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ACADEMICS AGAINST DISINFORMATION SINGAPORE

This is a public site containing documents related to concerns of a group of academics about Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill 2019. This effort has been coordinated by [Linda Lim](#), assisted by [Cherian George](#) and other Singaporean scholars.

UPDATE, 10 May 2019: Parliament passed the Bill on 8 May 2019. As the debate has raised important issues concerning the role of academics, we will continue to address some of these wider implications and post relevant materials here.

Join our **mailing list** to receive email updates. [Click here.](#)

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13 April 2019 [Updated 14 April]

MEDIA RELEASE

Academics Against Disinformation: Singapore's proposed online falsehoods law may deter scholarship and set precedents harmful to global academia

The Singapore government has tabled sweeping legislation against online disinformation. The proposed Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019 (POFMA) is currently being scrutinised by legislators and concerned citizens, ahead of the Bill's Second Reading in Parliament.

As academics with expertise, experience or interest in Singapore and Asia generally, we are concerned that the proposed legislation will have unintended detrimental consequences for scholars and research in Singapore, compromising Singapore's notable efforts to develop itself into an internationally-recognised hub for excellence in higher education. The legislation may also set negative precedents, with knock-on effects on the global academy.

We have written to Singapore's Education Minister to express our concerns. As at Sunday 14 April, the letter carries more than 90 signatures, solicited by invitation only. They include the current and four past Presidents of the Association for Asian Studies, the world's largest and premier scholarly association for academics who study Asia, and a former President of the International Communication Association.¹

Most of the signatories are not based in Singapore. Several Singapore-based academics privately expressed agreement with our letter but declined to sign for fear of compromising their career prospects. Our concern about the proposed legislation cannot be divorced from larger issues around academic freedom in the Republic.

The [Education Ministry responded](#) through Singapore media on 12 April 2019. We note its assurances that the proposed law will not affect academic work. But we cannot accept this as a categorical guarantee until it is reflected in the language of the Bill.

The disinformation dilemma that has prompted the Singapore government to act is a real one, resulting in the corruption of democratic processes and the spread of hate propaganda against defenceless communities. Many of our colleagues are directly engaged in researching this urgent problem and have contributed to emerging best practices for dealing with it.

We are concerned about Singapore's proposed legislation certainly not because we are oblivious to the seriousness of the global assault on reason. On the contrary, academics are at the frontlines of this battle. But no country's response should undermine the very capacities it requires to deal with this crisis.

- Also see [Briefing: Academic Concerns](#), compiled by Linda Lim (29 April 2019).

¹ An earlier version of this release included mention of a serving officer of a regional consortium of universities. We have removed this mention to avoid creating the wrong impression that the academic was signing in that official capacity. All signatories have signed in their individual capacities. We apologise if we did not make this clear enough in our communication.

LIST OF SIGNATORIES

Signatories to Letter from Academics on POFMA

Listed alphabetically by last name as of May 7, 10 pm SGT

*Singaporean

1. Barbara Watson Andaya, University of Hawaii
2. Leonard Andaya, University of Hawaii
3. Ang Peng Hwa, Nanyang Technological University*
4. Shannon Ang, University of Michigan/Nanyang Technological University (PhD student)*
5. Shobha Avadhani, National University of Singapore*
6. Alice Ba, University of Delaware
7. Michael Barr, Flinders University
8. Rachel Bok, University of British Columbia (PhD student)*
9. Carlo Bonura, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
10. Michael Buehler, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
11. Toby Carroll, City University of Hong Kong
12. Jason Chan, University of Minnesota*
13. Qizhong Chang, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University*
14. Pheng Cheah, University of California-Berkeley
15. Roland Cheo, Shandong University*
16. Chia Yeow-Tong, University of Sydney*
17. Angelina Chin, Pomona College
18. Ja Ian Chong, National University of Singapore*
19. Ping-Tzu Chu, National Tsinghua University
20. Charmaine Chua, University of California-Santa Barbara (as of July 1, 2019)*
21. John Ciorciari, University of Michigan
22. Nicole Constable, University of Pittsburgh
23. Robert Cribb, Australian National University
24. Edilberto C. DeJesus, Asian Institute of Management
25. Benjamin Hill Detenber, Nanyang Technological University
26. John DiMoia, Seoul National University
27. Richard Doner, Emory University
28. Saroja Dorairajoo, National University of Singapore*
29. Prasenjit Duara, Duke University
30. Mohan Dutta, Massey University
31. Benjamin Elman, Princeton University
32. Fam Shun Deng, Australian National University*
33. Anne Feldhaus, Arizona State University
34. Yuanqiu Feng, University of Michigan/National University of Singapore (PhD student)*

