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QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

Asia South Pacific Association
for Basic and Adult Education
Learning Beyond Boundaries

Innovative solutions to the digital divide in the Asia Pacific

The magnitude of the pandemic's effects is unparalleled. It is a health crisis that took a toll on the lives of many, an economic crisis that triggered the loss of livelihoods, and a social crisis that aggravated the vulnerabilities of societies. Devastating as it is now, the prolonged crisis and school disruptions are likely to put many learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, out of school. Reports show that nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries, or 94% of the world's student population, were affected by the school closures at the peak of the crisis (UN, 2020). In the Asia Pacific, while the situation has marginally improved, 1.09 billion learners, or 62.3% of the world's total enrolled student population, are affected by its impacts (UNESCO, 2020).

As the world grapples with the crisis, life must continue. And so must education and learning. Schools are gradually

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reopening in a phased manner or in full. Many countries are leveraging the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to continue learning through scaling up distance and remote learning strategies, including online

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Learners from rural and remote areas, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, girls and women, Dalits, learners with disabilities, migrants, and adult learners continue to face obstacles to accessing online education and learning.

learning and blended learning. Other forms of technology, such as radio and television, and the delivery of paper-based learning materials or offline content, are also used to implement distance education. Countries are also considering adjusting or reducing the curriculum content and deploying remedial accelerated learning programmes so learners will not be overloaded academically and psychosocially.

While the pandemic does not discriminate, it is the most marginalised, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups who are disproportionately affected by its adverse consequences and end up becoming victims of the digital divide as learning shifts online or remotely. Learners from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from rural and remote areas, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, girls and women, Dalits, learners with disabilities, migrants, and adult learners continue to face steep obstacles to accessing education and learning.

Governments and civil society have, therefore, sought to improve access to distance and remote learning solutions in today's times. In the Philippines, one of the major ways in which it has attempted to continue learning is through the provision and integration of Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) into the alternative learning delivery modalities. SLMs can be accessed online or offline, and are delivered in printed format to schools that are located in areas without access to the internet or electricity (Department of Education, 2020). Similarly, in Bhutan, teachers are going door-to-door to distribute Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) to children in remote districts. SIM contain the same lessons that are broadcast on television for various grades and additional instructions and follow-up activities to engage the learners (UNICEF Bhutan, 2020).

The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) in Kyrgyzstan, supported by UNICEF, took steps to make remote learning more accessible to students, including learners with disabilities. After identifying priority lessons, video lessons were filmed and then transcribed in Russian and Kyrgyz to support sign language interpretation in Russian. The transcription will also be used to translate text and include subtitles in other languages, such as Uzbek and Tajik (Zhusupova, 2020). In Afghanistan, Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), a Japanese NGO, managed to restart literacy and sewing courses for internally displaced and returnee women after its temporary closure. Women in these courses were able to produce protective masks that they can sell at a low price to villagers (Koarai, Samim, & Shahpoor, 2020).

Many countries are making commendable efforts to narrow the digital disparities. However, much more needs to be done. In Bangladesh, children in rural areas, as well as those from the poorest households, are much less likely to have access to a television, computer or the internet. Only 44% of 5- to 11-year-old children in rural areas and 6% of children belonging to the poorest wealth quintile have a household television, while only 3% of rural 5- to 11-year-old children have a household computer and close to 0% for the poorest wealth quintile. Those from the poorest wealth quintile (7%) can only access the internet through mobile phones (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,

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Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, & Ministry of Education, 2020).

There is also a gender dimension to the disparity in access to technologies. According to UNESCO and EQUAL Skills Coalition's publication (2019), the gender gap in internet penetration is around 17% in the Asia Pacific. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that, in 2019, the proportion of women using the internet in the Asia Pacific was 41.3%, compared to 54.6% of men. In India, for instance, boys are much more likely to use a computer, the internet, as well as other forms of technology regularly (Singh, 2020). Only 21% of women in India are mobile internet users, while 42% of men have access, according to GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report (2020). Aside from economic barriers, cultural and social norms also impede girls' and women's access to forms of technology.

The lack of access to digital technologies is not the only barrier for disadvantaged groups. In countries where distance learning solutions are accessible, it would be much more challenging for learners who lack basic literacy skills and digital skills to keep up with their education in a world that is increasingly being shaped by ICT. In some Asian countries, the gender gap in ICT skills is as high as 25%. In Jakarta, Indonesia, the gender gap in internet use is quite wide, with

male internet users at 50% and only 31% for female internet users (UNESCO & EQUAL Skills Coalition's publication, 2019). Equipping all learners, particularly girls, women, and adults, with the necessary digital skills will enable them to navigate the internet safely and effectively, and open more meaningful opportunities for knowledge and skills development.

