

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Pulwama Attack's After Effects: Fake News and Rumours

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

SYNOPSIS

The terrorist attack in Kashmir which resulted in the death of more than 40 members of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has generated fresh tensions between India and Pakistan. The Pakistan-based terrorism group Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed responsibility. What does the attack reveal about the nature of fake news and rumours?

COMMENTARY

THE PULWAMA Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attack that took place on February 14, 2019 resulted in the death of more than 40 members of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Kashmir. The Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM), which has conducted attacks in Kashmir and other parts of India since the late 1990s, claimed responsibility. War frenzy and diplomatic reactions notwithstanding, one significant development in the aftermath of the attack has been the rapid proliferation of fake news and rumours surrounding the incident.

Fake News Incidents

The Indian cyber space is replete with various fake news and false narratives in the wake of the attack of which two incidents particularly stand out. The first is a two-minute interview of a retired army personnel, General Bakshi, on national news channel India TV. The General heaped all the blame on the lack of security checks on the previous Kashmiri Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti. According to him, in a previous incident when military personnel shot dead a Kashmiri youth who refused to stop at a security barricade, the general-in-charge was made to apologise and security checks became considerably lesser, leading to the Pulwama attack.

However, fact checkers have since debunked this narrative given that the incident in question took place in 2014 when Omar Abdulla was the Chief Minister and not Mehbooba Mufti. Moreover, according to an army general who served in Kashmir during this period, there had been no reduction of security checks then. Many other claims made by the General, a particularly vitriolic figure who appears regularly on news media, have since been called into question.

Similarly, another report proclaiming the death of the alleged mastermind of the attack at the hands of the Indian military carried a photoshopped picture of a generic face super-imposed on a police uniform found on Amazon. Various other reports shared by members of the public belonging to both left and right wing groups have been debunked by various fact checkers such as Alt News and others who have noted a very high volume of reports floating post the attack.

While such reports are largely inconsequential, it is quite worrying that such assertions and graphic depictions are spread without any checks. For instance, the first report was shared by thousands of people including the governor of Pondicherry, Kiran Bedi, a prominent politician respected by the public. The second report was troublingly shared by major news channels such as India Today, Economic Times and Aaj Tak among others. Several journalists who contested the fake news were threatened for being anti-national, leading various journalism associations to release press statements condemning both the lack of ethics and the attacks on journalists.

Disasters and Rumours: Old Phenomena

For Indian news media channels, the lack of effort put in to conduct simple checks on such reports is not new. In 2018, a UAE-based newspaper, Gulf News, attacked Times Now and Zee TV, two major Indian news channels for spreading false news regarding the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince. Many other incidents have been reported with news channels often facilitating or in some cases even creating fake news. Such events take place in the face of an increasingly polarised society with an appetite for spreading incendiary news that are often fake or questionable in nature.

While most academics scramble to dissect the phenomenon of fake news, various scholars have studied it under the category of rumours. According to studies, rumours emerge as a collective activity due to a combination of psychological and situation factors. Chief among these is the involvement of personal anxiety of those spreading rumours, uncertainty regarding events and the desire to hold and share 'inside information' (thereby, becoming authorities in the news). The strength of the rumours depends on the severity of these three factors.

This is one of the primary reasons that natural disasters and catastrophic man-made events such as war and terror attacks generate the most amount of rumours. Combined with the fact that social media sites are built with algorithms to reward the most outrageous content (often symbolised by hatred and fear), it is no surprise that the Pulwama attack's after-effects includes so many rumours.

Yet, all rumours do not fall into the same category. As one scholar categorised, rumours may be classified as pipe dreams (those that express the wishes and

aspirations of the public), bogey rumors (those that are generated due to personal anxiety and fear) and finally, wedge-driving rumours that leave a long-lasting effect on society. It is the second and third categories that have the most potential to cause harm in the society due to their nature. Indeed, India has witnessed countless fake news reports and rumours that have led to driving social instability, particularly in the form of communal riots, since its independence in 1947.

Fact Checking: Need of the Hour

In the current atmosphere where emotions are running high, the media, politicians and the general public all have a role to play in denying the space for rumours and fake news to proliferate. National media, due to their perceived credibility in the eyes of the public, need to tread carefully. A hunger for increasing viewership and being the first responder to such events is no excuse for spreading fake news reports. Most of these endeavors do not just degrade the credibility of the media but also more significantly create instabilities that can lead to further fracturing of communities and a raising of ground temperature, sometimes to catastrophic effects. Indeed, Kashmiris living in various parts of India are now being attacked as an expression of public outrage towards the terrorist attack.

Similarly, the general population, while rightfully expressing anguish and grief, must refrain from excessively circulating news in these times, given the possibility that even media channels do generate fake news. The presence of fact checkers, as third parties and separate teams within news channels, is important to ensure that such news is not peddled to an unsuspecting public. Ultimately, it must be noted then that fake news and rumours are frequently spread by various parties despite their intentions and that media and the general public must remain vigilant at this time. In this regard, politicians too have an added and urgent responsibility to prevent both rabble-rousing and circulation of rumours.

Mohammed Sinan Siyech is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg