FACT CHECKING RESOURCES TO FIGHT COVID-19 MISINFORMATION IN SOUTH ASIA

This paper is one of a series of research elements produced by the European Union funded AHA! Awareness with Human Action project that seeks to contribute to the response efforts of the COVID-19 pandemic by preventing conflict and building social cohesion in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and broader South Asia. The AHA! project is implemented by a consortium of project partners, including the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers/Finn Church Aid, World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Center for Peace and Justice – Brac University, the Center for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Youth Development Foundation, and Sarvodaya.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how far online spaces are both extraordinary sources of information but are also flooded with misinformation. In the digital information age, social media has become a vital source of news and a prevalent means of communication. With a constant stream of eye-catching content from various sources, audiences struggle to determine which sources are credible and which claims are true. Many social media users believe and share the information they receive without questioning its veracity. Certain demographics are at a particular disadvantage due to socioeconomic factors.

South Asia, home to more than 500 million Facebook users,[1] has hundreds of millions of people using messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Messenger. The fast changing and bewildering environment is complicated by audiences' lack of digital and media literacy—the ability to locate and critically engage with online information. Disparities in education, internet access, and digital device ownership leave large populations in South Asia without the necessary knowledge or skills to obtain factual digital content.

This brief reviews fact-checking resources for online audiences in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These resources consist primarily of articles that assess popular claims—in this case, about COVID-19—and debunk or correct those that are false or misleading. Good fact-checking resources are published online by reputable news outlets and organizations dedicated to independent verification, usually certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). They follow a clear, rigorous methodology for fact-checking, with transparency about their sources. Without organizations willing to do this work, audiences—including ordinary social media users and journalists and policymakers—would need to expend enormous amounts of time and energy to personally investigate popular claims; few can afford to do so. The brief provides practical suggestions for general readers and community influencers to disseminate factual information effectively within their social networks.

MIS/DISINFORMATION DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

COVID-19–related misinformation comes in many different forms. Fake news stories, doctored images and videos, misleading statistics, fabricated or distorted quotes, and spurious cures have circulated widely during the pandemic. Misinformation can be dangerous, even fatal, putting populations at increased risk of infection and death by creating skepticism toward vaccines or giving credence to unscientific treatments. It also threatens social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts by contributing to fear and mistrust. In South Asia, misinformation surrounding COVID-19 has scapegoated ethnic and religious minorities. Muslims in Sri Lanka, Shia Hazaras in Pakistan, and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are among marginalized groups that have been falsely blamed for spreading the coronavirus. Online spaces have seen a significant rise in misogynistic language and narratives since the start of the pandemic.[2]

Online misinformation presents challenges for fact-checkers, peacebuilders, and influencers. The speed at which content goes viral on social media platforms, reaching millions of people around the globe within hours, makes it extremely difficult to curb false claims before they have circulated and caused damage. Factual correctives get drowned out in the echo chamber created by online algorithms, which target content to users based on their profile and previous activity, buried by the sheer volume of user-generated content on platforms.

The "digital divide" between those who have internet skills and access and those who do not poses another problem. In South Asia, access to a reliable internet connection varies widely, as do poverty and education levels. Owning a mobile device with data connectivity does not guarantee being able to retrieve relevant, factual information. Mobile users must also know how to apply search terms, sift through large volumes of online content to find reliable and up-to-date sources, and be sufficiently literate to read and understand what they find.

Women and youth play important roles in this discussion, both as potential victims of misinformation and as prospective community influencers. In more conservative South Asian communities, where gender roles are highly defined, men can often move more freely outside the home and more easily engage in public conversation and debate. In some cases, they also make decisions about media consumption and access to

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digital devices for the rest of the household. Women and girls often cannot participate in public spaces in the same way that men and boys can, limiting their access to information and even medical care.

South Asia has a very young population.[3] Youth are the most engaged social media users, shaping the tone and subject of online conversations and directing the flow of information.[4] They have a significant part to play in either amplifying or countering coronavirus-related misinformation, and thereby in heightening or reducing conflict. Youth are well positioned to be peacebuilders in their social networks as they produce, share, and interact with online content.

As technology advances, so too does the subtlety of misinformation and the ability to mislead. "Deepfakes"—fabricated but highly realistic photographs, videos, or audio tracks—are used to defame and discredit public figures.[5] Even discerning social media users sometimes fall for clever digital and messaging tactics. Audiences need to be aware of reliable and accessible fact-checking resources, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis in South Asia, where misinformation exacts heavy costs in terms of both public health and social cohesion.

RESOURCES

The resources listed here are certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies or represent official information channels, such as government health ministries and the World Health Organization (WHO). They are sorted into global/regional resources and country-specific resources, with some overlap between the categories. Websites are ranked by accessibility and thoroughness.

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL RESOURCES

1. **Fact Crescendo** (www.factcrescendo.com): Fact Crescendo is an independent media company based in India, certified by IFCN and a partner of Facebook's South Asia division. The website features fact-checking articles and updates on topics across South Asia, with content available in several regional languages, including Bangla, Tamil, and Sinhala, as well as

English. Content is updated frequently, fact-checked claims are clearly labeled as true or false, and contributing authors provide transparency about sources and methods. Content can also be searched by country, and the homepage has clear "Coronavirus" and "Vaccine" sections. Note: Fact Crescendo does not include Pakistan-specific stories or Urdu language content.

