Far from the truth

The year gone by has been anything but dull — at least on social media. Anything and everything was debated in the virtual world, battle lines were drawn, verbal duels were common and it seemed as if every netizen had strong opinions about at least one topic under the sun. In this increasingly obscure and chaotic scenario, it was no surprise that it became difficult to distinguish real news from fake stories, precision from propaganda.

While this is not a recent phenomenon, it was during the last year that the problem reached endemic proportions and invited the attention, as well as wrath, of global leaders. Prominent among these was outgoing US President Barack Obama who was furious at the spread of misinformation on Facebook during the election process in his country, calling it a ‘dust cloud of nonsense’.

“The US elections brought to the mainstream the problem of fake news in social media,” says Keerthana Varma, an engineer. “There was a constant flow of untrue claims like how the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump, how Clinton was selling weapons to terrorists and so on. Even in India, fake and unverified news articles with sensational claims have become viral. During the JNU unrest, student Umar Khalid was trending for days as a JEM terrorist sympathiser on Facebook; this when no official government agency had said anything of the sort.”

Says Siddharth Agarwal, data analyst, “Fake news is one of the newest cultural epidemics of this century. Initially we hated spins on news that slanted it one way or the other, today we are seeing complete homespun fairytales as news. The logic behind it is rather simple. People have stopped believing the mainstream media and are turning to the internet for news. Which is ironic as the smaller sources have a pretty obvious agenda — drive up sales. A story on sensible measures doesn’t sell half as well as one about dramatic conspiracies.”

Talking about some of the tricks that the Indian audience fell prey to during the year, Ashwathy Arun says, “There was a WhatsApp forward that said that UNESCO declared PM Modi as the best Prime Minister in the world. Another favourite rumour, again involving UNESCO, was that ‘Jana Gana Mana’ was declared the best anthem in the world. After demonetisation, rumours abounded that the new Rs 2,000 notes had GPS chips to detect black money as well as radioactive ink. It didn’t matter how far-fetched the claims were; if it was forwarded, it was believed.”

When the internet started, it was celebrated for being a place where information ran free. But on the road to becoming global giants, Facebook and the others acquired enormous power to shape the information that people consume. And while sometimes the consequences are limited to a blush on the face of the person who forwarded or shared the hoax, sometimes the fallout could be severe. Like the WhatsApp messages of a salt shortage in India that triggered panic buying at markets past midnight, and caused a four-fold price-rise in some regions. The subsequent chaos to stock up on the essential commodity even led to the death of a woman in Kanpur, while police baton-charged crowds and stopped mobs from looting grocery shops. The government issued a clarification denying any shortage of salt.

What is it that makes people fall for such tricks? “I think it is because people have an inherent need to feel like part of a story; like heroes, revolutionaries, romantics,” says Siddharth. “The details of the story don’t matter so much as the theme; they are the citizens and potential revolutionaries against a corrupt, decadent power. Fake stories feed into this feeling,” he says. Facebook recently said that it was planning to introduce some measures to counter the flow of fake news. Flagging of disputed stories and attempting to break the filter bubbles of news people see are some of the methods proposed. But all said and done, nothing can beat the plain old test of applying a bit of common sense.