

## Written Representation 122

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### **Executive Summary**

Strong cohesive ties between various ethnic & racial groups has benefited all Singaporeans, including the minorities. What we have in Singapore is unique and less seen in other parts of the world. However, falsehood might one day disrupt this 53-year-old democratic and multiracial experiment that has been successful thus far. Intent of those who propagate falsehoods includes, influence in the affairs of the State & electoral process, to disrupt social cohesion, to generate more revenue or even a moment of folly. Regardless of the intent, falsehoods can have unwanted consequences to the nation. Fake news has the potential to cause racial tensions after a terror attack, as seen in other countries, fueling and feeding emotions with falsehoods. In addition, foreign influence can sway electoral outcomes, eroding trusts between people and public institutions. To tackle falsehoods, here are my recommendations and views:

### **Recommendation 1 – Limited control on falsehoods for social cohesion and national security matters**

A legal framework to give jurisdiction for an independent organization to remove online falsehoods that threaten social cohesion & national security. To prevent misuse, this independent organization shall be audited by AGO, and a committee consisting of members of public, to verify and conduct audit on list of removed falsehoods.

### **Recommendation 2 – Advisory to public on falsehoods through independent watchdog / rating agency**

Independent watchdog to detect fake news and tag advisory to posts & articles. This is to tell that information is not from a trustworthy source. The viewership or traction of false news will be lesser if tagged with an advisory.

### **Recommendation 3 – Self-check capability and digital literacy for public**

An online site or app for public to verify news received. A self-checking app or site can allow public to input URLs, links or infographics to verify information received, including private portals such as Whatsapp/emails etc. Through online portals and wide-ranging workshops on grassroots level, materials can be disbursed to improve digital literacy.

## **Introduction**

1. Generations after generations we have strengthened bonds and trust between multi-ethnic and multi-racial communities in Singapore. This trust is not given and continuous work is required to keep this social fabric intact. Fake news is harmful to this trust, and can cause suspicions and friction between different race and ethnic groups. The onus is on this generation to tackle falsehoods, and continue this work in progress to strengthen social cohesion. I hope to contribute in a small way through this paper to the debate on how to tackle fake news or falsehoods.
2. This paper will cover my viewpoints on the following topics:
  - a. Intent and purpose of falsehoods
  - b. Implications of falsehoods
  - c. Recommendations to tackle falsehoods

## **Intent and purpose of falsehoods**

3. In order to put in place a prevention strategy, and legal framework to deter & penalize those who propagate falsehoods, one has to identify the intent of those who propagate falsehoods. The following are driving forces behind propagation of falsehoods.
4. Profit Driven – The higher the Internet traffic/viewership, the more revenue generated through number of clicks, shares etc<sup>1</sup>. To attract internet traffic/viewership, online sites & articles tend to be satire or scandalous in nature, and they churn out falsehoods to get the attention of the reader. With higher viewership, funding from advertisements increases, further escalating propagation of falsehoods.
5. Influence in the Affairs of State / Threaten Social Cohesion – Just as terrorism, intent of fake news is to disrupt normalcy, unsettle social cohesion and influence our electoral process. This intent is perhaps the most vulnerable to Singapore; a multi ethnic and multi-racial society.
6. Moment of Folly - With high Internet accessibility, people are building networks & relationships online, and they are driven to garner more 'likes' & 'shares' on their articles or posts. In a moment of folly, some online users create falsehoods to increase their 'viewership' among fellow social media users. Though the intent is to seek popularity, the outcome and reach of falsehoods might lead to unwanted consequences.

## **Implications of Falsehoods**

7. Falsehoods have already caused some misunderstanding within communities. One such example is an article falsely reporting that "halal pork" was sold at NTUC<sup>2</sup>. This article has circulated since 2007, and had resurfaced a few times since. Not only does this cause suspicions, it creates rift between communities. Though it is fake news, it takes time to repair and gain trust between communities.

