

# Bangladeshi media's troubling tango with fake news



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Oftentimes, we hear politicians, academics and journalists laying great emphasis on how the mainstream media can play its part to fight the menace of fake news and misinformation. In such a discussion last year, speakers said the role of the media was "more important than ever amid a growing surge of false information intended to mislead the public."

But sadly, in Bangladesh, we have been witnessing a disappointing phenomenon where some mainstream media outlets have been amplifying misinformation, instead of combating it. It may sound unpleasant to many, but the reality is that a section of the media has been contributing to the proliferation of misinformation online.

On February 3, 2022, international news agency AFP's fact-checking unit rated a news story published by a reputed Bangladeshi TV station, which recently reached the landmark of 10 million subscribers on its YouTube channel, as "false information." Crediting the state-owned Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the story claimed that the Saudi government had approved a draft amendment to redesign its national flag to remove *Kalima Tayyiba* (Islamic declaration of faith) from it. Currently, the green flag of Saudi Arabia is emblazoned with *Kalima Tayyiba* above a sword.

However, in reality, neither the SPA nor any other Saudi news media said anything like this in their reports about the approval of the draft amendment, which actually was revised to propose new regulations regarding the use of the flag. Rather, some Saudi newspapers categorically mentioned in their reports that the revised draft did not propose any changes to the contents of the flag.

Interestingly, not only that leading TV channel, but several other top media outlets in Bangladesh—newspapers and online portals—published this fake news, leading to a flood of reproduction on

social media platforms.

This incident is no anomaly, as outright false information, photos and video footage are frequently being carried by top Bangladeshi media outlets.

The ongoing Ukraine crisis can be another case in point to illustrate how heedless our gatekeepers are in the

they had detected 23 pieces of fake news in mainstream media outlets between March and December in 2020. Arguably the most popular TV channel in the country was caught 10 times in that 10-month period broadcasting fake news. Many other TV stations, newspapers and online-only portals were also identified

among the public.

Sometimes, some fake news or out-of-context information does not seem harmful to anyone. But we know as a matter of fact that this menace can turn deadly at any time. Bangladesh has seen, in recent past, murders of innocent people due to rumours spread on Facebook. Widespread violence against religious minorities was sparked by online misinformation on many occasions. When the problem is this big, the media has a crucial role to work out how to deal with the threat. And the first thing to do is ensure that it has not become a vehicle of fake news.

Analysing the types of fake news that have been carried by our mainstream media, we can identify two major factors that have contributed to the problem: One is a lack of proper understanding about scientific topics, including health-related issues, that journalists were reporting on, and the other is mistranslation from English.

Exhaustive information ecosystem, especially the volumes of user-generated content (UGC), makes anyone vulnerable to fake news. But for a journalist, verifying a piece of information found online is no tough job at all. What they need is the desire to be fool-proof when it comes to the accuracy of information. Oftentimes, some simple searches on Google about the origin of the content or basic image and video verification techniques can save a newsperson from falling into the trap of fabricated information. Present-day journalists, especially those who deal with the UGC, have to have a standard level of knowledge of how to verify a piece of information using modern technologies.

While social media platforms are increasingly becoming sources of revenue for the media in developing countries, tech companies like Facebook and Twitter have turned against the publishers of fake news, penalising them in the strictest ways possible. Under the third-party fact-checking programme of Facebook, pages of several Bangladeshi media outlets faced temporary restrictions in terms of reach and revenue, and the programme is only expanding. So, the newsroom bosses in Bangladesh have to be more watchful about what is being published and broadcast in their outlets.

