Misinformation in Bangladesh: A Brief Primer

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0.1 Introduction

Rumours and misinformation are not new in Bangladesh. One of the oldest yet most prominent rumour that people grow up reading in history books is the rumours of cartridges greased with beef and pork fat which led to the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. But what has changed over the years is the medium of communication and development of tools which allows to share anything and reach anyone instantly at any part of the world. Over the last decade in Bangladesh, there have been numerous cases where the misuse of social media became a security concern. Starting from the incident in Ramu (2012)[1] to Bhola (2019)[2] there has been an alarming number of attacks on minority communities instigated by defamation on social media and related rumours. False child abduction rumors have triggered mob attacks on 30 people in 2019 - attacks which led to the killing of 8.[3] Like the rest of the world, during the Covid-19, Bangladesh too was victim of severe coronavirus related misinformation.

A large part of this is an effect of the rise of digital news platforms and social networking sites. The impacts were visible in the Shahbagh Movement in 2013, the Quota Reform Movement and the Road Safety Movement in 2018 (some of the most significant events in Bangladesh where social media played an instrumental role). The same tools that empowers people also give them extraordinary power to create chaos, confusion and insecurity. Platforms such as these have increasingly became a hub of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, rumours, hate speech and the like.

Based on this context, this report, commissioned by LIRNE*asia*, aims to shed light on the state of misinformation in Bangladesh, perception of it among different stakeholders, common patterns and tactics of misinformation, the extent of the problem, the actors involved in mitigating it and the challenges of addressing such issues in the digital landscape of Bangladesh.

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[1]"Buddhist temples, homes burned, looted in Ramu", bdnews24.com, 29 September 2012.

[2]Bishakha Devnath, "Communal Attacks Over FB Posts: Instigators still on the loose", The Daily Star, 23 October 2019.

[3]"Bangladesh lynchings: Eight killed by mobs over false child abduction rumours", BBC, 24 July 2019.

0.2 Overview of Internet Use in Bangladesh

Over the past decade, both internet penetration and digital media user base have increased substantially. Since 2010, 3.3 crore internet users were added, which means an additional 20 per cent of the population came online.[4] As of December 2020, the total number of Internet Subscribers stood at 111.875 Million according to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) report.[5]

OPERATOR	SUBSCRIBER (MILLION)
Mobile Internet	102.353
ISP + PSTN	9.522
Total	111.875

Figure 1: BTRC subscription report December 2020

Several factors have facilitated this expansion. Since online media is mostly accessed through mobile phones, the increasing affordability of devices is one of the key factors that has resulted in a large user base: the price range of a new smartphone is as low as $35, and feature phones cost even less. The government has decreased the price of bandwidth significantly to make internet more accessible[6]; according to the ITU Measuring the Information Society Report 2018, Bangladesh is one of the top 20 countries with the lowest mobile prices, with mobile-cellular services under $3 per month.[7] Facebook itself has taken initiatives to make its service available to people in many regions of the world. "Free Basics" was initiated in Bangladesh in 2015.[8] Moreover, different telecommunication companies operating in Bangladesh have been consistently advertising several attractive packages for internet and social media. The combination of technological advances, initiatives from the government, private telecommunication operators and social media companies has made these platforms very popular among the people of Bangladesh.

The social media trend in Bangladesh evolved in different phases. In the early 2000s, many urban youths were active users of blogs, Hi5 and MySpace. But these platforms were limited among selected groups based on age and location; in 2008, the number of Facebook users in Bangladesh was only 10,000.[9]

However, the scenario has completely changed. Hi5 and Myspace have been replaced by Facebook, which is used across the country by people regardless of their age, background and location. Facebook has become so popular that in some rural areas of Bangladesh, it was found that people know 'Facebook', but they do not know about the internet.[10] While Facebook is

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[4]Mahmudul Hasan, "Bangladesh adds 3.3cr internet users in a decade", The Daily Star, 09 November 2020.

[5]BTRC subscription report 2020, available at http://www.btrc.gov.bd/content/internet-subscribers-bangladesh-december-2020.

[6]"Freedom on the Net 2020." Freedom House.

[7]ITU Publications, "Measuring the Information Society report Volume 1," 2018.

[8]Nurunnabi Chowdhury, "Internet for free" Prothom Alo, 10 April 2015.

[9]Syed Rabius Shams, "Social media trends usages in Bangladesh" Daily Asian Age, 02 February 2017.

[10]Ruhul Kader, "Facebook Rules The Internet In Bangladesh and Many Users Don't Know That They Are Using The Internet." Future Startup. July 30, 2017, available at https://futurestartup.com/2017/07/30/

widely popular in all parts of Bangladesh, the user base in the capital city Dhaka is remarkable. In the Global Digital Statshot of Q2 report 2017, Dhaka was ranked second in terms of having the most active Facebook users in the world.[11]

Besides Facebook, several other platforms are prominent in Bangladesh among people of particular age and interest groups. YouTube has a significantly wide user base. Tiktok is also gaining popularity. Instagram and Snapchat are increasingly becoming popular among urban youths belonging to economically solvent families. However, the user base of Twitter is very limited, in comparison the neighbouring countries.

Messaging services like WhatsApp and Viber are popular among urban populations, while Imo is popular in the sub-urabn and rural areas. Imo gained popularity in the country mainly through the large number of migrant workers who found it an easily accessible medium for communicating with their families. Gradually it also started to become familiar with sections of people in cities.

In the beginning of 2021, the Turkish messaging app BiP suddenly gained prominence. Many assume this was due to the debate over WhatsApp's policy change. While all these platforms and services have facilitated communication, the users are witnessing a rise of misinformation and disputed content in these. However, in Bangladesh Facebook tops the list of most polluted information ecosystem due to its vast user base.
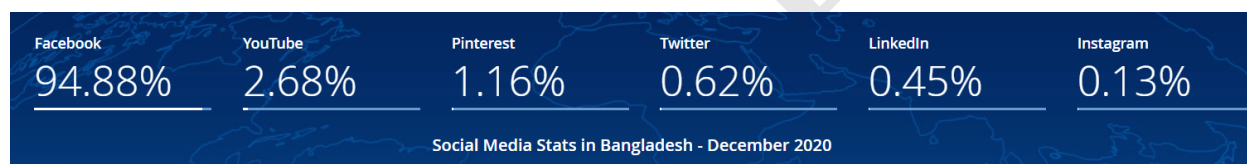

Facebook	YouTube	Pinterest	Twitter	LinkedIn	Instagram
94.88%	2.68%	1.16%	0.62%	0.45%	0.13%

Social Media Stats in Bangladesh - December 2020

Figure 2: Social Media Stats in Bangladesh, December 2020[12]

As internet reached almost all corners of the country, the media landscape also underwent a drastic shift. For many people, Social media, online platforms and messaging services replaced the traditional media as the primary mode of news and communication.

Online news portals and online versions of traditional media platforms have also risen in popularity to more than three thousand in 2020. However, only a limited number of these portals maintain a standard editorial process and fact-check their content before publishing. In July 2020, the government of Bangladesh released a list of only 34 verified outlets.[13] While this was an initial list and many more are awaiting clearance, the number of online news portals that can pass through the verification process is very less in comparison to the vast number which applied. It is observed that in many cases, the online versions of traditional media outlets do not follow the same editorial standards as that of their main publication or broadcast. As a result, the landscape of digital news platforms has some resemblance to social media, where users can post their opinions regardless of factual accuracy.

`facebook-rules-internet-bangladesh-many-users-dont-know-using-internet/`.

[11]Ibrahim Hossain Ovi, "Dhaka is second most active city in world for Facebook users." Dhaka Tribune. April 15, 2017.

[12]https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/bangladesh

[13]"Govt releases list of 34 verified online news portals", Dhaka Tribune, 31 July 2020.

0.3   Perception of Misinformation in Bangladesh

In recent times, various terms have been used to label content that people consider to be disputed or untrustworthy. The terms have different connotations depending on which profession is defining it. For example, civil society organizations tend to classify disputed content based on the intention of the actors. First Draft have been extensively working in this field and categorizes such content in three groups i.e., Disinformation, Misinformation and Malinformation. According to First Draft, Disinformation is content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm. When disinformation is shared it often turns into misinformation. Misinformation also describes false content but the person sharing does not realize that it is false or misleading. Malinformation is genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm.

Similarly, the UNESCO Handbook for Journalism Education and Training refers to misinformation as, "misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent."[14] However, the perception of misinformation in Bangladesh is slightly different because the approach of addressing it is based on the perception of different bodies affiliated with the topic.

In Bangladesh, different actors have different perceptions of what misinformation is and different lenses through which they react to it. The term that is popular in all parts of the country and regularly used in Bangla news, awareness campaigns and by most citizens in general, is "   " (read 'Gujob') which can be loosely translated to "rumour". Popular perception is hard to measure without thorough on-ground research, but Google Trends data can serve as a viewpoint into terminology. We should mention that sharing of rumours and misinformation and discussion in favour or against the content mostly takes place through peer to peer messaging apps and in offline settings, and thus Google Trends is an imperfect barometer: however, using the tool allows us some quantifiable insight.

Based on the data of Google Trends in the last 10 years (2010-2020), the highest interest for web search of the term "   " was in July 2019. This was when the rumour that human sacrifices were needed to build the Padma Bridge and children were kidnapped and beheaded as offerings was trending in social media, mainstream media and online news portals (Figure 3). This rumour led to mob attack and killing of eight people and 30 injured in suspect of child kidnappers in different parts of the country.[15]

The second highest peak of "   " was in March 2020 when the first case of coronavirus was detected in the country and there was a surge in disputed content related to the pandemic both nationally and globally. The search interest for the term was also high in August 2018 when Road Safety movement in Bangladesh was organized by students. While online platforms played an instrumental role in mobilizing students to demand justice for the school children killed by a speedy bus in front of their education institution, it also became a hub of several types of disputed content during the entire period of the protest. From the 'interest by subregion' it can be seen that users from all seven divisions of Bangladesh seem to have accessed content related to the term.

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[14]Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti (eds.), Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, Paris: UNESCO, 2018.

