

## Written Representation 60

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### The Phenomenon of Deliberate Online Falsehoods

In the "post-truth" era, individuals view situations from an emotional perspective, often disregarding the facts of the circumstance due to their own set of beliefs about the situation (Cambridge University Press, 2018). This is a phenomenon which has grown more prominent in our current generation as there is a shift in the values among individuals.

#### **Advancements in Technology**

Advancements in technology have allowed the growth of social media websites, where individuals can easily voice their opinions online. Individuals have hence grown more open to sharing their ideas due to the simplicity of posting their views on the various social media platforms. In this situation, an echo chamber has been created across the numerous media platforms. Since an individual posting an idea online would mean that all other media users can view and comment on said views, their opinions are easily reinforced by the magnitude of agreement or disagreement they receive. Individuals continue to raise their views online as they would gain the satisfaction of having other media users support their ideas. Due to the ease of access to media channels, these reinforced opinions spread like wildfire, even across nations, where the content being disseminated significantly impacts societies across the world.

While we heavily relied on radio broadcasting and newspapers for information in the past, we now have millions of other sources from which to retrieve information. This has created various platforms for the spread of online falsehoods. With these platforms, we can determine for ourselves, what information we choose to side with or believe. We then decide what information we accept or ignore due to our personal opinions, no matter the objective facts of the source. This causes a spread of information which is often highly subjective. These online falsehoods also become more believable as more individuals believe that the content is the objective truth and choose to share it (Keyes, 2004). We then assume that the information must be true since everyone else believes so.

Such information would not be able to spread to this extent without the help of the evolution of the media landscape. Anyone is able to turn on their phone or computer easily and find the information they want. They are able to search for information to support their stands easily as we have the "all-knowing" internet which has everything we need. If we search using certain keywords and are unable to find that piece of information that supports our stand, we would try to use different ways to find that specific information, and then share it so that more people would believe in it as well. This would then increase the number of people that have the same ideology from what started as just a small group, and it can then influence many others through a snowball effect.

With the evolution of media landscape, there are also computer algorithms now, which are able to infer a person's interests and personality based on what they surf online. This will then allow the system to churn out advertisements and posts on their social media pages that are closely linked to the users' personalities. This is a result of having many different social media platforms that one can use. Social media can thus be used as a very powerful tool which influences society.

**Reality TV: Reality or TV?**

Another matter of consideration would be the fact that prominent issues in the world are being sensationalised for the sake of publicity and attention. The concern is that there is no longer a fine line between entertainment and objective truth, where information becomes questionable. For instance, with the recent U.S. elections, media channels made use of the situation to increase view count by ridiculing the issues at hand. For any outside parties looking into the political climate of the United States, they don't seek out the details about policies and their implications; the facts. Instead, they are drawn to the clever jokes made about the supposed incompetence of the political candidates. The entertainment front of news undermines the criticality of the situations being covered, which then leaves non-sensationalised news disregarded, since it is less entertaining.

### **Social Inequality**

Inequality is another contributing factor. In this day and age, money has become more important for many people.

The inequality is shown through having the top income owners making much more money than most in the population. With the exception of the recession years of 2001 and 2008, real GDP growth has generally been above earnings growth. In 2005, the earnings of households in the 41st to 50th percentile soared above GDP growth, but it quickly dipped to 0.2% the next year (Ng, 2012).

The lag in earnings growth behind GDP growth indicates that gains in economic growth have not gone to wage earners, but other components of GDP such as capital owners. Economic expansion, when not evenly-distributed, pulls GDP growth and earnings of high earners away from bottom earners.

This inequality leads to political polarization, which is commonly mentioned when talking about inequality, where individuals will tend to be strictly defined by their identification with a particular political party. With political polarization, subjective online content can be used to shape individuals' views about a certain ideology, political party, their stance on a certain issue, and more. Other than political polarization, there is also overall increasing polarization with the shifting values that the younger generation has.

### **Power of Sharing Online**

Ultimately, individuals have the power to re-share the information they feel the most compelled to, either due to their agreement or disagreement on the matter discussed.

The formation of the echo chamber is then reinforced as more individuals, who share the same ideology, continue to contribute to the spread of subjective content. This idea is later expanded upon under "reasons for individuals to spread falsehoods".

## **Motivations and reasons for spreading falsehoods**

Fake news uses falsehoods to manipulate public opinion faster and across a wider audience. As long as agendas exist, misinformation will be a problem that prevails.

