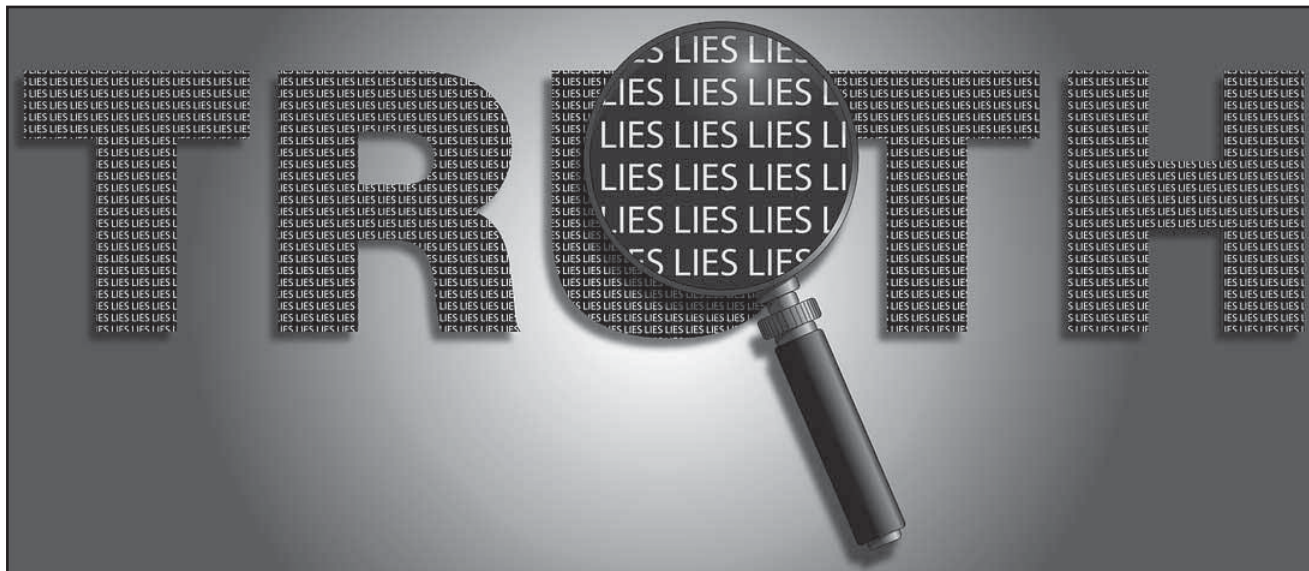


FACT-CHECKERS ON THE WEB

Social Media Warriors Have Arrived

Akhilesh Patil*



In an era when distrust of politicians and democratic institutions is shaping voter choices, fact-checking seems to be the accountability mechanism everyone is reaching out to. According to a survey by Reporters' Lab, a centre for journalism research in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, the number of active fact-checking projects around the world now stands at 156. Its steady growth is driven by expanding networks and new media partnerships that focus on holding public figures and organisations accountable for what they say.¹

Worldwide political organisations have been using 'fake news' as an effective tool to propagate

their messages. And as social media transforms itself into a real source of information, this toxic mixture of hoaxes, rumours, conspiracy theories and misleading news reaches the farthest corners of the globe. Despite social media platforms drawing most of the flak for lacking editorial filtration mechanisms, traditional media

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is also to blame for propagating misinformation. Print and television media have been accused ad nauseam about compromising the accuracy of their reportage. It is this gap in credible information across both mainstream and non-traditional media that fact checking outfits can plug. They can help citizens access facts and help empower democracy in an intensely polarised political environment.

Most social media platforms have already stepped up their game by focusing on a medley of technologies to curtail the spread of lies and hoaxes. Media organisations too are making efforts to stay close to ethical and journalistic standards, and coming up with fact checking

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units in their existing model of operations.

