

## Online sources of information: navigating the maze

Tessa Wong, The Straits Times/ANN, Singapore | World | Wed, July 31 2013, 7:02 AM

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

Like many Singaporeans these days, 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 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.

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. 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 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 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 Ng.

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 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."

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 Yaacob noted that 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 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. 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.

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".

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.

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 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 Devadas.

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.