RAFFLES INSTITUTION
YEAR 5 GENERAL PAPER
STUDENTS' INFORMATION PACKAGE 2024

Unit: Media Issues

Note: Articles and/or sections in **bold**/asterisk(*) denote foundational readings

What key concepts students will understand as a result of this unit:

1. The media serves multiple functions and roles. These functions are informed by the interests of the producers (commercial, political etc.) as well as the interests of the consumers.
2. The functions and roles of the media may come into tension with interests of other societal stakeholders, who may react to temper this tension.
3. All media are carefully manufactured cultural products that seem to represent reality but are, in fact, constructions of reality. Hence, they contain embedded values and points of view.
4. These constructions of reality influence the way we see ourselves, our aspirations and desires, and our perceptions of the world around us.
5. Technological advancements shape the media's impact on society. Such advancements can magnify, disrupt and accelerate media's effects in unpredictable ways.

What key questions students can ask as a result of this unit:

1. How reliable is the media? Can the media ever be truly objective?
2. Should the media aim only to inform or should they attempt to shape public opinion?
3. What is the impact of the media on culture, values and choices?
4. Is the media responsible for the problems in our society?
5. Who has the greatest influence – media conglomerates, consumers or the government?
6. How should governments balance the concerns of the community with the individual's freedom of expression?
7. What is the impact of new media on mainstream media?
8. What is the impact of new media on politics, governance and democracy? How is new media shaping the regulatory role of the government?

PAST-YEAR EXAMINATION QUESTIONS ON THE MEDIA (2010-2020)

Cambridge
1. 'The quality of human interaction is diminished by modern communication devices.' How far do you agree? (Cambridge 2023)
2. 'Dramas on television or film are never as effective as a live performance.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2022)
3. To what extent has social media devalued true friendship in your society? (Cambridge 2021)
4. 'Films are concerned with escaping from the problems of everyday life, rather than addressing them.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2021)
5. Is news today reliable? (Cambridge 2021)
6. 'Advertising is largely about persuading people to buy what they do not need.' How far do you agree? (Cambridge 2021)
7. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss (Cambridge 2020)
8. Consider the view that social media has more influence than politicians. (Cambridge 2019)
9. Does violence in the visual media portray reality or encourage the unacceptable? (Cambridge 2019)
10. Is regulation of the press desirable? (Cambridge 2017)
11. 'The quality of written language is being destroyed by social media.' What is your view? (Cambridge 2017)
12. Any adaptation of a novel for film, television or the theatre is never as effective as the original.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2016)
13. Consider the argument that the main purpose of television should be to educate rather than simply to entertain. (Cambridge 2015)
14. Do films offer anything more than an escape from reality? (Cambridge 2014)
15. In the digital age do newspapers still have a role in your society? (Cambridge 2011)
16. 'The book has no place in modern society.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2010)

Raffles Institution
1. Consider the role of social media in shaping political opinion. (RI 2023 Y6 Prelims)
2. 'We should not be afraid of social media.' Do you agree? (RI 2023 Y5 Common Test)
3. 'We can no longer rely on the press for the truth.' Do you agree with this view? (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. Examine the view that having a social media presence is a necessary evil today. (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
5. 'In today's digital age, freedom of expression works better in theory than in practice.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2022 Y6 Common Test)
6. 'State censorship of the media is no longer necessary today.' What is your view? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
7. Is there a place for social media beyond entertainment? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
8. To what extent has the media hindered scientific progress? (RI 2022 Y6 Prelims)
9. 'Advertisements on traditional media no longer have a place in society today.' Comment. (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
10. 'Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.' Do you agree? (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
11. Consider the view that comics offer nothing more than entertainment. (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
12. 'It is harder than ever to be a journalist today.' Comment. (RI 2021 Y6 Common Test)
13. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)

14. 'Social media disconnects more than it connects.' Discuss. (RI 2021 Y5 Common Essay Assignment)
15. 'Traditional media has lost its place in today's society.' Discuss. (RI 2021 Y5 Common Essay Assignment)
16. To what extent do you agree that the internet has made it difficult for us to care about anything for long? (RI 2020 Y6 Prelim)
17. 'Freedom of speech is key to building a strong democracy.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)
18. Assess the view that online interactions carry more risk than reward. (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)
19. 'There should be more regulation of advertising in society today.' Do you agree? (RI 2020 Y6 Timed Practice)
20. 'We can never rely on social media to convey the truth.' Do you agree? (RI 2020 Y6 Timed Practice)
21. 'Social media has made the world a more dangerous place.' Discuss. (RI 2020 Y5 Timed Practice)
22. 'Now more than ever, government regulation of the media is needed.' How far do you agree? (RI 2020 Y5 Timed Practice)
23. 'There should be further limits placed on advertising.' Discuss. (RI 2020 Y5 Promo)
24. Evaluate the claim that social media generate attention, but rarely accomplish anything meaningful. (RI 2019 Y6 CT2)
25. 'Social media has caused much damage to societies today.' Discuss. (RI 2019 Y5 Promo)
26. Do printed books still have value when online materials are so readily available? (RI 2019 Y5 Promo)
27. 'The cost of quitting social media is too high.' Discuss. (RI 2018 Y6 Prelim)
28. 'New media has made us more superficial than before.' Do you agree? (RI 2018 Y5 Promo)
29. 'Traditional media has lost its place in today's society.' Discuss. (RI 2018 Y5 CT)
30. Are newspapers still relevant in the digital age? (RI 2017 Y5 CT)
31. 'Social media disconnects more than it connects.' Discuss. (RI 2017 Y5 CT)
32. 'Media regulation is needed now more than ever.' Discuss. (RI 2017 Y5 Promo)
33. 'Video games do much more than entertain.' How far is this true today? (RI 2017 Y6 CT1)
34. To what extent can we rely on the media to be truthful in today's world? (RI 2017 Y6 CT2)
35. 'All news is fiction.' Comment. (RI 2016 Y5 CT)
36. 'Social media divides rather than unites.' Comment. (RI 2016 Y5 Promo)
37. How far is it possible for the press to remain objective today? (RI 2016 Y6 CT1)
38. To what extent has the Internet led to a narrowing rather than a broadening of perspectives? (RI 2016 Y6 CT2)
39. Consider the view that films should educate, rather than simply entertain. (RI 2016 Y6 Prelim)
40. 'The media needs to exercise more responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2015 Y5 CT)
41. With the rise of new media, censorship is needed now more than ever. Do you agree? (RI 2015 Y6 CT2)
42. In the digital age, do newspapers still have a role in society? (RI 2015 Y6 Prelim)
43. 'There is no such thing as privacy today.' Comment. (RI 2014 Y5 CT1)
44. 'The media is to blame for gender inequalities.' Do you agree? (RI 2014 Y5 CT1)
45. Is there any value in horror films and books? (RI 2014 Y6 CT1)
46. How far is the media responsible for promoting democracy in your society? (RI 2014 Y6 CT1)
47. To what extent has new media made us poor communicators? (RI 2014 Y6 CT2)
48. To what extent have people given up their freedom for comfort? (RI 2014 Y6 Prelim)
49. 'Censorship is both harmful and futile in today's society.' Comment. (RI 2014 Y6 Prelim)
50. To what extent do advertisements have a negative effect on society? (RI 2013 Y6 Prelims)
51. 'Public campaigns are rarely effective.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2013 Y6 CT2)

52. Assess the impact of foreign films or foreign TV programmes on the culture of your society. (RI 2013 Y6 CT1)
53. Are bookstores still relevant in today's world? (RI 2013 Y5 Promo)
54. 'With the emergence of new media, there is a greater need for censorship.' How true is this of your society? (RI 2013 Y5 Promo)
55. To what extent is social media a useful platform for change? (RI 2013 Y5 CT)
56. 'We should have the freedom to read and watch what we like.' Comment. (RI 2013 Y5 CT)
57. 'Advertising reflects the values of society but does not influence them.'(David Ogilvy) What are your views? (RI 2012 Y6 Prelim)
58. Discuss the impact of new media on social cohesion in your society. (RI 2012 Y6 Prelim)
59. 'Privacy is dead, thanks to new media.' To what extent do you think this is detrimental to modern society? (RI 2012 Y6 CT1)
60. To what extent are young people in your society slaves to the mass media? (RI 2012 Y5 Promo)
61. 'New media is a new evil.' Discuss. (RI 2012 Y5 CT)
62. 'Advertisements truly reflect what a society desires.' Do you agree? (RI 2011 Y6 Prelims)
63. To what extent has new media changed the face of human interaction? (RI 2011 Y6 Prelims)
64. To what extent do you agree that the media has been a liberating force? (RI 2011 Y6 CT2)
65. To what extent does the media create mediocrity? (RI 2011 Y6 CT1)
66. Do you agree that the mass media should pursue responsibility and not profit? (RI 2011 Y5 Promos)
67. 'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2011 Y5 CT)
68. Is there still a place for public libraries in your society? (RI 2010 Y6 Prelims)
69. 'The media works best when it gives the masses exactly what they want.' Discuss. (RI 2010 Y6 Prelims)
70. 'The media does not require more freedom; rather it needs to exercise more responsibility.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? (RI 2010 Y6 CT2)
71. 'Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions.' Discuss this with reference to your society. (RI 2010 Y6 CT2)
72. Should nation-building be on the media's agenda? Discuss this with reference to your country. (RI 2010 Y6 CT1)
73. 'Whoever controls the media controls the world.' To what extent do you agree? (RI 2010 Y5 Promos)
74. 'Pop culture is all about appearance.' Is this a fair comment? (RI 2010 Y5 Promos)
75. 'New media has made us more self-absorbed than ever before.' Comment. (RI 2010 Y5 CT)
76. Should the arts ever be censored? (RI 2010 Y5 CT)

Reading 1: Understanding the mass media – Key definitions   **EU1 & 5**

This reading will help you:
- Define key terms such as "mass" / "old" vs "new" / "mainstream" vs "non-mainstream" / "social" vs "new" media
- Examine the validity of some beliefs that you may have about the media
- More critically evaluate some key issues associated with the media, such as the role and responsibilities of the media

1a) What *is* the "mass media"?

The "mass media" refers to communication that is intended to reach a large group, or groups, of people (i.e. the general public). This communication can be in written, spoken or broadcast form, and it is enabled by technology that can take both analog and digital forms. The most common mass media platforms are newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.

1b) "Old" vs "New"

5   Descriptions about new media are often contrasted against what is seen as 'old media', including media such as newspapers, TV, radio, magazines, hardcopy books, 'landline' phones, and movies in the cinema. The hype around new media suggests that 'old media' are becoming increasingly less relevant, as users have begun to ignore or change what were seen as everyday practices – reading the daily paper in paper form, watching commercial television, using the family phone to call a friend.

10   However, as these are media that still are very much present with us today and are also being integrated into forms of new and social media, it is perhaps better to refer to them as **"traditional media"**.

1c) *Distribution* makes the difference

Traditional media were and are **analog** forms of communication and require relatively complex forms of distribution. For example, the distribution process for a traditional newspaper (e.g. moving from

15   the printing press to the delivery trucks to the local distributors) is a relatively **resource-intensive** process. And this is all for a product that remains the same and **cannot be changed** after being printed. The distribution for radio is not too different, with transmission towers sending out content at one particular time with the potential that many people or no one is listening to it at all.

New media changes the distribution process. Forms of new media are necessarily digital, with

20   communication broken up into **digital bits and bytes** and distributed through the internet, mobile phones, digital receivers, etc. This has drastically **reduced costs** for communication and the **time frame** for receiving the communication, as well as allowing the potential for **personalization**. It has created

significant problems for traditional media in terms of its audience and revenue, and all of these traditional forms are often desperately trying to catch up with and make use of new media.

1d) Is new media "better"?

25   In the process of making information and communication digital, new forms of media have made the ability to store, share and work with information **easier**. Computers have of course played an essential role in this, and it is the transition to technologies focused on use by the **consumer** (as opposed to the original use of computers at workplaces, for instance) that is a crucial element in new media.

30   These technologies are (relatively) affordable and simple to use, making the transmission of information and communicating with friends, family and colleagues easy, fast, and reliable. People now have the ability to **share** and **distribute** a lot of information about themselves and their life, including **personal** information data and the music they listen to, videos of their friends to pictures of their cat, ideas they have and plans they are making, preferences for food, people, and music and places that they have been and are going.

35   What's important is to see that new media is a concept that incorporates all the technological devices and programs that have made this change to **digital** information and distribution. It includes Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, but it is also about e-books and downloading movies and paying your concert ticket on-line and using Bluetooth to swap photos and having your own website, things that may not necessarily be 'social' at the outset.

1e) "Mainstream" media

40   Do not confuse "old" media (i.e. media in analog form) with "mainstream" media. Mainstream media refer to media channels provided by national or global networks that are run by established and relatively big corporations (e.g. BBC [UK]; CBS [US]; Singapore Press Holdings), typically operating with a legal licence. Such corporations tend to have a clear, hierarchical management structure and a large employee base (e.g. of journalists, marketing professionals, human resource departments).

45   And far from using only "old" media, today's mainstream media giants typically leverage on both "old" and "new" media platforms to deliver the news, provide advertising channels, etc. These companies continue to thrive by strategically using both media forms, often **symbiotically**. For example, traditional newspaper/TV/radio channels can provide key information and drive readership/viewership to their online counterparts for additional content or for "interactive" feedback
50   from their audience – i.e. to "continue the story" online, as it were. Conversely, online posts by the public can lead mainstream media reporters to the "next big story" to be carried in the headlines of the next day's traditional print/TV/radio news coverage. **It is <u>not</u> a zero-sum game.**

For discussion/class activity:
Based on what you've read so far, come up with a "media model" that includes the key components that are needed for <u>communication</u> (a key function of media) to take place.

- How do these components differ between "traditional" and "new" media models?
- Do these differences necessarily make new media "better"? In what ways might new media be problematic? Explain the difference between traditional and new media in terms of gatekeeping

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2a) Social media: Subset of new media

"Social media" are forms of new media, but ***not all forms of new media are social media***. Of course, social media are part of the "digitised sharing" of information – arguably the biggest and most
55 influential part, in many ways – but still just a part.

While new media allows for sharing, the development of social media and its interactive components has made the ability to comment, respond, share, critique, change and add to information possible on a broad scale. It is the increased visibility of interaction, with largely unfiltered peer-to-peer communication that **cannot be easily controlled**, that is central to social media.

60 Social media is necessarily **interactive**, focused on **social connections**. By this definition, a static website that only sends information out and does not allow for responses may be a form of new media, but is not a form of social media. In contrast, a blog that can be commented on and shared with others *is* a form of social media.

Still, the distinction between new media and social media is not always very sharp. The fact that
65 someone can take a picture with a camera on their mobile phone, and that this photo can be edited and put on a website, is a clear form of using new media. When the photo is put on Flickr or Facebook, it is now a part of social media. The two are clearly interlinked, and more and more new media devices and programs have a more social character.

2b) Social media – Are organisations losing control?

If the two are so interconnected, why make this distinction? The reason is that the distinction can be
70 especially important for the strategic practices of organisations (which include businesses, even governments). The 'social' aspect of social media makes the intentions an organization had for information **more difficult to control** and may require **increasing attention and work**.

Proximity marketing, for instance – that is using geolocation services to market to consumers near one of your stores – uses new media. The company has significant control over who gets that message and
75 when (and obviously where). In contrast, attempting to create a viral marketing campaign by making a humorous or clever YouTube video that is passed on from friend to friend is much **less predictable**. Plus it is easily subject to **misinterpretation** or creating a **negative image** for the company. Similarly, using Twitter for customer care makes these practices **far more public** than 'traditional' responses to complaint letters or even e-mail. To put it simply, using social media allows for some new and exciting
80 possibilities, but it also limits the control an organization has over its own practices – including how and when and where its message and information is distributed. These become subject to a different set of 'socio-technical' factors that are bound up in the systems and practices that surround social media.

Adapted excerpts from "New media and social media – What's the difference?" by Jason Pridmore, Annelies Falk, Isolde Sprenkels [http://www.academia.edu/1122278/New_media_and_social_media_-_whats_the_difference_v_2.0]

For discussion: Class/group work:
* Do you agree that social media causes organisations to lose control? Can you think of situations where organisations can use/have used social media to their benefit?
* To what extent can social media empower the individual? What issues might there be in such empowerment? – You can focus on one of these aspects: *(1) Social activism; (2) Political engagement; (3) Learning/Education; (4) Consumer decisions; (5) Leisure activities*

Reading 2: Understanding the mass media – The 5 Functions   EU1, 3, 4 & 5

(Adapted from "The Dynamics of Mass Communication: Media in the Digital Age" by Dominick, J. R., 2009, Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education)

This reading will help to:
- Introduce the key roles that the media plays in our lives
- Examine some implications & issues that arise from the media playing these roles through the lens of responsibility and accountability, power, and trust.
- Provide examples to illustrate each function discussed

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1) Surveillance

Surveillance refers to the news and information role of the media. Media serve as the "eyes and ears" for those seeking to find out what is going on around them, not just locally but globally. To this end, reliable media platforms aim to offer information that is authentic and timely.

Instrumental surveillance   beware surveillance

5   The surveillance function can be divided further into two main types. Warning, or **beware surveillance**, occurs when the media inform us about threats from natural disasters, depressed economic conditions, increasing inflation, or military attack. These warnings can be about immediate threats (a television station interrupts programming to broadcast a tornado warning), or they can be about long-term or chronic threats (a newspaper runs a series about air pollution or unemployment).

eg. earthquake warning systems, public health alerts, crime reports

There is, however, much information that is not particularly threatening to society that people might
10   like to know about. **Instrumental surveillance** has to do with the transmission of information that is useful and helpful in everyday life. News about films playing at the local theatres, stock market prices, new products, fashion ideas, recipes, and teen fads are examples of instrumental surveillance.

The fact that certain individuals or issues receive media attention means that they achieve a certain amount of prominence. Sociologists call this process **status conferral**. At the basis of this phenomenon
15   is a rather circular belief that audiences seem to endorse: If you *really* matter, you will be at the focus of mass media attention, and if you are the focus of media attention, then you *really* matter. Knowing this fact, many individuals and groups go to extreme measures to get media coverage for themselves and their causes so that this status conferral effect will occur. Parades, demonstrations, publicity stunts, and outlandish behaviour are commonly employed to capture airtime or column inches.

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2) Interpretation

20   Closely allied with the surveillance function is the interpretation function. The mass media do not supply just facts and data but also provide information on the **ultimate meaning and significance** of events.

One form of interpretation is so obvious that many people overlook it. Media organisations **select** those events that are to be given time or space and **decide how much prominence** they are to be
25   given. Stories that are ultimately featured have been judged by the various gatekeepers involved to be more important than those that did not make it.

Another example of this function can be found on the **editorial pages** of a newspaper. Interpretation, comment, and opinion are provided for the reader as an added perspective on the news stories carried on other pages. A newspaper might even endorse one candidate for public office over another,

30   thereby indicating that, at least in the paper's opinion, the available information indicates that this individual is more qualified than the other.

Interpretation is not confined to editorials. Articles that **analyse the causes** of an event or that **discuss the implications** of government policy are also examples of the interpretation function. Why is the price of gasoline going up? What impact will a prolonged dry spell have on food prices? News analysis,

35   commentaries, editorials, "opinion" columns and even editorial cartoons are some examples of interpretative contents. These are prepared by those journalists who have a vast knowledge of background information and strong analytical ability. The media also often feature the opinions of experts in specific fields (e.g. global warming, terrorism).

Some interpretation can be less obvious. Critics are employed by the various media to rate motion

40   pictures, plays, books, and records. Restaurants, cars, buildings, and even religious services are reviewed by some newspapers and magazines. One entire magazine, *Consumer Reports*, is devoted to analysis and evaluation of a wide range of general products. Political "spin doctors" try to frame the way media cover news events in a way that is positive for their clients. Many blogs interpret news events in line with their own political philosophy.

45   The interpretation function can also be found in media content that at first glance might appear to be purely entertainment. The comic strip *Bloom County* and TV shows such as *House of Cards* reflect a certain viewpoint about American politics. Shows featuring Martha Stewart send a message about what constitutes the "good life".

3) Linkage

The mass media are able to **join different elements of society that are not directly connected**. For

50   example, mass advertising attempts to link the needs of buyers with the products of sellers. Legislators in Washington may try to keep in touch with constituents' feelings by reading their hometown papers. Voters, in turn, learn about the doings of their elected officials through newspapers, television, radio, and websites. Telethons that raise money for the treatment of certain diseases are another example of this linkage function. The needs of those suffering from the disease are matched with the desires

55   of others who wish to see the problem eliminated.

Another type of linkage occurs when **geographically-separated groups that share a common interest are joined** by the media. Publicity about the sickness known as Gulf War syndrome linked those who claimed to be suffering from the disease, enabling them to form a coalition that eventually prompted government hearings on the issue. The Comcast Cable Company offers a service called "Dating on

60   Demand" that allows subscribers to watch five-minute video profiles of potential dates. If a person sees someone interesting, he or she can contact the individual for a rendezvous.

The best examples of linkage, however, are on the Internet. The online auction site eBay lets a person who wants to sell a bronze cremation urn link up with potential buyers across the world. WebMD offers subscribers various "communities" where they can discuss their problems with others who have

65   similar maladies. Craigslist.org lets users find jobs, roommates, dog Walkers, and motorcycles for sale. Match.com boasts that it "gets singles connected to the millions of romantic possibilities out there, and often, to one very special someone". After a person finds that special someone, she or he can check out thenest.com, a blog where newlyweds share their experiences about the ups and downs of married life.

radicalisation & extremists

70   On the other hand, this linkage function may have **harmful consequences**. The rise of online hate is a particularly troubling one. Facebook had to remove nearly 3 million pieces of hate speech between

July and September 2018 – a 15 percent increase from the start of that year. In September 2018 alone, YouTube had to remove 25,000 videos that broke its rules against harassment, cyberbullying, and abusive content. In the words of The Washington Post, which published these figures, online hate has

75 "transformed the Internet's great power to connect into a weapon"[1]. Terrorists can use these sites to spread hate propaganda and to recruit new members. Some websites provide password-protected online discussion groups in which veteran terrorists can persuade new members to join their cause.

4) Socialisation

Socialisation is the **transmission of values**, a subtle but nonetheless important function of the mass media. It refers to the ways an individual comes to adopt the behaviour and values of a group. The

80 mass media portray our society, and by watching, listening, and reading, we learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important.

Consider the images of an important but familiar concept as portrayed in the media: motherhood. The next time you watch television or thumb through a magazine, pay close attention to the way mothers and children are presented. Mass media mommies are usually clean, pretty, cheerful, and affectionate.

85 The Clairol company sponsored an ad campaign that featured the "Clairol Mother," an attractive and glamorous female who never let raising a child interfere with maintaining her hair. When they interact with their children, media mothers tend to be positive, warm, and devoted to their children. Consider these media mommies drawn from TV: Maureen Robinson (*Lost In Space*), Rainbow Johnson (*Black-ish*), Rebecca "Beth" Pearson (*This Is Us*), Kristina Braverman (*Parenthood*), and Lorelei Gilmore

90 (*Gilmore Girls*).

These examples show that the media portray motherhood and child rearing as activities that have a positive value for society. Individuals who are exposed to these portrayals are likely to grow up and accept this value. Thus, a social value is transmitted from one generation to another.

Sometimes the media consciously try to instil values and behaviour in the audience. Many newspapers

95 report whether accident victims were wearing seat belts at the time of impact. In times of a public health crisis, news reports reiterate practices that one should adopt to minimise risk to oneself and others. There are probably countless other examples of values and behaviour that are, in part at least, socialised through the media.

⚹ May encourage status quo (consequence)

What are the **consequences** of having the mass media serve as agents of socialisation? At one level,

100 value transmission via the mass media helps stabilise society. Common values and experiences are passed down to all members, thereby creating common bonds among them. On the other hand, values and cultural information are selected by large organisations that may encourage the status quo. For example, the "baby industry" in this country is a multimillion-dollar one. This industry advertises heavily in the media; it is not surprising, then, that motherhood is depicted in such an attractive light.

105 To show mothers as harried, exhausted, overworked, and frazzled would not help maintain this profitable arrangement.

The mass media can also transmit values by **enforcing social norms**. In 2018, Walt Disney Studios dropped filmmaker James Gunn from its *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise following a series of tweets joking about topics such as paedophilia, AIDS, and the Holocaust. That same year, actress Roseanne

110 Barr had her namesake show cancelled by ABC after a tweet of hers likened a black woman who was a former Obama administration advisor to an ape.

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[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/2018-was-the-year-of-online-hate-meet-the-people-whose-lives-it-changed/2018/12/28/95ac0558-f7dd-11e8-8c9a-860ce2a8148f_story.html

5) Entertainment

Another obvious media function is that of entertainment. Motion pictures and sound recordings are devoted primarily to entertainment. Even though most of a newspaper focuses on the events of the day, comics, puzzles, horoscopes, games, advice, gossip, humour, and general entertainment features
115 usually account for around 12 percent of the content. (If we considered sports news as entertainment, that would add another 14 percent to this figure.) Television is primarily devoted to entertainment, with about three-quarters of a typical broadcast day falling into this category. The entertainment content of radio varies widely according to station format. Some stations may program 100 percent news, while others may schedule almost none. In like manner, some magazines may have little
120 entertainment content (*Forbes*), while others are almost entirely devoted to it (*Entertainment Weekly*). Even those magazines that are concerned primarily with news – *Time* and *Newsweek*, for example – usually mix some entertainment features with their usual reporting.

The scope of mass media entertainment is awesome. The comic strip *Doonesbury* is read by more than 15 million people per day. Adele's *25* album sold over 9 million copies between 2015 and 2016. In
125 2019, *Avengers: Endgame* took in a record-breaking US$1.2 billion in global ticket sales on its opening run, while about 98.2 million people watched the Super Bowl. In the final quarter of 2019, streaming giant Netflix had over 167 million subscribers worldwide, with 61 million in the US alone.

The emergence of mobile media has also amplified the entertainment function of the media. Travellers in airport terminals can watch movies on their laptops and mobile phones while they wait.
130 Commuters can play video games on handheld devices while they travel. Specially-equipped vehicles let children watch DVDs as they go on family trips.

What are the consequences of having this task now taken over by mass communication? Clearly, the media can make entertainment available to a large number of people at relatively little cost. On the other hand, entertainment that is carried by the mass media must appeal to a mass audience. The
135 ultimate result of this state of affairs is that media content is designed to appeal to the **lowest common denominator of taste**. → appeals to everyone eg. barbie

One other consequence of the widespread use of media for entertainment is that it is now quite easy to **sit back and let others entertain you**. Instead of playing baseball, people might simply watch it on TV. Instead of learning to play the guitar, an adolescent might decide to watch or listen to a recording
140 of someone else playing the guitar. Critics have charged that the mass media will turn Americans into a nation of watchers and listeners instead of doers.

For discussion/reflection:
- **Summarise**: Identify the key points of each media function.
- **Illustrate**: Provide examples of local media platforms that fulfil each function.
- **Evaluate**: Consider (i) whether certain forms of media fulfil specific functions better than others (it's best to consider each function separately), and (ii) what implications this might have.
- What responsibilities/obligations towards society do the authorities as well as media organisations have when it comes to these media functions?

Reading 3: Evaluating the mass media – Asking 5 Critical Questions   EU1-5
(Adapted from "Five Key Questions Form Foundation for Media Inquiry" by the Center for Media Literacy)

This reading will help to:
- Introduce the foundational framework for critical evaluation of mass media messages and understand these media messages through the conceptual lens of power
- Reiterate the importance of developing critical media literacy
- Articulate links between the 5 Critical Questions & the 5 Functions of Mass Media (Reading 2)

Because the mass media are so pervasive and influential in our lives, it is important that we understand HOW and WHY the mass media work in the way they do (building on the "WHAT it does" covered in Reading 2).

5   To help develop this media literacy, this **5 Key Questions/5 Core Concepts** framework can be used to guide students in critically evaluating and assessing the mass media and what it does:

Key Question #1: Who created this media message? *(Focus: Authorship)*
Core Concept #1: All media messages are constructed.

Question/Concept #1 opens up two fundamental insights about the *manufactured* nature of all media.

The first is ***constructedness***. This is the simple but profound understanding that all mass media messages, texts and products are not "natural", but rather are **carefully manufactured cultural**
10   **products**. They create an emotional experience that looks like "reality", but of course is not. Whether we are watching a YouTube video, the nightly news, passing a billboard on the street or reading a political campaign flyer, or indeed a "reality TV show", the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably many people), images were captured and edited, and a creative team with many talents put it all together.

15   The second is ***choice***. In the process of constructing media messages, the authors/creators/producers **select** what is included (and excluded) – they **decide** what to **focus** on and how to **frame** the "reality" that we see. If some words are spoken, others are edited out; if one picture is selected, dozens may have been rejected; if an ending to a story is written one way, other endings may not have been explored. However, as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or endings that
20   were rejected, only what was chosen to be shown to us. The result is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "normal" for the rest of us: often, we believe what is shown to us, uncritically accepting it as "truth".

Links to MEDIA FUNCTIONS, e.g.:
- *Surveillance: Who & how reliable is the source of the information? Is the information complete?*
- *Interpretation: Why are specific messages highlighted? Whose opinion is being expressed?*
- *Socialisation: Is the social value that is being transmitted/encouraged neutral/objective?*
- *Entertainment: How much artistic licence has been taken (e.g. in movies & TV shows about real persons or historical events)?*

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? *(Focus: Format)*
Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Question/Concept #2 prompts us to consider the *way* a media message is constructed – the **creative components** used in putting it together: words, music, colour, camera angle, persons featured, etc.
25   **"What do you notice…?"** is one of the most important questions to ask in sharpening one's media literacy.

Because so much of today's communications, including the news, comes to us **visually**, it is critical that students learn the basics of visual communication: lighting, composition, camera angle, editing, use of props, body language, symbols, etc. – and how the use of these techniques influences the various
30   meanings we can take away from a message. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media, especially visual language, not only helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation but also increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media as a constructed "text".

