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## Information Pollution and the War in Gaza: Implications for Singapore

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### SYNOPSIS

*The Israel-Hamas war has seen the warring parties as well as other state and non-state actors disseminate biased and false information. This has clouded the information landscape surrounding the conflict. Besides demonstrating various disinformation types and tactics, there is also the increased resonance of certain disinformation narratives as they overlap and impact on societal sensitivities and identity-based fault lines. These are challenges for Singapore, as societal fault lines present vulnerabilities for disinformation penetration, ultimately affecting social cohesion.*

### COMMENTARY

On 24 March 2024, the Israeli embassy in Singapore posted an official Facebook post claiming that “Israel” appeared 43 times in the Quran, while “Palestine” was not mentioned even once.

The Singapore government told the embassy to take down the post immediately on grounds of preserving “[safety, security and harmony in Singapore](#)”. This expansion of the Israel-Hamas war into the social media domain demonstrates the sensitivities and potency of the information pollution surrounding it.

The war in Gaza has seen the warring parties as well as other state and non-state actors disseminate biased or false news and content via texts, images, videos, audios, etc., on the war, clouding the information landscape.

As the war progresses, new developments, for instance, on the Iran-Israel front, can be expected, bringing with them fresh waves of disinformation that will rattle social media even further. Indeed, [footage](#) disseminated on social media that depicted the

aftermath of Iran's April 13 missile attack on Israel were found to be from previous conflicts and video games. Some were even [AI-generated](#).

Amid the emergence of disinformation alongside the progress of the war, the information space gets inundated with false and biased information, requiring the public to stay alert on information accuracy when receiving information from online sources.

Disinformation on the war could resonate with the population of a country such as Singapore when it straddles societal sensitivities and identity-based fault lines. This can have grave impacts on social cohesion.

### **Disinformation about the Israel-Hamas War**

Misinformation and disinformation have marked the Israel-Hamas war from its beginning, overlapping identity politics and affinities. Some narratives fit the [disinformation types](#) witnessed before. These include [decontextualised](#) content, i.e., real content delivered with a false context; [false connections](#), i.e., genuine content delivered with false or unrelated captions, titles or visuals; [imposter content](#), i.e., content delivered by a source imitating a real entity or persona; and [manipulated content](#), i.e., real content that is manipulated.

Examples of disinformation about the Israel-Hamas war include the dissemination of a 2015 [video filmed in Guatemala](#) claiming that an Israeli woman was attacked in Gaza, and one sharing [non-war related videos](#) of Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, with false captions in English concerning the war.

There have also been [attempts](#) to imitate the BBC and Jerusalem Post in some disinformation circulation efforts, and to manipulate a July 2023 memo on aid to Ukraine claiming that the US will commit "[US\\$8 billion in military aid to Israel](#)".

Although [false accounts](#) were behind some of the deceptive information, in some cases, politicians and celebrities amplified false content. For instance, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, in a tweet targeting NATO allies, claimed that the weapons supplied to Ukraine were "[being actively used against Israel](#)".

US far-right accounts amplified a [video](#) shared by "an X account linked to the Russian mercenary group Wagner". The video allegedly portrayed Hamas thanking Ukraine for the sale of weapons it planned to use against Israel.

Some celebrities have also shared misinformation inadvertently, making it visible to their large follower base. For instance, Justin Bieber posted [images](#) showing the destruction of Gaza by Israeli forces while asking people to "pray for Israel".

Sponsored content have also been circulated. An example of this was the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry's push of "[paid ads](#) containing brutal and emotional imagery of the deadly militant violence in Israel" on X and YouTube.

## Fault Lines and Implications for Singapore

Regarding its aforesaid post on Facebook, the Israeli embassy explained that the post was put up without approval. Regardless of intent, [Minister K. Shanmugam](#) described its contents as an “astonishing attempt to rewrite history”. He also added that it was wrong to “selectively point to religious texts to make a political point”.

Indeed, there is an observable emergence globally of religious identity as a prominent fault line in the context of the war, which can be exploited. Individuals can be compelled to align with particular viewpoints, including exclusivist ones, leading to wider divisions and polarisation along religious lines. Incidents of Islamophobia and antisemitism have [surged](#) globally reflecting this phenomenon.

Fault lines and disinformation are mutually reinforcing elements. Disinformation [can be perpetuated](#) along societal fault lines such as religious, social, and political beliefs. Since Singapore is an open society, misinformation and disinformation could polarise it and impact social cohesion.

This problem is especially acute in the context of the Israel-Hamas war, where the resonance of “[narratives of grievance](#)” capitalise on a sense of injustice based on the moral codes, religious or otherwise, of communities.

The battle of narratives in Singapore extends beyond religious differences. Global information flows facilitated by social media could contribute to the pluralisation of viewpoints and affinities, transforming into fault lines.

Popular narratives in the global information sphere include those featuring [different visions of political fairness](#) vis-a-vis calls for ceasefire and peace.

Other content encompasses discourses on the “West and the rest”, mapping onto geopolitical divisions, and exploiting existing antagonism towards the US to fuel anti-West sentiments. Such content could gain a foothold here, as previously observed in the [Russia-Ukraine](#) war.

Interestingly, Ukraine and Russia were also central in some disinformation narratives that leveraged existing tensions. For instance, there were disinformation claiming that “[Russians were directing Hamas fighters](#) in the attacks on Israel”, that Ukraine provided Western weapons and military aid to Hamas, and that Ukrainians were “joining the [Israel Defense Forces](#)”.

## The Way Forward

Present policies in Singapore offer some protection against the penetration of misinformation and disinformation. For instance, Singapore has [multiple initiatives](#) to improve media literacy among the people, including the National Library Board’s “source, understand, research, evaluate” (SURE) programme. Besides this, which seeks to enhance media literacy, the Ministry of Education also conducts a cyber wellness education programme.

Attention to information accuracy has also improved with more people checking the

[authenticity of online news](#). Nevertheless, deceptive or false information may still beguile some, especially when their guards are down and when the narratives are emotionally charged. Technological developments also make it increasingly difficult to identify manipulated information. Furthermore, in conflict situations, the reliability of “official sources” may even be doubtful.

Alongside initiatives to build information resilience, there is a need to address the fault lines that could emerge from polarised online narratives. State efforts to manage the information space on the war in Gaza have prevented the escalation of contention between disparate views. And the examination of the narratives that emerge from this space also provides an opportunity to understand some of these divisions, whether ideological or identity-based and to establish a middle ground.

As such, opportunities for open and robust discussions are necessary. This was addressed in Parliament on 6 November 2023, when then [Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong](#) emphasised that the government “can provide a safe space for such sensitive conversations to take place”, but proper etiquette needs to be exercised for productive conversations.

As the war in Gaza continues, and new developments such as the rising tension between Israel and Iran facilitate the rise of new narratives, the information sphere will continue to evolve and convolute. Amid this, striking the balance between managing the information space and creating safe spaces for productive conversation is a challenge to overcome.

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