



Online News Media And The Issue Of Ethics, Credibility And Information Overload: A Study

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The world has transformed into a global village where access to information can be gained instantaneously, mostly due to the rise of the internet and social media which has had tremendous impact on human life changing the existing models of information and news consumption. Social media has provided a platform that has emerged as an easy-to-use application offering space to the consumers and the producers of news, leading to the rise of social media news networks. The move to an increasingly digital, mobile and social media environment coupled with intense competition for attention while mostly being financed by advertising revenues, raises questions over one's credibility and its relevance in today's tech savvy world. While Arunachal Pradesh is yet to see internet connectivity across its entire landscape, it has witnessed tremendous growth in the amount of news networks on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter creating a situation where too much news is arriving in too many different formats, creating a potential for information overload, misinformation and disinformation. The current paper discusses the issues of credibility that comes along with social media news networks, where it is no longer enough to be first with the news, nor comprehensive or trustworthy, but capable of spreading virally. The study further investigates the relevance of news networks among the users of social media. The methodology applied for data collection involves survey research method, where questionnaires were administered to the users of social media. The study reveal that users found it easier to access news faster in social media and sharing of news much easier but at the other end the credibility most of the time hangs in the middle.

Keywords: Social media, information overload, Digital, Mobile, News ethics and credibility

Introduction:

According to Dr. Stephen Franklin, "He who controls information controls the world". Information in contemporary society is seen as a valuable commodity with power to shape opinions, influence decisions, and drive economies. The world now is an interconnected global community where access to information can be gained with proper tools provided and mostly with the rise of internet and social media which has brought about tremendous influence and change in human life, as it has eroded boundaries limited by space and time by providing people more choices in communication (Dimyati & Juvenua, 2017).

In the evolving landscape of media consumption, many have moved on from conventional media such as reading newspaper, tuning in to radio news bulletins or viewing news broadcasts on television. The evolution of the internet has fueled exponential growth in social media and its user base. Platforms are no longer just spaces for connecting with friends, family, and news acquaintances but have also become key source for accessing local, national, and international news. This ultimately led to a shift in the approach how news media organization have made substantial strides in leaving its huge footprint in social media by introducing news portals to meet the growing demand for news and information. Hence substantiating the rise of the internet as an influential communication medium and revolutionizing the existing models of information and news consumption. The growing number of available information channels and sources, as well as greater

possibilities for interaction and co-creation among consumers of information, has fundamentally affected the way news is now consumed (Tarafdar & Pentana, 2017).

The space social media has carved out for itself and the significant impact it has on people and economies worldwide has created a direct path from producers to consumers which has allowed disintermediation, and changed the way users become informed, debate, and form their opinions which also leaves room for confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust (Del Vicario et al., 2016). However, such development has also allowed rapid dissemination of unsubstantiated rumors and spread of massive digital misinformation, to the extent that it has been recognized by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as one of the main threats to our society (Howell, 2013). Such diffusion of misinformation through social media is a potential threat to democracy and the broader society (Allcott et al., 2019).

The news industry in most democratic countries faces increasing commercial pressure. But a well-functioning democracy requires a free and diverse news media capable of keeping people informed and holding powerful actors to account and enabling public discussions of public affairs. Also, the history of news media is also a story of the permanent struggle to serve two different, very often considered antagonist goals: serving the public interest and generating private profit. Media now are clearly becoming more market oriented in most democratic societies which increases the likelihood of taking private interest more into consideration over public interest (Tomaz et al., 2022). This move to an increasingly digital, mobile and social media environment with intense competition for attention, where legacy media like broadcasters and especially newspapers, while remaining very important news producers are becoming relatively less important as distributors of news and are under growing pressure to develop new digital business model for revenue generation (Nielsen, Cornia & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). The freedom, diversity, and ability of news media to enable democracy are changing due to technology, digitization, and commercialization. These shifts, largely associated with the rise of digital media, bring comfort and ease of access to information. However, they also cause distrust and distress, as market-driven, profit-oriented content on social media news networks has become a leading cause of chaos and pandemonium among the masses (Collins et al., 2021)

