DISORDER IN THE NEWSROOM

The Media's Perceptions and Response to the Infodemic

MediaMatters for Democracy
Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative

FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION For Freedom.
Pakistan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the digital age, the traditional concepts associated with information ecosystems, cycles and the corresponding dissemination channels – print, radio and television – have taken a drastic overhaul. The primary sources of information have taken a reluctant backseat largely owing to a competitor – the Internet – challenging these once titans by the sheer nature with which it engages with, and propagates information.

The very speed, reach and diversity of the social media as a collective have impacted traditional journalism, including the ways in which it consumes and disseminates information.

While this may have created an exciting new dynamic on the information front, it has also opened up the floor to more pressing debates surrounding fact-checking. Otherwise having always played a central role to journalism, fact-checking, or content 'verification' has now been pushed further to the front. This digital acceleration of information cycles has in turn increased the pressure on newsrooms and news cycles.

At a time when media houses across the globe are challenged with organised campaigns – Often, backed by authoritarian governments and structural power hubs – working to discredit critical journalists through claims of "fake news", stringent fact checking and information verification has become vital to report the truth. The unleashing of all sorts of easily accessible information – verified or not – on various digital platforms pertaining to COVID-19 during the ongoing pandemic has added another complicated dimension to the misinformation dynamic. In the process, it has become even more crucial for journalists to be mindful of the absolute need to be transparent and authentic in information gathering and fact-checking.

To assess just how deep this information disorder goes, and how it affects the newsrooms in Pakistan, Media Matters for Democracy (MMFD) with support from Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) conducted a perception study titled **'Disorder in the Newsroom: The Media's Perceptions and Response to the Infodemic'.** The research included a survey of 546 journalists along with in-depth interviews of 10 senior reporters and editors in national and international newsrooms based in Pakistan.

The survey, aimed at understanding the perception of their ability to identify and counter misinformation, found that almost **90% of respondents believe that misinformation has had an impact on public trust in the media.**

It also concluded that **nine out of ten respondents claimed that they have become more vigilant about fact-checking due to accusations about the media's role in spreading misinformation.**

Editors interviewed for the study felt that **accusations of "fake news" and attacks on journalists on social media had not only made them more vigilant but also fearful of putting out information.**

In terms of their understanding, the survey found that **89% of respondents claimed there were discussions in their newsrooms about misinformation.**

While on the face of it this appears encouraging, the survey indicated **that none of the 584 respondents were able to differentiate between misinformation, mal-information, and disinformation** casting a shadow over their true understanding of integral concepts.

While **81 percent of reporters surveyed said that their organisations had written guidelines, none of the editors from mainstream Pakistan-based news organisations said they had written fact-checking guidelines.** This is further aggravated by the fact that **35% of respondents said they had not received any kind of formal training on fact-checking.**

Globally, many news organisations have understood the magnitude of the challenge and have adapted their fact-checking processes with an even more zealous pursuit as part of the larger newsgathering function. The same does not appear to exist in newsrooms in Pakistan. Financial constraints, lack of resources and training opportunities, and a reluctance to shift the newsroom culture to a more responsible role have all played their part.

As pointed out by the editorial staff interviewed for this study, while the concept of fact-checking is not new, the modern digital mediums require the process to be much faster than it traditionally has been and is. The editorial staff interviewed expressed low confidence in their newsroom's capacity to fact-check information.

In turn resource-handicapped newsrooms across the country are faced with a multitude of challenges when it comes to misinformation and corresponding verification and fact-checking procedures. Further assessment of conceptual understanding and verification protocols coupled with investment in technical training will help shift the dynamic in favour of newsrooms capable of not just identifying but also effectively challenging misinformation to better dispense their function of keeping the people informed.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The news media considers itself, and is perceived to be, the gatekeeper of information.[1] From breaking news to nuanced analysis on current affairs, the phenomenon of providing information has always been through traditional mediums, such as radio, television, and print. News and legacy media were specifically the primary source, with alternative mediums getting much less attention.

The advent of social media has shifted this dynamic considerably. It has also in some sense catapulted traditional ways of reporting news, and traditional definitions of journalism. For instance, news now often breaks on social media with information being shared on platforms such as Twitter, with the mainstream media citing these reports or picking up information from there.

In some cases, especially in regions where there is a dearth of journalists, news media has actively used information being put out by Twitter users to report on a story.[2] This has brought important conversations about verification and fact checking to the forefront.

Fact checking has also become a branch of news organisations, where statements by officials are fact checked and other misinformation being shared on social media is debunked. Organisations such as the Agence France-Presse (AFP)[3] have a global fact checking unit dedicated to checking misinformation being shared on social media. Reuters created an e-learning course with Facebook specifically for journalists that would help them identify manipulated media and 'deep fakes', all part of misinformation and disinformation that exist in online spaces.[4]

With organisations such as First Draft taking the lead, there are many initiatives now being run in mainstream newsrooms and adjacent to them that specifically verify and fact check information that is being shared in online spaces. This is not to suggest that these were not a part of the process of producing a story in the past, but these initiatives themselves have taken centre stage now.

One reason for this is the accusation of "fake news" that has harangued media houses and journalists. While former US President Trump is credited for popularising the term, it has been used by autocratic rulers throughout the world to discredit the work that journalists are doing, especially when it is critical of their governments and policies. The exercise of truth telling has therefore become even more important, as the press throughout the world is now increasingly accused of being a partisan either to political parties or ideologies.[5]

1. Ferreira, G. (2018). Gatekeeping Changes in the New Media Age: The Internet, Values and Practices of Journalism. *Brazilian Journalism Research, 14(2),* 486-505.
    https://doi.org/10.25200/bjr.v14n2.2018.1026

2. *BBC World Service - Institutional - Haiti earthquake.* Bbc.co.uk. (2019). Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2010/06/100626_annual_review_2010_haiti.shtml.)

3. *Fact Check.* Fact Check. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://factcheck.afp.com/

4. Staff, R. *(2020). Facebook starts fact-checking partnership with Reuters.* Reuters. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-partnership-reuters-idUSKBN2062K4.

5. Benkler, Y., Faris, R., Roberts, H., & Zuckerman, E. (2017). *Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda.* Columbia Journalism Review. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php.

