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Kaifia Ancer Laskar & Biswadeep Bhattacharyya

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Community radio stations' production responses to COVID-19 pandemic in India

KAIFIA ANCER LASKAR  AND BISWADEEP BHATTACHARYYA

The COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown have made community radio broadcasting more important than before. Using case studies and interviews, we explored the kind of programming adopted by selected community radio (CR) stations in India during the pandemic and how they fight fake news. We also analyzed other issues they addressed during this period. We identified more dedicated programming services concerning COVID-19, fake news, and mental health using two-way communication by CR stations. The latter shared personalized and fact-checked information disseminated to the community. Issues related to rising domestic violence and mental health were also highlighted in their broadcast during the nationwide lockdown. Fake news percolated quickly in the communities where most members are illiterate and have little access to fact-checked information. CR stations indeed play a pivotal role in engaging the community in verifying fake news through personalized storytelling, using folk and traditional media, and engaging COVID-19 warriors from the community to authenticate the information.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; community radio; programming; localization; fake news

With the rise in COVID-19 cases worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 (caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2) “a public health emergency of international concern” on April 16, 2020 (Wee et al., 2020, para. 9). India reported its first COVID-19 case on January 30, 2020, (Vara, 2020, para. 1) and eventually imposed a nationwide lockdown from “25 March to 17 May 2020” (Kumar et al., 2020, para. 1–2). India, like

several countries, had to deal with the fake news epidemic and infodemic (Arao et al., 2020, para. 1; Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Laskar & Reyaz, 2021). Infodemic has been described as an overflow of false information that might eventually lead to an existential crisis (Kanozia et al., 2021, para. 2).

Theoretical framework

The dominant paradigm of development communication theories emphasizes the use of mass media

Kaifia Ancer Laskar is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Aliah University, India. Her research interests include discourse analysis of gender and myth in fictional television and film texts. Biswadeep Bhattacharyya is a Doctoral Scholar at the same department and university. His research interests include development communication, gender studies, and colonialism. Corresponding author: Kaifia Ancer Laskar. E-mail: kaifiaancer@aliah.ac.in

