

# Media showcases role in helping to tackle Covid-19 crisis

Over 150 newsrooms highlight how credible media made an impact during the pandemic

Fabian Koh

As the coronavirus rages, the young in Asia did not sit still.

In China, community youth leader Xie Shang Wei helped to deliver food to the elderly poor living in Harbin city. In Indonesia, undergraduates of Bogor Agricultural University distributed masks to villagers in rural communities.

Their efforts and those of four

other groups from Singapore were featured in a video screened at a webinar yesterday to showcase how young adults went to the aid of victims of the virus.

It was produced by the National Youth Achievement Award Council and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS).

Its screening was part of this year's World News Day, with more than 150 media titles from across the globe coming together to mark

the occasion with special reports, interviews, webinars, shows and more.

Among those taking part were the Financial Times in the United Kingdom; The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times from the United States; The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald in Australia; The Chosun Ilbo in South Korea; and South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.

The day kicked off in Asia, where newsrooms from the Philippines to Indonesia to South Korea joined in with editorials and events. These would continue through the day as newsrooms around the world

joined in across time zones.

In Singapore, a webinar, titled Covid-19: How Can You Contribute?, was live-streamed from the newsroom of Singapore's national broadsheet, The Straits Times.

In his opening remarks, Mr Warren Fernandez, editor of ST and president of the World Editors Forum, stressed the media's role in informing the masses and debunking fake news, especially during the current pandemic.

"The world around us is getting more and more complex, it's fast moving and fast changing. I think all of us could do with a little bit of help figuring things out and staying on top of developments, of separating the facts from the fiction, of helping to join the dots and sort of interpreting where we are today and where things are moving tomorrow."

This becomes absolutely critical particularly in the current Covid-19 situation, added Mr Fernandez, who is also editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group.

Newsrooms have to step up to help people make sense of what current events mean for their lives and livelihoods, and provide credible information to help them stay safe and secure.

But quality journalism, he added, is neither free nor cheap. It takes hard work, commitment and resources, he added, noting that Covid-19 has hit many newsrooms hard, with sharp falls in advertising revenues. This would impact their ability to serve their communities.

During the webinar, two panel discussions explored how journalists are tackling the pandemic.

The first focused on the ongoing "infodemic" during the pandemic, with its surge of misinformation.

In the second panel discussion, moderated by Viswa Sadasivan, chief executive of consultancy firm Strategic Moves, Mr Fernandez; Dr June Tay, head of the digital media programme at the School of Science and Technology in SUSS, and infectious diseases expert Dale Fisher, spoke on issues of credibility and trust in media outlets.

Professor Fisher, who is group chief of medicine at the National University Health System and chairman of the steering committee for the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network at the World Health Organisation, highlighted the role of effective communications in a public health crisis and the need for a responsible media.

Efforts to deliver quality cover-

age to readers during the Covid-19 outbreak were also highlighted in ST's specially produced video, Journalism Through A Pandemic, yesterday evening.

The half-hour documentary on ST's Facebook and YouTube pages features footage of its correspondents covering the scourge across Asia, showing how newsrooms adapted to social distancing and the ways in which news stories have made an impact on national policies.

The World News Day events will culminate in a virtual programme by the Canadian Journalism Foundation and World Editors Forum today at 7am (Singapore time).

It will feature US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases director Anthony Fauci and Philippine news website Rappler's co-founder Maria Ressa.

The webcast will be hosted by CNN Worldwide's chief media correspondent Brian Stelter, and feature musical performances by singers like Grammy winner Macy Gray.

fabkoh@sph.com.sg

Those who are interested in the webcast can register for free on the World News Day website. Go to <https://str.sg/wnd-event>



(From right) Infectious diseases expert Dale Fisher, The Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, the Singapore University of Social Sciences' digital media programme head June Tay, moderator Viswa Sadasivan, and ST multimedia correspondent Yeo Sam Jo at yesterday's session on tackling Covid-19. Mr Fernandez said World News Day yesterday was an opportunity to make the case that having credible media organisations is important to the process of public communication as well as the health and well-being of societies. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

## Trust critical to bolstering public confidence during crisis: Panel

Lim Min Zhang

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of public communication, as well as the need for institutions such as the media to build up trust with their audiences, said panellists during a discussion on World News Day yesterday.

Public communication is often overlooked as a pillar of response to outbreaks, and having credible news organisations is critical to this, said the panel.

The three panellists were Professor Dale Fisher, group chief of medicine at the National University

Health System; Dr June Tay, head of the digital media programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS); and The Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez.

The session, titled Tackling Covid-19: Getting It Right And How You Can Contribute, was held at The Straits Times' newsroom and streamed virtually. The session was moderated by chief executive of Strategic Moves and former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan.

Prof Fisher, an infectious diseases expert, said a lack of good risk communication and community engagement could lead to people failing to do their part to curb the spread of disease.

"People always think of case management, infection prevention and control, testing, epidemiology and the epidemic curves that we have to flatten... but the final pillar is always risk communications, community engagement.

"And if you get that wrong, this leads to a failed response," said Prof Fisher, who chairs the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network steering committee for the World Health Organisation.

