

Fact checking in Singapore



Outline

- Getting the basics right
- Reporting on fake news
- Educating readers about fake news
- Calling out – and correcting – disinformation
- Going forward

Getting the basics right

- “With regard to my factual reporting of events of the war, I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions. Either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I have heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other, or else from imperfect memories.”

- Thucydides, in History of the Peloponnesian War

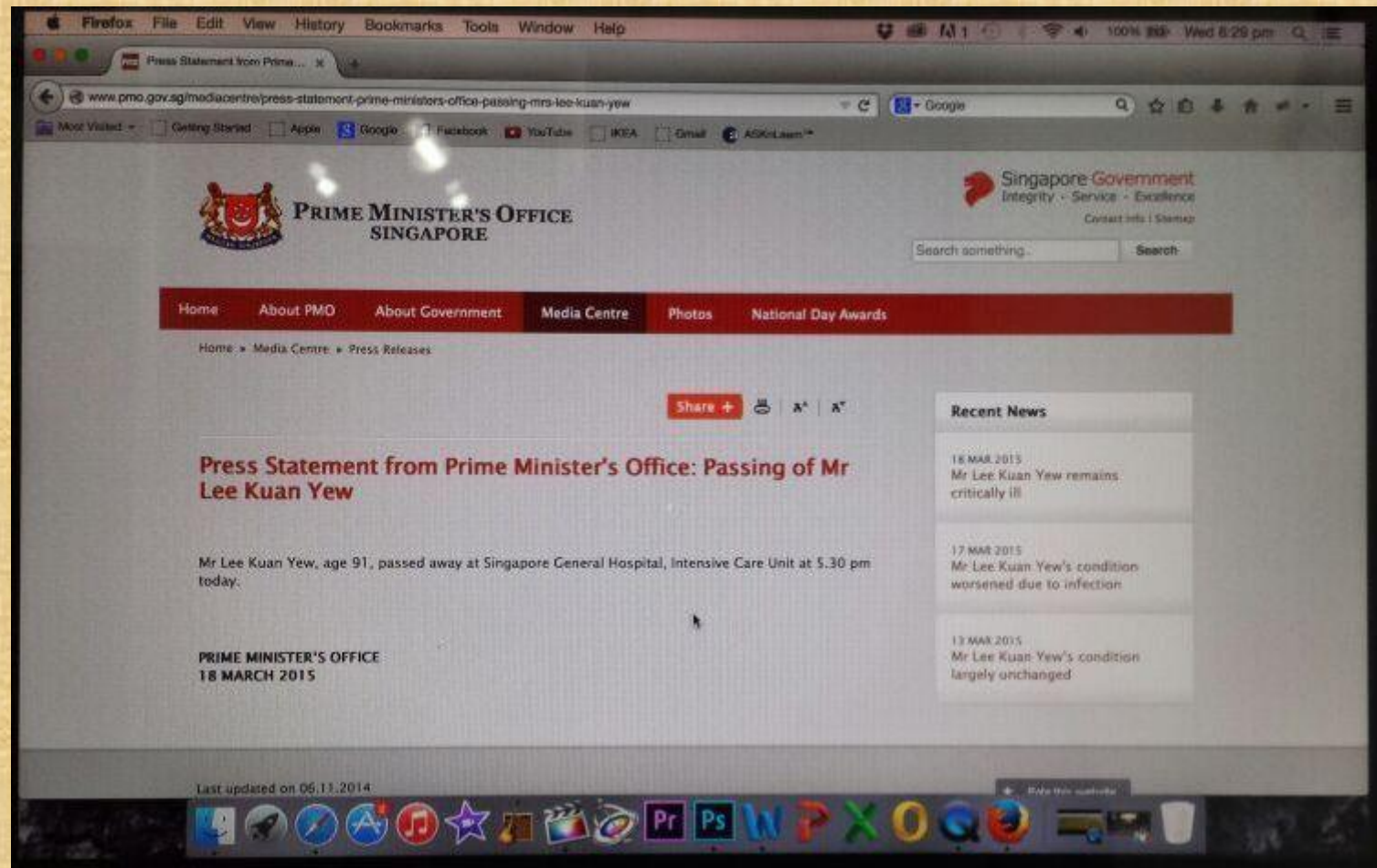
Getting the basics right

- Get to the original source as far as possible
- Independently verify the accuracy of information before posting/publishing it
- Be vigilant: Investigate the source and assess its credibility, as well as the credibility of evidence
- Check information against public records

