

In Times Of Fake News & Manufactured Outrage, How Do We Reclaim Empathy? - I

As misinformation and propaganda become the mainstay of public discourse, the space for reason is shrinking

YouTube and Twitter took down several videos and posts that part of China's state propaganda and information wars against the Hong Kong protests aimed to the discredit news stories emerging from there in September last year. Earlier in 2019, an Indian Parliamentary committee led by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party asked Twitter to explain a "liberal" bias, accusing it of only targeting right wing voices as they blocked and took down abusive accounts.

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In August 2019, police in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh decided to open an investigation into a local journalist, Pawan Jaiswal, all because he had exposed a government school for feeding its children salt and a chapati as a mid-day meal. This meal was well below the government's minimum nutrition standards. But the state didn't care about the information that was revealed, it didn't care to respond with alarm to the food that was being fed to these young children. Instead of taking action against the school authorities, the Uttar Pradesh government felt the journalist was at fault for making the government look bad, especially on video that could be circulated so widely now online. And so, it decided to charge him with cheating, using false evidence and conspiracy. The Uttar Pradesh government essentially accused him of reporting their version of fake news.

Barely two weeks after this incident, the same state government booked journalists Ashish Tomar, Shakil Ahmed and three others who tried to report on caste discrimination in the city of Bijnor. Discrediting journalists when the story doesn't suit those in power, by accusing them of peddling "fake news" has become par for course across the world. Populist leaders would like us to believe that news they don't like, or news they want to deny, is fake, simply because it is critical of them and their policies. These are just two cases in point, but the world is littered with such examples.

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So when we see politicians and world leaders call stories like Pawan Jaiswal's "fake news", the terminology itself stands discredited. Instead, a bigger, deeper danger confronts us – what is in essence the real threat of "fake news" – misinformation, propaganda and hate speech propagated by state machineries and co-opted media voices. Falsehoods, rumours, real news disaggregated and put back together with the aim of feeding fear and diverting public attention from accountability – this kind of misinformation is all geared to stop journalists from doing their job. It is geared to sow hate division amongst the people.

News in digital times

We can argue that fake news is as old as time and we would be right. It has been around since news became a concept 500 years ago with the invention of the printing press in the 1400s. Rumors in Italy in the 16th century, for example, about Jewish people drinking children's blood circulated

on printed pamphlets in Italy. Printing technology gave the rumor legitimacy. Today, those rumors are considered the precursor to anti-Semitism in the world. Like the printing press's disruptive technology, broadcast technologies have also been misused to spread hate – most visibly in Rwanda, where they pitted the Hutus and Tutsis against each other and exhorted violence.

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan burst on to the intellectual scene by defining the media as an extension of ourselves. The phone extends our voice, the TV extends our eyes and ears, the computer extends our brain, and electronic media overall extends our central nervous system. This extension of technology, McLuhan argued can allow us to detach ourselves from the world around us. If we think about it, in an era of social media, of trolls and online abuse, the keyboard has placed distance between the abuser and the victim. That distance has empowered people to speak in the most hateful ways – something that face-to-face interaction censures and discourages. Today, just as computing technology gives us access to all sorts of news and information at the click of a button it also spreads opinion, propaganda and unverified information that masquerades as news quicker than anyone could have ever imagined with more damaging consequences that anyone could have imagined.

In 2018, a spate of deaths by lynching that were the result of rumors about child kidnappers in India forced the Indian public to sit up and take a hard look at just how we were becoming part of this rumor factory. These deaths finally forced the platform, WhatsApp, to restrict our ability to forward messages without a second thought and realise, through identifiable markers that what we get isn't always an original, fresh piece of information.

In 2014, the World Economic Forum called misinformation one of the ten greatest perils confronting society. It sows the seeds of hate, waters them and harvests them. Think of these numbers – WhatsApp, which is accused of being used to disseminate rumor and whip up hysteria, has 400 million users in India alone. Facebook has 2.5 billion monthly active users around the world. How often does it shock us to read comments from some of these users below the most innocuous posts? Politics, gender rights, festivals, food – just about anything can spark off a verbal war about choices and biases.

