

Sifting truth from lies in the age of

#FakeNews



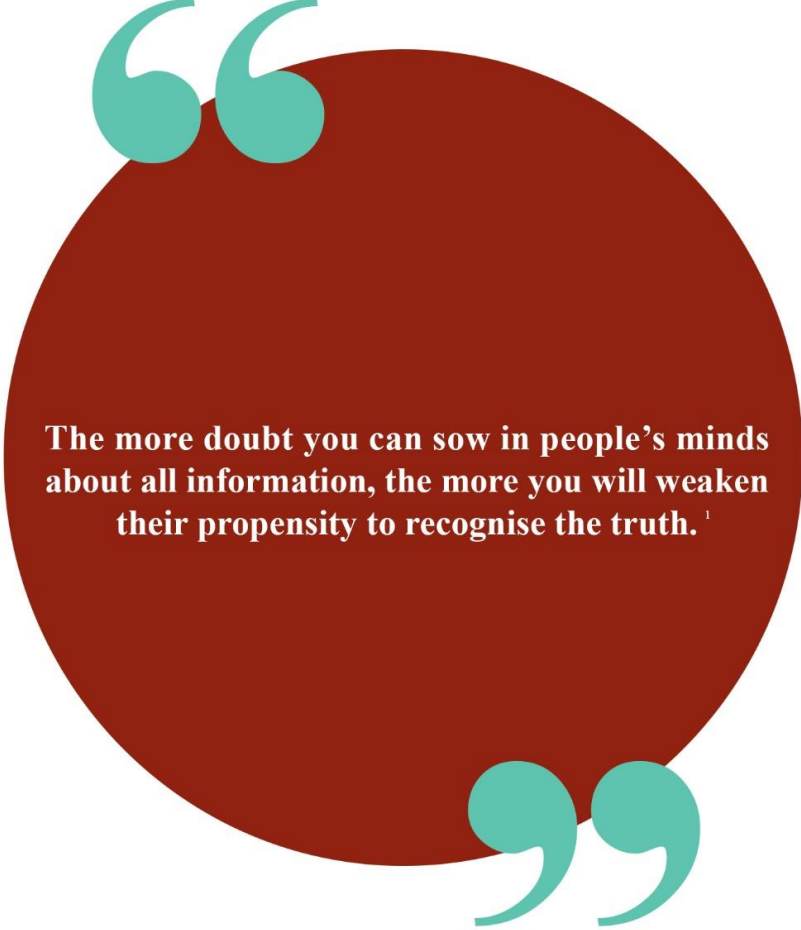
ABOUT

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a registered research-based advocacy non-governmental organization in Pakistan. Founded in 2012, DRF focuses on ICTs to support human rights, inclusiveness, democratic processes, and digital governance. DRF works on issues of online free speech, privacy, data protection, surveillance and online violence against women. DRF opposes any and all sorts of online censorship and violations of human rights both on-ground and online.

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The more doubt you can sow in people's minds about all information, the more you will weaken their propensity to recognise the truth.¹

¹ (Patrikarakos, 2017)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are living in an epoch in which some of the most vocal defenders of press freedom, such as the United States, rank 48 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.² A very specific phenomenon has manifested in this “information age” that is posing a challenge to journalism across the world--it’s called ‘fake news’.

Fake news has emerged as a new buzzword with a two-fold meaning. At times, the term is used to refer to the spread of disinformation with an intent to deceive. At others, it is used as an accusation to attack and discredit mainstream media or political opponents.

This study aims to understand the two-pronged nature of this information disorder. It identifies the major challenges pertaining to the question of fake news and adds to the existing literature on the subject. The study’s findings, based on survey responses and interviews, point towards the poor quality of fact-checking practices in Pakistani newsrooms and stress the urgent need of introducing media literacy trainings to journalists and media practitioners.

It also seeks to understand if media practitioners, who are concerned about fake news, have changed their reporting practices in response to this concern. It examines the extent to which a. fact-checking is practised in Pakistan’s newsrooms and b. journalists actually believe fake news to be true. The study attempted to identify a. specific subject areas that are more susceptible to falling victim to misinformation campaigns, and b. the common methods of the dissemination of such fake news.

The study includes helpful resources that enable media practitioners to report responsibly in the digital age. With the help of this study, the Digital Rights Foundation hopes to lay the groundwork for a nuanced conversation around fighting fake news in Pakistan.

Using a combination of in-depth interviews and an online survey, the study found:

² (RSF, 2019)

1. Reluctance to refer to fake news as news that are untrue

According to journalists, they are not comfortable using the term ‘fake news’ to describe news that are not true. This is due to the fact that the term has increasingly been used in Twitter campaigns for partisan propaganda and discrediting credible journalism.

2. Frequent accusations of ‘fake news’ lead to an increase in interest in fact-checking

Twenty-eight per cent of the journalists surveyed affirmed that they started applying fact-check methods after the recent rapid increase in accusations of “fake news”. Interviewees said Pakistani newsrooms were gradually realising the impacts of the information disorder.

3. Predisposed beliefs, conflict, and censorship enable spread of fake news

False news is more likely to be believed if it validates a preconceived bias, feeds into an already established narrative and/or is shared by public figures or people perceived to be credible.

4. Politically contentious topics are more likely to be susceptible to fake

The more a topic is politically contentious, the higher its chances of being susceptible to fake news.

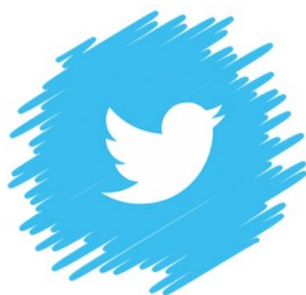
5. Social media, particularly WhatsApp, is the hotbed for spread of false information

According to 88.7% of the journalists surveyed, social media platforms were the least trustworthy source of information, with WhatsApp being the hotbed for spread of false information. Interviewees identified ‘WhatsApp journalism’ as the major contributor to a decline in factual reporting.



6. An emerging fake news ecosystem on Twitter

There is some competition out there for WhatsApp as Twitter is emerging as a parallel fake news ecosystem. According to participants of the study, fake news spread on Twitter via seemingly fake, hyper-nationalist accounts. Use of doctored screenshots from major news outlets is a frequent tool used by fake news practitioners as ‘documentary evidence’. Some also create links with a sensational headline containing false information as generally speaking, most Twitter users are likely to not click on the link and instead share the story based on reading the headline alone. Another common phenomenon is creating fake Twitter profiles to impersonate well-known figures and then disseminate false information using these profiles.



7. Dearth of media literacy training in Pakistan

Only 17 percent of respondents said they have attended fact-checking training, with the remaining 83 per cent stating they had not received any training. While some scattered initiatives are propping up, there are no dedicated fact-checkers or fact-checking organisations based in Pakistan. The findings point towards the urgent need to promote media literacy in the country – for consumers and producers of news, government officials and internet users alike. All stakeholders involved – platforms, media organisations, government, civil society – must come together to tackle the problem that has compromised confidence in credible gatekeepers of information. The spread of fake news cannot be contained with bad laws. Instead, a collective, more inclusive strategy based on media literacy is the need of the hour.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. contribute to academic literature on fake news, which remains an understudied topic in Pakistan
2. understand the origins of fake news in the digital landscape of Pakistan
3. analyse trends on Twitter and draw inferences about the specific topics that are more susceptible to fake news
4. determine the extent to which journalists believe fake news to be true and how this impacts their work
5. comment on the emerging practices in the media industry and treatment of fake news in the age of digital disinformation
6. discuss the main legal and technical mechanisms to stop the spread of false news
7. determine the role of intermediaries and their responsibility in the spread of fake news
8. highlight the best practices for journalists from across the globe in countering fake news

Methodology

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) conducted an anonymous survey among practising journalists in Pakistan to ascertain how pervasive the issue of misinformation and ‘fake news’ is. As there is little factual evidence to examine the extent of fake news itself, the online survey was devised to take a preliminary look at fact-checking practices in the industry.

The survey was circulated in online communities of journalists, including the Digital Journalists of Pakistan Facebook group, which is a popular space where Pakistani journalists discuss industry news, collaborate on projects, and share ideas, tools and feedback. Questions were designed to examine familiarity of respondents with fact-checking methods and also to simultaneously educate them on the mechanisms of news verification.

As many as 152 journalists based in Pakistan participated in the survey.

To deepen the analysis, structured interviews were conducted with 10 Pakistani journalists in editorial positions and those with some expertise and experience of sifting truth from lies. This was done to evaluate the impact of fake news on reporting.



Introduction

Fake news is now an important part of the political ecosystem. Understanding the fake news phenomenon both during and after the election is a task that holds critical value for journalists, policymakers, national security professionals, and citizens of all political stripes. However, the term itself has become hotly contested.