India's Crusade Against Fake News

In India, in 2018 alone, at least 25 people have been lynched or beaten to death over a fake WhatsApp message.² Growing internet penetration, low level of media literacy and rapidly decreasing credibility of traditional media have compounded the problem, triggering the process of 'fact-checking.' People who had started fact-checking out of genuine concern have now turned it into a serious profession. For instance, Govindraj Ethiraj's factchecker.in began as a small team, which debunked lies on mainly policy-related issues. Later in 2016 he started BOOMLive, a dedicated and independent fact-checking initiative. Similarly, Shammass Oliyath started Check4spam as a WordPress site in 2015. At present, Check4spam has its own website and is looking for collaborations to improve its functioning.

Though the number of dedicated fact-checking initiatives is still smaller in India than the rest of the world, it is important to understand their ownership patterns, business models and overall functioning. Here is a lowdown on some of India's prominent fact-checking initiatives:



FactChecker

(FactChecker.in)

India's first dedicated policy and data fact-checking initiative, factchecker.in was started by television and print journalist Govindraj Ethiraj. Founder Editor-in-Chief of Bloomberg TV India, Ethiraj has vast experience in the field of business, policy and new media. Factchecker.in is an initiative of the Spending and Policy Research Foundation, a charitable trust which also runs indiaspend.org, India's first data journalism initiative. The other main patrons of the trust are Rohini Nilekani, Vikram Lal, Pirojsha Godrej Foundation (philanthropic arm of the Godrej group) and the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation (IPSMF).

Since early 2013, FactChecker has been scrutinising statements made by individuals in public life as well as important policy data, researching them for veracity and context. However, it was in 2014 that it started its dedicated fact-checking unit as a separate website. This was the first Indian website to be certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) - Poynter Institute, but the certificate recently expired on November 9, 2018.

It is run by a small team of 12 – 15 people which includes policy researchers, journalists and data analysts.



SM HoaxSlayer

(SMHoaxSlayer.com)

This was among the earlier crop of fact-checking initiatives from India. Concerned about the increasing stream of incorrect and malicious information, mainly on WhatsApp, Mumbai-based businessman Pankaj Jain, decided to do something about it. He was so impressed by the Australia-based internet scam debunking website Hoax-Slayer that he tried to replicate the model in the Indian context by starting his own initiative – 'SM (social media) HoaxSlayer' in August 2015.³

While it started out as just a Facebook page, it gradually expanded into a standalone website and currently has presence in other media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, LinkedIn etc. Jain uses data from government sources and other media outlets to bust fake news.

Although no clear information is available regarding its funding, the website is monetised and donations from individuals are sought.



Check4spam

(check4spam.com)

In 2015, the chaos generated owing to a forwarded fake message bothered Shammass Oliyath, a Bengaluru based software engineer. He eventually started

a WordPress blog to list out such spam messages. Later, Balkrishn Birla, an engineering graduate from IIT Kanpur and a tech entrepreneur joined the self-funded initiative. Eventually, the duo launched check4spam.com, a dedicated fact-checking website in August 2015.⁴

Check4spam mainly deals with spams on social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc. It has a WhatsApp number where people can send content for verification, and it receives approximately 150 requests in a day. The roles of the website founders are clearly demarcated. Both Oliyath and Birla are working professionals and spend two to three hours a day on the site, with Oliyath handling the research and Birla taking care of the technology.

Though Check4spam is currently a self-funded initiative, it has opted for Google's advertising platform to help maintain the website.

In order to avoid duplication and increase efficiency, the website is planning to team up with other like-minded units from across the country.⁵



Factly

(Factly.in)

Factly is a public information portal founded by Rakesh Dubbudu, public information and data enthusiast. It puts out mainly public interest stories and

info-graphics using data from official sources, that is either available in the public domain or accessed using tools such as the RTI. It also fact-checks data from social media platforms and media organisations. It received the certificate from IFCN on November 21, 2018.

