



BY ANDY SEE

ISSUES

# FAKE NEWS IS BIG NEWS!

**F**ROM a simple expression often used by US President Donald Trump to variously describe news and comments by his opponents and detractors, “fake news” has certainly taken on a global dimension.

Consider these developments: India, UK, France and Germany are currently exploring laws to curb the spread of fake news.

As a matter of fact, Malaysia is one of the first countries in the world to enact an Anti-Fake News Act, which came into force on 11 April 2018, just before the 14th general elections.

However, the Act received heavy criticism from politicians and civil society for its open definitions and sweeping powers given to the government.

Fake news is not a new problem at all, for sure. But the Internet and social media have made it very immediate and perhaps even more dangerous.

Sure, the Internet and social media has democratised information, making it available to anyone. But it has also made it harder to tell fact from fake.

Rumours that used to take weeks or months to spread can be shared to hundreds or thousands of people at a click of a button and there are zero filters in place.

This is not just a Malaysian dilemma. I attended the Public Relations Global Network (PRGN) meeting in Canada earlier this year, and fake news was discussed by PR professionals from all over the world. It is a widespread problem that needs urgent attention.

Even former US President Barack

Obama weighed in on this issue.

In a 2016 press conference in Germany, he said, “In an age of social media where so many people are getting their information in soundbites and snippets off their phones—if we can’t discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems.”

## REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES

What might seem like good, useful content from the user’s perspective can have very negative consequences - from loss of business reputation to loss of relationship to even loss of life.

Case in point: you may have seen videos circulating on social media showing a Malaysian brand of cream crackers being set on fire. The video makers claimed the crackers burned because it contained plastic. This is wholly untrue.

But commenters were quick to condemn the company and call for investigations, boycotts, etc.

Those who tried to point out the basic scientific facts of why the crackers could burn could not convince the angry mobs and could not stop the videos from going viral.

Fake news can have horrifying consequences too. In India, messages warning of outsiders coming into villages to kidnap children were widely circulated through Whatsapp.

Paranoid locals began attacking random strangers who happened to be passing through their village, resulting in several deaths. Police are having a

hard time trying to dispel the rumours to avoid more of such mob lynchings.

In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, rumours spread on social media have resulted in bloody sectarian violence.

## IF FAKE NEWS IS SUCH A PROBLEM, WHY DO PEOPLE STILL SPREAD IT?

Social and digital media has effectively displaced mainstream media as the primary channel of information.

In the Perspective Strategies Youth Perspectives study, one of the largest youth surveys in Malaysia, we discovered that 93% of those surveyed went online every day. Over half of them spent up to 5 hours a day online!

Similarly, in an international survey by global communications firm Edelman, 45% of respondents said they consumed news from mainstream news sources less than once a week.

At the core of this shift away from mainstream media is credibility and trust issues, which may perhaps shift over time due to the current changing media landscape in Malaysia.

When there is a credibility deficit in established media, it’s only natural to turn to those whom people trust most – friends and family. Content shared by friends, family or other “influencers” automatically receive a credibility boost because of the perceived trustworthiness inherent in the relationship.

This is confirmed by the Youth Perspectives study, which discovered that young Malaysians ranked information shared by friends and family as “most trusted”.

The reality is, in most cases, no one sets out to lie to their friends and family. But the problem is that social media has zero check and balance.

While mainstream news organisations have a code of ethics, such as using reputable sources and checking facts, and can be held accountable for their content, anyone can produce and share fake news indiscriminately through social media.

And because fake news is typically geared to provoke reaction, it has almost become a reflex action to hit that “share” button on the screen.



## 7 WAYS TO DEAL WITH FAKE NEWS (IF YOUR BRAND/ ORGANISATION IS HIT)

There is no standard action plan for those affected by fake news. Each case must be evaluated individually. But here are some general guidelines on how you can be prepared:

1. **HAVE A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN IN PLACE**  
Anticipate all the possible issues and prepare your communication strategies accordingly in advance. This is like a fire drill. Basically, your plan should look like what you would have already done to successfully overcome a fake news story.
2. **CHECK YOUR EMOTIONS**  
It's easy to get riled up when you or your organization is unfairly targeted but that just serves the fake news machine. Always stay calm, objective and strategic. Don't respond when emotional.
3. **RESEARCH THE SOURCE**  
Knowing where the story is coming from will give you more information to use in your response strategy.
4. **PICK YOUR BATTLES**  
Often, issues are blown up by a response to something that would have faded away anyway. Consider the life cycle of the issue - is this fading story or a growing story? Sometimes, not responding is the best strategic option.
5. **TIMELINESS**  
Don't let the news grow legs. If a response is required, quickly craft a response that clearly states your true position. After all, this is the digital age, news cycles are 24/7.
6. **TURN IT AROUND**  
Instead of being defensive, regain control of the narrative by using the negative news as the starting point to explain your company's brand values. And keeping it going from there.
7. **RIDE IT OUT**  
Sometimes, any response will only make things worse. The best thing to do then is just to grit your teeth and wait for the storm to pass. As fast as it hits, in the digital age, it may pass by at lightning speed as well.

Even mainstream media is not immune to spreading fake news. In the rush not to be left out of breaking news stories, mainstream media does at times report on sensational rumours.

Although they are usually careful to couch it in neutral terms, it still gives the rumours some sheen of credibility. In the case of the child-kidnapping rumours in India, news channels reporting on the rumours further fuelled the villagers' paranoia, driving some of them into a murderous rage.

All these is leading to a rising uncertainty about what is real and what is fake news. In the Edelman survey, 63% of respondents agreed that an average person cannot distinguish rumours from good journalism.

About 73% were concerned about the potential negative impact of fake news. From the Youth Perspectives survey, we also discovered that ironically only 9.2% of young Malaysians fully trusted

information seen on social media.

### ARE FAKE NEWS LAWS THE ANSWER?

I don't believe legislation is the answer because it represents a swing to the opposite extreme. Fake news critics charge that such laws can be easily abused to silence dissent and hide truths from the public.

This is a universal concern as every government around the world that has considered fake news laws has met with strong resistance.

It would also be difficult to identify the original creators of fake news in the digital world, where information is shared at the speed of a finger tap. It would be like looking for a needle in the world-wide haystack.

### SO, WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT FAKE NEWS?

The new Pakatan Harapan government's decision to get rid of the Fake News Act will ensure we continue to enjoy

freedom of speech without unnecessary fear of repercussions. However, a solution still needs to be found for this huge problem.

I believe self-regulation is the key. Lu Yin Yin of the Oxford Internet Academy told Wired magazine in April 2018 that the best choice is to allow the people to deal with fake news themselves, rather than letting the government take care of it for them.

Everyone – media owners, businesses, consumers and other stakeholders – has a responsibility to address this issue. The concerted efforts of everyone will certainly help stem the tide of fake news. We have the responsibility not only to ourselves but also to society at large.

Perhaps one idea we should consider an initiative similar to the News Literacy Project (NLP) in the U.S.

The NLP is a non-profit organisation that works with educators and journalists to teach students how to distinguish real and fake news in the digital age, so that they can be smart

consumers of information and engaged, informed participants in civic life.

The proposal to set up a Media Council by the Communications and Multimedia Minister, Gobind Singh Deo, is also a step in the right direction towards addressing the issue of fake news.

The Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia (PRCA Malaysia) fully supports this initiative and has written to the Minister to seek participation in the Media Council.

As the PR industry deals with the media on behalf clients on a daily basis, the Media Council presents a great opportunity for us to share our experience to serve the common good. As such, the PR industry looks forward to having the opportunity to contribute positively to the Media Council dialogues. **mb**

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