

Understanding Fake news and Debunking:

Study of Reports by Fact Checking Units/
Platforms

Dimpal Gulwani

Abstract

With the advancement of technology, the spread of fake news has seen a stark rise. The ease in which online media platforms have given to the spread of misinformation, poses serious threats to society in real time. Take for instance the online media applications like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp etc which have proven to fuel the spread of fake news stories in the recent times. Consequences of fake news stories can also be unprecedented as some can even incite violence. This paper, seeks to understand how media has witnessed spread of false news while heavy emphasis is laid on the debunking methods applied to fact check such information. In order to do so, the study tries to understand how fact checking units/platforms are working in India to fight fake news. Thrust has been given to understand what kind of fake news stories go viral and what debunking methods are applied by certain platforms to fact check those stories.

Keywords: *Fake News, Media, Technology, Misinformation, Fact Checking.*

Introduction

A Twitter user posted a newspaper cut out claiming that 40 students were hospitalized after they took a dose of the Covid-19

vaccine. Since the vaccination process for the students hasn't begun yet, *Factly*, a data journalism and fact checking portal in India, ran a fact check for this claim. It was found that the newspaper article was from 2018 when some students fell sick after being injected with Measles-Rubella vaccine. Clearly it had nothing to do with the Covid-19 vaccination process in 2021. Various similar false and misleading claims are made by people online. With the advancement of technology, the spread of fake news has seen a stark rise. Moreover, online media applications like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp among others have proven to fuel the spread of fake news stories.

Through this paper titled, "Understanding Fake news and Debunking: Study of Reports by Fact Checking units/platforms", the researcher is trying to understand how media has witnessed spread of false news while heavy emphasis is laid on the debunking methods applied to fact check such information.

Research Objectives

The ease which online media platforms have given to the spread of misinformation poses serious threats to society in real time. The consequences of fake news stories can be unprecedented as some can even incite violence. The aim of the researcher through this study is to understand how fact checking units/platforms are working in India to fight fake news. The researcher is trying to understand what kind of fake news stories go viral and what debunking methods are applied by certain platforms to fact check those stories.

Research Questions

The researcher is studying the fact checked reports put out by five fact checking units/platforms in the month of February, 2021. The aim is to look for certain patterns and observations in the aspect of fake news stories and debunking methods applied. The researcher is trying to seek answers to the following research questions:

- What types of fake news stories went viral during the month of February 2021? What is the mechanism behind the framing of fake news stories?
- What are certain debunking methods that are applied to such fake news stories? Does the nature of the story affect its way of getting debunked?
- Are the fake news stories current event specific and in context of hard news? If yes, what were the major events during the month of February 2021 around which fake news stories went viral?
- What is the difference between the working of newsroom models and independent models of fact checking platforms?
- Which is the most prominent beat in which the majority of fake news stories come up?
- Does a particular bias exist in the working pattern of these fact checking platforms? If yes, is it directed towards some particular body/political party?
- What is the audience engagement both in enquiring about fake news stories and reading fact checked reports as per these platforms?

Research Methods

In order to have an in-depth study of the working pattern of these fact checking units/platforms, the researcher opted for the method of textual analysis. Fact checked reports published by the websites of these platforms are to be studied and analysed to understand certain concepts. This method allows the researcher to study the textual, graphic and representational content of the fact checked reports to observe certain patterns and draw probable conclusions.

The other method that the researcher opted for is intensive interview. Getting in touch with fact checkers will help the

researcher to have in depth knowledge about their working methodology.

Sampling

The research's aim is to understand the type of fake news stories that were taken up by fact checking units/platforms in the month of February 2021 along with heavy emphasis on debunking methods applied. In order to do so, researchers took up five fact checking units/platforms namely- *Alt News, India Today Fact Check, Factly, WebQoof and OpIndia Fact Check*, via the purposive sampling method. The purposive sampling method suited the process as it allows selection of samples on the basis of their certain unique characteristics. The researcher selected to interview fact checkers one each from *Factly* and *WebQoof*. Since the researcher wanted to get in touch with specifically people working as fact checkers at units/platforms under study, a purposive sampling method was used. Hence the textual analysis of fact checked reports and intensive interviews with two fact checkers from these platforms will help the researcher to have a detailed understanding of fake news and debunking scenarios.

Delimitations

The researcher wasn't able to gather much information about the audience's response to the reports put out by the fact checking platforms in India. The impact of such fact checking efforts on the public wasn't greatly explored. Hence the research is heavily focused on the working of fact checking units/platforms and fake news stories. Some information about the audience engagement was received via the intensive interview but direct contact with the audience couldn't be achieved.

