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University Students Engagement With And Disengagement From Fake News

ABSTRACT

The immensity of the exposed news online has given everybody the chance to manipulate information; and so, confusion and misinformation transpire, and the evaluation of credibility and trustworthiness becomes intricate. In spite of the continuous efforts of various academic institutions to provide a wide array of databases and resources among learners – still the current phenomenon called fake news has become incessantly dispersing. This research has explored university students' dis/engagement from/to fake news. Using quantitative measures, it was revealed that the students had used online platforms for communication processes and for retrieving and allocating information. Moreover, upon text mining the student responses, nearly all defined fake news as satirical with misleading and fabricated content which tends to deceive and do harm to people. Students also have a moderate view in which they scarcely believe that as they disengage from fake news, they will develop their communication skills since they learn how to fact check information before sharing it. Lastly, the content analysis has revealed various themes divulging students' experiences of fake news and its implications to the curriculum.

KEY WORDS

Fake news. Online media. Engagement and disengagement. Media studies.

1. Introduction

People trust what they know – what is familiar to them. So, it only makes sense that as coverage of their local communities has dwindled, so too has people's trust in the media. For decades, some pollsters have shown data on the deterioration in audience's dependence and trust of the online media in providing accurate and unbiased news – hence, fake news.¹ The notion of fake news is connected to the complex situation of a decline in public trust coupled with the current state of journalism.²

The Google Trend of 2017, the term *fake news* experienced a dramatic surge in Google searches.³ Jokes, rumours, lies, deceit, and propaganda had all earned a new name – fake news, however, has proven to be an elusive term.⁴ Within the media itself, its definition includes satire, hoaxes, poorly reported news that often gets retracted, a misuse of data, and imprecise and sloppy journalism.⁵

In the United States of America (USA), the perplexity and wide definition of the term was further convoluted when Donald Trump received the electorate majority necessary to become the 45th president of the United States. Shortly after, only weeks into his presidency, the term *fake news* received a massive overhaul. Lies, deceit, and deception are not new concepts in relation to news media and politics. Since the beginning of news media, the spread of information has caused worry over the possibility of said information to be misconstrued, incomplete, or entirely fabricated.

In the Philippines, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Cebu Citizens-Press Council (CCPC) in March 2017 released its definition of „fake news“ or „false news.“ The definition states that fake news occurs when standards of journalism are violated, and scope of content.⁶ According to Pachico A. Seares, CCPC executive director, who in an article in SunStar Philippines said: „*The definition sees „fake news“ from the viewpoint of media and the public it serves. Hence, fake news is a fabricated content presented as factual information in the guise of news. With this, the government (referring to two pending bills) in the Senate and the House that seek to penalize fake news.*“⁷

With this, while journalists and politicians have categorized and discussed what they think *fake news*“ is and what implications they think it might have in the current news media context, no one has ever asked audiences. To overlook the audiences who either engage or disengage with fake news would be to ignore many key dimensions in the discussion of fake news and how it fits into the current era of current affairs dissemination.

Locally, in an institution such as the Notre Dame of Dadiangas University (NDDU) in the Philippines, college students have been exposed to different media both for leisure and socialization. This exposure has led to various media activities such as blogging, reading articles online, watching vlogs (video blogs), online streaming and virtual chatting.⁸ During the rapid field assessment, it was found out that the student's substantial screen time exposure

¹ SWIFT, A.: *Media Bias: How the Bias Affects Public Perception of the Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018. [online]. [2018-10-12]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/yy74t2w5>>.

² ZARYAN, S.: *How Audiences are making sense of Fake News*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Sweden : Lund University Press, 2017, p. 2. [online]. [2018-09-07]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/y5nh9h27>>.

³ *Google Trend*. [online]. [2018-10-08]. Available at: <<https://trends.google.com/trends/>>.

⁴ JOHNSON, H.: *Journalistic Hoaxes in American Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : MIT Press, 2018. [online]. [2018-10-12]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/y64u36dt>>.

