

Written Representation 139

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FAKE NEWS TRACING AND INDEX RELATED RESEARCH

The submission proposes, as a countermeasure to the harmful effects of online falsehoods, a Fake News Tracing and Index Related Research initiative that can:

a) Curb the spread of “fake” news messages by “inoculating” Singaporeans and building, through education, their resistance to online falsehoods;

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b) Measure a population’s maturity and ability to resist fake news and provide the basis for Singapore to become a global leader in countering fake news.

Background

2 My experience in recent years has been trying to help those who have lost jobs or faced discrimination at work. I observe that some individuals appear stuck in an echo chamber of negativity. They resonate with those who rant on about the unfairness of various situations and often mixing things in their thinking and messaging with half-truths. It makes me sad because I see the damaging effect that staying mired in negativity, reinforced by falsehoods, can have. The natural tendency to blame others, when reinforced, can hinder some individuals from the positive steps they need to take to improve their own situation. In the meantime, this delay can have a devastating effect on their families.

3 From my own, albeit limited, experience of receiving messages containing fake news, I observe that many of the senders are not ill-intentioned. Many senders are misled by the inclusion of half-truths in what they receive and onward forward. When I probe, it seems most senders think they are doing me a favour by sending something they think may add value to me in terms of a helpful tip or warning or to entertain me with something they think I may like or think I can be persuaded on.

4 A common characteristic of such messages (for me most typically now received through WhatsApp) is that the messages are simply forwarded without first checking the facts or thinking through the possible consequences. Some of the senders who forward such messages appear either not aware or unconcerned over the harm that fake news can cause and hence are not bothered or don’t know how to do a simple fact check before forwarding.

5 When I received a message that I suspect is fake, I sometimes bother to check the facts of the message and politely reply to the sender to let him/her know the

message is fake. I typically include a URL citation as evidence that the news is fake (e.g. from snopes.com) and share with the sender how to recognise messages that may be fake (e.g. asking recipients to forward it) and how to check if the message may be part of an old viral message before forwarding.

Fake News Tracing

6 Expanding on what I've been trying on a limited individual basis, may I propose a Fake News Tracing initiative.

7 This will first involve researchers contacting those who forwarded messages identified as having fake elements with a polite request for information on who forwarded the fake message to them.

8 As some individuals may be reluctant to disclose who sent them the message, they can be given an option of forwarding the researcher's request on to the person who sent them the message. At Annex A are sample drafts of the messages that researchers can send in different scenarios.

9 In the process of engaging with those who forwarded the fake messages, there will be an opportunity to also:

- a) deepen understanding of the viral fake news phenomena by inviting senders to take part in a survey;
- b) highlight the implications for the sender's credibility if they become known for sending messages with false information;
- c) reinforce the importance of checking messages before forwarding; the malicious and harmful agenda of those who create fake news and the potential harm they are doing to their friends when sending fake messages or links to fake sites;
- d) educate senders on how to check fake messages so that they can still actively add value to their friends by sharing messages that have been fact checked.

Suggested Modalities

10 It is likely that the relevant authorities may already have been considering or received inputs on something similar. Nevertheless, some suggested modalities to think about are below:

- a) **Be non-threatening.** As people may be worried that they could be in trouble for spreading fake news and become defensive, allay this concern by explaining that it is part of a neutral University research project (which it is);
- b) **Assure confidentiality.** Explain that any information gathered will only be used in aggregate form and will not be shared with any authorities, unless there is information indicating potential critical harm being caused to someone.
- c) **Build good will.** Seek to understand those with a message to convey strongly or rant on about. Even though there may be anger, accept that "hurt people, hurt

people” i.e. those who feel hurt or aggrieved do often end up hurting others. Recognise and empathize with the hurt some senders may feel without agreeing to their point of view. Essentially all communication as part of this initiative should try to stay positive, polite and supportive.

d) **Anchor the tracing initiative with an organization perceived to be neutral like a University.** Sound out if relevant research institutes e.g. NTU’s Communication Studies programme are interested in developing this initiative. Don’t let it come across as a Government programme to silence critics.

e) **Use University or Polytechnic students as primary researchers.** As fake news is spread by various social media – e.g. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, blogs etc. ..., getting students involved will help better ensure coverage of whatever platforms for fake news grows or emerges in the future e.g. Instagram, Tumblr etc. ...

