

Combating Disinformation: A Toolkit



**Journalists' Association of Bhutan
Supported by The Asia Foundation**

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Backdrop

1.1 Message from JAB

“We live in exciting and terrifying times. Exciting because technology has truly transformed the world into a global village, dissolving cultural, economic, and political boundaries. Conversely, an avalanche of information has brought about a worldwide ‘infodemic’. Coupled with social media’s growing size and popularity, we have a dangerous scenario where one may unwittingly fall victim to mal-information. Bhutan is no exception.

In Bhutan, over 90 per cent of people are on at least one social media platform. Generation Z is ahead with 98.8 per cent of the generation on social media. Bhutan has limited newspaper and broadcast media, and the explosion of social media means we must all collectively promote media and information literacy.

The Journalists’ Association of Bhutan’s (JAB) mandate is ‘to promote professionalism in journalism, uphold freedom of expression and media, protect and promote the right to information, maintain high ethical standards in journalism, and protect journalists from hazards such as threats, harassment, and litigation, etc.

To promote credible news and information and promote media and information literacy in the country, JAB, with support from the Asia Foundation, has produced a Toolkit for combating disinformation which provides insight into the what, how, and why of disinformation trends globally and in Bhutan. It also introduces you to media and information literacy and equips you with tools for fact-checking.

This toolkit will:

- Define the various forms of mis- and disinformation so that readers will be able to recognise these;
- Enable readers to combat mis- and disinformation, especially where it influences your personal and professional interests and reputation;
- Facilitate readers to engender social responsibility and trust.

1.2 Definitions and Context

Information is not just the currency of power but also the engine for development. Access to correct information is a yardstick of freedom of speech and expression in many democracies. However, today’s complex information ecology risks being polluted by spreading untruths via disinformation. The sheer volume and reach of disinformation globally are alarming and pose a threat to not only democracy but, potentially, our lives.

According to UNESCO, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation form part of the ‘information disorder’ and have endangered trust in media and journalism.

Increased digital access and the reach of social media platforms coupled with inadequate digital literacy have compounded the problem in networked societies worldwide. Such an information disorder has been propagated internationally by state, media, and private channels. These include uncredited claims of election fraud, libel against citizens, and state propaganda, which have all contributed to social and political discord.

With the increasing population online, Bhutan has witnessed expanding proportions of mal-information. According to the Bhutan Media Foundation’s ‘Social Media Landscape in Bhutan (2021)’, about 90 per cent of the people are active members of at least one social media, using it as their primary source of information.

COVID-19 has amplified this trend. Bhutanese spend more

time on social media than the global average, presenting tangible dangers to exposure to disinformation through such platforms.

Low digital literacy levels magnify this threat. Disinformation has spread through social media at an alarming rate, which has compelled the government to strategically use its official social media pages as legitimate sources of information, particularly during the pandemic.

To better understand the context, it is useful to comprehend the key terms:

- **Misinformation** 'is false information that was not created with the intention of hurting others'.

Misinformation abounds in today's world, be it memes, word-of-mouth gossip or even official information. The intention of misinformation may not be to cause deliberate harm or for profit. It can create confusion, mistrust in institutions, and dent the democratic fabric. Today, social media has magnified the threat of misinformation, and it has become critical not just to identify misinformation but also to combat it.

- **Disinformation** 'is false information created with the intention of profiting from it or causing harm'.

Harm from disinformation could be to a person, a group, an organisation, or even a country. Misinformation generally serves an agenda and can be dangerous.

- **Mal-information** is information 'based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country'.¹

Fake News encompasses news which misleads and is factually incorrect. 'This term has a commonly understood meaning. This is because "news" means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this

¹ Ireton, C., & Posetti, J. (2018). Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training. UNESCO Publishing.

sense then, "fake news" is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – i.e., real news'.²

Targeted disinformation can occasionally be wholly invented, purposefully taken out of context, overstated, or omit crucial details, all of which create an inaccurate impression. It might be challenging to recognise targeted disinformation for what it is. Images and videos are now becoming more accessible and easier to modify, so it is not just limited to text. Additionally, attempts to present reality in a fundamentally misleading way, such as by removing quotes or figures from their context, portraying a minority opinion as the majority one, or intentionally adjusting the scope of specific articles, are ever-present realities online.

Disinformation spreads considerably more swiftly and indiscriminately online than during the Misinformation pre-digital era. On social media, anything may instantly be forwarded, liked, and commented on. Moreover, it is much simpler and less expensive for individuals to spread disinformation. Almost everyone has a social media account, which allows them to transmit disinformation to a large audience.

In this toolbox, we will use disinformation to refer to deliberate attempts to manipulate people by delivering false information.

1.3 Who is this toolkit for

This toolkit pertains to all of us. Disinformation permeates almost every aspect of our society and is becoming a greater threat to our collective safety. Every individual in society must work together to make the most of our influence over the information environment. This toolkit will provide a set of tools so that you can understand, identify, tackle disinformation and misinformation, and guide others to do likewise. By doing so, we can create a better information environment, allowing us to build a healthier, kinder, and more connected

² "Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation - UNESCO." e.n.unesco.org. UNESCO, 2018. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0.pdf.

world. We hope that the toolkit will act as an enabler for all the stakeholders listed below:

- Policymakers;
- Government officials;
- Journalists;
- CSOs;
- Teachers, school administrators;
- Faith leaders;
- and the community at large.

2. Why trust is important?

Journalism today is facing a severe deficit of trust internationally. The rapid advance in digital technologies, the proliferation of Internet-enabled personal devices, and engagement with social media have accelerated the trust deficit in journalism, governments, businesses, and institutions. While the Coronavirus pandemic reclaimed trust in news, this also diminished globally in 2022.³

Good journalism inspires trust by holding those in power accountable through investigations and public affairs coverage. It helps citizens make informed choices regarding who governs them. A weakened legacy media has meant the absence of gatekeepers in an information environment powered by user-generated content.

Additionally, powerful new technologies have given states, politicians, and corporate entities the tools to manipulate information to suit their agendas. For example, Russia's sophisticated use of online platforms to generate disinformation bots is credibly believed to have impacted foreign elections and has leveraged a blinkered view in favour of its expansionist policies, from the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula onwards.⁴ This disinformation, piggybacking on social media networks and shared by an indifferent public, has become a global crisis.⁵

³ "Digital News Report 2022." Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Reuters, 2022. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, 'GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem' https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

⁵ UNESCO, op. cit.

3. Exploring ‘Information Disorder’: Misinformation, Disinformation, Mal-information

To consider the various forms of information disorder in more detail, we offer a few cogent examples:

Case 1: Coronavirus

Someone on Facebook says:



This is not based on facts and qualifies as disinformation because it relies entirely on invented or completely unproven assertions. The intention is also suspect.



Case 2: Coronavirus

These pictures contain disinformation that Kuensel debunked in early 2020.⁶ These pictures spread disinformation under the UNICEF organisation’s name. As it does not have the official logo of UNICEF or any copyright sign, it is verifiably false.

This disinformation impersonates a genuine source, relying on a veneer of credibility somewhat equivalent to imperfectly forging someone’s signature on a declaration.⁷



6 Newspaper, Bhutan’s Daily. “Home.” Kuensel Online. Kuensel. Accessed August 31, 2022. <https://kuenselonline.com/fighting-fake-news/>

7 Ibid.



Let us examine a few global examples.
Case 3: The anti-vax movement⁸



Watch this video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8uRYqsu2W4>
(Total duration: 1 min 40 sec).

