

A BMF Publication

NAVIGATING INFODEMIC, MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION

A TOOLKIT



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MISINFORMATION
&
DISINFORMATION**

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BACKGROUND

These are dizzying times for our children and youth. The migration of news and information to digital platforms has transformed the way in which they create and consume media. They are swamped with all kinds of information, including misinformation and disinformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to infodemic, an excessive amount of information that makes it difficult for them to get through to the correct information.

And the growing size and popularity of social media are fueling the mad rush and rapidity of infodemic. The whirlwind of infodemic is wreaking havoc from the palm of the hand.

According to Bhutan Media Foundation's nationwide survey on social media use, 90 percent of Bhutan's population is on at least one social media platform (Social Media Landscape in Bhutan, 2021). And 98.8 percent of Generation Z uses social media. This means the Bhutanese in general and our children and youth, in particular, are in the thick of infodemic.

Exposure to an excessive amount of information and the lack of skills to navigate their way through it can severely impact the wellbeing of young people. Therefore, it is crucial to help them acquire a set of skills to deal with infodemic, misinformation, and disinformation.

Bhutan Media Foundation is pleased to bring out this toolkit for Bhutanese children and youth to help them find their way through a maze of information. This toolkit draws on diverse sources. Wherever possible and necessary, concepts and ideas have been Bhutanised. We have tried to keep the toolkit concise. It does not require a heavy reading but references several sources for those interested in delving deeper into the subject.

We hope that this modest initiative will pave the way for our collective fight against infodemic, misinformation, and disinformation.

Happy reading

Needrup Zangpo
Executive Director

01

**WHY ACCESS TO QUALITY
INFORMATION MATTERS**

There is so much information on the internet that distinguishing correct and false information has become next to impossible.

Right information moves everything positively forward in this world. False information would just do the opposite. Right information is the foundation for knowledge. The right to the freedom of expression is a universal right and it becomes meaningful and helpful for societies only when the information is right. UNESCO notes that verifiable and reliable information such as that produced in science and professional journalism is key to building 'Knowledge Societies'. False information, on the other hand, works in the other direction.

Today, the internet has made information flow fast, prompt and even unmanageable. There is so much information on the internet that distinguishing correct and false information has become next to impossible. The internet has made it possible for all players with all sorts of agenda to access, share, transmit, and even manipulate information. This is made trickier because in the world of the internet, even internet companies and the news media have their own specific interests in gatekeeping and shaping the flow of information transmission. Their role in transmission transcends the content reception and consumption role and it spirals forward to content reproduction and sharing, which leaves little room for message authentication for its correctness.

Therefore, the consumers of information are at the mercy of information providers in all manifestations. Herein lies the importance for necessary filters to authenticate information in this world of advanced information flow. The access to quality information has never been more important.

02 WHAT IS INFODEMIC?

An infodemic normally involves a large increase in the volume of information on a given topic, which increases exponentially in a short time when incidents like Covid-19 pandemic occurs.

The term 'infodemic' is a portmanteau (word formed by combining more than one word) of the words - 'information' and 'epidemic'. In simple terms, an infodemic is an overabundance of information¹. It refers to an excess of information, both right and wrong information, which presents a difficult situation for the people to access reliable sources and it, in turn, obstructs the process of seeking guidance when it becomes crucial for making important decisions².

An infodemic normally involves a large increase in the volume of information on a given topic, which increases exponentially in a short time when incidents like Covid-19 pandemic occurs. In such a scenario, scientific and technical information becomes mixed with rumours, manipulated data, fake expertise, incorrect information, and false and biased news, hindering people to process and/or evaluate the correct information³.

Infodemic during Covid-19 pandemic

An 'epidemic' is associated with a disease outbreak, and during times like the Covid-19 pandemic, an abundance of information includes false and misleading information. It causes confusion, leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines public health response. During a pandemic, people are unsure of taking the right preventive measures and an infodemic can amplify harmful messages⁴. The world has become a digital village with proliferating social media and it will only add to an exponential overload of information.

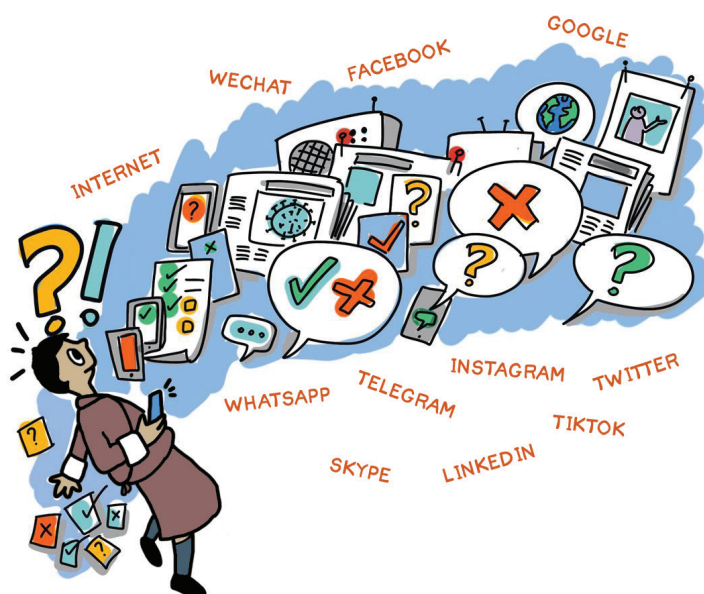
^{1&4}World Health Organization (WHO).

^{2&3}Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

WHO explains that infodemics are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people.

Infodemic in life

The ever-encompassing technological advancement and the world of the internet has made information easily available as never before. Today, people can google about anything on their smart phones and a click on the search button will yield countless results – presenting an infodemic situation about almost any topic in life.



03 WHAT IS MISINFORMATION?

Misinformation is misleading information created or shared without the intention to manipulate people⁵. The European Commission defines misinformation as verifiably false information that is spread without the intention to mislead, and often shared because the user believes it to be true⁶.

An example is sharing a rumour that a celebrity has died, before finding out that it is not true.

In misinformation, the intention of the one who creates it is not malicious in nature, i.e. the intention is not to harm or manipulate anyone. This element of evil/manipulative intention is the main difference between misinformation and disinformation.

We live in a world where we encounter a lot of misinformation. It could be a word-of-mouth gossip, harmless jokes, pranks, official and unofficial information, and it could take various manifestations. While the intention of such misinformation may not be to wrong someone or to gain political, professional or any undue mileage, it could create a lot of confusion for consumers mainly because it is untrue.

Today, in the social media, there is a lot of misinformation. There are a lot of different types and kinds of misinformation.

Today, on the social media, there is a lot of misinformation. There are a lot of different types and kinds of misinformation. It becomes critical to identify misinformation and it falls on everyone to be wary of misinformation and not to share and/or promote it.

⁵Alsmadi & O'Brien (2021)

⁶European Commission (2021)

Examples of misinformation



A **rumor** stating that the government is running out of isolation facilities.



Facebook Post alleging that 22 people tested positive for Covid-19 on rapid test kit in Punakha.



A **rumour** that a restaurant chef in Thimphu tested positive for Covid.



“**Rumors** are being circulated claiming that the outbreak of Covid-19 cases in the country is due to the recent flu vaccination. We would like to clarify that the rumor is baseless and untrue. Only WHO prequalified flu vaccines, which are also widely used in other countries, were used during the recent vaccination drive.”

Health Minister in December 2020.

04 WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

Disinformation is false or misleading information spread with the intention to deceive.

