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 linage 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 obviously 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 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 he could not explain:

         i.   Why Facebook did not notify the 50 million affected users in 2015.
         ii.   Why Facebook did not take steps to ensure that abused information had been deleted from CA.

      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 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. There are 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 Islamaphobic 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 was shared several times by an account of one Celeste Costa, who had 3,791 followers.

         iii. 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?"

iv. Had over 150 engagements and attracted comments such as the following:

- "Kill all the Mutha Muslims there all evil filth!!!"

- "These terrorists are just true followers of Islam ….. and this is why Islam really is EVIL"

- "Islam is a mental disorder"

- "Nazis did the same thing".

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."

i. This was shared 48 times and got 41 reactions.

ii. It was shared 3 times in 2014, 2015 and 2016 by a Facebook account (belonging to Solange Igarashi), which had 8,326 followers

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.*"

i. This was shared 117 times and got 68 reactions.

ii. In 2016, this was re-posted to several Facebook public groups by a Facebook user (Maria Smith). These groups each had between 11,000 to 27,000 members as of this date. These groups appear to have similar agendas, e.g. "Wake Up America".

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. This was shared 304 times and got 83 reactions.

        ii.   In 2016, this was re-posted to several Facebook public groups by a Facebook user (also Maria Smith). These groups had between 63 to 27,000 members as of this date.

        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; this was not foolproof and it was possible for Deliberate Online Falsehood posts and pages to get through.

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.

v. Facebook has not yet banned foreign currency payments for political advertisement.

11. Google's evidence was as follows:

i. Google acknowledged that they still need to continue improving their algorithm to discern low quality from high quality content.

ii. Google acknowledged that they have made mistakes in the past on the algorithms for YouTube's "up-next" function. Google expressed a commitment make improvements and hone the technology.

iii. For Google Search and Google news, claims that a particular article's content is inaccurate will generally not result in its removal because Google does not host the content.

    a. Even if a particular news article requires a correction, Google would not be able to correct it because it is another organisation's content.

    b. If a news organisation needs to make a correction, they need to be the ones to do it.

iv. An example was raised of a video of a Christian pastor making denigrating remarks about Buddhism. These videos were put on various websites and eventually carried on YouTube. On whether YouTube would voluntarily remove such videos or wait until legally required to do so:

    a. Google's representative noted that Google will review all legal requests for takedown of such material.
    b. However, Google's representative was unable to comment on whether this meant that YouTube required a valid legal request and would not voluntarily remove such a vide.
    c. Google's representative was also unable to comment on whether Google or YouTube would voluntarily remove content based on cultural specifics or sensitivities.

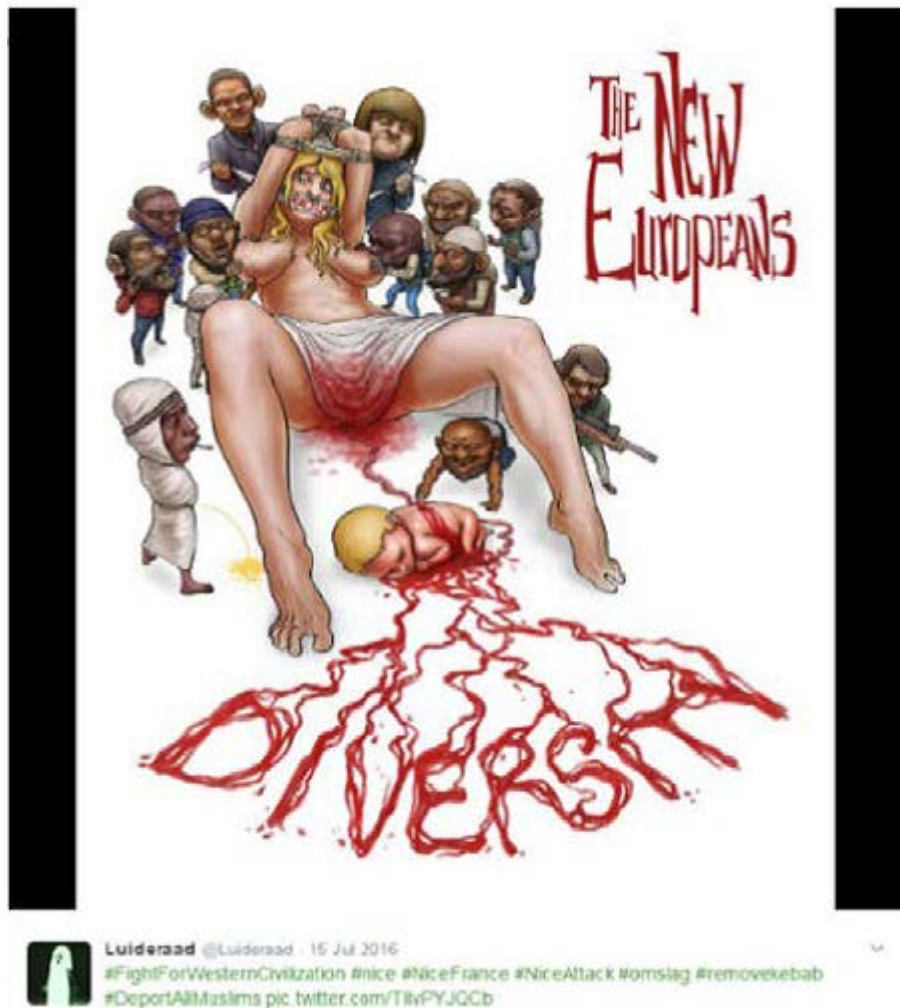12. Twitter's evidence was as follows:

