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Information Crises: the EU's response and the South Asian digital media landscape

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Abstract

These are difficult days for democratic countries. Among other challenges, advances in technology have allowed the seamless dissemination of manipulated or fabricated text, video and audio. The pervasiveness of social media has facilitated false information to be rapidly amplified to receptive audiences, and geopolitical contexts like that of South Asia are no exception. Within this scenario, with the whole world currently trying to battle an 'information crisis', this paper focuses on the efforts displayed by Europe in recent years so as to combat disinformation. It critically reflects upon what South Asia's approach could be to fight this eminent information crisis. It suggests that for an effective, long-term solution, it is imperative to move beyond tactical approaches that target the "supply" side of the problem. This paper argues that in order to succeed, regulatory policies must be accompanied by offline measures of socio-political inclusivity and transparency: healthy debates, education and knowledge dispersion and socio-cultural conscientiousness.

1. Introduction

Rising technological interventions in public communication systems have shaped new social power constellations (Castells, 2009). They fundamentally alter citizens' political behaviour. Those who advocate for the positive side of this phenomenon underline the ways in which public consciousness in politics has grown as we witness great increases in number and depth of political conversations (Mossberger et. al. 2007). Conversely, unchecked expansion of social media has also raised grave concerns. Its entanglement in socio-political activity is perceived to shift the agency of manipulation and consequently influence social discourse so as to harness political gains. According to a study by the Oxford Research Institute in 2018, the number of countries that witness cyber-troop activity — formally organised social media manipulation campaigns by a government or political party — has increased from 28 to 48 in a single year - since 2017 (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018).

In the past, such manipulation conventionally occurred by sharing propagandised news or similar political material hand-to-hand. Today, however, the degree of information generation and consumption has grown exponentially through the new structures and speeds of social media platforms. It has induced a global debate on how influential digital social networks are in democratic processes. Meanwhile we witnessed the emergence of the term 'post-truth': Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 international word of the year (Schulten & Brown, 2017). Signalling the decay of authenticity in journalism – the primary carrier of public information – post-truth further anticipates a worldwide information crisis. Interestingly, this occurs at the very same time as it is claimed that internet-driven media technologies have empowered and democratised a networked citizenry, with technologists asserting that the people are more vigilant and critical about actions and performance of their political representatives today than they ever were before. Such debates, however, lead to questions regarding how such platforms impact the sustenance and functioning of a healthy democracy.

At the core of such issues lies the fact that unequal access, the digital divide, privacy intrusion, algorithmic manipulation and mass surveillance all constitute major roadblocks to a successfully networked society. As the distinction between the mass and the interpersonal slowly fades away (Castells, 2012), democracy now performs beyond the ballot box, on a day-to-day basis and in real time. Citizens have become users and journalism becomes an

avalanche of user-generated 'content' (Bruns, 2008), concurrently politics and marketing become entangled. As a result, shifts in media infrastructure reveal the once invisible work of active audiences in creating market value and expanding engagement around media properties (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Relentless "retweets" and "shares" by a wide array of consumers and interaction between traditional and new media formats help political actors spread their emotional, personal and direct content by "constructing" realities that are more likely to be successful in their persuasiveness by "going viral" (Heinisch et al, 2017).

The changing landscape of the Internet, an inexpensive but powerful tool, has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction both among political groups and among them and their target audiences (Lievrouw, 2011). However, recent history shows that the Internet has in reality acted more as a catalyst for populist communication by amplifying leaders' agendas through standard lenses such as "conflict framing" – refugees vs locals – "strategic framing" – when elections are portrayed as a strategic game pitting one against the other – and "personalisation" – when the leaders' personalities become more important than the nation's political framework and policies (Sorensen, 2017). As digital media plays the role of the most important distributor of news in today's times, governance has focused on maintaining various social media interfaces with private-public interests and images (Julier, 2017).

This paper queries whether such modes of digital communication (or manipulation) either support or undermine democratic behaviour and outcomes (van Dijk, 2011) in the specific context of South Asia. It investigates this issue by reviewing the ways in which South Asia attempts to address the problems of information crisis that digital platforms create and inquires on the scope to potentially get ideas from the ways in which the EU has already addressed some of these problems. Firstly, the key features of Europe's information crises are outlined. This is followed by highlighting the measures that the EU has adopted so as to mitigate them. As a core component, the paper then discusses the country-specific variations regarding the important issues linked to democratic health in South Asian nations. Finally, it concludes with an analysis regarding how possible initiatives in the EU may be instructive to address these challenges.

