

Written Representation 21

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Date

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Date: 7 February 2018

To: The Select Committee (Fake News)
The Clerk of Parliament,
Parliament House,
1 Parliament Place, Singapore 178880

Dear Sir, Madam,

Education against falsehood

Evidently in what is going on in real-life when we read "Fewer lit students a worrying trend" (The Straits Times - August 24, 2015), and read "Panel 'will ensure space for healthy discourse'" (January 12, 2018), and read "Take care not to stifle genuine discourse" (January 15, 2018), it is obvious that a real education is needed to understand that when mal-informed, when provided with just only Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' to read for example, the readers can hardly enter into "discourse" on any of the subjects...read:

"How every fool can play upon the word, I think
the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence,
and discourse grow commendable in none only but
parrots; go in sirrah, bid them prepare."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice, Act 3, Scene 5.

"If you think fit, or that it may be done,
Give me advantage of some brief discourse."
William Shakespeare; Othello, Act 3, Scene 1.



U-GRADE

"If you feel yourself not fitting yet
And furnished with your old strength, I'll stay, cousin,
And ev'ry day discourse you into health."
William Shakespeare; The Two Noble Kinsmen, Act 3, Scene 6.

"Your discipline in war, wisdom in peace,
Your bounty, virtue, humility;
Indeed, left nothing fitting for the purpose
Untouch'd, or slightly handled, in discourse;
And when my oratory grew to an end,
I bid them."

William Shakespeare; King Richard III, Act 3, Scene 7.

"Into the market place; there shall I try,
In my oration, how the people take
The cruel issue of these bloody men;
According to the which thou shalt discourse
To young _____ of the state of things.
Lend me your hand."

William Shakespeare; Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 1.

"Put your discourse into some frame."

William Shakespeare; Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2.

Discourse-frame? When we read "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (The Straits Times - August 24, 2015) it is evident that (up to date) the schools had not provided the students with all the books needed to help them make sense of the information read:-

"We turned o'er many books together."

William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1.

Literature education, supported by some real-life evidences, can help to close the path towards "falsehood" and, at the very same accounted-for time, help to open the road to truth.



Recycle

U-GRADZ

MPs' views

Concerns over where to draw the line in fighting fake news

Combating falsehood not contrary to freedom of speech: Shanmugam

Seow Bei Yi

As Singapore prepares to fight fake online news, Members of Parliament yesterday debated the topic of where to draw the line that should not be crossed.

One of the questions posed was: How does Singapore ensure that new laws to tackle online falsehoods will not end up impeding citizens' rights to free speech?

"How do we distinguish those who knowingly create or spread online falsehoods from those who are just expressing their opinions?" asked Ms Sun Xueling (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC).

She was responding to a motion moved by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam to form a Select Committee to examine the problem of online falsehoods. This

was passed unanimously by all 80 MPs yesterday.

This 10-MP Select Committee will come up with countermeasures, which could include legislation, against the threat of such fake news.

Nominated MP Kok Heng Leun highlighted the need to define what a deliberate falsehood is and distinguish it from biased, but legitimate, commentaries.

He also called for a deeper look at existing laws. These include the Telecommunications Act - where knowingly transmitting a false message could lead to a fine and jail term - and the Protection from Harassment Act and Sedition Act, which already go some way towards curbing online falsehoods. This was seen in previous cases where founders of The Real Singapore were jailed for a series of defamatory articles.

"This demonstrates that our current existing laws and provisions have been effective," he argued.

"We do not want a heavy-handed approach that will root out con-



CLEARING THE AIR

Keeping falsehoods out of our discourse enables freedom of speech to be meaningfully exercised.

MR. KOK HENG LEUN, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law.

structive, though at times disagreeing, voices," added Mr Kok. He called for the Select Committee to balance the interests of protecting national security and public order, with the interests of individuals who want to have "meaningful discussions on issues of concern, including government policies," and also that of the media to report on such matters.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) noted that the extent of government involvement "requires deep discussion." "We may end up freezing free speech online," he said. "Legislation, if overly relied on, may also weaken the ability of society to educate themselves and discern what is real or not for themselves."

Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) suggested that the Select Committee pay attention to whether any proposed measures would silence the opposition and critics of the Government.

In response, Mr Shanmugam said combating falsehoods is not contrary to the exercise of freedom of speech. He added, "In fact, keeping falsehoods out of our discourse enables freedom of speech to be meaningfully exercised."

He added that in responding to falsehoods, there may be a need to

take into account their nature and the intention behind them.

Mr Shanmugam noted Mr Kok's point that fake news is used to divide and mislead society, and his question on how this segues into biased commentary.

In response, he said that strongly held viewpoints based on inaccuracies is one kind of falsehood.

However, its impact would be different from deliberate, targeted fake news, and these are matters that should be considered.

During yesterday's debate, Nominated MP Mahdev Mohan also said that users should be equipped to be the first line of defence against fake news.

To tackle fake news, several MPs also stressed the need to educate the public. Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong GRC) said that legislation should be a part of a "wider, more multi-pronged approach" where media literacy is key.

Nominated MP Ganesh Rajaram added that education can start as early as in pre-school.

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC) added: "What is important is discernment, and not just disbelief."

"Empowering people to discern between truth and lies is of paramount importance," he said. "Only then, can we increase our resistance to the insidiousness of falsehood."

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"Name the very crown of falsehood.
William Shakespeare; *Titulus And Cressida*, Act 4, Scene 2.

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,
An evil soul producing holy witness,
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath."
William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3.

"Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood."
William Shakespeare; *Titulus And Cressida*, Act 3, Scene 2.

"Truly, as a man of falsehood may."
William Shakespeare; *Part I, King Henry IV*, Act 2, Scene 1.

"How careful was I, when I took my way,
Each trifle under truest bars to thrust,
That to my use it might unused stay
From hands of falsehood, in sure wards of trust!"
William Shakespeare; *Sonnets*, Paragraph XLVIII.

"I gainsay my deed, how may he wound,
And worthily, my falsehood! yea, as much
As you have done my truth."
William Shakespeare; *King Henry VIII*, Act 2, Scene 4.

"See you now
Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth.
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By Indirections find directions out."
William Shakespeare; *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 1.

"Do it freely;
Or, by our greatness and the grace of it,
Which is our honor, bitter torture shall
Winnow the truth from falsehood."
William Shakespeare; *Cymbeline*, Act 5, Scene 5.

When we read the news "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (The Straits Times - August 29, 2015), did anyone read:

"We turned o'er many books together."
W. Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1.

? Students, provided with only Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, definitely did not process the information read:

"All this I speak in print for in print I found it."
W. Shakespeare; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 2, scene 1.

"Mine were the very cipher of a function."
W. Shakespeare; *Measure For Measure*, Act 2, scene 2.

"Who deciphers then?"
W. Shakespeare; *The Comedy of Errors*, Act 5, scene 1.

"Man shall do it."
W. Shakespeare; *The Winter's Tale*, Act 4, scene 4.

"You are singled forth to try experiments."
W. Shakespeare; *Titus Andronicus*, Act 2, scene 3.

"If you think fit, or that it may be done,
Give me advantage of some brief discourse."
W. Shakespeare; *Othello*, Act 3, scene 1.

"Put your discourse into some frame."
W. Shakespeare; *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2.

Schools, right up to this day, did not provide the students with all the books (and discourse-frame for example) so

how are the students going to have a proper discourse done on the subject of "falsehood" and so on and so forth?

MPs' suggestions

Fines, fact-checkers, education among ideas to fight scourge

Ng Jun Sen

A slew of suggestions were given by Members of Parliament yesterday on ways to tackle, if not terminate, the growing scourge of deliberate falsehoods posted online.

These include imposing fines on websites that do not remove fake content, using university students as independent fact-checkers and introducing critical thinking in schools' curriculum to develop a generation with a "healthy scepticism of online information".

The burst of ideas came after a move by Law Minister K. Shanmugam to get parliamentary permission to assemble a Select Com-

mittee, comprising 10 MPs, to analyse the issues and produce recommendations on lines of action.

One very likely measure is legislation. It is among the proposals in a recent government document called the Green Paper, which sets out the possible courses of action, including policy measures. The paper also gave actions taken by other countries.

Mr Zay Mohamad (Chua Chu Kang GRC) suggested that the Government examine laws that countries such as Germany and New Zealand have enacted to take down false content.

Germany's law against hate speech, known as NetzDG, allows its government to order sites to re-

move such unlawful content. Systemic breaches can result in fines of up to €50 million (\$80 million).

"The European Union, UK and France are considering similar take-down laws," said Mr Zay, who was among 13 members of the House to speak on the motion.

New Zealand takes a different approach. Its Harmful Digital Communications Act allows the courts to order a right of reply, or to correct false statements about individuals, he added.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) suggested that the Select Committee discuss the responsibilities of social media and tech companies, as well as educating people to discern what is fake news.

Some, like Nominated MP (NDMP) Kok Heng Leun, suggested multiple independent fact-checking bodies.

