

Role of Women Journalists in Countering Misinformation and Disinformation in the Indo-Pacific Region

Consolidated Report of Workshops

Phase I:

Series of Digital Training Sessions on Countering False Information using Tools and Techniques and through Cross-border Collaborations

This comprised a series of webinars that aimed to address information asymmetry in the present times and its overall catastrophic consequences on the public. The discussions also covered the numerous ways in which unverified information enters digital platforms and how they propagate a range of misinformation/ disinformation, fanning anti-government sentiments, harming public health and resulting in disastrous outcomes including death and irreversible damage to properties. 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.

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 and disinformation. Given the disproportionality between fact-checking entities and myriad sources of false information- journalists and news agencies everywhere were seen to be grappling with a deluge of speculative and fear-mongering content, which is further amplified by echo chambers and trust networks.

Participants

Key Speaker(s):

- Dilrukshi Handunnetti, the award-winning Investigative Journalist, Co-founder - Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) Sri Lanka, and Editor - Mongabay, Sri Lanka
- Swati Bhattacharya, Senior Assistant Editor, Ananda Bazar Patrika
- Brooke Van Dam, Director of Partnerships and Education & Steve Johnson, Founder, SeeBoundless
- Smita Sharma, Photojournalist and TED Fellow (key resource-person)

Participants:

- Women journalists from the Indo-Pacific Region

Summary of Discussions

- The series started with a webinar 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 present age, we have witnessed a rise in hoaxes around us. Given the lack of credible sources of information, distortion and manipulation of facts resulted in an infodemic. However, the most alarming fact is, it has not only been limited to society's vulnerable and uneducated sections, but took hold of the educated and the privileged in time.
- This session by Dilrukshi Handunnetti focused on debunking common hoaxes with a specific focus on the Indian context while referring to examples and case studies from other countries in the Indo Pacific region. The discussion was on how information that lacked any established scientific evidence were spread and exercised immense influence over significant parts of the country.
- The session by Swati Bhattacharjee, SWAM focused on how collecting disaggregated data on gender equality in (a) media content (b) media organization is crucial to deal with workspace harassment faced by the women journalists. Also, she emphasized on inclusion of gender provisions in regulations related to broadcasting licensing. The participants gained knowledge on how to protect communication rights of women and minority through collective efforts.
- The session by Smita Sharma steered a discussion on how photographs have played an essential role in combating rampant misinformation across the Indo Pacific region. 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. The various ways of distorting information in visual journalism were discussed at

length in this session. Also, she explained 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 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 blacklisted in the community or even boycotted globally.

- The last session by Dr Brooke Van Dam and Mr Steve Jhonson focussed on how Virtual reality (VR) technology in storytelling has the potential to mitigate many 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 the 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 to debunk the waves of misinformation and disinformation around us, that includes but is not restricted to entertainment, clinical context, business and industry, and education and training.
- 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 many incidents. These webinars highlighted one common cause of concern i.e. vaccine hesitancy as the worst consequences of this 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 underlying message conveyed by all these webinars was why ethical journalism is crucial to set the media narrative right and its various aspects. We live in an age where 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.

- These webinars adopted a structure that was largely interactive and the participants were often asked to share their experiences dealing with misinformation in the last two years or given an assignment to solve applying their newly learnt skills. Journalists from Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Bhutan and Sri Lanka reported how false information created a general sense of panic and resulted in damage to properties and lives in their respective countries,
- It was also highlighted in the discussions that across the Indo Pacific region, the local NGOs and civil societies should be more actively engaged in dispelling myths and false information. 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.

Conclusion

One of the biggest reasons behind why the need for Information Literacy and fact-checking became even more apparent during the past one decade 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 last few 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 series of webinars was to make us aware of the information asymmetry related to geo-politics, public health and other issues and its devastating consequences. It also aimed to make us aware of the various tools, techniques and strategies that could help us counter such misinformation and disinformation thereby strengthening the Indo Pacific region in terms of its geo-political position.

Highlights

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

Two Day Workshop on Media Literacy in Kolkata for Indo Pacific Region

Date: 11th and 12th August 2022

Venue: American Center, Kolkata, India

Agenda: Available [here](#)

Participants: More than 60 women journalists from different countries (India, Nepal, Bhutan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, United States of America, Indonesia and Singapore) in the Indo-Pacific region participated in the workshop.

Background

The ‘Digital Age’ has enabled access to diverse sources of knowledge at a mouse click. However, it has also created unprecedented challenges and structural changes in the news industry. In the absence of any gatekeeping entity, journalists and media educators everywhere are grappling with a deluge of speculative and sensational content in news making, which is further amplified by echo chambers and trust networks. In such a situation, verification/ fact-checking platforms are the need of the hour in order to navigate the distorted and fear-mongering information circulating on traditional media, and social media platforms. The media landscape has also changed considerably during the pandemic. Though information is largely free, this is not good for business, thus there are talks of charging content. It is a fact that women and minorities are more harassed than others. Thus, the workshop looks at the role of women journalists in countering fake, what method of fact-checking exists and how women are responding to these challenges.

In this context, this workshop aimed to train media practitioners and journalists to discern and respond to deceptive, biased, or false news and to combat disinformation across borders. The workshop tried to promote responsible journalism among women media-practitioners from the Indo-Pacific region, while also training them on several aspects of information asymmetry, including countering disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information – all of which pose a significant threat to their lives, careers as well as the overall society.

