**Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods**
**Summary of Evidence – 27 March 2018 (Day 6)**

1.  This is a summary of the evidence from Professor Hany Farid, Mr Benjamin Ang, Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim, Roses of Peace (represented by Mr Nadim Kapadia, Mr Jonathan Tan and Mr Mohamed Irshad), Mr Hazrul Jamari, National Library Board (represented by Ms Wai Yin Pryke, Ms Chow Wun Han and Ms Sara Pek]), Professor Cherian George, The Online Citizen (represented by Mr Terry Xu), Mr Howard Lee, Maruah (represented by Mr Ngiam Shih Tung), Ms Kirsten Han and Community Action Network (represented by Mr Jolovan Wham).

**Professor Hany Farid**

2.  Professor Hany Farid shared about the existing technological solutions to detect fake images and videos, and the need for technology companies to do more.

3.  His evidence was as follows:

    i.  Reining in online abuses is challenging. Relatively unskilled users can now manipulate images and videos online.

    ii. The problem is compounded by the way social media platforms promote these materials. Algorithms on social media platforms are designed to maximise engagement, given how they earn from advertising revenue. But this has led them to be vulnerable to manipulation. This is a serious issue which social media companies have not figured out how to deal with.

    iii. There has been a pattern of denial and inaction from technology companies, when it comes to responding to misuse on their platforms, specifically in dealing with child pornography and violent extremist content. Significant effort should be placed on technology companies to do more.

    iv. On Facebook representative Mr Simon Milner's comment on 22 March 2018 before the Select Committee that Prof Farid has "*an axe to grind*" and that his evidence about the technology companies' inaction is "*fundamentally wrong*", Prof Farid's response was as follows:

        (a) Technology companies have been asked for years to take down terrorism-related material, but they had effectively done nothing until late 2017, upon incredible pressure from the EU and the US.

(b) The notion that technology companies had been proactive in combatting extremist content simply does not gel with their pattern of behaviour over the years. Their history has not been one of openness or honesty.

- They had dragged their feet in combatting child pornography, and did the same for extremist content as well.
- Facebook, for example, has also been less than forthcoming, as shown in the way the Cambridge Analytica saga unfolded.
- Technology companies would do just enough to stave off regulatory pressure.

(c) It is unclear how technology companies can claim to be able to eliminate a certain percentage of extremist content on their platforms, when the technology and the data they are looking at are not revealed to others.

(d) Given how technology companies are able to detect and remove copyright infringement of materials; they are likely able to detect and remove other illegal or inappropriate content as well. Yet, extremist content can still be found on YouTube on a daily basis.

v.  The lack of effectiveness on the part of technology companies in taking down illegal or inappropriate content is one of policy or design, rather than a technical impediment.

vi.  Ultimately, the solution should involve a combination of regulation, human review, and the employment of effective technological measures.

## Benjamin Ang

4.  Benjamin Ang spoke about the principles to guide Singapore's response to Deliberate Online Falsehoods, with a focus on national security threats posed by information operations.

5.  His evidence was as follows:

i.  Information operations can work on "slow-burn issues that can be equally, if not more, pernicious." As part of a larger, long term strategy, the deliberate online falsehood may be a decoy, distraction, or ruse. Information operations can come in a guise which makes it hard to be identified.

ii. Instead of taking down the false story, the Government may want a right to respond to deliberate online falsehood, compelling platforms to publish an official correction. For national security threats posed by online falsehoods, it will be for the Government to take action squarely, through a strategic approach – to either take down or refute the DOF.

iii. Some legislation will at some time be necessary. Any legislation against online falsehoods must have checks and balances. A judicial process will also be helpful.

iv. One modality to consider would be to use executive actions, which can consist of take-down orders, to deal with the deliberate online falsehood, but with recourse to judicial review as a safeguard.

v. The other measures to consider are as follows:

   a. Pre-emptive measures include the Government collaborating with other stakeholders to target specific issues.

   b. Immediate measures include the Government issuing transparent and timely information, independent fact-checkers debunking the falsehoods, and social media users flagging the items as false.

   c. Long-term measures include building media literacy in the population, encouraging social norms against sharing information without checking and defining the responsibilities of technology companies.

**Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim**

6. Mr Zhulkarnain's evidence emphasised how deliberate online falsehoods had the real potential to divide Singapore society.

7. His evidence was as follows:

   i. Falsehoods spread within the Muslim community can inflame situations and radicalise.

   ii. Media campaigns and education efforts should be embarked on, to educate local Muslims on the means to verify the authenticity of the news they consume. He also suggested creating authentication mechanisms using blockchain.

iii.   A spectrum of responses should be adopted to address the problem of deliberate online falsehoods. A multi-pronged solution is needed; there are legislative gaps in Singapore. Singapore might need to use legislation, regardless of the fact that there will always be people who try to circumvent the provisions of enacted legislation. However, any use of legislation should be done prudently and in a calibrated manner.

## Roses of Peace (represented by Mr Nadim Kapadia, Mr Jonathan Tan and Mr Mohamed Irshad)

8.   Representatives from Roses of Peace (Nadim Kapadia, Jonathan Tan, and Mohamed Irshad), a ground up, youth-driven initiative, spoke about the need for a multi-pronged approach to combat the spread of deliberate online falsehoods.

9.   Their evidence was as follows:

i.   Tackling deliberate online falsehoods requires a multi-pronged approach; there should be action taken not just through legislation and government policy, but also through ground-up initiatives by citizens and civil society.

ii.   Deliberate online falsehoods can be tailored along racial and religious lines. They are aimed at sowing discord among the racial and religious communities, and may also be used to undermine democratic processes and thereby weaken the country.

## Hazrul Azhar Jamari

10.   Mr Hazrul Azhar Jamari shared his concerns on falsehoods targeting the Malay community, and some proposals on how to combat online falsehoods.

11.   His evidence was as follows:

i.   Spreading of falsehoods by WhatsApp and Facebook has been extremely common.

ii.   On the spread of falsehoods within the Malay community:

(a) These falsehoods usually touch on communal or religious nature.

(b) Mr Hazrul has tried using his Facebook page to debunk "Halal falsehoods", which can limit the impact. However, he also shared that such fact-checking initiatives has its limitations.

(c) Other falsehoods like ISIS propaganda are far more damaging and harder to eradicate – they can affect intra-community relations between different groups of Muslims. Freely spread videos on religious issues can cause a lot of damage.

   iii.   He therefore recommended the following measures:

(a) Impose community service for those spreading severe falsehoods, especially those impacting our racial and religious diversity. This will help better improve race and religious relations.

(b) Have a localised version of snopes.com to debunk online scams and falsehoods.

(c) Conduct more digital media literacy classes.

## National Library Board

12. Representatives from the National Library Board ("**NLB**") (Ms Wai Yin Pryke (Director), Ms Chow Wun Han (Assistant Director, Content and Services), and Ms Sara Pek (Senior Manager for Engagement)) spoke about NLB's efforts in promoting information literacy.

13. NLB's evidence was as follows:

   i.   Critical evaluation skills have never been more important as we are now inundated with information and data in our online and physical interactions

   ii.   NLB promotes information literacy through its S.U.R.E. campaign, which comprises four key concepts: Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate.

   iii.   The landscape is so complex that there is no one size fits all solution.

   iv.   Public education, while absolutely necessary, is not going to be sufficient to combat deliberate online falsehoods.

   v.   A poll showed that 66% of Singaporeans access news and current affairs via online sources and 77% had come across online news that they thought

was not accurate. 80% supported strengthening laws to better deal with spread of false information and 92% want more effective laws to require those who publish fake news to remove or correct the fake news.

vi. One important measure is to make sure that the truth is always put up alongside the information that is found to be false.

## Dr Cherian George

14. Dr Cherian George spoke about how disinformation is used in hate propaganda, as well as the possible measures that can be adopted.

