

Misinformation going viral a threat to society

IT DISTRACTS us from work and throws up pictures of our ex when we're least expecting it. Now it seems there might be another unfortunate side effect to using Facebook – becoming more narrow-minded.

According to researchers, people who use the social network suffer an “echo chamber” effect, in which their views are reinforced by peers who hold the same beliefs.

This is because people tend to form groups of shared interest online, meaning any bias they hold is simply repeated back to them – rather than being challenged.

As a result, controversial theories – such as the causes of autism or misinformation about epidemics – can be given more weight than serious academic research.

“Users tend to aggregate in communities of interest, which causes reinforcement and fosters confirmation bias, segregation and polarisation,” said the paper published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

“This comes at the expense of the quality of information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumours, mistrust, and paranoia.”



They added that while the phenomenon could be found across the web, it was likely to be exaggerated on Facebook because of the way the platform’s “algorithms” work.

The firm has invested heavily in computer codes which highlight articles that most interest users.

The researchers – from Boston University in the US, Sapienza University in Rome, and several other Italian institutes – analysed Facebook data about the topics people discussed on the social network in 2010 and 2014.

They found that once users accepted a piece of information as fact, it spread rapidly throughout that particular online “community”.

They were able to point to a number of such claims which travelled quickly – despite having no proven basis in science.

These included the contentious claim that vaccines cause autism. The effect also caused confusion during the recent ebola crisis, as people shared incorrect information about the disease.

“Whether a news item, either substantiated or not, is accepted as true by a user may be strongly affected by... how much it coheres with the user’s system of beliefs,” the scientists added.

“Such a phenomenon is particularly evident (online) where users – embedded in homogenous clusters – process information through a shared system of meanings, and trigger collective framing of narratives that are often biased towards self-confirmation.”

According to the researchers, the problem of unreliable information going “viral” online is now so serious it is classed as one of the biggest social threats.

They said: “Massive digital misinformation is becoming pervasive in online social media to the extent that it has been listed by the World Economic Forum as one of the main threats to our society.”

Nearly 1.6 billion users log in to Facebook at least once a month, and more than 1 billion of these access the network every day.

The company does not disclose how many users it has in a specific country, but in its last official figures it had 315 million users across Europe every month. – Daily Mail

Tweet stir’s Starbucks row

ACTRESS Thandie Newton has accused Starbucks of racism after she was offended by a coffee bean display in one of its shops.

A figurine of a black boy wearing a loin cloth and pith helmet while carrying a bowl of coffee beans was displayed on the counter at one of its branches, believed to be in London.

The Bafta winner, 43, posted the image on Twitter: “Seriously @Starbucks? At the counter – loin cloth and safari hat on a black child. Happy New Year circa 19th century.”

Opinion was split over whether the statue could be seen as offensive because of connotations of child slavery.

Many branded it “racist” and “offensive” but others claimed they could not see why it was inappropriate.

A staff member had taken the figurine into the store to promote



BITTER: Coffee bean display upsets Thandie Newton.

a new bean from Colombia that was being stocked. It was displayed for several hours before being removed following Newton’s post to her 24 000 followers.

Starbucks was quick to apologise and promised to launch an investigation. “As we became aware of the offence, we immediately removed the figure.”

However, Starbucks declined to comment on when the investi-

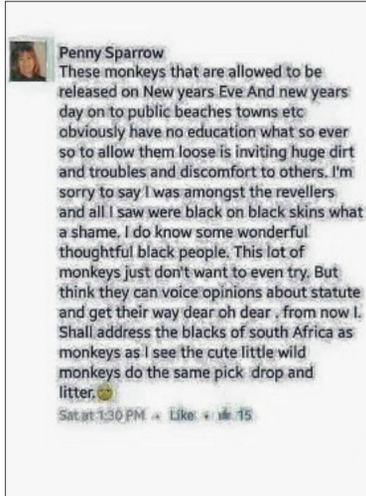
gation would come to a close or whether any disciplinary action was being taken.

Campaigners branded the statue “crude” and “offensive”, while many Twitter users were quick to offer Newton support.

One person wrote: “It’s people like you who speak up who are heroes in my eyes. Thank you for not being quiet.”

But others said they could not see a problem with the statue. One wrote: “Can anyone tell me what is racist about the statue? Seriously, I’d like to know why it is deemed ‘racist,’” while another added: “Thandie Newton needs to #Relax.”

Campaigners also backed the actress, with Show Racism the Red Card saying: “Such crude caricatures have clear historical connections with slavery and its potential to cause offence is undeniable.” – Daily Mail



ANTISOCIAL POSTINGS: Some social media ranting that elicited heated responses from the public.



Beware of what you say on social media

Be encouraging, don’t post degrading or negative speech online

ARTHI SANPATA

A TEACHER lost her job after she tweeted online about being drunk and high.

A fast food employee got fired because he posted pictures of urinating in food that was about to be served.

Penny Sparrow enraged a nation with racist comments. Social media can be unforgiving – even if you realise the error of your Facebook post a minute after you post it, some person out there has already taken a screen grab of the image and it’s gone viral.

As KZN south coast resident Penny Sparrow realised this week, the power of social media gives you a powerful platform to air your views and emotions, but airing your views can get you into trouble, especially if they are offensive, insulting, and racist.

Another case in point in December 2013 was Justine Sacco, a top public relations officer, who tweeted: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get Aids. Just kidding. I’m white!”. She may have thought her comment was funny and her

friends may have “Lol” in reply, but the social media world, driven by ordinary people, was having none of that. By the time she landed in Cape Town, her life came to a halt, costing her job.