Links to MEDIA FUNCTIONS, e.g.:   → subtitle   → laughingsound
- *Surveillance: Why are specific visuals and/or sound used to supplement the information?*
- *Interpretation: Why was that particular picture or piece of music selected to accompany the media message? How did that camera angle or choice of interviewee impact the message?*
- *Linkage: Are specific images or a particular "lingo" being used to promote or strengthen connection between the groups being "linked"?*
- *Socialisation: How are our emotions being engaged to encourage us to adopt a certain behaviour or support a certain value?*   ↳ funny allows us to be engaged
- *Entertainment: What impact does editing have on "reality" TV shows?*

Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently from me?
(Focus: Audience)
Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same media message differently.

Question/Concept #3 focuses on the *interpretation* of media messages by the audience/consumer.

The key idea is that our **differences** influence our **various** interpretations of media messages. Even
35   though two persons may be exposed to the same constructed message by the same creator, they do not necessarily "see" the same movie or "hear" the same song on the radio. Each audience member brings to each media encounter a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which create unique interpretations. A World War II veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* than a younger person - resulting in a
40   different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight.

This also underlines that media consumers are **not passive** audiences – we are constantly trying to **make sense** of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we and others are experiencing around us, the more prepared we are to **evaluate** the message. And recognising that there can be **multiple interpretations** of the "same" media message (due to variations in factors such
45   as age, gender, race or religion) can build respect for **different cultures** and appreciation for **minority opinions**, a critical skill in an increasingly multicultural world.

A secondary idea is that our **similarities** can create **common** understandings. This is important in helping us understand how media makers "target" different segments of the population in order to influence their opinion or, more typically, to sell them something. (Discussed further in *Key Question/Core Concept #5*.)

> ***Links to MEDIA FUNCTIONS, e.g.:***
> - *Interpretation/Socialisation: Why might someone else be upset or offended by a view/value promoted in the media that I find acceptable or neutral?*
> - *Linkage: In what ways does the increased interconnectedness offered by new media help or hinder?*
> - *Entertainment: Is it justifiable to use stereotypes in entertainment that is clearly meant to be humorous?*

> Key Question #4: What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? *(Focus: Content)*
> ***Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view.***

Question/Concept #4 underlines that there are *no value-free* media and never will be. All media carry subtle (even overt, sometimes) messages about who and what is important.

Because all media messages are constructed, with conscious choices made by the creators (Question/Concept #1), it follows that these choices **reflect** the values, attitudes and points of view of the ones doing the constructing. Even the news has embedded values in the decisions made about what stories go first, how long they are, what kinds of pictures are chosen, and so on.

To be fair, it is impossible to create a message without embedded values or viewpoints – even for respectable media producers who strive for fairness and balance between various ideas and viewpoints.

What we need to be sensitive to is when media makers are careless and turn a generalisation (a flexible observation) into a stereotype or "truth" (a rigid conclusion). We also need to know how to locate **alternative sources** of both news and entertainment and to be able to evaluate the alternatives as well for *their* own embedded values.

We should also ask if the values of mainstream media typically **reinforce/affirm the existing social system**. This may lead to two problems: (1) Less popular or new ideas can have a hard time getting aired, especially if they challenge long-standing assumptions or commonly-accepted beliefs; (2) Unless challenged, old assumptions can create and perpetuate stereotypes.

> ***Links to MEDIA FUNCTIONS, e.g.:***
> - *Surveillance: Can any "information" presented be completely objective? And if it cannot, is this always a problem?*
> - *Interpretation: Whose perspective is the message being presented from?*
> - *Socialisation: Do the viewpoints presented in a mainstream media message support the status quo to the disadvantage of minority groups? Are unorthodox viewpoints presented by alternative media sources intended to provide balance/broader perspectives or just to shock/destabilise?*
> - *Linkage: Does new media always offer us a better range of representation?*

> *Entertainment: Do some cultures' norms & values dominate popular entertainment?* <u>Key Question #5:</u>
> <u>Why is this message being sent / communicated?</u> *(Focus: Purpose)*
>
> *Core Concept #5:* **Most media messages and products help the author/creator/organisation gain**
> **profit and/or power**

Question/Concept #5 prompts us to look beyond the basic content motives (e.g. informing, entertaining) to examine how media messages may be **influenced** by money, ideology, or even ego
70   (of the media producers).

Much of the world's media were developed as money making enterprises and continue to operate today as **commercial businesses**. Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching (and even online platforms such as YouTube). Indeed, it might be argued that the real purpose of TV
75   programmes or magazine articles is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or publisher can sell time or space to sponsors to advertise products.

While commercially-sponsored-/-influenced entertainment may be tolerable to most people, of greater concern is whether media owners and institutions have **influence over the news and views** presented via their media channels. In the US, Fox News has been alleged to have Republican bias in
80   its news coverage; in the UK, major newspapers are divided along political lines (e.g. The Guardian and The Daily Mirror lean left towards Labour sentiments, while The Financial Times and The Daily Telegraph are more pro-Conservative). We therefore need to be alert to the motives of both ideological "spin" and commercial profitability.

And the issue message motivation is not confined to large, mainstream media companies. Since the
85   Internet became an international platform, groups and organisations – even individuals – have **ready access to powerful tools that can persuade** others to a particular point of view, whether positive or negative. Indeed, the difficulty in gatekeeping the Internet means that the number of possible motives behind media messages has increased exponentially. It is imperative that today's media user be able to recognise propaganda, interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources, and distinguish legitimate
90   websites from bogus, hate or hoax websites.

> ***Links to MEDIA FUNCTIONS, e.g.:***
> * *Surveillance: How free or reliable is a country's press in providing information to the public?*
>   *Interpretation: What ideologies underpin the viewpoints of "alternative" news sources?*
> * *Linkage: In providing a platform for advertisers & consumers to connect, how may the quality or reliability of the media have been compromised?*
> * *Entertainment: Are big movie franchises just a way to sell more merchandise?*

> **For Class Activity/discussion:**
> * Providing examples
> Divide the 5 key questions/core concepts among the class. Each group brainstorms / does research for <u>EXAMPLES</u> to support its respective question/concept
> * Critiquing Ads
> Assign students or groups to examine advertisements critically by applying as many of the 5 Key Questions / Core Concepts as possible. (Ideally, the ads should be from a range of media: print newspapers, print magazines, TV, radio, etc.). Each student/group will take turns to present, with those not presenting offering critique/comment.

Reading 4: Media and gender stereotyping   EU 3 & 4

This reading will help you to:
- Better understand the phenomenon and social *implications* of stereotyping
- Examine the media's *role in influencing* the gender stereotypes that we may hold and evaluate the power that the media holds
- More critically evaluate the *impact* that such influence may have and whether there is evidence of overreach by these media entities

4a. Stereotyping and its effects

A stereotype is a belief about a category/group of people that is over-generalised, inaccurate, and resistant to change. This belief is usually a negative one, resulting in a biased perception (prejudice) that can lead to undesirable behaviour (discrimination) towards all persons of that group.

5   For example, if one holds the stereotype that "all students of ABC school are arrogant" (prejudice), one may make rude online comments about a student of that school or refuse to offer him assistance, say, when he injures himself in public.

In the worst scenarios, holding a stereotype of a certain social group may lead to unfair treatment of a certain group, warped notions and expectations of persons belonging to that group, self-esteem issues among those who belong in that group, and even acts of hatred and violence against them.
10 Such behaviour could have ripple effects on factors such as personal safety, social mobility, and even government policy that may impact a nation's socio-economic and political stability, which in turn could have wider global repercussions.

It is therefore important to consider where we may derive stereotyped notions from, and research has shown that the mass media can be one powerful source of introducing and reinforcing skewed
15 perceptions.

4b. Media (mis)representation of gender
[i] Of women
In both quantity and quality, there is still a long way to go for media representations of women.

In terms of quantity, the media is still a long way from reflecting reality: women represent 49 per cent of humanity while female characters make up only 32 per cent of the main characters on TV, as shown by a broad survey done in 2008 by Maya Götz of the International Central Institute for Youth and
20 Educational Television. The media industry justifies this disparity by arguing that it is easier for girls than boys to identify with characters of the opposite sex. Götz argues that this argument reverses cause and effect, saying that it is the **lack of female characters** on TV that leads to the higher popularity of male characters.

Quality-wise, the media still conform to a stereotyped image of women. Götz's study identifies a
25 number of **gender stereotypes** found around the world. In general, girls and women are motivated by love and romance, appear less independent than boys, and are stereotyped according to their hair colour (blondes, for example, fall into two categories: the "girl next door" or the "blonde b***h"; redheads are nearly always conventionally attractive, thinner than average women in real life, and heavily sexualized (oddly, even as redheads are often portrayed as "tomboys").

30   Magazines are the only medium where girls are over-represented. However, their content is overwhelmingly focused on topics such as appearance, dating, and fashion.

Research indicates that these **mixed messages** from media make it difficult for girls to negotiate the transition to adulthood, with confidence dropping in the pre-teen years as they begin to base their feelings of self-worth more and more heavily on appearance and weight.

35   In a landmark 1998 study, American psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that this happens because of the widening gap between girls' self-images and society's messages about what girls should be like. Likewise, Children Now (a California-based advocacy organisation promoting children's health and education) points out that girls are surrounded by images of female beauty that are **unrealistic and unattainable**. And yet two out of three girls who participated in their national media survey said they

40   "wanted to look like a character on TV." One out of three said they had "changed something about their appearance to resemble that character."

In 2002, researchers at Flinders University in South Australia studied 400 teenagers regarding how they relate to advertising. They found that girls who watched TV commercials featuring underweight models **lost self-confidence** and became **more dissatisfied** with their own bodies. Girls who spent the

45   most time and effort on their appearance suffered the greatest loss in confidence.

The hyper-sexualisation of very young girls, most notably in fashion and advertising, is another disturbing trend, given that these stereotypes make up most of the representations of themselves which girls and women see in the media. The most cursory examination of media confirms that young girls are being bombarded with images of sexuality, often dominated by stereotypical portrayals of

50   women and girls as **powerless, passive victims**. The pressures on girls are exacerbated by the media's increasing tendency to portray very young girls in sexual ways, with the fashion industry being a major driver of this trend.

As these girls become teenagers, many choose to tune out, but others maintain a hungry appetite for these messages. And research has shown that those who continue to consume such media images

55   tend to have the most negative opinion of their gender.

[ii] Of men
Mainstream media representations play a role in reinforcing ideas about what it means to be a "real" man in our society. In most media portrayals, male characters are rewarded for **self-control and the control of others, aggression and violence, financial independence,** and **physical desirability**.

In 1999, Children Now, a California-based organization that examines the impact of media on children

60   and youth, released a report entitled *Boys to Men: Media Messages about Masculinity*. The report observes that:
- The majority of male characters in media are **heterosexual**.
- The media's portrayal of men tends to reinforce men's **social dominance**.
- Male characters are more often associated with the **public sphere** of work, rather than the

65   private sphere of the home, and issues and problems related to work are more significant than personal issues.
- **Non-white** male characters are more likely to experience personal problems and are more likely to use physical aggression or violence to solve those problems.

A more recent study found similar patterns in how male characters were portrayed in children's

70   television around the world: Boys are portrayed as tough, powerful, and either as a loner or leader, while girls were most often shown as depending on boys to lead them and being most interested in romance.

These portrayals are of particular concern when it comes to young boys, who may be more influenced by media images than girls. In the 2008 article "Media and the Make-Believe Worlds of Boys and Girls", Maya Götz and Dafna Lemish note that boys tend to incorporate media content into their own imaginations **wholesale**, "taking it in, assimilating it, and then…dream[ing] themselves into the position of their heroes and experience a story similar to the one in the original medium".

The portrayal and acceptance of men by the media as socially powerful and physically violent serve to **reinforce assumptions** about how men and boys should act in society, how they should treat each other, as well as how they should treat women and children.

4c. Stereotyping of men in advertising

In his analysis of gender in advertising, University of North Texas professor Steve Craig argues that women tend to be presented as "rewards" for men who choose the right product. He contends that these commercials operate at the level of fantasy – presenting idealized portrayals of men and women. When he focused specifically on beer commercials, Craig found that the men were invariably "**virile, slim and white**" (and the women always "eager for male companionship").

University of Kentucky academic Susan Bordo has also analysed gender in advertising, and agrees that men are usually portrayed as virile, muscular and powerful. Their powerful bodies dominate space in the ads. (For women, the focus is on slenderness, dieting, and attaining a feminine ideal; women are always presented as not just thin, but also weak and vulnerable.)

Clearly, just as traditional advertising has for decades sexually objectified women and their bodies, **today's marketing campaigns are objectifying men in the same way**. Research and anecdotal reports from doctors suggest that this new focus on fit and muscled male bodies is causing men the same anxiety and personal insecurity that women have felt for decades.

3d. Stereotyping of women in news coverage

Women professionals and athletes continue to be under-represented in news coverage, and are often stereotypically portrayed when they are included.

[i] Women, News and Politics

Although there has been a steady increase in the number of women professionals over the past 20 years, most mainstream press coverage continues to rely on men as experts in the fields of business, politics and economics. Women in the news are more likely to be featured in stories about **accidents, natural disasters, or domestic violence** than in stories about their professional abilities or expertise.

Women in politics are similarly sidelined. Canadian journalist Jenn Goddu discovered that journalists tend to focus on the domestic aspects of the politically active woman's life (such as "details about the high heels stashed in her bag, her habit of napping in the early evening, and her lack of concern about whether or not she is considered ladylike") rather than her position on the issues.

Quebec political analyst Denis Monière uncovered similar patterns. In analysing late evening newscasts on three national networks, he observed that women's views were solicited mainly in the framework of "average citizens" and rarely as experts, and that political or economic success stories were overwhelmingly masculine. Monière also noted that the number of female politicians interviewed was **disproportionate** to their number in parliament; nor, he noted, was this deficiency in any way compensated for by the depth and quality of coverage.

Inadequate women's coverage seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. In 2006 the Association of Women Journalists (Association des femmes journalistes – AFJ) studied news coverage of women and women's issues in 70 countries. It reported that only 17 per cent of stories quote women; one in 14

115 women was presented as a victim (compared to one in 21 men) and one in five women was shown in the context of her family (compared to one in 16 men).

Professor Caryl Rivers notes that politically active women are often **disparaged and stereotyped** by the media. When Hillary Clinton was still first lady, she was referred to as a "witch" or "witchlike" at least 50 times in the press. Rivers writes: "Male political figures may be called 'mean' and nasty names, but those words don't usually reflect superstition and dread. Did the press ever call Presidents Carter,

120 Reagan, Bush, or Clinton warlocks?"

[ii] Women and Sports
Women athletes are also given short shrift in the media. Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Michael Messner studied sports coverage on three network affiliates in Los Angeles. They report that only nine per cent of airtime was devoted to women's sports, in contrast to the 88 per cent devoted to male athletes. Female athletes fared even worse on ESPN's national sports show *Sports Center*, where they

125 occupied just over two per cent of airtime.

Duncan notes that commentators (97 per cent of whom are men) **use different language** when they talk about female athletes. Where men are described as "big," "strong," "brilliant," "gutsy" and "aggressive", women are more often referred to as "weary", "fatigued", "frustrated", "panicked", "vulnerable" and "choking." Commentators are also twice as likely to call men by their last names only,

130 and three times as likely to call women by their first names only. Duncan argues that this "reduces female athletes to the role of children, while giving adult status to white male athletes".

Media images of women in sports are also very different from the familiar pictures of male athletes in action. Female athletes are increasingly photographed in what Professor Pat Griffin calls "**hypersexualized** poses." Griffin notes: "When it was once enough to feminize women athletes, now it is

135 necessary to sexualize them for men. Instead of hearing, 'I am woman, hear me roar,' we are hearing 'I am hetero-sexy, watch me strip'."

Sources:
- *Media Smarts – Media and Girls @ http://mediasmarts.ca/gender-representation/women-and-girls/media-and-girls*
- *Media Smarts – Men and Masculinity @ http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/gender-representation/men-masculinity]*

For discussion:
- What gender stereotypes or gendered representation have you come across in other popular mainstream media forms (e.g. movies, TV shows, music videos)?
- What other kinds of stereotypes (especially negative ones) does the media perpetuate?
- What kind of *wider impact* (i.e. beyond the personal domain) do/might these stereotypes have on societies? How powerful are these stereotypes in effecting these impacts?

Related RI essay question:
1. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Promo)
2. 'The media is to blame for gender inequalities.' Do you agree? (RI 2014 Y5 CT1)
3. To what extent do advertisements have a negative effect on society? (RI 2013 Y6 Prelims)

Reading 5: Dollars and diversity - Hollywood's inclusive films   EU1-5
Ricardo Lopez | Variety Magazine | 2017 (adapted)

> **This reading will help to:**
> - Introduce the small but growing pool of films featuring diverse casts which may point towards greater on-screen representation
> - Explore the larger socio-cultural and socio-political reasons contributing to this positive trend
> - Understand the additional efforts needed to genuinely alter the entrenched views of major production studios in particular, even as a newfound shift towards racial and gender inclusivity is gradually taking place within the film industry, and how that reflects the wider responsibility of media entities and organisations

In Hollywood's struggle to increase diversity both in front of and behind the camera, 2017 is proof positive that such films can conquer the box office, potentially putting to rest long-held conventions about what kinds of movies are most successful.

5   "Get Out," the social thriller by first-time filmmaker Jordan Peele, featured a black, unknown lead (Daniel Kaluuya) but nonetheless became the most profitable movie of the year, grossing $253 million worldwide on a $4.5 million production budget. Patty Jenkins' "Wonder Woman" represented a triumph for female directors, who for so long have been shut out of helming big-budget superhero action movies. Adored by critics and audiences alike, the film lassoed $822 million globally, prompted a sequel and became a rare cultural milestone likely to inspire and empower a generation of girls for
10   years to come.

"I think we've turned the tide," Peele says in an interview with *Variety*. "It's becoming clear that the country and the world is ready for protagonists and stories and ideas and points of view that haven't been seen before."

As major studios struggle to fend off digital rivals like Netflix and Hulu, the box office performances of
15   these kinds of diverse films provide a blueprint for how studios need to adapt to competition from television, where inclusive representation is greater and the quality of shows has increased dramatically in recent years.

Audiences have shifted to TV in droves, increasing pressure on studios to offer films that reflect the world at large. In that respect, movies have failed year after year, according to nine years of data
20   analysed by USC's Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative, which shows that women and minorities continue to be underrepresented on the big screen. Of more than 39,500 speaking roles across 900 films studied, women made up just 30.5% of those roles. In the top 100 films of 2016, Latinos, who make up roughly half of Los Angeles residents, were represented by just 3% of speaking parts.

25   This absence of diverse voices stands in glaring contrast to the racial makeup of film audiences, raising questions about why — despite high-profile hits like "Hidden Figures" and "Straight Outta Compton" — pictures have largely featured straight white male leads, according to the USC data. By significant margins, Latinos, blacks and Asians represented an outsize and growing share of loyal filmgoers in 2016, according to a recent report from the Motion Picture Assn. of America. Latinos, who make up
30   18% of the U.S. population, accounted for nearly a quarter of frequent moviegoers, defined as those

watching at least one film per month. In comparison, the share of frequent white filmgoers has decreased dramatically, declining from 23.2 million in 2012 to 18.3 million in 2016, a 21% drop.

Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for comScore, says that audiences have the power to demand more-inclusive films. "If you want to take the most absolute cynical view and say that

35 everything in Hollywood is powered by the almighty dollar," he says, "then it still makes sense to have more diverse movies. … If you have groups of people who are really passionate about going to the movie theatre, you don't want to leave them out of the equation." Christy Haubegger, CAA agent and founder of Latina magazine, argues that studios are leaving money on the table by not casting films with true diversity, meaning a film that is not all-white or all of one ethnicity.

40 The agency's Motion Picture Diversity Casting Index, which analysed more than 500 films dating back to 2014, should help dispel at least one myth: that big-budget movies with diverse casts don't perform as well overseas. CAA's analysis shows that of nearly 100 features with budgets larger than $100 million, there is a $120 million difference in cumulative global box office average between films that have diverse casting (those with at least 30% diversity) compared with those that don't.

45 "In this case, when you're making a $100 million-plus bet, it's clearly essential that you find a way to appeal to a diverse, global audience," Haubegger says.

Though progress toward inclusion has been slow, interviews with studio executives, producers, box office analysts, researchers and media entrepreneurs suggest that a groundswell is growing. Diverse storytellers are creating opportunities themselves rather than waiting for them to form. And once a

50 film is made, the importance of the commercial success and profitability of pioneering titles cannot be overstated, in part because moral arguments for improving diversity have so far made only incremental gains. But can diverse films that make bucketloads of cash spur the production of more like-minded movies and close the racial disparities?

"I would love to think we have finally put to rest the notion that films that prominently feature and/or

55 are driven by women and people of colour don't perform well," says former WME partner Charles D. King, who two years ago founded Macro, a media company dedicated to providing opportunities for diverse filmmaking. "Certainly, [films like "Get Out" and others] have shown that not only will these projects be sought after by multicultural audiences but by mainstream audiences as well. We may be nearing a turning point, but we haven't fully reached it yet."

60 "There's a famous quote about being the change you want to see in the world. This is basically what's happening now," King states in an email. "The studios and financiers who recognize this stand to be rewarded handsomely for their efforts."

But USC researchers Stacy L. Smith and Katherine Pieper argue that box office hits alone have done nothing to move the needle toward greater inclusion. "There are successes time and time again, and

65 those rationales don't work," Smith says. "I hate being the naysayer here, but Hollywood loves to engage in adventures in missing the point."

Pieper agrees, adding that while "Hidden Figures" and other films have had a great impact on viewers, "these long strings of success are treated as anomalies and are a drop in the ocean of the status quo."

The success of "Get Out" prompted a stampede by studios offering Peele a first-look deal; he signed

70 with Universal, which had released his film. Among the majors, Universal has the most diverse roster of producers with first-look pacts, according to a *Variety* calculation of such deals through August and confirmed with studios. At Sony, 16% of production pacts are with minority companies. Fox and

Warner stand at 13% and 8%, respectively. Paramount and Disney, which did not respond to a request for confirmation, appear to have no arrangements with minority-owned production companies.

75 Universal last year also signed Eva Longoria to a two-year first-look deal. The "Desperate Housewives" alum turned producer is stepping into a void of content for Latino audiences. Rather than wait for others to write stories and parts for Latinos and women, Longoria decided to bring forth untold stories, tales that are largely unknown to wider audiences. It's similar to what "Hidden Figures" did when it unearthed the previously unknown saga of the black women at NASA who were critical to the success
80 of the country's space program.

"The responsibility I feel is producing with purpose," Longoria says. "Why do I want to put this out in the world? I want our community to see what it can be. If we can put those stories on the big screen, young Latinos and women can look up and aspire to do that or be that."
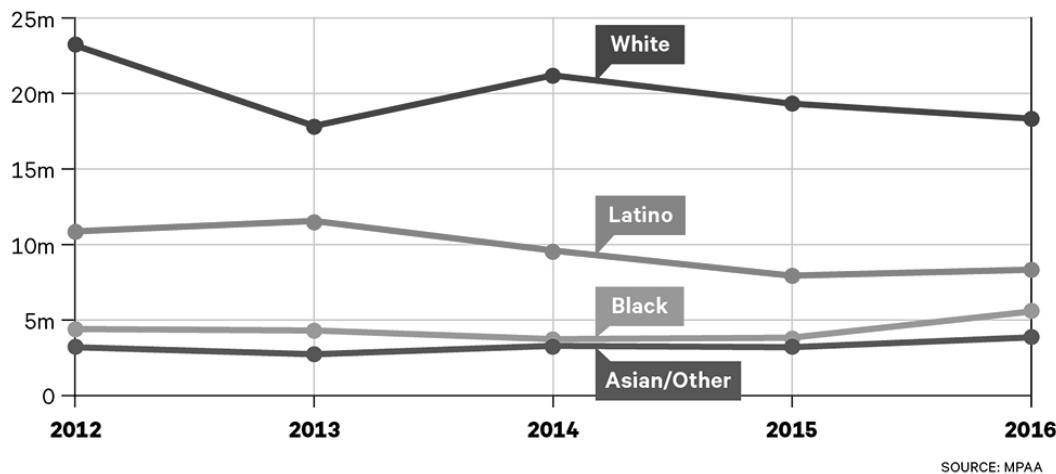
The vanguard of minority filmmakers, Longoria, Peele and others say, will hopefully inspire the next
85 generation of storytellers. Before them, so few role models existed that Peele could only think of two African-American directors he looked up to — Spike Lee and John Singleton. Longoria, who has aspirations to be the next Steven Spielberg or George Clooney, chuckles when she names the two men as role models, implicitly noting the lack of Latinas who have accomplished what she's hoping to do. "I want to be someone who does it all and does it well," she says.

90 Sony Pictures recently signed Antoine Fuqua, director of 2001's "Training Day," starring Washington, to make a sequel to "The Equalizer," also a collaboration between the two. "Antoine clearly has a sense of making a cool movie for the whole world and also has an understanding of domestic, diverse audiences," says Columbia Pictures president Sanford Panitch.

Sony's reboot of "Spider-Man," produced by Marvel Studios, became one of the highest-grossing films
95 of the year and earned praise for bringing a novel — and diverse — take to its casting. "Spider-Man: Homecoming," which featured Zendaya and Donald Glover, grossed nearly $880 million worldwide, and its opening weekend audience was more than half minority, according to post-tracking data. "Diversity of gender and race is simply reflective of the world we live in, and I think movies, or content in general, require authenticity," Panitch says.

Frequent Moviegoers by Ethnicity

Among those who attend movies often, Latinos, blacks and Asians gained last year as whites fell.

SOURCE: MPAA

100   Marvel and DC have seemingly clued into how to keep their ubiquitous films fresh, in part with diverse actors whose presence can appeal to fans of all backgrounds. "Thor: Ragnarok" featured Cate Blanchett as the first female villain in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Films that five years ago would have been considered "urban" and niche are now succeeding thanks to savvy marketing that not only targets loyal minority audiences but also finds a way to build on that
105   base of filmgoers to include white or other filmgoers.

Fabian Castro, head of multicultural marketing at Universal, says that early on the studio realized that its "Fast" series, which has filmed in countries like Brazil, Cuba and Iceland, had global appeal. Featuring a roster of actors such as Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez, Dwayne Johnson, Gal Gadot and Tyrese Gibson, the films allow fans to see themselves reflected in blockbuster action pictures. "There's
110   this unifying quality, and relatability [to the films that] make them accessible to people around the world," Castro says.

Looking ahead to the end of this year and into 2018, a handful of releases will test whether audiences continue to gravitate toward films with diverse casts. Among them: Disney's "A Wrinkle in Time" and "Black Panther." But what's notable is that in many of the diverse worlds created by storytellers like
115   Barry Jenkins, Ava DuVernay, Shonda Rhimes, Peele and others, race becomes an afterthought because the pictures mirror reality.

As many inevitably point out: Don't be mistaken in believing that diversity alone will guarantee a box office hit. It always boils down to simply telling a good story — and hopefully the money will follow.

For discussion:
- Drawing from the points raised by the author, identify and summarise the factors leading Hollywood films to feature more diversity in recent years.
- Do you agree that diversity makes financial sense for film makers and movie studios? Why or why not? (*A useful companion article that can be found online is 'Why Hollywood whitewashing has become toxic by Steve Rose for The Guardian, 29 Aug 2017')*
- Why and how might diversity in films be of value to society? *(You can also refer to this supplementary online reading: 'Why Seeing Yourself Represented on Screen is so Important' by Kimberly Lawson, 21 Feb 2018)* How are such diverse forms of representation powerful to the viewer?
- Should media function like a mirror that reflects realities, or should it attempt to shape how society thinks in ways it deems important/desirable?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. Do films offer anything more than an escape from reality? (Cambridge 2014)
2. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)
3. 'The media needs to exercise more responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2015 Y5 CT)
4. 'The media is to blame for gender inequalities.' Do you agree? (RI 2014 Y5 CT1)

Reading 6: Minahs and minority celebrity: social media as sites of resistance | EU1-3, 5-6

Adapted from Minahs and minority celebrity: parody YouTube influencers and minority politics in Singapore | Dr Crystal Abidin | 2019

This reading will help you:
- Understand how social media celebrities, especially those in minority or marginalised communities, co-opt popular culture via satire and parody in order to draw attention to issues in society
- Understand the various processes and the power of using social media to create 'narratives of resistance' against the backdrop of cultural hegemony in a particular society

Having developed out of amateur DIY microcelebrity in the 1990s and the early days of YouTube, YouTube Influencers are one form of internet celebrity who have been rapidly professionalising in production standards, aesthetic appeal, and financial and socio-cultural capital.

5   Many YouTube Influencers often respond swiftly to current affairs by tapping into networked viral cultures to produce content that bandwagons onto trending hashtags and memes in order to maximise their reach. Still, a smaller group of them have intentionally shaped their content and channels into 'sites of resistance' that produce critical commentary about social issues, politics, and the state.

10   MunahHirziOfficial (MHO) is comprised of Maimunah (Munah) Bagharib and Hirzi Zulkiflie, an Arab woman and Malay man from Singapore, both of which are minority racial and ethnic groups in Singapore. MHO are known for their highly localised parodies of feminist anthems by the likes of globally renowned female hip hop and R&B artists such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, and Ariana Grande.

15   MHO made their debut in December 2008 on YouTube, and as of April 2017, had accumulated over 142,000 subscribers and over 30 million views across over 350 videos and 18 playlists. Crucially, given their ability to commodify and monetise their marginalised status into a form of internet celebrity, MHO constitute a 'minority celebrity' – validating and celebrating minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life.

20   Here, we consider three of MHO's strategies for popular advocacy:
1. the use of cultural cringe via the caricature of minah
2. the emphasis on intersectional minority representation via an iconic cast of cameos, and
3. critical commentary on current issues pertaining to race in Singapore

25   **Cultural cringe**

While MHO present several personae in their videos, this paper is concerned with their performance of the minah, a subculture of Malay women in Singapore. Current academic work on this subculture is sparse, with only a handful of works briefly alluding to minahs as young Malay women in the working class who are deemed to be low brow and uncouth in their femininity. One news article in the Straits 30   Times offers an explicit definition of a minah as a 'colloquial term to describe rowdy Malay girls without drive or ambition'. An analysis of internet anecdotes, surveyed via digital folklore from a network of websites and internet forums, reveals that many Malay youth experience a 'cultural cringe'

– a collective feeling of inferiority of one's own society as compared to another society – when they encounter such individuals.

