Report of Proceedings

Regional Security in the Era of Digital Media

Workshop for journalists and media professionals from the
U.S., Kolkata, Northeast India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka

Date: August 29-30, 2019

Venue: Lincoln Room, American Center,

38A, J L Nehru Road, Kolkata 700071, India

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Executive Summary

The **U.S. Consulate, Kolkata, CUTS International, and East-West Center** organised a two-day workshop titled **"Regional Security in the Era of Digital Media"** for prominent mid-career journalists, online editors, social media practitioners, bloggers and think-tank commentators from the United States, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It was organized on the 29th and 30th of August 2019 at the American Center, Kolkata.

The workshop covered trends and technologies to discern and respond to deceptive, biased or false news and to combat disinformation across borders. Overall objective was to sensitise media practitioners and journalists on how to identify and counter fake news. In addition, the workshop also aimed at promoting a cross border network of media professionals and encourage professional and responsible journalism and promote freedom of press in the Indo-Pacific region.

Key points discussed during the workshop:

- Circulation of "fake news", propelled by digital media platforms, has been accelerating and affecting the way individuals interpret daily developments - one of the reasons, being the limited checks conducted before making a news item publicly available. Stories/ issues covered in NER are curated and often it was observed that wrong narratives are circulated (without verifying the facts) thereby creating disturbances at the ground level. One of the reasons for publishing such curated news about NER is due to pressure from political lobbies or incumbent government.
- Mainstream media often tend to fall for information floated on social media platforms without opting to check their authenticity thereby promoting misinformation (at times). This is because they are constantly under pressure to increase readership. Only a few journalists take the responsibility to travel to the areas and collect the correct information before making a credible news item. Therefore, journalist need to be more responsible and should not thrive on sensational news or Target Rating Point (TRP) and should undertake extensive fact-checking of news/information before publishing.
- Most of the countries lack any kind of policy to regulate digital media especially social media and immediate response of the government in case of any emergency is to fully shut down communication networks in affected areas. To this end, there is a need to formulate laws to regulate social media.
- Facebook uses software and algorithms to detect and remove any false and/or provocative content. They have also partnered with fact checking organizations like BoomLive. WhatsApp has also developed a mechanism to detect and block spammers in WhatsApp. Youtube and Google are also adopting steps to counter fake news by tagging videos and news items that are fact-checked and delete content that fails to meet their community guidelines.
- Digital news platforms should adopt a multi-pronged approach to check news integrity by design whereby only content received from credible sources will be allowed to be published in digital news platforms.
- Few entities such as BoomLive in India and BD FactCheck in Bangladesh have taken initiatives to verify the authenticity of news articles, videos, and images available in digital platforms. But, at times, they refrain from publishing fact-checked stories apprehending negative repercussions from governments and political parties. However, since fact checking is not a

revenue-earning sector, organisations operating in this space face difficulties in scaling up their operation.
- As part of training session the participants presented various data driven story ideas and cross-border collaborative story ideas on issues those can unite the countries in South Asia.

Key Recommendations

- Reach of social media or digital media is better over print media in certain areas. Low levels of education and lack of digital literacy of the masses in certain pockets make them more susceptible to fake news. **Therefore, it was considered essential to impart training on digital literacy at school and college level.**
- Many stories across the world such as global migration, climate change, trans-national crime have effects around the globe. Therefore, there is a need for a journalist to collaborate across borders. In South Asia, regional stories are rarely covered either due to insufficient funds, visa complications or other reasons. **Therefore, cross border networks can be instrumental in bridging information gaps. These networks can be established through international Seminars, Dialogues, Workshops, Reporting trips, Virtual exchanges and Fellowships.**
- **Investigative journalism** was considered to be the most effective way in developing cross-border stories. In investigative journalism reporters prepare stories based on a **deep investigation and are generally data-driven.**
- In US's Indo - Pacific Strategy there are four functional issues viz. Finance & Investment, Physical Infrastructure, Energy Infrastructure and Digital connectivity & cybersecurity. **News media (especially digital media) need to contribute in these areas by developing and sharing cross border stories in these areas to build positive narratives and further strengthen integration among countries in the Indo-Pacific region.**

Key outcomes:

- A WhatsApp group was created with participant journalists to maintain network, share information and work on collaborative stories.
- Journalist realised the role of fact-checking and best practices to curb spread of fake news.
- The journalist learned how to prepare data-based stories and practice cross border collaborative journalism.
- Host writer offered an award of €5,000 to participant journalists for collaborative journalism projects.
- Centre for Investigative reporting Sri Lanka announced that they will host and offer a data- journalism crash course to journalists who will write and publish an in-depth, data-driven investigative report with a strong South Asian focus.
- EWC offered an opportunity to journalist to write an article on policies relevant to Asia Pacific developments and US-Asia relations and they will publish it in "Asia Pacific Bulletin" in Washington.

