RESEARCH ARTICLE

FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN GUJARAT ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2022

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ABSTRACT

Fake news, misinformation and disinformation are an ingrained disease in the information world. In the Gujarat assembly elections held in December 2022, information was also polluted with the help of fake news. In Gujarat, three parties—the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress, and the Aam Aadmi Party—fought against each other. In this election, the digital armies of all the parties tried to defame each other. Fake news, misinformation, and disinformation were widely used. Spreading fake news created confusion among the voters. Old videos and photos were tampered with in an attempt to send the wrong message. There was also an attempt to endanger the religious unity of India. In fact, political mudslinging and the worst kind of influence on the voting process were also done. Social media was widely misused during the election period. There was a deliberate attempt to spread false information, the wrong message, and misleading content on all platforms, like text, audio, video, photo, digital board, posters, and pamphlets. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. were used to spread fake news. Furthermore, fake news was purposefully spread using the logos of major mainstream media in order to confuse voters.

INTRODUCTION

The Election Commission of India held two phases of voting in Gujarat in December 2022. The first phase occurred on December 1, 2022, and the second phase occurred on December 5, 2022. There are 182 assembly constituencies in the state. In the first phase, voting was held in 89 constituencies. In the second phase, voting was held for the remaining 93 constituencies. Gujarat has been ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the past 27 years. Gujarat is the stronghold of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. There was a direct fight between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party in the state. The Aam Aadmi Party has entered the fray in the 2022 assembly elections. Hence, a three-way fight took place in Gujarat. The Bharatiya Janata Party won an undisputed majority in this election. The BJP retained this stronghold by winning 156 out of 182 seats. Congress could win only 17 seats. For the first time, the AamAadmi Party contested the elections with strength in Gujarat. However, the AamAadmi Party had to settle for only five seats. Independents got three seats, while the Samajwadi Party managed to win one seat. The Bharatiya Janata Party once again proved its supremacy and captured power in the state assembly elections. The percentage of votes secured by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly was also significant. The BJP alone received more than half of the vote percentage.

The BJP got a record 52.5 percent of the votes in the Gujarat Assembly elections. Congress got 27.3 percent, and the Aam Aadmi Party got 12.9 percent. (India, 2022)This is a big mistake made by the Aam Aadmi Party. For the first time, the AamAadmi Party contested the election with strength in Gujarat, and the voter preference for this party is also remarkable. All the political parties tried to win this election. It was very important for the Bharatiya Janata Party to gain power in Gujarat. The election was prestigious for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Both the leaders had done meticulous planning in Gujarat during the election period. As a result of this, he gained undisputed power in the state, CPI, CPI (M), CPI (ML), JD (S), JD (U), etc. parties contested assembly elections in Gujarat. Another feature of this election is that none of them received more than 1 percent of the vote. All the political parties carried out campaigns in the Gujarat assembly elections. In particular, political parties and candidates campaigned heavily on social media. During the election season, however, many fake news stories emerged from Gujarat. This contaminated the campaign process.

Objectives of the study: Two main objectives have been put forward for the present research paper. The first objective of this research is to study the fake news, misinformation and disinformation spread during the Gujarat elections. Another goal of this research is to identify which political parties, activists, and candidates have been the targets of various types of fake news. At the same time, an objective was put forward to understand which platforms were used during the election period to spread fake news.

Methodology and Data Collection: The study of fake news, misinformation and disinformation has taken place during the Gujarat Assembly elections. The Gujarat Assembly elections were held in December 2022.A year before the elections, all political parties in Gujarat were attempting to sway voters. Campaigns, public meetings, and various programmes are started throughout the year to convince the voters of the political stance. This period has been selected for the present research. Apart from this, the fake news that went viral during the actual election period, until the completion of the voting process, and during the code of conduct laid down by the Election Commission of India have also been studied. Fake news has been studied by fact-checking websites. After checking the news and verifying its authenticity, it became clear whether it was fake or not. Only those news items that were found to be fake after verification were included in the study. Fact-checking websites are also highly reputed and reliable. They are operated by India's leading media conglomerate. The editors of this website have been working faithfully in journalism for many years. The news has been studied and verified by reliable and reputable fact-checking websites.

