DRF

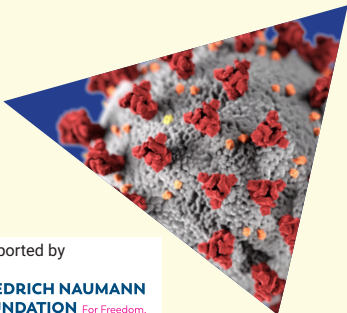**Digital**Rights**Foundation**
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

FACT-CHECKING AND SOURCE VERIFICATION MANUAL IN TIMES OF COVID19:

JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

Disclaimer

CONTENTS

ABOUT

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a registered research-based advocacy non-governmental organization in Pakistan. Founded in 2012, DRF focuses on ICTs to support human rights, inclusiveness, democratic processes, and digital governance. DRF works on issues of online free speech, privacy, data protection, and online violence against women.

DigitalRightsFoundation
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Media has become more decentralized with the advent of digital mediums, the spread of misinformation and fake news has become a feature of democratic and broader social discourse with both online and offline implications. Especially, the phenomenon of fake news has seen a spike in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.
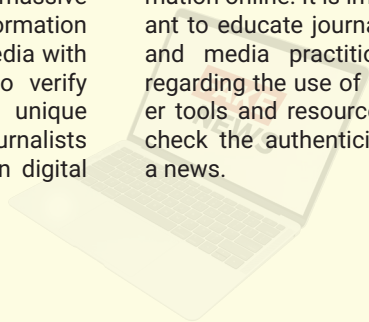
The world has completely changed due to Covid-19, which first originated in late December 2019 in China. The disease has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) with more than 2.97 million positive cases reported worldwide. The global death toll from the disease has reached up to 350,000[1] and Pakistan has around 195,745[2] cases as of 26th June 2020. During these testing times, fake news has been at an all-time high with critics saying that there is a 'dis-info-demic' of information online. During these times, we also see that with increasing advancement and reliance on digital technologies, it has become easier to disseminate fake news and connect with a larger audience than ever before.

In Pakistan, the emergence of fake news is mainly through the proliferation of various social media channels. At the same time, there has been no countervailing,

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1   https://www.gulftoday.ae/news/2020/05/27/global-coronavirus-death-toll-tops-350000
2   http://covid.gov.pk/

no awareness regarding fact-checking and source verification. Without proper training in digital news verification, the dissemination of misinformation is both rapid and disastrous. Journalists are often processing a massive amount of information through social media with very little time to verify it--this presents unique challenges for journalists working with or in digital media especially in times of a pandemic. These problems have manifested themselves in situations where journalists and news organisations have also fallen prey to fake news and disinformation online. It is important to educate journalists and media practitioners regarding the use of proper tools and resources to check the authenticity of a news.

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

The term "fake news" has been a recurring feature of the political debate since the US presidential election campaign of 2016, if not before. It is a relatively new collective term that lacks a clear definition and is used to refer to a variety of phenomena[3]. It signifies news that is not true, genuine or accurate. However, the way the term has been used in social and political discourse has made this too simplistic.

The term "fake news" has been used to refer to things as varied as news satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda[4]. According to the organisation First Draft working on how information is discovered, shared and presented to the public[5], the term "fake news" is unhelpful and misleading, due to which it is mostly used with air marks. It needs to be understood that fake news is more than just news and involves the different types of mis- and disinformation in the information ecosystem[6].

- **Dis-information** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.
- **Mis-information** Information that is

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3   https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2017.136
    0143
4   https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21670811.2017.136
    0143
5   https://firstdraftnews.org/about/
6   https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/

false, but not created to cause harm.

- **Mal-information** Information that is based on reality used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, or country.

The elements that govern how the information ecosystem works:

1. What are the different types of content being created?

According to First Draft, there are seven distinct types of content being created and shared within the information ecosystem.

2. Why is such content being created?

First Draft has developed a misinformation matrix with 8 Ps that signify which type of content is created for what purpose.

3. How is information processed?

Information processing research has identified two principal ways in which people deal with new information, including: Heuristically: little cognitive effort is used to understand the meaning of information Systematically: all aspects of information great cognitive effort and conclusions are drawn thoroughly; this is employed when the information is of high personal value, relevance and interest[7].

However, generally, people consume and process information on social media heuristically[8]. Recent studies show that when information is processed heuristically, chances of considering false information to be credible are higher[9].

4. How is the content being disseminated?

There are multiple ways and stakeholders that disseminate information in the ecosystem. Here are some of these:

7   Chaiken, S., Liberman, A., & Eagly, A. H. (1989). Heuristic and system
        atic information processing within and beyond the persuasion
context. In J. S. Uleman & J. A. Bargh (Hrsg.), Unintended Thought
(pp. 212−251). New York: Guilford Press.
8   Graber, D. A. (1988). Processing the News: How People Tame the
        Information Tide (2nd ed.). New York:Longman.
9   file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/FNF_FakeNews_Broschuere_EN_
        final%20(2).pdf

- shared by people on social media without double-checking and verifying;
- shared by journalists who are now under more pressure than ever to report information emerging on the social web in real-time accurately;
- pushed out by loosely connected groups who are deliberately attempting to influence public opinion; and
- disseminated as part of sophisticated disinformation campaigns, through bot networks and troll factories[10].

Understanding the role a journalist plays in the information ecosystem is the first step towards fighting the different types of misand disinformation that circulate on social media.

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10   https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/

ORIGIN OF FAKE NEWS BEFORE THE INTERNET

The origin of fake news or 'sensationalism' is not something new and can be seen as back as the 19th century or even before. In the 1890s rival newspapers competed against one another to publish sensational stories and rumours to increase their popularity and sales, this practice in turn coined the term 'yellow journalism'. It also led to the American Spanish war of the 1898 and eventually, people started questioning the authenticity of the news published in newspapers and demanded that reliable sources of news should be made available for them. Leading publications like the New York Times were established due to this very reason to increase journalistic integrity and provide authentic news. The term yellow journalism almost became an obsolete up until the point of web-based news which again gave rise to sensationalism[11].

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11 https://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/brief-history
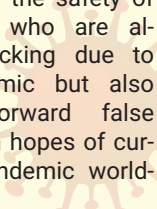
FAKE NEWS
IN TIMES OF COVID 19

The internet has brought forward vast opportunities for individuals in almost every field and transformed journalism as it is. However, it has also led to the spread of disinformation and misinformation online, which cannot be easily controlled. The term fake news became popular during the 2016 US elections when President Donald Trump used it multiple times to move ahead in the elections. The term was often used by the president to discredit the media and to this day has been used by governments and regimes.