8. Similarly, fake news has the potential to cause racial tensions or riots after a terrorist attack, fueling and feeding emotions with falsehoods. Foreign influence or even terrorists can use social media to post falsehoods to turn on communities against each other. One such example was after London terror attacks in 2017, where a picture was tweeted of a muslim woman, with the following comments and hashtags - "Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack, casually walks by a dying man while checking phone #PrayForLondon #Westminster #BanIslam"<sup>3</sup>. This tweet and picture was taken out of context, which went viral in the UK. Investigations show that it was tweeted by social bots (fake account) by Russian interests groups.
9. External forces can influence electoral outcomes, influencing internal affairs of the state to their desired outcome. Russian interference in 2016 US election is one example, where falsehoods were funded by foreign powers to effect elections outcomes<sup>4</sup>.
10. Credibility of factual news is at risk, as strong funding from advertisement or external influences can alter the type of news delivered to the public. As a result, public perception can be altered, creating a knowledge gap between public organizations and people.

### **Recommendations to tackle Falsehoods**

11. As a minority, Singapore has provided me an accommodating and a tolerant multi-ethnic and multi-racial home. What we have in Singapore is unique and less seen in other parts of the world. In my experience living abroad, there is lack of integration between different racial and ethnic groups. Lack of integration means fewer opportunities for minority groups, and minorities feel displaced. Whereas in Singapore, minorities have more opportunities and have a stake in the country's progress, mainly due to Singapore's emphasize on integration and strong cohesive ties. As a result, we are stronger as a nation.
12. However, as a minority I fear falsehood or fake news might one day disrupt this 53-year-old democratic & multi-racial experiment that has been successful thus far. It was an improbable journey that our fore-fathers worked hard to achieve, We must do whatever in our power to keep this trust between our communities intact, and eradicate falsehoods. As such, I am proposing the following recommendations to tackle fake news: (Refer to appendix 1 for summary)

- a. **Recommendation 1 – Limited control on falsehoods pertaining to social cohesion and national security**

A legal Framework to provide jurisdiction for an Independent organization or MHA, to remove online falsehoods that threaten social cohesion & national security.

To prevent any misuse, this independent organization shall be audited by AGO, with findings published to public annually. In addition, recommended to set up a committee within the independent organization, consisting of members of public, to verify and audit list of removed falsehoods on a quarterly basis. Committee members shall be from various ethnic & religious backgrounds, and

industry experts in this field of work. These measures both prevent misuse for political purpose and ensure public confidence.

In addition, this independent organization shall investigate sources of fake news and the intent of falsehoods, to prevent future re-occurrences. As this is a serious offence, appropriate penalties should be considered to discourage falsehood for those who jeopardize national security and social cohesion.

b. **Recommendation 2 – Advisory to public on falsehoods through independent watchdog / rating agency**

Set up of an independent watchdog to detect fake news through advance algorithms. Upon detection of fake news, an advisory will be tagged to article/posts, indicating that information may not be trustworthy. This will allow the public to judge how they should process fake news received, and if they should share to other social media users. Likely, the traction gained by false news will be lesser if tagged with an advisory.

In a survey, more are getting daily news from social media sites instead of traditional or print media. Hence public should be advised if the news they receive are from credible sources. It is proposed that these social media outlets/sites be given a credibility rating based on their news and information processed. If an organization & an online site releases or produces falsehoods, their credibility rating will drop. This will allow the public to access credible information in this new day and age.

