"Relevance of Traditional Broadcasting among AIBD member countries (Asia-Pacific countries) during COVID 19 Pandemic.

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Introduction and background

This paper will address the relevance of traditional broadcasting or mainstream broadcasting in the Asia-Pacific countries, in the context of the spread of disinformation during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The COVID 19 pandemic has opened all doors to the spread of disinformation. In an atmosphere of uncertainty, social media is successful at creating much confusion among the public under the guise of providing immediate information. On the contrary, it has only added to the deluge of disinformation congesting the minds of the public. To remain relevant and plausible, traditional media or mainstream radio and television have now, to claw uphill to first debunk such confusions, verify all sources of information including those from social media and disseminate them quickly, before more damage is done.

AIBD's past researches, its continuous surveys and ongoing discussions in response to the COVID 19 pandemic, bear crucial evidence that mainstream media are relentlessly engaging in combative initiatives to provide official and accurate information, much need for the public to be safe from the pandemic. In this respect, main stream radio television broadcasting has proven to be the growing, primary source of critical information to the public.

In response to the Angkor Initiative (2019) signed at the 18th AIBD General Conference held in Paro, Bhutan on August 23, 2019, the regional research report, by the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD, 2019), was endorsed by UNESCO and AIBD member countries. This was a research to help combat the menace of disinformation among broadcasters.

The findings, among others, discussed the need for action and provided a framework for the reform of public broadcasts' practices. The study provided recommendations on the management of disinformation in the context of rights to expression and the rule of law in broadcasters' respective countries. It specifically addresses the role of increasingly popular online or social media broadcasting. While it has become important to include social media generated content into mainstream media, it is equally important to be extra cautious and wary of its impact to mainstream content. Algorithm-ranked search results and social media news feeds have contributed to the creation of 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles', where people reinforce their beliefs rather than dialogue across differences have narrowed choices. The accessibility of media content has dramatically increased, largely through sharing and user-generated content on social media, made necessary due to an increase in media channels operating round-the-clock.

Media environment & media freedom

A timely reminder is Robert Lox's (2006) criteria for production and broadcast inclusion, 'Gate keeping and the environmental Bent'. It meant that broadcasters need not be overly concerned with just media political economy or criteria for news worthiness. During this period of crisis, broadcasters should also broadcast environmental stories of the pandemic irrespective of dramatic events to carry the story. Though there is noticeable representation of environmental news in the prime-time news broadcast of local television channels, more can be done by reducing commercial air-time. The critical analysis of content and style of narratives indicate that radio and television news broadcast increasingly relied on government sources.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that broadcasters are losing their independence and their professional standards of journalism are being eroded by political economic forces. There is a growing disrespect for truth and good broadcasting work by political actors, as evidenced in the case of, "... *an unreasonable person claiming that the Dominion Voting System in the recent United States Presidential elections was fraudulent*", reported by CNN Special Report by Fareed Zakaria on 28th March 2021. The relevance for truth was lost in the face of blatant lies under the guise of championing media freedom when actually broadcasters were selectively peddling disinformation.

Media and Internet providers are being subjected to increasing censorship and self-regulation. As measures to inhibit mainstream media becomes apparent, online or internet broadcasting too becomes a victim to digital censorship and shutdowns have been rampant. One of the main drivers of disinformation and propaganda among service-oriented broadcasters is in their political and economy model at the same time. This policy has to change before self-regulation can deliver effective results. A Google Transparency Report says numerous governments have requested to remove selected content; Twitter transparency report also has experienced such removal requests. This increase in requests received by Google and Twitter can be partially attributed to a large spike in the number of removal requests for reasons of national security (freedominfo.org, 2016). Out of the consensus list of 115 countries only 22 had some semblance of freedom of information laws or the equivalent.

Telecommunication and internet

Telecommunication and internet have again elevated broadcasting's accessibility to a larger audience. Internet connectivity has played an important role in expanding broadcasting reach to almost 95% in some countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region and Africa. Also, the mobile cellular subscriptions increased from 3.89 billion in 2012 to two-thirds of the world's population, with more than half of subscriptions located in Asia and the Pacific. The ITU has predicted this to rise to 5.69 billion users in 2020. Mitrov (2020) also attributes social distancing and quarantine measures for the two-fold increase in TV stations' ratings.

APEC economic leaders and ministers for telecommunications and information have set specific targets for universal access to ICT infrastructures and services. For example, the

Brunei Economic Leaders Declaration (2000) of TEL ministers and the Bangkok Declaration (2008) and the Okinawa Declaration (2010) of TEL Ministers. In addition, China as the host economy of APEC 2014, emphasized economic reform and growth, as well as strengthening connectivity and infra development in priorities of member countries. More specifically China proposed developing internet economy through enhanced ICT cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. High speed 5G connectivity has provided much needed tool for 'work from home' facilitation for the employment and educational sectors.

