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Article:	Role of veteran journalists and Influencers in the Promotion of fake news on social media: A Case of fake news in Pakistan
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ABSTRACT

In today's digital age, the dispersion of information has reached unaccustomed heights. Despite advancements in technology, a nefarious process has emerged, posing a threat to the trustworthiness of news sources and the reliability of information - fake news. The proliferation of fake news poses a significant challenge to societies worldwide, risking the foundations of democracy, impeding public converse, and sowing seeds of division. This study aims to explore the background and existence of fake news, the destructive consequences it entails, and the compelling need to combat this trouble, with a particular focus on recent developments in Pakistan. The objectives of this research are, to conduct a content analysis of fake news circulated by the three major political parties in Pakistan, to dissect the social media accounts of political actors/influencers to assess their involvement in spreading fake news, to perform sentiment analysis to understand the impact and blowout of the identified fake news stories, to give recommendations for combating the spread of fake news and enhancing media education in Pakistan.

Keywords: Veteran journalists, Influencers, Promotion of fake news, Social media

Introduction

The purposeful fabrication or distortion of information under the pretense of true information is termed as Fake News, and it has grown to be a significant problem worldwide. With the ease of content sharing and social media, Fake news spread quickly to bulk of people and it is shared usually without investigation and proper fact-checking. This whole process has cause societal division, eroded societal trust, resulting in false conduct and beliefs.

Recent events that have influenced several number of domains, comprising of politics, public shield, and perception, highlight the catastrophic capability of fake news. In the United States when the pentagon was attacked, it uncover vulnerabilities in news safety and spotlight the immediate necessity for vigorous methods to take up arms against fake news.

As numerous other states, Pakistan has not endured immunity against the unfavorable effect of fake news. Newly, the nation has observe a terrifying surge in fake news, specially in the environment of political firmness. Political parties has been using fake news as a tool to nurture their plans, manipulate citizen views, and target their rivals.

The significance of this study enlighten the part of skilled journalists and ambassadors in the spread of fake news on social platforms. The findings will demonstrate the effect of fake news on citizen's thinking and democratic process in a better way in Pakistan. Also, the study's suggestion will assist in forming ways to brush-off the proliferation of fake news and inflate media literacy

Research Problem

The research issue centralize on in-sighting the degree to which skilled journalist and ambassador in Pakistan contribute to the dispersal of fake news. The aim of this study is bounded to Pakistan and highlights on three prime political parties; Pakistan Muslim League, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf, Pakistan People's Party. The analysis will categorically consider the social accounts of leading political figures including Sharjeel Memon, Fawad Chaudhary, Maryam Nawaz, Imran Riaz Khan, Sharmila Farooqi, and Maryam Aurangzeb. Recognizing the complexity and dynamic nature of fake news, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study may not comprehensively capture the entirety of its impact.

Research Questions

The research will address the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do veteran journalists contribute to the spread of fake news on social media in Pakistan?

RQ2: How do influencers, and political actors, impact the dispersion of fake news in Pakistan?

RQ3: What's the nature and magnitude of the influence of fake news stories circulated by the three major political parties?

RQ4: What's the sentiment embracing these fake news stories, and how does it affect public opinion?

Literature Review

Fake news refers to deliberately fabricated or misleading information presented as legit news or factual content. It's generally spread through multiple media channels, including social media platforms, websites, and traditional news outlets. (Bond et al., 2012)

Lack of Verification and Fact-Checking Fake news generally lack proper verification and rigorous fact-checking processes employed by reputed news institutions. It may have inadequacy for trustworthy sources, fail to give supporting evidence, or depend on anonymous

or unverifiable sources. (Nelson & Kim, 2021) Fake news producers frequently prioritize speed and virality over credibility, neglecting the journalistic principles necessary for credible reporting.

Lack of Responsibility and Anonymity Fake news generators frequently operate anonymously or under false self-identities, making it challenging to hold them responsible for their conduct (Patrona, 2018) They may use aliases, produce fictitious personas, or hide behind fake profiles, which makes it delicate to trace the origin of the misinformation.