The workshop chased a broader objective of ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region by encouraging participants to create a strong collaborative network of women journalists, equipped with the tools and techniques required to counter “infodemic” and reinforce positive counter-narratives across borders to create stronger democracies.

The workshop also featured panel discussions to highlight the serious consequences of misinformation and disinformation for modern day warfare, geopolitical stability, and democratic processes.

Day 1 (11th August)

Opening Session: Countering Information Disorder in the Present Era (0930 – 1030 hours)

Panellists: The inaugural session was moderated by Adrian Pratt, Director, American Center, Kolkata, and the Public Affairs Officer (PAO), U.S. Consulate General, Kolkata, while the opening remarks were delivered by Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS. Melinda Pavek, Consul General, US Consulate, Kolkata was the guest of honour. Nilova Roy Chaudhary, General Secretary, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) India and Susan Kreifels, Media, Programs Manager, EWC Representative set the context of the workshop.



Summary of Discussions

The role of digital technology in bolstering people's access to information in real time from across the globe was highlighted. People access to information through internet searches, social media and mobile notifications were stated as the reasons for reduced dependency on print media. However, concerns of its misuse by state and non-state actors (through armies of irresponsible people and battalions of trolls) to spread misinformation and to harass journalists, especially women journalists were also discussed.

Harassment of women journalists was explained to result in suppression of their voices, depression and in extreme circumstances forcing them to leave the profession altogether. Challenges faced by women journalists in South Asia were discussed in particular, which ranged from misogyny to trolling to misinformation. The need for establishing cross-border collaboration among women journalists in the Indo-Pacific region as a tool for combating the harassment of women journalists was stressed upon.

Free and independent media was considered as the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. Caution was made against the adverse impact of information asymmetry with respect to undermining

people's trust in democratic institutions. Reports indicating loss of people's trust in media on account of misinformation were cited, and calling out and prosecuting actors who bombard society with misleading information was considered as an imperative.

In this regard, the Digital Communication Network (DCN) established by the United States was highlighted as a good practice, wherein a network of more than 8,000 journalists, educators, communicators, new media professionals, and public officials work together to combat disinformation and propaganda. The network also develops and shares tools that provide people with accurate information and fact-checking capabilities. The need to develop, strengthen, and integrate more such networks across the Indo-Pacific region was stressed upon, to promote media literacy, popularise fact checking, and support press freedom.

Furthermore, misinformation was considered to be intentional due to inherent biases and pushing propaganda, as well as unintentional due to time pressure and lack of awareness/subject knowledge. Accordingly, the issue of information literacy among journalists as a critical step for combating mis/disinformation was underlined. The need for disseminating correct information about the U.S.-led initiative of building an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was mentioned as example. It was stated that often the IPEF is viewed solely as a tool for extending market access by the U.S, and such incomplete narratives often overshadow the other pillars of the IPEF namely: regional security and climate change.

The role of Civil Society Organisation in the Indo-Pacific in creating information literacy among various stakeholder groups, including the media was recognised by speakers. Notably, combatting misinformation was believed to be require long-term effort and investment, i.e., it is not be seen as a one-time exercise.

While concluding the session, two digital stories were shown to participants, pertaining to the spread of misinformation during the pandemic, in India and US. These are available [here](#) and [here](#).

Session on “News literacy in the Age of Misinformation” (1030 – 1230 hours)

Resource Person: Dilrukshi Handunnetti, Executive Director of the Centre for Investigative Reporting, Sri Lanka.

Summary of Discussions

The session started with a quote from the famous Nobel Peace Prize winner, Maria Ressa, “*we need to create new institutions like the United Nations, and new codes stating our values. It’s an arms race in the information ecosystem. To stop that requires a multilateral approach that all us must be part of.*”

The session involved an activity for participants, wherein they were asked to state ‘an untruth about them, spoken by a colleague, that shocked or upset them’. Participants responses were

analysed to find that most of the such issues pertained to assumptions, stereotypes, and misogyny, which speak a lot about the challenges faced by women journalists in general.

The second activity was regarding the topics, places, patterns which make participants emotional. The responses received highlighted that behind every journalist is a human, for whom its natural to get emotional while covering stories pertaining to child abuse, healthcare shortage during the pandemic etc. However, such emotional triggers can also exhibit the possibility of inherent biasness, which risk manipulating information to draw such specific emotions.

The menace of the speed of spread of misinformation was explained through another quote, by Mark Twain, “*Once fairly on its feet, a good substantial lie about a man in public life, will circle the globe while truth is lacing its shoes.*” The quote was also used to underline the importance of fact checking, i.e., after much research by the Yale Book of Quotes, it was found that the quote had actually been coined by someone else, Jonathan Swift! The speaker then explained how this popular quote still continues to be misattributed to Mark Twain, which is a classic example of how misinformation circulates.

Next, the influence of digital media in amplifying misinformation was explained. The role of targeted, well-funded campaigns to capture the attention of its audience through various means like toxic narratives, misuse of algorithmically controlled news feeds, echo chambers etc., was highlighted. Risks of privacy violations and online surveillance were also touched upon.

Participants were taught on how to classify problematic content as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, propaganda and hate speech, based on certain parameters such as accuracy of information, intent behind inaccurate information, and harmfulness of the false information, among others.

A video was played next on the impact of perceptions, assumptions, and stereotyping, on women. It also explained concepts like logical fallacy, false cause, straw man, begging the question, false dilemma etc. Participants were urged to use the skill of critical thinking to avoid falling in the traps laid by such concepts.