Learners with disabilities are severely disadvantaged in access to education following the shift to distance and remote learning solutions. The absence of internet access, learning and teaching materials, accessibility features, assistive devices, parental and teacher guidance, and psychosocial support is a major obstacle for the effective participation of learners with disabilities in education. These figures are a stark reminder that digital access is often out of reach for the marginalised and efforts to ensure learning continuity first reach those who are privileged and have access to a stable internet connection as well as various technologies, thereby widening the digital divide.

Alongside the rise of online and distance learning solutions are private actors, including education technology companies and major corporations, that capitalize on the shift towards online and distance learning strategies. The recent report of Education International (2020) raises concerns about the

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heightened influence of these companies in the provision of education and their agenda to position themselves at the "centre of essential education services", not merely as a response to the current crisis, but for the long-term.

It is troubling to note the massive penetration of private ICT firms and their aggressive marketing of digital learning modules and platforms in countries with the biggest markets in the region. Education systems that are already rife with inequities even before the pandemic will become even more inaccessible and exclusive due to the abrupt shift to online and distance learning that intensifies the drive towards more privatised and commercialised education systems.

No doubt, the use of technology, particularly its application to digital learning, offers an attraction as governments and educational institutions cope with and navigate through the global pandemic. It is not only fashionable, but futuristic as well, offering a preview of tomorrow's digital world with a reconfigured educational system. Yet, there are potential pitfalls along the way.

It is not simply the availability of technology that matters. It must be accessible, affordable, and adaptable to the learning needs of all. It must ensure harnessing the full potential of the human agency, rather than diminishing it. But for as long as technology remains in the hands of a few private conglomerates, exercising full control and amassing information in private hands, there is danger that inequity is exacerbated, knowledge tampered, and learning manipulated.

ASPBAE asserts that technology must be for all, serving the needs and interests of learners, teachers, and all education stakeholders towards strengthening the right to education.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuates the harsh realities that many learners are already facing. Not only does the current crisis entrench existing inequalities, but it also creates new and even more formidable challenges in terms of education access, inclusivity, and quality. It will not be enough to set policies and develop plans; rather, meeting these challenges will require stronger commitment, well-targeted public investment, more robust implementation, and more meaningful spaces for civil society engagement.

ASPBAE, therefore, calls on governments, development partners, and the global community to ensure free and open access to appropriate technologies and tools that facilitate distance learning and community-based learning programmes, offering context-appropriate quality education and learning to the most vulnerable and excluded groups and ensuring that no learner is left behind. While there is a long way to go and the journey ahead is marked with daunting challenges, we must ensure that those without access to technologies and those without the skills to use them are provided with inclusive learning opportunities and the necessary digital skills training they need to thrive in today's crisis and beyond.

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The digital divide, education, and marginalised youth: Lessons from ASPBAE's Youth-led Action Research (YAR) in the COVID context

Societies have already been divided in many ways – by caste, class, race, sex, gender, and ethnicity, to name a few. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore and deepened another divide- that of technology. People with the privilege of technology access can search and find anything in one-click, but others who do not have this magic wand are left out of the game. In the physical world, people who have fewer resources, limited access, and no agency tend to be pushed to the peripheries, while people at the center relish power. In the current period, similar patterns are being reproduced in the virtual world with online education as a stark example.

To control the spread of the pandemic, many countries have closed educational institutes and learning shifted to online platforms. The shift was sudden, impromptu, and with no provision for the infrastructure and people's readiness required for this technology-based learning modes. The shutdown of physical schools had many negative consequences. It not only affected the academic progress of students, but also shut access to mid-day meals and safe shelter that students from poorer families were highly reliant on. School shutdowns also took away significant opportunities for socialization with peers which is an integral part of the cognitive and social development of children.

The shutdown of schools and colleges has affected millions of poor students, and evidence suggests that for countries with low learning outcomes,

For countries with low learning outcomes, a large number of school dropouts, and insufficient infrastructure, the impact of COVID-19 on education will be far more negative. Marginalized groups will be excluded from learning opportunities.

a large number of school dropouts, and insufficient infrastructure, the impact will be far more negative. It simply means that many from marginalised groups are unlikely to return to schools and those who were never in schools to begin with will continue to be excluded from learning opportunities even for foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy.

