

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

What's Next
Combatting Fake News in India
By Priya Shanker

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Pratik Sinha cofounded the nonpartisan fact-checking website AltNews to set the record straight while curbing the spread of misinformation on social media.

by 168 percent and blood waste has decreased to zero. Hospitals no longer have to keep in stock what they don't need. Since the program's inception, the company has delivered 12,000 units of blood on more than 6,000 flights in Rwanda. By the end of 2018, Zipline will operate in rural North Carolina—its first North American contract. ■

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Combating Fake News in India

BY PRIYA SHANKER

In early 2017, a gruesome video of a young girl being lynched by an angry mob began spreading rapidly through WhatsApp. The accompanying text claimed that a Hindu girl in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh was being punished for refusing to wear a burqa after marrying a Muslim man.

When staff at the non-profit fact-checking website AltNews.in began looking into the authenticity of the video and the accompanying narrative, they noticed that the people in the video did not look Indian, nor did it sound like they were speaking an Indian language. In addition, none of the other women in the video were wearing a burqa. A simple Google search revealed that the video had been shot in a Guatemalan village in 2015 and the girl was attacked for being an accomplice in the murder of a taxi driver.

AltNews shared international coverage of the actual incident with links to the original video through its website, social media accounts, and its WhatsApp broadcast lists. It also traced the earliest instance of the message to a Facebook page with apparent ties to right-wing Hindu nationalists. This was one of dozens of fake news stories that the AltNews team busted in its first year.

"It probably took us five minutes to get to the bottom of this story," says Pratik Sinha, cofounder of AltNews, "yet most people do not think to check the veracity of even the most obviously misleading stories."

Sinha was working as a software engineer in the city of Ahmadabad when he cofounded AltNews in 2017 with the anonymous administrator of "Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy," a parody Facebook page of the Indian politician. They had each spent several years attempting to debunk fake news on social media. While together they had more than one million

Twitter followers, they found themselves stuck in an ideological bubble, unable to reach the people that such misinformation seemed to affect most. They launched AltNews with the hope that an independent online platform would have a wider reach.

AltNews' six full-time staff members fact-check stories on a broad range of topics, including politics, science, education, and

religion. All content is licensed under Creative Commons and is free to reproduce with attribution. As a new entrant to India's crowded media landscape, AltNews still has to prove its credibility, but its articles are increasingly being referenced or republished in mainstream publications, Sinha says.

The website describes its methodology in painstaking detail in an effort to substantiate its claim as a fair, transparent, and nonpartisan fact-checker. Sinha hopes these guidelines empower other people, including professional journalists, to do their own fact-checking.

Sinha recognizes that AltNews will need to work with local law enforcement, civil society, and technology companies in order to have real impact. In July 2018, the team met with the police commissioner of Ahmadabad to propose a pilot program for collaboration between fact-checking websites and local government and law enforcement to curb the spread of misinformation. AltNews is

also working with Google to design a fact-checking curriculum for journalists.

Last year, rumors of child abduction rings began floating around via WhatsApp messages in the Eastern state of Jharkhand, leading to lynchings of suspected child kidnappers. Similar rumors have since spread in different parts of the country, and at least 20 people have been lynched in recent months.

"The peer-to-peer nature of WhatsApp messages and the fact that it is often the only window to the Internet for people in small-town and rural India makes it uniquely advantageous for spreading fake news," Sinha says.

Looking ahead, AltNews plans to develop its own mobile application that will allow individuals to submit stories they would like to see fact-checked. The idea is to track the frequency of requests for a particular fake story and track users' geo-coordinates to determine where fake stories are spreading. AltNews would then notify local

law enforcement to curb potential violence resulting from the false rumors.

"Fake news has become an epidemic of sorts in India," says Ravish Kumar, a senior journalist and television anchor for NDTV India. "AltNews has institutionalized the busting of this misinformation machine when few in mainstream Indian media have had the courage to take it on." ■

