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Written Representation on Deliberate online falsehoods – causes, consequences and countermeasures

Defining Online Falsehood

Any discussion on the countermeasures against online fake news must necessarily be preceded by an appreciation what a falsehood actually constitute. Yet, the effort to grapple with the concept of falsehood itself is far from trivial. For one, although truth is absolute, perceptions of truth can be relative. A bad traffic collision could be downplayed as one car coming into contact with another. Flooding in a neighbourhood could be considered as mere ponding. Who is to say one perspective is more truthful than another especially when the claims are couched in qualitative terms?

Another challenge is a definitional one. Falsehoods come in overlapping shades. Conspiracy theories, for example, are speculative and difficult to verify. Satirical messages often contain a grain of truth but sacrifice factual accuracies through humor and exaggeration just to make for a compelling read. Propaganda conceals information tendentiously to influence attitudes and responses. Gossips are more personally and privately targeted whereas rumours are statements about impersonal and larger social concerns. The themes of rumour run the gamut of hot-button issues, from health and sports to politics and current affairs. Dread rumours invoke fearsome consequences while wish rumours offers false hopes. Wedge-driving rumours are intended to sow discord between communities by exploiting fault-lines in society.

Adding into the mix are the ways falsehoods are produced. Fabrications are completely conjured out of thin air. Context-isolated falsehoods take genuine information but spin it in another context while manipulations are genuine information twisted in its original context. In general, when lies are insidiously laced with some facts, the boundary between what is true and what is false becomes less discernable.

The complexity of their contours notwithstanding, it is important to pin down what falsehoods are. After all, we cannot manage what we are unable to define. For practical purposes, falsehoods can be taken as claims which contain materials inconsistent with objective and verifiable data. For example, someone who reported a “5000-strong” crowd when there were actually only 50 people in attendance would be guilty of spreading falsehood. On the contrary, one who described the same crowd as “large” cannot be accused of spewing lies. Such a definition demarcates opinions and perspectives from blatant lies.

Tackling Online Falsehood

The Government can ill-afford to spring into action each time something false appears online. Such reactions are not only prohibitively costly but border on absurdity. Neither should the Government stare blankly at damaging falsehoods that make their rounds on social media. Such passiveness only sets the stage for what is known as the illusionary truth effect - the more people are exposed to a falsehood, the more they judge it to be true.

To guide the Government's response, a multi-pronged approach comprising both long- and short-term strategies is recommended. First is the education. Fake news sells only on the basis of sensationalism. Debunking them will always remain a Sisyphean task as long as there are people who are adept in concocting fake news and those who unwarily lap them up. Hence, as a proactive measure, the Ministry of Education can consider expanding the National Education curriculum to include the moral, legal and social implications of fake news. As a broadened aim of total defence, the goal is to develop digital information savviness in our students, and build national resilience against online falsehood in the long-run. Similar courses could also be mounted in local universities and private institutions that offer continuing adult education.

The second approach is to support and grow fact-checking online communities. A starting point can be found in the hubs of existing social networks, and in particular, influential users whose views and voices can spread widely within a short time. Working as partners with the Government, these users serve as anchors in crowd-sourced platforms to expose hoaxes and lies. In this way, falsehoods are dealt with from both top-down and bottom-up. Incentives for participation can come in the forms of gamification or even public service recognitions.

Guided by a 2-by-2 grid, the final approach is calibrated legislation. One dimension of this grid specifies intentionality which differentiates between falsehoods which are spawned out of ignorance (misinformation) and those that are crafted with a malice agenda (disinformation). The second dimension assesses the impact. Rumours and gossips about private entities or individuals tend to remain in the private domain (low impact), and are handled as libel cases under existing laws. There are falsehoods that undermine national interests and threaten social cohesions. Issues on race, language and religion, for example, are not only sensitive but potentially divisive (high impact).

The Government can ignore misinformation with low impact. In cases of misinformation with high impact or disinformation with low impact, the Government may issue stern warnings to those involved, or mandate them to undergo counselling. The Government may choose to take firm legal action, including custodial sentences against those who create or circulate disinformation with high impact. The 2-by-2 grid thus serves as a communication tool for the Government to articulate its position against online falsehood. In this way, the expectation of what can and cannot be shared on social media is clarified.

The battle against fake news is expected to be long-drawn. No single approach is likely to be efficacious on its own. However, when used in combination and with some tweaking along the way, they can be mutually-reinforcing to weed out damning

falsehoods, and hopefully make our country resilient to baseless accusations that emerge from time to time.
