

Information Credibility and Digital Media Literacy: A Media Fraternity Perspective

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Abstract

Mainstream media is traditionally an important source of information and is believed to provide credible, timely, and valuable information. However, social media popularity is increasing with every passing day for information gathering, sharing, and socializing. Resultantly an average user is continually exposed to a huge amount of unverified social media content, which ultimately distract people and can cause great loss to the recipients. This situation raises the challenge of information credibility on social media compared to other sources of information gathering. The purpose of this study has been to explore how people particularly media professionals assess the issues of disinformation and credibility on social media and how these features can be handled appropriately to bring harmony and tranquility in the society. Semi-structured interviews of 15 media professionals including senior working journalists, media managers, academicians in media studies and digital media experts were conducted. Qualitative data from media experts' interviews was obtained to understand the issues associated with the credibility of information on social media. Purposive sampling technique was used to approach more relevant respondents having rich information on the subject matter. It has come to light that the identification of credible information requires an understanding of digital content with special emphasis on its objectivity, authority, and purpose in addition to functional and critical digital skills.

Keywords: Disinformation, Credibility of Information, Social Media, Digital Media Literacy, Fake News.

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1. Introduction

People engage in information seeking particularly in uncertain and disastrous situations and acquire information from all available means to get knowledge on any certain issue. Mainstream mass media outlets are traditionally important source of providing information and are believed to provide credible, timely, and valuable information (Heath, Liao, & Douglas, 1995). Gradually, the usage of social media is increasing for information seeking along with traditional mass media sources. Social media provides freedom and ease for seeking such information which is usually not available on print and electronic media outlets. In this era of social media, an average user is continually exposed to a huge amount of unverified social media content (Pentina & Tarafdar,

2014). Schifffrin (2021) in her book *Media Capture* expressed that due to rapid advancement in new media such as Google and Facebook, people's choice of information gathering and sharing has changed and there is little work on to explore its consequences.

According to the report (*The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*) by Bradshaw & Howard (2019) discussed organized social media manipulation campaigns which were observed in about 70 countries in 2019, while 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017. In all these countries, political parties or government agencies were using social media for shaping public attitudes domestically. Computational propaganda was also being used for controlling information in three ways: for violation of human rights, disgracing political adversaries, and drowning out opposite opinions. Some known elements or state actors also use computational propaganda for foreign influence operations. Facebook and Twitter reported foreign influence operations by seven countries (Pakistan, India, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Venezuela). They used these platforms to influence international audiences. Facebook is the most used platform for social media manipulation. For all these reasons, social media is becoming a source of disinformation, increasing hatred, and damaging public trust in media and other democratic institutions.

Ördén & Pamment (2021) argued that influence operations are increasing day by day and increasing risks for democratic processes because they intend to damage the integrity of the political system. In this situation when people are using social or digital media for information gathering, the question arises of how people can evaluate the credibility of information. Information credibility on social media compared to the other sources of information has now become a challenge. Due to its exceptional features such as technology, type of information, quantity of information, and exchange capacity, credibility evaluation has become a more complex issue. It is important to identify which information is credible. Purpose of this study is to investigate how people, particularly media professionals assess the issues of disinformation and credibility of information on social media and how these matters can be coped.

2. Research Questions

1. How the media professionals identify fake news and misinformation on social media platforms?
2. How the credibility of the overloaded information being shared on social media can be ensured in this digital era?

3. Review of Literature

The following factors are crucial in understanding information credibility and digital media literacy in the contemporary digital era.

3.1.Credibility

Keshavarz (2021) developed a conceptual framework for social media users that was based on the following four components; information source, information presentation, information credibility, and decision-related issues which is useful when evaluating information for decision-making. Source credibility is defined as the believability of a message creator by a perceiver (O'Keefe, 1990, p. 181). Cronkhite & Liska (1976) discussed three dimensions of source credibility which include competence, trustworthiness and goodwill. The credibility of source is an important variable to assess the information, particularly during crisis and risky situations.

3.2.Gatekeeping

Due to the increasing amount of information on social media, the gatekeeping phenomenon has changed and now it is in the hands of content consumers instead of content producers (Haas & Wearden, 2003). Traditionally, journalists, news editors, and even advertisers or media owners

play the role of gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These gatekeepers are supposed to verify the information and play a key role in ensuring the credibility of information (Salcito, 2009). As there is no concept of professional gatekeepers in social media to verify content, therefore, responsibilities lay on consumers regarding credibility of online content. Now consumers are also gatekeepers in this new media landscape (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999). This has changed the concept of “gatekeeping” to “gate-watching” (Bruns, 2008). These gate-watchers are not able to filter anything and just keep an eye on information traffic that passes through the gates. Instead of producing unique content, they just share others' content and concentrate on maximizing the reach of the content.

3.3.Celebrities/Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers have now become parallel to opinion leaders and celebrities who shape public attitudes and opinions through their posts on social media. Studies show that endorsement from social media influencers and celebrities or other known people affects purchasing decisions of consumers (Cooley & Parks, 2019).

