

Keeping an Eye on History

by To Rui Xuan

How has history shaped the present and the future?

When talking about history, a preliminary question one must ask is: What is history? Disregarding history as simply 'the past' is dangerous. History has always been a powerful tool used to direct society's perceptions of the present, and in turn, used to shape the future. While the past is 'set in stone', history is very different. History is not just facts; history is an argument.¹ It is all about who believes whose argument.

Any historical argument, whether right or wrong, can cement into a truth. History is a battleground of belief. In the past, this has been taken advantage of by many political parties to push their own agendas and narratives. For instance, as posited by Jason Stanley in *Erasing History*, a devastatingly effective use of history has been the creation of a 'mythic past' for favoured demographics, and the erasure of other unfavourable pasts.² During the Western colonisation period, a common tactic to justify the taking of indigenous land would be claiming that the land was *terra nullius*,³ that the people there had 'no history', and were 'savages' in need of civilisation.⁴ Western empires would wield their historical might as a sword against indigenous populations, erasing local history, then preaching their own. More recently, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin attempted to justify the invasion to his people and to the world by insisting

¹"History is above all else an argument... Arguments are important; they create the possibility of changing things." See John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, 2000; online edn, Oxford Academic, 24 Sept. 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192853523.001.0001>.

² Jason Stanley, *Erasing history: How fascists rewrite the past to control the future* (One Signal Publishers, 2024), 8-33.

³ *Terra nullius* is a term that refers to a "territory without a master."...the term has oftentimes been used in order to legitimize state occupation and colonization. See Cornell LII Wex. "terra nullius." Accessed January 9, 2026. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/terra_nullius.

⁴ Jason Stanley, *Erasing history: How fascists rewrite the past to control the future* (One Signal Publishers, 2024), 33- 45.

that there was “no historical basis” for Ukraine being independent, and that any evidence suggesting so came from “all sorts of concoctions”.⁵

History has never been attacked in isolation. It goes hand in hand with attacks on education, language, and cultural practices. In Russian-occupied territories, the regime has suppressed the Ukrainian language and erased textbook mentions of Ukraine’s independent history.⁶ In Gaza, museums and heritage sites have been destroyed in an effort to erase the Palestinian past, as if they had never lived there.⁷ This is how aggressors justify violent takeovers of land and genocide by denying the victims’ peoplehood. Again and again, history has been stolen, erased, or magnified in order to justify wrongdoing and manipulate entire nations into supporting it. Losing your history leaves you vulnerable; it makes it far too easy to justify your destruction or subjugation. These are cases of the dominance of a malicious historical argument.

However, while attacks on history usually take root under nationalist or fascist governments, this does not mean other nations are upfront in portraying unflattering aspects of history either. An obvious example would be Japan’s erasure of its World War 2 atrocities from their history textbooks.⁸ Another would be Poland’s attempt at criminalising public mentions of their complicity in Nazi war crimes in 2018.⁹ The reasoning for these omissions typically echoes sentiments of “why should our children live in shame?”. It is easy to want to forget the wrongdoings of our ancestors, but it is a bitter pill we must swallow. Societies need to move forward in acknowledgement of their

⁵ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (Speech, Russia, July 12, 2021), Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁶ Bill V. Esveld, “Education under occupation: Forced Russification of the School System in Occupied Ukrainian Territories,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/20/education-under-occupation/forced-russification-school-system-occupied-ukrainian#:~:text=While%20occupying%20authorities%20punished%20distance,Ukrainian%20teachers%20and%20parents%20elsewhere>.

⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “UN experts deeply concerned over ‘scholasticide’ in Gaza,” *United Nations*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>.

⁸ Mariko Oi, “What Japanese history lessons leave out,” *BBC News*, March 14, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21226068>.

⁹ Adam Easton, “Poland holocaust law: Government U-turn on jail threat,” *BBC News*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44627129>.

pasts and its victims. Ignorance does not make future generations proud; it just makes them ignorant.

