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Can Governments Stop Fake News?

By Han Fook Kwang

Synopsis

Many governments are planning new laws and penalties to stop the spread of fake news. But they will have limited success because the new gatekeepers of information want freedom and autonomy to decide what they read and broadcast.

Commentary

FAKE NEWS is in the news, again. This time it is mostly about governments planning to introduce new laws and penalties to stop their spread. The German authorities are targeting Internet giants like Facebook, and plan to require them to take action against fake news posted on their sites failing which fines of up to 500,000 euros can be imposed. In Britain, there is a parliamentary committee looking into the issue. The Singapore Government announced last month it is studying the matter and looks likely to introduce new laws. Why are governments stepping in, and will they succeed?

Their concerns have mounted following the presidential election in the United States where the volume and intensity of fake news reached new heights. Even more alarming for them was the possibility that foreign governments might have been involved in attempts to influence the outcome of the polls. While there has been no conclusive evidence of this, the mere suggestion that future elections anywhere could be similarly targeted has made governments anxious to be seen doing something.

What Can Governments Do?

So, what can they do?

An obvious target are the large social media sites like Facebook, Google and Youtube. These platforms are powerful aggregators of news - genuine and fake - and spread them virally through users posting and re-posting them. It has been reported, for example, that the fake news of Pope Francis endorsing the American presidential candidate Donald Trump was shared on Facebook a million times.

By focusing their attention on these companies, governments hope to use their resources and technical know-how. They know their own capabilities are limited, and, in any case, many of the questionable sites are based outside their jurisdiction. Faced with impending new legislation, these tech giants will want to be seen responding though their actions are unlikely to amount to much.

So far the plans they have announced are mainly about flagging dubious content. But it is a laborious process trying to verify the spurious deluge and they will end up with token efforts on a handful of the most blatant cases. You can be sure, though, even these will find their way elsewhere, somewhere, somehow in the vast expanding cyberspace.

In fact, Facebook isn't the most prodigious multiplier of news. The distinction belongs to instant messaging apps like WhatsApp, WeChat, Line and others. They are harder to police because they do not operate any sites, only multitudes of chat groups formed and re-formed instantly.

But there is a more fundamental reason why government action is unlikely to succeed. It is that fake news is not like an illegal product bought and sold on the quiet, like fake watches or illicit drugs and firearms. If it were, it can be dealt with similarly, with laws, enforcement and public vigilance. Fake news is loud and wants to attract attention to itself and is happily passed around not by misfits and people on the fringe but the average citizen of the online world.

Up Against the Information Revolutio

To understand why this has happened, you have to understand the revolution that has taken place in information and communication which has completely upended the traditional world. Much has been written about this new media landscape that has made news and information available to everyone 24/7, turned mainstream media business on its head, removed the traditional gatekeepers of information and made authorities everywhere more accountable for their words and action than ever before.

But the more profound effect has been on how people consume and respond to news and information. They no longer do so passively but want to be active participants, posting and re-posting them to their social circles, acting as gatekeepers. They become active filters, deciding what to pass on and what to suppress depending on their interests and biases.

What drives this transformation from passive consumers to active broadcasters? It comes from the greater autonomy and independence from authority the digital world confers to everyone. People everywhere have embraced this freedom and made use

of it in many ways. Much of it is highly positive, in commerce, education, social activism and community building. Of course, there is also more pornography, Internet scams and hate content than ever before. But the good overwhelmingly surpass the bad.

Think back, for example, on your own experience online over the past 24 hours and it is likely you wouldn't want to go back to pre-revolutionary time, even with all the unsavoury parts included. In this milieu, enter so-called fake news.

The New Gatekeepers

But what is fake? It comes in all shapes and sizes, from the ridiculous to the sick and harmful. For example, there are countless versions of how using your mobile phone can fry your brain cells. Or conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre being the work of US intelligence to create an excuse to attack Islamic terrorists.

There is a lot of it going round every day, with or without an important election happening, and they exist alongside all the other stuff that inform, educate and entertain. But they have not slowed down the popularity of the online world because the consumer decides what to do with them - whether to delete, filter or re-broadcast it.

And in deciding, it reinforces his or her sense of autonomy and independence, and they will not give that up lightly. Government action to censor or filter, on the other hand, subtract from this freedom. Tech companies know this, which is why they have confined their action so far to only checking and flagging the more questionable material. But it also means their impact will be limited.

It is important for governments to understand this when they think about what action to take. The reality is that they will be not just be taking on the producers of fake news but the millions of consumers who want to be their own gatekeepers. That's the real revolution that has taken place. It is not fake.

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