Review of Literature

Fake news is a matter of concern and especially in the light of new media; the aspects to look into regarding fake news broaden even

more. This chapter aims to highlight what fake news is, how it is perceived by the public, what makes them believe in it, what makes it tough for the fact checking units to undo people's belief in it, what kind of tools are used to debunk fake news and other literature regarding the proposed approaches for the in-built effort to fight it within the social media applications like Facebook and WhatsApp.

Defining Fake News and Related Terms

Fake news can be defined as a news story that intends to mislead readers and viewers. (Alcott and Gentzkow 2017) While according to Thomas Fiedler who is the dean of the Boston University College of Communication fake news is, "False information packaged to deceive the public into thinking it was produced by professionals with respect for truth." (Rimer 2017)

Terms like disinformation and misinformation are often associated with fake news. The facts are manipulated or are published inaccurately within false context using unverified information at times. If it is done with a clear intention of misleading the citizens in order to influence their opinion, it is termed as disinformation. To the contrary when such dissemination of information occurs unintentionally, that is the when the creator isn't aware that the information being used isn't completely true or is fabricated it is termed as misinformation. Another version of misleading news is hoax which is defined as "a deliberately untrue report, the creator of which tries to give the impression of truth to the recipients, sometimes it is composed of jokes, other times it is the central part of a disinformation campaign." (Makoš 2019:248)

Spread of fake news in Indian Context

In India, the misinformation and disinformation reach the audience via audio, video clips, memes, messages and photographs. (Banerjee 2018) The development of new media

technologies has resulted in new techniques of hand blogging, vlogging and social media, which has opened up new spaces for exchange of thoughts. Especially for youngsters, social media platforms like Facebook are not just mere platforms meant for entertainment and interaction with friends but they also derive their information from these platforms. (Patel2019)

In another study, “Politics of fake news: How WhatsApp became a potent propaganda tool in India” (Farooq 2018) it was said that in India, political propaganda gains momentum on WhatsApp in the form of fake news. The success of this app because of its simple and convenient usage along with the technology making its way to communities that were earlier deprived of such facilities as well in India, WhatsApp is seen as a tool for disseminating fake news in the country widely. Along with the technology penetrating in all the areas, the low price of internet data boosts the linkage of people with the digital world but all are not literate about media and hence they become victims of fake news.

Fact checking platforms and their types

To combat attempts at manipulation and to debunk false information, an increasing number of fact-checking platforms have appeared in recent years. (Amazeen2017; Ciampaglia 2018) The first fact checking organizations were launched in the US in the early 2000s. Fact checking services are platforms that have been founded by volunteers, independent journalists or organisations that research the validity of the contents and claims in resources open to public. Thus, they analyse texts, images and videos with the help of digital tools and software. (Dalkir and Katz2020:310)

Graves and Cherubini (2016) generally distinguish two models of fact checkers-the ‘newsroom’ model and the ‘NGO model’, wherein the newsroom model contains fact checking

organisations affiliated with an established media company and they have a wide reach. They have a competitive advantage because they have their parent company's resources of editorial and infrastructure at their disposal as the company has established itself to be a mainstream news company.

On the other hand, NGO model involves fact checkers that operate independently of traditional newsrooms. The advantage here is that these organisations are not bound through the editorial and business constraints of the parent company. However, they don't have editorial resources and reliable audience that the newsroom model fact checking units get along with their parent company. Yet again it should be mentioned that such independent organisations have established themselves in the national media markets. These outlets being independent are projects under established NGOs or are linked to universities. (Humphrecht: 2019).

Countering Fake news

In this section, various ways to encounter fake news have been mentioned. There are certain concepts in regards to fighting fake news. There are certain mental concepts that can enable one to not fall for fake news stories while there is a technical approach which highly focuses on digital tools. Meanwhile certain journalistic practices have been taken up to fight fake news. Researches have shown that rumours and misinformation spread faster among uneducated digital media users as compared to educated digital media consumers. (Afassinou:2014). Media literacy can be defined as, "the ability to choose, to understand-within the context of content, form/style, impact, industry and production-to question, to evaluate, to create, and/or produce, and to respond thoughtfully to media we consume" (*National Telemedia Council: 1992*)

To debunk stories or rumours that are health related, subject experts or technical experts can be involved in fact checking or verification. This indicates that information that is scientifically incorrect can be easily debunked by talking to an expert straight away. The existing factual knowledge on a particular topic can be applied by such experts to look for logical loopholes in fake news stories.

Google image search is the tool that can tell if an image is old and has appeared earlier on the web. It is also able to acquaint you with a particular context in which a specific image was used earlier. This way it can be checked that an old image is being used from the past in a false narrative currently.

