Countering Disinformation in Pakistan

Lessons and Recommendations for Digital Journalism

Waqas Naeem and Adnan Rehmat

FREEDOM NETWORK
DEFENDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Digimap
Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan

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About the authors

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Executive Summary

Disinformation has arguably created severe risks for political and social development in Pakistan in recent years. The spread of false messages in the country, sometimes done through coordinated campaigns and influence operations, is not limited to cyberspace but most prominently noticed online. Research evidence suggests that the diverse kinds and formats of disinformation observed in Pakistan have endangered public health, political stability, human rights, journalism, and peace in the recent past, especially during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic and the political upheaval and transition in 2022.

The disinformation challenge is not unique to Pakistan. Countries around the world are struggling with the menace of online false messages and propaganda rooted in hate speech, with social media networks often being the common denominator. Similarly, global responses to fight disinformation can also benefit Pakistan. However, the country's unique sociopolitical context warrants local solutions and responses to disinformation. Moreover, both the State and non-governmental stakeholders of the information sector have a duty to protect citizens from the harms of disinformation.

Pakistan's policy response to disinformation has received criticism locally for its insistence on knee-jerk legislation to block false content without safeguarding free speech and without considering the potential misuse of laws to stifle dissent. But non-governmental responses have shown more diversity and vision during the same time, for example by launching fact-checking operations, conducting research, running awareness campaigns, and training journalists. This exploratory research study attempts to document non-governmental efforts undertaken to counter disinformation in Pakistan, compile learning about their effectiveness, and provide evidence-based suggestions for the future.

The research approaches disinformation responses from the perspective of journalism, specifically digital news media. This is because reliable journalism is not only a casualty of disinformation but also its antidote, and Pakistani journalists and the local news industry have a frontline role in countering disinformation to ensure the public has access to trustworthy information.

The study uses a comprehensive literature review to discuss the nature and perceived impact of disinformation in Pakistan as well as to identify past and ongoing disinformation responses by academia, media development organizations, news media, Big Tech, and fact-checking organizations. Primary research for the report relies on key informant interviews with a small but authoritative sample of individuals working on local disinformation responses and a short online survey of Pakistani digital journalists about their needs related to countering disinformation.

The study finds that journalistic and fact-checking disinformation responses in the country have struggled due to lack of conceptual understanding of disinformation among journalists, monetization trends that incentivize sensationalist news and reduce the impact of capacity building initiatives, lack of financial sustainability of responses, language barriers, and political backlash.

At the same time, the research finds that local capacity building responses have improved the ability of individual journalists to understand Covid-19 misinformation and hashtag manipulation on Twitter whereas fact-checking responses have led to the development of efficient workflows, informed recruitment principles, contextual verification practices, and collaboration with social networks to downrank viral online disinformation.

The study also confirms findings from literature that disinformation is negatively affecting the work and safety environment of Pakistani digital journalists. The journalists surveyed for this research reported that disinformation has increased their risk of getting deceived by fake social media posts during online newsgathering. In addition, most women journalists surveyed for the study said they were targeted with gendered disinformation campaigns, which caused them physical, psychological or reputational harm. A majority of surveyed women digital journalists also believed that they face additional challenges to counter disinformation due to their gender identity. The digital journalists who participated in the survey identified fact-checking training as their most urgent need to counter disinformation.

Based on the rich insight provided by the key informants and the information gleaned from the literature review and online survey of digital journalists, the study offers recommendations in the following four areas of disinformation responses. The details of the recommendations can be read in the 'Recommendations' chapter.

Fact-checking recommendations: Existing and new fact-checking organizations should consider organizational aspects of operations (team size, scope of fact-checks, methodology, and audience engagement), process (verification tools and explanation), financing (business model, Big Tech collaboration, and risks associated with revenue streams), and collaboration (working with news media, working with civil society, and working with youth and academia) to improve their consistency, impact, and effectiveness.

Training recommendations: Media development organizations, journalism support groups, and news media outlets should refine their capacity building interventions by focusing on specific themes (conceptual clarity, social media manipulation, and writing disinformation-related news investigations), training design (sustained training programs), and follow-up mechanisms (impact assessments, post-training engagement, and thematic cohort development).

Media & Information Literacy (MIL) recommendations: Education-based responses that engage young children, students, and teachers, and public awareness campaigns aimed at the general public or diverse population groups should be prioritized. These responses require multi-stakeholder collaboration among civil society, academia, media, and fact-checkers.

Coalition-building recommendations: Key stakeholders should be brought together to develop a broad consensus in Pakistan on the strategy to counter disinformation. The consensus can be better articulated through a structured but non-bureaucratic platform, such as a cause-centered coalition. This will help institutionalize disinformation responses and specify duties of stakeholders. The coalition should make its case public through conferences and campaigns. Regional information exchanges and sharing of lessons about fact-checking and journalism-related disinformation responses should be organized as these can benefit local knowledge of effective interventions in Pakistan.

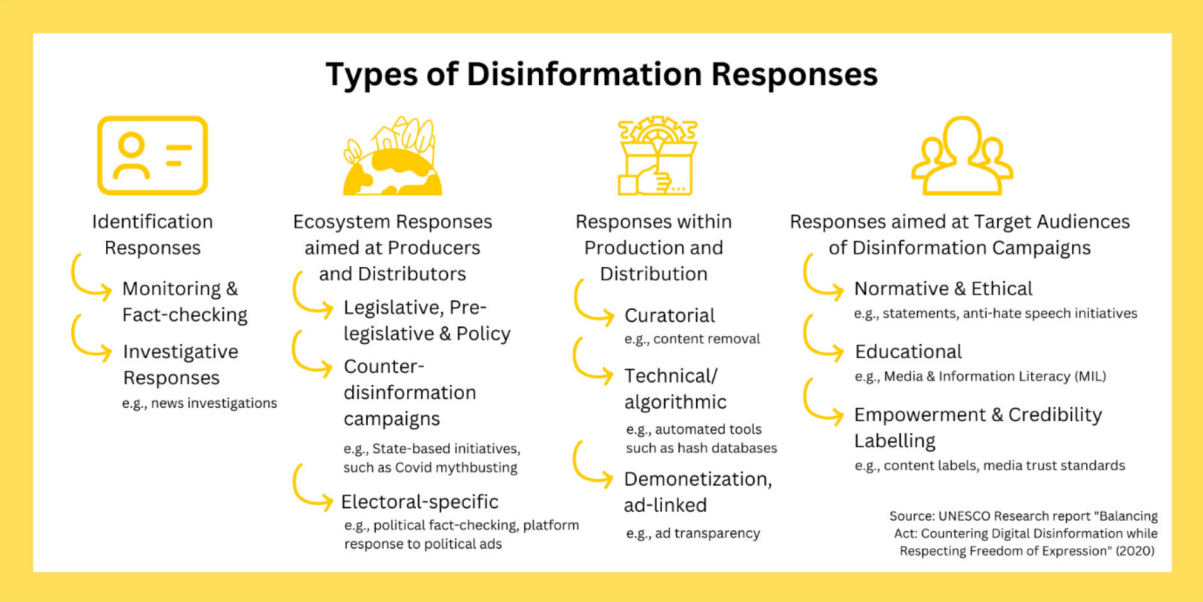

Figure 1 Types of disinformation responses

Introduction

The political developments in Pakistan since March 2022 that led to a change of federal government were closely followed by the unleashing of the latest round of viral disinformation on social media, including malicious trending campaigns on Twitter against political rivals, the judiciary, and the military. This fresh and ongoing episode of politically motivated propaganda laced with disinformation is shocking in its audacity and unrestrained nature, but it is also sadly unsurprising given what has happened in the country regarding viral falsehoods over the past five years.

Disinformation – false information that is deliberately created and intentionally spread to harm and mislead others – and misinformation – unintentionally spread false messages that may be harmless – are now an undeniable part of Pakistan's information landscape.[1] The pervasiveness of disinformation is such that it has affected almost all areas of public life in Pakistan, including politics, religion, health, economy, and culture, in the recent past.

While Twitter-based political campaigns often pushed by domestic influence networks with ideological or political affiliations hog the attention given to the so-called "fake news" issue in the country[2], Pakistani citizens have been exposed to dangerous false content on various other themes, including Covid-related misinformation[3] and anti-vaccination propaganda[4] that had a direct impact on public health and safety, fabricated financial documents that affected the stock market[5], online hate speech against religious groups and religious expression[6], and coordinated attacks against women's movements[7] and journalists[8], especially women journalists[9]. Pakistan was also reportedly the target of foreign disinformation operations designed to hurt its standing with international institutions.[10]

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[1] For definitions of disinformation and misinformation, this study follows the work done by Clare Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c

[2] Shaheryar Popalzai and Ramsha Jahangir. GrabYourKeyboards: Inside Pakistan's hashtag mills. Dawn. https://www.dawn.com/news/1519963

[3] Rebea Firdous. Misinformation in Pakistan during Covid-19. Friedrich Naumann Foundation. https://www.freiheit.org/pakistan/misinformation-pakistan-during-covid-19

[4] Sarika Bhattacharjee and Carlotta Dotto. Vaccine case study: Understanding the impact of polio vaccine disinformation in Pakistan. First Draft. https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/first-draft-case-study-understanding-the-impact-of-polio-vaccine-disinformation-in-pakistan/

[5] Farhan Zaheer and Salman Siddiqui. Pakistan's fake news problem is hurting gullible investors. The Express Tribune. https://tribune.com.pk/story/1585317/pakistans-fake-news-problem-hurting-gullible-investors

[6] Religious minorities in online spaces. Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Religious-Minorities.pdf

[7] Mariya Karimjee. A coordinated online attack has forced… Rest of World. https://restofworld.org/2021/a-coordinated-online-attack-has-forced-some-organizers-behind-pakistans-womens-march-into-hiding/

[8] DRM Investigates: Twitter Accounts Behind the Hashtag #ArrestAntiPakJournalists. Digital Rights Monitor. https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/drm-investigates-twitter-accounts-behind-the-hashtag-arrestantipakjournalists/

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[10] Indian chronicles: Deep dive into a 15-year operation targeting the EU and UN to serve Indian interests. EU Disinfo Lab. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests/

On the basis of these examples, it might be fair to say that disinformation continues to be deployed in Pakistan to sideline social development goals and undermine democracy and human rights.

Scholars have identified 11 major types of disinformation responses, including legislation, fact-checking, election-specific interventions, Media & Information Literacy (MIL) initiatives, and algorithmic solutions by Big Tech companies.[11] Based on this framework, the local responses to the disinformation onslaught in Pakistan have been slow but not negligible.

The federal government's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MoIB) launched a fact-checking Twitter account in 2018 in an attempt to combat disinformation.[12] The name of the account was changed to "Fact Checker MoIB" from "Fake News Buster" later on, and the account occasionally posts screenshots of allegedly "fake news" items mostly with a standard text warning that spreading false information is unethical, illegal, and a "disservice to the nation".[13] However, a more concerted push has been noticed in terms of policymaking where successive governments since 2018 have used the justification of curbing "fake news" to call for restrictive legislation to remove online content[14], leading to critiques from human rights defenders that such laws are rife for abuse and will endanger the legitimate freedom of expression of citizens.[15]

In the absence of a human rights-based policy response by the government to the disinformation crisis, the task to combat online misinformation and disinformation has arguably fallen on the shoulders of civil society.

Journalists, fact-checking organizations, news outlets, media development institutions, and digital rights groups have contributed to efforts to counter disinformation in Pakistan during this time. However, these initiatives are supported by limited resources and challenged by overwhelming odds, and there is very little evidence in the public domain about how effective they have been in protecting target groups against disinformation.

