



Information Disorder and Mainstream Media in Sri Lanka

A Case Study

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1. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of research on information disorder¹ focuses on social media as the source, producer and distributor of false content. Within this research, mainstream media² is often positioned as an inadvertent distributor or amplifier of false and harmful content, not as a producer of it (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 96; Philips, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 25). Similarly, research on the problem of information disorder within Sri Lanka often focuses on social media as a producer of it. In Sri Lanka, only 37% of the people use the internet, and only 61% of internet users use social media (Amarasinghe et al., 2019, May 22, pp. 46, 74). Meanwhile, 51.9% of the population reads newspapers, and 91% watches television (Kantar Lanka Market Research Bureau, 2017). In a country where mainstream media has a far greater reach than social media, it is important to examine mainstream media's role in the production of information disorder and its consequences.

The production and impact of information disorder in Sri Lanka's mainstream media is perhaps not focused on due to two likely reasons. The first reason is the perceived credibility of mainstream media. Mainstream media is linked to larger organizational structures with editorial boards that are expected to verify sources and facts to meet a standard of credibility. The second reason is impunity. Adequate checks are expected to be in place to prevent unethical media practices. However, accountability mechanisms for Sri Lanka's mainstream media are ineffective. On the one hand, the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL)—an independent, self-regulatory body for print media—lacks legal powers to act against unethical media practices. On the other hand, the Sri Lanka Press Council (SLPC) wields legal power up to and including allowing "for imprisonment of persons for certain publications" (Legal Team - MOM Sri Lanka, 2018, p. 40). Due to the extent of legal measures allowed by the SLPC law, it is perceived to facilitate "authoritarian abuses" (Johnson, 2015, July 16). As it can be easily abused, it is not a viable regulatory body for instances of information disorder. Meanwhile, TV and radio are regulated by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC). However, this institution largely deals with spectrum allocation as opposed to unethical media practices. The combined effect of perceived credibility and impunity can make information disorder in the mainstream media particularly dangerous. The production and impact of information disorder in Sri Lanka's mainstream media is further exacerbated by the media's dual presence both online and offline. By maintaining a significant presence in both domains, the information disorder in mainstream media possibly reaches a wider audience than social media.

This study attempts to contribute to literature that analyzes the role of Sri Lanka's mainstream media as a producer *and* distributor of information disorder. For this purpose, a case study approach is used to evaluate reporting on Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi.

¹ This term is further detailed in the Defining 'Information Disorder' section.

² In the context of this study, mainstream media generally refers to widely consumed TV channels, print media and radio stations. The specific media outlets selected for the purposes of this study are detailed in the Methodology section.

The study focuses on the Sri Lankan mainstream media's role in three parts. First, it examines the phenomenon of information disorder in a global and Sri Lankan context. The case study of media reportage on Dr. Shafi is located within this broader phenomenon. The study next presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of five weeks of monitoring primetime TV and press news. Second, it analyzes the impact of the information disorder surrounding Dr. Shafi. Finally, the study examines responses by the government, media and media regulatory bodies to the production of information disorder in this specific case.

2. PHENOMENON OF INFORMATION DISORDER IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

2.1 Context

2.1.1 Defining 'Information Disorder'

'Information disorder' is a term used to explain the complex phenomenon of the production and dissemination of erroneous information. It is sometimes referred to as 'fake news' or 'disinformation.' This definition was selected based on the Council of Europe's report on information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20), which establishes a robust theoretical framework to address the lack of precision in the language used to discuss the phenomenon. This framework is comprehensive and is cited in academic papers on types of information disorder (Ireton, & Posetti, 2018; Kaur et al., 2019; Reppell & Shein, 2019, p. 3). The Council's report identifies three constituents of information disorder, which rely on two factors: the truth value of the information and the intent behind publicizing the information. These are:

- 1) Disinformation: Information that is false, known to be false and deliberately shared to harm a person, social group, organization or country;
- 2) Misinformation: Information that is false, and not shared with the intention of causing harm, and;
- 3) Malinformation: Information that is true and shared to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.

The report also identifies three phases of information disorder. The phases describe the process information disorder goes through.

Phases of information disorder are:

1. Creation: The message is created.
2. Production: The message is turned into a media product.
3. Distribution: The message is distributed or made public.

This study draws from and engages with these definitions and uses them to analyze a selected case study.

2.1.2 Research on Information Disorder: Global and Local Contexts

A lot of research on information disorder focuses on social media being the creator, producer and distributor of false content, thereby participating in all three phases of information disorder. Meanwhile, discussions on information disorder often position mainstream media as participating in the third phase, i.e., a distributor/amplifier (Philips, 2018). Mainstream media is often perceived as susceptible to inadvertently running falsified content maliciously developed on social media (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 96). For instance, the Council of Europe's report on information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 25) states, "The role of the mainstream media as agents in amplifying (intentionally or not) fabricated or

misleading content is crucial to understanding information disorder. Fact-checking has always been fundamental to quality journalism, but the techniques used by hoaxers and those attempting to disseminate dis-information have never been this sophisticated." Similarly, First Draft, an organization dedicated to tackling information disorder, positions mainstream media as, "woefully unprepared to tackle the increasingly effective and dangerous tactics deployed by those intent on disrupting the public sphere" (Wardle, 2018).

In Sri Lanka, mainstream media has a greater reach than social media (Amarasinghe et al., 2019, May 22, pp. 46, 74; Kantar Lanka Market Research Bureau, 2017). Despite this reach, research on information disorder often focuses more on social media as a source and driver than mainstream media in Sri Lanka as well. This focus is often supported by the fact that information disorder, coupled with hate speech on social media in Sri Lanka, has contributed to a pattern of violence and antagonism towards minorities (Samaratunga & Hattotuwa, 2014). For instance, social media was used as a tool of information disorder and hate speech targeting Muslims during 2018 – 2019 (Taub & Fisher, 2018).

The Sri Lankan government also often focuses on social media, restricting it in times of increased tensions (Funke & Benkelman, 2019), while overlooking the role played by mainstream media. This oversight is harmful for two reasons. First, it undermines several occasions where Sri Lanka's mainstream media has acted as a producer of information disorder. Second, it overlooks the consequences of information disorder produced by mainstream media.

The mainstream media's role in producing information disorder has had a negative impact in Sri Lanka. For example, as highlighted by Ethics Eye (2019, November 13), in the week leading up to the 2019 Presidential Election, three well-established media outlets, *Aruna*, *Mawbima* and *Ceylon Today*, carried a false statement attributed to an MP of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) M.A. Sumanthiran. The newspapers claimed that Sumanthiran had stated, "the Sinhalese can be defeated only by voting for Sajith [Premadasa]." This claim was published amidst allegations of a 'secret pact' between Sumanthiran's party, the TNA, and presidential candidate Sajith Premadasa. It factored into existing ethnic fault lines, which were heightened prior to the election, by suggesting that Premadasa was politically compromised and would mainly work for the betterment of the Tamil minority. The veracity of this claim was subsequently countered by Ethics Eye—a social media platform dedicated to improving media ethics.