In Vid is another tool which, as the name suggests, is used to find out the truth of fake videos. It creates several photos out of one video and then by further using tools like Google image search one can see when the image first appeared on the web and in what context.

Amnesty International's YouTube Data Viewer is a platform that allows the fact checker to look for the exact upload date and time and check if the YouTube video has been uploaded on the platform before. Screenshots from the video can be checked with the tools mentioned above like Google reverse search and TinEye in order to look for fabricated or manipulated content.

Findings and Analysis

The objective of the research is to study and analyse the fact checked reports published by the fact checking platforms/units namely- *WebQoof via the Quint, Factly, India Today Fact check, Alt news* and *OpIndia Fact check*. This chapter aims at understanding the various types of fake news that go viral and the debunking methods used by these platforms. While analysing and studying the reports published during the month of February in 2021, the

chapter mentions the kind of fake news stories that went viral along with key emphasis on the debunking methods used.

Alt News

Alt News is a fact checking platform in India with the aim to verify news and fact check stories that go viral on social media applications.

The pattern for reporting of fact checked stories involves stating the claim at first that is explaining what information was spread online and by whom. The reports contain the embedded reports from the source with use of screenshots too. This is followed by a few more posts making the same claim while mentioning the likes such posts got. The report on *Alt news* involves mention of hyperlinks so that a reader can cross check the same for themselves. This is followed by the head 'Fact check' wherein the process of debunking and fact checking is mentioned in detail. The reports also show the relevant posts and documents to support their fact checking process. Some stories have sections on background information if the fake news stories were doing rounds earlier too.

The platform tries to debunk fake news stories in various ways sometimes using more than one method. A story was published on their website on 4th of February, 2021 titled "Morphed image used to claim Anna Hazare has joined BJP". The report begins with an introduction mentioning the current movements of Anna Hazare following the fake news story. Posts have been attached from twitter wherein false claim was made that Anna Hazare has joined Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The picture in the post shows him with BJP President JP Nadda while another post under the username @iAnnaHaare shows a tweet with the same picture mentioning his move. The picture was posted across other platforms like Facebook as well.

Alt news mentions under the fact check head that they looked closely and learnt it was a morphed image because there was a clear distinction between the face and the neck of Anna Hazare. A reverse image search conducted by them resulted in a picture posted in a *Navbharat Times* story from 2020 wherein the person with JP Nadda was actually JyotiradityaScindia. The report then verifies this result with the mention of the same information being published by *Economic Times* in March 2020. Moreover, it shows a post from *NDTV's* Twitter handle wherein a video from the actual event is posted. Apart from these actions, *Alt news* also looked up the image of Anna Hazare from where his face was taken to create the morphed picture. The reverse search results using Yandex revealed that his picture was from 2011 and has been used as a file photo by media organisations.



Image 1: Taken from *Alt News's* report showing the comparison

In order to trace the source of this fake news, *Alt news* mentions that it performed an advanced search on Twitter and the first tweet was made by @iAnnaHaare account which is a parody account that keeps changing its name.

India Today Fact Check

India Today Fact Check is the fact checking unit and a part of *TV Today Network Ltd.* and is also known as *Anti Fake News War Room (AFWA)*. This section is a part of their *India Today* website and is handled separately and independently from the editorial

operations of India Today. The reporting style of *India Today's Fact check* column is similar to that of *Alt news* as discussed before. A feature specific to this platform is its way of representing whether a particular claim was true or false. A crow rating chart named '*Jhooth Bole KauvaKaate*' is used wherein the number of crows determines the intensity of the lie. One crow stands for half true, two crows stand for mostly lies and three crows stand for absolutely false. The concluding box at the end of the report mentions the claim, the conclusion and the crow rating.

A fact checked report was published on this platform dated 27th February, 2021, with the headline, "Fact Check: No, it's not mandatory for users to verify their social media accounts within 3 months". The introduction of the report mentioned the claim along with the reality. The report starts with background information mentioning that the centre had announced new guidelines in order to regulate social media, online streaming and digital content platforms. The fake news was posted by a Delhi High Court lawyer Prashant Patel Umrao as well via his verified Twitter handle. The report showed the screenshot of his tweet along with hyperlinks of similar claims. Later they mentioned the fact that the government has only asked the social media platforms to provide an appropriate mechanism for users who wish to verify their accounts voluntarily.

Below the head *AFWA* probe they have mentioned how they figured out this claim was misleading. They say that they couldn't find any credible news report or government order regarding the claim of mandatory verification of social media handles. They however looked for tweets by credible news sources like the *Press Information Bureau (PIB)* of India who had shared the video of Ravi Shankar Prasad, the Union Electronics and Information Technology Minister. The post had the caption mentioning the truth that getting social media handles verified is a voluntary action. An appropriate mechanism to do so shall be provided. The

video shared is from a press conference announcing the new Digital Media Ethics Code.

