

Shaking the foundation of fake news

Battling disinformation must involve a fight against the narratives that act as grist for the rumour mill



Combating fake news is a growing preoccupation of the technology platforms, the political class, the news media, and an increasing tribe of citizens concerned about democracy being hijacked. There is a perception that fake news is a new phenomenon linked to the rise of social media; however, this is only half the story. Governments and political actors (anyone in the business of mobilising public opinion) have always invested in disinformation campaigns to build narratives of their choice. In fact, it is because the institutional news media is no longer seen as an arbitrator of the ‘real news’ – having lost credibility due to complicit and motivated reporting – that fake news has been able to thrive now. The advent of social media has merely decentralised the creation and propagation of fake news. It is this that has led to the ubiquity of and difficulty in controlling/eliminating fake news.

The current response to fake news primarily revolves around three prongs – rebuttal, removal of the fake news item and educating the public. While these are necessary measures, it is not apparent that they are sufficient in themselves to address the larger ‘political’ problem posed by fake news.

Rebuttal and removal

Rebuttal is a form of fact checking wherein the fake news is debunked by pointing out errors like mismatch, malicious editing and misattribution. To the extent that the fake news item appears on institutional handles, attempts are made to have it removed after rebuttal. There is much pressure on companies like Facebook and YouTube to proactively remove fake news from their platforms and rework their algorithms to ensure that such content does not gain prominence. The newly introduced limits on forwarding messages on WhatsApp are an offshoot of this discourse, where accountability to address fake news is offloaded on to the technology platforms. The third leg



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of the response revolves around educating the end users to be more discerning consumers of news by informing them of verification tools so that they can ascertain the accuracy of a news item before sharing it.

Another emerging strand in this discourse, propagated by the government, concerns tracking the ‘source’ of fake news, ostensibly to address the issue at its root. However, this suggestion, when combined with another proposal to de-anonymise all social media accounts, is fraught with serious issues concerning invasion of privacy and free speech, and will more often than not be used by governments to quell dissent.

While the measures outlined are important and must be expanded upon, there are some evident shortcomings in this approach. First, attempting to rebut fake news is akin to hitting a moving target, with a steady stream of fake news getting churned out consistently. It may be possible to rebut news on one fake instance of children getting abducted or on Indian citizens toting Pakistan’s flags but the ‘fake news factory’ will keep churning out similar stories to advance its chosen narrative.

Second, it is impossible to com-

pletely ‘remove’ fake news even after rebuttal, given the decentralised nature of dissemination. Propagation and virality of a news item are contingent not on its accuracy but on how well it conforms to the dominant narrative and also on the strength of the associated distribution networks that spread the narrative. Thus, the act of ‘rebuttal’, instead of supplanting the original fake news item, could end up vying for space with the latter. Moreover, in India, the right-wing propagators of fake news are often better organised, especially on messaging platforms like WhatsApp, than the liberal Opposition.

Reinforcing the fake account

However, the biggest shortcoming of this approach – the fact that the very act of rebuttal reinforces the fake narrative being pushed – goes beyond this cat-and-mouse problem. Since the act of rebuttal gets confined within the original framework of the fake news item, the political impact of the rebuttal is far less than ideal.

The average consumer relies on overall frameworks/narratives to evaluate a piece of information. The

increasing complexity of issues, in conjunction with the deluge of information – with the relevant jostling for space with the irrelevant – has made it impossible for any individual to develop a well-researched stand on all the topics. When an individual piece of information (fake news or otherwise) conforms to someone’s held beliefs, it is readily accepted and shared.

Confirmation bias

Studies have confirmed that people don’t care about finding the ‘truth’ behind a news item and instead look for evidence to support their preferred narrative (confirmation bias). Therefore, debunking discrete items of fake news without addressing this battle of narratives will have only a marginal value. This is because when an individual fake news item having a reinforcement value is debunked, the purveyors simply discard it and replace it with another piece of similar fake news.

It is evident that if we are concerned about the impact of fake news, we must address the underlying narratives, instead of merely trying to rebut individual items. This needs to be done in two connected ways: first, by addressing the weaknesses that allow the fake news narrative to take root. For instance, the right wing’s narrative across the world, while propelled by fake news, is premised on the loss of credibility of the liberal camp, which is perceived to be elitist and corrupt. Any forward must involve a rebuilding of this lost credibility.