Getting the basics right

- Be transparent about methods/approaches involved in getting the story
- Strive to get all sides of the story
- As social media increasingly becomes a source of news, there's a need to be more sceptical
- If it's too good to be true, it probably isn't

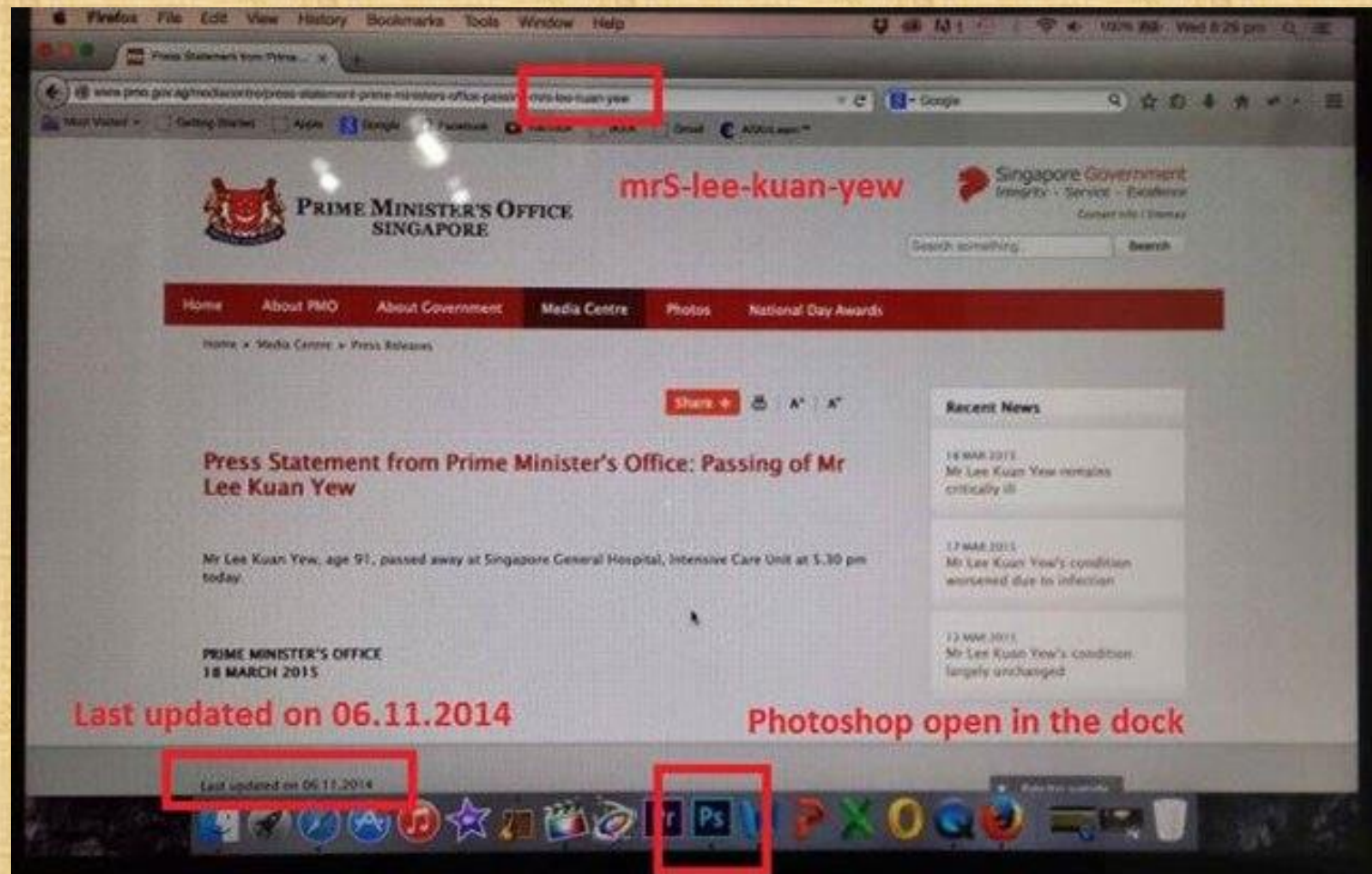
Reporting on fake news – LKY hoax



Reporting on fake news – LKY hoax

- March 2015: The rumours began circulating after a purported screenshot of a release from the PMO said Mr Lee had died.
- ST had our doubts: they were proven right
- The image spread and PMO clarified it was not true.
- Grassroots leader Roy Yeo told The Straits Times: “Some of us got duped seeing the image passed around, trusting that once you see a certain website, it is genuine.”
- Prominent blogger mrbrown weighed in on Twitter, saying: “Please stop posting the fake PMO screen. It says MRS Lee in the URL.”
- It turns out a student had doctored a 2010 PMO release announcing Mrs Lee Kuan Yew’s passing

