

# INFORMATION FLOW ON NEW MEDIA AND ITS CREDIBILITY

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## ABSTRACT

New Media embarked on its journey as a socio-cultural reference to groupings of outlier viewpoints in contemporary society. This media is about networking and communicating through text, video, blogs, pictures and status updates on sites such as Facebook, My space, LinkedIn or micro blogs like Twitter and Snap chat or messaging app like WhatsApp. It is a highly interactive platform via which individuals and communities co-create and discuss content by exchanging messages and comments. Interactivity distinguishes social networking sites from traditional ('static') websites.

What makes new media of particular interest to journalism is how it has become influential as a communication and news-breaking tool. However, the other side of the coin is very disturbing. As the online world is "loud", social media messages are heard far and wide and very quickly. The uninterrupted and unregulated flow of information on new media poses a grave threat to the civil society.

Undoubtedly speed or immediacy aspect of the new media rules the roost. But information without credibility and accountability may prove to be catastrophic.

**KEYWORDS:** New Media, Credibility, Information Technology, Fake News, Social Networking Sites.

## INTRODUCTION

Nuclear power may prove to be a boon for the energy-starved nations and the global environment, whereas a nuclear strike could wreak climate havoc, cause death and devastation beyond imagination and pose a danger to the existence of mankind on earth. Everything depends upon us whether we use the nuclear device constructively or with an intent to destruction. Almost the same logic applies with the Social/ New Media. The information flow on

this media has transformed the modern day life. This study will analyze the potentials of new media, influence of new media on the flow of information, evaluate whether social media is being used to incite/provoke or give direction to people, make it clear if this media has become a tool in the hands of mischief makers and rumour mongers and reach to a conclusion on the regulatory measures needed to make new media more accountable and reliable.

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The scenario of news consumption has undergone a sea change today. No longer people wait for morning newspapers or sit down at an appointed time before Television sets for the evening news. Now a growing number of readers, viewers and listeners opt for online news. Television, newspapers and radio are still there but there is a cut-throat competition from the interactive online media.

### **THE DAWN OF A GOLDEN ERA**

One of the greatest positives of new media is its power to engage with larger audience. The new media is able to move information quickly among a large group of people and can provide a valuable two way engagement with the audience. It has the power to disseminate information across the world instantaneously. As a result even local news gets transformed into international news within seconds.

As the information and communication technologies are advancing, social networking sites are growing at an amazing pace, and catalyzing civil society movements, and bringing in political changes in various parts of the globe. The social networks help the activists to get national and international attention for their movements.

In India, in 2011 Gandhian crusader Anna Hazare's 'India Against Corruption' became the first ever campaign to hit cyber-space to a great extent. A number of Facebook pages and virtual groups were created and dedicated to Hazare's movement. The popularity of Hazare's movement can be understood from the fact that the official 'India Against Corruption' page had more than 5 lakh followers.

Social networking played a major role in various movements on foreign land as well. In 2011's 'Arab Spring' and the United States' 'Occupy Wall Street' movements' pages on social networking sites like Facebook and text messaging through

mobile devices were used extensively to help create an unprecedented explosion of grass root protests in the Middle East, the US, and eventually worldwide.

Another very important aspect of new media is that it is increasingly being used as sources in mainstream news coverage.

New media has become a fixture for reporting for many journalists, especially around breaking news events where non-professionals may already be on the scene to share an eyewitness report, photo, or video of the event. At the same time, the huge amount of content posted in conjunction with such events serves as a challenge to finding interesting and trustworthy sources in the din of the stream.

### **NEW MEDIA-A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD**

New media has become a precursor of transformation in the society, bringing in revolutionary changes in people's mindset and playing a crucial role in promoting humane values like sympathy, helpfulness, forgiveness, charity and service to humanity. There are a number of examples of the positive impact of the new media. One of them was the case of a young schoolboy from a poor family, sitting outside a Noida metro station, trying to earn some money through a weighing scale and studying at the same time. This scene caught a commuter's attention. He took a picture and uploaded on Facebook, which went viral. In response, several people including then UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav came forward to help the child, ensuring full opportunity for the boy to study without having to work. Another case that came to lime light was that of tech-savvy Suresh Prabhu, who as the Railway minister became a god sent angel for a couple seeking help for their 18-month-old child. Prabhu sent a doctor and milk to the couple who was travelling in Marudhar Express from Varanasi to Gotan, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

However, the negative side of new media is gaining ground dangerously.

In 2012, one of the early cases of misuse of new media came to the government's attention, when morphed pictures and videos of earthquake victims began to go viral on new media. Miscreants were morphing these images to show that these were Muslim victims of civil riots in Assam and Myanmar. This was done to provoke further riots by vested interests and it did bring a reaction.

The social media space was soon full of hate and revenge messages against Hindu migrants living in South India, which spread panic and soon there was mass exodus of people from the North East, who were forced to return back to Assam and other Northeastern states. This was a clear example of the negative side of social media which helped in stoking mass hysteria in a very short time.

Similarly, riots that broke out in Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir after Eid celebrations in August 2013 were also aggravated by certain postings on the social media.

