

MANAGING THE MISINFORMATION EFFECT

THE STATE OF FACT-CHECKING IN ASIA

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Foreword

The need for fact-checking is as urgent as the challenges are great. This is true across the world and no less so in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka, where religious and ethnic divisions, social polarisation, authoritarian politics, partisan media and low media literacy create fertile breeding grounds for misinformation.

This not a new phenomenon, nor are its consequences. At times in the past, both state-sponsored campaigns and spontaneous false reports have provoked mistrust, violence and extra-judicial killings. But in the present, the risk is amplified by the internet and social media. Just as fear, scandal and mob mentality fuel rumour and gossip in a community, they drive online sharing at a velocity that sends misinformation quickly careening out of control.

The challenge for fact-checkers is to identify suspect reports, examine the evidence, and rapidly disseminate the truth by a means that will reach the same media consumers who have been misled. They often do this in a media environment where they, and indeed all journalists, are under pressure from powerful forces, and can be subjected to online defamation, invasions of privacy and even death threats. The work itself can be stressful, sometimes involving the need to repeatedly view potentially traumatising images to establish their veracity.

Fact-checking groups struggle to find sustainable business models and to secure revenue streams that free them from dependence on short-term grants. Access to government data can be difficult because official record-keeping is weak or online systems are poor. Online tools may not work with materials in local languages due to underlying technical issues.

Once a report is found to be inaccurate, fact-checkers face further obstacles in reaching the relevant audience, especially on social media. Shocking and inflammatory tales are inherently more shareable than balanced, evidence-based analyses. Producing a fact-check report in a form that will have appeal on a particular platform, then promoting the article to its users, calls for significant skills and resources.

To do their job effectively, fact-checkers need and deserve a range of support measures. They require both specific training in fact-checking techniques and broader journalism education that will allow them to discern and dig out the facts. To assist with this, schools and universities should incorporate fact-checking into their curriculums to develop the next generation of fact-checkers and raise media literacy generally.

Mainstream media houses should integrate fact-checking into standard journalistic protocols and rapidly correct their own mistakes. Fact-checks should sit high on daily news agendas and articles should be shared widely enough to undo some of the damage done by erroneous reports.

Fact-checking groups need stability and longevity, built on reliable funding and solid organisational foundations. They also need to look inward and protect their fact-checkers from harm, with an awareness of the threats to their physical safety and mental health that this type of work can entail.

Fact-checking is still establishing itself in South and South-east Asia, but it has already made solid contributions to the free media. Despite the challenges, fact-checkers persevere because they know both the value of their work and the dangers of letting misinformation run wild.

Speaking truth to power, preserving social cohesion, restoring the dignity of individuals who have been smeared – all these actions depend on the sharing and acceptance of accurate information. Without it, mischief and manipulation go unchecked. But with it, the free media can perform its proper role as a guardian of democracy. •

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Overview

The rise of misinformation has not only been a threat to our society and politics but has also attacked the very core of journalism and the media industry itself.

Historically, journalists were widely accepted as purveyors of truth with time-tested procedures to convey that truth to society. As a result, both the industry and those that delivered it enjoyed a high degree of public trust.

But in recent years, as misinformation has reared its head with the expansion of digital and social media platforms, respect for the media's work and role has also eroded. The term "fake news" is now extensively used to attack and undermine the profession and weaken public trust in the strongest tool available to combat misinformation.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the media today is rebuilding that public trust.

There is no doubt, quality journalism plays a crucial role in mitigating the impacts of misinformation on society and the politics that guide us. In order to regain public trust, media workers must be more careful than ever to rigorously follow fundamental journalistic practices and principles. At the same time, media operations and workers need to adapt to the new information landscape by supporting initiatives and collaborating on efforts to combat misinformation.

Fact-checking is a strong ally for journalists on the frontline of the war against misinformation. And although fact-checking requires a specialised skillset, many of these skills, especially verification, are very similar to journalistic procedures.

In many countries, we see media joining hands with fact-checkers to debunk misinformation, especially during elections, war and similar periods of tension when society is likely to be divided on opinions or there is a high chance of misinformation spread.

But sadly, in many Asian nations, fact-checking is yet to become a mainstream practice and too often is perceived as a fringe operation.

In some arenas fact checkers are actually becoming global leaders in the fight against misinformation with examples of for-profit initiatives now holding authorities accountable.

Yet fact-checking as an industry still faces many challenges. It is struggling due to a lack of resources, a shortage of trained fact-checkers, language and script issues, and in some cases, the overall press freedom situation of the country. Sustainability, resources, reach and training are identified as some of the biggest obstacles.

This report highlights the achievements of fact-checking initiatives across Asia. In Indonesia, fact-checking initiatives have reached thousands with digital literacy programs and, unlike in other countries, mainstream media outlets have embraced fact-checking. In India, fact-checks are published in many regional languages. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, fact-checkers are working hard to protect their politically and religiously/ethnically divided societies from misinformation. In Nepal, fact-checking is holding mainstream media, social media influencers and the powerful to account.

These are by no means small achievements, especially in circumstances where misinformation can lead to violence. But fact-checking's results are hard to measure since they contribute more to prevention: the media, influencers and politicians become more careful in what they say; the public become aware of misinformation and critically analyze information before sharing and acting on it; and society becomes less prone to its effects.

What is clear is that only factual and accurate news can fight disinformation and check the consequences of misinformation. And professional journalists are still best placed to provide trustworthy information to the public.

If we wish to work towards a truly free and democratic society, we need journalists and fact-checkers to work together mitigate the impacts of misinformation. •



Fact-checking is on the frontline of the war against misinformation.
CREDIT: FANATIC STUDIO / GARY WATERS / SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY / AFP

In many countries, we see media joining hands with fact-checkers to debunk misinformation, especially during elections, war and similar periods of tension.

Note on terms used

The term "**misinformation**" is used to refer to all types of false, inaccurate, or misleading information, regardless of the sender's intention. The term "**disinformation**", on the other hand, is often used to refer specifically to misinformation that is knowingly shared by individuals, groups, or media outlets. This may be done to make money, influence politics, or cause trouble for its own sake.

While some publications distinguish between unintentionally shared misinformation and intentionally shared disinformation, this report adopts the recent definition that includes all incorrect information, regardless of intent. Misinformation can be expressed or spoken, printed or published, or perceived.

This report avoids using the term "**fake news**" except when quoting other publications, as the authors believe the term is misleading. The term is often used by politicians to undermine independent media. But the term "news" should be reserved for referring to correct and verified information, something that is a powerful weapon against misinformation.

Another term, "**malinformation**" is sometimes used to refer to situations when misinformation, or even correct information, is used with a malicious intent to harm, mislead the public, or incite division and violence. Again, this term is not used in this report.

Finally, "**information disorder**" describes an environment where disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation are present and can combine to shape society and politics in new and unexpected ways. •

BANGLADESH

Challenging narratives on religion and refugees

BY QADARUDDIN SHISHIR

Bangladesh, a lower-income, Muslim-majority nation with a population of more than 160 million, is deeply polarized in political terms. More than 50 million people use the internet, a significant number by world standards. However, **media literacy** among Bangladesh is **low**, increasing the risks posed by online misinformation.

Political misinformation is a dominant topic in the websphere, while the Covid-19 pandemic brought an “infodemic” of **health** misinformation. In recent years, misinformation has **triggered** several incidents of communal violence, resulting in deaths and the displacement of people. These include an **incident** in which an angry Muslim crowd vandalized and torched Buddhist temples and homes in protest at a Facebook post that shared a fake photo of a partially burned Quran.

Some pure social media hoaxes have also proved to be deadly. Eight people were killed in 2019 in vigilante **lynchings** sparked by rumours on Facebook that children were being kidnapped and sacrificed as offerings for the construction of a mega-bridge. Anti-refugee misinformation fuelled by xenophobia has a place in the Bangladeshi mainstream media as well as on social media platforms, as has been documented by international media, including **AFP** and **Scroll.in**.