Mr Kok said: "As the world becomes more complex, no one person or institution can claim to have all information, everyone contributes in discovering (what is true)."

NMP Mahdev Mohan called for a network of fact-checkers to be formed to correct and report misinformation on social media.

He also suggested that the Government could block the ads of websites "to reduce or eliminate the financial incentives to generate fake news traffic".

ground-up efforts such as the United States' International Fact-Checking Network, or FactCheck.org," he added.

NMP Ganesh Rajaram urged the Government to consider marshalling social media influencers to get the word out swiftly when a piece of news is false.

"While we all know that our very own Prime Minister is one of the biggest social media influencers in Singapore because of his number of followers, there are others who also have a wide reach," he said.

Stressing the importance of immediately correcting fake news that could trigger nationwide panic, Mr Ganesh said mainstream media can lead the charge.

On education efforts, nearly all the MPs argued for media literacy and critical thinking to be part and parcel of the school curriculum.


NMP K. Thanaselvan said students can learn to spot cues to uncover misinformation and question misleading sources, instead of simply believing anything they read.

"Eventually, we hope to cultivate a generation with a healthy scepticism of online information," she added.

Mr Henry Kwek (Nee Soon GRC) suggested the committee commission "detailed and prolonged studies" to understand how Singaporeans consume news and how social media shape their understanding.

Mr Kwek said: "A clear understanding of news consumption patterns will be necessary to help us calibrate policy, so that we can balance a healthy discourse with necessary intervention."
ngjunsen@sp.com.sg

A healthy discourse? Did my (Nee Sook GRC) MP, Mr. Henry Kwek, read:-
 "If heaven slumber while their creatures want,
 They may awake their helps to comfort them.
 I'll then discourse our woes, felt several years,
 And wanting breath to speak help me with tears."
 William Shakespeare; Pericles, Prince of Tyre, Act 1, Scene 4.

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P116				09/2014	

"All tears; why she, even she
 (O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourned longer) married."
 William Shakespeare; Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2.

"There is a prone and speechless dialect,
 Such as move men; besides, she hath prosperous art
 When she will play with reason and discourse."
 William Shakespeare; Measure For Measure, Act 1, Scene 2

"O madness of discourse,
 That cause sets up with and against itself;
 Bi-fold authority where reason can revolt
 Without perdition, and loss assume all reason."
 William Shakespeare; Troilus And Cressida, Act 5, scene 2.

"This may be some error, but no madness,
 Yet doth this accident and flood of fortune
 So far exceed all instance, all discourse,
 That I am ready to distrust mine eyes,
 And wrangle with my reason."
 William Shakespeare; Twelfth Night, Act 4, scene 3.

The ideas whose time has come, to the 'marketplace of ideas', reveals...

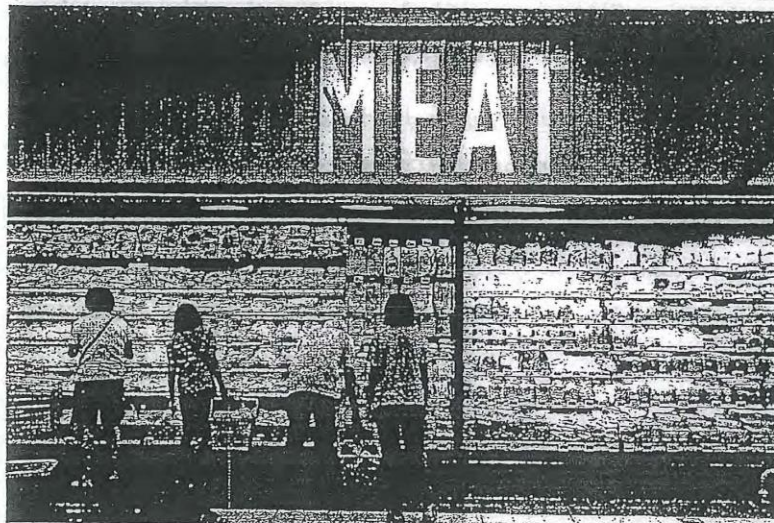
Didn't Shakespeare know what print brings to the market-place? to be...read:-

"Walk we forth, even to the market-place."
William Shakespeare; Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 1.

"To the market-place!
You have put me now to such a part."
William Shakespeare; Coriolanus, Act 3, Scene 2.

A16

THE STRAITS TIMES | TUESDAY, JANUARY 16, 2018



The allegation that FairPrice sells 'halal pork' has been making the rounds since 2007 and persists to this day, despite being shown to be false. Fakehoods do not wither and die when exposed to the light of truth, says the writer, adding that giving people the facts may not cause them to change their minds, as they may choose to disregard the facts or find new facts to support their ideas. ST PHOTO ONG WEE JIN

Proposed fake news law

Giving the lie to the 'marketplace of ideas'

People can't be bothered to call out lies. The law is needed to aid the process of sieving out falsehoods online.

Seah Kian Peng

As a Member of Parliament (Marine Parade GRC), I spoke at the recent parliamentary debate on deliberate online falsehoods (popularly known as fake news) and would like to share the key points that I made. Like welcome readers and members of the public to contribute their views and suggestions so that the Select Committee, of which I am a member, can take them on board when we meet.

Any discussion of fake news should take bearing from the relatively uncontroversial principles that we should, first, reduce falsehoods as much as we can and, second, promote the truth as vigorously as we can.

As with so much in policymaking, this is easier said than done. A June 2017 survey by the Ministry of Communications and Information found that around 25

percent of respondents shared information they later discovered to be false, and only half were confident of their ability to recognise fake news.

Clearly we need more processes to safeguard the two principles of reducing falsehoods and promoting truth. New processes are needed because the status quo is based on two assumptions which we now know to be questionable.

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS

• Enough time and capacity to call out lies

First, the assumption of infinite, or even adequate, time and capacity to process information. Some critics of legislation to tackle fake news argue that restricting information, even false information, infuses the population. They may think "here the state goes again—mollycoddling citizens by restricting information for equales".

Indeed, the argument from

freedom goes further—“Even if we do make mistakes, it is our mistake to make. The Government should not—and should not want to—protect us from our mistakes.”

That is true. But, it is also true that people have a right to expect the political leaders they have put in place to have a duty of care to ensure that the decision-making environment is not populated by intentional falsehoods.

Just throwing all the “data” we have into a pot and then leaving people to distinguish between good and bad information assumes that people have both the time and capacity to do this. I don't mean “capacity” in the strict sense of expertise or education—I mean it in the loose sense of “inclination” or “willingness” to “be bothered”. Indeed, most people cannot be bothered.

As the chief executive of NTUC FairPrice, a supermarket chain, I know that first-hand, as FairPrice has been hit by fake news—if you

believe what you see online, FairPrice sells “halal pork” and “plastic rice”.

In 2007, FairPrice filed a police report after we found a picture of “halal pork”, allegedly sold by stores, on the Internet. If the first person who saw this checked with us and deleted it, it would have died there. Instead, the news was carried in both mainstream media as well as online news media, and caused a stir in the community. It was so widespread that Muhiyiddin Islamic Religious Council of Singapore had to carry out physical checks. It was viral again in 2011 and again in 2014. Even today, 10 years later, I still get messages asking me about this. For the last time (I hope), this is a deliberate online falsehood!

Just last year, FairPrice also had to file a police report over viral claims that its house brand jasmine fragrant rice is made of plastic. Last year, the Agri, Food and Veterinary Authority also had to come out to debunk Facebook videos that

alleged a coffee shop in Ang Mo Kio was selling “man-made eggs” from China.

The consequences of fake news go beyond dollars and cents to the very destiny of nations. In the United Kingdom, some voters for Remain or Leave voted on the basis of information later found to be false.

Lies can be exposed by light. Some other critics of proposed laws targeting fake news argue that a government does not have a right to decide beforehand what is true and what is false. They say that people have a right to the facts, and to make up their own minds.

This is the argument from the “marketplace of ideas”—that people will change their minds when the facts change. As Cicero, the great Roman orator, said: “Does not, as fire dropped upon water is immediately extinguished and cooled, does not, if say, a false accusation, when brought in contact with a most pure and holy life, instantly fall and become extinguished?” Cicero, I think, did not have experience with “halal pork”.

The answer to his question—whether falsehoods wither and die when exposed to the light of truth—is, of course, not. Lies thrive and contest against the truth, even when the “truth” is as evident as where a man—or president—was born.

Instead of changing their minds when presented with a different set of facts, people may choose to disregard these facts or find ways to find new facts that support their pre-existing ideas. This confirmation bias is well tested and should be taken into consideration when we make the marketplace argument.

The extent of government involvement in sieving out online lies that can harm Singapore requires discussion.

One might think that this is about the need to balance our freedoms with duties, but I thought to make it clearer than that, it is not just a balance, but a difference between means and ends.

In Singapore, we do not pursue freedom for its own end. We do not, if I may put it bluntly, have a “philosophy of freedoms”.

