

WORLD NEWS DAY

ANN SPECIAL FEATURE : #JOURNALISM MATTERS

Hundreds of news organisations, media associations, and individuals are joining forces to highlight the importance of fact-based journalism on September 28, to mark World News Day. This global initiative draws public attention to journalists' role in providing trustworthy news and information that serves citizens and democracy.

The theme of this year's campaign is "Choose Truth". This emphasises the unwavering commitment of journalists to report the facts while acknowledging the public's challenge of navigating a toxic information environment flooded with misinformation and disinformation. The campaign is presented by the World Editors Forum, The Canadian Journalism Foundation (CJF), and Daily Maverick's Project Kontinuum.

To commemorate World News Day, Asia News Network republishes a few articles that draw attention to the importance of journalism in today's uncertainty-filled times.

#JournalismMatters

Joy of shared truth, sacred bond and democracies' self-evident values

By Branko Brkic and Maria Ressa

This is an open letter to readers amid unprecedented challenges from autocratic regimes, disinformation, and attacks on the very meaning of truth. The authors call on media to keep its commitment to news, facts, accountability, and public service.



In this maelstrom, it is journalism – fact-based, evidence-based credible news media – that has a lifelong duty to defend the self-evident values our civilisation was built on. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

Dear reader, citizen, fellow human,

LONDON - 2024 A.D. is testing our modern societies in ways we once hoped would never be repeated.

Autocratic regimes and aspiring dictators around the world have thrown a gauntlet to freedoms across borders, races and religions. Modern conflicts span the entire globe and are fought in an information expanse that is overwhelming in its reach and power.

New technologies, and the platforms they enable, are battlefields on which our future is being decided – often without our permission and against our will.

In this maelstrom, it is journalism – fact-based, evidence-based credible news media – that has a lifelong duty to defend the self-evident values our civilisation was built on. Worldwide, it is the journalists who live their responsibility to honour this sacred bond with our audiences and our communities.



In return, we feel the joy of shared truth – with You.

These special moments – when news stories save lives, improve understanding among people and guide us through rough times – are often lost in the avalanche of disinformation; destroying trust, the bedrock of our ability to live together.

Even the very meaning of Truth is under assault.

Journalism everywhere is struggling to maintain its standing and relevance to our own communities, and for an alarming number of our news organisations, daily existence equals a struggle for bare survival.

These are indeed extraordinary times – worrying to the core to every soul that cares about people, civilization and democracy that made it all possible.

And yet, these troubled days are also exciting and scintillating at the same time.

In moments when systems are crumbling and foundational truths are under pressure we, the news media of the world, must show that we're made of sterner stuff; the stuff that can withstand disinformation campaigns, sustained attacks, and a flood of falsehoods.

Our business models have crumbled under the pressure of Big Tech. Truth itself is being relativized daily; what once was a common understanding of material reality is today, often supplanted by fact-free interpretation.

In many instances, the very form of the word Truth carries the meaning of Lie.

These are not random, accidental attacks. These are all part of the crusade against our system of values, our basic understanding of what is good and bad. Without our system of values, if we can't distinguish right from wrong, we have no civilization either.

Come September 28 – every World News Day – we, news media organisations from around the world, join hands to reassure you of our undying commitment to News, Facts, Accountability, Public Service, Humanity, Scrutiny, Independence, Ethics & Community.

These words have deep meaning.

They matter to us. There's only one choice ahead of us: We, the news media, will continue to fulfil our sacred duty. The news we report will remain based in fact. We will defend Truth. And we want to further assure you, dear reader, that it is our every intention to keep it that way.

We will not tire, and we will not give up. The battle for Truth is the battle for our common future.



And to our colleagues everywhere in this troubled stretch of history: Do not despair. You are not alone. Our mission ties us all together.

The noise and violence will eventually subside, and the discourse based on truth and decency will return. It may not happen soon, but it will happen eventually.

For now, we fight. Every moment of every hour of every day.

This 2024 World News Day, let us ensure we never forget why we're here in the first place – and help to keep the joy of shared truth with our readers, our true North.

Branco Brkic is the Editor-in-Chief, Daily Maverick and the Creator of Choose Truth Campaign, South Africa and Maria Ressa is a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and CEO of Rappler.com, The Philippines

#JournalismMatters

Journalism is society's safety net

By David Walmsley, Editor in Chief: The Globe and Mail, Canada & Creator of World News Day

Amid increasing attacks on journalists and the rise of biased interest groups, World News Day 2024 serves as a reminder of the bravery and resilience of independent journalists who face personal risks to report the facts.



World News Day is a day to pause, and reflect on the importance of independent and often brave journalists who make a difference in their communities and countries, by providing the proof that leads to the truth. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

A record number of newsrooms have signed up for World News Day 2024, recognizing the positive influence of journalism the world over.

More than 600 newsrooms and media associations across all continents join to bring awareness to the purpose of journalism, a trade that is under constant attack.

It's a day to pause, and reflect on the importance of independent and often brave journalists who make a difference in their communities and countries, by providing the proof that leads to the truth.

Too often, he or she who shouts loudest on social media seems to be the newsmaker of the day, overshadowing the professional reporters and editors trained and determined to stand behind everything they publish.

Responsible journalism is a tough business when done properly. It necessarily confronts the easy, repetitive, and instant swirl of polemicists and propagandists determined to derail life to fit agendas that are often based on uncertainty and exclusion.

