Written Representation 159

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SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON THE ISSUE OF DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS

Mothership is a Singaporean digital media company made of a group of Singaporeans who care deeply about issues that affect Singapore and Singaporeans.

We do not believe in hiding behind false identities — all our names and pictures are displayed prominently on our website.

We also complied twice with the now-named Info-communications Media Development Authority in April 2014 and in July 2015 to register ourselves under Section 9 of the Broadcasting Act (declaring that we received no foreign funding) as well as to be individually licensed under Section 8 of the Act (one of 3 local companies that have done so).

Since our official site launch in February 2014, we are grateful to have received much support from Singaporeans. More than 1.9 million visitors in Singapore visit and interact with us every month and this number continues to grow. We have worked with more than 100 public and private sector clients, and we help them connect with our audiences online through our content and community marketing services.

The concern of any form of foreign influence impinging on our site's activities, integrity or operations — particularly in the form of misleading online falsehoods that could compromise our nation's security — is, therefore, of course, one that we are mindful of.

In the interest of our readers, we wish to share in this submission our views regarding the issue of deliberate online falsehoods.

This, we hope you will find, is a position consistent with where we have always stood. Why this issue is pertinent

Why this issue is pertinent

We now live in an age where information and ideas flow more freely than ever before, with the world consuming more content and data than ever before. The media space is vibrant, creative and interactive with an explosion of public expression of views and

opinions, because anyone with a connection to the Internet can be part of it and contribute to it.

But at the same time, the media industry is under siege. Technology has turned news and information into tradable, low cost and public commodities. Open distribution networks and access now bypass and significantly diminish the role of traditional media and the journalist. The dominion of Facebook and Google in global advertising revenue aside, audiences are also increasingly unwilling to pay for content.

With the exception of a handful of new organisations that have bucked the trend, most experience continued declines in subscriptions, viewership and readership. There is just too much information.

In Singapore, the role of the media is as unique as our society. As a first world economy, our media industry is one of the most regulated in the world. That said, of course, being regulated does not mean being restricted. Singapore is also one of the easiest places to set up a business, media or otherwise.

Our social and cultural diversity is both a boon and a bane. Diversity brings the flow of ideas, but also gives rise to fault lines.

In our daily interactions with our audiences, we have observed that the majority of Singaporeans are discerning and reasonable. Our audiences often self-regulate and proactively call out lies, mistakes and cruelty. However, it is technology that directly drives the information superhighways and not people. In the social media age, the failure to effectively and accurately factor human emotional complexity into its computing codes has given rise to what we commonly refer to as "echo chambers".

Operatives who deal in deliberate online misinformation and falsehoods understand this human bias and inclination to prefer and seek out opinions they agree with all too well. They exploit this and create alternate realities to serve their own agenda, be they financial or otherwise.

The Singapore success story is not just an economic one, but also a social one. That we have a Chinese Prime Minister, a Malay President and an Indian Chief Justice does not come naturally or by chance, this delicate social equilibrium is something we believe that all media platforms in Singapore must protect and preserve.

We are clear in our position that matters relating to the following concerns should never be subject to any attempts at deliberate falsehoods and misinformation, especially from outsiders:

1. Race and Religion
2. National Security
3. National Identity
4. Social Cohesion

How we tackle online falsehoods

As an active participant in Singapore's growing digital space, we are mindful of the challenges of striking a unique balance between informing and entertaining our audience. We are ultimately beholden to our audience and they are our priority in everything we do.

We are mindful of the responsibility that is lent to us for those few moments by Singaporeans who read us daily. Hence, we are sensitive to the need to constantly build a strong relationship of trust, reliability and credibility with our audiences.

The challenges presented by parties that spread online falsehoods make this a particularly difficult task. At Mothership, we have a group of editors who closely examine, give thought to, edit for clarity and double-check facts in the articles our writers work on before publishing and distributing it to our social platforms and on our live site.