[15]"Bangladesh lynchings: Eight killed by mobs over false child abduction rumours", BBC, 24 July 2019.
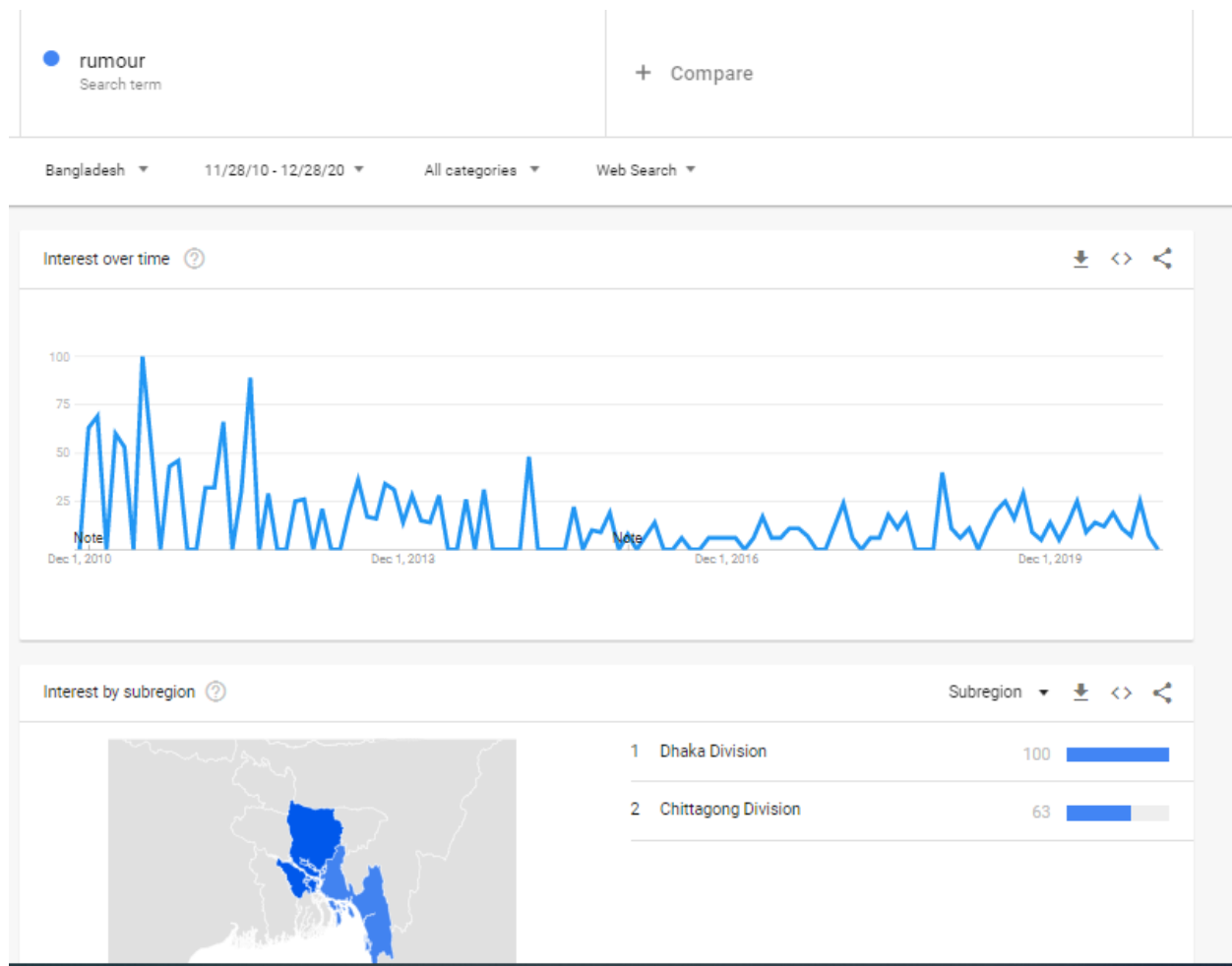
Figure 3: Google Trends of the topic "Gujob" in Bangladesh (2010-2020)

However, the search interest of the English translation of the word i.e 'rumour' and 'rumor' shows a different trend. Both variants of the spelling is taken, as most Bangladeshis interchangeably use British and American spelling. The search for the term "rumour" peaked between July 2011-July 2012 but gradually declined (Figure 4). The interest for "rumor" was high between December 2011-August 2012 (Figure 5). It reached the highest between March 2013 and continued till July 2013.[16]

However, it can be seen that the search interest by sub-region is also not as widespread as that of the term in Bangla.

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[16]This was the 2013 Shahbagh movement, one of the first large-scale movements organized through blogs and social media, gained momentum. While the Shahbagh movement saw several social media platforms being positively used to organize the movement and put forward demands related to the verdict of war criminals of Bangladesh's liberation war, it also received a counter-attack from anti-liberation forces and extremist groups. These groups carried out disinformation campaigns on social media to disrupt the support for the movement.
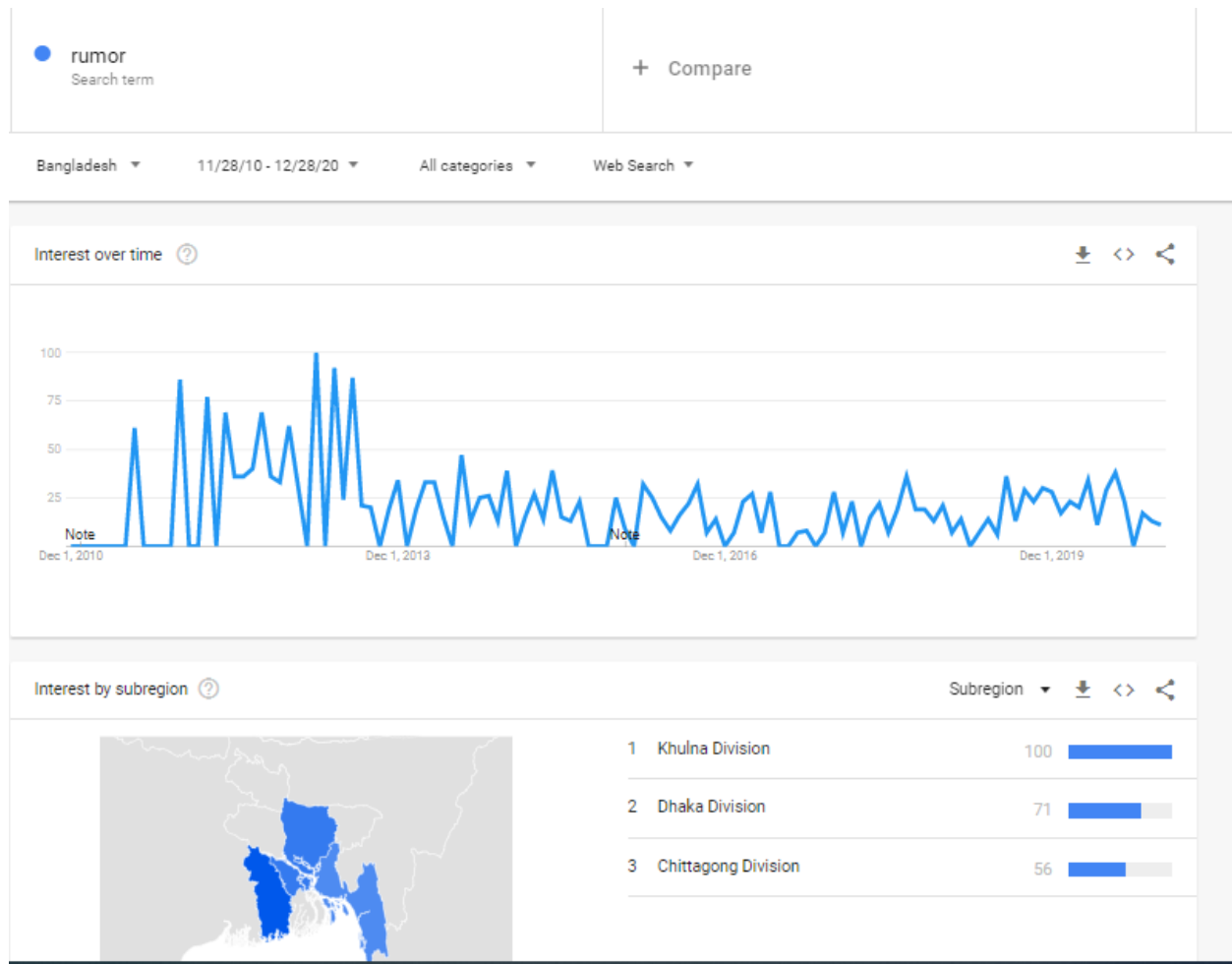
Figure 4: Google Trends of the topic "Rumor" in Bangladesh (2010-2020)
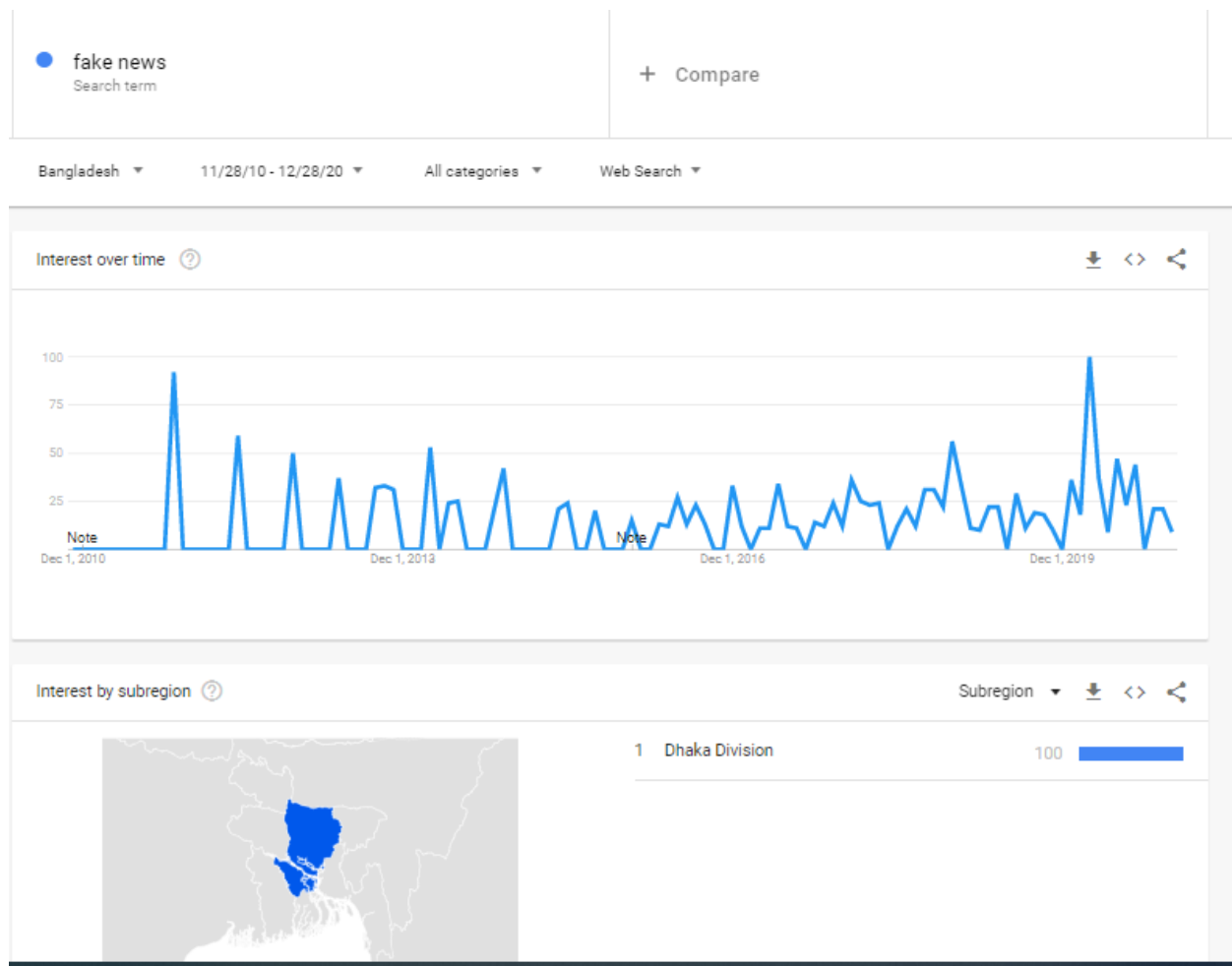
Figure 5: Google Trends of the topic "Fake news" in Bangladesh (2010-2020)

