

Tackling fake news, propaganda

EDITORIAL

IT WILL BE INTERESTING to see what happens in the wake of an announcement this week of a fresh attempt to deal with the issue of fake news.

Although hardly a day goes by without at least one mention of fake news by its chief practitioner, U.S. President Donald Trump, the term was seldom witnessed in the days before social media, when all news reached us in newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

However, even in those days the political leanings of various publications often distorted the real news, and there was a pro-Liberal slant to be found in the Toronto Star and a pro-Conservative one in the Toronto Sun.

But how is someone surfing Facebook really able to discern the truthfulness of anything they see?

The announcement this week by News Media Canada was that funding by a federal ministry will allow it to launch SPOT Fake News Online, which it describes as an educational program to empower Canadians in the fight against fake news.

SPOT is an acronym for Source, Perspective, Other sources and Timeliness.

SPOT Fake News Online will provide a simple tool to help Canadians of all ages critically assess online news and information by asking four critical questions when reading information online, said the news release.

The four questions: Is the source credible? Is the perspective biased? Do other sources provide the same information? Is the story timely?

Funding for the program is coming from the Digital Citizen Initiative of the Department of Canadian Heritage, and there's little doubt that the launch about 100 days before a federal election is not coincidental.

In the news release, John Hinds, President and CEO of News Media Canada, said. We know that 65% of Canadians are worried about false information being used as a weapon. And as we head into an election this fall, we know that fake news is an especially pressing issue. There is an urgent need to ensure that all Canadians can critically assess what they're reading and watching online.

Pablo Rodriguez, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, chimed: Access to accurate, diverse and relevant news is crucial to our democracy. In response to the increase in disinformation published online and through social media, our government has made it a priority to help equip citizens with the tools and skills needed to critically assess online information.

The release said the multi-faceted and bilingual program will launch this fall, and will include educational video content, a new microsite, a national PR campaign and a comprehensive print and digital newspaper advertising campaign in News Media Canada's member newspapers.

It describes Toronto-based News Media Canada as the national association of the Canadian news media industry, with members in every province and territory.

Mr. Hinds asserts that there is an urgent need to ensure that all Canadians can critically assess what they're reading and watching online, adding, We're thankful to the Canadian government for recognizing this need, and proud to be launching a tangible tool through our SPOT Fake News Online campaign to help build citizens' critical thinking, preparedness and increase resiliency to disinformation.

Funding for the initiative comes from a \$7-million allocation announced in January. All programs being funded by the ministry are to promote civic, news and digital media literacy to help Canadians to become resilient against online harms. Canadian Heritage will also invest \$19.4 million over four years in a new Digital Citizen Research Program to help everyone understand online disinformation and its impact on Canadian society, and to build the evidence base that will be used to identify possible actions and future policy-making in this space.

In the circumstances, it will be particularly interesting to see the reaction of opposition parties, who may well see the program as tilted in favour of the governing Liberals.

Coincidentally, the federal Conservatives this week issued two news releases which referred to the 'SNC-Lavalin corruption scandal.'

Corruption? It's generally defined as 'dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery.'

We thought the 'scandal' was merely unsuccessful attempts by the Prime Minister's Office and others to substitute a non-criminal proceeding as a means of punishing the firm for bribing Libyan officials years ago to get lucrative contracts.