



ONSLAUGHT OF INFODEMIC

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ABSTRACT

In this digital era, the world is reachable in one click. This has brought and increased the proliferation of false or misleading information. Distinguishing between genuine facts and fabulists is not always easy, and with so much of the time we spend online committed either to sharing links or reading ones that have been shared with us, not only does the junk get trusted, it also gets widely disseminated, creating a ripple effect of falsehoods that can mislead people and even endanger lives. Fake news often reverberates in the form of rumours which is an uncorroborated compelling story or a part of the news that may be accurate or formulated and spreads rapidly among people causing infodemic of fallacious information. It undermines serious media coverage and has increased yellow journalism. Publication of false content is done in such a manner that attracts users which indirectly benefits the advertisers and improves ratings.

This article posits the problems caused by misinformation and the actions taken by the United Nations to put restrictions on infodemic. It further deals with the legal provisions which are specifically prevailing in India and its effect on the on-going pandemic situation. Through this article the author wants its readers to get the proper intellect about the infodemic of fallacious information with some important suggestions attached at the end of the article.

KEYWORDS: - *infodemic of fallacious information, fake news, pandemic.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, one false report was published about the American President that he had been injured in an attack on the White House sent the Dow Jones on a US\$136 billion dive.¹ The false allegation that Hillary Clinton was operating a child-trafficking ring from the basement of a Washington pizzeria prompted a man to investigate with an assault rifle² and it may have influenced the 2016 US election.³ Fake news is widely considered a substantial security threat, in particular, if it is state-sponsored.⁴ Accordingly, various actors are now contemplating how to counter it. These above are some of the fake news which prevailed in the past few years and had

¹M. Fisher, 'Syrian Hackers Claim AP Hack That Tipped Stock Market by \$136 Billion. Is It Terrorism?', Washington Post (23 April 2013), available

at www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/04/23/syrian-hackers-claim-ap-hack-that-tipped-stock-market-by-136-billion-is-it-terrorism/?utm_term=.a9adecac21bc.

² M. Fisher, J.W. Cox and P. Herman, 'Pizzagate: From Rumor to Hashtag, to Gunfire in D.C.', Washington Post (6 December 2016), available at www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-

dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html.

³ In a December 2016 poll, 14 percent of Trump supporters believed Pizzagate to be true, 32 per cent were not sure. 'Trump Remains Unpopular; Voters Prefer Obama on SCOTUS Pick', Public Policy Polling (9 December 2016), available at www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2016/12/trump-remains-unpopular-voters-prefer-obama-on-scotus-pick.html.

⁴O'Malley and Levin, 'How to Counter Fake News', Foreign Affairs (5 January 2017), available at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2017-01-05/how-counter-fake-news.



created some sort of disturbance among the people at large.

Fake news which is also known as junk-news or deceptive news consists of deliberate hoaxes masquerading as genuine information that permeates via traditional print, broadcast media, and social media. There could be many reasons for the publication of false information. An individual may broadcast forged information to deceive in order to damage the reputation of a person or an entity or to gain superiority over them financially or politically. This type of content can be created by the motivation of partisanship and propaganda. Information is organized around “facts” which is used to recite stories. However, the major obstacle is that fact-based evidence is not relevant to a growing segment of the population. News agencies need facts to convey stories and to engage the audience they often publish deceptive statements instead of shaping the narrative around “facts”. Nowadays many sensationalists and clickbait stories use fabricated headlines to increase their readership. The post-truth political easy approach to online advertising revenue and the popularity of social media are some of the reasons for the pervasiveness of dishonest news which competes with licit news stories.

Seven types of problematic content with the intent to defraud has been identified- Satire, which has the potential to fool; Misleading context, which is used to frame an issue; Imposter content, when authenticated sources are impersonated with the made-up sources; Fabricated content, which is formulated to harm; False connection, when the headlines

don't support the contents; False context, when verified content is shared with erroneous facts; Manipulated content, when genuine particulars are manipulated to deceive.

SOCIAL MEDIA: BIGGEST SOURCE OF MISINFORMATION

With the emergence of the internet and social media, the world is battling a deluge of ‘information disorder’, where it has become tremendously difficult to disambiguate genuineness from falsehood. Fabrications of rumours are the lethal weapon that influences the morale of people. Many miscreants, because of the user-friendly features, are now using social media platforms to spread rumours to cause disruption in society. The content and the network can easily be manipulated by sharing links with legitimate number of users or even the spreaders may form groups by connecting with each other. It begins by being a common source of entertainment but soon may transform into a reliable resource of knowledge. Internet falsehood has made people more reckless and less discerning.