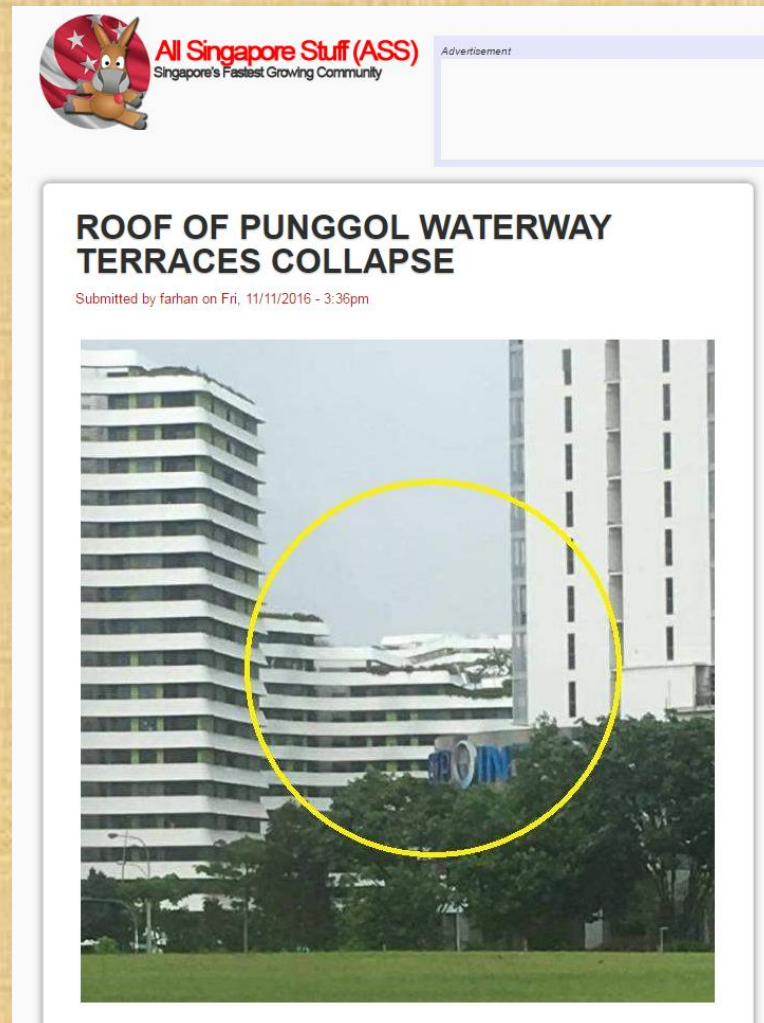
Reporting on fake news – LKY hoax



Reporting on fake news – LKY hoax

- However, a number of foreign media outlets, including American news network CNN and China's CCTV, Sina and Phoenix Chinese News, were taken in. They went ahead and reported Mr Lee's passing on Twitter and on TV news.
- The Chinese outlets later apologized and retracted the information, but CNN posted on Twitter: "Reports emerge questioning purported government message about Singapore founding father Lee Kuan Yew's health."
- The student was later given a stern warning. AGC said: "He created the image because he was frustrated with the frequent rumours about the demise of Mr Lee. He wanted to demonstrate to his friends how easy it was for a hoax to be perpetuated."

Reporting on fake news – collapse?



- Nov 2016: Sociopolitical site All Singapore Stuff posts a photo of what appears to be a HDB flat roof caving in
- A contributor said owners had voiced unhappiness online over poor workmanship of their flats

Reporting on fake news – collapse?



- Civil Defence officers go to the scene, and find no evidence of a collapse
- All Singapore Stuff removes post within 30 minutes, as authorities conduct checks
- A forum user suggests the roof appeared to have collapsed due to an optical illusion. HDB and developer confirm the report is a hoax

Reporting on fake news – collapse?

How a fake story got called out

A photo of Build-To-Order project Waterway Terraces in Punggol, showing the upper storeys of a block of flats that appeared to be collapsed, was widely shared online a week ago. But it was found to be a hoax and the HDB said a police report was being lodged. Here's how the "story" developed:

3.36pm

• Sociopolitical ists At Singapore, Stuff posts a photograph of Punggol Waterway Terraces Housing Board flats, whose roofs appear to have caved in. Claiming the information came from a contributor identified simply as "Bhansomani", the article says: "This just happened. The top floors of Punggol Waterway Terraces collapsed! Previous [sic] the owners of the Built-to-Order (BTO) flats had taken to the internet to voice their unhappiness over the poor workmanship of their flats."



