

# CGS PEACE REPORT

*an initiative of BPO*

CGS  
CENTRE FOR  
GENOCIDE  
STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA



Volume 4, Issue 3  
July-August 2020

*\*Published on 5 January 2021.  
Delayed because of Covid-19 pandemic.*

**What's the  
opposite of  
rumour?**

**fact, evidence, proof, quiet,  
silence, truth, confirm,  
conceal, tell truth, hard facts**



**Crime and Violence in  
Bangladesh:**  
An analysis from BPO

**Countering COVID-19  
'Infodemic': Global &  
Regional Overview**

**'Dead men tell no lies'—  
Rumors and Social Tension  
during the COVID-19  
Pandemic in Bangladesh**

**Profiling Rumors associated  
with COVID-19 in Social  
Media**

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*an initiative of*  
**BPO- Bangladesh Peace Observatory**



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## From the Editor's Desk

Rumour makes more noise than regular conversation. But that is precisely what it is supposed to do if we look at the etymology of the word. Its earliest reference in the English language is found in 1380 in Geoffrey Chaucer's translation of Anicius Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and was used in the sense of 'unsubstantiated report, hearsay or gossip.' Chaucer, in fact, borrowed the word from Old French *rumour*, which meant 'widespread noise,' while the Old French use of the word came from Latin *rumor*, which meant 'noise, clamor, report or common talk.' Interestingly, the Bangla translation of 'rumour' as গুজব (*gujab*), which originated from the Farsi (Persian) *gujafa*, meaning জনরব (widespread noise), came to be used only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the litterateurs, and the most prominent of them would be Rabindranath Tagore. This late use of the word could be for the reason of similarity between rumour and gossip, and the South Asian languages, including Bangla, already had a word for it under the expression, *kutanami*. The expression originated from *kuta*, *kuitila*, *Kautilya* or whatever is uttered or practiced in the 'name of Chanakya Kautilya,' the foremost strategist of the 3rd century BC, whose theories and practices became *kutaniti* (the *niti* or laws of Kautilya), which later became the word for 'diplomacy' in South Asia.

By 19<sup>th</sup> century, the habit of *kutanami* must have become so common and a socializing factor within the private realm of households that it probably created space for the Persian word *gujafa* to get localized into *gujab* and come into prominence in the public. This, of course, is in addition to the Persian being the court and administrative language of the Mughals and of colonial British India until 1835. But then, rumour may have been *gujab* or 'widespread noise' in Bangla, the public were soon warned not to listen to the 'noise' (গুজবে কান দিবেন না; don't listen to rumours)! This is easier said than done, unless of course one chooses to remain earplugged and tightlipped round the clock.

But rumour is such a sly that it knows even to bypass noise! Kautilya too was aware of it and therefore came with a directive for the state officials in the form of a metaphor, "দেয়ালেরও কান আছে" (walls have ears), so better be careful! The West, however, Orientalized almost everything by 19<sup>th</sup> century, partly out of fascination for the Orient and partly for the reason of reproducing hegemony or intellectual domination over the rest of the world. Neither 'rumour' nor 'gossip' could escape from Orientalism, and soon began to be called, 'Chinese whispers'! Keeping aside the reference to the Chinese, the transformation of rumour from 'noise' to 'whisper' is fortuitously in the direction of technological development with damaging outcomes. This, of course, has nothing to do with Orientalism. Rather, the development of technology has helped rumour to spread at an astonishing speed and become 'common talk' in different parts of the world without

subjecting itself to clamor or noise. But then, the transformation of rumour from noise to noiseless has made it even more menacing, indeed, with the 'walls' now literally having 'ears'! Nothing could be more dangerous than rumour becoming noiseless and 'going viral,' albeit with the aid of modern technology, during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, we now have a new word for rumour - 'infodemic,' the epidemic and now pandemic of noiseless information!

How do we then get out of this? Just like a virus, 'rumour' or *gujab* would continue to co-exist with humans. Only immunity and vaccines can contain what is already there, not what would emerge out of mutation in the future. If preventive public health measure like handwashing, wearing mask and maintaining physical distance are recommended for containing dangerous virus, including Covid-19, then the dissemination of evidence-based knowledge, rapid development of anti-fake news apps, and civic responsibility are the critical preventive measure for containing rumour. But then, what would the world be like without *gujab*, without rumour, without *kutanami*? Certainly, boring!

5 January 2021

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# Crime and Violence Update in Bangladesh: An Analysis from BPO

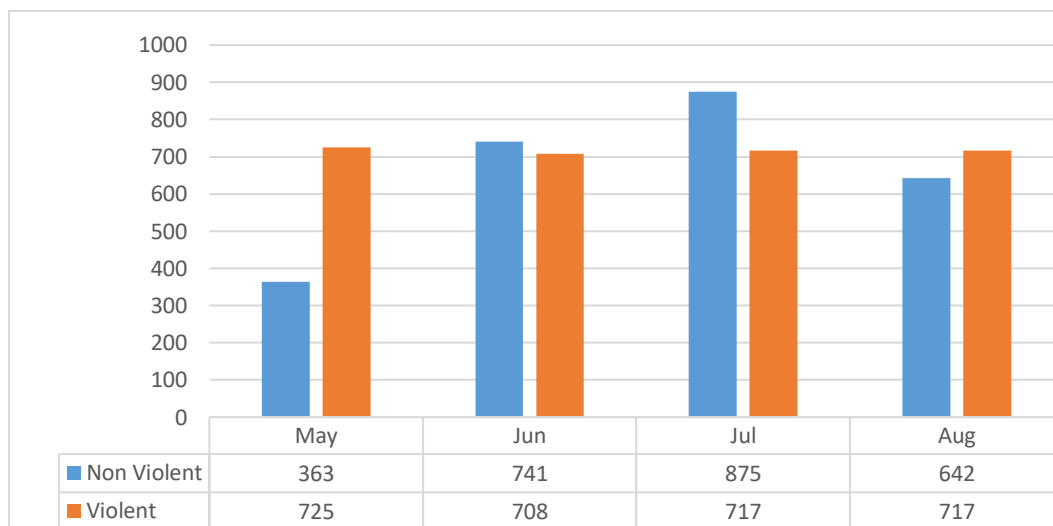
## Violence Update (July-August 2020)

The Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) brings together different streams of publicly available data on violence using news reports from prominent national and regional dailies. From July to August 2020, BPO recorded a total of 1434 violent<sup>1</sup> and 1517 non-violent<sup>2</sup> incidents.

Figure I shows the monthly segregation of the violent and non-violent incidents of May-June and July-August 2020

respectively. Drawing a comparison between these two timelines, one can observe that the pattern of violent incidents remained stable but the non-violent incidents showed an irregular trend. Also, a sharp increase in non-violent incidents is visible in July after a similar jump in the number in the previous months. The number of non-violent incidents went down in August.

**Figure I: Monthly comparison of Violent and Non-violent incidents (May-August 2020)**



<sup>1</sup> **Violent Incident:** According to BPO Codebook: The reported incident involved the intentional use of physical force by an individual or group against another individual or group, in a manner that resulted or could have resulted in death, injury or any other form of physical harm to persons or property.

<sup>2</sup> **Non-violent Incident:** According to BPO Codebook: The reported incident did not involve the intentional use

of physical force by an individual or group against another individual or group, in a manner that resulted or could have resulted in death, injury or any other form of physical harm to persons or property, e.g. Arrest, Peaceful Protest, Rescue and Recovery.

According to BPO data, the overall number of incidents increased by 16.32% in July-August 2020 than the previous two months. Table I summarizes the updates on major violent categories that constitute most of the violent incidents. A brief description of each category is available in the Annex. The table depicts that, incidents under some of the categories like clash, sexual assault, fight, destruction of property have decreased and incidents under assault, abduction/hostage have increased. Other categories depict

nominal fluctuations. It is important to note that, apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh is also experiencing heavy rainfall and flood in recent months in several districts. After 30 May, the public holiday due to the COVID-19 pandemic enforced since 26 March 2020 was withdrawn. However, the educational institutions remained closed. The natural hazard and impact of the pandemic may have influenced the overall crime and violence pattern in this timeline.

**Table I: Comparison of major violence types: From May-June 2020 to July-August 2020**

<b>Major Violence Types</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>August</b>
<i>Assault</i>	462	510	539	524
<i>Clash</i>	100	44	35	66
<i>Sexual assault</i>	56	83	52	77
<i>Gunfight</i>	19	20	39	4
<i>Fight</i>	33	10	6	2
<i>Abduction/hostage</i>	8	16	11	15
<i>Mob violence (large group assault)</i>	4	8	8	7
<i>Destruction of property</i>	12	5	2	8
<i>Unclear</i>	12	8	7	8
<i>Other</i>	9	5	16	9

### **Understanding the High number of Assaults**

BPO enlists the inter-personal attacks carried out by different parties against one person/persons by another person/persons for various motives under

the assault category. The motives include domestic violence, land-related and economic enmity, social-personal rivalry, attacks with criminal intent, suicide attempts, etc. Around 278 cases of suicides and suicide attempts are reported and in those cases, 277 people were killed

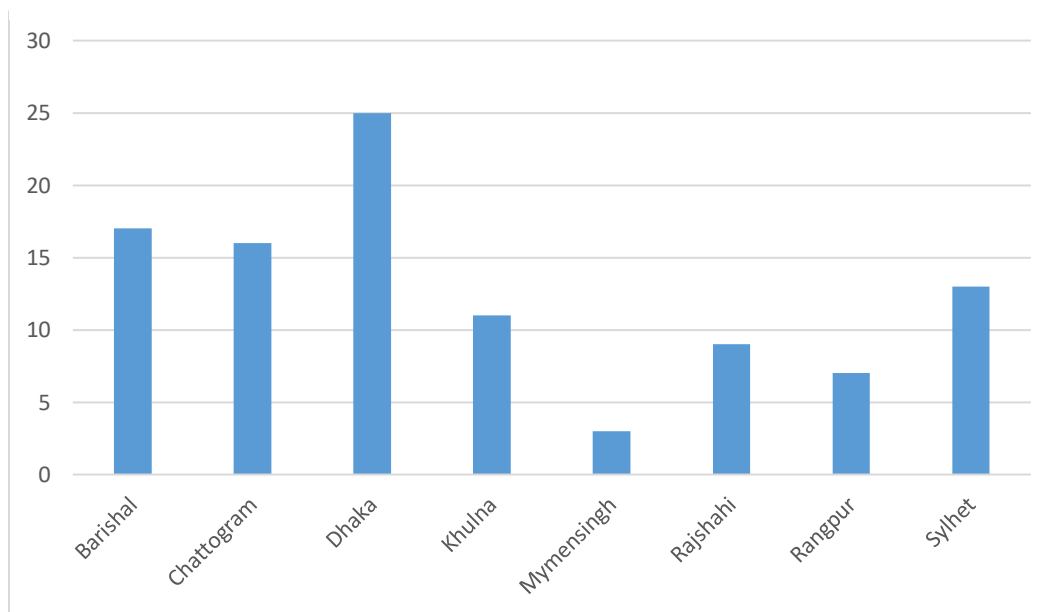
including 164 women. Besides, the recovery of unidentified dead bodies is also enlisted under the assault category.

### Decreasing Number of Clashes

The total number of clashes decreased in July-August than May-June 2020. More clashes took place in August than in July (see Table I). In 101 total clashes reported in July-August 2020, 1069 people were injured including 35 women. There are 10 reports of clashes injuring 25 people and

shows the divisional distribution of the number of clashes in July-August 2020. It suggests that, Dhaka, Barishal, and Chattogram divisions have a higher number of incidents than the rest of the divisions. Table I indicates an interesting trend, the number of clashes dropped suddenly from June after the public holiday was withdrawn on 30 May. Also, several districts in the Dhaka, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Rajshahi divisions which had a higher number of clashes in previous months are

**Figure 2: Divisional distribution of clash incidents: July-August 2020**



over. The main motives of these clashes are political tension, social rivalry, control over land or natural resource, economic and business-related feuds, social and personal trivial matters, etc. Figure 2

affected with heavy flood.<sup>3</sup> One can correlate the decline in the number of clashes as a consequence of this situation.

<sup>3</sup> 'Flood continues to aggravate in different Bangladesh districts', 21 July 2020, Cited in- <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/0>

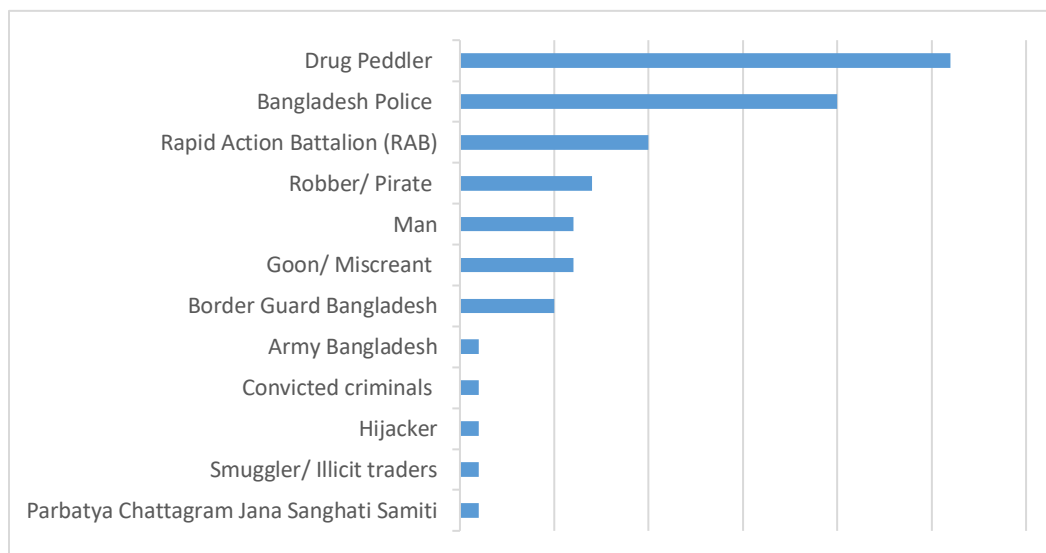
7/21/flood-continues-to-aggravate-in-different-bangladesh-districts , Accessed on- 4 September 2020.

