Fact-Checking and Verification

Navigating the Misinformation Landscape in Pakistani Newsrooms and Beyond

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This research study aims to investigate the existing systems of fact-checking and information verification employed by journalists and newsrooms in Pakistan. The study also endeavours to identify the gaps in these mechanisms and provide recommendations for improvement. The research questions addressed in this study include the following:

1. RQ1: How do journalists in Pakistani newsrooms verify any news? Are there any formal protocols in place?

2. RQ2: Do journalists in Pakistan have access to digital verification tools or have they been trained on the same?

3. RQ3: Are there any structural issues that obstruct journalists' access to tools and structures that can make fact-checking more effective?

4. RQ4: How do information consumers understand and engage with the information landscape?

The research methodology employed in this study includes a mixed methods approach, incorporating two perception surveys and a series of expert interviews in the media industry.

The findings of the research are as follows:

2 out of 10 journalists reported that they had self-taught fact-checking tools and skills, while 3 out of 10 indicated that they had self-taught how to gather news through social media.

Only 1 out of 10 journalists reported that they had been provided with digital tools by their newsrooms, with the rest relying on traditional means, their own expertise, or not knowing how to use them.

7 out of 10 journalists who participated in the survey indicated that they fact-checked their stories independently. Less than 1 out of 10 relied on editors/sub-editors for fact-checking.

Majority of the journalists (46.7%) indicated that they have not had any formal training on using digital fact-checking tools or newsgathering on social media

64% of news consumers indicated that they use 'social media platforms' as their go-to 'trusted medium' to get information. Ironically, they also indicated it to be the biggest spreader of misinformation in Pakistan; a self-contradiction.

The expert interviews conducted as part of this research revealed the following insights:

Traditional means of verification are still prevalent due to the absence of international reverse image databases, such as TinEye, in remote areas of the country and a lack of practice in using these tools.

The majority of newsrooms are understaffed and lack financial resources, making it challenging to establish a dedicated fact-checking desk or team.

The dominance of male voices in TV newsrooms leads to a lack of representation of women's voices and perspectives.

The term 'fake news' has been weaponized by political leaders, and the open affiliation of private channels with political groups has resulted in a decrease in public trust in media.

Section 1

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 outbreak in 2019 brought forth the critical nature of the multiple and continuous threats it posed to the social, economic, and health systems of the world. Pakistan is no exception. The lack of health literacy in a developing country like Pakistan led to a medical misinformation crisis[1] and consequently, vaccine hesitancy as well. It was further exacerbated by the mistrust in the government and the media. Shakil Afridi's case, a Pakistani doctor who allegedly helped the CIA run a fake Hepatitis vaccine program in Abbottabad to confirm Osama Bin Laden's presence, also played its part.[2] The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 an infodemic and misinformation played a huge part in delaying the flattening of the COVID-19 curve. All of this brought forth questions about training the journalists and media personnel on reporting on medical misinformation and disinformation in general, in the country. Fact-checks started being published and there was discourse on the spread of mis/disinformation on social media. Moreover, the organized disinformation campaign against Aurat March[3] 2021 was another feather in the hat.

Consequently, media development organizations in the country began working extensively on investigating and countering mis/disinformation, with Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) alone having trained over 600 journalists all over the country on the same, in the past year. However, the current situation still leaves much to be desired. While journalists are gravitating towards learning new tools and skills to counter misinformation, newsrooms either do not have the resources to provide access to digital verification tools, dedicated fact-checking desks, etc., or prioritize it because of myriad structural issues that will be explored in this research.

Misinformation is certainly not a new concept but it has seen a rise with an increase in the use of social media in the past decade - with 71.70 million users in Pakistan alone, as of early 2022[4] - a pandemic, and the revolutionizing of ways we consume news as a society. This research can be considered remedial in the sense that it will not only explore fact-checking protocols in Pakistani newsrooms but will also identify the gaps that can be filled.

1. Muhammad Ittefaq, Syed Ali Hussain & Maryam Fatima (2020) COVID-19 and social-politics of medical misinformation on social media in Pakistan, Media Asia, 47:1-2, 75-80, DOI: 10.1080/01296612.2020.1817264
2. Munir , A. (2012, May 28). *The curious case of Shakil Afridi*. The Express Tribune. Retrieved November 8, 2022, from https://tribune.com.pk/story/385308/the-curious-case-of-shakil-afridi
3. Khurshid, R. (2021, March 21). *Media: The march of disinformation*. DAWN.COM. Retrieved November 15, 2022, from https://www.dawn.com/news/1613626
4. Kemp, S. (2022, February 16). *Digital 2022: Pakistan - DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*. DataReportal. Retrieved November 2, 2022, from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-pakistan#:~:text=Social%20media%20statistics%20for%20Pakistan,in%20Pakistan%20in%20January%202022.

CHAPTER 2 – **Methodology and Research Limitations**

This study is being conducted to shed light on the current fact-checking practices of journalists in Pakistani newsrooms. This is a critical area of investigation as the accuracy and reliability of news have an impact on the public's trust in the media. The study aims to answer questions about the ways journalists verify news, access to digital verification tools, structural issues that obstruct the fact-checking process, and understanding and engagement of information consumers with the information landscape. These insights can inform the development of best practices and strategies to enhance the fact-checking process in Pakistani newsrooms.

The study focuses on the following research questions;

Research Question (RQ) 1: How do journalists in Pakistani newsrooms verify any news? Are there any formal protocols in place?

RQ2: Do journalists in Pakistan have access to digital verification tools or have they been trained on the same?

RQ3: Are there any structural issues that obstruct journalists' access to tools and structures that can make fact-checking more effective?

RQ4: How do information consumers understand and engage with the information landscape?

Methodology

To address this gap, this study employs a mixed-methods approach comprising two anonymous exploratory surveys and in-depth interviews with media industry experts.

1. **The First Survey, insights from Journalists on Fact-Checking Practices** was conducted to gather information on the current fact-checking practices of journalists, including the utilization of digital tools, the success rate of these practices, and any conversations within the newsrooms about incorporating digital tools for fact-checking. An anonymous exploratory survey was conducted with 248 journalists, who were reached through established networks and social media channels such as Facebook and Whatsapp groups. The survey was conducted in both English and Urdu languages, depending on the preference of the respondents.

    Respondent demographics

    A total of 248 journalists across Pakistan participated in the survey, of which 79% were men, 20% women, and 1% identified as 'Other'. The group was rather diverse in terms of their expertise and designation in the field; including bureau chiefs, social media editors, staff reporters, sub-editors, content producers, multimedia producers, research and station heads, etc. At least 41.5% of the journalists belonged to Electronic Media, while 36% were affiliated with Digital Media, and 22.5% with Print Media. The majority of the participants were from Punjab (35.5%), followed by Sindh (19.7%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (18.9%), Gilgit-Baltistan (10.9%), Islamabad (8.5%), Azad Kashmir (4.5%), and Balochistan (2%). They had different years of experience in the field. At least 66.1% of the respondents had been in the field for over 6 years, 14.9% for 4 to 6 years, 12.5% for 2 to 4 years, and 6.5%.

2. **The Second Survey, Assessing News Consumers' Perception on Misinformation Landscape in Pakistan** was conducted to evaluate the understanding of news consumers on the current state of misinformation in Pakistan, their trust in local media outlets, and actions they take to tackle misinformation as citizens. An anonymous exploratory survey was conducted with a sample of the general public, targeting news consumers. The results from this survey aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perception of news consumers on the misinformation landscape in Pakistan and their engagement in tackling it.

Respondent demographics

The survey was completed by a total of 282 news consumers, of which 57% were men, 42.5% women, and others refused to disclose their gender. They had education levels, at least 68% of the respondents were graduates, while 25.9% had completed their undergraduate, 4.6% of respondents had completed their intermediate/A Levels, while others had completed their matric/O Levels or below. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 20 to 35 years (82.4%), while 15.2% of the respondents were above 40 years, and 2.4% below 20 years. Most respondents belonged to Punjab (49.3%), followed by Islamabad (17.7%), Sindh (13.2%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (12.5%), Gilgit-Baltistan (3.1%), Azad Kashmir (2.8%), and Balochistan (1.4%). When asked about the regional classification, 70.6% of the respondents said that they belong to urban areas, 16.7% said semi-urban, while 12.7% said rural. They belonged to a variety of different professions such as assistant professor, actuarial analyst, accountant, blogger, lawyer, businessman, banker, civil engineer, computer expert, doctor, driver, educator, farmer, government employee among others.

The interviews with media industry experts aimed to gather information on their fact-checking practices and challenges faced, including staffing and financial constraints, barriers to access and use of digital verification tools, and the influence of political affiliations and gender dynamics. A total of 8 expert interviews were conducted with editors, producers, and chief executive officers of regional and national media outlets. The interviews were conducted to inform the analysis of the findings of the surveys. The interviews were semi-structured.

Research Limitations

While an effort was made to make the surveys and in-depth interviews as holistic as possible, there were still a few limitations that were met during the process. The limitations in methodology and process include;

1. **Imbalanced Gender Representation:** Despite repeated efforts to maintain a balance between the number of male and female journalist respondents, only 20.6% of the survey respondents were women. This limited representation of women journalists may have impacted the findings of the research as their perspectives, experiences, and usage of digital tools for fact-checking might not have been adequately captured.

