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Falling for falsehoods: A diet for prevention

Ong Wei Teck and Andree Hartanto

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Consuming information in a discerning manner can help us resist dubious claims

The reach of social media was once lauded for facilitating prominent social movements such as the Arab Spring uprisings against oppression, that spread across North Africa and the Middle East in late 2010. Now, it has been identified as a key medium for spreading lies.

Seven in 10 of 28,122 social media and messaging app users from 11 emerging economies surveyed last year by the Pew Research Centre reported being regularly exposed to blatantly false information online.

Once people believe something, they tend to persist in this belief, despite evidence to the contrary.

This can be explained by how our mind functions. Psychological research indicates that our mind often prefers having a complete (though somewhat incoherent) narrative over having no viable explanation when it is understanding how unfolding events have occurred.

So mere denials and retractions are an ineffective debunking strategy because valid explanations are not provided to address the mental "gap" left by false information. A "need for closure" thus increases our likelihood of believing in false claims that are seemingly plausible.

We Singaporeans overestimate our ability to detect falsehoods.

A study of 750 Singapore citizens and permanent residents conducted by market research firm Ipsos in 2017 revealed that eight out of 10 respondents here were confident of sifting fact from fiction, although 90 per cent of them actually believed at least one of five false news headlines presented to them.

False information often possesses unverified, exaggerated and controversial claims that prey on our frequent use of heuristics and the instinctively lazy brain's preference for quick, easy conclusions. Critical thinking makes us less susceptible to false information.

One real-life example involved Green Delights, a halal-certified yong tau foo stall. A picture insinuating that Green Delights had advertised a pork belly dish went viral on WhatsApp and social networking sites last year, even though the advertisement was actually displayed by a neighbouring stall.

In response, several netizens swiftly organised a boycott of the food stall.

Although a probe by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) found that Green Delights followed proper food-handling procedures, its sales continued to suffer.

Why do people believe dubious claims? In short, we believe what we want to believe.

Utilising our reasoning abilities, we interpret contrary evidence to favour ideologies or the consensus of groups we closely identify with, and unquestioningly accept claims cohering with our world view.

For instance, the anti-vaccination movement persists in the face of well-established evidence documenting the safety of vaccines because of mistrust fuelled by political, cultural and religious divides.

However, this does not explain the significant amount of false information circulating on social media, which is neither provocative nor of personal relevance.

The 2017 Ipsos study used politically neutral and non-provocative satirical news headlines to measure Singaporeans' ability to detect falsehoods, which nonetheless remained low. For example, only 53 per cent of respondents correctly identified the headline "Increasing food costs will deter eating, help Singaporeans fight obesity" as false. This suggests that our biases are not the only reason why we fall for falsehoods.

Another line of psychological research suggests that our belief in false information can be attributed to the role our reasoning processes play in evaluating information.

When completing routine and intuitive tasks, we often rely on heuristics - mental shortcuts, or "rules of thumb" - that allow us to complete those tasks without expending too much mental effort.

One such routine task is browsing social media. Research at Columbia University found that most links shared and commented on, on social media, are never clicked.

This implies that article highlights and previews, along with their associated comments, are often read while their body text is ignored.

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Critical thinking makes us less susceptible to false information.

In a series of studies, psychologists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US and the University of Regina in Canada first assessed whether participants engaged in critical thinking or relied on intuition when solving problems.

They found that individuals who usually engaged in critical thinking instead of relying on intuition were better able to discern between fake and real news headlines of varying political content, regardless of their personal political views.

The research findings strongly suggest that critical thinking can complement computer-assisted and legal approaches directed at reducing individual exposure to false information. Individually safeguarding against misinformation can be compared to watching your diet.

Just as how following a healthy diet can prevent chronic diseases, consuming information in a discerning manner can help us resist false information.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

- Inspect the "ingredients" of an article. Nutrition information and ingredient lists on product labels help us gauge food's healthiness. Similarly, we can assess the article's tone and source to determine its reliability. Credible articles usually cite primary sources such as documents, memos and speeches.

- Consume an adequate number of articles from various sources. Popular stories and breaking news will be carried by reliable news sources that are corroborated by one another. Be sceptical of details that are not common across articles from reliable sources.
- Have a balanced diet of information. Writers and readers both have biases that partially determine the stories they follow and the information they seek. It is possible to select stories that reinforce one's existing world view. Try to get information from multiple sources that have different opinions to obtain a holistic view of issues.
- Just like junk food is not good for you, online popularity does not determine validity. Although a story might be shared widely online, it might not be true. Unreliable news articles demonstrably receive higher levels of interaction than reliable news articles on Facebook, possibly by appealing to emotions instead of logic.

Above all, exercising critical thinking boils down to not relying on intuition alone when sifting through information.

Following a diet has always been challenging because old habits die hard. But a conscientious effort to think critically can gradually become second nature and help us resist the pervasiveness of falsehoods.

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