Fake news - media industry hits back, stepping up fact-checking

News media on the offensive to shore up credibility

WASHINGTON: The viral spread of hoaxes and misinformation ahead of the US election and Brexit referendum two years ago was a wake-up call for many established news media, who have gone on the offensive to shore up their credibility and help filter out fake news. Major media organizations, often in partnership with big technology and social media firms, have stepped up fact-checking and other steps to support fact-based journalism. But these efforts have been complicated by unrelenting attacks on the media by US President Donald Trump and others who tend to label any unfavorable coverage "fake news."

The 'gatekeeper' role

Fake news is as old as journalism itself, and reputable media organizations have often played a role of "gatekeeper" to reliable information. This role has been fundamentally challenged in the fast-moving internet age when rumors and false information can become viral, sometimes with tragic results. In one chilling example in India, a WhatsApp rumor warning that 300 people had descended on Gujarat looking to abduct and sell children has triggered deadly mob attacks. Social media "has made things much worse," because it "offers an easy route for non-journalists to bypass journalism's gatekeepers, so that anyone can 'publish' anything, however biased, inaccurate or fabricated," says John Huxford, an Illinois State University journalism professor.

Social media 'made things much worse'

"Journalism's role as the 'gatekeeper' of what is and isn't news has always been controversial, of course. But we're now seeing just how bad things can get when that function breaks down." Internet firms, after initial reluctance to define themselves as "media," have stepped up efforts to identify false news and to "curate" stories from "trusted" news sources. "Technology companies including Apple, Google, Snapchat, Twitter, and, above all, Facebook have taken on most of the functions of news organizations, becoming key players in the news ecosystem, whether they wanted that role or not," said a March 2018 report by Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism.

Fake news spreads faster

Numerous studies have shown that fake news-often more sensational than genuine information-spreads faster online because of how social media has prioritized "virality." "False political news traveled deeper and more broadly, reached more people, and was more viral than any other category of false information," said a report this year from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The MIT researchers examined 126,000 rumors spread by three million people, and found that false news reached more people than the truth.

"Analysis found that it took the truth approximately six times as long as falsehood to reach 1,500 people," the researchers said. Oxford Internet Institute scholars came to a similar conclusion, pointing out that on many online platforms, news is "prioritized by complex algorithms that have been coded to sort, filter, and deliver content in a manner that is designed to maximize users' engagement," according to a study. "The speed and scale at which content 'goes viral' grows exponentially, regardless of whether or not the information it contains is true," wrote Oxford researchers Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard.

Huxford said many internet users are not adept at telling fake news from the real thing, making the role of major news organizations critical. "This is why Trump

NEW DELHI: This photo illustration shows an Indian newspaper vendor reading a newspaper with a full back page advertisement from WhatsApp intended to counter fake information, in New Delhi. —AFP

falsely labeling the mainstream media as 'fake news' is so toxic," he said. "It means that, at a time when there is a lot of fabrication and falsehoods swirling through the system, the credibility of the most reliable sources of news is being undermined." There have been some hopeful signs for news media, such as increased digital subscriptions for the New York Times and Washington Post. But many legacy organizations such as local newspapers are struggling with a shift to digital platforms.

Journalists may face new dangers in the current environment, in some cases subject to attacks by political leaders even when trying to debunk false information. In Brazil, the fact-checking organizations Lupa and Aos Fatos, which have partnered with Facebook to curb fake news, have faced threats and harassment, with some groups accusing them of ideological bias. —AFP

Media curbs in DR Congo raise fears ahead of election

KINSHASA: The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is clamping down on online media in a declared campaign against fake news, hate speech and cyber-crime, a move that has stoked alarm as crucial elections loom. Watchdogs say the crackdown breaches media freedom and stifles political debate, adding to volatility in what is already a powder-keg country. On June 14, the ministry of communications issued a decree giving online media outlets a month to comply with new regulations, or else face potential fines and prison sentences.

