



Understanding Fake News and Its Rise Amid Crisis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Periods of crisis are often accompanied by a rapid increase in misinformation and fake news. During times of crisis, false information tends to spread faster and reach larger audiences which raises an important question: Why does fake news rise during crises? This knowledge brief argues that crises create ideal conditions for the spread of misinformation because people experience fear, uncertainty, and an urgent need for information. In such situations, individuals actively search for updates and are more likely to trust and share unverified content, particularly when it appears to provide immediate answers. Drawing on existing literature and examples from COVID-19, geopolitical conflicts, and economic rumors in Pakistan, the brief identifies why people share fake news and what factors contribute to the rise of fake news. The brief concludes that fake news during crises is not simply a consequence of technological change but a product of human behavior interacting with digital media systems that requires effective management both on individual and state level.

EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The media is considered to be a key factor in making the world a global village, and the news started traveling faster. The expansion of mass media through digital channels transformed how news is produced, consumed, and disseminated. Since 1975, the media have evolved through privatization, independent identities, getting out of family businesses, investment in digital communications, and operationalization and generation of content faster and more efficiently (Klinenberg, 2005), and this efficiency and speed increased multifold with the advent of social media. Social media consists of many apps, including WhatsApp, YouTube, X (Twitter), LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Instagram, that allow people to create, publicize, and share their own or other user-generated content and interact globally (Davis, 2016). Social media has provided people with numerous platforms to share real-time news with their friends and followers worldwide. Social

Media has empowered and enabled people to be proactive and to raise their voices when needed; it has been a source of many social movements and protests that have brought in revolutions (Leong et al., 2019). This has been proven through the spread of timely crucial information during the times of COVID-19 when social media became the primary source to update people with crucial information, and the governments and World Health Organization (WHO) were also convinced that social media is the right choice for spread of information faster. The use of social media is immense, and in Pakistan there are over 66 million social media users, as reported by Data Reportal in their Digital Landscape of Pakistan 2025 report. Figure 1 shows the stats of Pakistan's digital landscape. This number shows that if just a small fraction of these people share unverified news, it can become a viral trend and news can spread faster.

Figure 1: Digital landscape of Pakistan 2025



Source: DataReportal, Design: NotebookLM

RISE OF FAKE NEWS DUE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite several uses of social media and quick information dissemination, it doesn't come without its issues, and one of the key issues is the spread of false or fake information. As Bennett & Livingston (2023) stated that despite many factors contribute to the spread of mis and dis information, social media gets the main blame due to its communal nature. Kefalaki & Karanickolas (2020) state that social media platforms are the major contributors and a source of spreading fake news across borders. Fake news is generally defined as spread of sensational and controversial news (Tandoc et al., 2018). The spread of fake news rises amid genuine, truthful news as the news is created, disseminated, reproduced and recreated and cycle continues which gives rise to the information disorder that is fake news (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). During crisis, people are uncertain and in need of any kind of news and often believe fake news, which is the basic idea of this study to identify what factors contribute to rising of fake news during times of crisis. Fake news is becoming a rising concern due to multiple digital platforms and vast content that's being produced on those platforms (Priya et al., 2026) and people's reliance on user-generated content more than televised content. A clarity on fake news is also important, fake news is an umbrella

term coined to include the misinformation, disinformation, false information and malinformation (Aïmeur et al. 2023).

These issues often lead to the rise of fake news, particularly in times of crisis, and can cause problems or slow down the process of information spread. COVID-19 has seen an example of the rise of misinformation and disinformation, with the uncontrolled abundance of information, WHO coined the term “infodemic”. The idea was that irrelevant and fake information were confusing the people and was adding to the on-going health issues and have turned public health pandemic into an epidemic of information as well (Rovetta & Castaldo, 2022).

TYPES OF FAKE NEWS

Fake news can take multiple forms, as presented in Table 1, and can be broadly categorized into two typologies: Intent and content (Aïmeur et al., 2023). The intent means that news is created in order to deceive people whereas content means that it can be user-generated and can either be created to deceive and harm or the factual content is used in a way that it can spread misinformation or fake news. Certain types of fake news include a mix of both intention and content. The types of the fake news are provided in the table below.

