Minutes of Digital Training Sessions on Countering Health Related False Information during Pandemic

The session comprised a series of round-table discussions that aimed to address the information asymmetry related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its catastrophic consequences for public health. The discussions also covered the numerous ways in which unverified information enters digital platforms and how they propagate vaccine misinformation, fanning anti-vaccination efforts. Furthermore, this series aimed to facilitate a collaborative network of stakeholders who can help each other fight this infodemic in the face of limited access to credible sources of information.

1. Background

Digital media and citizen journalism have escalated the infiltration of fake news in the recent past- especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which witnessed an unprecedented surge in global misinformation. Given the disproportionality between fact-checking entities and myriad sources of false information- journalists and news agencies everywhere are grappling with a deluge of speculative and fear-mongering content regarding the pandemic, which is further amplified by echo chambers and trust networks, ultimately fanning anti-mask and anti-vaccines protests.

2. Participants

Key Speaker(s):
- Monideepa Banerjie, Ex-NDTV Correspondent (key resource-person), March 15, 2022
- Brooke Van Dam, Director of Partnerships and Education, SeeBoundless, November 29, 2021
- Steve Johnson, Founder, SeeBoundless, November 29, 2021
- Smita Sharma, Photojournalist and TED Fellow (key resource-person), March 28, 2022
- Women journalists from the Indo-Pacific Region (Participants)

3. Summary of Discussions

- The series started with a discussion on how the 'Digital Age' has enabled access to diverse sources of knowledge at a mouse click; it has also created unprecedented challenges and structural changes in the news industry. In the early days of the pandemic, we witnessed a rise in hoaxes regarding different potential cures for COVID. From homeopathy to simple kitchen remedies like warm lemon water, garlic, and

papaya leaves- everyone came up with some indigenous antidote to protect themselves and their loved ones from the virus. Given the lack of credible sources of information, distortion and manipulation of facts resulted in an infodemic as dangerous as the pandemic itself. However, it was not limited to society's vulnerable and uneducated sections. But it also took hold of the educated and the privileged in time.

- This was followed by a session on debunking common hoaxes with a specific focus on the Indian context, such as how cow-urine was believed to be an antidote to COVID by a notable proportion of the Indian population. However, the scariest part about this situation was the fact that there was not only no scientific evidence to establish the COVID-curing abilities of cow urine- ~~instead~~, but also the fact that the ones propagating this misinformation were godmen and some elected representatives of the country who were revered by the general public and exercised immense influence over significant parts of the country.

- Apart from this, another section of the population believed that the COVID-19 was not a virus. Instead, it was a demon unleashed by higher powers on the meat-eaters, deeming them responsible for the pandemic. Consequently, in the early few months of the pandemic, people stopped eating chicken and poultry farming took a 2000cr hit. This demonstrated how the vicious effects of misinformation were economywide.

- In a bid to further highlight the disastrous consequences of fake news and its contribution to COVID-related stigma, a video was shown to the participants wherein a 68-year-old man who was referred to a hospital on being suspected of COVID in Kolkata. Still, nobody offered to help him get into the ambulance due to his condition. His wife tried to help him but failed, while the ambulance driver and nearby onlookers didn't even bother to lift a finger. After struggling for 40 minutes, the man breathed his last in front of the emergency ward, having never made it into the ambulance. In another incident, in a village near Kolaghat, two grieving sons buried their father, who died from COVID, in the compound of their own home. While the panchayat had ordered the family to cremate the body, the villagers objected, and in the absence of any help from concerned authorities, the two sons had no choice but to bury their father.

- While there was much confusion in the early stages of the pandemic on the global scale owing to the novelty of the situation - we cannot deny that the resulting blindness towards facts has remained since then and has given rise to several dehumanising incidents, as demonstrated by the videos.

- However, vaccine hesitancy was one of the worst consequences of this fake news infodemic. Many facts regarding vaccines were twisted and misrepresented during the last two years, which ended up fanning anti-vaccine protests. People who fell prey to such fear-mongering went to great lengths to avoid getting the vaccine. To end vaccine misinformation, in June 2021, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) and Bharat Biotech (the makers of Covaxin) had to issue a joint statement

to debunk all false claims of new born calf serum used in the formulation of COVID vaccines.