The Part of social media in the Spread of Fake News

This subsection will explore the influential part of social media in the dispersion of fake news. In recent times, social media platforms have turned into strong channels for circulating information, connecting people, and shaping public converse (Kholisoh & Sulastri, 2017). Compounding the issue is the influence of algorithms employed by social media platforms. These are designed to maximize user engagement that aligns with individual preferences, former interactions, and shared characteristics. (Scholar, 2021) Fake news generators exploit this limitation by formulating deceiving captions, provoking bits, or out of- contexture quotations that induce engagement. (Scholar, 2021)

Moreover, social media platforms heavily depend on user-generated content. This user-driven model allows misinformation to spread swiftly, reaching a wider followership beyond the source. The lack of accountability further exacerbates the issue, as fake news generators frequently operate anonymously or under false self-identities.

Influence of Veteran Journalists on social media

Veteran journalists, given their reputed status and large following, their involvement can amplify the visibility and reach of fake news content. Their interactions, similar to commenting, retweeting, or sharing, may be interpreted as approval, thereby giving false or deceiving information a semblance of credibility. This increased visibility and endorsement by influential individuals can affect the wider rotation and possible acceptance of fake news by a larger followership (Ghauri et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2021)

The dispersion of fake news contributes to the corrosion of trust in media and the broader information ecosystem. The spread of fake news breeds mistrust, doubt, and confusion about what can be trusted as true. Fake news also plays a part in the polarization of society. The proliferation of fake news deepens societal divisions, stifles constructive dialogue, and hampers the quest for common ground (Strömbäck et al., 2020)

The impact of fake news extends beyond societal divisions and affects democratic processes. Misinformation has the potential to impact election results, distort public converse. When fake news is intentionally spread during elections, it can sway voter opinions, manipulate public sentiment, and disrupt the integrity of the electoral process. (Garnett & Bordeleau, 2022)

Media Literacy and Fake News Consciousness in Pakistan

Media education and fake news consciousness in Pakistan are pivotal aspects that demand attention and refinement. Multiple initiatives have been enforced to promote media literacy and combat fake news in the country. Collaboration among educational institutions, media institutes, civil society, are opportunities to strengthen media literacy. (Muzaffar et al., 2020) Fact-checking institutes similar to the "Pakistan Press Foundation" and "Media Matters for Democracy" have played an active part in debunking false information and raising consciousness about the significance of media literacy. (Ghauri et al., 2023; Hussain et al.,

2021) Further, advertising movements, public service notices, online campaigns, and community outreach programs can educate individuals about the significance of vindicating information, fact-checking, and critically assessing sources. (Hassan et al., 2023: Stier et al., 2020)

Still, challenges persist in promoting media education and fake news consciousness. The significant effect of Limited resources to educational quality, social media accounts and messaging apps has made the fake news to disperse quickly. (Shah, 2019)

Methodology

To regulate this analysis, various sources such as research articles, new-papers were used to analyze the pattern, reform themes, and provides basis in the dispersion of fake news by three political parties.

Research Design

A comprehension scrutiny design including qualitative analysis and sentiment analysis is used to examine the spread of fake news by the three prime political parties; PTI, PMLN, and PPP. The data for this study will be collected from multiple sources. Initially, a comprehensive collection of social media posts, tweets, and articles will be gathered from the official social media accounts and websites of the three major political parties “Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf”, “Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz”, and “Pakistan People’s Party”. Secondly, the social media accounts of the identified political actors, and influencers, Imran Riaz Khan, Sharjeel Memon, Maryam Nawaz, Fawad Chaudhary, Sharmila Farooqi, and Maryam Aurangzeb, will be covered and their posts related to fake news will be analyzed.

Sample Selection

A systematic sampling approach is employed to select a representative sample of posts, tweets, and articles from each political party and the influencers' social media accounts.

This content analysis aims to examine cases of fake news circulated by three prominent political parties in Pakistan “Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf”(PTI), “Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz”(PML- N), and “Pakistan People’s Party”(PPP). The analysis focuses on four critical confines the nature of the fake news, the contents it covers, the intended followership, and the strategies employed for dispersion. By probing into these dimensions, this study aims to reflect light on the frequency, patterns, and tactics of fake news in Pakistani politics.