In a country where press freedom has been **gradually** shrinking under repressive laws, and trust in the media is on the **decline**, fact-checking has opened a new window for the people to see some established narratives being challenged with facts and some powerful misinformation campaigners being exposed. A **research** project on the role of fact-checking organizations in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, published in 2018, concluded that “despite their limitations, these initiatives remained persistent in their pursuit of debunking false claims. Users also appear to have started to engage with these initiatives.”

A range of topics in the field of online misinformation and fact-checking have been explored by researchers in past years. The publishers include the LIRNEasia **research** institute, the **Association for Computing Machinery**, the **Asian Media Information and Communication Centre**, and the **Korea Institute of Science and Technology Information**.

The misinformation landscape

Some of the most significant proliferators of online misinformation are **politicians** and political activists from all sides of the spectrum. People with extreme religious viewpoints also contribute to amplifying religious misinformation. Fact-checkers have documented misinformation in religious sermons and social media posts made by some popular **Muslim clerics**.

As well, Bangladesh’s mainstream media have **frequently** been accused of spreading misinformation and this has been **documented** by fact-checkers. In a 2021 **report**, Boom Bangladesh, Facebook’s third-party fact-checking partner, documented more than 30 baseless stories published between March and December 2020 in top media outlets. The pattern was similar in the following years.

A 2021 **UNDP report** on Bangladesh disclosed that the largest disinformation network in the country’s online ecosystem is run by a nexus of websites whose primary motivation is to generate advertisement dollars through clicks.

Misinformation revolves primarily around three topics: politics, health and religion. A 2020 **research** project found: “Political rumors are mainly related to elections, political parties, national and international political issues, important political events, development initiatives, and political figures.”

Politics

State-sponsored **misinformation** has become a matter of concern, with fact-checkers debunking a good number of “fake news” items spread by top government officials and calling out pages and websites run by the allies of the ruling party. Often, **mainstream media** has been used to amplify such state-sponsored misinformation.

Ahead of the national election in December 2018, Facebook, Twitter removed accounts and **webpages** linked to the government that had posted anti-opposition content. A smaller number of pages and websites regularly publish anti-government misinformation.

Health

During the pandemic period of 2020-2022, health-related misinformation focused on Covid-19, alongside conspiracy theories surrounding the vaccines. Junk health tips with misinformation about sexual health are also common. Education-related fake news focuses on student-oriented concerns such as student rights movements, school routines and exams, and academic corruption and dishonesty.

Religion

Religious misinformation has two dimensions in the Bengali language webspace. On one hand, it often targets minorities, especially when there is any **claim** of so-called “contempt of religion” by a non-Muslim. This type of misinformation has proved fatal several times in the last 10 years. Unfortunately, there is no concrete data from credible sources on how many people have been killed. Research finds that most Bangladeshis “react to (religious) disinformation more emotionally than reasonably”.

In a country where press freedom has been gradually shrinking under repressive laws, and trust in the media is on the decline, fact-checking has opened a new window for the people to see some established narratives being challenged with facts and some powerful misinformation campaigners being exposed.

On the other hand, there is also the phenomenon of social media pages and websites run from India targeting Muslims in Bangladesh with religious misinformation. These are often operated from the Indian state of West Bengal, presumably by activists in favour of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, which advocates for dominance by Hindus and Hinduism. The common topics of religious misinformation are religious conversions, religion’s significance, religious laws and customs, and historical religious incidents.

FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

Fact-checking in Bangladesh **started** institutionally in March 2017 when this writer and Zahed Arman, now a faculty member at a US university, jointly founded **BD FactCheck**. Initially BD FactCheck was a voluntary project. In 2020, after becoming a registered entity, it worked in collaboration with Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), **Fojo Media** Institute and UNDP Bangladesh. BD FactCheck, with its focus on political fact-checking, gained a greater following especially for its active role in debunking misinformation during the 2018 road safety movement and the general election held in December that year.

Fojo Media Institute and MRDI organised a series of capacity-building workshops and training for BD FactCheck in 2018. This was the first time Bangladeshi fact-checkers had access to training by internationally recognised experts in open-source intelligence (OSINT). BD FactCheck **won** the Digital Khichuri Challenge 2020, a UNDP-sponsored ideas competition, for its role in combatting the Covid-19 stigma caused by misinformation.



BD FactCheck, with its focus on political fact-checking, gained a following for its role in debunking misinformation during 2018's road safety movement and general election. BD Fact Check website on March 28, 2023. CREDIT: BD FACT CHECK.

Two other fact-checking organizations – Jachai.org and Fact-watch.org – also started operating in 2017, although Jachai's activities became sporadic within two years.

Boom Bangladesh launched its operations in February 2020, and in April that year Facebook announced Boom Bangladesh would be its first third-party fact-checking partner in the country.

A new fact-checking organisation, Rumor Scanner, started operating in March 2020 and became a certified member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in July 2021. However, Rumor Scanner was marred by controversy when a 2020 [report](#) by BD FactCheck revealed that the founders of the organisation were the same people who had been found, in an internal Facebook investigation, to be involved in coordinated targeting of “local activists, journalists and religious minorities, including those living abroad, to compromise their accounts”.

After Facebook published its investigation, Rumor Scanner removed from its website all references to its connection with the group Facebook had punished, which was known as Don's Team. Despite its dubious identity, the organisation produced some good fact-checking articles in late 2022 and early 2023.

Facebook added Fact-watch.org and AFP Fact Check Bangla as new third-party partners for Bangladesh in May 2021. Dismisslab, a new independent fact-checking initiative led by fact-checkers who previously worked for other organisations, was established in December 2022.

Certain other fact-checking groups are seen as dubious because they do not disclose the identities of the people behind them. Evidence suggests the groups have pro-government connections.

Unlike in India and other South Asian countries, Bangladesh's mainstream media have mostly refrained from fact-checking online hoaxes and political statements. The newspaper *Ajker Patrika* opened a fact-check section on its website, but it is no longer running.

In 2021, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) hosted a series of training sessions for journalists in a bid to find some possible signatories from top media houses, but the move has not yet succeeded. Even so, there are signs of increasing awareness about fact-checking and verification in Bangladeshi newsrooms as a result of Facebook's rating systems, which penalise the publishers of false claims that are debunked by its partner fact-checkers.

Asia Foundation, Fojo Media Institute, MRDI and some other organisations are advocating for fact-checking and online verification

courses to be included in school and university curriculums. To date, at least one public university, Rajshahi University, has decided to introduce a new course to its existing curriculum.

Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) also regularly arranges capacity building programs in this regard. Some online courses and a book, *Fact-Checking and Verification Handbook*, in Bengali by the author of this report, are available to help journalists and students gain a clear understanding of the topic.

Strengths and achievements

While judging the precise effect of fact-checking is difficult, there is no doubt it has had some impact. When efforts began in early 2017, ordinary people and even journalists were not familiar with the process and thus not receptive to the idea. Media organisations threatened to launch law suits, terming fact-checkers “fake organisations”. Despite this, over the years, fact-checkers have proved themselves and have been accepted by all parties.

Media managers now seek training for their teams from fact-checkers. People at the policy-making level are also convinced of the positive potential of the activity and [advocate](#) for it. The most important thing that fact-checking has achieved is the creation of a sense of accountability among a wide range of people, including politicians, religious leaders, online influencers and journalists.

Many now think twice before sharing an unverified piece of information. And some top influencers, journalists and clerics, who were sceptical of the new concept initially, now reach out to fact-checkers to verify something they suspect before sharing it on their social media handles.

Challenges for fact-checkers

Among the weaknesses of the fact-checking project is that the majority of the fact-checkers in Bangladesh are not trained adequately in either journalism or fact-checking itself. Fresh graduates have flocked to grab a new opportunity in an emerging field. However, challenging a public claim that is also published by top media outlets requires having a clear understanding of the news and information ecosystem of the country and of the South Asian region in general. Moreover, limited access to public data, and a dearth of data more generally, constrain the ability of fact-checkers to verify many claims.

