



Curbing Fake News

This editorial is based on [“Stronger laws to curb fake news”](#) which was published in the Indian Express on 18/02/2023. It discusses the Issue of Fake News and ways to curb it.

For Prelims: Fake News, Indian Penal Code, National Crime Records Bureau, UPSC, IT Act 2008, Disaster Management Act 2005, Indian Penal Code of 1860, Epidemic Diseases Act 1897

For Mains: The menace of False information, Social media and spread of fake news, Risks to free speech and spread of misinformation.

In the age of the internet, fake news has become the new social evil that is haunting us.

Recently, a fake video was spread in which a migrant worker in Tamil Nadu was being attacked.

Concerned about the ongoing situation, the Tamil Nadu government said that those who spread rumours that migrant workers are being attacked in Tamil Nadu are against the Indian nation and they cause harm to the integrity of the country.

In 2020, the number of cases filed against people 'circulating fake/false news/rumours' under Section 505 of the [Indian Penal Code \(IPC\)](#) has **increased by 214%**, according to the [National Crime Records Bureau](#).

There is **also a need for stronger laws against fake news in India** and media organisations need to make fact-checking a routine practice and create greater public awareness.

What are the Challenges in Curbing Fake News in India?

- **Low Digital Literacy:**
 - India's digital literacy rate is still low, which makes it easy for fake news to spread, as people often do not have the skills to verify the authenticity of news sources.
 - According to the **India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide**, approximately 70% of the population has poor or no connectivity to digital services.
 - Among the poorest 20% households, only 2.7% have access to a computer and 8.9% to internet facilities.
- **Political Use:**
 - **Fake news is often used for political purposes in India**, especially during elections. Political parties use fake news to manipulate public opinion, which makes it challenging to control the spread of fake news.
- **Limited Fact-Checking Infrastructure:**
 - India has limited fact-checking infrastructure, and many of the available fact-checking organizations (PIB fact check units) are small and poorly funded.
- **Lack of Penalties:**
 - There are **currently no strict penalties for the spread of fake news in India**, which makes it difficult to deter people from creating and disseminating fake news.

▪ **Opacity of Social Media Platforms:**

- Social media platforms are increasingly becoming the primary ground for public discourse over which a handful of individuals have inordinate control.
 - One of the biggest hurdles in being able to curb misinformation is the lack of transparency by social media platforms.
 - Even when platforms have disclosed certain kinds of information, the data is often not presented in a manner that facilitates easy analysis.

▪ **Anonymity:**

- The most famous reason for anonymity is to **be able to speak the truth against vindictive governments or to not let the views be tagged to the real person** being spoken about, in the offline world.
 - Despite helping people share their views without any insecurity, it does more harm in the sense that they may spread false information without any repercussions.

What are the Initiatives taken in this Regard?

▪ **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021:**

- The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 **proposes that social media platforms are required to remove content that has been fact-checked** by the Press Information Bureau's fact check unit and deemed false.
- This rule aims to curb the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media platforms.

▪ **IT Act 2008:**

- Section 66 D of the **IT Act 2008** regulates offences related to electronic communication.
- This includes **punishing individuals who send offensive messages through communication services** or social media platforms. This act can be used to penalize those who spread fake news through electronic communication.

▪ **Disaster Management Act 2005:**

- The [Disaster Management Act 2005](#) and the [Epidemic Diseases Act 1897](#) (especially during Covid-19) regulate the circulation of fake news or rumours that can cause panic among citizens.

▪ **Indian Penal Code of 1860:**

- It **regulates fake news that causes riots and information** that causes defamation. This act can be used to hold individuals accountable for spreading fake news that incites violence or defames someone's character.

What should be the Way Forward?

▪ **Promote Media Literacy:**

- Education and awareness are **critical tools in combating fake news**. People need to be taught how to verify sources, fact-check claims, and understand the difference between reliable and unreliable news sources.

▪ **Strengthen Laws:**

- India has some laws against fake news, but they need to be more robustly enforced. Laws need to be updated to address the rapidly evolving online media landscape.

▪ **Encourage Responsible Journalism:**

- Journalists need to adhere to ethical standards and be accountable for their reporting. Media organizations can play a role in promoting responsible journalism and fact-checking.

▪ **Encourage Social Media Companies to Act:**

- **Social media platforms need to be more proactive in identifying and removing fake news**. They can use artificial intelligence tools to identify fake news and work with fact-checking organizations to verify news stories.

▪ **Encourage Fact-Checking Organizations:**

- **Fact-checking organizations can play a critical role in verifying news stories** and educating people about fake news. These organizations need to be encouraged and supported by the government and media.
 - The fact checks unit of the **Press Information Bureau (PIB)** busted 1,160 cases

of false information since its inception in November 2019.

▪ **Encourage Responsible Social Media Use:**

- **Individuals need to take responsibility for their social media use.** They need to avoid sharing unverified news stories and be more critical of what they see online.

▪ **Foster a Culture of Critical Thinking:**

- **Critical thinking skills need to be fostered in schools** and in society in general.
- People need to be encouraged to question what they read and hear and to seek out reliable sources of information.

Drishti Mains Question

What are the major challenges in effectively curbing the spread of fake news and disinformation, and what strategies and solutions can be employed to address these challenges?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q. What do you understand by the concept of “freedom of speech and expression”? Does it cover hate speech also? Why do the films in India stand on a slightly different plane from other forms of expression? Discuss. (2014)

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