Factshala Community Champions: Helping make truth-seeking go viral

Here are some glimpses of how Factshala end participants are taking program learning to a wider community and helping make truth-seeking go viral!

1. Empowering Youth Through FactShala and Triggering a Chain of Learning

Factshala participant Prashant Kumar, a graphic designer and a youth volunteer with Nehru Yuva Kendra - a youth club under the aegis of Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports - was so motivated after attending a Factshala session in October 2020, that he now discusses media literacy in the digital
empowerment training that he often organises with youth across 40 villages from Block Pilana in Baghpat, about 50 kms from the capital of India, New Delhi. *Nehru Yuva Kendra* is a nationwide network of youth that engages youth volunteers to conduct awareness drives on topics ranging from vaccination to sanitation, education and skill development. The youth he trains often reach out to him for verifying information. He also verifies information for his friends and family by using what he learnt in FactShala.

“The youth who come to me are often guilty of forwarding the fake messages. They inadvertently become a part of the fake news chain. However, after I tell them that a simple search can help them break this chain (I learned this through FactShala), they are amazed. I help by teaching them to avoid misleading information and also searching for correct information online.”

2. **Saving Lives by Providing Accurate Covid Info to Communities**

At the peak of a devastating second wave in India, as misinformation about COVID-19 particularly the vaccine and its side effects was spreading uncontrollably, Ankur Das, a non-profit worker from Jalpaiguri, West Bengal who helped provide oxygen and ambulance service during the pandemic doubled up as a fact-checker for community members after attending Factshala. He says the training helped him dispel vaccine related rumours and encourage people to get vaccinated at the earliest.

“People look up to us. When we go to communities to distribute what was
donated, people approach us to ask about the veracity of social media information.”

“Knowing more about misinformation and how to combat it through FactShala helped us dispel rumors and motivated people to get vaccinated along with their family members,” he told us.

3. **Doctor Heals Misinformation Malaise**

An ENT (Ear-Nose-throat) specialist from Delhi, Dr. Lalit Parashar, attended an online Factshala training organised for the Physicians Forum of India. He says he often used to feel annoyed when his patients used to ask him about weird, unscientific Covid cures. He understood that this was happening as panic overtook rationality and that believing such messages could be hazardous, but didn’t know how to explain this to others. But after attending FactShala, he now helps his patients cross-check any information being circulated on social media. From his clinic, Dr. Parashar now doles out advice on misinformation. In order to reach more people with this crusade, he says,

“After attending FactShala I immediately reached out to my peers who were also unable to convince patients that the knowledge they were obtaining online wasn’t necessarily authentic. With the guidance that I received through FactShala, I now not only cross-check from authoritative sources myself but encourage my peers, friends and patients to do this too.”

4. **In The Fight Against Fake, Bolstering GramVaani (voice of the village)**

Amit Kumar Savita, a panchayat level government school co-ordinator and a community reporter for GramVaani* attended a Factshala session in Munger - a district in Bihar. He puts the learning from FactShala to use every day to help people from his district debunk viral hoaxes, especially around Covid and related information.

“Teachers in schools across our district panicked when reports of school closure amid the resurgence of Covid-19 cases started circulating on social media. A fake circular posing to be
from a government education officer was also circulated and people reached out to me to confirm it. Had it not been for FactShala training, I would not have known how to actually confirm this information. These people have no other way of finding out the truth.”

Having attended FactShala, Amit says he is confident that no fake news can get past him now.

*GramVaani* (which literally translates to voice of the village) is a unique interactive voice response or IVR based rural information network that allows people to listen to news, information or messages by calling into a number and also leave messages about their community for others to listen to. It is dubbed as a voice-based social media platform for the rural population in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and the North-east India. FactShala has trained over 150 GramVaani community reporters through seven online sessions.