3.4.Immediacy

Levinson (2009) has pointed out that one of Twitter's (now X) main features is the proximity of messages. It provides information in real-time. An important way to study credibility is how this proximity of updates impacts credibility.

3.5.Digital or Media Literacy

Polizzi (2020) discussed digital literacy as the capacity to examine online content which means the awareness about the context and origin of the information in focus besides technical knowledge of the internet and the digital world. According to a research project conducted in the UK, only 2% of school children can recognize false information on the internet (National Literacy Trust, 2018). Polizzi (2020) stated that academicians and practitioners are in favor of embedding media literacy in academic curricula as low-scale media literacy projects in schools are not enough. When it comes to a digital environment, the term [digital literacy](#) is more suitable instead of *media literacy*. [Digital literacy](#) focuses on the functional and technical dimensions of social media (Bazalgette, 2010; Van Deursen, Helsper, & Eynon, 2015).

The critical dimension of digital literacy is the ability to evaluate biasedness and trustworthiness in online content (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). Another way to study digital literacy is to know about the production, consumption, ownership, advertising, commercial, propaganda, persuasion, and regulatory issues of social media (Buckingham, 2007). Digital literacy is also defined as examining the internet's potential for democracy and society (Fry, 2014). On the other side, the internet does not only facilitate the democratic process but it can also damage it through misinformation, fake news, and propaganda (Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

3.6.Influence Operations

Gabriele Cosentino (2020) in his book “Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation” discussed that the post-truth is not only a big issue in the Western World, but it has political and cultural consequences at the global level. The book discussed a few examples of disinformation and misinformation campaigns; reportedly thousands of unaware American citizens attend online events on social media organized by Russian trolls. European social media users were involved in spreading narratives in support of the Syrian ruling regime; Buddhist ultranationalists in Myanmar used Facebook for a harassment campaign led to the killing of thousands of Rohingya Muslims. These were a few examples that demonstrate the dangerous effects of social media-based disinformation and misinformation campaigns with gigantic effects.

Ördén & Pamment (2021) discuss another dimension to analyze the credibility and reliability of the information coming from social media called “influence operations” and link it with the concept of foreign threat. There are three different conceptions to define what foreign threat is when we discuss social media: foreign states, foreign citizens, and foreign interests. Influence operations by foreign states can be defined as threatening acts against adversary states, considered analogous to acts of war. Influence operations conducted by the citizens of a foreign country to destabilize the democratic process of a targeted state are considered threatening acts. Lastly, the influence operations through the illegitimate employment of soft power are also considered acts supporting foreign interests.

Accordingly, three different approaches are considered according to the situation. First is a democratic discourse approach, which discusses that democracies should be strong enough to counter external or foreign intervention in their political dialogue by strengthening its institutions and promoting media literacy among citizens. This can also be done through persuasion and inoculation of the citizens of a particular country against enemy propaganda and persuasion efforts. Second is the institutional democratic approach, which discusses the protection of public institutions from foreign influence. For example, when we talk about foreign influence in an electoral process, legislative changes are essential to address foreign interference such as changes in laws regarding electoral funding and online political advertising and marketing which is usually loaded with persuasion and propaganda efforts. Third is the national security approach. When there is irresistible evidence of a foreign state’s interference in the domestic process of a country, the national security approach is used for classification of the foreign influence operation. If the patterns of state-based hybrid and irregular warfare are found, targeting strategic and critical infrastructure or fault lines of a state, this situation should be dealt with national security approach. These approaches offered a tangible change in dealing with the influence operations (Ördén & Pamment, 2021).

4. Thematic Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2006) stated that thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used in a variety of social science research. In this method, the researchers analyze, organize, describe, and report themes found within the data. King (2004) and Braun and Clarke (2006) also argued that the thematic analysis is beneficial for analyzing the perspectives of different research participants while highlighting similarities and differences in their stance and also useful for identifying key features from bulk data. However, researchers also discussed some of the disadvantages of the thematic analysis. A normal thematic analysis is unable to analyze the use of language (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility but this flexibility can cause contradictions in themes (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

4.1. Methodology

There is limited empirical research available on the impact of social media messages therefore, an exploratory research design is being used in this research. Semi-structured interviews of 15 media professionals including senior working journalists, media managers, academicians in the media field, and digital media experts have been conducted. Their responses have been analyzed to understand the extent of the disinformation and ways to ensure the reliability and credibility of information on social media. Open-ended questions were sent to media professionals and their detailed answers were requested through WhatsApp voice or text messages. This research ensured the confidentiality of the respondents and voluntary participation. Notes of all significant remarks were taken to ensure reliability. As suggested by Bryman & Bell (2015) and Corbin & Strauss (1998), interviews continued until theoretical saturation was accomplished.

Although thematic analysis is explained here as a linear process based on six steps, actually the process involved a constant moving forward and back between the phases. Six-phased method for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) is presented below:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating of initial codes
3. Searching for a hierarchy of themes
4. Reviewing themes and subthemes
5. Defining themes
6. Report writing

To identify participants for this research paper, the purposive sampling technique was used. This sampling technique helped the researchers to approach more relevant respondents having rich information and expertise on the subject matter. The content analysis of responses was carried out and the frequency of the most commonly mentioned themes was noted to further interpret the research. The responses were read and assessed multiple times to improve reliability.

