

REVIEW

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When Emotion Becomes Evidence: How Zubeen Garg's Case Spiralled into a Narrative War

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Abstract

The sudden death of Assam's cultural icon, Zubeen Garg, in Singapore on 19 September 2025, rapidly transformed public emotion into a contested narrative space. What began as collective mourning evolved into a volatile discourse shaped by speculation, digital mobilisation, political opportunism and institutional communication challenges. This article examines how emotionally charged narratives interacted with procedural constraints, reshaping governmental communication during the first week following the incident.

Using qualitative content analysis of official statements, media reporting, and publicly accessible social media activity, the commentary identifies a five-stage escalation: shock, suspicion, distrust, mobilisation, and institutional pressure. The Chief Minister's initial position—emphasising Singapore's investigative jurisdiction and evidence-based process—was soon confronted by narrative surges that demanded immediate action. Indicators of coordinated online messaging, including synchronised hashtags and repetitive narrative frames, suggest that certain actors sought to leverage public emotion to influence institutional behaviour.

The case highlights a contemporary governance challenge: in digitally mediated environments, perception often precedes fact, and narrative pressure can shape state communication even before evidence emerges. Effective crisis governance, therefore, requires anticipatory, transparent communication strategies that prevent information vacuums and limit the scope for narrative capture. Emotion must be acknowledged, but institutional processes must remain anchored in evidence and jurisdictional clarity.

Keywords: Zubeen Garg; Zubeen Garg's Sudden Death; Conspiracy Theories; Singapore; Assam; India

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Introduction

The factual circumstances surrounding Zubeen Garg's death were first outlined by the Singapore Police Force (SPF). On 19 September 2025, the 52-year-old artist was found unconscious after a swimming incident off St. John's Island and transported to Singapore General Hospital, where he was declared dead. The SPF shared the autopsy and preliminary findings with the Indian High Commission, stating that *no foul play was suspected at the current stage* and indicating that a coroner's inquiry may follow. The authorities also appealed to the public to avoid circulating unverified information. These official details, however, emerged against a backdrop of intense emotional reaction and rapidly spreading speculation in Assam.

The news of Garg's death triggered an immediate collective response across the region. Because Garg occupied a distinctive cultural position—bridging artistic expression, regional identity and public memory—the incident was experienced as more than a personal loss. In the absence of granular information from Singapore in the early hours, digital platforms became the primary arena through which meaning was sought, constructed and contested. Speculative claims proliferated, at times overshadowing the restrained and procedural communication issued by state and investigative authorities.

As public grief shifted into suspicion, the information environment became increasingly volatile. Narrative gaps were quickly filled by conjecture, and media coverage often amplified emotionally charged frames. Political commentary entered the discourse early, further blurring distinctions between public sentiment, mediated speculation and administrative communication. This commentary does not adjudicate the competing claims surrounding the death. Instead, it examines how public sentiment evolved during the first week, how emotionally driven narratives interacted with procedural constraints, and how these dynamics influenced state communication.

The case is particularly instructive because it spans two distinct jurisdictions. Singapore's medico-legal processes operate on formal evidentiary timelines, while public expectations in Assam—shaped by affect, symbolism and political discourse—moved much faster. This misalignment generated pressures that shaped not only public understanding but also the form, content and tempo of institutional communication. By analysing this divergence, the commentary explores how crisis narratives develop in digitally mediated environments and how they complicate governance during moments of heightened public emotion.

Methods and Analytical Approach

Data Sources

This study uses:

- Official statements from the Government of Assam
- Public communications issued by the Singapore Police Force
- Reporting from national and regional media outlets
- Public social-media content between 19–26 September 2025
- Legal and procedural documents referenced in the bibliography

The aim is not to determine factual findings related to the death but to analyse how narratives formed and influenced institutional communication.

Analytical Techniques

Qualitative Content Analysis

Used to identify dominant themes within official statements, media reports and social-media discourse.

Discourse Tracing

Mapped shifts in narrative emphasis over time, showing how public sentiment and state communication influenced each other.

Jurisdictional Contextualisation

Examined how Singapore's medico-legal processes shaped the scope and timing of Assam's administrative communication.

