

A pack of lies engulfs India and Pakistan



Farhad Manjoo

OPINION

The internet truly is super-duper fake, and thanks to the malleability of digital media and the jet fuel of network viral-ity, a digital lie can spread more quickly, and cause more damage, than an analog one.

We all know that. Still, the blame-the-internet formulation has grown useless lately, because "the internet" has become inseparable from everything else. Social networks are now so deeply embedded into global culture that it

feels irresponsible to

think of them as some

exogenous force.

Instead, when it

comes to misinformation,

the internet is a

mere cog in the larger

machinery of deceit.

There are other

important gears in

that machine: poli-

ticians and celebri-

ties; parts of the

news media (especially television,

where most people still get their news);

and motivated actors of all sorts, from

governments to scammers to multi-

national brands.

As these players adapt to a digital

politics, they infect and become infected

by novel possibilities for misinformation.

It is in the confluence of all these

forces that you come upon the true

nightmare: a society in which small and

big lies pervade every discussion,

across every medium; where deceit is

assumed, trust is naïve, and a consen-

sus view of reality begins to feel fright-

eningly anachronistic.

You don't need to travel far to find

such a nightmare. But distance can help

clarify the picture: It's easier to appreci-

ate the simmering pot when you're

looking at it from the outside, rather

than boiling in it.

And so I spent much of the last week

or so watching a pot boil over on the

other side of the world from America.

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The New York Times publishes opinion
from a wide range of perspectives in
hopes of promoting constructive debate
about consequential questions.

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In retaliation for a terrorist attack against Indian troops last month, India conducted airstrikes against Pakistan. After I learned about them, I tried to follow the currents of misinformation in the unfolding conflict between two nuclear-armed nations on the brink of hot war.

What I found was alarming; it should terrify the world, not just Indians and Pakistanis. Whether you got your news from outlets based in India or Pakistan during the conflict, you would have struggled to find your way through a miasma of lies. The lies flitted across all media: there was lying on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp; there was lying on TV; there were lies from politicians; there were lies from citizens.

Besides outright lies, just about everyone, including many journalists, played fast and loose with facts. Many discussions were tinged with rumor and supposition. Pictures were doctored, doctored pictures were shared and aired, and real pictures were dismissed as doctored. Many of the lies were di-

rected and weren't innocent slip-ups in the fog of war but efforts to discredit the enemy, to boost nationalistic pride, to shame anyone who failed to toe a jingoistic line. The lies fit a pattern, clamoring for war, and on both sides they suggested a society that had slipped the bonds of rationality and fallen completely to the post-fact order.

The lies began immediately after Indian forces attacked what they described as a terrorist training camp in a Pakistani town called Balakot. The Indian government offered no visual proof of the effectiveness of its strikes, and there is still debate among Indian politicians about what was hit. Pakistan's military quickly put out pictures from Balakot showing not much damage.

Indian media, however, appeared eager to fill in a government-friendly narrative. As the Indian fact-checking site Alt News documented, several outlets, including some of the country's largest TV news networks, aired what they described as exclusive footage of Indian fighter jets attacking Balakot.

Except it wasn't. The fighter-jet footage was actually first posted online in 2017, Alt News found. It appeared to have been resurrected on social networks in the last week or so and then lifted by Indian TV networks as proof of the attack.

Not that Pakistani media were above fakery. After Pakistan's Air Force shot down an Indian jet and captured a pilot who was later released, Pakistani media began airing images of downed aircraft. Except, as fact checkers documented, the pictures were old, showing wreckage from a previous crash.

You would think fact-checking this stuff would limit its spread. Instead, what happened was that each side weaponized fact-checking, taunting the other for wallowing in lies without acknowledging its own part in all the fakery. And there were Indian anchors — from a network that pushed its own fake images — sliming Pakistani media with the hashtag #PakFakeClaim.

What I've shared here is just a taste. If you dive into the tireless fact-checking sites policing the region, you'll find scores more lies from last week, some that flow across both sides of the conflict and many so intricate they defy easy explanation.

And you will be filled with a sense of despair.

The Indian government recently introduced a set of draconian digital restrictions meant, it says, to reduce misinformation. But when mendacity crosses all media and all social institutions, when it becomes embedded in the culture, focusing on digital platforms misses the point.

In India, Pakistan and everywhere else, addressing digital mendacity will require a complete social overhaul. "The battle is going to be long and difficult," Govindraj Ethiraj, a journalist who runs the Indian fact-checking site Boom, told me. The information war is a forever war. We're just getting started.



REHAN KHAN/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Televisions last month broadcasting details of the conflict between Pakistan and India.