

# Making a Video Documentary on Fake News and Disinformation in Bangladesh: Critical Reflections and Learning

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## Abstract

The issue of fake news and disinformation remains widespread in Bangladesh. The author produced a video documentary “Making OR Faking” that focuses on how this issue affects journalism practices in the mainstream media in Bangladesh. In this piece, the author reflects on how the making of the documentary shaped his understanding of the issue. Undertaking a qualitative approach, the author used semi-structured interviews to explore the insights and perspectives of key informants. Critical reflections on the methodological aspects of the filmmaking process highlight the challenges in processing the construction of meaning through moving images. The analyses of the findings underscore the conceptual issues in understanding fake news and disinformation, the emergence of fake news in Bangladesh, and the impacts on the mainstream media. The article also explores potential ways to tackle this issue.

## Keywords

Fake News, Bangladesh, Disinformation, Video Documentary, Fact-Checking

## 1. Introduction

With the increasing penetration of the internet and social media, fake news and disinformation have emerged as a global challenge (Haque et al., 2020; López-Marcos & Vicente-Fernández, 2021; Tandoc et al., 2018). Richardson (2017) argues that the phrase “fake news” poses an existential threat to journalists dealing with an audience losing its faith in journalism. The issue is even more widespread in developing countries with relatively large populations and social, cultural, and political diversity. The discourses concerning fake news and disinform-

mation have developed with interest in how this harmful practice damages the traditional role of the “Fourth Estate and the responsibilities to inform and keep those in power accountable” (Richardson, 2017: p. 1). The spread of misinformation in the form of fake news or disinformation eventually damages the values of democracy in a society since it deliberately misleads people and their minds (Haque et al., 2020).

The case of Bangladesh regarding fake news and the spread of misinformation, is critical in the current context. Bangladesh has experienced a boom in the media industry—especially in electronic and new media—since the early 2000s, and several studies have shown that the mainstream media institutions have played a significant role not only in providing platforms for broader social and political participation but also to contribute to various issues by asking insightful questions (Ahmed, 2014; Panday, 2009). The country enacted the Right to Information Act in 2009 which provided people with a foundation to enjoy freedom of information (Hoque, 2018a). The country’s robust economic growth created positive impacts in all sectors, including agriculture, poverty reduction, energy, technology, governance, and so forth (Adnan et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hoque, 2014a, 2016, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Hoque & Tama, 2020, 2021; Sarker et al., 2020; Tama et al., 2015, 2018, 2021). However, the situation has changed in the last decade, especially with the massive growth of social media (such as Facebook) and online news portals. As Haque et al. (2020) note, the “spread of misinformation on Facebook in Bangladesh, a country with a population of over 163 million, has resulted in chaos, hate attacks, and killings”. A series of violent events triggered by fake news and disinformation led the government to pass a set of controversial acts and policies to prevent the spread and misuse of such misinformation and to protect people from being subject of such activities. The Digital Security Act was enacted in 2018 as part of a state campaign against fake news and disinformation. Media scholars and practitioners have identified this legislation as an Act that limits freedom of expression, and the freedom of investigative journalism in the country (Rahman & Rashid, 2020). A few non-state fact-checking platforms have been operating to examine the accuracy and credibility of doubtful content.

Within this context, I proposed to make a short ten-minute video documentary on this issue for the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference<sup>1</sup> on the Safety of Journalists—Risks, Resistance, and Resilience organized by Oslo Metropolitan University. I set out to work on video production in early September 2020 and managed to complete it within a month. This reflective piece mainly focuses on two aspects of this documentary—1) how the making of this video shaped my understanding of the issue of fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh and its impact on the mainstream media in the country, and 2) what are the key concepts and learning that the documentary illustrates. The article consists of three

<sup>1</sup>For more details, please visit:

[https://blogg.hioa.no/mekk/#:-:text=OsloMet%2C%20Norway,\(Fritt%20Ord\)%2C%20Norway](https://blogg.hioa.no/mekk/#:-:text=OsloMet%2C%20Norway,(Fritt%20Ord)%2C%20Norway)

(Accessed on 7 October 2020).

parts—scope and methodology, key reflections and analyses, and conclusions.