Social media has accelerated the spread of lies and political polarization has made people believe them. There are all sorts of misleading posts ranging from incorrect data to a whole new story. The news of forest fires in Uttarakhand is not remotely as severe as online posts have been overflowed with pictures exhibiting patches of forest on fire, erroneously professed to be from Uttarakhand. The old images were circulated claiming it to be recent ones.⁵ Another false

⁵ Poonam Ahuja, ‘Uttarakhand Forest Fire: Fake news, old photos being circulated on social media, says forest department’, Mumbai mirror (27 May

2020), available at <https://mumbaiirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/uttarakhand-forest-fire-fake-news-old-photos-being->



report was the controversial bois locker room case in which the screenshots of objectionable remarks about girls were circulated, became viral, and received hatred from all over the social media. Later, it was found that a minor girl had created a fake Snapchat account in the name of a boy to judge the character of her other male friends.⁶ Fake news on social media can be spread through spam, crowdsourcing, troll, in the form of hate speeches, and cyber bullying. In order to tackle this problem, social media channels have taken several initiatives to calm people and avoid chaos. For instance, Facebook has claimed to develop an artificial intelligence system that can recognize and deactivate fake accounts and disseminate fake news.⁷

BOMBARDMENT OF INFODEMIC IN THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

“We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous.”

– Dr. T.A. Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO

Fake news in itself is a very big issue but as soon as the spread of pandemic took a stance, the fake news too turned into an infodemic. For four months people are fighting this pandemic with the infodemic too. The false news era has been exacerbated by the

coronavirus pandemic. As defined by the United Nations Organisation, an infodemic is a profusion of information – some authentic and some not – taking place during an epidemic. It makes it extremely hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable counselling when they need it. Like pathogens in epidemics, disinformation has always been a destabilizing feature of disease outbreaks which spreads further and faster and adds complexity to health emergency response.

This global pandemic is controlling each and every aspect of an individual’s life. This pandemic has made people curious and turned them to believe in each & every information that surfaced online without any verification. Rumours about the novel coronavirus have advanced online as fast as the infection itself. Ranging from origins, cures, fake advisories, and conspiracy theories, no dearth of creativity is left in spreading false information. People are falling prey to misinformation day by day and are unaware of how to get out of this rabbit hole. Nevertheless, when the social media platforms are contemplated to spread awareness and factual information between the people, it is hapless that these platforms become the biggest sources of Infodemic which is hampering the response to the pandemic. Delinquents are taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of people, and the officials around the globe are forced to tackle an avalanche of false news about COVID-19

[circulated-on-social-media-says-forest-department/articleshow/76031510.cms](https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/article/new-twist-in-bois-locker-room-circulated-on-social-media-says-forest-department/articleshow/76031510.cms)

⁶ Nakshab Khan, 'Bois Locker Room probe: Minor girl created a fake profile to test boy's character, says Delhi Police', Times Now (11 May 2020), available at [https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/article/new-twist-in-bois-locker-room-](https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/article/new-twist-in-bois-locker-room-circulated-on-social-media-says-forest-department/articleshow/76031510.cms)

[case-juvenile-girl-created-fake-profile-to-test-boys-say-delhi-police/589894](https://thenextweb.com/neural/2020/03/04/how-facebooks-new-ai-system-has-deactivated-more-than-100m-fake-accounts/)

⁷ Thomas Macaulay, 'How Facebook's new AI system has deactivated billions of fake news', TNW (4 March 2020), available at <https://thenextweb.com/neural/2020/03/04/how-facebooks-new-ai-system-has-deactivated-more-than-100m-fake-accounts/>



on digital platforms. One of the leading reasons why misinformation regarding pandemic is gaining traction is that it's a topic that scares the daylight out of us. The more emotional valence something we read online has, the likelier we are to pass it on—either to share the joy if it's something good or unburdens ourselves if it's bad.

Since the very beginning of this pandemic, many articles have been surfaced online on various social media platforms causing panic and confusion among people. These included- a video claiming that a man is spitting on food giving communal angle in spreading coronavirus⁸; a fake doctor's prescription⁹ on how to cure coronavirus; Trump's bizarre claims on disinfectant and sunlight killing coronavirus¹⁰ and many more. These claims were made without any scientific evidence or research backup. Infodemic is making the pandemic even worse. It affects the decision-making process of an individual which may mentally affect him causing anxiety or depression.