Proposed Intervention:

- Need to create a network of women journalists through similar interventions to discuss how to combat fake news and online trolls with focus cross border countries to build positive development narratives and facilitate integration among countries in the Indo-Pacific region.
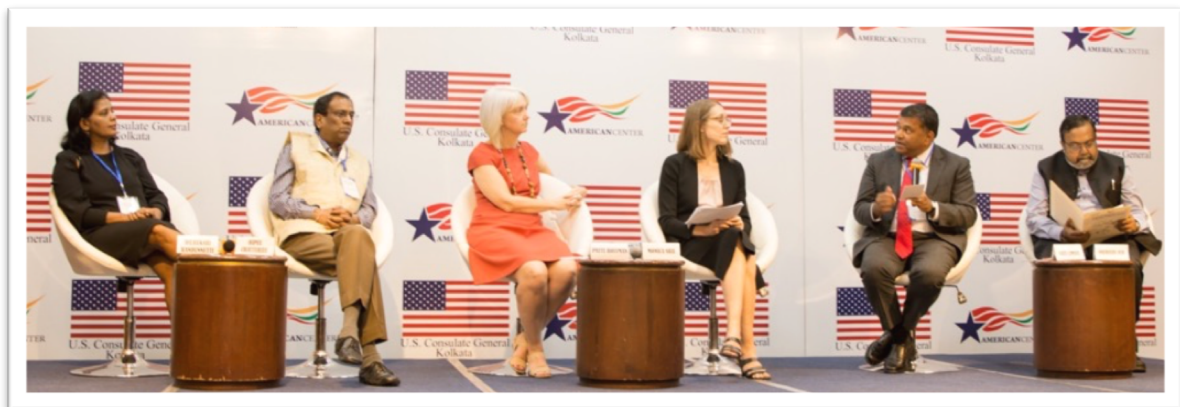
1. Introduction

The **U.S. Consulate, Kolkata, CUTS International, and East-West Center** organised a two-day workshop titled **"Regional Security in the Era of Digital Media"** for prominent mid-career journalists, online editors, social media practitioners, bloggers and think-tank commentators from the United States, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It was organized on the 29th and 30th of August 2019 at the American Center, Kolkata.

The objective of the workshop was to - understand the current trends in print, electronic and digital media, ways to counter fake messages, reinforce positive counter-narratives, promote media literacy, strengthen investigative journalism across border in the era of digital media, address regional security issues in the region for promoting an open and stable Indo-Pacific Region and create a strong network of informed media professionals.

2. Opening Session

In recent years, digital news media has revolutionised the news industry. New digital platforms have unleashed innovative journalism practices that enable novel forms of communication and greater global reach than at any point in human history. However, on the flip side, the circulation of "fake news" has been accelerating and affecting the way individuals interpret daily developments - one of the reasons, being the limited checks conducted before making a news item publicly available. This is in stark contrast to the traditional news media where a news item is checked thoroughly before publishing. However, traditional media also has its limitation especially when their circulation/ broadcast are controlled by the respective national governments. Therefore, in democratic systems, there are growing debates on how to address the issue of countering the circulation of fake news without undermining the benefits of digital media.

 Therefore, to maintain an open, democratic system, the respective government, business, and consumers must work together to solve these problems. Governments should promote news literacy and strong professional journalism in their societies. The news industry must provide high-quality journalism to build public trust and counter fake news and disinformation. Technology companies should invest in tools that identify fake news, reduce financial incentives for those who profit from disinformation and improve online accountability. Finally, individuals should follow a diversity of news sources, and be skeptical of accepting news prima facie without verifying them.

To this end, the Kolkata Press Club organises various workshops to sensitise journalist about fake news and capacitate them with skills and tools to identify and counter fake news. Besides, organisations in Sri Lanka are also working with regional journalists to prepare stories based on fact-checking, especially on stories related to connectivity.

3. Session II: Regional Security in the Era of Digital Media: What has changed?

The session was an attempt to understand the impact of digital media on regional security issues. The discussion centred around three moot questions discussed below.

3.1. Is digital media changing the nature of regional security threats?

Digital connectivity has no doubt increased people to people connectivity all over the world and especially in regions where physical connectivity is poor. But, this improved digital connectivity is sometimes used to facilitate illicit and illegal activities. Political parties and/or insurgency groups use social media platforms to spread fake messages to either instigate citizens and provoke action or polarise them. In India, lately, there were many incidences of communal violence, fuelled by misinformation propagated via social media. Digital connectivity has also helped in activities like smuggling, both within the country and across borders. Traditional media's reach has been limited and impact is momentary. But in the case of digital media impact is far-reaching. Implications are generally cascading at a global scale, as it gets shared repeatedly over social media platforms.

3.2. How security issues are covered by digital media versus traditional media? Do digital media pose a threat to accurate coverage of cross border security issues?