⁸ “Spot and Fight Disinformation.” Learning corner. European Union. Accessed August 31, 2022. https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/spot-and-fight-disinformation_en

The transcript of the voice-over is given below:
“For millions of families dealing with autism it was a possible answer for their struggles. A landmark medical study, linking children’s vaccinations with the disorder. But that study is now being called ‘misleading’ with some even saying it’s an elaborate fraud.”
(Fiona Godlee, Editor, British Medical Journal)

We’ve known from the start that the study was a poor study. It got an enormous amount of media attention. All of the evidence, all of the epidemiological studies, the ones looking at blood populations of children have countered this and said there is no evidence of the link.
(voiceover)

It was a paper by Andrew Wakefield and his colleagues in 1998 that scared patients prompting immunisation rates around the globe to drop. Wakefield claimed 12 children were normal until they got the common vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella.

But his paper was later retracted, and a new examination found that Wakefield and his colleagues altered facts about patients in their studies. But Wakefield still has his supporters – Jamie Handley is one of them, he is the father of an autistic son.
(JB Handley, Founder, Generation Rescue)

Vaccines are known to cause brain injury, so it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to think: they took the kid for an appointment, they were normal, they came out, they were suffering dramatically. And these things cause brain injuries to some kids. That’s why we’re all still here, and the real science has never been done.
(voiceover)

Wakefield was stripped of his right to practice medicine in Great Britain last May. Since then, other studies have shown no connection between the MMR vaccination and autism. Wakefield could not be reached for comment.
(Rosenson, the Associated Press)

This case highlights how an academic paper was one of the

key reasons behind the anti-vaccine movement. The findings were disproven and debunked many times, yet the paper received substantial media attention to injure the public perception of vaccines, even though they have been repeatedly proven to be safe and effective.

Free Speech is everybody's right, but it cannot be misused to deliberately spread lies, particularly when they can destroy trust and damage public health. This is dangerous because people connect the dots despite their assumptions contradicting scientific findings. Such campaigns affect individual psychology by 'transferring guilt' and obscuring personal responsibility or proven causes for the development of autism. For instance: The MMR vaccine is usually given to children at the same age as the time autism can be diagnosed. But people ignore this fact. In other words, people would rather believe that their child was given autism by the vaccine than accept that the diagnosis was out of their control. The impact of such disinformation campaigns could be widespread and disastrous - people could lose their immunity to serious diseases.

Case 4: 5 G causes Coronavirus

Since early 2020 when the pandemic began, confusing information has spread on social media at a greater rate, with many claiming a link between 5G technologies and the spread of the Coronavirus. While it is not wrong to be cautious or even sceptical about new technologies and their effect on our lives and health, this theory has brought harmful consequences in the real world. These consequences include the burning down of telecommunications infrastructure and physical attacks on workers installing the infrastructure.

Such actions have included:

- Real-life destruction: arsonists setting fire to cell towers across Europe;
- Failure of telecommunications networks, as many of the towers destroyed and vandalised were for 3G and 4G service, which the public depends on;
- Telecom employees were publicly harassed for laying down 5G fibre optic cables or any other telecommunication infrastructure.

- People are prone to conspiracy theories when they feel threatened. Absurdly, it gives them a greater sense of control to imagine that there are shady agencies or people behind them rather than things happening arbitrarily. The lack of control discomfits people.⁹

These examples demonstrate that disinformation and misinformation can take the shape of satire and parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content, or fabricated content. The potential threat to lives and democracy makes it imperative to distinguish authentic messages from false statements created, produced, or distributed by 'agents' who intend to harm those not part of their clique or individual interests.¹⁰

9 Ibid.

10 Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Council of Europe

4. The spread of Misinformation and Disinformation

4.1 The source - Where does false information come from?

False information emerges from a variety of sources. Some of these are: ¹¹

- Information that is misheard, misquoted, or misunderstood from a real news piece;
- Information created by human or AI agency to acquire profit or online attention;
- Information designed to promote a person, party, or point of view;
- Information misunderstood from a joke or parody post and taken as a fact.

If the information or content of the disinformation and misinformation matches our beliefs, we are more likely to accept it as a fact because of confirmation bias, as stated previously. According to the BBC, 'confirmation bias is how we all prefer the information or news that confirms what we already believe, rather than challenging it'.¹²

4.2 How and why does false information spread?

Even though people might not know that the information is false, sharing usually begins in small, trusted networks such as social or work groups, in person or on messaging apps. These often include family chats, social media groups, and by word-of-mouth.

Since trust in family and friend networks remains high, individuals are more likely to believe the information they share

¹¹ "How False Information Spreads," BBC Bitesize (BBC, December 14, 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zcr8r2p>.

¹² "What Is Confirmation Bias?," BBC Bitesize (BBC, September 23, 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/znbytrd>

with us even though it contains false information. The information is then shared with other trusted groups or individuals. Moreover, even if it is not something that is generally believed, the shocking nature of the content might have such an emotional impact that it is then shared.

This phenomenon was recently described by the BBC in prosaic terms: 'Imagine a web of contacts slowly getting larger as fake news is passed between different trusted networks; that's how the sharing starts'.¹³

The use of technology such as bots (automated software), trolls (users post derogatory or false messages in a public forum), social media, and message boards have magnified the challenge. Their objective? To sow chaos, confusion, and paranoia in order to disrupt institutions great and small.¹⁴ For instance, bots and trolls had a disruptive effect on the 2016 U.S. presidential election, spreading disinformation and propaganda via multiple outlets.¹⁵

Beyond these more calculated, pernicious motivations, entertainment has also been demonstrated to be a prime motivator for the spread of disinformation. A recent study by Obada and Dabija in 2022 investigated the motivations for individuals sharing fake news concerning environmentally friendly brands.¹⁶

Their findings demonstrated that, out of six measured motivations for the spread of such disinformation, 'to entertain others' scored roughly within the same range as half of the motivating reasons. The sense of wanting to 'belong to a

¹³ "How False Information Spreads," BBC Bitesize (BBC, December 14, 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zcr8r2p>.

¹⁴ Scott Shackelford et al., "Making Democracy Harder to Hack: Should Elections Be Classified as 'Critical Infrastructure?'," SSRN, October 19, 2016, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2852461.

¹⁵ "Media Literacy & Misinformation: How Misinformation Spreads," LibGuides, accessed August 31, 2022, https://guides.monmouth.edu/media-literacy/how_fake_news_spreads

¹⁶ Daniel-Rareş Obadă and Dan-Cristian Dabija, "In Flow! Why Do Users Share Fake News about Environmentally Friendly Brands on Social Media?," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 19, no. 8 (2022): p. 4861, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19084861>.

group' was the most frequent motivator discovered in their study, which may accord to other studies that have positioned human mentality as a herd mentality.¹⁷

4.3 The role of social platforms

Today, where everything has gone digital, social media has become essential to people's lives. Social media is a digital platform that enables individuals to produce and disseminate material of their choosing to others. It influences a variety of websites and applications. It has gained social, financial, and political significance in a relatively short period. Business, entertainment, food, lifestyle, and welfare, are examples where the role of social media can be every day and profound.

Most importantly, social media is popular for communication and information dissemination. Digital technology is now required for the simplest of tasks for daily communication. Social media facilitates communication between users, allowing people to remain in touch. People share images, movies, documents, and opinions with a single click, simplifying the transmission of messages and data across international borders.

The same was true for Bhutan, where social media made it simpler for citizens to be informed about current events and worldwide emergencies. For instance, the health authorities were able to provide the public with relevant information as much as possible during the pandemic. The sources' validity and dependability are disadvantages of sharing information and learning new things via social media.

The focus group interviews raised another significant point regarding social media's function in Bhutan. With social media's reach and influence, it also developed into a highly potent medium for sharing any injustices occurring in the community. Indeed, social media is a key forum where people may expose injustices and unfair treatment and make compelling arguments to be taken seriously by the general

¹⁷ Ramsey M. Raafat, Nick Chater, and Chris Frith, "Herding in Humans," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 10 (2009): pp. 420-428, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.08.002>.

public. People may anonymously use social media to vent all the injustice, abuse, and oppression they have experienced. It encourages everyone to defend their rights publicly and speak out against violence. Social media has a significant impact on society in the manner indicated above. The divide between individuals and higher authorities is closing due to social media. It assists in raising awareness of some outstanding problems and personal dissatisfaction on specific issues. Social media will continue to benefit people in many more ways if used effectively.

