

Journalism Reinforced: A Coronavirus Response

By Wu Shangyuan

Verification. Sense-making. Witness. Investigation.

This has been deemed the core of professional journalism by media scholars as early as the start of the 20th century. And it is this core that is being tested during times of crisis like this one, when the Covid-19 outbreak has prompted the spread of rampant misinformation, as fear and panic spread among the population.

Journalists in Singapore say it is this time that the public's "hunger for truth and verifiable news becomes insatiable", and there is greater reliance on mainstream media to deliver accurate reports and insightful analysis.

In the backroom, journalists are feeling the responsibility to deliver.

A glimpse behind the scenes shows them following their routine practice of having at least two independent verifiable sources giving the same information before they report it as news. News on the outbreak is treated with extreme care – official figures are checked with the Ministry of Health before they are published. Governments, ministries, and the World Health Organization remain their most authoritative sources of information.

This stays true to the journalistic convention of turning to official sources as fact-bearers.

The "newness" of the virus presents an additional challenge, however. There is little research from established scientific sources available. Taking its place has been extensive rumour and hearsay, sometimes well-meaning, other times sensationalized, but often unverifiable and groundless.

Journalists lament the need to cut through a lot more noise now, as the Covid-19 situation worsens worldwide. They are competing with social media posts or websites wanting to increase their readership, to populate the digital sphere with information. That is, correct information.

Redefining objectivity

Scholars call this the age of "networked journalism". Internet users are free to generate subjective media content, and professional journalists act as curators and facilitators of such content, while generating original reports of their own.

It is therefore the job of the journalist to make sense of the subjectivities in circulation, to mould the content into a more developed and improved "objectivity" – yet another hallmark of good journalism, and one that refers to the reporting of facts with impartiality, balance and fairness.

The more misinformation in circulation, the greater time and energy needed to determine the truth.

But this is a practice Singaporean journalists are well trained to do.

The history of Singapore's press system, from the time of the country's independence in 1965 and the subsequent developmental strategy enacted by the country's first – and only – ruling party, the People's Action Party, has shaped the press to play a collaborative role with the

government. In the Republic's first days as a struggling nation state, the press worked to help the government achieve its goals of social stability and economic growth.

This role in nation-building still stands today. The Singapore press respects the authority of the state and takes care not to disseminate messages that might harm public order or harmony.

As one journalist says, "I grew up seeing stability as a priority – if freedom of speech leads to instability, then it is not worthwhile"; another says, "When it comes to social harmony, we will work with the government; it's a voluntary thing."

When regulation matters

At the same time, journalists here say they are keenly aware of the government's watchful eye on the press.

On one hand, self-censorship is a common consequence of this; journalists are unaware of where the (invisible) out-of-bounds markers lie and therefore hold back in producing reports critical of the government, particularly in the political sphere, drawing frustrations from journalism scholars. There is concern that public interest may be undermined because the media has not been socialized to hold power to account.

During the Covid-19 outbreak though, this has taken a hugely positive spin. Journalists place great emphasis on producing reports that are properly verified and evidence based. Besides ensuring that the public is accurately informed, journalists also see this as a way to protect themselves and their news outlets.

As one journalist says, they do not want to be "accused of spreading fake news", and that if a news organization is "spewing nonsense and untruths, the government will come down hard on the site and close it down".

The passing of the "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act", quickly abbreviated as POFMA, in 2019 has added to the government's arsenal for curbing misinformation, enabling Singapore's ministers to require that falsehoods online be taken down or corrections be placed alongside them; social media accounts spreading untruths may also be ordered to be blocked.

Journalists know that all information they put out there must be able to be backed up, because credibility to a news organization is everything.

Most of all, journalists want the public to benefit from their coverage. As one says, "doing a service to Singapore should come first".

Indeed, Singaporean journalists have a deep sense of social responsibility, shaped by strict professional standards, years of socialization, and a regulated media environment – a point of reassurance, as the country's battle with Covid-19 rages on.

Dr Wu Shangyuan is a Principal Investigator at the NUS Centre for Trusted Internet and Community and Lecturer, Department of Communications and New Media, at the National University of Singapore.