35   However, the minahs by MHO not only embrace their caricature but go further to capitalise upon this marginalised subculture as their public persona. The stereotypes of minahs are satorialised and challenged in MHO's series of minah music parody videos, when they use satire and humour to portray minahs as more identifiable, relatable, and palatable for the general (Chinese) public, while also signalling the overt, casual, and institutional racism Malay minorities experience in everyday life.

40

Intersectional minority representation

Singapore is a multi-racial immigrant nation-state of over 5.7 million citizens. However, government statistics fail to identify the varied and rich micro-diversities within the neat CMIO racial categories, and especially so for the Malay race in terms of intersectional minorities' ethnicities and religions. To
45   further complicate the idea of Malayness in Singapore, MHO invests heavily in intersectional minority representation. Alongside the minah characters Katy (Munah) and Syasya (Hirzi) are a regular cast of genderfluid androgynous back-up dancers in drag; iconic Malay personalities in Singapore who are fringed or marginalised for their identity politics or practices; and one-off appearances by foreign construction workers usually approached on-the-fly while filming in public places.

50   Firstly, the strong and consistent presence of genderfluid and androgynous dancers as a regular and non-descript backdrop is significant when situated within the larger Influencer industry in Singapore – the YouTube industry in Singapore is dominated by Chinese Influencers, many of whom occasionally perform in gender-bending, queer, or drag characters as mere comic relief or the closing punchline. They are usually straight Chinese men dressing up in drag to parody motherly figures and deliberately
55   ugly subpar girlfriends, and in flamboyant men's wear to parody the gay stereotype of an effeminate man.

However in MHO's minah parody music videos, the genderfluid representations of their dance crew are hardly the subject of ridicule, mockery, or humour. Instead, their diversity is presented as a matter of fact, unapologetic and sincere: they are seen dancing through crowded public train cabins with
60   commuters, celebrating Hari Raya with friends and family, and enjoying themselves in entertainment districts in Singapore.

Secondly, the Malay icons who cameo in the minah music parody videos are also marginalised, as they seldom conform to the stereotype of a conservative and traditional Malay Singaporean. The recurring cameos across MHO's body of videos over the years often reference the social issues and cultural
65   causes they champion in their capacity as individuals in Singapore society. More critically, MHO's inclusion of these cameo actors often come closely after the latter's individual encounters with public spotlight, and thus also serves to lend them 'screen-time' to amplify their ethical and political stance on a variety of issues.

One recurring cameo is Malay Muslim male artist Muhammad Khairul Ikhwan who in the earlier years
70   of MHO cameos in androgynous and drag fashion. Diagnosed in 2015 with stage four colon cancer and a brain tumour, Khairul outlived his prognosis and continued to publicly document his artistic endeavours and struggles with his illness. In later MHO videos, his removal of his drag wig to reveal hair loss was an act of symbolic resistance against the taboo of death in public discussion. He passed away in August 2016.

75   Another notable icon is Malay-Arab-Indian woman model Nadia Rahmat. In 2015, she was cast as the only brown-skin Asian model for US fashion label *Marc* by Marc Jacobs and selected as one of two Singaporean women to be featured in Romanian photographer Mihaela Noroc's *The Atlas of Beauty* (2014). However, internet users in Singapore soon took to social media to condemn Nadia's dress sense and henna tattoos as being immoral or unsightly and criticised her for falling outside the
80   dominant ideal of a beautiful Singaporean woman. Users were upset that Nadia's brown skin and minority ethnicity were taken to represent the Chinese-dominated country. In response, in a series of

minah music parody videos, Nadia is featured addressing racial privilege and representing the diverse array of Malay femininities in society.

85 Further, MHO juxtapose Khairul and Nadia alongside other more normative and celebrated Malay women icons for the latter to lend their own star power to the marginalised. These include celebrity makeup artist and hair stylist Norehan Fong-Harun, renowned singing contestant Fathin Amira Zubir who represented Singapore in the popular reality show *I Love OPM* in the Philippines in 2016, and Farisha Ishak who was the winner of the televised national singing contest *The Final 1* in 2014. MHO's intentional cameo casting of fringe personalities such as Khairul and Nadia alongside these more

90 celebrated and even heroic Malay personalities thus constitutes a critical juxtaposition that asks viewers to expand their repertoire of diversity within the Malay community.

Thirdly, foreign construction workers are often featured in the minah music parody videos. These are members of the over 1.64 million non-resident population in Singapore. However, these foreign construction workers are far from merely being utilised as props, but instead, are subtle political

95 statements about migrant inclusivity and cultural diversity in Singapore. As a rotating cast of non-actors who are brought onto camera impromptu, this role of foreign construction workers adds a layer of authenticity to MHO's representation of the marginalised and minorities in society by challenging caricatures and stereotypes.

Further, by making visible and public the process through which they approach or select any foreign

100 construction worker from familiar places (i.e. parks, hawker centres, void decks) to feature in their videos, MHO allow their audience to see that these foreigners are embedded into their own everyday spaces and lives and position foreign construction workers as ordinary and rightful inhabitants of space in Singapore instead of mere imported labour.

105 **Critical commentary**

MHO's minah music parody videos provide critical commentary on several issues, but concerns with immigration and xenophobia, as well as discrimination and prejudice against Malays as a minority race feature most prominently. Several videos refer to discriminatory and preferential practices based on race, such as the April 2016 incident in which a Malay businesswoman, Diana Hairul, was denied rental

110 of a public shop space because her wares did not match the shopping mall's target group of Chinese customers. She had planned to book a venue space at the mall's pre-Hari Raya fair for her business, but the email response from a Tampines 1 employee was curt and prejudiced.

This incident was then recast in one of MHO's videos, in which the viewers were thrown into an 'alternative universe' where Malays were now the 'norm' and the Chinese are the 'minorities'. In the

115 video, Hirzi appeared in his minah drag to rehash a version of Tampines 1 mall's administrative letter.

MHO's representational politics draws on a longer history of Malay prejudice in Singapore, referencing an array of viral controversies. These include racist social media comments disparaging Malay weddings, discriminatory hiring practices at a local bakery chain, and 'no Malay' specifications in property rental advertisements. A 2017 survey on race relations by the Institute of Policy Studies in

120 partnership with Channel News Asia similarly reports that minority-raced citizens are more likely to experience and perceive more instances of racism than the dominant population of Singaporean Chinese.

Conclusion

MunahHirziOfficial have cultivated 'minority celebrity' for themselves in Singapore through their

125 concerted repertoire of parody YouTube videos that call out the social, cultural, and institutional discrimination and prejudice experienced by Malays, Muslims, and LGBT persons in the country.

To avoid being typed as complete outcasts or marginalised figures to whom viewers are unable to relate, MHO frequently collaborates with reputable YouTube Influencers and renowned personalities from the mainstream music industry in Singapore to expand their reach and remain relevant to the

130   wider Chinese population who may not identify with their intersectional minority innuendos and references.

Utilising their celebrity in the social media sphere, MHO also bridge Malay representation across new digital media and traditional mainstream television, radio, and cinema channels by carving out spaces for notable (feminine) Malay icons to address their young internet audience. And in an act of

135   intersectional minority allying, MHO also use their prolific digital media platforms to share airtime with fringed segments of Malay society such as queer and genderfluid persons, as well as marginalised 'discards' of Singapore society such as foreign domestic and construction workers.

For all the intellectual and aesthetic labour in which MHO engage to capture their viewers, the bulk of their parody content references concerns that often specifically speak mostly to the (intersectional)

140   minority social groups in Singapore. But their impact on political commentary and social issues should not be discounted. As Influencers, parody performers, intersectional minority advocates, and intersectional minority persons themselves, MHO have imbued layers of personal politics and popular publics into their body of work, proving that they have made the most and the best of their minority celebrity over their decade-long career.

For discussion:
- Dr Abidin's paper explains why social media influencers can be effective advocates for social issues. How convincing is the justification provided? Why or why not?
- The article considers how minority celebrities on social media represent the lived realities of such communities within the larger majority population of a society, often utilising imagery and symbols that are controversial. What are some of the implications or consequences for such a strategy, particularly in the context of Singapore? Support your answer with further examples of Singaporean influencers or your own knowledge of Singaporean society.
- With additional research, if necessary, identify examples of 'sites of resistance' (line 7) or other campaigns of resistance in the media. What similarities and differences do you see between MHO's co-opting of 'minah' identity and its effects, and the example you have chosen? What might account for these similarities and/or differences?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. Consider the role of social media in shaping political opinion. (RI 2023 Y6 Prelims)
2. 'In today's digital age, freedom of expression works better in theory than in practice.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2022 Y6 Common Test)
3. Is there a place for social media beyond entertainment? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)
5. To what extent can we rely on the media to be truthful in today's world? (RI 2017 Y6 CT2)

Reading 7: How the news changes the way we think and behave   EU1-3 & 5

145   Zaria Gorvett | BBC Future | 13 May 2020

> **This reading will help you:**
> - Understand that the news can shape societies in surprising ways ranging from our perception of risk to the content of our dreams
> - Understand how the news is crafted and reported through the lens of power and gatekeeping
> - Examine the implications on how the construction of news nowadays can potentially create filter bubbles

Alison Holman was working on a fairly ordinary study of mental health across the United States. Then tragedy struck. On 15 April 2013, as hundreds of runners streaked past the finish line at the annual Boston Marathon, two bombs exploded, ten seconds apart. Three people were killed that day, including an eight-year-old boy. Hundreds were injured. Sixteen people lost limbs.

5   As the world mourned the tragedy, news organisations embarked upon months – years, if you count the trial – of graphic coverage. Footage of the moment of detonation, and the ensuing confusion and smoke, were broadcast repeatedly. Newspapers were strewn with haunting images: blood-spattered streets, grieving spectators and visibly shaken victims whose clothing had been torn from their bodies. Holman and colleagues from the University of California, Irvine, decided to find out if mental

10   wellbeing of those affected changed in the weeks afterwards.

It's intuitively obvious that being physically present for – or personally affected by – a terrorist incident is likely to be bad for your mental health. It was indeed true that the mental health of those present suffered. But there was also a twist. Another group had been even more badly shaken: those who had not seen the explosion in person, but had consumed six or more hours of news coverage per day in

15   the week afterwards. Bizarrely, knowing someone who had been injured or died, or having been in the vicinity as the bombs went off, were not as predictive of high acute stress. "It was a big 'aha' moment for us," says Holman. "I think people really strongly, deeply underestimate the impact the news can have."

It turns out that news coverage is far more than a benign source of facts. From our attitudes to

20   immigrants to the content of our dreams, it can sneak into our subconscious and meddle with our lives in surprising ways. It can lead us to miscalculate certain risks, shape our views of foreign countries, and possibly influence the health of entire economies. It can increase our risk of developing post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. Now there's emerging evidence that the emotional fallout of news coverage can even affect our physical health – increasing our chances of having a heart

25   attack or developing health problems years later. Why?

Ever since the first hints of a mysterious new virus began to emerge from China last year, televised news has seen record viewing figures, as millions diligently tune in for daily government briefings and updates on the latest fatalities, lockdown rules and material for their own armchair analysis. But in 2020 these sources aren't the only, or even the main, way that we keep up to date with current affairs.

30   When you factor in podcasts, streaming services, radio, social media and websites – which often want to send us notifications throughout the day – as well as links shared by friends, it becomes clear that we are constantly simmering in a soup of news, from the moment we wake up in the morning to the moment we close our eyes each night.

35 Surprisingly few studies have looked into how this all adds up, but in 2018 the average American spent around eleven hours every day looking at screens, where information about global events is hard to escape. Many of us even take our primary news-delivery devices, our mobile phones, to bed.

Hardwired affects

One potential reason the news affects us so much is the so-called "negativity bias", a well-known psychological quirk which means we pay more attention to all the worst things happening around us. It's thought to have evolved to protect us from danger and helps to explain why a person's flaws are
40 often more noticeable than their assets, why losses weigh on us more heavily than gains, and why fear is more motivating than opportunity. Governments even build it into their policies – torn between providing a positive or negative incentive for the general public, the latter is much more likely to work.

The bias may also be responsible for the fact that the news is rarely a light-hearted affair. When one website – the City Reporter, based in Russia – decided to report exclusively good news for a day in
45 2014, they lost two-thirds of their readership. As the science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke put it, the newspapers of Utopia would be terribly dull. Could this extra dose of negativity be shaping our beliefs?

Scientists have known for decades that the general public tend to have a consistently bleak outlook, when it comes to their nation's economic prospects. The view that the future is always worse is plainly
50 wrong. It's also potentially damaging. If people think they won't have a job or any money in five years, they aren't going to invest, and this is harmful for the economy. Taken to the extreme, our collective pessimism could become a self-fulfilling prophecy – and there's some evidence that the news might be partly responsible. For example, a 2003 study found that economic news was more often negative than positive – and that this coverage was a significant predictor of people's expectations. This fits
55 with other research, including a study in the Netherlands which found that reporting about the economy was often out of step with actual economic events – painting a starker picture than the reality.

The news is accidentally warping our perception of reality – and not necessarily for the better. One way this is thought to happen is through "framing effects", in which the way something – such as a
60 fact or choice – is presented affects the way you think about it. For example, a drug which is "95% effective" in treating a disease sounds more appealing than one which "fails 5% of the time". The outcome is the same, but – as a pair of economists discovered in the 70s and 80s – we don't always think rationally. In one study, when scientists presented participants with news stories containing equivalent, but differently phrased, statements about political instability or terrorist incidents, they
65 were able to manipulate their perception of how risky that country seemed. For example, saying a terrorist attack was caused by "al-Qaeda and associated radical Islamic groups" was considerably more concerning than saying "Domestic rebel separatist group" – though both have the same meaning.

A 2014 University of Utah study found that the public generally view cancers which are overrepresented in the news – such as brain cancer – as far more common than they really are, while
70 those which aren't often discussed – such as male reproductive cancers – are seen as occurring much less frequently than they do. People who consume the most news generally have the most skewed perceptions. The research raises some alarming possibilities. Are people underestimating their own risk of certain cancers, and therefore missing the early warning signs?

Finally, there's growing evidence that the news might even infiltrate our dreams. Amid the current
75 global lockdowns, a large number of people – anecdotally, at least – are reporting dreams which are unusually vivid and frightening. One explanation is that these "pandemic dreams" are the result of our imaginations going wild, as millions of people are largely shut off from the outside world.

Another is that we're remembering our dreams better than we usually would, because we're anxiously waking up in the middle of REM sleep, the phase in which they occur.

80   But they could also be down to the way the outbreak is being portrayed by the news. Research has shown that the 9/11 attacks led to significantly more threatening dreams. There was a strong link between the dream changes and exposure to the events on television.

News is bad for us
Indeed, it turns out that wallowing in the suffering of seven billion strangers isn't particularly good for our mental health. After months of nonstop headlines about Covid-19, there are hints of an impending
85   crisis of coronavirus anxiety. Mental health charities across the world are reporting unprecedented levels of demand, while many people are taking "social media holidays", as they strive to cut their exposure to the news.

While some of this stress might be down to the new reality we're all finding ourselves in, psychologists have known for years that the news itself can add an extra dose of toxicity. This is particularly apparent
90   following a crisis. After the 2014 Ebola crisis, the 9/11 attacks, the 2001 anthrax attacks, and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, for example, the more news coverage a person was exposed to, the more likely they were to develop symptoms such as stress, anxiety and PTSD.

One possible explanation involves "affective forecasting", which is the attempt to predict how we will feel about something in the future. Thompson explains that during a crisis many people are likely to
95   be fixated on their future distress. In the meantime, this mistake is steering us towards unhealthy behaviours. "If you have a really big threat in your life that you're really concerned about, it's normal to gather as much information about it as possible so that you can understand what's going on," says Thompson. This leads us into the trap of overloading on news.

For example, those who thought they were more likely to develop post-traumatic stress
100   after Hurricane Irma made its way across Florida in September 2017, also tended to consume the most news in the run up to it. Ironically, these people did have the worst psychological outcomes in the end – but Thompson thinks this is partly because of the amount of stressful information they were exposed to. She points out that much of the media coverage was heavily sensationalised, with clips of television reporters being buffeted by high winds and rain while emphasising worst-case scenarios.

105   In fact, not only can news coverage of crises lead us to catastrophise about them specifically, but also everything else in our lives – from our finances to our romantic relationships. A 2012 study found that women who had been primed by reading negative news stories tended to become more stressed by other challenges, leading to a spike in their levels of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Negative news also has the power to raise a person's heart rate – and there are worrying signs that it
110   might have more serious implications for our long-term health. When Holman and colleagues looked into the legacy of stress about the 9/11 attacks, they found that those who had reported high levels at the time were 53% more likely to have cardiovascular problems in the three years afterwards – even when factors such as their previous health were taken into account. "What's especially remarkable about that study is that that the majority of people were only exposed to 9/11 through
115   the media," says Holman. "But they received these lasting effects. And that makes me suspect that there's something else going on and that we need to understand that."

Why do events that are happening to strangers, sometimes thousands of miles away, affect us so much? Holman has a few ideas, one of which is that the vivid depictions found in televised media are to blame. She explains that sometimes the news is on in the background while she's in the gym, and

120 she'll notice that for the whole time the reporter is telling a story, they'll have the same images repeating over and over. "You've got this loop of images being brought into your brain, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. We're looking at real life things – and I suspect that somehow the repetitiveness is why they have such an impact."

Holman points out that the news is not – and has never been – just about faithfully reporting one
125 event after another. Many of these organisations are dependent on advertising revenue, so they add a sense of drama to hook in viewers and keep them watching. Even when they're reporting on already-traumatic incidents, news channels often can't resist adding an extra frisson of tension. After the Boston Marathon bombings, coverage often appeared alongside urgent, sensationalising text such as "new details" and "brand new images of marathon bombs".

130 Part of the problem, Holman suggests, is that global dramas have never been so accessible to us – today it's possible to partake in a collective trauma from anywhere in the world, as though it were happening next door. And this is a challenge for our mental health. So the next time you find yourself checking the headlines for the hundredth time that day, or anxiously scrolling through your social media feed, just remember: the news might be influencing you more than you bargained for.

For discussion:
- Think about an incident that you saw/read on the news lately. Identify the emotions you first experienced upon encountering this incident. Examine how the method of reporting or 'framing effects' (line 60) is like for this incident in terms of the language/choice of words, formatting, tone, visuals used, length of article etc, and how these had an impact on your mood.
- Gorvett suggests that 'global dramas have never been so accessible to us – today it's possible to partake in a collective trauma from anywhere in the world, as though it were happening next door.' (lines 133-135) Do you agree with this statement? Why do you think that is so? Should Singapore welcome this phenomenon or be concerned?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. Consider the view that social media has more influence than politicians. (Cambridge 2019)
2. Does violence in the visual media portray reality or encourage the unacceptable? (Cambridge 2019)
3. 'We should not be afraid of social media.' Do you agree? (RI 2023 Y5 CT)
4. 'In today's digital age, freedom of expression works better in theory than in practice.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2022 Y6 CT)
5. Is there a place for social media beyond entertainment? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
6. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)
7. 'Media regulation is needed now more than ever.' Discuss. (RI 2017 Y5 Promo)

Reading 8: Is posting on social media a valid form of activism?   EU 1, 2, 4 & 5
Peter Sucia |Forbes | 1 November 2019 (adapted)

This reading will help you understand that:
- The double-edged nature and outcomes of hashtag activism and how such a phenomenon may encourage the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers.
- Hashtag activists casually indicating their online support for certain causes may not take any form of concrete and meaningful action to further these causes.
- The fruitful use of social media to further social causes depends on how best these platforms are employed.

This week speaking at the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago, former President Barack Obama called out those who use social media as a way to shame others, and said that such actions aren't activism.

5   "That's not bringing about change. If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far," the former POTUS was reported to have told the audience. He added, "I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people – and this is accelerated by social media – there is this sense sometimes of 'the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people.'"

10   However, even social media has become a popular way to support a cause or spread a message; the opinion of its effectiveness remains unclear. According to a June 2018 study conducted by Pew Research, some 64% of Americans felt that the statement, "social media help give a voice to underrepresented groups" described those sites very or somewhat well. A larger percentage of respondents said they believed social networking sites distract people form issues that are truly important, and 71% agreed with the assertion that "social media makes people believe they're making 15   a difference when they really aren't."
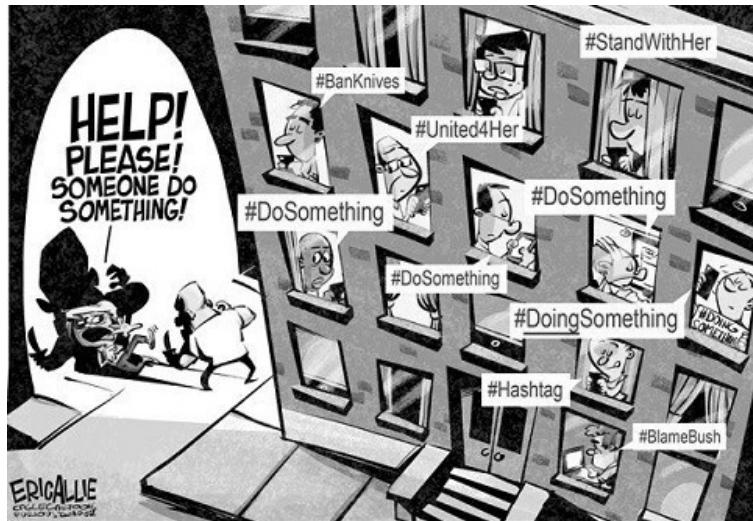
Hashtag activism
A new term for this type of movement is "hashtag activism," and it has been used to refer to the act of showing support for a cause through a like, share or other engagement. There are cases where a hashtag has created a larger movement, notably in the case of #Metoo, #NeverAgain and #BlackLivesMatter.

20   Critics have questioned whether this activism actually leads to any real change or whether users simply indicate support without taking any meaningful action. This could be in contrast to the long accepted definition of "activism," which was defined in the 1960s as "the policy or practice of doing things with decision and energy."

Posting to social media could be seen as actually doing something with decision, but is it actually using 25   the energy to necessitate any change?

"President Obama didn't quite say it this way, but people who rely exclusively on social media to advocate causes are just plain lazy, and self-righteous," said James R. Bailey, professor of leadership at the George Washington University School of Business. "Triggering and sustaining meaningful change is arduous stuff. It's more about deeds than words. These days, words are cheaper than ever."

30   Social media is just the latest platform to spread a message and call for social action. In some ways it has become the new soap box for those to stand on – but without the effort of actually climbing on a box!

Moreover, because it is so accessible the ability for a cause to gain traction – go viral – can be challenging.

35   "Social media is just plain ironic," added Bailey. "On the one hand it has unparalleled reach, making it tailor-made for activism. On the other hand, anyone can express themselves, without expertise, temperament, or even conviction. The result is that those of us who want to contribute are either lost in the mess or can't tell what's legitimate and responsible. Social media's advocacy draws as many people as it repels."

40   Despite this fact social media could still be an important part of any movement. The key to its success could depend on how it is best utilized.

"People use social media in different ways and for different purposes but two come to mind – one externally focused and the other internal," said Dr Paul Russo, vice provost at Yeshiva University and professor in the Masters of Data Analytics and Visualization Program.

45   "Some people are genuinely motivated to do good and they might use social channels to take on injustice or promote causes that make the world better," added Russo. "An alternative explanation for some of the 'activism' we see on the web is internally motivated. Some people use their profiles and interactions as a way of representing themselves to the world as they wish they were. Their profiles, images, posts and responses are a kind of 'performativity' or a way of defining oneself, but in
50   this case, on the web."

Deciding on whether activism on social media does any good is thus a complex question. As noted some causes have grown out of social media, but other causes have failed to gain traction.

"Depending on the issue, people trust advice from different groups," said Russo. "There is a good chance that posts from close friends will resonate with a user since people have homophilous
55   tendencies, that is, they tend to connect with and share views of people just like themselves. So it's reasonable that activist posts will get a reaction 'locally' in someone's social network. It's less likely that someone's tweet or status update will go viral, and have the kind of impact they hope. For most of us who are not celebrities or influencers, going viral is sheer dumb luck."

Future Of hashtag activism

60 The metonymic adage, "The pen is mightier than the sword," was penned by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, for his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy* about the French statesmen Cardinal Richelieu. In its original context it highlighted that communication – particularly written words – along with a free press could be more effective than direct violence. To that end, social media has already proven that it can be effective in spreading the word to the like-minded and help bring about social change.

65 "Look back to the Arab Spring," said Bailey. "Crowdfunding, charitable donations, and the location of food-trucks – that advance appetite – area just a few examples of efficiencies and effectiveness that rival the free-enterprise system. Of course social media can change the world – for better or worse."

Influencers and organizations could also use these channels to create awareness to a cause.

"If someone has a good message, connects with other influencers, is consistent in contributing content
70 that their followers value, the ground is fertile for promoting and motivating action," added Russo. "Also, so many people now get their news on social media; from reliable sources, trusted independent bloggers, and often from opinion mongers. If you want to learn about something before CNN, look to the Twitterverse."

Of course in the end, getting the message out there is just one part of it. Social media can call the
75 world to action, but the issue is whether anyone listens.

For discussion/further research:
- The author notes 'anyone can express themselves, without expertise, temperament, or even conviction [on social media]. The result is that those of us who want to contribute are either lost in the mess or can't tell what's legitimate and responsible' (lines 37-39) How relevant is this observation to you and your society?
- Recall specific instances where social media users in your society might have played an instrumental role in furthering noteworthy social causes: What are some reasons for those online activists succeeding in making a difference in the causes they advocate? Justify your views, with additional reading and research on your own.
- Is the relative lack of gatekeeping a good or bad thing when it comes to social activism?

Related RI essay questions:
1. Is there a place for social media beyond entertainment? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
2. Evaluate the claim that social media generate attention, but rarely accomplish anything meaningful. (RI 2019 Y6 CT2)
3. How far do you agree that social media has caused much damage to societies today? (RI 2019 Y5 Promos)
4. 'Social media divides rather than unites.' Comment. (RI 2016 Y5 Promos)
5. To what extent is social media a useful platform for change? (RI 2013 Y5 CT)

Reading 9: The Second Act of Social Media Activism   EU 1, 2, 4 & 5
Jane Hu |The New Yorker | 3 August 2020 (adapted)

This reading will help you understand:
- The inherent characteristics and potential shortcomings of social media activism and how the platform can be a powerful force for change
- How and why social media activism is changing, to become more effective at catalysing more significant or lasting change

Three months of quarantine taught us to live online, so it's perhaps unsurprising that it was what we saw online that sent us back onto the streets. On May 25th, the circulation of video footage capturing George Floyd's murder by four Minneapolis police officers quickly incited local protests. Three nights later, our feeds streamed with live images of protesters burning Minneapolis's Third Police Precinct. In the course of June, uprisings expanded at unprecedented speed and scale—growing nationally and then internationally, leaving a series of now iconic images, videos, and exhortations in their wake. Every historic event has its ideal medium of documentation—the novel, the photograph, the television—and what we're witnessing feels like an exceptionally "online" moment of social unrest.

Indeed, the struggle in the public square has unfolded alongside a takeover of the virtual one. Amid cell-phone footage of protests and toppling statues, the Internet has been further inundated with what we might call activist media. Screenshots of bail-fund donations urging others to match continue to proliferate. Protest guides, generated from years of on-the-ground activist experience, are readily shared over Twitter and Instagram, telling readers how to blur faces in photographs or aid in de-arrests. There are e-mail and phone-call templates, pre-scripted and mass-circulated. Webinars about police abolition now constitute their own subgenre. And city-council meetings, which had already migrated to Zoom because of the pandemic, have come to host the hallowed activist tradition of town-hall agitation. As some of June's uprisings evolve into today's encampments, the long revolutionary summer of 2020—made all the longer by quarantine—continues apace online.

Some of this story may seem familiar. In "Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest," from 2017, the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci examined how a "digitally networked public sphere" had come to shape social movements. Tufekci drew on her own experience of the 2011 Arab uprisings, whose early mobilization of social media set the stage for the protests at Gezi Park, in Istanbul, the Occupy action, in New York City, and the Black Lives Matter movement, in Ferguson. For Tufekci, the use of the Internet linked these various, **decentralized** uprisings and distinguished them from predecessors such as the nineteen-sixties civil-rights movement. Whereas "older movements had to build their organizing capacity first," Tufekci argued, "modern networked movements can **scale up quickly** and take care of all sorts of logistical tasks without building any substantial organizational capacity before the first protest or march."

The **speed** afforded by such protest is, however, as much its peril as its promise. After a swift expansion, spontaneous movements are often prone to what Tufekci calls "tactical freezes." Because they are often leaderless, and can lack "both the culture and the infrastructure for making collective decisions," they are left with little room to adjust strategies or negotiate demands. At a more fundamental level, social media's corporate infrastructure makes such movements vulnerable to co-optation and censorship. Tufekci is clear-eyed about these pitfalls, even as she rejects the broader criticisms of "slacktivism" laid out, for example, by Evgeny Morozov's "The Net Delusion," from 2011.

"Twitter and Tear Gas" remains trenchant about how social media can and cannot enact reform. But movements change, as does technology. Since Tufekci's book was published, social media has helped represent—and, in some cases, helped organize—the Arab Spring 2.0, France's "Yellow Vest" movement, Puerto Rico's RickyLeaks, the 2019 Iranian protests, the Hong Kong protests, and what we

40   might call the B.L.M. uprising of 2020. This last event, still ongoing, has evinced a scale, creativity, and endurance that challenges those skeptical of the Internet's ability to mediate a movement. As Tufekci notes in her book, the real-world effects of Occupy, the Women's March, and even Ferguson-era B.L.M. were often underwhelming. By contrast, since George Floyd's death, cities have cut billions of dollars from police budgets; school districts have severed ties with police; multiple police-reform-and-

45   accountability bills have been introduced in Congress; and cities like Minneapolis have vowed to defund policing. Plenty of work remains, but the link between activism, the Internet, and material action seems to have deepened. What's changed?

