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Fake News, Real Harm: Rethinking Accountability in Journalism in India

- Mohd Kaif Ali

1. Introduction

In the contemporary information landscape, the proliferation of fake news has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges to democratic governance, public health, and social cohesion. While misinformation is not a new phenomenon, the exponential growth of digital platforms, social media algorithms, and now artificial intelligence has dramatically amplified both the speed and scale at which false narratives can spread. What was once a fringe problem has matured into a structural threat — one that demands serious legal scrutiny. In an era where information is available at our fingertips, news plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, influencing decision-making, and promoting awareness about social, political, and economic issues. However, the digital revolution has also given rise to a significant challenge in India—the rapid spread of fake news. With the increasing use of social media platforms and online news portals, false or misleading information can reach millions of people within seconds, often before its accuracy can be verified.

This blog explores the growing problem of fake news and examines the need to rethink accountability in journalism. It discusses the impact of misinformation on society, the ethical responsibilities of journalists, the role of media organizations and social media platforms, and the importance of media literacy among citizens. By understanding these issues, we can work toward a more responsible and trustworthy media ecosystem.

However, the growing prevalence of fake news has raised important questions about accountability within the media industry. Should journalists be held responsible for inaccurate reporting? What role should media organizations and digital platforms play in preventing the spread of misinformation? How can the public contribute to maintaining a

healthy information environment? Who should be held accountable when misinformation spreads? Is it journalists, media organizations, social media platforms, or the audience itself? To answer this question, we must first understand the role of journalism and the consequences of irresponsible reporting.

2. What is Fake News?

Fake news refers to false, misleading, or fabricated information presented as legitimate news. Sometimes it is created intentionally to manipulate public opinion, gain political advantage, or generate advertising revenue through clicks and views. In other cases, misinformation spreads because of poor fact-checking, rushed reporting, or reliance on unreliable sources. Unfortunately, this reflects the current situation in our country, where a significant portion of the national news media appears to prioritize sensationalism over substantive reporting. The problem becomes even more serious when fake news appears to come from trusted media outlets. Many readers assume that information published by news organizations has already been verified, when inaccurate stories are reported, public trust in journalism suffers significantly.

3. Fake News Causes Real Harm in India

The consequences of fake news in India have been serious and far-reaching. In several instances, false rumours circulated through social media have led to mob violence, communal tensions, and public panic. During elections, misinformation campaigns have attempted to influence voter opinions and manipulate political discourse. There are several reports that reveal the truth behind fake news and the real harm it causes.

- 214% rise in misinformation during the COVID 19 pandemic with India accounting for 1 in 6 fake news pieces globally,
- According to the report of *UNESCO-Ipsos survey* over 85% of urban Indians report encountering online hate speech, with 64% blaming social media,
- According to *News Checker report* 38% of fake news originates from verified pages, while 70% spreads through at least one verified handle
- Deepfakes influenced the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, reinforcing biases and swaying voter sentiment.

- During Operation Sindoor, several national news television channels were criticized for broadcasting unverified and misleading information, raising concerns about journalistic responsibility and accuracy.

4. Who Should Be Held Accountable?

Journalism has traditionally been regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, entrusted with the responsibility of providing citizens with accurate, unbiased, and verified information. However, in recent years, concerns have been raised regarding the independence of certain sections of the Indian media, with critics arguing that some outlets appear to align closely with or favor the policies and narratives of the central government. The accountability for fake news should be shared among various stakeholders. Journalists and media organizations have a primary responsibility to ensure accuracy, fairness, and proper fact-checking before publishing news. Regulatory bodies such as the Press Council of India and the News Broadcasters & Digital Association promote ethical standards in journalism, although their enforcement powers are limited. Social media companies must also take responsibility by identifying and removing misleading content while improving transparency in their moderation practices. The government has a role in creating legal frameworks to address misinformation, but such measures must not infringe upon constitutional freedoms. Finally, citizens must exercise caution by verifying information before sharing it and developing media literacy skills to identify unreliable sources.

5. The Responsibility of Journalists

In India the Journalism plays a crucial role in informing the public, because of this responsibility, journalists must adhere to high ethical standards. Accuracy, fairness, independence, and accountability are fundamental principles of professional journalism. Before publishing a story, journalists should verify facts through multiple reliable sources. Information should not be reported simply because it is trending or likely to attract attention. The pressure to publish quickly should never outweigh the duty to publish accurately. When mistakes occur, journalists and media organizations should correct them promptly and transparently. A willingness to acknowledge errors demonstrates professionalism and helps rebuild public trust. The challenge of combating fake news in India must be balanced with the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and expression under **Article 19(1)(a)** of the

Constitution of India. A free press is essential for democracy because it enables journalists to investigate public issues, expose wrongdoing, and hold authorities accountable.

6. Conclusion

In India, the fight against fake news requires collective responsibility. Journalists, media organizations, social media platforms, government institutions, and citizens must work together to create a trustworthy information environment. By promoting accountability while safeguarding press freedom, India can strengthen its democratic values and ensure that journalism continues to serve the public interest effectively.

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