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Foreword

Development Letters is a periodical that aims to promote ideas with important policy and practical implications for a developing country like Bangladesh. This publication provides a platform to introduce thought-provoking ideas on broad development issues through short, concise articles that are accessible to policymakers and development practitioners.

Unlike established academic journals, *Development Letters* primarily focuses on communicating ideas in a manner that engages senior policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in the policy discourse. A core objective of this journal is to disseminate important and timely ideas without the encumbrance of technical details and protracted, ambiguous literature reviews.

Additionally, *Development Letters* selects and publishes ideas warranting in-depth research to gather evidence. Currently, policy-relevant analytical studies are often scarce due to the lack of financial support needed for such research. This journal aims to showcase foundational ideas that require backing to bridge the gap between analytical research and informed policymaking.

Development Letters also provides a venue to learn from those who have insights based on their experiences, which can highlight factors causing suboptimal development outcomes. This can generate invaluable lessons for future interventions.

Furthermore, *Development Letters* addresses issues that are topical and require immediate policy attention. Empirical research in social sciences can be quite time-consuming, and any evidence obtained might need further verification. This publication recognises this challenge and focuses on promoting promising ideas that warrant prompt consideration.

Each issue of *Development Letters* typically covers a wide variety of topics. Occasionally, it focuses on specific areas; for example, this issue explores various aspects of misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation involves errors that lead to inaccurate or outright false information, while disinformation is the deliberate use of incorrect information to mislead people. The prevalence and impact of these issues have intensified with the rise of social media, which is now widely used to influence public opinion. Inaccurate and misleading information imposes significant costs on economies and societies, making it imperative to tackle these issues. This issue of *Development Letters* highlights some of the pertinent challenges, with the aim of encouraging more research and public action in this area.

Abdur Razzaque, PhD
Editor-in-Chief, Development Letters
Chairman, RAPID

Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj
Country Representative
The Asia Foundation, Bangladesh

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The Role of Social Media in Spreading Misinformation and Disinformation in Bangladesh

Hiren Pandit

In Bangladesh, the misuse of social media platforms has become a catalyst for social, religious, political, and economic conflicts. This misuse has resulted in significant damage, with misinformation and harmful content exacerbating existing tensions. Political unrest, fuelled by deceptive material on social media, poses a challenge that requires cautious management by the government and law enforcement to maintain peace throughout the country.

The Pervasiveness of Misinformation

Social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has become a breeding ground for unlawful profiteering from misinformation in Bangladesh. With 84 per cent of internet users having a Facebook account, the daily dissemination of tens of thousands of misleading pieces of content reaches millions.[1] This creates a situation where a substantial portion of the population lacks the means to independently verify the accuracy of the information they encounter.

The rampant spread of misinformation has become a major societal challenge. Historical instances of political and communal violence in Bangladesh can be traced back to the influence of misinformation.[2] As social media's popularity and accessibility increase, the fight against misinformation becomes even more complex, posing a serious threat to the stability of the nation.[3]

Upholding Human Rights amidst Misinformation

The cornerstone of human rights in Bangladesh, freedom of expression, is under threat due to rampant misinformation. Initiatives are required to work with various stakeholders, especially the youth in rural areas, to counter misinformation at the local level. Meaningful participation of youth and youth-led organisations is crucial to identifying mechanisms and addressing challenges effectively. The objective is to empower the youth to play an active role in countering misinformation and contribute to strengthening mechanisms for dealing with these challenges both locally and nationally.

> **As social media's popularity and accessibility increase, the fight against misinformation becomes even more complex, posing a serious threat to the stability of the nation.**

Journalism in Bangladesh is facing unprecedented challenges in the digital age.

1. Basu, S. (2021). তরুণদের ৮৪ শতাংশই ফেসবুকে আসক্ত *News Bangla24.com*. https://www.newsbangla24.com/social-media/147369
2. Pakbir, M. M. H. (2023). Misinformation may form grave challenge for the national elections. *Daily Observer*. https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=414174
3. Sarker, L. M. L. (2023). Battle against fake news. *New Age*. https://www.newagebd.net/article/212803/battle-against-fake-news

The pressure to report news quickly in a 24/7 news cycle often compromises the accuracy of information. Responsible journalism must prioritise accuracy over speed in the face of sensationalism fuelled by misinformation. A race to break news first leads to hastily published stories containing errors or unverified information, impacting the credibility of the media landscape.

Global Impact: Misinformation's Alarming Spread

Misinformation and disinformation are not isolated issues; they are global phenomena threatening the credibility of journalism worldwide. In Bangladesh, platforms like Facebook and Messenger play vital roles in spreading misinformation, often going viral before being debunked. This global challenge requires collaborative efforts to address misinformation and safeguard the integrity of information dissemination on a broader scale.

> **Misinformation and disinformation are not isolated issues; they are global phenomena threatening the credibility of journalism worldwide. In Bangladesh, platforms like Facebook and Messenger play vital roles in spreading misinformation, often going viral before being debunked.**

Unravelling the web of misinformation involves understanding various tactics employed, including false connections, misleading content, and the creation of imposter content. These tactics pose serious threats to journalism and mainstream media integrity. The consequences of misinformation range from inciting violence to damaging reputations, ultimately undermining trust in the media. It is essential to

recognise and combat these tactics to establish a more resilient and truthful information ecosystem.

The Challenge of Information Flow

Bangladesh's technological landscape, with a 31.5 per cent internet penetration rate and 188 million mobile phone users, signifies widespread access to smartphones.[4, 5] This accessibility allows information to flow freely, but it also amplifies the challenge of combating misinformation. The majority of the population can afford smartphones, contributing to the rapid dissemination of information. The challenge lies in managing this flow of information to ensure accuracy and prevent the harmful consequences of misinformation.

> **Meaningful participation of youth and youth-led organisations is crucial to identifying mechanisms and addressing challenges effectively.**

Verification challenges in the age of social media stem from the fact that anyone can be a news source, complicating the verification process. Social media platforms create echo chambers where individuals are exposed to content that aligns with their beliefs, making fact-checking essential in combating the spread of fake news. To navigate this complexity, dedicating time and resources to confirm the credibility of sources becomes crucial. It requires a proactive approach from media outlets to verify

4. Kemp, S. (2022). DIGITAL 2022: BANGLADESH. *DATAPORTAL*.
   https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-bangladesh
5. Bangladesh Sets New Record with 190 Million Mobile Phone Users (2023). *Press Express*.
   https://pressxpress.org/2023/12/28/bangladesh-sets-new-record-with-190-million-mobile-phone-users/

information before publication and provide corrections when necessary.

NGOs Taking a Stand: Empowering Youth against Misinformation

The Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) actively counters misinformation through social media. Their initiative focuses on empowering youth to address challenges posed by misinformation at local and national levels. By enhancing knowledge and leadership skills, the initiative aims to strengthen mechanisms for countering misinformation. Youth and youth-led organisations are encouraged to play an active role in countering misinformation, contributing to meaningful participation in governance processes.

In conclusion, collaborative efforts are necessary to mitigate the harmful impact of misinformation on society. Responsible journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and promoting media literacy among the public are crucial components of this collaborative approach. Only through concerted actions can Bangladesh and the global community navigate the challenges posed by misinformation, fostering a more resilient and informed society.

Hiren Pandit is Programme Coordinator at Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication (BNNRC).

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Geo-Political Consequences of Misinformation and Disinformation: Culturally Adapting, Transnational Dis/Misinformation in South Asia

Sumon Rahman and Rahul Roy

Introduction

As the world struggles to grapple with social media dis/misinformation on the global stage, there are growing concerns about the perils of dis/misinformation in the Global South – where the populations have an ever-increasing accessibility to digital devices, internet services, and social media applications. In South Asia, while this increased digital accessibility is largely seen as a boon of economic development, the pervasive lack of digital and media literacy among its citizens has simultaneously left the public extremely vulnerable to dis/misinformation. Following global trends, South Asian countries have seen an uptick in fact-checking activity as an effective

> **Following global trends, South Asian countries have seen an uptick in fact-checking activity as an effective countermeasure to this social ill, and this in turn has shed light on the nature of circulating dis/misinformation in the South Asian social media information cyberspace.**

countermeasure to this social ill, and this in turn has shed light on the nature of circulating dis/misinformation in the South Asian social media information cyberspace. Particularly, the shared roots of a social, cultural, and religious history of South Asian countries have presented new challenges of fact – checking culturally – adapting transnational dis/misinformation – especially ones with the potential of disrupting religious harmony and inciting social unrest.

Culturally Adapting Mis-information and Dis-information

The worldwide adoption of fact-checking as a countermeasure for combating fake news has not only raised the level of awareness among various corners of society – whether they be media professionals, politicians, journalists, academics, or even social media users themselves – of the significance of fake news, but also given the world a window into the social media landscape of viral and consequential dis/misinformation. Therefore, the fact-checking corpus generated around the world has become an invaluable resource for observation, analysis, and research into the information disorder present in cyberspace; and South Asia is no exception in this regard. As the growth of digital penetration accompanies the economic development of the South Asian nations, the presence of low levels of media and digital literacy of the populations in this region has led to the institutionalisation of fact-checking as a watchdog against online and social media dis/misinformation has become crucial. This has led to many insights into the

spread of dis/misinformation not only within the geographical confines of individual South Asian countries, but also across the broader South Asian region.