Secondary data has been used for this study. News broadcasted and published through various media has been used as a source of information. Information that has gone viral on various platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, has been used as a reference. Text, audio, video, images, etc. have been studied. Most of the reputed fact-checking websites in India have also been used as references. Fact-checking websites are mainly used to check whether the claims made by various political parties, candidates, and activists are true or false. Apart from this, news published in important mainstream newspapers in India and news broadcast by various news channels have also been used as references.

Fake News and Election Management: Fake news has been defined in many contexts. In general, it is difficult to define it universally. Fake news refers to news messages that contain incorrect or false information but do not report the incorrectness of the information. It is the central concept in the study of fake news.(Wang, 2020)Fake news is information that is intentionally written to mislead readers, listeners, or viewers. However, any fake news can be verified again. General readers have faith in journalism. They strongly believe that information from newspapers or news channels is true. This belief is getting a big blow due to fake news. Fake news changes the perception of readers, listeners, or viewers by betraying them. Fake news involves misrepresenting or manipulating facts. This action is determined. This creates a lot of confusion. The Election Commission of India has expressed concern over fake news. While conducting elections in a fair and fearless environment, the Election Commission has warned about the ill-effects of fake news, saying that it poses a major threat to the democratic system. (Fake news on social media threat in elections, 2023). The misuse of social media is rampant in India. Misinformation is spread through social media during the election period. Deliberately planting fake news can affect the electoral process. As the process gets strained, fake news is becoming a major obstacle in election management.

There are many types of fake news in India; most fake news is spread in religion, politics, and health. Fake news has the six following themes, organized according to their prominence: health, religion, politics, crime, entertainment, and miscellaneous. Indian fake news has eight major content types: text, photo, audio, video, text and photo, text and video, photo and video, and text and photo and video. The most popular fake news contents are text, photos, and videos. In India, fake news has two main sources: online media and mainstream media. Online media produces almost seven times more fake news compared to mainstream media. (Al-Zaman, 2021). Fake news about health is more common when there is a health problem, but it seems to be more common when it comes from online media and is focused on religion and politics. WhatsApp is the most used medium for misinformation and disinformation in India. During elections, various political parties use WhatsApp to reach out to the voters. Sometimes political propaganda descends to a negative level. Many of India's misinformation campaigns are developed and run by political parties

with nationwide cyber armies; they target not only political opponents but also religious minorities and dissenting individuals with propaganda rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices. The consequences of such targeted misinformation are extreme, from death threats to actual murders. In the past year, more than two dozen people have been lynched by mobs spurred by nothing more than rumors sent over WhatsApp. (Bansal, 2019) Many political groups use WhatsApp to distribute pure propaganda. Propaganda prevents accurate facts from getting to voters. As a result, false information and fake news are becoming a significant challenge in the electoral process. The issue of fake news became very serious during the 2016 US presidential election. Along with the news, a large number of voters were misled through advertisements. Allegations of Russian meddling in the US election were later proven true. A bipartisan Senate committee found that before and after the 2016 election, the Russian government used social media ads to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. Even in India, social media is being misused by politicians. Fake news was spread during the elections through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media.

Use of a news channel's fictitious logo: Fake news influences people's perceptions and opinions. Scholars observed this effect in the Italian election. Fake news alone cannot spin any results. However, fake news certainly has the potential to influence the outcome.(Cantarella, 2023)An attempt to abuse social media has been made in each of India's recent elections. The cause of this was false information. Spreading false information in order to mislead voters by causing community confusion. As soon as the Gujarat Assembly elections were announced, the public opinion polls broke out. The Aam Aadmi Party had a strong showing in the polls held in the initial phase. Using the logos of four different news channels, messages were circulated saying that the Aam Aadmi Party would come to power in Gujarat. The four viral graphics feature the logos of India TV, TV9 Bharatvarsh, News24, and India Today. Upon reverse image searching the graphic, we found an old India TV article that contained an opinion poll of the Purvanchal region ahead of the 2022 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. The template matches the viral image, with the text and numbers being different. The article was published on January 17, 2022. (Shinjinee, 2022)It was found that logos of various news channels were used to make the fake news seem authentic. Attempts were made during this time period to confuse society by using various news media.