## 2. Making the Documentary: Scope and Methodology

Documentaries as films have a long history of not only recording concurrent social and political events but also reconstructing historical facts and incidents through moving images (Rosenstone, 1988). Notably, the number of these documentaries, especially in television media, has significantly increased (Aaltonen & Kortti, 2015). Nevertheless, the conceptual debates around the term “documentary” are an ongoing issue. “Documentary” has been a contested term, and almost anything that can be placed under the category of objective journalistic representation was labelled as “documentary” in television (Godmilow & Shapiro, 1997). Independent filmmakers have told stories through moving images (Krawitz, 1986), but we need to recognize that there is hardly any consensus and shared understanding about what can be called a “documentary film”. Scholars and practitioners use some alternative terms, including the most common one—*non-fiction*—the connotation of which is also tainted (Godmilow & Shapiro, 1997; Hoque, 2014b). Recognizing this debate and the issues around it, makers and producers keep producing non-fiction videos that are often referred to as video documentaries. It is considered an effective and subjective way to explore insights and understandings of an issue. Hackley (2012) notes that documentary films primarily “document” conditions of a specific time or place. He adds that documentary films are an art form that work as vehicles of change and educates the masses about a particular subject and gives people a chance to share their beliefs. However, scholars have identified critical issues relating to the ethics and credibility of the storytelling practices through documentary films (Galloway, 2016; Marfo, 2007; Nash, 2012).

Recognizing the above-mentioned theoretical discussions and practical issues, I proposed to make a video with the title “Making OR Faking” in the category of “video doc” within the scope of the aforementioned conference. In my proposal, I used the term “documentary” for the video production since my purpose was to document some views on the issue of fake news and disinformation and to engage myself in the process of constructing its meaning. The objective was to explore issues concerning the spread of fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh and its impact on journalism practices in the mainstream media. The lead question that guided me to do the research work and make the video was: How does fake news and disinformation affect the practice of journalism in mainstream media in Bangladesh?

Usually, making a documentary involves three stages of work—pre-production, production, and post-production (Hajare, 2018). The challenge was twofold—first, making a proper plan to employ appropriate methods and techniques for each stage and execute accordingly within a short period of time, and second, following the COVID-19 pandemic related-health guidelines and standards.

## 2.1. Pre-Production: Research and Planning

This work was initially informed by a review of literature regarding fake news and disinformation available in English on the internet. This review helped me to develop a keener understanding of what areas of the issue the video should focus on. I had to make a few critical creative decisions at this stage. First, I decided to produce a video that mainly aims to provide an understanding for an interested audience, mainly in academia. For this reason, I opted to keep several segments in the video, with each segment addressing a particular a sub-topic. Second, I chose to use a voice-over narration to provide an introduction of the issue and context for the viewers. I did not want to use narration too extensively and let the interviewees directly engage with the audience. Third, I wished to shoot the interviews in an order that could allow me to continuously improve my own understanding of the issue and develop informed questionnaire guides for the following interviewees. This way, I could integrate my own learnings in the making of the video. However, I also had to be aware of time and budget limitations.

Making a documentary is a deeply engaging and participatory learning process. In this case, the participants were mostly academics and practicing journalists. Any filmmaking requires a team and plan of action. I engaged two journalism students<sup>2</sup> in the process and asked them to collect some fake-news/disinformation related news-stories from English-language newspapers in Bangladesh. Parallely, I drafted an outline script to visualize how the video may look. Considering that the interviews would be the most integral part of the documentary, I looked up for recent studies that focused on fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh, and I found a crucial study conducted by an academic<sup>3</sup> (Karim, 2019) from a Bangladesh university. I contacted the author for an interview for the documentary. Subsequently, I used a snowball technique to select my next interviewees. Once I had a list of probable interviewees, a script, and an outlined plan of shooting, we entered the production phase.

## 2.2. Production: Creating Static and Moving Images

In the production phase, our team produced two types of images—static and graphic images. Graphic images were used to create a slideshow that served as backdrops to the story and guide the viewers. Student research assistants downloaded the screenshots of the relevant news-stories from online sources. We regularly met virtually to discuss emerging issues they faced. First, we learnt that categorizing a news story as “fake” is often not the simplest task, as the lack of authenticity of a published item is usually revealed at a later stage by another

<sup>2</sup>Tajwar Mamid and Arwin Ahmad Mitu are students of the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup>Farzana Karim is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Chittagong in Bangladesh. She presented her research paper “*Fake news on social media: who consume it and why: perspective of Bangladesh*” at the 27<sup>th</sup> AMIC Conference in Thailand in 2019.

story. In many cases, contradictory and diverse views create grey areas regarding the authenticity of a story. Second, downloaded screenshots contained many advertisements which needed to be removed. A professional visual content editor was hired to remove those advertisements and created a good-quality slideshow of static images.

