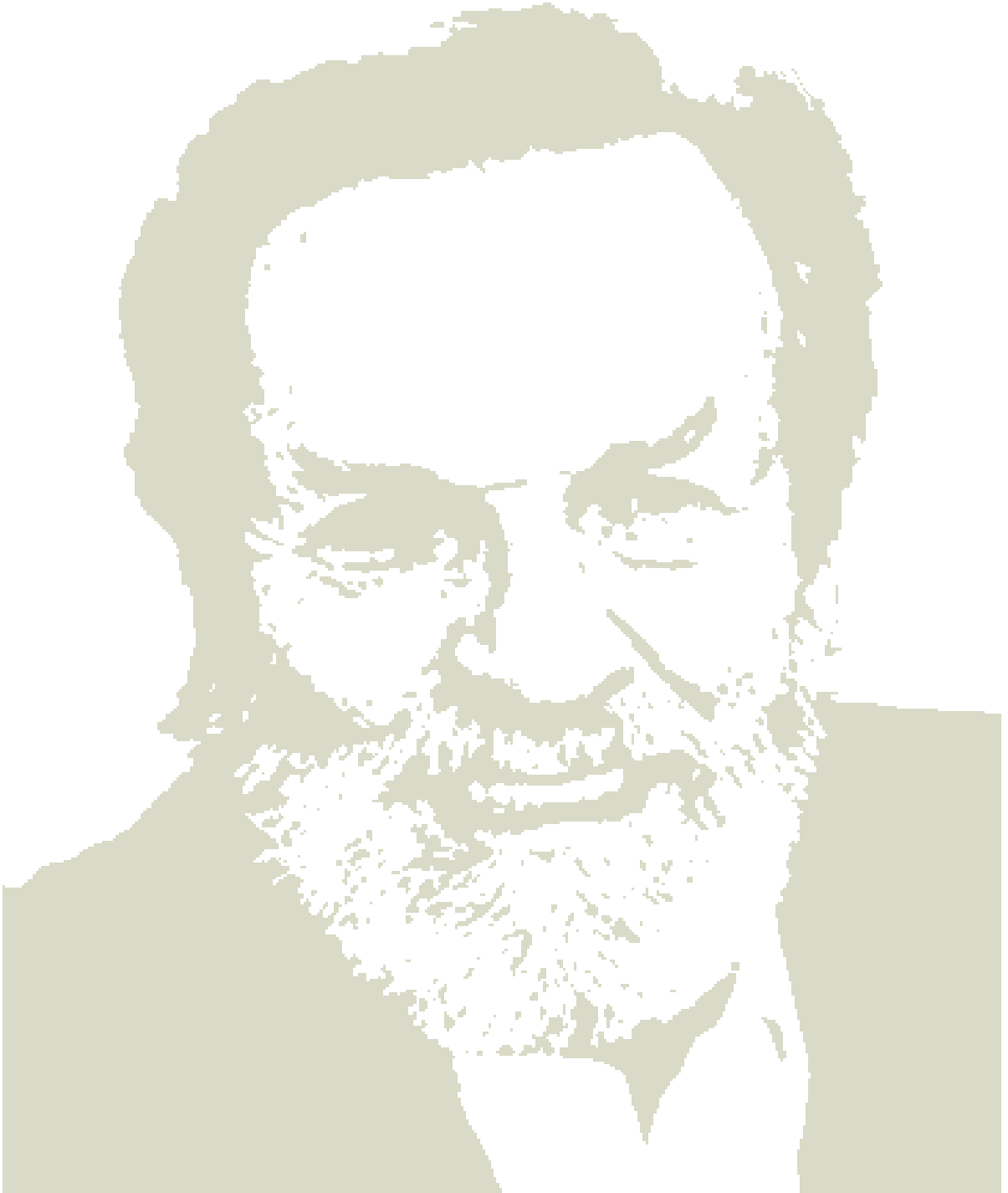


FAKE NEWS

& INFORMATION LITERACY



PeaceX



We are drowning in information but are starved for knowledge.

-John Naisbitt



CONTEXT

Journalism has been given the mammoth responsibility of shouldering the cause of principled neutrality and the dissemination of information. A journalist acts as a voice which conveys different views, outlooks and perspectives experienced in a society, not only of the powerful and wealthy. Journalism builds a base for freedom of expression and hence, is a very powerful medium.

But is modern journalism evolving? Does **Pinocchio** now lead our quest for knowledge? It is this, and more, that *PeaceX* desires to explore in its research on the topic: **Fake News & Information Literacy**.



OVERVIEW

The phenomenon of Information Disorder, in the form of fake news, misinformation, mal-information and dis-information, **plagues the 21st Century**. It is an old story in a new era: the spread of disinformation has been accelerated by technology. As the Clickbait Culture influences the most common sources of information, the instinct that guides us to trust these stands in danger.

