**How to fight fake news**

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A couple of years ago, a clip from an Indian soap went viral on social media. The clip shows the ‘ideal’ Indian bahu washing her husband’s laptop (literally) with a detergent, rinsing it thoroughly and then hanging it on the clothes string.

As she ticks off one task from her to-do list, her husband looks on in shock, paralyzed by the indescribable idiocy on display. What happens next is irrelevant, but the husband’s reaction is exactly how I feel when I see our government and experts dealing with all things tech-related.

The new buzzword in town is ‘fake news’, but surprisingly those who have taken it upon themselves to do something about it are unable to understand the ever-evolving world of the internet. Experienced journalists have one thing in common: their surprise upon learning that most young people do not refer to multiple sources to verify the information they come across on social media apps, TikTok or Facebook.

This is not surprising; according to a 2022 study, almost 40 per cent of Gen Zs use apps like TikTok and Instagram for search. The question of going to other apps is not relevant to them. The reason why this behaviour seems odd to most of us is because of our relationship with the internet.

Gen Z is the first generation to have been born into a near-complete digitized world where the internet is part of their lives. But for us, Millennials and previous generations, the internet was an add-on. I can recall the classes we had in school where the textbook would have small boxes with warning signs, encouraging young students to refrain from giving away private information on the internet – and we have now reached a position where the little device in our hands can tell the best places to eat near our locality, a major leap!

Gen Z has also been born in a world where media institutions have faced several attacks on their credibility, deliberately orchestrated by populist leaders who see any criticism as a threat to their survival. In the early 2000s, during my school years, Pakistan was in the grips of suicide attacks. Every morning, my classmates and I would check the number of dead before coming to school. In case there were discrepancies, we would go with the number quoted by a well-known Urdu newspaper. Such was the credibility the institutions enjoyed.

Over the years, the prestige of these institutions was replaced by the brand of journalists. With the advent of social media, people get direct access to journalists. Scoops posted on apps go more viral than the actual published reports. While this seems harmless, the exercise abandons the layers of checks media institutions have in place to ensure the authenticity, transparency, and credibility of reports.

Truth be told, my credibility as a journalist is heavily influenced by the media organization I am associated with. When I file a report, there are three parties involved to ensure the authenticity of the report – me, my editors, and the newspaper. Any misreporting would be a big crisis for all the parties involved. Such checks also allow established institutions to rely on anonymous sources. The editor would know who the source is and the on-the-record conversation I have had with them.

It takes years for a journalist to make a name separate from the institution. In Pakistan, while several journalists do not require any institutional tags, some early-career journalists pivoted to social media platforms to further their careers. While there is no harm in that, journalism is not a one-man/woman show.

There are multiple independent institutions around the world – DemocracyNow! in the US, for example, has produced powerful reporting. And while these institutions have one name behind them (Amy Goodman in the case of DN!), there is still an entire system in place to ensure credible reporting.

Social media users are not concerned about any of that. They see information on these apps as unfiltered and uncensored. When they read something on the internet, they readily believe it.

Banning social media apps – looking at you, Pakistan – is not the answer. In fact, establishing small fake news-buster accounts is also a futile exercise. Social media users are not going to come to a certain page to verify the information – the information has to reach them.

Previously, social media apps relied heavily on their users’ consumption patterns. People would log into the app at their convenience, interact with people they were friends with/or followed, and leave at their convenience. This partly changed when tech giants introduced mobile versions of their apps, allowing people to stay logged in round-the-clock and sending regular notifications to push users to check the apps.

But there used to be a point – Millennials can relate to this – when the mindless scrolling would have an end; the app would tell that the feed had no new updates. All of this changed largely by TikTok’s For You page which brought content from all users on the app to a person’s timeline.

There is now a popular meme on the internet about the frustration people feel when their timeline auto-refreshes and they lose the post they were looking at. The fact that they lost the post is a win for social media apps that do not want the content on the app to be finite.

In a digitized world where apps are largely reaching out to users, those interested in doing something about fake news or changing the narrative have to employ the same strategies to reach out to users. Relatable content that speaks to users is key to building people’s trust.

The answer to fake news is a flood of genuine, verified news posts and less use of click-bait fluff. The stories must stay relevant and must appear on people’s timelines to help them separate truth from fiction. Anything less than this is a tech suicide.

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