Analyzing the Role of Community Radio in Countering Misinformation at Grassroot Level

Developing Rural Ecosystem Against Misinformation (DREAM) Project Report

Covid19 Digital Emergency Relief Program 2.0

Cover page photo and the photos on this page - description

Poonam Khedla, an information entrepreneur from Alwar, Rajasthan, in India, creating awareness among women on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID 19 appropriate behaviors.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

ANALYZING THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN COUNTERING
MISINFORMATION AT GRASSROOT LEVEL

Developing Rural Ecosystem Against Misinformation (DREAM) Project Report

October 2021

Author: **Tarun Pratap**
Data Analysis: **Tarun Pratap**
Editor and   Reviewer: **Osama Manzar**
Design and Layout:
Year of Publication: **2021**

You can read the online copy at www.defindia.org/publication-2

Published and Distributed by: Digital Empowerment Foundation

Email: def@defindia.net | URL: www.defindia.org

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

About the Report

Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in collaboration with Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in order to counter the misinformation, through its project **Developing Rural Ecosystem Against Misinformation (DREAM)** developed a pilot based on a hyper-local fact-checking initiative rooted in community level interventions through Community Radio Stations (CRSs) and digital Community Information Resource Centers (dCIRCs). The project used Community Radios (CRs) as a tool to reach the larger community. Community Radios as institutions have a mandate to serve the information needs of the community and can be potential stakeholders in dealing with unintended consequences of an information dense ecosystem and increase penetration and adoption of mobile phones, internet, and social media platforms like WhatsApp. This report talks about the project in detail and its impact on the ground.

Misinformation Landscape

Twenty-first century is defined by the rapid flow of information, the Internet becoming a norm and a necessity which has enabled the people across the world to be connected and possess information more than ever. This development comes with a downside which is the phenomenon of misinformation.

Misinformation is information that is factually incorrect to a different degree, intentionally or otherwise. The purpose of misinformation can be varied depending on the context. The arrival of the Internet and social media has expanded the horizon and the possibilities for the spread of both information and misinformation. One can define misinformation as a kind of information that is misleading in nature and is communicated with or without the intention to deceive.[1]

Social media and the internet in general have the capacity to be an echo chamber and hence has the potential to spread misinformation faster before eventually clearing out. The damage inflicted in this period can range from nothing to devastating. The pandemic amplified the importance of the internet and digital wave in human life. The lockdown put due to the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 forced people to confine to their homes.[2] This invariably increased their reliance on digital sources, tools and platforms for connecting with friends and family, gathering news and scientific development in the field of Covid-19.[3] The lack of physical movement in the lockdown has made people and governments understand the urgency of adaptation to the digital platforms if they had any reservation left. Increased use of the internet combined with the fear of the unknown in the pandemic created more space for the misinformation to travel. India was one of the countries; worst hit by the pandemic especially in the second wave.[4]

The raging pandemic intensified the misinfodemic as well. Misinformation ranging from adverse impact of Covid-19 vaccines, home remedies to blaming certain countries and communities for the spread of the virus was all over the internet. The impact of misinformation on Indian society is worsening and it is being witnessed through the cases of violence on ground because of the offline misinformation. The misinformation has been a

---

[1] Lazer, D, et al. (2018). "The science of fake news". Science. 359 (6380):

[2] India Today Web Desk. (2021). Lockdown in Delhi till April 26, health system may collapse with daily 25,000 Covid cases, says CM Kejriwal. India Today. Retrieved from https://www.indiatoday.in/cities/delhi/story/lockdown-in-delhi-till-april-26-health-system-may-collapse-kejriwal-1792519-2021-04-19

[3] Koeze, E. & Popper, N. (2020). The Virus Changed the Way We Internet. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html

[4] Bhowmick, N. (2021). How India's second wave became the worst COVID-19 surge in the world. The National Geographic. Retrieved from https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/how-indias-second-wave-became-the-worst-covid-19-surge-in-the-world

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

catalyst in numerous cases of mob lynching around the country[5] and in the time of pandemic, there was misinformation about the availability of medical support such as life saving medicines and oxygen beds.[6] There were even cases of people being duped in the name of medical support. Misinformation has become a political tool as well and is used often by the political leaders and parties. During the pandemic there was repeated misinformation in the form of medical advice openly given by political leaders such as that consuming cow urine will save from the virus.[7] In this context countering misinformation is realistically one of the biggest challenges.