In fact, one of the more interesting phenomena that can be observed is not only the travel of dis/misinformation across South Asia, but also how the content of an event (real or fake) can present itself in different social, cultural, and political realities of these countries – morphing and adapting itself in accordance with the prevailing social and political climate, and yet successfully flaring up age-old socio-cultural vulnerabilities and tensions of these societies. The following section presents a case of such phenomena along with thematic political and social issues pertinent to the study of the South Asian information ecosystem.

> **The shared geographic, cultural, and social history of present-day South Asian countries makes the diffusion of certain kinds of dis/misinformation more probable on social media. In many instances, the travel of such dis/misinformation leverages the presence of historically rooted, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and nationalist tensions in popular consciousness.**

Case Study

One of the more illustrative examples of an effective spatial and temporal travel of dis/misinformation across South Asian countries, with static content being decontextualised to create religious and inter-state discord, is the spread of a video of a news reportage of a real incident, whereby senior male students were seen ragging first-year burqa-clad female students at a university in South Asia. This video first originated on 24 February 2019 and increasingly garnered attention on Facebook.[1]

The video then resurfaced in social media, in India, on 27 February 2019, with decontextualised framing, the video was circulated with claims such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the cultural wing of the ruling political party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – harassing and torturing Muslim women. The video then gained traction across many social media platforms and was eventually debunked by a number of fact-checkers like AFP Fact Check, Alt News, Factly and The Logical Indian. Even mainstream media outlets like The Times of India issued a fake alert regarding the inauthenticity of the claims made with the video. The video went on to resurface many more times, with various decontextualised framings, in different countries at different times. In the same year, the video made its way to the Indonesian social media space with claims of Islamophobia, where the accusation was made that Hindus were mistreating Muslim women in Kashmir.

In 2020, amidst reports of news of the stigmatisation of Muslims during the COVID-19 crisis in India, the video again resurfaced among Indian social media users with claims of the RSS members torturing Muslim college girls. Similarly, in 2022, during an ongoing turmoil regarding burqa bans in the state of Karnataka in India, the video started circulating in the Bangladeshi social media ecosystem with claims of bottles being thrown at Muslim women by Hindu extremists and was eventually debunked by fact-checkers such as Fact Watch. Thus, a video originally from a genuine news report in a South Asian country underwent decontextualisation, repurposing, and dissemination across different South Asian and Southeast Asian countries through various agents, platforms, and contexts—despite multiple fact-checks.

Implications

This case study illustrates a greater phenomenon of dis/misinformation diffusion, whereby the prevailing political, border, and religious tensions between the South Asian

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1. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/danish.zaidi.7399/videos/426919774718804/

nations act as triggers of dis/misinformation spread – leading to decontextualisation and recurrence of dis/misinformation on social media platforms. The shared geographic, cultural, and social history of present-day South Asian countries makes the diffusion of certain kinds of dis/misinformation more probable on social media. In many instances, the travel of such dis/misinformation leverages the presence of historically rooted, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and nationalist tensions in popular consciousness. Moreover, there is a historical precedence of these certain cultural drivers and vulnerabilities of facilitating the spread and adaptation of dis/misinformation across South Asia – and of having instigated harm and physical violence in the real world.

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To understand dis/misinformation in South Asia, it is essential to combine comparative, regional, historical, and cultural studies with existing research methods.

The systematic study of dis/misinformation is a relatively new undertaking, and traditionally the unit of analysis for most research has been confined to the locality of a country. Moreover, the bulk of research activity is centred. Thus, while there is significant concern for the adverse effect (or lack thereof) of dis/misinformation in the Global South – and South Asia – the research literature is still at a nascent stage. In South Asia, the shared cultural history can trigger, facilitate, and even sustain the flow of dis/misinformation across the region in a unique way – thus, while dis/misinformation may be perceived locally, in many cases its underlying mechanisms operate transnationally. Therefore, to understand the nature of transnational and culturally adapting

dis/misinformation in South Asia, it is important to not only conduct research from a comparative aspect across the region, but also integrate regional, historical, and cultural approaches to complement existing methods of quantitative and qualitative study.

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Professor Sumon Rahman is the Director of the Center for Critical and Qualitative Studies (CQS), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

Rahul Roy is Research Assistant at the Center for Critical and Qualitative Studies (CQS), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

Information Shaping Economic Policies and Decisions

Md. Deen Islam

Introduction

There is no denying that decision-making processes are fundamentally influenced by the quality and availability of information at the disposal of individuals, institutions, and governments. The efficacy of decisions undertaken by individuals and businesses hinges significantly on the clarity and completeness of information provided, while the stakes are even higher when it comes to the national policy making. When critical information is not readily accessible or is inadequately shared among the stakeholders, decisions may fail to reflect the underlying economic realities, leading to suboptimal outcomes. In markets where information asymmetry exists, the consequences can include market failures leading to distorted prices affecting demand patterns, supply disruptions, price volatilities, and widespread dissatisfaction among consumers and producers alike. The development planning process of a country can be significantly undermined by inadequate or incorrect information, which will result in inefficient resource allocation, compromising growth and development potentials.

Making Informed Decisions at the Individual Level

At the individual level, information acts as a guiding force in shaping economic decisions. Consumers, armed with information about product quality, pricing, and reviews, can make more informed choices in the marketplace. Whether it is comparing prices, researching product specifications, or assessing customer feedback, individuals leverage information to optimise their purchasing decisions. Additionally, access to financial information, investment opportunities, and economic trends empowers individuals to manage their personal finances more effectively. When accurate information is not available, individuals cannot identify all available options, and the opportunity cost of a decision cannot be determined. As a consequence, the optimal use of limited resources cannot be ensured. Moreover, in the presence of dis/misinformation, individuals form incorrect expectations and hold off making important economic decisions, slowing down economic activities and likely leading to economic recessions or depressions.

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Significance of Information in Businesses

For businesses, information is a strategic asset that influences decision-making across various facets of operations. One of the most important

ways information influences economic decisions is by providing insights into market trends and consumer behaviour. By analysing data on consumer preferences, businesses can develop new products or services that meet the needs of their customers. Market research, consumer behaviour data, and industry trends enable companies to adapt their products and services to meet changing demands. Financial information, cost analyses, and market forecasts guide corporate decisions on investments, expansions, and resource allocation. Businesses that effectively gather, analyse, and leverage information gain a competitive edge in dynamic market environments.

Information Asymmetry Could Cause Market Failures

In many cases, asymmetric information in a given market, where sellers could have better information than buyers, could lead to market failure. As buyers have less information, they cannot distinguish high-quality products from low-quality products and so their willingness to pay for high-quality products is not enough to induce the sellers of those products to remain in the market, and as a result, only the information, also popularly known as the 'Market for Lemons', was first pointed out by George Akerlof, who received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for this contribution. To overcome this information

Figure 1:The role of information in efficient decision-making
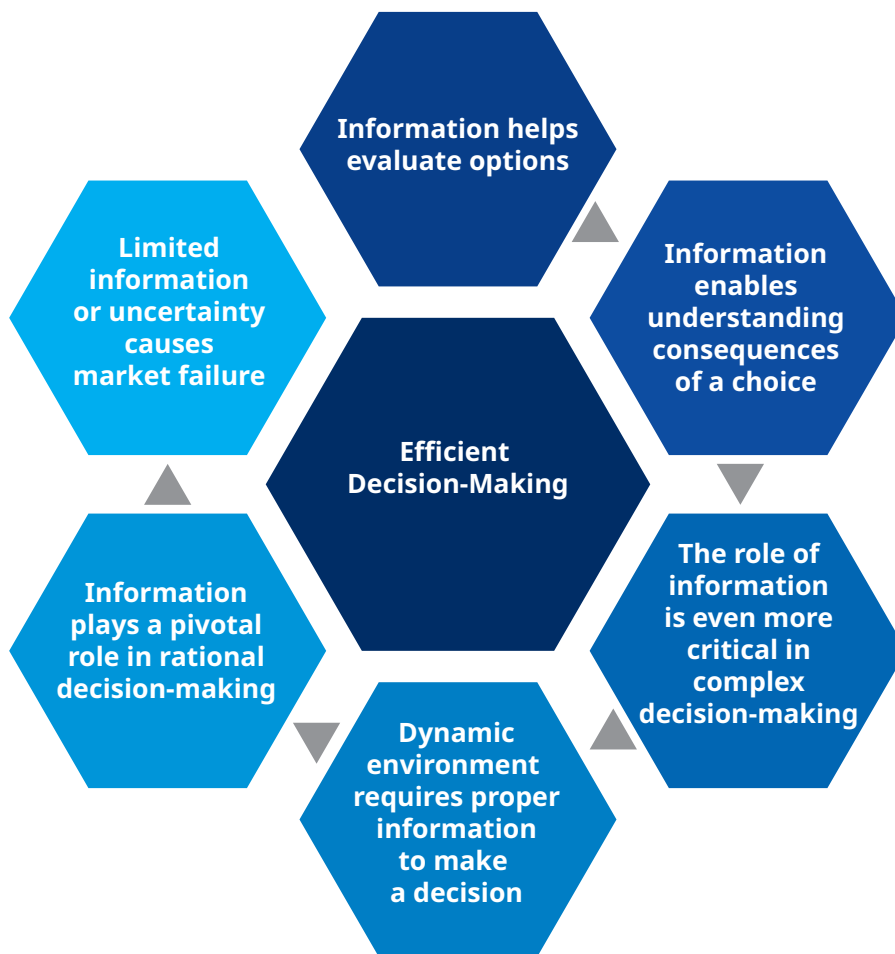
Source: Author's illustration.

asymmetry, businesses now invest a large sum of money in advertisements to disseminate information about their products. This type of market failure due to information asymmetry is present in the job market, insurance market, financial market, and even in the marriage market. Perfect and accurate information, if ensured, can help operate these markets efficiently, maximising the economic welfare of the whole nation.

