

Experiences with censorship in research and publication on Singapore's multiculturalism

Lai Ah Eng



Leaders of the main faiths in Singapore.
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This short essay is based on my own work experiences. I write about censorship by the state, vested interest groups or individuals, and even oneself, in the context of research and publication of findings on the topic of multiculturalism in Singapore. By censorship, I mean broadly the curtailment of freedom to research and present certain information and interpretations in public through publication, either through formal means or through practice and judgement in professional conduct.

Multiculturalism in Singapore

I have had a mixed career in social research (1982 to date) in various government and academic and policy research organisations, working primarily on Singapore's multiculturalism (with its overlapping ethnic, cultural and religious dimensions). Multiculturalism is highly complex and open to uncertainty, contestation and tension, and thus research and publication on it is open to critical and censoring comments and responses, be this by the state, various vested interest groups/individuals and/or myself.

The Singapore state has historically set the institutional framework for social-cultural policies. Multiculturalism is an explicitly declared founding principle in its nation-building project, but 'race' and 'religion' are treated as sensitive subjects requiring careful management through a plethora of legislative measures and institutional arrangements. State rhetoric on multiculturalism is focused around celebration of its diversity and fear of its conflict-proneness. Any direct state censorship and legal action is justified on grounds of the potential dangers of ethnic and religious extremism to public order and social stability. Although such action has been taken mainly against those in mainstream media and political and religious individuals and not against academics, the academic atmosphere has been affected and discourse on race and religion is generally one of extreme caution and preferably evaded. Some of my experiences point to caution and censorship not directly by the state, but by gatekeepers in academic and research organisations.

Experiencing caution and censorship

My attempt to publish my doctoral thesis "Meanings of Multiethnicity" with a local publisher, with the aim to promote local publishing, was met with silence from a commercial house, and a verbal response from a local research institute: "the director said not ready to publish such a book". The final recourse was to publish it with Oxford University Press (1995).

My application for a job in a policy research institute, based on a research proposal on multiracialism in Singapore,

was successful only in a subsequent assessment. Yet when the completed project, with the proposed title "Beyond Rituals and Riots" (2004), was ready for publication, I was advised by my directors to replace 'Riots' with 'Rhetoric'. However, I insisted that the most important word in the title was 'Beyond', and that 'Riot' was both a state-referenced and academic/research concept.

The next publication "Facing Faiths, Crossing Cultures" (2005) was a compilation of an intercultural and interfaith dialogue series of public lectures, seminars and discussions. In order to facilitate open and frank exchange, some discussions were conducted as closed-door sessions. Nothing happened censorship-wise in this unprecedented dialogue series, although I was taken to task for inviting an outspoken intellectual, who was critical of American foreign policies, as a speaker. My justification: he had credentials and expertise in interfaith issues, foreign policy views aside.

I approached a following research project, on religious diversity, with the understanding that there were huge gaps of knowledge to be urgently filled and issues to be better understood and managed for the larger social good. I worried about finding enough participants with sufficient local knowledge and experience for the project, but the end result was a bumper crop of 28 contributions. In the context of rising religious disrespect, extremism, aggressive proselytisation, provocative behaviour and other inter-religious tensions in Singapore and elsewhere, each invitation to contribute was undertaken with earnestness, concern and commitment to the larger social good of interfaith understanding. My editorial approach to the rare chance of publishing the project's "Religious Diversity in Singapore" (2008) was one of including as much as possible within the scope of religious diversity, with the exception of one detail on religious proselytisation in one chapter: I removed, to the dismay of the author, an example of overzealous religionists posing as tourists visiting some named religious sites (in Singapore and Malaysia), but who were actually engaging in spiritual warfare and praying for their collapse. I feared that the example might trigger more inter-religious anxiety, mistrust and even provide fuel for fire.

My primer on "Religion in Singapore" (2017) received two major reviewer's comments that posed potential censoring edits: that I misrepresented one of the religions discussed

as full of 'superstition' to account for massive conversions out of it; and that I was giving unwarranted attention to the secular state's management of multi-religious Singapore. I responded that I was simply reporting converts' given reason for leaving the religion, and that not to discuss the dominant state's role in the Singapore case would be negligent and careless scholarship. Thus far, nothing has happened censorship-wise since the book's publication, even though it covered several highly contested issues such as religious proselytisation, absolutism and extremism in some interpretations, gay rights and homosexuality and the secular-religious divide.

