



FACTSHALA USER STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BASELINE STATUS OF INTERNET USERS IN INDIA

Conducted by Internews and
DataLEADS in consultation with
Stanford History Education Group (SHEG)



**Stanford History
Education Group**

With support from

**Google.org**

Context

India is the second largest internet population in the world with over 687 million regular internet users, of which majority are mobile only, first-time internet users. The smartphone user base is projected to increase to 829 million by 2022. Over the last few years, the country has also become the largest user base for social media platforms like Facebook and Whatsapp with 324 million and 400 million active users respectively as of now¹. According to the Reuters Institutes' India Digital News Report (2019)², an overwhelming majority of Indians identify various forms of distributed discovery as their main way of accessing news online. Over half of the respondents the institute surveyed reported getting their daily news from social media, while one-fourth identified social media as their main source of online news. Facebook and WhatsApp are also the most widely used for news (52%), followed by Instagram (26%), Twitter (18%), and Facebook Messenger (16%).

The increasing reliance on these platforms as a source of information has aided the dissemination of unverified information and aggravated the problem of misinformation. In the last three years, over 30 people have lost their lives³ due to mob violence instigated by fake child kidnapping videos and texts shared over social media platforms⁴. Fake news also had a role to play in the Delhi riots where the police suspended 40 social media accounts as they were found to be instigating violence⁵.

In early 2020, as rumours, pseudo cures and fake news around COVID-19 virus took centrestage, the Supreme Court of India - the apex legal body in the country - observed that panic due to misinformation about the pandemic will destroy more lives than the virus itself and asked the Centre to set up a portal for dissemination of real time and verified information to counter the panic being spread.

Our program **FactShala: India Media literacy Network**, a news and information literacy project launched by **Internews** with the support of **Google.org** and the **Google News Initiative** and in collaboration with **DataLEADS**, aims to tackle this problem of misinformation by empowering the general public in non-metro cities and rural areas in India with the skills required to critically analyse online content and navigate the information overload they are often subjected to online. Our focus is on educating people about understanding their information ecosystem better and equipping them with the skills needed to consume information critically.

In India, over 30 people have lost their lives due to mob violence instigated by fake child kidnapping videos and texts shared over social media platforms. Fake news also had a role to play in the Delhi riots where the police suspended 40 social media accounts as they were found to be instigating violence.

1. <https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/whatsapp-announces-2-billion-users-worldwide-11581516342061.html>
2. Reuters Institutes' India Digital News Report - https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/India_DNR_FINAL.pdf
3. <https://www.indiaspend.com/child-lifting-rumours-33-killed-in-69-mob-attacks-since-jan-2017-before-that-only-1-attack-in-2012-2012/>
4. <https://www.wired.com/story/how-whatsapp-fuels-fake-news-and-violence-in-india/>
5. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/delhi-riots-police-crack-down-on-fake-messages-40-accounts-suspended/story-NmxTCWbzTu2NXpQ9PdibcK.html>
6. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sc-asks-centre-to-curb-fake-news-on-coronavirus-set-up-portal-within-24-hours-for-real-time-info/articleshow/74910176.cms>

Context

Before we set off on this key exercise, [FactShala](#) - under the consultation of the [Stanford History Education Group \(SHEG\)](#) - did a baseline exploratory study to understand how end users assess various types of messages they access online and what makes them believe or reject certain messages.

We then also contrasted the response we received with the strategies fact-checkers or journalists apply to verify information. The key patterns we saw and the insights drawn helped us create a framework that was used to prepare a curriculum that will be used by FactShala trainers to help the end audience of the program - adults aged 18+ in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages in India - understand their information ecosystem better, identify misinformation and connect them to trustworthy sources of information.

In total, 1955 responses from 391 respondents residing in 90 cities and 25 villages of 23 states in India were analysed for the study. These included 135 think aloud responses, where the answers were recorded in video or audio format remotely. There were 27 tasks in all.

The task questions simulated the type of content received by common people in everyday lives. There were nine categories of tasks in total. Each participant was given five questions that were essentially picked from five to six categories selected according to the particulars of the respondents we aimed to reach through the set. This included a mix of Whatsapp forwards, Facebook posts, screenshots of tweets and mainstream media, video news items from TV news and random videos that were frequently forwarded. Therefore, each respondent answered at least one type of question from the above mix.

1955

In total, 1955 responses from 391 respondents residing in 90 cities and 25 villages of 23 states in India were analysed for the study. These included 135 think aloud responses, where the answers were recorded in video or audio format remotely. There were 27 tasks in all.



Key Insights from User Study

The tasks in our study were designed to elicit information about how individuals evaluate online content. Since the aim of the exercise was to better understand patterns of decision making, respondents were asked to briefly explain their reasoning instead of completing a multiple-choice question. Responses were scored using a three-level rubric. An analysis of the responses revealed a stark contrast between the strategies used by professional fact checkers and those used by respondents. Unlike fact checkers, most respondents did not question the authority of the source or the sender. This was true for over 90% of the 1,955 responses collected. Instead, respondents often relied on their personal beliefs when deciding whether they would trust a message and rarely consulted other sources for verification. Overall, respondents showed a lack of skill in evaluating the credibility of online information.

The study revealed some clear patterns about why people fall for misinformation, regardless of their age, gender or education level. Some of the key trends common across city and village respondents were:

1. Majority of the respondents do not question the source of the information, or assess if the source or sender is a credible authority on the subject. Respondents across demographics focus more on the content of the message and rely on personal biases and beliefs while deciding whether they will believe or reject a message.
2. Respondents usually do not verify information from alternative sources on the web. There is a noticeable skepticism against social media, but despite that it is noteworthy that majority respondents are unaware of strategies to evaluate evidence or verify online content.
3. A great deal of trust in mainstream media, to the point that they blindly trust information misattributed to mainstream media.
4. Majority respondents do not realise the extent of manipulated content they access online. Respondents are also oblivious to the absence of gatekeeping on social media and the difference of nature between news versus non-news content.
5. If the sender is a prominent influencer or a person they look upto, respondents were more likely to believe the message. Believability increases if the ideology of person sharing information aligns with that of the audience.

The respondents did not question sources, verify information from other sources or look for verifiable evidence in information. They lacked strategies to spot and evaluate misinformation. The survey revealed some clear patterns about why people fall for misinformation.

