Submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods
by Ang Peng Hwa

1. False information: The Old and the New

1.1. The issue of the dissemination of false information is literally an old problem. Soon after the invention of the printing press, there was an outcry in Europe over the printing of false information. It would appear that for whatever reasons, those who have access to mass distribution of information and communication do disseminate false information.

1.2. That it is a problem from of yore suggests a persistence of the problem that is not confined to social media or the online realm.

1.3. Still, it is true that there are reasons to pay special attention to the online realm. A Nielsen survey indicates that more Singaporeans access their news over the Internet and social media than through the hardcopy. The "crossover", which appeared to have occurred sometime in early 2017, means that the majority of news dissemination is no longer under any one institution or organisation's control. Platforms are incentivised to disseminate "news" and of varying quality. Rather than professional expertise, it is clicks that validate legitimacy and truthfulness of such "news", questioning the definition of journalism.

2. Singapore Case

Who Spreads Hoaxes and Scams and Why

2.1. Some research from my colleagues suggest that in Singapore, the most common types of false information concern crime in Malaysia (such as a robbery or a car theft) and consumer matters in Singapore (such as that of the NTUC supermarket selling plastic rice). There appears to be no racial or religious divide, unlike the situation in the USA or the UK.

2.2. The type of false information passed on is therefore qualitatively different from that in the West, as one reads in the mainstream news outlets. It also suggests that the conditions in Singapore are different.

2.3. Anecdotally from personal experience and conversations with colleagues and students, it is the older adults in WhatsApp groups who pass on such false information out of concern. There is thus no intent to divide a community or to rebut a political opponent.

3. Unintended Consequences

3.1. In the year 2000, I organised a conference comparing the impact of the printing press with that of the Internet. One scholar speculated at the conference that the Chinese may have foreseen the impact of the printing press they had invented and what it would do to authority (undermine it) and so restricted the printing press to official documents and religious texts. The Korean printing press, the first metal moveable type printing press in the world invented a few centuries before Gutenberg's, was also confined to such use. If so, this suggests that while China and Korea may have successfully prevented the printing press from undermining the authority of major institutions (as happened to the Catholic church in Europe), they may also have stunted their own development.

3.2. In Europe, an institution that took on the role of gatekeeper of true and false information was the Catholic Church; information that the Church did not agree with was considered false. To stop the spread of "false information", such as the 95 Theses, the Church excommunicated the writer Martin Luther, an act that was the next closest thing to the death penalty in those times. Eventually the Church's authority was undermined by the Protestant Reformation. Any entity that takes on the gatekeeping role takes on the very real risk that some false positives or false negatives will redound on it, at the very least denting trust in the entity.

3.3. Highlighting false information may lead to its further dissemination. This was what happened with Martin Luther's 95 Theses. In order to condemn it, the Church had to first publish it, helping to spread the Theses more widely. In fact, some theologians then refused to criticise it for that reason—to avoid spreading its message.

3.4. The highlighting and dissemination of false information, which may be necessary to defeat them, is likely to arouse negative emotions and may cause anxiety, which together contribute to a climate of distrust.

3.5. Where false online information presented as news has been shown to be politically rewarding, there is incentive to carry on the activity in future elections. Heavyhanded regulation is therefore likely to lead such news creators to adopt more subtle and sophisticated approaches, which will make detection more difficult.

3.6. It would appear that just such a more sophisticated approach is evolving. Some researchers have observed that those who produce news with made up content have adjusted their modus operandi such that they emulate the news-making process. That is, the news will contain contrary views and other balances such that it is very difficult if not impossible to identify them as false or even biased news. But the interviewees and their quotes have been carefully selected with the intention to project one view.

4. Paths to Solutions

4.1. Because the problem of false information is an old one, to attempt to eliminate them most of the time will require much resources. Probably a more realistic

approach is to aim to greatly minimise false information some of the time, perhaps intensively but for a limited duration.

4.2. Any proposed solution should aim to address the social harm observed in Singapore. At the moment, such harm would appear to be limited. There is no evidence of significant false online information in election campaigns in Singapore.

4.3. The situation in the West is different from that in Singapore where there is in fact a high level of trust in institutions. This is a credit to the government of and governance in Singapore. Such trust is valuable and highly desirable in the information age: artificial intelligence systems and smart nation policies work best when institutions, systems and operators can be trusted.

Fact Checking

4.4. One solution that various groups have attempted with varying degrees of success and sustainability is fact checking. There are different models of such a service. There are sites that investigate hoaxes, scams and urban legends. As such information is timeless, there is more time to refute the facts if they are false. The model for checking such false information is more stable. A service can probably be established to refute false claims such as the sale of plastic rice in our supermarket.

4.5. In the West, fact-checking of news tends to focus on political news because of the link drawn between news and the democratic process. Such content may be time sensitive and also subject to partisan concerns. Here, there is no one model of factchecking for news.

4.6. There are challenging but not insurmountable issues around governance of a news fact checking entity. The entity must be seen to be independent and free from bias so as to be trusted by the public. Funding may come from the Government and the private sector but these should be at arm's length, for example, through a third party. And even the types of claims that are checked should be seen to be fair: at least one fact checking site has been accused of bias for checking more claims from one political stance over another.

Online Platforms

4.7. Contrary to some perceptions, online platforms do have an interest to ensure that their medium is trustworthy. Not to act to increase trust in their platforms will lead to the destruction of their respective platforms as trusted markets. It should not be surprising therefore to see platforms acting to remove false online information.

4.8. Platforms are working to engender trust in their systems but can certainly do more. One significant contribution is to identify its advertisers. Another is to reward and promote information for their trustworthiness—such as mainstream news—over content that trend simply because of the large number of clicks. Yet another is to incentivise creators of such trustworthy content, which include mainstream media.

Media Literacy Education

4.9. Some media literacy tips, tools and pointers may be helpful. For example, those who receive false information should alert the sender that this is the case. In theory at least, the chain is broken and the corrected information filters back to the source.

4.10. Good education, however, is expensive. And with every new cohort and every new visitor or migrant, education must begin anew.

Regulation

4.11. Any regulation on false online information should be narrowly tailored, for the reasons outlined above. Broad and loose regulations at this point in time are very likely to capture the older adults who spread false information out of concern.

4.12. The regulation should not create strict liability offence—creating an offence regardless of intent—because currently many of those passing on false information do so out of concern, feeling that it is better to be safe than sorry, a tendency common among *kiasu* Singaporeans.

4.13. Intent is also important so as to distinguish false online news from bad journalism.

4.14. The programmatic advertising and news delivery approach based on artificial intelligence and machine learning are not foolproof and so some allowance should be given for mistakes.

4.15. Those who are motivated to produce false online information are responding to countermeasures to detect their content by emulating the news production process. Any regulation should therefore focus on the information production and distribution process—how was the information obtained, why was it distributed the way it was—rather than simply at the content.

4.16. Singapore already has strong rules against communal agitation. The greatest harm from false information may be to our electoral process as such information may not necessarily concern racial or religious matters. It is suggested that regulation be narrowed to the election campaign period where, with our brief campaign election brief, it should be possible to have a focused period of attention on such content.