

Radio Against Misinformation

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It's a day like any other. Your alarm rings, waking you up from your slumber. You snooze it a couple of times before finally submitting to its mandate, sit up, rub your eyes and pick up your phone to clock into the world yet again. As soon as you find your way online, your reality falls apart.

Over 200 messages from friends, colleagues and various WhatsApp groups you are a part of – a lot of them saying, “It's red for me”, followed by multiple “Me too"s in a number of groups. One link is shared everywhere as the reference point. Puzzled, you tap it.

“Are you the carrier of a new virus?” – the headline reads, accompanied by a picture of a woman clutching her head in apparent agony.

“The government has declared mandatory isolation and quarantining of individuals suspected to be the carriers of a new virus to curb its spread. One of the most recognisable symptoms of the virus is headaches. The government is remotely identifying suspected virus carriers by checking what is being termed a ‘Condition Tracker’ through people’s mobile phones. If the tracker displays a red circle, you have been identified as a suspected carrier of the virus and are not to move out of your premises or have any kind of physical interaction with anyone. If the circle is green, you are safe. To check whether you are a carrier, follow these instructions...”

Recalling your headache from two days ago, you quickly follow the instructions - to be greeted by a big red circle on your screen. With a pit in your stomach, you go back to WhatsApp in search of answers. The chaotic barrage of messages includes links to articles and videos that claim this is “fake news”, whereas some others are lengthy discussions and explainers of what this means. News channels are competing with each other to declare the tally of suspected virus carriers while some others are recreating graphic simulations of the Condition Tracker. Social media is full of statements and advisories that have been put out by government sources – some endorsing the Condition Tracker and others flagging it as bogus. Now, with all this information at your fingertips, what do you do?

In this age, where we boast about information being a few taps away – we are also at the highest risk of being misinformed and misled. The sources through which we engage, interact and consume content are not only varied, they often do not disclose their interests behind the messages they put out. In the mindless contest of plugging our minds with everything we can access, we are increasingly training ourselves to be Pavlovian beings bereft of critical thinking abilities – the abilities which are unquestionably one of the characteristics why humans are considered to be marvels of the evolutionary process.

The information overload consisting of messages contrasting each other lead to the establishment of a perpetual state of distrust – against people, systems of governance, judiciary, media, and others – which poses a serious threat to our progress as a society.

So where do we go from this Doomsday announcement? Well, as they say, not all is lost.

Amidst all the noise, Radio continues to be the voice of sanity and one of the most trusted mediums. While the other media platforms concentrate their efforts on who is the loudest, radio focuses on drowning out an unwanted cacophony to provide clarity.

In the last two years, SMART has worked with over 75 community radios across the country and trained them on how to identify and counter misinformation and fake news. These stations have, in turn, passed on the knowledge to their respective communities as well.

SMART has also developed an interactive module and manual for training media practitioners with the support of UNESCO and has trained over 40 media personnel across India, Sri Lanka and Maldives using the same. The response has not only been encouraging but has generated further demand from the community members to further this effort.

The training session in Sri Lanka was conducted at the peak of the political crises in the country, and the journalists shared how the absence of a credible authority has left not only the commoners but even the journalists in a disarray. They acknowledged that community media outlets and local journalists were the ones putting out information after personally verifying them.

Radio still continues to be the most accessible medium in rural areas – where TV, newspapers and other forms of media have still not found a footing, as pointed out in a recently released report by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). This is a huge opportunity which needs to be capitalised on in time, while we still have time on our side.