* Residents and those in the vicinity start to dispute this on the site's Facebook page. Meanwhile, the post is shared on social media and duplicated on other forums. One HardcoreZone thread generates 24 posts in less than 17 hours, or slightly more than a post a minute.

5.45pm



* The Housing Board posts on Facebook a photograph of the building in question - with no visible collapse - taken at 5pm, and urges people not to be fooled by an online hoax.

* Separately, developer Tiong Seng Group confirms that the photo is a hoax, in response to queries from The Straits Times.

11.37pm

The editors of *All Singapore* Staff post an apology for the article, saying it was removed within 20 minutes of publication after our editors realized it was a hoax. They add, "We had no intention to cause any alarm to the public... We will speak to all our editors about maintaining responsible reporting of the news for the future."

Nov 11

- Shortly after 3.36pm

The Singapore Civil Defence Force dispatches one fire engine and a Red Rhino to the location, following the reports circulating on social media. Officers set up a cordon round the area, but find no evidence of a collapse.

- About 4pm

All Singapore Staff removes the post.

- 4.19pm

(Just because there are people whose brains work better than yours, it doesn't mean you're stupid.)



A HardwareZone forum user offers the suggestion that the roof could have appeared collapsed due to an optical illusion, posting his own photograph.

-11.42pm



APOLGYN: HOAX NEWS ON PUNGGOL KATENTHAI

ROOF COLLAPSE

On arrival, a collapsed roof was blocking access to the main building and a fire engine was used to clear the debris. The roof was found to be in poor condition and was replaced. The building was then repaired and the roof was replaced. The building was then repaired and the roof was replaced.

* A Facebook user shames All Singapore Stuff's apology, which features prominently the photograph that started it all, with the accompanying caption: "Umq."

* Over the next 24 hours, several users share the post but explicitly condemn the website for not fact-checking and wasting the audience's resources.

* The hoax itself may have died a quick death, but the profit life cycle is not as short. Indeed, some fake news stories can keep popping up indefinitely as people share posts without reading up on the latest updates.