2. Information Crises in Europe: an outline from origins to the present

Disinformation, meaning false information, which is intended to mislead, has important historical precedents in Europe. The past includes various episodes, from anti-Semitic blood libel stories in the 15th century to church-supported missives of divine retribution following the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake (Schudson and Zelizer, 2017). Today's organised disinformation is a development from propaganda news such as British efforts during World War II, Russia's practice of "dezinformatsiya" during the Cold War, or "Black Propaganda" campaigns popular across Nazi territory publicising news of concentration camps in Germany (Zelizer, 1998). The current "user-friendly" operation through communication interfaces like social media platforms facilitate publishing of content without meeting economic or educational barriers. This phenomenon does not take into account how "informed" users are, either as disseminators or consumers, and veils the mechanisms through which disinformation is perpetuated behind the flattering rhetoric of 'access'.

We witness today dramatically reconfigured systematic operations and structures of democratic public spheres. The most visible consequence seems to be the amplification and rise of right-wing nationalist parties across continental Europe, echoing Brexit rumours beyond borders. This invites political, draconian responses on issues such as migration, refugees, threats of foreign and domestic terror and warfare. Read this way, it is possible that disinformation is inextricable from the Continent's social fabric - at the crossroads of a somewhat shaken Post-war European integration scenario. Nearly five years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent disinformation assaults on a number of countries, the European Commission finally came up with an Action Plan (December 2018) to combat this problem.

In a Flash Eurobarometer (2018) survey, 83% respondents said that fake news represents a danger to democracy. The European Commission, as a result, focused on four key areas in its plan of action: improved capabilities, enhanced reporting, private sector commitments and societal resilience. These aim to mitigate fake news and false information spreading online. The Commission, since then, relies strongly on the anticipated support from all Member States and, more urgently, from social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter, whose operational structures engulf the citizenry in black holes of opaque technology (Keen, 2012),

however, have been resistant to introduce *pre-emptive* measures to tackle intentional distribution of disinformation and improve ad transparency. Their unwillingness to share data with fact-checkers and independent media experts so as to scrutinise fake news campaigns are allegedly based on privacy concerns. The question then arises: have the EU's measures been adequate in tackling the battle against disinformation?

3. Problematizing the crises: what will policy address?

It is important to bear in mind that – to begin with – there are key challenges to defining the problem of an information crisis. There are wide clashes in opinions and positions. The volume and reach of the information generated and consumed through collective structures has been exponential - and a global debate on advantages or crises of such information flows has, consequently, been growing. This section focuses on such challenges in defining the problem, bearing in mind that the advantages and disadvantages of the digital communication phenomenon are closely entangled. Indeed, even problematizing the 'information crisis' as a social issue is rather difficult. Major ambiguities on the consequences of digital communication across publics, policymakers as well as active agents need to be addressed.

3.1 Platforms and conflicts of interest

The voices claiming that internet-driven media technologies empower the citizenry, are heard alongside penetrative concerns on the vices that digital communication engenders. Technologist advocates have underlined the ways in which communities are more vigilant and critical about the actions and performance of both economic and political actors – now more than ever before (van Dijk, 2012). At the heart of this revolution lie social media platforms, which, on the one hand, frequently describe themselves as drivers of economic growth and innovation. However, on the other hand, critics often highlight the risks of privacy and data protection issues, protection of minors, misuse to manipulate electoral campaigns, and the spread of hate speech, fake news and other harmful content.

As content flows across multiple media platforms – and audiences migrate from one platform to another in search of entertainment, news, and information – a convergence of technological, industrial, cultural and societal changes take place in the minds of individuals (Jenkins, 2006) as well as political actors. Hence incidents like the Brexit referendum or the

rise of radical illiberal parties across several countries in Europe are the result of extremist debates competing and winning against rational, level-headed, informed ones. Today, content that triggers a strong emotional response is prioritized far more than sensible, fact-based political conversations.

