

# COUNTERING FAKE NEWS DURING ELECTIONS

## Strict Regulations, with Stricter Compliance, is the Key

Come elections and the season's flavour is fake news! The news we all use at our own peril, sometimes knowingly, but the damage is done before the realisation dawns. Elections are about citizens making informed choices and fake news is about queering that deal.

Fake news is not always false news. It is an artifice, a clever construct, which comes with elements of disinformation, misinformation, half-truths or twisted facts. It typically hits us on the go, as distorted news, memes or motivated jokes mostly hidden in routine WhatsApp or other social media messages. The intention, almost always, is to mislead for a variety of reasons, ranging from winning an election to polarising opinions, or anything between lionising a strong leader to trashing his enemies. The Cambridge Dictionary defines fake news as, "False stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."

Make no mistake, fake news is a creature of politics – and not of media. It is a god's gift to demagogues, spin doctors and propagandists. Conventional media is mostly a purveyor (and only sometimes a creator) of fake news but the social media is its ideal locale. It typically originates from an individual with an axe to grind but flies across family groups or friends' networks and multiplies its reach within seconds through forwards, shares or tweets by others. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it assumes a life of its own, sometimes shaking the foundations of public order on which rest the moorings of a civilised society.

We saw the impact of a dubious SMS gone viral when thousands of Indians of North-Eastern origin fled Bangalore in a flash in 2012. The panic struck India's Silicon Valley within hours in an atmosphere of lurking fear and mistrust. Everybody was soon running for life, away from the city, on buses, trains or whatever transport they could get. Fortunately, the hoax ended without costing human lives, which was not the case with many later incidents in Karnataka, Telangana, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu when rumours of child lifting ended up in the lynching of fellow human beings. True, rumours have always been dangerous but technology is taking them to new lows. Even before the digital age, images of Lord Ganesha drinking milk became a nationwide spectacle in the mid-nineties through landline phone networks and the newly arrived private TV news channels.

### Democracy in the Digital Age

What has changed in the digital age is the proliferation of dubious content using algorithms and customised pitches for every individual voter. It is like hate news meeting data analytics to game the system with the capability to create flare-ups on demand. The jigsaw begins to make sense when the elections are seen in their new eco-system of 24X7 digital war-rooms – complete with social media warriors, troll armies and data brokers. Their job: micro-targeting whole demography, down to every voter, with negative, positive, mixed or 'dark' messages, nudges and threats, delivered at the right time on the right platform.

The new order is that the elections must be won at any cost. The stakes are really high; the major parties spent more than Rs 30,000 crore in 2014 elections by conservative estimates and the figure in 2019 could be close to double that amount. Losing is not an option for many stalwarts who might end up in jail if the power slips out of their hands. Money and muscle power still have their use but money alone cannot guarantee a seat. And that is why the capability to inflame passions comes in handy. There is a market for influencing the minds with fears, threats and dark messages; the technology is available, there is no dearth of money, and the demand must be met.

## **New Demands of Post-Truth Politics**

The market logic of demand and supply fits into the new culture of post-truth politics where the debate is framed by emotional appeals rather than by facts. A case in point is the Brexit referendum in the UK, followed by the US and Brazilian Presidential elections, where facts were defeated by feelings drenched in superficial patriotic emotions. We have seen glimpses of this in India where established facts (like official statistics about the creation of new jobs or the country's GDP growth rate) are often tinkered in 'national interest' and fantastic claims of development are spread far and wide. The message from Brexit to Brazil is that fake news can eclipse rational thinking and influence elections in favour of manipulators and rabble-rousers.

It is clear that post-truth politics has serious implications for the rule of law, particularly in countries like India where institutions like the Election Commission and the Press Council are already besieged by a flood of paid news and hate speech. But we should all be concerned even more now if technology is being used to systematically inflame passions or to polarise opinions. However, it is futile to expect social media giants like WhatsApp and Facebook to change tack in any consequential way. For their revenue model hinges on the collection, deployment and monetisation of data as well as on the virality of messages which is responsible for fuelling fake news. They are also known for pandering to governments and deep pockets.

So, where do we begin in order to save democracy from the curse of fake news and subversive data gaming? Well, first and foremost is the need to recognise the problem and create awareness about it. Secondly, democratic institutions must be strengthened and tighter oversight regulations enforced for social media platforms. Transparent and accountable mechanisms for the storage, protection and use of data by all players, public or private, will also go a long way. And finally, institutions like the Election Commission must be empowered to establish norms of digital engagement during elections for all stakeholders, particularly the candidates, political parties and their supporters. The caution, however, is that the system of regulation and compliance has to work without impairing digital platforms or muzzling the media in the name of controlling fake news.

Like always, we will wait for your comments and suggestions. Please write to us at [commoncauseindia@gmail.com](mailto:commoncauseindia@gmail.com)

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