Singapore also has its own “mythic past”, though for more benevolent reasons. For years since our independence, the narrative of tiny Singapore with no resources to speak of rising up on its own after being abruptly kicked out by Malaysia has taken center stage. However, the government recently revealed an omission about this historical event in *The Albatross File: Inside Separation*. During Singapore’s separation from Malaysia, we were not entirely helpless victims, unexpectedly expelled and left to fend for ourselves. Instead, the documents revealed that Singapore had considered an eventual separation from Malaysia long before the actual ‘sudden’ separation happened.¹⁰ While it lasted, however, this omission bolstered national pride in Singapore’s success and heavily reinforced the central narrative of Singapore’s founding. This is our mythic past. Not completely untrue, but definitely manufactured to some extent and consistently hammered on for the past 60 years, so much so that it is now the nigh undeniable historical truth.

This is just one example of many. As the question of “what is the objective standard of historical retelling?” has yet to be answered, every nation in the history of the world inevitably purports its own biased version of history. History is used because of its weight on the present: look at how politicians use history to rally support. President Vladimir Putin uses a version of Russia’s history with Ukraine to claim they are “one people”.¹¹ Singapore’s Mr K Shanmugam also used our history of racial division to support the prevention of identity politics in Singapore.¹² History has weight; it will always have a hand in shaping the present.

¹⁰ Kevin Kwang, “*The albatross file: Inside the secrecy behind the Singapore-malaysia separation*,” *Channel News Asia*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/interactive/albatross-file-singapore-malaysia-separation/>.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (Speech, Russia, July 12, 2021), Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹² Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 October, 2025, (Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs) “Race and Religion” Ministerial Statement, Vol. 96, Sitting no. 7. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/newsroom/ministerial-statement-on-race-and-religion/>.

This, arguably, is how history has been used 'traditionally'. Now, the issue of history has become far more complex with the introduction of new media.

The power to shape the historical narrative has decentralised from political powers and put back into the hands of the people. Now, anyone can broadcast their own opinion on history and have it believed by millions. Not only that, but the layman now has access to a myriad of perspectives that expose previously inaccessible historical truths. We have more pieces of the whole picture. For instance, as this is being written, Renee Nicole Good was shot dead by an ICE agent in Minneapolis. Quickly, the official narrative of the shooting being in self-defence flooded online channels.¹³ However, even faster, eye-witnesses published videos of the shooting online in a direct counter to the official narrative, rallying support against this gross overextension and abuse of power.¹⁴ In today's world, people have the opportunity to see for themselves what really happened and make a decision on whose argument to believe. Furthermore, these videos also act as a historical record, available for the world to see and unobscured by a lack of access or official jargon. This is one benefit we have gotten from history in the hands of new media. The unfiltered free sharing of thoughts online has redistributed the ability to control the historical narrative. The bubble has burst.

This, however, is an idealistic view of the situation. In particular, the concern lies with historical content online. To reiterate, history is merely a series of arguments. Now, with new media, those arguments can come from anyone, from teenage enthusiasts to foreign disinformation agents. Rarely does it come from a professional source. History is now packaged into 'e-history'.¹⁵ This modern phenomenon is exacerbated by three factors. Firstly, the uptick in 'e-history' and its many permutations. Secondly, the lack of historical

¹³ Sakshi Venkatraman, "US immigration agent fatally shoots woman in Minneapolis," *BBC News*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0jvn4j1n4o>.

¹⁴ Devon Lum, Robin Stein, and Ainara Tiefenthäler, "Videos Contradict Trump Administration Account of ICE Shooting in Minneapolis," *New York Times*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000010631041/minneapolis-ice-shooting-video.html>.

¹⁵ 'E-history' is a term used to describe history related posts found online on digital platforms, or simply, digital history. See Jason Steinhauer, *History, disrupted: How social media and the World Wide Web have changed the past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 8.

media literacy in modern society. Lastly, the social media algorithms themselves, which disadvantage 'real history' and spread the opposite.