Factly is a for-profit entity registered as 'Factly Media and Research,' which runs its operation mainly with the help of project grants, consulting or research assignments and subscriptions.



Alt news

(www.altnews.in)

Pratik Sinha, an engineer and activist started Altnews.in in February 2017, with the objective of myth-busting as well as debunking misreporting in mainstream media. Sinha is also a member of Gujarat-based civil rights organisation Jan Sangharsh Manch, founded by his late father, senior advocate Mukul Sinha and mother, trade union leader Nirjhari Sinha.

Credited with debunking all types of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information from social and mainstream media, Alt news has emerged as a watchdog of the news space. In addition to fact-checking, it also covers news ignored by mainstream media such as caste-based atrocities, discrimination, labour struggles and much more. In a very short

span Alt news has debunked a bevy of lies chiefly disseminated by politicians, popular media outlets and opinion leaders.

A large proportion of its overall fact-checked data exposes lies of individuals and organisations associated with the right wing ideology, and the outfit often faces criticism for the same. Altnews' founder has even faced death threats for running the website.⁶ However, the fact-checking outfit's work has been widely appreciated by experts, while its founder was invited to Google News Lab Asia-Pacific Summit 2017 in Singapore to discuss solutions to the fake news menace.⁷

AltNews.in is the initiative of a not-for-profit company called Pravda Media Foundation. Therefore, it depends entirely on donations and grants for its work, which primarily revolves around checking the veracity of facts. Recently, IPSMF has provided financial support to the website for reporting and publishing stories of public interest. In the financial year 2017-18 it has also received donations from Zindabad Trust, managed by writer-activist Arundhati Roy.⁸

Presently, Alt news has expanded its team and recently launched its Hindi edition.



BOOM

(www.boomlive.in)

Boom is an independent digital journalism initiative by Govindraj

Ethiraj, also the founder of factchecker.in. However, unlike Fact-checker.in, BOOM is a part of Ping Digital Network, a private limited company. It forms the news division of the network and has been in existence since 2014. BOOM Live started its operation as a full-fledged fact-checking initiative in November 2016, and is one of the first two fact checking websites (Factchecker.in was the first) in the country that have been certified by International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Interestingly, Ethiraj, one of the founders of BOOM and Factchecker.in, is also one of the board members of IFCN.

BOOM mainly monitors content on traditional as well as social media, along with statements by politicians and people in position of authority. It also has a WhatsApp number where people can send content for fact-checking.

Facebook had hired fact-checking services from BOOM during the Karnataka assembly elections in 2018. After a successful pilot venture, it has now expanded its partnership with the digital truth-telling website to provide fact-checking services in Hindi and Bengali, as well as for photos and videos.⁹



OpIndia

(www.opindia.com)

OpIndia is a news and current affairs website that's hugely popular with those affiliated with the

centre-right ideology. It was launched in December 2014 by Kumar Kunal Kamal, an academician and his friends. OpIndia's team also includes Gaurav as well as Rahul Raj who runs the popular Facebook page 'Bhak Sala.' Today the portal is owned by Kovai Media which also operates the right-leaning Swarajya magazine. An investor in Kovai Media is former Infosys director and Manipal Global Education Chairman T. V. Mohandas Pai. As of March 31, 2017, Pai held 39,786 shares, representing a little above three per cent stake in the company.¹⁰

The website also runs a fact-checking initiative that extensively debunks media lies and popular personalities who often criticise the Narendra Modi led-BJP government. OpIndia is the only fact-checking website that Prime Minister Narendra Modi follows on Twitter, along with its editor.

The website received widespread attention from several national as well as international media organisations when its editor Nupur J. Sharma wrote a series

of articles criticising BBC's research on fake news in India and questioning the credibility of its findings.¹¹

Very recently, Fact Crescendo, an independent digital journalism initiative founded by Vinod Rathi has also started its operations in 'fact-checking' business. It also received IFCN certificate in October 2018.