“The failure of the term to capture our new reality is one reason not to say ‘fake news’. The other, more powerful reason, is because of the way it has been used by politicians around the world to discredit and attack professional journalists,” says Claire Wardle, co-founder of First Draft.³

Manipulating information has been a historical feature of world politics, long before modern journalism was established with certain standards to define news as a genre based on rules of integrity. An early record dating back to ancient Rome shows how when Antony met Cleopatra, his political rival, Octavian, launched a smear campaign against him with “short, sharp slogans written upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets”. He went on to become the first Roman Emperor as “fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all”.⁴

Fast forward to 2019. New technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content easier while social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by nation-states, populist politicians and dishonest corporate entities. This content is then easily shared by an uncritical audience. While propaganda is as old as war itself, social media has allowed information operations a scope, reach and speed that was previously unthinkable.

The tactics of spreading misinformation have been centuries old. However, the term ‘fake news’ became popularised after the US presidential elections of 2016 when the now American president Donal Trump repeatedly used it for political gains. The popularity that the term gained was such that it was also named 2017’s word of the year.⁵ The power that comes with this popularity is

³ (Draft, 2019)

today globally seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy, free debate and journalism.

A Google Trends map shows that it was in the second half of 2016 that people across the world began extensively searching for the term ‘fake news’.⁶ In Pakistan, the topic garnered the most interest rather recently, with the highest number of searches recorded in 2019 (graph below).



In the same year in Pakistan, a number of fake stories were fabricated with the intent to deceive while there were other examples that appeared to be cases of poor fact-checking on the part of the media and/or ordinary citizens.⁷

According to a survey conducted by Dawn, 57.5 percent of 1,705 respondents felt fake news was a major problem in Pakistan. Additionally, 44.8 percent said they had been tricked into believing a fake news story was true, while 34.3 percent said they believed they may have been tricked.⁸

The popularity of the term in Pakistan is an undeniable reality now. Yet the scope of the problem that the term entails remains understudied in the country.

The scope of the problem is not any more limited to electioneering or swaying public opinion. Fake news has even led to murder. In 2018, a series of unauthenticated social media posts claimed that seven Muslims were gunned

⁴ (UNESCO, 2018)

⁵ (Singh, November 7, 2017)

⁶ (Trends, n.d.)

down by the Ahmedi community in Ghaseetpura, Faisalabad, and after an investigation by the police it was known that no deaths had occurred. The social media posts provoking the Muslims against the Ahmedi community were motivated by a personal dispute and did not have anything to do with religion.⁹

According to a BBC analysis, at least 31 people were killed in 2017 and 2018 as a result of mob attacks fuelled by rumours on WhatsApp and social media.¹⁰

In an attempt to address the problem, the Pakistan government launched an official Twitter account (@FakeNews_Buster) to call out fake news and misinformation.¹¹ However, this has been widely criticised by media practitioners who hold apprehensions about the account's potential misuse in targeting opponents and dissenters.

Besides the fatal consequences and politicisation of fake news, the term has been increasingly used by hyper-nationalists across the globe to weaponize online spaces. Several studies have found that low-quality, extremist, sensationalist and conspiratorial published news content is overwhelmingly consumed and shared by right-wing social network users.¹²

Another BBC study found that a rising tide of nationalism in India is driving ordinary citizens to spread fake news.¹³ The research found that facts held little importance for some people compared to the emotional desire to bolster national identity.

In this scenario, the term 'fake news', which was initially meant to describe news that is not correct, is now being used as a synonym for partisan propaganda.

“You repeat things and you repeat things and you say them [in] different ways and you say them over time and it eventually starts to sink in,” says media columnist, Margaret Sullivan in a BBC interview.¹⁴

⁷ (Ali, July 14, 2019)

⁸ (Haque, December 6, 2017)

⁹ (Mubarak, 2018)

¹⁰ (Nazmi, November 13, 2018)

¹¹ (Dawn.com, October 1, 2018)

¹² (Hern, February 6, 2018)

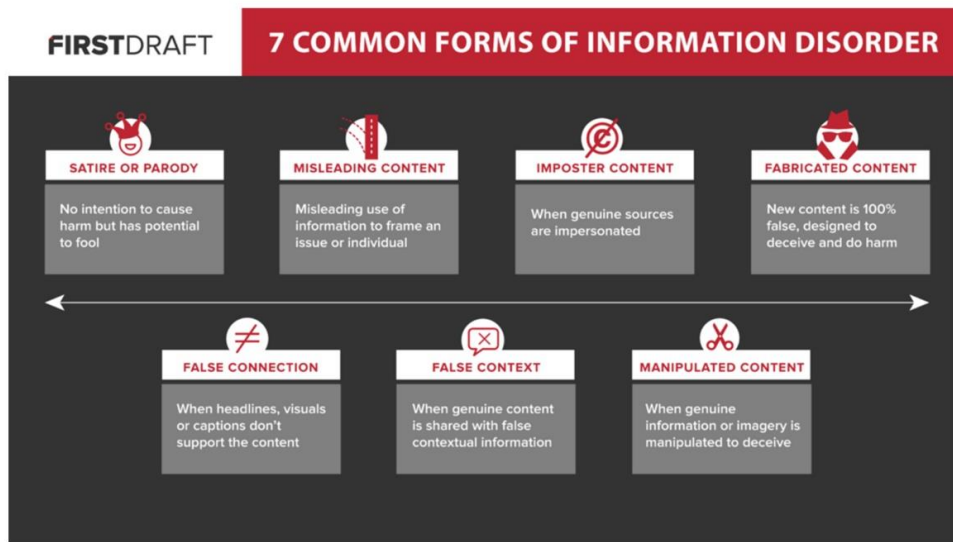
It comes as no surprise then that interviewees for this study, and most journalists in general, struggle to define fake news. In fact, one of the major challenges when calling out false information is categorising it.



DEFINING FAKE NEWS

It's complicated.

Satire, parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content and manipulated content all need to be seen separately from each other and dealt with accordingly.



¹³(BBC, November 18, 2018)

¹⁴(Herald, January 2, 2019)

Source: First Draft

The Ethical Journalism Network, a global conglomerate of journalists and media organisations, also highlights the need to clear the confusion about what does and doesn't constitute fake news. It has come up with its own definition: "Information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts."

If nothing else, this definition sets apart propaganda, "alternative" facts, and malicious lies from journalism.

Much of the discourse on 'fake news' conflates two notions: misinformation and disinformation. These classifications, collectively termed as 'information disorder', feed the crisis of confidence in journalism.¹⁵



A handbook prepared by Unesco offers a useful distinction between misinformation and disinformation. According to the handbook, misinformation is information that is false but the person who is disseminating it believes it to be true. For example, an unauthentic message (rumour) spreads on WhatsApp, warning that suicide bombers plan to attack large public venues in Karachi. The alert is distributed/disseminated by thousands, creating panic. Those who are spreading this message actually believe it to be true. On the other hand, disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows that it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively misinformed by malicious actors. For example, posts about polio vaccination discouraging parents from getting their children vaccinated are coordinated and intentional, and cater to a very specific, often religious, narrative.¹⁶ A third category is mal-information – information that is based on reality but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.¹⁷ For instance, information about a person's religious sect could be spread to inflict harm or damage their reputation in an organisation or public office.

Particular cases may have combinations of all three – misinformation, disinformation and mal- information. Plus, there is evidence that individual examples of one are often accompanied by the others (e.g. on different platforms or in sequence) as part of a broader (dis)information strategy by particular actors. Nevertheless, it is helpful to keep the distinctions in mind because the causes, techniques and remedies can vary accordingly.