Nielsen (2012) in its research title 'State of the media: The social media report' found that the amount of time spent by the world population using social media continues to grow, with 20% of our personal computer time and 30% of our mobile time now spent on social media. India is also on top of the list of countries with the highest number of Facebook users with 416 million accounts online. Being an integral part of India, Arunachal Pradesh, situated in the easternmost part has yet to see internet connectivity across the entire landscape. Yet, the amount of news portals that have cropped up on Facebook has seen a remarkable growth in recent years which has created a situation where too many news is arriving in too many different formats, creating a potential for information overload, which in turn leads to suboptimal information processing and decision making. A survey conducted by Statista confirms that 52% of users of social media encounter fake news daily (Ahuja & Kumar, 2020). News media organization which are operating in a very competitive market to reach audiences and advertising revenue are eyeing the potential of Facebook as social media for news consumption as most news organization create their own Facebook page and share links to news articles to drive traffic to their news portals (Dimyati & Juvenua, 2017). According to the Phillips (2012) it has now reached a point where it is no longer enough to be first with the news, nor is it sufficient to be comprehensive and trustworthy. It is now increasingly necessary to ensure that news is produced in a form that can spread virally to the point that it even threatens professional standards of accuracy. It is now worthy to note that the term "click bait" has entered the vocabulary of digital journalism. This plethora of information floating around the web, often unchecked, can go viral instantly without being verified for authenticity. While this drives more views and traffic to news portals, it also opens the floodgates for fake news, misleading information, doctored videos, tampered facts, and rumors (Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Journalism practice wields such enormous powers and calls for the highest standard of ethics and commitment to truth. Ethics and truth in journalism have assumed global concern as scholars recognize that their basic constituents of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, and balance have merely assumed mythical qualities as journalists battle to assign credibility to their news stories. Negating all fundamental principle of fairness, equity and balance required in journalism practices, the doubts created in the authenticity of news has affected information flow and its credibility tremendously (Omenugha & Oji, 2008). Therefore, it is important to recognize that throughout the history of journalism, changes in news production and usage have been closely linked and often amplified by technological innovations, commercialization, and digitization of the media industry. Surviving in a highly competitive space where revenue generation has taken precedence over journalistic ideals, where decision making process on what news and news articles should be pushed ahead for publication is replaced by commercial strategist of news organization who solely rely on social media metrics and algorithmic logic to determine which contents could perform best online. This reliance on popularity of stories leads to pushing content aimed at maximizing likes, clicks, and shares to monetize audience engagement (Paulussen, 2016).

To stand out amid the vast and constant stream of content on social media, news stories and headlines are presented in such a way, that their sociability and virality has taken priority over having an informed society. The issues of credibility and the consequences it bears can be detrimental to the media which measures success based on profits, virality and number of views it gets as opposed to quality and ethics. Such mechanisms causes

false information to gain acceptance, which in turn generate false beliefs that once adopted by an individual, are highly resistant to correction (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In summation, the social media news networks are structurally problematic as there is a dichotomy between its purpose as the fourth estate and the need to financially exploit its readers and weakening the idea that media is equal and beneficial for everyone. The way things are progressing now, media will continue to change, benefiting those powerful enough to control and hurting those who receive it (Wright et al., 2017).

Statement of the problem:

The development of the internet was in many ways radically different than the advent of any previous set of innovative communication technologies. The internet was similar in simply making it much easier than before to express and communicate information and ideas to others eventually leading to the rise and emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc. Social media has led to profound changes worldwide, and India is no exception (George. J & Ramesh, 2023). The online presence of Indian users has increased drastically with more than 100 million online users which comprises of 4.5% of total users across the globe. However, till now there has been no policy as such to govern the same except 'the framework and guidelines for use of social media for government organizations' which caters strictly to Government Organizations and their employees and not general public's basically leaving social media unregulated for others to use.

An unregulated platform has provided the news organization with the option to not only commercialize their approach for revenue generation, news portals have resorted to pushing forward suboptimal information in search of more reach and virality putting aside its ideals and giving rise to issues of credibility. Journalistic practices call for highest standards of ethics and commitment to truth, objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance, but due to the impact and influence of commercialization, economics of the media industry has taken precedence over the ideals of journalism and news reporting. Giving way for more news and information to flow out which is not only reduced in quality but also distorted, sensationalized, trivialized, and depoliticized. Arunachal Pradesh has witnessed a huge surge in number of news portals that solely rely on social media as their platform for dissemination of news and information. Internet being highly unregulated at this moment, it is important to study the how commercialization, misinformation, disinformation has impacted the media's credibility in generation of media content, and what impact these news portals have on people who are exposed to such news and information that is being pushed on social media.