f) **Ensure adequate funding.** While there should be one lead Research institute, after an initial pilot is completed, consider providing enough resources to expand the tracing research collaboration with other local IHLs e.g. NUS, SMU, SUTD students to spread the reach of the tracing and engagement effort. Provide those doing the research with pre-paid phone cards and individual smart phones that they can send and receive texts and voice on for the duration of their involvement in this research.

g) **Provide a Human interface.** Messages should include a handphone number to receive calls and texts that is manned by a real person. Provide an email that is also manned by a real person to respond to queries and if needed to forward leads to other researchers to follow up on. Let this “human-ness” contrast with the anonymity of many fake news communications.

h) **Ensure proper training for those doing the research.** To be effective in the tracing and education, those involved in the research need to be familiar, persuaded and engaged in the whole effort. Let them see the research survey results as it emerges. Take in the researchers inputs and address their concerns. Ensure the researchers all go through sufficient training including supervised role plays before letting them engage the public.

i) **Develop a viral element.** As this initiative is refined, consider developing a generic short message that any member of the public can use to respond to a sender of a potentially fake message by connecting them with this fake news tracing research initiative. This is for the third stage that takes this initiative beyond the researchers limited engagement efforts (See para 13 below).

j) **Start with clear-cut fake messages.** Given the likely misperception that this initiative is to stifle dissenting or opposing views, it is important to start with more clear-cut examples of fake news that will not be disputed as being “fake”. There is such a wide range of what can be considered “fake” – from miracle cures, cloned Facebook accounts, the foreign interference examples in the green paper, to the heart felt half-truths sometimes found in websites like thehearttruths.com. I am also mindful that universal acceptance of what is “fake” is not easy and that what is seen as a libelous lie to one person may be a strongly held legitimate point of view to another. If in doubt

whether a message is fake, I suggest being gracious, resist the temptation to classify the message as “fake” and don’t use the tracing mechanism for such cases, again lest the tracing be misconstrued as a tool to stifle opposing points of view.

Fake News Maturity Index

11 Building on the data gathered and subsequent analysis, the research institute should consider developing an index that can better measure an individual and population’s ability to discern and counter fake news. This index could attempt to measure the extent to which individuals are:

- a) Able to Identify some of the key reasons why some fake news is created;
- b) Able to Identify the key negative implications of spreading fake news;
- c) Identify the common tactics used by those spreading fake news;
- d) Inclined to check messages for false information before believing or forwarding such messages;
- e) Prepared to proactively counter the spread of fake news;
- f) Able to respond in a mature, positive and non-defensive manner to someone who rants and spreads the messages with fake information.

12 Possible elements of how such an index can be developed are at Annex B.

Suggested Four Stage Approach

13 Combining the tracing and index idea, it is may be helpful to consider developing this initiative in four stages:

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| Stage One | An initial pilot by one University to test the concept and refine the approach with say 3 researchers and targeting to trace 10 senders of the more clear-cut messages with false information; |
| Stage Two | Broader roll out using the intern researchers from multiple collaborative IHLs with say 100 researches being involved and 500 senders of clear cut messages with false information being approached; |
| Stage Three | Broader public communication and engagement utilizing the aggregate data findings and viral type communication to help individual members of the public better equip and guard themselves becoming become pawns or victims of fake news purveyors; |
| Stage Four | Become a global centre of expertise in understanding and addressing fake news. This could involve hosting international conferences and perhaps doing a multiple country analysis where hopefully Singaporeans – using the fake news maturity index - will hopefully rank high compared to other countries in their ability to discern and counter fake news in a mature and effective manner. |

