



Futures of Public Discourse

Version 1.0

About These Cards

Public Discourse

These cards explore how people will talk to each other in future.

Will they listen, shout or care for facts?

Should you even care about the futures of public discourse?

Perhaps not. Public discourse may not impact research into AI or sustainability.

Perhaps, however, you should if ...

Students take offence to terms, hurting debate and learning.

Professors make no impact on society, as people distrust them and their findings.

Staff reject how policies are made, slowing implementation.

Both views may be right, as various futures are possible.

Because we don't know what will be, we drafted these cards.

Together, let's talk about how universities shape and are shaped by the futures of public discourse.

Using the Cards

Here are a few ways to use the cards:

- *Sense-make.* Some colleagues may face an issue, others another. But each sees only part of the picture. Using the cards in groups, we can form a bigger picture.

- *Test plans.* You plan to introduce a pedagogy. Or change organisational cultures. Or build a hostel. How might these plans fare in various futures of public discourse?

- *Experiment.* You can discuss the cards and see what shapes the futures of public discourse. With this understanding, you can trial new ways to educate, research, or engage—ultimately to improve discourse.

This list isn't exhaustive. Let's chat and see what might be useful.

Futures Office

Futures Office was set up in 2018 to anticipate risks and opportunities for the National University of Singapore (NUS):

- Discern what NUS expects as the future, which shapes its plans.

- Chat with a diverse group of people to suss out other perspectives: if a different future pans out, how will our plans fare?

- Review trends that others have identified. Which trends fall under our radar?

Yet it can't ever be enough for one team to anticipate risks and opportunities.

Instead, NUS will grow more resilient, if we all watch for risks and opportunities, and consider jointly how to respond. These cards are an effort to do so.

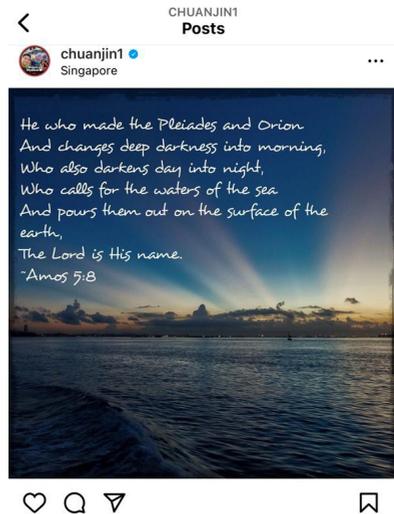
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“Bless You”



“Bless You”



What’s happening

In 2020, Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin said some asked him not to share biblical verses on social media because of his official role.¹

Concerns about upholding secularism aren’t new. Before 2021, Muslim women weren’t allowed to wear the *tudung* when in uniform - to show that services would be given equally, regardless of race or religion.² But others argued that Sikhs in uniform can wear turbans.³

These concerns may stem from different views of race and religion: a 2019 survey found a greater share of Malays, Indians, and youths disagreed that Singapore’s system/policy is fair to all races and religions.⁴

What might happen

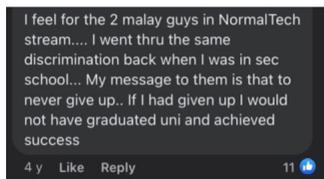
- As religion is conflated with other issues, debate grows in more areas: Can bakers decline to serve same-sex couples based on religion? Can people welcome refugees, but only if they share the same religion? Can people reject greetings, such as “bless you”, for being religious?

- The share of people with no religion grows, especially among youth.⁵ Atheistic groups gain traction and demand to join inter-faith dialogues, e.g Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles.⁶ They ask for their rights to hold their views on non-religion to be protected, as the government has done for the religious.