Way Forward

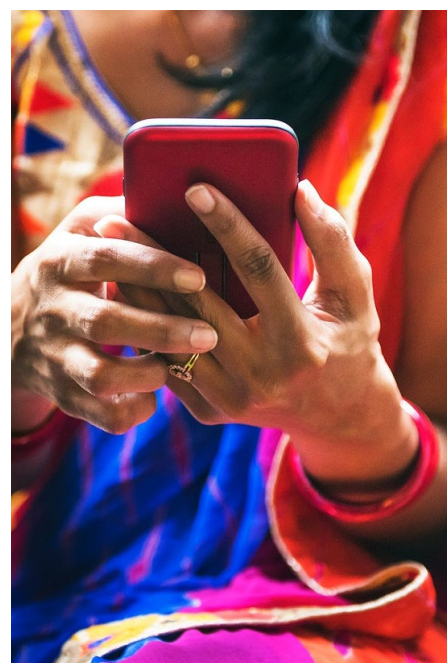
Even as millions of Indians continue to come online every year, there is no clear guideline for these ‘first generation mobile only’ internet consumers. Media literacy programmes in India are either restricted to school settings or are small independent efforts limited in scale and impact. There are not many focussed, all encompassing programmes that help adults in non metros discern media messages, especially so in regional languages. As we at FactShala started our journey to plug this gap, we used the insights gained from this study to sketch our future course and path and build a curriculum that will be used by our trainers to train the end audience.

In our study, we learnt that most new internet users rely on their traditional knowledge, beliefs and biases, validation from friends and acquaintances etc. to make sense of online information. To deal with this, one good way could be to share with the end users strategies on how fact-checkers and journalists evaluate and assess online information. For this, we decided to use this three-question framework (as per SHEG’s Civic Online Reasoning)⁷ and train the users to ask these basic questions as they assess the credibility of any information online.

- Who’s behind the information - is the source an authority on the subject?
- What do other sources say?
- Does the evidence shared support the claim?

Basis the patterns we observed and to get the best results, respondents also need to be trained on the following aspects to help them make better choices about information they see online:

- Audience need to be made aware of the changing media landscape and the key difference between traditional and social media
- The program should make them privy to the consequences of consuming misinformation, and give them a good primer about the extent of online manipulation
- They should be taught to identify authoritative sources of information and learn how and where to look for them on the web
- They should also be trained on basics of verification techniques that will help them evaluate the evidence shared in online posts
- They should be able to differentiate between news and non-news content and understand their information neighbourhood better
- They should be made aware about their own biases so that they move from passive to mindful consumption of information



7. Sam Wineburg, Joel Breakstone, Mark Smith, Sarah McGrew, and Teresa Ortega. “Civic Online Reasoning: Curriculum Evaluation” (working paper 2019-A2, Stanford History Education Group, Stanford University, Stanford, 2019).

FactShala ToT Approach

FactShala is a pan-India media literacy network. It is a first-of-its-kind simple, scalable program that encourages participants from all spheres and ages to partake in it. The program will deliver a curriculum tailor made by experts for the target audience in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages in at least seven Indian languages through our unique Train-the-Trainer model. The program will utilise the local knowledge and expertise of 250 trainers who will be mentored to pass on these critical skills to the last mile. The trainers will help the end-trainees in their communities and cities understand their information ecosystem better and evaluate and assess information critically. The examples would be contextualised as per local needs and sensibilities. Trainers will focus on marginalized, underserved communities and those that are disadvantaged.

FactShala program will utilise the local knowledge and expertise of 250 trainers who will be mentored to pass on these critical skills to the last mile.





Factshala User Study

Baseline Status of Internet users in India

Introduction	8
Methodology	10
Sample Tasks	12
EXAMPLE 1	13
EXAMPLE 2	15
EXAMPLE 3	17
EXAMPLE 4	19
EXAMPLE 5	21
Key Insights of User Study	23
Conclusions	26
The Way Forward	27
FactShala ToT Approach	29

Introduction

India is the second largest internet population in the world with over 687 million regular internet users, of which majority are mobile only, first-time internet users. The smartphone user base is projected to increase to 829 million by 2022. Over the last few years, the country has also become the largest user base for social media platforms like Facebook and Whatsapp with 324 million and 400 million active users respectively as of now⁸. According to the Reuters Institutes' India Digital News Report (2019)⁹, an overwhelming majority of Indians identify various forms of distributed discovery as their main way of accessing news online. Over half of the respondents the institute surveyed reported getting their daily news from social media, while one-fourth identified social media as their main source of online news. Facebook and WhatsApp are the most widely used for news (52%), according to the survey, followed by Instagram (26%), Twitter (18%), and Facebook Messenger (16%).

The increasing reliance on these platforms as a source of information has aided the dissemination of unverified information and aggravated the problem of misinformation. In the last 3 years, over 30 people have lost their lives due to mob violence instigated by fake child kidnapping videos and texts shared over social media platforms¹⁰. Fake news also had a role to play in the Delhi riots where the police suspended 40 social media accounts as they were found to be instigating violence¹¹.

In early 2020, as rumours, pseudo cures and fake news around COVID-19 virus took centrestage, the Supreme Court of India - the apex legal body in the country - observed that panic due to misinformation about the pandemic will destroy more lives than the virus itself and asked the Centre to set up a portal for dissemination of real time and verified information to counter the panic being spread¹².

The foundations of a good democracy rely on good information. Media and information literacy can help us in this by investigating connections between media and civil society, news production and audience reception, community and media representation, as well as locating diverse, credible and independent information and finding avenues for civic participation (Mihailidis, 2008)¹³. It is due to this, that access to and use of good information has also been considered a basic tenet of media literacy.

In early 2020, as rumours, pseudo cures and fake news around COVID-19 virus took centrestage, the Supreme Court of India observed that panic due to misinformation about the pandemic will destroy more lives than the virus itself.

8. <https://www.livemint.com/technology/tech-news/whatsapp-announces-2-billion-users-worldwide-11581516342061.html>

9. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/India_DNR_FINAL.pdf

10. <https://www.indiaspend.com/child-lifting-rumours-33-killed-in-69-mob-attacks-since-jan-2017-before-that-only-1-attack-in-2012-2012/>

11. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/delhi-riots-police-crack-down-on-fake-messages-40-accounts-suspended/story-NmxTCWbzTu2NXpQ9PdibcK.html>

12. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sc-asks-centre-to-curb-fake-news-on-coronavirus-set-up-portal-within-24-hours-for-real-time-info/articleshow/74910176.cms>

13. Mihailidis, Paul. (2008). Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens.

Introduction

Our program **FactShala: India Media literacy Network**, a news and information literacy project launched by **Internews** with the support of **Google.org** and the **Google News Initiative** and in collaboration with **DataLEADS** aims to tackle this problem of misinformation by empowering the general public in non-metro cities and rural areas in India with the skills required to critically analyse online content and navigate the information overload they are often subjected to online. Our focus is not just on quelling misinformation generated by conventional and social media but also on educating people about understanding their information ecosystem better and equipping them with the skills needed to consume information critically.

