

# CRISIS OF THE SOCIAL: FAULTLINES, (UN)TRUTHS, AND MANIPULATION

Event Report

23-24 March 2023

Centre of Excellence for National Security

**Report on the workshop organised by:** Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

**Rapporteurs:** Asha Hemrajani, Dymples Leong, Eugene Tan, Sean Tan, Shantanu Sharma, Zhang Xue

**Editors:** Antara Chakraborty and Yasmine Wong

**Terms of use:** This publication may be reproduced electronically or in print, and used in discussions on radio, television and for a, with prior written permission obtained from RSIS and due credit given to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg) for further editorial queries.

## Contents

CRISIS OF THE SOCIAL: FAULTLINES, (UN)TRUTHS, AND MANIPULATION .. **Error!**  
**Bookmark not defined.**

INTRODUCTION.....	4
WELCOME REMARKS .....	5
PANEL 1 - Identities and the Competition for Influence .....	6
<i>From love jihad to great replacement: exploring transnational links between Hindutva and the Western far-right</i> - Dr Eviane Leidig, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University.....	6
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Dr Eviane Leidig</i> .....	7
<i>Learning Across Difference: Mitigating Identity Conflict Through Education</i> – Dr Kamalini Ramdas, Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore .....	8
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Dr Kamalini Ramdas</i> .....	8
<i>From “Sea Turtles” to “Grassroots Ambassadors”: The Chinese Politics of International Student Migration (ISM)</i> - Jiaqi Liu, Incoming Assistant Professor of Sociology, Singapore Management University .....	10
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Jiaqi Liu</i> .....	11
PANEL 2 - Conspiracy and Populism in the Digital Age .....	12
<i>Authority-led conspiracy theories in China during the COVID-19 pandemic–Exploring the thematic features and rhetoric strategies</i> – Calvin Cheng, DPhil student, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford .....	12
<i>Discussions with Calvin Cheng</i> .....	13
<i>The Wellness to Far-Right Pipeline: the journey as a vehicle for conspirituality and extremism</i> - Dr Stephanie Alice Baker is a Senior Lecturer in sociology at City, University of London .....	14
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Dr Stephanie Alice Baker</i> .....	15
<i>Media Populism and the Polarisation of Family, Religion, and the People</i> – Jefferson Lyndon D. Ragragio, Assistant Professor, Department of Science Communication, University of the Philippines at Los Baños.....	16
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Dr Jefferson Lyndon D. Ragragio</i> .....	17
PANEL 3 - The Status of the Social.....	18
<i>The complex relationship between ethnic diversity and trust: Measures, underlying processes, and consequences for well-being</i> - Professor Miles Hewstone, Emeritus Professor, University of Oxford .....	18
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Professor Miles Hewstone</i> .....	19
<i>Are American-style “culture wars” taking place in Singapore?</i> - Professor Daniel P.S. Goh, Associate Professor of Sociology, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), and Vice Dean (Special Programmes) at NUS College, National University of Singapore (NUS).....	20
<i>Discussions with Professor Daniel P.S. Goh</i> .....	21

<i>Information Disorder &amp; Democracy: Lessons from the United States</i> - Dr Dominik Stecuła, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Colorado State University.....	22
<i>Syndicate Discussions with Dr Dominik Stecuła</i> .....	23
<b>Workshop Programme</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>LIST OF SPEAKERS AND CHAIRPERSONS</b> .....	<b>28</b>
About the Centre of Excellence for National Security .....	30
About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies .....	30

## INTRODUCTION

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) organised a Workshop titled, ‘Crisis of the Social: Faultlines, (Un)Truths, and Manipulation’ on 23 and 24 March 2023 at the One Farrer Hotel, Singapore. The workshop aimed to deepen our understanding of the ever-changing social landscape- particularly of a marked increase in polarisation especially in multicultural contexts. This evolving social landscape observes the decline of trust in states, traditional elites, and institutions, the transcendence of identities and nationalisms beyond borders, as well as the role of social media in facilitating mobilisation along identity lines. This changing social landscape forms the backdrop of the contemporary politics of influence, interference, and competition, where identities and affinities are vulnerable to manipulation by state and non-state actors.

The workshop comprised three panels over the course of two days. The focus of the first day was on identities and the competition for influence, and conspiracy and populism in the digital age. The first panel explored a range of issues including exploring the transnational links between Hindutva and the Western far-right, mitigating polarisation through education, and the Chinese politics of outbound student migration. The second panel titled “Conspiracy and Populism in the Digital Age”, focused on the impacts of authority-led conspiracy theories in China during the COVID-19 pandemic; how the health and wellness space online is enabling conspiratoriality and far-right extremism; and the rise of media populism and polarisation in the Philippines. The second day explored ‘The Status of the Social’, which focused on the complex relationship between ethnic diversity and trust, the rise of “Culture Wars” in Singapore, and the lessons learnt from the United States of America on misinformation, conspiracies, polarisation, and distrust.

Nine speakers from institutions in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Philippines, and Singapore shared their insights. Workshop participants included members of the Singapore civil service, the private sector, and academia involved in examining issues on intersectionality, polarisation, far-right extremism, hate speech and other national security topics.

This report summarises key points from the panel speakers’ presentations. Key takeaways made by participants during the syndicate discussions and the Q&A sessions, are included at the end of each panel section.

## WELCOME REMARKS

### **Shashi Jayakumar, Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS, NTU**

- Dr Shashi Jayakumar, Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), opened the Workshop by thanking the speakers and distinguished guests for making the trip to Singapore, and the participants for taking time out of their schedules to join the discussion.
- Dr Jayakumar noted that society is changing rapidly and becoming more polarised, no doubt fuelled in part by social media and its algorithms that prioritise hateful and inflammatory content. There has also been growing support for populist leaders and narratives, and the decline of trust in governments and traditional institutions as can be seen from vaccine scepticism during COVID-19 and the general rise of conspiracism.
- Affinities and identities, facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), now transcend borders, with movements such as Incels and QAnon taking root in Asia, and the glocalisation of social justice movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter. The influence of right-wing ideologies in Singapore also contributes to complicating the social landscape. Additionally, gendered disinformation, which leverages existing misogyny in societies, is a growing concern.
- This evisceration of the middle ground is especially worrying in a time of hyperdiversity, with societies becoming more cognizant of widening inequalities and shifting cultural landscapes. Renegotiating and redefining the social compact requires civil dialogue, but the emergence of "culture wars" reflect the challenges faced in having effective dialogues on difference. Inequalities and social divisions are fault lines that can be exploited by state and non-state actors that leverage these narratives. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the status of the social when analysing threats through a hybrid lens, including the role of identity in the geopolitical arena.

