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How Three Mission-Driven News Organisations in the Global South Combat Disinformation Through Investigation, Innovation, Advocacy and Education

Nabeelah Shabbir, Julie Posetti, and Felix M. Simon

Abstract

Disinformation is an old but increasingly escalating problem. While recent research on it has strongly focused on highly publicised incidents and responses across Europe and the US, the role and response of news organisations in the Global South has not been sufficiently illuminated so far. This chapter attempts to contribute to filling this gap. Drawing on case studies from India, the Philippines, and South Africa conducted between 2018 and 2020, we provide a comparative analysis of how three Global South news organisations have innovated in their existing counter-disinformation work, with a special focus on the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. We find that all three news organisations we studied—*Daily Maverick* in South Africa, *Rappler* in the Philippines, and *The Quint* in India—have innovated and adapted through a mix of professional, advocacy and educational responses, although the pandemic—and the outsized role of digital intermediaries in these countries—has exacerbated many existing challenges. Our chapter provides key lessons of how news organisations can address disinformation from a Global South perspective, and offers additional evidence for a reorientation of conventional thinking about innovation in journalism—away from a focus on technological innovation and towards other forms of innovation, especially in terms of how journalism is practised and news organisations engage with their audiences.

Introduction

Disinformation was a common occurrence in the Global South before it became a preoccupation in the Global North (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021). Amid a dearth of positive legal, state-led or policy responses, news organisations across the Global South are often left to write the playbook to fight disinformation. In the words of Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa, they experience the most severe impacts of the “weaponisation of the tools of freedom of expression” which enable disinformation (UNESCO 2018).

This chapter synthesises a range of research conducted between 2017-2019 as part of the Journalism Innovation Project at Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The news organisations we selected are three independent, commercial, digital born outlets: *Daily Maverick* in South Africa (established 2008) *Rappler* in the Philippines (established 2011), and *The Quint* in India (established 2015). We researched how each of them—all driven by a strong mission to produce independent journalism, with an aim to serve the public interest and defend their destabilised democracies—dealt with some of the

problems exacerbated by the digital transformation of media systems (Jungherr et al. 2020), and in particular, disinformation. In each case, they were targets of state-linked disinformation campaigns and operating in environments where politically motivated attacks on media freedom and individual journalists are the norm. From the earliest stages of this research, it became clear that innovative responses to disinformation were key to independent media viability in such contexts and to the response of the outlets we studied

We will not attempt a redefinition of innovation in this chapter, but instead address a weakness in existing thinking about innovation in journalism. As García-Avilés (2021) has shown in his review of the existing literature, innovation in the media—and research on the same—has often been overly concerned with technology and business innovation, what U.S. digital-born journalism veteran Kim Bui has termed ‘Shiny Things’ syndrome (Posetti 2018), as well as being strongly centred on news organisations in highly developed, westernised countries. We intend to deepen and extend this understanding of journalism innovation by including and focusing on a diverse set of audience-focused and technology-empowered practises and responses to digital transformation and external or existential threats such as disinformation in the Global South.

We draw on 51 interviews across the three news organisations conducted between 2018 and 2020. We provide a comparative analysis of the ways *Daily Maverick*, *Rappler* and *The Quint* have developed and adapted their existing counter-disinformation work, especially in response to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Applying the typology of global disinformation responses developed for UNESCO in 2020 (Bontcheva and Posetti 2020), we can see that the disinformation responses deployed by our case study organisations spans the four top level response types illustrated below. These capture 11 response type subcategories including: monitoring and fact checking; counter-disinformation campaigns; curatorial responses; ethical and normative responses; and educational responses.

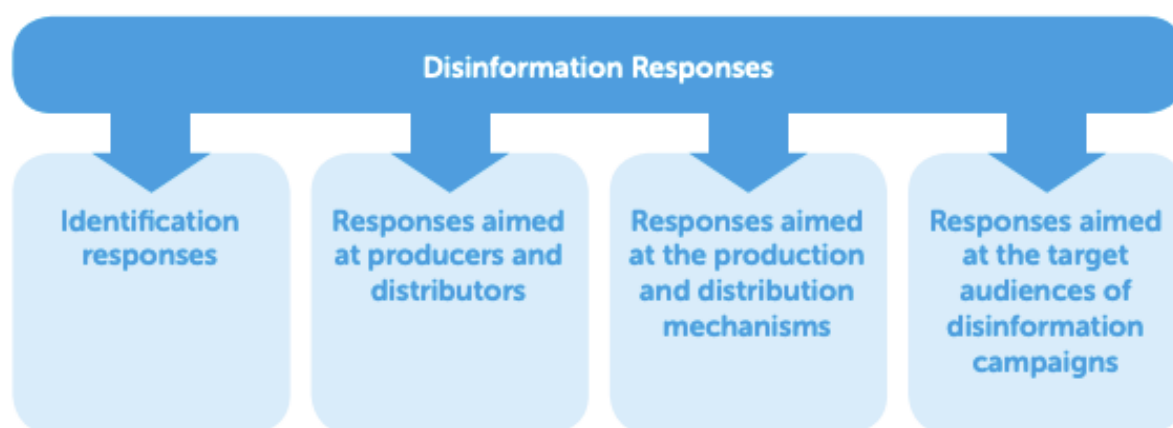


Figure 1. Top-level categories of disinformation responses (Source: Bontcheva and Posetti 2020)