Individuals or groups frequently share stories or information on social media platforms. This is popularly termed as "*Citizen Journalism*". Mainstream media often tend to fall for them without opting to check their authenticity. Increasingly, mainstream media is becoming dependent on digital media for such breaking news based on tweets, viral images or videos shared across different social media platforms. In this way, mainstream media takes the agenda of the creator forward, at times knowingly and generally unknowingly. Pressure on mainstream media houses to constantly publish breaking news and/or increasing viewership/readership often indulges journalists to resort to such actions. Only a few journalists take the responsibility to travel to the areas and collect the correct information before making a credible news item. Thus, while the traditional media often considers the digital media as a threat, but given their limited reach and

financial constraints, coupled with growing competition in the news media sector, traditional media houses are increasingly becoming dependent on the various digital media platforms for news items. In this regard, the need for technological interventions to identify and counter fake news coupled with an increased role of fact-checking agencies was emphasised.

3.3.   How to combat the spread of fake news through digital media?

Most of the countries lack any kind of policy to regulate digital media especially social media and immediate response of the government in case of any emergency is to fully shut down communication networks in affected areas. To this end, there is a need to formulate laws to regulate social media.

It was proposed that different digital platforms should form groups to prevent the spreading of fake news and illegal activities using their platforms. Although Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, and YouTube are taking initiative individually, there is a need for similar initiatives from other digital platforms as well. Also, digital platforms can adopt a multi-pronged approach to check news integrity by design. As per this approach, only content received from credible sources will be allowed to be published in digital news platforms. While it was proposed that Individuals or groups should be appointed to monitor and fact check contents in social media, but it was also admitted that generating revenue for such activities will be challenging for the media houses. It was also acknowledged that even with all the checks and balances in place, it is imperative for the journalist to be more responsible and should not thrive on sensational news or Target Rating Point (TRP). The need for undertaking extensive fact-checking of news/information before publishing.

4.   Session III: Cross border issues in the Indo-Pacific: Conflict and Cooperation in Trade and other strategic issues and role of digital media

The session mainly underlined the role of digital media in strengthening regional ties among countries in the Indo-Pacific region by curbing the spread of misinformation and false news.

Social media and digital media have better reach over print media and television in certain pockets of the countries of South Asia. Therefore, many Asian countries rely heavily on social media for information, making them particularly vulnerable to fake news. Low levels of education and lack of digital literacy of the masses in these pockets make them more susceptible to fake news. To this end, it was considered essential to impart training on digital literacy at school and college level.

Often social media platforms are used to spread hate speeches and fake news across countries, especially in the aftermath of any incident. Such dissemination of fake news causes serious economic losses and threaten security. Therefore, while dealing with serious situations (related to economy, social) government needs to be cautious about the possibility of fake news and falsified information as they could aggravate the situation. For example, in the case of the Madhesi-imposed 'blockade' on the Indo-Nepal border, following the adoption of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015, social media platforms were used to spread hate stories, organise campaigns against India by few vested interest groups in Nepal. This enhanced the conflict rather than resolving it and moreover, it got difficult to control the situation.

5. **Session IV: Voices from India's North East: Trafficking, Migration, Environment Degradation & Illegal Mining, Sub Optimal use of Waterways Connectivity and Cross Border Trade**

In this session, the discussion was focused on the role of media and fake news in creating disruptions in the North East Region (NER) of India.

Stories/ issues covered in NER are curated and often it was observed that wrong narratives are circulated (without verifying the facts) thereby creating disturbances at the ground level. For example, in the case of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, a lot of misinformation was spread through both mainstream media and social media which aggravated the tension among residents. One of the reasons for publishing such curated news about NER is due to pressure from political lobbies or incumbent government on the journalists.

