



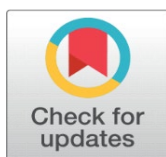


ANALYZING IDENTIFIED CASES OF COVID-19 DISINFORMATION IN INDIAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Media is an essential tool for disseminating information to the masses and educating them while maintaining professional ethics and piety. The responsibility of providing accurate information and preventing the spread of disinformation or erroneous coverage rests with mainstream media. During a natural disaster or pandemic like COVID-19, media reporting becomes even more critical as people require up-to-date information on government policies and guidelines. Media plays a vital role in uniting people during times of crisis to help them fight against a catastrophe effectively. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several cases have been observed in India where the media failed to fulfil its responsibilities, leading to criticism for inaccurate information and spreading hoaxes. The purpose of the study is to look at the selected cases of fake news in mainstream media during the first four months of COVID-19 in India and the societal consequences around it. The research methodology includes a qualitative approach. The selected cases were studied to look deeper into media coverage during the pandemic. Personal interviews with media professionals were conducted to further unfold the underpinnings. The findings are helpful for stakeholders to understand the importance of responsible journalism during times of crisis and recommendations would certainly help us fight the menace of fake news.

Keywords: Disinformation, Covid-19, Fake News, Journalism, Media, Mass Communication, Skepticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Media has been a powerful force for the past one decade [Cranley \(2019\)](#), shaping our experiences of the world and ourselves while also playing a crucial role in framing opinions and shaping our thoughts through the content it produces and the way it presents that content. In times of crisis, media becomes a rational and sensitive life system, feeding messages to the masses and persuading their ideas, opinions, and experiences [Thacker \(1991\)](#). In recognition of the crucial media's

contribution in uniting the general masses during public health crises, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, issued six-point directives in 2020. These directives stress the role of media in the act of providing information, issuing alerts, and readying individuals to endure and reconstruct amidst the emergency situation [ET. \(2020\)](#).

The covid-19 pandemic has further underlined the critical role played by media in shaping public opinion and influencing public behavior. During a pandemic, media plays a crucial role in disseminating information about the virus, its spread, and measures to control it. Inaccurate or false information can lead to panic, confusion, and even harm to public health. It is crucial for media to take a responsible approach to reporting on pandemics, ensuring that the information provided is accurate, up-to-date, and based on scientific evidence. The role of media is not just to inform the public but also to provide a context for the information they receive. Media has a duty to present the information in a way that is clear, accurate, and understandable to the general public.

Be it India, Japan, Spain or Germany, during times of crisis, there is often a heightened dependency on media as people tend to consume more media than usual [Blasco et al. \(2020\)](#), [Lemenager et al. \(2020\)](#), [TOI. \(2020\)](#), [Watanabe & Omori \(2020\)](#).

The Media Dependency theory suggests that during periods of chaos and political changes, people are more prone to resort to media as a means of seeking comfort and acquiring information. This theory posits that media dependency is a two-step process: in times of crisis, individuals use more media to search for information, and as a result, they become more susceptible to the effects that the media can have on audience members [Loveless \(2008\)](#).

Various national and international agencies have recorded an upsurge in media consumption since the covid-19 restrictions began. Recent research reports have indicated a surge in traffic on websites and news applications in the general news category. For instance, Comscore, an American company, specializing in media measurement and analytics, analyzed how the lockdown affected digital usage in India. Their findings revealed that during the initial week of the lockdown, there was a 17% rise in visits to such websites compared to the preceding week, marking an 89% increase when contrasted with the usage six weeks earlier.

KPMG, a worldwide consortium of expert companies offering services in Audit, Tax, and Advisory capacities, also reported a notable surge in digital media consumption during the pandemic in its report 'COVID-19: The many shades of a crisis' [KPMG. \(2020\)](#). These reports indicate that there has been an increase in media consumption, and the dependency on media has grown ever since the covid-19 outbreak took place in India and across the world.

Overall, people tend to consume more information through various means, primarily through mainstream media, to remain updated on the changing situation during a crisis such as a pandemic. The increase in media consumption suggests that people rely on media to act accordingly for their survival and well-being.

