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Overcoming political polarisation in a divided cyberspace

Social media empowers both good and bad actors and amplifies their messages. But who's listening?

Carol Soon

Out of the mainstreaming of the Internet beyond the military in the 1980s came utopian visions of an enlightened public. This vision was underpinned by the assumption that people would be better informed because they would have more access to diverse views and be more equipped to make rational decisions on politics and policy. Four decades on and the reality seems to be getting further and further away from this vision. Today, elections and political discourse are characterised by hate speech fanning tribalism, disinformation that chips away trust in public institutions, and incitement to violence, making political mudslinging mild by comparison. "Us" versus "them" and "me" versus "you" have never been so raw and naked. This is evident from developments around the world. In the months leading up to the storming of the US Capitol on Jan 6, 2021, discussions on pro-Donald Trump groups on Facebook, Instagram and Telegram built up the momentum for the eventual eruption of violence. Parler and Gab, social media sites popular among the far right, were used by demonstrators to coordinate travel routes and the tools to bring for breaking into the building. In the Philippines, disinformation on social media helped administration-backed candidates win the 2016 presidential election and 2019

midterm elections. According to Tsek-ph, an independent collaboration between academia, the media and civil society to fight disinformation, online disinformation tripled in the last three years.

At home, the recent political scandals involving members of the ruling People's Action Party and the Workers' Party saw rumours and falsehoods spread on social media. With an upcoming presidential election, there are concerns that similar weaponisation of hate speech and disinformation will put the country on the path of polarisation.

How has political discourse, made more accessible to all by social media, arrived at this point? Are we reaching a tipping point or have we, as some fear, gone beyond the point of no return? What can be done?

EMPOWERING ACTORS, BOTH GOOD AND BAD

Social media has democratised participation in political life by lowering barriers to information access and content creation, and reducing costs. This means political actors are no longer restricted to traditional ones like political parties and civil society organisations but have diversified to include regular citizens.

This expansion has certainly had a positive impact on society. Social media has been used by individuals and ground-up groups to raise awareness of different issues, advocate the rights of marginalised communities, and deliver goods and services in times of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a study conducted on youth civic engagement by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), we found that young people in Singapore use Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to disseminate information, call for action and express solidarity on issues

relating to the environment, race and religion, gender and sexuality, mental health and jobs.

However, democratisation of participation also means that a wider range of actors are now involved in manufacturing and weaponising hate and disinformation.

According to Associate Professor Jason Vincent A. Cabanes of De La Salle University, who studies disinformation in the Philippines, digital disinformation in the country has grown into an industry that includes content producers from the advertising and public relations industries. Over years, they build and sustain disinformation campaigns which pick up momentum during election time.

In Malaysia, a social monitoring project by the Centre for Independent Journalism and three universities found that those responsible for hate speech during the 2022 General Election in the country were not limited to politicians and political parties, but included opinion leaders like singers and actors. Together, these multi-actor networks amplify the reach of pernicious discourse across platforms to different segments of the population.

DIVISIONS AMPLIFIED

Besides empowering different types of actors, the allure of social media lies in its ability to connect people with like-minded others or those from similar backgrounds, through its algorithms. Remember the tingling amazement we felt when Facebook connected us with long-lost friends from secondary school and junior college?

With great ease and at unprecedented speed, social media allows us to connect with those who share similar personal interests and hobbies, values, ideologies and aspirations. However, this has become a double-edged sword when different segments of the society find themselves closeted into different parts of the digital space. When groups are formed based on issues relating to identity, tribalism emerges.

In the United States, gun control, white supremacy, abortion and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues are deeply polarising ones and have been used by politicians from both sides during election campaigns to attack their opponents and rally greater support from their followers. In Estonia, Poland and Serbia, issues involving the rights of same-sex couples pitch communities and, sometimes, family members against one another.

Coupled with platform algorithms that expose us to more of the same, many unknowingly find themselves in echo chambers that reinforce their world view.

Here in Singapore, immigration, race, religion, gender and sexuality are hot-button issues that are discussed regularly. Social media accounts and pages provide a space for people to talk about these issues, which they

may not be able to do freely in the offline world, owing to fears of stigmatisation and discrimination. These accounts tend to attract comments that suggest a concurrence of views and positions among followers.

But this may result in people of different groups adhering to in-group perspectives and not hearing the other side. For instance, leading up to the parliamentary debates on ministers' rental of Ridout Road properties, comments on social media and instant messaging groups were visibly partisan in nature. The same was observed in online discussions relating to the ongoing investigation of Transport Minister S. Iswaran and the resignations of former Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-jin and former MP Cheng Li Hui.

Many of the comments also smacked of personal attacks. While such reactions are understandable, given the nature of the scandals, they demonstrate how people are talking across one another instead of with one another as they seek to make sense of what is happening.

However, owing to the laws in place that govern speech both in the real world and the digital space, and consistent calls by the Government to safeguard social harmony, we do not at present observe the same degree of polarising rhetoric as other countries.

That said, laws like the Sedition Act, Penal Code and the recent Online Criminal Harms Act that enable the Government to "act against offences relating to harmony between different races, religion, or classes of the population" will always have to play catch-up with technology.

This is due to the rapid pace of technological development and the ensuing user behaviour which no one can predict. One instance is generative artificial intelligence, where ongoing developments are already showing potential regulatory challenges. While the technology increases productivity in various domains, there are risks of it being weaponised to

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produce mass disinformation such as fake news articles and deepfakes in the form of misleading images, video or audio.

NOT A LOST CAUSE

There are ways to counteract the power of platforms and tribal politics. Besides ongoing regulatory reviews requiring social media companies to take more and faster action against hate speech and disinformation, there are two things that can be done at the individual level in the online space and the offline world to help overcome personal blind spots and biases.

One, increase people's awareness of the pitfalls of social media and, more importantly, arm them with simple strategies they can put into practice. Users of technology, regardless of their demographic profile, should engage more with authoritative and credible content from diverse sources.

Platform algorithms personalise the content we receive based on what we comment on, what we like, and what we share. The more we engage with quality content, the more of such content we will receive. We should also engage more with diverse sources, even if they adopt positions that may seem contrary to ours. In doing so, we take active steps to not be drawn into echo chambers.

Two, we should create more opportunities for people to engage with those who are different from them. Since 2017, I have been involved in citizens' panels where people from different walks of life come together and work together to develop solutions for specific policy problems. I have seen first-hand the efficacy of such a process in helping individuals understand the plights and challenges of those who are different from them.

For instance, during the recent Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Citizens' Panel on Employment Resilience, employers and employees learnt more about the difficulties the other party faces. Some employers, when deliberating with people who were out of work, learnt about the lesser-known challenges faced by those trying to get back to work after a period of unemployment, be it by choice or not by choice.

More importantly, they experienced up close the challenges, aspirations, hopes and dreams of those whom they were unlikely to interact with in their day-to-day lives. "I never knew that others feel this way", "I have never thought of this issue this way" – simple utterances but heartfelt realisations.

Social media is both a boon and a bane and can amplify those differences, especially in the hands of nefarious actors. But all is not lost – each of us can make a difference in our own small ways.

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