The biggest challenge, however, was to maintain the COVID-19 related health guidelines while shooting the interviews. To minimize the size of the crew, I decided to operate the camera<sup>4</sup> myself with an on-location independent sound operator. Eight interviews were shot with individuals, including one television reporter, one online news media reporter, one freelance journalist, two academics, two students, and one fact-checking activist. Two of these interviewees shot the interview themselves using a mobile-phone and shared the video file with us. Each interviewee was asked a distinct set of questions in relation to various planned segments of the video. These interviews were shot in locations where they felt comfortable. The prior consent of the interviewees was obtained through emails. Although an interview protocol guided these interviews, most interviews were like conversations. In the end, we had footage, slideshows, and some audio files as raw materials.

### **2.3. Post-Production: Editing and Storytelling**

Postproduction is the most challenging yet creative stage of filmmaking. In this case, challenges were multi-fold. First, we only had a period of seven days to complete the post-production. Second, accommodating all the components in a ten-minute video required intensive re-watching and editing of footage. Third, we required background music and graphics exclusively created for this documentary. Managing to accomplish all these within the limited time and budget was challenging. With the assistance of the video editor<sup>5</sup>, I created the first version of the video. Then, I engaged a music composer<sup>6</sup> to create three pieces of background music—titles or credits, interviews, and slideshows. Simultaneously, a professional subtitle writer<sup>7</sup> was hired to create lucid and accurate English subtitles. Although all interviews were carried out in English, the purpose of putting subtitles was to provide the audience with a clear understanding of what was being said. After receiving the musical pieces, subtitles, and graphical add-ons, the editor was asked to put them together to formulate the story-telling aspect. In the end, I wrote down the narration of the film to walk the audience through the various sections. Putting my own voice in the documentary was one subjective way to display my authentic engagement in the making of the documentary.

However, this work had a few limitations. First, due to lack of time, I could not include the views of government officials in the documentary. I made contact with several potential such interviewees, but none of them were interested in

<sup>4</sup>I used a Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera to shoot the interviews.

<sup>5</sup>Imtiaz Bhuiyan Oni is a professional video-editor based in Dhaka. He works at EKMATTRA Society, an organization that offers various professional support to filmmakers in Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup>Md Ehsan Jabbar Evan is an independent music composer based in Dhaka.

<sup>7</sup>Shadlee Rahman is a professional proofreader and translator based in Dhaka.

participating. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, more time and a higher budget would have helped to create and present the content better.

### 3. Key Reflections and Analyses

Making the documentary was a unique learning experience for me. Although the process did not involve comprehensive research work, I explored some insights related to the issue of fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh. This section highlights the key issues and the analysis I could formulate being informed by reviewing the literature, the thoughts shared by the interviews, and while making the documentary.

#### 3.1. Fake News and Disinformation: *Conceptual Issues and Debates*

“Fake news” is also a controversial term. Although the term originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it got widespread global attention during and after the 2016 United States presidential election (Petraatos, 2021). Tandoc Jr. et al. (2018) reviewed 34 academic articles that used the term “fake news” between 2003 and 2017 and found that the definitions were based on two dimensions—level of facticity and deception. One interviewee of this study also highlighted these two dimensions, stating that fake news is often referred to as a story that has a very low facticity level, and an immediate intention to mislead or harm. Studies have also defined fake news as news that manipulates the audience’s cognitive processes (Gelfert, 2018). The term “disinformation”<sup>8</sup> is often associated with fake news, and described as information deliberately put on a medium to mislead an audience (Fallis, 2015; Ng & Taihagh, 2021). Studies point out that fake news and disinformation are global problems (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Dentith, 2016), and is often triggered by a set of planned actions that can create anarchy in a community. However, these discussions are often both context and case specific.