INDIA TODAY FACT CHECK

Claim
To make the internet safer, all social media accounts of users need to be verified with a government ID within three months.

Conclusion
The government has clarified that there is no such obligation for citizens to verify their social media accounts. The Centre has only asked social media platforms to have a provision for those who wish to verify their accounts voluntarily.

JHOOTH BOLE KAUVA KAATE
The number of crows determines the intensity of the lie.

1 Crow: Half True 2 Crows: Mostly lies
3 Crows: Absolutely false

Image 2: Taken from the report showing the representation along with crow rating.

OpIndia Fact Check

OpIndia Fact check by *OpIndia* is a section under the Indian right-wing news portal which was founded in 2014 and is also known to have spread fake news and passing anti-Muslim commentary on various events. The *International Fact Checking Network (IFCN)* had rejected *OpIndia's* application to be a certified fact in 2019 and *IFCN* certified fact checkers identified 25 fake news stories and 14 misrepresented stories published by *OpIndia* between January 2018 and June 2020. The website has a fact check column wherein they report over fake news stories that go viral and what is the truth behind those stories.

While studying the reports under this column in the month of February 2021 it was seen that many were directly at Rahul Gandhi or Congress (political party) for spreading lies. The reporting style starts with screenshots and embedded posts from social media handles that are believed to make a false claim. It is then followed by the mention and screenshot of similar claims

made by other people. The report then mentions what is the truth including screenshots of documented articles. As compared to other fact checking platforms the process of explaining how the fact checkers reached certain credible information to debunk the claim, *OpIndia Fact check* states what the truth is according to them with supporting document screenshots in some cases. They do not mention the process of fact checking or debunking in detail as studied across other such platforms. How they came across verifying documents or what searches led them to certain conclusions was missing. Mention of any digital tools as done by other fact check platforms was missing for reports with old images and videos in question.

A report dated 28th February, 2021 had the headline, “Congress IT cell passes off old images of left parties rally to claim lakhs of people attended their rally in Bengal”. It starts with an introduction that Saral Patel, national convenor of the Congress IT cell, shared two images on Twitter making a claim that a sea of people had gathered at a joint rally of the Congress party and Communist party of India. The report shows the post from the Twitter handle of Saral Patel along with mention of other people who made similar claims. Vinay Kumar Dokania’s post is also shared in the report along with the mention of journalist Pankaj Pachauri. The report mentions his position as the media advisor of former PM Manmohan Singh along with reporting and attaching his post as well. It further gives the mention of two more people who claimed the same and designates them as Congress party empathisers/supporters.

The next up is the fact check head in their report which states that the two images shared by the Congress IT cell members and their supporters were not captured at the so-called joint rally of the Congress party and other parties. The image was from the rally of left-wing parties at the Brigade Parade ground in Kolkata on February 3rd 2019. They mentioned ‘Red Club’, a Facebook group of left party followers sharing the same image in June 2020.

The report ended with the conclusion that the Congress party IT cell was sharing misleading images in the current context.

As compared to the fact check report by *India Today fact check* over the same event, the debunking method of the reverse Google search was mentioned in order to explain how the fact checkers understood that the images were taken from a past event already recognised online back in 2019. However, *OpIndia's fact check* stated the facts without mention of how the conclusion was drawn that the claim in question is fake.

WebQoof-the Quint

It is a separate fact checking unit via *the Quint* which aims at debunking fake news stories. The platform puts out stories regularly under their fact check section-*WebQoof*. Studying reports from the month of February 2021 it was observed that a lot of fake news stories were taken up with the majority being political.

One specific feature that this platform carries is the use of red-cross marks over embedded posts containing the fake news. The clear use of such red crosses creates an impact that the image/video is false and the fact check section comes right after explaining how the fact checkers came to know the truth. While explaining the debunking methods, use of red circles and moving arrows pointing to particular elements in a report screenshot or image helps in better understanding of why the claim viral online is actually false. Another specific feature with the fact checked reports by *WebQoof* is the concept of video stories. Certain fact checking stories are available in video form as well.

A report was posted by *WebQoof* on 3rd February, 2021 with the headline, "No, Viral message hailing PM Modi was not drafted by the NYT editor." The report starts with an introduction stating that a piece of text praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being circulated on social media with a claim that it is written by Joseph Hope, the editor-in-chief of *the New York Times* (claimed

as per the fake news story). The introductory part of the report mentions the fact that there are a lot of grammatical errors in that piece and there is no person named Joseph Hope working at *New York Times*.

