Written Representation 104

Name: Facebook

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Dear Deputy Speaker and Chairman,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide a written submission on the important issue of deliberate online falsehoods.

We wish to acknowledge the concerns expressed in the Green Paper published by the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Law on 5th January 2018, and during the Parliamentary debate on 10th January 2018. We recognise the importance of preserving social cohesion as well as racial and religious harmony, and of ensuring electoral integrity here in Singapore.

We share your concerns and commitment towards these goals, and we take our responsibility as an online platform seriously. We plan to continue delivering on this commitment by doubling our safety and security team to 20,000 people by the end of 2018 to help us better enforce our policies. We currently have around 14,000 people working across our community operations teams and on our integrity efforts.

We know that the vast majority of people want to see accurate information on Facebook and do not want to share "false news". However, they do not always know what information or sources to trust. This makes discerning truth from fiction challenging.

We understand that it is this same challenge that has prompted the Select Committee to request for specific principles that would guide Singapore's response to prevent and combat online falsehoods. We believe that the principle of building an informed community is critical to this response. Our submission below outlines our technical work to address deliberate online falsehoods, as well as our efforts to help build an informed community in Singapore and around the world.

Building an Informed Community

Tackling deliberate online falsehoods starts with building an informed community. This involves tools, partnerships and programs. We know that people want accurate information, and that they want to see it on Facebook. We want to help people stay informed and have meaningful conversations that create and preserve common ground.

We believe that reducing the spread of misinformation and false news is a shared responsibility between public authorities, tech companies, newsrooms and classrooms. We take our responsibility here seriously and conduct work in five key areas:

1. **Removing fake accounts and introducing ad transparency.**

   i. Facebook has an authentic name policy. People have to use their authentic name on their Facebook account. We know that online falsehoods are often propagated by fake accounts, so finding and removing these fake accounts more effectively helps to disrupt the spread of falsehoods. We use machine learning to detect abuse, protect against the creation of fake accounts, and uncover coordinated behavior that is abusive and counter to our Community Standards (facebook.com/communitystandards).

   ii. We are implementing changes to make advertising more transparent, since we know that there are concerns about misinformation being circulated through targeted ads. By the end of 2018, we aim to make it possible for anyone on Facebook to view all the ads that any Page is running, even if you are not in the audience for those ads. We began testing this in Canada and will launch it in the US by this summer, ahead of the US midterm elections in November. We plan to launch this to all other countries at around the same time.

2. **Disrupting the economic incentives for traffickers of false news.**

   i. Some false news is financially motivated. These spammers make money by masquerading as legitimate news publishers and posting hoax stories that encourage people to visit their sites, which are often mostly ads. We work hard to ensure bad actors cannot run such ads on Facebook or make money from our platform. Repeat offenders will no longer be allowed to advertise on Facebook.

   ii. We also work to identify pages that contain little substantive content, including hoaxes and false news, and have a large number of disruptive, Address: 38 Beach Road South Beach Tower, Level 22 Singapore 189767 shocking, or malicious ads. If a post links to low-quality web pages, it will show up lower in people's feeds and may not be eligible to run ads.

3. **Improving News Feed**

   i. We down-rank false news, misinformation and other types of low quality information such as spam, by improving the way posts, videos, and articles appear in News Feed. We use signals that people on Facebook produce to de-prioritize content that is inauthentic, including hoaxes and misinformation. Down ranking a piece of content means it will appear lower down on a user's News Feed.

   ii. In January, we began tests in the US to prioritize news from publications that the community rates as trustworthy. For this test, we surveyed a diverse and representative sample of people using Facebook across the US to gauge their familiarity with, and trust in, various different sources of news. This data will help inform ranking in News Feed, and help us ensure that the news that people see on Facebook is high quality. We plan to launch this internationally after we have learned from our test in the US and refined our approach.

   iii. We have also made updates so people see fewer posts and ads in News Feed that link to low-quality web page experiences, such as 'click bait', sensationalism or spam. We also found that if reading an article makes people significantly less likely to share it, that may be a sign that a story has misled people in some way. We are incorporating this signal into ranking, specifically for articles that are outliers, where people who read the article are significantly less likely to share it.