Given the massive risks to health of social interactions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments around the world have resorted to continued school closures or blended approaches to learning. In this context, online education has been promoted as the best alternative - a field dominated by private, for-profit players. Data clearly shows that almost half of the world's students face barriers in accessing computers

and internet facilities. According to the 2017-2018 National Sample Survey report on education, only 24% of Indian households have an internet facility and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. These disparities become distinctly visible across geographic locations, incomes, and education groups, ethnicities, and people with special needs.

The outcomes of the Youth-led Action Research (YAR) studies (May-July, 2020), facilitated by ASPBAE in nine countries in the Asia Pacific, highlighted the varied forms of discrimination, gaps, and challenges in the education system in the era of COVID-19.

In Mongolia and Bangladesh, researchers reported that many students who could not access online

education are left behind and fear to drop out of formal education completely, it will be challenging to bring them back to schools.

Youth researchers from Indonesia shared that students who are living in the remote parts do not have electricty and phone network. It is almost impossible for them to own devices and access internet.

Participants added, *"students also*

Lack of access to online learning has also negatively affected skills development training. Community learning centres are either closed and or are running with very little or no financial support.

need to buy internet quota which is expensive, and who buys it does not know how to use internet propely. Teachers only give home assignments and expect parents to monitor and support their children".

This observation was shared by the researchers in East Timor. They underscored the difficulties of youth especially in rural areas in accessing distance learning oportunities as they do not have acces, not only to internet

facilities, but also to electricity connections. Even low-tech solutions through radio and television have not been viable for them. The youth researchers have recommended that physical learning materials (books, handouts) are still the most viable medium for teaching and learning in most of the rural areas. For areas where internet conectivity is available, they come at a high price. Access to free interent services will be especially

helpful for marginalised youth to access formal and non formal learning opportunities including information on health and safety and on livelihood opportunities.

Youth researchers from Nepal reported that the pandemic is creating the educational disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults. They added, youths from the middle class family are somehow able to access the e-learning classes however, these classes were reported

to be boring and ineffective for the youths. Besides, children from low class families are not able to access these classes and neither the radio and television programs have been effective for them.

In Philippines, researchers described the disparity of education services in private and public schools. They mentioned, *"high-paying private schools easily shifted to online-based platforms and digital tools but accessing the online platform have been difficult for most public school pupils and students"*. It was noted that for many marginalised children and youth the community learning centers (CLC) are significant support. But many CLCs are either closed and or are running with very little or no financial support. Furthermore. lack of access to online learning has also negatively affected skills development training.

Female youth researchers from rural India argued that access to online education has strong gender barriers. According to their research, girls face more challenges in accessing the internet and owning devices. One of the YAR researchers shared that, *"Only 20% of the girls we interviewed have a smartphone. Even if they have a smartphone, they may or may not have the internet on it due to poor network connectivity in their villages"*. She further added, *"If this continues for some more time, that is, schools remain closed and online education continues to be the norm, we will remain excluded, and 33% of girls said that they are then likely to drop out of education"*. Where on one hand education is advocated as one of the pathways to come out of the intergenerational cycle of poverty and oppression, at the ground level, youth who are living in this challenging

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environment, are anxious and unsure of their prospects. Furthermore, due to increased expenses, loss of income, and to survive, some poor parents are inclined to marry off girls at a younger age.

Young researchers from Sri Lanka shed light on the perspective of teachers. Teachers are under tremendous pressure - they do not have adequate tools, training, and internet services for digital teaching. Even after many requests and follow up by teachers, the government seems

The Youth Action Research group's recommendations included promoting local education and training, especially at the village level, and equipping teachers with sufficient knowledge and skills on information technologies and distance education.

to be indifferent to their plight.

Arising from the outcomes of the study, the YAR youth group drew up as set of recommendations addressed to government, civil society organistaions, and other partners to address the deep divides and hige gaps in education and learning access of young people -

• Make higher education free and accessible to everyone and safely restart school and colleges at the earliest, with priority attention to ensuring the health and safety of students and educators.

• Increase scholarships to marginalized youth.

• Promote local education and training, especially at the village level - community learning centers need to be strengthened and sustained.

• Television, radio, and other low-tech tools can be explored to include communities in education.

• Ensure that education is a public good and that the state performs key responsibilities, including ensuring access to an online platforms for

all learners and teachers through transformative education systems.

• Complete lockdowns bring untold hardship to people, espeically the marginalised. Governments should develop resilient education and development systems, equipped to deal with emergency situations that protect the lives and interests of all its people..