The researcher used a content analysis method to determine the frequency of fake news on Twitter and Facebook. All the phony reports that were pronounced phony by the authorities by introducing archives, by the source, or by the established press were viewed as phony. After it was determined that a news story was fake, keywords associated with it were searched through posts on Twitter and Facebook. The tales were gathered from the main hit of a journey by one of the analysts of this review. For a given subject, one hunt on a particular day was made in the web search tools of Facebook and Twitter to keep away from emphasis.

In Pakistan alone this year as various as 17 Satellite Stations have been given show cause notice by the Pakistan Electronic Media Administrative Power (PEMRA) for giving phony news. Relating to different locales of the world, Facebook and Twitter are the two most utilized stages. According to The Express Tribune's 2018 Global Digital Report, 3.2 billion people worldwide use social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Twitter. While in Pakistan alone, 35 million individuals which is around 18% of the absolute populace, are utilizing online entertainment

To know the degree of frequency of phony news in Pakistan, every one of the points like governmental issues, financial matters, military, judicatory, and religion were remembered for the review. The researchers do not mention the names of the individuals and institutions that were targeted and about whom fake news was reported for ethical reasons. (Barberá, 2020) Through a qualitative lens, we will explore the strategies employed by these parties, the motivations behind their conduct, and the impact on public converse and political geography.

Findings

In this section we will see how major political parties and political actors of these major political parties uses fake news for their advantages and what are the implications and provocations of these fake news spread by each of them.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI)

PTI, the biggest party in Pakistan, has been observed to employ colorful strategies to spread fake news. Primarily, they oftentimes use social media platforms to amplify and propagate deceptive narratives. Secondly, PTI has been known to use particular information sharing, cherry-picking data that supports their claims while ignoring or suppressing contradictory testimonials. Some of the fake news identified and shared by PTI's official Twitter account includes:



The most recent tweet shared is a video of a policeman showing his private body parts to a woman being arrested was posted stating he was harassing female social workers of PTI although that video was 3 years old and the female being arrested was a prostitute. This tweet got 4183 retweets, 6213 likes, 138 comments, and was viewed by 242,300 people.



One tweet showed a video in which a house is being dismantled by the authorities stating that the house belongs to a member of PTI however that video was old from the 2019 operation against land grabbers this tweet was retweeted around 5324 times had 172 comments and was viewed by an audience of 193,500.

One vital motive of PTI is to control the narrative and shape public opinion in their favor. By spreading false or false information, PTI aims to maintain a positive image, redirect critique, and undermine Ruling parties. False narratives propagated by PTI have led to increased political stresses, downsized public discussion, and undermined the credibility of opposition parties.

Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML- N)

PML-N, a Coalition member party in the government, has also been intertwined in the diffusion of fake news. Their strategies mainly revolve around operating traditional media platforms and maintaining control over news outlets sympathetic to their cause. PMLNs fake news examples are:



Tweet by official PLM-N tweeter account tweeted a video showing direct export being conducted by Gwadar port despite that video being from the Karachi port. The tweet had 3278 likes, around 1364 retweets, and was viewed by 89,300 people.



Furthermore, a tweet stating damage to the state property and military outpost in the protests against Imran Khan's arrest was preplanned by the PTI leadership. This tweet was retweeted 349 times, had 795 likes, and was viewed by 16,200 people.



This tweet had been seen by approximately 11,500 accounts, retweeted by 154, and had 35 comments.

The focus of PMLN's spread of fake news majorly revolve around the facts, they seek to erode the reputation and ruin the image of the biggest rival party, PTI. PMLN's fake news spread has contributed to an environment of uncertainty in political discussion.

“Pakistan People’s Party” (PPP)

The dispersion of fake news has also been done by one more party in Pakistan's Politics, PPP. This party has been imposed with exploiting traditional media to nurture their narratives which includes stressing the press operators and editors to outline eulogistically on the party's programs and actions. Over times PPP's member are involved in dispersing conspiracy and propaganda assumptions to discredit their rival parties.

