

Written Representation 28

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Dear Sirs/Ma'ams,

I believe that the challenge of fake news should not be addressed by the use of harsh laws as a primary course of action. The strategy should rely on (a) education of students to be more discerning readers, (b) an easily accessible and reliable source of 'facts' on all policy issues, (c) cleverly designed online tools to help users sift fact from fiction, and (d) a forum for individuals to robustly debate dissenting opinions.

Allow me to elaborate on each.

(a) Education of students.

I propose that MOE revamp the secondary school syllabus to place a much stronger emphasis on critical reading and debating (which teaches individuals the art of disagreeing without disrespect, and also how to be critical of falsified facts). While debate has recently been made part of the syllabus, more can be done to ensure that young minds are taught the importance of being discerning about their online news consumption behaviour.

(b) Online Source of 'Facts'

Today, it is difficult for individuals to ascertain the 'truth' of issues because there is a dearth of facts on sensitive issues in Singapore. Given this information vacuum, unsavoury characters fill the void with believable fake news, to prey on sensitivities of various groups. If there was a reliable source of information that was NOT government curated (I propose for the creation of the Office Of Ombudsman to be a neutral arbiter to receive public requests for information and assess if government classified data should be revealed for the wider public good). A website should be created for the Ombudsman or whichever agency is assigned to disseminate such facts on sensitive policy issues. Where a new void of facts is discovered, the Government should quickly research and fill the void with objective facts, rather than letting the issue simmer.

(c) Engaging Tools to sift fact from fiction

As a personal project, I created www.confirm.sg as a gamified tool to help users sift fact from fiction and to test if the concept could work. The reach and 'stickyness' was significant, and the experiment proved to be successful. I recommend that the Government explore or support such projects which reach audiences with facts in a more engaging way than the very dry official websites such as gov.sg.

(d) Debate Forum

As another personal project, I created www.dialectic.sg as a custom-designed tool to encourage robust yet respectful debate on policy issues. As part of the project, I worked heavily with schools, and the feedback was that using the platform taught students how to critically analyse online text and engage with differing opinions in a more respectful way (which is not taught in schools today). While Reach is the official Government platform, it lacks the specific tools and algorithms to ensure a high quality of debate. Without such a platform, there is no societal 'venting' system to air dissenting views as 'opinions' and some individuals may resort to visiting less reputable online news sites to share their opinions as 'facts' instead.

I admit that I may not have the answers to the challenges of fake news, but I work with a team of volunteers who care deeply about such issues and would be glad to think this through in more detail, if any of the above ideas are of interest to the committee.

Thank you for your time.

cheers,

Gaurav