5. Results

Research questions in the current study are mainly concerned with the “identification of fake news” and “credibility issues” of information available on social media. Both these concepts are interlinked and interchangeably used. Broader themes regarding the identification of fake news and the credibility of information that emerged and finalized after carefully analyzing interview data have been discussed in this section from simple and frequently used themes to more complex and rarely used themes.

1. **Source Credibility:** Credibility of the source, author or initiator of social media posts is paramount while identifying fake news. It can be checked by evaluating the author’s previous posts and shared information. Fake news is mostly spread by anonymous sources and fake accounts on social media.
2. **Context:** Timing and surrounding events are also important to understand the context and motives of the information source behind sharing the post or event news at any specific time.
3. **Media Monitoring and Open-Source Intelligence:** Monitoring social and traditional media to beware of trending news items, observe networks and patterns of accounts, types of followers (whether credible or not), any suspicious activity such as bot activity (high volume sharing from single account), fake accounts, coordinated disinformation campaigns and user engagement and feedback (Like, Share and Comments) to check the impact of the post.
4. **Content Analysis:** Analyze the language, tone, and overall structure of the information shared to identify inconsistent, inaccurate, sensational elements and misleading or exaggerated claims that can be the signs of fake news. Media professionals are also trained to identify biased framing or one-sided stories. Identify hate speech, misinformation (inaccurate or false details), disinformation (manipulative information), and mal-information (information in the wrong context). Raise a red flag if the post is inflammatory or sensational.
5. **Fact Checking:** Verify facts from the relevant authorities, subject matter experts, or multiple reliable sources to ensure credibility. Images and videos shared on social media can also be verified by using a reverse image tool to check authenticity. Various fact-checking tools and organizations are also available. However, it is time-consuming and rarely used.
6. **Digital Environment:** It is crucial to know how the internet world operates such as bot activity, domain verification, scrutinize similar domain names, URLs, and verification of the website’s security and encryption. It requires a lot of professional knowledge about the digital environment.

7. **Source of Funding:** Some investigative journalists also consider the source of funding or political economy behind any organized disinformation campaign on various issues. This further emphasizes the investigator to comment on the wary ambitions of source behind this campaign.

Media professionals in Pakistan are incorporating above mentioned techniques to address the challenge of fake news. However, building networks and collaborating with other journalists, media organizations, watchdog groups, and civil society is also helpful besides engaging audiences, enhancing their ability to combat fake news, and promoting transparency in news reporting.

6. Conclusion

Social media is now an integral part of our life. It has changed the way of public interaction. The spread of false stories through social media is a serious challenge in this contemporary digital era. It can pose serious threats and damage to national security, manipulate public opinion, undermine public trust in government institutions, damage diplomatic relations, hinder efforts for peace, create political polarization, deteriorate sectarian and ethnic divide, undermine the electoral and democratic process, inflate distrust among institutions and creating civil unrest that can potentially harm the society.

This research study is focusing on both theoretical and applied goals. It explains how media experts evaluate online content to identify disinformation and how digital literacy can be promoted to strengthen this evaluation at a public level. Improving the credibility of information on social media requires a multi-faceted approach involving multiple stakeholders and especially the digital media literacy at grassroot level.

1. **Government and Regulatory Bodies:** Government and regularity bodies should develop a mechanism for the identification of sources and users of information. Penalties must be enforced on spreading false information and other malpractices on social media. Promote media literacy programs for all age groups and segments of society.
2. **Mainstream Media:** A mechanism of collaboration between all mainstream media should be developed for fact-checking and verification of information. Media should also play its role in educating the masses on the issues of fake news and information credibility.
3. **Social Media Providers:** Social media providers need to focus on AI or machine learning algorithms to detect false information and content moderation policies. Partnerships with fact-checking organizations, incentivizing credible content creators and adjustment of algorithms to prioritize trustworthy sources can help in reducing the spread of misinformation and fake news.
4. **Academia:** The academia in the Universities should conduct research projects on the impact of misinformation and fake news. They should develop strategies to identify fake news and combat the misinformation phenomenon. Academicians and social scientists should also collaborate with social media platforms to improve technological aspects in this domain.
5. **Society and Individuals:** Society and individuals have a key role in combating fake news and improving the credibility and reliability of information as an end user. Media literacy should be promoted among citizens from an early age. Responsible sharing of information should be encouraged, and irresponsible sharing must be discouraged. People must be aware of reporting false and suspicious content to social media

providers and fact-checking platforms, which can help in controlling misinformation through social media to a greater extent.

In the socio-political environment of Pakistan, combating disinformation is crucial for stability and promoting democratic values. There is a dire need for collaboration among government agencies, civil society, media houses, and companies working in information and communication technologies. This can promote media literacy and responsible information sharing. In South Korea, the government has taken a proactive approach by launching a comprehensive media literacy program for diverse age groups and communities. After conducting interviews with various media intelligentsia, it is opined that priority should be given to media literacy awareness before considering social media regulations.

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