Table 1: Types of Fake News

	Type	Explanation
1.	Misinformation	Misinformation is vague, wrong, or unauthentic news without any intent of spreading false news. The misinformation is disseminated considering it to be factual or true information
2.	Disinformation	Disinformation is wrong or false information that is spread with malicious intent of harm or to incite violence and anxiety.
3.	Malinformation	Factual information, often leaked on purpose to cause harm or provoke hate speech.
4.	Satire	Exaggerated information or mimicked facts in a humorous way, usually about politicians and political situations, without any intention of causing harm.
5.	Memes	Memes are internet-driven form of satire, mostly in form of images and texts. They are user-generated that is why they are more inclined towards spread of fake news or false information
6.	Rumor	Rumor are widespread claims with malicious intent, and the claims are never verified, therefore considered as fake news more often
7.	Hoax / Fabricated content	Planned fake content to harm people, create a narrative or masquerade as truth
8.	Click Bait	Irrelevant and catchy thumbnails or images, which are often misleading and have no connection with the original news and story and are just done to get some clicks on the irrelevant news. Most often have no intent to harm but can harm.
9.	Conspiracy Theories	The idea that something is happening because of certain plotting and scheming. Conspiracy theories have been part of news world for a long time and usually are built around political or public matters.

Source: Aïmeur et al., (2023); Lynch (2022); Cooke (2017)

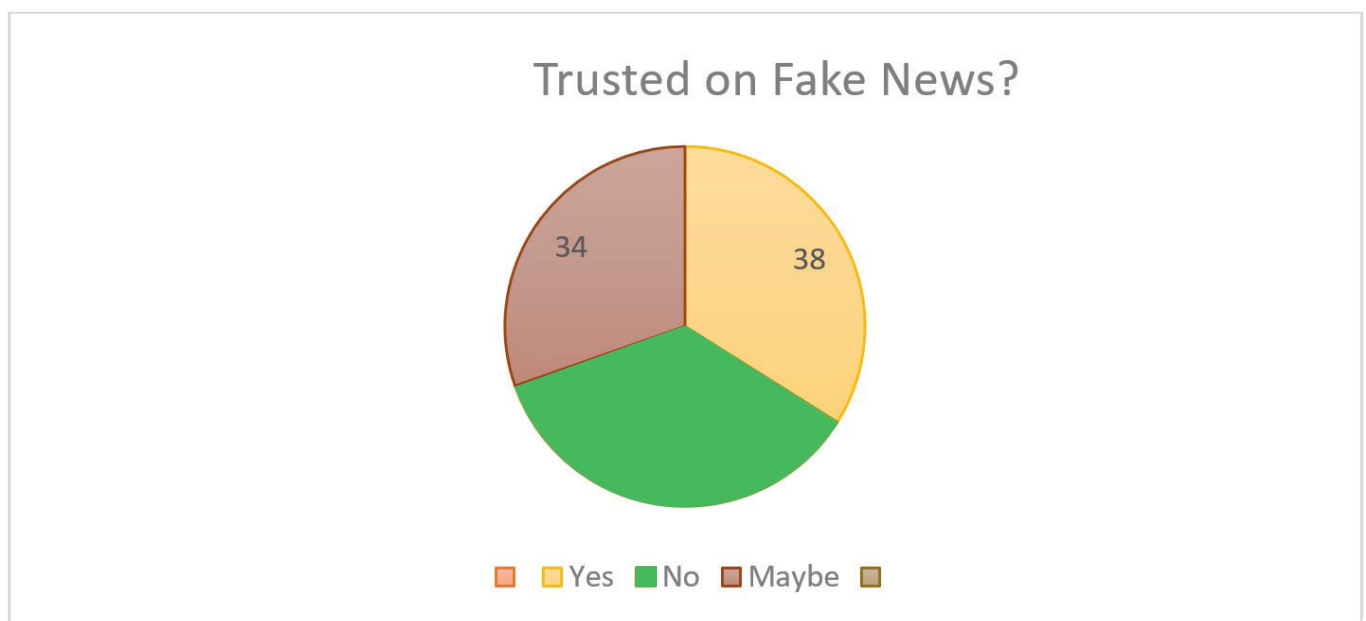
ROLE OF AUDIENCE IN SPREADING OF FAKE NEWS

According to Tandoc et al., (2018) audience or the receiver of the information play a major role in spread of fake news, the audience are the ones that spread it considering it factual information and sometime co-construct it. Audience or receiver of fake news also spread it due to their confirmation bias or considering it as part of information or knowledge sharing with their peers and uploading on their WhatsApp statuses and Instagram stories (An et al., 2025). Franceschi & Pareschi (2022) have defined four types of audience that becomes spreader of news and a particular type that stops it. The types are as follow:

- **Oblivious:** The people who are unaware of the news
- **Reflector:** The people who have awareness and reflecting on how to act on the news
- **Spreader:** The people who intentionally spread the news
- **Silent:** The people who can differentiate between the fake news and real news and stop the spread of news any further.

A small anonymous survey was conducted in Islamabad, Pakistan to identify if people can differentiate between the real and fake news, and if they have ever fallen victim to it and have spread it knowingly. The questionnaire was formed on google and was distributed online. The survey avoided the bias due to its anonymity. A total of 112 responses were collected. The survey included questions about the distinction between real and fake news and its spread. However, due to the small sample size, the findings are just indicative and may not be generalized to overall population of Pakistan.

