

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mental Health in the Newsroom: Ethical and Responsible Media Coverage

Experts in the industry share their insights about how the media has and can shape the public's perception on mental health issues

KUCHING, 14 JULY 2023 – The Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (Content Forum) and Astro Radio ERA Sarawak recently organised a panel session titled *"Let's Talk Content: Breaking News, Breaking Minds - the Trauma of Media and Mental Health"* to address the profound impact of media on mental health reporting. Held in Kuching, Sarawak, the event brought together industry experts to shed light on the influence of media biases, stereotypes, and responsible reporting in shaping public perception of mental health issues.

Moderated by Sarawakian radio personality and entrepreneur Chopie Cakap, the panel discussion centred around the country's media landscape and its coverage of mental health issues, including suicide, distress, anxiety, and trauma. Experts in the field, including psychiatrist Dr. Ravivarma Rao from Hospital Miri; Alia Ali, founder of the Awareness Against Suicide (AWAS) Malaysia; and journalist Norman Goh from Nikkei Asia, shared their insights and experiences on the subject.

During the insightful session, panellists shared personal experiences of how mental health issues have affected them or their loved ones. Alia, founder of AWAS Malaysia, opened up about the loss of someone dear to her due to the stigma surrounding mental health, reiterating the lasting emotional trauma she continues to experience. She emphasised, "To this day, I still feel the emptiness and trauma. There are even days when I still have nightmares and scream in my sleep. The pain is real, the stigma is real."

Alia also expressed concern over the portrayal of mental health issues in the news and how headlines can have a significant impact, especially when personal details are included. She highlighted the lack of awareness about mental health issues in Malaysia, particularly in rural areas where mental health is still associated with superstitions and spiritual disturbances.

Norman Goh, a journalist from Nikkei Asia, acknowledged the challenges faced by media practitioners in a fast-paced news industry that pressures them to break stories quickly. However, he emphasised the need to prioritise responsible reporting and asked the industry to consider the repercussions of their coverage. Goh highlighted the dangers of generalising mental health issues and urged journalists to question whether certain details are necessary. He drew parallels between South Korea's "cancel culture" to Malaysia's "fashion policing," highlighting the power of words and their lasting effects. Goh stated, "The effects of your words that you type or speak will stick with that person forever, regardless of whether they are a celebrity or not."

The panellists raised concern over the rise of cancel culture, particularly its impact on minority groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, migrants, disabled people, women, and young people. To this, they collectively highlighted the importance of reporting facts objectively, in a manner that empowers individuals to manage the situation and to push policy makers into action. They

advocated for responsible reporting that highlights positive stories, shifts biases, and considers the implications of content on vulnerable groups, including children and the elderly.

An example raised by panellists was the issue of copycat suicides, whereby detailed news reports on suicide cases can have a ripple effect on vulnerable individuals. They cited alarming statistics revealing that from 2019 to 2021, 1,706 recorded cases of suicide occurred in Malaysia, with over 83% involving women and 51% involving children. The panellists emphasised the urgent need to destigmatise suicide and depression, urging media practitioners to provide resources and support information alongside mental health reporting.

Dr. Ravivarma Rao, a psychiatrist from Hospital Miri, iterated the importance of ensuring individuals know where to seek help. He highlighted the need for counselling services, access to psychologists, and helplines, stressing the responsibility of news reports to provide information about mental health conditions and available resources. Dr. Rao also discussed the inadvertent harm caused by negative interactions and victim-blaming, which can be perpetuated by statements made in the news. He said, "Whatever is published stays on forever and will be consumed by the mass public of all ages. Articles about mental health issues should be written based on facts and evidence rather than media biases and stereotypes."

The panellists stressed the importance of media literacy and critical thinking abilities to counter the spread of fake news, acknowledging the presence of fake news and its effect on the youth's perception of news. Dr. Rao also accentuated that children's impressionable minds and ongoing brain development make them particularly vulnerable to misinformation.

The panel session concluded with a collective call to media professionals to adopt responsible reporting practices, prioritise accuracy and empathy, and contribute to a better understanding of mental health issues. The event was graced with the presence of Datuk Abdullah Saidol, the Deputy Minister in the Sarawak Premier's Office (Corporate Affairs, Information, and Sarawak Public Communications Unit), who commended the Content Forum for organising the event and emphasised the importance of qualified journalism in the digital media revolution.

For more information about the Content Forum or the Content Code, please visit www.contentforum.my.

– END –

ABOUT THE CONTENT FORUM

The Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (Content Forum) is a self-regulatory organisation and industry forum registered under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and designated by the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA'98) to oversee and promote self-regulation of content over the electronic networked medium. The Content Forum consists of key players of the content industry i.e., advertisers, advertising agencies, broadcasters, content creators/distributors, audiotext hosting services providers, advertising agencies, internet service providers and civic groups.

Aimed at facilitating self-regulation, which provides an additional layer of consumer protection that complements the legal framework, the Content Forum is committed to govern and promote the creation, distribution and consumption of electronic-networked content.

As an industry self-regulatory body, the Content Forum comprises of key members of the communications and multimedia content industry, including broadcasters, advertisers, content creators, internet access service providers and civic groups. This dynamic and robust representation of industry practitioners ensures that content standards continue to be developed with the objective of establishing a level playing field in the industry.

The Content Forum is responsible for the implementation and enforcement of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code (“the Content Code”). The Content Code was prepared by the Content Forum and first registered with MCMC on 1st September 2004. The Content Code is the principal source for industry self-regulation as it contains governing standards and best practices for content dissemination within the communications and multimedia industry in Malaysia. The main objective of the Content Code is to outline procedures of self-regulation that provides the platform for creativity, innovation and healthy growth of a fast-evolving industry.

The Content Forum houses a Complaints Bureau that is empowered to address all complaints relating to content disseminated over electronic networks. The Complaints Bureau is empowered to investigate possible breaches of the Content Code, mediate disputes, adjudicate cases, publish orders and impose sanctions where necessary. The Complaints Bureau accepts complaints from industry players and the general public. Additionally, it plays an advisory role to any party that requires guidance on electronic content matters.

Issued by GO Communications on behalf of the Content Forum

For media enquiries, kindly contact:

GO Communications

Lim Huei Yuih, Brand Director

+6012 635 3278 hueiyuih@gocomm.com.my

Anis Jilid, Associate Brand Manager

+6011 1233 9022 anis@gocomm.com.my