35. Nancy Florida, University of Michigan
36. Cherian George, Hong Kong Baptist University*
37. Xingli Giam, University of Tennessee, Knoxville*
38. Thomas Gold, University of California-Berkeley
39. Terence Gomez, University of Malaya
40. Pavel Gudoshnikov, University of Leeds
41. Eva Hansson, Stockholm University
42. Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina
43. Allen Hicken, University of Michigan
44. Hal Hill, Australia National University
45. Victoria Hui, University of Notre Dame
46. William Hurst, Northwestern University
47. Paul Hutchcroft, Australia National University
48. Darryl Jarvis, Education University of Hong Kong
49. Kanishka Jayasuriya, Murdoch University
50. Gavin Jones, Australia National University
51. Lee Jones, Queen Mary University of London
52. Walid Jumblatt, Nanyang Technological University*
53. Yuko Kasuya, Keio University
54. Laavanya Kathiravelu, Nanyang Technological University*
55. Eddie C.Y. Kuo, Nanyang Technological University*
56. Kwok Kian Woon, Nanyang Technological University*
57. Terence T. Lee, Murdoch University
58. Terence C.L. Lee, National University of Singapore*
59. Joanne Leow, University of Saskatchewan*
60. Victor Lieberman, University of Michigan
61. Liew Kai Khiun, Nanyang Technological University*
62. Francis Lim Khok Gee, Nanyang Technological University*
63. Jamus Lim, ESSEC Business School*
64. Linda Lim, University of Michigan*
65. Lim Wah Guan, University of New South Wales*
66. Bernard Loo Fok Weng, Nanyang Technological University*
67. Neil Loughlin, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (PhD student)
68. Donald Low, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*
69. Justin McDaniel, University of Pennsylvania
70. Neo Yu Wei, National University of Singapore*
71. Irene Ng Yue Hoong, National University of Singapore*
72. Ng Kok Hoe, National University of Singapore*
73. Kristopher Olds, University of Wisconsin-Madison
74. Lynette Ong, University of Toronto
75. Stephan Ortmann, City University of Hong Kong
76. Pang Eng Fong, Singapore Management University*

77. T.J. Pempel, University of California-Berkeley
78. Thomas Pepinsky, Cornell University
79. Elizabeth Perry, Harvard University
80. Martin Powers, University of Michigan
81. Kai Quek, University of Hong Kong*
82. Lily Rahim, University of Sydney*
83. Anthony Reid, Australia National University
84. Nicholas Rine, University of Michigan
85. Geoffrey Robinson, University of California-Los Angeles
86. Garry Rodan, Murdoch University
87. Herman M. Schwartz, University of Virginia
88. James Scott, Yale University
89. Sarita Echavez See, University of California-Riverside*
90. Ken Setiawan, University of Melbourne
91. Gerald Sim, Florida Atlantic University*
92. Vineeta Sinha, National University of Singapore*
93. Daniel Slater, University of Michigan
94. Patricia Sloane-White, University of Delaware
95. Jessica Tan Soo Lin, Nanyang Technological University*
96. Joanne Tan, University of Michigan/Singapore Management University (Postdoctoral fellow)*
97. Kevin Y. L. Tan, National University of Singapore & Nanyang Technological University*
98. Netina Tan, McMaster University*
99. Rae Yunzi Tan, University of Baltimore*
100. Robyn Tan, National University of Singapore*
101. Tan Ying Jia, Wesleyan University*
102. Yuko Tanaka, Hosei University
103. Tay Kheng Soon, National University of Singapore*
104. Katrin Travouillon, Australian National University
105. Kay-Key Teo, National University of Singapore (PhD Candidate)*
106. Teo You Yenn, Nanyang Technological University*
107. Mark Thompson, City University of Hong Kong
108. Toh Puay Khoon, University of Texas-Austin*
109. Wenfei Tong, University of Alaska-Anchorage*
110. Christopher Tremewan, University of Auckland
111. Jonathan Unger, Australian National University
112. Chin-Shou Wang, National Cheng Kung University
113. Yuan-Kang Wang, Western Michigan University
114. Meredith Weiss, State University of New York-Albany
115. Bridget Welsh, John Cabot University
116. Lynn White, Princeton University
117. Marina Whitman, University of Michigan
118. Thongchai Winichakul, University of Wisconsin-Madison

