

Media literacy vital to prebunk and debunk fake news

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With fake news making its rounds in Asia, it has become a must to invest in media literacy and critical thinking skills to 'prebunk' and not just debunk fake news.

This was shared during a journalism conference in Singapore that the Tamesak Foundation Asian Journalism Forum had organised for journalists, policy makers and academia from the region.

The participants were informed that while fake news is not a new phenomenon, it has become a buzzword in recent times and is common in Asia, especially during election times. It is more severe in some countries where it creates communal and religious disharmony.

The former AFP editor-in-chief and a member of the Agency's Global News Management in Hongkong, Eric Wishart, said fake news is not a politician or public figure lying. It is not a journalistic legitimate mistake. "Fake news is fake content making it look genuine."

He said that news verification has become a must and mainstream media and journalism plays a bigger role there. "We are gatekeepers and we ensure we verify everything before sending it to our audiences."

The chief corporate communication officer of TEMPO Media and editor-in-chief of TEMPO Channel in Jakarta, Indonesia, Wahyu Muryadi, showed that TEMPO debunked hoax in Indonesia since early 2016.

"We only debunk hoax that is related to news and current affairs and not every piece of misinformation that becomes viral on social media."

He said that things change during elections and hoax becomes even more visible and dangerous. "Even TEMPO became the victim of a hoax. People use our trusted brand to spread rumours and lies."

He said the media should play a larger role in debunking hoax or misinformation.

"Fact checking is most crucial during the election so people can vote with confidence and a firm understanding of each candidate profile and records."

However, he said that it is must to keep the election fact checking fair and balanced for all candidates. "Don't let fact checking become a political tool for and against any candidates."

However, the associate professor of Hong Kong Baptist University, Cherian George, said the term fake news should be used cautiously, as populist leaders have been using it to whip up hostility against legitimate professional media.

He said some governments, in the name of combating fake news, attack independent journalism.

He cited the comment made by the assistant director-general of communication and information at UNESCO, Frank La Rue, "Fake news is a bad term primarily because it is a trap. It is not news. Just the term generates mistrust of the press and of the work of journalists. Political leaders have started using the term against the press, which is especially serious. This is a crucial moment when we have to defend journalism. We have to promote a journalism of honesty, a journalism that is seen to build the truth."

He said that there have been incidences where disinformation comes from governments, corporation, non-profit and community organisation.

Participants highlighted that misinformation influences memory, reasoning, and decision-making. They claimed that because of propaganda through fake news, traditional media is distrusted.

Cherian George said although Britain and the United States are among the world's freest societies, in major contests between truth and falsehood, in Britain's Brexit referendum and the US Presidential Election, lies and misinformation triumphed. "When people were presented with established facts, they simply refused to believe them, preferring to believe what more reasonable minds knew to be wildly untrue."

He said that familiar crisis is befalling in Asia and this crisis of reason is, in some ways the most devastating, because it undermines the very premises of our profession. "If facts don't count, if reason doesn't win, then what's the point of fighting for press freedom or searching for sustainable business models? Maybe we should just give up and move into public relations."

Cherian George explained that disinformation often exploits people's inability to process risk. "Even with life-and-death matters like catastrophic climate change and epidemics, people have a hard time interpreting statistics. The scientific community is especially bothered by this because they often have the facts and figures for people to act on, but people are not absorbing the message."

The associate professor Farish Ahmad-Noor of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore said that while the problem of fake news is not new, it has a larger impact now because of the wider reach, impacting society and even national security. The responsibility, according to him lies with information technology companies.

While the participants and resource persons agreed that mainstream media has a role to tackle fake news, some said that mainstream media should call out false or insidious reports and rumours by being responsible, checking facts and informing people correctly.

The only answer to fake news is quality media, according to co-founder and chief executive officer of the Spice Newsroom, Alan Soon.

He said that it would not be fair to talk about fake news without talking about the quality of media. "Mainstream media should question what and how we can optimise trust and relation with mainstream society."

Cherian George said that journalism's core principles and practices are built on the faith that journalists treat facts seriously because they believe people's decisions should be guided by evidence. The press fights for freedom from censorship because they think that it's through open competition that better ideas will reveal themselves.

He said that competition is becoming more unbalanced because as countries industrialise, media and communication professionals in the persuasion business—public relations, marketing communication, advertising—tend to outnumber professional journalists.

Although professional news organisations are not enough to fight against disinformation, they are necessary, he said. "It should be quite obvious that the stronger the professional media sector, the better society's chances of combating disinformation. Journalists need the time and resources to produce meaningful stories that can counter fake news."

He also pointed out that some of the governments that claim to be very concerned about fake news are also busy making life harder for professional media. "This is like trying to remove a brain tumour by removing the brain."

Cherian George claimed that when governments compromise the health of news media, one could only conclude that they are not seriously interested in fighting fake news. "They are more interested in monopolising fake news. They want to be the only forces in society with the capacity to create and distribute disinformation."

Meanwhile, Facebook's head of public policy for Southeast Asia, Alvin Tan, said media literacy is critical. "We want to work with the journalist community to provide more authentic information online."