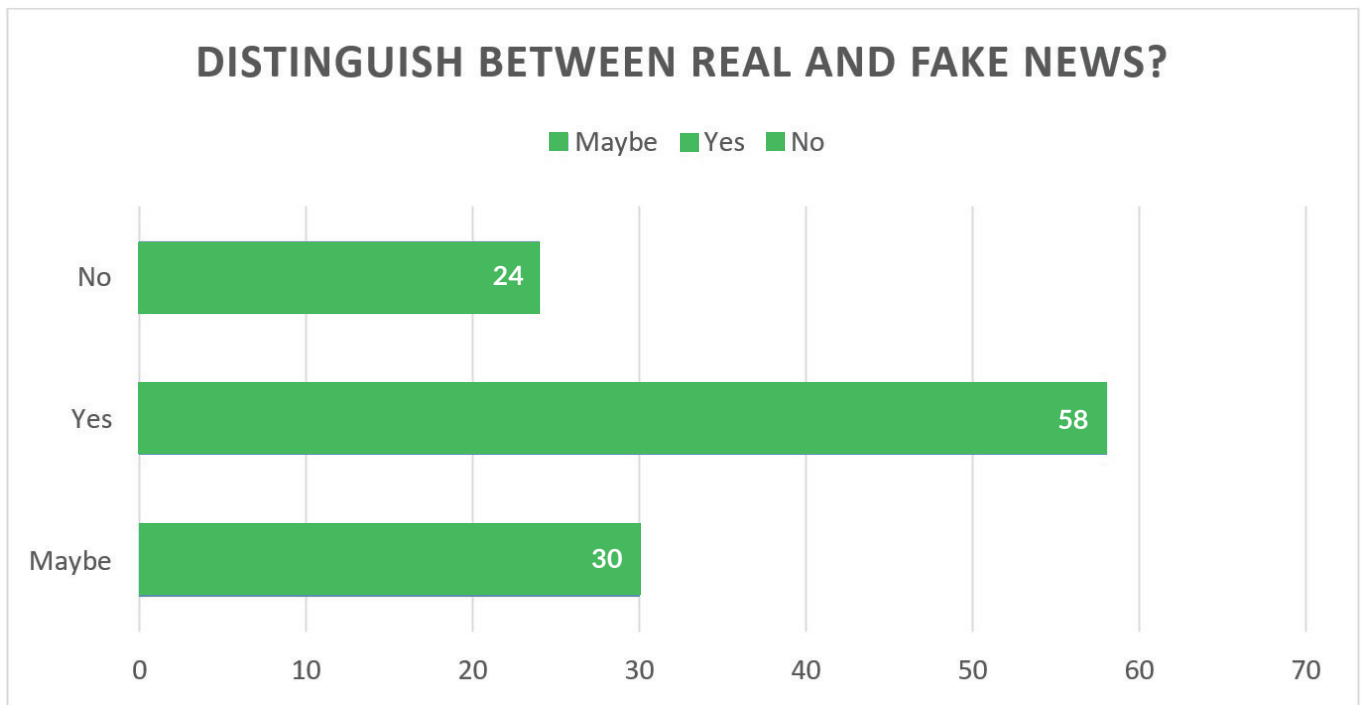
Figure 2



Source: Author

The results show that most individuals who participated in the survey could distinguish between correct and incorrect information and they avoid spread of fake news. The answer to the question if they have trusted a fake news is very nuanced, as the percentage of responses is very close. 36% of the people stated that they have never trusted a fake news. However, the 30% Maybe remains an interesting point as the audience are ambiguous if they may have trusted a fake news or not. Whereas, 30% participants stated that they have trusted a fake news. The results also show that all the participants have come across a fake news in their life and they were able to reflect on the news that it was fake.

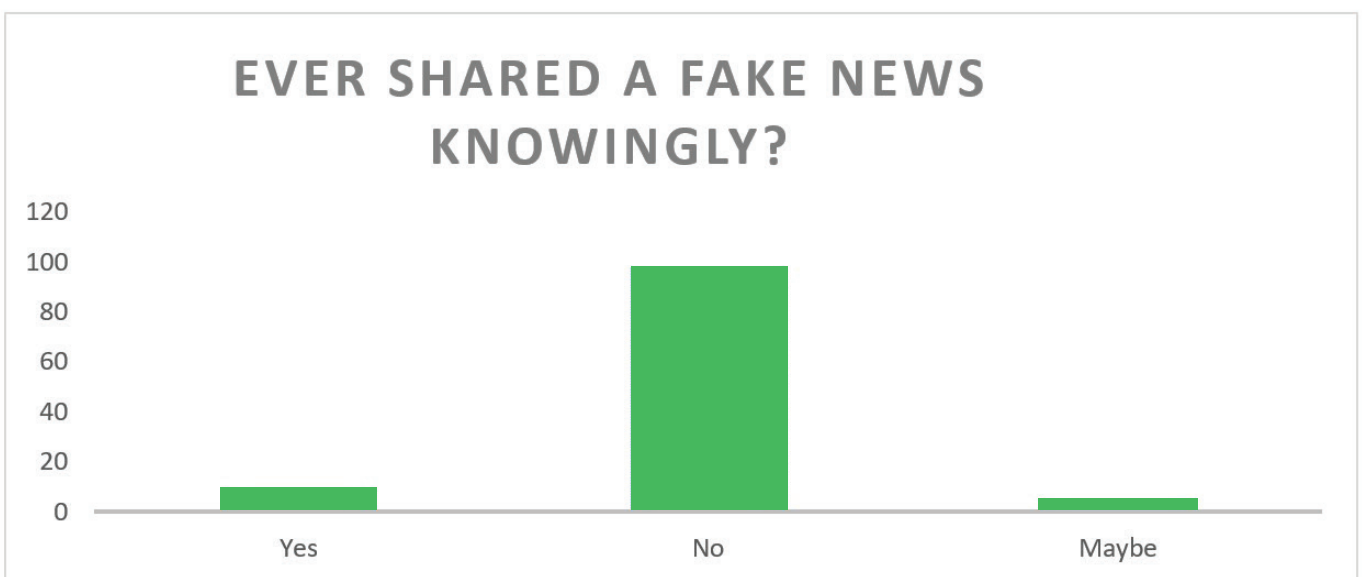
Figure 3



Source: Author

When the participants were asked if they can distinguish between real and fake news, 52% of the participants mentioned that they can very well distinguish between the two. Whereas, 21% of the participants can't create clear distinction between two and 27% of the people were unsure which can represent that they may have sometimes difficulty in differentiating between the real and fake news. When the participants were asked if they had ever shared the fake news as shown in Figure 4, 88% of the participants declared that they have never shared a fake news knowingly whereas few of the participants cited that they have knowingly shared fake news. The survey revealed that most of the participants involved in the survey were the silent type as per the typology of Franceschi & Pareschi (2022) since they were able to distinguish the fake news and stopped its

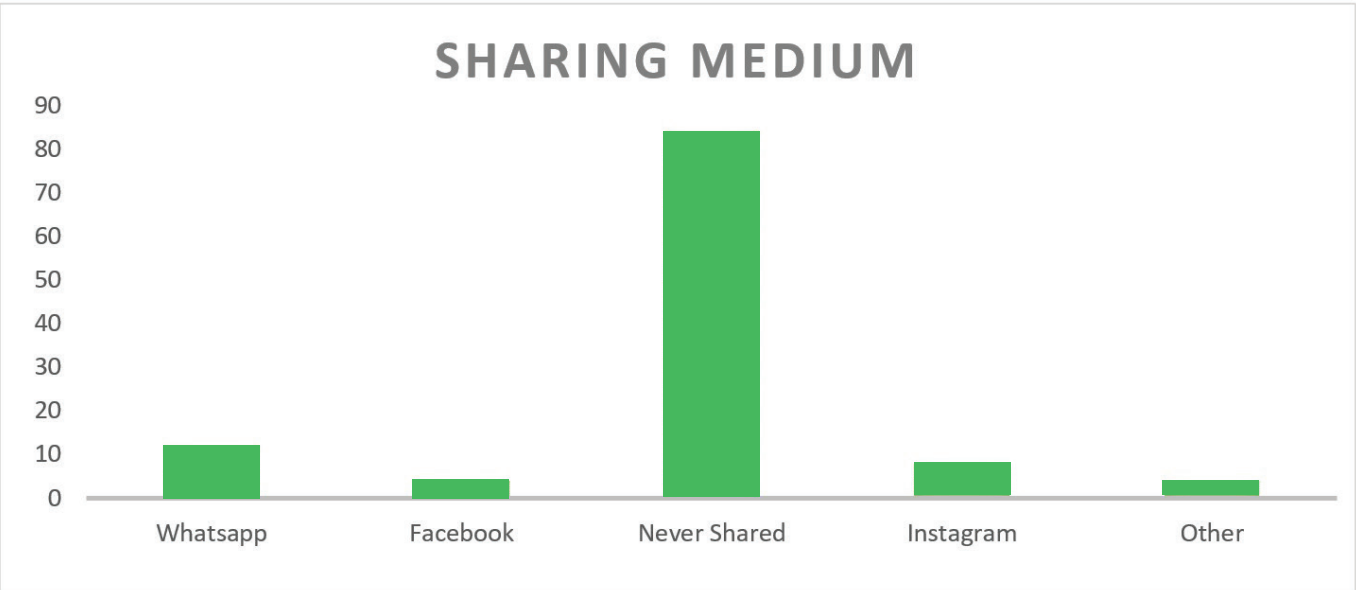
Figure 4



Source: Author

spread on their end. And when it was asked if they may have ever shared a fake news what were the mediums, the ones who have shared it, chose their social media as the medium, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5