One of the researchers, who had a rich background in the core print industry and served as an admin of a WhatsApp group where students, colleagues and friends used to inquire about the authenticity of skeptical news items received on their social media handles, came across cases of mainstream media disinformation at the onset of the pandemic. Witnessing these disinformation cases in mainstream media piqued the researchers' curiosity, leading to the foundation of the study, aimed at delving deeper into these instances. As the study began to examine cases of

disinformation with inquisitive eyes, it also sought to explore the motives behind disinformation and examined the societal consequences it brings. In the end, the study highlighted the consequences of repeated disinformation cases in mainstream media and discussed how this concern can be addressed.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. MEDIA, CRISIS AND DISINFORMATION: AN OLD TALE

The concern raised by the Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) pointed towards the danger of disinformation. He categorically stated it as 'Infodemic' i.e Information Pandemic and considered that disinformation spread faster and easily than a virus [World Health Organization. \(2020\)](#).

Earlier also media has done unchecked reporting - bringing criticism. On November 09, 2016, the ruling government announced the demonetization of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 currency notes in India, which was a significant decision for the country's economy. However, soon after the announcement, some of the top media organizations praised the government's decision on baseless claims which later drew massive criticism for their fake content. Zee News went as far as to broadcast an entire show, claiming how a Nano-chip embedded in the newly introduced Rs 2000 note would help the government to curb corruption. Similarly, Aaj Tak journalists also discussed similar claims on their channel [Sharif \(2016\)](#).

However, these claims by the top media channels were later exposed as completely fake. The spokesperson for RBI, Alpana Killawala [Reserve Bank of India. \(2016\)](#), told the media that such technology does not exist at the moment in the world, and questioned how it could have been introduced. This incident highlights the dangers of fake news and how it can be spread by even the top media organizations, leading to widespread disinformation and confusion among the public [Suman. \(2016\)](#).

The incident also highlights the importance of media ethics and responsible journalism, especially during critical moments like the demonetization of currency notes, which had a noteworthy influence on the nation's economic landscape and the everyday experiences of its inhabitants. It was later discussed at length that it is essential for media organizations to fact-check their information before broadcasting or publishing it to prevent the spread of false information and uphold their credibility among the public.

On one occasion in July 2020, IANS- News Agency fell for a fake Twitter account of late Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput's father. A tweet by the leading news agency of the country stated that Sushant Singh's father demands justice and looks for a CBI inquiry into his son's death. Several media houses like The New India Express, Outlook, Times, and National Herald also picked this story. Later it was found by factchecking websites that the tweet was made by an imposter account which had a long history of circulating fake information. The claims made by the imposter account were further refuted by the father of deceased actor [Chaudhuri \(2020\)](#). Similarly, a slang 'Imma Bounce' used by Sushant Singh Rajput's girlfriend, who was accused of his death, was taken out of context by Times Now as 'Bounced Cheque' and the national channel even added a picture of bounced cheque in the story [Chowdhury \(2020\)](#). The news channel made a story on a popular phrase 'Imma Bounce' which means 'I am gonna leave'.

Studies exploring the intricate relationship between media trust and consumption patterns have consistently highlighted that when individuals perceive the presence of disinformation and disinformation in news content, their trust in

traditional news media diminishes. This erosion of trust is often a result of concerns about the accuracy, integrity, and credibility of the information presented by media outlets, prompting individuals to seek alternative sources for information dissemination and consumption [Hameleers et al. \(2022\)](#). And, when citizens develop a sense of distrust in mainstream media outlets, they often exhibit a tendency to disengage from these traditional sources of information and seek out alternative channels and platforms for news and content consumption [Tsfati & Cappella \(2003\)](#).

In conducting a comprehensive review of the existing literature up to the time of writing this research paper, it was observed that there is a notable gap of studies explicitly addressing the pervasive occurrences of fake news within mainstream media and the underlying factors contributing to such journalistic practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on content analysis through which one can draw conclusions and generate assumptions about the communication, it entails locating patterns, themes, and meanings within the data [Krippendorff \(2013\)](#). It is a technique used to methodically examine and analyse communication-related content, such as texts, photographs, videos, or other types of media.

