Written Representation 11

Name: Yvonne Wong

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WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS

The Select Committee has invited the public to submit representations on any matter falling within the Terms of Reference:

(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, including:
    (i) the principles that should guide Singapore's response; and
    (ii) any specific measures, including legislation, that should be taken.

I would like to express my views on (a), b) and (c), as follows:

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

Digital technology has given significant convenience for individuals to express their point of views quickly across different platforms and borders. While most of the fake news I have received are communicated by contacts with good intentions, I noticed they tend not to verify if the information is genuine. It could be that the information has been sent by someone they know, or the news is too sensational not to circulate within their network.

I am mindful that the Select Committee is focusing on the deliberate act of spreading falsehoods, and will exclude the instances that are not deliberate. I wish to highlight that it is far more damaging when a large number of people unknowingly spread falsehoods that have been created and perpetrated by a few individuals or entities.

It is easy for individuals/entities to spread falsehoods online quickly, given that:

- it takes extensive resources to monitor and track wrongdoers,
- Some online/technological platforms offer some degree of concealment and privacy for their users, such as Telegram.

Stemming out deliberate spread of falsehoods with extensive enforcement would not be sustainable in the long run. I am not sure if investment in technological means and platforms *alone* will be effective as the pace of development is fast-evolving. Given the low cost of spreading falsehoods using mobile devices and computers, it is not pragmatic for Singapore to drain valuable resources to fight an uphill battle. I suggest to have collaborative agreements with the technological platforms instead to establish mutual understanding in:

1. Online communities are virtual extensions of the physical public spaces, where each individual/user should be mindful of their conduct, be respectful of others, and exercise personal responsibility. There should be a code of conduct given to all users, and they have to agree that the platforms have the right to pass on their contact details and contents that are deemed as damaging falsehoods, to the relevant authorities for investigative purposes.

2. Technological platforms with significant number of Singapore users or operating in Singapore, need to submit their high-level workflows; their approach to track deliberate spread of falsehoods about Singapore; and their responses to curtail or terminate the wrongdoer's account/privileges; to the relevant authorities. They may run the risk of not being recognised by the Singapore Government if the conditions are not met within a stipulated duration.

To support the collaboration with technological platforms effectively, our Government needs to ensure its policies and processes, expertise (which may include external partners), and staff's competencies are relevant and up to date.

(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;

Based on personal observations on online news and netizens' sentiments, the motivations and reasons for deliberate spread of falsehoods are mainly:

- Thrill of ability to influence many people to spread the falsehoods quickly across borders. For instance, the check4spam.com published online conversations on spams that are circulating in different countries. Some of the sentiments revealed that the creators of the spam messages want to show off their ingenuity for the widespread of their contents.

- Incentives like monetary rewards, for spreading falsehoods for those with malicious intent. This is increasingly more common in businesses where competition is intense and some of these falsehoods are contrary to their customers' values.

- Desire to influence others to share similar views such as ideology on politics, economics, religion, nationalist, environment, culture and terrorism.

Among the three reasons, the last one is the most lethal as their motivational drive is high, their actions are deliberate, and they reinforce their narratives across time.

The types of individuals and entities are diverse and personal motivations can evolve over time - be it voluntarily or involuntarily. I will confine the local and foreign parties to the last reason cited earlier:

- Governments
- Political parties
- Stakeholders and interested parties in pushing their agendas in the commercial setting, e.g. lobbyists
- Religious groups/leadership
- Patriotic citizens
- Media
- Non-governmental organisations, nonprofit organisations, voluntary welfare organisations
- Non-mainstream groups, which may not be structured or loosely formed, such as supporters of LGBT community
- Interest groups e.g. culture conservation
- Terrorism organisations

(c) the consequences that the spread of online falsehoods, including:
    (i) the principles that should guide Singapore's response; and
    (ii) any specific measures, including legislation, that should be taken.

Singapore and our people are well-connected to the world and rely heavily on technological platforms to network and be informed. Falsehoods designed to disrupt our cohesion and damage our value systems have to be curtailed swiftly. In crisis communications, we follow the principle of first 24 hours to respond to stakeholders. The Singapore Government has been doing a lot in responding to falsehoods quickly and tried to manage public sentiments with the little information it can afford to share. As observed in netizens' comments on social media, I suggest the following principles and some may have been implemented:

1. Timely and quick responses by relevant agencies within 3 hours for online falsehoods. To beat them in their own games, suggest the responses to be sent to the same technological platforms where the falsehoods have originated or have gain traction e.g. social media, WhatsApp, text messages. This is on top of Government's practice to circulate its responses on its communications channels and mainstream media.

2. Get in touch with individuals/entities who reported on online falsehoods within 3 hours, after they made contact. It can be interim response or to obtain more information for investigation.

3. Whole-Of-Government high-level internal assessment on the extent of potential damage caused by specific falsehoods. As the assessment relies on judgement call, some officers may not react quick enough to escalate serious cases for immediate action. Time is of the essence for online falsehoods.

4. Relevant agencies to publish the post-incident reports for serious online falsehoods, to let the general public be better informed of how they should react in the future.

The specific measures are covered in the collaborative agreements with technological platforms mentioned earlier. Besides measures for the wrongdoers, there must be systematic cultivation on the dangers of spreading falsehoods unknowing by Singaporeans and Permanent Residents. Active citizenry is key to deter wrongdoers from attempting to destroy Singapore's way of life. When they realise we do not buy their stories, they would shift their attention away from perpetrating online falsehoods.