Traditional Broadcasting during COVID 19 – Impact of the Angkor Initiative 2019 among AIBD Member Countries

Associate Professor Dr Antoon Gewijde H. De Rycker
Taylor's University, School of Media and Communication

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2019, the Angkor 'Anti-Fake News' Initiative was launched to bring together expertise in the fight against disinformation. It also committed regional public radio and television broadcasters – and the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD) – to developing a comprehensive strategy based on both the findings of evidence-based research and a pragmatic recognition of socio-cultural diversity and local sensibilities.

Since then, the Wuhan COVID-19 outbreak and resulting pandemic have dramatically changed both the overall media content landscape and the priorities of participating countries, organisations and AIBD members. Mainstream media have had to reckon with various forms of 'fake news' regarding the vital clinical details of the virus itself, the daily updates on key metrics such as case mortality or reproduction rate and – as of mid-2020 especially – information about the availability, efficacy and safety of vaccines.

In this paper, the term 'fake news' will be used in the same way it was defined in the survey that AIBD conducted among its member organisations in 2019 (AIBD, 2019): "news stories and social media posts posing, falsely, as genuine news items", which are, however, "demonstrably untrue" and "designed to mislead the reader or viewer" (Miller, 2018: 3). This type of disinformation can be related to the notion of "infodemic(s)" used by, among others, the World Health Organization (WHO). To quote from a speech that its Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, held in mid-February 2020, "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic." An infodemic happens when there is "an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution" (UNDGC, 31 March 2020); this situation is compounded by the fact that a large portion of that informational excess is 'fake news' (see also Pomeranz & Schwid, 2020).

Traditional radio and television broadcasters – whether in the public or private sector – play a critical role in supporting governments and international institutions, organisations and agencies in developing an effective public health response to the virus. To a large extent, and because of the infodemic, this support will have to be *reactive* in that the "misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency [...] create confusion and distrust among people" (UNDGC, 31 March 2020), crowding out public health information and news stories from genuine, legitimate sources.

It has been argued that, more than ever before, there is a need for "independent, robust, public interest and public service media" (PSM) due to "growing pressure on journalistic and media freedom" in various parts of the world and the prevalence of 'fake news' but also filter bubbles, media capture and other troubling phenomena (Aslama Horowitz *et al.*, 2020: 129).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This paper examines whether during the pandemic, the Angkor 'Anti-Fake News' Initiative has helped public service broadcasters manage more effectively the gathering, reporting and dissemination of COVID-related news. How did they go about assessing the 'fake news' risk, checking facts and other gatekeeping activities? Other research questions guiding the analysis relate to debunking myths, conspiracy theories and 'fake news', and more proactively, educating audiences by "providing listeners with the basic informational tools necessary for civic competence, while minimizing the chance they become mired in a state of information

overload" (McCauley, 2005: 120). Finally, the study is also interested in finding out if public service broadcasters were able to attract bigger ratings among their core audiences and even build new ones, that is, reach viewers and listeners who are tuning in, watching a programme or visiting a website or platform for the first time.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design is *archival* in that it consists in a review of the existing literature; in other words, it is based on sampling "data that has already been generated and/or assembled by others" (Vogt *et al.*, 2012: 198). The main source will be the survey study carried out by AIBD (AIBD, 2019), with 24 participating media organisations from 18 countries producing a total of 57 completed questionnaires. For selected AIBD member countries in the region, namely, Thailand, Pakistan, Fiji and South Korea, we also looked for current research, reports and articles, allowing us to illustrate and/or modify the generalisations arrived at in the AIBD survey. Together these four countries provide a representative sample of respectively the economic union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the regional intergovernmental South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and two distinct geographical areas, the Pacific and East Asia. For both types of archival sources, we will summarise the main findings, initiatives and trends relevant to this paper.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We will present the findings under three headings of related research objectives and questions.

'Fake news' risk assessment, fact-checking and gatekeeping

One of the survey findings (AIBD, 2019) is that the public broadcasters are fully aware that 'fake news' is partly due to the current media landscape, with its convergence, competition and constant change but also that they are as yet not well enough prepared to understand and combat 'fake news'. Though there is surely commitment and confidence, AIBD members also realise that to tackle 'fake news' effectively, more can and should be done.

There is agreement among the members that preventing, detecting and countering 'fake news' – especially, it can be conjectured, about a pandemic or similar health crisis – is a matter of (1) availability of – and access to – resources (material, human and financial) and (2) the existence of an integrated framework in which various systems, processes, policies, procedures and guidelines support and facilitate the fight against 'fake news'.

