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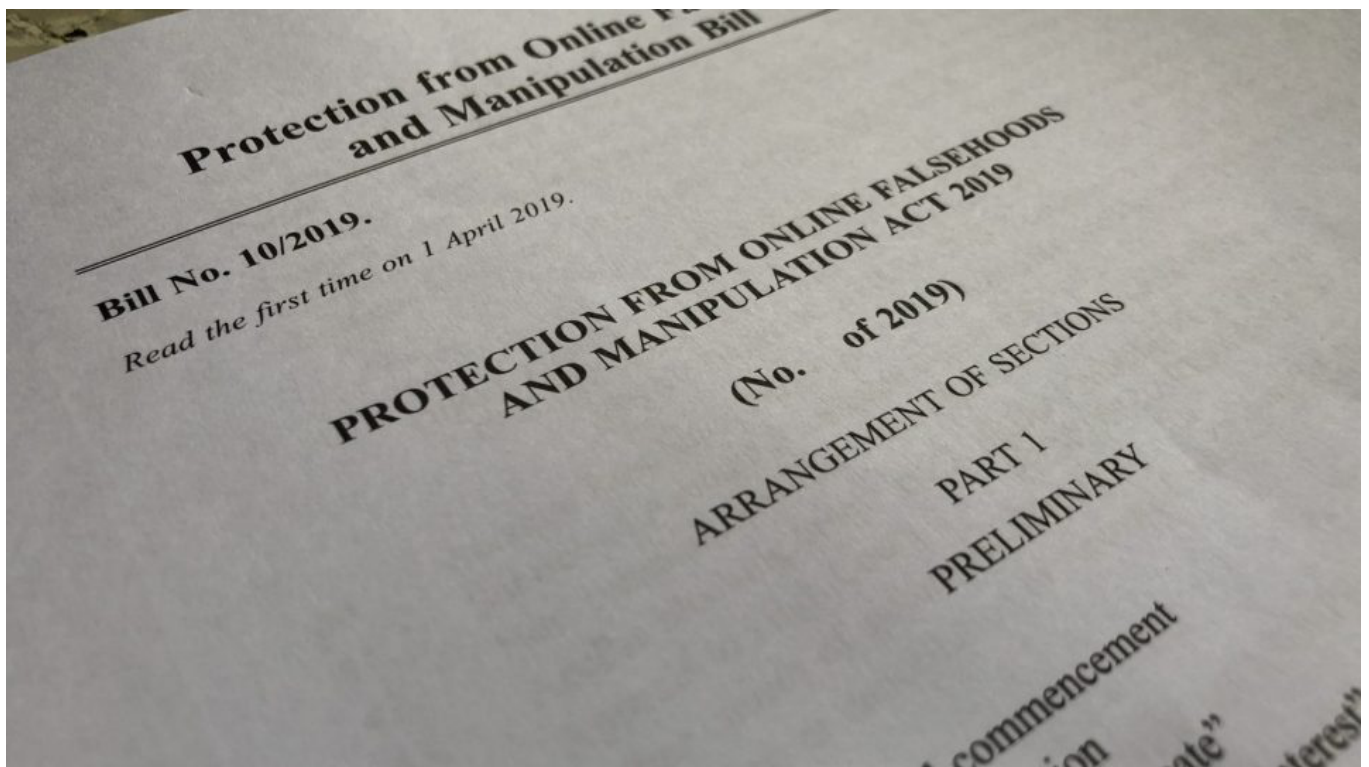
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Academic Freedom in Singapore and the “Fake News” Law

The Singapore government is seeking to pass new legislation to deal with “fake news” and misinformation on the Internet. Critics have already raised concerns about freedom of expression and press freedom, but less discussed thus far are issues related to academic freedom in the city-state.

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In recent years, Singapore's globally recognised and “world class” universities have done exceptionally well in science and engineering, and less well in the humanities and social sciences. This is not by accident. In the latter, especially when it comes to research about Singapore society, we have much room for improvement.

Some challenges academics face have been raised by Professors Linda Lim and Pang Eng Fong in [commentaries](#), as well as [Nominated Member of Parliament Walter Theseira](#) in Parliament.

Two issues are particularly noteworthy: one, limited access to information about the population and the government; and two, a conservative university culture partly stemming from academics' fears of offending the government.

Every law comes into existence in specific social contexts. Their likely effects, intended and unintended, have to be understood within those contexts. Where local research is already stymied by the two factors cited above, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill, recently tabled in Parliament, if passed, is likely to further dampen scholarship about Singapore.

[Read the FAQ about the “fake news” law here.](#)

Climate of fear

Why are academics fearful and how does this affect what we study?

Among academics in Singapore, it is an open secret that work is circumscribed by the government's desires. At conferences and workshops, academics awkwardly and regularly “joke”, tilting their heads to glance over shoulders, about their remarks being heard by “the government”. Students and younger scholars regularly ask if they should avoid certain topics because of “sensitivities”.

