Written Representation 31

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Received: 19 Feb 2018

<u>Submission to SELECT COMMITTEE ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS.</u>

I am a freelance journalist, host of the "Perspectives" current affairs show on ChannelNewsAsia, but this is a private submission made with no relation to CNA or MediaCorp.

The author has no financial interest in this or any other select committee.

The author IS prepared to appear before the committee.

<u>Introduction</u>

It is clear that the proliferation of falsehoods online does present a serious challenge to individuals, institutions and states, as articulated in detail by the Green Paper issued by the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Law.

Powerful global platforms like Twitter and Facebook can be - and have already been - manipulated with relative ease by "fake bots" that propagate false information very quickly.

Even worse, the growing sophistication of artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies have enabled new techniques like "laser phishing" and "FakeApp" software that can convincingly simulate actual people, whether friends or leaders, to deliver messages that are unrelated to the apparent sender. The potential of these technologies to deceive is indeed frightening.

Many of them, such as Adobe's "Project VoCo", are even being developed and presented as amusing, easy-to-use consumer products, with only scant recognition of the negative potential they inherently possess. (https://youtu.be/I3l4XLZ59iw?t=86)

However, while the capacity of technology to deceive is escalating rapidly, equally problematic is the possibility of over-reaction.

As with so many societal challenges, this issue is in danger of being over-simplified. Already the familiar military metaphors are being employed, and actors in the drama are being separated into teams of "black" and "white" hats.

This oversimplification is rarely helpful, and in many instances leads to a linear and two-dimensional response.

I would argue that this situation requires a more reflective evaluation of the problem, and I am hopeful that the upcoming Government hearing will entertain such.

In particular I would look to some of the insights offered by complexity theory. This discipline has already been recognised in Singapore, with the establishment of the Complexity Institute at NTU, and I believe that some of the ideas and analyses proposed by the theory would serve Singapore well in this environment.

The reality is that the problem of fake news is not a binary conflict. This challenge involves a wide variety of agents in extremely diverse social, political and economic contexts, and it can only be successfully addressed if these realities are accounted for.

Background

The first step would be to consider the challenge through a different frame: are these circumstances unique and unprecedented? I would argue not. The reality is that misinformation and the manipulation of public understanding is as old as communication itself.

It was more than a century ago that William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer kicked off the tabloid style that became known as "yellow journalism", and the battle between "truth" and "propaganda" has waged ever since.

It's not even new to the internet age; the problem emerged more than a decade ago.

In 2005, the American Dialect Society nominated the word "Truthiness" as its word of the year. Coined by the US comedian Stephen Colbert, the word referenced a phenomenon that had become increasingly apparent in media: misinformation being promoted by partisan interests without any reference to veracity or honesty.

A few years later, at the American Magazine Conference of 2008 Google's chairman Eric Schmidt warned of the danger that the internet was becoming a "cesspool" of misinformation.

So why now, a full decade after Schmidt's warning, has the troublesome rogue "truthiness" suddenly morphed into the terrifying ogre known as "Fake News"?

Certainly one reason is the concern that fake news can have impact at state level. But even here the phenomenon is not new. Instances of cross-border propaganda initiatives are legion.

Motivation

Secondly, while the capacity of new technology to deceive at vast and unprecedented scale is undeniable, it's necessary to realise that technology is not the only problem. Because although technology provides the means for creating false news, it does not provide the motivation. And the most influential actors in this challenge, the major media platforms, cannot themselves be considered as having malevolent intent. So what's the real driving force?

Context

The third, perhaps most important variable, is how the information is perceived by citizens. There is no doubt that prevailing social and cultural circumstances have led

to an unprecedented erosion of trust in many countries, and in such environments the possibility of chaos is amplified.

Conclusion

- The development of new technologies will always leave regulators trailing behind the innovators. The Pandora's box was opened when global governments gave carte blanche to entrepreneurs to experiment with technology; it cannot now be closed.
- Stricter controls over the individual agents that create content would amount to a linear response to a complex problem. They would probably serve to amplify feelings of mistrust, and provide fertile ground for conspiracists to sow unrest.
- Viewing the problem through a complexity lens would suggest examining ways to allow creativity and trust to co-exist; this would mean testing agent level interventions to gather useful data and insights and progress towards effective outcomes.

Potential Interventions

Without doubt the use of regulatory mechanisms must play a part in any strategy. The platforms operated by Google and Facebook are too powerful to ignore, and it will be necessary for regulators to engage with these companies to make sure their technologies do not unwittingly make the problem worse. In Singapore, there are no such platforms with any significant degree of power, therefore domestic regulation is not necessarily the priority.

There will also be a temptation use technology itself to monitor the rogue technology – Artificial Intelligence acting as content curator, in effect policing itself. But this relies upon a degree of technological sophistication that is not yet in evidence. As one of Silicon Valley's most visionary entrepreneurs, Reid Hoffman, said in "The Cardinal Conversation" at Stanford University recently, "people imagine that you can use an AI to do truth checking. I think that is a ways off, I think that's fiction. However what you can do, you can do identity checking, you can have an information registry that says "these are sources of information that have signed up for journalistic credibility."

It is this last observation that might offer Singapore, and all governments, some food for thought when considering how to deal with fake news.

The value and credence that consumers give to information depends in large part upon the trustworthiness of the source; therefore interventions that serve to build up that trust may well be the most effective way to guide positive emergent behaviours.

Instead of attempting to squash the undesirable by force, a different approach would be to make fake news irrelevant by facilitating market provision of better products. But generating better products will require the creation of new business models, ones that change the relationship between finance, creation and consumption.

Here, the Singapore government has an opportunity to lead the world.

In her book "Saving the Media", Harvard Professor Julia Cage has suggested the creation of a new legal space to allow for a hybrid model of news funding. Based upon the structure governing US "foundations", as used by the major educational institutions, this model would allow tax breaks on contributions to the foundation and enable news organisations to crowdfund their operations.

Freed from accountability to shareholders, freed from the financial incentives to create "clickbait", newsrooms could concentrate instead on accountable journalism, creating good quality news content and building up a trust relationship with consumers.

This freedom would also allow for greater digital innovation in the news industry. Already there are examples of new structures that attempt to solve the trust problem by creating verifiable and transparent platforms underpinned by blockchain. Boosting these efforts would help the industry to reform more quickly and effectively.

In conclusion, a forward-thinking solution to the problem of fake news would centre around a commitment to defining "news" as a "public good" in the economic sense. It would also help to create and empower institutional structures that would ensure transparency and accountability of providers and content through market mechanisms.

Such trusted institutions will help inoculate citizens against false information better than censorship or control measures would do.

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