4.4 Impact of false information

The problem mentioned in the above section of disseminating information through social platforms is that almost anyone may now call themselves 'journalists' and publish news they believe to be accurate and reliable. With other digital technologies, one can generate, share, and disseminate noteworthy or gossipy stories almost immediately internationally. Such efforts create and circulate fake news. Fake news is intentionally and verifiably false information designed to manipulate people's perceptions of reality. It is often used to sway politics and further commercial interests. However, it has also incited and amplified social discord, which has resulted in the growth of mistrust between and among various agents. Such agents include civilians, governments and news providers, which could result in incivility, protest over imaginary events, and, worse, violence.

Fake information can be dangerous as it can affect one's decisions. One of the prime examples of this is the anti-vax movement, and the information circulated stating that the vaccination had side effects that could be fatal. Consequently, many vulnerable groups not susceptible to the virus are in danger. It distracts people from important issues and creates scepticism among many.

One such commonplace example is that drinking hot water will kill the Coronavirus. Though drinking hot water is not injurious to health per se, such inappropriate health advice takes attention away from real ways to protect oneself, such as hand washing and social distancing.

It gives people a false sense of protection and builds on a false sense of security to spread disinformation.

Take a minute to think what if this disinformation was about drinking a liquid that was actually injurious to health, like bleach? Indeed, the dangers of disinformation and misinformation cannot be underestimated. A study in the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene found that Coronavirus untruths have led to the deaths of at least 800 people and possibly more (as of August 2020), as well as the hospitalisation of around 6,000.

Much of this kind of false information is spread unintentionally but in many other cases it is spread by sources trying to generate clicks from headlines and stories carefully crafted to attract attention. Known as 'clickbait' journalism, it seeks to lure users with headlines such as 'You Will Never Believe This...' or 'Scientists are saying that this ancient remedy could be the answer to curing ...Click to read more'.

More so, malicious actors could spread false information with the intent to spread chaos and confusion and pollute the information environment with many, often conflicting, narratives.¹⁸

18 European Union, op.cit.

5. Global Trends in Disinformation

Context

Disinformation has emerged as a global dilemma, extending beyond Coronavirus, into an ever-expanding information sphere, including politics, climate change, and entertainment. Consequently, public trust has been continually eroded, with people from 21 countries out of 46 demonstrating lower overall trust levels.¹⁹

Global concerns about false and misleading information remain stable in 2022, ranging from 72% in Kenya and Nigeria to just 32% in Germany and 31% in Austria. However, as in the comparison here, some nations have widely divergent trust levels from others. People say they have seen false information about Coronavirus more frequently than about politics in most countries,²⁰ a trend which has also emerged in Bhutan.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, the impact of the 'infodemic' brought on by the new digital technologies was particularly felt. The growing complexity of the spread of information and the proportion of disinformation have prompted many countries to consider legislation to tackle the problem. Tech giants and social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have also intensified efforts to develop mechanisms for tracking and removing disinformation and misinformation from their platforms.

Health emergencies have shown that there are four types of false information:²¹

19 Reuters, op. cit.

20 Ibid.

21 "Meeting Covid-19 Misinformation and Disinformation Head-On," Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, August 16, 2022, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/meeting-covid-19-misinformation-and-disinformation-head-on>.

- The mischaracterisation of the disease or protective measures that are needed;
- False treatments or medical interventions;
- Fcapegoating of groups of people;
- And conspiracy theories.

Many of these trends reflect the global societal trends, including polarisation, a loss of trust in institutions, media distribution and other factors.²² This implies that societies with high levels of political extremism are associated with a belief in conspiracy theories. Societies with low levels of trust in news media are more vulnerable as are communities with highly distributed media landscapes, leading to porous entry points to disinformation narratives. Disinformation is also abundant in large media markets as they incentivise sensational content to grab their audience's attention and generate advertising revenue.

'We are attracted to "drama" even more than pictures of cute kittens. In an internet world, attention is finite and the demands on it are infinite. This means that only the content which calls loudest will get our attention. In the case of YouTube's content moderation, critics have claimed that their formula is "outrage equals attention" in order to increase engagement and ad revenues'.

- Global Disinformation Index²³

We have identified key global trends in mal-information and disinformation which have surfaced during the past three years. These have been classified into four subjects, representing the most prominent and topical trends:

22 "Global Societal Trends Exacerbating Disinformation," InterAction, November 4, 2021, <https://www.interaction.org/disinformation-toolkit-2-0/part-1/global-societal-trends-exacerbating-disinformation/>.

23 Ibid.

COVID-19

In 2020, soon after Corona Virus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), there was disinformation about counterfeit face masks and fake medicines which claimed to be able to cure Coronavirus.²⁴

Conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus:

'The central allegation seems to be that 5G radiofrequency communications have a damaging health impact, and that either these are directly making people sick (i.e., COVID-19 doesn't exist and people are actually suffering from 5G effects) or the radiation is depressing peoples' immune systems and therefore making them more likely to suffer from the virus';²⁵

One in five Americans believes the US government uses the COVID-19 vaccine to microchip the population;²⁶ Scapegoating Bill Gates after he defunded WHO and that Gates wants to use a vaccination program to implant digital microchips that will somehow track and control people.

Ukraine-Russia War

Russia spread the following disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine:²⁷

- 'The situation in Ukraine triggered this conflict. There is proof that Ukraine is committing atrocities against its Russian-speaking population in the country's east. Russia has to intervene, not least because Ukraine and Russia are "one nation". Ukraine simply belongs to Russia's "privileged sphere of influence";

24 Sam Piranty, "Coronavirus Fuels a Surge in Fake Medicines," BBC News (BBC, April 9, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-52201077>.

25 "5G: What's behind the Latest COVID Conspiracy Theory?," Alliance for Science, September 15, 2020, <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/5g-whats-behind-the-latest-covid-conspiracy-theory/>.

26 Kathy Frankovic, "Why Won't Americans Get Vaccinated?," YouGov (YouGov, July 15, 2021), <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/07/15/why-wont-americans-get-vaccinated-poll-data>.

27 "Disinformation about Russia's Invasion of Ukraine - Debunking Seven Myths Spread by Russia," Disinformation About Russia's invasion of Ukraine - Debunking Seven Myths spread by Russia | EEAS Website, accessed August 31, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/disinformation-about-russias-invasion-ukraine-debunking-seven-myths-spread-russia_en?s=166.

- 'Ukraine is conducting genocide against the Russian-speaking population in the East';
- 'Ukraine will use chemical, nuclear and other prohibited weapons against civilians in Donbas';
- 'the current tensions are the result of persistent aggressive behavior of Ukraine and its allies in the West. Russia is defending its legitimate interests and is not responsible for this conflict';
- 'the current crisis is the fault of NATO and the West. If they had honoured their promise not to enlarge the alliance, Russia would not feel threatened';
- and 'because of NATO's aggressive expansion, Russia is now "encircled by enemies" and needs to defend itself'.

Celebrities

NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers lied about his vaccination status;²⁸

- In July 2020, rapper Kanye West told Forbes that he believed a coronavirus vaccine could 'put chips inside of us';²⁹
- In India, in early 2020, Bollywood movie star Amitabh Bachchan acquired a reputation for spreading false and misleading information online, such as claims that applauding could 'destroy virus potency' and that homeopathy could 'counter corona';³⁰
- Woody Harrelson shared a series of posts on his Instagram page making baseless claims linking the coronavirus outbreak to installing 5G equipment in Chinese cities.³¹

28 "Blog - Celebrities, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Media Responsibility," Bioethics Today, August 18, 2022, <https://bioethicstoday.org/blog/celebrities-misinformation-disinformation-and-media-responsibility/#>.

