

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Towards ICCS 2022

Online Misinformation and Cohesive Societies

By Yaacob Ibrahim

SYNOPSIS

The Internet has enabled misinformation to spread wildly, divide people easily, and incite violence and chaos quickly. Regulatory approaches and effective actions by individuals and civil society are needed to curb misinformation and contain the harm to social cohesion.

COMMENTARY

THE PREVALENCE of misinformation is as old as mankind. In war, misinformation – or more precisely disinformation which is intentional misinformation – and deception are accepted practice.

While slick advertising is largely accepted as part and parcel of the competition that companies engage in for market share, the claims companies make about their products have come under increasing regulatory scrutiny. Companies' efforts to shape public policy and research have also faced criticisms and pushback. The tobacco industry, for example, paid scientists to prove that smoking was not harmful to health and to thwart regulatory efforts. However, over time, scientists and governments have become more aware of the detrimental effects of smoking.



Truth Matters.

Creating Divisions and Doubts

Similarly, for many years, the automotive industry resisted the installation of seat belts. Significant efforts by individuals like Ralph Nader were eventually successful in the passage of legislation for safety belts.

Misinformation goes beyond advertising; sometimes it involves hate speech. Events such as the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) inaugurated in Singapore in 2019 can help governments, civic society, and individuals understand the dynamics at play when countering misuse of information and public trust.

At times we see individuals or social groups spreading misinformation to divide society or fuel violence anchored in prejudices. When a fire broke out in a train in [Gujarat, India in 2002](#), which resulted in the deaths of many Hindus, the blame was erroneously and purposefully put on some Muslim passengers. This resulted in the murder of several thousand innocent Muslims.

The resulting inquiry determined the cause of the fire to be an accident. In this case, the misinformation fed off the animosity between Hindus and Muslims with fatal consequences. When mistrust between two groups is deep-seated, misinformation can be easily weaponised.

Governing Misinformation

Today, we observe a broad spectrum of people engaging in the spread of misinformation. From anti-vaxxers to climate change deniers, from conspiracy theorists to snake oil salesmen, a growing number of individuals, groups, companies and even governments engage in campaigns of misinformation.

The greater speed at which such misinformation spreads via the Internet, and the ease with which individuals, groups or companies can become content creators on the Internet mean that people – young and old – no longer obtain their news or information from professional journalists, experts, and reliable sources.

This mistrust and misinformation can take the form of online hate speech against specific groups based on perceived racial, religious, or other markers. In relation to COVID-19, an early cluster related to the [Tablighi Jama'at movement](#) in Malaysia provoked prejudice against this faith group.

Given the detrimental consequences of misinformation and the speed and impact it can have on society, it is becoming more important than ever to have regulatory approaches. Yet, there are limitations to what the government is able to regulate to deal with some of the more egregious attempts to push narratives not anchored on facts. Clearly, how groups see each other cannot be regulated, but they can be influenced, and their views can be shaped.

Critical Need to Build Bridges

It is critical for governments and key individuals to work together to build bridges and lines of communication between the various communities. Everyone must see that there is value in trusting and respecting each other.

The tone of trust and understanding must be set from the highest levels of government down to the schools, community facilities, and public intersection venues. Despite differences, respectful interactions and leading by example at all levels can foster better understanding and social cohesion.

Much effort has been exerted to tackle misinformation online. The most common action is the creation of independent fact checkers that are usually based in media organisations, universities, and think tanks. While there are governments who have done fact-checking in relation to government policies, independent fact checkers cover a much wider area and scope.

Some universities dedicate their undertakings to deal with vaccine misinformation and climate change denials. Similar to the individual efforts of Ralph Nader, who called out the lack of transparency in the US automotive industry, key influencers in society can also play an important part as well.

We need recognised personalities, especially those who command respect in society like community and religious leaders, to assure the people. They need to be supported by key institutions such as the media, official agencies, and political organs acknowledged as responsible bodies. Political leaders also need to message clearly and effectively on online platforms.

Collective effort is important as misinformation can take place on many platforms and over different time horizons. A consistent effort by all those trusted by the community is vital in dealing with the pernicious effects of misinformation.

Truth Matters

It is also important to understand the psychology behind spreading misinformation. Why is it that some individuals or groups of them are prone to spreading misinformation, while others are not? We need to differentiate between those acting alone and those operating within a larger collective.

Those operating in a group have an ecosystem which helps to sustain their narrative and worldview. These groups are sometimes being fed by, and are feeding off, certain other personalities or causes and entities operating in cyberspace and the media. Each factor must be studied in greater detail to craft effective measures in response.

Every individual has an important part to play in this challenge. As with online scams, being wary and sceptical of anything that sounds too good to be true is a good starting point to deal with misinformation.

There are also skills that we can pick up, and effective measures we can take, to check and counter check information we come across online or offline. We each have a responsibility to check all the sources of information before responding or forwarding it to others.

Individually, we can set the tone of how one should behave with respect to information that we come across. By checking the validity of the information before forwarding it to others, we value the truth of everything we received. We are also able to identify the right and correct sources of information.

It is not possible to eliminate misinformation and the spread of misinformation. A combination of regulatory measures and actions by civil society is necessary to minimise the impact of misinformation.

Influencing Public Opinion Against Hate Speech

Like-minded groups must connect and act together. New skills need to be acquired by those who can help to shape and influence public opinion. This will include recognising misinformation and hate speech, which will often appear in subtle or disguised forms. Individuals must also insist that truth matters.

Events such as the ICCS provide a forum not only at a high level, but amongst the youth and grassroots bodies where we can raise questions and learn from one another to bridge divisive issues online and offline. In today's inter-connected world, it is essential to apply the relevant technologies and skills to unite people and strengthen the value of co-existence. With their adaptability and digital competencies, the younger generation will play critical roles in this endeavour and must be given every opportunity to do so.

Professor Yaacob Ibrahim is Adviser, Office of the President, Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). He is Director of SIT's Community Leadership and Social Innovation Centre (CLASIC) where he oversees SIT's community-related projects and initiatives, and the nurturing of social advocate leaders. He was a Member of Parliament and had served as Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports; Minister for the Environment and Water Resources; and Minister for

Communications and Information. Throughout the 16 years as a Cabinet Minister, he was also Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs. This is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg