

Written Representation 52A

Name: Calvin Cheng Ern Lee
Entrepreneur

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Dear Chairman

Submission to Select Committee on Online Deliberate Falsehoods: Addendum

After submitting my views last week to the Select Committee, I had a chance to read some of the other submissions posted online - most of them focused on media literacy and education. I would like to share some of my experiences on this from my time on the Media Literacy Council.

Media Literacy and Education

One of the impetuses of the formation of the MLC right in the beginning, was Minister Yaacob Ibrahim's idea of an internet code of conduct in 2012. This however proved impossible right from the outset, because the council members, of varying political leanings, could not agree on what such a code would look like. Further initiatives by the secretariat of the MLC to issue a guide to media literacy also proved futile, as more liberal-leaning members of the MLC objected to the prescribing hard and fast rules on what constitutes media literacy. So the MLC was reduced to issuing broad guidelines such as "Check the sources" which in my opinion ultimately proved useless, since the whole problem in media literacy is deciding which sources are credible.

These debates can never be ended by any council or committee - apart from egregious examples of fake news, arguments on 'credibility', that have to be the foundation of any attempt to objectify guidelines to media literacy, are grounded on value judgements. 'Media Literacy' and 'Education' cannot solve fundamental disputes based on such value judgements. Neither can more access to information (e.g. a freedom of information act), as more information cannot resolve a fundamental disagreement on WHICH information sources should be considered credible. Witness the accusations from hyperpartisan individuals who are claiming to the committee that the People's Action Party is most responsible for the generation of fake news in Singapore.

It is thus my opinion, from my experience on the MLC, that education and literacy, so-called 'inoculation' or any such 'ground up' initiatives, are idealistic delusions in practice. They sound nice and uplifting, but there are few useful, practical implementations.

The only solution has to be top-down. An elected government has to make value judgements on behalf of the country, and decide what constitutes deliberate falsehoods. This is nothing new - all Governments make value judgements on all spheres of social life everyday. This should not frighten more liberal-minded Singaporeans as much as they think it ought to.

In such a case, existing laws such as the Telecommunications Act are sufficient. (Ironically, the activists are arguing that existing laws are already too onerous). The problem, as I argued in my main submission is one of enforcement against supra-national internet companies.

Enforcement

There were also regular objections to regulating the internet because the argument was that it was 'impossible'.

Such arguments are absurd and wrong.

They are absurd because to say that any country is unable to enforce its own laws because of the advent of a new technology, is to argue that it is no longer completely sovereign over its territory and people.

It is also patently untrue.

As more authoritarian countries than ours have shown, the technology is there to block and censor sites that flagrantly flout local laws. And although technology such as VPNs also exists to overcome these blocks, every form of censorship will be vulnerable to loopholes. In the pre-internet days, a banned publication could still be smuggled into Singapore and circulated.

The issue with many of the larger social media companies is that they have made censorship an all-or-nothing choice for Governments. Because they refuse to selectively censor content regularly, the only choice for enforcement is to block the entire site, if at all. This is a blunt instrument that has to be used carefully, but also a result of the gauntlet thrown down by these internet companies as a challenge to Governments. As mentioned in my main submission, Wikipedia intentionally moved to a technology to make it impossible to block selected pages a few years ago, to challenge Governments to either block their entire site or not.

This must however remain an option if any country is to retain its sovereignty in law enforcement. It must be used only if all attempts at negotiation with the social media company is exhausted, but we must never be held hostage by foreign corporations or governments.

Calvin Cheng