Micro-Policy Intervention

CONTEMPORARY POLICY DISCUSSION IN CAMBODIA

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FUTURE
FORUM

Chapter 9 | Fake Online News Content:
Crime in the Digital Age

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Executive Summary

Journalism in Cambodia is shifting its direction from its previous version, traditional media, to the online world. As Cambodian society is digitizing itself to catch up with the rest of the world, the way people consume media is changing. The increase of fake content on online websites and social media raises concerns for people who consume news online and the credibility of journalists who provide news content online.

Introduction

In the past, fake news was predominantly spread in the form of propaganda, which was distributed intentionally and purposely. But now, as online journalism is growing and extending its powerful influence on social media users, propagandists are utilizing this new trend to spread fake news. The previous problems of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, which occurred in traditional media, have not changed their form, but simply changed their medium. Online media itself does not create any new forms of fake content or disinformation, but rather facilitates easier and faster spread of fake news, with a greater reach and a more significant impact.

Facebook stands as the largest social media platform in the world, with 2.41 billion monthly active users all around the globe (Clement, 2019), followed by Google's YouTube, with 1.9 billion monthly active users (Lua, 2019). In Cambodia, there are 8.8 million Facebook users (Ang, 2019) which is equivalent to half of the current Cambodian population (The World Bank, n.d.). As Cambodian society keeps developing, the number of social media users, especially Facebook users,

also keeps going up. Hence, quality news is needed, so that people who are on the internet can be informed correctly and properly.

As the problem grows bigger and bigger, what can be done at the professional level? What can professional journalists do to combat fake news? And how can people, from the grassroots level, protect themselves from fake news?

Fake news is widely spread throughout social media platforms, and it shows no sign of declining. While it is not possible to remove fake content from social media, social media platforms can be used to debunk fake content spread inside the platform itself. This paper suggests that social media itself can be used as a tool to spread media literacy knowledge, in the form of Facebook campaigns that educate people on how fake news or disinformation is spread.

Background to the Problem

Why is there so much fake content on the internet?

The concept of fake news and propaganda is not new to the world of media practitioners, yet most social media consumers struggle to distinguish between fake content and professional news information (UNESCO, 2018).

Social media now plays a crucial role in delivering news information to people. Cambodian citizens now consume the vast majority of their news through online platforms like websites or Facebook pages (Jensen, 2015). When accessing news online, consumers need to be very careful and critical to identify which news content is real and which is fake.

As fake news often adopts the format of professional news content, it is hard for new media consumers to distinguish between the two. A study in the US confirmed that fake information was more popular than real news, and fabricated news was retweeted on Twitter more often than true information (Lazer, et al., 2018). While social media does not create any new forms of fake news, it does help false content spread faster and more easily (Plaisance, 2016).

Why should Cambodia care about online fake content?

The growing social media community

Due to the growth of social media capacity in Cambodia, the market of online journalism has grown exponentially. Moreover, the social media community in Cambodia continues to grow every year. Facebook is the most popular social

networking site in Cambodia and its use among Cambodians has increased immensely in recent years. The number of Facebook users in Cambodia has now reached 8.8 million people, half of the current Cambodian population, compared to 6.8 million users in 2018 and 4.8 million users in 2017 (Ang, 2019). That means the number of Facebook users in Cambodia has increased by 29% in the past year, and by 83% in the past two years.
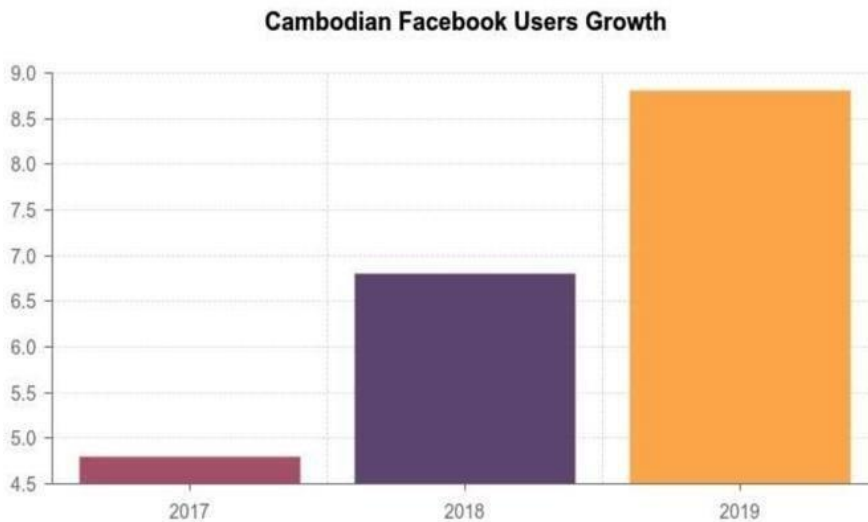
Ang, C. (2019, June 16). *CAMBODIA'S 2019 SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL STATISTICS*. Geeks In Cambodia. Retrieved from: http://geeksincambodia.com/cambodias-2019-social-media-digital-statistics/.

As the number of social media users continues to rise, concerns over issues of online propaganda, including fake news and disinformation, similarly increase. Combatting this issue requires effort from every stakeholder— including the government, professional media outlets, journalists, and citizens—to fight fake news on the internet, specifically on Facebook.

Author Opinion: What is the future trend of information distribution?

Online formats will continue to be an increasingly popular platform for journalism and media. Technology allows online journalists, bloggers or propagandists to share their content, whether real or fake, to the public on a greater scale than

ever before. Some traditional media sources will sooner or later adopt online formants, and seek to attract social media, including Facebook, users. At the same time, there are also news outlets that have been specifically created for online audiences. Together, these patterns will most likely result in an increase of online news and a decrease in traditional media. As the internet continues to increase in speed and accessibility, even more people will engage with online platforms. As a result, people will consume online news more than ever, and may believe most content they see and share it with their family or friends.