The COVID-19 pandemic is another issue that has fallen prey to partisan politics and ideologies. It has brought into focus not only the platforms through which information is shared but also the way it is packaged.[6] During the pandemic the large amounts of, often unverified, information being shared across multiple platforms popularised the term "infodemic."[7] According to the United Nations, the sheer amount of information being shared across multiple mediums made it difficult for people to identify the truth from lies, or information that might partially be true to information that is entirely false. This ranged from potential cures against the virus to information about whether masks were an effective way to prevent the spread of the virus. This information was being shared in an environment where there was a lot of uncertainty amongst experts and health organisations as well regarding the nature of the virus.

At the same time, research studies and platforms that were previously only known to a select group of academics and within the scientific community became more popular. The work on COVID-19 that was not peer-reviewed or understood properly by laymen was read and shared widely, adding to the misinformation being shared on social media.[8]

Pakistan is not alien to these issues either. Outside of the misinformation being shared during the pandemic, a few months before the COVID-19 outbreak in the country, a video surfaced on social media where school children were shown to be fainting after receiving polio drops. The video clip ran on various channels before it was finally verified. It then became clear that the video was fabricated on purpose to malign the polio eradication campaign, which is already an extremely controversial issue in the country.[9]

Verification has always been central to the work of journalists but the way information sharing has been catalysed by social media has increased the pressure on newsrooms. Accusations of being partisan or biased, especially coming from officials or governments, increase this pressure. Fact checking initiatives that exist in other countries do not exist in the same way in Pakistan and occasionally, newsrooms will run stories to check information being shared by politicians. At the same time, lay-offs and financial constraints on newsrooms have depleted the traditional processes through which verification took place.

This makes it essentially vital to look at where journalists in Pakistan place themselves not only in terms of their understanding of misinformation but also their ability to actively challenge it.

6. *COVID-19 - Fighting 'infodemic' and social stigma through community media in India.* UNESCO. (2020). Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-fighting-infodemic-and-social-stigma-through-community-media-india.

7. United Nations, D. (2020). *UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis | United Nations.* United Nations. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19.

8. Gibbens, S. (2020). *A guide to overcoming COVID-19 misinformation.* National Geographic. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/10/guide-to-overcoming-coronavirus-misinformation-infodemic/.

9. Morrish, L. (2020). *How fake videos unravelled Pakistan's war on polio.* First Draft. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
    https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/how-fake-videos-unravelled-pakistans-war-on-polio/.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The conversation on verification of content, fact checking, and misinformation is often prefaced by a discussion on what the truth is and how it is understood and categorised especially within the context of journalism, which is an integral part of our information sharing ecosystem. The use and ultimately popularity of the term 'fake news' led to the idea that we are living in a post-truth world, questioning the relationship between journalism and truth.

Waisboard (2018) argues that the idea of absolute truth and the rush to proclaim that we now live in a post-truth world comes from traditional and narrow understanding of what the news is and how it interacts with the truth. According to Waisboard, the idea largely comes from legacy news organisations such as The New York Times, which quickly challenged the accusation of 'fake news' by declaring themselves the arbiter of truth with the tagline "Truth is more important than ever" while asking people to subscribe to their publication.

He argues that truth is larger than news organisations and something that cannot be determined simply by the verification and fact checking procedures implemented during news production. Rather he places it as a question of public communication at large, linked to social conditions in which news is shared. "Truth," he says, "is an outcome of collective sense-making rather than [what is] unilaterally decided by newsrooms." Within this context, questioning the basis of truth, Waisboard asks the news media to revisit their understanding of their own role as truth tellers, because these ideas and notions were informed by different sociopolitical realities.[10]

These questions about the role of journalism are important to understand how verification and fact checking takes place in newsrooms. It is also an important step towards identifying and defining the different types of incorrect information that exist and are shared online. The term 'fake news', apart from being a favourite of autocratic rulers attempting to muzzle the press,[11] also does not capture the various nuances of the types of truths and untruths that exist within the information ecosystem. The term is not new and has been used to refer to various types of news items over the years from satire to advertising and propaganda.

Multiple terms have been used to describe the 'fake news' phenomenon. These include the term alternative facts,[12] which was not deemed fit to be used,[13] because it implies that the information being shared is simply another version of facts, therefore, just as valid or true as other information being shared by more reliable sources.[14] Ultimately the problem remains that these terms do not describe or attempt to understand the way that information is shared within the current communications environment.

10.   Waisbord, S. (2018). Truth is What Happens to News. *Journalism Studies, 19*(13), 1866-1878. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2018.1492881

11.   Gabbatt, A. (2018). *How Trump's 'fake news' gave authoritarian leaders a new weapon*. The Guardian. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
        https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/25/how-trumps-fake-news-gave-authoritarian-leaders-a-new-weapon.

12.   Bradner, E., Liptak, K., & Borger, G. (2017). *Conway: Trump White House offered 'alternative facts' on crowd size*. CNN. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
        https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html.

13.   Enfield, N. (2018). *In times of 'alternative facts' we must care about truth on a larger scale* | Nick Enfield. The Guardian. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
        https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/16/in-times-of-alternative-facts-we-must-care-about-truth-on-a-larger-scale.

14.   Tandoc, E., Lim, Z., & Ling, R. (2017). Defining "Fake News". *Digital Journalism, 6*(2), 137-153. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

In Facebook's own attempt, there were three categories of information: that is influenced specifically by government actors for a specific geopolitical aim, articles that on purpose or unintentionally include mistruths, and then false amplifiers, information that is shared by organised networks.[15] However, these categories do not capture the intricacy or encompass the larger motivations behind the sharing of false information. Understanding the complexity and motivations is key to understanding if the information is to be fact checked and verified.

The term information disorder has been coined to refer to the information pollution that exists. It refers to a larger more complex ecosystem where information is being created and shared with different intents through multiple mediums. It also refers to the different ways in which this polluted information is amplified.[16]

First Draft, an organisation founded primarily to challenge and create a better understanding of this information disorder, has attempted to define and categorise the various types of false information that exist within the public communication ecosystem, including journalism and social media.[17] The definitions and categories created by First Draft take into account the intent with which the information was created and distributed and encompass a wider variety of information being shared. These definitions are more widely accepted at an international level by multiple bodies and news organisations[18] and allow for more nuance in the conversation around mistruths or false information.

Through research, they have created three categories of false information, which are helpful in the fact checking and verification process.

Misinformation: Information that is false but not created with the intent of causing harm.

Disinformation: Information that is false and created specifically with the intention to cause harm.

Mal-information: Information based in facts, presented in a way to cause harm.

