Research article

Exploring the Alt News Phenomenon: A Case Study of One of India's Most Prominent Fact-Checking Campaigns

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Abstract

The AI-powered digital revolution of the 21st-century world has greatly exacerbated the problem of fake news, which has been a menace to humankind since ancient times. Misinformation and disinformation have infiltrated every sphere of contemporary human life, causing immense damage in the social, political and economic arenas. In this context, various humanities and social sciences disciplines have taken up the challenge of combating fake news. Numerous studies have found that instead of mere damage control, preventive education against fake news proves to be much more effective (for instance, Nolan Higdon's *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education,* 2020). This paper presents an analytical case study of Alt News, one of India's most prominent fact-checking and anti-fake news campaigns. Its co-founders were nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize for their courageous journalism in the face of tremendous political pressure. Interestingly, Alt News has initiated a media and digital literacy campaign by harnessing various humanities and social sciences disciplines, starting with curricular interventions in schools and colleges. While performing a SWOT analysis of Alt News, this paper seeks to highlight interdisciplinary humanities and social science educational initiatives that can help control and potentially end the fake news phenomenon.

Keywords: fake news, fact-checking, media/digital literacy, Alt News, combating fake news in India, critical humanities and social science education

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS — 4 QUALITY EDUCATION | 5 GENDER EQUALITY | 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES | 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | 13 CLIMATE ACTION | 15 LIFE ON LAND | 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

1. Introduction and Review of Literature

1.1. Fake News: An Overview

'Fake news' or 'information disorder' is widely held to include various phenomena, such as: a) misinformation or ignorant forwarding of incorrect information; b) disinformation or deliberate spread of malicious content or propaganda; and c) malinformation or sensationalisation of genuine news items to cause harm or divert attention. Fake news has been used since times immemorial to defame individuals, advocate unethical movements and attack minority groups (Weir, 2009; Kaminska, 2017; O'Brien, 2017; Soll, 2016). All through the Second World War, Axis and Allied Powers used fake news to target each other viciously (Little, 2016; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org). The 21st century AI-powered social media blitzkrieg has led to unprecedented domination and damage by fake news across all spheres of life (Himma-Kadakas, 2017; Borney, 2018). Deepfakes, shallow fakes, personalised news, bots, and trolling are used to manipulate minds and to serve vested political, economic and social interests.

Fake news is one of the major characteristics of a post-truth society wherein people cannot agree on the existence of even basic facts (Holan, 2016). According to UNESCO (2018), it can be traced to the loss of credibility of traditional press and media, low levels of critical thinking and news literacy, and the proliferation of social media outlets masquerading as credible news sources (see Figure 1). According to Statista.com, globally, on average, over 40% of citizens have consumed fake news related to elections, COVID-19, and international conflicts such as the Ukraine war and climate change (Watson, 2024). Further, "Identifying fake news is made more difficult by the fact that it is rapidly becoming an industry of its own, with individuals paid to write sensationalist stories and create clickbait content to increase site traffic" (Watson, 2023).
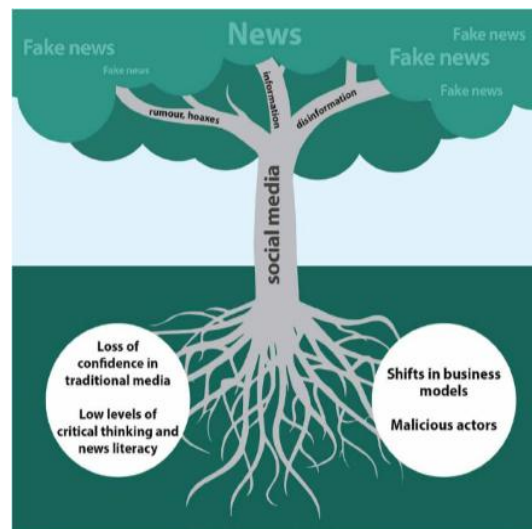

Figure 1: Rise of Fake News (Source: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2017/2018*, UNESCO, p. 202)*

1.2. Combating Fake News

Since disinformation boosts dictatorial and divisive tendencies, countering disinformation is essential to the survival of free societies. According to Tim Berners Lee, the founder of the World

Wide Web, fake news is one of the foremost issues to be resolved if the internet is to be of real service to humanity (Swartz, 2017). To quote from a Time Magazine report, the effects of fake news range from manipulation of elections to anti-vaccination campaigns, Holocaust denial, and mob violence (Steinmetz, 2018).

Anti-fake news strategies may be directed at its sources, media, or recipients. Among the most common strategies are legislative fact-checking measures. However, "Spanning from Brazil to South Korea, these (government) efforts raise questions about infringing free speech guarantees and are frequently victims of uncertainty" (Funke & Flamini, 2024).

