

Written Representation 100

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Protecting Racial and Religious Harmony in the Threat of Deliberate Online Falsehoods

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Introduction

I am making this written representation in response to the public invitation given by the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

My submission seeks to provide input on two aspects which are part of the terms of reference of the committee – “the consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to our institutions” and “how Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods”. I will focus specifically on how online falsehoods if they are left unchecked have the potential to over the long-term chip away, destabilise, and ultimately destroy the social harmony (especially between races and religions) we have painstakingly nurtured over the past few decades.

I am making this representation in my personal capacity as a researcher who has been examining issues related to social cohesion for over a decade, and who has led several large scale surveys on subjects exploring the fault lines based on race, religion and immigrant status. My submission draws on some of these research findings. I believe that these will provide a quantifiable, as well as valuable, backdrop to the official narrative that race and religion cannot be taken for granted which requires policy to safeguard against potential threats that could result in fracturing Singapore society.

For the purposes of this submission, my arguments and proposals are being made in the context of online articles that purposefully and deliberately seek to exploit racial/ethnic² and religious differences in society by fabricating, twisting or taking out of context comments, accounts or views on such matters.

Differences still matter

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² I not only refer to racial and ethnic differences between the Chinese, Malay, Indians and Eurasians who are traditionally recognized as constituting the main racial groups in Singapore but also newer migrants who may racially be categorised as “Others” and those who may be of the same race but are viewed as culturally different because of their more recent entry into Singapore (e.g more recent Chinese migrants from the People’s Republic of China)

First, there is widespread agreement that the maintenance of social cohesion in multiracial, multireligious and multilingual Singapore has been crucial to the success of the city-state. The various episodes of racial and religious conflicts prior to Singapore's independence and the example of many other societies demonstrate how racial and religious differences can lead to conflict and violence among different communities, even if they had long experiences of harmonious co-existence. Existing fault lines along racial, religious and linguistic differences have been well managed over the past decades through various legislation including the Ethnic Integration Policy in housing and the passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act³. These have ensured that there have been no occurrence of communal violence or agitation in recent decades.

However the existence of harmonious relationships between the different communities in Singapore does not mean that there are no misperceptions or prejudices about different groups in the population. Research on Singaporean resident attitudes to social differences show that while practically all of the population endorse multicultural living, stereotypes and prejudices are held by a sizeable proportion.

Based on the Channel News Asia – Institute of Policy Studies (CNA-IPS) Survey on Race Relations⁴ conducted in 2016 with 2000 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents, 96% of respondents reported that they respected those of other races, and that all races should be treated equally. However the survey also showed that just under half of respondents agreed that people from some races compared to others are more violent (44%), not friendly (46%) and are more likely to get into trouble (46%). Besides these stereotypes which respondents had of different communities, about half of the respondents in this study reported that most Singaporean Chinese (56%), Singaporean Malays (53%) and Singaporean Indians (49%) were at least mildly racist. Even more respondents perceived new migrants as racist.

There were also stark preferences for people of similar race to oneself across different spheres such as in spousal/familial relationships, or selecting an individual for tasks such as managing a business to tutoring a child.

My past research has also shown that despite the strength of our racial and religious harmony, some Singaporeans still perceive that discrimination and prejudice still exist especially when it comes to getting jobs and top positions⁵.

³ Mathew, M and Khidzer, MK (2015) Preserving Racial and Religious Harmony in Singapore. In Chan, D. 50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore (pp. 75-95) (Singapore: World Scientific).

⁴ http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/CNA-IPS-survey-on-race-relations_190816.pdf

⁵ Mathew Mathews (2014) "The State and Implication of Our Differences: Insights from the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language," In Mathew, M, Gee, C & Chiang, WF, Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences (Singapore: World Scientific).

The take-away is that we are still not a race-blind society, and our differences still matter in how we perceive and interact with each other at the workplace, and in social settings.

And it is in our everyday lives where deliberate online falsehoods could harm our social cohesion.

Slow drip effect

Much of the ongoing discussion and media reports, both within and outside Singapore, have focused on the dangerous effects of such falsehoods (popularly termed “fake news”) on political elections and referendums. Indeed, many of the examples cited in the Government’s Green Paper are from this arena. Countries affected include the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, and closer to home, Indonesia.

But it is a fallacy to think that such interference occurs only in the lead-up to, and during, elections. There will always be elements that seek to exploit existing divisions and differences within a society for their own ends.

For example, after the recent February 14 shooting in a school in Florida, Russian bots began to pile into the debate about gun control. This has been an issue that polarises Americans from both ends of the political spectrum, and reignites each time a mass shooting occurs. The added ingredient of social media, through fake Facebook and Twitter accounts used to amplify certain points in these discussions, serves to make the mix even more toxic than in the past.

In the Singaporean context, online falsehoods that can threaten social harmony can come in various forms and become an everyday experience. These can include reports that intentionally feature misinformation about particular ethnic, religious or immigrant groups and their loyalty to Singapore, their potential to commit anti-social acts or crimes, their lack of contribution to society, their overuse of state resources, or highlight and speculate about aspects of their culture which may not be well understood but deemed as at odds with majority culture.