Social Media is the nimblest way to propagate information with extensive coverage across the globe. It has taken over the traditional form of information sharing. Many intermediaries like WhatsApp and

Facebook has taken initiatives to tackle misinformation by introducing pop-ups and information center page which redirects the user to the original WHO source.¹¹ One of the initiatives includes the introduction of an official chatbox.¹² It creates awareness by providing official documents verifying information about the virus.

THE UNITED NATIONS TAKE ON INFODEMIC OF FAKE NEWS

From deception about the use of disinfectants to battle the coronavirus, to bogus cases that the infection can spread through radio waves and versatile systems, temperamental information is harming the worldwide effort to vanquish the COVID-19 pandemic. By dissipating rumours, fake news, and messages of loathing and division, the United Nations is working to spread detailed instruction and directives of expectation and solidarity.

To revitalize powers behind this effort, the United Nations is propelling another COVID-19 Communications Response Initiative dependent on science, solutions, and solidarity to fight infodemic.

⁸ Ayaan Khan, 'Video of Man 'Spitting on Food' Does Not Show 'Corona Jihad'', The Quint (03 April 2020), available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/covid-19-old-video-of-man-spitting-on-food-given-communal-angle>

⁹ Team Webqoof, 'Fake Prescription of Ganga Ram Hospital's Doctor Goes Viral', The Quint (12 June 2020), available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/ganga-ram-hospital-doctor-fake-prescription>

¹⁰ Himanshi Dahiya, 'Trump's Bizarre Claims: 'Disinfectant, Sunlight Can Kill Covid-19'', The Quint, (25 April 2020), available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/trumps-bizarre-claims-disinfectant-sunlight-can-kill-covid-19>

¹¹ Emma Bowman, 'Facebook Steps Up Efforts to Combat the Spread of Coronavirus Misinformation', NPR (26 March 2020), available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/26/822245048/facebook-steps-up-efforts-to-combat-the-spread-of-coronavirus-misinformation>

¹² Anumeha Chaturvedi, 'Govt launches chatbox on WhatsApp to create awareness about coronavirus, curb misinformation', The Economic Times (22 March 2020), available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/govt-launches-chatbot-on-whatsapp-to-create-awareness-about-coronavirus-curb-misinformation/articleshow/74750648.cms>



*Here are some examples of how the United Nations is tackling the spread of misinformation.*¹³

1. Producing and disseminating facts and accurate information

The World Health Organization (WHO), which is at the bleeding edge of the fight against the pandemic, is transmitting legitimate data dependent on science while additionally looking to counter myths.

Due to the high demand for convenient and dependable data about COVID-19, WHO has set up the Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) that joins specialized and social media teams working near the track and respond to misinformation, myths, and rumours. It will provide customized data and evidence for action.

2. Collaborating with businesses

Collaborating with WhatsApp and Facebook, WHO launched dedicated informing administrations in several languages, including Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, to share basic directions on COVID-19. This easy-to-use informing administration could reach up to 2 billion individuals and permits WHO to get the realities straightforwardly into individuals' hands.

WHO additionally collaborated with Rakuten Viber to dispatch another interactive chatbot which aims to get accurate data about COVID-19 to individuals in different languages? This

association gives WHO the possibility to reach more than 1 billion individuals in their nearby language straightforwardly through their cell phones.

WHO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), with help from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), are approaching all media transmission organizations worldwide to join their drive to help release the intensity of communication technology to save lives from COVID-19 through text messages.

3. Working with media and journalists

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have published two strategy briefs that assess the COVID-19 'disinfodemic' of misinformation, fabrications and falsehood. This was backed by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), which is assisting journalists concerned with the frontlines of the "disinfodemic" around the world, to ensure precise, reliable and testable public health information reaches communities everywhere.

The Bureau of UNESCO's International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) has affirmed several activities in Africa, India and the Caribbean.

4. Mobilizing civil society

The United Nations works intimately with a large number of civil society associations around the globe that are related with the UN Department of Global Communications

¹³By the Department of Global Communications, '5 Ways the UN is fighting 'infodemic' United Nations Covid-19 Response, available at [https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-](https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation)

[communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation](https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation)



(DGC) and partnered with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

5. Standing up for rights

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stood in opposition to prohibitive measures imposed by several States against the autonomous media, as well as the arrest and intimidation of journalists, saying the free stream data was crucial in battling COVID-19.

