

## Written Representation 91

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### Dealing with Fake News: Avoiding a Sledgehammer Response

1 The furore over fake news erupted in the wake of President Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States of America. News agencies and assorted non-state actors accused Trump's campaign of hobbling his erstwhile opponent Hillary Clinton's electability through the dissemination of falsehoods and the spreading of doubt in collusion with the Russian government.

2 The facts of this milestone that triggered worldwide soul searching over falsehoods in news circulation point to two things. Firstly, questions arose as to how and why false stories were believed in and passed on by mainstream news media and social media as credible information. Secondly, the alleged involvement of a foreign government in a national, domestic political arena through the 'front door' of open media outlets like Facebook, Twitter and interpersonal networking with news influencers.

3 The purpose of this short submission is not simply to explain how fake news is a historically recurring practice. It is to propose that fake news ought not to be treated as a strictly black and white matter of applying the full force of the law on criminality. Fake news can be a matter of accident, as much as it can be one of deliberate weaponization against a society's sense of peace and social order. A sledgehammer response should be avoided at all costs. *Punitive measures ought to be sensibly designed, while citizen education will be argued to be the ultimate defence against the nefarious effects of fake news.*

4 The case for a nuanced approach to dealing with fake news will be elaborated through what I term three shades of truth creation, or conversely three shades of creating falsehoods: *the risks of getting facts wrong in news reporting; fake news and the test of the intellect*, and *the propaganda potential of fake news*. This submission will then conclude with three recommendations that revolve around the principles of building educational defences against fake news.

## Fake News in three shades

5 ***Getting facts wrong in news reporting is a permanent and daily risk run by all serious journalists.*** While the online Oxford Dictionary defines fake as ‘not genuine; imitation or counterfeit’ (Dictionaries 2018), journalists have encountered much less clarity in separating fake news from what they can legitimately report as accurate news. Members of the public expect self-respecting journalists to fetch the facts and cobble an objective account of events that comprise news stories. Instead, studies examining the nature of professional journalism have identified journalism as a profession that has evolved its own standards, ethos and embeddedness within a prevailing host society. Michael Schudson, a scholar of journalism, defines a reporter as ‘someone faithful to sources, attuned to the conventional wisdom, serving the political culture of media institutions, and committed to a narrow range of public, literary expression.’ (Schudson 1988, 239) Schudson admits that this is not a very flattering description of the journalistic profession but it is a far more honest one than many other versions such as those celebrated in popular film and fiction. For our purposes, journalism needs to be viewed as being as vulnerable to channelling fake news as it is in potentially creating it. Loyalties to sources, ‘conventional wisdom’ and the political culture of certain host institutions are serious operational concerns.

6 Among journalists, controversy remains alive over the admissibility of partisan slants in reporting. In the 1960s and 1970s, media organizations and reporters from the Third World famously challenged their First World counterparts for deliberately ignoring positive achievements by the former such as extending the electricity grid to rural areas, the completion of highways, airports and dams, and the success rates of children making it through college education. Instead, First World news agencies exhibited a ‘bad news syndrome’ and tended to feature ‘Third World stories’ in First World newspapers under the taglines of man-made and natural disasters, coups, revolutions, wars, genocide and pestilence. Of course, certain Third World journalists and their host institutions could also be accused of whitewashing authoritarian regimes with atrocious human rights records. These sorts of biases in reporting border on fake news but they are frequently in operation in every news agency. In recent years, even the hitherto highly respected British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) found itself embroiled in scandals of omission and commission. In July 2003, it was found out that one of its own journalists, Andrew Gilligan, was encouraged by the BBC’s director general at the time to aggressively rake the sitting Labour government over the coals of public opinion, by accusing Prime Minister Blair’s government of ‘sexing up’ a dossier compiled by Britain’s own intelligence services to wilfully mislead Parliament into sanctioning Blair’s plans to jointly invade Iraq with US forces on the pretext of eliminating Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). (Lyll 2003) Citing this dossier, Mr Blair had claimed that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq could launch WMDs within 45 minutes of a decision having been made in Baghdad. Following a full scale parliamentary inquiry, and the suicide of Gilligan’s only source for the allegation,

weapons expert Dr David Kelly, it turned out that while Blair's government had made mistakes in exaggerating the deployment status of Iraq's WMDs, the BBC's reputation for balanced and cautious objectivity had been tarnished. Ultimately, following the more comprehensive Chilcot Inquiry into the Blair government's conduct over the Iraq War, it was finally confirmed in July 2016 that Blair's government had deliberately tweaked the wording in the intelligence dossier given to it by MI6 – Britain's equivalent of the US' CIA and NSA – to strengthen the public case for invading Iraq in 2003. (Hunt 2016) In this instance, the BBC provided a deliberate slant to check the government for its abuse of intelligence privilege, while the sitting government of Prime Minister Blair served up its own politically motivated slant to persuade Parliament and the British public of the need for a military solution to the menace posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In this regard, there is a clear difficulty in apportioning the greater share of the blame for producing 'fake news'.

7 Throughout the past decade similar conundrums over assigning blame for manufacturing fake news have also emerged all over the world. Spirited debates have regularly erupted over whether terrorist discourses and 'live' operations ought to be broadcast or streamed in real time, and if doing so meant lending assistance to false and malevolent political causes. In March 2010, for instance the government of Afghanistan was stung by live coverage of two high profile suicide terror attacks against locals and foreigners in Kabul. Journalists claimed that the attacks showed up the Kabul government's inept security measures. The Afghan government imposed immediate and draconian measures forbidding local and foreign media from reporting terror attacks in close proximity in real time. A spokesman for Afghan President Hamid Karzai claimed that this was done 'to protect journalists' lives and to prevent enemies from using those live broadcasts for their benefit.' (Rubin and Wafa 2010) This statement begs the question about whether news on acts of terror should be doctored or censored for political expedience. Similarly, photographs of mutilations and executions occasioned by armed conflict in the Middle East since 2010 have stirred further debate over whether deliberate depictions of acts of mass inhumanity on battlefields constitute the artificial hyping of 'torture porn' to polarize public opinion into hardened ideological positions that facilitate government intervention. (Linfield 2014) In 2015, following successive years of financial austerity and a conservative government elected to apply shock therapy to the economy, prominent and independent newspapers in Spain have shed both journalists and critical coverage in an effort to please both creditors and a government that was bent on curbing spontaneous political protests and 'amateur video footage' of police brutality. (Minder 2015) The Spanish case shows that journalism bordering on fake news can very well emerge under indirect pressures from financial and governmental quarters. Three years earlier, India's then 100 million strong Internet users were swamped with images of anti-Muslim violence that triggered an exodus of tens of thousands of young people from Bangalore, Pune and Chennai. Deeper investigation revealed that most images had been fabricated of anti-Muslim violence in India's northeast, and worse, from the context of anti-Muslim genocide in neighbouring Myanmar superimposed onto Indian 'narratives' anticipating sectarian violence. New Delhi appealed to Facebook, Google

and Twitter to filter these images while telecommunication companies in the country were ordered to limit mobile phone users to 'five text messages a day each for 15 days in an effort to limit the spread of rumours.' (Bajaj 2012) Although India's case does not implicate journalists in producing fake news, it shows the lethality of spontaneous, untutored 'citizen journalism' that can be unleashed through social media. Citizen journalists may be innocently passing on what they construe at first sight as a helpful and advanced public security warning, but the actions of each social media individual repeated multiple times within a short span of time easily generates mob-level panic that can be severely damaging to multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies.

