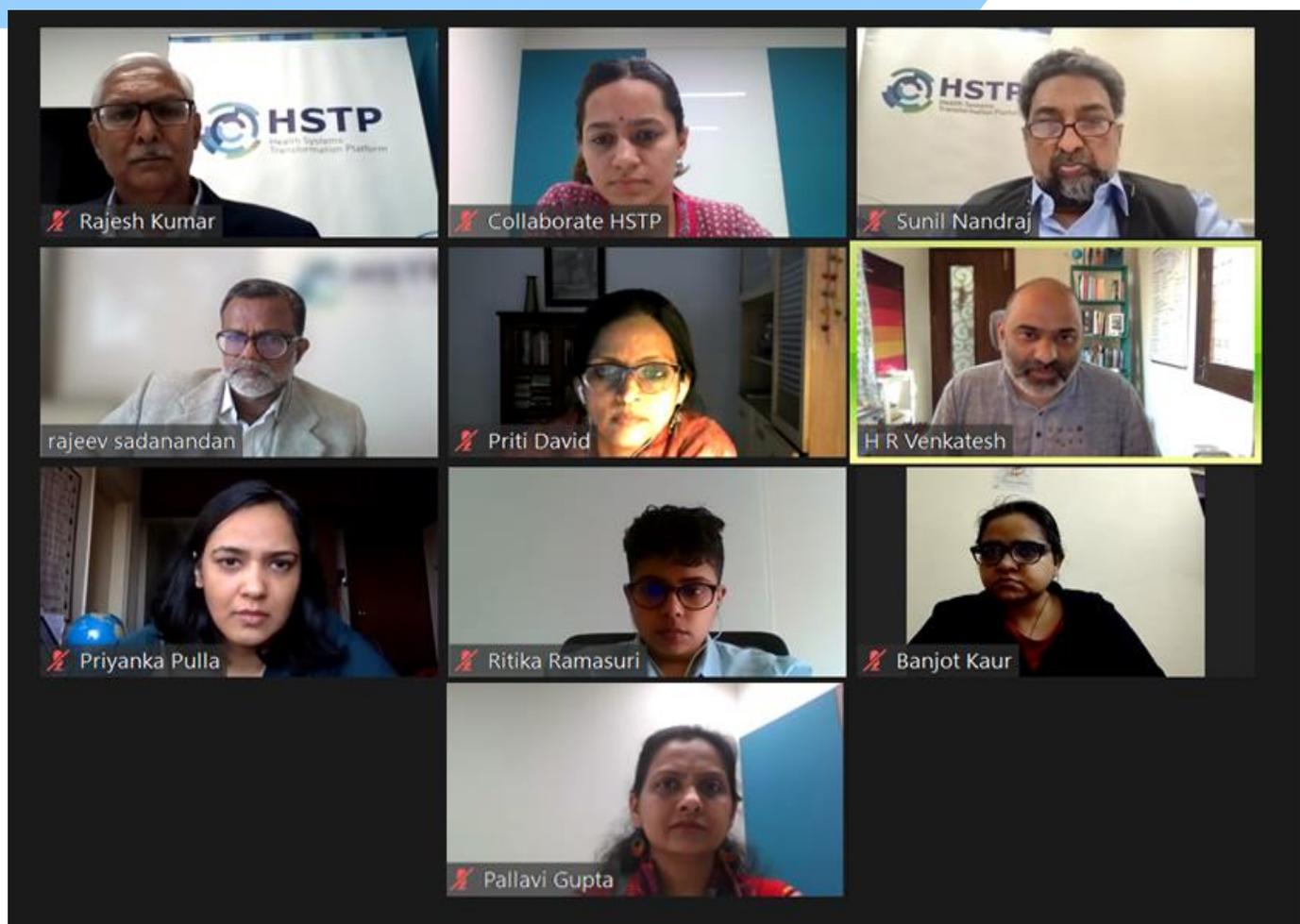


Webinar Report

Silence of the Stories – Health Journalism in India

4 March 2022



Introduction

In a December 2021 reportage titled 'A Deeper Malaise' by Health Reporting Fellow for The Caravan, Chahat Rana, the malaise in making sense of the pandemic by journalists across the country was brought to light. Health beat journalism has traditionally suffered from institutional neglect and lack of investment. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists from across the country were trying to decode data, interpret press briefings by the state and the messaging from various experts, interpret predictive modelling by statisticians, cover testimonies of patients and their kin - all part of the health system. Many of them had to undertake these interventions without training. Therein lies the acute social need for mainstreaming the discourse on health system governance in India.

As part of HSTP's commitment to foster policy dialogues on health systems in India, we had organized discussions and knowledge exchanges on various themes with different stakeholders of the health systems. Health Systems Transformation Platform (HSTP) is a non-profit organization with the mission to generate evidence for the transformation of the Indian health systems for improved health outcomes. We do this through research, evidence-based knowledge generation and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders. Our areas of work include health policy, service delivery, financing, governance, and health policy and systems research.

Media has an integral role to play in mainstreaming the discourse on health systems and making it a social and political priority beyond the times of crisis. Hence, this time, we wanted to hear and learn from journalists about their experiences and challenges in covering on aspects of the health system in India. We therefore invited Banjot Kaur (The Wire Science), HR Venkatesh (BOOM Media), Priyanka Pulla (Independent Journalist) and Priti David (PARI & Rural Hospital Network) to share their perspectives on the state of health journalism in India, its challenges and how media, research institutions, academia, civil society organizations, and the state could work together to increase the profile of health systems through strengthened reporting.

Around 70 researchers, students, academicians, and practitioners attended the webinar that was held on 4 March 2022.

Summary & Learnings

Dr. Sonali Randhawa (Research Associate, Health Systems Governance, HSTP) opened the webinar, introduced all attendees to its subject and invited Mr. Rajeev Sadanandan (CEO, HSTP) to present his opening remarks. Mr. Sadanandan welcomed all the panellists and talked about the importance of the interface between the state and journalists to improve the health outcomes in the country. Underscoring the frustration of journalists from dealing with the health sector, he invited the panellists to share their experiences of reporting on public health and express their ideas for how health researchers and civil society organizations could collaborate with them for mainstreaming the conversation on health systems.

Mr. Sunil Nandraj (Advisor, Health Systems Governance, HSTP) addressed the audience to underline the importance of collaborating with different stakeholders to reframe the public health debate and improve its coverage. He mentioned that very little work has been done to address the larger issues around healthcare regulation. External factors like corporate ownership interests end up determining the information that makes its way out of the editorial level. He highlighted the gravity of asking questions like, "Who gets to tell the story?" and "Whose stories get told?" He also emphasized the importance of the role of regional and vernacular media in covering healthcare stories from the ground up. Then, Ms. Pallavi Gupta (Specialist - Health Systems Governance, HSTP) introduced the attendees to the work of the Health Systems Governance (HSG) team, especially the repository of healthcare legislations, policy documents, gazette notifications, government-issued circulars, court judgements, and evaluation reports (<https://www.hstp.org.in/health-systems-governance/>). Ms. Gupta invited the attendees to collaborate with HSTP to build the repository further.

Ritika Ramasuri (student of MA Public Policy & Governance, Azim Premji University and Intern at HSTP) then invited the panellists to share their experiences and views.