In addition to these definitions they also outline the types of information that is shared and the wider category that it falls under. It is documented in the Venn diagram below. This is then referred to as the larger information disorder ecosystem.
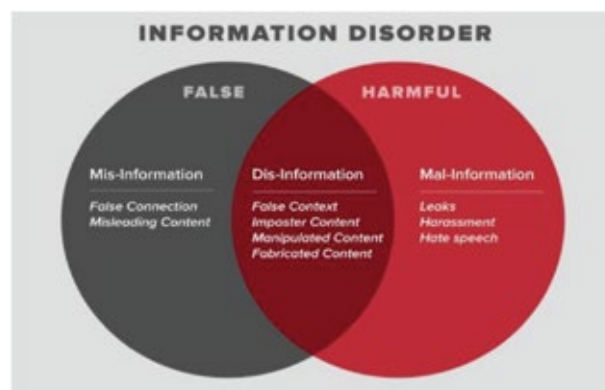
Source: First Draft

15. Statt, N. (2017). *Facebook says it will crack down on government-led misinformation campaigns*. The Verge. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
https://www.theverge.com/2017/4/27/15453368/facebook-fake-news-information-operations-political-propaganda.

16. *Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). INFORMATION DISORDER:Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Retrieved from
https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77

17. Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). INFORMATION DISORDER :*Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Retrieved from
https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-de%CC%81sinformation-1.pdf?x86577

18. Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2018). Thinking about 'information disorder': formats of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. In C. Ireton & J. Posetti, *Journalism, 'Fake News' & DisinformationHandbook for Journalism Education and Training* (pp. 44-55). UNESCO. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552.

The way information, and more specifically false information, is defined has an impact on the way that news organisations run and emphasise their fact checking initiatives. Throughout the western media, news organisations such as *New York Times,*[19] *Washington Post*[20] and even *The Guardian*[21] now check political statements for truth and accuracy, often assigning a rating to the statement and offering expert analysis.[22] Similar systems were used by other organisations. All of these attempts are ultimately based on a more nuanced understanding of the information disorder rather than simply calling the false information alternative facts or fake news.

Alfred Hermida discusses the importance of verification in journalism, the balance between accuracy and speed that has almost always existed in news organisations, and then the way social media has put "additional strains" on the verification process.[23] This additional strain is partly because the age old role of journalists bearing witness to the news has been usurped by social media. Users now not only witness it but also share and comment on events directly via social media. Thus, for journalists often the vantage point becomes their computer screen, which means sourcing from social media. In his discussion, Hermida tries to broaden the understanding and meaning of verification and ultimately concludes that the role of journalists has shifted from merely being an "arbiter of the truth" to becoming "a trusted professional who is transparent about how a news story comes together."

Hermida uses specific examples of how newsrooms have responded and evolved in response to information sharing on social media, and ultimately for him the idea of verification is a "collaborative, fluid and iterative online public process."

In response to social media becoming an important source of information in the earlier part of the last decade, news organisations throughout the world had already framed rules on how and when to use social media for collecting information. This includes organisations such as Reuters to NPR.[24]

In a recent interview with the Reuters Institute for Journalism Studies, lead of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Disinformation team talked about how the BBC used their monitoring team, one which has existed for 80 years and formed an additional disinformation team.[25] This is just one of the many interventions that journalistic organisations have made to the information ecosystem. Fact checking initiatives exist at almost all large media organisations and the birth of organisations like the International Fact Checking Network and Snopes, which focus solely on challenging disinformation, are part of this ecosystem. News organisations have also partnered with social media companies to help disseminate fact checked and verified information more easily.[26]

Closer to home, the news is considered partisan, often deemed fake where the term *"lifafa"* is used to describe anchors considered to be on the payroll of specific actors.[27] In this information ecosystem, it is

19.   The New York Times, S. (2020). *Fact-Checking the Trump and Biden Town Halls*. Nytimes.com. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
      https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/10/15/us/fact-checking-town-halls.

20.   The Washington Post, S. (2020). *Fact Checker*. The Washington Post. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/.

21.   Mohdin, A., Duncan, P., & McIntyre, N. (2020). *Coronavirus testing: the PM fact-checked*. The Guardian. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
      https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/09/coronavirus-testing-the-pm-fact-checked.

22.   Qiu, L. (2020). *Fact Checks*. Nytimes.com. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/fact-checks.

23.   Hermida, A. (2015). Nothing But the Truth: Redrafting the Journalistic Boundary of Verification. In *Boundaries of Journalism* (pp. 37-50). Routledge. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from.

24.   Reuters. (2008). *Handbook of Journalism* [Ebook] (2nd ed.). Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=Main_Page.

25.   Reuters Institute. (2020). *How the BBC addresses the challenge of disinformation worldwide*. Future of Journalism [Podcast]. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
      https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/our-podcast-how-bbc-addresses-challenge-disinformation-worldwide.

26.   Staff, R. (2020). *Facebook starts fact-checking partnership with Reuters*. Reuters.com. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from
      https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-partnership-reuters-idUSKBN2062K4.

27.   Husain, I. (2017). Where's my 'lifafa'?. *Dawn*. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from https://www.dawn.com/news/1376802.

important to understand where the media stand in understanding not only the various types of misinformation but also their own role within the larger information ecosystem. The response to combat and challenge misinformation seen throughout the world has not been seen in mainstream news organisations in Pakistan.

A study released in 2020 by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) offers a look at how journalists understand and process the information they come across.[28] The study found that over 82 percent of journalists, surveyed for the research, said they fact check their own work. By fact checking, the study elaborates, they mean they verify figures, names, titles, and dates. Only 22 percent of the respondents said they fact checked quotes. It also found that journalists felt information shared on social media could be used for verification, even though over 87 percent deemed social media to be the least trustworthy source of information. A majority of the respondents put the responsibility of fact checking and verification primarily on news desks.

This study will build on previous research by raising questions about the procedures followed by newsrooms for fact checking. It will also examine how well newsrooms understand the information disorder and how nuanced the conversation on misinformation is among editors and reporters.

28.   Jahangir, R. (2020). *Sifting truth from lies in the age of fake news.* The Digital Rights Foundation. Retrieved from

        https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Sifting-truth-from-lies-in-the-digital-age-of-fake-news-final.pdf

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The definitions discussed at length in the literature review, pertaining to the information disorder will be used as the baseline for this study. They will form the basis through which researchers analyse journalists' understanding of the information ecosystem.