### Nominal Decrease in Sexual Assault

The number of Sexual assault incidents has gone down to 129 in July-August from 139 in May-June 2020. The number is higher in August than in July. Out of 139 victims of sexual assault, 84 were girls under 18 years. Also, young women, homemakers, female garment workers, female students were targeted. Perpetrators of these crimes are mostly men of different ages,

has the highest number of gunfights and August has the lowest number in 2020 so far. In most of the reported news of gunfight that BPO recorded in July-August 2020, Law enforcement agencies and various criminal groups (drug peddlers, smugglers, robbers, convicted criminals, etc.) were involved. Figure 3 depicts the parties involved in gunfights in July-August 2020.

**Figure 3: Actors of gunfight in terms of involvement**



local goon/miscreants, family members, neighbors, teachers, etc. There were seven cases where perpetrators were minor boys.

### Increasing Number of Gunfights

The number of gunfights in July is the same as in May-June, the total number of gunfight incidents in May-June altogether (39). And in August, according to BPO data, the number fell drastically (4). July

One might correlate the sharp decline in gunfights in August to the highly discussed incident of the death of a Retired Army Officer, Sinha Md. Rashed Khan. The incident involved the members of Bangladesh Police and the law enforcement agency endured criticism from the print, television, and social media

platforms.<sup>4</sup> A connection of this incident can be made with the decline in non-violent incidents in August also.

### Decreasing Number of Fights

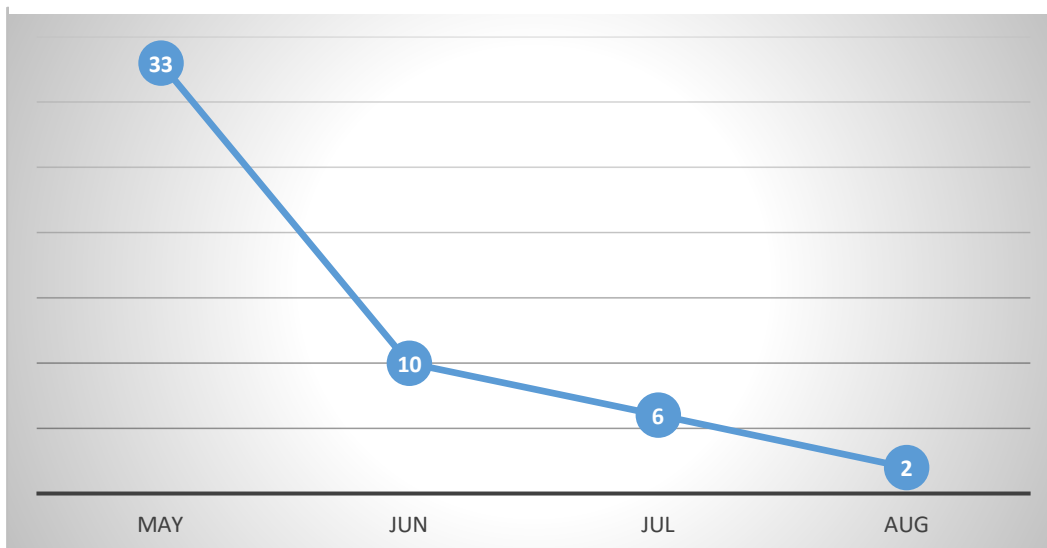
Fight alludes to violent quarrel between a small group of people. In July-August 2020, the number of fights has declined sharply to 8 from 43 in May-June 2020. The major motives of the fights in May-June 2020 were land-related disputes, social and economic rivalry, control over resources and establishing supremacy in the locality, etc. In July-August 2020, according to BPO data, most of the eight fights were fueled

term public holiday from 26 March 2020, as the slope continued going down with the progressing months.

### Violence-Population Nexus

Figure 6 provides a spatial glimpse through the divisional distribution of the recorded incidents and its consequences. The graph illustrates that Chattogram, Dhaka, and Rajshahi are the first, second, and third respectively in terms of incidents and are second, first, and third respectively in terms of the death count. These three divisions are the most populous in Bangladesh.

**Figure 4: Monthly segregation of Fight incidents**



by trivial issues. The decline in number might be correlated with the opening up of the economy after 30 May 2020; a long-

But if the population ratio<sup>5</sup> is applied to understand the incident prevalence and its consequences then a different picture

<sup>4</sup> 'Police repeats the same old story in self-defense', 05 August 2020, Cited in- The Daily Prothom Alo, Pg-1,2.

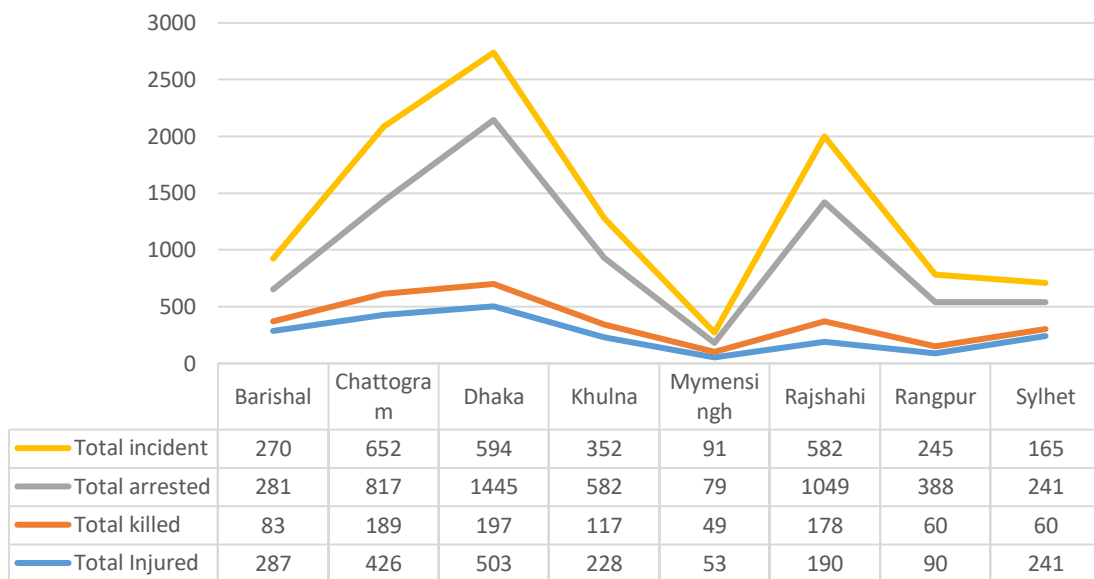
<sup>5</sup> The population data is based on the Population & Housing Census 2011, Bangladesh by the Bangladesh

Bureau of Statistics. Cited in: <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/site/page/47856ad0-7e1c-4aab-bd78-892733bc06eb/Population-and-Housing-Census> , Accessed on 5 September 2020.

emerges. Indeed, if the population ratio is considered then the Barishal division occupies the first position in all the categories. The Rajshahi division is the

second in death rate, incident rate, and female death rate while being the third in the sexual assault rate (see Table 2).

**Figure 5: Divisional distribution of the consequences**



**Table 2: Divisional segregation of incidents and consequences in terms of population: July-August 2020**

Division	Incident	Rate by pop*	Death	Rate by pop*	Female Death	Rate by pop*	Injury	Rate by pop*	Sexual Assault	Rate by pop*
Barishal	270	3.24 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	83	1.00 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	33	0.40 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	287	3.45 (1 <sup>st</sup> )	25	0.30 (1 <sup>st</sup> )
Chattogram	652	2.24	189	0.65	48	0.16	426	1.46 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	16	0.05
Dhaka	594	1.19	197	0.40	76	0.15	503	1.01	27	0.05
Khulna	352	2.24 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	117	0.75 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	39	0.25 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	228	1.45	11	0.07
Mymensingh	91	0.80	49	0.43	23	0.20	53	0.47	2	0.02
Rajshahi	582	3.15 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	178	0.96 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	73	0.39 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	190	1.03	25	0.14 (3 <sup>rd</sup> )
Rangpur	245	1.55	60	0.38	22	0.14	90	0.57	22	0.14 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )
Sylhet	165	1.68	60	0.61	17	0.17	241	2.46 (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	4	0.04

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# 'Dead men tell no lies'—Rumors and Social Tension during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

Niloy Ranjan Biswas\*

## I. Introduction

Nearly half-a-dozen books and a film have used the phrase 'dead men tell no lies [tales]' in their titles to portray the messages that someone who is not alive cannot reveal a secret or share any wrong information.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the 2019 Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and its influence on social tensions, the title of this paper borrows the phrase to highlight that as long as people survive the pandemic, and the human civilization is not perished, it may not stop spreading lies (one can read, misinformation or rumors) around the world. It is only the dead persons who cannot share an information, otherwise, active and alive persons, if and when they are deprived of authentic information, may rely on and share various other types of information that include misinformation or rumor.

Rumor is "unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat."<sup>7</sup> Rumors emerge to fill in the blanks in

information in certain contexts. When the situational context is ambiguous and threatening people feel the acute need of some kind of information, which will help them to get a sense of peace and security.<sup>8</sup> A rumor is considered successful when its origins remain untraceable and it could circumvent official surveillance mechanism. This becomes either a narrative without an author or with multiple unknown authors, whose identities are dissolved; and the text of the rumor has turned into key concerns—a common voice or opinion.

Rumor is often synonymously used with gossip, speculation or propaganda. However, in this write-up, gossip is significantly differentiated from rumor. Gossip is more interpersonal in nature and it has a social dimension, it usually considers [mis]information on personal lives of individuals and circulates through in-person conversation within small communities. On the other hand, rumors might circulate at a national or international scale and often relate to collective hopes and fears that transcend

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<sup>6</sup> Some examples include: *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales* (Film, released on 2017), see: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1790809/>. Lyndon Smith, *Dead Man Tell No Lies* (USA: NubiTales, 2016). Dylan Howard, Melissa Cronin, and James Robrtson, *Epstein: Dead Men Tell No Tales* (Skyhorse; Illustrated Edition, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas DiFonzo and Proshant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Arun Kumar, "Beyond Muffled Murmurs of Dissent? Kisan Rumor in Colonial Bihar," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 28, no.1 (October 2000): 95-125.

the moral behavior of individuals. While news generally denotes information that has been confirmed or generally accepted as true, rumor refers to uncertain or unverified information.<sup>9</sup>

Rumors flourish in ambiguous and problematic situational contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a surge in heightened public anxiety and a spread of misinformation—resulting in what is interpreted as the buzzword infodemic. In such a scenario, a problematic situation turns worse due to the spread of a large quantity of information and the truth cannot be distinguished from fake information or rumor.<sup>10</sup> Usually a matter of disregard, the infodemic has become a turbulent force in the contemporary society through the use of information technology, and easier access of people to social media. Globally, approximately 361,000,000 videos were uploaded on YouTube and as 19,200 published Google Scholar articles under Covid-19 searches appeared since January 2020, and 550 million Tweets in March alone had Coronavirus related hashtags, this led to the Secretary-General of the United Nations coining the term ‘infodemic’.<sup>11</sup> With innumerable audiences in digital platforms, diverse range of contents (text,

audio, video, and image) and immense redistributive capacity in the least possible time – rhetoric such as online rumors can spread like wildfire.<sup>12</sup> A particular negative manifestation of the infodemic can be traced through the rumor-tension nexus. Are rumors or infodemic leading to social tensions during the pandemic?

This study examines the relationship between COVID-19 related rumors and social tension during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. The data in this report has been collected from Covid19graphics, weekly infographic report, published by Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). The infographic has tracked COVID-19 related rumors, social stigma, suspected deaths, paranoia, fear, violence, and protests reported in daily newspapers and TV channels of Bangladesh. The report, in compliance with Covid19graphics, has conducted data mapping on the COVID-19 related rumors from 8 March till the end of August 2020 in order to understand how misinformation resulted in social tension in Bangladesh. The study demonstrates that not all COVID-19 related rumors have generated social tension. However, there were some critical rumors which may have instigated both violent and non-

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<sup>9</sup> David Coast and Jo Fox, “Rumor and Politics,” *History Compass* 13, no. 5 (2015): 223 (222–234).

<sup>10</sup> Kerry Maxwell, “Definition of Infodemic: BuzzWord from Macmillan Dictionary,” *Macmillan Dictionary*, published June 03, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/buzzword/entries/infodemic.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Dr Pradip Kuman Panday and Md Mamun Abdul Kaioum, “Infodemic amid pandemic: A Bangladesh

Perspective,” *The Business Standard*, last modified July 14, 2020, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://tbsnews.net/thoughts/infodemic-amid-pandemic-bangladesh-perspective-105976>.

<sup>12</sup> Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, “Telling Good Lies: Digital Rhetoric and Rumor in Bangladesh,” *The Independent*, published February 26, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://m.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/238463>.

violent social tensions during this period, and those constitute the area of this study.

## **2. COVID-19 Rumors during the Pandemic: The Bangladesh Scenario**

Rumor contents created and dispersed during catastrophe or emergency acquires a different dimension than rumors in normal times.<sup>13</sup> Historically, rumors have sustained during the pandemics in the past as well.<sup>14</sup> Pandemic engenders an environment conducive for rumors to go viral, as the given situation itself is a matter of great concern to people and their lives. The news that people often receive on the pandemic from the traditional media is often ambiguous and incomplete in nature.<sup>15</sup>

Traditional media and its censorship mechanism do not allow unsubstantiated information, which often fails to supply the much-needed information to the audience. Moreover, the media often provides conflicting versions of the news which are inconceivable to the audience.<sup>16</sup> People, thereby, tend to consume rumors as the most available convenient information during a crisis to explain the unexplained

or to suppress their anxiety. For instance, people are believing in viral rumors on social media such as taking home remedies like drinking alcohol, drinking hot water and inhaling hot water vapor, which apparently does not have a direct link to the prevention of Coronavirus, but has traditionally been used for dealing with common cold and cough. People went as far as to believe in a rumor that anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine can prevent coronavirus.<sup>17</sup>

In Bangladesh, the COVID-19 catastrophe has also generated rumors on the origin, treatment, and cure of COVID-19. Social media have mostly been exploited in spreading rumors. This is significant because even when data on Bangladeshi internet users are scarce, it is suggested that nearly 50 percent of Bangladeshi people are active Facebook users.<sup>18</sup> With around 50 million subscribers, almost one-third of the total population of Bangladesh, Facebook has become the most popular social network in the country.<sup>19</sup> Some rumors have specific objectives of executing socio-political agendas through disinformation, and some of these have torn the fabric of interreligious harmony

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<sup>13</sup> "Gujob er chinta (Thoughts of Rumor)", 09 August 2018. Cited in <https://www.dhakatribune.com/magazine/weekendtribune/2018/08/09/gujob-er-chinta>. Accessed on 19 May 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Coronavirus and The Plague: The Disease of Viral Conspiracy Theories," 10 March 2020 Cited in <https://p.dw.com/p/3Z71B>. Accessed on 21 May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, "An Analysis of Rumor," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1946-1947, p.502.

