Written Representation 144

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Submission: Fake News - A National Security Concern and What Needs To Be Done to Address It

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1. Introduction

There have been numerous efforts from governments, academia and industry around the world to address the challenges and threats posed by the phenomenon that has come to be known as fake news, but with little in the way of conclusive and definitive solutions or answers. This submission aims to raise ideas and suggestions from the perspective of journalism and the communications sector, to address some of the unique circumstances and challenges facing Singapore and Singaporeans in this era of fake news.

Information is a powerful tool that is essential to the effective functioning of a democratic society. It permeates all aspects of society and leaves its mark on tangible and intangible aspects, including public policy, financial markets, societal perceptions, attitudes, mores, values and behaviour of individuals. Information can be used positively to educate, influence and persuade, or for more nefarious purposes.

As a long-time journalist , first with The Straits Times for nine years and then six years at Mediacorp as a senior editor overseeing teams of reporters and other editors, the power of information as conveyed through different media platforms was deeply ingrained in me and indeed all of us practitioners of the trade from the first day on the job.

Accuracy was paramount, and context and background essential to ensure the value of the information was fully understood. Errors were the bane of our existence, as the impact on our readers and viewers could be significant, even in Singapore's relatively small media marketplace. Any inaccuracies or mistakes by journalists or editors would have severe personal consequences, including financial penalties on bonuses and increments, the loss of promotion or advancement opportunities, and in extreme cases – the risk of being fired.

This would explain why many of us in the media industry have watched with horror the rise and rise of fake news in recent years.

Information is double-edged, in that it can be weaponised through deliberate online falsehoods or fake news, which comprises disinformation and also mal-information.

The phenomenon of fake news is not new, and dates as far back as biblical times and classical Greece. Propaganda, misinformation, and information operations – early names for what we now know as fake news – have been present for thousands of years. Yet the rise of technology and changes in the global media industry has made the spread of information, and misinformation, easy, convenient, and fast.

At the same time, one of the challenges in addressing this phenomenon is the fact that fake news is inherently undefinable. It can encompass a broad range of material – from parody and satire, to inaccurate or mistaken information, to targeted products and material aimed at achieving specific effects, or as in the case of certain politicians, it could mean anything that is negative or unfavourable to themselves.

Regardless of what we call it, the rise of fake news is worrisome on a number of levels. A misinformed public is not good for a country, as it will result in individuals, social groups, communities and organizations making decisions based on incorrect or inaccurate data. Thanks to the increasing ubiquity of social media platforms, there is also a growing risk of "filter bubbles" or echo chambers being formed, due to technology enabled filters automatically feeding users with information they show prior preference for. This then creates a society where people only see parts of issues and not the broader picture, which would impede the formation of viable solutions to problems, or any coherent debate or discussion.

A more dangerous outcome of the growing prevalence of fake news is a populace that is disinterested in news and information, as a result of frustration or helplessness in terms of knowing who or what to trust and believe. Such apathy could result in individuals living in their own silos with little or no desire to be informed, educated or engaged. Experts are already calling this a potential "information crisis", where every source or platform of information is called into doubt, and which could lead to societal paralysis, dysfunction, conflict and chaos.

This can have disastrous effects when critical life decisions need to be made, or during major national events such as elections. In the United States and Britain, observers have begun referring to "low-information voters" as being behind some of the recent political phenomena, including the election of President Donald Trump and the Brexit decision.

Even more worrying is the possibility of other actors, whether state or non-state, developing tools such as artificial intelligence, hacking software and bots that will enable them to shape and direct sentiment and emotion of such a misinformed public, to effect outcomes that are in their favour, but not necessarily in the best interests of the state which is the target. Such efforts are commonly known as information operations when employed in a military or national security context. Examples of these are Russian operations in various theatres including Ukraine, China's efforts to establish and propagate its narrative around the region about the South China Sea and other issues, and North Korea's cyber-warfare capabilities, which have been built up over the past 15 years and have been accused of being behind various operations in recent months.