Photographing events that happen, reporting out the facts; beginning with incomplete information and building a more complete file over time and ultimately ensuring, in the final edit, that the facts are pried out and placed squarely into the public discourse, is the business of mainstream media. It is inefficient yet is a timeless tradition without parallel.

Professionals fight back against the hackneyed idea that belonging to the mainstream is somehow inferior to being extreme.

World News Day is a day of awareness, to better explain journalism to the public at large. It is also a moment to provide room for our audiences and highlight how their meeting a journalist improved their life. How, perhaps, finally, they were listened to.

Or to reflect on the contributions of a local newspaper to the body politic, or the cost of liberty for a reporter detained for no reason – other than that she could be – by those with armies at their disposal.

Amid the growing coarseness of public debate, the pride of independent journalism stands as a source of optimism and belief.

Often at significant personal cost, whistleblowers entrust journalists with secrets. Businesses, politicians and others in power increasingly refuse to meet reporters or explain themselves – but that doesn't mean they are unaccountable. The rot is still exposed by individuals.



This past year I met a source determined to get the truth out, but the conversations took place in a hot-tub to prove I was not wearing a listening wire, and, on another occasion, in my underwear for the final interview. The story was worth it all, but I couldn't have known it would be when I started out on the four-month odyssey.

That's the romance of the business that recruits and repays the indefatigable. Interest groups laden with bias threaten economic punishment: "I'll cancel my subscription" or "we'll pull our advertising." Perhaps next year we will list those people who act that way. So far, news organisations take the hit, and don't make it public. But it is all an attempt to interfere with editorial independence, and it is wrong.

Attacks on journalists – including murder – run at record highs. Journalism was not created for the messenger to be shot. But, while you can kill the journalist, you can't kill the story. Others will take it on. Look at journalists in Mexico or Iran if you haven't received your daily dose of inspiration. The rate of impunity, killing journalists and not being arrested, creeps toward 100% in some countries, but still the stories mount up.

A great miracle exists in the business of journalism: facts are not suppressible. Those in need understand it. And it is those least in need who fight us most: the powerful, terrified their world can't be entirely controlled.

That's the magic of World News Day.

As you talk to friends, and consider your community, village, town or the wider world, think about what you have learned today. There is a fair bet journalism was involved. The story tellers, who come from your community, tell the facts, no matter how uncomfortable that can be.

That is why, unarmed and living in your community, they are targeted, hassled, belittled, threatened. And it is why they respond with more facts, more answers, more independence of thought – and maintain the link between you and the wider world.

Journalists are a bridge as we build the future, supported by the capstone of our audience, who are as loyal and determined as the reporter and the editor.

Together, on World News Day, if it feels at times that the vestiges of hope are falling away, remember the safety net of journalism is there.

The writer is the Editor-in-Chief of The Globe and Mail, Canada and is creator of World News Day

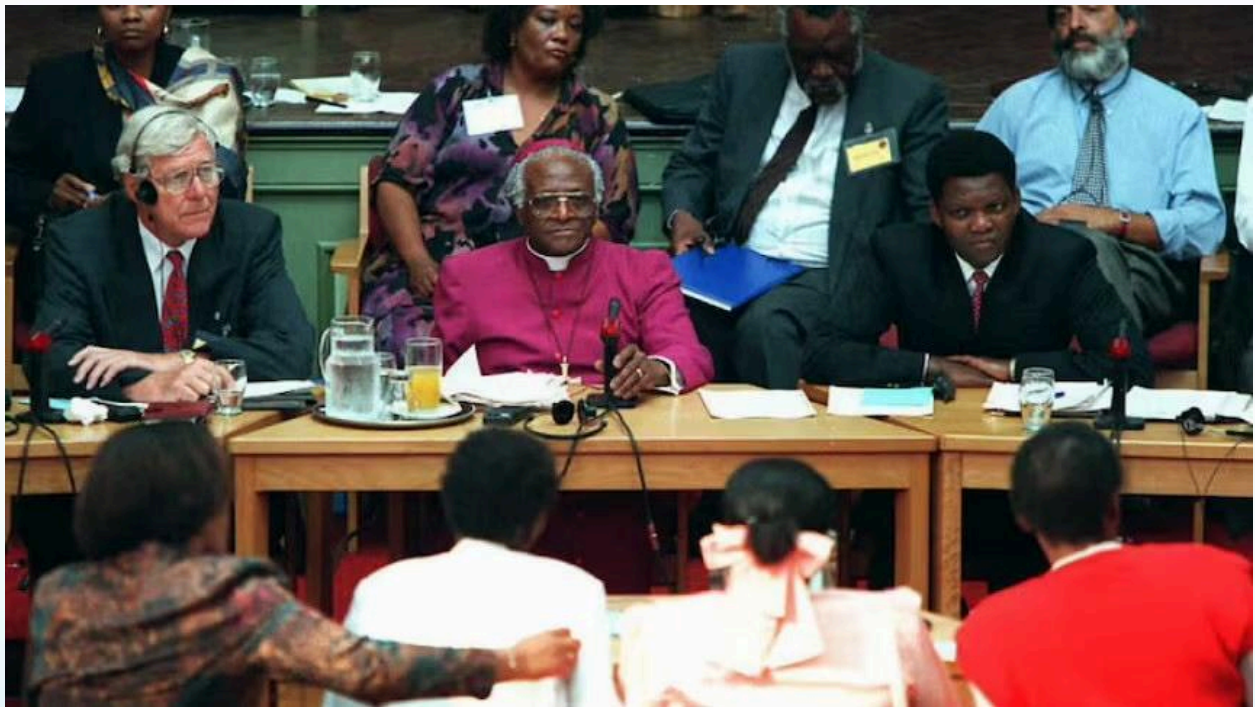


#JournalismMatters

The need for truth and reconciliation in Bangladesh

By Tamina Chowdhury
The Daily Star, Bangladesh

Despite these challenges, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or TRC remains a landmark effort to address a nation's violent past. By uncovering the truth and promoting reconciliation, it played a key role in South Africa's transition from a divided society to a democracy.



