Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods
Summary of Evidence - 15 March 2018 (Day 2)

1. This is a summary of the evidence from Dr Shashi Jayakumar, Mr Ruslan Deynenchenko, Dr Jakub Janda, Dr Janis Berzins, Ms Natalia Popovych and Oleksiy Makhunin (Ukraine Crisis Media Centre), Associate Professor Kevin Limonier, and Mr Ben Nimmo.

Dr Shashi Jayakumar

2. Dr Jayakumar spoke about disinformation campaigns, as a form of asymmetric warfare can be used by aggressors to tear societies apart.

3. His evidence was as follows:

   i. On information warfare, in general:

      (a) In information warfare, aggressors deploy a comprehensive suite of measures, picking and choosing the best tools to achieve their desired outcomes. The methods used include:

         - Mobilising minorities in a society
         - Infiltrating local NGOs
         - Bribing or paying off politicians, as China did in Australia.

      (b) A key modality that aggressors use is to target specific population segments within a society, to corrode the democratic process. With the technological tsunami, this can now be done in a persuasive, highly individualised way. Aggressors can now subvert and segment a target country's population in a way that was unthinkable in the past. Technology and data-rich societies like Singapore are particularly vulnerable.

      (c) Aggressors will use disinformation techniques to undermine resilience in target countries, using methods that are far cheaper (and less bloody than traditional (kinetic) warfare. They will deploy information warfare well in advance of any real-world conflict. By the time a target state detects it, communal resilience may have already started to fray.

      (d) With increasing sophistication of measures used by the actors, artificial intelligence and security services will have great difficulty spotting the fakes from the real.

ii. In Singapore's context :

(a) Targeted messages, focussed on a particular racial or ethnic group can be used to tear apart our social fabric.

(b) Singapore's conventional military power is high. A country which wants to target Singapore will therefore focus on using information warfare. Such strategy involves long term planning. We must assume that Singapore may already have been targeted.

(c) Disinformation tactics are already being used domestically in Indonesia and purportedly in Malaysia. For example, Cambridge Analytica, which allegedly profiled and micro-targeted the American population during the 2016 US presidential elections, has a presence in Malaysia. Such knowledge could seep out to people, private organisations. And they could be used.

iii. On possible solutions:

(a) It is nearly impossible for there to be any international norms on disinformation and subversion, as the actors would want to keep the tools they use a secret.

(b) Any online countermeasures must be accompanied by active human agency. There must be some real-world intervention.

(c) Legislation would be helpful, particularly in calling out individual agencies or individuals actively rooting subversion, as well as the level of accountability and culpability of big networks like platforms.

Mr Ruslan Deynychenko (StopFake)

4. Mr Deynychenko spoken on the Ukrainian experience with disinformation campaigns.

5. His evidence was as follows:

i. No state should ignore the problem of disinformation. Ukraine did that for many years to its own detriment.

ii. Ukraine has faced real consequences from a disinformation campaign. A part of Ukraine, Crimea, has been annexed by Russia. Other regions of Ukraine, with Russian speaking populations are heavily involved in armed conflict. 10,000 people have lost their lives.

iii. On modalities, Russian disinformation has targeted and fuelled existing tensions between the Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians. It also exploited the divisions within society, by focusing on historical examples of conflict between different groups of people.

iv. On possible solutions, state intervention in Ukraine to ban Russian channels, newspapers and radio stations was a formidable blow to Russian disinformation. This cut off the source of disinformation. While European officials criticised this move as undemocratic and a form of censorship, this intervention allowed the truth to be put out more effectively.

Dr Jakub Janda

6. Dr Jakub Janda ("Dr Janda") spoke on Russian disinformation in the Czech Republic and in Eastern Europe generally.

7. His evidence was as follows:

i. Foreign disinformation operations appear to be quite successful in the Czech Republic.

(a) A quarter of Czechs believe disinformation.
(b) Four in ten Czechs blame the US (rather than Russia) for the crisis faced by Ukraine today.
(c) More than half of Czechs say there is both pro-Russian and anti-Russian disinformation in the Czech public space, and they cannot trust anything.

ii. In terms of desired outcome, disinformation campaigns seek to undermine public trust.

(a) Public loses trust in democratic institutions, in free media and in democratic political parties.
(b) Anti-establishment political powers will gain ground.
(c) Fabricated disinformation can make it impossible to find constructive policies on sensitive issues such as migration.
(d) This can result in limiting the policy options of a government, by skewing the public debate on key issues.

(e) For example, one third of the Czech population is of the belief that the Ukrainian Government is run by far right extremists, making it impossible for the Czech government to render humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian state.
(f) Overall trust in the European Union is also deteriorating in the Czech Republic.

iii. Foreign disinformation outlets use traditional liberal democratic ideals like free speech to disguise their underlying agendas.

