

Sri Lanka's Online Battle against COVID-19

Archana Atmakuri and Chulanee Attanayake

Summary

Sri Lanka recently ordered the arrest of citizens who were spreading rumours about COVID-19. Fighting the spread of misinformation is not confined to Sri Lanka. Yet, some countries are better at dealing with fake news than others. This paper reviews Sri Lanka's use of social media to keep citizens informed and alert in fighting misinformation. It also highlights the best practices of other affected countries.

While Sri Lanka has been combating the coronavirus pandemic since late January 2020, it has simultaneously been fighting an online battle. On 16 March 2020, Sri Lanka's police arrested two people for spreading fake news about COVID-19 and [over 50 suspects](#) who were identified for spreading misinformation. Following the report of the first case of local transmission in Sri Lanka on 10 March 2020, the number of cases has jumped significantly, leading to rising public panic. The government took steps to limit public gatherings and enforced social distancing, which included declaring a three-day public holiday from 16 March 2020 and subsequently enforcing an island-wide curfew.

The Sri Lankan government went a step further by punishing citizens who did not abide by the law offline as well as online. While these tangible steps are important in the battle against the global pandemic, it is equally important for governments to act swiftly to keep citizens updated and to curb misinformation, which can fuel mass panic.

There are no hard and fast rules to fighting misinformation; one can only learn through experimentation by adopting the best practices of other countries. In this regard, Singapore has taken the lead by initiating a government-run [WhatsApp group](#), an active channel of communication with the public that provides various updates, ranging from the number of people who have tested positive to the number discharged, debunking misinformation and sharing measures to keep safe during the pandemic. Since WhatsApp is one of the most commonly used messenger services, it is especially effective for disseminating quick real-time information.

Likewise, Sri Lanka has recently taken steps to use digital platforms in its fight against COVID-19. The [Health Promotion Bureau](#) (HPB) associated with Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health (MOH) provides updated information, statistics, guidelines and necessary contact information regarding COVID-19. [On Facebook](#), HPB's page uses infographics to engage the public, providing necessary information on the number of cases, informing citizens about the curfew and educating them about the benefits of adhering to stay-at-home orders. It also uses informative videos in Sinhala and Tamil languages to advise the public on best practices and better managing mental health.

Additionally, MOH's [epidemiology unit](#) has been providing updates on the number of positive cases as well as making accessible circulars and directives to the public. It has guidelines related to COVID-19 for the various sectors, notices from the police and other related videos. However, the issue with having two websites for the same purpose is that sometimes the information overlaps and can even contradict, thus causing confusion. At one point, both websites were reporting different numbers. Such a situation underscores the importance of having a single channel of communication with the people.

Starting with active Facebook pages and a credible website to update the public, Sri Lanka seems to be moving in the right direction in handling the pandemic. Recently, the government launched the [Viber community chat group](#) – an important step in disseminating the latest news and information about the pandemic, reflecting the initiatives of many other countries.

While the usage of digital platforms to communicate and publicise information is admirable, the same platforms must also be used to fight misinformation. Fake news is now a common threat faced by governments all over the world. One effective way to deal with it is to collaborate with fact-checkers such as [WatchDog Sri Lanka](#). This could help the government expedite action against fake news. Clarified or debunked news can also be circulated in one-stop messengers like WhatsApp.

Singapore has such practices in place. For example, a recent WhatsApp message warned citizens to avoid certain places that suspected cases were said to have visited. However, the Gov.sg group countered that the message was false. From time to time, Singapore government officials have been clarifying misinformation being circulated on social media platforms.

In India, to compare, a government-run WhatsApp group has been initiated for the latest updates on coronavirus, in addition to general information about COVID-19, measures to contain the spread, professional advice from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and information about where to get help. WhatsApp is one of the most commonly used messengers in the country and hence it is one of the best channels of communication. Similarly, the World Health Organisation recently initiated a verified WhatsApp chat to update on COVID-19 cases and deaths across six regions.

For Sri Lanka, fighting a global pandemic is a new experience. However, it has experienced the repercussions of widely spread misinformation before, especially during the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. Hence, the government must establish mechanisms to curb the spread of fake news and attempt to tie up with fact-checkers to debunk the same through government verified messengers so as to regularly educate citizens. Establishing such infrastructure may help to fight outbreaks of misinformation beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Ms Archana Atmakuri is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at isasala@nus.edu.sg. Dr Chulanee Attanayake is a Visiting Research Fellow at the same institute. She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.