Similarly, popular channel *Hiru TV* misreported United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) MP A.H.M Fowzie's statement. According to the channel, Fowzie had stated that to "protect the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Gotabaya Rajapaksa should be killed" (Ranawana, 2019, October 25). Fowzie debunked *Hiru TV*'s claim and clarified his statement. He mentioned that Rajapaksa should be defeated at the presidential polls to save the SLFP—as several party members were joining the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which had fielded Rajapaksa as its candidate. This serious claim was another example of the production of information disorder by the mainstream media. This type of information disorder is often

seen in the mainstream media in Sri Lanka. The consequences of the production of information disorder by the mainstream media are far reaching, especially in a country with a history of ethnic conflict. Despite the impact, the media is rarely held accountable for its failure to meet ethical standards or for the harm it causes to society.

2.1.3 The Dr. Shafi Case Study: A Trial-By-Media

Having outlined the extent of information disorder produced by Sri Lanka's mainstream media, this section evaluates this phenomenon through the case of Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi, known widely as Dr. Shafi. This case study was selected based on the significant public and political interest it generated and the volume of reportage surrounding it, allowing for an in-depth study. This section provides the context for the case study and a brief description of Dr. Shafi.

Context of Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is still recovering from a nearly three-decade conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the state. According to Gunatilleke (2015), despite the war ending, "ethnic and religious violence has continued to take place in the country. Post-war discourses have produced fresh tensions and fault lines and have fostered an environment in which attacks on religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians, have taken place with impunity." The post-war years have particularly been marked by a resurgence of animosity and violence against the country's Muslim minority.

Following the Easter Sunday attacks of April 2019,³ which were reportedly perpetrated by suicide bombers connected to the Nation of Thowheed Jamath (NTJ) organization, the insecurities felt by segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist population increased. Incidents of violence towards Muslims and Muslim-owned property arose in the weeks that followed. Some of these incidents included widescale riots in Kurunegala and Gampaha. Largescale suspicion arose towards Muslims, and they were subjected to economic, socio-cultural and political policing. In the aftermath, the government took steps to ban face coverings, including burqas and niqabs. Muslim-owned businesses were boycotted, and Muslim politicians were asked to resign by certain Sinhala-Buddhist segments. The Dr. Shafi case arose in this context, one month after the attacks.

The Dr. Shafi Case Study

Dr. Shafi was a Senior House Officer in Gynecology and Obstetrics at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital (KTH). He was a member of the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), which campaigned under the United National Party (UNP) at the 2015 General Election. He secured 54,000 preferential votes and placed 8th in the list of candidates on the basis of preferential votes received. However, he was not elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) as the UNP only obtained seven seats in the Kurunegala District, in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka. After his election defeat, Shafi reportedly appealed to the Ministry of Health to be

³ The bombing of three churches and three luxury hotels on 21 April 2019 by an Islamic extremist group, resulting in the deaths of 259 people.

reinstated at the hospital. Following a cabinet vote, he was reportedly reinstated (Perera, 2019, May 28).

On 23 May 2019, the *Divaina*⁴ newspaper reported that the police had commenced investigations on an unnamed doctor, who was reportedly a prominent member of “a Thowheed Jamath organization.” The doctor was reported to have “illegally sterilized” more than 4,000 Sinhala-Buddhist women after caesarean operations. On the same day, Prof. Channa Jayasumana from the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka shared the name and picture of Shafi in relation to the *Divaina* article. On 24 May, Shafi was arrested over charges of earning assets through suspicious means. The following day, the Hospital Director of the KTH Dr. Sarath Weerabandara convened a media briefing. At the briefing, he requested women who suspected that they had been illegally sterilized by Shafi to lodge complaints against him. According to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) report (2019), over the course of the following weeks, several hundred women lodged complaints against Shafi with the hospital and the CID. The CID’s report eventually noted that the sterilization-related claims were untrue, as were the claims of terrorist links and illegal assets. However, the media had already widely reported on the story without substantiating its claims.

⁴ *Divaina* weekly (Sunday edition) reaches approx. 6.88 % of national readers, whereas *Divaina* daily has a readership share of 1.25%. This totals to 8.8%. (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017, *Divaina*)

Timeline of the Dr. Shafi case study

24 May 2019

- Press quotes Police Spokesperson Ruwan Gunasekara saying that he had not received any complaints and that an investigation had only been launched into an incident pertaining to a doctor from Kurunegala on allegations of acquiring a large amount of assets
- Press reports that Speaker Karu Jayasuriya had requested the CID to investigate on the truth behind the *Divaina* article

27 May 2019

- Press reports that the Acting IGP C.D. Wickramaratne has handed over details pertaining to the investigation on Shafi to the CID
- Press reports that Director of the KTH, Dr. Weerabandara had requested mothers to lodge complaints if they have suspicions that they have been physically affected during caesarean surgeries conducted by Shafi
- Press reports that Gunasekara requested mothers to submit complaints to the CID on suspicions of sterilisation surgeries

23 May 2019

- *Divaina* publishes an article with the headline "Thowheed Jamath doctor sterilised 4,000 Sinhala Buddhist mothers after caesarean surgeries."
- Prof. Channa Jayasumana reveals Dr. Shafi's identity via his Facebook account

25 May 2019

- Shafi is arrested for acquiring assets through suspicious means

29 May 2019

- Press reports that between 50 and 123 complaints were lodged about Shafi
- Press reports of a protest in Kurunegala against Shafi, demanding zero political interference into the investigations

Timeline of the Dr. Shafi case study

- 29 May 2019 (Cont.)**

 - A six-member committee is appointed by the Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Nutrition & Indigenous Medicine (MoH) Wasantha Perera to investigate complaints filed against Shafi
 - Press reports that the entire KTH staff has rejected the request made to testify before the committee appointed by the MoH to investigate allegations levelled against Shafi
- 30 May 2019**

 - Press reports that the CID has initiated an investigation into the allegations levelled against Shafi and that a group from the CID had left for Kurunegala to conduct the investigation
- 5 June 2019**

 - Press reports that the interim report on the initial investigation into the complaints on Shafi of the committee appointed by the MoH was submitted to Wasantha Perera
- 7 June 2019**