Example of fake news by PPPs:

Official Twitter ID of PPP tweeted regarding the "2020: Paternity and Maternity bill" being approved on direction of Bilawal Bhutto by the government. This tweet was seen by 123,500 viewers, 501 times retweeted, liked by 988.



Moreover, a tweet was done on the census uttering that Sindh was underestimated intentionally by the institution to belittle their image in the government. This tweet was viewed by 4294 accounts, 515 retweeted, and liked by 571



PPP's incitement for spreading fake news are correlating to those of contrasting parties. They inquire to safeguard their interests, nurture connections, and devalue their opponents. PPP shape public thinking, acquire voter advantages, and diverge attention from their flaws by influencing information.

PPP's dispersion of fake news has complicated the dichotomization within society. By forming information silos, and interrupting critical thinking among the society, fake news has eroded confidence in self-governing organizations.

Analysis of Political Actors' Influence on Social Media

Political members have been influencing public thinking in Pakistan by spreading false news and propagandas through their accounts.

The social accounts of Maryam Nawaz, Sharjeel Memon, Imran Riaz Khan, Fawad Chaudhary, Maryam Aurangzeb, and Sharmila Farooqi are viewed to examine their contribution in dispersing fake news.

Maryam Nawaz

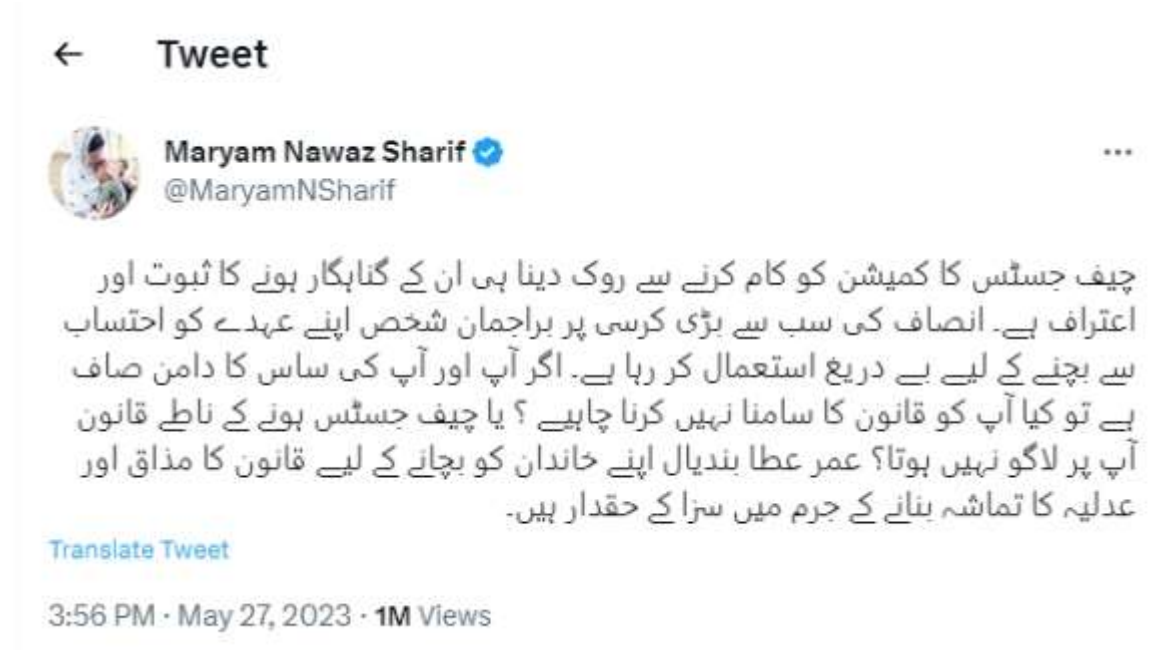
The daughter of previous Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz has been involved actively in her ancestry's political party, PMLN. The twitter account of Maryam Nawaz has followers over 5 million, and is noticeable platform for the dispersion of fake news in Pakistan. An investigation of her tweets provides a pattern of disseminating ambiguous information and propagandas to pursue her goals.