Such deliberate, pre-meditated attempts to spread false rumours have occurred before. The Real Singapore website, which attracted over two million unique monthly visitors every month at one time, tried to inflame racial and religious tension by posting a claim that a Filipino family had complained about some Singaporeans playing musical instruments during the annual Thaipusam procession in 2015, and which led to a commotion between Hindu participants and the police.

The woman who had granted the interview to The Real Singapore regarding the issue said in court later that the posted article was “cooked up” and “all nonsense”. “There was no such complaint by a Pinoy family, to the best of my knowledge,” Ms Gowri

Yanaseckaran said in her court statement. “I was surprised as I had made no mention of any complaint by a Pinoy family in my e-mail.”⁶

I personally witnessed just how quickly netizens took to this story and without questioning the veracity of facts, made comments maligning Filipinos. It is doubtless that this distorted article would have shaped the opinions of some Singaporeans towards immigrants, Hindus, and an important event in the country’s calendar of religious festivals.

This case (also cited in the Green Paper), serves to highlight a possible inadequacy in dealing with such websites especially if they are outside Singapore jurisdiction. Aided by the Internet, these websites can within a matter of hours spread such articles at great speed and with grave consequences for public opinion and societal cohesion.

Even outside of elections, we have to guard against online falsehoods that seek to harm our social fabric. If not tackled with haste, their spread and discussion can sow discord and widen the divisions already present at several levels – between racial and religious groups, and increasingly between born-and-bred Singaporeans and new citizens, or between citizens and immigrants.

Such acts, in combination and over an extended period of time, can have a corrosive effect. They progressively chip away at the harmony and cohesion that has been built up over time between different communities. Rifts then become schisms, as polarised communities move further and further apart.

This would leave Singapore even more vulnerable to attempts to wreck the high levels of security and stability which have allowed us to be a successful hub. As an open economy plugged into the global network and highly dependent on the flows of goods, people, and information for trade, the country is, compared to others, even more at risk of such attacks.

The impact of a major catastrophe

Fault lines can be accentuated during crisis situations. I provided my expertise to CNA on a survey dealing with community trust after a hypothetical terror attack. It was conducted on more than 2000 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents in April and May 2017, and the results pointed out that significant portions of the population are apprehensive of the aftermath of community relations if such an attack would occur.

In fact the study (as did the IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial Harmony conducted in 2012/2013⁷) showed that presently, before any attack, considerable numbers of Singaporeans find it hard to trust most of those of other races.

⁶ <http://www.straittimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/trs-case-nurse-says-her-account-of-thaipusam-case-altered>

⁷ http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/08/Forum_-Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious_110913_slides.pdf

Respondents were asked what proportion of people from different races they thought would return their wallet if they dropped it in a shopping mall. The Chinese were less trusting of minorities. Around 60% of Chinese respondents thought that less than half of Malays or Indians would return their wallet.

What would happen in the immediate aftermath of a terror attack in Singapore? Respondents were asked to imagine a situation where a bomb exploded on an MRT platform, killing 15 and wounding 40 people. Various scenarios of the identity of the perpetrators of the attack were presented. If the attack was planned by an overseas Muslim organization, nearly two out of five (39%) of non-Muslims said their community would view Muslims with suspicion while more than a third (35%) would be angry with them.

Forty four percent of respondents would also take precautions when they are physically near people of other religions, if that religion was associated with the attack. What about the longer term? More than half of the respondents felt that Singaporeans would remain suspicious for more than one year of those associated with the religion of the perpetrators of the terror attack.

At a time of heightened levels of suspicion and anxiety, any misinformation passed through the Internet will almost certainly have an effect on Singaporeans' minds. Trust among the different communities can be affected. Compared to peace-time, people would as a result of anxieties attempt to find as much information about the issue and thus be more likely to also spread messages or reports (which are not verified) to their online and offline communities. This may lead to further inflammation of racial/religious discord.

This indicates further potential for nefarious elements, whether local or foreign, to use deliberate online falsehoods to destabilise the racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

What happened in March 2017 in the immediate aftermath of the London Westminster Bridge attack illustrates this. As BBC reports – “A photograph was widely circulated of a woman wearing a hijab and talking on the phone at the site of the attack. Thousands shared the picture which claimed the woman, as a Muslim, was indifferent to the suffering of victims around her. #BanIslam was one hashtag circulating with the image.”⁸

A few months later, it was revealed that the image was shared by a Twitter user which was one of 2,700 accounts handed over to the US House Intelligence Committee by the social media company. They were fake accounts created in Russia to influence UK and US politics. There are almost certainly other examples of such attempts to manipulate public opinion over race and religion issues. A study by the anti-racist organisation Hope Not Hate found that there exists a “global network of anti-Muslim

⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-42487425>

activists using Twitter bots, fake news and the manipulation of images to influence political discourse.”⁹

In Singapore, anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise in the wake of a number of recent detentions of radicalised individuals. Young Muslims have openly voiced concerns about being looked at differently because of their religion.¹⁰ Overall based on the CNA survey 44% of respondents said that as a result of global terror, there is suspicion about some religious communities and 47% said that some religious communities are being mocked at because of their association with terror. Both unfriendly foreign governments and non-state actors could seek to widen the rift further, both before and after a possible attack.

