

Written Representation 151

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Introduction

TWC2 and HOME are advocates for fair treatment of migrant workers in Singapore. We publish articles on our website and social media through interviews with workers as conducted by staff and volunteers.

The articles are made up of first-hand accounts of workers and the occasional editorials that help give context to the issues they face.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) occasionally takes issue with some of these articles, calling them inaccurate, among other accusations.

This submission to the Select Committee is thus derived from the benefit of retrospection and engagement with the MOM, and the anticipation of how this framework on “online falsehoods” can impact our work.

The status quo

Out of the many stories and articles published, only an exceptional few are highlighted to contain errors and inaccuracies. By and large therefore, we should be awarded the goodwill of established credibility and not be subsumed within questionable websites and social media groups with unknown backers and agendas.

The “inaccuracies” in our articles do not stem from a deliberate attempt to mislead but could be due to one of the following:

- The lack of access to certain facts of the case
- The intention to highlight an aspect of a case with a macro view
- An incomplete picture as related by the worker / misinterpretation by the case worker

Since they are essentially write-ups of workers’ accounts and recollections, the stories do sometimes differ from the MOM’s interpretations.

We have offered the MOM the opportunity to publish their response or correction just as mainstream media do. MOM has not taken up this offer but has instead countered our stories by publishing notes on their social media page, detailing our “mistakes”.

They make the following points to assert that we circulate “fake news”:

- We do not conform to journalistic standards of fact-checking, accuracy and objectivity

- The incorrect details result in faulty conclusions
- We use one-sided accounts that are unhelpful to the workers represented in the article

Problems with a “fake news” stance

We verify facts to the best of our ability. Workers are often unable to procure documentary evidence and thus base their accounts on memory of conversations or of documents seen briefly but withheld by employers. The lack of documentary proof does not mean the workers are untruthful.

There therefore needs to be a distinction between an intentional malicious lie that sullies the reputation of a government ministry, and an honest portrayal that reflects the reality as perceived by the worker.

All content is by nature, biased as measured against one’s personal opinion on an issue. It does not mean however, that they are automatically misleading and one-sided.

Incomplete accounts do not necessarily distort the truth or gist of the story. Instead, they help give a complete picture of the details that were significant to the workers personally when they recount their stories.

Our recommendation

Given the differences in interpretation and inherent difficulty in defining “online falsehoods”, there should not be new legislation to deal with the problem

Current laws are adequate and entities that feel they have been misrepresented have right of reply.

If parliament is to enact new laws against online falsehoods however, it is our recommendation that the following be guarded against:

- 1.** Fake news should be narrowly defined as deliberately manufactured falsehoods. Errors and different interpretations or slant should be outside the scope.
- 2.** There should not be presumption that any assertion by any government-linked party is necessarily true. Tests for truth must be applied symmetrically. Government-linked parties must likewise reveal their sources and backing information if they wish to assert that something said by others is false.
- 3.** Considerable leeway should be allowed for differences in interpretation of facts, including leeway for speculative comment, so long as it is clear to the reasonable reader that comment is opinion or reasonable speculation.
- 4.** Errors must be seen within the context of the entire article. Leeway should be given to errors of minor points if the general thrust is itself not fake.