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DIMENSIONS AND DYNAMICS OF FAKE NEWS ECOSYSTEM ON THE INTERNET

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The news coverage and consumption across the globe is in the midst of a paradigm shift in which traditional news gathering practices are giving way to extensive use of web and social media into routinized newsgathering practices. The ripple effects of the new age media's tendency of trivialising and misinterpreting events and bypassing traditional gatekeeping and verification conventions has impacted the political, cultural, and aesthetic dimension and dynamics of the mainstream society, in a way which is far more consequential and frightening than previously imagined.

Journalism has always struggled to balance the issues of independence, ethics and righteousness with sensational, prurient and populist coverage.[1] A Large number of journalists have succumbed to overt pressure to forage, gather, collect or even generate news to satiate the incessant demand for contents with high populist, bigoted and sensationalist values. This is not a new development and in 1890s, many puritans had dubbed the sensational style of journalism in Joseph Pulitzer's New York World as "yellow journalism" due to concerns of non-adherence to accuracy and standards. [2]

The diffusion of the Internet into the mainstream of society was termed as a demographic and cultural evolution facilitated by the promise of a new age of hope, transparency, democracy and accountability. However, the cyberspace has expanded chaotically unrestrained and unencumbered raising concerns and recriminations of dilution of moral and ethical values. Now we are in the midst of an 'information crisis'. Most of us are in imminent danger of being overrun and inundated with fake news, misinformation, disinformation and unsubstantiated propaganda emanating even from places with relatively respectable credentials like Facebook, Twitter and Google.

The scourge of fake news, disseminated through the mass media, has gained traction in recent times and became an endemic problem of serious delinquency during the recent presidential campaign in the U.S. A recently published analysis found that fake news was more intensely followed and was more intimately taken to heart than real news. In the run-up to the presidential race last year, popular fake election stories, manipulated with subtle lies or with gross falsehood, generated more buzz and engagement than the top stories from such legitimate news websites as those of The New York Times, The Washington Post, NBC News and others. [3]

The fake news ecosystem is gaining traction, thanks to the proliferation of social network platforms and avaricious inclinations of tech companies. Facebook, for example, with its 1.6 billion users is fast becoming a ubiquitous place for everybody to share news. More than 40% of the population of the U.S. gets news on Facebook and it is from here that news- fake or genuine - gets shared and commented upon.[4] Completely made up stories like "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President" or "Barack Obama Admits He Was Born in Kenya" were shared by millions of Facebook users. Beside the motive of causing mischief there is the incentive of financial gain as more sensational news garners more followers which translate into more adverts, raking in even

more cash for Facebook.[5] At first, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg appeared not very enthusiastic to engage in a debate on fake news and was dismissive of the idea that fake news had an influential role on the outcome of last year's November presidential election. But he soon realized his position as untenable and promised to work on this particular problem seriously. In a way, Facebook is trying to seek a technology based solution to an age-old problem and is working on an algorithmic based method to sieve truths from untruths/ half-truths and real from fake.

The growing clamour against fake news was punctuated by the Apple CEO Tim Cook's call for a "massive campaign" against fake online news stories. He said that some people are more interested in trying to get the most 'clicks' than telling the most truths. Cook urged fellow industry leaders to develop tools to reduce the presence of non-credible news stories on the internet.[6]

A nondescript small city, Veles in Macedonia, has gained notoriety for being the 'fake news' capital of the world. Many of the fake news websites can be traced to this city, where teenagers are pumping out sensationalist stories to earn cash from advertising. After preparing a heady cocktail of news articles from various sources, the teenagers package it under a catchy new headline and share it on Facebook. The audience never goes weary of sensational news

and when these stories are clicked on, liked and shared, they began earning revenue from advertising on the site. The peddling of fake news on sites is not illegal and the whole game of creating fake news and earning money is unnerving and disturbing.[7]

The role of gatekeeping within the traditional media is one of the major roles of senior journalists and editors. These roles are seriously undermined in the online world where anyone can engage a global audience by using Internet. Besides, in the new techno-cultural landscape, the lines between professional journalism, dilettante reporting and amateur writing have blurred to the extent that one cannot distinguish the difference.

The battle against "fake news" is gathering steam. On February 10, 2017, the announcement of a verification system 'CrossCheck' hit the headlines.[8] The system is designed to clamp down on the generators and distributors of online information of dubious nature, especially to allay such concerns in the upcoming national elections in France. Google, Facebook and several major media companies have joined hands in the initiative which will be an amalgam of high end technology and traditional journalistic jurisprudence.

The fake news ecosystem is showing no signs of slowing down and in the coming years, the problem will be more exacerbated for the gatekeepers. The solution to a problem stemming – partly from technological evolution and partly from new cultural paradigm- lies in the technology innovations as well as by restraining the appetite for sensational and scandalous news.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

NOTES

[1] Ethical Journalism Network, "Media Crisis and the Rise of Populism", http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/ethical-journalism/rise-of-populism, accessed February 14, 2017.

[2] Luciano Floridi, "Fake news and a 400-year-old problem: we need to resolve the 'post-truth' crisis", *The Guardian*, 29 November, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/fake-news-echo-chamber-ethics-infosphere-internet-digital, accessed February 14, 2017.

[3] David Zurawik David Zurawik," Fake news a symptom of sickness in media ecosystem", *The Baltimore Sun,* February 16, 2017, http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/tv/z-on-tv-blog/bs-ae-zontv-fake-news-20161118-story.html, accessed February 14, 2017.

[4] Rory Cellan-Jones, "Facebook, fake news and the meaning of truth", BBC News Magazine, November 27, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-38106131, accessed February 14, 2017.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Max Greenwood, "Apple CEO calls for 'massive campaign' to battle fake news", *The Hill*, February 02, 2017, http://thehill.com/policy/technology/319110-apple-ceo-calls-for-campaign-to-fight-fake-news, accessed February 14, 2017.

[7] Emma Jane Kirby, "The city getting rich from fake news", *BBC News Magazine*, December 05, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38168281, accessed February 14, 2017.

[8] Glenn McDonald, "Google and Facebook Team Up to Fight Fake News Ahead of the French Elections", *Seeker, accessed* February 14, 2017.