The current uprisings slot neatly into Tufekci's story, with one exception. As the flurry of digital activism continues, there is no sense that this movement is unclear about its aims—abolition—or that

50   it might collapse under a tactical freeze. Instead, the many protest guides, syllabi, Webinars, and the like have made clear both the objectives of abolition and the digital savvy of abolitionists. It is a message so legible that even Fox News grasped it with relative ease. Rachel Kuo, an organizer and scholar of digital activism, told me that this clarity has been shaped partly by organizers who increasingly rely on "a combination of digital platforms, whether that's Google Drive, Signal,

55   Messenger, Slack, or other combinations of software, for collaboration, information storage, resource access, and daily communications." The public tends to focus, understandably, on the profusion of hashtags and sleek graphics, but Kuo stressed that it was this "back end" work—an inventory of knowledge, a stronger sense of alliance—that has allowed digital activism to "reflect broader concerns and visions around community safety, accessibility, and accountability." The uprisings might have

60   unfolded organically, but what has sustained them is precisely what many prior networked protests lacked: pre-existing organizations with specific demands for a better world.

Some of this growth is simply a function of time. It has been seven years since Black Lives Matter was founded. Since then, groups such as the Movement for Black Lives—an explicitly abolitionist, anti-capitalist network that includes more than a hundred and fifty organizations—have lent unity and

65   direction to a coalition that was once, perhaps, too diffuse to articulate shared principles. These groups have also become better at using the Internet to frame, formalize, and advance their agenda. As Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles write in "#HashtagActivism," social media provides a digital "counterpublic," in which voices excluded from "elite media spaces" can engage "alternative networks of debate." When moments of rupture occur, this counterpublic can

70   more readily make mainstream interventions.

What's distinct about the current movement is not just the clarity of its messaging, but its ability to convey that message through so much noise. On June 2nd, the music industry launched #BlackoutTuesday, an action against police brutality that involved, among other things, Instagram and Facebook users posting plain black boxes to their accounts. The posts often included the hashtag

75   #BlackLivesMatter; almost immediately, social-media users were inundated with even more posts, which explained why using that hashtag drowned out crucial information about events and resources with a sea of mute boxes. For Meredith Clark, a media-studies professor at the University of Virginia, the response illustrated how the B.L.M. movement had honed its ability to stick to a program, and to correct those who deployed that program naïvely. In 2014, many people had only a thin sense of how

80   a hashtag could organize actions or establish circles of care. Today, "people understand what it means to use a hashtag," Clark told me. They use "their own social media in a certain way to essentially quiet background noise" and "allow those voices that need to connect with each other the space to do so."

The #BlackoutTuesday affair exemplified an increasing awareness of how digital tactics have material consequences.

85 Another example arrived on June 3rd, when Campaign Zero—a Black Lives Matter branch often associated with the activist DeRay Mckesson—launched a campaign, #8cantwait, to "reduce police violence." The campaign endorsed a reformist platform, which included banning choke holds and enforcing de-escalation training; it was widely circulated, and won support from names like Jon Lovett and Ariana Grande. By the end of that weekend, though, the campaign had been roundly
90 criticized as too moderate—and perhaps even misleading, as many of its proposals had already been adopted—and it was abandoned by many within and without the B.L.M. movement. In response, a "group of abolitionist comrades," in the words of the human-rights lawyer Derecka Purnell, presented a competing campaign with its own hashtag: #8toabolition. The immense speed with which #8toabolition was born and broadcast illustrates the tactical efficiency of today's abolitionists. When
95 I spoke to three of #8toabolition's co-writers—Mon Mohapatra, Reina Sultan, and Rachel Kuo—over Zoom, they told me that their campaign's demands were drafted by ten different activists in a shared Google doc in the course of twenty-four hours. That speed was enabled by the networks of trust and collaboration built through years of organizing.

These networks suggest that digital activism has entered a second act, in which the tools of the
100 Internet have been increasingly integrated into the hard-won structure of older movements. Though, as networked protest grows in scale and popularity, it still risks being hijacked by the mainstream. From the renaming (and repainting) of "Black Lives Matter Plaza" by the mayor of Washington, D.C., Muriel Bowser, to ahistorical citations of Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s speeches, the discourse of Black struggle remains open to aggressive co-optation. The meme-ification of Breonna Taylor's death—in
105 which calls to arrest her killers are prefaced by mundane observations about, say, the weather—may be the most depressing example yet of how social media can **trivialize** a movement.

In "Twitter and Tear Gas," Tufekci wrote, "The Black Lives Matter movement is young, and how it will develop further capacities remains to be seen." The movement is older now. It has developed its tactics, its messaging, its reach—but perhaps its most striking new capacity is a sharper recognition of
110 social media's limits. "This movement has mastered what social media *is* good for," Deva Woodly, a professor of politics at the New School, told me. "And that's basically the meme: it's the headline." Those memes, Woodly said, help "codify the message" that leads to broader, deeper conversations offline, which, in turn, build on a long history of radical pedagogy. As more and more of us join those conversations, prompted by the words and images we see on our screens, it's clear that the revolution
115 will not be tweeted—at least, not entirely.

For discussion/further research:
- Using information from lines 26-36, explain why the main strengths of social media activism can also contribute to its downfall.
- From lines 101-102, the article suggests that "digital activism has entered a second act, in which the tools of the Internet have been increasingly integrated into the hard-won structure of older movements.". Do you think this is the case in Singapore? How so?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. 'Social media has made the world a more dangerous place.' Discuss. (RI 2020 Y5 Timed Practice)
2. 'Social media disconnects more than it connects.' Discuss. (RI 2021 Y5 Common Essay Assignment)

Reading 10: Cancel Culture – Force for Good or Mob Justice?   EU 1, 2, 4 & 5

Syazwi Rahmad | Cancel Culture in Singapore: A Critical Perspective | 15 October 2020

This reading will help provide:
- An introduction to what cancel culture is and is not
- Consider if the online community in Singapore has been justified in its targeting of various individuals deemed to have failed to meet various community norms, and how such targeting can be seen as an overreach
- Understand that online activism treads a thin line between serving as an indispensable tool for the weak to speak 'truth to power' in the form of exercising responsibility and accountability and being nothing more than mob justice

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In recent months, many high-profile individuals in Singapore – from the candidates of the recent General Election, or GE2020, to social media influencers – have been ineluctably plagued by the cancel culture.

5 When Ivan Lim was introduced as a new People's Action Party (PAP) candidate in GE2020, he was immediately belaboured by angry netizens, particularly his peers and ex-colleagues, who characterised him as "elitist" and "arrogant", amongst others. These allegations and sustained attacks, including an online petition to remove Ivan Lim from candidacy, eventually necessitated his withdrawal from GE2020.

10 Nonetheless, the successful act of 'cancelling' Ivan Lim set a precedent whereby police reports were even lodged against Workers' Party's (WP) Raeesah Khan over her alleged online posts on race and religion made in 2018. It turns out that one of the whistleblowers deliberately dug out old posts in order to incriminate Raeesah. Adding fuel to the fire, the PAP released a statement which called for the WP to state its stand and questioned the suitability of Raeesah as a Member of Parliament. This created a polarising online discourse. Many supporters of Raeesah viewed this as a form of **gutter** 15 **politics** – an attempt to 'cancel' Raeesah by undermining her credibility. On the other hand, some netizens felt troubled by Raeesah's old Facebook and Twitter posts. Nevertheless, GE2020 was where we witnessed the intensification of the cancel culture so far.

The attacks on Raeesah triggered a backlash. The hashtag *#IStandWithRaeesah* started trending. Police reports were lodged against the PAP's statement and Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's 20 old comments as they were perceived as wounding racial feelings or promoting enmity between different races, albeit no offence was found in both reports. In addition, Xiaxue, a social media influencer, fell afoul of the cancel culture when she labelled Raeesah a "radical feminist/leftist" and a "poison infecting our politics". Within minutes, the *#PunishXiaxue* hashtag became trending on Twitter, police reports and online petitions were filed against Xiaxue for her old, offensive tweets, and 25 angry netizens called on brands to end their collaboration with Xiaxue.

Now, what is the big deal behind this cancel culture? These incidents reflect that cancel culture is fast becoming prominent in topics of conversation in Singapore.

Some interpretations
The terminology of cancel culture is arguably derived from the US whereby there is a variation of definitions based on different levels of understanding. Online media company, Vox, generally defines 30 cancel culture as "a trend of communal calls to boycott a celebrity whose offensive behaviour is perceived as going too far".

One author describes it as "largely a calculus of diminishing returns of a public figure's goodwill to the community that they are beholden to". On the other hand, another writer points out that once "you do something that others deem problematic, you automatically lose all your currency. Your voice is
35   silenced. You're done."

Nonetheless, a common feature of cancel culture is calling out (or some would say public shaming) by the online community. It is also noted that in some cases, cancelling includes taking further actions such as boycotting, going after the employers, doxxing, or even filing police reports, particularly if the individual's perceived offensive behaviour or action amounts to a chargeable offence under its
40   country's rule of law.

Situating cancel culture in the local context, many are wary that the importation of Western ideas is detrimental to our society. In a recent interview on Instagram, former Nominated Member of Parliament Kuik Shiao-Yin contends that shame is weaponised to burn down the 'cancelled' individual's platform of worth. This could result in the belief that change is impossible. For example,
45   Tosh Zhang encountered an online backlash when his old homophobic tweets made back in 2011, were surfaced after he was announced as one of Pink Dot's ambassadors in 2019. Tosh apologised for his tweets and affirmed that he has changed since then. He eventually stepped down from ambassadorship to stop the controversy. Tosh even decided to take a break from social media after receiving a voluminous amount of hate due to his past tweets. Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, an Assistant
50   Professor at the Nanyang Technological University, warned that cancel culture could discourage open discourses and lead to self-censorship. As such, people may be afraid to articulate their views due to political correctness.

On the other hand, proponents of cancel culture argue that it is an effective tool to seek accountability and justice, especially when the 'cancelled' individual has a history of being exempted or if traditional
55   avenues are deemed to be insufficient in holding them accountable. For instance, Monica Baey shared her discontentment on Instagram about the meagre handling of the National University of Singapore (NUS) with regard to sexual violence. She called for more support and protection to be given to victims of sexual assault, as well as tougher penalties for perpetrators of sexual violence. In short, her Instagram stories became viral and created mass public rallying to pressure NUS to change its policies
60   and introduce more concrete measures. Her story also attracted the then-Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung who weighed in on the issue. She acknowledged that exposing the identity of her perpetrator, Nicholas Lim, is necessary as she points out that many of the perpetrators go unnamed and manage to get away with their crimes.

Another case to illustrate is the popular podcast, OKLetsGo (OLG), by three former Malay local radio
65   DJs. OLG became controversial due to the podcasters' casual and rampant misogynistic remarks. This led to a public outcry and many individuals called them out on social media. Some encouraged listeners to boycott the podcast. In fact, the defenders of OLG were insulted and threatened to the extent of doxxing them. In addition, advertiser Foodpanda distanced themselves from OLG by requesting its sponsored content to be removed. The saga even attracted the attention of many
70   political figures including President Halimah Yacob, who issued a statement calling them to apologise. Due to public pressure and backlash, the podcasters released an episode to address the issue and later, issued an apology.

Trial by Internet or Weapon of the Weak?
We indeed encounter polarising views on cancel culture – one camp views it as toxic and counterproductive, while the other sees it as an imperative to demand accountability. Here, I would

75   say that it is both. There is a time and place for cancel culture. If an individual intentionally causes harm and refuses to be responsible or be held accountable for his/her actions, particularly when such individual is in a position of power or influence and repeatedly exhibits problematic behaviour, then cancel culture becomes a powerful tool for the marginalised or victims to effect change and lessen his/her influence.

80   However, cancel culture can be counterproductive if the sole intention is to discredit someone by digging up ignorant remarks made years ago despite the individual recognising his/her mistakes and has genuine desire to grow. Although some may find it essential to hold the individual accountable for his/her present and past mistakes, especially if such mistakes are egregious, retroactively engaging in cancel culture for the sake of smearing the cancelled individual's reputation may thus limit
85   opportunities for him to grow and change. In addition, if one engages in performative cancel culture and assumes a mob mentality just to appear 'woke', one should re-evaluate his/her intention. This is calamitous when putting someone on trial by internet without knowing all of the facts.

Ultimately, cancel culture is a form of protest and a tool to seek social justice especially when traditional avenues are perceived to be insufficient or have failed. Social media creates a platform for
90   marginalised voices to be heard. This is not only about airing grievances but turning it into collective action – from boycotting to filing petitions. Scholars such as Jasper and Polleta assert that internet has changed the fundamentals of protest actions. Online mobilisations are more sporadic compared to physical protests which are typically more enduring and deep-rooted such as protest against the extradition bill in Hong Kong. Evidently, we witnessed how cancel culture erupts from time to time,
95   gather a large number of followings to the cause, and then fades away within a few weeks. Bennett and Segerberg further introduce the concept of '**the logic of connective action**' whereby individuals mobilise each other by sharing their experiences on social networks and under personalised action frames. For instance, *#PunishXiaxue* is a personalised action frame in which individuals galvanised around the hashtag to call for accountability.

100 It is important to note that cancel culture is not a social movement, but it is a product of various movement ideologies. Critically, actions shaped by movement ideology are conspicuous in institutions and structures of everyday life. Before the case of Monica Baey and OLG, there was a growing *#MeToo* feminist movement that created a space for women and men to speak publicly online about sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexism. This 'connective action' then turns into
105 collective action as we witness women as well as wider society coalesce together to seek for social justice and accountability.

I would add that cancel culture is a weapon of the weak, for victims to enact change and garner support from the online community. Nevertheless, we should create a space for rehabilitation and growth once the cancelled individual acknowledges his/her mistake and is willing to accept the
110 consequences, as well as take concrete steps for changed behaviour. We need to recognise human fallibility too.

Lastly, it is a noteworthy element to acknowledge that cancel culture is not a new concept and each society has boundaries with regard to what is considered acceptable speech or behaviour. To discuss meaningful contentious issues, cancel culture should not be used as a sole method of engagement.
115 There is a need to have room for diversity of voices or perspectives without having the fear that one will be cancelled if one does not articulate his/her views in a politically correct fashion. Moreover, there are still contentions with regard to how sensitive conversations should be carried out.

Nonetheless, cancel culture remains controversial but it is a socio-political force that is definitely here to stay.

For discussion/further research:

- Syazwi Rahmad provides an outline of what 'cancel culture' is, including some 'public shaming' being involved (line 36). Are there any significant differences between 'cancel culture' and 'public shaming'?
- Based on lines 41-55, summarise the pros and cons of 'cancel culture'.
- How might 'cancel culture' erode levels of trust between individuals in a community? Instead of serving as a way to speak truth to power and hold the powerful accountable for their actions, how might cancel culture do more harm than good or even have effects that are the opposite of what were intended?
- Syazwi Rahmad also suggests that 'performative cancel culture' (line 85) is unhelpful. Explain what it is in your own words. Do you think 'performative cancel culture' is common in a local context, or do you think attempts to 'cancel' here are well-intentioned? Explain your justification by considering what you know of Singaporeans and the media environment

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:

1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss (Cambridge 2020)
2. Consider the view that social media has more influence than politicians. (Cambridge 2019)
3. Examine the view that having a social media presence is a necessary evil today. (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.' Do you agree? (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
5. To what extent do you agree that the internet has made it difficult for us to care about anything for long? (RI 2020 Y6 Prelim)
6. Assess the view that online interactions carry more risk than reward.' (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)
7. 'New media has made us more superficial than before.' Do you agree? (RI 2018 Y5 Promo)

120

Reading 11: We're living in a digital serfdom – trading privacy for convenience   `EU 1, 2 & 5`
Hassan Khan | TheNextWeb | 10 November 2018

> **This reading will help you understand that:**
> - In the digital age, we often freely and unwittingly trade our personal data, identity, privacy and security for the access, convenience and privileges that digital platforms provide. These powerful platforms covertly collect our data, survey and exploit us for profit
> - Some inherent risks and dangers in giving up our private data include a threat to privacy and security.
> - As data is stored in public and permanent ledges, the amount of data collated by a few large but powerful data mining companies can be easily abused.

Think for a second: compared to your grandparents and parents, what do you actually *own* outright?

Why own when you can rent, license, or subscribe? This seems to be the new mantra, where nothing is permanent — but everything is convenient. This is the era of the digital nomad, and consequently, it's also the era of the digital serf. The masses of serfs in the feudal period in Europe provided the
5   labour, and the owners of property reaped the profits. Today, the labour is largely data, and the properties are digital.

Giving ourselves away
Before we dive into digital serfdom, let's take a look at what is actually happening now. The percentage of households without a car is increasing. Ride-hailing services have multiplied. Netflix boasts over 188 million subscribers. Spotify gains ten million paid members every five to six months.

10   The model of "impermanence" has become the new normal. But there's still one place where permanence finds its home, with over two billion active monthly users, Facebook has become a platform of record for the connected world. If it's not on social media, it may as well have never happened.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal uncovered how vast amounts of Facebook user data was taken and
15   used to influence and sway public opinion. It's turning the public's perception of the true nature of the social contract they signed up for upside down. Worryingly though, it hasn't really affected Facebook user numbers or engagement levels. And the recent revelations barely scratch the surface of how much of our identity and labour we have given away for access and convenience.

Our digitally enhanced lives have put tracking dots on each of us. On every website we visit, our clicks
20   and actions are data that's mined without our knowledge. Over 3.7 billion human beings use the internet today and the ways we use it are increasingly personal. We shop, bank, and store photos. We use search for just about everything and GPS to get almost everywhere. Convenient? Absolutely. Secure? Not really.

How many times have you participated in a free silly online quiz like "what kind of cat were you in
25   your past life*" for a bit of fun, while unknowingly giving up access to your personal data to unknown sources? (Full disclosure: I've done it too!)

Nothing is free

The problem isn't an online quiz about cats or our digital lifestyle. The problem is that we are sliding back into a feudal system while barrelling into the future.

How? By not paying attention to the first law of economics — nothing in life is free.

30   By engaging with online platforms, networks, and digital middlemen, we voluntarily exchange our identities for services, access, and convenience. We have converted our activity and labour into profit for these same platforms. We freely offer our ideas, personal information, and personalities to the world.

It is we, the 3.7 billion human beings using the internet today, who serve as unpaid content producers
35   for platforms such as Facebook and Medium. Our daily interactions, transactions, and ideas are now stored in third-party clouds, bringing in eyeballs to ads and earning millions for these organisations.

By doing so, we have once again become serfs. Not like the serfs of feudal times, who were apparently free because they laboured on their lords' estates and earned enough to live but not enough to improve their condition. In this case, our serfdom means tilling a *digital* field. We willingly trap
40   ourselves in a cage, but a digital cage, chasing likes and clicks in a relentless cycle.

When doing a search on a major search engine, have you ever seen a disclosure about how the platform chooses to serve you ads and information to generate revenue based on the information it gathers from you? When you download a new app and it requires a long list of permissions — to your contacts, photos, and microphone — do you just accept these intrusive (and often excessive) requests
45   and download it anyway?

In our digital-dependent world, what other option is there? That car hailing service you use almost every day has records of who you are, where you go and when — but you need it to get around. And the thought of *not* backing up your important documents to the cloud seems irresponsible. In order to enjoy any convenience in your time-crunched life, you are forced to hand over your most personal
50   information in order to use services that, for many of us, feel essential.

Even something as simple as bank transactions, there's a reason so many great credit card promotions pop up on your screen. It's all about giving you perks to access your payment data. With it, companies build on the approximately one trillion dollars in annual transaction fees that feed that industry. Even WeChat and Facebook have jumped on the payment platform bandwagon.

55 In the developed world, we think little of this. We are used to having monetary transactions go through intermediaries, so people tolerate transaction fee friction. Interestingly, it is the emerging economies that may be the first to experience some freedom from this.

New tech "solutions" but same old problem?
Approximately two billion people are unbanked, so their financial and purchase data is offline. A majority of these people are in developing nations. Blockchain technology is often cited as having the
60 ability to enable these communities to leapfrog traditional and invasive network of financial institutions. Exciting and liberating, most certainly, but early technology is not without its problems.

Bitcoin, for example, was celebrated with much fanfare as the answer to privacy and to fast, easy money transfers. Miners exploited this cryptocurrency five years ago and it's actually neither private nor efficient. Due to mining, Bitcoin consumes an exorbitant amount of energy. In fact, the energy
65 used mining bitcoin in 2017 surpassed the energy consumption of Ireland and most African nations. Furthermore, it's not private at all. The data is stored on a public, unchangeable ledger.

Most blockchains are not actually decentralised. Bitcoin and Ethereum, for example, use "miners" to verify transactions and they have mostly merged into a handful of large mining pools, reducing security and performance. That was not the initial pure design intent.

70 Technology is continuing to evolve as is the nature of trust. Intermediaries were created to establish trust between unconnected parties, but in the era of Equifax leaks and Cambridge Analytica scandals, things are set to change again.

In this phase of digital evolution, truly decentralised solutions won't be verified by mining pools but instead, by networks of devices themselves. This allows for localised ownership of your digital assets.
75 This puts control and privacy back into your hands**.**

In the end, no matter how much or how little you own in the future, your data and identity may be your most valuable assets.

If you can help it, don't give them up for a free email account, a free credit card, or a free quiz about cats. Know your value and value what you own.

For discussion/reflection:
- Why does Khan say that we live in 'the era of the digital serf' (line 4)?
- Explain the trade-off we make 'by engaging with online platforms, networks, and digital middlemen' (line 30). In what way(s) have digital giants leveraged their power over users?
- Khan argues that people are 'forced to hand over [their[most personal information' (lines 50-51). Do you agree that people are providing personal information unwillingly? How are online platforms and digital service providers able to compel people to give up personal information?
- Explain the use of the phrase 'feel essential' (line 51)
- In what ways is blockchain technology 'not without its problems' (line 62) in terms of giving the people control over their data instead of other powerful middlemen?

Related RI essay questions:
1. Assess the view that online interactions carry more risk than reward. (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)
2. 'Media regulation is needed now more than ever.' Discuss. (RI 2017 RI Promos)
3. 'The media needs to exercise more responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2015 Y5 CT)

Reading 12: Is social media vigilantism a valid or harmful way of dealing with rule breakers?

EU 4 & 5

Adapted from Covid-19 social media vigilantes: A valid or harmful way of dealing with rule breakers |
Aqil Haziq Mahmud | Today | 13 Jun 2020

This reading will help you understand:

- The power and effects associated with social media vigilantism, including its capacity for overreach such as doxing, bullying, and violence.
- The range of motivations – positive or otherwise – of netizens who engage in social media vigilantism
- The erosion of trust and other damaging outcomes on wider society resulting from social media vigilantism - mistaken identity, public shaming, and the fomenting of racist and/or xenophobic attitudes

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What would you do if you saw someone not wearing a mask in public? Mind your own business, or perhaps advise the person to wear a mask because it is now required by law and helps reduce the spread of COVID-19? Another option might be to report the infringement to the authorities. However, some people have decided on a different approach: Snap a photo and post it on social media.

5   With numerous Facebook groups and Telegram chats providing a platform for this in Singapore and elsewhere, experts CNA interviewed have explained why online vigilantism has appeared to become more prevalent during the pandemic. They said some see it as a social responsibility borne out of genuine concern for public health, while others cannot stand seeing others get away with breaking the rules as they themselves are compliant. Some of these vigilantes might also be motivated by jumping on the bandwagon

10   and seeing their posts go viral, the experts added.

But observers said this behaviour risks inciting unhappiness and rallying the online mob, influencing others to attack the alleged offenders with sometimes xenophobic comments. They added that vigilantes could also end up doxxing alleged offenders or identifying them wrongly, while victims may suffer public shame that far outweighs the official punishment.

15   However, supporters of vigilantism said it acts as a deterrence for would-be offenders, whose actions could harm public health and prolong stifling COVID-19 restrictions. Ultimately, the experts agreed that vigilantes would be better off reporting potential infringements directly to the authorities.

WHY ONLINE VIGILANTISM

Dr Jiow Hee Jhee, Digital Communications and Integrated Media programme director at the Singapore

20   Institute of Technology (SIT), pointed to several notable incidents of online vigilantism in recent months. This includes "furore over the SG Covidiots Facebook group which has named and shamed a variety of individuals from young to old", he told CNA.

"Many may feel frustrated as their routines are heavily disrupted, and as such, could be more likely to lash out due to said frustrations," he said of the reasons for online vigilantism, highlighting that rules for

25   behaviour are constantly evolving during the pandemic. "As such, society is constantly adjusting to it, and some may feel that others who violate the new 'social norm' are not taking this seriously, and therefore lash out at the 'violators'."

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser said some vigilantes could dislike the rules themselves but feel compelled to comply, and so "can't stand the thought of offenders getting off with

30   impunity". "They want to ensure that there is fairness in the sense of 'if I am complying, why can't they'," he said.

Associate Professor Edson Tandoc Jr of the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), who researches social media use, said vigilantes could expect others to take the same precautions out of "genuine concern". "Some initial studies in online vigilantism found that people who engage in it tend to report high levels of
35   social responsibility," he said. Others might also be doing it as a form of "uncertainty management", he added, explaining that filming someone seemingly not following rules could give them some form of control over a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

Assoc Prof Tandoc said some vigilantes are also motivated by wanting to go viral, with other viral posts providing incentive to engage in the same behaviour for the same kind of attention. "Some individuals might
40   be motivated by what others term as a bandwagon effect – everyone is doing it so I might as well do it," he added. "This has become much easier with camera phones, social media access and universal Internet connection."

Dr Tan said the echo chamber of online vigilante groups reinforces users' belief that "what is wrong ought to be punished". "It also makes them feel good about themselves, that they are the law-abiding ones."

45   **HARMFUL EFFECTS**

But Dr Jiow said there are many examples of how vigilantes can end up exposing the wrong person, especially as many people leave a large digital footprint in this day and age. "As social media has become a large part of many of our lives, the images, videos, comments and captions that we post form our digital footprint," he said. "While we may not think much about it, even if our accounts are private, this information
50   can still become public if someone screenshots your posts or comments. In cases of mistaken identity, this can be the result of pure coincidence and sheer bad luck."

Dr Jiow, who is also a member of the Media Literacy Council, said this makes it important for people to better manage their digital footprint. This can include turning off geo-tagging or location settings, setting accounts to private and avoid oversharing information. "Not only does it matter in this particular example
55   of being wrongly identified, which may feel far-fetched to many, it has other far-reaching consequences," he continued, highlighting exploitation by cybercriminals as one example.

In perhaps the most notable case of mistaken identity in recent times, vigilantes wrongly identified the head of a tech company as a woman who was repeatedly caught on video not wearing a mask in public, and who declared herself "sovereign" in one clip that went viral.

60   The Singaporean woman Paramjeet Kaur, 41, has been charged in court for offences including refusing to wear a mask and being a public nuisance. The tech company in a statement thanked everyone for "promptly redacting the misinformation once they uncovered the truth" and quoted its chief executive as saying she was grateful for the well-wishers who reached out and stood up for her.

For those who were mistakenly identified, Dr Tan it might not be so easy for them to convince others,
65   especially acquaintances, that they were not the culprits. Even for those who were correctly identified, "the public shaming may far outweigh the S$300 fine they have to pay if convicted", he added.

Dr Jiow said the way online vigilantes behave encourages the naming and shaming of offenders. "As a result, individuals can often incite each other towards unhappiness and chaos," he said.

RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

70   One consequence of such posts is xenophobia, Dr Jiow said, with many netizens jumping on board to call out the offending person based on race. "This can be extremely damaging to the community, especially in a multi-racial society like Singapore," he stated.

One video posted on Apr 16 to Facebook page Tiagong, which is described as a Singapore gossip page after the Hokkien word for hearsay, shows a man hounding a couple who were purportedly out for a run and
75   seemingly of Indian descent. The video showed the man not wearing a mask, with the person who took the video tailing the couple for a distance and saying: "I would like to see you run." Those engaging in strenuous exercise can temporarily remove their masks. The video was captioned: "Tiagong should send them back to India if they choose not to follow our measures."

80 Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu said in a speech on May 30 that the COVID-19 pandemic has divided societies across fault lines, including the issue of foreigners. "In another case of a lady who proclaimed herself a 'sovereign', the instinctive reaction of many people was to label her a foreigner," she said. "And when another person of a similar profile emerged at Sun Plaza, a stereotypical labelling along racial lines was made by netizens."

MANAGING VIGILANTE GROUPS

85 On SG Covidiots, its admins have set rules that prevent hate speech or bullying. "Bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading comments about things like race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated," the rule said.

The approach is different on SG Dirty Fella, where one admin told CNA that potentially racist or xenophobic comments are left untouched for authorities to take action. "Everyone is responsible for their comments,"
90 said the 30-year-old admin, who only wanted to be known as Ganesan. "We try not to remove these comments so that it will be evidence for those who feel offended to lodge a police report."

However, Mr Ganesan said admins remove personal particulars and addresses from posts, but do not censor faces or vehicle plate numbers as authorities might use these to track down alleged offenders.

When asked about the group potentially encouraging a mob mentality, Mr Ganesan said "only those who
95 break the law are unhappy as they feel ashamed". "What is posted are not false and backed with photographic and video evidence". He said admins will try to verify the authenticity of posts "as much as possible" through online sources and contacts, adding that the posts serve to help authorities identify and catch alleged offenders.

Ultimately, Mr Ganesan said the group was created to raise awareness of unacceptable behaviour before
100 mistakes are made. "During these difficult times, we need to be supportive of the Government's policy and rules to fight COVID-19," he stated. "This pandemic is currently affecting everyone financially and in their daily lives."

GETTING THINGS WRONG

NTU's Assoc Prof Tandoc acknowledged that some of these posts are well-meaning, with a few assisting
105 authorities in investigations. After a Facebook user posted photos of crowds gathering outside food and beverage outlets along Robertson Quay, police were able to trace several individuals involved. Seven people were eventually charged for the offence. However, Assoc Prof Tandoc also pointed to several cases where online vigilantes got things wrong. "Social media platforms have not only made it easier for just anyone to access a potentially mass audience, but to some extent this access also seemingly comes with no
110 accountability," he added.

In one incident in March, a picture posted on social media showed a couple transporting cartons of eggs in public, with commentators accusing them of panic buying – a hot topic leading up to the circuit breaker. But a subsequent post by a netizen who claimed to know the couple's child said the couple were school canteen vendors who needed the eggs for their business, and that they were unable to get their usual supply due to
115 actual hoarders.