State-sponsored misinformation has become a matter of concern, with fact-checkers debunking a good number of “fake news” items spread by top government officials and calling out pages and websites run by the allies of the ruling party.

Knowing how to use a few free online tools should not be enough to allow someone to claim to be a fact-checker. An open-source intelligence expert also needs a good grasp on one or more subjects such as history, science, literature, politics or economics. The lack of an umbrella organisation for fact-checkers is also a weakness, as this type of organisation could empower fact-checkers in many ways, including enhancing the ability to defuse any untoward pressure generated by their jobs.

The underlying problem is the lack of a democratic environment. Repressive laws such as the Digital Security Act are weapons to create an atmosphere of fear among journalists, fact-checkers and others. Fact-checkers are sometimes forced to abandon an article for fear it may aggrieve certain people and bring unwelcome consequences.

Another challenge is working in a deeply polarised society where people with extremist views – be they the religious right wing or the secular nationalists – are opposed to fact-checking. Rumours and misinformation are their preferred weapons.

Fact-checkers are targeted in smear campaigns by both religious extremists and pro-government trolls. Sadly, top government officials echo such claims. Scepticism and informed critique of the work of fact-checkers and journalists more broadly are always appreciated, but malicious defamation, bullying and death threats on social media are never acceptable.

A further problem is the lack of a financial model, especially in a lower income country such as Bangladesh. Subscriptions or public donations to fact-checking organisations are still not an option. The political situation is not favorable for running or even registering a non-profit, nor is accepting small foreign or local grants.

The way forward

As an emerging field, fact-checking in Bangladesh has been crucial for keeping online spaces comparatively clean and for drawing the attention of actors who have been propagating misinformation. But fact-checkers still have much to do, including improving their own methods, to ensure a better and less polluted information ecosystem.

Fact-checkers and journalists in general need specific training and broad education to more effectively question claims put forward by public figures and repeated in the mainstream media. As well, they need technical expertise in how to verify rumours that go viral on the internet and on social media and to track their spread through the websphere. Professionals already engaged in the industry need this training urgently but, over the long term, schools and universities should follow the example of Rajshahi University and include fact-checking and online verification courses in their curriculums.

Fact-checking operations are still searching for business models that will provide financial stability and longevity. An umbrella organisation for fact-checking groups would strengthen its individual members and make them a united force in the public arena.

In the meantime, fact-checking groups should pay particular attention to the needs of their workers. Individual fact-checkers come under extreme pressure, and need protection and support for their mental health and physical safety to enable them to continue their vital work.

Qadaruddin Shishir is a pioneering fact-checker in Bangladesh. He is currently working as the Bangladesh Fact Check Editor of AFP.

INDIA

Taking a stand against manipulation and violence

BY VINEETHA VENUGOPAL AND JENNY S.

The spread of misinformation in India is having a disastrous impact on public health, lives, livelihoods, and social harmony. Misleading and harmful information spread through WhatsApp has been blamed for causing mob attacks and violence.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, India witnessed a 214% increase in **cases** related to “fake news” and rumours, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau. According to Reuters, India’s **poultry** industry lost 13 billion rupees (USD158.964 million) in just three weeks in 2020 after speculation on social media that chickens could spread the Covid virus. When false claims that Muslims deliberately spread the virus went viral, the country witnessed calls for an economic **boycott** of Muslim traders.

While misinformation is an age-old phenomenon, the rapid growth of digital technologies and increased internet penetration have exacerbated its extent and impact. According to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, India had more than 700 million internet **subscribers** and over a billion mobile phones as of 2022. However, this access has not translated into a corresponding increase in **digital literacy** – that is, the ability to use the internet meaningfully. Nor has it caused an increase in critical digital literacy – that is, the ability to consume, produce and disseminate digital content critically.

A study by **Oxford** University Press reports that 54% of the surveyed audience in India use social media to access factual information. It also found that as many as 87% of people who share information from social media have confidence in its truthfulness. However, this confidence may be misplaced given that, according to the Microsoft Digital Civility Survey 2019, Indians are more likely to encounter fake news **online** than the global average.

In this context, fact-checking emerges as an important tool to tackle the misinformation problem. As of January 2023, 14 Indian fact-checking organisations are listed on the website of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) as verified and active **signatories** to its code of principles. This is the largest number of organisations in any one country and is double the number of organisations from the trailing country (the United States, which has seven organisations as verified and active signatories).

Another three organisations are in the process of renewing their membership of the IFCN; this would take the total to 17. Duke Reporters’ Lab lists 27 fact-checking **organisations** in India as of January 2023. These statistics show that India has a high presence of fact-checking organisations compared to other countries.

Duke Reporters’ Lab classifies nine of the 27 organisations as independent, 16 as associated with media organisations, and two as non-profit. Two of the organisations are dedicated exclusively to the theme of health and medicine, while the others engage with all types of social media and online misinformation.

FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

The first dedicated fact-checking organisation in India, **FactChecker**, was launched in February 2014 by journalist Govindraj Ethiraj ahead of that year’s parliamentary elections. The objective was to fact-check statements made by people in public life. Registered as a charitable trust, FactChecker deals with various issues, including health, sanitation, law and justice, education, environment, employment, innovation and science.

FactChecker identifies claims through active monitoring of social media. It also receives input from readers. To verify assertions, it relies



Image shows the locations of fact-checking organisations in India.
SOURCE: DUKE REPORTERS' LAB

on official data and other trustworthy sources. It also contacts the claimant, reaches out to experts and undertakes peer reviews to ensure accuracy. FactChecker operates on a non-profit model, being funded by patrons such as Rohini Nilakeni, Pirojsha Godrej Foundation, Forbes Marshall, and the Independent and Public Spirited Media Foundation.

Factly, a prominent fact-checking organisation founded in 2016, operates on a for-profit model. Registered as a micro, small and medium-sized enterprise (MSME), Factly generates revenue from partnerships with social media platforms, research, consulting services, and training and capacity-building services. Its main funders include Meta and Google. Claims are selected for fact-checking based on multiple criteria, such as the potential for real-world harm, their virality and the person making the claim. Factly uses the labels “true”, “misleading”, “partly true”, “false” and “unverified” to rate the claims. Quint **WebQoof**, founded in 2018, is an example of a fact-checking organisation associated with a media group. It is the fact-checking division of The Quint, a digital news platform. WebQoof is a video-first platform that strives to convert fact-checking stories into videos to reach the maximum audience.

Strengths and achievements

Seventeen out of 27 fact-checking organisations in India are associated with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) as active members or are under renewal. This is a commendable achievement for the sector as IFCN **vetting** and evaluation are quite rigorous. To be verified, the organisations must show a commitment to non-partisanship and fairness; transparency of sources, funding, organisation and methodology; and a commitment to open and honest corrections.

Another achievement is expansion into regional languages. Initially, fact-checking was limited to the English language. Gradually, it has expanded to Hindi and other regional languages, including Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, Kannada, Odia, Assamese, Punjabi, Telugu, Bengali and Urdu. Some of the fact-checkers that engage in multi-lingual fact-checking are Fact Crescendo, News Checker, Times Fact Check and Vikas News.

Some of the organisations, such as Alt News, have gone above and beyond IFCN guidelines to bring transparency to their process of claim selection and verification by providing detailed explanations on their website. Alt News also has a policy on hate speech. Alt News was instrumental in exposing some of the harmful misinformation spread against the minority Muslim community. Incidentally, Alt News co-

14 Indian fact-checking organisations are listed on the website of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) as verified and active signatories to its code of principles. This is the largest number of organisations in any one country.

founders Muhammed Zubair and Pratik Sinha were featured in the personal **shortlist** of the director of the Peace Research Institute of Oslo as worthy candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize 2022.