Source: Author

The survey was distributed to most of the participants who were working therefore it can be inferred that the results corroborate the findings presented by Franceschi & Pareschi (2022) that the more competent or educated a person is, the less they fall victim to fake news and don't become part of spreading it. Similarly, Beauvais (2022) reported literacy as one of the major contributing factors in the spread of fake news, among other factors. However, according to Gallup Pakistan's analysis of the PBS census 2023, almost 61% of Pakistani population is living in rural areas and 67.5% of overall population is under matriculation (Grade 10) which can make them more vulnerable to fall victim of the false news.

An et al., (2025) argued mindfulness and instant sharing of information as the main reason of sharing fake news. They also stated religiosity as a factor among people with less religious knowledge. Beauvais (2022) also mentioned cognitive bias, political pressures, familiarity, and illusion of an idea as major cognitive factors that explain why someone would spread fake news. Further, impulsivity, sensationalization, emotionally hyped up, novel ideas, pressure groups, and stressful environments also contribute to the spread of fake news. Stressful environments explain why fake news rises amid crisis and many educated people may also become part of spreading the news.

FAKE NEWS AMID CRISIS

The first reported incident of fake news amid crisis was occurred in 1938 (Tandoc et al., 2018) since many important events leading to World War II were happening around same time. This suggests that fake news have been around even before the social media times but its occurrence increases after social media. Rise of fake news is impacting the behaviours and viewpoints of people as when the fake news spreads across boundaries it tends to impact people and their narratives (Cherry, 2024).

The literature suggests that spread of fake news rises around the major events as seen during COVID-19. The other major events as described in literature are geopolitical conflicts like wars, election campaigns, high-profile conspiracies like Epstein files, health emergencies, and national and international disasters (Rovetta & Castaldo, 2022).

The fake news rise amid crisis because people tend to aim for more information and panic, therefore they tend to believe any information that is present on the internet. Twitter has been named as the most used social network as source of consolidated and organized misinformation and disinformation. Many people use twitter to get all the information they require as many public figures actively update their twitter accounts (Muñoz et al., 2024). Twitter has massively also been used as war weapon and been called as part of digital warfare. Therefore, people when are stressed use Twitter to get the information and then often believe the fake information and tend to spread it. Since during stress, the main aim of many people is to aware their loved ones and get as much real time information as possible, and doing so they fell victim to fake news as both receiver and sender.

Another reason stated by Cherry (2024) is planned efforts to increase the disinformation to create panic in the public and keep them away from truthful information in order to create chaos and manipulate people for required outcomes of the perpetrators, lobbyists, and certain governments. Their aim is to impact the psychology of the people during conflict so they believe the fabricated and planned version of the conflict rather reality. As it is always easy to manipulate people when they are in conflicting and vulnerable states, which is one of the major reasons of increment of fake news during the crisis like wars. This has also been evident in the political campaigns and unexpected election results.

Another reason of rising of fake news during conflicts is the algorithm settings of social media, when a user engages with a particular kind of content on social media, the social media algorithms read that and share them similar kind of information and content (Narayanan, 2023). That is why when people interact with news about the crisis, all fake news of similar type also starts showing up which people believe because of their bias or interest in the information. This way the creators of fake information also align their disinformation in a way that it appears in the searches of people and the network searches of algorithms.

Examples of Fake News

Fake news are highly prevalent in Pakistan and there are few of the examples of the Fake news that are presented below with brief analysis of what they show and what kind of impact they had.

Figure 6: AI generated Image of US base in Qatar allegedly targeted by Iran



Figure 6 was mass circulated during the initial days of US-Israel-Iran war 2026 and the claims were made that Iranian forces have attacked the US base in Qatar and US will plan an attack back on Iran to avenge it, but the image was reportedly fake and was identified by Al-Jazeera English. According to them the picture was generated by Artificial Intelligence and the building did not exist in reality. This picture is a type of disinformation and aimed to create more problems in already ongoing crisis situation, the picture was heavily circulated before it was identified as AI generated picture, the picture created issue in the Qatar region specifically due to the involvement of Gulf region in the war. As reported by the news channel there was panic among residents of Qatar region due to constant attacks in the Gulf region. The government of Qatar moved all the students to safe spaces and had asked the residents living nearby to leave the area and take shelter in safe spaces until the issue is resolved.

