



It is essential to recognise the influential role that journalism plays in humanitarian crises, such as the case of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. FILE PHOTO: AFP

## How the media helped shape a negative perception of the Rohingya

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As we celebrate World Press Freedom Day, it is essential to recognise the influential role that journalism plays in humanitarian crises, such as the case of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The media has the capacity to shape the public's perception of refugees, influencing opinions within a nation. The press in Bangladesh has undergone a significant transformation in its portrayal of the Rohingya, initially presenting them as innocent victims and later as threats and burdens, often echoing the government's stance.

In August 2017, the media portrayed Rohingya refugees as hapless people, persecuted due to their ethnicity and religion, and in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Bangladesh was lauded for its "open border" policy, which saved countless Rohingya lives, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was hailed as the "mother of humanity."

However, this narrative quickly shifted, and within months, the media focused on the economic strain the refugees placed on the host country. Reports of environmental destruction and rapid population growth among the refugees became widespread. Politicians labelled the Rohingya as a "security risk," resulting in harsh policies such as internet restrictions, SIM card confiscations, barbed wire fencing, forced repatriation, and relocating refugees to the isolated Bhashan Char. Local media in Ukhiya and Teknaf have played a significant role in fuelling anti-Rohingya sentiments, presenting a one-dimensional image of the Rohingya as a threat and a burden. These media outlets have skillfully exploited Facebook's algorithms to amplify their negative narratives, further contributing to the marginalisation of the Rohingya community.

Since then, the media's portrayal of Rohingya refugees has consistently been negative. Bangladeshi newspapers primarily highlight stories of crime and violence associated with the refugees. Photographs often show them surrounded by armed law enforcement officers. This oversimplified representation of the Rohingya crisis perpetuates the notion of "refugee-ness," painting refugees as problematic and burdensome.

A concerning trend in global news coverage involves the promotion of hate speech and stereotyping, leading to the social exclusion of refugees and migrants. Refugees are frequently depicted as a menace, with the media presenting them as an endless wave of individuals who will take jobs, burden the state, and ultimately threaten the native way of life. This coverage is often driven by political agendas, with unverified information from authorities making its way into headlines and

being disseminated across different platforms.

During a recent initiative to form a global Rohingya organisation, a retired Bangladeshi security officer shared his experience of encountering a 12-year-old traumatised boy in the refugee camps at the height of the crisis. His description of the boy as a potential future terrorist was an unwittingly delivered slight, revealing his underlying perception of the Rohingya as threats. The Rohingya attendees, feeling disempowered, could only meekly express gratitude for the ex-officer's presence at the meeting, despite the negative implications of his statement.

Censorship and self-censorship contribute to this biased narrative, as journalists fear retaliation from media owners or the government if they challenge the official stance. Consequently, the media struggles to provide balanced coverage when political leaders steer the narrative, and the confusion between facts and opinions worsens the problem.

The authorities skillfully directed the narrative surrounding Bhashan Char, targeting both domestic and international audiences. They successfully guided compliant domestic media to produce extensive news articles, promotional videos, and even a book, all while avoiding any mention of the numerous challenges faced by the Rohingya on the island. These unaddressed issues included drownings during escape attempts, inadequate facilities, deprivation of liberty for trafficked Rohingya, and mistreatment by the authorities, among other concerns.

Bangladeshi journalists have been largely unsuccessful in holding the authorities accountable for the treatment of refugees. There has been inadequate investigation and reporting on human rights abuses, mistreatment by law enforcement, and poor living conditions in the refugee camps.

Regarding funding and aid, the management of international aid and financial resources allocated for Rohingya refugees have not been thoroughly monitored or reported on by the media, creating opportunities for potential mismanagement or corruption. This lack of oversight extends to international NGOs, including UNHCR and others, which have been able to operate with minimal scrutiny due to a disinterested media landscape.

Arguably the most significant issue is the repatriation process. The Bangladeshi government's efforts to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Myanmar have not faced enough scrutiny, even though there are ongoing security concerns and human rights abuses in their home country. It is important to note that unsustainable repatriation has been occurring for 40 years, and this is

not new information for the press. Therefore, it is telling to see the media continue to echo the same narrative as the government, despite the historical context and long-standing nature of the issue.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the undervaluation and underrepresentation of journalism by the refugees themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of photojournalism. The work of refugee journalists, particularly those from the Rohingya community, is often not recognised, valued, or given space for expression. This has led to the marginalisation of refugees in various forms, including lack of credit, low or no pay, and exclusion from the field of photojournalism.

National and foreign news organisations tend to view Rohingya refugees primarily as stringers or fixers, often only utilising their skills during disasters or high-profile events. Consequently, they rarely engage these individuals to delve deeper into the daily lives and experiences of the refugees or to uncover more complex stories about the community. This limited perspective contributes to a superficial understanding of the Rohingya crisis and further marginalises their voices in the global media landscape.