The report then states the claim with more clarity that the text included what Narendra Modi is aiming at and India will become the most powerful nation in the world. It also mentions appraisal over the decision of abrogating Article 370. The report then contains several tweets mentioning about this article and it being true. Under the sub-section labelled 'What we found', the debunking methods have been explained.

Firstly, it mentions that there were a lot of grammatical errors in the article and no one had shared the link of the original article report by *New York Times* while addressing the article. Such grammatical errors and format abnormalities won't come from the *New York Times'* editor-in-chief. The report has the screenshots of tweets containing what was written in the viral article while highlighting the obvious grammatical and sentence formation errors. To fact check this viral article, they looked up straight away via a Google search for the original article by the *New York Times*. The search results didn't show the presence of the article in question. The team even cross checked the publication's topic page for PM Modi but no such article could be found.

To further cross check the name Joseph Hope, the team mentions that they looked up the 'Our People' section of the website as it carries the names and pictures of all employees and they couldn't find Joseph Hope on that list. Further to make things clearer, the report mentions that Danielle Rhoades who is the Vice President (Communications) at the *New York Times* told their team (*The Quint*) in an email reply that the editor of the publication is Dean Baquet and he hasn't said or published anything stated in the viral text. He also clarified that no one with the name Joseph Hope works for them. The report ends with a conclusion that the viral text was a fictitious one.

Factly

Factly is a Data journalism/Public information portal in India wherein application of Data journalism to fact check stories is one aspect of what they do. The methodology followed by *Factly* is more or less similar to the other fact checking platforms wherein the fake news stories viral online or sent in via their Whatsapp number are fact checked. During the analysis of the reports published by the fact checking platforms/units taken as a part of this study, it was found that *Factly* (English sub-section) published the maximum number of fact checked reports in the month of February.

It was seen the fact checked stories are also put out in the video form. The reporter gives the voice over explaining the claim with the relevant screenshots/tweets. Then they mention the fact checking process with images/videos/screenshots to support what the truth is as per the debunking process explained in the video.

A fact checked report on their website dated 22nd February was posted with the headline, "Video of rescue operation in Uttarakhand is falsely shared as the Indian army demolishing Chinese bunkers." The report starts with explaining the video containing visuals of JCBs clearing the debris went viral across social media with a claim that Indian soldiers were demolishing the Chinese bunkers near Pangong Lake. Hyperlink for the archive post making the claim was attached. The report then briefs the readers with the claim and the actual truth behind the instance in a box of summary. Wherein in the fact section they reported that it is actually the footage from a rescue operation that was conducted after the glacier burst in Uttarakhand.

The report then explains the use of reverse image search of the screenshots taken from the video in the post. With the help of this search, they could trace back to reports by *ANI news* dated 15th February 2021 wherein the title for the same video was "Chamoli

disaster: 56 bodies recovered; rescue operation underway.” The description further explained that the operations were carried out at Raini village in Uttarakhand’s Chamoli district by ITBP personnel along with NDRF. Links for similar videos posted by *ANI news* were attached thereafter along with a screenshot of their video post. The fact checking involved Google search with similar keywords to gain more clarity over the context of the video.

Ways of spreading Fake News online

Studying the reports on these platforms it was observed that fake news could be spread in numerous ways. Moreover, the type of fake news can be categorised. The most prominent way of spreading fake news was using old videos and images in a false context by connecting them to a particular event. Majority number of fake news stories debunked in the month of February 2021 fell into this category.

Use of old images/videos

Firstly, as mentioned above, the majority of fake news stories had their origin in tweets and posts containing images and videos from older events which were posted in recent times with a false narrative. In a report published by *WebQoof*, dated 16th February 2021, an image of Delhi’s Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal with an AamAadmi Party (AAP) supporter was viral online with a claim that the person with him is lawyer Nikita Jacob. A non-bailable warrant was issued against her (Nikita Jacob) after the arrest of Disha Ravi in the toolkit controversy which was in the news. Fact checkers found that the person in the picture with Delhi CM is not Nikita Jacob rather it is Ankita Shah, who is an AAP supporter. Indeed, the picture in question was posted by Ankita Shah herself back in 2019.

A claim fact checked by *Factly* was about the image of ‘Go Back Modi’ slogan painted on a street road. It was being spread

online in the context of an anti-Modi graffiti being displayed on a street in Tamil Nadu. It was then verified and as the report by *Factly* mentions, the image was from January 2020 that too it was an image taken in Kolkata when a protest was held amid PM Narendra Modi's visit there.