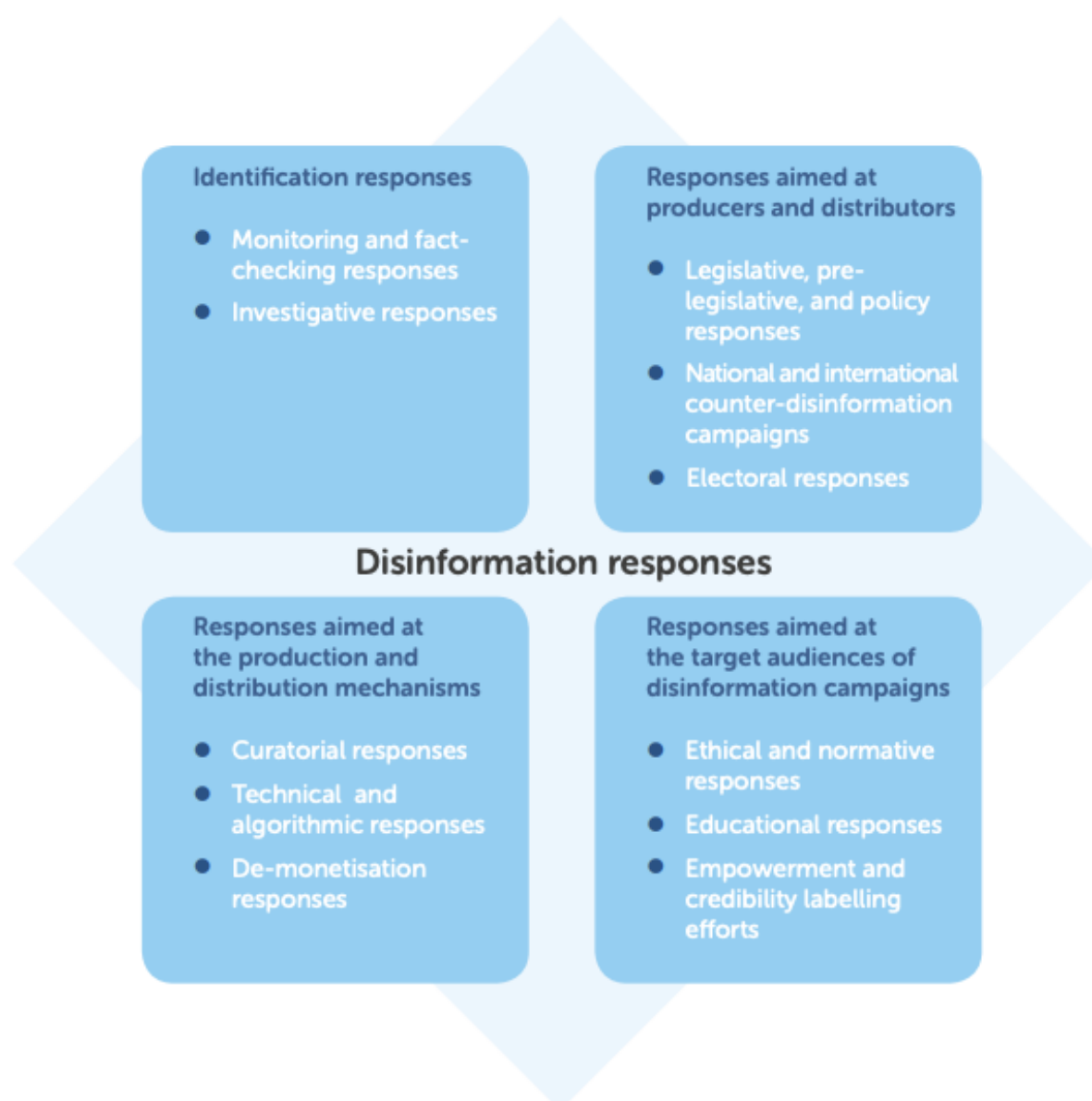


Figure 2. The 4 top-level response categories and their eleven sub-categories (Source: Bontcheva and Posetti 2020).

We find that all three news organisations we studied have innovated through a mix of professional, advocacy and educational responses. This includes increasing editorial verification initiatives to reach wider audiences perceived to be susceptible to disinformation, deeper collaborations with civil society organisations, using ‘alternative’ platforms to reach audiences such as Telegram, developing deeper relationships with audiences as ‘members’, working with the technology giants (such as via fact-checking partnerships), and a tighter focus on their missions of providing critical public service journalism, even as the coronavirus pandemic and its concomitant effects have presented them with extra challenges. The trio of organisations also confirmed that they have recently witnessed an uptick in disinformation in their respective countries, which contributed to a sense of ‘chaos’ throughout 2020, and potentially further eroded trust in institutions and the news.

