

# Media Literacy – The Key to Responsible Media Use

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## Introduction

Governments across the world are desperately looking for ways to curb falsities on the Internet. Some are passing new laws, others are exploring technological solutions to block fake news and some are clamping down on the social media networks.

One has to understand that the social media revolution is not a bad thing to have happened. Social Media is not all bad. In fact, it is the single most important development towards the empowerment of the masses. It has democratized information and communication. It is the carrier of free speech, so essential to a democracy.

As with any other good thing to happen, there are those who will misuse and abuse it, though. Freedom, to be complete, demands responsibility from those who wish to enjoy it.

That is the key to develop a broader understand of the issue.

Simply because some people are misusing it, do we block out Social Media? Just because some people tell lies, do we chop off everyone's tongue?

Lies are bad not because they are uttered, but because they are heard and acted upon. Those who post fake news would become powerless if their desired reaction does not take place. Any curbs on the Social Media would amount to restricting the freedom of speech and expression. In fact, they wouldn't work even if deployed. So what would work?

This paper argues that instead of concentrating at the source end of the problem, we should be looking at the receiver end. Creating awareness among Social Media consumers through the concept of Media Literacy may take a bit of time, but it would be a lasting solution.

## **The ‘Fake News’ phenomenon**

Just about everyone has an opinion on the media – good, bad or ugly. That’s because just about everyone is a media consumer.

This rising despondency regarding the news media amongst many of its consumers is the most worrying current phenomenon. It is as dangerous as citizens in a democracy losing interest in voting.

As with electoral politics, the disdain expressed by people over the news media is because of a feeling of powerlessness in bringing it about to honest public-serving ways.

Already, the common man has been subjected to an overdose of falsities via the unbridled social media.

Inaccurate, biased and purely false news reporting by the mainstream media is not new. Over the years, one has seen not one but many examples of unintentional as well as deliberate distortion or misrepresentation of facts in media coverage the world over, even in democratic societies with a free press.

So, why all this hullabaloo over ‘fake news’ now?

First, that the current spate of false information comes through the cyber space which, as yet, is inadequately governed by laws. Second, panic over the popularity of social networking sites, has caused the mainstream media to lift such unverified information, thus, in a way, legitimizing the falsehoods. In the present context, ‘fake news’ has been defined as false information or propaganda published under the guise of true happenings or authentic news. The present context has arisen with an unexpected and unprecedented flooding of the public domain by hoaxes and untruths mainly via Internet sources.

‘Echo Chambers’ and ‘Filter Bubbles’ have been created and ‘Post-truth’ has emerged as the biggest threat in the world of Mass Communication because people are more likely to accept a piece of information based on their emotions and beliefs rather than on facts.

The Internet revolution that swept across the globe in the 21st century gave a whole new meaning and context to the term ‘fake news’. The Internet-enabled social media – social networking sites and mobile messaging applications – have given the power to publish and broadcast to anyone with access to the technology. Their number, estimated for 2017 by Statista, is 2.46 billion. India alone will account for more than 226 million of them in 2018; the most popular social networks being YouTube and Facebook, followed by WhatsApp.

Twentyfirst century fake news is often intended to increase the financial profits of the news outlet. In an interview with NPR (National Public Radio, USA), Jestin Coler, former CEO of the fake media conglomerate Disinfomedia, said his company employed 20 to 25 writers at a time and made \$10,000 to \$30,000 monthly from advertisements.

Disinfomedia is not the only outlet responsible for the distribution of fake news; Facebook users play a major role in feeding into fake news stories by making sensationalized stories "trend", according to BuzzFeed media editor Craig Silverman. According to a 2017 BuzzFeed article, fake news writer, Paul Horner stated that a story of his about a rape festival in India helped generate over \$250,000 in donations to GiveIndia, a site that helps rape victims in India.

