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*Towards ICCS 2025*

## **Regulating Foreign Religious Content in the Virtual Space**

*By Amanda Huan*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Meta's recent decision to drop its fact-checking facility raises the question of who should regulate online content in Singapore, particularly foreign religious material. A recent survey found that most Singaporeans believe the government and religious organisations should take the lead. However, given the nature of the problem, a collaborative approach involving the different segments of society is likely to be more effective.*

### **COMMENTARY**

The uproar over Meta's recent decision to drop its fact-checking facility has once again raised the question of responsibility for safeguarding online content from misinformation and disinformation.

Fact-checking and content moderation across social media platforms generally deal with misinformation, including unverified claims about religious beliefs, practices, and events, which can contribute to misunderstandings, conflicts and polarising narratives. Fact-checkers can help dispel myths and clarify controversial issues, counteracting the spread of divisive narratives and reducing interreligious tensions.

Many people oppose Meta's decision because they believe that content platforms should play a key role in mitigating the spread of harmful content, as Individuals may lack the knowledge or skills to fact-check information properly.

This argument raises a critical question: who is primarily responsible for regulating online content, particularly foreign religious content?

## **What Singaporeans Think About Regulation**

In December 2024, the Social Cohesion Research Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, in collaboration with the Centre for Information Integrity and the Internet, both constituent units of Nanyang Technological University, surveyed 1,004 participants on the responsibility for regulating online foreign religious content.

About 6 in 10 participants felt that the Singapore government and religious organisations (e.g., churches, mosques, and the Singapore Buddhist Federation) should be primarily responsible for regulating online foreign religious content. About 1 in 4 felt that the Big Tech companies were mainly responsible, and only 1 in 10 thought individual self-regulation was key. The results suggest that many people think they lack the know-how or knowledge to verify the authenticity or appropriateness of online foreign religious content.

Consequently, they place responsibility on institutional authorities such as the government and religious organisations because these entities either possess or can acquire the necessary expertise. The government also maintains the enforcement capabilities to implement and uphold regulations.

This is more so in Singapore, where citizens trust the government to regulate matters concerning religious harmony and social cohesion. As the regulation of online foreign religious content directly impacts the country's social cohesion, the Singapore government is thus seen as needing to take on an expanded role in managing such content.

This is intriguing and ironic, as the Singapore government typically adopts a light-touch approach in regulating online religious content and would instead encourage content providers, such as websites and blogs, to self-regulate or rely on the Internet Code of Practice.

Nowadays, netizens in Singapore may access and consume online religious content from overseas. Believers among them can attend sermons, masses, and religious gatherings conducted in Canada, Taiwan, or anywhere else. People can search and consume online religious content quite freely, and the lack of appropriate regulation is potentially insidious for the following reasons.

First, false and misleading religious content can go viral, causing confusion and distrust within and between communities. The misinterpretations of religious doctrines can also divide and even incite hatred if not addressed promptly.

Second, the online algorithms on social media and search engines determine the visibility of religious content. As a result, some narratives may be amplified and others deprioritised, leading to intolerance and the marginalisation of minority religious groups.

Third and most importantly, religious discourse is a uniquely local practice. Foreign religious content does not consider local cultural and religious sensitivities. Some foreign components may inadvertently (or intentionally) disparage other religions, creating friction among local communities. This, on its own, could lead to the importation of foreign conflicts and divisions.

We have seen this trend in self-radicalisation cases, an ongoing concern as exemplified by the recent detainment of three Singaporean men in October 2024 under the Internal Security Act. All three had been radicalised through exposure to some form of online foreign religious content.

In other cases, the role of local religious leaders and institutions may be undermined as believers prioritise online (foreign) teachings over guidance from local leaders who are more attuned to Singapore's sensitivities. This could lead to a fragmented community where authority is decentralised, and individuals follow conflicting interpretations or ideologies.

As severe as the threat may be, regulating such content is particularly challenging because of the sheer volume and diversity of online foreign religious content. The global nature of these online platforms worsens the problem, as content is hosted and shared across borders. There is also the need to balance regulation with freedom of expression and access to information.

### **Whose Responsibility To Regulate?**

Notwithstanding their preference for active government intervention, Singaporeans need to appreciate that regulation against such potentially corrosive online content requires whole-of-society participation. The government should maintain the lead with legislation, oversight, and public campaigns to promote responsible consumption of online foreign religious content.

Religious organisations should provide guidance and accurate information by ensuring that their online teachings accommodate local sensitivities, proactively counter misinformation with credible interpretations of religious doctrines, educate followers on how to be discerning about online content, and encourage interfaith dialogue to promote trust and understanding.

Content platforms should maintain their fact-checking and content moderation policies and processes, targeting gross untruths and content aimed at sowing discord. Individuals could help by increasing their digital and religious literacies. This will enable them to critically evaluate the credibility of online foreign religious content and reduce the likelihood of being influenced by extremist content.

In this way, a collaborative effort can be fostered to safeguard and enhance social cohesion, ensuring that the online space becomes a platform for constructive and harmonious religious discourse rather than a source of division or conflict.

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