

## Written Representation 125

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Received: 7 Mar 2018

### **SUBMISSION BY MEDIACORP TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS**

#### **A. Introduction**

1. Mediacorp welcomes the proposal by the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Law to set up a Select Committee to examine and report on the issue of deliberate online falsehoods ("DOF") and to look into measures of how Singapore can prevent and combat DOF.
2. With the pervasiveness of internet usage in Singapore and the omnipresence of social media, the proliferation of DOF is a phenomenon that cannot and should not be ignored. Problems from the spread of disinformation is not an issue for the Government alone as it impacts all members of our society.
3. Actions that we would like to suggest to the Select Committee to look into to help fight the spread of DOF include:
  - (a) Regulating Technology Enablers;
  - (b) Harnessing the collective strength and efforts of Online Users; and
  - (c) Legislating against Purveyors of DOF.

#### **B. REGULATING TECHNOLOGY ENABLERS TO BATTLE THE SCOURGE OF FALSEHOOD**

4. As noted in the Green Paper, while digital technologies have been extremely positive enablers, technology has also been abused to spread falsehood, weakening and damaging societies in the process.
5. The Green Paper had further noted the efforts and steps taken by technology companies like Facebook using artificial intelligence to detect and delete

bots, fake accounts and pages, and by Google taking steps to modify its search ranking systems to prevent falsehoods from entering the top results for particular search terms, and both technology giants have banned sites that peddle false stories from their advertising networks.

6. That said, the actions currently taken by these technology giants are reactive and may be driven by political interests / affiliations or even social backlash from the perception that they themselves may be contributing to the spread of DOF in the first place. The Select Committee may want to look into regulations to compel these technology companies to address and reduce the spread of DOF through these actions:

(a) In the case of technology enablers that enable the swift and vast proliferation of the spread of DOF particularly through their large and enormous user base (examples like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook). While such technology platforms are often not the source of any DOF themselves, the nature of their technology and platforms permit the proliferation and spread of DOF easily and widely amongst the billions or millions of users that use their platforms. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow DOF to spread widely and easily, hence posts going viral. Even platforms and applications that started as private messaging platforms, for example, *WeChat*, have grown beyond just a mere messaging platform. We urge the Select Committee to consider requiring such enablers to also "disable" and/or "undo" any DOF that were proliferated on / through their platforms.

(b) Technology platforms that curate and/or disseminate news (examples like Google News and Facebook News Feed) actually have the ability of controlling and disseminating selective news for and to its users. As such technology platforms are not news agencies, like Mediacorp, which is licensed and exercises journalistic integrity, there will always be a potential that the news that are curated and disseminated may be driven by other factors and considerations that may run contrary to a neutral and centric news narrative. The Select Committee should also

consider if there should be any recourse or punitive penal framework against such news-like platforms should they proliferate any DOF which they curate.

- (c) Additionally, technology platforms are profit driven and provide an avenue for advertising. For example, Google reportedly discovered evidence that Russian operatives exploited Google's platforms in an attempt to interfere in the 2016 USA Presidential Election through ads by Russian agents spreading disinformation across Google's many products. The Select Committee should also consider if advertising on such platforms need to be reviewed and be subject to any regulatory requirements/overview.

### **C. HARNESSING THE COLLECTIVE STRENGTH AND EFFORTS OF ONLINE USERS**

- 7. Technology platforms and technology enablers, while playing a large and critical role in the dissemination of DOF, the common man and each of their independent responsibility also have a part to play.
- 8. In the minds of many of the men on the street, "fake news" and DOF are often equated with political maneuvers designed to influence election results. Even in cases where disinformation had resulted in health scares, these are often dismissed as problems happening in other countries, will not happen in Singapore and is an issue to be dealt with by the Government. In short, there is often a lack of awareness that each individual has a role to play and can help with the efforts to combat the spread of DOF. On the contrary, is it the case that the individual feels no responsibility in the spread of DOF or that the anonymity of the Internet "encourages" the individual to simply "forward" without due care or consideration as to the truthfulness of whatever it is that they are onward spreading?
- 9. A comprehensive program to create awareness in the public on why it is

important for each individual to play a part in helping to combat DOF, and how each individual has an integral and essential role to play in helping to curb DOF is fundamental and must be a priority. This should include efforts and campaigns to educate the public, and instill the knowledge and awareness in students through it being a compulsory component in the school curriculum. Especially students, must be taught to be more discerning and employ a thought process before assuming or taking for granted whatever they read online or in forwarded messages. Beyond the political and social discourse, the public and students should be educated on how disinformation if allowed to be unchecked can affect us in our day-to-day lives with easy to understand scenarios that are relatable to the men on the street.

10. Greater awareness and understanding of how allowing such disinformation to continue unchecked can cause considerable harm to themselves, the lives of their family and friends can help spur online users to take an interest to help check DOF and to stem indiscriminate spreading of news or information received online. In that way, the Government can draw on and harness the collective strength and efforts of the large number of online users to help to curb the spread of DOF.
11. Key to such a program is also to educate the public to question, check and verify pieces of news and information that they receive online, especially when such news do not originate from trusted sources. For such an effort to be effective and sustainable, it must be supported by a mainstream media that is and will be viewed and perceived as a trusted source of true, accurate and, most importantly, unbiased, centric and neutral reporting.
12. The Select Committee may also wish to consider setting up an independent fact-checking body that will provide easily accessible fact-checking facilities such that users will have an easy and robust resource to fact-check.

#### **D. LEGISLATING AGAINST PURVEYORS OF DOF**

13. While we do not propose additional legislation be implemented to govern online content as that may result in the wrong perception that the Government is trying to impose more censorship or controls on online content, the Select Committee should also consider if the present body of legislation and framework, ranging from the Defamation Act to the Seditious Offences Act, are sufficient to address all measures of DOF, especially towards originators and purveyors of DOF. We are cognizant of the myriad of reasons why DOF are spread. As mentioned above, it might simply be the case of the average Joe not caring and simply "forwarding" without due thought or consideration on one end of the spectrum versus the deliberate dissemination of DOF for other reasons. We have already witnessed some who are driven by a profit motive and the damage that it has caused. If the DOF stemmed from mischief, or worst, some malicious or nefarious reasons, the damage and harm that these can cause could be immeasurable. The Select Committee should consider if specific legislation or regulatory intervention is required to directly address the latter form of purveyors of DOF.
14. Of course, any such legislative or regulatory intervention should not seek to impose censorship or controls on content or access to information. There is a delicate balance to be maintained and we would urge the Select Committee to have due consideration as to whether or not such legislative or regulatory intervention can be specific to the purveyors of such malicious or nefarious DOF. Perhaps the Select Committee may wish to consider a two-fold test, (a) intent (which admittedly is often difficult to prove)-whether it was motivated by malice or just simply ignorance; and (b) extent of harm and damage caused.
15. A holistic review of the existing legislation must be undertaken to ensure that originators and purveyors of DOF for malicious or nefarious intent can be swiftly and effectively dealt with to serve as effective deterrents to counter the scourge of DOF.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

16. With the prevalence of information online and ease on which such information may be spread, galvanizing the strength of online users with the aid of technology to curb the spread of DOF will be an important move in addressing the problem.