The first panellist to speak was Ms. Banjot Kaur from The Wire Science. The COVID-19 pandemic launched a wholly new stage in the domain of healthcare journalism whereby journalists had to understand its dynamics, and then make it comprehensible for the common public. Ms. Banjot expressed her gratitude towards the experts and scientists who explained healthcare related concepts with a lot of patience whenever she reached out to them. However, representatives of the state were not as forthcoming in their approach. The delta variant was the mother of all tragedies and there was no country that did not make mistakes in managing the pandemic, but the uniqueness of the Indian state was in its denial to accept its mistakes in mismanaging the pandemic. Additionally, health communication is quite often talked about, but it is just as tough as governance is in itself. The state kept changing its messaging to the public on COVID-19 behaviours and it is likely that the underreporting during the Omicron wave was more than what it was during the 1st and 2nd waves respectively. She ended her presentation with a few contemplative questions-Science writing has become an elitist affair, so what purpose are stories by the journalists serving? Are common people really reading them? Who are the journalists writing for?

The next speaker on the panel was Mr. H R Venkatesh from BOOM Media. He said that health journalism helps to change misconceptions among those who read those stories and reports, and therefore, health journalists are contributing to dispelling the misconceptions in many ways because their work is going into the historical record. However, health is one of the hardest beats to cover even when it is perceived as a soft beat, which is customarily

assigned to women who then move on to other beats in their career paths. Mr. Venkatesh went on to provide an editor's perspective on health journalism. Given the structural and systemic problems of journalism, most of health journalism in India is about personal health and there are not enough health journalists. Therefore, any solution towards addressing these problems should include the economic sustainability of health journalism and ethical questions around native advertising. So, there is an urgent need to start setting up different kinds of funding models for health journalism. For instance, health journalism fellowships could help with covering expenses and pair journalists with mentors.

Ms. Priti David from People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) and the Rural Hospital Network (RHN) presented some of her stories from parts of rural India, and set rural health in the context of its allied determinants such as education, sanitation, agriculture and food security, and cultural practices like child marriage. She reported that in the district of Bastar, the district hospital had only three doctors and no specialists. This shortage of healthcare professionals is then filled by unlicensed and unqualified individuals who are colloquially known as *jhola-chaap* doctors. With respect to nutrition, NSS data reveals that 5% of India sleeps without even two square meals per day. Lack of education and sanitation infrastructure, and child marriage are also important contributors to poor health outcomes. In the context of these systemic issues, the Rural Hospital Network was co-founded by Ms. Priti and her colleagues.

Independent journalist, Ms. Priyanka Pulla, has reported extensively on drug policies and regulation of drugs, vaccines and diagnostics. Her prefatory remarks highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems of death underreporting, and the wayward drug and vaccine approval processes due to politically motivated interferences. Contrasting the perspectives shared by speakers before her, Ms. Priyanka opined that reporting on COVID-19 was far easier. The state was forced to engage with the media in press conferences because of the spotlight on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there were issues such as lack of clarity as to why the ICMR recommended hydroxychloroquine without evidence. While they presented a demonstration study on the drug, the ICMR's decision making process was not evidence-based. As part of her long-term project looking into the drug quality issues, Ms. Priyanka has learnt of the opacity in the drug quality standards in India and been trying to speak to multiple stakeholders in this regard. She felt that the aversion of the state to engage with the media is a sign of its non-transparent decision making practices. She believed that every single decision should be open to public scrutiny, but hierarchies within governments do not have a practice of proactive disclosure. For instance, there is no information on what state regulators are actively doing to control the use of nitrosamines in drugs. The gazettes and circulars are not uploaded online timely, and the outcome is a long-drawn process to retrieve information, for which media organizations do not have time or organizational capacity. As a result, a lot of good stories slip through the cracks. According to Ms. Priyanka, one way to solve this issue could be through the launch of fellowships for health journalists by organizations like HSTP, wherein journalists can have opportunities to build their own capacities. Organizations committed to health system strengthening and the civil society also need to nudge editors to focus on health systems issues instead of making their journalists switch from one topic to another.