One key theme that emerged across the three cases is that these more recent disinformation campaigns over the course of 2020—directed, for example, against immigrants (South Africa), members of progressive organisations (the Philippines), or peaceful protestors

(India)—not only further escalated media freedom and journalism safety threats in their societies, but also served as a distraction from the pandemic and its devastating effects. Describing these attacks as a form of ‘gaslighting’ or ‘an especially pernicious form of manipulation [...] threatening the agent’s status as a member of the moral community’ (Beerbohm and Davis 2021)—our participants described how critical journalism in the Global South about a global public health crisis has been undermined, as journalists and news outlets have scrambled to respond to these disinformation campaigns and cover the pandemic concurrently.

This chapter will consider the diverse and innovative responses of news organisations to disinformation in the Global South, amid a dearth of positive legal, state-led or policy responses to it, and in the context of responses that overreach and threaten media freedom, such as ‘fake news’ laws (Bontcheva and Posetti 2020). The need to confront the disinformation crisis through experimentation, creativity and going ‘pedal to the metal’, as one editor we interviewed described his strategy, is essential to survival in the midst of a pandemic billed as a potential “extinction event for news media” (Silverman 2020). It is, we suggest, also essential for building back trust amongst civic-minded communities.

I: Background context

In this section we will first provide a brief profile of each outlet, before taking a closer look at their responses to disinformation.

Rappler

Rappler was born in the context of a democratic media transformation in the Philippines in the aftermath of the Marcos dictatorship, which before it was toppled by a ‘people power revolution’ in 1986, labelled journalists as ‘communists’. It’s a line which editors say both the state and disinformation networks continue to push in acts of ‘red-tagging’ (Macaraeg 2020). Associate Editor Gemma Mendoza explains:

A lot of the context behind one online network takedown we recently did is actually that there is a mix of disinformation and hate mongering—we call it ‘red tagging’ because really, [these trolls] are calling everybody communists, and ‘therefore they should be killed.

The media freedom environment in the Philippines is the most fragile when compared to the two other countries under study in this chapter. Journalists and civil society activists are regularly being imprisoned or killed for their efforts to hold power to account. ‘You’re seeing a government that’s escalating things, labelling people as terrorists, and there’s been a spate of killings,’ said Gemma Mendoza, head of research and strategy at *Rappler*. The outlet has won international journalism awards for investigations into the Duterte government’s deadly ‘drug war’ (which has resulted in thousands of unlawful killings), and continues to uncover orchestrated digital disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilising the young democracy. Since August 2016, *Rappler* has done this by documenting, mapping and tracking various digital influence operations within the country. This has resulted in several attacks targeting *Rappler*, its reporters, and Maria Ressa, CEO of *Rappler*, and formerly head of news at ABS CBN, a top Philippines broadcast network shuttered in 2020 by the Duterte regime. The Manila-born journalist has been subjected to a state-sponsored harassment campaign since 2016 (Posetti 2017b) in response to her critique of nationalist-populist president Rodrigo Duterte and *Rappler*’s accountability reporting of his administration. She was convicted on a

trumped-up criminal cyberlibel charge prosecuted by the Philippine government in mid 2020. At the time of writing, if convicted on all counts, she stands to spend the rest of her life in a Philippine jail.

The support that *Rappler* receives from its audiences, who have also crowd-funded the organisation's legal defence, shows that their community lives up to the values of the organisation: being more than just consumers, but collaborators in an environment where news integrity is at risk in Gemma Mendoza's view:

Our audience now understands really clearly where the dangers lie and I think that's the reason also why they're there. The trolls are still on our comment threads, but there are also people defending us there.

In the next section we will provide more examples of how Ressa and her team have utilised investigative, educational and advocacy counter-disinformation responses as part of their defensive arsenal. These wits are also used to get worldwide attention: when Ressa was named *TIME* person of the year in 2018—the only one of the nominees that year not to have been arrested or imprisoned for journalism—she turned the media attention back on the work that Rappler was doing to fight disinformation.

Daily Maverick

'As a small, independent digital-only publication, born into a time of Google, Facebook and Jacob Zuma, survival was always going to be our biggest challenge,' Branko Brkic told us in Cape Town in 2019. Brkic is the founder of *Daily Maverick*, also created against a backdrop of strong media transition—that of the anti-apartheid struggle of the 70s and 80s. As with the Philippines' People Power movement in the 80s, press freedom activism was also a core component of the anti-apartheid struggle. *Daily Maverick* Associate Editor Marianne Tham told us: this points to a form of audience engagement that moves well beyond interaction with and around content: 'South Africans took control of the narrative themselves, not the journalists ... or anyone else. We had marches, but there was also this pushback against Zuma and state capture which was a physical demonstration of anger and FFS!' This kind of organised community response—often at the grassroots level and instigated by civil society organisations—underpins the rapid growth of *Daily Maverick*'s new membership base. (Posetti et al. 2019b).