2. **Lack of Definition of Misinformation:** There was no concrete definition provided to the respondents for the term "misinformation" and they were not asked how they viewed the term either. This lack of clarity on the definition of misinformation may have led to a limited understanding of what the respondents perceived to be misinformation and how they would define it, which could have had an impact on the accuracy of the findings.

3. **Online Bias:** Since most of the respondents for both surveys were reached via online mediums, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the findings might be affected by the preferences of those who are more active in online spaces. It might have excluded journalists or consumers who are more active in offline spaces, leading to a biased sample and limited generalisability of the findings.

4.   **Limited Sample Size:** The sample size of the surveys remains limited, which makes it difficult to generalize the key findings of the research. The limited sample size could have led to the absence of certain perspectives, experiences, and usage patterns that might not have been captured and could have affected the accuracy and generalisability of the findings.

5.   **Regional Bias:** Most of the survey respondents hailed from Punjab, which makes the survey sample biased towards one province. Responses received from other provinces and regions such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan were limited in number, which could have led to a skewed representation of the fact-checking practices and consumption habits across Pakistan. This regional bias may have had an impact on the generalisability of the findings.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Highlights and Analysis

As mentioned above, we gathered a total of 248 responses from journalists all over Pakistan. 79% of the survey respondents were male, 20.6% were female, and the rest identified as transgender or other. The group was rather diverse in terms of their expertise and designation in the field; including bureau chiefs, social media editors, staff reporters, sub-editors, content producers, multimedia producers, research and station heads, etc. Here's a quick breakdown of the number of journalists against each medium - electronic, print, digital - disaggregated based on their gender.
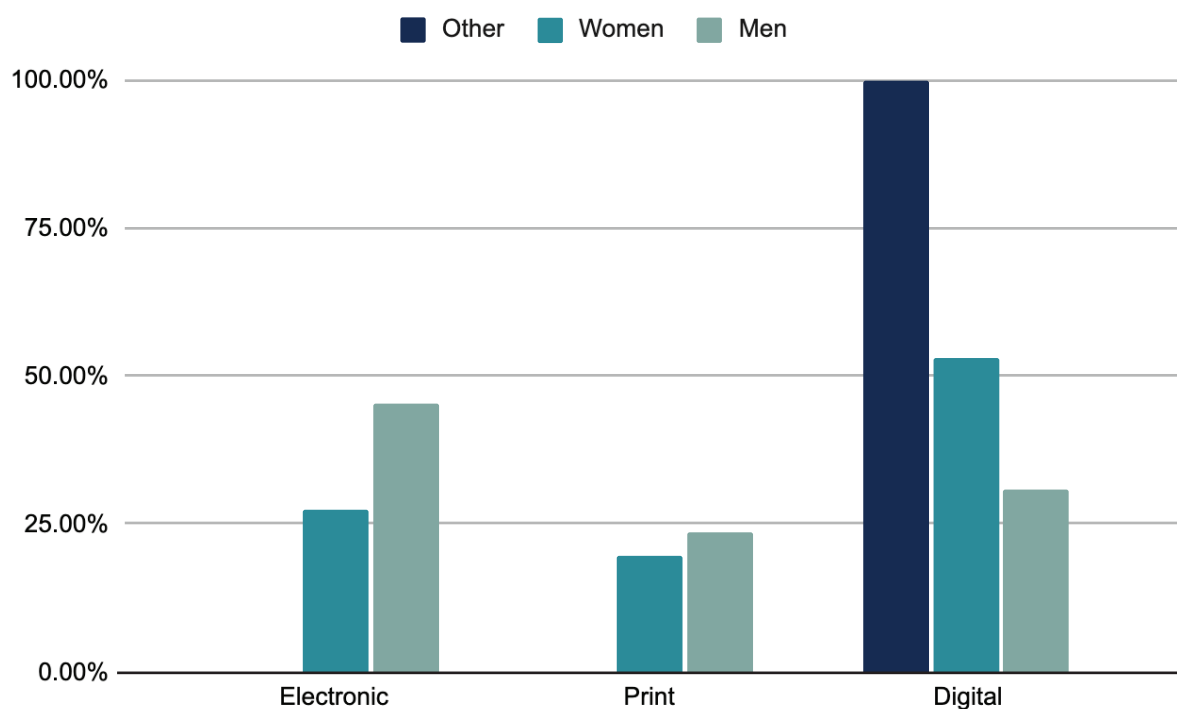
Figure 01 : Gender distribution of respondents across different mediums

How do journalists fact-check?

The journalists were asked a close-ended question on how they fact-check their stories and given the following options: I fact-check them myself, I rely on my editors/subeditors, We have a dedicated fact-checking desk for this, Ask Reporter if there is a confusion, Confirm with Reporters and take help from Google, We basically rely on our reporters/sub-editors, Check from concerned authorities and related department.

In response, 69.7% of the respondents shared that they fact-check the stories themselves. Only a small fraction; 7.6% of respondents said they rely on editors/sub-editors while an even smaller fraction, 3.6%, mentioned that they have a dedicated fact-checking desk. The rest of them were a mix of all of them.

Thirty one editors responding to the question pointed out that they rely on their reporters or their sub-editors for fact-checking.
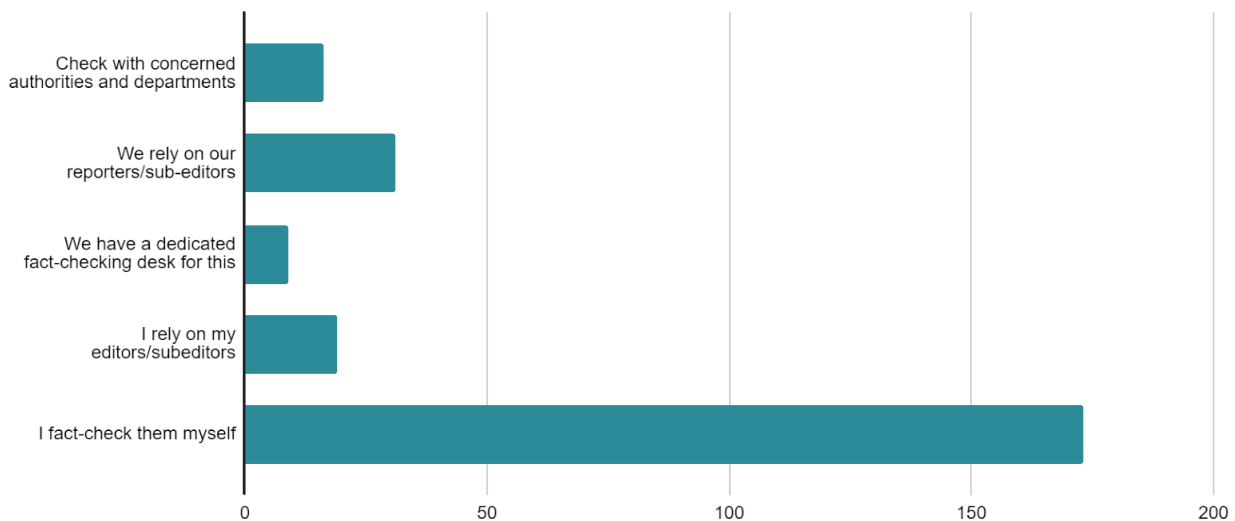

Figure 02 : Fact-checking methodologies employed by the respondents of the survey

A closer look at the data reveals that male respondents rely on self-fact checks more often than women respondents.

How do respondents fact-check stories	Women	Men
I fact-check them myself	52.94%	73.98%
I rely on my editors/subeditors	13.76%	6.12%
Multiple methods	23.53%	18.31%
We have a dedicated fact-checking desk for this	9.80%	1.53%

Figure 03 : Fact checking methodologies employed by men and women respondents of the survey

The answers to this question set the tone for the fact-checking landscape in Pakistan. At the moment, there is only one dedicated outlet; Soch Fact Check, that is actively working on fact-checking in the country. Soch is also the only outlet that's International Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) signatory. AFP also has a fact-checking desk but it is an international organisation which makes Soch the only local outlet to focus on fact-checking full-time.

Newsroom Discussions on Digital Fact Checking

"When queried about the presence of discussions regarding the integration of digital fact-checking tools into their daily reporting, 42.7% of the journalists surveyed reported either no discussions or discussions that have not resulted in any concrete outcomes. 12.5% indicated that management-level discussions have taken place and their organisation is taking steps towards implementation. 14.1% reported management level discussions but no further action has been taken, while 10.4% stated that internal team discussions

have occurred but have not yet been brought to management attention."

Training and Capacity Building

When asked if the journalists have received any formal training on fact-checking tools and capacity-building opportunities, 46.7% of the respondents replied in negative, while 30% said that they have. Forty-three respondents (17.3%) said that they have learned on their own, and the remaining, on the other hand, said that they have received some rudimentary training.
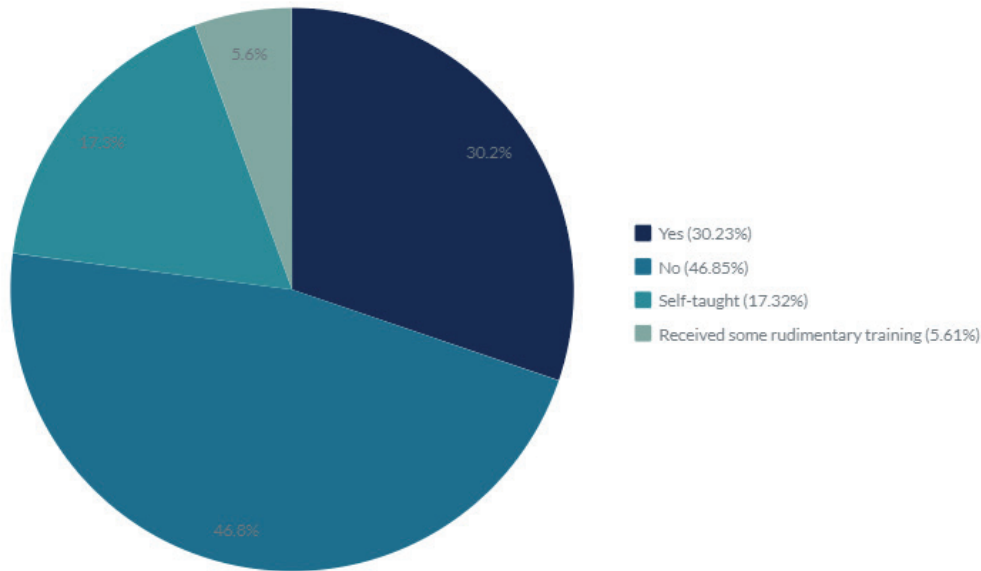
Figure 04 : Formal training on fact-checking tools received by the respondents

Similarly, when asked if they have received any formal training on newsgathering on social media, at least 33% of them indicated that they have self-taught while 37.9% of the respondents said that they haven't received any training. A total of 20.5% said that they have attended a formal training. It would, therefore, not be unfair to assume that there is definitely a lot of interest and drive to learn and incorporate digital fact-checking tools in their reporting and this is something that must be taken into consideration by newsrooms and media development organisations as well.
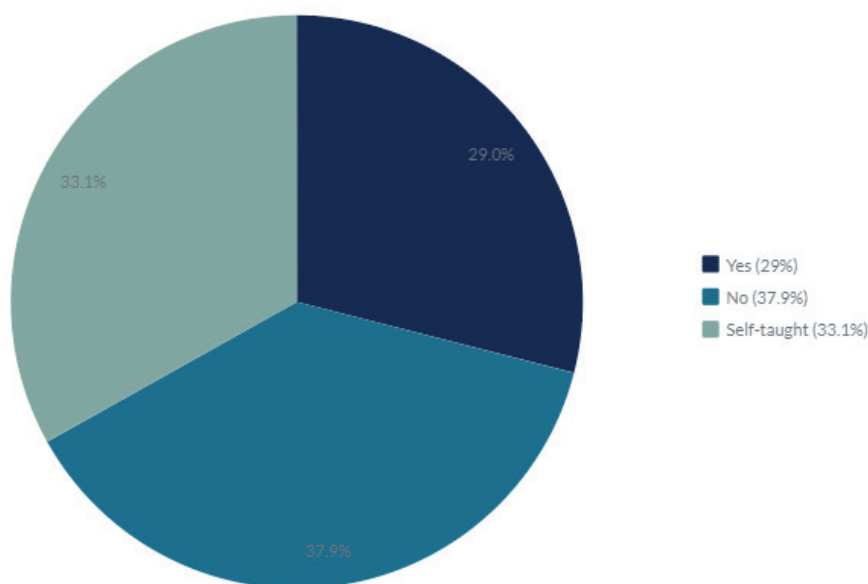
Figure 05 : Formal training on newsgathering received by the respondents

Access to Fact-Checking and Verification Resources

Journalists also seem to be aware of basic search and fact-checking tools including google and Twitter advanced searches, reverse image search, Invid verification, Facebook graph search, etc. They also indicated that they use them in their day-to-day tasks as well.

The participants were asked if they have access to any specialised tools/software by their newsroom outlet to help them fact-check. The majority of the respondents (28.6%) said that they check facts using their own sources. Forty-eight respondents (19.3%) said they rely on free tools, while 44 (17.7%) said they don't hav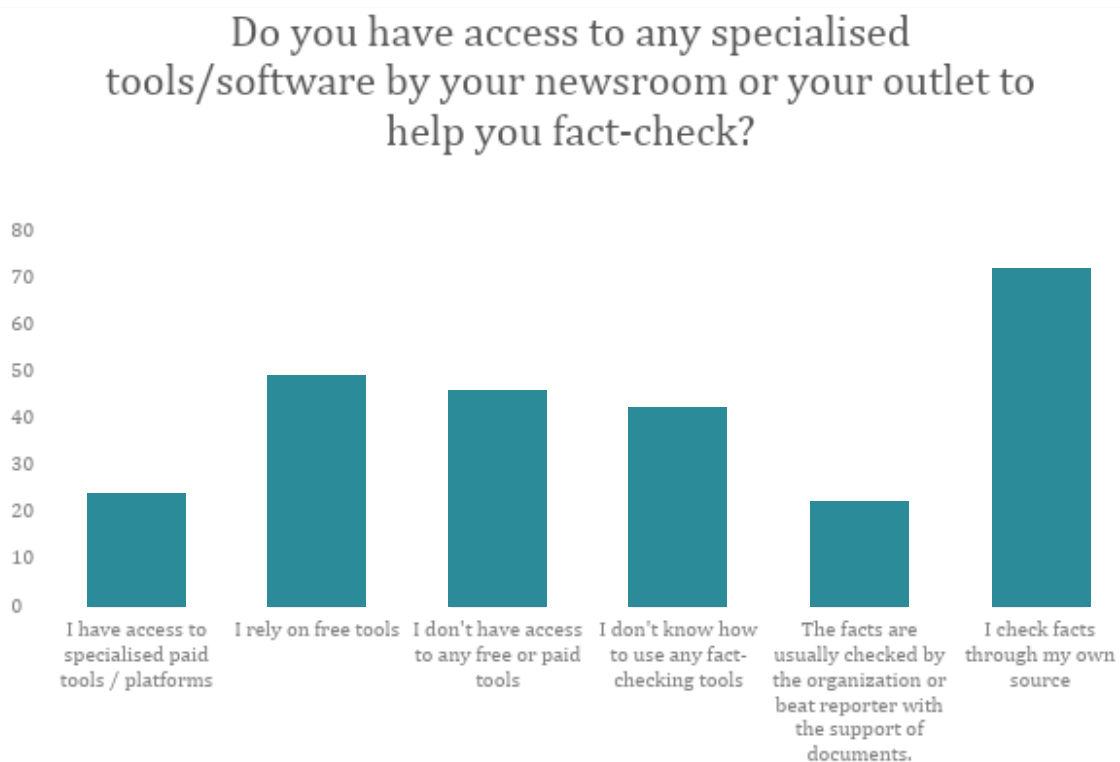e access to any free or paid tools. Only 9.2% of the respondents shared that they have access to specialised paid tools/platforms.

Figure 06 : Access to specialized fact-checking tools in newsrooms

The participants who said that they use news verification tools were asked to list the paid or free tools/software they use. At least 71 respondents (28.6%) said that they have access to free or paid tools/software of which 68% had access to free tools, while 32% said they had access to paid tools. It is interesting to note that out of the 32% of the respondents who said that they have access to paid tools, none of them shared any tool that qualifies as such. Another interesting thing to note here is that over 50 of them also mentioned asking in journalists' WhatsApp groups to confirm if a news item is real or fake.

The participants were also asked a close-ended question in which they were asked to select (one or as many) platforms they are aware of. Their options were Twitter Advanced Search, Google Advanced Search, Search Operators [Basic or Advanced], Reverse Image Search, InVid, Facebook Graph Search, TrendsMap, Tweet Binder, Fact Checker, and Facebook. Out of these, most respondents (181 or 72.9%) said they are aware of Google Advanced Search, followed by Twitter Advanced Search (122 or 49.1%), while 41 respondents said that they aren't aware of any of these tools.
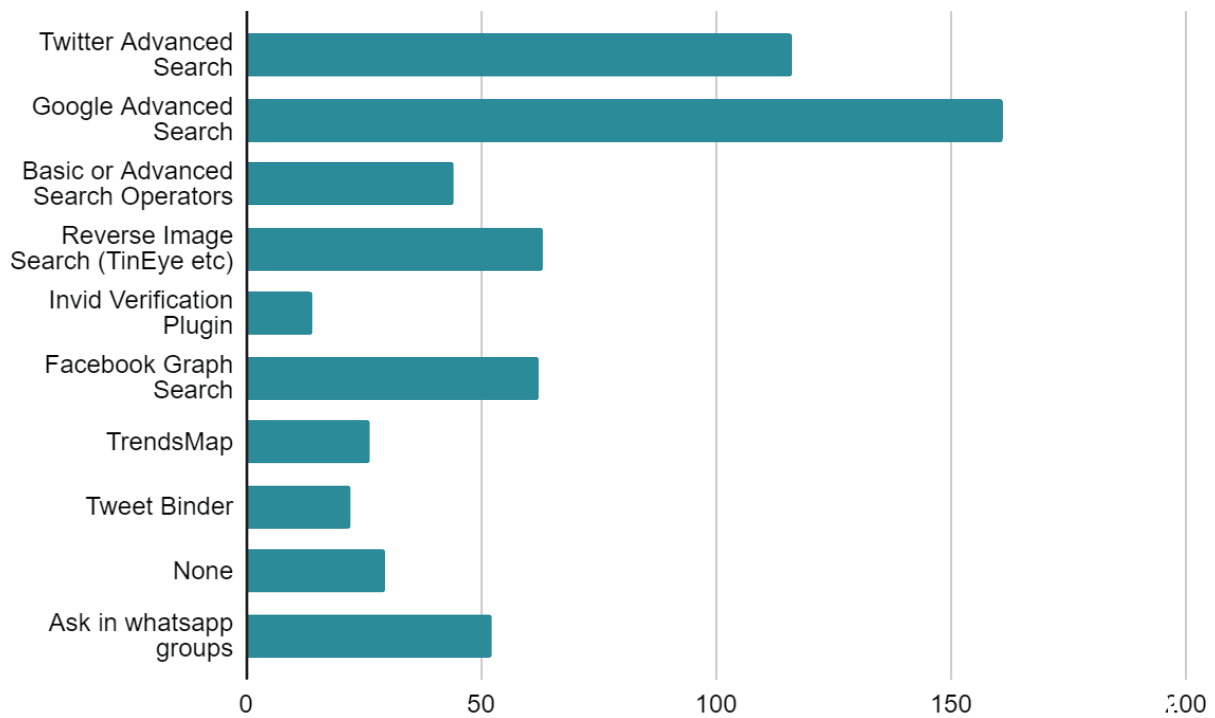
Figure 07 : Awareness of the available digital fact-checking tools