As Mr. Rajazakan, our then Minister for Foreign Affairs, said in a speech to foreign correspondents: “We see freedom of the press not as the end, but as means to an all-embracing end—the integrity and independence of our country, its security, its prosperity, the eradication of anything that would sow seeds of social, racial and religious conflicts which is far more serious than the exceptions in the world today.”

He was speaking in 1986, more than 30 years ago, and the world has come full circle. Today, even more so than in the past, Singapore is vulnerable to misinformation. Lies and fake news campaigns can ramp up through our small, highly connected society within minutes. It is naive, given human psychology, inertia and cognitive biases, to think that the marketplace of ideas will allow the truth to prevail.

Indeed, these days, a lie can travel halfway round the world before the truth gets out of bed.

The writer, an MP for Marine Parade GRC, is a member of the Select Committee formed to study deliberate online falsehoods, chaired by Deputy Speaker Charles Chong.

This article is adapted from his speech in Parliament last week.

"Go tell the lords o' the city I am here:
Deliver them this paper: having read it,
Bid them repair to the market-place; where I,
Even in theirs and in the commons' ears,
Will vouch the truth of it."

William Shakespeare; Coriolanus, Act 5, Scene 6.


Most people cannot be bothered, to read...life?

Just two millennium ago, the English language (as we know it today) did not exist; and many precious books, that were written by hand, were in the hands of a privileged few. Truly, did any one of the few really bother to read? In this real-life ongoing subject of humanities, (with history and English literature included), students must know about the good gifts of the English language and print to the human race. When Shakespeare read the English-language Geneva Bible, (and what's written in its margin), didn't Shakespeare know how "falsehood" may be print-perpetuated?

"O what a goodly outside falsehood hath."

W.S.; The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3.

In this new millennium, with the billions already spent on education, when I, a Singaporean in Budget 2013, read "More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature" (The Straits Times - February 26, 2013), and further read "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (The Straits Times - August 24, 2015), I know that the literature students, when provided with just only Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, are not given the chance to do a discourse on the subject of "history" or "falsehood" and so on and so forth. On 4 December 2015, I wrote to :-

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"Go sound thy trumpet in the market-place;
 Call thither all the officers o' the town,
 Where they shall know our mind."
 William Shakespeare; Coriolanus, Act 1, Scene 5.

If no one bother to...listen, how are the students going to learn... "history"?

"If we should recount
Our baleful news, and at each word's deliverance
Stab poniards in our flesh till all were told,
The words would add more anguish than the wounds."
William Shakespeare; Part III, King Henry VI, Act 2, Scene 1.

Fewer Lit students a worrying trend



Writers Jean Tay and Ken Honsava speaking about playwriting techniques at HEE last week. The number of students studying literature is falling but more schools seem to be offering the subject. PHOTO: DOB VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Today, through one's handphone, one can find that "History" appeared 22 times in William Shakespeare's literature.

Grindstone: My lord, unawaken'd on a word with you.
Marlet: Sir, a whole history.
William Shakespeare; Marlet, Act 3, Scene 2.

Duke: History?
Viola: A blank, my lord.
William Shakespeare; Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene 4

"Is it but this? A hardness in nature
Which often leaves the history unspoken
That it intends to do?"
William Shakespeare; King Lear, Act 1, Scene 1

Page: It is a kind of history.
Sly: Well, we'll see 't come.
William Shakespeare; The Taming of The Shrew, Induction II

"By the head, An indize and obscure prologue
To the history."
William Shakespeare; Othello, Act 2, Scene 1

"There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased,
The which observed, a man may prophesy
With a near aim of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life."
William Shakespeare; Part II, King Henry IV, Act 3, Scene 1

"To th' observer doth thy history
Fully unfold."
William Shakespeare; Measure For Measure, Act 1, Scene 1

"Sir, This paper is the history of my knowledge
Touching her flight. (Presenting a letter)"
William Shakespeare (1564-1616); Cymbeline, Act 3, Scene 5

Lack of exposure to literature could have an impact on cultural development, say experts

ForLee
Fewer students are taking literature at the upper secondary level, pointing to fewer believing in its relevance, and raising concerns about the impact on cultural development here.

Last year, about 6,500 students sat the literature O-level examination, down from about 6,800 students in 2012, according to figures from the Ministry of Education (MOE).

The drop came mainly from students taking literature as an elective - a "half subject" that is paired with another half subject, such as geography or history, and counted together as a whole subject.

Last year, about 3,100 students took the full literature exam while another 2,400 took the elective option at the O-level. In 2012, about 3,000 students sat each paper.

But while the number of students taking the subject is falling, the number of schools offering the subject appears to be on the rise.

Last year, more than 10 schools offered literature as a full subject, and over 50 schools offered it as an elective for the O-levels. In 2013, about 70 offered it as a full subject, and about 60 taught it as an elective.

The issue of declining literature enrolment has generated interest in the arts and literary communities.

In May, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) launched a series of roundtable discussions with the Singapore Art Museum on cultural policy, beginning with one on literature education in schools.

A summary report on the discussion was made available on the IPS website last month.

IPS senior research fellow Tan Jun Hong, who chaired the discussion, told The Straits Times that the state of literature education is tied to cultural policy, as the study of literature helps groom arts practitioners such as writers, playwrights and film-makers.

Said Mr Tan: "If we have so few students studying the subject, does it affect the number and the quality of practitioners, such as writers and playwrights, being produced? Who are the people who are able to do such work?"

At the closed-door discussion, Associate Professor Angela Poon and Assistant Professor Suzanne Choo, both from the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE), presented a paper discussing the factors that could have led to falling interest in literary studies in secondary schools.

They said most of the problem is that parents and students think the subject is difficult to score highly in, and that it has little practical value. The selection of texts is also unappealing to teens.

New Town Secondary School student Wayne Lee, 16, decided to take geography instead of literature as she found the subject "very difficult". She said: "We read Shakespeare's The Merchant Of Venice in Secondary 2 and it was so tough. I had to translate each page into modern English. I decided not to study literature after that."

Prof Choo analysed the O-level prescribed texts from 1990 to 2013 and found that excluding authors from Singapore made up 10 per cent of the texts, and those from Africa accounted for 14 per cent.

"The most frequently included author was William Shakespeare, who was also the only one to be included at least once for each year of the examination, followed by Arthur Miller," she said.

This has led to a lack of cultural representation, she added.

The prescribed list of texts for students sitting the literature exam next year includes titles such as William Golding's Lord Of The Flies, John Wyndham's The Midwich Cuckoo, and Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

Of the 13 set texts, only one is local works - playwright Jean Tay's Everything But The Brain, and Here and Beyond: 12 Stories, an anthology of short stories edited by writer Cyril Wong.

The IPS report said many participants felt the list of prescribed texts could be updated and made more inclusive. It adds that teachers tend to stick to " tried-and-tested" texts that previous batches of students did well in.

The IPS is preparing a full report on the issue, and will submit it next month to the relevant ministries, including MOE and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

Prof Poon said it is important for young people to study literature as it "encourages a deeper engagement, not only with language, but also with issues of socio-political and cultural import".

With Singapore aiming to be a global arts hub, Mr Tan said it is even more crucial that efforts are made to develop the country's own arts and literary scene.

"We will need, for example, writers, readers and people with some training in literature who will have an interest in this area," he added.

Cultural Medallion recipient and artistic director of theatre company The Necessary Stage Alvin Tan agreed. He said: "The reading capacity of the Singapore audience is not sophisticated, and it shows in their questions about our plays."

In February this year, he created an invitation-only Facebook group named L355 (Lit In Singapore Schools) to bring together people interested in discussing ways to revitalize literature in schools.

The group has 279 members, ranging from arts practitioners to teachers who share reading materials and literature-related news.

He said: "Literature is underrated here to the work that I do, and it is close to my heart. We know there are issues such as falling literature enrolment, and I want to do something about it. The Facebook group is a way for us to discuss issues and generate awareness."

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Skills... Future? Now, is Shakespeare's Skills... Future-ready? The Future (of Literature Education), the work on that, starts from when? When, after centuries of exegesis, we return to the words of the writers ("Give me advantage of some brief discourse," My lord, put your discourse into some frame," and someone here begin to discover that we can really have an actual discourse done on the subject of "history" (or "art" or "government" or any other one of the hundreds of course-subjects that Shakespeare had skillfully prepared for the future) within a standard-structured discourse-frame for example, won't we, Singaporeans, take our chance to learn about the real work that we can, now... on our part, do (in preparation for the future) and be ready... to pioneer a new literature Education system out to the world?

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), a Catholic in Protestant England, had much to say, to share, with his fellow English countrymen and the world. He knew that, with print, man will one day read:-

"To lapse in fulness
Is sorer than to lie for need, and falsehood
Is worse in kings than beggars."
William Shakespeare; Cymbeline, Act 3, Scene 6.

"Thou liest;
And I will turn thy falsehood to thy heart
Where it was forged."
William Shakespeare; King Richard II, Act 4, Scene 1.