Phony and deceptive surveys: Fake news is created by distorting information. Facts are misrepresented, and this creates illusions in people's minds. Based on the survey conducted by ABP News and C Voters, it was predicted that the Aam Aadmi Party would get 49–54 seats in Gujarat in the first phase itself. The logo of the news channel ABP was used for this, but the verification revealed that this claim was false. (Kumar S. D., 2022)The plan was to make the fake information look genuine by using the ABP News logo. Incorrect or false information was deliberately spread during the Gujarat Assembly elections. The ABP C-Voter final survey poll reported 134–142 seats for the BJP, 28–36 seats for Congress, and only 7–15 seats for AAP in the overall Gujarat elections. The survey never said that the AamAadmi Party would get so many seats, but false information was deliberately spread.

An attack on religious tolerance: Even before the announcement of the Gujarat elections, fake news was spreading. An AamAadmi Party hoarding in Gujarat started attracting attention. The text on this hoarding stated that Gujarat will now offer Namaz. This post went viral. The name of the AamAadmi Party was on this hoarding. A message on the board also stated that Satyanarayan Katha and Bhagwat Week are no longer being held. This post started going viral in many groups. Interestingly, this post was forwarded by a journalist-editor. The AamAadmi Party had put up some hoardings for a programme in another district, but an attempt was made to tarnish the image of the Aam Aadmi Party by tampering with these hoardings. The original hoarding, which said "Now Gujarat will change," has been replaced with "Now Gujarat will offer namaz." "Stop performing Bhagwat Saptah and Satyanarayan Katha" has been separately added

to the morphed image. (Aqib, 2021). Not only was the text broken, but so were the images. There were three photos on Aam Aadmi Party hoardings. One of the photos was made viral with the intention of jeopardising social harmony. The Muslim-looking person on this hoarding was Gopal Italia. Gopal Italia's image was put on the board as that of Mullah Krekar, the founder of the Islamist militant group Ansar al-Islam. In the Gujarat Assembly elections, the issue of Hindus and Muslims constantly comes up in the election campaign. The Bharatiya Janata Party focuses on the Hindu vote bank. The BJP will never hide it. Congress has consistently conducted election campaigns while keeping an eye on the votes of backward classes, tribal groups, women, and minorities. The AamAadmi Party also planned a different campaign than these two political parties. The AamAadmi Party released its manifesto before the elections. Fake news was widely spread that this manifesto was released only to appease minorities. The manifesto claimed that the AamAadmi Party promised huge funds to mosques and maulvis, but there was no truth in that. (Viral post with purported AAP Gujarat election manifesto is fake, 2022)The fake news had gone viral in Gujarat before the facts reached the public. A lot of fake news was spread in the name of the AamAadmi Party during the elections. The AamAadmi Party responded as well, but by then, the fake message had gone viral in many places. The AamAadmi Party will give employment to every unemployed person. The original content of the manifesto stated that manifesto stated that Rs.3, 000 in employment allowance would be given if employment was not available. Instead, information was circulated that every cleric would be given ten thousand rupees per month. Due to such fake information, the atmosphere during the election period was polluted. At that time, people were confused as to what information was true and what was false.

False information on the voting procedure: The claims made by the person responsible in the public campaign for the Gujarat Assembly elections were false. The claim made by Prime Minister NarendraModi on December 22, 2022, at Bavla in Ahmedabad district has come to light. In a public meeting, Modi said that two decades ago there were only two universities in this place; now there are 23 universities in the district. The fact check proved that this claim by Prime Minister Modi is false. (Nidhi, 2022)This information was given by the Twitter account of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The first part of the Prime Minister's claim stating that there was only one university before 2002 in Ahmedabad district is incorrect, according to Union government records. There were already three universities— Gujarat University, Gujarat Vidyapith, and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University—in the district two decades earlier, according to University Grants Commission (UGC) records. Some people deliberately tried to create confusion among the people by making old videos go viral during the Gujarat assembly elections. The message that the Bharatiya Janata Party is obstructing the election process was deliberately spread. A video of Bharatiya Janata Party activists influencing the polling process and forcibly occupying polling stations was circulated, but the video turned out to be fake. (Rujuta, 2022) This video was about malpractices in local body elections in West Bengal, but it was deliberately viral in the Gujarat elections.The video report by a Bengali news channel, TV9 Bangla Live, uploaded on February 27, 2022, carried a longer version of the same video. The video's description stated that this clip was from the voting ward 33 from the Lakeview School of South Dum Dum Municipality in West Bengal, where an "agent" was stopping the voters and pressing the EVM buttons himself. This old video went viral pretending to be a video of voting in Gujarat during the Gujarat Assembly, creating a stir in the community.