In the pursuit of studying fake news within the Indian media, the researcher undertook a comprehensive analysis of three distinct information sources i.e Online news portals, Hindi and English Newspapers and Indian News Agencies. Over a duration of four months, a detailed evaluation was conducted on every piece of news content published or broadcasted, guided by predefined criteria established by recognized authorities tasked with identifying disinformation like Google News Initiative. Notably, only those news items that had been specifically flagged either by government agencies or validated by reputable fake news debunking websites were considered for inclusion in this study.

Researchers also conducted personal interviews of four senior media professionals to further look into the issue and get the experts opinion on it. All these experts had experience of more than a decade of handling media content. They all started working with print media as a journalist and now handle fact checking for different news portals. The interview technique for gathering data involves the introduction of oral-verbal cues, prompting participants to reply using spoken language [Kothari \(2019\)](#). As interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity, identity of the interviewees have not been revealed. The interviews were conducted telephonically.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is divided into two sections:

Section I: Unfolding the popular disinformation cases

Section II: Personal interviews of Media Professionals

First, the selected cases based on the above-mentioned criteria (In the Methodology part) were analyzed. As all of these cases were refuted by some of the government agencies and were also debunked by popular IFCN (International Fact Checking Websites) certified websites, researchers tried to find out disinformation dynamics like (motive/intent behind such coverage, its impact in the society through personal interviews of the senior media professionals. Additionally,

researchers looked at addressing the concerns and tried to find some recommendations for solving the issue.

5. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To investigate COVID-19 disinformation in Indian Media during early period of pandemic
- 2) To explore motives behind disinformation
- 3) To examine the societal consequences of disinformation

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. SECTION I: UNFOLDING THE POPULAR DISINFORMATION CASES

Objective 1: To investigate COVID-19 disinformation in Indian Media during early period of pandemic

Mainstream Media and Disinformation

The reputation of media houses like Daily Mail, The Sun, and India Times were so high that even those who are skeptical of media coverage tend to believe their reports. Unfortunately, these reputable media houses can still get things wrong. In one example, the increasing level of Sulfur-di-oxide in Wuhan, China was falsely linked to mass cremation of coronavirus deaths by these reputable media houses. This disinformation can create an atmosphere of fear and panic, leading people to make hasty and unwise decisions [Mehta \(2020\)](#). One such case was observed when senior advocate Prashant Bhusan on June 28, 2021, posted tweets terming covid-19 vaccine unsafe for usage. His tweets were flagged as misleading by Twitter [Kaushik \(2021\)](#). Also, a report published by World Health Organisation in 2021 shows wrong explanations of health-related news, which often amplifies during disastrous situations like pandemic, has severe negative influence on people's mental health and their overall decision making regarding various issues pertinent to their health [WHO. \(2021\)](#). As per this report of WHO, nearly 6000 people were hospitalized in the first three months of pandemic due to Covid related disinformation.

One significant surge in fake news reporting occurred during the Tablighi Jamaat incident in the last week of March 2020. On different occasions, various news sources like Amar Ujala (a Hindi Daily), Asian News International (ANI) - news agency, and Zee News (a national news channel) were found to be disseminating false information that created chaos among the masses.

Case: 1 Amar Ujala

There were cases of fake news reported by mainstream media houses which were later snowballed through social media platforms. It was observed that Amar Ujala allegedly reported false news story related to Tablighi Jamaat, which was later refuted by the concerned authorities.

Amar Ujala reportedly published an article claiming that the group had asked for non-vegetarian food and openly defecated, which was later refuted by the Saharanpur Police [Patel \(2020\)](#). But the worst thing observed in this particular case is, despite Saharanpur Police refuting the claims made by Amar Ujala, the Facebook post has not been deleted yet (See Pic:1).

