Social Media and "Fake News": Impact on Social Cohesion in Singapore

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By Stephanie Neubronner

Synopsis

Social media's wide reach and influence accentuate the negative effects of inaccurate sentiments circulated online. Building resilience is essential in maintaining Singapore's social cohesion.

Commentary

THE CONTROVERSY following the uploading of a video clip depicting an imam's religious supplication about other faiths has underscored the importance of preserving religious harmony in Singapore. Ministers and religious leaders have since re-emphasised the central need for all, including netizens, to be mindful of maintaining social cohesion in Singapore as a plural society.

The misrepresentation or misinterpretation of information, deliberate or unintended, can be amplified on social media, resulting in social divisiveness. The risk of netizens obtaining only superficial understandings of issues, the possibility of echo chambers occurring, and the threat posed by fake news underscores significant challenges for Singapore.

The Changing Definition of "News"

According to the Pew Research Centre, the number of individuals in America who consider Facebook and Twitter as credible news sources has since 2013 been on a constant incline. The shift towards utilising social media as a news and information source has also been observed in Singapore.

Studies have argued that young people are not uninformed, but are instead,

"differently informed". Challenging the perception that the younger generation is uninterested in news, scholars have contended that the younger generation favours an "a la carte" model of news gathering. Young people tend to monitor multiple media sites simultaneously, "snacking" on bite-sized pieces of news. And, rather than postponing their news requirements until a specific timing during the day, as is the case for the older generation, young people prefer instantaneous access to news sources.

The ease with which everyday gripes and grievances can be aired online has added to the volume of alternative content accessible via social media. Resulting in the rise of personal publishing and citizen journalism, the changes in the way news information is utilised has implications for the ways Singaporeans, particularly the younger generation, understand their communities and surroundings.

The Virality of Content

Unlike content published by reputable news outlets, the content individuals post and share on social media is not subject to any formal fact-checking procedures or editorial judgment. Subjective individual judgment and personal accountability are the only measures restricting the kind of content individuals share online. Yet, because interest and appeal are critical in gaining viewership and attention, the desire to share content that is up-to-date and "trending" is heightened.

Content online goes viral and gets circulated rapidly and widely when it is relatable and is of particular interest to the reader, especially over topics that affect users personally. Examples of notable viral incidents that have occurred in Singapore's online sphere include the 2012 Amy Cheong incident and more recently, the 2016 Prima Deli issue.

In both incidents, the expression of prejudiced and disparaging remarks caused intense public outrage online. Amy Cheong posted offensive remarks about Malays on her Facebook page, which went viral and in less than 24 hours of her publishing the comments, had cost her job. The reactions to her post online also made her leave Singapore. This was despite Cheong having made repeated apologies via various media channels.

In the Prima Deli incident, a Facebook user claimed that the head of the department she was applying for a job with had made discriminatory remarks toward her and was dismissive of her abilities. The post quickly went viral and many netizens called for the company to be boycotted. Although these viral incidents did not result in social unrest, they accentuate the strains that biased narratives fueled by unsubstantiated speculations can have on Singapore's social fabric.

Echo Chambers and "Fake News"

Social media have made it easier for people to both cause and take offence. Echo chambers occur when a network of like-minded people share information and content that is accepted as fact and is repeated back to them without hesitation. Aggregating in communities of interest, such interest groups can be used as tools to

reinforce ideas, promote confirmation bias, segregation, and possibly even social polarisation.

Traditionally, "fake news" refers to the deliberate fabrication of information, with the intention to deceive. However, the Trump administration has labeled content that the mainstream media produces as "fake news", regardless of factual integrity, simply because the news that was being reported portrayed the president in an unfavourable light.

Trump's variety of "fake news" is quickly becoming a catchall phrase. Coupled with the increasingly widespread use of this version of the term, the resultant confusion and destabilising impact of ideas underscores the rising concerns over the influence fake news have in shaping and altering perspectives.

Credible Information and Ensuring Social Cohesion

The Singapore government has stepped up efforts to educate Singaporeans of the potential threats in cyberspace. The Better Internet Campaign, the proposed update to Singapore's broadcasting laws, and the introduction of the Cybersecurity Professional Scheme will better prepare Singapore for the challenges that lie ahead.

However, preventing the spread of misinformation will also require understanding the effects of disseminating news or information that is not properly validated. Knowing how to discern and negotiate issues viewed online and actively engaging in fact-checking will help prevent the misalignment of perspectives, assist in impeding the spread of malicious content and also the spread of misinformation that could strain inter-racial and religious ties.

Ensuring the general public continues to accept the mainstream media as an unbiased and reliable source of information is also vital. Journalistic institutions need to continue building on their foundations as credible information platforms and uphold probity standards in a rapidly changing news landscape.

Based on the events occurring elsewhere in the world, fake news and the spread of misinformation online will continue to pose even greater challenges for Singapore. To safeguard the social cohesion Singapore currently enjoys new dialogues and the generation of more ideas addressing these issues are needed.

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