

Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods
Summary of Evidence – 22 March 2018 (Day 4)

1. This is a summary of the evidence from Ms Jennifer Yang Hui, Mr Zubin Jain, Facebook (represented by Mr Simon Milner and Mr Alvin Tan), Twitter Inc (represented by Ms Kathleen Mary Helen Reen and Mr Chua Jin Wen Philip), Google (represented by Ms Irene Jay Liu), Asia Internet Coalition (represented by Mr Jeff Paine), Singtel (represented by Mr Yuen Kuan Moon and Mr Slattery Sean Patrick) and Starhub Ltd (represented by Mr Tim Goodchild).

Jennifer Yang Hui

2. Ms Jennifer Yang Hui spoke on Indonesia's experience with Deliberate Online Falsehoods.
3. Her evidence was as follows:
 - i. Online hoax campaigns in Indonesia utilise falsehoods designed to advance emotive sectarian and racial narratives. Many of these falsehoods are ultimately aimed at undermining the credibility of certain political figures.
 - a. One prominent case was the claim that then-incumbent Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as "Ahok") had blasphemed Islam in a speech. The claim was based on a video of Ahok delivering the speech, but edited to omit one word that changed the entire meaning of what Ahok had said. The video was posted on Facebook. This culminated in a protest movement against Ahok. It sharpened the narrative that if one supported Ahok, one did not support Islam.
 - ii. Disinformation campaigns, whether by domestic or foreign actors, that touch on racial and religious issues, can become a national security issue. They can have the same impact as a national security issue, and would have to be dealt with in the same way.
 - iii. Social media platforms are used by many syndicates and private actors to spread hate speech and online falsehoods. The landscape is complex.
 - a. The Saracen Cyber Team (operating through its own website and Facebook) had created and disseminated fake news to those willing

to pay for them. For example, some of the fake accounts which they sold were used to portray President Jokowi as having a certain ethnic lineage or being affiliated with some other political affiliations.

- b. The Muslim Cyber Army was a WhatsApp based syndicate that disseminated provocative issues and false information organised along religious, cultural and racial lines. Its nerve centre was a WhatsApp group. It also operated through Facebook and was very strong on Twitter.
 - c. There are many Facebook accounts affiliated with these syndicates.
 - i. Joining Facebook, Twitter and other platforms (by creating accounts with them) is not difficult as verification procedures are lax.
 - d. There are many partisan websites with different ideological leanings that disseminate false information organised along religious, cultural, racial and political lines.
 - e. Paid online influencers were hired by candidates during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections to influence a particular outcome. They promoted sensationalised information rather than factually accurate information.
- iv. In Indonesia, Facebook is the mostly commonly used social media platform to spread hoaxes, followed by Twitter and Instagram.
 - v. The role of closed platform such as WhatsApp in spreading hoaxes should be explored. Many Indonesians increasingly rely on smartphone-based private chat platforms for information.
 - vi. A suite of remedies is necessary to deal with the different types of Deliberate Online Falsehoods.
 - a. The ability to remove Deliberate Online Falsehoods is necessary. This must be coupled with active and speedy correction of the falsehood, concurrently.
 - b. As a long term measure, media literacy should be scaled up, so the public can be more discerning.

- i. Media literacy cannot immediately eradicate online falsehoods that are racially or culturally divisive.

Mr Zubin Jain

4. Mr Zubin Jain shared about the motivation for spreading fake news, the speed which it spreads, and how it should be tackled.

5. His evidence was as follows:

i. On actors and their motivation:

(a) There is a need to take into account the perspective of teenagers, as many Deliberate Online Falsehoods have originated from teenage efforts to generate profit or attention.

(b) This is because avenues of communication that most Deliberate Online Falsehoods are spread were initially dominated by teenagers.

(c) Speaking from personal experience, the motivation for posting online falsehoods is often to alleviate boredom, which is the case for many teenagers.

(d) The problem is exacerbated by people having different conceptions about how things work; and subscribing to radically different outlets in terms of news consumption.

ii. The speed in which falsehoods spread today is the main problem. In the past, falsehoods would take multiple hours to spread, giving the Government time to respond. However, social media has shortened this grace period, such that a falsehood could be spread to the entire population of Singapore in mere hours. Attempting to stop the generation of fake-facts is a losing proposition as it only takes a single success for the damage to be done. There is simply much traffic on the Internet.

iii. On recommendations:

(a) Strict legislation should be used against institutions and websites that encourage and abet the spread of misinformation. This is because some platforms like Facebook have communities which thrive and actively support people who spread falsehoods.

- (b) As for individuals, they should also be taken to task, but the reality is that there are too many people lying on the Internet. Action against individuals should be taken in the most egregious cases – when it is blatantly obvious they lied. Prosecution should be carefully considered as a last resort.
- (c) There needs to be quick responses using algorithms and agencies to freeze the activity of fake news websites, given that the traditional judicial process often fails to act quickly enough. One safeguard against the use of this power is judicial review.
- (d) There is a need for education on reliable sources and critical thinking to be implemented in more schools – this is an important measure. A distinction should be drawn between reliable, legitimate new websites; and those which are unreliable. Government announcements should also be structured in such a way to make it easy to verify.
- (e) There are several ways to reach out to young people to let them appreciate the seriousness of Deliberate Online Falsehoods, and why some measures have to be taken to address the problem:
1. Various avenues should be used to send out messages encouraging people to think critically: eg in classrooms, social media, through celebrities.
 2. There is also a need to reach out to more niche communities online, especially those which teenagers are visiting or are part of.
 3. One way of delivering the message to teenagers is by giving real-life examples. Messages must be engaging and interesting. For example, the Government can consider using social experiments to show how dangerous online falsehoods are – by spreading harmless online falsehoods and coming out publicly to rebut it to show how easy it is for people to fall prey to them.
- (f) Inculcating media literacy has been challenging because the speed and ease in which falsehoods spread makes it difficult for any school curriculum to “catch up”. There is a need to educate people to think critically – they should not just read the headlines, but should read the entire article before coming to their conclusions.

Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Asia Internet Coalition

6. Facebook's evidence was as follows:

- i. On Facebook's conduct in relation to Cambridge Analytica:
 - a. Mr Simon Milner, Facebook's representative, was asked about the evidence he gave to the UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee on 8 February 2018, on whether:
 - i. Facebook had provided any Facebook user data to Cambridge Analytica, and
 - ii. Cambridge Analytica held Facebook's user data.
 - b. Mr Milner's answer then was "no". He did not disclose that Cambridge Analytical had illegitimately accessed data of Facebook users, which was a major breach of Facebook's policies, even though he knew this at that time.
 - c. At today's hearings, Mr Milner conceded that:
 - i. he should have given a fuller answer to the Committee; and
 - ii. a reasonable person could take the view that he had not been full and frank in his answers and that he had misled the Committee.
 - d. When queried, Mr Milner said that, as he was not involved in those decisions, he could not explain:
 - i. Why Facebook did not notify the 50 million affected users in 2015.
 - ii. Why Facebook accepted the legal undertakings and certifications provided by Cambridge Analytica and did not take further steps to ensure that the information had been deleted by Cambridge Analytica.
 - e. He agreed that it was a serious breach of trust by Facebook towards its users and that what they did in 2015 was wrong. He accepted that Facebook should have notified the users, and that it should have

gone public with what had happened and should have taken further steps to ensure that the data had been deleted.

7. On the use of algorithms:
 - i. Facebook's Newsfeed algorithms decrease the ideologically diverse, cross-cutting content that Facebook users see.
 - ii. Facebook accepts that it promotes the content that users want to see.
8. On content that affects race and religion:
 - i. Different countries have different standards on what is acceptable speech in relation to race and religion.
 - ii. Minister Shanmugam highlighted two Facebook pages, titled Ban Islam Now! and the Truth about the Talmud, which have been flagged by the UK Parliament to Facebook for respectively carrying Islamophobic and anti-Semitic content.
 - a. On Ban Islam Now, there is one post, up since 7 December 2016, which alleges that the Koran commands you to "kill gays, stone women who have sex, coerce child brides, kidnap and rape non-Muslim women, general calls for the genocide of deviants, dissidents and unbelievers and a strict law to murder any who leave this cult".
 - b. It declares that human rights and Islam are incompatible.
 - i. The post was engaged with by over 500 people, including over 200 shares.
 - ii. It also got picked up by other groups with similar racial ideological agendas, e.g., a Scottish page against mass immigration, a French nationalist page.
 - c. Another post, up since July 2014, has an image of a group of men with guns taking aim at another group of people on the ground, titled "Muslims gunning down other Muslims for being the Wrong Kind of Muslims. An Ideology that persuades Minds to murder those who believe even slightly differently wages war with the whole earth."

- d. It adds below the image “Are there still any academics, liberals or other see no evil miscreants who cannot see ISLAM IS THE NAZI MOVEMENT OF OUR TIMES?”
- e. The Truth about the Talmud page is liked by 1,185 people, and followed by 1,178.
- f. It has used dubious claims to inflame anti-semitic sentiment. For example, a photo of Orthodox Jews with hands linked and dancing was captioned as “Talmud adherents celebrate the bombing and murdering of gentiles in the Gaza Strip.”
- g. In another example, a meme was posted stating that “1.3 million American families lost their homes to foreclosure in 2007. Meanwhile, billions of YOUR tax dollars continue to purchase beautiful new homes with subsidized mortgages... *in Israel.*”
- h. In another example, another meme claimed that a Jewish Rabbi had in his weekly sermon said that “non-Jews exist to serve Jews”.
- i. Facebook has applied its community standards, assessed that these pages do not violate its community standards and will not take down these pages.

9. On Deliberate Online Falsehoods:

- i. Facebook agrees that at its worst, social media allows people to spread falsehoods and corrode democracy.
- ii. Facebook has been slow to recognise its “corrosive” effect on democracy.
- iii. Facebook today does not have a policy that content which is false must be taken down solely on that basis.
 - a. Facebook will take such content down if they are legally required to do so.
 - b. Facebook supports an objective process which determines that such content is false. Facebook accepts that speed is of the essence.

- iv. Facebook relies on algorithms as proxies to determine what are “low quality” posts and pages. Facebook was shown examples of how this was not foolproof and it was possible for Deliberate Online Falsehood posts and pages to get through.
- v. Facebook has not yet banned foreign currency payments for political advertisements, but is willing to consider doing so.

10. On the role of legislation in respect of Deliberate Online Falsehoods:

- i. Legislation is not a “silver bullet” for Deliberate Online Falsehoods.
- ii. There is a valuable role for regulation generally. What remains to be discussed is where and how the regulation should apply, and what it applies to. Facebook will be happy to work with the government on the contents of such legislation.
- iii. Facebook does not require content on its platforms to be true, and does not decide what is true and what is false.
- iv. If a state wants Facebook to take falsehoods down, there has to be a legally binding direction.