Hence, it is necessary to focus on fake news recipients. Contemporary information overload leads busy consumers to accept fake news that matches their prior belief systems without any critical thought or verification (confirmation bias phenomenon). Numerous studies have found that preventive critical humanistic/social sciences education against fake news is much more effective instead of mere damage control (Higdon, 2020). Therefore, media and digital literacy/inoculation campaigns focusing on prebunking fake news have emerged as the most reasonable alternative. Such preventive strategies provide intellectual tools to the general public, equipping them to counter fake news without external assistance. These tools focus on training the public to question the manner of information gathering, sources of information, and the evidence of its validity. For instance, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), established in 2015, provides training in fake news detection (see Figure 2) via global collaborations (IFCN, 2024).
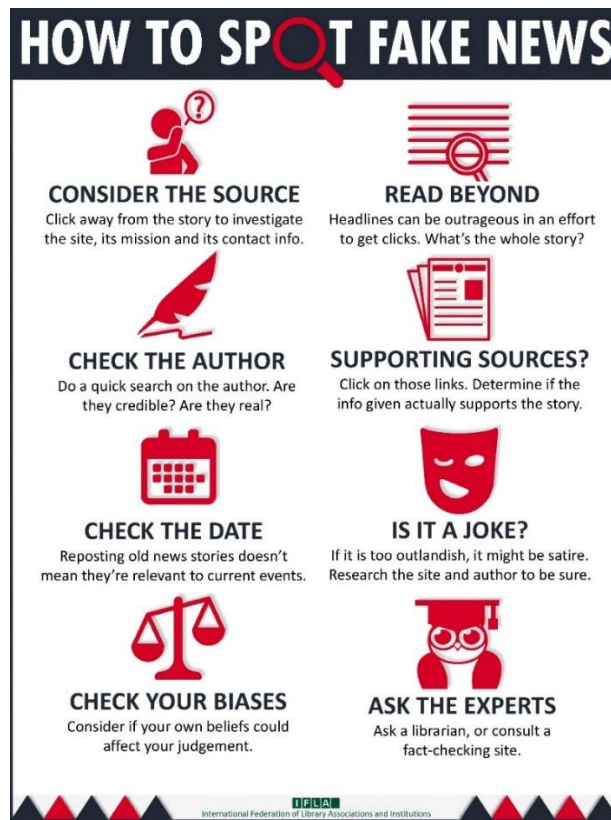

Figure 2: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Infographic

(Source: https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/files/2017/01/How-to-Spot-Fake-News-1.jpg)

1.3 The Fake News Scenario in India

India faces an unprecedented fake news crisis today, adversely affecting various spheres ranging from politics and national security to social harmony and health. A 2019 Microsoft survey revealed that 64% of Indians had encountered fake news online as against the global average of 57% (Morris, 2019). According to a 2021 Sage study, over a year and a half into the pandemic, India emerged as the biggest global source of COVID-19 misinformation (Banerjee, 2021).

Several factors are responsible for the aforementioned. The Indian journalistic apparatus is extremely vulnerable to fake news. With a lack of proper training, political and economic pressures from corporate owners/ruling classes, commercialisation/privatisation, tight deadlines, and meagre resources, Indian journalists are saddled with myriad responsibilities and restrictions. From being a watchdog of democracy, the Indian media has become a stooge of the powerful, often negatively influencing elections. A BBC study involving 16,000 Twitter accounts and 3,000 Facebook pages revealed that hyper-nationalism and a tendency to promote 'right-wing/Hindutva' nationalistic ideologies were among the prime causes for the rampant creation and spread of fake news in India (Gill, 2018).

According to a Poynter news report, "Given the sheer number of internet users (825.30 million) and poor digital literacy rate (virtually non-existent among more than 90% of India's population), verifying all the misinformation rampant on social media is a mammoth task. The diversity of language, culture and politics in India only makes the task more difficult…Reporters Without Borders designated India as 'one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists trying to do their job properly'. India ranked 161 among 180 countries on the 2023 World Press Freedom Index" (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023).

The fake news phenomenon has far-reaching repercussions for India. According to the Digital News Report 2023 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Indian media companies are facing declining interest in news, lower trust, and falling revenues. "India…holds the global top spot for the highest number of internet shutdowns… Conservative estimates place losses incurred by the Indian economy in 2019 alone at $1.3 billion at the least…" (Shahi, 2020). Apart from internet blackouts constituting a blatant violation of human rights, online fake news propaganda has incited hatred, violence and rioting, as well as manipulation of electoral processes.

1.4 Combating Fake News in India

Efforts to combat fake news in India may be broadly classified as follows: a) legislation, b) fact-checking, and c) education.

Legislation against fake news in India is a welcome measure but risks entering the dangerous terrain of censorship. The proposed Digital India Act (DIA) 2023 aims to create a highly accountable digital environment. However, many, including the Editors Guild of India (EGI) (Al-Jazeera, 2023; Dayal/Reuters, 2023) and the Indian Newspaper Society (INS) (FE Bureau, 2023) are very apprehensive about the DIA's impact on press freedom and the rights of marginalised groups. It has been suggested that the government should involve the IFCN and issue a White Paper on setting up an autonomous fact-checking authority (Dhawan, 2023).

Second, India does have several less-known fact-checking initiatives: Fact Checker, Alt News, Boom, News Mobile and Sach Bolo, Pls. According to Baybars Orsek, former IFCN director, "… 72

per cent of Indians are more likely to trust a social media platform that employs fact-checking, compared to 52 per cent in the US and under 39 per cent in the UK… The country boasts the world's largest fact-checking community, operating across languages and different media" (Orsek, 2023).

However, ground realities differ. Ravish Kumar, one of India's most respected journalists, has castigated mainstream news anchors and correspondents for becoming the flag-bearers of fake news under pressure from political elites. Fact-checking websites and alternative media have made a brave attempt to remedy this situation, but only a few of them, such as Alt News, have survived political threats and resource crunches (Kumar, 2019).