## PANEL 1 - Identities and the Competition for Influence

*From love jihad to great replacement: exploring transnational links between Hindutva and the Western far-right* - Dr Eviane Leidig, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University

- Hindutva, which refers to the political project with the aim of achieving a Hindu ethnostate within India, is a far-right movement promulgated by a fragmented but orchestrated network of organisations. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organisation founded in 1925, is a key player in this network and they draw their inspiration from Fascist Italy, especially in terms of style, dress, and organisation. Hindutva in India had been on the fringe until 2014 when Prime Minister Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came into power. Since then, Hindutva has become mainstream, spreading to countries outside India – first to eastern and southern Africa and the Caribbean, and then subsequently to the UK, US, Canada, and Australia.
- The emergence of a transnational Hindutva movement has brought together diaspora Hindus and non-Indian groups who share a common ideology. In the global stage, Hindutva is known to especially perpetuate narratives that highlight the perceived threat of rising Islamism in India and beyond. Supporters of Hindutva have found common ground with far-right groups in the US and UK who share their opposition to Islam. Non-Indian groups, including right-wing Swedish organisations and British far-right figure Tommy Robinson, have also supported the movement by spreading conspiracy theories about Muslims and COVID-19. The collaboration among these diverse groups underscores the transnational nature of far-right movements and their shared efforts to spread their ideologies.
- One of the most prominent aspects of Hindutva ideology is demographic conspiracy theories, and example being the Love Jihad theory which promotes the view that Hindu women would become dishonoured and enslaved if they marry Muslim men, thus Hindu women need to be saved from Muslim men. This has ideological connections with the Great Replacement Theory, a white nationalist far-right conspiracy theory, which espouses that white European men must be mobilised to protect white European women, who, like Hindu women, embody purity and need to be saved from Muslim immigrant men within European borders. Despite contextual differences between these two conspiracy theories, underlying them are sexual and gender dynamics that play to far-right anxieties arising from demographic change.
- These theories have now become institutionalised into governance. For instance, currently eight states have institutionalised legislations designed to prevent religious conversions of Hindu women through marriage to Muslim men, with the main objective being to stop inter-religious marriages despite them being legal. Love Jihad has now been classified as a threat that requires a counterterrorism response and policing has shifted to state-led Anti-Terrorism Squad.
- This phenomenon is not unique to India, and finds parallels in Sweden, for example. In 2018, Sweden Democrats, a far-right party, introduced a motion to the Swedish parliament to ban all religious conversions, using the example of Love Jihad in India as evidence of the dangers of interfaith marriages. The motion was voted down but shows the transcendence of conspiracy theories beyond borders.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Dr Eviane Leidig*

#### ISSUE: The Rise of Narratives of Love Jihad in India and their Potential Long-Term Impact under Hindu Nationalism

Narratives of Love Jihad in India were not a new phenomenon when they gained traction among Hindutva student organisations in 2014. Similar campaigns based on the concept of “Muslim grooming” had already emerged earlier, such as Tommy Robinson’s campaign with the English Defense League that started in 2009.

Although the BJP has not explicitly included the issue of Love Jihad in their manifesto, it remains an implicit issue. States in India hold significant autonomy and the mainstreaming of BJP within these states has led to the emergence of Love Jihad as a more prominent issue in some states, where anti-Love Jihad legislation has been passed into law.

However, it is worth noting that Love Jihad is just one of several conspiracies that fall under the umbrella of anti-Muslim rhetoric in India. The narrative is sustained by ongoing student activism and heavily sensationalised media stories, which have been amplified through the increased use of social media.

#### ISSUE: The Coalescence of Hindutva and Far-Right Ideologies: challenging assumptions of Hinduism as a competing ideology in Western spheres

While most Western far-right actors show little concern for events in India, a small but significant minority are drawn to the shared aspects of both Hindutva and far-right ideologies, such as nativism and extreme nationalism, that can serve as moral frameworks. It is important to note that the Far-Right in Western societies is highly fragmented, with anti-Islam and counter-Jihad strands having strong ties with Hindutva actors. Some of these actors have even established far-right publishing companies, encouraging Indian authors to write for Western audiences.

In contrast to other far-right movements, Hindutva is unique in its hierarchical and top-down structure. In Anglo-Western societies, younger Hindus are increasingly identifying with a model minority identity and using the discourse of multiculturalism to further their own political agenda. This development raises potentially interesting parallels with other countries, including Singapore, and prompts questions about how Singapore’s model of multiculturalism compares with that of Anglo-Western models.

#### ISSUE: Circumstances that Allow Hindutva to Thrive in Certain Countries/Societies

The first overseas Hindutva organisation originated in East Africa, later spreading to the Caribbean, and becoming institutionalised in Anglo-Western societies. The movement thrived in these societies due to the arrival of migrants with similar regions of origin, language backgrounds, and employment networks. For these migrants, Hindutva became a way to trace their shared roots in their new countries. Over time, this has taken on a generational and class aspect. For instance, younger, urban Indians from lower castes may view Modi as a role model for social mobility, as well as for digitising India and transforming its reputation on a global stage. Meanwhile, some Hindutva actors argue that Modi’s policies have not been drastic enough and call for a more extreme Hindu ethnostate.



*Learning Across Difference: Mitigating Identity Conflict Through Education* – Dr Kamalini Ramdas, Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore

- One of the major challenges of discussing sexuality identity politics is the competition for influence, particularly in a context where diverse groups may have different values and priorities. Additionally, the social and generational divide can create further challenges, particularly in societies where older generations may be more conservative and resistant to change.
- The rise of technology and social media has had a profound impact on discussions around sexuality identity politics. Social media has facilitated connection with like-minded people and the formation of communities around shared values and beliefs, creating new opportunities for advocacy and activism. However, social media also perpetuates the growth of echo chambers- making it more difficult for individuals to engage with others who hold different views. Social media can also create an environment where individuals feel emboldened to express extreme or controversial opinions, which can lead to further polarisation and conflict.
- This can create tensions and conflicts that can be difficult to navigate, particularly in an educational context where students may come from diverse backgrounds and have different beliefs. Within this context, education has an important role to play in addressing these challenges by providing spaces where students can engage in respectful and constructive dialogue around issues related to sexuality identity politics. Educators can also help to ensure that students are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate complex and sensitive issues. Additionally, education can help to counteract the influence of social media by providing students with accurate information and helping them to develop critical thinking skills.
- Singapore's Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs), in particular, can be leveraged to promote civil dialogue and education around sexuality identity politics. The national Institute of Education (NIE) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) can develop pedagogical strategies and curriculum that support open and honest discussion around these issues. Other IHLs like the National University of Singapore (NUS), National Technological University (NTU), and Singapore Management University (SMU), can contribute by providing research and insights to inform educational policy and practice. Through collaboration, these institutions can help to create a more supportive and inclusive educational environment for all students.
- Despite the success of some educational initiatives in promoting dialogue on contentious issues, there is a need for more such programs. It is crucial to engage with students on a more personal level to facilitate dialogue and understanding around LGBT+ students and issues. Education can play an important role in achieving this.

*Syndicate Discussions with Dr Kamalini Ramdas*

ISSUE: The Potential and Limitations of Social Media as a Space for Deliberation

Online engagement often seems reactive and lacks the depth of engagement that we see in face-to-face interactions. While social media may not be an ideal platform for deliberation, it is still a valuable space. In fact, social media has the ability to draw attention towards social fissures and make them more visible.

To improve deliberation online, a technology and infrastructure-centered approach could be adopted. This approach would entail redesigning the user interface based on insights from design and communication research. Additionally, improving people-to-people skills could also enhance deliberation online.

Therefore, while social media may not be the perfect space for deliberation, it can still be a valuable tool for understanding the issues that matter to people. By improving the technology and infrastructure of online platforms and enhancing people-to-people skills, we can facilitate more meaningful and productive deliberation online.

#### ISSUE: Exploring the Role of Platform Governance in Fostering Measured Conversations beyond Echo Chambers

The question of whether governance of platforms is sufficient to enable measured conversation with people outside echo chambers is a complex one. While governance is certainly important, it must be coupled with efforts to develop critical thinking skills among the public.

In the speaker's experience, important conversations and thought processes that occur behind closed doors can be obscured or reduced in online discussions. To combat this, government representatives could engage with the public and explain the discussion and deliberation process, which could help to inculcate critical thinking skills.

