

Written Representation 57

Name: Function 8

Received: 27 Feb 2018

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS – CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES

The Green Paper in its Introduction states:

“Around the world, falsehoods are being deliberately spread online, to attack public institutions and individuals. The aim is to sow discord amongst racial and religious communities, exploit fault-lines, undermine public institutions, interfere in elections as well as other democratic processes, and weaken countries.”

The Green Paper enumerated how other countries like the United States, France, Norway, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom dealt with deliberate online falsehoods, and concluded:

“The key objective of foreign States that spread online falsehoods will be to destabilise the target countries. They will seek to exploit existing fault-lines within a society and heighten tensions. They will do this particularly during elections when emotions run high, making it easier to exploit and divide. They will also seek to sway the electoral outcome towards candidates whose policies are more favourable towards them.”

From this statement, it is clear that States are the main culprits that any responsible government must and should be vigilant of. We all know today, that the United States has not been destabilised by Russia's interference in their recent presidential election. Investigations concluded that such interference did not even influence the outcome of the election. And Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team have already indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities for allegedly interfering in the 2016 presidential election.¹

We are confident that our government too has the capability and experience to prevent outside influence in our internal affairs with our existing laws which have seen even the minutest of “infringements” taken to task. The mischievous facebook publication of a tampered front page of *Lianhe Wanbao*, a Chinese daily was swiftly dealt with by the attorney general and unqualified apologies published together with immediate withdrawal of the post.

¹<http://bit.ly/2EOaZZY>

We are thus disappointed that the Select Committee is now appointed solely to “prevent and combat online falsehoods” rather than to investigate if online falsehoods are really so prevalent that it requires government's action or more legislation.

The government has tasked the Select Committee to examine and report on:

- (a) The phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online;
- (b) The motivations and reasons for the spreading of such falsehoods, and the types of individuals and entities, both local and foreign, which engage in such activity;
- (c) The consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to our institutions and democratic processes; and
- (d) How Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods, including:
 - i The principles that should guide Singapore’s response; and
 - ii. Any specific measures, including legislation, that should be taken.

The work of the Select Committee is too narrowly defined. The mandate does not allow the committee to investigate and determine if online falsehoods are so prevalent that it requires measures to be taken to prevent and combat such falsehoods. The mandate also fails to enable the Committee to determine who are the people or organisations or government that are involved in the spreading of falsehoods whether online or offline, if there is indeed a prevalence of online falsehoods.

Who are the most dangerous perpetrator of falsehoods?

Individuals and organisations have limited resources and ability to spread falsehoods. Their ability to reach a wide audience cannot be compared to state sanctioned schemes with state resources. Furthermore, such falsehoods can easily be combated with education and openness in discussions and information. It is falsehoods spread by States that our government must be weary of as the Green Paper states.

Some members of Function 8 are victims of our government's spread of falsehoods when they were arrested in 1987 under the Internal Security Act. We therefore wish to draw the Committee's attention to the vicious falsehoods spread by the local media concerning the arrests and detentions of 22 people whose activities were perfectly legitimate, legal and well-intentioned. Their work are today encouraged by our government and carried out by the Migrant Workers' Centre.

Back in the 1980s, the Geylang Catholic Centre's volunteers rendered assistance to migrant workers who were unjustly treated by their employers. They offered to work with the government to improve the working conditions of the workers. They had anticipated then that the problems faced by migrant workers were not going to disappear when Singapore's policy then and now is to encourage women to join the workforce and contribute to the economy. Instead of accepting their offer to work with them, the government arrested and imprisoned 22 people. They were accused of having communist links and intent on destabilising the country. See:

(a) *Business Times* of 22 May 1987 headline was “ISD detains 16 for communist links”²

(b) *The Straits Times* of 27 May 1987 “Two main fronts in conspiracy”³ when it reported that “The ISD has uncovered a Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore through communist united front tactics to establish a communist state. Sixteen persons involved in this conspiracy were arrested.”

Unlike the free press of progressive countries, the word “alleged” was omitted when the local media alleged that the 22 people had “communist links” or were involved in a “Marxist conspiracy”. Singaporeans reading the newspapers in 1987 would have been terrified and those arrested ostracised.

To add insult to injury *The Straits Times* of 3 June 1987 carried this headline: “PM: Not our practice to take subversives to court”.⁴ Again the word “alleged” was omitted before the word “subversives”. The 22 arrested were thus, in the eyes of the public, subversives who were out to cause discord and trouble.

The irreparable damage caused to 22 people by falsehoods spread by the government through the media reverberates to this day. Thirty years have gone by and those victims are still trying to restore their good names.

In our view, it is spurious for the government to try and prevent the spread of falsehoods when they themselves are the biggest perpetrator of falsehoods. Even after 30 years, the government is still unable and unwilling to admit the wrongs committed against its own citizens.

The Singapore Herald

We wish also to debunk the Green Paper's allegation that the *Singapore Herald* was established as a “tool of foreign interference” when it took an anti-government stand. If the Singapore Herald was a mouthpiece of foreign interest as alleged, thousands of Singaporeans would not have rallied to the “Save the Herald Campaign” launched by six idealistic young people who even appealed and held talks with Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S Rajaratnam to gain a reprieve for the paper. They solicited funds to save the *Herald*. It is worthy of note that no evidence was ever produced to convince Singaporeans that the *Singapore Herald* was manipulated by outsiders. Instead, Singaporeans stepped forward to form a Citizens Cooperative to own the *Herald* but they were denied the licence to do so. It was a dark chapter in Singapore's struggle for democracy.

² <http://bit.ly/2CJp8T6>

³ <http://bit.ly/2sXPxwF>

⁴ <http://bit.ly/2GMp9YL>

Our conclusion

Joseph Goebbels once said:

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.”⁵

What the Green Paper said about the *Singapore Herald* and how the mainstream media repeatedly broadcast the government's unfounded allegations against those arrested in 1987 are just two examples of lies perpetuated by the State. Such lies are difficult to eradicate. If there is a need to contain deliberate falsehoods, those repeatedly uttered by the State should be the ones that require attention for falsehoods repeated often enough will be believed by the people and that is the real danger to the survival of Singapore.

As far as we are concerned, we have more than sufficient laws to take care of online falsehoods. There is no need for parliament to legislate more laws to stifle freedom of speech and expression.

Representatives of Function 8 are willing to give evidence, if required.

Yours truly

Directors, for and on behalf of Function 8

Function 8 is a social enterprise initiated by a group of individuals who believe that there is a need to facilitate the sharing of social, political and economic experiences through reflection and civic discussion.

⁵<http://bit.ly/2jWaj7H>