Therefore, the least-used education-based approach seems to be the most effective. It involves high-quality, interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences education to promote media and digital literacy. Such education promotes long-term memory, cognitive development and emotional intelligence (Dolan, 2023; Padovano & Mille, 2023; Shephard et al., 2023). Evidently, digital/media literacy, along with intelligent and balanced use of legislation, social support, financial resources and AI to support human fact-checking, can lead to effective combating of fake news in India, as seen in the case of Alt News.

1.4.1 Alt News

Alt News is a not-for-profit, crowd-funded fact-checking website founded by Pratik Sinha and Mohammed Zubair — software engineers without a journalistic education and from widely varied backgrounds, but sharing a deep social consciousness. Since its inception in 2017, Alt News has busted over 4000 fake news items.

Pratik Sinha, an NRI telecommunications engineer, the son of the late Mukul Sinha and Nirjhari Sinha, renowned social activists from Gujarat, returned to Gujarat in 2013 as his father Mukul Sinha lay dying of cancer. During 2013-2014, Pratik helped his father run the 'Truth of Gujarat' website to bust disinformation and propaganda in Gujarat. In 2016, this website famously covered the Una rally for Dalit rights. Pratik Sinha's initiation into fact-checking coincided with the Indian digital revolution that gave a tremendous push to fake news at a time when Indian journalism courses did not include fact-checking training (Datta, 2022; Varma, 2019). To quote Pratik Sinha,

> …Alt News was born in a room in Ahmedabad in February 2017 with the primary focus of fighting disinformation propagated in the Indian social media as well as the mainstream media ecosystem. One of our earliest fact-checks showed how a grisly video of a young woman who was burnt alive for allegedly shooting a taxi driver in Guatemala was being circulated claiming her to be a Hindu Marwadi woman burnt in India by Muslims. Since then, we have penned over 1,000 articles and debunked and documented the most viral myths in India. …Among the present websites in India that are dedicated to the cause of fact-checking, Alt News attracts the most amount of web traffic (Sinha, 2019).

In 2019, Pratik Sinha co-authored the book 'India Misinformed: The True Story', which aims to identify the prime movers of fabricated news, expose the propaganda machinery, and familiarise readers with techniques to detect fake news. To quote Ravish Kumar, one of India's most renowned journalists,

Newspapers the world over were engaged in countering fake news but in India, this person was fighting alone. Today, Pratik has become a fact-checker for the media. Media has outsourced the fight against fake news (Kumar, 2019).

1.5 Rationale, Aims and Objectives of the Study

Given the context, the Indian state and civil society must create a transparent, self-regulatory framework, together enabling the utilisation of India's fact-checking community to: a) ensure timely access to accurate information, b) actively attack fake news, and most importantly, c) offer training in media literacy and critical thinking to the public. An extensive literature review (2020) revealed that studies on the significance/use of information literacy and critical thinking in combating fake news were extremely scarce: "...Since the increase in awareness of fake news in 2016, there has been an increase in academic focus on the subject, with most of the articles published between 2017 and 2018. Fifty per cent of the articles released focused on the subject of fake news, with 18% reflecting on information literacy and only 13% on critical thinking" (Machete & Turpin, 2020). In the Indian context, studies on and public awareness about fact-checking initiatives and media/digital literacy initiatives (critical humanities and social sciences) are extremely sparse (Basuroy, 2023).

To address this major gap in knowledge, this paper aims to present a qualitative case-study-based analysis of Alt News. One of India's most prominent anti-fake news initiatives, its founders were nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize for their courageous journalism despite tremendous political pressure (New Indian Express, 2022; Outlook, 2022). Interestingly, Alt News has initiated a media/digital literacy campaign by harnessing various humanities and social sciences disciplines, starting with curricular interventions in schools and colleges. This paper, while performing a SWOT analysis of Alt News, seeks to highlight interdisciplinary humanities and social science educational initiatives that can help curb and potentially end the fake news phenomenon with specific reference to India.

2. Methodology

The qualitative case study method has been used to study Alt News. Extensive literature review, especially media coverage of Alt News, close observation of the functioning of its offices, and interviews/discussions with stakeholders have been utilised. The paper critically analyses the origins, policies, structure, funding, operations, website, existing track record, reach and impact, and overall reception of Alt News.

Further, the Information Disorder Framework has been used to analyse the functioning of Alt News (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Accordingly, a comparative analysis of the work and impact of Alt News has been carried out, vis-a-vis other fact-checking platforms and initiatives across the globe. This information has been used for a SWOT analysis of Alt News, with a special focus on its digital/media literacy work involving humanities and social sciences education.

3. Findings

3.1 Alt News: Structure and Operations

Alt News is essentially a not-for-profit, crowd-funded fact-checking website operating under the aegis of the Pravda Media Foundation. Fact-checks by Alt News encompass political fact-checking, social media rumours and mainstream media. Alt News operates via Facebook and Twitter in English and Hindi, Instagram, YouTube and a mobile app (Alt News website).

Pravda Media Foundation is headed by scientist-turned-noted social activist and founder of the Jan Sangharsh Manch, Nirjhari Sinha. Alt News, co-founded by Pratik Sinha (editor) and Mohammed Zubair (manager), operates with a close-knit, experienced and dynamic team of ten members consisting of "engineers, social activists, journalists and scientists" capable of covering news from diverse domains (Alt News website).