Second, we must not get sucked into a losing narrative while attempting to rebut fake news. Instead, we must mobilise public opinion around an alternate narrative that makes the fake news item irrelevant. Most people cannot hold multiple stories in their head and thus, instead of poking holes in an opponent’s story, it may be more effective to replace it with a different narrative built on facts. Ultimately, all fake news is in service of a political, if not electoral, agenda. We should thus not lose sight of the wood for the trees by focussing disproportionately on individual fake news items instead of the larger narrative.

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The multitudes dispossessed by the ‘Gujarat model’

Extractive projects like Sardar Sarovar have hit many people



ARYAMAN JAIN & ASEEM SHRIVASTAVA

The Gujarat government has filled up the Sardar Sarovar this year, flooding the Narmada. In Madhya Pradesh alone, reportedly, more than 28,000 families still live in the submergence zone. They have not been given due rehabilitation or compensation. However, despite opposition by many groups, the Gujarat and Union governments are going ahead with this forced mass displacement of communities. Disturbing videos are circulating. In one, a woman is seen refusing to leave her home, even as it is flooded to waist level. In another, two childhood friends are seen consoling each other as they watch the only place they’ve called ‘home’ go under water. There are thousands of such scenes along the Narmada. Crops grown over the season have been destroyed and around 13,500 hectares of forests are being drowned by this developmental mayhem.

Ingress of sea water

Beyond Sardar Sarovar, the once mighty Narmada is now a seasonal drain that carries sewage and industrial effluents. At the mouth of the river in Gujarat, because of lower freshwater pressure on account of the dam, the sea water has ingressed several km inland, rendering vast fertile lands saline. With some 10,000 hectares of agricultural land having been destroyed, the farmers of the area are devastated. Just in Bharuch, a fishing community of around 30,000 has lost its livelihood. The estuary’s once-thriving population of the coveted Hilsa fish is in danger due to the ingress. In response, the Gujarat government has built a barrage which, paradoxically will only end up destroying the breeding grounds of the Hilsa.

When the dream of the Sardar Sarovar was sold to the people of Gujarat, these features of the dam were not mentioned. Even today, when proponents continue to defend the project after all that has happened, they fail to report these ‘gifts’ of the dam.

But how was such a disaster allowed to unfold? For years, industrial lobbies constantly pushed politicians to build the dam despite activists raising important questions about it. The politicians found it opportune to go along with the industrialists’ agenda.

The Sardar Sarovar was promised as a new lease of life for farmers across Gujarat. Even the Supreme Court, in allowing the project to go ahead in a 2000 verdict, relied pivotally on the argument that there was no other way to provide water to the dry areas of Gujarat. Farmers as far as Kutch were promised Narmada waters. They are still waiting as the canals leading to their agricultural lands have not been built as yet. Instead, the situation has worsened. As Gujarat neglected its own water resources and the changing climate, farmers, fishermen and herders have begun leaving, signalling the beginnings of a climate refugee crisis.

The primary beneficiaries

Today, it is clear that the primary beneficiaries of the dam were the industrialists of Gujarat. Tata’s plant in Sanand, shifted from West Bengal after farmers there protested illegal land grab, draws a generous amount of Narmada’s water and as does Coca-Cola, which was thwarted from expanding in Plachimada, Kerala, and Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, due to protests. Meanwhile, Gujarat’s own river, Sabarmati, now draws water from the Narmada to fill it.

The plight of the farmers of Dholera, who were once promised Narmada water and were successfully mobilised against anti-dam protests, brings out the cruel irony of the State’s policies. The soil of the area has turned saline, thanks to Gujarat’s neglect of its local water bodies. To add insult to injury, the State government now wants to build a ‘Special Investment Region’ there and has asked farmers to vacate the land. Any protest is being beaten into the earth. Such are the perverse ‘achievements’ of those relentless in their advocacy of the dam. The riches of Gujarat – shown as a model to the rest of the country – are the result of such violent extraction, exploitation and destruction that benefit a few while victimising many.

As we near Mahatma Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary, let’s recall these words of warning from him: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom [Britain] is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

We are now looking at 1,300-1,700 million people wanting to live like Britain. The ultimate outcome is a foregone conclusion.

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Nigeria’s war against wild poliovirus approaches a climax

Country could be declared ‘polio-free’ next year

R. PRASAD

On August 21 this year, Nigeria crossed an important milestone in the eradication of polio when it successfully completed three successive years without a single case of wild poliovirus. A country is said to have eradicated polio when no fresh case of wild poliovirus is reported for three successive years.

