

Chapter 12

New Mythologies of Fake News: WhatsApp and Misrepresented Scientific Achievements of Ancient India

Benson Rajan
Christ University, India

ABSTRACT

An ideological state project of assigning science achievements to that of Hindu mythologies is indirectly undermining democratic structures. Emergence of the fake news phenomenon within the current post-truth era has threatened India's state harmony. From its dominant role in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, fake news has become a political tool which was misused in both events. One of the major concerns with fake content creation appeared in its use by the central government to disregard science. Political leaders are achieving this by propagating fictional accounts of material inventions from mythological epics like the Mahabharata as the origin for modern scientific inventions like airplanes. Such fake content is part of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) larger project directed towards creating a Hindu nation. These content are provided virality with the help of social media and online chat platforms like WhatsApp. The chapter tries to locate the role of the instant messaging application WhatsApp in establishing Hindu mythological achievements as the predecessor of modern science in India.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the discourse around fake news became relevant with President Donald Trump's win in the 2016 presidential elections in USA, fake news penetrated into politics in India as well. Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) landslide win in the 2014 general elections in India saw the emergence of new media as a potential medium to establish a voting base. This was the first time social media and online chatting applications were seen as crucial campaigning tools in Indian politics (Bhattacharya, 2018). Sigerist (1938) explains that the origin of democracy collided with the development in science. He further claims that science has thrived only in the democratic period of history (Sigerist, 1938).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8535-0.ch012

New Mythologies of Fake News

To counter a codified system like science which only accepts material proof, the state uses mythologies as an apparatus which can be controlled and cannot be easily verified. Feyerabend (1975/2000) is of the opinion that science and myth have a linkage that is not accepted by the scientific community. He explains that both share humans as their creator and embody an imperfection in their form (Feyerabend, 1975/2000). A basic difference that separates science and myth is their place in reality. Soni and Thapar (2014) highlight that myths are old legends and science is part of the history that has happened. They further elaborate that to replace science's history with myth is incorrect (Soni & Thapar, 2014), which is what the current political leadership in India is doing. As mythologies constitute religious and group beliefs, the effects of such replacement are severe. For instance, Uttar Pradesh's Deputy Chief Minister Dinesh Sharma claimed that the female protagonist of Ramayana, Sita, was born out of in vitro fertilization (IVF) ("Sita was a test-tube baby, says UP deputy CM," 2018). In an attempt to place the machineries of modern science in mythology, the minister's speech resulted in protests in Nepal and Bihar. The indulgence of mass population with an unscientific claim is one of the categories of fake news in India.

For Alcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news comprises of all news content that is intentionally and verifiably false and hence misleads the readers. According to Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler (2017), misinformation is often created keeping people's political ideas and ideological inclinations in mind. The polarization of masses on the basis of information happens primarily because of stringent political ideologies. The ideological slant that people harbor is a natural tendency towards creation and reception of like-minded content, which included political news as well, even with the option of exercising choice (Iyenger & Hahn, 2009). This selective exposure to information (Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017) is where the functions of online chat platforms like WhatsApp becomes important. As per Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015), people willingly share fake content online because of its resonance with their consistent attitude towards news content. This makes it easier for online platforms to filter news according to a user's ideology and hence makes people prone to a linear narrative of newsworthy events. Further, people become participants in spreading the fake content through WhatsApp chat groups to people harbouring similar ideologies.

In India, there is an increased participation on WhatsApp as compared to other online platforms. According to Bradshaw (as cited in Bhattacharya, 2018; Rajan & Sarkar, 2017), WhatsApp resonates with the Indian culture of a constant connection with family, friends and a broader community. This is ensured through WhatsApp groups which are personally created by the user. Adapting this idea of personal, political parties in India direct their efforts towards reaching electorates personally by creating a virtual community/family of party sympathizers. A fitting example is the setting up of numerous WhatsApp groups by BJP for the upcoming 2019 general elections in India (Bhattacharya, 2018). Fake content circulated on these chat groups is often channeled into society, causing everyday disruption. Facebook had to take out a frontpage advertisement listing ways of identifying fake news after India witnessed mob lynching of more than 20 people due to false rumors of child abduction ("WhatsApp offers tips to spot fake news after India murders," 2018). The scale of distribution covered by the fake news was about 11 states with a recent case of mob lynching in Maharashtra ("India slams WhatsApp over deadly rumors," 2018). Due to the general unawareness of the intentionality of such forwarded messages for political and ideological development, the need to discuss fake news as a potential threat to societal harmony has become vital.

This chapter is structured in a way to question the determinants of 'fake' content and to explore how the advent of new media technology has played a partner in providing it a sense of legitimacy. The question will be looked within the realm of fake news claims around Hindu mythological references as

15 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/new-mythologies-of-fake-news/230754

Related Content

Sustainability Analysis of Tourism in India: Data Envelopment Analysis Approach

Surender Kumar (2018). *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking* (pp. 33-45).

www.irma-international.org/article/sustainability-analysis-of-tourism-in-india/219791

Engaging Millennial Students Through Social Media Usage and Its Impact on HBCU Persistence

Antwon D. Woods and Kenisha Shelton (2023). *Research Anthology on Applying Social Networking Strategies to Classrooms and Libraries* (pp. 424-433).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/engaging-millennial-students-through-social-media-usage-and-its-impact-on-hbcu-persistence/312933

Capturing the Gist(s) of Image Sets Associated with Chinese Cities through Related Tags Networks on Flickr®

Shalin Hai-Jew (2017). *Social Media Listening and Monitoring for Business Applications* (pp. 245-315).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/capturing-the-gists-of-image-sets-associated-with-chinese-cities-through-related-tags-networks-on-flickr/166453

Real-Time and Social Media in Trans-Atlantic Writing/Translation and Translation/Editing Projects

Steven Hammer and Bruce Maylath (2016). *Social Media and Networking: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1368-1386).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/real-time-and-social-media-in-trans-atlantic-writing-translation-and-translation-editing-projects/130425

The Impact of Internet Connectedness on Voluntary Social Activity in UAE

Azza Abdel-Azim Mohamed Ahmed (2011). *International Journal of E-Politics* (pp. 41-60).

www.irma-international.org/article/impact-internet-connectedness-voluntary-social/58930