<sup>16</sup> Allport and Postman, *An Analysis of Rumor*, 1946-47, p. 502.

<sup>17</sup> "Dangerous cures and viral hoaxes: common coronavirus myths busted," 06 April 2020. Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/28/dangerous-cures-and-viral-hoaxes-common-coronavirus-myths-busted>. Accessed on 20 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Rahat Rafe, "Bangladesh: Fake News on Facebook Fuels Communal Violence," *Deutsche Welle*, published November 01, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-fake-news-on-facebook-fuels-communal-violence/a-51083787>.

<sup>19</sup> Rafe, "Bangladesh: Fake News on Facebook Fuels Communal Violence."

in Thakurpara, Bhola and Cumilla in the past.<sup>20</sup> Mr. Mustafa Jabbar, Minister of Post and Telecommunication, expressed concerns over the promotion of hate speech and the negligence of the platform to deal with these issues. This is critical as many people are not aware of cross-checking or validation of a news before

falling victim to the information.<sup>21</sup> Rumors inform people who subscribe to it, regardless of it being valid or untrue; and it also offers access to information to many, who otherwise presumably would have remained in vagueness. Some of the most visible COVID-19 related rumors in social media are:

### **Rumor-1: *Thankuni* Leaves**

The rumor about Indian pennywort or Asian pennywort (*thankuni*) leaves spread in the Southern parts of Bangladesh. Although the herbaceous plant has medicinal properties, it is not a proven cure for Coronavirus. Nevertheless, the Southern districts of Barishal, Patuakhali and Borguna had shown public frenzy of collecting the leaves of the plant in the middle of the night after the breakout of the rumor. There were differences of opinions regarding the method of the leaf intake; as some said to eat the leaves by night, while others were specific about having three leaves at any time of the day.

### **Rumor-2: Holy Water**

The video posted by *Dainik Nabatan* (*the Daily Nabatan*), a Jamalpur-based local news agency, shows that villagers had lined up in front of a local mosque to have holy water and holy oil blessed by the local imam, (the conductor of prayers) for curing or fending off Coronavirus. Such belief is not rampant only in this village in Jamalpur, but in many parts of the country where modern medicines are either avoided or are complemented by the healing power of faith. While many religiously trained individuals do this out of piety and charity, there are also the ones looking for making a profit by taking advantage of the people's faith in religiously guided healers or spiritual individuals.

<sup>20</sup> Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, "Telling Good Lies: Digital Rhetoric and Rumor in Bangladesh," *The Independent*, published February 26, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020,

<http://m.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/238463>.

<sup>21</sup> Panday and Kaioum, "Infodemic amid pandemic."

### **Rumor-3: Vaccine**

One of the widespread rumors about the COVID-19 vaccine stemmed from a viral video of Carrie Madej, a US osteopath who made false claims after the preliminary results on the study from Oxford were published. She claimed that people who would be taking the COVID-19 vaccine would face changes in their DNAs and that the vaccine would connect them with artificial intelligence interfaces. A similar rumor that became popular was that big tech companies like Microsoft were planning to implant covert microchips inside humans through the vaccine. The rumor sprang due to the “we will have some digital certificates” comments made by Bill Gates in an interview in March where he referred to the use of digital ink technologies to mark the ones who would be tested, given a vaccine and would eventually recover.

Source: *BBC News, The Times of India, The Daily Prothom Alo*

Do rumors instigate tensions in the society during a pandemic? This is an issue to ponder upon, especially when a significant majority of the online media subscribers lack media literacy. Due to surge of new media-led infodemic, it is often very difficult to differentiate between truth and fictions due to the abundance of available information and misinformation, mass paranoia due to Covid-19 rumor remains a plausibility.<sup>22</sup> Besides, rumors intrude into the subjective domain and causes emotional disturbances in an unfamiliar and unknown manner with unverifiable factors, often in relation to group interests.<sup>23</sup> Rumors can

be manipulated for creating suspicion and fear, and for instigating violence. A cumulative analysis of open source data on rumor related incidents may substantiate the proposition.

### **3. Analysis of COVID-19 Rumor-related Data**

As of 30 August 2020, 86 rumor related incidents were reported in the national newspapers. March and April saw the highest peaks of rumor related incidents. It has sharply declined from the second week of April and onwards (see figure 6). Two reasons, in general, can be discussed

<sup>22</sup> Panday and Kaioum, “Infodemic amid pandemic.”

<sup>23</sup> Monira Nazmi Jahan, “Pandemics: Always accompanied by rumors,” *The Observer*, published April 3, 2020,

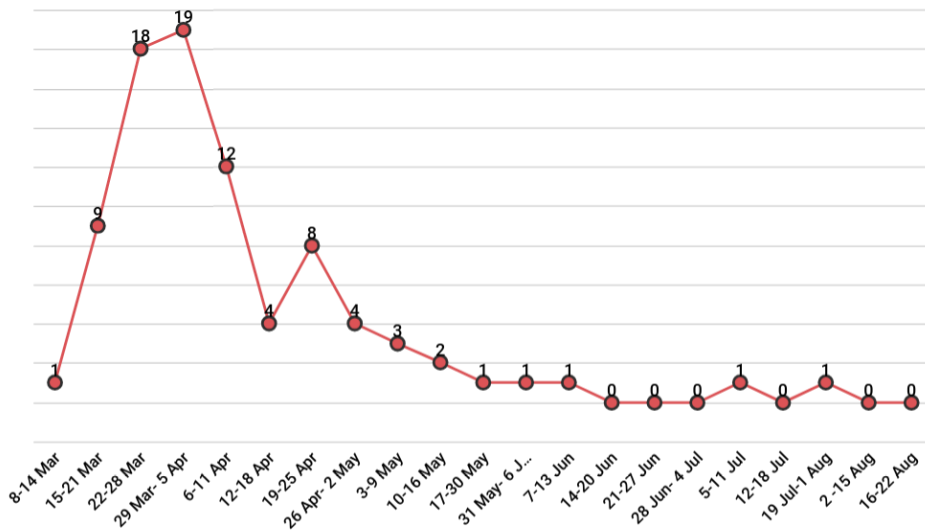
accessed September 2, 2020,

<https://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=252246>.

to understand the decline of rumor related incidents in Bangladesh. First, the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and its concerned ministries have started providing COVID-19 related information from valid sources. For example, Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR, Ministry of Health) has started regular bulletin to provide authenticated information using conventional and new media from the end of March. Since people had access to valid

sources which may have decreased their reliance on rumors. It supports the idea that rumors spread more in numbers when there exists a lack of valid information from appropriate sources. Second, the government and its security agencies had increased their monitoring and surveillance online and offline on rumor spreaders. Some arrest incidents also took place in March, which may have deterred the rumor spreaders.

**Figure 6: Weekly trend (incidents) 8 March – 22 August 2020**



**Table 3: Types of rumors on COVID-19 pandemic**

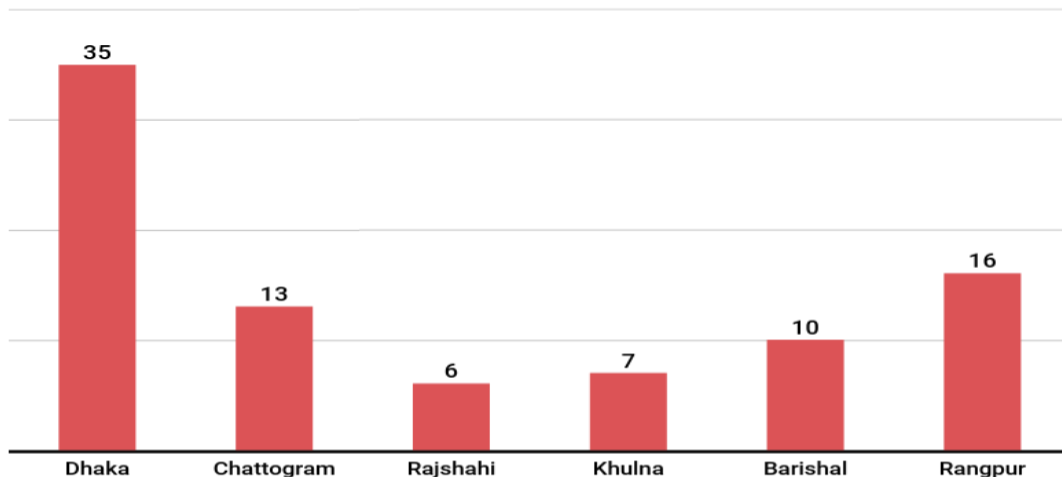
<b>Type of Rumors</b>	<b>Numbers/ variations</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
Origins of COVID-19	3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Amidst the fear of coronavirus spread, a misinformation was circulated over social media on animals being the bearer of coronavirus, which had caused trouble for many pet owners in Dhaka. It is reported that landlords in some areas have notified their tenants to get rid of their pet or vacate the house.</li> <li>2. Police arrested a physician for allegedly spreading rumor about coronavirus through an audio clip circulated via Facebook messenger in Chattogram.</li> <li>3. Fish farmers in some areas in Bangladesh have complained of rumors about corona infection through tilapia.</li> </ol>
Cure/ treatment related rumors	4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rumors spread over the consumption of 'Thankuni Pata' (Indian pennywort leaf) after a man dreamt that eating three leaves of 'Thankuni Pata' during Fazr Azan (morning prayer) would result in recovery from Corona virus at Santhia, Pabna.</li> <li>2. Price of lemons skyrocketed in local market in Chattogram as news spread about lemon being the prevention of Coronavirus.</li> <li>3. A man was fined for spreading rumors about inventing medicine for Covid-19 in Hathajari, Chattogram.</li> <li>4. Hundreds of people have started drinking water of a dirty pond in Lakshmipur, believing this water will prevent them from getting affected by Covid-19. A boy of Sadullah Haji Family from Shahidpur village of Laharkandi Union, Lakshmipur Sadar Upazila claimed to have so-called divine power to turn the pond water as medicine for coronavirus in his dreams.</li> </ol>
Vaccines related rumors	3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Two frauds had been beaten to injury as they were selling jaundice vaccine in the name of Corona vaccine in Narayanganj.</li> <li>2. Police arrested a young man (25) for spreading rumor about inventing COVID-19 vaccine on his own from Brahmanbaria.</li> </ol>

		3. A mobile court of the local administration forcefully stopped the attempts of a massive gathering further to the news of the discovery of COVID-19 vaccines in Wazirpur, Barishal.
Death related rumors	1	1. A rumor was spread in Monpura Upazila, Bhola, that doctors in the local hospital are killing COVID-19 patients by allegedly pushing poisonous injections. This turned the hospital almost patient-free.
Government response related rumors	2	1. A former Major of the Bangladesh Army has been detained by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) from the Dhaka Cantonment area for allegedly spreading false information and promoting anti-government and anti-state propaganda on Facebook. 2. RAB also arrested four members of a social welfare institution named <i>Rashtro Chinta</i> for spreading rumors and misinformation on the government's relief initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic on various social media platforms. Arrested persons include a cartoonist and a writer from the Ramna area of Dhaka.
Others	2	1. Police arrested six young people from Ramna zone, Dhaka, who were accused of distributing leaflets full of rumors—"Muslims will not be infected by Coronavirus, but only Kafirs will be infected". 2. Police arrested a college teacher for spreading rumors on Facebook by posting a fake video that a family committed suicide out of hunger during the Covid-19 in Naogaon.

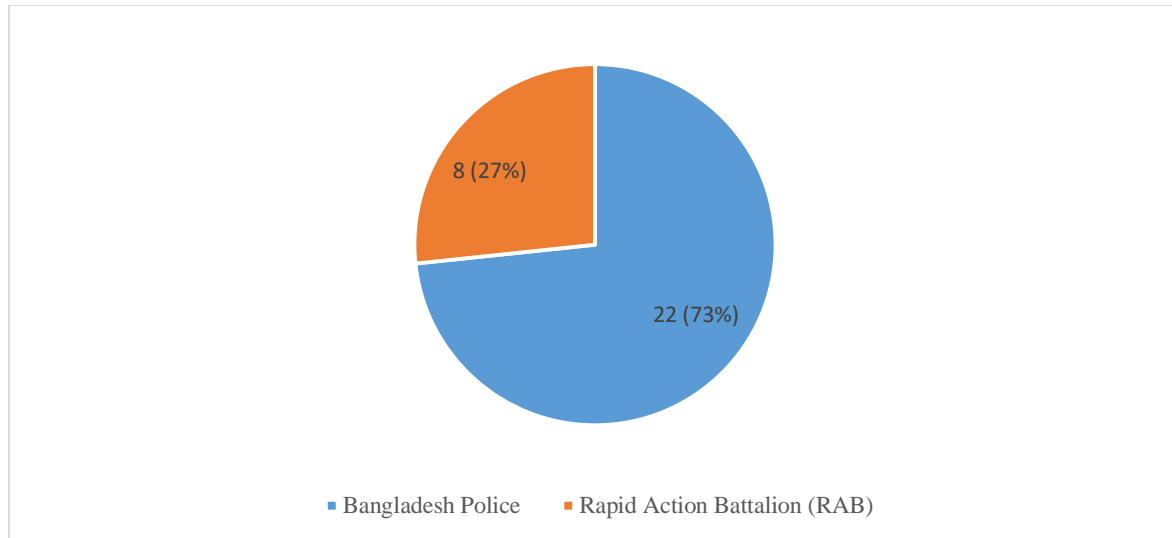
The security agencies of the GOB have arrested 87 persons within this period. A division-wise distribution of the data demonstrates that Dhaka (35) posits the highest position in rumor related arrests. Rangpur (16) and

Chattogram (13) take second and third positions respectively. The lowest number of arrests takes place in Rajshahi division.

