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To the Select Committee

I am an instructor at the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore. I have a PhD in Communications and New Media, and teach Public Communication, with research and publications in the fields of digital literacy, youth media practices, as well as the role of media in state-citizen relations. I write this submission of my own volition, and not on behalf of any organisation, and am prepared to appear before the Committee to give evidence, if required. Finally, I do not have any financial interest in the subject matter.

I have read the Green Paper on the challenges and implications of deliberate online falsehoods, and in summary, am unable to see from this document as well my other extensive reading that there is any clear and present danger for Singapore. Rather, my research and teaching experience lead me to advocate strongly for a particular type of media literacy that I think will better prepare the country for a more empowering digital future.

No clear and present danger

The points raised by the Green Paper seem alarming at first glance. However upon closer examination, the premises are based on evidence/suggestions from other countries of vote manipulation and racial/religious foment by bots/agents. These countries have very different politics and conditions from those of Singapore, and as such, premises that are based on them do not on their own support the conclusion that the same phenomena will apply in the same way to Singapore. Singapore is so small and so connected that any politically or socially significant rumours are rapidly quashed by the agencies that have the correct information. This means that even though such rumours may be widely shared, they will not have the sort of effect that we have seen in countries such as the US (which has highly partisan politics, significant racial and economic inequality, a large physical area, and state as well as federal level government, to name just a few features). This is not to say that one state is better than another. I merely make the point that the situation is very different.

Even if we want to consider the possibility that Singapore will at some point take on some of the characteristics of countries such as France or the UK (although at the moment I cannot see this actually happening), and that “fake news” will in this situation have some reach which the state is unable to quickly contain, there are existing laws such as the Sedition Act that do seem to me to cover this (unlikely) possibility. The reach of the state through media and other laws has been well established. That the technological platform is one that has unprecedented reach is balanced by the fact that it also allows governments unprecedented powers of surveillance and control.

Where a law might be able to have some effect is also where it is wholly unnecessary and even oppressive. By this I mean that if a powerful foreign actor really wished to introduce a false piece of news into the Singapore public sphere, it would be impossible to legislate against this actor. On the other hand if a local actor were to engage in this act, it would be highly possible to identify and apprehend them. Singapore has seen multiple cases of local activists and commentators being charged with some form of public misinformation. This shows that new laws are not necessary.

That falsehoods are spread and read online is not in fact the primary danger. Indeed, parody Twitter accounts and political satire videos could all be termed “online falsehoods”, and yet are the lifeblood of modern political discourse. Even with the caveat that malicious intent is what separates these from the phenomenon under consideration, terms are likely to be difficult to define. In all the cases presented in the Green Paper, it is clear that what DOES leave a society vulnerable is actual inequality, discrimination, repression, the lack of a trusted source of information and fact-checking, and technological corporations that have too much power. This is evident from the cases cited in Section V of the Green Paper, which details some states’ actions to address the perceived problem.

Focus on media literacy

While I do not think that any new legislation is needed, I do believe that the anxiety expressed in the Green Paper is the logical outcome of the lack of development of political and digital literacy among the citizenry. There is a clear gap in the curriculum in this regard, as many scholars and researchers have pointed out. Certainly there is (a) some instruction in terms of being safe online, (b) a sort of societal curriculum (the press, existing laws and their enforcement, circulating discourses about kindness and morality, etc.) that conveys messages to people about what they can and cannot do in online spaces, and (c) instruction that prepares some young people for media jobs. However there is a serious lacuna in the more empowering forms of media education, which would teach young people how to critically read media messages, draw on their media experiences to critically engage with social issues, and meaningfully participate in online spaces. A citizenry that knows how to consume and produce media to interrogate their lived reality is a citizenry that is less likely to be manipulated by false information - wherever it circulates and whichever agent produces it.

What a critical media literacy curriculum can do is to reshape the discourse on the duties of a citizen in a Smart Nation. Technology has a totalising and anti-democratic bent to it, and the only way to deal with this is through more democracy, not less. People need to be able to openly and freely debate issues, and for this we need information to circulate more openly.

In response to the Green Paper, I end this submission with an American example that I think DOES translate to Singapore. In Florida, young people have been standing up to speak out against gun violence after experiencing it in their schools. They have been able to keep their demands for legislative changes in the spotlight with keen political strategy, social media experience, and the urgency of their cause. One of the insights that has emerged is that these young people have been able to respond to the exigence because they have been receiving instruction in political and information literacy. Many also have training in public speaking and debate. These are all skills

that form an integral part of a critical media literacy curriculum, and we need to make this sort of education a priority in Singapore if we want to build a digital future in which we can have some confidence.

Regards

Shobha Avadhani (Dr.)