Some of the major issues in NER are trafficking, migration, mining, and deforestation. Among these issues, migration has always been a controversial one. Infiltration from neighboring countries, especially Bangladesh, has been a cause of socio-ethnic tensions in many states of NER as the locals are apprehensive of getting marginalised in their state. This is a prominent issue in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram. For years Arunachal Pradesh has been treated as a dumping ground for refugees (Chakma and Hajong) and there were several instances of conflicts between indigenous groups and refugee groups over various issues.
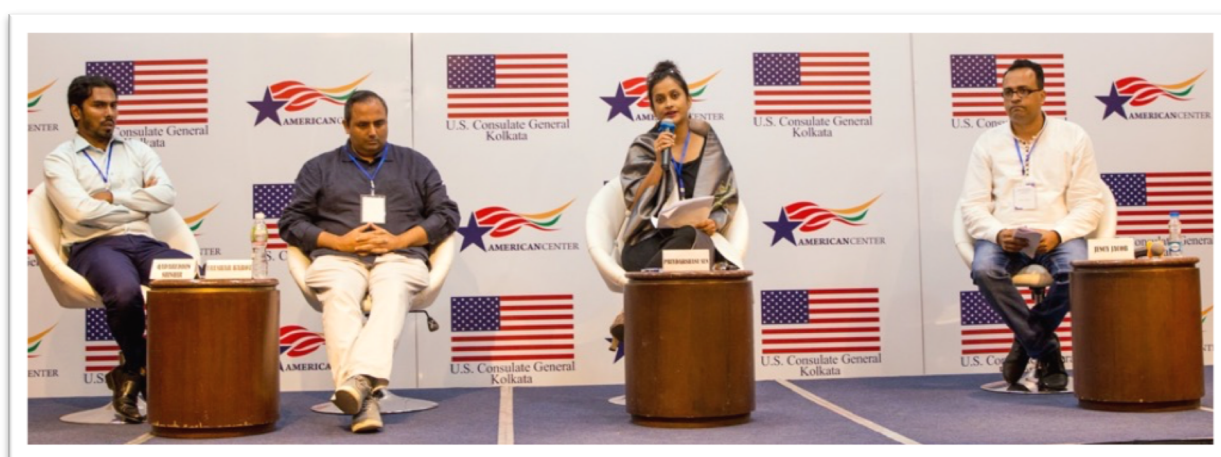
In Meghalaya due to environmental concern mining was banned 2014. However, illegal mining continued even after the imposition of a ban and the ban was withdrawn in early 2019. But various rules and restrictions are laid which will make the mining business uneconomical for many.

Regarding cross border trade, the need for greater trade connectivity with Bangladesh was especially underlined. It was mentioned that for some of the states in the NER, getting goods from Bangladesh is a cheaper option. In this regard, the role of CUTS in promoting border haats along the Indo-Bangla border was emphasised. It was mentioned that the opening of border haats was not only important for generating local livelihood opportunities, but also helped to a large extent in formalizing informal trade between India and Bangladesh.

Overall it emerged from the deliberations that there several issues facing residents in the NER, but those issues often do not find coverage in the traditional media circulated in mainland India. Under such circumstances, digital news platforms have gained great significance in the NER and have been a useful tool in keeping the rest of India abreast of the developments that are taking place in the NER. However, while the role of such platforms is gaining importance, it is essential to ensure that fake news/videos are not circulated through such platforms and for that, the role of technology, and fact-checking was considered to be of prime importance.

6. **Session V: How to counter fake news, misinformation, propaganda and trolling on digital media platforms**

This session deliberated on the rationality of different actors behind spreading fake news; role fact-checkers in combating misinformation and methodology adopted by them in this process, and initiatives taken by social media platforms to curb the spread of disinformation or fake news.

The rationality behind spreading fake news: Generally, fake news is created to serve the vested interest of a few people. They repurpose videos and images and use them to establish the narratives they have built. Fake narratives are very common for issues that are controversial or widely discussed and aimed at instigating citizens to take violent measures. This is similar across all countries in Eastern South Asia and probably across the world.

Role of fact-checkers: Fact-checkers from India and Bangladesh flagged that major fake news is generally propagated by mainstream media and at times by leading media houses, knowingly or unknowingly. Social media platforms provide them the platform for the fake news items to get viral. The participants were informed that BoomLive in India and BD FactCheck in Bangladesh have taken initiatives to verify the authenticity of news articles, videos, and images available in digital platforms. BoomLive monitors specific pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and if they detect any story as fake they immediately tag their media partners and upload that on their web page. It was highlighted that to check the authenticity of any news, fact-checkers take all

kinds of instruments including the use of software to detect fake videos and images, confirming information from primary sources, visiting those locations and conducting an investigation. However, at times they fear to publish a few fact-checked stories fearing negative repercussions from governments and political parties. It was mentioned that fact-checking not being a revenue-earning sector it is usually not possible for them to scale up their operation.

Initiatives by social media platforms to combat the spread of fake news: Facebook has taken several steps to combat the spread of fake news, apart from making BoomLive its fact-checking partner, Facebook uses software and algorithms to detect and remove any false and/or provocative content. Any content that breaks Facebook's community standard or flagged as troubling/fake by trusted partners gets deleted. Every day billions of posts get deleted based on these guidelines. However, often there is a grey area when even they are confused about whether to remove that content or not. At present, by using available technology fact-checking is performed in 11 languages and plans are in place to increase the number of languages over time. WhatsApp has also developed a mechanism to detect and block spammers in WhatsApp. Youtube and Google are also adopting steps to counter fake news by tagging videos and news items that are fact-checked and delete content that fails to meet their community guidelines.

Best practices that should be adopted by the journalist to combat fake news: If an editor realizes that they have circulated a wrong story then apart from taking the story off from the website, they must leave an editor's note to keep the readers informed. This act increases the credibility of the media houses. Mainstream journalists, especially digital, should be capacitated to use a different tool to identify fake news. It is equally important that users behave with much more responsibility and must not share any news or video instantly over social media.