Daily Maverick is known for its deep, globally reverberating investigative journalism in uncovering kleptocratic scales of government corruption, which the South Africans call 'state capture': a type of systemic political corruption in which private interests significantly influence a state's decision-making processes to their own advantage. Reporting on the biggest political scandal since the end of apartheid (known as #Guptagate) led to the eventual resignation of former South African President Jacob Zuma (2009 to 2018), and to the collapse of the implicated UK public relations firm Bell Pottinger. As with Rappler, *Daily Maverick* relies on strong support from its audiences with people 'donating money out of nowhere [...] I am talking serious money', according to Brkic.

While the pressure that many South African journalists are under is not necessarily state-led, and while journalists are not likely to be taken to court because politicians are avoiding being implicated, Brkic says that the attacks come from elsewhere. The 'state capture guys' in the form of the journalists working with Independent Media and 'who managed to regroup and came back really really strong'. This is an important feature of the disinformation landscape in all of the cases we researched: State-aligned media organisations targeting more independent and critical competitors. The effect of this, as it meets bottom-up pressure from hostile users or 'troll armies'—a group of individuals participating on social media forums and

in forums to spread or suppress a specific message – is similar to what *Rappler* has experienced in the Philippines in the five years since Duterte became president. Brkic said:

They employ an unbelievably massive army of bots and trolls on social media and what they are trying to do is gaslight people. There's a rogue unit thing which we managed to completely cut into pieces... three years later they're coming back and saying that everything we published is a lie...and they repeat it 20,000 times on Twitter because 20k bots are repeating it... they are aggressive beyond imagination.

When it comes to disinformation, Brkic and his team avoid publishing on social media as a philosophy—‘it’s a waste of time; it’s for marketing only’. Brkic says his inbox is a ‘mixture of threats’ especially with *Daily Maverick*’s most recent investigations, which led to one of Zuma’s close allies, Ace Magashule, being arrested on charges of corruption. Brkic says that Magashule, secretary-general of South Africa’s governing ANC party which has governed South Africa since the apartheid regime ended in 1994, is trying to regain power in his party to avoid jail:

This is what happened with Zuma, except that Ace Magashule as the president of the ANC in South Africa will literally be the end of South Africa. People like me unfortunately are going to have to leave because we’re gonna get killed...Again the problem is that Ace Magashule since Zuma resigned, kind of assumed the mantle. We are fighting a full-blown war, information war.

In the next section, we will look at how Brkic has guided *Daily Maverick* into a position where it has doubled its growth and can continue to fight what he calls an ‘information war’ through investigative reportage, media and information literacy work, and campaigning journalism.

The Quint

The Quint is the youngest of the three case studies featured in this chapter, having launched in 2015 as a mobile journalism-powered and social-first outfit. Like *Rappler*, it was born as a Facebook page, founded by veteran media executives Rita Kapur (CEO) and Raghav Bahl (Editor-in-Chief). The operation is heavy on video live-streaming and interactives; Kapur has described the Millennials-focused start-up as ‘young, scrappy, and dirty’ (Posetti 2018).

Privately funded by Kapur and Bahl, *The Quint* has grown to a staff of 130. It supports gender equality advocacy projects and a ‘citizen journalism’ portal, alongside a vertical dedicated to pop culture. In 2018, it also built a fact-checking and myth-busting unit called WebQoof (a Hindi colloquialism for ‘internet idiot’) which has a dedicated team of reporters, and a very invested audience that collaborates on surfacing and debunking the floods of disinformation and misinformation that find amplification on India’s social web, particularly in the closed environment of WhatsApp (McLaughlin 2018).

The Quint describes its style as cheeky and plucky—it delves deeply (but accessibly) into complex issues like gender violence and Islamophobia and it has not cowed from critiquing the right-wing populist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite charges of ‘anti-nationalism’ and threats being levelled at the outlet and its journalists—especially the women—by Modi supporters.

Defending press freedom is also a feature of *The Quint*’s mission. The outlet has itself been targeted by the Modi government, including through raids on its offices and staff. Groups and individuals who support the government have also engaged *The Quint* in a slew of legal cases. Both actions are designed, it is perceived, to chill their reporting in a climate of declining media freedom. Bahl and Kapur’s home, along with *The Quint*’s New Delhi

headquarters, were raided by tax officials in October 2018 in an act that the Editors Guild of India said 'could be seen as an intimidation of the government's critics' (Shapiro and Zidan 2020). This approach parallels some of the legal cases brought against *Rappler* in the Philippines.