15. His evidence was as follows:

i. Hate propagandists use disinformation campaigns to create the narratives they want, as well as to instigate followers into taking the action they want. Simple ideas can be used by political actors to activate tribal identities in a way that is difficult to fight.

ii. The risk to social cohesion from falsehoods is very serious. We should think of the threats other than terrorism. The scale and nuance of the response should be based on the type of impact and intent.

iii. Law should generally not be the first recourse. In some egregious circumstances, it can be the first recourse; however, such laws need to be balanced with non-legal interventions. Any legislation should consider the following:

a. Acknowledge that it can have unintended consequences.
b. Avoid over-breadth such that the law does not trap legitimate speech.
c. Acknowledge that the law, no matter how well-written, may have limited impact because of the threat of backfire.

iv. Laws should be updated to keep up with changing modalities, instead of coming up with new classes of illegal speech. However, he accepted, in principle, that there may be gaps that the Government needs to address.

v. Where falsehoods harm society, and are not covered by current legislation (e.g. defamation, harassment or assault), there may be the proper focus of further legislation.

vi.    Apart from media literacy, political literary or civic education is very important in dealing with falsehoods. We should learn from the experiences of other countries.

vii.   In the context of demonetisation, the market should not reward bad behaviour. It is also not a detriment to free speech to flag offensive sites before a person enters that site.

## The Online Citizen (represented by Mr Terry Xu)

16.    Terry Xu spoke on the problem of Deliberate Online Falsehoods from the perspective of one who runs a website.

17.    His evidence was as follows:

i.     Singapore's diverse society makes us susceptible to disinformation attacks. In particular, Singapore's particular vulnerability owes to its racially and religiously diverse make up.

ii.    There will be certain situations in which content should be taken down on social media platforms (for e.g., hate speech). Where social media companies do not comply with their own content regulation policies and fail to remove content such as hate speech, there must be powers to compel them to take down such content.

iii.   There must be effective remedies appropriate to the potential harm that Deliberate Online Falsehoods may cause. He said that he stood with 92% of Singaporeans in saying that there should be more effective laws to require those who publish fake news to remove or correct that fake news, in certain situations.

iv.    Where investigations are ongoing, and the information requested by the public is sensitive, it should be kept confidential.

v.     As a publisher online, there is an ethical duty to check and verify facts before publishing information.

vi.    In the context of previous articles in which it was queried as to why some facts were inaccurate, he said that he would only publish a clarification if (a) requested to do so by the authorities and there was evidence provided to substantiate the authorities' position; or if there was a court order mandating him to do so.
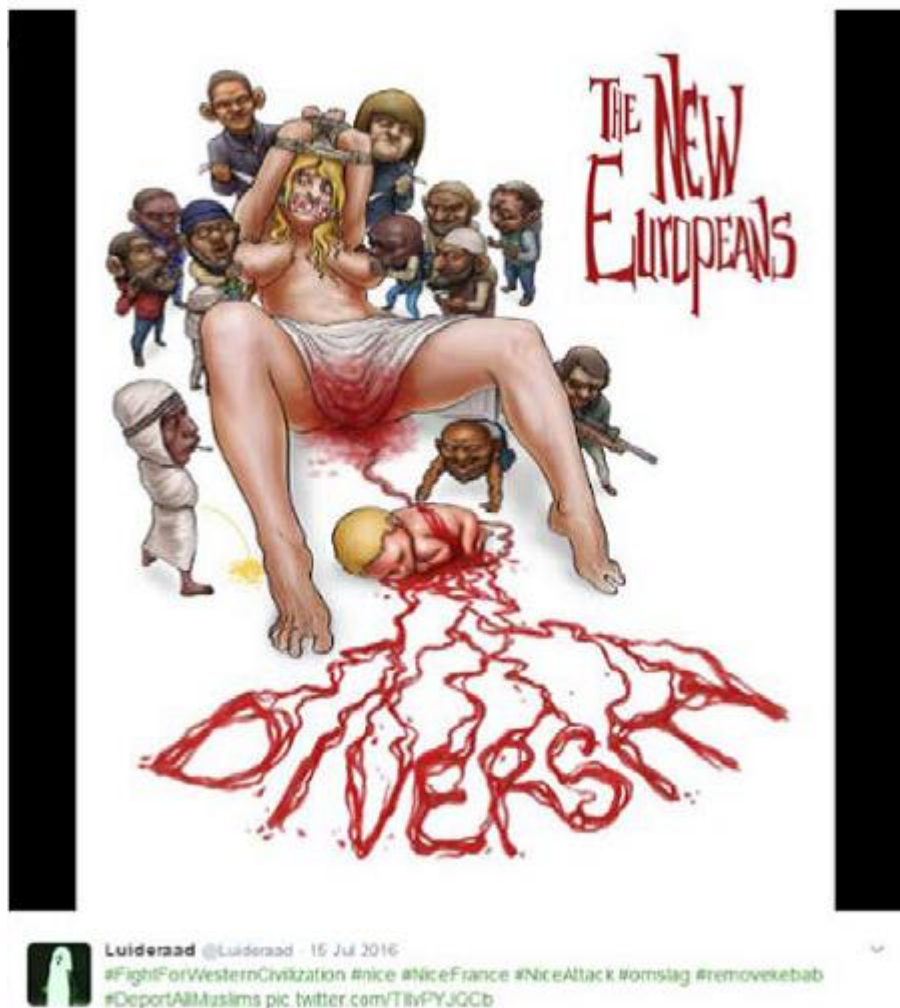
**Mr Howard Lee**