Indian fact-checkers have tried to incorporate sophisticated technology into fact-checking. **NewsMobile**, for example, was the only organisation from Asia that won the IFCN Facebook Global Innovation Challenge 2020. The challenge focused on how technology can be used to improve fake news detection. NewsMobile and its tech partner FakeNetAI at UC Berkeley were also among the five **winners** in round two of the challenge.

Challenges for fact-checkers

According to a **2019 study** on fact-checking in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, Indian fact-checkers reported the following difficulties: lack of resources, lack of machine learning tools built for local languages, lack of digital archives, lack of sustainable business models, and political pressure. They also reported difficulties in countering misinformation on WhatsApp due to its peer-to-peer and encrypted communication.

A 2021 study on the **factorization** of fact-checkers for low-resource Indian languages also highlighted that many of the automatic fact-checking and misinformation detection solutions had been designed for English, making them inaccessible for regional Indian languages.

Indian fact-checkers have been facing difficulties and increased persecution from the state. India has a low press freedom score (150/180 in **2022**) for a country with a democratically elected government. **Reporters** without Borders commented: “The violence against journalists, the politically partisan media and the concentration of media ownership all demonstrate that press freedom is in crisis in ‘the world’s largest democracy.’”

In June 2022, Muhammed Zubair, the co-founder of Alt News, was jailed for allegedly hurting the **religious sentiments** of Hindus in a tweet that was already four years old. In **condemning** the arrest, IFJ affiliate the Indian Journalists Union described it as “yet another blatant attack on press freedom and a continuation of witch-hunting by the government to silence independent media and critics”.



Managing editor Jency Jacob and staff at Indian fact-checking organisation BOOM Live at their office in October 2022. CREDIT: PUNIT PARANJPE / AFP



Alt News founder Pratik Sinha in his Kolkata Office in March 2022. CREDIT: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR / AFP.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has proposed changes to Information Technology Rules 2021. These changes propose that social media platforms and internet service providers be required to take down any content deemed to be “fake” by the Press Information Bureau (PIB) and other authorised government agencies. This is particularly worrying and may give rise to censorship. Organisations such as Reporter’s Collective have alleged that PIB’s **fact-checking process** is not transparent or non-partisan.

The way forward

While fact-checking is accepted as a practice to counter misinformation, it is also essential to understand the “politics of omission” that are likely to be prevalent if popular social media platforms outsource fact-checking. For example, an employee at a fact-checking organisation that operates on a business model told this report that their client, Meta, has a policy against fact-checking politicians or blue-tick holders.

In the employee’s view, political parties, especially during the elections, share misinformation to defame their rivals. Despite this, this policy prevents the handles that share the misinformation being labelled. This is particularly alarming in a country with a history of communal polarisation and hate crimes, which often emerge from politically motivated posts.

The selection of claims for verification also requires improvement. Much of the misinformation circulating virally may have little impact on real-life scenarios. While focusing on such misinformation, fact-checking organisations may miss out on potentially harmful claims related to socio-political events.

An industry leader in the fact-checking sector commented that, even though socio-political and communal claims cause significant damage to individuals, institutions and communities, many fact-checking organisations are reluctant to engage with such claims. He speculated that their wariness could be due to fear of the potential fallout from flagging such claims.

In recognition of the scale of the problem, there has been increased collaboration between fact-checkers and news aggregators. For example, DataLEADS, Google News Initiative and Internews collaborated with BoomLive, Alt News, First Draft and Storyful to

Much of the misinformation circulating virally may have little impact on real-life scenarios. While focusing on such misinformation, fact-checking organisations may miss out on potentially harmful claims related to socio-political events.

develop a curriculum with learning **modules** for photo and video identification and social media monitoring with India-specific case studies. Using these modules, the group launched an India Training Network in 2018.

As of 2022, this network has reached out to more than 45,000 Indian **journalists**, media educators, fact-checkers and journalism students. The training sessions are now conducted in more than 10 Indian languages. The network has also been instrumental in nurturing many fact-checking initiatives that later went on to become signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)

Fact-checking organisations have been focusing on the other crucial aspect of fact-checking and verification, that is, cultivating media and information literacy. **Factshala** is an initiative launched in 2020 in collaboration with Google, Internews and DataLeads. Vikas news has been conducting fact-checking and media literacy drives through its **Sach Ke Sathi** program.

These are crucial initiatives considering the extent of the misinformation problem in India. As a leader in the sector observed, while responding to individual claims can reduce the distribution of harmful content, we need to work towards cultivating critical thinking among the population to effectively address the problem.

Vineetha Venugopal and Jenny S. are associated with the Digital Empowerment Foundation. This report expresses their personal views.

INDONESIA

Exposing hoaxes, holding politicians to account

BY HESTHI MURTHI

Misinformation proliferates in Indonesia when a single party controls information sources, there are few alternative sources, or the public has difficulty identifying which sources of information they can trust. These conditions prevailed throughout the development stages of the digital era, both when digital communications were in their infancy and during the digital boom. In these periods, misinformation has significantly affected public life.

In certain periods, the state plays a vital role in spreading misinformation, adding to the contributions of groups with political or religious interests. Researchers at the University of Oxford have shown that the phenomenon has recently shifted to overseas **actors** and economic interest in the growth of digital platforms or social media.

The misinformation landscape

Historically, a blatant example of misinformation occurred in the early 1960s during the transition from the Old Order to the New Order era — a crucial political period. A state-sponsored nationwide campaign blamed the “30 September 1965 Movement” for the deaths of seven army generals, who were later referred to as the Heroes of the Revolution. The campaign caused the killings of some 500,000-1,000,000 members, sympathisers and groups allegedly affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) through almost the whole of Indonesia.

The authorities disseminated the misinformation, and the media amplified it. The press was under pressure from the state, and the interests of religious, military, and political groups saturated the media. The impact of this misinformation was felt even after the end of the New Order in 1998 and has persisted until now, although on a low scale.

The second major example of misinformation occurred in this pivotal year of 1998, during the transition from the New Order to the Reformation era. This incident largely affected ethnic Chinese minorities, who were identified as “non-indigenous” groups. The build-up of strong anti-Chinese sentiments had dire consequences for this group, especially ethnic Chinese women.

In the new digital era, when online media has evolved into various forms, such as social media, blogs, platforms and instant messaging that reach massive numbers of users globally, misinformation has followed. Indonesia is no exception, with certain groups driving misinformation as they try to exploit the economic potential of the digital economy.

Since 2000, social media platforms have become both places to share information and alternative sources of information. Moreover, the public can get this more quickly than information produced by the state. Since ordinary members of society can produce and distribute information, the information ecosystem is no longer controlled solely by formal groups, including the state.

In the early days of Indonesia’s social media growth, it was hoped that social media would become a channel to encourage positive change. Information that emerged and triggered a public discourse on social media became a reference point for debate. When the authorities were not transparent, the mass media treated the discussions on social media as alternative sources of news. Information might crop up on open social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, and on limited social media networks. Although such information is generally published on anonymous accounts, certain groups are regarded as a source of truth.

The situation is more complex when political interests take over social media and turn it into a tool. The first major example of this



Support for Indonesia’s fact-checking movement has come from government, state institutions, UNESCO and private groups, including tech companies Google and Facebook. Pictured is a poster for a series of fact-checking sessions run by the Cek Fakta consortium for 2020’s Indonesian local elections. CREDIT: HESTHI MURTHI

was Barack Obama’s success in gaining public support that drove his election as the first African American president of the US in 2008. Various **studies** have shown that Obama’s success was due to his strategy of using social media platforms to gain financial and political support from voters.

This strategy was replicated in Indonesia in the 2014 Presidential Election when Joko Widodo was elected president, becoming the first candidate outside the oligarchic group to win the post. Widodo and Prabowo managed to get overwhelming **support** on social media. However, certain experts questioned its **impact** on the result, since in 2013 only 40% of the population of about 250 million had smartphones, and these users were concentrated in big cities. Social media campaigns were also credited with the increase in public participation in general elections, which rose from 71% in 2009 to 75% in 2014 and 82% in 2019.

