

## Singapore has always been at war with Oceania

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10<sup>th</sup> October 2019

**Fake news may be politicised more than ever with the revelation that the Singaporean government will now decide what is real and what is not. Social media providers in the state will now be required to display warnings next to content alleging that it is false, if the authorities deem it to be so, with punishments ranging from \$1m SGD to ten years in jail for material that is ‘malicious and damaging’. This not only stifles free speech and debate but gives power to the dangerous precedent that truth is what the powerful make of it.**



Nobody denies that fake news is a real and pressing problem for journalism, business and politics across the entire world, nor that genuine measures to identify and castigate it are necessary. The problem is, that it relies more than anything else on empirical evidence and impartiality, and for anybody to disclaim ownership of the truth puts the entire edifice of unbiased, independent journalism at risk. The typical measures by which the veracity of a piece is judged – the credibility of the author and organ, the sources cited, the degree to which they are replicated – may be beyond reproach but can still be slapped with a ‘fake news’ banner if it is so decided. Equally, a piece that is obviously clickbait or riddled with errors and inadequate sources can completely avoid being castigated. And while the individual reader may still retain enough critical faculties to judge for themselves, if the fake ‘fake news’ (so by that double negative, just news) begins to be removed and outright banned, then the goalposts are moved and we lose the ability to make an independent judgement based on all the facts, and only facts.

This also sets a precedent that the truth is what is acceptable to those in power, rather than what is actually the case. The media is no stranger to fabricated or exaggerated claims, but previously these have always carried the veneer of being at a remove from the very cores of power (even if we know that brigades and efforts are in many cases state-sponsored). If the state itself has the power to judge what is and is not fake, then this immediately politicises both media and the conclusions presented. A piece deemed to be fake could just as easily be distasteful because of its arguments, rather than what those arguments are based on.

By this thinking, a law designed to ‘criminalise falsehoods’ could in fact criminalise the very people looking to expose those falsehoods.

The law does not necessarily cover official newspaper sites and media (to the degree that any of these are 'free' in Singapore), but this is a double-edged sword. Anything provocative, revolutionary or controversial on social media (which is the more person-driven channel where comment is likely to be 'bolder') can now be censored, just as easily from a political point of view as from a factual one when the government is the one doing the censoring, and anything fake can be maintained so long as it reflects their desires.

*"The Party told you to disbelieve the evidence of your eyes and ears,"* Orwell writes in 1984. *"It was their final, most essential command"*. The potential this law offers for the suppression of debate and the ultimate truths cannot be underestimated. Not only does it politicise the news, but it enforces the right of the super state to act as gatekeeper to facts and apply its own tests. Never has it been more important to defend the power of facts over opinion, and this Singaporean law unfortunately has any benefits outweighed by the degree to which it can attack the very freedoms it is supposed to ensure.

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