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The National Council of Churches of Singapore

Identifying and Countering Fake News: Some Proposals

Defining Fake News

In this paper, fake news is defined as the deliberate dissemination of misinformation on the Internet or social media by an organisation or an individual with the aim to influence opinion, stir controversy or make financial gain. Fake news often includes a ‘kernel of true information’ that is twisted, taken out of context, and accompanied by false information. Fake news is often presented as a genuine news item but is associated with a bogus news outlet. Their sources imitate legitimate, trustworthy and independent institutions or outfits.

One of the purposes of fake news is to cause people to change their minds about issues. Another is to polarise society. Fake news can also be used by a foreign government to interfere with the domestic affairs or elections of another country without the inherent repercussions of other means of domestic interference. Although fake news is not a new phenomenon, the social media revolution has enabled its rapid mass dissemination in a way that poses new and serious challenges.

In multi-religious and multi-racial Singapore, certain forms of fake news can spark conflict among the different faith communities and racial groups. In the wake of the current climate of heightened religious and racial sensitivity, fake news can damage the social fabric of our nation.

Social Media and Fake News

Two phenomena associated with social media are especially relevant to its ability to disseminate fake news.

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“... one body in Christ” Romans 12:5

The first is social media bubbles (or echo chambers). This phenomenon is especially associated with Facebook. ‘Bubbles’ are groups of users who consume the same piece of information or content and are basically not exposed to alternative information or opinion. Bubbles are generated automatically. On the basis of the online behaviour of a particular user, the social media algorithms decide what content will be shown to the user. Bubbles may therefore lead to serious distortions of public debate.

The second phenomenon associated with social media is the existence of automatic profiles or ‘bots’. ‘Bots’ are especially associated with Tweeter. They are special programmes that are able to operate autonomously, but giving the impression that they are controlled by a human being.¹ They can mass-send content, re-tweet selected items at tremendous speed, and even follow each other – creating the false impression of the popularity of a particular profile. Bots are responsible for spreading much of the fake news found on social media.

Identifying and Countering Fake News

Different countries have adopted different measures to identify and counter fake news. The measures taken depend very much on the nature of fake news they face and their particular domestic and geopolitical situations. The measures listed below have varying degrees of effectiveness. Their implementations have to take into consideration a number of important issues. These range from understanding the technology that facilitates the spread of fake news to the psychology of the recipients of fake news to issues concerning freedom of speech. In order to counter fake news effectively, both legislative and non-legislative approaches must be taken.

Tackling fake news requires a multi-pronged approach. Here are some suggestions of possible strategies that Singapore could consider adopting.

Voluntary Measures by the Industry

One way in which fake news can be countered is through the measures introduced by social media platforms to flag and report them. For example, Facebook attempts to tackle fake news and hoaxes spread by spammers for financial gain by placing the responsibility on users to flag and report them. Users can do this by clicking a special dialogue window that has been added to the platform’s interface. Once a certain number of users have submitted reports about this particular news item, it will be passed to an independent fact-checker. And if the news item is confirmed as fake, it will be flagged ‘disputed’.² Commentators have applauded this approach because one of the best ways to counter fake news in social media is to empower the community.

There are also other methods to stop fake news. For example, Snap, the owner of the Snapchat platform, has required third parties publishing on its ‘Discover’ platform to validate the content provided by them. Experts have also recommended that social

¹ D. Lazer et al., Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Conference Final Report (2 May 2017), accessed at <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/> on 2 March 2017.

² E. Hunt, ‘Disputed by Multiple Fact-Checkers: Facebook Rolls Our New Alert to Combat Fake-New’, The Guardian, 22 March 2017.

media platforms enforce the existing real-name policy more strictly. Users are required to publish content under their real names and provide genuine individual data. Attempts should also be made to prevent or minimize the hacking and cloning of existing social media accounts, especially chat applications like WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram and Facebook. To do this, telecom and network providers must do their best to protect their core telecom networks. And service providers like WhatsApp must introduce additional mechanisms to protect the security of its users.³ Other bodies have used the services of fact-checking establishments such as Snopes.com, FactCheck.org and Truthorfiction.com. In the future, social media platforms may be required to use artificial intelligence to comb through content to filter out fake news.

Although these measures are helpful to some extent, research has shown that they are not very effective in removing fake news. Research has shown that by these measures Facebook removed only 28.3% of illegal content, while Twitter removed 19.1% and YouTube 48.5% within the timeframe of 24 hours.⁴ Be that as it may, it is preferable to have these measures in place than not to have any gate-keeping mechanisms at all.

Using Current Press Laws

In his paper entitled, 'Weeding Our Fake News: An Approach to Social Media Regulation' published by the Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies, Konrad Niklewicz proposes a new approach to tackling fake news. This approach requires that social media platforms be no longer seen as platforms or 'Internet intermediaries' but as media companies. Thus social media companies must be seen as publishers and must therefore bear the responsibility for the content they publish. 'Based on the assumption that social media are in fact owned by media companies', writes Niklewicz, 'this paper calls on governments to consider applying a single, real-life-tested and effective tool to combat fake news: the existing press laws'.⁵

Niklewicz explains the implications of this approach thus: 'If press laws were to be applied, social medial platforms, like the traditional press, would have to correct (or take down) false information at the request of the genuinely affected party. Should the platform decide to ignore the request (which it would be entitled to do), the affected party would have the right to refer the case to an independent court, exactly as is the case with newspapers ...'⁶ When the social media company (platform) is notified, it can do nothing and face the possibility of being referred to court. Or it can take one of the following measures: (1) fact-check the item and decide if it is to be deleted; (2) delete the item outright; or (3) ask the author of the content to correct the information (if the author refuses, the item will be duly deleted).

³ Agamoni Ghosh, 'Hackers Can Impersonate Victims and Reply to WhatsApp and Telegram Chats', International Business Times, May 10, 2016. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/hackers-can-impersonate-victims-reply-whatsapp-telegram-chats-1559160> (accessed 4 March 2018).

⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, 'Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online: First Results on Implementation', Factsheet, December 2016.

⁵ Konrad Kilewicz, Weeding Our Fake News: An Approach to Social Media Regulation (Brussels: Wildred Martens Centre for European Studies, 2017), 41.

⁶ Ibid.

Strategic Communications

Another way to combat fake news is through strategic communications efforts that expose misinformation. For example, in September 2015 The European Union's External Action Service set up the East StratCom Task Force that runs that website euvsdisinfo.eu. The main purpose of this Task Force is to expose and debunk fake news. The Task Force also publishes a weekly Disinformation Review that discusses the latest cases of articles that brought pro-Kremlin disinformation into the international media. In addition, the advocacy works of think tanks are used to supplement the work of Europe's strategic communications efforts. Part of the work of these think tanks is to disclose disinformation sources and vehicles, and systematically build trust and social resilience.⁷

This strategy can be adopted and adapted by the Singapore government as one of the means by which fake news can be countered.

Government Intervention and Legislation

The government could also enact new laws as a measure to counter fake news. Some countries have already begun to enact such laws. For example, Israel recently enacted the so-called Facebook Bill 'which would allow the state to seek court orders to force the social media site to remove certain content based on police recommendations'.⁸ Germany has enforced a new law called the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) to counter hate speech and fake news. The companies affected by Germany's new law include Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram. Sites like Vimeo and Flickr could potentially be added to the list.⁹

Scholars have maintained that countries that wish to implement such state laws would encounter several challenges and obstacles. These challenges include definitional problems such as the ambiguities surrounding what is fake news. There are also political and other constraints. The *Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda*, issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE and the Organisation for American States in March 2017, warned against fake news, but also strongly condemned attempts at state-mandated censorship and blocking of websites.¹⁰

There is clearly a very delicate balance between freedom of information and national security. Nevertheless such legislations are worth considering, especially if they are complemented by the non-legislative measures explored in this paper.

⁷ Norman Vasu et al., 'Fake News: National Security in the Post-Truth Era', RSIS, January 2018, 16.

⁸ Shoshanna Solomon, 'Israel Getting Better Grip On Online Incitement, Justice Minister Says', The Times of Israel, 25 June 2017. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-getting-better-grip-on-online-incitement-justice-minister-says/> (accessed on 3 March 2018).

⁹ Tom McKay, 'Germany's New Social Media Hate Speech Is Now Being Enforced', Gizmodo, 1 January 2018. <https://gizmodo.com/germanys-new-social-media-hate-speech-law-is-now-being-1821697245> (accessed on 3 March 2018).

¹⁰ <https://www.osce.org/fom/302796?download=true> (accessed 3 March 2018).

Public Education

Perhaps the most important way to counter fake news is public education. Helping the public to acquire media literacy and learn how to spot fake news can counter their harmful effects in ways that legislation alone is unable to do. This is because no matter how robust the self-regulation of social media companies may be or how tight the legislation, some fake news will still fall between the cracks and reach the public. There is a real sense in which the Internet is a space that is impossible to regulate or govern. There is therefore a need for the public to be able to think critically when it reads a news item whose source and veracity are suspicious. Such education should also be provided in schools and universities to enable young people to be more judicious in their consumption of media.

A number of websites offer simple guidelines and tips on how to spot fake news.¹¹ These include (1) checking the source of an article by finding more about the website that carries it and even noting how well-written (or poorly-written) it is; (2) check the credentials of the author of the article to see if he or she is reliable and has the requisite qualifications to write on this topic; (3) check to see if the article in question contains links and references to other articles, authors or websites; (4) do a Google Reverse Image Search to find out more about the web page; (5) check if the content of the article is being discussed or reported by other reputable mainstream media outlets like BBC, CNN, etc.

The public should also be encouraged to be vigilant in spotting impersonations and fake social media accounts, either those of their friends or their own.¹² Users must be encouraged to report a fake or spoof account immediately. Left unattended, these fake accounts may have detrimental consequences to users. Some social media platforms, like Facebook, have provided clear instructions on how to report impersonations and fake accounts.¹³

Trust and Social Resilience

Finally, NCCS believes that building trust and social resilience is the most important and effective long-term strategy against fake news. By improving transparency and communication the Government can fight against scepticism, misperception and the populist narratives found in social media – and build trust between the state and society. This will go a long way in cultivating social resilience, so that the views and emotions of the population are not easily swayed by falsehoods.

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¹¹ For example, <http://theconversation.com/how-to-spot-fake-news-an-experts-guide-for-young-people-88887> (accessed 3 March 2018).

¹² Rachel Au-Yong, 'Fake Facebook Accounts Created in the Names of At Least 13 PAP MPs', The Straits Times, March 17, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/online-scammers-impersonating-mps-using-fake-facebook-accounts> (accessed 4 March 2018).

¹³ https://www.facebook.com/help/1216349518398524/?helpref=hc_fnay (accessed 4 March 2018).