¹⁵(UNESCO, Journalism, fake news & disinformation, 2018)

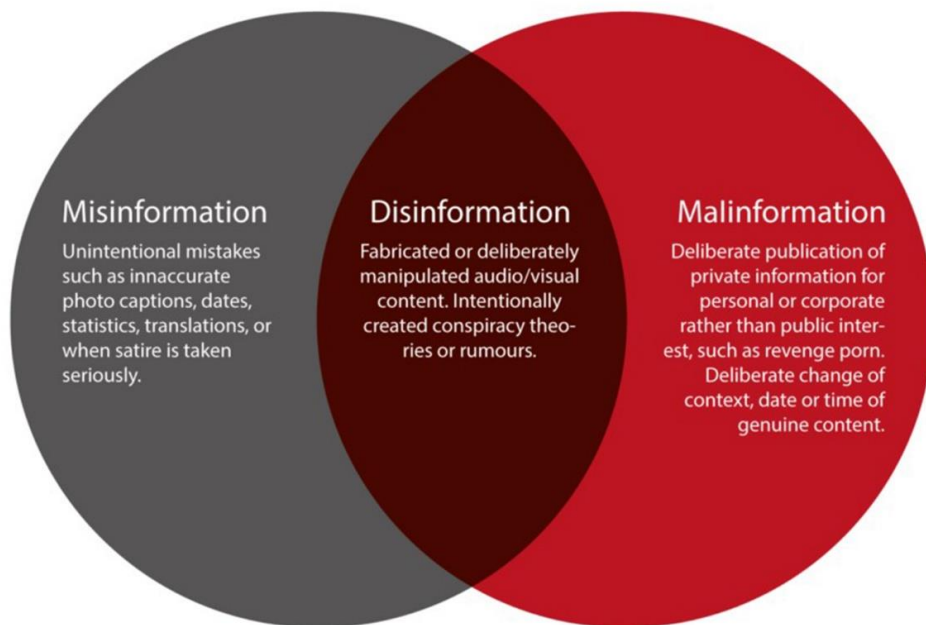
¹⁶(UNESCO, 2018)

¹⁷(UNESCO, 2018)

TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER

FALSENESS

INTENT TO HARM



Source: First Draft

Bots are social media accounts that are operated entirely by computer programs and are designed to generate posts and/or engage with content on a particular platform. In disinformation campaigns, bots can be used to draw attention to misleading narratives, to hijack platforms' trending lists and to create the illusion of public discussion and support. Researchers and technologists take different approaches to identifying bots, using algorithms or simpler rules based on number of posts per day.

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.

Fake followers are anonymous or imposter social media accounts created to portray false impressions of popularity about another account. Social media users can pay for fake followers as well as fake likes, views and shares to give the appearance of a larger audience. For example, one English-based service offers YouTube users a million "high-quality" views and 50,000 likes for \$3,150.

Malinformation is genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation.

Misinformation is information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who don't know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.

Propaganda is true or false information spread to persuade an audience, but often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity and propaganda are often unclear.

A **sock puppet** is an online account that uses a false identity designed specifically to deceive. Sock puppets are used on social platforms to inflate another account's follower numbers and to spread or amplify false information to a mass audience. The term is considered by some to be synonymous with the term "bot".

Trolling is the act of deliberately posting offensive or inflammatory content to an online community with the intent of provoking readers or disrupting conversation. Today, the term "troll" is most often used to refer to any person harassing or insulting others online. However, it has also been used to describe human-controlled accounts performing bot-like activities.

A **troll farm** is a group of individuals engaging in trolling or bot-like promotion of narratives in a coordinated fashion. One prominent troll farm was the Russia-based Internet Research Agency that spread inflammatory content online in an attempt to interfere in the U.S. presidential election.

Detecting fake news – a survey

1. Over 82% journalists say they fact-check their own work, but more than half of the respondents said they don't check others' work before publishing.

82%

2. 49.1% journalists fact-check the source they cite, but 50.9% of the respondents don't double check.

49.1%

3. 88.7% identified social media platforms as the least trustworthy source of information, WhatsApp being a top choice.

88.7%

4. 82.1% said that the news media are responsible for ensuring people are not exposed to fake news.

82.1%

5. Consensus that the fact-check responsibility lies with the news desk (editor/sub-editor). Over 8% of journalists said no one fact-checked in the newsroom they worked at.

8%

6. 28% affirmed that they started applying fact-check methods after the recent publicity of "fake news".

28%

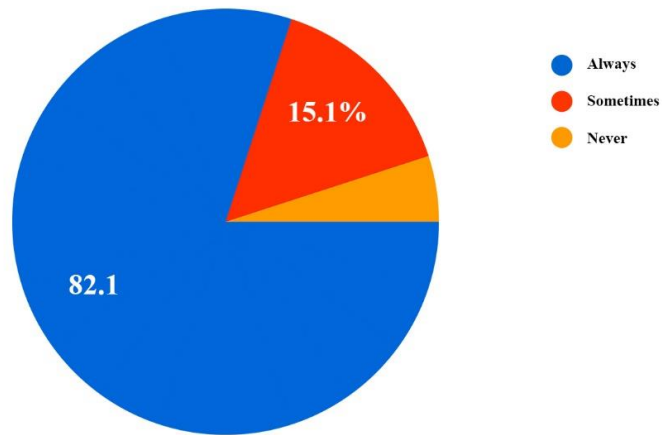
7. Only 17% of the respondents said they have attended fact-checking training, while 83% said they had not.

17%

Findings – survey

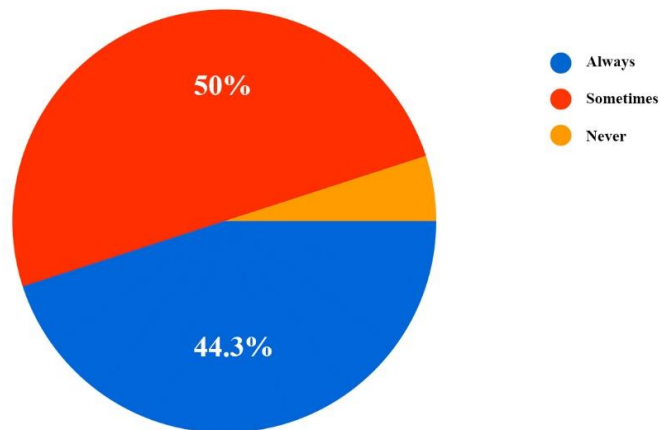
There was a dearth of fact-checking training in newsrooms as 81 percent of journalists said that they have not attended a fact-check training. Despite that, however, a majority of the participants of the survey said that they employed news verification methods at work.

How often do you fact-check your own content?



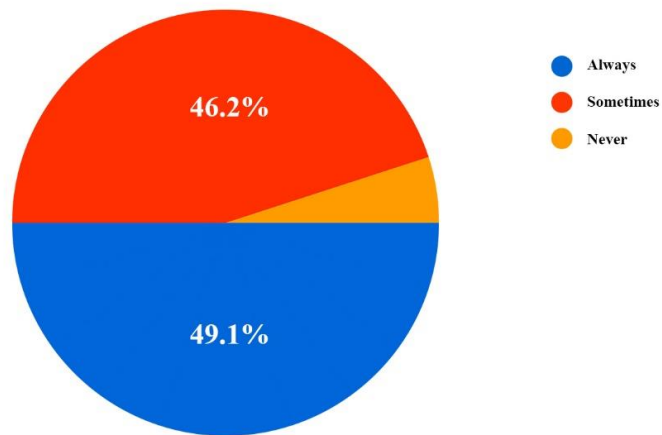
As many as 82.1 percent of survey respondents said they “always” fact-check their own content, while another 15.1 per cent said they verify facts “sometimes” and only three percent said that they “never” fact-check their work.

How often do you fact-check content from reporters/other’s work?



The survey responses revealed that fewer journalists verify other writers' work before sharing or republishing it. While 44.3 percent of those surveyed said they "always" verify facts in others' work before publishing it, 50 percent said that they "sometimes" check others' facts before approving the content. Another 5.7 percent journalists said that they "never" verify information in the reporter's copy. This shows that more than half of the respondents do not fact-check stories from reporters that may contain unfounded claims or wrong information.

When citing a source, do you also fact-check the source?



In terms of reliability of source, 49.1 percent of journalists said that they fact-checked the source of the information. However, 50.9 percent of respondents said they did not double-check the authenticity of the source.

To source or not to source

Participants were further quizzed about their choice of source to better understand and verify what kind of sources journalists rely on in the information age. As many as 70.8 percent of the respondents said that they quoted the relevant authority with expertise or authority on the subject to substantiate claims. Another 65 percent said that they turned to government websites to cross check information while 61 percent simply used search engines (mainly Google) to find other sources carrying similar information.

Verification via other news platforms

Results further indicate that finding coverage of the information in question on other platforms, including in the news media (51.9 percent) and social media (22.6 percent), inculcates a sense of trust. Many journalists who took the survey cited other news platforms, including social media feeds of reporters, as a method of checking if something was true.