Much is expected from rethinking the organisational structure of the newsroom and its many practices. Only 3.5% of survey respondents report that newsroom practices and the news workflow have not been affected by the 'fake news' threat. The remaining 96.5% all report one or more changes. The most frequently mentioned ones are improvements in how work is carried out: "more carefully", with "more robust" application of existing verification systems to both facts and news sources, more "journalistic vigilance and awareness", "double-checking stories from sources including social media", "in-depth research", checking "accuracy" and similar formulations. Two media organisations mention the introduction of multiple levels of vetting and screening while one public broadcaster highlights that "prompt correction and apology" are now required in case a 'fake news' story does get past the gatekeepers.

However, data collection and accurate and precise measurement of 'fake news' items remain problematic for now. It is clear that 'fake news' detection and prevention require a concerted effort among all the major stakeholders, an integrated approach across the whole news production cycle, staff training in checking and validating facts and a strong sense of professional ethics. To address COVID-19 misinformation and

disinformation, governments, for example, should, among other things, protect freedom of expression – as censorship undermines public health – and support independent journalism and an independent media environment (Pomeranz & Schwid, 2020).

Public broadcasters generally report that due to 'fake news', their fact-checking processes have been tightened. Information gathered especially from *new* sources are to be looked at cautiously. That is, newsrooms have to keep a sceptical outlook until information is 'proven' to be true. Nowadays, all stories have to be cross-checked, confirmed, double-confirmed and verified with official sources and field reporters before being broadcasted. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the new developments is "remote journalism" Túñez-López *et al.* (2020: 12): the productive routines of journalists have been altered, with many having to "master remote production tools, adapt to new schedules and take on new responsibilities" such as engaging more directly with their audiences (see the next section). Resources and best practices for public service media have been made available online by the Public Media Alliance, "the largest global association of public media organisations and focuses specifically on providing advocacy and support for public media worldwide" (publicmediaalliance.org).

As a final observation, the AIBD (2019) survey respondents also highlight the importance of investigation. This process did not used to receive much attention previously unless a particular situation really required it. Since the rise of 'fake news', however, investigation has become a standard procedure in the newsroom. To ensure reliability and credibility, editors now routinely conduct in-depth investigations, among other things, to locate the source of information.

Audience engagement

As was reported in the survey (AIDB, 2019), audience engagement can take the form of raising awareness of the 'fake news' problem, improving media literacy, providing tips on distinguishing 'fake news' from real news and changing attitudes regarding the sharing of 'fake news' and hoaxes. There is no unanimity among the survey respondents, however, on the role that public broadcasters should play – if any – in actively and continuously engaging in these activities. By comparison, there is considerably more agreement about protecting audiences from the harmful effects of 'fake news': all media organisations "strongly" or "mildly" agree that this is their responsibility as broadcasters or government media departments. It can be assumed that with the pandemic, even more public service broadcasters would agree with many of them "very strongly".

An interesting finding from the survey is that not all media channels, broadcast formats or genres are equally useful for 'fake news' audience engagement. As can be seen from Table X, public broadcasters rely most heavily on their websites (62.5%) and Facebook accounts (45.8%) as well as scheduled TV and/or radio news programmes (45.8% and 37.5% respectively). As for the TV and radio formats, the majority of media organisations spend approximately 120 seconds or more per week educating audiences on 'fake news' – 10 out of 24 (41.7%).

Table 1: The ten most frequently mentioned types of media channels, formats and genres used for 'fake news' audience engagement (in descending order of frequency)

	Types	N^1	$\%^2$
1	Website	15	62.5
2	Facebook	11	45.8
3	TV news item	11	45.8
4	Radio news item	9	37.5
5	Radio talk show	7	29.2
6	TV public service announcement (PSA)	6	25.0

7	Radio public service announcement (PSA)	6	25.0
8	Radio interview	5	20.8
9	TV documentary	4	16.7
10	TV talk show	4	16.7

[1] *N* stands for the number of media organisations per response category.

[2] % stands for the percentage this number represents out of the total number of media organisations.

Raising 'fake news' awareness, educating audiences on how to detect 'fake news', countering dis-information and similar engagement activities also frequently take place in public service announcements (25.0% each), radio talk shows (29.2%) and radio interviews (20.8%). With COVID-19, it can be expected that remote journalism (see the previous section) has intensified the way public service media engage with their audiences, especially in the digital news environment, with more effort put into listening to audience feedback, identifying communities of interest, working together with and interacting with target audiences or curating online discussion groups.

For roughly half of the respondents in the AIBD (2019) survey study, audience engagement on 'fake news' does not seem to require a great deal of additional resources while for roughly the other half, it does. Much depends on whether 'fake news' initiatives (for example, "media literacy education" or "cyber wellness") are produced in-house at a lower cost or whether they involve external parties and expertise.

