

Written Representation 66

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Received: 28 Feb 2018

Some Personal Observations in Battling Fake News

The Truths About Fake News

Truth 1: Fake news cannot be stopped. Under cover of anonymity and a perceived harmless good laugh, netizens will remain fearless and irresponsible in their posting and reposting.

Truth 2: Fake news is bound to increase in the future. Just like pornography, the urge to fake will see no bounds. By the very highlight of fake news' ferocity, its concerned impact, and public discussions, adds fuel to the creativity of producers of fake news.

Truth 3: Fake news will get more convincing with improving software technologies. Today it is possible to doctor photos to professionally show celebrities' headshots affixed to scandalous or compromising photo composites. This malicious "art" has developed a name - Deepfakes.

The Final Truth: While we cannot stop purposeful misinformation, we can be wise against it. Our mind can be the defence against it.

Discretion

It is our collective wisdom, our collective discretion that, I believe, can reduce the onslaught of malicious online postings. Yes, discretion can be taught from classrooms to online campaigns, from young children to adults, and even aunts and uncles. Teach us to hone our discretionary skills against the harm, the effects and the embarrassment of fake news. The more the skill is applied over time it becomes an educated counter force against this digital nuisance.

Teach Discretion to Our Children in Schools

Youngsters are as impressionable as they are quick learners of the digital lifestyle. We teach them moral values in our schools (I hope we still do). Upgrade the moral education programme to include the effects of internet lies and false stories. Give them real, relevant examples to comment and discuss, play games, and let them write and publish their views. They could even teach their parents at home. How wonderful would that be!

Teach Adults Discretion

I think this group is perhaps the largest group perpetuating fake news. We get these everyday, all for a moment of levity at anybody's expense. An example of fake news still making the rounds is Steve Jobs "famous" dying words that were wonderfully written. It is a fake. Not many would ask how an advanced pancreatic cancer patient

could write so eloquently in his dying moments. We have come to believe anything so long as it is exciting.

How do we teach adults?

We would need a smart communication campaign that digitally pops up on Facebook, Instagram and the like. Facebook (FB) is especially a good avenue. There is a substantial adult population enjoying FB. In fact, I find aunties and uncles use FB so much that the youths stay away (my children categorically attest to this).

Adults need to see their antics in a communication campaign before they realise how silly they have become. Online videos cannot teach us to be overcomers of silly behaviour and thinking overnight. However, it is the beginning of getting the conversation and self-reflection going among this audience. The main aim here is to get us to question ourselves before we hit that Forward button. Questions like "does it make sense?" "Can it be verified?" "How come no other media has picked up on this news?" Teach us to spot fakes - clues like bad spelling, wrong grammar, awkward sentence structure and English mixed with Singlish, etc.

Reference resource of fake news

Publish a continually updated website (or column in traditional media) with a listing of known fake news for anyone to reference the samples they receive. Users have the opportunity to upload their news for verification via public reviews. This offers a fallback resource against fake news.

Rating the news

The media companies should be willing to grade their major news items. For example, breaking news could be rated "Verified," "Being verified," and "Unverified." A specific news item can move along this rating as it progresses toward verification. "Verified" is simply corroborated by other news agencies. This is a voluntary practice by media companies that distinguish the standard of quality news versus the fake ones. Yes, fake news producers can copy and make up their own "verified" news ratings. However, the key is that legitimate media companies in Singapore are willing to practice transparency and have legitimate sources for verification. The act of transparency is an act towards authenticity built over time. The time, effort and practice are against the very proposition of fake news producers.

Summary

While we endeavour to be the smart nation, we need to be clever users of technology. We need to be astute against disinformation playing on unwitting minds. We need a shield against this barrage of lies least it perpetuates a new norm. We need to strengthen our minds with discretion. While it is usually thought that discretion is a mind skill accumulated with experience, I believe we can speed it along with public education and engagement.