As journalists, identifying and fighting these concepts was considered to require a three-tier approach – organisational level, community level and individual level. Participants were then requested to laydown steps under each tier, as their response to these ways of spreading misinformation. These included:

- Organisational level: need to have a dedicated fact checker in the editorial board, having a separate section on the organisation’s website/ newsletters on fact checking, in-house training for desk reporters, lay emphasis on primary and secondary research before publishing stories etc.
- Community level: having a network of grassroot level citizen journalists for fact checking, build trust amongst community members through integrity and following codes of community ethics etc.

- Individual level: personalised media literacy programs, boost confidence for standing with truth, question without fear, pause before publishing for fact checking.

More measures which could be taken in this regard, were enlisted by the speaker, with specific emphasis on information literacy, which also impact the news industry's credibility. Caution was made against fragmentation and politicisation of the news industry, as well as lack of integrity in media personnel.

The next group exercise required participants to verify the accuracy of a given piece of information, but without using any verification tools. Participants then discussed the possible approaches to verify the information. Based on the participants responses, the speaker explained the concept of information disorder, its severity, risk of rapid spread, and its different types/ forms -satire/ parody, false connection, misleading content, imposter content etc.

The last activity of the session asked participants to find more information about a given development through web search only. Participants tried different means to fact check the information, and highlighted various roadblocks, and gaps in the information, with respect to image proof, credible source, technical subject expertise, context etc. The importance of news literacy and information integrity was underlined through the exercise. The video presentation was shown in this regard as well and approaches to be adopted for verifying content were also explained.

The session concluded with discussing issues of online violence against women journalists, based on their race, ethnicity, nationality sexual preferences etc..

Session on “Press Unmute: Combating Workplace Harassment and Online Trolling for Women Journalists” (1230 – 1400 hours)

Resource Person: Swati Bhattacharjee, President, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) & Senior Assistant Editor, Ananda Bazar Patrika



Summary of Discussions

The session started with explanation of the situation of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination prevalent in the journalism sector. It examined what is being done about it and what can be done about it. From 2015-16 onwards, there have been concentrated efforts made with respect to assessing what is the situation and experience of women in newsrooms. There has been an acknowledgment about women journalists facing discrimination and workplace sexual harassment and the lack of justice.

In this context, various studies have been done. These studies prove that sexual harassment is prevalent across the journalism sector and more than half the woman don't report it. One of the main reasons for this is that women do not get any say in grievance redressal. Thus, there is a need to have a robust grievance redressal mechanism in place.

Women journalists fight lonely battles when they face sexual harassment and discrimination. Young women are more prone to such harassment and discrimination. Such harassment and discrimination are a direct attack on integrity and dignity of women journalists. They should not blame themselves for the sexual harassment they face.

The participants shared their own experiences of time when they faced sexual harassment and discrimination. For instance, a participant shared her experience on sexual discrimination. She stated that even after being the primetime anchor for a television news show, she was not allowed to be a part of the editorial discussion.

Further, the cost and impact of sexual harassment and discrimination is extreme. Women journalist are forced to leave the job, do independent journalism, leave the profession altogether to find another profession, among other things. Thus, there is a need to acknowledge the presence of sexual harassment and discrimination. It is often observed that women journalist let go off the sexual harassment and discrimination they face. They should also not run away from combating such sexual harassment. Any case of sexual harassment should be treated seriously. In this context, journalists should not shy away from getting counselling and legal help. Even if a woman journalist doesn't wish to pursue legal action, getting legal aid can help.

An effective way to combat and counter sexual harassment is to build alliances. Thus, it is important to realise that though, in professional terms, journalists may be competing, but when comes to sexual abuse of a women colleague, there is a need to build solidarity. Further, there is also a need to talk about stories which have had positive outcomes. Positive stories of journalists who have taken huge risks in protesting against discrimination need to be highlighted.

Panel Discussion I – Disinformation and Geopolitical Stability in the Indo-Pacific Region (1500 – 16:15 hours)

Panellists: The session was moderated by Namrata Sharma, Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal. The panel comprised of Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Editor, The Hindu; Mrinal Chatterjee, Regional director, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Odisha; Priyadarshini Sen, Freelance Journalist; and Monideepa Banerjee, Former Executive Editor, NDTV.



Summary of Discussions

The session started with panellists discussing about democracy. In the days of monarchy, the state had the ultimate say. However, now, democracy paves out ways for everybody to engage. Democracy is intrinsically linked to freedom of speech and journalism. There is a great focus on the Indo-Pacific region because it has more than half of the world’s population and two of the biggest economies lie in the region. Here, money and power are the two most important factors where power follows money. Thus, it also impacts the geopolitical stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Mis/disinformation needs to be looked at from different perspectives, as it can hurt democracy. Both state and non-state actors use mis/disinformation to confuse the opponent, occupy mind space, and to push their agenda. Mis/disinformation is recognised as a part of warfare, statecraft and policy. Mis/disinformation campaigns, when done state or state allied forces, hurt the foundations of democracy. If the state turns oppressor, it becomes a serious problem because non-state actors may still be fought but fighting the state is difficult due the power it possesses.

Many a times, journalistic stories might be completely true through all sources, but government may still deny it. Mis/disinformation on social media is also used to attack journalists. Further,

propaganda websites have cropped up in the recent past which deliberately propagate fake news. In the name of democracy, in the digital world, the powerful are becoming more powerful and are curtailing journalistic freedom. Even democratic movements have suffered as politicians who claimed that they supported democracy seem to have join hands with the ones who help them stay in power.

