer respond individually to such people, such as the volume of messages, but we devote much of our attention to what we receive from the audience (Ludtke, 2018).⁵⁴

From August 6th - October 28th, journalists and fact checkers established a system that took tips from citizens about information that was spreading virally during the elections. Comprova used WhatsApp Business API to get contacted by various WhatsApp users across Brazil who wanted them to verify information that they were receiving. The intensive exercise considered the following indicators :

- Level of Virality of the message
- Rate of Sharing of the message
- Toxicity of the message

Comprova utilized their web presence including their website, social media platforms, partner television and radio partners to broadcast the outcome of the verification. The format of a large number of messages spreading misinformation were supposedly static images with misleading content and numbers.

Even though there might not be a true measure of how much was the ratio between people who had access to the original message and the debunked message, the large scale participation of citizens, news rooms, fact checkers , electoral court and support from technology partners meant that all stakeholders were actively within their own limitations supporting containing misinformation.

Angela Pimenta - President of Projor, a founding member of 'Comprova' shared the following outcomes from the collaboration in an interview with Factly:

- There was a big again. There was a very dangerous hoax that was debunked. Some person presented himself as an expert in machine ballots and statistics and he was disputing the integrity of the process. He was alleging that he could prove rigging and that there was a plot to make sure a specific candidate lost the election. Comprova took several days to verify this claim, they spoke to many statisticians, they went to electoral court, found experts in electoral ballots and they debunked the hoax. They proved that there was no solid evidence to dispute to the integrity of the Brazilian electoral system. The debunk was so solid that the message did not garner much approval after that. This is very important because if people stopped believing in the election, there could not be a bigger disruption. The Electoral court also understood and experienced first-hand the crucial role of fact checkers and a collaboration like this.

- The creation of Comprova allowed us to see so many lies, that we now must call digital trash. This election was showed us the volume of digital trash and the scale at which it was being generated and shared.
- The most important takeaway from this project is that the authorities and a segment of Brazilians are able to accept the problem of misinformation as a real one and Comprova was able to bring to surface this public opinion.
- We just scratched the surface of the phenomenon. This is only sample but we are sure there is a lot that we still have not seen. But what we saw was potentially dangerous to the integrity of public discourse, very attached to the current political polarization in this country and to the antagonist discourse in the campaigns.

In spite of the inroads that ‘Comprova’ made during this Brazilian election, the scope of the collaboration was limited to fact checking and building a consensus about misinformation among the public. Ahead of a 10 day countdown to vote, Brazil’s leading newspaper investigated a major claim.

On October 18, the newspaper Folha de São Paulo reported that the marketing companies Quickmobile, Yacows, Croc Services, and SMSMarket made deals for “data-driven campaigns” not only with candidates but also with other companies. These deals were identified as corporate donation transactions which are unconstitutional in Brazil, based on a decision by the country’s Federal Supreme Court in 2015. The report also states that marketing agencies working on political campaigning combine and cross-reference information collected from social networks and databases of public information (like census data). Other data brokers, such as Seresa, considered to be the biggest data broker in the country, do not disclose the source of the data. Additionally, reporting by Folha de São Paulo confirms that sometimes employees of telecommunication companies provide user data to marketing companies illegally. What is happening now in Brazil violates two basic data protection principles: the principle of consent and the principle of purpose limitation. There is no information as to whether or how the data brokers and the agencies here asked people for their consent to use their data for targeted election propaganda. We doubt that the members of 1,500 WhatsApp groups gave consent to get ads from political campaigns. Moreover, when data are obtained through unauthorized access and later sold, this can constitute a crime (Pallero & Arroyo, 2018).⁵⁵

Paid activists and Bolsonaro supporters collaborated to send fake news blasts, potentially using illegally-acquired phone lists. They may have also used foreign cell phone chips to obscure their location and circumvent WhatsApp’s spamming restrictions (Nalon, 2018).⁵⁶

The findings and events during this Brazilian election strengthened the existing belief that scope and scale of misinformation is vast and varied and needs a multi-pronged approach and active participation of all stakeholders.

Academia, Civil Society & Discourse

Closely linked to the first recommendation made in this list of recommendations, academia emerges as a key stakeholder in the spread of awareness and literacy, but also of holistic education. As the part of society that takes stock of newer occurrences and developments, providing commentary and analyses, academia has the responsibility to take stock of the phenomenon of information disorder as well. Its role comes in the process of dispelling ignorance, and promoting fact-based education that presents diverse perspective for comprehensive accounts of complex phenomena.