Building on this, journalists also seem to be aware of basic search and fact-checking tools including google and Twitter advanced searches, reverse image search, Invid verification, Facebook graph search, etc. They also indicated that they use them in their day-to-day tasks as well.

Towards the end, journalists were asked to indicate the frequency of the usage of digital fact-checking tools in their day-to-day lives- on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being once a week or less and 5 being almost every day or multiple times a day). The findings revealed a contrast with 26.6% of the respondents saying that they use them once a week or less, followed closely by 26.2% of the respondents saying that they use them every day. The middle scale, 3, was selected by 24.2% of the respondents. It must be noted, however, that these could include any tools from basic reverse image search to advanced tools.
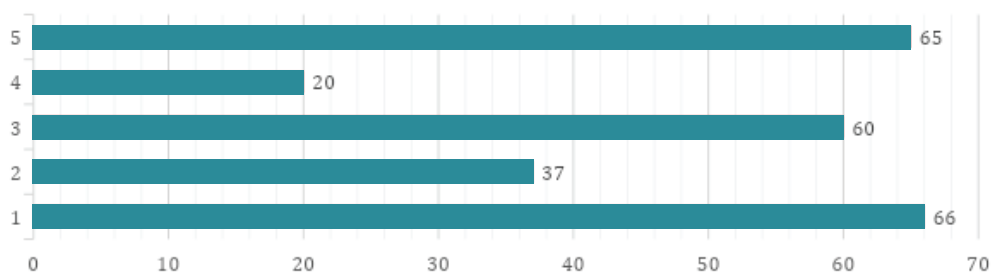
Figure 08 : Frequency of use of digital fact-checking tools by the respondents

There seems to be a difference in the pattern of usage by journalists working with different mediums. Journalists from print media appear to be using fact-checking tools most frequently. This finding does complement the underlying assumption that editorial standards in print media are higher.

Frequency of Use	Electronic	Print	Digital
1 (Once a week or less)	28.16%	23.21%	26.97%
2 (A few times a week)	9.71%	17.86%	19.10%
3 (Every other day)	28.16%	16.07%	24.72%
4 (Almost every day)	7.77%	5.36%	10.11%
5 (Multiple times in a day)	26.21%	37.50%	19.10%

Figure 09 : Frequency of use of fact-checking tools by respondents across different mediums

Women respondents also seem to be using the fact-checking tools more frequently than male respondents.

Frequency of Use	Women	Men
1 (Once a week or less)	23.53%	25.77%
2 (A few times a week)	5.88%	17.35%
3 (Every other day)	29.41%	22.96%
4 (Almost every day)	9.80%	7.65%
5 (Multiple times in a day)	31.37%	24.49%

Figure 10 : Frequency of use of fact-checking tools by male and female respondents

It must be noted, however, that these could include any tools from basic reverse image search to advanced tools.

When asked to comment on the success rate of using digital fact-checking tools (with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), a majority of the respondents (32.6%) selected the neutral option. At least 21.3% of the respondents felt that the tools have been somewhat successful, while 16.5% of them thought they haven't been successful at all.

Highlights and Analysis

The survey collected responses from a total of 282 news consumers, with the majority (87.3%) residing in urban and semi-urban areas. Additionally, 68.1% of respondents held a graduate degree or higher. While the survey received responses from individuals of various backgrounds, it is important to note that it may not be fully representative of how consumers in rural areas understand or tackle misinformation. Nevertheless, the responses provide valuable insights. Although the survey may not provide a comprehensive picture of how misinformation is perceived and handled in rural areas, the responses received shed light on the issue among a significant proportion of the urban and semi-urban population. The results suggest that addressing the problem of misinformation in the media, particularly on social media, is a pressing concern that requires further attention and action.

News consumption patterns

The survey captured a diverse range of professions, including doctors, teachers, students, businessmen, lawyers, content writers, and housewives. Among the respondents, 64% indicated that they source their news from social media. This finding was not surprising, given that the survey was disseminated via social media.
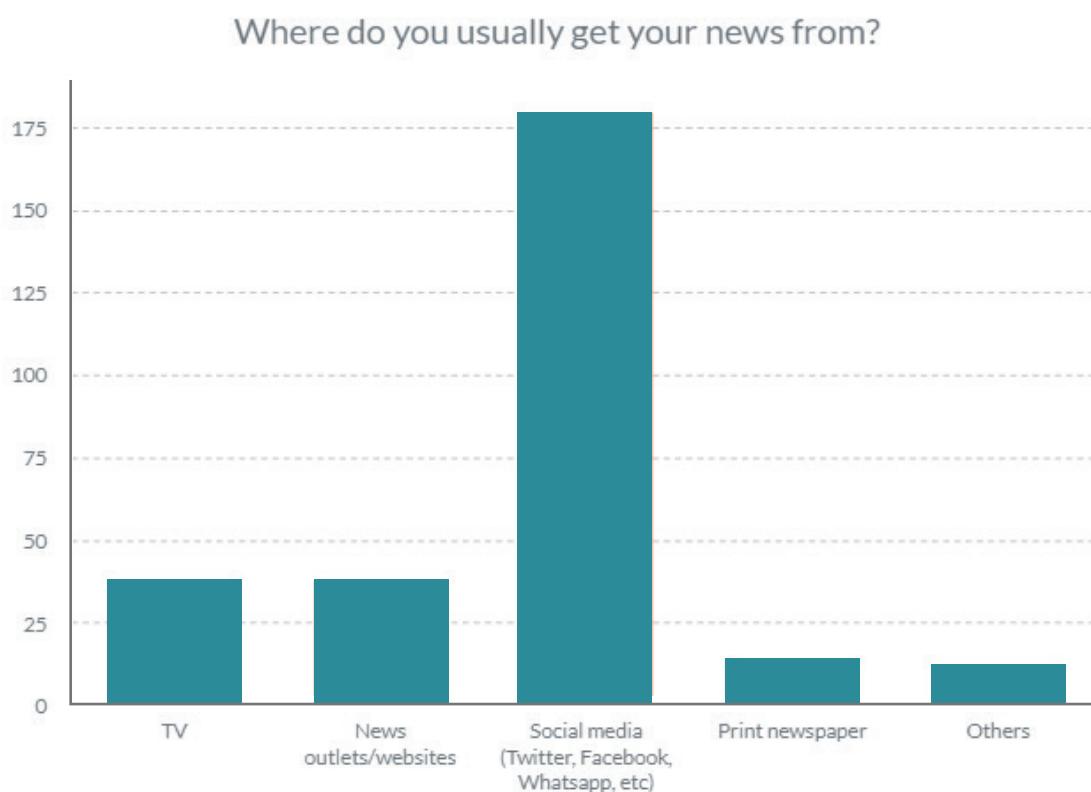
Figure 11 : Platforms respondents get their news from

Additionally, the survey revealed that a significant number of respondents not only rely on social media for news but also trust it as a source of accurate information. When asked about which platforms they trust the most for obtaining news, social media was the top choice for 47% of the respondents, followed closely by TV and news outlets' websites at 30% and 23%, respectively. These findings highlight the critical role of social media in shaping people's perceptions and understanding of current events, despite the prevalence of misinformation on these platforms.
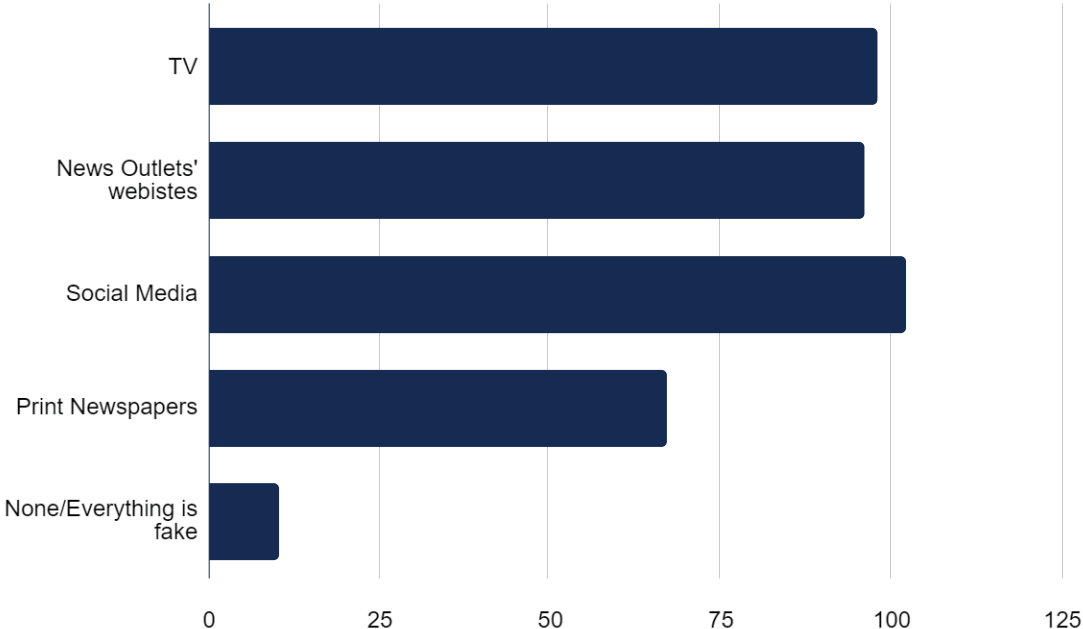
Figure 12 : Platforms respondents trust the most

