

Truth & Trust in the Media – An Asian perspective

**FINDINGS FROM KEEP IT REAL: TRUTH & TRUST
IN THE MEDIA, AN EVENT JOINTLY ORGANISED
IN SINGAPORE, ON 19-20 JUNE 2017, BY
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INTRODUCTION

Keep it Real: Truth & Trust in the Media

The rise of false news has become a pressing danger to modern societies.

From deliberate hoaxes created to cause mischief or make money, to media outlets re-circulating unverified or erroneous content, the misinformation ecosystem can take on many different faces. Often, people may not even know they are being exposed to questionable facts.

News media, in cooperation with tech companies, universities, foundations and civil society, can turn this challenge into an opportunity to improve their journalism practices in the social media era, strengthening their credibility and serving their communities better.

WAN-IFRA and the Straits Times jointly organised in Singapore, on 19-20 June 2017, a timely two-days event which brought together policymakers, news industry players and other stakeholders to explore concrete initiatives designed to fight the spread of misinformation in Asia.

The event featured practical fact-checking projects from Asia and around the world and discussions around what internet companies, journalism schools, government agencies and independent organisations are doing to improve media literacy and provide open societies with reliable facts to help lay the foundations of a constructive public debate.

The present report highlights some of the main points discussed at the Truth & Trust in the Media conference and presents the concrete outcome of the event's workshops, some of which are currently being developed or implemented in various parts of Asia.

Truth & Trust in the digital age: The various faces of misinformation

Moderator: Warren Fernandez
Editor-in-chief, English/Malay/Tamil Media Group and
Editor, The Straits Times

Panellist speaking at the
“Keep it Real: Truth and Trust
in the Media” forum.

ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN



Call to empower citizens to combat fake news

By Rachel Au-Yong, rachelay@sph.com.sg

In the eastern European nation of Lithuania, ordinary citizens have banded together to counter propaganda from its former Soviet master, Russia.

Calling themselves “elves”, they take on the Internet trolls who spread hate or misinformation to destabilise the Baltic state. They do it by patrolling social media to expose fake accounts on Facebook or Skype, or writing articles to correct the inaccuracies that float in cyberspace.

Ms Nejolla Korris, who heads InterVeritas International, which specialises in social-engineering awareness and lie-detection training, related the anecdote to make her point that citizens need to be better included in the fight against fake news. “Misinformation cannot be battled with just an algorithm,” she said.

Social media platforms have to respond to citizen reports more quickly, she added, citing her personal experience of having to send several e-mails - including to a high-level Facebook executive - and waiting for a number of weeks before a fake profile featuring a photo of her deceased brother was removed.

Delivering quicker responses more often would reduce the number of fake news sites, she added.

“The more social platforms allow participants to engage and report fake news, the more opportunities exist to combat misinformation,” she said. It is one way to make people be more careful about what they share online. “Everybody loves to be a detective,” she added.

Ms Korris was speaking on how to empower citizens to combat misinformation, at a forum organised by The Straits Times and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

A fellow panellist, The Straits Times’ associate opinion editor Lydia Lim, said journalists, too, can help people understand good media values like those practised in traditional media. “We don’t want to just be first with the news, but also fair and accurate,” she said. “These are values that aren’t discussed much, and our readers may not even be aware that that is how we do things.”

Ms Anne Kruger, a journalism lecturer at Hong Kong University, suggested that media literacy classes be made mandatory, so that children, who are exposed to online resources and social media at an increasingly young age, are armed with the skills to verify what is true or not true.

What may be more challenging is helping older folk, who may not be as savvy digitally, and are often the group most guilty of sharing unverified information on social platforms, said Mr Lock Wai Han, who chairs Singapore’s Media Literacy Council.

While his council is working with the Info-communications Media Development Authority to hold educational roadshows at public housing estates, he also urged patience: “We need to take it one step at a time.”