• Teachers need to be equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills on information technologies and distance education.

• Governments should implement

and promote policies that bridge the digital divide and move countries closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The partners in 9 countries produced their research reports and are currently engaged in the dissemination of the research findings and recommendations. Since this form of research is grounded in actions, many of the partners carried parallel local actions and advocacies. In Timor-Leste, for example, the youth researchers' group presented their research to the national Secretary of the State for vocational training and employment where they asked for state budget allocations for youth demands, specifically establishing non-formal education and training opportunities as a Community Learning Center (CLC). In the Philippines, E-Net Philippines and other partners facilitated virtual spaces for youth activism and advocacy. Community youth were actively involved in educational campaigns, relief work, and advocacy activities. Various youth-led campaigns were designed for holding the government accountable and responsible to safeguard citizens' right to food, right to education, and the right to ask questions. Based on the findings and recommendations, youth researchers developed a series of videos and podcasts, and organised webinars and Facebook live sessions to reach out to the larger youth constituency.

YAR partners are determined to continue these follow-up local actions and inform their policy advocacy work by youth voices from ground realities. ASPBAE is happy to see its youth work forming its own shape and speaking to the realities of the marginalised youth in the region.

Unpacking patriarchy through digital literacy

By Nishi Khanndelwal, Nirantar, A Centre for Gender and Education, India

Nirantar promotes transformatory formal and non-formal learning processes which enable girls and women from marginalised communities to better understand and address their realities. We develop and implement women's education programmes in such a way that women are able to use literacy in their daily lives, engage with the outside world, acquire information to know, understand, and challenge knowledge-based power structures and influence them too.

Over the past ten years, access to and expertise with digital technologies and apparatuses has emerged as new axis of power. This is the new reality that women are faced with and struggling to deal with. India is the second largest internet market globally, and it is estimated that the country will house 635.8 million internet users by 2021. While working on literacy, however, Nirantar found that despite being literate, women are intimidated by digital technologies and their use. Access to the mobile phone and participation in digital spaces is a second challenge. Women belonging to disadvantaged communities are often uneducated, and thus marginalised thrice over in the field of technological knowledge.

In times of COVID, technology, digital tools, and the ability to operate them have almost become survival tools for marginalised people to access their rights and entitlements. The forms to obtain government benefits like ration, pensions, subsidies, etc., were digitized, and were available only online. Those unable to fill forms online simply did not receive state-mandated benefits. Access and proficiency to technology have thus become even more crucial for the already marginalised communities, particularly for women.

Applied Digital Literacy (AppDiL): An Integrated Digital Literacy Programme was conceived by Nirantar in response to the changing educational needs of women in context of their livelihoods and new forms of knowledge essential for women's empowerment in the current context. Work on AppDiL, combining literacy and digital literacy work,

In times of COVID, technology, digital tools, and the ability to operate them have almost become survival tools for marginalized people to access their rights and entitlements.

began in Uttar Pradesh (North of India) in partnership with a local organisation - Grameen Vikas Seva Sansthan with 900 women part of a dairy cooperative.

Nirantar works with adult educators who come from the same communities as their learners. The difference is merely one of education; they are subject to the same injunctions, gendered norms, and regulations. The first challenge, thus, always is to ensure good quality training, building skills and perspectives of teachers as the backbone of the programme. In case of AppDiL, there was an added challenge that even teachers did not have access to smart phones other digital mediums. Initially, out of 32, 26 teachers had a basic phone but none had a smart phone. Often, teachers received phones only when they were going out. Families controlled passwords and data was used only by men in the household. But, as we moved along with the adult education and digital literacy skills training, not only did all teachers buy themselves a phone, but they also started asserting control over their mobiles and passwords.

Digital literacy to strengthen literacy and livelihood
When we conjoined literacy with digital literacy, we found that women's interest in learning to read and write increased manifold. The use of digital tools and mediums made learning

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interesting and women came to learning centers more regularly - attendance had hitherto been a challenge for many of them. Because they were now coming to the centers regularly, the pace and success of learning increased significantly. 30% more women acquired the ability to write letters (a high level of literacy) through AppDiL compared to the number of women who acquired this skill in previous literacy programmes. Similarly, in mathematics, a far greater percentage of women learned to add and subtract and to use those skills at work.

Women tried to use their newly-acquired reading and writing skills (letters, strokes, words, numbers) on their mobiles immediately.