> **While information is a powerful tool, challenges exist in its management and ethical use. Issues such as information asymmetry, data privacy, and the spread of misinformation pose challenges to effective decision-making.**

Consequences of Information Gap

The lack of information acts as a major impediment for businesses in accessing potential buyers in domestic and foreign markets. Small businesses in developing countries like Bangladesh do not have accurate information regarding the profitable export markets, and even if they know about these markets, they do not know the regulatory and standard requirements for exportation into these markets. The primary cause for inadequate knowledge and information is the limited resources available for market research and information gathering. Besides the deficiency in comprehensive knowledge and information about these markets, potential small exporters are often uninformed about the various trade benefits that they could receive from the domestic government and the governments of the importing developed countries. Because of this information gap, these small businesses fail to participate in exports, impacting their potential growth and survival.

Power of Information in Financial Markets

Information plays a central role in financial markets, where timely and accurate data

influence investment decisions. Investors rely on a plethora of financial information, including company reports, economic indicators, and market analyses, to make informed choices about buying, selling, or holding assets. The speed at which information is disseminated in modern financial systems underscores its significance, as even minor delays can impact market dynamics. Lack of information can cause the formation of incorrect expectations among small investors and create bubbles in the financial markets, which then cause a crash in the financial markets. Bangladesh has experienced several such share market crashes in the last few decades, all of which were driven partially or completely by misinformation or disinformation. Lives and livelihoods of thousands of small investors were devastated as a result of such share market crashes, a large part of which could have been prevented if they had been empowered with accurate information to make informed decisions.

Information for Policymaking

Governments and policymakers heavily rely on accurate and timely information to craft and execute economic policies. Key economic indicators, including GDP growth rates, inflation figures, and employment statistics, provide crucial insights into a country's economic health. By comprehensively analysing these data, decision-makers can gain a better understanding of the current economic climate and tailor their policies accordingly to make informed decisions about investments, hiring, and other economic activities. Additionally, data on income distribution, poverty rates, and other social indicators are essential for developing policies that tackle societal challenges and promote inclusive growth. In an interconnected global landscape, information sharing between nations is vital for coordinating policies and addressing cross-border economic issues.

Addressing the Challenges of Information Management

In many instances, the government needs to intervene in the market to restore efficiency in a sector when firms or producers in that sector try to collude among themselves to behave as a monopoly and fix prices, which is popularly known as 'syndicate' in Bangladesh. For effective

interventions by the government to break monopoly power in a market, the government needs accurate and reliable information about the market demand and supply, firms' capacity and other firm-related information. Without having accurate information and knowledge, if the government intervenes in a market, the situation can even become worse, and the sufferings of the consumers, especially the sufferings of the low-income individuals, will increase manyfold – a scenario Bangladeshi consumers are very familiar with.

"The development planning process of a country can be significantly undermined by inadequate or incorrect information.

Sometimes, controlling a monopoly business could be even worse if the policy is not formulated based on perfect information. For example, if a government forces a natural monopoly business that enjoys increasing returns to scale to sell its product at a competitive price, the monopoly will shut down its business, and the goods or services provided by the monopoly will no longer be available in the market. In this case, the government needs accurate information about the monopoly's production technology and cost structure to formulate an optimal policy for society.

The value of accurate information is undeniable in achieving efficiency in every sphere of economic decision-making. However, it is important to note that not all information is created equal. Decision-makers must be able to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources of information. Credible information is based on sound research and analysis, while

unreliable information is often based on rumours or speculation. Decision-makers who rely on unreliable information may make poor decisions that can have negative consequences for themselves or others.

While information is a powerful tool, challenges exist in its management and ethical use. Issues such as information asymmetry, data privacy, and the spread of misinformation pose challenges to effective decision-making. Ethical considerations regarding the responsible use of data and the protection of privacy rights are increasingly important in the digital age.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of information in influencing economic decisions is pervasive and transformative. From empowering individuals in their everyday choices to guiding corporate strategies and informing government policies, the impact of information is profound. Recognising the importance of information and addressing the challenges associated with its use are critical steps towards fostering informed, ethical, and effective economic decision-making in our interconnected world.

Md. Deen Islam is Research Director at RAPID and Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Dhaka.

False Information Online and Bangladeshi Youth

Syed Mafiz Kamal, Kazi Susmita Jahan and Ahnaf Tahmid Arnab

In the era of digital information, Bangladesh grapples with a growing menace—the proliferation of false information. With the rise of false information, terms like misinformation, disinformation, or even mal-information has become buzzwords. But their impact on society is ever more apparent. With a significant youth population, it is particularly important for a country like Bangladesh to check the impact of misinformation, disinformation, or mal-information on the youth.

Misinformation is basically 'fake news' and can spread on social media platforms like wildfire (Brooke, 2021). Disinformation is closely linked to misinformation whose roots can be traced back to the Soviet military science journals of the 1930s (Agursky, 1989). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Dezinformácija (in Russian) implies 'information known to be false that is surreptitiously passed to an enemy'. It is the purposeful dissemination of false or misleading information, often with harmful intent. With misinformation, disinformation, or mal-information, the general idea is that they cause some form of harm and influence opinions.

Apt Theory for Bangladesh

To understand the impact of false information on Bangladesh, one needs to delve into the theoretical framework, real-life examples, existing policies, and policy recommendations on this pressing issue. As a start, let us dissect the false information web. Aïmeur et al. (2023) mentioned that there are two basic categories: content-based and intent-based.

'Content-based false information' includes false text (like deceiving hyperlinks or embedded content), false multimedia (like fake videos), multimodal content (like articles with fabricated images), and AI-generated content (like convincing deepfakes).

'Intent-based false information' includes clickbait articles, hoaxes (intentionally fabricated news like claims of celebrity deaths), rumours (unverified claims), propaganda (politically motivated to shape public opinion), and conspiracy theories (like beliefs in secret plots).

> **A study done in 2018 found that false news spreads six times faster than truthful content online, and 70 per cent of the users struggle to distinguish real from fake news.**

In Bangladesh's case, the network propagation model can help us understand how false information spreads through social networks. Hereby, imagine a social media network where individuals are nodes. Someone posts a misleading article, and their followers (nodes) share it. Then a highly connected node amplifies the article, creating cascades. Here you have a basic model of fake news spreading like wildfire. This model can help stakeholders, like regulators, keep an eye on influential nodes.

Regulators can intervene to break the cycle of false information.

False Information and Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, as globally, the rise of online social networks has significantly increased access to news. But they have also produced a record number of fake news. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spreads six times faster than truthful content online, and 70 per cent of users struggle to distinguish real from fake news.

> **This means that mobile internet has reached many young Bangladeshis in remote areas before electricity or advanced education could reach them. In other words, youth, despite that location, have been connected to the internet in a very short period. They may not have the know-how to use the internet optimally.**

The impact of fake news in Bangladesh mirrors these global trends. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, TikTok, and messaging apps like WhatsApp are the main channels via which information circulates in Bangladesh. According to a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey, at the start of 2023, Bangladesh had an internet penetration rate of over 38.9 per cent, and it was largely young people who used social media, the hotbeds for false information. The social media algorithmic systems tend to boost sensational information, regardless of its truth.

Fuelling Violence in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has encountered situations in which the dissemination of false information has incited actual violence, predominantly directed towards religious minority groups. In 2012, attackers unleashed violence on the Buddhist community of the south-eastern township of Ramu after a rumour claiming that a Buddhist man insulted Islam on social media.[1] Post violence, the investigation revealed that it was a photoshopped image from a hacked Facebook account that started the rumour.[2]

Another sticking example was in 2013, when far-right groups took to the streets. False information on social media quickly spread, claiming that thousands of those activists were killed, thereby creating sympathy for their cause. Many human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, later refuted this claim. In 2021, at least six people died and more than 100 were injured throughout Bangladesh due to hate violence rooted from the alleged desecration of a copy of the Muslims' holy book, the Quran, in a Hindu temple.[3]

Impact of False Information

In 2010, Bangladesh adopted an across-the-board digitisation policy called Digital Bangladesh.[4] The effect of the policy is that it helped leapfrog the digital divide problem in just a decade. This means that mobile internet has reached many young Bangladeshis in remote areas before electricity or advanced education could reach them. In other words, youth, despite that location, have been connected to the internet in a very short period. They may not have the know-how to use the internet optimally. Hence, the impact of false information on the youth became a significant concern for Bangladesh.