Another panel discussed the role of tech companies, such as Google and Facebook, in improving the digital news ecosystem.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on June 20, 2017, with the headline ‘Call to empower citizens to combat fake news’



Good news: Help in spotting hoaxes coming soon

Nearly 200 leading news executives, tech experts and policymakers attended the conference on fighting fake news. From left are Associate Professor Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University’s School of Law; Hong Kong University lecturer Anne Kruger; ST managing editor Fiona Chan (standing); ST editor Warren Fernandez; and Asia director of WAN-IFRA Gilles Demptos.

ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

Network to work on checklist for journalists and readers, and list of websites

By Seow Bei Yi, byseow@sph.com.sg

A regional group of news organisations in Asia will work together to help its reporters and readers identify fake news.

They plan to draw up a checklist which will help their staff as well as readers spot tell-tale signs of stories with dubious content. They will also compile a list of known sites that regularly spread such false information.

Group members will call on each other to cross-check stories reporting on their respective countries which appear dubious so as to tap local knowledge. They will also share stories or content they produce debunking fake stories.

These are among a number of immediate steps that the Asia News Network (ANN) – a regional alliance of 22 media organisations – is planning to implement, The Straits Times (ST) editor Warren Fernandez said. He is a board member of the group, of which ST is a member.

He outlined the action plan at the end of a two-day conference on fake news that brought together almost 200 leading news executives, tech experts and policy-makers. The event at Singapore Management University was organised by ST and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

Among the more than 20 outcomes* produced from three discussion groups yesterday was a proposal that ANN members form special project teams to cross-check information on issues of common concern such as terrorism, the environment or the South China Sea.

*A complete list of the Truth & Trust in the Media conference's recommendations is published on p. 28

Mr Fernandez said: “Readers are tired of being taken for a ride by fake news sites and reports. As a responsible news organisation, we will do our part to help debunk false reports.”

But even as they pursued these initiatives, Mr Fernandez said news organisations must not lose sight of their core mission: Providing reliable and responsible news against the onslaught of fake news. That was the best way to earn and keep their readers’ trust, he said.

“Trust is something we have to earn all the time and not to be taken for granted, in the light of the very real threats the media is up against.”

He welcomed a suggestion from a forum participant that news organisations should be more proactive in calling out questionable content. One way to do so was for newsrooms to collaborate among themselves, as well as with journalism schools in universities, the participant had noted.

Government regulation not the best answer

Associate Professor Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University’s School of Law raised the possibility of countries setting up independent regulatory bodies, rather than relying on government regulation or legislation to counter fake news sites and reports.

While it is the norm for the authorities to regulate, “the concern is that governments themselves, for a variety of reasons... do generate fake news as well”.

He added: “You can’t have the Government being the judge and the jury.” He said laws should seek to cultivate “good journalism” and “good media behaviour” as well.

Lecturer Anne Kruger of Hong Kong University, who spoke on media and news literacy, wants the young to be taught in school the ways to spot and deal with fake news. The elderly, too, need such lessons, she added.

While ambassadors and role models can help raise their awareness of fake news, the mobile phone, a favourite device of the elderly, can be more effective in curbing the spread of unverified information.

“They go from analog, straight to mobile... and that is why they spread everything through WhatsApp,” Ms Kruger said of how rumours are spread among older people.

Methods to curb this have got to be on the mobile phone, or at least help them “get to the point where they will pause for seven seconds and not share it”, she added.

Editors told The Straits Times the conference has given them a better insight into the challenges posed by false information.

“My immediate priority will be to focus on collaboration with the Asia News Network to combat fake news,” said the editor and publisher of The Daily Star in Bangladesh, Mr Mahfuz Anam.

Mr Gilles Demptos, Asia director of Wan-Ifra, said a key conclusion is that “a multi-stakeholders approach involving tech companies, social media networks, news media, government agencies and civil society is needed to effectively fight misinformation”.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer’s associate editor John Nery said fake news is an old problem with new elements arising from technological advances and a more polarised political environment.

