

Written Representation 29

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An educator's perspective on fake news

I am a private tutor who teaches General Paper (GP), and new students sometimes say: "I thought I wasn't allowed to criticise Singapore's government in my essays!"

When it comes to misperceptions of the world, my new students start off with plenty. It's already an uphill battle to fight these errors, and I believe that introducing legislation aimed at battling fake news will only further stoke needless fear into a populace already unsure of those (in)famous "OB markers". This would especially be so if the legislation is aimed at social media, the ground for so much of our political discourse these days.

I completely understand if politicians think that this fear of authority, particularly the fear of speaking out against authority, is a good thing -- surely it makes a population easier to control, in some ways. However, considering the current government's goals, this fear that has worked so well in the past may prove counterproductive now, especially when we consider Singapore's economic productivity.

Already we are struggling to attain a level of productivity comparable to other developed countries, but this makes no apparent sense: aren't we topping the charts when it comes to the famed international student assessment benchmark, PISA? Why is this not translating to high levels of productivity in the workplace? My opinion is that the fear of authority -- which is so effectively worked into Singaporeans via the education system, national service, and our national bureaucracies -- plays a huge role in this lack of productivity.

The economy from here on out is going to be ever-shifting and unpredictable. The current government correctly places an emphasis on lifelong learning, since it is those with the ability to react effectively to such changes who will be more productive in this new landscape. It isn't just knowledge that is important. What is crucial is the ability to use that knowledge, to test data against reality, to tell falsehood from truth -- in short, we need to know how to solve those inevitable problems that arise daily for the modern worker.

The fear of authority acts against this skill of problem-solving that necessarily involves some level of risk-taking, and therefore the risk of angering authority, especially in the context of the modern office.

Witnessing history unfold before us with the presidency of Donald Trump and the attendant phenomenon of fake news is worrying, but we must be careful of knee-jerk reactions that will only set us back as a nation. What we need to combat fake news is a Singaporean public that can think critically for itself. It may be a public that's

more resilient to persuasion, but isn't that the goal here, to have a public that can resist manipulation by malign forces?