The use of hacking, artificial intelligence and digital bots which can be deployed en masse on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook mean that information and news, fake or otherwise, can be weaponised in a manner that could change the future of warfare in ways that are beyond our imagination. The investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections, and evidence of Russia's involvement in recent debate over gun control in the US, are just some of the examples of how this is already taking place.

In today's context, a more appropriate term for these campaigns would be influence operations, given the desired outcome of influencing a populace, and hence the government or authorities of a nation state. Such influence operations currently represent a clear and present danger to the security of countries, governments and people all around the world.

Crucially, it is necessary for Singaporeans to be aware of the real risks being posed by fake news and influence operations in today's world, and realize the need for all of us to play a part in developing solutions.

We are relatively lucky in Singapore to have been spared thus far from any major or dramatic impact of fake news or targeted influence operations, at least none which have been dramatically publicized. But that does not mean we are completely unscathed, and will remain so in the future. It is critical that we as a people begin to understand and appreciate what is at stake, and what we can do about it.

2. The Critical Dangers

There are a few critical dangers associated with the rise of fake news that are especially pertinent for Singapore.

To understand the dangers, it is necessary to be aware of one of the unique characteristics of the phenomenon. Fake news aims to reach deep into society by riling up emotions and sentiments of individuals with perspectives and news that stir up visceral and emotive reactions. This has become pervasive in recent years. Indeed, the Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2016 was "post-truth", which was defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". This "post-truth" phenomenon lays the foundations for other challenges that typically arise.

First and foremost, being able to identify and recognize fake news is not a skill-set that is possessed by the majority of people. The sophistication of some of the purveyors of misinformation when it comes to mimicking credible news products or posing as reliable sources of information is at a level where even trained professionals familiar with the news industry have a difficult time discerning what is real and what is not.

This is compounded by the natural human tendency towards complacency and the assumption that we will always be able to tell when confronted by fake news. This hubris is of course dangerous given the prevalence and increasing expertise of fake-news makers.

With this in mind, it is worth looking more closely at some of the potential dangers inherent in the rise of fake news:

A. <u>Erosion of trust</u>

Strategic fake news campaigns, defined as those with a clear intent to mislead, deceive and undermine a country's strategic edge by fracturing a people's unity and resolve, ultimately aim to erode trust in institutions, organizations and individuals.

These typically feed on a society's area of vulnerabilities and fragilities, seek to amplify areas of doubt and unhappiness, and through the use of media and technology, perpetuate falsehoods voluminously and at great speed.

As a result, an individual could be inundated with information that supports their preexisting biases and worldview. This will leave little space for alternative perspectives, which are key to informed and open dialogue.

There have been specific scenarios where such efforts aim to sensationalize news, or spread falsehoods in times of major incidents and crises. An example of this was the Boston Marathon bombing in the US in 2013, when a student, Sunil Tripathi, who had disappeared for a month prior to the incident, was wrongly accused by social media users seeking to crowd-source investigations in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. This was ultimately proven to be untrue, but caused undue grief to his family. While this was not an example of a fake news campaign per se, it illustrated the potential for such efforts to take root and affect public opinion and emotions in times of heightened stress or crises.

These toxic effects on public opinion can create potential tensions and divisions within society. It becomes a critical danger when it happens during a national crisis or high-impact events such as a terrorist incident.

But even if it is waged at a lower intensity over a sustained period of time, the erosion of trust it engenders can lead to a society where every piece of news and information is doubted. Such an information crisis can have effects that are at least as damaging as a financial crisis, and create situations where leaders, institutions and organizations are placed under suspicion as a matter of course, and where people are left without clear direction or confidence in their country and countrymen.

B. <u>Evolving nature of the threat</u>

Among the unique characteristics of the fake news threat is the fact that, throughout the history of the phenomenon, one constant has been the evolving nature of the threat, which taps greatly on the technology of the day to achieve its objectives.