In an Apr 29 Facebook note titled The Idiocy Behind SG Covidiots, user Wei Li Fong said the "demonising comments" accompanying such posts are usually made without knowing the personal circumstances surrounding the incident.

REPORTING TO AUTHORITIES

120 So, what should people do if they see potential infringements? NUS' Dr Tan said if their intent is to correct the action, rather than ensure the person gets due punishment, they should try approaching and gently reminding him to do the right thing. Those who forgot to put on a mask deserve a second chance, he added. "Perhaps if you are carrying an extra mask with you, offer it to them," SIT's Dr Jiow said. "You might be surprised by how others respond to kind words and actions."

125   If there is a fear that the person might not take it well and create scene or start a fight, Dr Tan said the safer way might be to take a video and report him directly to the authorities. Authorities have urged the public to submit feedback on safe distancing infringements via the OneService app, saying this will help them identify hotspots for enforcement. The app has received about 700 reports each day since the function was launched. "I believe 'civic duty' can be expressed by reporting those 'deviant' acts to the authorities directly – there is

130   no need to publicise it," he said.

In cases where users misinterpreted what they saw, Assoc Prof Tandoc said there should be a way for users to inform or notify others who saw the original post that it had been corrected or clarified. "Some of them posted corrections, apologies and clarifications, which reached a much smaller audience than their original misinformed posts," he added.

For discussion/reflection:
- According to the author, why does there seem to be an intensification of social media vigilantism during the pandemic? What role do filter bubbles play here?
- Based on lines 19 – 44, explain why the motivations behind the actions of the vigilantes are more selfish than altruistic.
- Dr Jiow argues that "the way online vigilantes behave encourages the naming and shaming of offenders" (line 67). What is it specifically about the behaviours of vigilantes **on social media** that tend to culminate in such injurious actions?
- What other examples involving similar 'name-and-shame' cases can you think of, and what were the precipitating or aggravating factors in each case? Why is it so difficult for all actors to be fully accountable for their actions?
- The author identifies racism and xenophobia as unwanted effects of online vigilantism. In what ways might there be a very high likelihood for racist and/or xenophobic attitudes to arise out of online vigilantism?
- Can cyber/social media vigilantism be a force for good?

Related RI essay questions:
1. 'The quality of human interaction is diminished by modern communication devices.' How far do you agree? (Cambridge 2023)
2. To what extent has social media devalued true friendship in your society? (Cambridge 2021)
3. Examine the view that having a social media presence is a necessary evil today. (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.' Do you agree? (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
5. 'Social media has caused much damage to societies today.' Discuss. (RI 2019 Y5 Promo)
6. 'There is no such thing as privacy today.' Comment. (RI 2014 Y5 CT1)
7. 'Privacy is dead, thanks to new media.' To what extent do you think this is detrimental to modern society? (RI 2012 Y6 CT1)

Reading 13: World Press Freedom Index (Report for 2022)   EU 1-3 & 5
Reporters Without Borders | 2022

This reading will help you understand:
- The significant increase in polarisation that is amplified by informational chaos, due to media polarisation fuelling divisions within countries
- That this media polarisation is driven by the spread of opinion media domestically as well as media asymmetry between open societies and authoritarian regimes on the international front
- The key role democratic access to information plays in the proper functioning of societies as well as the strengthening of trust, peace and order in international relations

The 2022 edition of the World Press Freedom Index, which assesses the state of journalism in 180 countries and territories, highlights the disastrous effects of news and information chaos – the effects of a globalised and unregulated online information space that encourages fake news and propaganda.

5 Within democratic societies, divisions are growing as a result of the spread of opinion media following the "Fox News model" and the spread of disinformation circuits that are amplified by the way social media functions. At the international level, democracies are being weakened by the asymmetry between open societies and despotic regimes that control their media and online platforms while waging propaganda wars against democracies. Polarisation on these two levels is fuelling increased tension.

10 The invasion of Ukraine (106th) by Russia (155th) at the end of February reflects this process, as the physical conflict was preceded by a propaganda war. China (175th), one of the world's most repressive autocratic regimes, uses its legislative arsenal to confine its population and cut it off from the rest of the world, especially the population of Hong Kong (148th), which has plummeted in the Index. Confrontation between "blocs" is growing, as seen between nationalist Narendra Modi's India (150th)
15 and Pakistan (157th). The lack of press freedom in the Middle East continues to impact the conflict between Israel (86th), Palestine (170th) and the Arab states.

Media polarisation is feeding and reinforcing internal social divisions in **democratic societies** such as the United States (42nd), despite President Joe Biden's election. The increase in social and political tension is being fuelled by social media and new opinion media, especially in France (26th). The
20 suppression of independent media is contributing to a sharp polarisation in "illiberal democracies" such as Poland (66th), where the authorities have consolidated their control over public broadcasting and their strategy of "re-Polonising" the privately-owned media.

The trio of Nordic countries at the top of the Index – Norway, Denmark and Sweden – continues to serve as a democratic model where freedom of expression flourishes, while Moldova (40th) and
25 Bulgaria (91st) stand out this year thanks to a government change and the hope it has brought for improvement in the situation for journalists even if oligarchs still own or control the media.

The situation is classified as "very bad" in a record number of 28 countries in this year's Index, while 12 countries, including Belarus (153rd) and Russia (155th), are on the Index's red list (indicating "very bad" press freedom situations) on the map. The world's 10 worst countries for press freedom include
30 Myanmar (176th), where the February 2021 coup d'état set press freedom back by 10 years, as well as China, Turkmenistan (177th), Iran (178th), Eritrea (179th) and North Korea (180th).

RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire said: *"Margarita Simonyan, the Editor in Chief of RT (the former* Russia Today), *revealed what she really thinks in a Russia One TV broadcast when she said, 'no great nation can exist without control over information.' The creation of media weaponry in authoritarian countries eliminates their citizens' right to information but is also linked to the rise in international tension, which can lead to the worst kind of wars. Domestically, the 'Fox News-isation' of the media poses a fatal danger for democracies because it undermines the basis of civil harmony and tolerant public debate. Urgent decisions are needed in response to these issues, promoting a New Deal for Journalism, as proposed by the Forum on Information and Democracy, and adopting an appropriate legal framework, with a system to protect democratic online information spaces."*
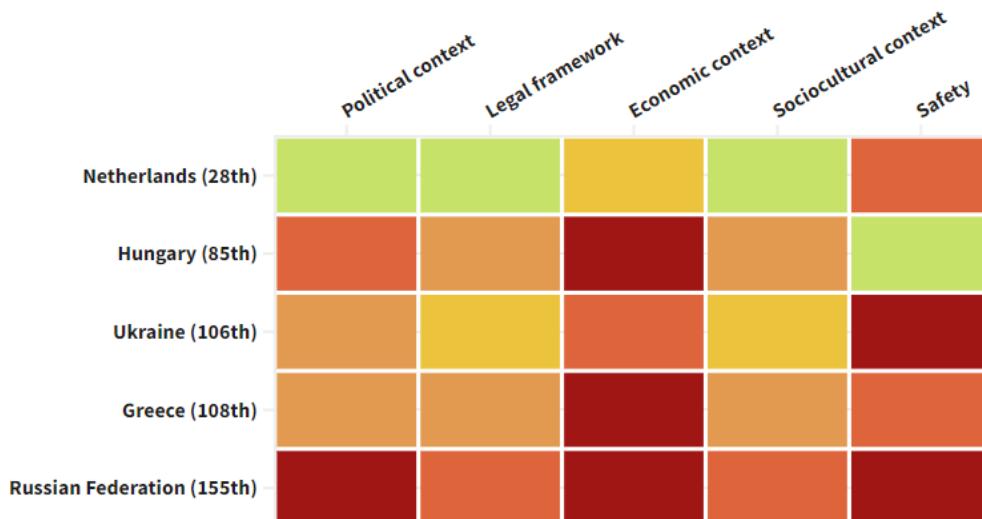
New way of compiling the Index

Working with a committee of seven experts* from the academic and media sectors, RSF developed a new methodology to compile the 20th World Press Freedom Index.

The new methodology defines press freedom as "the effective possibility for journalists, as individuals and as groups, to select, produce and disseminate news and information in the public interest, independently from political, economic, legal and social interference, and without threats to their physical and mental safety." In order to reflect press freedom's complexity, five new indicators are now used to compile the Index: the political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context, and security.

Five complex situations revealed by the new indicators

Situation... ▢ Good ▢ Satisfactory ▢ Problematic ▢ Difficult ▢ Very serious

	Political context	Legal framework	Economic context	Sociocultural context	Safety
Netherlands (28th)	Good	Good	Satisfactory	Good	Difficult
Hungary (85th)	Difficult	Problematic	Very serious	Problematic	Good
Ukraine (106th)	Problematic	Satisfactory	Difficult	Satisfactory	Very serious
Greece (108th)	Problematic	Problematic	Very serious	Problematic	Difficult
Russian Federation (155th)	Very serious	Difficult	Very serious	Problematic	Very serious

Source: RSF World Press Freedom Index (2022 edition)

In the 180 countries and territories ranked by RSF, indicators are assessed on the basis of a quantitative survey of press freedom violations and abuses against journalists and media, and a qualitative study based on the responses of hundreds of press freedom experts selected by RSF (journalists, academics and human rights defenders) to a questionnaire with 123 questions. The questionnaire has been updated to take better account of new challenges, including those linked to media digitalisation.

In light of this new methodology, care should be taken when comparing the 2022 rankings and scores with those from 2021. Data-gathering for this year's Index stopped at the end of January 2022, but updates for January to March 2022 were carried out for countries where the situation had changed dramatically (Russia, Ukraine and Mali).

60

For discussion/reflection:
- The report suggests that 'open societies' (line 8) are losing out to 'despotic regimes that control their media and online platforms' (lines 8-9). Explain how democracies are disadvantaged in such 'propaganda wars' (line 9).
- Christophe Deloire argues that 'the basis of civil harmony and tolerant public debate' (lines 38-39) is weakened when media firms become too ideologically driven. How would you explain the relationship between the former and the latter, particularly in terms of trust?
- How does polarisation and power play a role in the state of press freedom around the world?
- What impact does the spread of misinformation and propaganda have on press freedom?
- In your opinion, in what ways do governments and political leaders contribute to the decline of press freedom? Should they bear greater responsibility for this state of affairs today?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2020)
2. Is regulation of the press desirable? (Cambridge 2017)
3. 'We can no longer rely on the press for the truth.' Do you agree with this view? (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'State censorship of the media is no longer necessary today.' What is your view? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
5. 'It is harder than ever to be a journalist today.' Comment. (RI 2021 Y6 Common Test)
6. 'Now more than ever, government regulation of the media is needed.' How far do you agree? (RI 2020 Y5 Timed Practice)

Reading 14: Hold the press – A primer on Singapore media   EU 1-4
(Adapted from Chapter 20 of "Singapore Incomplete: Reflections on a First World Nation's Arrested Political Development" [2017] by Cherian George.)

This reading will help you understand that:
- While Western democracies see the Press as the Fourth Estate, checking on the possible abuse of power by the government, in Singapore, the Press is seen as having its own interests which may not be for the good of the nation so it is the Press that needs to be controlled.
- The press in Singapore is managed by specific gatekeepers who exercise their power by imposing legal restrictions such as the Internal Security Act, the Official Secrets Act, as well as Newspaper and Printing Presses Act [NPPA].
- The political ideology in Singapore, contrary to that in the West, is that of active support by the Press for those in power. This is achieved by striking the right balance between soft coercion and legal force and pressure, resulting in the press being given sufficient autonomy to still report the news.
- While this model has minimised conflict and not adversely reduced the trust placed in the press, some reform may be required if society's needs are to be properly served.

The media are free to earn profits, but not popular support
Singapore's news media industry underwent a shake-out in 2017, with smaller newspaper titles succumbing to financial pressures. This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Other advanced industrial economies had suffered more crippling closures many years earlier. What was noteworthy about Singapore, though, was the absence of public mourning when the newspapers' deaths were

5   announced.

It was different in 1971. The troubled Singapore Herald carried front-page news of a "Save the Herald" bid led by public intellectuals such as Tay Kheng Soon and Tommy Koh. While it didn't succeed, it tells us that there was once a more affective connection between the people and the press in Singapore. A key reason for the change in public attitudes is of course the internet. People feel much less

10   dependent now on big news organisations. But that's not the whole story. The shift in Singaporeans' attitudes to the press predates the world wide web and social media. It started when Lee Kuan Yew restructured the newspaper industry in the 1970s, turning it away from championing public opinion and community identities, and toward boosting shareholder value and the government's agenda. Lee's intervention was designed to allow the press to survive financially while also making it incapable

15   of satisfying the public emotionally. The system, which has lasted more than four decades, gave the media enough autonomy to perform a generally solid professional service, but never to side with the people against the government.

At its core is a unique piece of legislation enacted in 1974, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. Singapore Press Holdings, the publishing behemoth that owns The Straits Times and all of the

20   country's other daily newspapers and their online vehicles, operates under this law. The other half of Singapore's duopolistic news media scene is more straightforwardly government-controlled. Mediacorp, which monopolises local television news and is a major online news provider, is wholly owned by Temasek.

The NPPA ended the local tradition of cause-driven journalism, turning newspapers into profit-

25   oriented and non-adversarial establishment institutions. The law requires newspaper companies to be listed on the stock exchange, with no shareholder controlling 12 per cent or more of its stock. This rule was ingeniously counter-intuitive. Through most of the 20th century, conventional wisdom held that a government that wanted to control a newspaper would have to own it. Lee was a couple of

30   decades ahead of other rulers in understanding that the profit motive needn't be incompatible with political control, as businessman-publishers might be quite happy to cooperate with a pro-market government like the PAP. He had learnt from his battle with the Chinese-language media that the truly bothersome owners were headstrong publishers like Nanyang Siang Pau's Lee Eu Seng, who put his ideals ahead of profit and even personal safety-he ended up detained for five years under the Internal Security Act.

How the Singapore media asserts political control

35   The way to pre-empt such trouble, Lee Kuan Yew realised, was to ban individual- and family-controlled newspapers, and spread ownership thinly across many shareholders to dilute the influence of any single one of them. It's no coincidence that many of the world's most fiercely independent newspapers are or were family-owned: The New York Times and Washington Post in the United States, and The Hindu and The Indian Express in India, for example.

40   The NPPA also introduced a management share system to guarantee that newspapers wouldn't stray. Shares must be divided into two classes, ordinary shares and management shares, with management shares pumped with 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares. The government dictates who gets to be classed as management shareholders. Non-government companies Great Eastern Life Assurance and its parent, OC BC Bank, are the two largest holders of SPH management shares. Others

45   entrusted with super-voting stock include NTUC Income, Singapore Telecom, DBS Bank and United Overseas Bank. Their common trait is that they are corporations deeply invested in Singapore's political stability.

The NPPA allows the government to stack the SPH board with loyalists. Since the 1980s, the company's chairman has never come from the media industry; the post has always been handed to a former

50   senior public servant or minister. Since the 1990s, even the SPH chief executive position has been reserved for trusted former civil servants. As for who should run the newsrooms day to day, Lee and his successors reluctantly acknowledged that the group editor and chief editor positions were best left in the hands of experienced journalists. However, nobody is given a top job unless the prime minister is convinced of his political reliability.

55   It's not the case that the government intervenes in every news story that relates to its work. Every day, the mainstream media contain news and views that officials wish they didn't. Unlike China's Xinhua and People's Dairy, say, Singapore's Channel News Asia and The Straits Times have enough autonomy to pursue angles that don't make the government look great. But only up to a point. The moment government leaders sense that they may lose control of the agenda, phone calls are made to

60   editors to suppress unwelcome lines of journalistic inquiry or commentary.

When queried about Singapore's limited press freedom, the government's stock answer is that we can't afford to take risks with the extremely sensitive topics of race, language and religion. But the government's pressure tactics are used more often to police out-of-bounds markers that have nothing to do with such sensitive topics. They are about making the executive branch's job easier, by guiding

65   public opinion on matters that are politically controversial. This is in line with the PAP's belief-first articulated by Lee Kuan Yew in 1971-that press freedom must be "subordinated" to the "primacy of purpose of an elected government".

Why Singaporeans continue to trust the media

Despite these controls, the media are trusted by most Singaporeans most of the time. According to government surveys, around three quarters of respondents are satisfied with the quality of

70   newspapers. The communications marketing firm Edelman conducts annual global surveys of trust in institutions. It's tricky interpreting such data, because high trust could be a function of either the media's objective trustworthiness, or successful indoctrination of the audience-the same Edelman study puts China's population among the very top in trust in media. Such caveats aside, the Singapore press has met the market test more successfully than liberal critics assume. Circulation falls are in line

75   with global trends. On the whole, Singapore's mainstream media have not performed worse
      financially than most of their counterparts in liberal democracies.

      There are a few reasons why Singaporeans haven't turned their backs on the media in larger numbers.
      The simplest explanation is that there is much more to life than politics. On most non-political fronts,
      Singaporeans can count on the national media for relevant and reliable accounts of what's going on.
80   Furthermore, the government has a huge impact on people's lives from cradle (baby bonuses) to
      beyond the grave (exhumations for cemetery clearances). Regardless of their political orientation,
      people in Singapore need to keep up with what the government is thinking and doing in multiple
      arenas-its latest procedures for primary school admissions; land releases that will affect property
      prices; adjustments in rules for using MediSave; new financial incentives to promote business activity.
85   If you're looking for timely and accurate information about any of this, you need news organisations
      that are close to the government.

      Of course, beyond providing basic information, most people would also like media to speak up for
      them. A lot of the time, Singapore's press is able to fulfil that role within its available political space.
      After all, the PAP is usually on the same page as the people-it wouldn't have survived as long as it has
90   if it weren't-so there's often no contradiction between journalism that serves the public and
      journalism that serves the government. However, there will always be some issues where public
      opinion deviates from the views of those in power. This is usually when a free press shows its value;
      when an independent newspaper stands up to powerful interests, becomes the people's champion
      and earns their loyalty. But this is precisely when Singapore's media controls kick in. On politically
95   controversial issues, instead of pressuring the government to listen to the people, the press has to
      persuade the people that the government is right.

      Reforming the media's existing model of conflict minimisation
      Hence, the media's chronic inability to meet the aspirations of a large proportion of Singaporeans.
      Some intellectuals go so far as to say that press freedom has become a non-issue, since Singaporeans
100   now have access to the workaround solution of the internet. However, large, formal news
      organisations are still needed to produce regular, sustained and comprehensive journalism for a city
      state as busy and complex as Singapore. It's vital that we push our media-and more importantly their
      political masters-to improve their quality.

      We journalists used to comfort ourselves with the observation that the situation was gradually
105   improving. After all, journalists haven't been locked up under the ISA since the 1970s. The
      government's media relations have also become more professionalised. But, especially since the 2011
      general election, things have gone into reverse gear. Based on what insiders say and what we see
      published, the government micromanages the media more now than 20 years ago. Practices that used
      to be absolute no-no's in the past are beginning to creep in, like journalists letting officials approve
110   angles or even check entire stories before publication. For government-related stories that are even
      mildly controversial, the media switch into news-avoidance mode. Negative facts are buried deep in
      the story. Uncomfortable questions are not asked.

      The public is not fooled, but that doesn't seem to bother government officials who handle the media.
      They appear to consider it a good day's work if headlines and story angles match the government
115   press releases and talking points. Goh Chok Tong once stated that he did not want a "subservient"
      press or "government mouthpiece". Today's officials evidently do.

      There have also been cultural changes in the newsrooms. In the 1990s, my top editors were pro-PAP,
      but they had been socialised into the profession before Lee Kuan Yew restructured and transformed
      the media in the 1980s. As a result, they had a deep sense of what would be lost if they gave in too
120   easily to every government request. They made it clear to us that it was their job, not ours, to
      negotiate with the government and to decide how to balance the professional with the political. At
      our level, we were instructed to think only of our readers; we were scolded and shamed when we got

125 slow or lazy, or wrote stories that sounded like government releases. That generation of editors has left, and the newsrooms are now under journalists who've only known the PAP system. Some seem to have decided to take the path of least resistance.

My former big boss, group editor-in-chief Cheong Yip Seng-a true believer in the Singapore system and whose conservatism used to frustrate me when I worked under him-spotted the warning signs. His 2012 post-retirement book, OB Markers: My Straits Times Story, was a stout defence of the symbiotic relationship between The Straits Times and the PAP. But he also counselled a new

130 generation of politicians to give editors the respect and space to carry out their jobs professionally. The establishment didn't get the message, choosing to react as if Cheong had broken the magician's code, betraying too many secrets about the inner workings of government-press relations.

When Lee Kuan Yew suppressed the authoritarian instinct to nationalise the press outright, it was probably because he saw the value of professional editors who could independently decide how to

135 act in the nation's interests, rather than mindlessly await instructions from government. By those standards, there are already signs that the system is failing. When Lee Hsien Loong collapsed during his 2016 National Day Rally speech, the mainstream media showed itself incapable of thinking on its feet. The national broadcaster appeared shell-shocked. Seized by the fear of saying anything that would get them in trouble, they said nothing, unable even to recount what everyone in the auditorium

140 had seen with their own eyes.

If Singapore journalism underperforms, it is not for want of talent. There are still skilled individuals within Singapore newsrooms. There's also a reserve army of young and extremely able journalists who could be drawn into service. I sometimes fantasise about all these talented Singaporeans coming together to produce the kind of news media that will earn their society's respect and loyalty. It won't

145 happen within my productive life. But perhaps one day.

For discussion/reflection:

- What assumptions are made about the government of Singapore and the press in Singapore to justify the limitations on freedom of the press and the expectation that the press must support the government? In your opinion, have any of these assumptions become less tenable in recent times?
- Apart from the reasons given by the author, why do you think public trust in the responsibility and accountability of the press remains high relative to other societies?
- Do you agree with the author that the 'system is failing' (line 136)? Why or why not? To what extent have there been an overreach in terms of state power in the media industry here?
- Evaluate the effect of the overreach of state power in the media on the nature of the trust between the government and the people.

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:

1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss (Cambridge 2020)
2. 'We can no longer rely on the press for the truth.' Do you agree with this view? (RI 2023 Y6 Timed Practice)
3. 'State censorship of the media is no longer necessary today.' What is your view? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'Freedom of speech is key to building a strong democracy.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)
5. 'Censorship is both harmful and futile in today's society.' Comment. (2014 RI Prelim)
6. How far is the media responsible for promoting democracy in your society? (2014 RI Y6 CT1)

Reading 15: Broader implications of SPH Media circulation scandal

Adapted from Key Questions SPH Needs to Answer About Their Fluffed-up Circulation Numbers | Kimberly Lim | Rice Media | 10 Jan 2023

This reading will help you understand:

- The specific actions SPH Media engaged in when it inflated circulation numbers
- The serious implications, which extend beyond commercial irregularities, for what has generally been considered a standard bearer for mainstream journalism in Singapore. These include the possible erosion of trust between SPH and Singaporeans, misuse of public funds, and concerns about the sustainability of legacy media
- That the manner in which any wrongdoing or abuse of power is managed has a profound impact on how easily trust can be regained. This includes whether incriminating information is revealed or divulged, and whether key perpetrators are taken to task, and how corrective actions are taken

It turns out that people aren't reading our national broadsheets. At least not as many as SPH Media claims. On 9th January, SPH Media admitted in a *Straits Times* report that it had fluffed up its daily circulation numbers by between 85,000 and 95,000 (or between 10 percent to 12 percent). Not a good look for the company housing some of Singapore's biggest news titles across four languages.

5 The discrepancy was discovered in an internal review initiated in March 2022—the same month former Accenture Singapore chairman Teo Lay Lim took over as CEO of SPH Media. Also not a good look? It took alternative news platform *Wake Up, Singapore* (*WUSG*) to break the news on 8th January before *ST* spilled the beans. According to *WUSG*, three senior SPH Media executives will be leaving the company due to the discrepancy. Some hints on the perpetrators were dropped, claiming that they
10 are "industry veterans" with over 50 years of experience between them.

Read All About It (or Not)

Unsatisfyingly, the *Straits Times* report did little to scratch the itch of the (rightfully) curious masses. For what's essentially the dictionary definition of fraud, you wouldn't be able to tell from the headlines. Is it a stretch to say that the scandal was downplayed as "issues with circulation data"? Even Lee Hsien Yang weighed in, urging *The Straits Times* to "call a spade a spade".

15 But the report did offer some insights into how the bogus circulation numbers were derived. Lapsed contracts were included in the statistics, as were copies that were printed, counted for circulation, and then destroyed. Subscriptions were double-counted. Some numbers were simply plucked out of thin air or, in the words of SPH Media's spokesperson, "arbitrarily derived". Just as an influencer's following confers internet clout, a newspaper's circulation numbers give it legitimacy and play a part
20 in attracting advertising dollars. And perhaps the most damning: Funds were funnelled into a project account in order to "purchase fictitious circulation".

That's all we got. The employees responsible weren't named, their involvement reduced to a single sentence by SPH Media's spokesperson: "The staff involved had been taken to task, or had left the organisation." What makes the perfunctory explanation even more troubling is that this is
25 undoubtedly a matter of public interest.

In December 2021, SPH Media was carved out from the mainboard-listed Singapore Press Holdings, becoming its own not-for-profit entity. It was later announced that the government would support SPH Media with up to $180 million per year for the next five years. That's money from the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), mind you.

30   So what are the gaps that SPH Media has yet to address?

Who Are the Personnel Involved?

Some may call it a blame game, but we call it accountability. These aren't the first misbehaving white-collar executives anywhere, and they won't be the last. But what's unusual is the decision to keep their identities from the public. We'd argue that the public at large—as well as SPH Media's readers, advertisers, employees, and Singapore Press Holdings' shareholders—deserve to know the faces

35   behind the fibbed figures.

Unsurprisingly, speculation has been rife. And although SPH Media's spokesperson did not confirm if chief customer officer Eugene Wee is involved in the matter, industry publication *Marketing-Interactive's* sources say he is no longer employed at the company. Wee, previously the head of SPH Magazines, was appointed to the role in March 2021. He was tasked to oversee several audience-

40   related divisions, including circulation, SPHRewards, and customer service.

What Exactly Does 'Taken to Task' Mean?

A key question is how the company is going to clean up the mess.

Don't worry! The culprits will be "taken to task", and "steps to strengthen processes" have been taken, according to SPH Media. All fine and dandy, except for the fact that we still have no idea what any of those phrases *mean*. Have the executives been fired? Dragged into a dungeon somewhere in Toa

45   Payoh? Has their access to ST Premium been revoked?

How Long Has This Been Going On?

What we do know is that the internal review covered the period from September 2020 to March 2022. Were circulation numbers before this period inflated as well? Are there plans to examine past figures?

Not much light has been shed yet, but the issue is clearly on the government's radar. The Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) will launch its own probe, it told *Today*. The results will

50   determine if, and how much, the government will continue funding SPH Media in the future.

Who Bought Into the Fake Numbers?

SPH is a huge legacy organisation. They're trusted. There's no reason for stakeholders and investors to disbelieve their circulation numbers. But if there *were* people who were convinced to park their dollars due to an inflated reach, they deserve to know if they were duped or not. Right now, we don't know if the fibbed numbers were shown to the government too. And perhaps another question that

55   went unanswered: Will SPH make restitutions to the affected parties who bought into it?

If it's any consolation to advertisers, though, it turns out that the agencies they hire do indeed do the homework before sinking thousands of dollars into a newspaper ad. Media agencies that spoke to *Campaign Asia* and *Marketing-Interactive* said that besides circulation, they also look at third-party readership data to determine ad spend.

Why Did They Inflate the Numbers in the First Place?

60   Reacting to the news, journalist and activist Kirsten Han quipped, "Imagine still having to fudge your figures even when you're the only player in the local newspaper business."

A fair point, but a 2019 *Campaign Asia* report painted a pretty bleak picture of the media company's numbers. Even in an industry devoid of major competitors, SPH's media segment saw its profits plunge 44.7 percent for the 2018/2019 financial year. While digital circulation grew by 19.3 percent, print

65   circulation was the problem child, falling by 12.2 percent. Print ad revenue, too, was dismal, dropping by 14.9 percent.

We don't think it's likely that some higher-ups at SPH Media woke up one day and decided to tweak some figures for the hell of it. Was there pressure to hit certain numbers despite the rough outlook for print media? Was this an isolated incident, or is it indicative of deeper issues in how things are run

70   at the company?

Can the Public Still Trust SPH Media Now?

For decades, SPH Media's titles have enjoyed a certain status as the country's newspapers of record. That probably isn't going to change any time soon, what with its lack of competitors and the government's keen interest in keeping them alive.

75 But before the questions we raised are answered, the jury is still out on whether or not the company can redeem itself in the eyes of the public.

Amid this whole debacle, though, let's not forget that journalists do important work. They keep the public informed, hold those in power accountable, and likely have zilch to do with communicating circulation number.

The Legacy of Legacy Media

Here's a hot take in the face of all the flak SPH will take in the next few weeks. What if SPH just
80 becomes a public service broadcaster like the BBC? As a national broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation operates under the United Kingdom's Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. SPH doesn't have to be government-owned, sure, but it could also hold a special position as a statutory corporation like BBC.

With the way it's going now, SPH might as well be a semi-statutory board of the government, with
85 some autonomy to perform a national operational function. No longer will MCI simply have to be informed of SPH Media's total reach and engagement by executives who can inflate numbers—they'll have total oversight.

The matter of editorial independence is another question, though. But then again, it'll just be one of the many queries that remain unanswered.