Additionally, the government could explore more creative ways of presenting existing material in an informative and responsible manner that exposes the audience to a range of responses. For example, the PinkDot campaign compiled a video after the repeal of 377A that showcased responses from various members of society and allowed the audience to form their own conclusions.

However, it is important to note that there is also an irresponsible way of packaging material together, which can politicise and polarise the narrative. Therefore, governance structures with zero tolerance should not be interpreted as accepting all views. Instead, there should be a clear understanding of who is being protected and whether any group is being marginalised.

#### ISSUE: Opportunities for Bridging the Gap between Government and Gen Z in Singaporean Classrooms

The classroom can serve as a crucial space to challenge stereotypes and dispel myths by exposing students to the complexities of offline opinions. To achieve this, classrooms should be designed to foster open conversations and greater engagement. This can be accomplished by shifting from an authority-oriented to a discussion-oriented classroom architecture, with more interpersonal interactions and teachers moving around the room. Educators should be encouraged to be engaging and avoid self-policing, creating channels for meaningful engagement.

Furthermore, students should be encouraged to apply the concepts learned in the classroom to community-based issues, rather than solely focusing on politicised topics. Exposure to a range of issues faced in the community through voluntary channels is also crucial.

While ministers have previously held closed-door conversations with teachers in institutions of higher learning, there should be more opportunities for government officials to engage candidly with students in a public setting. This would require vulnerability, but it would help bridge the gap between the government and Gen Z and showcase the raw, unplanned nature of genuine conversation.

## ISSUE: Trajectory of the LGBTQ Community after repeal of 377A and How to Engage in a Non-Politicised Manner

The repeal of 377A in Singapore is considered a significant first step, but there are still policies beyond subcultural acceptance that need to change. For instance, ties to legal marriage disallow certain individuals from having rights or access to resources like housing and the formation of family life. These policies speak to wider implications regarding housing, education, and children. In order to move forward, there needs to be a change in perception of how marriage is viewed in a heteronormative manner, and what is the space of civil union in Singaporean society.

However, engaging with the LGBTQ community can be challenging due to the intersectionality of identities, including religion, gender, intergenerational, and ethnic divides. One way to approach this is to view the community as a mosaic, with various lines and fractures that need to be navigated. Organisations like PinkDot are trying to achieve such engagements by encouraging family conversations in an appropriate public setting. By taking the politics out of the subject and bringing it to the social and emotional sphere, individuals become legible as people rather than political objects. This also provides a platform for intergenerational conversations and helps to make the issue more personal, relevant, and relatable.

### *From "Sea Turtles" to "Grassroots Ambassadors": The Chinese Politics of International Student Migration (ISM) - Jiaqi Liu, Incoming Assistant Professor of Sociology, Singapore Management University*

- China has become the world's largest source of international student migration (ISM) since 1998, with over 300,000 Chinese students studying in the United States alone, making up a third of all overseas Chinese students.
- ISM serves China's objectives of increasing its geopolitical and economic influence and pursuing its goal of global ascendancy. Chinese students overseas have gone from being labelled as "sea turtles" (reflecting their return to China after completing their studies) to "grassroots ambassadors" - a term used by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013- to reflect their geopolitical value in increasing China's national image abroad. This reflects the changing role of Chinese students overseas, particularly under Xi Jinping, as China adopts more assertive soft power strategies to pursue global ascendancy.
- However, there are few studies on ISM, with limited evaluation of Chinese policies on ISMs and the perception of the students themselves about their roles in executing these policies. Findings from the speaker's research indicate that the transformation from sea turtles to grassroots ambassadors has (1) not necessarily been welcomed by the students themselves, and (2) not been fully implemented by local officials.
- On the former, for example, interviews conducted at retreats and summer camps organised for Chinese students going overseas for study found that most students only signed up because everything was free or because their parents thought it would be a good opportunity for them to find partners. Some were indifferent to the messages at the camp as leisure and entertainment desires outweighed the political agenda that the government had hoped to push. Furthermore, without ideological constraints overseas, students have developed their own political opinions, some of which run counter to Communist Party of China ideology. Students who had been planning to return to China in any case, however, were more receptive to the political messages being promulgated at these camps and even stated they were quite familiar with the same style of political indoctrination throughout their upbringing.

- On the latter, China's multilevel bureaucracy has been analysed to determine how political decentralisation has shaped ISM policies at the grassroots level. ISM policy objectives are three-fold: economic, governmental, and geopolitical. The relative importance of each of these objectives depends on China's socioeconomic and political conditions at the time. Based on the interviews, ISM politics can be contentious as national ambitions crosscut individual desires and national grand plans are confronted with flexible local improvisation.
- As such, although China's efforts to engage and leverage its overseas students as "grassroots ambassadors" indicate a clear shift in China's foreign policy objectives and desire for more influence in the international arena, the successes of these policies remain unclear.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Jiaqi Liu*

#### ISSUE: The Complexities of Initiating Change in China After Studying Overseas

When Chinese students study abroad, they are exposed to new perspectives and ideas, which can have a profound impact on their worldview. For some, this experience leads to a desire to enact change in their home country upon their return. However, this desire is not always easy to put into action, with the restrictive political environment in China serving as one of the barriers. And many students who leave the country to study overseas tend to not return due to concerns about censorship, limited freedom of expression, and lack of opportunities for professional growth. These students may find it challenging to implement changes in a country where dissent is often met with punishment.

On the other hand, there is a group of overseas students who become even more nationalistic after their time abroad. These students are not necessarily pushed by the Chinese government to develop stronger affinities to China. Rather, they are motivated by the discrimination, marginalisation, and isolation they may have felt during their time in Western countries. This sense of alienation can lead them to adopt a more nationalist stance and view the Chinese government as a source of support and validation.

#### ISSUE: Chinese Government Influence on Overseas Chinese Associations

The influence of the Chinese government on Chinese student associations, institutes of higher learning, and associations overseas is a highly debated issue. One of the key concerns is the extent to which Chinese student organisations and other associations abroad are influenced by the Chinese government. In recent years, there have been several examples of how the Chinese government has exerted its influence on these groups.

For instance, in 2017, the Chinese government cut all ties with the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) after the university invited the Dalai Lama to deliver a commencement speech. As a result, no PhD student could go to UCSD with Chinese government funding. This move was seen as a clear attempt by the Chinese government to pressure UCSD to conform to its political agenda.

Another example of Chinese government influence is the case of the Association of Chinese students (CISA), which is funded by the nearby Chinese consulate. The President of the association is often hand-picked by the Chinese consulate, which raises questions about the degree to which the organisation is truly independent of the Chinese government.

Furthermore, during the Hong Kong protests, Chinese student organisations abroad were reportedly mobilised to counter the pro-democracy protests. In addition, there were instances of anti-Falun Gong booths set up next to Falun Gong protest booths, and sponsorship of CISA organised events specially held to counter any anti-China events. These actions raise concerns about the extent to which Chinese student associations are truly independent and whether they are being used to promote the Chinese government's interests.

#### ISSUE: Re-diasporisation of Chinese Indonesians and China's Global Influence

Re-diasporisation is a phenomenon that has been studied among Chinese Indonesians, who had lost touch with their cultural roots. There has been a growing among this group to reclaim their Chinese identity and reconnecting with their 'ancestral' homeland. However, this trend is significant not only for the Chinese Indonesian community but also for China's global ambitions. As China seeks to increase its influence around the world, it has been actively reaching out to overseas Chinese communities to engage with Chinese identity as a way to strengthen cultural ties.

