

Written Representation 13

Name: Hazrul A. Jamari
Entrepreneur

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Title: Feedback on Tackling Fake News

Dear Honourable Members of Parliament

Thank you for providing the public an opportunity to submit feedback regarding the issue of tackling fake news.

Should Traditional Mass Media and Alt Media be compliant to "fake news" legislation?

In this day and age, citizens have the perception that traditional mass media isn't telling the whole story. Sometimes, they refer to new media that contain alternative views to get a better understanding of the issues.

When it comes to inaccurate news from either of these branches of media, the existing regime for a retraction and possible fines might already be sufficient.

Thus, we need to look at other outlets of information that are abused with fake news. However, the term "fake news" isn't quite accurate as not all information is news. The right term I feel should be "internet falsehoods".

New ways of spreading internet falsehoods requires concerted efforts from all agencies.

Spreading of falsehoods via messaging such as WhatsApp and Facebook sharing has been extremely common. For the Malay community, these falsehoods usually touch on a communal or religious nature. This is hyper sensitive territory and attempts to manage this needs to be handled with white gloves.

Some of these falsehoods are as silly as claiming a food brand is not Halal. Others are far more damaging such as the spreading of ISIS propaganda that will affect intra-community relations between Sunnis and Shia muslims.

The first is easier to manage. I had through my Facebook page, created a series on debunking Halal falsehoods using the hashtag #HaramDebunked. You can find this here <https://www.facebook.com/search/str/%23haramdebunked/stories-keyword/stories-public>

But one person can only do so much. As a result, I've not had the time to cover every single falsehood and help check the authenticity of these claims.

The second is much harder. People may already have a biased opinion on a particular community. It requires the hard work of different agencies and communities to manage a response and it must be a continuous effort because eradicating discriminatory views is always a work in progress.

Having a non-punitive solution to the problem: Creating our version of snopes.

One way to prevent the problem is to have a localised version of snopes.com which covers a wide array of online scams and falsehoods to debunk them. Citizens can refer to these articles first before deciding to share sensational messages that come via their messaging app.

The Malaysian government had launched something similar in sebenarnya.my. However, it is not well marketed to the citizens. Perhaps our government can better market it to our citizens. In any case, internet falsehoods transcend national borders and it would be good to have a joint task force to share some of these debunked stories.

Punitive action for more severe falsehoods

Preserving our peace is extremely important for our security. Falsehoods spread online has a life of its own, and will be difficult for the government of the day to control it. Therefore, citizens must be aware of the risks involved in wittingly or otherwise, spreading internet falsehoods that especially impact our racial and religious diversity.

However, jail time might be too strong an action, and neither does it help citizens break down their discriminatory worldview.

Instead, I would suggest a fine not more than \$3000 and community service such as serving time with another community group in their activities for 3 months and compulsory counselling.

Exclusion of parody sites from any action and action for sensationalists sites.

Parody sites that clearly indicate that their articles are just for fun and not to be taken seriously should be exempt. Some of the local versions are NewNation. However, if a site presents news as if it's real and do not clearly indicate their intent to entertain, like the US TheOnion.com, then it must be taken to task with. They must indicate that their site is for entertainment purposes only and are not real news or face liability with existing laws that cover new media sites.

Another category of sites that do not peddle "fake news" for entertainment purposes are sensationalist sites. I do not suggest punitive action, but I would require them to label all their postings as OP or Opinion Pieces and are not necessarily factual.

Digital Media Literacy

I would also like to suggest that the MOE have digital media literacy classes for students to be able to better discern between real news, opinions, and fake news. This will arm our citizens with better knowledge on the media.

Further, the PA should organise talks and courses on Digital Media Literacy so that citizens, especially the elderly will not fall into the traps of such scams and falsehoods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank the honourable Members of Parliament once again for the opportunity to submit my feedback. I wish the Select Committee will be wise in proposing to parliament a sensible plan of action.