Growing rapidly from the day when rumours and lies were spread by word of mouth, we now see fake news being propagated on ubiquitous social media platforms that have infiltrated all strata of society via all manner of devices.

This is likely to continue to be the trend, with the rise of newer technologies such as artificial intelligence, social media bots that can retweet messages hundreds of

thousands of times to amplify their impact, and other autonomous weapons made possible by advances in machine learning.

Social media platforms like Twitter have been working to root out bots allegedly linked to Russia, following the indictment of 13 Russians believed to have created fake accounts to conduct information warfare against the United States. Experts say that it's not hard to spot automation, but this means that bot creators are also likely to work to counter such efforts. This can take the form of blending automation with human curation, where humans will post new comments, along with the automated retweets, to create the impression that "real people" are behind accounts.

The net effect of such efforts is a social media "arms race", where all sides seek to outdo one another in developing more and more sophisticated tools that will grant them access to the levers that can influence human behaviour.

Even if an individual player does not have access to these ever-evolving arsenals of tools, there is also no shortage of creative ways to achieve similar effects. A client of my communications consultancy experienced continued online harassment by a specific customer aimed at eliciting a negative reaction from the service team. Once that had been obtained, it was screen-grabbed and then shared on multiple platforms in a bid to create a viral campaign against the company.

Potential future threats will no doubt include versions of measures such as narrowcasting or micro-targeting of individuals through social media and other online channels, where personal tendencies and characteristics are gleaned by artificial intelligence programmes based on behaviour in the digital world. These will then be used to determine how to target different groups of people with tailored messaging. This has proven effective especially in times of elections or when the public vote is being contested.

C. <u>Singapore's vulnerability and the impact on democracy</u>

As a small, highly connected and diverse country, Singapore is inherently vulnerable to deliberate online falsehoods, and the consequent societal impact of the spread of fake news.

The factors that put Singapore on the map in the years since independence are the same ones that could be exploited by those who wish to do harm. And it's getting harder to identify the source of threats. Increasingly, enemies are nonstate players, contentions are not cross-border, weapons are non-military, and conflicts will be unconventional and non-kinetic. Fake news and other tools of influence operations will become more prevalent threats for small nation states like Singapore.

High levels of Internet penetration and media consumption, which have enabled Singaporeans to reap the benefits of increasing globalization and thrive in a global city, can be exploited to quickly and widely seed and spread fake news. These effects can be amplified if promulgated via closed communication channels such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which are popular and also difficult to regulate due to security protocols.

Singapore's multi-culturalism and multi-racialism, admired by many around the world, also offer opportunities for bad actors to exploit and magnify differences and inevitable tensions between groups. This could lead to the undermining of national values and disruption of social harmony and stability.

These and other challenges have serious implications on the democratic process. Experts around the world are pointing to "AI-enabled interference" in the democratic process as one of the key concerns in the future. Among the worries is the effect that technology enabled fake news can have in terms of undermining institutions of democracy, and impacting trust among citizens and the ability to know what is happening in the world.

Such a full spectrum of threats is not unimaginable. We have already seen, and in some cases experienced, the impact of influence operations instigated by larger, more powerful nations who have at their disposal a full range of information tools – from a compliant national media, to well-manned and well-resourced Internet manipulation capabilities, and even fake civil society institutions that can be used to reinforce the official government positions and lend credence to their views. This then manifests itself as a veritable tsunami of fake news, influence and information operations that can swing opinion both within the target state and externally as well, increasing the pressure on the target.

3. Possible Solutions
There is no clear solution or "silver bullet" when it comes to addressing the threat of fake news. The rapidly changing technology that enables influence operations means that it can be a futile chase to work on defeating current threats even as the next generation emerges.

CNN national security analyst Peter Bergen said during a recent visit to Singapore that the best inoculation against fake news is an educated, engaged and informed society. This to me appears to be the best and most reliable defence
– for each and every one of us to learn to become critical thinkers.

This will then form the bedrock of a resilient community that is less susceptible to malicious influence operations, and more able to respond in ways that protect themselves, their loved ones, and their countrymen regardless of the threat that emerges.

