

Written Representation 123

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Written Representation to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

Dear Committee,

I have three recommendations for fake news education in Singapore.

1. It should commence in primary or secondary school.
2. It should combine critical thinking with character education.
3. The skills and dispositions should be practised and modelled in the regular academic subjects.

My reasons for these points come from my experiences in teaching critical thinking in the context of International Baccalaureate's Theory of Knowledge and an undergraduate core curriculum course.

1. It should commence in primary or secondary school.

I read in the New Paper in January about post-secondary education initiatives to combat fake news. Most of these courses are media- and communications-related. The institutions offering these are local polytechnics and universities. According to the Green Paper on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, "Most Singaporeans - 91% of Singaporean households and 84% of Singaporeans - have Internet access. Majority, 53% of Singaporeans, get their main source of news online (including through social media)". Compared to the Singaporeans that can benefit from fake news education, the reach of these post-secondary discipline-specific courses is too limited.

The Ministry of Education should introduce fake news education into the school curriculum because primary and secondary school is where we can hope to reach the most of each yearly cohort of Singapore's population. As far as I know, there is no systematic policy of educating against fake news in schools.

2. It should combine critical thinking with character education.

The core of fake news education should be to cultivate a healthy scepticism towards information. One can know the ways of fact-checking but, without healthy scepticism, one lacks the motivation to do so before retransmitting a piece of information. A healthy scepticism consists in part in withholding belief that a claim is true unless one is satisfied with the reason(s) for it, which is often just the evidence for it. Critical thinking education, in imparting the skill of identifying, evaluating and producing reasons and claims, is just the discipline for this part of healthy scepticism.

However, being good at critical thinking just lets you reason better to achieve your ends. Those ends can be evil, criminal or cynical. The best fake news is created by

those who know how to manipulate reasons for claims that cut close to the truth. The other part of cultivating a healthy scepticism entails that critical thinking education should not be carried out independently of character education.

Teach critical thinking in the context of caring about the truth, about social good, and about racial and religious harmony. These virtuous ends can be integrated with critical thinking when we strive to impart intellectual virtues (e.g. humility, empathy, integrity, rigour) instead of teaching argument forms and fallacies in silos detached from the ends that critical thinking should be servicing.

3. The skills and dispositions should be practised and modelled in the regular academic subjects.

A skill that is unpractised is lost. Ideas that one learns as head-knowledge to pass exams never become one's dispositions. The current teaching of critical thinking is inadequate to cultivate in our students the habit of critical thinking, much less make them into models of the intellectual virtues. This is because the teaching of critical thinking is confined to non-examinable parts of the curriculum or infused into the teaching of regular academic subjects at the discretion of individual teachers. There is no standardised understanding of what critical thinking is or how to infuse it properly.

The school academic curriculum is a fertile ground for practicing and modelling the intellectual virtues because all academic subject-matter is or can be presented as reasons and claims. Students can practise and be exposed to the intellectual virtues again and again throughout the school year in contexts as different as their academic subjects are different. Even exams and continuous assessments, the bane of the teaching of skills, can be recruited for practicing critical thinking if a simple standalone set of rubrics for making good arguments is developed, which acts as an add-on module to marking guides. Every trainee teacher should receive standardised training in critical thinking and in how to infuse it into classes.

A concluding note

In supply chains and human transportation, the 'last mile' refers to the last leg of an outcome-oriented delivery process. The 'last mile problem' is a bottleneck in a supply chain or transportation network that slows it down, e.g., commuters alighting at a transportation hub having to walk to destinations too close to the transportation hub to be served by its buses or trains.

Just like a supply chain, there are many steps in the dissemination of fake news. These range from its creation, to its first broadcast, to its being picked up by other websites, and to its spread on social media. The last mile of a piece of fake news is often its retransmission by a consumer. In order to be retransmitted, it has to be taken up by its consumer in a way that motivates that person to send it on. Legal and technology solutions control the availability of information but not its uptake by consumers. To counter the spread of fake news, we need to introduce the last mile problem to its dissemination. Education aimed at inculcating healthy scepticism in news consumers is the key.