The primary aim of this research is to understand:

1.   How journalists view their own role in the information ecosystem specifically relating to the information disorder

2.   What the response of newsrooms has been to the information disorder

A mixed methods approach was used for the purposes of this research to not only understand how reporters rate their knowledge of misinformation but also to cross-check this self-assessment. In order to do this, an initial survey was carried out which was followed up by in-depth interviews with 10 senior reporters and editors working in different mediums in both national and international news organisations based in the country.

The survey allowed the researchers to reach a wider group of journalists across the country, especially those in smaller cities, making the findings more representative.
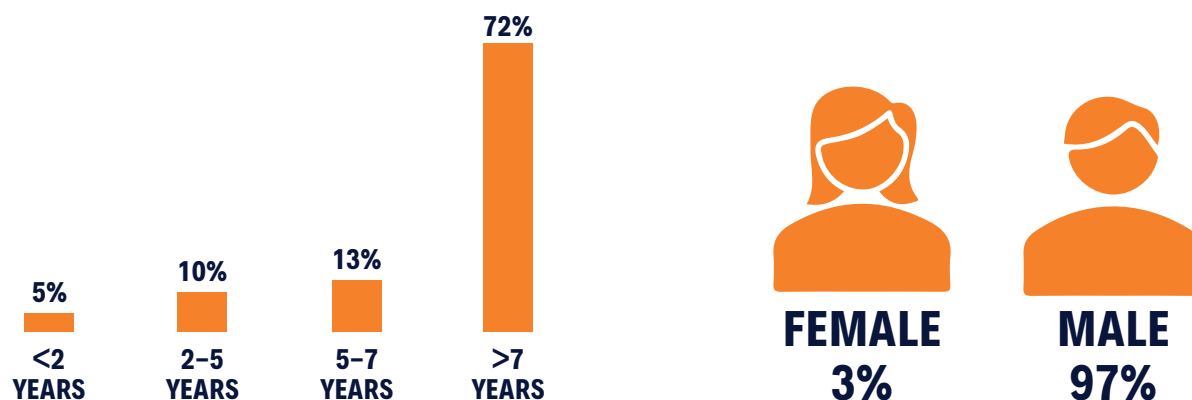
Survey

A questionnaire was specifically designed for this survey, which contained both open-ended and close-ended questions. The survey was conducted in 32 cities in total, with 546 participants. The questionnaire is annexed as Annexure 1.

Gallup was commissioned to conduct the survey. The survey was conducted online in all cities.

|	
Badin	Mirpurkhas
Bahawalpur	Multan
Bara	Peshawar
Dera Ismail Khan	Qamber
Faisalabad	Quetta
Hyderabad	Rawalpindi
Islamabad	Rohri
Jacobabad	Shorkot
Karachi	Sujawal
Kashmore	Sukkur
Khanpur	Tando Muhammad Khan
Kotri	Thatta
Lahore	Toba Tek Singh
Lower Dir	Turbat
Malir	Upper Dir
Mansehra	Warah

Respondent Demographics in Brief

DURATION OF AFFILIATION

72%

5%   10%   13%

<2   2–5   5–7   >7
YEARS   YEARS   YEARS   YEARS

**FEMALE
3%**

**MALE
97%**

Since the survey respondents were identified through press clubs, the percentage of women respondents remains very low. The ratio of women members of the press clubs, especially in smaller cities, is dismally low; in Swat, for example, there is only one woman member of the local press club. In cities like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, women make 4% to 5% of the membership.

MEDIA TYPE

**TV
39%**

**NEWSPAPER
55%**

**RADIO
3%**
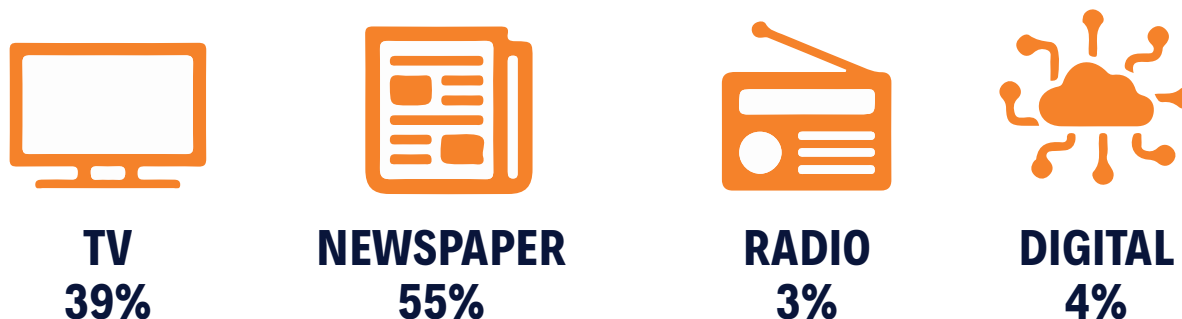
**DIGITAL
4%**

Province	Percentage of Survey
Punjab	30%
Sindh	49%
KP	3%
Balochistan	2%
ICT	16%

Key Informants

Ten editors and senior reporters from digital media, print, and television were interviewed for the research. The questions were based on the responses received from the surveys to provide more context to the findings. The editors interviewed are:

1. Benazir Shah – Geo News

2. Mahim Maher – Samaa Web

3. Badar Alam – Sujag

4. Ailia Zehra – Naya Daur

5. Zeeshan Haider – BBC

6. Irfan Aslam – Dawn

7. Iftikhar Khan– Tribal News Network

8. Haroon Rashid – Independent Urdu

9. Zarrar Khuhro – Dawn TV

Limitations of Research

One of the main limitations of this research is that it relies largely on self-reporting in both the quantitative and qualitative findings, which means that the researchers were relying on journalists to report as accurately as possible on the processes within their own newsrooms. SoThe the study, thus, has to be seen as a self-perception study, and further research using exploratory methods to ascertain how accurate this self perception is would be useful in creating a holistic view of the situation.

The survey and qualitative interview allowed respondents to define misinformation and disinformation in their own terms. In fact, one of the main questions in the survey was the assessment of journalists' own understanding of these terms. While the question and responses give a good insight into how journalists understand misinformation, the responses were also dependent upon how each respondent understood these terms.

The surveys were also filled out online and the researchers were dependent entirely on the journalists who chose to fill out the survey, making the sample random and not as representative as a more targeted survey through other means. Engagement on online surveys is also low.

