



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The true story of fake news

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This May, an online portal deliberately used a photo of Shrabonty Ananna—a model and social media influencer—in one of their reports with the title, “Illicit relationship with the uncle, girl arrested for killing her newborn”. Since stories accusing women never fail to capture the imagination of the public, this report went viral on Facebook. In a few hours, around eight online portals had picked up the false report and re-shared it on Facebook. It was shared thousands of times with captions, including some urging her to commit suicide. An overwhelming number of people wrote scathing comments about the character of the ‘media girl’ (the implication being that a woman who works in the media simply cannot possess good moral character).

Some people even took pictures from her own Facebook account and created numerous fake accounts. A good number commented on her pictures and passed on rape threats for being a ‘bad’ and ‘gone’ girl. By this time, larger and more prominent (and thus, deemed more trustworthy) online portals had picked up the ‘news’, without verifying the facts. This only led more people to trust the story.

Shrabonty herself was unaware of anything until her friends called her one night and asked about her whereabouts. Reports now said she had been arrested by the police.

“I was dumbfounded. When I went online, I got hundreds of notifications and text messages from my friends, relatives, and acquaintances. I tried to contact the authorities of those portals, but I was unable to reach them as their contact information was not available on their websites,” says Shrabonty. “Since it was around 11pm already, finding no other way, I posted a status saying that I am not the person who committed that crime.”

“I even went live from my account but most of the people did not believe my words. Rather, many of them were commenting that ‘a rumour can also have a grain of truth’,” she adds.

The next day, Shrabonty went to the Khilkhet police station and filed a general diary. The police suggested that she contact the cybercrime unit and take their help. The cybercrime officials contacted the portals, who then deleted her photographs from their reports. The portal that first ‘broke’ the news went on to publish another report headlined, “False image ruins the life of a girl”.

Additional deputy commissioner Md Nazmul Islam of the cybersecurity and crime department also posted a status

on his personal Facebook account to discredit the rumour and describe how a promising model and social media influencer Shrabonty was made a scapegoat for such fake news.

But the damage had already been done.

Her credibility as a Facebook page promoter has taken a hit. Earlier, Shrabonty was earning Tk 2,000 for each hour of live chat on a Facebook page, with page owners hiring her to increase likes on their pages. With the money she helped support her family, as her husband is currently unemployed.

Since the false accusation, she has already been labelled a ‘bitch’ by thousands of Facebook users. Page owners are reluctant to hire her as people also post negative comments on her live videos on these pages. “That broke me psychologically. Even today, if I post a photo on my profile, people post dirty comments. Seeing these, my husband forbade me from making live videos as he couldn’t take the negativity anymore,” says Shrabonty.

Shrabonty’s story accurately depicts how easy it is to spread false content on social media nowadays.

A major advantage of online portals is that these are able to attract a large audience online within moments—crucial in the age of information. But, by misusing that power, some fraud online portal

owners, having no education or training in journalism, often disseminate fake news, mostly containing click-bait titles with sexual innuendos, personal attacks, celebrity gossip or even rumours in order to get cheap popularity.

This popularity helps these portals get some financial gains, as their number of readers and page views rise. In the rush to compete with others to publish the latest news, they do not verify facts and even deliberately publish fake news to attract readers—in the process, harming people’s livelihoods and tarnishing the reputation of the innocent.

This directly goes against ethical journalism, or just journalism itself. The responsibility of a journalist is to investigate and verify facts and then present the truth to the public. Dr Md. Mofizur Rahman, professor at the department of mass communication and journalism of the University of Dhaka stresses the negative impact of fake news and false accusations. “Fake news of the online portals is more dangerous than that of the mainstream media, which has a limited audience. But online portals, even with few resources, can reach a wider, global audience, in little to no time. As such, it’s a lot more dangerous,” says Dr Rahman.

Furthermore, once a false report is published, it is difficult to stop the rumour mill. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to get in touch with these portals.

Currently, no online portal in Bangladesh is registered. Although in 2015, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology announced that online portals need to be registered in order to prevent yellow journalism and ensure government benefits for the employees, the process of registration is yet to complete. According to the ministry, more than 8,000 portals have submitted applications for registration; in reality, however, the actual number of these portals is significantly higher.

In addition, since the draft National Online Mass Media Policy 2017 has not yet been approved by the cabinet, in absence of any guidelines, anyone can be an editor of a portal by spending around Tk 3,000 to create a website. Most of these portals are run by an editor alone. Many do not abide by even the most basic of journalistic ethics and do not bother to investigate or verify facts before posting a story. Rather, they practice ‘copy-paste’ journalism and increase the views of their websites by spreading rumours and false stories with the potential to go viral.

From such portals, we get false viral news such as ‘cricketer Taskin beat up his wife’, or ‘actor ATM Shamsuzzaman is no more’, or ‘What did Porimoni do, watch the video to learn more’. Taskin and ATM Shamsuzzaman were forced to defend themselves in the mainstream media; however, a search on Google still shows those fake reports.

According to Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, president of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), those practising yellow journalism online don’t have any scruples about publishing such content. “Authorities responsible do not monitor such slandering and defamation by these portals. When they are questioned, they only declare the need for controlling the content on online news portals and social media.”

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