

Written Representation 92

Name: Jiang Haolie
University Student

Received: 1 Mar 2018

Submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

To the Clerk of Parliament,

1. I note with concern the efforts by the Government to formulate countermeasures and possible legislation in combatting the threat of “deliberate online falsehoods”.

Concerns on measures to combat “deliberate online falsehoods”

2. “Deliberate online falsehoods” may have presented a palpable threat in the United States with allegations of Russian meddling and malicious weaponisation of “fake news” in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections, but Singapore’s experience and institutional context is vastly different. While arguably, there is indeed a prevalence of “deliberate online falsehoods” such as in the form of WhatsApp hoax chain messages, but these present **a limited severity of damage** and do NOT in anyway amount to a national security threat. Elections have not been meddled with, and the so-called “deliberate online falsehoods” that have been circulated are quickly stopped by public statements, or by the use of existing laws such as the Sedition Act in the case of the *The Real Singapore*. Unlike the U.S., our public institutions are strong, public trust is high, and our society is not griped by polarised partisanship nor post-truth politics.
3. In this regard, **our laws are already sufficient** and broad enough to deal with the existing “threat” of “deliberate online falsehoods”. There is NO need for additional legislative powers to be enacted.
4. While it can be argued that there could be a risk of a national security threat of malicious and well-orchestrated “deliberate online falsehoods” in targeting elections, as in the case of the U.S., ultimately, due the inherent difficulties in clearly and objectively defining what would amount to malicious falsehoods, any attempt to provide full-proof state powers in combating “deliberate online falsehoods” will inevitably be vague and heavy-handed.
5. On this point, there are a number of considerations as to **why enacting stronger and heavy-handed measures are counter-productive and dangerous to our society** – (1) heavy-handed laws that attempt to provide an absolute full-proof protection against any sort of “deliberate online falsehood” are fundamentally more intrusive and draconian than what is acceptable to our values as a democracy; (2) heavy-handed measures could very potentially shut down valuable civic discourse on important social issues, as for example how

existing laws protecting racial and religious harmony reduced avenues for a more robust discourse on the Reserved Presidency in 2017; (3) heavy-handed measures will invariably have a chilling effect on independent journalism, civil society and academic freedoms – this occurs because the fear of being targetted by vague and excessively heavyhanded laws engenders a culture of self-censorship and fear of speaking against the conventional, government-sanctioned opinions of the day. This exacerbates a deleterious group-think effect in society and is ultimately unhealthy for the resilience and robustness of our community.

6. If the Committee nonetheless sees it fit to recommend laws and countermeasures, pronounced and deliberate steps must be taken to ensure that the dangers of heavy-handed measures, enumerated above, are prevented, and that measures must be written with clear clauses that mandate accountability to transparent and clearly spelt-out checks and balances.

Recommendations for how the Government should respond

7. The threat of “deliberate online falsehoods” **thrives on the lack of public trust and poor public political literacy** more so than on the ability of states to censor falsehoods. For example, attempts to meddle in the 2017 French elections with hacking and malicious “fake news” did not effectively sway the French public because of the high levels of public trust in their democratic institutions, high levels of political literacy and a culture of healthy skepticism.
8. In this regard, the best way to combat the threat of “deliberate online falsehoods” is through fostering public trust and increasing political literacy. **Increasing government transparency** is one of the key facets of fostering public trust in our democratic values and institutions. Thus, the Select Committee should consider the following policy recommendations:
 - a. **Promoting political and media literacy education;**
 - b. **Passing a Freedom of Information Act:** enabling access to Government archives and data not only promotes transparency and increases public trust, but also empowers Singaporeans to do their own fact-checking and come to their own conclusions;
 - c. **Creating a parliamentary ombudsman:** having an independent process for the public to lodge complaints on misconduct of government officials fosters stronger public trust;
 - d. **Creating fact-checking non-government organisations (NGO):** an independent, fully-autonomous and government-recognised NGO will have the legitimacy to both fact-check and provide the authority in refuting “deliberate online falsehoods”;
 - e. **Increasing state support for and recognition of civil society – independent journalism, academic freedoms and NGOs:** an active and dynamic civil

society is integral to the functioning and resilience of a strong Singaporean society. Our social resilience and civil society institutions present the best defence against the threat of “deliberate online falsehoods” in creating social distrust and political turmoil. The Government should thus recognise the important role played by civil society and fully support the freedoms and functions of our Singaporean activists and active citizens in the fields of academia, journalism and advocacy.

9. In all, the policy recommendations of the Select Committee **should aspire to principles** of (1) respect for our democratic values and constitutional freedoms, (2) institutional support for civil society, (3) government transparency, and (4) accountability to strong and transparent institutional checks and balances.
10. Ultimately, it is not an instinctive, knee-jerk retreat to illiberal and authoritative heavyhandedness, but our resilience as a civic community and our commitment to democratic values that would best safeguard Singapore.
11. I thank the Select Committee for this opportunity to offer my submissions.

Yours sincerely,
Jiang Haolie
Student