“But we should not succumb to moral panic,” he said, as there are tools to uncover the falsehoods, and organisations are moving to do so.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on June 21, 2017, with the headline ‘Good news: Help in spotting fake news coming soon’

Regional task force one way to fight bogus political news

By Seow Bei Yi, byseow@sph.com.sg

With fake news becoming a growing concern during such political events as the United States presidential election last November and Jakarta's election for governor in April, regional media outlets yesterday discussed ways to be pro-active in guarding against the spread of misinformation and falsehoods.

One suggestion was to set up a regional task force to verify rumours during such major events.

But there is a risk, said The Straits Times managing editor Fiona Chan. In educating people about misinformation, newspapers would look like they are supporting the party that has been attacked, she added. "(We have to) be aware that as media players, we are not putting out a partisan stance about it," she said.

Ms Chan was summing up the discussion of a workshop on fact-checking at the end of a two-day conference on fake news jointly organised by The Straits Times and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

She also noted that news organisations tend to collaborate only during a crisis, when there is "more shared interest in fighting misinformation than worrying about competitive interest".

It prompted Wan-Ifra's Asia Director Gilles Demptos to propose that newspapers in the region form a loose coalition, an "Asian election task force".

It could be introduced for the upcoming general election in Malaysia, with the country's news organisations taking the lead in correcting misinformation.

Others can play a supporting role and put into practice the lessons learnt, when their own country holds an election, Ms Chan said.



Hong Kong University lecturer Anne Kruger speaking at the forum.

Hong Kong University lecturer Anne Kruger said it is an opportunity for journalists to rethink how they approach reporting.

The focus has traditionally been on who is winning or losing. But fact-checking would force them to look deeper into policies and what citizens want, she said.

“You are fact-checking not just hoaxes, news items that are coming through, but also pushing through a little bit more of a civic journalism type of approach, where we try to get some answers for society as well,” she said.

Around the world, the spread of falsehoods has made headlines during elections.

In the days leading up to the United Kingdom’s general election this month, for example, the Conservatives were accused of creating “fake news” in a video that went viral and a Facebook advertisement, both misrepresenting Labour politician Jeremy Corbyn.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on June 21, 2017, with the headline ‘Regional task force one way to fight bogus political news’

Check platform helps HK varsity students to verify ‘fake news’

By Hong Kong Correspondent, joycel@sph.com.sg

When news broke that supporters of Chief Executive-elect Carrie Lam were paid HK\$600 (S\$106) to rally for her outside Wan Chai’s Convention and Exhibition Centre on polling day on March 26, a group of Hong Kong University students sprung into action to find out if this was indeed the case.

This was true, they found, after tracking down the person who was using chat applications like WhatsApp, to recruit part-time supporters for Mrs Lam.

In another incident, the students checked out a rumour that disgraced former chief executive Donald Tsang had committed suicide in jail. They quickly confirmed this was not true. These checks were part of an exercise done by students from the university’s Journalism and Media Studies Centre, in a project called Cyber News Verification Lab.

Founded last September by former CNN journalist Anne Kruger, the lab uses a software called Check, which provides a digital platform for students to work together. On the platform, they can list and share the steps they have taken to verify a claim in a news report or social media post.

“We have been researching ‘fake news’ here in Asia well before Donald Trump made it famous!” Ms Kruger, 44, an Australian who used to co-host News Breakfast on the ABC News 24 Channel, told The Straits Times last week. The term “fake news” became a trending topic after the United States President started using it routinely last year, to discredit news reports that he dislikes.

Hong Kong University journalism students “dispelled a number of frightening rumours” circulating on WhatsApp during the pro-democracy Occupy Central protests in 2014, said Ms Kruger.



“We have been researching ‘fake news’ here in Asia well before Donald Trump made it famous!” says former CNN journalist Anne Kruger.

ST PHOTO: JOYCE LIM

They set up a Facebook site called Live, Verified, which had over 100,000 “likes” in the first two days as they were able to calm fears by proving many rumours to be false.