Social-Media Pattern Observation

Reviewed hashtag clustering, repetitive messaging, timing sequences and amplification patterns to identify possible signs of coordinated narrative activity.

Scope and Limitations

- The study is qualitative, not quantitative.
- All social-media analysis uses publicly available content.
- The objective is to understand narrative development, not to validate or contest any factual claims.
- Motivations of individual actors are not inferred beyond observable patterns.

Mapping Observations

Initial State Response and Jurisdictional Constraints

The First Hours – Public Grief and Initial Communication

The announcement of Garg's death generated widespread shock. The Chief Minister, abroad at the time, issued a restrained statement urging calm and discouraging speculation. He emphasised the need to await official findings from Singaporean authorities and indicated that repatriation would follow established protocols.

Immediate Actions

Government coordination occurred quickly through:

- The Ministry of External Affairs
- The Indian High Commission in Singapore
- Assam Police liaison
- Logistical agencies involved in repatriation

A two-member Assam Police team was dispatched to Singapore to support procedural formalities. The Chief Minister briefed the officers before departure, emphasising adherence to diplomatic and investigative protocol. He directed a neutral, non-partisan reception for the arrival of the casket in India.

Public Commemoration and Administrative Measures

Sarusajai Stadium was designated for public homage. The Chief Minister reviewed arrangements concerning security, crowd movement and public access. The funeral procession incorporated both private family observance and public participation.

Digital Discourse: Escalation and Narrative Formation

Speculative content proliferated rapidly online. Calls for a CBI inquiry appeared within hours. The Chief Minister's office issued a statement stressing the importance of evidence-based inquiry. Assam CID initiated monitoring of misinformation, resulting in several arrests under applicable legal provisions.

Cremation and Memorialisation

Cremation occurred on 23 September at Hatimura with state honours. A three-day mourning period was declared. The state allocated land for a cultural complex in Garg's memory. The ceremony, attended by family members (including Garg's father (Mohini Mohon Borthakur, pen name, Kapil Thakur), spouse (Mrs Garima Saikia Garg), and sister (Dr Palme Borthakur), who performed the final rites) and state officials, featured ritual and symbolic elements that resonated with public sentiment. Silence, prayers, Vedic hymns, and Zubeen's one of the most cherished songs, *Mayabini Ratir Buku*, lingered in the sacred air like a final embrace.

Legal Jurisdiction and Institutional Communication

The Chief Minister reiterated that investigative authority rested with Singapore and that further action by Assam would depend on official findings from Singaporean institutions. This position aligned with international legal norms governing deaths occurring abroad.

Governance During Crisis

In the initial days, the Chief Minister's office attempted to balance procedural obligations with rising public expectations. Measures included controlled dissemination of

information, coordination with Singapore, support to the family and legal action against misinformation. The state's communication emphasised caution and jurisdictional clarity. However, the speed and emotional intensity of online narratives soon placed pressure on this approach, prompting later adjustments in tone.

The Second Postmortem and Shifts in State Communication

Public pressure grew for a second postmortem to be conducted in Assam. The Chief Minister initially explained that the Singaporean autopsy met international forensic standards and that duplicate examinations required legal justification. However, as agitation intensified, he adopted a more accommodating stance. He acknowledged public concerns, noted personal reservations about repeat procedures and ultimately allowed a court-monitored re-examination. The decision reflected an attempt to respond to public sentiment while maintaining legal safeguards.

Politicisation and Contestation of Narrative Authority

Public grief soon took on political and narrative dimensions. Anonymous digital accounts circulated unverified claims; media discussions emphasised possibilities of foul play; political actors reframed administrative caution as inadequate action. Emotional narratives gained visibility through:

- Amplified hashtags
- Cluster posting
- Synchronised messaging
- Emotionally loaded visuals

These patterns suggested a mix of organic and coordinated activity. The five-stage escalation observed was:

- Shock
- Suspicion
- Distrust
- Mobilisation
- Institutional Pressure

This process shaped the public perception of the state's role before any official evidence emerged.

