

# Health Information Crisis during COVID-19 in the South Asian Region: Challenges, Experiences, Resilience, and Collaborative Efforts

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## ABSTRACT

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is as much an information war as it is a medical war. Members from South Asia and the Asia Pacific countries share their experiences and challenges faced with collaborative responses for the ASIS&T Special Chapter funded project on “Dealing with COVID-19 and saving people’s lives in South Asia (SA) areas & beyond—A Health Informatics Promotion Project” awarded to the South Asia Chapter in 2021. The panel discusses the challenges faced within the context of geopolitical, socio-economic, religious, and cultural conditions prevalent within their countries. In the first 40 minutes, panel members narrate their own experiences by sharing their personal stories about this collaborative project and share the challenges of content creation and promotion from within the context of their respective countries. The next 30 minutes will be facilitated by the panel chair inviting a discussion between panel members and the audience to engage and come up with innovative ideas, discuss challenges in creating multilingual content and suggestions for improving the project outcome as well as shed light on initiating future health informatics project in similar regions. The last 20 minutes will culminate with the summarization of these collaborative experiences.

## KEYWORDS

Health Information Literacy, Covid-19 Infodemic, Collaborative Research, Health Informatics, South Asia

## INTRODUCTION

Health Information Literacy played a key role in dealing with the Covid-19 Infodemic. The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is as much an information war as it is a medical war that needs to be fought with scientifically proven medicines and evidence-based information. In a joint statement issued in the early part of the pandemic by the WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC (WHO, 2020), the Resolution stated that “managing the infodemic is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic”. This infodemic has resulted in an explosion of information—not all of which is accurate giving rise to a massive amount of misinformation (Muhammad et.al., 2022; Naeem & Bhatti, 2020; PAHO, 2020, IFLA, 2020). This was compounded by misinformation spread by influential public figures including some political leaders who chose to ignore the expert opinion (The Hindu, 2022) for example in Bangladesh, national-level political figures downplayed the threat of the virus and further fueled the spread of misinformation by passing statements like ‘the ruling party is stronger than coronavirus’ leading to mistrust in government initiatives (The Asian Age, 2020).

This overabundant and inaccurate information further resulted in adversely affecting people’s physical and mental health; increasing stigmatization and leading to poor observance of public health measures, thus reducing their effectiveness and endangering countries’ ability to stop the pandemic, and even losing lives (WHO, 2020).

## Problem Statement

This fight against misinformation and disinformation related to Covid-19 became more complex from the cultural, religious, and economic ethos of the South Asian (SA) region. The South Asia (SA) region comprises eight countries- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and the Maldives. Among the most densely populated regions with the typical resource constraints of the developing world, it has the second-highest confirmed COVID positive cases in India (Salman, et al, 2022). Efforts to curb the spread of the virus during the first and second waves of the pandemic were slow as the region grappled with low testing rates and low vaccinations influenced by low literacy rates, religious, political, cultural beliefs, and misinformation (Al-Zaman, 2021; Kanozia & Arya, 2021; The Wire, 2022).

Access to accurate covid information became a critical component of the fight against the pandemic. As most of these countries witnessed lockdown to varying degrees the major source of information became the mobile phone. The widespread penetration of mobile internet connectivity (93%) (Delaporte & Bahia, 2020) made access to information feasible for millions. But this access also became a source for spreading misinformation and disinformation. While the medical field has many approaches to collaborative work in fighting this pandemic, within the information science domain few studies at the individual country level (Alvarez-Risco et. al., 2020) and

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collaboration with social media influencers (Gisoni et al., 2022) offer some insights. There is hardly any literature indicating a cross-country collaborative effort to fight misinformation in the domain of library and information science.

This panel will shed light on the relationship achieved between COVID-19 misinformation and multilingual health information literacy through a collaborative approach. Although providing correct information is one of the most common strategies to fight health misinformation (see Facebook and YouTube's COVID-19 policy), health information literacy becomes critical in fighting against this misinformation (Patwa et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2020). The terms Health Literacy and Health Information Literacy are often used interchangeably with the former described as a “crucial tool” (Paakkari & Okan, 2020) giving the people the ability to “understand the medical information their caregivers give them or they find through the Internet and being able to use that information to make good decisions about their own course of care” (Paakkari & Okan, 2020; Schardt, 2011) making people health information literate.