"Why of eyes' falsehood hast thou forged hooks,
Whereto the judgement of my heart is tied?"
William Shakespeare; Sonnets, Paragraph CXXXVII.

"Time's glory is to calm contending kings,
To unmask falsehood and bring truth to light,
To stamp the seal of time in aged things,
To wake the morn and sentinel the night,
To wrong the wronger till he render right."
William Shakespeare; The Rape Of Lucrece, Line 940.

"If you suspect my husbandry or falsehood,
Call me before th' exactest auditors,
And set me on the proof."
William Shakespeare; Timon Of Athens, Act 2, Scene 2.

Shakespeare knows that with the development of printing, and the diffusion of information, someone will know... what's read:-

"I by letters shall direct your course."
William Shakespeare; Part 1, King Henry IV, Act 1, Scene 3.



Recycle

U-GRADZ

"A course,

Doth want example: who hath read or heard
Of any kindred action like to this?"

William Shakespeare; King John, Act 3, Scene 4.

Example, in real-life? From the information diffused, to the population at large, in the newspaper read "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (The Straits Times - August 24, 2015), I didn't swallow the dished news. I read what the students read:-

"We turned o'er many books together: he is
furnished with my opinion."

William Shakespeare; The Merchant Of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1.

"I now make moan to be abridged

From such a noble rate, but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time something too prodigal
Hath left me gag'd."

William Shakespeare; The Merchant Of Venice, Act 1, Scene 1.

"We have not made good preparation."

William Shakespeare; The Merchant Of Venice, Act 2, Scene 4.

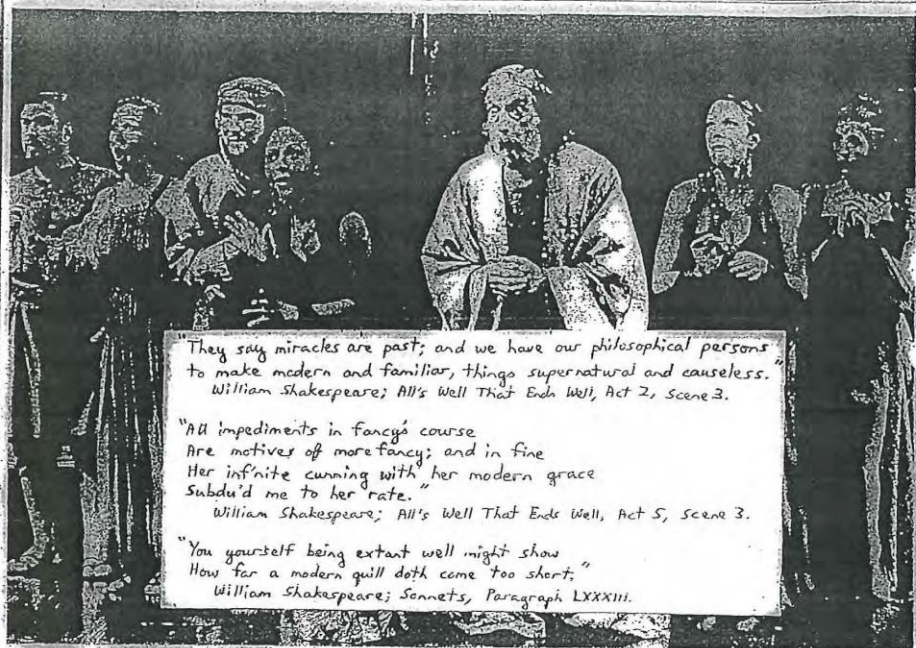
Literature always anticipates life. When I saw students spending their precious schooling-time reading those abridged-"Shakespeare Alive"-texts, and when I read "Shakespeare gets modern" (The Straits Times - October 3, 2016), it is evident why we always come short of the knowledge required--- to deal with "falsehood"?

Shakespeare's ciphered-literature must be deciphered, but did the schools provide the students with all the necessary books needed to do that? what about the lessons drawn? the discourse-frame? the letters? the course examples? the project? the brand? the merchandise? the business?



Recycle

U-GRADE



They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons
to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless.
William Shakespeare; All's Well That Ends Well, Act 2, Scene 3.

"All impediments in fancy's course
Are motives of more fancy; and in fine
Her infinite cunning with her modern grace
Subdu'd me to her rate."
William Shakespeare; All's Well That Ends Well, Act 5, Scene 3.

"You yourself being extant well might show
How far a modern quill doth come too short."
William Shakespeare; Sonnets, Paragraph LXXXIII.

An undated handout photo of an Orlando Shakespeare Theatre performance of *The Adventures Of Pericles, a production of Shakespeare's Pericles, Prince Of Tyre* with a modern language translation by playwright Ellen McLaughlin. PHOTO: SHUTES

Shakespeare gets modern

Ambitious project aiming to translate Shakespeare's language into modern English has divided critics and arts practitioners

ASHLAND (OREGON) • Since 1935, this mountain town has been home to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, whose guiding spirit is present not just on stage, but also in the names of businesses such as Oberon's Tavern and the All's Well Herb and Vitamin Shop.

So it was perhaps fitting that on a recent Sunday morning, actors were in front of a rapt audience in a small lecture hall, reading from the local equivalent of scripture: the plays of the man from Stratford-upon-Avon. Or were they?

Yes, there were passages from *The Tempest*, *Pericles* and *Henry VI, Part 1*, spoken much as they might be from the stage of this festival's outdoor Elizabethan theatre across the street.

But the rest were the parallel versions resulting from Play On!, an ambitious – and controversial – three-year project that asks 36 diverse playwrights to translate Shakespeare's often knotty language, line by line, into "contemporary modern English".

"I was very sceptical when they announced this project," said Mr Jim Wolf-Pitlor, one of the curious local residents who had turned out to see just how far the project was straying from the True Word. "We're taught that Shakespeare is a sacred thing, with the iambic pentameter and all that stuff. But they really kept it all in there."

Shakespeare regularly undergoes shape-shifting in today's theatre, whether it is transporting the plays into new settings (the festival's current *Twelfth Night* is set in a Golden

Age Hollywood movie studio) or freely recasting them in contemporary vernacular, as in the hip-hop "add-rap-tations" by the Q Brothers.

But among many Shakespeareans, the announcement last year that one of the leading theatre companies in the United States was asking writers to reconsider the entire canon, line by line, was greeted like a potential extinction-level event.

Columbia University scholar James Shapiro, writing in *The New York Times*, said it set a "disturbing precedent" and threatened to gut "the only thing Shakespearean about his plays": the language. One post on a Shakespeare e-mail list compared the project with "the current temple-smashers of the Middle East".

Temple-smashing was not on the agenda when nine participating playwrights, and 15 dramaturges, gathered here last month to compare notes on what some jokingly called a career-defining assignment.

"I always thought the reason Shakespeare's plays are good is because they are by Shakespeare," said Ellen McLaughlin, a New York-based playwright whose translation of *Pericles*, one of the first completed, was presented last winter at Orlando Shakespeare Theatre.

"Failure," she said of the project, "is absolutely built into it."

But many in the group – more than half of the playwrights are minorities and more than half are women – expressed impatience with what they saw as the elitism of the criticism, as well as hope the translations might help reach younger and more diverse audiences, along with those that find Shakespeare intimidating.

"The challenge of trying to understand the language is part of the experience you want," said Marcus Gardley, who is translating *King Lear*. "There could be more of a bridge to what Shakespeare is saying."

Building that bridge, of course, is what any production of Shakespeare tries to do, through deeply considered acting, judicious use of props and, yes, changes to the language.

Mr Bill Rauch, the festival's artistic director, said Play On! – while it requires the translators to weigh the understandability of every line – was just an "amplification and extension" of the kinds of cuts, restructuring and other textual tweaks that happen all the time.

"The idea that there is some sacred text an audience is receiving is a fallacy," he said. "Every production we do here is an adaptation in some way."

While he hoped to produce at least one of the Play On! translations at some point, he said, the festival – which has announced its commitment to performing the entire Shakespeare canon in the original language over the next decade – was hardly throwing Shakespeare's English out the window.

"You can't go in with the illusion that you're improving Shakespeare," he said of the project. "But I do think these translations can help shed light on the originals."

There were frequent invocations of the project's first rule – "Do no harm" – and debates about whether to keep "thees" and "thous" and whether it was kosher to include more rhymed couplets.

The project forbids inserting "personal politics" or "fixing" structural or other problems. But for some, the task of translation led to the most fraught questions posed by the plays.

Mfoniso Udofia, who is translating *Othello*, recalled how the two dramaturges she is working with, Ayanna Thompson and Alex Barron, pressed her on why her first draft left the word "blow" untouched.

"Moor is a big, big word," said Udofia, part of whose nine-play cycle about a Nigerian-American family

will be produced next spring at New York Theatre Workshop. "I'm the product of a hyper-racialised time. I don't know any big, big words that do what Moor does."