119. Jieh-Min Wu, Academia Sinica
 120. Anand Yang, University of Washington-Seattle
 121. Lorraine Yang, University of Leeds (PhD Candidate)*
 122. Dominic Yeo, Hong Kong Baptist University*
 123. Mako Yoshimura, Hosei University
 124. Kyu-ho Youm, University of Oregon
 125. Min Zhou, University of California Los Angeles
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11 April 2019

LETTER TO EDUCATION MINISTER

Minister Ong Ye Kung
Minister of Education, Singapore

Dear Minister Ong,

We are academics who have expertise, experience or interest in Singapore and Asia generally. We write to express our concern that the proposed Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019 (POFMA) will have unintended detrimental consequences for scholars and research in Singapore, and for the global academy.

We recognize that POFMA is not aimed at the academic community, and that it does not apply to “opinion, criticisms, satire and parody”. What concerns us as scholars is that it sanctions and potentially criminalizes “statements of fact” that are “false or misleading”.

The advance of knowledge derives from, and hence much of academic work focuses on, disputing apparently established “facts”. These are confirmed or denied through the process of research, and continuously reappraised as new data and analysis become available over time. Thus for many phenomena it is not possible to state definitively what is a “fact” proven for all time, and what is a conjecture or hypothesis that may turn out to be “false or misleading”. It is specifically those statements that “a reasonable person” would consider “to be a representation of fact” that are most usefully subject to rigorous academic scrutiny.

This is true in both the sciences and the sphere of human social activity, where even quantitative research deals in probabilities, not absolute certainties, and interpretations of even generally agreed upon “facts” may vary greatly, a contention that is the lifeblood of scholarly pursuit, from medicine and mechanical engineering to literary criticism and macroeconomics. In academia, scholarship is evaluated through peer review and specialist publication, but even the

results of this rigorous process are subject to disagreement and critical scrutiny. A good academic must always be prepared to use evidence and logic to evaluate established “facts.”

Much scholarly discourse now takes place online, with faculty sharing preliminary research drafts and working papers on personal webpages, blogs and other social media, and the increased popularity of open access journals. Universities and funding agencies also increasingly encourage scholars to share their research and knowledge with the general public through online media commentaries on platforms such as *The Conversation*.

Wide dissemination of ongoing research—which may be considered “facts in dispute”—is a global public good facilitated by the borderless internet. Our concern is that POFMA’s wide reach, both “in and outside Singapore”, its broad definition of Singapore’s “public interest” (e.g. covering matters deemed related to “Singapore’s friendly relations with other countries”), its holding “internet intermediaries” responsible for all items posted on their platforms, and its severe penalties of large fines and long prison terms for deemed violations, will discourage this for an indeterminately wide range of subjects and individuals. These provisions may have unforeseen consequences for Singapore’s ability to serve as a global hub of first-rate academic research and technological innovation.

Under these circumstances, POFMA is likely to make many academics hesitant to conduct or supervise research that might unknowingly fall afoul of POFMA, or refer colleagues or students to faculty positions in Singapore’s respected universities. Singapore is known for its investment in education, a commitment that reflects a belief that such an investment pays dividends. This act discourages scholars from marshaling their expertise in precisely the areas where it is most needed—namely, pressing questions and challenges for which there are no clear answers or easy solutions.

We are also concerned that passage of POFMA might set an international precedent and spur emulation by other countries with weaker institutions, thus casting even wider restraints on global scholarly research and knowledge advancement, and its public dissemination. Copycat legislation or reciprocal action could boomerang on Singapore entities, including businesses, government officials and universities with activities in other jurisdictions, just as POFMA will impact foreign entities that have interactions with Singapore, including universities.

We hope that government deliberations of the proposed law will take into account these concerns of the global academic community, clarify the law’s applications to academia, and ensure safeguards for scholarly research and its online outreach, to minimize the likely adverse effects on global as well as local innovation, knowledge production and dissemination.