Political, economic, ecological, and social transformation are fundamentally reshaping our communications landscape and raising questions about the quality, impact and credibility of the information being disseminated. Manipulation of half-truths via misinformation and unwitting sharing of fake news have led to mistrust and scepticism.

SDG 16 aims to guarantee public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

This research on **Fake News & Information Literacy** questioned our very understanding of social media as we perceive it today. One has to understand the potential risks of encountering misinformation digitally, whether in form of fake news, fraudulent message or spammed pop-ups. With ever increasing traction on such platforms, it becomes even more crucial to mitigate such risks.

The motive of *PeaceX* was to create awareness through dialogue to see how fake news affect our lives and how can we tackle it. For this a study was conducted to study how people perceive information literacy. This was followed by an exclusive webinar by veteran journalist and columnist of Nandini magazine, **Ms. Maini Mahanta**.

The event recorded over 1300 registrations from 45+ countries across the globe. Majority of the participants were from India and the Philippines. The exclusive discussion was broadcasted live on the Facebook handle of *PeaceX*.

1300+
REGISTRATIONS

FROM

45+
COUNTRIES



LIST OF COUNTRIES

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Afghanistan | Indonesia | Philippines |
| ALGERIA | Kenya | Qatar |
| Azerbaijan | Lebanon | Saudi Arabia |
| Bahamas | Liberia | Sierra leone |
| Bangladesh | Libya | South Africa |
| Belgium | Malawi | Sri Lanka |
| Bhutan | Malaysia | Tajikistan |
| Brunei Darussalam | Mauritania | Chad |
| Cambodia | Morocco | Trinidad and Tobago |
| Cameroon | Mozambique | Turkey |
| Egypt | Myanmar | Uganda |
| Ethiopia | Nepal | Ukraine |
| France | Nigeria | United Kingdom |
| Ghana | North Macedonia | Uzbekistan |
| Haiti | Pakistan | Zimbabwe |
| India | | |



Map: Countries from where majority of registrations were received

INITIAL RESEARCH

The study was conducted by circulating a digital form amongst youth groups, think tanks, community pages and social organizations. Social media played a crucial role in allowing the form to spread to diverse communities and to collect their insights.

The form was able to capture 1300+ responses from over 45 countries. The key observation was that every 4 out of 5 individual believed that misinformation affected them and their lives.

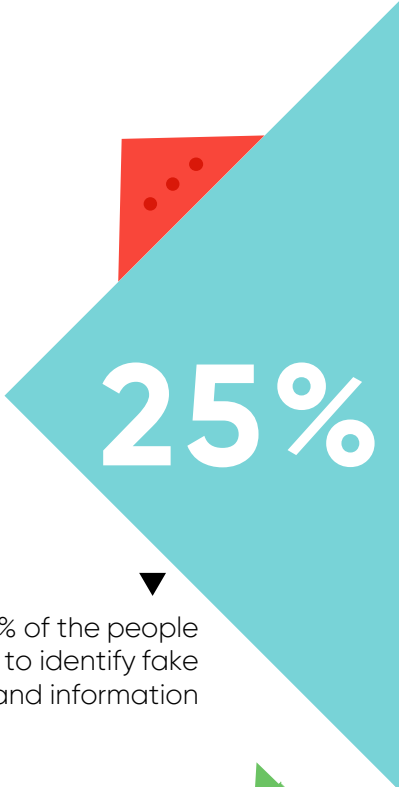
The more serious concern under this study was that though individual were aware of the existence of fake news, still 1 out of every 4 wasn't able to identify it.

PeaceX tried to engage in dialogue with them and asked the participants to send in their queries and doubts pertaining to information literacy while inviting them to be part of the discussion which was to be conducted in form of a webinar. Some of the most common areas of discussion were:

- “How to identify Fake News?”
- “As the Internet affords anyone to be a content creator, do you think this has diluted Journalism in any way?”
- “What is the role of youth in such crisis?”



► About 80% of the respondents felt that fake news and misinformation affects their day to day life



▼ Approximately 25% of the people aren't able to identify fake messages and information



Image Credit: Martin Elfman

70%

Approximately 70% of respondents believe that by cross checking information with source and through media literacy campaigns, one can tackle fake news and misinformation.

An important observation was that **people have begun to get aware of the concept of misinformation** and were interested in knowing how to tackle it. Alongside this, they were also asked to put forward questions they would like to be specially discussed during the webinar.

