



ONLINE SOURCES
OF INFORMATION:

Navigating the maze

Online posts that spread misinformation have heightened concerns over how this can cause panic and erode trust in public institutions.

Tessa Wong surveys the changing landscape and suggests ways to address the problem.

LIKE many Singaporeans these days, Mr Nicholas Lauw keeps himself informed by reading both mainstream and online news.

But the 32-year-old lawyer is careful about trusting what he reads online as he finds some local blogs and sociopolitical sites to be less reliable and more polarising than mainstream outlets.

One example that pulled him up short was The Real Singapore (TRS) website's article last month attributed to Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng and which criticised government actions during the haze. It later emerged that she had not written it, and the site had not checked if she was the author.

Says Mr Lauw: "It emphasises that you shouldn't take at face value everything you read from online sites that is not mainstream media. I read everything with a pinch of salt. But for some sources, I read them with a larger dose than others."

This issue of online credibility has become more acute as more turn to blogs, websites and social media as sources of information, and more cases have arisen where false news and rumours have spread quickly online.

How can the public navigate this new information landscape? What can be done to ensure news put out there is accurate?

A shifting landscape

BACK when the news was largely provided by print and broadcast companies staffed by professional journalists, editors acted as gatekeepers to ensure standards of accuracy and balance. Often, they were backed by support staff trained to check facts.

But now, blogs, sociopolitical sites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts have blossomed into news sources.

They now play a small but significant role in public discourse. Beyond airing views and shaping public opinion, they have done their fair share of uncovering issues that have in turn earned them some measure of trust.

Last year, sociopolitical website TR Emeritus (TRE) triggered one of the biggest political scandals in recent years when it reported that then Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong from the Workers' Party (WP) allegedly had an affair with a married woman from the same party.

Mr Yaw ended up being expelled from the WP. He vacated his seat in Parliament and fled the country, which in turn led to a by-election in Hougang - the first in Singapore in 20 years.

Last year, blogger Alex Au posted an item on his blog Yawning Bread that led to a discussion in Parliament, where Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean emphasised the need to keep religion and politics separate. Mr Au wrote that the then Archbishop of the Catholic Church Nicholas Chia had written a letter to activist group Function 8 supporting a rally against the Internal Security

Act, and added that the letter was retracted following a meeting with Mr Teo.

The archbishop later said he withdrew it because he feared it would be used in a way he did not intend. The Home Affairs Ministry, which Mr Teo heads, said it was a longstanding practice for government ministers to meet regularly with religious leaders as part of efforts to maintain religious harmony.

But false news and speculation are also rampant online, and some sources have been called out for inaccuracies.

Earlier this month, Minister for Communication and Information Yaacob Ibrahim spoke in Parliament about the spread of false information online during the recent haze crisis, which he said led to unnecessary anxiety. Among the examples he cited was a screenshot showing the wrong PSI reading; blogger Ravi Philemon reposting a friend's allegation that the Government's stockpile of N95 masks was not for the public; and TRS' false attribution of its article to Ms Ng.

Mr Au and TRE have also had to apologise in the past for untrue and defamatory remarks about Cabinet ministers, while TRS was last week found to have published false allegations made by a woman about the Chua Chu Kang Town Council.

Incidents like these have contributed to the perception that while blogs and websites may seem more independent-minded than mainstream media, the Internet is still less trustworthy.

An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey of more than 1,000 people in 2010 found that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is untrustworthy and 5 is very trustworthy, the Internet received 2.82 on average while television scored 3.55 and newspapers 3.58.

But the same study found that about half of the respondents felt there is too much government control over the media. About half also felt that newspapers and media are biased in their political reporting. Such findings show that credibility is a complex creature.

Research has found that people make credibility judgments based not just on objective factors, such as whether a source has expert knowledge and gets its facts right, but also subjective factors such as perceptions of bias, whether the source's view fits their world view and whether a website is visually attractive.

Whose responsibility is it?

IN THE new media environment, the onus for fact checking seems to have shifted to a large extent from professional gatekeepers to individual users of information.

There is little governments around the world can do to keep out every piece of misinformation online, given the porous nature of the Internet where anyone with online access can set up



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a blog or Twitter account and become an instant pundit.

Indeed, Singapore is not alone in dealing with rampant misinformation online. In the United States, concern about this issue has risen especially after false rumours and images were spread during the Boston bombings and Hurricane Sandy.

But government regulation of the online space has largely been rejected in several countries in the West, because of concerns that it would lead to censorship. For example, a recent attempt in Australia to introduce an independent council to set journalistic standards and handle public

complaints for all media, including online outlets, was blocked in Parliament.

In Singapore, the Government has tried to counter the problem through a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. It suggested that bloggers self-regulate by drawing up a code of conduct but this proposal was rejected.