In Asia, journalists have experienced different levels of 'information control' from the state. For example, a journalist was arrested under the Thai version of a law which puts restrictions on freedom of speech (the 'lèse majesté law') whilst a bill in Malaysia threatens publishers of 'fake news' with up to 10 years in jail or a \$120,000 fine. An early plan to issue a 'fake news blacklist' in India was nipped in the bud, after journalists were vocal (Kazmin 2018) about how 'curbing the spread of misinformation could be misused to silence journalists without really tackling the widespread problem of fake news (Scroll Staff 2018).

For Ritu Kapur, co-founder and CEO, at the time of speaking state challenges to press freedom have so far more heavily impacted regional media outfits in remote parts of the country which are also less connected to urban centers. An estimated 70% of India's population, or approximately 700 million people, live in the country's more than 600,000 villages (Venkataraman 2018). Kapur is seeing 'a lot of legal action against journalists in the hinterland for something that they are putting out on social media.' Indeed, an internet blackout in the Jammu and Kashmir region has led to deterioration of press freedom (Schapiro and Zidan 2020). Since *The Quint* is a mainstream and mainly English-language publication, Kapur thinks this may have offered it some form of immunity, although it intends to move into this space by growing its Hindi language offering.

In the next section, we will look at how *The Quint* has clarified its editorial focus in the first year of the pandemic, and doubled down on journalistic and educational responses to disinformation through a mixture of collaboration and fact-checking initiatives.

ii. Investigative, normative, educational and advocacy responses to disinformation

This section looks more closely at professional responses to disinformation that emphasise collaboration (with audiences and civil society organisations), that are also 'technology-empowered' (but not technology-led), are critical of big tech's role as disinformation vector, and deploy data analysis and investigative journalism to uncover disinformation networks spreading much of the false and propagandistic content encountered. We also present the normative and educational responses of these media organisations: by experimenting with engaging forms of media and information literacy and reaching out to audiences in clear calls to action they have found more loyal followings, which is important for both independent media viability and to re-establish trust in institutions.

Investigative responses to disinformation

When we talk about 'platform capture', we refer in part to the attempted manipulation of platforms and their mass user base for malicious purposes, such as orchestrated disinformation campaigns designed to destabilise democracies and chill media freedom (Ressa 2016; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018; Posetti et al. 2019; Bradshaw and Howard 2019). The news organisations studied here respond innovatively in four key ways: collecting data on the back-end of organised online hate- and disinformation campaigns to

investigate their reach; encouraging ‘fact-checker’ communities to write in with their unverified sources; partnering with platforms to fight disinformation; and doubling down on print and investigative journalism.

The phenomenon of politicians using social media to directly access audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Jungherr et al. 2020; Schroeder 2018), has been identifiable since 2008 and has aided the spread of disinformation within online social networks (Kaur and Nair 2018). In the Philippines, a social media campaign helped President Duterte come into power. This network evolved to solidify its base, unleashing malicious users whenever there was criticism of policies such as the drug war or in attempts to discredit traditional media organisations (CSIS 2018). *Rappler* felt this brunt: it lost approximately 50,000 Facebook followers after President Duterte called it ‘fake news’ in his annual State of the Nation address, and as a result of an orchestrated #UnfollowRappler campaign across several social networks.

Rappler’s strategic response was to ‘weaponise’ the social media platforms which were weaponised against them; for example by live streaming the arrests of their staff.

Rappler also manually collected data to discover that just 26 accounts were responsible for spreading misinformation to 3,000 accounts. This led to a series of investigations on social media propaganda in October 2016. From here, *Rappler* automated its ‘Sharktank’ database to map the disinformation ecosystem of the Philippines, and to continue to investigate its impact on the country’s information and social media ecosystem, in a country where 97% of the population uses Facebook as their main gateway to the internet.

Ferial Haffajee, Associate Editor at *Daily Maverick*, turned her own experience of being attacked online ‘into quite nifty fits of investigation into what trolling armies look like in South Africa, into mapping them, into analysing them with the data scientists... It’s a new enemy force, it’s a form of violence, it’s a trend. When you have the time and the support and the money to go study, it just makes, it takes away its harm.’ While *Rappler*’s data-driven series of investigative reports in 2016 led to Ressa getting 90 hate messages a minute, Haffajee points out that being ‘able to study, map it, write these classics, [means] people have begun to realise the trend... at least we’re developing a body of knowledge to explain it to audiences’.

Both *The Quint* and *Rappler* are ‘partners’ of Facebook’s initiative with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at Poynter, which began in 2016 in an effort to improve the quality of information on the platform. Despite *Rappler*’s forceful critique of the company as a disinformation vector, the Facebook contract is a ‘critical collaboration’, according to Gemma Mendoza: ‘If you don’t engage, you leave the floor open to others’. For example, when *Rappler* recently revealed Philippine police pages on Facebook to be sponsoring disinformation and targeting members or offices of ‘progressive’ groups, they reported this to Facebook. *Rappler* later learned that the network, with its links to the military, had been taken down (Gleicher, 2020).

