COVID 19 Pandemic Voices from Margins Webinar series

Webinar 34: Challenges from Fake News: Pandemic and Beyond

Date: September 23, 2020

Minutes

Profile of Panellists:

Panellist 1 Pratik Sinha is the co-founder and editor of Alt News. Previously, he's worked in multiple technology companies as a software engineer with his main focus area being wireless and embedded systems. He had followed the rise of fake news as early as 2013 but was moved to start the website after realizing the impact of social media in 2017. He quit freelancing as a software engineer in 2016 and founded Alt News the next year. He's also a member of Jan Sangharsh Manch, a civil liberties organisation based in Ahmedabad.

Panellist 2 Rukhsana Vora, is a Team Leader at Sahyog, Ahmedabad. Her journey started in the year 2002 after the Gujarat Riots. During that period, she was a teacher when she observed that the riot had a major impact on children, while many of them dropped out many were under the fear to go back to schools. This drove her to work towards issues related to children. In the year 2006, she joined Sahyog and since then she has been working on key areas related to child rights.

Panellist 3 S.D.L Vennila hails from Villupuram, women coordinator in Trust for Social Justice Shanthi Nilayam. She has 20+ years of experience in working with children, adolescents and women.

Panellist 4 Bharat Kantharia, Master in Social Work at TISS, Mumbai in 1987. Working in the social development sector for last more than three decades. Associated with a community-based organisation Samta Charitable Trust in Surat, Gujarat. At present working on issues vis: Children education and Adolescence development in Mumbai, urban working Youth's Right and legal Right in an organisation Yuva in Nasik, Tribal issues in Surat. Since 1998 engaged in some other urban issues like housing rights, child rights and the unorganised sector as well.

Panellist 5 Jency Jacob is the managing editor of BOOM, India's premier fact-checking digital initiative based out of Mumbai. Jency manages a newsroom of enterprising fact-checkers who are striving to keep our social media and public space clear of misinformation and communally sensitive disinformation that can result in real-life implications. The fact-

checking initiative that began as a small team of 3 reporters have now grown to 25 people (both text and video) across 4 major metros of the country, covering English and 3 Indian languages and also neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Jency is also a regular speaker at various national and international conferences, speaking about the importance of battling misinformation and the media's role in countering them with credible and factual news stories.

Panellist 6 Madhupa is currently Founder Dean and Professor, Dept. of Media Science, The Heritage Academy, Kolkata. The department has 250 students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in media science. In her 20 years of academic career, she has mentored more than 1000 students. Currently, her students are in premier brands like Times Now, CNN IBN, Wunderman Thomson, Netflix etc. An alumnus of California State University, San Jose Madhupa regularly teaches in executive programs of IIM Calcutta. Previously she has also taught in other IIMs like Ranchi, Udaipur and Bodh Gaya. She is actively involved in research and has published papers and case studies in A-ranked international journals. Her current research interest lies in Media literacy, digital media and marketing communications.

DISCUSSION:

Tom Thomas: The core idea of behind these webinars are two-fold one is to engage with the voices, the reality on the ground and the key aspects we should engage with. Secondly, through personal and organizational efforts try and multiply these voices. Our panel today consists of journalist and media professionals fighting against fake news in the forefront, and community-led organizations who bear the impact of fake news, people in the receiving end of fake news who also fights against them. As kids, we used to wait for April 1st to play the prank news prank on our friends and relatives. Fake news has moved beyond pranks to today's call for action. The unrealistic myths are used to hate communities, lynch each other and to destroy the democracy. The spectrum of fake news is broadly oscillating between the prank and civil war. In today's scenario, it is highly inclined towards civil war reaching a point where more and more people unable to identify between fake and real. Machines and humans have joined hands together against humans and humanity. It's an active army of paid people articulating the virus called fake news which travels six times faster than the original news. No fake news or misinformation is politically neutral, each of them has its purpose. If we are worried about the advancement of AI it will be through news factories generating fake news and misinformation rather than other means of destruction. I welcome the panellists to enlighten us on this emerging virus named Fake News.

