



A study of 'Fake News: Time to Rein in the Epidemic'

• Mona Singh • Priyanshi Singh • Pragyan Agarwal
• Amitabh Ranjan

Received : November 2017

Accepted : March 2018

Corresponding Author : Amitabh Ranjan

Abstract: *Beyond the need for increased alertness, fake news poses little danger by itself. However, beyond a point, fake news has the potential to affect society's information sharing.*

The mass media in any country is its public information system. Its various platforms – the print, the broadcast and the digital – satiate the people's hunger for information and thrive on the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by the constitution of all liberal democracies. For the mass media there is never a dearth of information to be disseminated among its audience. But what is required of it is a certain rigour

of sifting through the information and sanitising it before passing it off as news for the general public.

The rise of the social media and its usage as yet another medium of news disseminator has added another dimension to the mass media. The increasing use of the smartphone and urge to be on the social media first with a piece of information has posed a serious threat to a credible information ecosystem.

Keywords: *Alertness, mass media, news disseminator.*

Mona Singh

CEMS II year, Session: 2016-2019,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Priyanshi Singh

CEMS II year, Session: 2016-2019,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Pragyan Agarwal

CEMS II year, Session: 2016-2019,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Amitabh Ranjan

Guest Faculty, Department of CEMS,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna- 800001, Bihar, India
E-mail: amitabhranjans@gmail.com

Introduction:

The word 'fake' at its most basic level means forgery, a counterfeit, something that is not genuine. It implies an intention to deceive. In the context of the mass media, fake news refers to falsehood, half-truths and unsubstantiated reports. They attempt to play on the incredulity of the readers and lack of access to the truth to attain selfish goals.

We have witnessed how fake news could destroy peace and lead to loss of lives. From giving strength to religious obscurantism to stoking communal frenzy to false claims by the authorities, it has the potential of destroying social sanity.

The project is an effort to bring to the fore the implications of fake news for society and why it is necessary to put a leash on it. As Charles Dickens said, "Facts alone are wanted in life."

The double-edged sword

Fake news has been a preferred tool of political propagandists since ancient times. In modern times, Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister of Third Reich, is the most prominent example of what political manipulation could achieve. The misrepresentation of facts, the most basic feature of fake news, also invariably implies suppression of truth. To that extent the communist regimes, erstwhile and current, have relied on them as statecraft. Dictatorship of any hue thrives on doctored information. The Press in such regimes is more often than not the mouthpiece of the authorities.

What is getting worrisome in more recent times is that fake news is not only an aspect of public consumption of information but is also being used as a means to clinch political debates in liberal democracies. The parallels between Donald Trump's sensational victory in the American Presidential elections and Brexit referendum in the UK have been well documented. What the two events across the Atlantic divide had in common was the way they were achieved in what has been dubbed the era of "post-truth politics" based on appeals to emotion rather than policies and facts.

Like many countries, India is witnessing a proliferation of news channels, spurious websites and political 'agents' who pass off hoaxes and conspiracy theories as news. But even more than in the United States, fake news is seeping into the national conversation as politicians and a credulous news media seize on reports that glorify the country and bash its critics.

Drunk with an unprecedented electoral victory, the far right is exploiting the fake culture, being fed by the social media, to the hilt. Fake stories go viral because they advance the nationalist agenda of the saffron outfits, promoting Islamophobia at the expense of the country's composite culture.

"No single party or ideology has a monopoly on fake news in India, but it's certainly true that in many prominent cases stories that were later debunked took a pro-BJP line," says Sadanand Dhume, a South Asia expert and fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

On the other hand, as Elodie Vialle, head of the journalism and technology desk at the Paris-based advocacy group Reporters Without Borders, says, "Fake news has become a new 'trending topic' for predators of press freedom, a pretext seized by authoritarian regimes to muzzle media outlets."

