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1. Digital transformation - the “golden era” of the press but also the environment for information disorder, misinformation and disinformation

In recent years, the global digital transformation has become an urgent issue that affects all areas of human activity including journalism and communication. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc approved the “National Digital Transformation Program to 2025, with an orientation to 2030.” The goal of this program is to turn Vietnam into a stable and prosperous digital country, with the goal to become a pioneer in experimenting with new models and technologies; fundamentally and comprehensively renovate the management and administration of the Government, the production and business of enterprises, the working life and lifestyle of the people and develop a humane, safe and broad digital environment.

In journalism, digital technology is considered a keystone solution that will change the traditional model of operating, managing, producing, and distributing creative content in order to increase revenue and improve value. According to experts, digital transformation is about harvesting the data obtained from the interactive process and then applying new digital technologies to analyze and transform the data into new information. As of early 2020, there were a total of 614 licensed social networks in Vietnam. The number of Vietnamese Facebook and YouTube users was nearly 64 million and 35 million respectively. In that context, news agencies were forced to change their modes of operation to meet the new standards set forth from the evolving real-time situation.

In the near past, journalists were considered the source of the news, updating the public with new and timely information. Now, the press no longer holds a monopoly on

news and information but is now only one node of many in the digital stream. Digital transformation has allowed the public to satisfy their information needs by selecting and comparing not just a single piece of information, but an entire data set. In cyberspace, they can also contribute by expressing their views and creating information.

Social media has become a massive warehouse of valuable information. Nevertheless, it is also a place where distribution of false, misleading, and outright fake information occurs daily. Many unethical people worldwide have taken full advantage of the new technology to communicate false and distorted information. Group-IB is a Russian software company that analyzes and identifies the sources of cyber-attacks, hunts for threats, and protects network infrastructure and intellectual property in cyberspace. Group-IB reports that in Russia alone, in four days from February 28, 2020 to March 2, 2020, there were more than 30,000 fake and inaccurate stories about the corona virus. These stories were spread mainly through posts on social networks or in voice messages. With the use of chart analysis technology, Group-IB clarified the process of spreading voice messages with false and misleading content.

In Vietnam, according to the Minister of Information and Communications, in the last two months of 2019, the ministry removed 207 deceptive internet pages, including 46 pages under the names of Party and State leaders.⁽¹⁾ According to the Supreme People's Procuracy, in two months of 2020, police units and government agencies throughout the country verified and investigated nearly 700 cases of false reporting. More than 300 people in the country who spread fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic in cyberspace were intercepted by the authorities.⁽²⁾

The danger of false and misleading information is that it can generate consequences of different magnitudes at different times. It not only destabilizes security, politics, social order and safety, especially in sensitive times but also disturbs the information environment, causing confusion and anxiety in society at large. Malicious information also tends to harm and corrupt cadres, civil servants, state officials, soldiers of the Army, and soldiers of the Public Security. It also undermines and damages the reputation, honor and dignity of the leaders of the Party, State, and National

Assembly.

The most dangerous effect of distorted and malicious information incites the public , deliberately causing division, separating people, and creating distractions among the social classes. It also sows confusion, pessimism, skepticism, and causes disappointment, disorientation and political ambiguity among the public. Misplaced perceptions and distorted views have provoked some people to carry out negative and dissenting actions. For example, in the Dong Tam case, fake news was spread to slander the Government. Hostile and reactionary forces used the trick of "switching the concept," turning white into black. They falsely linked this incident with other events that happened in Tien Lang of Hai Phong province; Duong Noi in Hanoi; and the Loc Hung vegetable garden in Ho Chi Minh City to blame the Government for errors in coercive land acquisition.(3)