Further, there also exists staggering amount of mis/disinformation about the religious minorities, where minorities are stereotyped, in various countries like India and Greece, etc. There is mass scale hate and mis/disinformation which deeply affects the society and women particularly. It leads to violation of personal boundaries and creates an overall atmosphere of hate. Technology with its God like power, pits people against one another and brings out hate.

Furthermore, a new framework is required to curb mis/disinformation spread through state and state allied actors. Credibility should be the goal for all government bodies who want to be in a situation where they will not be attacked by the international community. If a country wants to be a strong nation in terms of credibility and in turn have security, it needs to allow democracy to spread. This will strengthen their digital security network.

News is not being looked at as a public service to inform people but is being used as an entertainment service. The problem stems from trying to monetise and make profit of news. Journalists are being reduced to be stenographers of the powerful. There is a need for journalists and journalism to recommit itself to be public service.

Many a times, it is difficult to eliminate misinformation. One's disinformation could be another person's misinformation. Perhaps, it may not be easy to eliminate mis/disinformation completely. Though governments are trying to put laws in place to curb the problem, it also leads to a crackdown on civil liberties and dissent. Further, in illiberal democracies, journalists are also often asked to censor themselves. This leads to spread in mis/disinformation. Thus, mis/disinformation along with censorship becomes extremely problematic.

Journalists should engage with disinformation and try to contain it. Therefore, it is necessary to build a network of journalists who bring out the plight of the marginalised. In this context, investigative journalism is needed. Further, journalists should do responsible journalism to combat mis/disinformation. It is important to get the story right rather than get it first. Further, it is vital for journalists to get both sides of the story so that there reporting is not biased. Furthermore, it is critical that when narrative from the government is being cited, it should be mentioned in the story that the narrative is from the government.

Session on “Be right, not First. Navigating the Journalism Industry as a Woman” (1615 - 1800 hours)

Resource Person: Brittani Kollar, International Training Manager, MediaWise – Poynter Institute, U.S.A.



Summary of Discussions

Journalism, fact checking and media literacy, were considered to be intertwined, and are not to be seen in isolation. History of misinformation tracing back to the coining of the term ‘yellow journalism’, for newspapers giving striking/ sensational headlines (sometimes including disinformation) to attract more readers were discussed. Their role in igniting the Spanish American war was described. The evolution of yellow journalism to reach where it is today in the internet age was explained.

The difference between misinformation and disinformation was deep dived into. Misinformation was believed to be often spread by friends and family, with good intent, since they believe it to be true. However, disinformation was explained to be spread by malicious actors with bad intent, with the objective of making money or pushing propaganda.

Tools and techniques which could be employed by participants to publish accurate information were introduced. These included: fact checking social media posts, analysing audio-video editing, watching out for snowball or viral information, recognising the difference between facts or opinions and subjective or objective information, analysing the implications of the information etc. Examples were discussed through various video examples.

This was followed by participant interactions, to gauge their perspectives and practices on news reporting and fact checking. Examples of popular free and open-source tools for fact checking

different types of information were also discussed, such as: Suncalc, Hoaxy, Mapchecking, Bing Reverse Image Search etc.

The importance and components of media literacy were explained to participants. Answering questions like who is the source of information; what is the evidence; and what do other sources say; were considered imperative. Caution was made against being trapped in echo chambers, and being driven by emotional reactions. Participants were also encouraged to inculcate this practice in their respective audience.

The session concluded with a group activity, wherein participants were asked to enlist some of the good practices adopted by them, for making their stories more credible for their audience. Responses included: adding definitions for technical terms, including hyperlinks of sources of information, giving adequate context of the story, including audience feedback loops, using simple language without any jargon etc.

Day 2 (12th August)

Session on “Visual tools for fighting Misinformation & Disinformation” (0930 – 1030 hours)

Resource Persons: Brooke Van Dam, Director & Steve Johnson, Founder, SeeBoundless.



Summary of Discussions

The objectives of the workshop included identifying basic tools and practices to both, document events that could be perceived as untrue and use them to combat disinformation. It was recommended that journalists should always photograph even when they are just reporting. This helps in many ways. For instance, it establishes a proof that the journalist was present at a location at a particular time period. Further, this can be used for remember details which may otherwise be difficult to recall.

In this context, review of fundamentals of photography and videography in the context of disinformation was done. There are many techniques of clicking good photographs which journalists might utilize. These include ‘Rule of Thirds’ and having a ‘Strong Focal Point’ which can be obtained by using a clear background. Many a times, wide shots are taken to capture broader visuals. Wide photographs of people in the room or public figures are useful. However, many a times, it is also important to capture minutest of the details as well. This might help while writing the stories. For instance, if a journalist is covering a protest,

documents the equipment police have and use – for example tear gas – can lead to formulating a credible story. Further, for countering disinformation, a checklist can be useful. Creating a checklist of things to document while reporting will build a case against those accusing journalists of disinformation.

Metadata is present in a photograph. It is data linked to an individual file and contains attributes such as date, time, location, size etc. To utilize it effectively, journalists should turn on the location settings while using camera which will give the global positioning system (GPS) coordinates. Metadata thus, gives the proof and can be extremely useful for journalists. For instance, if a journalist is doing a story which involves time as a component, GPS coordinates stored in the metadata can help in going back to the same place after some time. Many a times, journalists may be required to prove if they were present at any particular event, for instance, in a case of landslide or forest fire. This can be achieved by using metadata. It should be noted that metadata can be edited. However, an edited tag will be showcased in this case.

