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**“THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC TRUST IN SINGAPORE
AND THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY”**

What Is Public Trust?

Public trust is a term that is used quite loosely, and it probably means different things to different people. Public trust can also exist in various contexts – governments, media, business, and so on. Today, I will focus on public trust in the context of governments.

Let’s try to unpack it.

First, public trust has a “political” dimension because it could refer to the citizens’ trust in the government and its institutions. It could also refer to the trust in the individuals – the civil servants and the political leaders – who make up the government. In Singapore, both these aspects of public trust are “tested” every five years at the ballot box.

Second, public trust has a “social” dimension because it also involves citizens’ trust in each other. This dimension is reflected in efforts – at least in Singapore – to strengthen the social fabric that holds the nation together, by building trust among the different communities through efforts like the Inter-

Racial and Religious Confidence Circles – or IRCCs – and the use of racial quotas in public housing estates to promote mixing.

Arguably, the political and social components of public trust are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they interact and influence each other in very complex ways.

There is clearly a psychological aspect to public trust. Is public trust rational – that is, based on performance or outcomes of government and its institutions – or is it psychological – that is, based on human nature, perception and culture? Or is it a combination of all of the above? And how does trust incorporate normative values like integrity and empathy, as it surely must?

In this regard, there are many cognitive biases that can influence the psychology of public trust. They affect not only the citizens, but also the policy-makers and politicians in government. For example:

- (a) Confirmation Bias – which is the tendency to agree with those who share a similar viewpoint. This could involve looking to reinforce what we already believe in, often from people we already know, but sometimes from people we do not know. The proliferation of social media has magnified this tendency. Indeed, it is increasingly salient in today’s era of “fake news”.

(b) Negativity Bias – in which things of a more negative nature – for example, unpleasant thoughts, negative emotions and social interactions, or traumatic events like a terrorist attack – will have a much greater effect on our outlook than do neutral or positive things. This can make public trust fragile and difficult to regain once lost. When things go well, we take the situation for granted. But when they go wrong, as they inevitably must in our complex operating environment, we tend to look for someone to blame, rather than giving the benefit of the doubt. We see this negativity bias in recent public reactions to problems in our MRT system in Singapore, despite the fact that both LTA and the operator SMRT are clearly working hard to resolve these problems.

I raise these examples of cognitive biases, because public trust is as much a psychological construct, as it is a political and social construct.

Developments in liberal western democracies like the United States where political and social polarisation have occurred show how strong these cognitive biases can be, and why truth and logic might not be enough to overcome public distrust.

Why Is Public Trust Important?

Public trust in government is one of the most important foundations upon which the legitimacy, credibility and sustainability of governments are built. Today, it is not hard to see what happens when public trust is eroded.

The renowned political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, refers to public trust as the “currency” of governance, a means to account for transaction costs between government and the people. This is because it is a key social lubricant for information to flow, and it brings about more efficient information exchange. Public trust helps to lower the transaction costs in any social, economic and political system, for instance, by improving compliance with rules and regulations. It is also necessary for the fair and effective functioning of the government in service delivery and the provision of infrastructure for the citizens.

Particularly in times of crisis, as I will touch on later, public trust empowers the government to act decisively. Bitter medicine is more easily swallowed when there is public trust. It helps to resolve tensions over emotionally-charged issues such as resource sharing, distribution of benefits, and perceptions of free-riding.

But public trust – which is invariably hard-earned – can be quickly undermined. In recent years, many developed countries have seen the rise of

anti-establishment populism, marked by a strong distrust of the elites. In the June 2016 referendum, ignoring advice of the establishment – including the political and business elites – the British people voted for Brexit. And at the end of the same year, Donald Trump – a rank outsider – won the US Presidential Election by defeating establishment rivals both from within his party as well as from the Democratic camp.

Arguably, these results, and the success of fringe movements elsewhere, have been fuelled by people who have lost their trust in government and its institutions, who are deeply disenchanted by corruption, elitism, economic inequality – and by the inability of governments to deal with them. They no longer believe that the government will act on their behalf. This “radical uncertainty” is most pronounced among middle classes, and has led to a loss of belief in middle class narratives, and to the rise of populism and xenophobia in many countries around the world.

The Emergence of the “Post-Truth” World

This decline in public trust contributes to another global trend: the emergence of a world where truth matters less, and people are more willing to offer diverse views with little substance and no evidence, and then taking no responsibility for expressing them.

This is accentuated by Internet anonymity, which allows people to disseminate irresponsible views to a wide audience – “fake news”. Such falsehoods can severely erode trust, and very quickly. Falsehoods, no matter how ridiculous, are often believed to be true if repeated often enough, or because of the confirmation bias.

You may recall that the Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” as its 2016 word of the year, reflecting the highly-charged political 12 months that saw Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. In the “post-truth” world, objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs.

This could become a real problem not just because of an evident loss of public trust, but also because it could lead governments to only say what they feel are plausible and intuitively true without presenting any evidence. It could diminish the importance of evidence-based policy-making, and a general decline in the quality – and reliability – of governance, accentuating distrust in government.