Eat the Rich

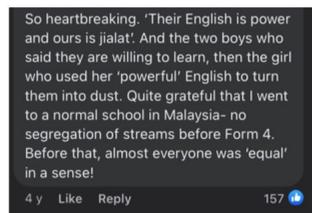


Eat the Rich



I feel for the 2 malay guys in NormalTech stream.... I went thru the same discrimination back when I was in sec school... My message to them is that to never give up.. If I had given up I would not have graduated uni and achieved success

4 y Like Reply 11



So heartbreaking. 'Their English is power and ours is jialat!' And the two boys who said they are willing to learn, then the girl who used her 'powerful' English to turn them into dust. Quite grateful that I went to a normal school in Malaysia- no segregation of streams before Form 4. Before that, almost everyone was 'equal' in a sense!

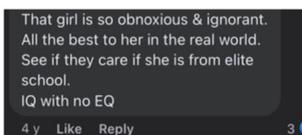
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I felt so much anger and sadness at the same time watching this video. Some of these "elitist" kids have ZERO morals as compared to the "regular" kids.

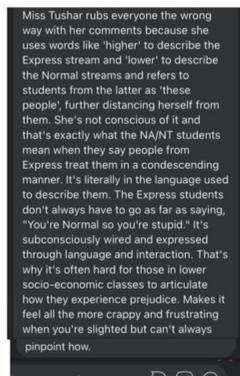
I was from the tail end of the express stream but I hung out with really awesome kids from NA and NT. Well generally there wasn't much of a gap between the different streams because most of us just hung out regardless. That was 22 years ago.

Times have changed and it ain't good.



That girl is so obnoxious & ignorant. All the best to her in the real world. See if they care if she is from elite school. IQ with no EQ

4 y Like Reply 3



Miss Tushar rubs everyone the wrong way with her comments because she uses words like 'higher' to describe the Express stream and 'lower' to describe the Normal streams and refers to students from the latter as 'these people', further distancing herself from them. She's not conscious of it and that's exactly what the NA/NT students mean when they say people from Express treat them in a condescending manner. It's literally in the language used to describe them. The Express students don't always have to go as far as saying, "You're Normal so you're stupid." It's subconsciously wired and expressed through language and interaction. That's why it's often hard for those in lower socio-economic classes to articulate how they experience prejudice. Makes it feel all the more crappy and frustrating when you're slighted but can't always pinpoint how.

What's happening

In a 2018 survey of 1,036 Singaporeans, almost half picked income inequality as the likeliest to cause a social divide – over race, religion, sexual orientation, and nationality.¹

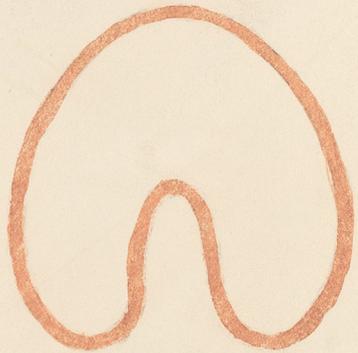
In an accompanying documentary, students from various educational pathways shared their experiences of class. Many comments on the documentary criticised the Integrated Programme students, who spoke good English and seemed “elitist”.²

These suggest income and other facets of class, e.g. language, have grown salient: 91% of respondents viewed the upper classes as arrogant, versus 35% for the lower classes. Is resentment towards the rich swelling?

What might happen

- A fall in social mobility means that some, despite going to university, stay in the lower and middle classes. They speak good English, but lack the same opportunities as the rich. Because they speak the same “language” as the rich, they understand each other. Some in the lower and middle classes tap this to rally support from the upper classes for their cause: systemic inequality.
- Educational reforms and tweaks to housing policies encourage social mixing. This incurs criticisms of social engineering, but kids start to make more friends across classes and hold less class prejudice. Differences remain, but distances are reduced.

The Power of Labels



The Power of Labels



What's happening

In 2021, some called student Dana Teoh “transphobic”, while others called her “brave”, after her *Today* op-ed on cancel culture.¹

This suggests more are using labels, such as “White privilege” and “populist”, as weapons to end discussion and discourage empathy. “Insiders” may also reject “outsiders” from joining dialogues.

