

# Spread of falsehoods in mother tongues a worry

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**NUS expert warns that such messages can amplify shared identity and are very relatable**

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**Seow Bei Yi**

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Falsehoods could be spread in mother tongue languages and dialects, and the potential impact of such messages should not be ignored, a National University of Singapore (NUS) communications and new media expert has warned.

Appearing before the Select Committee on deliberate online falsehoods yesterday, Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat noted that many discussions about disinformation have been conducted in English.

But some segments of society, such as the elderly, may be more comfortable in their mother tongues and less aware of the dangers of falsehoods, he said.

Also, messages in mother tongue languages could go viral on closed-group platforms such as WhatsApp chat groups, he added.

These messages tend to be “more closely relevant” to the communities they are shared in, and the use of a certain language amplifies the shared identity of the group as well, he added.

This is why there should be more efforts to examine the impact of disinformation in different languages, said Dr Elmie, one of six speakers yesterday and the first to speak in Malay in the first three days of public hearings by the committee.

Dr Elmie spoke mainly in English, but replied in Malay when Select Committee member Rahayu Mahzam, an MP for Jurong GRC, quizzed him about falsehoods in the Malay-

Muslim community here.

He said: “The (Malay) language is almost always closely linked to religion, so people are more comfortable with it (the language) and because of that, the role of language is also very influential in falsehood dissemination.”

He said the impact of Malay language messages originating from neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia might be felt in Singapore as well.

Dr Elmie cited the case of an untrue viral allegation originating from Malaysia last year, about how shoe company Bata stocked footwear with the word “Allah” on the soles.

While the story started from a school in Malaysia, it eventually found its way here.

The NUS assistant professor in communications and new media said the potential spread of falsehoods via the Chinese language and dialects could be a concern too. “They are very relatable to a certain community, so when this language-based information is passed... you see more responses from the particular group that speaks that language.”

In his written submission, he called for “more relevant forms of regulations, educational initiatives as well as greater research into the impact of deliberate falsehoods in a multiracial society”.

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A falsehood that taps into issues such as race and religion can spark a strong, knee-jerk reaction from the group, said Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION

## Tapping into race, religion to spark reactions

**Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh**

The ubiquitous halal logo was at the centre of a controversy in the Muslim community last month, when a photo showing an image of the logo next to a poster advertising pork belly rice spread online.

The photo appeared in a Facebook post last month which warned people in a mix of English and Malay “to be careful when you go to this place... There are several halal logos, but it also sells pork”.

National University of Singapore Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat, 36, recalled how the post caught the eye of some of his family members, who dismissed it as “fake news”.

They were right.

The halal logo and the poster belonged to two adjacent stalls, which had put these up on different sides of a pillar. The halal

logo was from halal-certified yong tau foo stall, Green Delights, while the poster was from a non-halal noodle stall.

Some tried to correct the misinformation online, but the damage was done – Green Delights saw a dip in business.

Dr Elmie, whose research areas include public opinion formation, said this shows how a falsehood that taps into issues such as race and religion can spark a strong, knee-jerk reaction from the group.

“If (it is) news that is very relatable in terms of how it is being framed when it comes to language and religion, we will take more notice of it,” he told *The Straits Times* yesterday.

Like-minded groups are congregating on platforms like Facebook, he noted, urging group administrators to fact-check posts or set guidelines to verify information before posting.

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