

Is Media a Boon or a Bane to the Society? Some Reflections in the Light of Dokmoka Lynching

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Abstract

Media often acts as the watchdog of the society. As carriers of messages of mass communication, the mass media is a very powerful instrument in informing the people or masses about virtually anything on earth. New media which includes internet, internet radio and social media has been gaining popularity among the masses the world over. Various forms of social media platforms are hugely popular among the youth because they are user friendly, cost effective and have various interactive features. However, on the flip side, social media has gained notoriety for spreading fake news leading to mob violence. Such acts of violence are widespread in various parts of India and its impact can also be seen in Assam.

The recent lynching of two boys in Karbi Anglong district of Assam over has once again brought into focus, the perils of communicating via social media platforms. This present study has been undertaken in order to pinpoint the fact that one must be cautious while forwarding or believing any messages that are widely circulated across various online sites. This is owing to the fact that such kinds of messages can have serious consequences in the long run, it changes the way people interpret and respond to real facts.

Key words: Media, Mob lynching, News, Social media

1.0 Introduction

Media has permeated every aspect of our lives. From the time we get up to the time we go to bed, we use of different forms of media. This is basically the digital age where news gets updated from all the corners of the world at every second. In fact, digital or social media has increasingly come to replace the print media to a large extent. However, this does not mean that the importance of newspapers and radio has come down. They still continue to exist with a majority of the netizens hooked on to the online newspapers and other news portals that

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offer the advantage of surfing news updates round the clock. Just as media can act as an effective medium of disseminating news and views, it also goes the other way round by engaging in sensationalism and false reporting or distortion of facts. Fake news can be created and spread easily through the web and social media platforms, resulting in widespread real-world impact.

2.0 Objectives of the Present Study

The basic objectives of the present study are:

- (1) To analyse how fake news can have detrimental impact on the society
- (2) To bring to focus the fallout of such fake and sensational news reports that lead to mob lynching cases
- (3) Taking measures to curb the growing incidence of the spreading of fake news

3.0 Methodology of the Present Study

The present study is basically a qualitative analysis of the present status of the social media landscape and how it can be exploited in spreading misinformation, falsehood and derogatory comments aimed at tarnishing an individual's reputation. The present study specifically focuses on the sensational Dokmoka lynching that took place in Karbi Anglong district of Assam in June, 2018 which was an aftershoot of fake news that was widely circulated in one of the popular social media platforms. The present study is also based on observation method. Document analysis of secondary sources like website, newsletters, journals, magazines, books etc. has been done to corroborate the fact on how the spreading of fake news can have detrimental impacts on the society.

4.0 What Makes News?

This is basically a debatable issue considering the amount of sleaze and sensationalism that occupies a major chunk of news coverage today. However, if one were to ask any professional journalist, he or she would say that 'anything new is news'. In fact, one must have the nose for news to sense it. It can break out at any time and is not necessarily confined to any geographic location or time zone. Novelty, interest, proximity, relevance, timeliness, immediacy and perishability are some of the important characteristics of news. However, with the growth of

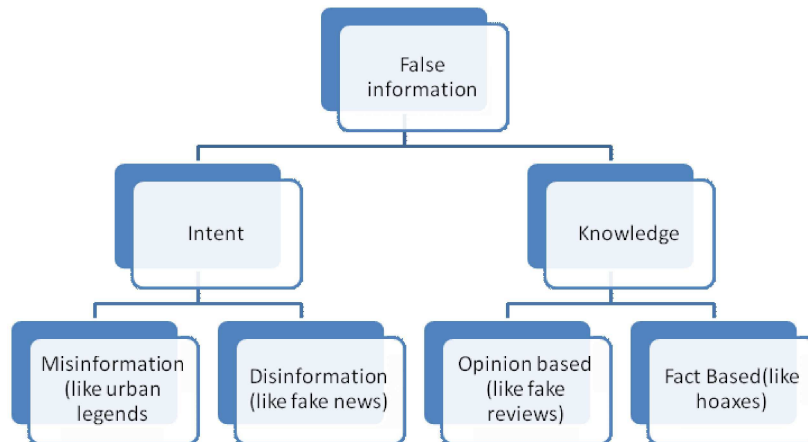
corporatisation of media houses, there has been a large scale degradation on the quality of news that are published or broadcast over different media platforms. Nowadays, social media is widely used by most of the media houses to keep the general public abreast of news round the clock. With its unique characteristics of interactivity, multimedia facility and immediacy, it is not only global in reach and access but also freely available to one and all. Moreover, internet based newspapers and live streaming of news by the news channels have enabled the common masses to access news stories at the click of a mouse.