But social media has also become a means of spreading disinformation for political purposes. There is a massive spread of disinformation on social media including on instant messaging applications, particularly WhatsApp, driving polarisation and creating division down to the family and micro levels of society.

Many commentators argue that the easy spread of disinformation, commonly known as “hoax”, or “hoaks” in Bahasa Indonesia, is due to the public’s low level of digital literacy and their low ability to identify misinformation. The mass media has lost the public’s trust and is no longer a reference for information. At the same time, internet penetration and smartphone ownership rates continue to grow.

This development has given rise to initiatives from various parties, civil society groups, journalists, and the media to carry out movements for literacy to fight hoaxes, including education on hoax identification and fact-checking for academics, journalists and the media as well as the target group – the public in general.

FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

The groups that have carried out digital literacy movement initiatives, including fact-checking, include the Anti-Defamation Society (MAFINDO), the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Indonesian Cyber Media Association (AMSI). While MAFINDO targets a wide range of people from various professions, AJI and AMSI target journalists and the media, especially online media. Their initiatives include workshops, talks, training and competitions.

MAFINDO was initiated as a Facebook forum called Forum Anti-Defamation of Incitement and Hoaxes (FHFHH). Harry Sufehmi created the forum in 2015 to respond to the rise of hate speech and hoaxes on social media. It became a non-profit legal entity in 2017, involving several people with similar concerns. MAFINDO now has

more than 95,000 online members and 1,000 volunteers in various regions of Indonesia. MAFINDO also has a fact-checking team that works professionally and checks facts daily.

AMSI is an online media association founded in 2017. Twenty-six online media outlets initiated it out of concerns regarding the rise of fake news and hoaxes. At the same time, cyber media are responsible for producing, distributing and reducing fake news and hoaxes, followed by social media as the massive amplifiers.

AJI is a non-profit organisation comprising journalists from various media spread across various regions. Founded in 1994, it now has more than 2000 journalists as members.

Cekfakta.com, a collaborative fact-checking consortium, was established in 2018 by 22 online media outlets with the support of MAFINDO, AJI and AMSI. Two more online outlets have since joined. The consortium committed itself to campaigning for fact-checking through the media by creating a special Cek Fakta channel in each supporting online media outlet.

Support for the fact-checking movement carried out by the three organisations and the Cekfakta.com consortium has come from various parties in different forms, such as capacity building, funding and networks. MAFINDO, for example, works with a wide range of **stakeholders**. The government, state institutions, UNESCO and private groups, including tech companies such as Google and Facebook, and have funded cooperation and campaigns.

Google News Initiative (GNI) provided AJI with funding support for fact-checking training for journalists, initially through Internews and then directly. GNI also provided AMSI with support for capacity building on fact-checking for online media.

The Cekfakta.com consortium, with Google News Initiative's support, expanded its target groups outside its members to include academics and students and is advocating for schools to adopt fact-checking in their curriculum. On various occasions, Facebook has indicated that it has involved online media to flag information shared on its pages.

Since 2017, AJI has provided debunking training to more than 20,000 participants through fact-check training classes for journalists and academics, and half-day fact-check training for the public, including students. Similarly, MAFINDO has trained more 60,000 of people through its "Kebal Hoaks" (Hoax Immunity) classes. AMSI has focused on fact-checking training for media teams.

AMSI seeks to increase the number of online media outlets that have fact-checking channels by providing team-based fact-checking training. AJI previously took a similar step by providing in-house fact-checking training to the Jakarta-based media, including online, television and radio. Television followed the fact-checking campaign initiative. Special Cek Fakta programs have been established by several TV media houses, including **Metro TV's** Fact-check, and **Kompas TV's** News or Hoax.

Broadcast media played a major role during the Covid-19 pandemic, actively campaigning against hoaxes about Covid-19. Several media outlets, such as Liputan6.com, went on to actively develop an **anti-**



Special Cek Fakta programs have been established by several TV media houses, including Metro TV's Fact-check. CREDIT: METRO TV

Cekfakta.com, a collaborative fact-checking consortium, was established in 2018 by 22 online media outlets with the support of MAFINDO, AJI and AMSI.

hoax community by training their audience on identifying fake news. Together with Kapanlagi Universe, Liputan6 developed a WhatsApp **chatbot**, "Liputan6 Cek Fakta" (Liputan6 Fact Check). Tempo.co media also developed a Whatsapp-based **chatbot** called "Cek Fakta Tempo" (Tempo Fact Check).

MAFINDO continues to innovate in encouraging the public to report suspected misinformation through **TurnBackHoax.id**. It also features a chatbot hotline, "Kalimasada". This service uses crowdsourcing to do fact-checking. The public can report suspicious information, including text chain messages, photos or website pages, and provide guidance on whether the information circulating is fake or true. MAFINDO activists moderate this service.

Digital literacy initiatives and campaigns against hoaxes continue to be developed by the media and organisations under the Cek Fakta consortium. They advocate for fact-checking in school curriculums, develop pre-bunking packages, and carry out campaigns in local languages so that hoaxes do not easily take hold.

Academics have carried out other initiatives, especially those within the Network of Digital Literacy Activists (Japelidi), with its 168 members from 78 higher education institutions in 30 cities in Indonesia and four countries. They actively engage in promoting digital literacy by organising workshops and seminars, producing comic-form campaign materials, and other activities.

The Indonesian Fact-check Summit, an annual event initiated by the Cek Fakta consortium, specifically discusses the journey and challenges of fact-checking in Indonesia. A major issue at the inaugural summit in 2021 was hoax content in programmatic digital advertisements in online media advertising inventories, including media with fact-checking channels.

Programmatic advertising content is a product developed by digital advertising agencies or networks that may contain many hoaxes. Kompas.com's fact-checking team has researched the content of such digital advertisements. The results of the research led Kompas.com to take a **stand** and terminate a partnership with an advertising agency, even though it meant accepting the loss of income from programmatic advertising collaboration worth hundreds of millions of rupiah per month.

A developing issue is the **"hoax stamp"** that the state authorities gives to journalistic productions. As well, Cek Fakta continues to focus on the crucial issue of the safety of fact-checkers, including those from both media and non-media organisations such as MAFINDO.

Strengths and achievements

Significant achievements by community fact-checking campaigns, especially the Cek Fakta network, include the Live Fact-Check for the 2019 Presidential Election Debate. This involved fact-checkers from MAFINDO and the 24 media outlets in the Cek Fakta consortium, academics and students, and experts from several civil society organisations. The Cek Fakta network carried out fact-checking on this debate several times during the 2019 presidential and vice-presidential election period.

Fact-checkers and their supporting teams gathered in the same place during the debate. They shared the task of identifying statements that could be verified, looking for sources of information or accurate data, and compiling the verification results in written form. They also published them together. For example, **CNNIndonesia.com** created a special page to publish their results. Kompas.com created a special channel for **2019 Election** Fact Checks with similar efforts by Liputan6.com, Merdeka.com, and other media outlets.



The Cek Fakta network carried out fact-checking on debates several times during the 2019 presidential and vice-presidential election period. Journalists pose outside Cek Fakta ahead of a presidential candidate debate in 2019. CREDIT: GOOGLE NEWS LAB

The media took a similar approach during the 2020 Simultaneous Regional Elections. Online media under the AMSI network conducted fact checks during the regional head candidate debates in 20 regions, collaborating with the CekFakta.com team. During regional head elections, they also performed “Siskamling Hoaks” (Hoax Neighbourhood Patrol) by monitoring hoaxes on social media.

These initiatives helped the public obtain comparative information regarding claims issued by candidates during campaigns, which often tend to be bombastic or even misleading to gain sympathy from voters. The initiatives succeeded in reducing the circulation of political hoaxes during the campaign period. As well, they marked the first collaborative movement carried out by the media in Indonesia, a development that garnered appreciation from many sectors, including election organisers and the candidates’ campaign teams.

