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Research Brief



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## YOUTH CONTRIBUTION TO THE ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN PREVENTING FAKE NEWS IN CAMBODIA

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### Introduction

Media literacy is the ability to identify different types of media, identifying what is real and what is false before circulating it to others.<sup>1</sup> There are many different types of media platforms including newspapers, magazines, posters, tweets, news on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> There is a growing concern about the significant influence of news on social media alongside the increasing amount of people using and consuming those

news on the internet. It is critical to know how to identify the types of news because it will allow us as readers and spreaders to keep up with the factual information. To prevent spreading fake news, it is important to know what it is. Fake news refers to reports, images, and videos shared among users to spread misinformation. Fake news can be devised by individuals or groups to further their interests or those of third parties.<sup>3</sup> There are four common types of fake news namely targeted misinformation, fake headline, viral posts, and satire (the news picks up on

current affairs and is used to raise awareness of social issues or criticize political wrongdoing).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, fake news also includes media bias which means that media outlets report news in a partial or prejudiced manner. This bias often occurs from self-interest and political matters.

The root cause of fake news is self-interest. Many authors create fake news using misinformation and disinformation for their fake news to be widespread for their benefit or money. Fake news is mainly made online with interesting or provocative content. For example, a Chinese media got his license revoked due to the fake news that he has spread by saying that the Cambodian government sells Chinese vaccines at a high price while Cambodian people get vaccinated for free amidst the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, some poorly trained or untrained journalists usually do not follow professional journalist standards or ethics which leads to the explosion of news sites that may contribute to shoddy writing. Some partisans also want to influence their political beliefs and policymakers by creating fake news concerning politics.<sup>6</sup>

In Cambodia, spreading fake news is one of the major concerns as it negatively affects society by creating chaos and many other problems. According to Khmer Times, A total of 525 fake news was recorded in the first quarter of 2021 and 215 of them were about the King and political leaders.<sup>7</sup> Not only is it related to the political leaders, but it is also related to the public interest. For instance, during this COVID-19 setting, there were numerous fake news spreading about the vaccines as various anonymous sources stated that "This is Cambodia" recently posted a picture of the dead body of a woman while claiming at least three people died and ten others were sent to hospital after getting vaccinated."<sup>8</sup> This information scared many Cambodian people into not getting the vaccine which could potentially harm their health and lives. According to Doctor Oung Sophal, the Deputy Principal of Cambodia's National Pediatric Hospital, vaccines are vital, and he feared that the public could be deterred from getting the vaccines by misinformation.<sup>9</sup>

## People who are Vulnerable to Fake News

In this digital era, fake news constantly surfaces on the internet; therefore, internet users are more likely to struggle with this problem. Older adults are particularly vulnerable to misinformation on social media.<sup>10</sup> They are likely to fall victim to fake news. According to the NPR website, Facebook users aged 65 and older reposted seven times as many articles from fake news websites compared to adults aged 29 and younger.<sup>11</sup> Older adults are also less capable of spotting the difference between advertisements designed to look like real news stories and articles that are actual news stories.<sup>12</sup> In other contexts, educational background is also one rationale behind a person falling victim to fake news. They lack the foundations to analyze critically, thus sharing everything they see as viral news.

In the Cambodian context, everyone is vulnerable to fake news. During this COVID-19 period, Her Excellency. Or Vandine has said, "fake news spreads fast because people find fabricated information more compelling than actual news and misinformation on the virus is affecting the mental health of Cambodians".<sup>13</sup> Cambodian people who use social media platforms are facing this concern. Therefore, the Ministry of Information is currently working to monitor social media posts including WhatsApp, Telegram, Messenger, Tik-Tok, Twitter, and Facebook to prevent people from being influenced and affected by fake news.<sup>14</sup> However, since many people are easily affected by the news, everyone must work together to tackle this problem. Consequently, it is significant to raise awareness to prevent and protect people from falling into fake news.

## The Impacts of Fake News

Much fake news is being spread every day on many different platforms causing many disruptions in the world of information. The rapid spread of fake news or disinformation

on online platforms has severe repercussions. Spreading fake news will cause distrust in the media, making it difficult for people to believe the information they see online on various social media platforms.<sup>15</sup> Fake news has immense impact on three aspects.

First, it impacts on the political aspect significantly. It is highly concerning that users can share news without discerning whether or not it is true. The reputation of the leaders may be ruined regardless of the truthfulness of the statement, and it will affect their dignity in the upcoming election.<sup>16</sup> Since there is so much fake news regarding people who died after getting Sinopharm vaccines, the government has taken decisive actions to counter this issue under Article 495 of the Cambodian Criminal Code - "Incitement to commit a felony or cause social chaos" shall be punished by imprisonment between 2 to 6 years with a fine of \$250 to \$1,000.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, fake news also has an impact on the social aspect. For instance, in the case of COVID-19 in Cambodia, fake news generates pointless fear in individuals that leads to the loss of confidence in themselves as well as the whole nation.<sup>18</sup> For example, a picture of a lady known to be a teacher in the province is being shared on Facebook with a suggestive caption that pushes all the blame on the administration. The post stated that the teacher died because of the COVID-19 vaccine. This post became controversial, making the public lose their trust in the government and the vaccines.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, fake news also causes economic consequences. According to the study conducted by Tel Aviv, Israel-based cybersecurity firm CHEQ and the University of Baltimore, it shows that fake news has cost the global economy \$78 billion each year. Based on the estimation, around \$200 million have been used to boost and advertise fake news.<sup>20</sup>