A closely related term that is widely popular in Western media is 'fake news'. However, the popularity of the term is limited to mostly urban educated groups in Bangladesh. In the Google web search trend, it can be seen that the search for 'Fake News' was high in November 2011 and reached its peak in March 2020 which was during the rise of the Covid-19 related "Infodemic".

The term 'Misinformation' has been used in few instances in the past ten years. In recent times this is mostly used in the reports of international organizations, some academic works, English newspaper reports and selected awareness campaigns facilitated by international organizations.

Figure 6: Google Trends of the topic "Misinformation" in Bangladesh (2010-2020)

The recent spike in Google search of the term was in April 2020, at a peak in the COVID-19 related content dissemination on online platforms (Figure 7).
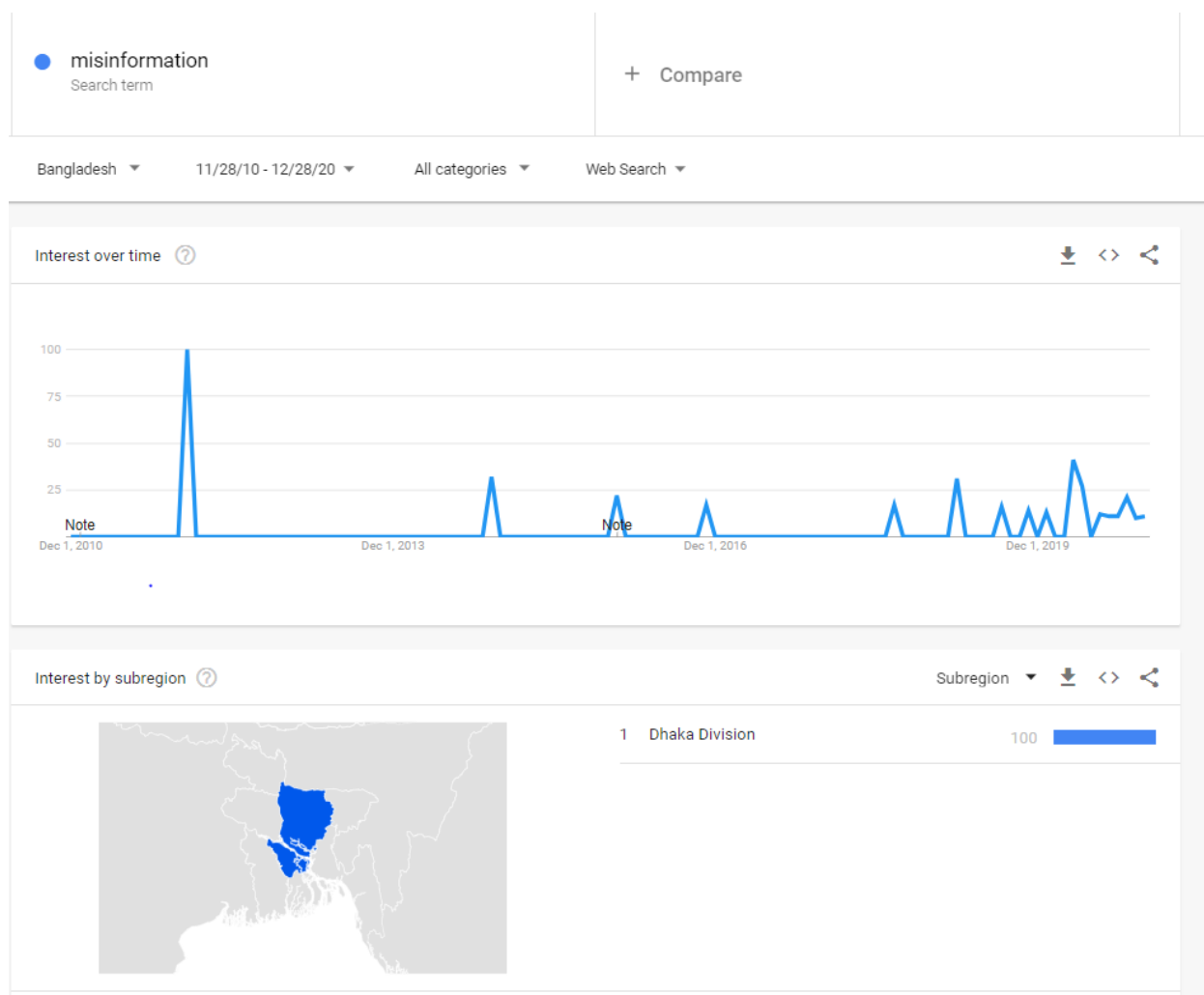
The term 'disinformation' has very limited use in Bangladesh, and seems to have been used only on a few occasions in the past 10 years (Figure 8).
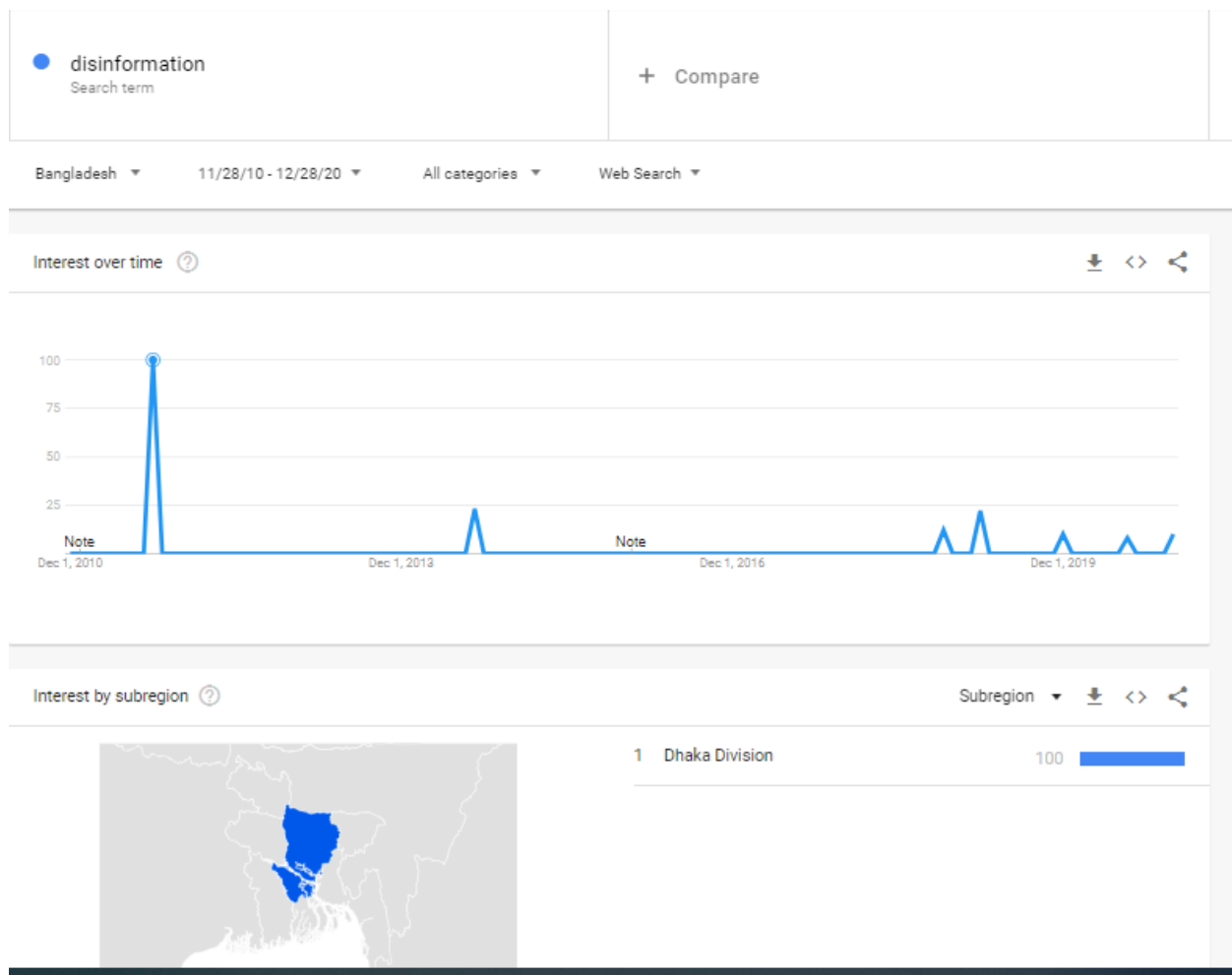
Figure 7: Google Trends of the topic "Disinformation" in Bangladesh (2010-2020)

0.3.1 Perception of the Government

For the Government of Bangladesh, misinformation is primarily judged based on the impact it may result, like mob attacks, communal violence, deterioration of law and order situation, creating panic among public, propaganda, tarnishing the image of government at home and abroad, etc. Labelling content as such generally happens through the lens of legal instruments like the Bangladesh Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act and Digital Security Act, as well as government bodies like law enforcement agencies, ICT Division, BTRC and National Telecommunication Monitoring Center (NTMC).