The ‘bogeyman’ of disinformation for many news organisations, especially in India, is Facebook-owned WhatsApp (Kajimoto and Stanley 2019). Indian audiences have traditionally engaged with *The Quint* by sending suspected mis- and disinformation through the outlets’ dedicated WhatsApp channels. This fact-checking takes place in conjunction with Meedan, a global technology not-for-profit using the WhatsApp Business API and powered by Meedan’s open-source platform. Whether it is verifying whether a fallen airplane pilot is indeed an Indian crash-landed in ‘hostile’ neighbouring Pakistan, or whether the president made certain statements while travelling through the country, ‘the aim is to send fact-checked details back to those people, so that then they have access to verified information,’

Submitted Manuscript: Shabbir, N., Posetti, J., and, & Simon, F. M. (2022). How Three Mission-Driven News Organizations in the Global South Combat Disinformation Through Investigation, Innovation, Advocacy, and Education.

says Kritika Goel who runs WebQoof, a fact-checking platform at *The Quint*, where the WhatsApp hotline is also housed.

However, WhatsApp's status as a 'force multiplier' for spreading dis- and misinformation in small groups on a closed platform has been a challenge, *The Quint's* Ritu Kapur told us. Facebook made changes to WhatsApp's terms and conditions to limit the spread of false information by stopping broadcasts to larger groups, which in India led to mob lynchings and deaths because of hate speech-laden mis- and disinformation. Concurrently, this also led to more difficulties for *The Quint's* work in fighting disinformation with communities of readers, says Kapur:

To be able to plough the fact-checked content back into the WhatsApp universe, that's been challenged. What we've not been able to do—and what we could have done earlier – is use the fact verified stories, amplified and spread on WhatsApp.

Finally, in a counterintuitive example of the 'Shiny New Things Syndrome', *Daily Maverick* 'pedalled to the metal' to launch a printed newspaper, proving it can offer its own diverse response to digital transformation and external or existential threats. 'Instead of cutting down and waiting for this to be over, we became proactive and we ended up launching a weekly newspaper in a pandemic,' says Branko Brkic. One edition of the '168' paper has the face of Ace Magashule, one of the country's most prominent politicians plastered all over it, who the *Daily Maverick's* Scorpio investigative unit revealed was under arrest for corruption related to procurement. At the time of writing this was distributed in 135 Pick 'n' Pay supermarkets, which are ubiquitous across South Africa. Circulation sat at a competitive 25,000 when we spoke to Brkic in December 2020, who warned that a victory for the ANC political leader who had *Daily Maverick* in his sights would mean 'game over'.

Educational and advocacy responses

This section looks at how *The Quint*, *Rappler*, and *Daily Maverick* are working with, and for, their audiences via media and information literacy and advocacy journalism work. This focus appeals to philanthropic investors focused on reinforcing democracy and audiences seeking reliable, trustworthy information in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis.

Educating audiences on disinformation has always been core to the DNA of the team at *Rappler*. Part of its success when it launched on Facebook in 2011 came with its grassroots efforts in disaster management and in mobilising networks of communities through its Move.PH 'Move Philippines' civic engagement events, with a primer on disinformation-coping tactics. *Rappler's* media freedom campaigns—including #HoldtheLine and #DefendPressFreedom—focus on the need for civility and responsible sharing in online communities, active collaborations with civil society organisations and 'loyal' audiences to 'defend truth' and media freedom.

This commitment to civic engagement triggered by public interest journalism is a theme common to all three news organisations studied here. Where *Daily Maverick* drives engagement through physical encounters and newsletters, during the pandemic it has seen audiences of up to at least 2,000 people attend the 74 webinars that they held at the time of writing in 2020, many about disinformation. *Rappler* has held 18 online at the time of writing, which also in part have replaced the educational events they would normally have held in person at schools and universities. The key learnings from these disinformation approaches, *Rappler's* Gemma Mendoza says, is that:

The webinars on fact-checking are teaching people they cannot post everything online. We try to emphasise social responsibility. A big part of the attention on the

pandemic highlighted the need for fact checking; the participants are teachers and students, members of the public or private organisations... people suddenly connected misinformation with something like public safety and their own lives.

Experimentation is also important. *Rappler* is testing out an approach which *The Quint* is known for, too: lighter, more direct methods of speaking to younger audiences, by 'converting fact checks into something that is more pop culture', according to Mendoza. Thanks to a philanthropic grant, from October 2020 *Rappler* began producing fact-checks in a video series (as *The Quint* already does). It's a wider move of Global South organisations to reach linguistic audiences across platforms. For example, *Rappler*'s civic engagement team of journalists have targeted anti-disinformation practise using English and Filipino—Taglish on YouTube, says Mendoza:

You sink into the recommendation algorithm, so that those who are seeing the first claims are also seeing the debunking arguments. As journalists we're covering issues, and there's a community looking for what they can do: list action points, list the groups, and then help the groups.

