

**Report on IPS Seminar “To Share or Not to Share: Gains, Risks and Human Agency in Digital Information-Sharing”
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Academics and industry experts advocate that the access, reciprocity and peer-to-peer communication afforded by digital technologies create a participatory culture. In such a culture, individuals from different walks of life converge online, pool their resources together and engage in collective production of media content. In many ways, information-sharing via the Internet has made us richer when it comes to knowledge acquisition, making gains in social capital and increased civic consciousness. However, the dark side of information-sharing rears up whenever individuals disseminate false information and propagate baseless claims. In spite of the risks, research has shown that technology users are not only aware of the peril, but weigh trade-offs and exercise choice and strategy when sharing information online.

IPS held a seminar with bloggers, leaders from the private and people sectors, civil servants and academics to examine the trends, uses and gratifications that drive digital information-sharing.

I) Opening Remarks by IPS Research Fellow Dr Carol Soon

Dr Soon outlined how Internet technologies and social media have dramatically changed the role of individuals in the media landscape. Individuals are no longer passive consumers of information, with their exercise of autonomy limited to selecting which websites to visit and which groups to join. Individuals have also become producers of information, providing first-hand accounts of what is happening on the ground, and are actively sharing that information.

Despite its obvious benefits, the dark side of the online space has been in the spotlight in the recent past. Concerns regarding speech and action, including their consequences and implications for the society, have dominated discussions surrounding the Internet. However, technology is Janus-faced. Just as there is noise and rumour-mongering, there is also useful feedback. Just as there is socially irresponsible behaviour, there is also pro-social behaviour, evident in information and resource sharing during crises.

This seminar brought into focus the role of the individual in online information-sharing, be it disclosing personal information or that of others, and of events. This seminar focused on agency, the decision and factors that govern the choices people make when deciding what information

to share, and how much information to share. As the boundary between what is public and what is private becomes increasingly blurred, the issue of privacy and privacy protection is an important consideration for regulators, educators and the public.

II) Presentations

There were three presentations at the seminar and they are summarised below.

1) “Privacy Management in Online Social Interactions” by Dr Jiang Zhenhui, Associate Professor, School of Computing Studies, National University of Singapore

Dr Jiang shared a study conducted by British regulator Ofcom in 2011, which showed that over 20 per cent of Internet users had participated in various online social interactions, such as chatroom conversations and instant messaging. Through these synchronous exchanges of information, individuals seek to gain immediate socio-emotional support and satisfaction in the immense and borderless space of the Internet.

Despite the promising potential of engaging in online social interactions, Madden and Smith’s 2010 survey of 1,698 Internet users in the US has revealed that about one-third (33 per cent) of the users were concerned about the loss of personal privacy, particularly in the context of online social interactions. As a large amount of information is being exchanged, an individual’s privacy is subject to public scrutiny.

Interestingly, according to a Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project study of 1,623 Internet users, even though 40 per cent explicitly expressed concerns about their privacy, a majority of the respondents reported that they would still be likely to disclose private information, such as names, affiliations, private thoughts or opinions in online interaction with others.

Dr Jiang raised the question of what accounts for the inconsistency. When people evaluate privacy, they evaluate using the “privacy calculus”. In other words, they weigh the gains they achieve by surrendering privacy against their loss by not disclosing private information. Tangible benefits include vouchers that users receive after registering for promotions and disclosing private information. Intangible benefits include gratification while using social interaction websites. His empirical study was conducted in online chat rooms over three weeks and involved over 250 respondents. His findings indicate that individuals utilise both self-disclosure and misrepresentation to protect their privacy. Here, self-disclosure refers to giving away true personal information whereas misrepresentation is about falsifying personal information. Results also show that social rewards such as those mentioned earlier explain why individuals may choose to disclose private information despite their awareness of the potential risk.

Dr Jiang presented various types of privacy invasion and disclosure patterns in online social interactions. He concluded his presentation by discussing the involuntary dissemination of embarrassing information in online social networking culture. His findings confirm that although people in general do not like to disclose their embarrassing information, they at times give tacit consent to such behaviour as they view it as a way to strengthen friendships.