Pratik Sinha: Despite our years of work and experience, the issue at hand has only highly increased. The problem is as pointed out very clearly that there is hardly any fake news or misinformation that is politically neutral or not made into a political angle. Especially the right-wing of India weaponise this misinformation. People working in the ground are aware of how misinformation pervaded through all sections of people and its impacts in terms of polarisation. I would like to focus on the way forward. Things now have come to the point where individuals and organisations should take a step forward rather than hope for the government or other institution to make positive interventions. The end goal of the current government is to control independent media. If you look at the mainstream media, they all speak the same language. The one issue covered by all channels is Sushant Singh Rajput's death when thousands of lives killed in Covid. When hundreds are in misery by the

unplanned lockdown the media was focusing on drugs and murder instead of issues at hand. With the whole system trying to ensure the real issues doesn't reach our ears, it is becoming hard and hard to differentiate between fake and reality. This truth that 'all news in mainstream and social media does not need to be true' should be percolated to the ground. We are writing a bilingual book on fact-checking hoping it helps the people to identify the news and data that are misleading them. At this point, the multiple of the fact-checking organisation must come together and ensure that the information that reaches the ground is reliable and make people know the mainstream social media may be misleading. If you look at what happened in 2019 fight between India and China, we don't know how many died. Most of the mainstream media claimed satellite image of an ordinary burial site as the burial site of Chinese soldiers for a recent fight between Indian and Chinese army. We are looking to enable the skills to the locals to make videos in vernacular languages which makes people understand what we do.

Rukhsana Vora: During the pandemic, the news was linked with minorities and was alleged of carriers of infections. In many of the societies, boards were put asking people from minorities not to enter with vegetables. The communities had to face a lot of implications due to the spread of fake news. Their lives and livelihoods were affected. Many of the people from started depending upon the informal loans. Practices of discrimination were commonly practised and the people preferred always visiting the chemist shops to take medicines rather than going to hospitals.

Vennila: I am working as a coordinator. During the lockdown, there has been an increase in fake news. One of those is that Covid has been spreading due to visitors from other countries or due to eating the wrong type of foods. People reacted by boycotting anyone they suspect from another region as they're scared that they might have covid or might affect them or their children. People were unable to receive any benefits offered by the government as they were isolated because of the spread of fake news. Fake news does not only affect their livelihood but also their mental health as children are most affected due to isolation. Livelihood highly depends on the income and with no support from the government they suffered more due to the fake news. Most buses here do not reach on time and in this situation, with fewer buses, there are also transport difficulties. Fake news has been spreading on the intake of medicinal products for getting cured. But people are not aware of whether or not this is a right one but they do follow it without any knowledge and such fake news only affects the intake of people where children might also get affected more. Fake news affects both physically and mentally. Passing on information which isn't right has only increased the risks people working in professions where there an influence of dust (Eg; construction) when these people visit hospitals just for a normal check-up they're being subjected to isolation which at times stops people from even getting the right treatment they require only with free ration being provided with the whole family isn't going to benefit from it. Fake news has only affected their life more than what the lockdown has impacted them.

Bharat Kantharia: When lockdown started, the daily wage workers, labours or those with limited livelihood options were not included in any of the policies or they were not thought about. The impact of lockdown on them - their livelihood, health, children etc There were also rumours if the money deposited in JDY account were not withdrawn will be retrieved. The bank employees were also not sure of how to deal with the crowd. The hawkers were evicted as there were rumours that COVID19 spreads through some vegetables like tomatoes etc. The vegetable sellers were also not able to get access to their health cards. Their livelihoods were also adversely impacted. The domestic help was asked not to go to their work as their employers would think that they live in slums and there are higher chances of them getting infected with corona. Those who live in slums such as flower sellers, workers in the textile market, vegetable sellers, those provide smaller services were completely isolated from their work. Due to the rumours of vegetables also being a source of corona many stopped purchasing those vegetables which have affected their work. A stereotype was created that these people could be the carrier of corona as they live in slum areas which impacted them and their health and lives of their children. This led to unemployment amongst most of them and they were then forced to walk miles and miles to reach their hometowns.