Several tweets of Maryam Nawaz involve targeting political rivals and the government, frequently using false news. Tweets of Nawaz's are usually distinguished by controversial and sensationalist content, designed to engage and keep her followers captivated.

The following are a few tweets from the tweets identified upon the analysis of her social media account:



This tweet is referring to the burning of the dummy warplane used in the 1965 war this is correct to this extent but Maryam described it as M.M Alam's plane which is not true. This tweet was viewed by 3.9 million people received 16700 likes and was retweeted 9030 times.



In the above-mentioned tweet, Maryam Nawaz is quoting the act out of context for political motives. This tweet received 1 million views and was retweeted 12000 times.

Maryam Aurangzeb

Maryam Aurangzeb, a prominent politician and point person of the “Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz”(PML- N), has played a significant purpose in shaping public opinion and circulating information through social media platforms.

Aurangzeb actively utilizes social media to amplify the narrative of the PML-N and promote biased views. By capitalizing on her position as a speaker and her large following on social media platforms, Aurangzeb can reach a wide following and shape public perception.

One of the tactics employed by Aurangzeb is the diffusion of manipulated images, videotapes, or misleading citations to advance the docket of the PML- N. These tactics not only distort the information but also contribute to the polarization of political dialogues and undermine the credibility of the information partook on social media platforms.

The following few tweets are identified upon the analysis of her social media account:



This tweet has several fabricated facts and got 359,000 views, and was retweeted 1200 times.



In the above-mentioned tweet, she is alleging Imran Khan of having a fake audience and using bots. This tweet got 1354 tweets, 3029 likes, and 930,000 views.

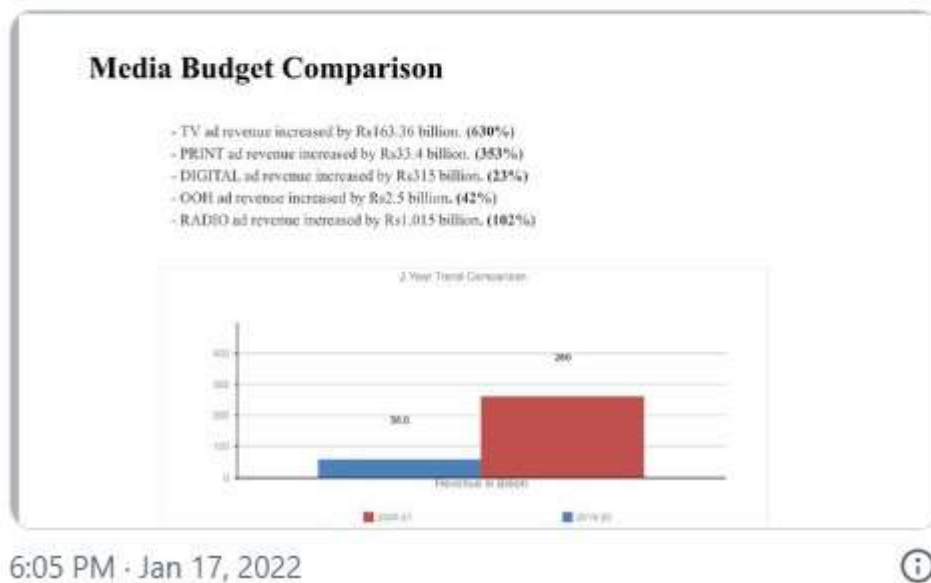
Fawad Chaudhary

Fawad Chaudhary, the Former Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, has also been accused of spreading fake news to serve his political agenda. As the minister keep an eye on media landscape of Pakistan, has a vital influence on the news shared to the public.

Twitter account of Fawad, has more than 1 million followers, and is another prominent platform for the dispersion of fake information in Pakistan. His tweets analysis reveal, he usually stay active on twitter to attack critics of his political party, which include human rights activist and journalists. He has been popular for spreading misinformation to manipulate the opinion of public by disseminating doctored videos and images to support his facts.

Ch Fawad Hussain @fawadchaudhry · Follow

پاکستان میڈیا کے ریونیو میں 2018 سے 2021 میں 600 فیصد اضافہ ہوا ہے ، یہ خوش آئند بات ہے لیکن سوال یہ ہے اگر معیشت مستحکم نہ ہو تو اشتہارات میں اتنا اضافہ کیسے ممکن ہے؟ ذرا سوچئے اور خدا کیلئے میڈیا ورکرز کی تنخواہوں میں اضافہ کریں تا کہ انہیں بھی مہنگائی کا اثر کم لگنا شروع ہو



He falsely claims in this tweet that the Pakistani media revenue has 600% increased, whereas Express Tribune reported and the source clarified that due to technical error the figures were printed inaccurately.

Ch Fawad Hussain @fawadchaudhry · Apr 29

نئی مردم شماری کے نتائج تباہ کن ہیں کراچی کی ایک اور پنجاب کی سات قومی اسمبلی کی نشستیں کم کی جا رہی ہیں، سارا عمل ہی انتہائی متنازعہ اور ناقابل یقین ہے، صرف انتخابات کو رکوانے کیلئے غلطیوں سے بھرپور پراسس اختیار کیا گیا جس کے نتیجے میں ملک کو شدید نقصان پہنچے گا

161 4,646 11.9K 165K

In the tweet above, Fawad is trying to assure the public that in Pakistan census is maligned with the opposing parties while the government or any of its institution had not made any decision about this.

Moreover, Fawad's engagement in attacks of individual, rumors propagation and assassinations of character further erode the quality and detachment of the news he shared.

Imran Riaz Khan

Imran Riaz Khan, a political influencer and social media personality associated with the "Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf" (PTI) party, wields significant influence in shaping public

opinion and political narratives. Khan diligently with the large following engages in sharing content that aligns with the agenda of the PTI.



In the above tweet, we can see that Khan tried to portray that in 2023 the Parade of Pakistan Day is canceled while the truth is that the news shared is from 2020 and got canceled due to Covid.



In this tweet, we can see that it is portrayed that Salman Ahmed, Singer, and as well a member of PTI were arrested on 25/03/2023 but in reality, this video was from 2014. Khan again tried to imply that the current government wrongfully arrested Salman Ahmed merely because he is a member of PTI.

Furthermore, Khan's engagement in individual attacks, character assassinations, and the propagation of rumors further undermines the credibility and detachment of the information he disseminates.

Sharmila Farooqi

Pakistan People's party's member, Sharmila Farooqi, has been using social platforms, especially Twitter, to disseminate inaccurate information about government and opponent political parties. On Twitter, she has more than 1 million followers, on which she has been sharing information and influencing opinion of public.

A close analysis of Sharmila's tweets reveals a pattern of disseminating inaccurate information, usually involving opponent political party or controversial problems. This comprise of disseminating doctored images and videos, making insignificant claims, and encouraging conspiracy issues. Sharmila's tweet usually involve significant engagement, because her followers comment and retweet her posts, further increasing the spread of misleading information.



For instance, the above tweet shows that she is bashing Imran Khan by calling Time Magazine out of the context. This tweet of her is views by 6952, 18 retweeted back, and has 47 likes.



The tweet above shows that she is influencing the bench procedure of supreme court to ruin the Judiciary and their decisions. It is retweet by 4561 people, 6934 liked, and almost viewed by 421,000 accounts.

Sharjeel Memon

A Pakistani politician and a part of PPP, Sharjeel Memon has also been a central figure in disseminating fake information. Memon has been accused of disseminating misleading information through his social platforms, resulting in increased discord and tension in the political arena.

Memon was took in custody in 2017 due to corruption charges, on which he claims it was politically motivated. The time he spent in prison, he alleges that he was put through inhuman torture and treatment during this time. He has been released, but the charges against him are still going. Despite all this, Sharjeel has been using his power to disseminate fake information, potentially with the target of manipulating opinion of public in his favor and disgrace those against him. His behavior has result in increased scrutiny of the fake news in the political arena and has call into question about the ethics of using these tactics to influence public thinking.

