Fake news mind traps

Understanding cognitive bias is a key to beating the modern-day media scourge

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For The Straits Times

Debates surrounding how to counter fake news typically focus on what regulation, technology companies, media literacy and fact-checking can do.

The focus on different types of counter-measures, while important, tends to overshadow the one thing that is common to all forms of misinformation – the human psychology behind information use. Understanding the root cause of why people respond to false news, or misinformation in general, is key. This is because the success of any counter-measure ultimately hinges on the individual.

A common assumption is that people are rational – they will filter out things that are not in line with their own beliefs.

This includes evaluating the sources and the presence or absence of evidence. Such an assumption is logical in everyday life, especially when it is easy to verify articles with a few key strokes. Sowing doubt in people’s minds is not easy.

Yet, human beings have inherent biases that affect their ability to discern the truthfulness of pieces of information. Understanding the cognitive biases – confirmation bias, motivated reasoning and optimistic bias – that shape responses to information is necessary first step in deciding how to counter fake news.

WHY DO ECHO CHAMBERS PERSIST?

Much has been said about the dangers of echo chambers since the early days of media use. This phenomenon is not exclusive to social media. However, such a problem has persisted. Why is this so? Could this be explained by people’s belief that they are not susceptible to the dangers of echo chambers, unlike others around them?

Optimistic bias, the often-felty belief that one is less susceptible to risks than others, has been demonstrated among people of all ages and different backgrounds. It encourages complacency and prevents people from taking precautionary measures against problems such as vaccine hesitancy and fake news.

While the government, media, technology companies and educators look at what can be done to combat fake news, it is important to be aware of the powerful influence of cognitive biases.

There are two implications for media literacy. One is to include psychological perspectives in the media literacy curriculum. Curriculum designers could include real-life examples to make the concepts more accessible. They could also incorporate activities that encourage students to reflect on their prejudices and biases, and their susceptibility to being trapped in information echo chambers.

Information users should also be urged to consider the consequences that the information they share will have on others. While they may be motivated by cognitive inertia, the outcomes of their actions often have a far-reaching effect on the part of family members and friends. The message should be clear – check before you share.

These character traits can help reduce the negative effects of all three biases. Finally, the frequent targets of fake news and misinformation – corporate entities and public institutions – should not underestimate the power of human bias. They should acknowledge and incorporate evidence on prejudices stemming from people’s cognitive biases into their communication with the public.

It is increasingly insufficient to just have the skills to combat fake news and misinformation. An understanding of psychological motivations is necessary, too.