2) *“Is Technological Adoption A Measure of Information-Sharing?” by Dr Natalie Pang, Assistant Professor, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University*

Dr Pang’s presentation began with the observation that Singapore was becoming the most mobile-savvy population in Southeast Asia. Her research questions were: Do Singaporeans share more information with one another? Are they more connected to their social networks than other societies? Are they replacing traditional modes of communication with mobile and online platforms? Dr Pang’s presentation also addressed the question of whether greater technological diffusion and adoption necessarily meant more information-sharing.

Based on a three-country study involving India, Singapore and Vietnam, Dr Pang concluded that technology alone is not sufficient in explaining how technology is used for information-sharing and building social networks.

Other social conditions like housing types, time, culture and existing communication networks should also be considered as mediators of information-sharing. Her research indicates that India and Vietnam have similar patterns of communication, i.e., face-to-face, among neighbours and fellow clans. However, Singaporeans may not interact with their neighbours every day, perhaps partly due to the dynamics of living in high-rise apartments. Vietnamese have the highest rate of sharing information and Singapore the lowest, which could be due to a culture of low self-disclosure in Singapore. Hence, people’s practices in sharing information need to be understood based on societal contexts.

Dr Pang said that media literacy is not only about technological competence but should also consider other critical factors, such as language used, users’ online representations and the strategies they use for communication. For example, users who are keenly aware of the interests of those in their social networks and desire to increase perceptions of their own credibility are more likely to post, comment, like and share things that are similar to those in their networks. It does not mean that they do not post things that disagree with the majority in their social networks — in many cases they do, but they do so in private forums or messages. Such behaviours require acute awareness of the contexts of the discussions on the part of the user, translating into corresponding behaviours that may be shaped from case to case. Of course, it may also depend on the individual’s expression strategies and personality traits: some users have a propensity to agree and may also be more strategic in communicating.

3) *“Digital Information-Sharing: Richer or Poorer? — A Legal Perspective on Protection of Privacy” by Ms Teo Yi-Ling, Director, Gateway Law Corporation*

Ms Teo spoke on the legal aspects of information-sharing: various categories of privacy interests, areas that the law does and does not protect, the legal remedies available, the contractual regulation of social media platforms and the state regulation/co-regulation of digital information-sharing.

There is no explicit constitutional right to privacy or common law protection against the invasion of privacy in Singapore. Nonetheless, alternative legal remedies are available if invasion or infringement leads to ridicule, false impressions, baseless allegations, innuendoes or results in physical harassment.

In social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Stomp, users are required to register themselves and accept terms and conditions to ensure compliance with appropriate online conduct. Ms Teo posited that there is no “silver bullet” solution for the issues relating to information-sharing online. For example, any control is unlikely to cover all grounds or completely deter irresponsible behaviour, and the actual enforcement will be a challenge. A multi-pronged approach involving online stakeholders is required to address the above issues.

The government is trying to address these issues via the Inter-Ministry Cyber Wellness Steering Committee and the Media Literacy Council. Ms Teo emphasised that information shared on the Internet will always leave a trace or residue. For example, if one suffers privacy loss online, this loss may result in damage to the reputation of an individual, or affect relationships. Such damages are not entirely reversible despite legal remedies. Information stays in the public domain forever and it can never be completely erased. Hence, there is a need to educate the public, children, parents and community to manage their online activities and privacy and to understand the multi-faceted dimensions of the Internet.

III) Discussion

Dr Soon moderated the discussion that followed the presentations. The following issues were the main focus of the discussion:

1) Information-sharing and Community-building

A participant commented that a lack of bonding and loss of communication result from vertical living and the “closed-door policy” prevalent in public housing estates in Singapore. This has led to the erosion of the *kampung*, or community, spirit. Internet technologies have also changed our perception of common spaces.

Dr Pang agreed that although there are many civic activities in Singapore, there is still a lack of community bonding in Singapore and shared her observations from her ethnographic study in India and Vietnam. In India and Vietnam, those who live in houses located within close proximity are provided with more opportunities to interact with one another. In Singapore, an overwhelming majority of the population live in high-rise apartments in Singapore, which seems to reduce the opportunity to interact. Housing types could be one of the various factors that influence day-to-day interactions.