Things came to a head in the 2016 US Presidential Election campaign during which fake news and fake accounts spread lies and half-truths about the candidates peaked. Many of the fake news websites that sprang up during the campaign have been traced to a small city in Macedonia, where teenagers were pumping out sensational stories to earn cash from advertising.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, described it as a “pretty crazy idea” that fake news on Facebook influenced the election in any way. A few days later, he blogged that Facebook was looking for ways to flag fake news stories.

In 2017, the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee claimed that fake news was one of the three most significant new disturbing Internet trends that must first be resolved, if the Internet is to be capable of truly "serving humanity." The other two new disturbing trends that Berners-Lee described as threatening the Internet were the recent surge in the use of the Internet by governments for both citizen-surveillance purposes, and for cyber-warfare purposes.

### **A Global Concern**

The response of many nations has been to crack down on the platforms that make use of the Internet to carry out their businesses or operations. In September 2017, the European Commission issued guidelines for web companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter to follow on hate speech and incitement to violence and terror. According to media reports, the Commission has warned that if the web companies do not comply, it would enact laws that could lead to heavy fines.

Germany has already passed a law - The Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz (NetzDG) – which came into force in October 2017. In the United Kingdom, a parliamentary committee (the Culture, Media and Sport Committee) was hearing oral evidence and accepting written submissions in the matter of fake news. French President Emmanuel Macron has already said he will overhaul media law in France this year to fight the spread of "fake news" on social media.

Fianna Fail – The Republican Party in Ireland introduced a bill in December 2017 to tackle the rise of fake accounts and “orchestrated, anti-democratic online campaigns” on social media. The Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CTHH) a unit of the Ministry of the Interior

of the Czech Republic primarily aimed at countering disinformation, fake news, hoaxes and foreign propaganda, started operations on January 1, 2017.

In The Philippines, there is a law that makes the publication of "false news" a crime punishable by longer imprisonment and heavier fines. In Indonesia, the Communications Ministry blocked 11 websites earlier this year, mostly for spreading hate speech and fake news. Under existing Singapore law, "Any person who transmits or causes to be transmitted a message which he knows to be false or fabricated shall be guilty of an offence".

In India, the Internet is covered under the Information Technology Act of 2008 and there are more than a dozen civil and criminal laws that relate to the mainstream media, including those for defamation and disturbing social harmony.

Throwing up a challenge to policing the Internet by the web companies and law enforcement agencies are the personal messaging applications. For Instance, in Facebook-owned WhatsApp one cannot search for conversations or statuses. These are closed groups within which the spread of rumours and falsities has seen an exponential rise over the years. A user can take a screenshot of the content and share it with appropriate law enforcement authorities. There are more WhatsApp users in India than there are on Facebook.

Policing the cyberspace became a bit more difficult after the Supreme Court of India struck off Article 66A from the Information Technology Act, the main instrument available to the authorities to govern the Internet. There are provisions in the IPC and CrPC to check malafide and malicious posts on social media, but awareness and willingness are low in equal measure among users as well as law-keepers. As for the mainstream media, there again are adequate laws. Even the freedom of speech and expression granted by Article 19(i)(a) of the Indian Constitution does not come without restrictions.

## **Who will Bell the Cat? – Media Literacy**

Media Literacy is the ability of the common consumers to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. According to the Centre for Media Literacy, it “builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”

For centuries, literacy has referred to the ability to read and write. Today, we get most of our information through an interwoven system of media technologies. The ability to read many types of media has become an essential skill in the 21st Century. Media literate youth and adults are better able to understand the complex messages we receive from television, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, video games, music, and all other forms of media.

Media literacy skills can help youth and adults:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Understand how media messages shape our culture and society
- Identify target marketing strategies
- Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
- Name the techniques of persuasion used
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
- Discover the parts of the story that are not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, skills, beliefs, and values
- Create and distribute our own media messages
- Advocate for media justice

To become a successful student, responsible citizen, productive worker, or competent and conscientious consumer, individuals need to develop expertise with the increasingly

sophisticated information and entertainment media that address us on a multi-sensory level, affecting the way we think, feel, and behave.