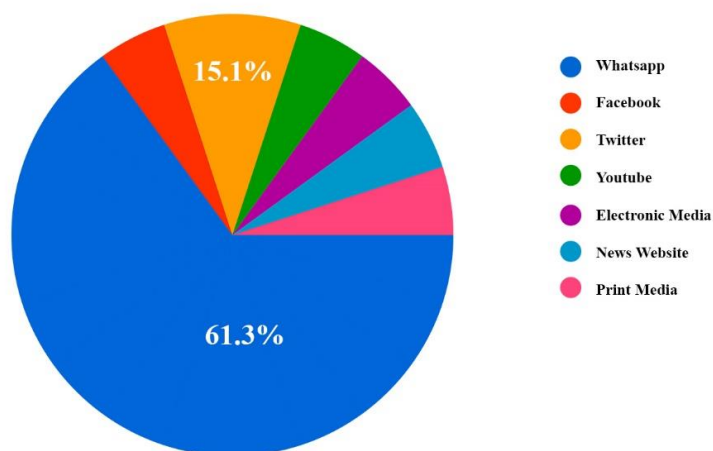
What's in a name...

When asked what type of information they usually verified during fact-check, a majority of the participants said that they double-checked figures (87.7 percent), names and titles (81.1 percent) and dates (75.5 percent). Among the least checked categories are places (42 percent), definitions (38 percent) and quotes (22 percent).

Beware: Can't be trusted

Despite citing social media as a source to follow developing events, journalists (88.7 percent) identified social media platforms as the least trustworthy source of information, with WhatsApp being the least reliable.

Responsibility – any takers?



Journalists who took the survey were not exactly sure who, besides themselves, carries the most responsibility to prevent the spread of fake news. The survey found that 82.1 percent of the respondents said that the news media are responsible for ensuring people are not exposed to fake news while 76.4 percent said that the responsibility lies with the person sharing the news.

As many as 52.8 percent of the participants said that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter should act as gatekeepers, while 30.2 percent said the government should act responsibly when sharing information. Search engines such as Google should play a role in preventing the spread of fake news, said 31.1 percent of the participants of the survey. .

Fact-checking in the absence of fact-checkers

In Pakistan, there are no dedicated fact-checkers employed in the newsrooms. For this reason, we asked our participants about who handled the task of fact-checking at their respective organisations.

The consensus was that the news desk is responsible for fact-check. Most of them (60.4 percent) said that the desk head or editor fact-checked information while 55.7 percent said the responsibility lies with the sub-editor. Over eight percent of journalists said no one fact-checked in the newsroom they worked at.

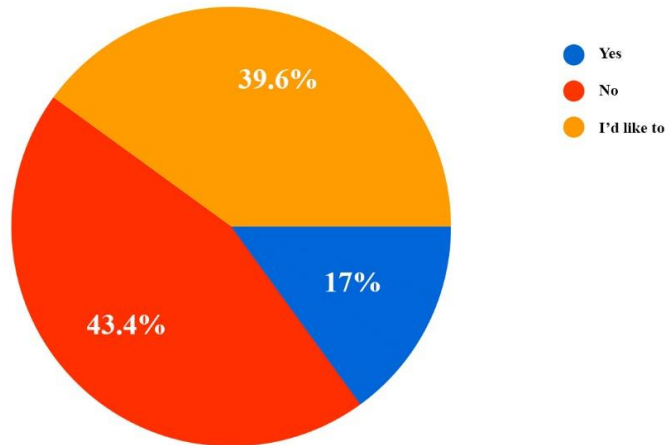
Realising the importance of verification

When did Pakistani newsrooms that do fact-check realise the importance of news verification?

When asked if fact-checking has always been part of their reporting practices, 71.7 percent of respondents said it has always been the same while over 28 percent said that they started applying it after the recent publicity of “fake news”.

Despite claims of employing a fact-check routine in newsrooms, journalists who responded to the survey revealed that they have not had relevant training opportunities regarding information verification. Only 17 percent of respondents said they have attended a workshop, while the remaining 83 percent had not.

A positive outcome of publicising fake news as a problem is that journalists are now expressing an interest in exploring methods to fight it. Almost 40 percent of the respondents said that they would like to attend a fact-check training.



Findings – Interviews

The interviews conducted for this study were aimed to identify common observations related to fake news such as popular sources of false information, which topics are more susceptible to propaganda, and how often journalists believed fake news to be true.

What is fake news?

In order to understand the dynamics of a problem, it is important to be able to identify it first. Common terms interviewees used to describe fake news are; ‘intentional’, ‘deliberate’, ‘misleading’ and ‘aligned’ with a certain political agenda.

However, ‘fake news’ has become a contested term over the years as it has been weaponized by powerful heads of states and government officials to discredit legitimate news and information that doesn’t suit them.

“Fake news is meant to deliberately mislead, misinform/disinform in order to pursue an agenda and push for a narrative arc to be accepted as the unquestioned truth. It needs to be repeated again and again there’s a difference between ‘fake news’ and what at times can be factually incorrect.”

The above quote by a participant shows how they differentiate between fake news and incorrect information on the basis of intention.

According to journalists, fake news has perhaps become one of the most commonly used parlances in their day-to-day lives. Its popularity and politicisation in the information age have clouded conceptual clarity — fake news is no longer limited to news but also applies to any content circulated in the digital sphere.

“Fake news can be defined as the type of content — not news — that is fabricated or manipulated, or deliberately tries to frame the ‘facts’ in a misleading way such as to serve a political agenda.”

It is due to the above-mentioned lack of clarity around the term ‘fake news’ that some journalists say that they don’t feel comfortable using it anymore.

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Which medium is most susceptible to being the source of fake news?

Interview results corresponded with the survey findings in establishing that social media, particularly WhatsApp, is the most common source of fake news.

“Social media with its ability for users to generate their own data and the manner in which social media timelines are constructed with algorithms that boost the most sensationalist news is emerging as the medium where we see the most fake news emerging. Private or semi-private social media applications such as WhatsApp are emerging as hotbeds of fake news as there is very little content regulation happening in these cases.”

While the issue maybe pervasive on social media but it is not limited to the medium. Journalists acknowledged the lack of fact-checking in newsrooms, which are increasingly relying on social media for information.

“Due to lack of resources for fact-checkers and inability to perform due-diligence, the greed for more clicks and be the winner in the race to break an exclusive, electronic media often turbo-boosts the reach of fake news which more often than not originates from social media platforms.”

At the same time, traditional methods of planting stories continue to disseminate propaganda. Furthermore, the deliberate choice of editors to publish stories on ‘request’ also contributes to circulation of news that may not be entirely true to facts.

“The problem arises when official sources provide stories for publishing with fabricated facts. The purpose is to align information with the state narrative. In such cases, the story as it is will qualify as fake news but since it is coming from [a] reliable source, editors don’t have the liberty to verify.”

Fake news, therefore, may not only be a problem of unsubstantiated claims. With its political and social consequences, it has evolved into an information operation technique that is largely used by influential quarters and propagandists to bury the alternative, often, dissenting truth.

Which persuasive strategies make fake news believable?

Participants said that fake news tends to what people firmly believe in and plays on predisposed sentiments of the consumers.

“False news is more likely to be believed if it validates a preconceived bias, , if it feeds into an already established narrative, [or] if it is shared by public figures/people perceived to be credible.”

Sharing an example, a journalist said that over the last one year, attempts have been made to discredit the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) as a ‘foreign-funded’ group. Their consistent mischaracterisation has led people to believe that they are the ‘enemy’. In this case, the persuasive strategy used by the producers of fake news was to play on people’s fear of an enemy that is forever ready to strike against their interests. Apart from fear, the confirmation bias for our own political, religious and ethical beliefs is also played upon.

Others said that censorship enabled the spread of fake news.

“Censorship also leads to fake news becoming more believable – the more that people are intuitively aware of the fact that they are not getting the full picture from mainstream news sources, even if they are not sure what they aren’t being told, [they] will gravitate towards social media and unreliable sources of information.”

Journalists identified another mechanism that enabled the spread of fake news. According to them, an outrageous, outlandish tale makes it more difficult to believe a false story, however if it is sprinkled with bits of truth, it gives the fake news a sense of reliability and believability. This leads to people falling for it.

The purpose of fake news is to create alternative facts and discredit real news. The most believable fake news stories are built on already existing news stories, said journalists.

“Producers of fake news pick on popular topics and bank on public curiosity. Often propagandist content is led by “what the media doesn’t want you to hear”. Their purpose is to build trust in alternate sources and build mistrust in legitimate gatekeepers of information that don’t support their narrative.”

Talking about what kind of circumstances enabled the spread of fake news, journalists observed that the phenomenon often spiralled out of control in times of urgency, conflict, attacks or disasters, and/or censorship.

Circumstances in which there is a breaking story, which cuts down time available for proper fact-checking would make a fake story more believable. Similarly, on some topics such as Balakot¹⁸, the information is most limited, or at times controlled. This allows fake news to travel because legitimate sources are scarce.

With regards to newsroom practices, interviewees’ responses echoed the survey findings: if other publications had run a story then the natural tendency was to carry it with minimal checks.