The inherent online architecture of the Big Five platform corporations, all based in the US, steer the ways in which other sectoral platforms, societal institutions, companies, and billions of users bypass editorial or institutional 'barriers' and interact with each other (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Gillespie, 2015). Platforms do not operate in isolation, but boost and support each other's practices and strategies, constituting an integrated ecosystem (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). Christian Fuchs (2012) argued that this feeds capitalist societies, wherein the Internet is controlled by people who primarily aim to monetise active users and commodify data.

3.2 Users: independent voices or tools for algorithms?

A second entanglement occurs across users. Platform users are seen as both disseminators and consumers in an even-playing field that is democratic because it is digital and easy to access. However, recent studies in Europe have argued that the real picture is far less rosy- and several interrelated problems are involved. Social media platforms are broadly configured to accelerate and multiply 'popular' ideas, to increase time spent on them, which in-turn benefits ad-views; their corporate revenue. How is this achieved? Embedded systems select and prioritise content by translating user activity into 'most relevant' or 'trending', algorithmically (Poell & van Dijck, 2014).

Such algorithms, firstly, personalize content and operate as invisible propaganda, indoctrinating users with their own ideas and preventing exploratory engagement (Pariser 2011). Mechanisms of datafication, commodification and selection provide real-time analytics of social media behaviour, allowing public sentiments to be (mis)used by unscrupulous agents for personal, political and financial gains (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018; Karpf 2016; Kreiss 2016; Tufekci 2014). Secondly, the black-boxed, nonhuman, architectures running algorithms are opaque and their selection-differentiation process is underpinned in techno-commercial strategies. This is a key barrier to experts' success in

deciphering why specific algorithms behave the way they do (Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2017). Therefore, although platforms pose as mere hosts or facilitators of circulated content, they are accountable because their roles in developing non-human/ computational mechanisms designed to increase profits cannot be overlooked.

While this clarifies the extent to which platforms can and should be regulated, one must not overlook the fact that active users are also party to constructing or eroding public values (Helberger, Pierson & Poell, 2017). However, it is clear that the power balance between users and platforms is unequal, not least because of the platforms' internal, and invisible, murkiness. Users, to a certain extent, themselves determine and influence what kind of content they upload, share and choose to be exposed to, even if only through their selection of friends or reading behaviour, which morph into fodder for a platform's algorithms. It seems that at least part of the remedy to social media's ills potentially lies in offline measures to educate users about algorithmic structures and their consequences.

3.3 Towards some key priorities in the social sphere

Give such entanglement of roles and agency, the path towards formulating policies remained unclear. How has the EU pushed for greater transparency, accountability and responsibility from these tech companies so as to counter disinformation and address their monopoly? Recently, increased pressure from the European Parliament and Commission to improve online political debate and protect its member countries from foreign malicious interference ahead of its May 23 elections in 2019 compelled Facebook to improve transparency for political ads. It mandated disclaimers declaring the contents' sponsors.

Further, everyone involved in the process and chain of political ads, from creativity and targeting to payment, required authentication through proof of identity or residence for the specific country in which they ran it. Pan-European organisations now need an Ad Manager for each country they operate in, who shall have to provide contact details and a payment method for identification. While this may seem to be a good first step, Alberto Alemanno, Director of The Good Lobby, has identified a very basic caveat. Since electoral laws are different for each country, there cannot be a pan-European political advertising option. As a result, smaller organisations with honest motives of facilitating free and fair elections in

Europe cannot afford to have Ad-managers run campaigns or impact simple citizens' initiatives and small activism groups. Even within these broad areas of proposed action, challenges abound.

3.4 Key challenges identified

Firstly, Europe is looking for a speedy implementation of a system that is well equipped and dedicated enough to counter disinformation with a track record of expertise in telling the difference between fact and fiction. Recent EU measures, however, leave a lot of questions unanswered. For example, have all the disinformation actors currently operating in the European market been identified? What are their methods of functioning? What are the tools used to disseminate disinformation? Is there any way to know how many such false messages with vested interests are spread daily? More importantly, how many people do they eventually succeed in persuading and how many do they reach out to? How many people buy into these disinformation messages spread by actor's hostile to the EU and its values and goals? It's important to note that unless the Commission has concrete answers to these questions, mere regulatory policies to check social media platforms will remain inadequate.