For discussion/reflection:

- What evidence is provided in the article to support the assertion that inflated circulation figures harm the credibility of media organisations? Why does this matter in Singapore particularly?
- The author argues that advertisers may have been "convinced to park their dollars due to an inflated reach" (lines 52). Explain the relationship between newspaper circulation numbers (or "reach") and how much advertisers are willing to pay newspapers as advertising revenue. Why is it problematic for circulation numbers to be "inflated"?
- How does the author suggest that SPH can address the issue of inflated circulation figures and restore trust in their brand?
- Beyond the loss of trust suffered by SPH, what are the consequences of a general erosion of trust in media, particularly mainstream or legacy media?
- How does the author suggest the media industry can address the challenges posed by changing consumer behaviour and the rise of digital media?
- What key truths and lessons does this scandal demonstrate in terms of ethical considerations, public accountability, and journalistic integrity in the current media landscape?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:

1. Is news today reliable? (Cambridge 2021)
2. Is regulation of the press desirable? (Cambridge 2017)
3. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)
4. 'Traditional media has lost its place in today's society.' Discuss. (RI 2021 Y5 Common Essay Assignment)
5. Are newspapers still relevant in the digital age? (RI 2017 Y5 CT)

Reading 16: Has POFMA been effective? A look at the fake news law, 1 year since it kicked in
Adapted from Has POFMA been effective? By Aqil Haziq Mahmud, Updated 4 Feb 2021 EU1-5

This reading will provide:
- An introduction to how POFMA is supposed to work to protect Singaporeans from the harmful effects of disinformation and 'fake news'
- A discussion of the concerns about POFMA's overreach to the extent of being counterproductive, particularly in terms of inconsistent enforcement, abuse of power and its potential to stifle political discussion
- A preliminary assessment of the effectiveness of POFMA in serving its intended function
- A consideration of how POFMA can be complemented by other types of measures for greater effectiveness

In late January, before COVID-19 was named as such, and before it was declared a global health emergency, Singapore had just confirmed its fourth case. The Ministry of Health announced on Jan 26 that the patient was a 36-year-old man from Wuhan who arrived with his family in Singapore four days earlier. The man had stayed at Village Hotel Sentosa before he was admitted to hospital. Later that evening, a thread on the

5   popular HardwareZone forum popped up with the title: [Breaking] Singapore Reports First Death From New Virus. A 66-year-old man had died after developing severe pneumonia, user Potato salad claimed. Naturally, this was alarming news. By that point, the virus had killed at least 17 people, all in China. The first confirmed fatality outside China would only be reported on Feb 2: A 44-year-old Wuhan man who died in the Philippines.

10   The Singapore authorities moved fast. On the morning of Jan 27, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) Office announced that then-Health Minister Gan Kim Yong had instructed it to issue a general correction direction to SPH Magazines, which runs HardwareZone. The general correction direction required the forum to communicate, publish, broadcast or transmit a correction notice to its users in Singapore. This was the first time that a POFMA order was issued for a COVID-related falsehood. As of

15   11pm on Jan 26, there had been no deaths among confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Singapore, an article on Government fact-checking website Factually clarified. HardwareZone removed the thread before the order was given, The Straits Times reported, but the forum published the correction anyway.

The Ministry of Law (MinLaw) told CNA on Tuesday (Sep 29) that POFMA was needed during the early days of COVID-19 to tackle such falsehoods. "Without intervention, these falsehoods could have spread

20   unchecked, caused public panic and reduced public confidence in Singapore's efforts to combat COVID-19," a spokesperson said. "The use of POFMA clarified the facts quickly and required corrections to be placed alongside the posts at their source, for example, on intermediary platforms like Facebook and HardwareZone."

Dr Michael Raska, an information and cyber warfare expert at the S Rajaratnam School of International

25   Studies (RSIS), said Singapore's society is increasingly affected by disinformation streams through social media. "Different actors are trying to alter what Singapore's Government and population 'knows' or thinks it knows about itself and the world around it." Dr Raska said online disinformation amplifies existing tensions or creates new fracture points within different layers of society. "The consequence is a loss of identity, which weakens societal resilience to xenophobia, extremists ideologies, fake news and complex security

30   challenges," he added. "In this context, POFMA has been trying to raise awareness to the problem of disinformation, prevent the diffusion of disinformation, and actively counter disinformation."

The birth of POFMA
POFMA was passed in Parliament on May 8 last year after a marathon two-day debate. One of the key concerns raised about POFMA, which came into force on Oct 2 last year, was that it could chill free speech and give too much power to ministers as arbiters of truth. The Workers' Party (WP) had opposed the Bill,
35   arguing that the Executive should not be the first to decide what is false.

While experts told CNA that POFMA has not displayed a chilling effect, they said it has inadvertently brought attention to certain falsehoods that could have been dealt with through non-legislative means. Some experts also urged for more transparency in the POFMA process, renewing calls for an independent fact-checking body to be the first to review an alleged falsehood. This was one recommendation brought up
40   during the Select Committee hearings. "We recognise that there are diverse views on POFMA and how it can be refined," the MinLaw spokesperson said. "We will continue to review and fine-tune legislation and relevant processes, so that POFMA can be more effective in tackling falsehoods."
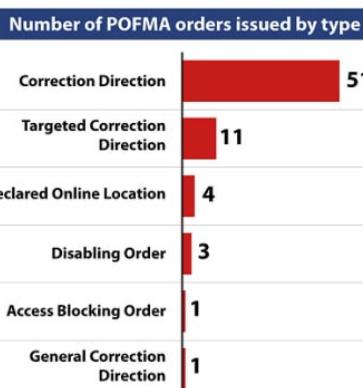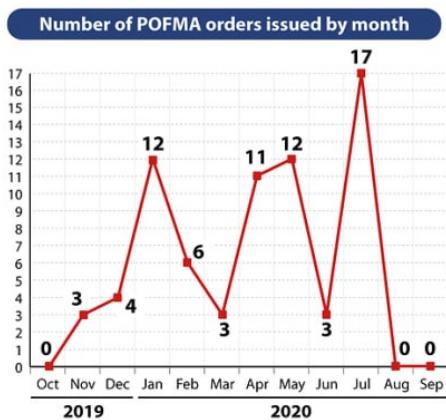
POFMA during Covid-19
Nevertheless, the spokesperson said the legislation must be able to tackle falsehoods regardless of communication medium, and must do so quickly to "break virality". Since the law kicked in, the POFMA
45   Office has issued 51 correction directions, 11 targeted correction directions, four declared online locations, three disabling orders, one general correction direction and one access blocking order.

Correction directions require recipients to post a correction notice and a link to the facts alongside a false statement. Targeted correction directions require Internet intermediaries to communicate a correction notice to Singapore users who accessed the falsehood. General correction directions work the same way,
50   but the correction notice is sent to all of the intermediary's Singapore users.

Declared online locations must carry a notice saying they have a history of communicating falsehoods. Disabling orders and access blocking orders require recipients to block Singapore users' access to online locations containing the false statement. Falsehoods targeted include those related to foreign workers, hanging methods, population plans, PMET jobs, and the salary of Temasek CEO Ho Ching. About half of the
55   falsehoods were related to COVID-19, the MinLaw spokesperson said.

A large majority of POFMA orders issued are correction directions, which MinLaw says do not require the falsehood to be removed and thus encourage "informed, responsible discussions without affecting free speech".

Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said the
60   expeditious issuing of POFMA orders in the early days of the pandemic was critical given the rapidly developing situation. When a Facebook post uploaded on Jan 28 claimed that Woodlands MRT station was

closed for disinfection from COVID-19, the POFMA Office issued a targeted correction direction to Facebook on the same day. On Jan 30, an alternative news website published an article claiming that five Singaporeans were infected by COVID-19 even though they had not been to China. The article was shared on two

65 Facebook pages. The next day, the POFMA Office issued correction directions to the parties involved.

"Instances of how POFMA was used during the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates how it can be used to protect public interest, specifically, safeguarding public health and public safety," said Dr Soon, who was the first to present evidence during the Select Committee hearings. "We recall high levels of anxiety when the outbreak started in January this year. The waves of misinformation from both foreign and local sources

70 exacerbated the fears and confusion experienced by the public, and concerns over whether the Government's response was adequate."

Associate Professor Alton Chua, who studies information and knowledge management at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said POFMA has been used most appropriately when falsehoods exploit racial and religious fault lines to arouse public concern. He pointed to how POFMA was invoked on Nov 28

75 last year after a post on the now-defunct States Times Review Facebook page alleged that a whistleblower, who had supposedly exposed a People's Action Party candidate's Christian affiliations, had been arrested. When Alex Tan, the owner of the Facebook page, did not comply with the correction direction, the POFMA Office issued the same order to Facebook the next day. "The post, which was plainly refuted by the Ministry of Home Affairs, did not gain any traction thereafter," Assoc Prof Chua added. "Here is a case where POFMA

80 was deftly used to nip a falsehood at its bud."

Does POFMA chill free speech?
Assoc Prof Chua said POFMA's legal requirement to post correction notices means "most users now think twice about concocting misinformation deliberately. The Government has given verbal assurances that POFMA does not cover opinions, criticisms, satire or parody," he added. "So those who value free speech may continue to express themselves freely so long as they do not misrepresent facts."

85 Singapore Management University (SMU) law professor Eugene Tan said POFMA has the "salutary effect" of promoting responsible and meaningful public discourse by encouraging people to get their facts right and clarify the basis of their opinions. "It is important to recognise the workings of POFMA often enable the offending online material to remain in the public domain," he said. "In that sense, the chilling effect is, arguably, overstated." Assoc Prof Tan believes the POFMA uses thus far have all had an "arguably

90 reasonable basis". "But the falsehoods could also be dealt with as was done in the pre-POFMA days," he added. "This could be done with the Government issuing a clarification, which is what POFMA also does too."

Choosing other means over POFMA
Assoc Prof Chua gave one example of when he thought POFMA was used unnecessarily, citing how four correction directions were issued on Apr 19 after a number of social media posts alleged that Mdm Ho Ching

95 earned "S$99 million a year". Earlier that day, Temasek had clarified that the allegation was false.

The case has since been brought up in Parliament and is before the courts. The Online Citizen (TOC), which received one of the POFMA orders, sought judicial review over whether the order should be upheld. "This issue was brought up in the previous Parliament and is now under judicial review as to whether it qualifies as a matter of public interest," Assoc Prof Chua said. "Perhaps, instead of bringing POFMA into the picture,

100 all that was needed was for the board of Temasek to explain their stand on the non-disclosure of specific remuneration details of anyone. The case would have blown over without fanfare."
RSIS' Dr Raska said POFMA could have shone an unintentional spotlight on some of the falsehoods it acted on. "POFMA's actions created unintended side effects in countering select disinformation or platforms, some of which might have been strategically irrelevant, which raised their profile," he said.

105   IPS' Dr Soon said POFMA's outcomes "seemed to be different" when it was used against Progress Singapore Party (PSP) member Brad Bowyer and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) last year. In the first use of POFMA since the law kicked in, Mr Bowyer was issued a correction direction on Nov 25 for his Nov 13 Facebook post which implied that the Government controls commercial decisions by Temasek and GIC.

Then on Dec 14, the SDP was issued three correction directions on two Facebook posts and an online
110   article posted on Dec 2, Nov 30 and Jun 8 respectively. The content was related to local PMET employment and retrenchment. In both cases involving Mr Bowyer and the SDP, the POFMA orders came at least 12 days after the offending material was published.

"That could compromise the ability of POFMA in curbing the spread of the falsehoods," Dr Soon said. "In those instances, there was also some public backlash and questioning of the Government's intent, which it
115   subsequently had to explain and give assurance for." For POFMA to achieve its desired impact, Dr Soon said it should be used during exigencies when time is of the essence and corrective information can be released nimbly. "In other situations, considerations on if the falsehood can be rectified (through other means should be made), particularly through public clarification and sharing of evidence," she added.

How POFMA can be improved
SMU's Assoc Prof Tan also suggested ways of improving POFMA's execution, including giving more clarity
120   on why POFMA needs to be used. "The challenge for the authorities is to ensure that POFMA is not 'overused' as that could undermine its effectiveness and salience whenever it is invoked," he said. Dr Raska said the key challenge for POFMA is balancing the need to counter misinformation with "increasing Government transparency".

The MinLaw spokesperson reiterated that POFMA can only be used when two "distinct criteria" are met:
125   There is a false statement of fact; and it affects the public interest. Public interest includes public health and safety, public finances, and confidence and trust in Government agencies and institutions, the spokesperson said. "In deciding whether to use POFMA, the relevant ministers have to determine the falsity of the statement in question and judge whether it is in the public interest to act," the spokesperson added. "The weight of this judgement is placed on ministers in the first instance, as they have the relevant domain
130   knowledge to act quickly as needed, and are also accountable to Parliament and to the electorate.

"However, a minister's direction is open to challenge in court both via an expedited appeal process and via judicial review, which a number of parties have already done." On Sep 17, the Court of Appeal reserved judgment against two appeals by the SDP and TOC against POFMA correction orders it received in separate cases. The cases relate to PMET jobs and hanging methods, respectively.

135   Still, NTU's Assoc Prof Chua feels there is room to introduce "checks and balances" in how POFMA is executed. "For example, before POFMA can be invoked, it needs to be reviewed by an independent body," he said. "The more transparent the review process, the stronger the case for using POFMA becomes."

POFMA critics hold firm
When WP opposed POFMA in Parliament, it cited the Select Committee's report in maintaining that the courts, an independent body or an ombudsman should decide what is false in the first instance. The WP
140   declined to comment for this story.

The PSP has held a similar stand, saying in a statement in December last year that having ministers declare a statement to be false "does not measure up to the standards of transparency and accountability". PSP assistant secretary-general Francis Yuen told CNA that POFMA seems like a "political tool to silence critics and political commentators", pointing to how it has been used against content by opposition parties and

145   members. "POFMA-ing politicians has a chilling effect on free speech and political discourse in Singapore," he said, adding that it is better to have an "open discussion" on the topics brought up.

POFMA during the General Election 2020
In a previous interview with CNA, Law Minister K Shanmugam said the use of POFMA during the recent General Election would not disadvantage the opposition and instead encourage democracy. In the period between the issuing of the Writ of Election on Jun 23 and Polling Day on Jul 10, the POFMA Office issued
150   20 orders. The first three came on Jun 29, when a correction direction each was issued to Alex Tan and State News Singapore, a new Facebook page he was running then. A targeted correction direction was also sent to Facebook. The false statements in question related to cross-border travel arrangements between Singapore and Malaysia.

The month of July saw 17 POFMA orders issued, the most in a month thus far. The orders were issued on
155   each day from Jul 2 to Jul 5. The falsehoods related to foreign students, migrant workers and population figures. CNA received one correction direction on Jul 5 for an article that included comments made by SDP chairman Paul Tambyah on the COVID-19 testing of migrant workers.

SMU's Assoc Prof Tan said the use of POFMA during the recent election was perceived by some as being politically motivated and could have led to even more polarisation of views. "From the authorities'
160   perspective, the temptation is not only present but also greater to use the law during the election," he added. "It doesn't matter that it wasn't politically motivated, because the use of POFMA, arguably, added fuel to fire and breathed life into falsehood. Clarification is the best that can be done. Ultimately, POFMA cannot compel people to believe in what they don't or want to believe in."

"People are the judges of truth"
Mr Yuen said the Government can in general dispel fake claims by publishing the wealth of data and
165   information it has and "demolish the credibility of the author". "This would be more effective than using POFMA. After all, the people are the judges of truth," he added. "The Government should let media outlets or an independent council self-regulate and manage this space." Mr Shanmugam had reiterated during a conference in September last year that technology companies cannot be left to self-regulate due to conflicts of interest in their business model.

170   In Singapore, social media giant Facebook has received 14 POFMA orders so far. This includes directions to post correction notices and disable access to certain pages for users in Singapore. A Facebook spokesperson told CNA that all government requests, including POFMA orders, are "carefully reviewed to assess their legal basis".

"Facebook continues to take considerable action to fight misinformation, including removing fake accounts
175   and harmful misinformation relating to COVID-19, tackling coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and supporting programmes to build digital literacy and understanding," the spokesperson said. "While we share the Singapore Government's commitment to addressing misinformation, we remain concerned about any law that risks stifling expression by empowering a government with the right to decide what is true and what is false." In particular, Facebook believes that a government which can decide what is true or false
180   creates the potential for overreach, and alters the balance of political discourse by allowing one party to unilaterally declare and label content as false.

No silver bullet
With or without POFMA, Assoc Prof Tan said people are not always going to agree with the Government's account or narrative, noting that POFMA is "not the silver bullet to preventing truth decay". "Although

185 POFMA is not a game-changer, it is a useful tool in the Government's legislative arsenal to deal with falsehoods that can undoubtedly harm us," he added.

The MinLaw spokesperson said the use of POFMA does not preclude the Government using other modes to clarify falsehoods, including through its public communications channels. "Domain agencies and ministers may use a variety of modes as they deem appropriate," the spokesperson said.

Nevertheless, Assoc Prof Tan said it is still the public's responsibility to be digitally literate. "Regardless of
190 whether there's POFMA or not, the onus is still on each one of us making discerning choices about what we read, especially on matters that affect us," he added.

For discussion/reflection:
- In your opinion, do you think POFMA is effective in tackling (online) falsehoods? Are there any trade-offs involved and are they worth it?
- PSP assistant secretary-general, Francis Yuen, believes that 'people are the judges of truth (line 165), and that the government would be more successful in addressing fake news by 'publishing the wealth of data and information it has' (lines 163-164) and 'demolish[ing] the credibility of the author' (line 164). What are some dangers/concerns with such an approach/way of thinking?
- How might media regulation laws/policies like POFMA and others affect individuals' ability to trust public institutions, the state or contribute in building 'digital literacy' (line 175) in today's world?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2020)
2. Is regulation of the press desirable? (Cambridge 2017)
3. With the rise of new media, censorship is needed now more than ever. Do you agree? (RI 2015 Y6 CT2)
4. 'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2011 Y5 CT)

Reading 17: Looking Beyond POFMA to Combat Fake News and Misinformation in Singapore
Ryan Chua | Singapore Policy Journal, Harvard Kennedy School | October 24 2021   EU 1-5

This reading will help you understand:
- The limitations and drawbacks of relying on hard regulations and punitive measures to make the online space safer
- The underlying motivations that are leading to the increase in fake news and disinformation, which have an impact on the effectiveness of laws like POFMA
- Alternative measures that do not centre on policing the online space, including independent fact-checkers and enhancing media literacy programmes
- The possible ways to make key stakeholders more accountable in fulfilling key objectives in media literacy programmes

In the past two decades, online communication and social media platforms have become dominant in our lives, serving as tools to advance globalisation, connectivity and the freedom of speech. However, falsehoods have also proliferated, polluting our interconnected information ecosystem. Such falsehoods—whether maliciously spread or not—have served vested interests, leading to potential
5   personal harm to individuals, polarised communities, and diminished trust towards experts, institutions, and technology.

Singapore is among a number of countries that have chosen punitive measures to mitigate online falsehoods, particularly through the introduction of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). While POFMA can be a useful deterrent, it may not be effective on its own
10 against the spread of falsehoods. This essay contends that there are non-punitive alternatives that the Singapore government should consider adopting such as the promotion of media and information literacy as well as experimental approaches such as gamification and "prebunking."

POFMA and hard regulations
In heterogenous, multicultural Singapore, small incidents stemming from misinformation can light a fire that may affect trust towards public institutions and tear apart the fabric of its society. Hence, the
15 Singapore Parliament set up a Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods in 2018 to assess this complex issue and recommend solutions to it. It recommended a multi-pronged approach to combat deliberate online falsehoods, which focused on: (i) nurturing an informed public; (ii) reinforcing social cohesion and trust; (iii) promoting fact-checking; (iv) disrupting online falsehoods, with particular consideration to the role of technology companies; and (v) dealing with national
20 security and sovereignty threats. The Committee highlighted the need for government intervention, through legislation, to "disrupt online falsehoods."

This resulted in the May 2019 enactment of POFMA, which criminalises the deliberate spread of online falsehoods on online communication, social media, and private messaging platforms. Anyone caught contravening the law is subject to a fine not exceeding S$50,000 or a maximum five years of
25 imprisonment, or both. Presently, the government may issue a Correction Direction, where the accused must publish a corrective notice to indicate that the published information is false without necessarily removing access to the falsehood. It can also issue a Stop Communication Direction, where the access to the information is disabled and that technology companies can be ordered to block accounts spreading the information, which is now considered a falsehood. Institutionally, the POFMA
30 Office was established under the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) to administer the Act and provide support and technical advice to cabinet ministers.

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Singapore is not alone in choosing the path of deterrence to combat falsehoods. A number of countries including Germany, France, and Thailand have introduced laws that grant authorities more executive power to deter fake news, allowing them to force social media platforms, websites, and publishers to remove false content. At the time of writing, fact checking reporter Daniel Funke found at least 50 countries that took action against online falsehoods, ranging from hard regulations, such as internet shutdowns, to soft regulations, such as media literacy initiatives and task forces. While he found the effectiveness of such actions hard to assess, he stated that critics saw hard actions as potentially censoring citizens while soft actions were insufficiently meaningful. Given the complex nature of

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falsehoods, governments globally now have an unenviable task. It is now a question of how to regulate fake news, rather than choosing whether to regulate it at all.

POFMA has its fair share of compliments and criticisms, ranging from those that believe it has helped to keep falsehoods in check, reduce public panic, and protect public interest, to those still concerned with the continued rising risks of misinformation despite the enactment of the said legislation. There

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were also worries that POFMA might be abused to silence dissenters of the government. It is also not easy to measure the effectiveness of legislations like POFMA where objectives like combating misinformation can be intangible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has showcased both the strengths and limitations of POFMA. Dr Carol Soon, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that "instances of how POFMA was used

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during the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates how it can be used to protect public interest, specifically, safeguarding public health and public safety." However, fake news still looms large in Singapore's information ecosystem, where a study by the National Centre of Infectious Disease found that six in ten Singaporeans received COVID-19-related falsehoods on social media. An alarming survey at the end of 2020 by the NTU Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information found almost one

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in four Singaporean residents believing a falsehood on DNA-altering COVID-19 vaccines. This raises concerns whether deterrence is the best way forward in curbing the spread of online falsehoods.

Reviewing how information is consumed and disseminated

Before exploring alternatives to punitive measures in combating misinformation, one must first understand why people share falsehoods in the first place. Increasingly, experts observe that online platforms have become a place where rational persuasion has diminished while "affective persuasion,"

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where people receive and share messages with symbolic and emotional value, is pervasive, with collective action being driven by shared feelings and emotions. Cognitive biases, affective polarisation, and ideological sorting are arguably more responsible for susceptibility to misinformation and misperceptions than the media and information environment that facilitates the sharing and exposure of misinformation.

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The advent of such platforms has allowed for direct access between content creators and users, with the former tapping into emotions to engage with the latter. This has remade the rules of the game for the post-truth era digital society where the platforms have amplified populism and stirred emotions.

Alternative approaches to combating misinformation

With a better understanding of how one's emotions and biases can fuel the spread of online falsehoods, there is a need to explore alternative approaches beyond POFMA to combat

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misinformation and maintain the reservoir of public trust towards institutions. This section acknowledges the multi-pronged approach besides legislation advocated by the Parliamentary Select Committee in combating misinformation in Singapore, and adds to it by looking at how these approaches have materialised in Singapore and globally.

75　Although legislative action can be important in managing online falsehoods, POFMA targets statement makers but does not address user-specific issues, including those affecting news literacy, cognitive biases, and emotions. For example, while 76 percent of persons aged 60 and above use smartphones in Singapore, a 2018 survey showed about 40 percent of Singaporeans between 55 and 65 are unable to identify falsehoods.

80　To address this, fact-checking tools such as those by Reuters and AFP (Agence France-Presse), as well as Black Dot Research's COVIDWatch, have been developed to debunk falsehoods immediately or as soon as they are discovered. Media literacy programmes have also been designed to raise awareness and educate the public at large on online falsehoods and the consumption and dissemination of information. Altogether, they are part of media and information literacy (MIL), now considered an essential life skill to critically assess the accuracy, soundness, and sufficiency of information in order
85　to navigate their consumption, production, discovery, evaluation, and sharing of information.

More attention should be focused on MIL as the knowledge and skills required to identify credible news sources, such as fact-checking, verifying, and correcting, are similar to those needed to identify and perhaps reject misinformation. More organisations are promoting such initiatives, such as the Google News Initiative and the International Fact-Checking Network. Such MIL efforts have been
90　established in Singapore, in the form of educational resources and awareness campaigns such as "s.u.r.e. (Source, Understand, Research, and Evaluate)" and "Sure Anot." The Media Literacy Council, a group of public and private stakeholders focused on media literacy and cyber wellness, has also introduced a "Better Internet Campaign" that has disseminated e-resources and launched initiatives including youth-led community projects to promote online safety, responsibility, and civility, as well
95　as develop abilities to discern online content.

While MIL efforts would help build up societal capacity for dealing with the information at hand, it is considered more long-term in the objectives they aim to achieve and the learning to share and embed among citizens in such education and awareness-related programmes. In short, they take time, which we may not be able to afford. Such efforts are further limited by the funding and capabilities of non-
100　governmental organisations to drive MIL initiatives, which do not have profit motives to attain the buy-in of private stakeholders. As such, further resources need to be allocated to help scale MIL initiatives upwards and experimenting with different approaches such as gamification and "prebunking."

Gamification, or the addition of game mechanics and features into non-game environments, would
105　assist in making MIL more interactive and easily understood by laypeople. Prebunking, or the idea of debunking misinformation before it is presented, is grounded on inoculation theory—people's resilience against online falsehoods can be built through pre-emptive exposure towards weakened persuasive arguments. A study trialled this method with vaccine-related conspiracy theories, with results demonstrating that it is possible to inoculate against the harmful effects of such conspiracy
110　theories, but once established, will be resistant to correction.

Further, there are studies that show gamification and prebunking being able to reduce susceptibility towards misinformation across cultures, which would be pertinent to a multicultural society such as Singapore. There are also new methods being trialled such as observational correction, whereby people change their attitudes upon seeing another person being corrected on social media
115　platforms. While the approaches described remain experimental, they have shown potential for rooting out misinformation through people's hearts and minds, rather than by hardening their worldviews.

120 Experimental approaches have begun to take root in Singapore such as an affordable and gamified fake news toolkit aimed at children aged 8–12 years old. These innovative steps against misinformation are crucial to diversify the tools available to the Singaporean government and public to help the average Singaporean not only debunk but also "prebunk" falsehoods, anticipate and prepare against false content, and promote cyber community wellbeing.

Building institutions and technology we can trust

125 There is no doubt that more information needs to be gathered to improve upon current efforts to combat online falsehoods. Hard regulations like POFMA remain the norm and an important tool for policymakers, but they should be mindful of their intended, and especially unintended, consequences that need to be studied further. Alternative approaches have been looked into before and are starting to take shape in Singapore. Such approaches will need to be evaluated further, but should also be afforded the ability, resources, and space to be tested, for the purposes of diversifying and enhancing the capabilities of Singaporeans to detect and identify falsehoods. This would better ensure that we

130 can build back better the foundations and relationships of trust between people, institutions, and technology, and not fracture it further in this post-truth era.

For discussion/reflection:

- Chua asserts that 'rational persuasion' (line 60) has paled in comparison to 'affective persuasion' (lines 60-61), the latter having an added focus on shared feelings and emotions. Is this your experience with online communication? What are some reasons that can help explain this apparent shift? Base your explanations on the characteristics of social media as well as society at large.

- The article suggested three types of strategies that go beyond POFMA to help curb the spread of fake news and misinformation: building one's media and information literacy (MIL); gamification; and 'prebunking' (line 107). Which of the three strategies do you find to be most significant or impactful? How so? Which strategy has the greatest potential in building trust among all stakeholders in society? Which strategy is most effective in strengthening a sense of personal responsibility?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:

1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss. (Cambridge 2020)
2. Consider the role of social media in shaping political opinion. (RI 2023 Y6 Prelims)
3. 'Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.' Do you agree? (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)
4. To what extent can we rely on the media to be truthful in today's world? (RI 2017 Y6 CT2)
5. 'Media regulation is needed now more than ever.' Discuss. (RI 2017 Y5 Promo)
6. 'Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions.' Discuss this with reference to your society. (RI 2010 Y6 CT2)

Reading 18: Social media regulation in different countries

Adapted from Divergent Global Views on Social Media, Free Speech, and Platform Regulation:
Findings from the United Kingdom, South Korean, Mexico, and the United States | John Wihbey et al.
| SSRN | 3 Jan 2022

Citizens and policymakers in many countries are voicing frustration with global social media platform companies, which are, increasingly, host to much of the world's public discourse. Many societies have considered regulation of some kind to address issues such as rampant misinformation and hate speech.

5   To date, however, there has been relatively little data produced on how countries compare precisely in terms of public attitudes toward social media regulation. This report provides an overview of public opinion across four countries – the United Kingdom, South Korea, Mexico, and the United States – furnishing comparative perspective on issues such as online censorship, free speech, and social media regulation. All democracies, the countries nevertheless hold different and often conflicting values with

10   regard to free expression and communications policy preferences.

Global social media platforms face inherent tensions in policy as they grapple with issues around moderating speech and content. While many of the major social media companies are headquartered in the United States and operate at global scale, the norms and sensitivities they encounter in the local speech environments of countries are nuanced and particular. The United States not only has a

15   distinctively wide-open free speech tradition rooted in the First Amendment, but it has long enshrined in law, through Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, protection for Internet sites that host user-generated content. Yet the expectations and rules for what is proper or improper may be quite different cross-nationally. The problem of varying rules and norms across national boundaries has left these global companies in the position of "speech police," as the former U.N. Special Rapporteur for

20   Freedom of Opinion and Expression David Kaye has written, with both enormous responsibility and yet little accountability. Companies often say they comply with local law, but the degree of effort and resources they put into proactive monitoring and moderation can vary widely, and the scale and speed of user-generated content on these platforms often results in lax enforcement without significant human intervention, language skills, and well developed algorithms.

25   The four countries studied here each have their own particular sets of social-political issues and historical factors that influence public attitudes. For example, South Korea typically scores relatively high among Asian countries in global analyses of press freedom, but the country is sensitive to pro-North Korean messages and media, and so allows certain areas of censorship. The British public continues to debate the Brexit issue, and many there believe the 2016 vote to leave the European

30   Union was heavily influenced by online misinformation campaigns. Meanwhile, Mexico is grappling with a high level of violence as a result of power struggles with criminal cartels, who have targeted journalists and other independent sources of information within that society, as well as a lack of government accountability. And U.S. policymakers and technology leaders have focused on election integrity and curbing COVID-related misinformation; at the same time, social media companies'

35   behavior and practices have come under heavy scrutiny by U.S. lawmakers.