**Figure 7: Division-wise distribution of rumor related arrests (8 Mar – 22 Aug 2020)**



**Figure 8: Rumor-Related Arrest Incidents by Law Enforcement**



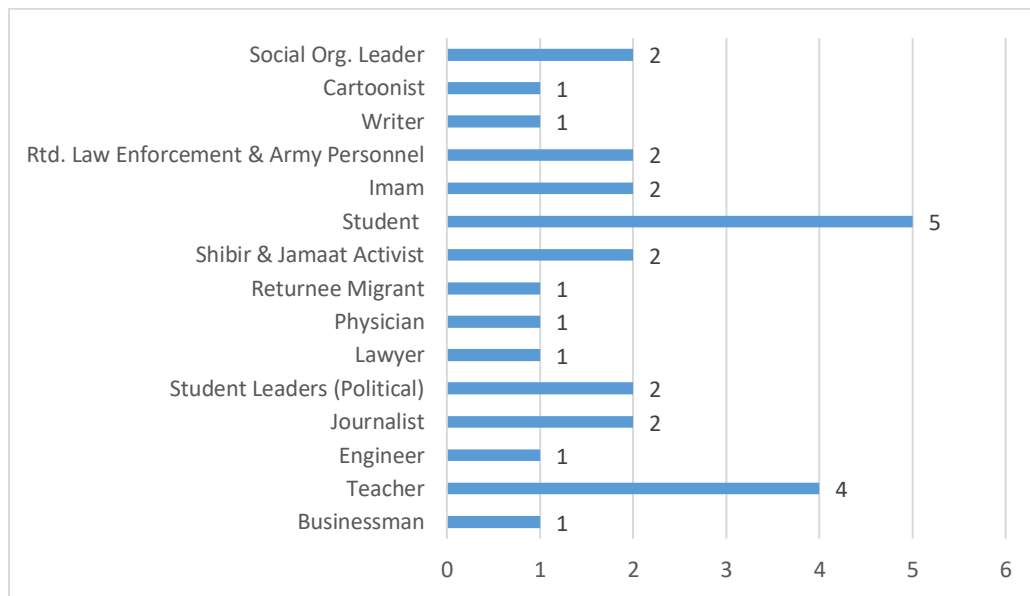
The BPO data also highlights that among 30 arrest-related incidents on COVID-19 rumors 22 (73%) arrests have been made

by Bangladesh Police and 8 (27%) arrest-related incidents have been conducted by the RAB. As per the newspaper reports,

law-enforcement agencies applied the provisions of the Digital Security Act 2018 against the arrested suspects on

allegations of spreading rumors or misinformation.

**Figure 9: Professional affiliation of arrested persons**



During the COVID-19 pandemic, a scattered group of polarized individuals was accused of spreading rumors using different media sources. Social media is mostly used as it is an easy and an almost no-cost action to spread misinformation. This rumor community is not static and is also engaged in social interchange to maintain some forms of relationship with new members and manage favorable self-impression.<sup>24</sup> The nature of the community of individuals that is likely to consume, and share rumors is not homogenous because of the diversified nature of members—

educated/uneducated, rich/poor, famous/ordinary public, young/elderly, religious/atheist, rational/irrational. From the reported cases of around 86 rumor-related incidents in Bangladesh, the BPO data identifies professional affiliations of 28 arrested persons (see figure 9). It includes people from several professional groups, such as: youth, students, political activists, doctors, cartoonists, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and the like. The professional affiliations of others were not specified in the news reports. In most of the unspecified cases, the arrested persons were labeled as ‘youth’ in the reports.

<sup>24</sup> Jill A. Edy and Erin E. Risley-Baird, “Rumor Communities: The Social Dimensions of Internet Political

Misperceptions”, *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (2016): 588-602.

They may be unemployed or self-employed. The age was not disclosed in a majority of the reported cases. For other cases, the youngest arrested person was a 14-year old schoolboy. The oldest one was more than 60-year old; three of the arrested persons were retired individuals. Among the reported cases, the arrested were youths ranging from 18 to 30. In media reports, the youth with access to social media are majorly identified as propagators of rumors.

#### 4. Rumors and Patterns of Social Tension

On 28 March, 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) to allow Hydroxychloroquine Sulfate and Chloroquine Phosphate; usually used for treatments of malaria and autoimmune diseases to be used for hospitalized COVID-19 patients.<sup>25</sup> Later the FDA revoked the EUA for hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine to treat COVID-19 patients on 15 June 2020, “when a clinical trial was unavailable, or participation in a clinical trial was not feasible.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the GOB did neither clearly recommend the use of the drug nor stopped the use for a certain period.<sup>27</sup> It was reported that

people in Dhaka panicked to collect the aforementioned drugs and these were sold without doctors’ prescriptions by local pharmacies, which created temporary shortages for patients who actually needed those for emergency treatments.

Some rumors spread violent social tensions on COVID-related deaths in rural and suburban communities. One particular case can be noted in Rajbari Sadar upazila. On 21 March 2020, a quarrel broke out over whether or not a person had died due to Coronavirus.<sup>28</sup> The aftermath of this verbal disagreement between a local quack and a villager resulted in a fistfight between their families—ultimately, resulting in the death of the villager’s brother, Lablu Molla, and an injury of five people.<sup>29</sup> Community tensions also erupted because of COVID-19 treatments. In such cases, the hospitals or the dead persons are not spared during the crisis. In Uttara, Regent Hospital was attacked by local mob with an allegation that local people were kept in dark before the hospital decided to admit COVID-19 patients for treatment. In Khilgaon, Dhaka, a dead body was not allowed to be buried due to the fear of virus spreading from the dead body.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Li, Xing, Ying Wang, Patrizia Agostinis, Arnold Rabson, Gerry Melino, Ernesto Carafoli, Yufang Shi, and Erwei Sun. “Is hydroxychloroquine beneficial for COVID-19 patients?.” *Cell death & disease* 11, no. 7 (2020): 1-6.

<sup>26</sup> “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update: FDA Revokes Emergency Use Authorization for Chloroquine and Hydroxychloroquine” 15 June 2020. Cited in <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-revokes-emergency-use-authorization-chloroquine-and> Accessed 22 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Tawsia Tajmim. “WHO banned it. Bangladesh yet to decide use of Malaria drug” 26 May 2020. Cited in <https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/bangladesh-yet-decide-hydroxychloroquine-use-covid-19> Accessed 22 September 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “Clash over Coronavirus: One Dead in Rajbari,” *The Daily Star*, published March 21, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/clash-over-coronavirus-1-dead-in-rajbari-1883770>.

<sup>29</sup> “Clash over Coronavirus: One Dead in Rajbari.”

<sup>30</sup> Shyamal Dutt, “Coronavirus vs. Rumour Virus,” *Bhorer Kaagoj*, published April 5, 2020, accessed September 2,

Rumors and suspicion issue have also become a matter of cross-border concern. On 1 April 2020, some members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) alleged a Bangladeshi man to be a COVID-19 patient, and beat him up in the Akhaura border of Brahmanbaria district.<sup>31</sup>

Rumors were overheard in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar during the pandemic. In the Rohingya refugee camps, the shutdown of mobile networks was a pre-existing condition before the pandemic. During the pandemic, it is reported that non-use of mobile SIM cards had accentuated their fears of not getting enough information about the virus.<sup>32</sup> Many refugees believed that there was the possibility of not living anymore if anyone caught the virus, and they even believed

that if the virus did not kill them, maybe Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies would do it by isolating the infected persons in quarantine.<sup>33</sup>

A person of a minority faith was alleged as a regular Dhaka-bound migrant in Lalmonirhat during lockdown, and two families were beaten up by several villagers on 1 May 2020 when the allegation was circulated.<sup>34</sup> A total of nine people were injured in this incident (among them, there were three women and two children) and property were damaged. But by then a perception had already been created among the people, that the person was a carrier of COVID19, due to his frequent trips to Dhaka. This instilled a feeling of insecurity in the minority person even in

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2020,  
<https://www.bhorerkagoj.com/2020/04/05/%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%AD%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B8-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE-%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0/>.

<sup>31</sup> "Bangladeshi Injured at Akhaura Border by BSF," *The Daily Jugantor*, published April 02, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020,  
[https://epaper.jugantor.com/2020/04/02/15/details/15\\_r8\\_c3.jpg](https://epaper.jugantor.com/2020/04/02/15/details/15_r8_c3.jpg).

<sup>32</sup> Anu Shukla, "Internet ban spreads coronavirus fears faster than infection at Rohingya refugee camps," *The New Arab*, published March 30, 2020, accessed August 30, 2020,  
<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/4/2/fear-spreads-faster-than-infection-at-rohingya-refugee-camps>.

<sup>33</sup> Shukla, "Internet ban spreads coronavirus fears faster than infection at Rohingya refugee camps."

<sup>34</sup> "Assault and Destruction of Properties over Allegation - 'There is a Dhaka-returnee in the house'," *The Daily Star: Bengali Version*, last updated May 02, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/bangla/%e0%a6%b6%e0%a7%80%e0%a6%b0%e0%a7%8d%e0%a6%b7-%e0%a6%96%e0%a6%ac%e0%a6%b0/%e0%a6%ac%e0%a6%be%e0%a7%9c%e0%a6%bf%e0%a6%a4%e0%a7%87-%e0%a6%a2%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%95%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%ab%e0%a7%87%e0%a6%b0%e0%a7%87%e0%a6%9b%e0%a7%87%e0%a6%a8%e2%80%94-%e0%a6%85%e0%a6%ad%e0%a6%bf%e0%a6%af%e0%a7%8b%e0%a6%97-%e0%a6%a4%e0%a7%81%e0%a6%b2%e0%a7%87-%e0%a6%b9%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%ae%e0%a6%b2%e0%a6%be-%e0%a6%ad%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%99%e0%a6%9a%e0%a7%81%e0%a6%b0-14767947679>.

his own home, and he felt unsafe staying there.

In Bangladesh, rumors went viral that returnee migrants from Europe and China brought coronavirus in Bangladesh. International airport in Dhaka went to complete lockdown much later than its European counterparts. Thousands of migrants have returned from various destinations of Asia and Europe to Bangladesh. Despite the government's initiatives of quarantine and tracing Coronavirus among returnee migrants, it might not have been possible to make appropriate arrangements for self-isolation and quarantine in one of the most densely populated countries of the world. These migrants often faced difficulties in returning to their homes as they were implicated as the carriers of the virus. It is also reported that law enforcement agencies had to deal with some migrants, who had returned from Wuhan or Singapore, with extra force, to ensure self-isolation.<sup>35</sup>

In the heightened panic scenario, mob justice has also been prominent. As two frauds selling jaundice vaccines as Coronavirus vaccines were given a taste of the public fury on 22 April 2020, the formal law and order option was disregarded.<sup>36</sup> The prices of ginger and garlic skyrocketed when the rumor of

frequently drinking tea with ginger or garlic for curing Coronavirus spread.<sup>37</sup> Some medicines were also floated as the panacea for the virus (namely doxycycline) and their prices also soared. Public disregard for protective measures against the virus became prominent when the virus was touted as the disease for the rich.<sup>38</sup>

Rumors are often shared by the educated young people in closed or private online sites administered by matured students. A group of university students are trying to get out of the online education system and are opting for reopening the universities in steps to avoid session jams, even while pondering on if such a situation poses several risks.<sup>39</sup> Tensions are still prevalent between the university students who are in favor of opening the educational institutions and those against. For instance, a public group on Facebook calling for the universities to be opened within September has gathered 17.8 thousand members, and their demands are either met with sarcasm or contempt from the opposing students.<sup>40</sup>

In public discourse, it is often argued that the infodemic or rumors must be curbed down, and any information needs to be

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<sup>35</sup> "Call for avoiding rumor and violence regarding Coronavirus," *Banglanews24.com*, published February 19, 2020, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://m.banglanews24.com/health/news/bd/772379.details>.

<sup>36</sup> "Two people beaten by the mob as jaundice vaccine was sold as Coronavirus vaccine," *The Daily Ittefaq*, published March 23, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020, [https://epaper.ittefaq.com.bd/2020/03/23/images/05\\_102.jpg](https://epaper.ittefaq.com.bd/2020/03/23/images/05_102.jpg).

<sup>37</sup> Panday and Kaioum, "Infodemic amid pandemic."

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Md. Umar Faruk, "Students call for opening educational institutions by maintaining health regulations," *RisingBD.com*, updated August 31, 2020, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www.risingbd.com/campus/news/368509>.

<sup>40</sup> "We want universities opened by September," *Facebook*, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/4407454075963338>.

cross-checked and validated.<sup>41</sup> The idea of negotiating public responses is equally important, as proposed by Rosenberg, that the government and the health services, in emergency crisis situation, must up their ante in negotiating, informing, and controlling the responses of the common people.<sup>42</sup>

## 5. Controlling Rumors

Shall or can we stop/control rumors? If so, whose role will be paramount in this regard—state, media or individuals? Allport and Postman, in their seminal work, expressed their concerns and argued that some interventions will be required to manage rumors and prevent rumors from further dissemination. On the other hand, Shibutani argued that the spread of rumors had been uncontrollable.<sup>43</sup> The latter is particularly more convincing in the era of social media with minimum censorship. Controlling rumors may, therefore, be hierarchical and empower certain actors over others, for example, the state over individuals and elites over the poor.

Who will stop rumor contents and restrict spreaders? Can media do that? Unlike conventional media, social media do not have editors who check the information before publishing it. However, use of artificial intelligence (AI) editors, third-party fact-checkers, machine learning and automation, updating apps, deleting fake accounts, involving partners and experts from different places, updating site policy, rules and regulations, labeling, warning and removal of posts, reviewing contents, safeguarding that fewer publics see misinformation, taking action against offenders, creating tools and options for the users to report and block, informing people about misinformation, making options for users to send their feedbacks on misinformation, and easy fact-checking options for users are some of the steps that are being undertaken by the social media companies to fight against rumors in the recent times.<sup>44</sup>

Despite all measures undertaken by social media companies, these initiatives have proven to be inadequate to contain rumors completely from spreading across communities. Rumors tend to resurface,<sup>45</sup> therefore, a rumor can reappear in new media, even if it was removed or banned once. Banning or deleting rumors from

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<sup>41</sup> Sahid Sumon, "Two Viruses Together: Corona and Rumor," *The Daily Prothom Alo*, published March 23, 2020, accessed September 2, 2020,

<https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/%E0%A6%8F%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%99%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%87-%E0%A6%AD%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%87%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B8-%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%93-%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%AC>.