Further, people may argue about labels, not issues. Local academics debated if “Chinese privilege” is a useful term, distracting from the issues minorities or Chinese-educated people face.² People may also subvert labels, e.g. “woke” as a pejorative or “little red dot” as a term of endearment.

What might happen

- One group labels another, which labels the other. A name-calling society fails to understand and solve problems, and becomes fractious. It turns to the state, social media firms, or professors to adjudicate. What if people see these authorities as biased?

- Societies overcome misuse of labels, fostering empathy and joint action. In 2015, Taiwan used the Pol.is platform to agree on rules for Uber (it curbs trolls by banning replies).³ From 2017-18, Singapore used Citizens’ Jury on diabetes.⁴ Stanford developed Deliberative Polling for informed debate.⁵

Who Gets to Make Knowledge?

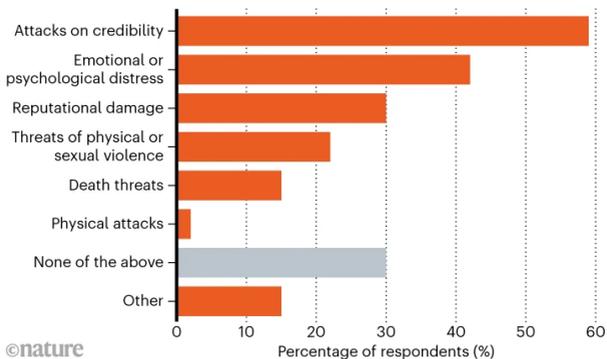


Who Gets to Make Knowledge?

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

In a *Nature* survey of scientists who have commented about COVID-19, 15% of 321 respondents said they had received death threats.

Question: Have you experienced any of the following negative impacts after speaking about COVID-19 to the media, or posting on social media? (You may select multiple options.)



What's happening

One in six scientists who spoke with the media about Covid-19 received death threats. Belgian police put a virologist in a safe house after threats from a sniper.¹

Scientists remain trusted, but some people no longer accept *how* societies create knowledge.²

In the past, academics and policymakers created knowledge by interrogating evidence and ideas, not people. They made corrections, when disproven.³

Today, some give “alternate facts”. They reject inconvenient facts as “fake news”, opposing views as “hateful”. Is it because they feel betrayed by scientists and elites, because foreign powers mislead publics, or because social media polarises views?⁴

What might happen

- Societies splinter into parallel worlds; each world has its platforms and norms around what is legitimate knowledge. When people meet across worlds, it is as if they speak foreign languages. Confused, they can't act together. Worse, discourse becomes destructive.

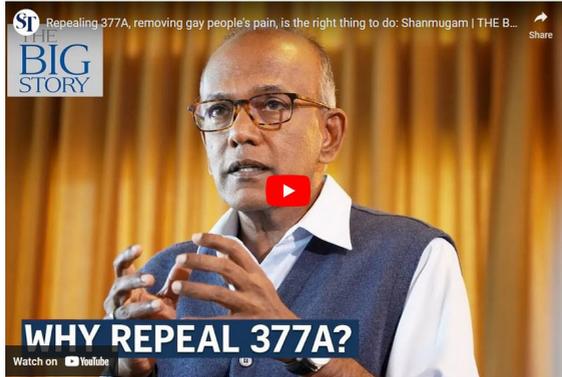
- As disgruntled people rebel against elites, they layer new norms of knowledge creation over existing ones, just as science did over religion-based knowledge. Shamans and doctors partner to strengthen community health, spiritual and physical. What might be these new norms and ways of knowing?

Government as Rules-maker?



Government as Rules-maker?

Section 377A: Constitution will be amended to protect Parliament's right to define marriage, says Shanmugam



What's happening

Singapore has legalised gay sex, and enshrined in the Constitution Parliament's right to define marriage.¹ These bolster Government's role in making laws and tacit rules of public discourse: who decides which topics are out of bounds?