The survey also revealed significant gender differences in news consumption habits. Notably, 73% of women reported relying on social media as their primary source of news and information, compared to 57% of men. Conversely, a mere 0.83% of women reported getting their news from print newspapers, in contrast to 8% of men. These findings suggest that social media plays a vital role in shaping women's understanding and perceptions of current events, and that traditional print media may not be as influential or accessible to women as it is to men.
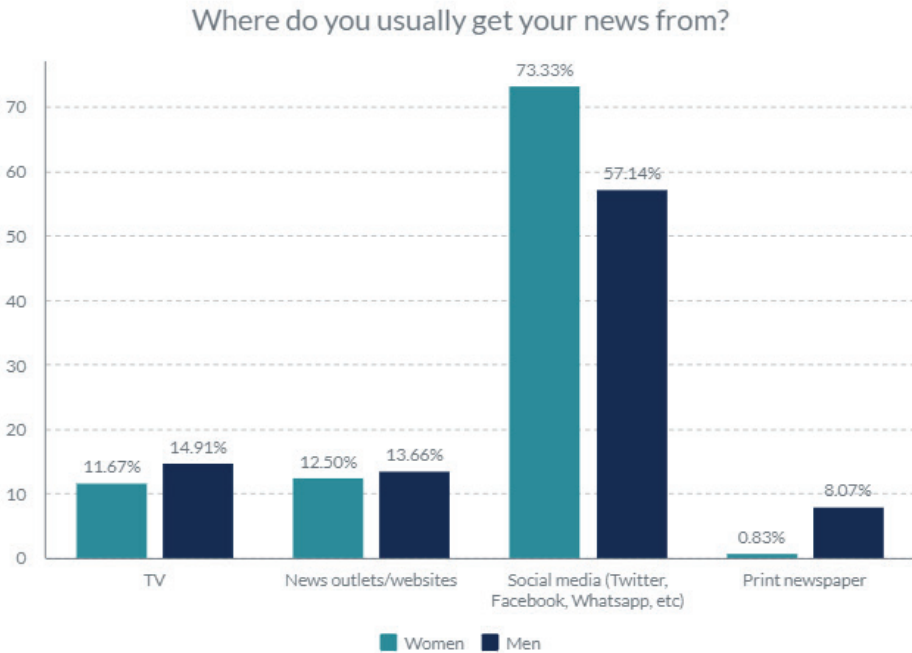
Figure 13 : Platforms male and female respondents get their news from

The survey results revealed a noteworthy contradiction in the respondents' perceptions of social media. While the majority of the respondents indicated social media as their go-to to get information and news (also a platform they trusted the most), they also indicated it to be the biggest spreader of misinformation in Pakistan, as seen below. This could easily be the subject of further research into how people reconcile these two starkly opposing notions.
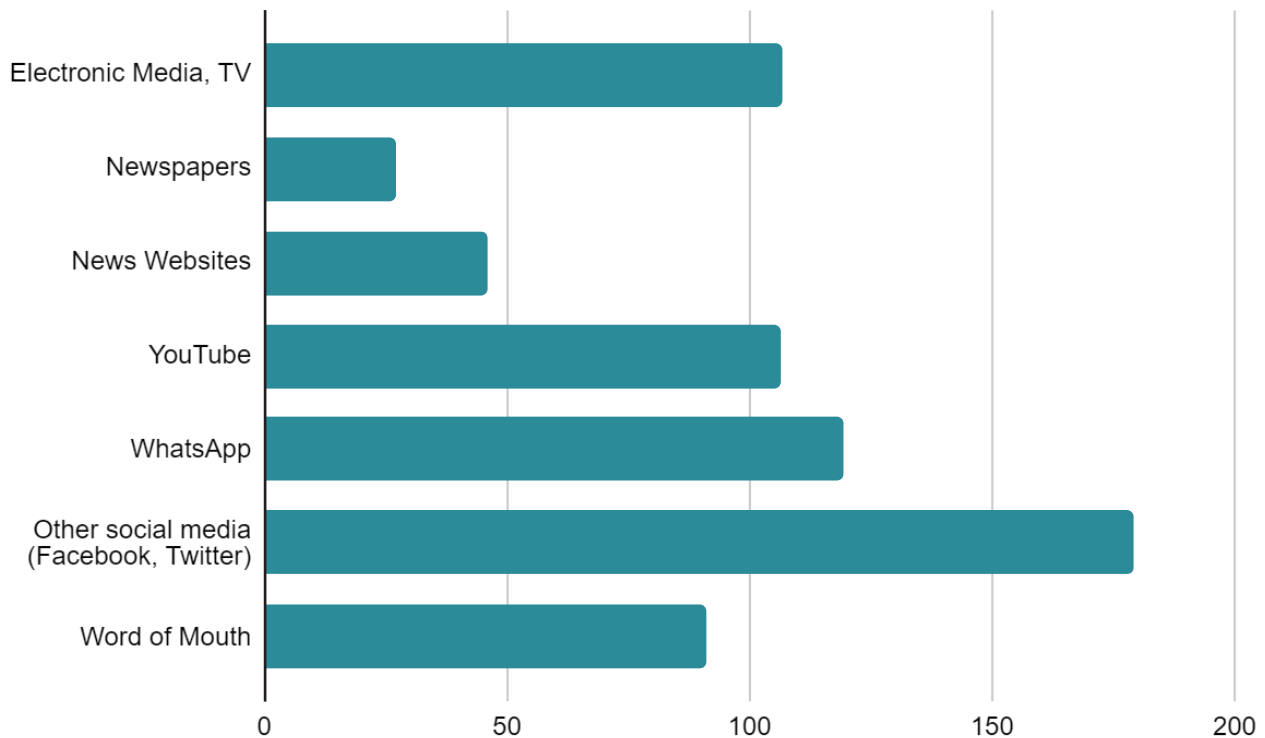
Figure 14 : Biggest spreader of misinformation, according to the respondents

This paradox highlights a significant challenge in combating misinformation on social media. Despite being aware of its potential to spread false information, people continue to rely on and trust it for news. It would be interesting to explore further how people reconcile these two contradictory notions, and whether increased media literacy efforts and fact-checking initiatives could help to mitigate this contradiction.

Formal education and recognition of misinformation online

When the data was disaggregated based on the education level of the consumers, a noteworthy pattern was observed. Contrary to the common assumption that people with higher education levels possess higher media literacy, over 69% of the individuals with intermediate as their highest level of education reported encountering misinformation online almost every day, while only 43% of undergraduates and 61% of graduates or above indicated the same. This finding highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of media literacy and its relationship with education. It also suggests that educational programs aimed at promoting media literacy should consider targeting individuals with lower levels of education, who may be more vulnerable to misinformation. Moreover, this finding underscores the need for further research in this area to better understand the factors that contribute to misinformation susceptibility and media literacy.

