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Building Resilience Against Disinformation: Need for Wider Education

By Stephanie Neubronner

Synopsis

Increasingly, cyber threats have been directed at targets with economic, political and social impact with the aim of sowing confusion, fraying civic threads, and intensifying existing polarisations. Singapore needs to commit towards instructing the wider public on how to manage disinformation campaigns.

Commentary

THE EUROPEAN Commission recently proposed regulating against disinformation online, setting a 'one-hour' rule for the removal of content as well as penalties for non-abiding service providers. The enshrinement into law of previously advised rules signals the continued threat faced by offending material online.

The statements given by social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter at the ongoing Senate Intelligence Committee hearings in the United States highlight the significant role such platforms play in ensuring both proper conduct and the reliability of information that circulates online. Answering questions about political interference, representatives from Facebook and Twitter described how their platforms were tackling issues such as foreign influence and fake news. Much like Singapore's Select Committee on Fake News hearings, queries were raised on the ways content is circulated to users and the limits of what these platforms are willing and able to do to restrict the spread of online falsehoods.

Distorting Public Discourse

Yet, it is not enough to have legislation and hold social media giants accountable for the spread of bias and untruths online. The changing aims and presentations of cyber

threats in today's context need to be acknowledged. Individuals need to step up and take ownership of securing cyberspace for their own sake.

Cyber threats are no longer confined to those that cause physical chaos or critical disruptions to a country's infrastructure, transport systems or electrical grids. Taking the form of disinformation campaigns, fake news stories and conspiracy theories, the use of half-truths and the appeal of alternative viewpoints to influence public opinion in pursuit of hidden agendas threaten democracies and social harmony.

Election meddling has occurred in Europe, America, South Africa and even Indonesia. It undermines a country's democratic values and is an example of the different forms of cyber threats encountered in today's digital environment.

Such disinformation campaigns are targeted at degrading public trust in the media and state institutions, as well as to amplify social divisions, and fears. While such exploitation has been most prominently linked to Russia, Moscow is not the only one that has used such tactics. State actors around the world continue to use such methods to exploit information systems today.

Culture of Distrust

Capitalising on individual cognitive bias and increasingly utilising social media to distort public discourse and affect political outcomes, disinformation campaigns, misinformation and conspiracy theories are used to distract individuals from actual issues, and can be deployed to influence actions and decisions.

Disinformation campaigns, misinformation and conspiracy theories can also be utilised as part of a strategy to scope and alter an information environment so that individuals, governments, and other actors are prejudiced into forming skewed beliefs.

For instance, far-right conspiracy theory and fake news website, InfoWars receives approximately 10 million monthly visits, a following that is greater than the viewership of some mainstream news sites.

InfoWars has succeeded in sowing doubt in institutions and the reliability of the US media, while perpetuating distrust and circulating extreme viewpoints.

In Singapore, local alternative media websites are not as extreme, are geared more towards countering dominant perspectives, highlight marginalised viewpoints and encourage a participatory culture of content production. While such predispositions suggest increased democracy and civic engagement in Singapore, alternative websites still question the integrity of mainstream media and challenge dominant beliefs and values while promoting biased views and blatant misinformation.

Singapore's Vulnerability

By attacking individuals' trust in democracy, institutions, values and social systems, disinformation campaigns are aimed at mobilising people against something rather than for something. Changing social behaviours, such campaigns target one of the most powerful weapons – emotions and feelings. Once debates get emotional,

individuals stop listening to arguments and the challenge of persuading individuals to listen to reason becomes close to impossible.

Furthermore, deep fakes and online trolls make these challenges more problematic. By manipulating videos and images to look as if the news was real, technology is making it harder for netizens to distinguish real from fake. Taking images out of context can also be used to alter agendas and cause rifts in society.

Preserving social cohesion is even more arduous if a culture of distrust and discontent erupts. Basing viewpoints on biased narratives will exert unnecessary stress on social fault lines and will further intensify existing polarisations within a multiracial community.

What Needs to be Done

In Singapore, efforts to curb the influence of disinformation include campaigns initiated by the Media Literacy Council, as well as fact checking websites the government and The Straits Times have set up. Yet, these initiatives are targeted at helping active internet users discern truths from untruths. Educating the wider public has, however, not been addressed.

Educating the young about how to discern truths and untruths is a start, but it cannot be taken for granted that other members of the population know how to identify and negotiate disinformation campaigns. Public education via advertisements on accessible mediums such as television and radio could be introduced to raise awareness and teach the general public how and why they need to be vigilant.

Guarding against negative influences online is vital to Singapore's resilience. While it is not possible to prevent the existence of websites like InfoWars, it is possible to prevent a culture of distrust by rejecting extreme alternative viewpoints. Strengthening the foundations of good journalism so that the public have a viable source they can rely on will help in this endeavour.

Vigilance and resilience as a society is a long-term task that will require commitment. By utilising Singapore's highly educated populace to its advantage, critical literacy skills can be instilled, and a strong defense against disinformation campaigns can be established. Developing counter-strategies that are based on national experiences and identity will enable governments and their citizens to collaborate more effectively and develop suitable approaches and narratives.

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