

## Report on the Asia Journalism Forum Reporting Facts and the Future of Journalism

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THE ASIA JOURNALISM FORUM, hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and funded by Temasek Foundation Connects, was held on 17 – 19 August 2017 at Orchard Hotel Singapore. It was convened by Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow at IPS and Associate Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship (AJF). A total of 123 participants comprising policymakers, media practitioners, industry leaders, and academics from Singapore and Asia attended the forum.

Inspired by the recent attention on fake news and its impact on journalism, the theme of the forum was “Reporting Facts and the Future of Journalism”. The forum included an Opening Keynote by Associate Professor Cherian George on 17 August, and a full-day conference on 18 August. A workshop on investigative journalism was also conducted on 19 August.

### DAY ONE, 17 AUGUST 2017

#### Opening Keynote: Journalism’s Crisis of Reason

In his Opening Keynote, **Associate Professor Cherian George** from the Hong Kong Baptist University said the problem of fake news was part of a larger crisis – a crisis of reason. Like science, journalism was inspired by the belief that humanity progresses with knowledge accumulation, and better ideas would squeeze out worse ones in open competition. However, in a crisis of reason, people choose not to believe in facts, and fake news and disinformation triumph.

Assoc. Prof. George listed four types of fake news that were particularly detrimental to society, namely, health myths about smoking sponsored by the tobacco industry, climate change denial, hate propaganda (e.g., the “love jihad” conspiracy in India), and fake news for political gains (e.g., the invasion of Iraq on accusations that it possessed weapons of mass destruction).

Based on these examples, Assoc. Prof. George made several observations about fake news and disinformation. First, disinformation is not exclusively an Internet phenomenon. Second, disinformation often exploits peoples’ poor understanding of risk and fear of the “other”. Third, disinformation is often produced by skilful professionals.

Assoc. Prof. George provided three takeaway messages. First, there is a market failure in the current marketplace of ideas where truth will not overcome falsehood without intervention.

Hence, intervention through more fact checking, and from Internet intermediaries (e.g., Facebook and Google) to tilt the balance in favour of quality journalism is needed. Second, governments must not use “fighting fake news” as a proxy for censorship as this would undermine professional media capacity, which itself is crucial to tackle fake news. Third, more investment in critical thinking to build society’s resilience against fake news is needed.



The Question & Answer Session (Q&A) was moderated by **Associate Professor Kenneth Paul Tan** from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Among the questions posed, a participant asked if government intervention to fight fake news was necessary. Assoc. Prof. George replied that governments have multiple instruments at their disposal, ranging from punitive and restrictive laws, to arm-length funding that supports fact checking, media literacy and quality journalism. However, he added that risk management implicitly assumes a tolerable level of risk in return for the freedom individuals enjoy. Thus, it would be impossible to completely eliminate the harms associated with fake news.

## **DAY TWO, 18 AUGUST 2017**

### **Opening and Welcome Remarks**

**Mr Janadas Devan**, Director of IPS, said taking over the AJF from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information was a natural fit for IPS, as IPS aims to provide a platform for various groups in the society to come together.

**Mr Benedict Cheong**, Chief Executive of Temasek Foundation International, said Temasek aims to contribute to Asia in terms of capacity building, which includes promoting learning and exchange among journalists in Asia. He added that this was the first time two Temasek

organisations sponsored the programme in a complementary approach – Temasek Foundation International supported the 12-week AJF while Temasek Foundation Connects supported the three-day forum.

### Panel 1: The Problem of Fake News in Asia

The first panel tackled the problem of fake news in Asia, and was chaired by **Mr Alan John**, Director of the AJF. The speakers examined the impact of fake news on society and governance, its historical context, and the present fault lines that they exploit.

**Associate Professor Farish Ahmad-Noor** from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies said fake news has always existed and will always exist. Fake news emerged since the beginning of the press in the colonial era where it played an instrumental role in framing information for a colonial audience. Messages were often distorted for political mileage and tailored to justify military action taken in Southeast Asia. Some historical examples include the US attack on Kuala Batu in 1831, the Anglo-Burmese wars, and the US colonisation of the Philippines.



**Mr Eric Wishart**, former AFP Editor-in-Chief and Member of the Agency's Global News Management (Hong Kong), said reasons behind fake news range from communal strife to financial motivations that led to the rise of greater fact checking efforts to counter disinformation. He cited that AFP was one of the partners of First Draft (a non-profit that addresses challenges relating to truth in the digital age), which developed *CrossCheck*, a collaborative journalism project for fact checking the 2017 French Presidential Election. He also looked forward to similar outreach programmes that First Draft is developing in Asia.

**Mr Wahyu Muryadi**, Chief Corporate Communication Officer at TEMPO Media and Editor-in-Chief at TEMPO Channel, explained how TEMPO debunked hoaxes related to current affairs. During the Jakarta gubernatorial election earlier this year, TEMPO carried out live fact checking during the public debates between electoral candidates. Mr Muryadi added that fact checking – which should be independent and non-partisan – is imperative, so as to allow citizens to be informed and to vote with confidence.

Among various questions asked, a key concern raised was about the additional resources required for increased fact checking efforts in response to fake news. Mr Wishart acknowledged that fact checking is indeed a challenge for journalists, especially small media outfits. Thus, it would be advisable for them to team up and form coalitions to share manpower and resources, as exemplified by *CrossCheck*.

## **Panel 2: Going behind Misinformation and Fake News**

The second panel, moderated by **Professor Lim Sun Sun** from the Singapore University of Technology and Design, looked at what motivates people to spread misinformation and what factors make certain people more vulnerable to misinformation than others.

**Associate Professor Ullrich Ecker** from the University of Western Australia spoke about the psychology of misinformation. He said misinformation could have a lasting impact on people's reasoning and decision-making, even after credible corrections have been made. Corrections leave "gaps" in people's understanding of the world, which might be irrationally "filled" with incorrect information because people prefer a complete understanding. Thus, factual alternatives are necessary to "fill the gap" after debunking a myth. Assoc. Prof. Ecker also provided recommendations for effective messaging to debunk myths.

**Associate Professor Shyam Tekwani** from the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies spoke about the socio-cultural and political factors behind misinformation. Using India as an example, he said governments can also contribute to the propagation of fake news and disinformation. India's long history of anti-minority policies against Muslims explains why fake news that went viral in India tend to advance the Hindu nationalist agenda of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and promote Islamophobia. He also emphasised that the media is an integral part of the political architecture of security.

**Assistant Professor Edson Tandoc** from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information spoke about the problem of fake news in Singapore. Based on a survey he conducted in 2016, Asst. Prof. Tandoc said social media is a place where false news spreads, thus making users vulnerable to believing false information. He also explained that users engage in different techniques of assessing the veracity of a piece of information, namely, internal and external acts of authentication, and that understanding of how users authenticate information can help understand how fake news spreads.





Participants posed questions related to the psychology of fake news during the Q&A. One participant asked whether journalists should report about fake news to debunk it or simply not report it at all. Assoc. Prof. Ecker replied that debunking fake news is necessary as ignoring it adds to the problem as well. Thus, it is important to know the most effective debunking technique in order prevent doing more harm than good. Asst. Prof. Tandoc agreed and said, given the current plethora of information sources, ignoring a falsehood would be complicit in its spread, and disseminating the truth now involves correcting falsehoods.

### **Panel 3: Pecha Kucha – Trends and Players**

The third panel adopted the Pecha Kucha format to present what different players in the media landscape are doing to combat the problem of misinformation. The session was moderated by **Mr Peh Shing Huei**, Partner at The Nutgraf.

**Mr Zakir Hussein**, Political Editor at *The Straits Times*, said news outlets need to get the basics of journalism right, such as verifying the original source and reporting all sides of a news story. Singaporeans also tend to turn to the mainstream media for answers and verification, thus increasing the importance of fact checking in the newsroom. Mr Hussein added that *The Straits Times* also publishes articles on how to spot fake news to equip readers with the tools to spot fake news.