Review of literature:

Over the past two decades, the media landscape has grown increasingly digital, driven by the advent of more advanced and affordable digital devices, enhanced connectivity, and a growing supply of digital media content, products, and services (Nielsen, Cornia & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). Social media because of internet development has grown since the early of 2000 and is currently very popular among the societies which has enabled them into exchanging and accessing information, making friends and sustaining relationship. Cut throat business in today's environment has made the competition among business become more intense and serious in which social media have been used as marketing tools by many businesses organisation across different industries to garner more reach, promotion, and influence. In this context, media organisations or mainstream media have also utilised social media platform such as Facebook as a publication medium with the aim to meet the information needs of societies, provide up-to-date and quick information (Dimyati & Juvenua, 2017; Franklin, 2008).

As the world has moved towards a more digital, mobile and social media environment, it points towards a situation where news media are still very important for news productions, but are relatively less important for news distribution that they were in the past (Nielsen, Cornia & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). Das (2020) in his article 'Impact of Digital Media on Society' writes, in earlier times, publishers had great source of power over the information as messages were once distributed by one source which gave them greater power over the information distributed and how it was perceived by the public. But things changed with the rise of computers and more importantly internet. But on the other hand, Obijiofor & Singh (2020) in their paper titled 'Coping with change in India's media' mentions how the Indian media sector has been confronted with changes due to development of the internet and how it has severely impacted the journalistic practices in multiple ways, which harms the citizens of the country. They go on to further add that technological changes have not been a part of a gradual evolution, but a significant 'leap' that has come to be known as digital disruption which not only advances but represses journalism we well.

But on the contrary, Flew (2008) found internet to have transformed not only the society but of the public sphere turning into a more democratized and equitable space offering access to each and everyone. One such research conducted by Reuters Institute Digital News Report, across 26 countries found that most successful media today have digital audiences far larger than what they have historically been able to attract to their legacy print or broadcast offerings (Nielsen, Cornia & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). Pentina & Tarafdar (2013) adds internet and digitization has made it possible for more information channels and sources available, as well as more

opportunities for engagement and co-creation among information consumers. These changes have made it possible for how people consume news.

News and its form have also changed drastically. Many internal and external factors influence the news content and primary among those factors is the economics of the industry due to which the blurring of the distinction between news and advertisement are increasing (McAllister and Giglio, 20005). Nielsen (2012) explains how urbanisation, the growth in advertising after WWII, and the rise of internet and digital television are just some of the factors that have driven this change and how media has evolved into what it is today. News is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events. It is now packaged broadcast or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties which in turn gives control over the mass media during news time for a prescribed fee which renders news as a commercial product (Julius, n.d). The commercial aspect has shifted the media from a politically controlled unit to something that is subject to a new set of pressures with varying consequences on the media and journalism. McChesney (2008) pinpointed commercialisation as a core tendency of a profit driven, advertising supported media system and the resulting concentration as a “poison pill for democracy”. But, attraction of advertising has become more essential with the introduction of competition from online news and the decline in newspaper readership which has eventually led to a state where concerns regarding the blurring of boundaries between editorial and advertising content is starting to diminish and where business considerations are upheld before editorial considerations. Which leads to the production of suboptimal information to be pushed out for the public where facts are either twisted to suit the narrative or left out completely. And with the market which has completely shifted its base on the world wide web has made social media its breeding ground for news to find new consumers of its product.