For example, the Digital Security Act of 2018 makes it punishable to share content which "*creates enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes or communities of the society, or destroys communal harmony, or creates unrest or disorder, or deteriorates or advances to deteriorate the law and order situation.*"[17] A wide array of disputed content which can be created and shared both intentionally and unintentionally can fall into this broad category.

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[17]Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, Digital Security Act, 2018, Dhaka: Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2019.

It can be seen here that the government lens is focused more on the impact and the action that needs to be taken to reduce it.

0.3.2   Perception of Researchers and Academics

While rumour and misinformation have been present since time immemorial, holistically studying the topic is very new in Bangladesh. Only a handful of institutes and university departments have dedicated time and resources behind it. For example, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) has been studying this topic from the national security lens starting from 2019. It has published one monograph title "Information Disorder in the Information Age: Actors, Tactics and Impacts in South and Southeast Asia"[18] and one journal article "Weaponization of Social Media and National Security" on the topic.[19]

The researchers at BIISS broadly used the term "Information Disorder" to collectively address disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. However, they realize that although this categorization is helpful in understanding the intention behind the actors involved in the creation and dissemination of content, it is inadequate in explaining several other forms of information disorder which has real-life implications in the lives of individuals and communities in countries of South and Southeast Asia. Through a contextualized framework their research addresses action induced by contents like hate speech, rumours and defamation through fabricated content or framed social media accounts. Such content needs special attention as it can result in large-scale impacts in these regions. These contents have the potential to trigger actions like violence against targeted communities or escalate an ongoing conflict. It can also lead to mob killings, vigilantism, and revenge attacks resulting in deadly clashes. Their paper also emphasizes on the association of the actors to understand if the threat is domestic or foreign.

The Center of Genocide Studies (CGS) in one of its monthly Peace Report in 2019 discussed the issue at length by labelling it as fake news phenomenon.[20] The report studied the topic in the context of post-truth reality and defined fake news as stories that have no factual basis. It covered a series of incidents related to fake news in Bangladesh, like communal violence in different parts of the country resulting from fake news, rumour surrounding development projects like human sacrifice needed for Padma Bridge, rumors of child abduction, mob violence and vigilantism, rumour regarding dengue and rumour during student activism. The report also brought up interesting analysis on anti-rohingya rumors in Bangladesh on one hand and on the other, discussed the use of doctored historical photos to misrepresent the Rohingya crisis by the Myanmar army in its country. It also briefly touched the issue of fake news creating confusion and chaos among the locals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) has recently started to take interest in understanding the impact of disinformation, misinformation and fake news as part of the evolving security landscape. BIPSS published a commentary on weaponizing social media in

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[18]Ayesha Binte Towhid, "Information Disorder in the Information Age: Actors, Tactics, and Impacts in South and Southeast Asia", BIISS Paper 28, October 2020.

[19]Ayesha Binte Towhid, "Weaponization of Social Media and National Security", BIISS Journal, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2019.

[20]Center for Genocide Studies, "CGS Peace Report", Volume 3, Issue 3 May- June 2019.

September 2020.[21] Towards the end of 2020, the research organization hosted workshops on Disinformation and Fake News targeting university students. The workshop was conducted by an editor of an English daily and a senior lecturer of media and communications of a private university in Bangladesh.

Among the academic fields in Bangladesh, misinformation related topics are predominantly studied in the Journalism department. Md. Sayeed Al Zaman, Lecturer, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University has been working in this field for quite some time. In his paper "Digital Disinformation and Communalism in Bangladesh", Zaman defined digital disinformation as information that is deliberately constructed and disguised to gain intended result. He identified the rapid penetration of internet to a large user base with low information literacy as the prime factor behind digital disinformation and thus digital communalism. [22] This was reflected through the series of attack on religious minorities in Bangladesh which is elaborately discussed in the paper. In his study titled "Social Media Rumors in Bangladesh", Zaman divided social media rumor into seven popular themes: political, health & education, crime & human rights, religious, religiopolitical, entertainment, and other.[23]

The Media Studies and Journalism department at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) has been conducting action-oriented research on the topic as part of its Fact Watch initiative. This is separately discussed in Section 7.1.4 of the report.

Additionally, students and faculty members from computer science[24], international relations and philosophy departments are also starting to take interest on the topic. But in most cases it is seen that the papers are more of an overview of the incidents which took place surrounding rumours or misinformation, without digging deep into the topic or critically evaluating the factors that contribute in the creation and consumption of misinformation.

Here it is seen that in existing policy on literature, disputed content in social media and online portals have been labelled and is widely understood in ways that the term 'misinformation' in English does not necessarily and directly map to; an understanding that misinformation in Bangladesh incorporates several other forms of disputed content which are often studied under separate categories.

0.4 Patterns of Misinformation Spread in Bangladesh

Misinformation in Bangladesh is varied: some are very specific to certain issues and fade with the shift in news cycle while some continue to resurface in short intervals with slight modifications in different platforms. While many of these contents are evidently false and people are

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[21]Marjuka Binte Afzal, "Fighting a New Battle: Weaponising Social Media", available at https://bipss.org.bd/fighting-a-new-battle-weaponising-social-media/

[22]Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, "Digital Disinformation and Communalism in Bangladesh." China Media Research, Volume 15, Issue 2, 2019.

[23]Md. Sayeed Al Zaman, "Social Media Rumors in Bangladesh", Journal of Information Science Theory and Practice, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2020, pp. 77-90.

[24]Matiur Rahman Minar and Jibon Naher, "Violence originated from Facebook: A case study in Bangladesh", available at https://arxiv.org/pdf/1804.11241.pdf

able to identify at a glance, there are many which are so carefully manipulated that it even passes through fact-checkers.

Misinformation has been very high during politically significant events like elections. During the 2018 national election, several fabricated screenshots and images were shared on social media. Fake profiles of political figures were also widely seen in social media. By impersonating to be the political leader, mischief mongers used these fake accounts to spread rumours and misinformation. Several people fell victim of such news. Misinformation was also rampant during natural disasters where clips from movies were circulated as real life incidents. Such posts create fear and panic among general people.

Two give an idea about the extent of misinformation in Bangladesh an overview of the content shared during the two big protests in 2018 i.e. Quota Reform Movement and Road Safety Movement is shared below. This will help to understand how and for which purpose fake news was created, the method used to share it in social media and the impact it had.

Sharing unverified news through Facebook group posts and status updates to intensify the protest: During the peak of the Quota reform movement, a rumour spread on Facebook that a rubber bullet fired by the police had hit one of the protestors in the scrotum.[25] The news quickly spread throughout different Facebook groups and pages. The protesters reacted by criticizing the action and shared the news from their individual profiles calling for intensified protests.

Dhaka Tribune carried out an investigation to check the authenticity of the news. But the designated doctor from Dhaka Medical College Hospital told Dhaka Tribune that on that particular night no one was admitted with a scrotum injury.[26]

Another rumour misinformed people about the death of Abu Bakar Siddique, a protester who had been injured when a rubber bullet hit him on the left eyebrow.[27] The fake information was picked up by a number of Facebook pages. Many prominent personalities posted it without verifying whether Siddique was shot dead during the clash. This news intensified anger and panic among the protestors and turned the general people against the law enforcement agency. Siddique later started a Facebook Live video and posted a status clarifying that he was alive.[28]

Beside these two incidents, there were several more rumours going around in social media during the protests, most of which were debunked. Several people shared the news without confirming it from an authentic source. They might have done it intentionally or unintentionally, but all these resulted in panic among the citizens and instability of the security situation of the country.

Fake and exaggerated news to defame people and organization: During the Quota Reform Movement, there was a clear divide between the students supporting the movement and students against it. Both groups had rigorous online battles in social media platforms.

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[25]Fahim Reza Shovon and Fazlur Rahman Raju, "How rumours and fake news shaped the quota reform protest." Dhaka Tribune, 17 April 2018.

[26]Ibid

[27]Ibid

[28]Ibid

The conflict accelerated when rumour spread that a Hall unit President of a student political organization had tortured a demonstrator and cut the victim's tendon. According to the rumour, no one was taking the demonstrator to the hospital even though she was bleeding. So the rumour quickly spread across Facebook and several users shared the news creating absolute chaos online and offline.

Later, in a Facebook video, the injured student clarified that she herself injured her foot on broken glass.[29] Although there were few more versions of the incident shared by the people present during the incident, the claim of the alleged student cutting the tendon of a protestor could not be established.

Reusing old photos to support false news: Reusing old photos to support false claims in the event was a common activity seen during the Road Safety protests. This made the movement very chaotic online as well as on grounds. For example, a photo of a policeman holding a student by his collar went viral during the movement. It was shared saying that the police were charging the peaceful protestors.[30] Many people raised their voice after seeing this photo. But later it is was discovered that the photo was of an incident in 2015.[31]

Another photo of a dead female student found on the bank of a water body was shared rigorously to justify the claim that members of the student body of a political party had raped and murdered female protestors in their office. This made the netizens furious and the news went viral very quickly. But later the Fact Checking organization "Jaachai" shared that the photo was of a female dead body in Chadpur in 2015.

Several more photos were shared in that period claiming that students were murdered, raped and severely injured. But most of the photos were proven to be taken from separate incidents few years back and reused in the present context. This incident led to protests, mobs and fears, resulting in security concerns.

Based on the reports of the fact-checking organizations and content analysis of popular social media platforms in the past four years, some of the popular patterns are identified below:

0.4.1 False alarms from would-be first breakers of news

During any health crisis, there is an escalation of misinformation. This became evident during the Covid-19 related "Infodemic". Since the beginning of the pandemic, social media users saw several posts with false alarms regarding the number of deaths, rumours that dead bodies are hidden, exaggeration of symptoms and after effects of coronavirus, vaccine related misinformation etc. Many people also shared unscientific and un-prescribed remedies thinking that they are helping others but instead, threatened lives of many. Similar kind of misinformation was seen during the dengue outbreaks in previous years. Studies show that many people share misinformation because of their desire to be seen as a local 'expert' or 'first source' for local

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[29]Ibid

[30]"Rumours swirl on Facebook amid student protests for safe roads" bdnews24, 03 August 2018.