⁵ SCHOW, A.: *The Case against the Media*. New York, USA: New York Media LLC, 2019. [online]. [2018-12-11]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/zm2sn6g>>.

⁶ *National Union of Journalist (NUJ)*. [online]. [2019-09-07]. Available at: <<https://www.nuj.org.uk/home/>>.

⁷ SEARES, P.: *CCPC Offers Definition of Fake News*. Released on 06 March 2018. [online]. [2019-10-12]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/y36aen4k>>.

⁸ DECENDARIO, A.: *Health Implications on Technology Usage among College Students*. [Thesis]. General Santos City, Philippines : Notre Dame of Dadiangas University. Research and Publications Center, 2017, p. 3-5.

and engagement with online media (e.g. exposure to mostly all forms of media) has incrementally led to various conflicts academically, socially and in terms of peer interaction.

With this, NDDU adhered towards providing students with authentic and reliable materials. In fact, the institution's library (for instance), has subscribed to diverse print and online resources for the students. In the 1st semester of SY 2019-2020, there were a total of 15,076 student library users who maximized various library print and online materials. This is an initiative of the university to capitalize on the extent of resources by providing them with quality databases and materials essential in their academic journey at the university.

However, as per interview, some university students tend to spread wrong information during class participation. The information they have read online has been shared in their classes which was later discovered to be a hoax. Moreover, with the students' exposure to online media, they tend to disseminate wrong news such as the presumptuous class-off and holidays without official declaration. Added to that, social conflict has also occurred due to giving wrong judgments and misinformation towards their peers. All these are dilemmas brought by university students' engagement with fake news. Experts say that overexposure and too much engagement with social media may affect one's life drastically.⁹

On the basis of the above-cited scenarios, the researcher became motivated to conduct this study due to its topicality and sense of urgency. In the Philippines alone, there have been comparatively fewer studies conducted focusing on fake news, such as on identifying political fake news¹⁰; the effects of fake news in media and economy¹¹; and, on fake news production and social media „trolls.“¹² There have been minimal studies related to the effects of fake news among students and how academic institutions encourage students to become responsible in retrieving and processing online information. Further, this research hopes to make a contribution to knowledge by better understanding news audiences and how they engage with journalism in the public sphere.

2. Statement of the Problem

The research has examined the students' dis/engagement from/with fake news within the context of online news media. Specifically, the following research questions were answered:

1. What are the online activities engaged in by the university students?
2. How do the university students define fake news in the context of online media?
3. How do the university students view the effects of their engagement with and disengagement from fake news in their development in terms of:
 - 3.1.1. Academe
 - 3.1.2. Communication Skills; and,
 - 3.1.3. Interpersonal Skills
4. What are the experiences of the university students to fake news in the context of online media?
5. What are the implications of the students' engagement with fake news to the curriculum?
6. Based on the findings, what media literacy program can be designed?

⁹ SCHUDSON, M.: *The Power of News*. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 208.

¹⁰ BAUM, M.: Foundations of Fake News: What We Know. In BAUM, M., LAZER, D., MELE, N. (eds.): *Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action*. Cambridge : Harvard University press, 2017, p. 6. [online]. [2018-10-15]. Available at <<https://tinyurl.com/yy99ty4s>>.

¹¹ MANALO, S.: *The Effects of fake news on the Philippine media and the economy*. Released on 06 August 2018. [online]. [2018-10-15]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/yylg6hh2>>.

¹² CABANES, J.: *Fake news and scandal*. Released on 07 September 2017. [online]. [2018-10-15]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/y6r9b4rs>>.

3. Methodology

This study utilized the quantitative - qualitative method of research. Specifically, this involved a conducted survey on students' most frequent online activities and how they view the effects of fake news as they dis/engage with such. Furthermore, with their online experiences and exposures, this research also text mined the student's definition of fake news and how their experiences affect the institution's program through examining its implications in the academe. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will employ Moustakas' Phenomenological Thematic Analysis procedure. This described the procedure of preparing and analyzing the data. The general procedures include preparing data for the analyses, reducing the phenomenological data, engaging in imaginative variation, and uncovering the essence of the experience.