c. **Recommendation 3 – Self-check capability and digital literacy for public**

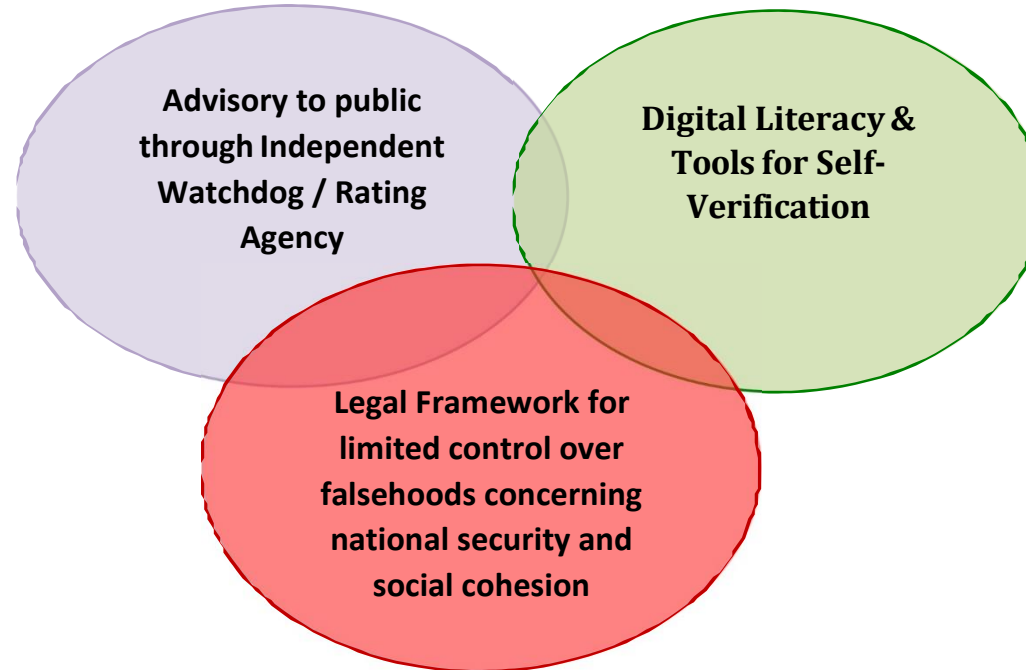
An online site or app for public to verify news received. A self-checking app or site for public to input URLs, links or infographics to verify credibility of information received. An independent organization shall assess & verify the information received through the self-check site or app. This will also allow public to check information received through private portals, such as Whatsapp/emails etc, where recommendation 2 does not cover.

Not all falsehoods are preventable in the long term but we can build deterrence through digital literacy. Through online portals and wideranging workshops on grassroots level, materials can be disbursed to improve digital literacy.

## Appendix 1

### **Deliberate Online Falsehoods: Recommendation**

- Set up an independent organization
- Detect fake news through advance algorithms; and identify intent & track source of fake news
- Provide credibility rating on articles and sites
- This independent agency shall be audited by AGO



- Improve digital literacy among social media users
- Provide a platform to self verify news received. Users can input URL/infographics etc into platform.
- Users will be able to verify credibility of news circulated through private messaging app (Whatsapp/emails etc)

- Independent organization to detect & track fake news
- Allow jurisdiction to take down/de-activate sites or articles that threaten national security & multi-racialism
- Penalties for those who fabricate and distribute false with an intent to cause harm to societal cohesion & national security
- The independent organization shall be audited by AGO
- Comprise of committee members from the public representing various ethnic & religious groups, and industry experts. Committee to review & audit list of removed falsehoods online by independent organization

## **References**

<sup>1</sup>(Washingtonpost, 2016), 'This is how Facebook's fake-news writers make money' available online at, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/18/this-is-how-the-internets-fake-news-writers-make-money/?utm\\_term=.0e22be59157a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/18/this-is-how-the-internets-fake-news-writers-make-money/?utm_term=.0e22be59157a)  
[accessed 02/03/2018]

<sup>2</sup>(STNews, 2014), "Halal' pork label an insensitive hoax: FairPrice' available online at, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/halal-pork-label-an-insensitive-hoax-fairprice>  
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<sup>3</sup>(STNews, 2017), "Russian bot behind false claim Muslim woman ignored victims of Westminster terror attack' available online at, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/halal-pork-label-an-insensitive-hoax-fairprice>  
[accessed 04/03/2018]

<sup>4</sup>(STNews, 2017), 'US charges 13 Russians with 2016 election tampering; Trump says no collusion between campaign and Russia' available online at, <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/us-indicts-13-russian-nationals-for-election-interference>  
[accessed 03/03/2018]