

Written Representation 45

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Public Consultation on Fake News

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Suggestion for Public Consultation

I had participated in various public consultations such as the Financial Advisory Industry Review. As the government and many people already agree on certain things, the government should have a website to first share what they have discussed and then consolidate submitted views so that later participants need not repeat the same things and we can all increase our productivity.

Fake News is Not New

Ancient people had myths. The baby boomers had Urban Legends. Now we call them fake news. So fake news is as ancient as witchcraft!

Scope, Severity and Motive

All false information is false. However, not all wrong information is equal. While people generally agree that falsehood can be destructive, they also worry that governments would use fake news as an excuse to stop free speech because politicians often complain that falsehood affects election and governments. To allay fears and win trust, we should first discuss the scope, severity and motive of falsehood.

Contrary to many views, falsehood affects everyone: businesses, charities, religions, ordinary people, etc. Hence we first need a holistic view of falsehood say by using the PESTEL (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Ecological and Legal) model.

Political: Years before Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away, I heard rumours that he had died but the government covered up so as not to alarm businesses. The rumour arose probably because Mr Lee was admitted to the hospital then. When he appeared at the National Day Parade, I said, "See".

I disbelieve such rumours because I understand how the government works. However, one morning, I tuned in to a radio programme but heard classical music instead. As Mr Lee had been hospitalised for some time, I guessed and checked the news immediately.

Economic: In December 2017, Reuters reported that a Twitter user, TheUsopIbrahim, claimed that McDonald's "channelled funds to Israel". In 1978, someone said that McDonald's founder Ray Kroc donated to the Church of Satan. Even non-Christian Singaporeans boycotted McDonald's! Don't they know that "Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbour"?

Social: Quite recently, the Straits Times reported that someone sent a SMS message that that day was the last day for senior citizens to receive train fare subsidies. My relative received the hoax and told my mother to rush for it. Despite having a bad diarrhoea, she rushed to join the long queue. If I had received the message, I would disbelieve it because I knew that the government would not be so stupid as to give people only one day to receive such benefits. The police investigated the case but what had they found? I was very angry with those who caused such harm.

Technological: I was a bank system administrator. Then everyone always received email hoaxes on viruses, system flaws, etc. These laypeople would quickly forward these emails to everyone. System administrators then wasted time researching and convincing non-technical managers that they were hoaxes. Even my Vice-President was very angry because companies spent a lot of money to hire technologists to develop new products and services and increase productivity rather than to debunk hoaxes. I always told people, "If you receive these again, send it to your systems administrator or to me".

Ecological: People can easily mistake smoke as poison, terrorist act, etc.

Legal: Some people had spread wrong legal information about CPF, Annie Ee/City Harvest cases, etc.

Motive

We can also use the PESTEL model to analyse why people create and spread lies.

Political: While the NTUC FairPrice's plastic rice hoax seems like an economic hoax, it could be politically motivated as many people think that NTUC belongs to the government or the People's Action Party.

Economic: In year 2000, Mark Jakob shorted Emulex share and sent a fake press release. Bloomberg published it and it caused Emulex shares to plunge. For the past years, Iceberg and Muddy Waters also wrote negative reports about Noble.

Social: Some people may spread a lie as a prank or out of curiosity not knowing that such pranks can harm businesses and people. Some people are emotional and would rather believe a scammer they love than a family member with strong education qualification, industry experience, reputation, etc. Others may do so due to mental illness.

What should be Criminal Fake News?

Some false news are obviously false (e.g. bomb hoax, Punggol Waterway Terrace roof collapse, NTUC FairPrice's plastic rice) as they are deliberately created. Others may be due to insufficient education, information, knowledge, etc. Even experts (e.g. Wall Street investment banks, billion-dollar fund managers) can have different opinions or even make mistakes. A few years ago, someone from the Bank of Korea said that we would have another Asian Currency Crisis. I disagreed and was glad that other experts and the Monetary Authority of Singapore later also disagreed.

I had advised and trained insurance agents/staff, polytechnic finance students, and small and medium enterprises on finance and business including regulation (e.g. Financial Advisers Act, Company Act, tax). As we are not lawyers, we may make mistakes and our mistakes should not be regarded as fake news. To protect ourselves, we always ask clients, trainees, etc, to seek qualified lawyers, tax accountants, etc.

Multi-Prong Solution

Root of the Problem

We must handle falsehood seriously due to the Crying Wolf problem else no one will believe when the real wolf comes. While regulation is necessary, it does not address the root of the problem. We need to understand the motive and cause behind each falsehood and customise the solution.

Moral Education

We need to educate people on these:

“Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbour”. It is just as evil to spread falsehood. The accused is assumed innocent until proven guilty.

Check the facts with several experts (e.g. government staff, accountants, bankers, engineers, lawyers, lecturers) before circulating any message for even experts can disagree.

People should not get pleasure from other's misery. Some pranks are plainly evil.

People should educate those around them to do the above.

Gradual Regulatory Approach

To allay fears and win trust, governments should do the following:

Scope: Set anti-falsehood laws gradually starting with the clear and maliciously created lies (e.g. Punggol Waterway Terrace roof collapse). We can quickly set up laws against maliciously created lies if we limit the scope in the first phase.

Severity and motive: Punishment should vary with severity and motive. Those who create harmful lies should be jailed. Those who ignorantly forward harmful falsehood should pay a small fine. Small fines will cause people to grow up, learn to be responsible and check the facts with experts before sending any message.

We can set more controls as we gain more experience in handling falsehood.