- Editors of the site posted an apology, saying they had no intention of causing alarm
- Readers online criticise the site for not checking and wasting resources
- Dec 2016: ST reports on how a fake news story gets called out

Reporting on fake news – KFC?



President Tan invites Thailand's new King to visit Singapore to eat KFC

straitstimes.com



Did ST just report that President Tony Tan invites the Thai King to Singapore... to eat KFC?

unscrambled.sg

11 shares



Like



Comment



Share



7



Han-Wei Lai

What does unscrambled and CNN have in common?

Both fooled by screenshots.

1 hour ago · Like · Reply



Han-Wei Lai

The picture in your thumbnail comes from here:
<https://www.facebook.com/sureboh.sg/posts/1297422590277943>

1 hour ago · Like · Reply

Reporting on fake news – KFC?



- Dec 2016: Many thought ST had put out the cheeky headline
- ST posted a note to say the headline had been modified by a Facebook user, and that the paper viewed this act of mischief seriously
- But the damage had been done

Educating readers about fake news

A22 | ST READERS' POST

| THE STRAITS TIMES | MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2016 |

Weed out fake news with real scepticism

Contact information, sources, domain name and user comments can provide clues on the veracity of a post



Daryl Chin
Social Media Editor

Did President Tony Tan Keng Yam invite Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun to visit Singapore to eat fried chicken?

That may have been the impression some readers got if they had checked their Facebook news feeds on Dec 3. After all, the sensational headline was linked to an article in The Straits Times, and "straitstimes.com" appeared prominently under the text.

It turned out that the headline of the Facebook post was entirely doctored by a satirical page which took advantage of a small loophole in the social media platform's posting system.

While Facebook does not allow the average user to tweak headlines when sharing posts put up on a personal account, changes can be made to posts that appeared on a Facebook Page – which is a public profile specifically created for a business or brand.

This means that entirely legitimate headlines, such as ST's original one – President Tan Conveys Best Wishes To Thailand's New

King, Invites Him To Visit Singapore – can be altered to look like something else entirely with a click of the mouse and some editing.

While the satirical page has since removed the post, it did not stop users from reacting strongly to what they perceived to be a disrespectful act towards a foreign head of state. Despite several Facebook users pointing out the ease with which such headlines could have been doctored, the post had already gone viral.

"What headline was that? How could ST do something like this?" said one user.

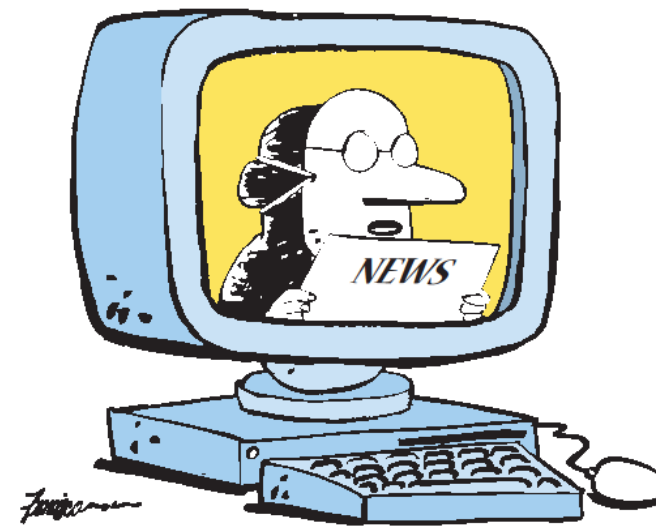
Another Facebook user called for the reporter to be sacked.

The users could have verified the veracity of the headline by simply clicking the Facebook link through to the article.

Not only was the headline to the linked article different, the story made no mention of fried chicken or any invitation to consume it.

The prank is the latest in a long line of spoofed content and fake news on social media, which has come into the spotlight recently in the wake of the United States presidential election. Concerns have been raised about this by leaders from the US to Germany.

Other imitations are more nefarious. An article which made its rounds on the Internet in October copied ST's layout, including the logo. It had offered iPhone 7s for just \$1. The catch was that users needed to register at the site and provide



As a rule of thumb, it's always wise to play it safe if there are doubts, rather than risk propagating false information or giving up personal information. After all, a healthy dose of scepticism is required given the wide range of content in cyberspace.

their credit card details.

The fake report has since been taken down.

The clear giveaway in this case, however, was the domain name, which was www.business.news-reports.net, instead of www.straitstimes.com.

Many Internet users may not have noticed the change in the website name in the address bar, and could have been misled into giving up vital information to unknown sources.

As a rule of thumb, it's always wise to play it safe if there are doubts, rather than risk propagating false information or giving up personal information. After all, a healthy dose of scepticism is required given the wide range of content in cyberspace.

And if in doubt, there is always the askST site (www.straitstimes.com/askst) to turn to for answers.

daryl@sp.com.sg

Getting to the truth

Some ways to determine if an online article is genuine or not:

- Users can navigate through the site to check if the contact information provided is legitimate.
- They can navigate around the site to see if the rest of the site works. If it leads to just a bunch of dead links, then that's a sign something is not quite right.
- They can also do a simple look-up search (<https://www.whois.net>) to find out who or which organisation the website is registered to.
- If their information source is a Facebook Page, they can check to see if the entity regularly posts real or satirical content.
- Another telltale sign: Check if the people leaving comments on the posts have called it out to be fake.

Educating readers about fake news

- Local sites like TRS have posted false reports that could spark racial or religious divisions
- Foreign sites could try to influence Singaporeans' sentiments where relations with other countries are concerned
- Such fake news tendencies have been around, but are now more pronounced with social media
- These could seek to influence how local readers see issues, and cast doubt on local media reports

Reporting on misinformation

ThinkingAbout

3 myths about Singapore-China ties

Singapore's policy on China hasn't changed, but China's expectation of Singapore has



Chua Mui Hoong

Opinion Editor

Much chatter online and off has taken up on why Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong did not attend the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in Beijing last weekend.

The event organised by China had heads of state and government from 39 countries attending, including seven out of 10 from ASEAN. Singapore was represented by National Development Minister Lawrence Wong.

Two schools of thought prevailed. China snubbed Singapore, so it was Singapore that didn't want to take part.

My Wong chaffed at the issue when asked about this. He told reporters on May 16, a day after the event, that the limitation was decided by the Chinese – which meant PM Lee wasn't invited.

The snub was on the Chinese side, not Singapore's. Taniguchi Wangwei, the record of the night. Nature – and possibly others – are vast, so when there is scant information on a noteworthy event, citizens are wont to rush in with speculation that hasn't taken up but should little light. Wong, a climate of opacity has been rising up but should little light. Wong, a climate of opacity has been rising up but should little light.

Former permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Blaise Hsiao, who has a wide Facebook following these days, thanks to his candid, often caustic posts, tweeted against Singaporeans falling for "gossip" or psychological operations of foreign powers.

Even when Singaporeans work these things out, it is rather that Singapore wasn't at the coming-out ball of the Belt and Road Forum. Singapore also conducted bilateral military and military training exercises with China. At the same time, an English-speaking country with British colonial heritage and an open English language has a long history with the United States.

During a Facebook post on the meeting, Mr. Kaulan commented: "It is a matter of the way we see the world. As a city-state and node in Asia, it is inevitably linked to the region, including China."

If the external diplomat – who read foreign policy to know for a living to forget – is right, what

are some say going on tonight now that Singaporeans need to be aware of?

I'm not a foreign policy guru, but what I put out as a journalist, I can discern the myths floating out there that merit being picked from the ocean of misinformation and tossed into the incinerator.

Myth 1: Singapore has changed its stance on China and now alligns itself more overtly with the United States

THE CASE: Singapore sided with Western powers when it spoke out on the recent Chinese ruling on the South China Sea that ruled against China's "historic rights" claim over vast waters of the sea. American ships patrolling the region call it a "freedom of navigation" exercise.