However, the re-diasporisation hasn't been without its challenges. For instance, in the Chinese Indonesian community, many still face prejudice and discrimination in the Indonesian society. There is also the added pressure of striking a balance between reclaiming and maintain their Chinese and Indonesian identities, respectively. These challenges shed light on the complex dynamics at play within diasporic communities and the ways in which these communities are shaping and being shaped by broader geopolitical trends.

## PANEL 2 - Conspiracy and Populism in the Digital Age

*Authority-led conspiracy theories in China during the COVID-19 pandemic—Exploring the thematic features and rhetoric strategies – Calvin Cheng, DPhil student, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford*

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of vast amounts of misinformation was so extensive that it was termed as an "infodemic." This confusion led people to fall for misinformation, and state and state-affiliated actors were involved in conspiracy theories. One of the biggest drivers of coronavirus conspiracy theories was former US President, Donald Trump. Other state actors, including Iran, China, and Russia, also engaged with coronavirus conspiracy theories.
- Conspiracy theories are highly correlated with detrimental consequences and are problematic misinformation. Studies have found that individuals who are likely to believe in conspiracy theories are less likely to cooperate with authorities' instructions and have lower trust in the government. At the group level, conspiracy theories were found to be detrimental towards social polarisation and discrimination towards minorities. At the societal level, conspiracy theories can lead to collective violence, such as vandalism of 5G towers in Europe, Capitol riots in the US, and quarantine policies in Asia.
- Academically, conspiracy theories have many definitions. For the purpose of conducting the research, the definition used was "the kind of explanation of social and historical events that attributed the causes to a collection of small groups of persons acting secretly for their own benefits, usually with a benevolent purpose." There are five features of conspiracy theories -

they have a hypothesised pattern (causal relationship between actors and events), indicate agency (show deliberate planning), include a coalition of more than one conspirator or group, show threats in a relatively sizeable socio-economic scale, and carry some elements of secrecy that cannot be falsified or validated.

- An authoritarian environment can provide fertile grounds for conspiracy theories to grow and potentially create more detrimental effects with higher levels of polarisation. This is due to the specific features unique to authoritarian governments, such as a more censorious internet environment, restrained third-party fact-checkers, dominant state media, and limited public discussion. In China, there is a historical trauma of conspiracies in domestic politics and domestically, which is used as propaganda for political purposes, making citizens more prone to conspiracy theories.
- To study the authority-led theme of conspiracy theories during the pandemic in China, a two-fold dual stylistic framework was used to understand the actors and their interaction, and the logic used to theorise the conspiracy. The thematic features of authority-led conspiracy theories were spread across four main themes - virus organisation, whom to blame, remedies discussion, and economic confrontation. Authority-led conspiracy theories mainly aimed to deny China's accusation for the pandemic and relate the pandemic to international political confrontations.
- Based on a temporal analysis of the data, the general tone of the authority account had a relatively consistent defensive tone during the pandemic, emphasising absolving the authority of responsibility for the origination. Meanwhile, non-authority accounts focused on aggressive and apparent conspiracy theories during the pandemic. Based on textual analysis, it was found that authority-led conspiracy theories included multiple actors - the authority, Chinese people, and international supporters - to create a community and used defensive and aggressive tones and often cited favourable international sources. Chinese authorities cemented collective cohesion among the public by crediting Chinese achievement to the people while constructing a strong, responsible, and tough leadership image.
- The rhetoric strategies used in authority-led conspiracy theories observed were arbitrary denials instead of providing evidence, echoes of historical conspiracy, fractal fact-linkage via questioning rhetoric (to shift the focus from proving something is true to disproving something is wrong). Authorities tried to spread conspiracy theories on social media and compared to individual and grassroots conspiracy theories, they would apply rhetoric strategies to make it less conspiratorial by connotatively conveying the conspiracy.

### *Discussions with Calvin Cheng<sup>1</sup>*

#### ISSUE: The Long-Term Consequences of Authority-led Conspiracy Theories in China during the COVID-19 Pandemic for Social Stability, Public Health, and Political Legitimacy

The spread of conspiracy theories in China during the pandemic has raised serious concerns, as it is difficult to refute them in the country's digital environment. If these conspiracies continue to spread, it could have a detrimental effect on social stability, public health, and political legitimacy. One potential impact of authoritarian governments using conspiratorial content in domestic politics is the characterisation and handling of protesters. Studies have shown that Russia uses conspiratorial narratives in its propaganda to legitimise domestic policies, obscuring what protesters are trying to achieve but claiming they are trying to overthrow the government or are FBI or CIA sponsored. This

---

<sup>1</sup> As Calvin Cheng was unable to participate in syndicate sessions, questions directed to him were addressed during a Q&A session

was observed during the Hong Kong protests in 2019. There were already discussions in China about whether there would be another cultural revolution during 2021 and 2022 due to absurd quarantine policies, and conspiratorial propaganda was used to justify these policies. These narratives have strong mobilisation power, as citizens are often exposed to only one side.

#### ISSUE: The Rise of Sinophobia against the Chinese Overseas Diaspora, and the Response of the Chinese Government

The Chinese government has been vigilant in refuting conspiracy theories related to the pandemic and its impact on Asian communities. As the pandemic spread, Sinophobic incidents increased in many parts of the world, including the targeting of Chinese diaspora overseas. In response, the Chinese government took an active role in countering these conspiracy theories and propaganda by acting as fact-checkers and providing accurate information to the public.

One reason for the government's response is to maintain social stability and prevent potential unrest or violence against Chinese citizens abroad. The Chinese government has a history of protecting the interests of its citizens overseas, and by refuting conspiracy theories and propaganda, the government sought to prevent the further spread of these harmful narratives and protect Chinese diaspora from harm.

#### ISSUE: The Evolution of Fact-Checking and Content Moderation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China, has created official fact-check accounts to combat the spread of conspiracy theories during the pandemic. These fact-checking efforts were managed by the government under the Cyberspace Administration of China, indicating a centralised and coordinated approach to content moderation. While there may have been gradual shifts in content moderation in China, the government's control over media and online content means that their actions are more centralised compared to other countries. The Chinese government's involvement in content moderation and fact-checking has been criticised by some for limiting freedom of speech and promoting propaganda, but it also ensures that conspiracy theories and misinformation are less likely to spread in China. Despite concerns about censorship, it appears that the Chinese government's approach to content moderation during the pandemic has been effective in combating the spread of harmful conspiracy theories.

#### *The Wellness to Far-Right Pipeline: the journey as a vehicle for conspiratoriality and extremism - Dr Stephanie Alice Baker is a Senior Lecturer in sociology at City, University of London*

- During the pandemic, there was a noticeable increase in the number of people embracing extremist beliefs, not just in conspiracism but also in the wellness and fitness industry. Many well-known celebrities and influencers were promoting harmful treatments like colloidal silver, anti-vaccine discourse, and conspiracies like Fauci-Bill Gates and QAnon theories.
- One example of this is Belle Gibson, an Australian wellness influencer who had over 200,000 followers in 2015. She presented herself as a cancer survivor who rejected chemotherapy and promoted a holistic lifestyle that included basic wellness advice like a plant-based diet and avoiding coffee, meat, and alcohol. She was given legitimacy by large brands like Penguin,

Apple, media outlets, and even awards. What conditions enabled her to gain such authority and influence that rivalled medical professionals?