The editorial policy of Alt News declares it to be politically non-partisan, committed to evidence-backed fact-checking, and fully transparent. Transparency and education are ensured by explaining in detail how each false claim was debunked. Further, Alt News constantly targets hate-mongering through its UnHate campaign launched in 2022 (Alt News website). A five-step methodology (Alt News website) is used by Alt News to debunk fake news. It involves the following steps:

1. Alt News continuously follows social and mainstream media news for selecting a news item to debunk. Selection of news items for debunking is based on the following parameters: a) How viral is the claim (extent, reach and spread); b) Source of the claim (Who shared it? A prominent politician? A verified account?); and c) Nature of the claim (Is it provocative? Can it lead to violence or physical harm to individuals?).

2. The second step involves researching the selected news item and debunking it, using one or more of the following procedures: use of Google Reverse Image search, internet search using various search filters, establishing contact with the local authorities or, reviewing original video or transcript, referring to primary data or official data source/s, contacting the person to whom a seemingly fake claim is attributed, and consulting reputed subject matter experts where necessary.

3. Using one or more methods described above, the veracity of a claim is evaluated, and a final decision about debunking is made.

4. Next, the fact-check is written in simple, reader-friendly language, explaining the debunking process and providing links to reliable websites for verification. No conclusive judgment is passed unless all adequate information/facts have been gathered and verified.

5. Fact-checking articles are promptly and constantly updated to reflect accurate information with readers encouraged to submit potential corrections. The privacy of visitors to the Alt News website is safeguarded.

Alt News has a transparent funding policy. It accepts contributions from individuals/entities with verified Indian bank accounts, through online portals/cheques/demand drafts only, or only through subscriptions/pledges. It does not accept donations in cash, in non-Indian currencies or from foreign bank accounts. All financial accounts/details are regularly updated on the website.

3.2 Impact of Alt News

The Alt News team, with its international, multi-domain expertise, seems to have a keen understanding of the Indian fake news scenario. Most fake news in India is directed towards villainising minority groups, and the lack of internal knowledge systems about how mass media narratives are shaped leads to mass duping (author's interview with Alt News, 2023). With a small team and limited funding, their focus lies on a bigger impact through selective and consistently high-quality work ("Chat with Alka Dhupkar on the issue of misinformation and Alt News", YouTube).

The Alt News website (altnews.in) is user-friendly and available across various social media and mobile platforms. Additionally, Alt News operates in both Hindi and English, ensuring a wider grassroots reach. The fact-checking articles are written in a jargon-free style, with the process of fact-checking explained and giving scope for readers to engage in autonomous fact-checking. According to the New York Times, Alt News had drawn 80 million pageviews on its website by 2022 (Raj, 2022). By and large, the track record of Alt News reflects an adherence to the Information Disorder Framework. Accordingly, Alt News pays close attention to several facets of the information ecosystem: originator/agents of fake news, motives behind the fake news, the fake news message/content, modus operandi of fake news transmission, targets of fake news and interpreters/consumers of fake news (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). For instance, a fact-check article by Alt News debunks fake infographics related to the 2024 Indian general elections, with specific reference to the state of Andhra Pradesh (Das, 2024). Alt News regularly targets extremists, imposters, scamsters, opposition as well as ruling parties, apart from special feature articles targeting one major viral fake news item of the week or month.

Alt News has successfully attacked the following major categories of fake news, as seen on the Alt News Website and comprehensively covered in the volume 'India Misinformed: The True Story' (2019).

1. Creation of Communal Conflicts – This is an area wherein top national newspapers and news channels/agencies have fallen prey to fake news. Examples include Muslims in Karnataka and West Bengal being blamed for killings of Hindus using morphed pictures and videos from film shootings and past accident sites; morphed videos falsely suggesting shouting of pro-Pakistan slogans by certain communities; morphed videos and images with false claims related to 'love jihad'; inflation of statistics related to numbers of Rohingya refugees (4000 inflated to 11 crores) and Bangladeshi immigrants (30 lakhs inflated to 8 crores) in India. In 2021, Alt News debunked fake claims of an anti-Hindu genocide during the West Bengal elections, by revealing that the video clips used to support this false news were from Bangladesh and not India (facebook.com/altnews.in/videos/3022041458110740/).

2. Glorification of Ruling Leaders – Thousands of webpages and social media sites are dedicated to falsely glorifying those in power using false quotes, fictitious news stories, and falsely labelled or morphed pictures and videos.

3. Maligning Opposition Parties – Again, hundreds of websites and online/offline media platforms specialise in presenting Indian opposition parties and leaders as anti-national or being communally biased.

4. Attacks on Political Leaders and Prominent Personalities – Cutting across party lines, political parties and their supporters deliberately create hundreds of fake news stories, morphed video clips and photoshopped images targeting rivals. This is mainly done through fake Twitter accounts. Alt News has exposed the falsity of several attacks on the Indian Prime Minister.

5. False Historical Claims – One of the major tools used for manipulating and polarising citizens is the falsification of history and maligning of historical figures. There has been a systematic attempt to cater to extremist right-wing ideologies across religious groups and to weaken the secular fabric of Indian society, especially through fake infographics (Sinha et al., 2019).

6. Miscellaneous Items – These include fake news related to the Indian army; child abduction rumours; science, technology and health-related misinformation; and COVID-19 fake news. For instance, during 2021, Alt News exposed that morphed videos shot in Germany were used to malign protesting Indian farmers as being anti-national (facebook.com/altnews.in/videos/3022041458110740/).

