

Journalists, public cooperation key to fighting fake news

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While not new, disinformation and fake news continue to be a problem as it can be very persuasive and look real. However, is it something that journalists and the public can work together to fight?

Speakers during the Asia Journalism Forum in Singapore said on Friday that while difficult it can be done, but with the cooperation of media and the audiences that they serve.

However, it is not an easy task, particularly in the Philippines, where many get their stories from Facebook, which can be accessed for free on mobile phones.

While traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers continue to be widely watched, listened to, and read by Filipinos, digital news has become a go-to for the young and old, particularly due to the boon of free mobile access.

One problem, said former Agence France-Presse editor-in-chief Eric Wishart, is that this free access has led to a phenomenon where many Filipinos consider Facebook their primary source of information.

According to Wishart, Facebook is a closed environment where stories are amplified. “To many Filipinos, Facebook is the Internet,” he said.

While not wrong, using Facebook to get information can also have its disadvantages, such as possibly getting misinformed by a story shared by a trusted friend, and not having the means or desire to know if it is the best information available.

Most of the time, said psychologist Ullrich Ecker, simply being told information is wrong is not enough to stop people from referring to a wrong story or fake news even though it is retracted.

“Retractions can backfire,” he said, as there is a danger that people will remember the myth more than the fact — thus, the burden is also on journalists to ensure that they put the facts first, so as not to reinforce false information in the minds of their audiences.

However, for historian Farish Ahmad-Noor, during this new “industrial revolution”, the advent of digital technology, social networks render meaningful contact difficult.

“The IT (information technology) industry should understand that the impact of their gadgets are far wider than they realize,” he said.

Those spreading false information also distort information and reduce it, often oversimplifying, and package it nicely, to suit their needs.

This is why Alvin Tan, Facebook's head of public policy for Southeast Asia, and Irene Liu, Google News' lab lead for Asia Pacific, both assured the public they are doing their part in trying to curb disinformation on their respective platforms.

This, especially because technological advances seem to make spreading fake news easy, despite also opening up the world to new opportunities and benefits of easily accessible information.

Facebook is continuously adding features such as tweaking the site so users can see less ads for low-quality pages, downgrading clickbait, and adding recommendations for related news on certain issues.

In countries including the Philippines, Facebook also puts out public service announcements to educate users on getting information from reliable sources, Tan said.

Meanwhile, Google provides tools to help content publishers surface their own material and keep it from drowning in the "very noisy world," Liu said.

The two companies also said they help train journalists to use their tools to enrich their content, verify facts, and ensure proper delivery to audiences.

However, the burden is also on the media to ensure that they put out "quality journalism," said Yvonne Chua, co-founder of the VERA Files, and a professor at the University of the Philippines' College of Mass Communication.

"In the fight against alternative facts, we need not to lose sight of journalism principles such as truth-seeking, truth-telling, fairness, and verification," she said.

Besides reporting false information, proper fact-checking, she said, is key in ensuring that false information does not get circulated in the first place.

Recently, the Philippine News Agency mistakenly used the logo of a food company to accompany an article about the labor department.

In June, Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre also drew flak from lawmakers for allegedly being a "fake news king."