Figure 7: Thumbnail of Geo News YouTube, Showing a satire



Figure 7 is depiction of the news run on Indian news channels and social media during the India-Pakistan War 2025 where Indian journalists claimed that they have hit the Seaport of Lahore and have captured Lahore. This news then got viral on the social media and Indians were celebrating a huge win against Pakistan and were teasing Pakistanis. Whereas on the other side Pakistanis identified the malinformation and intent of Indians and changed into meme where they were asking why the Lahore seaport was hidden from the people of Lahore and Pakistan. Lahore is a plain region and isn't surrounded by any sea, it just has a long canal. However, the people who were uneducated or less informed were highly impacted by it and created the panic-driven content on social media that how India has taken over Pakistan. Further, news channels then took a step to stop the spread of fake news by clarifying in the news that it was malinformation. Figure 7 is a thumbnail of Geo News' YouTube page, where the news and meme were picked up and reported by the news channel Geo in a satire form.

Figure 8: An interview with Luc Montagnier during Covid-19

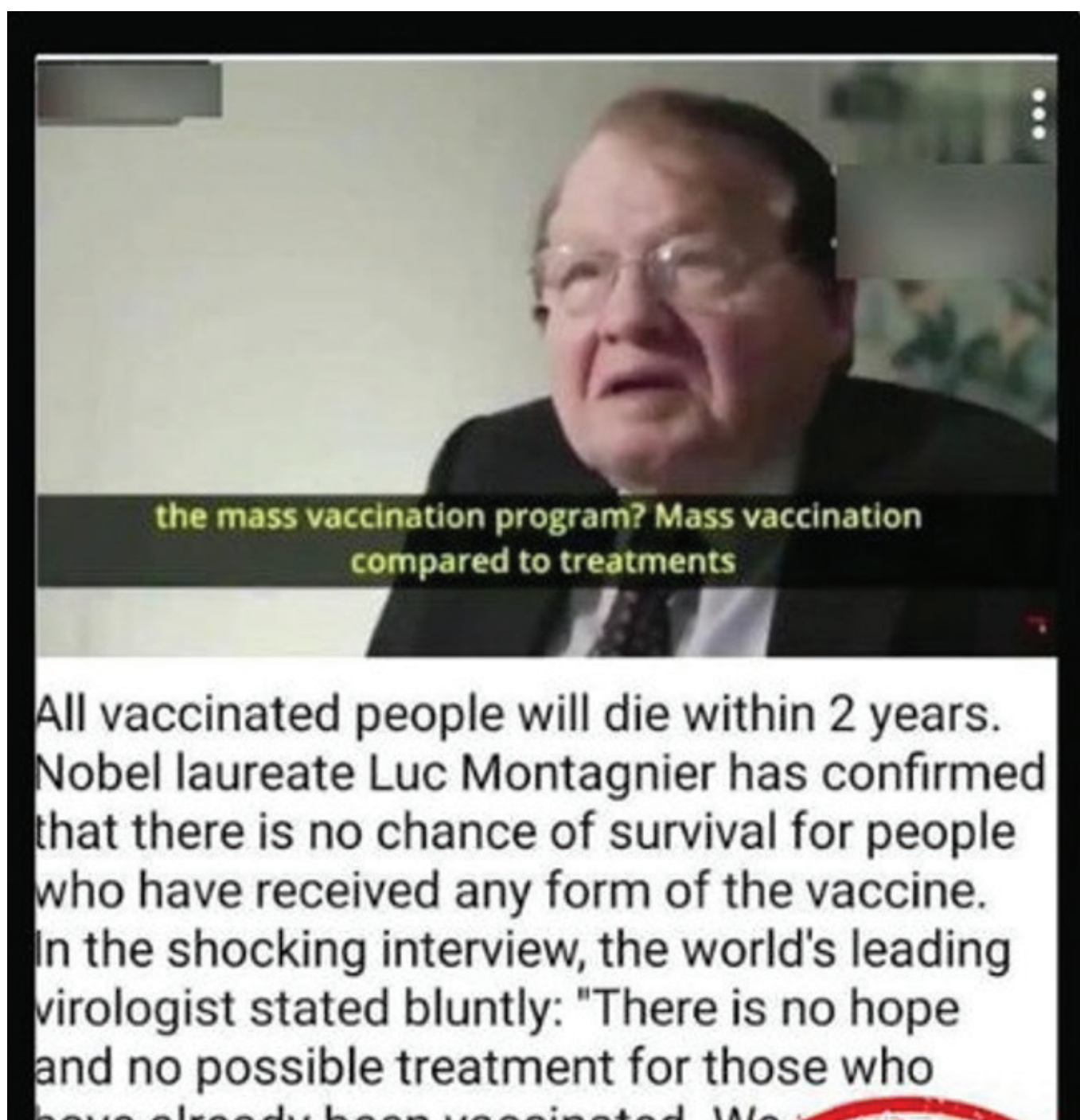


Figure 8 represents a still from an interview with a Nobel laureate who claimed that Covid-19 vaccines were dangerous for the people and those who have taken shots of the vaccines will die within 2 years of taking shot. There were many similar conspiracy theories around the world where people were making different claims, like men will go impotent, women will