Disinformation is misleading information created or shared with the intention to manipulate people with dishonest information⁷. In other words, disinformation is false or misleading information spread with the intention to deceive⁸. Disinformation is deliberate propaganda.

Disinformation is different from misinformation because the latter is unintentional spread of false information. If left unchecked, disinformation could create confusion among the public, fuel political polarization, create misunderstandings, and promote distrust in the political system and democratic institutions⁹.

The motivations for the disinformation are diverse. They may be to make money, score political advantage, undermine confidence, shift blame, polarise people, and to undermine responses to the pandemic. On the other hand, some drivers may be ignorance, individual egos, or a misguided intention to be helpful¹⁰.

Disinformation can be shared by individuals, organised groups, some news media, and official channels – wittingly or unwittingly. Disinformation often hides falsehoods among true information, and conceals itself in the clothes of familiar formats. It resorts to well-known methods – ranging from false or misleading memes and fake sources, through to trapping people into clicking on links connected to criminal phishing expeditions¹¹.

The advent of the internet and social networks have fast-tracked and democratized the flow of information. It has also enabled malicious actors to spread disinformation for their own undue ambitions.

⁷Alsmadi & O'Brien (2021)

^{8&9}Atlantic Council (2021)

^{10&11}UNESCO

Examples of disinformation



A **fake news** post about the Prime Minister to temporarily terminate DANTAK and IMTRAT from Bhutan went viral on Facebook in December 2020. The account was disguised as that of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation (BBSC).



A **rumour** that the Prime Minister would be announcing the lifting of nationwide lockdown in 2020.



Prime Minister on mis/disinformation about Covid-19 on social media

“It can be a mix of accurate and inaccurate information. There can be some information from reliable sources and some from unreliable sources. It is good if the information shared is correct otherwise, we would request not to share any false information during such a situation. Take your time to check it out against reliable sources of information. This will help you decide if you can trust the advice.”

Source: BBS (2020)

05 WHAT IS MALINFORMATION?

Malinformation is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country¹². Malinformation could be understood as containing something real that was taken completely out of context and with malicious intent.

In other words, malinformation is genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation.

An example is during the 2016 US presidential elections, the incident of Russian agents hacking into emails from the Democratic National Committee and the Hillary Clinton campaign and leaked certain details to the public to damage reputations.

Malinformation could be understood as containing something real that was taken completely out of context and with malicious intent.

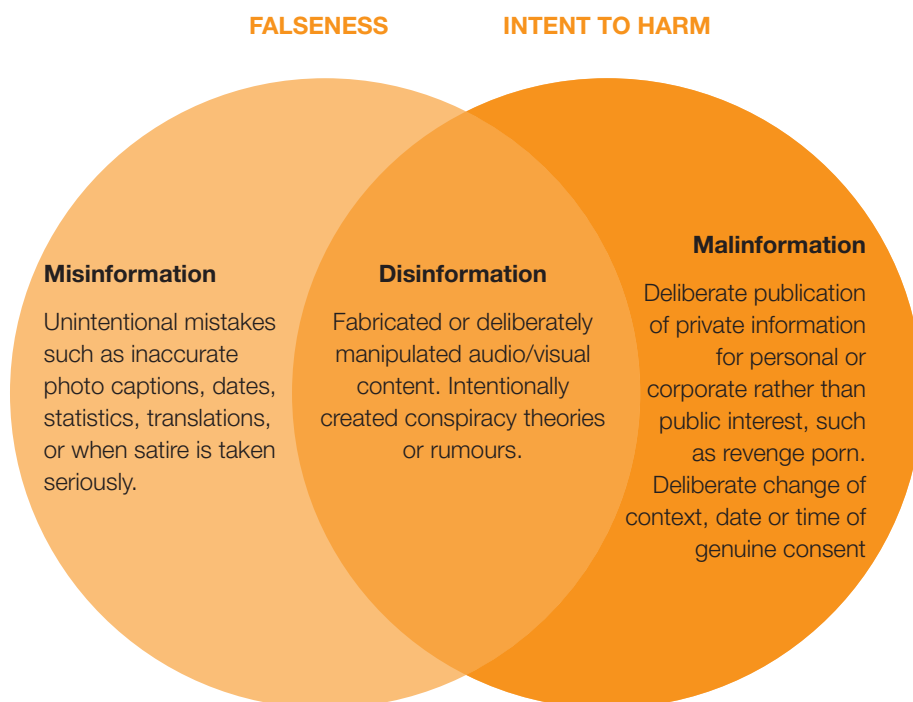
¹²(Kujawski, 2019)

Misinformation is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.

Disinformation is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.

Malinformation is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER



Credit: Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakshan, 2017

Theoretical incidences about mis-, dis-, and malinformation concepts

	Author	Author's understanding
Misinformation	Floridi (2005)	"False information", i.e. misinformation, is merely pseudo-information" (p.352).
	Floridi (2011)	"Misinformation is 'well-formed and meaningful data (i.e. semantic content) that is false" (p. 260).
	Fallis (2014)	"Inaccurate information (or misinformation) can mislead people whether it results from an honest mistake, negligence, unconscious bias, or (as in the case of disinformation) intentional deception" (p. 1).
Disinformation	Fallis (2009)	"First of all, in order to disinform, you have to intend to deceive someone" (p. 3). "It is also worth noting that you must intend to deceive and not just intend to disseminate false information" (p. 3).
	Floridi (2011)	"Disinformation' is simply misinformation purposefully conveyed to mislead the receiver into believing that it is information" (p. 260).
	Karlova and Fisher (2013)	"Disinformation is deliberately deceptive information. The intentions behind such deception are unknowable, but may include socially motivated, benevolent reasons [...] and personally-motivated, antagonistic reasons" (p. 3).
Malinformation	Walker (2019)	"Genuine information that is shared to cause harm" (p.232).
	Wardle and Derakhshan (2018)	"Information, that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country" (p. 44).
	Baines and Elliott (2020)	"'Malinformation' requires both intention and equivalence and often involves a repurposing of the truth value of information for deceptive ends" (p. 12).

Source: ISSN 1518-2924. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5007/1518-2924.2021.e76900>

06 WHAT IS DISINFODEMIC?

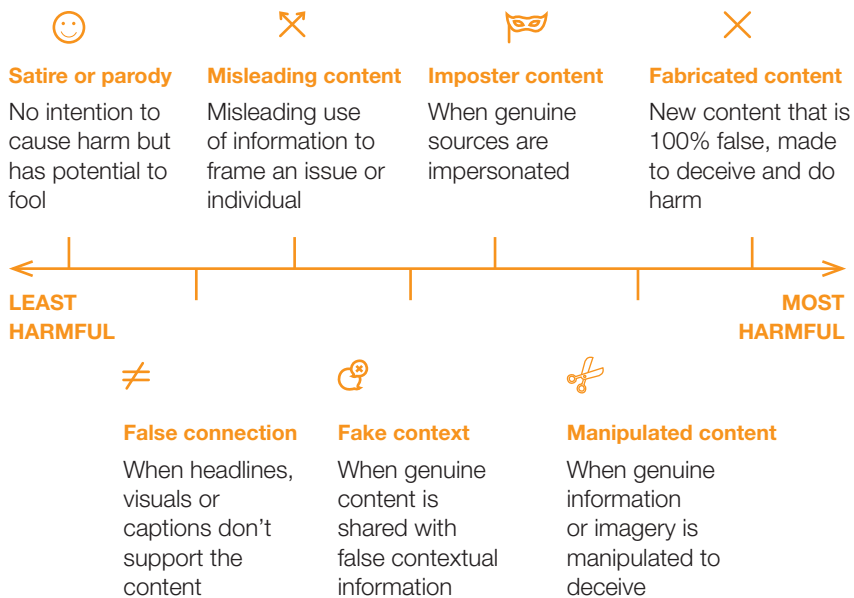
We have seen that an infodemic is an overabundance of information, both right and wrong information, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy and credible sources and make it difficult for people to seek guidance when they need it.