---

[5] The Wire Staff. (2019). Mob Lynchings: What Kind of WhatsApp Users and Groups Spread Fake News? The Wire. Retrieved from https://thewire.in/communalism/mob-lynchings-whatsapp-fake-news

[6] Staff Reporter. (2021). Police arrest man over oxygen cylinder scam. The Hindu. Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/police-arrest-man-over-oxygen-cylinder-scam/article34574298.ece

[7] HT Correspondent. (2021). Drink cow urine to prevent Covid: BJP MP Pragya Thakur; experts reject remark. Hindustan Times. Retrieved from https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/drink-cow-urine-to-prevent-covid-bjp-mp-pragya-thakur-experts-reject-remark-101621298599190.html

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Role of CR in society

CR as known is the most local form of radio broadcasting; focusing and broadcasting out for specific geographic locations such as a university campus or a village.CR is a perfect example of decentralized democracy in the sense that it is run by the locals and usually covers the issues concerning their localities. It becomes an important tool in the hands of a community especially the ones living on the periphery. Moreover, these radios provide people with a platform to voice and gather important information.

Since 2006, Government of India has given permission to NGOs and civil society organisations to operate and own CRs.[8] There are several benefits of CRs, firstly the programmes are in the local language which makes it easier for the local community to understand and secondly, the issues raised in the programme are very context specific, dealing with those particular people who are from the community itself.

During Covid-19, CRs became a very important tool for disseminating critical yet important and relevant information, because of the inherent closeness and connections of them directly to the community. The potential of CRs in tackling misinformation is something that is not fully realized yet, but it can make an important difference to the fight against the problems of misinformation.

---

[8] "Indian Ministry of Broadcasting—Community Radio Stations". (2018). Archived from the original on 2011-12-20.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

About the project and debate on IT guidelines and intermediaries' responsibility to curb misinformation

Over the past years India has seen some of the most adverse fallouts of online misinformation whether it is the form of offline violence, social panic, or targeted campaigns of harassment. The problems of misinformation in a complex and diverse society like India might be "more sophisticated and more challenging than they are in the West". The years 2017 and 2018 saw an alarming rise in mob violence pan-India fuelled by rumours circulated via social media and end-to-end messaging platforms driven by the high penetration of WhatsApp in the country. Fact-checking and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) have emerged as potential strategies for countering misinformation.

However, learnings from DEF's implementation of MIL with local stakeholders have shown that sensitization and tools to counter misinformation are yet to reach the community in a way that can make them resilient to misinformation. This requires a sustained approach that is rooted in the community practices and is able to respond to the recurring social dynamics that misinformation harnesses on to. Further, online fact-checking initiatives operate at the national level and are unable to respond to the hyper-local content cycle which is more directly linked to offline violence. In response to this, DEF in collaboration with APC, through its project **Developing Rural Ecosystem Against Misinformation (DREAM)** developed pilot 5 hyper-local fact-checking initiatives rooted in CRSs. The project used CRs as a tool to reach the larger community, as these institutions have a mandate to serve the information needs of the community and can be potential stakeholders in dealing with unintended consequences of an information, dense ecosystem and increase penetration and adoption of mobile phones, internet, and social media platforms like WhatsApp.

In order to counter the rising misinformation, the Indian Government unveiled new guidelines earlier this year for the social media intermediaries.[9] The guidelines have allowed the government to get access to private data and force social media companies like WhatsApp to break their encryption which keeps a user's data safe and private.[10] The new guidelines are claiming to be an answer against the misinformation but they seem more to be a new method of surveillance.[11] The increase in government's power without accountability does not solve the problem of intended misinformation on social media application. It is evident that large parts of dangerous misinformation in the country are political misinformation which travels with ill intentions and specific purpose; resulting in violence, hate crimes or other disturbing activities.

Through this project, we witnessed the various kinds of misinformation people of the community come across in their daily lives and at times passed it on to each other without checking the factuality of them. But looking into what people are typing on social media and

---

[9] Pratap, T. & Alam, S. (2021). The New IT GuidelinesPrivacy censored. Digital Empowerment Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IT-Guidelines-2021_6-May-2021.pdf
[10] Ibid
[11] Ibid

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

then punishing them and social media for it is not the answer. It is visible that most misinformation can be cleared out with fact checking and providing people capability to do that at the initial level. Often people do have doubts over any information that looks out of the ordinary but it is the lack of fact checking support that diminishes their curiosity about the information and they accept it as the norm.

The social experience of Covid – 19 has shown how CRs have re-asserted their importance within the local information ecosystem by providing vital information to underserved communities on how to deal with Covid – 19. The project built the capacity of the 5 local CRs and provided them with active fact-checking services along with creating sensitization and awareness in dealing with misinformation fuelled by prejudice.