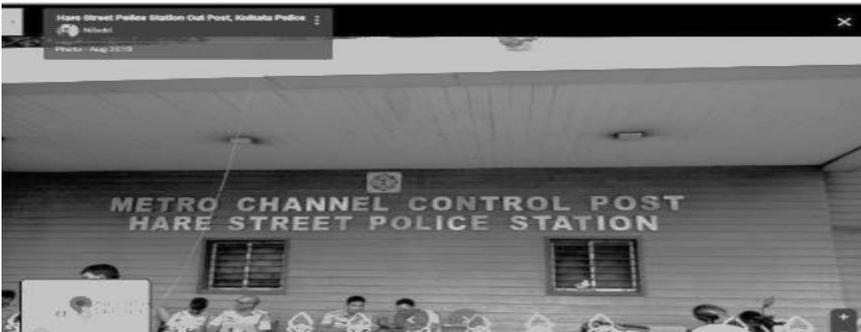


Image 3, 4: Taken from the report showing the location marked in red box which gave a cue

In another report put out by *India Today Fact Check*, a picture of masked youths pelting stones went viral on social media with a claim that clashes took place at Srinagar's Batmaloo area. The fact checkers found out that the picture in circulation was actually taken in 2016 when protesters in Batmaloo, Srinagar, clashed with security forces after Kashmiri terrorist Burhan Wani was killed in a gunfight. Hence images from a clash in 2018 were made to look like a recent one in 2021.

Use of Edited/Morphed Pictures

The other way to spread fake news as observed was the use of editing to post morphed pictures and make a point that doesn't really exist in reality. Such spread of fake images results in news stories which don't even have a base of being credible but still go viral online. *WebQoof* fact checked a story wherein a tweet screenshot was being shared claiming to have tweeted a call for 'Hindu Mukt India' by the Bollywood singer and activist Caralisa Monteiro. The viral tweet screenshot contained the lines, "Every time a Hindu is killed, I get orgasmic pleasure. Modi might dream Congress Mukht Bharat, but we will get Hindu Mukt India soon. Amen." The tweet screenshot was being shared on social media with a claim that she is an AamAadmi Party (AAP) supporter. The fact checking team of *WebQoof* tried to look for the same tweet on her official account but couldn't find one. Upon analysis and comparison with how a standard tweet looks like on Twitter it was found that the tweet screenshot was actually fake and was created rather than being tweeted originally.

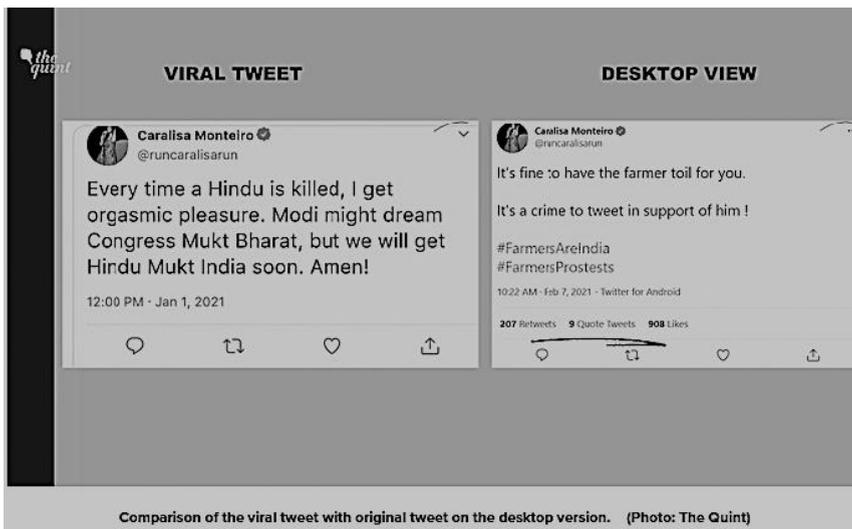


Image 5-Taken from *WebQoof's* report showing the comparison

Use of False identities/fake accounts

The third category of spreading fake news as mentioned previously was about false identities created online in someone else's (usually a well-known figure) name. In a recent event wherein many accounts came up claiming them to be the original account of Disha Ravi, the climate activist who was arrested by the Delhi Police on 13th February 2021 on the charges of 'sharing and spreading' a toolkit on the farmers' protest posted by international green activist Greta Thunberg. There was an account on twitter with the handle name @climatedisha with a bio 'Climate activist from India. Fridays for the Future.' There was a tweet by this account in Disha Ravi's name by her sister saying that this is the only credible account of hers. Disha Ravi's friend told *the Quint* that she has no sister and it was also found by the *News Minute* that according to Disha Ravi's friends @climatedisha was not her account. Many other false accounts came up claiming to be of Disha Ravi.