Even with some less familiar, less obviously charged plays, the translation process uncovered some unexploded mines.

McLaughlin recalled a workshop reading of her translation of *Pericles* in Ashland last year by actors appearing in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production, which used the original Shakespeare.

Half the actors were open to the idea of translation, she said, while the other half thought it was horrible. One actor balked when his character announces the need to "ravish" – or, as McLaughlin's modern English had it, "rape" – a virtuous woman imprisoned in a brothel. "Afterwards he said, 'It just seems so ugly,'" she recalled. "I said, 'What was it about what you were doing that wasn't ugly, except the language, at least as we understand it today?'"

How much of a market there will be for the translations when they are completed in 2018, and just how theatregors and critics will weigh the balance between beauty and comprehension, remain to be seen. The audience at the demonstration seemed to greet the translated scenes (read immediately after the originals) with more laughter and murmurs of response, but not all early notices have been kind.

Douglas Langworthy, translator of *Henry VI*, had decided to screen out criticism of the project and concentrate on the task.

"I'm lucky there aren't any quotable quotes in these plays, except 'The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers,'" he said. "And of course, that's modern English. It's safe, for now." HTIMES

Today's readers need education more, in the obvious, than reading:-

"What should I don this robe, and trouble you?
Be chosen with proclamations today,
Tomorrow yield up rule, resign my life,
And set abroad new business for you all?"
William Shakespeare; Titus Andronicus, Act 1, Scene 1.

Literature is news that stays news. Chew on the news, now read:-

"We have friends
That purpose merriment: but fare you well,
I have some business."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant Of Venice, Act 2, Scene 2.

"I can make what merchandise I will."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice, Act 3, scene 1.

"It must appear in other ways than words."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice, Act 5, scene 1.

"I take it your own business calls on you,
And you embrace the occasion to depart."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant Of Venice, Act 1, scene 1.

The information are available. To bring the ideas whose time has come to the 'marketplace of ideas' to compete against "falsehood", the preparation, books, letters, discourse-frame, discourse, history, project, art, merchandise, business, example, and so on and so forth, "it must appear in other ways than words". Truth, given the eternal years of God, is never alone; to know one will require the knowledge of many. Do provide the students with what they truly need.

Yours truly,

Raymond Khng



Recycle

U-GRADE

Select Committee on fake news Panel 'will ensure space for healthy discourse'

The day-old Select Committee on fake news will strive to ensure there is space for healthy discourse even as it recommends ways to tackle deliberate falsehoods posted online.

Its chairman Charles Chong, who is also Deputy Speaker of Parliament, gave the assurance yesterday after announcing earlier in the day the names of the MPs who will form the 10-member committee.

He said in an interview with The Straits Times there is some apprehension among people that even when "they may misspeak or may not be accurate in what they say", their remarks will be taken as a serious offence.

The formation of the Select Committee took place after a meeting called by the Committee of Selection in Parliament yesterday, the day after the House voted unanimously for its establishment.

Apart from Mr Chong, the rest of the members comprise three office-holders, four People's Action Party (PAP) MPs, one Workers' Party MP and a Nominated MP (NMP).

The office-holders are Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee and Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Education Janil Puthucheary. The PAP MPs are Mr Seah Kian Peng, Ms Rahayu Mahzam, Ms Sun Xueling and Mr Edwin Tong. The remaining two are Workers' Party MP Pritam Singh and NMP Chia Yong Yong.

The committee's mandate is to examine and report on causes and consequences of online falsehoods, and to propose countermeasures, including legislation, that may be needed.

Yuen Sin



Mr Charles Chong, chairman of the newly formed Select Committee to look into online falsehoods, said there was consensus in Parliament on the need to "say 'yes' to alternative views, but not alternative facts".

Select Committee on fake news

Take care not to stifle genuine discourse

It is important to be clear-minded about the issue of fake news, and not overreact by enacting overly restrictive legislation (Select Committee to examine fake news threat; Jan 11).

First, fake news is not news, but simply lies.

This is not exclusive to the Internet, and occurs both online and offline. The only difference is the speed with which such lies can be spread on new media platforms.

While we should try to limit the reach of lies and falsehoods, an overreaction may instead stifle genuine discourse.

Existing laws on national security and defamation adequately address this issue. For example, in the case of the now

defunct The Real Singapore, the operators were charged using sedition laws.

Second, fake news can come in a variety of forms - from the innocuous slip and uninformed opinion to biased commentaries and lies intended to sway public opinion and cause widespread alarm.

It is impossible to eliminate and regulate the entire spectrum of inaccurate information without causing greater harm.

We should instead encourage critical thinking skills and allow Singaporeans' sense of discernment to develop, especially when it comes to media consumption.

Third, social media platforms like Facebook are primarily

meant for social interaction. Regulating what can be said on such communication platforms overly restricts human activity and is likely to lead to adverse pushbacks.

The "light touch" approach adopted by the Government thus far has worked well and has allowed Singapore to strike a fine balance between innovation and regulation.

In an age of a globalised contest of ideas and opinions, we should focus on boosting the resilience and critical thinking ability of Singaporeans, and strengthen Singapore's ability to invent or innovate and harness new media technologies - which cannot take place in a vacuum.
Ivan Teo

"Masters, I am to discourse wonders."

Shakespeare; A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act 4.

"Of government the properties to unfold,
Would seem in me to affect speech and discourse,
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds, in that, the lists of all advice
My strength can give you."

Shakespeare; Measure For Measure, Act 1.

"I dare as well

Die as discourse or sleep. Only this fears me:
The law will have the honor of our ends.
Have at thy life!"

Shakespeare; The Two Noble Kinsmen, Act 3.

"Come in.

Discourse is heavy, fasting. When we have supped,
We'll mannerly demand thee of thy story."

Shakespeare; Cymbeline, Act 3.

"By what means got'st thou to be released?"

Discourse, I prithee, on this."

Shakespeare; Part I, King Henry VI, Act 1.

"All the world's a stage."
William Shakespeare (1564-1616); As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7.

"A stage, where every man must play a part."
William Shakespeare; The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 1.

Fewer Lit students a worrying trend



Writers Jean Tay and Ken Misouva speaking about playwriting techniques at NIE last week. The number of students studying literature is falling but more schools seem to be offering the subject. PHOTO: GIG VINCIO JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature

By STACY CHIA
FEWER students are taking pure literature as a subject at the O-level because of the availability of more subject options. The perception that it is difficult to do well in literature is also another factor, said Ms Indraneel Rajah, Senior Minister of State for Law and Education.
She was responding to questions from Opposition Member of Parliament Indranee Rajah on the huge drop in O-level pure literature candidates.
Only about 3,000 students took the subject last year, versus 16,000 in 1992. Ms Indraneel said the decline needs to be understood in the context of "an education system responsive to a changing social context" and which has offered more choices over time.
The main reason for the drop in students taking pure literature, as well as geography and history, is linked to the introduction of Combined Humanities as a subject in 2011, she added. For this compulsory subject, students take social studies and choose from elective versions of geography, history or literature.
"They can also choose a second humanities subject different from the elective component. Over the years, subjects such as drama, physical education, computing and economics have also been introduced for students to choose from."

LITERATURE'S SLOW DEATH

Students fear it is too hard to do well in. Can anyone save it?
Literature has long been a subject that students fear to take. It is often seen as a subject that is difficult to do well in. This is not surprising, as literature is a subject that has been declining in popularity over the years. The number of students taking literature at the O-level has fallen from 16,000 in 1992 to just 3,000 in 2014. This is a worrying trend, as literature is a subject that is essential for a well-rounded education. It is a subject that helps students to develop their critical thinking skills and their ability to understand and appreciate different cultures and perspectives. It is a subject that is also essential for a career in writing, journalism, and the arts. So, how can we save literature? One way is to make it more relevant to students. We can do this by focusing on contemporary issues and by using more engaging and accessible texts. We can also make it more practical by encouraging students to write and to engage in discussions about the texts. Finally, we can make it more fun by using more interactive and multimedia resources. If we do this, we can help to reverse the decline in literature and ensure that it remains a vital part of our education system.

In this real-life ongoing subject of humanities, English Literature, did the students do... a discourse on, for example, the subject of "art"?

Do... No...
"To learn the order of my fingering,
I must begin with the rudiments of art
To teach you gamut in a briefer sort,
More pleasant, pithy, and effectual,
Than hath been taught by any of my trade."
William Shakespeare; The Taming of the Shrew, Act 3, Scene 1.
Isabellia: O, but one word!
Ariel: My master through his art foresees the danger
That you his friends, are in
William Shakespeare; The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1.
"The help of heaven we count the act of men.
Dear sir, to my endeavours give consent;
Of heaven, not me, make an experiment.
I am not an imposter, that practise
Myself against the level of mine aim.
But I know I think, and think I know most sure,
My art is not past power, nor you past cure."
William Shakespeare; All's Well That Ends Well, Act 2, Scene 1.
"Trace me in the tedious way of art,
And hold me pace in deep experiments."
William Shakespeare; King Henry The Fourth, Act 2, Scene 1.
"This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art.
For folly that he wisely shows is fit;
But wise men, folly-fallen, quite taint their wit."
William Shakespeare; Twelfth Night, Act 3, Scene 1.
"The rest I'd give to be to you translated,
O teach me how you look and with what art
You sway the motion."
William Shakespeare; A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act 1, Scene 1.

