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Safeguarding against Ethno-political Influence in Vernacular News Media

By Deborah Koh

SYNOPSIS

The evolving nature of foreign influence, particularly ethno-political forms prevalent in vernacular news media, presents a challenge. Alongside legislation and public initiatives, a resilient national identity forged could also be an important organic safeguard against insidious external influences. This entails a society-driven dialogue that should expand beyond everyday multiculturalism.

COMMENTARY

From the 2016 “Brexit” referendum to Donald Trump’s 2020 US Presidential Election win, contemporary history is replete with examples of how foreign influence and interference has been evolving as a security concern, escalating in scale and severity. Defined as coordinated attempts made by state or non-state actors to shape public opinions of a target country to achieve specific outcomes undermining national interests, foreign influence can covertly manifest in a variety of ways across political, economic, and socio-cultural domains.

Some examples include the cultivation of persons of interest, economic financing of proxy entities, coordinated online disinformation campaigns, and sentiment manipulation. There are other relatively less suspect, longer-drawn forms of influence that can take place along the spectrum.

Ethno-political Undertones in Vernacular News Media

Singapore is no stranger to this emergent threat. Its international political standing, economic status, digital hyperconnectivity and diverse population, render the nation susceptible to it. In February 2024, [Philip Chan](#), a naturalised Singapore citizen became the first to be invoked under the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act

(FICA) and was designated “politically significant” for engaging in activities that veered into the political arena.

This bears some resemblance to the 2017 case involving [Huang Jing](#), an academic indicted on grounds that he operated as a foreign agent of influence. It is worth noting that both Philip Chan and Huang Jing had contributed substantially to *Lianhe Zaobao*, whose opinion pieces – spanning from personal reflections to foreign affairs commentaries – have been published over the years. Some of these articles had themes that were perceived to be pro-China rhetoric, such as China’s unification and the duties of the Chinese diaspora to their ancestral land.

The editorial integrity of *Zaobao* has been upheld, but these cases nonetheless underscore the potential risks of local vernacular news media being leveraged as a medium for foreign influences with ethno-political undertones. This is of particular concern to Singapore whose majority population is ethnic Chinese.

Such concerns are not new. Bilahari Kausikan has spoken on the insidious impact of ethno-cultural influence on [identity politics](#), and a recent [article](#) by *The Washington Post* has pointedly suggested that *Zaobao* had functioned as a proxy for foreign influence. The allegation has since been refuted by *Zaobao*’s editor.

Readership and Consumption: Potential Effects on Society

Certainly, the risk of foreign influence is not limited to vernacular news formats; articles with political undertones can exist in all languages and across most forms of broadcast, print and social media.

The main concern about such articles published in vernacular news media like *Zaobao* is its readership and consumption in Singapore, a nation where ethnic Chinese make up approximately 74 per cent of its population. A 2019 Nielsen Consumer and Media View Study reported that *Zaobao* had a local readership of 419,000 (both hard copy and digital), attesting to its continued popularity amid changing trends in media consumption (more recent data is lacking).

In addition to the editorial porosity of news media, which increases the risk of such articles being published, it is also important to highlight the consistent publication of the themes. Consistency confers on them a semblance of relevance and validity over time, gradually shaping – or distorting – perceptions of uncritical readers who may then imbibe these foreign influences as local truths. This could potentially foster or amplify a dangerous chauvinism towards minority communities that can manifest in many forms to varying degrees; implicit prejudices, casual microaggressions, and institutional discrimination, all of which erode societal trust and cohesion.

Safeguards: Society-driven Efforts Complement Existing Legislation

Several top-down measures exist to address the growing pervasiveness of foreign influence. Alongside legislative countermeasures like the FICA and the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), the 1974 Newspaper and Printing Presses Act is an added safeguard against unsanctioned foreign funding of [SPH Media](#).

Initiatives such as the National Library Board's S.U.R.E Campaign have also been launched, aimed at improving public information literacy and discernment about fake news. These are examples of resources the state can utilise in response to more immediate threats of influence, and to address longer-term public education in anticipation of such evolving risks.

Concerns about the potential risks that vernacular media carry extend beyond matters of editorial standards and public literacy. It is also inextricably tied to national identity – a shared conception that informs how Singaporeans engage with, or relate to, narratives or such influences.

A distinct and consistent Singaporean identity can therefore function as an organic resilience or safeguard of sorts; superseding foreign, ethno-political conceptions at odds with local consciousness.

Navigating National Identity amid Changing Demographics

Given its amorphous nature, the importance of nurturing active participation and open dialogue amongst ethnic communities cannot be overstated. Together with everyday multiculturalism, these conversations could also be encouraged to delve into deeper questions of being and belonging in Singapore. Forging an identity is intrinsically a ground-up process. The cultivation of a collective consciousness and understanding of shared experiences, aspirations and anxieties is central to the formation of a strong national identity.

Moreover, in embracing our changing demographics, exchanges can be continually fortified to normalise the inclusion of second-generation immigrants who often find themselves navigating a liminal space between two cultural spheres. They could also be expanded to encompass diaspora communities, regardless of citizenship status, who grapple with challenges of acceptance and integration.

Examples include society-driven outreach programmes, cultural workshops, and engagement initiatives, which entail collaboration with social enterprise ventures, non-governmental organisations, and civil society groups. The contributions of these actors to the workforce, socio-cultural production, and nation-building are poised to grow in significance, in tandem with the growth of its population within our borders.

Conclusion

Recent cases remind us of the pervasive threat posed by evolving forms of foreign influence. Of focal concern is the prevalence of influence with ethno-political undertones, particularly within vernacular news outlets, given Singapore's ethnic mosaic.

While legislative countermeasures and public education initiatives exist, cultivating a resilient national identity is equally integral in combating foreign influence. This entails fostering open dialogue amongst ethnic communities, which should be expanded to include second-generation immigrants and diaspora communities in forming a collective consciousness.

As Singapore navigates its changing demographics, these society-driven practices become increasingly crucial in promoting cohesion and fortifying the nation against insidious external influences.

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