South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and fellow commissioners listen to testimony from witnesses during the start of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that opened in East London on April 15, 1996. PHOTO: AFP

For over 15 years, under Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime, the people of Bangladesh endured rampant oppression and untold cruelty.

The regime was characterised by state-sponsored torture, enforced disappearances, maiming, and pervasive human rights abuses. Cruelty was employed as a deliberate tactic to suppress dissent and erode people's democratic aspirations. The oppressive system was maintained with

impunity by the state machinery and bureaucracy. As a result, the state is widely mistrusted and seen by Bangladeshis as anti-people.

Given the scale of corruption and brutality orchestrated by the regime, the judicial system alone cannot swiftly or adequately deliver justice. The institutional nature of the crimes and urgent demand for accountability call for a truth and reconciliation process (TRP), similar to the one guided by South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

A TRP, led by a commission or council-type body, would expose the human rights violations without relying on retribution. It would provide a platform for victims and witnesses to share their stories and give perpetrators the chance to confess their crimes, bringing the atrocities to the fore. This process would help Bangladesh (re)build a just and accountable society, by creating a culture that listens to victims and addresses past atrocities transparently.

By focusing on restorative justice, the TRP could help break the cycle of vengeance and promote a peaceful transition to democracy. This approach is essential for rebuilding a society after prolonged injustice, as it establishes a foundation for accountability, reduces impunity, and restores public trust in institutions.

Additionally, by demonstrating that truth-telling and reconciliation can be powerful tools for healing divided societies, the TRP could help form a moral centre for the country, establishing new norms and institutional safeguards to prevent future abuses.

The TRP should be tailored to Bangladesh's unique situation with a focus on: i) investigating human rights violations like killings, torture, and abductions between 2009 and 2024. The TRP would present its findings on the extent of state-sponsored violence to the public; ii) offering victims a space to tell their stories and recommending reparations and rehabilitation to address national trauma and promote healing; and iii) considering amnesty for those who fully disclose their actions based on set criteria, which may be limited to lower-level perpetrators who followed orders or helped cover up abuses.

The concept of addressing state violence and delivering accountability through the process of victim testimony and perpetrator confessions emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. Following the end of apartheid, a brutal system of racial oppression that spanned from 1948 to 1994, the newly elected government of Nelson Mandela sought to confront past injustices without resorting to retribution or further violence.

The TRC was created in 1995 through the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, to uncover the truth about the atrocities committed during apartheid. The commission was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a respected anti-apartheid activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. His leadership was crucial in guiding the commission's work with a moral and ethical focus on reconciliation.

The TRC had three main committees: i) Human Rights Violations Committee: investigated human rights abuses like killings, torture, and abductions committed between 1960 and 1994; ii) Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee: focused on restoring the dignity of victims by recommending reparations and rehabilitation; and iii) Amnesty Committee: assessed and granted amnesty to perpetrators who came forward and fully disclosed their actions.

The TRC held public hearings across South Africa, where victims could tell their stories and perpetrators could confess their crimes. These hearings were often emotional and widely covered in the media, exposing apartheid's horrors to the nation.

The TRC successfully revealed the extent of apartheid-era human rights violations, with thousands of victims coming forward and many perpetrators confessing. By focusing on restorative justice, the TRC helped prevent a cycle of vengeance and facilitated South Africa's peaceful transition to democracy. Its public hearings encouraged national dialogue, essential for forging unity and healing.

However, it faced challenges and criticism. Some believed that amnesty allowed perpetrators to escape justice, and others argued that it did not address systemic injustices or offer sufficient reparations to victims. Moreover, the government did not fully implement the TRC's recommendations for reparations.

Despite these challenges, the TRC remains a landmark effort to address a nation's violent past. By uncovering the truth and promoting reconciliation, it played a key role in South Africa's transition from a divided society to a democracy.

As Bangladesh grapples with the aftermath of Sheikh Hasina's autocratic regime, it must ensure that justice is timely and effective. The nation needs closure and healing from the trauma inflicted by years of state-sponsored violence and oppression.

A well-designed TRP can offer a path to healing. By uncovering the truth, giving victims a voice, and fostering reconciliation, it can help break the cycle of violence and write a new chapter in Bangladesh's story—one that must be different from its past.

We are at an inflection point in shaping the country's future. How we address its dark past will define its social fabric, establish norms, and set the tone for the future. It is crucial that we get this process right.

Tamina Chowdhury is a policy, legislation and advocacy specialist based in the US. This article was published on September 24, [this year](#).