Before we set off on this key exercise, FactShala - under the consultation of the **Stanford History Education Group (SHEG)** - did a baseline exploratory study to understand how end users assess various types of messages they access online and what makes them believe or reject certain messages. We then also contrasted this with the strategies fact-checkers or journalists apply to verify information. The key patterns we saw and the insights drawn helped us create a framework that was used to prepare a curriculum that will be used by FactShala trainers to help the end audience of the program - adults aged 18+ in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages in India - understand their information ecosystem better, identify misinformation and connect them to trustworthy sources of information.

In total, 1955 responses from 391 respondents residing in 90 cities and 25 villages of 23 states in India were analysed for the study. These included 135 think aloud responses, where the answers were recorded in video or audio format remotely. There were 27 tasks in all. The respondents were identified by way of snowball sampling.

FactShala - under the consultation of the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) - did a baseline exploratory study to understand how end users assess various types of messages they access online and what makes them believe or reject certain messages.



Methodology

A qualitative study of respondents from rural, urban and semi-urban areas from across India was conducted to understand how people assess the trustworthiness of online information. Tasks included simulated the type of content received by common people in everyday lives. This included a mix of Whatsapp forwards, Facebook posts, screenshots of tweets and mainstream media, video news items from TV news and random videos that were frequently forwarded.

There were nine categories of tasks in total. All respondents were given one set comprising of five to six tasks selected according to the background of the respondent. Since the aim of the exercise was to know patterns of decision making and understand exactly why, or why not, would an end user trust any information, the respondents were asked to explain reasons for their decisions in a couple sentences instead of yes or no, true or false or multiple choice answers.

It has been noticed in previous studies¹⁴ that stories appearing as if they are from traditional news outlets are widely circulated amongst Indian audiences. The most common examples were photoshopped newspaper clippings and TV news screengrabs that are edited¹⁵. Another form of commonly circulated misinformation are old videos circulated out of context or with fresh and misleading text¹⁶. Since images are preferred over texts, memes and screenshots seemed to form a major part of the fake content. The trend of 'screenshotting' (as per BBC) has become ingrained as a method of both receiving and sharing information. Since the messages consumed by urban and rural audiences were similar, all possible types of messages were included in the questionnaire. Wherever possible, similar messages were picked in both Hindi and English.

Keeping the difference in accessibility of information in mind owing to language and geographical location, three forms were developed in Hindi and three in English to cover rural and urban areas. In some places, where respondents spoke in dialects of Hindi (eg Marwari, Haryanvi etc.) but accessed Hindi messages on phone, the help of interpreters was required to translate the questions and get responses from them. Responses were sought in written as well as audio-video format. The idea was to give each set of respondents messages that they are most likely to receive in real life and see how they arrive at decisions regarding their trustworthiness. Therefore, respondents were asked to comment upon whether the texts/videos/pictures were trustworthy for them and what evidence within the message made it believable for them. Responses were scored using a three-level rubric.

The questions were carefully chosen with the intent of covering various issues where we think misinformation is most rampant.

Respondents were sought through snowball sampling and sent 'online' survey forms. A Google form comprising five questions representing some of the above types were sent to respondents over email or as a WhatsApp link.

Our focus is not just on quelling misinformation generated by conventional and social media but also on educating people about understanding their information ecosystem better and equipping them with the skills needed to consume information critically.

14. DUTY, IDENTITY, CREDIBILITY Fake news and the ordinary citizen in India (Beyond Fake News- BBC World) Lead author: Santanu Chakrabarti

15. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/india-misinformation-election-fake-news/586123/>

16. <https://www.wired.com/story/how-whatsapp-fuels-fake-news-and-violence-in-india/>

Methodology

Each survey form had five to six tasks along with basic demographic questions such as name, age, education level etc. with some sets having an overlap. The responses were sought from all cohorts such as students, homemakers, working population and retired individuals etc. Since a lot of respondents from villages and underserved communities in tier 2&3 cities had limited or no reading ability, their responses were recorded as audio/video over Whatsapp or regular calls. A few respondents were also asked to answer the questions over video conferencing apps. This was done to get an idea about how they arrived at decisions about messages. The researchers were able to see which questions were particularly challenging and which ones were relatively easy for the respondents through the think aloud format. Some city based respondents were offered think alouds over video conferencing apps if they agreed.

For the audio/video think alouds of respondents who were less educated, individual task items were forwarded to them instead of the form and answers to demographic questions were orally recorded and manually entered by the team. The questionnaires were circulated through email, whatsapp and direct messages.

The aim was to reach as many different types of cohorts as possible. But due to pandemic related restrictions and limited internet capabilities of respondents the sample obtained is not representative. But since the study is a baseline survey and exploratory in nature, this does not affect our findings.

The respondents were adults (above 18years) and residents of tier 2,3 cities or villages in India. The demographics were:



FEMALES
201



MALES
190

AGE - 18-25
166

AGE - 26-50
181

AGE - ABOVE 50
44

HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

GRADUATE
108

HIGHER SECONDARY
54

POST GRADUATE
180

VOCATIONAL/
TECHNICAL
28

MATRICULATION
OR BELOW
21

OCCUPATION

HOME-MAKER
30

NOT EMPLOYED
8

RETIRED
16

SALARIED
122

SELF-EMPLOYED
73

STUDENT
142

HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU READ/ WATCH/LISTEN TO NEWS?

DAILY
175

SOMETIMES
64

NEVER
-

MANY TIMES IN A DAY
112

WHEN SOMETHING
IMPORTANT
HAPPENS
40



SAMPLE TASKS

There were nine categories of tasks in total.

Each set had a combination of five to six categories of fake messages or posts selected according to the particulars of the respondents we aimed to reach through the set. For instance, English speaking audiences received more wordy and text heavy messages and were more likely to be familiar with Twitter etc. so their set contained questions related to that. While village audiences receive more video messages and may not be familiar with Twitter, so their survey form was designed accordingly. Across all 27 tasks, more than 90% of responses received the lowest possible score on the rubric.

