

Filtering and Fact-checking as the Antidote to ‘Fake News’

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Abstract: In this modern era, journalist also plays an important role as the one who will decide how an information will be delivered to public. Especially with the development of technology recently, people tend to use the easiest online news platform (whether it is reliable one or not) as their sources and unreliable online media platform will be the crux of the matter. This article will analyze and describe how important filtering and fact-checking an information to stop the spreading of fake news.

I. INTRODUCTION

Soon after the shooting at *Capital Gazette* newsroom in Annapolis, Maryland, on June 28, 2018 numerous trolls ‘celebrated’ⁱ the targeted murder of the four journalists and a staffer. One troll declared: “Dead journalists can’t spread leftist propaganda.”

Since Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in November 2016, attacks on the ‘fake news media’ are becoming commonplace with right-wing media platforms emerging bolder and stronger. Trump’s anti-journalist rhetoric is not entirely blameless in riling predatory attacks on journalists by deranged individuals such as the shooter at the Capital Gazette whose unresolved grievance with the paper escalated into him murdering an editor and three other journalists on June 28.

Trump’s Nixonianⁱⁱ loathing of the American media has effectively created echo chambers for the white supremacist agenda, the most recent being Milo Yiannopoulos’s red flaggingⁱⁱⁱ to “vigilante squads to start gunning journalists down on sight”.

Rightist contempt for the liberal press has degenerated to such a state that the New York Police Department felt it necessary to deploy armed police to news organisations across Manhattan. It was unthinkable that journalists needed police protection in a democracy that gave us Watergate, Walter Cronkite, the Pulitzer and Edward R. Murrow who famously said: “We cannot make good news out of bad practice.”

Even as the media in parts of Asia where they are under tight government control look to the United States as the beacon of press freedom, bad media practices are being mainstreamed – notably at Fox News and Breitbart News Network. The partisan media climate in the United States has empowered hardline conservative attack machines in the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. The political left also has their share of anti-Trump media platforms as well as on late night TV shows in the Bill Maher and Stephen Colbert comedic news genre.

The polarised American media portrayal of the Trump presidency – which has led to Trump supporters publicly hating the liberal media, and Trump alleging that Google’s algorithms are “rigged” against him^{iv} - reminds me of my teaching stint at the University of Montgomery-Alabama as a visiting journalism educator many years ago.

My brief was to expose the American students to a more ‘international perspective’ of journalism practices and cultures. The final year students, unsurprisingly, said the media were blatantly biased (such as Fox News), that journalists generally lacked integrity, that the news were overly negative, sensational and obsessed with celebrity trivia.

That cynical judgment on the media is not exclusive to the United States. Journalists I had worked with at training workshops in parts of Asia cited similar complaints. Which underlines my point that knowing what is bad and lacking in professional journalism does not necessarily motivate journalists to do something concrete to fix it for various reasons. As a senior Malaysian

journalist said at one of my training workshops: “When you have unqualified editors running the newsroom, our hands are tied.”

While digital technologies have radically changed the production, distribution, packaging and composition of the news narratives, what should not change as far as best practices in journalism are concerned are the functions of constructive journalism and the journalists’ obligation to speak truth to power.

On this score, it is axiomatic that editors ought to lead, inspire and exemplify in their editorials and inhouse policies what good journalism practically means, particularly with the proliferation of ‘fake news’ and media conspiracy sites. Good journalism goes beyond a reporter’s ability to ask questions and string sentences into a readable news story.

Good practices are forged in the newsroom by fair-minded journalists whose primary obligation is to their readers rather than those in power, journalists who know that they should not become part of the story but recognise that they could be caught up in issues that conflict with their core values. The journalists’ task, therefore, is to recognise their blind spots and preconceptions that influence their judgement of what is right and wrong, what is fair and unfair, what is true and what is ‘fake’.

Good journalists are defined by their ability to weigh the evidence to illuminate the truth of the matter – all these are based on the trust that journalists place on their sources to provide the information that could be checked and verified for its contextual and factual accuracy. Journalists, though, seldom work in isolation. They work with their sources in uncovering the truth.

In authoritarian states, journalists uncovering the truth do come with personal costs. At this time of writing, two Reuters journalists are still in detention in Myanmar for their investigation of military brutality against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has warned journalists critical of his administration that they “are not exempted from assassination”.

In the Czech Republic where I visit occasionally, the rightist President Milos Zeman was reported to have turned up at a press conference with a fake Kalashnikov inscribed with the ominous words “for journalists”. And, in Egypt, Al Jazeera journalist Mahmoud Hussein is being detained since December 2016 for allegedly “disseminating false news and receiving monetary funds from foreign

authorities in order to defame the state's reputation”. Annual reports of ongoing threats against journalists around the world can be read at the Reporters San Frontiers website.^v

2. METHODOLOGY

This research using qualitative descriptive as the method to analyse the issue. Data and information collected through observation based on author experience as journalist. Data for this topic also collected from online journal, official sites, internet articles and also from You Tube.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 What can journalists and the public do to counter the proliferation of fake news?

What can journalists in Malaysia and Indonesia for instance – and independent writers - do when the kakistocrats clamp down on enterprising critical reporting? Renowned American journalist Dan Rather had sounded out to journalists in the United States to “stay steady ... relentless and remain aggressive” against Trump’s persistent attack on the media as ‘fake news’ and ‘enemy of the people’.^{vi}

“That’s the proper role of the press ... to be part of the system of checks and balances, to ask questions, keep on asking the tough questions, do deep investigative reporting. I think the public (including the people who voted for Trump) understand that that’s a vital role,” he said.^{vii}

In an interview with Jimmy Fallon on NBC’s The Tonight Show, Rather said that journalists got to “stay steady” against Trump’s deprecation of the US press as “the enemy of the American people”.^{viii}

“But also, be relentless and remain aggressive. That’s the proper role of the press ... to be part of the system of checks and balances, to ask questions, keep on asking the tough questions, do deep investigative reporting. I think the public (including the people who voted for Trump) understand that that’s a vital role, that it doesn’t help when the president is so negative about the press.”

On the need for the people (and media) to be relentless and tenacious in holding the governments in check, Rather said, “Don’t be afraid, don’t be scared (although it’s a natural inclination). Also, organise, and get to the polls. The eventual leverage is at the polls, and you can’t win at the

polls unless you have a sustained effort to be organised and get yourself (and others) to the polls. “It’s also very important to reach out to other people and say ‘what can I do?’, especially people of different political persuasion, different race. Talk to them, reason with them, try to reach common ground. That’s the way that we come together.”

In synthesising his thoughts, Rather proposed a set of values that Americans need to return to a healthy democracy - Healing, Unity, Hope – a ‘HUH’ antidote to Trump’s divisive tweet-laden presidency, values that apply to journalists as well to the news consuming public at large. Rather’s HUH principles define some of the best practices of journalism.

Fact-checked and research-based journalism must endure, especially in the Malaysian media context. Pakatan Harapan’s ousting of decades of Barisan Nasional rule on May 9, 2018 has given Malaysian journalists a shot at doing better in their job. The nascent freedom to speak truth to power, the freedom to critically report and boldly investigate should ideally lead to a positive change in Malaysian journalism. Greater freedom, however, does not necessarily lead to quality journalism. Higher standards can only be achieved if the editorial leadership and newsroom environment are firmly committed to fair, accurate, contextual and investigative reporting. Journalists must be led by the facts. Stringent fact-checking is central in daily news reporting and production.

True, reporters are expected to check their stories, and checked again by their news editors. With the fast turnover of news, however, this task should be delegated to fact-checkers. Their main job is to multiple check the veracity of statements, claims and opinions of various sources. Self-regulation in the newsroom is certainly preferred to government legislation – and it works better in raising standards.

3.2 Filtering the ‘truth’ from ‘falsehoods’

The above discussion underscores the observation that if the media are to be socially constructive, they must rely on the journalist’s intelligent understanding and reporting of issues. This can only come about if journalists are themselves intelligently informed. That was the basic premise of UNESCO’s seminar on media training^{ix} in Kuala Lumpur in June 1973.

Journalism has changed radically since then - from the makeup and digital literacy of the readers to the multi-tasking required of journalists to write

for a newspaper and produce an online package for the same story on the same day.

Journalists are no longer the main purveyor of news. Social media sites are increasingly sparking stories and flagging to journalists what is newsworthy. Journalists are less protected from their readers’ ire by the office switchboard. Stories and assertions are virtually exposed to public scrutiny and scorn in ways that were impossible during the days of manual typewriters.

Media contents are now packaged with hourly updates. News cycles are getting shorter and shorter with tweets breaking the headlines more often than sourced interviews and shorthand squiggles at press conferences. What used to be top down delivery from a perceived authoritative media outlet to a passive audience has turned multi-directional, accessible anywhere anytime across media platforms.

Readers are now able to circulate their version of the same story on social media sites, which add another level of complexity to today’s journalism – the tussle between ‘journalistic truth’ and ‘fluid truth’, ‘real news’ and ‘fake news’.

Misinformation and disinformation add another level of complexity to today’s journalism. Journalists do misinform when they report inaccuracies because they did not do their research or quote a source out of context. But when sources knowingly circulate false information and dressed it up to look like real news to mislead the public, that’s disinforming. That’s pandering to the inherent biases we hold of particular issues, people and events. Herein lies the menacing nature of ‘fake news’ – to deceive for political ends.

The line separating ‘truth’ and ‘falsehoods’ is constantly shifting, depending on who you ask. And, the difference between real and fake news is unclear - so vague that ‘fake news’ have become a catch-all term to mean anything that we don’t like, particularly information that strikes at our core values. As mentioned earlier, Donald Trump has appropriated the term to demonise the media that are hyper-critical of his presidency. Trump has wilfully engaged in deceptive political tweets to mislead and disinform, as do many conspiracy theorists.

Rookie and poorly trained journalists are not immune to the fake news phenomenon either. Journalists do misinform when they report inaccuracies because they did not do their research or quote a source out of context. But when sources knowingly circulate false information and dress it up to look like real news to mislead and manipulate, that’s disinforming. That’s pandering to the inherent

biases we hold of particular issues and people. Herein lies the ‘fake news’ menace – to deceive for political ends.

The spread of disinformation has caused the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI) to jointly declare ^x on May 10, 2018 a resolution to stem the flow of ‘fake news’. The Poynter Institute has also initiated an International Fact-Checking Network ^{xi} counter the ‘fake news’ phenomenon. April 2 was even named as a global fact-checking day.^{xii} Computer programs ^{xiii} are being designed to help readers sieve falsehoods from the ‘truth’.

A useful reference on fact-checking is the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter Institute, which publishes guidelines, serial articles and updates on fact-checking initiatives. The University of South Australia library has also curated fact-checking sites and plug-ins for free public access.^{xiv} KiniGuide published by Malaysiakini ^{xv} also provides its readers with tips and resources on how to sieve real news from the dross online.

What has come to be called ‘fake news’ is easy to know when it’s published deliberately by satirical sites. It is trickier to detect when misinformation is packaged with visuals and headlines to look and feel like legitimate media sites. A prominent feature of misinformation – particularly of polarising issues like same sex marriage, racism, religious extremism, gun controls - is its outright appeal to your emotions, and laced with polemics from unnamed ‘reliable’ sources. ‘Fake news’ is persuasive because it works on the principle that what someone did or said, you may forget; but how that someone made you feel, you will remember. That’s what political advertisements set out to do.

‘Fake news’ often dresses itself in journalese to make it sound legitimate on Twitter, gets amplified on Facebook and WhatsApp, which then goes viral on YouTube. Here, I’m reminded of the former US president Barack Obama’s indirect response ^{xvi} to Donald Trump’s poorly spelt impulsive tweets: “Have a little bit of an edit function, think before you speak, think before you tweet.”

Indeed, the quickest way to circulate one’s impulses today is on Twitter – the go-to place for breaking ‘news’, where memes are born and trolls linger. But before one tweet off the 140 to 280 characters and hope to gain more followers, one will need to filter the tweet to avoid unintended consequences caused by ill-considered comments that lack context. Test the veracity of what you have

read. And, suss out different views from diverse sources. Here’s an acrostic, FACTS, to guide journalists and social media users on stemming the circulation of ‘fake news’:

Filter – Differentiate between claims that are based on assertions and arguments based on facts. This means double-checking the veracity of what you have read. Examine the ‘facts’ behind the tweets and Facebook posts against what the established media have reported and reputable organisations have published, notwithstanding their ideological differences. Filter before you tweet to ensure that your comment is fair and accurate.

Avoidance and accountability – Avoid following groups or linking to sites that could affect your personal reputation and professional standing. You are who you are from what you post online. Pictures, words and links can send the wrong message to your employer and friends. Avoid channelling your angst and envy through vile tweets. Which leads to the next point.

Consequence and context – Your fleeting thoughts – vile or virtuous, political or personal, cocky or cautious - will remain in the Twitter archives, which may come back to haunt you long after you’ve gone offline. Consider the consequences of your tweeted contents. It’s said content without context is pretext. Retweeting information without checking and customising it for your followers may miss the point of the original Tweeter, or at worst, perpetuate misinformation.

Test – We’re somehow programmed to think that things happen for a reason. We make assumptions on why things happen the way they do. We form pet theories about the world. Often, we’re wrong. Events, issues and circumstances are usually connected. It’s as crucial to find information that confirms our assumptions, as it is to know when we are misinformed. Test your theory. Show the evidence.

Source – This returns us to the earlier point: suss out conflicting views from diverse sources for the bigger picture before you tweet off those 140 to 280 characters. It’s too late if you have to ask later: ‘Should I have tweeted?’

4. CONCLUSIONS

The proliferation of fake news has become one of crucial issues. Journalist need to be precise in filtering every information they have to avoid anything that will lead to fake news. Public also need to do the effort to reduce the proliferation of fake news by doing FACT (filter, avoidance and

accountability, consequence and context, test, and source). Those methods are the easiest way to reduce the spreading of fake news especially for social media users. At the end, its not only journalist responsibility to hold and check all the distribution of fake news because the existence of online media.

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