7. <u>**Closing Session: Methodology of Cross-Border Journalism**</u>

Many stories across the world such as global migration, climate change, trans-national crime have effects around the globe. Therefore, there is a need for a journalist to collaborate across borders. Christina Lee, Head of Ambassador Network, Hostwriter briefed journalist about the methodology of cross- border journalism and the importance of collaborative journalism.

Cross-border journalism is a collaboration of journalists from different countries to research on a shared theme or story. In this collaboration journalists compile, mutually cross-check and

merge their findings to fact check and tell their findings to their audiences on a national, regional or local level. Cross border journalism is a seven-step circular process and each step is discussed in detail below.

Step 1: Networking: Networking help journalist to find colleagues with similar interest. There are four degrees of collaboration Loose network, One-off assistance, Loose collaboration, and Close collaboration. Each type of collaboration depends on the level of trust and availability of time as well as patience among the journalist.

Step 2: Story Idea: Search for story angles that are relevant to each country's audience. It could be a) cross-border approach to current events, c) chain stories, c) impact of international organisations across the region, d) comparative stories.

Step 3: Research team: Team members should be decided based on their competences and skills (language skills, well-developed source contact, insight into a certain theme, knowledge of different journalistic research methods, data journalism and experience of covering organized crime). Appropriate countries and journalists need to be selected to obtain a desirable impact through publication. Security for working in an international team should also be considered at this stage.

Step 4: Research Plan: It helps to develop the research plan together in a physical meeting. Pick a location that is easily accessible for all team members, keeping in mind that visa restrictions may apply. A research plan should include a schedule; the role of each team member; deadlines and milestones, leading to shared publication date; a clear division of tasks. The research team should agree for a team coordinator, communication tools that include a level of security appropriate to the research subject, sources of fund and a common ground regarding the journalistic methods to be used.

Step 5: Research: During this phase, the team will encounter different views regarding journalism practices, ethical questions, etc. But, team members should try to find common ground, through discussions, instead of seeing such differences as a problem.

Step 6: Publication: While the research is shared among all team members, the stories must be adjusted for each target group individually. Fact-checking is an obligatory task and should not publish anything on assumptions.

Step 7:Follow-up: Cross-border journalism works best in circles. The last step is the new Step 1: Follow-up and New Networking. This will help in developing potential new contacts and new story ideas, to start a new cross-border investigation.

Fellowship Announcement

Cristina announced an award of €5,000, on behalf of Hostwriter, for collaborative journalism projects. The Hostwriter Prize consists of two categories. The Story Prize presents awards for collaborative projects that have already been published, with €2,000 going to the first prize winner and €1,000 going to the second prize winner. The Pitch Prize awards €1,000 each to two collaborative projects that have not yet been realized. The deadline to apply for the prize is 31 October 2019.

Link: https://blog.hostwriter.org/application-process-opens-for-2019-hostwriter-prize/

Day 2 of the Workshop

8. **Interactive Session and Group Activity 1: Challenges in network building and information sharing among journalists across border**

Ms. Susan Kreifels, Media Program Manager, East-West Center discussed the importance and challenges related to network building and information sharing across borders among the journalist.

In South Asia, regional stories are rarely covered. A few of the reasons for the same are lack of sufficient funds with the media houses to send their correspondent to neighboring countries for reporting trips or to hire any correspondent in the foreign country or to open a bureau in that country. At times, visa complications also make travel impossible. Therefore, cross border networks can be instrumental in bridging information gaps. Cross border network can be established through international Seminars, Dialogues, Workshops, Fellowships, or by collaborative initiatives such as '*Panama Papers' and 'Paradise Papers'*. At present, most of the journalist makes use of social media to build a network and share information.

East-West Centre (EWC) organised various media programs (reporting trips, dialogues, and virtual exchanges) in South Asia both across contentious and non-contentious borders to facilitate cross border journalism; network building and information sharing; and training of journalist in this region. In the case of dialogues and reporting trips, the main issue is with a visa. From India- Pakistan reporting trips more than 65 stories were prepared and shared on social media. They also facilitated virtual exchanges between 105 master's degree students (in their third semester) from the Institute of Business Administration in Karachi and MJI, New Delhi. These students have prepared 22 stories and posted them in their student blog "**Ittehad-Building bridges across South Asia**"[1].These types of exchanges are fruitful in curbing disinformation, cross-check fact, building network and strengthening goodwill.

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[1] Link of the blog: https://ittehad.net/

Following these interactions, two activities were assigned to the participants.

