

THE PANDEMIC AND THE PRESS

Children stand in queue to collect food during the government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Kolkata, India, on April 12, 2020. CREDIT: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/ AFP

The lockdowns and physical distancing measures put in place in varying degrees of severity in all countries in South Asia had direct implications for the media. From self-protection and workplace safety, lack of protective equipment and training, and reporting amidst physical barriers, journalists in the region learnt quickly and hit the ground running. Journalists did a commendable job of exposing the unfolding humanitarian crisis, encroachment on citizens' rights, policy failures and also stories of touching humanity amidst the crisis. And all this while desperately trying to keep their jobs.

The lockdowns came as a severe blow to the news industry's financial basics. Global signals of peril had been emerging from the early years of the century, as digital media began claiming a larger share of the advertising pie. But most of South Asia was buffered to some degree by growing newspaper readership – a consequence of both increasing literacy and affluence – and the buoyant growth of advertising spending for close to two decades ending 2008. The virus cracked unambiguously exposed the deep fissures in the media industry, whose lack of sustainability came sharply to the fore.

MEDIA INDUSTRY AT SEA

On April 27, India's Supreme Court admitted a writ petition filed by the National Alliance of Journalists (NAJ), the Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) and the Brihanmumbai Union of Journalists (BUJ) demanding an end to job losses and salary cuts in the media industry. Notice was issued to the two apex industry organisations – the Indian Newspapers Society (INS) and the News Broadcasters' Association (NBA) – asking for a response on specific points about job losses and salary cuts.

India's newspaper industry, lulled into a sense of security, chose a revenue model in which the subscriber paid little and advertising contributed 65 to 90 per cent to total revenue.

When advertising first started slowing with rising anxieties over the economic slowdown in China, and then abruptly dried up with the nationwide shutdown, the news industry found itself cut adrift, without any means of negotiating choppy waters. Negotiating the current crisis will involve reversing the course set some three decades back, when the pursuit of profit through maximising advertisement yield became the priority.

The obvious solution is to aggressively start pricing online content. Yet, with several local governments decreeing a ban on printed newspaper distribution through the health crisis, this strategy could potentially mean that newspaper titles could drop off audience radars. Several have nonetheless retreated behind paywalls, or announced such intention, while providing free content ostensibly as a public service through the days of lockdown.

The Indian Newspaper Society meanwhile has submitted a memorandum to the Indian government, demanding a number of fresh concessions including import duty exemption for newsprint; a two-year exemption from taxation; and an increase of 50 per cent in the rates paid for government advertisements.

Journalists' unions have underlined that the industry should not be allowed to default on its primary responsibility of safeguarding job security and ensuring regular wage payments through the crisis.

In Pakistan however, the digital media led the way in converting what is a media production and operation crisis into an opportunity. One way they did that would be to examine any innovation around what they are doing that others are not, specifically in the context of Covid-19. Mainstream print establishments (facing distribution problems) and even current affairs TV channels which could not generate pre-outbreak levels of field-based content rapidly beefed up their digital operations, reworking their websites and social media accounts to focus on Covid-19 coverage.

LOCKDOWN OF RIGHTS

India awoke late to the Covid-19 threat, but then went the maximum distance. The public mood was already fearful and the markets had begun to shed value. Following a day-long nationwide “voluntary” curfew on March 22, the Indian Prime Minister addressed the nation at 8 pm on March 24, to announce a complete lockdown all across the country starting within four hours, at the stroke of midnight.

India’s lockdown was the severest in scope, amounting to a complete paralysis of normal life. Yet India’s economic stimulus package to deal with the adverse consequences of economic paralysis was among the most modest, amounting to less than one per cent of GDP, against 3 per cent or above in most countries threatened by the pandemic and 9 per cent in the richer nations.

Via video conference, India’s Prime Minister urged news channel heads, newspaper owners and editorial heads, to communicate key decisions “swiftly and professionally... through easy to grasp language” and also “counter pessimism and panic through positive communication”. This attempt to shape the narrative was not entirely successful.

Media personnel were given permission to move about during the lockdown and over the first few days of the lockdown, the stories that dominated the headlines were of a mass movement of working people, mostly employed in the informal sector in India’s bustling cities. There was also a real possibility that the harvest, by then due in some of India’s most productive agricultural regions, would be disrupted. Reports suggested a mass flight to rural India in which essential norms of social distancing were disregarded and for those who stayed back, living in cramped quarters, recommended precautions against possible infection were even more impractical. These reports brought home a story of a rushed decision, careless about possible human consequences.

