

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: [Hong Kong Baptist University |

Unit of Assessment (UoA): [29 – Communication and Media Studies |

Title of case study: [Responding to hate propaganda |

(1) Summary of the impact

[Cherian George's research on the global problem of hate propaganda around the world exposes how political opportunists use hate speech and manufactured outrage to boost their power. It also demonstrates how religious insult laws, such as anti-blasphemy laws, make matters worse. His research helps governments, media, and civil society understand rising intolerance and devise responses. His ideas influenced official recommendations to the General Assembly of the United Nations and UN Human Rights Council, and the Singapore government's revisions to religious offence laws. His concepts and frameworks have been used in training workshops for parliamentarians, journalists, and activists around the world.]

(2) Underpinning research

[George works within the critical tradition in social science, revealing hidden ways in which powerful forces shape communication. His research on hate propaganda shows how agents of intolerance, such as religious nationalists, carry out propaganda campaigns that undermine vulnerable minorities' equal rights, including their freedom of expression and religious freedom.

He developed an original concept, "hate spin", to capture the twin strategy of incitement (conventional hate speech) and the less familiar tactic of manufactured outrage. His groundbreaking theoretical contribution was to conceptualise the vigorous *taking* of offence as a key weapon of hate agents, alongside traditional hate speech. Applying his concept of hate spin, George has shown that seemingly spontaneous eruptions of mass religious outrage — such as protests against offensive books, cartoons, and films — are in fact orchestrated by skilled political entrepreneurs. Such conflicts and controversies should not be classified as inevitable outcomes of a clash of civilisations. They are political creations that can be addressed through political solutions.

These ideas are explicated in his 2016 monograph, *Hate Spin* [Reference #1], which analysed the propaganda methods of the Religious Right in the United States, Hindu nationalists in India, and Muslim hardliners in Indonesia. Jeffrey Haynes, one of the world's leading authorities on religion and politics, said in his book review:

"It shows conclusively that the charges of many secularists — that religions are filled with fanatics waiting to pour their wrath on the heads of transgressors against their narrow worldviews — is untrue. Only when cynical and manipulative politicians manage to skew debates and twist truths do we see this occurring. George has done both the scholarly and policy worlds a huge favour by telling it like it is." (*Democratization* 25(4): 754)

George's hate spin research also shows how laws meant to address hate speech or fake news can easily backfire. Governments have an obligation to prohibit incitement to discrimination and violence; but criminalising mere insult or offence backfires on religious freedom, on top

of violating freedom of expression. *Hate Spin* shows why attempts to legislate against religious insult, including through anti-blasphemy laws, tend to heighten majoritarian threats to minority rights: hate groups weaponise such laws to suppress minority opinions and beliefs that have allegedly caused offence. George's 2016 working paper critiqued Singapore's religious insult laws, especially Section 298 of the Penal Code, which criminalises the "wounding" of "religious feelings" [Reference #2].

Since 2017, in response to worldwide concern about so-called "fake news", George has extended his analysis to show how hate propagandists use disinformation. His article in the legal magazine *Asian Jurist* [Reference #3] explained why attempts to censor falsehoods would backfire if they did not take into account hate merchants' sophisticated strategies. Hate groups are not only likely to evade such censorship, but also gain publicity mileage from such interventions: intolerant populist movements cite such restrictions as further evidence that they are the real victims of establishment elites. George argued for longer-term interventions rather than misguided legal quick-fixes. |

(3) References to the research

[1] George, C. (2016). *Hate Spin: The Manufacture of Religious Offense and its Threat to Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

[2] George, C. (2016). "Managing Religious Diversity in South East Asia: How Insult Laws Backfire." *City University of Hong Kong Southeast Asia Research Centre Working Paper Series* 175.

[3] George, C. (2018). "Disinformation and Hate Campaigns." *Asian Jurist* October: 26-33 |

(4) Details of the impact

1. INTRODUCTION

The Social Sciences panel guidelines suggest, as examples of impact, "generating new or clarified ways of thinking that influence social or cultural policies or public opinion", and "adoption in public discourse by activists, artists, stakeholders and commentators of conceptual tools and empirical evidence". Government policy changes are also examples of impact. George's hate scholarship has demonstrably reached these different benchmarks. *Hate Spin* has influenced official reports at the United Nations, legislative reform in Singapore, and public discourse in Indonesia and other countries. It has also been used for training of police, journalists, and civil servants. *Hate Spin* was selected by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the 100 Best Books of 2016. It was the only academic book in the religion category of the list [Source 1].

