

After page 7

This, however, leads down the dangerous path of censorship and constraints on freedom of expression. "We don't want that the online portals and social media be controlled as to what content they can publish; rather, we want to identify people who are misusing these technologies and are involved with yellow journalism," says Bulbul. It is a matter of journalism ethics, he emphasises.

Bulbul also notes that journalism and dissemination of information through social media is not the same thing. In mainstream media, a news report must go through several gatekeepers before being published, while online portals have no such gatekeepers. And this is why some such portals disclose the identity of rape victims, show pictures of dead bodies without giving warnings, give a step-by-step description of suicides, or fabricate negative stories, particularly on women

But how can we stop such practices? If we look at the laws related to media, the penal code of Bangladesh contains specific provisions (499, 500) for defamation by publishing any imputation by words or visual representation, and it is a punishable offence with two years' imprisonment or by fines (or both).

Additionally, the recently passed Digital Security Act 2018 gives maximum 14 years and minimum seven years of imprisonment and a fine of one crore taka for deliberately posting false, provocative, indecent or sensitive information on web-

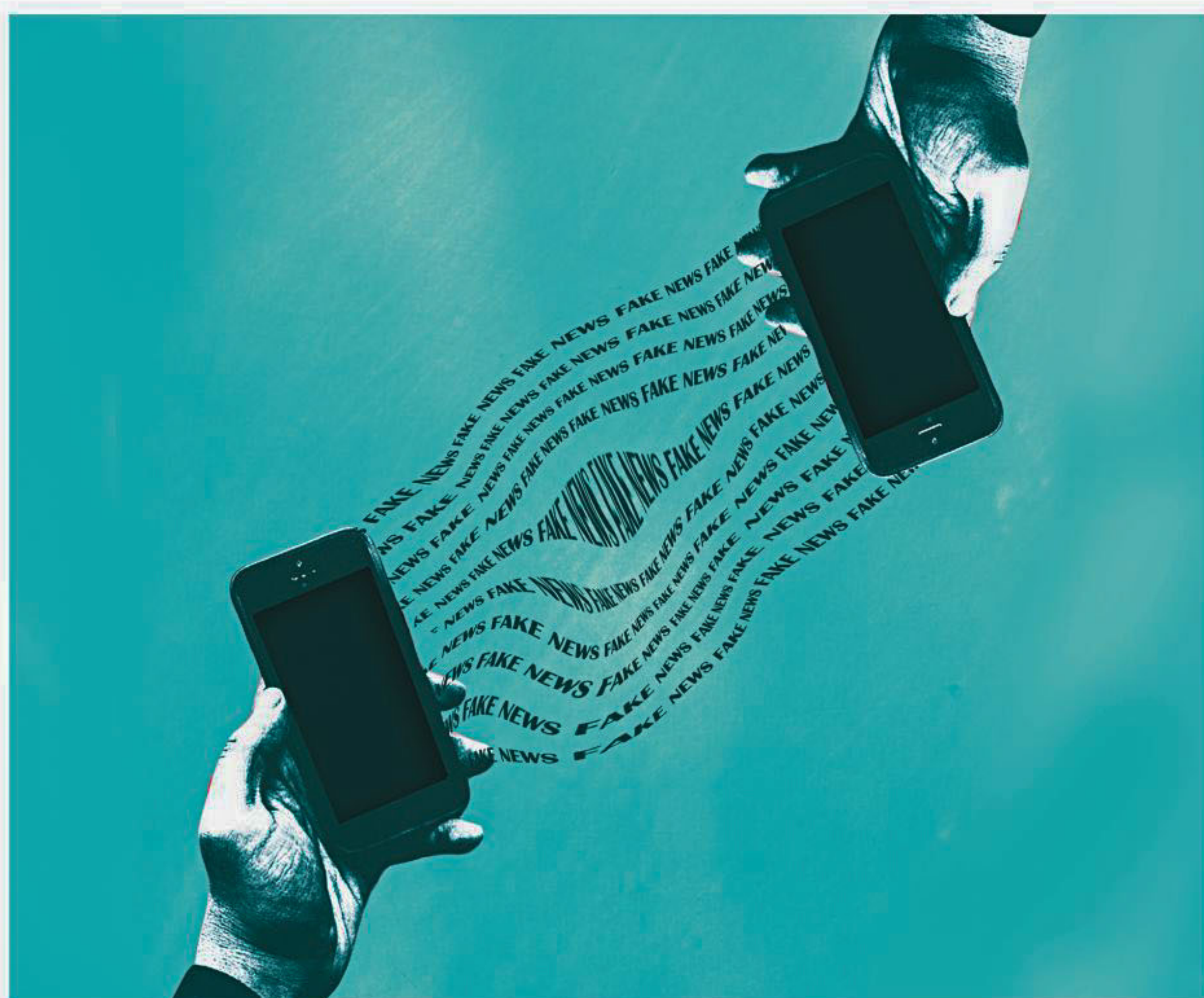


IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

sites or any electronic platforms.