While making this documentary, several issues shaped my understanding of conceptualizing fake news. We—I and my two research assistants—found it difficult to pick news stories that could be called completely fake. Two aspects are crucial here. First, fake news, as we know and several interviewees mentioned, can originate from rumours and human-to-human communication; and what gets published as a news story a Bangladeshi newspaper is often mixed with contextualized information and the immediate impacts of the rumours. Second, the spread of fake news and information often happens very quickly on social media platforms, or through local online newspapers (which are mainly published in Bangla<sup>9</sup>); and eventually, national and international newspapers respond with publishing stories related to those events. Inconsistent headlines were also an issue. We found some headlines which were completely different to

<sup>8</sup>Many people use the terms “misinformation” and “disinformation” interchangeably which may be misleading. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) offer an insightful discussion on three types of information disorders—misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information.

<sup>9</sup>Bangladesh is a country with relatively small land with a large population, and all people speak the official language of the country—Bangla.

the stories they were discussing—which are examples of “click-bait” journalism<sup>10</sup>. Another crucial factor was the non-existence of news stories on websites. Some news stories had appeared on news portals, but later could not be found on the respective websites. Removal of news stories from the online archive is also a widely debated issue (Nah, 2019; Terry, 2017).

Based on these learnings, we can say that the term “Fake News” is an oxymoron. Something which is fake cannot be news, and a news story cannot be completely ignored as fake. Once spread or published on a public platform, any piece of information or news item—regardless of the level of facticity—creates implications.

### 3.2. The Emergence of Fake News and Disinformation in Bangladesh

Several interviewees pointed out that although disinformation and fabricated news are not new phenomena in Bangladesh, the issue got traction and attention with the increasing penetration of internet, social media (especially Facebook) and smartphone technologies. Haque et al. (2020) note that in South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, misinformation efforts mostly targeted religious sentiments. Karim (2019), who is also a respondent in this work, studied the implications of fake news through social media in Bangladesh, and found that the *2012 Ramu Tragedy*<sup>11</sup> was the first major fake-information-based event that drew the attention of national and international agencies. Haque et al. (2020: p. 2) note that this tragedy was also based on religious sentiments since the event was triggered by a Buddhist boy’s “fake” Facebook post that “included a photo of burning the Quran and led an angry mob to set fire to Buddhist temples, loot, and vandalize more than a hundred homes in a Buddhist village at Ramu in Cox’s Bazar”. Two interviewees also mentioned a rumour about a war criminal (Delwar Hossain Sayeedi) turning into a religious leader and being seen on the Moon in March 2013, immediately after he was sentenced to death by a tribunal in Bangladesh. This incident spread via social media and led mobs to cause human deaths and damages of public and private properties (Bilu, 2020). One interviewee who was a reporter of a national daily newspaper at the time shared that he found many local journalists who believed in this rumour. As interviewee Professor Mofizur Rhaman pointed out, “Fake News” became a buzzword in Bangladesh during this period.

Notably, all these incidents are linked to social media posts. In Bangladesh, the popularity of social media, especially Facebook, started to grow in 2008, and since then a number of hate crimes and violent incidents have been triggered from Facebook in the country (Minar & Naher, 2018). In 2019, a series of mob attacks killed eight people on the streets due to the spread of inaccurate and misleading information on Facebook about child abduction (BBC, 2019). Now, the country has more than 106 million internet users. The number of Facebook

<sup>10</sup>For more information, see Chen et al. (2015) and Bazaco et al. (2019).

<sup>11</sup>For more details about this tragedy, see Alam & Ahmed (2012).

users is 44.7 million (FE, 2021; Statista, 2022). One interviewee stated that 90% of social media users are ignorant about fact-checking. Like many other countries, the spread of fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh has become a great concern, and social media has been a breeding-ground for spreading disinformation.

### 3.3. The Impact on Mainstream Media

In the age of the internet, social media, and misinformation, the role of the mainstream media has become even more critical. Mainstream news sources in Bangladesh still have high credibility (Ahasan, 2019) and several interviewees note that mainstream media ought to provide the audience with true information and facts-based news reports.