In order to highlight how the study helped us map the big trends of how respondents evaluate online information, this report cites some of the sample questions that were included in the study and analysis of their responses.

Example 1

Picture messages with misleading texts are one of the most commonly and frequently shared messages across social media platforms in India and hence some such examples from this category were chosen to get responses from individuals in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages. The tasks included for this question required respondents to comment on the trustworthiness and credibility of the messages and share what made them believe them or state why they would reject the claim made in the message. One of the tasks was a Whatsapp message that included a screenshot of a tweet that claimed that the Indian army had constructed a 1000 bed Covid hospital in two days in Barmer, Rajasthan. The accompanying question asked respondents if they believed that this message was authentic and state the reasons for their answer.

Ideal Response: When confronted with such a message, media literate individuals - fact-checkers or journalists - would question the source of the message and authority of the sender. Alternatively, they would try to evaluate if the evidence shared - in this case the pictures - supported the claim or will verify it from other sources on the web.

What We Found: Contrary to the ideal response, we found that only 20% of respondents talked about any or all of the above. Out of the 80% remaining, no one asked about the source or sender.

This message was circulated while India was in the middle of a border clash with China along the International Line of Actual Control in Leh and nationalistic fervour was high. At the time, anti-China sentiment was also high owing to the pandemic. And interestingly, we found that about 26% accepted the message on the basis of the content or due to their own biases and beliefs about Indian army. They believed the message due to its nationalistic content and its face value.

Sample Response 1: "Yes I think this is true owing to the excellent skill and devotion of the Indian army to do something for their countrymen"

Sample Response 2: "Real news as Indian Army can be seen here."

Interestingly, about 36% rejected the message but the reasons they cited did not question the authority of the source. They did not accept the message due to reasons such as blanket mistrust on social media, inability to verify the message, technical and logistical problems in constructing the hospital etc.



TASK-1

This WhatsApp message shares a screenshot of a tweet that claims that Indian army constructed a 1000 bed Covid hospital in 2 days in Barmer, Rajasthan. Do you believe that this message is authentic? What is the evidence in the message that makes you believe/not believe in it?

Example 1

Sample Response 3: *“Fake. Because it is physically not possible and why would it be in Barmer of all places”*

Almost 18% did not give reasons for their acceptance/rejection and many said they had no idea about the content or how to verify it. Misattribution was also noticed in a couple of responses where the respondent remembered seeing the news on mainstream media.

Key takeaways: We observed that a majority of the respondents did not question the source. They were more focussed on the content and went by the overall look and feel of the message. The personal beliefs and biases played a big role in deciding response towards messages. There was a general confusion about messages that they were not familiar with. Many respondents did not know that they could verify information from alternative sources on the web. They lacked ways and means to do it. Overall, respondents were not able to correctly point to authoritative sources, or verify content from other sources.

SAMPLE RESPONSE-1

“Yes I think this is true owing to the excellent skill and devotion of the Indian army to do something for their countrymen”

Many respondents did not know that they could verify information from alternative sources on the web. They lacked ways and means to do it. Overall, respondents were not able to correctly point to authoritative sources, or verify content from other sources.

Example 2

Bollywood stars, cricketers, politicians, singers and other influencers are a big source of viral information in India. Most often, a tweet by an influencer would garner millions of views within a few minutes. News channels often pick up tweets and package stories on this basis. Though Twitter is not as popular among Indian users as Whatsapp and Facebook, the most common way for tweets to reach the common man is through screenshots.

We shared 3 such messages from popular celebrities for our study. One of the messages was about a tweet that was shared by Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan who has over 30 million subscribers on Twitter. He tweeted this [video](#) that seems to be of a rain cloud generator made by NASA.

Ideal Response: The ideal response to the above should consider whether the sender/source - in this case Amitabh Bachchan - is an authority on the topic and if the video shared is strong evidence that NASA has indeed created a cloud generator. The claim could also be easily verified by consulting credible sources of information on web.

What We Found: Only 5% of these respondents talked about whether Amitabh Bachchan or the person who posted the video were an authority on the subject or talked about verifying the information from NASA, BBC or other credible sources.

Of the remaining, over 71% failed to correctly evaluate if the evidence shared - in this case the video - was supporting the claim. And about 42% admitted that they did not have skills to verify the claim.

Interestingly, the majority of those who rejected the message cited reasons such as the feat not being technically possible etc..

Sample Response 1: *"Yes I do find this message trustworthy because the concept of artificial rain has been in practice in some parts of the world and with the advancements in technology I do think such invention is possible."*

About 24% believed it because it came from a prominent person and his verified official twitter account. For some, it was believable because the information came from a respected social figure, for others NASA and its technical capabilities made it plausible, while to some, the BBC logo in the video made it trustworthy.



TASK-2

Read the message and see the accompanying video by [clicking here](#). Is this message strong evidence that NASA has created a cloud generator? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning in 2-3 sentences.

Example 2

Sample Response 2: “Yes, it is true because it is shared by Amitabh Bachchan from his official Twitter account”

Sample Response 3: “According to me this message is trustworthy because the video has BBC watermark on the top and the video is shared by a prominent person of our country”

Sample Response 4: (think aloud): “If it is from the verified account of Amitabh Bachchan and if he has done this, then I think this would be true because these people will be correct only. Since it is a verified account I will tend to believe it (Link: [Listen to think aloud](#)).”

Key takeaways:

Majority respondents lacked necessary skills to critically evaluate the evidence of the claim in the message. The general focus on content over source of the message persisted in this case as well. We also saw that the messages were more believable if they came from a prominent influencer or a person. This was regardless of the fact that the person sharing it may or may not be an authority on the subject. The only differentiating factor was the ideological alignment of the person who shared it with that of the receivers. Believability increased if the ideology of the person sharing the information aligned with that of the audience.

In view of the fact that Indian social media consumption is dominated by influencers at the level of the family, society and public life, it is important that they value and propagate correct information. Tweets or posts by celebrities and politicians should also be observed carefully for discrepancies. Social media consumers should understand the value of good sources, authority and evidence regardless of who the sender is or whether the content looks authentic.

SAMPLE RESPONSE-1

“Yes I do find this message trustworthy because the concept of artificial rain has been in practice in some parts of the world and with the advancements in technology I do think such invention is possible.”

SAMPLE RESPONSE-4

(Think aloud):
“If it is from the verified account of Amitabh Bachchan and if he has done this, then I think this would be true because these people will be correct only. Since it is a verified account I will tend to believe it”

Example 3

Mainstream media is not just a source of news for Indians but a staple diet for many underserved communities owing to their inability to read. With over 650 news channels in almost all languages in the country, the impact of television news media is huge.

