Operational Report
Digital Investigation Fellowship

Prepared by

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of Bangladesh's political transition and the heightened risk of mis/disinformation during this crisis, MRDI realized a critical gap in the response system. Although a number of initiatives were ongoing by different organisations in the country to spot and debunk individual pieces of mis/disinformation, but if the focus is solely on surface-level fact-checks, it risks treating only the symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes.

Keeping the risks of rapid spread of false content often as part of coordinated campaigns that exploit political, religious or social divides in mind, the organisation believed that organizing just training sessions will not be sufficient as a response rather a more strategic and investigative approach is required.

With this understanding, MRDI partnered with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh for a project titled 'Digital Investigation Fellowship' from November 2024 to April 2025 to develop a cohort of digitally skilled journalists capable of tracing mis/disinformation back to its sources, identify actors/networks and uncover the patterns and motivations behind these campaigns.

As part of the initiative, six early-career journalists were selected and trained over 12 sessions on fact-checking techniques, digital verification tools, metadata analysis, identifying disinformation networks and understanding on investigative productions. After the training, each fellow produced and submitted an investigative story addressing critical narratives affecting public perception and democratic values.

Through capacity building, mentorship, and practical reporting, the project has planted seeds for a sustainable response to the growing threat of digital information pollution in Bangladesh. Plans are underway to scale up the initiative and institutionalize fact-checking practices across newsrooms as a sustainability of the initiative.

KEY IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

Impact area	Result
Fellows trained	6 young journalists from diverse newsrooms
Training sessions delivered	12 intensive hands-on sessions
Stories produced	6 in-depth investigative reports
Tools & skills delivered	Reverse image search, advanced searching, source verification, metadata analysis, identifying deepfakes, geolocation, archiving, video verification, digital forensics and digital archiving
Future expansion plan	Scaling fellowship, establishing newsroom fact-checking units, 24/7 help desk support service, e-learning course on fact-checking, roadshow for youths on digital security & misinformation, fact-checking lab support to universities, and conference for fact-checkers

BACKGROUND

In a country like Bangladesh, where access to the internet and social media has substantially expanded, addressing the problem of information pollution is increasingly vital due to the growing risk of digital harm resulting from mis/disinformation and fake news.

The swift dissemination of false information through social media and online channels poses a grave threat to public trust and democratic processes. Over the past decade in Bangladesh, coordinated disinformation campaigns have targeted vulnerable groups, fueling communal tensions, social unrest and violence.

During the mass uprising that ousted the previous authoritarian regime in Bangladesh, social media became a fertile ground for rumors, fake news and misinformation. Citizens continued sharing information without understanding its authenticity. Efforts and initiatives by the news media to debunk misinformation and disinformation were limited compared to the volume of false content being spread.

Following the establishment of an interim government led by Prof. Dr. Muhammad Yunus, religiously motivated disinformation surged. Claims of minority persecution—particularly involving Hindus—and the arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a former ISKCON leader, gained traction and so did the pro-Palestine demonstrations lately. False narratives spread rapidly, often using outdated or unrelated photos and videos. Some posts misrepresented attacks on Muslim individuals or political activists as attacks on the Hindu community.

The situation escalated in November. On 5 November 2024, an anti-ISKCON Facebook post in Chattogram triggered a violent clash that injured several police and army personnel. The man behind the post and 49 others were arrested. Later that month, Chinmoy Krishna Das was arrested for sedition and his followers' protest led to further violence, resulting in the death of a Muslim lawyer. Misinformation falsely claimed the lawyer was Das's legal counsel, further fueling tensions. Although the newsrooms remain vigilant and alert to provide authentic information and countering such false narratives, situations like this become difficult due to limited resources and tools.