Without understanding the challenges and achievements of the previous disinformation responses, any further interventions might unwisely duplicate previous actions or follow inefficient or unsuccessful strategies already tried in the past. Therefore, this research study aims to explore the effectiveness of countering-disinformation initiatives in Pakistan, with a focus on online journalism and the role of digital journalists in putting up a fight against disinformation. The focus on journalists and the news media is merited because of the importance of their role in the information ecosystem.

Disinformation thrives in the absence of accurate news; it weakens public trust in the news media, and it is also actively used to undermine good journalism and independent

[11] See Figure 1 or Bontcheva & Posetti (2020).
[12] Govt launches 'Fake News Buster' account to expose false reports. Dawn. https://www.dawn.com/news/1436167
[13] Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's disinformation identification Twitter account: https://twitter.com/FactCheckerMoIB
[14] Ramsha Jahangir. First consultation on Citizens Protection rules questions regulation of fake news. Dawn. https://www.dawn.com/news/1561910
[15] Beenish Javed. Pakistan: Social media curbs shrink free speech space. DW. https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-social-media-restrictions-hurt-free-speech/a-56012599

journalists. Moreover, news outlets can unwittingly amplify misinformation and disinformation if they are not aware of the mechanics of the information disorder or are not alert to the subtleties of disinformation campaigns. The news media, therefore, have a lot to gain from countering disinformation in addition to fulfilling their basic duty of public interest journalism.

The research hopes to draw lessons from past and existing private (non-governmental) efforts to combat disinformation in the country and provide recommendations for journalists, media outlets, journalism support groups, and other civil society actors to plan and implement effective interventions to curb disinformation in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The scope of this literature review is limited to Pakistan. In recent years, various academics, journalists, media development organizations, and digital rights advocacy groups in Pakistan have produced research studies to determine the impact of disinformation on the public, including local journalists, as well as the level of preparedness among the news media industry for combatting disinformation as a threat to reliable journalism and credible news access.

Studies on the nature and public impact of disinformation

Several recent articles and studies have discussed the public perception of disinformation in Pakistan and shared prominent examples of false messages that went viral on social media in the country.

Haque (2017) observed that disinformation in Pakistan ranged "from the mundane to issues of national and regional significance", including fake security threat warnings, fabricated official documents, rumors about the military top brass, and coordinated online attacks featuring "fake news" accusations against news outlets. The author also shared a readers' survey conducted by Dawn.com, in which a majority of the 1,705 respondents said "fake news" was a major problem in Pakistan and almost 45% respondents admitted they had been tricked into believing false information as being true (Haque, 2017).

Rehman, Hussain & Durreshehwar (2020) identified at least 72 reportedly "fake news" items on Pakistani social media during a three-month period after the general elections in 2018. This disinformation content was related to international relations, politics, military, judiciary, economy, and religious affairs, lending credence to the claim that the pernicious spread of disinformation is affecting all areas of State and society.

Ghani & Khan (2020b) explored the Pakistani public's perception of online and offline misinformation and the strategies they used to tackle it, using a national representative survey of 503 individuals. Around 75% survey respondents said they encountered misinformation at least once a week while roughly 60% said they were only able to recognize misinformation "sometimes" when they saw it. The respondents claimed they mostly identified misinformation after searching the Internet for supporting evidence or comparing news broadcast on different TV channels. Most respondents thought anonymous social media accounts were the most frequent sources of misinformation. A majority of the individuals who took the survey (70%) said Facebook was used most often to spread misinformation in Pakistan.

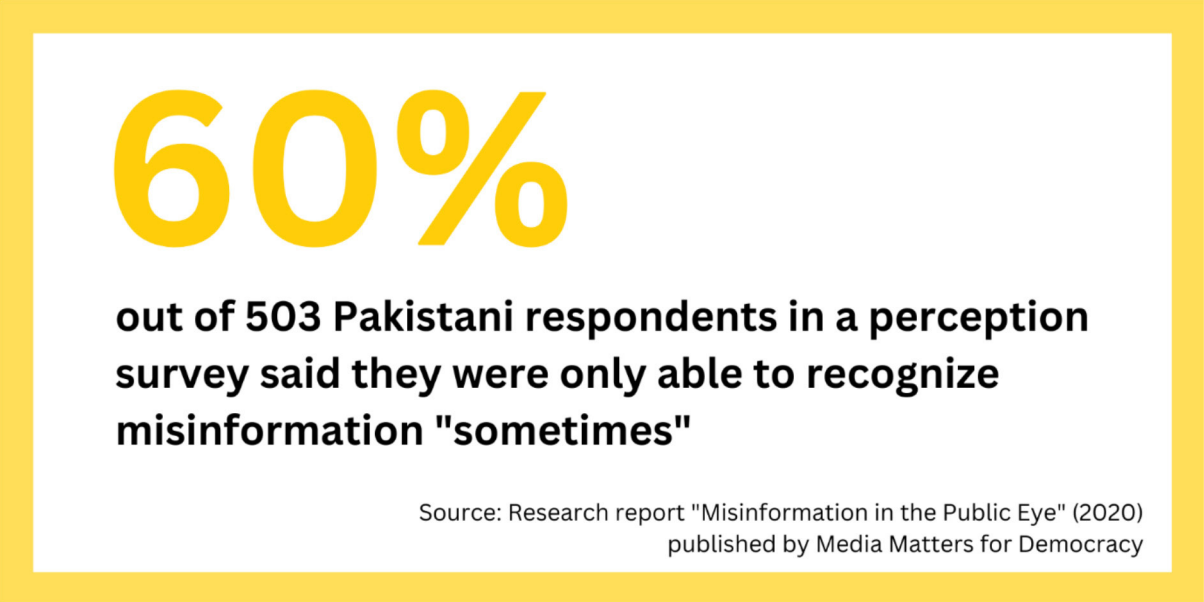
Jahangir (2020) provided some more examples of "fake news" in Pakistan between 2018 and 2020, including a Twitter hate campaign against a local private school, a photoshopped

image of President Arif Alvi, and a fabricated news post that impersonated the web layout of a leading national news publication.

Health-related disinformation messages in Pakistan preceded the Covid-19 pandemic. Most notable among these is the 2019 incident involving fake anti-vaccine videos that targeted Pakistan's polio vaccination campaign and led to arson, violent attacks on health workers, the suspension of the vaccination drive, and over two million children left unvaccinated (Bhattacharjee & Dotto, 2020).

However, the pandemic brought a deluge of medical misinformation. As Haque (2021) noted, there was "a sharp rise in disinformation" in Pakistan in 2020, with many false messages "focused on the pandemic, the coronavirus and government lockdowns" (pp. 5). He documented eight major disinformation messages, including a fake Twitter account of the ministry of health and a fabricated alert about pesticide spray from helicopters at night to exterminate Covid. Haque (2021) also shared a list of 46 fact-checks published by AFP Fact Check Pakistan in 2020.

The findings by Javed et al. (2022) corroborate Haque's claim about prevalence of medical misinformation. Javed et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive analysis of Covid-19 messages on 227 public WhatsApp groups in Pakistan between March and April 2020, which showed that misinformation made up 14% of over 7,000 Covid-related texts and images.



The misinformation varied widely, ranging from false information about the origin of the virus to fabricated number of deaths and fake remedies. Javed et al. (2022) noticed that while the overall share of misinformation in the analyzed messages was low, the misinformation messages had the longest lifetime among the content categories of WhatsApp messages identified (such as news, religious information etc.), indicating that false messages remained in circulation on Pakistani WhatsApp for longer durations than reliable information.

Cheema, Chacko & Gul (2019) posited that various social, religious, and political actors in the country have used disinformation effectively since 2013 to trigger "mass anxieties" among the public for achieving their socio-political goals by embedding false information in identity-based narratives of religion, nation, and culture. Their thesis suggests that domestic entities might be deliberately deploying disinformation in Pakistan for personal gains.

Nizamani (2019) used a review of international literature to assert that the Internet's predominant revenue models, including Facebook's business model, Google AdSense, and programmatic advertising that uses software to automate digital ad buying, incentivize the spread of disinformation in Pakistan as well as globally.

Literature indicates that journalists and news media organizations, which also now rely heavily on the Internet for distribution and revenues, are significantly affected by the spread of disinformation.

Impact of disinformation on journalists

Jahangir (2020) investigated the level of understanding of disinformation and the practice of fact-checking among Pakistani journalists. Based on a survey of 152 journalists and interviews with 10 journalists in editorial positions, the research found that while most of the respondents said they verified information before publishing, fewer than one in five respondents had received fact-checking training and most of them felt it was the editorial staff in their news organizations that were responsible for formal fact-checking.

The research interviewees and survey respondents agreed that WhatsApp was the least trustworthy source of information for Pakistani journalists (Jahangir, 2020). The study also showed that local journalists considered propaganda, censorship, the ratings race, time pressures in breaking news situations, erosion of trust in the media, and lack of resources as the several factors that made the news media vulnerable to spreading false messages.

Ghani & Khan (2020a) also examined the way Pakistani newsrooms were affected by disinformation. The study's findings were based on a national perception survey of 546 journalists and in-depth interviews with 10 experienced media professionals. A vast majority of the surveyed journalists (90%) said that misinformation affected public trust in news. Most respondents also said they had become more vigilant about fact-checking due to accusations of spreading misinformation against the press and that discussions on misinformation took place in their newsrooms.

According to Ghani & Khan (2020a), the responses of reporters and editors who participated in the study contradicted each other about the existence of organizational guidelines on fact-checking, with most of the former claiming such guidelines existed but the latter mostly suggesting the guidelines were a rarity. The study also found that none of the survey participants could specifically distinguish among mis-, dis- and mal-information, indicating that their conceptual understanding of the information disorder was incomplete at best.

Shahid, Ibrahim & Ullah (2020) found similar behaviour among journalists from Mardan and Nowshera in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The journalists interviewed for the research generally understood "fake news" as untrue information but attached different

procedural meanings to it (such as, claims denied by a source etc.) and did not categorize it theoretically as mis-, dis- or mal-information. The local journalists believed social media was a major source of the spread of false messages and felt that "fake news" was sometimes created for political or profit motives. The respondents also saw it as harmful to society and to the credibility of journalists (Shahid, Ibrahim & Ullah, 2020).

Jamil & Appiah-Adiei (2020) examined the influences that affected the ability of Pakistani journalists to deal with challenges posed by Covid-related disinformation during the pandemic. They interviewed 25 journalists working for Pakistan's mainstream print and broadcast media. The research found that the lack of both science journalism education and fact-checking training among local journalists increased the risk of medical misinformation getting unintentionally included in news reports. At an institutional level, lack of resources and unavailability of organizational guidelines for fact-checking reduced the ability of journalists to guard against disinformation (Jamil & Appiah-Adiei, 2020).

Research evidence about private initiatives to combat disinformation in Pakistan is not widely available. However, some studies are noteworthy and offer a picture of past and existing attempts to combat disinformation.