¹⁸ Pakistan and India have been engaged in an information war over the Balakot site, where Pakistan says the bombs on February 26 landed in an empty area and hurt no-one. India insists it killed a large number of Jaish-e-Mohamed group militants and destroyed their camp in retaliation for a suicide attack two weeks earlier in Indian-administered Kashmir, which killed 40 paramilitary police troopers. That attack was the deadliest against Indian forces in Kashmir in decades and raised fears of a new war between India and Pakistan, which are both nuclear powers.

What tricks journalists into believing fake news?

Most journalists said that social media, particularly Twitter trends, have become topics that are discussed during editorial meetings as the trends usually reflect the biggest stories of the day or week. While the trends themselves may not always amount to coverage, discourse on social media has increasingly gained political attention and hence, mainstream media focus.

The respondents identified common characteristics of fake news that increase the likelihood of journalists believing in them:

✦ Use of carefully made and authentic-seeming fake account with a substantial follower count is very strategic and manipulative. These accounts often change identities and leverage follower count to trick readers into believing their authenticity.

✦ Creating a credible-looking online news source platform (or mimicking an established one), which can be made to go 'viral' through coordinated campaigns to game social media algorithms.

✦ Using pictures and video content is particularly convincing since it gives the illusion of 'documentary evidence', and it is difficult for an average person to recognise whether the photo or video is (a) taken out of context, (b) misleadingly edited, (c) staged, and/or (d) digitally altered.

✦ Creating fake headlines as most readers do not click on the link but share the story based on the headline alone. (Tip: Never trust screenshots of news stories)

Consedering using phrasing such as..	Rather than:
Distorted videos of Nancy Pelosi spread on social media in attempt to undermine the speaker	Trump shares videos of Pelosi speech, hints at mental health issues
Video of Nancy Palosi speech is slowed down. opponents reshare an excuse to attack credibility	“Pelosi slammers through news conference”, Trump tweets
The manipulated Pelosi video: Why we embrace fiction over fact	Fake: video of ‘drunk’ Pelosi slurring her words

Responsible headlines. Source: First Draft^[13]

Which topics are more susceptible to fake news in Pakistan?

When asked which topics are more susceptible to fake news in Pakistan, one respondent summed it up well:

“Mostly politically contentious topics. If it's nationalists, topics on PTM, critical journalists and activists would work well. If it's the Islamists, topics related to blasphemy could work well. If it's men in general, fake news related to #Metoo would have a high tendency to be believed and shared. Basically, anything that could confirm the biases of a large number of people.”

deaths political statements
security alert
 Balochistan
 Israel PTM Pak-India polio
 government announcements

Fighting fake news

Consistent efforts to debunk fake news have yet to be seen. However, some news organisations have gradually started to debunk fake news with the help of fact-checking initiatives such as AFP – which has only one partner in Pakistan¹⁹. AFP is part of Facebook’s third-party fact-checking programme²⁰. Among other things, it investigates stories flagged on Facebook. Content rated “false” by fact-checkers is downgraded in news feeds so fewer people will see it and alternate reading material is provided to users who do use such material. AFP’s fact-checking operations receive direct support through Facebook’s programme.

Pakistan’s English daily Dawn occasionally debunks and calls out fake news on its website. Various doctored screenshots to resemble Dawn’s web layout have been circulated recently to spread fake news and mislead the public. To educate its readers on how fake news is manufactured, the publication has run detailed explainers on its website.²¹



Similarly, Pakistan’s largest television group Geo has also started to debunk fake news going viral in online spaces.²²

¹⁹ (Check, 2019)

²⁰ (Check, 2019)

²¹ (Dawn.com, August 21, 2018)

²² (Geo.tv, October 1, 2018)

Fake news: Imran Khan will commute to PM House in a Suzuki Mehran



Recently, a video that went viral on social media, showed 'PM Imran Khan' commuting from his Bani Gala residence to the Prime Minister Office in a Suzuki Mehran. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, in a statement, said the video was fake. Photo: File

Courtesy: Geo.tv

Another fact-check initiative launched by Pakistan-based non-profit Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) counters rising instances of online disinformation and misinformation. As part of a new initiative titled “Sachee Khabar” (that roughly translates into Urdu as “factual news”), MMfD has set up a Twitter handle to flag online false news.²³

The above-mentioned efforts are a welcome step in the right direction but they are certainly not enough.

Interviews conducted with journalists for this study revealed that even those media practitioners who have some command on fake news had not attended fact-check trainings. They had only a basic knowledge of fact-check tools.

²³(Raza, March 4, 2019)

“Reporters now practice WhatsApp journalism. They get press releases and statements on WhatsApp. These forwarded reports are then edited and run on air. Nobody cross-checks. Nobody invests time. Everyone runs the same story.”

Interviewees highlighted the lack of media literacy and training in news organisations and also the lack of investment in fact-checking tools that are easily available online.

Besides, Google reverse image and AFP fact-check, what other tools are journalists aware of? Even if they are, they are not going to pay for it. Organisations should. But they don't realise its importance yet.

In this scenario, how are journalists dealing with fake news without access to advanced tools? They have resorted to the basics of traditional journalism.

“Fundamentally, the most important thing is to have a nose for scepticism and make the cardinal rule to question everything. When there is news that is too good to be true, be the devil's advocate and work as if the news is false. Work it with process of elimination before finding if the news is true or not.”

The 5 Pillars of Visual Verification

- PROVENANCE**
Are you looking at the original piece of content?
- SOURCE**
Who captured the original piece of content?
- DATE**
When was the piece of content captured?
- LOCATION**
Where was the piece of content captured?
- MOTIVATION**
Why was the piece of content captured?

FIRSTDRAFT **VERIFICATION**

Five questions you should always ask yourself when verifying online information.

Source: First Draft

When asked to elaborate on the fact-check process, respondents of the survey shared that they referred to the following sources in the same order of preference:

1. Cross-check with reporter
2. Find the official source (government websites/reports/quotes)
3. Scour Twitter to find more evidence – if journalists/official accounts had posted
4. Speak to a fellow journalist/expert for confirmation
5. Check other news publications
6. Use digital tools such as reverse image before using images taken off the internet

It is important to note, however, that the process is not widely followed in Pakistani newsrooms which are often short-staffed, on tight deadlines, and have limited resources and access to digital literacy.

How to spot an impersonation account on Twitter?

A majority of the journalists interviewed highlighted that a common technique used to spread fake news is in the form of impersonation accounts on Twitter (see discussion above).

To help identify such accounts, here is a short guideline.

- **Type in the name yourself.** (Lookalike account names use a different spelling or font)
- **Explore the account's tweet history.** (A spoofed account may have changed the name and biography details of an existing account.)
- **Check the follower and following count.** (A fake account will have a disproportionate follower and following count and the users may not be of diverse backgrounds)
- **Analyse the content.** (Has the account's activity peaked recently? Is the content agenda-driven?)

Limitations

It should be noted that the survey was non-scientific and only aims to provide a snapshot of fact-checking habits of journalists. Due to the brief reporting period, a bigger, more representative sample size could not be achieved.

The survey was also circulated in online spaces and, thus, does not represent journalists who are not active on social media. Additionally, the aim was to ascertain the overall familiarity of journalists with fact-check methods and the responses were, therefore, not categorised into mediums – print, electronic and online.

As this is the first research on the subject in Pakistan, the questions were structured to be more informative than investigative. The respondents were given options to select from. (See Annexure)

Fake news at a glance

✦ Hate campaign against a school system

A hashtag #BoycottBeaconHouse trended at the top of Twitter Pakistan trends in October 2018, labelling the school as an ‘enemy of the state’. It was retweeted more than 37,000 times.

At the core of the campaign was a map in a textbook used by The Educators, a subsidiary of the Beaconhouse School System. The map did not show Indian-controlled Kashmir as a part of Pakistan. In reality, the issue had been rectified in 2015 and was corrected in all textbooks.

With the help of misrepresented half-truths, the campaign was mostly based on fake news. For instance, incorrect news was shared that Beaconhouse was exclusively using a problematic Oxford University Press Pak Studies textbook, when in fact many schools were using the book.

The campaign was carefully crafted as the false information spread was based on national anxieties and preconceived notions such as “the invasion of western and liberal values”.

The web link that received the most traction on Twitter during this campaign belonged to some students who were allegedly studying at the Beaconhouse School System. Content of the web link pertained to the topic of menstruation. In addition, some images were circulated that showed some students dancing inside a school. Photoshopped memes were also circulated to back the ‘anti-Islamic’ allegations against the school.