Government accommodated discussion of legalising gay sex, but criticised academics and religious leaders who, it deems, pit a religion against others.² Laws on falsehoods, ownership in media, and religion bolster tacit rules.

Government has used its influence to curb polarisation. Will people still see it as legitimate and let it set the rules, if contestation grows and more live on digital platforms?

What might happen

- Despite a political consensus, more people debate taboo topics. In private, families are divided: Dad wants Singapore to back a country, but Mum wants non-alignment. Students organise a teach-in on critical race theory in an off-campus café, after receiving repeated reprimands for their activism in school.

- More parties win seats in Parliament by making emotional appeals on lightning-rod issues, such as race, religion, and cyborg rights. Government, business leaders, and experts are split: respond in kind or take the high road? Tacit rules aren't enforced; things fall apart. Can society pull together?

Umbrella Identities



Umbrella Identities



What's happening

Amid protests against the government in Hong Kong, a 25-year-old developed the 和你Eat app to identify “yellow” (pro-democracy) eateries for people to patronise and “blue” (pro-government) ones to avoid.¹

Hong Kongers have lined up behind “yellow” or “blue”. Both groups see the world differently: police caused deaths among protesters or not; the US is interfering or helping.²

When people repeatedly line up on one of two sides—despite differences within each, e.g. race and gender—it gets harder to make laws and policies, or act together.³ This has occurred in the US, the UK (Brexit), Turkey, and Thailand.

What might happen

- Influenced by trends abroad, Singapore polarises. Populism gathers strength. The “rest” (e.g. working-class Chinese-educated, Indians, Malays) criticise elites in Parliament. When a deliveryman is berated, the client is doxxed; when a diploma-holder is denied promotion, the employer is flamed for favouring graduates.

- Singaporeans are divided, but along many dimensions: poor, rich; straight, queer; men, women; devout, atheist. Given people hold various identities, they form opposing coalitions, but only occasionally. These are short-lived and focus on one or two issues. There is neither unity nor disunity in diversity.

(De)globalisation



(De)globalisation

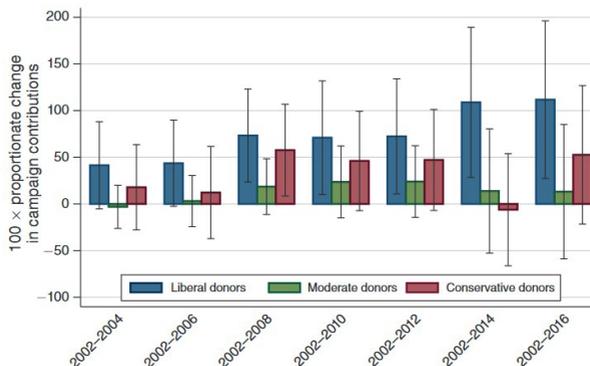


FIGURE 4. EXPOSURE TO CHINESE IMPORT COMPETITION AND CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS, 2002–2004/2016

Figure shows relationship between changes in China import exposure between 2002 and 2010, and $100 \times$ proportional changes in campaign contributions within ideology terciles.

What's happening

In US counties that import more goods from China, donors give a bigger boost to liberal and conservative political candidates than moderate candidates. This polarisation increased over time, suggesting that job losses from free trade can widen social fissures.¹

Might a retreat from globalisation heal societies?

Perhaps. Trade in goods now makes up a smaller share of world GDP. Nations slap tariffs and want to make their own goods, such as microchips.²

Or perhaps not. In their rivalry, the US and China stoke deglobalisation; to influence other nations, they confuse, sway and divide populations, e.g. over Covid-19 vaccines.³

What might happen

- Regional blocs emerge; trade and investment grow in each. Rules vary across blocs: some regulate labour and environmental conditions, others don't; some rules are negotiated, others imposed. Confident in their regional leadership, China and the US stop trying to sway other nations thru information operations.