become infertile, children will become stunted were widespread. These conspiracy theories and fake news regarding vaccination had made it hard for WHO and national authorities to combat COVID-19 effectively as people were against getting vaccinations, which was raising the spread of virus that led to deaths in large numbers in many countries. Many nations then took responsibility to convey message through the official social media and news channels through doctors and politicians that vaccination is safe and people should get those. Similarly, in Pakistan, people when heard different types of conspiracy theories were hesitant to get vaccination, the pattern was similar to the polio vaccination related hesitancy, which was causing medical emergencies and were increasing the

cases of COVID positive cases. Government took a stern stance and started massive campaigns to vaccinate people and issued vaccination certificates that were then required for travels and admissions etc. which help them combating the virus. Figure 9 shows a message that was used to combat the fake news regarding COVID-19 vaccinations.

Figure 9: Post by Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination Islamabad issued to refute fake news

ویکسین محفوظ ہے



کووڈ ویکسین کے بارے میں جھوٹی اور گمراہ کرنے والی خبریں نہ پھیلائیں۔

جعلی خبریں صورتحال کو مزید سنگین کرنے کے علاوہ آپ کے دوست و احباب اور رشتہ داروں پر منفی اثرات مرتب کر سکتی ہیں۔

مزید تفصیلات کیلئے
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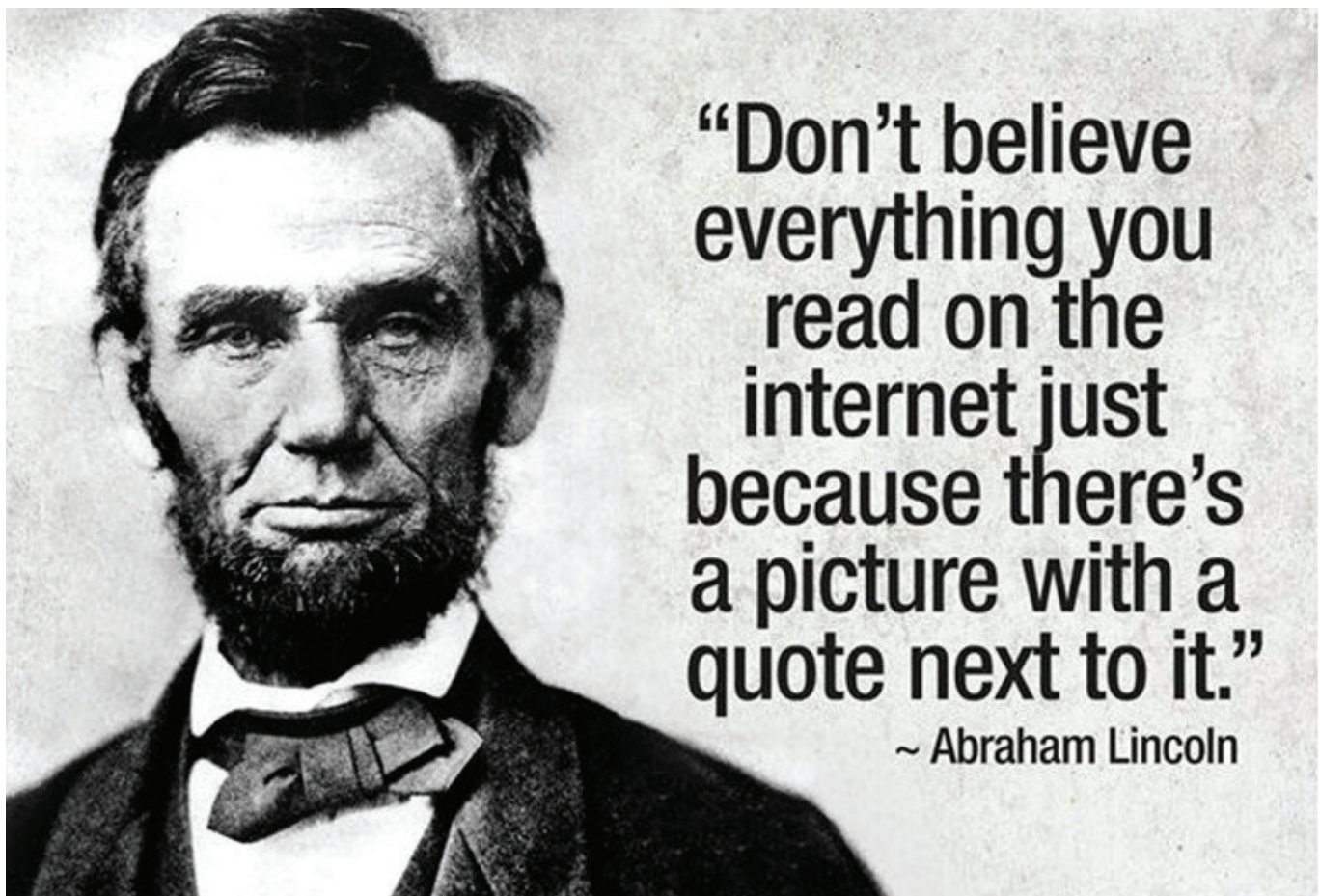
Figure 10: Misinformation regarding petrol prices



