

Written Representation 120

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Writer

Received: 6 Mar 2018

Dear Committee,

There are many aspects of “fake news” that need addressing. I agree with the arguments made in some other submissions, including those by Ian Chong, Cherian George and Thum Ping Tjin.

I will limit my discussion here to one broad philosophical point: whether or not established media channels globally are partly responsible for creating an environment in which fake news can thrive; and what can be done about it.

Best wishes,
Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh,
Writer

The very idea of Singapore is founded on fake news. The modern zoological consensus is that lions never roamed around Malaya. So in 1299 when Sang Nila Utama, the Srivijaya prince, landed in (what was then called) Temasek and spotted a handsome beast, it was most likely a tiger. *Singa-pura*, lion city, could well have been named *Harimau-pura*, tiger city, in modern Malay, or even *Vyaghras-pura*, in Sanskrit, in use then, and the roots of “Singa”.

Yes, Vyaghras-pura. Without fake news, our little red dot might have pre-empted erectile dysfunction’s saviour. ¹

Yet that was more a simple falsehood than “news” as we know it. One of the first instances of fake news in the mass media was in 1835, when the *New York Sun* published observations of the moon by astronomer John Herschel, detailing “giant man-bats that spent their days collecting fruit and holding animated conversations; goat-like creatures with blue skin; a temple made of polished sapphire”.²

The fake news had the desired effect—among a public hungry for galactic fantasies, the Sun’s circulation rose from 8,000 to over 19,000, making it the world’s bestselling daily.

All this is simply to point out that “fake news” has been around for over a century at least. It is not just some new-age digital poison spewed by greedy Macedonian teenagers, disenchanted trolls in Saint Petersburg, or others of their ilk.

Moreover it is not only dubious, fly-by-night media outfits that are prone to publishing fake news. Some of the industry’s most venerable brands are too.

¹ At arriving at this cheeky suggestion, I did not consult a historian or Sanskrit teacher, but simply looked up the Sanskrit word for tiger. Whether or not that word was actually in use in 13th C Srivijaya, I do not know.

² <https://www.1843magazine.com/technology/rewind/the-true-history-of-fake-news>

It would be convenient for me to make this point by pointing out possible fake news by conservative stations, like *Fox News*, whose political views differ from mine.

So instead I will point out possible fallacies in two newspapers which I hold in the highest regard: *The Economist* and *The Financial Times*.

And I will do so by defending two politicians whose views I find ignorant at best: Sarah Palin and Donald Trump.

This is more than just me playing the devil's advocate. Trump is one of the most vociferous attackers of what he perceives to be "fake news". He is usually wrong, i.e. he frequently engages in straw man arguments in an effort to discredit facts he doesn't like.

However, Trump is sometimes right. He is indeed sometimes the victim of fake news. No surprise when this emanates from radical leftist publications. But *The Economist*?

Consider this article's opening lines: "America's allies and trading partners await Donald Trump's arrival in the White House on January 20th with trepidation. None is more anxious than Mexico. Mr Trump began his election campaign by damning Mexicans as rapists and killers of American jobs."³

In the run-up to the 2016 presidential election it became fashionable to repeat some variation of the line that "Trump has called Mexicans rapists". An average reader would conclude that Trump has insinuated that Mexico is a country of rapists. But that is not what Trump said. This is his full quote:

"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

No doubt, it is a horrible, bigoted statement. But to reduce it to "damning Mexicans as rapists", as *The Economist* and many others have done, is inaccurate and unfair. A better phrasing would be "damning some Mexican immigrants as rapists". But that formulation would dampen some of its sting.⁴

The misrepresentation of Sarah Palin is perhaps worse. Her undisguised provincialism meant she quickly became a favoured punching bag for what she decried as the "liberal media" and elite.

After Palin endorsed Trump in early 2016, *The Financial Times* reported:

"Ms Palin shot to prominence in 2008 when John McCain chose her as his running mate on the Republican ticket. At the time, she was mocked by commentators and

³ <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21714342-americas-new-president-could-be-disaster-its-southern-neighbour-how-mexico-should-handle>

⁴ Tim Kaine, Hillary Clinton's running mate, repeated the lie that Trump has been "saying all Mexicans are rapists". Politifact, a fact checker, called Kaine out for it.

members of the political elite for her questionable knowledge of foreign affairs, including her remark that she could see Russia from her backyard in Alaska.”⁵

Just one problem: Palin never said that. In response to a question about whether proximity to Russia strengthened her foreign policy chops, she said:

“They’re our next door neighbours and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska.”

Palin may not be Kissinger, but her geography is spot on. In the Bering Straits just over two miles separates the Little Diomedede Island, part of the US, and the Big Diomedede Island, part of Russia.

But how did her factual geographic observation get turned into a moronic statement?