4. **Empowering our community and partners like journalists, fact-checkers, policymakers, and educators.**

   i. We empower people on Facebook to better understand the content they see on our platform through initiatives like:

a) **Article Context:** For links to articles shared in News Feed, we are testing a button that people can tap to easily access additional information without needing to go elsewhere. The additional contextual information is pulled from across Facebook and other sources, such as information from the publisher's Wikipedia entry, a button to follow their Page, trending articles or related articles about the topic, and information about how the article is being Address: 38 Beach Road South Beach Tower, Level 22 Singapore 189767 shared by people on Facebook. In some cases, if that information is unavailable, we will let people know, which can also be helpful context.

b) **Educational Tools:** In consultation with First Draft (a non-profit dedicated
to   improving skills and standards in the reporting and sharing of information online), we launched an educational tool to help people spot false news. We featured this tool at the top of News Feed for a few days to people on Facebook in 14 countries, often in preparation for elections. We featured this in Singapore in September 2017. When people click on this educational tool at the top of their News Feed, they will see more information and resources in the Facebook Help Center, including tips on how to spot false news, such as

checking the URL of the site, investigating the source and looking for other reports on the topic.

ii.   For our partners in **journalism** and the news industry, we launched the Facebook Journalism Project (FJP) last year. FJP provides tools and training to newsrooms globally, and has changed how we work with publishers, by enabling us to collaborate and integrate feedback on tools as we build them. Since launching FJP last year, we have trained over 700 journalists from newsrooms in Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia and Japan.

iii. With partners in **education and research. and the news industry**, we created the **News Integrity Initiative (NII)**. NII supports research on news literacy, fact-checking and improving trust in the news industry worldwide. NII's work includes events in the Asia-Pacific region such as:

a) In June 2017, we convened the **APAC News Literacy Working Group** with Hong Kong University (HKU) and the Society of Publishers Asia. We gathered 40 news literacy experts from across Asia, including from Singapore's MLC, to discuss and commit to ideas on how to advance news literacy in the region. We will reconvene this group in Sydney in April 2018 and have invited Singaporean experts to attend.

b) We continue to support the media industry, including **WAN-IFRA** and the **Society of Publishers Asia**. We are also supporting the **East West Center's International Media Conference** to be held here in Singapore in June 2018.

iv.   For **policymakers, politicians and their staff**, we have created a training process to help them enhance their cyber security and awareness for how their accounts could be hacked or abused. During high profile events such as elections, times of conflict, or political turmoil, the accounts of political candidates, elected officials, and staff are at higher risk of threats and abuse. We help them learn how to be proactive and look for signals that their accounts could be harmed, and how to report fake accounts to us. We regularly conduct such trainings in Singapore, including for staff from political parties, government ministries and agencies.

5. **Enabling people to be more civically engaged.**

    i. Facebook enables people to connect with their policymakers, representatives, and enables politicians to communicate with their electorate. We have launched a variety of election tools in different markets. In Singapore, we plan to work with government agencies, including the Elections Department and Ministry of Communications and Information ahead of the next General Elections to ensure that we are rolling out the right tools to help.

In addition, we would like to reiterate our commitment to combating **hate spee**ch on our platforms. There is no place for hate speech on Facebook. We will remove hate speech when it is identified. We have a team of experts who continually develop and update our Community Standards to ensure we improve our policies, and that they reflect changing trends and local context. This underscores our commitment to ensuring that deliberate online falsehoods do not cause social discord or disrupt the integrity of the political process globally and here in Singapore.

Our Commitments in Singapore

We have conducted a number of initiatives in Singapore to help build an informed community here. We work closely with the Media Literacy Council (MLC), of which I am an active member.

Along with the MLC, the InfoComm and Media Development Authority (IMDA) and partners like Touch Community Services, we have conducted a number of initiatives to enhance media literacy through public and private campaigns, workshops and dialogues. Last September, we partnered with the MLC to distribute 130,000 posters (in English, Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil) to local neighbourhoods around Singapore to raise awareness of how to spot false news. In the same month, we also launched a public service announcement on "How to Spot False News" on our Singapore Facebook page, which reached over tens of thousands of people on Facebook in Singapore.

These partnerships build upon other major initiatives in Singapore to encourage respectful and positive online behaviour:

1. In 2014, we launched our **Think Before You Share guide** aimed at helping students understand the impact of what they share online.