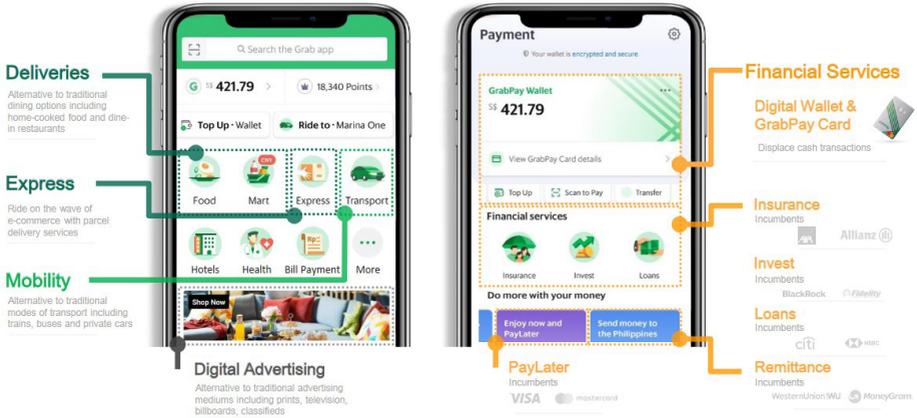
- The US weakens from internal culture wars. China weakens from an aging population, a loss of trust in the Party, and shortages of food and energy. Cross-border trade and investment fall, as the two biggest economies buy fewer goods. Neither enforces global rules. Each blames the other; both try to sway other nations.

Regulating Technology



Regulating Technology

#1 Superapp in Southeast Asia



What's happening

We engage tech firms (e.g. Grab), daily for rides, deliveries, payments, and more.¹ Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp are owned by one firm: Meta. Five billion Internet users worldwide are in bed with tech firms, day in, day out.²

This has given tech firms influence, and prompted rules to prevent them from turning into monopolies, harming people (e.g. privacy) and being misused (e.g. influence elections).³ Singapore passed a law in 2022, requiring social media to block harmful content.⁴

Might distributed and decentralised networks curb the influence of tech firms? Or will metaverses, run by a few firms, increase it?

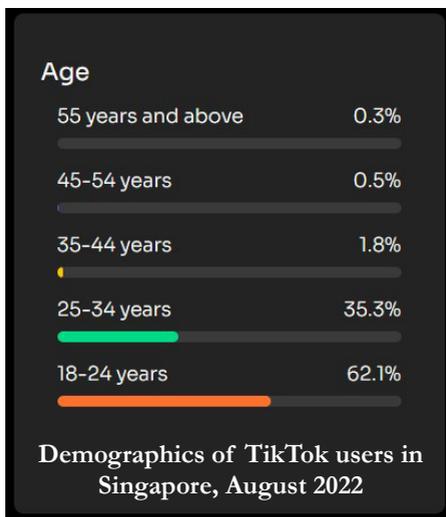
What might happen

- Increased rules may create safe spaces where intense, yet non-defamatory discussions take place. This lets all parties have a greater understanding of other positions, while reducing vitriol against others.
- As rules increase, some groups retreat into the dark web and hidden threads on public forums, giving the illusion of civil discourse.⁵ Yet these rejected groups knuckle down in their beliefs, and grow isolated and further from mainstream discourse. Might these unseen pressures build—and even blow up?

Grandparents on Metaverses?



Grandparents on Metaverses?



What's happening

The demographics of popular social media platforms differ greatly. In Singapore, 62% of TikTok users are youth, and 35% young adults; 13% of Facebook users are youth, and 35% young adults.¹ (Youth are 18 to 24 years old, and young adults 25 to 34 years.)