LAWS PREVALENT

International Law

The Broadcasting Convention's purpose, as expressed in its preamble and operating provisions, is the protection of 'good international understanding'. This normal intrigue is shielded from specific broadcasts. For this article, the central provision is **Article 3(1)**,¹⁴ which, as per its '*travaux préparatoires*',¹⁵ was expressly intended to cover the news.

While **Article 3** of the Broadcasting Convention absolutely applies to false news, it is faulty if it is abused by just mutilated news.¹⁶ This would not exclusively be conflicting with the normal signs of 'inaccuracy' since, regardless of post-current questions in the scientific community,¹⁷ whether an announcement is 'correct' or 'incorrect' is resolved, in standard language,

by a simple correspondence hypothesis of truth – that is, the agreement of the statement with reality. This was likewise the perspective on the Drafting Committee: 'inaccuracy' is taken in the current sense of charges conflicting with the truth.¹⁸ The French word 'estimation' appears to be fairly progressively open to a more extensive understanding but ultimately the purpose behind **Article 3**¹⁹ is to counter false data, not incorrect interpretations or a certain presentation of facts. The League of Nations previously used the category of 'distorted' news for the latter.²⁰

Indian Laws

Fallacious information may have serious consequences if left unchecked. Presently, India doesn't have a particular law to manage the 'infodemic' however there are certain legal provisions under different statutes that are evocable in case a person is caught circulating fake news during or after this pandemic.

Section 66D of the Information Technology Act, 2000

This section stipulates punishment for cheating by personation through any communication or computer device and provides that, such person shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years and

¹⁴ See League of Nations, Treaty Series, [vol.186, p.301.](#); [vol.197, p.394.](#) and [vol.200, p.557.](#)

¹⁵ Preliminary Draft International Agreement for the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace, Doc. C.12.1934.XII, 4 January 1934, Annex 1, at 4. Cf. J.B. Whitton and A. Larson, *Propaganda* (1964), at 255, holding Art. 3 to address 'false news'.

¹⁶ Affirmative: Krause, *supra* note 91, at 49; Lange, *supra* note 79, at 109;

¹⁷ For an overview, see Searle, 'Why Should You Believe It?' *New York Review of Books* (24 September 2009), at 88.

¹⁸ See the Draft Broadcasting Convention, *supra* note 69, at 16.

¹⁹ See League of Nations, Treaty Series, [vol.186, p.301.](#); [vol.197, p.394.](#) and [vol.200, p.557.](#)

²⁰ Leagues of Nations, *supra* note 8.



shall also be liable to fine which may extend to rupees one lac.

Section 505²¹ of the Indian Penal Code, 1860

This provision consists of the statements conducive to Public Mischief and provides that such person shall be punished with imprisonment for a term of three years and shall also be liable for fine or both.

Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005

This provision consists of Punishment for False Warning and provides that such person shall be awarded one year of imprisonment or fine or both.

Section 54²² of the NDMA is quite certain to disasters and the bounds of fake news are much far away. Indian Penal Code is an increasingly appropriate plan of action accessible to the victim of deception. The Ministry of Home Affairs in its roundabout dated second April 2020 notices the appropriateness of **Section 188²³** and **Section 505** of the IPC. Section 188 endorses punishment for disobeying any request appropriately proclaimed by a public servant. The punishment incorporates imprisonment for a term which may extend up to six months or with fine which may reach out to ₹1,000, or both. Any fake claim in insubordination of the government's order would land such an offender in prison.

Section 2& 3 of the Epidemic Disease Act, 1987

The Epidemic Diseases Act deals with a pandemic of this massive extent. Section 2 of this Act gives power to the state governments and union territories to take special measures and formulate regulations to contain the disease. Section 3 of the Act states that: "Any person disobeying any regulation or order made under this Act shall be deemed to have committed an offense punishable under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code." A person circulating misinformation could be arrested u/s 3 of the Epidemic Disease Act, 1987.

Recent actions taken by the judiciary

In *Alakh Alok Shrivastava v. Union of India*²⁴, the SC in its order on 31st March, 2020 asked the media to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing chaos cannot be disseminated. It was further added that a daily bulletin by the GOI through all media avenues including social media and forums to clear the doubts of people would be made active within 24 hours as submitted by the Solicitor General of India. It also mentions the legal consequences (**Section 54** of Disaster Management Act coupled with **Section 188** of the IPC) one may have to face if caught spreading fallacious information regarding the pandemic.