5.0 Fake News and the Spread of Misinformation

The web provides highly interconnected world-wide platform for everyone to spread information to millions of people in a matter of few minutes. This has no doubt brought forth the concept of citizen journalism, while at the same time, it has led to increased visibility and impact of both true and false information. False information has far reaching impact– they are liked, shared and commented on more other than any other news. This high engagement of false information with readers shows the degree of impact it can have on public opinion and ideological perception. It has also become easy to identify fake news whereby the text is more longer, exaggerated and opinionated

Kumar and Shah (2018) has categorised false information into the following categories:

Figure 1 Categories of False Information



Source: Kumar & Shah (2018)

False information can be classified based on the intent of the author as misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is spread without the intent to deceive while disinformation is spread with the intent to deceive. False information can also be classified as either opinion-based or fact-based. Opinion-based false information relates to individual opinion and highlights cases in which there is no absolute truth. On the other hand, fact-based false information contradicts, fabricates or conflates a single valued ground truth information. As such, it becomes harder for people to distinguish between true and false information. There are also some people who operate by creating fake ‘sock puppet’ or ‘sybil’ accounts. They use these accounts to reflect the same point of view or making similar comments on public forum.

There are several reasons as to why people fall prey to such type of news. Consumers relate to those stories that confirms to their existing views. They tend to believe that their perceptions of reality are the only accurate views while others who fail to agree to such views are regarded as uninformed, irrational or biased.

6.0 Dokmoka Lynching: A Case in Point

One such incident that was the fallout of such false reporting of news was the sensational Dokmoka lynching which took place a couple of months back in June, 2018. Two innocent young men who fell prey to the fake news of their being child kidnappers in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The spine chilling video of the two young men being lynched to death apparently took the internet by storm. It brought to focus the fact that the circulation of news by certain groups through the medium of social media can actually lead to disastrous circumstances. Unaware of the rumour that was spreading like wild fire regarding the presence of child lifters in that particular area, both the young men had come to enjoy the scenic Kangthilangso waterfall. While on their way back home, they were stopped by a group of locals who apparently mistook them for child lifters referred to as *xopadhora* in Assamese. The two boys were no match against the 250 persons in the crowd who were armed with machettes, knives and sticks. They finally succumbed to their injuries once again pointing to the fact how people blindly believe in facts without even verifying it. After this gruesome incident, thousands have taken to the streets demanding justice and punishment for those involved in the killing.

This is just one of those numerous cases where such kind of reporting of news can be disastrous for the society at large. It is worth mentioning here that in February, 2018 two Sikh men from Punjab were mistaken to be child-lifters and beaten by a mob in the Kamrup district of Assam. Video of the two men begging for mercy was widely circulated on social media. The irate mob reportedly removed the turbans of the two men with their hair hanging on the shoulders.

Guwahati, the gateway to the North East has been a witness to such acts of mob violence. In 2007, an Adivasi woman was publicly stripped and beaten up along with some Adivasi men who joined hands with All Assam Adivasi Students' Association (AAASA) and took to the streets to protest against the delay in granting of ST status to tea plantation workers of Assam. Similarly, in 2012 a young girl was molested in full public view in the city's bustling G.S. Road of Guwahati city, the videos of which were later telecast on news channels.

Some of the distinguished educationists of the State have come up with different answers as to why this horrific crime was committed. The myth of *xopadhora* (child lifters) is not just an urban myth in Assam but is prevalent across the urban-rural divide and across class divisions. The burning question is why is it still a persistent belief in the state? Parents over the years have narrated tales of the *xopadhora* in order to discipline naughty children. Basically the children are warned to not to talk or approach any strangers. So, one must keep in mind that this did not always carry a negative meaning. *Xopadhora* has always been described as someone with long hair, carrying a small bag and one who doesn't belong to the community. Reports said that one of the victims had dreadlocks at the time and the two were in an SUV. This might have established the fact that they were not locals. It is no wonder that people took in the rumours that were circulated via WhatsApp of the entry of child-lifters from Bihar who were dressed as women or were transgender and had long hair. The attacks on such individuals were based on pure xenophobia.

Having said that, the fear of the child-lifters is not completely baseless in contemporary Assam. As per the 2016 report on 'Crime in India' published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Assam has had 6126 cases of abduction and kidnapping in 2016 out of which 1451 cases are related to child victims belonging to different age groups. If one looks at the table one will find that the cases of kidnapping and abduction is on the rise in Assam for the period 2014-16.