[31]Ibid

information.[32] This is widely seen in Bangladesh.
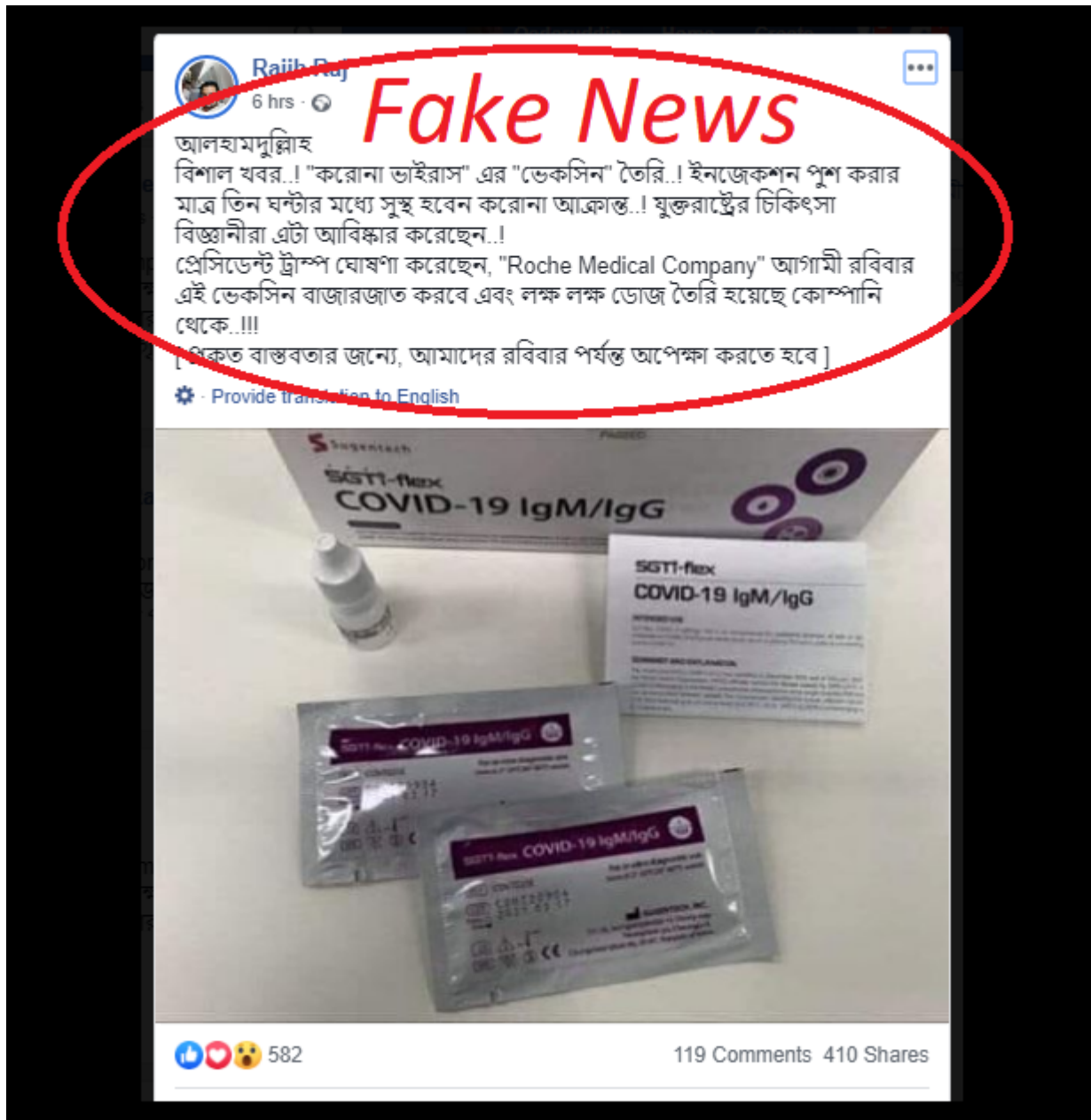
Figure 8: Fake news mentioning the invention of injections which would cure corona virus within three hours were shared in March 2020. BD Factcheck report found that the image was basically of a Covid testing kit.[33]

0.4.2 Glorifying topics related to religious sentiment

Many actors of misinformation bank on the sentiment of Muslims and create content in a way which creates sympathy or glorifies certain activities. Fake news around celebrities, eminent

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[32]Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, "WhatsApp Vigilantes: An Exploration of Citizen Reception and Circulation of WhatsApp Misinformation Linked to Mob Violence in India", London: Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019.

[33]BD Factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/1009507349450260/.

personalities and sportsmen converting to Islam is a common phenomenon (Figure 10). Fabricated images are often shared which shows that Arabic messages have been found in fruits, vegetables or in other elements of nature.

The Palestine cause is also exploited heavily.For example, a story of a hacker named Hamza Bendelladz who was executed for hacking USD 40 crores from several banks across the world and donating it to charities working for the Palestinian cause keeps popping up very frequently (Figure 11). According to BD Factcheck's report, this is an exaggerated story with a false photo.[34]

Figure 9: Misleading photo claiming that a Christian wrestler has accepted the religion of peace "Islam". Boom BD's fact check report found that the picture is of Ahmad Ashkanani, a body builder from Kuwait, a born Muslim and no news of his conversion could be found.[35]

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[34]See detailed report at "Top fake news of the week", The Business Standard, available at https://tbsnews.net/feature/fact-check/top-fake-news-week-169834

[35]Boom BD, report available at https://www.boombd.com/fake-news/photo-of-bodybuilder-ahmad-ali-ashkanani-was-shared-with-false-claims-12152?infinitescroll=1.

Figure 10: BD Factcheck report found that the image shared with the social media posts is not of Hamza Bendelladz, rather of Majid Kavousifer who was hanged in public in Tehran, Iran's capital, in 2007, for murdering a prominent judge. The claim of executing Hamza Bendelladz also turned out to be false.[36]

Figure 11: An edited photo of a person being guarded by lions while praying.[37]

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[36]Detailed factcheck report available at https://tbsnews.net/feature/fact-check/top-fake-news-week-169834

[37]BD factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/1196343634099963/

0.4.3 Celebrity gossip and click bait headlines

News of celebrities getting married or divorced, becoming victims of accidents etc are often shared with click bait headlines in online news portals, but in most cases these are false or taken out of context from plotlines in upcoming films or shows. Moreover, rumours of celebrities getting into fights with another person from the same industry, frequent change of partners, quitting careers etc often become viral on social media.

However, the alleged celebrities debunk such claims in most cases. Beside Bangladeshi celebrities, rumours and gossip of Indian celebrities are frequent targets in both online and traditional news media in Bangladesh.

Figure 12: News of an Indian actress tweeting that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the most remarkable man in the history of mankind went viral several times since 2017. BD factcheck did not find any official source of this news.[38]

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[38]BD factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/1212940789106914/

0.4.4 News of child missing, child found or child hurt

In online news portals and Facebook pages, news and images of child lost or child found often resurfaces with a tag "Urgent, share as much as you can to help the child find his/her parents". In few instances these were debunked as false or that the child has been taken in safe custody. But these are unearthed times and again and shared as if this is a present-day issue and it is the duty of responsible social media users to spread the news.

Figure 13: Fake news of attempt to slaughter a child in Bangladesh went viral in social media. BD Factcheck found the original video was regarding an Indian child hurt from kite strings.[39]

0.4.5 False or misleading success story

Another popular avenue of misinformation are stories of the country's glory or supposed success of people with Bangladeshi origin. Misleading or exaggerated content is often created and shared surrounding such topics. Even after these are debunked as false stories, people continue to share it at regular intervals with customized text and images.

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[39]BD Factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/809307139470283.
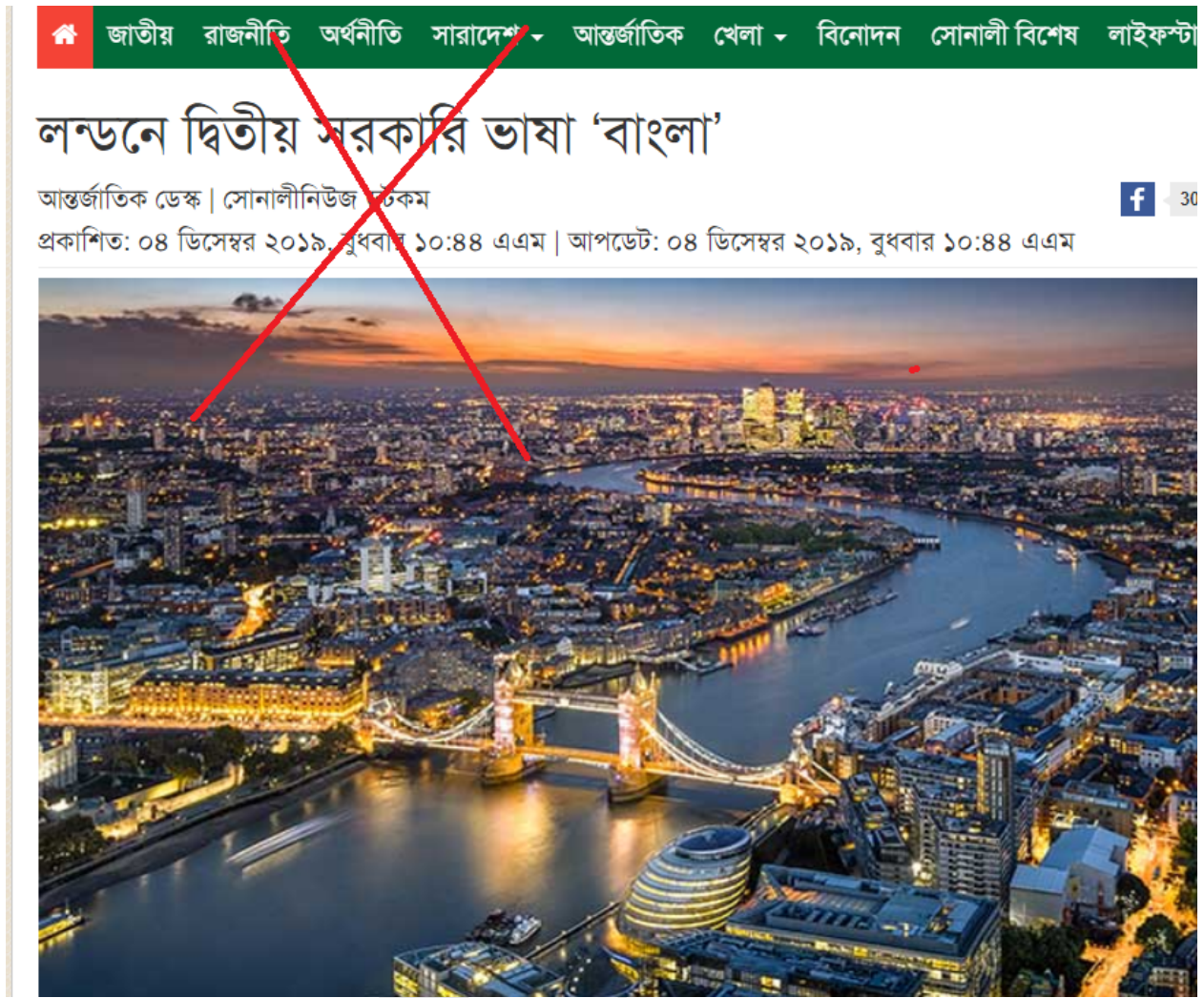
Figure 14: In December 2019, different news portals claimed that Bangla has been officially declared as the second language in London. BD Factcheck published a report identifying it as a misinformation. In reality, this was based on research which found that Bengali was the second most spoken foreign language in the city, not a government source or study.[40]

0.4.6   Misinformation against person who is in controversy or in the limelight

Whenever a person or an institution becomes the center of attention, be it for positive or negative reasons, a plethora of misinformation starts to float in the information ecosystem. The content varies from exaggerated story making the person an overnight celebrity to defaming the person with false accusations or digging up unrelated content from the past and reusing it to shame him/her. Political personalities and beauty pageant winners are frequent victims of it.

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[40]BD Factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/916958128705183

0.4.7 False death news of celebrities or renowned personalities

Misinformation about death of renowned media, political or religious personalities is often shared on social media and online news portals using out of context photos. This usually gets a very prompt response from the fanbase of the person. Many click bait news portals and Facebook pages use this to create fast engagement and reach. For example, a week prior to the death of the popular Bangladesh TV Actor Abdul Kadir on 26 December 2020, several kinds of misinformation became viral on social media claiming the actor to be dead. Similar misinformation about the death of Allama Shah Ahmad Shafi, the Amir of Hefazat-e-Islam was shared in frequent intervals before he finally passed away in September 2020. Misinformation was also spread claiming the death of spiritual leader Syed Mahbub-e-Khuda Dewanbagi several times before he actually passed away.

The people chosen for this type of misinformation are usually popular figures with whom general people are emotionally attached, often in cases where the person is or has been suffering from ill health.

Figure 15: False death news of a Bangladeshi politician went viral while he was still alive.[41]

0.4.8 Maligning political/ideological opponents

Maligning opponents and responding with counter attacks is not new. But the scope of creativity in manipulating audio, video, images and screenshots and the speed of circulation has surpassed any previous times.

This is frequently seen among the supporters of political parties and faith-based organizations in Bangladesh. At the peak of the tension regarding the leadership of Hefazat-e-Islam after the demise of its Amir, the dispute between factions of the organization was reflected in online platforms. Moreover, during the debate surrounding the Hefazat e Islam leaders' demand for demolishing all statues in Bangladesh, there was widespread disinformation in online platforms.[42]

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[41]BD Factcheck report available at https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/1238153093252350/

[42]"Top fake news of the week", The Business Standard, 10 December 2020.

0.5 Misinformation from neighbouring countries

In the beginning of the pandemic, misinformation and rumours regarding the virus from across the world was widely shared in online news portals and among social media users in Bangladesh. Traditional print and broadcast media also shared some of these unverified content. Also, it is seen that misinformation related to the neighbouring countries often become viral in Bangladesh. Clickbait news, memes and fabricated images regarding events in India are often circulated among the Bangladeshi users. Additionally, misleading and out of context photos were widely shared during the peak of Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

0.5.1 Sharing satire as news

It is often seen that satires from local, regional or international sources are shared as authentic news by online news portals. These news are again picked up by traditional media houses and re-shared. This makes the misinformation go in circles across different platforms.
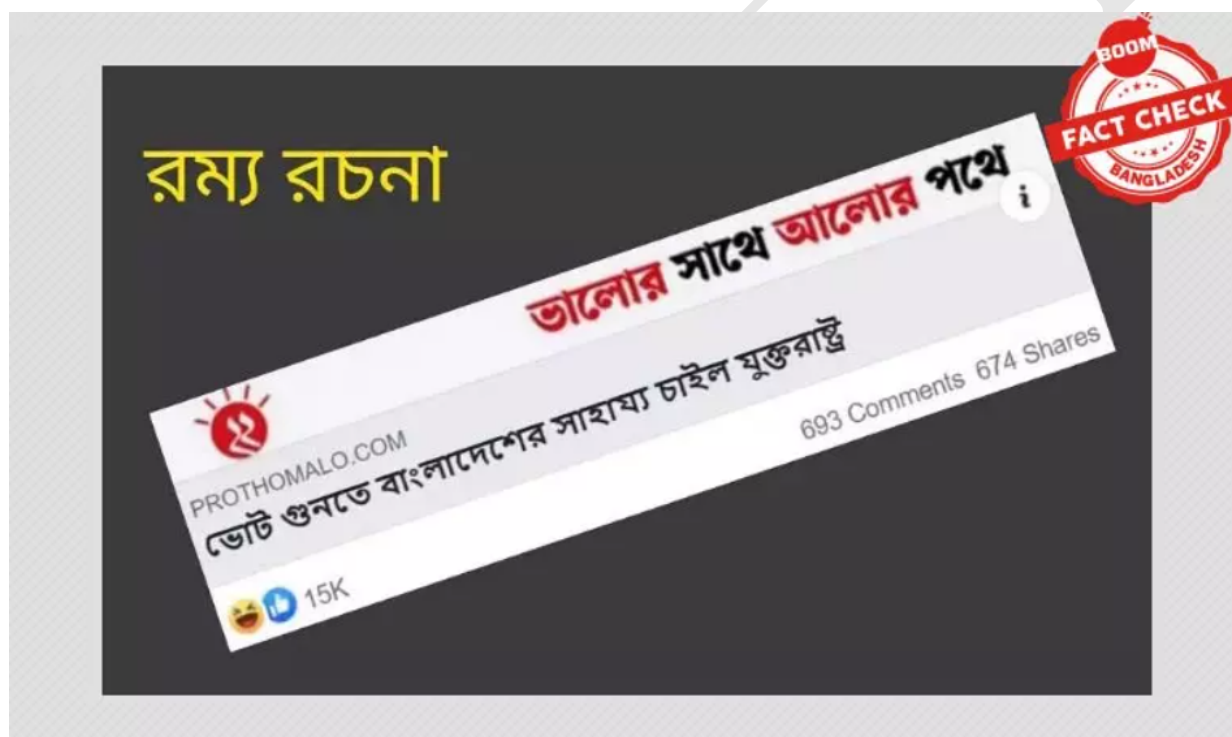
Figure 16: A satirical piece with the headline "The United States asked Bangladesh's help for counting votes" was published in the Bangla daily newspaper "Prothom Alo" during the 2020 US elections. The article was reproduced without disclaimer by online media outlets and shared by social media users as original news.[43]

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[43]Boom BD, fact check report available at https://www.boombd.com/fact-file/satire-article-on-prothom-alo-reproduced-without-any-disclaimer-10628.

0.5.2 Rumours of supernatural activities

Horrific tales of haunted person and place, aliens, supernatural activities etc. are often shared in social media and online news portals in Bangladesh.

Figure 17: Fabricated image of children like the one in this picture often get viral among social media users in Bangladesh.[44]

0.5.3 Unverified scientific experiments

Unverified claims of adulterated food items often make rounds in social media. In most cases these are based on experiments which try to show that food items like eggs, rice grains, vegetables, milk etc are made artificially in labs and marketed for mass consumption. Such unverified content creates confusion, distrust and change in food habits in many people.

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[44]See more at Bd factcheck report https://www.facebook.com/bdfactcheck/photos/1110306322703695/

0.5.4   Religious defamation and rumours of defamation

In Bangladesh, defamatory content shared online hurting religious sentiment of a particular community can result in a severe backlash from the target community in the form of attacks which often turn into deadly clashes resulting in destruction of property, religiously significant establishments and loss of lives. It is often seen that the defamatory content hurting religious sentiment is disseminated using a fabricated content or fake account is used to frame someone. Through off-line measures like sharing photocopy of the screenshot and megaphone announcement, such content is circulated to a wide range of people who do not have access to the original online content.[45] In many cases it created clashes among the communities and targeted attacks on the religious minority as a form of revenge. In the last ten years, series of such incidents was seen in different rural and remote parts of the country.

0.6   Tactics of Spreading Misinformation

After creating a content with misleading narration, fabricated photo, audio or video, many tactics are followed to give it maximum reach. Some of the widely used tactics in Bangladesh are listed below:

- Posts begins with statements like, "The media won't share, it is your duty to share" or "Corporate media makes many things viral for their interest, this needs to be made viral for commoners interest"

- The post ends with the note "collected", thus the original source cannot be easily tracked.

- Emotionally blackmailing people to share the post if they are true believers.

- Sharing the post is often associated with giveaways, discounts, free offers etc.

- Established and trusted media houses are impersonated by using a slightly modified logo or font.

- Recycling old news with new twists and promoting it as a recent event

- Using real photos of popular personages in hospital beds, fake 'death news' is made to appeal to the emotions of a large number of people.

0.7   Extent of Misinformation in Bangladesh

Using Facebook Live videos to spread panic: Facebook Live has also been exploited for misinformation. During the Road Safety protest, some young people claimed to be victims of

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[45]Detailed analysis of religious defamation and rumours of defamation can be found at "Information Disorder in the Information Age: Actors, Tactics, and Impacts in South and Southeast Asia", BIISS Paper 28, October 2020.

the attack by police and political student bodies. They narrated their experience in the live videos and called for people to join the protests and ensure justice for the victims.

Notably, Quazi Nawshaba, a Bangladeshi Actress went on a Facebook Live session and said that the attackers had killed two students and gouged out eyes of another in Jigatola of the city's capital.[46] She urged her Facebook friends and followers to "step in and save the children from unsafe conditions".[47] Although she made it appear that she was near the spot where this incident was happening and she was panic stricken, later it was found that the video was based on unverified information and she was in a different part of the city during that time. Several social media users shared the live session and the video quickly went viral both at home and abroad. Few hours later, the actress was arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) on charges of spreading rumours about the attacks. According to the RAB, Nawashaba Ahmed confessed that she was in different place during that time and she appeared on Facebook Live at the request of another person.[48]

Producing fabricated videos: Manipulating videos by adding fake audio or extracting certain parts of a video and using it in a different context to make it controversial were frequently done during the protests. Notably, the Rapid Action Battalion arrested two YouTubers on charges of circulating rumours and fake video clips.[49] These people collected photographs and video clips from different news websites, distorted them by adding fake audio and video materials and later uploaded the clips on their YouTube channel. Voiceovers were given in those videos with false information to mislead people and spread confusion.

