E(c)ho systems of cohesion and rupture

A South Asian perspective on the infodemic

Dr. Sanjana Hattotuwa
Context matters

- Product
- Platform
- Time
- Language
- Location
- Data subjects are never embodied selves
- Gender and identity
It’s complicated

• Unlike traditional media or political architectures, where a few influential individuals or entities generate or represent the most significant authority, social media is “multi-centred, multi-tiered, dynamic, and dispersed” (Bennett, W. L. and A. Segerberg).
Dangerous speech & borderline content
• Bruce Schneier – “hackable society” and attacking society’s core systems: elections, the market economy, lawmaking, tax policy, journalism etc.

• Attention

• High trust societies extremely vulnerable but have little to no mitigation.
Simultaneous hate and harm

• Anti-social and prosocial
• Harmful and healing
• Destructive and democratic
• Divisive and cohesive
• Fact and fiction
• Organic and engineered
• Foreign and domestic
Symbiotic relationship between online & offline
Hacking Circadian rhythm

• In 2018, academic Zeynep Tufekci warned that “... the core business model underlying Big Tech platform – harvesting attention with massive surveillance infrastructure to allow for targeted, mostly automated advertising at a very large scale – is far too compatible with authoritarianism, propaganda, misinformation and polarisation”

• Online patterns observed during periods of heightened offline unrest
Reactions & responses

• No critical appreciation
• Reflexive sharing
• Reactions over reflection
• Spill over to offline behaviours
• Media ecologies, enclaves of exposure, enclave deliberation, group polarisation, individual action frames, power signatures.
• The Global South has generally seen, lived and negotiated it first.
What Russia does today to undermine truth, studied in Sri Lanka previously.
Volatility is its own goal

Generating instability and enduring disorders a goal of disinformation
Information disorders

- “If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer... And with such a people, you can then do what you please.” - Hannah Arendt
Law of apparent realities

- “emotions are elicited by events that individuals regard as real, and the intensity of their emotions corresponds to the degree to which they experience the events as real” Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda
- Mass psychosis, or an algorithmically amplified *folie à deux*
Belonging and meaning
Endemicity of information disorders as a wicked problem

• De-fi
• Distributed and decentralised
• Encrypted
• Democratisation of access as driver of disinformation
• New economies
• New ecologies
How to address?

- Cut off source
- Cut off engagement
Virtuous viscosity

• How to create friction and around what – freedom of expression is not freedom of reach
• Ecological approach, locating harm in context
• Nurture and nature
Thank you!

sanjanahattotuwa@ict4peace.org