Lack of exposure to literature could have an impact on cultural development, say experts

Pearl Lee
Fewer students are taking literature at the O-level secondary level, pointing to a decline in its relevance, and raising concerns about the impact on cultural development.
Last year, about 5,000 students sat the literature O-level examination, down from about 6,000 students in 2012, according to figures from the Ministry of Education (MOE).
The drop came mainly from students taking literature as an elective or a "half subject" that is paired with another half subject, such as geography or history, and counted together as a whole subject.
Last year, about 3,100 students took the full literature exam while another 2,400 took the elective option at the O-levels. In 2012, about 3,000 students sat each paper.
But while the number of students taking the subject is falling, the number of schools offering the subject appears to be on the rise.
Last year, more than 80 schools offered literature as a full subject, and over 50 schools offered it as an elective. In 2012, about 70 offered it as a full subject, and about 50 offered it as an elective.
The issue of declining literature enrolment has generated interest in the arts and literary communities.
In May, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) launched a series of roundtable discussions with the Singapore Art Museum on cultural policy, beginning with one on literature education in schools.
A summary report on the discussion was made available on the IPS website last month.
IPS senior research fellow Tan Tam How, who chaired the discussion, told The Straits Times that the state of literature education is tied to cultural policy, as the study of literature helps groom arts practitioners such as writers, playwrights and film-makers.
Said Mr Tan: "If we have so few students studying the subject, does it affect the number and the quality of practitioners, such as writers, playwrights, being produced? Who are the people who are able to do such work?"
At the closed-door discussion, Associate Professor Angelika Poon and Assistant Professor Susanna Choo, both from the English Language

and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE), presented a paper discussing the factors that could have led to falling interest in literary studies in secondary schools.
They said part of the problem is that parents and students think the subject is difficult to score highly in, and that it has little practical value. The selection of texts is also unappealing to teens.
New Town Secondary School student Wayne Lee, 16, decided to take geography instead of literature as she found the subject "very difficult". She said: "We read Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice in Secondary 2 and it was so tough, I had to translate each page into modern English. I decided not to study literature after that."
Prof Choo analysed the O-level prescribed texts from 1990 to 2013 and found that excluding anthologies, 65 per cent of them were from authors originating in England, Ireland and the United States. Authors from Singapore made up 10 per cent of the texts, and those from Africa accounted for 14 per cent.
"The most frequently included author was William Shakespeare, who was also the only one to be included at least once for each year of the examination, followed by Arthur Miller," she said.
This has led to a lack of cultural representation, she added.
The prescribed list of texts for students sitting the literature exam next year includes titles such as William Golding's Lord of the Flies, John Wyndham's The Midwich Cuckoos, and Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.
Of the 13 set texts, only two are local works - playwright Jean Tay's Everything But The Brain, and Here and Beyond 12 Stories, an anthology of short stories edited by writer Cyril Wong.
The IPS report said many participants felt the list of prescribed texts could be updated and made more inclusive. It added that teachers tend to stick to "tried-and-tested" texts that previous batches of students did well in.
The IPS is preparing a full report on the issue, and will submit it next month to the relevant ministries, including MOE and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.
Prof Poon said it is important for young people to study literature as it "encourages a deeper engagement, not only with language, but also with issues of socio-political and cultural import".
With Singapore finding to be a global arts hub, Mr Tan said it is even more crucial that efforts are made to develop the country's own arts and literary scene.
"We will need, for example, writers, readers and people with some training in literature who will have an interest in this area," he added.
Cultural Medallion recipient and artistic director of theatre company The Necessary Stage Abhinav Theagaraj agreed. He said: "The reading capacity of the Singapore audience is not sophisticated, and it shows in their questions about our plays."
In February this year, he created an invitation-only Facebook group named LISS (Lit in Singapore Schools) to bring together people interested in discussing ways to revitalize literature in schools.
The group has 229 members, ranging from arts practitioners to teachers, who share reading material and literature-related news.
He said: "Literature is an inter-related field to the work that I do, and it is close to my heart. We know there are issues such as falling literature enrolment, and I want to do something about it. The Facebook group is a way for us to discuss issues and generate awareness."

Isn't Shakespeare's Skills... Future-orientated? Skills... Future? The Future (of English-Literature Education), the work on that, starts from when? When after centuries of exegesis, we return to the words of the writers ("Give me advantage of some brief discourse," "Put your discourse into some frame," "We turn'd o'er many books together") and someone here start to find that one can really have an actual discourse done on the subject of "art" (or "history" or "government" or any other one of the hundreds of course-subjects that Shakespeare had skilfully prepared for the future) within a standard-structured discourse-frame for example, aren't we, Singaporeans, learning about the real work that we can now... on our part, do (in preparation for the future), and be ready... to pioneer a new English-Literature Education system out?

What's going OUT

EXPENDITURE

■ FY 2013 (budgeted)
■ FY 2012 (revised)

Total
\$53.4b (FY 2013)
\$50.1b (FY 2012) **6.6%**

Defence
\$12.3b
\$11.8b **4.3%**

Education
\$11.6b
\$10.5b **10.5%**

Transport
\$6.4b

DEFENCE

■ To fund purchases of military equipment, maintenance of equipment and camps, and the salaries of national servicemen

EDUCATION

■ For the expansion of publicly-funded university places and salary increases for education officers

TRANSPORT

■ The bulk will be for the Downtown Line, Tuas West Extension and Thomson Line rail projects

HEALTH

■ To increase the number and quality of health-care services and maintain their

What's coming IN

REVENUE

■ FY 2011 (actual)
■ FY 2012 (revised)
■ FY 2013 (budgeted)

Total
\$50.5b (FY 2011)

THE DEBATE IN 2 MINUTES

PARLIAMENT heard a range of issues yesterday, from new citizenship numbers to the spike in dengue cases and the drastic fall in the number of students taking Literature.

THE HIGHLIGHTS:

More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature

By STACEY CHIA

FEWER students are taking pure literature as a subject at the O levels because of the availability of more subject options.

The perception that it is difficult to do well in literature is also another factor, said Ms Indraneel Rajah, Senior Minister of State for Law and Education.

She was responding to questions from Nominated Member of Parliament Janice Koh on the huge drop in O-level pure literature candidates.

Only about 3,000 students took the subject last year, versus 16,970 in 1992.

Ms Indraneel said the decline needs to be understood in the context of "an education system responsive to a changing social context" and which has offered more choices over time.

The main reason for the drop in students taking pure literature, as well as geography and history, is linked to the introduction of Combined Humanities as a subject in 2001, she added. For this compulsory subject, students take social studies and choose from elective versions of geography, history or literature.

They can also choose a second humanities subject different from the elective component. Over the years, subjects such as drama, physical education, computing and economics have also been introduced for students to choose from.

Data from the Ministry of Education shows that, contrary to popular belief, "performance in O-level literature has been consistently good".

Ms Indraneel said there has been a slight upward trend in the pass rate of pure literature, from 90 per cent in 2002 to 95 per cent last year. More students are scoring distinction grades - from 35 per cent to 40 per cent in the same period.

Ms Koh also asked if the emphasis on academic achievements has led to schools discouraging students "from taking up softer subjects like the humanities".

Ms Indraneel's response was that "even if you take literature, there's an academic grade attached to it". While she hopes that schools are not putting pressure on students regarding what subjects to take or drop, she noted that the system allows the students to choose.

Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Yee Jenn Jong asked if the smaller number of students taking literature has led to a shortage of literature teachers. Ms Indraneel said there are enough teachers but the ministry will boost the pool if needed.

Separately, in a written response to Ms Koh, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said the number of students taking pure geography and history had also fallen between 2001 and last year.

✉ stacey@sph.com.sg

March 3, 2013, the Sunday

LITERATURE'S SLOW DEATH

Students fear it. Schools shun it. Can anyone save it? THINK PAGE 42

SUZANNE CHOO

What's the best literature - such a good way to teach values? THINK PAGE 13

literature /lɪtə(r)ə/ noun (uncount)

1 You use the term literature to refer to novels, poetry and plays, especially if they have high artistic quality that will ensure that they last: *Italian literature* or *medieval literature*. 2 The literature on a subject is all the books and articles about it: *There is quite a lot of literature available on the history of computers*. 3 (informal) Literature is also printed leaflets which advertise things or give you advice: *The bank produces literature advising customers of the services it can provide them with*.

"When I wander here and there
I then do most go right.
If tinkers may have leave to live,
And bear the sow-skin budget,
Then my account I will may give."
William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Act 4, scene 3.