- Enter the concept of alt-health influencers, who monetise their brand built on alternative wellness that often opposes mainstream medicine. They sell products, supplements, or services, and often have accompanying ideologies. The internet allows for micro-celebrity, where these influencers can gain fame online and cultivate a loyal niche audience or community.
- Alt-media is often seen as a trustworthy alternative to mainstream media because the idea of media being manufactured predates the pandemic. Alt-health and wellness also fit well with this discourse, as they are often seen as in opposition to mainstream medicine and the medical establishment. This idea is reinforced by conspiracy theories like the government interfering with the mainstream medical narrative and corrupt elites, with Bill Gates being a common target.
- Alt-health influencers employ three main presentation strategies to establish authority, visibility, and attention, but also to promote conspiracy theories and extremism during the pandemic. These strategies include the concept of micro-celebrity, accessibility (appearing more accessible to their audience), autonomy (being outside of the system), and authenticity (conveyed by giving backstage access to their life).
- However, during the pandemic, some alt-health influencers were promoting fraudulent products and spreading misinformation. When their posts were removed or accounts were taken down, these influencers would often claim censorship or encourage platform migration to set the stage for victimisation. This creates a prosecuted-hero narrative, where they expose corruption and represent themselves as a heroic force of good, defending truth, freedom, and justice.
- Finally, there are calls to participate in the journey, which is a religious ideology and moral framework that binds conspiratorial and extremism discourse. Before the pandemic, health was often pitched as a journey, with shared emphasis on purity similar to conspiracies like QAnon, where the purity of the body stands in for the purity of the nation-state. This journey, however, currently involves mind-body purification, spiritual awakening, conscious community, and most importantly 'moral supremacy', leading to an extremist mindset.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Dr Stephanie Alice Baker*

#### ISSUE: The Ambiguity of Influencers' Intentions in the Context of Populism and the Challenges of Governance

One of the key challenges in addressing populist narratives is understanding the motivations behind the content posted by influencers online. While personal responsibility for consuming and posting content online is crucial, it is often difficult to determine the underlying intentions of influencers. Experts broadly point to three motivations driving influencers: economic gain, social gain, and political gain. Many influencers are motivated by the economic opportunities of peddling influence and gaining sponsorships from brands. Others may seek social gain, such as gaining fame and increasing their following to further their agenda. Finally, some influencers may peddle content for political gain, promoting a particular ideology, such as nationalism or anti-globalism, to gain followers and influence public opinion.



### ISSUE: How Influencers are Changing the Way Audiences Consume Content

Influencers focus on building personal connections with their audience and providing them with emotional support. As a result, their messaging tends to be better received among their audience, as compared to the advice given by professionals or government officials. This is further exacerbated in contexts where the government is not viewed as trustworthy. Influencers are also able to produce content at a larger scale and with greater speed. Government/professional communication strategies struggle to compete, as they typically offer their content that is less attractive through media channels.

### ISSUE: Regulating Influencers

Regulating influencers is a complex issue due to the need to balance regulation with rights to free speech and expression. Unlike professionals who are subject to strict regulations and accountability, influencers are not held to the same standard. For instance, while professionals are expected to provide balanced advice to their clients while maintaining their professional distance, influencers often build rapport with their followers by providing emotional support.

There is a general lack of regulations in certain jurisdictions. This problem is compounded by inconsistent enforcement of regulations, which may lend credibility to such influencers, as they can position themselves as martyrs of truth. Some jurisdictions have imposed fines on products that are found to be ineffective or fraudulent. However, in areas where regulations are looser, influencers may still be able to ignite their following and direct them to dubious products.

### ISSUE: Importance of Pre-bunking in Countering False Narratives

Pre-bunking is a proactive approach in countering false narratives presented by influencers, which involves informing and educating the public about the accuracy and legitimacy of information before it becomes widespread. This method has been proven to be more effective than debunking false narratives after they have already been accepted by a large audience, as it can help prevent the development of cognitive biases.

However, pre-bunking must be executed in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner, as believers of the false narrative may feel shamed or attacked, which could further drive them to seek out like-minded individuals who reinforce their beliefs. Thus, it is important to approach pre-bunking with empathy and understanding, and to provide factual and evidence-based information in a clear and concise manner.

### *Media Populism and the Polarisation of Family, Religion, and the People – Jefferson Lyndon D. Raggio, Assistant Professor, Department of Science Communication, University of the Philippines at Los Baños*

- Media populism is a term used to describe the mediated expression of populist sentiment on social media platforms such as Facebook. One of the most significant examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the case of the Philippines, where there has been a major push back against the rule of law, civil liberties, and freedom of the press. According to the Democracy Report, the Philippines has been described as an "electoral autocracy" due to the decline in press freedom and civil liberties from 2017 to 2020.

- Populism is a political communication style that hinges on certain rhetoric, identity, and media to connect with groups while aggravating others. It is a core element of populism to speak and act in the name of the people, and this apparent representation of the people by the populist can be manipulated to construct political identities and conflicts. Populism is central, if not intrinsic, to the rise of networked disinformation in many societies, as seen in the rise of trolls and influencers in the Philippines, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, and the use of buzzers in Indonesia.
- Narratives about family, religion, and people collectively represent the appeal of the populist online, and these accounts are weaponised to spoil the robust conversation on free speech and inclusive nationalism. The 2016 Philippine presidential election saw vitriolic populist sentiments and networked disinformation take centre stage, becoming the "patient zero" of global information where conspiratorial narratives were mainstream online. President Duterte was even labelled the "Trump of the East" due to his openly hostile attitude towards the dominant news media outlets and the Catholic Church.
- One of the prominent narratives that contributed to Duterte's success was the "Father Appeal" or "Family Appeal" of the populist. Duterte presented himself as a caring figure who spent time with his family and children despite his busy schedule. This persona was carefully crafted to make him seem more humane and value-oriented despite his crass remarks against women, journalists, church people, and members of the LGBTQ community. Another narrative that helped him gain support was his devout persona, which was portrayed through texts and images with Catholic subtext. Lastly, Duterte also mainstreamed the ordinary by making symbolic gestures such as eating in public food stalls and mainstreaming infrastructure projects.
- The complex fusion of hostile and non-conflictual sentiments online characterises, if not amplifies, the polarisation of digital politics. Populist leaders often use social media to amplify their message and create a sense of us versus them, further entrenching polarisation and eroding the fabric of democratic institutions. As the Philippines and other countries show, media populism is a real threat to democracy and the rule of law. It is crucial to recognise the role that social media platforms play in amplifying populist rhetoric and disinformation, and to develop strategies to combat this growing threat to democratic institutions.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Dr Jefferson Lyndon D. Ragragio*

#### ISSUE: The Impact of the Digital Media Environment on Populism in the Philippines

The prevalence of populist narratives on digital media platforms in the Philippines is a major concern, with Facebook being the primary platform for these narratives due to its high usage rate of 70-75%. To combat this issue, credible online news websites must provide counter-narratives. Investigative journalism skills are essential for navigating populism in this digital media environment, and news agencies are exploring algorithmic potential to counter populist narratives.

Fact-checking is another crucial tool in combating the spread of misinformation, requiring collaboration between a range of actors, including local government, communities, journalists, students, academics, and news agencies. However, collaboration between fact-checking institutions and technology companies, as well as community-based journalists, is limited. Additionally, the decreasing number of local journalists poses significant obstacles for fact-checking initiatives.