Civil society groups involved in formulating the Santa Clara Principles, which articulate standards for content moderation, have been engaging more with global stakeholders. The survey data we present here speak to some of the issues being considered and are consistent with efforts to bring more global understanding. The Santa Clara Principles, which have been endorsed by many major companies such

40   as Facebook (Meta), Apple, Google, Reddit, and Twitter, note specifically that: "Companies should ensure that their rules and policies, and their enforcement, take into consideration the diversity of cultures and contexts in which their platforms and services are available and used, and should publish information as to how these considerations have been integrated in relation to all operational

principles." Understanding diverse cultural norms and preferences, in other words, are a crucial part
45 of responsible content moderation.

Still, challenges associated with global communications technology companies are proliferating and growing more complex. The socio-political context that frames technological questions is changing in many places. Around the world, observers see an erosion of freedom of press and expression, as a political polarization trend affects many societies. There are macro issues such as geo-political
50 competition between technology leaders such as China and the United States, determining which kinds of models may win globally with respect to free expression. There also are nuanced issues of labor, national control, and sovereignty. Further, in volatile situations where civil conflict is present, such as in Myanmar or Ethiopia recently, questions relating to the weaponization of the platforms and the fueling of mass violence may hang in the balance.

55 The data here suggest the complex demands required of social media companies operating at global scale by illustrating differences in public opinion even among countries that may ostensibly seem similar. The findings underscore how different democracies, and their underlying cultures may have different needs and translate and apply their values in nuanced ways. A clear implication is that companies operating cross-nationally must consider how to dedicate the necessary resources to
60 grapple with the diverse needs of global societies. This is particularly true given that the United States (the home country/headquarters location of many of the companies in question, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) is a relative outlier across many dimensions in terms of its public favoring less regulation and more wide-open speech environments – values reflected in many company policies. Survey data relating to potential punishments for social media companies that consistently neglect a
65 given society's rules also show divides among the United States and the other nations surveyed. While there is only modest support in the United States for tough actions against companies (e.g., blocking sites, issuing fines, or criminally punishing executives) that fail to curb the spread of misinformation, publics in South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Mexico are more strongly supportive of such tougher measures.

70 The data in this report point to a number of interesting comparisons and paradoxes. For example, publics in the United States and the United Kingdom – similar countries in many respects, as both are English language-majority democracies with intertwined histories – have different views on support for government regulation of social media platforms, with British respondents supporting increased regulation at an 75.3% level, compared to only 55.5% among Americans. However, it is unclear if
75 British respondents would trust their government to regulate these companies more, given significant declines in trust in the U.K. government post-Brexit.

The data patterns for South Korea may also have intriguing explanations – with 65.7% of South Korean respondents supporting government regulation, South Korea has long prided itself on its commitment to free speech. Indeed, South Korea has been at the top in Asia for freedom of the press ratings for
80 three consecutive years (2019, 2020, 2021 - 42nd out of 180). At the same time, however, South Korea is often regarded as a more collectivistic country (culturally) than some of its Western peers such as the United States. In collectivistic societies, the needs and goals of the group as a whole may be more important than the needs and desires of each individual. Therefore, it may stand to reason that South Korean respondents supported restrictive or regulatory initiatives if certain content (e.g.,
85 misinformation) causes severe distress on others or society at large. Of course, much may depend on the degree of collective trust in government to accomplish the desired ends.

In contrast, while 68.4% of Mexicans agreed that "people should trust authorities when they restrict certain kinds of content as "dangerous" or "hateful," they much less strongly support government regulation. This may be reflective of the current state of Mexican press freedom where protection for
90 journalists - and against "dangerous" or "hateful" content is needed, yet there is limited government accountability in preventing and protecting attacks against press freedom. Overall, the data in this report warrant further exploration to assess how differences in public opinion stem not only from the political system, but also from underlying cultures.

95   As mentioned, one central reality underscored by this report is that companies operating cross-
nationally must consider more deeply how to allocate resources to grapple with the diverse needs of
global societies. The four societies studied here are diverse, but they represent only a small fraction
of the diverse societies across the world. The United States is a clear outlier in many categories of
public opinion with respect to social media. Whether or not the views of tech executives and engineers
in the United States should prevail globally is a matter of ongoing contention, to be resolved only as
100   more nations individually decide to formulate public policy accordingly, to support or roll back current
platform rules for expression.

For discussion/reflection:

- What distinguishes/differentiates the United States as a 'speech [and political] environment' (line 14) relative to most other countries?
- In turn, how might 'norms and sensitivities' (line 13) peculiar to it shape public attitudes towards social media regulation?
- What do you think distinguishes Singapore in this same regard? How do our own 'norms and sensitivities' shape the way Singaporeans view government regulation of social media?
- In general, do you think people are more willing to accept government regulation in traditional media than in social media? Why or why not?
- What about the general media environment that we are in today? Do you think societies are becoming more or less inclined to accept government regulation of social media?
- Given inherent differences across different societal and political contexts, why then do social media companies possess 'both enormous responsibility and yet little accountability' (line 21)?
- The authors offer the explanation that despite being committed to 'free speech' (line 80), South Koreans are generally supportive of government regulation because it is a 'more collectivistic country' (line 82)
- Singapore is also often seen as a rather collectivistic country. How might this shape our general attitudes concerning government control in other aspects of our lives? Select one specific area, carry out independent research and explain the influence of collectivistic culture on social attitudes
- The authors suggest that disparate levels of societal acceptance regarding government regulation of social media arise from differences in 'the political system, but also from underlying cultures (line 94). What other factors (such as a country's history) might lead to disparities in societal acceptance?

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:

1. 'In today's digital age, freedom of expression works better in theory than in practice.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2022 Y6 Common Test)
2. 'Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.' Do you agree? (RI 2022 Y5 Common Test)

SECTION E: MEDIA FREEDOM & REGULATION

Reading 19: Excessive regulation no 'silver bullet' to Internet woes

Adapted from In Southeast Asia, regulatory overreach no silver bullet to Internet woes | Dien Nguyen An Luong | Fulcrum | 17 February 2022

In some Southeast Asian countries, governments have effected restrictions to the Internet in the name of curbing disinformation and safeguarding national security. The key question here pertains to who should be the ones regulating acceptable behaviour online.

5 Across Southeast Asia, governments are looking at or have enacted laws to rein in the Internet and social media in the name of curbing disinformation, safeguarding national security and ensuring Internet sovereignty. Truth be told, such efforts belie the real intent of the authorities: they are exploiting growing public clamour for fighting fake news and disinformation to effect state control.

There is a growing trend, whereby governments use different ways to restrict access to the Internet, particularly social media platforms. Vietnam is amending a decree that has served as the oft-cited
10 legal basis for Facebook and YouTube to restrict or take down content at the behest of the authorities. The amended rule envisages maintaining, and in some cases augmenting, the government's takedown authority in a country where anti-state content has dictated Internet controls.

In Myanmar, the military regime has been floating a new cyber-security law that, among other things, seeks to criminalise the use of virtual private networks — a common workaround for Internet users
15 to circumvent online censorship — to access banned Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In Cambodia, the National Internet Gateway is *de rigueur* for all service providers. It would allow all online traffic — including from abroad — to be controlled and monitored by a government-run portal. It was scheduled to start operating on 16 February but has been temporarily shelved.

20 Another trend sees governments applying vaguely defined and sweeping anti-fake news laws. These have all too often been applied beyond their stated purposes to stifle news that is inconvenient to the authorities or to go after government critics.

In Vietnam, 'toxic content' has been mostly defined as content that is deemed detrimental to the reputation of the authorities and the ruling Communist Party. Rights groups have decried Malaysia's
25 fake news law as a smokescreen to squash online dissent. In Thailand, the ban on the dissemination of 'false messages' has drawn widespread flak for seeking to shield the authorities from public criticism of their handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

To be sure, those regulatory moves come at a time when increased global scrutiny of major Western social media platforms, compounded by the growing concern that Big Tech should not be trusted to
30 self-regulate, has rekindled the debate over the role of Southeast Asian governments in regulating the online sphere. That discussion has never been more important for a region where social media has become part and parcel of daily life of millions of people. Southeast Asia is home to 400 million Internet users, accounting for 70 per cent of its population. 4 of the 10 countries that boast the highest number of Facebook users are also in Southeast Asia.

35 Proponents of the regulatory approach, such as Singapore and the Philippines, point to Germany, a democratic country, to rationalise enacting fake new laws. That justification is however not a panacea, as the devil is in the details. The reason? In countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia, broadly worded anti-fake news measures embolden governments to execute implementation according to their will. The German Network Enforcement Act specifically targets hate speech and
40 other extremist messaging, a much more narrowly defined concept. Under the German law, Internet users — and not the authorities — are the source of complaints about hate speech. They provide the major rationale for platforms to erase hate speech.

In that context, the regulatory approach to disinformation, if adopted, needs to first thoroughly address the crucial question: Who gets to decide the boundaries of acceptable content online? Even in authoritarian countries such as Vietnam, that should not be just the prerogative of the authorities. The drafting of such laws should involve other grassroots actors from the very outset in hashing out the most agreeable definition of what constitutes 'fake news' or 'toxic content'.

But the bottom line is, as experts have repeatedly argued, laws should not be considered the silver bullet to stem the flow of misinformation; they might serve well as a last resort. At the very least, they should not be the first priority box to be checked when addressing this global problem.

In reining in the information chaos, bolstering the power of the press, improving news literacy and appointing independent fact-checking organisations are important. These solutions are obvious but have been largely ignored. For instance, in Vietnam, where the government strictly controls the media, the onus of fighting disinformation has been largely on two ministries: Information and Communication and Public Security. This means that the Vietnamese government's efforts have revolved chiefly around scrubbing online content and accounts flagged by the authorities.

Empirical evidence presented in a recent report by the U.S. Agency for International Development also sought to challenge conventional thinking by arguing that disinformation is the consequence — not the cause — of democratic backsliding across the Asia-Pacific region. According to the report's authors, tackling the scourge of disinformation cannot go without addressing 'societal rifts brought about by worsening socioeconomic inequality and their political manifestations that have resulted in a democratic rollback' in the region and elsewhere.

In that spirit, a focus on improving governance transparency, fixing income inequality and creating a media literate public should take precedence over a fixation on laws and regulations. This approach seems to offer some glimmer of hope at a time when the fight against fake news and disinformation is almost tantamount to relentless rounds of whack-a-mole.

For discussion/reflection:

- Dien Nguyen An Luong asserts that a 'key question [is] who should be the ones regulating acceptable behaviour online' (lines 2-3).
- In what ways is this question significant, either in terms of the relationship between media and governments, or between governments and the governed?
- Would allowing governments to directly regulate social media give them too much control over people? Why or why not?
- What is the author suggesting are governments' 'real intent' (line 6) when it comes to regulating online behaviour? How does he support his view? Do you find it persuasive?
- Do you think government regulation of social media may NOT lead to the outcome that the author fears? Why not?
- In lines 42-43, why does he point out that in Germany, 'Internet users — and not the authorities — are the source of complaints about hate speech'?
- In what ways might having social media users directly involved in regulating hate speech be more effective or desirable?
- In the area of social media regulation, what limits should there be in terms of what governments can / should regulate?
- What are the possible detrimental effects of excessive media regulation?

SECTION E: MEDIA FREEDOM & REGULATION

Reading 20: Of social media platforms' power and the future of digital democracy
Nanjira Sambuli | When bulls fight: of social media platforms' power and the future of digital democracy | Observer Research Foundation | 26 April 2022

The United Nations (UN) Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation dubbed this the Age of Digital Interdependence, with "uncharted peaks, promises untold and the risks of losing our foothold apparent". Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of catastrophic events across the globe have given credence to just how relevant this framing is, as the panel launched a
5 call for digital cooperation to be added to the already packed global governance agenda.

Collectively, the crises that have kicked off this decade elucidate the primacy of digital technologies across political, economic, and sociocultural spheres. The war in Ukraine is particularly significant in spotlighting issues that will impact digitalisation and technology governance. Social media platforms, in particular, have expectedly been a key theatre of information dissemination, communication, and
10 organisation. The Ukraine government has fully leveraged these platforms to speak to the world, and issue calls to action. Ukrainians have also been documenting and narrating on-ground events firsthand. Much of the world is one click away from real-time insights, not only from the established media's news cycle, but also—and possibly to a greater extent—via the apps to which we congregate online.

15 The platforms and tech companies have, in turn, taken unprecedented steps. Value judgements have been made and explicit actions taken—from granting exemptions to prevailing hate speech rules[2], to suppressing circulation of content from Russian state-affiliated media, to downranking sites on search engines (associated with Russian disinformation), to suspending advertising and new sales of tech products and services to Russian audiences. The significance of these unilateral
20 decisions made by search engines, software vendors, and social media platforms warrants critical inquiry. For one, they have challenged the notion that tech companies are neutral actors and mere service providers. What it means for private actors to determine how governments use their platforms is a shift in power balances and technology governance with implications beyond this war. While the tech companies' actions seem to pass muster in western capitals, how they are
25 interpreted by other regions, including by Russia, are an important dimension to observe in the near and long term.

This display of power by these technology companies brings up several urgent questions. Politically, this crisis has been described as a fight for democracy, which is under threat worldwide. Digital democracy, it follows, is what is at stake in cyberspace. What then do we make of these decisive
30 actions by private actors that have impacted the information environment with lasting public consequences? Do the platforms' moves pass the democracy litmus test? As analysts have pointed out, there is little to no legal requirement necessitating the actions these corporations have taken. Instead, these are individual companies making decisions on technology access and reach, with reverberating consequences beyond cyberspace.

35 Related questions are on transparency and accountability for these corporations' (in)actions, and the decisions they can make and have made in other domains and geographies, notably in developing countries. To which governments and laws are they answerable? Are the actions taken symbolic of defending democracy, or are we to take it that defending and enforcing digital democracy is about actions and decisions whose reasoning we collectively are inadequately
40 informed about?

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[2] Meta temporarily allowed Facebook and Instagram posts that called for violence against Russian soldiers and Russian and Belarusian Presidents Putin and Lukashenko

These actions have signalled yet again the sheer power that a few private companies have over the flow of information and on digital communication. In the case of state-affiliated Russian media, these corporations have benefitted from amplifying these platforms in the past, to bolster engagement metrics against which they have served eyeballs for advertisements. While the rationale seemingly is to suppress misinformation and disinformation, it indicates that social media giants are the judge, jury, and executioner of what comprises democracy and democratic action in cyberspace. Russia, in response to Meta's hate speech exemptions, has moved to ban Meta platforms from operating in the country (with the exception of WhatsApp); Russian courts have found the company guilty of engaging in 'extremist activity' and demanded that the tech giants be held accountable for their actions against Russia. Meta's hate speech exemptions have also been condemned by the UN Secretary General. These moves will be noted across various capitals in the world, perhaps as precedent and plausibly as a threat. There will likely be consequences, intended or otherwise.

Take Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy—in June 2021, the government banned Twitter indefinitely for deleting a post by President Muhammadu Buhari that violated its policies. The ensuing events are particularly instructive for the kinds of catalytic effects platforms' decisions can have. The Nigerian government's justifications for the ban—allowing its platform to be used in "undermining Nigeria's corporate existence", Twitter's purported "double standards" and not understanding the local context—were given impetus by Twitter's actions, which did not entail contacting the Nigerian government prior to deleting the provocative post. The seven-month ban on Twitter presented the Nigerian government an opportunity to additionally ban the use of virtual private networks to bypass restrictions and to pursue draconian social media regulations. Nigerian citizens, meanwhile, were caught in the crosshairs, starved off a key means of communication and business for months. While the ban has since been lifted, it is under an emboldened Nigerian government's demands that Twitter establish a local office in the capital Abuja, pay taxes locally, register as a broadcaster, and "commit to being sensitive to national security and cohesion", demands to which the company acquiesced.

If these platforms' executives continue to operate in a manner that is inconsiderate of the disparate geographies, political economies, and complexities within which their users exist, digital democracy could become a pipe dream as the battles between platforms and non-western governments illustrate. For one, it could accelerate the trend of governments ordering shutdowns or instilling bans. These could be facilitated through the passing or amending of cybersecurity, privacy, and data protection laws and regulations to include clauses that infringe on the very freedoms that such legislative instruments are expected to protect.

When bulls fight, it is the grass that suffers. The casualties in the stance that social media platforms have taken on the war in Ukraine are citizens, as was the case in Nigeria. With the Ukraine war, a wall disrupting information exchange across political and ideological divides has been erected, and it will have long-lasting, and possibly, devastating effects for the future of an interconnected information environment. The legitimacy of digital democracy as an ideal is now up for questioning, and that could yield adverse technology governance (re)actions by states. That these corporations are not answerable to many a domestic law could catalyse the formulation and adoption of draconian laws and regulations in other politically fraught contexts, as regimes grapple with how to exert their own power in the digital realm and over the tech giants. If these are the foothills of the digital age, we have ourselves a steep climb ahead.

For discussion/reflection:

- Sambuli warns of actions social media companies have taken, ranging from 'granting exemptions to prevailing hate speech rules' (lines 16-17) to 'suppressing circulation of content from Russian state-affiliated media, to downranking sites on search engines (associated with Russian disinformation)' (lines 17-18).

- What do you think gives social media companies the ability to make such 'unilateral decisions' (lines 19-20)? Is it justifiable for social media companies to be making such decisions unilaterally?

- Which other parties or stakeholders do you think should be involved in such decisions?

- Sambuli also argues that social media companies should be 'neutral actors' (line 21). In what way(s) have they crossed the line or overreached? Do you think social media companies have a responsibility to be neutral?

- In terms of managing / regulating media information about the ongoing conflict, in what way(s) might their well-meaning actions become counterproductive, or do more harm than good?

- Sambuli also argues that such companies have to be accountable for their actions, 'notably in developing countries' (lines 36-37). Why might this be the case? Do you think social media companies have a greater accountability in this regard, than traditional media companies?

- Finally, Sambuli avers that if social media companies continue to act unilaterally, 'digital democracy could become a pipe dream' (lines 69-70). In what way(s) do you think such companies have a responsibility to foster 'digital democracy' on their platforms?

Reading 21: Banning harmful ideas only empowers them   EU 1, 2, 4 & 5

Adapted from Even noxious ideas need airing-censorship only makes them stronger | Jacob Mchangama | The Economist | 31 January 2020

This reading will help you understand that:
- The appearance of hate speech and destructive or pernicious ideas is not a uniquely modern phenomenon, and neither is the struggle to try to manage it
- There exists a historical tensions between freedom and security in public space
- Restricting free speech in the name of liberty can in fact fuel illiberalism, as history suggests

"Freedom of expression has its limits. Those limits begin where hatred is spread … where the dignity of other people is violated." So said Angela Merkel in a speech to the Bundestag last November. The German chancellor grew up under a communist dictatorship and leads a country where vicious propaganda once paved the way for genocide. So few people have stronger credentials when it comes

5   to balancing the pros and cons of free speech. And she is not the only democratic leader concerned about extremism. French President Emmanuel Macron has worried that the internet is becoming a "threat" to democracy.

Ms Merkel and Mr Macron have overseen laws clamping down on online hate speech and fake news, adding new layers to already extensive limits on free speech. Other democracies—including Britain

10   and Denmark—seem poised to follow. And ever-more restrictive "community standards" by Facebook and Twitter fuel this from the private sector. But despite the good intentions, they are charting a dangerous course. Fighting illiberal ideas with illiberal laws not only perpetuates illiberalism. It also removes the "steam valve" that lets noxious ideas get diluted in society rather than build up pressure until they explode.

15   The attempt to rein in the internet in the name of democracy raises problems both in principle and in practice. Removing millions of posts based on subjective criteria such as "hate", "extremism" and "offense" often results in collateral damage that winnow important discussions in society—especially if the role of censor is placed on tech companies whose rules lack transparency and due process.

Speech that directly incites violence obviously must be prohibited and punished (though admittedly,

20   there can be some gray areas). But when policing speech that is clearly non-violent, as many of these rules do, no group is more than a political majority away from being the target rather than the beneficiary of the suppression of ideas. And the efforts by democracies to limit online expression are regularly imitated by authoritarians.

The arguments for and against tolerating extreme speech are well rehearsed. Yet history provides

25   insights that can help democracies draw the boundaries based on centuries of experience. Despite the unprecedented speed and ease of communication offered by the Internet, the dilemmas faced by current generations are hardly unique.

Moral panics tend to erupt whenever the public sphere is democratised and marginalised groups are given a voice through new technology or new rights. The pattern repeated itself with the printing press,

30   newspapers, telegraph, radio, cinema, television and now the internet. At such junctures, those who traditionally shaped public opinion fear that the new, openly-expressive "mob" will be manipulated by dangerous ideas and propaganda that will corrode the social and political order.

From the very start, the concept of free speech has been a perpetual tug of war, usually between the privileged who are willing, within limits, to tolerate open discussion, and previously powerless groups
35   who assert their rights to make themselves heard. The elitist vs. egalitarian conception of free speech stretches back to antiquity. It takes form in the differences between Athenian democracy and Roman republicanism.

In Athens, "*isegoria*" (equality of speech) and "*parrhesia*" (uninhibited speech) were cherished values. "*Isegoria*" allowed all free-born adult male citizens to debate and vote in the Athenian assembly, and
40   "*parrhesia*" allowed them to be candid and bold when expressing opinions. The Roman republic, by contrast, was rigidly top-down and elitist. Ordinary citizens were not allowed to speak in popular assemblies and there was no Roman equivalent of "*parrhesia*". Elements of free speech were included in the Roman concept of "*libertas*", but were mostly exercised by elites in the Senate and magistrates before assemblies.

45   This conflict would repeat itself in the early modern era. When Enlightenment thinkers in the 18th century established the principle of free speech, they looked to Rome rather than Athens. While they demanded a voice in public affairs, they did not necessarily think that everyone should enjoy such a right. Voltaire, for instance, fought hard for freedom of the press (though he never wrote "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"). Yet he welcomed "enlightened
50   despotism" and the privileged status of "*les philosophes*" over the uneducated, whom he felt "must be treated as monkeys" to some degree.

England at the time enjoyed one of the freest presses in Europe. But it rested on a delicate balance between order and liberty. Criticism of the existing order by radicals and the newly-emerging working classes was punished as sedition. Reforms in the first half of the 1800s removed obstacles to speech,
55   and lowering Stamp Act duties (a tax on paper) boosted newspaper circulation. In 1848 John Stuart Mill wrote that the working class had thrown off the yoke of "paternal" government "when they were taught to read, and allowed access to newspapers and political tracts." What had once been considered seditious had become a vital part of democratic citizenship.

While these historical examples of censorship are a far cry from today's restrictions, they are a
60   reminder that an egalitarian concept of free speech depends on recognising the equality of all people, and that one's right to expression is contingent on a willingness to concede the same right to others, be they minority groups or political opponents.

However proponents of limited speech argue that the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century changes the calculus of tolerance. After all, the Nazis shamelessly exploited the press freedom of the
65   Weimar Republic to spread their propaganda, only to ruthlessly censor their opponents once in power in 1933. But despite its liberal ideals, Weimar Germany was not committed to free speech absolutism. In fact, Germany's historical attempts to counter political extremism demonstrate the perils in principle and practice of "intolerance towards the intolerant."

Prior to the Weimar Republic, Bismarck's Imperial Germany cracked down hard on Social Democrats,
70   banning some 1,300 publications and jailing 1,500 people. By comparison, Weimar Germany protected freedom of opinion. But it came with caveats. Cinema and pulp fiction were censored after campaigns against "trash and filth". Hitler was prohibited from public speaking and several Nazi newspapers, including Joseph Goebbels's *Der Angriff* and Julius Streicher´s virulently anti-Semitic *Der Sturmer*, were frequently banned or their editors imprisoned. Democratic politicians warned that
75   press freedom had become "the most poisonous weapon against democracy". Draconian measures were introduced to curb political extremism.

Not only did this fail to stem the tide of national socialism, it often had the very opposite effect: it played into the hands of Nazi propaganda. Goebbels proudly proclaimed *Der Angriff* Germany's "most frequently banned daily." The censorship didn't stop huge Nazi electoral gains that helped bring Hitler
80 to power. Once in power in 1933, the Nazis eagerly exploited these democratic but illiberal precedents to target the opposition press until it could be crushed entirely. And yes, they surely would have censored their opponents anyway, but having the mechanisms already in place was convenient and made it easier for them to attack their opponents for hypocrisy.

Today we are reaching a historic crossroads for free speech. The internet is the new public sphere. But
85 it presents the same challenges as did radio a century ago and the printing press before that. Far-right websites and leaders not only attract readers with their venom, but parlay criticisms, victimhood and censorship into a seductive lure to strengthen their appeal.

The history of free speech suggests that these restrictions are themselves dangerous. It winnows the internet's initial promise of global "*parrhesia*", the uninhibited speech of ancient Athens. If the
90 content prohibitions grow, some of those excluded from the public sphere might be the 21st-century equivalents of history's suppressed reformers. After all, both Gandhi and Martin Luther King were imprisoned for nonviolent protests by the leading democracies of their day.

Free speech remains an experiment in exposing society to new ideas. No one can guarantee the outcome of allowing everyone an equal voice. And all freedoms come with costs and risks. But history
95 suggests that suppressing ideas empowers them, while giving all human thought an airing is the best way to advance societies committed to freedom, democracy and tolerance.

For discussion/reflection:
- Mchangama argues that attempting to regulate online speech 'raises problems both in principle and in practice' (lines 15-16). Explain in your own words the distinction between the two and categorise the problems Mchangama identifies in Reading 21 accordingly.
- Do you think it is realistic or feasible for societies today to practise '*parrhesia*' or 'uninhibited speech' (line 39)? What might be key differences between Athenian society during which parrhesia was originally practised and modern societies? How likely is it that unity and trust is forged given modern trends in various domains today?
- Mchangama claims that free speech requires people's 'willingness to concede the same right [to free speech] to others, be they minority groups or political opponents' (lines 62-63). What barriers are there that might prevent this from happening?
- Do you agree with the author that the internet 'presents the same challenges as did radio a century ago and the printing press before that' (line 86) or is the advent of the internet and social media fundamentally different?

Related Cambridge essay questions:
1. 'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss (Cambridge 2020)
2. Consider the role of social media in shaping political opinion. (RI 2023 Y6 Prelims)
3. 'State censorship of the media is no longer necessary today.' What is your view? (RI 2022 Y6 Timed Practice)
4. 'Freedom of speech is key to building a strong democracy.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2020 Y6 Common Essay Assignment)

Reading 22: After a 'post-truth' presidency, can America make facts real again?   EU1-5

Eoin O' Carroll | Christian Science Monitor | 4 February 2021

This reading will help you understand that:
- America is at a crossroad in terms of the need to re-establish truthful and responsible politics
- There is a need for political and scientific leaders to take the lead and overcome misinformation, disinformation and 'post-truth' politics
- The stakes are high, in that 'post-truth' politics have resulted in a severe lack of trust between the people and political institutions instead

A common theme in U.S. inaugural addresses is for the newly sworn-in president to identify what he sees as the country's biggest problem. For Ronald Reagan, it was government overreach. For Barack Obama, it was "our collective failure to make hard choices." For Franklin Roosevelt, it was fear itself. For Joe Biden, it was a breakdown of national cohesion, common purpose, and reality's most
5   fundamental distinction. "There is truth, and there are lies," said President Biden. "And each of us has a duty and responsibility ... to defend the truth and to defeat the lies."

That an incoming U.S. president devoted part of his inaugural address to insist that facts are, in fact, factual reveals just how much of a beating the truth has taken. Over the past five years, politics have motivated huge swaths of the American public to abandon not just facts, but also the system of logic
10   and standards of evidence used to establish facts in the first place. This phenomenon is widely known as "post truth."

It didn't start with Donald Trump and hasn't ended with his departure. But his presidency pushed the boundaries. Notable falsehoods ranged from the seemingly petty, such as his inflation of inauguration attendance and his apparent altering of a National Weather Service map with a Sharpie, to the
15   momentous, such as his claims that China was paying for U.S.-imposed tariffs or that the coronavirus pandemic was "very much under control." Most damaging were his baseless claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. On Jan. 6, those claims culminated in a mob of Trump supporters storming the U.S. Capitol, an attack that cost the lives of five people.

Now, a new president has arrived with a stated priority on truth-telling. But as important as that can
20   be, many experts on public discourse say solutions need to extend beyond the corridors of Washington into our news outlets, schools, and neighborhoods. They'll range from the institutional to the interpersonal. Overcoming the post-truth era will require a renewed public emphasis not just on science, but also on thinking scientifically or critically.

If a healthy democracy requires grassroots engagement, many observers also see a need for
25   institutional change at the top. President Biden has sent strong signals that he intends to push for just that. The scientific community has largely welcomed his selection of advisers with strong research backgrounds, particularly his elevation of a science adviser to a Cabinet-level position. His decision to rejoin the Paris Agreement on climate change showed his acceptance of a scientific consensus that Mr. Trump flouted. President Biden's "wartime" strategy to combat the pandemic has also drawn
30   praise as a fact-grounded response.

That said, it remains to be seen how broadly Mr. Biden and his now-ascendant fellow Democrats in Congress will actually hew to scientific understanding. Mr. Biden's coronavirus policy, for instance, departs considerably from the scientific consensus that the most effective way to combat the virus's spread is with a national stay-at-home order, a move that some of his own science advisers had called
35   for, prior to walking back their comments.

Climate policy under Mr. Biden may similarly reveal an attempt to balance scientific understanding with political expediency. He calls for full-scale efforts to address climate change, yet has kept the door open to the process known as fracking – the injection of water, sand, and other chemicals into bedrock formations to extract fossil fuels. Fracking has consistently been shown to be a driver of
40 global warming, but has also greatly contributed to the rise of the United States as a global exporter of fossil fuels.

A tool of authoritarians
The Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol illustrated how the unmooring of politics from facts can threaten the very foundations of democracy. During the Second World War and the years that followed, writers like George Orwell and Hannah Arendt memorably described how pervasive, bald-faced political lying
45 serves the interests of totalitarianism, for example. "Post truth is the political subordination of reality," says Lee McIntyre, a research fellow at the Center for Philosophy and History of Science at Boston University and the author of the 2018 book, "Post Truth." "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced ideologue," he says, paraphrasing Arendt. "It's the person for whom true and false and right and wrong don't exist."