Secondly, these platforms, with their large and diverse databases, facilitate different kinds of interactions and content. In the process, they host a humongous amount of public/commercial information and organise both attention and access to it. As a result, these platforms today dictate the entire fiscal structure around investments in public communication (including by news media, political campaigns, and social movements), dominate public discourse, and represent governments and media regulators with new challenges.

Finally – and this may seem obvious – all of Europe doesn't function in the same manner. Every member state has its own national vulnerability and hence, (mis)information echoes differently in each state. For example, in Central and Eastern Europe, disinformation still relies heavily on email chains (Pennycoock & Rand, 2017). Hence, too much focus on social media will not address the crux of the problem. If a distinction is not made between the actor who spreads disinformation merely for financial gain and the one who is trying to weaken our democracies, and influence our electoral processes, approaches and solutions could be disproportionate and ill-targeted.

4. EU's recourses

With such knowledge of corporate platforms' need for social accountability, in contrast to the US model – one of self-regulation – European approaches have given primacy to social welfare through extensive, and increasing, experience in co-regulation nationally and supra-nationally (Enli, Raats, Syvertsen & Donders, 2019). In June 2017 the European Commission's competition authority fined Google with a record €2,42 billion for abusing its dominant position as search engine, in giving illegal advantage to its own comparison-shopping service. Earlier in May the same year, it announced the decision to fine Facebook €110 million for providing misleading information on the 2014 WhatsApp takeover (European Commission, 2017a; European Commission, 2017b; Mark Scott, 2016). These were not one-off actions but the product of wider policy approaches. In 2015, the Commission proposed the Digital Single Market Strategy, aiming to harmonise national regulations of online businesses in the EU. In 2016, however, it published a report – Communication on Online Platforms in the Digital Single Market – outlining limits of its own one-size-fits-all approaches, considering the businesses' diverse natures and urging member states to use different mechanisms (copyright law, audio-visual law, telecommunications law etc.) to address particular problems (European Commission, 2016).

4.1 Action Plan overview

Taking cognisance of these factors, the Commission launched an action plan, The Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2018), intended to improve detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation, stronger cooperation and joint responses to threats. This plan enhanced collaborations with online platforms and industry so as to tackle disinformation. In such cases, where governments and policy makers have been brainstorming on remedies and their efficient implementation, democracy and media crises become evident. However, governmental regulation comes with the key caveat of states possibly being tempted to create digital media systems that suit political interests. It also has other important structural limits.

Is the Commission's Action Plan, which merely demands accountability from social media platforms, adequate - given this "viral" syndrome's intersection with news and consequently with users' political behaviour? Perhaps not, for these platforms have access to data on millions of European citizens - which makes them the chief multiplier of disinformation. Even supranational regulatory bodies such as the European Union (EU) have been struggling to find efficient ways to limit the dominance of the US-based platforms (Enli et al., 2019). Regulations do not fundamentally alter operation of these corporate players, besides their limits to control platforms collectively operating as a digital ecosystem.

Since such problems do not have a historical pattern yet, degrees of clarity on the category's "disinformation" or "fake news" vary widely and are difficult to interpret in a unified way across societies and states. In such cases, regulations address the outcome rather than the cause, and often uncritically. Furthermore, lack of a clear pattern is continuously causing fractures in established ethical principles. Equally, blanketed normative practices risk not being able to distinguish between genuine threats to national security or fake news for financial gain and harmless satire and critical journalism. This can curb substantive social freedoms (Tambini, 2017).

4.2 Concrete measures: strategy and execution (2015-18)

Ever since fake news and disinformation have been introduced into the global political and media narrative, the European Union has worked on various measures so as to tackle the issue. This section focuses on seven key actions that have been elaborated by official European institutions since 2015. It is important to mention that not every measure was been taken into consideration due to the limited extent of this article. The first step that the European Union undertook was when in 2015 the European Council first recognised the threat of fake news campaigns launched by Russian and asked the High Representative to address this issue (European Council, 2015). The European Commission set up the Est Strategic Communication Task Force within the chart of the European External Action Service so as to address this issue.

The action plan of Strategic Communication which was adopted in June 2015 consists of three main pillars:

1)   Effective communication and promotion of Union policies towards the Eastern neighbourhood.

2)   A strengthening of the overall media environment in the eastern neighbourhood and in the member states.

3)   An improvement in the union's capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation campaigns by Russia (European Commission, 2018).