In addition, academia is also home to efforts at researching and documenting occurrences in society. Towards this end, academia has inherent in it, the ability and responsibility of inquiring into the phenomenon of information disorder and presenting detailed research and analyses, in order to inform policymakers and the citizens, besides various other stakeholders. Collaborative research across disciplinary boundaries could tackle uni-dimensional perspectives on this phenomenon, by bringing in the technological, as well as the human.

With this phenomenon evolving around us in real time, academic collaboration and research insight can help shape our current experiences, thinking, and policy. The markers of conversation in a society at any given point of time, are seen in the kind of human stories that capture public interest. They determine the recording of epochal discourses at various junctures. With the proliferation of information disorder, the discourse generated through online echo chambers and newsmakers are rooted in falsities. The dissemination of certain kinds of information and news, while keeping out the rest, can create imbalance in information dissemination and flow. There exists the danger of these biases and false information getting fillip, becoming markers of larger discourses of today.

Research

Commissioning research in the area of information processing at the intersection of human behavior and technology use to develop literature, guidelines that can be piloted on the ground to combat information disorder. To give leverage to behavior and social sciences to study and give insights into the issue than to purely treat it as a problem that is product of technology.

Fund Allocation

Universities, think tanks, foundations and agencies working on information and human behaviour should mobilize and allocate funds to provide the support system for reports examining the information disorder.

For those individuals, it is hard to distinguish false from real news, and they need to learn how to evaluate news sources, not accept at face value everything they see on social media or digital news sites.

Helping people become better consumers of online information is crucial as the world moves towards digital immersion. There should be money to support partnerships between journalists, businesses, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations to encourage news literacy(West, 2017).⁵⁷

Collaboration

Provide space, subsidies and incentives to independent foundations and researchers to invest their time and resources in this area of study. Government could commission various departments across universities, to collaborate on a multidisciplinary project to bring out the various ramifications and aspects, tools and technologies to deal with fake news in the country. Academic partnerships can increase rigour and attention to detail in everyday practices across stakeholder spaces

Training

Journalism schools should mandatorily include training on tools, methods of verification in their curriculum and initiate students to fact checking networks and resources for them to understand the burden of proof and responsibility in the digital context and otherwise. Fact checking agencies can be integrated into these workshops to allow students in training to understand the process and importance of fact checking.

Partnerships

Cultivate relationships with technology platforms, government, and individuals to partner with them to design digital literacy materials and add value to them by localising content and language. Actively participate in disseminating information that is not easily accessible by using open data, instruments like Right to Information Act (RTI) and encourage other citizens to do the same. Hence, initiating and replicating open data systems & proactive disclosure in various aspects of public information dissemination would be able to aid the process of dispelling myths and rumours, and providing truthful information to the public.

Case Study : Gadwal District, Telangana, India - 2018

Gadwal is a small town and administrative subdivision headquarters of the southern state of Telangana in India. The local literacy rate hovers around 50 percent, roughly 25 percent below the national average, and the area has a history of political violence (Marlow, 2018)⁵⁸ Rema Rajeshwari, officer from the Indian Police Service (IPS) took over as the regional police chief in March 2018. She implemented the concept of a specific police constable for every village in order to develop an organic relationship between the grievances of the people and the police force and to ensure that the constable becomes the contact person at the village level. In one of the review meetings, one constable highlighted something unusual in the village he was in-charge of. He informed the group about villagers not sleeping outside their houses in summer, and locking themselves up, which was quite unusual for the region in Telangana, during extremely hot summers. The other constables also got back observing that the same happened in the other villages also. It was found that the villagers were getting WhatsApp messages of an inter-state criminal gang doing the rounds.

Rajeshwari worried WhatsApp rumors had the potential to spark violent riots if Hindus clashed with Muslims.

This region has always been sensitive. That's why we were so worried about WhatsApp. Any trigger could set it off. We had to educate our officers first, before sending them out into the community to educate the people. I also spoke to hundreds of village leaders. They deployed drummers to sing about fake news before her team began their work. We told the villagers to look at the people who are in these videos because many of them did not even look Indian. Some of the videos are from South America, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar. Local leaders have added her officers into local WhatsApp groups, where the police could monitor messages flowing across the encrypted service. In the first phase the police personnel were trained through a daylong workshop on how to differentiate between real and fake news. A cache of images and videos were looked at and it was found that most of them were morphed. After undergoing training, they conducted a massive door to door campaign and met every individual in the villages at fields, at Mahila Samakhya, in schools and colleges. They tried to allay the fears of the villagers especially about the interstate gangs, but it was not of great use. There were about 13 different incidents, including 6 criminal cases reported in the district. The fear aroused by a viral audio in local dialect on WhatsApp, warning the villagers against strangers led to these incidents. We ironically, had to resort to ancient communication methods to battle a challenge thrown up by modern technology. The police used dandoras and those who could sing and dance were trained to do folk performances and enlighten the people on the gravity of the issue at hand. Since section 79 of the IT Act doesn't hold the intermediary accountable for inflammatory content circulated on social platform, it was difficult to track down the source of these fake messages. Educating the people was the only solution to these problems and their efforts in this direction put them on the national map. (Summary Report Government of Telangana Roundtable, Hyderabad, 2018).⁵⁹

