Tackling the fake news phenomenon - legislation and other factors

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)

Online falsehoods or fake news as they are commonly called refers to the " false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting". With the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, people now have more avenues to get their news other than through traditional sources such as print and broadcast media. Where previously journalists have to exercise due diligence when reporting the news, fake news are " promoted on social media to deceive the public for ideological and/or financial gain". Fake news gained prominence in 2016 with the election of President Donald Trump. Since then, concerns have grown " that fake news may cause confusion in the fact-checking process and eventually undermine an informed citizenry". Locally, the Singapore government had convened a Select Committee to look into the fake news phenomenon. The Committee recently released its recommendations, among which was the introduction of new legislation to combat fake news. While the government's proactive approach in tackling fake news is commendable, I disagree that more laws are needed to tackle fake news. Singapore is known for its tough censorship laws, with the Republic ranked 151st in the World Press Freedom Index.

As noted by human rights group, Maruah, in their written submission to the Select Committee, Singapore's existing laws such as the Telecommunications Act, the Defamation Act and the Sedition Act, had been and are effective and sufficient in dealing with fake news. Being a multi-racial society, Singapore places utmost importance in maintaining social harmony among the different communities and anyone caught intentionally sowing discord is swiftly dealt with by the law, as seen by the 2016

conviction of the editors of the defunct socio-political site The Real Singapore. That is not to say that existing laws cannot be updated to keep up with the times. As suggested by Dr Cherian George, a media studies professor at the Hong Kong Baptist University, the Government should look into addressing the existing and potential issues caused by new technologies such as social media. Prevailing regulation lack the ability to efficiently deal with fake news which are mostly spread through social media.

A common recommendation heard by the Select Committee was to have technology companies remove or block fake content to prevent Singaporeans from accessing them. For instance, in the US, Facebook and Google are removing fake news sites from their platforms as these sites violate their content policies. Facebook, which faced criticisms over its role in the spread of fake news in the 2016 US presidential election, had taken steps to address how it handles fake news, such as collaborating with 3rd-party fact-checkers to identify and flag fake news on its platforms. Whether existing laws are updated or new laws are introduced to curb the spread of fake news, we must ensure that such laws do not stifle the right to freedom of expression. Political debate makes for an informed society and in this current climate of fake news, the Government needs to tread a fine line in identifying fake news and legitimate political discourse. If new laws are seen to be suppressing society's right to free speech, this could create fear and suspicion of the Government and further reinforced the perception that the Government will clamp down on anything that opposes it. Hence, it is important that any new legislation that the Government intend to pass to

tackle fake news needs to be thought of carefully and with sensitivity. This means balancing the need to maintain social harmony and the society's right to free speech. We have seen how fake news have given rise to right-wing ideals in the West in today's politically charged climate. Politicians in the West have tapped into the fears and worries of their countrymen by spreading fake news that work to their advantage, endearing them to those disillusioned by the current state of affairs, and sowing discord among fellow countrymen, especially those who oppose their policies.

While Singapore's politics are not as liberal as those in the West, the country has experienced social upheavals in the past, most notably the riots in the 1950s and 1960s wherein the press had played a role in inciting racial violence. Those events had helped in enacting Singapore's tight censorship laws to prevent such devastating events from re-occurring. Till this day, these laws and their enforcement have proven to keep the flow of information in check, thus confirming that current legislation is effective even in the growing threat of fake news. What is needed to combat fake news is not new legislation, but is the education and equipping of society with media and digital literacy skills so that they will have the capability to distinguish between fact and fake.

New legislation or getting technology companies to be gatekeepers on their platforms threaten the freedom of the Internet and may not fully address the problems arising from the proliferation of fake news. By having media and digital literacy skills, society will be able to view news that are presented to them critically and questioned the sources from which the news gets their

information from. Fake news has become one of the major threats to global democracy as it undermines the truth and spread misinformation, giving rise to the risk of political disorder. While the easy solution is to introduce new legislation to tackle fake news, it is more important, in the long run, to empower the masses with the knowledge and skills to critically examine the news they receive. It does not matter how many new laws are proposed and implemented as part of efforts to tackle fake news because as long as the masses lack these vital set of knowledge and skills, they will continue to be susceptible to fake news.