Keeping this in mind, for this category of tasks, the respondents were asked to comment on a news clipping from a mainstream channel as well as screenshotted manipulated images claiming to be from TV news. In the middle of the pandemic, WHO had been giving directions about masks, sanitizers and other protocols. Indian news channels were wasting no time in relaying the information to the masses. However, this also presented an opportunity to spread misinformation. Pseudo cures, unscientific claims, manipulated or false statements, xenophobia etc. abounded. Some screenshots claiming to be from mainstream media became viral. Therefore, this category was selected for highlighting the trends observed. In the example shared here, the picture seems to be a screenshot of a popular news channel that claims that WHO is endorsing Tulsi as an effective traditional cure against Covid-19.

Ideal Response: An ideal response would involve questioning if the channel really aired this, could it be a photoshopped picture, and if WHO had indeed made such a declaration.

What We Found: Only 15% respondents talked about checking WHO's website or other sources to check this and doubted if this is a genuine image. Among the rest of the 85% there was wide contrast in responses. Those who believed the message either cited the attribution to the TV channel or WHO or relied on their traditional beliefs about Tulsi.

Sample Response 1: यदि कभी ऐसा वीडियो में देखता हूँ और उस पर किसी टीवी न्यूज का लोगो लगा रखा हो तो मैं भरोसा कर देता हूँ।
(If I see any video that has a TV news logo, I believe it)

Sample Response 2: Yes because source is given as WHO



TASK-3

You received this picture on WhatsApp. Do you believe that this message is authentic? Why or why not? Explain reasons for your answer.

Example 3

Sample Response 3: (think aloud): “Yes, Tulsi is a medicinal plant. It is a complete plant because it just keeps the virus aside. It never allows them to go into the human body (Link: [See Think Aloud Video](#)).”



Interestingly, some of those who rejected the message cited incorrect reasons such as the traditional medicines' lobby and support groups and admitted to their inability to verify information as the cause. Some also expressed skepticism about social media forwards in general.

A seemingly simple question that should have been apparently clear to regular consumers of the channel was confusing for most respondents. This indicates that the ability to spot misinformation will be even more compromised in case of completely new pieces of information. Also, focus on content takes the debate away from sources.

Key takeaways: The majority of the respondents had no idea about the extent of manipulated content they access online. They exhibited blind trust on the mainstream media. So much so that even information misattributed to mainstream media was trusted by them. On the other hand, they had skepticism about social media forwards in general. They did not question whether the channel actually aired this. The focus was on content and not source. The fact that beliefs played an important role in deciding about a message was reinforced here.

SAMPLE RESPONSE-1

“यदि कभी ऐसा वीडियो मैं देखता हूँ और उस पर किसी टीवी न्यूज का लोगो लगा रखा हो तो मैं भरोसा कर देता हूँ।”
(If I see any video that has a TV news logo, I believe it)

The majority of the respondents had no idea about the extent of manipulated content they access online. They exhibited blind trust on the mainstream media. So much so that even information misattributed to mainstream media was trusted by them.

Example 4

Indians consume more videos online than most other regions. YouTube is most popular (388 million unique visitors, 8.1 % of all YouTube viewers are Indians¹⁷) followed by TikTok, Reels and Instagram. Often unverified videos from one platform are cross-posted on the other, leading to a deluge of unverified content available on multiple platforms. Even during the pandemic fact-checking organizations flagged videos as the primary source of misinformation¹⁸ (35%) followed by images (29%). Though mostly entertaining, random videos could also be inflammatory and hateful. The content of such videos hinges on emotional and provocative sentiment.

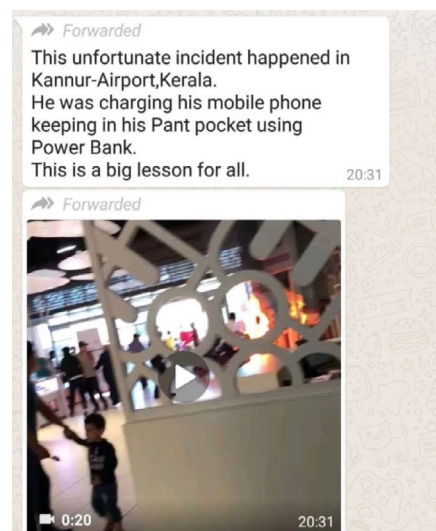
Many times, such messages have led to mob lynchings, communal tensions and harassment of individuals¹⁹ so much so that WhatsApp had to take corrective measures like tagging all forwarded messages, restricting the number of people that can be added on WhatsApp groups and even limiting the duration of status videos. In spite of this, videos continue to be the most common form of misinformation. Therefore, random video messages were shared with respondents. We gave three fake videos to gauge respondents' reactions. One of the examples we shared was about a viral video purportedly of a fire incident at an airport in Kerala.

Ideal Response: Ideally, any video like this should be questioned through the prism of evidence, source check and verifiability. In case it incites particular feelings, people should ask the motivation of the sender in sharing the message.

What We Found: However, responses received were far from ideal. Only about 10% gave ideal or close to ideal responses. Almost 30% respondents said that the incident seemed real. They cited hearsay and unconfirmed claims to support this. They did not question if such an evidence was available within the message. This somehow points to the fact that content takes precedence over source when watching things online. Also, the message seemed trustworthy as it did not promote a specific product or ideology.

Sample Response 1: "Convincing.....Due to over heat in battery explosion is quite possible and that only done over there"

Sample Response 2: "I tend to believe this sort of thing because I don't expect any agenda to be behind it"



TASK-4

Is this viral video a convincing evidence of a phone explosion at an airport in Kerala? Watch the accompanying video and explain your reasoning in 2-3 sentences.

17. <http://www.businessworld.in/article/YouTube-India-2020-Will-See-Further-Rise-In-Regional-Content-Gaming/08-01-2020-181715/>
18. <https://www.boomlive.in/fact-file/fake-news-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-a-boom-study-8008/page-2>
19. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/21/how-misinformation-whatsapp-led-deathly-mob-lynching-india/>

Example 4

This is consistent with an earlier study that was done in India where it was observed that,

“The dominant factor that drives people to share/forward information is found to be their belief that it might benefit others and help in their safety”.²⁰ (Pg 44)

Again reliance on TV news to check if the event was true was noted. Source misattribution also happened where respondents claimed that they believed in the story as they had seen it on other platforms when it did not appear there at all. Around 10% did not have any strategy to verify the message and hence did not give any reason for their choice. About 50% of respondents who rejected it either focused on the location, the language used in the video, the plausibility of the event and other such things as a basis. There was no question about the source. Blanket mistrust of social media was also a reason for rejection.