29 Andrew Solender, "They Want to Put Chips inside Us: Kanye West Cites Debunked Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, July 8, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/07/08/they-want-to-put-chips-inside-us-kanye-west-cites-debunked-anti-vaccine-conspiracy-theories/?sh=398314cd24b8>.

30 Ali Abbas Ahmadi, "Online Influencers Have Become Powerful Vectors in Promoting False Information and Conspiracy Theories," First Draft (First Draft, December 10, 2020), <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/influencers-vectors-misinformation/>.

31 "Influencers among 'Key Distributors' of Coronavirus Misinformation," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 8, 2020), <https://>

Climate Change

Climate change is invented or overstated by the mainstream international scientific community;³²

Climate change is the result of secret government experiments;

Celebrity environmental activists have been falsely accused of being on the payroll of corporations and the privileged classes who take advantage of precautions to protect the environment. Also, the young climate activist Greta Thunberg is labelled as a 'pawn of the powerful' to counter her outspoken language at world conferences;

The conspiracy theory channels relating to the Covid-19 outbreak have become a fertile ground for the article 'Avoiding a Climate Blockade', distributed through a Tik Tok video. According to the account, governments would attempt to restrict citizens' movement, spending, and activities to benefit major corporations. Nearly 70,000 people watched videos shared outside of the main chats relating to this issue.³³

Harm

Global disinformation has an enormous potential to harm individuals and collectives. The above examples from section 5.1 have obvious, embedded harms that do not require extrapolation but that include health risks, war, and inactivity over climate change. Here, we offer examples of harm caused by social media when combined with human reaction.

In India, there has been a general trend to the misuse of social media leading to mob action, which resulted in serious

www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/08/influencers-being-key-distributors-of-coronavirus-fake-news.

32 Dan Patterson, "Climate Change Conspiracies Are Spreading Rapidly during UN's COP26 Event," CBS News (CBS Interactive, November 12, 2021), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-conspiracies-are-spreading-rapidly-during-uns-cop26-event/>.

33 "Fake News and Virality in Support of Conspiracists and Climate Change Deniers," Media Futures (Media Futures, 2022), <https://mediafutures.eu/fake-news-and-virality-in-support-of-conspiracists-and-climate-change-deniers/>.

harm and fatalities. In July of 2018, the District Police Chief of Telangana described a recent lynching in the region as ‘state of mass hysteria in many parts, because these villages saw these videos and really believed that yes, there is a gang out there that is going to take their children’.³⁴ The videos he referred to were shared via WhatsApp and other social media and invoked a false perception that children were being kidnapped. These videos contributed to five men being lynched after they were seen handing candy to children in public places. The mob gathered in such strength that the police were incapable of stopping them, which led to the death of Mohammed Azam and the injury of two of his companions. The mob had been able to mobilise so quickly because members of the mob had shared images of the men handing candy to children.

The giving of candy to children in the region is, in fact, an ordinary custom for travellers to partake in, but the prior perception of child kidnappings, coupled with the unknown outsiders being perceived as enticing children, engendered suspicion. This, combined with the rapid use of WhatsApp, led to the eruption of violence.

Later in the same year, it was reported that 14 separate incidents of mob violence related to social media use had occurred in the Maharashtra state of India.³⁵ One such incident also involved mass hysteria over perceived kidnappings of children, rumours that were spread via social media platforms. However, local police had received no reports of missing children and had no evidence of there being such at the time.

Child trafficking and abuse are frequently subjects of disinformation on social media, spread by well-known groups such as QAnon (an online conspiracy group frequently

34 Elyse Samuels, “Analysis | How Misinformation on WhatsApp Led to a Mob Killing in India,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, February 21, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/21/how-misinformation-whatsapp-led-deathly-mob-lynching-india/>.

35 Abhiram Ghadyalpatil Pretika Khanna, “Death by Social Media,” *Mint* (Live Mint, August 2, 2018), <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/jkSPTS-f6IJZ5vGC1CFVyzl/Death-by-Social-Media.html>.

spreading outlandish and unverified information). The most famous of these incidents relate to the PizzaGate incident. This conspiracy claimed, without ever having provided evidence, that a pizza parlour in Washington was a front for a child-sex trafficking ring. Tragically, a lone individual, believing the copious and entirely false reporting by private individuals and conspiracy groups, armed himself with an assault rifle and opened fire in the pizza parlour, trying to find evidence of child trafficking. No evidence was forthcoming.³⁶

Despite the potential harm of PizzaGate, the story has returned to being something of a joke online, and, despite some conspiracy peddlers like Alex Jones being forced to apologise for propagating untruths on the matter, others continue to lay claim to the veracity of the original, debunked stories.

36 Cecilia Kang and Sheera Frenkel, “‘Pizzagate’ Conspiracy Theory Thrives Anew in the Tiktok Era,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, June 27, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/technology/pizzagate-justin-bieber-qanon-tiktok.html>.

6. Disinformation Trends in Bhutan

6.1 Research Methodology

This study investigated the disinformation trends in Bhutan by adopting three key methodologies.

First, it conducted two focus group discussions, one with college students at Royal Thimphu College (RTC), to gather data on youth perceptions of disinformation and identify the sources of such that the investigators were unaware of. This was supplemented with a second focus group discussion with the stakeholders of the project, including those professionally engaged in the media, politicians, and individuals working for official groups with a vested interest in the integrity of information in the country.

Given the project's time frame, a focus group discussion was a more practical and achievable approach than individual interviews. Focus group discussions also have the added benefit of participants' talking points being enhanced by their hearing of like views, which can inspire a deeper reflection from those attending. These discussions were qualitatively analysed and checked for validity through the content analysis.

Second, content analysis was conducted on examples of disinformation, and in Bhutan's online and media record. The project's original intention was to conduct a content analysis of social media sites, checking for frequency of word use and so on within these platforms. A major impediment to this methodology, which is actually a potential positive for the integrity of information in Bhutan is that, in COVID-19 period, social media sites seem to have policed their sites and removed many of the posts recording falsehoods. Users may also have removed their posts, but with site administrator interaction with our investigation not forthcoming, it was impossible to know if the latter was the case.

Instead, this report analysed content for the individual veracity of the claims and used the data as illustrative examples. Applying a statistical analysis to the data we uncovered would not have been relevant as we would have first needed to verify data that was removed. Therefore, an analysis of the extant data would have only provided an incomplete record, and would not have been statistically valid.

Third, this report conducted an online survey, targeted at Bhutanese users of digital technology. This survey was shared through numerous digital avenues, including with college students, via Instagram and other social media, and a snow-ball sampling method where survey respondents shared the link with their friends, family, and other associates. This final method was particularly relevant, given the nature of information sharing and the importance of word-of-mouth to the distribution of information in Bhutan.

Although all forms of data collection were important to this study, the survey was planned to be the main source of collection, with the other two functioning as preliminary steps to verify the information and achieve a grounding in the trends that would be investigated in the survey. Accordingly, the survey forms the core component of the quantitative analysis of this project.

6.2 Mediascape in Bhutan: An overview

Bhutan is traditionally an oral society with little interest in print. The country leapfrogged into the digital era with the introduction of the Internet in 1999. The decline in the number of newspapers—from 11 in 2013 to five in 2022—indicates limited private enterprise and poor sustainability. Television (Bhutan Broadcasting Service) is state-owned, while there are a handful of private radio stations besides the state-owned service.

The rising engagement with mobile phones, television, radio and social media and an emphasis on digital transformation indicates that Bhutan is taking confident steps towards development. The mobile phone's widespread popularity (introduced in 2008 and reached a near saturation of 92.8 per cent

by 2012)³⁷ has enabled citizens to connect with each other and a wide range of social media platforms.