Discussion

Emotionally charged narratives can complicate legal and administrative processes. Information vacuums allow speculation to dominate, and procedural steps—particularly those constrained by foreign jurisdiction—may be interpreted as reluctance or opacity. In this case, the Chief Minister's early procedural communication was overtaken by rapidly spreading speculation. Later shifts in messaging reflected efforts to manage rising agitation rather than any change in the underlying legal position.

The broader implication is that crisis governance in the digital age requires both procedural integrity and anticipatory communication strategies. Where communication is delayed or cautious, narrative gaps can be filled by speculation, politicisation and coordinated digital mobilisation.

Chronology of Narrative Capture

Day 0 – News breaks; tributes dominate.

Day 1 – Speculative rumours emerge.

Day 2 – Initial official statement emphasising jurisdiction.

Day 3 – Media amplification; hashtags trend.

Day 4 – Political pressure intensifies.

Day 5 – Tone shift toward openness to further inquiry.

Day 6 – Demands for CBI/judicial probe escalate.

Day 7 – Disinformation spikes; narrative dominated by perception.

Governance and Communication Lessons

The decision to allow a second postmortem reflected an attempt to address public sentiment without compromising procedural norms. The case shows that:

- Information gaps invite narrative takeover
- Perception can influence state communication
- Rapid, transparent communication is essential
- Institutional processes must remain evidence-based

Critical observations are summarised in Table 1.

Table 3: Observational Summary

Trend	Observation
Information vacuum	Fuelled social media takeover
Government gap	The initial technical approach lost narrative ground.
Media role	Amplified speculation over facts
Political interference	Escalated mistrust
Organised campaign indicators	Consistent hashtag clustering suggests mobilisation.
Result	Public pressure reshaped the government's stance.

Compiled by the Author

Conclusion

The death of Zubeen Garg and the public response that followed illustrate the complexities of crisis governance in a digitally saturated environment. The Assam government’s early procedural approach operated within the constraints of a foreign jurisdiction, yet it quickly encountered a narrative ecosystem moving at a much faster emotional and informational pace. The resulting tension between institutional timelines and public expectations demonstrates how easily information vacuums, emotionally charged speculation and digital amplification can reshape the trajectory of official communication.

The case offers several instructive lessons. First, crisis communication must be anticipatory rather than reactive. When institutions delay or provide only minimal information—especially in high-impact situations involving public figures—speculation fills the void. Establishing an early, clear channel of factual updates can prevent narrative hijacking and reduce the influence of misinformation. Second, cross-jurisdictional cases require public education about legal processes. Transparent explanations of the limits and possibilities of action within foreign investigative frameworks can help align public expectations with procedural realities. Third, governments need structured strategies for monitoring and responding to digital mobilisation. Emotional expression should be respected, but organised misinformation campaigns—whether politically motivated or opportunistic—require timely counter-messaging grounded in evidence.

Finally, the case underscores the importance of safeguarding investigative integrity. Regardless of public pressure, inquiries must remain anchored in evidence, legal norms and procedural discipline. The challenge for contemporary governance is to combine factual clarity with communicative sensitivity: engaging with public emotion without allowing it to preempt legal processes. Managing this balance is now central to maintaining institutional trust during crises. By adopting communication models that integrate transparency, timely updates and contextual explanation, states can better navigate moments when emotion threatens to become a substitute for evidence.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

This is a commentary and does not require ethical approval. However, the commentary was prepared in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki Protocols. The author firmly declares that there are no conflicts of interest—financial or personal—associated with this commentary. Nevertheless, this commentary emerges from the author's multifaceted identity — a clinician-researcher rooted in biomedical inquiry, a littérateur, and a social figure actively engaged in grassroots efforts across Assam, his home state. His insights are shaped by this hybrid vantage point, positioning him as a perceptive witness to Assam's evolving socio-cultural dynamics and digital public sphere. Dr Sarma's reflections draw upon his rigorous

scientific training and sustained field-level involvement. Yet, the commentary is consciously framed not as a formal contribution to social science scholarship, but as the considered perspective of a practitioner and engaged citizen.

Informed Consent

Does not arise.

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Data Availability Statement

The references in the bibliography serve as the primary data source for chronology and administrative detail. It should be noted that the aim of this study was not to measure sentiment quantitatively but to examine how specific narratives emerged, spread, and shaped institutional communication.

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