Women indicated during the needs assessment that they wanted to use their digital skills for fun and pleasure — they wanted to listen to music, learn to cook in different ways, and find out about different kinds of places on their phones. The end-line survey of the programme revealed that 60% of the women use their phones to listen to music and 45% to watch films.

The access to digital technologies is the prerogative of men, as well as to those belonging to upper castes and classes. Persons from marginalised groups are subject to the prevailing notion that they have no use for digi-tech platforms, or even education. When a Saraswati or an Aarti understand and participate in the digital world, those notions fall apart. They demonstrate

they are using this technology not only for work, but also for entertainment and active communication. Cognizance of this free, independent wielding of a powerful tool is crucial to Nirantar's AppDiL approach - literacy is not the bare ability to operate technology, but is also the reading and execution of digital literacy in the context of gender difference and gendered experience.

Digital literacy and women's empowerment

Nirantar works with feminist pedagogies to unpack, articulate, and challenge hierarchical or unequal patriarchal structures. It builds women's understanding of their own and other women's situations. AppDiL pays attention to the articulation of their lived realities by women. These pedagogic practices mean that women have begun to speak of their expectations, desires, and of respect, in their homes and outside.

32-year-old Saraswati from Parsanda village belongs to a marginalised community. Her husband works as a driver in Mumbai. Saraswati lives in the village with her two children and is a dairy farmer. She was not able to understand record-keeping and accounts for these activities as she was entirely non-literate. She is now able to do her own book-keeping as well as manage her finances at the bank. She told us that, *"I do my own calculations before going to the bank now, so I can see whether the right amounts have been credited to my account and whether these amounts have been recorded accurately in my passbook."*

The AppDiL programme, through literacy and digital skills training, helped improve women's self-confidence and built their understanding of how and where women's access to technology is generally restricted.

32-year-old Aarti is a Dalit resident of Barsaay village. She says her parents did not send her to school because they were too poor. After her wedding, she was able to attend classes at the literacy centre. The first thing she learned was to send messages. She says, *"When I sent my first message to my husband, he could not believe it was me sending it. Now when he does not answer a call, I message him."*

1 Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). Press release, New Delhi. 20 February 2018.

2 GSMA Connected Women- The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019; pg 29.

3 The Grameen Vikas Seva Sansthan is a grassroots organisation founded in 1978. They work on the development of education, health and nutrition, environment, and livelihoods in rural Uttar Pradesh. Pratapgarh is an extremely backward region in UP, where this organisation has been working on women's empowerment since 2012. They partnered with AppDiL in 2018.

Nirantar did not anticipate the large-scale disruption brought by the COVID-19 epidemic and thereafter the exigencies of the lockdown. But digital literacy proved to be a pivotal tool in the hands of our teachers and the women learners during this period. Even during the lockdown, women continued to communicate with teachers about housework, the increase in violence against them, impact on their children's education, and livelihoods. 38-year-old Husna Begum wrote about how the dairy was shut down during the lockdown and milk was not procured, and how it had been difficult to obtain regular supplies of animal feed and to meet household expenditures. Women at the digital literacy centers also learned to record audio and videos on their phones, so several of them recorded their concerns and experiences.

Literacy is not the bare ability to operate technology, but is also the reading and execution of digital literacy in the context of gender difference and gendered experience.

At the end of 18 months, 19 teachers had bought themselves a smartphone for individual use. Among students, 547 women bought themselves a basic phone, and 116 bought themselves a smart phone. By claiming technology for individual use, these women challenged the myth that women are not capable of operating technology.

The AppDiL programme made clear that digital technologies facilitate women's interest in literacy. Yet, access is withheld from women, citing their inability to use it and through the claim that

35-year-old Anshu is a Dalit, and studied at the digital literacy center. She also participated in the literacy camp organised to improve digital literacy capacities. Anshu told Nirantar, "*When my husband found out I was attending the literacy camp, he said my tongue has started wagging too much - that is what you learn at the camp! Do you want me to massage your feet now? I said, no! I want you to respect the work I do, and to respect me too!*"

it will be of no use to them, while the real purpose is to refrain them from accessing technology that allows them freedom, mobility, and a voice. When women are presented opportunities through the use of technology, they set to learning, without reference to how hard or easy it might be. Not only do they themselves learn how to navigate the digital world, but they challenge norms and inequalities by bringing their experiences and voices in the digital sphere. The use of technology by women during the lockdown to stay connected, share, and support each other in cases of violence, stringent control, and surveillance indicates that they need access and skills to use technology as a new tool of empowerment. Now!