Social media has emerged as the primary communication platform, with 90 per cent of Bhutan's population on at least one social media platform and 98.8 per cent of Generation Z using it³⁸. Amongst these, Facebook has emerged as one of the most popular, with users availing it for news, information and entertainment.

Although studies on the use and impact of the Internet in Bhutan exist in relatively decent numbers, these impacts have largely been discussed in terms of infrastructure and growth, with much less emphasis on social dimensions. One such study emerged in 2015, when Dorji explored the impact of the Internet on academic performance, finding that Internet use for entertainment often harmed learning. However, its proper use in an educational environment was positive.³⁹ As such, this report represents one of a burgeoning field of studies on the larger social impacts of modern communication in Bhutan, which itself remains a ripe field for longer-term research.

6.3 Sites and forms of disinformation

Disinformation is not new in Bhutanese society. Before COVID-19 turned disinformation into a global concern, the traditional oral society had its share of 'rumours' and 'gossip'. Over 50 per cent of the Bhutanese agree that disinformation was always a problem in Bhutan.⁴⁰ Gossip is an even bigger problem, according to over 77 per cent of respondents. A few rumours, such as stories of head-hunters, have been doing the rounds for decades and resurfaced recently in eastern Bhutan, sending panic waves in the region.⁴¹ The pro-

37 "Bhutan Information and Media Impact Study Final Report - Moic.gov.bt," moic.gov.bt (MOIC, 2013), <https://www.moic.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/media-impact-study-2013.pdf>.

38 "Social Media Landscape in Bhutan - Bhutan Media Foundation," bmf.bt (BMF, 2021), <http://www.bmf.bt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Social-Media-Landscape-in-Bhutan.pdf>.

39 Lekey Dorji (Royal Institute of Management, 2015).

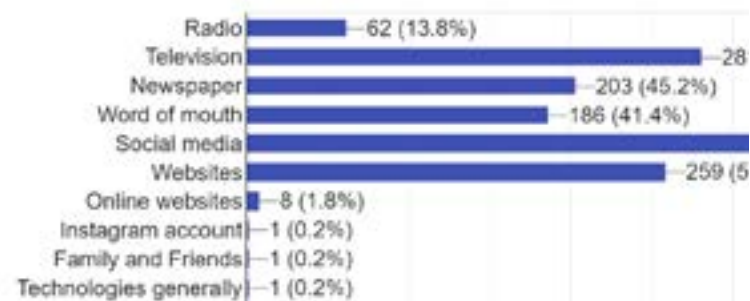
40 Disinformation survey, June 2022

41 Bhutan's Daily Newspaper, "Headhunter Rumor Goes Viral in

pensity toward misinformation and disinformation has taken more significant proportions since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased usage of social media platforms, lack of media and information literacy and an information vacuum from official sources has prompted this trend. The survey confirmed the findings of the BMF study⁴² that the majority (over 96 %) of the Bhutanese access information through social media. Disinformation is widespread, with over 64 per cent of the survey respondents encountering disinformation. Facebook is the primary site for encountering disinformation, with word of mouth coming a close second. Over 50 per cent of the respondents also experienced disinformation on social media networks like WeChat, WhatsApp, Tik Tok, Instagram, and social media influencers. Traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio scored better on the trust quotient.

What are your sources of information?

449 responses



Over 50 per cent of the Bhutanese find it difficult to source credible information, and a large number (70 per cent) believe that disinformation has become more apparent since COVID-19.

Even though the literacy rate is high (73 % in general and 93 % among youth), the oral nature of the society leads to people depending on social media networks such as WeChat,

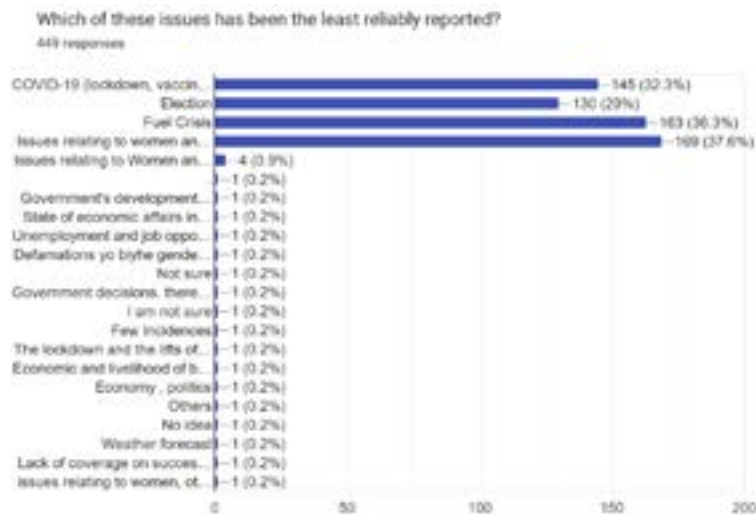
Eastern Bhutan," Kuensel Online (Kuensel, 2018), <https://kuenselonline.com/headhunter-rumor-goes-viral-in-eastern-bhutan/>.

42 Social Media Landscape, op. cit.

WhatsApp and Telegram. Many of these networks, which are end-to-end encrypted, make it difficult to decipher the source of misinformation. A stakeholder shared that 'I was fighting misinformation in my own home. My mother was tuned into a network with thousands of listeners. All that the person was doing was reading out whatever he had read on the Internet'.

Most disinformation is in English, with the national language Dzongkha being a close second, which may lead to misunderstanding certain forms of satire or obvious exaggeration that could potentially only be known to those versed in the nuances of idiomatic, modern English. It is interesting to note that over 60 per cent of the Bhutanese state that translation barriers are responsible for causing and spreading disinformation, which tends to support the prior assumption. For instance, there is no corresponding word for 'disinformation' in Dzongkha. Conversely, a lack of full comprehension of idiomatic English may indeed prevent the spread of certain forms of disinformation when, for example, certain forms of slander in everyday English are not translated as such by a reader.

Forms of Disinformation



In keeping with global trends, COVID-19 and its off-shoots such as lockdowns, vaccination, prevention and medical treatment, and origins of the virus, amongst others, was one of the primary forms of mal-information. Globally as in Bhutan, mal-information regarding COVID-19 was at its peak due to lack of information which bred several conspiracy theories and speculation. The lockdown rumours, which led to citizens' frenzied stocking of necessities, started shortly after the first lockdown in August 2020 in Bhutan. The lockdowns returned in early 2022, with the country battling the Omicron variant. 'When the government went for the Flu vaccination drive, there were rumours that they could cause COVID-19,' an official from the Ministry of Health said.

Though Bhutan's vaccination figures for other diseases is quite high, COVID-19 vaccination safety was of considerable public concern. One stakeholder stated that 'much of this was happening due to increased access to digital information with anti-vax content coming from the West'. A key strategy to reinforce public trust in the vaccine was to vaccinate the Prime Minister on national television, which may have contributed to Bhutanese resilience against forms of disinformation prevalent in the West (anti-vax movements, for example). There are certainly noteworthy forms of local resilience to certain kinds of health disinformation in Bhutan, but investigating this to identify the precise determinants is beyond the scope of this report, as a more longitudinal analysis and investigation would be required. Suffice it to state that participants in focus group discussions evinced a distaste for some health disinformation common in Western spheres.

People perceive that after COVID-19, issues regarding women and other genders, fuel crisis, and elections prove harmful to them. The fuel crisis may understandably feature here due to its recent impact. Although this crisis is likely to continue to varying extents as long as the Ukraine-Russia War does, it is not yet known to what extent disinformation concerning it will proliferate, except to state that participants were acutely aware of its informal spread online and, especially, by word-of-mouth. People perceive that harm caused by

disinformation to the country relates to COVID-19, elections, fuel crisis, and issues related to women and other genders, in that order.