The interviews have illustrated several ways in which fake news and disinformation has affected the journalism practices in mainstream media in Bangladesh. First, the need for immediacy and increased competition in the sector has been an issue. Nowadays, all media outlets want to publish news stories as quickly as possible, and a sense of competition is explicitly visible. This results in a lack of quality in reporting and storytelling. Second, almost all news media organizations post their latest news stories and reports on their respective social media pages or accounts. Often, reporters and journalists share the news updates (covered by them) on social media well before the stories get published on mainstream news media and websites. This indicates a lack of professionalism in journalism practices. Third, the reporters in the mainstream media these days check more sources for a piece of information. As one TV reporter commented, “the stranger the information is, I check for more sources” meaning that the frequency of getting misinformation from various sources has significantly increased. The fear of being the person spreading disinformation among journalists has also increased. Fourth, in the last several years, thousands of news portals have started to operate in Bangladesh and recently, a staggering 3000 news portals applied for government registration (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). District-level local journalists run these portals, and they often publish news stories well before the mainstream media. In many cases, these web portals work as channels of spreading disinformation by certain interest groups. The emergence of these portals has impacted the practices of journalism in mainstream media. Mainstream media often responds to the stories published on those news portals, and in most cases, they need to start with verifying the authenticity. Finally, fact-checking has emerged as a regular phenomenon in the mainstream media because of the increasing spread of misinformation through social media.

### 3.4. Fake News and Disinformation: *How to Tackle?*

The previous section illustrated how fake news and disinformation has been affecting journalism practices in Bangladesh. Now, the burning question is—how



do we tackle the issue? A few recent studies have highlighted the idea of fact-checking, along with the role of journalists and media users (Haque et al., 2018, 2020). Haque et al. (2020) found that the audience wants the news media to verify the authenticity of information that they see online. The authors note, “the newspaper journalists say that fact-checking online information is not a part of their job, and it is also beyond their capacity given the amount of information being published online every day” (Haque et al., 2020). The study suggests increasing the impact of fact-checking efforts through collaboration, technology design, and infrastructure development.

However, most interviewees in this work have shared deeper insights and have touched upon some critical aspects around the issue. First, journalists working in the mainstream media must provide unbiased details and comprehensive insights into their reporting. This will help the audience understand the story better. Second, the audience must be empowered to identify what is fake and what is real. Authorities and concerned organizations can circulate media bulletins not only in response to critical incidents but also to make people aware about fake news and disinformation on social media. They can also organize events to increase the media literacy of users. Third, besides providing accurate information, state and non-state agencies can use digital technologies and artificial intelligence to monitor social media to track disinformation. However, as pointed out by one interviewee, this monitoring should not intervene in the freedom of expression. Fourth, the role of the newsroom must extend towards fact-checking as well. All mainstream media outlets ought to have separate fact-checking sections. In fact, a few independent fact-checking organizations are already operating in the country. Zahedur Rahman Arman, who is the founder and editor of BD Factcheck<sup>12</sup>, Bangladesh’s first factchecking initiative, stated that the organization receives nearly one hundred factchecking requests every day. Despite facing some challenges, including the lack of a sustainable model, the organization continues to debunk fake news and enhance the authenticity of news to the audience.

Interviewees also noted that fake news and disinformation cannot be tackled merely by laws and regulations. Civil society and media organizations have repeatedly pointed out that legal instruments can in fact prove to be impediments to protecting the freedom of information and press in the country (Rabbi, 2020; Rahman & Rashid, 2020). Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Information formed a committee to monitor the spread of misinformation in news media. However, the authorities was forced to dismantle the committee immediately following an outcry from media and civil society organizations (The Daily Star, 2020). In a democratic society like Bangladesh, such government intervention into media functions is neither accepted nor is it expected. In these circumstances, how to tackle fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh remains open for discussions and innovative solutions.

<sup>12</sup>For more information, see <https://en.bdfactcheck.com/>.

## 4. Conclusion

The above discussion lays out the critical reflections and learnings that I gained while making the documentary. The issue of fake news and disinformation is the tip of an iceberg; it has both deeper and wider social, political, and policy implications. The documentary—Making or Faking—that I produced mainly explored the conceptual issues relating to the understanding and historical aspects of fake news and disinformation, and touches upon potential mechanisms to tackle the issue. The construction of meaning and knowledge through the documentary, as indicated in the methodology section, was a participatory process. This documentary will merely be a primary reference to encourage and lead the audience to obtain an in-depth understanding of how fake news and disinformation in Bangladesh has affected the journalism practices in the mainstream media. This article can contribute to not only understanding the making of a video documentary on similar academic debates, but also exploring the ways reflective practices can be used for generating insights.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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