Dr Janis Berzins

8. Dr Janis Berzins spoke about influence operations and the use of information as part of modern warfare.

9. Dr Janis Berzins's evidence was as follows:

i. One of the main aspects of modern warfare is the idea that the main battle-space is the mind.

(a) Information and psychological wars are conducted to reduce the morale of an enemy's armed forces and civilian population, in order to reduce the need to deploy hard military power.
(b) The battleground becomes a perception war in cyber-space and the human mind.
(c) Influence operations are used to achieve specific strategic objectives.

ii. Influence campaigns today are conducted in the areas of politics, economics, information, technology and ecology. These campaigns result in asymmetric warfare being the natural state of affairs.

iii. There must be a system to monitor social media and to make social media providers responsible for removing falsehoods quickly.

Natalia Popovych and Oleksiy Makhunin (Ukraine Crisis Media Centre)

10. Natalia Popovych and Oleksiy Makhunin spoke about the disinformation campaigns run by Russia and its implications for Ukraine.

11. Their evidence was as follows:

i. While the West sees informational operations as limited and only appropriate during times of hostilities, Russians view their information operations as perpetual regardless of their state relations with any government.

ii. Given the widespread of the internet and social media, it is an ideal mode for information operations.

iii. There are multiple aspects to a strategy for a disinformation campaign.

(a) Identifying and exploiting the relevant fault lines in that society, whether race or religion.

(b) Targeting distribution of the disinformation to ensure it reaches the right audience.

(c) Spreading over-arching narratives that set out fundamental reasons for the conflict and complementing this with local narratives to demoralise the target country's population.

(d) Such narratives are usually emotional and supported by images and pictures.

(e) Use of locals (termed "useful idiots") to widen the spread of that narrative.

iv. It was necessary to formulate a definition of disinformation. Additionally, it was necessary to change national legislation accordingly to deal with disinformation. Websites that spread disinformation should not be accorded the benefit of being treated as free media.

v. The election period is usually the most vulnerable period to information attacks. Elections should be considered a part of the national critical infrastructure as they are a cornerstone of sovereignty.

Associate Professor Kevin Limonier

12. Associate Professor Limonier spoke about how Russia was increasingly using cyberspace and disinformation to destabilise individual states.

13. His evidence was as follows:

i. States can fund "news" organisations to transmit disinformation overseas. Examples include Russia Today and Sputnik.

(a) Such "news" organisations specifically target foreign audiences.
(b) They will have local staff on the ground to advise and produce material. This material is then seeded amongst locals, such as activists, to further their respective agenda. The people sharing this information often do not know from where it originates.

ii. These "news" organisations often produce misinformation by blending the truth and falsehoods. For example, they use digital marketing to further their reach. This is done by catchy headlines ("clickbait") and taking advantage of social media algorithms and bots to ensure the information reaches a broader audience.

iii. The reach and impact of such organisations can be worsened by social media algorithms. These create an "algorithm jail" – where the algorithm results in a person only being exposed to one point of view.

(a) An experiment was done to create fake profiles on Facebook and to like Russia Today and other pro-Russian pages.
(b) A week later, the only information shown on the fake accounts' Facebook pages was pro-Russian.

iv. Studies have also shown that same piece of information is shared by groups on opposite ends of the political spectrum (e.g., far right groups and far-left groups). But the information is confined to being shared within each group and there is limited interaction between the groups.

v. Arguments about the denial of democracy have prevented an effective response to disinformation campaigns in France.

Mr Ben Nimmo

14. Ben Nimmo spoke on the methods and impact of spreading deliberate online falsehoods.

15. His evidence was as follows:

i. The Internet and technology have made it far easier and cheaper for falsehoods to be spread;

(a) For example, a troll factory ran at least 470 accounts, spending US$100,000 in advertising, and was able to reach at least 126 millions of Americans.

(b) This is a relatively small sum for a very large reach.

(c) All you need is about a thousand bots to tweet a thousand retweets, to amplify the message. Genuine users may then be manipulated into thinking that those are genuine tweets.

ii. There are financial motivations for agents spreading falsehoods, such as creating works of fiction about politicians (eg Hillary Clinton) that attract many clicks, which can end up spreading very widely.

iii. Disinformation has also been spread as a systematic attempt to further inflame social divides. One example is the effort put in by trolls to widen the divide between the black lives matter supporters and the police in the USA.

iv. It is best to try and get the tech companies to cooperate first, before considering legislation. If they don't cooperate, then legislation could be used as final resort.

On the scope of legislation, a distinction had to be drawn between information that was completely fake, and information that constituted a breach of journalistic standards, but which was not completely false. Where information was shown to be false, legislation could be used to order the information to be taken down.

There could be difficulties in identifying what was false and what was not false, in cases. If there are disputes on whether information was false, it could be resolved by a neutral tribunal.
For information which is in breach of journalistic ethics, the possibility (for example) of requiring the carrying of a proper clarification, together with the original article, could be considered.

It would be preferable for the legislative toolbox to have as many options as possible, to allow for a nuanced approach.