According to a 2022 survey by The Asia Foundation and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), people aged 18–25 years use mobile internet 72 per

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cent more than other age groups in Bangladesh. Young people are less likely to distinguish between actual and false information since they may not follow reliable sources. Studies show that their (especially school and college goers') lack of media literacy makes them more susceptible to spreading fake news on social media.

Roots of the Problem

False information has been a tool to derail Bangladesh's nation-building. It can be traced back to what is known as the 'post-Mujib value vacuum' era, soon after the country became independent. The 15 years of political vacuum after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's then-president, in 1975, chocked the dissemination of liberal values. This vaccum created the rich grounds necessary for false information to take roots among the population.

> **False information regime often buds out of an 'attack on culture' agenda from some quarters, including the radical hardliners. It can distort cultural narratives and historical facts, affecting the understanding of Bangladesh's rich heritage and the liberal founding values of 1971.**

The radicalisation of youth in the post 9/11 era through exposure to extremist ideologies is another root of the problem. In 2016, false information online led to the radicalisation of young people who plotted the terror attack in Dhaka (popularly known as the Holey Artisan tragedy).[5]

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the understanding of Bangladesh's rich heritage and the liberal founding values of 1971.

The presence of bots, or fake accounts on social media has also been mobilised to disseminate provoking comments in posts that contain news of sensitive issues such as religion or gender. Such comments desensitise people, especially youth in their formative years.[6]

Policy Responses to False Information

Bangladesh has been puzzled by the false information regime. The first bold policy response came quite late when the Digital Security Act was enacted in 2018. Soon, a new law, the Cyber Security Act, took its place in 2023 because of the inadequacy of its predecessor. The law was designed to protect people against defamation and to curb fake news in social media. It can take preventive measures on the grounds of hurting religious sentiment and threatening public safety.

Meanwhile, different state agencies have taken project-based initiatives to create awareness about false information. Bangladesh's tech-facilitation agency, the ICT Division, launched a collaborative online platform, 'durbar21.org', to give people tools to differentiate between real and false information.

Bangladesh's special operations force, the Rapid Action Battalion, has a 'cyber news verification centre'. It is an initiative, formed from a security lens, that helps debunk false information. Bangladesh's most on-alert police department, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, has a very robust 'cybercrime investigation unit'. The unit monitors rumours and fights cybercrimes. It is essentially the police's eyes and ears online.

Low-hanging policy reforms

The online false information regime is fast-changing by nature. It adopts cutting-edge tech to expand its impact. Bangladeshi policymakers need to move fast to cope with the

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challenge. Some of the practical reforms that can help counter the spread of false information has been briefly discussed below.

> ## "
> ## A holistic strategy integrating AI, and blockchain technologies can help minimise the effects of false information.

Heightened digital literacy

Polls suggest that young Bangladeshis in their formative years cannot differentiate between reliable and false information. By including media literacy education in the school curriculum, policymakers can equip young people with the skills to navigate the digital landscape.

Robust regulatory framework

Bangladesh is currently struggling to smartly regulate the flow of information. It is essential to have a well-balanced regulatory strategy with an equilibrium between the right to express and to limit false information spread. A working group can be formed to support the regulatory reform agenda.

AI and blockchain tech

Implementing technology solutions with human oversight is crucial for detecting false information. Currently, Bangladesh does not have a policy framework other than an early attempt at a blockchain regulation strategy. A holistic strategy integrating AI, and blockchain technologies can help minimise the effects of false information.

Fact-checking

Encouraging community involvement, such as fact-checking organisations, can counter the spread of false information. The most effective tool for young people to fight the spread of false information can be online fact-checkers. The information oversight government ministry, the Ministry of Information, can work with media outlets and fact-checking organisations to promote reliable information.

Syed Mafiz Kamal is the Head of Research and Communications at Centre for Research and Information (CRI).

Kazi Susmita Jahan is Research and Communications Analyst at Centre for Research and Information (CRI).

Ahnaf Tahmid Arnab is Research and Communications Junior Analyst at the Centre for Research and Information (CRI).

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The Cost of Misinformation and Disinformation: Evidences from Global Perspectives

Nishat Tasnim Anika and Rakin Uz Zaman

Background

Disinformation has historically served as a tool for warfare among nations, seeking advantages across personal, political, economic, or social domains (Ahlquist, 2023). The advancements in information technology have led to the widespread prevalence of disinformation, encompassing deceptive advertising, propaganda circulated by vested groups, manipulated digital content, including doctored photographs, and outright false information (Fallis, 2015). While misinformation has always existed, the internet has expanded its reach and influence, making people rapidly shift away from established news sources, instead favouring slanted or unsubstantiated information on social media (Romeo, 2022). This proliferation poses a grave threat to the quality of information available, potentially resulting in misguided decisions in critical areas such as healthcare, financial investments, and political processes. In its recent publication, employing a perspective survey, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has recognised the spread of misinformation and disinformation as the most acute global risk in the short term and ranks it as the fifth most critical risk in the long term (World Economic Forum, 2024).

The expressions 'fake news' or 'false information' — which are commonplace these days —frequently overlap with 'misinformation' and 'disinformation,' though the latter terms represent more specific instances within the broader category (Cummings & Kong, 2019). The distinction between these subcategories— misinformation and disinformation — hinges on the presence or absence of intent to deceive.

Misinformation usually refers to the inadvertent circulation of incorrect information, whereas disinformation is characterised by the intentional fabrication and sharing of falsehoods aimed at deceiving or manipulating others.

> **The report acknowledged that the indirect cost of fake news is much higher than the estimated cost, provided the difficulty in quantifying the cost of misinformation on politics, health, and economics in most developing and some developed countries.**

Disinformation spreads more easily on the Internet-driven digital age because of social media platforms, which make it simple for people to share, like, and comment on false information. Because the algorithms of these platforms favour material with high user engagement; these interactions increase the exposure and impact of disinformation. According to Frau-Meigs (2019), fake news undermines the credibility of information sources and threatens freedom of speech by causing information disorders that cut across national boundaries and media platforms. Moreover, combating 'fake news' may inadvertently restrict democratic processes by eroding public trust in institutions and the media.

The deployment of bots and automated accounts represents another significant method (Ferrara et al., 2016). These digital entities are programmed to spread false information broadly, simulating widespread endorsement or agreement with certain viewpoints, thereby skewing perceptions of public opinion. Furthermore, the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles through social media algorithms exacerbates the spread of disinformation. By tailoring content feeds to align with users' past behaviours, these algorithms fortify pre-existing convictions while sidelining divergent views. Consequently, this environment fosters a landscape where misleading information circulates more freely, often escaping rigorous scrutiny.

Findings from International Studies

Numerous studies have aimed to assess the impact of deceptive news and information. A 2019 report highlighted the direct cost of fake news, estimating an annual toll of $78 billion on the global economy (Cavazos, 2019). This study uses statistical analyses to identify the economic consequences of fake news in vital sectors, including politics, finance, advertising, online retail, and media. The report highlighted that the stock market suffers the most losses. The report acknowledged that the indirect cost of fake news is much higher than the estimated cost, provided the difficulty in quantifying the cost of misinformation on politics, health, and economics in most developing and some developed countries.

Economic Implications of False Information

False news poses a significant threat to business flow and consumer welfare. The dissemination of misleading information that signals potential supply chain disruption may lead to businesses reacting impulsively. In response to perceived

Figure 1: Breakdown of the $78 billion cost of fake news
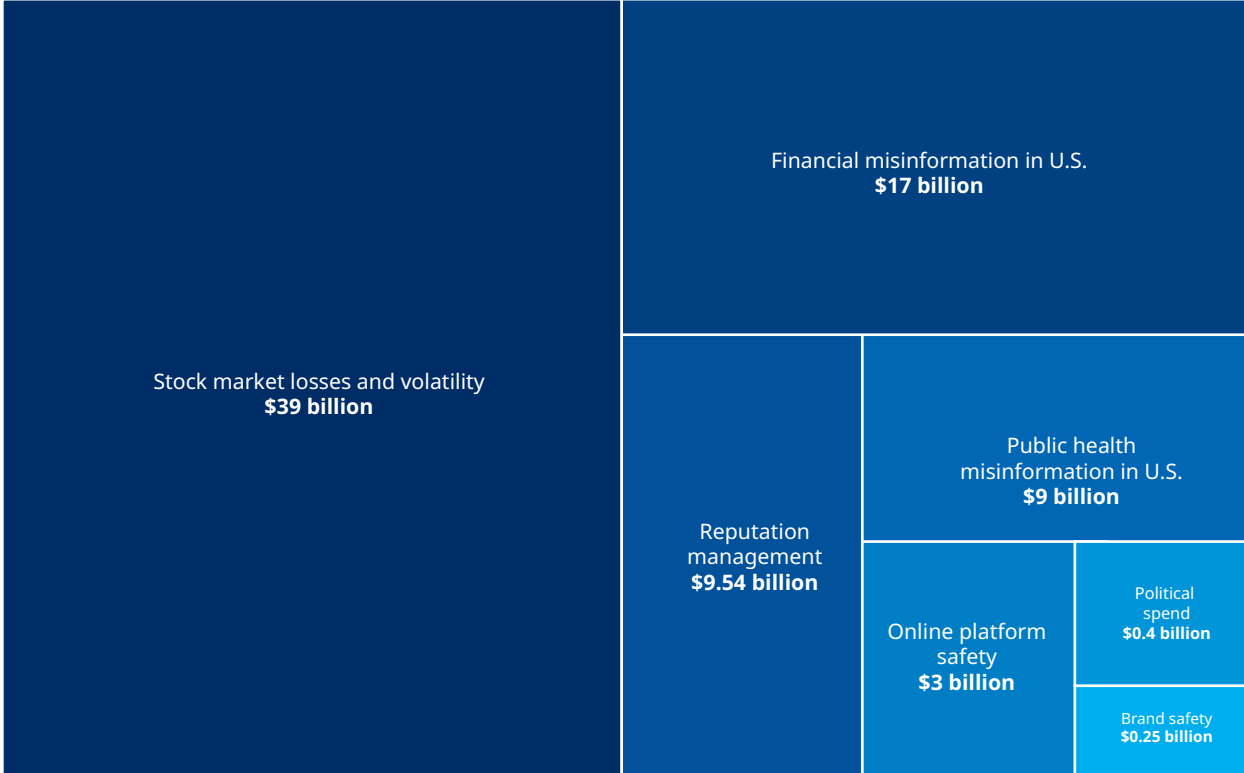
Source: Cavazos, 2019.