This type of misinformation during the Quota reform and the Road Safety movement had large implications on the information ecosystem. Several features of the social media sites were exploited to agitate crowds and turn a peaceful movement into a violent clash. Here some groups are seen to deliberately spread fake news and misinformation by carefully fabricating content for partisan gains or with intention to destabilize the security condition of the country. And the other group consists of general people who might or might not have a direct connection to the conflict, unknowingly fell in the trap of misinformation. By sharing the unverified information, they further contributed to popularize the disputed content and deteriorate the situation.

Another factor was the self-censorship of the mainstream media houses. In many cases, adequate coverage of the incidents were absent during crucial events of the movements, so people relied on news they saw in social media. They believed in whatever they saw on Facebook or YouTube, including fake news and fabricated information.

0.8 Efforts to combat Misinformation in Bangladesh

The actors involved in mitigating misinformation in Bangladesh have adopted different reactive and proactive measures. At times it is seen that some stakeholders have deployed both forms

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[46]"RAB arrests actress Nawshaba on charges of spreading rumours to incite violence." bdnews24, 04 August 2018, available at https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/08/04/rab-arrests-actress-nawshaba-on-charges-of-spreading-rumours-to-incite-violence.

[47]Ibid

[48]"Nawshaba confesses to spreading rumours", Prothom Alo, 05 August 2018.

[49]"100 police teams active nationwide" The Daily Star, 07 October 2018.

of initiatives to holistically address the problem, while others focus on only one aspect of it. A brief overview of their efforts is shared below:

0.8.1 Reactive measures

Different stakeholders have taken reactive measures in different times to contain the spread of misinformation. The country witnessed an escalation of such activities surrounding the COVID "Infodemic".

Arrests

Since mid-March 2020, Bangladesh has arrested at least a dozen people for their comments about coronavirus, according to the Human Rights Watch Report.[50] Most of these arrests were under the Digital Security Act.

Warnings and public clarifications

Since the surge of COVID-19 related misinformation, the government have given strict warnings to people and platforms to refrain from sharing unverified information, rumours and propaganda surrounding the pandemic. As part of that, the law enforcement agencies took measures to counsel some of the perpetrators and made them publicly provide a clarified version of their content.

The case of a popular Bangladeshi social media influencer and fashion vlogger can be used as an example. After she posted a video demonstrating the use of Savlon disinfectant spray and fogging machine on her body as a precautionary measure against coronavirus, she was called by the law enforcement officials to retract her claim and record a clarified version about why such acts are harmful. Like this vlogger, few more people also had to go through the same process. In an interview, an official from Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Cyber Security and Crime Division said: "We called around 20 to 25 social media users and online news portals to correct the misinformation that they posted regarding the deadly virus. They were asked to delete and fix their posts and stories regarding coronavirus."[51]

Content restriction

The next reactive measure was in terms of content restriction. In different times, Facebook and Google received requests from Bangladesh authorities to take actions against selected contents. Between January to June 2020, Facebook restricted access to 123 items for COVID-related misinformation and blasphemy.[52] This is the first-time content was restricted based on

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[50]Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: End Wave of COVID-19 'Rumor' Arrests", 31 March 2020.

[51]Arifur Rahman Rabbi, Coronavirus: Social media users, news portals asked to 'delete,' 'fix' posts to prevent rumours, Dhaka Tribune, 10 March 2020

[52]Facebook Transparency, Bangladesh, available at https://transparency.facebook.com/content-restrictions/country/BD, accessed on 29 January 2020.

"misinformation" since the availability of Facebook's transparency reports in 2013. Previously contents were mostly restricted on the grounds of blasphemy, nudity, terrorism and violation of local laws.
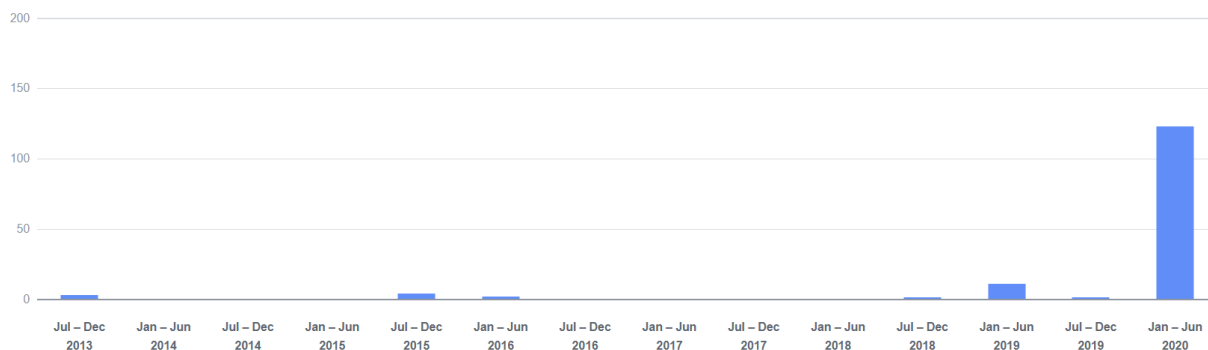
Figure 19: Facebook Transparency Report, Content Restriction Country Overview: Bangladesh

According to Google Transparency report, The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) requested the delisting of 6 Facebook URLs from Google Search, claiming that the content misrepresented information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.[53] BTRC was also ordered by the government to take measures against websites which spread COVID-19 related misinformation. As part of that, in April 2020, BTRC blocked 50 websites for spreading misinformation.[54] Previously, during the 11th National election in December 2018, BTRC had temporarily blocked 58 news websites. Subsequently, it again blocked 54 of the 58 sites on the grounds of national security and publishing fake news related to the elections.[55]

Fact checking disputed content

Fact checking is a relatively new field in Bangladesh and there are only a handful of Bangladeshis involved in the process. Until very recently, none of the fact checking organizations were International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) certified, and so could not directly work as third party fact checking organization with corporations like Facebook. However, some of the fact checkers in Bangladesh reportedly worked with such companies as local resources in unofficial capacity. In April 2020, Facebook announced partnership with the Indian fact checking organization Boom for tackling misinformation in Bangladesh.[56] In March 2021, FactWatch became the first local fact checking initiative to receive IFCN certification.[57] In this part, a brief overview of the fact-checking organizations in Bangladesh is given below:

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[53]Google Transparency report, Bangladesh, available at https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/BD?hl=en&country_request_explore=period:Y2020H1;authority:BD&lu=country_request_amount&country_request_amount=group_by:totals;period:;authority:BD, accessed on 29 January 2020.

[54]Freedom on the Net 2020, Report on Bangladesh, Freedom House.

[55]Ibid.

[56]"Facebook launches third-party fact-checking in Bangladesh", The Daily Star, 19 April 2020.

[57]Fact watch, "Factwatch receives the first International Fact Checking Network recognition from Bangladesh", available at https://www.fact-watch.org/web/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%%E0%A6%A5%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A5%E0%A6%%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4/.

a. BD FactCheck

Among the fact checking organizations in Bangladesh, BD FactCheck has gained popularity among a large number of social media users for its detailed and professional fact checking reports. The initiative was founded by a group of journalists based in Bangladesh and the United States. It is registered as a non-profit in Illinois, USA and monitors the factual accuracy of statements by political party leaders, public figures and intellectuals and disputed content of traditional media, social networking sites, and public places. It claims to be a nonpartisan platform which aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion regarding news in social media by fact checking it and publishing it in their website and Facebook page.[58]

BD Factcheck was initially run voluntarily and dependent on donation from its readers. Gradually they have expanded and received grants from international organizations. However, they are yet to be IFCN certified. Mahbub Roni, the General Secretary of BD FactCheck, has noted that in order to get IFCN certification the company needs government registration, but fact-checking in Bangladesh is a new phenomenon and it is not yet acknowledged as a field of media or journalism. However, they closely work with social media companies to verify Bangla content under special arrangement.

b. Fact Watch

Fact Watch was launched by the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) in June 2018. It was set up with a grant from The American Center Dhaka. According to news reports, Fact Watch is an impartial organization which focuses on deciphering fraudulent statements and misconceptions in Bangladesh's socio-political environment.[59] The organization analyzes information spread through social media, statements made by public figures and politicians, news items published through mainstream media and other relevant materials and publishes it in their website under different categories like "false", "half true", "unverified". As it is stationed inside the journalism department, it has a fairly large student body who voluntarily participates in fact checking activities. But for being part of university, it also has certain limitations and thus mostly concentrates on health and socio-religious misinformation.

c. Jaachai

Jaachai, the Bangla translation of "verify", is another fact checking initiative which gained popularity during the 2018 Road Safety movement. Through its Facebook page, the Jaachai team debunked and clarified various photos and news which were going viral on social media during that period. [60] The Jaachai page was very active in 2018 but has gone through bouts of inactivity, resuming briefly in March and April 2020 but falling dormant again.

d. Rumor Scanner

Starting in March 2020, Rumor Scanner is the latest addition to fact-checking initiatives in Bangladesh but it also became disputed within a short time. According to Rumor Scanner's official Facebook page, the organization's aim is to bring the truth behind viral rumour in front

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[58]BD Factcheck, available at https://en.bdfactcheck.com/?page_id=212
[59]"News fact-checking now in Bangladesh", Bangla Tribune, 06 June 2018.
[60]Nazmul Ahasan, "Combating our fake news problem" The Daily Star, 05 April 2018.

of people.[61] It claims to be an independent self-funded organization. Through its website and Facebook page, it provides fact checked reports on contemporary topics.

However, the organization became questionable after Facebook published a report labelling Don's Team and Crime Research and Analysis Foundation (CRAF) as hacker groups responsible for violating its community guidelines. According to the report, "Don's Team and CRAF collaborated to report people on Facebook for fictitious violations of our Community Standards, including alleged impersonation, intellectual property infringements, nudity and terrorism. They also hacked people's accounts and Pages, and used some of these compromised accounts for their own operational purposes, including to amplify their content."[62] In a report of BD Factcheck, it was found that the founder and team members of Don's Team are also the operators of Rumor Scanner.[63] This weakened the credibility of the organization and its fact checking endeavours.

Computer science-based efforts

Based on the interview with two leading fact checking organizations in Bangladesh, it was found that currently there are no computer science-based efforts for the fact-checkers to detect misinformation and assist their work for Bangla content. For detecting misinformation in English language they take support of open source instruments, free bots and AI-enabled services and combine it with their knowledge of journalism.