### **Reasons for Individuals**

First and foremost, it is important to understand the people and their personal agendas. As news media landscapes changes to a digital-centric one, the increasingly stiff competition and the need to innovate in the industry make generating profits crucial to the continuity of one's job.

For individuals who knowingly allow themselves to partake in the creation (e.g. marketers) and falsification of information, perhaps money and power, and the greed for them, are at play.

Hence, clickbait and buzzwords are splashed all over headlines to appeal to the emotions of readers (e.g. shock, worry, frustration) so as to elicit traffic toward the published content to gain direct and advertising revenue (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). Their hunger for money or power incentivises them to this exploitation of their audience and the truth.

Secondly, it is apparent that some find a need for gratification of their beliefs through others concurring with them. This has resulted in the formation of the aforementioned echo chambers in the form of some newspapers and media sites that tend to be extremely polar and lacking dialectic. This collection of people with like-minded views talking among themselves reinforces their confirmation biases, perpetuating group polarisation and implicit biases which is unhealthy for a society pushing for acceptance.

What exacerbates this phenomenon is the lack of accountability for these individuals, especially on the internet. Perpetrators can hide behind anonymity or fake identities, and social media platforms allow misinformation from the anonymous sources to be amplified many times over rapidly.

Finally, debunking falsehoods does not appeal to most on a psychological level. While keeping falsehoods out of our discourse enables freedom of speech to be meaningfully exercised (Ng, 2018), studies show that there is some emotional resistance to wanting to be wrong (Silverman, 2016). More often than not, accepting inaccurate information is also less work than being critical, and this only serves to hamper constructive discussions based on the foundation of truth.

### **Motivations for Organisations**

Organisations as a whole have huge driving motivations that have led to the continued perpetuation and survival of online falsehoods. The following are stakeholders and their incentives.

Organisations that primarily rely on mass media publications are incentivised to grab the attention of readers and passersby in order to make revenue. The truth, in some cases, is then compromised because of these organisations trying to pull in income. The economics of social media favour gossip, novelty, speed and "shareability", not truth (Yates, 2016). At worst, rumours with malice are spread across mass media causing harm to those targeted.

Organisations could also be seeking political gains through the content they publish. Such organisations seek to make others feel personally threatened and involved through exaggeration and falsification of facts to convince its readers to hold a certain political belief. The end goal for these groups is to obtain power and influence through manipulating and polarising people who do not carry the same beliefs as them. This has been observed as falsehoods were shared widely online during the American presidential election in November 2016 (Solon, 2016) and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom earlier last year to "fuel xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments" (Smith, 2016).

## **Consequences of Online Falsehoods on Singapore Society**

Deliberate online falsehood could lead to various consequences. These consequences that could affect society on a macro level can be categorised into social, health, political and economic consequences.

### **Social Consequences**

A social consequence that could occur due to deliberate online falsehoods would be rising racial tensions.

In a multiracial society such as Singapore, we strive to seek racial harmony and tolerance. Hence, any form of deliberate online falsehood could be set out to disrupt that form of harmony.

With more foreign workers coming into Singapore to work, such false news could feed a form of xenophobia into the citizens as well. This would essentially polarize how the citizens feel in terms of racial tolerance and harmony. A recent example would be the incident with the Thaipusam ceremony and the Filipino family. This is where the news platform claimed that the Filipino family supposedly told the police 'to make the people stop playing the urumi', which is an Indian drum (Chew, 2015).

Although direct impact towards the citizens cannot be seen by this single incident alone, the fact is that in the long run, such feelings of hostility can be fueled, causing more problems in the near future. It was reported that the same news site, The Real Singapore (TRS) had come up with several other articles to stir up ill-feelings towards certain racial groups in Singapore (Loh, 2016). Therefore, it is evident that such small but impactful news is capable of causing hostility and anger towards a certain racial group. Such feelings are detrimental to Singapore's multi-racial society.

### **Health Consequences**

Deliberate online falsehood could potentially affect the health of the citizens as well.

In 2017, the skin care product category held the largest share amongst the various product segments. Increasing awareness about skin rituals, urge to maintain an even skin tone and desire to look beautiful and young is driving the product sales (Inkwood Research, 2017).

With Singapore's market so easily accessible to a plethora of beauty products, it is no surprise that some form of false information has been spread. An easy solution for weight management has been weight loss pills which have claims to be "100 percent natural", "herbal ingredients" and "quick effect". However, these pills were marketed just to sell fast especially through online platforms where such claims were seen to be reliable. It was discovered that such pills contain sibutramine which is an illegal substance as it causes an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, as well as other serious adverse effects (Toh, 2017). Hence, such false information can lead to negative implications towards the citizens.