With overwhelming responses, it was observed that the main questions of the participants were:

- *How to correct misinformation?*
- *How are we going to deal with the proliferating fake news on social media? How are we going to stop people from spreading misleading information?*
- *What are the legal actions a person can do when he or she encounters or experiences damage from false information especially when it's about himself or herself?*
- *What is the motive for circulation of fake news?*
- *How can we empower journalism or mass media in times of widespread and toleration of fake news?*
- *How will you encourage teenagers to read journals, newspapers, etc. These days?*
- *How the youth with knowledge about fake news and information literacy can help the people who are blindly following every kind of news and information sources?*

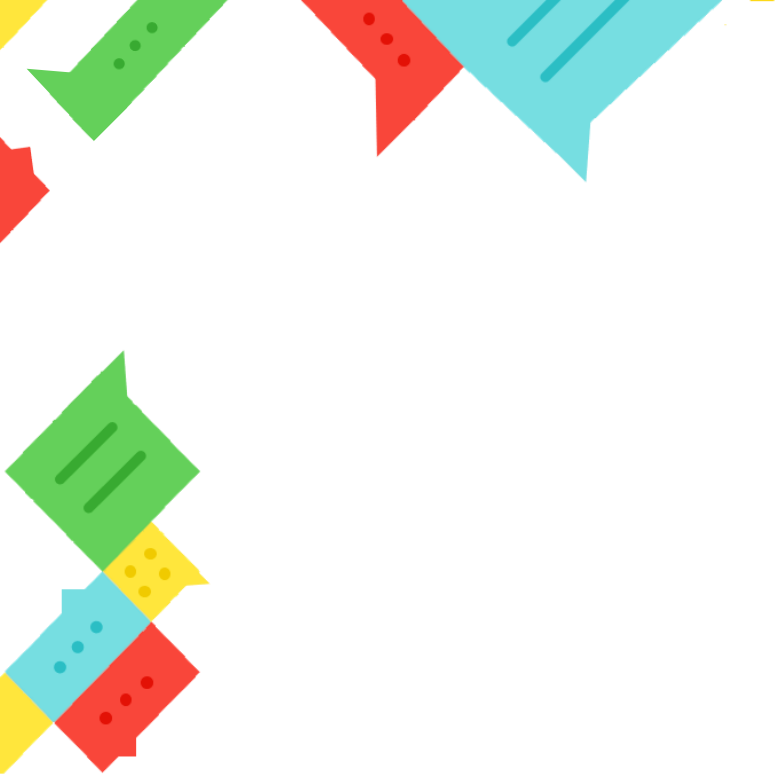




WEBINAR

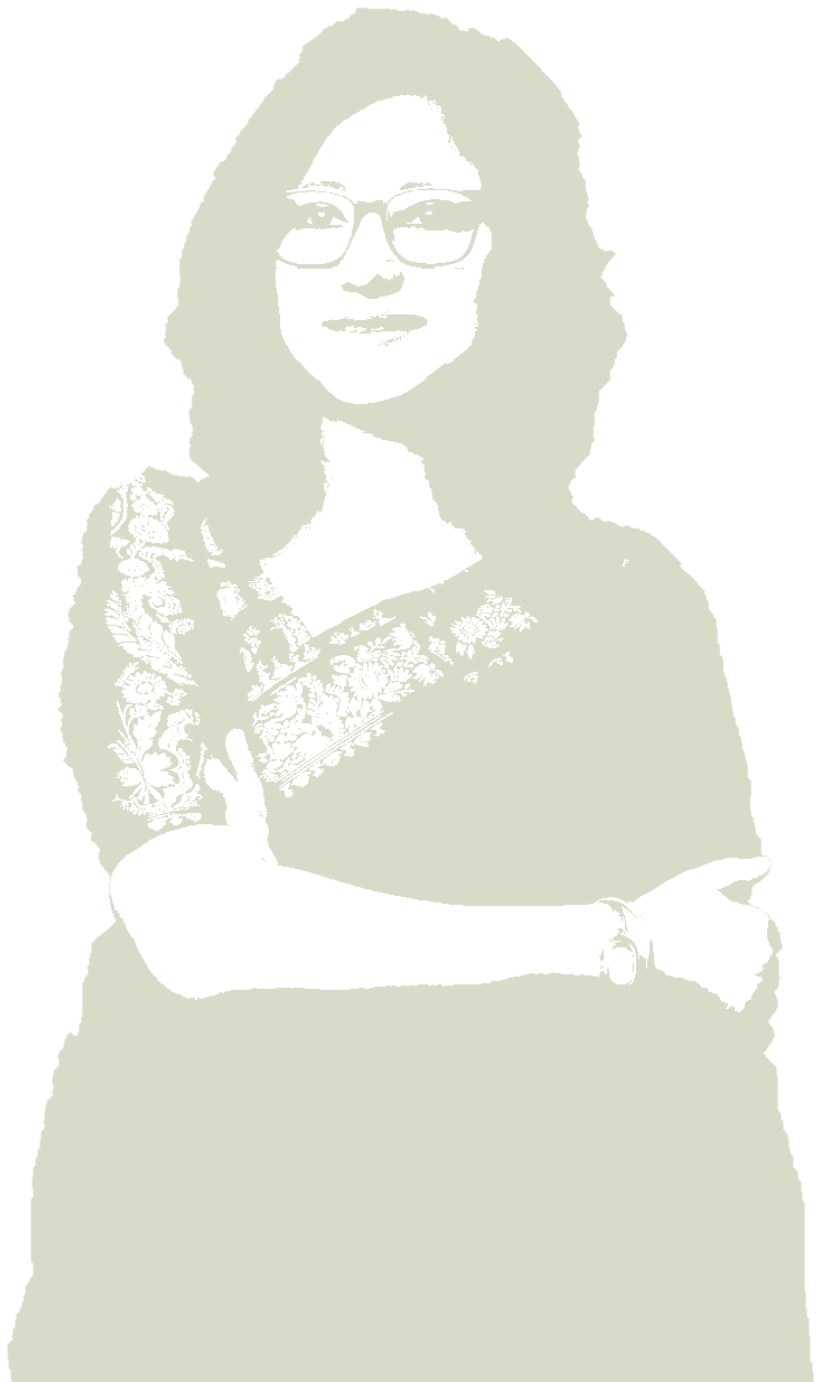
On **Thursday, September 24, 2020**, *PeaceX* organized its webinar on the topic Fake news & Information Literacy. The webinar was made live on the Facebook handle to ensure that participants from diverse areas can easily access it.

The speaker for the webinar was **Ms. Maini Mahanta**. She is a veteran journalist, author, columnist and social commentator; and is the Editor of the Nandini magazine, a momentous Assamese publication on women's issues. She is an eminent television personality who has published twelve books to her credit. Ms Mahanta is also a pioneer in various social movements.



Ms. Maini ◀ Mahanta

Editor, Nandini Magazine



1

What are your views on fake news and its impacts on different domains of life?

Ms. Mahanta registered her pleasure on being invited to speak on the topic and noted the aptness of the topic of fake news especially in this age of social media. She preluded her answer to this question with an ancient war story which had elements of fake news in the age of Mahabharata. This sought to make the point that fake news has been an age-old phenomenon and it is in fact not a new concept.

News, which is unreal, untrue that is intentionally or inadvertently spread is fake news. However, fake news is much more advanced today and it poses significant threat to the well-being of society. It is very dangerous especially in India. She cited a sociologist in the Google executive who made a dire statement that fake news will destroy our civilization in 20 years, and this puts into perspective the danger of misinformation and disinformation.

What do you think is the motive behind spreading fake news? Is it just to attract more people?

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2

What is the role of governments especially local governments in handling this problem?

3

On this, Ms Mahanta posited that government's role is paramount in curbing this problem. There must be laws to punish perpetrators of fake news. It is quite easy for fake news spreaders to get away with it and this emboldens them. However, she doubts that governments will do much about the issue because they in fact use fake news to propel their own political agenda. Governments must realize that they have to do something because a Microsoft and BBC survey found out that India is suffering a serious fake news epidemic especially when it comes to issues of nationalism. In fact, a Twitter MIT survey showed that fake news spreads six times faster than authentic news.

She went further to attribute this to the fact people seem to like fake news more. So, governments must do something and if not, then the young people must take charge and change the system or risk destroying our society.

4

How can the youth play a part in promoting information literacy and to address hate speech without jeopardizing freedom of expression in a sovereign state like ours?

Youngsters should play a leading role in this challenge especially in today's world. This webinar is very good work from youngsters like you she noted. These are the ways to raise people's awareness by educating them on the dangers of fake news. An instance is a teacher being abused in a Delhi school as a result of fake news. Raising awareness of people is the key.

Remember every news is fake news so always fact-check especially in India fake news is serious. It is very difficult to recognize fake news especially now that data has become the new oil. Our data is being used to understand us even more than we know ourselves so it is easier for tech companies to target us with news that will appeal to us even when it is fake. It is very tough to control fake news and there is no one word solution.

5

So since nature of fake news is changing, what can we categorize as fake news and how can we identify and prevent its dissemination?

Ms. Mahanta acknowledged that is a very complex question that everyone is grappling with at the moment. So there is no straightforward answer for it because it is a difficult task. Identifying fake news and preventing it is a mammoth task. In fact, the situation has deteriorated so much that almost every piece of news is fake news in a sense. Every news channel is rushing for bad news because that is what attracts ratings. Additionally, it is no longer only humans who generate fake news but bots,

AI can get a lot of fake news that seems very real. News is used to not only divide people but to target specific groups of people. An example would be using same piece of news and frame it in different ways to suit different groups to meet a specific interest. However, to counter this, we must ensure that we do not accept news from one source without verifying its veracity. We must always analyze the news and uncover the reason behind it. We must always read in between the lines. Always see the news from different perspectives and agencies to be able to ensure authenticity. Everyone must be very alert and attentive nowadays.