The campaign lasted for a few days until the school management reported the matter to the federal authorities.²⁴

²⁴(Dawn.com, October 5, 2018)

Pakistan trends · Change

#BoycottBeaconHouse
Qaiser Thethia and Aftab Afridi are Tweeting about this

Hafeez
3,432 Tweets

#COAS

Australia
97.8K Tweets

#PP217
SHOAIB MEHMOOD 🇵🇰 is Tweeting about this

#IKRebuildingPakistan
KayKay 🇵🇰 is Tweeting about this

Balochistan
4,494 Tweets

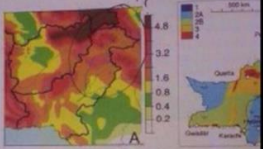
#SupremeCourt
Syed Shahmeer Ali and Javeria Siddique are Tweeting about this

Pakistanis
3,502 Tweets

Adnan Shabbir Malik
@iamAdnanShabbir

Beaconhouse is doing deep subversion in our country. They are destroying our future generations. We should stop and [#BoycottBeaconHouse](#) immediately. Government should stop this immediately.

Muzaffarabad, and also affected Pakistan's province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The earthquake also affected the surrounding region with tremors, which were felt in Afghanistan and Xinjiang province. The severity of the damage caused by the earthquake is shown in the map below.



Class 7 : Page 34

Most of the devastation of the earthquake of 2005, hit north Pakistan, Kashmir, three main districts were badly affected and Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir, was the most devastated in terms of casualties at schools, and rescue services including police and armed forces were virtually no infrastructure and communication was extremely affected. All casualties occurred in Muzaffarabad. Bugh was the second most affected area with 15% of the total casualties.

An estimated 100,000 people or more died, and approximately over 3.5 million became homeless. According to government figures, in the earthquake, and most of them in collapsed school buildings, families were affected, and over 250,000 farm animals died, due to harsh Kashmir winter.

Earthquakes and volcanic activity

Earthquakes often occur in regions where there are active volcanoes. They can be caused by the movement of magma in volcanoes. So

ایک سوچے سمجھے منصوبے کے تحت پاکستان کی نئی نسل کو ایجوکیٹر ز سکولوں میں یہ تعلیم دی جا رہی ہے کہ کشمیر بھارت کا ہے۔ تاکہ یہ نسل جب جوان ہو تو کشمیر کی بات ہی نہ کرے۔ ایجوکیٹر ز سکول سسٹم بیکن ہاؤس کے ماتحت ہے۔ اور بیکن ہاؤس میں نیو سلیک روٹ نام کی بھارتی تنظیم فنڈنگ کرتی ہے

Source: Twitter

✦ President Arif Alvi caught sleeping!



A picture of President Arif Alvi sleeping on a seat at the Lahore airport had gone viral on social media in April 2019. It also became substance for widely shared memes. The photo was posted by the seemingly fake account (screenshot above) on Twitter on March 29, 2019, and has been retweeted around 1,600 times since.

The account tweeted the picture with a caption that implied that the president was playing a stunt by pretending to behave like a common man.

On March 31, 2019, an Urdu newspaper, Nawaiwaqt, published President Alvi's photo alongside a similar claim on its Facebook page that has more than 1.6 million followers. The post, credited to a news agency, Independent News Pakistan (INP), was headlined: "Photo of president sleeping at the airport lounge goes viral on social media."

Originally, the picture was taken on January 2, 2018 when a Karachi-bound flight from Lahore, in which Alvi was supposed to travel, got cancelled due to fog. He was waiting for Pakistan International Airline (PIA) to inform him about his rescheduled flight. The fake news was debunked by AFP Fact-Check²⁵

✦ Fake 'US Senator' praises PM Imran Khan

Following Prime Minister Imran Khan's return to Pakistan from his official US trip, a tweet posted by an anonymous account went viral on social media in September 2019.²⁶

"If he is selected then it might be the best selection ever, and if he is elected then Pakistanis are the most wise nation in the world [sic]," the tweet quoted "US Senator Tony Booker" as saying about PM Khan.

American senator

Tony Booker said:

"If he is selected then it might be the best selection ever, and if he is elected then Pakistanis are the most wise nation in the world".

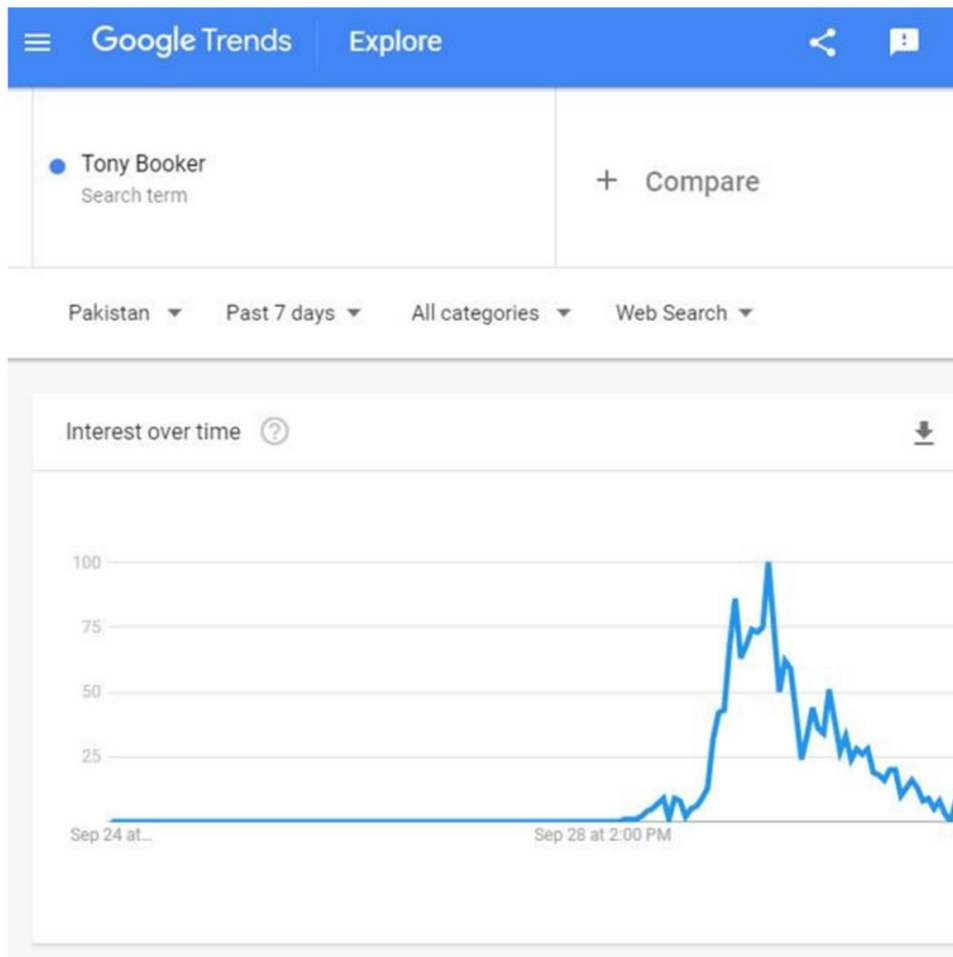


²⁵(Check, 2019)

²⁶(Current, n.d.)

The tweet generated nearly 2,500 likes and 1,000 retweets before it was deleted. However, by the time it was deleted, dozens of supporters of the ruling PTI had flooded the micro-blogging website with praise for their party chief

In a matter of few hours, Tony Booker was trending on Twitter in Pakistan. According to Google trends, searches for the term ‘Tony Booker’ witnessed a spike on the same day.



Source: Google Trends

The only problem is that Tony Booker does not exist. Cory Anthony Booker is an American politician serving as the junior US senator from New Jersey since 2013. He is a member of the Democratic Party.

Spreading false information related to a trending topic (the PM's US visit in this case) is a common method that propagandists use. That is why journalists reporting during a peak news day should a. be wary of information they find online and b. fact check false claims as it spreads, particularly in real time.

The Tony Booker false claim was responsibly reported by several media outlets, including BBC Urdu ²⁷.

✦ Fake account of famous actor created to praise the PTI chief ahead of elections

In 2018, a fake Twitter account was created in the name of Pakistani actor Shabnam, from which a tweet was posted in appreciation of Imran Khan for expelling convicted rapist Farooq Bandial from his party.²⁸

The incident happened just ahead of the 2018 elections – a picture of now PM Imran Khan and Bandial had gone viral, sparking outrage over the fact that the latter was a convicted rapist, after which PTI expelled him from the party over 'negative feedback'.²⁹ It was then that an account in the name of Shabnam with the handle @JharnaBasak tweeted praise for Mr Khan. The tweet went viral within hours and major news organisations reported on it.

Samaa Digital debunked the fake news.³⁰ The fake account has since been deleted. Despite that, some news organisations still have the fake news story up on their websites.³¹

²⁷(Karim, October 1, 2019)

²⁸(Tahir, 2018)

²⁹(Tahir, 2018)

³⁰(Tahir, 2018)

³¹(News, June 1, 2018)

✦ Discrediting journalism

Online propaganda has put journalists under pressure. They must watch their words constantly as they are likely to be targeted on social media if their reports or analyses fall on the other side of the state narrative. We are living in an age in which propagandists resort to frequent exploitation of the term ‘fake news’ to target credible gatekeepers of information.

Between October 20, 2018 and November 16, 2018, at least six hashtags trended on Twitter which directly targeted journalists and journalism in Pakistan.³² Those participating in these hashtags have portrayed journalists as “biased” and “propagandists”.

One of these hashtags, #BikaoMedia, accused journalists of spreading disinformation and urged the government to take “strict action” against them.

“Everyone knows that Media is the main tool of enemies in 5th Generation Hybrid war — the main tool with [which] they will make up your mind ... will make you watch what they want ... don’t be at this destructive route #BikaoMedia,” read a tweet posted under the hashtag.

Another hashtag, #SayNoToFakeJournalism, generated almost 14,000 tweets (of which about 200 were identified as spam/bots).

In July 2019, a trend calling for the arrest of journalists briefly became the top Twitter trend in Pakistan, deepening concern over a shrinking space for dissent in the country. By the evening of the day it started, the hashtag (#ArrestAntiPakjournalists) had dropped to second place after having been used or forwarded more than 28,000 times³³. Many users accompanied their use of the hashtag with a composite photograph of prominent journalists and TV anchors, some of whom regularly criticised the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the powerful military establishment.

³²(Jahangir, January 2, 2019)

³³(Dawn, July 4, 2019)



Freedom of press is a part of freedom of expression;
given it does not hurt state or nation
[#JournalismNotAgenda](#)



“These are the people who are responsible for chaos, anarchy, manipulation. They are the real enemy of the states,” said one tweet.

“Hang them all #ArrestAntiPakJournalists,” said another.

“Freedom of Expression is beauty of Democracy. Expressing Enemy’s Stance is Not Freedom of speech but treason against its people,” read a tweet posted under another similar hashtag #JournalismNotAgenda.

In addition to online abusive trolls, government authorities frequently use this catchphrase ‘fake news’ to silence their critics. The official account of the PTI fired off over two dozen tweets in English and Urdu, lambasting the press for criticism and saying that it can be deemed “anti-state”.³⁴

³⁴ (Jahangir, July 18, 2019)

✦ Israeli pilot arrested in Pakistan?!

An image shared thousands of times on Facebook purported to show a Jerusalem-based newspaper reporting the arrest of an Israeli pilot in Pakistan. The claim was false – the photo in the post was of an Israeli Air Force pilot who died in a helicopter crash six years ago.

Multiple Facebook posts, for example one published on March 10, 2019, and shared more than 2,000 times since, contain what appears to be a screenshot of an article by Israeli newspaper The Jerusalem Post. In the purported screenshot, there is a photo of a man in military uniform standing with his family next to an airplane. The man's head is circled in red as is the article's headline, which says, "Family Bids Farewell to Pilot Who Arrested by Pakistan Army After Crash The Fighter Jet". The same image was shared hundreds of times elsewhere on Facebook, likely due to the fact that Israel remains a contentious topic that generates public interest in Pakistan.

A logo reading "Pakistan News" overlaid the screenshot's top-left corner while the caption under the photo reads: "Lieut-Col (res) Noam Ron with his family 370 (photo credit: Courtesy Ron family)."

The image also contained text in Urdu on a dark red background above the screenshot, saying: "An Israeli newspaper confirmed the arrest of its pilot in Pakistan. Startling truth has come forward. Speculations died down. Pilot is in Pakistan's custody."

Compared in the image below is the image in the misleading Facebook post (L) and a screenshot of the original article as it appears on a mobile screen (R):



According to The Jerusalem Post, Lieutenant Colonel Noam Ron died along with his colleague Major Erez Flekser when the helicopter they were flying crashed on March 12, 2013. The incident was also reported on at the time by the Times of Israel. The fake news debunked by AFP Fact-Check ³⁵.

✦ Maryam Nawaz pregnant

Rumours that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's daughter, Maryam Nawaz, was pregnant made the rounds on social media based on a doctored screenshot presented to be an article on Dawn.com.



³⁵ (AFP, March 22, 2019)

To substantiate the fake story, the screenshot said that the news organisation had obtained medical reports of Maryam that proved she was pregnant. The doctored image, besides the news being completely false, also had a host of differences from what an authentic Dawn.com news article looks like. For instance, a typical Dawn.com news article has a headline with only the opening letter capitalised, except for proper nouns which also begin with a capital letter. The headline in the fake screenshot is written in sentence case, with the first letter of every word capitalised.

Also, entire words are never written in block letters with the exception of acronyms such as NAB or PCB. Dawn later published an article debunking the news and pointing out the mistakes made in the screenshot that proved it was fake.³⁶

Penalising ‘fake news’ with bad laws

Apart from definitional ambiguities, there is also a fair amount of legal confusion around fake news in Pakistan. The government, on its official social media accounts, has often threatened legal action against those spreading fake news. It has also launched a Twitter account to “tackle and expose” fake news that is spread through social media.³⁷

A tweet from this account, known as ‘Fake News Buster’, says:

It is the prime responsibility of all social media users to share information/posts that are factually correct. Reporting fake and baseless news on sensitive issues may lead to unrest among the public and is a punishable crime under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016.

³⁶ (Dawn.com, October 13, 2018)

³⁷ (Dawn.com, October 1, 2018)

This message lays bare the problem of dealing with fake news and partisan propaganda masquerading as journalism under existing laws: Unless you connect the fake and propagandist social media content to “sensitive issues” and “unrest among public”, the generators and disseminators of such contents cannot be prosecuted and punished.

In Pakistan, there is no legal and judicial tool that directly deals with fake news and propaganda.

A legal provision available to try someone for producing and propagating fake news is the defamation law. If fake news or propaganda harms someone’s reputation, they can always approach the courts of law to seek damages. In Pakistan there exist both criminal and civil defamation laws, section 499 of the Pakistan Penal Code, section 20 of the Prevention of Electronic Act 2016 and the Defamation Ordinance. The criminal defamation laws are restrictive of free speech and have been severely criticised by women and human rights advocates.

This makes it difficult for authorities to come up with a clear procedure to take action against those involved in producing and promoting fake news

Recently, the government announced plans to regulate social media, saying that “no one will be able to defame anyone under the new law”.³⁸ However, the proposal to regulate has yet to be implemented.

Governments and companies across the world are increasingly worried about the spread of false information online and its impact on everything from share prices to elections and social unrest. Human rights activists fear laws to curb so-called “fake news” could be abused to silence opposition.

Singapore’s new law, for instance, would require social media sites like Facebook to carry warnings on posts the government deems false and remove comments against the “public interest”. Violations could attract fines of up to \$1 million (\$737,500) and 10 years in prison.

³⁸ (Ali, October 19, 2018)

Germany passed a law last year for social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, to quickly remove hate speech. Called NetzDG for short, the law is the most ambitious effort by a western democracy to control what appears on social media. It will enforce online Germany's tough curbs on hate speech, including pro-Nazi ideology, by giving sites a 24-hour deadline to remove banned content or face fines of up to 50 million euros. Since it was adopted, however, German officials have said too much online content was being blocked, and are weighing in changes.

Indonesia set up a 24-hour "war room" ahead of its 2019 elections to fight hoaxes and fake news.

Florida-based research non-profit Poynter has created an extensive guide on existing attempts to legislate against what can broadly be referred to as online misinformation.³⁹ The muddying of the definition of fake news, the relative reach of which is still being studied, hinders governments' ability to accomplish anything effective, says Poynter.⁴⁰ Given the lack of definitional clarity when it comes to fake news, fears persist that these fake news laws can be weaponised by governments and limit free speech.

³⁹ (Poynter, 2019)

⁴⁰ (Funke, 2019)

What are social media platforms doing to tackle fake news?

Facebook's efforts have involved adding fact-checkers, limiting the spread of problematic stories, and trying to highlight when stories have been flagged as fake. Facebook said it spent 18 months preparing for India's 2019 election: it blocked and removed fake accounts, looked for attempts at meddling and partnered with outside fact-checkers (albeit relatively few) to combat fake news.