Moreover, the Central Government and other state governments have tremendous powers under the Epidemic Act and the Disaster Management Act. These powers are not intended to encroach upon freedom of speech as long as they are used to spread genuine data and not to cause panic among the masses. Subsequently, any direction by the

²¹See at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1198526/>

²²See at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/640589/>

²³See at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1432790/>

²⁴ Writ Petition (Civil) No.468/2020.



Government ought to be secured within the ambit of **Article 19(2)**²⁵ of the Constitution. The Supreme Court in *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram*,²⁶ has held that everybody has a fundamental right to shape his opinion on any issues of general concern. Open criticism of government policies and activities isn't a ground for confining articulation.

Freedom of speech not just stretches out to the right of expressing the perspectives uninhibitedly but also the right to know. The Apex Court in *Bennett Coleman and Co Vs Union of India*²⁷ saw that "Right to Information" however not explicitly incorporated in the **Article 19(1) (a)**²⁸ of the Constitution of India, the privilege of Freedom of Speech and Expression is deciphered completely and "Right to Information" is brought within the ambit of **Article 19(1) (a)**. During this Covid-19 pandemic, the significance of the right to be informed is undeniable. Free media plays a vital role in the dissemination of valid data to the general public.

DISSEMINATION MECHANISM

The rampant growth of fake news has caused the erosion of democracy, justice, and public trust. Every time we passively accept information without cross-checking it or share a post, image or video before we've verified it, we're adding to the chaos and confusion. The need of the hour is to intervene and detect misinformation and its propagation patterns. It is possible that sometimes even the reliable institutions may get entangled in the web of misinformation and incorrect information

may sometimes be released from an official source²⁹. This heightens the problem of fake news or the spread and leads to a certain air of distrust. In light of the above, the only effective way to prevent the spread of disinformation is self-verification. This can be done simply by a quick search on Google or visiting the official websites to verify the accuracy of the data.

A person should continuously navigate throughout the article analysing its URL, site, author, links, and other sources used. Each and every individual must understand the larger repercussions of a meagre social media forward and should avoid it. Merely because similar claims have been made on the same topic multiple times does not mean that it is authentic until and unless it has been justified by the official authority. Many people unwittingly share posts online without even checking deliberately trying to influence public opinion. The users need to debunk the pseudo reporting or when somebody posts bogus content. False information can be very challenging to correct and may have lasting effects even after it is discredited. One reason for this persistence how people make causal inferences based on available information about a given event or outcome. As a result, false information may continue to influence beliefs and attitudes even after being debunked if it is not replaced by an alternate causal explanation.

²⁵ See at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/493243/>

²⁶ 1989 SCR (2) 204, 1989 SCC (2) 574

²⁷ 1973 AIR 106, 1973 SCR (2) 757.

²⁸ See at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1142233/>

²⁹

<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/homoeopathic-drug-arsenicum-album-30-cant-prevent-coronavirus-infection-as-claimed-by-ayush-ministry-800083.html>



CONCLUSION: THE WAY AHEAD

It's well-nigh impossible to keep the Internet free of such hoax news, but it ought not to be quite as hard to confine it to the fever swamps where it emanates and prevent it from spreading. A small intervention can clearly make a difference. Individuals lay at the center of the problem of misinformation and they have the potential to reduce or mitigate its effects. It is time that we should start placing greater emphasis on self-verification of facts as it is the most efficient way to debunk various myths, especially during a health emergency. The consumers of information have to identify and spot the false news responsibly with a higher degree of caution. They can do it by asking simple questions like "what is the source of the said information/forward?" It can effectively avert the mass spread of fallacious information. It is acceptable to trust but authenticate first.

SUGGESTIONS:

On the basis of our research work, we would furnish the following suggestions which aims at seeking initiatives by the UN requesting member states to:

1. connect a group of 200 Eastern African and Asian lady journalists through an on-line asset center that provides training materials on the most proficient method to cover the flare-up;
2. help a system of 25 community radio broadcasts in Eastern and Southern Africa as well as of Asia, serving 250,000 residents living in rustic and underestimated networks better cover the Coronavirus-related difficulties in these distant regions;
3. support 25 network media intently work with the disaster management authorities to reach

a wide broad crowd, however most especially tribal and underestimated communities;

4. empower 50 media professionals in nine Eastern Caribbean and Asian nations to lead viable reality-checking and counter disinformation and sensationalism on coronavirus;
5. when false news violates the principle of non-intervention, its correction and acknowledgement as false could be demanded as restitution and satisfaction respectively by the government and other authorities.