The relationship between social media and journalism requires an awareness of the past and ongoing changes in news production and consumption due to commercialisation and digitisation of the media industry (Paulussen, 2016). As social media has become an integral part of public communication, ultimately it has given the people the ultimate power to influence the flow and even the form of news (Poell and Van Dijck, 2014). (Allcott et al., 2019) comments how the diffusion of misinformation through social media is a potential threat to democracy and found user interactions with false content rose steadily on both Facebook and Twitter through the end of 2016. But in response it was also found that Facebook and other social media companies have made a range of algorithmic and policy changes to limit the spread of false content. With false, fake, misinformation and disinformation in the form of news has been floating around the web especially social media has also given rise to fact checking organisation to exist in the same sphere flagging inaccurate stories as “Disputed”. Facebook in its fight against inaccurate and fake stories spreading misinformation and disinformation also flagged stories which now has been discontinued. But, as Pennycook and Rand (2018) in its research found that unflagged inaccurate stories are seen as more accurate in the presence of stories that have been flagged as false and inaccurate creating trust over stories that are not flagged.

Studies have also shown that there is a rapid adoption of social media among journalist where is it safe to say that today’s news journalist use social networking sites such as Facebook and twitter for professional purposes (Gulyas, 2013). Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013) asked whether it matters if journalists use social media or not: “more specifically, does social media usage impact upon and change professional identities and ideals?”. The answer remains somewhat inconclusive.

According to Phillips (2012), sociability has become a third pillar of ‘good’ online journalism. “It is no longer enough to be ‘first with the news’, nor is it sufficient to be comprehensive and trustworthy. It is now increasingly necessary to ensure that news is produced in a form that is capable of spreading virally”. This recent trend in the way journalistic practices have taken another step towards news production, is due to the impact social media like Facebook and Twitter has on the way news organisation functions. The impact Facebook now has, lies in the potential to reshape the flow of news. It is clear from a critical political economy point of view, the blurring news business boundary in journalism and more specifically the intensification of the commercial pressure on journalism due to social media, should not be considered as just a side effect of the increased user control over the news process. Scholars have raised concern over the news media’s tendency to confuse the relevance with popularity when evaluating newsworthiness (Heinderyckx, 2015). Also, the cultural and commercial interactions between social and legacy media, as well as between the ‘producers/suppliers’ and ‘user/recipients’ of news are shifting the power relations in the news distribution process. The fundamental question that arises is, to what extent can news media actually uphold the public interest. To what extent professional journalism be capable to separate the newsroom from ownership, management, the sales department and to retain editorial independence where whole business is market driven and based on traffic and user data and not so much anymore with the public interest. McQuail (2010) asserts that commercialisation of the media leads to over reliance on advertising and a loss of editorial independence as well as content trivialisation and tabloidization.

In summary, today’s increasingly global computer network – this complex network of networks is dependent on sophisticated control mechanism that needs to be understood in order to influence the framing of content in pursuit of media services for the public good which stands as the core idea for the fourth estate of democracy, the media. It is important because so far most of what has been accomplished with the transformation of the mediascape with digitization, hybridization and commercialization has not been towards the public good, but

rather to advance commercial interest. This matter most because information flow can be influenced, subverted, hacked, commodified, or curtailed (Jackson, 2022)

Objectives of the study:

1. To find out how social media users perceive and navigate the credibility of news disseminated through news networks in social media platforms.
2. To find out to what extent exposure to misinformation, disinformation and unreliable news on social media impact users' beliefs and behavior.
3. To study the prevalence of fact-checking behavior among the users regarding news shared on social media by news networks.

Theoretical Framework:

1. Media Dependency Theory:

Developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976, Media Dependency Theory examines the effects of mass media on audiences and the interactions between media, audiences and social systems. The theory focuses on the relationship between media and audiences which is crucial in understanding individuals' reliance on various media for information, especially in a context where traditional media may be less accessible or trusted upon. The theory posits that the extent of media's influence correlates with the degree of individual and societal dependence on media. Two key propositions are that the more functions a medium serve, the greater the audience's dependency, and the more unstable a society, the higher the media dependency and potential effects.

2. Framing Theory

Proposed by Ervin Goffman in 1974, Framing Theory explores how the media and other communication sources shape the perception and interpretation of events by placing them within a particular contexts or frames. Building on agenda-setting which highlights the topics media focuses on by emphasizing how the presentation influences audience's interpretation and the way media frames issues which affects the public perception and understanding, guiding not only what people think about but also how they think about affecting everything from everyday interactions to large scale public discourse. Framing theory showcases how media outlets shape public perception on issues by framing them in a particular way.

