In an era of fake news, the truth may not always be out there

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Sometime in March, word spread like wildfire via Whatsapp that someone was given a hefty fine for leaving used tissue behind at a public eating place.

“Pls take note... When you go to coffee shop, hawker centre to have your meals,” the message went. “DO NOT throw your used tissue into bowl, on plate, or cup! My friend just got fined $200! This is real!”

Incredulous as it may sound, many people here believed it enough to pass on the message to friends and family - so much so that the National Environment Agency (NEA) had to come forward to debunk the hoax with a Facebook post on March 30.

But more than two months on, administrative and accounts executive Michelle (not her real name), 61, who had seen the message, was still not sure if it was false, as she was unaware of the NEA’s clarification. “Was that true?” she asked, before being told by TODAY that it was a hoax.

Like many Singaporeans, she would pass on text messages that “contain some form of warning” to loved ones, even if they were not verified. “I usually forwarded messages related to health, or warnings to not download certain apps for fear of viruses, or to stay away from certain places because of (possible terror attacks),” she said. Of late, she has been more discerning, but confessed that she would still forward messages occasionally without checking if they were true.

It is not just the elderly or the less savvy among the population who regularly give false information the benefit of the doubt.

Mr Jun Koh, a student in his 20s, said: “Some of us share because we want to inform our family and friends. Some of us just want the ‘glory’ of sharing it faster than our friends and family as a way to show that we are very informative.”

Taxi driver Victor Wong, 58, said he takes unverified messages which he receives on mobile and social media “with a pinch of salt”, but he will not dismiss them outright. “I usually take note of these things and be on my guard, especially if it is something that can potentially affect me personally. But I will not share them further until they are confirmed by the authorities,” said Mr Wong, citing the old adage that there is no smoke without fire.

Nevertheless, some are more careful. For example, Miss Lee Xin Ying, a 27-year-old teacher, said she would look up the gist of the message on Google, and check if it is a scam. “I will also tend to verify with several other sources,” she said.

Around the world, policymakers are cracking their heads over the scourge of fake news. Consumers themselves are worried, as recent international and domestic surveys show.

Less than two weeks ago, a study by BBC Global News found that eight in 10 Singaporean news consumers are concerned about fake news, the highest among five places - the others were Australia, Malaysia, Hong Kong and India - in the Asia Pacific which were surveyed. A study by Blackbox Research, which was conducted over a fortnight in April, also found that 42 per cent of Singaporeans “regularly wonder if the news they read is fake”, with six in 10 saying the issue worries them.

Speaking to TODAY, Blackbox Research managing director David Black said a fake news item tends to be picked up and shared if it is perceived as “threatening the community or accepted moral standards”. Information on purported flouting of health and food regulations typically gains instant traction, said Mr Black, referring to the hoax circulating in January that FairPrice’s house brand of rice was made of plastic. The supermarket chain subsequently debunked the hoax on its Facebook page. “Singaporeans, like everyone on social media, typically assume prima facie accuracy when reading news within their personal and social space – on Facebook and Twitter news feeds as well as messaging apps,” Mr Black said. “People tend to trust their connections, which in turn diminishes their cognitive filters and critical thinking abilities, making social media feeds fertile ground for fake news to breed.”

Nominated Member of Parliament Ganesh Rajaram added: “People often think that (just because a piece of information) has thousands of views, or has been ‘liked’ or shared thousands of times, (it) must be authentic and factual. That isn’t always the case.”

Reflecting the concerns of policymakers here, Chua Chu Kang GRC Member of Parliament Zaqy Mohamad said: “My worry is that when you speak to people about this, they are usually quite rational. But when things go viral and they are bombarded (by information) rapidly, it is harder to be discerning.”

In 2015, several foreign news outlets, including American news network CNN and Chinese broadcaster CCTV, wrongly reported that founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew - who was then in intensive care - had died, based on an announcement made by a fake government website. The website was created by a teenager. The teen, who had claimed that he wanted to demonstrate to his friends how easy it was for a hoax to be perpetuated, was given a stern warning by the police.

Citing the incident, Mr Zaqy, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Communications and Information, stressed the dangers of fake news. “In an actual situation or emergency, it becomes hard for people to distinguish what is fake from real,” he said.

Fake news flourishes

News-related hoaxes have been around for hundreds of years. But things are different now: Never before has information - or disinformation - been able to spread so quickly, to so many people, in so many places worldwide. What this means is that there is very little time for authorities to react, and it is a challenge to debunk hoaxes promptly and effectively. The confirmation bias intrinsic in human nature makes the situation worse, as people readily believe false information that confirms

their existing beliefs or theories instead of seeking the truth. It also does not help that people can profit - in both monetary and non-monetary terms - from spreading false information.

The United States of America saw some of its most memorable media fakes during the growth of the “penny press” in the 19th century, where the quest for greater circulation led to sensational opinion pieces and staged events to attract readers’ attention. Historians today still point to the Spanish-American War in 1898 as the first press-driven conflict, where newspaper publishers used propaganda to agitate public opinion in favour of conflict.