Sample Response 3: *“No i don’t believe in any type of message shared through whatsapp”*

When respondents receive such messages on their phones they do not look for the source or credibility of the information. They do not understand the way social media works or that not all information online is true.

Key takeaways: Readers on social media are unable to differentiate between the flow of information on social and traditional media. They do not understand the importance of gatekeeping or the role of editors. Therefore, to them, all messages online are usually genuine unless proven otherwise. Alternatively, some individuals have developed a mistrust on social media and would not believe even correct information. Even in case of blanket mistrust on social media, respondents didn’t know how to evaluate the evidence shared to verify the claims.

SAMPLE RESPONSE-1

“Convincing.....Due to over heat in battery explosion is quite possible and that only done over there”

Even in case of blanket mistrust on social media, respondents didn’t know how to evaluate the evidence shared to verify the claims.

20. Countering Misinformation (fake news) in India- Solutions and Strategies (Factly & IAMAI, 2018)

Example 5

Evaluating the reliability of any website is a critical skill that internet users must be aware of. To assess this skill, we included a few satirical pieces in the tasks to see if the respondents' reactions were any different if the information seemed out of 'way' or unusual in any way and if they felt motivated to check the source in that case.

Satire is an under explored and ignored category of messaging in India. It is often restricted to cartoon videos such as So Sorry!²¹ by the India Today group or cartoons in mainstream newspapers. Though incredibly popular and easily understood by some owing to the popularity of stand up comedy, it is not yet fully appreciated by others. Satire, parody and spoof are therefore common sources of misinformation.

Satire pieces are often circulated in full or part as screenshots to mislead end users, and are also republished by less trustworthy websites without any disclaimer to garner page views.

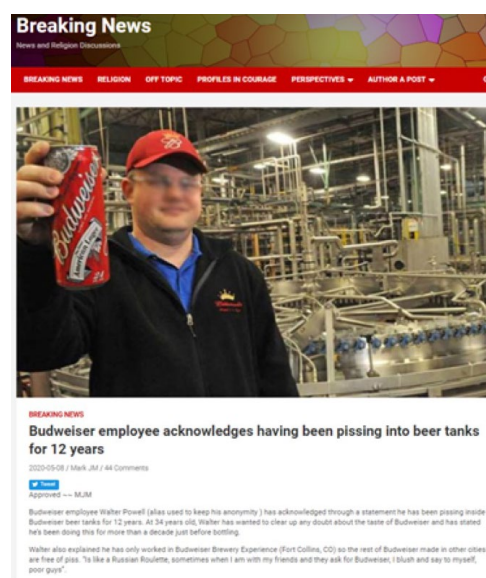
In the example below, a satirical piece of news was presented to the respondents to assess if they check the web source at all and are able to catch sarcasm and satire. The article we shared claimed that an employee had been pissing in Budweiser bottles since 12 years and asked if the respondents found the screenshot trustworthy.

Ideal Response: Asking about the source of the news, its verifiability and trustworthiness should have been the first questions by respondents when confronted with this message.

What We Found: However, the trend of focusing on content over source persisted. Only 8% respondents checked that this article came from a satirical website. For the other 92%, the credentials of the web page were not a factor in the discussion.

Sample Response 1: "The behaviour of this human is pathetic. The message is trustworthy because the name and designation of the man is mentioned for cross checking and it is important for the brand users to know about this."

Sample Response 2: "No it's not true because if the employee was pissed for 12 years then how can he survive in the company."



TASK-5

You found the article below with this [link](#) on your social media feed. What do you think about this? Is this trustworthy? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning in 2-3 sentences.

21. So Sorry is an exclusive Politoons series by India Today Group. It is India's first politoons series and an initiative by India Today Group which focuses exclusively on the most trending and controversial news from all over India. It mainly emphasizes the issues trending in India, creating spoof and humorous videos about the issues (<https://www.youtube.com/c/SoSorrypolitooons/about>)

Example 5

Responses clearly indicated that satire and parody are not genres commonly understood. There have been instances when such screenshots or news items have been taken out of context and led to controversies²². Also, inability to determine what evidence in the message is verifiable often leads people to confuse between facts and opinion.

Even when respondents mention they would verify who the person is they are talking about the event and not the source of the information. They do not give any idea about how they propose to evaluate the said information.

SAMPLE RESPONSE-1

“The behaviour of this human is pathetic. The message is trustworthy because the name and designation of the man is mentioned for cross checking and it is important for the brand users to know about this.”

SAMPLE RESPONSE-2

“No it's not true because if the employee was pissed for 12 years then how can he survive in the company.”

22. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/kangana-ranaut-falls-for-satire-piece-claiming-facebook-has-new-feature-to-mark-yourself-safe-from-shiv-sena-goons-says-well-done/story-w2HpQB8YTntraQ5COSsusM.html>

Key Insights from User Study

The tasks in our study were designed to elicit information about how individuals evaluate online content. Since the aim of the exercise was to know patterns of decision making and understand exactly why, or why not, would an end user trust any information, the respondents were asked to explain reasons for their decisions in a couple sentences instead of yes or no, true or false or multiple choice answers.

An analysis of the responses revealed a stark contrast between strategies used by fact-checkers and journalists and the respondents. Unlike fact checkers, most respondents did not question the authority of the source or the sender. This was true for over 90% of the 1,955 responses collected. Instead, respondents often relied on their personal beliefs when deciding whether they would trust a message and rarely consulted other sources for verification. Overall, respondents showed a lack of skill in evaluating the credibility of online information.

The study revealed some clear patterns about why people fall for misinformation, regardless of their age, gender or education level. Some of the key trends common across city and village respondents were:

1. Respondents do not question the source of information or authority of sender:

This was a common trend observed across all examples in all nine categories. Regardless of the platform of news/message consumption, majority respondents did not question if the source was a credible authority to talk about the subject matter. They could not identify differences between news coming from authoritative or dubious sources. This was sheer contrast to the strategies fact-checkers would apply. The authority of the sender or the source of information is usually their first check point.