How often do you come across misinformation online?
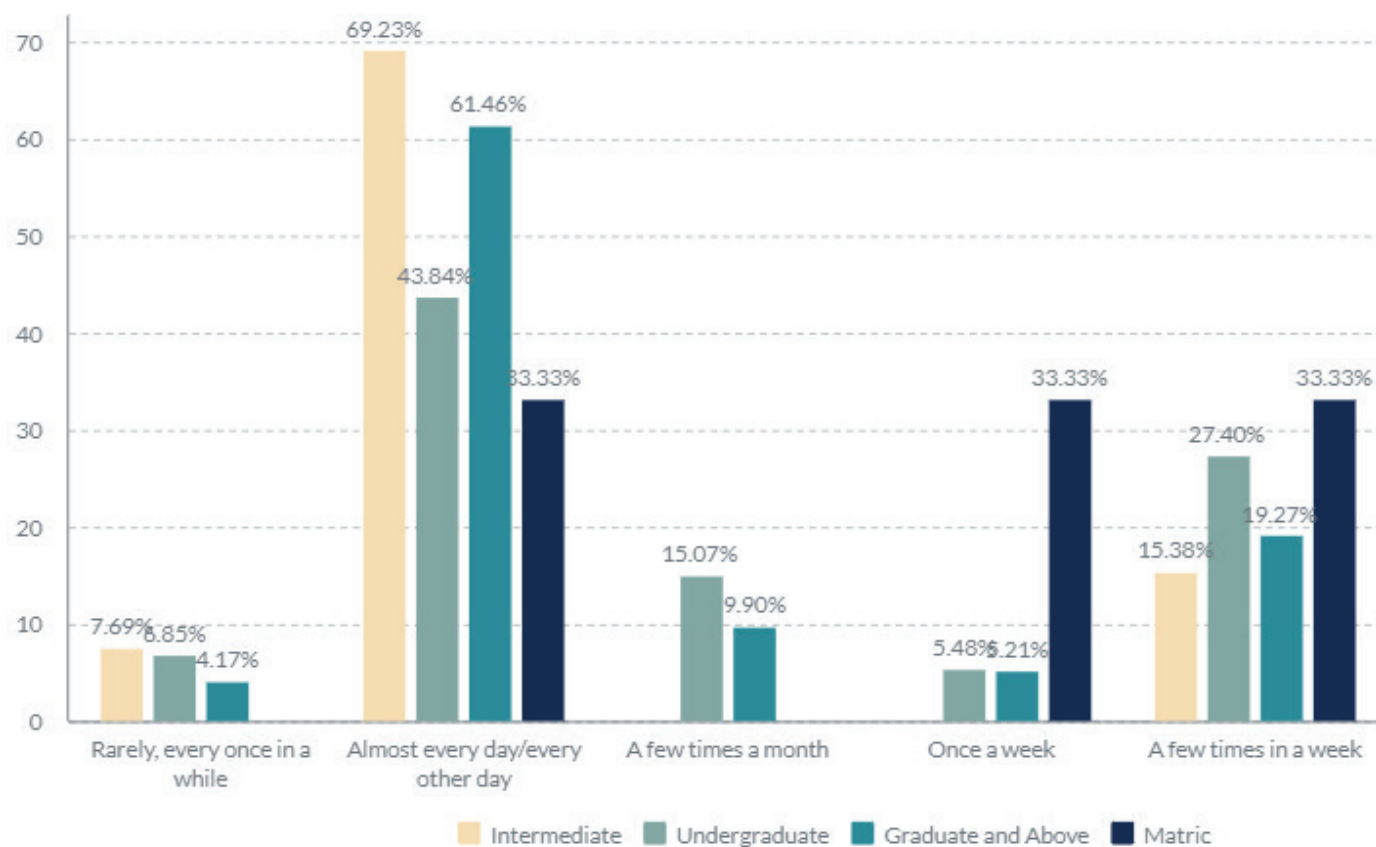
Figure 15 : Frequency of misinformation encountered online by the respondents, based on their level of education

Gender and and recognition of misinformation online

Similarly, when disaggregated based on gender, here's how the frequency of misinformation encountered online presented itself:

	Women	Men
Rarely, every once in a while	7.50%	3.73%
Almost every day/every other day	53.33%	59.01%
A few times a month	11.67%	9.94%
Once a week	7.50%	3.73%
A few times in a week	20.00%	22.36%

Figure 16 : Frequency of misinformation encountered online by male and female respondents

The data shows that both men and women in Pakistan are equally likely to come across misinformation online, with 53.33% of women and 59.01% of men reporting encountering it almost every day or every other day. However, a higher percentage of men (7.50%) than women (3.73%) reported encountering

misinformation rarely. This could suggest that men are more likely to filter out false information or have better media literacy skills than women. However, further research would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Dealing with misinformation

The last question on the survey was an open-ended question on how they usually tackle misinformation as citizens when they are confronted by it. Over 100 respondents indicated that they just 'ignore' it. While it could be argued that ignoring it at least ensures that the chain is curbed at the user's end, it is important to keep in mind that it doesn't stop or slow it down much. It is probably imperative to understand the concept of a 'trusted network' here. " The issue of personal relations and trust has become the driving force of a new generation of social systems brought to life by Web 2.0."[5] This simply means that with social media and the internet taking over our lives, our personal relations have also moved online significantly. A trusted network could be your social media friends, followers, or connections who trust you or the content you share, for the most part. This is how misinformation spreads but it could also be how it's stopped.

A range of Web 2.0 systems such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, etc., provide various kinds of "social linking, enabling their user to pick known and trusted users and add them to their list of connections. These self-defined links between users establish a rich network of trust, which is, in turn, used to propagate various kinds of information. Explicitly or implicitly the users in these trusted networks recommend each other group to join, events to attend, bookmarks to explore, or research papers to read."[6]

Trusted networks establish a rich network of trust that is used to propagate various kinds of information, and users in these networks often recommend each other's groups to join, events to attend, bookmarks to explore, or research papers to read. The concept of trusted networks could be useful in Media and Information Literacy efforts by prompting people not only to ignore the mis/disinformation they see online but also to debunk it for the people in their trusted networks. For instance, in the United States, the News Literacy Project has developed a program called "Checkology,"[7] which teaches students how to identify and combat misinformation in their social networks. The program emphasizes the importance of understanding and engaging with trusted networks as a means of stopping the spread of misinformation. Similarly, in Finland,[8] the government has implemented a media literacy program that encourages citizens to fact-check information they encounter online and share accurate information with their trusted networks.

5. Lee, D. H. (n.d.). *The influence of trust on sharing information* . Retrieved November 5, 2022, from https://sites.pitt.edu/~peterb/indepstudies/Lee-073.pdf
6. Ibid.
7. *The News Literacy Project*. Checkology. (2023, January 10). Retrieved January 14, 2023, from https://get.checkology.org/
8. Mackintosh, E. (n.d.). *Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to Western democracy.* CNN. Retrieved January 14, 2023, from https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/

CHAPTER 5 – **Key Informant Interviews and Common Themes**

A total of 8 experts from the industry were interviewed to get their insights on the survey findings, fact-checking protocols in their newsrooms, the gaps that exist, and so on. These include editors (social media, digital, editorial, managing, etc.), and CEOs of regional media outlets including Hazara Express and Pamir Times.

Traditional Means of Verification are Here to Stay

Almost all the experts were unanimous in agreeing that for the foreseeable future at least, Pakistani newsrooms will have to rely on traditional means of verification.

Saqib Tanveer who currently works as a social media editor for Independent Urdu and has a decade of experience in journalism detailed that whenever there is news from a region they do not have a dedicated reporter in, his colleagues usually come up to him to ask if the visuals could be verified using reverse image search or similar tools. Saqib says it is easy to figure out if the photo or the video has not been posted anywhere else before on the internet but he cannot give a confirmation if it's also authentic. For that, you always have to reach out to the people in the region.

Similarly, Zulfiqar Ali Khan, CEO of Pamir Times - based in Gilgit Baltistan - and Sher Afzal Gujjar - CEO of Hazara Express - based in Mansehra, KPK - are of the view that most of their content is region specific. A lot of times google or other reverse image features such as TinEye, and Yandex fail them because their databases do not contain landscapes, etc. from their regions. They rely on phone calls to relevant people and authorities. Gujjar says, "in our context, there is not much intervention from the digital world. Even FIRs etc. take a long time to be registered, let alone become a part of the digital spaces."

Mahim Maher who is currently the head of digital at Aaj agrees that reverse image search isn't always helpful in the context of Pakistan. According to Mahim, "through the sophisticated satellite imagery used by New York Times, fact-checking regarding the troops' movements, etc. in the Ukraine war was made possible, but we do not have that sophistication." At a time when our newsrooms are already strapped for funds and are understaffed, this seems as valid as ever.

The majority of these newsrooms do employ basic techniques such as reverse image search, but it's either very hard to find similar imagery from Pakistan on Google or other platforms such as TinEye, Yandex, or Bing or they just do not exist altogether. Saqib, however, swears by carefully analyzing the pictures or videos received, finding shops, etc. in the background, and looking them up and their numbers on google maps.

Financial Struggles Ultimately Paving Way for Misinformation

While media development organizations in the country such as Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) or Global Neighborhood for Media Innovation (GNMI) and even the Center for Excellence In Journalism (CEJ) are playing their part in equipping journalists and citizens on how to counter misinformation, it is rather naive to assume that this will solve the problem. There are myriad structural issues that need to be addressed first before a more permanent solution can be reached for tackling misinformation.

Haroon Rasheed, the current managing editor for Independent Urdu, is of the view that the first step to reaching there is reducing media owners' involvement in what goes online or on-air. He detailed that they usually look at everything from a business point of view and this results in running news that is good for

ratings but hasn't really been verified properly. While this is mostly a concern for bigger newsrooms, smaller newsrooms such as Hazara Express or Pamir Time struggle with having adequate funding, to begin with. A number of people working in the said newsrooms are either students or doing it on a voluntary basis. Expecting them to have a dedicated desk for fact-checking will not only be unfair but impractical as well.

Similarly, Awais Hameed who currently supervises the central newsroom at Express News Lahore, mentions that the newsrooms in Pakistan are currently understaffed which already makes it difficult to manage shifts. If you add a dedicated fact-checking desk to the mix, that's rather impossible to sustain at the moment. He further added that while he has authority, these are the kind of decisions that the upper management must take. Awais echoed Haroon Rasheed's sentiments and emphasized sensitizing the owners and the higher management to prioritize this.

Lack of Women's Voices and Perspectives
Digital Vs TV

One common thread that came up repeatedly during this research was the lack of women in media - be it the small number of women survey respondents or the lack of space for women to actually express their opinions openly when it comes to calling out their male counterparts in the newsroom.