Purportedly, the act is to prevent the media indulging in yellow journalism. Many, however, are convinced this law is motivated less by the need to stop cyber crimes and more by the threat the government feel from the media and people's freedom of expression. According to mainstream media journalists, fraudulent

portals continue to get away with slander while 'real' journalists are mostly targeted by this highly controversial law.

In such a dilemma, what recourse remains to stop such practices that endanger the lives and reputations of innocent people in the name of journalism? What policy changes can be undertaken without sacrificing freedom of expression?

Fahmidul Haq, associate professor of the department of mass communication and journalism at the University of Dhaka opines, "Every portal must have a registration with the government because they must be responsible for the content they publish. This registration must be free of cost. In 2012, when the initiative was taken to create a policy for online portals, it said that the registration required Tk 5,00,000 and it should be renewed annually. But this was criticised by small newspapers and online portal owners, as well as by us."

"Instead of annual renewals, registered portals can submit a report to the government once or twice a year about their activities," he adds.

On the other hand, the limited media literacy of people is another factor explaining why false accusations and fake news go viral. "People cannot differentiate between the mainstream media and fraud online portals and they think that Facebook live videos and television live broadcasts are similar and the dodgy online portals are equivalent to the online version of the mainstream media. If they could identify fake news reports and stop visiting such portals and taking such content for fact, that would be a great help for the victims," says Bulbul.

Fahmidul also stresses that the issue of media literacy and internet etiquette should be discussed more. "Since this is a matter of culture, it will take time for people to become media literate and such fake news will continue to flourish till then."

ANIMAL RIGHTS

After page 3

We reached out to some of my friends and we started knocking on some big doors and asked for help with this new bill. Turns out, the 'final' draft which was approved by the cabinet didn't have to be the final one and that it would go through another round of vetting by the parliament. For each bill, a parliamentary sub-committee is formed, and their job is to study the bill extensively and put forth recommendations, which not even the livestock ministry can dismiss. Jackpot!

We were put in touch with the chairman of the sub-committee, the legislative draftsman for the parliament, and the former personal secretary of the late Suranjit Sengupta, who was known for

tearing apart bills even after the cabinet's approval. Finally, we were on the right track!

We went through the bill with the help of our lawyer friends until it looked like a piece of Swiss cheese—jotted down our recommendations and made our way into the first meeting of the steering committee in March. Representatives of the livestock department were also present, confident that the bill would be passed that very week. Luckily, the committee heard our 30-point recommendation and accepted our prayer for a time extension. The bill was put on hold.

The following weeks went into incorporating the new changes into the draft. The committee met two more times after that and although the committee

didn't accept all our recommendations, we felt that they met us half way.

According to the revised and final bill:

Not only that street/unowned animals cannot be killed, they also cannot be removed from their locality. Anyone harming/dislocating/removing/killing street animals will face up to two years of imprisonment or Tk 50,000, or both. (This recommendation was accepted as is)

If a street animal is suspected to be rabid, then the animal must be observed first as per the international protocol to confirm rabies. If confirmed, then and only then can the animal be euthanised following a humane protocol. (This recommendation was accepted as is)

All breeding kennels must be brought under registration and supervision under this new law. The codes by which these kennel should operate will be set following international standards. If anyone is caught operating without a license, or breaking a code, the authority can confiscate the business. (We recommended shutting down the kennels altogether, but settled for this)

Although killing livestock for food or religious rituals will not be considered cruelty, new codes will be set to ensure OIE/humane standards of rearing/farming, transporting, and slaughtering of farm animals, even when it is for food or religious sacrifice. These codes will be set following international animal welfare standards for farm animals.

No animal can be used for entertainment, exhibition, or to generate income without prior permission of the authorities. (This was included with the begging mahouts in mind).

Reality check

A day after the new bill was passed, Heera

the lion had died in Dhaka zoo, possibly from neglect. Two days later, a group of people in Kishoreganj culled nearly 300 street dogs. People were flabbergasted! How could this be? Don't we have a new law now? As I was writing this, I came to know that someone was poisoning dogs in Azimpur. The man who reached out to us was an advocate himself whose own dog had just been killed by poisoning. The punishment for poisoning is now up to two years of imprisonment and a fine of Tk 50,000. The man was still unwilling to go to the police because he didn't want to make enemies with his neighbors.

The truth is, a few decades of practice and attitude will not change overnight just because there is a new law. This law is indeed one of the most important developments in the field of animal welfare in Bangladesh, but it is merely a tool, which can be leveraged to build and base a larger movement on. The new law is not the end of a movement, but a beginning. There needs to be a sustained campaign to bring about policy changes, to raise awareness amongst the law implementing authorities, and most importantly, changes in people's behaviour. The law exists for all, and it is upon every citizen and animal lover to harness its benefits. No organisation is strong or large enough to combat animal cruelty on its own no matter how strong the law is. Even with the new law, if animal lovers don't muster the strength to fight animal cruelty, the abusers will end up having the last laugh. If you are an animal lover, will you be able to live with that?

Rubaiya Ahmad is the founder and chairman of Obhoyaronno - Bangladesh Animal Welfare Foundation.



ARTWORK: SARIA SAGUARO