It also set up a Media Literacy Council and introduced an individual licensing framework for online news websites.

On bloggers' rejection of the proposed code of conduct, IPS special research adviser Arun Mahizhnan says: "No one can impose a common standard on all bloggers... The simple fact is that the blogosphere is made up of numerous individuals who act on their own beliefs. They play by their own rules. And they represent no one but themselves."

Mr Philemon, in a recent public statement, described himself

as "an ordinary citizen" who is "not in a position to verify what is truth and what is not". In a recent interview with The New Paper, he also sought to make a distinction between journalists and bloggers, as the latter are still, in his view, "amateurs". But Dr Yaacob noted that Mr Philemon's allegations had "no basis", and that the blogger's post about N95 masks being kept out of the public's reach had come after the Government had announced it would be giving out one million N95 masks free to lower-income households.

Syracuse University researcher R. David Lankes has argued that Internet users are now moving away from an "authority-based" approach to credibility to a "reliability approach".

The first is where individuals rely on trusted sources to vouch for the credibility of information, such as a trusted TV news programme. By contrast, a "reliability approach" sees individuals seeking multiple sources and assessing for themselves over time those that deliver accurate information. It is also defined by its openness, what Professor Lankes calls "the credibility conversation", where people actively exchange information to verify if something is true or not.

Indeed, just as the Internet empowers anyone to post, it also empowers readers to question and correct misinformation when they spot it.

One recent local example was when a rumour surfaced online that the Cannes prize-winning film *Ilo Ilo* had been refused government funding. Some netizens found information on the Media Development Authority's website stating that the film had received grants, and pointed this out in discussion threads.

Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong posted a clarification on Facebook which was quickly circulated by netizens.

A checklist to help sort fact from fiction

With the torrent of views available online daily, there is a temptation to dismiss the need to sort fact from fiction as too troublesome. To combat this, one suggestion is that individuals use short and simple checklists to help them navigate. An example is the Media Literacy Council's (MLC) list posted on its website, which has five elements:

WHO/WHERE

Look at who created or uploaded the piece, whether the author can be trusted, and whether it is an authoritative source and there is a potential conflict of interest.

WHEN

Check when it was published, and if it is up-to-date and relevant.

WHAT

Check if the piece has an agenda and whether it offers more than one perspective. Cross-check with multiple sources if possible.

WHY

Ask yourself why you are reading

that media, and consider that people tend to go to information sources that depict or are in line with their own beliefs and perceptions. To be objective, seek out other sources of information.

THINK

Always have an inquiring mind and remember: Photographs, videos and texts can be manipulated and taken out of context to distort or influence perceptions.

The MLC suggests a short cut to assess the credibility of an online source: Browse through the site first to understand its purpose, and read the website's terms of service. Using quick and

reliable ways to assess credibility is important because people often do not want to take the time to make in-depth assessments.

A 2003 Stanford University study found that the biggest factor people use in assessing a website's credibility is its presentation and visual design, while a 2007 University of California study found that people take the time to make a full assessment only when they are highly motivated to do so, such as a patient researching medical information.

Singapore Management University assistant professor Michael Netzley said research has also shown that people tend to have "increasingly tribal" habits,

and tend to interact online with other like-minded people in what is known as the "echo chamber" effect. Thus, the need to critically compare information across various sources is diminished.

But what will also help users is that over time, blogs and websites will develop their own reputations and reporting styles that readers will come to recognise, said communications and new media professor Lim Sun Sun of the National University of Singapore.

"Consumers can then decide for themselves whether these different news sources are worth their time or if they prefer to access more credible sources," she said.

TESSA WONG

Some sites which had posted the rumour, such as The Online Citizen, later apologised.

But there are media watchers who believe that the Government and bloggers themselves must do their part to counter misinformation.

The Government can be more proactive in providing accurate information on a consistent basis, especially in a crisis, says former Nominated MP Calvin Cheng. This counters the tendency of people latching on to non-official sources, which may spread misinformation.

Dr Lim Sun Sun, deputy head of communications and new media at the National University of Singapore, says: "When official bodies are more responsive and forthcoming, people will begin to distinguish between the messages from official sources and those that are not, and decide for themselves which updates they want to pay heed to."

With Singaporean readers becoming more discerning, it is also in bloggers' own interests to raise their standards, says Nominated MP Eugene Tan, "particularly in terms of being objective and balanced with the political agenda... Otherwise, they will find themselves remaining marginal to the public discourse".

Mr Cheng says: "Nobody has a free pass as the Internet is also bound by the same laws as real life."

These include defamation laws and the Telecommunications Act, which makes it illegal to transmit or cause to transmit a message known to be false or fabricated.

