



There is also an element of social inequality in getting information. Just as the poor suffer bad nutrition because they eat cheap food, they could also suffer from a diet of misinformation if they cannot afford to pay for quality news. PHOTO: AFP

Brave new news world

As the world becomes even more polarised, knowing how to defend oneself as the information wars play out is crucial. **By Ong Soh Chin**

SOME years ago, when I was in Washington DC, I visited the Newseum, an institution celebrating journalism and the American First Amendment which protects, among other things, freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

I saw the visit as a pilgrimage of sorts. I grew up respecting the ability of words to communicate truth to power, eventually making a career out of it as a journalist.

On Dec 31, 2019, however, the Newseum closed its doors, a victim of funding, or lack thereof. It charged admission, which made it less attractive than DC's many other great and free museums.

But I also saw its closure as symbolic.

When the Newseum opened in 2008, the iPhone was just a year old, Facebook was four years old, and Donald Trump was supporting Hillary Clinton's run for the American presidency.

By the time it closed, countries were being accused of infiltrating other nations' political systems, the Dark Web, bots and click farms were a thing, and fake news had become a way of life.

Ironically, in its last days, the Newseum had started selling Make America Great Again merchandise, which it eventually withdrew from its shelves. The institution should not be political, said protestors, especially when it comes to promoting a leader who has little regard for journalism or the truth.

So much for freedom of speech, I thought; even the Newseum had its limits. And those limits have become even more real, as news has become more fake.

The jaunty covenant of journalism at the start of the 20th Century was *The New York Times*' "All the news that's fit to print". By 2017, however, *The Washington Post*'s "Democracy dies in darkness" was the zeitgeist. One wonders though, if this democracy is also suffocating in the light of day.

What passes for news or "content" has changed. So have the channels in which they are

consumed. And while I have been talking about America so far, the implications are global.

Fast and furious

News today has become a commodity; to think otherwise would be naïve. And commodities have a dollar value, which means they can be traded and, put crudely, sold to the highest bidder. It can be fabricated, but also shaped and moulded.

Previously, one of the most heinous things a journalist could be accused of was making the move to public relations – or, as they call it, the dark side – where information is manicured and pruned for the world according to a client's taste.

Today, nobody bats an eyelid because the lines have been so blurred. Journalists accept that they have to submit questions in advance to newsmakers before an interview. Native advertising – ads which look like editorials – is acceptable. There was a time when neither of these practices existed.

This transformation has been compounded by our rapidly changing consumption habits. Thanks to the rise of online platforms, everything – work, entertainment, socialising and shopping – has been squeezed into one place, the smartphone.

According to the 2019 Reuters Digital News Report, which surveyed 40 countries, two-thirds of respondents use a smartphone to access news.

So, from being slow thoughtful readers, we now take on several articles concurrently, reading everything and absorbing nothing. How could we when we are also watching YouTube cooking tutorials and laughing at cat videos at the same time?

Deep literacy or deep thinking has, therefore, been replaced by surface-skimming. We are multi-tasking and taking bites of the information cherry.

Our brains take in information the same way it does when we play video games; we imbibe

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passively and give ourselves sugar highs to stay engaged. In video games, we use our thumbs to drive the action; in reading, we swipe or scroll when we get distracted. Which is often.

This is worrying, especially as a 2018 study by the United Kingdom's Office of Communications found that participants who used social media for news were unable to recall the primary sources of news they had read and were often unable to distinguish news from advertisements or sponsored content.

Being alone, together

In this case of buyer beware, the buyer is truly alone. While Twitter recently fact-checked two tweets by American president Donald Trump, Mark Zuckerberg has taken a different view, saying privately-owned digital platforms like Facebook should not act as the "arbiter of truth".

This raises some red flags as countries like Singapore ramp up their digitalisation efforts. They should also ensure their citizens know how to consume – and disseminate – news responsibly.

That second factor is equally important. In parts of South-east Asia and South America, WhatsApp is fast becoming the primary network for discussing and sharing news, even in chat groups with strangers, says the Reuters report.

I have noticed this over the years as my list of WhatsApp groups has grown. What starts out as an easy way to organise a dinner party soon ends up as a platform for meaningless pleasant-ries, milestone updates and, increasingly, pieces of news – real or fake – that are passed around to inform, entertain or shock.

So how does one navigate the minefields in this brave new news world?

By taking small careful steps.

First, when there is any doubt about the veracity of the news source, just don't spread it.

Second, start paying for news from quality publications. We are told from young never to accept candy from strangers. Yet, we are happy to accept free information while ignoring respectable news outlets that need our money to survive.

There is also an element of social inequality in this. Just as the poor suffer bad nutrition because they eat cheap food, they could also suffer from a diet of misinformation if they cannot afford to pay for quality news.

Perhaps companies could offer their employees paid subscriptions to news publications as part of their benefits. Schools and universities already do this. But surely, every single individual deserves proper news, no matter what they do for a living.

And last, make a conscious effort to get away from anything that involves scrolling. The recent circuit breaker in Singapore has given me the rare chance to be still and spend more time by myself. To stay active, I have gone for quick jogs around the neighbourhood and, as a result, have discovered the joy of podcasts.

Rather than straining my eyes or worsening my cellphone elbow by scrolling for news, I have instead put my ears to work and found a new way to appreciate information.

As the world becomes even more polarised, knowing how to defend oneself as the information wars play out is crucial. Hopefully, one day, it will also become second nature.

☞ The writer, a former journalist, is Deputy Director of Strategic Planning and External Relations at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore. The views expressed are her own.