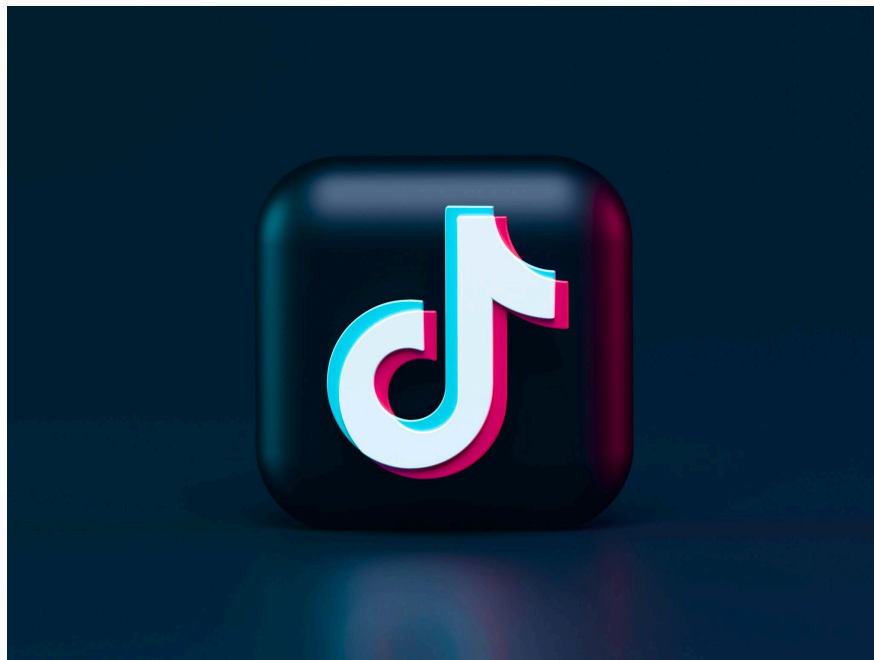
#JournalismMatters

How TikTok is shaping politics

By Randy David

Philippine Daily Inquirer

Information and images posted on today's social media platforms thrive on sheer virality.



From mere passive consumers, today's audiences have become active producers of mass communications—a dramatic role transformation that is not adequately captured by the term “user”—as in TikTok or Facebook user. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

Like many who believe that what happens in American politics today is bound to have a great impact not just on America but on the rest of the world, I listened intently to the presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump last Sept. 10.

What I found remarkable was not the debate itself but the wide variance between the commentaries on mainstream media that followed and the political memes that flooded social media platforms like TikTok soon after the debate. To me, it is the most graphic indication of how social media is shaping political culture in ways we have not known before.

As expected, mainstream media's analysts sought to parse the entire event by focusing on the substance of the statements made by the two candidates and the demeanor they projected on the stage.

They pointed out the instances where Harris and Trump faltered and where they scored points. They compared their debating styles and strategies and decided who was the clear winner. Between the two, it was Harris, in their view, who was able to project self-confidence, equanimity, and mastery of the issues. But, best of all, mainstream media's talking heads fact-checked and weighed the validity of the assertions the candidates made.

In general, I believe that is how a reasonably well-informed political observer might approach an event like this. The interest would be on the substantive answers, rather than on the demeanor; more on the utterances made than on the stage performance.

I now think that this way of experiencing a debate has changed tremendously. Audiences have become less cerebral and more visual; more responsive to the debaters' deportment or bearing than to the intellectual adequacy of their arguments. The new media lend themselves more easily to sarcasm and ridicule than to deconstructive analysis, to wordless depictions of the absurd than to fact-checking and logical argumentation.

I thought that the hilarious memes of pet dogs and cats scampering away after hearing Trump's racist rant about migrants eating their neighbors' pets in Springfield, Ohio, conveyed the absurdity of his anti-immigrant paranoia far more sharply than any commentary I have heard or read.

To begin to understand the implications and consequences of this mind-boggling change, we need to go back to Niklas Luhmann's discussion of the societal function of the mass media.

"Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media," wrote Luhmann in his pathbreaking book "The Reality of the Mass Media".

Written in 1994, this slim volume, however, did not anticipate the rise of the new social media—the interactive digital platforms that allow mass media audiences to use the same tools of mass copying and dissemination that, for a long time, have been the monopoly of mainstream media and the source of their outsize power in modern society.

From mere passive consumers, today's audiences have become active producers of mass communications—a dramatic role transformation that is not adequately captured by the term "user"—as in TikTok or Facebook user.

This development has been described as a form of democratization that can potentially unleash human creativity and offer fresh ways of seeing the world. In many ways, however, it is also akin to giving a powerful weapon to people without holding them accountable for its misuse.

The mass media construct reality. That is their function. The authoritative depictions of reality they provide become the foundation or starting point of much of what we do in our everyday lives. Since none of us ever directly experiences the world of everyday life in its entirety, we are left to rely on the mass media for knowledge of what is happening beyond the sphere of our direct personal experience.

The funny thing is that sometimes we may even find ourselves disbelieving what we have actually seen or heard until it is confirmed by the news. This trust remains even when we suspect the media of being selective in what they report or unduly protective of certain “sacred cows.” Such reservations seldom ripen into a full-blown skepticism because, as Luhmann puts it, “knowledge acquired from the mass media merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing structure.”

Behind this standardization of the news is the fact that traditional mass media organizations “are dependent upon assumptions concerning acceptability.” To ensure the continuous patronage and interest of their readers and viewers, they adhere to common standards of what is appropriate or expected.

