

## **Written Representation 41**

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### **TISG's Submission to Parliamentary Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods**

#### **Introduction**

Political actors vie to mobilise public opinion and in recent years social media (including digital media) has become a popular tool to reach the masses, often bypassing traditional media channels. This new phenomenon has created a new socio-political-media environment and this report addresses some of the issues or challenges faced by the industry.

We have also attempted to correlate the use-case presented in the Green Paper to see its applicability in the local context. Our intention is not to debunk the notion of “fake news” or “falsehoods” or to say that the PAP government is the chief perpetrator of “fake news,” a popular narrative by bloggers and civil society members. Instead, we view the proliferation of fake news to be problematic as it only creates more work and the very existence of fake news means that we need to diligently verify everything that comes to our news desk – it adds a layer of costs to our reporting.

We have read some of the earlier submissions to the select committee, and the abstracts of these have been published on our news site. We like to highlight to the committee that as a news organisation we have an obligation to report these in an unbiased manner and some of the views in those articles are not representative of the views of the editorial team or what is reported herein.

1. Firstly, we are of the view that the current Telecommunications Act and Protection from Harassment Act are inadequate to deal with Fake News or Disinformation. The current laws do not directly deal with the nature of industry-scale-fake-news, dissemination, intention (for profit or agenda based) and the treatment of it. We see a need to enact new laws which gives both the government and regulators appropriate tools to act and stop the proliferation of industry scale disinformation.  
We want to impress upon the committee that this is an opportunity to address members of the blogging community and the media industry that having new and updated laws should be welcomed as it gives the industry proper regulatory and legal framework to work in.  
We understand that there are segments of our society having reservations about fake news laws being enforced as a tool to silence critics and civil society members. It is important to engage this segment to alleviate any fears that they may have about the new laws.

2. The response to the phenomenon of industry scale disinformation should not result in the enactment of more draconian laws but a more calibrated approach of self-regulation by the primary actors of the media industry.

The role of this self-regulatory body may be limited in function as an independent panel to verify the authenticity of news items rather than one with broad regulatory powers to shut down websites.

Shutting down local sites (which were identified as fake-news sites) like AllSingaporeStuff, StateTimesReview or TOC will only have the opposite effect of promoting virile objectionable content. Our fear is that, these players may end up going deep-net and may engage in black-hat techniques.

The new laws must not inadvertently hamper the existence and development of **alternative but pro-Singapore** social media websites. Their absence will mean we are abdicating the role to outside players – an undesirable outcome for Singapore.

3. We further recommend a “notice and take down” approach of self-regulation, where the media operators keep themselves in check through an Internet Watch Group. The proposed framework to provide for escalation mechanisms when individuals or media organisations fail to comply with take down notices.
4. Media organisations should also strengthen their vetting process and should not be severely penalized for erroneous pieces published in good faith. Government to consider various support and funding mechanisms to strengthen media institutions.

Media organisations to consider community safety standards and build internal mechanisms to detect fake news using automated verification process. However, the functionality of this may be limited to the availability of source data and the implementation of these may be both costly and time-consuming. The committee to study the various technology options that are currently available.

Media representing the views of whistle blowers also need a form of immunity so that people can come forward.

5. Any form of Internet Surveillance or eavesdropping by the government using gateway servers should be strictly limited to inbound traffic to Singapore and/or social media accounts based overseas. We are concerned that the government will use or is already using such technologies to monitor Internet traffic in Singapore. We hope to have more clarity on the government’s usage of such technologies.

We request the committee to furnish more details, if any, on the use of such technologies by the authorities.

6. Green Paper has anecdotal evidence of how falsehood has affected elections in various parts of the world. Except for one instance of TRS, there isn't sufficient evidence to suggest that falsehood statements are prevalent or ubiquitous and has impacted political outcomes in Singapore.

In fact, a paper by Dr Carol Soon of Institute of Public Policy, has categorically said that social media has little impact on election outcomes in Singapore.

In any case, for any piece of fake news to have been pivotal, each fake article would have had an impressively large effect on voters. ([Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election, Stanford University](#))

7. Moreover, it is imperative to note that the media space and social media is dominated by pro-PAP websites and Facebook pages. Edmund Wee, a prominent book publisher in Singapore said that the government has taken measures to either silence or neutralise the various news outlets using existing legislation.

	Number of likes and followers*
Lee Hsien Loong	1,193,303 people like this 1,191,094 people follow this
K. Shanmugam	119,991 people like this 119,752 people follow this
Vivian Balakrishnan	97,982 people like this 100,301 people follow this
Tharman Shanmugaratnam	65,297 people like this 65,297 people like this
Teo Chee Hean	63,169 people like this 63,062 people follow this
Chee Soon Juan	62,925 people like this 63,098 people follow this
Chen Show Mao	42,911 people like this 42,148 people follow this
Heng Swee Keat	38,325 people like this 38,283 people follow this
Ong Ye Kung	33,152 people like this 33,854 people follow this
Chan Chun Sing	35,782 people like this 36,033 people follow this
Low Thia Kiang	23,560 people like this 23,419 people follow this

Sylvia Lim	17,873 people like this 17,862 people follow this
Pritam Singh	16,320 people like this 16,272 people follow this
Leon Perera	8,395 people like this 8,526 people follow this
Fabrications about the PAP	182,973 people like this 208,569 people follow this
The Online Citizen	99,247 people like this 96,939 people follow this

Figures as at 02/02/2018

The table above shows the number of Facebook likes by politician. Going by what was presented in the Green Paper, it would make sense for those who are driven by profits to create fake news about opposition so that they can target the fan base of the most popular fan-pages.

A popular Facebook Page, Fabrications about the PAP, has been wilfully spreading disinformation about various political figures and The Independent. There are rumours about Jason Chua being funded by PAP. We hope the committee investigates into this.

8. Journalists and Bloggers are public intellectuals and it is important that their space is safe, and it deserves protection of the law.

We find it problematic that the Green Paper has said that sites propagating a certain view or narrative to be classified as fake news. There are many bloggers who hold different views on Operation Spectrum and Operation Coldstore. We hope the purpose of this exercise is not to shut down the dissenting voices in Singapore.

9. Facebook has recently changed its feed algorithm to focus more on social sharing from individuals rather than from pages. This limits the perpetrators of fake news sites to use Facebook Pages to propagate their fake-news.

Conversely, this also limits professional news organisations from reaching their networks fully and may result in a lopsided reporting of social stories as opposed to articles from publishers.

10. Misreporting Vs Fake News

In an interview with journalists, Minister Chan Chun Sing said, “prepared to serve as PM.” However, it was widely reported that Mr Chan is prepared to become the next PM if called upon.

MCI was quick to state that Reuters, an international news agency, fabricated the headline. His statement was obviously misinterpreted, and we are concerned that the new framework, if solely regulated by the government or MCI, will be detrimental to the ongoing discourse in current affairs and might have a chilling effect on the media.

## **Conclusion**

To reiterate our position, while we feel that there is a need for a new legal framework around fakenews and dissemination of disinformation, we are concerned that the government will use this to further stifle freedom of speech and communication in Singapore.

A collaborative approach, with the co-operation of the current media operators and/or professionals from the sector would be the best approach.

We avail ourselves for further consultation on this matter.

## **About The Independent**

TISG is an entrepreneurial outfit, our shareholders are Singaporeans with complete voting rights. The shareholders are active participants in the strategic decision making of the business.

## **Author**

Kumaran Pillai is the principal author of this report and has a controlling stake in TISG. He is currently the editor-in-chief and has financial control of the business. He has also served as the Chief Editor of The Online Citizen in 2012.

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