Activity 1:

The participants were divided into groups. Then each group was asked to prepare and present a **cross border story plan** *on any issue that will unite the countries in South Asia and its importance.*

Title: Citizenships and Statelessness- *The creation of new aliens*
The focus of the story is to capture the impact of NRC on Assam as well as neighboring countries. This issue is a major concern in India as well in neighboring countries because as updated NRC list will unfold in Assam on August 31st, 2019 and it is expected that a huge number of individuals will be excluded from the list and they will suffer from statelessness. There are chances that these people will migrate to neighboring countries of India. Nepal is apprehensive that many Nepalese will be excluded from the list and they could end up in Nepal like Bhutan refugees, and therefore neighboring countries are apprehensive about the repercussion of an influx of refugees. As it is a politically charged story first, they will capture the human side of the issue and then capture the political dimension of the issue.

Title: Repercussions of forced migration
There are different fallouts of forced migration such as drug smuggling, environmental degradation, and violence. This story will focus on these aspects of migration. Migrants are generally vulnerable and lack resources; therefore it is easy to exploit them. They are often used to smuggle drugs in exchange for petty cash. For example, drug abuse, indulgence in a drug called *Yaba* was very commonly observed in Rohingya refugees. Migrations also harm the environment as often large scale deforestation takes place to create camps for refugees. Ethnic militias and rebel groups can use digital media to radicalise victims and propagate hate speeches and create violence.

Title: Cross border smuggling of *Ya-ba*
The focus of the story was drug smuggling across three countries in South Asia, viz Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India. *Yaba*, an illegal drug, is smuggled from Myanmar to Bangladesh and from there to India, through the porous borders of these neighboring countries. Myanmar is one of the biggest producers of it. Many lives in these three countries are affected due to these drugs. Generally, Rohingya refugees are hired by Burmese drug dealers to smuggle *Yaba* from Myanmar into Bangladesh. These migrants being trapped in poverty use this drug money to meet basic needs.

Title: Glacier lake outburst floods
The focus of the story will be to analyze the impact of glacier lake[2] outburst floods. This a crucial issue as it is a real-time impact brought about by climate change and these floods can inflict devastating impact on downstream communities in Nepal, India, and Bangladesh.

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[2] When glaciers melt, they sometimes form lakes on mountain tops and these lakes are called glacial lakes. The water in these lakes accumulates behind loose "dams" made of ice, sand, pebbles and ice residue. But these dams are inherently unstable and avalanches, falling boulders, earthquakes, or even simply the accumulation of too much water can unleash sudden, potentially disastrous floods.

9. **Interactive Session and Group Activity 2: Global trends in cross-border investigative journalism and how the media is reacting**

Dilrukshi Handunnetti, Executive Director of the Center for Investigative Reporting in Sri Lanka, was the resource person for this session. She introduced the concept of investigative journalism to the participants. Investigative journalism is a type of journalism in which reporters prepare stories based on a deep investigation. It can be data-driven stories or on political or corporate wrongdoings based on evidence. Investigative Journalism is usually not a revenue-generating field, therefore, CIR organises various workshops and training on data-based investigative journalism, mobile-based journalism, drone journalism, how to do fact-checking; does commercial fact-checking to generate fund.

Basic skill for investigative journalism: There are few basics that a person must know to be part of investigative journalism. Basic knowledge in data journalism; ability to write the Right to Information (RTI) application without assistance; understanding about the new verification tools; know how to carry the device (such as mobile) while doing a story and have to be psychology strong because at times physical risk is also involved in this type of journalism.

Composition of their team: A person who will lead the story, data experts, authenticators (fact-checkers), legal experts (to write RTI, for legal vetting), risk assessors, gap editors, and crowdsourcing.

Process of preparing an investigative journalism story: There is a sequence in the process of preparing a story: a) Basic research (to check its feasibility); b) assessment of risk and team formation; c) preparing a workable story hypotheses (those will either influence policy in foreign or some kind of outcome); d) main research; e) report writing; f) fact-checking , legal edits/ checks &risk assessment of publication.

This discussion was followed by two activities, mentioned below.

Activity 2 (A): All the participants were requested to mention the least and most covered stories in South Asia, and the participants form North East India were also requested to mention the least covered stories in their state. According to the feedback of the participants:

The least covered stories in South Asia are: Illegal animal trafficking; Corruption in public distribution; Organ trafficking; Environmental issues; Issues related to rural areas (impact of development on rural areas, rural distress, success stories at rural level, Panchayat conflicts etc); Cultural and ethnic heritage, Climate change; Migration; Wildlife; Education; Chinese injection through investment; Conflict stories; Security issues; Child rights; Victims of development.

The dominating stories in South Asia are Political development; Insurgency; Geo-Politics; Bollywood; Global politics; Terrorism; Indo-Pakistan-China tension, Events, Cricket, Prime Minister, Pakistan.

The least covered stories in the North Eastern States of India are Health; Environment, Violation of fundamental rights; Migration; Economic Development; Women welfare; Climate change; Diverse cultural issues, Wildlife; Inclusion of youth in human trafficking and terrorism.