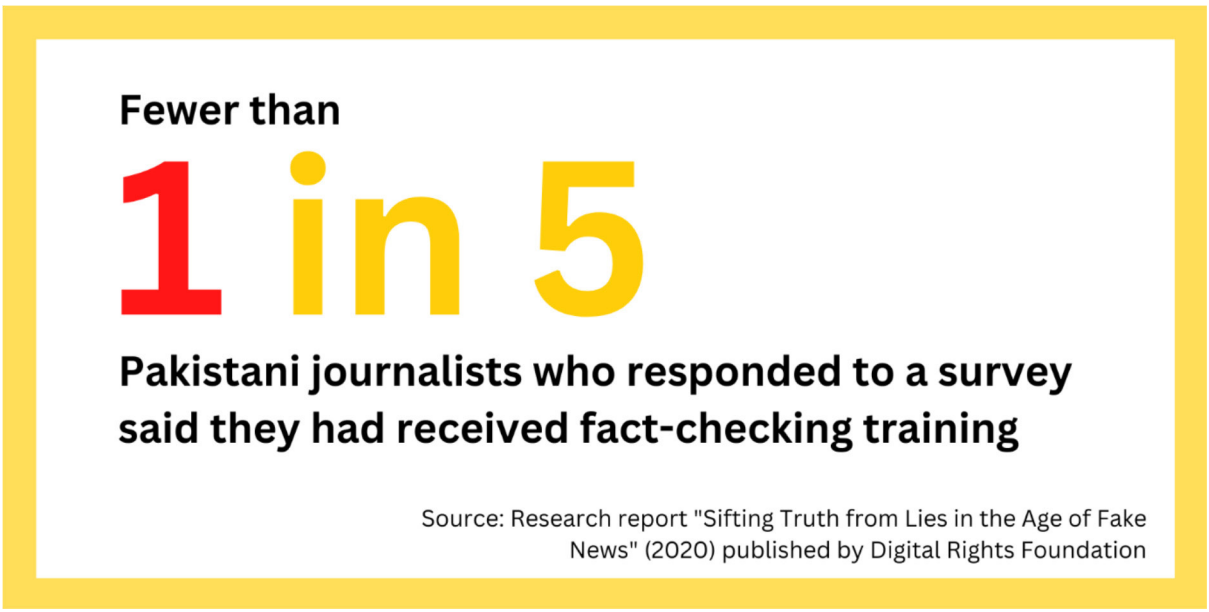
Efforts to counter disinformation

Bontcheva & Posetti (2020) have identified and assessed 11 responses for countering disinformation in their typology of disinformation responses. Some of these response types, including monitoring and fact-checking, educational, and electoral-specific responses, have been noticed in Pakistan.

One of the most useful findings about efforts to counter disinformation in Pakistan is provided by Ali & Qazi (2021), who conducted a randomized experiment with 750 participants in urban Lahore. The experiment aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of two educational interventions to counter misinformation among populations with low levels of digital literacy. The study participants were first asked to correctly identify "fake news" from a list of true and fake news stories to establish a baseline. Then, two educational interventions were delivered to the participants. In the first intervention, the participants were shown an informational video to educate them about misinformation. In the second intervention, the participants were shown the video and then given personalized feedback about their own responses to the baseline quiz to help them understand what features of the news items made them true or false.

Ali & Qazi (2021) found that the general informational video – the first educational intervention – had no significant impact on the ability of participants to identify misinformation. However, when the video was followed with personalized feedback – the second intervention – the participants were found to be more likely to correctly identify "fake news". The second intervention also made them more likely to mention features of a news story as their basis of considering it true or false rather than citing their prior beliefs as reasons (Ali & Qazi, 2021). This improvement was driven by male participants and individuals with relatively higher levels of digital literacy, according to the study.

Haider (2022) reviewed evidence of lessons from counter-messaging interventions against online misinformation, hate speech, and extremist narratives in the Global South, with



a focus on Pakistan. Specifically in connection with disinformation, the report relayed the findings of Ali & Qazi (2021) and Sahotay, Ashraf, & Hakim (2020). Ali & Qazi's work is discussed above in detail. Sahotay, Ashraf, & Hakim (2020) had examined the impact of disinformation on Pakistani youth in the context of religious extremism and sectarian violence.

Based on eight focus group discussions in Islamabad with 70 Pakistanis between the ages of 18 and 26, the authors suggested that civil society campaigns to counter extremism should also "try to build critical consumption of news on social media platforms among youth" as it might help reduce the spread of misinformation and help the youth to identify and counter sectarian or extremist disinformation (Sahotay, Ashraf, & Hakim, 2020, pp. 21).

Fact-checking initiatives in Pakistan

Fatima (2020) compiled a brief history of fact-checking initiatives in the country. Pakistan has only two fact-checking services at present that are signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and members of Facebook's third-party fact-checking program, and only one of these is purely local.[16] These two fact-checking organizations are: AFP Fact Check Pakistan, which is part of the French news agency Agence France-Presse's global fact-checking operations, and the local organization Soch Fact Check, which is independently established and operated by Pakistani fact-checkers.[17] In comparison, India has at least 14 IFCN signatory fact-checkers. [18]

Several fact-checking units are also operating on social media in the country. These include Fact Check Pakistan[19], Basic Fact Check[20] and "Fake News Media"[21], among others. But it is difficult to comment on the transparency, methodology, reliability, and consistency of the

[16] List of IFCN signatories: https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories and List of Facebook third-party fact-checkers: https://web.facebook.com/formedia/mjp/programs/third-party-fact-checking/partner-map
[17] AFP Pakistan Fact Check: https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-pakistan and Soch Fact Check: https://www.sochfactcheck.com/
[18] List of IFCN signatories: https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories
[19] Fact Check Pakistan on Twitter: https://twitter.com/PakistanCheck
[20] Basic Fact Check on Twitter: https://twitter.com/BasicFactCheck
[21] Fake News Media on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Pk_FactChecker

fact-checking output of some of these apparently small-scale services. Some others, such as Sachee Khabar[22], Surkhi[23], FactNama[24], and Pakistan Fact[25], are completely or mostly inactive.

Legacy news outlets, such as Dawn[26], The Express Tribune[27], and Samaa[28], also publish or source fact-checks online with varying frequencies (Fatima, 2020). TV news channel Geo News, which also has its own news website, launched a dedicated fact-checking initiative in September 2022.[29] Digital-only news start-ups, such as Naya Daur[30], The Current PK[31], and Balochistan Voices[32], also publish fact checks with varying levels of consistency.

In the run-up to Pakistan's general elections in 2018, Facebook worked with civil society organizations in Pakistan to publish its "tips to spot false news" in Urdu and posted the tips as a public service announcement to the news feeds of Facebook users in the country.[33] Before election day, Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp also published full-page advertisements in leading Pakistani newspapers to raise awareness about tips to fight disinformation.[34] Facebook and Tik Tok have also indicated proactive and AI-based content monitoring and content moderation in Pakistan, including for misinformation and hate speech.[35]

Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) published an Urdu digital guide in 2018 with advice for Pakistani Internet users on protecting against online disinformation.[36] In 2019, UNESCO Pakistan and MMfD organized a national conference on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) with a focus on countering online disinformation to prevent violent extremism.[37] The conference proceedings inspired the Pakistani Ministry of Information's countering-extremism project, the Pakistan Peace Collective, to design and deliver MIL and fact-checking training workshops for journalists, students, and media academics.[38]

Digital rights advocacy group Bolo Bhi launched a public awareness campaign in 2019 to combat misinformation, which included advice in several local languages.[39] Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) published a fact-checking guidebook for journalists in 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.[40]

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[22] Fact checking initiative "Sachee Khabar" launched to counter online disinformation. Digital Rights Monitor. https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/fact-checking-initiative-sachee-khabar-launched-to-counter-online-disinformation/
[23] Surkhi on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SURKHI.pk/
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[26] An example of a Dawn.com fact-check report: https://www.dawn.com/news/1644845
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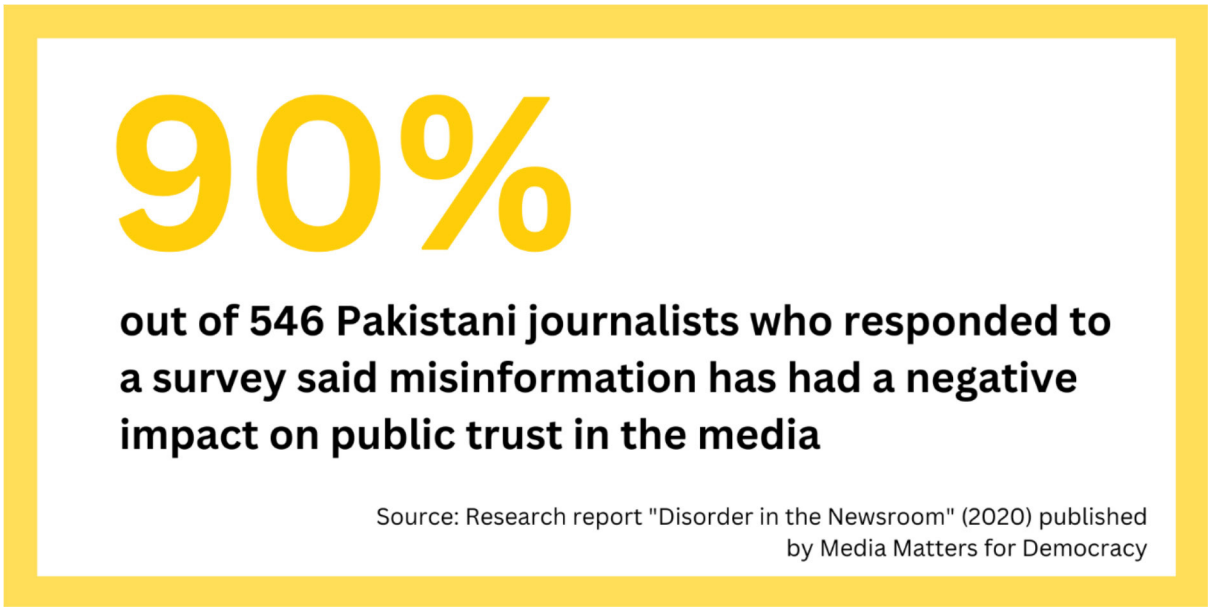


DRF also published a collection of essays on gendered disinformation – the deliberate use of false sexual or misogynistic accusations against women to portray them negatively – that included papers on the mass media's role in spreading it and feminist approaches to countering it.[41]

Abbasi (2021) found that Pakistani media often propagated gendered disinformation due to lack of objective gender reporting, inadequate gender diversity in newsrooms, absence of standard editorial policies and fact-checking mechanisms, and cultural and security concerns. There is sufficient evidence that gendered disinformation is used to target Pakistani women journalists online.[42]

In terms of capacity building of local journalists for fact-checking and visual verification, several journalism support organizations have offered training sessions, courses, and workshops. These include efforts by MMfD[43], Pakistan Press Foundation[44], the Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation[45], and the Centre for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ)[46] at IBA-Karachi, among others. In 2019, the CEJ had also signed a partnership agreement with IFCN to offer live training and self-directed courses on fact-checking to Pakistani journalists.[47]

Some of the above-mentioned studies also included recommendations for different stakeholders regarding ways to counter disinformation, which are discussed below.

[41] Policy papers: Perspectives on gendered disinformation. Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HBS-Report-2021-U.pdf
[42] Joint statement: Attacks on women in media in Pakistan. 12 Aug 2020. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DD8BQ53noKO6zHy-gysGnFjeKT4ride4uYtQsNNRYoc/edit
[43] Online course on digital disinformation. Media Matters for Democracy. https://mediamatters.pk/course/digital-disinformation-and-journalistic-responsibilities/
[44] Skill-building training for Pakistani journalists on countering misinformation and disinformation. Pakistan Press Foundation. https://www.pakistanpressfoundation.org/skill-building-training-for-pakistani-journalists-on-countering-misinformation-and-disinformation/
[45] GNMI arranged a fact-checking workshop for journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. GNMI. https://gnmionline.org/2020/12/09/gnmi-arranged-a-fact-checking-workshop-for-journalists-of-khyber-pakhtunkhwa/
[46] Workshop on election reporting and essentials of fact-checking. CEJ Facebook page. https://www.facebook.com/CEJatIBA/photos/a.878068492224764/5625164317515134/
[47] CEJ teams up with International Fact-Checking Network to train journalists in Pakistan. Dawn. https://www.dawn.com/news/1619136/cej-teams-up-with-international-fact-checking-network-to-train-journalists-in-pakistan

Suggestions from existing literature

Ghani & Khan (2020a) recommended the need for training, fact-checking support initiatives, information resources in local languages, and written fact-checking guidelines for newsrooms. Shahid, Ibrahim & Ullah (2020) presented professional reporting, reliable sourcing, legislation, and media literacy training as solutions to counter disinformation, based on the comments of their research interviewees.