COVID-19 has brought with itself many challenges and has changed the structure of the world as we know it. During the pandemic, we see how everything has changed completely and how the spread of disinformation and misinformation is at an all-time high. Commentators have noticed how there has been unreliable information being spread through social media channels, and this increase in misinformation with COVID 19 has been referred to as 'disinfodemic'. UNESCO has feared that this particular phenomenon has not only jeopardised the safety of individuals who are already panicking due to the pandemic but also brought forward false remedies in hopes of curing the pandemic worldwide[12].

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12   https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061592

> ↗ Forwarded
>
> He told them a super news... This is how it should
> I send it.
>
> The cure for the C19 virus or the way to eliminate it was achieved.
> Information comes from Israel there this virus did not cause any
> death.
>
> * The recipe is simple *
> 1. * Lemon * 😊
> 2. * Bicarbonate * 🌿
>
> Mix and drink as hot tea ☕ every afternoon, the
> action of the lemon with hotter baking soda 🥄
> immediately kills the virus ⚠ completely eliminates it
> from the body. These two components alkalize the
> immune system, since when night falls the system
> becomes acidic and defences lower.
>
> That is why the People of Israel is relaxed about this virus.
> Everyone in Israel drinks a cup of hot water with lemon and a
> little baking soda at night, as this is proven to kill the virus.
>
> 2:27 AM

formation pieces online, has started a campaign of 'Mythbusters' online. The campaign refutes claims about how drinking bleach might kill the virus from inside, along with how the spread of the infection can be curbed with growing temperatures.
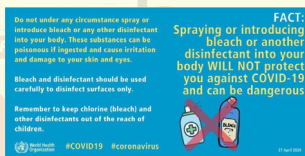

Misinformation regarding the pandemic has been all over the place - stories about the origin of the pandemic, the possible cures of it, and the responses of states, celebrities and companies. Fake news being spread by influential people has also been a cause of concern for many since it leaves little chance for the truth to be accepted by the public. The World Health Organization, due to the growing number of misin-

Some countries have also outright rejected the existence of the virus even though the virus till May has had 5.3 million confirmed cases, in 188 countries[13]. One such country is Brazil, according to the John Hopkins University tally in May is now the epicentre of the virus[14]. Healthcare workers have

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13   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105
14   https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

complained about how social distancing is not being practiced in the country, and their biggest problem during the pandemic is the spread of fake news[15]. Government officials have also been seen sharing Instagram or Twitter posts around how the health workers have highly exaggerated fatalities due to the pandemic, and there's no need to panic. Social media companies have stepped in and are trying to curb the spread of fake news. Facebook and Twitter have deleted posts of famous world leaders for spreading misinformation about the virus online[16].

Facebook removed a video of the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro who claimed that hydroxychloroquine has been effective in treating the infection. Twitter has also deleted a post of the Venezuelan President which was fake and has updated its guidance on combating medical misinformation that goes against international public health guidance. Facebook has also pledged to remove information online, which they think could cause community harm.

15   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52739734
16   https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52106321

FAKE NEWS LEADING TO VIOLENCE AND CONFUSION

There have been multiple instances of fake news, causing panic and chaos in Pakistan. According to DRF's research 'Sifting truth from lies in the digital age of fake news' 88.7% journalists surveyed stated that social media platforms were the least trustworthy sources of information, *'With Whatsapp being the hotbed for the spread of false information. Interviewees identified 'Whatsapp journalism' as the major contributor to a decline in factual reporting'* [17].

According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), there are 76 million 3G/4G subscribers in the country and 78 million broadband subscribers in the country[18]. Internet penetration in the country is still significantly less and according to the annual Economist Intelligence Unit which measures access to the internet, affordability, and people's ability to use the web has ranked Pakistan at 76th out of 100 countries[19]. Even 19 though access to the internet is limited, the emergence and spread of fake news are not at all restricted. In 2019 a fake news about children dying due to polio vaccines in Mashokhel, a village on the outskirts

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

18   https://www.pta.gov.pk/en/telecom-indicators

19   https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/629600-internet-access

of Peshawar spread like wildfire online. While vaccination teams were busy vaccinating children, WhatsApp groups, Facebook and Twitter were flooded with this news which eventually led to people going out on to the streets and taking their children to hospitals. It led to massive traffic jams on busy roads, and around 40,000 children were admitted to hospitals within hours. None of the children had any serious medical problems. However, the news caused enough panic that at a nearby village, 250 people took to the streets to protest and vandalise property and an old hospital building[20]. This particular news not only led to violence on the streets but also put in question the integrity of polio workers in the country. They are trying to eradicate the disease.

Another example in June 2018 is when a leading newspaper in the country had a doctored post posted in its name on Facebook regarding the Durand Line. The post suggested that Afghanistan had accepted the Durand Line as an official border with Pakistan along with an image of the Afghan National Security Adviser at the time Hanif Atmar and Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa. The image copied the social media layout of the newspaper which led the Afghan National Security Council (NSC) to issue a press release assuming that the post is true[21].

20 https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-the-rumour-of-a-b
21 https://www.dawn.com/news/1415411/fake-facebook-post-posing-as-dawncom-attempts-to-mislead-public

During COVID 19, the spread of misinformation in the country has been at an all-time high with various pages and groups over social media platforms. A post started circulating online from an account titled, 'Defence Offence' regarding the Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa possibly being infected by the coronavirus. The page shared the layout, logo, and branding of a leading news agency in Pakistan to misguide people. Two weeks before this the same page also posted a picture of Arif Wazir, a leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement stating that he died in Islamabad after a gun attack. Both the posts were quickly taken down by Facebook at the request of the news agency[22].

News had also been circulating on social media in Pakistan that Prime Minister Imran Khan had tested positive for coronavirus. It was later fact-checked by Poynter and confirmed by PTI's government as fake[23].

BBC analysis has also quoted that at least 31 people have been killed in 2017 and 2018 as a result of mob attacks which were fueled by rumours on Whatsapp and other social media platforms[24].