FACTLY interviewed Rema Rajeshwari, IPS to learn more about her initiative. The following are the core points of our conversation

- A day-long event was held, where the messages and videos were examined. It seemed clear that they were morphed or made up. A PowerPoint presentation was made, to teach the Police Officers how to differentiate between a real image and a fake one, who were then asked to carry these messages to the villages as well. In the first phase, a door-to-door campaign was conducted, requesting people to not believe in these rumours.

- All of them have mobile phones, and access to the Internet because of the cheaper data plans. Their literacy is mainly visual, and people feel that what they receive is true, especially when received multiple times from trusted sources like family and friends. This is when the team realised the need for campaign. It is difficult to do a door to door campaign. That's when they contacted local drummer or dappu artistes, training them to give the messages in one minute.
- The police folk artistes team, of the Police Cultural Group wrote a song on fake news and Rema Rajeshwari helped with the lyrics. The song became a huge hit in the villages. Communicating through songs and dance had a good reach. Some people were arrested because they were making the most of the situation and even indulging in lynching.

Gadwal initiative is an example of innovative application of traditional folk communication methods to counter problems stemming from digital content. If such initiatives can be scaled/ replicated to suit local needs by civil society organisations in partnership with government and law enforcement, they can change and inculcate critical thinking and skepticism about content they interact and participate.

Conclusion

We conclude that the findings of the report indicate the need to re-evaluate and define the problem of fake news and collectively take responsibility for the information crisis looming over the country. The goal of this report is to provide information and understanding of the narrative around unverified information and the different aspects that influence, sustain and motivate sharing of the same. The report is an attempt to constructively layout best practices and in depth understanding of the underlying challenges that information disorder creates.

Our exhaustive recommendation section was consolidated by integrating our survey results in the context of stakeholder opinions. We strongly believe that several aspects of the report could be used as markers to initiate discourse and debate the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders that could change the ecosystem of fake news in India. We hope that the goal of setting a precedent of research findings that can be applied in real time motivates other institutions, agencies and people to engage in this field of study by looking at it from an intersection of human behavior and technology point of view and not engage in tunnel vision being a problem of either or.



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Annexures



Here is a list of people approached for the purpose of interviews

People Approached	Affiliation
Ponnurangam Kumaraguru	IIIT Delhi
Sarvjeet Singh	National Law University, Delhi
Madhavi Ravikumar	University of Hyderabad
Chitralkha Dhamija	Jawaharlal Nehru University
Saima Saeed	Jamia Milia Islamia
Kanchan Kaur	IJNM, Bangalore
Pratik Sinha	Alt News
Rema Rajeshwari	IPS, Government of Telangana
Jayesh Ranjan	IAS, Principal Secretary, IT, Government of Telangana
Chetan Krishnaswamy	Google
Shivnath Thukral	Facebook
Payal Kamat	Twitter
A S Murthy	C-DAC
Dr. Keseva Rao Devulapalli	Telangana Psychiatric Society
Pankaj Jain	SM Hoax Slayer
Harsh Poddar	IPS, Government of Maharashtra
Jency Jacob	BOOM
Shammas Oliyath	Check4Spam
Mohammed Mir Ali	IAS, Kannur, Government of Kerala
Abhinandan Sekhri	News Laundry
Dhimant Parekh	The Better India
Supriya Sharma	Scroll
R Jagannathan	Swarajya Magazine
Official email on the website	Post Card
Siddharth Varadarajan	The Wire
Naresh Fernandes	Scroll
Mishi Choudhary	Software Freedom Law Centre
Joshua Benton	Nieman Lab
Tathagata Satpathy	Biju Janata Dal
Shashi Tharoor	Indian National Congress
CN Jayadevan	CPI
Kavitha Kalvakuntla	TRS
Derek O Brien	Trinamool Congress
Mazher Hussain	COVA