Survey Responses at a glance

Over 95 percent of Bhutanese access information through social media.

64 per cent of Bhutanese have encountered disinformation.

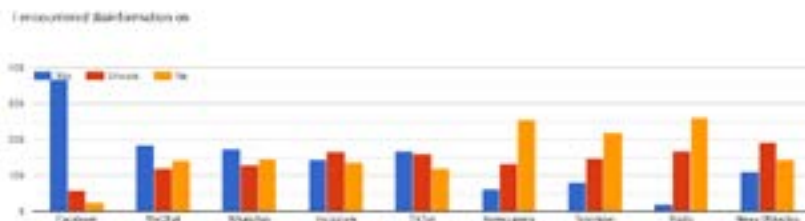
Facebook is the primary site for encountering disinformation; word of mouth is second.

35 per cent Bhutanese have fallen victim to disinformation.

Over 10 per cent have spread disinformation knowingly or unknowingly, while 25 per cent are not sure.

Most respondents do not know how to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources

Sites of Disinformation



Survey results demonstrate that Bhutanese spread disinformation for entertainment (71 per cent), for financial or personal gain (50 per cent), and to harm others (36 per cent). During the lockdowns, social media was a great source of entertainment. 'I would make outrageous memes and share them with my friends. It was purely for entertainment. I had no intention of spreading disinformation,' a younger participant shared at the focussed group discussion.

This comment above conforms to prior studies mentioned earlier. In this sense, one may ask whether spreading know-

ingly and demonstrably false information for entertainment to a closed discussion circle is even a problem. Satire and burlesque have long been respected and legitimate forms of social commentary and humour. However, traditional interpretations of humour are becoming increasingly hard to parse from the subject. A modern Internet adage is the idea of 'Poe's Law', which refers to the fact that no matter how extreme a satire may be, there will be a more extreme view on the topic, more outrageous, but nevertheless presented with genuine belief. As such, to the casual observer, differentiating between satire and truth online is increasingly difficult.

6.4 Trust

With 64 per cent of Bhutanese encountering misinformation during the past three years,⁴³ trust, or the lack of it, has emerged as a major concern. The greater inclination since the pandemic's start may be attributed to spending more time online and psychological insecurity. Roughly 35 per cent of the survey respondents perceived that they had fallen victim to disinformation, while 24 per cent were unsure. About 10 per cent of respondents admitted to spreading disinformation knowingly or unknowingly, and a large section (25 per cent) were uncertain of doing so.

Are you actively employed or engaged in the spread of information via media sources?
489 responses

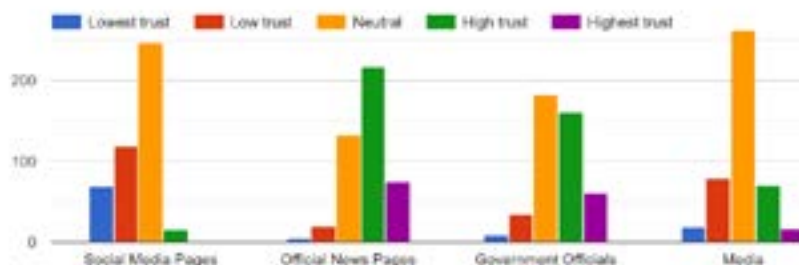


The Bhutanese are conflicted regarding whether they trust traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio to give them timely, credible information. On the surface, traditional media is more trusted than social media. However, the information vacuum often leads people to trust information over social media. Several examples testify to this.

When the government of Bhutan decided to change their tourism policy and levy an increased Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) for foreign tourists in June 2022, the ‘rumour’ was widely circulated and discussed on social media, particularly WeChat, WhatsApp, and Telegram for weeks before the traditional media reported it.⁴⁴

A similar information gap was witnessed during rumours of fuel shortage in June 2022, leading to panic buying. The panic turned the rumour true, with people lining up for hours to hoard fuel leading to a shortage in Paro and Thimphu.⁴⁵ A lack of clarification from the concerned government departments or information through traditional media further escalated the crisis.

Who do you trust the most?



A key factor which led to people believing the information was its implication for them. As one of the stakeholders put it, people’s trust depends on the ‘cost of believing’ that information. The fuel crisis served as an excellent example of this. People believed in rumours on social media because ‘what if BBS is wrong? I will be left with no fuel’.⁴⁶

The official Facebook pages of the government departments such as the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), ministry of health, and ministry of information and communications are well

44 Stakeholder FGD, June 2022

45 “Fuel Crisis: Is the Govt. Hiding the Crisis? – Bhutan Times,” Bhutan Times (Bhutan Times, 2022), <https://bhutantimes.bt/index.php/2022/06/20/fuel-crisis-is-the-govt-hiding-the-crisis/>.

46 Stakeholder FGD, June 2022

trusted, with government officials coming a close second.⁴⁷ The swing towards government sharing information on their social media handles and eliminating the traditional media as a viable medium, has further escalated the existential crisis for the traditional media. This has led to most Bhutanese cross-checking information from the Facebook pages of government departments.

The potential danger here for truth-telling is that international governments have often engaged in openly false statements to deceive their citizens. For example, in 2002, the Liberal-National-Party (LNP) government of Australia doctored footage to portray an illegal migrant as threatening to throw their infant into the sea. Later described as the ‘Children Overboard Scandal’ and, cleverly played by the LNP prior to an election, it helped to secure their re-election on a militant migration policy. This is not to assume that government would misuse information to deceive voters in Bhutan, at least not to such an extent. However, the possibility of such malfeasance should be constantly watched for, further highlighting the importance of reader evaluation of sources. The tilt towards trusting government sources, including official Facebook pages, Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), and the Facebook page of the king reiterate the concern mentioned above.

Contrary to global trends where fact-checking has emerged as a major off-shoot in the media industry, Bhutan remains an exception. Due to limited media and information literacy, efforts to verify Fact-checking have been limited to checking social media handles of government or traditional media.

6.5 Perceptions of truth

Facebook has emerged as a key site for spreading disinformation, with certain public groups becoming notorious for it. At times it is not the post which is fictitious but the comments which are responsible for spreading mal-information. The increasing number of fake accounts and the anonymity that comes with them have exacerbated this phenomenon.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, one cannot ignore that social media has pro-

47 Disinformation survey, June 2022

48 Stakeholder (Youth) FGD, June 2022

vided a voice to different sections of society. For example, one discussant stated that ‘people go to social media if they perceive that they are not getting justice’.⁴⁹

The dependence for verification information on social media handles of the government and traditional media is reflected in that over 50 per cent of respondents find it challenging to source credible information, while 38 per cent are unsure. The lack of credible reporting pertains to issues regarding women and other non-male genders (38 per cent), fuel crisis (36 per cent), Covid-19 (32 per cent) and elections (29 per cent). These figures tend to indicate that reporting is more highly trusted on health and political issues than on social and financial ones. However, a 32 and 29 per cent rate is still a substantial figure, indicating noteworthy levels of distrust on such reporting.

6.6 Media and Information Literacy

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is increasingly perceived as an essential life skill, enabling us to navigate the information fog and avoid concealed mines within the mist.⁵⁰ MIL has assumed critical proportions in the information society as it ‘informs our consumption, production, discovery, evaluation and sharing of information’.⁵¹

Even though the adoption of digital media has been rapid in Bhutan, media and information literacy (MIL) is limited. A media literacy survey conducted by the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) in 2019 revealed that social media is widely used across the country, irrespective of age or educational level. Most illiterate respondents still owned a smartphone and used social media, especially WeChat, communicating through voice messaging.

