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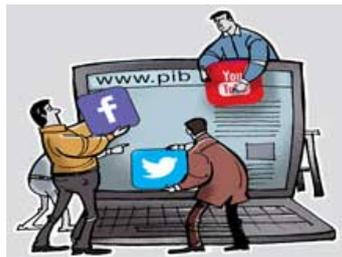TRENDING ON BS   [Search]   [News ▾]   🔍

Is social media prone to exaggeration?

Sahil Makkar & Mayank Mishra | New Delhi
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A little over a year ago, a war of words broke out between a leading film actress and one of the country's leading newspaper over the way she dressed. The actress was protesting against an old-video, hosted on the website of the newspaper, which, according to her, was inappropriate. The newspaper hit back by publishing more photos similar to those shown in the video. The publication questioned the timing of the protest, which incidentally coincided with the release of her new film. Social media lapped up the controversy and the issue kept trending. The campaign, originally starting as an organic one, turned viral with some help from interested parties.

"We promoted a hashtag on the second day to keep fuelling the fire. The results were astonishing as the actress remained in news for over 10 days and grabbed about five million eyeballs in social media," a person closely associated with the entire episode told this newspaper. He did not wish to be named.

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Industry insiders say most debates or topics that are trending on social media, do not last more than eight hours on an average. But the debate on her protest remained popular for the next 10 days.

The successful social media campaign worked for the actress as the film turned out to be a hit. What looked like a controversy may well have been a well-orchestrated promotional gimmick that helped her and her team.

But many social media campaigns have caused considerable damages also. A recent case in point is uninstallation of Snapdeal's mobile app following uproar in the cyber world after actor Amir Khan's statement hinting at growing intolerance in the country. As many as 91,000 customers reportedly gave a negative review to the Snapdeal application in two days and 700,000 are rumoured to have uninstalled the e-commerce company's app after the controversy.

"People have this misconception that social media is a 'free for all' medium. Boundary lines are often crossed and the language used is reprehensible in many cases. At the moment, it suffers from 'vomitting revolution'. You vomit out whatever you feel, without realising the implications," says cyber expert Pawan Duggal.

Whether as a promotional activity or as a means to target something - person, corporation or an issue - why is social media susceptible to wild swings with elements of exaggeration?

The sense one gets after talking to a range of players tracking social media is that there may be cases of debates being manufactured using fake accounts. Experts say it can be done for as low as Rs 10,000.

"If you take a look at some of the topics that trend in a given day, you will realise that many of them are manufactured and clearly done on purpose," says a frequent Twitter user, associated with a political party. "Being a democratic forum, you are free to counter the views if you don't agree. But, by participating in debate on frivolous issues you end up giving them credence," he adds.

There are hundreds of unregulated small companies or sweatshops, illegally involved in the business. To evade Indian law and jurisdiction, millions of fake social media accounts are created overseas. These accounts are run through an automated script, without the actual involvement of human beings. "Messages through fake accounts are re-tweeted, liked and shared. This helps the hashtag and the topic keep trending," says the person quoted earlier. "It is easier to create fake followers on the click of a mouse," he added.

Experts say algorithms for Twitter and Facebook work differently. The other ways to fuel the fire is through WhatsApp messages and short-messaging services (SMSs), which are cheaper and cost-effective. While WhatsApp messages are virtually free, there are companies which are ready to provide 100,000 SMS for as low as Rs 9,000. "Content is the king. If the content is strong and persuasive, it finds its space in people's social media accounts," he observes.

A Facebook spokesperson, however, says "We have placed an increased focus on abuse from fake accounts recently. We have made a lot of progress by building a combination of automated and manual systems to block accounts used for fraudulent purposes… We also take action against sellers of fake clicks and shut them down."

A Twitter spokesperson declined to "participate in the story at the moment".

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