CHAPTER 4
SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey was designed to assess self perceptions about skills and the ability to recognise and counter misinformation. Journalists were asked to self assess their own ability to recognise misinformation and rate themselves on the ability to verify it. Interestingly, the majority of journalists rates themselves highly and pro-claimed a good understanding of misinformation and verification tools. However, in-depth interviews with editors and news managers paint a different picture of the general level of skill, showing that the self-assessment may be too optimistic. This section presents the key findings of the research survey.

Understanding Misinformation

Highlights

- The understanding of misinformation among journalists appears to be sketchy; while all the respondents talked about some vibration of news and information that isn't authentic, none of the 546 respondents specifically differentiated between misinformation, mal-information, and disinformation. Among the respondents 28% said that misinformation is 'news that lacks truth, is a lie or a rumor';

  89% of journalists said that there were discussions in their newsrooms about misinformation

Details

The understanding that misinformation would be linked to some sort of untruth is thereexists, however, the quotes and descriptions of misinformation as perceived by the respondents show that the understanding is not nuanced. There were no comments about the different kinds of misinformation, there were no reflections on the mediums and structures involved in the spread of misinformation, and there didn't seem to be an in depth understanding of weaponised misinformation. The phrases 'based on a rumour' and 'lacks truth' appeared in 28% of the responses, while variations of 'not substantiated', 'not verified', and 'lacks proof' appeared in 21% of the responses.

> **What is misinformation?**
>
> **28% Say it is news based on a 'rumor' or news that 'lacks truth'.**

Around 38% of the respondents gave descriptions which demonstrate that they do not have a clear understanding of what misinformation is, including 18 % saying that any information that is circulating on social media and does not reference proper sources is misinformation. While misinformation may be circulated on social media without references, a significant amount of information that appears online without references may not be misinformation at all. Additionally, 2% of respondents linked misinformation to 'blackmailing' and thought that misinformation is always connected to attempts to blackmail. Another common trend among the respondents was linking misinformation to defamation; 18% of the respondents felt that news that furthers personal interest by maligning someone.

Some respondents saw misinformation through the lens of verification process. One of the respondents, a bureau chief of a TV channel, stated that "fFor any journalist, all news is fake news if the information is not his own or he didn't get to the bottom of it himself. In the newsroom, we make sure that such news is not aired and discussion regarding it takes place with the editorial board; however, sometimes in an attempt to break news first, errors are made but efforts to control this are also done". A senior news editor said that "fake news monthly circulates on social media and some also on the traditional media. It is news based on manipulating facts, and references are fake while wrong attributions also make news fake". Such responses demonstrate an understanding that the process of verification becomes very important when journalists are dealing with information. Some respondents also referred to propaganda and information published due to intimidation and coercion. A reporter from Islamabad said that "fake news is that specific news which we forcefully send to the sub editor to publish but everyone knows that it is against the truth and merely a television story". Similar comments were made by some of the other respondents. However, all of the respondents used the term 'fake news' to describe such information, showing that there isn't much knowledge about how 'fake news' is a term weaponised against the media itself. No one among the 500 plus respondents mentioned mal- information and disinformation in the descriptive responses.

Looking at the demographics of the respondents who reported regular discussions on the phenomenon of misinformation in newsrooms, it appears that the discussions are most common in newspapers and TV with 9 out of 10 respondents from newspapers and TV saying that discussions on misinformation are regularly happening in their newsrooms. Even from digital newsrooms, 8 out of 10 respondents said that they regularly discuss misinformation. While there is a small difference in the percentage of respondents from different mediums who reported regular discussions on misinformation, the difference is minimal and it appears that these discussions are common place regardless of the medium. The fact that there is regular interaction between editors and reporters on this theme is a positive sign.

Discussions on misinformation appear to be common across all newsrooms regardless of the news medium
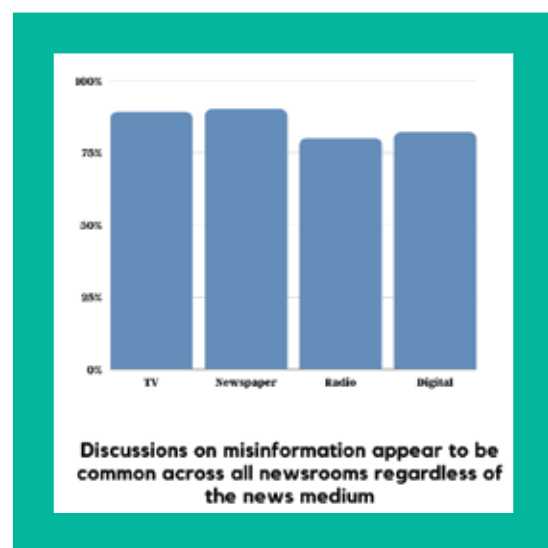
Fact Checking

77% Claim that they fact check information shared by public figures and government officials
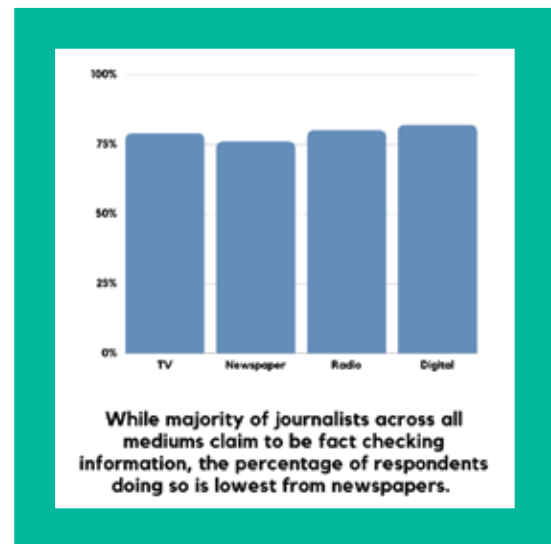
Practices & Processes

Highlights

- As many as 77% of the respondents said that they fact- check statements made by public figures and government officials.

- 81% of the respondents claimed that there were formal editorial guidelines in their organisations on fact checking

- 87% of the journalists who participated in the survey said that their editors and gatekeepers regularly inquire about verification of the news stories that they submit

Details

A significant majority, 77% i.e. almost 8 out of 10 journalists claimed that they fact- check statements made by public figures and government officials. The trend was the same across all the regions in which the survey was conducted, with the majority of respondents in each region saying that they fact check claims made by public figures. The highest ratio of respondents who fact checked this information was from Balochistan, where all of the respondents said that they did fact check claims, while the lowest ratio was from Islamabad with only 64% of the respondents claiming that they fact checked information shared by public figures.