The Quint has also recently hired Hindi fact checkers, which is vital for fighting disinformation more widely in India on the country's most downloaded app, according to Kapur:

They're able to get into spaces on Whatsapp. A lot of our readers are English city metropolitan readers and we want to go deeper into India. In 2021 we want to get into Hindi, which has a different sensibility, environment, literacy levels at variance, and whose issues are also different sometimes.

As *Daily Maverick* has sharpened its mission through a print venture, *The Quint* has moved away from commodity news and the news wire, to a much sharper focus on fact checking, enterprising investigative journalism, citizen journalism and video; it is seeking philanthropic funding to be able to do this. CEO Ritu Kapur says an added interest in 'ground reporting'—field reporting infused with citizen journalist's witness accounts and insights—is vital in combating false information:

The entire north east Delhi riots, all of that was ground information. We want to integrate both our fact checking work and participate with readership and citizen journalism models into our membership, anyone who's participating with The Quint. We've applied for a grant. It is a loyal user who is flagging disinformation.

Covid-19 and 'chaos'

The coronavirus pandemic and its concomitant effects have presented all three news organisations with extra challenges, with all three reporting an increase in mis- and disinformation over the course of 2020, further complicating efforts to serve audiences public interest journalism.

The overt and continuous spread of disinformation by various political leaders during the pandemic has been extensively reported on, along with assessments of how, for instance, official statistics have been instrumentalised and used to convey misleading impressions of the state of the pandemic (Gaw 2020; Ireton and Posetti 2018). In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has not only denounced *Rappler* and Maria Ressa by name, and called *Rappler*'s journalists 'criminals', he also utilised his special powers as president to stem the

spread of coronavirus with a 'prohibition' on spreading 'false' or alarming information—a dangerous new feature of an existing law (Bayanhian to Heal as One Act 2020), signed into law on 25 March 2020, which has been used to 'criminally penalise the spreading of 'false information' related to the pandemic' (Conde 2020), and in effect censoring journalists. For example, Filipino journalists Mario Batugas and Amor Virata face up to two months in prison as a result of charges brought against them on 28 March, although 'false information' is not legally defined which makes it easier to broadly apply the law in attempts to stifle the free press. This mirrors trends in various other countries where governments have used the pandemic as a cover or to justify crackdowns on human rights, including the freedom of expression, as well as critics and journalists (Radu 2020).

The senior editors we interviewed described a general sense of 'chaos' fuelled by the pandemic. *The Quint's* Ritu Kapur described a 'relentless' year, mostly thanks to an uptick in mis- and disinformation. All three countries we researched have a shared problem: according to the journalists and editors we spoke to, each of their respective governments responded poorly to the need to procure equipment for frontline workers, a key concern especially in the early stages of the pandemic. As per its DNA of being a news organisation mobilising in the face of disaster, *Rappler* has led a campaign to help these workers in the Philippines, and its journalists also uncovered early pieces of COVID-19 related misinformation in a global collaboration with the Poynter Institute's International Fact Check Network (IFCN), the largest collaboration of fact checkers around the world (also including *The Quint*).

According to our India and South Africa-based editors in chief, there is an ongoing manipulation of existing news events by both media organisations subject to 'state capture' and disinformation networks which is diverting their audiences' attention away from trustworthy public interest news. This serves as a form of 'gaslighting' communities concerned about the very real issue facing these societies: a mismanaged pandemic. 2020 has been a year full of protests in India, despite its strict and sudden lockdown owing to COVID-19. In India, the so-called 'Godi media'—a nickname for the 'lapdog' media of the Modi government and the influence they wield—has utilised the death by suicide of a film star to spread rumours about his drug use, rather than mental health issues, according to Ritu Kapur. The extra disinformation fuelled during a pandemic, when media jobs are being cut and licenses not awarded, has the effect of creating more polarisation in society, Kapur said, referring to the state-aligned actors working in bad faith:

Covid-19 gave birth to a lot of misinformation. It took the focus away from public health. In the middle of a pandemic when we should be talking about masks and social distancing we have a farmer's protest going on. The desperation is so immense that the pandemic sort of takes a back seat. Fake news has been generated that this is another terrorism movement...It's never-ending... This fake news wasn't just coming in the last eight, nine months. It wasn't just coming from the fake news machines. It was coming from broadcast news, news entities.

Another example comes from the Indian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, which took place against a discriminatory law which would have made religion the basis for citizenship, and which would have been one of the longest pan-Indian protests until the pandemic stopped it, said Kapur:

A general legal action that has been taken on the basis of incorrect misinformation during the pandemic is that a lot of people who were part of the protest have actually now being thrown into jail on...terrorism charges – including somebody who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. To justify the legal action against those people, again there was mountains of misinformation...And on the basis of this fake news there are

young, innocent people who are currently in jail. That's been the consequence, the impact, of the disinformation.

In a recent book about the riots Delhi Riots 2020: The Untold Story, *The Quint* amongst others flagged up a dozen examples of misinformation, such as false claims that the protests are being 'fuelled by the Left and Islamic fundamentalists', or are 'urban warfare' against the Indian government', both of which have been debunked (Roy 2020).