What are the solutions to tackle these political and money-making motives of fake news?

According to Ms. Mahanta, this is a very difficult task. The best and simplest way to tackle the menace of fake news is to avoid social media but she states that its impossible to avoid. Social is the main source and conductor of fake news. She suggested that the audience read the book titled: *Alone Together* which outlines how we want more from technology than we want from each other.

She suggested that if we cannot avoid social media, we should at least turn off the notification bell to reduce the distractions. It has become a habit for people to read a WhatsApp news and share without fact-checking it and that is dangerous. We should at all times take into account ethical concerns and authenticity before sharing information.

6



DIALOGUE

Throughout the webinar, live chat was made available to participants so that they could send in their thoughts and questions. Over **4,000 engagements** were generated in the process, with the comment section of the Facebook Live getting filled with queries, remarks and opinions.

The speakers tried to answer some of the questions which were asked while the rest of the questions have been documented. The participants were also asked to fill a post webinar form so that a condensed insight could be gazed.



Image Credit: Collins Dictionary

1

How can we resolve a conflict erupts from intentional or unintentional dissemination of false information?

This is very difficult nowadays because not only humans create fake news, but algorithms and AI create very realistic fake news that can spread very fast on social media. Unlike old days where fake news spread slowly by word of mouth. Unintentional spread of fake news maybe controllable through education but intentional spread of false news is harder to control.

We see how tech companies use these tactics to influence politics as seen in India and even the 2016 presidential election. Although, it is hard to avoid social media, we should mute notifications so as to tame the spirit of spreading fake news. Governments must institute strong laws to control these criminals but its very tough and no one seems able to control these big tech corporations who make a lot of money through fake news.

2

How do you think factors such as literacy and education relate to fake news and its circulation?

Ms. Mahanta pointed out that she does not necessarily see a relationship between education and spread of fake news. She noted cases where highly educated people blindly accept fake news without even vetting it. They do not even think twice about it. Now we see on university campuses spreading fake news.

Fake news has evolved and includes a lot of statistical data that may fool even the educated people. Furthermore, she argued that educated people spread more fake news than even the uneducated ones.

3

Do you think there are pre-existing conditions against women which leads to an increasingly vicious cycle of fake news and persecution?

Earlier, women were targets of fake news even before technology. Many fake news publications about women were made and this brought suffering and death to women. Today, fake news systems are much more advanced and fake news spreads much faster.

Just as women of the olden days fell victim to fake news, modern day women fall victim to fake news today and this is more widespread because of technology.

4

Do you the law is an effective measure to curb fake news?

Ms. Mahanta acknowledged that yes there should be strong laws to curb the problem but she again pointed out that governments may be hesitant to do it. She states that crime rates rise when criminals feel comfortable and believe that they can get away with committing the crime. Therefore, there should pressure from all of us to ensure that laws are passed to control misinformation.

5

What would be the strategy to develop information and media literacy at school level?

School level is the best period to make children aware of fake news because it is much harder to convince adults once their brains are set. Children should be educated to watch out for fake news and always think twice. We should also try to limit their usage of social media until they are old enough. In fact, she cited that it is good to note that tech geeks do not allow their kids to use social media. Children must be shielded from social media.