Publishing photographs taken by the refugees without due credit and compensation contributes further to their marginalisation. Repeated instances of such actions have reinforced this exclusionary practice. Organisations that would never consider using the work of other photographers without permission or compensation may view images taken by Rohingya photographers as fair game. This double standard undermines the potential for refugees to have their voices heard and their perspectives shared, perpetuating the one-sided narrative that dominates mainstream media.

Refugees, as a vulnerable minority, can easily become scapegoats for various societal problems. The media can counter this issue by adhering to ethical principles, avoiding stereotypes, and engaging with audiences. Journalists should commit to core principles such as independence, impartiality, and humanity. The lack of interest taken by Bangladeshi civil society and professional associations in these issues is both an indictment and an own goal, highlighting the need for a more proactive approach to address the challenges faced by the Rohingya community.

In light of the 2017 crisis and the military coup in Myanmar, the need for responsible, empathetic, and well-informed journalism in Bangladesh is more pressing than ever. It is crucial to bolster investigative journalism that is dedicated to thorough research, providing reliable information, and holding those in power accountable. By investing in ethical and public-spirited journalism, we can ensure that the complex stories of the Rohingya refugee crisis are brought to light.

## Disinformation is a threat to democracy



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We live in an age where information is all-pervasive and gets into all aspects of our lives. Access to and availability of information is essential at all levels of decision-making and for the effective conduct of any operation.

At the national level, policymakers need accurate information in the policymaking process. At a personal level, information has a transformative effect on people who receive it. It stimulates one's thought process and helps advance their areas of interest. Information eliminates any sense of doubt and uncertainty. At an organisational level, information is crucial to run an organisation efficiently and effectively. For the success of any organisation, there is no alternative to good information.

True information can be life-saving, while false information can be life-threatening. False information can spread like a virus and cause an "infodemic." At present, we are experiencing two forms of wrong information: misinformation and disinformation. The key differentiating factor between these two words is intent.

Misinformation is false information with no intent to mislead. The spread of misinformation is a common phenomenon as humans often make mistakes in passing information. Today, misinformation spreads easily due to different social media platforms. But when this spread of misinformation comes with negative intent, it becomes disinformation. Disinformation is false information spread with the intent to mislead and deceive. It is biased information and propaganda and can be destructive and divisive. Usually, there is a nefarious motivation behind the spread of disinformation, as it can be weaponised.

Such intentional spread of false or misleading information has been employed throughout history for various reasons, such as political propaganda, espionage, and psychological warfare. However, modern technology, social media, AI, and algorithms have completely changed how disinformation can be created and disseminated. The nature, scope, and speed of disinformation have changed significantly. The information age has created a vast information space where disinformation can enter any space and ruin information integrity.

In a country, disinformation and fake news can create chaos, unrest, and violence. The rising spread of false information on

social media platforms has led to the manipulation of public opinion and undermining of democratic processes. Fake news in particular can create social divisions by exploiting emotional issues, spreading conspiracy theories, and polarising people along political and ideological lines.

Deepfakes, which are realistic, AI-generated videos or images that manipulate visual and audio content to create fabricated content, pose a serious threat to national security. Deepfakes have the potential to spread false information and manipulate public opinion, which can be used to undermine trust in institutions, create civil unrest, and sow discord in societies.

Disinformation has become a crucial part of influence operations or information warfare. This involves the collection of tactical information about a rival and spreading disinformation about

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them to gain a competitive advantage. Influence operations are generally carried out against the state by foreign actors. All states are vulnerable to these tactics. Disinformation and influence operations today are data-based and data driven.

The consequences of disinformation and influence operations can be severe for national security. Disinformation and influence operations can undermine the democratic processes of a country by manipulating public opinion and interfering with democratic processes, such as elections and referendums. They can alter beliefs, change citizens' voting behaviour, and incite political violence. This can lead to social unrest and undermine trust in democratic institutions. For example, in the United States, the spread of false information during the presidential

election of 2016 was found to have influenced public opinion and potentially impacted the election outcome.

Minority groups are a common target of influence operations, which can increase social tensions and disrupt national unity. Diplomatic relations may also be hampered due to the spread of disinformation through the creation of division and discord between countries. Disinformation campaigns connected to public health issues, such as vaccines, can damage public health efforts and worsen disease outbreaks. It can also be used to spread extremist ideologies and radicalise people to increase violent extremism. Cyber attacks can be facilitated through influence operations which can hamper critical infrastructure. Finally, disinformation and influence operations can threaten national security by encouraging foreign interference in a country's internal affairs.

In Bangladesh, disinformation is usually related to social, political, or religious matters. Here, people react to disinformation emotionally rather than reasonably. Disinformation can easily become a social disruptor. The 2012 Ramu Puja violence and the Durga Puja violence in 2021 were both instances of communal violence fuelled by disinformation.