50 But in recent years, misinformation – and its intentional sibling, disinformation – have come to play an outsize role in American politics, thanks in part to the rise of social media. A study published in October by the German Marshall Fund of the United States found that, from 2016 to 2020, Facebook interactions with news articles from sites that publish false or misleading content rose by 242%, with much of the increase happening in 2020. "The structure of how we share information about the world
55 has been radically decentralized," says Dr. Leiserowitz. "We've entered a world in which anyone can be a journalist, a contributor to the discourse. But everyone is also expected to be an editor, to distinguish between what's real and what's not."

None of this is to suggest that Americans don't care about the truth. They clearly do: The same poll showed that more than 8 in 10 Americans are concerned about the spread of false information. As
60 Nancy Rosenblum, a Harvard University professor emerita of Ethics in Politics and Government, points out, people don't typically deny empirical reality when, say, calculating their grocery budgets. "We don't do this outside of politics," she says.

Near the end of Mr. Trump's presidency, America's institutional patience for misinformation and conspiracy theories seemed to begin wearing thin. Following the Capitol attack, Mr. Trump was
65 banned by Twitter and Facebook. On Thursday, the U.S. House of Representatives voted largely along party lines to bar Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia from serving on committees, in light of her record of inflammatory and unfounded statements rooted in conspiracy theories. "Somebody who's suggested that perhaps no airplane hit the Pentagon on 9/11, that horrifying school shootings were pre-staged, and that the Clintons crashed JFK Jr.'s airplane is not living in reality," said Senate minority
70 leader Mitch McConnell, in an uncharacteristically harsh rebuke of a fellow Republican.

Fighting lies with facts – and science
How can Americans more broadly elevate the place of facts in political discourse? The solution lies in education, says Mona Weissmark, an adjunct associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. "People are not, in high school or in college, trained to have any kind of scientific reasoning background," says Dr. Weissmark.
75 "They can't make sense of the conflicting information."

Dr. Weissmark says that scientific thinking – an approach that tests facts empirically, examines assumptions, considers alternative hypotheses, invites others to challenge conclusions, and whose

findings always remain open to revision – can be taught. One simple, effective technique for combating falsehoods is called inoculation theory, says Dr. Leiserowitz. Research indicates that
80 offering people gentle descriptions of misinformation and a counterargument in advance can help them ward off future lies. For instance, you could say to someone, "You may hear that there is no scientific consensus on global warming. But, in fact, surveys have found that 97% of climate scientists agree that human-caused climate change is happening."

"When you inform people of that ahead of time, you're training them to become more critical
85 consumers of information," Dr. Leiserowitz says. Such efforts to plant seeds of truth may not work with everyone, given human tendencies such as "motivated reasoning" (reaching the conclusions one desires) or "confirmation bias" (interpreting new information in a way that supports one's prior viewpoints).

But faith in falsehoods is by no means irreversible. The political scientists Ethan Porter of George
90 Washington University and Thomas J. Wood of Ohio State University have been testing the issue in survey research since 2016. "We found that when presented with factually accurate information, Americans – liberals, conservatives and everyone in between – generally respond by becoming more accurate," they wrote in Politico last year.

From skeptic to realist
Public debate over climate change has been a forerunner of wider battles today. Investigative
95 journalists have revealed that scientists at big fossil fuel companies knew about climate change decades ago but kept their findings secret. Instead of taking action, they bankrolled skeptics to spread doubt.

One of those skeptics was Jerry Taylor, who, from the late-1980s to the late-2000s was, in his words, a "superspreader of misinformation" about climate change. Most of that time was spent as the head
100 of the Cato Institute's energy and environment program, where he would assail the claims of climate scientists on broadcast news segments, and share convincing but scientifically skewed talking points with journalists.

Today, however, Mr. Taylor is president of the Niskanen Center, a Washington, D.C., think tank that advocates, among other things, a carbon tax. What happened? As Mr. Taylor tells it, his journey from
105 denialist to realist began in the mid-2000s, after he appeared on TV with a climate expert Joe Romm. Mr. Taylor says that Dr. Romm challenged him to go back and re-read the source material they were disputing. He did, and he found that Dr. Romm was right. From there on, Mr. Taylor says that he took greater care with checking his sources and challenging the assertions of Cato's scientific advisers. Gradually, Mr. Taylor's views came to align with those of mainstream scientists who said that
110 humanity's influence on the climate is significant, and with those of mainstream economists who said that the costs of inaction greatly outweigh the costs of action.

Mr. Taylor doubts, however, that his own conversion experience can be widely replicated. He offers two reasons for this. First, part of his job at Cato was to engage his opponents' ideas, and doing so requires a degree of intellectual honesty. Second, Mr. Taylor found that he was becoming less
115 ideologically libertarian and less resistant to the idea of collective action in some circumstances. "I began to lose faith in the broader libertarian catechism that I was swimming in," he says. Mr. Taylor's willingness to examine the facts without ideological prejudice, alongside an openness to changing one's mind, are key elements of the scientific method. But these elements are not being cultivated by today's conservative elite, he says.
A "crisis of trust"

120   Even if U.S. schools were to begin emphasizing scientific reasoning above all else, change wouldn't come overnight, says Dr. Weissmark at Northwestern. One reason is that any post-truth reconciliation will need to address emotional pain as well as promote scientific reasoning, she says. Dr. Weissmark says that today's ideological polarization is correlated with an increase in stress, anxiety, and interpersonal problems that are unlikely to go away by themselves. "The divide is so deep, and
125   it's playing out in how people take in facts," she says.

Some observers say that it's this lack of trust – between individuals and between individuals and institutions – that will need to be overcome for America to return to a fact-based political culture. "This crisis of truth is really also a crisis of trust (in the institutions and practices of democratic governance and the belief that more often than not these function in fair and reliable fashion)," writes
130   Cynthia Hooper, an associate professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.

This crisis is "making it difficult for people on either side of the political spectrum to embrace ideas of moderation or champion rhetoric about 'coming together.'" Lee McIntyre, the Boston University philosopher, agrees that rebuilding trust is "the only way forward. ... When we begin to talk to one
135   another again, that's when we grow some trust," he says.

But how?
Harvard's Dr. Rosenblum points to a concept as ancient as it is familiar: neighborliness. "The sphere around home is absolutely vital, says Dr. Rosenblum. "Take COVID as an example," she says. "When people would say 'how are you feeling today,' it becomes an intimate important question. It can be the last preserve of reciprocal and democratic relations."

140   Dr. Rosenblum, who dislikes the phrase "post truth" and prefers "national reality disorder," expects that it will linger in state and federal politics for perhaps another decade, but is ultimately optimistic that it will come to an end. "The beating heart of democracy has always been civil society," she says, citing how groups like 350.org have rallied public support for climate action over the past decade. "The kind of opposition that changes the minds of the public has come from civil society."

For discussion/reflection:
- In lines 8-10, Eoin O' Carroll provides an explanation of 'post truth'. Based on what you have read, explain the 'post truth' phenomenon in your own words.
- Lee McIntyre argues that "[t]he ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced ideologue [but] the person for whom true and false and right and wrong don't exist." (lines 47-49) Explain what you think McIntyre means by this.
- Explain the distinction between 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' (line 51).
- The author warns of a lack of trust (line 126) between Americans and their political leaders. Do you think there is a similar relationship between Singaporeans and our political leaders? What could account for the differences between America and Singapore? Base your answer on different considerations, such as history, societal mindset, and political climate.

Related Cambridge/RI essay questions:
1. Is news today reliable? (Cambridge 2021)
2. 'We can no longer rely on the press for the truth.' Do you agree with this view? (RI 2023 Y6 TP)
3. 'It is harder than ever to be a journalist today.' Comment. (RI 2021 Y6 CT)
4. 'We can never rely on social media to convey the truth.' Do you agree? (RI 2020 Y6 Timed Practice)
5. 'Social media has made the world a more dangerous place.' Discuss. (RI 2020 Y5 Timed Practice)
6. 'Media regulation is needed now more than ever.' Discuss. (RI 2017 Y5 Promo)
7. 'All news is fiction.' Comment. (RI 2016 Y5 CT)
8. Discuss the impact of new media on social cohesion in your society. (RI 2012 Y6 Prelim)

Reading 23: Belonging Is Stronger Than Facts: The Age of Misinformation   EU 1-5

Max Fisher | New York Times | 7 May 2021

This reading will help you understand:

• Why the causes driving the current age of misinformation is not due to a lack of accurate information
• The three preconditions that increase the vulnerability of societies to misinformation
• How it is almost impossible to ensure greater trust, responsibility and accountability in society due to effects of ingrouping, the rise of populist leaders, and the ubiquity of social media

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There's a decent chance you've had at least one of these rumors, all false, relayed to you as fact recently: that President Biden plans to force Americans to eat less meat; that Virginia is eliminating advanced math in schools to advance racial equality; and that border officials are mass-purchasing

5   copies of Vice President Kamala Harris's book to hand out to refugee children. All were amplified by partisan actors. But you're just as likely, if not more so, to have heard it relayed from someone you know. And you may have noticed that these cycles of falsehood-fueled outrage keep recurring.

We are in an era of endemic misinformation — and outright disinformation. Plenty of bad actors are helping the trend along. But the real drivers, some experts believe, are social and psychological forces

10   that make people prone to sharing and believing misinformation in the first place. And those forces are on the rise. "Why are misperceptions about contentious issues in politics and science seemingly so persistent and difficult to correct?" Brendan Nyhan, a Dartmouth College political scientist, posed in a new paper in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

It's not for want of good information, which is ubiquitous. Exposure to good information does not

15   reliably instill accurate beliefs anyway. Rather, Dr. Nyhan writes, a growing body of evidence suggests that the ultimate culprits are "cognitive and memory limitations, directional motivations to defend or support some group identity or existing belief, and messages from other people and political elites." Put more simply, people become more prone to misinformation when three things happen. First, and perhaps most important, is when conditions in society make people feel a greater need for what social

20   scientists call ingrouping — a belief that their social identity is a source of strength and superiority, and that other groups can be blamed for their problems.

As much as we like to think of ourselves as rational beings who put truth-seeking above all else, we are social animals wired for survival. In times of perceived conflict or social change, we seek security in groups. And that makes us eager to consume information, true or not, that lets us see the world as

25   a conflict putting our righteous ingroup against a nefarious outgroup. This need can emerge especially out of a sense of social destabilization. As a result, misinformation is often prevalent among communities that feel destabilized by unwanted change or, in the case of some minorities, powerless in the face of dominant forces.

Framing everything as a grand conflict against scheming enemies can feel enormously reassuring. And

30   that's why perhaps the greatest culprit of our era of misinformation may be, more than any one particular misinformer, the era-defining rise in social polarization. "At the mass level, greater partisan divisions in social identity are generating intense hostility toward opposition partisans," which has

"seemingly increased the political system's vulnerability to partisan misinformation," Dr. Nyhan wrote in an earlier paper.

35 Growing hostility between the two halves of America feeds social distrust, which makes people more prone to rumor and falsehood. It also makes people cling much more tightly to their partisan identities. And once our brains switch into "identity-based conflict" mode, we become desperately hungry for information that will affirm that sense of us versus them, and much less concerned about things like truth or accuracy. In an email, Dr. Nyhan said it could be methodologically difficult to nail down the

40 precise relationship between overall polarization in society and overall misinformation, but there is abundant evidence that an individual with more polarized views becomes more prone to believing falsehoods.

The second driver of the misinformation era is the emergence of high-profile political figures who encourage their followers to indulge their desire for identity-affirming misinformation. After all, an

45 atmosphere of all-out political conflict often benefits those leaders, at least in the short term, by rallying people behind them.

Then there is the third factor — a shift to social media, which is a powerful outlet for composers of disinformation, a pervasive vector for misinformation itself and a multiplier of the other risk factors. "Media has changed, the environment has changed, and that has a potentially big impact on our

50 natural behavior," said William J. Brady, a Yale University social psychologist. "When you post things, you're highly aware of the feedback that you get, the social feedback in terms of likes and shares," Dr. Brady said. So when misinformation appeals to social impulses more than the truth does, it gets more attention online, which means people feel rewarded and encouraged for spreading it. "Depending on the platform, especially, humans are very sensitive to social reward," he said. Research demonstrates

55 that people who get positive feedback for posting inflammatory or false statements become much more likely to do so again in the future. "You are affected by that."

In 2016, the media scholars Jieun Shin and Kjerstin Thorson analyzed a data set of 300 million tweets from the 2012 election. Twitter users, they found, "selectively share fact-checking messages that cheerlead their own candidate and denigrate the opposing party's candidate." And when users

60 encountered a fact-check that revealed their candidate had gotten something wrong, their response wasn't to get mad at the politician for lying. It was to attack the fact checkers. "We have found that Twitter users tend to retweet to show approval, argue, gain attention and entertain," researcher Jon-Patrick Allem wrote last year, summarizing a study he had co-authored. "Truthfulness of a post or accuracy of a claim was not an identified motivation for retweeting."

65 In another study, published last month in Nature, a team of psychologists tracked thousands of users interacting with false information. Republican test subjects who were shown a false headline about migrants trying to enter the United States ("Over 500 'Migrant Caravaners' Arrested With Suicide Vests") mostly identified it as false; only 16 percent called it accurate. But if the experimenters instead asked the subjects to decide whether to share the headline, 51 percent said they would. "Most people

70 do not want to spread misinformation," the study's authors wrote. "But the social media context focuses their attention on factors other than truth and accuracy."

In a highly polarized society like today's United States — or, for that matter, India or parts of Europe — those incentives pull heavily toward ingroup solidarity and outgroup derogation. They do not much favor consensus reality or abstract ideals of accuracy. As people become more prone to

75 misinformation, opportunists and charlatans are also getting better at exploiting this. That can mean tear-it-all-down populists who rise on promises to smash the establishment and control minorities. It

can also mean government agencies or freelance hacker groups stirring up social divisions abroad for their benefit. But the roots of the crisis go deeper.

80 "The problem is that when we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it's not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone," the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci wrote in a much-circulated MIT Technology Review article. "It's like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium. Online, we're connected with our communities, and we seek approval from our like-minded peers. We bond with our team by yelling at the fans of the other one. In an ecosystem where that sense of identity conflict is all-consuming, she wrote,
85 "belonging is stronger than facts."

For reflection/discussion:
- Of the three social and psychological factors highlighted by the author - ingrouping, populism, and predominance of social media – which do you think is the most powerful force in the light of misinformation cases involving Singapore? Support your answer by providing some local contexts as to what the local socio-political environment for Singaporeans are like today.
- Identify the 'opportunists and charlatans' (line 76) who are making use of misinformation for their own gains.
- Zeynep Tukekci suggests that social media represents 'an ecosystem where that sense of identity conflict is all-consuming' (line 85). Explain what he means and provide some examples to support your interpretation.

Related RI essay questions:
1. 'Social media disconnects more than it connects.' Discuss. (RI 2021 Y5 Common Essay Assignment)
2. To what extent has the Internet led to a narrowing rather than a broadening of perspectives? (RI 2016 Y6 CT2)
3. Discuss the impact of new media on social cohesion in your society. (RI 2012 Y6 Prelim)
4. 'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2011 Y5 CT)

Reading 24: Falsehoods fire up online battle to control narratives of Israel-Hamas war EU 1-5

Joyce Lim | The Straits Times | 22 October 2023

> **This reading will introduce you to the:**
> - Proliferation of misleading content and viral posts related to the Israel-Hamas conflict and the adverse effects on the public's understanding of the war
> - Tactics used by bad faith actors to spread disinformation and dupe readers or viewers
> - The vested interests of governments and non-state actors in shaping the narrative around the conflict in accordance with their own agendas
> - Features of social media platforms that contribute to the spread of misinformation and disinformation
> - Global implications of the information war on global stability, particularly the framing of the conflict as a religious one between Jews and Muslims
> - Need for critical media literacy and discernment

A murky war of disinformation is being waged online by both Israeli and Palestinian supporters attempting to control the narrative in the wake of a deadly blast at a Gaza City hospital on Tuesday that killed hundreds of people and sparked protests in the Middle East.

5 In viral posts since debunked, a Facebook account masquerading as the Israeli military's Arabic-language page claimed responsibility for the blast. Separately, a user on X, formerly known as Twitter, falsely claimed to be an Al Jazeera journalist who had a video of a Hamas rocket landing in the hospital. These are just two instances of the proliferating online misinformation as Israeli and Palestinian officials blame each other for the blast and, more broadly, the war.

A swathe of misleading content online

As the ground battle between Israel and Hamas rages on, social media platforms such as X, Telegram,
10 Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are rife with content attempting to shape narratives of the war. Experts say that some of this is misinformation, or content that is simply inaccurate, while some is disinformation, defined as content that is intended to mislead.

Spreading alongside real stories of human suffering are shocking but unverified accounts that have sometimes entered mainstream political discourse before they are deemed factual. For instance,
15 claims that Hamas had beheaded babies and toddlers, which have not been independently verified, were referenced in remarks by United States President Joe Biden on Oct 11. A US official later clarified that neither the President nor the administration had seen evidence of this.
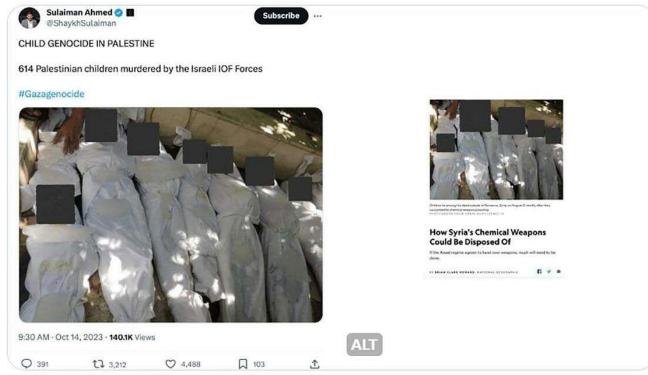
People seeking a closer look at the war have found themselves duped into viewing old content
20 masquerading as fresh footage. This is used in part to "create a sense of outrage", said Dr Jean-Loup Samaan of the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. For example, a widely shared image on X purportedly depicting the Israeli murder of Palestinian children was actually taken in Syria in 2013, said BBC journalist Shayan Sardarizadeh, who covers disinformation.

BBC reporter Shayan Sardarizadeh demonstrating that an image purportedly of deceased Palestinian children is unrelated to the current war. PHOTO: SCREENGRAB FROM SHAYAN86/X

Several clips from the video game Arma 3 have been cast as footage from the war, including one which
25   has been viewed more than 2.7 million times.

And a viral TikTok video showing children in cages, who some social media users said were Israeli while others said were Palestinian, was uploaded before the war even began, according to Israeli disinformation watchdog FakeReporter.

Israeli disinformation watchdog FakeReporter demonstrating that a viral TikTok video of children in cages pre-dated Hamas' Oct 7 attack on Israel. PHOTO: SCREENGRAB FROM FAKEREPORTER/X

Speculation that undermines established
30   narratives has also surfaced. A conspiracy theory alleging that Hamas had help from inside Israel in planning the Oct 7 attack has spread across social media, according to a study by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab published on Oct 12. "The danger of mis/disinformation and propaganda further inflaming an already boiling conflict remains as high as ever," the study said.
Many voices with a particularly virulent streak

35 The emergence of false and misleading content on the Israel-Hamas war is to be expected, said experts. "Like any conflict, like the conflict in Ukraine at the moment, there is always an element of misinformation or disinformation on both sides to make their narrative the most compelling," Dr Samaan told The Straits Times.

40 While it is not easy to discern what lies behind this cacophony of voices online, Dr Samaan said that governments and non-state actors have an interest in supporting information campaigns backing their respective agendas. "Hamas will conduct an information campaign that emphasises the brutality of the Israel Defence Forces' operation on Gaza, while Israel's government will report on Hamas' terrorist tactics to consolidate the legitimacy of its ongoing operation," he said.

45 Third parties to the conflict are also looking to shape the narrative to serve their broader interests, including "to portray the American response as part of the problem", Dr Samaan added. Associate Professor Marc Owen Jones of the Hamad bin Khalifa University in Qatar said individuals also have a role to play. "The polarisation of the conflict means that people on both sides are less willing to accept that 'their side' may be capable of brutality, so people may share false narratives simply because they agree with them," the disinformation expert told ST. The misinformation and disinformation surrounding the Israel-Hamas war, while not necessarily of a larger scale than past conflicts, are 50 "particularly virulent", said Prof Jones.

One contributing factor is that social media platforms have "backed away from user safety and content moderation, meaning that there is less censorship of fake news and hate speech", he said. Another factor is that individuals can also "propagate misinformed views faster and to a broader audience" by paying to become "verified" premium users on X or to use the "promote" function on TikTok, noted 55 Assistant Professor Saifuddin Ahmed from Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

According to US-based media analysis firm NewsGuard, nearly three-quarters of the most viral posts on X advancing misinformation about the Israel-Hamas war in the first week of the conflict were pushed by "verified" X accounts. Users of X can pay US$8 (S$11) a month, or US$84 a year, to receive 60 a blue-tick verification on their profiles and have their posts prioritised by X's algorithm.

It will get worse
The spate of online misinformation and disinformation surrounding the Israel-Hamas war is unlikely to have reached its peak. "The battle of narratives will probably get tougher and more intense after the Israelis start their ground invasion," said Dr Samaan.

65 One danger for the international community is the ability of these narratives to go beyond the Middle East, the experts say. "The most dangerous narrative," said Dr Samaan, is one that argues "that this is not just a conflict between Israel and Hamas, but a conflict between a Jewish entity and Muslims".

Malicious actors on social media and also some international media organisations are guilty of framing the sensitive underlying issues as a religious conflict, said Prof Saifuddin, noting that such narratives are "a concern for any multicultural society, including Singapore".

70 "(We) must not take social media information at face value but seek out information from reliable and multiple sources. It is crucial to recognise that most misinformation and disinformation operate by exploiting our emotions rather than appealing to our rational thinking," he said.

For reflection/discussion:
- Which do you think is a more serious problem: 'misinformation' (line 11) or 'disinformation' (line 12)? Based your analysis on the prevalence vs severity of the problem.
- Why would various state and non-state actors seek to 'make their narrative the most compelling' (line 36)?
- Apart from Israel and Hamas, what 'third parties to the conflict' (line 36) can you identify and how are their 'broader interests' served through the shaping of the media narrative surrounding the conflict?
- Explain how 'polarisation' and a lack of trust between 'people on both sides' (line 46) worsens the problem of mis/disinformation.
- What reason(s) could there be for why the spread of falsehoods surrounding the current conflict between Israel and Hamas is 'particularly virulent' (line 50)? What role may filter bubbles play?
- Based on lines 51-60, summarise the reasons why the nature of social media platforms has also worsened mis/disinformation.
- Why is the narrative that the Israel-Hamas war is 'a religious conflict' (line 69) the 'most dangerous' (line 65)?

Related RI essay questions:
1. 'The quality of human interaction is diminished by modern communication devices.' How far do you agree? (Cambridge 2023)
2. Consider the role of social media in shaping political opinion. (RI 2023 Y6 Prelims)
3. 'Now more than ever, the media needs to exercise greater responsibility.' Do you agree? (RI 2021 Y5 Promo)
4. To what extent has the Internet led to a narrowing rather than a broadening of perspectives? (RI 2016 Y6 CT2)
5. 'We can never rely on social media to convey the truth.' Do you agree? (RI 2020 Y6 Timed Practice)
6. 'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true? (RI 2011 Y5 CT)

Reading 25: How Finland starts its fight against fake news in primary schools   EU 2 & 5
Jon Henley | The Guardian | 29 Jan 2020

This reading will help you understand:
- Why it is vital to build media and information literacy from a very young age
- Why it is important to adopt a cross-department/cross-agency approach to combatting misinformation
- Why it may be more productive and responsible to first arm citizens with misinformation-fighting tools rather than to tell them what's right or wrong all the time

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You can start when children are very young, said Kari Kivinen. In fact, you should: "Fairytales work well. Take the wily fox who always cheats the other animals with his sly words. That's not a bad metaphor for a certain kind of politician, is it?"

With democracies around the world threatened by the seemingly unstoppable onslaught of false information, Finland – recently rated Europe's most resistant nation to fake news – takes the fight seriously enough to teach it in primary school.

In secondary schools, such as the state-run college in Helsinki where Kivinen is head teacher, multi-platform information literacy and strong critical thinking have become a core, cross-subject component of a national curriculum that was introduced in 2016.

In maths lessons, Kivinen's pupils learn how easy it is to lie with statistics. In art, they see how an image's meaning can be manipulated. In history, they analyse notable propaganda campaigns, while Finnish language teachers work with them on the many ways in which words can be used to confuse, mislead and deceive.

"The goal is active, responsible citizens and voters," Kivinen said. "Thinking critically, fact-checking, interpreting and evaluating all the information you receive, wherever it appears, is crucial. We've made it a core part of what we teach, across all subjects."

Whole-of-society approach

The curriculum is part of a unique, broad strategy devised by the Finnish government after 2014, when the country was first targeted with fake news stories by its Russian neighbour, and the government realised it had moved into the post-fact age.

Successful enough for Finland to top, by some margin, an annual index measuring resistance to fake news in 35 European countries, the programme aims to ensure that everyone, from pupil to politician, can detect – and do their bit to fight – false information.

"This affects all of us," said Jussi Toivanen, chief communications officer for the prime minister's office. "It targets the whole of Finnish society. It aims to erode our values and norms, the trust in our institutions that hold society together."

Finland, which declared independence from Russia in 1917, is on the frontline of an online information war that has accelerated markedly since Moscow annexed Crimea and backed rebels in eastern Ukraine five years ago, Toivanen said.

Most campaigns, amplified by sympathetic far-right, nation-first and "alternative" Finnish news sites and social media accounts, focus on attacking the EU, highlighting immigration issues and trying to influence debate over Finland's full NATO membership.

Resistance is seen almost as a civil defence question, a key component in Finland's comprehensive security policy. Toivanen said: "We are a small country, without many resources, and we rely on everyone contributing to the collective defence of society."

The programme, piloted by a 30-member, high-level committee representing 20 different bodies from government ministries to welfare organisations and the police, intelligence and security services, has trained thousands of civil servants, journalists, teachers and librarians over the past three years.

"It's a broad-based, coordinated effort to raise awareness," said Saara Jantunen, a senior researcher from the defence ministry who has been seconded to the prime minister's office. "Like virus protection on your computer: the government's responsible for a certain amount, of course, but ultimately it's up to the individual to install the software."

Starting them young
For Kivinen, who returned to Finland after a career in international education to head the French-Finnish school in Helsinki and pioneer the information literacy programme in schools, no one is too young to start thinking about the reliability of the information they encounter.

"Kids today don't read papers or watch TV news, which here are OK," he said. "They don't look for news, they stumble across it, on WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat … Or more precisely, an algorithm selects it, just for them. They must be able to approach it critically. Not cynically – we don't want them to think everyone lies – but critically."

Fake news, Kivinen said, is not a great term, especially for children. Far more useful are three distinct categories: misinformation, or "mistakes"; disinformation, or "lies" and "hoaxes", which are false and spread deliberately to deceive; and malinformation, or "gossip", which may perhaps be correct but is intended to harm.

"Even quite young children can grasp this," he said. "They love being detectives. If you also get them questioning real-life journalists and politicians about what matters to them, run mock debates and real school elections, ask them to write accurate and fake reports on them … democracy, and the threats to it, start to mean something."

He wants his pupils to ask questions such as: who produced this information, and why? Where was it published? What does it *really* say? Who is it aimed at? What is it based on? Is there evidence for it, or is this just someone's opinion? Is it verifiable elsewhere?

On the evidence of half a dozen pupils gathered in a classroom before lunchtime, it is an approach that is paying off. "You must always fact-check. The number one rule: no Wikipedia, and always three or four different and reliable sources," said Mathilda, 18. "We learn that basically in every subject."

Lila, 16, said she had grilled local politicians for a live panel discussion on the local radio station. Alexander, 17, said he had learned a lot from devising a fake news campaign. Asked why fake news mattered, he said: "Because you end up with wrong numbers on the side of a bus, and voters who believe them."

Priya, 16, said education was "the best way to fight it. The problem is, anyone can publish anything. There's not much a government can do when they're faced with big multinationals like Google or Facebook, and if it does too much it's censorship. So yes, education is what's most effective."

Part of that continuing education is also provided by NGOs. Besides operating an effective fact-checking service, Faktabaari (Fact Bar), launched for the 2014 European elections and run by a volunteer staff of journalists and researchers, produces popular voter literacy kits for schools and the wider public.

Teaching rather than telling
"Essentially, we aim to give people their own tools," said its founder, Mikko Salo, a member of the EU's independent high-level expert group on fake news. "It's about trying to vaccinate against problems, rather than telling people what's right and wrong. That can easily lead to polarisation."

In the run-up to Finland's parliamentary elections last April, the government went so far as to produce an advertising campaign alerting voters to the possibility of fake news, with the slogan "Finland has the best elections in the world. Think about why".

Similarly, Mediametka has been developing and working with media literacy tools since the more innocent days of the early 1950s, when its founders were motivated mainly by fear of the irreparable damage that comic books might do to the minds of Finnish children.

These days, the NGO, part-funded by the culture ministry, organises ed-tech hackathons with inventive Finnish start-ups in a bid to develop "meaningful materials" for schools and youth groups, said its executive director, Meri Seistola.

"We work with pictures, videos, text, digital content; get our students to produce their own; ask them to identify all the various kinds of misleading news," said Seistola: from propaganda to clickbait, satire to conspiracy theory, pseudoscience to partisan reporting; from stories describing events that simply never happened to unintentional errors of fact.

Finland has something of a head start on information literacy, ranking consistently at or near the top of international indices for press freedom, transparency, education and social justice. Its school pupils have the EU's highest PISA score for reading.

"The level of trust in national institutions, in the media, in society as a whole, does tend to be higher in the Nordic countries than in many others," said Faktabaari's Salo. "But that means we really need even greater vigilance now, to prepare ourselves for the next phase. Because we have more to lose."

For discussion/reflection:
- Identify the key strategies used by Finland to combat misinformation and its spread.
- Compare the strategies that Singapore has been using: (i) What are we doing that is similar? (ii) What are we doing that is different & why? (iii) What strategy/ies might we want to adopt & why?
- What are some other countries doing to combat misinformation and its spread? How do they differ from Finland's & Singapore's?
- In the light of information security and public trust in state management of misinformation, how do current policies and efforts done locally compare to Finland's?