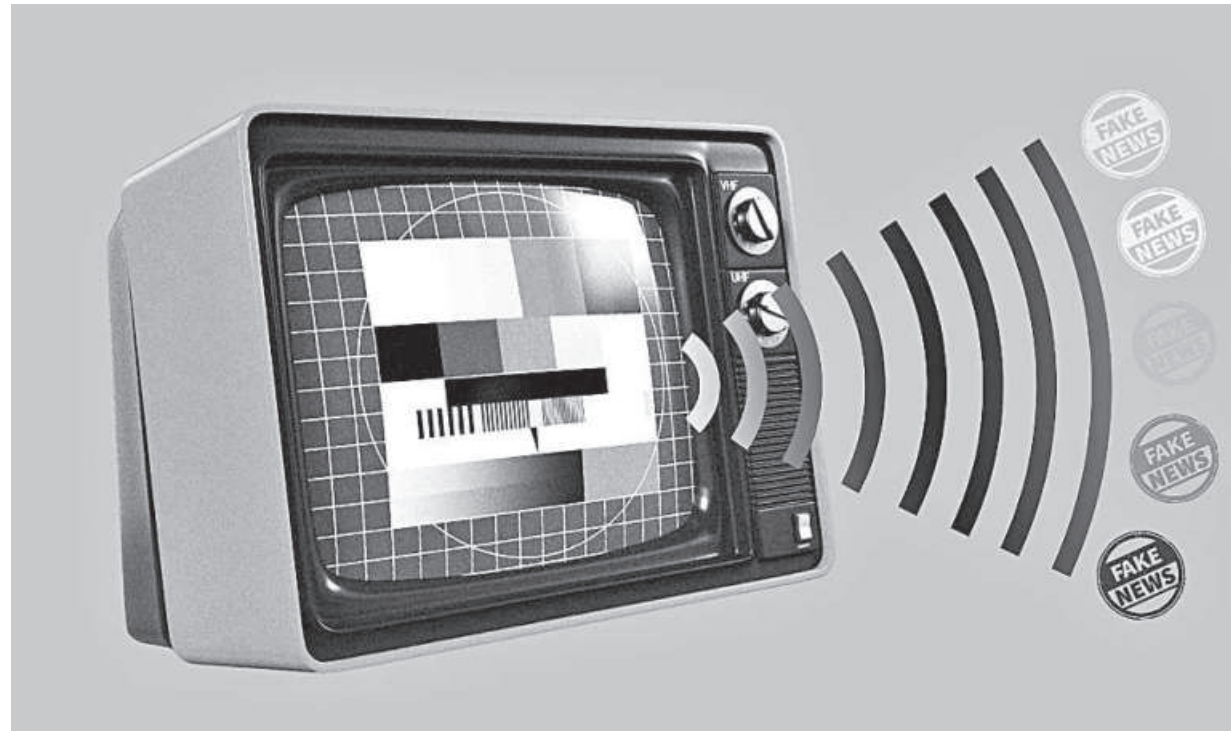


ILLUSTRATION: STAR

newsrooms in ensuring the accuracy of what they publish, especially on a sensitive issue like war. Fact-checkers identified more than one TV channel in Bangladesh that aired footage from video games as real-life scenes of the Russia-Ukraine war. Some broadcasters used in their reports old and unrelated clips and photos with false or misleading descriptions to stoke emotion among their viewers. Unsubstantiated claims picked up from social media platforms found places in news reports as "information."

Numerous news items published by the Bangladeshi mainstream media outlets have been rated as false or misleading by national and international fact-checking organisations in recent years. In a report in January 2021, Boom Bangladesh, a third-party fact-checking partner of Facebook focused on Bangladesh, said

as fake news proliferators during the same period. Those fake news items were mostly centred around health, politics and religious sentiments. The year 2021 saw a similar trend when Boom Bangladesh encountered 11 fake news stories in the media. Other fact-checking organisations also detected misleading news stories in Bangladeshi media in the same year.

As a fact-checker who has been working with different organisations for around five years, I have to struggle to name five news outlets in the country that have not been rated at least once as spreaders of fake news. While the media in Bangladesh, which has ranked low in the Press Freedom Index for years, has contributed immensely to the development of the country, despite all odds, the problem of fake news that it currently faces can diminish its credibility

## Are celebrities liable for the brands they endorse?



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ON December 4 last year, in the immediate aftermath of the crumbling of Evaly's empire of sand, celebrities Rafiath Rashid Mithila, Tahsan Khan and Shabnam Faria were sued by a customer of the e-commerce platform for "aiding and abetting fraud."

