

Role of Journalists in Fighting against Fake News on Social Networks in Vietnam

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Abstract: *Press is a channel that plays a key role in orienting public opinion, refuting and preventing the flows of false information, particularly fake news on social networks. Every journalist is a soldier who has the task of transmitting, leading the flow of right, accurate and healthy news to the public, at the same time fighting against negative impacts of fake news, improving the healthy information environment.*

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1. The complexity and sophistication of fake news and its negative impacts

Fake news is understood as fabricated, distorting, deceitful information that mess up the right and wrong, true and false, or uses a part of the truth with malicious intent to analyze and orient public opinion with false and hostile views.

For example, on July 19, 2021, the news spread on social networks: “*Feeling too frustrated with the Covid-19 prevention measures, an annoyed man burnt himself right in the street of Truong Tho Ward*”. However, according to the People’s Committee of Truong Tho Ward, at around 2.50 p.m on July 19, it was reported that a young man had burned himself with flammable liquid in the street, at house No. 56, Road 2, Resident area 8. Luckily, the fire on the young man was put out by people on a hearse passing by. The victim was then immediately taken to Cho Ray Hospital. Through the police’s identification, the victim was N.M.H (46 years old, living in Road 11, Truong Tho Ward). N.M.H’s family said that he had neurological - mental disability certificate level 2, and that he hadn’t had any conflict with his family and neighbors. This is a case that fake news used a part of the truth, i.e the young man who had mental disability burnt himself with flammable liquid, in order to distort the Covid-19 prevention work.

Fake and bad news also propagates the following contents: Negate Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Thought; Distorting the nation’s history, resistance wars, wars to defend the Fatherland, the image and career of Ho Chi Minh; Democracy and human rights issues; Religious policy; Neglect the Party’s lines

and policies and the State's governance and administration by taking number of errors and weaknesses in management and administration; Inciting secessionist tendencies, undermining national and ethnic unity, causing splits in internal solidarity; Provoke "self-evolution", "self-transformation" internally; Neglect the national cultural identity, propagating and imposing foreign cultural values and lifestyles, especially political culture; Provoke the establishment of "Civil Society" in Vietnam, etc.

Fake news negatively affects the perception of the recipients, resulting in deviant views and actions that are detrimental to the State in all aspects that it approaches. Gradually, it infects those who lack the courage, and acts as a catalyst to push them to resist the core values that were long built by the lives and wisdom of many revolutionary generations.

Over the past time, taking advantage of the complicated situation of the Covid-19, hostile forces, reactionaries and dissidents inside and outside the country have continuously spread fake news to distort the pandemic situation and the control measures taken by the Party, State, Government and localities. They targeted such activities as: the implementation of social distancing, lockdown, quarantine; supporting people in pandemic affected areas, and Covid-19 vaccination. Notably, there have been many Facebook accounts, groups and Fanpages that spread fake news about the Party's lines, State and local leaders' directions in order to attract public reaction for bad purposes.

In addition, exiled reactionaries and dissidents have used cyberspace to spread fake news, in order to deceit and exaggerate negative news to create discontent, frustration among people, particularly vulnerable young people, then incited them to participate in protests. The so-called cyber protest is a form of calling on simultaneously changing avatar of personal accounts, using a hashtag, or by clicking the Like button or signing online to support a pre-made protest plan. Thus, the entire accounts on social networks will "wear uniform" to join the protest. This tactic was continuously used by reactionary organizations during the election of National Assembly Deputies and People's Councils at all levels as well as during the pandemic. This online method has attracted hundreds of people to participate in discussions on the given topics. Users are free to comment, express their personal views, and without information verification. Some people even fueled the online protests by tagging their friends' accounts in support posts. Most of these accounts are fake, anonymous on the cyberspace, so it is difficult to make them accountable.

More dangerously, through inciting young people to participate in online protests, by registration, signing, and avatar change, hostile forces collect personal information, then continue to bribe, incite, and use young people as tools to carry out nefarious schemes. Their long-term goal is to gather forces, organize movements to weaken and overthrow the government. In many terms of the National Assembly and People's Council deputies election at all levels, hostile forces have always incited people, especially social media users to spread sabotage messages and views, such as "What's the difference between voting and not voting", "I don't know, so I don't vote", "It's all arranged", etc., to provoke attacks on the principle of democratic centralism, calling for the sabotage of the election, which is an important political event that decides the line of the country's development in the coming years, a great festival of the whole people.