Table 1 Reported Cases of Kidnapping and Abduction in Assam (2014-2016)

	2014	2015	2016	Percentage State Share to All-India (2016)	Rank Based on Incidence/percentage Share	Mid-Year Projected Population + (in lakhs) (2016)	Rate of Kidnapping and Abduction (2016)	Rank Based on Crime rate (2016)
Assam	4824	5831	6126	7.0	6	325.8	18.8	2
Total All India	77250	83005	88008	100.0		12739.9	6.9	

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2016).

Table 2 Age-wise Distribution of Kidnapping and Abduction in Assam in 2016

Below 6 years	6-12 years	12-16 years	16-18 years	Total Child Victims
135	1191	4891	3461	9678

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2016).

Total number of cases related to the kidnapping and abduction of children in Assam for the year 2016 as provided by NCRB has been shown in Table 2.

As is evident from the above data, the number of cases of kidnapping and abduction of people specially children are on the rise in Assam. Having said that, the rise in the cases of kidnapping and abduction is not only the sole reason as to why the local people had panicked at the thought of the presence of child-lifters in their locality. This, along with the rising cases of child trafficking added fuel to the fire. This caused a kind of panic in the minds of the people. The areas from where children are trafficked in Assam are conflict-stricken areas, the hill areas, the Char areas, and Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD). Moreover, the charged atmosphere caused by the NRC (National Registrar of Citizens) and the Citizenship Bill that was focused through different social media platforms made the people believe in the news that was circulated through this medium.

Distrust towards traditional media as being 'paid news' and also towards the police and the State is a contributing factor. Keeping aside these factors, one also needs to understand the dynamics of mob psychology. The people in the mob may not know each other but they are united by a common belief and common intention. In a mob, people lose their individual identity and sense of judgement, eventually committing brutal crimes with the belief that they are doing the right thing. The mob at Dokmoka feared that the future of their children was at stake and so they took matters in their own hands. In fact, an insecure and revengeful mob will commit heinous crime on innocent people in order to send a message to the society at large. This sort of vigilante justice is a threat to humanity and seeks to endanger the social contract in lawful societies.

A group of social activists have alleged that superstition was behind the Dokmoka lynching. People living in the interior parts of the villages of the state blindly believe in superstitions. Witch hunting is one of the common problems which have been plaguing the State since time immemorial. There have been more than 80 instances of killing of so called 'witches' in Assam since 2006. There is also a village known as 'Mayong' which is regarded by many as the place where black magic abounds. It is often said that black magic practitioners can turn people into animals. Such unscientific thoughts and beliefs are not easy to shake off from the minds of the illiterate villagers.

The aftermath of the incident has led to an anti-tribal sentiment in the minds of the common people. However, care must be taken that this does not

mushroom into a full-blown public outcry against the tribal population residing in different parts of Assam. This incident perfectly captures several elements that characterise the new normal in India – video graphic evidence of mob killings, often taken by the perpetrators themselves; crowds who take “justice” into their own hands; the discourse of the “outsider” and the large-scale propagation of fake news via social media.

The last decade has seen a spurt in mob violence due to the prevalence of certain social, economic and political conditions at a particular moment in time. Such kind of atmosphere instigates the perpetrators to dehumanise a fellow human being. The increase in the number of such cases needs to be analysed within these frameworks. Karbis, Bodos, Mishings, Tiwas, and Kalitas occupy a major portion of the Assamese community. Many such groups have a tribal historical background and were later absorbed into the Brahmanical fold. Despite a significant tribal populace, the ‘surplus producing’ non-tribal communities are culturally and economically dominant. They hegemonise the public discourse. The Karbis who mostly reside in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, have over the years been demanding autonomy from Assam. The isolation of this hill district is both cultural and geographic. Thus, the reactions of the people consequent to the incident revealed an ‘us versus them’, a tribal versus non-tribal dynamic.

Video recording of hate crimes and subsequent uploading of such videos in popular social media platforms are quite common these days. The human fascination with witnessing barbaric violence inflicted on fellow men predates the invention of videography and social media. Be it the crowds watching gladiators fight to death or the thrill-seeking audience who came to witness public executions; the idea of death as a spectacle is not new.

7.0 Media at the Crossroads

Social media has no doubt taken the world by storm as far as dissemination of news is concerned. However, there are certain darker sides to it too. Not only are fake news widely circulated through the different social media platforms like Facebook, blogs, twitter, WhatsApp etc., but social media also facilitates risk of identity theft and fraud. Many a times, unsuspecting users are duped by people pretending to be someone else. There is also an increase in the cases of online harassment and stalking. A large number of terror outfits are also discreetly using the web for propaganda purposes and recruiting cadres worldwide. Thus, social

media has become a weapon of destruction and desecration in the hands of unscrupulous elements and mischief mongers.