At its core, the WhatsApp marketing campaign: The Gujarat BJP uses more than 15 applications in its voter outreach drives. The saffron party has over 35 lakh followers on Facebook, 57.8 lakh on Instagram, 1, 64,000 on Twitter, and 8, 91,000 on YouTube. As against this, the Congress has 7 lakh followers on Facebook, 64.3 lakh on Instagram, 1,64,000 on Twitter, and 8,91,000 on YouTube. The AAP has 5.67 lakh followers on Facebook and 1.17 lakh followers on Instagram. While the state AAP does not have a separate YouTube page, it relies on its national YouTube page, which has 42.3 lakh

followers. The three parties, namely the Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress, and AamAadmi Party, fought fiercely in Gujarat. These three parties were at the forefront of using social media. All parties took the initiative to reach out to everyone, from booth workers to top leaders, through the media. The three main political rivals—the BJP, the Indian National Congress, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)— reveal that the instant messaging app owned by Meta is central to their strategies to communicate with voters and influence their choices. Each of these parties runs thousands of WhatsApp groups where they push their content. Experts fear a cycle of misinformation and a breach of voters' privacy in this practice. As many as 10,000 volunteers and 50,000 registered "digital warriors" of the BJP's IT cell were influencing voters with the help of social media. Every day, at least 50 new posts were sent to the voters by these volunteers. Millions of voters were directly contacted through all forms of social media, including WhatsApp.(Sakunia, 2022) Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party also deployed their digital armies. The Congress had ten thousand volunteers, while the AamAadmi Party fielded a force of twenty thousand volunteers.The Gujarat BJP uses more than 15 applications in its voter outreach drives. The saffron party has over 35 lakh followers on Facebook, 57.8 lakh on Instagram, 1.5 million on Twitter, and 45,600 on YouTube. As against this, the Congress has 7 lakh followers on Facebook, 64.3 lakh on Instagram, 1,64,000 on Twitter, and 8,91,000 on YouTube. The AAP has 5.67 lakh followers on Facebook and 1.17 lakh followers on Instagram. While the state AAP does not have a separate YouTube page, it relies on its national YouTube page, which has 42.3 lakh followers. (Gujarat: Parties Extensively Use Social Media To Connect With Voters, Run Poll Campaigns, 2022) These three parties had established thousands of WhatsApp groups. 150 to 200 voters were involved in each group. Party policies, campaign issues, resolutions, manifestos, and other emotive issues were conveyed to the voters.

Video manipulation and altered content: Delhi Chief Minister and AamAadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal had a special focus on the Gujarat elections. The AamAadmi Party is in power in Delhi. The party also got a landslide victory in the Punjab assembly elections. Due to this, the enthusiasm and confidence of the workers of this party increased. Arvind Kejriwal had launched a vigorous campaign in Gujarat after the Gujarat elections were announced. Just as the election campaign was in full swing, Kejriwaltweeted a video with the message, "Watch this video to understand the mood of Gujarat." In this video, it is shown that the Congress has lost a lot of ground in Gujarat and that the real fight is between the BJP and the AamAadmi Party. Moreover, it was hinted in this video that the referendum will go against the BJP and the AamAadmi Party will come to power in Gujarat. On verification, this video was also found to be fake. (Kumar A. , 2022)The video went viral using the logo of ABP News, the country's leading news channel. The video was manipulated and misrepresented the facts. The voiceover was also modified. The video shared by ArvindKejriwal and AamAadmi supporters was manipulated. A 25-second clip, allegedly from the PM's Surat rally, which shows the crowd purportedly raising pro-Kejriwal slogans, is going viral on social media platforms. This video went viral during the election period. AamAadmi Party supporters were making this video go viral. "Kejriwal-Kejriwal" can be heard shouting slogans in this video. Members of the AAP, which is touting itself as a synonym for "Parivartan" in Gujarat, were among several Twitter users who shared the video, claiming to show the wind of change in the state. Fact checking revealed that the slogan "Kejriwal-Kejriwal" in this video was digitally modified. (Beri, 2022) The BharatiyaJanata Party organisedModi's road show in Surat. Many activists had gathered for Modi's road show. These activists were shouting "Modi-Modi" slogans. There was no mention of Kejriwal in the video, but Kejriwal's name was announced in the video. The video was fake, and it was done on purpose. In October 2022, 132 people died after a bridge collapsed in the Morbi district of Gujarat. Prime Minister NarendraModi visited this place. SanketGokhale, the national spokesperson of the Trinamool Congress, spread fake news based on RTI information. Gujarat BJP workers filed a complaint against him. When the police investigated, it became clear that no such information was called for in the RTI, so Gokhale was arrested for