Figure 1



Figure 1 Screenshot of AmarUjala's Unchecked Reporting

Source Amar Ujala's official Facebook Page

Figure 2



Figure 2 Saharanpur's Police Tweet Refuting the Claims Made by Amar Ujala

Source Twitter handle of Saharanpur Police

Peoples' reaction on Amar Ujala's report

Figure 3



Figure 3 Some Comments from the Above-Mentioned Coverage from (Pic-1)

Case 2: Asian News International (ANI)

“On April 7, 2020, a tweet by ANI quoted Sankalp Sharma, DCP, Gautam Budh Nagar, stating that people who had contact with Tablighi Jamaat members were put in quarantine. Later, DCP Sankalp Sharma clarified that the tweet was misquoted and aimed at spreading fake news.” Usha (2020).

Figure 4



Figure 4 Misleading Tweet (R) by ANI and Refuting Tweet Through Official Handle of DCP Noida (L)

Source boomlive.com

Figure 5



Figure 5 A Thread from ANI’s Tweet Where a User Asked People to Shoot and Take Actions Before it too Late

Case 3: Zee News

In two separate incidents, Zee News was caught spreading lies during the pandemic. On April 02, 2020, the national news channel lied about stone pelting at the ambulance of a medical team carrying Tablighi Jamaat members infected with coronavirus in Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The claim was refuted by the Firozabad police via twitter. It also warned Zee News to delete the tweet [Madaik \(2020\)](#).

In another incident just after three days, Zee News on April 09, 2023 claimed that the entire north-eastern India has 11 cases of corona patients and that too is the outcome of Tablighi Jamaat. The Arunachal Pradesh Information and Public Relation Department debunked that claim of Zee News by stating that there is only a single case till date. The tweet read, “The reporting by Zeenews is false and does not carry any authenticity” [Madaik \(2020\)](#).

Figure 6



Figure 6 Two Different Refuting Tweets from Firozabad Police (L) and Arunachal Pradesh Information and Public Relation Department (R)

Source Logical Indian

Case 4: Zee – MP and Chhattisgarh

Zee- MP and Chhattisgarh aired the news of people belonging to Tablighi Jamaat creating ruckus, spitting on doctors and trying to escape from the quarantine Centre

on April 04, 2020. All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Raipur's hospital administration took to twitter to refute the claim made by one of the top state TV channels [Agarwal \(2020\)](#).

Figure 7



Figure 7 Screenshot of MP and Chhattisgarh's Claim (L) and Official Tweet of AIIMS-Raipur Refuting These Claims.

Source Twitter.com

Case 5: Aaj Tak

An incident happened when Major (retired) Ranjit Singh expressed his frustration on Twitter towards Aaj Tak, one of the prominent news channels in the country, for broadcasting false news about his death due to covid-19 on April 15, 2020. Major Ranjit Singh, who is the president of the RWA (Resident Welfare Association) of Defence Colony, conveyed the profound sadness and shock that this incident caused to himself and his family [Express News Service \(2020\)](#). Big organizations like AajTak making such a grave mistake points towards one of the interviewees' conclusion that tough competition of providing news at the earliest can lead to wrong coverage.

Figure 8



Figure 8 Screenshot from Major Ranjit Singh's Official Twitter Confirming he is Alive, Following the Fake News of His Death by AajTak

Source twitter.com

As a retired army personnel, Major Ranjit Singh's reputation was at stake due to the broadcast of such disinformation. This incident highlights the issue of the media's responsibility to verify the authenticity of the information before broadcasting it. The spread of fake news and disinformation not only damages the reputation of individuals but also undermines the credibility of the media and their responsibility in spreading precise information to the general public. Such incidents also lead to emotional and psychological distress to the individuals and their families who become victims of such false news. The incident with Major Ranjit Singh emphasizes the need for media organizations to be cautious and responsible in their reporting, especially during a crisis like the covid-19 pandemic, where reliable and accurate information can save lives and prevent panic. It also highlights the importance of individuals speaking up against false news and holding media accountable for their actions.

Case 6: National Herald, Times Now, News 18 and Orissa Post

Some of the leading mainstream media houses like National Herald, Times Now News, News18 English and Orissa Post covered a story stating that a goat has been arrested amid lockdown for not wearing face mask. The incident was reported from the industrial city Kanpur of Uttar Pradesh in July 2020. Later the media coverage was debunked by the local police as they refuted claims made by the news outlets [Chaudhuri \(2020\)](#).