2. Journalists fight to prevent and minimize the negative impacts of fake news

News agencies have deployed new columns to combat fake news. For examples, some online newspapers have "Comments and Criticism" column (People's Newspaper, Entire People's National Defense Review), "Fighting against hostile and false claims" (Communist Review), "Anti - peaceful revolution" (People's Army, VietnamPlus, People's Public Security), "Vietnamese seas and islands" (Vietnamplus), and such. These columns cover a wide range of content, including prominent *analysis, comments, and criticism on fabricated information and false views*.

Television channels have produced many political programs to combat disinformation and bad news. Since 2019, there have been some political programs, such as "Face-off" on VTV1, "Party building", "Perspective and truth", "Cybersecurity" on ANTV; "Recognize the truth" on QPTV, "Identifying fake news" on News Television, etc. Those programs aimed at directly fighting against the distorting and false claims of hostile forces and protecting the Party ideology base, through carefully researched and filtered contents with the participation of experts and in-depth and thorough analysis. Journalists are taking active steps in fighting and preventing malicious news.

In 2021, on the eve of National Assembly deputies and People's Council deputies' election at all levels, at the 7 p.m. News, VTV's journalists have continuously updated about training conferences on election campaigns with such news as: "When meeting candidates, voters can ask candidates anything

they are interested in”, “Do not use material manipulations”, “Election campaigning, a face-to-face test for National Assembly’s candidates”, etc. Those programs have indirectly countered the claims of hostile forces on the Internet for many years, proved that the lists of National Assembly and People’s Councils deputies at all levels are not “arranged”, and no fraud, and the candidates must come up with convincing action plans and answer voters’ questions satisfactorily.

In VTV’s “Face-off” program, to combat misrepresentations and malicious information from hostile forces, the journalists in the production team not only make full use of sharp reasoning based on the Party and State’s guiding views, but also provide practical evidence. For example, in August, 2021’s “Face-off”, to counter such numerous fake news on social networks as “The poor people in Ho Chi Minh City are impoverished at the pandemic but have not received the support package ...”, “The government does not care people’s life when imposing lockdown and quarantine”, “Who will help the poor not starve in the middle of the lockdown”, etc., the production team showed images and directly interviewed poor people how they felt when receiving unemployment allowances, and provided information related to assistance packages for the vulnerable people during the pandemic.



Some images on the VTV’s “Face-off” program

3. Journalists shape awareness, behavior of the public on social networks

First of all, journalists orient information on social networks *by promptly giving accurate information and correcting false information*. They play the role of capturing public opinion and orienting information, creating stability in the online community and in society.

In early 2020, when the murder and resisting and obstructing an officer occurred in Dong Tam commune (My Duc District, Hanoi), there was a lot of information about this “hot” case on social networks, including misinformation and false information. Many people posted information without reliable sources, and reported what happened in Dong Tam as if they were there and witnessed the case. Many Facebookers themselves did not understand the nature of the case, but still posted comments which were subjective, one-sided, for the purpose of attracting public attention, to receive more Like reacts and views on social networks. They made malicious comments, used rude language to disparage the government and functional agencies. Sadly, many people using social networks followed them and hastily commented based on subjective speculations, worsening the incident in Dong Tam and changed its nature on social networks. In addition, hostile forces, disgruntled elements, and opportunists have taken advantage of the incident to spread bad, toxic and untrue information, spread propaganda against the Party and State that affected political security, social order and safety, and eroded people’s trust in the Party and State. More sadly, many people used images of sacrificed police soldiers and their families, relatives to spread false information with dark intentions, to entice others on social networks who lacked a sense of vigilance to follow, spread malicious information, inciting disturbances and riots. Specifically, from January 8, 2020 to January 14, 2020, there were tens of thousands of news and video clips posted on websites, blogs, social networks, facebook, youtube related to the incident, attracted hundreds of thousands of reacts, comments, and sabotage incitements.

The protesters used many contents to distort the nature of the incident, accused the government of directing the police force to use weapons to suppress the people of Dong Tam in order to “rob the land” to serve “group interests”, smeared and discredited the Party and State’s leaders; propagated extremist groups’ activities against the government in Dong Tam, called on the online community to spread and share information, images, and video clips that falsely reflect the nature of the case to request human rights organizations, press

agencies to watch and monitor the case; disseminated provocative information, called on people to gather in Dong Tam to march, disrupt security and order, and put pressure on the government.