Relevance and reach

People nowadays access information through multiple media platforms and technologies; audiences receive and process a wide range of media content but they also increasingly spend time just monitoring or sampling large volumes of information (e.g. McCauley, 2005). Arguably, this monitoring of news feeds, scrolling through updates across platforms and the like has intensified due to the pandemic. The stakes in a public health crisis are high; being well informed has become a necessity and even a matter of life or death.

Túñez-López *et al*. (2020: 3) observe that the pandemic – with its "social confinement and the paralysis of commercial and business activities" – has led to "sudden and spectacular increases in media consumption throughout the world". The evening news bulletins provided by public service media in Europe saw their audiences increase by an average of 14% and by as much as 20% among the young demographic. This may also hold true for home entertainment. According to Mitrov (2020), due to the pandemic and especially social distancing and quarantine measures, "[f]or the first time in years, TV channel ratings have doubled".

As far as news consumption is concerned, the increase has been explained in terms of the perceived credibility of public broadcasters, with television news channels at the top as the most widely used source of COVID-19 information, just behind government sources. The level of trust that news consumers have in the reliability of the public service media content is considerably higher than their confidence in social and digital media outlets and networks.

An interesting finding of the study conducted by Túñez-López *et al*. (2020) is that the pandemic has led to the adoption of new programming decisions where emotions are allowed to be expressed more directly, thus speaking to people's sensibilities while opening up space for the co-creation of news and user-generated content from among core audiences.

Not much research seems to have been done yet on public broadcasters in the Asian-Pacific region, let alone, the four selected countries, Thailand, Pakistan, Fiji and South Korea. There is perhaps no reason to assume the figures and trends would be vastly different among AIBD member countries: also here news broadcasts have surely attracted more viewers than before, with overall higher ratings for all programmes due to the pandemic's standard operating procedures, with much more time spent at home than before and the emergence of new listening and viewing patterns.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, though none of the public broadcasters had a comprehensive and detailed action plan in place to deal with the pandemic, they all responded well to the news-gathering and news-reporting challenges that they encountered while staying true to their three-fold mission: (1) "universal coverage and access", (2) "the provision of impartial, non-commercial, national news and current affairs service", and (3) "representing minority interests and [offering] 'quality' programming that reflects and contributes to national culture and identity" (Debrett, 2010:16).

AIBD assists its members is facilitating collaborative initiatives and creating networking opportunities, also when it comes to research. Within newsrooms around the Asian-Pacific region, 'fake news' can only be dealt with successfully when underpinned by systematic, empirical and methodologically robust research. Since many media organisations and public service broadcasters may not have the know-how or resources, AIBD can play its part in promoting and intensifying collaboration among key media players. More specifically, one of AIBD's goals is to enhance its members awareness and readiness to deal with disinformation in the context of COVID-19. It plays this vital intergovernmental role by organising "demand-driven" seminars on combatting disinformation, regional workshops on fighting 'fake news' or changing newsroom practices, in-country workshops on the latest developments in newsroom operations or digitisation. AIBD can thus be said to be one of the factors in ensuring impartial, balanced, factually accurate and verifiable news across the Asian-Pacific region.

It would be ideal that efforts made by public service broadcasters helped curb the spread of the virus itself. However, this causal relationship is difficult to establish in any empirically convincing way. Túñez-López *et al*. (2020: 3) could not locate any research into the impact of media coverage in Europe on, for example, the levels of public knowledge about the virus. They do cite a study conducted in the United States, where significant variation in knowledge was found depending on a person's primary source of political news (e.g. Fox News versus CNN). At best, it can be hypothesised that in the Asia-Pacific region, public service broadcasters – with AIBD's assistance – create the conditions for their audiences to become more aware of what is at stake.

Through radio, television and diverse Web-based platforms, video-on-demand, streaming services (Mitrov, 2020) and technology-specific programming strategies, consumers of COVID-19 news and related content are presented with high-quality information about – and balanced in-depth analysis of – the sometimes rapidly changing governmental decisions regarding hard or soft lockdowns and the standard operating procedures necessary in fighting the virus. At the same time, as a trusted and impartial reference point for many citizens, or what McCauley (2005: 91) calls "a civilized voice in a news media environment", public media organisations can also be credited with instilling a sense of community, shared values and mutual support, thus building civic competence and responsible citizenship.

As a final point, since the research is still ongoing, the findings reported in this paper may have to be refined, re-evaluated and/or qualified in light of further data analysis and interpretation.

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