2. **Google Fact Check Tools** (https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/explorer): Google's fact-checking tool harnesses the world's most powerful search engine to aggregate fact-checking information from around the world. Searching by keywords related to COVID-19 and health retrieves news and articles from trusted global partner agencies in many languages. Search results are clearly labeled with a true/false/misleading verdict, and tags indicate the topic and the fact-checker.

3. **World Health Organization, "Advice for the Public"** (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public): The WHO has produced a series of graphics, documents, and Q&A items about the coronavirus for global public benefit. Resources use clear, simple illustrations and language. The "Mythbusters" section indexes popular myths about COVID-19 treatment and prevention by keyword—for instance, "Bleach," "Garlic," "Hot and humid climates"—and provides fact-based correctives. Unlike dedicated fact-checking sites, these web pages are not updated regularly. The WHO advice pages are better for refuting general misinformation than the steady stream of fake news. "Advice for the Public" is not available in South Asian languages.

4. **Poynter Institute, "The Corona Virus Facts/Datos Corona Virus Alliance Database"** (https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/): The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the leader of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), runs the website PolitiFact. IFCN membership is the gold standard for fact-checkers around the world. Poynter's database on coronavirus-related misinformation draws articles from verified member organizations in over 40 languages. While this represents a large repository of valuable information, the search function and filters can be difficult to navigate.

Poynter also launched a WhatsApp chatbot to counter COVID-19 misinformation, which can be reached at poy.nu/ifcnbot or +1 (727) 291-2606. WhatsApp users can save the number as a contact on their mobile phone and initiate a conversation by messaging "hi." They will then see a menu of options for receiving factual information on specific pandemic-related claims. The chatbot can function in English and Hindi (as well as European languages).

3 https://www.statista.com/statistics/591066/median-age-of-the-population-in-south-asia/

4 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/02/8-charts-on-internet-use-around-the-world-as-countries-grapple-with-covid-19/

5 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deep-fakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them

5. Health Feedback (https://healthfeedback.org/): Health Feedback is run by Science Feedback, a France-based fact-checking organization. The website offers detailed analysis of medical misinformation for readers who want a thorough explanation. Articles tend to be lengthy, written for an educated audience, and sometimes use scientific jargon. The "Article reviews" section is a distinctive feature. Contributors respond to news and journal articles on the coronavirus and health more broadly. All reviewers are scientists or health professionals with doctoral degrees. Content is published in English with new articles added several times per week.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC AND REGION-SPECIFIC RESOURCES

PAKISTAN

Dedicated fact-checking resources for Pakistan are limited. A few (https://www.sochfactcheck.com) resources (https://twitter.com/khabarsachee) with multilingual content offer some useful information, but posts on COVID-19 are infrequent. While the sources below are reliable and accessible, the language barrier presents a major challenge. Urdu content is scarce, and content in Pakistan's regional languages (Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi, etc.) is virtually nonexistent. The communities most susceptible to misinformation are also those least likely to benefit from English-language content.

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BANGLADESH

- ■ ■ **Fact Watch** (https://www.fact-watch.org/web/), affiliated with the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and an official partner of Facebook, publishes frequent fact-checking articles and updates in Bangla.

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SRI LANKA

- ■ ■ **Fact Crescendo Sri Lanka page** (https://srilanka.factcrescendo.com/): Fact Crescendo provides focused fact-checking articles on Sri Lanka in Sinhala and Tamil, with thorough coverage of COVID-19 misinformation.

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INFORMATION IS NOT ENOUGH – MESSAGING ALSO MATTERS

A Bangladeshi social media influencer shared useful principles for effective communication during an AHA! digital town hall meeting (July 14, 2021) that can guide community organizers, religious leaders, and others seeking to build peace and promote social cohesion through online activity.

The medium matters as much as the message. While many factual and fact-checking resources exist online, they are overshadowed by a large volume of content that is more entertaining and more attractively presented. To make content more engaging, storytelling rather than simply sharing raw facts or data is important. Audiences respond better to visual content—videos, graphics, animations—than bare text. This also ensures that people who cannot read will still benefit. Humor can be a "secret weapon," simultaneously entertaining and educating the audience. The presented uses comedy videos to raise serious social issues in a non-threatening way.

The power of storytelling and creative formats to frame information in ways that are compelling, persuasive, and memorable needs to be kept in mind.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Fact-checking resources to counter COVID-19 myths are freely available online; the challenge is getting them into the hands of prospective audiences. Peacebuilders and others seeking to share balanced, accurate information with their networks need to develop effective and coordinated messaging techniques to be heard over noisy, sensational, and attention-grabbing content.

South Asian populations face profound barriers to accessing fact-checking resources. Lack of digital and media literacy restricts internet users' ability to find and evaluate relevant information. Internet access and quality vary widely by area. Rural residents and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged face greater obstacles to obtaining necessary information online. Cultural norms can limit women's and girls' use of the internet. Fact-checking resources available for minority-language speakers are limited.

To remedy this situation:

- Community leaders and influencers can emphasize to their social networks that sharing unverified information online is dangerous, offering simple guidelines for how and where to fact-check claims.

- Community leaders and influencers can counter misinformation by sharing specific links and articles via messaging apps—such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram—since even mobile users who are not proficient in internet searches often use messaging apps.

- Fact-checking websites need to diversify their language content to serve marginalized and under-resourced language communities. The absence of Urdu-language and Pakistani regional language resources, in particular, needs to be addressed.

- Grassroots organizations, especially those working in rural areas, should develop oral and print means of communicating factual COVID-19 information to populations that are excluded from online resources. Community health sessions and picture-based resources, for instance, would help reach audiences facing digital or literacy barriers.

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Awareness with Human Action
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