Nizamani (2019) also offered suggestions to build resilience against disinformation for the Pakistani context, including a government-civil society collaboration to act against publishers of disinformation, consensus-based "balanced" legislation to limit online disinformation, media literacy campaigns, and self-regulation by advertisement industry to only display ads on reliable news websites (pp. 35-39).

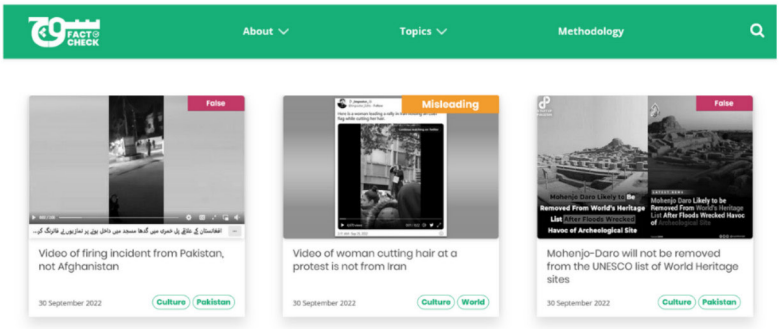
Ali & Qazi (2021) suggested that "educational interventions can enable information discernment" but their effectiveness depends on customized design and delivery based on the target population (pp. 1). Moreover, the researchers noted that anti-misinformation educational interventions should also be customized from the gender perspective because the female participants in their study did not exhibit improved discernment between true and false news.

Jahangir (2020) recommended that journalists should engage in evidence-based reporting, prioritize and practice fact-checking, and call out disinformation while news organizations should invest in fact-checking resources, and media support organizations should conduct fact-checking training for journalists, organize media literacy workshops, and offer expert advice to governments to avoid legislation that uses the justification of curbing online falsehoods to endanger the legitimate freedom of expression of citizens.

The literature review was used to inform the methodology of the present study, which is described in the next chapter.

Soch Fact Check describes itself as a "team of non-partisan fact checkers investigating disinformation and committed to responsible journalism." It is currently the only Pakistani-origin fact-checking organization that is a signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). It is also one of Facebook's third-party fact-checking partners in Pakistan.

Soch Fact Check declares its focus to be on claims that could potentially incite violence against vulnerable minority groups, create risks for public safety or cast doubt on scientific and historical facts. In addition to monitoring social media, it also receives claims for verification from the public through its website, email, and Twitter account.



Recent fact-checks published on the Soch Fact Check website

Methodology

This research study aims to examine the effectiveness of past and existing efforts to counter disinformation in Pakistan with the intention to provide evidence-based recommendations for future initiatives. Based on the literature review, the following research questions were developed for the study.

Research Question (RQ) 1: How do Pakistani digital journalists think disinformation has most affected their work during the past five years?

RQ2: How do Pakistani digital journalists think they are affected by gendered disinformation?

RQ3: What are the challenges faced by existing and past initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan?

RQ4: What are the lessons or achievements from existing and past initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan?

RQ5: Based on the needs of digital journalists and evidence from countering-disinformation initiatives, what are the key suggestions to design and implement effective interventions to combat disinformation in the future?

The study used an exploratory research methodology with qualitative data collection to answer the above-mentioned research questions. The data was collected through key informant interviews and a close-ended qualitative survey.

The survey was conducted online over a period of one week in August 2022 and received 28 responses. While the survey sample is extremely small, the respondents belonged to all four provinces of Pakistan, the federal capital, and the Gilgit-Baltistan region. A third of the total number of respondents were women journalists. This lends the survey some degree of diversity. The key informant interviews were conducted with four individuals with vast first-hand experience of countering disinformation initiatives in Pakistan, which makes them authoritative sources for the purposes of this study. The interviewees were two established fact-checkers, one media development professional who has overseen disinformation research and media literacy efforts, and a journalist who covers technology and disinformation trends in Pakistan.

RQs 1 and 2 were answered through the survey responses. RQs 3 and 4 were answered through the interviews. Survey and interview responses were used together to answer RQ5.

Limitations

The study has the following limitations:

1. The scope of the study is limited to private (non-governmental) initiatives taken by media, journalism support groups, and civil society organizations to counter disinformation in Pakistan. It does not analyze the government's anti-disinformation efforts, except in passing for contextual reasons only. Moreover, the discovery of private initiatives was limited by their prominence and identification through desk research.

2. The study is exploratory and intended to offer a snapshot analysis for actionable recommendations and further research work. However, the findings of the study are not representative or generalizable due to the limited number of data observations.

AFP Fact Check

French international news agency AFP (Agence France-Presse) launched its digital verification service in 2017 and has since become a global fact-checking organization. It expanded its fact-checking operations to cover Pakistan in 2018. Apart from Soch Fact Check, AFP is the only other IFCN signatory and Facebook fact-checking partner operating in Pakistan.

AFP's Pakistan team follows their international methodology that relies on a variety of tools and news reporting to check claims. AFP Fact Check Pakistan also publishes detailed explanations of why it believes a claim is false or misleading based on its investigation along with relevant background information. However, like Soch, at present it is publishing fact-checks in English only.

Recent fact-checks published on the AFP Fact Check Pakistan website

Findings

The data analysis from the survey responses and key informant interviews offered the following findings.

RQ1: How do Pakistani digital journalists think disinformation has most affected their work during the past five years?

Just over 60% of the 28 survey respondents said disinformation has increased the risk for them to be deceived by false social media posts during their newsgathering process. A quarter of the respondents said it has become difficult to verify information online due to the spread of disinformation. The responses indicate that Pakistani digital journalists are facing disruptions in their news reporting due to online disinformation.

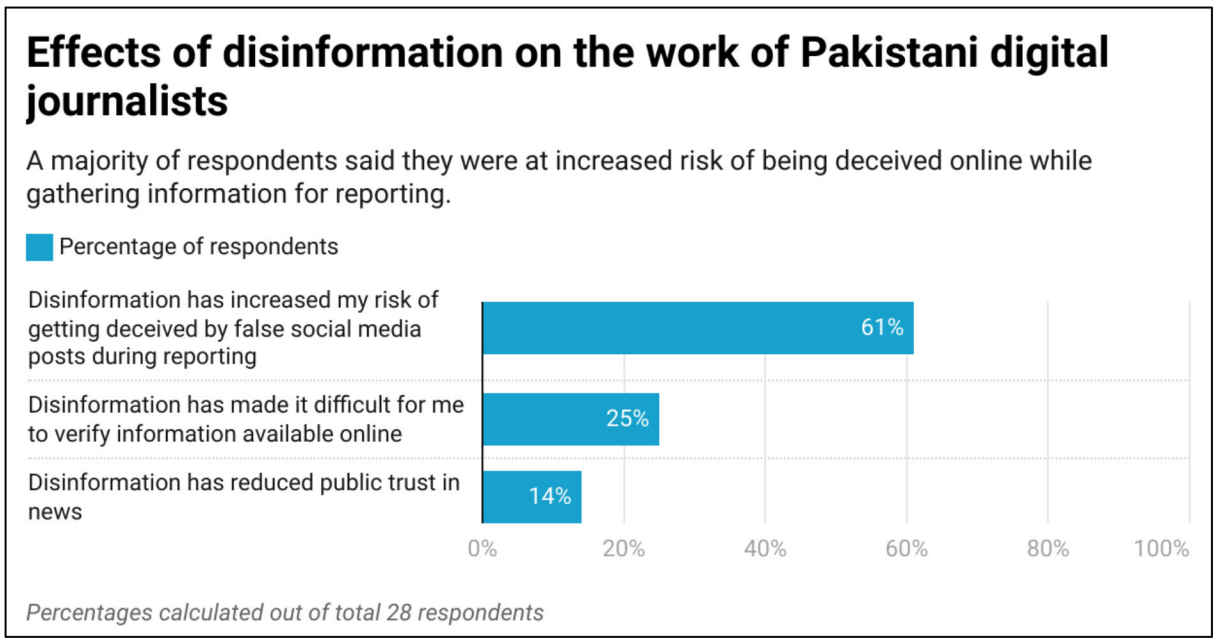


Figure 2 Effects of disinformation on the work of Pakistani digital journalists

RQ2: How do Pakistani digital journalists think they are affected by gendered disinformation?

The respondents were asked a series of connected "yes or no" questions to investigate the challenges at the intersection of disinformation and gender. Women journalists disproportionately perceived the negative impact of disinformation more, according to the survey data (Figure 3).

A majority of the women journalist respondents said they were targeted with disinformation campaigns due to their gender and that gendered disinformation had caused them some form of harm and restricted their news access to sources of information for reporting. In comparison, less than one-third of the male journalists felt affected by these challenges.

Only for the question about additional challenges to counter disinformation due to their specific gender identity, a majority of male journalists also admitted the pressure they faced. Assuming reliability of responses, this indicates that traditional gender roles might influence or affect the ability of Pakistani digital journalists to respond to disinformation across genders.

However, the alarmingly high prevalence of disinformation-related adverse impact on the work of Pakistani women journalists indicates that future interventions to equip journalists with the resources for combatting disinformation must pay special attention to the needs of women journalists.

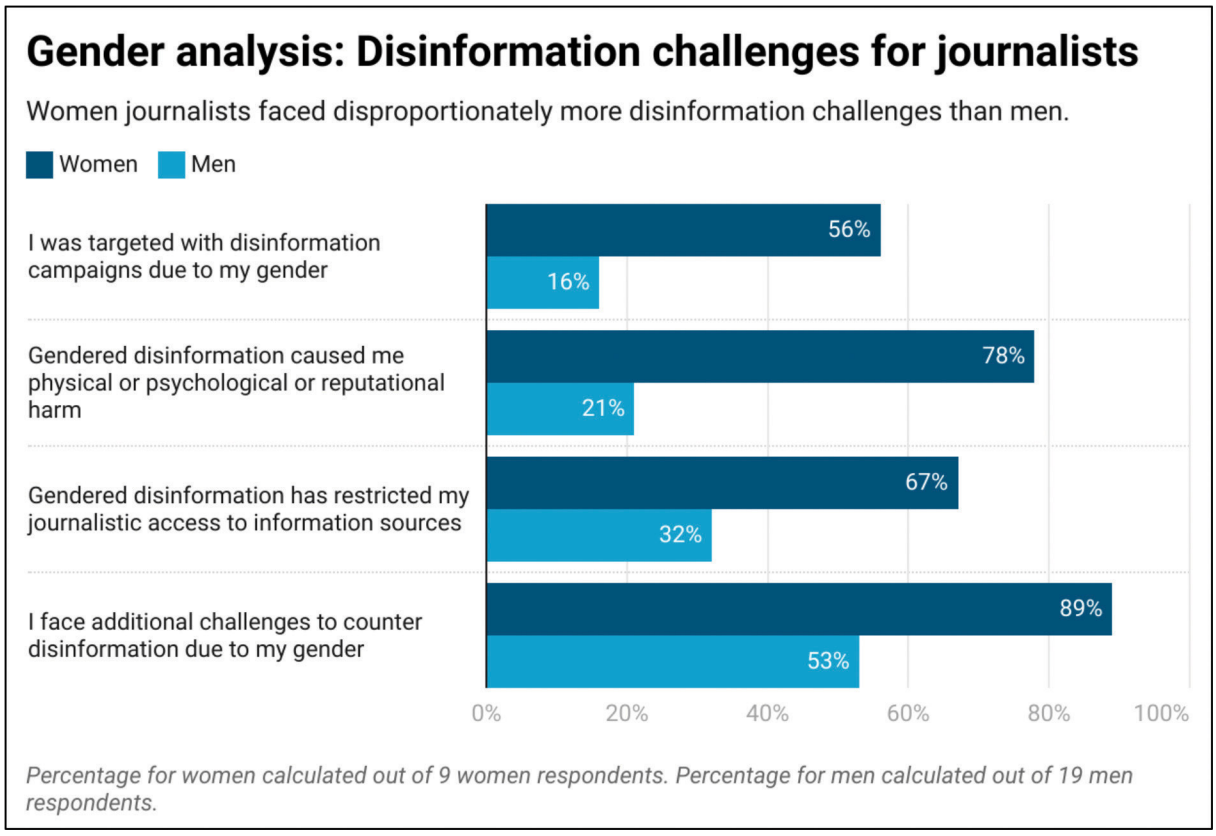


Figure 3 Gender analysis: Disinformation challenges for journalists

RQ3: What are the challenges faced by existing and past initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan?

