**GP Notes 2018 – Fake News**

**Introduction**

Fake news occurs with the primary objective to sway public opinion and reshape thinking with the usage of misleading and even falsified information.

Used with political ill-intents, fake news deceives the wider audience regarding political opponents and attempts to influence their voting decisions with biased political information. (US 2016 Presidential Election, Malaysia Election)

On the social aspect, fake news incites hate and contempt among the public on issues such as racism, sexism and even class divide. As a result, the thin social fabric tears while the society drifts apart, given the increase in biased voices aided by the misinformation of fake news. (a disenfranchised society as stated - PM Lee Hsien Leong) – misinform – biased views – deepened prejudice – fragmented society – discriminative

1. **Why fake news occurs**

**1.1 A Source of Political Influence**

Fake news has had an extensive effect as a source of political influence. With fake news providing a wide spectrum of information (or misinformation in this case), politicians cherry-pick news that is favourable to their political campaign and use it to their advantage to gain voter influence.  Consequently, voters believe in the political misinformation and acquire bias in their decision-making. Conservative and right-wing parties have been known to borrow such misinformation to campaign for presidency or premiership as well as extending leadership position.

For example, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) have used fake news to generate wrongful awareness of incoming refugees and convinced its voters that the current party is not managing the problem. In the US, during the 2016 election, presidential candidate Donald Trump validated certain false news to his voters and tarnished his opponents’ image. He pervaded the seriousness of Hillary Clinton’s health and called for voters to avoid a sickly candidate.

Why politicians can use fake news to evoke biasness?

Mislead their perception – individuals have more biased views about the issue – fake news will ascertain the views of the individuals – news provide information to shape thinking and decision

Depending factor – how fake news is construed? – fake data, related issues

**1.2 Economic and Commercial Interests**

With increasing competitiveness and economic interest in the corporate markets, news has been misconstrued to generate investors fear which affects confidence in the market. This leads to investors and shareholders pulling out of their financial investments as they are led to believe that the company is facing serious problems. Such a move helps the interest of corporate rivals and allow them to capture more market share in the process of fake news.

In the mainstream media, a reporter was arrested for allegedly accepting bribes from a competitor to construction giant Zoomlion, hurting its stock price. According to an Oct. 27, 2013 report by the Associated Press, the CCTV network said its reporter Chen Yongzhou supposedly wrote more than 10 news stories between September 2012 and August 2013 with fabricated facts saying there had been losses of state assets, abnormal sales practices and false financial reporting by Zoomlion. They resulted in widespread criticism of the company and its stock price fell 26.9% on the Hong Kong stock exchange in that same Sept. - Aug. period. The Hang Seng Index rose 9.9% by comparison.

Pharmaceutical products’ benefits – aggravated the extent of benefits through social media

Beneficial effects of coffee -

**1.3 Social Interests**

Certain segments of the society have exploited the issue on fake news and used it to advance their malign social interests of dividing the society. These people generate fake news targeted at certain minority groups to incite hostility and resentment. With certain groups of publics convinced of these stories, the society divides further due to their bias reaffirmed.

Incite racial sentiments to undermine other racial groups - Malaysia racial divide among the Chinese and Malays – undermining Democratic Action Party’s role in Malaysia Politics

LBGT issue, feminism, racial issue.

**1.4 Psychological Factors**

Psychological factors have also played a part in the uptrend of fake news. This stems from the natural cognitive bias of man which is directed to accepting what one seeks to believe in. In turn, the public chooses to believe the fake news they see online hence, becoming manipulated.

* Natural biasness towards certain issues – personal opinions and preference formed by their environment

Based on Kellogg insight by Adam Waytz, the first is “motivated reasoning,” the idea that we are motivated to believe whatever confirms our opinions. “If you’re motivated to believe negative things about Hillary Clinton, you’re more likely to trust outrageous stories about her that might not be true,” says Waytz. “Over time, motivated reasoning can lead to a false social consensus.” The second concept is “naïve realism,” our tendency to believe that our perception of reality is the only accurate view, and that people who disagree with us are necessarily uninformed, irrational, or biased.

Inborn perception is reinforced by fake news – we accept fake news to support our opinions

**1.5 Degradation of Morality**

Fake News rises with the degradation of morality as it represents the changing habits of the society. With fake news implemented by Man himself, it is evident that much has changed in the ways of Man, such that people actually perverse the nature of information in order to mislead fellow peers. With social media a mere tool, it is the perverted user that seeks the cause of spreading misinformation. Such a degraded morality leads to harmful intentions which in turn channel into fake news to influence the innocent perception of others.

Loss of civic consciousness – disregards the harmful impact of the society – denial of responsibility

**1.6 Individualism**

One reason for the rise of fake news is the idea of individualism prevalent in the current modern society. As individualism calls for individual ideologies and individual fame, many people have pursued these through the creation of fake news. Such an attempt to generate readership due to its typical sensationalist stories to attract reader attention. An unsuspecting reader would view the news and regards it as actual news, thereby believing in the fake news.

Andrew Anglin - founder of the Daily Stormer, attempted to pursue individual ideologies such as neo-nazism and white supremacy through fake news websites which publishes often biased news to manipulate public opinion.

Why people shared fake news – use it as a way to their cleverness – stisfy the ego that they are better and in the trend

**1.7 Proliferation of Social Media and Communication Technology**

The proliferation of social media and communication technology has brought about the use of fake news through the medium of social media. With the ease of use and convenience provided by social media platforms, users can publish and share news articles whenever and wherever. As a result, individuals and groups with ill-intents have perpetrated fake news to the public and sought to promote their hate messages.

After the 2016 US Election, a tally by the Daily Beast showed that the 3,000 Russian-bought Facebook ads "were likely seen by a minimum of 23 million people and might have reached as many as 70 million”. These ads strived on the Facebook platform and had such a wide outreach with help from the convenience of social media.

**2. Negative Impact of Fake News**

**2.1 Create political division that undermines the unity of the country**

* Fake news is further driven in the political scene of the US due to their partisan divide
* People want to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true
* Encourage certain groups to hate the opposing group → Tool for political propaganda and hate crime
  + Eg: During the Malaysian General Election in 2013, when the opposition was seen being likely to win a majority of seats, the ruling party was accused of hiring 40,000 foreign workers from Bangladesh to vote. Many people took the rumour as genuine and even wanted to heed the call of non-governmental organisations on social media to arrest the purported phantom voters at polling stations.

**2.2 Social Impacts**

* Fake news is a source of social divide → fake news incites hatred towards certain groups → may be used to distort the truth of an incident - creates a disenfranchised society - leading to social conflicts and unrests - very dangerous for multicultural society
  + In Malaysia, a story of a phone theft incident at Low Yat Plaza shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur that circulated on social media stated that the suspect had been sold a counterfeit mobile phone by the dealer, who refused to replace the phone, and a clash took place. The incident almost turned into a racial conflict as the suspect and dealer were of different races.,
  + In Singapore- income inequality, political issues

**2.3 Economic Impacts**

* False news in the market is used to skew asset prices → so prevalent that Indexer is launching an app called Vector next month designed to give news readers a credibility score on content
  + According to an Oct. 27, 2013 report by the Associated Press, the CCTV network said its reporter Chen Yongzhou, who was arrested for allegedly accepting bribes from a competitor to construction giant Zoomlion, supposedly wrote more than 10 news stories between September 2012 and August 2013 with fabricated facts saying there had been losses of state assets, abnormal sales practices and false financial reporting by Zoomlion. This resulted in widespread criticism of the company, causing its stock prices to fall 26.9% while the competitor to rise 9.9%
* Fake news distorts information → create asymmetric information → as individuals conceive wrong information → make bad decisions → incur external cost → government need to spend resources correcting this form of distortion
  + Nov 11, 2016: All Singapore Stuff published a hoax with the headline: “This just happened. The top floors of Punggol Waterway Terraces collapsed!”. Scores of police and civil defence officers were activated because of the hoax.
  + This example reflects economical cost to the society because of the false information

**2.4 Individual Level**

* **Psychological Impacts**
  + Mistrust of the society and develop cynical mindset towards the society - feel insecure of the social environment - the lack of trust will undermine individuals to support social development
  + Eg: In Feb 2017, an anonymous post was widely circulated on social media and messaging platforms in Singapore claiming that a childcare centre at River Valley Road made their enrolled children sleep on the floor and eat rotten fruits. The Early Childhood Development Agency’s investigations showed the childcare centre complied with regulatory requirements for safety, health and hygiene, and said that the photographs appeared to have been taken out of context.
* **May be negatively affected in terms of health and social instability**
  + Gleneagles Hospital in Kuala Lumpur fell victim to a fake news story that alleged that staff members had been releasing a "toxic fragrance" over a period of 16 years. Despite the hospital's repeated denials, the story is still being spread today.

