

Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

Closing Remarks by Chairman Charles Chong, Deputy Speaker of Parliament

29 March 2018

1. We have come to the end of 8 days of public hearings.
2. Over three weeks, we heard from 65 witnesses, including local and overseas experts, technology and media companies, community groups, civil society members, students and other members of the public. There was extensive involvement and robust engagement. It reflects our sincerity to consult widely and engage deeply on the issue, to properly understand the problem and recommend solutions that would best serve Singapore and Singaporeans.
3. Over three weeks, we have received evidence on all aspects of our terms of reference. We heard first-hand how deliberate online falsehoods are a real and serious problem and how they can harm national security, racial and religious harmony, public institutions and democratic processes. We learned about how digital technologies have made it easier, cheaper and more profitable to create and spread falsehoods, and how technology and our heuristic tendencies have made them hard to counter. We heard how there is no one silver bullet and how we need a suite of different measures to address this complex problem, including public education, media literacy, fact checking, quality journalism, technology and legislation. We discussed how the Government, media and technology companies, and the community need to work together, to tackle what one witness refers to as the “threat of our time”.

4. Specifically, we heard how organised disinformation campaigns have been incorporated into the arsenal of offensive tools employed by state actors to undermine the sovereignty and security of target states. Online falsehoods have also been used to manipulate electorates, and to exploit racial and religious fault-lines in societies. We also heard how the drip-drip effect of falsehoods can, over the long term, undermine public trust.

5. Here in Singapore, we heard about rumours on the sale of halal pork, and the experience of a witness who was abused with falsehoods because of his ethnicity, and because he is a new citizen. Representatives from religious and community groups also told us about their concerns about how falsehoods can be divisive in our society. We also held two private sessions to hear about information campaigns with national security implications for Singapore.

6. We learned about how digital technology can be abused to spread online falsehoods, cheaply and to great effect. We heard, for instance, that \$18 can buy you one 1 million Instagram likes.

7. We had an extensive exchange with the tech companies and social media giants, who are critical players in the online world. We discussed how each of their platforms provide content to their users, and the limits of what they are willing and able to do to curb the spread of egregious online falsehoods.

8. On the possible responses that Singapore can take, we heard a wide range of views, both at the level of principle as well as specific suggestions.

9. Many witnesses agreed on the need to respond to falsehoods both quickly and effectively, as a matter of principle. Different approaches were put forward on how to do this.

10. Local media organisations spoke about how quality journalism is a bulwark against the spread of false information, and the need for a fact-checking mechanism.

11. Media literacy groups and others spoke about the need to educate all segments of the public on how to discriminate between what is factual and what is not.

12. The importance of free speech was a recurring theme in our hearings. We heard scholarly evidence about how free speech does not extend to the deliberate spread of falsehoods, and how the online world is not a rational and egalitarian marketplace of ideas. We also discussed with many witnesses the distinction between fact and opinion, and how we are entitled to our own opinions but not our own facts. On the other hand, we also heard views from some civil society members against any limits to any form of expression, even if demonstrably false and harmful.

13. The need for legislation was another recurring theme. We heard evidence about how current laws had limits of scope, speed and adaptability and why we need new legislative levers. We heard specific proposals on the contours of new legislation, including take downs, rights of response and demonetisation, as well as the need for judicial oversight and due process. Some witnesses were opposed to any legislation at all, even if today's laws were inadequate in countering the harms posed by deliberate online falsehoods.

14. The evidence we have received have given us much to think about. We are grateful to everyone who has written to us, and everyone who has given oral evidence. When Parliament reconvenes in May, we will resume our work, to reflect on the evidence and work on a report.