Based on interviews with four key informants, the following challenges were identified regarding local disinformation responses. The interviewees were two fact-checkers, one media development professional, and a technology journalist.

Lack of comprehension among journalists

The media development interviewee said the effectiveness of disinformation responses involving journalists in Pakistan was limited due to the lack of conceptual understanding of misinformation among the journalist community.

"I feel there is still unfortunately a lack of understanding about what is misinformation. A lack of understanding (of misinformation) exists in news consumers obviously, but it is also evident among news producers," the interviewee said. "Even senior journalists perhaps do not differentiate between analysis, opinion, facts, and information, and this also colors their own perceptions of disinformation."

The interviewee said this assessment was based on the observation that when asked to quote examples of disinformation, journalists often shared instances that were simply opinions with which they did not agree. The interviewee believed Pakistan's polarized media industry and partisan news culture was to blame for it, and this polarization was leading journalists to make value judgments about opinions without looking at the core facts.

The lack of comprehension also has a potential impact on policy solutions. Journalists have been a major interest group in the steps to counter disinformation in Pakistan. Therefore research and policy consultations on online content regulation also rely on inputs from journalists. According to the interviewee, journalists who do not have a proper understanding of disinformation might propose or endorse problematic solutions such as legislation to curb disinformation through arbitrary removal of online content. Given Pakistan's history of controlling access to information, it is reasonable to think that such laws could be abused to endanger the legitimate online freedom of expression of citizens.

The journalist interviewee agreed that Pakistani journalists still struggled with their own digital media literacy and since even the big media organizations do not have robust internal fact-checking systems, the vulnerability of journalists to mis- and dis-information has increased over time.

One fact-checker interviewee spoke plainly regarding mainstream media practices.

"The reporters (in Pakistani newsrooms) are not trained to think critically about information," the interviewee said. "They are told to file stories, and file them before everyone else. Editors do not care about fact-checking."

This apparent indifference among journalists and news outlets might be due to structural and financial reasons.

Monetization (dis)incentives

Disinformation responses do not operate in a vacuum, according to the interview respondents. Rather, the existing means of monetizing digital and broadcast news content influence the efficacy of the journalism-related disinformation responses.

The journalist interviewee said that many Pakistani journalists have migrated to YouTube to set-up their online news channels and develop their personal journalism brands. There

is a lot of sensationalism in their content on YouTube, according to the interviewee, because monetization works that way. The content views go down apparently if they do not sensationalize their videos.

“If you don’t sensationalize, then your views might get reduced,” the interviewee said. “So they might spread false information (to get more views) because they have to monetize the content.”

The media development interviewee agreed with this sentiment but in relation to mainstream broadcast and digital news.

“A lot of the misinformation that seeps into the news media is juicy and it works for their (financial) benefit in terms of getting them viewership,” the interviewee said. “Whatever (the media) people are doing is selling, (even if it involves misinformation) and they think it is OK to remain in the same state.”

For mainstream news organizations, it might be a “willingness issue” more than a “capacity issue”, according to the media development interviewee, who pointed out that it does not take extensive resources to develop and enforce a fact-checking policy for the big mainstream news outlets who can also afford to buy subscriptions to popular verification tools, most of which are free anyway. These observations are supported by the discussion by Nizamani (2019).

In this context, the interviewee said the effectiveness of fact-checking training interventions becomes linked with the motivations of the individual journalists who attend the training.

“Participants use the learning from the training according to their own levels of motivation. They cannot influence the policies and practices regarding verification and fact-checking inside the newsrooms,” the media development interviewee said.

Beyond training, disinformation responses that deal with monitoring and fact-checking in Pakistan face their own set of challenges.

Sustainability of disinformation responses

One fact-checker interviewee said sustainability was the biggest hurdle in the way of running a fact-checking organization in the country.

“Fact-checking needs to pay for itself, (but) since it’s not a media platform where you can get ads and stuff, so you have to think about a business model,” the interviewee said.

Several people have started voluntary fact-checking accounts on Pakistani Twitter as passion projects in the past. But it is difficult to sustain these beyond two to three months, the interviewee said, adding that “unless it is sustainable, it will be linked with individual effort and when the people move on, the fact-checking initiative will collapse.”

The media development interviewee also agreed that volunteer-based fact-checking initiatives struggle with sustainability and reach.

"(The approach) with volunteer efforts is that we will do whatever we possibly can and beyond that, we'll think about it later," the interviewee said.

Essential questions about the intended audience and intended impact of the fact checks get ignored in this approach, according to the media development interviewee.

The journalist interviewee pointed out two other constraints affecting independent fact-checking initiatives: lack of transparency and the publishing language of checks.

Lack of transparency in fact checking

The journalist interviewee said transparency of methodology is a basic requirement for fact-checking and fact-checkers need to make it clear. The established fact-checking organizations, Soch Fact Check and AFP Pakistan Fact Check, clearly mention their methodology and offer a corrections or complaints mechanism in accordance with IFCN guidelines. However, the smaller voluntary initiatives have so far not fulfilled these best practices.

"The biggest thing missing from the smaller fact-checking initiatives in Pakistan is transparency, which is not to blame them because it's a matter of resources too," the journalist said. "Some of the Twitter-based fact-checking accounts have not laid down their methodology."

One of the fact-checkers interviewed for the study said credibility is needed for fact-checking organizations for people to take them seriously. The journalist said credibility leads to trust, which is essential in fact-checking. The fact-checkers' bias might show without a transparent methodology, making it difficult for the public to trust them, the journalist interviewee said.

Moreover, in Pakistan, the language of the fact-checks can also reduce their effectiveness.

Language barriers

Usually the target audiences of some disinformation responses such as fact-checking are Internet users or the general public. The impact of existing fact-checking initiatives in Pakistan might be affected by the language they use to publish, according to the journalist interviewee.

"The biggest challenge is language," the interviewee said. "A lot of the initiatives address English media or English-speaking audiences, but Urdu is of course a big language for the audience in Pakistan and there is a short-coming in terms of countering disinformation in local languages."

The journalist interviewee said some of the fact-checking initiatives are posting in Urdu, but their output is not at a scale that could compare to the reach of local languages. In comparison, several fact-checking organizations in India now publish their checks in Hindi and other local languages.

Apart from the financial and technical issues, some fact-checkers are also facing online abuse due to their work.

Political backlash

One fact-checker said they retain anonymity when publishing their checks because online trolls target them for political fact-checks.

“When we check things being mis-represented by a political party, then we get reaction from its supporters,” the fact-checker said. “When we look at the profiles of the troll accounts, most of these accounts mention political party affiliations in their bios or photos.”

The other fact-checker said their organization usually does not fact-check what the politicians say if it is rhetoric.

“Unless (the politicians) speak about history, science, geography, economy – anything that can have a tangible factual inaccuracy, we do not pick the claim for fact-checking,” the second fact-checker interviewee said. “During election times, however, we do fact-check the websites (and manifestos) of political parties for factual inaccuracies.”

RQ4: What are the lessons or achievements from existing and past initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan?

The survey respondents were asked whether they were familiar with recent disinformation responses in Pakistan, such as fact-checking, training, and awareness campaigns. Just under half of the respondents (13, or 46% of the total 28 journalists) said they were familiar with recent initiatives.

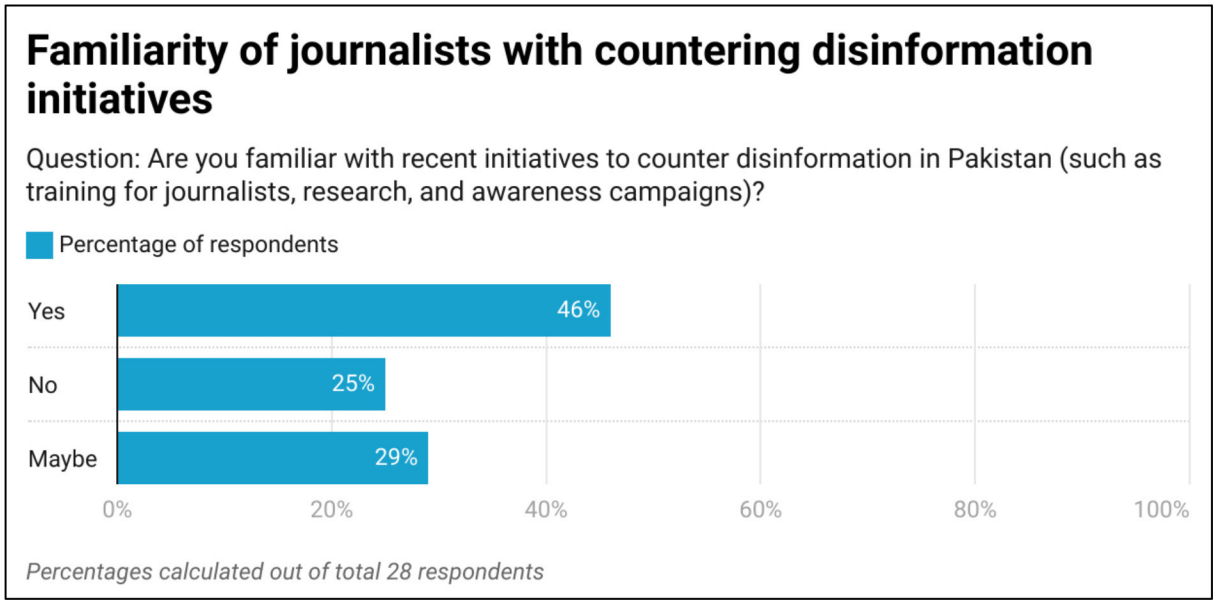


Figure 4 Familiarity with countering disinformation initiatives among Pakistani digital journalists

Of the 13 survey respondents who said they were familiar, altogether 76% said these initiatives were either “very effective” (30%) or “effective” (46%).