It is a system that has worked without central coordination. In addition to this systemic guardrail, news organizations that jealously guard their credibility adopt internal procedures for fact-checking and repeated verification.

In contrast, information and images posted on today’s social media platforms thrive on sheer virality. Their mere proliferation confirms their value, often reinforcing unexamined beliefs and latent emotional dispositions, regardless of their truth or falsity.

*The article was published in the **Philippine Daily Inquirer** on September 15, 2024*

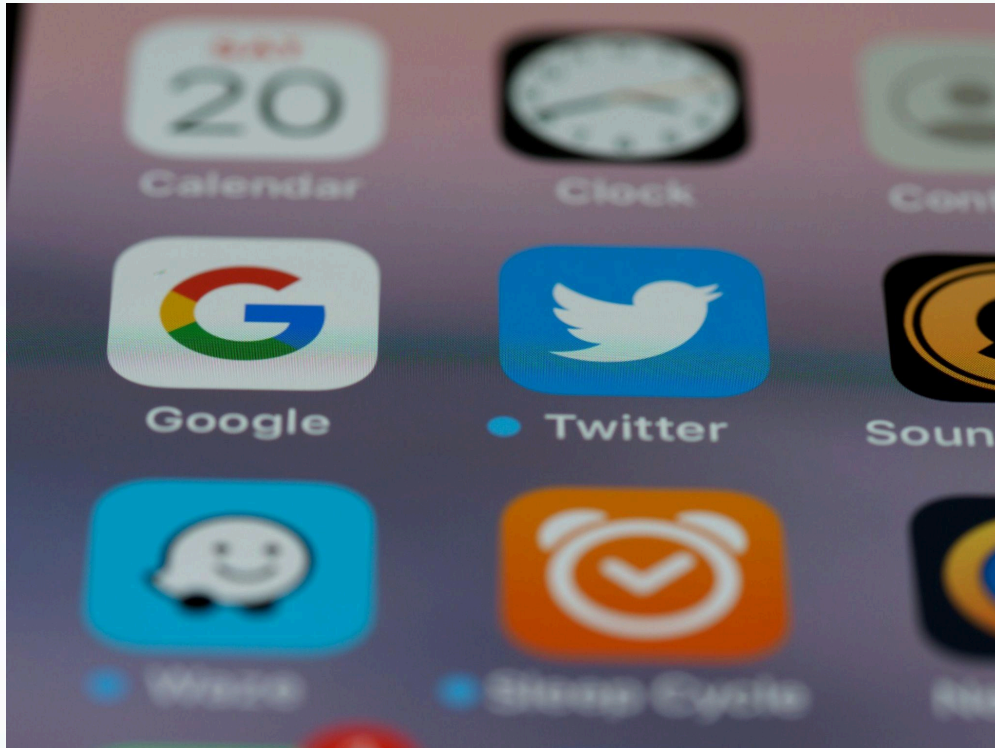
#JournalismMatters
Fighting fake news in the media

Editorial
Philippine Daily Inquirer



The proliferation of fake news and disinformation in a social media-crazy country like the Philippines has been an ongoing concern, but more so as we brace for the midterm elections next year.

“Truth is not always the most viral, but it remains to be the best story to tell.”



A Pulse Asia survey in September 2022 found that nine out of 10 Filipino adults believe that the proliferation of fake news is a problem. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

This statement, by GMA Network chair Felipe Gozon, sums up the vision of a landmark coalition of major media organizations and academic institutions launched last week, to combat fake news and disinformation as the 2025 midterm elections draw closer.

Around 60 partners signed up for the GMA Network-led “Panata Kontra Fake News” (Pledge Against Fake News), including the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) and several print, broadcast, and online news organizations. GMA Network and PDI are the most trusted media brands in the country, according to the 2024 Reuters Digital News Report which tracks the media landscape and the latest trends in media consumption across the world.

Among the other signatories are the Commission on Elections (Comelec) led by its chair George Garcia, and the tech giant Google.

The proliferation of fake news and disinformation in a social media-crazy country like the Philippines has been an ongoing concern, but more so as we brace for the midterm elections next year which are expected to heighten partisan tensions among allies of the country's warring powerful leaders.

As succinctly pointed out by Gozon, the problem of disinformation has become "so wide and deep" that it needs a "massive undertaking to fight it."

Serious concern

Statistics bear out this observation. A Pulse Asia survey in September 2022 found that nine out of 10 Filipino adults believe that the proliferation of fake news is a problem. This was validated by another survey by the Social Weather Stations in 2021, which showed that 67 percent of respondents believe that fake news on the internet is a serious concern.

Moreover, more than half of the respondents said it was difficult for them to spot fake news.

This difficulty becomes even harder as most Filipinos access their news from online and social media platforms, not all of which are necessarily produced by professional media organizations trained and skilled in verifying, analyzing, and contextualizing information and critical issues affecting public interest.

According to the latest edition of the Reuters Digital News Report, online news, including social media, was the top source of news for 82 percent of Filipinos, followed by social media at 63 percent, television at 46 percent, and print at 13 percent. The study also said that Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) remain the top sources of news in the Philippines.

Lonely voice

Yet these top tech companies have been criticized for failing to regulate harmful content on their platforms, including fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda, and constantly bombarding users with content based on algorithms that track their preferences and biases.

Against such a backdrop, fighting disinformation is truly a formidable endeavor.