6

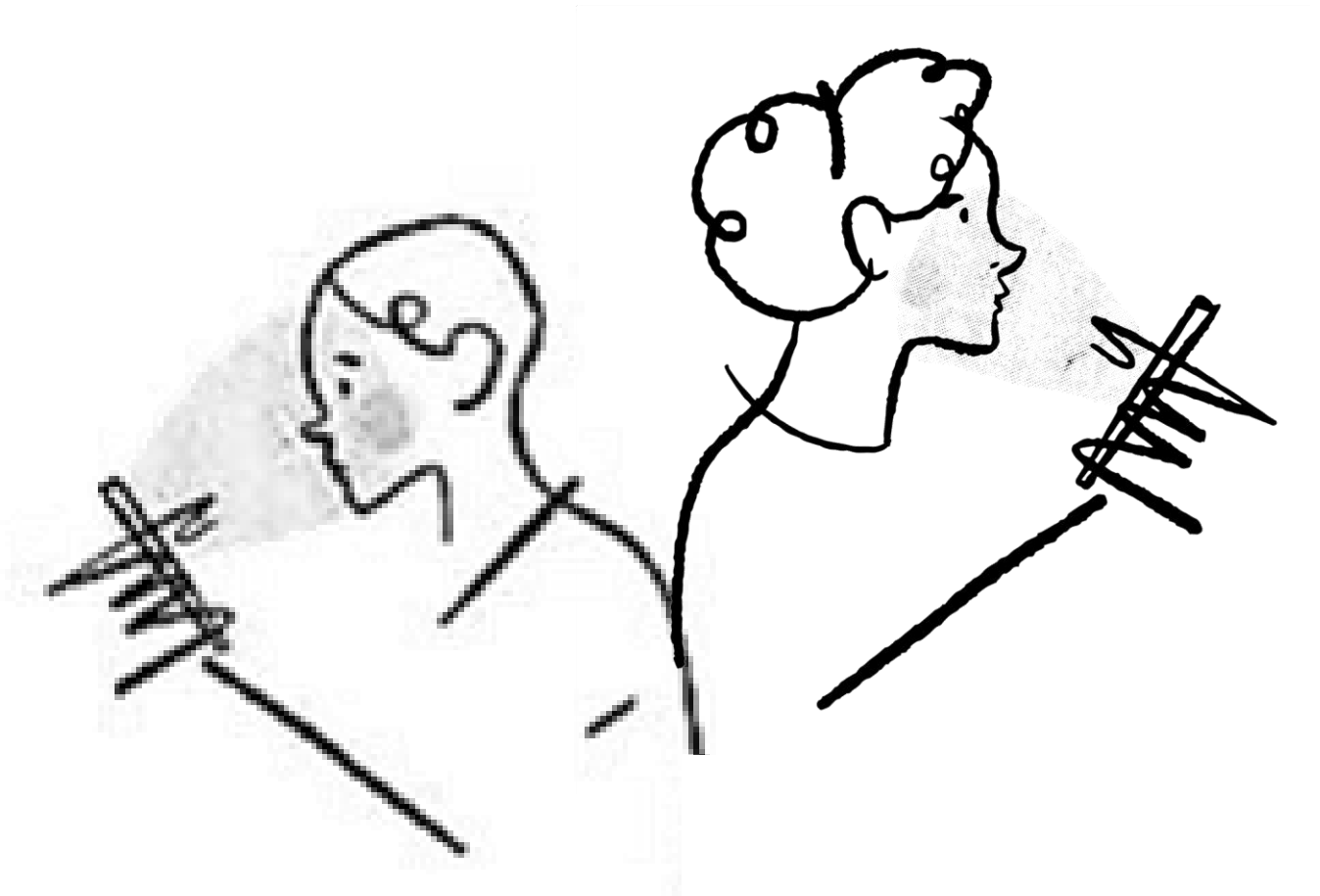
Since data is the new oil, how do you think advertising uses fake news?

We use Facebook but we do not pay for it so always remember that if you are not paying for the product, then you are the product. Advertisers use Facebook to target you for their products that can be potentially dangerous or even to drive you towards certain political ideologies. There is a lot of fake information on various products that can harm our health.

7

Do you think some media outlets have become the judge, jury and the executioner based on fake news?

Yes, the media has become all powerful even though their role should just be to disseminate news and not sensationalize it. She cited instances of border conflicts in India where news anchors do not report the facts but instead become carried away by emotions. Media personalities should disengage themselves from the news. In a lot of cases, media outlets become judges, juries, and executioners even before actual courts decide on a case.



-The Judge, The Jury, The Executioner

8

What is the role of institutions such as the state and media in circulating fake news?

She agreed that the media's role is very important. Even though she is a veteran media personality herself, she admitted that a lot media houses are very aggressive in spreading fake news. She considers some news as fake because as she mentioned earlier most of the top news is presented from a very biased perspective that seeks to serve a certain interest including their own. Media houses can sensationalize news to drive ratings or support or oppose a political group.

9

How do you think fake news and information illiteracy has furthered biases against groups like women?

In fact, women suffer more from fake news and there have been instances of women being labelled as witches and bad omens. Women have been killed and tortured because of fake news. A woman was tortured as a result of fake news labelling her as a trafficker. Women are easy targets especially in a patriarchal society like India.

Women are stereotyped as tom boys or acting in ways that are not in line with their gender roles. Women work so hard every day and night, but society mostly tries to stop women from reaching their goals. So, in essence it is worse for women when it comes to the impacts of fake news.

10

Is ethical journalism possible in this age of fake news?

As a person involved in journalism, Mahanta expressed that she cannot say that ethical journalism is not possible, but she is bound to say that ethical journalism is not used by many in the field of journalism. Most media houses in Delhi are running what is called TRP which basically means that whatever people like is what the media houses run because otherwise it will affect their viewership and consequently advertisement money. So, to raise their TRP, media houses can even create news to attract advertisement money.

To change this, young people must come out and join the media. She cited some young people who used the YouTube channel to present accurate news. As it is, some journalists are paid to create or present fake news. So, to bring back ethical journalism, youngsters must join the fray because it is only, they who can bring meaningful change.

