Written Representation 149

Name: Mohamed Elmie Bin Nekmat
       Assistant Professor, Communications and New Media, National University of
       Singapore

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Written Representation to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

1. I am writing to express my independent views and recommendations to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods. I am currently an assistant professor of Communications and New Media at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, with research interests in the social-psychology of online communication, public opinion formation and civic engagement in social media.

2. Unless otherwise stated, this paper references the terms and descriptions of "online falsehoods," "role of digital technologies," and "impact of online falsehoods" according to the Green Paper set by the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Law as presented in Parliament on 5 January 2018.

3. I focus my comments on a potential issue that may arise from the current national deliberation to protect Singapore and her people against online falsehoods – that a disproportionately sided argument for educational imperatives, particularly media literacy, would downplay the importance of legal measures.

> i. At this point, I would like to state my strong belief in the value of media literacy, having done research on online information credibility evaluation and literacies pertaining to digital technologies and social media in the contexts of Singapore and the United States. The importance of nurturing media literate citizens to protect against deliberate online falsehoods can never be undermined.

> ii. That said, recommending media literacy initiatives in place of regulation is – 1) an obvious solution that involves a long drawn process which may not sufficiently address the complexity and speed in which deliberate falsehoods impact society, and 2) shortchanging solutions to a multifaceted problem that demands the concerted responsibility of all stakeholders.

> iii. In this regard, I argue that regulations and education-based efforts (public education and media literacy) are both necessary to establish short-term protection toward building long-term resilience to safeguard society from online falsehoods.

Building Short-Term Protection toward Long-Term Resilience

4. Online misinformation and falsehoods cannot be eradicated. To come up with the best preventive measures would thus require an understanding of their undesirable effects on society and applying the appropriate measures to protect against such effects.

      i. Broadly, harmful effects of online misinformation and falsehoods can be said to occur in two ways – delayed and immediate.

5. When delayed, we can expect "drip-drip" effects of informational falsehoods to be cultivated over a period of time via constant exposure to a consistent set of information.

      i. Such falsehoods can be made up of opinionated, biased information with strong extremist or partisan views that are typically found in 'ideological chambers' and 'information cocoons'[1] in social media.

      ii. More often than not, the content of such information are not necessarily false, but manipulated and twisted out of context.

6. In such cases, it is reasonable to depend on readily available forms of interventions and existing laws to safeguard against falsehoods.

      i. Public education campaigns would help prepare social media users on how best to react to such information.

      ii. Existing laws, such as the Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Protection from Harassment Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Broadcasting Act, and Telecommunications Act, can be used to stop the dissemination of such falsehoods and prevent the future production of the information at its source.

      iii. Having media literacy skills to critically evaluate the contextualized nature of information would not only protect individual users from the direct influence of such information, but would also build long-term public resilience against such online falsehoods.

7. In sum, if we were to consider the effects of online falsehoods to only occur gradually, implementing new laws to safeguard society seems unnecessary.

8. In reality, the effects of deliberate falsehoods and misinformation in social media can occur rapidly and impact broad segments of society within a short period of time.

      i. Such effects tend to be the outcomes of finely calibrated disinformation campaigns carried out on social media, leveraging unverifiable information.

      ii. Among other things, 'cyberarmies' and 'web brigades' comprising fake accounts, bots, and trolls in social media - 1) induce virality of online falsehoods by 'sharing' disinformation within and across different social media channels, 2) produce faulty perceptions of majority opinion surrounding issues affecting society, and 3) create the illusion of majority support that can spur actual individual support through a bandwagon effect.

iii. Such disinformation campaigns tend to be strategically aimed at influencing election outcomes by steering public discourse and altering public opinion within short, immediate time-periods.

iv. The campaigns can work against any parties and candidates, and tend to be orchestrated by foreign players with multi-million dollar funded operations.

v. An analysis of nearly 17 million Twitter posts shared within the short time period (April 27 to May 7, 2017) in the run up to the 2017 French Presidential election revealed that the user accounts that had engaged in the most tweeted issue, "*MacronLeaks*," mostly belonged to "foreigners with preexisting interest in altright topics and alternative news media, rather than French users with diverse political views."[2]

vi. Such disinformation campaigns have also shown attempts to influence public debates on domestic policies.

vii. Between 2015 and 2017, 9,097 posts related to energy policies and events were found to manipulate Americans' opinions about "pipelines, fossil fuels, fracking, and climate change" via social media, particularly Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook[3]. Linked to the Russian-based internet Research Agency (IRA), the campaign adopted conservative positions, supporting activist groups to stir up tensions and skew public policy debates in the country.

9. The rapid rate in which disinformation gathers critical mass within short time spans from such campaigns exposes some limitations of public education and media literacy efforts.
   i. Social aggregation (e.g., large numbers of "likes" or shares) and user-generated comments (e.g., large number of comments expressing support) become compelling indicators of credibility when the facts behind certain information (e.g., leaked information from secret government files) cannot be verified.

   ii. The supportive or harsh tone of user messages and comments surrounding a specific story influences how people *think* and *feel* about the story. The greater the number of messages expressing a visibly consistent tone, the more it compels one to feel the same way, reinforcing inherent biases and attitudes when the tones are consistent with individual beliefs.