Over the next few weeks, the issue became something of a sensation on social media, sparking conversations in some intellectual quarters about the premise of the lawsuit, about whether the three very popular celebrities could be held responsible for Evaly's wrongdoings.

Though the conversation died down soon—as is always the case on social media—the issue stuck with me. What really is the ethics of celebrity endorsements, which have become an integral and rather indispensable part of the equation in this current phase of capitalism?

Before we get to an answer to this, let's consider what actually happens when a celebrity figure, or an influencer, endorses a brand or business in exchange for money.

It's simple, really. A celebrity, throughout their career, builds up a rapport with the public. This imbues the celebrity with a certain kind of aura—there's the trustworthy celebrity, the bad boy, the family-first person, the celebrity with professional expertise, and the list goes on.

This rapport (or, social capital) is then "sold" to a company in exchange for the company's money. The transaction

here, then, is one of monetary capital for social capital, and vice versa. Beyond just face value, when a celebrity appears on our screens representing a company, we immediately link the celebrity's brand value or aura with that of the company.

The three celebrities in question over the Evaly scam all possess the same trustworthy sort of face value. Mithila is widely regarded as a strong, sincere feminist personality. Tahsan Khan has a carefully curated brand name for being a kind and gentle soul. And Shabnam Faria comes off as a sincere and loyal person, thanks to all the roles she has played on-screen over the years.

If we agree that a popular figure's brand value is not just a result of their real selves, but can also be calculated quite carefully and with intent, we can shed light on how this element works in the discourse of celebrity endorsements.

There are two layers of "deception" that operate here. On one hand, the performer-artist poses as being different from how they are in order to obtain a certain kind of social capital from their audience. For the second layer, the artiste uses that social capital to strike deals with brands and drive their audience towards said brands.

Given how the Evaly scam played out, the more pressing concerns of the issue came to the fore quite forcefully. But this issue is not just limited to fraudulence.

When a celebrity, known for their good health, lends their social capital to a beverage company whose product can have debilitating effects on consumers' health, is it not the same kind of deception?

You see, given how society works today, a brand cannot build a relationship with its market without a little help from figures who already have a connection with the people. Seen this way, a celebrity who has once signed



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the contract to endorse a brand can no longer be seen separately from it, or from the consequences of its business. So when things come crumbling down, the affiliated celebrities cannot just be allowed to run and hide, claiming they didn't know any better.

Brands themselves are aware of this, and don't wait even a second before cutting off their prized endorsee when a controversy develops in the latter's personal life. Case in point: Cristiano Ronaldo and Nike.

Another case study that sheds light on this issue is that of Scarlett Johansson's role as an ambassador for both Israeli soda-maker Sodastream and the INGO Oxfam. After online activists found out that one of Sodastream's factories is located in an illegal settlement on the West Bank, they started hounding Johansson for her connection to the company—a criticism which also extended to Oxfam for their connection with her.

As this case illustrates, when the activities of corporations stop being innocent in the name of doing business and raising a country's GDP, should not the role of celebrities in enhancing the corporations' fate be scrutinised as well?

As the activities of corporations are deemed not innocent due to those being done only for profit, shouldn't the role of celebrities in enhancing the corporations' success be scrutinised as well?

But beyond just scrutiny, we ought to move into a culture wherein, before signing a deal, a celebrity conducts background research on a brand—the same way brands do, quite extensively, when taking a celebrity on board. And this fact-checking exercise shouldn't be limited to legal matters or instances of public backlash, but also in terms of whether a celebrity's philosophy aligns with the company's. If a self-proclaimed nature-lover signs up for a top-five polluter, for instance, that's more than a little contradictory.