

APAC Insights #2

True Lies: Misinformation, Censorship and the Open Internet – Discussion Summary



30 June 2020

1. Introduction

The APAC Insights webinar series brings together thought leaders and subject matter experts to share and contrast experiences, explore challenges and opportunities, and provide insights into topical issues around the Internet. Each session takes place on Zoom and is broadcasted live on [Livestream](#),¹ [Facebook](#),² [Periscope](#)³ and [Twitch](#).⁴ A Q&A segment provides an opportunity for attendees to ask panelists questions.

The second APAC Insights webinar on 30 June 2020, moderated by Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President of Asia-Pacific, brought together a diverse panel to discuss misinformation, censorship and the open Internet. The panelists for this session were:

- Nighat DAD, Executive Director, Digital Rights Foundation, Pakistan
- Peng Hwa ANG, Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
- William YU, Chief Technology Officer, Novare Technologies Inc., Philippines

The next section provides a summary of the discussions.

¹ <https://livestream.com/internetsociety/apacinsights2>

² <https://www.facebook.com/InternetSociety/posts/10157232618393239>

³ <https://www.pscp.tv/w/1RDGIrBWpmdxL>

⁴ <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/665718277>

2. Discussion Summary

Fake news is not new and has been circulating for centuries in the offline world, but with more people connected to the Internet and using it as the main source for information and news, it has allowed fake news to spread much faster across a much greater scale throughout the globe, causing unprecedented consequences.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are also experiencing an “infodemic” where there is an overflow of information, making it hard for people to find accurate information when they need it. Further, people are experiencing first-hand the impact of fake news on public health and safety. Fake news have also contributed to prejudice against certain groups and triggered violence.

There are multiple dimensions of fake news that need to be tackled. Many fake news are political, and there are instances where political leaders are involved in spreading fake news. But some fake news are not political and are more of a nuisance, created by individuals just to get a reaction. First of all, it is important to differentiate between misinformation and disinformation:

- Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information that is spread without malicious intent, causing people to be *misinformed*.
- Disinformation is deliberately misleading or biased information, manipulated narrative or fact, or propaganda that is targeted and organised to shape public opinion.

Three polls were conducted during the webinar. The first poll asked attendees why they think fake news is increasing online and many (36%) felt that it is because of a tendency to quickly believe things seen online without any research.

The panel deliberated on the different reasons for this. Some groups of people may be seeking certainty in an uncertain world with a deluge of information. Another group may be seeking a sense of belonging and act to reinforce their community or national identity. A third group may be seeking some form of closure on an issue, especially if the issue is not in line with their ideals.

It is therefore important to strengthen people’s capacity in handling the deluge of information and not fall prey to fake news. Often, fake news are created to trigger strong emotions prompting recipients to react and share immediately without verifying or thinking critically about the content.

In the attempt to stop disinformation, unrest and violence, one of the approaches that governments around the world have taken is to shut down mobile communication networks and the Internet. The panel discussed whether it is justified to use technical measures to stop the spread of disinformation.



Another poll in the webinar asked attendees whether the use of drastic technical measures such as shutting down Internet access or filtering out websites and services makes sense as a means to control fake news. Attendees were divided on this issue with 58% saying it does not make sense, and 42% saying it does.

Technical measures, such as blocking the Internet and placing signal jammers to prevent cellular-activated bombs are often used because it is easy to implement. Citizen safety and national security are reasons put forward by governments to justify network shut downs. But with people depending on the Internet for work and education and for essential services such as banking, Internet shut downs have significant economic and social impacts. Even temporary network shut downs at a local rally could mean that those in the area could not access emergency services. With network shut downs, it will be more difficult for law enforcement to intercept communications between malicious actors.

Instead of Internet shut downs, it may be more effective to focus on enhancing transparency and promoting accurate information. Findings from a research study conducted by Peng Hwa Ang show that citizens are willing to accept Internet shut downs for a limited period when they perceive that the reasons are legitimate.

Regulatory processes to address disinformation need to ensure due process, as well as accountability and proportionality, and take a human rights perspective, with due respect to privacy and freedom of expression. Other important measures are promoting media and information literacy to counter disinformation, and helping users navigate the digital media environment, starting in schools and through public awareness campaigns, including for those living in rural and remote areas who have just started using the Internet.

One of the polls asked who should be responsible for monitoring fake news online, and the majority of the attendees believed that social media platforms and users are responsible.

Social media platforms are taking some measure to tackle the spread of fake news, using artificial intelligence and engaging fact-checking agencies, but with the huge increase in the volume of fake news, it is hard for platforms to keep up.

Therefore, it is also important that individuals play a role in stopping the spread of fake news. This includes checking that the information is accurate before sharing (even if it is from friends and family that you trust), informing the sender of the fake news so that s/he will be more cautious in sharing news in future, reporting fake news to administrators of platforms, and advocating for governments and platforms to play a greater role in tackling fake news.

Looking into the future, the panel are optimistic that things will get better. There will probably be more regulations on the Internet, but social media platforms will be playing a greater role in tackling fake news, and people will be more able to differentiate between fake and accurate news and employ critical thinking.

3. Quotes

Nighat DAD, Executive Director, Digital Rights Foundation, Pakistan

“State and private actors are recognising the potential of the Internet for shaping public opinion and building narratives, ... and are exercising more control over the Internet to monopolise discussions.”

“It is problematic when you normalise this practice of [Internet shut downs] and national security is being used everywhere to justify these measures.”

“When you see a news on social media and you have a strong emotional reaction to it, or you immediately want to amplify that news, or the story seems totally ridiculous, or it perfectly confirms your bias, this is when you need to verify the sources on the Internet.”

Peng Hwa ANG, Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

“People want a fairy tale, a sense of certainty and closure, so when the story makes sense to people, they fall for it.”

“I have a rule of thumb ... when somebody says ‘please pass it on’, it is 99.9% fake news.”

“Government defines what fake news is and that opens the possibility for censorship.”

“[Research shows that] citizens are willing to accept Internet cuts or bans for a limited period if citizens perceive that the cut is legitimate.”

“If you receive something that is fake, send it back. And then ask that person to send it back again. Usually when people are caught [with sending fake news] they become more cautious next time.”

William YU, Chief Technology Officer, Novare Technologies Inc., Philippines

“[Governments] use measures like block the entire Internet because it is simple. We have this joke in the Philippines about cutting the Internet in only seven places and the whole country leaves the Internet.”

“Proportionality is important. The amount of control or restrictions [imposed] is proportional to what is necessary. You don’t just block the Internet because somebody is saying things you don’t like.”

“If we get to know why, who said it and see for ourselves whether it is credible [that would help]. Problem is these [social media] platforms don’t render well to transparency, which we need to work on.”

Rajnesh SINGH, Regional Vice President, Asia-Pacific, Internet Society

“Fake news is not something new. April Fool’s Day is probably the original fake news day.”

“There is a fine line between trying to prevent fake news and censorship.”

“Anytime you shut down a service, you are impacting everything that the Internet is able to do for you. So you can’t just say we will allow online banking and filing taxes, but everything else we shut down.”

Disclaimer: Views expressed in this report are those of the panelists and attendees (in case of poll) and do not reflect official Internet Society positions.