Self-censorship

There are at least two reasons behind possible self-censorship. The first is the fear of authority, be this the state or powerful gatekeepers such as work superiors or even publishers, and the consequences for self-interests. The fear of state limits on academic freedom in Singapore has its roots in early post-colonial nation-building history in which there were varied views on the autonomous role of universities. This was made worse by the state's authoritarian and interventionist tendencies in political and social life, particularly through punitive action against mostly political individuals whose public views and actions were seen as disruptive to public order or threatening to social stability. At the same time, its pragmatic priority over economic survival and economic goals rendered the social sciences and independent critical thinking on social issues unappreciated, even sometimes distrusted. The culture of caution and fear of writing and speaking on the 'sensitive' topics of race and religion is also a consequence of the larger ethnic politics of the 1960s and 1970s in Malaysia and Singapore, and later of religious politics.

However, it would be mistaken to think that this culture of caution and fear is rigid and unchanging. Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual opening up of research and scholarship to address pertinent and pressing social issues, including race and religion, as younger generations of both locally- and foreign-educated scholars and researchers entered the field. There was a strongly felt urgency to fill huge gaps in and catch up with information and higher level knowledge, and a hunger for discussion and varied views on complex and difficult topics, amidst rapid changes and developments. The advent of the internet and social media further drastically changed views and expectations about social research and its public implications. Thus, even as I worried about finding enough participants from the local pool for my research projects, those I found showed sincere interest and earnest desire to take up the challenge of researching difficult

issues, and to write and speak with a sense of concern and commitment – this not only with regard to professional scholarship per se, but equally to larger social ideals of intercultural understanding and social cohesion. This maximised the desire for freedom to research, write and publish – and minimised any tendency to practise self-censorship. At the same time, in the context of volatile religious politics, the closed-door discussions which were part of our research methodologies were not seen as reflecting or perpetuating the lack of freedom to speak openly, but as safe spaces where participants felt free to speak frankly. Nor was censorship by gatekeepers a rigid practice to be unquestioningly accepted, but to be negotiated based on facts and reasoning. The books still got published. And as for self-interests, I did not lose my job nor did I switch to safer topics. Indeed, my idealistic motivations, nerve and competency to research multiculturalism, with all its 'minefields', were gradually recognised.

Academic responsibility in the real world

The second reason behind self-censorship in publication is the fear of causing offence to others and of the social consequences, particularly contributing to intercultural tensions. Whether to publish in the interests of knowledge or to omit a piece of evidence, fact or opinion to avert offence and its consequences – requires discerning judgement based on skills, experience and grounded awareness. Having directly experienced an ethnic riot (Kuala Lumpur, 13 May 1969), and having witnessed or researched ethnic tensions over the years, has shaped my views towards a broader sense of responsibility in research and scholarship on multiculturalism. Rigorous gathering, analysing and interpreting of evidence remain the main requirements of responsible research. But responsibility is also about consciously considering the social impact and consequences, whether on policy and practice implications or the behaviour of vested interest groups or individuals. Responsibility's underpinning ideal of contributing towards better understanding and management for the common good and a cohesive multiculturalism is all the more central in importance in our time. As such, rather than focus on censorship versus freedom in a narrow sense, I consider social responsibility in scholarship and publication to be a parallel challenge. Working under the often complex, uncertain and volatile conditions that multiculturalism presents, the responsibility of taking extra care, caution and consideration of the consequences of publication is not so much an act of self-censorship that goes against academic freedom, but an expression of the responsibility that must accompany it. This larger sense of responsibility also helps us make clearer and better judgements in our decisions on what to publish for the real world.

Other issues, such as access to information held by the state and the culture of civil debate, discussion and dialogue, affect freedom and censorship. But there is now definitely more freedom to research and publish on issues of race and religion than before, and one must continue to expand this freedom. It also remains forever true to write and publish honestly and responsibly, without fear or favour.

Lai Ah Eng Adjunct Senior Fellow,
University Scholars Programme,
National University of Singapore.
laiaheng@nus.edu.sg

Note

The ongoing incident (since March 2018), in which the Law Minister intensively questioned historian P.J. Thum on his 'fake news' interpretation of the state's rationale for the arrest of political opponents (Operation Coldstore, 1963) on grounds of public security, is a case of old versus new political styles of managing information, publication and interpretation. I view the Minister's style as akin to that of some old ruling party first-generation political leaders', and Thum's as that of an idealistic and young historian's.