14 Above suggestions are for the Select Committee's consideration and development if needed.

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Annex A

Sample Messages for Fake News Tracing Research

| # | Scenario | Message Outline |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Initial Message from researcher to a person identified as having possibly forwarded a fake news message | <p>“Hi ____, this is <u>name</u> _____. I’m part of a 2018 <u>NTU</u> research team trying to understand how fake news spreads.</p> <p>I have your contact as you may recently have forwarded a message on <u>topic</u>__ that contained some fake information.</p> <p>The message was probably sent with good intentions on your part. Would you be ok to let me know where you got the message from and when?</p> <p>Alternatively, could you forward this message to the person who sent you the message?</p> <p>For more information on the study visit www.ntu.edu.sg/wkwsci. Thanks for your help. Any questions you can text or WhatsApp me. <u>name</u>_____ 96790581</p> |
| 2 | 1 st reply to Positive Response e.g. When subject replies positively With information on who sent him the message or says that he forwarded your message to the sender. | <p>Hi ____, thank for your reply. I think you meant well.</p> <p>May I ask your help to complete a short online survey on why and how you ended up sending out a message that may have contained fake information?</p> <p>The survey will take less than 10 minutes. All information will be kept strictly confidential. Any data gathered will be used only in aggregate form without individuals being identifiable unless your written permission is given. Click here _____ if you are prepared to help.</p> <p>Thanks for your help. Any questions you can text or WhatsApp me. <u>name</u>_____ 96790581</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| 3 | Information to be given to the respondent upon completion of the online survey | <p>Thank you for completing the survey.</p> <p>Sending out messages without first checking if the information may be fake can cause harm or even injury. See (provide a link to article)</p> <p>For your information our preliminary finding also shows that sending out fake news also undermines the credibility of the sender i.e. most people begin to no longer trust the person who tends to send out fake news without checking.</p> <p>Tips:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To check if a message may be fake a simple tip is to google it or try looking for it on www.snopes.com. - Another telltale sign that a message may be fake is it the message asks at the end that you forward the message to others. <p>If you know of others who can contribute to this study on fake news can you pass me their contact or help forward my contact to them.</p> <p>Also, if you would like information on the results of the study, let me know.</p> <p>Have a great day! <u>name</u> 96790581</p> |
| 4 | 1 st Reminder When subject is silent i.e. fails to respond to the initial message #1. | <p>Hi ___ – Hope things are well. You may have overlooked my earlier message asking if you could let me know who forwarded you the message that was identified as having some fake information.</p> <p>As you probably already know even if done with good or fun intentions, sending out messages without first checking whether they contain fake information undermines the credibility of the sender. It can also end up causing harm to others.</p> <p>As you have yet to respond would it be okay for me to infer that you helped start or modified the message with fake information that was sent out?</p> <p>For more information on this NTU research study see www.ntu.edu.sg/wkwsci". Thanks for your help. Any questions you can text or WhatsApp me. Have a great day! <u>name</u> 96790581</p> |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| 5 | 2 nd Reminder When subject is silent i.e. fails to respond to the initial and reminder message | <p>Hi ____ – haven't heard from you. Hope everything is ok.</p> <p>As I'm assuming you had a role in starting the message with fake information that went viral, I wanted to let you know that as part of the study we're compiling a list of names and numbers of persons who we think may have started the messages with the deliberate intention of misleading others.</p> <p>If you have any concerns or questions about this, please don't hesitate to ask. _____ 96790581</p> |
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Annex B

Fake News Maturity Index

To gauge an individual or population's ability to discern and counter fake news, individuals can be asked a series of questions. Their ability to answer can be used to develop a score for the individual and to provoke interest in educating themselves on what will lead to a higher score. Some sample questions, ideas and ways of measuring the level of maturity are indicated below

| # | To what extent are you: | How to Gauge | ✓ |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Able to Identify some of the key reasons why some fake news is created | Respondent able to name at least two: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generate views for advertising revenue and profit • foreign interference to destabilize the target country • foster terror, • phish to steal data/money • promote a point of view • sabotage a competitor | |
| 2 | Able to Identify the key negative implications of spreading fake news. | Respondent able to name at least two: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make truths out of lies through repetition • undermine credibility of the sender • sow discord/undermine trust between different groups | |
| 3 | Identify the common tactics used by those spreading fake news. | Respondent able to name at least two: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking individuals to forward the message • Using a mixture of Half-truths • Sensational emotional headlines to gain attention • Use of repetition | |
| 4 | Inclined to check messages for false information before believing or forwarding such messages | Options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Forward without checking or thinking too much <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Forward without checking as some of the facts inside the message are known to be true <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Forward after checking some facts <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Don't forward if some doubt | |
| 5 | Prepared to counter the spread of fake news | Options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not my job to counter. I don't even read. So, won't forward <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not my job to counter. Will forward if interesting. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I don't forward messages that may be fake <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I will reply to let the sender know it is fake. | |
| 6 | Able to respond in a non-defensive or attacking manner to someone who rants | If I strongly disagree with a fake message, I tend to want to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Send an angry rebuttal • Ignore the sender • Seek to understand why the sender may feel that way <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reply empathetically while seeking to help the individual | |