Even some newspapers make the mistake of publishing false information. Recently, four newspapers were fined by the Press Department at the Ministry of Information and Communications for publishing false information. Specifically, the online newspaper Dan Viet was fined for false report in the article "Prosecuting and arresting Mr. Tat Thanh Cang, former Deputy Secretary of Ho Chi Minh City"; the online newspaper To Quoc was fined for providing misinformation in an article about the scientific conference "President Ho Chi Minh - the Founder of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" and the online newspaper VnExpress was fined for publishing misinformation in an article about the 90th anniversary of the Party's Communication and Education Central Commission. And Thanh Nien newspaper was fined for misinformation in a series of articles published in May 2020 about a number of construction investment projects in the form of BT in Hai Phong.(4)

In the age of digital transformation, in addition to the opportunities, the journalists face with several challenges such as their voice was lost in the huge noise; they are manipulated by unethical public relations to spread misinformation.(5) They can become the target of lies, rumors and tricks designed to harm their credibility and occupation, especially when their works expose the source of misinformation.

2. The role and responsibility of the press in fighting and refuting false and misleading information on social networks in the context of the current digital transformation

During the forum “Press and Technology” held by the Ministry of Information and Communications at the end of 2019 in Hanoi, Minister of Information and Communications Nguyen Manh Hung affirmed that digital technology will affect journalism the most and digital technology can create the “big bang” in the field of journalism and communication.

When it comes to digital transformation in journalism, most people are more interested in its economic aspects. The issue of revenue has never been as hot as it is today, especially for self-financed press agencies. However, it is vital to pay attention to the cultural factors and the role and responsibility of the journalists and the cultural researchers in this context because the digital transformation in essence is a technological revolution, which affects not only economics but also politics and culture.

Many people and several journalists are bewildered to ask themselves: Where are the journalists in the information “waterfall”? What are the role, position, and mission of journalists in the context when they are dominated, challenged, and threatened by social media and their traditional power diminished? Are journalists equally positioned with netizens who are free to produce and manipulate information but are not bound by strict professional rules and regulations? Information standards and the legitimacy of journalism are sometimes challenged by the curiosity and misunderstanding of the audience or by the intentional fabrication and deformation of information by the will, interest and wishes of the sources of information. The journalists and press organizations can be manipulated, set up, tricked by hostile forces, influential people and evil forces to spread misinformation over accurate information. In the resolution of the 4th Plenum of the Party Central Committee (12th Tenure), our Party pointed out the inadequacy of management of the press and media that it “has not been active and running short of appropriate solutions to accurately orient information in the context of extensive international integration and vigorous development of information technology and social networks. The management of information remains loose,

lacking strong solutions to effectively fight disinformation, counter distorted claims of hostile and reactionary forces, opportunists and political dissidents." (6)

During this time, journalists, news agencies, and management agencies must preserve the central role and leadership of the press. The more chaotic and unverified the information environment become, the more essential it is for the mainstream media to continue to give accurate information to maintain the role to lead, direct and serve the interests of society and people. With the accurate, truthful, objective and humane characteristics, the press must show the bravery of the revolutionary press as the voice of the Party, organizations and agencies, and the forum of the people.

The distortion of information comes from the process of reporting, transmitting, and receiving information between the senders and the receivers of the information. If misinformation and distorted information is published frequently and regularly, it will certainly influence the recipients. Currently, hostile forces use cyberspace as the weapon to people, who are not media-savvy and easily misguided. It becomes even more complicated and dangerous when some immoral and degraded cadres and Party members take advantage of the freedom on social media to spread misinformation, irresponsible and negative comments about events, issues and individuals to create social confusion. In reality, some press organizations and journalists run after hot information on social media or create the opportunity for toxic, wrong information to invade the information sphere.

Therefore, it is important for the journalists and press agencies to properly understand the role of handling misinformation and disinformation on social media in the context of digital transformation. The journalists cannot exclude themselves from this effort and must increase their responsibility and professionalism in processing information, creating information value and combat misinformation and disinformation strongly. It is both personal and social responsibility of the professional journalists to take this job automatically and effectively.