Dr Pang’s research also established that text and voice communication are used primarily in India and Vietnam because smart phones are expensive. In addition to the presence of a cultural community that individuals can associate with, there are many “horizontal” public spaces, such as coffee shops, that promote face-to-face interactions for such communities. Although there are “horizontal” public spaces in Singapore as well, they may not always be

accompanied by distinct communities and social practices. Such factors account for Singaporeans' different communication and information-sharing patterns, compared to the Indians and Vietnamese. However, Dr Pang noted an improvement in Singapore, as efforts are being made by citizens in organising offline activities in addition to online activities. Such efforts promote a greater diversity of social activities. The online medium may also be used as a way to sustain interests with the purpose of keeping a community alive.

The moderator referred to “bottom-up” citizen-government collaborations such as “Citizens Connect” in Boston, US, where citizens play an active role in solving day-to-day problems through information-sharing. She asked Dr Pang about the viability of such citizen-government collaborations in Singapore. For such an initiative to succeed in Singapore, Dr Pang stressed the need for a strong partnership between government, academics and citizens. Mutual trust is important as such collaborations require sharing of personal information and partners need to be clear on how information will be used. Unfortunately, trust is still an issue in Asian countries as there is fear regarding how information will be used.

2) The Relevance of Privacy Concerns

A participant mooted the idea that privacy is not always essential, and it may be sacrificed for security and good neighbourliness. Ms Teo added that being completely private is not possible in a densely populated environment such as Singapore's and in the online space. A system of mutual surveillance or monitoring, as exemplified by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, may be more beneficial to the well-being of a community in some respects.

Dr Pang added that privacy concerns are also dependent on the size and context of one's social networks. Studies have shown that if a person has more friends online, he will be more concerned about his privacy. This is associated with Dunbar's number — the perceived cognitive number of people a person can maintain stable social relationships. Studies have found that Dunbar's number lie somewhere between 100 to 230 (150 is often used as the median), which means that beyond 150 people in an individual's social network, concerns about privacy may escalate. Such fears may be less pronounced in the physical or *kampung* setting, where there is more face-to-face communication and fewer people in the communication environment, and individuals have access to cues such as emotions and other non-verbal cues for communication.

3) Information Dissemination in Networks

During the discussion, a participant asked if it were possible for a user to be alerted or to tag others when he encounters cyber bullying. Dr Jiang clarified that his research was on privacy protection behaviour of Internet users in the context of online embarrassing behaviours.

He said by applying the same concept to cyber bullying, factors such as the kind of exposure, behavioural responses and nature of information dissemination matter. For example, there is a difference between normal posting and posting with tags. In the case of cyber bullying, tagging can intensify the outreach as the size of the audience increases and the target is specifically

mentioned. Hence he concluded that there is a need to be prudent while using tags. Tagging can result in vicious consequences especially when it comes to cyber bullying.

4) Information-sharing Versus Privacy

A participant asked if loss of privacy is still a relevant concern when people share personal and intimate details of their lives on their own accord on social media platforms. Regardless of the amount of personal information one shares online, Ms Teo stated that it is unlikely that people would surrender their privacy completely. In addition, there is also the possibility of online misrepresentation as a means of protecting privacy, also alluded to by Dr Jiang. Another participant asked what could be done to promote more pro-social information-sharing and to reduce privacy infringement. Dr Jiang shared that online users have to provide identification before posting in forums in China. This helps forum owners or the authorities to track the posting and results in users being more careful with what they post.

5) Guidelines for Information-sharing

A participant brought up the issue of the viability of an online code of conduct to regulate online sites. The panellists felt there could be an informal code of conduct among the active Internet players who co-regulate the space. It is only possible if active and lead bloggers initiate and follow these codes, as enforcement is difficult.

Another participant asked if we should wait until something bad happens like in the case of mistaken suspect's identity in the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, before we take action on irresponsible information-sharing. Ms Teo noted that law is only as good as it is enforceable. Too much regulation can cause a loss of freedom of speech. Self-regulation among the industry is the way to go but the Internet space is very large and self-regulation is problematic as it is difficult to define "self". People should decide on the information they want to reveal, where the law steps in only when harm is caused. The harm can come in the form of indecency, harassment, defamation (libel and slander), breaches of confidentiality, obscenity, crime and exploitation.

A participant asked if she could seek legal recourse if a picture of her is taken in public without her knowledge or consent and posted online. Ms Teo said there is no law that prohibits taking photographs of people in public spaces, but one could seek recourse if the photograph causes harm through defamation, harassment and breach of confidence.