

Singapore's social cohesion faces big test in the age of borderless viral hate speech

Prevention must play a bigger role. It's about acting before the damage is done.

Jaclyn L Neo

Australia has been forced to confront the realities of how online hate and violent rhetoric can spill into the real world in the wake of the attack on a Jewish holiday event at Sydney's famous Bondi Beach that killed at least 15 people.

In the days that followed, social media platforms were flooded with incendiary speech targeting entire communities. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has announced plans to strengthen Australia's hate speech laws.

While the debate is unfolding in the country, the underlying challenge is hardly unique. In Singapore, where racial and religious harmony is both a lived reality and a societal red line, the online spread of hate speech poses an urgent challenge.

For decades, Singapore has carefully cultivated a culture of interreligious, interracial and intercultural peace and cooperation among its multiracial population. Racial and religious harmony has become a key lived experience, marking both a foundational pillar and a red line in our society.

However, increasing global interconnectedness and the impact of events across the world have placed a growing strain on this multicultural compact.

External social divisions, ethnic hostilities and religious conflicts exert tangible influence on Singapore's social and political life through online dissemination. Findings from a Ministry of Digital Development and Information Perceptions of Digitalisation Survey and a Smart Nation Policy Perception Survey have observed a notable rise in violent content as well as content that incites racial or religious tension.

This trend poses a significant challenge to Singapore's commitment to multiculturalism and racial-religious harmony. And it has required a deeper look into how our laws and society can be better equipped to tackle the problem.

FROM ONLINE TO OFFLINE

Our digitally connected world has

created a deep and complex melding of offline and online life, demanding more nuanced approaches to managing our multicultural society. Falsehoods and hateful speech left unchallenged can gain traction, with consequences that spill across both digital and physical spaces.

Harmful speech or behaviour that begins offline can trigger online cascades, and vice versa. Social media, in particular, has been transformative.

Its speed, interactivity and multimedia affordances enable communication at a scale and velocity unimaginable just a decade ago, empowering individuals and groups to spread content, whether informative or inflammatory, with unprecedented reach and immediacy.

There is also the disinhibiting effect of online communications and the possibility of anonymity lowers the personal cost of aggression even if the online material might have an outsized effect.

Indeed, harmful racial-religious speech may be perceived as less severe than other forms of online harm precisely because it targets groups and ideas, rather than individuals. This was reflected in a recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies on public perception of online harms in Singapore.

Yet it is precisely because harmful racial-religious speech produces diffused but cumulative effects that its impact should not be underestimated.

Such speech is often insidious and feeds off implicit biases, and can be especially pernicious in engendering doubt and suspicion among different communities, leading to greater disconnection over time.

It can normalise discriminatory behaviour, silence diverse opinions and be used to mobilise offline violent reactions.

We only need to recall the discriminatory and violent outcomes brought about by viral hateful speech through Facebook posts against Rohingyas in Myanmar that sparked attacks against the community and the #coronajihad content against Muslims in India during the Covid-19 pandemic as some



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examples of the potential impact on society.

Thus, as boundaries dissolve in digital spaces, constitutional and legal frameworks must also evolve to protect individuals and communities from borderless and often amorphous digital harm.

LEGAL TOOLS TO MATCH DIGITAL REALITY

Prevention has to play a larger role. Waiting for harm to fully materialise may be too late when misinformation or incendiary content can reach thousands or tens of thousands within minutes. The traditional wheels of punishment move too slowly in a world operating at digital speed. Swift responses have become critical. Research shows that repetition can create an "illusion

of truth": statements encountered repeatedly can feel more credible over time, even unsettling well-grounded beliefs.

That is the thinking behind recent laws like the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA) in Singapore.

OCHA, for instance, empowers authorities to direct entities and individuals to remove harmful content or restrict access to potentially criminal websites.

The aim is to reduce the risk of harm rather than punish only after the fact. Accordingly, laws like OCHA supplement existing laws like the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), which allows the Government to issue restraining orders against religious actors and prosecute offences.

When harmful content

originates from actors beyond Singapore's jurisdiction, these laws have to work together: for instance, the MRHA defines offences that threaten religious harmony, while OCHA enables the authorities to limit the spread of harmful online material by directing platforms to restrict access. In doing so, it limits further exposure in Singapore to problematic content.

This was the approach taken when the Government issued directions in late November under OCHA to TikTok and Meta to disable and restrict access in Singapore to the social media accounts of former Internal Security Department detainee Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff.

The aim is to stop Zulfikar from using his TikTok and Facebook accounts to further communicate

content stirring disaffection within the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore against the Chinese community.

In one of his TikTok videos, Zulfikar claimed that Malay-Muslims were being forced to move away from Islam and assimilate into the Chinese community in Singapore. What is most pernicious about Zulfikar's posts is that they demonise the very foundations of interreligious interaction, portraying coexistence and cooperation as inherently suspect.

His acts could constitute an offence under the MRHA but the fact that he is based in Australia, and not Singapore, would have made prosecution less effective. The key is to limit the harmful effects.

There are, of course, valid concerns about potential overreach. OCHA allows directions to be issued based on suspicion or reasonable belief that an online activity is preparatory to an offence. The threshold must be low enough to ensure timely intervention, yet it is precisely this lower threshold that troubles critics. But speed matters.

Once harmful content goes viral, it is hard to contain its reach and effect. Any damage, whether psychological, social or even physical, may already be done.

Recognising this tension is essential, but so is acknowledging the asymmetry of risk: a single misleading or inflammatory post can reach thousands instantly, while corrective information moves far more slowly and often with limited effect.

SETTING NORMS AND ENHANCING DIGITAL LITERACY

Beyond prevention and punishment, laws such as OCHA also serve an important educative and norm-setting function.

When government directives are issued and accompanied by clear public explanations, they signal the kinds of online speech and behaviour that pose risks to social cohesion in Singapore, and why such risks matter.

Over time, these signals help shape shared understandings of what falls outside acceptable public discourse, particularly in a multiracial and multireligious society. This, in turn, can sharpen citizens' ability to recognise online rhetoric that exploits fear, amplifies grievance, or misrepresents the interests and experiences of particular communities.

Such legal measures should therefore be paired with open conversations within and across communities to reinforce norms of mutual respect rather than see one another as competition.

Ultimately, laws that restrain harmful racial-religious speech online are critical in swiftly containing the impact on society. But citizens will also have to make everyday choices to develop digital literacy and empathy to be able to pause, consider context, and recognise how online speech affects others, especially across communal lines, and to reject harmful online speech.

Sustaining our multicultural compact in the digital age will depend on effective laws as well as on Singaporeans' commitment to draw a line under harmful online speech.

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