A coordinated effort from a range of stakeholders is required to combat populism and the spread of misinformation in the Philippines. Addressing these challenges and working together will ensure accuracy and credibility in digital media, providing a more informed public discourse.

#### ISSUE: Mainstream Mass Media and Populism in the Philippines

In the Philippines, there are legitimate news organisations that have been found to embrace populist narratives and present them as facts. Unfortunately, these organisations often rely heavily on state and government information without conducting further investigation or analysis to confirm the veracity of such information. They employ stenographic reporting, which essentially presents official sources as the truth without questioning their accuracy.

Reporting on science and health news, including topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic and conspiracies related to climate change, is particularly vulnerable to the spread of false information in the Philippines. This presents a major challenge for news organisations that are trying to provide accurate and reliable information to the public. Despite the potential for the media in the Philippines to combat false information and narratives, some news organisations and individuals may not be effectively doing so. This highlights the need for media literacy and critical thinking skills to be promoted and strengthened among the general public

#### ISSUE: Populist Narratives Targeting Younger Filipinos

Populist narratives in the Philippines are designed to resonate with younger Filipinos and are spread through social media channels such as Facebook and YouTube. Domestic workers and millennials are particularly susceptible to these narratives, particularly seen in pro-Duterte Facebook pages targeting domestic workers abroad and narratives crafted to appeal to different age and class divisions of millennials and cultivating a sense of nationalism and loyalty to the current administration. These narratives often focus on issues such as corruption, economic inequality, and political dynasties. Fact-checking initiatives and media literacy campaigns are crucial in addressing this issue, as social media channels are highly influential among younger generations. It is important to recognise that populist narratives can come from non-state actors, making collaboration between various stakeholders essential in combating these narratives.

## PANEL 3 - The Status of the Social

*The complex relationship between ethnic diversity and trust: Measures, underlying processes, and consequences for well-being* - Professor Miles Hewstone, Emeritus Professor, University of Oxford

- Diversity is a term used to describe the range of different groups within a social context, such as a neighbourhood, school, or organisation. Robert Putnam's research initially found that living in ethnically diverse areas was positively associated with "threats" and negatively associated with "trust," including outgroup trust, ingroup trust, and neighbourhood trust. However, subsequent studies have produced differing results depending on whether diversity

is measured at local or broader levels, and whether trust is measured based on intergroup, ingroup, or neighbourhood relationships.

- While some studies have found that ethnic diversity can erode social trust, others have suggested that diversity can increase interethnic contact and promote positive attitudes towards outgroups. One potential explanation for these differing findings is that the effects of diversity on trust are not just a matter of the presence or absence of diversity itself, but also depend on the broader social and cultural context in which diversity exists. For example, in societies where there are strong norms of social equality and a shared sense of national identity, ethnic diversity may be less likely to lead to negative outcomes than in societies where there are deep-seated divisions and social inequality.
- Furthermore, the effect of diversity on trust should not be assessed without taking into account intergroup contact. Direct, face-to-face contact between people in diverse societies or neighbourhoods can make a significant difference in trust levels, as can indirect contact, such as knowing someone who has contact with the outgroup. Contact is a key mediator between diversity and trust. Research has shown that contact between members of different groups can help to reduce prejudice and promote more positive attitudes towards outgroups. However, it is important to note that the effects of contact can depend on a range of factors, such as the quality of the interaction, the perceived status of the groups involved, and the broader social and cultural context. While positive contact is typically associated with more positive outcomes, where there is a sense of social equality and shared identity, whereas negative contact, particularly in contexts of high social inequality and group-based competition can often lead to worse outcomes, even if the negative contact is less frequent.
- Another potential explanation for the mixed findings on the effects of diversity on trust is that there may be different types of diversity that have different effects. For example, while ethnic diversity has been the focus of much research on this topic, there may be other types of diversity, such as diversity in gender or sexual orientation, that have different effects on trust and social cohesion.
- Overall, it is clear that the relationship between diversity and trust is complex and multifaceted, and that the effects of diversity on trust are not always straightforward. While some studies have suggested that ethnic diversity can erode trust and social cohesion, others have found that diversity can actually promote positive attitudes towards outgroups and increase intergroup contact.
- It is important to consider the broader social and cultural context in which diversity exists, as well as the level and quality of intergroup contact, when examining the effects of diversity on trust. By taking these factors into account, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how diversity affects social cohesion and build more inclusive and resilient communities.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Professor Miles Hewstone*

#### ISSUE: The Role of Policies in Fostering Diversity and Social Cohesion in Singapore

Singapore's Housing Board Development (HDB) was implemented to promote diversity and social cohesion through its housing arrangement. The UK, which witnessed major immigration during the 1950s and 1960s, did not have similar policies to encourage integration and this led to the formation of enclaves among the immigrants. While enclaves can provide a sense of familiarity and safety, they can also have negative effects like segregation and discrimination. According to several studies, HDB flats, where around 80% of Singapore's population lives, have been shown to facilitate friendships across different groups, and children of different races play together if they share a common language.

And it is crucial to continually evaluate social intervention policies to study its effects on cohesion and polarisation.

#### ISSUE: The Role of Online Interaction in Shaping Diversity in Today's Society

In addition to direct face-to-face contact, there are also other forms of contact that can influence intergroup relations. One such form is extended contact, which occurs when individuals have indirect experience with outgroup members through social networks or acquaintances. Another type of indirect contact is contact through media, which is referred to as carrier contact. Online contact, such as social media and email, is also becoming an increasingly common form of interaction.

It is important to consider not only the various forms of contact, but also the content of these interactions when assessing their impact on intergroup relations. While social media and other online platforms may offer new opportunities for intergroup contact, it is crucial to address the negative content that can spread easily and rapidly, and which may hinder efforts to promote positive intergroup relations.

#### ISSUE: Methods for Measuring the Diversity of a Society

When it comes to measuring diversity in a society, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. One commonly used measure is the Herfindahl Index, which approximates the percentage of individuals or groups that one does not belong to. More refined measures exist as well, such as the number of different groups present within a society. To accurately capture diversity, one can sample from neighbourhoods throughout a country and control for factors like deprivation using measures such as the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Rather than simply comparing diversity levels across low, medium, and high areas, it is more fruitful to examine the relationship between diversity and other factors of interest across a continuum of diversity.

While quantitative measures like these are important, it is also valuable to complement them with a qualitative approach. Social geographers and anthropologists, for instance, may conduct in-depth studies of a particular area to gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of diversity and its impact on the community. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their merits and can work together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of diversity in society.

#### *Are American-style "culture wars" taking place in Singapore?* - Professor Daniel P.S. Goh, Associate Professor of Sociology, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), and Vice Dean (Special Programmes) at NUS College, National University of Singapore (NUS)

- The question of whether American-style "culture wars" are taking place in Singapore is complex, and the answer is both "yes" and "no." On the one hand, we can see elements of these wars gradually taking root in the city-state. However, the ways in which they are manifesting are nuanced and reflective of Singapore's unique political economy and social production of nationalism.
- The Anglophone middle class has expanded, and identities have become more important than interests. In the past, interests were tied up with the state, and the middle class was made up of bureaucrats, professionals, and teachers. Today, middle-class identities are more diverse

and include mobile academics, pastors, content producers, media independents, tuition and enrichment teachers, affective workers, freelance consultants, and traders.