Moustakas Thematic Analysis in 1994 includes identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns of relevant statements and revealing the core themes within the data. Hence, the Thematic Content Analysis as paraphrased by Moustakas, includes the following procedures:¹³

Horizontalizing or listing all relevant expressions. In this part of the data analysis, the researchers should look at all data as every statement has equal value. If some statements are irrelevant to the investigating phenomena and are repetitive or overlapping, researcher should ignore these statements. In other words, researchers can create a list from the verbatim transcripts of and delete all irrelevant expressions. After cleaning the data, the remaining parts of the data are called *horizons*. Horizons are the textural meanings or constituent parts of the phenomenon. The horizons are unlimited and horizontalization is a neverending process.¹⁴

Reduction of horizons into relevant statements. In this step, researcher should cluster horizons into relevant statements. The translated data should be split into meaning of units so that each of the horizons has only one meaning. This step of the phenomenological reduction describes the phenomena in „textural language.“

Creating clustered core themes. In this step, the researchers should cluster and thematize the relevant statements which became the „core themes of the experience“ of the phenomenon.

Construction of individual textural descriptions. The textural description is a narrative that explains participants' perceptions of a phenomenon. Moreover, the researcher explains the meaning of units in a narrative format to facilitate the understanding of participants' experiences.

Developing a composite structural description. After researcher writes the textural description, researcher should incorporate the textural description into a structure explaining how the experience occurred. Researcher adds the structures at the end of each paragraph in order to create structural description. This process helps researchers to understand experiences with the phenomena under investigation.

4. Sampling Method

The research participants of this study were randomly selected students of Notre Dame of Dadiangas University (NDDU) in the 2nd semester of school year 2018-2019. There were 2,099 students enrolled in the university by means of the Slovin's Formula. As per computation, using 5% margin of error, the researcher has chosen 16% of each population in every department. Box 1 shows the distribution of the respondents:

¹³ SALINAS, E.: *Academic Journey of the Blaen Tertiary Learners*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Davao City, Philippines : University of Immaculate Conception Graduate School, 2016, p 198-200.

¹⁴ MOUSTAKAS, C.: *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA : SAGE Publications, 1994, p. 178-184.

Department	Total Population	Percentage	Sampling Size
College of Arts and Sciences	284	16%	45
Business College	791	16%	126
College of Education	244	16%	39
College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology	601	16%	96
College of Health Science	179	16%	28
Total	2099	16%	334

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents of the study

Source: own processing, 2020

5. Results and Discussion



FIGURE 1: Online activities engaged in by the university students

Source: own processing, 2020

The data implies that in terms of online activities, students utilized online platforms primarily for communication purposes. Sending instant messages online or through electronic mails or any other social messaging sites was the most convenient way of sharing information.¹⁵

An email, for example, is a digital message sent electronically from one computer to one or more other through the internet. Emails are flexible and can be used in schools in giving instructions, serving as documentation, providing confirmation, for communication, making recommendations, providing a status update and making an inquiry.¹⁶ Moreover, with its increasing availability, dynamic nature and easy use, the Internet has become a popular source of information that has inevitably changed citizens' media repertoires.¹⁷ The data also revealed that students have used internet and social media as a source for current events. This means that many students have instead turned to social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter rather than to television, radio or newspapers to read and acquire their news.

¹⁵ SALUDO, R.: *Fake News in PH: Here's the real story*. Released on 15 February 2018. [online]. [2018-02-15]. Available at: <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2018/02/15/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/fake-news-ph-heres-real-story/380295/>>.

¹⁶ SYJUCO, M.: *Behind the fakes in the country*. Released on 24 October 2017. [online]. [2018-08-18]. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/opinion/fake-news-philippines.html>>.