Jency Jacob: Misinformation mostly affects the minorities and marginalised sections of society. There was a lot of fake news in April 2020. Boom is one of the first IFCN-certified fact-checkers in India. Worked on National Election-related misinformation in January-May 2019 in three languages English, Hindi and Bengali.Generated Fact check videos/ground reports and two Helplines for community engagement with the help of 20-member team based out of Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata, Myanmar & Bangladesh. Fake News in India is not a new phenomenon. It is rampant for many years, especially on social media. Attention to fake news only posted November 2016 in the post- Trump era demonising the mainstream media- "Media will not tell you this", "News traders" etc. Mainstream media underestimated the impact of fake news. Political IT cells built a robust online army much before mainstream media discovered social media. We need fact-checkers to look at content ignored by mainstream media certified by IFCN, the world body of fact-checkers. Fact-Checking is a stringent process, like primary source, led news and strict attribution which should be independent, free from government or corporate pressure. With affordable mobile data plans, more people are coming online for the first time. Many of the lack of media literacy on how to consume news. Misinformation thrives in regional languages away from the scrutiny of the English or Hindi mainstream media. Fact-checkers are predominantly focused on debunking misinformation in these languages. WhatsApp is end-to-encrypted. Anonymity is key to spreading rumours.2018 is defining Year that showed Fake News just doesn't misinform but also kills. Over 35 people have died since 2017. Mobs have lynched innocent on charges of being child-kidnappers. Zero fear of the law - police has been attacked when they tried to save those being lynched. In Elections: 2014 & 2019 the exponential rise of voters who are now being touched by multiple social media platforms. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Share chat, Tik Tok. Bad actors using celebs, sports stars & army as proxies to build an audience. Pol parties later buy those pages. In 2014 there were no fact-checkers to track social media. in 2019Two Major Incidents, Terror Attack in Kashmir followed by an airstrike by India across the border and the special status was withdrawn for

Kashmir. Over 100 fact checkers holding political parties, politicians, verified and journalist accountable.

Misinformation thrives in two conditions: Age of election, incidents around the national security and depolarisation of Hindu or Muslim. Mostly minority sections were impacted. CRP impacted the most and 45 soldiers died in a gas explosion, there is a set of team officers who quickly responded through Twitter and WhatsApp. There are three approaches like monitor, analyse and debunk. Google reverse image search is available on every gadget, so it is mainly for creditable mainstream media reports and the official sources for comments and they mostly work on primary sources base information and the main thing he conveyed is not to ignore the conversation on social media. They are doing a lot of research in school programs. Nearly 2500 students in 15 schools. During this pandemic, they have completed two studies. one is during May; the study is based on fake news of coronavirus and there are 178 stories. Mostly of false allegation is Muslim, the source of useful information is through Facebook WhatsApp and Twitter. During April there are nearly thirty stories which are fully based on communal stories but there are no stories till march. The second one is there is 174 fact-checking, communal stories went down during June and July. Tension with China began. National stress is that there is a lot of people, who were pushed into the Misinformation about the community and Bollywood stories.

Madhupa: I used to manage 250 students and when I had a discussion with students on media illiteracy, the students said that there is a lot of impact on parents especially the older generation. One of the student's family restricted her from moving to Mumbai solely due to the rumours of Sushant case and the portrayed Mumbai life by media. It is our responsibility to train the new generation so that students can go out and disperse the misinformation. This kind of misinformation can only thrive when there are less illiteracy and less consciousness about the hard news and soft news. Soft news is the easiest way of consuming. The sensational news has a tendency, which has been approved through research that the generation below 18 and above 52 is the most susceptible for such news. We need to think upon how can we train the present generation to fight against such information and manufacturing of news? The age-old practices of manufacturing news should be updated in sync with the current digital world which gives space to the youth to take forward.