Opinion on whether the education system in Bhutan has prepared people to recognise disinformation is divided, with 30 per cent respondents disagreeing, 36 per cent unsure, and 32 per cent agreeing to it. People also perceive that the

49 Stakeholder (Youth) FGD, June 2022

50 UNESCO, op. cit

51 Ibid.

government, mainstream media, and social media dominate in combating disinformation. Private citizens, politicians, and local leaders score lower than the aforementioned groups. 35 per cent of the respondents falling victim to disinformation and 20 per cent being unsure of whether they did, indicates the level of MIL.

Many spread disinformation knowingly or unknowingly and are unable to discern between credible and non-credible sources of information. General responses generated by the survey revealed that the majority of the respondents were not equipped to identify disinformation and cited ‘instinct’, ‘google’, ‘social media’, and ‘official pages’ as their means of verification. The respondents clearly did not know how to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources of information. Most of the young respondents at the first focus group discussion were aware that disinformation is prevalent in memes, morphed pictures, and tampered videos, amongst others.

They were universally unaware of tools for identifying mis- and disinformation. The survey confirmed these findings to be general. Many respondents gave generic replies reflecting this—‘I verify it immediately’, ‘checking authenticity, fact checking’, and ‘proper citation’, for example. This weakens the claim of 7 per cent of respondents that they try to verify disinformation on encountering it. This number might be better understood as self-confidence in doing so, not as an ability to do so. About 46 per cent of respondents talk to their friends and family to verify information, a spiral which may feed disinformation further verifies the oral tradition’s importance in Bhutan, and its potential weaknesses.

7. Combating Disinformation and Misinformation: A toolkit

7.1 The need for Media and Information (MIL) Literacy

MIL is essential because, through it, people can be equipped with critical thinking skills, enabling them to demand high-quality and rights-respecting services from all content providers.⁵²

The ‘infodemic’ on digital platforms has further drawn attention to the need to enable people’s ability to think critically and click wisely. According to UNESCO, Media and information literacy enables people to engage with information critically. It also strengthens effective content and information agencies, enabling the better use of diverse platforms for its spread.⁵³

The disinformation survey for this toolkit shows that 64 per cent of respondents encountered disinformation in the past three years, while 24 per cent were unsure about it. Bhutan’s low media and information literacy rates likely contribute to this. Due to the low rate, many Bhutanese people tend to believe the contents on social media regardless of their thinking and the mindset that it could be false. They also tend to believe whatever content a high-ranking government official would share, whether on social media or through word-of-mouth, without questioning whether it could be false or that

52 Grizzle, A., Wilson, C., Tuazon, R., Cheung, C. K., Lau, J., Fischer, R., ... & Gulston, C. (2021). Media and information literate citizens: think critically, click wisely! (UNESCO)

53 “About Media and Information Literacy,” UNESCO.org (UNESCO, 2022), <https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/media-information-literacy/about>.

even the high-ranking official could be misinformed.⁵⁴

MIL can also help people in determining whether information seen online is credible or not, regardless of individual biases. This has a trickle-down effect on media quality because such individuals require realistic messages of higher quality. For example, during the 2018 Election in Bhutan, in many Facebook groups, people posted and shared content which defamed the political parties they did not support. If people are not media and information literate, this can harm both the reader’s perspective and the reputation of the political parties. However, with MIL, people can keep aside their biases, even if they do not support the defamed parties, and be able to determine whether the content is credible or not.

7.2 Fact-Checking - A capsule

Fact-checking is an essential part of combatting disinformation and misinformation that verifies whether the claim or the rumours are true with scientific evidence from global and credible organisations such as the WHO and UNESCO.

Even though the difference of intent between disinformation and misinformation can be theoretically explained, in real life, it can be challenging to distinguish whether the social media post is entirely false or if there is a harmful intent behind those posts.

54 FGD, Stakeholders, June 2022

Questions to ask and actions to take:

Q1: Who is behind the information?

CHECK THE SOURCE: Is the message/info coming from a **CREDIBLE AUTHORITY** or **EXPERT** on the subject? Googling it might throw up some relevant information!

Q2: What do other sources say?

VERIFY and **CORROBORATE** the message from other authoritative sources, news media or fact-checkers.

Q3: What is the evidence?

ANALYSE the **EVIDENCE** shared. Does it support the claim? Check authentic and official websites for information

One can do a simple reliability check. Let's start with a quick example: Take a look at this. Is this really a picture of a cow chilling on a BMW?



This was a hoax. But you can employ logic to question it this way:

1. Will the car be dented if the cow climbed up there?
2. Does a milking cow make sense in a grazing field or on a BMW Series 3 in a snowy field?
3. You might also want to pay attention to the car's number plate (it has been fuzzed out). It is a clear indication that the image has been manipulated.

Here are more detailed tips from World Health Organization to tackle misinformation and disinformation:⁵⁵

Assess the source

Where did you get the information from?

- If orally through your friends and family, verify the source. If on a social media platform, check to see if other official pages or mainstream media outlets have disseminated the same information. Understanding how long social media accounts have been active and their number of followers is a good means of verifying information integrity. 'About Us' and 'Contact Us' pages can help to verify accuracy and the legitimacy of offered data.
- When it comes to images or videos, make it a habit to verify their authenticity. For images, you can use reverse image search tools provided by Google and TinEye. For videos, you can use Amnesty International's YouTube DatViewer, which extracts thumbnails that you can enter into reverse image search tools.

⁵⁵ "Let's Flatten the Infodemic Curve," World Health Organization (World Health Organization), accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/let-s-flatten-the-infodemic-curve>.

Other clues that a source may be unreliable or inaccurate include unprofessional visual design, poor spelling and grammar, or excessive use of all caps or exclamation points.

Go beyond the headlines

Headlines may be deliberately provocative or sensational. Credible information and their claims are backed up with facts.

Identify the author

Search whether the author of the information is credible or not.

Check the date

Is the information up to date and relevant to current events? Sometimes old news can be manipulated to appear as current.

Turn to fact-checkers


When in doubt, consult trusted fact-checking organisations, such as the International Fact-Checking Network and global news outlets focused on debunking misinformation, including the Associated Press and Reuters.


During the pandemic's beginning, numerous rumours surfaced in Bhutan. Without a dedicated website or an organisation to fact-check rumours or claims in the country, the Ministry of Health's Facebook page took up the responsibility to fact-check the COVID-19-related rumours and disinformation in the country.


For example:⁵⁶



The Ministry of Health's Facebook page also shared videos and posts from credible global organisations such as the WHO to provide facts to the people.

WhatsApp Post With  = Red Flag!

Look for the  sign. This indicates the post is NOT original and has been forwarded. You may want to investigate the post carefully.

If the post has  sign it means it has been forwarded multiple times. Please be alert before sharing it further. You could be unknowingly sharing misinformation.

7.3 Social Media Verification⁵⁷

The proliferation of disinformation on social media implies that professional journalists and newsrooms, including many of the consumers of the media, can be exposed to

⁵⁶ "MoHBhutan," Facebook (MoHBhutan, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/MoHBhutan/posts/3031830040211925>.

⁵⁷ "Synopsis - UNESCO," en.unesco.org (UNESCO, 2022), https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module_4.pdf.

disinformation and even be victims of it. There is always a chance for mistaking satirical material and sharing or publicising it as fact. The issue worsens when abundant visual evidence is available online, all of which can be decontextualised and reused in subsequent news stories, as we see daily internationally with hoaxers deceiving politicians and professional journalists.

However, there are several ways to evaluate the reliability of a certain source who has information to contribute or a tale to tell. It is necessary to pose important questions and provide direct answers to some of them while providing evidence-based responses to others.

It is feasible to manually triangulate a source by reviewing their social media history to look for hints that could indicate the plausibility of their being at a specific location at a specific time, in addition to using verification tools to determine where a source was posted from. The manual verification method also helps remove information posted by bots by investigating their past interactions with other users and examining any links in posts.