Facebook, however, has been widely criticised for aiding rightwing groups in amplifying bias on its platform. In October 2019, Mark Zuckerberg was grilled about his platform's controversial fact-checking policies after Facebook announced it would effectively allow politicians to lie in the platform's advertisements.⁴¹

In Pakistan, media literacy efforts are picking up pace

Prior to the national elections in July 2018 in Pakistan, Facebook ramped up its efforts to prevent the spread of misinformation or fake news.⁴² The social media giant partnered with AFP to launch a third-party fact-checking in Pakistan to review potentially false content and provide the necessary context where it is lacking. The social media giant also plans to launch digital literacy programs in Pakistan in 2020.⁴³

Social media platforms have also blocked several accounts/pages involved in propaganda and spreading false information about anti-polio vaccination in Pakistan on the request of the government's polio programme.⁴⁴ The government has blocked over 500 anti-vaccination posts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Dailymotion.⁴⁵

⁴¹(Independent, 2019)

⁴²(Tariq, July 21, 2018)

⁴³(Ali, November 8, 2019)

⁴⁴(Junaidi, August 28, 2019)

⁴⁵(Jahangir, July 19, 2019)

Meanwhile, WhatsApp has limited the number of times a user can forward a message to five. It also labels forwarded messages now. In India, the company has launched a nationwide advertising campaign in 10 languages, which it says has reached hundreds of millions of people.⁴⁶ It also says that it bans two million accounts globally every month that are sending automated spam messages, reported BBC.⁴⁷

⁴⁶(BBC, 2019)

⁴⁷(BBC, 2019)



Together We Can Fight False Information

Here are some easy tips to help you decide if something sent to you on WhatsApp is true.

1 Understand when a message is forwarded

Starting this week, we're rolling out a new feature that lets you see which messages have been forwarded. Double check the facts when you're not sure who wrote the original message.

2 Question information that upsets you

If you read something that makes you angry or afraid, ask whether it was shared to make you feel that way. And if the answer is yes, think twice before sharing it again.

3 Check information that seems unbelievable

Stories that seem hard to believe are often untrue – so check elsewhere to see if they are really true.

4 Look out for messages that look different

Many messages containing hoaxes or fake news have spelling mistakes. Look for these signs so you can check if the information is accurate.

5 Check photos in messages carefully

It is easier to believe photos and videos, but even these can be edited to mislead you. Sometimes the photo is real, but the story around it is not. So look online to see where the photo came from.

6 And check links too

It may look like the link to a well-known website but if there are spelling mistakes or unusual characters, it's usually a sign something's wrong.

7 Use other sources

Look at other news websites or apps to see if the story is being reported elsewhere. When a story is reported in multiple places, it's more likely to be true.

8 Be thoughtful about what you share

If you are not sure of the source or concerned that the information may be untrue, think twice before sharing.

9 You can control what you see

On WhatsApp you can block any number or leave any group you want. Use these features to keep control of your WhatsApp experience.

10 Fake news often goes viral

Do not pay attention to the number of times you receive the message. Just because a message is shared many times, does not make it true.



To fight fake news, we all need to work together – technology companies, the government and community groups. If you see something that's not true, make people aware and help stop the spread.

An ad published in major newspapers as part of WhatsApp's awareness campaign

Users can also control who can add them to groups under new privacy settings. Earlier, any WhatsApp user could be added to a group by any other but now users can choose to only be added automatically to groups by contacts, or by no-one at all.⁴⁸

Twitter, on the other hand, has permanently suspended thousands of accounts in its ongoing effort to fight the spread of disinformation and political discord on its platform.⁴⁹ However, it has yet to devise a formal policy on fake news and disinformation.

The government of Pakistan has repeatedly expressed its frustration that social media giants Facebook and Twitter are not cooperating with authorities regarding the circulation of fake news on social media.⁵⁰ The Federal Investigation Agency has said that Twitter is not complying with government requests while Facebook has also not been cooperating since August 5, 2019. During the Senate sub-committee meeting to discuss fake news, a senator said that 80 percent of the news on social media in Pakistan is fake.

Twitter's non-compliance to work with the Pakistani government is reflected in its latest transparency report.⁵¹ The number of accounts reported by Pakistani authorities to Twitter dropped to around 2,300 between July and December 2018 from 3,000 in the first six months of the year. Twitter has to date declined all the requests for account information and removal from Pakistan.

Google has also taken various steps to combat fake news, from partnering with fact-checking networks to launching the \$300-million Google News Initiative. Its YouTube division has also adjusted its "up next" algorithms to limit recommendations for suspected fake or inflammatory videos, a move it had resisted for years.⁵²

Despite all these efforts, the problem is far from over.

⁴⁸(BBC, 2019)

⁴⁹(Talbot, September 20, 2019)

⁵⁰(ProPakistani, September 2019)

⁵¹(Twitter, 2019)

⁵²(England, February 19, 2019)

Conclusion

The fake news problem is not just a technological problem. It now has both social and political consequences.

With governments increasingly using the term to limit critical speech, and hyper-nationalists to their own benefit, fake news is no longer just false information. The organised ecosystem of fake news production and dissemination is compromising confidence in credible journalism.

This report was intended to serve as a starting point in the research conversation. The DRF hopes this report will spur researchers from multiple disciplines to investigate the fake news problem in Pakistan.

Recommendations

For journalists and media practitioners:

- Engage in accountable, ethical journalism practices and evidence-based reporting
- Prioritise fact-checking and the actively calling out of disinformation and misinformation
- Practice verification of data, sources and digital images
- Utilise online training resources on fact-checking and introduce them in respective newsrooms
- Conduct routine trainings of practitioners and exchange resources
- Question everything you find/receive online
- Source the source
- Invest in fact-checker desks at every organisation
- Allow space to debunks and busting the myth, and fact-check stories
- Educate your audience
- Be sceptical and willing to question

For non-profits, NGOs, think tanks working on media:

- Organise fact-checking trainings, media literacy workshops
- Engage with the communities that journalists engage with (press clubs, unions) and introduce media literacy concepts
- Create opportunities for dialogue on information disorder
- Research on the dynamics of fake news in Pakistan to devise workable solutions/policy
- Engage government officials on information disorder, introduce vocabulary to discourage bad laws/regulation

For media organisations and press clubs

- Invest in fact-checking training, verification tools
- Conduct hands-on digital security exercises
- Encourage collective dialogue on identifying and fighting information disorder
- Initiate public literacy campaigns, projects
- Encourage dialogue on ethical journalism

For government authorities

- Develop consensus on authority dealing with social media matters (as of now, interior ministry, information ministry, National IT Board and IT ministry are all involved)
- Involve stakeholders and media practitioners in legislation plans to regulate media to tackle fake news
- Initiate social media literacy training in government departments

Helpful Resources

- Unesco’s handbook on Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation⁵³
- First Draft’s free online verification courses⁵⁴
- VerificationHandbook.com⁵⁵
- ResearchClinic.net⁵⁶
- Meedan’s Check for verifying breaking news online⁵⁷

⁵³(UNESCO, 2018)

⁵⁴(Draft, n.d.)

⁵⁵(Handbook, n.d.)

⁵⁶(Myers, n.d.)

⁵⁷(Meedan, n.d.)

- GIJN's extensive compilation of fact-checking resources⁵⁸
- A 5-point Guide To Bellingcat's Digital Forensics Tool List⁵⁹

⁵⁸(GIJN, n.d.)

⁵⁹(IFCN-Poynter, n.d.)

Annexure (survey questions)

Detecting Fake News

This survey is part of a **Digital Rights Foundation** research on journalism in the digital age with particular focus on Fake News. Please only respond if you are a practicing journalist in Pakistan.

1. How often do you fact-check your own content?

Always
Sometimes
Never

2. How often do you fact-check content from reporters/other's work?

Always
Sometimes
Never

3. When citing a source, do you also fact-check the source?

Always
Sometimes
Never

4. Who fact-checks in your organisation?

Reporter
Editor
Sub-editor
Intern
Nobody

5. When fact-checking content, what type of information do you usually verify?

Names and titles
Dates
Names and title
Quotes
Places
Definition of terms
Other

6. Have you always fact-checked content or did you start after the term fake news became popular?

Always
Recently
I don't fact-check
Occasionally

7. Who holds the responsibility to prevent the spread of fake news? (Check all that apply)

Person sharing the news
News media
Social media companies
Government
Search engines (Google etc)

8. What are your go to sources to verify information?

Search engines (Google etc)
News media
Social media
Reporter
Government websites
Quote from relevant authority
Other

9. Which, in your opinion, is the least trustworthy source of information?

WhatsApp
Twitter
Facebook
YouTube
Electronic Media
News websites
Print Media

10. Have you ever attended a fact-checking training/workshop?

Yes
No
I'd like to

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