But disinfodemic refers to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The two concepts of misinformation and disinformation constitute disinfodemic.

But disinfodemic refers to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

The term disinfodemic was coined by UNESCO in light of the Covid-19 disinformation which creates confusion about medical science with immediate impact on every person on the planet, and upon whole societies. It is more toxic and deadlier than disinformation about other subjects.

SEVEN TYPES OF MIS/DISINFORMATION



07

**WHERE COULD FALSE INFORMATION
COME FROM – THE SOURCE**

According to the BBC, fake news could start as a misinformation or as a disinformation. It could be a misheard or misquote from a real news; made up to make money or clicks for a website; designed to promote a person, party or point of view; or misunderstood from a joke or parody post and taken as a fact.

When a piece of information conforms to our own belief, confirmation bias influences us to believe it as a fact. Sometimes the shocking nature of information forces people to share the information.

How does the sharing start?

Sharing of false information usually starts in small and trusted networks like a family social media group or a group of like-minded people. People are more likely to share information shared by a family member or a friend because they trust them. Then they, in turn, share it with the people they trust and the move spirals on making it viral in the social media.

Sharing of false information usually starts in small and trusted networks like a family social media group or a group of like-minded people.

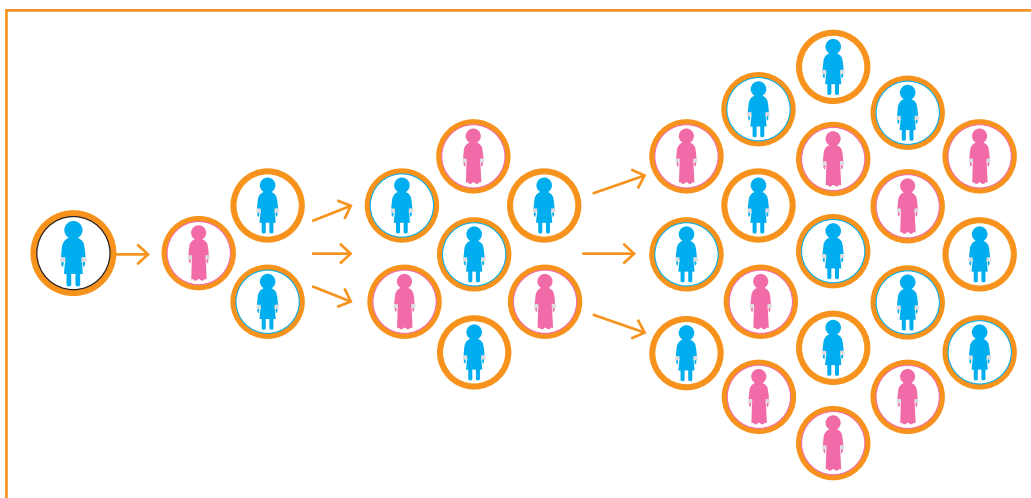
Sometimes, this process is helped by bots (fake accounts programmed to spread a story to as many people as possible) and trolls (real accounts who like to harass and intimidate other people online), who aim to push fake news onto lots of social media timelines. They might do this for money, political gain, or even just for fun.

When does it go viral?

A false information will immediately go viral if the one who shares it is a popular figure or has a lot of followers on social media.

The BBC quotes a study by the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute which found that only 20% of fake news stories were produced or shared by famous public figures, these posts made up nearly 70% of the total engagements on social media. These "super-spreaders" can easily amplify false information online, which their followers are likely to trust as they look up to them.

But false information can also become viral through groups like family and friends. In the process of spreading, the false information could be endorsed by popular people or even formal information sources, making it more viral.



08

HOW DOES MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION SPREAD?

In this information age, the spread of information is immediate and rapid with a click of a button, spreading it worldwide instantaneously. Among the information providers, particularly the news media, there is also a rush to be the first to transit and share information which often results in overlooking the standard fact-checking process. Moreover, there are many malicious players involved in intentional distribution of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation for their own selfish interests, which aggravates the sharing of false information.

UNESCO underlines three reasons for the spread of false information, particularly in light of the changing landscape of the mainstream media and the emergence of social media.

Collapsing traditional media business models

The private media houses in Bhutan are struggling for survival with dwindling advertisement revenue. While media houses are trying their best to be responsible, the burgeoning social media has started becoming the main source of news.

The traditional mainstream media business globally is looking at a rapid decline in advertising revenue and their digital advertising is not able to make profits. This trend has led media houses to enjoy lesser time for 'checks and balances'. Media houses are increasingly prone to 'clickbait' journalism. As media houses promote subscription and 'on-demand access', consumers increasingly opt for alternative news sources like 'peer-to-peer' news products and such sources do not adhere to standard ethics.

This is also the case in Bhutan. The private media houses are struggling for survival with dwindling advertisement revenue. While media houses are trying their best to be responsible, the burgeoning social media has started becoming the main source of news.

Digital transformation of newsrooms and storytelling

The mainstream media is witnessing a transformation to digital platforms. This trend is calling for journalists to prepare news content in multiple platforms and this severely limits them from following standard fact-checking process. A new trend among journalists worldwide is to share news stories first on their social media platforms to meet audience demand in real-time. This results in promoting click-bait practices and issues like ‘virality’ take precedence over quality and accuracy.

In Bhutan too, media houses are increasingly resorting to digital platforms. Journalists are increasingly looking to compete to serve their audience and be the first to share their news stories.



The creation of new news ecosystems – the rise of the social media



The proliferating social media has enabled anyone to stream any information of their choice. This has filled social media with inaccurate, false, malicious and propagandistic content. People on social media are prone to share sensational stories and rarely do people check facts before sharing. This allows false information to flourish. There are also cases where people cannot 'un-share' or retract false information after realizing the content is false.

Like everywhere else in the world, social media is also increasingly becoming the primary source of information for people in Bhutan. Moreover, it is dominated by anonymous players most of whom are sharing information with their own self-interest. It places Bhutanese consumers in a storm of false news circulating on the social media.

09

**CONSEQUENCES OF MISINFORMATION
AND DISINFORMATION**

The consequences of mis/disinformation can be at varying levels which could depend on the kind of mis/disinformation and the purpose with which it is spread. But the consequences are in no way desirable. All kinds of mis/disinformation would only result in misleading people which will only contribute to more factions in society. Some of the consequences of mis/disinformation is discussed below.

Many would believe it

Most people are just causal consumers of information and as such would tend to believe it. People, generally, believe the mainstream media blindly and rarely question its authenticity. People would be a little more cautious about information on social media but when information is presented convincingly – which most disinformation is – people tend to believe it.

People would be a little more cautious about information on the social media but when information is presented convincingly – which most disinformation is – people tend to believe it.

**Mis/disinformation makes it harder to see
the actual truth or fact**

False information in all manifestations are designed to deviate people from the truth. It camouflages fact and dilutes it, taking the attention of the people away from the truth.