 - Press reports that 421 complaints were lodged against Shafi
- 8 June 2019**

 - Press reports that 700-835 complaints were lodged against Dr. Shafi
- 22 - 23 June 2019**

 - Press reports that between 1000 and 1042 complaints were lodged against Shafi
- 26 June 2019**

 - Press reports that Attorney-at-Law Rushdie Habeeb files a Fundamental Rights petition to abolish the detention order on Shafi who was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The petition also states that Shafi's assets were earned through legal businesses
- 27 June 2019**

 - CID presents a 210-page report before the Kurunegala Magistrate Sampath Kariyawasam and states that according to the investigations conducted thus far it has not been revealed that Shafi has damaged fallopian tubes while conducting caesarean surgeries. CID also states that Shafi will be further detained under the PTA and two private banks will be examined in relation to Shafi's assets
- 25 July 2019**

 - Shafi is granted bail by the Kurunegala Magistrate's Court

2.1.4 Methodology

Prior to presenting the quantitative and qualitative findings that emerge from monitoring media reportage on the Dr. Shafi case, it may be important to explain the methodology used for such monitoring. This study includes the collection of primary data from mainstream media reports and the analysis of secondary literature. The definition of mainstream media in the context of this study is limited to TV, print, and radio. A representative data sample, only containing data from primetime TV news and print media, was collected. Collection was restricted based on public availability of reportage.

TV channels and newspapers were selected on the basis of viewership and readership (Media Ownership Monitor, n.d.). In print media, the four most read Sinhala and Tamil newspapers and the three most read English newspapers were selected. In TV, every national news channel with primetime news segments available online was selected. This sample was also representative of the three main languages in Sri Lanka, i.e., Sinhala, Tamil, and English (see Table 1).

Table 1: Media Monitored

Mainstream Media	Language		
	Sinhala	English	Tamil
Television	(i) <i>Hiru TV</i> (ii) <i>TV Derana</i> (iii) <i>Sirasa TV</i>	(i) <i>TV 1</i> (ii) <i>Ada Derana</i>	(i) <i>Shakthi TV</i>
Print (weekday and weekend editions)	(i) <i>Divaina</i> (ii) <i>Lankadeepa</i> (iii) <i>Mawbima</i> (iv) <i>Silumina/Dinamina</i>	(i) <i>Sunday Observer/Daily News</i> (ii) <i>Sunday Times/Daily Mirror</i> (iii) <i>The Island</i>	(i) <i>Virakesari</i> (ii) <i>Thinakkural</i> (iii) <i>Thinakaran/Thinakaran</i> <i>Vaaramanjari</i> (iv) <i>Tamil Mirror</i>

The above news sources were monitored for a period of five weeks, from 23 May 2019 to 30 June 2019. These dates covered the production and distribution of the information disorder, including the peak of the discourse, Shafi's arrest and responses to it, and the majority of discussions over the legal proceedings. This time period was selected to evaluate the media's immediate responses to the allegations.

All statements within the sample that were relevant or considered to be of relevance to the case study were maintained in a database. These statements were coded and organized into six categories:

1. False narratives – proved false sometime after reporting
2. Misleading content – true information presented in a way that makes readers infer false information

3. False connection – disconnects between the headline/associated images and the article in a misleading way
4. Direct disinformation – provably false at the time of reporting
5. Counternarratives – statements questioning or contradicting the false claims about Shafi
6. General news reporting on Shafi's case

Categorization limitations

From a practical standpoint, it is difficult to determine with certainty the intent of anyone producing information. The difficulty in outlining intent makes it challenging to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation as defined in Section 2.1, whose chief distinction relies on intent. It also poses a challenge in identifying malinformation as defined in Section 2.1. Furthermore, this framework does not adequately account for instances where an agent shares information that is presumed to be true (yet turns out to be false) and is likely to cause harm.

Therefore, the label 'direct disinformation' was only extended to statements that were proved to be false at the time of publishing. Any statement that was proven to be false after publishing was classified as a 'false narrative' and not as misinformation or disinformation, as it could be argued that the reporter had no knowledge that the statement was untrue. However, it is possible that some statements classified as 'false narratives,' 'misleading content' or 'false connections' were published with negative intent and can therefore be classified as disinformation. Similarly, it is possible that some reports categorized as 'general news reporting' were published with negative intent and can be categorized as malinformation.

2.2 Findings

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to assess the primary data collected through media monitoring. The quantitative findings demonstrate the extent of information disorder on Shafi and its many forms. The qualitative findings demonstrate what elements were used by the mainstream media to produce information disorder.

2.2.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 2: Number of reports on Shafi

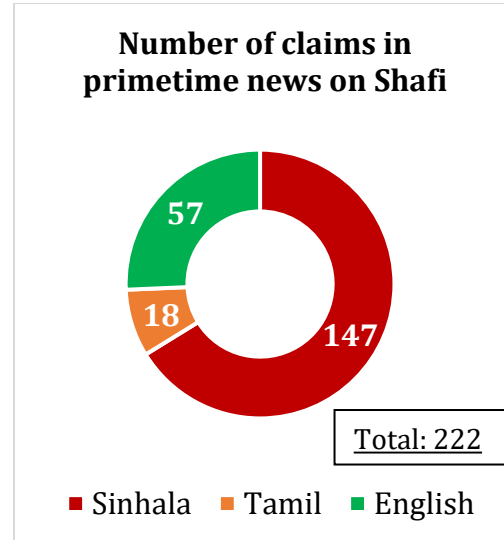
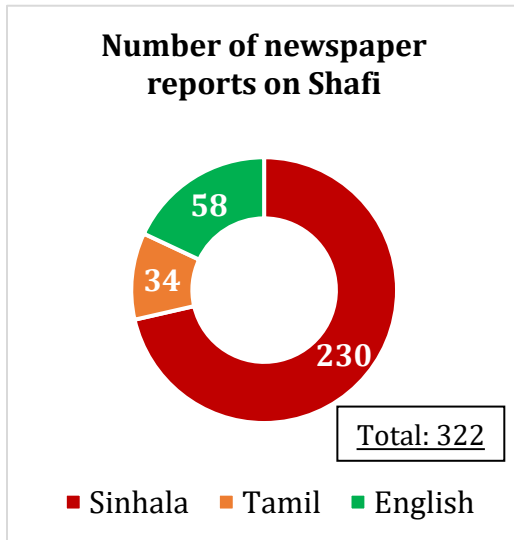


Table 3: Press category breakdown⁵

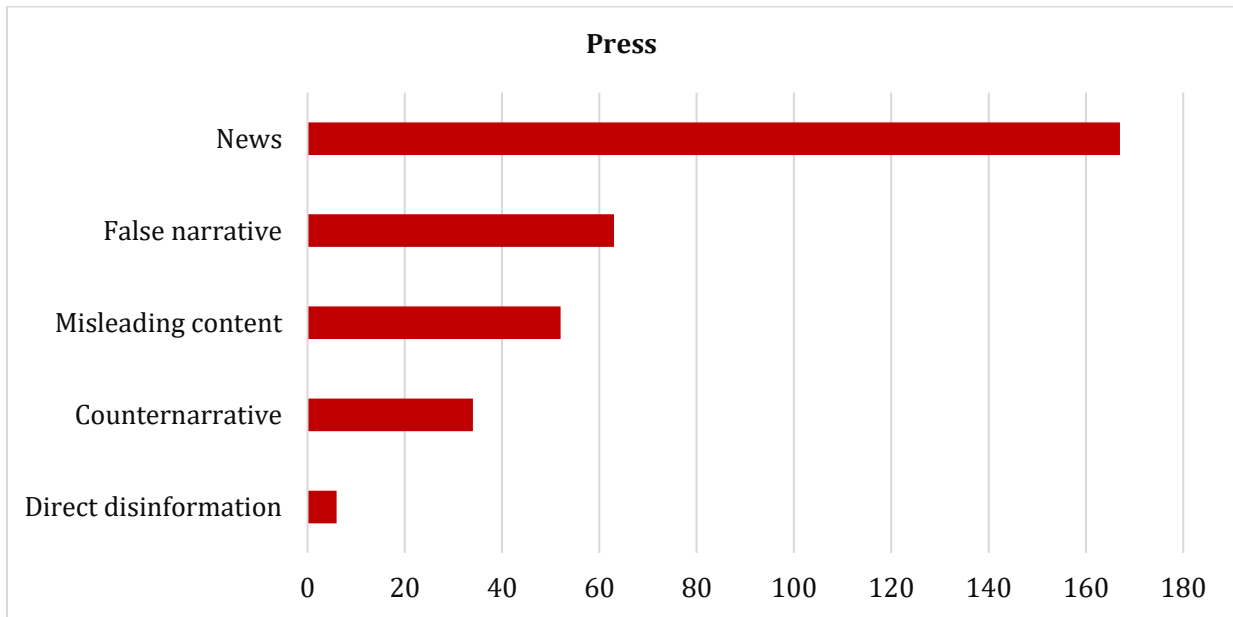
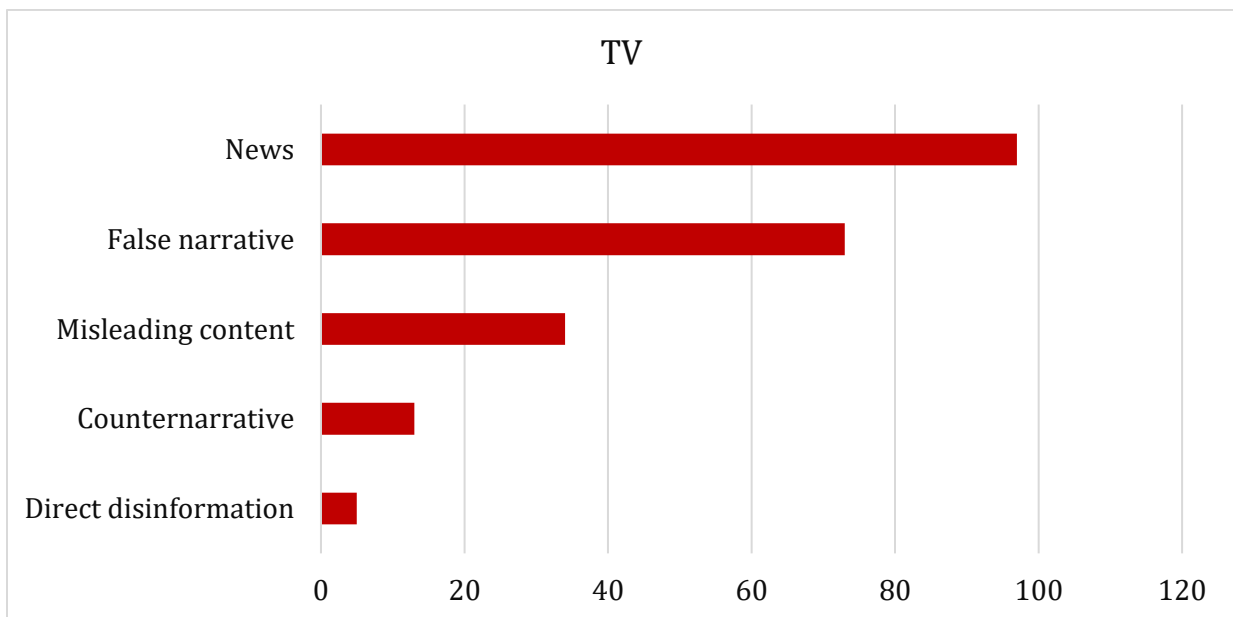


Table 4: TV category breakdown



Detailed findings from each category are expounded below.

⁵ No reportage fell into the category of ‘false connection’ in the press or on TV. False connections are usually utilized to drive traffic and clicks to media content. Therefore, it was possibly not prevalent in mainstream media because audiences received reportage through mediums that rarely use web traffic or clicks to measure success, as online content is simply a replication of printed and TV content.

False Narratives

False Narratives		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	55	53
Tamil	2	2
English	6	18

Table 5.1: False narratives

All reports that were proved false sometime after reporting were classified as false narratives. Reports under this category featured claims about Shafi performing sterilizations with little or no attempts to check the veracity of these claims. There was also no indication that these claims may be false by referring to them as ‘alleged.’

Misleading Content

Misleading Content		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	41	24
Tamil	3	1
English	8	9

Table 5.2: Misleading content

All reports that presented true information in a way that led readers to false conclusions were classified as misleading content. Most reports in this category strongly suggested that Shafi was arrested due to performing ‘illegal sterilizations.’ This suggestion disregarded the grounds of his arrest being the acquisition of assets through reportedly suspicious means and possible links to terrorism.

Other reports in this category implied Shafi’s guilt by connecting certain related claims. For example, one article stated, “It was reported that several members of the Ministry of Health are trying to save the gynecologist and obstetrician Dr. Shafi Siyabdeen who is under arrest” (Thathsara, 2019, May 30). Such reports implied Shafi’s guilt by emphasizing undue political interference in the attempts to ‘save’ him.

Direct Disinformation

Direct Disinformation		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	4	4
Tamil	0	0
English	2	1

Table 5.3: Direct disinformation

All reports that contained information that was proven false at the time of reporting were classified as direct disinformation. By definition, disinformation is false information that is deliberately shared with the intent to harm. Given the difficulty in proving a reporter's intent, as elucidated in the methodology, there were very few statements in this category.

Counternarratives

Counternarratives		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	11	7
Tamil	4	2
English	19	4

Table 5.4: Counternarratives

All reports that contained statements questioning or debunking the false claims about Shafi were classified as counternarratives. The media carried two types of counternarratives. The more common type tried to logically counter the claims. The less common type drew attention to the underlying anti-Muslim sentiments surrounding the claims.

General News Reporting

General News Reporting		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	119	59
Tamil	25	13
English	23	25

Table 5.5: General news reporting

The majority of items on the topic of Shafi were classified as news. These spanned a range of topics and did not overlap with any of the above categories.

2.2.2 Qualitative Findings

The continuous reporting of information disorder in this case resulted in the production of an overarching false narrative: a 'Muslim' doctor of gynecology and obstetrics, i.e., Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi, intentionally and 'illegally sterilized' thousands of Sinhala-Buddhist women while carrying out caesarean operations to 'exterminate' the Sinhala race.

A qualitative analysis of the monitored data suggests that mainstream media not only acted as an amplifier of this narrative, but also as a producer. The message was first disseminated through mainstream media, particularly Sinhala-language media, and not through social media. The analysis also suggests that the mainstream media produced the false narrative by using four interconnected elements: building on pre-existing narratives; establishing legitimacy through authoritative sources; creating an emotional connection through sympathy, sensationalism and justice; and giving prominence to the story. By using these elements, the media turned false information into a narrative that became a successful media product. These elements may be viewed as a framework through which to examine all information disorder, across both mainstream and social media.

Element 1: Building on pre-existing narratives

From the outset, several articles on the Dr. Shafi case were linked to pre-existing negative narratives on Sri Lanka's Muslim community. These articles drew from two main pre-existing fears: (1) that Muslims are strategically 'exterminating' the Sinhala-Buddhist population by trying to render Sinhala-Buddhist women infertile, and (2) that Islamist terrorism is a significant threat to the country, especially in the aftermath of the Easter attacks (Verité Research, 2019a). Notably, it was mainly the Sinhala media that featured element 1. The English and Tamil media only used pre-existing narratives when necessary to report on the proceedings of the investigation.

Anti-minority sentiments and violence that have led to attacks against Muslims have been attributed to a long-standing existential insecurity prevalent among segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority population by scholars. One such existential insecurity includes the fear that the Muslim population is increasing, while the Sinhala population is decreasing (Gunatilleke, 2018, p. 74). It is in this context that the first fear arose.

The fear of "extermination" through a variety of means, has been seen in information disorder campaigns in the past. For example, anti-Muslim riots in Ampara in 2018 were fueled by social media posts that alleged 'sterilization pills' were mixed with the food sold at Muslim-owned restaurants (Gunaratna, 2018). These attacks were led by Buddhist militant groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and the Mahason Balakaya.

In this vein, in addition to reporting on the alleged surgical 'sterilization,' the articles supplemented the main story with other accusations. For example, a report from *Mawbima*

states, "It has been said that Dr. Shafi provided *pani walalu*, *boondi* and *wattalappan* (food items) to a canteen in a major girl's school in Kurunegala... Since the police are also investigating the matter, we thought that this cannot be simple and were concerned about it. Information on mixing medicine that causes sterilization in food items has emerged from time to time for years" (Poramadala, 2019, June 9). These reports draw on the existing fears and beliefs of the Sinhalese of the existence of 'sterilization pills' and attempts to sterilize women through food items. These pre-existing narratives on sterilization were then used to lend credibility to the claims about the doctor, strengthening the misinformation.

The second fear was apparent from the outset of this case. The very first article published on the incident was titled, "Thowheed Jamath doctor sterilized 4,000 Sinhala-Buddhist mothers after caesarian surgeries" (Randunu, 2019, May 23). By using an association with the (Nation of) Thowheed Jamath, which was proscribed as a terrorist organization following the Easter Attacks, the report contextualized this doctor within the narrative of Muslim jihadists in the aftermath of the attacks. This article, and many others that followed, further entrenched the idea of Shafi as a terrorist and used existing narratives around religious extremism that surfaced after the attacks to legitimize the allegations against Shafi.

The media also included comparisons between Shafi and Zahran Hashim, who is considered to have been the orchestrator of the Easter attacks. For example, *Mawbima* reported UPFA MP Udaya Gammanpila stating "Shafi is a greater terrorist than Zahran" (Udukumbura, 2019, June 25). Reports like this relied on existing knowledge of Zahran Hashim, as the feared terrorist who executed one of the deadliest attacks in Sri Lanka, and connected it with Shafi, who was framed as a collaborator or even bigger threat.

This contextualization of Shafi as one part of an organized effort to strengthen Islamist terrorism and carry out 'genocide' of the Sinhala people helped make the sterilization claims seem believable and consumable. Such contextualization further entrenched the information disorder being produced by the media.

Element 2: Establishing legitimacy through authoritative sources

When reporting on the Dr. Shafi case, the media of every language and medium featured the voices of highly authoritative sources. Sources such as high-level political actors and religious leaders are respected by society and expected to meet a higher standard of reliability. Similarly, medical professionals are expected to have a more credible understanding of medical practice, while other authorities such as lawyers and police are believed to be credible sources on legality. Therefore, by featuring the responses of these individuals, the media strengthened the legitimacy and trust in the information disorder.

However, due to Shafi's political involvement, religion, ethnicity and position at the KTH, it is possible that even trusted sources had their own intentions. Despite possible vested interests, several media reports quoted statements made by MPs, Buddhist monks

and doctors, both directly addressing the allegations and providing complementary narratives.

In the political sphere for example, *Divaina* reported that UPFA MP Rohitha Abeygunawardana stated, "he and the SLPP offer respect and are thankful to *Divaina* for the revelation of Dr. Shafi Siyabdeen" (Balasuriya, 2019, May 28). The UPFA and SLPP are political rivals of the UNP, the party Shafi campaigned under. However, the MP's statement was likely used to bolster the paper's claim and strengthen the false narrative of sterilizations.

Similarly, in the political and religious sphere, *Divaina* reported that Gampaha District MP Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thera "stated that allegations levelled against Shafi have been covered up by the government", (Dharmasena, 2019, June 25) implying that the allegations were credible and needed to be concealed. Ven. Rathana Thera is a Buddhist monk and politician who is considered a representative of the Sinhala-Buddhist force (Verité Research, 2019b). As he is a trusted figure among a Sinhala-Buddhist constituency, reports such as these had a higher likelihood of enhancing the believability of the claims.

