Written Representation 156

Name: Lim Shi Mei and Benjamin Yiwen Smith
        Postgraduate Student

Received: 7 Mar 2018

REPRESENTATION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS - CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES

Dear members of the committee,

        As two Singaporeans pursuing postgraduate studies in the US, we have observed first-hand the effect of fake news on national cohesion and policy. We had been concerned that online falsehoods could have a similar, if not even more detrimental, effect on our home which we look forward to returning to at the end of our studies.

2.   We are therefore glad to see the committee addressing online falsehoods and deeply appreciate the extension of the deadline to allow for the submission of further comments. We would like to respectfully suggest several issues for the committee's consideration.

Inoculation

3.   When dealing with online falsehoods, the natural impulse to counter it with the truth is not only inadequate, it might even be counter-productive. Any attempt to rebut online falsehood will run into several problems:

    a. Volume: Bearing only a passing relationship to the truth, online falsehoods are easier to manufacture than fact-checked rebuttals. Furthermore, online falsehoods are likely to come from a variety of sources, while the onus of rebuttal may fall disproportionately on central authorities like government.

    b. Primacy: Psychological studies have found that the first piece of information an individual receives is likely to be the stickiest information in their memory - the primacy effect. Because online falsehoods do not need to be fact-checked, they are in the ideal position to be the first out the gate to reach audiences and later, more accurate reporting, will face an uphill task in displacing them[1].

    c. Inadvertent amplification: Any rebuttal of a falsehood unavoidably involves a reference to, if not an outright repetition of, the falsehood. This risks amplifying its message by drawing further attention to it.

---

[1] Paul, Christopher and Miriam Matthews. The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html

4.   Therefore, the best solution to online falsehood is to inoculate the target audience against its message through media literacy education and countermessaging.

a. Media literacy education: Much of the public's susceptibility to online falsehoods boils down to a lack of media savvy. This includes an inability to recognise the hallmarks of online falsehoods, such as sensationalised headlines and a lack of sources, and the lack of instinct to fact-check before reacting. Singapore could cooperate with NGOs such as IREX, which has worked with the Ukrainian government on media literacy campaigns to counter Russian disinformation efforts, to roll out nationwide media literacy campaigns[2].

b. Counter-messaging: Counter-messaging involves the identification of common themes or inaccuracies in online falsehoods, and the crafting and spreading of messages which provide credible alternatives beforehand. Counter-terrorism efforts offer some useful lessons here in which countermessaging efforts generally work best when they are generated by the target community itself as this assures both salience and credibility of the message. In wider application for online falsehoods, this means that the Singapore government will need to continue to partner with other social actors depending on the falsehoods which are expected to arise.

5.   Admittedly these inoculation measures will not be the end-all and be-all. They might work on online falsehoods designed to perpetuate a certain political agenda or worldview, or sensationalist reporting. However, they will be less effective on more tactical falsehoods, such as claims that there has been in a terrorist attack which are designed to sow confusion or draw first responders to a specific location for targeting. Nonetheless, a public which fact-checks its news might at least not exacerbate tactical falsehoods by thoughtlessly amplifying such messages and spreading panic.

Legislation and trust in the government

6.   We propose that although additional legislation may be helpful for ordering takedowns of false online content, the government may wish to avoid seeking further enforcement or punitive powers to deal with online falsehoods. To begin with, there is no real need for additional legislation targeting online falsehoods generally. Although the threat of online falsehoods proliferating is real, it is important to recognize that the heart of the matter is fundamentally how a society should deal with the truth. Singapore law has already laid out the red lines of where falsehoods cannot be tolerated. Laws dealing with mischief, fraud, slander and libel, and the Internal Security Act already provide avenues for addressing the assorted kinds of falsehoods which could be perpetuated online. Further legislation is likely to either be too granular to be uniformly and universally enforceable (e.g targeting every person who spreads an online falsehood), or so broad as to risk creating the impression of abuse (e.g applying to such a broadly defined class of alleged falsehoods that very wide discretion would need to be given to the authorities to prescribe the boundaries of the law in practice).

---

[2] https://www.irex.org/project/learn-discern-schools-l2d-s

7.   The impression of abuse is particularly insidious because it could create a situation in which online falsehoods could thrive. Online falsehoods thrive when there is a lack of trust in centralised sources of information such as the government or mainstream media. In such a scenario, people become more receptive to alternative sources of news, and over time, might imbibe an inaccurate set of facts and narratives.

8.   In Singapore's context, one such narrative which enjoys considerable attention online emphasises the unreliability of the Singapore government. Although the Singapore government has a strong track record and enjoys a generally high level of trust, there is a real risk that the wave of distrust in institutions sweeping the world could be mirrored locally. As such, one area the committee might also wish to consider is how counter-messaging efforts might be developed and deployed to pre-empt distrust in the government. These counter-messaging efforts would be made truly persuasive if accompanied by measures designed to either add checks on the government, (e.g. creation of an ombudsman's office, or including more opposition MPs and NMPs in select committees), or to increase transparency (e.g. implementing a freedom of information act, or continued improvements in communicating rationales for public policy decisions).

Yours respectfully,

Lim Shi Mei
Benjamin Yiwen Smith