The question is then how to activate the population in an environment which encourages and provides the tools to recognize the implements and tools of influence operations and fake news, the ability to discern the impact and intent of such operations, and the will and resilience to resist and counter such effects.

A. **Awareness and understanding**

It is imperative for Singaporeans to be aware not just of what fake news is, but the threat that it poses. There is a danger that interest and awareness of fake news is limited to what personalities like Donald Trump make of it, or it gets confused with parody and humour, or simple inaccurate or mistaken information.

With fake news and influence operations becoming more ubiquitous around the world, it is necessary to grow the level of awareness and understanding of such phenomena around Singaporeans.

The challenge lies in overcoming two significant challenges. The first is Singapore's good fortune in having been spared any major attack from an enemy intent on tapping on influence or information operations to disrupt our way of life or major national events. This does not mean that we will be spared forever.

The authorities have warned that it's not a question of "if" but "when" when it comes to terror attacks on Singapore soil. I would posit that this extends to major influence operations as well. Indeed, we have already experienced some level of attacks, and it is unlikely that our potential enemies will stop there.

The second challenge is related to human psychology and basic nature – it is a common response by the average person to believe that he or she will be able to recognize and resist any attempted fake news. This is of course reasonable if one considers early ham-fisted attempts by fake news purveyors to edit or change news products, or spread ideas and information that are blatantly and obviously made-up.

But the effectiveness of fake news in influencing behaviour and achieving strategic objectives has led various state and non-state actors to refine and improve their capabilities in producing tools and products that are virtually indistinguishable from the real thing, and spread through such insidious channels as to fool even the semi-trained eye. Complacency on our part and a belief in our own abilities to spot such fake news can prove a real challenge to building awareness and understanding of the threat.

The solution to these and other related issues lie in a multi-pronged approach that will include education, government-driven awareness-building, and private sector and civil society initiatives, to ensure that the messaging is driven down to all parts of society. These will be elaborated on below.

B. Motivation
The key to ensuring that a broad base of people, who are aware of the threat of fake news, and who are motivated to prepare and educate themselves in order to defend themselves from this threat, lies in human psychology.

It is widely accepted in the communications sector that paternalistic and didactic messaging from authorities tends to have a reverse effect in turning people away from the intended message. As such, official warnings about the dangers of fake news are unlikely to be completely effective.

Efforts around the world in areas such as the countering of violent extremism has borne out the theory that the source or the person delivering narratives or messages can be critical in boosting the receptiveness of such messages. Official or government messaging for example tends to enjoy little traction or credibility among certain demographics.

Given this phenomenon, it's useful then for official sources of facts, data and information, which include mainstream or traditional media and online platforms, to be reinforced with other credible, non-official voices and on-ground engagement.

This should include civil society institutions such as independent think tanks, as well as the private sector. The challenge is to create a groundswell of initiatives which can tap on these various channels to complement official efforts to combat fake news.

A fundamental element of human nature which might be useful in motivating people to take the threat of fake news seriously is the normal disinclination to be made a fool of, or to be "taken for a ride" by a bad actor or dishonest player.

This, more than any official warning or imperative, could be the key to mobilizing and motivating people to become engaged, educated and informed, which is critical in the fight against fake news and influence operations. This threat is significant because it reaches deep into society and the emotions of individuals, and any sustainable solution has to take that into consideration as well.

Given current popular trends, there may be benefit in considering the game-ification of fake news awareness campaigns and efforts to counter this threat, to broaden the appeal and receptiveness of such messaging. Similarly, it may be useful to explore the possibility of creating some crowd-sourced channels to exchange views and perspectives on possible fake news, and to encourage people to depend more on becoming educated and informed about current affairs and issues, and to engage and discuss with their peers instead of merely clicking and sharing information from unverified or unsubstantiated sources.