Figure 9

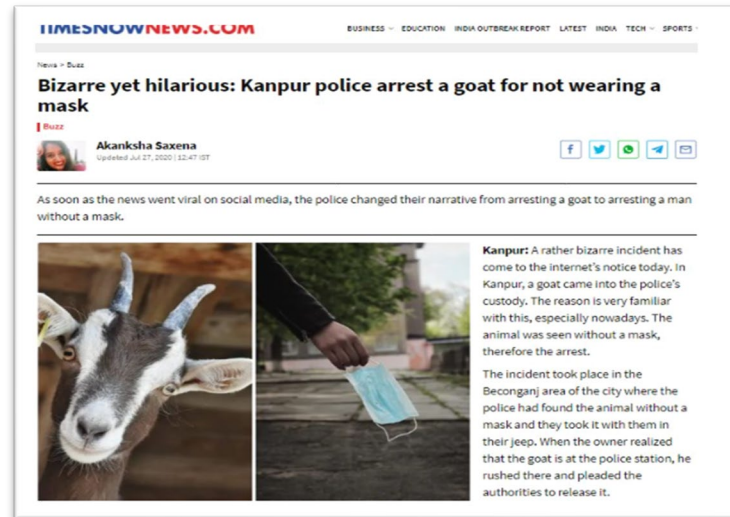


Figure 9 Bizarre News of Goat Arrest Which Later Turned Out to Be Fake
Source AltNews

Such irresponsible reporting tends to have grave consequences and can lead to a breakdown of public trust in media sources. According to a September 2018 Knight/Gallup poll conducted on 1440 respondents, Inaccuracy, prejudice, "fake news," and "alternative facts" were named by 45% of respondents who said they did not trust the media when asked what caused their mistrust [Reed et al. \(2020\)](#). It is essential for media houses to maintain the highest standards of accuracy and ethics in their reporting, especially during a crisis when people rely on them more than ever.

6.1. SECTION II: PERSONAL INTERVIEWS OF MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Objective 2: To explore motives behind disinformation cases on mainstream media

1) What is the designated role of the media in times of crisis?

Interviewee 1: "To help the public grasp the issue, its effects, and the required safeguards, media should promptly and accurately release information."

Interviewee 2: "The media could encourage solidarity by sharing stories of resiliency and group support during trying times."

Interviewee 3: "Media must ensure openness and responsible decision-making by holding authorities accountable for their deeds."

Interviewee 4: "To reduce unneeded worry and concern among the populace, the media should refrain from sensationalism and offer fair coverage."

Interpretation: Interviewees firmly believed that media shall provide inspiring tales of resiliency and helps to correctly inform the public, educate them about the problem, and foster solidarity. Additionally, it helps ensure openness by making authority answerable for their deeds. For the sake of preventing fear and worry among the population, the media should offer fair coverage. For them, media shall become eyes and ears of the people and encourage them to stay strong.

2) What do you think is the factor that motivates the inclusion of disinformation in journalism?

Interviewee 1: "It could be a clickbait game, as both the readership and viewership were at its peak during the pandemic with the increased consumption of online content. However, disinformation cases that came out from reputed media organization raised multiple questions. It can be some vested interest, some pressure and in political world we have seen bigger games. US Presidential election of 2016 is one such example".

Interviewee 2: "Studies show that it has been done to draw favours for one fraction. It can be one of the reasons of it. Using media for drawing favours has a long history, even public broadcasting has been used for this but under the veil".

Interviewee 3: "Drawing public opinion by showing 'what it is not' can be a reason. Groups with vested interest can be behind such things".

Interviewee 4: "I consider cut-throat competition as one of the major reasons for it. You will find such erroneous reporting majorly in digital media. Round the clock dissemination and to be in the 1st line in the market is ruining true journalism".

Interpretation: Making money through clickbait by offering false headlines, drawing public attention, taking political edge and even the competition between the various media houses were quoted as the prime reason for such journalism.

Objective 3: To examine the societal consequences of disinformation

3) What is your reaction to erroneous media coverage, sloppy journalism and disinformation cases?

