

## **Written Representation 37**

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### **Introduction**

1. I am currently a 21 year old male who has just completed my national service and awaiting matriculation into University. The purpose of this submission will be to provide the select committee with a youth's perspective of how Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods. While most of this submission will be based on anecdotal experiences, I hope that the committee will find those experiences useful in calibrating a long term approach toward combating the spread of fake news.

### **Assumptions**

2. On the topic of proposed solutions, one suggestion raised by the Ministry of Law would be to effectively transpose the 'offline' laws into the 'online realm; "The same rules should apply to cyberspace. People's lives are greatly intertwined with the digital world. Many receive and share information primarily through the Internet and social media." I find this suggestion likely to be ineffective and unlikely to contribute in the long term to combating the spread of 'Fake News'.
3. My aversion to the proposed solutions stems from a few observations. Firstly, the internet is an inherently ungovernable space. Attempting to police the flow of information in and out of Singapore would be practically impossible. Secondly, as pointed out in the green paper itself, the high rates of literacy and internet penetration facilitate the quick spread of information throughout Singapore. The proposed solutions would in my mind, be unable to prevent the public discourse from being affected by which pieces of 'Fake News' have been spread. Finally, the proposed solutions do not address the fundamental issue associated with 'Fake News', whereby once the news has spread, different segments of the population will be debating the issues on the basis of different 'facts'. This phenomenon was clearly observed in the US presidential election of 2016 and continues to be observed today.
4. In sum, the 3 main assumptions I would like to raise with regards to the issues are as follows. Firstly, the 'advent' of the internet age will render traditional legislating unable to react quickly enough to misinformation campaigns. Secondly, attempting to govern the internet as we do our physical spaces would be inherently difficult. Finally, there needs to be a solution which begins from the assumption that the misinformation has already been spread and accepted throughout our society.

## Solutions

5. One solution likely to be proposed by many would generally be along the lines of 'greater education'! While not misguided, what those proposing these solutions may not be aware is that there already exist such initiatives within our education syllabus. When I was in secondary school 5 years ago, a compulsory subject which every student had to undertake was 'Social Studies'. As part of the curriculum, we were taught to evaluate the reliability of 'sources', and consequently formulate a judgement on that basis. To this end, I would suggest that our education system does provide the necessary skills to inoculate our youths against the spread of 'Fake News'.
6. Another solution which may be proposed would be for the government to directly inform the people of what is 'Real' and what is 'Fake'. While this simplistic idea has been roundly rejected in parliament, I would suggest that the idea of the government playing a role in combating the spread of misinformation is not unthinkable. After all Singapore has a unique situation whereby government institutions are generally trusted by the populace.
7. Ultimately I would suggest that the overriding principle which should ultimately guide our nation's response toward the phenomenon of 'Fake News' should be that of transparency. This suggestion is based off the previous two assumptions that (a) our citizens, and in particular our youths, will be able to differentiate between credible and non-credible sources of information and (b) the populace does not instantly discount whatever our government claims.
8. In accordance with the principle of transparency, one possibility would be to create a mechanism, or in fact expand the role of SingStat, which enables citizens to request and gain access to non-sensitive governmental data. A simple example would illustrate the usefulness of such a solution. Suppose an online website publishes a claim that the ministry of defence spends an exorbitant amount on entertainment. The author doctors some receipts and documents to further support his point. Within hours, this claim spreads like wildfire and by the time it has been disproved, the damage has already been done and people have already lost faith in their government. Should an online platform through which citizens are able to request access to and even look up commonly available data be available, the moment such a false claim is raised, it is arguable that the factual data can quickly be retrieved and a counter narrative created. All this without the perceived interference of the government, would provide one effective manner through which our nation can combat the spread of misinformation. In such an instance, it is obvious that an increase in transparency will be an effective first layer of defence against the spread of misinformation.
9. Another principle through which a solution toward combating the spread of fake news and misinformation should be based upon would be that of continuous public education. Just as the government seeks to prepare members of the public on how to respond to say a terrorist attack, so too can the government play a part in preparing members of the public to a concerted misinformation campaign against our nation. Such a public education campaign can take on many forms

but would ultimately seek to empower citizens to spot attempts at misinformation and subsequently address the said attempts.

10. Ultimately, the aforementioned solutions are not in any way revolutionary or will they be the 'silver bullets' required to counter the rise of the 'Fake News' phenomenon. However, it is my hope that the principles which I have raised will provide a general frame through which our response to the 'Fake News' phenomenon can be calibrated. In my mind, the principles which I have raised are united in that they adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach toward dealing with the problem. In an era where the general public has an arguably shorter attention-span, any solution would ultimately require the participation of the entire society instead of relying upon our government to police our 'public squares'.