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Governments everywhere must rethink their strategies if they want to win the public's trust, said former top civil servant Mr Peter Ho at a conference organised by SMU's Behavioural Sciences Institute.



AsianScientist (Mar. 2, 2018) – By Sim Shuzhen – When severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) reached Singapore's shores in 2003, it set off not only a public health crisis, but also a crisis of fear. Realising that SARS would be even more difficult to combat if fear ran rampant, the Singapore government took a transparent approach to disseminating information, laying bare the uncertainties and risks associated with the outbreak rather than providing false assurances.

“Singaporeans trusted the government for its effectiveness and integrity, and the government trusted Singaporeans to deal with uncertainty as the outbreak unfolded,” said Mr Peter Ho, senior advisor to the Centre for Strategic Futures at the Prime Minister's Office, speaking on 6 February at the Singapore Management University (SMU) Behavioural Sciences Institute's (BSI) 2018 conference on 'Public Trust in Singapore'. “This two-way trust between the government and the people formed a deep source of national resilience in Singapore during the SARS crisis.”

But if the government were to respond to a similar crisis today, it would find itself in a very different situation, Mr Ho continued.

“Lest we think that Singapore's response was a paragon to be emulated, let us consider what might happen if SARS were to occur in 2018, when social media, not mainstream media, could emerge as the dominant platform for communication and diffusion of information.”

The currency of governance

Public trust—so critical that American political scientist Francis Fukuyama referred to it as the currency of governance—is the foundation upon which the legitimacy, credibility and sustainability of governments are built, said Mr Ho.

“Public trust helps to lower the transaction cost in any social, economic and political system, for example by improving compliance with rules and regulations. It is also necessary for the fair and effective functioning of the government in service delivery and in the provision of infrastructure for citizens,” explained Mr Ho, adding that trust also empowers governments to act decisively in times of crisis.

But in addition to its political and social dimensions, there is also a strong psychological aspect to public trust—it is affected by human nature, culture and perception, as well as influenced by cognitive biases, said Mr Ho. Confirmation bias, for example, leads to the tendency to seek out views that reinforce what one already believes in.

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“Developments in western liberal democracies like the US, where political and social polarisation have occurred, show how strong these cognitive biases can be, and why truth and logic alone might not be enough to overcome public distrust,” said Mr Ho.

Technology and the decline of trust

The decline in public trust in many developed countries, driven by widespread disenchantment with corruption, elitism and economic inequality, has been further fuelled by rapid technological change, said Mr Ho. Social media and internet anonymity, in particular, have magnified cognitive biases and contributed to the emergence of a world where people offer views with little substance, and then take no responsibility for expressing them.

“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 things that they feel are plausible and intuitively true, but without presenting any evidence,” warned Mr Ho. “It could diminish the importance of evidence-based policy making, and result in a general decline in the quality and reliability of governance.”

At the same time, in countries like Singapore that have experienced a rapid rise in affluence, people are no longer content simply to leave it to governments to make decisions on their behalf, he added.

“The complex interplay between societal changes and rapid technological advances leaves little time for government and societies to adapt, leading to consequences that can be very surprising,” said Mr Ho, citing Brexit and the election of US president Donald Trump as examples.

From institutions to individuals

Technological and societal shifts are ultimately leading to the disintermediation of public trust, said Mr Ho; instead of flowing vertically from people to governments and experts, trust is now also beginning to flow horizontally, to other people and even to computer programmes and algorithms.

“It is certainly an age in which individuals matter as much as institutions,” he added, noting that this trend could in part be driven by a loss of trust in the government’s ability to police the commons, such that society feels the need to step in to generate ground-up solutions.

Given its importance to good governance, public trust should be viewed as a valuable resource, and governments must be on their guard against developments that could diminish it, said Mr Ho. For example, governments must stand ready to dispel falsehoods that could alarm or disrupt society, and to take firm, decisive action against those who spread such falsehoods with malicious intent.

At the same time, however, governments must be prepared to function under greater contestation and scrutiny, as well as take a more consultative approach when it comes to policy making.

“This will require government to become less hierarchical, involving not just more whole-of-government, but also more whole-of-nation,” said Mr Ho.

“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,” emphasised Mr Ho. “It is arguably a world of radical transparency.”

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