"The law is intended to protect the public," Communications Minister Lambert Mende said in an interview with AFP. "It's not just fake news-there's also incitement to violence, hate-speech, and in our country, we know where that can lead." The rules include registering with the authorities, complying with a 1996 law on freedom of the press and having ads approved by relevant authorities. The punishments are the same as those detailed in the 1996 law, which include a fine and a 15-day prison term that can be longer if the crime warrants a higher sentence.

Watchdogs for media freedom and human rights say they are worried. "If the decree is applied in its current form, it will muzzle online media and restrain freedom of expression," said Tshivis Tshivuadi, head of an advocacy group called Journalists in Danger. "There are real concerns that these new requirements will soon be used as an excuse to crack down on Congo's vibrant online media outlets," said Ida Sawyer of Human Rights Watch. Amnesty International warned about text prohibiting "any illustration, story, information or insertion infringing the right to the image and the right to privacy"-a provision that, it said, has been used in the past to censor political criticism. —AFP

Activists debunk war-torn Syria's fake news

BEIRUT: Old images, fiction films and even video games have all been used to spread fake news stories in war-torn Syria-creating all the more work for a media collective debunking them. Protests broke out against Syria's regime in 2011 and then spun into violent conflict. All along, there has been a continuous stream of fabricated "news", helped by the rapid-fire reach of social media. To bring clarity and truth to an increasingly complex war, 32-year-old activist and journalist Ahmad Primo founded Verify-sy, an electronic platform that monitors and fact-checks stories about the conflict.

"As reporters, journalists, and activists, we've got a responsibility," Primo tells AFP. "What's happening today will be written down as history, and we don't want it to be fake history." Years ago, Primo took part in protests in the northern city of Aleppo and worked at a website that published news about the popular movement. After being arrested three times by government forces, he moved to rebel-held territory in northern Syria before eventually leaving for Turkey. "I was arrested for publishing the truth about what's happening (in regime territory), and when I moved to opposition areas, I noticed they tamper with the truth, too," says Primo. —AFP

Fake news: Algorithms in the dock

PARIS: At the heart of the spread of fake news are the algorithms used by search engines, websites and social media which are often accused of pushing false or manipulated information regardless of the consequences.

What are algorithms?

They are the invisible but essential computer programs and formulas that increasingly run modern life, designed to repeatedly solve recurrent problems or to make decisions on their own. Their ability to filter and seek out links in gigantic databases means it would be impossible to run global markets without them, but they can also be refined down to produce personalized quotes on everything from mortgages to plane tickets. They also run our Google searches, our Facebook newsfeed, recommend articles or videos to us and sometimes censor questionable content because it may contain violence, pornography or racist language. Other algorithms charged with the most complex and sensitive tasks can be opaque "black boxes" which develop their own artificial intelligence based on our data.

A skewed view of the world?

"Algorithms can help us find our way through the huge amount of information on the internet," said Margrethe Vestager, the European commissioner for competition. "But the problem is that we only see what these algorithms-and the companies that use them-choose to show us," she added.In organizing your online content, algorithms also tend to create "filter bubbles", insulating us from opposing points of view.

During the US presidential election in 2016, Facebook was accused of helping Donald Trump by allowing often false information about his rival Hillary Clinton to circulate online, closing people into a news bubble. Algorithms also tend to make extreme opinions "and fringe views more visible than ever", according to Berlin-based Lorena Jaume-Palasi, founder of the Algorithm Watch group. However, their effects can be difficult to measure, she warned, saying that algorithms alone are not to blame for the rise in nationalism in Europe.

Spreading fake news?

Social media algorithms tend to push the most viewed content without checking if it is true or not, which is why they magnify the impact of fake news. On YouTube in particular, conspiracy theory videos get a great deal more traffic than accurate and properly sourced ones, said Guillaume Chaslot, one of the Google-owned platform's former engineers. These videos, which may claim that the moon landings or climate change are lies, get far more views and comments, keeping users on the platform longer and undermining credible, traditional media, Chaslot insisted.

More ethical algorithms?