Some Other Initiatives

Apart from these dedicated fact-checking initiatives, traditional media organisations have also started coming up with their own 'fact-checking' units. Recently, TV Today group started its dedicated fact-checking division called India Today Fact Check. Though it is part of the TV Today Network, it is independent of the editorial operations of India Today. Digital news platform NewsMobile also has its own fact checking division called NM Fact Checker. These fact-checking initiatives started by established media organisations fulfilled all the necessary criteria and managed to get IFCN certificates in 2018.

Likes, Followers and Subscribers of Fact-Checking Websites

Fact-checkers	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Factchecker.in	1,639	32,735	--
SMHoaxSlayer	66,923	50,451	12,511
AltNews	1,05,656	89,384	30,952
BOOMLive	3,13,414	29,010	17,581
Check4Spam	40,422	932	--
Factly	93,130	2,383	15,665
Opindia	1,25,227	96,440	6,032

As of December 5, 2018

“Some of these myth-busters have openly admitted their ideological inclinations and their fact-checking revolves around certain individuals and media organisations”

Popular YouTube celebrities like Dhruv Rathee and Akash Banerjee also occasionally engage in fact-checking initiatives through their videos, while enjoying a huge following on all popular social media platforms. Interestingly, 24-year-old Rathee has more than 12 lakh subscribers on YouTube alone, along with more than 4 lakh and nearly 1.5 lakh followers on Facebook and Twitter respectively. After a decade-long stint in journalism, Banerjee started his own YouTube channel which now has over 2 lakh subscribers. He also does a weekly show *Fake Bole Kauwa Kate* for Times of India. Both work independently and do their research and production on their own. They use crowd funding initiatives like Patreon to run their businesses.

Conclusion

We have witnessed the genesis of many independent fact-checking initiatives in India in the last couple of years. Barring a few exceptions, individuals running these websites do not possess

any journalistic experience and have started fact-checking owing to sheer disappointment in the representation of facts in mainstream narratives. Social media is a fertile ground for fake news and fast-growing internet proliferation is making the information landscape acquire a nightmarish quality. To lock horns with purveyors of fake news, fact-checkers are using the same social media platforms where a deluge of misinformation, rumour-mongering, political propaganda and urban legends continue to thrive. These digital votaries of truth are therefore constantly monitoring and identifying a surging stream of online falsehoods and countering them using several techniques. A big limitation for them, however, is their low number of subscriptions.

Although the process of fact-checking demands a completely non-partisan approach, some of these myth-busters have openly admitted their ideological inclinations. Additionally, their fact-checking procedures revolve around certain individuals and media organisations.

Most of these ambassadors of accountability journalism

“Transparency is imperative, both in funding as well as in the overall approach in tackling the issue of fake news”

however have shared nitty-gritties about their organisations. Websites like FactChecker.in, AltNews.in and BOOMLive have disclosed details of their business model, ownership and annual funding on their websites. Each one has a different business model, with some functioning as charitable trusts and running their operations on donations. There are others who are purely dependent on subscriptions and online ad revenue as means of support. Still others are using online crowd funding platforms to cover their costs, whereas a few run their operations as a private media company where not much is known about their main investors.

Sustaining on the merits of accuracy, reliability and transparency is undoubtedly the biggest challenge for all these initiatives. As far as the process of debunking is concerned, most of these fact-checkers follow a similar method. Several of them, such as Alt News and Factly, have even mentioned it on their respective websites. While nearly all of them more or less pass the accuracy and reliability test, the problem revolves around the issue of transparency. Transparency is imperative, both in funding as well as in the overall approach in tackling the issue of fake news. In an age where the media is flooded with debates on right versus left, pro-establishment versus anti-establishment, the fact-checking organisations need to walk a tightrope and be impeccable and

transparent in their work to be able to brace for tougher future challenges.

Endnotes

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