¹⁷ MARCHI, R.: With Facebook, Blogs, and Fake News, Teens Reject Journalistic Objectivity. In *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 2012, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 246-262. [online]. [2012-10-03]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0196859912458700>>.

On the other hand, upon text mining¹⁸ students' definitions of fake news, it was revealed that the student respondents define **fake news as information that can deceive and harm people**. In terms of its content, students define **fake news as a satire or parody, or information with misleading and false content**¹⁹. This means, fake news are news information that has no intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool and the information are used to frame an issue in which the new content is 100 % false, invalidated, unverified and designed to deceive and do harm. The following are excerpts from students' definitions.

A report or an information broadcasted live, personal and online which are not yet proven true or factual. Today, fake news circulates around the world today in different forms from different platforms - mainly to divert people from the authentic truth, to sway someone in the wrong info, to spread wrong type of awareness or to fight a government. By spreading wrong info, it illuminates a macroeffect that threatens people, their identity and their existence. (Student B)

Fake news is basically, false information being put out to the public, mostly by reporters and journalists. It is mainly used in order to mislead and damage an identity, a company etc. This type of news can happen within the news media or social media platforms. (Student E)

The table shows the overall view of the students on the effects of their engagement with and disengagement from fake news. As revealed, the student's engagement with fake news is 3,35 which is interpreted as moderate. This means that as students engage with fake news, they believe that it has a moderate effect in the academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills.²⁰

Moreover, the data also presented the overall result of the students' disengagement from fake news. The table shows an overall mean of 3,49 or interpreted as high. This means that as students disengage from fake news, they feel that it has a high effect on their academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills

	Overall Mean	Interpretation
Engagement with Fake News	3,35	Moderate
Academic	3,31	Moderate
Communication Competence	3,37	Moderate
Interpersonal Skills	3,38	Moderate
Disengagement from Fake News	3,49	High
Academic	3,32	Moderate
Communication Competence	3,55	High
Interpersonal Skills	3,60	High

TABLE 2: Overall view on student's engagement and disengagement to fake news

Source: own processing, 2020

¹⁸ DASRI, Y.: Text mining framework, methods and techniques. In *IOSR Journal of Computer Engineering (IOSR-JCE)*, 2017, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 19-22. [online]. [2017-07-15]. Available at: <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2249/6c8251735204fcf66cceb0feedb946a68e25.pdf>>.

¹⁹ WARDLE, C.: *Six types of misinformation circulated this election season*. [online]. [2018-08-05]. Available at: <https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/6_types_election_fake_news.php (2017-05-05)>.

²⁰ KIEMAN, S.: *With The Rise of Fake News on Social Media, Can Information Literacy Impact how Students Evaluate Information on their Social Media Channels*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Sydney, Australia : Anglicare, 2017, p. 29. [online]. [2017-08-19]. Available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/yyow3xeu>>.

This implies that, in terms of how students view the effects of their engagement with fake news, they believe that it has a moderate effect in the academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills.²¹ Moreover, in terms of their views on their disengagement, results revealed that it has a high effect on their academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills.

Student Experiences on Fake News

In addition, the researcher has analyzed and extracted relevant themes from the clustered statements using the lens of Moustakas²², the following were the themes:

Clustered Core Themes	Relevant Statements
Deception in Fake News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thought it was an interesting advertisement but it was a software virus • My computer has been damaged so badly • Fake news scammed me. • It was not a job opportunity at all. • It's all a scam
Fake News Caused Disappointment and Inconvenience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It really caused disappointment to us fans. • We found out that the job source was just a hoax. • It's a simple fake news but it affects a lot of people. • A trending news says „no class“ but stated otherwise. • The person tweeted that holiday post was not reliable.
Harmful Effects of Fake News on Students' Academics and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I copied some reviews but it turned out the source gives wrong information • Reviews were made by netizen and was not professionally made • <i>Mali ang nabasa ko</i> (I read wrong information) • I don't know which sites are fake and which are not. • My assignment was not accepted. • I got no grade on that activity. • <i>Parang contradicting yung information na naresearch namin</i> (It was as if that our researches were contradicting) • I think she (classmate) built this hard feeling towards me. • <i>So di nya ako pinapansin.</i> (My classmate starts ignoring me) • <i>Parang nagka conflict kami a little bit.</i> (It seems we had a little conflict)
Conventional Responses to Fake News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did I go wrong? • Maybe I don't know which sites are fake and which are not fake • (Fake news) It's a scam! • <i>maybe mali lang talaga nabasa ko</i> (Maybe I read the wrong ones) • Professor reacted and sort of got angry upon hearing it. • That post was not reliable at all. • Everybody in class laughed