"This is a gift that I have, simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions. These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of pia mater, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it."

William Shakespeare; Love's Labor's Lost, Act 4, 1564-1616

"Whenever I attempt to frame a simple idea of time, abstracted from the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly, and is participated by all beings, I am lost and embroiled in inextricable difficulties."

George Berkeley; The Principle of Human Knowledge, 1710

"Language is the only instrument of science, and words are but signs of the ideas."


Samuel Johnson; Dictionary, pref., 1755

"Time is our consciousness of the succession of ideas in our mind."

P. B. Shelly; Queen Mab, Notes, 1813

"The great difficulty in education is to get experience out of ideas."

George Santayana; Life of Reason, 1, 1905

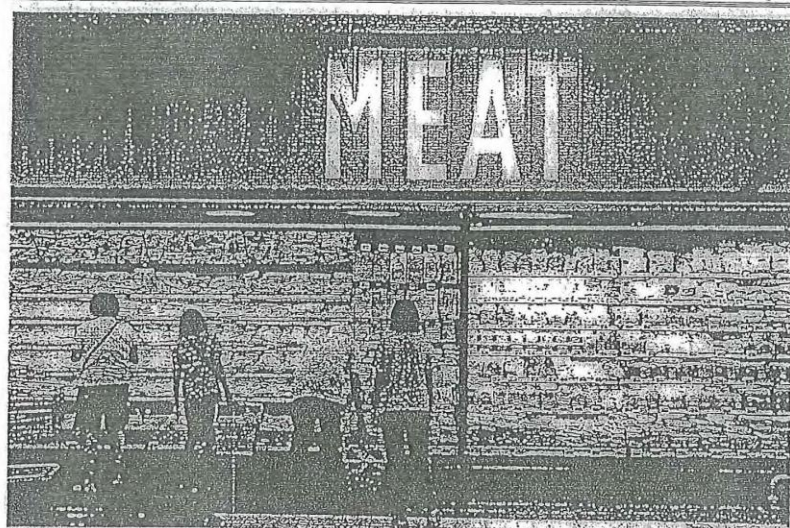
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P116				09/2014

The required ideas whose time has come, to the 'marketplace of ideas', came... by the real works done over many years; and not by accident. All living, practical, ideas are to be market-tested.

Didn't Shakespeare know what print brings to the market-place? to be... read:-

"Walk we forth, even to the market-place."
William Shakespeare; Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene 1.

"To the market-place!
You have put me now to such a part."
William Shakespeare; Coriolanus, Act 3, Scene 2.



The allegation that FalPricer sells 'halal pork' has been making the rounds since 2007 and persists to this day, despite being shown to be false. Falshoods do not wither and die when exposed to the light of truth, says the writer, adding that giving people the facts may not cause them to change their minds, as they may choose to disregard the facts or find new facts to support their ideas. ST PHOTOGRAPHY

Proposed fake news law

Giving the lie to the 'marketplace of ideas'

People can't be bothered to call out lies. The law is needed to aid the process of sieving out falsehoods online.

Seah Kian Peng
As a Member of Parliament (Deline Parade GRC), I spoke at the recent parliamentary debate on deliberate online falsehoods (popularly known as fake news) and would like to share the key points that I made. I also welcome readers and members of the public to coordinate their views and suggestions so that the Select Committee, of which I am a member, can take them on board when we meet.
Any discussion of fake news should take bearing from the relatively symmetrical principles that we should, first, reduce falsehoods as much as we can and, second, promote the truth as vigorously as we can.
As with so much in policymaking, this is easier said than done.
A June 2017 survey by the Ministry of Communications and Information found that around 25

percent of respondents shared information they later discovered to be false; around two-thirds could not recognise fake news when they first saw it, and only half were confident of their ability to recognise fake news.
Clearly, we need more processes to safeguard the two principles of reducing falsehoods and promoting truth. New processes are needed because the status quo is based on assumptions which we now know to be questionable.
QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS
• Enough time and capacity to call out lies
First, the assumption of infinite, or even adequate, time and capacity to process information. Some critics of legislation to tackle fake news argue that restricting information, even false information, humiliates the population. They may think "here the state goes again - mollycoddling citizens by restricting information for our sake".
Indeed, the argument from

freedom goes further - "Even if we do make mistakes, it is our mistake not - and should not want to - protect us from our mistakes."
That is true.
But, it is also true that people have a right to expect the political leaders they have put in place to have a duty of care to ensure that the decision-making environment is not populated by intentional falsehoods.
Just throwing all the "data" we have into a pot and then leaving people to distinguish between good and bad information assumes that people have both the time and capacity to do this. It doesn't mean "capacity" in the strict sense of expertise or education - I mean in the loose sense of "inclination" or "willingness" to be bothered.
Indeed, most people cannot be bothered.
As the chief executive of NTUC FalPricer, a supermarket chain, I know that Ghee-hoon, as FalPricer has been hit by fake news - if you

believe what you see online, FalPricer sells "halal pork" and "halal chicken".
In 2007, FalPricer filed a police report after we found a picture of "halal pork" allegedly sold by us and deleted it, it would have died there. Instead, the news was carried in both mainstream media as well as online news media, and caused stir in the community. It was so widespread that it was (Singapore) had to carry out physical checks. It was viral again in 2011 and again in 2014. Even today, 10 years later, I still get messages asking me about this. For the last time (I hope), this is a deliberate online falsehood!
Just last year, FalPricer also had to file a police report over viral claims that its house brand Jasmine Fragrant rice is made of plastic. Last year, the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority also had to come out to debunk a Facebook video that

alleged a coffee shop in Ang Mo Kio was selling "man-made eggs from China".
The consequences of fake news go beyond dollars and cents to the very identity of nations. In the United Kingdom, some voters for Remain of Leave voted on the basis of information later found to be false.
Lies can be exposed by light. Some other critics of proposed laws targeting fake news argue that a government does not have a right to decide for and when it is true and what is false. They say that people have a right to all the facts, and to make up their own minds.
This is the argument from the "marketplace of ideas" - that people will change their minds when the facts change. As Cicero, the great Roman orator, said: "Does not, as fire dropped upon water is immediately extinguished and cooled, so, does not, if a false accusation, when brought in contact with a most pure and holy life, instantly fall and become extinguished?" Cicero, I think, did not have experience with "halal pork".
The answer to his question - whether falsehoods wither and die when exposed to the light of truth - is, of course, not lies thrive and resist against the truth, even when the "truth" is as evident as where a man - or president - was born.
Instead of changing their minds when presented with a different set of facts, people may choose to disregard these facts or find ways to find new facts that support their pre-existing ideas. This confirmation bias is well tested and should be taken into consideration when we make the marketplace argument.
The erosion of government involvement in our online lives that can harm Singapore requires deep discussion.
One might think that this is about the need to balance our freedoms with duties, but I ought to make it clearer than that. It is not just a balance, but a difference between intent and ends.
In Singapore, we do not pursue freedom for its own end. We do not, if I may put it bluntly, have a "philosophy of freedom".
As Mr S. Rajaratnam, our then Minister for Foreign Affairs, said in aspects to foreign correspondents: "We see freedom of the press not as the end, but as means to an all-embracing end - the integrity and independence of our country. Its security, its prosperity, the eradication of anything that would sow seeds of social, racial and religious conflicts which is the real rather than the exception in the world today."
He was speaking in 1986, more than 30 years ago, and the world has come full circle. Today, even more so than in the past, Singapore is vulnerable to misinformation. Lies and fake news campaigns can rampage through our small, highly interconnected society within minutes. It is mine, given human psychology, inertia and cognitive biases, to think that the marketplace of ideas will allow the truth to prevail.
Indeed, these days, a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth gets out of bed.
The writer, 68MP for Deline Parade GRC is a member of the Select Committee formed to study deliberate online falsehoods, chaired by Deputy Speaker Chai Sze Chong.

"Go tell the lords o' the city I am here:
Deliver them this paper: having read it,
Bid them repair to the market-place; where I,
Even in theirs and in the commons' ears,
Will vouch the truth of it."
William Shakespeare; Coriolanus, Act 5, scene 6.
Most people cannot be bothered, to read... life?

MPs' views

Concerns over where to draw the line in fighting fake news

Combating falsehood not contrary to freedom of speech: Shanmugam

Seow Bei Yi

As Singapore prepares to fight fake news, Members of Parliament yesterday debated the topic of where to draw the line that should not be crossed.

One of the questions posed was: How does Singapore ensure that new laws to tackle online falsehoods will not end up impinging citizens' rights to free speech?

"How do we distinguish those who knowingly create or spread online falsehoods from those who are just expressing their opinions?" asked Mr Sun Xueling (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC).

She was responding to a motion moved by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam to form a Select Committee to examine the problem of online falsehoods. This

was passed unanimously by all 80 MPs present yesterday.

This 10-MP Select Committee will come up with countermeasures, which could include legislation, against the threat of such falsehoods.