The External Action service put more effort into providing a safe media environment by setting up two additional task forces, the western Balkan task force and the task force south for the Middle East and South Africa.

Secondly, in April 2016 the EU formed a joint framework on countering hybrid threats. Disseminating disinformation was perceived as a hybrid threat within the line of threats such as chemical, radiological, biological and nuclear threats - as it targets social stability and sows distrust and social tension (European Commission, 2016).

Thirdly, again in 2016, the Hybrid Fusion Cell was formed. Based on a joint framework on countering hybrid threats in June 2016, a structure called the Hybrid Fusion Cell was established within the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre of External Action Service so as to observe any threat in the hybrid security environment. The Hybrid Fusion Cell receives and analyses both classified and open-source information from different stakeholders concerning hybrid threats and share their analyses and detections with EU's institutions and member states so as to inform EU decision-making (European Commission, 2016).

Following the Hybrid Fusion Cell, an effort for strategic communication was engaged in by the EU. This step focused more on monitoring disinformation content on social media and audio-visual media in the non-EU language areas. It was called the East and Arab Strategic Communication Task Force and was intended to optimise the use of linguists fluent in non-EU languages to monitor disinformation targeting EU's media environment (European Commission, 2016). In 2017, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats was formed. It consisted of a research institution based in Helsinki which aimed to

analyse and organise training and exercises so as to help member states building resilience against cyber threats and disinformation campaigns that target the EU media environment (European Commission, 2016).

The following year, in June 2018, the Commission proposed a widely ranged guideline that obliges platforms and urges member states and all stakeholders to combat every kind of disinformation. These guidelines include a code of practice on disinformation which forces platforms to ensure transparency on political advertisement, providing clarity on the functioning algorithm, identifying and closing fake accounts and enabling fact checkers to monitor online disinformation. It also emphasises enhancing media literacy among EU citizens, proposes an independent network of European fact-checkers and supports quality journalism among member states. (European Commission, 2018)

Later, based on all previous steps, the European Commission's latest plan 'Action Plan against Disinformation' (2018) consisted of four pillars:

1.   Improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation.

2.   Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation, setting up a rapid alert system.

3.   Mobilising the private sector so as to tackle disinformation.

4.   Raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

5. South Asia: intersectionality and distinctions

The trajectory of information crisis in South Asia, while following some general patterns, is very different and even more complex that the European scenario. South Asian states are relatively more delicate, not least due to internal diversity and complexities. Many governments struggle to meet objectives as basic as law enforcement, which is complicated by distributed forms of corruption. In fact, most states in the region, including Afghanistan,

Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka score low on the index and are close to failure (Fragile State Index, 2014).

According to Francis Fukuyama (2012), the fragmented nature of society in South Asia is to be blamed for its fragility. There are many caste, linguistic, and religious groups in the region. The enormous diversity makes it even more difficult for any state to impose a single working bureaucracy on the land. It also doesn't have an EU-like common working structure. Ethnically and linguistically, South Asia's diversity quite resembles that of Europe. Yet, unlike Europe, for the most part, it is not broken up into many medium-sized, relatively homogenous states that make effective governance easier. Fukuyama argues that South Asian states never developed the bureaucracies or institutions that enabled them to govern their territories effectively, as mentioned due to the fragmented nature of society in South Asia. The many caste, linguistic, and religious groups in the region historically only interacted among themselves, even as they lived side by side. The problem of disinformation varies across every state in South Asia due to the lack of penetration and implementation of basic infrastructure or educational systems. Also, for this reason, the following discussion is structured largely according to nation-states rather than in a pan-regional way.

6. Key informational issues in South Asian states

6.1 India

In India – one of the largest populations as well as internet markets in the world – the consequences of spreading fake news have been extensive. The spread of misinformation has caused massive damage – there have even been instances of people being murdered. In mid-2017, a scare over child kidnappers resulted in at least 33 cases of murder and over 99 cases of attacks triggered by rumours of child-lifting (Murthy, 2020). In July 2018, four men were beaten to death in a village in Maharashtra over rumours spread on WhatsApp that they were child kidnappers, casting nets in villages looking for their next victim. Prior to this unfortunate incident, photos of dead children laid out in rows were relentlessly shared by everyone and anyone on WhatsApp, warning parents to be vigilant and on the lookout for child snatchers. The photos were real except they were of children who were killed in Syria during a chemical attack in a town called Ghouta in August 2013 (McLAughlin, 2018).