The independent, transparent financial model adopted by Alt News is its USP. Unlike most other fact-checking websites, Alt News does not face commercial pressure from sponsors/donors: it is free to pursue all kinds of stories, from hardcore politics to hate speeches and violence (author's interview with Alt News, 2023). Also, the small, continued donations from committed individuals constitute the core sustenance of Alt News and intimidate its opponents, according to Pratik Sinha (Raj, 2022).

Alt News uses appropriate technology/approaches for debunking viral fake news, such as CrowdTangle for Facebook and TweetDeck for Twitter, while ensuring that non-viral fake news does not garner attention (Dhara, 2019). The Alt News App allows users to submit material for verification, elevating them from passive recipients to truth-seekers (Faleiro, 2021).

The systematic and scientific approach followed by Alt News since 2017 has paid off in the long run. They have transitioned from active to passive monitoring since the team receives thousands of fact-checking requests each day. In response, the most viral fake news items are selected and debunked ("Chat with Alka Dhupkar on the issue of misinformation and Alt News", YouTube). Several alternative Indian media sites have either linked up with or quoted Alt News and published its fact-check articles (thewire.in/byline/alt-news-desk; newslaundry.com/author/alt-news). It has been observed that "...Some of the websites they unmasked as right-wing misinformation have shut down (altnews.in/sex-hindutva-social-media-partnerships-secret-insistpost-coms-astounding-success/). In one instance, the government had to investigate an image posted by the Home Ministry after Alt News debunked its premise (ndtv.com/india-news/home-ministry-report-on-border-floodlighting-shows-spain-morocco-border). The mainstream media sometimes carries Alt News's fact-checks, as though to compensate for its own failures" (Faleiro, 2021). The persistence and sincerity of Alt News has been lauded by alternative

media sites such as Caravan and Boom (Raj, 2022) and former CEO of Prasar Bharati Jawahar Sircar (Sircar, 2023).

3.3 Alt News: Educational Initiatives

While the public has been given tools to consume information, it has not been given the tools to differentiate between true and false information, especially in India. Critical thinking (logical analysis and evaluation) developed via humanities and social sciences education is one of the most crucial tools to combat fake news.

According to Bronstein et al. (2019), critical thinking can curb religious fundamentalism and dogmatism that motivate forwarding fake news without verification. Further, training in critical thinking is crucial as both the content and the rhetorical structure of fake news, as well as deepfake technology, challenge the basic ways in which humans process reality (Beisecker et al., 2022). Social media has hampered critical thinking by making it easy and fashionable to access information without verification as opposed to traditional information-gathering, which consumes time and effort. An extensive study (2018) of Twitter posts from 2006 to 2017 by MIT scholars revealed that false news was 70 per cent more extensively re-tweeted by humans (not bots), thanks to its novelty element. Therefore, behavioural interventions centred on reflective reading have become as important as technological interventions in curbing fake news (Dizikes, 2018).

Further, according to several studies, information literacy based on critical thinking is a crucial life skill. Rose-Wiles (2018) opined that educational institutions had a key role to play in inculcating information literacy and critical thinking skills among students. Media literacy education should not be a quick-fix solution; instead, it should seek to strengthen audiences' cultural competencies, social skills, and knowledge bases (Buckingham, 2015). To quote the UN Secretary-General, states should "invest in education systems that further critical thinking about media and information, and digital literacy … through collaborative efforts with civil society and academia…" (UN Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly, 2022).

In their book 'History in a Post-Truth World: Theory and Praxis' (2020), Gudonis and Jones opined that we might waste too much time countering symptoms such as fake news rather than striking at the roots. In this context, Pratik Sinha of Alt News accused powerful media players of failing to develop even one effective app for consumers to detect fake news since it might harm vested interests and sensationalism-powered business models. Instead, the state has sought to hide behind futile anti-fake-news legislation ("Chat with Alka Dhupkar on the issue of misinformation and Alt News", YouTube). According to Sinha, the ability to authenticate information is a life skill that must be inculcated in every citizen (Datta, 2022).

Further, education that encourages critical thinking has become crucial for India today. Citizens, and often journalists too, especially in rural areas, lack the education required to process the information bombardment in an increasingly religious/polarised society where even the most crucial national security-related news is part of highly controlled narratives (Meet the Fake News Fighter, Brut, facebook.com/brutindia/videos/2252796721549937/). In such a scenario, only an educated civil society, in its capacity as consumer, can pressurise governments, mainstream press and media, and politically-backed social media giants to control the fake news pandemic.

Therefore, Alt News seeks to bring together a diverse group of supporters from various backgrounds, both urban and rural, and offer them training to combat fake news on a larger scale (author's interview with Alt News, 2023; Varma, 2019). The Alt News team has chosen to start its work in certain conducive regions of the country: Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal, given that most of the Indian population is unaware of fact-checking and information literacy. The plan is to train and equip small groups of volunteers who can spread media literacy within their communities much faster than slow-moving educational types of machinery (Datta, 2022).

In co-operation with the Nabadisha Community Centre in Kolkata in 2023, AltEd, the educational wing of Alt News organised a two-month long activity-based training programme designed to develop knowledge, mindset, and skills in media literacy amongst youngsters by harnessing critical thinking (see poster in Figure 3). Thirty children between the ages of 12-14 were trained here. A pre-pilot was also held at Batanagar Boys High School in February 2023, and about 30 children from Class IX participated. Also, AltED held focus group discussions with children between 12 and 14 years old in about five schools, including both private schools and state-run schools in Kolkata and adjoining districts. The children were taught about the concept of fake news and media biases while being trained to detect fake news. Subsequently, the children demonstrated their skills at an exhibition. Pratik Sinha opined that they planned to target children in this age group just before they started using smartphones (Singh, 2023).
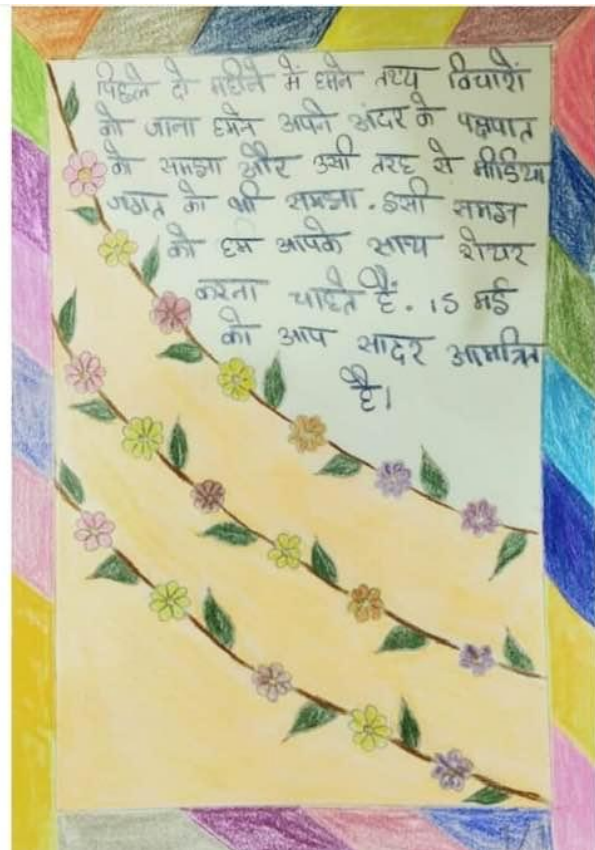

Figure 3: AltEd Poster

(Source: Singh, 2023)

3.4 Challenges Facing Alt News

According to Pratik Sinha, one of the biggest challenges facing Alt News is the political patronage of fake news and religious polarisation, as well as the animosity from government agencies (Sinha et al., 2019; Chat with Alka Dhupkar on the issue of misinformation and Alt News, YouTube). The coalition of 14 fact-checking agencies, officially approved by the Indian government, excludes Alt News and IFCN (Deep, 2023).

Alt News has also angered right-wing extremist elements despite the non-partisan approach of its articles. The physical safety of the team members and their families is a significant challenge. Both Pratik Sinha and Mohammed Zubair face death threats and expect to be arrested any time. The website's communication servers have been shifted to Europe, where data protection laws are stronger (Faleiro, 2021). Both the Alt News founders have been massively trolled as being pro-Islamist, pro-left-wing and anti-national (Organiser Web Desk, 2023; Parashar, 2023). In June 2022, Mohammad Zubair was arrested on fictitious charges of receiving foreign funding for hate speeches, thanks to his expose of a hate speech video. He was released only in July 2022, after all charges were proved false (Dhillon/ The Guardian, 2022; Economic Times, 2023; Joy/Deccan Herald, 2022). The team's mental well-being is also a major concern. Team members not only face hate and constant trolling but are also exposed to violent, gruesome, or toxic content for long hours. The team tries to rejuvenate itself through modest team picnics or outings (author's interview with Alt News, 2023).

Another major challenge is funding. Following the exhaustion of major grants in 2021, Alt News depends on crowd-funding. The team constantly organises donation appeals to raise salaries and resources. People are often unwilling to donate, mostly because they fear being penalised by powerful elites. Every donation to Alt News is constantly under the scanners of various state agencies (author's interview with Alt News, 2023).

One more obstacle is the lack of manpower and resources. Despite the efforts of fact-checkers and the messaging limits imposed by WhatsApp, it becomes very difficult to catch up with thousands of Indian political party workers who are trained and incentivised to spread propaganda online (Perrigo, 2019) continually. Yet, Alt News is aware that

> ...the ambit of their already considerable responsibilities had extended to keeping Indian social media safe. Tech companies worth many billions of dollars had in effect outsourced their responsibility to a tiny group of people. (Faleiro, 2021)

There is also a lack of cooperation from social media giants. To quote Pratik Sinha,

> We cannot stop bad actors from pushing out misinformation, you can only control the velocity—that is where social-media platforms come into the picture.... For example, (Facebook) has algorithms which recognise copyright infringement in videos and images. ... the same technology that it needs to use (to fight fake news) (Dhara, 2019).

However, social media giants present a different version. Facebook claimed that from 2016 onwards, it has used third-party fact-checkers and AI to control fake news (Chowdhry, 2017). In 2018, Google launched the Google News Initiative (GNI) to fight the spread of fake news (Locklear, 2018). Further, Google has introduced the About This Result feature, FactShala, and the GNI Fact Check Academy (Indian Express Tech Desk, 2023).

Further, it has been pointed out that the Alt News team does not consist of professional journalists. Nevertheless, their work quality and social outreach are more important. As per the UNESCO Handbook for Journalism Education and Training (2018): "...'crowd-sourcing' is essential if media are to uncover and report on beneath-the-radar disinformation..."