Disinformation is more harmful

While misinformation can sometimes be harmless, disinformation is intended for malicious gains and it manipulates consumers. The players spreading disinformation do it for ulterior motives and the extent of the motives could be personal or societal manipulation. Disinformation is particularly harmful and takes consumers for a ride. It directly affects the people's right to factual information.

It could personally affect people

People make decisions based on the information they get. Wrong information would direct people to make wrong decisions.

Impacts more severe in times of emergencies

In times of emergencies, people make decisions based on the information at hand because there is no time nor resources to evaluate the information in detail.

Desperate times require desperate measures. And in times of emergencies, people make decisions based on the information at hand because there is no time nor resources to evaluate the information in detail. For example, the mis/disinformation surrounding health emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, people could end up making decisions that could be life-altering or could even claim lives.

Impact on students

Students could easily fall prey to mis/disinformation and it could impact their academic performance or they could end up making wrong decisions about their career which could be more dangerous.

Young people are more vulnerable to mis/disinformation.

Impact on the youth

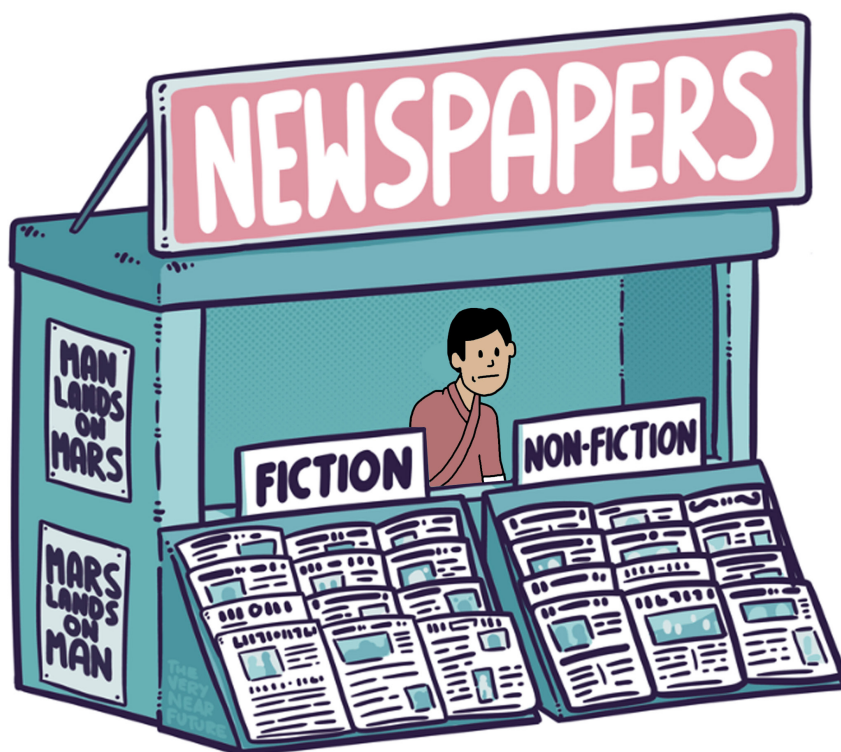
Young people are more vulnerable to mis/disinformation. They are at the prime age of making life-altering decisions. Small decisions they make at this stage would make or break their career. At this stage, they are also impulsive and ignorant about the politics of false information floating on social media. As such, they could end up making decisions based on mis/disinformation which will only have dire consequences. If this happens at a societal level, this could have national consequences.

Distrust in the media

If the mainstream media practises unethical journalism which manifests in mis/disinformation, it will eventually result in people losing their confidence in the media. This can be worrisome because the media exists as the fourth arm of governance and a credible platform for the people to access the right information. The media is mandated to provide checks and balances and it is expected of them to be responsible. If the media flounders, the entire society and the nation will suffer.

Provides platform for conspiracy theories and hate-speech

The world of social media has empowered everyone to share information even under the guise of anonymity. It is impossible to impose ethical standards on faceless people and it enables everyone to share anything. This gives ample room for conspiracy theories and hate-speech.



Distrust in public institutions

Everyone falls prey to information. Targeted disinformation could result in people losing confidence in public institution creating discord in the society. It could undermine the democratic process. The essence of democracy is sacred. It empowers people. But it also enables miscreant to promote their mischievous and ulterior agendas. As such, mis/disinformation could undermine the entire democratic process.

It is a national threat

Mis/disinformation has no moral boundaries. It could be designed to defame a person, an institution, or the government. It could be designed to incite ethnic or regional differences. It could be devised to promote anti-nationalistic sentiments. It could be conceived to cripple a nation. Therefore, mis/disinformation is a national threat.

It is a global threat

In this advanced age of information, there are various groups working against world peace and global advancement. The motives could be multi-faceted. The world of internet and social media gives them the ideal platform to promote their agenda and manipulate global sentiments. As such, mis/disinformation is a global threat.

10 SPOTTING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Identifying misinformation and disinformation can be a difficult and tricky process. A crucial aspect of identifying false information is to develop a critical mindset about the information one consumes and checking it against multiple sources.



The European Liberties Platform (2021) provides the following five-question guide to spot false information.

Validate who is the author? Is he/she a reliable source?

The first and an important step is to note the author of the information. Is the author credible? Has their past works been credible and accurate? Is the author seen as credible by news sources?

What do other sources say about the topic?

Have other sources shared the same information? If the information is from a certain media outlet, have other credible media houses covered it too?

Is there any real evidence?

If the information is just an opinion, is it supported by empirical evidence? If there is an information that a country has developed a cure for the coronavirus, does it contain studies proving it?

When was the information published?

Always be mindful of the publication date. Old news is sometimes repurposed and manipulated to make it appear current.

Where did you find it? is that platform reliable/credible?

It is important to validate not only the author but also the platform where the information is shared. Has the information been covered by mainstream news outlets?

11

YOUTH, MISINFORMATION AND
DISINFORMATION

The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2019 in a study reveals that more than half of all respondents in 38 countries (55%) are concerned about their ability to discern what is real and fake on the internet. These studies have revealed a particular exposure of young people to these contents and their special vulnerability as consumers, as lost as adults when it comes to assessing the credibility of information¹³.



Studies in different European countries, in the United States, or in Australia show that teenagers' habits showed that their access to information was mainly through social media. It was also noted that secondary sources and contents received from their friends are more highly valued than the original source of information. They display little interest in the accuracy of a news item in favour of contents that really affect them, preferably of a humorous, striking, or novel nature¹⁴.

^{13&14} (Herrero-Diz et al., 2020)



The proliferation of the social media has also exposed the Bhutanese people, particularly young people, to a lot of information on the various social media platforms. The report 'Social Media Landscape in Bhutan' by the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) reveals that 90% are active members of at least one social media. The high penetration rate is supported by widespread ownership of smartphones and greater access to the internet. The report notes that social media usage among children and young adults is a major issue of concern and 66% of parents believe that their children use social media at the expense of other good and healthy activities. Only around a third of parents regularly monitor their children's social media use.

In Bhutan, Spam and indecent posts are the two most reported negative individual experiences on social media.

A research by the Pew Research Center show that in the United States, 95% of 13-17 year-olds own a mobile phone and use it to communicate and learn. The BMF study shows that the penetration of social media among generation Z (ages 13-29) in Bhutan is higher at 98.8% and it is an astounding 100% among university graduates showing that Bhutan youth is ahead even from their counterpart in the US in its exposure to social media.

