



Old habits die hard The telltale sign behind the recent PIB notice in India is the effort to pick on traditional media sectors where older values of journalism still have a place THULASI KAKKAT

STATES OF MATTER

Fake it like real

The ostensible effort to curb fake news is little else than a feint for regimes that have benefited by deliberate distortions



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Late in March, Mahesh Hegde, owner of the Postcard News website, was arrested in Karnataka on charges of causing ill will on religious grounds. A monk of the Jain faith had a few days before, suffered injuries in a road accident. Hegde, who has never made a secret of his adulation for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, picked up an image of the monk and embellished it with the narrative that his injuries had been inflicted by a mob of Islamic radicals. For good measure, he added that nobody is safe in Karnataka as long as chief minister Siddaramaiah, who happens to be in Modi's crosshairs in the upcoming State elections, is in charge.

Postcard News is one among a growing ecosystem of websites that style themselves in a new idiom of nationalism, as articulating a long-suppressed majority voice. It is an idiom of majoritarian nationalism often confected in deliberate distortions about the country's principal religious minority.

This category of problem was clearly not on the minds of the official information agency of the Indian government on April 2, when it announced fresh guidelines, ostensibly to check the menace of "fake news". Media accreditation, a privilege granted to journalists after a long breaking-in, was the pressure point. And the sanction to be applied was the withdrawal of the privilege, after due process, to journalists found purveying fake news.

In a jaded re-enactment of the "good cop, bad cop" routine, the notice was withdrawn within hours, after a supposed intercession by the Prime Minister, who warned that the proposed sanctions exceeded the authority of the information agency.

"Fake news" as a term has gained traction since the man who occupies the office associated with leadership of the "free world" adopted it as his favoured riposte to every critical media story. In the land of "first amendment fundamentalism" — where free speech is an

absolute value that enjoys higher protections than elsewhere in the world — US President Donald Trump, on numerous occasions, has suggested the cancellation of licences for TV channels that pursue a persistent line of critical reporting.

The recent PIB notice in India echoes this stratagem. The telltale sign is in the effort to pick on traditional media sectors where older values of journalism still have a place, when the abuses clearly lie elsewhere.

Statistics may often have no more than transient utility in the rapidly changing scenario of the modern media, but they may be of provisional use in gauging which way the winds are blowing. In 2011, as Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron set about researching their book *Cell Phone Nation*, India had 100 million newspaper copies coming to market every day, and an estimated 600 million cell phones in use. These figures were regarded as portending momentous change, though the relevance of the newspaper still seemed assured. By 2017, the figures had not changed much in respect of newspaper numbers, though there were growing doubts over how much of it was mere artifice to keep advertisers interested. Cell phone users — or at least the number of active SIM cards — had topped one billion by then.

In September 2016, India's largest industrial conglomerate, Reliance, announced the launch of a high-speed data service under the brand name Jio. The service came bundled with freebies, causing serious worries among other telecom and internet service providers, whose feeble protests to the regulatory authority went unheeded.

A few months later, the *Ericsson Mobility Report*, which has become something of a standard reference for trends in the telecom and internet domains, observed that total global

traffic in mobile networks "increased by 70 percent" in the first quarter of 2017 in relation to the earlier year. A large part of this increase was due to "one Indian operator's" introductory offer of free data traffic.

India's trajectory is a few steps behind the global trend in some respects, though the magnitude of the transition, given the sheer size of the country, has attracted attention. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) has since 2011 been carrying out an annual survey of the digital media. Though India is yet to figure in this annual survey, the global trends it highlights are applicable.

In its survey published October 2017, the RISJ found, firstly, an increasing dependence on the smartphone for accessing news and information. "Distributed discovery" was becoming more important, with particular news sources less likely to be remembered than the platform on which they were discovered. Beyond these platforms, the growth of "private" messaging apps such as WhatsApp was growing in news discovery. With this multitude of sources and choices, ironically, the vital attribute of "trust" was eroding.

The ambience was just right for the persistent power of the mouse-click, rather than a shared belief in a universe of facts, to become arbiter of what gets to be seen, heard and read. And in a world of growing resentments and anxieties, facts become what you choose to make them. Fake news is an accessory of the new structures of power emerging in liberal democracies. The ostensible effort to curb fake news then, is little else than a feint for newly empowered authoritarian regimes, to target quarters where a challenge to the new universe of alternative facts might still survive.

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