Atishi Marlena	Aam Aadmi Party
Mukund Padmanabhan	The Hindu
Jaideep Bose	The Times of India
Sukumar Ranganathan	Hindustan Times
Raj Kamal Jha	Indian Express
R Rajagopal	Telegraph
Uma Sudhir	NDTV
Navika Kumar	Times Now
Arnab Goswami	Republic TV
Pawan Varma	Janata Dal (U)
Rajeev Chandrashekar	Bharatiya Janata Party
Trushar Barot	BBC News
Raju Narisetti	Columbia University
Rohit Chopra	Santa Clara University
Sunil Abraham	Centre for Internet and Society
Anja Kovacs	Internet Democracy Project
Bedavyasa Mohanty	Observer Research Foundation
KG Suresh	Indian Institute of Mass Communication
Joint Secretary	Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Government of India
Sreenivasan Jain	NDTV
Vinay Sahasrabudde	Bharatiya Janata Party
Rohit Saran	The Times of India
Claire Wardle	First Draft
Divya Spandana	Indian National Congress
Nikhil Alve	Indian National Congress
Nupur J Sharma	OpIndia
Prasanna Viswanathan	Swarajya
Nandgopal Rajan	Indian Express
Vikas Khanchandani	Republic TV
Jay Van Bavel	New York University
Nivedith Alva	Indian National Congress
Raji Nagarkar	LinkedIn
HR Venkatesh	Journalist and Researcher
Sundeep Muppidi	University of Hartford
Manish Khanduri	Facebook
Ben Supple	WhatsApp
Amit Malviya	Bharatiya Janata Party
Pranav Dixit	BuzzFeed News
Angela Pimenta	Projor (Brazil)

Here is a list of people interviewed for the project

People Interviewed (who agreed to be named)	Affiliation
Madhavi Ravi Kumar	University of Hyderabad
Kanchan Kaur	IJNM, Bangalore
Pratik Sinha	Alt News
Rema Rajeshwari	IPS, Government of Telangana
Jayesh Ranjan	IAS, Principal Secretary, IT, Government of Telangana
A S Murthy	C-DAC
Dr. Keseva Rao Devulapalli	Telangana Psychiatric Society
Harsh Poddar	IPS, Government of Maharashtra
Jency Jacob	BOOM
Bal Krishn Birla	Check4Spam
Mohammed Mir Ali	IAS, Kannur, Government of Kerala
Abhinandan Sekhri	News Laundry
Rohan Venkataramakrishnan	Scroll
Mishi Choudhary	Software Freedom Law Centre
Mazher Hussain	COVA
Nandagopal Rajan	Indian Express
Uma Sudhir	NDTV
Raju Narisetti	Columbia University
Rohit Chopra	Santa Clara University
Bedavyasa Mohanty	Observer Research Foundation
Claire Wardle	First Draft
Nupur J Sharma	Opindia
Prasanna Viswanathan	Swarajya Magazine
Angela Pimenta	Projor (Brazil)
HR Venkatesh	Journalist and Researcher
Sundeepp Muppidi	University of Hartford
Trushar Barot	BBC News
Anushree Bishnoi	Unfound
Maya Mirchandani	Observer Research Foundation
Anonymous	WhatsApp
Anonymous	Google

About IAMAI

The Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI] is a young and vibrant association with ambitions of representing the entire gamut of digital businesses in India. It was established in 2004 by the leading online publishers, but in the last 14 years has come to effectively address the challenges facing the digital and online industry including online publishing, mobile advertising, online advertising, e-commerce, mobile content and services, mobile & digital payments, and emerging sectors such as fin-tech, edu-tech and health-tech, among others. Fourteen years after its establishment, the association is still the only professional industry body representing the digital and mobile content industry in India. The association is registered under the Societies Act and is a recognized charity in Maharashtra. With a membership of over 300 Indian and MNC companies, and with offices in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Kolkata, the association is well placed to work towards charting a growth path for the digital industry in India.

About Factly

Factly Media & Research is an organization striving to make public data & information more accessible to citizens. Factly was established in 2017 and does the following

Data Journalism/Fact Check: Factly's written and visual stories lay out facts with evidence and help separate the wheat from the chaff in times of hyper connectivity and constant information bombardment. The content aims to simplify public data & information that might otherwise be in complex forms.

Information Tools: Creating and developing tools that will increase access to public data and information by making it easy, interactive and intuitive. Counting India is Factly's first tool in its beta version that focuses on accessibility and data visualization of Census-2011 data. Factly is currently working on other tools that are in the development stage.

Advocating Open Data: Factly believes that for better public engagement with government data, the supply side also has to be strengthened. Factly actively advocates 'Open Data' policy to governments and agencies that house large amounts of public information.