BULLETIN 34

Pakistan Coronavirus CivActs Campaign (CCC)
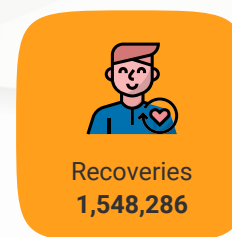
Preamble

For over two years, the Coronavirus CivActs Campaign (CCC), supported by the Open Society Foundation (OSF), debunked fake news, misinformation, and myths around COVID-19. The campaign now focuses on building healthy information ecosystems where we will lead and support efforts to stop the spread of fake news and misinformation in Pakistan in a broader manner. The focus of our work might not necessarily be around COVID-19 unless, of course, we face a new wave. We plan to tackle fake news around health emergencies (remember, polio is still a challenge in Pakistan, and fake news is responsible for creating perennial vaccine hesitation), politics, sociocultural taboos, and other similar phenomena.

What's Inside

- NIH confirms one death from Covid-19 in Punjab
- The Role of Misinformation & Disinformation in Fueling Hate Speech in Pakistan
- Steps Involved to Stop the Spread of Fake News

COVID-19 Dashboard (Pakistan)

Confirmed Cases	Active Cases	Deaths	Recoveries
1,580,631	1,689	30,656	1,548,286

NIH CONFIRMS ONE DEATH FROM COVID-19 IN PUNJAB:

The National Institute of Health (NIH) on Friday confirmed that one death was reported in Punjab from COVID-19 during the month of April.

As per the data shared by the National Institute of Health, 53 new coronavirus cases had been reported over the month of April across the country. The case positivity ratio became 1.37 percent, while 13 patients had been in critical condition.

As many as 3,863 Covid-19 tests were conducted. 595 tests were carried out in Lahore out of which, 11 cases were confirmed with a ratio of 1.85 percent, whilst 453 tests have been conducted out in Islamabad out of which 10 cases were reported confirmed with a ratio of 2.21 percent. In the meantime, Minister for National Health Services, Regulations, and Coordination Abdul Qadir Patel said the government has reinforced the role of Border and health services in Pakistan to cope with any sub-variant of Covid-19.

The minister stated there has been a surveillance system at all entry points of the country which includes airports. There could be rapid tests and screening of passengers in any respect airports, he added. He stated the situation has become absolutely under control and asked the general public to avoid listening to rumors. He added that 90 percent of the country's population already got the Covid-19 vaccine.

"An efficient system with a proper management team is fully functional in the country to remain vigilant and is ready to make an emergency plan to deal with any sub-variant of Covid-19," the minister added.

He said the Border and Health Services Pakistan was ensuring the implementation of international health regulations. He said that in case of any untoward situation, the health system was fully prepared to deal with any sub-variant of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 including BF.7 in the country.

Sources:
NIH confirms one death from Covid-19 in Punjab - Pakistan - Business Recorder (brecorder.com)
NIH confirms one death from Coronavirus in Punjab (app.com.pk)

THE ROLE OF MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION IN FUELING HATE SPEECH IN PAKISTAN:

Manipulation through misinformation and disinformation is a powerful tactic used to achieve Social and/or political goals. Information has the power to form opinions, similarly, misinformation or disinformation when backed by a certain agenda, can propagate hate speech. The power of misinformation leading to hate speech can be understood by the following comments made by the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres in an address to the UN Security Council;

> *"Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech are increasingly being used as weapons of war. The aim is clear: to dehumanize the so-called other, threaten vulnerable communities — as well as peacekeepers themselves — and even give open license to commit atrocities"*

These remarks highlight the threats posed by misinformation.

Since its inception, the social setup in Pakistan has been such that leaders of religious, political and sectarian groups have had a very prominent role in forming public opinion. Especially in areas where the literacy rates are below the national average, the leaders and the elders of the community play a vital role in shaping the sentiments of the masses.

This gives them the power to use misinformation to push ideas and believes that are in their own interests, but even more dangerously, it also gives them power to turn their affiliates against a certain way of thinking, a certain community, a certain religious sect, a certain political party and even a particular person that they feel is a threat to them, to an extent that it generates feelings of hate, leading to hate speech against the other group or person, and in some cases, even acts of hatred.