Conrad David, founder and owner of HashtagSA, a Durban social media agency, said while people should not stay away from social media, it had to be used with great consideration.

“When people decide to create a social media account such as Facebook or Twitter, it means you are allowing the world to get to know you. People will be able to read what you tweet, search for your name and find out where you work because information is available online,” said David.

“Posting things online gives a person their 15 minutes of fame to have their say on any topic, but with that comes great consideration in what you should be posting and what you shouldn’t be posting,” said David.

Well-known people have a greater responsibility online. “If you are a person of influence, your messages can be



ONLINE UPSET: Penny Sparrow, a former Jawitz Properties estate agent, created a social media uproar after a racist rant on her Facebook page.

PICTURE: FACEBOOK

used as a point of reference, in essence you are giving out public announcements, and especially when you decide to speak on matters that are popular, you are bringing yourself into debates, and you need to be prepared for the consequences of that,” he said.

Most important, for parents, David cautioned against posting pictures of their children, especially many of those children who will be attending their first day of school in the coming week.

“As much as there are good people out there, there are also

bad, and people who prey on children are a reality, it is your choice to share such images, but be careful the images don’t give away too much information of where your child schools, little pieces of information can be pieced together that other people can use for the wrong reasons,” he said.

From his personal experience, David said he posted only what he thought was necessary and then posted for business purposes.

“We advise clients to always consider what is to be shared online before the send button is pressed,” he said.

Important, he said, was that human resources managers could access social media accounts of potential and existing employees.

“Please don’t only have posts where there are pictures in which you are drunk. Also, don’t only be a complainer online, be positive, be encouraging. Don’t post derogatory things or hate or negative speech,” he said.

Emma Sadleir, a social media law expert and author of *Don’t Film Yourself Having Sex*, said people should never believe that they were anonymous online.

“In the online space you are open to the world. I can search for anyone and find de-

tails about them,” said Sadleir. She said people should never post any information “in the heat of the moment”.

“Information posted online can become permanent in the digital world, it doesn’t matter if you deleted it because someone would have taken a screen grab of the post. One thing people should do is equate their post being visible on a billboard along the freeway, along with a picture of their face and where they work. If you are fine with that, then go ahead, if not then don’t post it,” she said.

When it came to educating children, Sadleir said she taught them the five Ps of social media.

“The five Ps stand for the police, your principal, a predator, a potential employer and your parents. If you are comfortable posting it and it won’t upset any of those five Ps, then go ahead,” she said.

Offensive posts do have legal consequences, said Sadleir.

“There are issues of reputational damage to the company you work for, and the person you are offending can sue you for defamation, the same as they would if an article was run in the paper and a person took offence to what was written about them,” she said.

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Joining hands against racism

QUINTON MTYALA

INDEPENDENT Media, its parent company Sekunjalo Investment Holdings (SIH) and the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) are joining hands to launch an anti-racism campaign which speaks to individuals by promoting active citizenry.

The “Racism, It Stops With Me” campaign will officially be launched on February 11, using all the company’s newspaper and online platforms.

The campaign will be rolled out in Independent Media’s 20 newspaper titles and digital platforms, with the media group also encouraging debate and discussion on numerous public platforms and at schools and universities around the country.

More comprehensive details of the campaign will be announced at a function coinciding with the State of the Nation address on February 11, with regional anti-racism conferences scheduled in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg this year.

Sactwu general secretary Andre Kriel says it is not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the latest incidents of racism on social media.

“There are many instances where issues get thrown out in the heat of the moment and then everybody wants to start a campaign on that specific issue, then it just dies down,” said Kriel.

He said racists were bold in expressing their racism because there were barely any consequences for their actions, as the institutions supposed to deal with this were not empowered enough to take “concrete, harsh action”.

And while criminal charges had



ACTIVE CITIZENS: Sactwu secretary Andre Kriel, Independent Media’s Moshe Apleni and Dr Iqbal Surve at the launch of the anti-racism initiative.

PICTURE: COURTNEY AFRICA

been laid against KwaZulu-Natal estate agent Penny Sparrow, Kriel said it would be difficult to secure a conviction.

“At the end of the day, when this campaign ends, there must be some measurable change that we’ve brought about,” said Kriel.

Independent Media and Sekunjalo executive chairman Dr Iqbal

Survé said ordinary citizens had led South Africa forward and they could not leave this solely in the hands of politicians.

“If we’re going to leave it to politicians we’re going to make a terrible mistake. They only want power,” said Survé.

He said racism was the first step towards xenophobia, and that it

stripped the humanity from people who were judged only on their skin colour.

Survé said that South African companies also had to be called to account for the subjective treatment of their workers, which in essence was racism.

“Racism is not just about saying someone is black and white, it’s about the actions. If your actions only affect black people you are racist,” said Survé.

He said the campaign would also fight racism by celebrating black excellence, and ultimately restoring the dignity of black people.

“The time for merely talking about racism and equality in our country is over. We need decisive action and for all South Africans to be part of the long-term solution to combat racism.”

“At Independent Media, we have consciously contributed to the development of our country by shining the spotlight on our country’s burning issues and giving our readers in all sectors of society the platform to share their stories,” said Survé.

Kriel said: “As a trade union with one of the racially most diverse membership profiles in the country, Sactwu wishes to be at the forefront of this anti-racism campaign.”

“Often workers bear the brunt of racist attacks, in the workplace and generally in society.

“It is important that the on-going scathing attacks on our human dignity be arrested, if we are to help prevent our country from facing an explosion of racial hatred.”

“This cannot be good for socio-economic stability, nor for nation-building.”