11

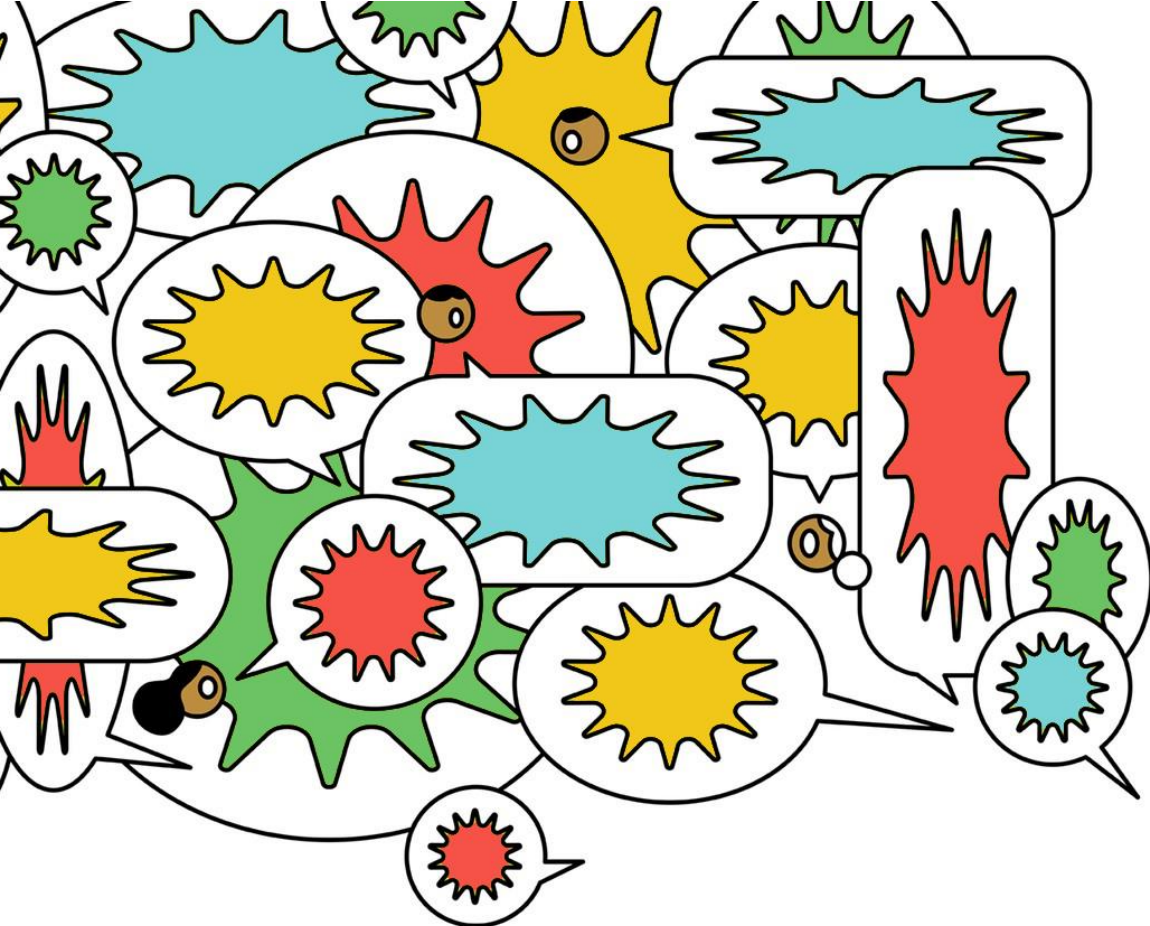
Do you think we are taking adequate steps to move towards data regulation and curb the extent to which it can be used?

If it is possible, data regulation would be helpful, but the situation is very tough nowadays considering that at every moment of everyday, we are revealing and sharing data on our electronic gadgets. We share our favourite restaurants, food, sports and so on. Google keeps asking about our likes and logging our movements. The more we use the technology, the more we give our data. Health apps, surveillance apps and so on is all collected and saved somewhere online. According to her we can just say that technology knows us better than we ourselves. There should be regulations for sure.

LIVE QUESTIONS

- What sort of punishment should be given to those and counter attack people spreading fake news?
- What can be done to stop the spread of fake news ? How can one get away from those fake stuffs ?
- Knowing the great effect of fake news, any ideas or thoughts on how we should educate our people about this misinformation and disinformation?
- How can we keep the youth motivated in changing the system?
- Do you think the prevalence of fake news will become more evident during the ongoing pandemic crisis?
- You have said that one way for us to avoid Fake news is limiting our time on using our social media accounts, what do u think is the best thing we can do to limit ourselves from using it? Should you suggest steps or ways?
- What is the impact of fake news on Sexual Gender-Based Violence?
- How can we remove this fake news by education?
- What persuasive strategies make fake news seem to be true?
- Which government body to contact if we found any fake news around?