Research Methodology:

This research utilized survey method to collect data from users of social media in Arunachal Pradesh. Simple random sampling method was used and the survey was distributed using Google Forms.

Findings and Discussion:

From the analysis of the responses gathered through the use of survey, in regards with which social media platform mostly is used for accessing news, 64.4% responded Facebook while 53.4% responded Instagram and WhatsApp. Twitter only amounted to 23.3%. On being asked how often one comes across news content while using social media, 56.2% responded with Very Frequently, 37% responded Sometimes and 6.8% responded Rarely. From the data above, we can say that while using any form of social media, more than half of the users do come across news while using social media.

In regards with how often do people verify the credibility of the news shared on social media, 52.1% responded Sometimes, 37% responded Very Frequently and 9.6% responded Rarely. On being asked how actively one engages in fact checking the news on social media, 52 % responded Sometimes, 37% responded Very Frequently. From the data gathered, it can be said that majority of the respondents do engage in some form of fact checking to some extent and verify the credibility of the news that is shared rather than trusting everything that is available on the social media.

When asked about to what extent one feels responsible for verifying the accuracy of news before sharing it on social media, 54.8% responded Very Frequently while 35.6% responded Sometimes. When asked about how confident one feels while distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate information on social media, 43.8% responded Confident while 37% responded Slightly Confident. 13.7% responded Very Confident while 5.5% responded Not confident at all. The data indicates that users do believe in verifying the accuracy of the news before sharing and are very confident in distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate news.

When asked about what factors contribute to one's trust in news shared on social media, 42.5% responded Source Credibility and Platform reputation. Personal knowledge or experience came in close second at 37%. On being asked how one deals disinformation and misinformation when encountering it on social media, 69.9% responded Ignore and avoid sharing. 13.7% responded Report or flag it to the social media platform. One being asked about if social media platform should have better feedback mechanism for reporting and flagging misinformation/disinformation, 93.2% responded Yes while the rest responded No. These data clearly shows that users put most of its faith on the truthfulness of the news based on the source and the reputation that

source carries. Users also rely on their personal knowledge on the subject on judging whether the news is accurate factually or not. Users also believe that social media platform could have better and prompt feedback mechanism when a news is flagged by the user.

Lastly, when asked about what changes or improvements social media could bring about in the way news is shared and presented on social media in the near future, 65.8% responded Stricter policies against spreading of misinformation and disinformation. 15.1% suggested Transparency in source attribution. 13.7% responded with Implementation of stricter fact checking mechanism. These data suggest that majority of the users want policies that take strict action against spreading of false news and information in social media.

Conclusion:

The study reveals significant insights into the complex dynamics of social media news networks, particularly in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, examining the issues of credibility, relevance, commercialization, the existence of misinformation and disinformation floating around and existing in the World Wide Web. The findings highlight the duality of social media news networks. These platforms became the most widely used source for valuable information world over, but it also became a breeding ground for the unchecked and unverified spread for misinformation and disinformation to exist, undermining the credibility and reliability of news. Such has been the case that it has eroded the trust once legacy media enjoyed raising critical concerns regarding the impact it has on its users' beliefs and decision making.

Furthermore, findings also point towards a user base that actively engages in verifying news and fact checking, relying heavily on self judgement and platform reputation which showcases the growing awareness among the users of social media. However, the absence of robust mechanism and the lack of stricter policies continue to allow the spread of false news undermining public discourse and relegating societal trust. It is crucial to cultivate the habit that prioritize understanding source credibility, platform accountability and user responsibility among the users of social media news networks and a collaborative approach among news organizations and social media platforms. Results also point towards how platforms have established themselves as one of the central points for accessing information which is indicative of users' reliance on such platforms highlighting aspects of Media Dependency Theory. While Framing Theory explains how the context in which news is presented can shape perceptions and interpretations, especially influenced by the dynamics of social media platforms.

Social media wields great power in the current world scenario. Command over resources for information dissemination comes with great responsibility towards pushing forward correct and verified news to the audiences. A collaborative effort from both social media platforms and news organizations can establish a more transparent experience by exercising accuracy, journalistic ethics, and practices. Only then, can platforms present in the realms of social media can perform to its fullest potential fostering as a credible source of information and contributing to an informed and empower society in Arunachal Pradesh and beyond.

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