Note: The estimates provided are conservative. 'Reputation management' cost refers to the direct costs of fighting allegations.

dangers to their supply chain, businesses might engage in panic buying or hoarding of raw materials. This short-sighted behaviour can trigger unintended consequences, such as inflated prices and stock shortages, ultimately harming the very consumers they aim to serve (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

Bergman (2021) identifies six hidden costs of fake news for businesses – escalation, verification and triage, false positives, false negatives, communication and compliance, and stress and health – demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, political partisanship, and climate change. A study by Jo et al. (2022), based on a survey of 525 Korean taxpayers, shows that the average household in the Republic of Korea is willing to pay approximately $9 annually for five years for a virtual public fact-checking system during national disaster situations. This translates to a willingness to pay of $196 million annually by the Korean citizens.

Financial markets are highly vulnerable to the influence of false information. A prominent illustration of this vulnerability occurred in 2013 when a flash crash was triggered by fake financial news tweeted from a trusted news source.[1] The fake tweet temporarily erased approximately $136.5 billion in value from the S&P's 500 index (Selyukh, 2013).[2] There were many instances of flash crashes in stock markets, but this specific event highlights the precarious nature of financial markets when faced with misinformation.

Health Consequences of Misinformation

The spread of false health information has grown to be a major social issue with considerable consequences for public health. According to Youmshajekian (2023), laxative misinformation regarding weight loss in social media may lead to eating disorders among Americans. Vaccine hesitancy among the misinformed public has been reported to have led to an outbreak of measles in the United States (Phadke et al., 2016; Zucker et el., 2020).

Health misinformation has also impacted animal health, with 53 per cent of dog owners demonstrating canine vaccine hesitancy, as found in a study by Motta et al. (2023). Online rumours and conspiracy theories during the coronavirus pandemic led to mass poisoning and violent attacks across the world (Spring, 2020). The internet and social media platforms have been major sources of COVID-19 'infodemic', which led to behaviours such as vaccine avoidance and mask refusal, contributing to increased morbidity (Caceres et al., 2022).[3]

> A 2021 study by Johns Hopkins researchers emphasised the severe impact of health misinformation. They estimated that misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines led to people choosing not to get vaccinated, causing approximately $1 billion in daily harm. This includes hospital costs, lost lives, and long-term health problems. The study suggests that misinformation might be responsible for $50 million to $300 million of this daily harm (Bruns et al., 2021).

The 2019 study by Cavazos revealed that health misinformation leads to $9 billion in economic losses each year. The literature highlights the adverse implications of false health information, which include the circulation of inaccurate medical advice. Public confidence in government health guidelines is undermined by this problem, which was noticed during global health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 study by Johns Hopkins researchers emphasised the severe impact of

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1. A flash crash denotes a sudden and significant decline in stock prices within a brief period.
2. The Standard and Poor's 500, or the S&P 500, is a stock market index that tracks the stock performance of 500 largest firms listed on US stock exchanges.
3. An infodemic refers to an excess of inaccurate or misleading information, that circulates in physical and digital spaces amid a public health crisis (Wilhelm el al., 2023).

health misinformation. They estimated that misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines led to people choosing not to get vaccinated, causing approximately $1 billion in daily harm. This includes hospital costs, lost lives, and long-term health problems. The study suggests that misinformation might be responsible for $50 million to $300 million of this daily harm (Bruns et al., 2021). An expert panel from the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA) reported that the Canadian healthcare system incurred a minimum of 2,800 lives and $300 million loss in the nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 due to misinformation (CBC, 2023 & Major, 2023).

Political Ramifications of Disinformation

It is quite commonplace these days for vested quarters to invest in disseminating false information, which is a concerning development in the field of politics in recent years. The purpose of this duplicitous strategy is to influence public opinion by purposefully spreading false information, frequently via social media platforms. A Princeton-led study estimated that during the 2016 US election, 2.6 per cent of hard-news articles were found to be false (Brown, 2019). While there is no definitive data on the amount of money spent on spreading fake news during elections, Cavazos (2019) estimated that approximately US $200 million was spent during the 2020 US presidential election, as per a forecasting model. According to the same study, beyond the United States, significant financial allocations towards disseminating fake news are observed in countries such as India, Brazil, and Kenya during the election period. When aggregating the spending from these major nations and assuming a conservative estimate of at least 2 per cent of political news being highly misleading or fake, Cavazos (2019) estimated that the global expenditure on advancing fake news would be at least US $400 million.

Tackling Misinformation and Disinformation

Government and global efforts

While the aforementioned studies have estimated a significant direct cost associated

Figure 2: Estimated spending on fake news during election (US Dollar)
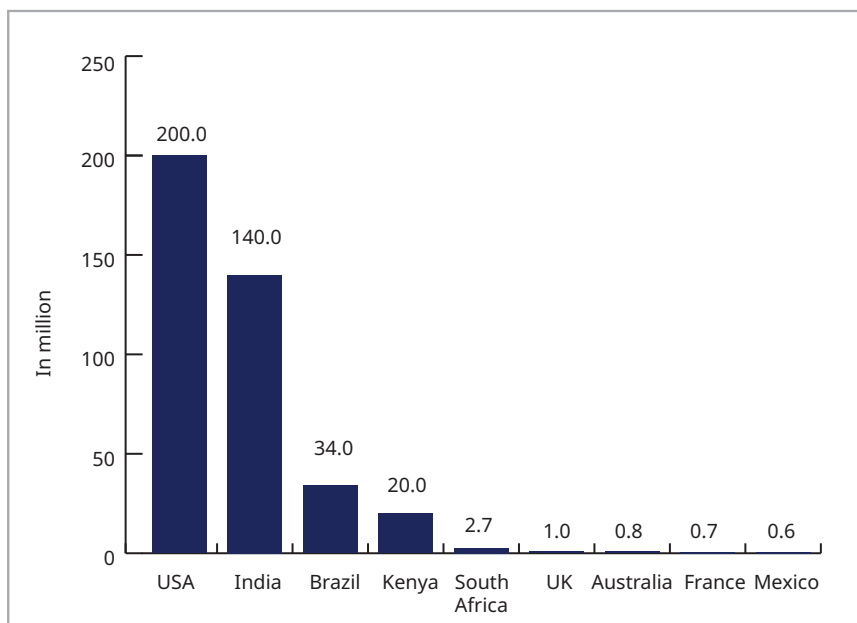
Source: Cavazos, 2019.

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4. Deepfakes are artificial multimedia content (i.e., image or video) generated by deep machine learning techniques.

with misinformation, the total cost will be much higher when indirect costs are taken into consideration. Disinformation has a detrimental impact on several aspects of the global community, most notably the decline in trust for important institutions. In response, governments all over the world are investing billions to combat the spread of false information. The US military's research arm, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), invested $68 million in artificial intelligence (AI) tools to identify deepfakes during 2017-18 (Robitzski, 2018).[4] The UK government has allocated £18 million for three years to counter disinformation in Eastern Europe (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2019). The European Union's anti-propaganda unit announced to invest €1.1 million annually for 2018-20 to combat Russian propaganda (Rankin, 2017). Canada has pledged $7 million to support projects aimed at raising public awareness about misinformation online (Funke & Flamini, 2024). Some other countries, including Brazil, China, and Indonesia, are also developing fake news detection tools and systems (See Cavazos, 2019; Funke & Flamini, 2024). London Economics (2020) estimated that between 1 April and 10 November 2020, a total of 21,947 COVID-19 cases, 2,187 hospitalisations, and 509 deaths could be attributable to misinformation online. As a result, the same study found the UK National Health System (NHS) faced additional health costs of £22.1 million, while the indirect impact of misinformation on the UK economy was estimated at £3.6 billion during the second and third quarters of 2020. To maintain information integrity on digital platforms, the United Nations is spearheading the development of a Code of Conduct. This voluntary code serves as a global call for action to combat information threats while upholding fundamental human rights (Buzato, 2023).