Firstly, 'e-history' can take many forms. For instance, we have people creating dangerously uninformed historical arguments, or more recently, AI-generated media that create false or hallucinated narratives designed to reach the front page.¹⁶ AI is a predictive machine. It cannot handle the nuances of history, which is inherently sensitive, empathetic, human and not merely a series of facts.¹⁷ Another damaging form of 'e-history' is the watered-down history lessons scattered across the internet. While people do learn something, 'bite-sized' history rarely leaves room for the nuances that are critical in understanding history. Online, history is rendered one-dimensional.¹⁸ Another concerning outcome of 'e-history' is the creation of a 'viral past'.¹⁹ On social media, a post can be regarded as an authoritative source, even if criticised by experts, simply because so many people believe it.²⁰ This is the bandwagon fallacy at work. Take Khan Academy for example: the person behind it was, in reality, a financial analyst, but made wildly successful lectures on topics ranging from history to physics.²¹ To this day, it is an incredibly popular source of free open-source education that many, myself included, have learnt from. Sources like Khan Academy are not the main concerns, but are great examples of how a historical argument can become so popular that it essentially becomes a proxy for the truth, even when it does not come from a professional historian. The danger of this surfaces when 'viral pasts' that gain popularity lack actual credibility, quality assurance, or clearly intend to advance ideological agendas by deliberately being stripped of context. The internet is a place where history is especially susceptible to being

¹⁶ Mathew Lim, "Rethinking History Education in the Age of AI," *HSSE Online*, 13(1), 24-37, (2025): 26, <https://hsseonline.nie.edu.sg/rethinking-history-education-in-the-age-of-ai/>.

¹⁷ Mathew Lim, "Rethinking History Education in the Age of AI," *HSSE Online*, 13(1), 24-37, (2025): 25, <https://hsseonline.nie.edu.sg/rethinking-history-education-in-the-age-of-ai/>.

¹⁸ Jason Steinhauer, *History, disrupted: How social media and the World Wide Web have changed the past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 19 - 22.

¹⁹ Jason Steinhauer, *History, disrupted: How social media and the World Wide Web have changed the past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 9 - 11.

²⁰ Jason Steinhauer, *History, disrupted: How social media and the World Wide Web have changed the past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 35.

²¹ Khan Academy, "What is the history of Khan Academy?," accessed January 9, 2026, <https://support.khanacademy.org/hc/en-us/articles/202483180-What-is-the-history-of-Khan-Academy>.

manipulated in uncontrolled and unregulated ways. Unfortunately, nowadays, the internet is a foremost source of history for the public.

This leads to the second issue: the lack of media literacy. This is a major problem for a technology-rich nation like Singapore. As aptly put by Senior Minister Mr Edwin Tong, “Singapore, an open, democratic, digitally-connected and diverse country, is especially vulnerable.”²² Our inability to recognise when media biases are reshaping the way we think, combined with our tendency to be blindly influenced by the internet without source checking, creates an ideal online environment for manipulative historical arguments to thrive. Many are concerned for the younger generations who are growing up with unprecedented access to the internet. However, we must not forget that the older generations, who have spending and voting power, are not immune, but rather, even more vulnerable than the young digital natives. The nature of ‘e-history’ is not the sole cause of this issue; the problem also lies with how we receive it. We lack the skills to recognise the biases generated by ‘fake history’. We rarely question the content we see or look beyond it, stuck in a state of inertia.²³ Far too easily, we allow comfortable but biased historical arguments to shape us and our future because of our inability to navigate the digital realm. It is foolish to think that simply having access to a multitude of perspectives on a single historical event means one can understand them, much less even find them. This obscuring of the truth is also the work of the algorithm, the third factor.

The algorithms of new media are the least recognised perpetrator of history’s decay in a time of new media. Most would have heard of the term “social media rabbit hole”.²⁴ A few stray likes can flood a feed with hateful fear-mongering posts, leading to an online echo

²² Edwin Tong, “Oral Answer by Senior Minister of State for Law, Mr Edwin Tong to Parliamentary Question on Foreign Interference” (Speech, Singapore, February 12, 2019), Parliamentary speeches and responses, <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-speeches/oral-answer-by-senior-minister-of-state-for-law-edwin-tong-to-parliamentary-question-on-foreign-interference/>.

²³ Jason Steinhauer, “Of Fake News and Fake History,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/06/fake-news-fake-history/>.