"It would be too long to mention all the enemies of press freedom because the concept of 'fake news' as a censorship tool has gone viral. What is certain is that many of them have taken recent statements by President Donald Trump on fake news as a means of justifying their repressive policies," she adds.

There are examples aplenty of what Vialle says. President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Cambodia strongman Hun Sen, Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey have all taken measures in the name of checking "fake news" which have curtailed freedom of expression in one way or another.

By all indications, fake news will remain in the public domain until either traditional media organizations, the platforms responsible for spreading verified news, or consumers can reliably combat falsehoods or deny fake news and its desired impacts.

Hypothesis of the Research:

- Fake news are designed to create commotion more likely among those who are illiterate and ignorant.
- It aims at misleading common people who are unable to differentiate between authentic news and fake news.
- The mindset of people are now framed in such a way that even after knowing that a particular news is authentic, they tend to suspect it.

Objectives of the Research:

- To study the impact of fake news on common people.
- To spread awareness of the importance of the judgement parameter of the authenticity of any news.
- To rely on the relevant sources of the news delivered.

Methodology of the Research:

- This research is based upon assumptions, questionnaires to check the authenticity of the assumptions, personal interviews, data collection, assimilation reading, analysis and drawing conclusions.
- The data collection was undertaken by surfing the relevant websites, conducting interviews, distributing a variety of questions among businessmen, working women, senior citizens, students and people belonging to below poverty line.

Major findings of the research:

- This section of the research depicts a major observation in the form of findings through which we can illustrate the major understanding concerning the entire research. A survey was conducted among altogether 100 respondents including working population (business men and working women), senior citizens, students and people belonging to below poverty line, each 20 in number. An interview was conducted among 3 media experts. Some relevant URLs have been surfed to gather some information.
- Based on these, we have arrived at various findings and conclusions.

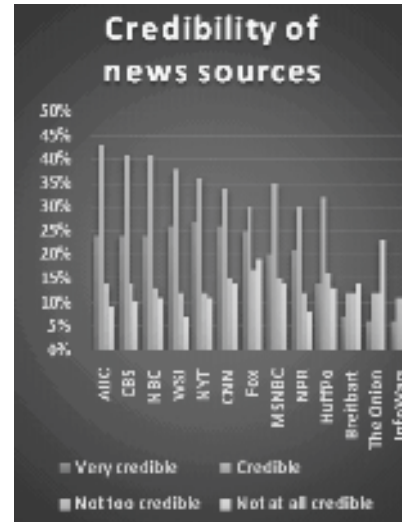
1. The finding of this research concerns viewers' frequency of confronting, fake news online. Despite the proliferation of coverage of fake news and historically low opinion about the media, a majority of adults think most cable news networks and major newspapers are credible, according to a Morning Consult poll. And while it is unclear how people's views on the media predict their ability to detect fake news from reporting, the adults who polled said they see it in their social media feeds frequently. Thirty-one per cent said it happens more than once a day, and 55 per cent said they have started reading a story only to realize it was fake.



(Source: morningconsult.com; Laura Nichols; December 7, 2016)

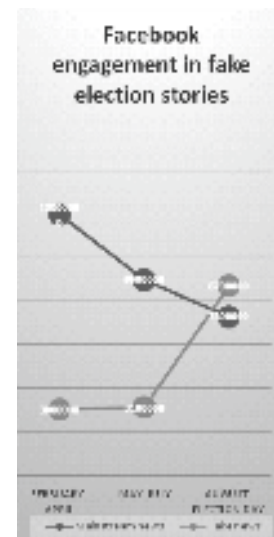
2. The finding of another research concerns the credibility of news sources. Television news gets the highest number of people saying they are credible, with major newspapers such as *The New*

York Times not trailing far behind. ABC led all outlets with 67 per cent of people saying it is credible, and CNN was top among cable news networks with 60 percent. Sixty-five per cent said both CBS and NBC are credible and 55 per cent said the same about the more partisan MSNBC and Fox News channels.



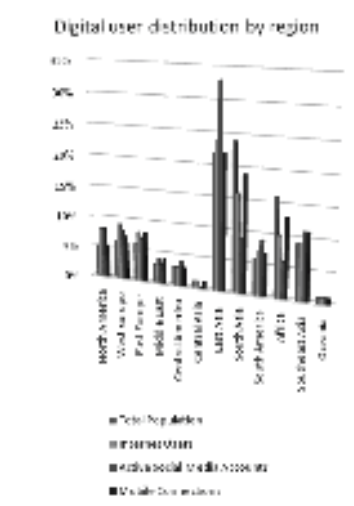
(Source: morningconsult.com; Laura Nichols; December 7, 2016)

3. Yet another finding includes the Facebook engagement for top 20 election stories. The engagement is measured as the total number of shares, reactions and comments. In the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *NBC News*, and others, a BuzzFeed News analysis has found.



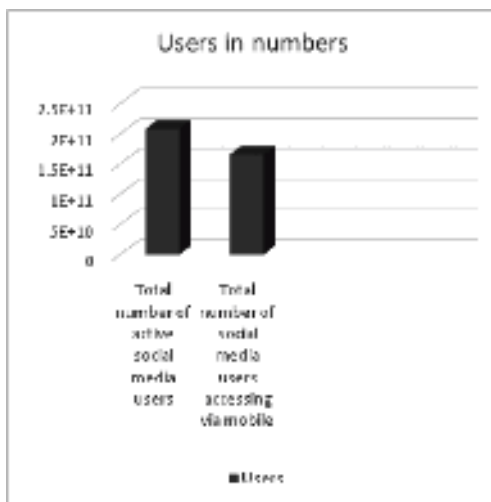
(Source: BuzzFeed News)

4. The finding of this research includes digital user distribution by region. It concerns each region's share of the world's population, global internet and social media users, and global mobile connections.

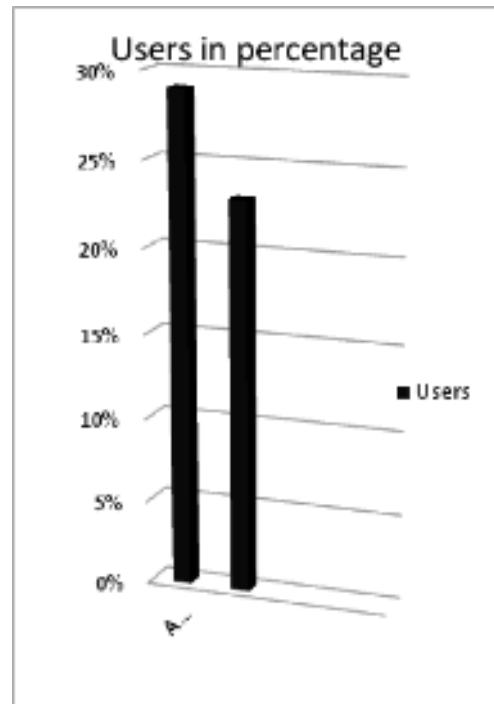


(Source: slideshare.net; Southeast Asia; January 26, 2017)

5. This finding includes the information collected by We Are Social's digital, social and mobile report in 2015 which includes the monthly active users reported by the most active social media platform in each country.



6. This finding includes the interview responses of the experts in media, in the interview conducted by us.



(Source: Sonya Waterhouse; March 6, 2016)

EXPERTS SPEAK

A. Mr. Nandagopal Rajan:

Editor-New Media; The Indian Express, Delhi

1. What is fake news? Can you offer a general definition?

Any news that is not factual, but made to look so, is fake news.

2. 'Post-truth' was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016. Why?

The Trump-Hillary election campaign saw a lot of falsehoods and half-truths being peddled as truth. Sadly a lot of people ended up believing these too.

3. What in your opinion is the single most important reason for the rise in fake news?

The most important reason according to me is the rise of the many platforms for content — from social media to blogs and WhatsApp, there are many places where unverified content can be pushed.

4. Is there an estimation of the percentage of fake news in a day across media platforms?

No.

5. How serious is this phenomenon and what it means for the masses?

The phenomenon is there at many levels and the sad part is that the common man/woman is not aware that a lot of the content that they consume and help propagate is fake.

6. Would you agree that in the age of the social media and Facebook and Twitter-driven TV newsrooms, the print offers the most credible source of information?

Yes. Print newsrooms still take the time to check facts and passing off a completely unverified piece of news into a page is tough.

7. What basic rigour we must exercise to spot a piece of false information?

Go with instincts. If your gut says there is something wrong with the news item, then check and recheck the facts. See if there are other good sources running the same story.

B. Mr. Dipak Mishra:

Bureau Chief; The Telegraph, Patna

1. What is fake news? Can you offer a general definition?

Reporting news which has either not happened or is distorting a fact.

2. 'Post-truth' was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016. Why?

During the last three years, media houses all over the world have begun to take extreme stands on certain issues particularly the prevailing power equation and news is aimed to embarrass someone or give benefit to another. For example in the USA, media houses were divided into pro and anti-Trump. In India media houses are divided into pro and anti-Modi.

3. What in your opinion is the single most important reason for the rise of fake news?

Major blame should go to social media which posts reports without any verification and weak laws allow it to get away with it. Some regional TV channels are also responsible. They run news without verification in a competition to beat their rivals. Even in national channels the treatment of news are different from each other depending on who they want to aim their guns at. Views dominate news and all this contributes to the rise of fake news.

4. Is there an estimation of the percentage of fake news in a day across media platforms?

Will not be able to say the percentage but it is getting larger. One of the main reasons is following social media or even TV channels without verification.

5. How serious is this phenomenon and what it means for the masses?

It is worrying. Communal flare-ups have been taking place due to misinformation and distortion. It has led to social tension and is used to create misconception. In the social media it has given rise to abuse.

6. Would you agree that in the age of the social media and Facebook and Twitter-driven TV newsrooms, the print offers the most credible source of information?

Yes print media reporters are more serious in verifying their reports because unlike the electronic media they have ample time and do not have to break news. Unlike social media the newspaper is accountable and open to defamation cases. To avoid cases or legal hazards they verify their facts. In case they are writing against any person or institute, their quote is a must.

7. What basic rigour we must exercise to spot a piece of false information?

Check the facts from other sources before you can confirm that the news is true.

C. Mr. Kuljeet Bains:

Editor; The Tribune Online, Chandigarh

1. What is fake news? Can you offer a general definition?

Any deliberate misrepresentation of facts, presented as news, is fake news. It can be a distortion of a largely correct narration, with small but crucial bits of wrong information slipped in to completely change the final meaning. Often it is a complete lie told with a straight face in a credible sounding or looking format. If a segment is maliciously cropped out of a narrative and presented without the context, thereby conveying a false story, then that too is fake news.

2. 'Post-truth' was Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016. Why?

Post-truth refers to use of selective facts – as opposed to the complete set of facts or data – to stir in the audience more emotions than a reasoned response. The intention is to play on or reconfirm pre-existing fears and prejudices, often racial or parochial. The year 2016 saw many political contests that made full use of “post-truth”, some of them which may have changed the course of world politics forever. Notable among them were the campaigns for the American presidential election and the Brexit referendum in Britain.

3. What in your opinion is the single most important reason for the rise of fake news?

The foremost reason is the easy and cheap availability of powerful mediums to create and spread fake news – digital technology and the Internet. It takes very little to set up a fake-news generation team, and any interest can pay for such a set-up. While vested interests have always existed, news dissemination till recent years happened only through conventional news organisations and mediums such as radio, TV or printed newspapers. All of these mediums required huge investments, which needed returns. For that, a crucial requirement was credibility to get sustained business. New mediums can sustain themselves on very little investment, therefore do not require credibility.

4. Is there an estimation of the percentage of fake news in a day across media platforms?

I am not aware of a specific estimation. But also I do not believe there is a way to reach a definitive figure, especially because it is hard to define “media platforms”, which in today’s world have to include all forms of social media. The variety of such platforms is virtually endless. Even one-to-one spread of information through any digital device will effectively constitute a news platform.

5. How serious is this phenomenon and what it means for the masses?

One, it is an extremely serious phenomenon in terms of sheer volume. But it is even scarier because it stands to undermine the entire legacy of news production and all its code of ethics. The ultimate harm will be to society at large, which will find itself forming its world view based on false information and ‘fake facts’. As the intention of fake news – as with post-truth – is often to create divides for political benefit, the result will be a scared, angry, untrusting, fragmented society. Violence and destruction can be the only outcome.

6. Would you agree that in the age of the social media and Facebook and Twitter-driven TV newsrooms, the print offers the most credible source of information?

Every medium is equally capable, or at least equipped, to produce reliable, accurate and honest news reports. But it is the business models that are forcing many news platforms to look for shortcuts to revenue generation. This can be in terms of getting paid directly by a beneficiary of fake news, or through generating greater audience by putting out salacious, scandalous, distorted news designed to attract clicks or eyeballs. Thus far the business models of print have been less susceptible to such temptations, but that cannot last forever. Print is also under pressure from the electronic/digital platforms. The same weaknesses will thus necessarily creep in, and are already evident. In

fact, print will be even more desperate as it has huge expenditure liabilities, but is losing out revenue to electronic platforms that have very small running costs.

7. What basic rigour we must exercise to spot a piece of false information?

The most basic parameter to watch out for is the source of the information. Do you recognise the source/media platform as reliable? Within the story, you may look for “completeness” – are there data/quotes/dates/references/citations as required by the given story? At all times be conscious of the fact that any piece of news on any platform can be potentially fake. Always be on your guard. In the end, use your reason/good sense to assess if the story as told adds up in light of your larger and historical understanding of the subject.

8. This finding includes the data mentioned by the Pew Research Center in the US. It disaggregates the figure based on political affiliation of the citizens. For the Republicans, The trust in national and local news organisation is 35%; it is 3% for social networking sites. In the case of the Democrats, it is 70% for news organisations and 6% for social media. The EBU survey reads: “The gap between broadcast and new media is widening: while traditional media increased their levels of trust compared to last year, new media (Internet and social networks) lost even more trust.

9. This finding includes the survey conducted among 80 respondents who include working population, students, senior citizens and people belonging to below poverty line. A set of questionnaire was distributed among them.

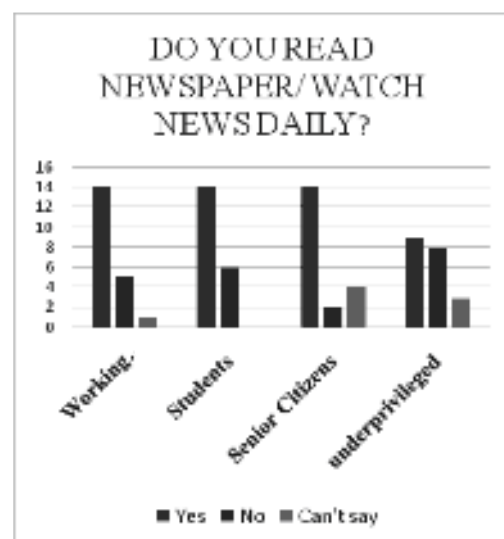


Fig. 1

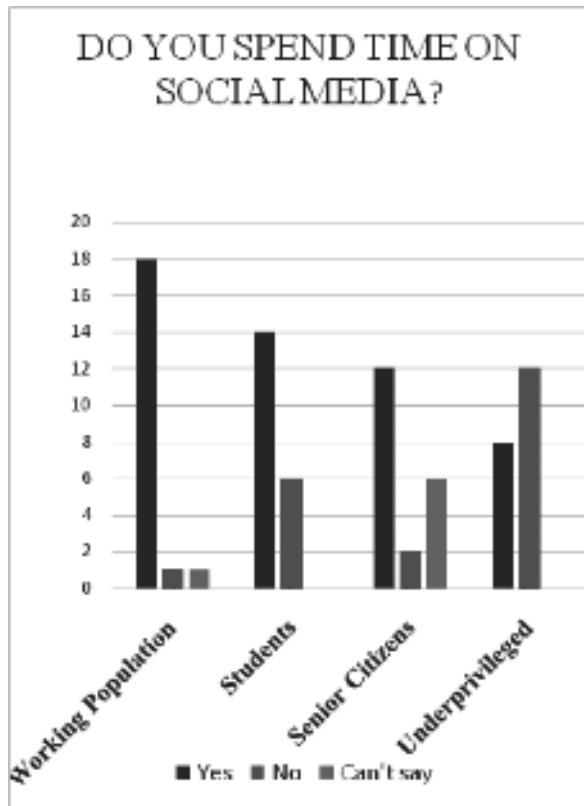


Fig. 2

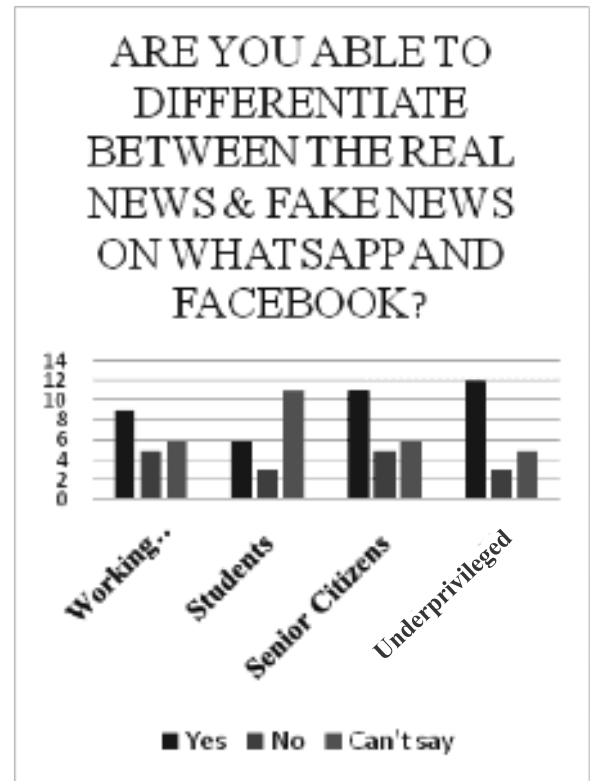


Fig. 4

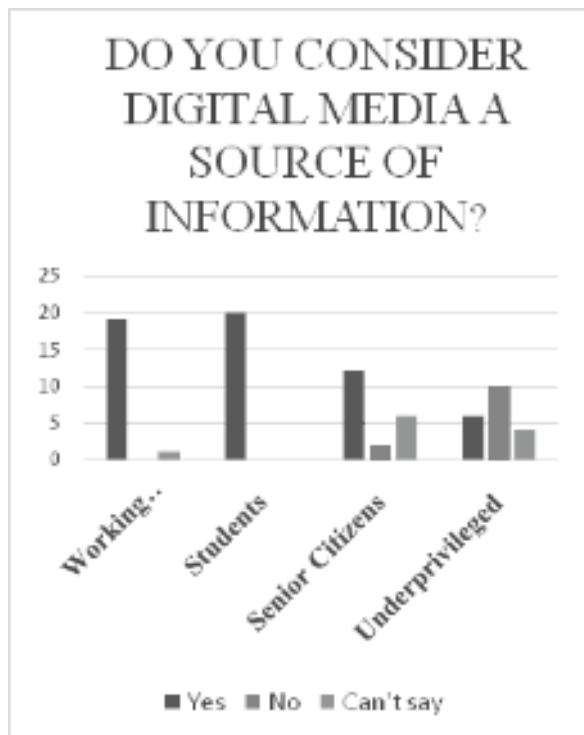


Fig. 3

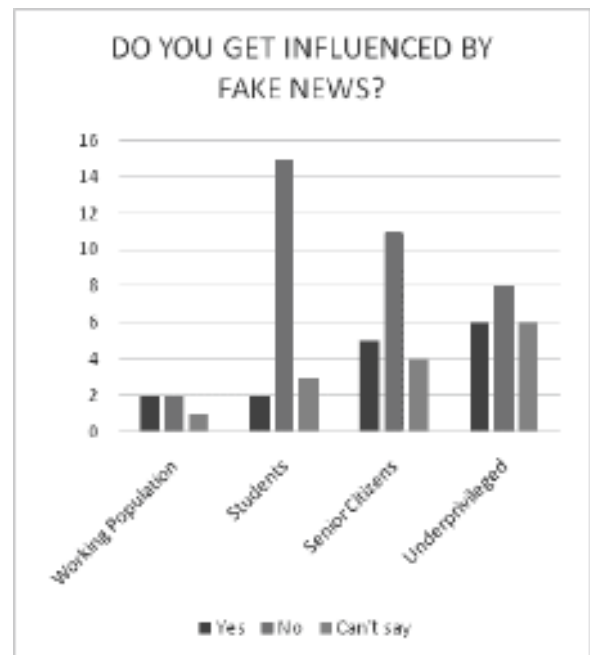


Fig. 5

Conclusions:

The research project 'Fake News: Time to Rein in the Epidemic' analysed the coverage of fake news on media. We discovered how people tend to be influenced by them and respond to them. The study also shows the conscience of general people, their instinct in differentiating between the authentic news and the fake news. Throughout the world, fake news have left their footprints in most of the TV channels, social sites, and so on.

Some have raised their voice to fight off this calamity. The truth has no alternative and so the endeavour goes on.

References:

- www.bbc.com, August 24, 2017
<https://www.buzzfeed.com>, September 10, 2017
www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/hillary-clinton-fake-news-us-584a016ee4bc8e2baf2586, September 2, 2017
www.linkedin.com/pulse/socialmedia-nominates-everything-sonya-waterhouse, September 10, 2017
<https://www.meltwater.com/blog/fake-news/>, September 3, 2017
<https://morningconsult.com/2016/12/07/poll-majority-find-major-media-outlets-credible/>, September 3, 2017
<https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/17/india-and-it-s-fake-news-epidemic>, September 5, 2017
www.newsmediaUK.org, September 10, 2017

- <https://news.utexas.edu/2017/01/03/fake-news-is-dangerous-because-it-sticks-in-your-brain>, September 12, 2017
www.rediff.com/news/special/warriors-of-the-fake-news-era/20170628.htm, September 15, 2017
www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-2017-southeast-asia, september 7, 2017
www.telegraph.co.uk, September 15, 2017
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate>, August 26, 2017
<https://www.voanews.com/a/fake-news-spurse-angst-in-the-internet-age/3616571.html>, September 8, 2017

Bibliography:

- A. S. Panneerselvam, September 10, 2017, readerseditor@thehindu.co.in (online), The Hindu
John D'Agata & fimgal Jim. The lifespan of a fact. USA: W.W Norton & company, 2012
Herman S. Edward & Chomsky Noam. Manufacturing consent, the political economy of the mass media. USA: Pantheon, 1988
J. Levitin Daniel. Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post Truth Era. USA: Dutton; Reprint edition, 2017.
Current editions and archives of – The Indian Express; Hindustan Times; The Economist; The Telegraph (Kolkata); New York Times; The Washington Post.