The BMF report notes that spam and indecent posts are the two most reported negative individual experiences on social media. Organisations report that negative comments and fake reviews are their most common negative experiences. Making it worse is the fact that about three-fourths of the social media users in Bhutan have little or no awareness of privacy and ethical issues. Due to limited knowledge and awareness about ethical, privacy and safety issues, and increasing incidences of exposure to insidious or negative content, social media users may be highly vulnerable to negative experiences and cybercrime.

Social media penetration in Bhutan

All over the world, young people are turning to technology as a tool for self-expression. They are developing their digital identity, mainly through instant messaging applications. In the process, they are exposed to a lot of information and they are using this information, exploiting it, growing up with it, and consuming it. As such, this addiction of the young people to technology is becoming a public concern all over the world because of the lack of fact filters in the entire process of the information flow.

Social media penetration among regular paid employees and students is at 100%.

The BMF study shows that social media penetration among regular paid employees and students is at 100% which shows that everyone in these two groups uses social media without exception. The social media

Facebook is the most used platform among generation Z (ages 13-29), while WeChat is the most widely used platform among the other generations.

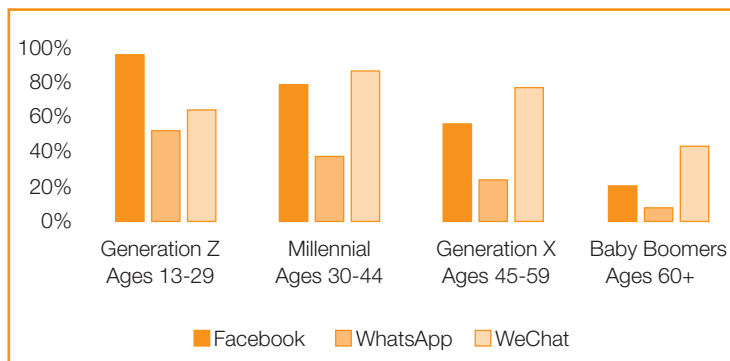
penetration is lowest among agriculture workers at 81%, which means that about 8 in every 10 people use social media. The penetration is a high 93.1% among unemployed people, which is reflective of the scenario that they would be scouting for jobs and opportunities through social media.

The study shows that an average Bhutanese person is an active member of four social media platforms. The average number of social media platforms used varies from 5.3 in Thimphu to 2.4 in Dagana. This clearly shows how exposed our youth are to social media and how vulnerable they are to misinformation and disinformation in their lives.

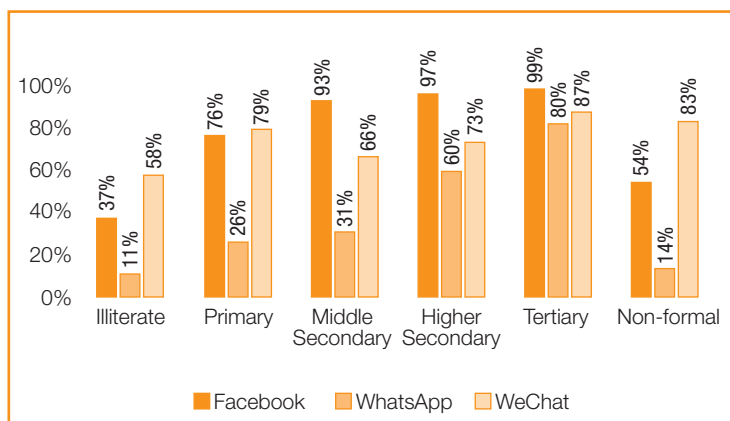
Dominant social media in Bhutan – Facebook and Wechat

The study 'Social Media Landscape in Bhutan (2021)' shows that Bhutan follows the global pattern and Facebook is the most popular social media in the country with 77% using it. WeChat is second with 72% YouTube (58.4%), Telegram (39.6%), WhatsApp (38.9%), Instagram (33.2%), Gaming apps (29.7%) and TikTok (20.6%).

Facebook is the most used platform among generation Z (ages 13-29), while WeChat is the most widely used platform among the other generations. Popular social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are yet to capture the attention of the elderly Baby boomers generation (ages 60+), while WeChat is more widely used by this generation.



Membership share by age cohort (in %)



Membership share by education level (in %)



The pattern of social platform use is somewhat different among monks. WeChat is the most popular platform among monks, with 89.3% using it, followed by Facebook (85.7%), YouTube (57%), WhatsApp (39.3%) and Telegram (35.7%).

Among respondents with disabilities, 40% use Facebook, 45% use WeChat, and 32% use YouTube.

Among persons with disabilities (PWDs), 40% use Facebook, 45% use WeChat, and 32% use YouTube.

Social media aligns with human psychology and stimulates a craving for connections and validation. Globally, people continue joining newer platforms and are spending increasingly more time on social media. Bhutan is probably no different, although there is no baseline data to support this yet.

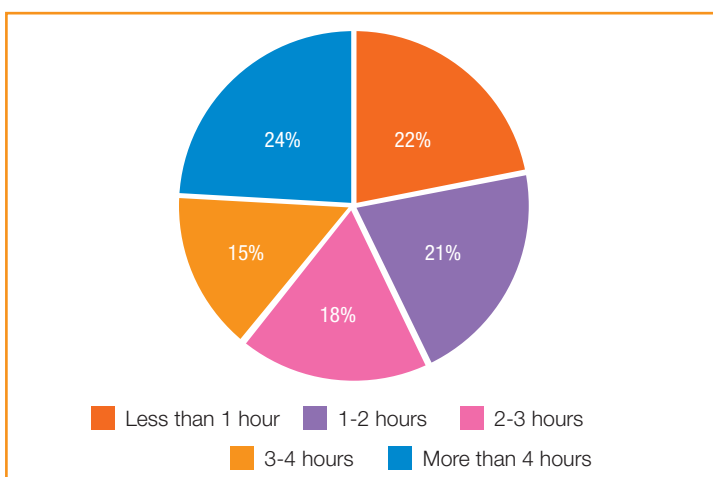
Facebook and WeChat are the most heavily used platforms, with 28% and 24.9% of people, respectively, using these at least once per hour, and 43.8% and 38.4%, respectively, using these 3-4 times a day. Social media platforms like Twitter, blogs, Pinterest and LinkedIn are the least-used platforms both in terms of membership and intensity of use.

Bhutanese people spend more time on social media than global average

A stark finding of the study 'Social Media Landscape in Bhutan (2021)' is that Bhutanese people spend more time on social media than the global average, presenting tangible dangers to the exposure of misinformation and disinformation in the social media.

A Bhutanese spends 163 minutes every day on social media, with a higher degree of skewness, which is 18 minutes higher than the global average of 145 minutes.

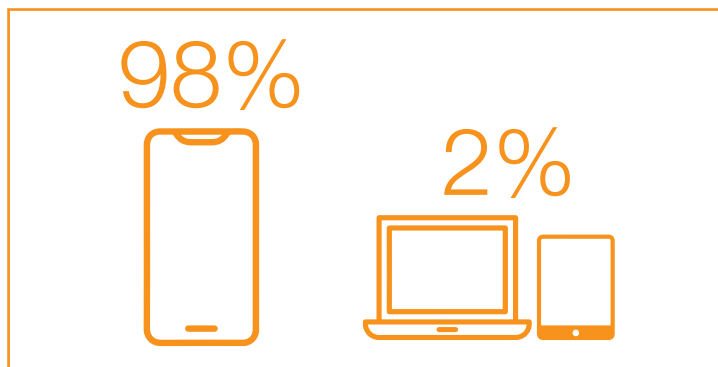
Nearly a quarter (24%) of them are very heavy users, spending more than four hours a day on social media, while 15% of them are heavy users spending 3-4 hours a day on social media. 22% of them are light users, spending less than an hour a day on social media.