According to Indian government's policy think tank, NITI Aayog, in July 2019 the number of WhatsApp users had shot up to 400 million: larger than the entire population of the United States. Statistically, four out of every five smartphone users in India are on WhatsApp. The app's design and architecture are such that rumours and misinformation spread very quickly. And due to the lack of sufficient and credible fact-checking and quality control, the problem is only worsening (Agarwal, 2019). "There are factories of fake news and misinformation that are running in the country — almost like a business where skilled content creators are hired and used for manufacturing misinformation," said Osama Manzar, founder and director of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, India (Agarwal, 2019).

There have been outbursts of violence in Shillong, Meghalaya, due to communal differences between two groups; the lynching of two men by an angry mob presuming the victims to be cattle thieves in Jharkhand - all stoked by fear and hatred on social media. In the wake of multiple killings due to rumour-mongering, WhatsApp in August 2018 had to start rolling out the five-chat limit for forwarding messages so as to control the spread of fake news (Agarwal, 2018). Unlike Facebook and Twitter, WhatsApp's popularity is even more problematic because it is an instant messaging service with end-to-end encryption, giving user privacy supreme importance; it is technically impossible to narrow down viral forwards to one source (Agarwal, 2019). Messaging products that are end-to-end encrypted can be read only by the sender and the recipient. The encrypted platform itself — such as Apple's iCloud, or Facebook's WhatsApp — can't read the message, because it doesn't have a key (Newton, 2020).

The Indian government, meanwhile, has sought to exert more control over the internet. It has proposed a new set of rules that would compel tech platforms to cooperate with government requests, without requiring any warrant or judicial order to trace a viral social media posts and their origins. The government has also asked for these technological companies to use their innovative software mechanism so as to track a post's spread on their network back to its point of origin, and then turn that information over to law enforcement (Newton, 2020).

That, however, raises major concerns over hampering users' data privacy and the possible rise of authoritarian mass surveillance.

6.2 Pakistan

The media is one of the vital pillars of any nation and so is that case in Pakistan. The country is taking gargantuan measures so as to tackle fake news not only at the societal but also at state level. In the last few years, and especially during the election campaign, misinformation was used systematically by political opponents so as to demean each other. This compounded to a situation wherein even the state's ministers could not escape the claws of the viciously fabricated misinformation. According to Westcott (CNN) (2016), a fake news story almost started a nuclear war between Israel and Pakistan. The country's defence minister, Khawaja Asif responded to a false article on his twitter misinterpreting it to be real.

Without a doubt, social media is the ultimate source as well as convoy for most fake news generation and propagation in Pakistan. A survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (2020) reported that around 88% respondents identified social media platforms as the least worthy source of false information. It has also been observed that the severe dearth of media literacy in Pakistan is the reason for the spread of falsehoods online. Whilst there are various understandings and uses of the term "fake news"(Corner, 2017), information is considered fake news if it includes information which purports to be news but is not, if it includes content which is untrue by any measure and if the content is created for financial or political benefits (Kalnes, 2018). In the race towards breaking news first, many journalists have acted as catalysts of fake news by releasing information even before it has been confirmed. Since most of the country's citizens find print journalism more trustworthy, they buy into whatever is said and avoid raising questions. Such situations wherein journalists fail to act properly as gatekeepers is a prime example of bad journalism. In order to deal with the growing menace, concerned governmental bodies have been set up.

The recently formed Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (2019) promises to take strict action against the spreading of false news and deliver public punishment for offenders. Attending to the surge in misinformation, the ministry of information has even set up a twitter handle so as to combat fake news. It is true that at a time of increasingly polarized media, lies, fake news, conspiracies and propaganda, the lie is efficiently loud and clear while the truth fades away in the background.

6.3 Sri Lanka

In April 2019, following the deadly Easter Sunday bombings, the Sri Lankan government very promptly blocked social media websites, including Facebook and WhatsApp. The authorities feared that the American-owned social network sites could give rise to more violence and confuse the citizenry (Fisher, 2019). The state's then Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, warned his people to avoid falling for unverified reports and speculation (Bogost, 2019). This, however, was not the first time when social media in Sri Lanka was blocked by the authorities. Previously, in 2018, the government had briefly blocked social networks after rumours circulated on social Facebook that provoked anti-Muslim sentiments. The government justified such action by alleging that social networking sites failed to listen to any warning and wouldn't act before it was too late (Fisher, 2019).