Despite the demand for fact-checkers, their numbers in Bangladesh have not grown significantly. Only one news outlet now employs a dedicated fact-checker while other newsrooms rely on editorial decisions to maintain vigilance. Investing in journalists who have an interest in protecting authenticity of information thus ensuring integrity in digital ecosystem as a skilled group could be an effective way to support news media in addressing challenges related to mis/disinformation.

To address this crisis, MRDI initiated "Digital Investigation Fellowship" that aims to groom a new generation of journalists with capacity, tools and resources to combat information pollution with advanced investigative skills.

During this fellowship, six journalists combated contemporary mis-disinformation spread centering minority attacks, communal violence and political affairs through digital investigation as well as producing fact-checked reports on the issues.

OBJECTIVE

To build a batch of digital investigative journalists to better fight mis/disinformation and expose actors behind information pollution in Bangladesh.

Reporting Period: 21 November 2024 – 20 April 2025

ACTIVITIES

Activity-1: Launching Programme of Digital Investigation Fellowship

MRDI started the Digital Investigation Fellowship programme with a launching session on 12 December 2024, Thursday from 11 am to 12 pm at MRDI office.

The selected fellows along with the facilitator Qadaruddin Shishir, formar Fact-Checking Editor at AFP (Agence France-Press) Bangladesh Office, were present at the launching session. MRDI's Executive Director Hasibur Rahman welcomed the attendees and briefed about the initiative.

Ms. Corinne Henchoz Pignani, Chargée d'affaires a.i Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh, Alberto Giovanetti, Counsellor, Head of Political, Economic & Communication Affairs at Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh and Khaled Chowdhury, Senior Political, Economic & Communication Officer, Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh were also present.

During this session, Syed Samiul Basher Anik, Manager, Programme, described the fellowship overview, structure expected outcome and future plan. Qadaruddin Shishir also presented the

background for the need of such an initiative and current scenario of the newsroom not being able to combat fake news.

Ms. Corinne Henchoz Pignani applauded the initiative saying that this digital investigation is now important during this transition period of the country. She also welcomed the six fellows as they will be torchbearer in upcoming days in newsrooms.

Lastly, Hasibur Rahman thanked all for their presence.

Activity-2: Fellowship Sessions

Qadaruddin served the fellowship simultaneously as trainer, facilitator and mentor as well as the fellowship participants. He outlined a session plan for the five-month fellowship and conducted the sessions accordingly.

Session 1: Understanding Information Disorder

MRDI organized the first session on Understanding Information Disorder of the Digital Investigation Fellowship programme on 21 December 2024, Saturday from 11 am to 2 pm at MRDI office.

Md. Badruddoza Babu, Head of Capacity Building and IJ Help Desk, MRDI, made an introduction of the initiative and welcomed the fellows. Facilitator Qadaruddin Shishir led the training, explaining the different types of information disorder, their causes and implications. Fellows shared their initial understanding of fact-checking and digital investigations and engaged in a practical exercise to identify misinformation in an actual news story. The session emphasized the importance of digital literacy in identifying and combating false narratives.

Session 2: What's fact-checking

The 2nd session on 'What's fact-checking' of the fellowship programme was held on 31 December 2024, Tuesday from 11:30 am to 2:30 pm at MRDI office.

Fellows learned about different techniques used to verify textual claims, images and videos. The session covered tools and methodologies for tracing the origins of multimedia content and determining their authenticity. Through hands-on practice, fellows verified various types of online content, including manipulated images and out-of-context videos. The importance of source transparency and maintaining objectivity in fact-checking work was also highlighted.

Session 3: What's Digital Investigation

This session was held on was held on 14 January 2025, Tuesday from 4pm to 7pm at MRDI office and introduced fellows to digital investigative journalism, focusing on how to conduct in-depth inquiries.

Fellows presented their initial ideas for digital investigations and discussed strategies for refining and implementing them. The session covered case studies that illustrated how digital trails, social media activity and metadata can be used to track misinformation sources and verify claims.

