

Institute of National Security Studies

“Fake News: Apex threat to National Security”

Press Release



The Institute of National Security Studies (INSS)

**Public Lecture
on**

FAKE NEWS: APEX THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY



**Guest Speaker
Mr. Mohan Samaranayake**

Director General, Department of Government Information

**On 6th May 2021
from 1500-1630 hrs**

Institute of National Security Studies; the premier think tank on national security established under the Ministry of Defence, organized a Public Lecture on “Fake News: Apex Threat to National Security,” as a virtual session on the 6th of May 2021 from 1500-1630 hours. The Guest Speaker of the occasion was Mr. Mohan Samaranayake, Director General of the Department of Government Information. The Moderator, Rear Admiral Dimuthu Gunawardena, Director of Communication and Publication welcomed the guest speaker and took an approach towards the dialogue on the threats posed by the circulation of Fake News. The event was opened to the public and valuable outputs were rendered by the audience; inclusive of representatives of government authorities, tri-forces, academia, journalists and other invitees.

The bottom-line of the discussion on Fake News was trifold. Those include the revisiting into the definition of Fake News focusing on its evolution up to the digital age, motives of the circulation of Fake News and critically putting under a lens, the progress Sri Lanka achieved in the regulation of the said matter.

The guest speaker first set straight on the fact that Fake News lacks a universally accepted definition, thus positioning Fake News as a semantically contested concept. A broad definition was also provided which referred to Fake News as false or misleading information which appears as credible, but in reality, are mere fabrications. Three scholarly established elements of Fake News were also identified, namely creating mistrust, misinformation and manipulation. Apparently, the misuse of information is nothing novel, and dates back to ancient chapters of

history. Such instances were false allegations spread against Lord Buddha, Marc Antony committing suicide following the spread of baseless rumors and the sensationalizing of news by Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst competing with each other as news agencies in New York, which was later referred by the phrase 'yellow journalism'. As the term Fake News, lost its meaning given the newer advancements of the digital age, scholars promoted the use of the term, 'False Information'.

Focusing on the motives behind the circulation of False Information, the guest speaker pointed out several factors citing examples. The predominant motive was politically oriented, where False Information was used as a weapon against regime change. Most of the regime change attempts on political leaders such as Viktor Yanukovich by the West during the cold war, was sparked by misuse of information. The speaker also pointed out the alleged misinformation campaign during the 2015 presidential election as another objective of Fake News; seeking victory in elections. Rather than disposing of Fake News solely to the account of internet-based sources; Social Media, mainstream media was also assigned with a liability of being responsible in dissemination of misinformation, which has affected greatly for the losing of their credibility.

As to self-assess the credibility of information, the guest speaker proposed several factors such as detecting the credibility of the source, reading behind headline and critically viewing the content, checking for supportive sources and dates and assessing the authenticity of the author.

The discussion was also turned towards Sri Lanka's commitment on battling Fake News. In this regard, the most recent cabinet decision on social media regulation was considered highly debatable, and the consequent discussion revealed several crevices in the local system towards regulation of information. The government does not have a specific institutional body solely in charge of regulating Fake News. No studies were conducted as to propose policy options, hence no academically sound and politically viable regulatory measures were adopted on the misuse of information.

By concluding the lecture, Mr. Samaranayake brought up valuable outputs to the issue, which ranged from attitudinal transformation to policy formulation. Therein, the approach towards the matter was preferred to be both bottom-up, which focuses on increasing public awareness and top-down options which include introducing fact-checking mechanisms within the parliament itself, which is currently not in existence and the establishment of proper supervisory bodies.