Technology optimists in Sri Lanka suggest that after suffering a brutal civil war for over 25 years, social media played an essential role in seamless communication, gathering together a largely divided country and allowing its people to make informed choices. Pessimists, however, say that social media's potential for weaponization led to a modern crisis in the state. Violent content on Facebook, Sri Lanka's most popular social networking site, in the form of short videos, memes and commentaries have been translated into a new-age, digital communalisation that appeals to a young demographic (Hattotowa, 2018). For example, hate and mob violence against Muslims in Digana, Kandy, in March 2018 were channelled through social media platforms. At least two people were killed and eight more injured before the government was forced to block Facebook and other social networking sites so as to bring the violence under control (Safi and Perera, 2018).

Meanwhile, the Centre for Policy Alternative's research Sanjana Hattotowa shows that governmental blackout failed to prevent larger "engagement, production, sharing and discussion of Facebook content". In fact, there was a rise in such content. One video from 2018 showed a man dressed in a burqa, who was allegedly involved in the bombings. Another five-year-old photo of a group of men from India wearing T-shirts with 'ISIS' - another name for the Islamic State - written on them was shared multiple times claiming there was an ISIS cell in Sri Lanka (Straits times, 2019). Why is it so difficult then to control the spread of false information in Sri Lanka? Firstly, lack of data is a huge disadvantage in

finding the source of hate speech or fake information on Facebook and other sites. According to police data, 20% of Sri Lanka's Facebook accounts out of a total of 1.2 million (in 2012) are fake. That number must have risen by now. Secondly, hate speech and false information shared in local languages such as Sinhalese and Tamil often miss Facebook's black-boxed algorithm intended to detect inappropriateness at the source.

6.4 Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a useful example for he who wishes to simultaneously consider both the implications of unchecked 'fake-news' and policies of governmental regulation. The key impetus for this arises from the ways in which the media landscape in Bangladesh, even in the present day, is inextricably tied to the politics of its past. K. Anis Ahmed (2018) argues that Bangladesh lacks the technological instruments to transform fake news into an organised phenomenon. However, his analysis also shows that most influential media houses are aligned to major political parties. This entanglement of politics and the journalism sector compounds the problem of the accuracy and non-partisan nature of information reaching publics. In this sense, the government itself becomes the original cause of fake news, and the systematic propagandisation as well as disinformation to the public has been systematised on a historical basis. It is within this condition that Bangladesh's contemporary situation must be viewed.

Bangladesh adopted a secular constitution upon independence from Pakistan in 1971. Such constitution guaranteed freedom of the press, albeit with "reasonable restrictions". The framework of media censorship has always operated through with a fear of legislative consequences such as sedition and criminal libel (Freedom House, 2016). The restricted nature of press freedom, therefore, creates ground for abuse and curbs on civil liberties of the press when it is revealed to cause inconvenience to the state. Beyond the expected channels of social media platforms, the country has a lively culture of blogging, which has always played an active role of independent voices, often even critical of ruling dispensations. Such voices have been – under the aforementioned legal framework – subjected to both criminal prosecution as well as extrajudicial harassment on the ground.

Between March and July 2017 alone, a Bangladeshi daily reported that under article (57) restricting press rights, twenty-one journalists faced charges brought against them by the state (Adhikary, 2017). This article has been, since then, brought under severe criticism and the present government is working to replace and supersede it. However, the country's new Digital Security Act retains its main features and, further, makes certain offences non-bailable and subject to higher fines and longer imprisonments. This is complicated by the ways in which many reports show that the proportion of Bangladeshis with digital literacy is low. Furthermore, many people in a higher age demographic are not active on social media and continue to depend on traditional methods of news consumption and dissemination, wherein there is a culture of reports by mainstream journalism being considered true.

This presents an interesting contrast between censorship or suppression and fake news. While the perception of highly regulated media can be argued to improve its credibility, fake news – brought about as disinformation – in combination with societal prejudices make reliability of the media apparatus as a whole questionable in Bangladesh. This presents an intricate entanglement of the ways in which the lack of civic freedoms in online space is actually instrumentalised outside it.