For example, a student heard talk one evening about how triad members were causing trouble in Mong Kok and immediately activated some students to check on the situation. They spoke to people on the ground and confirmed that it was just a rumour.

Said Ms Kruger: “While I say participatory technology has led to the increasing spread of fake news, we are also at an important juncture: the technology companies are beginning to come on board and take some responsibility about finding solutions to the problems.

“It is early days and I don’t believe fake news will ever be fully stamped out due to human nature, but there is hope on the horizon.”

She added that good journalism often requires a journalist to carry out multiple checks before publishing a piece of news.

Ms Kruger said one thing the project has found is that social media messages sent through chat applications have a higher chance of being false or rumours. Between January and April this year, her students found that at least 40 per cent of 31 “news” posts spread through social media applications such as WhatsApp, were false.

During the week leading up to the Chief Executive election, students conducted checks on 45 reports and found at least two of them fake. They verified at least 23 reports, found 11 inconclusive, and are still verifying the rest.

Ms Kruger warned that blogs which often portray a one-sided, biased view could have a snowball effect when people keep sharing it. “Citizen journalism is great, however, we need to hold it accountable like we would hold a good investigative journalist accountable.”

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on June 07, 2017, with the headline ‘Check platform helps HK varsity students to verify ‘fake news’

Finding the truth in an avalanche of lies

By the Singapore Management University (SMU) Social Media Team

Singapore is at “an inflection point” in its battle against fake news, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam told a forum at the Singapore Management University in June.

The proliferation of online misinformation and disinformation has become a genuine threat to social cohesion, he told the event, which was organised by The Straits Times and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

The US presidential election in 2016 demonstrated the power of fake news, and showed how quickly unfounded rumours on message boards in the backwaters of the internet could find their way through social media into the eyeline of voters, many of whom could not discern what was true and what was a fabrication.

Fake news sites and stories sprung up, sometimes with the deliberate goal of influencing the election, others simply to make money by drawing in readers with sensational headlines. This has become a global phenomenon, and the actors involved range from the amateurish or accidental through to highly-complex state-backed systems of automated social media accounts, or ‘bots’, that spread disinformation.

“I think what we can learn from this is how viral this can go, how many millions of people can be influenced, how it impacts on societies, and how it brings mistrust into important institutions, into the process of democracy, into newspapers,” Mr Shanmugam said. “It makes everyone wonder what the truth is.”

Mr Shanmugam said that a government poll found that 75% of Singaporeans come across fake news occasionally, the rest do regularly. Of them, 66% said they cannot always recognise fake news at first sight, and 25% said that they have shared stories that they later found out to be false.



Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at SMU.

Fake stories have already spread in Singapore, including one, shared widely on WhatsApp, that the government was chemically seeding rain to clear the haze ahead of a Formula One race. Others were more sinister, and were targeted at creating division between communities.

A matter of national survival

There is also a geopolitical dimension to the spread of fake news for propaganda reasons. Russia was accused of sponsoring fake news in the US to tip the election in favour of Donald Trump, and Mr Shanmugam said that: “You must assume that every country with an interest in another country would do the same.”

“Given that we are such an open country in terms of internet penetration, and such a small country, but very strategically important not just to our neighbours, but to a variety of countries. Given our racial and religious profile. We would be of particular interest to a number of countries who would want to influence specific racial groups, or social groups, or religious groups within Singapore.”

In the past, Singapore has had newspapers backed by foreign powers that have sought to target ethnic groups, but digital platforms have magnified the threat by making it far easier to create and spread fake news. “We are particularly vulnerable. It would be stupid and naive for us not to recognise that and to see what we can do to defend ourselves. That is a matter of national survival.”

The government is now working on legislation to tackle the spread of fake news. “Policymakers don’t have the luxury of just discussing it,” Mr Shanmugam said. Such legislation has, however, to be carefully handled, according to Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at SMU.

Regulation must not weaken free speech

US President Donald Trump has used the epithet ‘fake news’ to deride legitimate outlets that question his view of the world. Governments that set themselves up as the arbiters of truth walk a fine line between quashing disinformation and restricting free speech.