THE REALITY: Freedom of navigation matters a lot to Singapore and it wants to see maritime disputes resolved according to international law. As a small, open nation, it also has a vested interest in global trade and speaking up for the rule of international law in disputes.

Singapore's leaders routinely drive home such home truths to its domestic audience and at regional events. It wasn't taking sides but it didn't help if it was speaking for truth offends the longevity party in the region.

As for being pro- or anti-China, Singapore leaders point out that the limitations between the two countries go back a long way. Singapore is friendly with China and continued investing after Tiananmen, when China was international isolation. Recently, Singapore was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Singapore is China's top foreign investor, and China is Singapore's largest trading partner.

On the security front, Singapore, like most states, wants to be friends with all big powers.

Its change base, for example, is America's. When Mr. Lee Kuan Yew was interviewed for the book *The Man View Of The World* five years ago, he made the point that one day, Singapore will be a major power. That was his stand.

It is not common knowledge, but today, China also makes use of the Chang base, sending its many ships there for refuelling. Singapore also conducts bilateral military and military training exercises with China.

At the same time, an English-speaking country with British colonial heritage and an open English language has a long history with the United States.

Singapore has historical and economic affairs with America. As a city-state and node in Asia, it is inevitably linked to the region, including China.

But the fact of the matter is that Singapore's position is consistent;

it has not changed. It is China's perception – and perhaps expectation – of Singapore that has

Myth 2: Singapore is a Chinese society and should be more sympathetic to China

THE CASE: China has often viewed the Chinese diaspora as part of greater China. Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example, for political and historical reasons, fall within China's orbit. Singapore has a majority Chinese population and should thus understand China, and uphold China's interests.

THE REALITY: Singapore is a "Chinese society" got Singaporean who uphold multiculturalism very much, on behalf of our non-Chinese compatriots. In fact, this myth comes across quite hollow to those born and bred in Singapore. True-blue Singaporeans are quite aware that we don't just

proclaim ourselves a multiracial society, we live it every day. My office, for example, is a bodgepodge of ethnicities. When I'm having lunch with colleagues, I sometimes do a double take. There's a Sikh woman, a Malay-Muslim woman, a Muslim who lives with her Chinese-Cantonese mother, a woman of Chinese-Indian heritage, and even a few plain Chinese, including me.

Our families are Singaporean, not Chinese; many of us have blood ties and deep friendships in the region, especially in Malaysia, but not many of us have ties back to China any more.

Any Chinese commentator who expects Singapore to give China an easy pass and always take its side on international issues on account of "ethnic" ties has read us Singaporeans totally wrong.

We are small, our protective instincts lie in our own skin and other readers, standing up for ourselves, and now accepting being read around, is in our DNA.

Myth 3: China is out to punish Singapore, and Singaporeans should feel worried about this and pressure the Singapore Government to be more accommodating of China

THE CASE: Those who say China is out to punish Singapore point to recent incidents such as the seizure of nine Singapore military vehicles during shipboard confrontation with the Singapore Government to go after on China, as though Singapore were the one playing hardball.

Most of all, this myth is the most dangerous for Singaporeans because it feeds on fear and anxiety.

China is large country with a lot of resources at its disposal. In fact, it can open up land routes and an alternative sea route to the Malacca Strait that would, in fact, make Singapore's port less important.

China's economic dependency on Singapore's neighbours, including Malaysia, the Philippines and Cambodia, is a reality.

Today's social media world is rife with the shadows



IT LIES WITHIN OUR CONTROL

because no Chinese official is going to say publicly that it wants Singaporeans to pressure the Singapore Government to change its stand.

Instead, there is a lot of whispering going around. Many of us – in the media, business world and in political and government circles – have heard stories of how Chinese officials are beating on those with businesses in China to get the Singapore Government to go after on China, as though Singapore were the one playing hardball.