Disaggregating the responses according to the medium, it appears that the trend of fact- checking official statements is most prevalent in digital newsrooms, where 82% of the respondents said that they fact check. Interestingly, 1 in 3 respondents from newspapers said that they did not fact check statements by a public figure. This is an interesting finding as newspapers traditionally have the longest news production cycles and do not work under the pressure of 'breaking news', thus reporters from newspapers actually have more opportunity and time to fact check than reporters working for other news mediums.

While majority of journalists across all mediums claim to be fact checking information, the percentage of respondents doing so is lowest from newspapers.

While the number of overall respondents who say they fact check is encouraging, there is a paradox that must be mentioned. A look at newspaper, TV, and digital content does not show any indication of regular fact checking of claims made by political figures, unless there is already a controversy around it. Most news bulletins air contradictory claims by opposing political parties without offering any additional insight to the news audience about the authenticity of the claims being made. This contradiction between the responses and what appears on news media may be a result of a lack of understanding about fact checking itself; it may be that journalists believe that ensuring that they attribute claims correctly to public figures or government officials counts as fact checking.

In the previous section of the survey there were various responses that talked about 'correct attributions'. It appears that a number of respondents link attribution to verification; thus, 'fact- checking' may simply be seen as checking if a particular government official or public figure had actually made a certain claim rather than checking if the claim made was accurate and reflective of the truth.

Does your newsroom have formal editorial guidelines regarding fact checking?

Another question in this section dealt with the presence of formal editorial guidelines on fact- checking. Among all the respondents, 8 out of 10 journalists claimed that they had formal editorial guidelines in their newsrooms.

However, 6 out of 10 respondents from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said that there were no formal editorial guidelines in their newsrooms. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was an outlier among other regions in this aspect as the
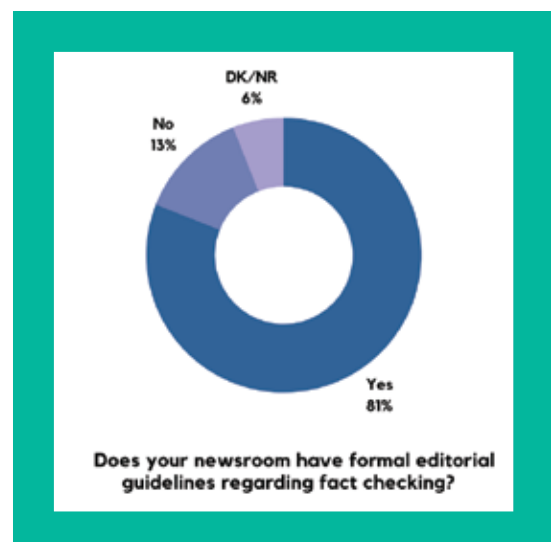
majority of respondents from every other region said that they did have formal guidelines.

> **On formal guidelines…**
> While majority of survey respondents claim that there are formal editorial guidelines in newsrooms, majority of editors interviewd for the research, say guidelines are given to individuals based on their history and performance.

This claim, made by respondents, was largely contradicted by the key respondents, editors, and gatekeepers in charge of newsrooms. Only 3 out of 10 interviewees said that their newsrooms had formal fact- checking guidelines, while 70% said that the fact-checking process depended on 'who was filing the news' i.e. editors tend to go by history and reputation when checking news stories rather than applying the same standards and procedures to every story. This contradiction in the expert opinion versus the findings of the survey can be reflective of a lack of understanding about

the nature of 'formal editorial guidelines' or may be an indication of a response bias with respondents choosing an option which they think is the 'correct' and more desirable one.

Another possible explanation for this contradiction may be in the response to another question; 87% of the respondents said that their editors and gatekeepers regularly ask about verification of information and facts. It may be that this verification by editors themselves and any inputs offered during the editorial process may be perceived as 'formal editorial guidelines'.
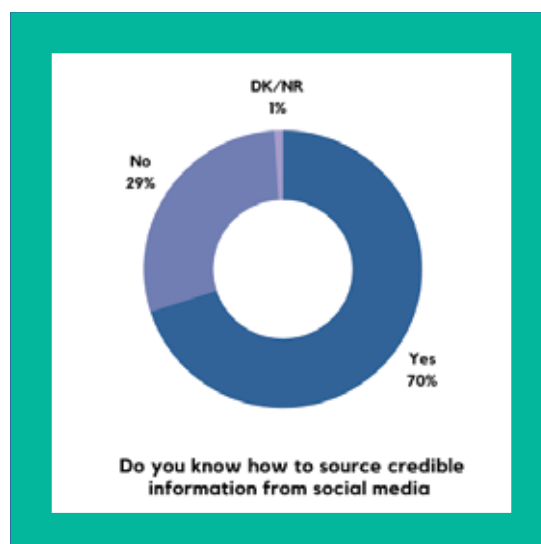
Expertise

Highlights

- 3 in 10 of the respondents said that they do not know how to source credible information from social media

- 3 in 10 journalists who took part in the survey do not know how to check the authenticity of digital images and videos

- 35% of respondents have not received any kind of formal training on fact- checking; 56% of the women respondents have not received any formal training

Details

The expertise section of the survey sought to assess how journalists perceived their own skills to verify, fact check, and source credible information. A question about the ability to source credible information from the Internet found that 3 out of 10 respondents do not know how to source information that is credible.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 53% said that they did not know how to source credible information.

DK/NR 1%

No 29%

Yes 70%

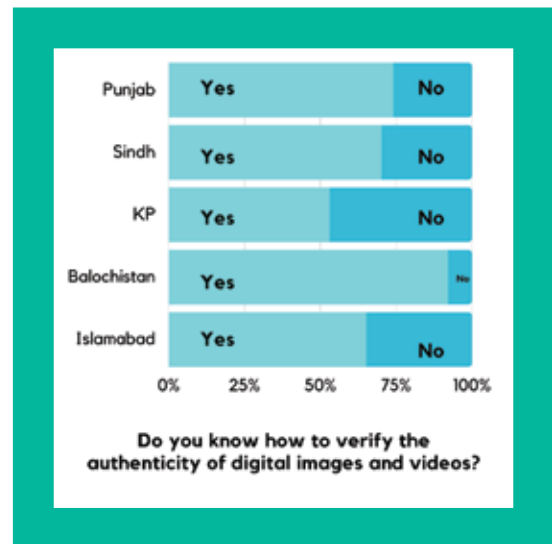**Do you know how to source credible information from social media**

The majority of respondents said that they knew how to check authenticity of multimedia content like digital images and videos. Only 3 out of 10 journalists said that they did not know how to check images and videos for authentication. Like the previous question, respondents from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa appeared to have the least expertise in verifying multimedia content with 47% of respondents saying that they did not have the skills to authenticate images and videos.