The end of presentations by the panellists was followed by a Q&A round moderated by Mr. Rajeev Sadanandan. The question he asked the panellists was, "How do you create that credibility for a journalist to manage an infodemic?" In response to this question, Mr. Venkatesh suggested that there needs to be a fundamental realignment of incentives for journalists and that journalism schools need to emphasize on the value of credibility. However, Ms. Priyanka and Ms. Banjot flipped the question to assert that the governments need to work towards getting their credibility back instead of creating an alternate source that is removed from itself. The next question raised by Mr. Sadanandan was about the absence of healthcare in the political discourse in India. While it is important in a state like Kerala because of its significance in electoral results, how can healthcare be nudged to become important in the EAG states of India and what advice can the panellists give to health policy activists attempting to grab media attention? Ms. Priti David suggested that rural and local reporting be given due importance. This viewpoint was also expressed by one of the attendees who suggested that promoting and strengthening community reporting could be useful in engaging the electorate.

Ms. Priyanka suggested that the government needs to actively talk to the media and so should policy experts. Additionally, creating fellowships will allow for the creation of an ecosystem of exchange between all the stakeholders working towards better health outcomes. Mr. Sunil Nandraj talked about the importance of collaborations and discussions between institutions. While fellowships could help individual journalists, partnerships also need to be made between organizations for scaled collaborations. Lastly, Dr. Rajesh Kumar (Technical Advisor, HSTP) summarized the major talking points of each of the participants and emphasized on the need to vitalize the relationship between the state, the media, healthcare policy activists, researchers and the civil society at large. He thanked all the speakers and the attendees for making the webinar a success.

Way Forward

The webinar highlighted diverse issues that challenge comprehensive media coverage of health systems in India. Mentioned below are some of the measures suggested during the webinar for further action:

- Introducing newer, ethically sound funding models for health journalism and incentivizing health journalism through awards and recognition.
- Situating healthcare in the context of its allied socio-cultural and economic determinants and promoting community and local reporting.
- Establishing fellowships and mentorship programmes for sustained and profound coverage of health systems.
- Creating stronger links of communication between the state and the media by impressing upon the state the need to follow the practice of proactive disclosure of processes and protocols.
- Initiating dialogues with editors for giving health systems reporting its due attention and importance.
- Creating institutional collaborations between media houses and organizations working towards health systems strengthening, for improved coverage.

The panel

1. Banjot Kaur Bhatia (Senior Correspondent for health at The Wire Science)
Banjot has been reporting on public health for the past 9 years. Before joining The Wire in November 2021, she has worked with Down to Earth, Times of India (Patna) and Asia News International. For the past two years, Banjot has been reporting on different aspects of the pandemic and has been invited to speak at various forums on her pandemic reportage.
2. HR Venkatesh (Director - Training and Research, BOOM)
H R Venkatesh is a journalist at the fact-checking organisation boomlive.in, where he created Media Buddhi, which is aimed at digital literacy, media literacy, political and tech literacy. He is a former John S. Knight fellow in journalism at Stanford University. Previously he was also with CNN-IBN and The Quint as an anchor and editor. In 2017-2018, as Knight Journalism Fellow at ICFJ, he put together a collective of health journalists.
3. Priti David (Education Editor, PARI; Co-founder, RHN)
Priti David is a Journalist and Education Editor at the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI). She writes on education, health, women, craft and livelihoods. Priti is a co-founder at the Rural Hospital Network - a free to access website that is a platform for hospitals in rural and peri urban areas to connect with health professionals who are looking to serve there.
4. Priyanka Pulla (Independent Journalist)
Priyanka Pulla is a health and medical journalist. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she wrote about India's efforts to develop and commercialise vaccines, drugs and diagnostics, and how political imperatives may have compromised these efforts. She is currently working on a project to look at the various issues surrounding drug quality in India. She has over thirteen years of journalism experience, and her writings can be seen in The Wire, Mint and The British Medical Journal, among other publications.

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The webinar report 'Silence of the Stories – Health Journalism in India' is developed by Health Systems Transformation Platform (HSTP) to share the record of proceedings.

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