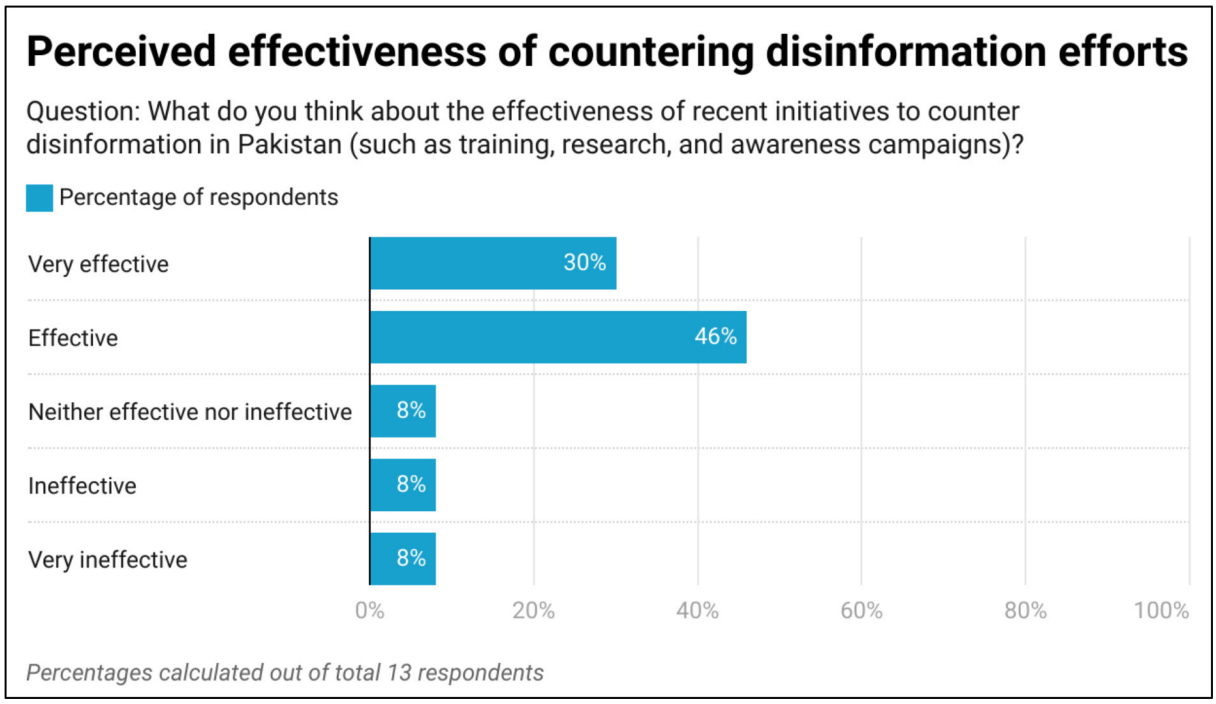


Figure 5 Perceived effectiveness of countering disinformation efforts among digital journalists

These results show that at least one in every three journalist respondents had a favorable view of recent disinformation responses, indicating that at least some local journalists might have benefitted from the interventions.

The interview respondents shared the following lessons or achievements from disinformation responses.

Timely Covid-related interventions

The media development professional said a series of training sessions they conducted related to Covid-19 coverage, which included learning about navigating the myths, misinformation, and lack of information related to the pandemic, were well-received among the journalist community.

“The training of journalists was timely, and I feel that during the first and second waves of Covid-19 the training helped journalists understand that scientific knowledge of the coronavirus was still evolving and that is what they could communicate to the public,” the interviewee said.

The interviewee said such interventions helped to expand the vision of health journalism taking place in the country at that time by helping the journalists see the need to report things beyond what the government authorities were saying.

Improvement in technical ability

The media development interviewee said they noticed enthusiasm among local journalists about an advanced training to investigate manipulation of trending topics on Twitter, and

based on the trainee feedback, the training helped journalists understand social media trends and dynamics better.

However, the media development professional noted, the trained journalists struggled with framing the final stories about their investigations because the analysis was complicated and often did not prove causality for social media manipulation as the journalists would have wished. Consequently, the trained journalists struggled to include elements in the story that would make their story credible, such as the use of circumspect language, indicating a further need for journalism training on the craft of storytelling for complicated disinformation-related investigations, according to the interviewee.

Hire social media whiz kids

One fact-checker interviewed for the study said they had learned that setting up an efficient fact-checking unit starts with the hiring process.

“The key is in hiring people who are on social media anyway,” the fact-checker said. “They are in the flow. The thing with fact-checking is that you have to constantly go through all the digital media platforms.”

The fact-checker interviewee said the recruits can then be trained to track campaigns and dig deeper into disinformation verification. But their initial familiarity with social media is a huge advantage for the fact-checking team.

Develop a workflow

Fact-checking has a lot of moving parts, from identification of viral disinformation to selection of claims to verification and publishing.

One fact-checker said their team, which consists of fact-checkers, editors, and website staff, established a workflow to ensure coordination within the team. They use team- and project-management apps, such as Slack and Trello, to keep stock of pending and ongoing fact-checks, the interviewee said. Protocols are in place about how to write and file the fact-checks so staff can also work remotely, the interviewee added. But this was not always the case.

“The system alone took us around eight months to develop,” the fact-checker said. “It was a big hassle in the beginning, but now everything is done smoothly.”

Use existing networks of local journalists

Visual verification can be a challenging task for fact-checkers in settings such as Pakistan where eyewitness videos often lack quality, visual markers or identifiable landmarks and do not have support from online tools, such as Google Maps Street View etc., which have been found to be helpful for visual verification by fact-checkers in Western countries. In such circumstances, one fact-checker interviewee said they have sometimes relied on existing networks of local journalists, for example on WhatsApp groups, to get supporting evidence from the ground to confirm or deny visual claims.

Downranking and impact of fact-checks

There was disagreement among the respondents about the impact of fact-checks being published in Pakistan. One fact-checker said that Facebook's labelling and downranking system that warns users about the existence of false claims and reduces the reach of third-party certified disinformation messages is the real indication of impact because it means that fact-checks actually limit the spread of the disinformation. The downranking can force publishers to take down disinformation content or remove factual inaccuracies from their posts to restore their reach, the fact-checker said. The same system of third-party fact-checking and downranking is not used by Twitter or YouTube, according to the fact-checker.

However, another fact-checker interviewed for this study contended that Facebook is the last platform to receive disinformation in Pakistan, indicating that it was more important to focus on other social networks in terms of relevance and impact of disinformation. This fact-checker said that disinformation was mostly originating in the country in WhatsApp groups from where it usually goes public on Twitter before arriving at Facebook at the tail end of the disinformation cycle, meaning that downranking on Facebook would be too late to stem the flow of a viral piece of false content.

RQ5: Based on the needs of digital journalists and evidence from countering-disinformation initiatives, what are the key suggestions to design and implement effective interventions to combat disinformation in the future?

Over two-thirds of the 28 respondents (68%) said fact-checking training for journalists is most urgently needed in Pakistan to counter disinformation. This is understandable because the respondents are journalists and they are most likely thinking of their own interest when opting for the need of fact-checking training, which could benefit their skill development.

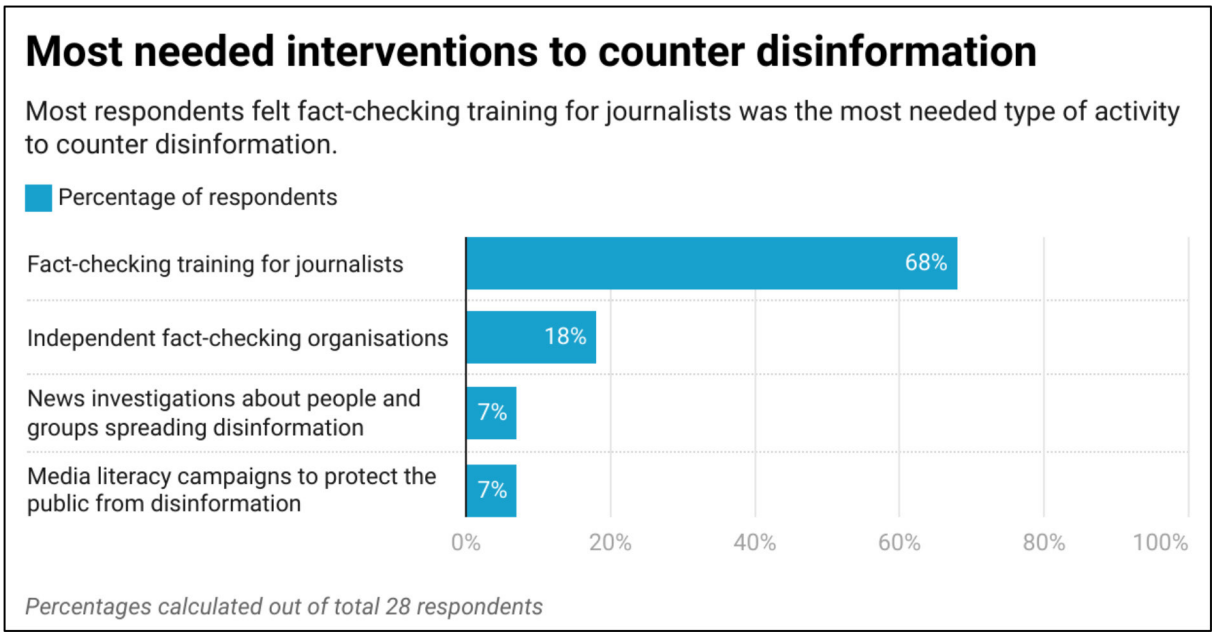


Figure 6 Most needed interventions to counter disinformation according to digital journalists

The interview respondents shared the following suggestions for improving disinformation responses in the country.

Use a multi-stakeholder approach

The journalist interviewee said the discussion around countering disinformation in Pakistan is still only limited to journalists mainly, and the digital rights groups that advocate for disinformation responses also get limited to a like-minded echo chamber.

"We do not take initiative to engage diverse perspectives (on disinformation responses), but we need to expand somehow," the interviewee said.

The journalist said that beyond fact-checking, Pakistani stakeholders need to explore multi-stakeholder solutions, which could include inputs from academia, researchers, teachers, political parties, and the government in addition to the journalists and media support groups.

Putting focus on diverse types of disinformation

Political disinformation and impact on democratic systems take the limelight in terms of practitioner attention and development sector donor priorities, but other types of disinformation, such as health-related falsehoods, get ignored despite having a genuine and more direct impact on public health and safety, according to one interviewee.

Addressing political disinformation alone might not rid the society from the perils of disinformation, the interviewee said. This means that customized interventions might be needed for country-specific prevalent disinformation themes, for example the polio-related anti-vaccination propaganda in Pakistan.

Work with diverse groups of news consumers

The media development interviewee said family-and-friends' networks are crucial to the spread of disinformation in Pakistan, and these are also often the sources people consider to be the most reliable or difficult to challenge.

But these are also actors that development sector professionals have not traditionally approached for media literacy or disinformation responses, focusing more on the news producers instead.

"We (the media development community) don't really know how to work with a demographic that is so diverse," the interviewee said. "I feel it's a huge challenge."

However, there is a need to engage with diverse groups of news consumers, the journalist interviewee said.

"Traditional news organizations still refuse to engage with young audiences," the journalist said. "We don't allow them space, even laugh at the young content creators, such as Tik-Tokers."

But the young people can be extremely influential and important in combating disinformation, the journalist said. The media development professional agreed with this comment.

“As long as the public does not start to reject disinformation, unfortunately the way we are right now the news media are not going to stop using disinformation and benefiting off of it,” the media development interviewee said.

Explore education and media literacy interventions

Children in Pakistan, especially from working class and lower-middle class backgrounds, are increasingly becoming the gatekeepers of technology access for their tech illiterate parents, according to experiences shared by the media development professional.

This means that children as young as seven-year-olds may be exposed to online disinformation. Education-based interventions will be needed to protect them against disinformation.

The journalist interviewee agreed that early education-based digital media literacy engagement is needed.

“These days young people want to be content creators from an early age,” the journalist said. “If we work on their media literacy from the beginning, then they will become better news consumers and producers.”

But the interviewees also said they realized there was no easy solution for an educational intervention because of Pakistan’s broken education system.

“Even our teachers are media illiterate, so it is unfair to ask them,” the journalist said. “They need to be educated so they have awareness.”

One fact-checker said school children should at least be taught to review the information they are receiving online from the lens of someone who wants to first see if it is true before reacting to it.

The interviewee said summer schools on disinformation where fact-checkers train students could be one potential way forward on a voluntary basis.