Challenges for fact-checkers

Indonesia’s Cek Fakta Initiative has enjoyed significant public support but has also faced significant challenges. These challenges are related to the safety of fact-checkers and fact-checking institutions. Digital attacks on fact-checkers, as well as on the Cekfakta.com website, have started to appear.

After Cekfakta.com performed the Live Fact-Check event during the first debate session of the 2019 Candidate Debates, the Cekfakta.com website was **hacked** by an unknown party. The hacker altered the homepage of the Cekfakta.com website to show a Youtube video about ghosts. As well, the public could not access the fact-checked links displayed by the network media.

Journalists and non-journalist fact-checkers have experienced digital attacks and threats from parties who are uncomfortable with facts that do not align with their interests. These attacks include doxing, that is, the public release of private details such as home addresses.

The mental health of fact-checkers is also a concern. A media outlet fact-checking team tends to have a small number of members because specific skills are required to carry out verification, especially regarding digital proofing. This small team must often expose themselves to traumatising pictures or videos while checking the authenticity of the images.

A further challenge is that the results of a fact-check are less likely to go viral than the initial hoax itself. The subject matter and sensational tone of hoax materials tend to have greater appeal than the cool, balanced approach of fact-checks.

The way forward

Collaboration on fact-checking between media and non-media organisations, including university groups, needs to be continuously improved. The media has limited capacity to allocate its human resources to carry out fact checks, since it must also produce many other journalistic products, including in-depth news and investigative reports.

Future collaboration between media and universities would be most effective if supported by informatics faculties. These experts can provide support to the digital technology aspects of projects, such as increasing the views of fact-check articles, improving the security systems of fact-check websites and creating artificial intelligence applications to support fact-checking. In addition, universities can act as research and development units to formulate and test applications before they are put into operation by media outlets.

Universities can provide opportunities for students to do collaborative work to strengthen the fact-checking movement. Universities increasingly understand developments in the media and the challenges they pose to producing reliable and accurate information for the public, including conducting fact-checks, from content to technology.

Special measures are needed to ensure the physical and mental health of fact-checkers. The media needs Standard Operating Procedures to protect fact-checkers from digital attacks, which can affect both them and their families. They also need to take steps, including regular monitoring, to limit the strain of recurrent exposure to traumatising images and to pick up signs that fact-checkers need support.

In addition, social media platforms must support media outlets or the fact-checking community to ensure that fact-checking content distributed on websites or social media platforms is adequate. It is not enough for technology companies to contribute to fact-checking groups simply to fulfil certain obligations under the current chaotic conditions, and then to disregard the results they achieve. Social media platforms need to make concentrated efforts on the technological side so that the fact-checks produced have a good level of visibility and reach targeted community groups.

Hesthi Murthi is the Former Executive Director of Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and a fact-check trainer.

NEPAL

Promoting digital literacy with scarce resources

BY UJJWAL ACHARYA

Nepal is a prime target for misinformation due to political instability, weakened public trust in the relatively new media system, a lack of media and information literacy among citizens, the proximity of two large neighbours, diverse population groups, and the rapid adoption of mobile phones and the internet. Yet, despite its vulnerability, Nepal has only sporadically experienced problems caused by misinformation.

Nepal, with a population of just over 30 million, has high mobile and internet penetration. There are 1.41 mobile connections and 1.31 internet connections for each person. Of those using the internet, 73% access it through mobile devices, while the rest use wired broadband services. The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, followed by Instagram, which is mostly used by younger people.

Nepal's worst experience with misinformation occurred in 2000, in the pre-internet era, when internet access was limited. A false claim that Indian film star Hrithik Roshan had said in a TV interview that he hated Nepal and its people sparked riots in the streets of Kathmandu, despite there being no evidence to support the claim. The riots lasted several days, during which at least five people were killed and hundreds were injured. Indian businesses were vandalised, Indian tourists attacked, and public transportation halted. The riots were eventually quelled when Roshan repeatedly denied making the statement and expressed his love for Nepal.

The impact of misinformation in Nepali society was felt again in 2009. In June of that year, 16 people suspected of being kidnappers were lynched or burned alive in the southern belt near the border with India. Two more were lynched in July in the Kathmandu Valley after rumours spread that they were child kidnappers.

Since then, no similar violent incidents have been triggered by misinformation, but several studies suggest a significant amount of misinformation is still circulating. This includes information operations by foreign actors, particularly China and India, which could have dangerous consequences. The misinformation has appeared in national media, as well as YouTube channels and social media platforms, and on a wide range of topics.

The misinformation landscape

The database of fact-checks compiled by the Center for Media Research – Nepal, a non-government organization, shows that from March 2020 to January 2023, Nepal's fact-checking initiatives published 285 fact-checks. The fact-checkers classified 57% of that potential misinformation as fake information, 35% as misleading information, 5% as unverified information and 3% as correct information.

Almost half of the misinformation originated on social media, while about 42% originated in mainstream media, either print or online. Analysis of the topics attracting misinformation showed that 36% related to politics, 32% to health (which spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic) and 29% to social topics.

A study in 2020 by Media Action Nepal found that Nepali media have a tendency to disseminate misleading information and that nearly 4% of the news contains misleading information. The Nepal Social Media Users Survey 2021, published in June 2022, concluded that more than 9 in 10 social media users in Nepal receive misinformation online. Of 403 respondents, 92% said they had seen misinformation online in the previous seven days.

According to the survey, the dominant location for misinformation was the social networking site Facebook, with 79.8% of respondents



Journalists from different provinces of Nepal participated in the fact-checking training organized by the Centre for Media Research-Nepal in Kathmandu in January 2023. CREDIT: UJJWAL ACHARYA

Nepal's fact-checking initiatives suffer from lack of funding opportunities and human resources.

who saw misinformation saying they saw it there. Among them, 23.3% said they saw misinformation only on Facebook and not on any other platforms. Of other respondents, 48.1% said they saw misinformation on the video streaming site YouTube, 36.3% saw it on Twitter and 30.3% saw it on other websites. The survey also revealed that 97.8% of social media users think misinformation is, or will be, a problem for Nepal's politics and society.

Nepal held two elections in 2022: first, the municipal elections in May, and then the parliamentary (both federal and provincial) elections in November. Fact-checkers agree that during those elections, doctored images, fake screenshots, and out-of-context "shallow fake" videos spread misinformation. However, they also concluded that "dangerous misinformation creating suspicion over election results or discouraging voters or creating disrespect on electoral integrity or system" was not found during the election period.

FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

Nepal's fact-checking initiatives are limited and struggling, even though fact-checking is an effective tool in combating misinformation. Nepal's first fact-checking initiative was launched in 2015, but as of February 2022, there were only three fact-checking initiatives, with one of them being relatively new and another being largely inactive.

South Asia Check, established in 2015 by a non-government organisation called Panos South Asia, was a pioneering fact-checking attempt that did well initially. South Asia Check received financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundation from 2016 to 2020, but failed to find further funding and has remained largely inactive since then. It has a small team based in Kathmandu and from its outset, the organization has been verifying claims made by politicians, ministers, bureaucrats, and diplomats. South Asia Check is the only fact-checking initiative in Nepal certified by the International Fact-Checking Network.

Nepal Fact Check, a joint initiative by the Center for Media Research Nepal and a popular blog, My Sansar, was launched in March 2020 as an urgent response to viral misinformation on coronavirus and relied on indirect support put together from small components of various other short-term projects for which Center for Media Research Nepal received funding. Nepal Fact Check assesses viral information on mainstream and social media. It has a small team based in Kathmandu and misinformation monitors in all seven provinces.

In addition to monitoring misinformation, Nepal Fact Check works actively to raise awareness and provides training on information verification and fact-checking. The team monitored misinformation during the November 2022 elections and organised misinformation awareness webinars, as well as one-day and three-day intensive training programs for potential fact-checkers.

Nepal Check, established in December 2022 by the former editor of South Asia Check, Deepak Adhikari, describes itself as a "volunteering effort to hold politicians, public and elected officials and political party leaders to account for their false, misleading and half-truth statements through an act of fact-checking".