<sup>42</sup> Jahan, "Pandemics: Always accompanied by rumors."

<sup>43</sup> Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (New York, 1966).

<sup>44</sup> "Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know," 01 June 2020. Cited in

<https://web.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722>. Accessed on 01 June 2020; "An update on our continuity strategy during COVID-19," 16 March 2020. Cited in

[https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html). Accessed on 01 June 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "How to respond when rumors start to spread on Facebook," *The Guardian*, 14 May 2014. Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2014/may/14/how-to-respond-when-rumours-spread-on-facebook>. Accessed on 01 June 2020.

online platforms has not been proven to be a useful method to prevent the spread of rumors across social media networks. Moreover, banning, or censoring rumors online can often ignite curiosity among the users to search for more information which can eventually amplify the spread of a rumor. Social media, unlike traditional media, is not capacitated to regulate the spread of rumors.

States often look upon rumors as a law-and-order issue, hence, they undertake legal and security measures to control rumors. An inquiry into rumor-related law and order situation during the pandemic represents an interesting dimension. Tensions were raised due to misinterpretation of government's policies and measures on social media; for example, rumors on government postponing of bank loans, house rents and electricity bills, required the government not only to clarify the issues several times, but also to take stern actions against the rumor spreaders.<sup>46</sup> This led the government to consider the shutdown of 50 websites and 82 Facebook pages in an attempt to curb down the rumor phenomenon.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Panday and Kaioum, "Infodemic amid pandemic."

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed Shawki and Nurul Amin, "Govt to block 50 websites, 82 Facebook pages for spreading rumors," *The Business Standard*, published April 01, 2020, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/govt-block-50-websites-82-facebook-pages-spreading-rumours>.

<sup>48</sup> "Bangladesh: End Wave of COVID-19 'Rumor' Arrests," *Human Rights Watch*, published March 31, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/bangladesh-end-wave-covid-19-rumor-arrests>.

<sup>49</sup> Panday and Kaioum, "Infodemic amid pandemic."

Government measures have been interpreted by some analysts as attempts at curbing freedom of speech by taking advantage of the crisis. Some arrested persons, who were accused of spreading rumors, were allegedly associated with the political opposition parties and were punished under the Digital Security Act 2018.<sup>48</sup> For example, after the first Coronavirus death case on 18 March 2020 was traced, the security agency personnel in Chattogram arrested a physician for spreading rumors on Covid-19 through Messenger.<sup>49</sup> People were also arrested by law enforcement agencies for deliberately posting fear-mongering and anti-government posts on social media, under fake accounts.<sup>50</sup>

As per the BPO data, around 30 persons were specified as youth, and interestingly, while many of the youth were arrested for spreading misinformation on the social media, and arrested under the Digital Security Act 2018, some were also arrested for prank calling over the Coronavirus hotline.<sup>51</sup> This calls for urgent attention to the fact that the youth, with their easy access to social media, may not be thoughtful enough in verifying the truth behind an information, and therefore, are

<sup>50</sup> One such incident can be seen here: "One arrested in Keraniganj for spreading rumor on Coronavirus," published June 10, 2020, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www.kalerkantho.com/online/country-news/2020/06/10/921292>.

<sup>51</sup> Primary Data: Sourced from the Master Database on Rumour, Bangladesh Peace Observatory. One incident of a minor detained by the police for prank calling: "The Misinformation Spreading School Student of Natore is Detained," published March 22, 2020, accessed August 27, 2020, [http://www.ekaratoa.com/2020/04/22/3/details/3\\_r9\\_c4.jpg](http://www.ekaratoa.com/2020/04/22/3/details/3_r9_c4.jpg).

susceptible to panic. Moreover, there was a tendency to exploit religion or religious place to spread rumor which could have instigated some tensions. For instance, Bangladesh Police arrested six people involved in spreading social media rumor through microphones in a locality, and this was done using the microphone of a mosque.<sup>52</sup>

Rumors during the pandemic in the age of social media demonstrates a complicated process. It is difficult for the state apparatus to control rumors that surfaced online from anonymous and fake sources, and states may apprehend these as potential threats to social stability and law and order. It compels states to control the sources of information and penalize those who exploit information with national legal frameworks. However, it is yet inconclusive to suggest that states and its institutions can effectively control rumors in a global pandemic situation. States often are incapable of exercising their legal-institutional control over the new media and its content across the world.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This report analyses open-source data from Bangladesh Peace Observatory on COVID-19 related rumors in Bangladesh and its influence in propagating social tensions from March to August 2020. It

demonstrates rumor related incidents, types of rumors, activities of law-enforcement agencies in curbing rumors, and nature of rumor communities in Bangladesh. It observes that certain rumors during the pandemic have generated violent social tensions concerning the treatment and protection of the community from further transmission of the Coronavirus disease. Others have influenced social fault lines on religious divisions, migrants versus locals, and unethical practices of profiteering on the pandemic. Finally, controlling of rumors is a critical subject-matter for the state and its citizens. States view rumors as a law-and-order issue, hence, it takes a legal-institutional approach to control rumors in order to stop social tensions. It is, however, farfetched to argue that an exclusive security-institutional approach would resolve the crisis. Two approaches—(a) Education and awareness against misinformation and rumors, and (b) access to valid sources of information may need to be continuously provided to prevent social tensions during the pandemic.

Originators or transmitters of rumors, who often remain voluntarily invisible, and victims of rumors are not the lifeless beings during the pandemic. They rather are either exploiters or victims of ambiguity and scarcity of valid information

<sup>52</sup> “Six people Fined over Spreading Rumor on Corona,” *The Business Standard – Bangla*, published April 1, 2020, accessed September, 1, 2020, <https://tbsnews.net/bangla/%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B6%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BF%E0%A7%9F%E0%A7%87->

<https://tbsnews.net/bangla/%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%AC-%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%8C%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%87-%E0%A7%AC-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE>

in the crisis situation. Moreover, they are the victims of paranoia of the pandemic. It is to be noted that they have survived the pandemic, and perhaps, rumors were exploited as a survival tool for some of them during the pandemic. Rumors, therefore, will exist in the pandemic and

transmit through new media so long the valid sources of information remain less credible. While surviving the pandemic, we also need to learn how to survive from the rumors using our choice and conscience on information.

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## Countering COVID-19 ‘Infodemic’: Global & Regional Overview

**Nadia Nur\***

COVID-19 is a global phenomenon, which has impacted every corner of the world. The pandemic has put extreme pressure on economy, education, employment opportunity, socio-cultural practices and global politics. Worldwide the epidemic has the potential to restructure countries even those yet to report any confirmed cases. At this time of global pandemic, misinformation and rumors are being circulated together with information and facts. However, it is challenging to distinguish the facts from the fictions. Numerous misinformation is spreading like wildfire. Misinformation can have adverse impacts on individuals by triggering mass panic. Comparative studies show that different countries have taken various initiatives to prevent such misinformation from spreading among the people like an epidemic. The availability of disproportionate online information relating to the pandemic has emerged as a major problem.

UN-Secretary-General for Global Communications, Melissa Fleming stated that, “Fear, uncertainty, and the proliferation of fake news have the potential to weaken the national and global response to the virus, bolster nativist narratives and provide

opportunities for those who may seek to exploit this moment to deepen social divisions.”<sup>53</sup> In the same tune, the Director General of World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated: “We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic”.<sup>54</sup>

Since the pandemic started in December 2019, the number of people seeking information on COVID-19 has risen from 50 to 70 percent.<sup>55</sup> The volume of misleading information is higher and it is distorting the actual information. In this age of social networking, rumors are spreading like a virus. Varying on the ratio of spread of fake news, each country has its unique response.

Regrettably, online users share different updated news related to the pandemic what they get in different online sources including the Tweeter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and e-newspapers. The spread of misinformation and false propaganda has had adverse impact both in the global North and South. Country leaders have taken conscious steps to tackle any major catastrophe caused by the rumors. In February 2020, the WHO notified the spread of massive infodemic

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<sup>53</sup> The United Nations, COVID-19 Response, Cited in <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation> Accessed on September 5, 2020.

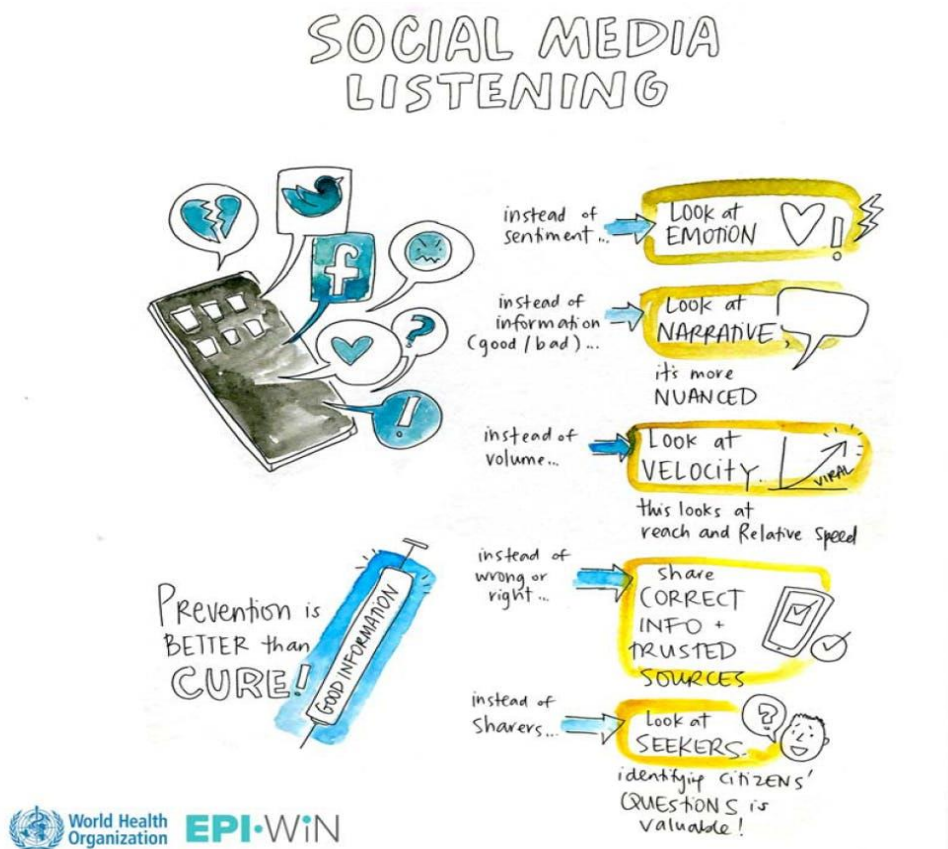
<sup>54</sup> The Department of Global Communication, Cited in <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19> Accessed on September 5, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> The Business Standard, Cited in <https://tbsnews.net/thoughts/infodemic-amid-pandemic-bangladesh-perspective-105976> Accessed on September 5, 2020.

associated with the coronavirus. The WHO has continually alerted that the

spread of infodemic interrupts the response efforts.

**Figure 10: The picture represents the exact message that the WHO disseminated worldwide to increase public awareness on the misinformation, videos and online news linked to the COVID-19.<sup>56</sup>**



This write-up is based on secondary sources. Data have been collected from different secondary sources including various online platforms, websites of fact-checking agency, Facebook, Twitter, and online news portals. The write-up has also used data from different international

organizations working in collaboration with different government to fight against the infodemics. There are noticeable variations in handling the ongoing COVID-19 rumors from global North to South. This write-up aims to compare and contrast initiatives taken by different

<sup>56</sup> The United Nations Foundation, Immunizing the Public Against Misinformation, cited in <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/immunizing-the-public->

against-misinformation/, Accessed on: 18 September 2020

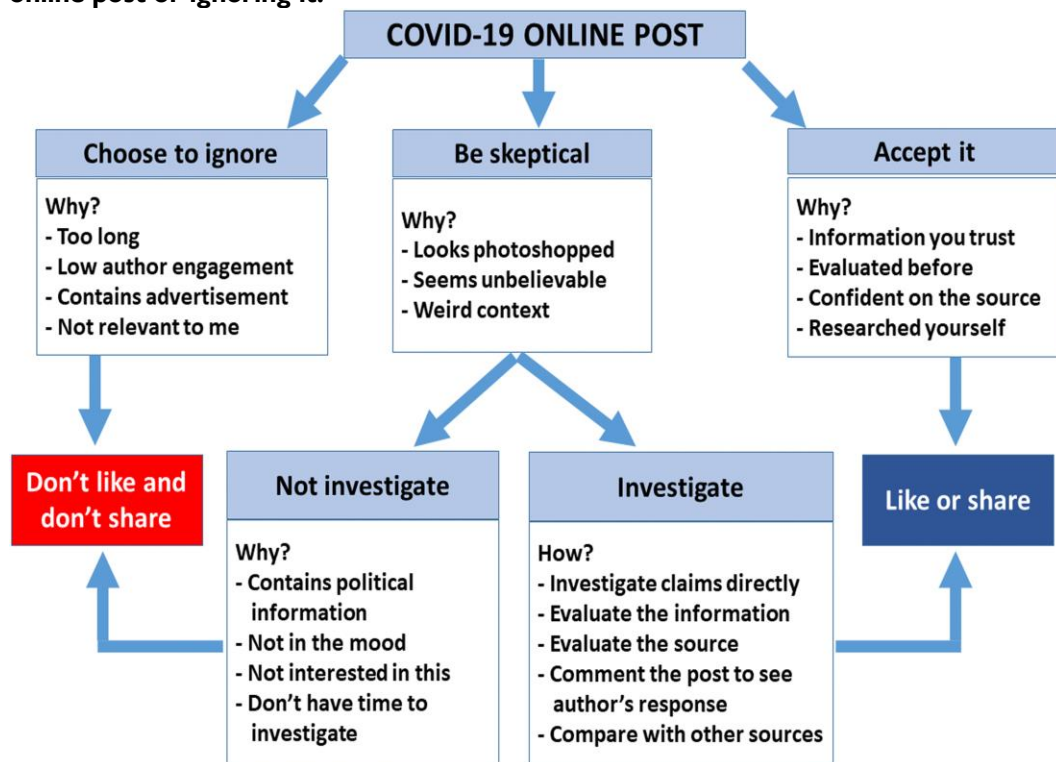
governments to handle infodemics. It also illustrates the new policies and legislations developed by different governments to combat the spread of fake news nationally and globally. Finally, the write-up aims to examine the overall impact of such rumors on day to day life.