2. Respondents focus more on content, rely on beliefs and personal biases while assessing credibility:

In our analysis of various messages across different categories, we observed that as against the source, respondents paid more attention to the content of the message. We also saw that in many cases, like the Indian army example above and the tweet by superstar Amitabh Bachhan, they relied heavily on their beliefs and personal biases while deciding whether they would believe or reject a message. Since most people are unaware of their biases and hidden beliefs, they tend to get caught in confirmation bias or echo chambers on social media and end up believing information that aligns with them and reject all that doesn't. This becomes

An analysis of the responses revealed a stark contrast between strategies used by fact-checkers and journalists and the respondents. Unlike the experts, respondents did not question the source, refrained from verifying information from other web sources and lacked skills to evaluate evidence.

Key Insights from User Study

a hindrance in objective understanding of an issue. Therefore, it is very important that the readers understand this tendency.

3. Respondents usually do not verify information from alternative sources on web:

Among the most contrasting points between fact-checkers and respondents was their inability to verify information from alternative sources. Lateral reading, (a term for leaving the current web page/chat app and searching for the same information on the alternative sources) or even a simple search was not done by respondents indicating their habit of not verifying facts from other sources. As we have seen in instances such as examples 1 and 3, respondents prefer to focus on content or beliefs rather than checking at other places. Since they do not actively seek information from other sources on the web, they end up framing their ideas on the basis of a single point of reference. Thus, their information landscape is skewed and often contradicting principles of fairness, objectivity and accuracy. Respondents need to be exposed to alternative sources of information.

4. Noticeable skepticism against social media, but lack of strategies to evaluate evidence

We observed skepticism against social media in several examples (2, 3 & 5). Again, this seemed to be a common trend across cities and villages. Often, the respondents struggled to identify the evidence correctly and could not suggest strategies to evaluate the content they see online. This has resulted in them not believing even correct information coming their way. The problem is more complicated in instances where the source of the message is not apparent. In order to deal with this confusion, many respondents choose to ignore the messages they receive. Therefore, strategies on evaluating evidence need to be the basis of any media literacy intervention.

5. Respondents unaware of the extent of online manipulation:

The respondents were not aware of the scale and extent of manipulation they were exposed to online. As opposed to fact-checkers, they did not look for evidence in pieces of information and often believed them at face-value. They did not have the realisation that a 'harmless' looking screengrab of a TV channel could actually be a manipulated image. They are not familiar with photoshop, fake accounts etc. and therefore, navigating online space becomes a major challenge. Additionally, they did not think about sources or motivation behind messages that were

The respondents were not aware of the scale and extent of manipulation they were exposed to online. As opposed to fact-checkers, they did not look for evidence in pieces of information and often believed them at face-value.



Key Insights from User Study

being rampantly forwarded. This can be really problematic in case the message has hate speech, violence or defamatory content.

6. A great deal of trust in mainstream media, to the point that they blindly trust information misattributed to mainstream media


Overarchingly, the absence of strategies to verify online information and great deal of trust on mainstream media lead to a situation where even content misattributed to mainstream media is sometimes blindly trusted. Respondents also tend to lean on mainstream news channels to verify information. Therefore, as seen in examples 3 & 4, respondents believe that any important development will be conveyed to them through TV news. Also, they might not believe that a piece of information is correct unless it is aired on TV news. This is an important factor because a lot of fake news they receive is often impostor or fake content posing as legitimate TV news pieces.

7. Respondents oblivious to absence of gatekeeping on social media


Most respondents appeared to be clueless about concepts such as gatekeeping implying that in the confusing information landscape of new internet users, there is no difference between pieces of news and opinions. They did not understand the rigour involved in publishing news that goes through gatekeeping processes. Also, the difference between information from authentic sources and user generated content was not obvious to them. Since these distinctions were not clear to them immediately, they either viewed all online information with skepticism (because everything on social media is untrue) or believed it without any doubt.

8. If the sender is a prominent influencer or a person they look upto, respondents were more likely to believe the message and the believability increases if the ideology of person sharing information aligns with that of the audience

The role of influencers or people who respondents are connected with cannot be overlooked while discussing how they make sense of information online (example 1,2). The ideological alignment and popularity of the sender makes them overlook the authority of the sender or the original source of the content. This puts them in a very disadvantageous space as the onus of verification is automatically shifted to the sender. Since they lack strategies to verify information and look for it at alternative sources, this becomes an obvious refuge for them.



If the sender is a prominent influencer or a person they look upto, respondents were more likely to believe the message and the believability increases if the ideology of person sharing information aligns with that of the audience



CONCLUSIONS

Guess et al., (2020)²³ state that *even under ideal conditions, most people struggle to reliably evaluate the quality of information they encounter online because they lack the skills and contextual knowledge required to effectively distinguish between high- and low-quality news content*. The impact of mainstream media and influencers pervades across platforms. They do not consider the fact that a lot of content they come across on the web is ‘manufactured’ or ‘outright fake’. The illusory effect and halo of online information shifts their focus from the source to the ‘content’.

Since social media provides infinite sources of information for anybody who comes looking, the problem of identifying a useful and accurate source is larger and more difficult to solve than it looks like. This is consistent with what BBC found⁹, *“the identity of the source is not at all central to the question of consumption or sharing of information”*. The role of media literacy interventions becomes even more important here as common citizens are not checking messages for accuracy and authenticity, largely due to the sheer volume of messages and low awareness about fake-news and fact-checking.

Since they are not aware about gatekeeping processes in traditional media, they don’t seem to understand how the flow of information on the internet differs. They are either careless or not confident about sharing online information. The onus of verification lies on the sender if he/she is an influencer or the person who receives forwards from them. In any case, they do not take the responsibility of sharing correct information on themselves. This is partly due to the fact that verification is a technical and complicated process for them. The realisation that a simple web search could often give them a clearer perspective is not obvious to them.

Opinions and analysis are different from news and sponsored content sometimes masquerades as original news is not known to them. In case of social media, most messages are either believed at face value or negated simply because they came from social media. As citizens are still grappling with these basic questions about messages they receive everyday it becomes easy to understand how this undermines democracy.

The peace and harmony of society can be easily disturbed due to fake messages. Guess et al., (2020) (ibid, pg 1) have also observed that,

“Social media platforms have proved to be fertile ground for inflammatory political misinformation. People around the world increasingly worry that so-called “fake news” and other forms of dubious or false information are misleading voters”

Butler (2010)²⁴ has argued that young people in underserved environments often consume media messages that portray them in negative light. It follows as a corollary that,

“When such underrepresented or misrepresented groups gain media literacy skills and become investigators of their representations and creators of their own meanings, the learning process becomes an empowering expression of voice and democratic transformation” (Kellner & Share²⁵, 2007)

Over a long period of time inability to verify information can lead to dependence on others to perform basic tasks. The ripple effect of this is that individuals flit from platform to platform and media to media in search of authentic information. The trust in each platform will also be substantially eroded.

23. Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(27), 15536–15545. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1920498117>

24. Butler, A. (2010). *Media education goes to school: young people make meaning of media & urban education*. New York: Peter Lang.

25. Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). *Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education*. In D. Macedo, & S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader* (pp. 3-23). New York, NY: Peter Lang

The Way Forward

Even as millions of Indians continue to come online every year, there is no clear guideline for these ‘first generation mobile only’ internet consumers. Media literacy programmes are restricted to school settings or small independent efforts limited in scale and impact. There are not many focussed, all encompassing programmes that help adults in non metros discern media messages, especially so in regional languages. They use their traditional knowledge, beliefs and biases, validation from friends and acquaintances etc. to make sense of online information.

Since this audience lacks strategies to assess online information, one good way to deal with the problem at hand is to share with the end users how fact-checkers and journalists evaluate and verify online information. FactShala tried to find a way around this and consulted experts to come up with a curriculum that can empower individuals to navigate the information landscape through crisp, focussed, practical and succinct strategies similar to those used by fact-checkers and journalists.

Basis the analysis and what we observed, we plan to start with this three-question framework and train the end users to ask these basic questions as they assess the credibility of any information online:

- **Who’s behind the information - is the source an authority on the subject?**
- **What do other sources say?**
- **Does the evidence shared support the claim?**

(Adapted from Civic Online Reasoning, SHEG)

Though the framework looks simplistic and easy to impart, it actually makes one question their entire information processing pattern. Therefore, simply proposing that users look through the prism of this framework while accessing online information is not enough. They need to be told how exactly to do this.

Media literacy programs that improve information analysis capabilities of individuals and enhance critical thinking while making them ‘self-reliant’ in terms of using their technology devices, and media interactions are the need of the day (ibid). Creating curriculum that is politically neutral but encourages best practices like source-vetting and comparing sources is the foremost recommendation for a resilient information system²⁶. For this reason, the the curriculum for end-trainings made by FactShala will include sessions and exercises on these topics:

- **Understanding the changing information landscape**

Users need to introspect their sources of information and learn to differentiate between good and bad sources. They need to be more conscious about information they see and critical about what they chose to share and why.

Three Question Framework
Who’s behind the information - is the source an authority on the subject?
● **What do other sources say?**
● **Does the evidence shared support the claim?**
— (SHEG)

26. Countering Misinformation With Lessons From Public Health (pgs 52-60)

The Way Forward

They need to identify elements of different types of misinformation they see in their online spaces and know the action required to correct this. Basically, they need to be skilled on the basics of good information such as accessing authoritative sources and verifying information from other sources.

- **Understanding how social media is different from traditional media**

Understanding why certain sources are more credible cannot happen till they really understand the difference in the information ecosystem in both online and offline spaces. The rigorous editorial and news collection processes involved in presenting information in news platforms and how it is different from user generated content needs to be emphasized upon. The difference between news, views and analysis is also a key element of this. They should be made aware of the extent of manipulated content they receive to sensitize them towards the pitfalls of social media.

- **Where to look for correct information? How?**

With the increasingly complex labyrinth of fake messages coming from a plethora of sources such as bots, deepfakes etc., it has become important that users are at least critical about if not experts of source analysis. They need to be told about using the correct keywords to search relevant information online and to look for fact-checked pieces of information.

- **How to identify and verify evidence in claims?**

In case the information is not yet fact-checked or needs to be immediately verified, they should be taught about basic verification skills. They should be trained on citing and reporting misinformation.

- **Critical thinking and understanding bias**

Lastly, critical thinking is at the root of many issues around misinformation. Understanding what motivates them and their own biases about the kind of messages they receive will help them in stemming the flow of fake messages. Their own reflections on what to share and what to embargo is what will make them empowered. They should be made aware about their own biases so that they move from passive to mindful consumption of information.

It could be argued that there is not ample evidence to believe that social media literacy interventions necessarily have the desired impact but it can be assumed that their impact can be amplified if those trained initially make efforts to correct misinformation they come across online (Guess et.al, 2020). It is also further stressed that the solution to this problem lies in a “brief intervention which could be inexpensively disseminated at scale.” The FactShala India Media Literacy Training Program fits into the above role.

The rigorous editorial and news collection processes involved in presenting information in news platforms and how it is different from user generated content needs to be emphasized upon.

FactShala ToT Approach

Internews launched FactShala as a pan-India media literacy network in collaboration with DataLeads and with the support of Google.org and the Google News Initiative. It is not designed as a one-stop shop for all information needs of individuals. Rather, it is the first step for many who have already been driven \ onto the information superhighway. It is a first-of-its kind simple, scalable program that encourages participants from all spheres and ages to partake in it.

The program will deliver curriculum created by experts on the basis of the survey findings to participants in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages in seven Indian languages through an extensive Train the Trainer program that hopes to prepare at least 250 mentors to take knowledge on misinformation to the last mile. The trainers will enhance knowledge of end-trainees in areas such as misinformation, understanding information neighborhoods, verification through simple keyword searches and other techniques, concepts such as gatekeeping, filter bubble, echo chambers etc. The examples would be contextualised as per local needs and sensibilities. Trainers hope to reach marginalized, underserved communities and those that are disadvantaged.

The end goal of the exercise is to create inquisitiveness about sources of information among India's large 'first generation mobile only' social media consumers. The program will benefit students, home-makers, farmers, teachers as well as uneducated and unemployed to access, reach and evaluate online information critically. Even highly educated city bred individuals who are long time smartphone/internet users will learn to sort, sift and use relevant information to enhance the quality of life. Their careful consumption is also likely to affect how they create online information. This will lead to a healthier online information ecosystem benefiting all stakeholders.

Since the program is not academic but practical and flexible, it aims to accommodate families and not just individuals at the site of learning. It would be open to college students, resident welfare associations, communities, workplaces etc. The dynamic and hyper-local nature of the program allows it to remain relevant and valid for its community.



FactShala will deliver curriculum created by experts on the basis of the survey findings to participants in tier 2 and 3 cities and villages in seven Indian languages through an extensive Train the Trainer program that hopes to prepare at least 250 mentors to take knowledge on misinformation to the last mile.