“In any attempt to try to regulate fake news, there must be regard shown to sustaining free speech,” Prof Tan said. “Even as governments seek to do what they think is right, I think it is important that regulation must not weaken the ability of societies to discern for themselves. Governments cannot do the thinking for the people.”

Fake news will always exist, regardless of attempts to quell it at its source, Prof Tan said, which means that societies need to be more resilient.

“If we want to deal with fake news, then the role of trust becomes very important. Trust in the basic institutions of society. Trust in the media, trust in journalism, and of course, trust in the people themselves,” he said.

Gilles Demptos, Asia director at WAN-IFRA, said that the traditional news industry needs to play a role by ensuring that it maintains its standards of ethics and fact-checking.

“The news ecosystem has evolved drastically in recent years, and we have to make sure that our traditional standards of ethics and of processing information are up to date, and that they match the evolution of the creation and distribution of news on digital platforms,” he said. “On our side, we have to make sure that we are up to the challenge that we face.”

Society at large needs to be able to distinguish between quality journalism and fake news, or else the vital role that the media plays in democratic societies could be undermined, he said. “Disinformation comes from many other parts of society. They come for profit reasons, for propaganda, for political influence... As news publishers, our mission is to provide society with established facts, verified facts, on which we can build a real dialogue.”

Fighting back against prolific online harassment in the Philippines

By Julie Posetti

Misinformation or disinformation are only one aspect of the weaponisation of the internet to serve partisan interests. The experiences of Filipino journalist Maria Ressa show how reporters now face targeted online harassment campaigns designed to discredit and silence them. Social media platforms, she argues, must take responsibility.

Maria Ressa is a former CNN war correspondent but none of her experiences in the field prepared her for the destructive campaign of gendered online harassment that's been directed at her since the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.

"I've been called ugly, a dog, a snake, threatened with rape and murder," she says. How many times has she received online death threats? She's lost count. "Gosh, there have been so many!"

A journalist with more than 30 years experience, Ressa is the founding CEO and executive editor of the social media-powered news organisation Rappler, based in the Philippines.

In addition to being threatened with rape and murder, she's been the subject of hashtag campaigns like #ArrestMariaRessa and #BringHerToTheSenate, designed to whip online mobs into attack mode, discredit both Ressa and Rappler, and chill their reporting.

Every journalist in the country reporting independently on the Duterte presidency is subjected to rampant and highly coordinated online abuse, she says. Especially if they're female.

Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez (left) and Maria Ressa, CEO of Manila-based online news site Rappler, and Jason Subler, Managing Editor, News Strategy and Operations, Asia, Reuters.



“It began a spiral of silence. Anyone who was critical or asked questions about extrajudicial killings was attacked, brutally attacked. The women got it worst,” she says. “And we’ve realised that the system is set up to silence dissent - designed to make journalists docile. We’re not supposed to be asking hard questions, and we’re certainly not supposed to be critical.”

This onslaught represents a real threat to the psychological, digital, and even physical safety of journalists, she adds. But she refuses to be cowed by online armies of “super trolls”, whom she believes are part of a campaign to destabilise democracy in the Philippines.

She admits that the constant attacks do make her think twice about doing stories that will be lightning rods for attacks. “But then I go and do the story even harder! I just refuse to let intimidation win.”

Investigative journalism as a fightback weapon

Her response to the threats includes investigative reporting on the intertwined problems of online harassment, disinformation and misinformation. She believes in “throwing sunlight” on the abusers.

But after Rappler published a feature series mapping the corrosive impacts of organised political “trolling” on the Philippines in October 2016, the onslaught of abuse and threats of violence escalated dramatically.

The series deployed “big data” analysis techniques to establish that a “sock puppet network” of 26 fake Facebook accounts was influencing nearly three million other Philippines-based accounts. Behind the “sock puppets” were three “super trolls”, as Ressa describes them.

Their aim was to seed misinformation and foment targeted attacks. “They would plant messages within groups, inflaming the groups who would then become a mob to attack the target,” she says.