2. In 2015, in partnership with the MLC, we launched the **Bullying Prevention Hub** - a resource for students, parents and teachers to deal with online bullying.

3. In 2017, in partnership with the MLC, we hosted a **Parents Workshop** to equip parents with digital literacy skills, so they can also engage their children online.

4. On 5th December 2017, we partnered with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) to launch **#SpeakupSpeakout**, an initiative to train community and religious leaders on how to counter hate and radical

ideologies online. On 27th January 2018, we conducted a workshop for racial, religious and community leaders at the National Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circle Convention hosted by President Halimah Yacob. We are committed to continue conducting regular #SpeakupSpeakout trainings in Singapore throughout the year.

We have also launched local initiatives under the *Facebook Journalism Project*. In July and August 2017, we conducted workshops here with both journalists and media outlets, including members from The Straits Times and the Asian Journalism Fellowship. We continue to explore practical opportunities to build on these initiatives, and are open to ideas on how and where we can do more.

Adopting an Innovative and Iterative Approach

Finally, we understand that the Select Committee is also considering whether any specific measures, including legislation, should be taken to prevent and combat online falsehoods. We do not believe that legislation is the best approach to addressing the issue. Singapore already has a variety of existing laws and regulations which addresses hate speech, defamation and the spreading of false news including the Telecommunications Act, the Protection from Harassment Act, the Penal Code, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and others.

Instead, we believe in the need to adopt an innovative and iterative approach, as prescriptive legislation and requirements would make it harder for us and other online platforms to find the right technical solutions, consumer messaging, and policies to address this shared challenge.

For example, we recently experimented with "Disputed Flags" on pieces of "questionable content" on Facebook to see if this would slow the spread of misinformation. We learned through real world testing and academic research on correcting misinformation, that this "disputed flag" was not the most effective feature at slowing the spread of misinformation. In some cases, it may actually entrench deeply held beliefs – the opposite effect to what we intended. Another product called "Related Articles", by contrast, is designed to give more context, which our research so far has shown is a more effective way to help people get to the facts and slow the spread of misinformation. Indeed, we have found that when we show Related Articles next to a false news story, it leads to fewer shares than when the Disputed Flag is shown.

As we have acknowledged, false news undermines the unique value that Facebook offers: empowering our community to connect with their family and friends in meaningful ways. That is why we are investing in better technology and more people to help prevent the spread of misinformation. Overall, we are making progress. Demoting false news (as identified by fact-checkers) is one of our best weapons because demoted articles typically lose 80 percent of their traffic. This destroys the economic incentives spammers and troll farms have to generate these articles in the first place.

We will also continue to monitor the evolving tactics of the purveyors of misinformation and to experiment with product features (assessed with rigorous

research and testing) to slow the spread of misinformation. These efforts need to be ongoing and iterative, rather than constrained by ideology or legislation. Suffice to say, a set of legislative requirements around an approach to false news would make it harder to adjust and update our approach in light of ongoing evidence and research based on behavioural psychology and science, among other disciplines.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for giving us the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. The challenge of deliberate online falsehoods and misinformation is complex. Over the past year, we have been actively engaging the community, industry and your government on this issue, including with the Ministry of Law, the Ministry of Communications and Information, and the Prime Minister's Office. We have also worked with local partners to launch product, policy and community solutions.

Through these engagements, we have learned that there are no silver bullets in the battle against deliberate online falsehoods and misinformation. We know that it takes all of us - government, industry, academia, students, teachers and publishers to address the issue. We thus appreciate your government's thoughtfulness to carefully study how other governments have approached the issue, instead of rushing into legislation or adopting knee-jerk responses which could be counter-productive to your efforts.

On our part, we are investing in product, policy, programs and people to aid this effort. The doubling of our safety and security team to 20,000 people this year is a case in point. We also believe that building an informed community is critical to this effort, and will continue to invest in media and digital literacy efforts in Singapore with our local partners to develop this important pillar in the fight against online falsehoods and misinformation.

We look forward to working with you and fellow members of your government and the Singaporean community at large to confront this challenge together.

Yours Sincerely,

Alvin Tan
Head of Public Policy, Southeast Asia