Session 4: Media, politics and economy in Bangladesh

MRDI organized the 4th session on Media, politics and economy in Bangladesh on 18 January 2025, Saturday from 10am to 1pm at MRDI office.

This session provided a contextual understanding of how media, politics and the economy interact in Bangladesh. Fellows examined how political affiliations and ownership structures influence news content and contribute to the spread of disinformation. They presented their investigative story ideas in this context, exploring how their projects could expose or counteract media manipulation. The discussion helped fellows align their investigations with real-world implications and media accountability.

Session 5: Digital Source Verification

5th session on Digital Source Verification was held on 5 February 2025, Wednesday from 11am to 2pm at MRDI office.

Fellows analyzed reported communal violence cases and practiced how to validate or debunk those narratives using digital investigation tools. They compiled a list of such incidents that could

potentially be developed into fully fact-checked stories. Techniques included cross-checking sources, analyzing metadata and using geolocation tools.

Session 6: Identifying disinformation networks

MRDI organized the 6th session on Identifying disinformation networks on 9 February 2025, Sunday from 11am to 2pm at MRDI office.

In this session, fellows explored how organized disinformation networks operate, including how false narratives are systematically produced and disseminated. They learned to trace the digital pathways of disinformation—from source creation to viral spread—through social media analysis. Practical exercises included photo verification tasks and mapping disinformation actors using investigative tools.

Session 7: Advanced Searches

MRDI organized the 7th session on Advanced Searches on 15 February 2025, Saturday from 11am to 2pm at MRDI office. This session introduced advanced search techniques essential for digital investigations. Fellows practiced locating obscure or deleted online content using specialized tools, Boolean search operators and archived web pages. The focus was on verifying videos and finding contextual information that could support or refute content claims. Fellows also refined their story ideas with this enhanced research capability.

Session 8: Understanding Maps

MRDI organized the 8th session on Understanding Maps on 26 February 2025, Wednesday from 11am to 2pm at MRDI office. This session focused on using digital maps and geospatial tools in investigations. Fellows learned to track geographical shifts, locate specific places in news stories and cross-reference maps with digital evidence. Tools such as Google Earth and online satellite archives were used to trace geographical changes, which can be vital in verifying claims related to conflict zones, deforestation, land grabbing, or infrastructure development.

Session 9: Image Verification

MRDI organized the 9th session on Image Verification on 9 March 2025, Sunday from 11am to 2pm at MRDI office. This session was dedicated to image verification techniques. Fellows verified images from political social media pages, focusing on detecting manipulations, reverse image searchingand checking metadata. Despite one fellow being absent, the others shared their investigative progress with the resource person and received feedback on their evolving stories.

Session 10: Video Verification

MRDI organized the 10th session on Video Verification on 15 March 2025, Saturday from 10am to 1pm at MRDI office. The fellows learned how to verify videos and detect AI-generated or manipulated content. They practiced identifying signs of deepfakes, analyzing video metadata and using tools for frame-by-frame analysis. The session also covered video archiving and the importance of

maintaining documentation to support fact-checks. Fellows continued updating their stories based on these new skills.

Session 11: Digital archiving

MRDI organized the 11th session on Digital archiving on 22 March 2025, Saturday from 10am to 1pm at MRDI office. This session introduced the concept of digital archiving, where fellows learned how to systematically store and organize digital evidence. The aim was to ensure transparency, traceability and future access. They explored platforms and tools for creating accessible archives of screenshots, links and original content, which are essential in building credible and lasting fact-check stories.

Session 12: Writing a fact-checked story

MRDI organized the 12th and the last session on Writing a fact-checked story on 8 April 2025, Tuesday from 10am to 1pm at MRDI office.

In the final session, the fellows were guided on how to structure and write a complete fact-checked story. They learned about narrative building, citing evidence, maintaining neutrality and adhering to ethical standards. The fellows presented draft versions of their stories for feedback. On 12 April 2025, they submitted their revised drafts to the facilitator for final review, marking the conclusion of the fellowship programme.