Q&A Session:

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Question: What could be the role of civil society?

Answer (Pratik): Civil society only with their collective effort can make an impact. If an organization works together in civil society, this enables themselves to improve skills and critical thinking is very important so that the people should aware of the good possibilities like policies and so on. It is important for the civil society which is not politically inclined to train and enable the skills to reach ground level. Misinformation also has a psychological compound. When a family member or a Community leader who the community trust believes the information passed by them. By enabling the community leaders and grassroots with fact-checking skills it is easy to debunk the misleading information then and there.and they

are working for the well-being of the community. Though we have helpline it is impossible for an organisation for the scale of population India has to debunk the misinformation. Some of the queries should be answered at the grass-root level than waiting for 18-48 hrs to reach the fact-checkers.

Question: If in the 35 deaths you mentioned is there any action take forward and whom is to be blamed?

Answer (Jency): In 2017 and 2018 child kidnapping is a very famous rumour that killed 45 people. There is no proper gang to spread the rumours. The surge of smartphone using is also the factor for the spread of misinformation. In today's world when a person travels a long distance in search of livelihood or for any other purpose constantly stays in touch with his family compared to non-smartphone era. He/She was contacted easily by family, friends and relatives through WhatsApp chats like communicating a lot of information and images which may or may not be true. Still, many rural communities do not know to use the internet. If some fake news information is coming in WhatsApp, they are not going to check-in Google or in some websites like boom and so on. In child trafficking rumour incident led the villagers to kill the strangers who were passing through their village. The villagers and most of us did not know how to handle a lot of information pouring in that is the reason for such incidents to take place. Most of the Police have begun the community initiative to be part of the community what's up the group to prevent rumours.

Question: How can we identify news is fake? How to differentiate between western agenda or fake news?

Answer (Jency): It is not such a hard task. Anyone with a mobile phone can check. The moment you receive the information from What's up, pick up the text and search in Google so that you prevent yourself from misleading the other person. You can also reach organisations like Alt, Boom, various other fact-checking and trackers to help with.

LEGAL SOLUTIONS TO CURB FAKE NEWS

Question: Does any state developed an international mechanism to control fake news? Would you say that we need any judicial guidelines in terms of fake news?

Answer (Jency): Singapore has a new law and that has been applied. There is a dilemma between freedom of speech and exercising control. In respect to hate speeches, the narratives going to continue with or without law. Why do we need a new law? there are existing laws which are not applied uniformly by the government.

Answer (Pratik): I encounter this question in many forums and conference. The concept that Laws can stop misinformation is wrong. If we take Nirbhaya case we all wanted law and the law is in place but such incidents continue. During 377 BBC reported the rally in Kashmir against the enactment which the home ministry claimed misinformation. Later they backed up as other media too reported on the rally. If there was a law they would have targeted the journalist. Anytime we ask for the law it is being used against opposition and activist. We need to be careful when we ask for the law.

CRONY CAPITALISM AND FAKE NEWS

Question: What we have witnessed in last 6- 8 years were in India corporates for their interest using media and funding right based agency to earn more "profit "and with new liberal policy state has able to create monster corporates like Adani, Reliance which now become powerful than the state. Are they being an equal partner in spreading fake news? What can be done to make these corporates accountable?

Answer (Jency): We all are well aware of issues of crony capitalism and how Adani and Reliance have especially come up. We are now facing the issues of crony capitalism which enables the political party that works in their favour to be in power. Political parties weaponise misinformation to create narratives. The relationship between government and giant corporates should be looked in the lens of what it is doing to small scale units like the recent farmer's bill. Corporates deliberately mislead us more in terms of marketing and products than direct narratives. The misinformation created by corporates is marketing specific than targeting on any sector.