Figure 10 represents a fake news that is done in urgency of providing information. This news doesn't malign somebody but is an example of misinformation. Every week government of Pakistan changes the petroleum prices and there are always rumors about it until proven. On April 2, 2026, the rumor was that the government was raising petroleum prices by over 100 PKR. As a result, there were large queues of vehicles outside petrol stations to get petrol, and many petrol pumps ceased their operations in greed of earning profits and claimed there was shortage of petrol. Due to the long queues there were road blocks at many places and there was massive trolling of government on the social media platforms. Government took a quick decision and instead of waiting for another day, changed the prices same day and the petrol was actually raised only PKR 06 in the said week. Due to this news there was lot of panic and chaos in the public, whereas the main purpose of sharing this news was to inform people and do good for them. Few leading news channels also believed the misinformation and ran it on news channels which later was proven wrong.

Figure 11 shows a meme which is parody or satire and takes a dig on the believers of fake news as it uses the image of Abraham Lincoln, former President of USA who passed away in 1865 and internet usage was started in late 1900s. This shows the ultimate misuse and spread of misinformation.

Figure 11: A meme highlighting fake news



How to avoid Fake news & What Pakistan is doing?

Cherry (2024) highlighted that education is one of the major sources from which one can avoid disinformation and misinformation. Also, it is very important to verify news before believing it. It is also important to verify the source of information, many pages on social media are often imitating the real official pages of government offices and public figures, so it is always very important to verify news from the authentic source. Further, Kefalaki & Karanickolas (2020) encourage people to develop the critical thinking skill and urged the teachers to specifically work on their student's critical thinking skills which are very important in today's times of social media and abundance of information both fake and correct.

Pakistan has consistently recognized and acknowledged fake news, and its impacts on governance and security, but freedom of speech, socio-political and religious factors and internationalization of fake news often hinder its strong stance against it (Yousaf et al., 2024). However, Government of Pakistan is making efforts to make legal frameworks to eliminate the fake news, the first legal act was Prevention of Electronic Crimes (PECA) 2016 which was amended in 2025. Figure 12 shows an excerpt from the act mentioning the penalty for the spreaders and creators of fake news.

Figure 12: PECA Act establishing Punishment for spread of Fake News

"26A. Punishment for false and fake information.— Whoever intentionally disseminates, publicly exhibits, or transmits any information through any information system, that he knows or has reason to believe to be false or fake and likely to cause or create a sense of fear, panic or disorder or unrest in general public or society shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend upto three years or with fine which may extend to two million rupees or with both."

The federal Investigation Agency and cybercrime authorities also keep a check and balance on the online shared content and take actions accordingly. Currently, the actions are fundamentally against the anti-state and blasphemy-related content. Further, Pakistan is joining many international fact-checking organizations and is creating its own as well. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has its own fact-checker, which expose fake news on its X(Twitter) handle @FactCheckerMoIB. The government of Pakistan is making efforts to combat the fake news and provide authentic news to its people but due to the excessive number of producers and spreaders of fake news, there remain many hindrances.

Recommendations

- There are many international fact checking institutes that keep auditing social media for any fake news, Pakistan should also become member of such institutes in order to combat with international level fake news.
- Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication should work on developing more authentic and fast fact checkers in Pakistan that will look for fake news as there are centers for auditing state-against and blasphemy related content
- Government response rate on crisis related fake news needs to be quicker and make amends to post rebuttals before the spread of news.
- Media and social media literacy and awareness campaigns must be considered to inform and teach to distinguish between fake and real news.
- There must be awareness campaigns regarding the authentication checking of sources particularly in the rural and less literate areas.

Conclusion

Fake news rises during times of crisis, be they national or global crises. The reasons include the uncertainty, fear, and information hunting by people to stay aware of the situation of crisis. The survey conducted showed that participants of the survey were not spreading the fake news but they since the findings are indicative and not generalized therefore, a proper awareness campaign needs to be designed to aware people of the harms of fake news and how to deal with those. People are now increasingly dependent on digital and social media and their perceptions change based on the information available on social media which requires attention to combat with misinformation and disinformation particularly in order to manage crisis better.

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