

Written Representation 65

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To the Clerk of Parliament,

I note with concern about the recent Select Committee Green Paper on Deliberate Online Falsehoods presented to Parliament, centered on the potential harm fake news can cause to Singapore civic society given the developments concerning fake news in foreign countries. In the Green Paper, it has been proposed that a Select Committee should be formed to evaluate the threat fake news can pose to Singapore, while coming up with measures to combat the spread of falsehoods online. I write this letter out of concern for the vagueness surrounding the definition of what constitutes 'fake news' and its possible implications, which I will elaborate upon in this letter.

Firstly, it is difficult to have a precise definition of what "Fake News" is, and this is neither acknowledged, nor mentioned in the Green Paper, except for defining "Fake News" as the use of digital technologies to spread falsehoods to advance certain agendas. As a result, any arbitrator who wields the power to define what constitutes "fake news" can spin it to their advantage that in turn will allow them to control the flow of information that gets to be disseminated to the general population.

I acknowledge that the problem of "fake news" poses a significant threat to Singapore, especially in the maintenance of Singapore's hard-won racial and religious harmony. However, precedent has already shown that the Singaporean government already has the necessary institutional tools available at its disposal to deal with such inflammatory claims. The shutdown of The Real Singapore is a prime case in point. Under Sedition Laws, its owners/operators were swiftly arrested and charged with spreading falsehoods that had the potential to incite racial tensions and sow discord among Singaporeans. As such, the proposal to broaden Singapore's existing toolkit to combat "fake news" is worrying, as it could mean increasing government overreach and monitoring of the narratives that Singaporeans can come into contact with. My main worry is that such fake news legislation will stifle the vibrancy of discourse on other sensitive issues pertinent to Singapore, such as LGBT rights, that are necessary for responsible debate to happen in the public arena.

Although you may point out, rightly, that the worry over the implications of fake news transcends not just race and religion but our national security especially in our political process given the harm fake news has wrought on numerous Western democracies, such legislative excess would only further exacerbate the culture of apathy that is prevalent among the majority of Singaporeans.

What we need for a more vibrant, intellectual society is an educated population that is able to critically engage with the sources of information presented to them. This

would work far better to combat the proliferation of fake news rather than identifying and suppressing fake sources of information, as the Singapore government cannot hope to have 100% control over information flows to its polity, given the ease at which falsehoods can be crafted and spread online, and the presence of encrypted modes of information dissemination such as WhatsApp and Telegram that can enable the spread of fake news which many Singaporeans use. As such, what the government can do is to implement media literacy education on all Singaporeans, to be politically aware and to be skeptical of all information presented to them regardless of source.

I hope parliament takes into serious consideration the possible ramifications that drafting vague laws over fake news can have. Even if the current administration has personal faith in responsibly interpreting the laws restricting the spread of falsehoods online, **who is to say that future ones will not be prone to abusing it?** Thank you for taking the time to read my letter. I hope it adequately highlights the concerns I have over this issue.

Yours Sincerely,
Cedric Choo
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