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Fighting Online Extremism: Tackling Old Challenges in the Internet Age

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The Internet provides a ready platform for broadcasting to a larger audience. Singapore has its own approach to tackling the problem of bigotry and religious extremism in the Internet age. Trust in the impartiality of the authorities is as important as building inter-religious harmony.

THE WORK of the Dutch politician Geert Wilders provoked irate reactions against the Dutch and their embassies in Muslim majority countries. His movie “*Fitna*”, coming on the heels of the publication and republication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in Europe in 2007 and early 2008, threatened to further polarise communities. *Fitna* in turn sparked online retaliation from other religious bigots, raising distrust and suspicion among the ill-informed. Apart from wrecking communal harmony, such hate-inducing products as *Fitna* also provide propaganda fodder for Islamist extremists attempting to make the case to a wider Muslim audience for attacks against the West.

In Singapore, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng has described the *Fitna* video as ‘offensive’ and ‘regrettable’. Freedom of expression, he added, should not give anyone the licence to insult another’s religion. While Singapore’s resolve against offensive materials remains strong, its approach to tackling and/or mitigating the undesirable effects of harmful racial or religiously-charged information spreading via the Internet has evolved; policies are designed to prevent divisiveness online from taking form in real life. This differs from a hard censorship approach of preventing materials deemed by the government as offensive from reaching the mass audience.

The Futility of Conventional Censorship in the Internet Age

Parallels can be drawn between the repercussions of the release of *Fitna* with the release of a similarly controversial item, the novel *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie in 1989. Back then, the Singapore government reacted with an outright ban on sale and distribution of the publication, considered deeply offensive to the Muslim population. The Singapore government has also prevented the publication of the more recent Danish cartoons in similar fashion. In general, the content of television programmes is scrutinized for discriminatory, offensive or undesirable elements.

Singapore has been, since before the advent of the Internet, extremely successful in preventing religiously-offensive materials from making it to mass circulation. However, the Internet is resistant to government censorship due to its redundant nature, and short of shutting down cyberspace completely, most governments cannot control its power to broadcast content to the population at large.

Despite an official ban on the dissemination of *Fitna*, popular websites such as YouTube have brought it into the homes of ordinary Singaporeans. The outright banning of video streaming websites such as YouTube is possible, but as Indonesia discovered, impractical and counter-productive given its immense popularity among the youth; the ban was promptly lifted following an outcry led by the newspapers.

Singapore's reputation as an IT Hub also militates against such sweeping censorship of fashionable websites. The desire to prevent the plethora of materials that propagate hatred against specific religions or ethnicities from reaching Singapore butts up against Singapore's push towards information technology development and the expansion of high-speed Internet penetration and use among the population.

Education is Key

As the Singapore government cannot prevent offensive materials from reaching the masses through the Internet, it has to combat the divisive and other negative effects from the end-users' perspective through innovative alternative means. National efforts such as the Community Engagement Programme (CEP) and National Education enable the populace to understand the intended negative effects of broadcasts like *Fitna* and empower them with knowledge to make conscious choices to accept or reject a particular message in cyberspace.

To combat the potential negative repercussions from an end-user's perspective, public education and engagement continue to remain key. Education can broaden an individual's mental capacity to retrieve, decipher and relate to viable and accurate information and distinguish legitimate sources from a cacophony of discordant views, disinformation and undesirable materials that the Internet brings. An education programme tailored to inculcate greater tolerance can help communities to process and reject antagonistic, offensive, or provocative materials. A good educational programme can also improve the emotional response of communities and moderate public reactions towards antagonistic forces.

Singapore's National Education effort through the school system can develop the necessary social conditions to protect our students against bigotry and racism. Education can also be effective in creating an unbiased understanding of a particular religion and in facilitating inter-religious interaction. The Singapore National Education system therefore has the dual task of not only educating students on the dangers of the Internet, but also to imbue in them the positive values of good citizenry such as the preservation of Singapore's social fabric.

The fact that there has been open, unambiguous rejection of bigoted and extreme materials online such as *Fitna* bodes well for the efforts made by communities to maintain Singapore's social cohesion and, more importantly, the trust-based relationship between Singaporeans and the government and vice versa.

Where Building a Common Language of Trust Matters

While the Internet has brought up old challenges to Singapore's social fabric in new forms, there can be positive lessons from this current situation. The challenge to Singapore, as with many states, remains the pervasiveness of undesirable materials entering society via the Internet. Any attempt to restrict offensive materials on the Internet is extremely difficult and resource intensive, and is typically

ultimately ineffectual. Religious institutions also play an important role in preventing inflammatory information from taking root in their communities.

The Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC) established to build bridges between the religious communities has been a significant measure in countering religious cyber extremism and bigotry from taking root and driving wedges between ethnic communities. Singapore's multi-faceted approach through community engagement strives to create and share a common language among its people - of trust and mutual confidence.

More to the point, the community engagement programmes have engendered a high level of trust in the government leaders to do the right thing. It is this trust that perhaps explains why there has been a fairly muted response to *Fitna*, apart from the almost pro forma condemnations of its message from the usual religious organisations.

Is the lack of a robust community response to *Fitna* thus a good litmus test of the strength and endurance of the social resilience programmes? Are we really successful? Where there exists no one silver-bullet to prevent the disruption of the social fabric, the lack of an extreme reaction from Singapore's population seems to indicate, for now, much trust in the impartiality of the authorities to deal effectively with threats to their religious identities.

Can we say for sure that there is real trust among the different communities? Ensuring that extremism does not transcend the boundaries of cyberspace and into real life in any form remains a continual challenge. Only if these measures withstand the test of time and the evolving nature of the Internet can Singapore remain steadfast in combating bigotry, religious strife and extremism from gaining a foothold.

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