8 In perhaps one of the most iconic episodes in fake news damaging inter-societal and international relationships, the video clip of a 12 year Palestinian boy, Mohammed al-Durrah, allegedly murdered 'live' and in cold blood by Israeli soldiers during the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 required nearly 13 years of official and private investigations to uncover the truth. The image of al-Durrah in his father's embrace, grimacing in abject fear and cowering from Israeli fire behind a barrel and a white concrete wall, literally awaiting death, stirred the world into loud condemnation of Israeli brutality against Palestinians. The original footage, sold to the France 2 television station seemed like a scoop at the time and supplied a huge moral boost to the Palestinian cause. Israel officially apologized for what seemed like an incident straight out of what military professionals dub 'the fog of war' where the exigencies of combat rarely allow separation of civilian from military targets. Subsequent investigations by the Israelis and independent French journalism groups revealed that the Palestinian freelance cameraman had staged it all with the boy shot in cold blood to make it look like he died from Israeli bullets. (Dawber 2013) The France 2 staff had edited the final moments of the video that showed the staged killing. Interestingly, the earlier parts of the broadcast footage did not reveal any visible blood on al-Durrah's tee-shirt and pants. In this instance, fake news was circulated internationally in aid of a desirable political cause – advocating for the political underdog – but its means of production violated its claim to the moral high ground.

9 In tandem with slanted reporting, speculative journalism runs an equally high risk of being censured if fake news is being targeted indiscriminately. The practice of speculative inquiry and the presentation of estimated scenarios is a practice that evolved with the serious broadsheet newspaper in both western and non-western societies. In fact, the evolution of the commercially oriented public service newspaper in western countries tracks the historical struggle of the democratic 'public sphere'. Newspapers and their owners started out by siding with the increasingly middle class voices of citizens who owned property, held professional or blue collar jobs, and whose income and the futures of their families and children depended on a government who ought to be responsive to their actual needs. Additionally, democracy could not be said to be practised if no outlet existed for independent voices and thoughts. The same logic was reprised for public and private radio, television, and today, the Internet, as well. Speculative journalism can therefore be seen as an expression of democratic

opinion. If news outlets and their owners were serious about their responsibility to the public, they ought to be allowed to criticize government policies using both normative arguments and the sketching of hypothetical scenarios. Theoretically, the reading public expects their news outlets to hold government to account by acting as their organ of opinion on specific issues, as well as taking the initiative to predict both good and bad outcomes of certain government policies. This is straightforward democratic communication logic but once the charge of 'fake news' is levelled at speculative journalism, it hurts democracy.

10 In today's 24/7 news cycle operating at Internet speed, information breeds a psychic anxiety amongst all well-read citizens. The daily work of both blue and white collar occupations depend on up to the minute forecasting of trends in society, politics, economics, the weather and increasingly geology and biology as well. Journalism scholars Christy Wampole and Richard Grusin argue that twenty first century life thrives under a culture of 'premediation' where past shocks – such as tsunamis, earthquakes, stock exchange meltdowns, genocides, wars and freak election results – can recur in unpredictable, and unrecognizable mutations. (Wampole 2018) The only hedge ordinary hardworking citizens can build for themselves would be to prepare psychologically for several contingencies and pick the right response once 'bad news' is revealed. Therefore, speculative journalism is needed, even desired by many consumers of news, as the mitigation of risk. In journalism scholar Christy Wampole's words, 'What the speculative journalist has in common with the gamblers of Las Vegas and Wall Street is the willingness to take risks, but the stakes in this game are relatively low. When the future materializes, there will certainly be winners and losers. *Someone* will have gotten it right, and this certainty reassures us somehow. But given the superabundance of speculations clouding the mediascape, will anyone remember or care exactly who got it wrong? Those who were right will trumpet their prophetic insight and ascend as soothsayers; those who were wrong will simply keep quiet. One has little to lose but much to gain from this wager.' (Wampole 2018) Not only in Singapore, but in most economically prosperous states and politically fragile systems, living at Internet speed requires access to news media that offer facts with predictions. It is a future where news professionals will tread frequently into the grey borders of fake news to scan the time horizons for the citizen-consumer, and it is likely we have to live with it.