Nominated MP Kok Heng Leun highlighted the need to define what a deliberate falsehood is and distinguish it from biased, but legitimate, commentaries.

He also called for a deeper look at existing laws. These include the Telecommunications Act - where knowingly transmitting a false message could lead to a fine and jail term - and the Protection from Harassment Act and Sedition Act, which already go some way towards curbing online falsehoods. This was seen in a previous case where founders of The Real Singapore were jailed for a series of sedition articles.

"This demonstrates that our current existing laws and provisions have been effective," he argued.

"We do not want a heavy-handed approach that will root out con-



CLEARING THE AIR

Keeping falsehoods out of our discourse enables freedom of speech to be meaningfully exercised.

MR K. SHANMUGAM, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law

structive, though at times disagreeing, voices," added Mr Kok.

He called for the Select Committee to balance the interests of protecting national security and public order, with the interests of individuals

who want to have "meaningful discussions on issues of concern, including government policies", and also that of the media to report on such matters.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) noted that the extent of government involvement "requires deep discussion". "We may end up freezing free speech online," he said.

"Legislation, if overly relied on, may also weaken the ability of society to educate themselves and discern what is real or not for themselves."

Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) suggested that the Select Committee pay attention to whether any proposed measures would silence the opposition and critics of the Government.

In response, Mr Shanmugam said combating falsehoods is not contrary to the exercise of freedom of speech. He added: "In fact, keeping falsehoods out of our discourse enables freedom of speech to be meaningfully exercised."

He added that in responding to falsehoods, there may be a need to

take into account their nature and the intention behind them.

Mr Shanmugam noted Mr Kok's point that fake news is used to divide and mislead society, and his question on how this segues into biased commentary.

In response, he said that strongly held viewpoints based on inaccuracies is one kind of falsehood.

However, its impact would be different from deliberate, targeted fake news, and these are matters that should be considered.

During yesterday's debate, Nominated MP Mahdev Mohan also said that users should be equipped to be the first line of defence against fake news.

To tackle fake news, several MPs also stressed the need to educate the public. Mr Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong GRC) said that legislation should be a part of a "wider, more multi-pronged approach" where media literacy is key.

Nominated MP Ganesh Rajaram added that education can start as early as in pre-school.

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC) added: "What is important is discernment, and not just disbelief."

"Empowering people to discern between truth and lies is of paramount importance," he said.

Only then, can we increase our resilience to the insidiousness of falsehood."

byseow@sph.com.sg
SEE PARLIAMENT 84CS

Name the very crown of falsehood.
William Shakespeare; *Titulus And Cresida*, Act 4, Scene 2.

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,
An evil soul producing holy witness,
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath."
William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3.

"Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood."
William Shakespeare; *Titulus And Cresida*, Act 3, Scene 2.

"Truly, as a man of falsehood may."
William Shakespeare; *Part I, King Henry IV*, Act 2, Scene 1.

"How careful was I, when I took my way,
Each trifle under truest bars to thrust,
That to my use it might unused stay
From hands of falsehood, in sure wards of trust!"
William Shakespeare; *Sonnets*, Paragraph XLVIII.

"I gainsay my deed, how may he wound,
And worthily, my falsehood! yea, as much
As you have done my truth."
William Shakespeare; *King Henry VIII*, Act 2, Scene 4.

"See you now
Your bait of falsehood take this carp of truth.
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By Indirections find directions out."
William Shakespeare; *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 1.

"Do it freely:
Or, by our greatness and the grace of it,
Which is our honor, bitter torture shall
Winnow the truth from falsehood."
William Shakespeare; *Cymbeline*, Act 5, Scene 5.

When we read the news "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (*The Straits Times* - August 23, 2015), did anyone read:-

"We turned o'er many books together."
W. Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1.

? Students, provided with only Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, definitely did not possess the information read:-

"All this I speak in print, for in print I found it."
W. Shakespeare; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 2, scene 1.

"Mine were the very cipher of a function."
W. Shakespeare; *Measure For Measure*, Act 2, scene 2.

"Who deciphers them?"
W. Shakespeare; *The Comedy of Errors*, Act 5, scene 1.

"Man shall do it."
W. Shakespeare; *The Winter's Tale*, Act 4, scene 4.

"You are singled forth to try experiments."
W. Shakespeare; *Titus Andronicus*, Act 2, scene 3.

"If you think fit, or that it may be done,
Give me advantage of some brief discourse."
W. Shakespeare; *Othello*, Act 3, scene 1.

"Put your discourse into some frame."
W. Shakespeare; *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2.

Schools, right up to this day, did not provide the students with all the books (and discourse-frame for example) so how are the students going to have a proper discourse done on the subject of "falsehood" and so on and so forth?

MPs' suggestions Fines, fact-checkers, education among ideas to fight scourge

NgJunSen

A slew of suggestions were given by Members of Parliament yesterday on ways to tackle, if not terminate, the growing scourge of deliberate falsehoods posted online.

These include imposing fines on websites that do not remove fake content, using university students as independent fact-checkers and introducing "critical-thinking-in-schools" curriculum to develop a generation with a "healthy scepticism of online information".

The burst of ideas came after a move by Law Minister K. Shanmugam to get parliamentary permission to assemble a Select Com-

mittee, comprising 10 MPs, to analyse the issues and produce recommendations on lines of action.

One very likely measure is legislation. It is among the proposals in a recent government document called the Green Paper, which sets out the possible courses of action, including policy measures. The paper also gave actions taken by other countries.

Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Chua Chu King GRC) suggested that the Government examine laws that countries such as Germany and New Zealand have enacted to take down false content.

Germany's law against hate speech, known as NetzDG, allows its government to order sites to re-

move such unlawful content. Systemic breaches can result in fines of up to €50 million (\$60 million).

"The European Union, UK and France are considering similar take-down laws," said Mr Zaqy, who was among 13 members of the House to speak on the motion.

New Zealand takes a different approach. Its Harmful Digital Communications Act allows the courts to order a right of reply, or to correct false statements about individuals, he added.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) suggested that the Select Committee discuss the responsibilities of social media and tech companies, as well as educating people to discern what is fake news.

Some, like Nominated MP (NMP) Kok Heng Leun, suggested multiple independent fact-checking bodies.

Mr Kok said: "As the world becomes more complex, no one person or institution can claim to have all information, everyone contributes in discovering (what is true)."

NMP Mahdev Mohan called for a network of fact-checkers to be formed to correct and report misinformation on social media.

He also suggested that the Government could block the ads of websites "to reduce or eliminate the financial incentives to generate fake news traffic".

"These networks can be state-driven, such as the Government-owned website Factually, or

ground-up efforts such as the United States' International Fact-Checking Network, or FactCheck.org," he added.

NMP Ganesh Rajaram urged the Government to consider mobilising social media influencers to get the word out swiftly when a piece of news is fake.

"While we all know that our very own Prime Minister is one of the biggest social media influencers in Singapore because of his number of followers, there are others who also have a wide reach," he said.

Stressing the importance of immediately correcting fake news that could trigger nationwide panic, Mr Ganesh said mainstream media can lead the charge.

On education efforts, nearly all the MPs argued for media literacy and critical thinking to be part and parcel of the school curriculum.

NMP K. Thanaseelan said students can learn to spot cues to uncover misinformation and question misleading sources, instead of simply believing anything they read.

"Eventually, we hope to cultivate a generation with a healthy scepticism of online information," she added.

Mr Henry Kwek (Nee Soon GRC) suggested the committee commission "detailed and prolonged studies" to understand how Singaporeans consume news and how social media shape their understanding.

Mr Kwek said: "A clear understanding of news consumption patterns will be necessary to help us calibrate policy, so that we can balance a healthy discourse with necessary intervention."

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"What news among the merchants?"

William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1.

"No news of them, why so? and I know not how much is spent in the search."

William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1.

"I have better news in store for you Than you expect: unseal this letter soon, There you shall find."

William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1.

In all those real-life stories that we can see proceeding in the day-to-day news, for example when we read "More subjects to choose from, so fewer take pure literature" (*The Straits Times* - February 26, 2013) and read "Fewer Lit students a worrying trend" (*The Straits Times* - August 24, 2015), is it not evident that (with the annual spending of billions) somebody must still do the work and deal with those real-life issues? found, in reading:-

"We turned o'er many books together: he is furnished with my opinion."

William Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1.

Students, with only Shakespeare's '*The Merchant of Venice*', cannot read:-

"I by letters shall direct your course."

William Shakespeare; Part I, *King Henry IV*, Act 1, Scene 3.

"If you think fit, or that it may be done, Give me advantage of some brief discourse."

William Shakespeare; *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 2.

"Put your discourse into some frame."

William Shakespeare; *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2.

The latent ideas are present, in the words read. To date, did the schools provide the students with all the books needed? What about the letters? the discourse-frame and so on and so forth? Without the basics in place, can the readers have a proper discourse done on the subject of "falsehood" or "history" or "art" or any other one of the hundreds of course-subjects prepared-ready for discourse?