Combating disinformation and influence operations is a major priority of governments worldwide. But policymakers need more information regarding the problem they intend to solve. To counter disinformation and defend ourselves against influence operations, we need to have a comprehensive understanding of this new era of information. Suppression of information is sometimes counterproductive and causes more damage.

To combat this threat, improving media literacy and educating the public on how to identify and avoid false information is important. Fact-checking is crucial to see if the information is true or false. Data forensics should be developed for identifying, preserving, recovering, analysing, and presenting attributes of digital information. Understanding the information cycle is also important. For instance, old news is stale news. The modern information space abhors an information vacuum, which always becomes filled with negative information. Thus, it is important to actively fill information vacuums with positive information.

Governments and tech companies must work together to develop effective solutions to combat the growing threat of disinformation. Bangladesh should assess the information space and its vulnerability accurately and comprehensively. The process of doing this should be dynamic and should be constantly updated. A new national strategy should be crafted to confront the threat of disinformation and influence operations.



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পণ্য সরবরাহের নামঃ ব্যাংকনোট প্যাকিং এর জন্য প্রাস্টিক বাস্তব সরবরাহ।

উপরোক্ত পণ্য সরবরাহের জন্য প্রাস্টিক সামগ্রী উৎপাদনকারী প্রতিষ্ঠান এবং সরকারী, আধা-সরকারী, স্বায়ত্বশাসিত, আধা-স্বায়ত্বশাসিত প্রতিষ্ঠানে প্রাস্টিক পণ্য সরবরাহের ন্যূনতম দশ বছরের অভিজ্ঞতা সম্পন্ন অস্থায়ী প্রতিষ্ঠানের নিকট হতে অত্র করপোরেশনে বিভিন্ন মূল্যমানের ব্যাংকনোট প্যাকিং কাজে কমপক্ষে ৪০,০০০ টি প্রাস্টিক বাস্তব সরবরাহের জন্য দুই পর্যায় বিশিষ্ট দরপত্র পদ্ধতিতে ১ম পর্যায়ে কারিগরি প্রস্তাব আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে। কারিগরি প্রস্তাব সিডিউল এসপিসিবিএল এর ওয়েবসাইট থেকে ডাউনলোড করে দরপত্রে অংশগ্রহণ করা যাবে। সিডিউলের ক্রমসূচ্য বাবদ ২,০০০/- টাকার পে-অর্ডার / ডিডি (নগদায়ন হওয়া সাপেক্ষে প্রস্তাবপত্র গ্রহণযোগ্য হবে) (অফেরতযোগ্য) দরপত্র দাখিলের সময় সংযুক্ত করে দিতে হবে। সিডিউল ক্রয়ের পে-অর্ডার / ডিডি ছাড়া কোনো দরপত্র গ্রহণযোগ্য হবে না। ব্যবস্থাপনা পরিচালক, দি সিকিউরিটি প্রিন্টিং করপোরেশন (বাংলাদেশ) লিমিটেড, গাজীপুর বরাবরে ডাকযোগে বা কুরিয়ার সার্ভিস মারফত সীলমোহরকৃত দরপত্র, সিডিউল ক্রয়ের মূল্য বাবদ পে-অর্ডার / ডিডি ১৪/০৬/২০২৩ তারিখ সকাল ১১:০০ ঘটিকার মধ্যে পৌঁছাতে হবে অথবা একই তারিখ ও সময়ের মধ্যে গাজীপুরস্থ প্রধান কার্যালয়ের লিখিত স্মিক্ত নির্ধারিত বাস্তব জমা (ড্রপ) করতে হবে। নির্ধারিত সময়ের পরে কোনো দরপত্র গ্রহণ করা হবে না। দরপত্র দাখিলকারীগণের সামনে (যদি কেউ উপস্থিত থাকেন) গাজীপুরস্থ প্রধান কার্যালয়ে সকল দরপত্র ১৪/০৬/২০২৩ তারিখ সকাল ১১:১৫ ঘটিকায় খোলা হবে। অসম্পূর্ণ ও ত্রুটিযুক্ত দরপত্র বাতিল বলে গণ্য হবে। করপোরেশনের স্বার্থে কর্তৃপক্ষ কোনো কারণ দর্শানো ব্যতিরেকেই যে কোনো বা সকল দরপত্র বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা সংরক্ষণ করেন। খামের উপরে অবশ্যই কাজের নাম "ব্যাংকনোট প্যাকিং এর জন্য প্রাস্টিক বাস্তব সরবরাহ কাজের দরপত্র" উল্লেখ করতে হবে।

মোঃ রকুনুজ্জামান

মহাব্যবস্থাপক (ব্যাংকনোট ও প্রকৌশল বিভাগ, চলতি দায়িত্ব)  
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