Looking forward to your response, we are, respectfully yours,
Listed alphabetically by last name as of April 11, 8 am SGT

Leonard Andaya, University of Hawaii

Michael Barr, Flinders University
Michael Buehler, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Toby Carroll, City University of Hong Kong
Pheng Cheah, University of California-Berkeley
Angelina Chin, Pomona College
Ja Ian Chong, National University of Singapore
Ping-Tzu Chu, National Tsinghua University
Nicole Constable, University of Pittsburgh
John DiMoia, Seoul National University
Richard Doner, Emory University
Prasenjit Duara, Duke University
Benjamin Elman, Princeton University
Anne Feldhaus, Arizona State University
Cherian George, Hong Kong Baptist University
Xingli Giam, University of Tennessee*
Thomas Gold, University of California-Berkeley
Terence Gomez, University of Malaya
Eva Hansson, Stockholm University
Kevin Hewison, University of North Carolina
Allen Hicken, University of Michigan
Hal Hill, Australia National University
Victoria Hui, University of Notre Dame
William Hurst, Northwestern University
Paul Hutchcroft, Australia National University
Darryl Jarvis, Education University of Hong Kong
Gavin Jones, Australia National University
Yuko Kasuya, Keio University
Linda Lim, University of Michigan
Donald Low, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Justin McDaniel, University of Pennsylvania
Kristopher Olds, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Lynette Ong, University of Toronto
Stephan Ortmann, City University of Hong Kong
Pang Eng Fong, Singapore Management University
T.J. Pempel, University of California-Berkeley
Thomas Pepinsky, Cornell University
Elizabeth Perry, Harvard University
Lily Rahim, University of Sydney
Geoffrey Robinson, University of California-Los Angeles
Garry Rodan, Murdoch University
James Scott, Yale University
Sarita Echavez See, University of California-Riverside
Ken Setiawan, University of Melbourne

Daniel Slater, University of Michigan
Patricia Sloane-White, University of Delaware
Netina Tan, McMaster University
Teo You Yenn, Nanyang Technological University
Mark Thompson, City University of Hong Kong
Toh Puay Khoon, University of Texas-Austin
Christopher Tremewan, University of Auckland
Chin-Shou Wang, National Cheng Kung University
Yuan-Kang Wang, Western Michigan University
Meredith Weiss, State University of New York-Albany
Bridget Welsh, John Cabot University
Lynn White, Princeton University
Thongchai Winichakul, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Jieh-Min Wu, Academia Sinica
Anand Yang, University of Washington-Seattle

April 11, 2019, SGT

c.c. Prof. Sun Sun Lim, NMP
Assoc. Prof. Walter Theseira, NMP

11 April 2019

LETTER TO UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS & BOARDS OF TRUSTEES

We also wrote to the Presidents and Boards of Trustees of all Singapore universities on April 11 morning:

Dear President (Name) and (University) Board of Trustees,

On behalf of my fellow signatories, I am sharing with you the letter below that we have sent to Minister Ong Ye Kung, and NMPs Sun Sun Lim and Walter Theseira, expressing our concern about the impact that Singapore's proposed Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (2019) will have on our profession globally, and specifically on Singapore universities and research. Minister Ong and Prof. Theseira have acknowledged receipt and we are hopeful that they will follow up on our concerns.

All the current signatories were individually invited by other signatories to contribute to and sign the letter, and are Asian Studies scholars familiar (to varying extents) with Singapore. We focused on inviting only senior and tenured scholars, all of whom are signing in their individual

capacities, not necessarily as representatives of their institutions or professional associations. However, many are prominent in their respective fields: they include the current and four past Presidents of the Association for Asian Studies, the world's largest and premier scholarly association for academics who study Asia; one is the Secretary-General of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities; many are or have been department chairs, and directors of university centers and institutes on Asian and international affairs.

Our signatories work in a range of institutions, from large research universities to small liberal arts colleges, in many different countries. Besides those who conduct research on Singapore, the group includes individuals who have received full professor offers at Singapore universities, been distinguished visitors there, served on Singapore university Visiting Committees, and sat on various Singapore institutions' external advisory boards. Several of those at overseas institutions are Singaporeans. All are motivated by deep concern for the future of scholarship worldwide, and its contribution to human knowledge and well-being, particularly but not only in Asia.

We hope this letter will be useful to you in your own deliberations about POFMA and its impact on your university and on Singapore academia and academics. At the moment we are sharing it only with the boards of trustees of all the autonomous universities, but may eventually circulate it more widely to other academics and others affected by the act.