spreading fake news. Gokhale had commented on the expenses incurred during Prime Minister Modi's visit and the amount received by the heirs of the deceased. Gokhale had tweeted that the cost of Modi's visit was more than the amount received by the heirs of the deceased. Later, the court granted bail to Gokhale. (Gupta, 2022) However, during the Gujarat election period, the issue came to light when a Trinamul leader was arrested for spreading fake news. The government's fact-check unit had zeroed in on the tweet, which was accompanied by what appeared to be a newspaper clipping. "RTI revealed the PM's visit to Morbi cost Rs. 30 crore," it said. The Press Information Bureau, in its fact-check of December 1, said it was fake and "no such RTI response was given."

Disinformation and misinformation: A photo of a BJP leader begging for votes with his head on the feet of an old woman was circulated on social media. Anti-BJP propaganda was being carried out, claiming that the BharatiyaJanata Party had not done anything in Gujarat in the last27years, so they had to put their heads on the feet of the people. This photo turned out to be fake. (Mallick, 2022)The person in the image is BJP's ex-Vikaspuri MLA Sanjay Singh, who was also the party's candidate from the same constituency for the 2020 Delhi Assembly elections. The picture was taken during his campaigning for the polls in the national capital. The previous assembly elections in Delhi were held on February 8, 2020. By spreading various photographs online, an effort was made to fool the voters. Disinformation and misinformation led to the Gujarat elections. The conspiracy to trouble the opposition parties was carried out with the help of social media. Each party harassed the other political party by spreading fake news. During the election period, a video of a political leader giving voters liquor was circulated. It was pretending to be a BJP leader, but the video was not from Gujarat, and he was not a BJP leader either. (Thate, 2022) Such videos were made to mischievously tarnish the political image of the party and individuals.A video of Hardik Patel, a young leader in Gujarat, was going viral during the election period. In that video, Hardik Patel was saying that people are fed up with the governance of the BharatiyaJanata Party, but this video was revealed to be fake.Another video of Hardik Patel being abducted by citizens of Gujarat went viral. The videos showed that people in Gujarat have a lot of anger toward Hardik Patel. This video was three years old, and Hardik Patel was working in Congress at that time. (Kinjal, 2022) In the run-up to the elections, an attempt was made to tarnish Hardik Patel's image by using an old video.In the Gujarat elections, candidates of various parties and political parties were defamed. Leaders and important influencers of all three political parties, the BJP, AAP, and Congress, were defamed through fake news. Fake news was used to tarnish the image of leaders.

CONCLUSION

Hate speech and fake news were deliberately used in the Gujarat assembly elections. Fake news was spread in support of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress, and AamAadmi Party or against each other. Fake news is spread to benefit political parties or certain candidates in elections. Most of the fake news proved to be false when fact-checked, but by then, this fake news had gone viral on a massive scale. Misinformation and disinformation along with fake news were widely circulated. Supporters of all major political parties in the country were at the forefront of this act.Voters were influenced by fake news before the facts came before them. Fake news is proving to be a major hindrance to the election process and the Election Commission of India's efforts to conduct polls in a fair and fearless environment. The Election Commission of India is developing various mechanisms to control fake news, but these efforts are insufficient. It is essential to develop an independent, autonomous, and highly effective mechanism to control fake news. It is time to take strict action as per the Indian Penal Code and Information Technology Act if fake news is spread.

Fake news can be controlled to some extent if action is taken and the law is enforced. While print and electronic media are being strictly verified, digital media as well as social media are spreading the wrong message to a large extent. There should be a serious brainstorming session on how to intercept this message. After the Gujarat elections, the issue of how the election process can be carried forward without corrupting the information has once again been discussed.

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