ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary

How Online Platforms Can Be a Boon, Not Bane, for Cohesive Societies

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SYNOPSIS

Digital platforms are increasingly central to connecting communities in civic and social spaces. They have great potential as a force that cultivates healthy, positive, and affirming communication. Innovative multi-stakeholder cooperation is highly effective in creating and rolling out fresh digital platform features and moderation policies that may overcome misinformation and disinformation, promote digital literacy skills, and build trust via online and offline relationships.

COMMENTARY

At the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022 (ICCS 2022) held in Singapore in September 2022, many participants expressed their curiosity and concern regarding how large digital platforms moderate this space; can users be encouraged to generate authentic content that promotes mutual understanding rather than hate?

One of the main drivers of hate speech is misinformation in the digital realm that has repercussions in the physical world. Misinformation poses a new set of challenges for both digital companies and government entities. It requires a careful approach to maintain socially cohesive societies within Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, especially in a multi-cultural, diverse society such as Singapore.

At the level of enforcement, developing relevant policies may prove effective in addressing the spread of misinformation. However, the scale of the Internet and speed

of which the digital landscape is evolving indicates that achieving desired outcomes cannot rest on the shoulders of digital and government policy alone.

Bolstering Social Cohesion through Digital Platforms

As Dr Yang Mee Eng, Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation, articulated at ICCS 2022, bringing ASEAN together digitally is a priority. With approximately 240 million users across ASEAN, a figure that is forecasted to grow with increasing internet penetration rates, TikTok takes a hard position on misinformation that causes harm to individuals, communities, or the general public – regardless of intent. It sees people beyond the screen, and its strategy is guided by the need to care for its users. TikTok also aims to provide easy access to trusted sources and guidelines, reduce the spread of unverified content, and empower users to be digitally literate.

Most recently, TikTok teamed up with Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) to work with religious and community organisations in Singapore on how to best leverage digital platforms to educate others on issues of race and religion (R&R). By forming "R&R" groups, TikTok equipped diverse communities in Singapore to safely experiment ways they could express themselves and address misconceptions about their identities. It also advised groups to pay close attention to public feedback on their content, and how to respond in a considerate manner to appropriate questions. Not only did this spark meaningful content creation, but it also helped users to connect with others more deeply through honest and respectful conversations.

Social cohesion is not merely a matter of bridging racial and religious divides; it is also about reaching out to isolated, vulnerable members of the community and addressing their concerns. In the area of mental wellness, TikTok took the "3P" approach and worked with Singapore's public institutions (MCCY, Ministry of Education, and the National Youth Council) to roll out a specialised Youth for Good training programme. As part of the programme, TikTok worked with its pool of 43 local non-profit partners, such as Fei Yue Community Services and TOUCH Community Services, to impart expert knowledge to 50 Youth for Good participants over two programme runs. These were to empower the youth as wellness educational content creators on TikTok to creatively transform their short form videos to educate their peers at scale.

Building Trust and Ensuring Safety: Addressing Misinformation

The work is never "done" when dealing with misinformation online. Nonetheless, digital platforms are improving quickly to implement safeguards that empower users to manage their online experiences. In addition, collaborations with industry leaders, news organisations, non-profit partners, and the wider society help platforms like TikTok to identify and remove false or misleading content. At the same time, TikTok works with more than a dozen fact-checking partners around the world that assess the accuracy of content in over 30 languages, all of whom are accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network. TikTok further collaborates with third-party experts and trusted sources to provide easy access to accurate and authoritative information, while limiting the distribution of unverified content.

Like many other online platforms, TikTok is also committed to driving digital literacy,

which is vital to dealing with misinformation in a sustainable manner. For instance, it created an in-app [digital literacy hub](#). The hub has localised content to equip users with skills to thoughtfully engage the content on the platform, while serving as a one-stop portal to access resources on mental wellbeing and cyber-wellness. TikTok publishes [Transparency Reports](#) to provide insights into the volume and nature of misinformation removed from its platform, and to hold itself to the highest standards in the industry.

Future Needs

From deploying a combination of policies, platform features, and moderation strategies, to engaging independent fact-checkers, organisations are taking robust measures to address the issue of misinformation. However, a long-term multi-stakeholder approach will be key to managing this ongoing challenge.

Recognising the rapidly ageing segment of ASEAN's population and the specific needs of the older generation of ASEAN citizens will be an important component in managing the threat of digital misuse to social cohesion. More relevant research on this area is necessary, and the "3P" approach must be the mainstay of this effort to digitally include more members of the diverse and dispersed communities in ASEAN for strengthening social cohesion.

With the rising prevalence of creating and consuming information online, a long-term "3P" approach will form the backbone of managing this ongoing challenge. It will call for continuous efforts for online platforms to forge close collaborations and build trust through technology and the human touch. From building safe and supportive communities online, to enabling open conversations, and understanding that maintaining an inclusive online space is not a standalone effort, these have underpinned TikTok's ethos and formed the basis for the many programmes and initiatives it embarks on.

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