Strengths and achievements

The biggest accomplishment of fact-checking in Nepal has been to raise awareness about misinformation among the public and media. Many media outlets have corrected their factually incorrect information and given credit to fact-checkers. This

shows that the media is becoming more diligent in verifying information before publication.

Fact-checking has also had some impact on social media influencers. Some influencers deleted debunked posts, others apologized for their mistakes, and several even thanked the fact-checkers for the corrections.

During the 2022 elections, fact-checking organizations, mainstream media, journalists, and even journalism-related organizations affiliated with political parties were successful in debunking misinformation in a timely manner and bringing the truth to light. This minimized the impact of misinformation and discouraged those who create and spread it.

Challenges for fact-checkers

In a 2019 study of fact-checking in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, five major challenges emerged from the interviews with fact-checkers: lack of human resources; lack of machine learning tools built for local languages; lack of digital archives; lack of a sustainable business model; and political pressure. While political pressure is not a factor, the other four challenges all apply. A specific challenge in Nepal is that media consumers largely do not recognize the value of fact-checking, making it hard for fact-checking organisations to reach large audiences.

Lack of resources

Nepal's fact-checking initiatives suffer from lack of funding opportunities and human resources. South Asia Check, which was fully functional when it had funding from either the National Endowment for Democracy or the Open Society Foundation from 2016 to 2020, became largely inactive when funding dried up. Learning from South Asia Check, Nepal Fact Check uses a different funding model to allocate some funding to it from other projects that Center for Media Research – Nepal (CMR-Nepal) receives. This decreases its dependence on one or other funders. But despite CMR-Nepal's commitment to fund it through core funds, it still relies on project funding from donors. So far, Nepal Check is a voluntary operation that is actively searching for funding.

The lack of human resources is another challenge. South Asia Check received in-house fact-checking training supported by the International Fact-Checking Network, but most of those trained are not in the field. Nepal Fact Check developed its own training program and has conducted trainings, but many those trained have not joined fact-checking operations. Realising that one-day training is not enough, CMR-Nepal held a three-day intensive training program for 12 participants, eight of whom are now part of the initiative as disinformation monitors.

Language

Language is another challenge. Nepali uses Devanagari script, the same as Hindi, which makes it harder to do both automated and manual fact-checking, as searching requires some extra skills. Many official documents still use non-Unicode fonts which are not recognized as Nepali text by search engines. Certain tools and techniques, such as searching for images on Google and using internet databases, might not be available or useful due to language barriers.

In addition, fact-checking initiatives struggle with bilingual publishing. South Asia Check and Nepal Check are bilingual, publishing mostly in English but also partly in Nepali. This approach requires more resources. Nepal Fact Check publishes only in Nepali because, according to its editor, Umesh Shrestha, their "aim is to reach Nepali population with Nepali language".

Digital archive

South Asia Check has faced issues because organized government data and government websites do not contain the latest statistics. Other fact-checkers face similar problems because the country's digital archive system is weak and sometime unsearchable. Even when data is available, it is not up to date or from trustworthy sources. Newspaper websites tend to delete older contents when they update designs, making it possible to access only through internet archival services which do not always archive all contents.



Fact-checking sites in Nepal have been successful in creating some awareness among media and political leaders but are not widely consumed by the general public. CREDIT: UJJWAL ACHARYA



Nepal Check describes itself as a “volunteering effort to hold politicians, public and elected officials and political party leaders to account for their false, misleading and half-truth statements through an act of fact-checking”. CREDIT: NEPAL CHECK

Nepal’s popular blog mysansar.com co-publishes all fact-checks by Nepal Fact Check, while South Asia Check and Nepal Check also encourage online media to republish their contents.

Sustainability

The future of Nepal’s oldest fact-checking operation, South Asia Check, looks uncertain due to its lack of a workable business model. The organisation relied on funding from two funders and did not look towards other funding models or funders for a long time. Nepal Check is very new, still a voluntary effort and actively looking for funding. The organisation does not seem to have any other model so far and both their models (volunteer and donor-funding) carry risks of unsustainability.

Nepal Fact Check has a slightly different funding model, diversifying its funding through various funders and looking for small amounts of funding from various funders rather than look for one or two big sources. However, the model still depends upon external donor funding. The organisation has tried to raise some funding from relevant projects, such as training, monitoring and organising discussions on misinformation and fact-checking.

Audience reach

Fact-checking sites are not popular in Nepal. Although the sites have been successful in creating some awareness among media and political leaders, the public largely do not read them. This could be because of the high number of citizens relying on the internet and social media for information. According to the editor of Nepal Fact Check, Umesh Shrestha, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok have become popular sources of information for the public, but fact-checkers are largely absent from these platforms. While Nepal Fact Check has created some TikTok videos, fact-checkers are largely absent from YouTube and TikTok and their Facebook pages likes are insignificant (South Asia Check – 4K+ likes; Nepal Fact Check – 2K+ likes; and Nepal Check – 300+ likes).

More promisingly, the fact-checkers have partnered with popular mediums to reach wider audiences. Nepal’s popular blog mysansar.com co-publishes all fact-checks by Nepal Fact Check, while South

Asia Check and Nepal Check also encourage online media to republish their contents.

Nepal Fact Check used influencers on TikTok and YouTube in 2022 to raise awareness about misinformation and promote fact-checking to reach those audiences, arguing they “**need to reach** them [general public] on the same platform where they receive misinformation, and in the same way they receive it”.

The way forward

The fact-checking scene in Nepal is not very strong as there are only a few organizations and limited efforts to combat misinformation. Despite the current lack of perceived serious threats to Nepali society and politics, the presence of elements that could cause problems in the future make it crucial to strengthen measures to combat misinformation. Fact-checking is a crucial part of these measures.

To strengthen fact-checking, it is important to increase public awareness about misinformation and improve information literacy skills. Fact-checking skills should be taught to as many individuals as possible, especially journalists and students, through intensive training and mentorship programs.

Media organisations should consider establishing dedicated fact-checking units and should understand the value of partnering with fact-checking organizations or conducting fact-checks internally, particularly during crucial times such as elections, disasters, and politically/socially sensitive periods. With their resources and verification capacities, the media can play a leading role in the fact-checking scene in Nepal.

Fact-checking organisations should seek deeper partnerships with media and influential social media groups to disseminate fact-checks and train others in fact-checking skills. They should also consider joining the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to increase exposure, trust, training, and partnerships.

Fact-checking organizations should look for diverse funding sources and establish a sustainable business model to continue their work with greater impact. Finally, they should find ways to reach more audiences by using various local languages and promoting themselves on platforms where their target audience is active.

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SRI LANKA

Fighting polarisation in public discourse

BY DEEPANJALIE ABEYWARDANA AND MAHOSHADI PEIRIS

Sri Lanka's media and political landscape has been marred by two significant problems that have also posed numerous challenges to the democratic discourse in the country: first, the problem of polarisation; and second, the problem of information disorder.

The media in Sri Lanka is divided along ethno-linguistic and ideological lines, and often features polarised framings on national issues. For instance, polarising media framings on the topic of the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) Resolution on Sri Lanka on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in the country have been a consistent feature of [the discourse](#).

The Sinhala language press portrays the UNHRC as imposing “too much” and “undue pressure” on the Government of Sri Lanka, while the Tamil language press positions it as applying “legitimate pressure” and “too little” of it in holding the government accountable. This divide in the way the Sinhala press and the Tamil press frame the issue serves to exacerbate the pre-existing ethno-religious divide in the country.

The problem of information disorder manifests within this polarised media and political landscape. Political statements that contain factual inaccuracies are uncritically disseminated and amplified by local media in a way that limits the ability of the public to engage in democratic discourse and make informed electoral decisions. As a result, such statements not only have negative social, economic, and political ramifications, but also reinforce polarisation in the country.