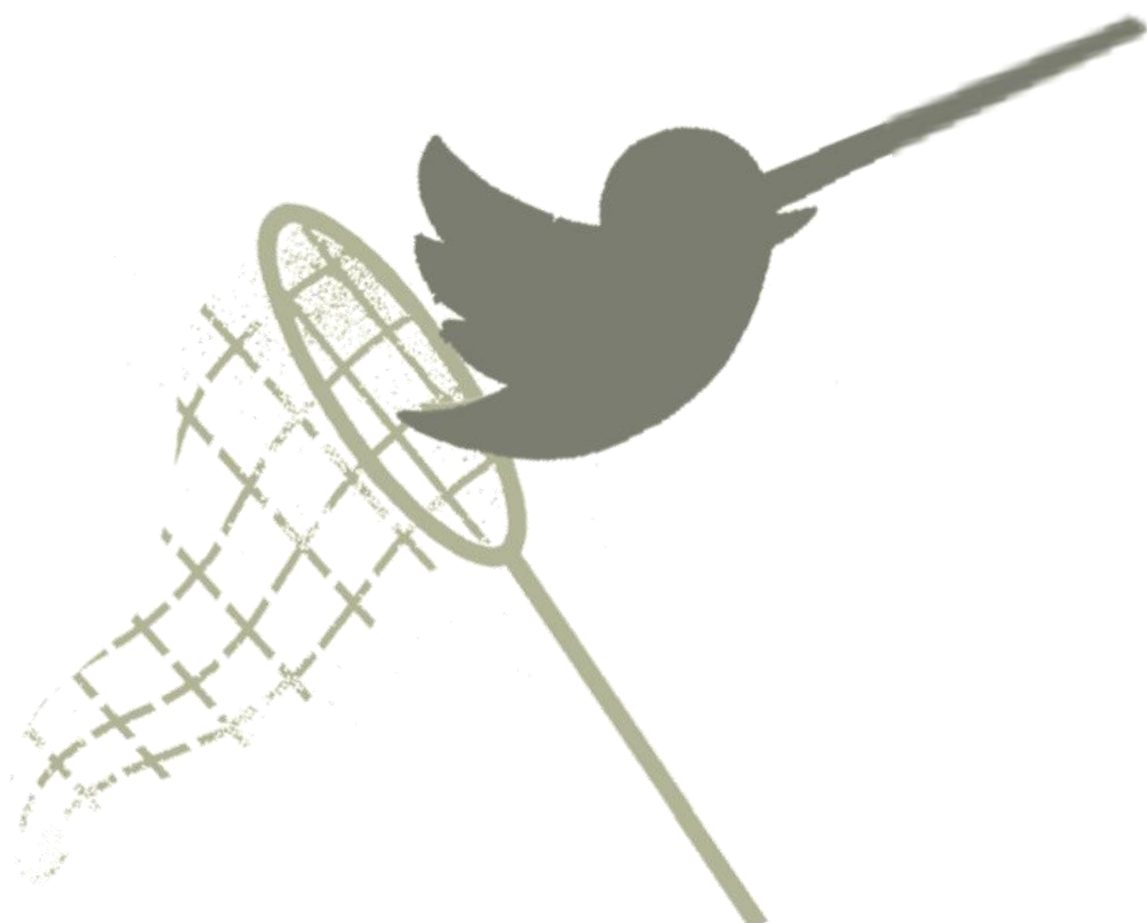




POST WEBINAR

95%

About 95% of the participants responded in the post webinar form that they are better equipped in handling fake news and are prepared to tackle it.



"My nose grows now!"
said Pinocchio



CONCLUSION

The important takeaway from the webinar is that people are getting acquainted with the concept of fake news and they have begun to provide significant diligence to tackle them in their lives. This would synergize the current usage of social media, and make these a resourceful platform for spreading awareness and acquiring knowledge.

Being equipped with basics on how to identify misinformation, what is the impact of ignoring them and how to mitigate risks become key in browsing through this digital era.

THOUGHTS AHEAD

Thank you for the very informative webinar, indeed social media has a great impact especially in gathering information. We should be careful nowadays in choosing the right information that we encountered.

Rizza Mae G. Vega

The respective topic of the webinar session should be further influenced amongst the society. Why because many of citizens belongs from the village background faced lots of trouble by social media sites. It should be further spread to the literally backward area.

Jwngthaigiri Khakhalary

Indeed Information Literacy campaign is a really good approach esp. if your target audience are students and professionals. Now, How would u further advocate your campaign on communities residing at far-flung areas considering the illiteracy rate?

Brelyn Mae P. Belmores





PeaceX is an international amity and peace organization that stands atop the ideals of harmonious co-existence with a cooperative nexus of youth across the world. It believes in effectuating a better order through cultivation of a new generation of leaders who provide for the creation of a more responsible, accountable, inclusive and sustainable world.