Immersive stories are useful in innovative storytelling. They can bring audiences anywhere. The speakers explained terms such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), extended reality (XR) and metaverse and their usage in enhancing storytelling to prevent false narratives of events. Journalists need to think about the experience they want their audience to have. VR is the best in terms of bringing someone to a place, while AR is the best in bringing an object to a person. Further, while ideating, journalists also need to think whether the video will be a voice over or a guided tour with an expert on camera or just a b-roll experience.

Immersive videos can be created by 360-degree VR videos. For this, journalists would require to plan equipment and placement of camera, edit and then finally publish. There are various cameras present in the market which can be utilized. Further, 360 images with the smartphone Google Street View can also be used which does not require any additional equipment. Furthermore, while editing a 360 VR story, journalists need to have slower cuts so that audience can get time to look around and discover. Story should be previewed in VR before publishing.

Session on “Photojournalism and the Manufactured Bias” (1030 – 1200 hours)

Resource Person: Smita Sharma, Photojournalist and TED Fellow



Summary of Discussions

The session started with the speaker showing her TED talk (available [here](#)). It contained stories of human trafficking. Human trafficking has become a 150-billion-dollar industry globally. As per a 2016 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report, there were more than 40.3 million people trafficked into modern-day slavery, out of which 23 million were women and girls. The public authorities do very less to address the issue. Girls and woman from poor families don't have any value and disappearance of a girl doesn't matter to anyone except her family. Further, many a times, girls also elope to escape family torture. Girls leave the safety of family, drop out of school and escape, perhaps to gain some control of their future, where at least they are able to choose their own partner.

Photojournalism is that class of journalism which can help bring out such stories in an effective manner. Photographs inspire passion and enhance the understanding of the world. It is a powerful tool for making connections with people. The speaker showed a lot of photographs such as - the falling man during 9/11 and the Bhopal gas tragedy etc. She explained that image becomes the face of an incidence from which the public remembers.

In stories of human trafficking, where women and girls are stripped of their dignity, photojournalism can be a powerful tool to bring to light their plight. Further, photojournalist have an added responsibility. They have to treat their persons they are documenting with

dignity and fairness. The persons who are being documented have already faced a lot of plight and thus, the least that can be done by photojournalists is to treat them well. Here, taking consent is of paramount importance.

A photojournalist may also win many awards for their work but their work might be problematic. For instance, a photojournalist photographer underaged girls who were trafficked into sex work. This revealed the identity of the girls. This was unethical because the underaged girls could not give informed consent. When the photographs were shown to entire world, these girls were deprived of the chance of going back to living a normal life as they will face stigma. Further, there are other unethical practices as well which are problematic. For instance, if a photographer asks children to lay down on the footpath or street and photographs them, it is unethical. If a person is being asked to do a particular thing, it is called staging and it is an unethical practice. Further, photojournalists should not invoke emotions. If the person being document wants to be express something, the same should happen naturally. This process may take time. Thus, photojournalists will need to follow people over a period of time.

There is a need to develop ethical literacy. If someone is giving their consent to be a part of a story, they should be treated with dignity. Photojournalists has the power of control and understanding that is important. They should explain the purpose and take a consent form the person who is being documented. In case of children, permission of their parents or guardian should be taken. Ethics is, generally, a part of the private space. In the public space, a photojournalist may need not necessarily be required to ensure anonymity. For instance, street photography is allowed because it is in public space. However, there is also a need to be aware of the law of the land. For instance, in the New York Subway, photography in the subway is allowed but it is not allowed in Kolkata Metro.

Photojournalists need to come up with creative solutions for ensuring that anonymity of the persons who are being document is protected. In this context, journalists may utilise certain spotlights, shadows or props present in the setting like mosquito net etc. For this purpose, photojournalists will have to spend some time and look for creative ways.

There is a difference between portraiture and photo journalism. In portraiture, the photographer clicks a portrait which is intentional. Here, the photographer can ask the subject to change clothes, change the settings etc. However, in case of photojournalism, documenting needs to be free from staging and performance, where such changes cannot be made.

A group activity was conducted towards the end of the session where five photographs were distributed in groups and the groups were asked to sequence the given photographs, such that it forms a story. At the end of the activity, participants narrated story prepared by their respective groups. Through this activity, the speaker explained the process of making a photojournalistic story.

Session on “Fact-Checking for Journalists” (1200 – 1330 hours)

Resource Person: Divya Chandra, Fact-Checker, Boom Live



Summary of Discussions

The session focussed on archiving, image and video verification, geolocating, google translation, as well as privacy and security. A fake video clip was shown to participants to sensitise them on how and why fake videos can be a dangerous tool for spreading misinformation. Also, the difference between fake news, disinformation and misinformation was explained through the video. It was emphasised that fact checking is a skill not just for journalists, but for every citizen.

The importance of archiving links, pages and social media posts was emphasised. Its greater credibility over mobile/ desktop screenshots was also explained, on parameters of data and time stamps, preserving the source of information, reduced risk of tampering etc. Usage of popular free tools for archiving were demonstrated to participants.

Demonstration of using popular image and video verification tools was also given, after which they were requested to undertake a group exercise on the subject. Importance of checking source, context, conducting reverse image search was underlined.