- The next session started with a discussion on how photographs have played an essential role in combating rampant misinformation about the coronavirus. It is much more difficult to deny the devastating impact of this disease when there's photographic evidence. However, with the rise in social media, smartphones, and the availability of affordable internet services, there has been an increase in the number of manipulated and misrepresented images around us and how they mislead the common man. Besides that, with the rise in sophisticated editing tools, it is becoming increasingly hard to differentiate between new images from retouched or edited images.

- After that, various ways of distorting information in visual journalism were discussed, and how sometimes photojournalists themselves end up manipulating images to get visually aesthetic clicks. In this presentation, photos by renowned photojournalists were shown to the participants alongside the originals to ~~show~~ demonstrate how minor retouching can sometimes make substantial contextual differences. Few pictures were manipulated, and some even plagiarised to such an extent that the photojournalists who captured them were ~~blocked~~ blacklisted in the community.

- Finally, the different aspects of ethical journalism were discussed in detail. Since we are being bombarded by visuals, some of which are often manipulated or misrepresented to serve varying agendas. Such images are even more harmful than fake news as people are more likely to believe pictures than written texts.

- Another session focussed on howVirtual reality (VR) technology in storytelling has the potential to mitigate many ~~of the~~ challenges brought about by the pandemic, especially those related to the misappropriation of images and videos. With 360-degree videos and pictures, one can get a complete idea of everything happening around them, leaving no scope for manipulation and speculation. Thus VR technology creates a complete visual record of events.

- VR and AR technology immerses people in spaces so that they have a better comprehension of scope. It also leads to better retention of information. It can also be utilized to create models that can be historical records.

- VR technology has been used for preventing or responding to infections by simulating human behaviours, infection transmission, and pathogen structure as a means for improving skills management and safety protection. Telehealth, telecommunication, and drug discovery have been among the other applications of VR during this pandemic. Moreover, AR has also been used in various industries, including healthcare, marketing, universities, and schools. Providing high-resolution audio and video communication, facilitating remote collaboration, and allowing the visualisation of invisible concepts are advantages of using this technology. The session covered potential applications of these technologies for COVID-19 in four groups, i.e., 1)

- entertainment, 2) clinical context, 3) business and industry, and 4) education and training.

- In the final stage of the webinar, the participants, mostly health journalists and fact-checkers, were asked to share their experiences dealing with misinformation in the last two years. Journalists from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka reported how misinformation created a general sense of panic in their respective countries, especially regarding COVID-related deaths. As health journalists, they were grappling to deal with the tsunami of COVID-misinformation.

- Apart from them, journalists covering northeast India reported that the churches branded vaccines as anti-Christ, resulting in low vaccination rates. However, local NGOs and civil societies were actively engaged in dispelling such myths and encouraging people to take the vaccine. Additionally, it was pointed out how the difference in opinions among journalists has resulted in crevices that vested interests can exploit.

- Coming to fact-checking, given the tremendous amounts of unverified information, engagement of smaller bureaus and independent journalists was deemed imperative, along with knowledge sharing between academia and industry which can provide valuable insights and breakthroughs.

4. Conclusion

One of the biggest reasons behind why the need for Information Literacy and fact-checking became even more apparent during the pandemic is because much of the information we were exposed to lacked credibility and was motivated by hidden agendas. On the one hand, we were overwhelmed by a deluge of information, but on the other hand, much of it was unverified. During the entirety of these two years since March 2020, we saw twisted facts, misquoted leaders, and digital platforms facilitating the spread of fake news and increasing its reach.

Given this context, the main agenda of this webinar was to make us aware of the information asymmetry related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences for public health. It also aimed to make us aware of the various strategies that could help us counter such misinformation and disinformation.

5. Highlights

- The webinars had women journalists from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.
- The webinars were interactive, with the key spokespersons/ resource persons and the participants sharing anecdotes of their experiences debunking COVID-19 misinformation, which also made the discussion relatable.