**Countering COVID-19 Infodemic:**

Along with the challenge of grappling with COVID-19, states are also facing the

challenge of how to respond to the misinformation spreading through the online platforms. The ongoing pandemic has severely challenged the health services across the globe; the same is being done by the rumors related to it. Since the flare up of Coronavirus, disinformation operation has noticeably increased globally. Monitoring social media data has been proved as the best method of detecting infodemics connected to the COVID-19.

**Figure 11: Decision tree and factors to consider before liking or sharing a COVID-19 online post or ignoring it.**<sup>57</sup>



<sup>57</sup>McQuate S, 2020. How People Investigate — or Don't — Fake News on Twitter and Facebook. Available at: <https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/03/18/how-people-investigate-fake-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>. Accessed on September 6, 2020.

Due to lockdown, people have got more spare time to look for new information online associated with the virus. According to the WHO, this situation is an infodemic: “An over-abundance of information — some accurate and some not — rendering it difficult to find trustworthy sources of information and reliable guidance.” Italian data scientist Walter Quattrociochi said “COVID-19 is the perfect storm for the diffusion of false rumor and fake news”. Researchers say it is difficult to stop people from spreading fake news, effective strategies are required to ‘flatten the curve’ of infodemic.

### **Initiatives taken by different governments to counter the COVID-19 Infodemic:**

States have been struggling to tackle the rumors alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. The availability of internet has caused the rumors to draw more public attention than ever. Many governments have taken legal initiatives to counter the COVID-19 infodemic.

Singapore, for example, formed the first advisory board to correct fabricated news and misrepresentation online. Singapore government boosted Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), for internet intermediaries including the Facebook, Twitter, Baidu and Google to abide by the POFMA guiding principle to instantly correct cases of

fabricated news in order to stop the spread of fabricated news on their platforms.<sup>58</sup> In Singapore, five different ministries worked in partnership to form advisories reachable to diverse sectors of the society. It intended to disburse information from the official sites of social media pages belonging to government ministries. Furthermore, information was also displayed in residential areas and disseminated government-driven message through WhatsApp. Not only the Prime Minister but also the representatives of different educational and business institutions supported the socially-driven initiatives. Countrywide, citizens were educated about the significance of cross-checking the legitimacy of information associated with COVID-19.<sup>59</sup>

In East Asia, China imposed strict regulations against those who produce and publicize misinformation or false propaganda focused on the pandemic.<sup>60</sup> The government introduced laws and legislations that included punishment for spreading false news and propaganda. Anyone found guilty was penalized. The government also regularly shared the criminal prosecutions related to rumors. News and media reports comprehensively represented how false information has doubled within a week from 20 to 27 February 2020. Since COVID-19 was identified in China, state authorities made several attempts to regulate chronicles on the coronavirus including systematic

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<sup>58</sup> Singapore Fake News Law: POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act), Cited in <https://ifonlaysia.blogspot.com/p/singapore-fake-news-law-pofma.html> Accessed on September 8, 2020

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*

<sup>60</sup> Disinformation and Propaganda During the Coronavirus Pandemic, Cited in <https://www.dw.com/en/disinformation-and-propaganda-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/a-52970643> Accessed on September 8, 2020

under-reporting on infection rates, blue-penciled online memorandum, manipulated media reporting, held informants, media personnel and health service providers for disclosing information about the infection.<sup>61</sup> Gradually the virus got spread in the region and then around the globe and so do the rumors. Teachers educated their students about mutual responsibility towards their friends in battling rumors allied with the COVID-19 pandemic.

South Korea followed Singapore and largely focused on exposing misinformation through the news sources, live programs, expert interviews and health authorities.<sup>62</sup> Beyond imposing the stubborn prosecutions, both Singapore and China asked for support from the residents to combat infodemic. However, South Korea largely stressed on the conditions of other states that faced problems of fake news and rumors of coronavirus. South Korean news sources represented comparative information on the struggle of other countries in this matter. Noticeably, South Korea has responded to the attacks on China in dealing with the infodemic crisis. Against this backdrop, South Korea has united its citizens against the "Chinese phobia phenomenon" arising from China's

inability to grip the global fake news propaganda.<sup>63</sup> It was crucial for the government to handle the infection rate and spread of rumors. The government has always been at the strict point in uniting its citizens to overthrow infodemic of misinformation.

The contemporary global campaign against rumors is known as 'Stop the Spread'.<sup>64</sup> The campaign intends to create awareness about the perils of misinformation on Coronavirus. It aims to cross check information with the reliable authorities like the WHO. The latter is promoting this campaign across Asia, Middle East, Africa, Europe and Latin America. The campaign also attempts to address the spread of wrong information about the COVID-19. The government of United Kingdom (UK) has launched a joint awareness campaign with the WHO about the risks of incorrect and false information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. As a part of this, the UK government has developed an awareness toolkit that intends to translate and share the toolkit information among the partner states.<sup>65</sup> To combat the spread of infodemic, BBC World News and BBC.com have broadcast the toolkit information to reach the UK citizens abroad. To reduce the impact of coronavirus health crisis, the

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<sup>61</sup> The New York Times, Cited in <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html> Accessed on September 8, 2020

<sup>62</sup> The Guardian Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/mass-testing-alerts-and-big-fines-the-strategies-used-in-asia-to-slow-coronavirus> Accessed on September 18, 2020

<sup>63</sup> The Guardian, Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/30/south-korea-cracks-down-on-fake-news-about-spread-of-coronavirus> Accessed on September 18, 2020

<sup>64</sup> The United Nations, COVID-19 Response, Cited in <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation> Accessed on September 18, 2020

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*

BBC Global News' is committed to donate free airtime to public health bodies to promote messaging. The National Health Service (NHS) website explained penalties for spreading any kind of misinformation associated with COVID-19.<sup>66</sup> The NHS also cooperated with Google, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to ensure free flow of authentic information and to combat the spread of rumors.<sup>67</sup> Consistently, the Pan American Health Organization has provided the risk communication guidelines for spreading fake news linked to coronavirus.<sup>68</sup>

### Italy and Covid-19 Infodemic: Acumens and Approaches

Italy became the first country after China that plagued with amplified cases of infectio and deaths.<sup>69</sup> *In Europe, Italy became the center point of coronavirus infection and misinformation. Evidently, disinformation operations in the country increased from early March to May 2020.* As reported in the media, some rumors have gone viral in Italy whether there was any truth or not. Being the center of the COVID-19 outbreak, Italy declared a countrywide lockdown. Pictures revealed that people fleeing from different Italian

provinces were returning to local villages. These became a matter of concern for people around the globe. At that point, Italy started to take strategies to control the infection. However, it also became the center of misinformation and disinformation that emanated from other states. Therefore, other states closely observed Italy for developing coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many European countries reported problems due to a substantial increase of distortions and misrepresentation. The spread of rumors brought potentially harmful consequences in the proper management of the pandemic situation.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, campaigns criticizing the European Union (EU) unity have intensified during the coronavirus pandemic. The EU vs Disinfect website enthralled frequently on pro-Russia propaganda, stalked at least 84 campaigns concerning Italy.<sup>71</sup> Also, there has been a notable increase in pro-China campaigns, often adopting a habituated pro-Russian focus. Evaluation of such campaigns represents China as a strong and responsible state was able to protect its population, and to help other states to counter the pandemic. In the name of

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<sup>66</sup> NHS, 2020. NHS Takes Action against Coronavirus Fake News Online. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/03/nhs-takes-action-against-coronavirus-fake-news-online/>. Accessed on 10 September 2020,

<sup>67</sup> Lovell T, 2020. NHS Joins Forces with Tech Firms to Stop the Spread of COVID-19 Misinformation. Facebook, Google and Twitter Take Action to Ensure Accurate Health Advice on Their Platforms. Available at: <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/europe/nhs-joins-forces-tech-firms-stop-spread-covid-19-misinformation>. Accessed on 10 September 2020,

<sup>68</sup> PAHO, 2020. Risk Communication: Guidelines and Technical Reports. Available

at: [https://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=12801:2016-risk-communication-guidelines-technical-reports&Itemid=42221&lang=en](https://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=12801:2016-risk-communication-guidelines-technical-reports&Itemid=42221&lang=en). Accessed on 12 September 2020,

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2020/08/06/bangladesh-set-to-overtake-italy-in-number-of-confirmed-covid-19-cases>

<sup>70</sup> DW.com, cited in <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-says-china-russia-behind-coronavirus-disinformation-campaigns/a-53762806> Accessed on September 10 2020,

<sup>71</sup> Politico, cited in <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-warns-on-pro-kremlin-disinfo-on-coronavirus-pandemic/> Accessed on September 10 2020,

benevolent support, the intention was to undermine the EU and the transatlantic alliance.<sup>72</sup> Russia sent military doctors to Italy. At that moment, a rumor got spread

among the locals that the Russian aid might have military chattels.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, China donated defective protection equipment's to Italy.<sup>74</sup>

### **BOX I: Examples of some Incidents Related to Coronavirus Rumors in Italy<sup>75</sup>**

- By circulating the availability of vaccines, some dishonest people took the opportunity of rapid spread of COVID-19 in Italy. In Venice, a leaflet was distributed at marketplaces and households with a fake claim about a COVID-19 vaccine that anyone can afford at a cost of 50 Euros. The leaflet claimed that six doses of the injection would protect from the virus for a year and the given email address in the leaflet should be contacted to buy the vaccine. Though no vaccine was available anywhere in the world.
- **Military Deployment:** As a part of combating covid-19 spread, Italy imposed restrictions on prison visits. A Tweet somehow linked the presence of military to the prison restrictions. The video posted on Twitter got 250,000 views and showed that military were in the southern city of Foggia, later it amended this to Palermo in Sicily. Although the military were on the streets in Palermo, but there was no linkage with the coronavirus pandemic. The Italian military have confirmed that they were returning from a military exercise and their presence wasn't linked to the prison disturbances, nor for any other reason related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A misleading information got spread in social media and in the Viralmagazine on the ways to prevent coronavirus by taking vitamin C. In Viralmagazine, it was viewed 576,000 times and was shared by 30,000 people. The information claimed that this research was done by a researcher at Zanzan University, China. In practice, there is no university in China with this name.

### **Peru as the combat zone of COVID-19 Infodemic:**

Peru is one of the top fifteen countries in the world that reported COVID-19 cases. Even after 60 days of social isolation and

countrywide lockdown normal life has been highly affected due to the rapid spread of fake news. Apart from handling the pandemic, fighting the fabricated news has turned into another battle as it spreads

<sup>72</sup> The Guardian, Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/russian-media-spreading-covid-19-disinformation> Accessed on September 12, 2020,

<sup>73</sup> The Globe and Mail, cited in <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-russia-sends-military-medics-supplies-to-italy-in-war-on-covid-19/> Accessed on September 12, 2020,

<sup>74</sup> Foreignpolicy.com, Cited in <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/russia-china-coronavirus-geopolitics/> Accessed on September 12, 2020,

<sup>75</sup> BBC News, Coronavirus: Italy sees rapid spread of fake news, cited in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51819624>, Accessed on September 10 2020,

on the social networking sites in no time. Nationwide lock down as well as low literacy rate has contributed to rapid spread of fabricated information. Peruvian government summarized the reported fake news in the 'Handbook COVID-19 Peru' website.<sup>76</sup> This kind of website helps people to easily identify fake news. The Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of Peru announced that persons who shares misinformation shall be punished for agitating public tranquility. The Ministry also requested the citizens to share only authentic news with a hashtag 'Don't spread#FakeNews.' The government, social media and other technology companies worked together to curb the infodemic. Twitter combated the spread of fake news by deleting accounts while Amazon<sup>77</sup> and eBay<sup>78</sup> deleted offers declared as miracle cures. Peru is also planning to include health literacy into elementary and high school curriculum like basic cancer literacy and primary knowledge on infectious diseases.<sup>79</sup>

## UN Approach to fight 'infodemic of misinformation'<sup>80</sup>

The United Nations (UN) Department of Global Communications (DGC) has formed a rapid response team to promote comprehensive awareness to fight infodemic of misinformation, images and videos. The UN have launched a COVID-19 Communication Response Initiative associated with science, solutions and solidarity to combat false claims and fake information. It intends to combat infodemic like the virus can spread through radio waves and mobile networks. Essentially the UN DGC is relentlessly working to provide wide-ranging information on peace, cohesion and solidarity to battle the pandemic.

The Secretary General of United Nations Antonio Guterres rightly pointed out that, 'Our common enemy is Covid-19, but our enemy is also an 'infodemic of misinformation'.

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<sup>76</sup> Incio J, 2020. Handbook Covid-19 Perú - Noticias Falsas.

Cited [https://jincio.github.io/COVID\\_19\\_PERU/Fake.htm](https://jincio.github.io/COVID_19_PERU/Fake.htm) Accessed on August 23, 2020

<sup>77</sup> Valinsky J, 2020. Amazon Deleted 1 Million Items for Price Gouging or False Advertising about Coronavirus. Cited

: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/02/tech/amazon-coronavirus-products/index.html>. Accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Kan M, 2020. eBay Bans Sales of Face Masks, Hand Sanitizer to Stop Coronavirus Price

Gouging. Cited : <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/347346>. Accessed August 26, 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Hudson L, Samons KM, Dicken HE, Prichard C, Weiss LT, Edward J, Vanderpool RC, Vanderford NL, 2020. A brief educational intervention enhances basic cancer literacy among Kentucky middle and high school students. J Cancer Educ doi:10.1007/s13187-020-01696-3.

<sup>80</sup> The United Nations, COVID-19 Response, Cited in <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%9Binfodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation> Accessed on September 18, 2020

- The UN team, missions and WHO are at the frontline to fight against the misinformation pandemic. The UN Department of Global Communications is working to spread authentic science-based information related to COVID-19. Therefore, WHO has established the Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN). It aims to make social media and mechanical team work in a coordinated manner for tracking and responding to fake news, pictures, rumors and videos. For example, the government of Uganda in collaboration with WHO took precautionary measures to educate the people of remote areas who have limited access to digital information. As a part of its awareness raising, materials were translated into the local dialects to reach more people and to circulate accurate information.
- WHO has developed Partnership with WhatsApp, Facebook, Rakuten Viber and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to share serious guidance and information

Viruses cannot travel on radio waves/mobile networks.