While we have not always succeeded in this endeavour, having made mistakes in the past, we are nonetheless serious about helping our audiences become more discerning about what is legitimate, factual and true, and what isn't, as well as how to spot examples of the latter.

One of our efforts in this regard, for instance, is a section on our site that specifically hosts articles debunking false stories from various sources online.

Supporting community efforts offline

Over the past year, we were among the most active online platforms engaging the community in public discourse on issues related to fake news.

Representatives from our company have previously participated in public forums and community efforts that addressed the issues and challenges in combating fake news. They included our participation:

• On a panel at the Institute of Policy Studies' Asian Journalism Forum on Reporting Facts and the Future of Journalism (August 2017)
• As part of a group of industry mentors together with *Channel News Asia*, *The Straits Times*, and the Media Literacy Council at the Fake News Must Die Hackathon organised by Google Asia Pacific (14 October 2017)
• As a speaker at the #Call to Action: Fake News, Misinformation and Post-Truth forum organised by the SMU Libraries (November 2017).

We have in the past year also hosted visits from students and journalists who were interested to understand the Singapore online space and our editorial policies (our fact checking processes, our views on fake news etc.). They include:

• 22 Mass Communication students from Republic Polytechnic across two days (27 and 28 April 2017)
• 16 Fellows from Asian Journalism Forum and 4 coordinators (8 September 2017)

- 13 Temasek Polytechnic Students (marketing, design, IT) and 2 coordinators (20 September 2017) 1. If the government chooses the way of more regulation or introducing new legislation, we urge lawmakers to consider its **impact on the flow of ideas and creativity**, in view of the current scenario in Singapore — a local media industry that is languishing. Would we risk government-regulated media being viewed with increased scepticism by Singaporeans who increasingly desire differing perspectives?

But more needs to be done, of course. We wish to take this opportunity to share a few concerns we have that we hope the Parliamentary Committee will consider in weighing its options regarding this issue, as well as a few recommendations of steps that can be taken.

On legislating against deliberate online falsehoods

Should the Parliamentary Select Committee be contemplating about enacting legislation in its recommendations to the government, we have a number of concerns that we hope can be considered in the decision-making process:

1. If the government chooses the way of more regulations or introducing new legislation, we urge lawmakers to consider its **impact on the flow of ideas and creativity**, in view of the current scenario in Singapore — a local media industry that is languishing. Would we risk government-regulated media being viewed with increased scepticism by Singaporeans who increasingly desire differing perspectives?

2. How does the government plan to regulate the **complex network of "micro" players** — WhatsApp chat groups, Facebook discussion groups (open and closed), individual influencers — who all have a part to play in perpetuating and creating online falsehoods? These are the players who form not entirely a small amount of influence on Singaporeans' social media feeds that cannot be ignored or dismissed.

3. We hope that the government can provide clarity and discernment on **the difference between deliberate attempts to mislead and misinform and genuine editorial mistakes and oversights**. Additionally, we also hope it will decide and state clearly how exactly, concretely, the government would intend — if at all — to deal with the latter.

Apart from this, we have a few points to make that we hope the government can also consider in its deliberation process:

a) *Applicable legislation does already exist*
   We believe that existing legislation is sufficient to deal with online falsehoods and misinformation, especially for sites like ours. If the government is concerned about deliberate online falsehoods influencing an election, the way it did in the 2016 U.S. election, rules that prevent this are provided for in the Parliamentary Elections Act, such as for Cooling-Off Day.

We humbly suggest that parliamentarians consider refining the PEA instead of creating new laws that could be exploited by the government of the day to advance political agenda contrary to public interests.

b) *Defining and applying the term "fake news" in practice*
It is difficult to define "fake news" or even "deliberate online falsehoods" for that matter, given how abstract both those terms are. It is therefore crucial that different ministries have the same understanding of what they mean, or what they are, and when remedy actions will be required.