- This expansion of the middle class has given rise to influencers as social figures. Changes like the democratisation of education, globalisation of labour markets, diversification of civil society, diminishing marginal utility of wealth, and reduced political power have all contributed to this trend. Additionally, the rapid development of the internet has caused a democratisation of free expression, and social media has enabled real-time validation of identities. In this context, public opinion is less crucial, and real-time validation in terms of how many affective likes a post receives becomes more important.
- The culture wars in Singapore operate through three registers: identities, influence, and intersectionality. Rather than interests, the belligerents work through identities. Rather than (infrastructural) power, they seek influence. And rather than positionality, they focus on intersectionality. Decentred networks of transmission of previously foreign ideas that latch on to historical undercurrents in Singapore are examined. Organic intellectuals move laterally in the networks, interweaving through existing institutions to produce new fields of meanings and credibility.
- The three case studies presented illustrate the ways in which these culture wars are playing out in Singapore. In Case Study A, a Christian blogger with nationalist identities frames anti-LGBTQ rights and pro-Section 377A views as cultural justice issues. In Case Study B, a musician and content producer tap into the international political rap subculture to amplify the voice of "disenfranchised brown folk" and struggles for minority rights. In Case Study C, a nativist with religious fundamentalist identities seeks academic respectability to articulate a critique of Chinese privilege and oppose LGBTQ activism/advocacy.
- These culture wars in Singapore centre around issues of LGBTQ rights, racial privilege, and mRNA vaccines. In conclusion, culture wars are natural features of plurality in modern politics and culture in open societies. They can be relatively benign and even positive for vibrant public sphere and civic life. However, they can also become polarising when they map onto the political geography of an electoral system, as in Malaysia, or dangerous when they become embedded in institutions of social welfare and education, as in Indonesia. While neither of these threats is imminent in Singapore, it is wise to keep an eye on new organic intellectuals who may emerge in the future.

### *Discussions with Professor Daniel P.S. Goh<sup>2</sup>*

#### ISSUE: The Relationship between the Dynamics of Political Parties and the Culture Wars in Singapore and the US

The cultural war has deeply affected the electoral system in America, with many members crossing political geography despite the system being divided along those lines. However, in Singapore, political geography does not significantly affect the electoral system due to the government's control and ability to distribute the population evenly.

The ruling party in Singapore not only presents itself but also institutionalises itself as being above the cultural war. It strives to bring in different sides and allows debates to happen within the party itself. The debates on the controversial 377A legislation, for instance, occurred in Parliament. Therefore,

---

<sup>2</sup> As Daneil Goh was unable to participate in syndicate sessions, questions directed to him were addressed during a Q&A session.

political geography does not impact the electoral system in Singapore as long as it is kept at a sweet spot. Consequently, there is no room for culture to enter into the electoral system.

#### ISSUE: Reproductive Rights and the Culture Wars in Singapore

The issue of abortion in Singapore was resolved long ago, so it was quickly taken off the table and did not become a subject of cultural war. However, when there are issues that remain unresolved, that is where the cultural war tends to happen. Take for example, the 377A law, which was a lightning rod for the cultural war in Singapore. The question now is whether the pro-LGBTQ movement will gain any momentum. The government has attempted to defuse the situation by stating that they will not focus on changing any laws related to it.

In the case of the fight for or against civil unions, it will be more abstract and difficult for any particular political party or MP to push for change. It will require significant effort to build the necessary infrastructure and influence the state to make a change. Therefore, the government's decision to keep the family issue within the Parliament instead of the judiciary is a clever move. This is because the cost of bringing the issue into Parliament is high, making it less likely for the issue to become a subject of cultural war.

#### ISSUE: Religious Politicking in a Secular Public Space

Religious groups are increasingly using secular language in public discourse to remain relevant and effective in their messaging, particularly in the anti-vaccination movement. This is a departure from the initial response of the religious right towards LGBTQ rights, which focused on the right to religious representation in the public sphere without engaging in secular discourse. By using secular language, religious groups can reach a wider audience, including those who do not share their religious beliefs, and engage in issues in a more effective way. However, this shift also presents challenges, such as requiring religious groups to engage in unfamiliar ways and risking the dilution of their religious message. Overall, using secular language can be a meaningful way for religious groups to impact issues of concern.

#### *Information Disorder & Democracy: Lessons from the United States* - Dr Dominik Stecuła, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Colorado State University

- Scholars and commentators have been expressing concern about the rise of misinformation, the emergence of the “post-truth” era in politics, and the increasing prevalence of conspiracy theories, populism, and polarisation. These trends have been observed in countries across the world, including the United States, Brazil, Poland, and Turkey. Events such as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Brexit, COVID-19, and the events of January 6th have brought attention to these issues.
- This talk clarifies the relationship between these phenomena and addresses some of the misconceptions that have been prevalent in the public sphere in the US and abroad.
- The term “post-truth” describes a situation in which objective facts have less influence on public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. “Polarisation” refers to a strong dislike of the opposing side, while “populism” characterises politics as a battle between “the people” and corrupt “elites”. “Conspiracism” refers to the belief in a small group of powerful people working in secret against the common good.

- People's beliefs have changed as the information and media environment evolves. A survey conducted in the US found that 73% of Americans believed conspiracy theories were “out of control”, and 59% believed that people were more likely to believe conspiracy theories than 25 years ago. However, a study by Uscinski et al. (2022) found no empirical evidence for this claim when examining conspiracy theories among Americans and Europeans.
- Information disorder has also become a concern. Misleading information does not necessarily have to be “fake”, but intent matters. However, there is a danger of labelling everything we do not agree with as “misinformation”. In a survey conducted in 2022, Americans were more concerned about “misinformation” than about issues such as sexism, racism, terrorism, or climate change.
- Although “fake news” was not widespread in 2016, the excessive media coverage has made polarisation worse, exacerbating feedback loops. Furthermore, people tend to think of others as the victims of misinformation rather than themselves, due to the “third person effect”.
- There has been a lot of focus on the supply side of misinformation, but less attention has been paid to the demand side- who is generating fake news, and what is the platform doing about it? Furthermore, misinformation would not simply disappear if social media platforms like Facebook no longer existed. In the US, research shows that people tend to seek out misinformation with partisan motivated reasoning.
- Many solutions to information disorder have focused on the supply side, such as regulation, platform design, and fact-checking infrastructure. However, these solutions do not address the underlying problems. Fact-checks work, but they also decrease public trust in news. Pre-bunking and news literacy address the demand side, but they cannot solve the problem alone. The underlying issue is the decreasing trust in institutions such as the media, science, and NGOs, which have historically provided reliable information. This issue is not limited to the US but is a global phenomenon.
- The key question is how to address this issue and focus on the demand side, rather than just looking at the supply side. This is worth further exploration.

### *Syndicate Discussions with Dr Dominik Stecula*

#### ISSUE: Factors Influencing the Spread of Misinformation: Environmental or Cognitive?

The factors contributing to the spread of misinformation are complex and multifaceted. While there may be a small proportion of individuals who are naturally drawn to conspiracy theories, the media environment plays a far more significant role. The lack of critical engagement with the concept of misinformation in the public sphere has resulted in the term becoming devoid of meaning and, in some cases, even dangerously partisan. The proliferation of misinformation on TV and social media, coupled with the politicisation of the media environment, provides incentives for people to seek out certain types of information, reflecting certain types of behaviour. This can lead to people wanting to show loyalty to a group or prove themselves as good members. Ultimately, a combination of both environmental and cognitive factors contributes to the spread of misinformation.

#### ISSUE: The Role of Academia and Everyday People in Recognising Misinformation

There is a general distrust towards academics and their understanding of misinformation, particularly in the US where they are viewed as affiliated with the Democratic party. Public opinion is often influenced from the top-down, as seen in Canada where conservative leaders' support for COVID-19



mandates swayed public opinion, while the opposite happened in the US. This suggests that people are compelled to follow leaders who act in certain ways. In the US, many Republican elites have openly promoted conspiracies, leading to the marginalisation of moderate elites.

However, there is still a lot that everyday people can do on their own to recognise and combat misinformation. For instance, constructing a healthy media diet for themselves by using free open-source tools and browser plugins. It is important to note that there is no such thing as a single misinformation 'expert' or authority, as technical, sociological, and ethnographic understandings of the problem are all required. This presents an opportunity for meaningful collaboration across academic disciplines. While responsible elites may currently have little incentive to become more prominent in the US, everyday individuals still have agency in navigating the media environment.

#### ISSUE: Social Alienation and Exploiting Societal Divisions in Conspiracy Theories

Social alienation is a prevalent theme within the QAnon movement, often amplified by the urban-rural divide. Most conspiracy theories exploit existing societal divisions and issues, using them to gain support and fuel their movement. This problem extends beyond just misinformation and is deeply rooted in societal issues.

In addition to fact-checking initiatives by the government, "pre-bunking" interventions can help people understand how the online information environment operates and how incentives for lying in online spaces work. The Baltic nations are a good example of this. They routinely share valuable information with their citizens and encourage open discussions on the information shared. Such initiatives that are not necessarily top-down can empower citizens and help them become more discerning of the information they consume.

#### ISSUE: The Rise of Disinformation as a Systemic Problem

It is worth noting that despite the visible rise in online disinformation content, this does not necessarily equate to a rise in people actively seeking out and consuming such content. In fact, studies from as far back as 2016 have shown that such content only makes up a small portion of most people's information diets. It is also important to acknowledge that the group of people who are most attracted to disinformation content has remained relatively consistent over time, with some showing interest in disinformation as a way to signal their partisan beliefs.

Furthermore, recent research published in the Journal of Quantitative Description in 2022 has shown that during the pandemic, traditional sources of information such as news outlets and government agencies were still the primary sources of information for most people. This suggests that despite the prevalence of disinformation, the majority of people are able to discern between reliable and unreliable sources of information.

It is also important to note that those who propagate conspiracy theories do not necessarily believe in them themselves. Rather, they benefit from the emotional charge and mobilisation of their support base that these beliefs can generate. Ultimately, the issue of disinformation is a systemic problem that may persist for generations and will require a multifaceted approach to address.

## Workshop Programme

Venue: One Farrer Singapore

### Thursday, 23 March 2023

0900–1000hrs	<b>Registration</b> Venue : Ballroom 1, Level 6, One Farrer Hotel, 1 Farrer Park Station Road, Singapore
1000–1010hrs	<b>Workshop Welcome Remarks</b> by <b>Shashi Jayakumar</b> , Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS, NTU
1010-1110hrs	<b>Panel 1: Identities and the Competition for Influence</b>  Chair : <b>Dr Shashi Jayakumar</b> , Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS, NTU  Speakers : <b>Dr Eviane Leidig</b> , Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, the Netherlands  <b>Dr Kamalini Ramdas</b> , Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS)  <b>Jiaqi Liu</b> , Incoming Assistant Professor of Sociology, Singapore Management University (SMU)
1110–1140hrs	<b>Networking Break</b>
1140–1240hrs	<b>Interactive Syndicate Discussions</b>  Venue : <b>Syndicate 1</b> Ballroom 1  Venue : <b>Syndicate 2</b> Read Room  Venue : <b>Syndicate 3</b> Spottiswoode Room
1240-1430hrs	: <b>Networking Lunch</b>
1430–1545hrs	<b>Panel 2: Conspiracy and Populism in the Digital Age</b>

Chair : **Antara Chakraborty**, Senior Analyst, CENS, RSIS, NTU

Speakers : **Calvin Yixiang Cheng**, DPhil Candidate, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford  
**Dr Stephanie Alice Baker**, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, School of Policy & Global Affairs  
Department of Sociology and Criminology, City University of London

**Dr Jefferson Ragragio**, Assistant Professor, Department of Science Communication, College of Development Communication, University of the Philippines Los Baños

1545-1615hrs **Networking Break**

1615-1655hrs **Interactive Syndicate Discussions**

**Syndicate 1**  
Read Room

**Syndicate 2**  
Spottiswoode Room

1655hrs **End of Day 1**

1830–2030hrs **Welcome Dinner (By Invitation Only)**  
Venue : Wisteria and Camellia Villas

### Friday, 24 March 2023

1000-1100hrs **Registration and Coffee**  
Venue : Ballroom 1, Level 6, One Farrer Hotel, 1 Farrer Park Station Road, Singapore

1110–1230hrs **Panel 3: The Status of the Social**

Chair : **Yasmine Wong**, Senior Analyst, CENS, RSIS, NTU

Speakers : **Professor Miles Hewstone**, Emeritus Professor, University of Oxford

**Professor Daniel P.S. Goh**, Associate Professor of Sociology, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), and Vice Dean (Special Programmes) at NUS College, National University of Singapore (NUS)

**Dr Dominik Stecula**, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Colorado State University

1230-1400hrs                **Networking Lunch**

1400-1440hrs                **Interactive Syndicate Discussions**

Venue                                **Syndicate 1**  
     : Read Room

Venue                                **Syndicate 2**  
     : Spottiswoode Room

1440-1500hrs                **Closing Remarks**

1500hrs                                **End of Workshop and Tea**

1830–2030hrs                **Closing Dinner (By Invitation Only)**

Venue:                                Ballroom 1

## LIST OF SPEAKERS AND CHAIRPERSONS

### SPEAKERS

Eviane Leidig

Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow

Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University [The Netherlands]

Kamalini Ramdas

Senior Lecturer

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS)

Jiaqi Liu

Incoming Assistant Professor of Sociology

Singapore Management University (SMU)

Calvin Yixiang Cheng

DPhil Candidate, Oxford Internet Institute

University of Oxford [United Kingdom]

Stephanie Alice Baker

Senior Lecturer in Sociology

Department of Sociology and Criminology

City University of London [United Kingdom]

Jefferson Ragragio

Assistant Professor

Department of Science Communication

College of Development Communication

University of the Philippines Los Baños [Philippines]

Miles Hewstone  
Emeritus Professor  
University of Oxford [United Kingdom]

Daniel P.S. Goh  
Associate Professor of Sociology  
Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education)  
Vice Dean (Special Programmes)  
National University of Singapore (NUS)

Dominik Stecuła  
Assistant Professor of Political Science,  
Colorado State University [United States of America]

### **CHAIRPERSONS**

Shashi Jayakumar  
*Senior Fellow and Deputy Head*  
Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)

Antara Chakraborty  
*Senior Analyst*  
Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)

Yasmine Wong  
*Senior Analyst*  
Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)

### About the Centre of Excellence for National Security

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) is a research unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Established on 1 April 2006, CENS raison d'être is to raise the intellectual capital invested in strategising national security. To do so, CENS is devoted to rigorous policy-relevant analysis across a range of national security issues. CENS is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporeans and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs. Besides fulltime analysts, CENS further boosts its research capacity and keeps abreast of cutting-edge global trends in national security research by maintaining and encouraging a steady stream of Visiting Fellows. For more information about CENS, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/cens/](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/cens/).

### About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education, and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific. For more information about RSIS, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg).