

From Social Media to Global Misinformation: The Role of Citizen Journalism and Photojournalism in the Spread of False News Amid the Bangladesh Crisis: A Case Analysis

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Abstract

In this digital age, social media platforms—particularly Facebook and X, the old Twitter—have emerged as the main venues for citizen journalism and photojournalism, particularly in times of crisis like the upheaval in Bangladesh. Social media facilitates real-time recordkeeping, but it also makes it simple to spread misinformation and fake news. During the Bangladesh crisis, the research used citizen-generated digital photographs and videos to dissect how false narratives were spread, echo chambers developed, and disinformation spread throughout the globe with a communal angle leading to the creating of dynamo effect of misinformation and polarization. This highlights the amplification of false information within online networks, which heightens social tensions, and is known as the "dynamo effect." According to the research, ethical standards for digital journalism activities that aid in the dissemination of false information are necessary.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Photo Journalism, Echo Chamber, Viral Content

Introduction

In the current digital era, disinformation is a major global issue in every civilisation. The rapid dissemination of disinformation on social media platforms has altered not only the general landscape of news production and consumption but also public opinion, media confidence, and democratic processes at a far deeper level. The majority of observers agree that disinformation, misinformation, and fake news have become much more common during the last ten years (Benkler et al., Citation2018; Kavanagh & Rich, Citation2018; O'Connor & Weatherall, Citation2019), despite the fact that history demonstrates that inaccurate and deceptive data is not something new (Kapantai et al., Citation2021; Ortoleva, Citation2019). Because of the anonymity and ease of access provided by digital platforms, fake news—defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the "deliberate spread of false or misleading information presented as legitimate news"—has become more prevalent (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In contrast to established media outlets, which are typically constrained by editorial guidelines and ethical norms, social media lacks thorough processes for fact-checking content before it is shared and published. Stories that are completely made up or unconfirmed are widely circulated because so many actors, from organised groups with financial or political motivations to lone content creators, have been used to influence this missing link (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

False reporting, albeit connected in many ways, can be defined as the deliberate or careless dissemination of false information about the facts under investigation through any media outlet or other person. This could be the result of source manipulation, reporter bias, or a desire to break a story first. When it comes to traditional media, misinformation can have major consequences like character assassination, public panic, or even a hold on the political system. But when this occurs on social media, with its viral nature, the consequences are massive, spreading its impact over vast audiences in a matter of minutes and establishing enduring opinions in the public consciousness.

Photojournalism and its ethical dilemmas

With its ability to capture moments of truth and visually represent complex narratives, photojournalism has long been a powerful tool for storytelling. However, there are now significant ethical challenges due to new technology in the digital age, especially when it comes to photo editing. The simplicity with which a picture can be altered raises important questions regarding the objectivity of news reports that use visual media. Apart from side-tracking the media's trust, this approach also puts in jeopardy the public's faith in journalism at large (Newton, 2009). The ease of photo editing software has blurred the line between authentic photojournalism and digitally altered images more and more, thus making it hard for viewers to determine between fact and fantasy (Frosh, 2003).

An overview of Bangladesh's democratic crisis

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned on August 5th, following a month of widespread protests against her government's increasingly authoritarian leadership. Thousands of demonstrators had besieged her mansion in the capital city of Dhaka. Hasina then departed the country, seeking safety in neighbouring India. Although it had appeared for some weeks that Hasina would be removed from office, she battled tenaciously and violently to stay in her position. Around 440 people were murdered in all when state troops attempted to put an end to the unrest, the vast majority of them were demonstrators. Early in July, students in Bangladesh started protesting against the reinstatement of contentious hiring limits for government positions. The movement began in the midst of popular dissatisfaction with Hasina's government, which had mismanaged the economy and had become more authoritarian over its fifteen years in office (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The democratic unrest led to surge of reports and news that fled the traditional as well as social media where people were concerned about the life of Hindus and Muslims and their distress. The social media took a platform for these reports which were rapidly spread over, the question was whether these news true or manipulated in nature?

The spread of mis information is not new. The public's interests are now seriously threatened by the dissemination of false information on social media. During the COVID-19 epidemic, for instance, a number of instances involving public health issues resulted from false information shared on social media. (Muhammed T Mathew, 2022)

According to Lazer et al. (2017)- Information disorders, such as misinformation and fake news—which are defined as false or misleading information—coexist with disinformation, which is defined as false information that is purposefully spread to deceive people, either way, connectivity and online platforms that facilitate communication and information transmission in situations where time and place are no longer limits are to blame for the increase in fake news. They also make it easier to disseminate misleading information that affects our day-to-day lives. Fake news articles are made up on the spot. Millions of

people watch them on the internet and give them a lot of attention. Politicians utilise them especially during election seasons in the US, Canada, UK, China, and other countries (Sadiku, Matthew & Eze, Tochukwu & Musa, Sarhan, 2018). Comprehending the acceptance and dissemination of false information can be complex and may involve psychological or mental ramifications (Scheibenzuber et al. 2022).