The last case of type 1 wild poliovirus in Nigeria was reported in August 2016 in Borno State, in the country’s insurgency-hit northeast. The official announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) is expected by early next year.

With Nigeria almost winning the war against the wild poliovirus, the endgame is getting closer. Today, wild poliovirus is endemic only in two countries – Pakistan and Afghanistan. Global eradication will depend on stopping the disease in these two countries. But as long as polio exists in any part of the world, children are at threat everywhere.

Spike in Afghanistan, Pakistan

Just as it appeared to be easy to snuff out the virus in these two Asian countries, there has been a spike this year. As on September 11 this year, there have been 16 and 62 wild poliovirus cases reported in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively. Compared to 2018, the number of cases in Afghanistan reduced while it increased manifold in Pakistan.

After being removed from the WHO’s list of ‘polio endemic countries’ in September 2015, Nigeria came close to eliminating polio the very next year. However, it faced a setback in July-August 2016 when three fresh cases were reported.

The wild virus strain that caused the fresh cases was found to be linked to the virus detected in 2011 in Borno, indicating that the strain was still present in the environment. This did not come as a surprise as health-care workers had not been able to access as much as 60% of settlements in Borno due to the decade-long insurgency in northeast Nigeria.

As a result, about 5,00,000 children in the State were deprived of health services by 2016.

Like the Democratic Republic of

Congo during the latest outbreak of Ebola, Nigeria had to rely on security personnel to escort health workers to Borno. But certain areas were out of bounds for health-care workers and access was limited to only military personnel. Nigeria came up with a unique strategy to reach out to children by training the military personnel to double up as vaccinators.

These strategies have borne fruits. Health workers, accompanied by security personnel, were able to immunise



A health worker immunising a child in Kano, northwest Nigeria, in April 2017. • GETTY IMAGES

nise 80% of children with three doses of the vaccine containing only type 1 and type 3 polio viruses. Military personnel by themselves were able to reach 26%.

60,000 yet to be vaccinated

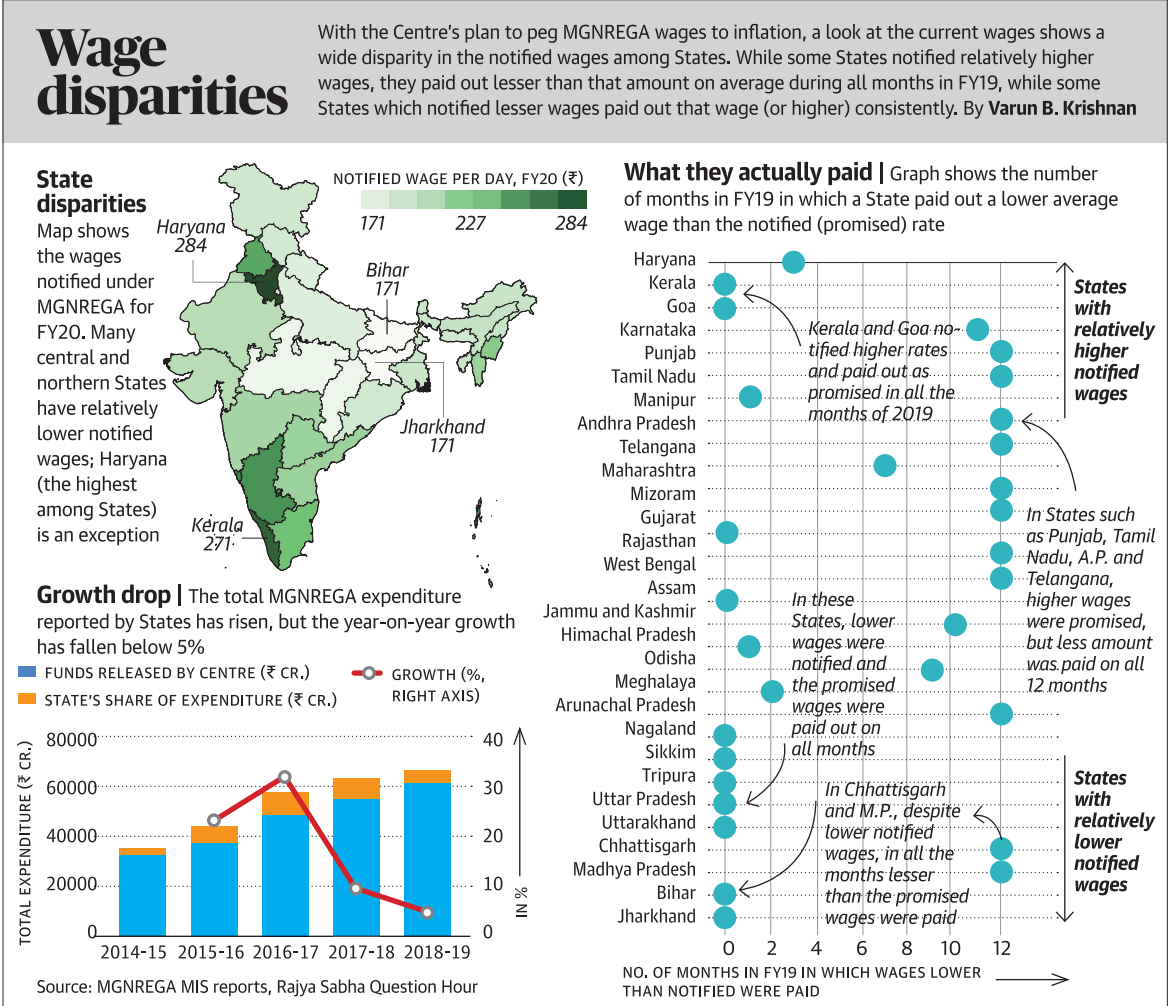
However, the success of the two strategies notwithstanding, about 60,000 children are yet to be vaccinated in the insurgent-held areas, according to a July 2019 paper; the true status of wild poliovirus in these children remains unknown.