To respond, the press has promoted the role of guiding public opinion by reporting truthfully and objectively about the incident, such as the protesters' use of grenades, petrol bombs, and knives in Dong Tam commune attacked functional forces, resisted and obstructed officers, causing the death of three police officers and soldiers. Newspaper agencies simultaneously reported on the incident that some local people obstructed the fence construction around Mieu Mon airport, resisted and obstructed the law enforcement force. Journalists have played the role of objectively reporting, citing sufficient documents and legal grounds to help people understand the true nature of the incident. The entire contingent of journalists got involved, hundreds of press agencies, radio and television stations frequently and continuously reported about the incident in various forms: news, reflection, reports, interviews, comments, reviews, and such. On timely reporting accurate information about the incident, exposing fake news and distorting claims of hostile forces, many journalists have also written insights to provide deep analysis on the incident, and clarified the cause and nature of the incident so that people can properly understand the problem.

Besides providing accurate information to correct people's perception in an appropriate way to the situation, *journalists also often express their views on newspaper pages. Journalists take advantage of social networks to report corrections, correct misinformation, and avoid misleading public opinion about present events and issues in social life.*

With professional ethics and knowledge, genuine journalists filter and select information on social networks, and adjust information in two ways: cheering, praising and exploiting, promoting good information, and criticizing, correcting and reshaping misinformation.

Journalists actively integrated mainstreamed information into social media, thereby, gradually shaping the way of thinking and reacting for the public. Journalists can also use social networks as a means of mobilizing and gathering the masses to respond to major national events, especially young audiences. Thanks to social networks, many communication campaigns have been spread and implemented successfully. VTV "I go to vote" campaign in 2021 was considered an effort to "rejuvenate" political events so that they could reach Gen Z (young people) more effectively. The campaign targeted young voters,

18 - 34 years old, particularly Gen Z, to help them realize the importance of voting as an act of an adult citizen with responsibility for the country, thereby convinced them to take a very natural and proud action: go to the polls. The campaign achieved 43 million views and broadcasted on social media platforms of VTV Digital and VTV.

Besides, journalists *discovered and introduced good practices, good models, and excellent examples* in implementing the Party's guidelines and resolutions, State policies and laws; clearly played the leading role in propaganda and education of revolutionary ideals, traditional education, ethics and cultural lifestyles for the people, thereby improved the people's immunity to the pandemic and misinformation, especially prevented the younger generation from the conspiracies and tricks to poison ideology and destroy the Party's ideological foundation.

Journalists also *published and spread humanistic messages, meaningful information and works* of the press on social media platforms. During the peak of the COVID-19, journalists had to accelerate to deliver updated information to the public. Many business activities had to suspend due to the pandemic, but newsrooms, radio and television stations did not. Journalists had to work in enormous pressure, but still ensured the fastest, most accurate and truthful information transmission. Through the press, people were not only timely and accurately updated with the news on the pandemic situation in the country and the world, but also raised awareness in disease prevention. On the other hand, the press also helped to convey and spread positive information, good deeds, and beautiful stories to the public, bringing optimism, solidarity, and sharings towards the goal of winning the pandemic. Notably, the companionship of journalists and recognition of frontline forces's contribution in fighting against the pandemic has greatly encouraged the medical staff, doctors, police and soldiers. In 2021, during the peak of the COVID-19 in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam Television conducted and broadcasted a special documentary film - "Boundaries" that not only moved the audiences but also haunted them with realistic images that depicted the extremely harsh battle of medical staff with the deadly pandemic. Through social networks such as Facebook, Youtube, even Tiktok - an emerging social network, this film has received a lot of sympathy, support, and tears of the online community. On VTV Go's Youtube channel, "Boundary" received more than 2.6 million views and 5,000 comments.

In short, as the leading force on the information front, journalists always determine the role of orienting public opinion, actively fighting to prevent fake news, contributing to protecting the stability of social life. Besides providing truthful, fair and balanced information, journalists have to thoroughly observe and identify fake news, and proactively expose false and fabricated information. That process requires journalists to constantly cultivate professional ethics, improve political skills, professional qualifications, professionalism in receiving, processing and organizing information and the capability of using modern technology so that they can provide the public with updated, accurate and interesting information./.

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