

Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods
Summary of Evidence – 28 March 2018 (Day 7)

1. This is a summary of the evidence from Dr Liew Khai Khiun, Associate Professor Alton Chua, Mr Prakash Kumar Hetamsaria, Mr Raja Mohan, Mr Dan Shefat, Associate Professor Eugene Tan, Dr Norman Vasu and Mr Andrew Loh.

Dr Liew Khai Khiun

2. Dr Liew Khai Khiun spoke about the threat of systematic disinformation campaigns from foreign actors and the need for a calibrated, legislative response to the threat.
3. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. Singapore has experienced incidents which suggest a systematic effort of manipulation from external sources. This is a serious threat to Singapore, given how well connected to the outside world Singapore is.
 - (a) There are forces which do not respect the marketplace of ideas, and which engage in organized and concerted forms of online trolling.
 - (b) There are ongoing efforts to manipulate and spread deliberate online falsehoods. We now live in a post-truth society.
 - ii. The visible hand of the state is needed when information flows are being systematically manipulated by external parties with intentions to misinform rather than inform.
 - iii. The following suggestions were proposed:
 - (a) Media companies need to be upfront about their funding sources.
 - (b) While education is important, it is not a panacea. In emergency situations, the legal consequences must be strong enough to deter people from sharing the fake news.
 - (c) A take-down order in certain situations is important.
 - iv. A traffic light framework for a calibrated response was also proposed in accordance with the severity of the situation.

Associate Professor Alton Chua

4. Associate Professor Chua spoke on how the Singapore government can tackle deliberate online falsehoods.
5. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. The status quo today is unacceptable.
 - ii. Deliberate online falsehoods have no place in public discourse, and should not be protected in the name of freedom of speech. Freedom of speech should not be allowed to undermine a well-functioning society.
 - iii. We need a multi-model and multi-pronged approach, comprising both long-term and short-term strategies, to tackle the problem of deliberate online falsehoods. As part of the multi-pronged approach, there can be some legislative options.
 - iv. Taking down inappropriate content is acceptable so long as citizens are told what is wrong with the content.

Mr Prakash Kumar Hetamsaria

6. Mr Hetamsaria spoke about his experience as a victim of a deliberate online falsehood, and offered some recommendations to combat the problem.
7. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. Mr Prakash was a victim of fake news on the “All Singapore Stuff” website, where his photo was used to suggest that he was a new citizen disappointed with Singapore and thinking of giving up his citizenship.
 - (a) The article with the fake photo was shared 44,700 times; but Mr Prakash’s Facebook post clarifying that the photograph was false was shared only 3 times.
 - (b) Even after trying to debunk the falsehood on social media, the harm had already been done.
 - (c) Such fake news led to xenophobic comments from others, which impacted his family members.

- ii. The law needs to be updated to bring better redress to victims who need legal protection, taking into account the resources and clout the Government has to combat fake news.
 - (a) Proper legislation which allows action to be taken against fake news will assist individuals like himself, as his own efforts to rectify the falsehood were insufficient.
- iii. The following recommendations were proposed:
 - (a) Educate people to check the veracity of news before spreading it;
 - (b) Have an updated code of conduct for social media sites, to prevent fabricated stories from being published, and punishing these sites from doing so by law.
 - (c) Ensure that sites which are problematic should be identified, warned and shut down if they continue to spread fake news.
 - (d) Draw a clear distinction between fake news and criticism; and between genuine errors and conscious efforts to create mischief.
 - (e) Encourage fact-checking sites to bring the truth to the attention of the public.

Mr Raja Mohan

- 8. Mr Mohan spoke about the use of online bots to spread falsehoods; and the impact this can have on elderly citizens.
- 9. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. Online falsehoods are often spread by online bots, which post fake content on a regular basis; and can be exacerbated by the sharing of messages through social media platforms like WhatsApp, which is common amongst members of the same community.
 - ii. The elderly may not recognize that not all content posted on websites are actually posted by real people. Many of them spread falsehoods unknowingly as well. It is critical for the elderly to be educated on this, as the elderly could be influenced by these falsehoods, with real world consequences.
 - iii. There are pressure points in Singapore which could potentially lead to disharmony and crisis.

- iv. The following recommendations were proposed:
 - (a) Social platforms need to better regulate the content that are posted on their websites.
 - (b) Adopt the “Honest Ads Act” where those who pay for political or socially related advertisements need to declare their identities.
 - (c) Government and affected parties need to quickly address online falsehoods via Government channels in various mediums, to prevent falsehoods from spreading further.
 - (d) The rectification of errors or falsehoods does not impede free speech. This is because preventing the spread of online misinformation should not be conflated with preventing unpopular or alternatives ways of thought.