While the origin of visual content may not be able to be determined with complete certainty, there are some 'red flags' that can be found by a straightforward verification method that asks:

1. Is the content original, or has it been deceptively 'scrapped' from earlier reporting?
2. Has the content been altered in any way digitally?
3. Using visual cues in the material, can we verify the date and location of the photo or video capture?

We must also comprehend the many forms of typical deceptive or misleading visual information to identify red flags effectively:

Wrong time/wrong place: The most prevalent sort of deceptive images are outdated visuals that are disseminated again with fresh assertions about what they depict. In these situations, virality is frequently occurs through the acciden-

tal spreading of content that can be difficult to retract but is simple to refute.

Manipulated content: Content that has been digitally altered using photo or video editing software is referred to as 'manipulated content.'

Staged content: Original content that is produced or distributed to deceive. Some of the introduced basic tools and techniques to learn and practice source and content verification by UNESCO:

Facebook account analysis: Using an online tool from Intel Techniques. You can find out more about a source by analysing their Facebook account.

Twitter account analysis: Using this guide from Africa Check, you can find out more about the source by analysing their social history and thereby identify whether it is a bot tweeting

Reverse Image Search: As mentioned earlier, you can check to determine if an image is being reused to support a new claim or event using either TinEye, RevEye, or Google Reverse Image Search. It is possible to determine whether one or more image databases (which include billions of photos) contain an earlier version of the image using a reverse image search. It is a big red flag and suggests that the image is recycled from an earlier event if a reverse image search reveals that it existed before the event. If a reverse image search produces no results, the image may not be authentic; further verification is still required.

YouTube Data Viewer: Although there are no publicly accessible 'reverse video search' tools like Amnesty's YouTube Data Viewer, InVID190, and NewsCheck191 can identify video thumbnails for YouTube videos and can reveal whether earlier versions of the video have been uploaded by conducting a reverse image search on those thumbnails (tools also display the precise upload time).

EXIF Viewer: EXIF is a type of metadata that is added to vi-

sual content and contains various information generated at the time of capture by digital cameras and mobile devices. The precise time and date, location metadata, device data, and light setting information are a few examples. Thus, EXIF metadata is very beneficial in the verification process, but a significant drawback is that social networks remove the metadata from visual content. Therefore, photos uploaded to Facebook or Twitter will not show EXIF information. However, you can utilise EXIF information to confirm the content if you can get in touch with the uploader and obtain the actual image file. Considering that EXIF data can be altered, additional verification is necessary.

This is how you can reverse search an image on google.

1. Open the Google app or Chrome app on your Android or tablet.
2. Go to the website with the image.
3. Touch and hold the image.
4. Tap Search with Google Lens.
5. Select how you want to search: ...
6. At the bottom, scroll to find your related search results.

Step-by-step guide to Reverse Image Check

Step 1: Describe the picture/post in easy 3–5-word phrase for web search

Step 2: Google Reverse Image Search



Step 3: Upload the image on the search



Step 4: When we do a “Reverse Image Search” with this image, we get results that match the image

Step 5: Check the dates of the posts, the claims and the sources.

Google Fact Check Explorer - A Search Engine ONLY of facts. Search on Fact Check Explorer gives results only from fact-checking websites.



7.4 How can you help?

An aware citizen needs to consider the various tools for combating disinformation and thinking and verifying before they share any information. Often, one encounters disinformation at the community, friends and family level, and it becomes important to talk to them about it. Here are a few tips on

how to talk to them⁵⁸:

1. Listen

Let them tell you why they believe what they do, and be sure to let them know you understand their fears.

Instead of focusing on the false claim, focus on the “wider issue” and how they feel about it.

Fact-checking may seem like a smart way to prove someone wrong, but it may also push them away, ending the conversation.

2. Lead them to credible sources

Let them know that you know finding accurate information can be hard, especially in times like this when the information about COVID-19 is constantly changing.

Underscore the need for them to find credible sources who are not in a position to profit from the spread of misinformation.

Remind them that an expert on one topic is not necessarily an expert on another.

3. Empathise

When talking to a friend or family member, ensure them that you understand why they might find it hard to trust some sources for information.

Ask questions to understand why they believe what they do. Admit that you also had times when it was difficult to know what was true and false.

If possible, share a time when you have been misled by misinformation and explain why.

4. Do not shame or embarrass

Try to keep the conversation between the two of you, either face-to-face or through direct messages on social media sites. Remember, no one likes to appear to be wrong.

Posting conversations social media comments could backfire, exposing more people to the misinformation.

Using a caring tone of voice; listening and showing empathy

58 Kim Witbeck, “Tips for Talking with Family and Friends about Misinformation,” Oregon Health News (Oregon Health News, December 10, 2021), <https://covidblog.oregon.gov/tips-for-talking-with-family-and-friends-about-misinformation/>.

may help the person open up to your ideas.

5. Use inclusive language

When possible, use inclusive language to make it clear that you see yourself being impacted similarly.

Share how you also struggle to know who or what to trust.

Since the inability to communicate effectively across languages has always been a barrier to sharing information, the most effective approach to interacting with families, friends, and communities is using the appropriate linguistic medium. Any given information might be vernacularised to discuss its veracity or credibility. For instance, it would be challenging for English speakers to understand crucial information broadcast on News TV in Dzongkha and vice versa.

Speaking every language with the proficiency that the needed group requires is challenging. Moreover, the unavailability of technical words such as disinformation and misinformation in local languages does not allow for smooth communication. For example, in Bhutan, the younger generations are more fluent in English than in their local languages, creating a barrier between their generation and their previous generations. Such an approach requires effort, patience, and a willingness to translate complex ideas into simple terms from one language to another, which is often equivalent to one thought system.

What do journalists need to do?

For example, ‘crowd-sourcing’ is essential if the media are to uncover and report on beneath-the-radar disinformation spread on social messaging or email.

The media should be careful that external post-publication corrections do not become a substitute for internal processes of quality control. Journalists must do better and ‘get it right’ in the first place or forfeit society having believable media.

Journalists cannot leave it to fact-checking organisations to do the journalistic work of verifying questionable claims presented by sources (whether such claims are reported in the media or whether they bypass journalism and appear directly on social media). The ability of news practitioners to

go beyond ‘he said, she said’ journalism and to investigate the veracity of claims made by those being covered has to be improved.

Journalism must also proactively detect and uncover new cases and forms of disinformation. This is critical for the news media and represents an alternative to regulatory approaches to ‘fake news’. It also encourages journalists to engage in societal dialogue about how people at large decide on credibility and why some of them share unverified information.

8. Key Resources

8.1 Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training
<https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

8.2 Disinformation Toolkit <https://www.interaction.org/documents/disinformation-toolkit/>

8.3 Tackling COVID-19 misinformation

8.4 Spot and fight disinformation
https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/spot-and-fight-disinformation_en

8.5 Disinformation Toolkit: Apps on Google Play
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=uk.nimbl.disinfo&hl=en&gl=US>

9.6 Fact Shala tip sheets on news and information literacy
<https://factshala.com/resources/>

8.6 10 Tips to Minimise the Sharing of Misinformation via Social Media Channels
https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/aap/documents/UNHCR_AAPTool_CT_Tips_on_using_Social_Media.pdf

8.7 Counter Disinformation | Counter Disinfo Online Toolkit
<https://counterdisinfo.org/>

8.8 RESIST Counter Disinformation Toolkit
<https://counteringdisinformation.org/interventions/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit>

8.9 Training of Trainers Program to Address Disinformation and Promote Media Literacy – Toolkit for Educators
<https://asean.org/book/training-of-trainers-program-to-address-disinformation-and-promote-media-literacy-tool->

kit-for-educators/

8.10 The Full Fact Toolkit
<https://fullfact.org/toolkit/>

8.11 Digital News Report 2022, Reuters Institute
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022>



**A Journalists'
Association of
Bhutan Publication**