FACT: 5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19

COVID-19 is spreading in many countries that do not have 5G mobile networks.

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or speaks.

People can also be infected by touching a contaminated surface and then their eyes, mouth or nose.

World Health Organization #Coronavirus #COVID19

8 April 2020

on COVID-19. As a deliberate part of it, a message service and interactive chatbox have been established in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.

- The United Nations has also worked with media and journalists to ensure precise, consistent and verifiable public health information. The UNESCO has published two policy briefs assessing the fabricated misrepresentation of social media in support with the International Center for Journalists. Therefore, several initiatives have been approved in the developing countries, including India,

Africa and Eastern Caribbean, to conduct effective fact-checking and counter disinformation and sensationalism on coronavirus.

- As a part of the UN approach to fight infodemic of misinformation, globally thousands of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) were incorporated in the awareness campaign. CSO's associated with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and DGC were given the scope to access, take part and contribute to UN high-level processes. Across the world, 1,900 organizations get access to the weekly newsletter. CSOs are also sharing their stories of contribution in response to the pandemic.
- The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights clarified that the battle is against the false information not against the freedom of speech and right to information. Restrictive measures levied by state authorities against the freedom of online and print media were highly criticized by the UN. The UN authority always spoke out about the right of media freedom.

### **Cross-regional Declaration on infodemic<sup>81</sup>:**

A cross regional declaration has been developed where 130 member states sanctioned statement on manipulated information concerning the virus. The effort was led by 13 countries including India, Indonesia, Latvia, Lebanon, Mauritius,

Mexico, Australia, Chile, France, Georgia, Norway, Senegal and South Africa. These countries co-authored the cross-regional statement acknowledging that the spread of infodemic can be hazardous to health and security. As described in the cross-regional statement, "it is critical that states counter misinformation as a toxic driver of secondary impacts of the pandemic that can heighten the risk of conflict, violence, human rights violations and mass atrocities," It also stated:

We call on countries to take steps to counter the spread of such disinformation, in an objective manner and with due respect for citizens' freedom of expression, as well as public order and safety. We reaffirm the importance of ensuring that people are accurately informed from trustworthy sources and are not misled by disinformation about Covid-19.<sup>82</sup>

The initiative also encourages people to become 'information volunteers' for disseminating trusted information to keep their communities safe. Undoubtedly, the world has experienced a perilous outbreak of rumors on health issues. The UN have launched 'Verified', an initiative, to combat the rising scourge of COVID-19 fabrication. India's Permanent Mission supported the UN Response initiative '#VERIFIED' and "calls for global action to fight infodemic in times of COVID-19."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in New York, Cross-Regional Statement on "Infodemic" in the Context of COVID-19, Cited <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Cross-Regional-Statement-on->

Infodemic-in-the-Context-of-COVID-19 , Accessed on 7 September2020

<sup>82</sup> ibid

<sup>83</sup> ibid

The UN agencies in collaboration with the state actors emphasized on the increase of societal resilience to counter fake news and fabricated information.

**Measures to ensure access to accurate information and combat the COVID-19 infodemic:**

- To keep people safe and informed about the virus and misinformation social networking platform can be used.
- To support fact-checkers by issuing funds
- To prohibit commercial advertisement of personal protection equipment including disinfection spray, wipe, hand sanitizer, face mask, face shield and eye protection goggles.
- To support health and economic relief efforts for the frontline fighters and free advertisement facilities for global health volunteers.
- To support local government and emergency health services to reach people on social media
- To develop reliable health and information app for local people
- To build more resilient region including greater national and subnational-level venture in health and information sharing services.

- To diversify e-commerce, e-government, e-learning, e-education and tele-medicine services

To sum up, dealing with the COVID-19 infodemic is a multifactorial challenge. It requires the increase of health literacy among people supported by the government, health sector and social media networks. Confronting the spread of fabricated news mostly depends on individual users and their decisions to share or not to share, before truly verifying such information. It is also important to address territorial inequalities because the rumors have asymmetric impact on individuals, societies and regions. To cope with the future challenges of indistinguishable issues building more resilient regions including regenerated policy dialogue can help in this regard. It is challenging to accomplish the strains of the crisis by a single government. In order to better prepare for the future misinformation crisis regardless of their pattern, government at all levels including local, national, federal, unitary and regional have to work together in a collaborative and coherent manner. The pandemic has created the prospect for countries to reinforce partnership-based approach to better implement the response measures. Crisis management approaches adopted in Asia and Nordic countries may help to meet crisis-induced challenges.

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## Profiling Rumors associated with COVID-19 in Social Media

The huge spread of rumors associated with COVID-19 led the international community to term this pandemic as 'Infodemic' because rumor or fake news is being spread faster and in an easier manner than the virus – as pronounced by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) in a gathering of foreign policy and security experts.<sup>84</sup> Rumors or proliferation of false news has become a buzzword in post-fact era where the objective facts are getting less attention or minimum-priority.<sup>85</sup> Rumor or fake news is getting floor due to the rapid expansion of social media platforms like Facebook since they have become more convenient to spread manipulated news or fake news. While doing so, people also believe that they are exercising their citizenship rights and duties in doing so, this may be described as 'Citizen Journalism'. Though the types, contexts, contents, and consequences of fake news vary, it always has a dark side which impacts negatively upon societal harmony and peace.

### Types of Rumors in Social Media

Plenty of rumors were spread in social media (Facebook and Twitter) which can be differentiated into roughly five different categories: rumors related to the origin of

the virus, cure or treatment of the virus, vaccines, COVID-19 death, source of infection or transmission and others. A list of these varieties of rumors associated with COVID 19 is briefly discussed below.

#### I. Origin of the Virus

Rumor I: A group of tweets suggest that it was a cynical Chinese plan all along to spread the virus and to secretly deal with the repercussions afterward. These tweets referred to a long-term strategy of China to dominate the world.



What if China started this virus intentionally? It seems to be the only country that has been able to deal with it. Almost as if it was ready for it.

Mimi naona it was China's plan for world domination. 😂

11:02 AM · Mar 27, 2020 · Twitter for Android

66 Retweets and comments 198 Likes

(Source: Twitter, Date: 27 March 2020)

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<sup>84</sup>“UN tackles ‘infodemic’ of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis,” 31 March 2020. Cited in <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99->

[misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19](#). Accessed on 29 October 2020.

<sup>85</sup> F. M. Arafat, “Fake News Phenomenon in Bangladesh,” *CGS Peace Report* 3, no. 3, May-June 2019.

## 2. Cure or Treatment

Rumor 1: The screenshot indicates that this particular rumor had primarily spread in Jamalpur. It prescribes to have ginger, cinnamon (*daruchini*), black fennel flower (*kalijeera*), and honey mixed with red tea while reciting 'May Allah save me from Coronavirus' as a cure. Curiously, the rumor does not end with the prescription, but rather, gets accentuated with its narrative. A superficial value is added with the remedy being spoken of, as it is circulated that a newly born baby died immediately after prescribing it.



জামালপুরের এক ডেলিভারি মহিলার বাচ্চা হইসে...  
বাচ্চা জন্ম হওয়ার সাথে সাথে বলছে (লাল চায়ের  
সাথে- আদা, ডালচিনি, কালিজিরা আর মধু মিশিয়ে  
খাওয়ার জন্য এবং এক নিয়তে বলতে হবে আল্লাহ  
আমাকে করোনা ভাইরাস থেকে রক্ষা করুন.. বাচ্চা টা  
এইটা বলেই সাথে সাথে মারা গেছে....  
Kahini ta real amr cacchur bari jamalpur...

(Source: Facebook, Date: 27 March 2020, Location: Jamalpur, Bangladesh)

## 3. Death

Rumor 1: Very few tweets were dedicated to the defamation of China. Needless to say, some of them overlapped with the geopolitical tension between China and its adversaries in the regional (India) or global



(Source: Twitter, Date: 7 February 2020, Location: China)

(US) arenas. Tweets from conservative politicians and commoners in India or in the US would try to portray that China had been deliberately killing COVID-19 patients and was taking other hideous measures to stop further transmission.

#### 4. Source of Infection or Transmission of the Virus

Rumor 1: A rumor was spread that 5G mobile network or Wi-Fi signals spread coronavirus. People panicked about it and stopped using Wi-Fi for a while in order to prevent the spread of this virus among their neighbors.

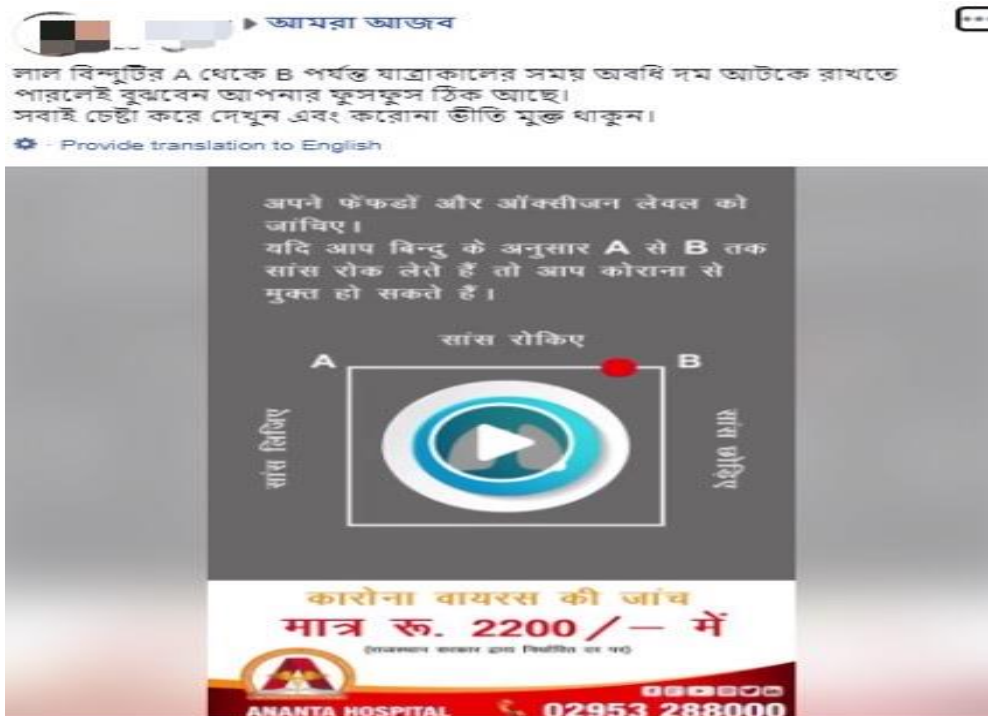
#### 5. Others

Rumor 1: A rumor about a virtual dot test was spread in Facebook telling if anyone can hold his/her breath till the red dot reaches at point B from point A, that person's lung is too well to get infected with COVID-19. This video was created and spread from India; which the people of Bangladesh could access easily, and most

of them were seen transmitting this video of a red dot with this message.



(Source: Facebook, Date: 20 April 2020)



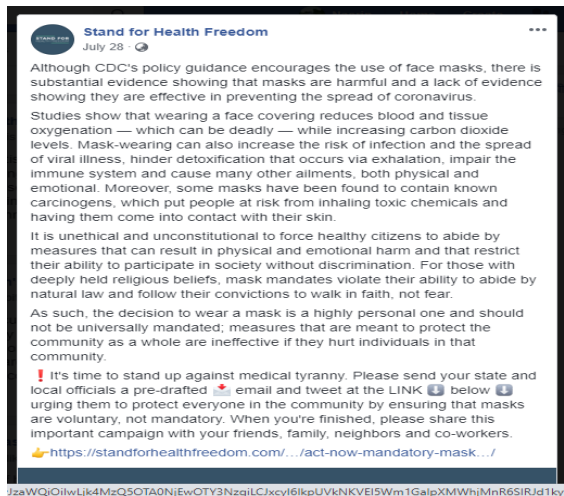
(Source: Facebook, Date: 29 August 2020, Location: India and Bangladesh)

Rumor 2: The following screenshots express the ‘unnecessary’ use of face masks in order to reduce the risks of Coronavirus. ‘Evidences’ against wearing face masks were shown in terms of hypoxia – where it was suggested that wearing face-covering can reduce blood and tissue oxygenation – which is deadly.

Rumor 3: Some research institutes published imperceptive and manipulative studies which made people believe that wearing masks in public or adhering to the quarantine rules might not be feasible. This indeed resulted in the #nomasks movement on Twitter and in reality, while the issue earned misleading political undertones as well.



(Source: Facebook, Date: 3 August 2020)



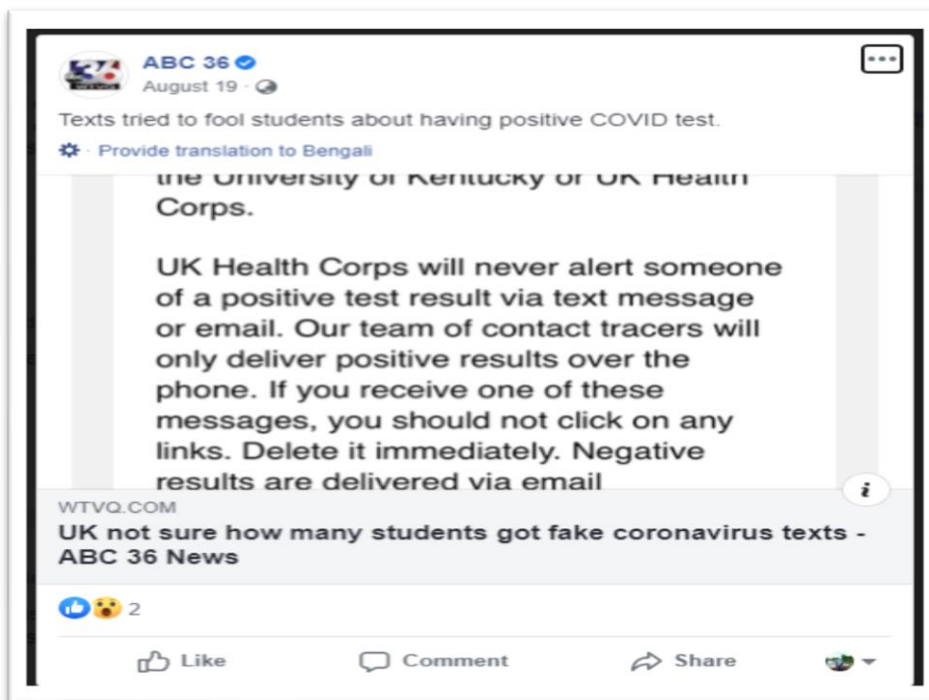
(Source: Facebook, Date: 28 July 2020)



(Source: Twitter, Date: 27 August 2020)

Rumor 4: A good number of University students of Kentucky University of the United Kingdom (UK) received fake mobile texts about having a positive COVID-19 test. The screenshot tells about the fake text and notice of authority to the students for not panicking.

it is wise to keep in mind that social media are no less than double-edged swords that sometimes force people to consume rumors. Misinformation posted by a single individual can now be seen by thousands of people in a matter of seconds. So, people need to think deeply about the



(Source: Facebook, Date: 19 August 2020, Location: United Kingdom)

Rumors and fake news have a negative impact on peace and stability in society. Since rumors spread faster in social media,

moral and social consequences of rumors during the pandemic period.