Mr Dan Shefet

10. Mr Shefet spoke on the issue of deliberate online falsehoods.
11. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. The marketplace of ideas does not work. It is premised on an erroneous assumption that the tech companies are at the mercy of the marketplace; instead, today they control the marketplace.
 - ii. The “real” marketplace is far from being unregulated. Even the most liberal societies have anti-trust laws, financial regulations, and consumer protection regulations.
 - iii. The “virality” of the content may have no bearing on its “validity”.
 - iv. The marketplace of ideas, far from justifying the absence of regulation, demonstrates exactly the opposite: deliberate online falsehoods need to be regulated.
 - v. Deliberate online falsehoods can be a great challenge not only to democracy but also to a nation’s stability.
 - vi. Removing financial incentives to key to the combatting Deliberate Online Falsehoods. Advertisers are the key players that pay for the business model which the technology companies run. One way would be to demonetise the financial incentive to proliferate these falsehoods. This requires some sort of regulatory pressure or regulatory lever.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan

12. Associate Professor Tan spoke on how to ensure Singapore's social resilience to combat deliberate online falsehoods.
13. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. The phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online is real and pervasive. The spread of deliberate online falsehoods can have an immediate effect and/or a "slow burn" effect. The "slow burn" effect is more insidious and could have a greater impact.
 - ii. Pervasive public education is needed to equip people with the skills to determine the reliability of information received and enable people to have an open mind. There should be more research on the local "fake news" ecosystem, including what makes Singaporeans more resilient, and what weak areas could be.
 - iii. Remedies and responses should be:
 - (a) Differentiated for the different types of online falsehoods and calibrated to the threat they pose
 - (b) Suited for our local climate and context, take into account what has worked for us
 - (c) Balance the interests of public discourse with the potential harm posed to society. In that regard, the right to free speech carries a concomitant duty of responsible speech.
 - iv. Laws are an important means to deal with the threat of disinformation, though it is not a silver bullet. It is just one in a suite of different measures. A multi-stakeholder approach is needed. Solutions should not be left to the Government alone.
 - a. There are gaps in existing legislation.
 - b. The law has limitations, and a unique combination of hard and soft law is needed.
 - v. There should be a regime to ensure that individuals or entities do not benefit financially from spreading deliberate online falsehoods.

Dr Norman Vasu

14. Dr Norman Vasu shared two guiding principles on the appropriate responses to the problem of deliberate online falsehoods.
15. His evidence was as follows:
 - i. The challenge of deliberate online falsehoods stems from the velocity, intensity, and extensity of information. Information today moves far more rapidly (velocity), comes at a greater volume (intensity), and reaches more people than ever before (extensity).
 - ii. The 2 key principles to aid the selection of the appropriate response should be:
 - (a) Any response should target only falsehoods deliberately created to undermine society or the state.
 - (b) The measures put in place will not reasonably be expected to stifle the frank and healthy exchange of opinion and ideas required for a functioning democracy.
 - iii. Falsehoods knowingly distributed to undermine society and falsehoods distributed for financial gain would demand some form of state response.
 - iv. Freedom of speech is not an absolute freedom and has to be calibrated against the protection of the public. Any measure recommended by the Committee would have to take an approach which recognises that in certain circumstances, there has to be a greater restraint on freedom of speech than in others.
 - v. There are various possible responses. Instilling critical thinking and media literacy, and reducing the financial incentive for the creation of falsehoods is amongst them. It is also necessary to debunk falsehood and legislate to make the spreading of falsehoods illegal. There can also be self-regulation on disinformation by social media platforms.
 - vi. It is prudent to be cautious on how much regulation of information should be left in the hands of private enterprise like social media companies, as they may not be equipped to make decisions on what is false, and may not have the public good at heart.

- vii. A multi-pronged approach is needed.

Mr Andrew Loh

- 16. Mr Andrew Loh spoke about the problem of Deliberate Online Falsehoods in the context of his experience in running a socio-political website.
- 17. His evidence as follows:
 - i. The concerns about Deliberate Online Falsehoods are valid, given examples of incidents around the world and in Singapore. Concerns that Deliberate Online Falsehoods will stir racial and religious sensitivities or be used by terrorists for recruitment are valid, and the matter should be dealt with decisively.
 - ii. We must be able to deal with the harm caused by Deliberate Online Falsehoods independent of the intention of the purveyor of such falsehoods. Repeated, deliberate publication of Deliberate Online Falsehoods with the intention of doing damage must be dealt with firmly, and through law.
 - iii. There must be a range of remedies to respond to Deliberate Online Falsehoods, taking into account the culpability of the persons involved.
 - iv. In terms of legislative responses, a quick take down was essential to deal with virality in the digital age and this could be balanced with judicial oversight. It was necessary to ensure that those seeking recourse had the means to do so.
 - v. Laws regulating content which can harm society, for example, contempt laws, are necessary. Such laws must be calibrated at the right threshold.
 - vi. There must be circumspection when exercising free speech that has an impact on national security, or racial and religious issues.
 - vii. Ultimately, elected officials in Parliament should decide whether certain types of speech was harmful to the public good and the country as a whole.
 - viii. Publishers and content providers have to be clear and judicious with what they posed. Some facts can be easily fact-checked and they have a duty to do this.