CAN MEDIA LITERACY HELP FIGHT THE INFODEMIC? A STUDY OF YOUTH

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Abstract:

COVID-19 a worldwide catastrophe, and while humankind is grappling to find a solution. The pandemic has adversely affected the citizens globally both physically and psychologically, and the torrent of information is acting as a double whammy. The past research delineates that media literacy's paucity is missing in Youth, which involves critical thinking skills, analyzing and evaluating media messages. Media Literacy is emerging as a critical challenge amongst the citizens. The interdisciplinary nature of media literacy sets a foundation for understanding and participating in the public good's ongoing dialogue. In COVID-19 times, where there are restrictions on many activities and services, the research portrays that the social media usage among people has amplified to an extraordinary rate. In isolation, people are more dependent on online information. The plethora of information available online is fake and misleading, termed as 'Infodemic'. This kind of information is risky and poses harmful effects. The most vulnerable to such a risk are Youth, as they are heedless of the adverse effects and deprive the skills of identifying the reliability and credibility of the news story.

The present study with exploratory cum descriptive design attempts to determine whether the Youth are media literate or not and how they make distinctions among fake and reliable news. It also finds out that how information sharing and consumption has changed due to the pandemic. The survey method finds that people are more dependent on social media networks for news and other information. The Youth do encounter fake news and feels that it creates confusion among people. The Media Literacy skills were tested with the help of a five-point Likert scale. The findings reveal that the Youth lacks media literacy skills, and it should be taught in schools and colleges to churn out informed citizenry. The study concludes that social

media platforms with the power of engaging and informing the citizens when used mindfully and with a developed knowledge structure can make wonders in a democratic country like India.

INTRODUCTION

World Health Organisation(WHO) declared SARS(Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)-CoV-2 virus as a pandemic and a severe threat to public health. Pandemic COVID-19 has made the world come to a standstill. With an increase in positivity and death rate, it has created havoc globally. Countries far and wide observe lockdown where people are confined to their homes and allowed to go outside only for necessities with restricted movement and precautionary hygiene. Children, adults and old age people are constricted behind walls, doing their work, schooling, and other essential engagements online. The lockdown has created uncertainty and an unforeseeable future. Rumor mongering has left citizens bewildered. It involves much effort to understand and identify trustworthiness, as it involves critical thinking skills and awareness. The new internet users find it more challenging to discover a solution to the web information. The research has shown that skill is required to identify the harmful information which can be learned. In India, where 700 million people are internet users, they need to be skilled users with media literacy.

INFODEMIC

The term Infodemic denotes the perils of harmful messages during the outbreak of the disease. The coronavirus causing several health hazards is crucial, just like the rumors and false information causing Infodemic. The disease has made the science word 'epidemiology' familiar to everyone, which deals with ways the disease is transmitted and controlled in a population similarly, the misinformation in pandemic has given the new term 'Infodemic.' It is essential to be informed and stay up to date on the challenges the world is facing. However, at the same time, it calls attention to look out for misleading information. The Director-General of WHO Dr T.A Ghebreyesus, remarked that "we are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus and is just as dangerous." Along with COVID-19-19, the Mis and disinformation have enveloped the world. The clickbait headlines, false information creates users' interest, which could be hazardous for public health. Achim Steiner(UNDP Administrator) said that the hoaxes are not only "undermining the effectiveness of public health measures, but also leading to real-life violence and discrimination, confusion, fear and, arguably, long-term societal harm." The potential of misinformation is dangerous, a study by Reuters Institute noted that the commonly shared misinformation is about the policies and steps taken by public authorities regarding COVID-19. The report revealed that "in the absence of sufficient information, misinformation about these topics may fill in gaps in public understanding, and those distrustful of their government or political elites may be disinclined to trust official communications on these matters."For example: A news on Whatsapp anticipating the lockdown in Delhi(A State in India), caused confusion, overcrowded markets, rush at the border to escape from the city. The news circulated

before the government's order caused chaos and distress among the people disrupting the government's aim to contain the pandemic and rise in contagion. Thus, it is imperative to research how people consume, react to the information, and affect their behavior.

FAKE NEWS

Social Media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter provide unprecedented information, creating a new information environment, which gives space for rumors and misinformation. The phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers further enhances the exposure of the same information over and over again. Social perceptions and narrative construction further impacts the policy-making and thus strengthening public debates. The controversial messages spread like wildfire, people tend to accept the information in line with their ideology and perception giving rise to a polarised society. The theory of cognitive dissonance proves true in the information era, where people reject the information that gives discomfort and is against their ideology. The consumption of information from similar viewpoints lines up misinformation and disinformation. Previous studies prove that fake news and manipulated information spreads faster than accurate information and factual information. Derakhshan and Wardle(2017) divided the information disorder into three parts: Mal-information, dis-information, and misinformation. Mal-information is the sharing of information regarding an actual incident or story but with the motive of harming a specific person, community or government. Dis-information is the intended and purposive escalation of false information, whereas misinformation is the unintentional dissemination of false news, in which the sender is not aware of the news genuineness. The researchers found more than 2300 fake news stories leading to Infodemic in different countries, namely India, USA, Spain, Indonesia, and Brazil, in about 25 languages.