In the days following publication of the Rappler series titled Propaganda War: Weaponising the Internet, she received on average 90 hate messages an hour. Among these was what she describes as the first “credible death threat” against her.

The messages continued for months. “It happened so fast and at such frequency, I didn’t realise how unnatural it was”, she says. The effect was to mute the seriousness of the threats in her mind initially. “I really struggled with what’s real, what’s not. How do I respond, should I respond?” These are familiar questions for journalists and editors struggling to combat the impacts of online harassment.

But speaking up and speaking out brings protection through awareness, Ressa believes.

Asking loyal audiences to help

In early 2017, Ressa received another threat that stunned her. It was the kind of threat that women journalists are increasingly familiar with internationally: a call for her to be gang-raped and murdered. A young man wrote on Rappler’s Facebook page:

I want Maria Ressa to be raped repeatedly to death, I would be so happy if that happens when martial law is declared, it would bring joy to my heart.

Ressa responded like a digital journalist who understands the power of audiences. She asked her online communities to assist in identifying the threat-maker, who was using a Facebook account in a fake name. They came through. With her supporters’ help, Ressa was able to identify the man as a 22-year-old university student. When his university learned of his activities, he was forced to call Ressa and apologise.

Then, in the middle of an online storm triggered by a deliberately misleading report on a fake news site that misquoted Ressa, active and former members of the Philippines military piled on with abuse and threats.

Again, she activated her own online communities in response, and one “netizen” wrote an open letter to the chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, General Eduardo Ano, asking him to intervene.

This activation of her networks worked. General Ano was upset by the incident, ordered an investigation and issued an official apology: “We publicly apologise to Miss Maria Ressa for the emotional pain, anxiety, and humiliation those irresponsible comments and unkind remarks might have caused her,” he wrote.

Tightening security, online and off

As Ressa began to realise, online threats to harm a journalist, or incitement of others to harm a journalist, must be taken seriously. They can't just be dealt with by blocking, muting, reporting, deleting and ignoring because, "You don't know when it will jump out from the virtual world and sneak into the physical world."

In response, Ressa decided to upgrade security in Rappler's newsrooms and provide protection for the journalists facing the worst of the online attacks, adding that:

It's crossed the line where I do worry about safety. When you have people getting killed every night in the drug war and you have these online threats, you have no choice as a responsible corporation but to increase security for the people who work for you.

In parallel, she strengthened digital safety defences. But while providing psychological support, she hasn't removed her journalists from reporting duty, nor has she sent them out of the country.

And she's keeping her legal options open. The sheer number of attacks means that it's not possible to follow through on each one, Ressa says. But Rappler is recording every online threat and storing the data for possible future legal action.

"We've put in place protocols for how we deal with online threats", she says. "We're looking at potential ways to hold the offenders accountable. This impunity that exists shouldn't be this way. We need solutions."

Calling the platforms to account

Ressa's public Facebook page is the target of about 2,000 "ugly" comments every day, she explains.

"The propaganda machine uses it to incite anger and then we have to deal with real people who believe this stuff. So that takes a lot of time", she says. "It's like playing whack-a-mole."

She rejects the idea that the onus is on journalists to police the platforms by constantly reporting problems: "Block, mute, report ... when you get so many of these it just takes up so much time. There's not enough time in the day. We also have jobs to do."

While she recognises the enormity of the challenge confronting Facebook, Ressa is adamant that the only way forward is for the social media giant to take responsibility for the problem and accept its role as a news publisher.

So she has begun publicly advocating for Facebook to step up. She's also gone directly to the company with data demonstrating the size of the problem.

In the immediate short term, "the only group that has the power to restore some sense of order and civility is Facebook... To not do anything is an abdication of responsibility."