**Mr Martino Tan**, Deputy Managing Director and Co-Managing Editor of Mothership.sg, an online news site in Singapore, said fake news has changed the landscape they work in. For example, *Mothership.sg* had to constantly maintain its credibility among readers, be always in “beta mode”, and ready to improve.

**Mr Alvin Tan**, Head of Public Policy, Southeast Asia Facebook, said Facebook's mission statement has changed from empowering people to sharing and making the world more open and connected, to a focus on building community and bringing the world closer together. New tools introduced to the newsfeed include clickbait, spam and false news detection. The Facebook Journalism Project has also committed USD \$14 million dollars to work with the news industry and promote higher quality journalism.

**Ms Irene Liu**, News Lab Lead, Asia Pacific Google, introduced the new Google News Lab that was launched this year. They believe that creating a more informed world requires journalists and technologists working together to elevate quality journalism in a "noisy" world of information. Hence, Google News Lab partnered First Draft to launch *CrossCheck*. Google also introduced new technological tools including the fact check tag for web links (e.g., *Fact checked by Snopes.com: False*).

**Mr Septiaji Eko Nugroho**, Chair of the Indonesian Anti-Hoax Movement and Indonesian Anti-Slander Society spoke about MAFINDO, a crowdsourced and crowdfunded community that started an anti-hoax movement in Indonesia since 2016. MAFINDO has full-time fact checkers to complement more than 200 active volunteers. It works with multiple partners including the independent Indonesian Press Council.

Questions relating to the credibility of fact checking sites were asked during the Q&A. In particular, a member of the audience asked, to what extent can we trust fact checking sites, and whether Facebook and Google need to step up and back certain fact checking sites? Ms Liu replied that Google is a technological company and does not wish to be the arbiter of truth. Instead, Google identifies organisations that seek higher standards of verification and promotes them.

#### **Panel 4: Fake News and Journalism 3.0**

The fourth and final panel, moderated by Assoc. Prof. George, looked at how fake news impacted journalism, both as a profession and as a business, and how journalism should fight the problem of fake news moving forward.

**Mr Alan Soon**, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Splice Newsroom, spoke about the importance for media organisations to build genuine relationships with its readers. He proposed a new model of journalism that does not solely pursue clicks and sales, but one that builds a relationship with its readers by understanding what content would better inform and benefit them.

**Assistant Professor Yvonne Chua** from the University of the Philippines and Co-Founder of VERA Files said the principles of journalism have made journalism a resilient profession in spite of the many crises it has faced throughout history. Thus, in the face of fake news and alternative facts, journalism should adhere even more strongly to the journalistic principles of truth-seeking, verification, and journalistic autonomy and accountability. Asst. Prof. Chua also spoke about VERA Files' post-hoc fact checking process and emphasised the increasing importance of collaboration and leveraging technology in fact checking.

**Professor Charlie Beckett** from the London School of Economics, said the problem of fake news would worsen in the near future. First, governments and other powerful organisations

have begun to weaponise fake news for political gain. Second, new technologies would allow fake news to spread undetected (e.g., in closed messaging apps like WhatsApp). Third, fake news is a symptom of deeper systemic problems of our society that cannot be solved overnight. Moving forward, journalism needs to regain the trust of the people by being transparent in its reporting and by engaging audiences with greater humility.

Among the various questions asked, one participant asked how traditional journalism can re-invent itself to engage an entirely different generation of audience. In response, Asst. Prof. Chua said journalists should stick to the traditional values of journalism and ensure that they are practising good journalism before thinking about re-inventing journalism.

### **Day Three, 19 August 2017**

A total of 41 journalists attended the investigative journalism workshop conducted by Asst. Prof. Chua, where she gave journalists an introduction into investigative journalism, why it is important, as well as effective reporting methods.

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