At the end of March, a public spirited group of individuals pressed a petition in the Supreme Court, pleading for credible steps to safely evacuate migrant workers from cities and other transit locations where they may be stranded, and to provide essential food and care for them. At the first hearing of the petition, the government denied the existence of a crisis of internal migration and blamed the disruption on “fake news”, amplified through irresponsible media reporting. The government urged the Supreme Court to order that the media only report the official version of events in matters involving the pandemic. While hesitating to go that far, the Supreme Court did enjoin the media to take into account the official version of events in their reporting.

But with their treasuries drained, the Indian media may not be in the best position today to push back against the government’s relentless will to ensure that its version of events alone gains traction among the public.

DANGEROUS POLARISATION

By end of March, it was revealed that a religious congregation involving a significant number of overseas participants in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi between March 13 and 15 had not fully dispersed. Some of the participants had stayed behind, others had travelled to various parts of the country. Some tested positive for the virus and through contact tracing a trail of infection was found stretching to various parts of India. Official negligence and lacunae in communication were obviously to blame. Overseas participants had all entered on valid visas and none of them were screened on arrival. And even if the local government in Delhi had issued an advisory against large public gatherings on March 14, the police which is controlled by the national government, had failed to enforce the rule.

These details were lost in the tide of media outrage that followed, which identified India’s largest religious minority as the source of infection, deserving of social ostracism and even criminal sanction. In the days that followed, localities that public health authorities sought to access to carry out their screening and quarantine processes, witnessed unrest and the occasional riot, fanned by rumours and fake news circulated on WhatsApp. With social trust at a low ebb, the effort to rein in the lethal pandemic too suffered.

In Sri Lanka, the anti-minority rhetoric whipped up by the Sinhala nationalist media and social media users blaming a particular community for the epidemic prompted the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medical Services to issue guidelines for reporting Covid-19, requesting the media not to mention race or religion of infected persons or of those who die of it; not to publish photographs or show videos of infected persons without their permission and not to report in a manner that causes hatred among people.

LITTLE PROTECTION

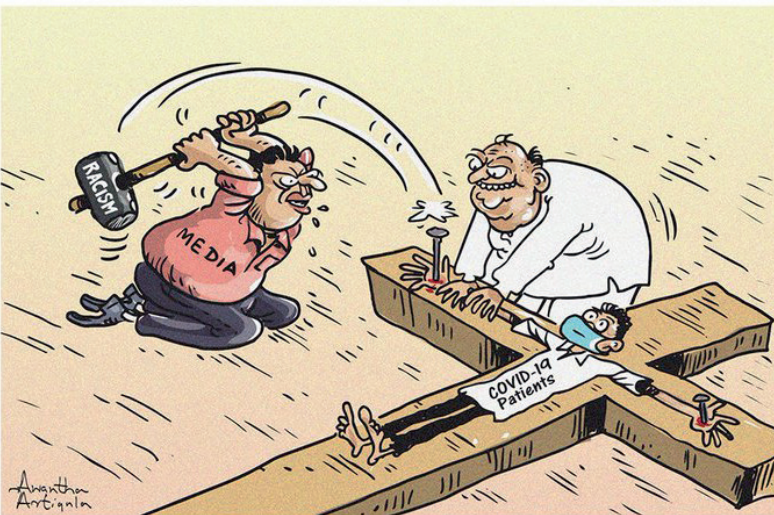
As elsewhere, access to the frontlines against the pandemic is one of the challenges facing media personnel in South Asia where widespread lockdowns, stay-home orders and containment zones restrict physical access. Secure access is another category of problem, since personal protective equipment (PPE) has been in short supply across much of the region. With the scarcity situation dictating that available supplies be reserved for medical care professionals media personnel have often had to disregard necessary safeguards, and journalists in several cities in India contracted the virus. Of 167 journalists in Mumbai covering the pandemic, 53 of them Covid-19 positive. Most of these were reported asymptomatic.

With businesses closed, even small-scale advertisements, including lifelines from the government, have dried up, adversely affecting routine operations due to logistical challenges (transport, etc), health and workspace safety issues – at least a dozen journalists and media workers have tested positive, including eight at the ARY TV channel bureau office in Islamabad. Senior journalist Zafar Rasheed Bhatti died on April 26, 2020 after testing Coronavirus-positive. While most media houses embraced the necessary social distancing, a significant part of the media staff had to work from home but feared being rendered redundant and preferred to risk themselves in the workplace and the field.

Given the looming threat of infection, the All Pakistan Newspaper Employees Confederation (APNEC) to request the government to distribute safety kits and ensure medical treatment for media workers. By early April, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) negotiated with the Punjab provincial government to extend a package for media persons affected by Covid-19, from monthly pensions to compensation for families of journalists. Masks and protective gear was also to be provided to hawkers. All this was in addition to tax exemptions to media houses to get through the crisis.