During the lockdown, the most spread rumor was regarding coronavirus illness, transference, the death toll and how to control this pandemic. The misinformation also focused on improving immunity through miracle syrups and treatments such as cow urine and alcohol in India, camel urine with lime in Saudi Arabia. Some of the myths turned out to be harmful when consuming concentrated alcohol to kill the virus took around 800 deaths in Iran. In India also the myth of having Datura known as thornapples or devil's trumpets as a cure for coronavirus took 12 lives, including five children. The past research reflected that the pandemic saw various stigmas and blames rising related to COVID-19, especially in Asian countries. A few conspiracy theories claim that the virus is produced by the Chinese as a bioweapon to control the population. This kind of harmful messages can impact the individuals lives heavily and on the community as a whole. The stigma attached with coronavirus can delay getting proper medical care, which can intern increase community transference. Thus, media literacy among people will help identify the false messages, eliminate conspiracy theories, and contribute to society to debunk rumors and create awareness through social media platforms.

MEDIA LITERACY

"A media literate person – and everyone should have the opportunity to become one – can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is a critical autonomy relationship to all media. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence." (Aufderheide, 1992). "Media Literacy is a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter."(Potter,2011)

Different scholars elucidate media Literacy at various times. The process of critical thinking, accessing and developing the different products of media and its content. (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999). Media Literacy is a trans-disciplinary concept focussing on four crucial concepts which Renee Hobbs highlights: Media Literacy is a technique to a) counter the harmful results of media messages b) to counter the dominance of mass media c) to recognize the construction and structure of media messages d) acknowledging media for creating and consuming media messages. These four contribute to the 'Great Debates' of this field. (Hobbs, 1998). The Leadership conference scheduled at Aspen Institute in 1992 discussed the different concepts of media literacy. The scholars, academicians, and practitioners worldwide decided on five key concepts: 1) All media messages are manufactured 2) Messages in media make use of different genres and specific codes and conventions. 3) Messages in media are interpreted by people differently. 4) The messages have ingrained beliefs and points of view 5) Media messages practice a more substantial influence on people's attitudes and behavior as they have political, economic, and social power. Inclusion to these five concepts, NAMLE (National Association for Media Literacy) also explained Media Literacy (2007) as the expansion of literacy meaning including all forms of media, it requires critical thinking of media messages along with active inquiry, it is a skill which reinforces and builds the learners ability.

Factshala of India media literacy network shared some pointers to take care of while spotting fake news:

1. Check the URL of the website: is it strange or matches the credible source of news. The real news source should match the credible news network.
2. Read the headline carefully: the fake story has a headline full of dramatic words and does not match the story. The real news has an accurate headline and supports the story's content.
3. Check the article properly for its date and time. The article is real when it has proper byline, date, author and is linked for further information. The fake article will not have a date and author's name on it.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Scotland emphasized the importance of critical thinking and suggested eight simple steps to spot the fake news: a) Consider the source (click the story and check the source) b) Read Beyond: Headlines are outrageous to invite clicks. c) Check the author(it is a credible source) d) Check the date e) Is it a Joke? (It might be a satire) f) Check biases (our own beliefs could affect the judgment) g) Information supporting the story h) Check with an expert.

It is significant to note that media literacy emphasizes critical thinking, which is different from cynicism. Being skeptical of the news story and judging it from all aspects is being critical.

YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Prensky(2005) termed the Youth as digital natives as they are the technology's early adopters. ICT interwoven in their lives, they are aware of the digital language, culture and adopting changing technology quickly. The act of doom scrolling in times of COVID-19 lockdown has significant implications on Youth's lives. In a study about social media and teens, Pew research revealed that almost 97 percent of teens use social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, and almost 45% of them were active the whole day. Social media reap benefits for teens, such as building their identities, communication and a social structure. It gives them a sense of togetherness and makes them overcome loneliness. It helps them in painting good relations with their friends and helps them keep updated about the latest happenings and keep them entertained. Social media breaks all the geographical barriers to maintain good rapport with peers. Social media posting so many benefits for Youth does affect them negatively—the ill-effects target on their mental health, sleep disorders, studies and bullying. A study in the USA in 2019 on social media usage among Youth revealed that Youth having more than three hours of social media exposure are at higher risk for mental illness. In England, a similar study conducted divulges that using social media platforms more than three times a day depicts poor mental health and well-being. The problems like depression, insomnia, anxiety in Youth are all by-products of pervasive social media. A famous saying goes that 'Mindless scrolling is the new smoking.' Doctors, professionals, and experts suggest that promoting media literacy among Youth is the antidote to protect themselves from social media platforms' ill effects. The study adopts youth as the segment of study because it is the stage of intensive development and there is a strong motivation to find out information on some topics, a stage of developing information in a detailed form such as politics, sports and entertainment. Media Literacy among this segment will equip them with high awareness of utility of information and also quick processing of useful information.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to find the Youth's exposure to online news on social media platforms. It aspires to find the role of media literacy in COVID-19 times. The information flood on social media platforms in COVID-19 times has made it imperative for the Youth to be media literate to safeguard the democracy of the country.

