

Written Representation 18

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Fake news

All Singapore Stuff posted a fake news about how Fernandez, a new citizen was disappointed with Singapore and thinking of giving up his citizenship. It carried the photograph of Prakash Hetamsaria who had moved to Singapore in 1995 and taken up citizenship in 1999.

Shocked friends, who knew Prakash and his passionate stance for social causes in Singapore well, informed him in India where Prakash was travelling to attend a wedding.

Wasting no time Prakash quickly took to social media to clarify that the article and the photograph were unrelated. However the harm had been done. He and his family had to face xenophobic comments from people who did not know him nor did they try to check if the facts were true. Fortunately Prakash has a large circle of people who know him well, as he has been an active grassroots leader who stood by him. But he felt it was unfair and uncalled for and regrets the impact this had on his wife and young daughter.

Having set up a successful career in Singapore, Prakash had not been sitting back to enjoy the comforts of his new home but actively gave back to society. He was involved not just in his condo management council but actively involved in the West coast Neighbourhood committee. There was no personal gain in this in fact it meant giving less time to his wife and daughter.

Prakash lives by the belief that integration is a never ending life long process and therefore the fake news hit him where it hurt most. He did not even read all the malicious comments the fake post elicited because he wanted to ignore them and move on without harbouring any ill feelings towards anyone.

What is fake news:

Fake news is a phenomenon not confined to any one place but is today a global nuisance. It is an imaginary and unsubstantiated story created either with the desire to make money or to discredit people and organizations and disrupt peace. Termed as yellow journalism, it is written with the intent to mislead.

There is a difference between fake news that is meant to amuse or bring a smile to people's faces. Eg: Traditionally newspapers would publish hoax news on 1st April just for fun and publish a clarification the next day. There was no intent to be malicious, to deceive or create harm.

Times have changed and previous laws are now archaic as Prakash learnt. In spite of filing a police report and the police following up his case nothing came out of it. He was informed 4 months later that the case was civil in nature and the police advised him to seek civil redress. Prakash insists that he does not blame the police but feels that changing times require a change in laws which he feels will bring better redressal.

Prakash welcomes the formation of the Parliamentary committee that has recently been created to tackle fake news.

In today's day and age when everyone is on social media news is shared at a click of a button. People are gullible. They also want their two minute of fame by being the first ones to share the news on their groups. Rumours become talking points and spread like wild fire. Such news serves to only manipulate people's minds reinforcing prejudices.

What can be done:

1. It's important to educate people to check the veracity of the news before spreading it. This is a long winded process. Ultimately members of the public should take the lead in finding and verifying news
2. Social media platforms should be responsible for what is put up on their portals. They should respond very quickly on social media to negate malicious news.
3. There has to be an updated code of conduct for social media sites, so that fabricated stories are not published and doing so is punishable by law. Recently Facebook has given the facility to users to flag any news they think is inappropriate. More needs to be done.
4. Identifying sites that are potentially trouble makers should be identified. 1st fake news gets warning 2nd fine and 3rd time they do it, the site should be shut down.
5. Governments have the resources and the clout to fight back not so the common man. They need legal protection.
6. There should be a clear differentiation between fake news and criticism. Checking veracity of news is not to be confused with censorship of genuine information
7. Fact checking sites should be encouraged to bring truth to the attention of the public.
8. There should be a clear differentiation between genuine errors and conscious effort to create mischief

Prakash has always been committed to foster a feeling of togetherness and belonging among the locals and immigrants but such malicious falsehoods can cause harm.

Unfortunately for him the article that started it all continued to be there, though his picture had been replaced and subsequently the article has been removed. As far as he knows no action was taken against the site as it is outside Singapore jurisdiction.