The use of technology by women during the lockdown to stay connected, share, and support each other in cases of violence, stringent control, and surveillance indicates that they need access and skills to use technology as a new tool of empowerment.

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Education on critical thinking and fact-checking:
A formula for fighting fake news and misinformation

By Jerald Joseph, Pusat Komas, Malaysia; and former ASPBAE Executive Council Member

Citizens of the world are struggling to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, which has unexpected and unprecedented impacts not only on health, but on the socio-political and economic landscape of the entire planet.

The severity of the disease demands us, the public from all walks of life, to take necessary measures, such as frequent hand-washing practices, maintaining physical distance, wearing facemasks in public places, and taking other precautionary steps as advised by health professionals. These new protocols were necessary to ensure protection in the fight against the disease.

During this difficult period, society was thrust with disinformation and misinformation that could be viewed to be as dangerous as COVID-19 itself. For instance, prior to the lockdown announcement in Malaysia, WhatsApp and Facebook were used as a medium to spread distressing messages that the country may be faced with shortages in terms of food, medicinal supplies, and basic goods. These unwarranted calls of distress caused panic buying among the public, especially among the upper middle class and the rich as they could afford to hoard goods, which was unnecessary and caused some food shortage. Another example of disinformation was the false advertisement in social media, which informed the public to consume traditional foods as a preventive measure in battling COVID-19. Despite lack of scientific evidence to support such claims, many followed the advice and consumed them.

Society was thrust with disinformation and misinformation that could be viewed to be as dangerous as COVID-19 itself.

This may have a profound impact on the efforts to overcome the spread of COVID-19 by speeding up the spread of disease, hinder effective public health responses, as well as create confusion, fear, and distrust.

Education as deterrence
The growth of technology can be regarded as either a blessing in disguise or the devil cloaked as an angel. It all boils down to the way it is utilised. Anyone today, with the assistance of smartphones, can instantly assume the role of citizen journalist or content creator.

While professional journalists are bound by ethics in ensuring accuracy and impartiality of news, citizen journalists are not bound by them. All they have to do is to snap a picture or record a video and then disseminate them on-line.

Therefore, it is imperative that the public is equipped with media literacy skills, especially when receiving forwarded materials and information. One should first fact check, verify the sources, and cross-check the information received with the parties involved or the news organisation. They should not share something until the information received is verified.

To illustrate, in a recent incident in Malaysia involving a student from Universiti Malaysia Sabah, named Veveonah Mosibin, a YouTuber residing in rural Sabah, recorded a video of herself climbing a tree to access the internet for her online exam. She was accused by the Deputy Communications and Multimedia Minister, Datuk Zahidi Zainul Abidin, and the Deputy Finance

Minister, Datuk Abdul Rahim Bakri, of faking the lack of internet connection and having exams on that specific day as a ploy to get people to watch her videos. This has led Veveonah to be subject to online criticism. However, upon investigation, it was found that Veveonah did in fact climb a tree to sit for her exams. The negligence by the deputy minister created confusion and distrust among people.

Instilling critical thinking

Throughout the decades, Malaysian educational institutions have been seen as ideological state apparatuses aimed at controlling critical thinking of students. Instead of promoting critical discussion, students were conditioned to abide to instructions and regurgitate what is being taught.

Henceforth, education institutions, from primary to tertiary level, should start encouraging students to be vocal and to begin questioning information that is conveyed to them. They need a set of teachers, lecturers, and academicians who are not rigid and will not restrict them within the compound of the syllabus. This would be beneficial in inculcating critical thinking from a young age, making stduents less susceptible to false information.

It is imperative that the public is equipped with media literacy skills, especially when receiving forwarded materials and information.

What needs to be done?

The Malaysian government should maximise the state's apparatus, such as www.sebenarnya.my (a web portal dedicated to fact checking news and information), to provide accurate information to the public and to counter fake news. The government should also encourage the general public to utilise platforms like this to double check that the information they received is accurate. However, it is essential for them to ensure that such platforms are not abused for their personal gains.

Last but not least, the government should seriously consider the prospects of introducing digital literacy skills, at least starting from secondary school, as the young generation today are exposed to technology at an early stage of their life. By introducing digital literacy skills at an early stage, the young students will be able to discern between accurate and inaccurate news. This would be helpful in overcoming the issue of misinformation and fake news.

The government should consider the prospect of introducing digital literacy skills, at least starting from secondary school, as the young generation today are exposed to technology at an early stage of their life.