6.5 Myanmar

As Sarah Schulman (2019) notes, Myanmar combines a struggle to handle transitions brought about by the shift to a digital environment and a shrinkage of democratic space. Nothing has been drearier in its recent history than the ways in which social media has played an instrumental role in mass genocide of the Rohingya minority within its territory. This, Schulman argues, must be seen in the context of the nature of Myanmar's political transition in recent years, wherein the military regime implemented sweeping reforms across digital media space after decades of formal censorship and surveillance.

At one level, such reforms brought about an optimism regarding how digital interventions would help leapfrog other social issues such as education, as well as other more physical infrastructures such as the transportation system. There was also an expectation that the digital leap would accelerate the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. However, failing the redressal of issues such as digital divide and access, once offline entered the online

space, and like in the case of Bangladesh, digital literacy – one that brings about a caution and scepticism about what is read online – reveals itself as much wanting.

This was compounded by the ultra-nationalist atmosphere that both the democratic and the erstwhile remnants of the military state engendered. The phenomenon had similar contours in the framing of legal instruments, as observed in Bangladesh, wherein a 'telecommunications misuse' law was deployed so as to silence dissent both among journalists and online activists. Thus, paradoxically, the very freedom meant to be constructed gradually through the proliferation of online media was subverted. Both state propaganda and legislation itself helped weaponise the nationalist sentiment of majorities and channel this dynamic against the Rohingyas.

It is of particular note that with the increasing market of cheap 3G phones, and their amenability to various apps, Facebook - rather than any other media - became synonymous with the internet. Moreover, still more problematically, the site catered to the majority language – Burmese – in an extremely diverse national territory with a hundred languages among over a hundred different ethnic groups. This selective access to a social media platform is almost exemplary – as the case of Myanmar shows – in the exclusion brought about rather than the enhancement of individual and civic freedoms.

Conclusion

Much of the world's attention has focused on how the US and Europe have been dealing with issues of information crises and what the future holds. Developing countries' experience of the same phenomenon, however, has been gravely overlooked. This inattention, not only in terms of global democratization and democratic consolidation, but also in the ways it is impacting democratic processes in the Global South, needs to be terminated. For example, in India, the world's largest democracy, the spread of misinformation increased by 40 per cent during the last general election (Chinchilla, 2019). In Brazil, during the 2018 presidential elections, electoral authorities were forced to redouble their efforts to counter the spread of videos showing false alterations of results (TSE, 2019).

In a bid to control these big corporations, most such governments have turned to blocking the Internet as their go-to solution. However, that holds the danger of a decline in global internet freedom. According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report, in 2018, there was a negative trend - most evident in Asia. The internet became less free in nine Asian countries in 2018, contributing to a global decline that affected 26 out of the 65 countries reviewed. The majority of declines were related to issues such as privacy, surveillance, violence, arrests, and prosecutions. Interestingly, Sri Lanka in 2018 saw a four-point decline on a 100-point scale (Funk, 2018). In 2019, however, Bangladesh saw a rise in multiple blocking of independent news websites and mobile networks so as to control the population and limit the spread of unfavourable information (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019). In India too, internet shutdowns across the country are on a rapid surge.

Therefore, the question arises – what does the future hold? With the middle-class in these societies becoming more exposed and richer, with a deeper penetration of mobile technology across every town and village, how can this deepening crisis of information overload be controlled? Firstly, there is an urgent need to teach every digital consumer the importance of media literacy. The ability to intelligently and logically access, analyse, evaluate and react to all modes of communication is most crucial in today's day and age so as to nip this epidemic at its bud. In developing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, it is harder to control the spread of misleading information because the viral content is often translated into local languages across platforms and becomes harder to be detected. Therefore, we have to make people aware of the significance of self-editorial measures as the first step towards a healthy digital media landscape. Secondly, involving more forces from different backgrounds – such as governments, technology companies and civil society – in the investigation of misinformation and disinformation is crucial to strengthen this reliability. Lastly, to promote resilience towards disinformation on an institutional level, there needs to be a harmonization of legislation so as to counteract the fragmentation across several states, which creates uncertainty. Where appropriate, the framework shall leave space for self-regulation and co-regulation so as to complement global standards.

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