There is a dearth of documented strategies and data on successful counter-fake news initiatives, given the relative newness of the phenomenon. Taking into consideration Singapore's vulnerabilities to such threats, it would be logical for us to adopt an active and innovative approach to developing solutions that work for us and our circumstances.

C. Skillsets and capabilities

There is a broad range of skillsets and capabilities that can and should be deployed against fake news, given the pervasiveness and constantly evolving threat.

Public policy

i. At the whole-of-government level, there is a need to create an environment, and offer guidance and leadership that places an emphasis on building an informed, educated and engaged society that is resilient and united in the face of the full-spectrum threat of influence operations and fake news.

This environment should foster critical thinking and media literacy, and should take into consideration a holistic education strategy that spans students, young adults, PMETs and the elderly. It should be recognized that educational efforts through schools is likely to require a period of time before any significant and widespread effects are felt.

In the same way that SGSecure has problematized and broadened awareness about the threat of a potential terror attack on Singapore soil, a similar campaign for fake news could be developed, with "Run, Hide, Tell" possibly replaced with something in a similar vein, for e.g. "Read, Check, Think". Along with a broader publicity campaign, this could achieve the objectives of bringing greater awareness to the threat, while also offering the baseline measures that can be brought to bear to counter it, as opposed to remaining part of the problem by clicking, believing and sharing harmful fake news.

Earlier efforts such as the National Library Board's S.U.R.E. information literacy campaign, launched in 2013, should be harnessed and included in a holistic national effort to combat the threat.

Also important would be for government ministries and agencies to have a clear and defined definition of what fake news is, and what the general direction of efforts to counter this threat should be. This would then enable greater efforts for a sustained and long-lasting solution to be developed.

ii. There is a need for legal guidelines and restrictions to be put in place to allow the authorities to respond quickly and firmly to threats, especially those from external actors and which threaten critical national milestones and infrastructure.

It is necessary to recognize however that laws are just part of the equation. Given the pervasive and at times indefinable nature of the threat, it remains to be seen if a legal response can completely neutralize it, and if such a response is able to keep up with the fluid and ever-changing nature of the technology behind fake news and influence operations.

<u>Social activation</u>

i. Given that top-down initiatives may not be very successful in driving home anti-fake news messages, there is a critical need for ground-up initiatives to spread awareness and information about the threat.

An ideal situation would be for activated and motivated individuals across different demographic and social groups to create opportunities for information-sharing, open debate and discussion, in order to disprove fake news, prevent its spread, and to uplift the level of awareness, understanding and appreciation of truth and facts.

However, given some of the challenges discussed above, it may not be the most natural process for this to evolve organically in the near future. As such, it is imperative that these individuals who are passionate and interested in this issue, including those who have taken part in this current exercise to pen submissions for the Select Committee, be encouraged to lead discussions on different platforms and develop tools and engagement channels that will boost ground-up efforts to combat fake news.

ii. On a related note, there is also much scope for civil society institutions to play a role in addressing fake news.

Think tanks and other NGOs would do well to consider this issue among their list of key causes and focus areas which are of social relevance and import, given the potential for harm to society and communities. Already, institutions such as the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies have included the study of the fake news phenomenon among their focus areas.

Given the challenges facing the traditional or mainstream media sector, there might be a need for a think tank or other institution to focus on the growth and development of media and journalism not just in Singapore but potentially in the region. As the media landscape evolves, with rising pressures from increased competition and phenomena like fake news, it will be necessary for an objective and credible voice on the sector to emerge to guide and facilitate discourse on this and related issues.

Private initiative

i. The private sector has a key role to play in this issue. This includes the need for social media companies, technology firms and any other business that operates in areas which plays a part in the fake news phenomenon to step forward and examine how they can help to address the issue.

Much has been said of the responsibility that companies like Facebook and Twitter have in the fight against fake news, and also their efforts thus far. These are to be commended, but also to a certain extent expected, given that these firms have operated and profited from some of the platforms on which fake news is spread and popularized.