Google, YouTube and Facebook by nature are not press organizations, who produce news but they are the conveyer, disseminator of news on their platform to attract people and serve as advertising agency for revenue. Meanwhile, with their functions,

tasks and influence, the press serves as the original producers of information and this is the unique advantage that the press must maintain and uphold. Journalists and press agencies must be aware of their values in the current context and should not avoid and miss the opportunity to show their pioneering, brave and courageous role to join the information and communication industry 4.0. The press cannot run after sensational, unverified information on social media but must provide official information with adequate load and frequency to make sure that accurate, timely information pushes back misinformation and disinformation.

3. Many newspapers actively participate in the struggle to combat false and misleading information on social networks

Many central and local press organizations, including People, People's Army Newspaper, Vietnam Television, Journal of Communication and Education, Communist Review, Voice of Vietnam, Vietnam News Agency, Public Security Newspaper, and Communist Party of Vietnam Online Newspaper have devoted numerous columns and sections to fight false and misleading information in cyberspace such as "Defending Party's ideological foundation" (Journal of Communication and Education), "Preventing self-transformation and self- evolution" (People's Army Newspaper), "Counter-attacking wrong, hostile views" (online Communist Review), "Defending Party's ideological foundation and combating wrong, hostile views" (print Communist Review), "Commentary - Criticism" (People newspaper); "Face to Face" (Vietnam Television), "Fake and Real" (Tuoi Tre newspaper), "Preventing self-evolution", and "Today issue" (Public Security newspaper), etc. The section "Preventing self-evolution" on Public Security newspaper publishes two to three articles a week, including the writing by leaders of the Party, State, Ministry of Public Security and public security forces. In 2019, the section "Preventing self-evolution" and "Today issue" on Public Security newspaper published nearly 200 articles to combat wrong, hostile, distorted information and defend Party's ideological foundation.(7)

The section "Preventing peaceful evolution" and "Preventing self- evolution and self-transformation" on People's Army newspaper focuses on mainstream information, communicating persuasively on economic and social achievements, giving objective

information on both bright and dark sides in the society and refraining from inflating drawbacks to produce sensational news. "People's Army newspaper requires articles which combat wrong, hostile views to be highly persuasive in the "war of words", have clear direction and combine both "construction" and "fight" with the focus on the construction".(8) In addition to in-house journalists, the People's Army newspaper develops the network of collaborators and informants, who are the experts, researchers, scientists and editorial columnists to actively combat wrong, hostile information.

Hostile forces have used a variety of contents, forms and tactics to spread misinformation and disinformation frequently to provoke and attract the online community. Therefore, in this front, press agencies need to use diversified, strong combat skills to take the fight directly and publicly. The pieces of analysis and commentary in the specialized sections and columns provide timely, positive and profound information and demonstrate the strength of mainstream information, which attract the interest and support of the people.

The press has used social media as the "extended hand" and effective assistant in spreading the information. The development of online newspaper, fanpage and YouTube channels is a good solution to reach the audience, especially the youngsters. In addition to specialized sections and columns, several press agencies organized information campaigns, events, contests and forum to provide the audience with positive information and effectively combat wrong, hostile information. However, in reality, it is still a phenomenon that "some journalists and online press agencies are politically cold and uninterested in this topic, arguing that this is difficult topic, which is already taken care of by Party newspaper so they leave these columns and section blank or short of contents".(9)

Some press agencies are not active, sensitive and sharp in fighting, combating wrong, hostile views. Some events are exploited by evil forces on social media and foreign reactionary newspapers but they are not properly handled and prevented. There are not many practically and theoretically profound articles to combat distorted arguments by the hostile forces. Therefore, some online newspapers and journals do not have the power to lead and influence. In addition, some journalists and online

newspapers are politically cold and do not pay attention to this theme, arguing that this is difficult topic and has been taken care of by Party organizations so they leave the section and column blank or do not provide adequate contents.(10) Therefore, it is important for journalists and press organizations to work more professionally in the current context of digital transformation to effectively combat wrong, distorted information on social media.

Tài liệu tham khảo

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