Some of the tweets he made are:



In the tweet made by him, he is stating that the video evidence there of the delay of the oath ceremony for local body electives to suppress the people of Karachi and the Peoples' party

Though, it was not the case that the ceremony was postponed due to rigging allegations in the polls by the court until judgment was passed on this matter.



These two tweets were made during the nationwide protest in the country on 9th May 2023. In these tweets, he states that all this damage to state property was done at the direction of the senior PTI leadership and single-handedly declares PTI as a militant group. However, there was evidence found to back his allegations.

Sharjeel's case serve as a major example of how the spread of misleading information can have devastating consequences.

Sentiment Analysis of Fake News Stories

To better understand the influence and frequency of misleading information in Pakistan, we performed a sentiment analysis of data on social media. We found thousand of facebook posts and tweets, looking for ways in the sentiment and language used in posts that contain fake news. Our analysis found that misleading information are shockingly common in Pakistan, with many social users disseminating false narratives without verifying and fact-checking them first.

We systematized that fake news divides into certain categories, just like rumors, conspiracy theories, and propagandas. Several false information were closely related to politics or religion, giving consideration to the polarized behavior of Pakistan's society. Moreover, we discovered that inaccurate narratives gets viral more extensively than true narratives, which can form an oblique aspect of reality among the users of social media. (Bibi & Yousaf, 2020)

Due to various reasons, fake news are a major problem in Pakistan. One big reason is lack of media literacy skills among several people, so that they aren't able to critically rule out the news they see on social platforms. One more reason is the insufficient regulation on social platforms. In contrast to traditional media, social platforms doesn't have the neutrality and accuracy standard as it was before. This make the fake news to disseminate freely without any consequences. Social Platforms like Twitter and Facebook make it convenient for everyone to spread information, even if it's false.

Moreover, sensational and controversial content tends to promote due to social media algorithms, which can further reinforce the extension of misleading information. Occasionally, extremist influencers and foreign actors use social platforms to manipulate public thinking and generate division in society of Pakistan. To stop the dissemination of fake news, we need better oversight and regulation of social platforms. False information can also have a major impact on elections and politics. False narratives can manipulate public opinion and even change voting results. It can also create dispute among political parties and groups in society and when public lose their belief in the democratic process, it can result apathy and lower voter turnout towards politics which is why it's important to address and evaluate fake news to protect the credibility of our democracy.

Sentiment Analysis limitations

The procedure of evaluating user sentiment in posts of social media is termed as sentiment analysis. This can be beneficial in understanding how viewers are responding to false narratives. We can get insight into the characteristic that cause the dissemination of false information by dissecting sentiment of user toward misleading information. (Bode, 2016)

Sentiment analysis has various limitations other than its usefulness in understanding the responses of user to fake narratives. First limitation is that it can be difficult to find the difference between ironic or sarcastic sentiment and genuine ones. For instance, a stoner may not take the story ironically, but analysis may found this as genuine. One more limitation is that the analysis tend to be told by the atmosphere in which a social post has included. For example, without supporting a user may share a misleading news, however the analysis may conclude this story as a positive sentiment.

Conclusions

The major problem in Pakistan is misleading narratives that affect elections and politics. It can manipulate thinking of public, divide parties of politics, and ruin trust of public in

democracy. Even political influencers and journalist are spreading misleading narratives. Proper verification and fact-checking is an important way to combat this problem. International organization and political parties also use false news for their benefit, manipulating opinion of public. The social influencers have great impact over their followers, who have belief in them. It's crucial to be careful and cautious before sharing and believing the information.

Collective and comprehensive strategy is required to address the power play of false information in Pakistan. Encouraging media literacy skills among the public is important, which enhance individual's ability to access the narratives and identify misleading information. The regulative groups should implement stricter penalties and guidelines for those who spread inaccurate news intentionally. Tech companies should also take part in forming algorithms that prioritize genuine and accurate information, restricting the dissemination of false news on media platforms. Reporters must follow ethical rules, prioritize source verification and fact checking, and remain careful when sharing unverified or controversial stories. Individualities also have a duty to check the credibility of information they share and engage in accurate and productive online discussion. (Muzaffar et al., 2020)

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