Types of Debunking Methods Applied

While studying the fact checked reports put out by these fact checking platforms, it was seen that a lot of debunking methods were used depending on the nature of the story. Many a times more than one method was applied to cross check the claim to be false. This section aims at understanding the various news stories that were debunked by various methods like-

Use of Digital Tools

Firstly, digital tools like Google reverse image search, keyword search, Google maps, TinEye search, Yandex, YouTube Data Viewer, Yandex among others were used to debunk fake news stories wherein old images and videos went viral in a current context falsely. In a report published by *WebQoof* on 10th February 2021, it is mentioned that a video went viral labelled as showing

the 'first visuals' of the glacier burst in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district which occurred on 7th February 2021. The team used the reverse image search and found the original video on Instagram where it was posted with the location of Nepal on 11th January.

An image of Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg went viral wherein she was seen having food in a train with a group of poor children overlooking her through the window. A reverse image search helped the *India Today's fact check team* to understand that the image was fake and the original picture could be found on her official twitter account. It was clear from her post that it was the forests in the background which were edited and replaced with the picture of poor children. Moreover, they found that the image of the children was from a bush war in the Central African Republic as per a report from *Reuters* in 2017.



Image 6: Showing the original picture from which the morphed one was created.

Contacting relevant sources/officials for clarity

The second debunking method that was found to be quite prevalent was contacting any person related to the fake news story somehow to know the ground reality. *WebQoof* has been reaching out to officials to fact check certain claims like when a video of a rally organised by the Popular Front of India (PFI) went viral. It was claimed that the video shows parading workers of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in handcuffs on the streets in

Kerala. Their report says that they contacted the officials of both PFI and the RSS and got to know that the individuals in handcuffs are not affiliated with RSS but were role playing members of the organisation.

India Today Fact Check has also been contacting their local correspondents in respect to various fake news stories to get more clarity. In a report stated earlier too, a video went viral with the claim of Indian Army destroying Chinese bunkers across Pangong Tso Lake. Through reverse searches it was found that the footage is of a rescue operation in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district. Their local correspondent at *India Today's Uttarakhand Bureau* asserted that the video was from the site of the Rishi Ganga Power Project in Raini village of Chamoli. He also confirmed that the orange jackets in the video belong to the eighth battalion of ITBP.

It can be said that the fact checking units working under a parent news media company has a set network of sources spread throughout. Such a source network was used by the parent organisation for mainstream reporting and their fact checking units seemed to have benefited from already existing sources and local correspondents. On the other hand independent fact checking units were also successful in gathering ground reports from the sources but mention of correspondents helping them was not seen. Hence for fact checking units under a parent media company have already existing news sources to contact straight away for the purpose of debunking. While in comparison to independent fact checking units the process to reach out to the sources begins from scratch usually.

Taking cues from the viral images/videos

Certain fake news stories could be fact checked by observing the image or video viral for some cues that can lead the fact checker to the real story. At times the spelling or grammatical errors also help in checking the credibility of the content that gets shared

widely online with false claims. *Factly* closely observed the image that went viral with the claim that a bullock carts rally was organized by people to align with the farmers' protest. Close observance made them read the slogans on the placards which were about rising fuel prices. The image was traced back to its original context wherein it was posted in 2018 by *Patrika* saying that the Youth and NSUI members organized this rally back then to protest the increasing fuel prices.

Similarly, when an old photo with the slogan 'Go Back Modi' written on a street went viral with the claim that it is from Tamil Nadu, the team at *Factly* observed a better version of this photo. They found 'METRO CHANNEL CONTROL POST, ARE STREET POLICE STATION' written on a building beside the road. Taking this cue from the picture they looked for places on Google maps and with appropriate keywords they were directed to this location which was in Kolkata. Moreover, reverse searches had already shown that the picture was from 2020 during the protest against CAA and NRC in Kolkata.

Political fake news stories were the maximum in number

While analysing the various fact checking reports it was seen that majority fake news stories were political in nature. Some had political leaders involved while some fake stories were spread by the party members themselves. There were a very few stories wherein no political angle was seen. There were limited stories from the entertainment and local beats and stories with national or political relevance were seen to be in large numbers.

Interview

The researcher used the method of intensive interview to understand various concepts related to debunking fake news stories and their performance. The aim of the interview was to

have an in-depth understanding of how fact checking units/platforms function to gather fake news and debunk it. Apart from that, the aim was to gather information about the audience engagement at these platforms in order to have an idea about how the public is receiving their work.

The researcher managed to interview two fact checkers, one with Bharath Guniganti; he is the Head of Fact-Checking projects at *Factly*. The second interview was conducted with Kritika Goel who is an Associate Editor and Fact Checker at *the Quint*, *WebQoof*.