In Nepal, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) issued guidelines on the ‘Dos and don’ts’ of reporting the pandemic, based on WHO guidelines, adapted to the local context. A co-ordination committee headed by the FNJ President monitored the situation in media houses and a Situation Report found that precautionary measures taken by the media houses for the journalist were unsatisfactory: even in the office, the required distance was not maintained and journalists in some of the media houses did not have the necessary protective equipment..

In tandem with Nepal’s Ministry of Health and Population and the Red Cross, the FNJ distributed over 5000 masks, sanitizers, hand gloves and hundreds of press jackets to the journalists



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through its provincial committees, district chapters and also through media houses in Kathmandu. FNJ has also coordinated with health and humanitarian organizations to provide health professionals for regular health check-ups.

A common trend is the empowerment of police authorities across the region – officially in a “Police Curfew” in Sri Lanka – which has sharpened an already tense equation between the compulsions of enforcement and the task of extracting and reporting news from beneath the security lockdown. The notice to media organisations issued by the Sri Lanka Police threatening strict legal action against those who ‘criticize’, point out ‘minor shortcomings/failures’ or ‘scold/chastise’ state officials performing their duties does not bode well for critical reporting.

VIRAL MISINFORMATION

Countries in South Asia face like problems though differently manifest according to internet penetration, literacy deficits and relative levels of poverty. India with its proliferation of “smart-phones”, faces a potential overload of spurious information, while Pakistan with 35 per cent internet penetration has the problem – as a digital rights campaign group put it – that these technologies are “still a luxury for many”.

Misinformation and fake news have gone viral amidst the difficulties of authentic news reporting. Governments across South Asia have issued directives against fake news about Covid-19 and followed up with specific efforts to control the flow of information. India’s first positive case in the southern Indian state of Kerala, was reported “uncooperative” in providing travel details. Contact tracing was done by accessing the individual’s cell phone records. Though the final outcome may have been benign, there are persistent fears about privacy violations and increased surveillance of citizens, especially under regimes that do not set much store by public trust. The use of “electronic fences” and stipulations that quarantined individuals should provide real-time compliance reports by regularly posting “selfies”, have engendered new fears about privacy violations.

Across South Asia, fake news reports proliferated about the viral spread and possible remedies. In Sri Lanka, a Facebook post claiming that hot water and sunlight would kill the virus went viral; in Pakistan, the photograph of a Chinese worker at a hydroelectric project who visited a hospital with a stomach complaint was shared as a Covid-19 case, and in Bangladesh, a

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man was arrested for spreading fake news on the virus. In India, a morphed UNICEF report that hand sanitisers were ineffective in killing the virus was widely circulated, and varieties of “natural” cures forwarded on WhatsApp groups.

In Pakistan, most newspapers cut down their pages. For mainstream media, Covid-19 has meant less content, and often content that may not necessarily be useful for the people in a time of enhanced need for reliable information. Such as clerics populating prime time TV talk shows and news bulletins being thin on “news you can use” formats, especially since the government did not want criticism of its relatively poor Covid-19 response performance. The overall impact has been a diminishing in the quality and quantity of media.

The other grave concern was the denial of information, thanks to censorship restrictions on communities in conflict. Despite several attempts and petitions to India’s Supreme Court, internet restrictions continued in Kashmir, with a renewed ban on high speed mobile internet. In Bangladesh, an internet blackout and phone restrictions at Rohingya refugee camps obstructed the work of humanitarian groups tackling the Covid-19 threat. This hit nearly 900,000 refugees in Cox’s Bazar and the Bangladeshi host community, as the aid groups’ ability to provide emergency health services and rapidly coordinate essential preventive measures were severely hampered.

In Nepal, the media faced an entirely different attack: with the Chinese embassy issuing a statement against Anup Kaphle, the then editor-in-chief of *The Kathmandu Post*, for alleged persistent bias. The statement issued unspecified threats against the paper for a column reprinted from *The Korea Herald* by former a former US diplomat that was critical of China’s response to the Covid-19 epidemic.

There were also damaging fake news reports that mimicked government notifications, including a supposed press release dated March 18, purportedly issued by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) of India, that restricted entry of Malaysians. Another was a notification purportedly making WhatsApp group moderators liable for messages written or forwarded on their groups.

On March 20, India’s Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) issued an advisory to all social media platforms, that they were intermediaries under the Information Technology Act, 2000, and needed to take down any content potentially violative of public order.

Non-profit organisations, civil society groups, lawyers, public policy professionals, technologists, social activists, entrepreneurs, and citizens of India, expressed concern over what they called the “unwarranted, excessive, collection and processing of personal data of individuals” by the central and state governments. “Although this is an extraordinary situation”, the statement warned, “care should be taken to ensure that the personal information of individuals is handled securely and with due care respecting their privacy rights”. With minor qualifications, these apprehensions were shared by media and human rights organisations across South Asia.