[Collected by: Nasrin Jabin, Nahian Reza Sabriet and Mansura Amdad]\*

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## Commentary:



**Mizanur Rahman Khan\***

### **I. How would you define rumor?**

A famous formula asserted that: Rumor = importance × ambiguity,  $R = i \times a$ . "Ambiguity" here refers to the uncertainty of the circumstances or contexts in which the rumor spreads. Gordon Allport and Leo Postman's two conditions test corroborated the said formula.<sup>86</sup> Some scholars 'involve subjective emotional distortion, and the level of these distortions is determined by the overlapping effects of "importance" and "ambiguity".' Western sociologists opined that 'interpersonal networks and group dynamics' are 'at play during the spread of rumors.'<sup>87</sup>

However, I simply see rumor to be uncertain, but not necessarily untrue. The definition of rumor may vary from person to person, society to society with their cultural levels. It could be time-bound; it

could last for generations. Ultimately, it is all about the quality of the people's empowerment. It may contain plenty of shades such as 'fact-free hearsay', half-truth-prone hearsay, truth and lies mixed cocktail and 'news without basis.' There can be a society where an inconvenient truth is leaked as 'rumor'. And in the end, that 'truth' may change shades and the distorted version may catch the imagination of the public mind. Finally, the rise of social media has hugely impacted the rumor literature which was being orchestrated from time immemorial.

### **2. Do you think rumor has a political connotation?**

It depends largely on any given context. Rumor has a political dimension only if the actors want to play it to advance their particular agenda. Anti-government rumors prevail in authoritarian regimes. In contrast, we saw last weekend that a

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<sup>86</sup> Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947).

<sup>87</sup> Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, "Rumors Influence: Toward a Dynamic Social Impact Theory of Rumor," In A. R. Pratkanis (Ed.), *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress* (Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2007).

Bulgaria-born blind mystic Baba Vanga (known as "the Nostradamus of the Balkans," died in 1996) is said to have predicted Donald Trump's coronavirus battle after saying that the US President would get sick in 2020. I saw this 'news' (many would say fake news, lies, rumor) got wide publicity, at least in every prominent British tabloid.

The SecDev Group, with funding from the UNDP Partnerships for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh (PTIB) program, has started to monitor the COVID-19-related 'disinformation' from almost the early stage of the pandemic. Their reports have proved that social media platforms were widely used by different groups to give issues a political overtone. Clandestine groups have tried to create serious confusion in the society (e.g.: fueling hatred against the government). The report alarmingly found a 'stoking political tension' between 8 April to 21 April which peaked the related curve from 0% to more than 25%. Between March to May 2020, out of 64% misinformation posts in social media, at least 6% were from 'politically affiliated actors.'

Actually, popular rumor, which has the potential to capture any agitated mind, could be easily used as a political tool. For instance, a student getting infected was falsely propagated in the University of Southern California campus and many feared that racial profiling and racist attacks might be imminent.

It was apparent that conspiracy theories got space among a section of Americans when President Trump propagated that the spreading of the virus was a Chinese

ploy to do harm to the American establishment. The contrary version also got some credence among Chinese citizenry against American hands in spreading COVID-19.

### **3. Can we classify the rumors associated with COVID-19? If yes, what are those?**

Yes. Since COVID-19 is new to the people of Bangladesh, it must have a rumor mill. SecDev detected 33 disinformation posts related to COVID-19 in Bangla language from 27 May to 02 June 2020. Analysts identified these entries in a sample of 727 social media posts on 17 channels. In total, these posts attracted 246,868 interactions.

It was found that the 'false claims seeking to provoke anger against the government and public health authorities continued to resonate strongly with audiences.'

Some of the features are mentioned below:

1. The victims of COVID-19 would have died in 2020 anyway.
2. The government was exaggerating the gravity of the pandemic.
3. It is a mere seasonal flu, calling upon to break the social-distancing rules.
4. It would be eradicated within the next four weeks (by falsely citing the top respiratory authority in China, Dr. Zhong Nanshan).
5. The crisis was concocted by the 'global liberal establishment' to oppress people.
6. The World Health Organization (WHO) was conspiring with global

business elites and government officials to profit from the lockdown.

7. After the violent episode of 'Delwar Hossain Sayeedi (a convicted Jamaat-e-Islami war criminal) being sighted in the moon,' it was propagated at the height of the pandemic that he would be released from the prison due to COVID-19.

#### **4. Is it possible to differentiate between harmful and harmless rumor?**

Yes. It is possible. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a large section of the Bangladeshi society generally does believe in somewhat harmless rumors in daily life. Some of them go down through generations. For instance, sometimes it is reported that there are some lapses in following the mystic traditions akin to harmless rumor in different parts of the country.

On 18 March 2020, *The Business Standard* reported that rumors were spread in every district of Barishal Division that COVID-19 will not attack people if they ate *Thankuni* leaves (a popular herb). The people hysterically had eaten the leaves overnight at war footing. But it was not regarded as a threat to health. When Chinese people were sneezing, we have heard that all the people in the airport were running in fear. But it can be seen as harmless.

Again, a rumor may be harmful and harmless. When it is said that the China's 5G internet may help spread the virus it may not be harmful; but when it is said that

the virus had been weaponized to spread in such a way, it might be harmful.

#### **5. How do you think the COVID-19 situation has contributed to the spread of rumor?**

As I have already pointed out, a rumor is a notion which needs to be understood in the light of the empowerment of people. This empowerment connotes and includes democratic practices, rule of law, good governance, and finally, the reliability of the healthcare system. The scarcity and vulnerability to access treatment and other healthcare facilities have contributed to the 'situation.'

News about false cures (e.g.: salt-water rinsing) and prevention measures (from traditional herbs to even fireworks) were generated even in the developed countries. But it would be wrong to equate it to understand the 'situation' of Bangladesh. Till this date we are somewhat fortunate that we did not face a situation compared to the deadly 'spike' that was seen in countries like Spain, Italy, the USA or the UK.

In Bangladesh, especially those who live in remote villages, they are not really dependent on the state-aided institutional treatment. There is reason to believe that many people have managed or devised a plan to confront COVID-19 if they are attacked. The lack of medical facilities in the resource-constrained countryside has compelled them to rely on the available medication and some practices (relying on herbs and other traditional methods) which are essentially based more or less on rumors. So, I see further penetration

and even institutionalization of the rumor mill in our society in the wake of COVID-19.

#### **6. How does rumor affect the state?**

The State has no undisputed definition. The Constitution of Bangladesh defines the State that includes 'Parliament, the Government and statutory public authorities.' The judiciary and the media, the third and fourth state is absent. However, it is understood that the State can be distinguished from a government. The State is the organization. The government is the manifestation of a particular group of people.

How a particular form of rumor could affect the state depends on the nature of rumor and the quality of the state machinery. The impact of any rumor cannot be the same in a good-governed state and a bad-governed state. It is conceivable that the rumor has the potential to affect very negatively on the 'low-culture polity' under an authoritarian or hybrid regime. On the contrary, there could be rumors in the democratic and 'highly cultured' society, but it cannot do much harm in that state.

#### **7. The Government has certain policies like punishment of 14 years of jail or penalty of up to 3 crore takas. Do you think this punishment is credible enough to stop rumors?**

It is understandable that the quantum of punishment itself can do little to curb the menace of criminal acts or fatal rumor. When the gap in the democratic deficit widens, the fabric of rule of law also erodes. In recent years, Bangladesh

adhered to extreme modes of punishment such as mandatory death penalty to curb violence against women, but it could not help much in achieving that goal. So, my answer is no.

#### **8. What is the role of media in controlling or spreading rumors?**

The media has a vital role to play, both in controlling and spreading the rumor. Media accountability and responsible journalism came to the forefront during the pandemic.

Following the rise of social media and citizen journalism, the need for investigative and ethical journalism is felt more than ever before. The coverage by the mainstream media on rumors related to COVID-19 has helped to prevent its negative impact greatly.

#### **9. In today's time, we see that social media is the largest platform for spreading rumor. Do you think it will go against people's freedom of speech if they are monitored over social media?**

Social media have emerged and come to stay for years to come. There are cross-border online forums that are regarded as a constant source of spreading misinformation, lies and rumors about coronavirus.

It is true that freedom of speech should not be seen in an irresponsible way. Most of the written constitutions have guaranteed freedom of speech, subject to reasonable restrictions. However, no constitutions dare venture to define the 'reasonable;' so, the onus of interpretation

lies in the judiciary. Consequently, the quality of judicial independence and rule substantially govern the people's right to speak.

The American First Amendment (which stated that the 'Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press')<sup>88</sup> gave an enormous opportunity to build a much stronger America. But it is also true that after 9/11, they have passed some legislations which indirectly undermine the above-mentioned constitutional guarantee.

I do agree that reasonable monitoring is acceptable over social media; but not acceptable at all if it is designed to serve the collateral purpose to muzzle the press and dissenting views or to punish the power contenders or to protect individuals from constructive public criticism.

But the ruling elites have a strong point when they expressed concern: 'a section is deliberately lying about the COVID-19 death tolls as they are saying that all those who died recently in the country were infected with coronavirus.'<sup>89</sup>

But when the government went for blocking 50 websites and 82 Facebook pages arbitrarily in March for 'spreading rumors regarding the COVID-19 pandemic,' it cannot be said that it is the rational outcome of 'monitoring.' They

should not keep the 'blockade' for an indefinite period without any judicial scrutiny.

### **10. Do you think the government might also have their propaganda in spreading rumor?**

On many occasions (e.g.: the Russian Revolution), it was admittedly seen that "newspaper offices organized oral agitation, political circles, posters and slogans on a grand scale which went far beyond the limited bounds" and subsequently, those were made as a tool of governance.<sup>90</sup>

It again depends on the democratic values of the party in power. If any authoritarian regime comes to the conclusion that spreading rumor could give some leeway or comfort to the government, then they will surely do so. Iran officially blames America and Israel for spreading the virus.

Western studies show 'modern authoritarian governments increasingly turn to information manipulation, rather than relying on ideological indoctrination or physical repression to maintain rule.' Traditionally, China has rejected this notion in what they love to say 'pathological Western style of propaganda and rumor.'

Ali Haif Abbas has conducted a study based on the reports published by the

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<sup>88</sup> "U.S. Constitution – First Amendment," Cited in <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/#:~:text=Congress%20shall%20make%20no%20law,for%20a%20redress%20of%20grievances>. Accessed on 7 October 2020.

<sup>89</sup> "Quader: Vested quarter is conducting propaganda against government," *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 May 2020. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/15/quader-vested-quarter-is-conducting-propaganda-against-government>. Accessed on 7 October 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Roger Pethybridge, *The Spread of the Russian Revolution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1972).

New York Times and the Global Times, and found that “the news of COVID-19 has been politicized and used for ideological interests.”<sup>91</sup> So, it reminds us as to how the American mainstream news outlet went wild with the Bush administration to declare ‘War on Terror’ against the Saddam Hussain regime on the plea of destroying the so-called weapons of mass destruction.

So, there is reason to believe that most of the governments have systematic propaganda tools and tactics to spread rumors to advance their will and intentions.

### **11. How do you think rumors can be stopped?**

It is diabolic in nature. Many people love to hear and take part in gossiping. They love to imagine, love to dream.

In 1942, psychologists Gordon Allport and Robert Knapp established the first “Rumor Clinic” at Harvard University to combat rumors in the wake of WWII.<sup>92</sup> So, it cannot be stopped by sermons,

executive proclamations, or punitive actions. You can prevent or lessen the adverse effect but you cannot stop it completely. Almost every potential rumor carries some degree of ‘importance.’

Before concluding, I must say that the criminal or harmful rumors must be dealt with in accordance with the law. But to make the society rational and free from prejudices, we have to inject better and scientifically advanced education at all stages and allow the meritocracy to prevail at every level of our national life, especially in the political and constitutional institutions. It could ensure social justice and the best healthcare system, among others.

An apolitical, efficient and merit-based law enforcing agency (not draconian) and judicial branches could be the best answer in preventing rumors, which could disrupt peace in the society.

**Thank you!**

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<sup>91</sup> Ali Haif Abbas, “Politicizing the Pandemic: A Schemata Analysis of COVID-19 News in Two Selected Newspapers,” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 3 July 2020.

<sup>92</sup> “During WWII, ‘Rumor Clinics’ Were Set Up to Dispel Morale-Damaging Gossip,” *Atlas Obscura*, 17 May 2017. Cited in <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wwii-rumor-clinics>. Accessed on 7 October 2020.

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## Annex:

Some definitional clarification according to BPO Codebook.

**Gunfight.** Shootout opposing the police or security forces to criminals, militants or other irregular forces that do not match the definition of a non-state armed group.

**Clash.** Two-sided violence between groups, outside of the context of war or insurgency. *Example: supporters of rival political parties fight each other.*

**Assault.** One-sided violence by an individual or small group against another individual or small group. *Example: stabbing, shooting of someone by a perpetrator*

**Fight.** Two-sided violence between individuals or small groups. *Example: brawl between 3-4 people.*

**Sexual assault.** One-sided sexual violence, such as rape or attempted rape, by an individual or small group against another individual or small group.

**Destruction of property.** One-sided violence perpetrated with the intent of damaging property. *Examples: vandalism, arson.*

**Mob violence (large group assault).** One-sided violence by a mob or large group against an individual or a comparatively small and/or defenseless group. *Examples: lynching of a thief, looting of shops and houses owned by a religious minority.*



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