Gatekeeping and fact-checking

There are valid reasons for the loss of confidence in mainstream media among audience. Broadcasters have for some reason been disseminating conflicting reports despite the passage through gatekeeping. Government fact-checkers cannot justify their selection criteria, their systematic due process, which makes them vulnerable to criticism. Broadcasters' own misinformation has turned into disinformation, coupled with low level of critical thinking and a lack of news literacy, make it confusing for audience to discern the truth. A shift in media business models, the adoption of social media style reporting without efficient fact-checking, an unavoidable necessity during crisis period; malicious media actors and stakeholders are the roots for the generation of disinformation that feed into the growing forest of 'fake news'.

Gatekeeping and fact-checking starts with 'fake news' risk assessment. The spread of fake news can be extremely damaging to the broadcaster and the nation. In particular, China has full control over their mainstream media (except in two regions). On the contrary, India has no absolute control over their mainstream media (except One government station). Both countries have stringent gatekeeping and fact-checking mechanisms. Yet, positive engagement with audience is never an easy process to accomplish with the spread of falsehood. Falsehood is 70% more likely to be retweeted. According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), the emotions of drama inspired by fake news are the key reasons behind broadcasters' failure to engage their audience.

In this case, government gatekeeping has to resort to blocking twitter accounts of local people to enable the broadcast of 'true' information. But opposing voices from within and overseas IPs addresses prove to be a stumbling block, with the help of fake and video clips available widely on social media.

Audience are more likely to accept information that conforms to their world view, leading to the creation of echo chambers where closed groups of virtual friends reinforce a pre-existing perception of the world, no matter how flawed that is." (Editorial, Times of India, dated 18.12.2016).

Empirical Observations
False news is inherent in all societies. It is particularly pervasive in societies which lack general and critical public knowledge. The larger problem is the need to provide a wholesome, rounded education, in particular media literacy education that will address the woes of this

and the coming generations. Only then the spread of disinformation will be inconsequential or bear no effect.

Disinformation is a multi-faceted problem that encompasses economic, political, and cultural aspects. Technology alone cannot provide effective solution as in installing trained fact-checkers or relying on algorithm driven solutions.

Social media platforms, for example: Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms owners have answered before high level televised interrogations. They were all crafty at evading direct questions and admitted to some accountability. The plea of 'being neutral platforms' does not hold water anymore.

An ITU survey during the early period of the pandemic: March 16 to 20, 2020, reported watching more news coverage, watching more TV on broadcasting channels, watching more shows / films on streaming services and listening to more radio, were among the top 20 ways the public retrieved information and spent their 'locked-in' time (Jinane Karam, 2020). During this period, ITU also reported an average 21% rise in linear TV viewing time among audiences.

These findings were somewhat evident in Malaysia and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific countries. Audiences were kept up-to date through daily updates and special reports, live reports cross-overs from various hospitals and COVID 19 isolation and quarantine camps, breaking news coverage during news hour, Health Director-Generals and security Ministers authenticating daily official statements from the government. Regular reminders, promos and capsules to educate the public on the new norms and SOPs consistently to-date.

Broadcasters quickly adapted to the new situation by changing their modus operandi to distract the audience from what is keeping them indoors. New shows without studio audience, but with virtual experts from among the public and the audience appealing to their sensibilities creating more user-generated content (Túñez-López *et al.*, 2020), have now become popular. Celebrities were roped in to raise funds for those affected by the pandemic. Frontline workers were recognized and celebrated for their immense sacrifices. Broadcasters made huge changes to their programming, forsaking their advertising revenue, just to fit-in 'war-like' national campaigns.

Education of school and college going children were most affected, especially in countries with poor access to quality internet. The Asia-pacific and African countries were the most impacted who needed immediate help (UNICEF COVID 19 Educational Response Survey). National TV stations became the new learning platforms. In Malaysia and Punjab, India, satellite stations added ETV content to mainstream broadcasts in response to educational needs.

Conclusion
The paper has addressed the relevance of traditional broadcasting in the context of disinformation during the COVID 19 pandemic.

During this COVID 19 pandemic period, regular audience of broadcasting has been on the rise by about 21%. They accessed broadcast content through a variety of multimedia, made

available by high-speed internet. Audience's appetite for more and variety of content led them to scroll across platforms, thus also giving rise to social media and alternative entertainment content providers. With these changes, new listening and viewing patterns became apparent. Social distancing and quarantine measures during this period, have caused TV channel ratings to double after a long time.

Relevance of traditional or mainstream broadcasters can be further explained by the fact that audience are returning to the radio TV environment as it was before the emergence of social media in the 90s. The increase in ratings and reach can be partly attributed to the credibility of broadcasters from the widely used COVID-19 information, especially by government managed stations. They have gained a higher level of trust and reliability for their news broadcast. The trust in mainstream media is now considerably higher than social media networks. The adoption of new programming genre by broadcasters giving more space for audience's live engagement and expression that appeals to "audience by audience" provided a kind of core audience endorsement.

There is perhaps, limited research conducted from among broadcasters in the Asian-Pacific region. Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that the trends reported by global agencies, ITU, UNICEF and UNESCO, cannot be extrapolated to the Asian-Pacific region as well.

AIBD member countries broadcasters have certainly performed to the required standard operating procedures of the pandemic period, according priority to national well-being first, while achieving higher ratings and improved audience reach.

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