2. CLARIFYING THINKING AT INTER-GOVERNMENTAL FORA

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief is mandated to report annually to the General Assembly of UN and the UN Human Rights Council. The current Special Rapporteur, Ahmed Shaheen, calls *Hate Spin* "a very valuable tool for my advocacy and outreach work." [Source 2A]

The Special Rapporteur's 2017 report to the General Assembly of UN urged member states to repeal anti-blasphemy laws [Source 2B]. He says this and other recommendations in the report were partly informed by *Hate Spin* [Source 2A].

George's research on the role of political entrepreneurs as outrage brokers also influenced the Special Rapporteur's 2019 report to the UN Human Rights Council, which refers to the role of influential middlemen in either fomenting or countering hatred [Source 2C, 2A]. Shaheen has used George's insights in his discussions at the International Contact Group (ICG) on Freedom of Religion or Belief, comprising ambassadors from around 30 countries [Source 2A].

3. INFLUENCING REFORM OF NATIONAL LAWS

George's research has contributed to legal reform in Singapore. In 2018, Parliament invited him to testify before its Select Committee on online falsehoods. Drawing from his research, George argued that Section 298 of Singapore's Penal Code, which criminalises the wounding of racial and religious feelings, could be weaponised by hate propagandists. He called for its repeal.

Singapore is not known for liberalising speech laws. However, near the end of an exchange lasting 1 hour 15 minutes, the Law Minister agreed to refer George's recommendation to a government committee reviewing the Penal Code [Sources 3A, 3B].

In 2019, the government amended laws concerning religious hate and insult [Source 3C]. It deleted religious insult from Section 298 and inserting a modified clause into separate legislation. The new law raises the bar for prosecution: ordinary citizens can be charged only if their religious insult also poses a threat to public order.

It is not possible to demonstrate conclusively that this amendment to Singapore law was solely attributable to George's testimony, as the government does not usually credit its critics publicly for any reforms. However, George was the only person to criticise Section 298 publicly prior to the tabling of the Amendment Bill.

4. USE IN TRAINING OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

The Special Rapporteur on religious freedom uses George's work in training workshops he conducts for parliamentarians and human rights defenders. [Source 2A]

George's work is also used in journalism training. The London-based Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) includes his writing in resources for training journalists around the world. The chapter is also shared European Federation of Journalists as a resource in its "Media against Hate" campaign. [Source 4A]

In Indonesia, George's monograph has been adopted by PUSAD, a non-governmental organisation specialising in religion and democracy, in its battle against intolerance. PUSAD published an Indonesian translation of *Hate Spin*. It used the book in its "Fighting Hate Speech" workshop in five Indonesian cities. Each workshop was attended by 20 participants comprising activists, police, religious council members and journalists. PUSAD also used the book in its "Strengthening Religious Harmony" workshops conducted in nine provinces. This series brought together 540 religious councillors. [Source 4B]

5. SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE

George introduced the term "hate spin" to sensitise people to offence-taking as a covert political weapon. The term is now part of the political vocabulary in Indonesia. For example, at the close of a national conference of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim NGO, a

spokesman said the meeting had discussed the connection between online fakes and “hate spin”. In Malaysia, an opposition politician, Saifuddin Abdullah, wrote three newspaper columns using the term. The politician is now Malaysia’s foreign minister. [Source 5] |

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Publishers Weekly review
2. Informing debates at inter-governmental fora
 - 2A. Email from United Nations Special Rapporteur
 - 2B. UN Special Rapporteur’s report to the General Assembly of UN
 - 2C. UN Special Rapporteur’s report to UN Human Rights Council
3. Influencing reforms of national laws in Singapore
 - 3A. News report on Cherian George’s Parliamentary Select Committee testimony
 - 3B. Minutes of Parliamentary Select Committee hearings
 - 3C. Maintenance of Religious Harmony (Amendment) Bill
4. Use in training outside academia
 - 4A. Examples of adoption by professional journalism groups (Ethical Journalism Network, European Federation of Journalists, US Religion Newswriters Association)
 - 4B. Email from Director of PUSAD Paramadina
5. Shaping public discourse |