What are the impacts on citizens?

People make decisions based on the information they have, so consuming false content could lead to serious problems. The Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec (n.d.) lays out five different ways that fake news could possibly influence people:

Financial impact: Getting the wrong information may lead citizens to spend their money on the wrong things. Consuming fake content on the internet regarding online shopping leads people to waste their income on useless and possibly unhealthy products (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec, n.d.). In Cambodia, there are a lot of online shops that operate as Facebook pages. Some unauthorized sellers produce their own body lotions and sell them to online buyers. This act not only exploits the buyers' money but may harm the buyers' health as well (Khy, 2019).

Fear: Fake content could create chaos in society and plant fear inside people's minds (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec, n.d.). For example, the current outbreak of coronavirus in China caused chaos in Cambodia because some Cambodian Facebook users spread false information about the presence of coronavirus in the Kingdom. One Facebook user posted a video of a woman, working in the hotel in Sihanoukville, the province where the case of coronavirus in Cambodia was found, passing out and claimed she was infected with the virus. The video went viral cross the country and created fear among Cambodian Facebook users. Later on, the woman in the video clarified that she was simply tired and did not have the virus.

Racist ideas: Some Facebook posts intend to disparage certain races, genders, or religions (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec, n.d.). When

people consume news that contains racist content, it is more likely that they can become racist. For example, during the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, multiple incidences of racism occurred in France. People in France avoided interaction Asian people in general simply because coronavirus was from China.

Violence: Some fake content uses rumors to attack specific people. When the news goes viral, and is consumed without proper background context, online users can intentionally or unintentionally harass or bully the person targeted by the fake news (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec, n.d.). In March 2018, there was mob violence against a university professor when the Facebook's users accused him of causing a traffic accident. A rumor of the professor hitting a motorbike driver went viral on Facebook, leading a group of motorists to chase after him, and finally, caused a mob to attack the professor, causing serious injury. As published by Khmer Times, what actually occurred was that the motorbike driver was drunk and lost control of himself, then fell off the motorbike next to the professor's car (Buth, 2018).

Political decisions: What would happen if fake news is spread during the national election? Political fake news is very dangerous in terms of choosing the representatives of a country (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec, n.d.).

The impact on professional media outlets

Professional news will be affected as the amount of fake news on the internet increases. As people shift to consume the majority of their news online, professional news outlets and journalists need to publish their work on the internet as well so that people have access to accurate news. However, there are problems in identifying what is credible online news and what is not. As the internet is a free space for everyone, all content can be thrown online without verification, or with very limited fact-checking. This raises questions about the credibility of online news. This concern has led the Cambodian Ministry of Information to propose amendments to the Press Law to combat misreporting (Pech, 2019).

Fake content is written in a similar, but more provocative, way than professional news in order to attract more readership. By frequently encountering fake content, people may come to believe such content is real. This poses a big

challenge for professional news organisations as they fight for accurate and ethical news content in this modern age. They have to work harder than ever to ensure that people still choose to read quality news.

The obstacle of the development

Fake content not only effects citizens at a grassroots level, but also can influence the implementation of government policies as well. When fake news about new government policies is spread to the public, it influences their opinion of such policies. Once people's opinions have been formed, it is hard to change them, even when based on inaccurate information. When public opinion is altered through disinformation, people will react accordingly. Such could potentially influence how the government and other development organizations put their policies into practice. Once citizens acquire a negative perception about a policy, it can be difficult for the government or non-governmental organization to earn their trust back.

Micro-Intervention

A)   Overview

The suggested solution is to run a social media campaign to raise awareness about fake information on the internet. The campaign will be run on Facebook, as it is the largest social networking site in Cambodia. The campaign will come in the form of multimedia, including texts, photos, infographics, and videos. This project will last for 2 months, due to the limitations and resources of the project implementer.

B)   Justification

This campaign aims to raise media literacy, understanding, and skills among Cambodian Facebook users aged from 18 to 30, as this group of people represents 73% of Facebook users in Cambodia (Ang, 2019). By targeting this population, the project will reach the biggest portion of Facebook community in Cambodia.

C)   Implementation

This campaign will use four media formats to educate Facebook users on media literacy skills. The first format is text. Text will convey a short description on how to spot fake content on Facebook. Moreover, text can inform people about fake news criteria through articles explaining how fake news is spread.

The second media format is photography. Photos can illustrate the messages in a more effective and visual way, which benefits those who do not want to read long texts. The photos can be screenshots of fake contents posted on Facebook. In this manner, photos play the role of fake news debunkers. Photos can also be used to show what professional news content looks like.

The third proposed format is infographics, which are a creative way to convey messages to audiences. Using graphic design, media literacy knowledge can be provided to targeted audiences on Facebook, illustrating how fake information is formed and spread.

The final media format to be used in this Facebook campaign is video. The campaign can employ short videos, around one or two minutes, talking about media literacy and how to spot fake content or disinformation. The videos can be interviews with media experts or explanatory videos about media literacy.

Conclusion

While the spread of fake news on social media has become a serious problem, this paper displays it is possible to use social media itself to combat the issue. Equipping social media users with the tools, via a Facebook campaign, to identify fake news or dubious sources empowers them to protect themselves from misinformation. Due to the immense popularity of Facebook in Cambodia, such a campaign is likely to be successful in reaching its target audience and stopping the spread of misinformation.

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