Media literacy does raise critical questions about the impact of media and technology, but it is not an anti-media movement. Rather, it represents a coalition of concerned individuals and organizations, including educators, faith-based groups, health care-providers, and citizen and consumer groups, who seek a more enlightened way of understanding our media environment.

In other words, to learn to raise the right questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to. Len Masterman, the acclaimed author of *Teaching the Media*, calls it "critical autonomy" or the ability to think for oneself. Without this fundamental ability, an individual cannot have full dignity as a human person or exercise citizenship in a democratic society where to be a citizen is to both understand and contribute to the debates of the time.

Media literacy is important because it helps one avoid inaccurate news and remain properly educated about current events. The avoidance of inaccurate news is important as it helps one access the right source of information. It is important that as a consumer of media, one takes into account the type of information they're receiving and where they are receiving it from.

### **Checking the Facts**

Where on the one hand, the ignorant, gullible and mischievous are flooding the Internet media with falsities, on the other there is an ever-growing band of truth warriors and hoax slayers who have made it a mission to cleanse cyber space.

Fact-checking websites, including Snopes.com and FactCheck.org, have posted guides to spotting and avoiding fake news websites. New critical readings of media events and news with an emphasis on literalism and logic have also emerged.

In 2017 media activists started a website [Konspiratori.cz](http://Konspiratori.cz) maintaining a list of conspiracy and fake news outlets in Czech. The Taiwanese government has introduced "media literacy" in school curricula. The course provides training in journalism in the new information society. It aims to develop the critical thinking skills needed while using social media. Further, the work of media literacy will also include the skills needed to analyze propaganda and sources, so the student can identify fake news.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published a summary in diagram form (pictured at right) to assist people in recognizing fake news.

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), launched in 2015, catalyses international collaborative efforts in fact-checking, provides training and has published a code of principles. In 2017 it introduced an application and vetting process for journalistic organisations. A global alliance of tech industry and academic organisations unveiled plans in April to work together to combat the spread of "fake news" and improve public understanding of journalism. The News Integrity Initiative has the backing of Facebook, the Ford Foundation, Mozilla and others.

India-based portal 'Firstpost' put out a 'Reading news on the internet for dummies' guide, which has some insights on how to not fall prey to fake news. It is a tutorial in identifying sources, corroborating them, separating a news report from a feature from an opinion, identifying clickbait, identifying biases and such other skills. Another Indian news portal called The Quint has started a section called Webquf that debunks fake news (a play on words, as bewquf means "stupid" in Hindi).

BBC Hindi and The Quint have come together to launch a 'Swachh Digital India' mission (borrowing the term from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's much-publicised 'Swachh (clean) India Mission'). They're looking to educate newsrooms and readers to be alert to fake news; to

find easy, accessible ways to seek out the facts; and also to involve readers, citizen journalists and tech gurus in the effort.

Some of the most popular citizen-driven anti-fake news websites in India are: ‘Boom FactCheck (BFC)’, established by Govindraj Ethiraj, ‘Social Media Hoax Slayer (SMHS)’, started and run by Pankaj Jain, ‘Alt News’ run by Pratik Sinha’s and ‘check4spam.com’ by Shammass Oliyath and Bal Krishn Birla.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

We can thus conclude that legal or technological curbs on Social Media would be less effective in the long run than creating an atmosphere of rational and critical thinking and responsible behavior among the consumers themselves.

The time is right to launch a movement for Media Literacy. Looking at the success of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s “Swatchha Bharat Abhiyaan” (Clean India Movement) one can safely expect success of a “Swatchha Internet Abhiyaan” (Clean Internet Movement). It would have to begin with the people’s representatives and the political parties as they are the ones perceived to be the biggest generators of potentially harmful politically-motivated posts, particularly during election periods.

Concerted public awareness campaigns at government and private establishments, educational institutions, residential areas and even religious centres need to be organized. Educationists, students, mainstream journalists, social workers and spiritual leaders should first enlighten themselves and then take on the role of Media Literacy facilitators.

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