

Forum discusses fighting fake news

Panellist suggests newsrooms band together to verify stories circulating on social media

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The Straits Times, 19 August 2017

Facebook users in Singapore and Malaysia will soon see tips on how to spot fake news routinely at the top of their news feeds.

"We want to improve the ability of people to learn about what constitutes false news," said Mr Alvin Tan, head of public policy for South-east Asia at Facebook yesterday.

That measure is one way tech giants can work with newsrooms to fight the spread of fake news, said panellists at the Temasek Foundation Asia Journalism Forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies yesterday.

Titled Reporting Facts And The Future of Journalism, the conference focused on the problem of fake news and its impact on journalism. It featured panellists who, over four sessions, discussed fake news trends in Asia, the psychology of spreading or believing in fake news, fact checking, and journalism's response.

Former Agence France-Presse (AFP) editor-in-chief Eric Wishart defined fake news as fabricated or distorted content presented as genuine news, and said it was usually malicious. "It's not a politician's lies, it's not a journalist's legitimate mistake, it's not a story that a politician or public figure doesn't like," said Mr Wishart, now a member of AFP's news management department.

He suggested newsrooms band together to verify stories being circulated on social media, as fact checking requires people and time, which a single organisation sometimes cannot afford to spare. He cited CrossCheck, a project in which French newsrooms worked with Google and Facebook to debunk false claims and correct misleading stories related to the French elections this year. It now has 10 full-time staff.

On a smaller scale, Indonesia's Tempo news site has a channel dedicated to debunking hoaxes related to news and current affairs, said its editor-in-chief Wahyu Muryadi.

Once newsrooms verify that a piece of "news" is fake, they have a responsibility to set the record straight, he told 100 journalists, academics and policymakers.

Straits Times political editor Zakir Hussain said: "Increasingly, we have to report on fake news even if it's not newsworthy in itself, because media outlets have a role to play in educating readers about fake news and fixing falsehoods out there."

Panellists also stressed the importance of teaching the public to be more discerning about hoaxes.

This is because even if people learn that something they believed in was fake, the decisions they make later are still affected, said psychology associate professor Ullrich Ecker of the University

of Western Australia. "Fact checks reduce misconceptions but not feelings or voting intentions," he said.