Without a shift in people's discernment and behavior, such campaign against fake news will remain a lonely voice in the (social media) wilderness. It is thus noteworthy that GMA Network vowed to offer content that will educate the public about fake news and how to fight it. The rallying cry "Magkaisa tayong labanan ang fake (Let us be united in fighting fake news)" comes as a timely call for collective action.

On top of indifferent social media platforms comes now the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled disinformation, such as deepfake or manipulated videos, a bigger concern among netizens who may not be tech-savvy enough to discern such sophistry.

In the United States, for instance, researchers have raised concerns that tech-fueled political disinformation could be used to manipulate voters, and stoke tensions as the country heads to a showdown between Democratic presidential candidate Vice President Kamala Harris and Republican bet Donald Trump in November.

Ambitious proposal

On Wednesday, President Marcos described as fake news rumors that he had a medical emergency while a manipulated photo earlier showed him supposedly doing drugs.

Aware of the possible use of deepfakes in the coming 2025 polls, Comelec's Garcia has proposed a ban on the use of AI technology by candidates in their election campaign.

While some sectors have warned that the Comelec proposal could infringe on freedom of expression, others have wondered how the election body could prohibit the use of such tech-driven content. Garcia remains unfazed, with the Comelec expected to release guidelines on this ambitious proposal soon, including the penalty of disqualification for candidates violating the ban.

But no matter how difficult and challenging, these efforts by the Comelec and members of the Panata Laban sa Fake News alliance must be pursued vigorously to protect the integrity and necessity of truthful discourse in these polarized times.

Ultimately, the success of this fight lies in the hands of the public who choose what information they want, and where to get them. Advocates of truth can only hope that they would choose to be enlightened.

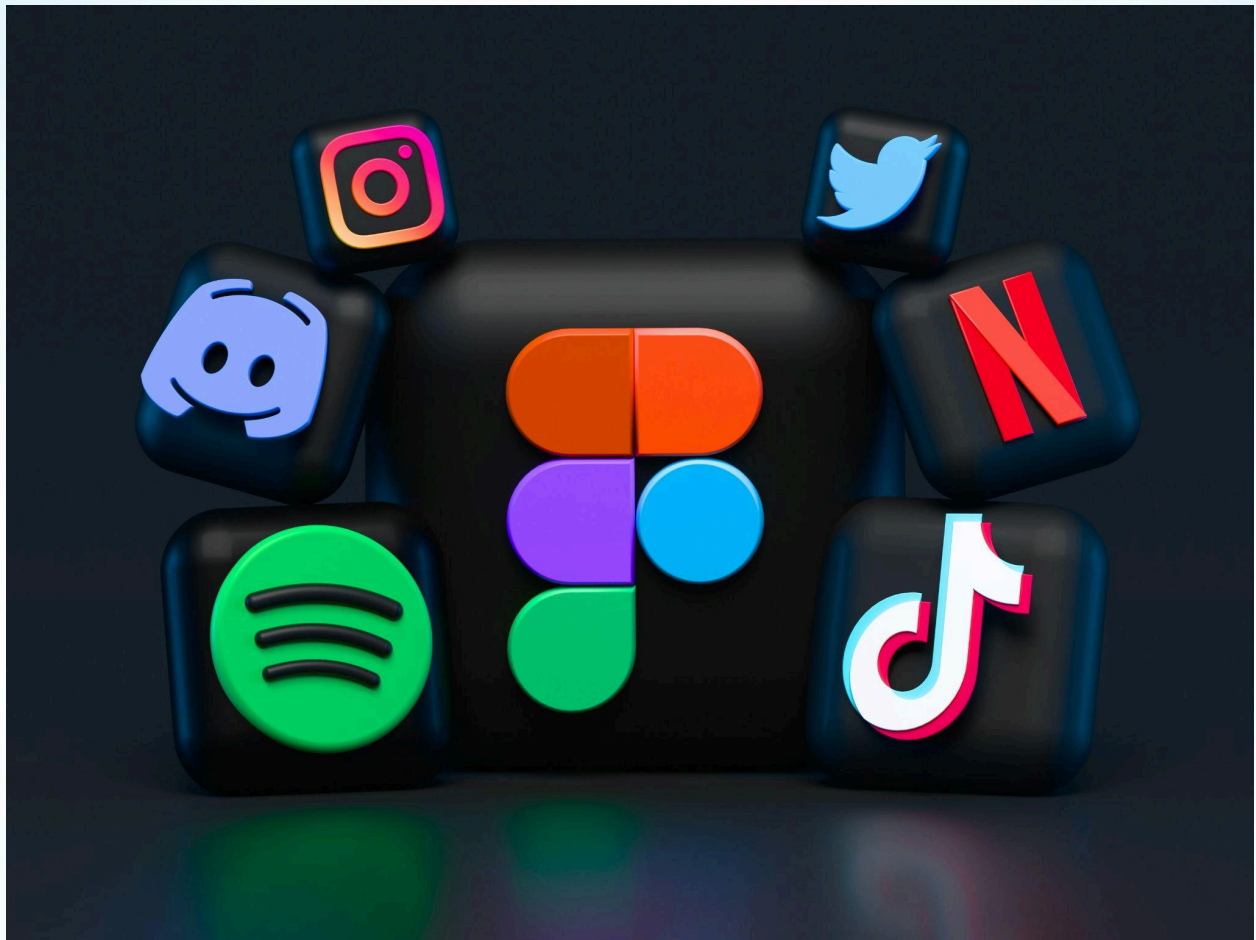
*This article was published in the **Philippine Daily Inquirer** on September 5, 2024*

#JournalismMatters Under the influence

By Muna Khan
Dawn



While there are a lot of problems with traditional media, there are no safety rails in place when it comes to influencers.