BD Factcheck reportedly examined the development of a bot for assessing Bangla content, but stated that they could not make progress due to limitation of funds and time. As fact-checking in Bangladesh is still based on volunteering or as a side initiative to full time journalism career, it has not been possible to dedicate sufficient time and effort in developing digital systems. However, when asked if they would be interested to adopt such systems, they have responded positively and also showed interest to be part of any process as such by sharing their experiences.[64]

Instead of fact-checking misinformation, the existing computer science-based efforts seem to be more directed towards making the correct information available. During the peak of the Covid-19 related misinformation, different stakeholders considered using technology to address the problem. As part of that, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the ICT Division jointly launched an infobot service on WhatsApp to provide latest information about Covid-19.[65] Additionally, a Covid-19 Response Bangladesh textual chatbot was built for Facebook Messenger in collaboration with Appinion BD, SAJIDA Foundation, Renata Limited, and Vertex Chambers.[66] It is available in Bangla and English and aims to help people with information and services related to the coronavirus.

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[61]Rumour Scanner Facebook page "About", available at https://www.facebook.com/RumorScanner/about/?ref=page_internal, accessed on 30 March 2021.

[62]Facebook Newsroom, "Taking Action Against Hackers in Bangladesh and Vietnam", available at https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/taking-action-against-hackers-in-bangladesh-and-vietnam/

[63]BD Factcheck report on Rumor Scanner, available at https://bdfactcheck.com/%E0%A6%AB%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%83%E0%A6%95-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8-%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%93%E0%A7%9F%E0%A6%

[64]Based on phone interview with Mahbub Roni, the General Secretary of BD FactCheck.

[65]"DGHS infobot on WhatsApp to provide information about Covid-19", The Business Standard, 23 April 2020.

[66]"New chatbot to answer coronavirus queries", Dhaka Tribune, 26 March 2020.

0.8.2 Proactive Measures

Alongside the reactive measures, there has been a growing trend of media literacy initiatives in Bangladesh. Such initiatives do not specifically address misinformation; instead they generally target the abuse of social media and attempts to build tolerance and media literacy among the users. Alongside relevant bodies of the Bangladesh Government, initiatives have also been taken by international organizations, private tech-based organizations, fact-checking organizations[67], telecommunication companies and student-led campaigns. Some of the ongoing initiatives are briefly highlighted below:

Government initiatives

a. ICT Division

Proactive measures by the government to tackle rumours and misinformation are mostly related to awareness building and conducted through the ICT Division. In June 2020, the ICT division organized workshop on "Misinformation, Fact-checking and Credible Web" where established journalist, citizen journalists, blogger, vlogger, media experts and students participated to learn about fact-checks, fake news, rumors, computational propaganda, spam, scams, fake reviews, formats of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, social media verification, assessing sources, combatting online abuse, etc. The ICT division in collaboration with Leveraging ICT for Employment and Growth (LICT), Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) and Digital Bangladesh, launched an online platform "Durbar21.org" to facilitate the process.[68] The initiative is titled "Ashol Chini" which can be loosely translated as "Know the Real" and involves appointment of youth ambassadors across the country to create awareness about rumours and misinformation. It also calls for a video, poster and essay competition to create youth engagement on the issue.

b. Law enforcement agencies

Different divisions within the law enforcement agencies have been tasked with addressing social media rumours that threaten cyber life and may translate into real life harm. The Cyber News Verification Center of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is one such initiative which makes people aware about responsible content sharing and also debunks selected misinformation. During the pandemic, RAB encouraged people to share coronavirus related disputed content in this center's Facebook page for verification. Previously, RAB created an awareness building television commercial which was widely circulated and managed to make general people realize the impact of misinformation to some extent.

The Cyber Crime Investigation Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has also taken measures to address online rumours as part of its wider campaign to fight cybercrime. As part of its "Cyber Life" series, the department is presently conducting a series of interactive web programs to raise awareness regarding the topic.

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[67]BD Fact-check recently took an initiative to conduct fact-checking training for journalist working in online news portals.

[68]Available at https://www.facebook.com/ictdivisionbd/posts/4299363483414935?comment_id=4304269856257631, accesed on 23 December 2020.

Non-government initiatives

Among the few non-government initiatives in this field, the South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID) has been doing commendable work. SACMID is responsible for preparing content on 'Media and Information Literacy' which will be incorporated in the ICT curriculum of school students. This is a joint initiative of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The organization is also preparing to launch a Bengali book titled "Gono Maddhyam Sakkhorota: Sahaj Path" which aims to teach media literacy in easy terms.

SACMID is also involved in awareness and capacity building. In August 2020, SACMID organized two orientation workshops titled 'Appropriate use of information & media during Corona Pandemic' where 46 community leaders representing different segments of the rural society like elected representatives, religious leaders, journalists, teachers, parents and political party members participated. Previously in June 2018, the organization published a baseline survey on media literacy among secondary school students in Dhaka city.

Private sector initiatives

a. Preneur Lab

Among the private sector initiatives to fight misinformation in Bangladesh, Preneur Lab undertook a series of activities over the past five years. In partnership with Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, the company recently launched a website titled "Nirapod Online" to tackle different forms of internet threats. Fighting fake news and promoting fact-checking is part of that initiative. Under the "Covid-19 Misconceptions" tab in that website, there are 20 blogs debunking selected coronavirus fake news and misconceptions. The company also organized digital fake news verification workshops for journalists and media professionals in Dhaka and Rajshahi in December 2020. In the workshop the participants received training in basic skills like reverse image verification, news verification, internet news archive verification, and use of geo-location for social media audit.

In December 2018, right before the general election in Bangladesh, Preneur Lab hosted an event titled "Role of Media in Upcoming Election" for editors, journalists, media activists and development professionals where Mr. Sivnath Thakral, the then Director, Public Policy (India and South Asia), Facebook and Mr. Varun Reddy, Public Policy Manager of Facebook were present. They discussed Facebook's community guidelines for safety and security and discussed the company's initiatives to address the challenge of misinformation in its platform.

Additionally, Preneur Lab was listed as a Trusted Flagger in 2017. As part of that, the company conducted a project in which its social media team worked for 4 hours daily to find disputed contents on different social media platforms and published it through monthly reports. It primarily looked for YouTube channels which had offensive content and provoked violence and extremism.

b. Grameenphone

Grameenphone, a leading telecommunication company in Bangladesh has recently initiated online safety and etiquettes programs. Awareness campaigns against spreading rumours on

digital platforms is an integral part of it. The company has created several advertisements and blog posts for the purpose. With its big budget creative TV and digital media commercials, it managed to draw the attention of a large audience. Such initiatives targeting the mass people seems to be an effective way for addressing misinformation.

INGO initiatives

a. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

International organizations in Bangladesh have recently engaged in the fight against misinformation. UNICEF Bangladesh took an initiative to address misinformation during the pandemic through its Media Monitoring Task Force. UNICEF Bangladesh's social media team trained 16 volunteers from eight administrative divisions of the country to be a part of it. The volunteers mainly monitored medical misinformation surrounding COVID-19 on social media platforms, especially Facebook and reported it to the platform authority.

According to the UNICEF Bangladesh communication officer, the team detected 85 major misinformation posts that garnered around 1.87 million interactions on social media during the monitoring exercise done with the volunteers. The team claimed that around one in five of all detected misinformation posts reported to Facebook were removed.[69]

b. UNDP Digital Khichuri Challenge

Digital Khichuri Challenge (DKC) is an initiative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for Bangladeshi young change makers interested in making the digital space more safe and tolerant. The 2020 theme of the competition involved ideas to address disinformation, fake news, hate speech and cyberbullying. BD Factcheck was the winner in startup level.[70] Previously DKC supported an initiative named 'Fakenewschecker.online' but the website does not have much activity since 2018.

0.8.3 Challenges of Addressing Misinformation in Bangladesh

There are several challenges regarding effectively addressing misinformation, but the definitional challenge tops the list. Classifying content into fixed categories is a struggle for both civil society and law enforcement agencies. Also, there is no clear definition regarding misinformation or similar types of content in the legal instruments and labelling it is often based on subjective judgment and interpretation. This definitional ambiguity has been the most debated aspect of the Digital Security Act and ICT Act. But at the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that laying out a definitional framework which is acceptable to all is a big challenge. Nonetheless, without some level of definitional clarity, addressing misinformation becomes quite challenging.

Moreover, rumour, disinformation, misinformation, misleading content often have a political angle to it. There are concerns that addressing it might make one look associated with a

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[69]UNICEF Bangladesh, Youth volunteers bust COVID-19 myths and combat misinformation, available at https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/youth-volunteers-bust-covid-19-myths-and-combat-misinformation, accessed on 23 December 2020.

[70]Digital Khichuri Challenge 2020 Winners, available at https://digitalkhichuribd.org/winners/bd-fact-check/.

certain political party and result in backlash from the supporters of the other. So there seems to be a kind of self-censorship among some fact-checkers as well as media platforms when it comes to political content.

There are also debates surrounding content governance. Facebook's third-party fact-checking is very new in Bangladesh so people have less idea about how this process works and who are behind it. During the peak of debate surrounding Hefazat-e-Islam and its leaders in late 2020, certain videos were flagged by Facebook. This was one of the first events where several posts of Bangladeshi users received fact-check warnings. This caused quite an uproar among the social media activists as there were confusions regarding what process is being followed to censor their content and whether there is a biasness of Facebook and its fact checkers. Clarity regarding this process is very important to make fact-checking trustworthy.

At times it is seen that the same content is created with modifications based on the features of the platforms. Therefore, similar messages would circulate through all popular public platforms and messaging services and the audience would repeatedly be exposed to the content. However, as the public policy standard and response to disinformation are different among the companies, it is seen that even if the content is taken down or fact-checked it is still accessible in other platforms.

The intention and incentive to propagate misinformation also needs to be closely scrutinized. It is seen that many online news portals and the online version of selected mainstream media use misinformation, misleading and click bait content as part of their promotional and business strategy. As they are more interested in quick popularity and financial benefit rather than providing factually correct news, they are less likely to seek information verification. As the current business model based on misinformation favours them, they are reluctant to review their policies and thus, they continue to share the kind of content that suits their purpose. The political and ideological association of the media owners are also an important factor here.

There are also limitations in the reach of awareness building and fact-checking workshops. Many of the workshops are targeted towards media professionals, students and civil society representatives. It is usually seen that people from a few selected educational institutions or organizations who are based in Dhaka and easy to reach are regular participants in most events. This type of selection and self-selection means a limited audience for these efforts.

Thus, definitional ambiguity, self-sensorship, debate on content governance, limitation of fact-checking initiatives and questions on their neutrality are some of the major challenges of addressing misinformation in Bangladesh.