Another health consequence would be how vaccines, a vital public-health tools are under threat from growing public mistrust in immunisation and the rise of so-called "fake news" drowning out expert voices (Larson, Piot, 2018). An example would be where a deliberate online falsehood had

been spread about the ingredients of measles-rubella vaccines, resulting in many parents in Indonesia refusing to let their children be vaccinated against the infectious diseases. This is also due to the claims that it is haram - forbidden according to the Muslim law (The Jakarta Post, 2017).

With people more and more people facing the internet, as shown by a survey conducted revealing that 84.9 percent of adults accessing the Internet on an average month (Lee, 2017), it is no surprise that people would tend to rely on social media for any news. Therefore, this shows how dangerous such fake news could be onto the citizens and causing adverse effects to public health.

### **Political Consequences**

Next, deliberate online falsehoods could threaten society on a political level as well, affecting our election process.

When people are faced with a false news story, the first impression lasts even after discovering it is false. This means that such online falsehoods have the potential to stoke doubt or even hatred for political groups who, in reality, have done nothing wrong, no matter how quickly such stories are resolved and declared to be false.

In Singapore's case, even the trust and confidence of citizens in our long-running ruling party, PAP, can be eroded with a viral and sensationalised enough falsehood.

The speed at which such falsehoods could be spread is easily observed in the 2015 case of the circulation of the hoax of Lee Kuan Yew's death (Philomin, 2015).

Within the day, several international media outlets had already reported on his supposed death, only to correct themselves shortly afterwards. Despite the hasty correction, there is no doubt that some panic had already occurred at a societal level.

If a falsehood more political in nature were to spread around instead, particularly during election period, it would no doubt leave an impact on our citizens.

This has the potential to steer how our society develops, and can be a serious threat to our democracy when the information influencing voters are falsehoods intended to deceive and manipulate us.

### **Economic Consequences**

Lastly, on an economic level, one way online falsehoods would impact us is through the waste of resources when they are spent on false alarms based off of false stories.

When reading about a fire nearby, a terrorist threat, or a report of a building collapse, concerned citizens and authorities would of course want to take relevant action or report onto the site. The building collapse report is something that actually did occur, and it shows the threat of how manpower and time can be wasted on nothing more than a false alarm (Toh, 2018).

The civil defense force cannot afford to take risks and have an obligation to take such alarms seriously, but the unnecessary use of resources remains a problem.

Citizens may even take action themselves, rushing off somewhere safer or leaving work out of concern for what appears to be happening at home. If a false story about something major becomes widespread enough, we could see a societal-level panic whereby citizens or organizations fall for hoaxes and buy or prepare things they believe would save them.

An example would be the panic-buying of salt in China due to the spread of misinformation that it would ward off radiation poisoning from the threat of Japan's nuclear emergency (Associated Press, 2011). Prices of salt rose up to 10-fold and many stores had run out of stock. This shows an obvious impact on the economic market and serves as an example of what turned out to be pointless purchases on a massive scale.

It is not entirely unbelievable for Singaporeans to fall for a similar hoax, especially during times of crisis or vulnerability, where our society would be all the more susceptible to wasting resources as a result of such online falsehoods.

### **Joining the Dots**

While we have categorised the different consequences neatly, it is important to note that they do tie in with each other and can reinforce one another as well. The social and health consequences can easily affect our economy, for example.

Singapore needs to maintain racial harmony for the society to function well, and any disruptions in that area would therefore affect other factors such as our economic status or labour force.

This is due to the fact that Singapore relies heavily on foreign manpower, and human resource is our most powerful economic resource. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, at the opening of Unilever's Four Acres Singapore Campus, mentioned in his speech that "In Singapore, we have focused on this obsessively for a very long time. People are our only resource" (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2013).

The dangers that online falsehoods can have on public health can be linked to our economy as well. This would ultimately affect government spending with healthcare being a public good. A higher amount of GDP would have to be spent on healthcare, and workers would be taking leave to recover, thus also affecting Singapore economically.

Other ways that consequences link together include how racial tensions could make society more vulnerable to manipulation for political gains, or how social panic can encourage reckless or risky behaviours that threaten both public health and the economy. Other consequences we did not discuss here may also amplify such threats.

The key takeaway is that online falsehoods do have negative impacts on our society, making it crucial for us to find ways to combat it.