Digital platforms have brought yellow journalism back to the fore. For one, algorithms that create news feeds and compilations have no regard for accuracy and objectivity. Content moderation tools need to work in tandem with human intervention. At the same time, the digital news trend has decimated the journalistic force – measured in both money and manpower – of the traditional free press. The advertising-based business model that supported journalism all these years has collapsed, platforms like Google and Facebook have become the most powerful news disseminators in history.

Speed and time have become compressed in our

hyperconnected world and it has become next to impossible to reconcile the need for speed with the need to verify information that we either get or pass along. Technology serves not only to amplify disinformation and hate, but also creates the scope for its automated spread through bots that are learning to mimic human behavior and imitate legitimate users. This sort of technology has no use for borders, so people and machines in Ukraine can influence public opinion in America, Russian agencies can interfere with the US electoral process. And as the Cambridge Analytica scandal showed us, specific audiences that could be influenced were targeted. The manufactured information they received disguised as news confirmed their anxieties and biases.

Hate as political tool

In India, propaganda and disinformation is being used constantly to discredit political leaders, and political legacies inimical to the government. Pictures of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru being affectionate and social with women friends, or family; or lighting a cigarette, were shared by the head of BJP's IT cell accusing him of being a womaniser with westernised values; and in turn rally political support for the BJP's current leadership, projected as one that upholds/respects "traditional values."

This is all profitable – the flow of fabricated stories, rearranged half-truths and decontextualised facts has corroded trust in the media. Worse, it co-opted some in the mainstream media via unscrupulous politicians and media managers looking at a profitable bottom line.

In fact, journalists in Rwanda stood trial at a United Nations court – accused of inciting genocide of 800,000 people by Hutu extremists. But the legitimacy we as readers and viewers get from text, sound and images, taken out of context, however incorrectly projected, is hard to undo. Today, newsrooms around the world are prioritising the role of fact checkers precisely to call out this sort of propaganda.

But peddlers of propaganda and disinformation have no real reputation to maintain, no incentive to stay honest. Their concern is limited to reach. And they thrive on anonymity. Automation allows them to be here today, on to another story tomorrow. Their campaigns seek to destroy what exists, what is built. They are almost messianic – mobilising to raze what is, with the promise of what is to be – of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

This is why conversations about the health of our democracies converge naturally around the threat from misinformation and the role its manipulators play in blurring the lines between news and opinion, rumor and fact. Misinformation is a key part of hate campaigns.

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To be concluded

REVIEW

'My Seditious Heart' Is Two Decades Of Arundhati Roy's Rage

Roy has, after all, been called "seditious" on many occasions by many people. And she is, in so many ways, offering up her heart through this book

SONALI KOKRA

Arundhati Roy has always been an evocative, yet incendiary writer. She's irked several governments across the world with her excoriating analyses of foreign policies and the clever ways in which those governments have tried to sell the interests of their most vulnerable citizens to satiate capitalist greed.

During her 20 years as a political, environmental and human rights activist, Roy has supported the secession of Kashmir – an inflammatory political position to take in India – and described former US president George W Bush as a war criminal, as well as accusing the Israeli and Sri Lankan governments of state-sponsored terrorism.

As such, it's almost poetic that the book containing two decades of Roy's rage is called My Seditious Heart. She has, after all, been called "seditious" on many occasions by many people. And she is, in so many ways, offering up her heart through this book.

Roy has had an astonishing rise to international fame

Many people know Roy's name because of her astonishing rise to international fame. In 1997, at the age of 36, she won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for her debut novel, The God Of Small Things. It would be 20 years before Roy published her second work of fiction, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. But the real Roy – and the things that move, perplex, anger and sadden her – exists within her extensive non-fiction writing.

As someone who has followed Roy's acerbic prose for a long time, I knew that My Seditious Heart was going to be a deeply disconcerting read. Roy's rage is sharp when she gives her views on the way India's indigenous, tribal people are being treated by the country's newly monied middle class, which she says

is giddy with delight over a shiny development story that exists only in the imaginations of those whose financial interests the performance of democracy serves.