While there's never been any consensus anywhere on who gets to call themselves a journalist, the way of reporting or covering events hasn't changed. Journalists work from a place of balance, whereas influencers are partisan from the get-go. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

I am currently struggling to embrace the era of the influencer, especially as it enters the newsroom. This is despite me attempting to convince my previous employer to let us — a legacy media outlet — join TikTok in 2022.

I knew our younger audiences were on TikTok, so I wanted to train a young journalist, armed with all the principles of journalism, to engage with new audiences there. The channel was apprehensive, I guess, because change is daunting — so we didn't move forward with it.

The next year, I returned to the classroom to find students were getting their news (read views) from influencers; many even aspired to become one themselves. I felt sort of validated, save the part where students weren't really getting balanced, even well-informed information.

The news media, they told me, was lying to them. And they weren't wrong, especially on the Gaza issue, which we watched unfold in class following the Oct 7 attack. In Pakistan, however, I take exception to the term lying media, which is better suited to describe the men in charge. Journalists can't say it how it is because of censorship and boss' interests, but that doesn't make us liars.

I digress. I was talking about influencers, whose global industry was worth around \$21bn in 2023, according to Harvard Business Review. Around 300m people globally consider themselves content creators. "It is difficult to imagine an organisation or a consumer today who is exempt from contending with the realities of a world shaped by influencers," they write.

While there are a lot of problems with traditional media, there are no safety rails in place when it comes to influencers. You name a product, and, arguably, the Kardashians and their minions are selling it. This industry is, as the report says, a place for entrepreneurship but also exploitation. The influencer industry has grown from beauty, fashion, hospitality and travel to non-profits, news and politics.

Nowhere was this more visible than the Democratic National Convention last week, where content creators jostled for space with journalists and were getting access to top Democrats, like journalists would.

The party gave these influencers press-like credentials and a "front row seat to history", DNC's communication director told Reuters. Democrats understood they needed to tap into a younger audience which consumes information on social media. According to the latest figures from Pew Research, 83 per cent of adults use YouTube, 68pc use Facebook, 47pc use Instagram, and 33pc use TikTok. The mainstream media is no longer the gatekeeper of political news.

Of course, it rankled a lot of journalists who feel the press box is, well, for the press. The number of journalists at the convention was slashed and reporters say they faced restrictions in access as well. Meanwhile, content creators got a (real) platform from where they could record their videos.

While there's never been any consensus anywhere on who gets to call themselves a journalist, the way of reporting or covering events hasn't changed. Journalists work from a place of balance, whereas influencers are partisan from the get-go. They are not accountable to anyone. That is the fundamental difference, and if the DNC is roping in influencers to spread their message, is it because they have lost confidence in journalism or in its product; ie, their candidate?

At the time of my writing, Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were giving their first joint interview, an anomaly in itself. Harris has come under criticism for not giving an interview since becoming the presumptive candidate.

There is a lot of speculation as to why: from she's avoiding scrutiny, to she doesn't think the media industry plays fair. My guess is that she wants to win (duh) and doesn't think she needs air time to get there. Maybe she's taking her cue from Joe Biden, who gave the least amount of interviews and press conferences as president since Ronald Reagan. Or she is confident her polling figures are strong enough. Whatever the reason, it hurts the media and the electorate it reports for.

To reiterate, I have no skin in this — or any country's — electoral game. What does it matter if we are bombed or sanctioned by the first Black and Indian female president? But it matters if countries take their cues from a superpower like the US and dismiss the press as an increasingly irrelevant institution that will be replaced by TikTokers. This is worrying and requires a serious rethink by media managers.

They must embrace change, whether it is learning technological innovations, research from audience insight, or exploring new business models. I don't want officials to be answerable to influencers. I want to keep asking tough questions and ensure elected officials are held to account. That is my job.

*The writer is an instructor in journalism. This article was published in the **Dawn** September 1, 2024*

#JournalismMatters

Digital literacy, not censorship, is key to mitigating social media harm

By Hestutomo Restu Kuncoro
The Jakarta Post

We know social media platforms do have harmful effects on democracy, especially a budding one like Indonesia, as evident in the spread of misinformation that significantly undermines public trust in democratic institutions.



Don't be fooled: A vendor walks past a mural encouraging vigilance against the spread of fake news on Feb. 22, 2021, on Jl. KH Hasyim Ashari in Tangerang, Banten. PHOTO: KOMPAS/WAWAN H. PRABOWO

In today's digital age, social media wields unprecedented influence over democratic processes, a double-edged sword that can act as a powerful tool for communication or misinformation. While some advocate for the blunt instrument of censorship to combat the negative effects of social media, a more effective and ethical solution lies in promoting digital literacy.

We know social media platforms do have harmful effects on democracy, especially a budding one like Indonesia, as evident in the spread of misinformation that significantly undermines public trust in democratic institutions.

Studies have shown that the dissemination of false information, particularly during elections, erodes public confidence in the electoral process and democratic governance. For instance, misinformation can distort voter perceptions and lead to misguided political decisions.