The concept of geolocating was deep dived into. Its main use case was to finding out the location of a particular image or video, through tools such as Google Maps and Google Earth. Examples through different images and videos were given with respect to the same.

The session concluded with tips on fact checking, which included: not to rely exclusively on fact checking tools, use observational skills, conduct multiple related keyword searches on different platforms, to get complete information, go hyperlocal through local language translations etc.

Panel Discussion II - Challenges to Network Building and Cross-Border Information Sharing among Journalists (1430 – 1530 hours)

Panellists: The session was moderated by Vasanthi Hariprakash, Founder-Editor, Pickle Jar. The panel comprised of Bharat Nayak, Founding Editor, The Logical Indian; Joydeep Dasgupta, Fact Check Trainer, NewsSense; and Rogena Akter, Special Correspondent, Prothom-Alo.

Summary of Discussions

Speakers highlighted the many benefits of cross-border collaboration amongst journalists, which included not only monetary benefits, but personal/ professional growth as well, and offer opportunities for cross-learning. Accordingly, participants were suggested to come out of their narrow shell, and be open for continuous learning.

Furthermore, bringing facts/ news to the front also requires a consortium of journalists, and the example of Panama papers was cited in this regard. Participants also shared their past experiences of collaborating with other journalists across borders. These included:

- The covering news of the extent of damage caused by the earthquake in Nepal in 2015. Fake news was being circulated in India on the subject, which was busted by Indian journalists in collaboration with their counterparts in Nepal.
- During the Ukraine war, the Ukrainian media association made accommodation and logistical arrangement for foreign journalists to cover the war for their respective countries. This also went to show that collaboration between journalists is not just about information sharing, but also included facilitating other journalists.

Challenges in cross-border collaboration among journalists were also briefly discussed, which included having opposite ideological poles, language barriers, difference of opinion, time zone constraints etc. However, speakers suggested participants to adopt qualities of credibility, sincerity, hard work, developing subject expertise and country specific contexts/ sensitivities/ laws, belief in secularism, liberalism and democracy, which could help in overcoming such challenges.

The specific case of collaboration between India and Pakistan was also discussed. The need for understanding each other's viewpoints, making efforts towards cooperative journalism, and overcoming the serious lack of trust was suggested by the speakers. Avoiding sensitive issues like partition was also suggested. Similar examples of Israel-Palestine conflict were also briefly discussed.

Group Activity on Learning from the Workshop and Strategy Building (1530 – 1615 hours)

Moderators: Arnab Ganguly, Associate Director, CUTS and Sameek Ghosh, Head of Communications and Media, Public Diplomacy Section, U.S. Consulate General, Kolkata.



Summary of Discussions

As was recognised in the previous sessions, the need for having follow-ups on the learnings from the workshop was highlighted. Creating a WhatsApp group for the participants, and keeping it alive through regular interactions was decided, along strengthening the network through platforms like LinkedIn. Feedback from participants on the workshop was also sought, who opined:

- Insufficiency of a two-day workshop to develop strategic bonds amongst participants was highlighted.
- Language constraints was cited as a barrier for the effectiveness of the workshop, and the need for having interpreters was felt.
- More capacity building initiatives on how to clearly differentiate between misinformation and disinformation was requested. Also, more exposure to
- Strengthening regional news outlets in a large and diverse country like India was considered as an imperative. The example of media outlets in North-East was also cited, with respect to it having borders with many countries, making it easier for them to engage with journalists across borders.

- The workshop was considered to have raised awareness in theory, and a need was felt to now build capacity in putting the theory into practical use. This was considered to take time and financial resources.
- With respect to workplace harassment, workshops for creating sensitivity in different workplaces was suggested. Forming internal workplace committees was a useful suggestion in this regard.
- Increasing diversity of participants was thought of being important. Inviting male journalists also, so that they may also benefit from such training was suggested. Including journalists from Pakistan was also considered useful.
- In order to create a ripple effect of the learnings from the workshop, participants urged for more such workshops to be organised in different parts of India.
- Fact checking was recognised as not just an important skill, but a habit as well, which needs to be inculcated across hierarchies in every media outlet, and also be incorporated in their editorial policies.
- Participants from smaller media outlets and freelance journalists suggested the organisers to undertake field visits to larger media outlets to learn from their good practices.

Lastly, participants also formed groups and chose different subjects/ topics for cross-border collaboration amongst them. Topics included: climate change, human trafficking and forced migration, feminisation of agricultural workforce and women's rights, ethical use of social media, and laws impacting minorities in different countries. Stories on these topics, once ready, will be disseminated through US Embassy's social media handles.

Vote of Thanks (1615 – 1645 hours)

Panellists: Sucharita Bhattacharjee, Policy Analyst and Deputy Head, CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre summarised the key takeaways from the two-day workshop. A way forward was laid out by Adrian Pratt, Director, American Center Kolkata, and the Public Affairs Officer (PAO), U.S. Consulate General, Kolkata; and Arnab Ganguly, Associate Director, CUTS delivered the vote of thanks.



Summary of Discussions

Speakers summarised the discussions from the two-day workshop. It was acknowledged that participants met as strangers, but were leaving as friends and collaborators. Participants were urged not to restrict their collaboration to the two days of the workshop, but continue it even from their respective countries through continued virtual interactions.

Continued collaboration and support for each other was said to be an important strategy to fight trolling, and overcome the feeling of being voiceless and isolated. Speakers stated that optimism, talent and passion can help overcome resource constraints.