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22 https://www.dawn.com/news/1554464
23 https://www.poynter.org/?ifcn_misinformation=pakistans-pm-imran-khan-tested-covid-19-positive
24 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-e5043092-f7f0-42e9-9848-5274ac896e6d

LEGISLATION AND STEPS TO TACKLE FAKE NEWS IN PAKISTAN

Broadly, there are two approaches to tackling fake news, one is to invest in fact-checking and independent media sources; and the other is to use laws to remove and censor misinformation content.

The State has taken a mixed approach in trying to curb fake news in the country and to stem the spread of it online. Various legislations have attempted to restrict the dissemination of fake news or false information but their jurisdictions have remained unclear mainly because technology and forms of communication continue to evolve. Before the advent of present day communication devices and technology, the legislation that regulated most of the digital communication was the "Telegraph Act 1885." This Act, along with many others that followed, placed the burden of fact-checking on the person transmitting any information. Section 29 of the Telegraph Act 1885 prohibits a person from transmitting any message through a telegraph which he knows or has reason to believe to be 'false'. "Telegraph" is defined as *"any apparatus, equipment or plant used for transmitting, emitting, making or receiving signs, signals, writing, speech, sound or*

intelligence of any nature by wire, radio or visual or electro-magnetic system." Although the above definition seems to cover telecommunication systems, electronic media as well as online media, the name 'Telegraph' itself is outdated and misleading. Hence, it remains unclear whether the Act applies to modern day telecommunication systems and electronic and online media or not.

The "Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organisation) Act, 1996", which was passed to regulate telecommunication systems and telecommunication services in Pakistan, also penalises transmission of false information. Section 31 of the said Act penalises anyone who transmits through a telecommunication system/service any speech, sound, data, writing, image or video that he knows or has reasons to believe to be false. The overly-broad definition of telecommunication system[25] and service[26] continues to cause confusion with respect to the Act's jurisdiction. While it is generally understood that

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25   Section 1(u): " telecommunication system " means any electrical, electro-magnetic, electronic, optical or optio-electronic system for the emission, conveyance, switching or reception of any intelligence within, or into, or from, Pakistan, whether or not that intelligence is subjected to re-arrangement, computation or any other process in the course of operation of the system, and includes a cable transmission system, a cable television transmission system and terminal equipment

26   Section 1 (v): " telecommunication service " means a service consisting in the emission, conveyance, switching or reception of any intelligence within, or into, or from, Pakistan by any electrical, electro-magnetic, electronic, optical or optio-electronic system, whether or not the intelligence is subjected to re-arrangement, computation or any other process in the course of the service

the Act would regulate the telecommunication industry alone, social media platforms have also often been subject to the provision of the said Act.

Similarly, to regulate the dissemination of false information within the broadcast media, the "Electronic Media (Programmes and Advertisements) Code of Conduct 2015" is used. Section 3 (f) of the code of conduct prohibits the licensee (holder of license for operation and establishment of broadcast media) from airing any content *" which is known to be false; or there exists sufficient reasons to believe that the same may be false beyond a reasonable doubt."* The wide and unclear defini-

tion of broadcast media[27] again gave rise to certain questions with regards to jurisdiction. It is unclear whether online platforms like Netflix, Youtube, facebook, Amazon Prime etc., or other such platforms which use the internet to broadcast content, are subject to the provisions of this Act.

It should be noted that the laws discussed till now place the responsibility of fact-checking on the person transmitting the information or the service/information provider. It was never the obligation of the regulator to monitor falsehood of any content being transmitted. The "Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020," however, is in sharp contrast

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27   "broadcast media" means such media which originate and propagate broadcast and prerecorded signals by terrestrial means or through satellite for radio or television and includes teleporting, provision of access to broadcast signals by channel providers and such other forms of broadcast media as the Authority may, with the approval of the Federal Government, by notification in the official Gazette, specify.

to this previously held position.

In February 2020, the federal government notified the "Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020" to regulate online systems and all online content shared or transmitted over online systems. Section 2(h) defines "online system" as 'social media applications, OTTAs and any cloud based content distribution services'. "Online Content" includes photo, image, video, audio, text, infographic, article, sub content and status uploaded or updated on any online system. The Ministry of Information Technology which wrote the Rules stated that the Rules would tackle 'unwanted and slanderous content online.

As seen above, while previous legislations had used the term false content or false information, this is the first law in Pakistan that has used the term 'fake news.' The Rules require social media companies to deploy proactive mechanisms to ensure prevention of live streaming of fake news (Rule 4) and to remove, suspend or disable accounts or online content that spread fake news (Rule 5). It does not, however, define or shed light on what constitutes or can be referred to as 'fake news.' It is noted that fake news laws across the world have been criticised from a free speech perspective, and strengthening of fact-checking institutions is a more rights-compliant way to tackle free speech online.

The "Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020", is also the first legislation that makes the regulator incharge of policing truth.

Rule 5(f) obligates a social media company that "if communicated by the Authority (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority) that online content is false, put a note to that effect along with the online content" This provision gives unbridled powers to the Authority to decide what is true and what is false and also violates the principle of freely forming an 'opinion' (a right read as part of Article 19 of the Constitution). Why the federal government opted to shift the responsibility of fact-checking from the person/service provider transmitting the information to the regulator remains another question mark to the government's respect for free-speech.

Almost immediately after the notification in February 2020, the Rules drew sharp criticism locally and internationally. Digital Rights groups and journalists opposed these Rules and expressed concerns regarding violations of fundamental rights. As a result, the Ministry of Information Technology & Telecommunication (MoITT) announced[28] the formation of a committee to begin consultation on the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020. Although the implementation of these Rules has been suspended, their legal status still remains unclear. As a result, many advocacy and digital rights groups have decided to boycott the consultations until and unless the Rules are de-notified and withdrawn. What eventually becomes of these Rules is yet to be

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28   https://moitt.gov.pk/NewsDetail/YmI3NTU0ZjQtMzg1Yi00YzEwL
      WE0NjYtMGY1YTA4NjgyYjVh

seen. The government is now rethinking these rules to bring all the relevant stakeholders on board[29].

The Pakistan government in 2018 also launched a Twitter account to 'tackle and expose' fake news that is spread through social media online. The account titled 'FakeNews-BusterMoIB' was created by the instructions of the Ministry of Information in Pakistan. The account was supposed to give the 'official response' to false propaganda online. Critics have highlighted how the account may be misused and target opponents and dissenters given there is no clear definition of what constitutes 'fake' or 'authentic' news[30].

Journalists today increasingly face threats from a range of actors, including governments, organised criminals, business interests and religious fundamentalists, in both online and offline spaces. Legal means are increasingly being deployed to pursue the extra-legal end of silencing free speech and expression in Pakistan. The most formidable legal barriers to free speech have been the Defamation laws in Pakistan. Defamation In Pakistan, is considered a civil wrong, under the Defamation Ordinance 2002, as well as a criminal offence, under Section 20 of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and Section 499 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC).

Under the Defamation Ordinance 2002, defamation is defined as *"any wrongful act or publication or circu-*

29 https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-rethinks-so
    cial-media-laws-1.70073974
30 https://www.dawn.com/news/1436167

lation of a false statement or representation made orally or in written or visual form which injures the reputation of a person, tends to lower him in the estimation of others or tends to reduce him to ridicule, unjust criticism, dislike, contempt or hatred." Defamation under PECA involves *intentional transmission or exhibition of any information through any information system that is false and intimidates or harms the reputation or privacy of a natural person.*

On the criminal defamation side, section 499 of PPC defines defamation *as words either spoken or intended to be read , or signs or visible representations , that harm the reputation of a person. Inclusion of phrases, in Section 499, like "words intended to be read" and "visible representations" has once again caused a jurisdic-tional dilemma on whether it applies to online spaces as well. Section 20 of PECA specifically applies to defamation in online spaces, given that it is the specific law it is likely to prevail in cases of online spaces. A plain reading of Section 20 of PECA suggests that the legislature intended it to apply only to a 'natural person' who could claim defamation in online spaces, the language used in Section 499 PPC has enabled even institutions like the judiciary and military to stifle dissenting opinions in online spaces.*

While the language of PECA makes it abundantly clear that only a 'natural person', i.e. individuals who face reputational harm, can avail the remedy under Section 20, in practice, journalists and citizens have been charged for making comments against institutions like

the judiciary or the military. Recent cases against journalists, such as Shazeb Jillani[31] who was accused of `articulating defamatory remarks against the respected institutions of Pakistan`, and charged under PECA and PPC simultaneously show how legal tactics are being used to undermine media freedom and create a climate of fear that discourages others from speaking out. Criminalising speech by the media will not only affect the journalists booked under these laws, but also have a chilling effect on online media freedoms in general.

A significant reason that defamation law(s) pose a risk to free speech, journalism and free media is that it is relatively easy to sue or charge a person for defamation and significantly difficult to defend such a claim. All a claimant will need to allege is that the accused published, transmitted or displayed a false material/content that identified the claimant, directly or indirectly, and in doing so caused harm to his/its reputation. The burden then falls on the accused to show why they should not be held liable. This particularly threatens the freedom of those journalists who are involved in investigative journalism. For these individuals, each time they investigate a serious crime or expose political or corporate corruption/wrongdoing, they expose themselves to the possibility of a defamation suit/charge.

This particularly impacts independent journalists and smaller media organisations who cannot

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31 https:// www.newslaundry.com/2018/11/22/pakistanmedia-spend-ownership-layoffs

afford to be entangled in long and expensive legal battles.

If the looming threat of defamation action was not enough to stifle 'unwanted' attention even when the information was true, the wide powers granted to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) under Section 37 of PECA has facilitated censorship on the internet. PECA is a big question mark on the freedom of expression in Pakistan and is in sharp contrast to the constitutionally granted right. While PECA is a special law made to prevent unauthorised acts with respect to information systems, it has been widely criticised by human rights groups for the powers it grants the government to regulate the internet. Amongst the many criticisms of PECA, Section 37 is particularly contentious inasmuch as it threatens free speech. It states: *"The Authority (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)) shall have the Power to issue directions for removal or blocking of access of any intelligence through any information system, if it considers it necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, commission of or incitement to an offence."*

Vast powers have been granted to PTA to determine the content that may or may not be accessed or viewed by internet users in the country. The lack of definitional clarity surrounding terms like "the glory of Islam", "against the integrity, security and

defense of Pakistan", "public order," "decency or morality" is particularly concerning mainly because journalists will never know what content might be deemed objectionable by PTA. Any content posted, shared or transmitted online may be removed as being immoral, anti-state or politically unacceptable. From a freedom of speech perspective, the impact of such arbitrary powers is devastating. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Pakistani government is one of the foremost countries in terms of content removal requests to Facebook[32].

In early 2020, the government has attempted to implement the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020 which grants power to PTA to monitor falsehood of any online content if it is deemed 'fake news', since PECA empowers PTA to determine what content may be viewed or accessed online. If implemented, these Rules will have a detrimental effect on online freedoms, giving the government sole authority to determine what is fake or real news and unprecedented control over user data. Given the extensive and arbitrary powers of the PTA, the constitutional freedoms given under Article 19 has been significantly eroded, making it virtually toothless in online spaces.

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32   https://transparency.facebook.com/government-data-requests/country/PK

POST-COVID19

Post pandemic the rise of fake news on Whatsapp has been at an all-time high. Numerous false news through forwarding messages online have misguided citizens regarding the epidemic, and most individuals are unsure what to do. The government has launched a website titled www.covid.gov.pk to restrict the spread of fake news further online. The website gives updates on the number of cases in the country. Also, it has a 'Myths about COVID-19' section focusing on the various myths being circulated regarding the virus one of them being that the virus can be stopped by eating garlic and the virus is transmitted through mosquito bites.

Dial **1166** health helpline

GOVERNMENT OF
PAKISTAN

symptoms of respiratory illness.

WE SHOULD BE AWARE

Myths About COVID-19

The new coronavirus CANNOT be transmitted through mosquito bites.

The new coronavirus is a respiratory virus which spreads primarily through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose. To date there has been no information nor evidence to suggest that the new coronavirus could be transmitted by mosquitoes.

GOVERNMENT OF
PAKISTAN

☰

...hold close contact with anyone showing
symptoms of respiratory illness.

WE SHOULD BE AWARE

Myths About COVID-19

There is no evidence from
the current outbreak that
eating garlic has
protected people from the
new coronavirus

Garlic is a healthy food that may have some
antimicrobial properties. However, there is no
evidence from the current outbreak that
eating garlic has protected people from the
new coronavirus.

The provincial govern-ment of Khyber Pakh-tunkhwa is also reaching out to religious leaders for assistance to tackle mis-information[33].

The Sindh government has urged the citizens to 'act responsibly' and has asked the Federal Inves-tigation Agency (FIA) to take action against people spreading misinformation online regarding the vi-rus[34].

In February 2020 a Pa-kistan Tehreek-i-Insaf leader in Chitral had also been arrested for spread-ing fake news regarding the virus. The leader was booked under section 505 of PPC, section 25 of the Telegraph Act, and 16 MPO.[35]

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33 https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1644161/pakistan
34 https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/623278-coronavirus-sindh-govt-
    wants-fia-to-take-action-against-fake-news-on-social-media
35 https://nayadaur.tv/2020/02/pti-leader-

WHAT ARE SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES DOING TO COUNTER FAKE NEWS?

Social media companies have been continuously criticised for doing less to tackle fake news online. Governments and individuals have been pushing social media companies to do more to tackle disinformation online, especially in times of elections and political instability. Companies, in return, have hired fact-checking teams to handle misinformation online in the first quarter of 2019 disabled 2.19 billion Facebook accounts compared to 1.2 billion accounts in the fourth quarter of 2018[36].

To tackle fake news and disinformation, Google introduced the Google News Initiative in which it will work with journalists and media houses to bring forward accurate news to the public.

Social media giants like Twitter and Facebook have also started working with AI startups to tackle fake news online. Facebook[37].

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36   https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/23/facebook-fake-accounttake
      downs-doubled-q4-2018-vs-q1-2019.html
37   https://analyticsindiamag.com/how-social-media-firms-arefighting-
      fake-news-by-acquiring-ai-powered-startups/

POST-COVID 19

Post-COVID 19 everything has now moved towards online spaces. People have been working from home, and internet usage amongst individuals have increased under lockdown. In times like these, there has also been a rise in fake news online with multiple messages, posts and news being circulated on various social media platforms.

Twitter has introduced several updates to ensure that the spread of fake news is curbed. It has launched a dedicated COVID-19 event page and has been working directly with organisations working to tackle the pandemic. The company ensured
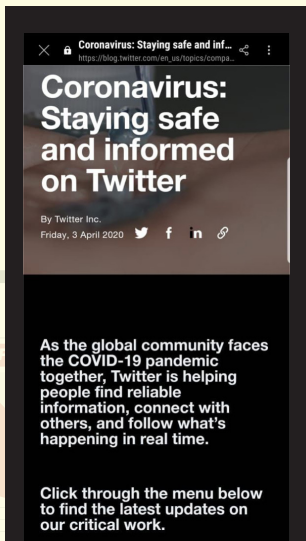
that users searching for information related to coronavirus received information that was from verifiable sources like the WHO[38].

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38   https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/covid-19.html

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information Centre
Follow for updates and notifications.

🔒 Follow

25 May 2020
Latest updatesⓘ

🌐 Global confirmed cases: 5,324,933; total deaths: 342,341; total recovered: 2,119,237

🇪🇸 Spanish prime minister says that Spain will reopen to foreign tourists in July

🇫🇷 French churches reopen for first Sunday masses in over two months

🇮🇳 India reports record daily rise in infections for third consecutive day

🇦🇷 Argentina extends Buenos Aires lockdown until 7 June after cases increase

🛡 Learn more about coronavirus (COVID-19) at covid.gov.pk.

Visit covid.gov.pk   ⓘ

Facebook has also introduced many features to tackle fake news in times of the pandemic. Facebook has established a Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information Center to combat fake news and give the latest updates regarding the virus.

Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, is also using algorithms to track hashtags which are sharing false information on the platform. Instagram is also rolling out a special message to its users which further connects them to reliable resources like WHO and other health ministries[39]. These are some of the efforts from Instagram to stop the spread of unverified information online.

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39   https://www.firstpost.com/health/instagram-steps-up-efforts-to-curb-spread-of-coronavirus-misinformation-8189781.html

Whatsapp also announced to tighten its control over forward messaging and restrict users to share forward messages to one chat at a time. This has been done for an indefinite period after the company noticed a significant increase in forwarded messages amid the coronavirus crisis[40].

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40   https://www.dawn.com/news/1547196
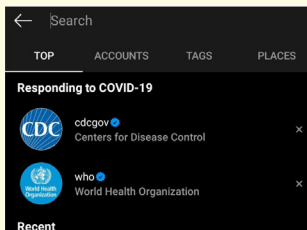
FACT-CHECKING AND SOURCE VERIFICATION

## WHY IS SOURCE VERIFICATION AND FACT-CHECKING NECESSARY?

Information ecosystem in the digital world has been dangerously polluted, and we now live in the age of information disorder. Disinformation is becoming so easy to generate and spread that journalists need to understand basic to advanced verification skills.

The breaking news environment, where the pressure to report quickly as well as get the facts right is too high, is often the most challenging for journalists. Agents of disinformation frequently exploit this to seed rumours and manipulated-content in online spaces.

It is increasingly critical for journalists and news organisations to employ source verification and fact-checking measures, mainly when relying on social media content as the primary source. To avoid trade-offs between reporting accurate information and the breaking news publishing, the following sections list easy-to-use and efficient tools and measures for fact-checking and source verification.

It is pertinent to highlight the difference between the two terms. Fact-checking and source verification are terms that are used

interchangeably when mentioning fake news. There are, however, minor differences between the two words which are essential for journalists to understand for their everyday work.
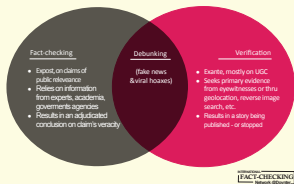
- Source verification is an editorial process used by journalists (including fact-checkers) to verify the accuracy of a statement, according to Bill Adair, the founder of PolitiFact and currently the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy at Duke University. Verification is used by various other professions and is not only restricted to journalists.

- Fact-checking, on the other hand, is specific to journalism; hence verification is a practice fundamentally enabling fact-checking[41].

For simplicity, verification is a process that checks the accuracy of a story before it becomes the news. On the other hand, fact-checking occurs post-publication to review a publicly-made claim against trusted sources of facts[42]. For fact-checking, practicing verification is a must.