Daily time spent on social media (as % of social media users)

Among the dzongkhags, time spent on social media is highest among those in Thimphu (227 minutes) and lowest in Dagana (90 minutes). Urban people spend 217 minutes per day, while rural people spend 136 minutes each day on social media.

An overwhelming 98% of people regularly use smartphones to access social media, while personal computers and tablets are only used by a minuscule 2% of users regularly for accessing social media.



Medium used by Bhutanese people to access social media

12

**YOUTH AS SPREADERS AND CREATORS OF
MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION**

Courtesy to the internet, today, information is circulated not only by the mainstream media but by everyone. After the advent of social media in the beginning of the 21st century, the world of information flow has transformed. This has allowed everyone to spread information, including false information, without surveillance.

For the youth, social media has become their natural habitat. Social networks are a perfect setting for the youth to socialize, be entertained and informed. The youth spend most of their time on the social networks and stand exposed to false information all the time.

A study by Columbia University states that 59% of the links shared on social media have not been previously read because users are in the habit of viewing attractive images and text and sharing on the impulse of that intriguing, suggestive or attractive content, and so fake news are being shared.

For the youth, the social media has become their natural habitat. Social networks are a perfect setting for the youth to socialize, be entertained and informed.

Research by the Pew Research Center in the United States showed that only 39% of American adults was “very confident” that they can recognize fake news. The study said 23% had shared fake news, 14% said they knew it was fake when they shared it, and 16% said that they learnt it was fake only after sharing it. There is no similar study done in Bhutan, but it would not be wrong to presume that youth in Bhutan would be spreading fake news and false information regardless of knowing whether it is fake or not for various reasons.

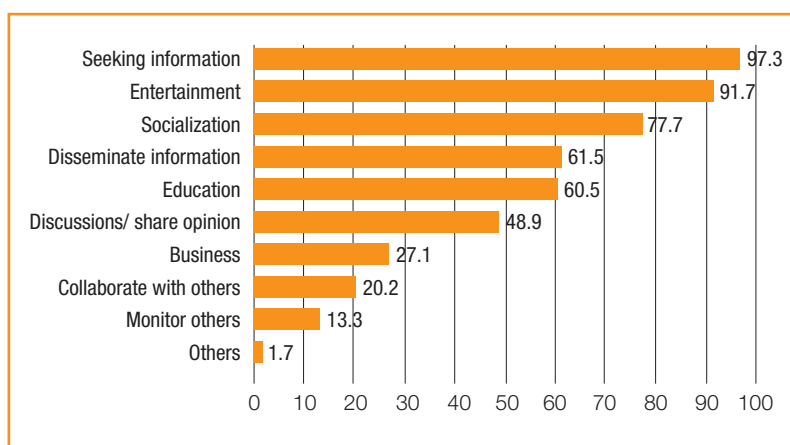
The Generation Z (aged 13-29) who are also called centennials, post-millennials, iGen, Gen Zers, are from the

digital generation because they were the first to be born in a fully developed technological environment¹⁵. The Generation Z is the first generation to have been radically affected by digitization and they are oblivious of the pre-smartphone memory and the social media is embedded into their lives.



¹⁵(Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021)

In Bhutan, people use social media both as consumers and generators of content as per the study ‘Social Media Landscape in Bhutan (2021)’. The top five purposes of the use of social media in Bhutan include seeking information, entertainment, socialization, disseminating information and education.



Most preferred purposes for social media use (in %)

The National Institute of Cybersecurity (INCIBE) & Office of Internet Security (OSI) (2019) note that fake news is negative contents circulating mainly on the mobile phones of children and adolescents. The report notes that it becomes difficult for the youth to identify “what is reputable journalism and what is amateur reporting, let alone what is journalism.”

With technology, it will soon be possible to easily generate any kind of misinformation and disinformation and the challenge to manage and control it would be equally difficult if steps are not taken on time.

The report notes, “If a piece of content attracts their attention, they do not hesitate to share it, sometimes in masse, without pausing to assess whether the information is reliable. Often, they spread it even knowing that it is not”¹⁶.

As such, the youth are more vulnerable to share misinformation than disinformation. It can be done with no malicious intent but just for the merit of sharing it with friends and people in their circle.

Misinformation and fake news have become very easy to generate. False information in the form of text or corrupted and doctored images and photography can spread very fast and become viral without anybody evaluating its authenticity. With technology, it will soon be possible to easily generate any kind of misinformation and disinformation and the challenge to manage and control it would be equally difficult if steps are not taken on time.

When narrative persuasive techniques are used, misinformation and disinformation influence the behaviours of the youth. They are seduced by the interesting suggestive content relevant to them and end up sharing it, contributing to its distribution.

¹⁶(INCIBE & OSI, 2019)

13

**YOUTH AS TARGETS OF MISINFORMATION
AND DISINFORMATION**

Globally, youth have been targets of misinformation and disinformation. UNICEF says that the full extent of how much youth have been targeted through mis/disinformation has not yet been studied.

A typical case is of Emma Gonzalez who is a teenage survival of the 2017 Parkland School shooting in the United States. She soon became an activist and advocate of gun control. A fashion magazine for teenage girls, Teen Vogue, published a photograph where Emma is ripping up a shooting range target paper. The photograph was later manipulated showing her ripping up the US Constitution and widely spread on social media.



Emma Gonzalez is ripping up a shooting target practice in the original photograph (left). It was manipulated to show her ripping up the US constitution (right)

Source: David Mikkelsen (2018)



Malala Yousafzai

In 2012, a 15-year-old girl in Pakistan was shot in the head by militants. She went on to become a global figure and an activist for education for girls and women and went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, becoming the youngest recipient of the coveted Prize at 17 years of age. The girl is Malala Yousafzai.

In 2013, a senior Pakistani Taliban leader wrote a letter to her accusing her of running an anti-Taliban smear campaign. The militant leader reasoned that Malala was shot as she campaigned to “malign the Taliban’s efforts to establish the Islamic system”¹⁷. This is a typical case where no one is spared, even the youth, when it comes to politics of power.

¹⁷(BBC news, 2013)

A more recent example is online mis/disinformation discrediting the youth icon and Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. She rose to prominence in 2018 when she was only 15 standing outside the Swedish parliament calling for stronger action on climate change. It spurred other youth to do the same. After that, a series of mis/disinformation campaign went online, including personal attacks, her mental abilities and her associations.



Greta Thunberg

While there are no notable cases of mis/disinformation targeting particular youth in Bhutan, the age of the infodemic has exposed the Bhutanese youth to be misled and affected by false information, particularly on social media.

Youth are more vulnerable to cyberbullying



Forms of cyberbullying

The virtual world of social networks is distinct from the real world in many ways and the cyberspace offer an ideal platform to bully others. A study by the Pew Research Centre (2014) suggests that 40% of youth are bullied online. It is also accepted globally that the youth are more vulnerable to cyberbullying than adults.

Cyberbullying can be defined as a repeated behaviour to denigrate someone through internet¹⁸. It could include sex-texting, false statements, humiliating, hurting, teasing and threatening remarks or graphic illustrations by an aggressor. One of the main reasons for perpetrators resorting to cyberbullying is that the internet offers them the luxury of anonymity, which gives them a false notion that they cannot be traced.

