**Media literacy**

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SHOCKING. Sinister. Sanctionable.

There are many ways to describe the network of anti-Pakistan, India-linked NGOs and fake media organisations uncovered by the EU DisinfoLab. These are the `cyber nukes` that define 21st-century conflict. And it`s time Pakistan developed a coherent response to the challenge of disinformation.

Our politicians and security establishment, who have previously warned of India`s `fifth-generation warfare` to undermine Pakistan, are feeling vindicated. They will now feel doubly justified in clamping down on any critique of the Pakistani state citing nefarious Indian plots. The state was already headed down the road of crushing free speech in the name of protecting national security and institutions.

But the threat of disinformation requires a more progressive and holistic response.

There is a danger that Pakistan politicises the concept of disinformation, narrowly conceiving it as an issue of national security. But disinformation is a broader challenge that affects all realms (eg the world is bracing for the wave of disinformation that may undermine the Covid-19 vaccination effort).

Pakistan`s discomfort with debate also increases the risk of stakeholders labelling anything they disagree with as fake news, further eroding the quality of national discourse and diminishing trust in institutions and processes.

The best approach to tackling disinformation is by boosting media literacy opting for empowerment rather than suppression, critical assessment rather than censorship.

As the information landscape becomes more complex everyone needs robust skills to spot disinformation: the ability to identify sources and assess their credibility; to synthesise and cross-check information from multiple sources; to understand the context in which information is produced; to analyse the economic drivers for the spread of (dis) information; and to share information in a responsible, transparent way.

Media literacy is best imparted through the curriculum at primary, secondary and higher education levels. To survive, and thrive, in the 21st century, citizens will need this essential skill, the development of which must be integrated across all other disciplines. Pakistan has not prioritised new media literacies in its national curriculum, and is unlikely to do so because this literacy requires those very attributes perceived by our state and society as problematic: critical thought, scepticism, analysis.

One of the most striking aspects of the EU DisinfoLab`s findings is that fake news, published by fake media outlets, was then amplified by credible media platforms, including India`s largest news wire service.While the public needs to be media literate, the bar is particularly high for journalists.

The pressure of the 24/7 news cycle, lack of ongoing professional training, and resource constraints plus, in some cases, overt state pressure mean that mainstream news outlets are also susceptible to spreading disinformation. This must stop, with newsrooms further prioritising sourcing and fact checking as a way to maintain credibility.

But the challenge is not as simple as distinguishing fact from fiction. The most compelling misinformation is that which is factually correct, but partially deployed or framed in a way that is misleading or agenda-serving. We have to ask why and how information was produced, and who benefits from its dissemination.

Such analysis requires real technical skills, ranging from basic digital skills to an understanding of how online algorithms work, how tech platforms generate revenue, and the implications of all this for online content. Media literacy of this scale requires a firm policy commitment and investment.Currently, the onus on increasing media literacy lies with major digital platforms themselves. For example, after disinformation shared on WhatsApp led tocommunal violence in India, the platform participated in a training campaign targeting 100,000 Indians. Google in 2019 expanded the curriculum of its digital safety offering for children,`Be Internet Awesome` to include media literacy. And Twitter now flags false or misleading tweets. But recognising platforms` agendas, the limitations of their `red flag` systems, and the economic motivations behind their selective approach to information moderation is itself an important media literacy topic.

Critics of media literacy say that the skills will make suspicion the default mode of information consumers. This is potentially counterproductive in an era when another challenge is the need to restore trust in institutions, experts, data and traditional media.

Question everything, and even that which is credible becomes dubious. This sparks a vicious cycle of paranoia, increasing vulnerability to co-option by radical, right-wing or other interest groups. No doubt, there is a balance to be struck. But empowering people to make sense of their information-saturated world is the only way forward.  The writer is a freelance joumalist.

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