

Written Representation 110

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Submission to Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

by Professor Lim Sun Sun

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Dear Members of the Select Committee,

thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission on the critical problem of deliberate online falsehoods. Allow me to provide some context on my interest in this topic, and the expertise I bring to the table. I began my academic career in 2002 as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications and New Media, NUS, after pursuing my PhD in the London School of Economics. When I returned to Singapore in 2002, I was startled as to the overwhelming presence mobile phones and the internet had started to assume in the country and was curious about the impact these technological innovations would come to have on our sociocultural landscape.

I was therefore motivated to understand how, in the context of the country's technological and media landscape, set against its prevailing sociocultural, political and economic backdrop, media consumers in Singapore were engaging with and through technology, and any challenges they were encountering, as well as opportunities they were tapping. I commenced on a research programme where I focused specifically on households, to understand how young people and families were incorporating internet and mobile communication into their everyday lives and family routines. In so doing I was to derive keen insights into how the home environment offers interesting opportunities for the transmission of media literacy skills while also presenting various pitfalls.

In my current position as Professor of Media & Communication and Head of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, I have the privilege of influencing the next generation of technologists. My goal is to sensitise them to the sociocultural dimensions of technology acceptance, as well as political and economic factors at large, and industry and market pressures in particular, that direct how technology is developed, commercialised, applied and exploited. As an educator, I recognise that such knowledge is invaluable for all media consumers because our media consumption is significantly shaped by the

technological platforms that convey media content, and enable media consumers to create, share, and comment on media content.

My contribution to the select committee's discussion will thus centre around the angle of media literacy – how our populace can be more well-apprised of the issue of online falsehoods, and which aspects our media literacy outreach can strive to stress more vociferously so as to ensure that our educational efforts on this issue are more effective and enlightening. My submission will touch on two dimensions: (i) the political economy of online falsehoods, (ii) the role of technology companies.

Sincerely,

Lim Sun Sun

Political economy of online falsehoods

Principally, a key aspect that media literacy education must focus on is the political economy of online falsehoods. Currently, media literacy education tends to focus on helping individuals identify the characteristics of online news that indicate that they are falsehoods, or advising individuals on the authentication activities they can undertake to verify the credibility of news. Such information, while not without value, fails to provide individuals with a broader view of the macro political and economic factors that influence the production and dissemination of online falsehoods, especially agenda-driven and profit-generating motivations.

In the same way that individuals understand that advertising is the active promotion of a particular product, concept or line of thinking, individuals must also appreciate that the production and dissemination of online falsehoods is also a form of advocacy/promotion that seeks to advance the spread of particular news reports, or ideas that can heighten commercial or political gain. Public education efforts that comprehensively and effectively explain the gains that can be derived from the spread of online falsehoods should thus be mounted. Specifically, remind people to consider the following when they encounter news or information:

- Who/which agency produced this piece of news?
- Which individuals/groups are being targeted by this piece of news?
- Who has funded/supported the production of this piece of news?
- Who benefits if you read/share this piece of news? Highlight that benefits can be in the form of advertising revenue, greater social media following, public mindshare etc.

These should be accompanied by concrete examples of individuals/entities that have clearly derived significant political/commercial gains from the production and dissemination of online falsehoods. Through such efforts, a greater appreciation of the political and economic imperatives driving the production of online falsehoods can make individuals more discerning and circumspect when they consume online information.

Beyond public education, education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels can also benefit from a sharpened focus on such issues. Fundamentally, Singapore has been very successful in vesting our citizens with basic literacy skills of reading and writing. Given the high level of online usage, we must view media literacy as a basic literacy skill that we must inculcate in all citizens. Media literacy must encompass more than just functional literacy (ability to use) and extend it to critical literacy (ability to judge). In our current media environment, it is crucial to imbue all consumers with a heightened level of criticality.

One possible model to emulate when developing more intensive media literacy education that can tackle today's media landscape is advertising literacy campaigns¹ that are mounted in North America and Europe. These campaigns educate young

¹ Rozendaal, E. (2011). *Advertising literacy and children's susceptibility to advertising* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=59a96c2a-1dd8-4fbc-8ac1-1c0cf4836420>.

people to critically evaluate the advertisements they encounter and the claims that they make, so as to be more discriminating and less inclined to yield to their persuasive influence.

Role of technology companies

Another important aspect to consider is the role that technology companies play in mediating information. Fundamentally, online falsehoods are a present-day iteration of rumours and today's technological environment provides a wealth of highly accessible resources for the sophisticated production and rapid dissemination of falsehoods. Currently, all hyper-connected communities, including Singapore, rely heavily on technology platforms to communicate with others, and to obtain or share information.

Yet the systems, structures and algorithms by which technology companies sort and share information, and forge connections between media consumers, are still largely opaque and proprietary. In such an environment, it is very difficult for media consumers to be conscious of hidden biases in the news and information they come into contact with. Very critical questions have emerged in light of the nature of our technologically-shaped information and media landscape today, including but not limited to the following:

- Why does one consumer see a particular story on his newsfeed while his friend is served another on hers? Why and how should that matter?
- How do the technological processes that determine the content of what we see interact with our own cognitive biases?
- How can media consumers be made more aware of their own cognitive biases rather than having technology companies exploit these biases against consumers' interests?

In this regard, there needs to be a greater push for industry self-regulation by technology companies that are at the forefront of filtering, presenting and mediating information, and those that offer communication platforms for individuals to connect, and communicate and share information. Indeed, some critics have even argued that technology companies should share the results of their proprietary algorithms.²

Because these companies have an oversize presence in determining how we engage with information and with one another, it is imperative that they be more proactive about helping users understand the information infrastructure and the algorithms that shape them. Such information must be shared in a timely and accessible fashion that helps consumers keep pace with rapidly changing technology trends. The burden cannot and must not always be pushed to consumers to educate themselves. In this regard, the Media Literacy Council can play a steering role in advising technology

² Wheeler, T. (2018, February 20). How to Monitor Fake News. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/opinion/monitor-fake-news.html>

companies on particular aspects of their technology processes that consumers should be made aware of.

The design of information and communication platforms can also be more carefully deliberated with their consequences more fully thought through. Principles derived from research on technocognition can be applied to more enlightened design, where: “information architecture should incorporate principles from psychology, behavioural economics, and philosophy to undo the damage and polarization that fake news has inflicted through social media.”³ At the same time, efforts must be made by technology companies to mitigate the adverse effects of bots on the spread of misinformation.⁴

³ Cook, J. (2017, November 17). Technology helped fake news. Now technology needs to stop it. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Retrieved from <https://thebulletin.org/technology-helped-fake-news-now-technology-needs-stop-it11285>

⁴ Emerging Technology from the arXiv. (2017, August 7). First Evidence That Social Bots Play a Major Role in Spreading Fake News. *MIT Technology Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/608561/first-evidence-that-social-bots-play-a-major-role-in-spreading-fake-news/>