

# A SPOOF STORY

A rash of Indian news satire websites take potshots at the high and mighty in the land. And readers seem to like their fun take on news far more than the real stuff, says **Priyanka Sharma**

"Mayawati's missing shoes were thrown at Rahul Gandhi"

"Indian team to carry their own pitches for future foreign tours"

These are some of the headlines that greet you on [www.fakingnews.com](http://www.fakingnews.com), a website that publishes satirical articles on politics, business, entertainment and sports. A brainchild of IIM-Ahmedabad graduate Rahul Roushan who writes under the pseudonym Pagal Patraakar, Fakingnews was born out of acute boredom. "The recession was at its peak and I was out of work," Roushan admits. "I was addicted to The Onion and at the time, there was no news satire website in India." [www.theonion.com](http://www.theonion.com) is a popular American website launched in 2006, featuring satirical articles on local, national and international news. Determined to make "India laugh at her own follies" Roushan registered the domain name of his website. Taking a dig at the term, "Breaking News", used by 24/7 news channels, Roushan named his website Fakingnews. At present, the site has over 160,000 followers on Facebook and around 65,000 followers on Twitter — the highest for any news satire website in the country.

While Roushan was filing his first post on Fakingnews on September 14, 2008 — a spoof on the recession in the US economy — he had no idea that Lehman Brothers, one of the largest investment banks in the US, would declare bankruptcy the next day. "I realised there was a way to laugh about everything!" For Roushan, satire was one way. "I wanted to satisfy the journalist in me," he says. Roushan has studied journalism at Indian Institute of Mass Communication and worked as an anchor for Hindi news channel Sahara Samay.

At first glance, Fakingnews looks like a regular news website, with sub-heads like "Politics", "Business" and "Entertainment". Under the masthead is the dubious motto — "where truth doesn't hide, where truth doesn't hurt". Next to it, is a quote by Hollywood actor Angelina Jolie: "When Brad [Pitt] bores me, I turn to Faking News". In a section called "Ask Pagla", Roushan plays agony aunt to readers' queries. What's the catch? All the stories and queries are spoofs.

In the last few years, several have followed Roushan's lead. In 2009, two students of Delhi College of Engineering, Tanay Sukumar and Sugandha, launched [www.newsthatmattersnot.com](http://www.newsthatmattersnot.com). Though it is far less popular than

Fakingnews (it has around 11,000 followers on Facebook), the website recently won the 8th Annual Manthan South Asia Award for best e-content practices.

With their candid humour, these websites have ruffled quite a few feathers. Roushan recounts one such incident. He had posted an article about Ravana fleeing to Pakistan during Dussehra. "I photo-shopped an image of Rama, removing his body, so that only his ornaments were visible. I wanted to make a point," he says. But his point — that religion carries a sub-text of wealth and political power — was not taken well by the Hindu Janjagruiti Samiti, which filed notices against Fakingnews for "denigrating Sri Rama's picture and mocking the *Ramayana*". Roushan refused to remove the article.

IIM-A graduates C S Krishna and Karthik Laxman, who launched [www.theunrealtimes.com](http://www.theunrealtimes.com) last year, had a similar experience. Days after the movie *Singham* released, the site uploaded a video spoof showing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, whose face had been morphed onto that of Ajay Devgn, bashing up "villains" such as inflation, corruption and terrorism. "Manmohan Singham" went viral and trended on Twitter for two days, receiving over 350,000 views on Youtube. There were reports that Congress party-workers in Pune and Madhya Pradesh had filed complaints with cyber crime cells about the video's objectionable content.

"I get thousands of entries from readers every week,"

says Roushan who tries to write at least one article a day.

"Though I do not want to be Kapil Sibal in defining SPAM,"



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he continues, "I want to ensure satire is used carefully." So readers are free to debate issues and mock personalities on a "discussion forum", but all entries go through Roushan before being published on the website.



The difference between "fake news" and "real news" has become hard to tell, feels Roushan. Two of his news reports were picked up by mainstream media and republished as news. His spoof on Axe deodorants, "Unable to attract even a single girl, frustrated man sues Axe", went viral across local radio stations in the Emirates and Australia. "A

journalist from a German news website asked me if Unilever {the company that owns Axe} had paid me!" Axe got publicity worth millions of dollars from the article, he adds.

Though the names of the websites are disclaimers in themselves, it is clear from their comments that readers take a while to realise that the articles are spoofs. A story on Theunrealtimes, about a CNN journalist mistaking Bollywood actor Imran Khan for the Pakistani politician, became an instant hit in Pakistan but for the wrong reason — readers thought it was true. Minutes later, the article was flooded with comments citing American journalists' ignorance of South-Asian affairs.

Despite the growing popularity of these websites, big brands do not want to advertise on them. "They might not want to tarnish their image... there are many holy cows in this country," jokes Roushan. Which is why the founders have turned to Google Ads to foot the operational costs of web hosting, mobile and Internet bills as well as generate funds to reinvest into the website. Roushan has recently partnered with Singapore-based mobile media company AFFLE to manage the advertising and marketing of his website.

Though the websites receive a stream of "hate mail", their founders do not mind the attention. While Fakingnews takes regular digs at politicians, actors and bureaucrats, Unrealtimes refrains from getting "too cynical". "Negativity sells more, but our attempt is always to write something uplifting, something that will make people laugh," says Krishna.