Figure out consistent methodology and sustainability

The journalist interviewee said resources are a challenge for fact-checking, but limited resources can also be put to efficient use for better results.

“Even if two people do it dedicatedly with a consistent methodology, targeting regional languages and maybe starting with Urdu for their fact-checks, they can do far more than maybe a team of 10 people with no methodology who are randomly going about fact-checking without any structure,” the journalist said.

Based on personal experience, one fact-checker interviewee said if a small team of one or

two fact-checkers want to start a new initiative, there is no stopping them obviously, but it would be wiser to consider sustainability along with the methodology.

“Start it by all means, but with a vision that you will turn it into something sustainable,” the fact-checker said. “Have a business model for it.”

Build partnerships: Opportunities for independent digital media

The interviewees said independent digital journalism start-ups, such as members of the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP), can explore a number of opportunities to initiate disinformation responses.

The journalist interviewee said Big Tech companies and social networks, such as Meta and Tik Tok, are focusing on media literacy and have a lot of resources, such as monetization through service delivery, platform tools, and advice on sharing content, which can help media organizations and fact-checking teams. But the social media companies have mostly only engaged with governments in Pakistan so far, according to the journalist, so private initiatives on countering disinformation and media organizations should explore such opportunities.

“Partnerships is the way to go,” the interviewee said. “Partnerships with organizations such as the IFCN can bring credibility, which leads to trust.”

The media development professional said digital media outlets can pool resources to conduct joint disinformation investigations and publish joint stories to make them more impactful. They can also facilitate discussions on disinformation responses.

“Working collectively within their (digital journalism) community will be great, having these conversations (on disinformation) in a more public way, maybe through a podcast or discussing disinformation stories together,” the interviewee said.

The fact-checker interviewee said fact-checking organizations can also partner up with local journalism support organizations to see if they can introduce demand in the news industry for outsourced fact-checking services.

Build capacity for disinformation investigations

The media development interviewee said local organizations have limited capacity to teach journalists how to craft investigative stories about social media-based disinformation trends in a way that is accessible to the ordinary readers and how to distribute these stories for maximum impact. Human resources, local or international, with access to skills about reporting, writing, and distribution would be beneficial for the local journalist support community that can pass on the learning to journalists.

Conduct regular impact assessment of disinformation responses

Local journalism support groups and digital rights organizations working on disinformation responses do not have sufficient capacity to assess the impact of their anti-disinformation interventions.

"Due to capacity issues and self-reporting biases, it is difficult for local organizations to gauge well what has had impact and how, and what are the gaps," one interviewee said. "This creates gaps in our own understanding (in terms of designing disinformation responses)."

Impact assessment support to local disinformation responses can help inform future actions. This study itself is an attempt to explore the potential impact of existing and past disinformation responses. But more formal project-based impact and learning studies are required on a regular basis, based on the observations shared by the interviewees.

Facilitate international and regional civil society collaboration

Many of the countries in South Asia are facing similar challenges with respect to disinformation but there is not enough sharing of experiences or lessons, according to the media development professional interviewed for the study.

"I do feel just having a space where these discussions can happen in a way which is not led by Big Tech companies, that would really help," the media development interviewee said. "If we had more platforms for engagement on disinformation responses regionally, it will be very helpful."

Do-It-Yourself (DIY) training

One fact-checker said most fact-checking work involves digital verification and does not require special software. It can be managed with freely available tools, such as reverse image search through major search engines. The interviewee said many organizations, such as Google, First Draft, and AFP, have developed free online training resources for journalists which can help individuals in Pakistan who want to start or improve their fact-checking services.

Dedicated team for fact-checking

The fact-checker interviewee also said that if someone is considering setting up a new fact-checking initiative in Pakistan, they would need at least one or two dedicated fact-checkers, one editor, and perhaps one additional resource for website publishing. Part-time fact-checking is not advised, according to the interview respondents.

Fresh human resource for fact-checking

Another fact-checking interviewee advised not to look for experienced journalists for a new fact-checking operation.

"We realized that people with strong experience of journalism were conditioned in a way that they wanted to speak with too many sources for fact-checking even when the evidence was available in front of them online," the interviewee said. "This had repercussions for the real-time workflow because some fact checks are time sensitive and need to be published immediately."

The fact-checker suggested that people who are young, active on social media, technology-driven, and passionate about disinformation trends are a better fit for fact-checking work.

“If you train young people, then some months down the line, they become so incredibly amazing at their work that even when you were hiring them you would not have thought they would advance their skills to such a great level,” the fact-checker said.

While these suggestions from the interview respondents are substantial, the study has attempted to consolidate these findings and present them in the form of overall recommendations in the next chapter. The recommendations for disinformation responses in Pakistan that follow are based collectively on the literature review, survey responses, and interviews.

Recommendations

The following recommendations about disinformation responses in Pakistan are presented keeping in mind the stakeholder groups of journalists, news media, fact-checking organizations, and media development groups.

1. Fact-checking recommendations

This set of recommendations deals with the operational, technical, financial, and collaborative aspects related to setting up a new fact-checking service or sustaining an existing fact-checking operation in the country.

1.1 **Fact-checking operations:** Organizations that want to set up or sustain fact-checking services need to consider the size of the team, scope, methodology, and audience engagement as the key operational issues for their work.

1.1.1 **Pick the ideal team size:** A fact-checking service would ideally need at least one or two fact-checkers, one editor, and one resource person that manages the web publishing and social media distribution. Solo projects would run into consistency issues and larger teams will require more homework on the sustainability of operations.

1.1.2 **Identify the scope:** Fact-checking services in Pakistan so far have adopted a national scope and used the English-language for publication, both of which affect their overall efficiency and effectiveness. Some local, regional, and international examples explain the way identifying the scope of a fact-checking service can be helpful to the fact-checking operations. Pakistan's Soch Fact Check, for example, looks for "claims that have the potential to go viral", allowing it to focus on falsehoods related to politics, governance, science, and culture. In neighboring India, where there are more than 15 IFCN-signatory fact-checkers, many services have limited their scope. Alt News specializes in fact-checking political disinformation and misinformation spread by mainstream media, D-FRAC focuses on identifying hate speech, First Check and THIP only look at medical misinformation, and Boom, NewsMeter, Factly, and Vishwas publish in local languages, to name a few. Similarly, the well-known US fact-checker PolitiFact checks for the accuracy of claims by public officials and politicians, which has allowed it to develop an excellent reputation within this important niche. Identifying the scope, including the nature of disinformation claims to focus on and the language of publishing, can help new and existing fact-checking services to concentrate their energy and develop their expertise. Expansion can follow if required. Fact-checkers should also prioritize publishing in local languages,

at least Urdu, to ensure their checks are received and understood by the local communities.

1.1.3 **Adopt a methodology:** The public will question why fact-checkers pick certain claims to be fact-checked. A transparent methodology can help fact-checking services to build trust with their audiences and be clear about how they select what to check. For industry best practices, new and existing fact-checking services can use inspiration from the IFCN code of principles, which lists six criteria related to methodology and mandates the adoption of a corrections policy, and examples such as the AFP Fact Check methodology which describes in detail the tools its fact-checkers use to perform the checks.

1.1.4 **Think about audience engagement:** The impact of fact-checking depends on how fact-checking services engage with their primary audiences. In Pakistan, most fact-checking initiatives are primarily focused on using Twitter for distribution because the micro-blogging platform has become central to online political conversations and these initiatives appear to see Pakistani Twitter users as their key audience. But if viral misinformation is spreading first and quickly on WhatsApp, then fact-checking services might need to consider integrating the communication app in their operations. For example, around 50 fact-checking services around the world use WhatsApp services to collect claims from the audience and distribute their fact-checking output. New and existing fact-checking services should define their audience in order to work on building reach and engagement for their fact-checks.

1.2 **Fact-checking technical issues:** The fact-checking process requires the use of certain tools that can help with digital verification, but the presentation of these fact-checks also requires consideration.

1.2.1 **Which tools to use:** Most fact-checking services around the world rely on the use of text search, reverse image search (such as Google Reverse Image Search or Tin Eye), and the InVID video verification browser extension. These online tools are free to use, and new or existing fact-checking services can begin here. Complex claims might require searching across social networks, using maps and weather conditions to check visual cues, and traditional news reporting techniques, for example by calling sources to verify, and in such cases, fact-checkers should not limit themselves to assumptions on the basis of preliminary online research.

1.2.2 **Explaining the why:** Putting a red cross or ‘fake’ label on the screenshot of a viral claim might not be the most appropriate or sufficient way of getting the public to trust a fact check. The best fact-checking services around the world explain ‘why’ a claim is false. This requires detailed description, which can later be packaged as text, photos or videos for distribution on social media platforms. But fact-checking services would do well to document the context, their process of arriving at the verdict, and the evidence that proves falsehood in a descriptive template. Some fact-checking organizations, such as Full Fact in the UK and Soch Fact Check in Pakistan, open their fact-check posts by clearly mentioning the claim and the fact, before explaining the background and presenting the evidence.

1.3 **Fact-checking financing:** Funding a fact-checking unit remains a significant issue and the following recommendations may help fact-checking services in figuring out their finances.

1.3.1 **Do not ignore sustainability:** Fact-checking passion projects may begin with good intentions and honest zeal, but like most passion projects they run into resource problems early on. New fact-checking services in Pakistan need to consider a business model before launching and existing services can do well to work on one if they have not already. The business model would allow the service to think more clearly about their work in terms of product, intended audience, and expenses. Fact-checking services mostly rely on grants and donations, for example Full Fact, Alt News etc. For this revenue stream, the fact-checking service will have to register as a charity or non-profit organization. The fact-checking organization can also try to sell premium services to selected target groups, for example news organizations, think tanks etc. They could also monetize through diversifying their services, for example by offering consultancy or training services, or diversifying products, for example through podcasts and newsletters. The solution will depend on the individual fact-checking service and its scope or ambition. But the bottom-line is that fact-checking services in Pakistan should not delay their internal conversation on sustainability.

1.3.2 **Working with Big Tech:** The social media giants, such as Facebook and Google, have provided massive financial support for fact-checking globally in recent years, perhaps in an attempt to distract from their problematic role in amplifying disinformation online. However, partnering with social media companies, for example Meta or Tik Tok, for third-party fact-checking on their platforms can allow fact-checking organizations to be paid for their work and gain useful experience from access to the monitoring tools used by these companies, such as CrowdTangle.

1.3.3 **Stay aware of funding concerns:** The caveat to the above-mentioned recommendations is that any type of external funding might come with strings attached. So new and existing fact-checkers need to be cautious about what sources of funding they are comfortable in working with because these sources may affect their independence or impartiality or the external perception of the same.

1.4 **Fact-checking collaboration:** Fact-checking services may also benefit from cross-sectoral collaborations in Pakistan.

1.4.1 **Collaboration with news organizations:** Many news organizations in Pakistan, especially the independent journalism startups, might not be capable of setting up their own fact-checking units because of resource constraints. Therefore, established fact-checking services can collaborate with news organizations to jointly publish checks or provide a news wire-like service. This will help fact-checkers reach a wider audience.

1.4.2 **Collaboration with civil society:** First Check in India facilitates collaboration among journalists, medical professionals, and technologists to fact-check medical misinformation. Pakistani fact-checking services can also similarly collaborate with professional groups and civil society organizations to focus on checking

specific themes of disinformation messages. The 2022 floods in Pakistan have also attracted online disinformation connected with natural disasters. With the newfound emphasis of the government to embrace narratives of climate change in the wake of the floods, an opportunity exists for fact-checkers and media to collaborate with civil society organizations to dispel disinformation that relies on climate change denialism. General elections in Pakistan are scheduled for 2023 and it is expected that the electoral process will be mired in political disinformation. The elections offer an opportunity for collaboration between media, fact-check organizations, and civil society organizations working on monitoring elections and electoral campaigns.

1.4.3 **Collaboration with youth and academia:** New and existing fact-checker organizations should explore collaboration with youth groups and universities, especially mass communication departments or journalism schools, for conducting orientation sessions for students, recruiting tech-savvy young people as fact-checkers, and setting up research labs at academic institutions on disinformation and fact-checking trends. This form of collaboration can address the gap in disinformation understanding among journalists by helping journalism students who are the future of the news industry to learn about disinformation concepts.

2. Training recommendations

These recommendations are about the capacity building of journalists to understand and counter disinformation.

2.1 **Training areas:** The capacity building of journalists should focus on developing conceptual clarity, improving familiarity with disinformation trends, and effectively investigating disinformation campaigns.

2.1.1 **Improving the understanding of disinformation and fact-checking:** Based on the primary research done for this study, Pakistani journalists might still be struggling with the basic concepts of disinformation and are also interested in getting more fact-checking training. Special orientation sessions should be conducted with journalists, unions, press clubs, and news organizations to educate a critical mass of journalists about disinformation concepts, its types, local examples, motivations for spreading disinformation, and ideal policy responses to the menace of disinformation. These sessions can be followed up with technical training on fact-checking tools and practices.

2.1.2 **Providing learning about social media manipulation:** Advanced training on the way social media trends, especially on Twitter, are manipulated through organized disinformation campaigns or influence operations can help journalists better investigate the spread of disinformation and the actors behind the disinformation spread.

2.1.3 **Writing a disinformation investigation professionally:** Media development and journalism support organizations should conduct training sessions for Pakistani journalists to write effective disinformation investigative stories. As indicated by the study's findings, journalists might struggle to write if no smoking-gun evidence is found or might not adequately be able to explain a complex

investigation for layperson readers. Such training workshops could benefit from using case studies based on fact-checks already done by locally operating fact-checking services, such as AFP Pakistan Fact Check and Soch Fact Check, and investigative disinformation story guides, such as Rappler's Shark Tank technique or BuzzFeed's disinformation network investigations.

2.2 **Training design and follow-up:** Since the study has identified that use of learning imparted through training might depend on the personal motivation of individual training participants, the organizations that are delivering disinformation-related capacity building training to Pakistani journalists need to consider some suggestions for shoring up the impact of the interventions.

2.2.1 **Continued engagement instead of brief interactions:** Limited duration training sessions might be appropriate for basic orientation of stakeholders, including journalists, on disinformation topics. However, such brief exchanges might not be most effective for the purposes of building adequate capacity of local journalists to investigate influence campaigns or commit to fact-checking on a regular basis. Organizations that seek to deliver such training opportunities should design capacity building programs that engage participant journalists over a longer duration of time, with workshops at regular intervals and practical assignments in the intervening periods. This will allow these organizations to develop the skills of a cohort with more attention and customized support. Such interventions can take the form of a course with online and offline components, and these can be supplemented with a training-of-trainer approach so that the participants can go on to train more journalists in the future.

2.2.2 **Build impact assessments and learning opportunities:** Outcome-oriented capacity building workshops should be an opportunity for media development and journalism support organizations to also assess whether or not this form of intervention is actually proving to be beneficial in the Pakistani context. Donors working with these organizations on capacity building regarding disinformation should encourage an open-minded and non-judgmental attitude towards impact assessment and learning from the implementation so that the organizations do not feel pressured to report only positive results. The impact assessment and learning opportunities can help identify what mode of training is most effective, which target groups are most responsive, and which skill areas need further support.

2.2.3 **Develop mechanisms to keep trainees engaged after training:** Despite the best efforts of media development organizations, individual trainees might lose motivation to use the learning of the training especially if they return to a news work environment that does not incentivize or actively discourages their new skills. These structural problems of the media industry that could impede effective use of countering-disinformation skills can be circumvented by building investigative fellowships, research positions in collaboration with universities, or part-time placements at established fact-checker organizations to ensure that the trained journalists use their skills to produce fact-checks and investigations that can inspire others in the field.

2.2.4 **Build journalist cohorts around major disinformation themes:** Journalists can be trained on countering disinformation, but a more effective approach of long-term engagement with trained journalists is to build cohorts around important themes of disinformation messages in Pakistan. These themes can be politics, gender, climate, and economy etc. These cohorts can offer a news beat-like structure for media development organizations to support future journalistic investigations about disinformation campaigns in Pakistan.

3. Media & Information Literacy (MIL) recommendations

The following suggestions deal with improving the media literacy of the general public, especially children and youth, and relevant stakeholders, such as journalists themselves, in an attempt to respond to the disinformation challenge faced by society. The media and information literacy recommendations are important because these interventions typically focus on firming up the protection of audiences who are the intended targets of disinformation campaigns.

3.1 **Educational responses – Working with students and teachers:** An overall strategy to counter disinformation nationally cannot ignore the pressing need for educational responses. Young children are exposed to false messages on the Internet in ways that might be difficult to discern for older generations, as indicated by the study's findings. The places of education attended by children offer a natural environment where they can be informed about ways to protect against disinformation. Teachers, however, might not have the necessary skills to guide discussions on this topic. Therefore, working on educational responses takes on a two-fold responsibility. It was previously suggested that fact-checkers should collaborate with academia. Such collaborative efforts can also be led by educational institutes themselves, civil society groups, and media development organizations. The goal could be to develop learning resources for teachers and students in local languages to understand disinformation, find out ways to access reliable information sources online, and learn how media messages are created so that they are able to determine the motivations and intended reactions of good- and bad-faith information actors. The resources can eventually be made part of curriculum to maximize reach and impact.

3.2 **Run public awareness campaigns:** Regular public awareness campaigning on issues of disinformation and hate speech can help the general public distinguish between reliable information and disinformation. Media & Information Literacy (MIL) campaigns can also include actionable information for the public to protect themselves against potential harm from false messages. Just like the educational responses, the awareness campaigns offer an opportunity for collaboration among stakeholders, such as government, private companies, civil society, media, and academia. As the study's findings indicated earlier, the Pakistani journalist community is also struggling with disinformation comprehension issues, so the news media professionals should also be a target audience of the media literacy campaigns to help them develop better understanding of the concepts and responses.

4. Coalition building recommendations

As the study's findings indicate, a multi-stakeholder approach can be beneficial towards tackling the challenges posed to society by disinformation. In this regard, broad-based

coalitions of relevant stakeholders can help build solidarity against disinformation in Pakistan and offer unique ways of combating the spread of false message online and offline.

4.1 **Develop consensus on disinformation response strategy:** Key stakeholders that have a duty towards raising greater social awareness regarding disinformation need to be identified and brought together to develop a broad consensus on lobbying for changes in media and information cycles to promote factual narratives. Critical stakeholders in this collaborative enterprise include media (especially digital media where gatekeeping of facts is low), academia, civil society (especially rights-based groups), media development organizations that promote media professionalisms and media consumers.

4.2 **Institutionalize advocacy against disinformation through an alliance:** Any broad-based consensus against disinformation is better articulated through a structured but non-bureaucratic platform such as an alliance or network of critical stakeholders to allow for an institutional approach to advocacy against disinformation. This also helps specify duties for each duty bearer for optimal collaboration.

4.3 **Showcase demand for anti-disinformation agenda:** Once a potential alliance of critical stakeholders is established and it has strategized its advocacy to articulate the demand side for initiatives against disinformation, the alliance needs to make its case public through one or more conferences to mobilize the supply side actors against disinformation and generate a critical mass of support.

4.4 **Develop regional linkages for knowledge and inspiration:** Sharing information and gathering learnings from fact-checkers and other organizations working on countering disinformation in the Asia and the Pacific region can improve quality of local initiatives against disinformation in Pakistan and bring critical resources to the campaign.

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Annexure A: Survey Questionnaire

The following survey questionnaire was used for the research.

1. Name:
2. Gender: Woman/Man/Transgender Person/Prefer not to say/Other
3. Are you a Pakistani digital journalist? Yes/No
4. How has online disinformation affected your journalism work the most during the past five years?
    a. Made it difficult to verify information available online
    b. Increased the risk of being deceived by false social media posts during the news process
    c. Reduced public trust in news
    d. Disinformation was used to target me with online harassment and trolling
5. Please respond to the following statements:
    a. I was targeted with disinformation campaigns due to my gender Yes/No
    b. Gendered disinformation caused me physical, psychological or reputational harm Yes/No
    c. Gendered disinformation has restricted my journalistic access to information sources Yes/No
    d. I face additional challenges to counter disinformation due to my gender Yes/No
6. Are you familiar with recent initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan (such as training for journalists, research, and awareness campaigns)? Yes/No/Maybe
7. If yes, what do you think about the effectiveness of recent initiatives to counter disinformation in Pakistan (such as training, research, and awareness campaigns)?
    a. Very effective
    b. Effective
    c. Neither effective nor ineffective
    d. Ineffective
    e. Very ineffective
    f. Not familiar with recent initiatives to counter disinformation
8. Which of the following do you think is needed most urgently in Pakistan to counter disinformation?
    a. Independent fact-checking organizations
    b. Fact-checking training for journalists
    c. Public awareness campaigns about the harms of disinformation
    d. Media literacy campaigns to protect the public from disinformation
    e. News investigations about people and groups spreading disinformation
    f. Research on nature and impact of disinformation

Annexure B: Key Informant Interview Questions

The following questions were used for semi-structured interviews with the key informants.

1. What challenges do you think online disinformation poses for the work of digital journalists in Pakistan?
2. Based on your experience of countering disinformation efforts in Pakistan, what are the main lessons you have learned?
3. Based on your experience of countering disinformation efforts in Pakistan, what are the main challenges you faced?
4. What are your suggestions to design and implement effective interventions to counter disinformation in Pakistan?

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK (www.fnpk.org)

Freedom Network is a Pakistan-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013.

In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious global French Human Rights Prize 2017 by the Government of France for "its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression."

OUR MISSION: To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.

OUR OBJECTIVES AND EXPERTISE:

1. **To serve as a watchdog on the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet and of civil society**
   a. Through 24/7 monitoring of the rights to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and online
   b. Through monitoring and documenting violations of freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet
   c. Through researching the causes, symptoms and case studies of the violations of freedom of expression in all forms of media
   d. Through monitoring violation of the right to expression of non-media sections of society such as human rights groups, development practitioners, and the performing arts industry.

2. **To promote an ethical and professional media**
   a. By promoting, supporting and conducting advocacy, research, analysis and training initiatives for media
   b. By promoting, supporting and conducting initiatives to help civil society strengthen its stakeholding in a pluralistic, independent, open and professional media with emphasis on professional ethics and journalism best practices
   c. By strengthening the interface between media and civil society by improving professional development communications within and for development sector organizations as well as for their supporters and donors.
   d. By promoting a culture of safety and security for journalists and media houses through advocacy, research and training on issues of safety and impunity against journalists.

3. **To serve as an advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental rights**
   a. Through a broad range of advocacy, research and analysis initiatives
   b. By promoting and building synergies between and among media and civil society stakeholders
   c. By promoting citizens' participation on issues relating to freedom of expression and access to information
   d. By conducting assessment missions, studies, research, translations of resources in multiple languages on its own and for other organizations for wider national and international audiences.

ABOUT DigiMAP

DigiMAP is a formal alliance of independent non-legacy media online media platforms in Pakistan. DigiMAP was formed in November 2020 to collectively work for protecting the interests of independent digital media in Pakistan. Currently, DigiMAP has 25 members all across the country. DigiMAP actively takes initiatives to promote unity among digital media platforms and use the unity to protect their collective interests. DigiMAP is currently working to improve the reporting of religious minorities in Pakistan, countering fake news and disinformation and digital union organizing among its members.