¹⁸(Rafi, 2019)

Research shows that victims of cyberbullying may experience feelings of helplessness and isolation, which may prompt them to sustain behaviour of aggression and feelings of anger and/or revenge toward their aggressor or other people¹⁹. Studies also show that cyberbullying could lead to increasing suicide among teens and the same has been proven to be the case in Japan.



¹⁹(Rafi, 2019)

14

**YOUTH AS OPPONENTS OF
MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION**

While children and youth stand as the most vulnerable to mis/disinformation, there are several heartwarming examples of them taking up the challenge to fight false information in their attempt to secure their future.

For example, the youth in Nepal are actively engaged in fighting mis/disinformation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic through a UNICEF project in conjunction with the World Health Organization and the government of Nepal.

In the United States, the 'Teens for Press Freedom' in New York is a national youth led organization actively working to promote freedom of the press and factual literacy among teens .

In Montenegro, the Montenegro Agency for Electronic Media and UNICEF launched a media literacy campaign with the theme 'Let's Choose What We Watch' calling for youth to critically assess media contents and to build awareness among the young people.

Let's look at few global examples:

Youth in Finland most efficient is dealing with false information

It is said that people of all ages in Finland are the best among all countries in detecting false information. It is largely because they boast the best education system that covers more than just an average curriculum and focuses on contemporary challenges. According to the Open Society Institute, if one has a good general education to start with, one is more likely to have a high level of media and information literacy (MIL). MIL is critical in fighting false information.

Finland begins teaching information literacy and critical thinking to children in kindergarten as well as running MIL classes for older people. Its aim is to make sure that everyone – from school students to journalists, teachers and politicians – can spot various forms of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Finland's success in dealing with false information is testimony to the country's strive for excellence. The Legatum Institute's Prosperity Index ranks it as the best place in the world to live. The 2019 World Happiness Report ranks Finland as the happiest country in the world. The 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International ranks it as the third least corrupt. The World Press Freedom Index reports Finland to have the freest press. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports Finland to have the OECD's best-educated kids. Today, Finland tops the European index of nations in being the most resistant nation to fake news.

The case of Finland shows the nation's resolve to excel in all parameters to make the nation the best place in the world to live for its residents. Such a national resolve and commitment is a steadfast obligation from the state to its citizens and the most upright factor in fighting false information in a nation.

Source: www.dw.com

3,500 youth in Brazil fighting misinformation

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazil, like any other country in the world, has been challenged with conspiracy theories behind the nature of the pandemic and misinformation campaigns against vaccines.

In light of the health misinformation, UNICEF Brazil's volunteer initiative appealed to young volunteers to help UNICEF combat misinformation and protect public health. It attracted 3,500 youth volunteers from all over Brazil. The #tmjUNICEF programme takes a hashtag on the name which means "We are together UNICEF" in Portuguese. The initials tmj is a widespread symbolism in Brazil to say "I support you whatever happens".

UNICEF imparted the youth volunteers with leadership skills and with knowledge around child rights. UNICEF organized training sessions for anything from fake news and its impact on vulnerable people to best practices for protecting adolescent's mental health during the pandemic. Training also covered effective mobilization and volunteer engagement strategies.

UNICEF worked with this large digital community of young people to spread public messages and advocacy on the internet, driving traffic to social media channels and engaging with followers on other issues related to the crisis. Within the eight months of the programme, 22 events were organized, with an average of 2,245 volunteers attending regularly through Microsoft teams, Zoom and Facebook live sessions.

The #tmjUNICEF mobilizations reached 1.7 million people on the internet and over 55,000 of such audience would engage directly with volunteer's posts and stories.

Source: www.generationunlimited.org

Podcasts fight misinformation in Egypt

As countries around the world are grappling with COVID-19 pandemic, the role of young people becomes more important than ever in efforts to stop the spread of the virus and help mitigate its different consequences. For Egypt, a country where youth constitute about 60 percent of population, finding ways to engage young people and empower them can be decisive in the battle against the pandemic.

Taking this into account, Mohamed Elkholy, 25, is working to find and scale up new ideas from the young people to counter misinformation and spread the right messages on the virus using new technological tools. Mohamed, a leading member of Y-Peer Egypt, is hosting PEERCAST, a podcast programme from youth to youth, that he hopes would open a new window for raising awareness among young people on population issues.

In its first season, the programme, it features interviews with experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population endeavouring to spread the right information and correct the misconceptions and rumours about the virus.

An interactive handwashing challenge using videos, photos, gifs and animations came into light. The challenge was created by the youth to spread awareness about protective measures against Covid-19.

In addition to podcasts, the youth created “Y-PEER geniuses” on Youtube. It’s a show where volunteers compete on information about Covid-19, sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, art, sports and science.

Source: www.un.org

“We need to engage young people as catalysts for change, as co-creators and co-leaders of media and information literacy development and dissemination.”

UNESCO's global approach focusing on youth

UNESCO is the UN body responsible for promoting media development, freedom of expression, and access to information. It promotes all countries to take media and information literacy (MIL) seriously. It stresses that everyone, especially young people, needs to be able to tell fact from fake information. UNESCO prioritizes that there is a need to integrate MIL into the formal education system and to develop national policies and strategies on media and information literacy. Training of teachers to integrate MIL in their classroom has already begun in some countries.

An expert from UNESCO, Alton Grizzle, says that the role of young people in fighting misinformation and disinformation has to change from the traditional role of simply being passive recipients and beneficiaries of MIL learning. “We need to engage young people as catalysts for change, as co-creators and co-leaders of media and information literacy development and dissemination,” he says²⁰.

UNESCO is piloting an initiative called ‘Capacity Building on MIL for Youth Organizations.’ It is an institutional approach to ensure MIL expansion by guiding youth organizations and youth leaders to integrate MIL in their organization policies and programmes, irrespective of their mandates.

²⁰Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com, 2020)

APPROACHES TO TACKLE INFODEMIC, MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

The burden of identifying wrong information does not fall on any particular individual but to the society as a whole. It is necessary to create an environment where false information is less likely to reach the people. It does not mean encouraging censorship. There is too much information today that even algorithms cannot validate it accurately. But the effects of false information can be mitigated.

Having a well-funded and independent public service broadcaster is important to facilitate quality journalism and to encourage balanced debate. It could be supplemented with a pluralistic independent media industry. Regulations should be in place to ensure that tycoons and those endowed with resources don't own the media and push their own agenda. Code of ethics for journalists is a must.



Strong advocacy should be made to let people know that misinformation and disinformation pose certain threats to our democracy, especially disinformation.

It is important to remove financial incentives that encourage false information on social media platforms. Popular content makes more money than unpopular content. Sensationalist misinformation and disinformation is very popular, so algorithms push lies to make money. Changing the way content promotion algorithms work would help. Having the right data protection rules will also go a long way. False information has to reach the target audience to do harm. They rely on microtargeting so that they can reach the people most likely to be affected. But microtargeting only works because social media platforms are violating data protection rules and gathering information without people's consent.

Strong advocacy should be made to let people know that misinformation and disinformation pose certain threats to our democracy, especially disinformation. All citizens should also think critically about the information they consume, make the effort to question it and open their minds to opposing views. Only when the citizens are well informed can they make informed decisions about what to trust and what not to trust. And governments need to construct an environment where factual news is encouraged and has the same chance of reaching people as misinformation or disinformation.

Therefore, fighting mis/disinformation falls on all stakeholders involved or affected by the flow of information. UNICEF notes that while mis/disinformation is being countered by many stakeholders, the efforts are not coordinated. Making the situation worse is the absence of reliable data on the scale of the problem

posed by mis/disinformation. It should be noted that there is no single comprehensive solution identified to address all the complex issues related to mis/disinformation.