In the medical sphere, the media quoted several doctors engaging with the accusations against Shafi. For example, *Mawbima* reported Prof. Channa Jayasumana of the medical faculty of the Rajarata University, stating that "there are 13 [Muslim] doctors from nine other hospitals who have conducted organized sterilization surgeries" (Ranaweera, 2019, June 21). Professor Jayasumana is not a medical doctor but is a medical researcher who is a member of an influential organization called Viyathmaga, which is associated with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sinhala-Buddhist values. Such reports not only built the credibility of the information disorder, they also fed into pre-existing narratives of injustices carried out by Muslims towards Sinhalese.

When quoting medical professionals, the media also added 'scientific' explanations to 'prove' the possibility of sterilization surgeries taking place. One such example is the reference to the fragility of the fallopian tubes (Palandeniya, 2019, June 2). These types of reports further strengthened the scientific credibility of the sterilization claims and helped entrench the portrayal of Shafi as a 'villain.'

Element 3: Creating an emotional connection through sympathy, sensationalism and injustice

The media also provoked emotive responses from its audiences in a manner that legitimized Shafi as a 'real' threat. While the scientific language used by authoritative sources led the false narrative to seem rational, the emotional language led it to *feel* believable. The media mainly inspired three emotions.

The first was grief, which was inspired by drawing sympathy. The media of every language featured the narratives of mothers who complained of their inability to conceive after having caesareans carried out by Shafi. The English media only presented these narratives on TV news. The Tamil media presented very few on TV and in print. However,

the Sinhala media featured these narratives regularly, especially in print, and provided detailed descriptions. For example, an article in *Divaina* reported, "These mothers with tear-filled eyes complained that even though they tried for another child, they could not have a second child" (Randunu, 2019, May 23). Such detailed reporting, coupled with clips of mothers crying on primetime news, provoked sympathetic responses from audiences.

The second was fear, which was inspired by sensationalizing the narrative. Particularly the Sinhala media used emotionally heightened language to describe the alleged sterilizations. 15 reports in the Sinhala press and one in English referred to the alleged events as a "massacre" (Abeydeera, 2019, June 9a, June 9b; Alahakoon & Perera, 2019, June 23; Arasakularatne, 2019, June 14; *Dosthara Shafi*, 2019, May 30; Duminda, 2019, June 19, June 28; Fernando, 2019, June 13; Gunaratne, 2019, June 2; Jinapriya, 2019, June 5, June 23, June 25; Munasinghe, 2019, May 29; Ratnaweera, 2019, June 23; Weerasekara, 2019, June 2; Wimalasurendra, 2019, June 12). Several media also used the word "genocide" (Ada Derana, 2019, May 29, 20:22 – 20:27; Gamage, 2019, May 29; Gunaratne, 2019, June 2; Gunathilake, 2019, June 02; Ranaweera, 2019, June 14; Warnakulasuriya, 2019, June 02). For example, *Mawbima* reported that the National Organization for the Protection of Patients' Rights stated that this was "a massacre similar to the scenario that occurred during World War II, under Hitler's army" (Munasinghe, 2019, May 29). The use of this kind of language sensationalized the accusations and stoked the fear felt by the Sinhalese.

The third was anger, which was inspired by appealing to a sense of justice. For example, *Divaina* quoted UPFA MP Wimal Weerawansa stating, "even though a month has passed after the sterilization incident, the mothers who were victimized due to the incident have not received justice" (*Winditha mawwarunta*, 2019, June 14). Reports like these, including those that used incendiary rhetoric of genocide and massacres, appealed to a sense of anger at the extent of injustice. These types of articles too featured prominently in the Sinhala media.

By inspiring grief, fear and anger, the media was able make audiences connect to the narrative on an emotional level. This connection helped establish the idea that Shafi was a 'real' threat to the Sinhalese, which in turn lent credibility to the narrative of his guilt.

Element 4: Giving prominence to the story

In addition to the three narrative elements analyzed, the prominence given by the media to the respective case contributed towards the production of the false narrative on Shafi. By overwhelming the daily news cycle with regular reportage, new components and details on the Dr. Shafi case, the media routinely produced the false narrative. The prominence given comprised two factors: volume and prioritization.

The sheer volume of coverage on Shafi in the media, coupled with the relative importance afforded to that coverage, likely contributed to the spread of information disorder. Having Shafi's name consistently presented in connection with the notion of 'illegal sterilizations' may have strengthened the audience's association between Shafi and the

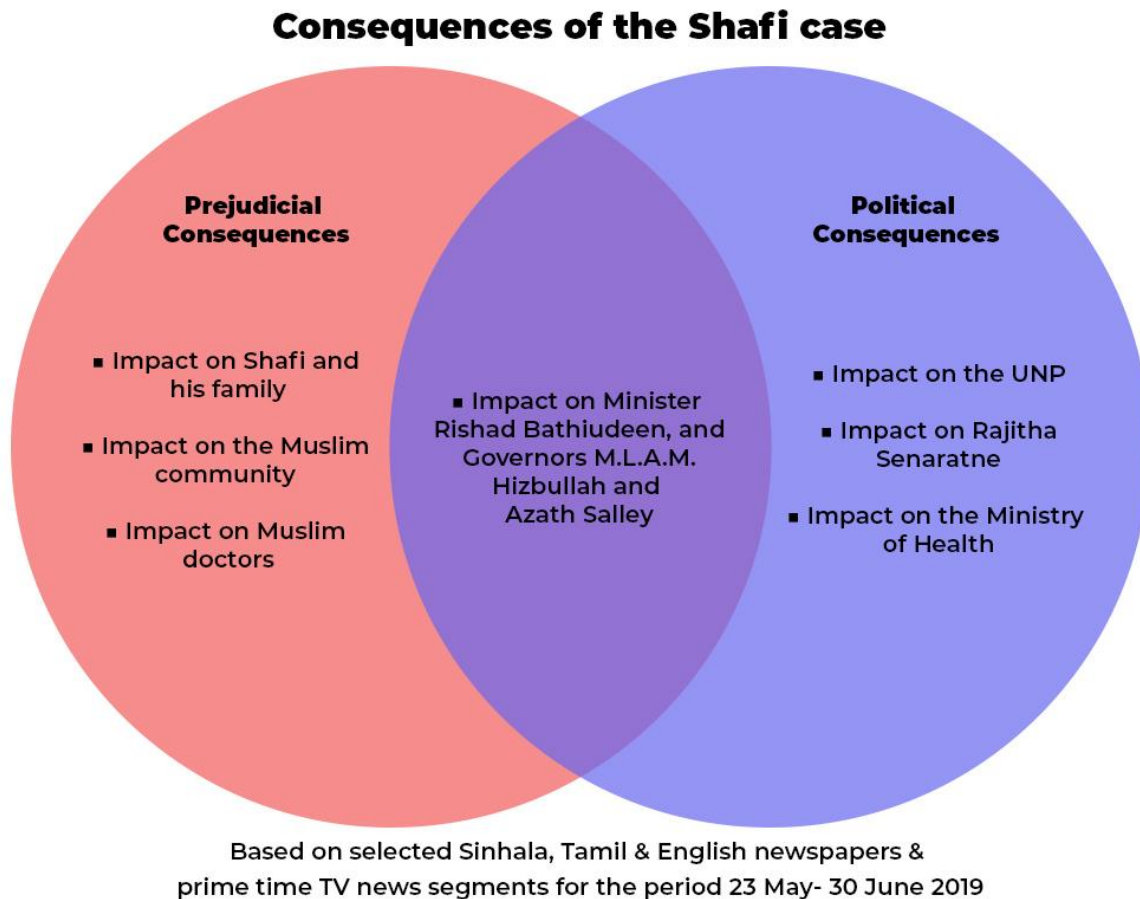
sterilizations, regardless of whether the articles contained information disorder, presented a counternarrative or was merely featuring truthful content. In fact, in the Sinhala media, even general news reporting without any mis- or disinformation was often negative in sentiment, which could have strengthened negative associations with Shafi, despite being presented with truthful information. This negative sentiment, if intentionally included to cause harm, may allow for these reports to be classified as malinformation, contributing to the information disorder produced by the Sinhala media.