For instance, during the 2019 Presidential Election, the candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Gotabaya Rajapaksa, ran a campaign catering primarily to Sinhala-Buddhist interests. During this period, much of the disinformation targeting his main opponent, Sajith Premadasa, [claimed](#) that Premadasa and his allies had asserted that the “Southern Sinhalese can be defeated by voting for Premadasa”.

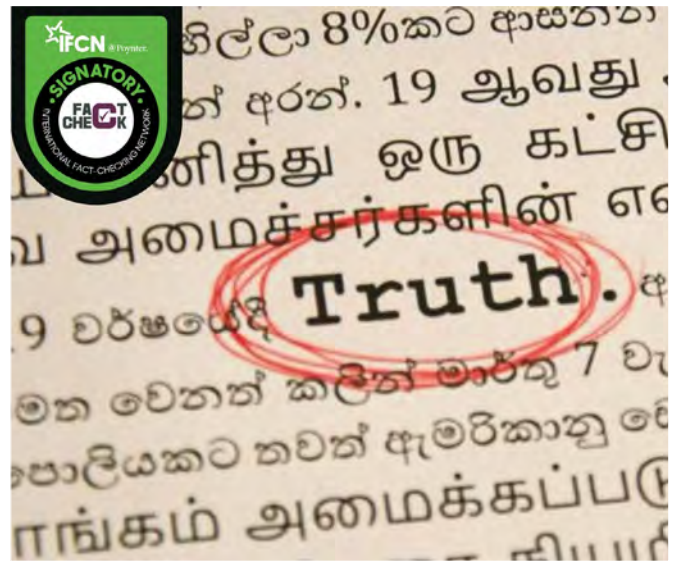
In 2022, Sri Lanka experienced an unprecedented wave of democratic public protests (commonly known by the Sinhala term *aragalaya*), which was triggered by the deteriorating economic conditions in the country. The economic crisis and political instability in Sri Lanka have served as a hotbed for the spread of mis/disinformation, thereby weakening the information space for well-informed democratic discussion.

The misinformation landscape

Four dominant and recurring patterns are identifiable in the political and media discourse. These patterns tend to exacerbate the polarisation of the local political landscape along ethno-religious lines and political ideologies. At the same time, they hinder citizens' ability to make informed choices in a democracy. The work of fact-checking platforms is to impede and disrupt these negative patterns.

Playing into prejudice

Sri Lankan political figures often make claims that run the risk of promoting and perpetuating prejudicial and harmful narratives that work against the country's ethno-religious minority groups. For instance, in 2019, Member of Parliament (MP) Udaya Gammanpila claimed that the Sinhala population in Sri Lanka was declining in comparison to the Muslim population and was under the threat of extinction due to the rapid growth of the Muslim population. This was later shown to be blatantly false by the [analysis](#) published on FactCheck.lk.



Launched in 2018, FactCheck.lk was the first fact-checking program to be internationally recognised in Sri Lanka. CREDIT: FACTCHECK.LK

Political statements that contain factual inaccuracies are uncritically disseminated and amplified by local media in a way that limits the ability of the public to engage in democratic discourse and make informed electoral decisions.

The blame game

Most often, politicians currently in government and state officials attribute blame for issues concerning economic mismanagement to the politicians who were formerly in government. For example, there has been a persistent debate – which has been heightened in the aftermath of the 2021-2022 economic crisis – on the question of which government contributed the most to the country's extensive debt. FactCheck.lk has [analysed](#) various such claims to distinguish the correct and false narratives associated with the debt debate and to clarify the substantive issues with regard to the increase in debt.

False sense of security

This pattern emerged primarily at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. It involved government officials creating a false sense of security through their communications, such as in relation to the status of the country's Covid-19 transmission rates, by falsely assuring the public that the level of transmission in the country [had not reached](#) the level of “community spread” at the time. Shortly afterward, the government communication shifted to creating a [false sense of success](#) by declaring that Sri Lanka had been the most successful country in the South Asia region at controlling the pandemic. This type of misinformation continues as Sri Lanka [battles](#) through an economic crisis, having defaulted on the payment of its foreign currency-denominated debt.

Misconstruing rights

Politicians and public officials misinterpret the law in a manner that serves their personal or political interests. They do this by exploiting the difficulty that a layperson would face in interpreting legal texts in written laws and regulations. Most recently, Minister of Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe falsely [interpreted](#) provisions of the law to claim that Sri Lanka's highly contested executive presidential system

IFJ RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Fact-checking has established itself in the international media and journalism community as a critical truth frontline. It is vital in defending democracy by fighting misinformation, encouraging media literacy and restoring public trust in independent media. All stakeholders, including media outlets, journalists, unions, educators, funders, donors and fact-checkers themselves, have a role to play in this endeavour.
- ◆ Media outlets should consider establishing fact-checking units, regularly publish fact-checks, correct misinformation, and promptly and publicly correct their own errors.
- ◆ Media outlets and journalists should support independent fact-checking institutions and the expanding network of factcheckers regionally and globally. This can be done by encouraging their work, republishing their content and giving full attribution when quoting their findings in reports.
- ◆ Media operations should also consider providing fact-checking skills workshops and training to all journalists and media workers to help mitigate the chances of unintentionally publishing misinformation in media reporting.
- ◆ Fact-checking organisations should protect fact-checkers from any threat to their physical and mental health, including defamation, harassment, abuse and vicarious trauma.
- ◆ Social media platforms should ensure that fact-checks are given the same level as visibility as the online misinformation they seek to correct.
- ◆ Journalist unions should explore and expand efforts to support and represent fact-checkers' "rights to publish" and express solidarity with them by acceptance of their participation as media workers. Unions may also consider extending memberships to the fact-checkers.
- ◆ Funders and donors should continue to support fact-checking initiatives by supporting their training, start-up, and sustainability programs.
- ◆ Fact-checking initiatives should adhere and remain committed to impartiality, accountability, transparency, and correct methodology.
- ◆ Fact-checking initiatives should consider looking beyond short-term funding models to ensure long-term viability and sustainability through industry and network support and collaboration.
- ◆ Fact-checking initiatives should expand their reach by using various communication formats and channels to improve media literacy and actively seek support from media outlets, civil society and human rights defenders in publishing their findings. This will promote fact-checking - as a layer of democratic defence and discourse.
- ◆ Fact-checking initiatives should attempt to publish reports in local languages wherever possible, despite the technological barriers.
- ◆ Universities and schools should teach skills in critical reading of official information, mass media and social media to encourage media literacy.
- ◆ Media and information literacy are important aspects of fighting misinformation; therefore, all stakeholders, including media, journalists, unions, and fact-checkers, should promote media and information literacy through programs, trainings and resources. •

HOW TO LAUNCH A FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVE

Launching a fact-checking initiative is equivalent to starting a small media venture. It could be a unit within a media outlet, or an independent operation established as a private company or a civil society organisation.

Editor, fact-checkers, and monitors - Who are they?

Fact-checking initiative need an editor, and some fact-checkers (and/or monitors) who are trained in fact-checking principles and methods. The team decides what and how to fact-check. They also decide on workflow and procedure to follow.

Fact-checking's role with websites and social media

Fact-checking groups generally publish their fact-check reports on their website or a separate page in an existing website. Social media accounts are used to publicise the fact-checks and reach media consumers where they originally saw the misinformation.

Getting recognition!

Gaining recognition at the local level depends largely on the performance of the fact-checking initiative. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) requires applicants for signatory status to have published at least one fact-check a week on average over the six months before they apply.

How can journalist unions support fact-checking?

Fact-checkers may not be journalists in the strict sense, but they are media workers doing vital work that helps strengthen integrity, accountability and public trust in journalism. Fact-checkers also follow many of the key principles and procedures of journalism and uphold the same fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression and the public's right to know. This commitment to media freedom makes them at least natural allies of journalists' unions, and even potential members. •

MANAGING THE MISINFORMATION EFFECT
THE STATE OF FACT-CHECKING IN ASIA

