

How do we use messaging platforms such as WhatsApp appropriately in a crisis?

Natalie Pang

Is WhatsApp a hot spot for misinformation? Much ado about nothing?

Crises and disasters are often marked by a heightened need to seek information, as we have seen in the ongoing responses to Covid-19. Because of such needs, social media platforms have been lauded for their role in not just sharing critical information but also in the pooling of resources. For instance, a Google spreadsheet created on Feb 8 (2020) by individuals from 'A Good Space' has seen different groups and individuals come together to offer resources, call for volunteers and resources, and brainstorm for ways to help one another during this time. It is testament to the civic resilience that is made possible through digital platforms.

But we are no longer naïve about technology. Just as digital platforms can be used for civic pursuits and engagement, there is growing awareness that technology can be used to manipulate opinions and behaviour, spread panic, to weaponise and amplify divides.

Instant messaging platforms, in particular, have been accused of being breeding grounds for echo chambers, and most of all, associated with the spread of misinformation. Telegram, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are all considered instant messaging platforms. WhatsApp has been reported to be the most popular according to the State of Mobile Report 2019¹ by US-based analytics firm App Annie.

Research on WhatsApp has gained traction in recent years, and not limited to misinformation. Scholars have also examined the use of WhatsApp in moments of civic and collective action. Are such instant messaging platforms truly hotbeds for misinformation or have they been badly misunderstood?

It is (sometimes) about reciprocity

A day after Singapore confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on Jan 23, messages circulated on WhatsApp cautioning recipients to avoid specific hospitals and malls associated with confirmed or suspect cases.

In response, the Ministry of Health (MOH) clarified that it was unnecessary as there are strict protocols to handle and manage suspect cases.

Such public communications were quickly disseminated using different channels, including MOH's own Facebook page and the Gov.sg WhatsApp group.

But such rumours, memes and messages of places to avoid continued to circulate. Pictures and memes shared the day that the alert level was raised to Dorscon Orange have been associated with the panic buying and hoarding that followed.

Why did these messages persist? Was the public messaging unclear? Is it a matter of media literacy? Are people just simply fond of bad news over positive news?

As a communication environment, instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp is different from other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Beyond the informational value embedded in multiple messages, memes and conversations, many interactions on WhatsApp serve a social function. Users exchange messages and stay engaged in a chat group to signal that they are

¹ <https://www.appannie.com/en/insights/market-data/the-state-of-mobile-2019/>

listening by responding to messages in the group. Such reciprocal exchanges encourage the production and reproduction of conversations, and often create feelings of solidarity and empathy within the group.

There are features in the platform that contribute to this sense of reciprocity. The ticks on WhatsApp (e.g. double blue ticks to indicate that a message has been read) introduce certain expectations in terms of communication – in a way having a message read but not responded to signal that it is being ‘ignored’. More often than not, such features enhance two-way exchanges and contribute to the persistence of a topic. The ability to forward or broadcast a single message to multiple chat groups and individuals encourages the trending of popular memes, pictures and rumours. The end-to-end encryption feature provide users with the confidence that messages will not be read by anyone, not even WhatsApp itself, other than the intended recipient – contributes to their willingness to respond to show solidarity and express empathy regardless of the value of the information.

WhatsApp can be an environment of safety and trust in the social network in the form of the chat group, where individuals are relatively certain about the platform’s encryption of the conversations, and norms associated with being a supportive member of the chat group. In such an environment, information will circulate through reciprocal exchanges.

But even such patterns can be dynamic, and informed by social dynamics. The extent of moderation and gatekeeping, the power structures between individuals in the group and of course, characteristics of the messages matter. It is much harder to correct a message sent by the admin or moderator of a group. It is also difficult to correct someone who is perceived as senior in terms of age or authority in real life. In other words, messages are constantly read not just for their informational value, but are read bracketed with perceptions about who is sending them.

Messages that build on existing and implicit biases are much more convincing and persuasive than messages that “don’t sound right”. For example, jokes, memes and warnings about the eating habits of the Chinese have been circulated widely since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak. Such messages have evolved and expanded to include avoiding Asian people and Asian food in general and seen circulating in countries such as Australia, UK and USA.

The Covid-19 crisis is also about building capacity for civic resilience

But while there may be messages instigating panic, hostility and fear, the very same features of WhatsApp can also provide opportunities for civic engagement. It is not limited to offers of help and resources, but we can also recognise the battle against messages of hate, falsehoods and panic as a civic cause. We can verify the information received with authoritative sources, and present facts where relevant in the same chat group where we can contest dubious information or hateful speech in a variety of forms.

There is evidence of this happening already. As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded over the past weeks, there have been instances of individuals using WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to verify and question intentions behind messages. For instance, in response to a list of places to avoid, individual users have engaged in conversations to debunk or verify the information as well as deliberate how to react to such information. Even as the Government has used Pofma to blunt the effects of misinformation, let us not forget that civic action – at the ground as it happens – is often the most effective.

In a society where so much of our personal and social lives are mediated by digital platforms, we must go beyond thinking about technology as the provision of electronic services or the betterment of individuals in terms of jobs. The Covid-19 crisis presents new challenges in which we can act as part of a community. It means rethinking how we mobilise and how we engage each other. It can mean disrupting certain power structures or norms in the chat group, or sending someone a private message seeking to verify the facts.

The nice thing is that it is only one WhatsApp message away.

Dr Natalie Pang is a Principal Investigator at the NUS Centre for Trusted Internet and Community and Senior Lecturer, Department of Communications and New Media, at the National University of Singapore.