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As it wants to judge Singapore off the fence and make it come to its side, China will use pressure – economic and diplomatic and via pay-off – to get Singaporeans to question the status quo and to try to shift Singapore's foreign policy to be more accommodating of it.

But beyond diplomatic pressure, how much power does China have to "punish" Singapore?

Perhaps not that much, according to Dutch academic Lieke Bos, who studied in England and Singapore. Writing in *The Diplomat*, a website which features analyses on the Asia-Pacific, she said: "China does not have much power to get Singapore back in line, as Chinese economic statecraft so far has been relatively unsuccessful. Singapore is also in a very different position from its neighbouring countries as it manages its advanced economy and many international security relationships across the world. At the same time, China is still far too dependent on imports through the Malacca Strait to seriously oppose Singapore. The sailing of goods in port can, after all, easily be done by both parties."

While Singapore should take heed of China's displeasure seriously and seek to keep ties on an even keel, Singaporeans shouldn't feel worried about it, either. As Mr. Kaulan argued, keep calm and carry on.

As for the Belt and Road displacing the Malacca Strait as the premier shipping hub, it would take many more years for that to happen. For the time being, at least, even as port projects are being planned around Malaysia and Indonesia – presumably as alternatives to the Malacca Strait – port planners have aren't keeping still.

Singapore was named maritime capital of the world for the third time this year.

The impending move to the new port to be designed to accommodate mega container ships – from 12,000 to about 20,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) that will fly the sea. Only about 20 ports around the world now can accommodate these mega ships.

As former head of civil service Peter Ho put it last week in a lecture, Singapore can overcome its constraints in the future by making itself the hub of a new range of new flows. It is already a finance hub, a tourism and recreation hub, and a petrochemical hub. It is already a trade and capital hub.

Mr. Ho suggested that Singapore should not be a place where companies can store and process data. With data now deemed as the oil of the future, that is a dead-end road.

The key to remaining relevant to the world – and hence have an edge over any emerging power – is to build up Singapore's global networks to talent, capital and information. And data, must allow through there.

No matter how uncomfortable relations between Singapore and China appear at times these days, it's worth the game back to basics.

First, Singapore hasn't changed in its foreign policy. It is China that has changed its stance and its attitude towards Singapore.

Second, Singapore stands up for its national interests, not for the interests of any other society that wants to claim dominion over it.

Third, our countering and responding to China's moves to play ball with Singapore to play ball.

As Singaporeans, we play ball when it is Singapore's interests to do so. When it isn't, we are free to play with others. The key to making our way in the world is to play with others who will still want to play ball with us, and that we all play for the accepted rules of the game.

It is not a matter of taking sides or being against it, but of not taking sides or being against it.

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- One hot issue is Singapore-China relations
- One way to set out the facts on issues/myths that are out there, and give a fact-based response
- Myth 1: Singapore has changed its stance and aligned with the US
- Fact: Singapore's position is unchanged its foreign policy. It is China's perception – and perhaps expectation – of Singapore that has

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Reporting on disinformation

- Myth 2: As a Chinese society, it should be more sympathetic to China
- Fact: Singapore is a multiracial society with Singaporean instincts – it stands up for its national interests, not that of any other society that wants to claim kinship with it
- Myth 3: China is out to punish Singapore. Singaporeans should feel worried about this and pressure their Govt to be more accommodating towards China
- Fact: Singaporeans shouldn't feel overly anxious. Other countries big and small will periodically want Singapore to play ball, and it will play ball when it is in its interests to do so. When it is not, Singapore is free to play with others – it makes sure it has plenty of friends, and that everyone plays by the accepted rules of the game

Going forward

- How can we better deal with fake news?
- **Call out** false/insidious reports and rumours that might otherwise be downplayed
- **Debunk** fake news and its agenda
- **Explain** the facts to readers/viewers and educate them on how to spot fake news
- Readers have a role

askST
you ask. we answer.



ASK US A QUESTION

Send an e-mail to
askST@sph.com.sg