Objectives: a) To determine the rate of change in news consumption on social media networks by Youth. b) To know that Youth can distinguish between fake news and trustworthy news. c) To analyze whether the Youth are undergoing mindful exposure while consuming news on social media networks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is interdisciplinary, involving various disciplines such as social sciences, communication studies, journalism studies, and information communication technology. The descriptive cum exploratory research design was used to analyze media literacy's importance amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Research design provides a broad framework for the research activity. Descriptive cum exploratory research design helped in formulating the problem for clear analysis and describe the characteristics and function of the variables related to the problem. The Quantitative approach was adopted towards the research work for which the survey method is used. The survey method helps in investigating the problem clearly and carefully. The Area of study is the Delhi NCR region, India. The universe of study is Youth aged between 15-25 years of age. The sample size is 250 students studying in different schools and colleges using digital media for news consumption. The sampling technique used is the random proportionate sampling in which boys and girls were equal in number. Due to the restrictions and limitations of COVID-19 the survey was done online. The time period of the study was six months from April to October 2020. The responses were accessed through a well-detailed questionnaire containing mixed questions of open-ended, close-ended and Likert scale questions. Data Collection is done by both the methods primary and secondary.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Measures in the study include exposure to the social media networks during the pandemic and a comparison with the time spent before the pandemic, the preference of social media networks for reading news, the encounter to fake news and perception towards media literacy.

Exposure to social media networks includes the time spend on these networks. Respondents were asked to tick the correct option for the total time spent on the SMPs(Social Media Platforms) before the lockdown and after the lockdown. This question was constructed to analyse the total time spent and ascertain the reason for the exposure. The analysis divulges that the exposure increased up-to two hours per day as compared before lockdown. The questions posing the purpose for usage of social media networks, the respondents were asked from the various purposes such as for entertainment, socializing, political, information or any other reason. The respondents replied mainly for entrainment (67%), socializing (75%) and for information purposes (68%). The respondents intervened for the preference of platforms for news consumption; it was found that Instagram(60 percent) followed by Facebook, Twitter, and then WhatsApp. When asked about the fake news, the respondents agreed that they had encounter fake news on SMPs during pandemic, which creates confusion and has also forwarded the fake news, sometimes anticipating as truthful news. It seems complicated for the sample to identify the difference between fake and genuine news. The 43 percent of respondents believe that Facebook is prone to fake news, whereas 21 percent go for Twitter and WhatsApp to disseminate false information.

For identifying media literacy skills, respondents were asked questions on a Likert scale where they have to answer strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree and strongly agree. Questions related to media literacy like knowledge about the media organizations, awareness of personal objectives while using social media networks, and mindful thought processing while consuming news were asked and analysed. Potter (2011) A media literate person is aware of the personal locus which is comprised of goals and drives, which means less mindless exposure to media and active usage. The knowledge structure is measured in five area: media effects, media content, media industries, real world and self. A well developed knowledge structure enables to make sense of the news media messages and gives more confidence. Respondents strongly agree that it is important to check the news source's credibility before sharing the news article whereas they strongly disagree that if the headline sounds interesting, then its an authentic news story. The respondents also agree that the spread of fake news creates confusion about recent events' facts. The respondents were given pictures of real and fake news, in which they were asked to identify the fake news. Sixty-five percent could spot the fake news and find the difference between fake news and real news.

Thus, the present study discusses a surge in news utilization on social media networks by Youth. They were majorly dependent upon Instagram, Instagram and Youtube for their news consumption. The consumption of news through social media platforms rose up to 2 hrs per day during the pandemic. The false information was also sometimes believed it to be true. It was found that media literate people were able to analyze the fake news and undergo critical thinking before sharing the news and believing it to be true. There is a need to create more awareness about media literacy to not fall prey to the false information circulated.

CONCLUSION

The burgeoning technology makes critical thinking and creative skills indispensable. The skills are essential not only for the individuals who have problem solving or creative skills but also for the mass society living in a democracy dealing with changing and tangled situations. Media literacy skills, particularly critical thinking, has been an agenda for many academicians to include in the curriculum. The emphasis should be less on memorizing and more on producing a knowledge-based society. Ennis(1998) Media Literacy has metacognitive skills that focus on studying and examining the media messages, which helps develop an individual's reflective ability. Gordon(1995) complementing the thought that individual must develop independent critical thinking while exposing oneself to the mass media. Through developed media literacy skills, society can fight through Infodemic or any future situations involving information disorder enabling them to be reflective critical thinkers.

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