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Of global crisis and false posts

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How they worsen the crisis

AMID a worsening global energy crunch, authorities are now fighting a parallel battle: a surge of false information online. In just four days — between March 29 and April 1 — the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) had taken down 159 false posts linked to misinformation exploiting the ongoing global crisis. The false social media content taken down by MCMC is reported to be of three categories: allegations about fuel price hikes; misinformation claiming that Malaysia would have to pay toll charges to use the Strait of Hormuz; and false claims about increases in Tenaga Nasional Bhd electricity tariffs. Call them merchants of fakery. Perfidy is their game. Otherwise why use fabricated news graphics falsely attributed to mainstream broadcasters, including their logos for good measure. Admittedly, it is hard for most people to detect that these are artificial intelligence-generated unless pointed out by MCMC, as has happened in this case. Be that as it may, we have to be vigilant, especially in times of crisis when exploitation is that much easier. Those who are well-informed will know Malaysia is not the only country affected by the energy crisis. Others are in far more serious situations.

The perfidious offenders may want to take note that MCMC hasn't just stopped at taking down fake posts; it is investigating 17 individuals believed to have spread false information on social media about the global energy crisis. According to the commission, the 17 individuals include those identified to have edited pictures and infographics displaying fake information using the names of local news agencies. Is Malaysia affected by the global crisis? Yes, it is. Putrajaya has made this clear to the nation. Leaders from the prime minister downwards have addressed the nation about the impact of the global crisis on Malaysia. Despite this, why the insidious disease? Those being investigated may have been seeking fame and fortune by fakery, but instead infamy is what they have earned.

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Here is why fakery is an insidious disease. False narratives can deepen uncertainty, distort public behaviour and ultimately worsen the very crisis they exploit. False claims about fuel shortages or price hikes can trigger panic buying, hoarding and artificial demand spikes. Even untrue rumours can create real shortages if enough people act on them. When fake posts mimic legitimate media or government announcements, they blur the line between truth and falsehood. Once trust is eroded, even accurate government communication struggles to land. Every fake post forces authorities to fight two battles: one real, one manufactured. Policymakers must spend time debunking rumours instead of focusing solely on solutions. Misinformation during a crisis has tangible consequences on public behaviour, economic stability and national resilience.

These merchants of fakery will soon realise the impact of their treachery when they and their families fall victim to the very crisis they have exploited. By then, it will be too late to save themselves from criminal charges and the infamy that is sure to follow.