TABLE 3: Experiences of the university students on their engagement with fake news

Source: own processing, 2020

²¹ KEARSLEY, M., SCHNEIDERMAN, J.: *Engagement theory*. Columbia, USA : Journalism Review, 1999, p. 15.

²² YUKSEL-ARSLAN, R., YILDIRIM, S.: Theoretical Frameworks, Methods, and Procedures for Conducting Phenomenological Studies in Educational Settings. In *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 9-15. [online]. [2015-07-01]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271833455_Theoretical_Frameworks_Methods_and_Procedures_for_Conducting_Phenomenological_Studies_in_Educational_Settings on September 2019>.

Implications of Fake News on the Curriculum

This research also examined the implications of student engagement with fake news as viewed by various subject matter experts (SME) and university administrators. After examining the responses of the SME or faculty informants, when asked about the implications of fake news, the following were the themes extracted:

Clustered Core Themes	Relevant Statements
Fake News Radically Alters and Manipulate Truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread of information to misinform and alter public opinion • Satire or mock a subject or position with all its metaphors and overstatements • Manipulate public stance and opinion
Fake News Misleads Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students possibly use wrong concepts in their future academic tasks • It is difficult to correct or change students' perspective especially if they strongly believe the misinformation shared in social media despite the evidence proving otherwise.
Fake News Compromised Critical Thinking and Research Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skeptical in identifying sources to support claims • Students should be critical of them not to be easily deceived. • Students should know how to differentiate facts from opinion • Fake news would be a hurdle in training students' critical thinking. • Critical thinking is greatly affected.
Too Much Exposure to Fake News Affects Students' Psychological Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The more students have increased access to media; so too they have more exposure to fake news • Fake news affects their confidence and well-being. • Teach students to navigate the challenges of the digital age • It is difficult to correct or change students' perspective especially if they strongly believe the misinformation
Proposition to Combat the Spread of Fake News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate Digital Literacy in our respective classes. • Substantial training for students on how to contextually analyze sources • Integrate authentic materials such as using real news and compare it with fake news. • Integrate media literacy • Situate symposiums about topics concerning the issue • Integrate awareness in various disciplines especially among General Education (GE) courses. • Students must be taught with skills on identifying the demarcation between real and fake news.

TABLE 4: *Implication of fake news to the curriculum*

Source: own processing, 2020

With the abovementioned results, an intervention program has been proposed to strengthen the current stance of the students on the subject matter. Even though, the students are aware of fake news, it is still necessary for the institution to build a program to intensify the values of trust and truth.²³

Looking at the last thematic statements, it can be implied that the faculty informants hope to discourse this issue with a collective and collaborative effort in the academe through formulating a concrete mechanism to mitigate the continuous spread of fake news.²⁴

²³ SHERMER, M.: *Reasons why people ignore facts and believe fake news*. Released on 19 March 2017. [online]. [2017-03-19]. Available at: <<https://www.businessinsider.com/why-do-people-believe-fake-news-2017-3>>.

²⁴ BALMAS, M.: When Fake news becomes real: Combined Exposure To Multiple News Sources And Political Attitudes Of Inefficacy, Alienation, And Cynicism. In *Communication Research*, 2014, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 430-454. [online]. [2014-04-01]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0093650212453600?journalCode=crxa>>.

