

## VIRAL FEVER

The only antidotes to fake news are truth and commonsense

**S**TART EXERCISING YOUR SMARTPHONE THUMB, because the next big election will be fought on our mobiles. The latest Internet and Mobile Association of India survey says 86.5 per cent of users access the Internet via mobiles and smartphones. That works out to over 430 million Indians (553.8m voted in 2014).

Get set also for an avalanche of fake news designed to foment caste, religious and political divisions. How do you keep from being swept away?

Significantly, the IAMAI study does not include news as a category. The survey shows the majority use the Internet for entertainment. What these surveys do not tell us is how many people depend on their mobiles for the latest rumours, or what is dressed up as news. I don't want to sound like Donald Trump, but fake news is growing at exponential speed, keeping sites like BOOM and Alt News busy debunking nonsense like we will all be switching to a 13-digit mobile number on July 1 – or pointing out that the Congress party even conducted a Twitter poll based on this fake news. In December last year, one fact-checking site detected (because the researcher caught one word spoken by an attacker in Spanish) that a video purportedly showing three men of one community brutally killing a man from another community was in fact a two-month-old clip of members of a Mexican drug cartel slaughtering a rival gang member.

Huge numbers of Indians now go straight to WhatsApp every morning before they even brush their teeth, which is all to the good given how often those messages cause teeth to grind and clench with rubbish like Rs 2,000 notes being embedded with GPS trackers, or the Reserve Bank of India freezing all Punjab National Bank accounts after the Nirav Modi scandal. WhatsApp now has 200 million users (and counting) in India, a fifth of its global total.

Fake news goes viral because it is forwarded between large groups of users. Most insidious are morphed photographs and videos. You need to have very sharp vision and hearing to detect fraudulent images. If you have the time you

could use Google (images.google.com) to see if your eyes are deceiving you, but remember the scammers are one step ahead of you.

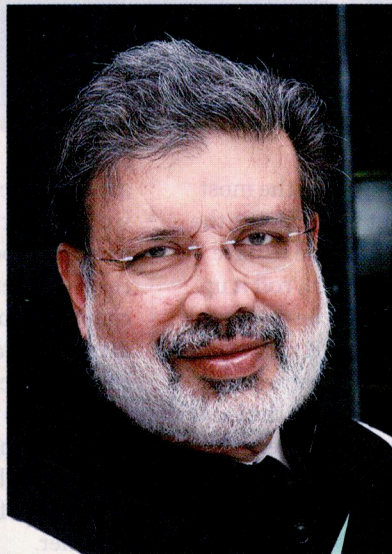
Trump's assertions that charges of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election were 'fake news' were rebutted on February 16. The Justice Department indicted 13 Russians and three companies for using systematic and sophisticated techniques to influence voters (including through disinformation on social media), the hacking of Democratic Party emails, identity theft, and the use of bots and malware.

Social media now drive the news agenda on many of our television channels. At a recent conference a senior editor from a major media organisation said they now depended 'far less' on WhatsApp as a news source.

It was interesting that Twitter estimated (in September 2017) that its automated systems caught an average of 3.2 million suspicious accounts globally *per week*, more than double the 2016 count. Twitter says about five per cent of its monthly active users (about 330m) are false or spam accounts. It

fights bots by detecting automated or scripted logins. As of September 2017 it was catching about 450,000 suspicious logins *per day* – a 64 per cent year-on-year rise.

It's safe to guess that fake news will rise to fever pitch. **BW**



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*The author is former Editor, Reuters Asia, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindustan Times and Editor of Business Today*