Interviewee 1: “There is no place for sloppy journalism especially when technology is at its zenith. A very large majority of people blindly follow what is shown on TV and told through journalism. There is no room for errors.”

Interviewee 2: “There was a time when editorial policies were strictly and rigorously followed, now I frequently see errors in media coverage. One thing which is not at all acceptable is that now media do not admit mistakes.”

Interviewee 3: “To err is human and journalist can also make mistakes, but rectifications shall also be made which is majorly missing. We are living in the time of social media, once an issue is snowballed, even if it is false, people would believe it then the damage cannot be then undone.”

Interviewee 4: “Journalistic writing is hallmark of authenticity and it shall be error free. Seeing vague journalism, sloppy reporting and at time fake content in media, makes me feel bad.”

Interpretation: Interviewees emphasized the importance of meticulous journalism, particularly in the technological age where people often uncritically trust media. Editorial standards have declined, errors occur without admission, and the irreversible impact of false information in the social media era is highlighted, lamenting the degradation of authentic, accurate journalistic writing.

4) What is your reaction to public criticism and strong reactions post disinformation cases of mainstream media?

Interviewee 1: “There are two aspects of such reporting. In case of involvement of two parties, one would criticize and other would enjoy, but at the end when such news is debunked there is a loss of credibility for Media”.

Interviewee 2: “It is natural to react strongly and people shall check such reports at their end as well. Media shall also be held accountable for their work”.

Interviewee 3: “In the age of digital media, if the information can be manipulated at one end, it can also be cross-checked at the other end. And when people come across the unauthentic information, strong reactions are bound to surface”.

Interviewee 4: “It’s OK for general masses to question the authenticity of the news they receive through various media. But such reactions shall not be politically motivated or have some vested interest”.

Interpretation: Interviewee considered public criticism and strong reactions as a repercussion of such reporting and for them it is bound to happen. Vigilance, shared accountability, and digital tools allow fact-checking, prompting genuine reactions. Questioning news is fine, if not politically biased or self-interested.

5) What are the repercussions of recurrent instances of disinformation by mainstream media and their effects on society, in your perspective?

Interviewee 1: "It brings mockery to the journalist as well as the organization. Certainly, there will be loss of credibility for both. The darker side is, people would start taking media casually. And the worst part is, it would create room for fake content to flow in the news ecosystem".

Interviewee 2: "Media is the fourth pillar of democracy, people firmly believe on the content shared by media, but such journalism tends to raise questions and ultimately credibility is lost".

Interviewee 3: "Constant dissemination of unverified news is dangerous. It is not only about the short-term credibility lost but also about the long-term erosion of trust in reliable sources of information, the potential for fueling disinformation-driven conflicts, and the distortion of public perceptions that can have far-reaching societal consequences".

Interviewee 4: "Spreading news that hasn't been checked goes beyond just losing trust. It keeps confusion going, makes room for false rumors, and stops us from making smart choices together".

Interpretation: All the interviewees talked about both the long- and short-term consequences of such media reporting. For them sensationalized journalism harms the credibility of journalists and the media, weakens the crucial function of the media in a democracy. Unverified news spreads false information, undermines confidence in reputable sources, exacerbates conflicts, impact opinions, and makes it harder for society to take independent decisions. Worst part is, it gives room for fake information to entry news ecosystem.

6) What recommendations can be proposed to address concerns regarding disinformation in mainstream media?

Interviewee 1: "We must fund media literacy initiatives in order to counteract fake news. To assist people in differentiating legitimate sources from unreliable ones, instructional materials should be made available in schools, community centers, and internet platforms. In the digital age, it is crucial to teach students how to think critically and to examine facts."

Interviewee 2: "Establishing a strict system for content verification is one strategy to handle the fake news problem. The deployment of professional fact-checking teams by media outlets and is encouraged, as is user reporting of dubious content. To increase credibility, verified sources might be prominently presented. We have already witnessed these initiatives by both mainstream and alternate media houses, 'IndiaToday Fact Check' of India Today and WebQoof of The Quint are two examples."