One of the most important media for news communication is photojournalism, which gives textual texts a visual component. Since photos may easily be utilised to frame societal discourses and impact public perception, news creation requires that photos are true. In that instance, given the prevalence of photo manipulation in journalism due to computer editing or simple selective framing, ethical problems are particularly salient, particularly when it comes to matters pertaining to news credibility (Fahmy, 2017). Experts have mentioned photojournalism's contribution to credibility development. "Photographs are viewed as unbiased evidence, therefore legitimising the narratives on which they accompany," (Newton (2001). There is a "crisis of credibility" in journalism as a result of picture editing, which undermines this supposed objectivity. Campbell (2014). The hazards connected with photo editing have expanded with the advent of the digital age. It can be somewhat challenging to distinguish between a real photograph and one that has been altered in some cases due to the abundance of user-generated content and simple editing tools (Zhang & Fahmy, 2009). This problem is made worse by the social media environment, where edited photos have the potential to become viral and quickly disseminate false information to many individuals (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

The manipulation of photos has ethical implications in general, therefore the problem goes beyond the decline in public confidence in the media. These altered photos reinforce harmful stereotypes and biases because they frequently confirm preconceived beliefs about specific groups of individuals rather than dispelling them (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). This is especially problematic for conflict reporting since skewed or altered photos have the potential to escalate tensions and stir up discontent (Allan, 2013).

Materials and methods used

The researcher gathered news stories from the Indian fact-checking website Alt News (<http://altnews.in>) from the recent published reports in order to examine the data on fake news. It was specifically picked because of three things: (a) broad acceptability and credibility; (b) systematic procedures for fact-checking; and (c) well-organised data. Professional journalists and media specialists run Alt News, which is a branch of the nonprofit Pravda Media Foundation. Additionally, this website has been accredited by the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

The main objectives of the paper were to understand-

- The extent to which social media facilitated the dissemination of fabricated or altered images amid the turmoil in Bangladesh.
- The part photojournalism and citizen journalism had in shaping public opinion in Bangladesh during times of social and political unrest.

Three cases were filtered with the key word Fake news and Bangladesh were obtained and studied to unveil whether the claims were true or manipulated, for this Google reverse image process, internet search using different search filters like date and time and linked news were dated and referred back to understand the origin of the news and how it was manipulated and presented in the social. Further more some tweets relevant to specific cases were also scrutinized in order to understand how social networking sites fuels this fake information and reaches the mass at a rapid pace.

Results and Findings

CASE 1

Hindu minorities in Bangladesh are reportedly being targeted in a number of locations amid the turmoil that has ensued since former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned on Monday, August 5. In this context, a video has gone viral featuring a woman with tape covering her lips and her arms and legs bound. The woman in the video appears to have been targeted because she is a Hindu in Bangladesh, according to users who have reposted it.

A report published on 7th August 2024 on News18 which shows as



(image source- <https://archive.ph/1MQ2h>)

In a report regarding the video, News 18 Hindi stated that the girl in the clip was a Hindu. The report's title was "यह वीडियो आपको देगा झकझोर..." अेडिऔ हांग्लादेम में हिंदू हयकी के साथ क्या हो मब्रमड्ड हो मज़ा है... मुस्लिम देशों में अल्पसंख्यक होना क्या गुनाह है? (Translation: You will be shocked by this video.) Take a look at the Hindu girl in Bangladesh. Is it illegal to belong to a minority group in Muslim nations?) Later, the article was removed.

Tweets after this clip was extensively shared with a communal angle.

Propaganda handle on the right The video was posted with the same assertion by Sanjay Dicit's Jaipur Dialogues (@JaipurDialogues). 10,000 retweets and 1.7 million views were received by the tweet. (https://twitter.com/JaipurDialogues/status/1821169327472541740?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1821169327472541740%7Ctwgr%5E2da0fff878516f87eb300f9ff7cc14b1d6e941a2%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.altnews.in%2Fbangladesh-woman-protesting-against-varsity-student-fairuz-abontikas-harassment-death-video-falsely-viral%2F)

Similarly, along with the hashtags #HindusAreNotSafeInBangladesh, #HindusUnderAttack, #SaveHindusinBangladesh, and similar ones, verified user @jpsin1 also tweeted the video with 697.3K views and 5.7k likes and retweets.

(https://twitter.com/jpsin1/status/1821099377236029699?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1821099377236029699%7Ctwgr%5E2da0fff878516f87eb300f9ff7cc14b1d6e941a2%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.altnews.in%2Fbangladesh-woman-protesting-against-varsity-student-fairuz-abontikas-harassment-death-video-falsely-viral%2F)

Several similar tweets were followed with the same content on platform x(<https://archive.ph/WM70Y>) with religious and communal angle.

Upon fact checking it was found that the film was posted on several platforms in July 2024, with the allegation that the woman portrayed in it was a student at Jagannath University, after conducting a reverse image search on key frames from the widely shared video (source1-<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=808446994752265>, source 2-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4P-sU34ivQ>). Obviously, this was a long time before Sheikh Hasina resigned. Further discovered that the video was posted on July 26 by the JnU Short Stories(<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=824402983091296&t=0>) Facebook page, which clarified that the girl in the video was a Jagannath University student and had no political affiliations. She might be seen in the video demonstrating against JnU student Fairuz Abontika's suicide. According to reports, Abontika killed herself(<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/they-didnt-let-her-live-grieving-mother-abontika-seeks-justice-809782>) in March of this year following what she claimed to be harassment by Amman Siddique, a student, and assistant proctor Deen Islam. University students organised a protest calling for the two to be punished.

As a result, a footage from a protest in March 2024 showing a lady bound and with tape covering her lips is circulating online under the fictitious impression that this lady is a Hindu woman subject to persecution in Bangladesh.

CASE 2

Another reported viral tweet on August 7, 2024 from Salwan Momika (https://x.com/Salwan_Momika1), an X-verified account, shared this widely shared video and claimed that the Hindu family had been massacred by "Islamic jihadists" in Bangladesh. Additionally, he included a hashtag that said, "Save Bangladeshi Hindus."



Image source- <https://archive.fo/05yLF>

Social media users are sharing a horrifying 28-second video of four dead bodies—including the bodies of two children—in a room. Two of the dead are still hanging, and all of them have knots around their necks with 886.6k views.

He also pleaded with the Indian government to step in and protect Hindus in Bangladesh from Muslim "genocide." As of the writing of this article, the post had received over 12,000 reshares and almost 8.8 lakh views.



Image source- <https://www.altnews.in/bangladesh-4-of-a-muslim-family-found-dead-in-brahmanbaria-footage-falsely-viral-as-killing-of-hindus-by-jihadists/>

Followed with the same video, X user @Sharabh_Vishnu_ claimed that Islamic jihadists had killed the Hindu family. The source was taken from (<https://archive.fo/czAsE>).



Similar post on Facebook by Amba Shankar Bajpai and many other verified profiles who shared the clip with tags saying An entire Hindu family was wiped out by Islamic jihadists in Bangladesh just because they were Hindus. Where are the eyes of the world? (<https://www.facebook.com/search/posts?q=An%20entire%20Hindu%20family%20was%20wiped%20out%20by%20Islamic%20jihadists&filters=eyJyZWNIbnRfcG9zdHM6MCI6IntcIm5hbWVcIjpcInJlY2VudF9wb3N0c1wiLFwiYXJnc1wiOlwiXCJ9In0%3D>)

On dating back to the article, it directed us to a July 28, 2024, news story published in the Bangladeshi daily Dainik Ittefaq. According to the report, a family of four perished by hanging in Bijoypara in the Bangladeshi Nabinagar upazila of Brahmanbaria. It further says that on July 28 at around 10:30 am, neighbours found the hanging bodies and informed the police. Sohag Miya, Jannatul Begum, and their two kids, Fariya and Fahima, were named among the deceased. (<https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/694634/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B9%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%A3%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9C%E0%A6%BF%E0%A7%9F%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F-%E0%A6%8F%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%87-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A7%AA-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%9D%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4-%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B9>).

Upon searching a Youtube video was found (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjWSLgj0Jg4>) from July 28, describing the same event involving four family members who were hanged in Bangladesh. In conclusion, the widely shared video is from an incident that happened on July 28 in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh, where four people of a Muslim family were discovered dead in their home. The film is being circulated with the unfounded rumour that Muslims in Bangladesh killed a Hindu family.

CASE 3

A similar video from platform X shared by @VoiceofHindu71, depicts the loot of a Hindu-owned retail store in Bangladesh. The video has been reposted by other right-wing accounts with the same assertion. (https://twitter.com/VoiceofHindu71/status/1820713979255361903?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1820713979255361903%7Ctwgr%5E0611f785f5aebc22761091c134f5a73847ba92f2%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.altnews.in%2Fstores-of-bangladeshi-retail-brand-yellow-ransacked-video-viral-in-india-with-communal-spin%2F), with the tag Looting From a Hindu Shop in Chittagong Market.. #AllEyesOnBangladeshiHindus

@visegrad24, another X user shared the same video received more than 20,000 views (https://twitter.com/visegrad24/status/1820766439868940674?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1820766439868940674%7Ctwgr%5E0611f785f5aebc22761091c134f5a73847ba92f2%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.altnews.in%2Fstores-of-bangladeshi-retail-brand-yellow-ransacked-video-viral-in-india-with-communal-spin%2F), with the tag Islamists in Bangladesh incite a crowd to loot a Hindu-owned store in the Chittagong Market. Hindus are losing lives, homes and property due to the Islamist attacks against them after the government was overthrown yesterday.

It was observed a store called "On Fire" in the widely shared video. Google Maps was used to pinpoint the incident's location to Mohammadpur, Dhaka. One of the several locations of the upscale Bangladeshi brand Yellow was the one being robbed. (<https://www.google.com/maps/place/YELLOW,+Mohammadpur/@23.7643345,90.3588065,3a,75y,80.0>

7h,94.98t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sCf2Ecwhq7-OsXuEtICGdww!2e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fcb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile%26w%3D900%26h%3D600%26pitch%3D-4.983909204665295%26panoid%3DCf2Ecwhq7-OsXuEtICGdww%26yaw%3D80.06896623047803!7i16384!8i8192!4m14!1m7!3m6!1s0x3755c0a0f24fc8e9:0x2d2ca33cdaf1a641!2sOn+Fire!8m2!3d23.7643967!4d90.3589775!16s%2Fg%2F11dxrswd5s!3m5!1s0x3755c0bb4ba27a99:0xf97686d6923c9bc4!8m2!3d23.764368!4d90.3589553!16s%2Fg%2F12hp_1nm6?coh=205410&entry=ttu)

YELLOW, an online portal catering to Bangladesh and Canada, and its parent business BEXIMCO comprise 19 locations around Bangladesh. Books, ceramics, paintings, home textiles, accessories, clothes, and fragrances are among their offerings. The largest private sector organisation in Bangladesh is the Bangladesh Export Import Company Limited, or BEXIMCO Group, which was established in the 1970s by Ahmed Sohail Fasihur Rahman and Salman Fazlur Rahman, brothers.(<https://www.linkedin.com/company/yellowclothing04/>).

Similar Facebook post was also where the store named Yellow was looted(<https://www.facebook.com/fuad.msayed/videos/3812832768935213/>).

Therefore, a video that went viral showing a YELLOW store in Mohammadpur, Dhaka, being robbed is misrepresented as showing images of a Hindu-owned business being looted. Actually, Salman Fazlur Rahman, a Bangladeshi businessman and Sheikh Hasina's adviser, is the owner of the Yellow brand.

Discussion and conclusion

At an age when social networking platforms such as Facebook and X (previously Twitter) are seeing rapid growth, the landscape of information distribution has entirely transformed due to the growing prevalence of citizen journalism. Because citizen journalism has democratised news reporting by providing in-the-moment reports from the scene, the loosely controlled environment of content generation carries serious concerns. Thus, when shared without due diligence, citizen-captured photographs have turned into misinformation-vectoring tools. This makes it riskier, for instance, during periods of political and social upheaval, when false information could travel quickly online, stoke animosity and division, and worsen the situation.

The issue is made worse by the echo chamber effect, which occurs when people stumble across and spread these misleading pictures, setting off a vicious cycle of disinformation. Fake news thrives on an existence of itself in a world where information is so freely shared online and there are few obstacles to its dissemination, further destabilising an already fragile global civilisation. These days, the ease with which false information circulates on social media highlights the urgent need for platform responsibility as well as individual media literacy. Therefore, the risk of harm is not mitigated by carelessly reading shared content and permitting false information to continue circulating, warping reality, and creating even more gulfs in society.

Through a loop of sending out and receiving information back, the self-amplifying dynamo effect could have disastrous effects. Echo chambers could be created, reinforcing other facts and ultimately dividing and negatively influencing public opinion. It gets more and harder to sort through and distinguish the wheat from the chaff as this false information spreads, escalating animosity and widening societal gaps.

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