Women journalists are often told to "toughen up" or "grow a thicker skin", and that's a common response to those who experience gendered online harassment. But the cumulative effect of constant derision - frequently received via the intimate device of a mobile phone - must be recognised, Ressa says, not just because the damage includes well-documented impacts on emotional and psychological well-being, but also censorship and erosion of trust:

They attack your physicality, your sexuality. When you are denigrated, and stripped of dignity in this way, how can you maintain your credibility? All of these things work together for a single purpose and that's to prevent journalists from doing their jobs.

She's been shocked at the level of the attacks and offered counselling and support to affected Rappler journalists, along with the social media team on the frontline of the battle, because: "I don't want our people going home with this."

Ressa also seeks to support others who are suffering online abuse but may not be as empowered as Rappler staff.

"We come together to help each other through it. We know what's going on - it's being done to intimidate us. We galvanise each other. And I think we'll get through it," she says. "I'm an optimist and I think we're being forged by fire and we'll emerge stronger."

This article - originally published on [TheConversation.com](https://www.theconversation.com) and reproduced here with permission - is an edited extract from a UNESCO report titled *An Attack On One Is An Attack On All: Successful initiatives to protect journalists and combat impunity*.

Julie Posetti is an award-winning Australian journalist and academic, and the author of a major global UNESCO study covering 121 countries, "Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age." She is currently head of Digital Editorial Capability at Fairfax Media in Australia and a journalism fellow at the University of Wollongong, where she is a doctoral candidate.

Spread of fake news 'can lead to more violence' in Bangladesh

By Nirmala Ganapathy

The editor and publisher of the largest-circulation English language newspaper in Bangladesh, The Daily Star, says the spread of fake news poses real dangers and could incite even more violence in a country that is already experiencing a spike in bloodshed.

Mr Mahfuz Anam said fake news was already being used by religious extremists to target liberal voices and incite mobs.

Bangladesh has seen high-profile murders of a dozen bloggers, writers and foreign nationals amid a government crackdown on far-right groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami. In many of the cases, the victims were hacked to death with a machete.

Mr Anam, 66, said fake news had been used by religious extremists to go after bloggers, writers and other liberal voices who were “falsely accused of being anti-religious, by misinterpreting their writings”.

“So far, ‘false news’ has been mostly confined to the religious extremists who use it to intimidate liberal and secular thinkers... Thankfully, the mainstream media has been mostly free of this malaise,” he told The Sunday Times in an e-mail interview.

Further illustrating the danger of fake news, Mr Anam said the “most tragic incident” in his country occurred in 2012 after a photograph showing a burnt Quran was posted on the Facebook site of a Buddhist youth.



Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star in Bangladesh.

Muslim mobs angered by the post burnt down Buddhist homes and temples. It was later found that the youth had nothing to do with the incident.

“This revealed the vulnerability of religious and ethnic minority groups who are targets of deliberate misinformation or false news,” he said.

Mr Anam himself faces around 79 defamation and sedition cases in different courts in Bangladesh over stories published in his newspaper in 2007 based on information that was given at the time by the then caretaker government, which was backed by the military, against its political rivals.

The avalanche of cases were triggered by an interview he gave on a TV talk show in February last year, in which he said he regretted publishing stories of graft against Ms Sheikh Hasina, the current Prime Minister, based on information from military intelligence officials.

International media and human rights organisations condemned the cases as politically motivated and a means of muzzling the media, while hailing Mr Anam for making The Daily Star the country’s most respected and trusted English language newspaper.

Last year, he was given the Courageous Journalism Award by the East-West Centre – an institution for public diplomacy based in the United States.

Err on the side of caution

The editor of The Daily Star, which has a circulation of 65,000 to 80,000 and is known for its liberal editorial line on many issues, said that its newsroom took great care to verify news stories.

“At The Daily Star, we have strengthened our normal procedure of verification and have become more alert to prevent lapses,” said Mr Anam.

“We have decided to ‘err on the side of caution’ and be late with stories rather than print stories about which we are not 100 per cent sure.”

The Bangladeshi government has introduced tough Internet laws, including giving the police authority to arrest journalists without a judge’s order. But he noted that this had also become a tool for curbing freedom of expression and clamping down on criticism against the government. Still, he noted that journalists had to be careful in an age where all types of news spread fast via social media.