Furthermore, the spread of fake news disrupts public opinion and influences electoral outcomes, contributing to political instability and a lack of trust in the political system. In addition to distorting perspectives, social media can also reinforce polarization of perspectives.

Social media algorithms often create echo chambers by promoting content that aligns with users' existing beliefs while filtering out content that provides opposing viewpoints, constructing bubbles that reduce the possibility for cross-cutting political dialogue. This selective exposure entrenches partisan divisions.

Another manner in which social media can be damaging to democracy is less like a natural occurrence and more like a calculated strike. State-sponsored propaganda and coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media have been widely documented as tools for manipulating public opinion, sowing distrust in democratic institutions and dividing societies.

Reports from the Oxford Internet Institute reveal that organized social media manipulation campaigns are prevalent in numerous countries, with governments and political parties spending significant resources on these efforts. These campaigns involve spreading disinformation, employing bots and using fake accounts to amplify misleading messages and suppress dissenting voices.

The manipulation of public opinion through social media is particularly concerning in contexts where internet freedom is limited, as this reduces the availability of diverse information and increases the impact of propaganda.

However, when it comes to combating these issues, censorship is not the answer. The concept of the "Streisand Effect" illustrates how attempts to suppress information can backfire and amplify the very content they aim to censor. This phenomenon is well-documented in multiple cases where censorship attempts led to increased public attention to the censored content.

Even in instances where censorship does work, harmful content can adapt and resurface through other means. For instance, Facebook's moderation of content related to the Myanmar crisis showed that such efforts can lead to the spread of misinformation through alternate channels.

A report by the United Nations Human Rights Office highlighted that censorship measures often push harmful content to more obscure parts of the internet. This displacement makes it more challenging to monitor and control, leading to a less transparent and more difficult-to-regulate information environment.

Furthermore, censorship does not address the underlying issues that lead to the spread of misinformation, such as a lack of critical thinking skills and media literacy among the public. Censorship as a standalone solution fails to tackle the root causes of misinformation.

Censorship also poses significant ethical and legal concerns, as it can threaten freedom of speech and expression. Legal frameworks for censorship vary widely across different countries, often leading to inconsistent and arbitrary enforcement.

For instance, the Council on Foreign Relations highlights that many governments rush to implement simplistic solutions to complex problems, jeopardizing human rights and leading to inconsistent censorship practices. This often results in protected speech being inadvertently or intentionally suppressed, affecting public debate and participation negatively.

To make matters worse, the potential for abuse of censorship powers by governments to suppress dissent and control public discourse is a major concern. The UN Human Rights Office has warned that such laws are frequently used by governments to limit speech they dislike, silencing civil society and critics.

This trend toward authoritarian practices undermines democratic principles and threatens the integrity of free expression.

Digital literacy is the compass guiding us through the vast, often tumultuous sea of online information. This critical skill set includes the ability to sift through the digital chaff to find credible sources by evaluating author credentials, cross-referencing with reputable sources and recognizing inherent biases.

Understanding digital privacy is equally paramount, involving practices such as crafting robust passwords, safeguarding personal data and frequently updating privacy settings to ward off cyber threats. Moreover, recognizing misinformation is akin to wielding a shield against the barrage of falsehoods online; it involves honing critical thinking and media literacy to detect and resist deceitful content.

Educational programs are the lighthouses in this digital storm, illuminating the path for individuals to analyze media messages astutely and engage responsibly in the digital arena, thereby fostering a well-informed and resilient society.

In regions where digital literacy blooms, there are fewer weeds of misinformation and greater public trust in democratic institutions. The Stanford Impact Labs' Empowering Diverse Digital Citizens Lab is a testament to this, highlighting how targeted digital media literacy programs can arm communities—including older adults and adolescents—with the tools to navigate the tangled web of misinformation and foster trust in credible news.

Research from the Stanford Social Innovation Review underscores that media and information literacy programs significantly enhance critical thinking, awareness of media bias and the desire to consume high-quality news—all of which are essential for weeding out misinformation and fortifying democratic engagement.

An evidently effective way to provide adequate digital literacy training is to embed it into educational curricula. Strategies for integrating digital literacy into educational curricula involve creating comprehensive programs that cover critical thinking, media literacy and digital ethics.

Further collaboration must also be made with tech companies who have a significant role to play in fostering digital literacy through various initiatives, such as developing tools for fact-checking, promoting digital literacy through online courses and creating safer online environments.

For instance, Google has been proactive in this area by launching the Google Safety Engineering Center for Content Responsibility and contributing 25 million euros (US\$26.76 million) to the European Media and Information Fund to support media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives. Similarly, Microsoft offers comprehensive digital literacy courses that cover essential skills like accessing information online, creating digital content and participating safely online.

While these initiatives are commendable, there is a growing sentiment that tech companies could do more. Critics argue that despite these efforts, misinformation continues to spread rapidly, indicating that current measures might not be sufficient.

The adjustment of algorithms and introduction of content labeling by platforms like Facebook and Twitter are steps in the right direction, but they often face criticism for inconsistent enforcement and limited impact.

Furthermore, these companies profit from engagement-driven algorithms that can amplify harmful content, creating a conflict of interest that undermines their efforts to curb misinformation. This duality suggests that more robust and consistent approaches are necessary to truly address the spread of misinformation and enhance digital literacy.

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