As the world emerges from this crisis, this panel discussion will serve as an example of a collaborative response aimed at building a more information resilient society befitting the theme of the 85th ASIS&T Annual Meeting.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE PANEL**

Amidst the raging pandemic in April 2021, in response to a call for the ASIS&T Chapter Special Project Fund, volunteers from different chapters representing the South Asian countries of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan; from the Asia Pacific and the Europe chapter convened in a series of seven meetings from April to May 2021 to discuss and submit a project proposal on “Dealing with COVID-19 and saving people’s lives in South Asia (SA) areas & beyond—A health informatics promotion project”. The project was awarded 7000 USD and the ASIS&T Chapter Innovation Award for the South Asia Chapter in 2021.

The project team members from the South Asia Chapter are drawn from four SA countries characterized by cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. During the project, members shared their personal experiences and expertise, supported by members from the Asia Pacific Chapter with previous experience dealing with the deadly SARS virus.

Through a series of ongoing meetings which have now crossed more than 30+ beginning from June 2021 to May 2022, the project team successfully worked together despite challenges such as the long-standing geopolitical tensions (India and Pakistan), and economic crises affecting some of the participating member countries (Sri Lanka and Pakistan).

The team developed strategies to identify relevant topics to demystify many myths and rumors surrounding Covid-19; offer a conceptual understanding of Covid-related concepts using local accurate sources and languages. The team developed a series of nine informative videos, with each video created in English and translated into prominent languages- Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, and Sinhala languages spoken by most people respectively in each of the countries, thereby creating 45 videos. The team members convened to plan, execute, and promote the various informative videos published in five languages across the region.

The project has been featured on many national and international platforms including ‘Information matters’ ASIS&T, IFLA, and many professional platforms in the respective countries. A series of webinars on this project were organized in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. The project content scope has further been expanded by conducting an international digital story writing competition on AI, health, and COVID-related issues where more than 1000 participants joined this from 16 countries. In sum, this panel works as a platform for bringing out the potentialities of connecting and collaborating LIS professionals and researchers to create values by preparing COVID content in local languages for the community. While the COVID-19 pandemic has mushroomed the extent of health information on the Internet, and this makes it even more difficult for the people of the SA region because of the low literacy. Fighting the Coronavirus in local languages and making people aware by helping them to choose authentic covid health information through the SA YouTube channel is the major outcome of this panel. In addition, for uploading videos, YouTube's current requirements only need to ensure sensitivity and copyright issues and do not focus much on citing sources in the video (Yang, 2019).

### **PROPOSED PANEL**

#### **Goals**

The panel members from each of the participating Asian countries will share their experiences of:

- share personal experiences of Covid-19 and how they dealt with it.
- identifying accurate local and global content, especially concerning the socio-economic, religious, and cultural context from within their country.
- overcoming the challenges of making multilingual video content on the respective topics

- exploring various collaborations across borders, especially among certain countries with long-standing geopolitical tensions.
- identifying individuals including medical professionals and organizations for their inputs on content development and its promotion across the region.
- sharing their overall experiences and learnings from their involvement in this multi-country, multilingual collaborative project.

### Panelists

This 90-minute panel will be led by project team members (a) Bhakti Gala (India) Past-Chair, South Asia Chapter, (b) Md. Anwarul Islam (Bangladesh), Advisor, South Asia Chapter (c) Naresh Kumar Agarwal, President, ASIS&T and (d) Ruwan Gamage, Chair, ASIS&T South Asia Chapter

### *Biographies of Panelists*

**Bhakti Gala** is an Assistant Professor at the School of Library and Information Science, Central University of Gujarat, India, and is the past chair of the ASIS&T South Asia chapter. She is also the Chair-elect for ASIS&T SIGIII. She is the lead PI for ASIS&T Special Chapter Project Fund from SA Chapter in 2021-22 and has worked as a project manager for an international research project funded by OCLC and ALISE. She was awarded the 2022 ASIS&T James E Cretsos Leadership Award. She has published her research in international journals like *The Library Quarterly*, *Library and Information Science Research*, *Information Processing and Management*, and *First Monday*.