11 ***Fake News and the Test of the Intellect.*** There is little to doubt that the advent of fake news is a severe test of the intellect of citizens. The idea of a population identifying themselves by choice and through reason as a nation means that all incoming information that challenge them ought to be subject to critical analysis. In the late 1800s, Ernest Renan wrote that a nation 'is a soul, a spiritual principle.' (Renan 1994, 17) A people cannot be rightly called a nation if it did not ritualize a particular form of remembrance of the sacrifices and glories of the past. This has clear parallels with how people identify with culture and religion. It is mostly about beliefs, and having faith that those beliefs were derived justly, nobly and objectively. Therefore, fake news

challenges nationhood head-on as citizens are tested to remember the values and common narratives that bind them as one people. This also means that nationalist histories tend to be regarded as sacrosanct by politicians and patriots, even beyond questioning. If, however historians venture revisionist accounts of a purportedly heroic past on the basis of academic license, nationalists may denounce their work as biased, vindictive and politically motivated, as has happened with many Southeast Asian histories of the Cold War. The victors tend not to approve of the losers being regarded in retrospect as people with good intentions, but as agents armed with nefarious strategies that distorted truth for their revolutionary ends. This is where one must exercise caution in policing one's nationalist ethos against some supposed violation of a cherished memory. Universities and their faculties are often at the receiving end of complaints about fake news produced by authoritative sources such as professors, freelance researchers, nongovernmental organizations and investigative journalists!

12 Indeed, the ability to critically read and empathize with rival versions of nationalist narratives cut to the heart of what citizen-based public opinion is in any modern state, and why it needs to attempt objectivity in reacting to unconventional information. The latter is often inverted as 'fake news' by persons unwilling to keep an open mind about political and social matters. The relevant question to be posed in relation to 'new history as fake news' would be: do the public exercise reasonable judgment with the aid of a proverbial rear view mirror on history? Although this submission is not the right place to debate the meaning of citizenship in Singapore or abroad, it bears repeating that Aristotle did write that what distinguishes a citizen proper 'is his participation in giving judgment and in holding office.' (Aristotle 1992, 169) From East Asia, the ancient sage Confucius, while not addressing the idea of citizenship directly, offers advice for the learned gentleman as one who attains sincerity: 'Sincerity is the way of Heaven. The attainment of sincerity is the way of men...He who attains to sincerity, is he who chooses what is good, and firmly holds it fast. To this attainment there are requisite the extensive study of what is good, accurate inquiry about it, careful reflection on it, the clear discrimination of it, and the earnest practice of it. The superior man, while there is anything he has not studied, or while in what he has studied there is anything he cannot understand, will not intermit<sup>1</sup> his labour.' (Confucius 1971, 413) Leaving aside the archaic English translation of Confucius's advice, the ideal of the upright man/woman in society can only be realized if one is willing to develop the habit of interrogating all incoming information before apprehending its validity. Across time, these two quotes from Aristotle and Confucius have a deep bearing on what will be proposed at the end of this submission: the best defence against fake news is to foster a spirit of critical inquiry amongst citizens, and additionally encourage good citizenship through the cultivation of that very learned quality as a goal of being Singaporean.

13 It is not enough to reiterate to Singaporeans today that manufacturing lies and spreading them to cause malice is evil and downright criminal, and assume that they

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<sup>1</sup> 'Intermit' means 'interrupt'.