Activity-3: Produce Digital Investigation Stories

In line with the fellowship sessions, the fellows shared their story ideas with the facilitator and gradually developed the idea. Following the lessons from the sessions, they produced stories through digital investigations and submitted to the facilitator by 20 April 2025 which were later finalized by him.

Activity-4: Certificate Giving Ceremony

MRDI organized a certificate giving ceremony on 30 April 2025, Tuesday from 10:30 am to 11:30 am upon completion of the fellowship.

At the ceremony, the fellows shared their inspiring journeys—from developing fact-checking skills to driving change in their newsrooms by advocating for dedicated fact-checking sections. They also presented key findings from their investigations, highlighting the vital role of accountability and truth in journalism.

The certificate giving ceremony was graced by Alberto Giovanetti, Counsellor and Head of Political, Economic & Communication Affairs and Khaled Chowdhury, Senior Political, Economic & Communication Officer from the Embassy of Switzerland, alongside MRDI's Executive Director Hasibur Rahman and fellowship facilitator Qadaruddin Shishir.

At the event, Alberto Giovanetti congratulated the fellows for their accomplishments and the MRDI for implementing such an initiative. Acknowledging the need to combat mis/disinformation and establish freedom of speech, he also expressed their will to continue such an effort in future.

REFLECTION FROM FACILITATOR & PARTICIPANTS

"I think MRDI's Digital Investigative Fellowship will play a very important role in tackling disinformation in Bangladesh. This market lacks full-time journalists dedicated to deal with disinformation. This fellowship will fill that gap to some extent. However, more initiatives are required to enable young journalists to do disinformation counters and digital investigative work."

Qadaruddin Shishir
Former Fact-Checking Editor, AFP

"Participating in this fellowship opened my eyes to digital investigation, a skill I hadn't explored before. Despite the challenges of gathering hard evidence, I successfully produced a report that will benefit my career. In fact, recognizing my involvement in the fellowship, my newsroom entrusted me with a new responsibility by assigning me in a newly introduced fact-checking section."

Tanzila Akhter
Broadcast Journalist, Channel 24

FUTURE ACTION

Building on the success of the first cycle of the Digital Investigation Fellowship, MRDI plans to institutionalize the initiative as a recurring programme to develop a wider network of trained digital investigative journalists across Bangladesh. The following steps are planned:

1. Scale Up Fellowship Programme: Expand the fellowship engaging new batch of aspiring journalists from national and community news outlets to ensure a more inclusive and representative fight against disinformation.

2. Integrate Fact-Checking Units in Newsrooms: Provide strategic support to newsrooms to help set up internal fact-checking units drawing on the expertise of trained fellows as leads or consultants.

3. Establish Fact-checking Help Desk in MRDI: MRDI also plans to introduce Fact-checking Help Desk to provide continuous guidance and technical assistance to fellows, journalists and news outlets tackling complex digital investigations and debunk mis/disinformation. The Help Desk will serve as a resource center for real-time problem-solving, source verification and ethical queries.

4. Develop E-Learning Course on Fact-Checking: An e-learning course on fact-checking will be developed to enhance the capacity of journalists and CSOs in identifying mis/disinformation and fake news that will allow them to counter threats to all citizens. The course will equip participants with the skills to navigate the internet safely, verify information and spot mis/disinformation. This initiative will provide essential resources and expertise for navigating online spaces and avoiding the unintentional spread of false information. Lobby meetings with public universities will be organised to ensure higher number of reaches of the course. Besides, a fact-checking competition styled as e-learning course for the youths will be held among participants from each university.

5. Roadshow For Youths on Digital Security & Misinformation: The roadshow will cover discussions on digital literacy & security, misinformation & combating its spread involving students of public universities. MRDI with support from the head/chair of journalism department of respective universities will organize the roadshow taking knowledge from the faculties and involving their students. Sessions will be conducted by the academics and fact-check experts during the road-show at each university.

