9th ASEF Editors’ Roundtable
Exploring the Battlefronts of ‘fake news’: A Tripartite Approach to the Fight Against Misinformation

Brussels, Belgium
15th – 16th October 2018

Introduction:

ASEF’s 9th Editors’ Roundtable took place in Brussels on the 15th and 16th of October, 2018. The event, drawing in news editors and professionals from both Europe and Asia, focused on the rise of misinformation and the subsequent fight against it.

The event was particularly topical as misinformation campaigns have affected issues of governance and elections around the world. At the time of conference, politicians have harnessed the sentiment against the rise of misinformation and used it as a sweeping indictment of the media sector.

As a result, journalists faced increasing prosecution from political campaigns wishing to portray all media as fake news and consumers who found a trust deficit with age old media institutions.

The event was enhanced also by the participation of civil society groups and politicians on the front line of combatting and countering the rise of misinformation.

As the conference was operating under the Chatham House Rules, no participants will be identified by name other than the keynote speaker.
Keynote Speech:

The conference began with a keynote speech from Mr Charles Chong the Deputy Speaker of the Singaporean Parliament.

Mr Chong highlighted that states both big and small faced increasing challenges from the rise of misinformation and fake news.

“Small states are not insulated from the effects of fake news. On the contrary, due precisely to their size, it is easier for fake news to reach a larger proportion of the population in a shorter time than it would take in larger countries, and for fake news to therefore have a greater impact in small countries.”

As a result of the rise of misinformation and fake news, Singapore’s parliament therefore set up a fact-finding team that was to investigate and report back on what Singapore was facing. As Mr Chong suggested, such missions must be non-partisan and as unbiased as possible to prevent against accusations that the findings may be biased:

“Recognising that the issue was an important one for the whole of Singapore, and should not be the subject of partisan politicking, membership of the 10-person committee was not limited to Parliamentarians from the ruling party. I was appointed as chairman of this committee.”

The team also consulted individual citizens, civic society groups, academics and corporations.

Utilizing all these various stakeholders, the committee eventually reached a unanimous conclusion that Singapore was vulnerable to the spread of ‘deliberate online falsehoods’ and that

Mr Chong also outlined the steps that Singapore was trying to take to combat against fake news including the passing of new strategies by the government to combat the rise of fake news include better education programs, watchdogs and fact-checking bodies to ensure the non-virality of fake news information.
Conference Day 1:

The conference continued with an introduction into the topic and the state of the news media at the present time. Among the initial debates the participants engaged in was whether the term fake news was an appropriate name at all. Suggestions included ‘deliberate misinformation’ as a more accurate description of the campaigns taking place around the world.

Session 1: The Scourge of Fake News

In the opening session candidates gave varying accounts of how fake news has affected the fabric of society and why it is so relevant.

From the United States we heard how President Donald Trump has utilized and coined the term to discredit the news media and set a dangerous precedent in regard to the freedom of expression and independence of journalists.

Panelist and participants talked about the experience of journalists in the Philippines who have to combat fake news not only from the populace who deliberately mislead through the country’s social network but also from the central government in an attempt to smear the opposition.

We heard about the problems in Thailand and Malaysia where people will spread deliberate falsehoods for clicks and coin.

In Vietnam and Singapore, the government has considered the spread of fake news so pervasive that sweeping anti-cyber laws are being passed to offset its effects.

The session also focused on whether fake news was a social, technological or political issue with the conclusion drawn by the panelists that it was a problem that encompassed all three measures of society.
Session 2 The Political Economy of Fake News

The afternoon session on the first day was held on the political economy of fake news, specifically how power relations influence how fake news is created and spread.

Again, the example of the Philippines was brought up with how fake news invariably seems to support the Duterte government. Examples from Europe were also used including Russian attempts through their programs to influence elections in Germany, Central European Countries, and France.

The participants also learned of cyber-bot farms in places like Moldova and Georgia where people make lucrative billing off fake news clickbait and malicious bot programs for hire.

Conference Day 2:

Second Key Note

The second keynote address was by Ms Claire Bury, the Deputy Director-General of DG Connect, a part of the European Commission.

Ms Bury outlined plans by the European Commission to fight fake news including stepping up fact checking organization and advising European Union on legislature that would help in combatting fake news.

Session 3 and 4: Examining Current Approaches to ‘Fake News’

In the morning session of the 2nd day the participants examined how various countries are involved in combatting fake news and steps to ensure the population is shielded from fake news.

Presentations were made by organizations like Facebook and Google to talk about their efforts at establishing a fake news center to combat and flag potentially malicious disinformation and fake news.

Civil society have also set up none profits to do fact checking not only on fake news story but mainstream media story. Initiatives like Snope have expanded to Asia but are met with limited success.
Public Forum: Maintaining Truth & Trust in Media in the Digital Age

The well attended public forum focused on how social media has disrupted the media industry and whether the media still serves as the role of being gatekeepers in society.

The four-person panel agreed that the media’s role of gatekeeper has completely diminished with the rise of social media. However, the notion that everyone can be a journalist is not necessarily for the benefit of society and could and has led to the rise of the age of misinformation.

There was also a lively debate over the merits of introducing laws that would restrict and block fake news – and whether to prosecute those that share hate speech or fake news.

The European members of the panels sided with the need for legislation and cited examples of laws being debated and pushed through by the EU to regulate social media and curb disinformation.

The Asian members of the panel countered that such sweeping laws set a bad precedent and in Asia, the historical implications were that laws that restricted freedom of expression were generally abused by power hungry despots eager to stamp out dissent and stamp on their authority.

No resolution was made.

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Report by Glenn CHONG
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