Zain Siddiqui who is the current Assistant Editor at DAWN indicated that women tend to be slightly less vocal when working in the newsrooms. He attributed it to the fact that most of Pakistan's newsrooms especially in the legacy media, are male-dominated and some of them can be very misogynistic so women are naturally hesitant to speak up. However, in digital newsrooms, fortunately, the situation seems to be getting better because they are led by younger men and women who are generally more open and accommodating, as compared to traditional TV newsrooms.

Mahim echoes Zain's sentiments. According to Mahim, it also has to do with your position in the newsroom as well. As the head of the digital, if she flags something as misinformation, no one will question it. However, if she does the same around the television team, which is dominated by men, the result will not be the same and they will not pay heed to what she is suggesting. The behaviours in digital newsrooms are rather different than in television newsrooms.

Shahneela Farhan who is currently the Executive Producer at GNN seems to agree with Mahim. According to Shahneela, men do question women's capabilities and judgement in the newsroom, in her experience.

This is rather interesting to note because television is the most dominant medium[9] in the country with the majority of the population relying on it for information and entertainment.

Weaponising Fake News and Polarization

Almost all the experts agreed that the current state of polarization in the country has led to reduced trust in media overall. According to Sher Afzal Gujjar, news channels have become rather blatant with their support of one political party or another which makes the masses question the media's credibility overall.

Similarly, Zain Siddiqui also attributed political leaders weaponizing this to the decreasing trust in media. According to Zain, "our political leaders have realized that they can easily call media houses as biased or yellow journalists or whatever and you know just by the sheer power of their platforms they can turn their followers against various media houses, and that is obviously also impacting public trust in the work we do."

9.   BBC. (2022, October 19). *Pakistan Profile - Media*. BBC News. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12965785

Mahim echoed Zain's sentiment by pointing out that there are continuous efforts by the establishment, politicians, and the military to reduce the credibility of the media. Consequently, younger masses have lost interest in the media in general, and unfortunately, nothing much has been done to rectify that by media houses as well. This is perhaps also why news shared on social media is trusted more than the news published in actual newspapers. Shahneela Farhan agrees.

According to Awais Hameed, the issue of polarization is probably bigger than misinformation at the moment. He insists that it's also the way the stories are angled in the local media that fans polarization even more. This is interesting to note because 'misleading content' is definitely one of the seven types of misinformation. According to the First Draft, "reframing stories in headlines, using fragments of quotes to support a wider point, citing statistics in a way that aligns with a position or deciding not to cover something because it undermines an argument are all recognized — albeit underhanded — techniques"[10] all fall under the ambit of misleading content. Awais Hameed gave a similar example. When Shehbaz Gill - special assistant to the former Prime Minister Imran Khan - was arrested, Geo News' 9 pm bulletin's headline stated that he has confessed to the crime [of speaking against the army]. A similar headline was used in the next day's Jang newspaper but no such headline was seen in the London edition of the same newspaper because misinformation is taken seriously there and could have consequences.

Regional Outlets Have More to Lose

Regional outlets catering to far-off or remote areas have more to lose mostly because
a) these regions are the most affected by mis/disinformation due to their remoteness
b) they have limited resources and c) they do not have alternative means to verify the information.
According to Sher Afzal Gujjar, they are just one organization and there's only so much that they can do. There are other channels and smaller pages as well, that operate in the region but misinformation is a very big issue in peripheral areas. Here, people do not have alternative sources for verifying or cross-checking information. Before COVID-19, there were 21 newspapers that operated in the region, and now they have only three left. Therefore, whatever is shared in the Whatsapp groups is published in the newspapers as well, as they do not have adequate resources or bigger teams. Moreover, these newspapers have not transformed themselves digitally. They have a small number of followers on Facebook and those running the pages do not have any formal training.

Zulfiqar Ali Khan from Pamir Times echoes Gujjar's opinion. He pointed out that regions such as Gilgit Baltistan (GB) are the most affected by mis/disinformation. Our local media understands the context, but the issue arises when international media is involved. It is difficult for them to verify the information related to Gilgit Baltistan on account of any authentic alternative sources.. For instance, at times people confuse GB and KPK as well. So, terrorism and such things are associated with GB too.

10. *Understanding information disorder.* First Draft. (2021, August 3). Retrieved November 3, 2022, from https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/

Section 3

FILLING THE GAP

CHAPTER 6 – **Useful Practices and Suggestions from the Newsrooms**

This chapter provides insights and recommendations based on expert interviews conducted to explore the practices and protocols utilised by newsrooms without dedicated fact-checking desks. These insights aim to benefit the wider industry by offering practical solutions for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of news reporting. The following key recommendations were made;

Incorporating digital tools in the newsroom

The interviewees emphasise the significance of utilising various digital tools in fact-checking practices in the newsroom. Such tools include Google Maps, Snapchat maps, Invid Verification Plugin, and Amnesty International's YouTube DataViewer, and offer an efficient method of verifying information, ensuring the accuracy of news reporting. To fully leverage the potential of these tools, it is recommended that journalists receive training and exposure to them in their professional development.

One of the interviewees shared examples of videos that they verified by carefully analyzing the visuals, finding a shop's name in the background, or a DJ's name, looking for the said shop on google maps, and calling them up to confirm if something similar actually happened in their area. For instance, when the Balakot airstrike - conducted by Indian warplanes in February 2019 - happened, Independent Urdu did not have any confirmation on the location and they could not run the story without it. Saqib and his team identified a hotel - Lahore Hotel - in the background, found their number through google maps, and called the owner. The owner eventually trekked 3 kilometers to get some footage for Independent Urdu and that's how they were able to confirm that it happened in Balakot. Just finding a departmental store in the background or a police station nearby via Google maps, a lot can be accomplished by calling them and getting confirmations. Such uses demonstrate the potential of these tools to be used both as a verification and sourcing tool.

Another tool that has been termed underrated is Snapchat maps. After the recent Centaurus Mall fire in Islamabad, editors used Snapchat maps to look at people's stories from the area. Saqib, an editor with Independent Urdu, is of the view that people who usually post on Snapchat do not have the intention to cause misinformation, it's mostly for sharing purposes. Similarly, when the MV Heng Tong 77, a container ship stranded at Karachi's Seaview beach, remained stuck for a month, they used Snapchat maps to see people's stories and get updates on the situation. Independent Urdu's parent organization Independent UK even did the famous [Gaza vs. Israel story](#) - highlighting the difference between lives in the two regions - using stories from Snapchat maps.

Fact-checking practices by newsrooms without dedicated fact-checking desks

The interviewees also touched upon useful practices and protocols that have been developed by newsrooms that do not have dedicated fact-checking desks. Some of the techniques include utilizing Google Maps as a phone directory, Snapchat maps to gather updates on events and tools such as Invid Verification Plugin and Amnesty International's YouTube DataViewer for video verification. It is recommended that these techniques be widely disseminated and incorporated by newsrooms, especially those that do not have dedicated fact-checking desks.

Additionally, developing internal guides or formats to structure the information verification practices could help ensure fact-based and balanced reporting, countering misinformation in the process. An example was

shared by Hazara Express[11] which uses a well-defined template to ensure that reporters have all the necessary information needed before filing the news story.

In conclusion, the findings of the study highlight the importance of incorporating digital tools, understanding user consumption patterns, exploring digital verification tools, and analyzing distrust in the media. These recommendations, if implemented, could help address the issue of misinformation in Pakistan and improve the quality of news reporting.

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11. *Hazara Express's internal guide template is attached with this report as Annex 3*

Recommendations for newsrooms

1. Encourage collaboration and networking between different news outlets to share resources and information in regions where they do not have a dedicated reporter, in order to pool their expertise and knowledge to verify information.

2. Invest in training programs for journalists in Pakistan to build their capacity in traditional means of verification, such as reaching out to people and authorities in the region, analyzing images or videos, and using geolocation tools. These skills are essential in regions where reverse image search and other digital tools are not effective.

3. Develop partnerships with organizations that work on the ground in the regions, such as civil society groups, NGOs, and community-based organizations, to establish relationships with local sources and authorities. This will provide more opportunities for verification and collaboration, and help newsrooms to build a more reliable network of trusted sources.

Recommendations for further research

1. **Understanding contradictory user consumption patterns in Pakistan:** The first idea for further research could be to understand the contradictory user consumption patterns in Pakistan. With social media as the primary source of news but also as the primary source of misinformation spreader, it is crucial to study how this trend is affecting the public perception of news and its impact on the democratic processes. Additionally, the research could focus on how these contradictory patterns can be incorporated into media and information literacy (MIL) efforts in the country.

2. **Success rate of digital verification tools in Pakistani newsrooms:** Another important area for research is the success rate of digital verification tools in Pakistani newsrooms. Given the growing concerns over misinformation, it is imperative to study the effectiveness of digital verification tools in the context of local stories and fact-checks. The study could also assess if the suggestions shared by the experts in Chapter 6 will yield any tangible results in improving the accuracy and reliability of news reporting in Pakistan.

3. **Distrust in media and its impact on political decision-making:** The phenomenon of distrust in the media, in the context of media houses siding with political parties, is another important area that needs to be studied further. The study could focus on the consequent implications of this trend on political decision-making and democratic processes in the country. Additionally, the research could explore how this phenomenon could be addressed through media and information literacy initiatives and regulatory measures.