While research suggests that generational differences (i.e. in the workplace) aren't real, could segmentation by platforms actually create a gap?²

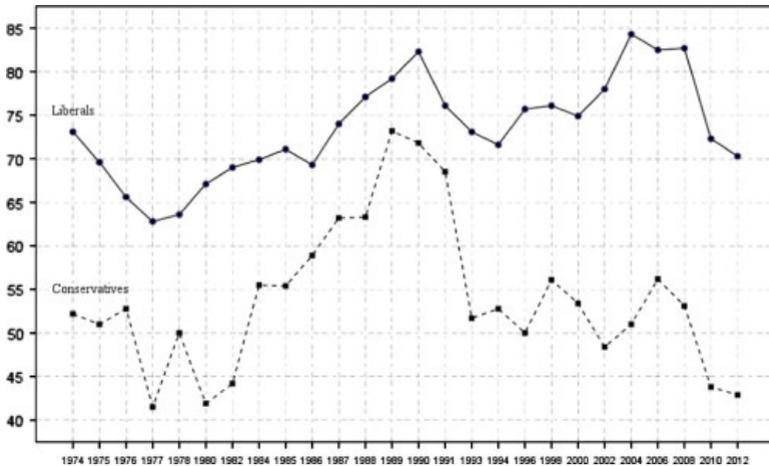
What might happen

- A study showed that tech adoption by seniors is affected by their perception of the benefits of that technology.³ Hence, platforms like the metaverse may see higher uptake by seniors if it gives them freedom from physical ailments, helps them break through language/cultural barriers, or allows them to connect with friends and family.
- As demographic extremes migrate to different platforms, interlocutors who can bridge these may find business and social opportunities. Platforms that create a common language and are inter-operable with other platforms allow people from different generations to increase interactions and deepen discourse.

Climate of a Blame Game



Climate of a Blame Game



Percentages of liberals and conservatives reporting that national spending on the environment and climate is “Too Little,” 1974–2012.

What’s happening

In 2018, Yellow Jackets protested after France raised taxes on petrol.¹ Since 1990, liberals and conservatives in the US have diverged about public spending on the environment and climate.²

Discussion has grown visceral. Climate activist Greta Thunberg blames national leaders, saying “How dare you!”, and gets ridiculed because the crew of her net-zero yacht took a few flights.³

Such heated discussion could intensify if people see national and business leaders as blaming climate change for forest fires in California or an insurgency in Nigeria, without acknowledging their own complicity.⁴

What might happen

- Activists shame national and business leaders, who in turn ridicule activists. In this cycle of name-calling, no one agrees on mitigation and adaptation. Climate change soon exacerbates socio-economic issues. Even as many die from heatwaves and floods, they bicker on and on, rather than deal with the disasters and issues.

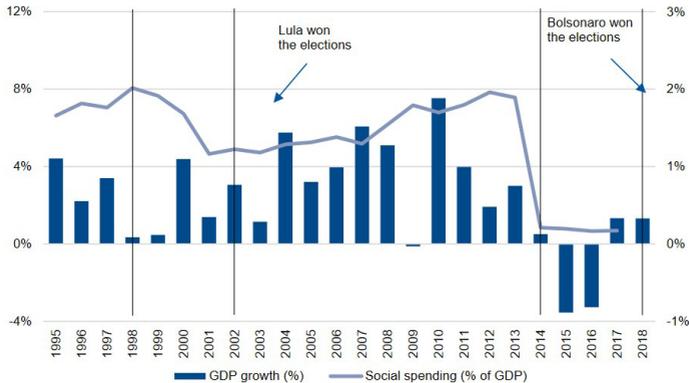
- Activists partner universities and businesses on little projects, e.g. reforestation in Riau.⁵ Some call these tokenistic. As the partners build trust, they start bigger projects, e.g. regenerative agriculture. Despite differences, they attack problems, not people. They view issues through climate, governance, and other lenses.

