

Addressing the phenomenon of fake news and enhancing digital literacies to tackle the challenge

17 December 2018, Jakarta, Indonesia



Several members of NEW Indonesia came together to participate in a workshop on fake news and critical digital literacy.

The rising incidents of violence and unrest due to circulation of “fake news” on social media are matter of grave concern all over the world. In an effort to address the challenge, several members of NEW Indonesia (an ASPBAE member) came together in Jakarta to participate in a workshop, facilitated by ASPBAE’s Medha Soni, on fake news and critical digital literacy. The purpose of the workshop was to increase critical thinking to recognise fake news; enhance digital literacy skills to counter fake news; and work with NEW Indonesia to tackle the challenge of fake news.

The workshop was designed to actively and creatively engage the participants in the sessions. Some of the issues covered were social media’s responsibility towards protecting users from fake news, the “post-truth” era, why and how fake news originated and is spread, the impact it has on people and communities, how to recognise it, and how to counter its growing influence.

Participants took part in several activities that guided them in reflecting on how their own opinions impact the way they evaluate information, recognising and analysing fake news content, and in critically looking at websites, social media platforms, and their own networks, such as WhatsApp, to evaluating information found online. Participants noted that people tend to trust our networks of friends and family for news, and these organic formations are reflected and exacerbated by social media platforms. When people receive news and information through social media, they are less likely to be aware of the source of the information. They are more likely to remember a news source if they receive a link through email, a text, or a news alert.



Participants determined that the most salient danger associated with fake news is the fact that it devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data.

Participants determined that the most salient danger associated with fake news is the fact that it devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data - all of which undermines society’s ability to engage in rational discourse based on shared facts.

Three harms were noted - first, the problem of increasing fragmentation and politicization; second, the promotion of “safe news” at the expense of difficult or challenging news stories; third, the need for credible sources to allocate ever-diminishing resources to debunking inaccurate information.

Participants then identified a number of structural reasons why these problems are particularly prevalent now –

1. The exchange of information is now democratised, thanks to social media platforms and digital content production technologies (like Photoshop). Anyone is now able to produce credible “noise” that is difficult to distinguish from high-quality information.
2. The demand for “fake news” may be a natural by-product of faster news cycles and increasing consumer demand for shorter-form content.

Addressing the phenomenon of fake news and enhancing digital literacies to tackle the challenge

17 December 2018, Jakarta, Indonesia

3. While there is a general awareness of the existence of “fake news,” there is widespread disagreement over what comprises “fake news.” Merely labelling something as “fake news” can itself be considered mere propaganda, making it all the more important that journalists cite sources and “show their work.”
4. Traditional gatekeepers are less effective or visible. For example, traditional news organisations lack the institutional authority they once enjoyed.
5. Current gatekeepers are more likely to view news production and dissemination as a business enterprise than as providing a public service. Additionally, the public perception of mass media as a corporate, profit-driven entity has further diminished its authority.
6. New respected and trusted gatekeepers have yet to be established.



Some of the issues covered at the workshop were social media’s responsibility towards protecting users from fake news, why and how fake news originated and is spread, the impact it has on people and communities, how to recognise it, and how to counter its growing influence.

7. Ownership of news distribution has shifted from traditional content creators to digital distributors. Digital distribution allows for highly efficient micro-targeting and limited exposure of users to challenging content. Digital distribution tends to favour popularity, engagement, and “shares” over expertise and accuracy.



The workshop was a first-of-its-kind for ASPBAE and a step towards initiating a dialogue on the rising phenomenon of fake news and the need to enhance critical digital literacy.

There is no quick or permanent solution to the problems associated with the various kinds of “fake news.” That being acknowledged, participants proposed a number of ways in which different problems might be addressed –

- Content consumers must be better educated, so that they are better able to distinguish credible sources and stories from their counterparts.
- Content creators and content distributors need to adapt their professional norms to new technologies of distribution, better explain these norms to the public, and protect them from erosion. They should also engage in practices that increase the likelihood of producing trustworthy, high quality information.
- Content distributors - particularly digital content distributors - should engage in practices that minimise the spread of fake news and promote the dissemination of trustworthy, high quality information.
- There might be some form of accreditation system for content creators and/or content distributors.
- Technological design might be harnessed to both promote more credible content and/or to present content in a way that fosters consumer scepticism and critical analysis.



Addressing the phenomenon of fake news and enhancing digital literacies to tackle the challenge

17 December 2018, Jakarta, Indonesia

- There may be relatively few legal tools capable of addressing aspects of the “fake news” problem, but effective laws should be in place to combat fake news.

The workshop was a first-of-its-kind for ASPBAE and a step towards initiating a dialogue on the rising phenomenon of fake news and the need to enhance critical digital literacy.

END