In terms of prioritization, the prominence given to the false narrative on Shafi was particularly evident in the Sinhala language media. Reports on Shafi were clearly prioritized above other potential news. The Sinhala press featured the highest number of articles on the Shafi case, i.e., 230 articles from 23 May to 30 June 2019. Moreover, close to half of these articles, i.e., 113 articles, were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers. Of the 35 reports in the Tamil press, a relatively high proportion, i.e., 25 articles, were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers. Despite the neutral tone of the majority of these reports, the prominence given by the Tamil press likely had an amplifying effect on the information disorder. By contrast, of the 58 articles in the English language press, only five were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers.

Similarly, the Sinhala TV news also prioritized the Shafi case by dedicating significant primetime coverage to it. Sinhala TV news featured 147 statements on Shafi on primetime news. This was significantly higher than the English news' 57 or the Tamil news' 18 on primetime news. By featuring this narrative prominently during peak viewing hours, the Sinhala media likely elevated the perceived importance of the sterilization claims and strengthened the false narrative. It is likely that these two factors subtly contributed to the entrenchment of the false narrative in society.

3. IMPACT OF INFORMATION DISORDER

Several consequences can be traced to the information disorder produced by the mainstream media on Dr. Shafi. These consequences can be classified into two interconnected categories: prejudicial and political.



3.1 Prejudicial Consequences

The prejudicial consequences of the information disorder were a result of the high degree of anti-Muslim sentiment present within the narrative produced by the media. These consequences were felt on two levels: at a private and personal level, and at a communal level.

On the private and personal level, the damage of the trial-by-media was already underway, despite the verdict of innocence given by the CID and the court. While most media outlets reported at least minimally on the CID's report and the court's verdict, *Divaina* continued to present Shafi as guilty. (Duminda, 2019, June 28; *Wanda dosthara*, 2019, June 30). Shafi's name was inextricably linked to allegations of sterilization widely in Sri Lanka, and he is still perceived to be guilty by some. This will likely impact both his personal relationships and his professional career in Sri Lanka.

This negative impact extends to Shafi's family as well. In an interview with *The Sunday Times* published on June 30, Shafi's spouse, Dr. Imara Shafi, elaborated on the consequences the mainstream media's information disorder campaign had on her family. She and their three children had to leave home for their own safety after Shafi's arrest and are now unable to find a place to live, as no one is willing to rent to them out of fear. Their children had to stop school because of ostracism by their peers (Wijedasa, 2019, June 30).

At a communal level, growing anti-Muslim sentiments especially affected Muslim doctors. Following the negative coverage on Shafi, similar allegations were levelled against several other Muslim doctors. For example, an article in *Divaina* stated, "It was reported that a [Muslim] male and female doctor from the Peradeniya Hospital had been engaged in sterilization surgeries in 2001 and 2004 and had done 6,000" (Jinapriya, 2019, June 23). These types of statements demonstrate that the prejudice against Shafi was extended and generalized to the Muslim minority. Such a generalization may potentially generate a long-lasting negative perception around the entry and practice of doctors who are Muslim.

3.2 Political Consequences

The information disorder on the Shafi case also had consequences in the political sphere of Sri Lanka. Politicians and political parties associated with Shafi, both directly and indirectly, were subjected to scrutiny. Their association with Shafi was used as a measure to delegitimize them.

Specifically, the UNP (a prominent political party that was part of the 2015 government), the ACMC (a Muslim party that ran under the banner of the UNP in the 2015 election), and Minister of Health Rajitha Senarathne faced political consequences. Several reports on Shafi cited his political history as a candidate belonging to the UNP-affiliated ACMC (Balasuriya, 2019, May 27; Kurunegala doctor, 2019, May 26; Wijayawardhana, 2019, May 30). By highlighting Shafi's political links in conjunction with the allegations against him, the media in all three languages called into question the trustworthiness of the parties he was affiliated with.

Similarly, the reportage also emphasized the relationship between Shafi and Minister Senarathne. Several reports questioned the legality of Shafi's reinstatement following his loss at the 2015 General Election (Palandeniya, 2019, June 2; Poornamal, 2019, May 28). This reinstatement was attributed to an alleged relationship between Shafi and Minister Senarathne and was interpreted to reflect a bias in favor of Shafi. In light of this, the Ministry of Health's appointment of an expert committee to investigate the allegations of sterilization against Shafi were viewed with suspicion. Minister Senarathne's own credibility was questioned in view of the false narrative surrounding Shafi and the perceived negative outcomes of his reinstatement. This in turn, could have led to a loss of credibility for the Ministry as a whole, weakening its position as a government institution.

The information disorder produced by the mainstream media had the power to weaken the position of particular democratically elected political actors and platforms. This power signals the potential dangers of continued production of false narratives by the media.

3.3 Prejudicial and Political Consequences

In addition to the purely political impact, some of the consequences were at the intersection of the political and the prejudicial. At this intersection were politicians who were Muslim. Those particularly impacted by these consequences were Minister Rishad Bathiudeen, Governor of the Eastern Province M.L.A.M Hizbullah and Governor of the Western Province Azath Salley. These three individuals also previously faced racially motivated accusations following the Easter Sunday attacks and were asked to resign by segments of the public, the media and the political opposition. This negative sentiment was sought to be justified through allegations that the political actors were connected to Zahran Hashim, and that they supported terrorism. All three, along with other Muslim politicians, resigned from their posts on 3 June 2019 (Bastians & Mashal, 2019, June 3). Rishad Bathiudeen was eventually reappointed.