## Response to Fake News in Cambodia

Some methods to combat fake news already exist internationally, administered by International Organizations and States, including both legal and non-legal mechanisms. Many countries established independent websites to counter fake news, such as "Stopfake.org,"<sup>21</sup> by Ukraine, while some responded by creating legislation; for instance, Germany adopted "the Network Enforcement Act" in 2017 to impose a penalty on social media legal persons, in case of failure to restrict fake news in their platform.<sup>22</sup>

At present, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has published a Guidance Note on "Responding to COVID-19 Information Pollution" on how to respond to the fake news efficiently amidst the pandemic situation to guide all stakeholders, including the government, mainstream media, social cohesion, and public.<sup>23</sup> This Guidance has introduced both short-term and long-term responses in the best effort to combat fake news. These responses include the government policy and legislation, the trust-building between citizens and government, promoting media standards, and constructing public education and engagement.<sup>24</sup>

Since 1995, Cambodia has adopted a Law on the Press of Cambodia that has marginally discussed the prohibition of false information.<sup>25</sup> However, this law only applies to the press regime. Consequently, the people, who are not under the press regime, are left in question<sup>26</sup> since the platform of accessing the information has switched to online. In March 2020, the Cambodian government issued a Decision on The Establishment of the Fake News Monitoring Committee, whose responsibility is to monitor, report, and disprove fake news on digital platforms.<sup>27</sup> To combat COVID-19 related fake news, the government of Cambodia granted a Decision on the Establishment of the National Committee for Combating COVID 19 to counter fake news associated with COVID-19.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Cambodia is also drafting the Law on Access to Information to tackle fake news of all forms.<sup>29</sup>

## Youth Contribution in Preventing Fake News

Youth is one of the stakeholders who have actively engaged with the spread of fake news online. Technology serves as one of the main tools for youth to express themselves and gain knowledge in this digital era.

Based on the Assessment Report of UNDP in 2020 has shown that 88% to 94% of the young people in Cambodia have social network accounts; 83% to 86% of them consume it for social networking purpose, while 65% to 70% of them use it as a platform to read the news.<sup>30</sup> Although here is no clear data on the spread of fake news specifically in Cambodia, as the internet has no boundary, the United Nations (UN) asserts that unreliable and false information is spreading globally amidst the pandemic.<sup>31</sup>

According to the National Institute of Cybersecurity and Office of Internet Security (INCIBE and OSI) of Spanish in 2019, it reports that fake news spreads on minors' mobile phones and youths. Young people do not hesitate to share the information, despite the lack of reliability and credibility, so long as it attracts their attention.<sup>32</sup> Even if this report was not specific to the Cambodian context, it indicates minors' behavior in using the internet in general. This data shows that young people are both the recipients and distributors of fake news at once. Upon receiving the news, they share it digitally through their social media platforms. Therefore, they are also the victims of fake news and the stakeholders that distribute unreliable information online. On that account, to respond to the Guidance provided by UNDP, education and engagement from young people is a must to teach them to identify reliable news and prevent them from distributing fake news efficiently.

Raising awareness campaigns is one of the best ways to spread knowledge on the risk of fake news and how to avoid it. Youths should be determined to prevent fake news through

community-led actions and self-initiative ones. According to research, highly educated youths perform consistently better on social media than those at the lower education tiers.<sup>33</sup> Thus, youths can participate in webinars and offline training through the initiatives from corporations that are currently promoting solutions to fake news. For example, The Digital Literacy and Internet Safety Pilot Program, which Smart Axiata established in 2019, has trained over 1,500 high school students about the pros and cons of media in three different provinces, namely Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, and Kampong Chhnang.<sup>34</sup> Those high school students, in turn, can raise more awareness to the elders by making explanatory videos on the impacts of fake news and its possible solutions.

Another example is spreading awareness within the media itself. Youths can produce written or video content on social media for other vulnerable youths to learn about how to identify fake news. For example, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) has conducted numerous ongoing Media and Information Literacy programs to raise young people's awareness on using media responsibly. Online and offline training, workshops, and competitions on media literacy content are available.<sup>35</sup> Considering many elders are generally vulnerable to unreliable content on social media, youths can apply peer to peer strategy by explaining how to identify credible sources.

Since fake news is already all across media, youths can help tackle the outcome of unreliable content through cooperation with national authorities. With support from the officials, a group of youths can create a platform on social media for other youths to reach out when met with questionable content. This platform serves as a representation of youth on the media side. Then, the representatives can propose to the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication to take down every anonymous or misleading post before it goes viral. This way, the media users vulnerable to fake news can find support

immediately after facing unreliable sources. Besides, youths can utilize tech support by clicking reports on false information. However, the action can only be done when they know that the post's content is not legitimate with sufficient force of many users. When all youths with media literacy work together, those small actions will generate a significant change in increasing awareness and combating fake news.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, fake news is a severe concern for everyone in Cambodia, ranging from teenagers to adults and elders. Youths can make contributions to combating this issue by either self-initiated or joining with other organizations. The legal authority has taken various actions in punishing people who spread fake news, but it is only for a particular area related to criminal acts. There is a myriad of fake news that badly influences both the mental and emotional states of vulnerable people. Therefore, youth's participation in spreading media literacy is considerably significant in preventing fake news in Cambodian society.

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KAS For Legal Youth is an educational and training program for students and young professionals in legal field. This program gathers a group of high potential law students and emerging professionals working in legal sector of Cambodia to provide and support them with development of their professional and personal skills. The program look to recruit students and young professionals in law sector annually. For more information write to [chanbormey.long@kas.de](mailto:chanbormey.long@kas.de) or visit our website at <https://www.kas.de/en/web/kambodscha/veranstaltungen/detail/-/content/kas-for-legal-youth-network>