

Written Representation 68

Name: Julian Sng Wei Meng
Tertiary Student

Received: 28 Feb 2018

Dear Select Committee,

I am writing this submission solely in my personal capacity. I am a student at the National University of Singapore and a Singaporean member of the public. I have no financial or other interests to declare in this subject matter of 'Deliberate Online Falsehoods'.

Understandably, as raised in Parliament on 10th January 2018, the issue of Deliberate Online Falsehoods is a pertinent one given the ['Rise of Populism'](#). Yet, I worry that the study on the consequences and causes of Deliberate Online Falsehoods [may be skewed](#) for new legislation that either further enhances the already extensive censorship laws or the discretionary powers of the government such as the [Internal Security Act](#) or [IMDA's Films Act](#).

I worry that the new legislation may further the [possibility](#) of abuse by ministries or the ruling government due to the highly subjective nature of what a 'Falsehood' is and what is indeed an appropriate countermeasure that does not legally stigmatise individuals that wish to enact their citizenship in discourse. These individuals constitute an [active and diverse citizenry](#) that may help in furthering transparency and critical understanding of matters/policies that affect Singaporeans - among the less-informed citizens. It is this kind of citizenry that is necessary to combat the dangers arising from the 'Wave of Populism' hitting our Singaporean shores.

I would like to second [Dr. Thum Ping Tjin recommendations](#) and express the following in my own words in the hope that the Select Committee understands my personal concern for the issue as a citizen:

1. To continue and expand governmental work in encouraging media literacy across all demographics.

I find efforts undertaken by the National Library Board of the Ministry of Communications and Information particularly laudable in an information-laden era today. Such efforts can (and have such as in Our Tampines Hub) ride on the push for a 'Smart Nation' and take place in our community centres, schools and local media. For schools, this should also include a better understanding of quantitative methods in surveys so the younger populace is able to discern the veracity of reports and surveys. Interministerial efforts may be the key to reaching out to the wide-ranging demographic that is vulnerable to the dangers of misinformation in a concerted manner.

2. To favour such media literacy education and awareness efforts over new legislation.

Due to the inherent ambiguity and subjectivity of what constitutes a 'Falsehood' (veracity, intent and impact) and to how much of an extent does it qualify as one,

imposing new legislation may be legally problematic and/or potentially open areas for governmental abuse. Governmental abuse may include the furthering of political interests, reducing transparency and preventing alternative but legitimate voices in online discourse through censorship by the state as opposed to self-censorship. The costs of censoring such subjective content may incur high administrative costs and reduce the willingness of citizens to engage in free and constructive criticism. Current legislation is already overwhelmingly harsh and adequate to deal with blatant purporters of 'Falsehoods' - widespread 'falsehoods' that still spread through private messages could be indicative of a pressing lack of media literacy as opposed to the case of insufficient legislation.

3. Avoid the possibility of abuse by the government in new legislation and/or amendments to current legislation with regards to countermeasures of 'Deliberate Online Falsehoods'. If further legislation is necessary, an independent fact-checking body must be in place to prevent potential governmental abuse. Independent fact-checking bodies have been repeatedly suggested by commenters on this issue and is done so in many other countries. These bodies should operate on a separate payroll funded by citizens as a charity (if 'Falsehoods' are deemed as a significant threat to Singapore's safety, the funding could be done through donations as opposed to tax revenue. It is, however, ultimately a matter of whether the government agrees that having independent fact-checking bodies are a positive externality and hence should be funded with taxpayers' money.). The fact-checking body must not employ people holding governmental or other private positions. Laws should also not inhibit the comments of the independent fact-checking bodies unless it is "objectively" clear that comments are severely lacking in veracity. Rather, a system of community/expert-led peer review system be in place to determine overall veracity in statements. Otherwise, the independence of the organisation will be undermined.

I am willing to appear before the Committee to present my views if I will be dealt in an open, fair and non-punitive manner.

I hope the Select Committee understands my concerns as it affects both the government's hard-built legitimacy and its citizens' right to freedom of expression.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Julian Sng