The Ministry of Law is clear about the issue, with Minister for Law and Home Affairs K Shanmugam elucidating clearly in his speech at a forum last June the nature of challenges with deliberate online falsehoods and what Singapore should do about them. Notably, he mentioned unintentional reporting failures, where there "was no deliberate intention to create fake news", saying that "we have to treat it slightly different from the other types of fake news".

That said, the Ministry of Education in one instance last year broadened the definition of "fake news" to label an unintentional reporting mistake (the misattribution of the MOE Director-General's comments at a conference) as "fake news". In seeking recourse, the ministry sought either a correction, which is normal procedure, or the immediate removal of the article — a more extreme scenario that will become a much more distinct possibility if new legislation for this is introduced.

We wish to submit that if the government were given the power to order immediate removal of "fake" or "false" news through legislation, this will deprive both government and society the opportunity to build critical thinking around information, especially if the issues discussed are not related to matters of security, race and religion.

c) *Defining and applying the term "fake news" in practice*
As we mentioned earlier, there already exists extensive legislation for media companies that range from the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (for print publications), the Broadcasting Act (for TV and radio broadcasters) and the Class License registration (for online content providers).

We wish to suggest that any new legislation or policy measures that are taken by the government should tackle the social challenges posed by technological changes, as well as the companies that pave the way for this development. While large and foreign tech companies can argue that they are not publishers, they are platforms that possess massive broadcasting influence and ability, neither of which currently come under the jurisdiction of any existing media-related legislation.

Considerations for social media, large tech companies

We are cognisant of the pivotal role that large international tech companies have to play in the media landscape, seen both here and around the world. We have observed small moves by Facebook (for instance, to its News Feed) and/or Google (through

search rankings and advertising) that are tailored for the Western markets that have gone on to severely (and often negatively) impact news consumption and distribution in many other countries these measures or tweaks were also applied to.

Both Facebook and Google have also massively amplified deliberate online falsehoods through crawlers and algorithms that failed to discern fact from fiction, while hiding behind the argument that they are mere platforms for the information — true or false.

In recognition of this, we also wish to register a few considerations regarding giants like Facebook and Google for the Committee to consider:

1. *Optimising offerings for local markets*
   Western ideas of freedom of expression and information have benefited the world, but are not universally applicable. In this age of continued fragmentation, every country, culture and society has varying needs and concerns that may be worth considering for each of these tech giants' regional offices.

   Rather than being accused by some that technological companies are privatising advertising profits from online virality and socialising social costs to the community, media and government, they could consider reviewing the way their systems work, in closer partnership with regulators, the media and the local community.

   Such efforts may be more effective in developing sharper and more defined solutions better suited for their host markets and countries.

2. *Putting accountability front and centre*
   While the importance of freedom of expression cannot be contested, it is a widely-acknowledged reality, especially in Singapore, that words and ideas hold the power to build and tear down. For us to continue to develop as a society, we must be held accountable for, and be prepared to stand behind, what we say.

   We hope tech companies will double up in their efforts in this regard, to place a renewed focus on accountability. Our view is this is especially crucial given their unique role in society, as well as their cause for democracy.

   One specific way this can be done is through the speedy identification and removal of fake or identity-impersonating Facebook accounts. We further hope that the likes of Facebook can develop technology to ensure there is only one person using one account each, and as far as possible, to ensure the account is linked to a named individual and not an avatar or a bot.

Conclusion

We are in full agreement that the issue of deliberate online falsehoods is a serious and complicated one that needs significant thought and consultation. We are therefore grateful that the government has opted to seek views from Singaporeans, experts,

industry players and members of the public alike, and are also glad to be given the opportunity to contribute our own.

It is our sincere hope that any course of action decided upon by the government will be a carefully considered one that factors in the above, the strong points made by numerous other parties and experts far more familiar with this field than we are, as well as the eventual ethos we have always had — to encourage young Singaporeans to care more, and think more, about Singapore.