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41   https://verificationhandbook.com/additionalmaterial/
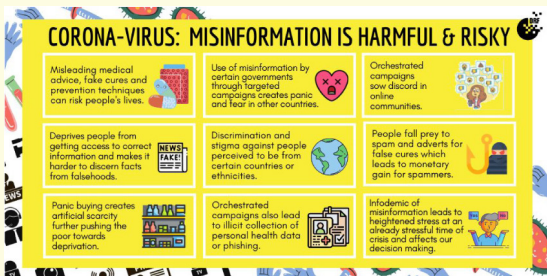42   https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2015/will-verificationkill-fact-checking/

As already discussed, the new coronavirus outbreak in 2019, there has been a massive spike in rumours, myths and misinformation about the virus and its cures. Fakes and misinformation can lead to panic, confusion, and death during health emergencies. They can create a run on critical infrastructure and erode trust in media institutions.

The pandemic has affected journalists and media organisations across the globe. Newsrooms are transforming to adapt to the new working conditions amid practicing social distancing. It has become extremely challenging for journalists to report the coronavirus outbreak accurately and safely as the fast-moving story is presenting newsrooms with a once-in-a-generation test to interpret the scientific data, tell human stories and hold political leaders to account. Research on the virus is still in its initial stages, which makes the challenge to identify false and misleading data unprecedented[43].

CORONA-VIRUS: MISINFORMATION IS HARMFUL & RISKY

Misleading medical advice, fake cures and prevention techniques can risk people's lives.

Use of misinformation by certain governments through targeted campaigns creates panic and fear in other countries.

Orchestrated campaigns sow discord in online communities.

Deprives people from getting access to correct information and makes it harder to discern facts from falsehoods.

Discrimination and stigma against people perceived to be from certain countries or ethnicities.

People fall prey to spam and adverts for false cures which leads to monetary gain for spammers.

Panic buying creates artificial scarcity further pushing the poor towards deprivation.

Orchestrated campaigns also lead to illicit collection of personal health data or phishing.

Infodemic of misinformation leads to heightened stress at an already stressful time of crisis and affects our decision making.

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43   http://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/the-challenges-of-covering-coronavirus-how-we-can-help/

Addressing the disinfodemic has become crucial to fighting the pandemic. For journalists, it requires not just dealing with the immediate challenge of combating misinformation, but also involves the building of habits, measures, systems, and the awareness necessary to resist misinformation in the long term. Failure to do so will have grave consequences, as seen previously: In Pakistan, health workers vaccinating children against polio have been repeatedly gunned down following false claims that they were Western spies[44].

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44   https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/fighting-coronavirus-infodemic/

TOOLS FOR COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

With communities looking to the media for trustworthy information and amid a disinfodemic of information in online spaces, journalists have to employ stricter measures of verification and fact-checking to bring accurate and reliable information to the public.

In the light of the COVID-19 crisis, this section provides an overview of resources and tools from different renowned international organisations for journalists who are covering COVID-19 and can verify and fact-check information.

Verification

Employing stricter and efficient verification measures requires repetition, persistence and using digital investigative tools with creativity and innovation[45]. There are so many verification tricks, tools and resources at the disposal of journalists now that it has made it harder to remember which one to use. In a published paper, "Verification As A Strategic Ritual : How journalists retrospectively describe processes for ensuring accuracy', the researchers found that verification is widely seen as an essential practice to a jour-

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45   https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Verifying_Online_Information_Digital_AW.pdf?x89004

nalist's work. However, journalists do not follow a single standard for verification and the methods for ensuring accuracy differ from one journalist to another. Every fact/ piece of information is not treated in the same manner[46].

First Draft has compiled a condensed guide to master the science of verification , which includes essential concepts, checklists and easy tips and techniques.

According to the guide, five pillars of verification remain the same for an image, video, meme or any other content that a journalist is looking at. The manual states that the process and its result are rarely foolproof; it requires collecting clues and corroborating evidence.

The 5 Pillars of Visual Verification

PROVENANCE
Are you looking at the original piece of content?

SOURCE
Who captured the original piece of content?

DATE
When was the piece of content captured?

LOCATION
Where was the piece of content captured?

MOTIVATION
Why was the piece of content captured?

FIRSTDRAFT   VERIFICATION

Visual verification Images: reverse image search
Reverse image search is a process of using software to find matching or similar images in an extensive database. The searches help in finding *provenance*, the first of the five pillars - the origin of the content, or any older versions of it. If the journalist finds out that there exist older versions of an image, it is an immediate hint that it may be out of context, re-purposed or misleading.

Some tools for using reverse image search:

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46   https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2013/new-research-details-how-journalists-verify-information/

- **Google Images Search:** Journalists can use this tool to find the original source of a photo, the articles/websites that had previously used it and its publication date on the internet. Once the journalists has uploaded the image for verification, they can click on 'Tools' and also look for visually similar pictures (to see if the image has been re-purposed) or different sizes of the same photo.
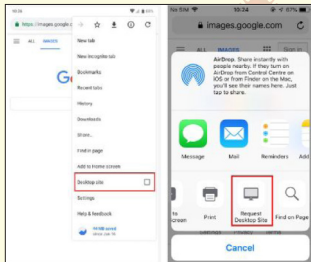
(Add graphic for IMP NOTE:) The tool is available on desktop computers. To use it on Android, iOS and tablets, go to images.google.com in your browser and open the desktop version.
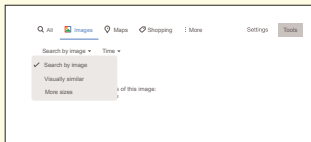
- **RevEye:** It's the most recommended tool by First Draft. The RevEye browser extension allows you to right-click on a photo and immediately perform a search on Chrome/Firefox and more, or all of them at once.

- **TinEye:** This platform allows the journalist to organise their search results by date easily. They can quickly see the first recorded instance of a photograph online, which gets them closer to understanding the provenance. The downside is that the engine has a much smaller database.

- **BING:** Journalists can use Bing when they need to focus on a specific element in an image. Bing allows you to crop a photograph and concentrate on the user-defined box, excluding the extraneous details[47].

- **Images: exif/metadata:** Another useful method for finding the time or date of an image is by looking at the metadata in the file.

Every image we capture on a digital camera contains extra information in the image file, such as time, date, camera settings, device information and even coordinates if the device has GPS turned on. This is called Exif data (Exchangeable image file format)[48].