6. Fact-checking Lab Support to Universities: Efforts will be made to increase the knowledge and skills of the students of the journalism department by preparing courses especially on fact-checking and verification. Also, assistance in setting up laboratories will be provided as needed. Through this activity, knowledge and practical skills among journalism students will be enhanced, making them better prepared for newsroom demands. Besides, there will be alignment between academic curricula and industry requirements, strengthening collaboration between media houses and academic institutions.

7. Host Conference of Fact-checkers: Organize an international conference where fellows, news media professionals, fact-checkers, investigative journalists and related stakeholders from home and abroad convene to share findings, best practices and discuss policy-level changes needed to combat information disorder.

By continuing this initiative and expanding its scope, MRDI aims to contribute meaningfully to safeguarding the integrity of public information, preventing mis/disinformation and fostering a resilient news media ecosystem in Bangladesh.

Digital Investigation Fellowship
21 November 2024 – 20 April 2025

Participants List

Sl.	Name	Designation	Email
1.	Shohag Omar	Sub-editor Kalbela	sohug45jms@gmail.com
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3.	Md. Azom Islam	Apprentice Reporter Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)	azomislam77@gmail.com
4.	Tanzila Akhter	Broadcast Journalist Channel 24	tanzilamimi082@gmail.com
5.	Shahadat Hossain	Staff Reporter The Business Standard	shahadatbiplob97@gmail.com
6.	Afrin Jahan Mim	Student (MSS) Mass Communication and Journalism Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)	afrinjahan7798@gmail.com

Digital Investigation Fellowship

December 2024 – February 2025
MRDI Meeting Room, Dhaka

Session Plan

Week 1	
Time	**Session**
3 hours	**Session 1: Understanding Information disorder** • Disinformation, Misinformation, Malinformation, Propaganda, Influence operation etc. • Examples from BD and world
Week 2	
3 hours	**Session 2: What's fact checking? It's history, importance and impact of fact checking in the last two decades.** • IFCN, EFCSN • Fact-checking in Bangladesh • Ethics and Standards
Week 3	
1 hour	**Session 3: What's digital investigation?** • Global leaders in Digital investigation and best practices in the field • The story of Bellingcat
2 hours	**Practical Session**
Week 4	
1 hour	**Session 4: Media, politics and economy in Bangladesh** • Media ownership in Bangladesh and India • Media bias, xenophobia, jingoism in media coverage
2 hours	**Practical Session**
Week 5	
1 hour	**Session 5: Digital source verification** • UGC and website verification • Human and digital bots
2 hours	**Practical Session**
Week 6	
1 hour	**Session 6: Identifying disinformation networks** Indian Chronicle and others
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Trainer, Facilitator and Mentor: *Qadaruddin Shishir***,** Former Bangladesh Editor, AFP Factcheck

Digital Investigation Fellowship

December 2024 – February 2025

MRDI Meeting Room, Dhaka

Session Plan

Week 7	
Time	**Session**
1 hour	**Session 7: Advanced searches** • Social Media searches • Cross platform searches
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Week 8	
1 hour	**Session 8: Understanding Maps** • Google Earth • Google Street View/Satellite view • Mapillary • World Imagery Wayback • https://suncalc.org/
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Week 9	
1 hour	**Session 9: Image Verification** • Tools and techniques • AI images • Metada etc.
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Week 10	
1 hour	**Session 10: Video verification** • Tools and techniques • Deepfake • Metadata etc.
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Week 11	
1 hour	**Session 11: Digital archiving** • July August archiving experience (inviting a team of archivers to show a demo of how they worked) • Tools of digital archiving
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Week 12	
1 hour	**Session 12: Writing a fact check story**
2 hours	**Practical Session**

Trainer, Facilitator and Mentor: *Qadaruddin Shishir,* Former Bangladesh Editor, AFP Factcheck