Some observers believe that algorithms could be programmed "to serve human freedom", with many non-governmental groups demanding far more transparency. "Coca-Cola doesn't reveal its formula but its products are tested for their effect on our health," Jaume-Palasi argued, insisting on the need for clear regulation. The French privacy protection body, the CNIL, last year recommended state oversight of algorithms and that there should be a real push to educate people "so they understand the cogs of the (information technology) machine". New European data protection rules also allow people to contest the decision of an algorithm and

CALIFORNIA: Twitter logo is seen on a sign at the company's headquarters in San Francisco, California. Twitter shares tumbled on concerns the social media's efforts to crack down on fake accounts would affect its user base, and potentially its finances. —AFP

"demand a human intervention" in case of conflict.

Some internet giants have themselves begun to act to some degree: Facebook has started an effort to automatically label suspicious posts, while YouTube is reinforcing its "human controls" on videos aimed at children. However, former Silicon Valley insiders who make up the Center for Humane Technology, which was set up to combat tech's excesses, have warned that "we can't expect attention-extraction companies like YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter to change, because it's against their business model." —AFP

When fake news sparks violence

NEW DELHI: India has been shaken by a spate of mob killings sparked by a hoax about child kidnappers spread on WhatsApp. In just two months, 20 people have been murdered in such attacks. Officials and social media platforms have so far been powerless to stop the violence. But who is to blame? And why is a rumor turning people to violence?

A rumor is born

An online hoax emerged more than a year ago in eastern India claiming strangers were sedating and abducting children. Six men falsely accused of snatching kids off the streets were killed by mobs in Jharkhand state, police said. In February this year, the rumors resurfaced nearly a thousand miles away in western India. By May, it had reached the country's southern states, often accompanied by a grainy video purporting to show men on motorbikes stealing kids.

This falsehood spread like wildfire via WhatsApp, which boasts 200 million users in India who send a billion messages a day. Later, a grisly video claiming to show Indian children killed by organ-harvesting gangs went viral. The macabre images were Syrian infants killed in a gas attack five years ago. Translated into regional languages, the rumor triggered violence across India, particularly in rural areas where distrust of outsiders is entrenched and digital literacy is poor. By early July, at least twenty people had been killed in the previous two months. Among the victims were homeless people, two picnic goers and an elderly woman handing out chocolates to children.

Police powerless

India's police rounded up suspects and formed patrols, driving village to village to quash the rumors. In some areas, travelling musicians sung about the scourge of fake news. Authorities in some states shut down internet access in a desperate bid to stop the hoax from spreading. But the awareness campaigns had limited effect. In one instance, an official "rumor buster" was himself beaten to death. Anger turned to WhatsApp, blamed by authorities for spreading "irresponsible and explosive messages".

Seeking penance

WhatsApp said it was "horrified" by the violence and assured Indian authorities it was taking action. The Facebook-owned company said it was working with Indian researchers to better understand the problem and had introduced changes which it said would reduce the spread of such messages. But some pointed out that WhatsApp as a medium was not to blame, and urged the authorities to tackle the violence.

Mob rule

India is no stranger to mob violence, with well-documented cases of crowds turning on victims for every manner of transgression, real or imagined. In recent years, for example, there has been a sharp escalation in "cow vigilantism"-Hindu extremists murdering Muslims and thrashing low-caste Dalits accused of killing cows or eating beef. Many of the victims in other vigilante killings, such as those over child kidnapping rumors, are targeted because they are outsiders.

Facts vs Fiction

India is fertile ground for fake news to take hold and spread. It has a billion-plus mobile phone users-more than any other country on earth-and close to half a billion people with internet access, most via their smartphones. Cheap handsets and data plans are bringing more Indians online but many are first-time internet users unskilled in discerning fact from fiction. Indian police say there is no substance to the child kidnapping rumors, but the viral videos may not appear outlandish to some. More than 120,000 children were abducted or went missing in 2016, according to the most recent Indian government figures. There is no data available on the number of children who were found. —AFP

GUWAHATI: Photo shows Gopal Chandra Das, father of lynching victim Nilotpal Das, with a picture of his son at his residence in Guwahati, the capital city of India's northeastern state of Assam. —AFP