fully agree to the logic behind this admonition. One ought to justify seeing through falsehoods as a positive affirmation of citizenship and the psychological means of doing so. Even in liberal democracies such as the USA, Canada, France and Great Britain, debates about whether public opinion possesses a steady nerve and a sharp discriminating mind that could be relied on when the entire ship of state runs into difficulties under a weak leadership fall back on reflections on how a good citizen should be equipped to think about political, social and economic affairs. The thoughts of one of America's most well-cited theorists of public opinion, Walter Lippmann, are relevant here. Lippmann decried the fact that modern practical government from the twentieth century onwards required citizens to transcend the assumption that the wisdom attributed to citizenship sprung naturally from their biological evolution from the cradle. (Lippmann 1960, 256-259) Occupational experience, geographical isolation or exposure mattered, along with sustaining a lively interest in current affairs beyond one's village, town or city. In a complex modern nation-state, specialized information – not unlike the many dedicated sections contained with the weekend editions of Singapore's broadsheet newspapers – would have to be digested into manageable proportions for the ordinary citizen who has a short attention span to take in both national and global matters after eight to ten hours of an average workday. (Lippmann 1960, 398-402) Lippmann argued that the ordinary citizen, as the proverbial, regular outsider to specialized subject matters, must not only understand the merits of each national and global matter at hand, he or she must also be aware of how the latter came to be set up as an agenda for decision-making before him or her. In short, reliable and objective citizen-derived public opinion must know enough substantively about the issues they are called upon to decide while also, appreciating the procedures that brought about the information agenda he or she has to decide on.

14 In tandem with considerations of good citizenship and level headed public opinion in tackling fake news, the tapping of expert opinion in think-tanks, nongovernmental organizations and the universities require some concessionary space for intellectual labour. In particular, the issue of relativity posed by the social sciences and humanities should not be confused with declaring an information source as a purveyor of fake news. In Mass Communication studies, or in opinion polling, or quantitative surveys pertaining to Economics, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, International Relations and Geography, hypothetical scenarios need to be posed in questionnaires to elicit opinions, and subsequently observe or debunk something termed 'the null hypothesis'. It is known that in statistical analyses of social and political phenomena, the few and random opinions that lay on the outer positions of a scatter graph are conventionally termed as 'outliers' and treated in formal analysis as 'unrepresentative' or minority positions. In this regard, social science analyses may technically stray frequently into the territory of generating 'fake news' through less than accurate analyses that may well pass muster amongst elite expert circles. This is an ironic contrast to the preceding paragraph where enlightened public opinion places a premium on expert opinion informing them how to think about complex phenomena. Incidentally, historians may face the biggest conundrum of all in relation to fake news. If history is analysed mostly according to 'plausible interpretations' based on reading

literal documents and in between the lines, then historians are almost regularly producing fake news by some biased standard. The point about highlighting academic methodology here is to reveal the deep dilemma arising from any attempt to define fake news in relation to the realm of public, professional research.

15 ***The Propaganda Potential of Fake News.*** In its most clinical formulation, propaganda is the deliberate manipulation of representations to affect human behaviour. (Lasswell 1995, 13) In this regard, fake news is technically one of the many tools available to both the government propagandist and the marketing professional to sway people's minds. With little stretch of the imagination, one might argue, as does Robert Jackall, that slants, embellished truths and outright sensationalism are professional tricks of the trade in corporate public relations and beyond. In fact, companies have adapted so much from the historic promotional feats of the travelling circus. In the latter, performance to thrill and invocation of suspension of belief is the norm. This builds up what is called hype today. (Jackall 1995, 351-354) The more hype, the likelier the prospect of a massive buy-in from the public, contributing to profitability. Governments involved in dishing out propaganda may not always have the profit motive in mind but they certainly would have their particular national interests in mind. Better still, propaganda issued across frontiers may offer the illusion to their targets that a foreign government wishes to offer 'win-win' deals to them while in actuality that foreign government has no obligation to make it a level outcome.

16 According to ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, the highest demonstration of skill in warfare manifests in subverting the enemy without physical combat. (Chong 2014, 15) To achieve this requires the use of propaganda action through a combination of military, economic or political feints, and the dissemination of planted information. That last category includes what we term fake news. In incorporating propaganda, information warfare is the use of symbolic resources to penetrate the enemy's secrecy and confidence for the purpose of winning a war on one's own terms. The proximate concept of information operations refers to that entire range of symbolic resources straddling both military and civilian spheres that are aimed at achieving national objectives in both peacetime and wartime. (Chong 2014, 3) Information operations aims to weaken a potential adversary in peacetime by disseminating information that sows doubt and tension amongst a target population. There could be any number of ethnic, religious or ideological features susceptible to such campaigns of paralysis. Singapore's tragic experiences with the 1964 and 1969 racial riots might well be attributable to fake news circulated by foreign *agents provocateur*. Likewise, the Malaysian police is constantly patrolling social media for tell-tale signs of any images or complaints that might trigger Malay-Indian and Malay-Chinese riots. As mentioned earlier, India witnessed a serious number of incidents in 2012 whereby doctored images of Muslims being attacked were circulated without consultation with the authorities, thereby contributing to panic and imitation attacks. (Bajaj 2012) In fact, scholars of propaganda have pointed out that the central purpose of influencing hearts and minds is either to divide a target population or to unite it. (Whitton 1941, 594)

17 In peacetime, information operations should theoretically be undetectable since it utilizes agents such as news agencies, social media, official statements, and spies operating in plain sight. When it comes to wartime, or ideally, in the prelude to an anticipated armed conflict, fake news is usually ratcheted up to the point where no kinetic military action needs to be set in motion due to the chaos within the enemy camp or the visible collapse of the national will to resist the enemy. While there have been no pure examples of Sun Tzu's version of ideal information operations forcing a bloodless capitulation of the enemy, there have been plenty of illustrations of the lethality of information warfare in conjunction with physical invasion. Hitler's scheming between 1936 and 1938 in arousing pro-German and pro-unification sentiment in the demilitarized parts of the Rhineland, the Sudeten province of Czechoslovakia, and the entire country of Austria, was a crucial part of his diplomatic and military grand strategy in creating a militarized Greater Germany. Famously, Hitler orchestrated the fake news of multiple Polish initiated attacks on German border posts, radio stations near the border, and railway junctions as the *casus belli* for launching the invasion of Poland in September 1939, thereby formally triggering World War Two in Europe.

18 Although it is fashionable today to employ the phrase 'hybrid warfare' to encompass offensive military measures short of actual combat to further a military objective, it was Hitler who pioneered it to devastating effect during the Second World War. It is known that part of Germany's success in accelerating the collapse of French resistance in 1940 was to sow panic and confusion amongst the French population following the initial breach of the Franco-German border. Radio broadcasts by Nazi Germany appealed to French civilians to abandon their futile fight against Germany considering that their military defences to the north and east have been overrun. More chillingly, Nazi broadcasts sought to ignite an instant civil war within the French heartland that appealed to latent xenophobia and class divisions. A translated excerpt captured by US monitoring services read: 'Spare your country and save your lives. Force your government to make peace or drive it out. Stop the rich, the profiteers, and the merchants, the Jews and the English from escaping. Otherwise they will not fail to leave you in the lurch.' (Whitton 1941, 585) In another famous ruse during the Second World War, British naval intelligence hatched a plot to plant false invasion plans targeted at Nazi Germany on an 'authentic' deceased British soldier whose body was deliberately allowed to wash ashore on the Spanish coast in April 1943. Britain and the US had planned to invade Italy through Sicily. Both powers wanted to distract the Germans into sending reinforcements to Greece and Sardinia instead, thereby weakening their resistance in their targeted landing zones. (Montagu and Cooper 2010) This worked to produce a speedy recapture of Sicily by the Allied forces after the actual invasion unfolded. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Hutu-controlled Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) brazenly demonised the minority Tutsi population, appealing to all righteous Hutus to 'exterminate' the Tutsi 'cockroaches'. The RTLM radio broadcasts took a leaf from Nazi propaganda and preyed on Hutus' latent prejudices against their Tutsi co-nationals. It was estimated that RTLM broadcasts both incited and legitimized the mass killings by ordinary Hutus

simply because it enjoyed its prior standing as *the* legitimate national broadcaster utilizing government-controlled equipment. More recently in 2014, Russia disguised its annexation of Crimea in the Ukraine by disguising its agents of penetration as disgruntled Ukrainian and Crimean volunteers who spontaneously acted to return the territory to the Russian motherland. In short, fake news does produce military dividend when utilized judiciously. It might also be argued that China's plans for militarizing and consolidating the Spratly islands in the South China Sea are being presented as innocent and morally legitimate in the perception of the Chinese public and some quarters of overseas public opinion because the reasoning is dressed in the language of ensuring civilian navigational safety and emergency search and rescue discourse. (Reuters 2015)