Around 4 out of 10 journalists who took the survey (46%) have never received any formal training on fact-checking content. The majority of women respondents i.e. 56% have not received any training while only 35% of the men respondents have not received any training.

Do you know how to verify the authenticity of digital images and videos?

Respondents were also asked about the kinds of training and capacity building interventions they may be interested in. One in three respondents said that training on news verification is most important and that this training should be done by some 'NGO', while 7% of the respondents said that senior journalists should conduct training sessions on news verification. A senior correspondent from Peshawar said that "technical training on social media is the need of the day as misinformation is mostly taken from social media. Usually, inauthentic news is published and broadcast on social media, especially through Facebook and Twitter". Other respondents talked about raising awareness on misinformation through workshops and seminars and holistic trainings on the digital world and digitisation.

Impact

Highlights

- 45% of the respondents have faced public accusations of and harassment for spreading misinformation

- Almost 90% of journalists believe that misinformation has had an impact on public trust in media, **with 11 in 4 respondents saying that it has led to people losing trust in media.**

- 9 in 10 of the respondents claimed that they have become more vigilant about fact checking due to public accusations about the media's role in spreading misinformation

Details

A significant number of respondents have faced harassment and public accusations of spreading 'fake news'. Respondents from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa appear to be the most common recipientstargets of such accusations and harassment, with 67% of them saying they have been harassed.

The survey results show that journalists associated with TV are most likely to face these accusations (48% respondents), while journalists from radio are least likely to face these accusations (20% respondents).

Almost 9 in 10 journalists believe that misinformation has negatively impacted the public's trust in news media. Discussing the impact, respondents described the impact of misinformation as 'huge' and said that 'trust has been lowered'. Several journalists claimed that social media has caused this decline in the image of the media.

"

Increase in trust defecit

9 in10

Respondents believe that misinformation has negatively impacted public trust in news media.

A reporter from Islamabad said that "the credibility of the media has been questioned many times due to fake news. The agenda based and biased information affects the value of journalism". Bias and 'agendas' in news content was mentioned by various respondents. This shows that journalists believe that the media industry itself has also been guilty of disseminating misinformation. Around 10% of the respondents referred to various factors that are linked to non-professionalism within the industry. 'Yellow journalism', 'personal agendas and interests of journalists', 'focus on ratings and rankings', 'increased corruption', 'lack of professionalism', 'involvement of various institutions in journalism' and 'blackmailing' were mentioned as factors that affect the quality of content on news media, create an environment where media becomes involved in disseminating misinformation and further loses the trust of the public.

The negative impact of misinformation on the news industry is obvious, but there is also a silver lining. When asked if facing public accusations of spreading misinformation has affected their own work process, 9 out of 10 respondents said that they had become more vigilant about fact checking information and sources before publication.

CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The questionnaire for the in depth interviews were semi structured, customised to best reflect the expertise of each respondent. The interviews also included editors and editorial staff.addit This section presents the key findings of the research survey.

Verification Guidelines and Sourcing

- Only 3 of the 10 interviewees said they had written guidelines in their newsrooms. Of those 3, one newsroom was in the process of developing guidelines. One participant said guidelines were shared with editors on the desk. The third was from an international organisation and said the guidelines followed were required for all bureaus across the world.

- All editors expressed the idea that the process of verification and fact- checking are and had always been integral to journalism. The concept or the idea was not new. However, the use of digital mediums requires the process to be a lot faster than it is now.

Reporters Matter

- Almost all editors agreed that the fact- checking process, where it was not formalised and written guidelines did not exist, depended greatly on the reporter filing the news.

- All editors spoke about reporters who were more responsible in their reporting, had sources that are more reliable, and reporters whose stories "bounced" often. They differentiated between these reporters by saying that as an editor they were well aware of the quality of the work different reporters produce, and so how much a story and its sources are vetted depends greatly on the past performance of the reporters.

- They also said that while a reporter's performance was judged on how accurately they reported on the news and whether the information they provided was factually correct, there was little training provided to them on reporting or verification procedures.

- This was especially true for editors dealing with breaking news, where it might be considered important to be the first news outlet to report something. They said if the reporter was reliable, they would run the story without cross checking to ensure that it immediately gets out there.

- This differs for stories that are thought to be politically controversial in some way or contain serious allegations about individuals. The level of fact- checking and editorial levels the story goes through differed with each newsroom, but there was an informal unwritten process put in place to verify the sources of information from the reporter.

Social Media: The Great Evil?

- All editors expressed concern about sourcing stories only from social media and said that the trend of having stories sourced only from websites such as Twitter had declined significantly.

- They also said they asked their teams to double-check the information they were receiving and also the authenticity of the accounts sharing that information. They also said that if the verified Twitter account of a politician, one they knew to be real, tweeted out important information they would run it.

- Editors whose newsrooms do not directly deal with breaking news said they should not try to use information shared on social media without verifying it independently. Those who do deal with breaking news said the verification process differed depending on the story but they did not use information shared only by one person or source without it being verified by other individuals either on social media platforms owned by the organisations or their own independent accounts.

Accusations of 'Fake News'

- All editors felt that accusations, specifically on social media, and the way that journalists were attacked had not only made them more vigilant but also fearful of putting out information.
  They said that the accusations were used largely to discredit information as untrue, and there was little discussion on evidence or facts.

- The editors were also unanimous in saying that they felt this narrative had a huge impact on the way the public viewed the work being done by reporters. The audience, specifically on social media, is less forgiving of mistakes made by news organisations.

- Editors dealing directly with breaking news situations agreed that they did not have the required staff in newsrooms to run effective real time fact checks on information coming in and also break news before other organisations so mistakes could be made. Two editors said that in television or on the web desk, news was at times pulled off air or figures were changed as new information was received, which was in a way fact checking with the limited resources they were working with.