Minister Bathiudeen is the leader of the ACMC and a prominent member of the 2015 government. Shafi's relationship with Bathiudeen received specific attention in the media (Balasuriya, 2019, May 27; Kurunegala doctor, 2019, May 26.) Whenever Shafi's political history and membership in the ACMC was reported, Bathiudeen's leadership of the party was almost always specified. Several reports also critically noted that Bathiudeen played a role in reinstating Shafi to his position in the hospital after he resigned to participate in the 2015 election. By linking Bathiudeen to Shafi, the media was able to cast Bathiudeen as guilty by association and characterize him as indirectly responsible for the alleged sterilizations. This delegitimized Bathiudeen's position as an authoritative political figure.

Governor Hizbullah was appointed governor of the Eastern Province in January 2019 by President Maithripala Sirisena. Unlike Bathiudeen, former Governor Hizbullah was not directly connected to Shafi. However, reports on Shafi built on allegations against both Bathiudeen and Hizbullah and connected them to the narrative on illegal sterilizations, framing them as "Islamist terrorists" (Gamage, 2019, May 30; Jayasena, 2019, May 31). This too, served to further delegitimize their political positions.

Governor of the Western Province Azath Salley also did not have a direct connection to Shafi. But Salley did state that the allegations against Shafi were baseless (Selvanayagam, 2019, May 28). The media used this response to draw a connection between the two individuals. One report from *Mawbima* stated, "Shafi is an individual who planned to destroy the future generation of children. Governor Azath Salley is trying to release such a person, which is also a wrongdoing. This means Azath Salley is also an extremist" (Bandara, 2019, June 3). This narrative clearly demonstrates the long-reaching impact of the information disorder surrounding Shafi. The false narrative was so entrenched that by defending Shafi, Governor Salley implicated himself in the eyes of the media.

The perception of guilt by association towards high-level Muslim political figures was not just damaging to the individuals concerned, but to minority representation in government. The information disorder surrounding Shafi and the ripples of its impact worked to delegitimize Muslim leaders and legitimize demands for reduced minority representation in government. This impact demonstrates the ways information disorder has the power to weaken vital facets of democracy within the country.

4. RESPONSE TO INFORMATION DISORDER

Public responses relating to the production of information disorder by the mainstream media on the Dr. Shafi case were limited, despite the case receiving significant attention from the media and government officials. The limited response supports a persistent issue identified by this study—i.e., the mainstream media is often overlooked as a producer of information disorder in Sri Lanka. This section maps out the limited responses of the media, media regulatory bodies, and the government to the information disorder surrounding the Dr. Shafi case.

4.1 Media and Media Regulatory Body Response

The counternarratives that identified and debunked the information disorder in the mainstream media received marginal coverage (see Section 2.5.4). These counternarratives only represented 8.8% of overall reportage, most of which were from the English press. Meanwhile, *Divaina*—the paper that published the initial article on Dr. Shafi—did not issue any retraction or correction of the article, neither did any other media outlet, despite the CID report clearing Shafi of all charges.

The PCCSL, the regulatory body in print media, wrote to *Divaina* and explained the paper's noncompliance with the Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) by the Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka (n.d.). According to PCCSL President Sukumar Rockwood, the PCCSL also communicated these violations verbally. However, the PCCSL did not receive a verbal or written response from *Divaina* regarding the latter's willingness to comply with media ethics (Media: A circus, 2019, June 16). The PCCSL's lack of power to take action against journalists and newspapers, such as revoking credentials, likely factored into the absence of a correction issued by the print media. The absence of a regulatory body to monitor the ethical compliance of Sri Lanka's electronic media enabled these media outlets to also contribute to the production of information disorder without penalties.

4.2 Government Response

Following the accusations against Shafi in the press, the government launched an official investigation into the complaints. As described in Sections 3 and 4, several political figures from both the government and the opposition made statements about Dr. Shafi. These statements were made while the CID's investigation was ongoing. Individual political figures both commended and condemned the reports on Shafi. However, there was no coordinated government response following the submission of the CID report to address the information disorder produced by the media from the president or parliament.

The journalist who wrote the original article and editor of *Divaina* were questioned by the CID and revealed their source to be member of the police. However, media reported that investigations thereafter seemed to focus on the police officer (Sri Lanka top, 2019, June 18). No further action was taken against *Divaina* or the journalist. No inquiry was launched into

other media outlets for reporting the false information. Furthermore, the government did not emphasize the need for media accountability.

5. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to nuance existing discourse on information disorder by demonstrating that the mainstream media can be a producer and distributor/amplifier of information disorder, akin to social media. The study also highlighted the need to recognize the mainstream media's involvement in all three phases of information disorder, creation, production and distribution, to gauge its wider social impact. For this purpose, the study undertook an in-depth analysis of media reporting on the Dr. Shafi case.

The findings of this case study suggest that the mainstream media, in this case, the Sinhala media, and not just social media, acts as both a producer and amplifier of information disorder. The Sinhala media produced the initial story on Dr. Shafi. The English and Tamil media acted as re-distributors/amplifiers of the information disorder.

A total of 322 articles and 222 claims on the Dr. Shafi case were reported in the press and on primetime news respectively in the first five weeks after the initial article in *Divaina*. This reportage led to the Sinhala media creating a media product of a false narrative involving Shafi. The production of this false narrative can be examined through a framework of four elements: the use of pre-existing anti-Muslim narratives; the use of authoritative sources to lend legitimacy to the claims; the use of emotional language and descriptions to inspire grief, fear and anger; and the prominence given to the narrative.

The damage caused by the information disorder fell within two interconnected categories of consequences: the prejudicial and the political. These consequences can not only weaken occupational and political positions of individuals but can also harm the position of the entire Muslim community, as they form the perceived basis for calling for the removal of persons from various posts due to their religious and ethnic affiliations.

Despite the far-reaching consequences of this case of information disorder, there was no coordinated official government response. The only official response was by the PCCSL. This too did not result in rectifying the damage caused and holding the media to ensure nonrecurrence.

The grave consequences and the limited responses outlined through the Dr. Shafi case urge further studies into the role played by the mainstream media in information disorder. Not all of the findings of this study may be generalizable to every instance of information disorder. However, this study can be used to further examine the methods by which information disorder in both mainstream and social media is produced, and to help address the growing concern of information disorder in society today.

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