

Written Representation 85

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Dear Clerk of Parliament

I am writing in my personal capacity to the Select Committee on my opinion to the topic of deliberate online falsehoods.

This submission is made in my personal capacity. It does not represent any views of my Ministry. As a private citizen, it is within my capacity to provide my opinion on the rise of deliberate online falsehoods.

I would be able and willing to appear before the Committee to give evidence, if required. Please let me know early so that I could inform my Permanent Secretary as a matter of work protocol. Thank you.

(a) the phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online

Spreading falsehoods is nothing new. it is as old as the society herself. But what makes it (spreading falsehood) wicked is, the speed at which these falsehood(s) reach its intended and unintended audiences. In chinese saying,好事不出门, 坏事传千里: 谣言像野火蔓延, rumours spread like wildfire on their own. Spreading falsehood is human nature. Born out of envy and the root of malice, falsehood is intended to elicit, at its mildest, brief attention, to prolonged action.

Digital technology has improved by leaps and bounds ever since the Internet was launched in 1994(or 1996?). Back then, download speeds were limited by analogue modem technology, which meant that falsehoods travelled slowly. The Internet was not a common utility and out of reach to the broad public. 2006 saw the steady introduction of smart phones: compact, colourful, fast and attention-grabbing and improvement in cellular transmission technology.

The commoditisation of these Internet devices meant anyone who could afford a mobile subscription, could have access to the Internet, set up social media accounts to share their preferences. The "free" subscription of these social media accounts encouraged a proliferation of personal profiles. There is no check on the actual identity of the person who created the account. The early principles of the Internet assumed users are mature to decide their online identity (real or anonymous), things that they want to share (photos, texts) as long as it promoted the "share" "information" concept.

Information: something that serves to inform, to tell.
share: to spread, to tell or show.

We soon come to know, information can be deliberately false and purposely shared to achieve a purpose that the sharer (social media account user) has.

(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

This is something like the fable on “The Child who Cried Wolf”.

Bragging rights and social standing

Spreading a harmless joke, on April Fools’ Day is common, can be a way of relieving social tension or creating conversations. I remember a certain brand of outdoor clothing, once joked that it was producing Scottish kilts on 1 Apr. This practical joke went viral, caught with many people who are familiar with the brand and attracted many online orders. It gathered the attention on the brand products. When it was revealed on 2 Apr, the outdoor clothing brand decided to honour its customers seriously by producing a limited edition of the kilt. Harmless joke would not kill, but falsehoods sometimes does.

There is no universal definition on falsehood, but it is safe to say that anything that is deliberately false, harmless or with malice otherwise, should be falsehood.

Falsehood elicit attention, even if it has fleeting attention, it has served its purpose. Because of its absurdity and deviation from reality, people tend to pay a little bit more attention than its sister version of true-hood. Who are we to say what is false and what is true? It depends on perception. For example, a photo of a car that landed in the drain: is it a photo-composite or an accident that has taken place? Such photos attract attention simply because of the rarity and the non-plausibility of the incident.

There is a claim to bragging right that the sharer (social media account user) has been there first, or at least, done the biggest (or superlative) version of the common thing that we are used to. This share, attracts attention rapidly and is made worse by the ease at which a “share” can be re-posted (on Facebook), re-tweeted (Twitter), forwarded (on messaging platforms). These “re-shares” are counted by the social media companies and given prominence. Social standing is measured by the number of followers following that particular account. These account(s) with social standing are given unequal and out-sized influence. For instance, #MeToo rapidly became a social campaign after a simple tweet in Oct 2017 and garnered millions of posts using the same hash-tag. The viral nature of the Internet brought forth the ease at which postings, including falsehoods, can be spread with a single click.

Local or foreign, individual or entity

It is difficult to differentiate the public persona of a single user account simply because the Internet was built on trust. An account can be created with real personal data or fictitious data and something in-between. It is human nature to be less

truthful about our age. Why can't it be extended to the Internet persona? After all, there are no police checkpoints on our identities in the virtual world. It is usually taken, at face value, that the profile of these entities that generate postings are genuine unless proven otherwise. Online spoofs is altogether another matter though it has the same roots of purposeful mislead in verifying the person or entity behind the public persona.

Social media companies (Facebook, Twitter) started to have a verification process with blue ticks to verify that the account user is true, but this is usually for high social standing or out-sized influencers. That leaves the bulk of the account users unverified. These can be exploited when entities have a purpose to plant accounts to influence opinion. These accounts look, just like your neighbours accounts, unsuspecting and unassuming. We could probably have a national identity vault that recognises individuals and require a verification to activate the (social media) account. This vault would be left best to the private sector, or banking industry, to develop.

(c) the consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to our institutions and democratic processes; and

State actors have deliberate agenda to force a change. This could be achieved through the spread of online falsehoods, with the implicit knowledge that these online falsehoods can be easily created, anonymous and viral. It is a cheap form of campaign, compared to the traditional propaganda machine involving speakers, printed publications and spreading flyers. These falsehoods are difficult put out and much more difficult to detect or track.

Teenagers with raging emotions

The Internet and social media have a tendency to reduce mature persons to teenagers when they respond emotionally to messages or postings on social media forums. The innate urge to respond, refute, agree, disagree or simply "Like" puts us at the whims and fancy of our emotions. Stephen Pinker's work on the human mind puts it on a scale similar to unconscious responses to external stimuli. This is like avoiding a speeding car heading in our direction.

But we cannot control where these responses will lead to. If it becomes viral, we might have become unwitting victims of attention (for good or for bad). Netizens (online social media frequent users) are fond of tracking social injustices and pushing them to the fore for attention, e.g. the sleepy passengers who did not give up priority seats to those who need them. On a benign touch, these could be simple brushes with social norms.

