Fighting an information avalanche during Covid-19

By Carol Soon

A bigger problem than an info-demic is an information avalanche. Governments can counter this avalanche through anticipation and inoculation, while businesses and individuals can help by practising information austerity.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the Covid-19 outbreak caused by Sars-Cov-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) a pandemic.

It has caused not just over 6,000 deaths but also much disruption to global economies.

Since January, governments have been fighting to contain the spread of the virus and also of false information, comprising rumours, fake news and misinformation.

However, false information is only part of the problem. The bigger challenge governments and health practitioners are contending with is the information avalanche — an overwhelming volume of information that flows relentlessly across borders.

This avalanche impedes people's information processing ability, which is already compromised by anxiety and fear in times of crisis.

Information overload is an old problem; research on its effects dates back to the 1960s. However, the problem has been magnified by digital innovation.

Legacy media are racing round the clock to report the latest updates on infected cases, government responses and expert clarifications.

However, they are no longer the mainstay of people's information diet. Today, online news sites, social media and personal communication platforms are people's go-tos for information and data.

According to the 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the messaging app WhatsApp has become the main platform for sharing news in non-Western countries such as Brazil, Malaysia and South Africa.

In Singapore, while news consumption is increasing for online media accounts, it is declining for television and print.

Current measures adopted by the Singapore Government point to a relatively efficacious playbook at trying to stay on top of an information avalanche. Are they enough? And can we do more?

MORE AI NEEDED — ANTICIPATION AND INOCULATION

Since Jan 2 when the Ministry of Health (MOH) said it was monitoring the Covid-19 situation and was issuing advisories to healthcare practitioners, the Singapore Government has taken swift public communications measures.

Besides the well-noted multi-ministry taskforce which made its first address to the public over the Chinese New Year weekend, the Government has also adopted a multi-modality approach to push out core critical messages relating to the virus.

From gov.sg, ministry websites and social media accounts, and ministers' Facebook pages, information messages on the latest developments of Covid-19, how Singapore is responding to the situation and important practices to observe for personal protection are communicated and reinforced.

Transmission of these messages extend beyond public fora to closed and offline platforms such as WhatsApp and digital display panels in public housing estates.

Such focused and repetitive messaging is key to increasing the salience and hence recall of the important facts, clarifications and behaviours they should heed.

However, as the Covid-19 situation rapidly develops in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the United States, the slight calm observed among the Singaporean public in recent weeks is under threat.

For instance, reports of possible re-infection among recovered patients and other governments' responses or a sudden sharp spike in number of infections here may lead to a resurgence of public panic and impede the work that agencies are trying to do.

To prevent this, AI — Anticipation and Inoculation — is required. Before WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic (on March 11), the Government warned that with the increasing numbers of infected cases overseas, the situation in Singapore may become more severe. During his speech delivered in Parliament on March 5, Minister Gan Kim Yong, who co-chairs the multi-ministry taskforce, said that while it is not practically to close off Singapore's borders completely, all resources and manpower will be mobilised to "mount a swift and effective response".

Images of panic buying and reports of lockdowns in other countries will threaten the calm that has started settling among the Singapore public. Despite Minister Chan Chun Sing's reassurance given earlier this month that Singapore is continuing to diversify its sources to ensure a steady supply of essential goods and products, Malaysia's announcement on Monday of a lockdown has triggered another wave of stocking up of supplies and groceries by Singaporeans, albeit on a smaller scale.

Timely and anticipatory moves such as these will be more critical as people are likely to receive conflicting and possibly confusing accounts from local and foreign sources. While they are unlikely to eradicate all concerns and negativity, close sensing at the grassroots level and in the online sphere will help public officials anticipate likely speculations, issue advance warnings and more importantly, sensitise the public on what is to come. Akin to vials of antibodies, such warnings will help inoculate people from speculation and false information before they are exposed to them, and mitigate their spread and impact.

What the rest can do — Practise information austerity

Besides MOH, which provides updates and policy responses to Covid-19, other agencies have put out advisories to different sectors on what should be done. These agencies include

Enterprise SG, Singapore Food Agency, Early Childhood Development Agency and Immigration and Checkpoints Authority.

Apart from reinforcing key messages put out national level, such advisories tailor recommendations to the needs of different sectors. Businesses and employers should tap such information as resources and amplify core messages relevant to the workplace.

As for individuals, let us also practise information austerity. We should turn to authoritative sources and be selective about what we share, so as to alleviate information overload on others. When in doubt, refrain from sharing. Many of us share well-intentioned information such as alternatives to standard medical treatment and supposedly "latest" developments. However, false information increases panic and distracts people from correct practices.

In times of hardship, we tighten our belts, survive on the essentials and avoid excess. A similar lesson holds for crises.

Dr Carol Soon is a Principal Investigator at the NUS Centre for Trusted Internet and Community and Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, at the National University of Singapore.