## **Recommendations for Combating Online Falsehoods**

Having discussed the phenomenon of deliberate online falsehoods, the reasons/motivations behind their use and the consequences that they can have, here are some recommendations that we believe would help combat the issue.

### **Regulation within the country**

Starting with a regulatory approach, there could be regulation of online sites that achieve a high enough level of traffic.

It is difficult to measure what amount of traffic would be considered a high level of traffic, but a comparison can be done on Google Analytics where a benchmarking report for the different websites can be found (Mulder, 2014). After a certain period of time, where the amount of traffic for the various websites would have been tracked and compared, registration would be needed for the websites that have been identified to have constant high traffic. This is because it can be assumed that high traffic would mean a high level of influence on our society as there would be many citizens who read the articles on the site.

Registering their website would mean getting the directors of the website to have some agreements with the government that they would need to be accountable for what they post. This means being accountable for the headlines and content of their post. Registration would also mean a third party overseeing the content of their website and ensuring that the content has been constantly regulated so that any deliberate online falsehood would not be spread, be it intentionally or unintentionally.

It is understandable that different websites have a wide range of content covered, including seemingly harmless content such as cooking recipes, humorous blogs or gardening advice. However, it is only fair to regulate all websites with high traffic regardless of the type of content for the sake of consistency and taking precautions.

Even so, having government initiatives to clamp down on deliberate online falsehoods is not enough. To minimise the negative impacts of online falsehoods, citizens must also be able to play a part, which leads us to our remaining recommendations based in the education of said citizens.

### **Education on Media Literacy**

Looking into the implications of online falsehoods, we find that a critical method of managing the matter would be to implement classes on media literacy. We see that individuals show a lack of awareness on how to determine and manage online falsehoods, which we identify as a core source of concern when it comes to the implications of media (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.).

We recommend an educational scheme, which involves educating the public on online falsehoods in phases: The in-school phase and the post-education phase.

In each phase, the content of study would be catered to the knowledge base of the target groups. The intended goal would be to educate the public on the implications of online falsehoods and how to manage them. Media literacy education would be conducted in parts across one's educational path, like the curriculum of moral education which is taught throughout one's lifespan. The classes could be conducted as 1-hour programs on a bi-yearly basis. The idea would be to slowly incorporate the management of media implications into our daily lives, where we gain awareness and develop an understanding on the impact media has on society.

#### **1. Primary Level**

The in-school phase would begin at the upper-primary level of education. At this stage, students would be given the opportunity to grasp the concept of online falsehoods. Students would be taught to understand the reality of online falsehoods and its implications. This is the first stage of the in-school phase, where it would build the foundation of media literacy education amongst the public.

## **2. Secondary Level**

At the second stage, after gaining knowledge and understanding on what online falsehoods are and their implications, the next step will be for them to know how to identify them. The activities can include giving them different articles that can be found online and getting them to identify whether it is considered an online falsehood. This will enable them to be able to differentiate between reliable sources and online falsehoods when they are surfing online.

## **3. Post-Secondary Level**

At this stage, they will learn how to counter online falsehoods. As they are able to identify and understand the implications that online falsehoods have, stopping the spread of online falsehood will be one way to combat against it. Other than that, they can be taught on other ways such as reporting to the right authorities when they find an online falsehood.

We hope that with this educational scheme, students will be able to be more mindful, cautious and critical when they are surfing online.

## **4. Post-education Phase**

Moving on to post-schooling phase where individuals venture out into the society, it is essential for continued public education on this topic of media literacy (e.g. awareness about presence of online falsehood and how to discern it). This is to ensure effectiveness in the general public's ability to discern truth from falsehoods, regardless of their educational backgrounds. Apart from discernment, the aim is to reduce the spread of online falsehoods in this phase. We recommend two approaches.

Firstly, advertising through media channels. This is targeted at the older citizen population, and people in general who have the tendency to tune into television programmes and radio broadcast channels. With this implementation, it increases their knowledge and awareness of online falsehoods and its management. In addition, research has been done to suggest there is a greater ability to connect with viewers emotionally through television advertisements as compared to digital ones (Ionova, 2016).

Secondly, social media campaigns. The increasingly digital nature of society leads to a rise in social media usage. With almost 4 million YouTube users in Singapore, Singaporeans are found to mainly watch Youtube videos to be entertained or inspired (Pink Elephant Consultancy, 2016). We recommend YouTube as a channel for advertising, with short, concise video advertisements that cannot be skipped. These ads are meant to force YouTube users to watch through them, which bring their attention to the issue of online falsehoods, and heighten their awareness on media literacy.

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