Source: *The Straits Times,* pB2
Date: 17 January 2025

Why Meta's fact-checking retreat can hit some communities harder

Countries where language diversity and political fault lines can fuel polarisation are at great risk if the policy is scrapped globally.

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi

Meta's decision to dismantle its third-party fact-checking programme is more than a policy shift; it is a global abdication of its ethical responsibility with catastrophic implications for democracies worldwide, says the writer.
PHOTO: AFP

It's a dangerous gamble with the truth that mirrors the unsettling tenor of today's political climate.

Meta's abrupt decision to end its third-party fact-checking programme in the United States signals a disturbing retreat from responsibility, dressed up as a shift towards "community-driven" moderation.

The company's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg announced on Jan 7 that the Facebook and Instagram parent is replacing professional fact-checkers with mechanisms like X's Community Notes. His rhetoric about restoring "free expression" under this new system is little more than a thinly veiled attempt to dodge accountability, conveniently timed with the political resurgence of Trumpism.

While the immediate impact is visible in the US, this shift carries seismic implications for the global fight against misinformation, especially in regions like South and South-east Asia, where the challenges are compounded by the prevalence of vernacular languages and regional dialects. In such contexts, the falsehoods are tailored for specific communities.

Fact-checkers, equipped with contextual knowledge and linguistic expertise, play a crucial role in debunking such misinformation effectively.

If Meta's withdrawal extends beyond the US, it could threaten to dismantle this vital defence, leaving such societies increasingly exposed to the corrosive effects of unchecked disinformation.

PULLING THE PLUG

India offers a stark example of the collateral damage Meta's policy can cause. Over the past few years, Meta has cultivated partnerships with 12 fact-checking organisations in India that include big names such as AFP, PTI and India Today Fact Check, and the smaller ones like Factly and NewsMeter.

Many of these organisations, particularly the smaller ones, depend on Meta's funding to sustain their operations. Beyond this, their visibility also hinges on Meta's platforms as Facebook and Instagram are critical for driving traffic to their fact-checking websites.

If Meta replicates its US policy in India, these organisations could face an existential threat. The timing could not be worse: India's political landscape is already rife with disinformation campaigns that exploit religious and ethnic divisions.

Misinformation in India often thrives in vernacular languages and dialects, making it harder to detect and combat effectively. False narratives tailored to regional contexts spread rapidly, fuelling polarisation and sharpening the existing societal divides. Removing fact-checkers from Meta's platforms would strip away one of the last lines of defence against this tide.

In South-east Asia, the implications are similarly alarming. This is especially in countries that are navigating complex political environments marked by increasing reliance on social media as a battleground for ideological warfare.

In Indonesia, misinformation surrounding elections, such as claims about candidates' religious affiliations, has already poisoned democratic discourse. The deluge of falsehoods exploits Indonesia's linguistic diversity, with hoaxes crafted in vernacular dialects to evade detection and resonate closely with local audiences.

Fact-checkers, who understand the cultural and linguistic nuances of Indonesia's diverse regions, have played a critical role in countering these narratives. However, their work hinges on Meta's support for funding and visibility, both of which are now under threat.

Meta has partnerships with six fact-checkers in Indonesia, including respected names such as Kompas.com and Tempo. Meta's retreat risks amplifying disinformation in a country where false claims have previously fuelled communal tensions, as seen in the 2019 elections when fake communist accusations against Mr Joko Widodo incited widespread polarisation.

Malaysia faces comparable challenges. The country has witnessed a proliferation of racial and religiously charged misinformation, often targeting its diverse communities.

For example, during the 2018 elections, Facebook was a key platform for spreading false claims about the opposition's intentions to undermine Malay-Muslim dominance. Similarly, the aftermath of its 2022 general election offered a grim preview of what unchecked misinformation can unleash.

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, became breeding grounds for racially charged rhetoric, including the invocation of the "May 13" riots – an ethnically driven tragedy from 1969. Viral conspiracy theories painted Chinese political candidates as communists or Malay leaders as betrayers of their ethnic heritage.

This divisive propaganda – often presented in local languages like Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – proved difficult for automated moderation systems to address. Fact-checkers, armed with linguistic expertise, were instrumental in debunking these narratives.

A DANGEROUS PRECEDENT

Meta's decision to dismantle its third-party fact-checking programme is more than a policy shift; it is a global abdication of its ethical responsibility with catastrophic implications for democracies worldwide.

The catastrophic failure of Facebook's content moderation during the 2017 crisis in Myanmar offers a stark warning of what happens when local languages and contexts are neglected.

Despite pledges to address the rampant spread of hate speech, the platform allowed inflammatory posts in Burmese to incite violence against the Rohingya, culminating in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the decade. This failure underscores the critical importance of investing in fact-checkers and content moderators who understand local dialects and cultural nuances.

For countries where electoral processes are already plagued by disinformation in diverse vernaculars, this retreat risks amplifying hate speech, polarisation, communal and ethnic tensions.

With Meta pivoting towards a crowd-sourced model like Community Notes, the region risks falling into a misinformation quagmire. Unlike professional fact-checkers, community-driven moderation lacks the rigour, neutrality and expertise required to tackle nuanced, culturally specific falsehoods. Worse, it opens the door for coordinated brigading by bad actors to manipulate truth ratings.

Professional fact-checkers, steeped in local languages and cultural contexts, are not optional; they are indispensable in combating the nuanced, context-specific nature of misinformation in these regions.

Authorities can enforce stringent accountability measures. But it is in the interests of platforms like Meta to prioritise building partnerships with regional fact-checkers.

If left unchecked, Meta's retreat could set a dangerous precedent, allowing profit-driven negligence to erode the fabric of democracies in one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse regions of the world. The stakes are not just regional, they are global.

Meta's actions also set a dangerous precedent for other platforms. If one of the largest social-media companies can shirk its responsibility to combat misinformation, it emboldens competitors to follow suit.

This race to the bottom threatens to dismantle years of progress made by fact-checkers worldwide in building trust and combating the misinformation epidemic. If Meta truly cares about "free expression", it must recognise that freedom without truth is a hollow promise.

The world is watching, and it cannot afford to look away.

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