5. Media Literacy As A Way Of Life: Empowering Udayan Shalini Fellows

Deepak Sharma, a trustee with Udayan Care, an NGO that provides residential care to disadvantaged children and supports over 1000 children through 17 homes in India, has adopted media literacy as a way of life. After attending Factshala training, he now also dons the role of a fact-checker and filter for information on his chatapp groups and addresses the issue of misinformation and media literacy as part of the digital literacy mentoring training that he organises for his mentees or the Udayan Shalini fellows. *Shalini* - meaning intelligent & talented- is a unique academic excellence and personality development programme run by Udayan Care for deserving and talented girls from weak socio-economic backgrounds.

“Post FactShala, we have developed a culture where I and the girls (scholars) never forward any message we’re not sure about. A few of our girls have actually become in house fact-checkers. Whenever they receive or hear any news they tend to investigate it at their end and then educate others in the group.”
6. **A FactShala Of Her Own For The Tribals**

Laxmi Munda, (20) a tribal girl from Jamshedpur in Jharkhand (one of the least developed states in the country) and a *Medhavini* Scholar attended FactShala workshop organised for the Celluloid Chapter Art Foundation, an NGO working for the revival of tribal art and culture.

After attending the program, she is now taking lead to be a fact-check guide for her fellow villagers. She has been making villagers and women aware about how not to believe everything they see online without being sure of the source. Many of these people had been guilty of forwarding unverified information, the likes of which have often resulted in mob lynching incidents in the state. Laxmi now corrects and fact-checks messages for people around her, especially those who could not attend FactShala, and also makes it a point to address misinformation and share Factshala learning in gatherings involving villagers.

*Medhavini* is a tribal girl education project initiated by Jamshedpur based NGO Kalamandir CCAF and supported by the Tata Steel Downstream Products Ltd.

7. **Prepping A Brigade of Teen Fact-check Crusaders:**

Neha Tiwari, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Karim City College of Jamshedpur in Jharkhand noticed how fake news led to
incidents of mob lynching and deaths in her area. After attending a workshop by Factshala trainer Antara bose, she was convinced that creating media literacy among the people of the region can reduce the cases of violence and disharmony. She is now working to set up a ‘fact-checking wing’ as a center in the college where students trained on fact-checking will identify viral or suspicious stories circulating on social media platforms, fact check them and then circulate the results to the wider community - their college network, friends and family groups. They also plan to collaborate with local media houses to get a daily column where they can post fact-checked information.

8. **Pitting Media Literacy against Superstitions:**

A homemaker from Gujarat who attended a FactShala session by *Rudi No Radio*, a Factshala radio partner from Sananad, was inspired to log all messages on superstitious beliefs - such as the infamous hair clipping incident which created a sensation⁠¹ - in a hand-written journal with the help

---

of her 13-year-old daughter who happened to attend the session with her. She documented the incidents and connected them with their real causes and helped create awareness about why believing pseudo cures and occultists wasn’t the correct approach. She then shared the diary on family and her daughter’s school chat app groups and also in a subsequent training done by Rudi No Radio.

9. Helping Make Truth-seeking Go ‘Viral’

Mohammad Afzal Wani, a bank manager from Kashmir, became a media literacy mascot after attending a Factshala training. Learning from Factshala not only prompted him to become more responsible in how he consumes online information, but also motivated him to help his colleagues, friends and acquaintances become more “media literate”.

“Factshala has been an eye-opener for me. I can no longer be a passive consumer of information. Proud that I made 14 families information-literate.”

Wani often discusses the issue of fake news at family gatherings and corrects viral and incorrect information shared on family whatsapp groups. Wani also educated his cousin - an Imam at a mosque in Kashmir’s summer capital Srinagar - who now often addresses the issue at large gatherings.

10. Each One, Teach One (Or More):
Sundarsing Rabha, a local community leader and Factshala participant takes workshop learning to forest dwellers of Rabha tribes in Darjeeling to help them thwart misinfo and reclaim their land rights. Disinformation spread by groups with a vested interest in the forest has thwarted the tribe's efforts, and made it difficult for forest-dwellers to reclaim land rights. Some of the disinformation has caused divisions between people of different villages who were earlier united in their efforts.

“Learning about fact-checking has helped the communities understand how they can be divided by disinformation and how that division can impact their rights.”