18.  Howard Lee spoke about the appropriate responses to Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

19.  His evidence was as follows:

   i.  What social media platforms find acceptable would differ from what Singapore deems acceptable.

   ii.  Mr Lee is opposed to legislative measures to tackle the problem of deliberate online falsehoods. He advocates that fact-checking bodies and independent councils be set up instead. Even for an online falsehood which could incite violence, his view is that the post should not be taken down, but an advisory should be published stating what the facts are. Mr Lee accepts that his position on legislation would put him at odds with 92% of the Singapore population, based on a recent poll done by REACH.

   iii.  Mr Lee accepted that foreign actors can set up different accounts and proliferate information across geographical boundaries; and that having an Election Advertising Act will not stop our local population from receiving the information generated by these accounts.

   iv.  In his view, the appropriate response to Deliberate Online Falsehoods should be the VAT approach: Vigilance, Awareness, and Timelines. Public awareness and an open exchange of information remain the best solutions against misinformation.

**Ms Kirsten Han**

20.  Ms Han spoke on the problem of Deliberate Online Falsehoods from the perspective of a freelance journalist.

21.  Her evidence was as follows:

   i.  92% of Singaporeans, at face value, supported more effective laws, including to remove falsehoods. Ms Han did not support the need for more effective legislation as there were existing powers and she accepted that she may be out of step with the majority of the population.

i.     A false, racially motivated, rape allegation which is now inciting violence should not be taken down.

ii.    One example which was cited 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. In 2017, when asked by the UK Home Affairs Committee to remove the tweet, Twitter had refused, stating that the tweet was not a breach of their hateful conduct policy.



iii.   Ms Han was of the view that while it was abhorrent, it should not be removed nor should there be powers to compel its removal. In response to other examples of offensive content, Ms Han maintained that the content should not taken down, regardless of the circumstances.

iv.   Subsequently, in response to a query from another member of the Select Committee, Ms Han said that she would accept that an elected Government can have a take-down mechanism.

v.   On her article in relation to the Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act, she agreed that it could be interpreted as being incomplete or misleading.

vi.   While she had not done a comprehensive study of a Freedom of Information Act, she was of the view that transparency should be valued, even if such legislation could compromise national security and waste resources.

vii.   In the context of a report which discussed a case on scandalising the judiciary, she did not agree that one should set out fully the facts on which the alleged scandalising of the judiciary was done. Instead, it was a matter of editorial choice.

## Maruah (represented by Mr Ngiam Shih Tung)

22.   Mr Ngiam spoke on the issue of deliberate online falsehoods.

23.   His evidence was as follows:

i.   There are specific cases where the truth or falsity of a claim can be established. Deliberate online falsehoods can be tailored along racial and religious lines.

ii.   Singapore's ability to maintain a degree of balance between our different and diverse racial, religious and cultural groups is a pre-condition for our existence.

iii.   His personal opinion is that to counter deliberate online falsehoods, Singapore can either apply existing legislation or modify at the margins. However, he has not considered the testimony or proposal put forth by Professor Goh Yi Han, the dean of the SMU law faculty.

## Community Action Network (represented by Mr Jolovan Wham)

24.   Mr Jolovan Wham was of the view that Deliberate Online Falsehoods are not a major issue in Singapore, contrary to the views expressed by a number of previous representors to this Committee.

25. His view was premised on the assumption that there is no evidence of online falsehoods.