(The socio-economic condition of Pakistan as it is, with all its woes, the ever-rising inflation and joblessness, along with other reasons, has led to very low acceptance levels within the society. People are generally led to believe that their religious ideology or their political orientation is the only one that should be accepted and consider any differing opinions as derogatory and unacceptable.

When this is topped by news agencies, political parties and religious sermons directly or indirectly encouraging unacceptance towards other school of thoughts and baselessly alleging 'the other side' of the country's poor economic state, or any loss, it inevitably results in Hate speech)

Misinformation is spread through 1) News agencies; news channels and newspapers who are working on a particular agenda by limiting or twisting the information they present depending on what agenda they are trying to promote, and who funds or owns them. Similarly, 2) Political parties through their workers, leaders and spokespeople misinform knowingly to promote their party's mandate. And, 3) Religious scholars, through sermons and teachings sometimes instill the ideology of extremism. All of which result in hate speech. With the advent of Social media, people can express their feelings of hate towards each other even more openly on social media platforms with comparatively lesser risk of being held accountable.

There are various cases that present how hate speech is prevalent in Pakistan. The cases of Asia Bibi and The Murder of Salman Taseer are high profile cases that are very well documented. The refusal of various groups to get the polio vaccination owing to a widespread misinformation that the vaccine is dangerous is also an example which resulted in a very aggressive approach towards polio workers by the protestors.

- Junaid Jamshed eg – religious
- Tosha Khana eg – political

The question remains how can misinformation and disinformation be controlled to control hate speech? The legal framework of Pakistan does somewhat cover the issue in the 'Pakistan Penal Code' (PPC) by stating that any individual or group found guilty of creating or promoting "feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities" will be punishable by law. Similarly, the 5th point of the 'National Action Plan' (NAP) aims to counter hate speech by declaring that "Strict action against the literature, newspapers and magazines promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance." It needs to ensure that the legal frameworks mentioned are adhered to and strict examples are set to discourage hate speech. Simultaneously some reforms should be made to proactively counter misinformation and hate speech.

- The national curriculum in schools should be vetted to ensure the students are not exposed to any sources that develop feelings of hate or discrimination towards any community or sect.
- The education curriculum in Madrassahs should also be streamlined.
- Media and News agencies should be strictly monitored to ensure no content is aired that could potentially foster feelings of hatred in its viewers or readers.

STEPS INVOLVED TO STOP THE SPREAD OF FAKE NEWS:

Following are some effective steps that can be taken to stop the spread of fake news:

01 Educate Yourself:
Take the time to understand what fake news is, how it spreads, and the consequences it can have on individuals and society. Be aware of your own biases and try to approach news sources with a critical eye.
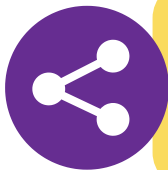
02 Verify the Source:
Verify the source of the news before sharing it with others. Check whether the source is reputable, trustworthy, and has a history of producing accurate news.
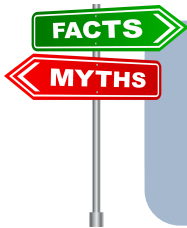
03 Check the Story:
Before sharing a story, verify its authenticity by checking other sources to see if the story is being reported by reputable news outlets. If a story seems too outrageous or sensational, it is worth taking a few minutes to check its authenticity.

04 Don't Share Without Checking:
Resist the urge to share news stories immediately without verifying their accuracy. Sharing fake news only helps to spread it further and can cause harm to individuals and society.

05 Use Fact-Checking Tools:
Utilize fact-checking tools to verify the accuracy of news stories.

06 Report Fake News:
Report fake news to the social media platforms, websites, or news outlets where it is being shared. Social media platforms have become major distribution channels for fake news, and they are beginning to take action to prevent the spread of false information.

07 Encourage Critical Thinking:
Encourage friends and family members to think critically about the news they consume and to verify its accuracy before sharing it with others. By following these steps, individuals can play a significant role in stopping the spread of fake news and promoting the sharing of accurate information.