Fake News and Real Tensions:
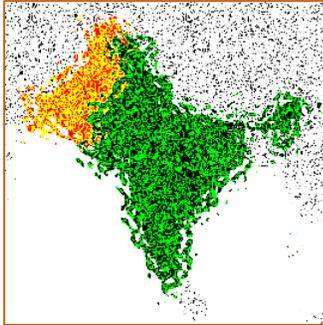# The Impacts of Misinformation in South Asia

India and Pakistan are two nuclear powers locked in a decades-long border conflict with spurts of cross-national violence ranging from terrorist operations to full-blown war. In February 2019, a suicide bombing by a Pakistan-based terrorist organization killed 40 paramilitary police officers in Kashmir. Two weeks after the attack, India launched retaliatory action against what it claimed was a terrorist camp within the rival state's borders. Pakistan then shot down an Indian fighter plane and captured the pilot in response. The pilot was later returned to India.

Throughout the rising tensions and violence reflected in this episode was a relatively new element of the contemporary Indo-Pakistani conflict: fake news. Both national governments, news media in both countries, and social media accounts operated by citizens and trolls alike engaged in widespread and unchecked dissemination of misinformation. The fake news included inflated body counts, mislabeled photographs from previous conflicts, and manufactured gore like an image of a "bucked filled with mutilated body parts, mislabeled as the remains of a dead Indian soldier" (Bagri, 2019).

According to Govindraj Ethiraj, journalist for the fact-checking site *Boom*, "the wave of misinformation after the Pulwama attack was driven by inflamed emotions, overanxious media on all sides, [and] the desire to use this as a political weapon" (Bagri, 2019). The influx of fake news was made worse because "unfortunately mainstream media organizations both in India and Pakistan have failed to play their roles responsibly," said Ashok Swain of Uppsala University while describing the back and forth between state agencies and media organizations (Thaker, 2019). Speaking to their role in the explosion of fake news, a Twitter spokesperson advised that "everyone has a role to play in ensuring misinformation doesn't spread on the internet" (Phartiyal, 2019). Regardless of who is responsible for the misinformation, Pratic Sinha, co-founder of *Alt News*, argues, "during such a time, when people's sensitivities are involved, people are more vulnerable and gullible" (Bagri, 2019).

However, this gullibility may be advantageous in preventing the two nations from going to war. Sadanand Dhume of the American Enterprise Institute explains that "the fact that both governments have effectively been able to create these information bubbles" where "everybody's willing to believe their own version … means that both sides can declare victory to their people and go home" (Bagri, 2019). Of course, this is all taking place in a climate where misinformation has "led to mass beating and mob lynchings" among communities in South Asia (Phartiyal, 2019). It is then unsurprising that a spokesperson for the Central

Reserve Police Force said fake news during such a situation "had the potential to create communal tension and lead to violence" (Bagri, 2019).

At the same time, the identification of fake news is a war in and of itself. Those fighting fake news in South Asia have even been described as "a line of defense for this fifth generation warfare" by Shahzad Ahmed of "Bytes for All," a Pakistani digital rights group (Jorgic & Pal, 2019). But the best outcome of that war on the Indian subcontinent remains unclear. Despite the risks of misinformation, Dhume holds firm on the positive side effects of certain kinds of fake news. He says, "paradoxically, the over-zealous Indian media and cowed Pakistani media may help prevent escalation of conflict" because "Indian TV is happy to run giddy stories about 'hundreds' of terrorists killed" and "Pakistani journalists won't question their army's claim that nothing much was hit," meaning that "everyone gets to save face, and in south Asia face matters—a lot" (Thaker, 2019). If fake news involves illusion, might there be some illusions that are helpful in South Asia's dreams for peace—or do they all eventually lead India and Pakistan to wake up at war?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the challenges of defining "fake news?" What values are in conflict in this case?
2. Is it ever ethically acceptable to spread misinformation? What if one spreads it unknowingly?
3. Who is responsible for ensuring the information environment is as accurate as possible? To what lengths must they go to do this?
4. What are the conflicts that may arise if social media or government attempts to control the spread of fake news on social media?

Further Information:

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Authors:

Dakota Park-Ozee & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.
Media Ethics Initiative
Center for Media Engagement
University of Texas at Austin

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www.mediaethicsinitiative.org