We probably have Tina Fey to thank. In a star turn, Fey portrayed Palin on Saturday Night Live, a comedy show whose sketches often parody contemporary politics. At one point she tells Amy Poehler (playing Clinton): “And I can see Russia from my house.”

From that moment much of the media, including it seems *The Financial Times*, began repeating the satire instead of the truth.

To be sure, these apparent errors by *The Economist* and *The Financial Times* may not even qualify as fake news, largely because neither had any intention to deceive its respective audience—I remain an avid reader of both, though with a greater skepticism in this Trumpian era.

Yet they are important case studies because they show how political biases might affect journalistic output; how the relentless drive for conciseness can sometimes come at the cost of clarity (Trump’s rapists); how truth and satire can easily become convoluted in this hyper-competitive, rushed, digital news era; and how “fake news” and political polarisation can sometimes be unwittingly fomented by reputable sources. A conservative voter who believes that the “liberal media” is biased against his/her worldview likely becomes more susceptible to right-wing fake news.

Having established that fake news is an old phenomenon and is sometimes propagated by reputable media brands, it is time for us to examine one of the most obvious purveyors of fake news locally: the mainstream media (MSM), including Channel News Asia (CNA) and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH).

During campaigning at the 2015 General Elections, Lianhe Zaobao, SPH’s Chinese paper, published allegations from a poison pen letter suggesting that Daniel Goh, the Workers’ Party candidate, had had an affair with one of his students. *The Straits Times* and CNA repeated the allegation, the latter with a salacious “Did he or did he not?” teaser.⁶

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/f68e069a-bf06-11e5-846f-79b0e3d20eaf>

⁶ <https://mothership.sg/2015/08/ex-straits-times-editor-peh-shing-huei-calls-daniel-goh-poison-pen-letter-saga-a-dark-day-for-spore-journalism/>

In doing so, they failed to follow the most basic of journalistic principles: source verification. One suspects they would not have been so callous had the accusation been made against, say, K Shanmugam, the law minister.

Let me put this as unambiguously as I can. The reason “fake news” is of global concern today is because of its potential to affect elections. At Singapore’s last election, the worst and possibly only instance of fake news, cited above, was produced by three of Singapore’s mainstream media channels.

Fake news is not just about what is published. The MSM’s sins of omission are just as damning. On 18th August 2009, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, then finance minister, was asked in parliament to reveal the reasons for Charles Goodyear’s resignation from Temasek Holdings. Amongst other things, he said:

“People do want to know, there is curiosity, it is a matter of public interest. That is not sufficient reason to disclose information. It is not sufficient that there be curiosity and interest that you want to disclose information.”

The next day, *The Straits Times* published the parliamentary conversations. However, it decided to leave out the phrase “it is a matter of public interest”.

Leaving out the phrase changes the statement. It is one thing for the then finance minister to say, “Yes there’s curiosity but we’re not going to tell.” It is something different for him to say, “Yes, it is a matter of public interest but we’re not going to tell.” Just like that, the spin machine changed facts.

Through my experiences appearing as a guest on CNA’s news shows (documented here), I know that local producers and journalists might sometimes altogether avoid reporting on sensitive local stories. In some ways this is a far more insidious form of omission. The local audience may never know what it missed out.

Just this past week, MSM readers got to experience what this blackout feels like. *Al Jazeera* released a documentary, “Singapore: The House that Lee built”, which discusses the Oxley Road saga and includes new interviews with Li Shengwu, grandson of Lee Kuan Yew. Even though this is clearly an ongoing matter of national interest, the MSM did not report on it.

All this comes at a cost. Outfits like *The Real Singapore*, a now defunct site which published allegedly seditious articles, are able to draw eyeballs precisely because of some Singaporeans’ disillusionment with the MSM. If the MSM was doing an honest, unbiased job, Singaporeans would be less susceptible to fake news.

What should Singapore do? There are no easy fixes, certainly not in this age of shifting media business models. Thankfully, Singapore’s MSM has long had a solid newsroom helmed by talented journalists who do a good job with Asia coverage. Sadly, when it comes to Singapore, they can only perform at their best when reporting on non-political issues, such as food and music.

The MSM's problem is a specific ideological one—the real or perceived threat of political interference and the attendant bias and self-censorship when reporting on socio-political issues in Singapore.

If even the world's most reputable media brands can fall prey to bias and mistakes, Singapore should not be embarrassed about embracing MSM reform.⁷

Specific recommendations are well beyond this article's scope and the Committee's mandate. Yet I hope the Committee simply acknowledges the need for it.

If it does, it will show that Singapore is taking a holistic view to tackling the scourge of fake news, as part of broader efforts to temper political polarisation and strengthen our democracy.

Singaporeans would do well to monitor this Committee's recommendations.

⁷ There are more examples of boo-boos by Singapore's MSM [here](#) and [here](#).