Thanks to the fake news spread on social media, rumours about child kidnappers on the prowl were doing the rounds in various states of the country. Against this backdrop, in May 2018, two young men from Guwahati were lynched by a mob in Karbi Anglong in Central Assam that had accused them of being child kidnappers. A month after this incident a 45-year-old man in Telangana's Wanaparthy district narrowly escaped being killed for the same reason. His life was saved after a villager called the police, even as members of the mob that attacked him cheered about thrashing a donga, the Telugu term for a thief. It later emerged that the man, who worked as a labourer in a Hyderabad factory, had arrived in Wanaparthy to meet a woman with whom he had been having a secret relationship.

As per media reports Viral rumours about kidnappers, spread through Facebook and WhatsApp, led to the lynching deaths of more than two dozen people in 2018 in the country. Between January, 2017 to July, 2018, 33 persons were killed and at least 99 injured in 69 reported cases.

Evidence suggests that used as a rumor tool, social media had an impact on events such as Muzaffarnagar riots. According to reports of Uttar Pradesh Police, the circulation of a dubious video clip that reportedly showed the execution of two Hindu Jat boys by the mob, fuelled the riots in Muzaffarnagar. But the footage was later found to be a video shot in Pakistan.

## **GROWING CONCERN ON THE MISUSE OF NEW MEDIA**

The issue of mob violence and lynchings was discussed in both Houses of Parliament in the monsoon session of 2018. The government blamed the social media for the rise in such incidents. Home Minister Rajnath Singh said that the government has taken up the issue with social media platforms and they have been asked to ensure that proper checks were installed in their platforms.

WhatsApp said it was "horrified" by the violence and promised action. The social media giant took out full-page advertisements in Indian newspapers offering "easy tips" to sort fact from fiction on its platform.

Considering the graveness of situation, the Government of India proposed to set up a Social Media Communication Hub. However, it faced widespread flak over surveillance fears. Trinamool Congress legislator Mahua Moitra filed a petition in Supreme Court challenging Centre's proposal in which he contended that the project was intended 'to monitor social media content'. Hearing the matter Justice D Y Chandrachud observed 'We will be moving to a surveillance

state 'if every tweet and WhatsApp message was going to be monitored. Ultimately government dropped its plan for Social Media Hub.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also expressed concern over the misuse of new media. In a video interaction with Bharatiya Janata Party workers and volunteers from Varanasi, his Lok Sabha constituency in August 2018, PM urged people not to use social media to "spread dirt", saying the issue was not about any ideology but it simply does not behave a decent society. PM Modi stressed on the need to share information that strengthens the society

### **CREDIBILITY OF NEW MEDIA**

People increasingly rely on new media to get first-hand news and information. During disasters such as Hurricane Sandy and the tsunami in Japan people used social media to report injuries as well as send out their requests. During social movements such as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the Arab Spring, people extensively used social media to organize their events and spread the news. As more people rely on social media for political, social, and business events, it is more susceptible to become a place for evildoers and rumor mongers to spread misinformation and rumors. Therefore, the onerous task lies on the shoulders of users to discern which piece of information is credible or which is not. They also need to find ways to assess the credibility of information. This problem becomes more important when the source of the information is not known to the consumer.

With the fast spread of internet across the rural and remote corners of the country, people easily rely on web-based information despite the fact that it is often inaccurate and biased and many times used with mala fide intentions. Taking such types of information seriously and reacting over it without testing its veracity may prove to be catastrophic.

### **CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, social networking sites are becoming a tool in the hands of mischief makers and rumour mongers and the society is paying the price of their misdeeds.

It has become difficult for government to check the activities on social networking sites. In August 2012, when morphed pictures were used by mischief makers in the form of MMS to fuel communal tension by targeting people from northeast, the Government stepped in and banned bulk SMS and MMS for a certain period. The task became more difficult with most pictures morphed and uploaded on websites in Pakistan and some other countries. To act against the posts and uploads, the government had to depend on the micro-blogging and social-networking sites whose servers are located in the US. In the process, it took days before objectionable contents were blocked.

It is quite difficult for us to take legal action against owners of the popular social networking sites that are situated in foreign countries, as they are not bound to obey our law.

As the internet and mobile penetration increases in India, bringing more first time users onto these platforms, the danger of mass hysteria and communal reactions spreading with serious consequences, increases manifold. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to get together all stakeholders of civil society and try and address the issue of balancing the freedom of new media with suitable regulations.

So far social media contents are concerned, drawing a line between what is freedom of speech and what comprises derogatory, seditious or communal content is not an easy task. What may seem acceptable to one part of the country may be completely unacceptable to another part. Again, what is seen to be acceptable to metropolitan cities, may not be socially

acceptable in the remote rural parts of the country. And, it takes just one upload to go viral and trigger a violent reaction. These are very challenging issues and the government will have to respond to these emerging threats with urgency.

The renowned legal theorist Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld in his work *Fundamental Legal Conceptions* says that a “right” only becomes a right as such if it is matched by a corresponding duty. In other words rights are not absolute. One’s right ceases to exist if it encroaches upon other’s rights. This theory of rights and duties is equally applicable to social media content as well. Therefore, the government must come out with a comprehensive policy, having stringent provisions for offenders.

With the world getting increasingly connected through the web and India on the cusp of a ‘Digital’ revolution, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary will have to work in tandem and formulate a sound cyber management policy to address this daunting challenge.

New media could work as a development catalyst or could become a national threat. The government must act now and fast before this evil spirit turns into the all powerful mythological demon ‘Raktabeeja’ and pose a danger to the humanity.

## REFERENCES

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