Evolution of Public Trust

In the latest 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, the “global” level of public trust in government was 43%. At this level, a state of “distrust” exists in the world. Of the 28 countries surveyed, the only ones that registered a score

classified as “trust” by Edelman were in Asia: Singapore, India, Indonesia, UAE and China. A year earlier, the headline for the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer was “Trust in Crisis”, with trust in government, the media, business and NGOs at an all-time low.

In a similar vein, only 14% of respondents from 38 countries in a 2017 Pew Research Centre survey expressed “a lot” of trust in their governments to do what was right for their countries. Once again, in the Pew survey, it was the respondents in Asia-Pacific and Sub-Saharan African countries who responded more positively about trust in government, not in the Western liberal democracies.

A trend seems to be emerging.

Public Trust in Singapore – the SARS Case Study

Why has a country like Singapore fared better than many in terms of public trust? Some answers to this question can be found in the SARS crisis.

On 25 February 2003, the SARS virus entered Singapore and then spread with frightening speed through the hospital system. It confounded our medical authorities in the beginning, as it did experts around the world, including the WHO. They did not know how the virus spread, and why it spread so aggressively. The fatality rate was shocking. By the time the SARS crisis was

declared over in Singapore, 33 people had died out of the 238 who had been infected.

It was a very frightening time for Singaporeans. Then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told the BBC in an interview in April 2003 that this was a “crisis of fear”. It was critical that the government managed the fear, otherwise the larger challenge of dealing with SARS would have been made even more difficult.

In this regard, the dissemination of trusted information proved to be vital. During the SARS outbreak, Singapore took a transparent approach. The government laid bare the uncertainties and risks during SARS, even as other countries sought to reassure their citizens – without basis – that SARS was under control. Singaporean leaders told people not only what they knew, but also what they did not know. They avoided providing false assurances. In the BBC interview, then-PM Goh explained, “I’m being realistic because we do not quite know how this will develop.”

This transmission of information – transparently, laying bare uncertainties, and acting with empathy – was built on an underlying foundation of trust, not just of the people in the government, but also of the government in the people. Singaporeans trusted the government for its effectiveness and integrity. The government trusted Singaporeans to deal with the uncertainty as the SARS outbreak unfolded. This two-way trust, between the government and

the people, formed a deep source of national resilience in Singapore during the SARS crisis.

Ebola in the United States

Let's now contrast this to what happened after the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was declared an international health emergency by the WHO in August 2014. Several cases emerged in the United States, with the majority imported, and only two nurses contracting the disease in the US directly from an Ebola patient they were treating.

A few American states – New York, New Jersey, and Illinois – imposed a mandatory quarantine on anyone returning to the US who had direct contact with Ebola patients in West Africa. But two doctors – who should have known better – violated their quarantines, creating havoc for the authorities in the subsequent contact tracing efforts. A nurse who was quarantined even sued the Governor of New Jersey. The reactions in the US stand in contrast to the trust that Singaporeans placed in the government to stem the spread of SARS, despite a much larger slate of draconian measures on the table than just quarantine.

These contrasting examples – SARS in Singapore and Ebola in the United States – together make an object lesson on the importance of public trust, and what happens when it does not exist.

But it also raises the question of whether the authorities in the US were contending with a situation of low public trust, compared to the high level of public trust demonstrated in Singapore in 2003 during the SARS crisis.

And lest we think that Singapore's response was a paragon to be emulated, let us consider what might happen if SARS were to occur today, 15 years later in 2018, when the social media – and not necessarily the mainstream media – could emerge as the dominant platform for communication and diffusion of information?

Impact of Technology

Technology is changing the world – of that there can be no doubt. The thing about technological change today is that it is global in scope, and the pace of change is accelerating.

Moore's Law says that computing power doubles every two years. But it is not just computing power that is growing at an exponential rate. In his latest book, "Thank You for Being Late", Tom Friedman presents evidence that other technologies are also changing at a similar breath-taking rate, writing of "simultaneous accelerations in technology, globalization, and climate change, all interacting with one another."

Singapore's Changing Context

It took less than half a century for Singapore to move out of the Third World and enter the First World. But in tandem, within less than two generations, societal demands have moved from the basic needs at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy – such as food, shelter, water and security – rising towards the more complex psychic needs at the top of the hierarchy, such as self-esteem, self-actualisation and transcendence, which are needs that all governments find very difficult to service.

This represents a tectonic shift in Singapore society, and significantly, it is taking place at a time when technology is also changing and accelerating. With the complex interplay between societal changes and rapid technological advances, acceleration gives little time for government and society to adapt. It leads to consequences that can be very surprising, and to outcomes that are very disturbing.

Because of the *confirmation bias* that many of us are afflicted with, technology – the social media in particular – now enables people to retreat into online echo chambers that narrow down information and reinforce already-held beliefs. It becomes easy to ignore, or to simply shut our eyes to contrary views that are in conflict with our beliefs and outlooks. More information does not yield better decisions.