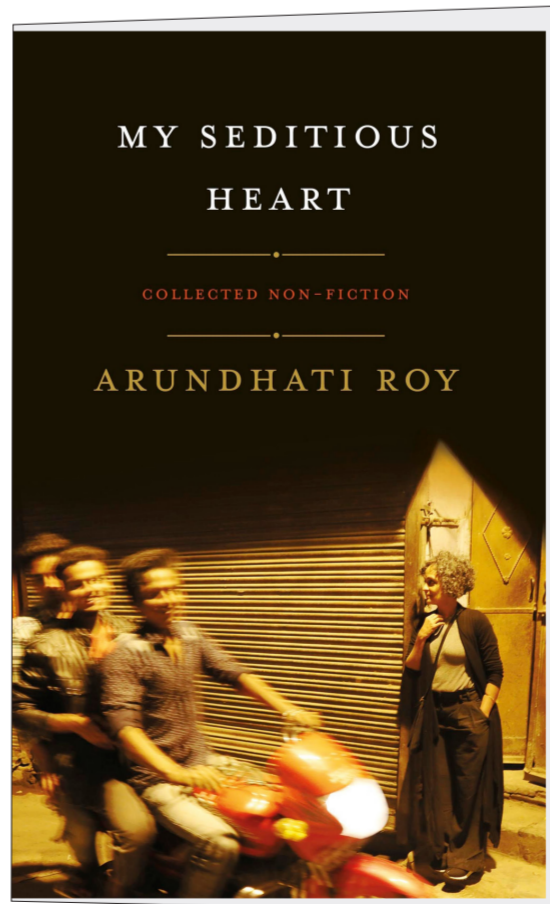
'India doesn't live in her villages. India dies in her villages' In one of her early essays, The Greater Common Good, she writes that "India doesn't live in her villages. India dies in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities. Her villagers are her citizens' vassals and for that reason must be controlled and kept alive, but only just".

In another essay, Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin, Roy discusses what she says is the tragedy of privatisation of water in India. In it, she forces us to wonder how you can put a value on water, or decide what is a fair market price for something so essential to human life?

My Seditious Heart concerns itself with all of Roy's most intimate vexations in the past two decades. She ruminates over the idea of nationhood and the "right way" to love the land that nurtures you. One of her most poignant and powerful essays is about the nuclear bomb, and how it is the most "anti-democratic, anti-human, outright evil thing ever made", no matter how much a government may try to sell its people the idea of national pride in nuclear prowess.

Much of the book is dedicated to answering the thorny question of Kashmir

Through the course of the book, Roy zigzags across nations, states and cities, from Washington DC and New York in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, to Delhi in 1984, Mumbai in 1993 and Gujarat in 2002, drawing parallels between war-hungry governments the world over. In Democracy: Who's She When She's At Home? Roy says there is no difference between different forms of religious extremism in India and holds both Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose Bharatiya Janata Party has conservative, Hindu na-



tionalist leanings, and former Congress prime minister Indira Gandhi, who was assassinated while in office, equally responsible for injecting venom into the country's political veins.

Come September is a reminder that practically every part of the world has its own tragic, bloody September to contend with, while The Loneliness of Noam Chomsky deconstructs the idea of freedom. In Peace Is War: The Collateral Damage Of Breaking News, Roy attempts to disentangle what she calls the "complex mess of cables that connect power to money to the supposedly neutral free press".

Much of the book is dedicated to answering the thorny question of Kashmir and a growing demand for secession, much to the chagrin of people who stand to lose nothing, but claim to be wholeheartedly invested in the matter in the name of national pride. In How Deep Shall We Dig? Roy draws our attention towards what she describes as the unchecked, undemocratic powers that the Indian government has lavished on those entrusted to maintain order – political speak for quashing dissent – on its behalf.

Her sorrow is laced with biting sarcasm

Despite its many meandering, thematic turns, Roy keeps returning to the plight of people being callously, unthinkingly uprooted from the only lands and lives they've ever known.

Her sorrow is laced with biting sarcasm as she describes the expediency with which, over and over, mammoth loans were approved and used for India's rapid pace of development, despite a lack of data about the human and ecological costs of the country's widely celebrated projects.

My Seditious Heart might be many things, such as a study in Roy's cynical view of life, or maybe a guide to making sense of a world that is frightening, chaotic and confusing. But at its heart, it is her attempt to have us consider our roles in what she says is the unbearable tragedy befalling the world's poorest, most ignored, practically forgotten citizens. Someone had to.

The National