These anxieties have been generated through multiple levers of governmental power. Government officials maintain close contact with academics and directly communicate their preferences and displeasures. Academics are publicly named and sometimes chastised when perceived as critical of the government; without equal access to mainstream media, our right to respond is curtailed. High-profile examples of public shaming, or the denial of jobs or tenure, send shudders through the community.

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On many important topics about Singapore, research is directly commissioned by government agencies, and academics must seek permission before releasing

findings. The government has influence over the funding sources that academics rely on for research.

Thus, academics are painfully and constantly aware that speaking directly about government—persons, institutions, or policies—comes with multiple risks. We regularly decide what to study (or not) based on what is acceptable to the government; temper our words in discussing state practices and policies; hold back on critiques even when we see things worth scrutiny.

Chilling effects on academic freedom

In this environment, where fear of reprisal already makes it difficult to think clearly and research boldly, the proposed law on online falsehoods is likely to have further chilling effect on scholarship, and indeed thought.

What does this law have to do with academic freedom? Its targets are ostensibly falsified accounts published online. Indeed academics are not the most at risk as targets of the proposed law's measures.

There are two main concerns. The first is the major discretionary powers it accords to ministers to be the arbiters of “facts”. The second concern is the way the Bill defines a “false” statement: “a statement is false if it is false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears.”

This means that an individual who calls attention to matters where information is incomplete—which might be due to the state guarding data tightly—faces high risks. Fears of being partially incorrect will likely further encourage self-censorship.

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Younger scholars—students or untenured faculty—are particularly vulnerable to accusations that their claims in ongoing work and developing ideas are “not factual”. Worry over this will chill critical thinking well before individuals put ink to paper.

While the Bill is ostensibly directed only at straightforward factual falsehoods, the mechanism for limiting it to these cases is an after-the-fact application to the courts—too daunting for most people to contemplate, and at odds with how academics typically conduct discussion.

The complex issue of “facts”: according to

whom

While “fake news” is a serious concern, what counts as “fact” is not straightforward.

The reality of the empirical world is that very few things are “only” or stable facts.

Most of what we can say about social phenomenon, how we say it, and in what direction, depends deeply on standpoint and interests. There can be a simple “fact of the matter” at a granular level: whether it rained yesterday, whether a person said specific words at a specific time. But concepts with an interpretive or evaluative component are less straightforward: people may validly perceive different meanings or values in the same action or interaction.

For example, a teacher and a student are unlikely to describe an hour in a classroom the same way. Their perspectives are both “true” and not “false”, and any decision to demarcate one as “fact” and the other as not is more dependent on the power of the arbiter than on any objective value of the positions themselves.

In the domain of social and political phenomena, to the question of “what are facts”, a discerning and educated reader should always ask: “according to whom”. Do not fake neutrality where there is none.

We should be especially wary of concentrating the authority to arbitrate “facts” in an institution or persons who already hold great authority.

Sociological and historical research on knowledge production have shown this often: the powerful can centre their facts as the facts, an act important to the perpetuation of their power.

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Beyond direct fears, we must remember that scholars do not work in vacuums, but in broader contexts of ideas and debates. The vibrancy of this context, its space for diverse views, directly shape the questions we ask.

To do our work we need journalists, artists, activists, and various social critics to do theirs. My work on poverty and inequality, for example, is shaped and enriched through engagements with the work of writers, theatre practitioners, student audiences, reporters, and advocacy groups. If the law leads to more conservative behaviour on everyone’s part, scholars will live in an even more impoverished environment of ideas.

Good scholarship entails asking difficult questions, where the answers may be inconvenient or not pleasing to the powerful. To do this consistently and well, freedom is a precondition.

Academics' work are often funded by taxpayers and should serve the public good. With rich and diverse findings, widely shared outside of "closed-door meetings", we as a society can better understand collective problems and potential solutions. Research independent of governments is international best-practice because of the recognition that public good and governments' interests are not always aligned.

Knowledge, diverse perspectives, debate, ordinary people's wisdoms and experiences—these are necessities for facing a complex world.

People can be equipped to discern better and worse information, make judgments about evidence, get along despite differences, only in environments that embrace rather than discourage multiple perspectives. Journalist Masha Gessen put this beautifully and poignantly in her multi-award-winning book *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (Riverhead Books, 2017): "The ability to make sense of one's life in the world is a function of freedom."

I have heard people say that my book, *This is What Inequality Looks Like* (Ethos Books, 2018), shows that our academic freedom in Singapore is in good health. Although critical of public policy, it became a national bestseller, and I'm still active in academia. But none of this diminishes my anxiety about the future of my scholarship and that of others.

The social and political context which makes my book an anomaly has not changed. We need many more scholars serving Singaporeans' need for deep and diverse perspectives. For this, we must create more space for freedom, and resist moves to further circumscribe it.



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