3.5 Alt News: Opportunities and Relevance

One of the major opportunities for Alt News lies in its diversification into education and information literacy, primarily through AltEd. Alt News is already working towards an online link and a professional team dedicated exclusively to media/digital education. Their long-term plan involves developing, government approval and implementing a comprehensive media/digital literacy curriculum for teachers and students (author's interview with Alt News, 2023).

The Alt News team plans to organise training programmes in media/digital literacy and publish fact-checking guides to raise funds for its survival (Faleiro, 2021).

Another major focus area for Alt News is busting an even greater number of fake videos that constitute a major share of fake news in India. This would require more time, resources, and manpower, in addition to further enhancing their online security and accountability (author's interview with Alt News, 2023).

Five years down the line, Alt News sees itself playing a greater role in the policy-making domain, especially with reference to the creation and dissemination of media/digital literacy and anti-fake-news education in the form of user-friendly audio-visual content (author's interview with Alt News, 2023).

The relevance of Alt News is evident in the public credibility it has gained. Its high standards have ensured support from NGOs and other charitable trusts. Pratik Sinha recalled being inspired by the constant support from struggling individuals and families in the form of various kinds of donations, which ensures the day-to-day functioning of Alt News (author's interview with Alt News, 2023). Mohammed Zubair was nominated for the 2023 Freedom of Expression Awards. One of the major endorsements came in the form of Alt News' nomination for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize (according to the Time Magazine) (Mansoor, 2022). Further, Pratik Sinha was one of the invited keynote speakers at the globally acclaimed BBC Trust in News Summit 2023 (Sinha, 2023).

4. Discussion

To critique the effectiveness of alt news, some of the latest global approaches towards combating fake news may be explored. First, AI (machine learning, deep learning, natural language processing, and network analysis) is being used to detect and down-rank unreliable news items. AI-based textual analysis techniques involve the examination of the linguistic features of fake news through natural language processing, sentiment analysis and fake news classification models. These aim to detect structural inconsistencies, manipulative syntax/semantics, emotionally charged language, clickbait titles and other means used to mislead readers subtly. Similarly, in visual analysis, convolutional neural networks (CNNs) are used to detect subtle pictorial distortions in deepfakes. Image forensics, as well as reverse image search and matching, are used to identify

alterations and misrepresentations of videos/images. However, AI cannot match human fact-checking since information is complex, multi-dimensional and constantly evolving. AI and human efforts must move together, demanding equal involvement from journalists and social media/tech companies. (Islam et al., 2020)

Another effective intervention involves depending on human fact-checkers (though limited in number) and attaching specific warning labels to fake news (Clayton et al., 2019). Individuals immediately and publicly countering fake news online is impactful, though it might draw unnecessary attention to low-profile fake news (McIntyre, 2018). However, all counter-fake news attempts run the risk of backfiring, with false beliefs being reinforced by cleverly designed cues from elite fake news spreaders (Nyhan, 2021). Combating fake news calls for a holistic approach involving all stakeholders.

A third intervention is inoculation or pre-bunking: debunking fake news items, tactics or sources before they strike. This involves online games wherein people are rewarded for exposing fake news (Nolan & Kimball, 2021). A study of 15,000 participants revealed that "... people's ability to spot and resist misinformation improves after gameplay, irrespective of education, age, political ideology, and cognitive style (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). Given the lack of time and patience, shorter techniques such as bullet lists differentiating genuine and fake news or short lists of tips can be more useful. Here again, human fact-checkers and AI can collaborate to set up automated fact-checking systems based on cross-referencing and real-time verification as well as the generation of textual and visual counter-narratives.

Accuracy prompts have been proven effective in reducing the indiscriminate, hasty forwarding of news (Larson, 2021). An example is Twitter's 'read before you re-tweet' prompt (Vincent, 2020). According to a 2023 report on Statista.com,

> ...the majority of consumers in selected countries worldwide felt it would be appropriate for internet and technology companies to display fact checking next to advertising, news links, and user posts .... those in Brazil, India, and Nigeria felt more strongly about the subject... (unesco.org/en/world-media-trends/).

Similarly, studies have shown that using crowdsourcing or asking readers/consumers to rate the veracity of a news item leads to promising results. This develops critical thinking and information literacy and compensates for the limited number of fact-checkers (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Pressuring social media giants to play a positive role in combating fake news is another major anti-fake news initiative. The results of an extensive study of over 2000 Facebook users led by the University of Southern California revealed that more than individual users, the rewards and benefits-oriented structure of social media platforms were responsible for the spread of online misinformation. Just 15% of users were spreading 30% to 40% of fake news online in return for a variety of rewards, including extra online attention. Hence, social media platforms should pursue structural changes in their reward structure and penalise offenders to limit the spread of misinformation (Madrid, 2023; Menczer & Hills, 2020).

The most crucial long-term cure for fake news seems to be a holistic humanities and social sciences education. In humanities, encouraging multilingualism can be one of the most effective tools to improve cognitive, emotional and analytical skills. Multilingual individuals can enhance

the use of AI tools such as multilingual natural language processing, real-time translation systems and cross-border fact-checking systems. When it comes to social sciences, increasingly neglected disciplines such as literary analysis, linguistic analysis, culture studies, media studies/journalism, sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, political science, ecological/environmental studies, economics, management and other allied disciplines can play a crucial role in fostering critical humanistic thinking and information literacy via development of analytical skills, empathy, cognitive depth and sharpness, emotional intelligence and judgment power. Education of teachers, staff and parents about the latest developments in media, information and communication technology, as also organisation of regular media literacy events, partnerships with media and IT organisations, and developing a strong curriculum for media and digital literacy in consultation with all stakeholders and implementing it in an incremental manner with the help of a small team of specialists – are some of the key ways in which schools, colleges and universities can initiate the anti-fake news movement. Several governments are actively incorporating young people into their public education campaigns: efforts by Finland, Norway, France and U.K. to offer learning by doing courses, EducaMidia in Brazil, the 'Fake ≠ Fact' toolkit launched by the Swedish embassy in Vietnam, the 'Listen to Discern' programme funded by the US and UK in Ukraine, XS News in Singapore, Taiwan's 'media literacy' curriculum implemented in 2017, Google's 'Be Internet Awesome' and Facebook's 'Digital Literacy Library' (Lim & Tan, 2020; Smith, 2017). In the U.S., several media/digital literacy initiatives and inoculation techniques such as those by Poynter, MediaWise for Seniors and The News Literacy Project are now focusing upon educating the older generation who are politically more engaged, more trusting and hence more vulnerable, compared to the younger generation (Span, 2020).

Critical, interdisciplinary humanistic and social sciences education greatly strengthens human cognition and judgment that the digital onslaught has targeted and weakened. Due to information overload, consumers begin to depend on cognitive biases: deep-seated fears, prejudices, social conformity/pressures, herd mentality and so on while believing a particular news item to be true and engaging in its widespread forwarding/dissemination. Social media players exploit this phenomenon to manipulate consumers. While several online apps have been developed to detect manipulative social media algorithms and bots, preventive education and training play a key role in protecting consumers (Menczer & Hills, 2020). A study of 46 electoral democracies between 2000 to 2019 revealed the following:

> ....education offers the best solution in solving the signal extraction problem created by over-information and fake news. ... Developing the capacity for long-term memory by teaching consolidated literary, scientific, and cultural knowledge at an early age has been shown to help individuals, even in later stages of their lives, to recognize valuable information and to filter out fake news. ...recognition of fake news heavily depends on someone's level of 'emotional intelligence', ... a capacity which is in turn positively correlated with educational attainment.... Investing in education, especially in the quality of education that schools and universities provide, appears to be the best remedy ... this requires assigning a more prominent role to the teaching of humanities, as well as... verbal reasoning and literacy skills from an early age, compared to the current emphasis on STEM" (Padovano & Mille, 2023).

As per a study published in 'Frontiers in Psychology': "…higher levels of emotional instability were predictive of sharing fake news , and higher levels of rational thinking were predictive of the capacity to detect fake news on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Dolan, 2023)."

Wherever critical humanistic education and awareness campaigns have been successful to some extent, the results are positive. It is heartening to note that a large number of individuals worldwide are aware of the menace of fake news and have taken some steps to protect themselves from the same. According to a 2019 Ipsos survey conducted on behalf of the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI),

> The poll of over 25,000 interviews in over 25 economies finds that well over four in five (86%) online global citizens believe they've been exposed to fake news. …The vast majority think fake news is made worse by the Internet (87%) and negatively impacts political discourse in their country (83%).… The vast majority (87%) also support better education for Internet users on how to identify fake news. … Some have already taken matters into their own hands, as two in ten (20%) report having reduced their social media usage or used a news fact-checking website (24%) in response to fake news, while around one in ten unsubscribed from traditional media outlets (12%), used the Internet less often (11%), and closed their Facebook (8%), Twitter (6%) or other social media accounts (9%) completely (Simpson, 2019).

A TIME magazine article concludes that inculcating a deep sense of guilt and shame about being misled by and sharing fake news is crucial to combating fake news: "…we need to make sharing misinformation as shameful as drunk driving… we need to cultivate an awareness of 'digital pollution' on the Internet… (Steinmetz, 2018).

Further, fake news that fuels autocracy, violence and genocides is deeply indicative of the general decline in ethics and values. According to a 2017 Reuters study: "Tackling false news narrowly speaking is important, but it will not address the broader issue that people feel much of the information they come across, especially online, consists of poor journalism, political propaganda, or misleading forms of advertising and sponsored content" (Neilsen & Graves, 2017).

Given the above context, while Alt News has made reasonable use of selected AI tools, it needs to bolster further resources to use AI at a more effective level. Human fact-checking remains its mainstay. However, it needs to focus more on warning labels, accuracy prompts, inoculation games/strategies and crowdsourcing. Alt News can also collaborate with like-minded fact-checking organisations, NGOs, civil society, journalists, and government agencies to pressurise social media giants to control the fake news pandemic. Alt News has made a meaningful start towards critical thinking and information literacy through AltEd. However, this beginning needs to be carefully nurtured, since there is a long way to go.

5. Conclusion

In the final analysis, combating fake news calls for concerted, continued efforts from all sides: high-quality journalism, promotion of media literacy by governments and educational institutions, high levels of accountability and investment in hi-tech anti-fake news measures by social media companies, and wide, critical reading and reflection on the part of the public. All these will have

to be accompanied by a strong social will. Such a social will can perhaps best be inculcated through a well-rounded, interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences education.

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