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Clickbait: Fake News and Role of the State

By Eugene EG Tan and Benjamin Ang

Synopsis

States all around the world are seeking to restrict the proliferation of 'fake news' to insulate their populations against messages that may destabilise their societies. But is the state the best entity to combat fake news?

Commentary

IN 2016, several populist politicians around the world gained power by drawing on the emotion and biases of their supporters. Many of these followers appear to have been swayed by fake news, not verifying the 'facts' that their leaders provide them. More worrying, the leaders themselves seem not to care about the veracity of what they are spreading. Fake news can present as websites that deliberately publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation purporting to be real news, and often using social media to drive web traffic and amplify their effect.

Some commentators fear that this is leading to a new normal where extremely biased views become the mainstream, thanks to fake news. These extreme views can cause divisions in society, foment unrest, and in some cases, lay the foundations for violence, such as the fake news that a pizza restaurant was operating a child abuse ring.

Role of Technology

The first problem is that the reporting of news can be biased in how it is presented or phrased, depending on the intention of the writer. The second problem is that some websites report news that has no factual basis. Some writers create them as 'clickbait' - online content that attracts attention so that visitors will click on the link to

generate advertising revenue. Others may be hostile states spreading propaganda as part of information warfare to destabilise their adversaries. Others yet may be motivated by personal vendettas or paranoid belief in conspiracy theories.

Whatever the motivation is, the speed at which fake news can spread has been supercharged by social media and search algorithms that control what users read. These algorithms are software that show the user only stories and sources that are similar to what he/she has liked before, creating filter bubbles or echo chambers where users only read and share information that they were already inclined to believe. This builds confirmation bias in users, which can create mistaken world views that persist even when the 'truths' are disproved by external sources. One example is the fake news that Democratic senators in the United States wanted to impose sharia law in Florida.

The first response has come from the technology companies that create these algorithms. Facebook and Google have introduced processes and software that they hope will help users check the truthfulness of each news article. However, this solution has limitations, because part of the process relies on third parties to verify each article, and those third parties have been accused of bias themselves. Even artificial intelligence struggles to keep up with the chaotic mix of truth and falsehood that is typical in fake news.

Role of the State

Since technology companies alone cannot succeed, states are increasingly getting involved in restricting fake news, some by establishing state-run agencies to check and debunk fake news. The Czech Republic recently set up a unit within the Ministry of the Interior for this purpose, while Germany and Indonesia are also considering setting up similar units to combat news that is "slanderous, fake, misleading and spreading hate".

State intervention in creating approved media is not new, but in the past this was mostly confined to authoritarian states, where freedom of expression was not highly regarded. Today, even relatively 'free' states are trying to assert that they are the most truthful source of information. One fear is that these measures could lead to the future suppression of dissenting views and compromise the freedom of expression in established democracies.

In fact, if a state insists that it is the sole source of truth and dismisses all dissenting voices as fake news, it may ironically lead to an erosion of trust in the state. States can only succeed in this if their citizens wholeheartedly trust the information provided to them by the state, but the level of trust in states varies greatly, and is easily damaged by over censorship.

Role of the People

If the state has limited power to deal with fake news, then some commentators have suggested that citizens must be more critical over the information they consume online. This requires everyone to develop information literacy skills to critically assess if the news they read is authentic or not.

Unfortunately, studies show that most people, regardless of education level, have difficulty distinguishing fake news from fact, partly because the news format is easily imitated and the sources are manipulated to resemble credible journalism.

If the citizens are unable to deal with fake news, then a joint effort with the state may be required. China has an innovative way to operationalise responsibility in cyberspace, which is to require people to use their real names when they are using social media. This enables reader to verify the identities of the writers behind the posts or comments, and places the responsibility for truthfulness firmly on the writers.

This removal of the Internet's veil of anonymity increases the cost of distributing fake news, as it forces the writer to prove and justify any claims that he or she is making. However, this policy is only possible because of the Great Firewall of China that can filter out unauthorised information.

For states with more open Internet access, such as Singapore, citizens are exposed to information from all over the world, whether it comes from reputable overseas sources or from fake news sites in Macedonia, all of whom are outside the jurisdiction of the state.

For that matter, any laws in force or which can be passed, whether to combat defamation, sedition, or harassment, will have limited effect when the source of fake news is beyond the reach of the state, or is difficult to attribute or identify.

Shared Responsibility

Although states have the responsibility for preserving stability and security for their citizens, the flawed nature of the technology available, state-led solutions, and the people reading and sharing the news mean that there is no one agency that can claim a perfect solution in combating fake news.

There is a dire need for a more holistic solution, and this might well come from a public-private partnership using innovative tactics and technology. In the meantime, for states who want to be the trusted source of information for their citizens, they would do well to cultivate and protect that trust most diligently.

The protection of this trust may require more transparency and timeliness in the information provided by the government, and a media that prides itself on the unbiased reporting of news.

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