"'WhatsApp University' and the Role of Indian HEIs: A Call for Research and Awareness"

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Introduction

Should higher education institutions (HEIs) ignore the widely discussed 'WhatsApp University' phenomenon? Should HEIs respond when university campuses are labelled as 'Physical Campuses of WhatsApp" by adopting some proactive strategies or leave it for media to discuss and debate?' ('Physical building,2024). The silence of HEIs is strange despite the flood of fake news that threatens citizens' intellectual capabilities. The term' WhatsApp University' has entered the Indian lexicon in the last few years to highlight how political propaganda, distortion of historical facts, and fake news are making their way through social media and even reputed sources of information, including print and television (Arun,2019).

This proliferation of misinformation is not only a threat to the intellectual capabilities of the populace but also undermines the credibility of Indian higher education institutions. India is the world's largest WhatsApp market, with over 400 million users, so it has the distinction of forwarding the most content through this application (De, 2024). Since most Indians trust messages from family and friends, the shared content is passed without checks, exacerbating misinformation in the social realm (Sundar *et al*, 2021). The impact of misinformation has profound implications even for the industries, for example, during the COVID-19 crisis, the falsely claimed link between meat consumption and the pandemic resulted in massive losses for meat traders and farmers. Furthermore, it created religious tensions and economic hardship for vulnerable communities (Menon, 2020). Overall, the problem was so severe that one out of six information related to Covid 19 generated was fake, making India the top source of COVID misinformation (Sharma, 2022).

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Indian higher education has a long-established history of producing millions of intellectually stimulated, professionally trained, and globally recognized workforce for hundreds of years, underscoring its historical significance in education (Kumari & Shi, 2018). The quality of higher education in India is vital for the nation's ambitions to excel in the global knowledge economy (Rahman, 2022). Moreover, the global success of Indian students, particularly in fields like information technology, reflects positively on the country's higher education system (Ezer, 2006). So, given the strong education sector of India, can society expect our HEIs to make some social contributions towards countering the spread of fake news and empowering communities to battle the challenges posed by such narratives?

Given the severity of fake news and misinformation, our HEIs need to take some proactive steps especially promoting the media and information literacy (MIL). With the massive development of modern media resources and social media that inundate individuals with a vast amount of information, much of this information is questionable. So, it is not just about using media effectively but also about developing critical thinking and lifelong learning skills. This emphasis on media literacy is key to combating misinformation (Chibás *et al*., 2023). The other strategies include offering specialized training sessions on information literacy, digital citizenship, and the responsible use of social media. It is important to foster a culture of respectful debate and dialogue on campus. Engaging students in research projects investigating the spread of misinformation, its impact, and potential solutions can empower them to become active contributors to knowledge creation.

Therefore, given that the rise of the 'WhatsApp University phenomenon poses a significant threat to informed discourse and critical thinking, HEIs have a crucial role in combating this challenge with their legacy of knowledge creation and dissemination. By actively engaging in research on misinformation and equipping students with media literacy skills, HEIs can empower the next generation to navigate the complexities of the digital age and contribute to a more informed and discerning society. This proactive approach will safeguard the integrity of information and uphold the reputation of Indian higher education in fostering critical thinking and responsible digital citizenship.

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