i. Twitter accepts that Deliberate Online Falsehoods continue to present a challenge, but Twitter is alive and alert to the threat, and will continue work in this respect.

ii. Twitter is committed to setting ad transparency for the industry. Machine-learning is also an important tool Twitter uses, especially when dealing with automated information.

iii. Twitter does not have a policy to determine what is true and what a Deliberate Online Falsehood is.

iii. Twitter also does not have a policy of taking down information that is known or proven to be false, unless there is a legal requirement to do so.

iv. Twitter has recently updated its guidelines to show zero-tolerance for hate speech in relation to areas like ethnicity, religion, race and gender identity, and that they will continuously do so.

13. Asia Internet Coalition's evidence was as follows:

i. A multi-stakeholder model should be adopted. Measures by the technology companies alone are not enough, and that a whole-of-society solution and a long-term solution is required. He admitted that Government would be a very important stakeholder in this collaboration.

ii. Asia Internet Coalition noted that technology companies' commitment to dealing with the problem of Deliberate Online Falsehoods can be seen from the fact that they have been hiring more people, deploying new programmes, and establishing new partnerships.

iii. Asia Internet Coalition's representative accepted that they had not looked into detail at the specific legislative framework in Singapore that would apply to Deliberate Online Falsehoods and that there could be gaps in existing legislation in Singapore.

iv. Asia Internet Coalition accepted that there are many Deliberate Online Falsehoods and other types of speech (including hate speech) which seek to undermine and divide our society.

One example which was cited to them was a cartoon that had been uploaded on Twitter. The cartoon depicted a group of male, ethnic minority migrants tying up and abusing a semi-naked white woman, while stabbing her baby to death with a hashtag #DeportAllMuslims. Twitter had refused to take this down as this was not a breach of their hateful conduct policy.

Luideraad @Luideraad · 15 Jul 2016
#FightForWesternCivilization #nice #NiceFrance #NiceAttack #omstag #removekebab
#DeportAllMuslims pic.twitter.com/TllvPYJQCb

Singapore Telecommunications Limited (Singtel) – represented by Mr Sean Slattery and Mr Yuen Kuan Moon

14. Mr Sean Slattery and Mr Yuen Kuan Moon shared about Singtel's experience as a victim of Deliberate Online Falsehoods, and how regulations should apply equally to all online platforms.

15. Their evidence was as follows:

    i.   Singtel has itself been the subject of commercial scams. Significant reputation damage may be suffered as a result of the viral effect of such falsehoods.

    ii. There should be parity in the treatment of Network Service Providers ("NSPs") and all digital platforms

(a) Network Service Providers ("NSPs") are required to comply with written laws, court orders or IMDA's directions to remove, block or deny access to certain material online:

(b) The Government already has wide powers against Singtel, to order take downs and to black access to Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

It may therefore be necessary to extend similar Governmental and/or court powers against unlicensed or foreign digital platform owners.

   iii. Singtel's platforms allow it to block advertisements and/or remove advertisements should areas of concern be found.

   iv. However, Singtel is not able to block specific falsehoods without further information as it does not have content passing through its network in its capacity as an internet content provider.

   v. There should be clear guidelines should platforms be required to put in place blocks, remove content or to deny services; and platforms should be ready to execute these orders as long as the requests are made in a legal manner.

StarHub Limited – represented by Mr Tim Goodchild

16. Mr Tim Goodchild shared about current regulations and tools, and also additional measures, to combat Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

17. His evidence was as follows:

   i. There are regulations in place to ensure that broadcast content in Singapore is accurate, reliable and free from foreign influence.

(c) The Broadcasting Act has strict rules against foreign interference in broadcasting services.

(d) IMDA has also required internet service providers to block certain sites which host objectionable content.

   ii. However, there are limitations on site-blocking as a solution to the problem of Deliberate Online Falsehoods:

(a) While StarHub can block standard access to, for example, Twitter or Facebook, StarHub is not able to block customers' access to individual tweets or posts.

(b) As an internet content provider, Starhub does not have sight of the content passing through its network.

(c) It is possible for customers to circumvent site-blocking, through the use of VPNs and user-established Domain Name Servers.