**Md. Anwarul Islam** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Information Science and Library Management, University of Dhaka. He received a Ph.D. from the School of Knowledge Science, JAIST, Japan. His primary research areas are KM, information behavior, and informetrics. He was a visiting fellow at iSchool, SLAIS@UBC, Canada; ACRC Fellow at NTU, Singapore and VLIR-UOS Scholar at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. He is a New Leaders Awardee of the ASIS&T and received the James M. Cretsos leadership award in 2021. He is now serving as Co-Chair of SIG-III, past chair of SIG-KM, and advisor of the South Asia Chapter of ASIS&T.

**Naresh Kumar Agarwal** is a Professor and Director of the Information Science & Technology Concentration at the School of Library & Information Science at Simmons University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Naresh's research area is information behavior and knowledge management. His first book 'Exploring Context in Information Behavior' was published by Morgan & Claypool in 2018. His second book was published in 2021 as 'Engineering to Ikigai' in South Asia and 'You know the glory, not the story' internationally. He has been a keynote/invited speaker at workshops/conferences in Bangladesh, France, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, South Africa, and USA. Naresh is the President of the Association for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T). At ASIS&T, he has held various leadership positions, including Co-Chairing its Annual Meeting in 2017 and founding the South Asia Chapter. In 2012, he was awarded the ASIS&T James M. Cretsos Leadership Award.

**Ruwan Gamage** is the current Chair of the South Asia Chapter of the ASIS&T and the Immediate Past President of the Sri Lanka Library Association. He is a Senior Lecturer at the National Institute of Library and Information Sciences, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and currently serves the Maldives National University on a teaching assignment until July 2023. Dr. Gamage completed his Ph.D. in Library Science from Wuhan University, China in 2008. His research interests include public library policy and information organization. In 2009, the CILIP awarded him the ILIG award for making a difference in libraries and information centers outside the UK.

### Structure

Project lead Bhakti Gala will introduce and moderate the panel discussion. In the first half of the session (40 mins), panel members will share their own experiences of the pandemic, how they dealt with it, challenges of the content creation process during the COVID-19 and sharing of their personal stories about this collaborative project from the context of their respective countries. The second half of the session (30 mins) will be facilitated by the panel chair inviting a discussion between panel members and the participants from the audience. The interaction between panelists and audiences will help to engage and come up with some innovative ideas, discuss challenges in creating multilingual content and suggestions for improving the project outcome as well as shed light on initiating the future health informatics project in some other regions. The last (20 mins) will culminate with the summarization of these collaborative experiences.

### EXPECTED OUTCOME

The panel's discussion will create professional awareness among the audience about the collaborative practices of health information literacy instruction through the creation of public health promotional content using authentic information sources in multilingual languages and present solutions to challenges. The presented arguments during the discussion will create a research niche for researchers to conduct empirical studies and can also be preserved as indigenous professional knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed panel objectives and ASIS&T 85th annual meeting theme “Crisis, Transition, Resilience: Re-imagining an information resilient society” are closely aligned together. Information crisis including misinformation, disinformation, fake news, etc. specifically during the recent pandemic time calls for an information resilient society. Therefore, it is high time to discuss, negotiate and plan some strategies for the present and future of the profession. One of the major elements of the discipline of information science is information use and its management, therefore appropriate use of health information is only possible through effective knowledge and skill set, namely health information literacy. The proposed panel’s expected outcome will provide a more collaborative, inclusive, and resilient information-sharing roadmap for researchers, educators, and practitioners.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project team members gratefully acknowledge the grant from the ASIS&T Chapter Special Project Fund (<https://www.asist.org/2021/06/17/chapter-special-project-funds-awarded/>) and the support of members from South Asia, Asia Pacific, and European Chapter for their contribution towards the project.

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