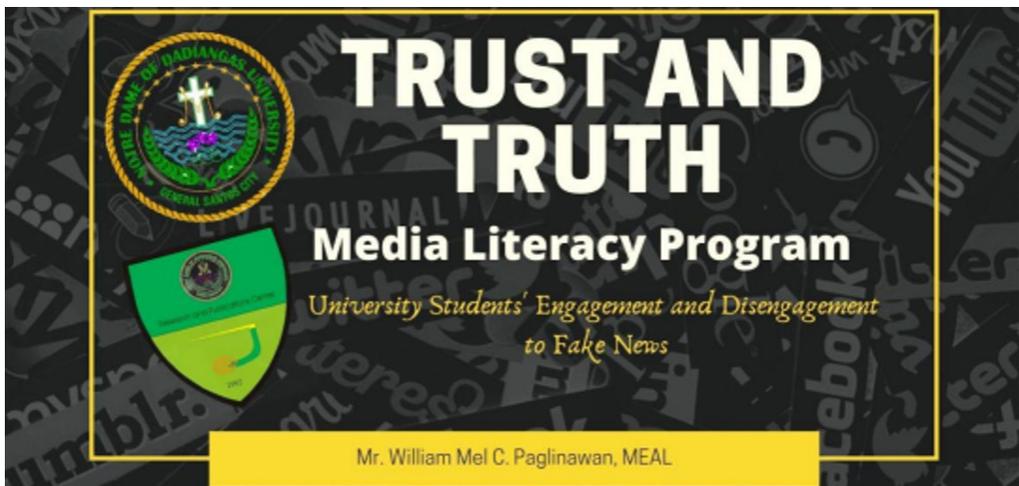


FIGURE 2 | Media literacy program

Source: own processing, 2020

It is imperative to convey the importance of teaching and embedding media and information literacy into the curriculum.²⁵ This could have been an initial step towards addressing the issue of fake news and its further implications.

Through the lens of the aforementioned results, this study also aims to build a program which primarily aims to address the issues under study. Hence, the researcher proposed a media literacy program named „*Trust and Truth: A Media Literacy Program.*“ This Media literacy program primarily encompasses the practices that allow students to access, use and critically evaluate media contents available.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that students utilized online platforms primarily for communication purposes. Sending instant messages online or through electronic mails or any other social messaging sites was the most convenient way of sharing information.

Moreover, fake news, as defined by the students, are news information that has no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool. The information is used to frame an issue in which the new content is 100 % false, invalidated, unverified and designed to deceive and do harm.

In terms of how students view the effects of their engagement with fake news, they believe that it has a moderate effect in the academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills. Moreover, in terms of their views on their disengagement, results revealed that it has a high effect on their academe, their communicative competence and interpersonal skills.

Lastly, various themes were extracted which helps the researcher analyzing the students' experiences on their engagement with and disengagement from fake news; as well as the implications fake news might have brought to the pedagogical curriculum of the institution.

With this, this study had probed on the university student's engagement with and disengagement from fake news. From the start of this research, there is still more to be explored in this topic. Hence, the following were recommended: Future research in this field may also discover other salient issues that the informants may experience in relation to the subject. Aside from this, other researchers may also include different participants coming from other ethnic backgrounds.

²⁵ RAYESS, E.: *Fake News Judgment: The Case of Undergraduate Students of Notre Dame University-Louaize, Lebanon.* [Dissertation Thesis]. Lebanon : Notre Dame University- Graduate School, 2018, p. 298.

Moreover, it is also recommended that a study on the experiences of teachers in the context of fake news will also be conducted. This will also determine if professionals also have personal experiences of fake news and how they cope with the spread of misinformation. Teachers may instill among their students the value of critical thinking and research skills. Aside from this, teachers may also learn and update themselves with various information gathering and searching tools to expand their versatility in teaching. The material output proposed in this paper will be launched and implemented. This will serve as the institution's initiative and mechanism in order to address the issue of fake news.

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