What would be useful to see going forward is greater public-private cooperation in this space, so that the authorities are kept appraised of the latest developments, technological and otherwise, within the sector which is most at risk of being exploited by the purveyors of fake news and influence operations.

ii. Beyond social media and tech companies, I firmly believe it is also the responsibility of every company and business owner to encourage greater awareness and understanding about fake news and the threat it poses.

It is not an exaggeration to say that fake news has the power to one day impact all of our lives, whether it's from something we read, or that is shared within our social circles both online and offline, or that has become accepted as a universal truth. This means that every company is at risk of being impacted, through the vulnerability of their individual staff members.

It is thus in the interest of corporate citizens to embrace broader campaigns to combat fake news if and when these are rolled out, in line with other

campaigns to support institutions such as national service and racial harmony.

iii.   Also within the ambit of the private sector is the role and responsibility that communications companies have to play.

Public relations and media consultancies, marketing and advertising firms all operate within the communications sphere, advising clients on messaging and also pushing out narratives and brand images of corporations, their products and services. They thus have opportunities to encourage the responsible use of media and marketing platforms, the creation and spread of truthful and credible messages, and the broader education of consumers.

As the founder of a communications consultancy, I feel that all of us working in this industry have a responsibility to shape the sector and landscape in a way that encourages greater understanding of truthful messages versus fake news, and also encourage more authentic communications strategies that will contribute to a more fake-news- free environment.

Media excellence

i.   The media industry has been the one that has been hit hardest by the rise of fake news. Law Minister K Shanmugam has noted that it is important in today's environment for the media to ensure that journalism standards are robust as its role as a trusted news source is being challenged.

Part of this has been due to the attempts by some political leaders to discredit any news that is not favourable to them by labeling it as fake. This has resulted in a loss of faith in news outlets.

News outlets have also been hit by a general rise in distrust of all forms of information, collateral damage in the "information crisis" that has resulted in confusion among individuals about what news and platform to trust.

This, coupled with the financial pressures facing traditional media platforms courtesy of rising competition from digital media, has created distractions for media companies from their core mission of delivering excellent, credible and reliable journalism.

Based on my time in the newsrooms of the two largest domestic media companies in Singapore over the past 18 years, I've noticed that the current environment has led to a general fall in morale, especially among the younger journalists who were drawn to the noble aspects of the profession, but have since had to face the reality of pressures to attract more eyeballs, and to stay relevant as consumers and audiences drift towards social media and other channels for their news and information.

I believe it will be in the best interests of the journalism sector as a whole to refocus on the core missions of educating, informing, engaging and

entertaining audiences and consumers so that they not only stay viable and sustainable in the business sense, but also perform their function of delivering critical news and information that enable people to make the right decisions at key junctures in their lives. This will also enable media companies to continue attracting, developing and retaining top talent in the sector.

This should be encouraged by regulators, who at the same time should also work with other authorities to build a national culture of appreciation of the value that news media organisations play in our society. This could form some elements of education curriculum in schools, and indeed of broader national campaigns.

All these efforts should of course not run counter to the continued drive to modernize and tap on technology to keep up with consumption trends and behaviours, but should complement such evolution by ensuring that the reputation for reliability and credibility is maintained, even as new delivery platforms are tapped.

i.   Related to this point is my suggestion that the news industry and journalism be delinked from the profit motives of media companies in Singapore.

It is inevitable for companies seeking to grow revenues, maximize profits and minimize costs to seek out the best sources of revenue based on the environment they operate in. In today's media landscape, that often means catering to the demands of the majority of consumers. This has often resulted in a rush to the lowest common denominator of popular demand, and the rise of the "clickbait" phenomenon where eye-catching and titillating materials are proffered to audiences in the hopes of "going viral" and seizing the greatest share of attention and interest from consumers, and hence drawing the advertising dollars as well.

With an almost infinite number of sources of free "news" and information online, the model of charging consumers for access to news is also proving to be increasing unrealistic and unfeasible, creating yet more financial pressures and challenges for news organizations.