Activity 2 (B): *Participating journalists were divided into team members and they were requested to prepare and share and a brief data-driven story idea.*

These are the story ideas presented by participants during this activity session.

1. **Topic:** *Crime against Women in West Bengal*
According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data (which is available till 2016), in India, 9.6 percent of crime against women were committed in West Bengal. According to this data, West Bengal has a leading position in trafficking cases, rape cases, dowry cases, and acid attacks. The Government of West Bengal however, objected to the NCRB data. According to the state government, the figure for the total number of crimes against women is high in West Bengal due to a rising number of reported dowry and domestic abuse cases. However, the rate of serious crimes that occurred in West Bengal is much lower compared to other states of India. Other states and members of Parliaments also objected to this data, therefore, the publication of this data is stalled from 2017.

2. **Topic:** *Illegal Mining in Meghalaya*
In 2014, a ban was imposed on mining in Meghalaya, but extracted coals were allowed to be traded. As per government data (DMI) in 2014, at the time when a ban was imposed, 66 Lakh Metric Tons of coal were extracted and it was allowed to be traded. In 2019, when the ban was removed, still 32 Lakh Metric Tons of coal were yet to be traded. This figure is doubtful as over these five years a huge amount of coal has been transported from these mines. It seems illegal mining was conducted between 2014 and 2019. So the team intends to verify the authenticity of these two above mentioned figures and inspect how much of these remaining coals are extracted through illegal mines.

3. **Topic:** *Human trafficking and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)*
The trafficked victims rescued from brothels of West Bengal and Mumbai are often detected with HIV positive, but once they are repatriated no follow-up actions are undertaken. This is often a reason behind the spread of this dreadful disease. As per one case study, a woman was trafficked from India to Bangladesh and was detected as HIV positive by the rescue team but when she was repatriated back to India she got married. Therefore, based on data of the Health Ministry and National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), they intend to map this uncovered section of the population.

4. **Topic:** *Child marriage rate in Bangladesh*

According to UNICEF data, the rate of child marriage is increasing in Bangladesh but its parameters such as the education rate of women, growth of an economy and expansion of social indicate differently. Therefore, there is a need to identify the reason for this paradox. There is also a contradiction in child marriage data published by the Government of Bangladesh and UNICEF. The prime reason for this could be that the Bangladesh government release this data every 10 years (last it was published in 2011) whereas UNICEF releases it on yearly basis (last data available is of 2018). The second reason behind this confusion is the lack of clarity on the actual definition of child marriage in Bangladesh. As per law in Bangladesh, the official age for a girl to get married in 18 years but if parents want they can get their girls married at the age of 16.

5. **Topic:** *Mortality rate in Nepal*

The mortality rate has been very high in Nepal over decades but data of 2015 reflect that there has been a fall in this rate by 70 percent. Therefore, there is a need to identify factors affecting it. Data reveals that the number of women going to the hospital for assistance has increased significantly this could be one reason for a significant fall in infant mortality rate. Other reasons are improved medical services (both private and state-owned), fund assistance from the U.S. to improve health services in Nepal. However, a detailed study needs to be conducted to identify all the factors and the affected regions.

6. **Topic:** *Drug smuggling between India and Bhutan*

Drug SP+ [3]which is available in India over the counter is smuggled to Bhutan from India, and Marijuana is smuggled from Bhutan to India. According to data from the Narcotics Bureau of India (2017-2018), in India consumption of SP+ is decreasing and that of marijuana is increasing over the years. Therefore, the story is to understand the process through which these drugs are smuggled across the Indo-Bhutan border.

7. **Topic:** *Cross border drug smuggling*

The drug *Yaba* is smuggled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, but recent data reveals that the rate of *Yaba* sourced from Myanmar to Bangladesh has reduced but the rate of consumption of *Yaba* in Bangladesh has increased. Therefore the team intended to identify new sources of this drug in Bangladesh. As per a few primary sources, it is now routed from Myanmar to the North Eastern States of India and from there to Bangladesh. However, a detailed study is required to understand its exact route.

8. **Topic:** *Consumption of Alcohol in India*

The team intended to understand the trend of alcohol consumption across the states of India and their reasons. As per the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre (New Delhi), the four states consuming the highest amount of alcohol are Tripura, Chhattisgarh, Gujrat, and Arunachal Pradesh. States with the lowest consumption of alcohol are two dry states Bihar and Rajasthan. According to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) report, in the last 11 years, the consumption of alcohol has doubled. The reported reasons for high alcohol consumption are unemployment,

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[3] Not an illegal drug

economic and mental distress, way to celebrate the festival, etc. High alcohol consumption has a varied and adverse impact on health.