Mr Fernandez said that World News Day was an opportunity to make the case that having credible media organisations is important to the process of public communication, and the health and

well-being of societies.

"You need good public information going out, you need the experts. But to complete that circle, you need good, credible journalism as well," said Mr Fernandez, who is also president of the World Editors Forum and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group.

During this Covid-19 period, there has been a surge in the number of people accessing news from sources like ST, he said. This hunger for information speaks to the issue of trust and credibility.

What the newsroom has done is to invest in correspondents, building up their authoritativeness and credibility over the years so that they can step up when such a crisis breaks out, he said.

He said a decision was made by ST to put all content related to Covid-19 outside of the paywall as a public service.

"We did that with some tepida-

tion as it has commercial implications, but what we found was our subscriptions actually went up, and that says to me that people do value the information," he added.

Dr Tay, from SUSS' School of Science and Technology, said that Covid-19 has brought not just risks and challenges, but also opportunities in the digital space.

Responding to a question from the audience about how people can adapt to certain jobs are wiped out with the advent of the digital economy, Dr Tay said it was important to harness creativity and the "human touch" to create more compelling products and services.

"If you see some durian sellers who do live streaming, it's actually very exciting. They are able to engage the audience and show their personality. So, we really have to think about how we do things in different ways," she said.

mzlim@sph.com.sg

## Credible media sources one way to fight infodemic, say Asian journalists

Dominique Nelson

Explanatory journalism and access to reliable information will have key roles in dealing with the pandemic, Asian journalists said at a webinar to mark World News Day yesterday.

Misinformation is causing much alarm and making it difficult for countries to tackle the spread of coronavirus infections, they noted.

The journalists were participat-

ing in a webinar, titled Covid-19: How Can You Contribute?, telecast over Zoom and YouTube. More than 500 people had signed up for the webinar.

Facilitated by The Straits Times' Asian Insider editor Shefali Rekhi, the panel took up the issue of the plague of misinformation in Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore, and weighed in on efforts of journalists to counter the infodemic.

With lack of accurate data from the Indonesian government, many

Indonesians are turning to movements that have appeared in the grassroots and so-called "experts" to plug the information gap, said Mr Tama Salim, world news editor at The Jakarta Post.

"Misinformation creeps into the vacant spaces that are lacking attention by the government... This kind of information has resulted in even influencers and their tens of thousands of followers falling victim," he said.

Fellow panellist Zakir Hussain,

ST's Singapore editor and vice-president of the Singapore Press Club, discussed the alarm in Singapore after falsehoods spread on social media channels.

"I think one area where fake news and misinformation spread quite rapidly was among migrant worker communities themselves because they didn't understand, or didn't have access to information in their own languages initially," he said.

In the Philippines, Ms Pam Rances, digital content manager at the Manila Bulletin, said several Filipino newsrooms had published explainers to give readers a better understanding of the virus.

But Mr Salim said journalists cannot know everything there is to know about Covid-19 in Indonesia.

In response to a question from the audience on how to coax readers to listen to information that is inconvenient to them, both Ms Rances and Mr Hussain agreed that news on Covid-19 must reach the audience on platforms familiar to them such as WhatsApp.

Wrapping up the session, Ms Rekhi said tapping credible media sources is one way to fight the infodemic. She said that legacy and traditional media are sources of credible information, while Mr Salim added that students should approach a mix of news outlets to fact-check any information.

World News Day was created in 2018 and spotlights the relevance of good journalism.

dnelson@sph.com.sg

### Why journalism matters more than ever now

Here are extracts of editorials from several newspapers yesterday to mark World News Day:

#### Hold the front page (The Irish Times):

"In marking World News Day today, news organisations across the globe are setting out the case that 'news' matters, that news is more than entertainment or advertising – though it can be all – and that news is an essential oxygen supply empowering citizens, holding authority to account. And in doing so, sustaining democratic societies, a vital counterweight to political and economic power..."

The occasion, however, is not just an acknowledgment of journalism and its necessity, a mutual self-congratulatory pat on the back, but a warning that all is far from well, that news and journalism are critically threatened."

#### Quality journalism more crucial than ever (The Herald, South Africa):

"With so much misinformation circulating on social media these days, credible journalism is crucial..."

In a world feasting on 'fast news', it is up to professional media organisations and journalists to ensure that the traditional forms of gathering the news, together with the required checks and balances, don't fall by the wayside in the rush to be 'first' with the story.

In the age of Twitter, Facebook and Google, among others, there is a very clear place for credible, trusted media organisations."

#### In an age of fake news, press freedom must be promoted and protected (South China Morning Post):

"There is a thirst for accurate information about this deadly new disease and the measures taken to curb it. But readers are confronted with a mass of unreliable information and rumours, most of it through social media. Journalists are trained to report objectively and fairly. They substantiate facts and provide balance. They do not always get it right. But there are good reasons why readers have turned to professional media organisations during the pandemic as they seek reliable information."

#### Vital, vigilant journalism (Philippine Daily Inquirer):

"The weaponisation of social media for the benefit of powerful political interests is why journalism has become even more vital and relevant today."

In an age where all sorts of information are at people's fingertips, the work of journalists has become way more daunting but essential, a constant fight to shine the light of truth against those who have the motive and the means to suppress it."