All these considerations create an environment that is not conducive for the development of excellent journalism. If recent moves by both Singapore Press Holdings and Mediacorp are anything to go by, the default solution, at least in the short run, appears to address such pressures by cutting costs, and hence resources. This is being done at a time when competitive forces would suggest that beefing up resources to deliver superior products that are in line with their core mission would be a more effective solution.

In the current operating environment, where the newsrooms and the products they produce are part of a bigger corporate structure that ultimately must answer to a profit target, it is unlikely that there will be significant shifts in the modus operandi.

What then is needed is a change in the framework, and one model that can be considered is to have the news functions of these companies separated from the rest of the business and held under a not-for-profit umbrella where the sole mandate is to deliver excellence in journalism. Funding of the operations could be modeled after the BBC in Britain, which is funded principally by an annual television licence fee charged to all British households, companies, and organisations using any type of equipment to receive or record live television broadcasts.

The BBC also generates revenue in other ways, including from the sale of its content to other broadcasters, and also products derived from its bulletins and programmes. However, it does retain independence from any corporate owner or shareholders, which enhances its credibility and allows it to focus on its core mission – to inform, educate and entertain.

Having attended courses for senior news editor sat the BBC in London, I can vouch for the fact that, despite it being the world's oldest national broadcasting company and currently the largest broadcaster globally by number of staff, the energy and passion of its employees ranging from senior editors down to junior reporters and producers is extremely high, with pride in their work a key consideration for any staff member.

This in turn contributes to the organisation's reputation as a trusted and valued news source around the world.

Singapore media has much potential to emulate this reputation in the region. But I strongly believe that the way the media operates must change if we are to enable Singapore news companies to be respected, admired, and consumed by the next generation of audiences in the years ahead.

Continuing to link journalism to profit will impede the industry from developing and growing as a credible, trusted, and hence useful, tool to counter fake news.

4. Conclusion

In light of the various challenges and threats facing a relatively small and young nation state like Singapore, it is heartening that the Government has taken the proactive step of setting up a Select Committee to address the looming threat of fake news. While it may not be foremost among the minds of many citizens consumed with other pressing and practical needs, the threat it presents is significant and insidious, and possesses the power to strike us at our key vulnerabilities.

The commemoration of Singapore's Bicentennial in 2019 will focus on three aspects that comprise the Singapore DNA: openness, multiculturalism and self-determination.

In light of the threat fake news poses to these core elements of the country, the effort of the Select Committee is a timely and important one.

In the context of the Total Defence framework, there is a need to strengthen the pillar of psychological defence as a bulwark against deliberate online falsehoods, fake news and malicious information operations.

The aim of the national effort to combat fakes news comes down to the ability of people to trust each other, to have faith in government and social institutions, and to be resilient against forces which aim to sow discord and create fissures in our society.

Laws and other regulatory safeguards must be in place to enable the authorities to take quick and decisive action against those who wish to do Singapore harm. But they may not be enough to respond to a threat unlike any the world has seen before, and which can evolve and transform while still acting with split-second efficacy to strike from anywhere, at any target. Indeed, laws may serve as a clear signal of where other vulnerabilities may lie, to a class of bad actors who specialize in adapting and changing their tactics faster than defences can be erected against them.

Strategic information strategies require time to be developed, and the environment in which they function is fluid. Developing good strategies is thus a long-term incremental process, and one where a significant amount of failure can be expected. Traditional government culture anywhere in the world has not typically supported this kind of process. As such, a whole-ofnation approach that includes the Government, private and social sectors, and critically, the media industry as a key player, must be adopted if a truly effective and longlasting solution is to be found to counter fake news.

In many fields, nomenclature or the naming of objects is of significant importance, and perhaps this also applies to fake news. Experts have pointed out the need to call it for what it is, and that there really is no "news" in fake news, it is in fact just lies. And whether we call it fake news or some other name, the truth is that weaponized lies in the form of influence operations pose the greatest threat to our safety, stability and democracy in the years ahead.

END