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47 https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2019/12/26/
    guide-to-using-reverse-image-search-for-investigations/
48 https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Verifying_
    Online_Information_Digital_AW.pdf?x89004

- **Jeffrey's Image Metadata Viewer:** Jeffrey's is a great free tool for viewing a file's Exif data. Journalists can simply upload an image, and it will show the extra information stored in the file. For this to work, an original image file is needed as almost all social media platforms remove exif data when a user uploads an image.

  When verifying eyewitness content, ask the uploader to email you the original image file to complete this check [49].

Videos

Finding the provenance of videos is similar to photo verification.

- **InVID:** Journalists can use InVID, which is one of the most powerful tools used for verifying videos[50]. The tool will allow the journalist to break down any video from social media into thumbnails and then do a reverse image search on any of them. It provides necessary information including, upload date and time, information about the user account, shares, likes and any associated text in the video[51].

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49 https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Verifying_
    Online_Information_Digital_AW.pdf?x89004
50 https://www.invid-project.eu/tools-and-services/invid-verification-plugin/
51 https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Verifying_
    Online_Information_Digital_AW.pdf?x89004

YouTube Data Viewer: YouTube Data-Viewer is an easy-to-use tool that captures thumbnail images of any YouTube video you paste it. The site then lets you reverse image search each thumbnail to see if the video or parts of the video have been uploaded previously online.

Geolocation:
Geotags are sometimes tricky as they do not always reflect the location where the content was captured. So it is crucial for journalists to always independently verify the location of the content. It must be noted that geolocation will involve identifying several different features in a picture or video that help journalists triangulate where it was captured.

First Draft has listed a few tools for journalists to be aware of when doing the location verification:

- **Google Maps:** Journalists can search for and look at locations in satellite view
- **Google Earth:** If journalists want to look at historical satellite data, they can use Google Earth
- **Wikimapia:** Journalists can use this tool that allows them to describe features on the map.

COVID-19 medical and scientific resources

The most reliable resource with accurate information on COVID-19 is the World Health Organisation (WHO), which provides information about COVID-19 in six languages on its website. This includes data, text, images and videos.
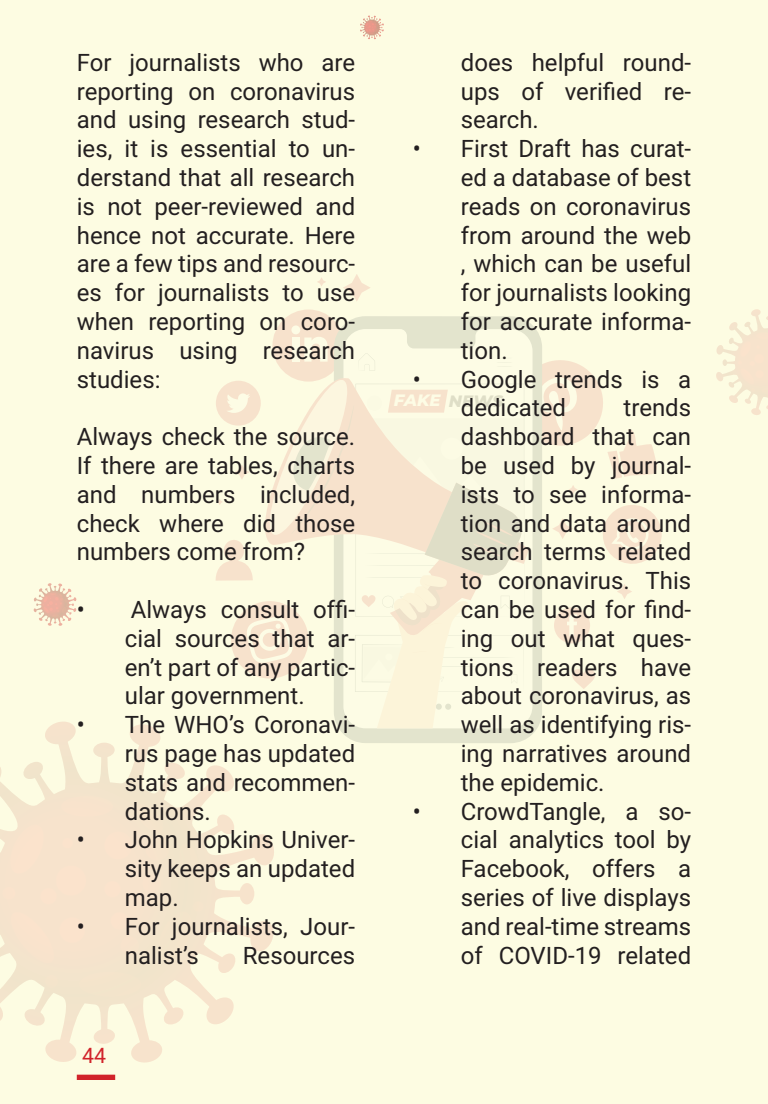
The website also contains information about rumours that are spreading online. WHO has developed a WhatsApp bot that can provide necessary information and statistics, which journalists can use to debunk myths and false information.

Reuters looked at scientific research studies published on the novel coronavirus since the outbreak began. Of the 153 studies identified, 92 were not peer-reviewed yet, and a few studies included some pretty outlandish and unverified claims , like linking coronavirus to HIV or snake-to-human transmission.

Reuters says that "speed science", which is speedy research and analysis of scientific issues, can be useful if it is reasonable and accurate. Still, if it is flawed or misleading, it can cause panic, encourage risky behaviour, make people take wrong cure measures, or make the disease worse by prompting policy decisions before the data has been adequately researched[52].

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52   https://graphics.reuters.com/CHINA-HEALTHRE
      SEARCH/0100B5ES3MG/index.html

For journalists who are reporting on coronavirus and using research studies, it is essential to understand that all research is not peer-reviewed and hence not accurate. Here are a few tips and resources for journalists to use when reporting on coronavirus using research studies:

Always check the source. If there are tables, charts and numbers included, check where did those numbers come from?

- Always consult official sources that aren't part of any particular government.
- The WHO's Coronavirus page has updated stats and recommendations.
- John Hopkins University keeps an updated map.
- For journalists, Journalist's Resources does helpful round-ups of verified research.
- First Draft has curated a database of best reads on coronavirus from around the web , which can be useful for journalists looking for accurate information.
- Google trends is a dedicated trends dashboard that can be used by journalists to see information and data around search terms related to coronavirus. This can be used for finding out what questions readers have about coronavirus, as well as identifying rising narratives around the epidemic.
- CrowdTangle, a social analytics tool by Facebook, offers a series of live displays and real-time streams of COVID-19 related

posts from social media that can be used by journalists and newsrooms to keep track of information.

