

Post-Truth Politics & Fake News in Asia

By Andy Yee

With the digital world generating ever more information, ever faster and ever more available to vast numbers of people through social media, Asia is not immune to the problem of “fake news.”

The region’s challenge, writes Andy Yee, is to avoid draconian solutions while addressing the underlying issues of social and political polarization that fuel misinformation, distortion and the creation of “digital bubbles that isolate citizens” from one another.



¹ *Global Risks 2013*, World Economic Forum, January 2013.

² *Digital News Report 2016: Asia-Pacific Supplement*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016.

³ Ross Tapsell, "Post-Truth Politics in Southeast Asia," *Inside Story*, Feb. 17, 2017.

AMERICAN JOURNALIST Walter Lippmann's 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, opened with a long quotation from Plato's parable of the cave, the famous scene of cave-dwellers who discern reality only as shadows flickering on the wall. As Lippmann wrote, we inhabit a cave of media misrepresentations and distortions of reality. Neither the press nor the public can discern the truth. Addressing the advent of mass media in the 20th century, this was one of the first expositions on the notion of fake news.

Fast forward a century, and our hyper-connected world faces an unprecedented scale and speed of information creation and transmission. The amount of data produced doubles almost every 12 months and is predicted soon to be doubling every 12 hours. In 2016, we produced as much information as in all of human history through to 2015. As a result, the fake news problem has evolved exponentially. Not only is there an explosion in the amount of information, our ability to alter and fabricate it has also increased significantly as sophisticated digital devices and tools are now available to the average netizen.

In 2013, the World Economic Forum identified a global risk from "digital wildfires," in which the viral spread of misleading information can result in serious real-world consequences.¹ For instance, the spread of unverified content can damage the reputation of politicians, companies or institutions. It can even undermine social stability by causing panic over security threats or outbreaks of disease. In 2011, disorder and looting broke out in London and other towns across England due to the spread of rumors on social media. In the following year, a prominent retired politician, Lord McAlpine, fell victim to false accusations of child sexual abuse on Twitter. With the fake news stories during the US presidential elections and the blatant misinformation accompanying Britain's vote to leave the European Union, fake news

has become a major concern. "Post-truth" — the Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year for 2016 — has been increasingly used to describe a politics in which feelings trump facts.

Post-truth politics aren't confined to the West. Asia's vast connected populations provide a fertile ground for fake news. The social media and messaging apps that are popular in Asia tend to be "walled gardens" with closed networks. Information spread via these networks can especially resonate since receivers are more likely to trust their circles of like-minded people. These networks command scale. On China's WeChat, 4,112,500 articles are read every minute by its 864 million active users. LINE, an instant messaging app popular in Japan, Thailand and Taiwan, reached 100 million users within 18 months of its release in 2011. KakaoTalk has 170 million users and is used by 93 percent of smartphone users in South Korea. And Facebook has 629 million active users across the Asia-Pacific, its fastest growing region in the world. According to research by the Reuters Institute, a quarter of online users in Singapore and Malaysia say social media is their main source of news. This is far higher than in the UK (8 percent) or the US (15 percent).²

FAKE NEWS IN ASIA

Indeed, rumors and disinformation have become part and parcel of social and political tensions in Asia.³ In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte was elected in 2016 on the basis of a misleading depiction of the country as a "narco-state." According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the prevalence of drug use in the Philippines is actually lower than the global average. However, Duterte's false narco-state message was used to justify more than 7,000 extra-judicial killings, earning him immense popularity — and notoriety. Social media is cen-

tral to winning the hearts and minds of voters. An army of pro-Duterte online commentators, which include celebrities and popular bloggers, consistently argue that the mainstream media are biased and unfair to Duterte. This is not unlike the alternative news sites in the US. Social media has taken over the traditional media's agenda-setting power.

Fake news also aggravated an emotionally charged gubernatorial election in Jakarta this year when the incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known as "Ahok"), was targeted for his race and religion. A Chinese-Indonesian Christian, Ahok fell victim to a doctored video in which he appeared to criticize those who use the Quran to denounce the role of non-Muslims in positions of leadership. In essence, 13 seconds of talking was taken, out of context, from a 100-minute speech. He was charged with blasphemy and an estimated 500,000 protesters turned out on the streets of Jakarta in December 2016 to demand his ouster and arrest. Anti-Ahok campaigners also circulated a series of Internet memes linking Ahok to the threat of Chinese invasion and a revival of communism in Indonesia. In this most social of countries, Whatsapp, Facebook, and Twitter are the conduits for Indonesians to share misinformation that can inflame ethnic and religious tensions. In mid-April he lost his bid for re-election to a Muslim candidate, and in May he was convicted and jailed on the blasphemy charge.

Fake news is equally rampant on the Chinese Internet. In 2011, Beijing supermarkets ran out of salt after false rumors circulated that iodized salt can guard against radiation poisoning amid Japan's Fukushima nuclear emergency. Ironically, the current debate over fake news shows the foresight of China, which recognized problems with misinformation on social media early on. "China's crackdown on online rumors a few years ago was

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4 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, Edelman, January 2017.

harshly condemned by the West,” wrote the official mouthpiece *Global Times*. “Things changed really quickly, as the anxiety over Internet management has been transferred to the US.” In 2015, China arrested nearly 200 people for spreading false information about stock market turmoil and a massive explosion in the city of Tianjin. In July 2016, the Cyberspace Administration of China issued a statement saying that it was “forbidden to use hearsay to create news or use conjecture and imagination to distort the facts.” While China claims that this is necessary for social order, it is really about nipping signs of unrest in the bud before they fester into a political movement.