The Methodology of the Project

Under the project, a call-in number and a chatbot were developed for the community to report cases of misinformation that they were coming across, which the radio could then respond to in a special program dedicated to countering misinformation content circulating in the community. The chatbot received over 3000 queries in the duration of the project.

The DREAM project had an aim to build capacity and ecosystem at the ground level to fight against the rising tide of misinformation. For this the project worked at three significant levels creating knowledge products that can be used as reference for similar projects against the misinformation.

Module and Toolkit to counter misinformation

For the project, DEF produced two toolkits which were used in training of the CRS workers.

The first toolkit was on **MIL. MIL** is a set of skills that enable a person to access media, analyse media content, create new media messages, reflect on existing media content, and take action with media. This curriculum sought to inculcate in the readers these five skills through a three pronged approach: read, watch, play.

The MIL curriculum created for the project focused on imparting specific knowledge to readers and users like to –

- Understand the role and functions of media in democratic societies
- Critically evaluate media content in the light of media functions
- Engage with media for self-expression and democratic participation

The second toolkit was on Building Community Responsive Fact-Checking. This toolkit was created to train CRs along with the communities to deal with fake news, misinformation and disinformation around them. This toolkit talks about fake news, misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. This can help users in understanding the differences between these and identifying information based on it.

The activities in toolkits were designed to be contextual and participatory in nature. Both the toolkits were created in Hindi and English to widen their reach and be accessible to larger audiences. These toolkits were provided to CRS for their use in making programmes and imparting the knowledge further to their audience.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Training to CRSs

Based on the above module and toolkit we provided active training to CRS managers and workers. This training focused on introducing them to the problem of misinformation, ways to identify and countering the misinformation. The training was participatory in nature and based on activities designed in toolkits. The training was aimed at building capacity of CRS workers to not only use the training but provide the same to their audience through the programmes dealing with the issues relating to misinformation.

Building a Chatbot

Under the project we created a chatbot. It was a WhatsApp number. The admin access of the chatbot was given to each radio station and kept with us. The CRSs were trainedto use the chatbot and then during their programs on misinformation, they urged their audience to use the chatbot to register misinformation that they were witnessing. We received over 3000 queries on the Chatbot. WhatsApp was used to make it easier for the people to be able to send multimedia content, keeping in mind that people receive most information on this application itself. All the queries are saved in their original form in case there is need for further analysis in future and also to use it as reference points for further knowledge products.

Covid-19 and misinformation that surfaced

In the pandemic era, we witnessed various kinds of misinformation that occupied the public sphere. From the beginning of the pandemic, it was religious and racial tone to it in terms of misinformation with blames being put on specific races and communities for the origin and spread of the virus. The origin was blamed on China and because of which North-eastern communities of India faced racist discrimination[12] and then spread of the virus was blamed on Muslims which led to communal behaviour in form of calls for boycott.[13] In an earlier DEF report on the misinformation during covid, the analysis of the data identified five themes under which rumours and misinformation were being circulated.[14]

a. Fake Medical Advice which involved urging people to drink alcohol, as it would prevent the virus from entering the body, or taking steam would kill the virus.[15]

b. Islamophobia gained immense media coverage and gave the pandemic a politico-religious angle. The media channels portrayed Muslims, a minority community in India as the ones spreading the virus. This religious profiling of the diseases led to the wide circulation of Islamophobic fake news. People started boycotting Muslim vegetable vendors, there were fake social media posts of Muslim men spitting on vegetables and currency notes that started making rounds. This even resulted in creation of trending Twitter Hashtags such as #CoronaJihad and #CoronaTerrorism .[16]

c. Food and poultry was another thematic area under which a lot of misinformation and fake news were circulated. There were viral messages which encouraged people to boycott poultry items such as chicken on the false pretext that consuming chicken causes Covid-19. This fake news severely impacted the poultry industry.[17]

d. Blind faith such as keeping fast would keep away the virus or the literary epic Ramayana predicting Coronavirus were widely popular in the first wave of Covid-19.[18]

e. Conspiracy theories of calling Covid-19 a Chinese conspiracy which involved various tweets which said the virus was prepared in Chinese labs and it is a world war conspiracy.[19]

---

[12] Singh, V. (2020). Northeast citizens faced racial discrimination amid COVID-19 outbreak, says govt. study. The Hindu. Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/northeast-citizens-faced-racial-discrimination-amid-covid-19-outbreak-says-govt-study/article34303162.ece

[13] Frayer, L. (2020). Blamed For Coronavirus Outbreak, Muslims In India Come Under Attack. NPR. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2020/04/23/839980029/blamed-for-coronavirus-outbreak-muslims-in-india-come-under-attack

[14] Jha, A. & Pratap, T. (2021). The Second Wave of Covid-19 Misinformation. Digital Empowerment Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.defindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Fakenews-of-covid-19-Report-2021_26-July-2021.pdf

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Categories as per subject (gender/politics/age/vaccination/medical cure)

In total, we received over 3000 queries during the project life cycle. A number of those queries had repetition or spelling errors or were incomprehensible. Such queries were not considered in the course of our analysis. In total, we analyzed 1432 queries. After the first analysis, we divided queries into five categories. The first of those queries were related to taking vaccination and its effects on other diseases. The second category was related to gender based questions related to vaccination. The third category was about the misinformation related to the after-effects of vaccination and general information about vaccination. The next category of queries was related to questions related to age in relation to vaccination. And then there were questions identified which were completely based on misinformation from outset irrespective of being in the other categories.

In the first category, we received 243 queries marking it 16.96 per cent of the total queries selected for the analysis. These queries ranged from questions about whether weak people can take vaccination, if the sugar or blood pressure patients can be vaccinated against the Covid-19, if the people suffering from a serious illness such as HIV and cancer can take the vaccination. There were queries focusing on other diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and diarrhoea.

In the second category, we received 52 queries which were up to almost 4 per cent of the total queries received through the chatbot. The queries mostly focused on, if pregnant women and women during their menstrual cycle could take the vaccination. This was clearly influenced by the ongoing misinformation about the adverse impact of Covid-19 vaccination on women and their health, menstrual cycle, and pregnancy. These questions were important in the social context as often there is hesitancy, lack of space, and agency for women to be able to ask the questions that directly concern them, and their reproductive and sexual health.

In the third category, we received the most queries. More than 33 per cent of the total queries meaning one-third of the queries were received under this category. This category included queries related to the fundamentals of the need of vaccines. Questions such as why vaccination should be taken or how it works are numbered a lot. There were other questions such as what if a person forgets the second dose of vaccination or takes a different vaccination. What will be the duration of doses? One of the main queries most people had was if vaccination had any side effects. A lot of people even believed and asked that they have zero chance of contracting Covid-19 if they take vaccination. Some of the other queries included if a tablet like paracetamol could be taken after the vaccination or what kind of food should be consumed before and after the vaccination.

---

[19] Ibid

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

In the fourth category, we received over three per cent of the queries. This category focused on the queries about the age and its relations and implications of the Covid-19. There were questions such as if the effects of Covid-19 and its vaccine doses differ depending on the age of the patients. One of the most asked queries in this category was 'what is the age limit', lower or upper to take the vaccination. A number of questions were about if there is any vaccination available for children as it is still a work in progress. Similarly, a lot of questions were about if people of 60 and above age could take vaccination and what could be the impact on them.

As mentioned above with these categories, we had one overlapping category which was for questions that were clear misinformation. In total 93 such queries were identified that could be established as misinformation with secondary research or through substantiation from basic news reports and reliable sources. This amounted to 6.49 per cent of the total queries, which might seem low but has to be considered with the fact these queries are based on misinformation which has the capability to hamper the belief of the people leading to outcomes that can have implications for the people. The misinformation queries were of different kinds. Some of the misinformation that we received were :

- If animals can catch Covid-19
- People who consume alcohol never catch Covid-19
- If one catches the virus, consuming alcohol can cure them of the virus
- People die because of vaccination
- Coronavirus is different in a male body from a female body
- Paralysis patients get better because of Covid-19 vaccination
- The pandemic has impact only in summers
- Covid-19 virus dies because of heat and sunlight
- Consuming pork leads to Covid-19
- Covid-19 vaccination makes people impotent
- Why did China send Covid-19 to India
- People are dying because of Covid-19 vaccination

These were just some of the misinformation that were received through the chatbot. Interestingly a number of these were sent in the form of fact rather than a question which shows the strength of belief or credibility of the information in people's minds.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

How the data produced underscores the context of the project

The data received through chatbot shows us how much misinformation travels through social media and is consumed by the general public in a manner that has no counter available to it. The categories of the misinformation that were visible from the secondary research data only underscore the validity of these categories. The misinformation related to vaccination also shows why there was hesitancy among people to get vaccinated.

Almost one-third of the total queries received were about what vaccination really is and what it does. This reflects the lack of information or doubts that common people had in the context of the vaccination. A lack of information can result in hesitancy, scepticism, and misinformation hasthe potential to stop the receiver not only from being vaccinated but also stopping the families and close people from getting the doses. Since the chatbot received queries from rural and semi-rural areas, it also shows before implementing the vaccination program, there was not enough awareness spread among the public regarding the do's and don'ts of vaccination. Perhaps more focus and efforts were required and sustained awareness programmes were needed to clear doubts about the vaccination.

The number of queries that focused on if the vaccination had side effects was relatively high. This again was the result of highlighting misinformation where a rare case of death or other side effects after vaccination was dominating the public sphere and hence the memory of the public as well. This again provides backing to a number of anti-vaccine people to further their argument that vaccination is not an ideal option.

Similarly, there were queries that were based on misinformation which were conspiracy theories such as that the virus was created and sent on purpose from China as some sort of biological warfare. This was extremely serious misinformation as it has consequences leading to incidents of racism against people of different communities considered close to Chinese identity.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Conclusion

The pandemic was a tough proposition to deal with at all levels from human to the administrative. The impact of misinformation on pandemic only amplified the worst of it and vice versa, through pictures, bad news and factually incorrect information. This project has given a practical example of the theoretical argument behind the issues of misinformation in India. The prevalence of misinformation in daily life of the common public is more than ever because of social media and its ability to spread information across without editorial fear. India has already seen some incidents of extreme consequences of misinformation when it resulted in mass violence like lynching.

This project showed relevancy first of all how much misinformation is part of the ecosystem of a normal person's daily life. Secondly the project outlined the importance of the CR station because of the positive impact it can create on the audience at the local level. Thirdly, the project helped in identifying different types of misinformation that were prevalent at the peak of the second wave of pandemic in India. These important findings point to the gravity of the situation where the phenomena of misinformation cannot be underestimated and needs countering at a robust level.

Recommendations

There needs to be recognition of CR as a legitimate source of information for its audience.

There should be focused robust capacity building of CRS workers to become a proper source of information.

There needs to be resources and capacity building to counter misinformation among the CR in form of fact checking.

There should be encouragement for more programs on CR that deal with misinformation.

ANNEXURE

Some glimpses of the ground activities of the use of chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news

Poonam Khedla, a Soochnapreneur from Alwar, Rajasthan, creating awareness among women on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID 19 appropriate behaviors.
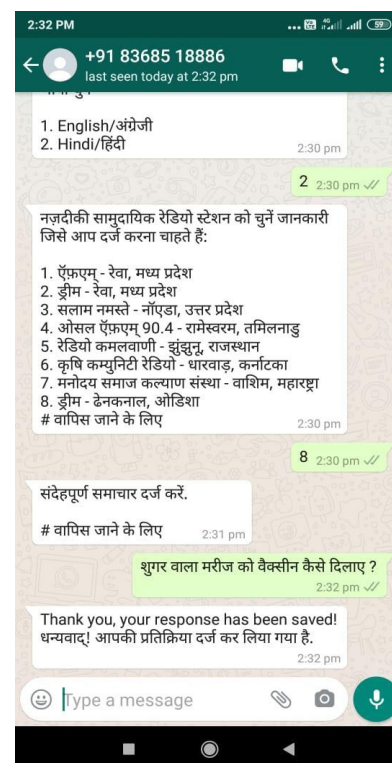

Madhuri Gautam, Sidhi, Madhya Pradesh creating awareness among the community on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID 19 vaccination.
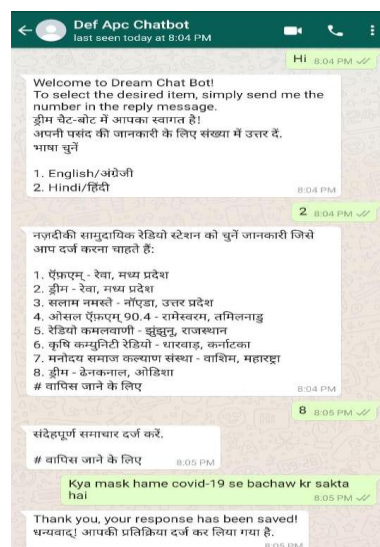
Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Fulwanti Devi, a Soochnapreneur from West Champaran, Bihar, creating awareness among women on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID sensitive health.

Neha Kumari, a Soochnapreneur from Ranchi, Jharkhand, creating awareness among girls and women on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID sensitive health and Covid sensitive nutrition.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Jyoti Singh, Panna, Madhya Pradesh creating awareness among the community on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID 19 vaccination.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level

Madhuri Gautam, Sidhi, Madhya Pradesh creating awareness among the community on using chatbot as a tool to demystify the misinformation and fake news on COVID 19 vaccination.

Analyzing the role of Community Radio in countering misinformation at grassroot level