Authentic Liars



Authentic Liars

Figure 3. GDP growth rate (left axis) and social spending (right axis) between 1995 and 2018



Source: Iacolla Francesco, Justino Patricia, and Martorano Bruno, “Roots of Dissent”, vol. 2020 (Helsinki, Finland: UNU-WIDER, 2020).

What’s happening

Two populists, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Jair Bolsonaro, vied for the Brazilian presidency in 2022.¹

Populists pit “us” (the “people”) against “them” (the “elites”).² Some believe that populists are *authentic*—they feel and think like the people. If they lie, it’s because they speak *for the people*.

Lula’s campaign portrayed Bolsonaro as a cannibal. Bolsonaro’s called Lula a satanist.³ A fan said Bolsonaro “exaggerates” and “doesn’t think”, but is sincere, unlike politically-correct politicians.⁴

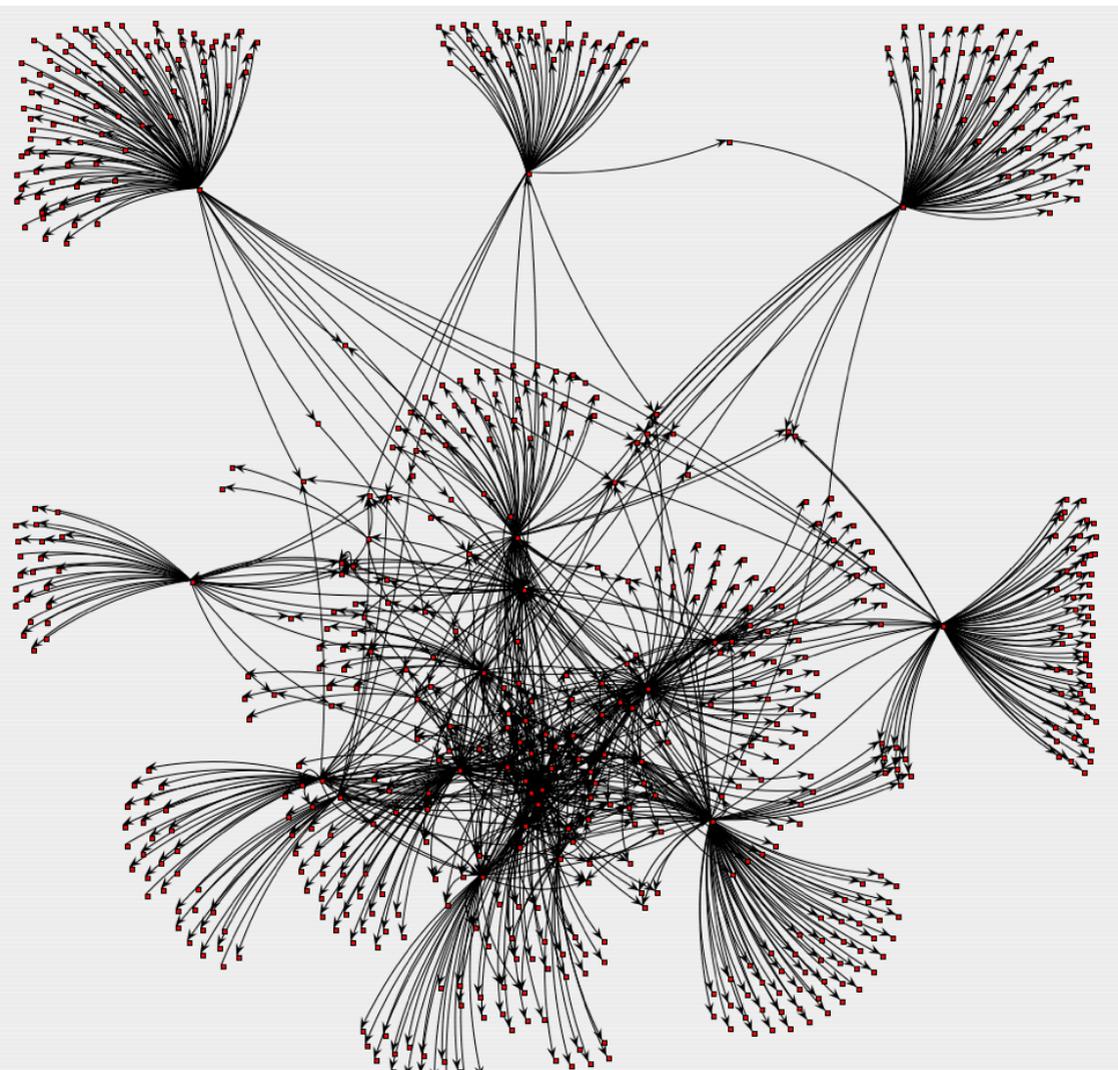
Will more adore populism and authentic lying? In 2023, Bolsonaro supporters stormed government buildings after Lula took office and Bolsonaro alleged election fraud.⁵

What might happen

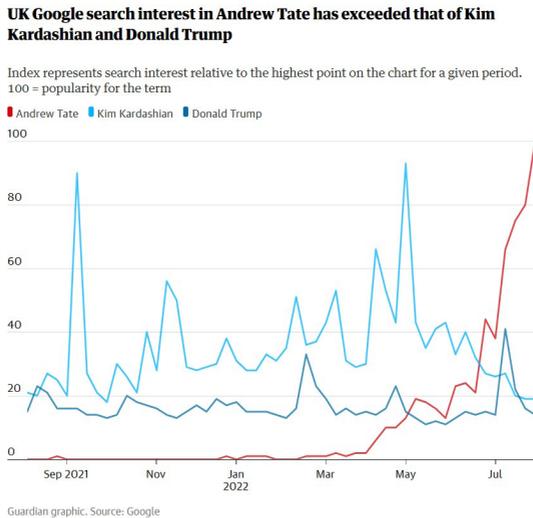
- Populism and the desire for “authenticity” spread to Singapore, radicalising politics. Authenticity is speaking one’s mind, not just social media engagement, despite possibly getting into trouble. Politicians one-up each other by saying the darndest things. Some ridicule such politicians, others vote for them.

- Populism is a bad word; leaders are criticised for distorting reality and alienating groups (e.g. immigrants in U.S). In Singapore, some use the label to shut down critical, but constructive conversations, e.g. an opposition party was criticised as populist for engaging citizens and publishing online their grievances about a housing crisis.

The Dark Side of Influencers



The Dark Side of Influencers



What's happening

In July 2022, there were more searches for misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate than Donald Trump or Kim Kardashian. Before TikTok suspended him, Tate's videos had been viewed 11.6 billion times.¹

Because social media is viral, individuals can amass a large following and influence debate and action, often beyond their hometowns and expertise. Echo chambers form; discourse and behaviours polarise.

Teachers said some 11-year-old boys emulate Tate, who said women bear responsibility for rape. He backed Trump and called an anti-Islam activist a "solid guy".² His Hustler's University teaches young men to make money online.³

What might happen

- Imagine this: in a video asking the Government to implement a minimum wage in Singapore, a fashion TikToker uses the phrase, "Arbeit Macht Frei". Called out, she and her followers say everyone should have a fair wage. Holocaust deniers start to follow her, tag her with similar content, and hijack her channel for their own agenda.
- As the mainstream tires of extreme content on social media, some influencers create separate personas to spread "mainstream" content against falsehoods, anti-science posts, and hateful content. They keep their original channels. Addicted to their power, they don't care if they are exposed.

This card is deliberately left blank. What did we miss?

Issue _____

What's happening

What is the issue, and why does it matter?

What might happen

How might this issue pan out?

- Possibility 1

- Possibility 2

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“Bless You”

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The Dark Side of Influencers

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