But readers' best defence against being misled remains their own level of digital literacy, experts say, and it is thus important to equip them with the skills and savvy needed to evaluate information, whatever the source. Some observers believe Singaporeans are already developing these skills.

Mr Devadas Krishnadas, founder of risk management and advisory consultancy Future-Moves, says there was calm even when the rumour mill over former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's state of health went into overdrive last year.

He also notes that Mr Philemon's post about the masks was not shared widely on Facebook, and prior to the Government's chastisement, there was hardly any backlash against his post. "One way to look at it is that in the first instance, not many read his post, and of those who did, few took it seriously while others cross-checked with other sources," says Mr Devadas.

Dr Michael Netzley, assistant professor of corporate communication education at the Singapore Management University, says that as with any new medium, it is inevitable that consumers become more savvy over time.

This change takes place in tandem with public institutions moving to increase digital literacy courses, governments designing and putting in place new regulations, and citizens themselves learning from their mistakes. "So the pendulum may swing for a while but will always settle in the middle with time... Consumers will become better at spotting fakes, rumours and conjecture," he says.

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The main online players



THE ONLINE CITIZEN

■ **Who:** Set up by lawyer Choo Zheng Xi (left) and blogger Andrew Loh. The latter has since left. Mr Choo now oversees the website as consultant editor, while its executive editor Terry Xu is the site's sole full-time employee.

■ **Founded:** 2006

■ **Known for:** One of the more established sites, it features mostly commentaries on current affairs and is also known for hosting offline events such as debates in the lead-up to the 2011 general and presidential polls. It became the first and so far only political website to be gazetted as a political association that same year. In May, it said it meets the requirements for an individual licence under the new Media Development Authority licensing framework for news websites, but the MDA has disagreed.



NEW NATION

■ **Who:** The site was founded by Mr Terence Lee (left), who is also the editor of Sgentrepreneurs.com, freelance writer Belmont Lay, and a third friend, Ms Fang Shihan, who has since left.

■ **Founded:** 2011

■ **Known for:** Satirical takes on current affairs and news stories, in the vein of popular US website The Onion.



YAWNING BREAD

■ **Who:** A sociopolitical blog by Mr Alex Au, who is also known for his gay rights activism.

■ **Founded:** 1996

■ **Known for:** Analyses on current affairs and politics. Has brought to light matters of public interest, disclosing last year that the then Archbishop of the Catholic Church here had withdrawn a letter he sent to activist group Function 8 after a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. Last year, Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam sent him a lawyer's letter regarding defamatory comments which someone else posted on Yawning Bread, which Mr Au removed. Mr Au also apologised last year to the courts for writing a piece alleging plastic surgeon Waffles Wu received special treatment.



TR EMERITUS

■ **Who:** It has a group of about five editors, of whom only one has identified himself to be the face of the site: IT consultant Richard Wan.

■ **Founded:** 2011

■ **Known for:** It had its origins as Temasek Review, a site highly critical in tone, publishing speculative pieces. But it toned down somewhat when it turned into TR Emeritus under a new editorial team, and also after it was sent lawyer's letters last year from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his brother, then Fraser & Neave chairman Lee Hsien Yang, for hosting defamatory content. It apologised and removed the content. It is also known for surfacing issues of public interest such as an alleged affair by former Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong, which led to his expulsion and a by-election.



RAVIPHELEMON.NET

■ **Who:** A former editor of The Online Citizen, Mr Ravi Philemon now mainly blogs on his site. He is also among the very few bloggers who are also political party members, having joined the opposition National Solidarity Party last year.

■ **Founded:** 2009

■ **Known for:** Sociopolitical commentaries that tend to have a critical take on the Government. He made the news recently when Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim took him to task for reposting false information during the haze that the Government's stockpile of N95 masks was not for the public.



THE REAL SINGAPORE

■ **Who:** Founded by systems engineer Alex Tan (left) with a couple thought to be based in Australia; now headed by chief editor Mohd Farhan, who declined to reveal further details about himself.

■ **Founded:** 2012

■ **Known for:** Speculative pieces on current affairs and plagiarising content from other sites, often without permission or attribution. The site was criticised recently for falsely attributing an article to PAP MP Irene Ng, who has lodged a police report, and for publishing a woman's allegations about Chua Chu Kang Town Council which she later admitted were false.



PUBLICHOUSE.SG

■ **Who:** Started by Mr Andrew Loh after he left The Online Citizen. He also blogs on his personal site andrewloh.wordpress.com

■ **Founded:** 2011

■ **Known for:** Public House carries stories on current affairs, sociopolitical issues, the arts and music, while Mr Loh's personal blog tends to have critical views of the Government and the mainstream media. He recently apologised for an expletive-filled tirade on his Facebook page against the President.