**2.5 Other Impacts**

* **Degradation of standard of journalism**
  + Fake news is a euphemism for lying. However, it has become so prevalent that newspapers, once known to be the only few sources of real news, is also reporting lies
  + Eg: The Real Singapore (TRS) website was shut down by the authorities, and its owners were jailed for sedition last year. The website owners made more than S$500,000 in advertising revenues, by publishing these “completely false articles”, Mr Shanmugam noted. Yang Kaiheng, one of the owners who went to jail, boasted about earning S$4,000 to S$5,000 a month, he added. An example was an article falsely claimed that a Filipino family caused a dispute between the police and participants of a Thaipusam procession in 2015. There was no such complaint.

**3. Solutions to the Issue on Fake News**

**3.1 Self-Censorship**

At the very end, the effect of fake news only becomes apparent when readers of such media react to it. These reactions could include ignorance or acceptance. Thus, a direct solution to the effect of fake news is primarily the ability to ascertain the credibility of whatever source of information readers come across by checking on the source of information.

* Reporting suspicious news to authorities
  + Facebook users in the US and Germany can now flag articles they think are deliberately false, these will then go to third-party fact checkers signed up with the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN).
  + Le Monde, one of the biggest French newspapers, set up a fact-checking unit called Les Decodeurs in 2009 that  gives pop-ups to reader’s screens that warns the low credibility of news sites they access.
* Hypodermic Needle Theory
  + This theory is a model of communications suggesting that an intended message is directly received and wholly accepted by the receiver. It states the media injects its messages straight into the passive audience, and the audience is immediately affected by these messages. Definitely, this theory is flawed as the audience has a mind of their own.

**3.2 State Censorship**

* Ownership of networks
  + In Taiwan, there are a total of 7 nationwide free-to-air television networks that are owned by a number of different owners such as Taiwan Television (TTV) and Taiwan Broadcasting System (TBS). This makes the control over television programmes difficult, and the credibility of news reported lies in the integrity of television channels themselves. There have been cases where, to gain competitive viewership, news are exaggerated to catch attention.
  + In Singapore, there are also primarily 7 television channels accessible by all analog televisions, but they are all owned by MediaCorp. Abiding by guidelines set by the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA), news reports are vetted before being aired on television.
* Limitations
  + The Singapore IMDA has its limitations in censoring all types of new media. Since the Internet is a boundless media, it is difficult to track all possible new sites.

**3.3 Legislation**

* Draws fine lines and punishes those who violate the law deliberately. This creates a deterrence for potential evil-doers, and eliminates fake news to an extent.
  + In 2017, new laws to regulate the online space in Singapore have been introduced to reduce the spread of fake news. The legislation will work with technological platforms to spot fake news sites
  + On January 5, the Ministry of Communication and Ministry of Law introduced the Green Paper targeted at taking down fake news online.
  + In Singapore, a 10-member committee of MPs that will recommend how Singapore should tackle the problem of fake news has been formed. The committee's mandate is to examine and report on causes and consequences of online falsehoods, and to propose countermeasures, including legislation that may be needed.

**3.4 Upholding of Standard Journalism**

* In the competitive, breakneck pace of the modern newsroom, journalists and reporters are pressured to deliver their stories in ways that capture attention. This does not come without less time for editing, additional research, or fact-checking and verification.
  + Standard journalism includes ethical journalism which, in other words, refer to ground rules that a journalist ought to follow.
  + The core principles of ethical journalism include pointers like “Truth and Accuracy” and “Fairness and Impartiality” which provides an excellent guideline for people who contribute to the public information sphere to show responsibility in how they use information.

**3.5 Public Education**

* Curriculum specifics
  + In 2015, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced their 21st Century Competencies, of which one of its targeted student outcomes includes cultivating critical thinkers and improving media literacy. This aims to expose students to the subject of reliability and credibility of news sources, and requires them to learn to be discerning citizens of the Internet.

Is social media to be blamed for the ignorance of the society?