4. **Media literacy programs in schools and universities:** This research will examine the effectiveness of media literacy programs in schools and universities in Pakistan, and their impact on the general population's ability to identify and critically evaluate information. The study will explore the challenges faced by educators in implementing these programs, and will make recommendations for best practices to improve the effectiveness of these efforts.

5. **Social media algorithms and misinformation:** This research will explore the role of social media algorithms in the spread of misinformation in Pakistan. The study will examine how these algorithms prioritize certain types of content and how they contribute to the spread of false information. It will also look at the ways in which these algorithms can be designed to reduce the spread of misinformation.

7. **Impact of misinformation on public opinion:** This study can examine the impact of misinformation on public opinion in Pakistan. It will explore the ways in which false information can shape public opinion and the impact this can have on political and social discourse. The study will also look at the steps that can be taken to mitigate this impact and prevent the spread of misinformation.

Recommendations for improving media information literacy

It could be useful to create a Media and Information Literacy program that leverages the concept of trusted networks to combat misinformation in Pakistan. The program could involve the following:

1. Educating citizens about the concept of trusted networks and how they can use it to debunk misinformation.

2. Encouraging citizens to take responsibility for the misinformation they come across and not just ignore it, but also actively work to debunk it within their trusted networks.

3. Providing citizens with the necessary tools and resources to fact-check information and distinguish between credible and non-credible sources.

4. Collaborating with news media outlets and media development organizations to promote this program and leverage their expertise in the area.

ANNEXURES

Annex 1 - Research Questionnaires

Survey 1 - How do journalists fact-check in Pakistani newsrooms?

Section 2 of 5- Demographic Details

1. **Gender**
   Man
   Woman
   Transgender
   Other/Prefer Not to Say

2. **Experience**
   Under 2 years
   2-4 years
   4- 6 years
   Over 6 years

3. **Designation**

4. **Region**
   Sindh
   Punjab
   Balochistan
   Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
   Islamabad
   Gilgit Baltistan
   Azad Kashmir

5. **Medium**
   Print
   Electronic
   Digital

Section 3 of 5- Fact-checking in Pakistani Newsroom

6. How do you fact-check stories?
   I fact-check them myself
   I rely on editors and subeditors
   We have a dedicated fact-checking desk for this
   Other

7. Do you have access to any specialized tools/software by your newsroom or your outlet to help you fact-check?
   I have access to specialized tools and platforms
   I rely on free tools
   I don't have access to any free or paid tools
   I don't know how to use fact-checking tools

8. If yes, please enlist the ones you have access to.

Section 4 of 5- Tools & Skills

9. Which of these tools are you aware of?
   Twitter Advanced Search
   Google Advanced Search
   Search Operators
   Reverse Image Search
   InVid Verification Plugin
   Facebook Graph Search
   Trednsmap
   Tweet Binder
   Other

10. Which of the following tools do you normally use in your day-to-day tasks?
    Twitter Advanced Search
    Google Advanced Search
    Search Operators
    Reverse Image Search
    InVid Verification Plugin
    Facebook Graph Search
    Trednsmap
    Tweet Binder
    Other

11. Have you received any formal training on newsgathering or sourcing news from social media?
    Yes
    No
    I have self-taught myself
    Other

12. Have you received any formal training on fact-checking tools and skills?
    Yes
    No
    I have self-taught myself
    Other

13. On a scale of 1 to 5, what is the frequency of you using any digital fact-checking tools? (1 being once a week or less and 5 being almost every day or multiple times a day)

    1   2   3   4   5

14. What, in your opinion, has been the success rate for using digital fact-checking tools? (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest)

    1   2   3   4   5

Section 5 of 5- Conversations in the Newsroom

15. Have there been conversations in your newsrooms about getting paid fact-checking tools or setting up dedicated fact-checking desks?

Yes, at the editorial/management level and steps are being taken
Yes, at the editorial/management level but no steps have been taken
Yes, but only within the team and not with any officials
No, we haven't had any

Survey 2 - Consumers' understanding of the misinformation landscape in Pakistan

Section 2 of 5- Demographic Details

1. **Gender**
   Man
   Woman
   Transgender
   Other/Prefer Not to Say

2. **Age**
   Under 20 years
   20 - 25
   25 - 30
   35 - 40
   Above 40

3. **Education level**
   Below Matriculation
   Matric
   Intermediate
   Undergraduate
   Graduate and Above

4. **Region**
   Sindh
   Punjab
   Balochistan
   Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
   Islamabad
   Gilgit Baltistan
   Azad Kashmir

5. **Regional Classification**
   Urban
   Semi-Urban
   Rural

6. **Profession:**

Section 3 of 5- Media & Trust

7. Where do you usually get your news from?
   TV
   News Outlets
   Social Media
   Print Newspaper

Other

8.   Which of the following mediums do you trust the most, to get your news?
      TV
      News Outlets
      Print Newspaper
      Social Media
      Other

9.   Can you share the name(s) of the outlets/channels you trust the most, in terms of getting your news?

Section 4 of 5- Frequency of Misinformation

10.   What, in your opinion, is the biggest spreader of misinformation in Pakistan?
      Electronic Media/TV
      Newspaper
      News Media Websites
      YouTube
      WhatsApp
      Other Social Media
      Word of Mouth

11.   How often do you come across misinformation online?
      Almost every day
      A few times in week
      Once a week
      A few times a month
      Rarely, every once in a while

12.   How often do you come across misinformation offline/in your daily life?
      Almost every day
      A few times in week
      Once a week
      A few times a month
      Rarely, every once in a while

Section 5 of 5- Tackling Misinformation

13.   If you come across something online that looks like misinformation, how do you tackle it?

Annex 2 - Interview Questions

1.   We did a survey with around 250 journalists. Despite our repeated efforts, only 20% of the respondents were women. Secondly, some of the conversations at MMfD training sessions have been around how even if women in newsrooms know something is wrong, they sometimes hesitate to point it out because their male counterparts either don't listen or are dismissive. Are you doing anything about it or has it come to your knowledge?

2.   A lot of them mentioned that they use traditional means to verify their news, very rarely do they use google or the tools available. a) what kind of digital tools do your journalists have access to? b) are they given any training to use them? Please name them if you remember.

3. Do you have any paid tools/softwares that journalists in your newsrooms have access to? Name them. **Any success stories using either free or paid digital tools?**

4. What's the protocol for fact-checking a story, as a news organization? Do you have any guidelines that your journalists follow? How are the responsibilities re: fact-checking delegated?

5. Editors/CEOS at smaller/regional outlets: Is your area affected by mis/disinformation more?

6. How do you plan on filling the gaps that exist in the fact-checking realm? Do you plan on bringing in new tools for your journalists? Have there been conversations in the newsroom about it, what do you see the future to be?

7. In your opinion, how is the situation re: public trust in media at this point in time? Do you take any steps to make sure your audience trusts you, any steps for audience engagement, etc.?

Annex 3 - Hazara Express Verification Format

1- وقوعہ کیا تھا:		
2- وقوعہ کب ہوا؟	سال	مہینہ	تاریخ

3- وقوعہ کہاں ہوا؟	گاؤں	محلہ
	ڈاک خانہ	تحصیل وضلع

4- کیا وقوعہ کا مقامی رسم ورواج سے تعلق ہے	ہاں	نہیں

5- وقوعہ کیسے ہوا؟ (مختصر تفصیل)

6- وقوعہ کا ماضی کے کسی دوسرے واقعہ سے تعلق اور اس کی مختصر تفصیل

7- وقوعہ کا شکار ہونے والے کوائف	نام	ولدیت/زوجیت	پیشہ

8- وقوعہ سے متاثر ہونے والے کے معاشی/سماجی حیثیت	بچہ/بچی	عورت/مرد	غریب/ان پڑھ	بوڑھا/بوڑھی	بیمار
	مخالف سیاسی کارکن	سماجی کارکن	اقلیتی فرقے کارکن	دیگر (تخصیص کریں)	

9- وقوعہ میں ملوث اشخاص کے کوائف:	نام	ولدیت/زوجیت	عہدہ	پیشہ
-1				
-2				
-3				

10- وقوعہ کے ذمہ دار فرد/افراد کی معاشی/سماجی حیثیت	بڑا جاگیردار/زمیندار/بہت امیر آدمی	متوسط طبقے سے/غریب آدمی	بااثر صلاحیت/سیاسی اثر ورسوخ

11- وقوعہ کی پشت پناہی کرنے والے عناصر کے کوائف	نام اور ولدیت	عہدہ	پیشہ	پارٹی/ادارہ
-1				
-2				
-3				

12- وقوعہ سے متعلقہ فریقین گواہان وغیر جانبدار افراد کے کوائف وموقف

وقوعہ سے تعلق	نام اور ولدیت	وقوعہ سے متاثر ہونے والے کے ساتھ تعلق/رشتہ داری	عہدہ	موقف
واقعہ سے متاثر				
واقعہ کا ذمہ دار				
چشم دید گواہ				
غیر جانبدار/پڑوسی				

13- اس قسم کے واقعات علاقہ میں کس قدر ظہور پذیر ہوتے رہتے ہیں	بہت زیادہ	اکثر اوقات	کبھی کبھار	کبھی نہیں
اس قسم کے واقعات اندازاً کتنی تعداد میں ہوتے ہیں	روزانہ	ماہانہ	سالانہ	