9. **Topic:** *Mitigating measures for Assam Floods*

From the data and satellite images available from the National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC) of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), it is feasible to detect the issues (both in upstream and downstream) causing flood and identify the areas those get inundated during monsoon in Assam. Unfortunately, in spite of the availability of these 18 years of long data and these images, not many effective measures were adopted to mitigate floods. Therefore, the team intends to understand why fruitful and effective flood mitigation measures were not taken in spite of the availability of this data and funds allocated by Centre and State for this purpose.

Fellowship Announcement

Ms. Handunnetti announced a fellowship on behalf of Centre for Investigative reporting Sri Lanka. CRI will host a journalist who will write and publish an in-depth, data-driven investigative report with a strong South Asian focus.The fellowship can be granted in 2020, and the selected journalist can spend a week in Colombo and undergo a data-journalism crash course (five days). CRI will cover airfare and take care of lodging and basic local travel of that journalist.

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10. Training Session and Interactive session: U.S. Government's Indo-Pacific Strategy and security issues across borders: the role of media professionals

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy: the U.S. has always remained extraordinarily engaged in the overall region but under Trump's administration the U.S. launched a free and open Indo-Pacific Policy. In the Indo-Pacific strategy, they will consider areas and functional issues that will not only apply to one region but across the region. Therefore, the four functional issues where the journalist are expected to contribute by sharing stories and project ideas are;

- *Finance and Investment:* Journalists were requested to collaborate and share feasible project ideas with the possible outcome, where the U.S. can assign investment funding.
- *Physical Infrastructure*: U.S. Congress passed the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (or BUILD Act) it is a financial tool which supports infrastructure development across the region. The U.S. seeks local guidance to connect one or more countries in the region.
- *Energy Infrastructure*: U.S. started a new initiative called Asia EDGE (Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy). This initiative is part of the U.S. government's effort to grow sustainable and secure energy markets throughout the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. is expected to get new project ideas from the ground.
- *Digital connectivity and cybersecurity*: the U.S. is taking initiatives to improve cybersecurity and digital connectivity. In this area too the U.S. seeks guidance from the journalists, civil society members, and CEOs along with policymakers.

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: India wants a free, open and inclusive Indo–Pacific region. Therefore, India is engaging with several countries based on its interest in different fields, such as physical connectivity, digital connectivity, and cybersecurity. India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and India's Act East Policy complement each other very well. At present India is investing in various connectivity initiatives, such as Kaladan port in Myanmar, partnering with Japan in modernizing Colombo port, investing in the development of infrastructure in Khulna and Mongla port of Bangladesh, establishing Akhaura-Agartala railway connectivity. India signed various multilateral and trilateral agreements other than QUAD[4]. India, Australia, and France are also keen to collaborate on digital connectivity & cybersecurity and also space research. Russia, India, and China are taking initiative to build infrastructure not only in this region but also in some parts of Africa. India is likely to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. These developments will shape the future of the Indo- Pacific region.

Publication announcement

EWC has a publication called "Asia Pacific Bulletin" in Washington which focuses on policy-relevant to Asia Pacific developments and US-Asia relations (are 1000 words in length). A journalist can share their article/ ideas/stories with them for publication and circulation at the government level.

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11. Conclusion:

Fake news is generally agenda based, driven by citizen journalists and foreign actors, and propagated especially through social media platforms. Mainstream journalists also often tend to fall these stories on social media rather than fact-checking this information which aggravates the situation. Therefore, journalists need to be more responsible and learn tools to fact check all information. Cross border network, media programs could be instrumental in bridging information gaps across countries. It also helps in cross-checking information even about one's own country. Readers and viewers should also be skeptical about what they are reading and seeing and judge before forwarding any message on social platforms. Although many social platforms are taking initiative to counter the spread of fake news through their platforms, governments of respective countries also need to devise mechanisms to regulate social media platforms.

12. Way forward:

- The journalists are expected to prepare some of the positive cross borders collaborative stories that will connect this region.
- More Cross border media programs should be organised to establish a network among journalists.
- Workshops should be organised to capacitate the journalist on fact-checking tools.

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[4] the quadrilateral formation which includes Japan, India, United States, and Australia

13. **Key outcomes:**

- A good network was established among the participant journalist and to maintain this network, share information and work on collaborative stories a WhatsApp group was created with all the participant journalist.
- Journalist realised the role of fact-checking and ways to avoid the spread of fake news.
- The journalist learned how to prepare data-based stories.
- The journalists realised the need for and methodology of cross border collaborative journalism.
- Hostwriter offered an award of €5,000 to participant journalists for collaborative journalism projects.
- Centre for Investigative reporting Sri Lanka announced that they will host a journalist who will write and publish an in-depth, data-driven investigative report with a strong South Asian focus. The selected journalist can spend a week in Colombo and undergo a data-journalism crash course (five days).
- EWC offered an opportunity to participant in journalists to write an article on policies relevant to Asia Pacific developments and US-Asia relations and they will publish it in "Asia Pacific Bulletin" in Washington.