

Written Representation 111

Name: Anonymous

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Dear sir/madam

I would like to provide the following feedback to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods with respect to its terms of reference and the Green Paper:

1. Existing laws are more than sufficient to address potential problems

Based on the current evidence, deliberate online falsehoods are not a major problem in Singapore. Even if they reach the scale of potentially causing significant widespread harm, there are existing laws with wideranging powers that are more than sufficient to address them, for example the IMDA online licensing regime, the Sedition Act, the Telecommunications Act and so on.

2. Concern on increasing the scope of censorship

As a citizen, I would like to register concerns on increasing the scope of censorship when existing laws and powers are already wide-ranging. The definition of "deliberate online falsehoods" is extremely broad and it would be concerning if new legislation could result in a wide range of normal activities by individual citizens potentially being criminalised, or resulting in investigation and/or prosecution of speech by individual citizens that is not specifically related to harmful acts.

In addition, it is concerning that individuals' online speech could be restricted solely based on nationality, in the absence of evidence of specific intent relating to harmful acts. Singapore is an open society with a large proportion of non-citizen residents, workers and visitors, and such legislation could have significant chilling effects on their ability to navigate online spaces, which already constitute a large part of our social and professional lives today. Such effects could be damaging to Singapore's international reputation and the dynamism of our society.

My concern is also with regard to the effectiveness and proportionality of targeting censorship and enforcement actions at individuals' speech, given that the power of misinformation to cause harm is proportional to the socioeconomic and/or political power wielded by the source.

3. More censorship is not a sustainable solution to problematic speech and social divisions

Building a more open and just society with avenues of expression for all is a more effective method for building social trust and strengthening society. It is especially important for specific efforts to be made to ensure that the perspectives and interests of people from marginalised backgrounds and experiences are sought out and represented fairly.

The Green Paper positions Singapore as having achieved an ideal, steady state of racial and religious harmony. As a citizen, I have a concern that genuine attempts at discourse around the still extant issues and inequalities will then be framed as problematic or disruptive in of themselves. This could lead to a culture of fear or even apathy around speaking up about concerns and problems. Such a culture could seriously impede our ability as a society to first of all build empathy by acknowledging difficulties faced by fellow members of society, and to tackle those problems to seek collective resolutions and better outcomes for all.

Speaking up about existing inequalities, injustices and social divisions should not be seen as manufacturing those divisions in the first instance.

4. Improve media literacy and standards of discourse

In addition to building a more just and open society, it is also important to equip everyone with the skills and information to critically engage with the media they encounter, whether online or otherwise. This should be more substantive and extend beyond the current approach of raising courtesy standards on social media which was adopted by the Media Literacy Council in collaboration with the Singapore Kindness Movement. It could include educational material on how to spot typical signs of hoaxes, scams and propaganda, and skills relating to evaluating information based on factors such as corroborating evidence, sources and power relations.

These critical skills should be fostered at all age levels, from school-going students to adults and older persons. It is more sustainable to empower people to identify and reject problematic, malicious or inciting speech at the onset. As a society, we should also continue to build spaces where members of society, including citizens and non-citizens, can address and discuss challenging topics without fear of censorship or prosecution.

It is also important to raise the standards of public discourse. We should promote evidence-based discourse and practices, underpinned by fundamental principles of respecting and valuing all members of society. As such, my hope is that government bodies and public sector entities can take the lead in promoting evidencebased policy and robust discourse.