Extreme socialism brought WWII

On the extreme end, these falsehoods create different versions of the same event(s) and convince their followers that these falsehoods are their version of the "real" thing. An occasional falsehood helps to check our senses, but repeated, regular feeding of falsehoods breed cynicism and mistrust. These falsehoods blunt our

senses and sensitivity to the world around us. We no longer have the ability to differentiate between fake news, alternative facts and post-truths.

The regular stream of falsehoods, aimed at a purposeful movement was able to create extreme socialism in the 1930s and those social conditions led to World War II. Despite regular counter-facts and attacks at falsehoods, then-society was able to accept these falsehoods as the 'real' thing because the social structures, institutions and democratic processes were eroded and regularly infused with falsehoods.

Society, institutions and democratic processes

We define society. The very notion of a multi-cultural, multi-racial society was built into our national fabric at 1965 independence. We define what it means to be a Singapore society of multi-culture and multi-race. Tolerance for differences also meant tolerance of a separate identity. What do institutions and democratic processes in a small nation mean? Are they functioning government agencies that dole out services? These institutions also include both the government and non-government institutions. A government institution is the regulatory agency or the marriage registry. A non-government institution could be the reporting press, or the civil society or the community self-help groups. This belief in institutions could be giving due respect to the institutions and their processes, believing that it will right itself in the age of extreme opinions. Strong institutions can suffer an occasional attack on its integrity, but I have not come across an institution that could survive repeated, sustained attacks by falsehoods. An institution, when it crumbles, can no longer rebuild itself, very much like Humpty-Dumpty when he had a great fall.

We must be mindful and call out individuals or entities that deliberately spread falsehoods and create divisions. It is our ego-self that feeds on bragging claims and influential standing. This ego-self is also the one that will have disproportionate response to extreme view.

(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.

Combating online falsehoods start with recognising these falsehoods exist. These falsehoods are different from elastic truths. Elastic truths are stretches of imagination on individual truths, e.g. the "tornado" that blew across the East Coast in Jan 2018 was a water spout that turned over boats at the National Sailing Centre. An elastic truth has some elements of true facts and false assertions.

Guiding principles

- Recognise falsehoods, fake news, alternative facts exist.
- Make it easy to verify or at least check facts
- Differentiate those, who identify falsehoods from destructive cynicism.
- Have healthy constructive criticism on opinions exchange

Singapore cannot prevent online falsehoods. It is generated locally and overseas with a multitude of participants. It reminds me of earlier efforts to can spam emails; neither conclusive nor efficient.

Having the courage to speak up

We can combat online falsehoods. It requires an organised community effort to identify, weed out and counter-act against falsehoods. Falsehoods come in all shapes and form. It requires sustained effort by the community to counter falsehoods. The primary purpose of falsehood is to seed discontent and doubt in the community and create division. Collectively, people have the ability to sustain falsehood and (emphasis added) discredit falsehood. Do not be afraid to speak up against false statements: make a point, lay out the facts in the sun and let other people decide. The hardest thing to do is to face up that people have their own interests; they may not publicly agree with the facts and may go with the falsehood on consensus grounds.

Living in filter bubble

It is a pretentious state of being to believe in falsehoods. It could be the absence of counter-arguments that allow these falsehoods to thrive. When there is a healthy competition between facts and untruths for attention, it is easier to discredit falsehoods. Encyclopaedias, as an institution, collapsed in the Internet age. They were once a great source of facts. The current free site on the Internet is subjected to editorial biases. Current newspaper regime divides factual news into low quality free news and medium-to-high quality paywall news. The largely free-content nature of the Internet do not encourage people to pay for news. The alternative is news with paid advertising. In general, the news media is undergoing consolidation and downsizing. Paid advertising has fallen drastically with reduced viewership. Hence, it is difficult to predict if factual news reporting will survive in 10 years' time. The other side of news is opinion reporting. This has gained popularity because these opinions have self-serving interest and feed into the ego-self.

Automatic response and delayed thoughts

System 1 and System 2 thinking was brought to the fore in the 1980s in a behavioural response study by Tversky and Kahnemann. System 1 is the automatic response trained through repeated or inculcated responses to external stimuli. These automatic responses, like the instinct to avoid a speeding car heading in your direction, occur at the sub-conscious level. System 2 is the delayed thinking that requires conscious effort and result in thought-through responses. The very human nature of our mind is to adopt System 1 responses, unless we are conscious of our responses/consequences to external stimuli. For example, to discredit falsehoods, System 1 was to dislike or engage in quick-response exchanges. System 2 thinking might be: should I re-post a counter-fact or ignore the falsehood? After all, without the social media picking up that falsehood, it might not have the attention that it was seeking in the first instance.

Critical thinking

At a conscious level, we could develop students at the secondary to graduate level with the critical thinking ability to assess information. Critical thinking requires delving into the source of information, factual authenticity, differentiating between objective facts and perceptual opinions. It activates the System 2 thinking. It is not easy, and some say critical thinking is an academic exercise. But at least it builds a society that will think for herself and will not accept falsehoods unquestioned.

Specific measures

Legislation is a blunt tool for the technology age. Key principles of legislation (if one is to have) should be forward thinking: falsehoods exist throughout the ages. It is not going to extinguish because of our legislative action. How to remedy a multitude of participants who wilfully participate in falsehoods? Closing their accounts is like cutting off a multi-headed Medusa. More accounts will spawn with encrypted content that makes them harder to detect and trace.

Legislative action can be reserved for the serious cases that threaten social cohesion or endanger social institutions. But legislative action to protect democratic processes? I don't see why not, but the Singapore society at-large do not understand democratic processes. We have a long way to raise awareness on why these institutions and democratic processes are important before we have the want to genuinely protect them against falsehoods.