Interviewee 3: "We should explore enacting legislative frameworks that hold those who produce and distribute fake news accountable. Malicious actors might be discouraged by laws that prohibit

disinformation and disinformation. Authorities should work together with media outlets to spot and delete bogus news.”

Interviewee 4: “I suggest that Media Literacy programme shall be included in the New Education Policy and must be taught irrespective of the stream. I rigorous drive of equipping people to differentiate between true and false content is the need of the hour.”

Interpretation: The interviewees emphasized the significance of media literacy programs, including funding and integration into educational policies, to enable people to recognize reliable sources. They also advocated about strict content verification through expert fact-checking teams in the mainstream media houses. They also see requirement for legislative frameworks to hold false news distributors accountable, in order to handle the various difficulties brought on by disinformation in the digital era.

7. CONCLUSION

The incidents discussed in this study, occurring within a short period of four months, highlights critical observations. Mainstream media, on multiple occasions, failed to uphold journalistic ethics, which require them to unite people during times of crisis, provide accurate information, and strengthen their emotional well-being. As such, it is essential for media organizations to prioritize the dissemination of factual, evidence-based information, and take proactive measures to combat the spread of fake news and disinformation. By doing so, they can play a crucial role in informing and educating the public during crises, promoting trust, and contributing to the well-being of individuals and communities.

Continuous exposure to disinformation through media without proper gatekeeping can negatively affect the reputation of individuals and organizations. This can result in harsh criticism, damaging their credibility and causing a breakdown of trust. Such disinformation, particularly around the pandemic, has become a significant concern for the society.

BOOMLIVE.IN, a fact-checking website, has published 178 fact checks on misinformation and disinformation related to covid-19 during the outbreak. These fact-checks have been critical in countering false claims and improving public awareness. It highlights the importance of the role of fact-checking websites in combating disinformation and disinformation during such crises [Chowdhury \(2020\)](#).

The immediate motive behind such journalism cannot be pointed towards one thing, but media experts believed that there could be various factors behind it. They believed clickbait, competition between different media houses, political mileage as the possible reasons for it. During the case discussions as well, a news story from a Hindi newspaper was found still posted on its official social media page, even though the authorities denied it three years ago.

During a pandemic, accurate and reliable reporting was vital in informing the public and shaping their perceptions and behaviors. When asked, interviewees highlighted the role of media during any pandemic, they said that the responsibility increases manifolds during such times. However, if media reports are not verified and are found to be inaccurate or misleading, it can erode public trust in the media and the information they provide. Regular reporting that is not factual or evidence-based can lead to skepticism and distrust among people. This can happen when

people see discrepancies or inconsistencies in the news being reported or when they observe sensationalized or exaggerated coverage of events. In the case of a pandemic, this can lead to individuals ignoring or dismissing important public health information and recommendations, which can result in harmful consequences for individuals and communities. Distrust in media reports can also lead to the spread of disinformation and false news through unofficial channels, such as social media. When people do not believe the information being provided by mainstream media houses, they may turn to alternative sources for information [Hameleers et al. \(2022\)](#), which can be unreliable and further fuel distrust and skepticism.

Therefore, it is crucial for media organizations to ensure that they adhere to high journalistic standards and principles, such as fact-checking and accuracy, especially during times of crisis. This can help rebuild public trust in the media and ensure that people have access to reliable and accurate information to make informed decisions during the pandemic.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING CONCERN

The widespread sharing of false information can lead to panic and confusion, which can further complicate efforts to manage the pandemic situations like Covid-19 even in near future. Some recommendation from the study are:

- Fact-checking websites and awareness through media literacy can help provide accurate and reliable information to the public and help prevent the spread of misleading information.
- Experts interviewed also believed that it is crucial for media houses to adopt proper gatekeeping mechanisms to ensure that only reliable information is shared with the public, especially during emergency situations like pandemics. Making strong editorial policies was recommended by them.
- They further emphasized to take media literacy programme at the educational institutions so that sensitization can be done from the basic level.
- Strong legislative frame shall be framed to held fake news peddlers was one of the recommendations suggested by the interviewee.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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