In a detailed interview section with Goel, the researcher got to know that fake news stories often emerged parallel to the news cycle. Upon asking how they select such fake news stories, Goel answered that there isn't a set criterion to do so. *WebQoof* picks up those stories that are capable of impacting the society or are highly relevant to current events. (For example, fake news around Covid-19 pandemic, West Bengal Elections, Farmers' protest). Borderline hate stories with communal hatred angles are taken up and usually no fake news story is discarded from the process of debunking.

When asked about the queries received via the audience on their WhatsApp helpline number, she answered that the number of queries received keeps changing according to the events. There are times when multiple people send in the same queries while on an average they receive 150-200 such requests a month. There was a spike in number during the farmers' protest in the months of December 2020, January and February 2021.

While answering to the question about *the Quint's* already established network being helpful, she said that it is an additional benefit for the fact checking unit. She mentioned that the newsroom reporters, stringers network and local correspondents reaching out to local sources have been helping *WebQoof* to gather ground information. Although majority work is done by fact

checkers at their desk but having an established network contributes positively.

Bharath Guniganti, also specified the factors *Factly* considers while picking up fake news stories. He mentioned that the viral factor (number of shares and likes) of a particular news story helps in understanding that it can misguide a huge audience. He also specified that stories capable of causing harm or inciting violence on ground are taken up for debunking. Such fact checked stories need to be brought out to prevent any such action.

While answering the question about sources of these stories, he mentioned that WhatsApp queries are received in good numbers while the team also keeps an eye for such stories on social media platforms. Moreover, while discussing debunking methods applied he mentioned that using information put out by some news platforms cannot be taken at its face value as a debunking process. This is because there have been instances wherein the fake news story was spread by a media platform itself. The audience response is analysed by reading the mails sent to them by people while some people tag them in various posts. Guniganti mentioned that people also shame them over news stories that do not align with their ideologies while at the same time they receive a lot of appreciation from others. Messages of audience response on WhatsApp, comments on YouTube videos and Facebook posts help them in understanding how the information put out by *Factly* is being received. It was also observed that fact checking units working as a body under a parent news media platform benefitted from the already existing source network of stringers and correspondents as compared to independent fact checking units.

The details received from two intensive interviews gave an idea about the audience engagement. It helped in understanding how the public contributes to the cause of debunking by sending in queries to these platforms and how they respond to their work.

Conclusion

The researcher aimed at drawing patterns and observations via the methods of textual analysis and intensive interview. Through exhaustive understanding of the fact checked reports, the researcher was able to lay out how each fact checking unit/platform functions with respect to debunking. Moreover, certain findings were made wherein features unique to reporting style, political bias, representation style and fact check sections of these platforms were highlighted.

While studying the fact checked reports from the month of February 2021, the researcher focused at understanding the debunking methods applied. The most common method was the use of digital tools like Google reverse image search, keyword search, InVid tool among others. For the stories that see the use of old images/videos in context to a latest event, these tools were the first way to find out their original dates of publication. Other very important debunking method was to contact the people/sources in direct connection to a particular story. These sources could include people directly involved in the story or authority/officials relevant to it. It was seen that various police departments, ministries and known figures were contacted for official statements over the claims.

Through analysis and interviews with two fact checkers, it can be said that the fake news stories go hand in hand with the current events. These stories are mostly based on hard news and the majority chunk belongs to the political beat. Through careful analysis of these reports it can be said that major news stories are about a particular political party, their members/leaders or an action directly linked to them.

The researcher also tried to trace out certain patterns of targeting if they existed. *OpIndia Fact Check* showed clear publishing of stories that were targeted at Congress, a political

party and its leaders/members. Moreover, in comparison to all other platforms, *OpIndia Fact Check's* reports saw opinion-based commenting. All the other platforms conducted a fact check but never gave an opinion from their side to give the story a slant.

While comparing the working model of the units/platforms picked up for sampling, the researcher could draw certain differences. The units working under a parent news media company benefited from their already existing source network including local correspondents and stringers. The independent fact checking platforms could still reach out to the sources for official comments but having an established network proved to be an advantage for the former.

Lastly the interviews proved to add on to the observations made while conducting the analysis. In addition to that the researcher got to understand the criteria according to which fact checkers pick up such stories. Both of the interviewees exclaimed that with the aim to not miss any, the fact checking units/platforms first pick up stories that are capable of inciting violence or causing harm.

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Miscellaneous

Fact checked reports that were analysed were taken from the official websites/webpages of *Alt News*, *Factly*, *WebQoof* via the *Quint*, *India Today Fact Check* and *OpIndia Fact Check* from the month of February 2021.

Dimpal Gulwani is a Multimedia journalism post-graduate diploma student at the Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media. She can be contacted at dimpal.gulwani@gmail.com