Post-truth politics is possible through lack of trust in institutions and social safeguards. This is not unique to Asia, but is true across the world. In the years since the global financial crisis of 2008, the Edelman Trust Barometer has tracked a consistent decline of trust around the world in mainstream institutions such as media and government. This can most obviously be seen in the election of Donald Trump and the vote for Brexit. In 2017, 19 of the 28 countries surveyed are now classified as distrusting states.⁴ To be sure, media in Asia-Pacific countries are more trusted compared with their Western counterparts. This might be due to a different understanding of the role of media in Asia, where nation-building and consensus-forming are viewed as more important than free expression and checking government power. However, there is a limit to this. There are big drops in trust of the media in Singapore due to their muted coverage of public service failings. In Hong Kong, social media led the coverage and debate on pro-democracy protests because traditional media are seen as biased. This explains why the mainstream media are being circumvented by social media, and why people prefer “authentic” politicians who seem genuine and approachable, but not necessarily truthful.

This is aggravated by the phenomenon in the online world known as the “filter bubble,” a concept popularized by Internet activist Eli Pariser, in which technology platforms offer personalized content according to the preferences and behaviors of users. The result is that netizens gather in what amounts to echo chambers, so that one exchanges information only to reinforce rather than debate viewpoints. As Lippmann observed nearly 100 years ago, “for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.” This results in the formation of groups that do not understand each other and find themselves in conflict based on misconceptions. This is the perfect medium for fake news and fringe beliefs to establish themselves and spread.

TACKLING THE PROBLEM

To address the fake news problem, Lippmann proposed creating a professional “intelligence bureau” of “expert reporters” who would present an accurate picture of reality. The modern-day equivalents are sophisticated digital tools to help people assess the reliability of information circulating online. Researchers have developed fact-checking software and browser extensions such as Lazytruth and Truthy. Facebook has recently partnered with independent organizations from the Poynter Institute’s International Fact Checking Network to identify fast-spreading hoaxes and discourage users from sharing them. Many technology platforms also have self-correcting mechanisms that empower consumers of information to flag disputed content. Communities such as Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube usually quickly correct errors or remove content that breaches community standards.

But technical solutions only go so far. They might work less well in Asia where institutional capacity is weak. Independent organizations are unlikely to have the ability to act as verification

5 *Freedom on the Net 2016*, Freedom House, November 2016.

intermediaries. Furthermore, these solutions rely on netizens having an ethos of responsibility and healthy skepticism toward information that might not be properly fact-checked. This is dependent on overcoming the barriers of awareness (the existence of misinformation) and digital literacy (the tools and skills needed to assess the reliability and biases of sources). There are opportunities for civil society, companies and other stakeholders to establish education programs to improve skills and awareness.

A bigger problem is that governments and politicians may have a vested interest in misinformation to hide the truth or push their own agendas. A case in point is Duterte as a key peddler of misinformation in the Philippines. On the other hand, attempts to stop fake news and online rumors could descend into censorship. This is especially relevant in the context of Asia where democratic institutions are weak and immature. Freedom House, a US NGO that advocates for democracy, says Internet freedom around the world has been on a declining trend, and two-thirds of the world’s Internet users live in countries where criticism of the government is subject to censorship.⁵

In a new development, social media platforms, communication apps and their users face greater threats than before as these tools grow in influence. In Thailand, military courts issued decades-long sentences in 2015 in cases involving Facebook posts deemed critical of the monarchy. In the same year, Bangladesh blocked WhatsApp to prevent potential protests after the Supreme Court upheld the death sentences handed down to two political leaders convicted of war crimes. To fight the spread of fake news, governments already have traditional law enforcement methods such as those against rumors and libel. But more regulations and oversight are coming. In a pioneering move, Germany is consider-

ing legislation that would subject social media firms to fines for “publishing” fake news unless it is deleted within 24 hours. Indonesia is also reportedly setting up a National Cyber Agency to improve inter-agency co-ordination and prosecution of fake news. The Ministry of Communication and Informatics is also asking Facebook to help block fake news. In countries with imperfect legal regimes, new regulations and governance mechanisms to tackle fake news will inevitably be intertwined with rule-of-law and freedom of speech issues. This calls for appropriate checks and balances to prevent abuse.

In the end, the fake news that we choose to believe in our respective digital bubbles may just be a reflection of our social and political divisions. Speaking after the social media-incited riots in England in 2011, Google Chairman Eric Schmidt said, “It’s a mistake to look in the mirror and decide to break the mirror. The fact of the matter is ... whatever the underlying problem was, the Internet is a reflection of that problem, but turning on and off the Internet is not going to fix it.”

Ongoing globalization and technological advances have eroded public trust in institutions, which people believe have failed to protect them from the negative effects of these forces. In Asia, there is deep unease about issues related to income inequality, erosion of social values, immigration and the rapid pace of change. Ultimately, any attempts to reverse the proliferation of fake news will need to address social fragmentation and political polarization amid anxieties about social and economic well-being, religion and identity.

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