Tech industry initiatives

Many tech companies are now investing millions to combat disinformation, realising how serious this problem is. For example, the tech giant Google donated $30 million to a recently established organisation tasked with combating false information and fake news (Thorbecke, 2021). The company also collaborated with the Indian government to combat deepfakes by granting $1 million to the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras (Borak, 2023). Although these initiatives are praiseworthy, governments, the tech sector, academia, and civil society must work together to address these issues effectively to create a trustworthy and knowledgeable world community by working together.

AI-powered tools can be used to counter disinformation, such as spotting social bots, screening content, detecting modified versions of debunked articles, and other hostile activities. However, AI can only play a supportive role in this process; it cannot perform a leading role (Juršėnas et al., 2022). It is the enactment of government legislation and strengthened cooperation with online platforms that can lead the way toward success in fighting disinformation.

> **A global issue like misinformation requires a global call for a multi-faceted approach involving public and private institutions that would ensure trust, transparency, and accountability. Even though technology offers potential, tackling online misinformation requires overcoming financial, legal, and political challenges**

Addressing disinformation in developing nations

While much of the debates on disinformation have been focused on the developed world, the impact on developing countries or the global south remains largely unexplored (Matsilele, 2022). Although developing countries like India and China are taking proactive approaches by drafting new regulations to combat deepfakes, their effectiveness requires further evaluation (See Agarwal, 2024; Dovas, 2023; Hemrajani, 2023). Therefore, the battle against false information necessitates guidance from collaborative research among developed and developing countries. Computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) can guide these

countries in developing effective policy responses (See Starbird et al., 2019). A global issue like misinformation requires a global call for a multi-faceted approach involving public and private institutions that would ensure trust, transparency, and accountability. Even though technology offers potential, tackling online misinformation requires overcoming financial, legal, and political challenges (Schiffrin et al., 2022).

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The battle against false information necessitates guidance from collaborative research among developed and developing countries.

Conclusion

Finding a balance between preserving freedom of expression and protecting people from misinformation and disinformation is crucial. Falsehood engenders public externalities such as reduced trust in institutions, public health risks, and market disruption. Inadequate investment in countering these falsehoods could have severe consequences.

The magnified challenge may complicate the efforts to preserve freedom of expression in these nations. In a world where even developed nations struggle to combat misinformation, developing countries with limited resources and infrastructure find it particularly daunting. This heightened challenge could further complicate efforts to maintain freedom of expression. Technology companies can emerge as leaders in combatting misinformation. With the rapid advancement of AI tools, they may take the initiative to pioneer innovative solutions, such as identifying and flagging dubious content before it gains traction.

Additionally, media outlets should be made accountable for fact-checking before publishing or running content with potential disinformation. Targeted social campaigns could effectively enhance source credibility. Although such campaigns might not always build extensive knowledge bases, they are effective in fostering public consensus around factual accuracy. Furthermore, think tanks and policy organisations should collaborate to enhance fact-checking resources, empowering individuals to distinguish between true and false information. Finally, to combat disinformation, governments should use their authority to enact balanced legislation that counters misinformation effectively without suppressing freedom of expression.

Nishat Tasnim Anika and Rakin Uz Zaman are Research Associates at Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

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Enhancing Reproductive Health Practices among Garment Workers in Bangladesh: Addressing Myths, Misinformation, and Policy Gaps

Runa Laila

This article is based on a project titled "Migration, Livelihoods and SRHR: A Triple Case-study of Young Female Migrants (YFMs) in Dhaka, Bangladesh", supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research and WOTRO Scientific Global Development and carried out by researchers and partners from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Jahangir Nagar University, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), Bangladesh Sanjukta Sramik Federation (BSSF), Indigenous Peoples Development Service (IPDS), and Hazard Analysis and Risk Control (HARC). The author acted as Research Fellow at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam during the research.

Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been integral to global policy frameworks since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994. Bangladesh has embraced these principles, aiming to empower women to control their sexual and reproductive choices. Despite policy shifts towards comprehensive reproductive healthcare, challenges persist, especially among marginalised groups (WHO, 2018). The Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 highlights the need to address these issues to meet Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Policy Efforts for SRHR in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has enshrined SRHR in its population policy since the ICPD, recognising women's right to control their sexual and reproductive health free from coercion, discrimination, and violence (Kismödi & Ferguson 2018; UNFPA, 2014). This shift in policy approach and service delivery towards comprehensive reproductive healthcare, as outlined in the Health and Population Sector Strategy (HPSS), reflects the country's commitment to ensuring SRHR for all (GoB, 2012). However, despite government efforts, ensuring sexual and reproductive health for marginalised women, particularly those in rural areas, remains a challenge. The ICPD25 provides an opportunity to recommit to a forward-looking SRHR agenda that addresses the unfinished business of the ICPD programme of action and aligns with the SDGs (UNFPA, 2019). Nonetheless, the global discourse on SRHR often neglects cultural and structural inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalised women (Laila, 2016).

> **Garment workers often prioritise cost and convenience over informed choice. Some opt for injectables or implants to manage menstruation and work responsibilities.**

Myths and Misinformation Shaping Reproductive Health among Garment Workers

Ethnographic research conducted among Ready Made Garment (RMG) workers in Gazipur, Dhaka, reveals that due to lack of knowledge and understanding, there is erratic use of contraception among the participants, leading to health risks associated with unwanted

pregnancies. For instance, some newly married women believe that taking pills before childbirth could lead to infertility, while others think that experiencing menstrual pain prevents pregnancy, hence forgoing contraception. Consequently, many women become pregnant within the first year of marriage without any family planning. Additionally, some women believe they cannot conceive until they resume menstruation after childbirth, leading them to skip contraceptive use.

Misinformation also extends to the proper use of contraception. For example, some women discontinue iron pills after completing a strip of white pills, assuming that iron tablets are only for regulating menstruation. This discontinuation results in iron deficiency, leading to fatigue and weakness during work. Others mentioned taking contraceptive pills every other day to manage dizziness, forgetting to take them after long working hours or night shifts. Cultural barriers, such as women's dependence on their husbands to purchase contraception, further exacerbate the risks, especially when husbands are absent or travelling.

> **Garment workers, largely originating from rural areas, often miss out on reproductive health education despite its inclusion in the school curriculum. Additionally, conservative attitudes in rural regions result in superficial teaching of the subject by educators.**

In cases of missed pills, women assess whether they had intercourse with their husbands on that day before deciding to skip the pill, increasing the risk of unwanted pregnancy. Although women mention a 'safe period', there is conflicting information about when in the menstrual cycle women are actually safe. Many women do not consistently track their menstrual cycle but rely on bodily sensations of 'wetness' or 'dryness'. These examples illustrate how myths, misconceptions, gender dynamics,

and work regulations contribute to erratic contraceptive use among women.

Garment workers often prioritise cost and convenience over informed choice. Some opt for injectables or implants to manage menstruation and work responsibilities. However, logistical issues such as timely access amidst demanding work schedules pose significant barriers. Additionally, cultural norms and gender dynamics hinder independent contraceptive decision-making, exacerbating reproductive health challenges.

Menstrual Regulation as an Alternative to Contraceptive for Fertility Regulation

In response to these challenges, many garment workers turn to menstrual regulation (MR) for fertility regulation. MR pills are readily available in local pharmacies in Gazipur, although their usage can result in incomplete abortion if the duration of pregnancy is inaccurately determined. Additionally, there are private clinics that perform MR and abortion procedures, even up to six months into pregnancy, without adhering to proper hygiene practices or receiving adequate training. In dire situations, women may resort to clandestine healthcare providers, putting their health and well-being at risk.

Supriya, a 32-year-old garment worker, shared her experience, stating, "My husband is an idle man; he doesn't work. I am responsible for feeding seven mouths. With three children and in-laws dependent on me, the workload increased significantly before the Eid holiday. The garment factory didn't grant leave during weekends. Amidst this chaos, I often forgot to take my pills. I didn't have the time to seek services in the city, so I resorted to using the roots of a plant for abortion in the village. Despite experiencing high fever and severe pain, this method was my only option as it was free. I simply cannot afford to have another child."

A healthcare provider at the Bangladesh Association for Prevention of Septic Abortion (BAPSA) clinic revealed that many garment workers seek treatment for abortion-related complications stemming from clandestine care

providers. To ensure the provision of safe MR services to garment workers, BAPSA is considering implementing night shifts, recognizing that garment workers struggle to access reproductive healthcare services during regular office hours. The primary researcher observed garment workers rushing to the BAPSA clinic during their lunch breaks, immediately returning to the factory after undergoing an MR procedure. Due to the stigma surrounding MR and abortion, women refrain from disclosing their SRH needs to their male supervisors and avoid requesting sick leave.

SRH Interventions in the Garment Sector and Policy Gaps

In order to ensure access to SRH care services and promote an efficient and productive female labour force, the government initiated a specialised programme for garment workers. As part of the programme intervention, SRH services are available in a limited number of factories, offering women improved access to information and services. However, a genuine commitment to SRHR is lacking in these initiatives, as they primarily aim to reduce absenteeism during menstruation and mitigate the costs associated with pregnancy. Although SRH care services are brought closer to women, the offerings in mini clinics within factories are limited to pills, condoms, and injections. Condoms are withheld from women to prevent mistrust between couples, while their long-term contraceptive needs are not adequately addressed.