19 Propaganda operations designed around fake news often have time limited objectives but sadly the effects of such deception are more enduring than its plotters can or care to predict. Our society prides itself on being modern and progressive, and that may just mean following trends with little scrutiny, in synchronization with the global economy. This is an economy that privileges expertise and the idea of institutional approval of that expertise. But the expert often becomes one by debunking rival 'experts', and by having a new organization rubber stamp the former. (Gerver and Bensman 1995) One sees this frequently in the advertising claims of rival soap and detergent manufacturers. One claims to have a string of certifications (e.g. allergy testing, anti-colour bleaching, indoor drying without odour etc.) that another lacks. At some point, this promotional rivalry may derive from clinical provenance based in a proper laboratory. On many other occasions, product superiority may very well be derived on highly subjective bases and film star endorsements and the like. Once the latter happens, a culture of fake news creeps into commercial advertising and the consumer public can be misled indefinitely. Many food scares and cosmetic toxicity scandals have come to light only after a period of time have elapsed, due in large part to consumer gullibility towards advertised 'expertness'.

20 Propaganda practitioners are often proud of their work as professionals in advertising, mass persuasion, business owners, or simply media management. They are not always instinctively evil persons. The Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, while not always exemplary of all currently practising advertising and media professionals, has bequeathed a number of World War Two-era documents that have been read by scholars of propaganda as insights into the art of creative deception. (Doob 1995) Although this submission is not the place for a detailed summary of Goebbels's operating principles, a few points are worth highlighting concerning the practice of creatively fusing truths and falsehoods. Goebbels starts with the premise that propaganda must always be grounded in actual, factual intelligence. Any ugly, inconvenient truths must be fully grasped before it can be creatively spun to favour one's cause. Even the silences of the Opposition regarding their embarrassments or defeats need not always be exploited by overtly highlighting them. In Goebbels's own words, 'controversy between the Allies is a small plant which thrives best when it is

left to its own natural growth.’ (Doob 1995, 197) To convert the public’s imagination to intense rage or rock solid solidarity against an enemy, the appeal of the ‘popular big screen’, whether one calls it the newsreel, the motion picture, or today’s social media circulated and highly polished ‘amateur’ video clip, must be utilized to present a seemingly straightforward version of ‘what really happened’. The target population must be inundated with a bombardment of popular media channels singing the same tune. Finally, what is of interest to this submission is that Goebbels fervently believed that neither truth (i.e. white propaganda) nor falsehood (i.e. black propaganda) were decisively superior in themselves. Credibility in presenting either one expediently to favour one’s reputation was the overriding consideration. In one scholar’s reading of Goebbels, truth ought to be used as frequently as possible so that the Opposition could not label one’s efforts as complete fabrications. Over time, skilful propagandists must assume that audiences develop the ability to ‘read between the lines’ and are not easily deceived. Lies, or black propaganda, are most effective when they could not be disproved or subject to some scientific verification. (Doob 1995, 199-200) During warfighting, not just in World War Two but in other conflicts, the problem of incomplete information arising from the complex of physical dangers, devastation and accessibility dubbed the so-called ‘fog of war’, is the propagandist’s dream opportunity. Fake news is as valid as truthful news within that moment. Even after the ‘fog of war’ lifts, propagandists can correct themselves by attributing circumstantial errors to it and exonerate themselves for the next round of judicious information manipulation. Interestingly this happened when Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 uncovered no weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi arsenal. Instead, the propaganda from the capitals of the two western powers that despatched the largest troop deployments justified the invasion emphatically as counter-terrorism and the installation of democracy and constitutional human rights. The latter two reasons had initially been surfaced as secondary ‘choruses’ in the ‘hymn’ of anti-Saddam propaganda before the invasion. After the invasion, the hymn was slightly tweaked by upgrading the secondary choruses to primary ones. The fact that the Bush White House won a landslide re-election the year after the invasion testified to the effectiveness of this propaganda tweak.