Also in South Africa, a user calling himself 'uLerato_Pillay' mobilised a network of 50,000 people on social media, promoting xenophobia through the 'Put South Africa First' movement, and developing disturbing parallels to the QAnon movement. *Daily Maverick* broke the story about the person (a disgruntled ex-soldier) behind the disinformation (LeRoux 2020). Brkic argues that this and similar incidents during the pandemic have made life even harder than usual:

There's a concentrated effort in causing chaos in the fabric of society. It's difficult to have a master plan of fighting back when you're trying to put out the fires on a daily basis. The normal status of South Africa would have been near disastrous without the pandemic and without these bad faith actors and without the protestations for power in the top of the ANC. Let's put it this way, South Africa is actually close to breaking down, unfortunately.

At the time of writing, 800 journalist jobs had already been lost in the country during the pandemic, 'which for South Africa is horrific,' as Brkic said. Yet, not all outlets have suffered. *Daily Maverick's* audience doubled in 2020, to four million readers, and they employed 15-20 more staff during the pandemic—a trend also visible at *Rappler*. In India, however, *The Quint* had to cut jobs, and its sister organisation (Bloomberg India) was denied a broadcast license by the state. In the Philippines, the state has also forced the top broadcast network ABS CBN, where Maria Ressa once led the news division, to shut down; Duterte has previously complained ABS-CBN was 'biased' against him (Gutierrez 2020).

Conclusion

Disinformation and misinformation have been a feature of the information landscape in the Global South long before becoming a topic of concern in the Global North (Madrid-Morales et al. 2021). Structural changes to the conditions of information exchange and the public arena, for instance through the increasing availability of mobile internet as well messaging apps, as well as the absence or inconsistency of countermeasures by digital intermediaries in these country-contexts have further exacerbated these issues (Jungherr et al. 2020; Madrid-Morales et al. 2021). Amid a dearth of positive legal, state-led or platform policy responses, news organisations in the Global South have often seen no other option than attempting to respond to the problem on their own. While recent research has mostly focused on Europe and the US, the role and response of news organisations in the Global South to the problem of dis- and misinformation has not been sufficiently illuminated to date. Responding to this lacunae, this chapter has drawn together evidence from three case studies of news organisations in the Philippines, India, and South Africa to highlight some of the diverse and innovative responses of news organisations to these issues in the Global South, with a special focus on the unique challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.

In all three countries, the situation for journalists and the press has long been difficult, although the situation has arguably worsened in recent years amid the rise of political forces with authoritarianist and nationalist tendencies and a subsequent weakening of democratic

institutions. These shifting conditions have come in tow with an increasing demonisation of independent journalism and the ‘weaponisation’ of social media platforms to attack the press and destabilise democracy, often furthered, aided, or abetted by political elites. Focusing on the work of the *Daily Maverick* (South Africa), *Rappler* (Philippines) and *The Quint* (India) between 2018 and 2020—who all have been targets of media freedom crackdowns, and (state-linked) harassment and disinformation campaigns in retaliation for critical journalism—we find that all three news organisations have responded to these challenges by innovating through a mix of professional, advocacy and educational responses. This includes increasing editorial verification initiatives to reach wider audiences perceived to be susceptible to disinformation, deeper collaborations with civil society organisations, using ‘alternative’ platforms to reach audiences such as Telegram, developing deeper relationships with audiences as ‘members’, working with the technology giants (such as via fact-checking partnerships), and a tighter focus on their missions of providing critical public service journalism, even as the coronavirus pandemic and its concomitant effects have presented them with extra challenges.

Although similar initiatives and solutions can be observed in select news organisations in the Global North, the main difference between these and our examples is that in their case these innovations have taken place under much more difficult socio-political conditions than can be said for many news organisations in Europe or the United States. The coronavirus pandemic has, however, further complicated an already tense situation, further escalating media freedom and journalism safety threats in all three countries while also giving rise to a new wave of misinformation and (state-supported) disinformation campaigns which often served as a distraction from the pandemic and its devastating effects. Scrambling to respond to these new threats while concurrently attempting to cover the pandemic, our organisation’s limited human and financial resources have been stretched even further, threatening to set back hard-won gains over recent years in fostering civic engagement and creating ‘safer’ digital spaces for civil discourse.

Nevertheless, the news organisations in our study have demonstrated that by collaborating with audiences, and by building deeper audience engagement and loyalty, news organisations can not only help to erect a civil society bulwark against misinformation, as well as disinformation campaigns; instead, such efforts might also translate into greater professional prestige and potentially even profit for the organisations in question. Experimentation, creativity and a willingness to adopt a ‘bricolage mindset’ will ultimately not be the sole solution to the problems of many news organisations in the Global South, and will by no means solve the problems of dis- and misinformation or various forms of democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, the example of these organisations shows that these practices can be powerful forms of resistance in environments where outside help or a quick improvement of the situation cannot be expected.

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