Factory management heralds the success of SRH projects in terms of reduced maternity leave and absenteeism during menstruation, attributed to the availability of subsidised sanitary napkins and short-term contraception under the SRHR project. However, health professionals at factories are reluctant to provide information about safe menstrual regulation (MR) or abortion provisions, possibly due to concerns about the reputation of the factory. Additionally, factory doctors claim that women typically do not seek advice regarding MR or abortion from them.

Government services may not be readily accessible to working women due to clashes between work obligations and reproductive health needs. Consequently, garment workers are systematically excluded from subsidised services provided by NGO clinics such as Marie Stopes. During participant observations, researchers noted that garment workers often missed out on claiming subsidised SRH services because they were at work during surveys conducted by Marie Stopes in order to provide subsidised services among the poor marginal population. Furthermore, the sustainability of NGO healthcare is questionable, as two Marie Stopes clinics in areas heavily populated by garment workers were closed due to a reduction in donor funding.

The Way Forward

Addressing the intricate challenges confronted by garment workers' demands a comprehensive strategy. To ensure the availability, accessibility, and affordability of comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services for these working women, service delivery must be customised to meet the specific needs, information gaps, and priorities of garment workers.

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A concerted effort involving the government, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector is essential to guarantee effective and inclusive reproductive healthcare for garment workers.

Primarily, accessing SRH services necessitates women to be cognisant and informed about their sexual and reproductive health rights. This study reveals the inadequacies in women's knowledge and information regarding SRHR.

Garment workers, largely originating from rural areas, often miss out on reproductive health education despite its inclusion in the school curriculum. Additionally, conservative attitudes in rural regions result in superficial teaching of the subject by educators. Strengthening reproductive health education and information in government and NGO school curricula in rural areas, with a focus on outreach to school dropouts and hard-to-reach areas, can play a crucial role in addressing this gap.

Secondly, government family planning information and contraception services are currently restricted to married women. Many research participants experienced early pregnancies due to a lack of or inconsistent information within the first year of marriage. Innovative initiatives, such as linking marriage registrars with family planning services, can be expanded to provide accurate information and contraception supplies to newly married couples.

Thirdly, policy interventions should prioritise women's health and tackle systemic structural and gender inequalities. Ensuring meaningful consultation with garment workers is essential for effective and inclusive interventions. While the Bangladesh government is making efforts to provide free reproductive health services through satellite clinics in 500 garment factories, sustained commitment is crucial for the continuation and expansion of these services to cover the extensive number of garment factories.

Fourthly, enhancing the accessibility and affordability of services for garment workers can be achieved through collaborative efforts. NGOs like BAPSA and Marie Stopes could extend their services after office hours or on specific days within garment factory premises in collaboration with owners. Expanding services to areas where garment workers reside during weekends could further enhance accessibility.

Fifthly, recognising the increasing use of MR/abortion pills by garment workers for fertility regulation, it is imperative to ensure the safety of these services. Training healthcare providers at local pharmacies on the safety and regulations of MR/abortion pills can be pivotal. Private healthcare providers could serve as access points for post-MR/abortion family planning counselling and services. Furthermore, involving men/husbands in family planning counselling requires increased attention. A concerted effort involving the government, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector is essential to guarantee effective and inclusive reproductive healthcare for garment workers.

Conclusion

Ensuring reproductive health rights for garment workers in Bangladesh is crucial. By addressing misconceptions, improving access to comprehensive services, and tackling structural inequalities, policymakers can empower marginalised women and advance SRHR outcomes. Achieving comprehensive reproductive healthcare requires commitment, collaboration, and a deep understanding of the challenges faced by garment workers in their pursuit of reproductive autonomy and well-being.

Runa Laila is Research Fellow at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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Enhancing Data Accountability and Governance to Counter Misinformation

Jillur Rahman and Mahrab Al Rahman

Introduction

Misinformation arises from a wide variety of sources, including the unavailability of timely data, gaps in understanding quantitative information, inadequate explanations of data methodologies, and questions over data credibility. Such misinformation poses significant challenges to evidence-based policymaking. Reliable and accurate information forms the bedrock of sound policies, while policies based on misinformation can severely undermine development efforts and societal well-being. Consequently, reinforcing data accountability and governance is critical in combating misinformation. This involves setting clear responsibilities for data transparency and accuracy and implementing robust governance frameworks for systematic data collection, management, and dissemination.

> **The timeliness of data is a crucial aspect of fiscal transparency, as delayed publication can diminish its relevance and credibility. A prime example is the Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) data. The latest HIES survey was collected from January to December, 2022, its final report got delayed until December, 2023, with the data released in March, 2024.**

In the wake of Bangladesh's balance of payments crisis, the importance of robust data governance was highlighted when discrepancies in Bangladesh Bank's forex reserves data prompted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to mandate an independent assessment before approving a $4.7 billion loan. This scrutiny, alongside the IMF's recommendation to adopt the sixth edition of the Balance of Payments and International Investing Position Manual (BPM6) calculation method, significantly enhanced the credibility of the data reported by Bangladesh Bank.

Challenges of Data Inconsistencies

In Bangladesh, government agencies produce major macroeconomic data used by independent researchers and international organisations. Discrepancies in these data can lead to misinformation and affect policymaking, particularly evident in the underreported official inflation rates. This unreliability stems from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) outdated Consumer Price Index (CPI) methodology which, until July 2023, used 2005/06 as the base year and surveyed prices from 140 markets, emphasizing food items disproportionately (56% in urban areas and 72% in rural areas). In 2023, BBS updated this, adopting a 2021/2022 base year, expanding to 154 markets, and increasing the item count in the consumer basket to 749, which balanced food (32%) and non-food items (68%). Despite these improvements, BBS must still enhance transparency by publishing its Consumer Price

Figure 1: Merchandise exports data reported by the EPB and Bangladesh Bank

Source: Authors' presentation based on Bangladesh Bank and Export Promotion Bureau Data.

Index (CPI) methodology in a clear, non-technical format to boost understanding and credibility of the data.

Data inconsistencies are also major in fiscal indicators such as tax collection, write Annual Development Programme (ADP) expenditures, and deficit financing (Bhattacharya, et al., 2023). The reported tax collection figures differed by 1.5 per cent between the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the National Board of Revenue (NBR), ADP expenditures reports varied by 3.0 per cent between the MoF and the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), and deficit financing data showed a substantial 31.4 per cent discrepancy between the MoF and Bangladesh Bank. These significant discrepancies create ambiguity, hindering effective policymaking as stakeholders may prioritise accessibility of data over its accuracy and credibility, leading to potentially harmful decisions. Therefore, promptly addressing these data discrepancies is crucial to strengthen policy foundations and safeguard the economy.

Data Reporting Irregularities

The widening gaps between export figures reported by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB)

and Bangladesh Bank (BB) is another issue, which has become increasingly alarming with profound policy implications. In the fiscal year 2023 alone, this discrepancy amounted to a staggering $12 billion, a drastic escalation from the comparatively modest $2.0 billion observed in FY15 (Figure 1).[1] A mere methodological disparity cannot fully account for such a substantial discrepancy in the data. The EPB's explanations listing internal transactions involving sales from firms in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) to non-EPZ factories, currency volatility, etc. as contributors to the disparity only serve to amplify concerns surrounding the accuracy and reliability of exports data, which are considered to be one of the most important pieces of information for macroeconomic and external sector assessments.

Previously, Bangladesh used to report their export earnings to UN Comtrade—a UN specialised system that reports detailed export data for all countries by individual export partners. However, since 2012, Bangladesh has been irregular in reporting the data and has not reported any data since 2015. This might have resulted in relaxed data governance causing the discrepancy to grow rapidly. In addition, the mirror data UN Comtrade, i.e., what partner countries report imports from Bangladesh,

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1. Based on (EPB, 2023) and (Bangladesh Bank, 2023).
2. It is important to note that mirror data include cost, insurance, and freight (CIF) values, while direct data is reported as free on board (FoB).

differs significantly with the figures reported by EPB and Bangladesh Bank.[2] Since researchers and policymakers often rely on mirror data for analysis, drawing erroneous conclusions can become unavoidable. Efforts to deal with these inconsistencies have been weak.

The timeliness of data is a crucial aspect of fiscal transparency, as delayed publication can diminish its relevance and credibility. A prime example is the Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) data. The latest HIES survey was collected from January to December, 2022, its final report got delayed until December, 2023, with the data released in March, 2024. This mirrors the situation with the previous rounds of HIES conducted in 2016, where data wasn't published until 2018. Furthermore, HIES 2016 was initially intended to occur in 2015 but it did not happen. Intermittent data on irregular intervals with delayed availability make the data less relevant especially when a country is growing fast and undergoing important structural transformations, as reflected in rapid urbanization, changes in sectoral output compositions, etc. The Labour Force Survey 2022, conducted in the same year, remains unreleased as of March, 2024.