Now the question that arises is where do we stand? Does media really help in dissemination of constructive news or does it glorify such false reports? Is contemporary society getting caught up in a culture of celebrating violence, and does the disintegration of community life have anything to do with it? It is not worthwhile to constantly accuse the media of maligning the people or for that matter indulging in yellow journalism. Many people might disagree with this proposition as media often acts as the magic bullet- we take in whatever is thrown at us. The need of the hour is to develop a scientific attitude towards life based on rational thinking. The menace of fake news and malicious rumours propagated through social media must be looked into. Fake news are re-tweeted, forwarded and shared in some of the common social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Such kinds of popular, yet untrue viral posts are forwarded by the common people who pretend to be 'verified users'.

A lot of debates and discussions can go on as to why people fall for such kind of news, whether it is from a bot or a real friend. False news is more novel and people like to repeat information that seems to affirm their beliefs. People tend to get drawn towards sensational news rather than other news of national and international importance. Just after the lynching incident took place, it was widely discussed that the electronic media should refrain from repeatedly telecasting the incident so as to avoid bringing in more controversies and creating communal disharmony in the minds of the people. It also created a rift between the tribal and the non-tribal population with a major chunk of population from Guwahati taking to streets to protest against this violent act of crime.

A lot was said about the role of the media towards the development of the society- that of beaming stories which would change the mind-set of the people without hurting their sentiments. However, we are yet to see the light of the day in this aspect. Such kind of incidents makes it somewhat difficult to foray into the path of development.

8.0 The Road Ahead

The outrage following the incident revealed a dangerous progression of mounting racist tensions and bigotry. The nature of the furore revealed an endemic problem in our society, which perhaps explains how lynching have become

commonplace. It is not only the responsibility of the Government but also the duty of the people to try and inculcate the spirit of tolerance towards each other and bring in a reform in the society. A lot needs to be done in order to instil scientific temperament in the minds of the people and remove superstitious beliefs that is likely to cause more harm than good in the long run. Facing backlash, the Assam government came up with a cyber-wing to book the perpetrators of such malicious stories circulating on social media. The need of the hour is to have a strong anti-lynching law to put an end to this mindless violence for which the state must act on it. Our law enforcement agencies have a reactive approach towards prevention of crime. However, in order to keep vigilantism in check, one requires a proactive approach. The police should also remain alert and nip the problem in the bud. Visible policing, conducting awareness programmes to counter the rumours and keeping a watch on the activities is of prime importance. Intelligence sources must be placed in every possible remotest corner that should be clearly instructed to inform the police immediately of any suspicious activity that might be going on.

Facebook owned WhatsApp have said that one needs to be cautious while checking forwarded messages. Very often, it is seen that messages containing hoaxes or fake news are wrongly spelled. So, one must crosscheck with the facts before forwarding or believing such messages. The sum and substance of the matter is one must be able to distinguish between true and false reports and confirm the authenticity of the reports. Usually, such falsified reports contain unbelievable news which are too good to be true and often goes viral. These are some of the tell-tale signs of fake news stories.

Thus, there is the necessity of proper education and sensitisation in using social media from school level onwards, the personal etiquette of not sharing harmful or fake posts, and a counter strategy to flood social media with positive and constructive news by agencies concerned. The repetitive airing of visuals with violent content by TV channels racing for TRPs, neglect and lack of understanding of deprived areas where incidents like witch hunting and mob lynching occur, sensational coverage of sectarian conflicts yet disregard to fact finding reports by investigative agencies, indifference to developments in science and technology etc. are some of the issues that calls for soul searching by mainstream media. Hence, a good education system, proactive policing and a strong judiciary can set precedents and bring about evolutionary positive changes in the long run.

The above discussion brings us to the question on whether the media really proves itself as a boon or bane to the society. Media, especially 'social media' has definitely changed the way people communicate and express. It has become such an integral part of our lives that we are constantly engaged in some activity or the other. These different medium of communication allows people to access news and information quite easily. The availability of e-newspapers and other online news portals have opened up new vistas of knowledge and information. Nevertheless, there are also certain negative sides to it. New media, specially the different social media platforms can sometimes lead to disastrous consequences if proper care is not taken. For instance, the spread of false rumours can not only endanger the lives of the people, but also convey inauthentic expression of feelings. Thus, there are two sides to the coin if one debates on the usefulness of media in the society. The fact of the matter is that, we as responsible citizens must be able to distinguish between right and wrong. In fact, media will throw at us innumerable news and views of events around the world but we must play the role of a gatekeeper and take in only those stories which are supported by facts and figures.

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