Written Representation 98

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Online Falsehoods Write-Up

SUMMARY

How are online falsehoods spread?
1) Online bots that post fake content on a regular basis.

    a) Most website visitors aren't humans, but are instead bots—or, programs built to do automated tasks. Harmful bots have the edge over helper bots, which were responsible for 29 percent and 23 percent of all web traffic, respectively. "The most alarming statistic in this report is also the most persistent trend it observes," writes Igal Zeifman, Imperva's marketing director, in a blog post about the research. "For the past five years, every third website visitor was an attack bot."https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/bots-bots-bots/515043/

    b) Therefore, for the elderly, they have to recognize that not all content posted on websites or even comments on posts were done by other people. This is critical for them to recognize that other parties may have vested interest in programming bots to behave in ways to shape public opinions like bots posting multiple comments criticizing the CPF model when actually there may only be a few people who have an issue with CPF.

    c) Hence, it is critical for the elderly not to take information or form their opinions at face value. They need to evaluate the identity of the poster and the verifiability of the content posted.

2) Individuals or organizations that profit by creating click-bait content to drive online traffic to particular sites which spread misinformation.

    a) Same as above. Recognize the vested interests behind the post and double check content with other sources to prove truth.

3) Sharing of messages through social media platforms like Whatsapp by member of similar communities. For example, a fake message in Mandarin or another Chinese dialect could be easily spread around within an elderly Chinese neighbourhood Whatsapp group.

Why are online falsehoods created and spread?
1) To influence public opinion on important and sensitive issues that would affect government outcomes such as elections and referendums. Mainly catalyzed to fulfil state- or national-level interests such as CPF changes which would then cause political and social tensions.

2) Private-entities can attain financial benefits from the online advertisements posted on sites on which they post online falsehoods. For example, every view of a click-bait article allows the poster to earn financially.

Effect on Singaporean society and political processes?
1) Increased levels of feedback to political representatives. For example, this may cause an issue at Meet the People sessions if a large group of people, who are only familiar with Mandarin for example, engage with an MP of a minority race over an issue that may be false.

    a) First, the MP would find it difficult to explain the falseness of the issue in a language that is not their primary tongue.

    b) Second, if the issue is technical, the MP would be hard-pressed to break down the technical understanding to a population who may be less familiar with official terminology.

    c) Third, if the prevailing perception is anti-government, the people who are upset may be less inclined to listen to official explanations.

2) Opportunity cost in terms of addressing an issue that is not-existent just because some entities or people are focused on creating political and social tensions within the country. The time spent addressing this issue could be spent fixing actual problems. Therefore, it is critical in terms of manpower cost and time to detect and effectively address falsehoods so as to not disrupt regular government action and programming.

What to do to prevent the spread of online falsehoods?
1) Social platforms need to better regulate the content that are posted on their websites. For example, Facebook needs to take down "illegal content" within 24 hours once they uncover it or it is reported to them. Utilization of AI technology by social media platforms to detect online bots or fake accounts that post online falsehoods.

2) Follow the "Honest Ads Act" where those who pay for political or socially-related advertisements need to declare their identities. This prevents anonymous entities from buying ads to stoke tensions without having to reveal their private motives.

3) Government and affected parties need to quickly address online flasehoods via government channels like the newspapers, TVs, and on social media. Do not let falsehoods fester which will then grow into strong beliefs, despite being based on misinformation.

4) Encourage the community to check in with their grassroot leaders and MPs to clarify concerns without resorting to immediate expressions of anger and unhappiness. A culture of respect and openness with regard to information dissemination needs to be established. A perception of government accountability and transparency will help establish this culture of respect.

OTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER FOR SINGAPORE

1) What are the pressure points unique to Singapore?

    a) Racial tensions

b) Religious conflict

c) Immigration perception

d) Class divide

e) Governmental problems like SMRT

f) Elderly experience and perception

2) Who would benefit from exposing these pressure points?

a) Anti-government entities

b) Alternative media sources

3) In what contexts to these pressure points intersect with government and institutional interests?

a) Elections

b) Referendums

c) Town halls

d) Budget allocation

4) Who can rectify the inaccuracies? How do they prove that they are reliable?

a) Ministers and Members of Parliament

b) Grassroot leaders

c) Important thought leaders in Singapore

5) Does this impede free speech or re-define what free speech means?

a) It should not impede free speech unless clear cases of seditious comments are made. If people were merely making arguments based on the evidence available, the government has to engage with those points intellectually and not merely group negative comments as sedition. Doing so gives the perception that there is something to hide and nullifies the government's ability to dismiss the negative perception.

b) Therefore, having very strict guidelines on what is considered falsehoods is critical. Preventing the spread of online misinformation should not be conflated with preventing unpopular or alternatives ways of thought.