Sincerely yours,
Linda Lim

SELECTED MEDIA REPORTS

Parliament Debate

- Channel NewsAsia, 9 May: [“Parliament passes Bill to tackle online falsehoods”](#)
- Channel NewsAsia, 8 May: [“Proposed law against online falsehoods will not curb academic research”](#) (Education Minister’s speech)
- Video: Parliamentary speech by NMP Walter Theseira, Singapore University of Social Sciences.



- Nominated MPs’ proposed amendments to the Bill:
 - [Notice of Amendment to POFMA, and media statement](#)
 - [Law Minister’s response](#)
- South China Morning Post, 1 May: [“Fake news decisions by Singapore government should be subject to review by independent council, say lawmakers”](#)
- Straits Times, 1 May: [“NMPs suggest 4 amendments to fake news Bill, including having independent council to review Govt decisions”](#)

Reports on academics’ concerns

- Today, 1 May 2019: [“Experts raise concerns, suggest changes to fake news Bill”](#)
- Yahoo! News, 27 April 2019: [“New fake news law won’t affect votes, says academic Cherian George”](#)
- Times Higher Education, 23 April 2019: [“Singapore ‘fake news’ law ‘threatens academic freedom worldwide’”](#) (Also appears on [Inside Higher Ed website](#))
- Academe (American Association of University Professors blog), 15 April 2019: [“Singapore ‘Fake News’ Law May Threaten Academic Freedom”](#).
- University World News, 15 April 2019: [“Sweeping ‘fake news’ bill a risk for academic freedom”](#).
- AFP, 15 April 2019: [“Academics concerned about Singapore’s ‘fake news’ law”](#).
- Straits Times, 13 April 2019: [“Some scholars want academic protection reflected in fake news Bill”](#).
- South China Morning Post, 13 April 2019: [“Dozens of university dons concerned Singapore’s anti-fake news laws will stifle academic freedom”](#).

OTHER STATEMENTS

- United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression:
 - [Letter to Prime Minister](#)
- International Commission of Jurists:
 - [Letter](#) and [Legal Briefing](#)
- International Political Science Association:
 - [IPSA Statement on Singapore's Proposed "Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act"](#)
- Statement by gender equality group, AWARE:
 - [AWARE's statement on the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act](#)
- Letter from journalists to Minister for Communications and Information:
 - [Journalists call for withdrawal of Singapore's "fake news" Bill](#)
- Statement from independent media practitioners:
 - ["Singapore media practitioners voice concerns over proposed fake news law"](#)
- Statement by Singaporean arts groups and civil society organisations:
 - [Joint statement regarding POFMA](#)
- Letter from Singaporean book publishers, Ethos Books:
 - ["We need to become better readers"](#)

COMMENTARIES

- Commentary by Linda Lim, University of Michigan:
 - ["Singapore's 'fake news' law undermines the credibility of academic expertise"](#)
- Commentary by Inderjit Singh, member of NTU Board of Trustees and former PAP MP:
 - ["Former PAP MP urges Singapore government to take world lead in anti-fake news law by getting it right and not losing people's trust"](#)
- Commentary by Harpreet Singh Nehal, Senior Counsel:
 - ["Strengthening the Online Falsehoods Bill: Some Practical Suggestions"](#)
- Commentaries by Teo You Yenn, NTU:
 - ["Academic Freedom in Singapore and the 'Fake News' Law"](#)
 - [新加坡的学术研讨自由与"假信息"法案](#)
- Commentaries by Cherian George, HKBU:
 - ["Singapore's online falsehoods bill will deepen culture of self-censorship"](#)
 - For more, visit [Cherian George's home page](#)
- Comments by Ja Ian Chong, NUS:
 - [Replies to the Straits Times, unpublished](#)
- Commentary by Eugene Tan, SMU:
 - ["On facts and falsehoods"](#)

RESOURCES

- [List of Queries and Examples](#) compiled from researchers and sent to MinLaw for consideration for an advisory for scholars.
- [Briefing: Academic Concerns](#), compiled by Linda Lim
- The Bill: [Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act](#)
- Factsheet on the Bill: [FAQ by New Naratif](#)
- International Commission of Jurists [Letter](#) and [Legal Briefing](#)
- 2018 Parliamentary Select Committee on [Deliberate Online Falsehoods](#).

Official views

- Education Ministry's response to academics in [The Straits Times](#)
- Law Minister responds to critics: [Interview with CNA](#)
- Channel NewsAsia [documentary](#) (video)
- Law Minister on how the law would work, in [The Straits Times](#)