False and misleading stories

A group of researchers from MIT found in 2018 that stories that trigger an emotional response are shared more than straight news stories. N euroscientists have confirmed that people are more likely to remember stories that make them angry, sad, or laugh. This way, reckless sharing of information and false claims can undermine trust overall, which for journalists and newsrooms can be harmful to their professional reputations.

First Draft has come up with a few tips to avoid sharing misleading and false stories[53].

- If a story is too good to be true, too funny, too infuriating, too sweet, too outrageous, it probably is. In this case, it is recommended that the journalists should go to the source and check its accuracy before using it in their report.
- Other news outlets might be reporting it, which can be a trap for journalists. But if they are, it doesn't mean the story is verified with the source.
- For more websites and tools to verify content online check

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53   https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/5-tips-ways-wecan-all-covid19-check-coronavirus-information-online-fake-disinformation-misinformation/

out First Draft's verification toolkit and Guide to Verifying Online Information.

Fact-checking

According to UNESCO[54], fact-checking is composed of three phases:

1. Finding fact-checkable claims by scouring through legislative records, media outlets and social media. This process includes determining which major public claims (a) can be fact-checked and (b) ought to be fact-checked.
2. Finding the facts by looking for the best available evidence regarding the claim at hand.
3. Correcting the record by evaluating the claim in light of the evidence, usually on a scale of truthfulness.

As discussed above, there has been a tremendous amount of misinformation on the coronavirus, different organisations and alliances have been working to fact-check and debunk virtual deceptions.

The Corona Virus Fact-Checking Alliance , led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute, has checked more than 1,500 pieces of information from 70 countries in more than 40 languages and the database is still being updated and improved. These are mainly news reports that aren't true or misleading and are an excellent resource for journalists and media organisations reporting the coronavirus.

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54   https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module_5.pdf

AFP Factcheck has also been debunking disinformation as it emerges along with new cases across the world. They have compiled a list of 485 fact-checks in English which can be very useful for journalists and media organisations while reporting the coronavirus.

Meedan's CHECK is a tool for journalists and newsrooms to work together to investigate, debunk, verify, annotate and fact-check online content.

Journalists use different strategies to fact-check their stories.

Here are some useful strategies that some *investigative reporters use to fact-check their long-term projects:*

ProPublica Illinois shares how they do investigative reporting, which is difficult, time-consuming and comes with costs. Their transparency is also crucial for journalism and press in general, mainly so that others can learn from the strategies and for public trust in media institutions.

"This marked-up sheet of paper represents just a fraction of the extensive fact-checking that went into Jason Grotto's story about the error-ridden commercial and industrial property assessments system in Cook County. Jason underlined and assigned a number to every fact in the 4,000-word article. Then he created a spreadsheet that included the fact number, a flag to indicate if it had been checked, a flag for any needed change to the fact, the source of the fact and a notes field for any

other pertinent information about the fact. He did this for 291 f cts. And then he went through and fact-checked the entire story again. Yes, just like Santa, Jason made a list and checked it twice.[55]**"**

Jayme Fraser, a reporter for the Malheur Enterprise and ProPublica Local Reporting Network, uses pen and paper for fact-checking her work, which also makes her slow down, helping in catching errors and problems.

"First, I highlight each fact, detail or quote in green. I use an orange highlighter for proper nouns, titles, or technical terms for which I need to check spelling or proper usage. With a red pen, I go through and circle trigger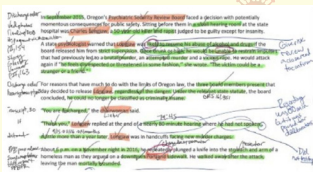 words that need special attention, like "first," "only," or "most." I usually start by going through all the orange highlights first to get them out of the way. It also makes it easier to notice if you spell a certain word/name multiple ways. I use two pens as I do the fact-checking. **With black, I put a checkmark on things I have confirmed and write short citations for them in the left margin of the page.** (Usually, these citations are the short name of the original document and the page number.) When I find an error, I circle it in blue and write the correction or my

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55   https://www.propublica.org/article/calculating-the-work-behind-our-work

lingering question in the right margin. When I used one colour, it was too easy for me to miss fixes in the sea of checkmarks and citations, so I started using a separate colour to make the changes stand out .[56]**"**

help journalists in maintaining accuracy, and a few minutes of extra work are worthwhile and can save the damage an error causes[57].

For dailes and short deadlines, journalists can follow the following guidelines for fact-checking:

Stories for quick submission require less work for fact-check as opposed to the long term projects discussed above.

Journalists need to verify and do a final fact-check before submitting a piece and checklists are beneficial in this regard, especially when the deadline is short. Checklists can

It is usually said that journalists are always short on time, and fact-checking is a tedious process which requires hours. However, experts say that for most stories, running through a checklist takes only 10 to 15 minutes and simply requires working the checks into the workflow of reporting, writing and fact-checking[58].

56   https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGj3Bn2CAd1_Uf6NE3tjH
      7CXkjcSlfU1U6Vy52Bgr7M/edit
57   https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MGj3Bn2CAd1_Uf6NE3tjH
      7CXkjcSlfU1U6Vy52Bgr7M/edit
58   http://mediashift.org/2015/02/journalism-professors-should-teach-
      accuracy-checklists/

Detroit Free Press has developed an accuracy checklist designed to cover the key newsroom roles of reporter, assigning editor, copy editor, photographer, photo editor, page designer and artist. Journalists can use this resource once they have completed their verification process to ensure that their story is accurate.

According to other journalists, in case of very tight deadlines, they fact check the following information: proper nouns, numbers and quotes[59].

GUIDE
Red - statements can't be fact checked
Orange - statements are in between
Green - statements can be fact checked

UNESCO highlights a simple process that can be useful when the deadlines are short. Once the story is finished, the journalist can highlight statements that can be fact-checked in green, on the screen to save time.

Once this is done, break down each statement into the following five categories to fact-check[60].

Proximity	How close is the evidence to the phenomenon?
Expertise	What credentials indicate the quality of the producer of the evidence?
Rigour	How was the evidence collected?
Transparency	What do you know about the evidence?
Reliability	Is there a track record to evaluate?

59
60 https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/module_5.pdf