- Editors also specifically mentioned that at times, official sources would give information but then change their stance or deny the comments given which could not be attributed to the reporters or be called misinformation or disinformation, because they were reporting accurately on the information they had.

- One editor specifically mentioned that often when verifying government notifications or other information, attempts to find the source of the activity proved to be a futile exercise because of the lack of public data and information available. They said it was as simple as not being able to verify and cross-check basic things such as which bureaucrat in a government office has the authority to issue a stamped notification.

Skeleton Staff

- All editors spoke of limited human resources and said this was a major hindrance in properly verifying and fact checking news because they simply did not have people available to handle the workload.

- One editor specifically mentioned that on joining their organisation they had initially asked reporters to send in audio recordings. One story would be read and seen by at least 3 sub-editors which acted as quality control in terms of verifying and fact checking information. But with staff being laid off, this had become difficult. Reporters were also underpaid and did not want to make the extra effort, since this was not an activity they were used to doing regularly.

So What is Misinformation?

- The editors themselves understood the larger conversation around the information ecosystem, referring to social media as something that accelerated the spread of misinformation and changed the amount of information that had to be verified or fact- checked but also believed that it was no different from the work that journalists had already been doing in the past.

- In terms of larger newsrooms and reporters on the ground, they said that most of them understood 'misinformation' as mistakes that were made in reporting or sometimes understood it to mean the way stories were "angled" or framed.

- They said that there was a limited understanding of what misinformation and the larger information ecosystem was. At the same time, they said that through the intervention of international organisations and conversations within their own newsrooms, prompted by accusations of 'fake news', these discussions were beginning to take place.

- However, all editors said that the conversation was not adequate in various ways. Some pointed to the press following better internal procedures while others felt that there was not enough understanding and responsibility on the larger information ecosystem outside the control of the media or journalists.

CHAPTER 6
ANALYSIS

There is a clear contradiction between how editors, and those in positions of power in newsrooms, view their understanding of the information ecosystem and misinformation, and the way surveyed reporters understand it. The editors had a much lower confidence level in the reporters and their newsroom's capacity to verify and fact- check news. The most obvious difference though is that none of the editors from mainstream Pakistan-based news organisations said that they had written verification and fact- checking guidelines while 81 percent of reporters surveyed said that their organisation did have written guidelines.

This discrepancy could be attributed to various reasons, which would require further research. But in the interviews with editors, it was found that even where written guidelines did exist, these were not shared with reporters – thus theso reporters cannot claim that they are given clear written guidelines from their organisations. However, the editors said reporters are questioned about the information they are giving in their stories. It is not that the stories are run without any editorial oversight, which for reporters who do not interact closely with the desk could imply the existence of written guidelines.

Through the interviews with editors it was also apparent that while all editors agreed that information shared through news media should be verified and fact- checked, the responsibility they were willing to accept for misinformation differed greatly with how they saw themselves in the larger information ecosystem. Editors dealing with breaking news situations said that mistakes could be made and were made during a constantly evolving incident or situation that was being reported on. They thought their primary role was to put out information as fast as they were getting it. In other organisations, where editors made it clear that they did not deal with breaking news, there was a greater stress on verifying, cross- checking and double sourcing information. At the same time, the onus of this activity in all newsrooms regardless of their place or role within the media in Pakistan, liesrelied entirely withon their sub-editors and editors – to fact- check and verify all types of information they were receiving from social media or reporters.

The information coming from social media or that coming from reporters, even if similar, requires a very different verification process. Information coming from reporters can be verified with more traditional methods, such as multiple sourcing, backing it up with documents, or simply asking for audio recordings. Information shared digitally, however, requires a more thorough online searchsearch online to locate the source of information, studying for clues in images to check for manipulation, or using metadata to corroborate locationgeographical attributes, among other techniques. Deep fakes require another level of expertise.

Unlike the reporters who took part in the survey as respondentssurveyed, editors did not believe this expertise existed in their newsroom. They recognised that digital verification requires consistent practice of specific tools, keeping up to date with different types of content being created, and how such content could be fact checked. All editors understood that social media had changed in some way how people interact and share information. One editor spoke of WhatsApp forwards, and identified it as a primary source for spreading misinformation, ultimately saying that the media could do little to challenge or counter the sheer amount of misinformation shared there.

This was a primary concern across the board. Editors ultimately thought that it would be impossible to try and control the narratives onsocial media or the information being shared and did not think of their role as "gatekeepers of truth" in the same way as the western media does, where it became a primary branding

concern such as with The New York Times. They seemed to view their roles in a more limited capacity in terms of actual impact on the misinformation and disinformation shared in the larger communications ecosystem.

One major reason for this is clearly the lack of resources in terms of staff but also training opportunities that Pakistani newsrooms have. All of them spoke of how processes of verification and fact checking, in more traditional ways of cross-checking with reporters, had been more robust a few years ago when they had more desk editors. It was also clear that editors thought that they could not be both accurate and quick in publishing and so they chose one based on the editorial guidelines of their organisations.

CHAPTER 7
RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for media development organisations

- There is a significant need to develop training and modules that take into account the reduced resources that media houses and newsrooms are working with.

- Initiatives that can help decrease the workload of newsrooms by simply fact checking and verifying digital material such as pictures and videos being shared on social media, can work adjacent to news organisations.

- Digital verification techniques and tools are constantly changing, and so it is important to create updated material in regional languages that reflects this.

Recommendations for media houses and journalists

- Creation of written guidelines in newsrooms is an important step to take towards verification, especially when sourcing content from social media.

- The culture in newsrooms, especially those dealing with breaking news, is largely news first correction later. Ultimately, there has to be a shift in this culture.

Recommendations for further research

Further research themes that this study suggests include:

- Assessment of the effectiveness of newsrooms' fact check and verification procedures

- Content analysis to ascertain the media's role in disseminating misinformation

- Assessment of technical skills of journalists

- Research on public perception of news media, specifically with regards to its role in challenging and disseminating misinformation

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GLOSSARY

AFP - Agence France-Presse
BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation
DRF - Digital Rights Foundation
FNF - Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom
MMfD - Media Matters for Democracy

About MMFD:

Media Matters for Democracy (MMFD) is Pakistan's leading media development organisation, with a focus on digital democracy, Internet rights and governance, and Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

The main premise of our work is push for a truly independent, inclusive media and cyberspace, where the citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.