And even as wild poliovirus appears to be tamed in Nigeria, as on August 28, 2019, the weakened type 2 virus used in oral polio vaccine had turned virulent and caused 16 cases of paralysis, down from 34 last year. Though vaccine-derived polio cases will not come in the way of Nigeria being certified as ‘polio-free’ by the WHO, multiple outbreaks of such kind are concerning, particularly the emergence of new strains in areas where oral vaccine containing only type 2 was used.

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DATA POINT



The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 19, 1969

Political silence of Sheikh Abdullah

Busy in planning the construction of a new mosque at Hazratbal near Srinagar to house Prophet Mohammed’s sacred hair (brought to Kashmir in 1700 A.D.), Sheikh Abdullah is significantly silent about his future course of action in the political field. This is puzzling to his critics and admirers alike. Political analysts believe that apart from the fact that he might have become more religious-minded with his advancing age, he is conserving his energy for the 1972 General Election in which the Plebiscite Front, of which he is the patron and trouble-shooter, is going to participate with an eye to capturing a majority of seats in the State Legislative Assembly. The Sheikh’s seeming “political inactivity” is, therefore, interpreted as a part of his unexpressed overall strategy not to get involved in any such agitation as would make him unable to lead the Plebiscite Front to “victory” in the next General Election. Accordingly, it is explained in political circles, the Kashmiri leader gives the impression of letting things slide for the time being. Knowledgeable circles argue that it is futile to believe that the Sheikh is tired of politics. Nor is there any evidence to show that he has become pliant or is chary of shouldering the political consequences of his plebiscite slogan. On the contrary, it seems that for the present he is only trying to avoid a war of words – and action – which may create an explosive situation. And the new mosque at Hazratbal is expected to take two years to be completed. That is about the time when preparations for the next General Elections will start.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 19, 1919.

Help the Punjab: An appeal.

The Press Sub-Committee of the Punjab Relief Committee has issued the appeal:

Yesterday we gave our reader breathing time. Not breathing time to rest, but breathing time in which to carry out the numerous suggestions we have been making on behalf of the Relief Committee. What Madras city has been doing remains to be seen, but the muffasal is waking up, meetings have been held all over the Presidency, and here and there a Punjab Week has been decided upon. Let us remind our readers that next Sunday is Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday – his Swadeshi birthday. In Madras we are going to celebrate it by a monster meeting on the Beach, near the Aquarium opposite the Presidency College. We are going to make a special collection from the audience to send in Mahatma Gandhi’s name to the Punjab sufferers. Muffasal friends, we suggest to you to go and do likewise.