He said: “As fake news spreads faster and faster through social media, journalists should become more and more cautious about their own work.

“It is my belief that readers will be more critical of the fake news phenomenon in the coming days and will turn to traditional print media for authentic news, providing a big opportunity for us to retain our readership and even grow it.”

A version of this article appeared in the print version of the Sunday Times (Singapore) on Sunday, 4 June 2017, under the title Spread of Fake news “can lead to more violence” in Bangladesh.

Unsure about a story? Ask ST

COME ACROSS A REPORT OR VIDEO THAT YOU THINK MIGHT BE FAKE? ASK ST, AND IT WILL HELP YOU TO PIN IT DOWN.

The Straits Times is pitching in to help its readers distinguish between true and false reports by opening up its popular AskST platform for readers to send in queries about reports, photos or videos they find dubious.

ST reporters will then work to establish if the report is true or false.

Readers can also alert the newsroom to content they have determined to be false by sending it to the AskST site, for the paper to consider whether to publish their findings.

These are among the steps The Straits Times will undertake as part of its efforts to counter fake news, said its editor Warren Fernandez.

It may also feature reports debunking misinformation on health issues in its Mind & Body pages, he said, to help readers make sense of the many stories on healthcare products and practices they receive through social media.

The ST digital team will look into producing videos featuring its social media editors pointing out fake news reports, he added.

The ST newsroom will also work with local media schools and its regional partners in Asia to tackle fake news.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keep it real: Truth and Trust in the Media

HERE ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS PROPOSED BY PARTICIPANTS IN THREE WORKSHOPS ON DAY 2 (JUNE 20) OF THE CONFERENCE ON FIGHTING DISINFORMATION ORGANISED BY THE STRAITS TIMES AND WAN-IFRA.

Fact-checking

1. Train journalists and equip them with tech tools to verify news
2. Asia News Network to draw up a checklist to help journalists and readers identify hoaxes and other types of fabricated or manipulated content.
3. Create citizen communities to help fact-checking.
4. Create a common database of news sites that create and distribute fake content for Asia News Network members to tap into.
5. Spread awareness about the issue. This could take the form of advertising campaigns or videos done by newsrooms.
6. Create an Asian news task force, comprising of regional members to debunk false information and fact-check on issues of common concern such as terrorism, the South China Sea conflict or environmental issues (haze).
7. Set up an ANN election watch group to fact-check fake news during elections.
8. Create messaging groups to alert fake news instances.
9. Work with media schools and universities to contribute to fact-checking projects.

News literacy

1. Countering fake news has to be habit forming. Gamifying the process is a way to involve the children, while making it fun and interactive.
2. Integrating media literacy skills into the existing school curriculum.
3. Use youth role models and celebrities to champion the cause.
4. To prevent seniors from spreading fake news, engage “ambassadors” within their community to create Facebook or Whatsapp groups to spread awareness on their networks.
5. Create an online WAN-IFRA news literacy group to roll out measures to counter disinformation.
6. Media companies should expand their efforts to promote good journalism.
7. To avoid, as much as possible, the term “fake news” which is vague, misleading (“fake news” actually aren’t “news”) and has been widely used by governments around the world to discredit legitimate journalism.



Media Policy

1. Media policy doesn't only relate to regulation. We also need to look at non-regulatory techniques.
2. All stakeholders (government, media, academic and other organisations) must participate in the media policy to tackle fake news.
3. There is a need for a better understanding of the drivers of demand and supply of misinformation.
4. Preventing the monetisation of false, misleading content as an effective way to fight this phenomenon.
5. Build a more resilient community to deal with fake news and help individuals to make better judgement on information.
6. Study models of public service broadcast to promote reliable and responsible journalism.
7. Recommend the setup of independent regulatory bodies to maintain objectivity in the monitoring of the news ecosystem. Governments cannot be judge and jury.

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