With social media today, falsehoods and fake news can quickly spread through networks, unchecked and with an unstoppable momentum. Indeed in 2016 – the year of Brexit and Donald Trump – the World Economic Forum identified online misinformation on a grand scale as one of the major risks to global society.

Former Foreign Minister George Yeo referred to the “disintermediation of hierarchies”. People are now gaining access to huge amounts of information, some of it consisting of DRUMS (Distortion, Rumours, Untruths, Misinformation & Smeared) and magnified by online echo chambers, with the end result that our fears are verified, often baselessly. Instead, suspicion of elites is growing, anger against the establishment is amplified, and the cycle of public distrust is magnified. The danger is that faith in government and its institutions may have already reached a critical tipping point in some countries.

Is a Fundamental Transformation of Public Trust Underway?

The question is whether this is a global trend, and whether and how it will impact on Singapore?

An emerging line of argument is that the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump are harbingers of a gigantic and global change in the nature of public trust. This line of argument relies on the hypothesis that instead of public trust flowing up and down a vertical street from the people to the

government, to the politicians and the regulators, to the authorities and the experts, as it used to, it is now also beginning to flow horizontally, to other people, and even to programmes, algorithms and *bots*.

Today, we are already putting our faith in algorithms over humans in our daily lives, leaving them to decide what to read on our smart phones, what to buy, where to spend our money, where to travel, and where to stay. Marc Benioff, the CEO of Salesforce, even admits to consulting an AI robot aptly named Einstein who “sits” in at his senior-management meetings and advises on whether the human beings present have made faulty judgements.

Instead of public trust just being focussed on the government, trust is being redistributed to many, enabled by technology – such as AI, big data and data analytics – and the social media. This is a trend of trust being distributed rather than being concentrated.

This trend, of distributed trust, helps us to understand why cryptocurrencies could be the future of money, and why blockchain technology which is a distributed ledger system could be used for everything from tracking the source of foods, to monitoring electronic health records, to selling our homes without the need for real estate agents.

From Distributed Trust to Decentralised Government

If public trust is more distributed, what forms of government will emerge? I had earlier said that public trust has a “social” dimension because it also involves individuals’ trust in each other as citizens in the people sector. Is it possible that in today’s world, technology is shifting the balance from the political to the social? Instead of public trust being reposed with the elites, experts and authorities in government, the argument being made is that trust today lies more with “the people” – families, friends, classmates, colleagues, even strangers who might share your same outlook. In other words, a transfer of trust is taking place, from institutions to individuals.

The *#MeToo* Movement that started as a reaction to the outrageous sexual misconduct of one man in Hollywood, Harvey Weinstein, quickly became a digital wildfire, spreading first across the United States, and then across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom where it cost ministers and politicians their jobs.

Perhaps such things are happening because there is a loss of trust in government to police the commons, so society steps in to generate ground-up and more emergent solutions to governance.

It is certainly an age in which individuals matter as much as institutions because people, empowered perhaps by better education, but certainly by the

social media, are becoming social influencers. We are now scoring and rating everything from restaurants to Über drivers, helping to shape, almost instantly, the rise and fall of all sorts of businesses, while also creating reputation trails where one mistake or misdemeanour could follow us for the rest of our lives.

Perhaps we might see a more network-centric, mutually-verifying, distributed approach to dealing with fake news. But it is not clear that such things will be the result of government intervention. Indeed, the paradox is that any effort by the government to dispel things like fake news is predicated on the level of trust that the people have in the government in the first place.

Nevertheless, we should not overlook the fact that it can also work the other way. A trust-scoring system – more formally called the Social Credit System – is being developed in China to rate the trustworthiness of its 1.3 billion citizens, and could determine everything from a citizen’s job to whether they can get on a train or a plane. It may well find acceptance in other parts of the world, despite its Orwellian overtones.

In this world, in which public trust is disintermediated by the social media, the traditional notion that public trust is only about government and its institutions, taken on faith, kept in the hands of a few and operating behind closed doors, is going to be challenged. It is arguably a world of radical transparency. *WikiLeaks* demonstrates that you can run, but you cannot hide.

Conclusion

Given the importance of public trust to governing well, governments obviously must build trust as a valuable resource, and guard against developments that may reduce it. Where there is malicious intent in spreading falsehoods to cause alarm or disrupt society, governments must stand prepared to dispel them quickly, and take firm and decisive action against those who start or perpetuate such falsehoods intentionally. It should not come as a surprise that the government in Singapore has set up a Parliamentary Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, *aka* fake news.

But it is also important that governments are better prepared to function in and adapt to an environment of greater contestation and scrutiny, in which the balance between public trust at the focal point of government and its institutions is shifting to the many – the people. In such an environment, perhaps there is a need for more consultation and greater interaction between the public sector and the people sector. This will require government to become less hierarchical, not just more Whole-of-Government, but also more Whole-of-Nation.

Thank you.

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