UNICEF offers a set approaches that could be used to counter online mis/disinformation²¹. It focuses on the government and civil society, technology companies, education providers, and parents and caregivers as key actors in the mis/disinformation ecosystem.

Policy measures

Since 2018, the European Union implemented a voluntary code of conduct that asks social media companies to submit reports about their services and products.

Countries around the world have started drafting regulation to counter mis/disinformation. Since 2018, the European Union implemented a voluntary code of conduct that asks social media companies to submit reports about their services and products. In May 2021, the European Commission released a complementary Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation. It was aimed at online digital companies, to demonetize disinformation, empower users to understand and flag disinformation, expand the coverage of fact-checking, and provide increased access to data for researchers. Signatories are mandated to specifically consider the situation of children and youth who are more vulnerable to disinformation.

In 2018, Germany enacted the Network Enforcement Act mandating social media companies to remove content that is “manifestly unlawful” within 24 hours. Similarly, 13 other countries have developed or proposed

²¹(Howard et al., 2021)

similar models. Elsewhere, governments have relied on technology companies' terms of service to tackle disinformation.

However, UNICEF advises that the focus on addressing mis/disinformation should be transparency and due process and not developing regulation defining illegal content or opinion. The advice is pertinent because developing regulations has the risk of censorship and limiting freedom of speech. Finding the balance between rights-based online protection and freedom of expression is a very significant policy challenge.

In Bhutan, the constitution guarantees the citizens the freedom of speech, opinion and expression (Article 7.2), the right to information (Article 7.3) and the freedom of the press, radio and television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic (Article 7.5).

While mis/disinformation is not directly addressed in Bhutan through any legislation, it has been indirectly addressed through related legislation like the Information, Communication and Media (ICM) Act of Bhutan (2018) which is the umbrella Act relating to information and the media. In case there are undesirable content identified on social media, the internet service providers (ISP) "Upon obtaining such knowledge or awareness, they act expeditiously to remove the content in question or to disable public access to it" says Article 363 (3).

The Act notes that "social media also brings challenges. It has been used to spread material which defame, abuse or threaten others. Children who use social media

Children who
use social media
expose themselves
to danger.

expose themselves to danger.” It also says that “it is important for government to develop a policy that would harness the potential of social media to do good and mitigate its dangerous effects.”

Chapter 20 of the ICM Act deals with cyber security and Article 376 and 377 provides the Information and Communication minister with the power to block public access to any information “until such time they are deemed no longer to pose a threat” in cases of “interest of the sovereignty, security, harmony and defense of Bhutan or friendly relations with foreign States” or “in the interest of public order.”

For the mainstream media, the Code of Ethics developed by the Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) is expected to be respected by all Bhutanese journalists. Moreover, all mainstream media also have their own code of ethics which guides their professional conduct, duties and obligations.



The most common techniques of moderation include filtering, automated removal and human deletion.

The government has developed the 'Social Media Policy for the Royal Government of Bhutan' which guides civil servants responsible use of social media.

As such, there is room for Bhutan to develop standards and procedures to address mis/disinformation with a particular focus on children and the youth.

Technology companies and content strategies

While most content-focused technology companies have ethical policies to address mis/disinformation, its practical application is often very difficult. As such, UNICEF recommends the following strategies.

Content moderation and pre-moderation

The most common action used to minimize mis/disinformation is moderation, both of the content online and of the users. But it is easier said than done and big companies like Facebook and Google also have had problems in this department.

The most common techniques of moderation include filtering, automated removal and human deletion. While this can be effective, the amount of information online limits its effectiveness. The efficiency of human moderating content in itself could be a major challenge.

Some content providers like YouTube Kids or Netflix Kids, rely on pre-moderation, such as human approval or algorithmic filtering by age, to try to ensure children do not access mis/disinformation and other age-inappropriate content. The idea is to stop certain

contents from reaching users when children or their parents self-report their age.

Bhutan does not have global companies like Facebook or Google but it has many content providers including the government itself, corporate and private companies that have their websites and social media sites, and many other players that reach out to the people with information. As such, content moderation and pre-moderation advocacy is paramount to address mis/disinformation with a particular focus on children and the youth.

Corrections and warnings

Researches show that corrected information has a huge impact among young people, particularly if it is visual.

All information providers could provide corrective information on mis/disinformation content to mitigate misperceptions. This could be promoted as a culture among responsible information providers.

Research shows that corrected information has a huge impact among young people, particularly if it is visual and it spreads among the youth as they become ambassadors of these corrected information.

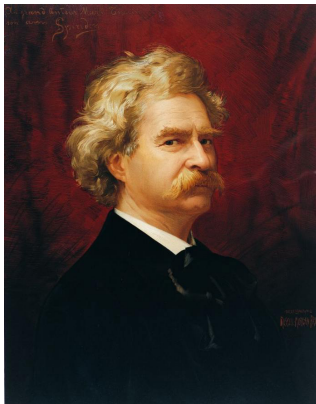
Expert voices

Recent research offers evidence that corrective responses from experts, including non-partisan think tanks and public health agencies, can reduce misperceptions.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been found that millions of users worldwide accessed authoritative

sources through tools designed to guide online users to rightful information.

Slowing the trend



Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Mark Twain said “A lie can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots”. Therefore, slowing down the spread of mis/disinformation can help mitigate its impact. In 2019, WhatsApp introduced a limit so that messages could only be forwarded to five users or groups, instead of 20. The company reports that this has reduced the total number of forwarded messages on WhatsApp by 25%.

Focusing on viral sources and content could be highly relevant and relatively straightforward to implement. It was found that 65 % of anti-vaccine content posted or shared on Facebook and Twitter in February and March 2021 originated from only 12 people. As such, disabling the accounts of ‘superspreaders’ is an approach that is gaining momentum and has been shown to reduce mis/disinformation at scale.

Educational approaches

Finland offers an exemplary educational approach. Equipping children with the critical reading and thinking skills to determine the veracity of information, even from primary school age offers a supportive check on their exposure to mis/disinformation by increasing their media literacy and resilience.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation

to the digital environment calls for educational efforts to increase children's "critical understanding, [provide] guidance on how to find trusted sources of information, and to identify misinformation and other forms of biased or false content".

One study found that students with greater information literacy but not other types of literacy (including news, digital and media literacy), are significantly better at recognizing mis/disinformation.

In Bhutan, it is not only children and the youth but most people seem to be unaware of the negative impacts of mis/disinformation. Therefore, there is a need for a national advocacy drive on mis/disinformation at all levels. While the youth needs to be targeted with special attention, everyone else should also be targeted and no one left behind.



Open dialogue between children, parents, caregivers and educators can promote critical thinking among children.

Parents, caregivers and educators

Digital, media and information literacy skills alone do not provide a foolproof solution against mis/disinformation, and the onus cannot be entirely on children to protect themselves. UNICEF experts suggest that open dialogue between children, parents, caregivers and educators can promote critical thinking among children. Several reported that child focus groups, surveys and community-level research can be useful ways for parents, caregivers and educators to understand the information habits of the children in their care, and may be among the best ways to generate healthy community and policy responses that are locally relevant.

Given the many reasons that children have for sharing information, talking to them about the consequences of doing so, especially when mis/disinformation is a risk, may be helpful. Adults caring for and educating children are in a position to start these conversations and to prompt critical reflection and understanding.



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