10. It is thus necessary to consider more relevant regulations that can provide short-term protection against the rapid effects from online disinformation campaigns in social media.

11. Introducing legal measures that compel digital content distributors to implement effective self-regulation mechanism to prevent the flow of deliberate misinformation plying their platforms is one way to do so.

Pressing on the 'Pressure Points'

12. While media literacy helps inoculate information consumers to self-protect against online falsehoods, laws that compel content distributors to proactively stop fake news and false information from spreading on their platforms help to prevent the flow of falsehoods from reaching users.
> i. Content distributors would include technology companies and organizations that facilitate the distribution of information using the internet. This includes those with editorial processes (e.g., news sites, blogs) as well as those that rely on algorithmic processes to help determine the contents that are to be foregrounded (e.g., search engines, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instgram, Youtube)[4]

13. Such content distributors, especially social media companies, are major conduits to the development and spread of online falsehoods and misinformation.
> i. Troll farms, such as the Russian 'internet Research Agency (IRA),' engage in "audience development" on social media platforms with operations beginning "with a few dozen people (around 80 at the peak) and managing to reach 150 million people through Facebook and Instagram."[5]
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> ii. Findings from a nine nation study done between 2015 and 2017, which included Brazil, Canada, Germany, China, Ukraine, Poland, Russia, Taiwan, and the United States, revealed that the widespread of manipulated information in social media aimed at influencing public opinion is largely "supported by Facebook and Twitter's algorithms."[6]

14. By making such content distributors accountable, a clear signal is sent that stopping online falsehoods and misinformation from reaching the people is also their responsibility, and that failure to carry out such responsibilities will have serious repercussions.
> i. Such laws implemented on digital content distributors would also set precedence to the guidelines and norms that define Singapore's seriousness in engaging all stakeholders toward establishing the best safeguards possible against online falsehoods.

Securing our Social Fabric

15. The final point that I make here draws attention on the need to address how deliberate online falsehoods can harm Singapore's multiracial society.

16. The fact that no racial conflicts have resulted from misinformation belies the potential of such falsehoods to stoke ethnic and religious tensions among Singaporeans.
> i. This is pertinent when we consider that deliberate misinformation can disproportionately spark racial tensions and distrust when they spread in the aftermath of national crises. An example of which is a hoax video that had circulated on Facebook showing "moderate Pakistani Muslims" celebrating the Paris terror attacks in November 2015 that had killed 130 civilians. The video actually showed Pakistanis celebrating their country's cricket victory in 2009, leading to heightened islamophobia sentiments and concerns.

17. To better protect against impact of fake news and misinformation that can sow discord amongst the different ethnic communities in Singapore, pre-emptive studies should be done to – 1) locate the various online pathways in which misinformation of such nature can target and reach members of different ethnic communities in Singapore, 2) identify a list of online sources that are prone to produce and spread falsehoods with racial slants, 3) identify the message characteristics, arguments, and modes that can affect the believability of such messages, and 4) examine the influence of cultural biases and shared beliefs in the evaluation and sharing of such information.

18. Public debates to safeguard against online falsehoods have also tended to focus on English language examples of misinformation, blind-siding the fact that such information exist in different languages.

   i. Efforts should therefore be taken to examine the impact of misinformation in different languages, especially when they are more likely to penetrate ethnicbased community networks via close group communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Personal Messengers.

19. Given that deliberate online falsehoods can erode social trust and rupture society along racial lines in irreversible ways, it is necessary to implement the best safeguards possible to secure our social fabric. Such efforts would require more relevant forms of regulations, educational initiatives, as well as greater research into the impact of deliberate falsehoods in a multiracial society.

Recommendations

1. Content distributors should be made to publicly furnish details and information on the actions and mechanisms done to safeguard users from misinformation coming from their platforms.

2. Content distributors should be made to provide regular updates and information on the outcomes from Recommendation 1, such as the number of Bots and fake accounts removed, the list of sites and sources that are banned, the countries where such accounts and sites were registered in, and so forth.

3. Pertaining to Recommendation 1 and 2, content distributors should be made to provide the information on content that are in the languages of the main ethnic groups in Singapore.

4. Content distributors should be held accountable for failure to stop methods of information distribution (e.g., bots, spam) rather than content.

5. More local studies should be carried out to better understand how online falsehoods in different languages can sow discord and spark tension amongst the different ethnic communities in Singapore.

6. Publish a list of websites and online sources that produce misinformation and falsehoods, especially those with racial slants.

7. Pertaining to Recommendation 6, existing fact checking websites, especially local ones that can provide contextualized knowledge of misinformation and falsehoods, should be updated and improved.

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