

Hard truths in crisis communication – what to expect with a political scandal

And why Covid-19 pandemic messaging offers useful lessons.

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On July 21, sites operated by The Online Citizen Asia (TOCA) were marked as Declared Online Locations (DOLs). TOCA was taken to task for communicating three falsehoods within a six-month period prior to the declaration.

The move by the Ministry of Communications and Information means that TOCA will not be able to derive any financial benefits from operating these sites.

The declarations on Friday came after a recent string of targeted corrections issued under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Pofma).

It would be remiss of us to dismiss these directions and declarations as sledgehammer moves by the Government to control online discourse on ongoing developments involving MPs from both sides of the House. Instead, this spate of incidents highlights three hard truths, and also shows what more can be done to reclaim trust during a crisis.

HARD TRUTH #1: FALSEHOODS ARE GIVEN IN TIMES OF CRISES

The news that the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) was investigating Transport Minister S. Iswaran and the disclosure of the affair between former Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin and former MP Cheng Li Hui have already sparked discussions on

how these developments will impact the ruling party's political capital.

The general sentiment online is that of bewilderment and disgruntlement. People were upset over how details of the CPIB investigation were released in dribs and drabs. They also remarked on the time lapse between when the affair between Mr Tan and Ms Li was outed and when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong decided to accept their resignations.

Similar sentiments were expressed regarding the affair between the Workers' Party's Leon Perera and Nicole Seah. In some quarters of cyberspace, people questioned the integrity and public accountability of the two political parties.

While explanations have been given for the timings of the release of pertinent public information, at the height of the controversies, instant messaging groups were rife with speculation. When there is no timely communication from authoritative sources, people turn to any source that is available, even at the risk of falling prey to falsehoods.

Such behaviour is to be expected. These controversies trigger visceral emotions like feelings of injustice, disappointment, disgust, shock and anger. Research in psychology and communications points to a negativity bias, where information that evokes negative emotions attracts more attention, leaves a stronger impression, and is harder to debunk than information that evokes positive emotions.

Furthermore, research that dates to the study of rumours and conspiracy theories in the 1980s found that information that evokes an emotional response is more likely to be shared,

regardless of whether it is believable or not. When you add this to the discomfort people feel when there are information gaps, it means that communicating slowly, or too little, may cause damage that lasts beyond a crisis.

HARD TRUTH #2: SOCIAL MEDIA FILLS INFORMATION GAPS

Information gaps exist in the absence of data and evidence. In the cases cited above, people dug up social media posts from the past, which were removed from context. There were also all sorts of speculation from "the grapevine" that circulated widely on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, instant messaging groups, discussion forums like Reddit and websites like TOCA. Those rumours and falsehoods unfortunately plugged the information gaps that people were grappling with.

Information gaps also come about when people think that a portrayed reality is too good to be true – a result of one-sided reporting. They start to think they do not have the full picture of a situation or an event. An ongoing study that I am conducting reveals that certain segments of the society deliberately seek out social media for the "real Singapore" or the "unfiltered reality." However, that unfiltered reality at times includes false information that can do society harm.

Social media provides people with a quick way to understand how regular Singaporeans feel about a particular issue. While this sounds harmless, they may be subject to the bandwagon effect or be taking the wrong cues from others that are based on false information. So while they may initially doubt a rumour, they may

come to believe it because others treat it as truth.

HARD TRUTH #3: PUBLIC AGENCIES AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA MUST RAISE THEIR GAME

While due process like an investigation must be given time, and individuals must also be given the privacy to handle their personal matters, officials will increasingly find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

While the Covid-19 pandemic was a crisis of a very different kind, it highlighted key learning points for crisis communication – clear, transparent, on-time and in-time communications, admission of shortcomings and a candid assessment of how different arms of the public sector can do better in future.

For public agencies to keep pace with a rapidly changing information landscape, there should be no sacred cows in governance. Processes will have to be reviewed and government communications refined to keep up with Internet time. While corrections under Pofma will help curb online falsehoods, it is doubtful they will work when it comes to communications on instant messaging apps. Hence government communications will have to be more anticipatory and proactive, rather than reactive.

Mainstream media plays an even more critical role in the current age of misinformation. In the reporting of recent sagas, they sought to break news and update developments in real time to put facts out there, while operating within the limits of available information.

But I would like to make a more general point about mainstream media which should be borne in mind, going forward.

A study that I conducted on Singaporeans and false information found that people are more likely to trust a news source when it presents different perspectives and different sides of a story. Their suspicions are aroused when they are presented with one-sided articles because they begin to wonder if the publisher is advancing a certain agenda.

While the studies I conducted in the past years show that Singaporeans turn to social media more frequently than mainstream media for news and information, they also show that people trust mainstream media more.

Mainstream media should protect and grow its trust capital. Besides timely reporting, it will have to strike the delicate balance between showcasing different views and safeguarding national interests, especially when it comes to sensitive topics like race, religion and sexual identities. For instance, reporting on the challenges faced by racial minorities and the LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer – community in different settings might be perceived to disrupt social harmony.

However, in an increasingly diverse society, differences can be embraced only when we are aware of the lived experiences of those who are different from us but equally deserving of the opportunities we have.

Supporting official narratives and observing out-of-bounds markers to help maintain social cohesion and political stability have been the ways in which the mainstream media supports nation-building. Perhaps, it is time to revisit what nation-building by the mainstream media should entail, when it is no longer the dominant source of information.

No one can predict what the political fallout of recent events will be, but one thing is certain. We can learn from the present to future-proof Singapore by rebuilding trust and reclaiming truth.

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