## **Recommendations**

21 Fake news is a chameleonic target. It lies in the realm of education, literacy, maturity of the public opinion, legitimate academic activity and accessibility of information. A sledgehammer response should be shunned in favour of a fine scalpel. Singaporean society as a thinking, passionate nation ought to be allowed critical thinking spaces lest national progress be undone. As a Policy Report from the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the Rajaratnam School puts it, legislative measures against fake news can only do so much given the chameleonic target that it is. The ‘long-term solution would also require building social resilience so that opinions and emotions cannot be easily swayed by falsehoods...Both critical thinking and media literacy entail teaching people to be more judicious in consuming

information including having the natural inclination to fact-check the materials they read. This encourages a culture shift: highlighting blind spots and biases, a curiosity for information from a spectrum of sources, and training them to assess materials logically and consider alternative viewpoints, before coming to a conclusion.’ (Vasu, et al. 2018, 19-20) Additionally, members of the public ought to be exposed to an open ended series of ‘current affairs’ talks conducted by academics, voluntary welfare organizations and civil service professionals to facilitate their intellectual perspicacity to guard against fake news campaigns. In this regard, it is proposed that the Committee consider re-establishing a body to organize or recommend *pro bono* talks along the lines of the Political Study Centre operated by the PAP Government between 1960 and 1966 to orientate the civil servants of the nascent State of Singapore towards the spirit of nation-building. (Government of Singapore 1960-66) Of course, the name of the Political Study Centre ought not to be retained as it is, but retitled more felicitously to entice public participation at venues like the National Library of Singapore and the Arts House. Subjects could include ‘the nature of the fundamentalist threat posed by ISIS’, ‘understanding territorial disputes in Asia’, ‘comparative peace philosophies between Asian religions’, and ‘the dilemmas of national development in Asian countries’. Additionally, efforts to curb the circulation of fake news must never obstruct the growth and practice of the social sciences where it comes to value-adding testing of hypotheses and thought experiments in Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, Economics, History and Political Science.

22 In line with this submission’s preference for a softer nuanced approach to pushing back on fake news, a bipartisan committee should be established in Parliament or under the supervision of the Council of Presidential Advisors on clarifying salient fake news issues that contain content that could inflame inter-ethnic animosity and inter-religious disputes. This remit can be extended on an *ad hoc* basis to matters concerning foreign affairs and defence upon the joint recommendation of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. By the term ‘clarifying’, it is meant setting the record straight on a particular topic and laying out any number of possible interpretations of an issue so that the public can judge for themselves the veracity of the original report. This bipartisan clearing committee should comprise an advisory body of experts nominated by Parliament or the Council of Presidential Advisors for a fixed term of two years for verification of facts and interpretations of them. The experts ought to be drawn from the Civil Service, Academia, the Arts and Civil Society.

23 Finally, even though the propaganda potential of fake news is morally ambiguous, it should be acknowledged for what it is for national security purposes, and potentially international ones as well. This is not to say that Singapore ought to actively pursue the propaganda of fake news as an instrument of foreign policy. Where Singapore has to pursue foreign policy in coalition with others or lead others in a peaceful coalition consistent with peace-making missions mandated by ASEAN, or a peace-oriented international body such as the United Nations, the Republic should not be averse to participating in ‘information operations’ to build peace in war-torn or

disaster stricken territories insofar as such operations assist in the psychological rehabilitation of populations in the affected areas.

24 Submitted please.

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