But the phenomenon is back with a vengeance, with “fake news” entering the everyday lexicon, thanks, ironically, to US President Donald Trump. Since his election win last November, Mr Trump has given new life to the phrase through liberal use, even though critics have pointed out that he himself has been less than rigorous about fact-checking his public utterances.

Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Institute of Policy Studies, said: “What makes fake news today more insidious is how it often assumes the form of news articles or information from professional-looking sites, which makes it difficult for people to tell their authenticity.”

In Singapore, the Media Literacy Council (MLC) defines “fake news” as “different types of misinformation, often circulated as deceptive headlines, questionable theories, articles, tweets, and other sources of information that cast doubt around an issue”. “It often mimics real news and is sometimes created with the intention of generating revenue through advertising that depends on viewer clicks,” said MLC chairman Lock Wai Han.

So, what type of fake news should Singaporeans be most concerned about?

Falsehoods that undermine the Republic’s values such as multiracialism and multiculturalism, said media analysts and practitioners whom TODAY spoke to. “Also, given how polarised the world is today, we have to be very careful with issues relating to security, foreign policy and the economy. When ‘fake news’ on these hallowed issues are broadcast and allowed to be disseminated, it is dangerous to our very existence as a society,” said Mr Rajaram, who is Executive Vice-President (Asia) of independent content producer and distributor Fremantlemedia. The greatest danger lies with fake news created with the aim of spreading misinformation, creating disruption or sowing distrust, he said. “Yet, we can’t stop the proliferation of fake news as a long as there is free and open use of the Internet and social media,” he added.

Professor Ang Peng Hwa from the Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information felt that fake news that has a bearing on election results would be the most troubling. Unlike one-off hoaxes, fake news that “disrupts the democratic process” has a far more enduring impact, said Prof Ang, who is also the MLC’s vice-chair.

Dr Soon, who specialises in research on new media and politics, cited the case of entrepreneurial Macedonian teenagers who produced hoax articles that may have tipped the US Presidential Election in Mr Trump’s favour. The articles, which were sensational and often baseless, were posted to Facebook, and attracted scores of readers and earned fake-news writers money from pay-per-click advertising.

Closer to home, during Malaysia's General Election in 2013, unsubstantiated allegations that the election commission had conducted itself fraudulently — such as by tapping on phantom voters and staging power outages — went viral online.

In Singapore, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam has lashed out at "completely false, made up, trumped up" attacks made against the police, which not only discredited the men in blue, but also dumbed down discourse.

Professor Mohan Dutta, who heads NUS' Department of Communications and New Media, said that globally, the scourge of fake news is growing amid the backdrop of "increasing public mistrust of the traditional sources of information".

"The catalysing role of technology in disseminating information, the large concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the global elite and the shrinking democratic spaces for authentic participation are the underlying reasons for this growing mistrust of conventional news sources," said Prof Dutta.

Mr Rajaram felt that what is particularly worrying is when people pick and choose what to believe based on their existing beliefs. "Certain opinion leaders tend to dismiss any news as fake news if things do not fit their agenda. This blurs the whole notion of truth — that is it okay to ignore the facts and just believe and propagate one's own notion of 'truth', as it were," he said. "This is scary and could have long term consequences, especially for kids growing up today."

A national security issue: MinLaw

Some countries are taking action to tackle the scourge of fake news. For example, draft laws have been passed in Germany to force social networks to remove fake news and hate speech on their platforms within 24 hours or face hefty fines of up to €50 million (S$77.8 million). The United Kingdom has also launched parliamentary inquiries into online hate speech and fake news, while the Czech government has set up a specialist "anti-fake news" unit to tackle falsehoods, which Czech officials claim are being created by Russia Kremlin ahead of the country's elections in October.

In Singapore, a government review is underway to address the problem, given the limited remedies under existing laws. Responding to TODAY's queries, a Ministry of Law (MinLaw) spokesman reiterated that while it is an offence under the Telecommunications Act to knowingly transmit false information, this is "ineffective in stemming the circulation of falsehoods, given how quickly they can go viral". He added that the Protection from Harassment Act also affords a civil remedy to individuals who are the subject of falsehoods.

No timeframe has been set for the exercise, with MinLaw saying it will "take the time needed to conduct a careful and comprehensive review".

Adding that fake news is a complex problem which "does not lend itself to simple solutions", the spokesman said: "To succeed in the fight against fake news, various stakeholders need to work together. To this end, we have begun discussions with stakeholders to find the best way forward."

The Government is concerned with “falsehoods that can result in serious consequences for individuals and for society”, he stressed. “There have been many examples both locally and overseas of fake news being circulated, especially on social media platforms and private messaging services. Fake news has become an issue of national security. We have seen how it has been used to interfere in the domestic affairs and politics of other countries,” said the spokesman.

Observers said it could be an onerous task to enforce any new laws in this regard, especially when foreign parties are involved.

Prof Ang felt that Singapore’s existing laws were largely robust enough. “(They) come down quite hard on fake news content and people who try to spread fake news,” he said, pointing to how The Real Singapore website was ordered to shut and its editors jailed, for publishing content that incited hostility between Singaporeans and foreigners.

Any new legislation warrants careful study, he said. Nevertheless, he suggested looking at laws to cripple the scale and speed at which fake news gets disseminated.

Associate Professor David Tan from NUS’ Faculty of Law said that while the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act are in place, they may not offer adequate protection against the harm caused by fake news. “There are different types of fakes news… The ongoing review should address the entire spectrum, but enforcement is going to be a Herculean labour,” said Assoc Prof Tan, who specialises in areas such as entertainment and intellectual property law, as well as freedom of speech.

Mr Black argued that bringing regulations up to speed with the new media environment was “inevitable”. “Unfortunately, technology is not yet at a point where it weeds out plain untruths,” he said. “The truth is that self-regulation and media literacy are ineffective tools against propaganda whose sole aim is to manipulate the truth.”

Nevertheless, Dr Soon said that the task for regulators, not just those in Singapore, is to determine “what makes fake news so different from existing forms of misinformation that it warrants distinct legislation”.

Public education is key, but not the only solution

The Government has put in place several measures: Information literacy — including the ability to discern the authenticity of digital information — is currently taught in primary and secondary schools, as part of the Cyber Wellness syllabus. The MLC runs an annual campaign to educate Internet users, including outreach programmes targeted at those aged 15 to 35. The Government has also set up a website, called “Factually”, which aims to clarify widespread or common misperceptions of Government policy, or other matters of public concern. It recently featured, for example, the Government’s reasons for closing the Sungei Road flea market and increasing water prices. There was also an article debunking rumours of “fake eggs” being sold here.

While some cast doubt on the efficacy of current public education efforts, most of the observers TODAY spoke to believe that in the long run, raising media literacy is the only sustainable solution.

Set up in 2012, the MLC works with the industry, educators, parents and the Government on public education and awareness programmes relating to media literacy and cyber wellness. To tackle the growing concern of fake news, the MLC shares tips on how to discern content accuracy via its website and social media platforms, such as the importance of cross-checking various sources, and considering the agenda of the purveyors of information.

Assoc Prof Tan urged the council to “step up its efforts” in educating the millennial generation on rules of engagement on social media, as young “citizen journalists” may be unaware of the severe consequences of their tweets or Facebook posts. “People generally enjoy reading about the sensational and the scandalous, and spreading gossip has become a social convention,” he said.

Miss Lee, who teaches at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, stressed that media education should be extended to the public at large, especially the older generation, who may be more vulnerable to phoney chain messages.

Professor Lim Sun Sun, who heads the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences division at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, said that schools should teach students about the “political economy” of media production that influences how news is produced and disseminated. “A greater awareness of these broader structures, like who or what profits from the proliferation of fake news, can shape more informed, critical consumers,” said Prof Lim. The sheer scale and speed at which news can be disseminated today also calls for the use of machine-learning to weed out falsehoods, she added.

To this end, the DSO National Laboratories is developing an artificial intelligence system to determine the authenticity of news. The initiative aims to reduce the time taken to verify news from five days to two hours.

Tech giants around the world have also upped their game: Google, for instance, has launched a Fact Check tool to tag search results that have been verified by news publishers and fact-checking organisations. In March, Facebook also introduced a third-party fact-checking tool which alerts users to “disputed content”. The social media giant has promised to curb the spread of fake news by “disrupting economic incentives for fake news creators”, and launching an educational tool to help users make more informed news consumption decisions. It has trialed the tool in some countries, which directs users to information and resources in the Facebook Help Center, including tips on how to spot false news, such as checking the URL of the site, investigating the source and looking for other reports on the topic.

Media observers and consumers here felt that mainstream media outlets also have a key role in stamping out fake news. Prof Dutta called for the outlets to critically evaluate information, rather than blindly jumping onto viral content to draw readership. “Journalists must constantly question, not just ask what information is here, but what is not here, and why,” he said.

Mr Han, the taxi driver, suggested that media outlets have dedicated sections on their websites to debunk misleading and false stories that have gone viral. The BBC, for instance, has assembled a fact-checking team that calls out false stories shared on social media and clarifies them on its Reality Check series.

Amid the deluge of fake news, Dr Soon felt that this is a chance for mainstream media around the world to “re-establish its leadership in the business of news”. “While some hold the perception that fake news and online providers pose an existential threat to journalism, what is currently unfolding could be an opportunity... That said, journalism has to regain the trust of people who may have been disillusioned with partisan and sensational reporting,” she said.

In the meantime, the hope among experts and observers is that the public can be more discerning. After all, the first step to addressing a problem is to recognise that it exists. And as the BBC and Blackbox surveys show, a majority of people in Singapore are worried about fake news.

Since the middle of last year, Michelle has tried to be more careful about which messages to forward to her friends and family members - after police turned up at her house, checking on the source of a hoax that a bomb was found in Orchard Road. That experience, and the fact that the message which she had passed on turned out to be false have taught her a valuable lesson. “Now I will not forward without checking with other sources… Sometimes I Google, but most of the time I just don’t forward anymore,” she said.