

False tale stirs online outrage

Blog post claiming MM Lee had suffered a serious heart attack draws netizens' wrath

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A BLOG post by a former Singaporean, claiming that Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had suffered a serious heart attack, incurred the wrath of netizens.

The post by Mr Gopalan Nair, a lawyer who gave up his Singapore citizenship in 2005 and now lives in the United States, created a stir in cyberspace on Sunday night and much of yesterday.

The buzz died down when he wrote another post admitting it was a hoax, but many netizens continued to fume.

They condemned what he did as 'fear mongering', 'malicious', 'distasteful' and 'shameless'.

'Such a poor and bad lie that it does not help anyone or any process,' wrote blogger Sam Ho.

'It's not even April Fool's Day yet,' wrote another Facebook user.

The Online Citizen website ran a strongly worded editorial criticising Mr Nair for abusing free speech by 'spreading deliberate misinformation'.

Its writer Choo Zheng Xi noted the 'outrage' of those led on a 'wild goose chase' by Mr Nair's post, and worried Mr Nair's act had the potential to 'cement the public's perception of the Internet as untrustworthy' and 'provide the Government with the best excuse to regulate the Internet'.

Mr Nair's blog post appeared on Sunday at 3pm local time. It quoted 'latest reports' that MM Lee was hospitalised at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) after a 'massive heart attack' on Saturday night. He also said that Singapore would face 'total destruction' due to a 'power vacuum'.

Within the next few hours, the post was reproduced on many other websites and social media networks like Facebook and Twitter. By midnight, there were more than 140 tweets linking to Mr Nair's blog and discussing the issue.

Netizens asked if Mr Nair's 'news' could be verified, given that he did not name any sources. Some wondered what would happen to the stock market the next day.

Online news site A Pakistan News even reported the hoax as factual news.

A handful of more sceptical netizens, noting 'exaggerated embellishments' in Mr Nair's post, suggested that he had made the whole thing up.

Mr Nair, a former Workers' Party election candidate, was last in Singapore in 2008. During that brief visit, he succeeded in getting himself entangled with the law twice.

He was fined \$3,000 for disorderly behaviour and hurling expletives at police officers, and two weeks later was jailed for three months by the High Court for contempt after he was convicted of insulting a High Court judge in a blog post.

He returned to California, where he is based, after his jail term.

Commenting on the incident, law lecturer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University said that Singaporeans have a social responsibility to verify information and not to spread falsehoods.

'In this case there hasn't been any damage done, but can you imagine if someone says that three persons of racial group A were killed by 10 persons of racial group B?' he said.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Arun Mahizhnan said hoaxes have always been around, but what is different today is the speed at which they spread, and their global reach.

'One single person with the help of a mobile phone or a laptop can have a far-reaching impact. That is new,' he said.

He said governments cannot prevent hoaxes but can manage them, picking and choosing their battles and intervening only when absolutely necessary.

'In the Internet world, there are many responsible netizens, contrary to popular belief. Netizens will play their own part in quashing hoaxes.'

Contacted yesterday, an SGH spokesman said the hospital had indeed received 'quite a number of calls' since Sunday, and was still getting them.

The stock market was, however, unaffected. Most traders were aware but generally sceptical about Mr Nair's original post, said a local remisier who did not want to be named.

The benchmark Straits Times Index, which tracks the largest stocks on the Singapore Exchange, opened higher than Friday's close and rose steadily throughout the day.

The Government declined comment. Separately, a statement from the Prime Minister's Office yesterday said MM Lee arrives in London today for a four-day visit, during which he is scheduled to meet British political and business leaders.

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