Lastly, a vote of thanks was delivered for the organisers and participants. Certificates of participation in the workshop

Phase II & III

Organising Fact-Checking Workshops in Tier II and Tier III Cities: East and Northeast India

Witnessing the success of the Kolkata workshop and following our interactions with media professionals, this grant was further extended to tier II and III locations adopting a cluster-based approach for a media literacy drive. The second and third phases of this intervention were pertinent on three counts – firstly, to take forward the key recommendations of its predecessor to take a more cluster-wise approach for greater focus on local capacity and network building in digital and print media; secondly, to include all genders media practitioners in such endeavors; thirdly, to encourage and sustain cross-border collaborative networks. -

These six more locations include Assam, Nagaland, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Sikkim and Tripura where capacity building workshops were organised for the benefit of the local media professionals. The goal of this, was to create a group of informed media professionals who would counter spreading misinformation, disinformation and fake news that could jeopardise peace and stability in border states of Eastern and Northeastern India.

In addition, the project also focused on network and capacity building for the local media professionals in these states so that they are well equipped to engage in cross-border media coverage in the BBIN region. Such collaborations were seen as the key to the development and sharing of cross-border stories about migration, trafficking, access of women to land rights, challenges of cross-border reporting, ethical use of social media, and so on. Furthermore, the subsequent phases also aimed at creating a local cadre of media professionals, youth leaders, and community leaders, both men and women, who will take forward the initiative of combatting disinformation to maintain peace and geopolitical stability in the mentioned region.

Selection of Beneficiaries

CUTS undertook a detailed mapping exercise to shortlist a pool of probable workshop participants. The criteria for mapping were - mid-career journalists (age; 25-45 years), gender experts, online editor from Eastern and Northeastern India who are willing to develop their skills in debunking false information while reporting, and enhance their professional network abroad through digital platforms as well as physical connection for promoting responsible journalism. We reached out to the local Press Clubs and our existing participants based in the proposed workshop locations to identify the relevant stakeholders (participants) who could not participate in the first phase owing to various reasons including the pandemic restrictions.

Collaboration

- Each of the Six (6) workshops were organised in collaboration with the Local Press Club. The training partner was Boom Fact Check, India.

Trainer

Divya Chandra is Producer, Workshops and Training at BOOM Live. She conducts training sessions and LIVE workshops to teach the art of fact-checking. Apart from various online workshops in fact-checking, she has conducted several offline sessions for journalists, journalism students, engineering students and the general public. Previously, she was Correspondent-Fact Check at The Quint and had been actively debunking online misinformation.

BOOM is an independent initiative with a mission to fight misinformation and keep the internet safe. Founded in 2014, BOOM is headquartered in Mumbai. It publishes fact-checks in four languages (English, Hindi, Bengali, Burmese) across three countries (India, Bangladesh, Myanmar). In addition to fact-checks, BOOM runs several initiatives. Their vertical Decode is dedicated to investigating the intersection of technology and society. The organization runs several training initiatives and have trained fact-checkers and mentored fact-checking newsrooms across South Asia and South East Asia.

Broad outline

It is important to familiarise oneself with the dynamic concepts of information and the need for verification in order to attain reliable information, subsequent creation of more information, its modes of dissemination in the digital age and the risks associated with the same. Traditional media – for instance the newspapers, radio or television – have been heading towards a downfall. Journalists need to constantly up-skill themselves with the digitising world, learning the tools and techniques for attaining reliable information and enabling wider dissemination. Having a social media presence is imperative, not only to educate the masses, but also to learn the diverse opinions of the population.

The journalists, as the frontline warriors in the age of Infodemic, must be well equipped with tools and techniques for debunking false information while curating and serving news. This workshop emphasized on the following key points for consideration by the media professionals as well as common people while dealing with information and assessing its credibility and reliability for further analysis:

- Check for usability of data
- Systematically review all sources, and identify information sources or references that appear most critical or compelling. Triangulate the information with other sources, considering whether there are any details being left out by one source?
- Assess the credibility of the evidence. People are prone to relying on any type of evidence or information to support their biased hypothesis.
- Determine whether your analysis is supported by sufficient data.

- Consider the problem from a **variety of angles and perspectives**. This can be done through "**What If?**" **analysis**, which entails challenging a preconceived notion or stated assumption that an event will not occur by assuming that it has occurred and investigating how it occurred.
- **Examine the number of assumptions used** to fill information gaps carefully and actively **seek alternative hypothesis**
- Usage of vague phrases should be discouraged and writers should instead **use more direct and descriptive language**
- Don't publish one-sided accounts in a story
- Where comments are laced with stereotypes, don't simply accept such comments and incorporate in your writing instead journalist should ask follow-up questions aimed at the specific and personal intentions. Seek to understand context in which the source is framing the comments; press the source to clarify the meaning.
- **Have multiple sources to verify information**. If all sources, supporting sources, and documents do not provide a clear picture, do not publish the story.
- When possible, **visit the field and report from the ground**. Conducting extensive research, specifically looking for facts and other data, can assist in determining potential gaps between one's gut reaction and reality.
- Be careful while referring to the reporting of events on social media. While social media has a large audience, it lacks a system for policing content and sources to prevent the spread of false information.