> **In addition, the mirror data in UN Comtrade, i.e., what partner countries report imports from Bangladesh, differs significantly with the figures reported by EPB and Bangladesh Bank. Since researchers and policymakers often rely on mirror data for analysis, drawing erroneous conclusions can become unavoidable. Efforts to deal with these inconsistencies have been weak.**

Due to the delayed publishing of the HIES data in Bangladesh, research publications have lagged significantly behind other countries that publish data on time. The delayed availability of important socio-economic data from the HIES hinders academics and policymakers from conducting timely and comprehensive studies, restricting insights and analyses that might support evidence-based policy-making.

The inconsistency in the frequency of the data is another problem. For instance, for a brief period of time, the Labour Force Surveys were conducted on a quarterly basis, which got discontinued from 2017 before being reinstalled again recently. To enhance the effectiveness, relevance, and credibility of socio-economic data, research and policymaking, it is crucial to prioritise the timely and consistent data generating exercises and their reporting.

Data Collection Inconsistencies

Yet another concern revolves around the inconsistency in sample sizes across survey data over time. In HIES 2010, the sample size was 12,240 households, which rose to almost four times to reach 46,080 households in 2016, before dropping drastically to 14,400 in the latest round of 2022. Such significant fluctuations in sample sizes can undermine the comparability of the information collected over time. The HIES 2022 is representative only at the divisional level, whereas the HIES 2016 achieved representation at the district level. Maintaining representation at the local level is essential especially if the collected data should be used for informed policymaking. The irregular and wide issues in national sample sizes can erode confidence in the data.

Comprehensive and disaggregated data is vital for gaining nuanced insights into complex phenomena, as they allow for a more detailed and accurate understanding of trends and patterns. Overseas employment scenarios and remittances are examples of data issues that are also prominent. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) publishes monthly and yearly data on overseas employment, which indicates the number of people migrating internationally but fails to distinguish unique migrant workers. This oversight means the data may include multiple counts of individuals who depart multiple times within a year, thus not providing an accurate migrant stock count. Accurate, unique migrant workers' outflow data and a comprehensive

migrant database over time are essential for assessing remittance flows and informing effective policy-making. In the absence of reliable information on the actual outflows and stocks of migrant workers, it becomes challenging to explain the annual inflow of remittances, which are perceived to be significantly supplemented by migrants' earnings sent through informal channels. While data on transactions made through informal channels can be difficult to obtain, it would have been possible to estimate the stock of migrant workers and remittance inflows using the household-level data, as conducted under the HIES, if they would be representative at the local level.

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Reinforcing data accountability and governance is critical in combating misinformation.

Data is often provided by agencies in formats that are not user-friendly, either in partial tabular formats with difficulties in downloading, hindering quick accessibility. Amongst others, Bangladesh Bank tends to offer most data in widely used Microsoft Excel formats, which are much easier to use. Many websites feature complicated interfaces that make navigating and retrieving data a challenging task. This highlights the critical need for an interactive, user-friendly central database that can ensure data consistency, foster transparency, and enhance the user experience. Although the BBS has begun to create an online data service to address these issues, the platform still requires significant enhancements in terms of usability and functionality.

Conclusion

Bangladesh needs to improve data governance and accountability in order to fight against misinformation. Factors to be considered in enhancing data credibility and transparency include establishing appropriate coordination among the agencies who are responsible for data generation, undertaking surveys and reporting data in a timely manner, clearly explaining methodologies used in data generating exercises, leveraging international systems (such as UN Comtrade) to validate data, making collected data widely available so that those can be widely used generating feedback of data limitations and thereby exposing the scope of improvements, strengthening capacity-building programmes for the officials, and maintaining consistency in survey methodologies and sampling frameworks overtime, etc. Fortification data accountability, and accessibility will contribute to fostering trust promoting informed decision-making, and ultimately effective development interventions.

Jillur Rahman is Assistant Professor of Economics at Jagannath University and Deputy Director at Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

Mahrab Al Rahman is Research Associate at Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

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Building Trust in the Digital Age: Navigating Fake News Challenges Through Ethical Journalism in Bangladesh

Syed Samiul Basher Anik

In an era dominated by digital information, the role of journalists in ensuring accuracy and credibility has become paramount. Bangladesh, with its expanding internet and social media accessibility, grapples with the escalating threat of misinformation and disinformation, risking public trust and democratic processes.

From Nasirnagar of Brahmanbaria to Borhanuddin in Bhola, from city elections to national elections, from road safety protests to fuel price hikes, there are plenty of examples of coordinated disinformation campaigns, and fake news spread through social media over the past decade fuelling social tensions and violence in Bangladesh (Rafe, 2019; Rezwan, 2016).

With millions of texts, images, and videos uploaded to Facebook every day, much of such disinformation often goes viral before being debunked. The use of such information in the form of fake news not only poses significant threats to journalism and the integrity of mainstream news outlets but also emphasises the urgent need to reinforce ethical standards in journalism that stand as a beacon of truth, fostering trust between news outlets and their audiences.

The Reality in Bangladesh

While we all acknowledge the vital role of ethical journalism, many Bangladeshi news websites face exposure to disinformation due to operational transparency issues, policy inaccuracies, and inadequate fact-checking practices, according to a recent study conducted by Digitally Right and Global Disinformation Index on 33 news domains.[1] This calls for the need for capacity building and self-regulation in the news media industry which can help news outlets in Bangladesh adopt proactive measures that may help combat fake news effectively.

Rumour Scanner, a verified signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network and an independent fact-checking entity, detected 1,915 cases of misinformation disseminated via social media and mainstream media in 2023, averaging to about 5 misinformation items a day. Among them, 145 misinformation cases involved the misuse of media elements like fake photocards, names, logos, and edited headlines.

> **According to a survey titled News Literacy in Bangladesh: National Survey, conducted by MRDI in 2020, 76 per cent of people have low news literacy in Bangladesh. It also finds that two-thirds of people in Bangladesh have experience of fake news.**

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1. The Global Disinformation Index (GDI) is a not-for-profit organisation working on defunding and disrupting disinformation. Digitally Right is a Bangladesh-based company that supports civil society, media, and businesses with critical knowledge and solutions to help them navigate the ever-changing information ecosystem.

A study titled Advocacy for Enhanced Media Self-Regulation in Bangladesh, conducted by the International Training Programme (ITP)[2] and coordinated by Media Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), a leading media development organisation in Bangladesh, emphasises the need for self-regulation in Bangladesh's media landscape. It identifies challenges posed by external influences, social media's uncontrolled nature, and the commitment of media practitioners to adopt self-regulation guidelines. Collaboration between regulatory authorities and digital news platforms is crucial for effective mechanisms against ethical violations, misinformation, and the development of comprehensive self-regulation guidelines, it emphasised.

> **Developing professional best practices for media self-regulation can help fight the menace of fake news.**

A questionnaire survey conducted among eleven news outlets as part of a study developed under the same initiative titled Promoting Self-regulation in Digital News Platforms finds that six out of ten news outlets do not have any editorial policy guideline or social media policy while eight of them do not have any code of conduct or code of ethics. 70 per cent of the news media staff interviewed said they have never attended any special training in digital skills enhancement like fact-checking.

According to a survey titled News Literacy in Bangladesh: National Survey, conducted by MRDI in 2020, 76 per cent of people have low news literacy in Bangladesh. It also finds that two-thirds of people in Bangladesh have experience of fake news.

Self-regulation for Ethical Journalism: The Way Forward

MRDI, during its regular interaction with journalists, finds that establishing separate editorial policies for digital platforms and formulating comprehensive social media policies are crucial steps in fighting the fake news menace and stablishing a united front based on ethical journalism practices.

In Bangladesh, only a few newspapers have their own editorial guidelines which usually are not publicly available. News outlets must prioritise the development of robust editorial and social media policies, invest in media literacy initiatives, and champion fact-checking efforts. Upholding principles of accuracy, fairness, and transparency will reaffirm the media's role as a reliable source of information in the digital age.

The unhealthy competition among news outlets for clickbait news, lack of consultation with original sources, and poor or incorrect translations only exacerbate the issue of fake news. The key to fighting this is to simply follow the basic principles of ethical journalism-maintain a set of cautions and acknowledge the importance of offering quality news over clickbait to prevent potential dangers.

News media authorities must stick to the basics of avoiding unhealthy competition for breaking news and only publishing content that follows some editorial checks. Every content it produces must be questioned through a check and balance based on editorial judgment to maintain special cautions on AI-generated content and deepfakes. A culture of fact-checking within newsrooms, coupled with collaborative fact-checking initiatives, can fortify the media's commitment to accuracy, as suggested by newsroom gatekeepers on different occasions.

A collaborative approach involving all relevant stakeholders is needed to make a functional,

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unified code of conduct for journalists, replacing the decades-old code of conduct prescribed by the Bangladesh Press Council to enable individual news outlets to develop their self-regulation mechanism. It can be in the format of an internal governance system, rules of professional conduct, code of ethics, separate gender policy, or media/press ombudsman, etc. The current position underlines the need for credible news institutions through self-regulation and training for journalists on greater professionalism to allow them to identify and debunk fake news while telling credible news stories.

Developing professional best practices for media self-regulation can help fight the menace of fake news, improve capacity through safeguards against information pollution, contribute to regaining public trust, and ensure the sustainability of the media industry as a whole.

Syed Samiul Basher Anik is Senior Programme Officer at Media Resources Development Initiative (MRDI).

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