

Myth vs Reality: equipping youth to spot fake news, propaganda

The drive by the Elections Department aims at educating youth on spotting fake news. The outreach covered an estimated 24,000 colleges. Students were encouraged to flag instances of fake news in the lead-up to the elections, says election official

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The audio-visual tutorials, led by a team of resource persons, being held in the democracy room of an institution. | Photo Credit: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Behind the scenes of the high-pitched campaign for the just concluded Lok Sabha elections, an initiative was under way in college campuses to change the way youngsters process the barrage of data in an age of social media bubbles and propaganda bots.

The drive by the Elections Department, drawn from Thirukkural wisdom and new knowledge in behavioural sciences, aimed at educating youth on spotting fake news.

Launched as part of the Continuous Electoral and Democracy Education (CEDE) initiative of the Election Commission of India, which has opened a publicly available “Myth vs Reality” register to combat misinformation, the Puducherry campaign “Meypporul” after the couplet 423 of the Thirukkural--- “*Epporul Yaaryaarvaik Ketpinum Apporul Meypporul Kaanpa Tharivu*” (roughly translates to “To discern the truth in everything, by whomsoever spoken, is wisdom”).

In a span of a few weeks, the outreach covered an estimated 24,000 college students.

“Meypporul” was part of a slew of initiatives under the Systematic Voter’s Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) push for ethical and informed voting. The audio-visual tutorials, led by a team of resource persons, were held in “democracy rooms” across institutions.

“The programme pursued immediate and long-term objectives. While the students who attended the training sessions were encouraged to flag instances of fake news in the lead-up to the elections, the long-term goal aimed at evolving a generation of informed citizens,” an election official said.

These tutorials provided a primer on “misinformation” and “disinformation” and both posed a hazard to electoral democracy.

While misinformation involves the spread of false information regardless of the motive to mislead, disinformation pertains to a deliberate intent to mislead, manipulate narrative, or peddle propaganda.

A section, “Why facts matter”, focused on the deleterious effects of fake news on fair elections, by manipulating voter perception regarding election integrity/ candidates, spinning wrong notions of “correct vs incorrect” and influencing the decision of whom to vote. Voting based on fake news or incorrect, even incomplete information defeats the essential aspect of informed voting.

Cognitive bias

Youth were also exposed to forms of cognitive bias, a tendency to act in an irrational way due to a limited ability to process information objectively, which, while helping humans find mental shortcuts (heuristics) to assist in the navigation of daily life, often caused irrational interpretations and judgments.

From familiarity bias (the tendency to believe anything that is repeated often, anchoring bias (totally trusting the first piece of information on any topic), confirmation bias (the tendency to believe news which supports latent beliefs and expectations) to the sunk cost fallacy (tendency to continue with an endeavour that has taken up resources or effort and scale back even if the costs outweighed the benefits). Then, there was the bandwagon bias (the trait of aligning with the majority view) and the negativity bias where the brain subconsciously places more significance on negative events than positive ones.

Social media bubbles

Youth also learnt about social media bubbles, an echo-chamber of a particular ideological or cultural perspective that excludes or misrepresents other points of view. These media bubbles are reinforced by the algorithms of preferred search engines, social media, and frequented websites.

Practical tips to counter this included examining the web address of a page and looking up for strange domains other than ".com" such as ".infonet" or ".offer." Checking for any spelling errors of the company name in the URL address, credible sources cited within a story, or even the author profile. Bots can be verified by examining follower count or how long an account has been active. A reverse image search of photo on Google Reverse Image Search can help distinguish the original from the fake. Participants were also introduced to the thumb rule that if a story is pitched to persuade readers to use another site, it is probably a case of fake news.

"The idea is to develop more learning modules in these classrooms as the emphasis is on continuous electoral and democracy education", an election official said.