It is important for Singapore to remain vigilant about efforts from different sources (including foreign governments and ideologically based groups) which may seek at some point (especially at crisis situations) to undermine the good level of social cohesion for their interests. The recent Mueller investigation probing foreign involvement in the US elections, suggests that Russians used the existing fault-lines in American society, whether between Whites and African Americans or Christians and Muslims, as part of their strategy of manipulation.

In an age where ads bought on Facebook can be targeted to different communities based on their demographic and political characteristics, the Russians were able to increase anxiety among different groups through featuring threatening information about another group, “to heighten tensions among groups already wary of one another” according to a Washington Post report¹¹. The concerted campaign of the Russians also accentuated racial concerns among African Americans urging them to “see Hilary Clinton as an enemy and stay at home on polling day”, an article in a recent issue of The Economist magazine pointed out.¹²

Counter-measures

If a targeted campaign is mounted by unfriendly parties to undermine social trust among groups in Singapore, such misinformation can systematically reduce the ethos of multicultural respect that currently prevails in Singapore society. Misinformation can act on already existing prejudices between communities and act to further confirm and bolster prejudices. Considering this, it is important that there be sufficient legislation to curb the exposure of Singaporeans to such falsehoods especially when these can undermine social harmony.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/26/anti-muslim-online-bots-fake-accounts>

¹⁰ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/muslim-youth-air-concerns-about-islamophobia-here>

¹¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/russian-operatives-used-facebook-ads-to-exploit-divisions-over-black-political-activism-and-muslims/2017/09/25/4a011242-a21b-11e7-ade1-76d061d56efa_story.html?utm_term=.90589d9044e0

¹² <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21737276-and-why-west-s-response-inadequate-how-putin-meddles-western-democracies>

As such I propose the following points for consideration.

First there should be a mechanism in place to allow the Government to stop the access of the local population to media sites which feature deliberate online falsehoods that threaten Singapore's social harmony. This mechanism should kick in quickly when such clear falsehoods (as defined in the Introduction) are discovered. Since some sites might be based overseas there must be adequate provision to block these sites if it is deemed as necessary, especially if website owners cannot be reached to take down the online distortions or place the needed clarification of facts related to the story.

An independent committee should hear appeals to remove the bans of such sites if the owners of such websites contest that the news reports are not at odds with the protection of the values of social harmony in Singapore.

Second, there should be greater responsibility placed on individuals based in Singapore who repost/share such online falsehoods which undermine trust between communities. Perhaps there should be some mandated education that these individuals will have to undertake if the articles that they spread is subsequently flagged as online falsehoods. This will hopefully raise their awareness to the problems posed by online falsehoods and make them more discerning about future information they read.

However it is important that placing more responsibility on individuals does not lead to a chilling effect where few people discuss sensitive issues but instead continue to harbor prejudices without the opportunity to confront them. Sixty-four percent of respondents in the 2016 CNA-IPS study agreed that it is very hard to discuss issues related to race without someone getting offended. About a quarter of respondents had questions about other races but did not ask these because they were concerned about the possible ramifications. The issues that people were concerned about largely related to religious beliefs and practices associated with racial groups and cultural practices. On the whole any measure imposed on safeguarding racial and religious harmony through curbing online falsehoods, must not have the unintended consequence of stifling potential useful discussion and clarification about communal differences.

Thus it is important that Singaporeans have adequate platforms to clarify and raise their concerns and anxieties (as uninformed as they may be) about other communities, especially when they read reports which can include deliberate online distortions. As such I propose dedicated websites, independently run by community agencies committed to the preservation of harmony in Singapore. This will allow individuals to post these reports and other concerns/misinformation. In an analysis of online discussions after several key incidents which highlighted racial/religious/immigrant tensions, my co-author Dr Lai Ah Eng and I opined that "objectivity and reasonableness exists (among online communities) as much as raw emotion or

prejudice”¹³. We noted online voices which brought balance to rather contentious issues involving differences. However it is unclear to me whether such voices exist on every online platform.

As such it might be worth considering promoting these dedicated portals which encourage moderate voices to provide balanced views on reports. The discipline of limiting the sharing of information which is racially and religiously sensitive to dedicated portals is especially crucial after an incident which can undermine social trust (such as a terror attack). This is necessary to lessen the incidence of deep fractures within Singapore society.

Conclusion

The threat of deliberate online falsehoods to our racial and religious harmony is a real one. Similar to the policies enacted to build up social cohesion in the early decades after Singapore’s independence and in the wake of communalism, measures are needed to tackle this new and emerging threat. I am willing to provide further clarification to the Select Committee if this is needed.

¹³ Lai A.H. and Mathew, M. (2016) “Navigating disconnects and divides in Singapore’s cultural diversity.” In Mathew, M and Chiang, WF Managing Diversity in Singapore: Policies and Prospects. London: Imperial College Press.