

Written Representation 20

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Dear Clerk of Parliament, Select Committee:

I believe Singapore Government, Singapore Politicians and Singapore Netizens are well aware of and are quite comfortable with the eco-system of social media in Singapore and they should have very good ideas on how to battle against online falsehoods in our domestic context. But I am more concerned about online falsehoods targeting Singapore's foreign relations which also involve social media in other countries.

It is not about addressing the problem at the very end (i.e. after the falsehoods appear on webpages and then try to delete these falsehoods). Deleting posts might compromise freedom of speech and ideally we do not want to end up in that situation. A smarter and more effective way is to address the problem at the very beginning through proactive collaboration among friendly Governments, mainstream media, scholars and netizens.

It was actually our own fault as we were too reactive / lukewarm to stand up and stop the rampancy of the online falsehoods against Singapore in the past. For example, when there were wild false online and offline news that Singapore is taking side against another country, was each party in our society doing enough to rebut these falsehoods? Let me elaborate:

- Singapore Government / Leaders. Our government's job is focused on dealing with their counterparts in the foreign country at business and working level. This is not enough to effectively fight against online falsehoods. We have very good official and personal connections with the foreign leaders and officers which have yet to be utilized.
- Singapore Media / Media Practitioners. Singapore has very high quality media practitioners and they are all very professional. They know how to battle against the falsehoods domestically but sadly little was done to promote Singapore internationally – although Singapore has the advantage of having non-English media and we indeed are able to reach out to foreign readers through our non-English media – however are our media able to deliver our stories effectively in a non-domestic context to foreign readers albeit the language advantage?
- Singapore Think Tanks and Scholars. More Singapore Scholars should stand up to explain Singapore's position to their counterparts in foreign countries.
- Foreign Think Tanks / Scholars / Media. There are actually abundance of foreign scholars and officials who have visited / lived / studied in Singapore

and who know all aspects of Singapore well and who are friendly to Singapore. But naturally they would have little motivation to stand up for Singapore as there are social pressures in the foreign country that prevent them from speaking for Singapore against the falsehoods, when the falsehoods are overwhelming in that foreign country and the falsehoods are taken as truth by the population.

- Singapore Netizens. I have to say that Singaporeans have better sense about politics and foreign relations comparing to people from other parts of the world. Because Singaporeans interact online and office line with our MPs and political leaders as part of our daily life. However sometimes the online falsehoods are so overwhelming that even Singaporeans themselves fall into the fallacy that Singapore is taking side and the fallacy becomes a collective believe which reinforces itself among Singaporeans.
- Foreign Netizens. Unfortunately they are the most vulnerable and it is easier for them to become the victim of online falsehoods and most of them do not have interest or time to take a closer look at and to understand the Singapore narrative.

Solutions? Yes we should have. Here are a few examples.

- Singapore Government / Leaders. Fighting online falsehoods is not a small issue and our leaders should be frank and upfront to work with foreign leaders to address it. Even tiny small things like setting up a privileged social media account in that foreign country can be achieved by our leaders speaking to the foreign leaders (not a joke).
- Singapore Media / Media Practitioners. As said this is our advantage. For example, one of our non-English media has huge fan base in a foreign country and its social media account in that foreign country has 2 millions fans (sadly currently that account page attracts more attack / negative comments from the foreign netizens / bots). We could have used these advantages much more lively, creatively, effectively and proactively to convey our Singapore narratives to the foreign readers, especially youngsters (look at our Singaporean politicians - how lively and creative they are in connecting to our domestic young people through facebook). A good example of the effectiveness of social media is the viral spread of Prof Kishore's "unconventional" Harvard Speech video in China with more than 30 million views in Feb 2017. If Singapore Tourism Board and Dubai Tourism Board are doing a fairly good job in promoting Singapore / Dubai to the world, one fundamental question we should ask ourselves: is it right or wrong for us to promote our true Singapore story to youngsters in other countries? To me, yes we should promote our Singapore story through foreign social media channels, furthermore, we should promote the ASEAN stories to other East Asian and South Asian countries. This does not only mean news on politics or bilateral relations, but also stories on ASEAN culture, history, politicians, people, business, foods, music, arts, and every aspect of lively ASEAN societies.

- Singapore Think Tanks and Scholars. There are some distinguished Singapore scholars who are very popular in foreign countries.
- Foreign Think Tanks / Scholars / Media. We have many foreign friends who understand Singapore so well and who are willing to maintain good relations with Singapore. Their voice should be heard.
- Singapore Netizens. More and more Singapore netizens are already aware of the online falsehoods and they are already acting actively to fight against it. For example, they are actively making positive comments on facebook, youtube to rebut false comments. We just wish more and more netizens to join them.
- Foreign Netizens. Similarly, there are now foreign netizens who began to understand Singapore's position better.

I am a new Singapore Citizen (since 2009) and I grew up in China in a time when each news about Singapore was positive. And that shaped the positive views on Singapore of the current generation of Chinese middle class who are holding management position in companies and government today. But I have to make an alert that today's Chinese teenagers are growing up in an environment in which each and every news on social media (and also perhaps many printed media) about Singapore is totally negative. It is a valid concern that things may go difficult when the young generation grow up and take management positions in the future. We should work hard to stop this.