Manual fact-checking is necessary to the end that there is no one software or technique that can help identify any wrong claim made in the public domain. The trainer, Divya explained various phases of Fact Checking –

- Finding fact-checkable claims – this step requires identification of facts that a) can be checked; b) need to be checked. The need to check may arise from the potential impact of the news piece upon the public.
- Substantiating the fact – this step requires looking for best evidence to support the claim made via the fact.
- Analysing the fact – this step essentially is determining the truth in the fact by looking at it from the lens of the evidence produced.

The workshops also discussed at length about the following components -

Introduction to misinformation/ disinformation: Introduction to basic terminologies used in the fact-checking space. Before starting the process of fact-checking, it's essential to find out what is going viral on the internet and what could potentially be false information. This section also includes how to spot misinformation.

BOOM's methodology of verification: Taking the audience through the 7-step-methodology that BOOM follows while verifying information.

Image verification

- Familiarise with tools: such as reverse image search on different search engines on both laptop and mobile phone.
- Show examples of how to use these tools: taking examples of content debunked by BOOM to guide them through the process.

Live exercises: After taking examples, participants were asked to verify images on their devices using the online available tools so that they can try it out themselves.

AI/ Deepfakes

Familiarising the participants with the difference between artificial intelligence and deepfakes

Live exercises: Participants were asked to identify AI-generated content and deepfakes using different images/ videos shown to them.

Archiving

- How to archive online links: guiding them through tools to save LIVE URLs.
- How to find an archive online: since it's humanly impossible to archive every single URL, we taught them how to find an already archived link.

Live exercises: Participants were asked to try both the aforementioned topics

Advanced searches on social media platforms:

It aimed at narrowing down the search results using relevant filters so that the search process is less time consuming and one gets more useful information.

- Google Advanced Search
- Twitter Advanced Search
- Facebook Advanced Search

Geolocation

- How to find location of images and videos
- Usage of Google Earth, Google Maps

Live exercises: Participants were asked to try it out with examples.

Video verification

Since reverse image search is only for images, we introduced the tools to debunk videos since a lot of misinformation is viral in the form of videos. This was followed by showing already debunked examples and giving them LIVE exercises to be well versed with the tools.

- Use of InVID WeVerify Plugin
- Use of multiple techniques/ tools to find out details about the video

Examples and live exercises

Outcome:

All the Six (6) workshops witnessed overwhelming participation from the local media fraternity. The workshop was thoroughly interactive in nature. CUTS received written request for organizing this type of capacity building workshops in other places including Sikkim (and thus the inclusion of Gangtok in Phase III happened). An annexure with all participant details and Press Coverage will be enclosed with this Report.

Guwahati, Assam Workshop – April 18, 2023



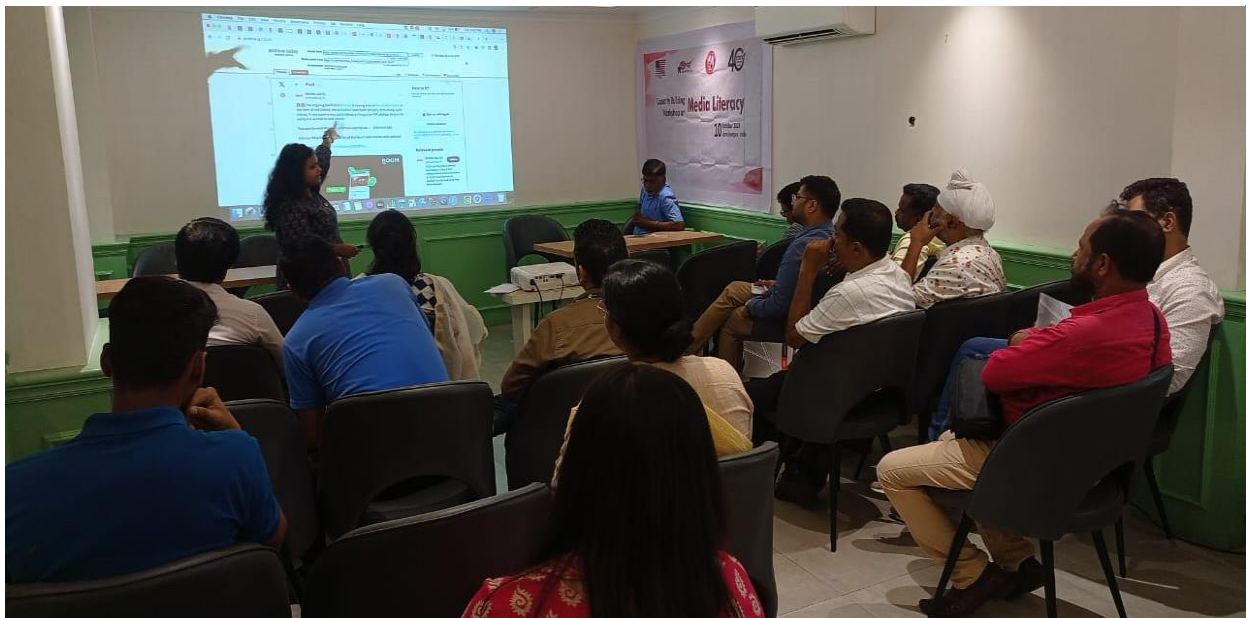
Dimapur, Nagaland Workshop - June 02, 2023



Siliguri, West Bengal Workshop - August 17, 2023



Jamshedpur, Jharkhand Workshop - October 10, 2023



Gangtok, Sikkim Workshop - December 11, 2023



Agartala, Tripura Workshop - December 27, 2023

