Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

1.   The Select Committee has been hearing evidence from witnesses on the issue of Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

2.   This is a summary of the evidence from witnesses who testified on 14 March 2018.

Dr Carol Soon and Shawn Goh

3.   Dr Carol Soon ("Dr Soon") and Mr Shawn Goh ("Mr Goh") spoke on the overview of the challenges posed by Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

4.   Their evidence was as follows:

  i.   Deliberate Online Falsehoods are a danger which pose threats to national security and public order by exploiting existing cleavages in society.

      (a) Deliberate Online Falsehoods seek to sow discord.

      (b) These falsehoods can widen the divisions which are already present in society. They can also deepen the divisions.

  ii. Examples of falsehoods which had occurred overseas were provided, including spread of falsehoods during the French Presidential elections (which exploited social tensions arising from immigration and religion); and a video on Twitter which falsely claimed that Muslims in London were celebrating a terrorist attack in Paris.

  iii. There is a need to guard against online falsehoods that harm our social fabric. These can sow discord and widen existing divisions in Singapore.

  iv. Motivations for Deliberate Online Falsehoods can be political, financial.

  v.   Research shows that human beings are wired to accept falsehoods easily and in a manner that is difficult to dislodge. Once a piece of false information is out in the open, it may be too late to retract or blunt its influence.

      (a) This is because of various biases that each of us have. This includes confirmation bias.
      (b) *Motivated reasoning* is where people believe what they want to, even in the face of counter-evidence.

(c) *Illusory truth effect* is where repeatedly hearing the same facts can influence people to believe that a falsehood is true.

(d) *Backfire effect* is seen where the act of debunking false information may reinforce it in one's mind instead.

(e) Many of these human responses are common to a broad cross-section of people.

vi. Additionally, there is the phenomenon of filter bubbles. People tend to identify with groups, look for information on their own and confirm what they already believe and filter out what does not accord with their beliefs. This can entrench false information further.

vii. There were gaps in the existing legal provisions. This could be addressed by new laws. They agreed that whether this was done by amending existing legislation or by a new legislation was a decision for the Government.

viii. Fact-checking is a possible tool which can be used to counter falsehoods. There are limitations with this. For instance, people who read the fake news usually do not even see the fact checks. Additionally, individuals often dismiss the debunking if it does not accord with their pre-existing viewpoints.

ix. It is useful to consider an independent advisory panel which could advise – in cases where it is not clear if a statement is a falsehood.

Dr Mathew Mathews

5.   Dr Mathew Mathews spoke on the dangers that Deliberate Online Falsehoods pose to racial and religious harmony.

6.   His evidence was as follows:

i.   While there exist harmonious relationships between different communities, this does not mean that there are no misperceptions or prejudices about different groups in the population.

ii.   Deliberate Online Falsehoods can also perpetuate a slow drip effect i.e., an ongoing effect around a low-level type of Deliberate Online Falsehoods which is then punctuated by some high level, high visibility events. These two types of processes have a significant interrelationship between the two of them.

iii. It is necessary to tackle quickly online falsehoods that seek to harm our social fabric. Otherwise, in combination, these acts could have a corrosive effect

and destroy the cohesion and harmony between the different racial and religious groups in Singapore.

iv. Fault lines can be accentuated during crisis situations. When people are suspicious and anxious, they would be more likely to spread unverified messages or reports.

v. It is important for us to be alert to efforts to others to undermine social cohesion in Singapore. This includes efforts from foreign governments and ideologically-driven groups.

vi. There should be sufficient legislation to protect Singaporeans from such falsehoods. We should have a mechanism to empower the Government to stop access to media sites that carry Deliberate Online Falsehoods which can threaten Singapore's social harmony. This mechanism should kick in quickly, from when the falsehood is put up.

vii. There is no need to protect the ability for someone to deliberately spread a known falsehood online. Spreading falsehoods online undermines the effectiveness of our democracy and effectiveness of trust and free speech.

Dr Michael Raska

7. Dr Michael Raska spoke on how disinformation operations are a form of cyber-warfare.

8. His evidence was as follows:

i. Information operations should be treated as a form of warfare. Many states try to leverage new types of advanced military technologies, including cyber and information warfare to achieve political and strategic interests.

ii. It is easy for state actors to mask their actions. They do this by hiding behind a proxy, for example, non-state actors.

iii. Cyber-information threats challenge Singapore's traditional understanding of defence and deterrence. Singapore has taken steps such as total defence but it remained to be seen whether Singapore can cope with multi-type spectrum of attacks which could happen. Sometimes a state may not even know that it is being subject to a propaganda war.

iv. In particular, Singapore is vulnerable. Singapore has a strategic edge in terms of being a conventional military power. However, this means that if a foreign

state wishes to target Singapore, it would begin with a subtle informational campaign. Using Deliberate Online Falsehoods and targeting the divisions as a way of weakening Singapore's will to defend itself will take precedence over any other action a foreign state could take.

Roman Catholic Archdiocese, National Council of Churches Singapore and Singapore Buddhist Federation

9. These organisations spoke on the importance of our racial and religious harmony and the negative implications of Deliberate Online Falsehoods may have on it.

10. Their evidence was as follows:

   i. The religious harmony we enjoy in Singapore today is made possible by the combined efforts of sound and decisive political leadership, effective laws, and the willingness of each religious community, its leaders and members to ensure religious harmony prevails. Effective laws have allowed the Government to move swiftly and decisively when religious harmony was threatened.

   ii. However, the religious harmony we have in Singapore is hard-earned, and can be easily undone. One way in which religious harmony can be harmed is through the use of falsehoods spread online about the doctrines or beliefs of the different religious communities in Singapore.

   iii. Effective legislation is necessary to deal with Deliberate Online Falsehoods swiftly.

   iv. The solution to Deliberate Online Falsehoods has to be a multi-pronged one. There is a role for legislation to play, to correct falsehoods quickly. In addition, public education and fact checking are also important tools to consider.

SHRINIWAS RAI

11. Mr Shriniwas Rai spoke about how a multi-racial and multi-religious society like Singapore is fragile and we have been fortunate that our political leadership has taken steps to protect this.

12. He noted that we live in a close-knit, dense society where harm can spread quickly.

13. Mr Rai emphasized the need for a legal framework to address this problem.

GOH YIHAN, DEAN, SMU LAW SCHOOL

14. Associate Professor Goh Yihan spoke on the gaps in existing legislation to counter Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

15. His evidence was as follows:

    i. There are three characteristics of Deliberate Online Falsehoods which legislation has to address:

       (a) First, Deliberate Online Falsehoods are cross-border in nature, geographically and virtually. And while they may originate in the virtual space, there are implications in the physical realm. This means legislation that deals with online falsehoods needs to deter and punish such conduct.

       (b) Second, Deliberate Online Falsehoods are rapidly and easily spread, and legislation needs to prevent their spread.

       (c) Third, Deliberate Online Falsehoods have serious, sometimes irreversible consequences. Legislation should provide for a take-down provision, or some form of clarification and if necessary, an apology.

    ii. Current legislation has gaps; and they are not sufficient to deal with the Deliberate Online Falsehoods. There needs to be legislation which goes beyond the existing framework, specifically enacted to cover Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

    iii. Conceptually, what is illegal in the physical world, must also be illegal in the online space.

    iv. An appropriate approach might involve a two-stage process:

       (a) First, quick executive action that is aimed at removing the falsehood or preventing its spread;
       (b) Second, provision for independent judicial oversight, where the statement maker can apply to court to show and explain why the statement is not false.
       (c) This balances the interests of all parties – the judicial process alone, while important, may not be sufficiently fast to deal with the rapid spread of online falsehoods.

v.   Legislation should also cover those who assist in the circulation of online falsehoods.

vi. While freedom of speech is important, it is not absolute; and freedom of speech would actually be compromised if falsehoods are allowed to be perpetrated.

vii. There is no one solution to the entire problem. Legislation has to be accompanied with other approaches, including public education and outreach.