

Written Representation 146

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Received: 7 Mar 2018

Submission to the Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

As one of the worst episodes of haze blanketed Singapore in 2013, a cloud of misinformation was spreading throughout the country as well. Some people circulated a screenshot that purportedly proved the National Environment Agency had edited and lowered the Pollutant Standards Index (PSI) reading at one point in time. Rumours also spread online of the government hoarding N95 masks, which were sold out in many stores. The atmosphere of panic and uncertainty dissipated only when the haze cleared.

This was a clear example of fake news affecting the country's resolve in the face of crisis, even before the term "fake news" entered public consciousness. While there has been focus on who the culprits were and how the misinformation was spread, less attention has been paid to why the misinformation gained traction in the first place.

The fake news of the 2013 haze could spread because it fed into the perception held by some that the civil service is not politically neutral and that grassroots organisations are partisan tools of the ruling party. The government has always forcefully refuted such sentiments whenever they surface. However, the misinformation of the 2013 haze disseminated rapidly and reached a wide audience, a worrying indication that a sizable number of Singaporeans could be convinced enough to pass on such aspersions on the public service. While this incident was relatively brief and did not appear to leave a lasting negative impact on Singapore society, these existing fault lines can be exploited and deepened by a coordinated and sustained misinformation campaign aimed at exacerbating underlying differences between Singaporeans. For instance, a foreign adversary with some understanding of Singapore society could mount such an attack, similar to what Russia carried out during the 2016 presidential election in the United States.

Clarification of the facts in the mainstream media can help to blunt the effect of misinformation, but may not be effective on those most susceptible to such misinformation in the first place. Those who already perceive the civil service and grassroots organisations as partisan will also believe that the mainstream media outlets are biased towards the government as well. In the end, the greatest defence against fake news may well lie in boosting the credibility of the mainstream media.

There are surveys showing that public trust in mainstream media is high, but these polls may not capture the full nuance of public sentiment. Media consumers differentiate between conventional articles and more contentious pieces that discuss politics and national policy. As such, even those who find the mainstream media to be credible on the whole may harbour doubts about news on politics and the government. This is especially so given the close relationship between the mainstream media and

the government, which is documented in books such as *OB Markers* (by former long-time editor in chief of the Singapore Press Holdings' English and Malay Newspapers Division Cheong Yip Seng) and a matter of public record. To reiterate, legitimate concern about the mainstream media's alignment with the government is what a foreign adversary can take advantage of to sow suspicion on all mainstream media information in times of crises.

The only long-term solution to this vulnerability is to build up a press respected by Singaporeans of all political persuasions. This can be achieved if the public can see that the news is shaped more by the professional judgment of editors and less by direction from the government. Such a media will serve as a strong anti-body against infectious fake news. Such a development will also go some way towards arresting the slide in local media consumption that has imperiled the financial viability of the press here.

Complete freedom of the press is not a panacea as a freewheeling media brings about many ills of its own. Hyper-partisan media also exists in jurisdictions where there is little or no government influence on the press. But that should not stop us from recognising that the current situation in Singapore is tilted too much to the other extreme, and a balance must be struck so that more space is given for the press to better perform its functions.

After more than half a century of nation building, Singapore national identity has grown only stronger, reflected in a burgeoning sense of pride in local talent and brands. The *Straits Times*, as a homegrown institution with 173 years of history and staffed by an overwhelmingly Singaporean core, should enjoy widespread support. But in my seven years at the newspaper, I sensed a general lack of interest in Singapore journalism from Singaporeans, except from those who were curious about the extent of government influence on the media's editorial work.

I raise this not to disparage the work that the mainstream media does, as I know first-hand the lengths journalists here go to in order to strive towards the ideal of serving the public. Instead, I raise this to highlight the unhealthy level of cynicism towards what should be a cherished national resource.

We can be much more resilient against fake news if the mainstream media, one of the first lines of defence against misinformation, is able to shed the reputational lodestone hanging from its neck and fight without this longstanding handicap.