²⁴ Kerry Healey, Farah Pandith, Sasha Havliceck, and Micheal Chertoff, “Down the Rabbit Hole: How Social Media is Designed to Radicalize its Users,” *Issue One*, February 2, 2024, <https://issueone.org/events/down-the-rabbit-hole-how-social-media-is-designed-to-radicalize-its-users/>.

chamber of the same ideas that traps someone in a false reality. I can personally attest to this phenomenon. During the 2024 presidential elections in the United States, my own TikTok feed was exclusively filled with people showing support for the Democratic candidate, former Vice President Kamala Harris, leading to my belief that she would win the presidency. This left me completely blindsided when the election results dropped. When I looked into why I had no clue about the actual direction the elections were heading in, it led me to this conclusion: the algorithms that decide what shows up on our feeds are designed to suppress views that deviate from the realm of reality one is already in, and actively work to reinforce our views instead of challenging them.

To briefly explain how it works, social media algorithms decide how many people a post reaches solely based on data. Likes, saves, shares, watch time, and click-through rates are all data points collected and used to determine whether a post goes viral. Collectors of 'real history' commonly find themselves stuck with no easy way to gain a footing in the online ballpark, especially given the stigma of history being "boring" in a world where attention is currency. The professional status that used to lend them credibility now ironically makes them indigestible to the masses. Again, history is all about belief. Historical arguments need to be heard to be of any effect. So, then, what kinds of historical arguments end up on everyone's feeds? Extreme, radical, hateful and inflammatory content. Simply because it keeps people watching. Because it is sensational.²⁵ The veracity of a historical argument has no bearing on how far it spreads. Once it has its hooks in, it discreetly leads users down the digital 'rabbit hole'. The algorithm throws you into a manufactured world of unreality. How quickly, then, can a mere machine change your beliefs, steering them towards extremism? How quickly can it turn you against your neighbours?

²⁵ Kerry Healey, Farah Pandith, Sasha Havliceck, and Micheal Chertoff, "Down the Rabbit Hole: How Social Media is Designed to Radicalize its Users," *Issue One*, February 2, 2024, <https://issueone.org/events/down-the-rabbit-hole-how-social-media-is-designed-to-radicalize-its-users/>.

As observed by Mr K Shanmugam in his “Race and Religion” Ministerial Statement, this divisive threat is especially dangerous for Singapore as a small, diverse nation.²⁶ We see how media-driven identity politics has affected other countries. Take the United States: their divisive political campaigns that vilify the opposition were in no small part founded on the hammering of historical grievances on new media platforms.²⁷ Singapore would not survive such a harsh split. We know how powerful history can be in shaping the trajectory of entire nations. Now, history’s new form, ‘e-history’, is spiralling out of everyone’s hands and out of control. The shape of our future is uncertain; any stray idea could take root and turn our nation on its head.

As we speak, a million different historical arguments are amassing online, whether intent on telling a truth, or intent on spreading a lie. History has always been a powerful and contested tool that has shaped our present. We must now contend with how we will allow it to shape our future. With modern technology, it certainly is easier for us to sound the alarm when we identify propaganda or witness the destruction of history. However, it is also easier for us to be manipulated and pacified. History is being obscured. Everyone is constantly bombarded with bad news over and over again. It is overwhelmingly easy to become disengaged. However, it is now more crucial than ever that we pay attention. We must keep an eye on what is happening to our history, especially given how little Singapore has. Too often do people in today’s world, especially here in Singapore, reduce history to an ‘irrelevant’ profession. However, now, the new battleground of belief will be even more sharply contested than before. We must act to defend our history from being warped by the wrong influences by learning to recognise them for what they are. We must not forget to look back at our history because of Singapore’s perpetual forward motion. It is never easier to take something from us than when we are looking away.

²⁶ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 October, 2025, (Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs) “Race and Religion” Ministerial Statement, Vol. 96, Sitting no. 7. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/newsroom/ministerial-statement-on-race-and-religion/>.

²⁷ Paul M. Barrett, “Fueling The Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization – And What Can Be Done About It,” *NYU | STERN Center for Business and Human Rights*, September, 2021, <https://bhr.stern.nyu.edu/publication/fueling-the-fire-how-social-media-intensifies-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-can-be-done-about-it/>.

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