

## Written Representation 62

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Dear Esteemed Members of the Select Committee

### **WRITTEN REPRESENTATION ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS – CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES**

We are pleased to submit our written representation on deliberate online falsehoods – causes, consequences and countermeasures for consideration by the Select Committee. This written representation is made in our personal capacity and does not represent the views of our organisation.

We are also prepared, if needed, to make an oral representation in English to the Select Committee at a public hearing to answer any questions or queries that the Select Committee may have on our written representation. We also give our consent to the Select Committee to publish our written representation as it deems fit.

Yours sincerely

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# WRITTEN REPRESENTATION ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS – CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES

## BACKGROUND: WHY WE SHOULD LOOK BEYOND “FAKE NEWS”

1. A combination of political upheavals brought about by alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election and the unanticipated deployment of advanced digital tools, have thrown “fake news” into the spotlight. Similar occurrences in other countries such as France, Germany, the UK and Indonesia during periods of high and intense political activity have conferred a pandemic status to fake news, leading governments, media and civil society scrambling to find ways to tame the scourge. These events have also created the impression among members of the public that fake news is a new phenomenon and problem. However, fake news is but one type of false information in our information ecology today. Other types of false information such as rumours, conspiracy theories and propaganda have been perpetuated for as long as human communication has existed. History has demonstrated how different groups, political organisations and mercenaries have used different types of false information to sway public opinion.

2. In the past 18 months, the term “fake news” has been, and still is being used, by various stakeholders as an umbrella term to refer to myriad types of false information. We would cite some of the examples used by academics, mainstream media, and governments, when we discuss our proposed principles and framework that should guide the Select Committee’s consideration of the suitable approaches to adopt when countering deliberate online falsehoods.

3. The overly broad use of the term “fake news” is problematic on many fronts. Primarily, without a clear definition of what is “fake news”, it would be impossible or at best, a near futile exercise, to prescribe the most appropriate countermeasures. This is because to prescribe a “cure”, we need to first address fundamental questions such as, “What types of content are cause for concern?”; “Whom and where to devote scarce resources to monitor the problem?”; “Whom and what to take action against?”, and “What are the range of countermeasures to adopt?”.

4. Despite the lax and illiberal application of the term “fake news” (often by politicians and members of the public), academics and industry players have practised a more stringent application. They ascribe four characteristics to fake news — it is false information that is **deliberately fabricated**<sup>1</sup> with the **intent to deceive**<sup>2</sup>, **motivated by economic gains or political influence**<sup>3</sup> and **assumes the disguise**<sup>4</sup> or trappings of an authoritative news source. Together, these characteristics distinguish fake news from other types of false information such as rumours, parodies, satire, hoaxes, conspiracy theories and poor reporting.

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<sup>1</sup>Chadwick, P. (2017, May 12). Defining fake news will help us expose it. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/commentisfree/2017/may/12/defining-fake-news-will-help-us-expose-it>.

<sup>2</sup>Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election (No. w23089). *National Bureau of Economic Research*.

<sup>3</sup>Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2017). Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news [Research paper]. Retrieved from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2958246](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2958246).

<sup>4</sup>Mele, N., Lazer, D., Baum, M., Grinberg, N., Friedland, L., Joseph, K., & Mattsson, C. (2017, May 2). Combating fake news: An agenda for research and action. Retrieved from <https://shorensteincenter.org/combating-fake-news-agenda-for-research/>.

5. As such, the Select Committee's focus on "deliberate online falsehoods" (instead of just fake news) is a commendable move. This is because "deliberate online falsehoods" captures the various and evolving types of fabricated false information that have the propensity to cause different types and degrees of harm. Our study of deliberate online falsehoods in Singapore, in the region and in the West, sheds lights on its complexity, and borrowing from folklore, its shapeshifting nature. Besides being wide-ranging in terms of content, the intent and motivations that underpin the production and sharing of deliberate online falsehoods are also diverse. At one end of the spectrum, the motivations can be political (e.g., Russia's manipulation of online public opinion during the 2016 US Presidential Election and the stirring of anti-Chinese sentiments among Indonesians by online syndicate Saracen<sup>5</sup>), or financial (e.g., Macedonian teenagers and the duo behind *The Real Singapore* who astutely realised that "news" bearing a certain slant attracts eyeballs and advertising revenue<sup>6 7</sup>). At the other end of the spectrum, online falsehoods can be a result of mischief (e.g., Minister Mentor's death hoax in early 2015<sup>8</sup>) or misleading reporting (e.g., a misleading headline suggesting that the Labour Party's campaign was boosted by automated bots during the 2017 UK General Election<sup>9</sup>). Producers of deliberate online falsehoods can also either be domestic or foreign actors, sometimes even both.

6. The different types of communication platforms used to disseminate deliberate online falsehoods add another layer of complexity to the problem. They include closed-communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, to open-communication channels such as Facebook, 4Chan and Twitter. Further compounding the problem is that purveyors of deliberate online falsehoods often utilise an extensive repertoire of tools with increasing digital sophistication. These production techniques run the gamut from text, doctoring of images and manipulating videos, to creating doppelganger websites that imitate entire legitimate news sites (e.g., *ABC News*, *BBC*, *CNN*) and using automated bots to conjure a mirage of many.

## WHY THE SPREAD AND WHAT IS THE IMPACT

7. The recent 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report based on a survey with more than 33,000 respondents from over 25 countries found that 70 per cent of the respondents worry about false information or the weaponisation of fake news (i.e., the production and dissemination of fake news to influence politics and democratic processes in a targeted country). Over 60 per cent agree that the average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumours or falsehoods. The survey also found that more people in Singapore worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon, compared to people in Canada, Ireland, Japan and Germany<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Soeriaatmadja, W. (2017, August 26). Indonesian police probe alleged fake news factory's protest links. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-police-probe-alleged-fake-news-factories-protest-links>.

<sup>6</sup> Subramanian, S. (2017, February 15). Inside the Macedonian fake-news complex. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>.

<sup>7</sup> Loh, R. (2016, March 24). Ex-TRS editor jailed for demonising foreigners. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from <http://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/ex-trs-editor-jailed-demonising-foreigners>.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, M. K. (2015, April 7). Student who posted fake PMO announcement on Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death given stern warning. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/student-who-posted-fake-pmo-announcement-on-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-given-stern-warning>.

<sup>9</sup> Busby, M., Khan, I., & Watling, E. (2017, June 21). Types of misinformation during the UK election. Retrieved from <https://firstdraftnews.com/misinfo-types-uk-election/>.

<sup>10</sup> 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report [Report]. (2018). Retrieved from <https://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-01/2018%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report.pdf>.

8. In many parts of the world, we observed that deliberate online falsehoods often mirror the cracks and fissures that pervade each country. The producers of deliberate online falsehoods are astute in exploiting the pain points found in political systems and societies, and capitalise on people's anxieties, doubts, fears and insecurities. For instance, domestic and foreign deliberate online falsehood producers stoked already high tensions during election periods by targeting citizens who rallied behind different party lines in the US<sup>11</sup> and by leveraging the highly polarised nature of politics in Kenya<sup>12</sup>. The alt-right communities in France and Germany spread anti-immigrant falsehoods, capitalising on societal strains and tensions that have been simmering between citizens and the immigrant population as a result of the immigration crisis in Europe<sup>13 14</sup>. Similar exploitation was evident in Indonesia where deliberate online falsehood producers fed on anti-Chinese and anti-Communism sentiments<sup>15</sup>.

9. So, what is the situation in Singapore? Are there any clear themes or issues propagated by purveyors of deliberate online falsehoods? Who are the producers and why do they do it? Thus far, we do not observe any dominant themes in the falsehoods that proliferated online in the course of our research. The subject matter is varied — from consumables (e.g., rumours about plastic rice<sup>16 17</sup>), infrastructure (e.g., a purported collapsed rooftop in Punggol<sup>18</sup> and an explosion at a Tuas waste management plant<sup>19</sup>), to policies and government officials (e.g., falsehoods about Central Provident Fund (CPF) monies<sup>20</sup>, National Environment Agency (NEA) fines<sup>21</sup> and the collapse of Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan at a UN Summit<sup>22</sup>). Fortunately, the severity of the situation in Singapore is not as dismal as that observed in the aforementioned countries.

10. The motivation behind the production of some of these online falsehoods often include mischief. Many would remember the fake announcement on the passing of Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, by a young Singaporean student in March 2015. His action stemmed from his frustration with the rumours about Mr Lee's demise, and him wanting to show his friends how easy it was to perpetuate a hoax. More recently, a Singaporean male

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<sup>11</sup> Faris, R., Roberts, H., Etling, B., Bourassa, N., Zuckerman, E., & Benkler, Y. (2017). Partisanship, propaganda, and disinformation: Online media and the 2016 US presidential election [Research paper]. Retrieved from [https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/33759251/2017-08\\_electionReport\\_0.pdf?sequence=9](https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/33759251/2017-08_electionReport_0.pdf?sequence=9).

<sup>12</sup> The reality of fake news in Kenya [Report]. (2017). Retrieved from <https://portland-communications.com/pdf/The-Reality-of-Fake-News-in-Kenya.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Nimmo, B., Durakgolu, N., Czuperski, M., & Yap, N. (2017, May 6). Hashtag campaign: #MacronLeaks. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/dfrlab/hashtag-campaign-macronleaks-4a3fb870c4e8>.

<sup>14</sup> Schmehl, K., MBoundza, S., Lytvynenko, J., & Broderick, R. (2017, September 4). Trolls are trying to hijack the German election by copying Trump supporters. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved from [https://www.buzzfeed.com/karstenschmehl/german-meme-war?utm\\_term=.gv4e0d6XJg#.clgKnDobxw](https://www.buzzfeed.com/karstenschmehl/german-meme-war?utm_term=.gv4e0d6XJg#.clgKnDobxw).

<sup>15</sup> Danubrata, E., & Suroyo, G. (2017, April 18). In Indonesia, labor friction and politics fan anti-Chinese sentiment. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-election-china/in-indonesia-labor-friction-and-politics-fan-anti-chinese-sentiment-idUSKBN17K0YG>.

<sup>16</sup> Lin, M. (2017, February 2). FairPrice files police report over fake rice rumour. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fairprice-files-police-report-over-fake-rice-rumour>.

<sup>17</sup> Happy Family rice 'authentic'; no fake rice found in Singapore so far: AVA. (2017, November 1). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/happy-family-rice-authentic-no-fake-rice-found-in-singapore-so-9366362>.

<sup>18</sup> Report of Punggol Waterway Terraces roof collapse a 'hoax': HDB. (2017, November 11). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/report-of-punggol-waterway-terraces-roof-collapse-a-hoax-hdb-7714182>.

<sup>19</sup> Chew, H. M. (2017, February 23). Fake video of Thursday's Tuas fire explosion spreads on social media. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fake-video-of-thursday-tuas-fire-explosion-spreads-on-social-media>.

<sup>20</sup> Govt website debunks CPF savings rumour. (2017, June 18). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/govt-website-debunks-cpf-savings-rumour>.

<sup>21</sup> Wong, L. (2017, March 30). NEA rubbishes fake message claiming used tissue left uncleared leads to \$200 fine. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nea-rubbishes-fake-message-claiming-used-tissue-left-uncleared-leads-to-200-fine>.

<sup>22</sup> Tham, Y. (2017, September 24). Vivian debunks fake news about collapse at UN. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vivian-debunks-fake-news-about-collapse-at-un>.

doctored the headline of an article relating to the City Harvest Church case published in *Lianhe Wanbao*, due to his dissatisfaction with the outcome of the trial<sup>23</sup>. In other instances, financial gains could have been a motivator, as in the case of *The Real Singapore* and *Global News* (*glonews360.com*) where their sensational articles drew eyeballs and readership. Another reason that accounts for online falsehoods is poor or inaccurate reporting, rather than a deliberate attempt to deceive or to gain profit. Some examples include the falsehoods involving the *Australian Teacher Magazine* and the director-general of education<sup>24</sup>, misreporting by both local media as well as foreign media about three Chinese women detained at the airport in South Korea<sup>25</sup>, and online news site *Mothership's* inaccurate reporting of presidential candidate Salleh Marican<sup>26</sup>. Often, swift measures were taken by these media outlets to correct or remove the article (see Appendix A for a summary of the different cases of online falsehoods in Singapore, the channels used and the outcomes).

11. Similar to the situations in other countries, deliberate online falsehoods producers leverage different communication platforms, especially those that see high adoption rates in Singapore. According to We Are Social, the top three most commonly used social media platforms in Singapore in 2017 were YouTube (75 per cent), Facebook (72 per cent) and WhatsApp (67 per cent), followed by Instagram (43 per cent) and Facebook Messenger (42 per cent)<sup>27</sup>. The top three platforms are also the common ones on which deliberate online falsehoods are disseminated and circulated. However, the hyperlinked nature of the digital space means that online falsehoods can spread across platforms and hence often reach larger audiences than anticipated. For instance, the video of an “explosion at a Tuas waste management plant” taken from YouTube was shared on social networking sites and WhatsApp. In the case of the misreporting of the three Chinese women detained in South Korea, the image which was initially posted on Weibo (one of the most popular social media sites in China) went viral when mainstream media worldwide (e.g., *The Express Tribune*, *Mirror* and *Channel NewsAsia*) reported the “news”.

12. We classify deliberate online falsehoods into two categories – “low breach” and “high breach” deliberate online falsehoods. “Low breach” deliberate online falsehoods have the propensity to create anxiety among the public and cause inconveniences to people. For instance, the photograph of a “collapsed rooftop” of Punggol Waterway Terraces in an article published on the *All Singapore Stuff* website led to the despatch of the police and civil defence to the site. However, members of the public were quick to call out the falsehood; residents in Punggol took to Facebook to refute the claim and the website editors deleted the article and issued an apology<sup>28</sup>. Other “low breach” deliberate online falsehoods such as the alleged

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<sup>23</sup> Seow, B. Y. (2018, February 5). Parliament: AGC looking into Facebook post with doctored headline of City Harvest news article. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/facebook-post-with-falsified-headline-of-chinese-news-article-under-investigation-shanmugam>.

<sup>24</sup> Yuen, S. (2017, August 28). Article carrying MOE remarks on Singapore's 'culture of compliance' is fake news, says MOE. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/article-carrying-moe-remarks-on-singapores-culture-of-compliance-is-fake-news>.

<sup>25</sup> Yeo, K. (2017, October 12). Reports of 3 Chinese women stuck at South Korea airport after plastic surgery are fake news. *Mothership*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2017/10/reports-of-3-chinese-women-stuck-at-south-korea-airport-after-plastic-surgery-is-fake-news/>.

<sup>26</sup> Mothership apologises for fake news about Salleh Marican. (2017, August 9). *Yahoo News Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/mothership-apologises-fake-news-salleh-marican-064846943.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Kemp, S. (2017, February 15). Digital in Southeast Asia in 2017 [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2017/02/digital-southeast-asia-2017>.

<sup>28</sup> Apology: Hoax news on Punggol Waterway roof collapse. (2016, November 11). Retrieved from <https://www.allsingaporestuff.com/article/apology-hoax-news-punggol-waterway-roof-collapse>.

selling of plastic rice and issuing of NEA fines at hawker centres were similarly quickly debunked by the organisations and institutions embroiled. In cases where the online falsehood is a result of misreporting, the news producers had made timely corrections (e.g., by *Channel NewsAsia*, *Mothership* and *Australian Teacher Magazine*). Thus, in such “low breach” incidents, the stakeholders involved are often able to quickly establish the facts and debunk the falsehood. Furthermore, the timely coverage by both mainstream media as well as online websites help spread the corrections.

13. However, what pose a more severe threat or “high breach” are the coordinated and insidious efforts targeted at disrupting democratic processes in a country. To date, there are no published or publicly recorded incidents involving such “high breach” deliberate online falsehoods in Singapore. This could be due to existing laws that govern both online and offline discourse in the country. However, deliberate online falsehoods as part of a disinformation campaign have wreaked havoc on domestic politics and allegedly influenced referendum and election outcomes in other countries<sup>29</sup>. Russia has been found to use social media platforms as a military tactic (part of the “Gerasimov Doctrine”) to create permanent chaos within an enemy state<sup>30</sup>. Compared to traditional military engagement, disinformation campaigns provide plausible deniability<sup>31</sup>. According to the testimony submitted by Facebook to the US Senate Judiciary Committee in October 2017, approximately 29 million Americans were directly exposed to 80,000 posts from 120 fake Russian-backed pages. However, the reach was magnified multiple times through shares, likes and follows. As a result, Russian-sponsored content reached as many as 126 million Americans on Facebook during and after the 2016 US Presidential Election<sup>32</sup>. In January 2018, Twitter had said it will inform nearly 700,000 people in the country that they have either followed a troll account linked to the Internet Research Agency (IRA – a Kremlin-linked Internet troll army that meddled in the election), or retweeted or liked a tweet from one of its accounts<sup>33</sup>. More recently, the US Justice Department charged 13 Russians (12 of whom worked for IRA) and three companies for using stolen identities to pose as Americans, and for creating Facebook groups (e.g., *Secured Borders* and *Blacktivist*) to distribute divisive content to subvert the election and support the Trump campaign<sup>34 35</sup>.

14. British lawmakers have also announced that they are investigating possible Russian interference in the Brexit referendum that took place in June 2016 after researchers at the University of Edinburgh found 419 Twitter accounts linked to the IRA, which had attempted to influence UK politics in November 2017<sup>36</sup>. Earlier this month, some members of the British

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<sup>29</sup> Investigations are ongoing when this document was submitted.

<sup>30</sup> McKew, M. K. (2017, September). The Gerasimov Doctrine. *Politico Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538>.

<sup>31</sup> Abeshouse, B. (2018, February 8). Troll factories, bots and fake news: Inside the Wild West of social media. *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/americas/2018/02/troll-factories-bots-fake-news-wild-west-social-media-180207061815575.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Solon, O., & Siddiqui, S. (2017, October 31). Russia-backed Facebook posts 'reached 126m Americans' during US election. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/30/facebook-russia-fake-accounts-126-million>.

<sup>33</sup> O'Sullivan, D. (2018, January 19). Twitter to tell 677,775 people they interacted with Kremlin-linked trolls. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com/2018/01/19/media/twitter-internet-research-agency-accounts/index.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Frenkel, S., & Benner, K. (2018, February 17). To stir discord in 2016, Russians turned most often to Facebook. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/technology/indictment-russian-tech-facebook.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Graff, G. M. (2018, February 20). Inside the Mueller indictment: A Russian novel of intrigue. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/inside-the-mueller-indictment-a-russian-novel-of-intrigue/>.

<sup>36</sup> Booth, R., Weaver, M., Hern, A., Smith, S., & Walker, S. (2017, November 14). Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>.

Parliament also travelled to Washington to question Facebook, Google and Twitter about the spread of fake news on their platforms, indicating the severity of the issue<sup>37</sup>.

15. “High breach” deliberate online falsehoods might also disrupt social stability and national stability by deepening and widening existing cleavages in our society. The Green Paper cited disinformation campaigns in other countries such as those in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine). Besides these countries, France is another example where deliberate online falsehoods posed a threat to its social harmony. In the run-up to the 2017 French Presidential Election, besides deliberate online falsehoods that targeted the frontrunner of the race<sup>38</sup>, there were also fake news stories that exploited social tensions arising from immigration and religion. Falsehoods that were anti-immigration focused on preserving the traditional French character and nation, and identified migrants as a threat to the French way of life<sup>39</sup>. Anti-Islam falsehoods typically associated Muslims and Islam with terrorism and instability in the suburbs<sup>40 41</sup>.

16. Closer to home, Indonesia also fell prey to deliberate online falsehoods leading up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which were mainly about Islam under threat and Chinese communism posing a threat to the Indonesian society. The prominent cases included a doctored video of then-incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as “Ahok”) delivering an allegedly “anti-Islam” speech that went viral online, rumours that the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle that backed Ahok was linked to the Communist Party of China, and the fake news on 10 million Chinese workers taking over locals’ jobs<sup>42</sup>. Such deliberate online falsehoods saw real world consequences, such as the rallies involving hundreds of thousands of Muslims protesting against Ahok and demanding his arrest<sup>43 44</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Shaban, H. (2018, February 6). In Washington, British officials to confront Facebook, Google and Twitter over misinformation. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/02/06/in-washington-british-officials-to-confront-facebook-google-and-twitter-over-misinformation/?utm\\_term=.666213435cbe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/02/06/in-washington-british-officials-to-confront-facebook-google-and-twitter-over-misinformation/?utm_term=.666213435cbe).

<sup>38</sup> One example is a fake news story that had fabricated documents of Macron’s “offshore bank account” for tax evasion purposes. The story originated from English-language imageboard website 4Chan and was circulated widely on social media. [Did Emmanuel Macron open an offshore account?. (2017, May 5). Retrieved from <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/emmanuel-macron-open-offshore-account/>.]

<sup>39</sup> An article published by one of the most prominent French far-right opinion websites, *La Gauche m’a Tuer*, reported that the Breton lighthouse in Paris will be demolished to provide social housing for migrants. *La Gauche m’a Tuer* is also one of the most influential French far-right opinion websites, which received about 1.6 million engagements from Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms between 5 March 2017 and 5 May 2017. [Is the Paris town hall replacing a Paris lighthouse with social housing for migrants?. (2017, April 5). Retrieved from <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/paris-town-hall-replacing-paris-lighthouse-social-housing-migrants/>.]

<sup>40</sup> One well-known example of anti-Islam content was a video posted on Twitter which claimed that Muslims in London were “celebrating” a terrorist attack that happened in Paris, which left a policeman dead. In this case, the video was posted by a leader of Britain First, a far-right British political organisation. The video was actually shot of taken of Pakistanis celebrating a cricket match victory back in 2009. [Did London Muslims “celebrate” a terrorist attack on the Champs-Élysées?. (2017, April 22). Retrieved from <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/london-muslims-celebrate-terrorist-attack-champs-elysees/>.]

<sup>41</sup> The role and impact of non-traditional publishers in the French elections 2017 [Report]. (2017). Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58495e3329687f8bfbb3f25c/t/58f5b4cd2994ca075dfa803c/1492497618893/Role+and+Impact+of+Non-Traditional+Publishers+in+the+French+Presidential+Election+-+Report+1+-+Bakamo.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Maulia, E. (2017, February 13). Fake news charges emotionally driven Jakarta election. *Nikkei Asian Review*. Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Indonesian-fake-news-spread-ahead-of-Jakarta-election>.

<sup>43</sup> Varagur, K. (2016, December 16). Fake news roils Indonesian politics. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/fake-news-roils-indonesian-politics/3638752.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Ahok lost the election and was sentenced to two years prison for committing blasphemy against Islam. [Jakarta governor Ahok found guilty of blasphemy. (2017, May 9). *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39853280>.]

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING? WHY THE CONCERN NOW?

17. Rumours, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and propaganda that twisted facts to exploit human emotions like fear, anger and anxiety have existed for as long as human communication has. Well-known examples include conspiracy theories about the September 11 attack (some suggested that the attack was orchestrated to advance geopolitical interests and that authorities had advance knowledge and even assisted attackers), as well as rumours that the disappearance of flight MH370 was in fact a hijack and that the plane was flown to Afghanistan. However, what makes deliberate online falsehoods a pressing threat is that the digital revolution has lowered the barriers to entry for content producers, including producers of online falsehoods, increased the ease of content dissemination and sharing by producers and users, as well as allowed the widespread application of automation.

18. New media scholar Terry Flew drew the distinction between older digital technologies and the newer ones. The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 technologies saw a move “*from personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome of large upfront investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging (folksonomy)*”<sup>45</sup>. Today, anyone can be a content producer, unhindered by barriers such as financial outlay and technical expertise. Besides the low or no barriers to entry, there are several factors that contribute to why deliberate online falsehoods is a different monster from the rumours, hoaxes and conspiracy theories mentioned earlier. They are the method of virality, source-layering on the Internet and social media, and exacerbated filter bubbles and echo chamber effects.

19. Good news sells, but bad news sells better, and faster. Producers of deliberate online falsehoods often deploy automated bots to amplify the spread of false information on social media. Such amplification spans beyond social media and across different platforms due to the hyperlinked nature of the digital space. In the examples mentioned in the preceding sections, bots contributed to the spread of false information by automatically sharing or retweeting false content. Bots thus promote certain views and voices by making them “louder”, and create the mirage that a particular idea is highly popular and is endorsed by many. For instance, research done by the Oxford Internet Institute Computational Propaganda Project found that pro-Trump automated bot activities significantly outnumbered (by a ratio of 5:1) pro-Clinton automated bot activities during the 2016 US Presidential Election<sup>46</sup>.

20. Another effect unique to social media is source-layering. In traditional media, the information presented typically features one salient source (e.g., the cited source, the article or the newspaper). This makes assessing source credibility relatively straightforward for information consumers. On social media however, people encounter multiple source cues or layers of sources (e.g., the cited source, the article, the platform, and the friend or family member who forwarded the content). This complicates people’s assessment of what is credible and encourages them to rely on cognitive heuristics (mental short cuts) even more<sup>47</sup>. Research has shown that the closest source cue (often our friends) exerts the greatest influence when it comes to assessing information credibility<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Flew, T. (2005). *New media: An introduction* (pp.xv-xxii). Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press.

<sup>46</sup> Howard, P. N., Bolsover, G., Kollanyi, B., Bradshaw, S., & Neudert, L. M. (2017a). Junk news and bots during the US election: What were Michigan voters sharing over Twitter [Working paper]. Retrieved from <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/03/What-Were-Michigan-Voters-Sharing-Over-Twitter-v2.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., & Medders, R. B. (2010). Social and heuristic approaches to credibility evaluation online. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 413-439.

<sup>48</sup> Kang, H., Bae, K., Zhang, S., & Sundar, S. S. (2011). Source cues in online news: Is the proximate source more powerful than distal sources?. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88(4), 719-736.



21. Filter bubbles and echo chambers reinforce people's biases and (often times parochial) worldviews. While these are not new phenomena, the algorithms used by social media platforms aggravate the problem — algorithms predict what people like based on what they consume and personalise their information exposure, thereby reinforcing filter bubbles and echo chambers where they are exposed to information and opinions that are consistent with their pre-existing beliefs<sup>49 50</sup>.

## **NON-GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTIONS: SELF-REGULATION, FACT CHECKING AND CRITICAL LITERACY**

22. The preceding sections illustrate the “wickedness” of deliberate online falsehoods as a policy issue — there is considerable ambiguity to the problem and data available (concerning who is involved, the precise magnitude and impact of exposure to deliberate online falsehoods *et cetera*); there are multiple intervention points; and more importantly, the problem is often connected to other problems and broader issues (e.g., political divisiveness and social conflicts). As Paragraph 34 in the next section presents, there is also no single correct view of the problem. To even have a chance of countering the effects of deliberate online falsehoods on individuals, community, society and nation, a suite of governmental and non-governmental interventions with both near-term and long-term effectiveness is required. Measures with near-term efficacy are those that can provide temporary relief and yield positive results soon (e.g., fact checking) while measures with long-term efficacy are those that will require some time for positive impact to take shape (e.g., cultivating critical literacy). A combination of these measures will mitigate the shortcomings of each, thus providing a holistic solution to the problem at hand.

23. One key measure is for technology companies to self-regulate by leveraging their technical expertise and resources to tackle the problem that they are complicit in. Since coming under intense spotlight for their failure to spot and stop Russian disinformation campaigns on their platforms, technology companies have been working on remedies to prevent similar manipulation in future. For instance, for the impending US mid-term election, Twitter has created a "cross-functional elections task force" to work with federal and state election officials to manage issues that arise during the campaign, verify party candidates to prevent copycat accounts, and improve its algorithm to stamp out bot accounts targeting election-related content<sup>51</sup>. Google will require advertisers to identify who they are and where they are from, provide disclosures on political advertisements telling viewers who paid for them, and release a transparency report on election advertisements<sup>52</sup>. Facebook has also said that it will increase its political advertisements transparency and accountability by using US-mailed postcards to verify the identities and location of people who want to purchase US election-related advertisements on their platform<sup>53</sup>.

24. In addition to measures specific to election periods, social media companies are also experimenting with different approaches to counter deliberate online falsehoods on a day-to-day basis. For instance, Twitter has made changes to TweetDeck and the Twitter API that

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<sup>49</sup> Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin UK.

<sup>50</sup> Del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2016). The spreading of misinformation online. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(3), 554-559.

<sup>51</sup> Ng, A. (2018, January 17). How tech giants plan to keep fake news out of 2018 election. Retrieved from <https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-google-twitter-2018-election-prevent-fake-news-senate/>.

<sup>52</sup> Google supports tightening rules on online political ads, Facebook conducts advertising training. (2017, November 10). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/facebook-to-train-us-businesses-on-advertising-after-russia-scandal>.

<sup>53</sup> Volz, D. (2018, February 18). Facebook plans to use U.S. mail to verify IDs of election ad buyers. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-facebook/facebook-plans-to-use-u-s-mail-to-verify-ids-of-election-ad-buyers-idUSKCN1G10VD>.

prohibit users from performing coordinated actions across multiple accounts in their services<sup>54 55</sup>. One of Facebook's latest move is to relegate news publishers in its News Feed and prioritise content from users' contacts<sup>56</sup>. Clearly, social media companies have to re-examine their philosophy and approach towards regulating content on their platforms, enhance transparency and leverage their resources to combat deliberate online falsehoods proactively. However, self-regulation by technology and social media companies is not without its own set of limitations (see Paragraph 36).

25. Another important measure that will help combat the problem of deliberate online falsehoods is fact checking. Research has shown that fact checking can be effective in influencing people's views, and that negative fact checking (i.e., calling out that a piece of information is false) that debunks inaccuracies is more powerful than positive fact checking (i.e., affirming the truthfulness of a piece of information) that reinforces the message<sup>57 58</sup>. Repeating retractions — corrective information — also help to reduce the effects of misinformation<sup>59</sup>. Thus, it is crucial to provide and support fact checking facilities that are accessible to the general public. In Singapore, *Factually* by the Ministry of Communications and Information seeks to dispel and clarify false information that has gained sufficient public attention (e.g., refuting WhatsApp rumours which claimed that Singaporeans' CPF savings will be transferred to their nominee's Medisave account by default upon death). Similar efforts have also been made by the Czech Republic government and the Malaysian government. For instance, the Czech government has set up a specialist anti-fake news unit (Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats) that will combat falsehoods spread by Russian disinformation campaigns via a dedicated Twitter account<sup>60</sup>. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission has also set up a fact checking portal called *Sebenarnya.my* that will soon be made into a smartphone app to allow wider reach and access for Malaysians to check the authenticity of a piece of information before sharing it<sup>61</sup>.

26. While government-led fact checking initiatives are important, they are insufficient on their own to combat deliberate online falsehoods. Research shows that people with low institutional trust are more likely to believe in rumours, conspiracy theories and alternative narratives<sup>62</sup>. The implication is that during a crisis where the subject embroiled in a deliberate online falsehood is the government or organs of the state themselves, people are likely to turn to non-government platforms to seek information or verification, especially if government-led fact checkers demonstrate a pro-government bias<sup>63</sup>. The same may happen during a period where people's trust in the government is low, perhaps due to poor government performance.

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<sup>54</sup> Gagliardi, N. (2018, January 19). Twitter says 50,000 Russia-linked accounts tweeted during 2016 US presidential election. Retrieved from <http://www.zdnet.com/article/twitter-says-50000-russia-linked-accounts-tweeted-during-2016-us-presidential-election/>.

<sup>55</sup> Roth, Y. (2018, February 21). Automation and the use of multiple accounts [Blog post]. Retrieved from [https://blog.twitter.com/developer/en\\_us/topics/tips/2018/automation-and-the-use-of-multiple-accounts.html](https://blog.twitter.com/developer/en_us/topics/tips/2018/automation-and-the-use-of-multiple-accounts.html).

<sup>56</sup> Murphy, M. (2018, January 24). Facebook defends two-question fake news survey. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/01/24/facebook-defends-two-question-fake-news-survey/>.

<sup>57</sup> Fridkin, K., Kenney, P. J., & Wintersieck, A. (2015). Liar, liar, pants on fire: How fact-checking influences citizens' reactions to negative advertising. *Political Communication*, 32(1), 127-151.

<sup>58</sup> Min, Y. (2002). Intertwining of campaign news and advertising: The content and electoral effects of newspaper ad watches. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(4), 927-944.

<sup>59</sup> Ecker, U. K., Lewandowsky, S., Swire, B., & Chang, D. (2011). Correcting false information in memory: Manipulating the strength of misinformation encoding and its retraction. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 18(3), 570-578.

<sup>60</sup> Schultheis, E. (2017, October 21). The Czech Republic's fake news problem. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/fake-news-in-the-czech-republic/543591/>.

<sup>61</sup> MCMC to release app for fact-checking portal. (2018, January 30). *The Malaysian Insight*. Retrieved from <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/35189/>.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, J. M., Saunders, K. L., & Farhart, C. E. (2016). Conspiracy endorsement as motivated reasoning: The moderating roles of political knowledge and trust. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(4), 824-844.

<sup>63</sup> Jackson, J. (2017, February 15). Fact-checkers are weapons in the post-truth wars, but they're not all on one side. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/15/fact-checkers-are-weapons-in-the-post-truth-wars-but-theyre-not-all-on-one-side>.

27. As such, we should encourage and allow room for the establishment of non-government fact checking. Non-government fact checking should be seen as a complement and not a substitute for government-led efforts. In other countries, industry-led and ground-up fact checking initiatives play an important role in debunking deliberate online falsehoods. In the UK, the *BBC* started its own fact checking service, *Reality Check*. The *Reality Check* team focuses on fabricated content masquerading as real news and uses a combination of different media — online, television and radio — to push out the facts to as wide an audience as possible<sup>64</sup>. *Le Monde* in France developed a web extension called *Decodex* that is linked to the newspaper's fact checking unit's database which compiles real, fake and satirical sites. *Decodex* sends users a pop-up warning when users come across a false report<sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup>. During the 2017 French Presidential Election, another French newspaper, *Libération*, launched *CheckNews*, an election search engine. Readers can submit questions and the fact checking team will email readers links to articles from *Libération* and other digital publishers that answer their queries<sup>67</sup>.

28. Besides industry-led fact checking, ground-up fact checking efforts such as Indonesia's *Turn Back Hoax* (a crowdsourcing-based application that curates false information and hoaxes circulating on the Internet and on social media<sup>68</sup>) and the Indonesian Anti-Hoax Movement which counters the spread of false information online<sup>69</sup> also play an important role — they educate the public on deliberate online falsehoods and tap on collective participation to fight the problem. In Lithuania, citizens took matters into their own hands by banding together. They coordinate their efforts through Facebook and Skype, police social media platforms and expose fake accounts, and write articles that debunk falsehoods to fight against Russian disinformation<sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup>. Besides countering cynicism (towards the authorities and institutions), industry-led and ground-up fact checking initiatives also help build social trust and increase the number of avenues and platforms that people can go to in times of doubt and fear. In fact, such ground-up fact checking efforts that are in their nascent stages can already be found in Singapore, with the public Facebook group *Fact Check Singapore* being one example<sup>72</sup>. However, for industry-led and ground-up fact checking initiatives to be effective — in terms of being trusted by and sought by the public for verification — the government should not view them as a threat and should accord them with the independence to develop their own structure and processes.

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<sup>64</sup> Jackson, J. (2017, January 13). BBC sets up team to debunk fake news. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jan/12/bbc-sets-up-team-to-debunk-fake-news>.

<sup>65</sup> Davies, J. (2017, January 25). Le Monde identifies 600 unreliable websites in fake-news crackdown. Retrieved from <https://digiday.com/uk/le-monde-identifies-600-unreliable-websites-fake-news-crackdown/>.

<sup>66</sup> Wendling, M. (2017, January 30). Solutions that can stop fake news spreading. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38769996>.

<sup>67</sup> Southern, L. (2017, May 5). Libération launches fact-checking search engine ahead of France's election Sunday. Retrieved from <https://digiday.com/media/liberation-fact-checking-search-engine/>.

<sup>68</sup> *Turn Back Hoax* was developed as a Google Chrome extension that allows users to flag websites, chain messages and pictures they encounter as either "hoax" or "not hoax". The database of false information collected by *Turn Back Hoax* can help identify patterns of the spread of false information. Users' inputs are collated on the *Turn Back Hoax* website where users can comment and discuss and acts as a reference for users to verify whether information they encounter online is accurate or not. [New app allows public to report fake news. (2016, December 25). *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2016/12/25/new-app-allows-public-to-report-fake-news.html>.]

<sup>69</sup> Maulia, E. (2017, February 23). Indonesian authorities battle 'fake news'. *Nikkei Asian Review*. Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/20170223/Politics-Economy/Indonesian-authorities-battle-fake-news>.

<sup>70</sup> Dapkus, L. (2016, December 28). Lithuanian 'elves' combat Russian influence online. *Associated Press News*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/27ce7f001bde4ccb9415ce4a0de74af1/lithuanian-elves-combat-russian-influence-online>.

<sup>71</sup> Weiss, M. (2016, March 20). The Baltic elves taking on pro-Russian trolls. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-baltic-elves-taking-on-pro-russian-trolls>.

<sup>72</sup> Fact Check Singapore. In Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/FactCheck.SG/>.

29. However, fact checking is not a panacea and has its limitations. First, it happens after the falsehood, and considerable effort must be made to put up corrections in a timely fashion. In addition, efforts must be made to ensure that the corrections reach a wide audience. Second, research has found that corrective information may not change people's beliefs, especially when the new information conflicts with their pre-existing beliefs<sup>73 74</sup>. Thus, it is also necessary to strengthen critical literacy among citizens. Critical literacy goes beyond recognising characteristics of a piece of online falsehood. More importantly, critical literacy is about questioning the content (validity of arguments and substantiation by evidence), the source (who produces the message) and the motivations of the source (e.g., political or economic). Cultivating critical literacy is also about making people more aware of how the online space works, and how effects such as source-layering and echo chambers capitalise on individuals' cognitive biases and hinder their assessment of the veracity of the information they encounter online. In the long run, equipping citizens with critical thinking skills will boost their "immunity" to the different types of false information circulating in our information ecology. More importantly, increasing people's critical literacy will prepare them for challenges that unfold in the future, which we cannot envisage at present.

30. Currently, there are programmes in Singapore that seek to increase information and media literacy among different segments of the population. The National Library Board's (NLB) S.U.R.E. campaign and Ministry of Education's (MOE) Cyber Wellness programme are laudable. NLB's S.U.R.E. campaign uses different avenues — from conducting learning journeys and workshops to providing open-source resource guides — to promote information literacy at a national level, and MOE's Cyber Wellness programme teaches information literacy skills to students at both primary and secondary school levels<sup>75 76</sup>. The Media Literacy Council (MLC) which promotes information and media literacy has also embarked on a series of education and outreach programmes aimed at different segments of the public. They range from articles and videos relating to fake news (for the general public) to a roving Better Internet Truck (for school and communities), and conferences for the industry and public sector<sup>77</sup>.

31. However, more can be done in terms of embedding and entrenching critical literacy into the core curriculum as possible. More importantly, critical literacy should not be just an additional or extra-curricular module, where it is taught and discussed in silos. In fact, well-designed curricula (e.g., by the University of Hong Kong's Cyber News Verification Lab<sup>78</sup> and Stony Brook University's Centre for News Literacy<sup>79</sup>) are already available for Singapore to model, adopt and tweak to suit our needs in the local context. In addition, concerted efforts must be made to reach out to vulnerable communities such as the elderly. In this area, the MLC has designed a module for the Silver Infocomm Curriculum to promote literacy among mature adults and seniors.

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<sup>73</sup> Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, 32(2), 303-330.

<sup>74</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(3), 106-131.

<sup>75</sup> About the S.U.R.E. Campaign. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/sure/sure-campaign/>.

<sup>76</sup> Students taught to verify authenticity of online information: Ng Chee Meng. (2017, May 8). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/students-taught-to-verify-authenticity-of-online-information-ng-8828620>

<sup>77</sup> Hio, L. (2017, February 8). Internet campaign to educate users on fake news and cyber bullying. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/internet-campaign-to-educate-users-on-fake-news-and-cyber-bullying>.

<sup>78</sup> Lim, J. (2017, June 7). Check platform helps HK varsity students to verify 'fake news'. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/check-platform-helps-hk-varsity-students-to-verify-fake-news>.

<sup>79</sup> Rosenwald, M. (2017). Making media literacy great again. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from <https://www.cjr.org/special-report/media-literacy-trump-fake-news.php>.

## GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTIONS: TO LEGISLATE OR NOT

32. Governments around the world are responding to fake news and deliberate online falsehoods in myriad ways, some of which are non-legislative in nature. One example is the launch of the National Cyber Encryption Agency in Indonesia to tackle online religious extremism and fake news on social media. The agency is tasked with cracking down on terrorist networks that communicate online and combating online hate speech that has been blamed for driving fundamentalism in a country once praised for its religious pluralism<sup>80</sup>. (We note that in the same month, the Indonesia court sentenced a member of Saracen, an Indonesian online syndicate, for intentionally spreading information to incite hate on social media and violating the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, to 32 months in prison. Saracen's website is believed to have charged clients tens of millions of rupiah to help them publish and spread fake news, as well as hate speech<sup>81</sup>.)

33. Other examples include the Media Watch app developed by the Thai government under the Ministry of Public Health<sup>82</sup>, and the website set up by the Chinese military for people to report leaks and fake news<sup>83</sup>. Sweden is also looking at creating a new government agency to protect its upcoming election from Russian and other propaganda. The agency would be responsible for bolstering the psychological defence of the Swedish public by identifying, analysing, and responding to external influence campaigns. The counter-propaganda agency is part of wider measures that include increased funding for Swedish intelligence and cyber-defence services to monitor external threats, to safeguard the upcoming election<sup>84</sup>.

34. The Green Paper highlighted legislative measures that are being considered or have been implemented in countries such as France, Germany, Italy, the US and Jordan (where the Royal Court has declared legal action against those who spread rumours). More recently, the CEO of Malaysia's Internet regulator, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, proposed to increase the severity of the punishments under Malaysia's existing Communications and Multimedia Act to send a stronger deterrent signal to producers of deliberate online falsehoods<sup>85</sup>. The concerns expressed towards legislative measures that are being considered by governments such as those in France, Germany and Italy, centre on the "muzzling" of speech and the constraint of freedom of speech<sup>86</sup>. The typical questions and doubts that surface are, "What is fake news?", "Who will define it?", "Who will enforce regulation?", and "Will legislation be used by those holding political power to weaken opposition and entrench their position?" In the case of Germany's Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or NetzDG), in addition to social media companies, free speech advocates, opposition political parties, independent media watchdogs and legal practitioners have voiced these concerns. The perennial reservations and fears surrounding legislation are overly broad conceptions of what constitutes problematic speech (in the case

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<sup>80</sup> Indonesia acts to tackle fake news, extremism. (2018, January 4). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-acts-to-tackle-fake-news-extremism>.

<sup>81</sup> Indonesia court sentences administrator of 'fake news factory' Saracen to jail. (2018, January 12). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-court-sentences-administrator-of-fake-news-factory-saracen-to-jail>.

<sup>82</sup> Yingcharoen, T. (2017, November 29). Health Ministry app to fight 'fake news'. *The Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/tech/local-news/1368603/health-ministry-app-to-fight-fake-news>.

<sup>83</sup> China military sets up website to report leaks, fake news. (2017, November 19). *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-military/china-military-sets-up-website-to-report-leaks-fake-news-idUSKBN1DJ03Y>.

<sup>84</sup> Rettman, A., & Kirk, L. (2018, January 15). Sweden raises alarm on election meddling. *EU Observer*. Retrieved from <https://euobserver.com/foreign/140542>.

<sup>85</sup> MCMC exec wants 10-fold hike for fake news penalties. (2018, February 18). *The Malay Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/mcmc-exec-wants-10-fold-hike-for-fake-news-penalties#6lrW3YdYvV14rBif.97>.

<sup>86</sup> Alemanno, A. (2018, January 7). Macron's fake news law will threaten democracy. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-fake-news-law-will-threaten-democracy/>.

of Germany, it was “hate speech”, criminal defamation and insult), abuse of power, arbitrary censorship practised by those in power for their own gains, and self-censorship among people and online platforms due to uncertainty and fear of persecution<sup>87 88</sup>. In Singapore, since the government announced that it is convening a Select Committee to look into the problem of deliberate online falsehoods, some have expressed concerns relating to the curtailment of speech if the line between falsehood and opinion is not drawn clearly, and the silencing of political dissent.

35. There is certainly a conundrum surrounding legislation. Legislation relating to the online space has inherent limitations. These limitations include ensuring the sustainability of legislation in the long run, given the speed of technological advancements which engenders rapid, unanticipated and oftentimes unimaginable adoption and accompanying consequences, and issues of enforceability and practicality. As the online space is like an amoeba — technological advancements and user behaviour always shifting in ways that are hard to anticipate — legislation will always unfortunately be one step behind. In addition, it is unlikely that legislation will have any teeth against deliberate online falsehoods that originate and circulate on closed-group communication platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram) as well as those from foreign actors. The ideal remedy is for self-regulation — both on the part of users and online platforms. In our research on the online space and use of digital technologies, we have found evidence of self-regulation among online users<sup>89</sup>. Calling out and condemning anti-social behaviours and online falsehoods that have ramifications for the offline world, and the individuals and groups who are responsible, will help set norms which will shape behaviours.

36. As mentioned earlier (see Paragraphs 23 and 24), self-regulation by technology companies is critical as people spend increasingly more time in the online space. Such self-regulatory approaches are prominent in Europe’s media landscape, where a system of self-regulation is developed voluntarily by professionals who are independent from public authorities to encourage industry players to adhere to a set of professional and ethical guidelines<sup>90</sup>. Technology companies have also shown signs of acknowledging the importance of self-regulation. Almost two years ago before fake news came under intense spotlight, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft had agreed on a voluntary code of conduct. Developed in May 2016, the code of conduct had two objectives. First, it aimed to improve ways of combating hate speech and to make the “notice and take down procedure” more effective by giving their commitment to remove illegal content based on reviews within 24 hours of receipt of notification of its existence. Second, it also obliged social media giants to develop their own guidelines on clarifying with users regarding what constitutes illegal hate speech<sup>91 92</sup>. While the code of conduct was a positive move as it signalled a recognition of the

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<sup>87</sup> Oltermann, P. (2018, January 5). Tough new German law puts tech firms and free speech in spotlight. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/05/tough-new-german-law-puts-tech-firms-and-free-speech-in-spotlight>.

<sup>88</sup> Germany: The Act to improve enforcement of the law in social networks. (2017, August). ARTICLE 19 [Report]. Retrieved from <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170901-Legal-Analysis-German-NetzDG-Act.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Soon, C., & Tan, T. H. (2013, June). *Corrosive speech: What can be done*. Policy paper published by the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore. Retrieved from [http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/03/Report\\_ACM\\_Corrosive-Speech-Report\\_120613-1.pdf](http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/03/Report_ACM_Corrosive-Speech-Report_120613-1.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Hulin, A. (2014). Statutory media self-regulation: beneficial or detrimental for media freedom? [Working paper]. Retrieved from [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/34047/RSCAS\\_WP\\_2014\\_127.pdf;sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/34047/RSCAS_WP_2014_127.pdf;sequence=1).

<sup>91</sup> Hern, A. (2016, May 31). Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Microsoft sign EU hate speech code. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/31/facebook-youtube-twitter-microsoft-eu-hate-speech-code>.

<sup>92</sup> Niklewicz, K. (2017). Weeding out fake news: An approach to social media regulation [Report]. Retrieved from [https://www.martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/mc-weeding\\_out\\_fake\\_news\\_v3\\_web.pdf](https://www.martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/mc-weeding_out_fake_news_v3_web.pdf).

impact of online speech and a commitment to improving track record on the part of the technology and social media industry, a 2017 report commissioned by the Justice Ministry in Germany found that the companies were failing to meet their commitments<sup>93</sup>. Experts and observers have also expressed doubt that technology giants would have sufficient will and incentive to self-regulate effectively simply because they are monopolies (or near-monopolies) in the industry<sup>94 95</sup>.

37. We have made the case for how a suite of measures — self-regulation (by users and technology companies), fact checking and increasing critical literacy — is required to counter the complex and wicked problem of deliberate online falsehoods. We have also explained how each approach is important but has its own limitations. So, is there a role for legislation to play? Indeed, legislation plays a complementary role to the aforementioned countermeasures. However, legislation must balance the interests of protecting national security and preserving public order, while enabling individuals to have meaningful discussions without fear of legal repercussions and empowering all parties (the government, members of the public, mainstream media and online media) to report and comment on issues of concern. As member of the Select Committee, Mr Seah Kian Peng, said, “*Heavy-handed legislation may backfire on the Government acting as judge, jury and executioner of what constitutes credible information. We may end up freezing free speech online. Too much reliance on legislation may also weaken the people’s ability discern fact from fiction by themselves*”<sup>96</sup>. Another member of the Committee, Minister for Law and Home Affairs, Mr K. Shanmugam, had said that acting against deliberate online falsehoods will not curtail the freedom of speech but allow freedom of speech to flourish<sup>97</sup>.

38. To protect the freedom of speech and not cultivate over-reliance among members of the public on authorities to counter deliberate online falsehoods, we have to be precise and specific in the types of deliberate online falsehood that legal action should be taken against. There should be a clear and workable definition of what constitutes “deliberate online falsehoods” and the harms (what types and degrees of harms and the parties responsible) that we want to guard against. Based on existing frameworks such as First Draft’s definitional typology<sup>98</sup> and ARTICLE 19’s framework which assists in assessments relating to hate speech<sup>99</sup>, we propose “5Cs” when determining what online falsehoods warrant regulatory intervention.

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<sup>93</sup> Toor, A. (2017, June 30). Germany passes controversial law to fine Facebook over hate speech. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/2017/6/30/15898386/germany-facebook-hate-speech-law-passed>.

<sup>94</sup> Blumenthal, P. (2017, November 3). Here’s how Facebook could be regulated. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/facebook-regulation-us\\_59e5211ee4b0ca9f483a14bd](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/facebook-regulation-us_59e5211ee4b0ca9f483a14bd).

<sup>95</sup> Kovach, S. (2017, October 28). If you think Washington’s going to regulate Big Tech, I’ve got a bridge I’ll sell you. *Business Insider Singapore*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.sg/tech-company-regulation-2017-10/?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>96</sup> Ng, K. (2018, January 10). Govt sets up committee to study problem of deliberate online falsehoods. *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/govt-sets-committee-study-problem-deliberate-online-falsehoods>.

<sup>97</sup> Ng, K. (2018, January 10). Debunking falsehoods safeguards freedom of speech, say MPs. *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/debunking-falsehoods-safeguards-freedom-speech-say-mps>.

<sup>98</sup> Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017, October 31). One year on, we’re still not recognizing the complexity of information disorder online. Retrieved from [https://firstdraftnews.org/coe\\_infodisorder/](https://firstdraftnews.org/coe_infodisorder/).

<sup>99</sup> Germany: The Act to improve enforcement of the law in social networks. (2017, August). ARTICLE 19 [Report]. Retrieved from <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170901-Legal-Analysis-German-NetzDG-Act.pdf>.

- **Content:** There are two dimensions that should be taken into consideration. First, is the content verifiably false? Falsehoods should be distinguished from opinion, which is a belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty. For instance, the statement “*In 2016, 10 million Chinese workers took over jobs from locals in Indonesia*” is verifiably false as official statistics from Indonesia’s Ministry of Manpower showed that the actual number of Chinese workers who were employed in Indonesia in 2016 was 21,000<sup>100</sup>. Second, the nature of content that should be considered should go beyond text or fabricated articles. Visuals (e.g., images and videos) and audio formats are equally powerful and should be addressed as well.
- **Context:** The content should be considered within the political, economic, and social milieu prevalent at the time it is communicated. What is of concern to one country may be different to that of another country, although governments worldwide currently seem to share a common concern on the impact of deliberate online falsehoods on social and national stability. In Singapore, the evaluation of the consequences of deliberate online falsehoods should take into account the country’s political, economic and social landscape. Despite the changes in digital technologies and the online space, Singapore’s approach to regulating speech in general has remained constant — protecting racial and religious harmony among its diverse population, maintaining public order and security, and safeguarding judicial integrity. Moving forward, one possible approach is to focus on deliberate online falsehoods that pose a threat to these pillars that Singapore has always upheld.
- **Communicator’s Identity:** Our research on deliberate online falsehoods found that there are different types of perpetrators. As mentioned in Paragraph 5, perpetrators run the gamut from members of the public, domestic political agents (i.e., political parties competing in an election campaign) to foreign state actors. Some actors could be part of a larger network (e.g., accounts linked to a Russian troll farm). Corporations could also be another group who might produce or perpetuate falsehoods (as seen with the tobacco industry during the 1950s and 1960s<sup>101</sup>). Depending on the intent (see next point on *Communicator’s Intent*), individuals from the general public should be dealt with differently from networked players and foreign state actors whose deliberate online falsehoods are typically part of a larger insidious agenda to disrupt social stability and national security.
- **Communicator’s Intent:** First Draft’s definitional typology categorised false information into three types — Misinformation, mal-information and disinformation. *Misinformation* is false or inaccurate information produced or shared without the intent to deceive or harm. Parody and satire would fall into this category. In Singapore, the online site *New Nation* and the MediaCorp production *The Noose* would be examples of satire and parody produced with the intent to entertain rather than to deceive or harm. As mentioned in Paragraph 10, mischief could be another intent. *Mal-information* is information that is genuine or has basis but produced with a clear intention to cause harm. One example would be Macron’s private emails that were leaked just days before the 2017 French Presidential Election to damage his reputation<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Jokowi dismisses concerns over Chinese workers in Indonesia. (2016, December 23). *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/12/23/jokowi-dismisses-concerns-over-chinese-workers-in-indonesia.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Harford, T. (2017, March 9). The problem with facts. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/eef2e2f8-0383-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>

<sup>102</sup> Mohan, M. (2017, May 9). Macron Leaks: the anatomy of a hack. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39845105>.



*Disinformation* is the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false. The end game for this type of false content is to deceive, attract viewership, or incite hostility. Some examples include “news reports” that claim to be made by reputable news organisations when they are not and the impersonation of genuine news websites sources. We propose that any legislation to combat deliberate online falsehoods should focus on disinformation. Misinformation, especially if understood by readers and the audience to be so (e.g., in the case of satire and parody or the inadvertent spread of false information), should not fall within the ambit of deliberate online falsehoods of which legal action should be taken against.

- **Consequence:** We have to consider the extent and magnitude — in terms of its frequency and volume — and the public nature of the content. For instance, a deliberate online falsehood that goes viral due to the use of automated bots clearly points to concerted orchestration on the part of the producer. The consequence of deliberate online falsehoods should also be considered in terms of the extent and magnitude of its impact. In the above point concerning *Context*, we made the case that we should limit actions to deliberate online falsehoods that cause harm to Singapore’s social fabric and national security. Finally, the likelihood of harm occurring, including its imminence, should also be taken into account. There must be a reasonable probability of discrimination, hostility or violence occurring as a direct consequence of the incitement.

39. Here, we use the case of the doctored headline of an article relating to the City Harvest Church trial as an example to illustrate how our “5Cs” framework should be considered in its totality. Indeed, by assessing the *Content* and *Context* of the issue, this piece of deliberate online falsehood might be considered as “high breach” especially since it has the potential to shake public confidence in our judicial integrity. However, the producer of the deliberate online falsehood is an individual (*Communicator’s identity*) who is not part of any organised network attempting to use automated bots to amplify their message (*Consequence*). Furthermore, the motivation (*Communicator’s Intent*) behind the production of the falsehood was neither to deceive or nor harm, (as demonstrated by his quick issue of an apology after warning was given by the Attorney-General’s Chambers), but instead out of personal dissatisfaction with the outcome of the trial. Evaluating each aspect of the “5Cs” framework in combination, this would not be a piece of deliberate online falsehood that warrants legal action.

40. In addition to the “5Cs” guidelines for determining what types of deliberate online falsehoods Singapore should take legal action against, we propose a two-prong approach to counter deliberate online falsehoods in Singapore. The first prong is to strengthen Singapore’s existing legislative framework. Our existing laws already have provisions for the regulation of speech and sanction those whose speech or action causes harm or poses a threat to society, public order and national security. Earlier, we have noted that there are no published or publicly recorded “high-breach” deliberate online falsehoods in Singapore, unlike in other countries. One possible reason is our existing laws have been providing adequate safeguards against harmful speech, which could be one of the factors that account for the difference between Singapore’s experience and that of other countries. In response to an inquiry launched by the UK House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee on fake news in January 2017, the News Media Association argued that the growing problem of fake news is a result of the failure of enforcing existing laws<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> The News Media Association represents over 1,000 newspaper titles and functions to promote members’ interests to the government. [Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee ‘fake news’ inquiry: News Media Association response. (2017). Retrieved from

41. In Singapore, we have a comprehensive set of laws that govern both offline and online speech and behaviours. Some of those can be (and in some cases, have been) drawn on to tackle the problem of deliberate online falsehoods.

- The **Broadcasting Act**<sup>104</sup> (and its subsidiary legislation, the **Broadcasting (Class License) Notification**<sup>105</sup>) which enforces compliance with the Info-communications Media Development Authority's (IMDA) Class License Conditions and the Internet Code of Practice, hold Internet Service Providers and Internet Content Providers accountable for the content they put out and allow the authorities to demand that websites hosting objectionable content be taken down. These regulations also define what constitutes "prohibited material" and the factors that should be considered when assessing whether something should be considered as "prohibited material"<sup>106</sup>.
- The **Telecommunications Act** states that "*any person who transmits or causes to be transmitted a message which he knows to be false or fabricated shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction*". Under this Act, people who transmit a message known to be false or fabricated can be fined up to \$10,000, jailed for three years, or given both punishments<sup>107</sup>. The penalties are higher if it is a bomb hoax. In 2007, a polytechnic student was sentenced to three months' jail and a \$4,000 fine after he posted a bogus article on an online forum saying that bombs were found at the Toa Payoh bus interchange a day after the London bombings<sup>108</sup>.
- **Section 298A of the Penal Code** acts against those who "*by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, knowingly promotes or attempts to promote, on grounds of religion or race, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups*"<sup>109</sup>. **Section 505 of the Penal Code** deals with statements, rumours or reports in written, electronic or other media which are intended or "*likely to cause fear or alarm to the public, whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquillity*", or intended or likely to "*incite any class or community of persons to commit any offence*" against others<sup>110</sup>.
- The **Administration of Justice (Protection) Act** includes provisions for action to be taken against those who scandalises the court and undermines public confidence in the administration of justice through different forms of publishing. "Publishing" includes "*oral, visual, written, electronic or other means (for example, by way of newspaper, radio, television or through the use of the Internet, subscription TV or other online communications system) to the public at large or a member of the public*"<sup>111</sup>. The recent

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[http://www.newsmediauk.org/write/MediaUploads/Fake%20News/NMA\\_Submission\\_to\\_the\\_CMS\\_Select\\_Committee\\_'Fake\\_News'\\_Inquiry.pdf](http://www.newsmediauk.org/write/MediaUploads/Fake%20News/NMA_Submission_to_the_CMS_Select_Committee_'Fake_News'_Inquiry.pdf)]

<sup>104</sup> Broadcasting Act, Rev. ed. Cap 28 (2012).

<sup>105</sup> Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification, Rev. ed. Cap 28, s. 9, (2012).

<sup>106</sup> Prohibited material is material that is objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws. [Internet Code of Practice. (2016, October 1). Info-communications Media Development Authority. Retrieved from <https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/regulation-licensing-and-consultations/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/acts-codes/19-policiesandcontentguidelinesinternetinternecodeofpractice.pdf?la=en>]

<sup>107</sup> Telecommunications Act, Rev. ed. Cap 323, s. 45 (2000).

<sup>108</sup> Au-Yong, R. (2016, December 16). How to fight back against the scourge of fake news. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/how-to-fight-back>.

<sup>109</sup> Penal Code, Rev. ed. Cap 224, s. 298A (2008).

<sup>110</sup> Penal Code, Rev. ed. Cap 224, s. 505 (2008).

<sup>111</sup> Administration of Justice (Protection) Act, Act 19 of 2016 (2016).

example where the producer of a deliberate online falsehood could have been charged under this Act is one that involved a Singaporean male who doctored the headline of a *Lianhe Wanbao* report on the City Harvest Church trial proceedings.

- The **Sedition Act** applies to written or printed matter that is of “seditious” nature, i.e., “bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection” against the Government, the administration of justice in Singapore, among the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore”, and “promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore”<sup>112</sup>. The most recent case involving deliberate online falsehoods and this Act was that of the socio-political website *The Real Singapore*. The couple behind the website were charged under the Sedition Act and sentenced to jail in 2016 for two articles that had the “tendency to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different groups of people in Singapore, namely, between ethnic Indians and Philippine nationals in Singapore”<sup>113</sup>. The website was eventually ordered to shut down (for breaking rules under the Internet Code of Practice).
- The **Defamation Act** acts against slanderous words that are communicated with the intention to “disparage the plaintiff in any office, profession, calling, trade or business held or carried on by him at the time of the publication”<sup>114</sup>. In the case of deliberate online falsehoods, individuals can also turn to the **Protection from Harassment Act** “if any statement of fact about any person which is false in any particular about the person has been published by any means”<sup>115</sup>.
- The **Undesirable Publications Act** regulates against objectionable publications that are likely to be injurious to the public good, or more relevant to falsehoods, that deal with “matters of race or religion in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between different racial or religious groups”<sup>116</sup>. While this Act targets offline publications, it has relevance for today’s context as the boundary between what is offline and online is getting increasingly nebulous — deliberate online falsehoods may make their way to the offline context where they are further disseminated in non-online formats, or an online falsehood could originate from content that is circulated offline.

42. There are several reasons why Singapore should reinforce its existing legislative framework instead of drafting a new law to target deliberate online falsehoods specifically. First, the aforementioned legislations have stood the test of time and contain clear provisions for safeguards against harmful content, particularly those that involve falsehoods and the incitement of hostility between different groups in society (e.g., Penal Code and Sedition Act). Second, they also contain provisions for the removal of content deemed harmful or illegal, as in the case of the Broadcasting (Class License) Notification, and the Sedition Act. The latter stipulates that the Court can make an order prohibiting the issuing and circulation of the offending publication, as well as requiring every person who has a copy of the publication to hand it over to the police<sup>117</sup>. Third, the various legislations allow for different intervention points as each has provisions targeted at different stakeholders, from individuals to groups and

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<sup>112</sup> Sedition Act, Rev. ed. Cap 290, s. 3 (2013).

<sup>113</sup> Chelvan, V. P. (2016, March 8). Former TRS editor Ai Takagi pleads guilty to manufacturing articles for profit. *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/former-trs-editor-ai-takagi-pleads-guilty-to-manufacturing-artic-8158490>.

<sup>114</sup> Defamation Act, Rev. ed. Cap 75, s. 5 (2014).

<sup>115</sup> Protection from Harassment Act, Rev. ed. Cap 256A, s. 15 (2015).

<sup>116</sup> Undesirable Publications Act, Rev. ed. Cap 338, s. 4 (1998).

<sup>117</sup> Sedition Act, Rev. ed. Cap 290, s. 10 (2013).

organisations that host content and provide Internet services, to different formats and different types of harms.

43. Fourth, existing legislations are platform neutral, as in they can be applied to a wide array of online platforms. The examples we had provided earlier showed how falsehoods are disseminated on different platforms, with the problem compounded by the hyperlinked nature of the cyberspace. Some of the current legislations are also context neutral and can be used to target falsehoods in the offline and online context. Our research showed up doppelganger print newspapers in Kenya that were produced and circulated offline during the 2017 Kenyan General Election<sup>118</sup>. However, there was nothing which could have stopped the perpetrators or members of the public from taking photographs of the doppelganger print newspapers and circulating them online. Fifth, the different legislations also allow for calibrated responses based on the egregiousness of the deliberate online falsehoods and intent of the perpetrators. For instance, Section 298A of the Penal Code provides an alternative legal measure to the Sedition Act when dealing with deliberate online falsehoods that are of “lower breach”, especially if they are racial or religious in nature and the elements of the offence under Section 298A can be equally proven<sup>119</sup>.

44. In view of the changing online environment, it is timely for the government to review existing legal provisions and strengthen them. One possible area of review would be to consider if there is a need to broaden current definitions of “Internet Service Providers” and “Internet Content Providers” so as to deal with the virality of deliberate online falsehoods. A current gap in existing legislations is they do not sufficiently address the spread or dissemination of deliberate online falsehoods. Should the definitions be expanded to include Internet intermediaries and content hosts such as news aggregators and social networking platforms?<sup>120</sup> Another alternative would be the creation of a “notice and correct” provision to help slow down or stop falsehoods from spreading, which protect the rights of affected parties at the same time. Such an approach would hold social media platforms jointly responsible for the content they publish, and might provide incentives for companies to adapt their business models and to modify the construction of their algorithms and policies<sup>121</sup>. It will entail discussions between the government and technology companies on if and how platforms’ community standards can be tweaked for the local context in view of different sensitivities and challenges in different regimes. Third, consideration should be given to how to promote transparency among social media companies, for instance, relating to the removal of fake accounts, how complaints are handled, third parties who buy advertisement space, as well as the effects of their algorithms in terms of how it distributes content on the platforms<sup>122</sup>.

45. The second prong is to set up an independent body or panel that advises on the type of deliberate online falsehoods to take action against. As presented in Paragraph 34, there are fears that legislation can be misused or abused by authorities, especially vaguely defined regulations that allow wide restrictions against independent or anti-government reporting.

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<sup>118</sup> Ngirachu, J. (2017, April 13). Hard tackle in Busia politics as fake news used to woo voters. *Daily Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Busia-fake-news/1064-3888294-format-xhtml-4h8gle/index.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Choo, Z. X. (2013, April 26). Why the Sedition Act shouldn’t apply to Leslie Chew. *The Online Citizen*. Retrieved from <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2013/04/26/why-sedition-act-shouldnt-apply-to-leslie-chew/>.

<sup>120</sup> Chik., W. B. (2017). Fact or fake news: The role of law for data accuracy. *Law Gazette*. Retrieved from [https://www.lawsociety.org.sg/portals/0/Media%20Centre/Law%20Gazette/pdf/SLG\\_JUN\\_2017.pdf](https://www.lawsociety.org.sg/portals/0/Media%20Centre/Law%20Gazette/pdf/SLG_JUN_2017.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> Niklewicz, K. (2017). Weeding out fake news: An approach to social media regulation [Report]. Retrieved from [https://www.martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/mc-weeding\\_out\\_fake\\_news\\_v3\\_web.pdf](https://www.martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/mc-weeding_out_fake_news_v3_web.pdf).

<sup>122</sup> Wheeler, T. (2018, February 20). How to monitor fake news. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/opinion/monitor-fake-news.html>.

Such concerns are warranted as laws that ban hate speech or protect against terrorism have been used for political rather than public safety reasons in countries such as Turkey<sup>123 124</sup>.

46. Independent advisory and review panels have assisted different ministries and organs of the state in Singapore. We cite three examples that span different domains. In 2014, the Ministry of Home Affairs set up an Independent Review Panel (IRP) to ensure that internal investigations into Home Team officers are thorough and fair, such as for cases that result in death or serious injury and those that obstruct the course of justice. The IRP provides its opinion on whether investigations are thorough and fair, and whether there are any areas that require further investigation<sup>125</sup>. Another example is the Library Consultative Panel formed to provide recommendations on library materials after the decision by the National Library Board to remove three children titles containing alleged homosexual themes led to a public backlash. The third example is taken from the media sector<sup>126</sup>. Based on recommendations put forth by the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS) released in 2008, an independent advisory panel was set up to advise the Board of Film Censors on whether films are party political films and if they can be allowed under the amended Films Act<sup>127</sup>.

47. It is likely that situations where different stakeholders such as the government, platforms companies and the public (or even within the public) may disagree on the harm posed by a deliberate online falsehood, and if using legislation to manage the problem is the most appropriate response. The independent body should comprise a diverse range of members — academics, community leaders, educators, industry professionals and legal practitioners — who are non-partisan. In situations where there is a contestation of views, the panel will review the cases and submit its views to the government on whether a violation has taken place, what the appropriate sanctions are, and advise the government on how best to respond. To perform these duties, it is imperative for such a panel to act on behalf of the public, and in the public interest; assess breaches and remedies with reference to the track record of those involved; and ensure there is a clear right of appeal for parties involved (e.g., alleged perpetrators, complainants, platform owners, technology and social media companies).

## CONCLUSION

48. We would like to reiterate our support for the government's attempt in stepping beyond the parochial boundaries prescribed by the term "fake news" and addressing the broader problem of deliberate online falsehoods. As presented in the preceding sections, deliberate online falsehoods is a wicked problem that confounds governments around the world. Its complexity lies in its shapeshifting nature (where it adopts many different forms), the types of actors involved (from disgruntled individuals to networked political actors), the myriad motivations that drive its production and dissemination (from misreporting to the financial and

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<sup>123</sup> Hulin, A. (2014). Statutory media self-regulation: beneficial or detrimental for media freedom? [Working paper]. Retrieved from [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/34047/RSCAS\\_WP\\_2014\\_127.pdf;sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/34047/RSCAS_WP_2014_127.pdf;sequence=1).

<sup>124</sup> Banisar, D. (2008). Speaking of terror: Report on the 1<sup>st</sup> Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for media and new communications services [Report]. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/168048622f>.

<sup>125</sup> MHA sets up independent review panel for Home Team. (2014, August 2). *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/mha-sets-independent-review-panel-home-team>.

<sup>126</sup> National Library Board sets up independent panel to advise on review of materials. (2015, April 15). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/national-library-board-sets-up-independent-panel-to-advise-on-re-8267466>.

<sup>127</sup> Government's response to the recommendations made by the Advisory Council on the impact of new media on society (AIMS) in the report "Engaging new media – Challenging old assumptions." (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20090116002/govt%27s+response+to+aims+recommendations.pdf>.

political), the range of communication channels (open- and closed-platforms) used, and the contextualised themes and messages. The impact of deliberate online falsehoods also varies, from “low breach” to “high breach”. Furthermore, the wickedness of the problem is compounded by rapid technological advancements that afford low-cost digital sophistication to users and the pervasive use of algorithms and automated bots.

49. While falsehoods in the forms of rumours, conspiracy theories, hoaxes and propaganda are not new, deliberate online falsehoods have the potential to wreak havoc and irreparable damage to societies and nations, especially when exploited by actors (both foreign and local) with malicious agendas. In our recommendations, we emphasise that self-regulation by technology companies and users, fact checking (both government-led and non-government initiatives), and critical literacy are key measures to fight the battle against deliberate online falsehoods, as well as future online scourges which we are unable to anticipate at this juncture. These measures will arm individuals, communities and societies with the necessary “antibodies” and “immunity” to deal with an increasingly convoluted information ecology. We also emphasise in the case of fact checking that we should not rely only on government-led fact checking. Non-government fact checking initiatives play an important role in debunking deliberate online falsehoods and spreading corrections, especially during times of crises or periods where trust in the government is low.

50. We call for the government to focus on “high breach” deliberate online falsehoods. As observed from the examples mentioned in Paragraph 12, members of the public, organisations and institutions are able to step up and competently counter deliberate online falsehoods they face. Furthermore, such opportunities provide critical training and “teachable moments” for different stakeholders in the society. The government should not intervene in every incident but focus its resources on “high breach” deliberate online falsehoods, specifically those that threaten public order and national security. Legislation plays a complementary role to non-governmental measures and non-legislative governmental measures. We proposed a “5Cs” framework that can be used by the government to evaluate the necessity for legislative action. Each of the “5Cs” — *Content*, *Context*, *Communicator’s Identity*, *Communicator’s Intent* and *Consequence* — should be used when evaluating if legal action (and what type) is needed to counter a specific deliberate online falsehood (as demonstrated in Paragraph 39). When legislative action is absolutely necessary, we advocate that the government leverage existing laws and regulations as they have stood the test of time, contain clear provisions for safeguards against content that can harm our society, are platform and context neutral, as well as allow for various intervention points in a calibrated fashion. That said, there is room for the strengthening existing legislation, such as broadening the current definitions of “Internet Service and Content Providers”, creating a “notice and correct” provision, and ensuring greater transparency by social media companies. Lastly, we also recommend the establishment of an independent panel that the government can consult when deciding if and what action should be taken. Comprising a diverse range of members, the panel will play an important role in providing neutral assessments, especially in situations where there is a contestation or dissent on the severity of a deliberate online falsehood and if a legislative response is necessary.

51. Wicked problems call for a sophisticated and well-rounded approach, especially when it comes to the amorphous and amoebic online space. The slate of measures proposed in this submission will not eliminate deliberate online falsehoods, but are essential components that

can help mitigate the problem, while providing the necessary clarity and assurance of the intentions behind any adopted measures moving forward.

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Dr Soon Wan Ting, Carol

Mr Shawn Goh Ze Song

## Appendix A – Summary of different cases of deliberate online falsehoods in Singapore

| Online Falsehood  | Content  | Platform(s)  | Actor(s)  | Motivation(s)  | Outcome(s)   |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|
| 1. Doctored newspaper headline on City Harvest Church trial | In February 2018, a doctored front page image of local Chinese tabloid <i>Lianhe Wanbao</i> article on the outcome of the City Harvest Church trial received widespread public attention. The original, translated title of “Outdated law ‘saved’ the accused from harsher penalties” had been changed to “PAP lawyer ‘saved’ the accused from harsher penalties” <sup>128</sup> . | The doctored image was circulated on Facebook and the original Facebook post (which was posted in a public Facebook group) was shared 23 times in two days <sup>129</sup> .  | The doctored image was produced by Mr Neo Aik Chau.                               | The motivation behind this falsehood is likely to be due to mischief, as well as dissatisfaction towards the outcome of the trial. | In response, the Attorney-General’s Chambers wrote a statement to Mr Neo about his Facebook post, and said that it would take firm action against him for contempt of court, including the institution of committal proceedings in appropriate instances <sup>130</sup> . Mr Neo quickly issued an apology on Facebook, and said that any indication of contempt of court by him was unintentional <sup>131</sup> .  |
| 2. Chinese women detained at airport after plastic surgery  | In October 2017, <i>Channel NewsAsia</i> reported a story about three Chinese women who were detained at South Korea’s airport. They were allegedly detained because of plastic surgery that had resulted in immigration officials being unable to recognize them by their passport photos <sup>132</sup> .  | <i>Channel NewsAsia</i> published the story on their website and shared it on their Facebook page as well. Their Facebook post received more than 3,500 reactions, 1000 shares and 250 comments within a day. Other local mainstream media outlets such as <i>STOMP</i> , <i>AsiaOne</i> and <i>Channel 8 News</i> also picked up the story <sup>133</sup> . | <i>Channel NewsAsia</i> , <i>STOMP</i> , <i>AsiaOne</i> , <i>Channel 8 News</i> . | This was a case of misreporting both on the part of <i>Channel NewsAsia</i> and other local mainstream media outlets.              | <i>Mothership</i> quickly debunked the story in an article which showed that the story actually originated from China’s largest micro-blogging platform, Weibo. <i>Mothership</i> also reported that South Korea’s Ministry of Justice have debunked the story – South Korean authorities said that they have been using fingerprint identification technology at their immigration checkpoints since 2012. The following day, <i>Channel NewsAsia</i> also reported that South Korea’s Ministry of Justice has debunked the story and confirmed that no such incident occurred <sup>134</sup> . Besides local mainstream media, many international news media agencies also picked up on the story <sup>135</sup> . |

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/agc-has-written-to-man-who-posted-fake-news-about-lawyer-who-9928278>

<sup>129</sup> Ng, K. (2018, February 5). AGC looking into doctored headline of Chinese news report on CHC case. *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/AGC-looking-into-doctored-headline-CHC-case>.

<sup>130</sup> AGC has written to man who posted ‘fake news’ about lawyer who defended City Harvest Church leaders. (2018, February 5). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/agc-has-written-to-man-who-posted-fake-news-about-lawyer-who-9928278>.

<sup>131</sup> Man apologises for faking news headline on City Harvest case. (2018, February 6). *Yahoo News Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/man-apologised-faking-news-headline-city-harvest-case-115759813.html>.

<sup>132</sup> 3 Chinese women detained at South Korea immigration after plastic surgery. (2017, October 11). *Channel News Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/3-chinese-women-detained-at-south-korea-immigration-after-9299002>.

<sup>133</sup> Yeo, K. (2017, October 12). Reports of 3 Chinese women stuck at South Korea airport after plastic surgery are fake news. *Mothership*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2017/10/reports-of-3-chinese-women-stuck-at-south-korea-airport-after-plastic-surgery-is-fake-news/>.

<sup>134</sup> South Korea denies reports of Chinese women detained at airport after plastic surgery. (2017, October 13). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/south-korea-denies-reports-of-chinese-women-detained-at-airport-9304712>.

<sup>135</sup> Yeo, K. (2017, October 12). Reports of 3 Chinese women stuck at South Korea airport after plastic surgery are fake news. *Mothership*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2017/10/reports-of-3-chinese-women-stuck-at-south-korea-airport-after-plastic-surgery-is-fake-news/>.



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| 3. Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan collapsed at UN Summit | In September 2017, a false article claimed that Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan had collapsed at 72nd session of the UN General Assembly <sup>136</sup> .  | The article was published on <i>Global News</i> ( <a href="http://glonews360.com">glonews360.com</a> ).   | The people behind <i>Global News</i> remains unknown as the website is registered under Domains By Proxy, a domain registrar company which helps shield the identities of website owners. | The motivation behind the production of this falsehood remains unknown, but is very likely to be economic motives (by attracting clicks for advertising revenue) as this is not the first time <i>Global News</i> has created such falsehoods <sup>137</sup> . | The Minister himself took to Facebook to debunk the falsehood, and assured Singaporeans about his health and safety at the Summit <sup>138</sup> .   |
| 4. <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> and the Ministry of Education (MOE) | In its 2017 August edition, <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> published an article which claimed that the director-general of education had attributed Singapore's educational success to "standardised test drilling and a culture of compliance", a comment he purportedly made at the National Institute of Education's Redesigning Pedagogy conference <sup>139</sup> . | The article was published on <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> and the comments in question were also reproduced by <i>Mothership</i> <sup>140</sup> . | Author of article and editors of <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> .   | This was a case of misreporting both on the part of <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> and <i>Mothership</i> .   | In response, MOE had asked <i>Australian Teacher Magazine</i> to take down the article, or print a correction. MOE also published the transcript and the video of the director-general's speech at the conference to clarify that he did not make the statements quoted by the article <sup>141</sup> . <i>Australia Teacher Magazine</i> eventually took down the article and apologised without reservation <sup>142</sup> . <i>Mothership</i> also amended its article on their website and included the correction in its article <sup>143</sup> . |
| 5. <i>Mothership</i> and Salleh Marican                                   | In August 2017, <i>Mothership</i> published an article that wrongly attributed presidential candidate Salleh Marican to comments about the hijab found on a Facebook page <i>EPPresident Singapore</i> . Mr Salleh had allegedly commented that "the hijab was not part of the Malay dress code before the 1970s and that increasing   | The article was published on <i>Mothership</i> .  | People behind the <i>EPPresident Singapore</i> Facebook page and <i>Mothership</i> .  | This was a case of misreporting on the part of <i>Mothership</i> . However, there might be political motivations for the people behind the <i>EPPresident Singapore</i> Facebook page.   | Mr Salleh's team reported the page to Facebook to tell them it does not belong to his campaign. <i>Mothership</i> also took down its article and issued an apology. It said in its apology that the article it published was based on a post from a Facebook page "masquerading as a fan page" for Mr Salleh, and clarified that the page is not linked to Mr Salleh's campaign efforts. <sup>145</sup>  |

<sup>136</sup> Lam, L. (2017, September 23). Vivian Balakrishnan calls out fake news that says he collapsed at UN summit. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vivian-balakrishnan-calls-out-fake-news-that-says-he-collapsed-at-un-summit>.

<sup>137</sup> Tan, M. (2017, September 23). News that Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in critical condition at UN Summit is fake. *Mothership*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2017/09/foreign-minister-vivian-balakrishnan-in-critical-condition-at-un-summit-fake-news/>.

<sup>138</sup> Vivian Balakrishnan. (2017, September 23). In *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/Vivian.Balakrishnan.Sg/posts/10154687829311207>.

<sup>139</sup> Yuen, S. (2017, August 27). Online article is 'fake news': MOE. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/online-article-is-fake-news-moe>.

<sup>140</sup> Yuen, S. (2017, August 28). Article carrying MOE remarks on Singapore's 'culture of compliance' is fake news, says MOE. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/article-carrying-moe-remarks-on-singapores-culture-of-compliance-is-fake-news>.

<sup>141</sup> Australian article on Singapore's education system 'fake news': MOE. (2017, August 29). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/australian-article-on-singapore-s-education-system-fake-news-moe-9166830>.

<sup>142</sup> Yuen, S. (2017, August 30). Aussie magazine pulls out article MOE called 'fake news'. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/aussie-magazine-pulls-out-article-moe-called-fake-news>.

<sup>143</sup> Ministry of Education raps *Mothership* for 'fake news' on official's comments. (2017, August 29). *Yahoo News Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/ministry-education-raps-mothership-sg-fake-news-officials-comments-091535082.html>.

<sup>145</sup> *Mothership* apologises for fake news about Salleh Marican. (2017, August 9). *Yahoo News Singapore*. Retrieved from <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/mothership-apologises-fake-news-salleh-marican-064846943.html>.

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|   | <i>religiosity in the Middle East and around the region has eroded Malay culture in Singapore</i> <sup>144</sup> .  |   |   |   |  |
| 6. CPF savings will be given to nominee's Medisave upon death | In June 2017, a widely circulated text message claimed that Singaporeans' CPF savings will be transferred to the Medisave account of one's nominee by default upon death. One statement in the message read, "Everybody please note that when we kick the bucket, all our balance CPF money will not be automatically deposited into our nominated NOK bank account in cash" <sup>146</sup> . | The text message was widely circulated via Instant Messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and SMS) and social media.                 | The actor(s) behind this falsehood remains unknown. | The motivation behind the production of this falsehood remains unknown, but could possibly be due to mischief.    | The official online communication platform of the government, <i>Gov.sg</i> , quickly clarified that there is absolutely no basis for this falsehood and said CPF savings will be given to one's nominees in cash via cheque or GIRO by default. Furthermore, the Ministry of Communication and Information's fact checking outfit, <i>Factually</i> , also debunked the falsehood and published an article explaining exactly what happens to Singaporeans' CPF monies after death <sup>147</sup> . |
| 7. NEA fine for leaving used tissue behind                    | In March 2017, text messages claiming that NEA would issue a \$200 fine to people for discarding used tissue into one's bowl, plate or cup at hawker centres were circulated. The message also claimed that people had already been fined by NEA <sup>148 149</sup> .   | The falsehood was circulated on WhatsApp and was also shared on local forum, Hardware Zone <sup>150</sup> .                       | The actor(s) behind this falsehood remains unknown. | The motivation behind the production of this falsehood remains unknown, but could potentially be due to mischief. | Several worried netizens voiced their concerns by writing to news websites to question the message's veracity <sup>151</sup> . NEA eventually debunked the falsehood on its Facebook page and said that they have not been issuing fines for such acts <sup>152</sup> .  |
| 8. Tuas waste management plant explosion                      | In February 2017, the SCDF said a fire had broken out in the morning at a Tuas waste management company, Eco Special Waste Management. Soon, a video of dramatic explosions claiming to be the footage of the Tuas explosion was widely circulated.   | The video, which was hosted on YouTube, was widely shared on WhatsApp, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and online forums. | The actor(s) behind this falsehood remains unknown. | The motivation behind the production of this falsehood remains unknown, but could possibly be due to mischief.    | After the fake video went viral, sharp-eyed netizens pointed out that the location in the video did not look like Tuas, and that the sun was too high in the sky for it to be 6am <sup>154</sup> . Others pointed out that the same footage has previously been posted on YouTube in 2015 and 2016, which is likely to be a gas plant explosion in Zhejiang, China. Some netizens also   |

<sup>144</sup> Presidential hopeful Salleh Marican acts against fake news taken from a Facebook page. (2017, August 9). *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/presidential-hopeful-salleh-marican-acts-against-fake-news-taken-from-a-facebook-page>.

<sup>146</sup> Lam, L. (2017, June 17). Gov.sg debunks rumour that CPF savings will be given to nominee's Medisave upon death. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/govsg-debunks-rumour-that-cpf-savings-will-be-given-to-nominees-medisave-upon-death>.

<sup>147</sup> What happens to your CPF savings when you pass away?. (2017, June 17). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.sg/factually/content/what-happens-to-your-cpf-savings-when-you-pass-away>.

<sup>148</sup> No fine for leaving used tissue at hawker centre tables: NEA. (2017, March 30). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/no-fine-for-leaving-used-tissue-at-hawker-centre-tables-nea-8591060>.

<sup>149</sup> Tan, G. Z. (2017, March 31). Obviously fake: WhatsApp messages about NEA issuing S\$200 fines for tissue in cups. *Mothership*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2017/03/obviously-fake-whatsapp-messages-about-nea-issuing-s200-fines-for-tissue-in-cups/>.

<sup>150</sup> Soezan, M. (2017, March 30). NEA responds to rumour of fine issued for tissue paper thrown into used bowl. *The Online Citizen*. Retrieved from <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2017/03/30/nea-responds-to-rumour-of-fine-issued-for-tissue-paper-thrown-into-used-bowl/>.

<sup>151</sup> Wong, L. (2017, March 30). NEA rubbishes fake message claiming used tissue left uncleaned leads to \$200 fine. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nea-rubbishes-fake-message-claiming-used-tissue-left-uncleared-leads-to-200-fine>.

<sup>152</sup> National Environmental Agency (NEA). (2017, March 30). In *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/NEASingapore/posts/1893176607570344>.

<sup>154</sup> Tuas fire: Fake video spreads like wildfire on social media. (2017, February 23). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/tuas-fire-fake-video-spreads-like-wildfire-on-social-media-7607702>.

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|  | However, this widely circulated video was a fake one <sup>153</sup> .  |   |   |  | pointed out that the video looked like a controlled explosion, and that it might be part of a film set <sup>155</sup> .   |
| 9. Plastic rice from NTUC FairPrice and Sheng Shiong | In January 2017, text messages about NTUC FairPrice's house brand of rice, Jasmine Fragrant Rice, claimed that the rice was made of plastic. The rumours also claimed that this was confirmed by a chemist, and that NTUC FairPrice had agreed to withdraw the rice from all its outlets <sup>156</sup> . A similar rumour broke in October 2017, when pictures of Sheng Shiong's Happy Family Housebrand Special White Rice were circulated. Rumours claimed that the rice was made of plastic and that a family had fallen ill after consuming it <sup>157</sup> . | Both rumours were circulated in both English and Chinese on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and Instant Messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp). | The actor(s) behind these two falsehoods remains unknown. | The motivation behind the production of these falsehoods remains unknown, but could potentially be economic motives or mischief. | NTUC FairPrice posted on Facebook and said that their rice is 100 per cent safe for consumption as it had passed stringent safety checks by authorities <sup>158</sup> . NTUC FairPrice also eventually filed a police report over the rumours <sup>159</sup> . In Sheng Shiong's case, the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA) tested the rice and had found it to be authentic. AVA clarified the rumour on Facebook and also posted an infographic that teaches people how to test the authenticity of their rice at home <sup>160</sup> . Sheng Siong also posted AVA's clarifications on its website <sup>161</sup> . |
| 10. Punggol Waterway Terraces roof collapse          | In November 2016, an online article with the headline, "This just happened. The top floors of Punggol Waterway Terraces collapsed!" received wide attention. The article came with a photograph of seemingly "caved in" rooftops, and mentioned that flat owners had voiced their unhappiness over the poor workmanship of their flats <sup>162</sup> .  | The article was published on an alternative online news site, <i>All Singapore Stuff</i> .  | Editors of the <i>All Singapore Stuff</i> website.        | This was a case of misreporting as the editors of <i>All Singapore Stuff</i> had no intention of deceiving the public.           | <i>Lianhe Zaobao</i> reported that residents in the area took to Facebook to refute the falsehood, and explained that the photograph was actually an optical illusion when taken from certain angles <sup>163</sup> . The Police and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) officers were dispatched to the scene, but quickly confirmed the incident to be a false alarm. The Housing Development Board (HDB) also debunked the falsehood with a Facebook post and later filed a police report <sup>164</sup> <sup>165</sup> . The editors of <i>All Singapore Stuff</i>   |

<sup>153</sup> Chew, H. M. (2017, February 23). Fake video of Thursday's Tuas fire explosion spreads on social media. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fake-video-of-tuas-fire-explosion-spreads-on-social-media>.

<sup>155</sup> Au Yong, J. (2017, February 26). When a real fire and a fake video collide. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/whatstrending-when-a-real-fire-and-a-fake-video-collide>.

<sup>156</sup> Lee, J. (2017, February 2). NTUC FairPrice files police report on fake rice rumour. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from <http://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/ntuc-fairprice-files-police-report-fake-rice-rumour>.

<sup>157</sup> Happy Family rice 'authentic'; no fake rice found in Singapore so far: AVA. (2017, November 1). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/happy-family-rice-authentic-no-fake-rice-found-in-singapore-so-9366362>.

<sup>158</sup> NTUC FairPrice. (2017, January 31). In *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/thatsmyfairprice/posts/10154267675351409:0>.

<sup>159</sup> Lin, M. (2017, February 2). FairPrice files police report over fake rice rumour. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fairprice-files-police-report-over-fake-rice-rumour>.

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/avasg/photos/a.123453477731188.24703.123228704420332/1497529540323568/?type=3&theater>

<sup>161</sup> Social media fake news on happy family special white rice. (2017, November 3). Retrieved from <http://www.shengsiong.com.sg/news/77/Social-Media-Fake-News-On-Happy-Family-Special-White-Rice.html>.

<sup>162</sup> Report of Punggol Waterway Terraces roof collapse a 'hoax': HDB. (2016, November 11). *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/report-of-punggol-waterway-terraces-roof-collapse-a-hoax-hdb-7714182>.

<sup>163</sup> Lim, J. (2016, November 11). All Singapore Stuff posts hoax about collapsed roof at Punggol Waterway Terraces, made SPF/SCDF go down to investigate. *MotherShip*. Retrieved from <https://mothership.sg/2016/11/all-singapore-stuff-posts-hoax-about-collapsed-roof-at-punggol-waterway-terraces-made-spfscdf-go-down-to-investigate/>.

<sup>164</sup> Housing & Development Board. (2016, November 11). In *Facebook*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/SingaporeHDB/posts/1488249391201942:0>.

<sup>165</sup> Ng, C. (2016, November 11). HDB files police report over Punggol Waterway Terraces photo hoax. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/hdb-files-police-report-over-punggol-waterway-terraces-photo-hoax>.

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|  |   |   |   |  | removed the article within 20 minutes of publication after realising it was a hoax, and issued an apology saying that had no intention to cause any alarm to the public <sup>166</sup> .   |
| 11. <i>The Real Singapore's</i> article on Filipino family's complaint of Thaipusam procession | In 2015, a fabricated article that was published claimed that a Filipino family had disrupted the 2015 Thaipusam procession, and had asked the police to tell "local Indians to stop playing (the drums)" because the loud noise was making their child cry. However, no such complaint was ever made by a Filipino family <sup>167</sup> . | <i>The Real Singapore</i> , now defunct socio-political website.  | Yang Kaiheng and Ai Takagi, former editors of <i>The Real Singapore</i> . | The motivation behind the production of this falsehood was commercial greed. Within a span of 1½ years, the editors reached out to millions of viewers by doctoring, fabricating and publishing scandalous, provocative articles to increase the website's following and garner advertising revenue (which amounted to AU\$500,000) <sup>168</sup> . | In 2015, <i>The Real Singapore</i> was ordered by the government to shut down as it had a track record of fabricating articles that incited hatred between communities <sup>169</sup> . Other examples include an article which claimed that a Filipino employee had bribed a colleague to delete traces of the Filipino's misdeeds to ensure that only his countrymen were hired by the company, and another article that casts PRC women as home-wreckers whose main motive was 'to hook' Singaporean men and destroy Singaporean families. In 2016, Takagi was sentenced to 10 months' jail on four charges of publishing seditious articles <sup>170</sup> . Yang Kaiheng was sentenced to eight months' jail <sup>171</sup> . |
| 12. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's death hoax  | In March 2015, a screenshot of a fake Prime Minister's Office (PMO) webpage that falsely announced the death of former Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yew was widely circulated <sup>172</sup> .   | The screenshot was quickly forwarded by one or more of the original recipients on closed-group messaging platforms. | A male Singaporean student below 16 years of age.                         | The motivation behind this falsehood is mischief, and the student said that he had never intended for his message to be so widely disseminated. He produced the falsehood because he was frustrated with the frequent rumours of Mr Lee's demise, and had wanted to demonstrate to   | After completing investigations into the case in consultation with the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC), the Police issued him with a stern warning for his actions <sup>174</sup> . The falsehood also fooled several international media outlets, which erroneously tweeted news of Mr Lee's death and broadcasted reports on their channels. Subsequently, <i>CNN</i> corrected its report and deleted its tweet, and Chinese broadcaster <i>CCTV</i> also deleted an erroneous tweet and issued a clarification on its official Weibo account <sup>175</sup> .  |

<sup>166</sup> Apology: Hoax news on Punggol Waterway roof collapse. (2016, November 11). Retrieved from <https://www.allsingaporestuff.com/article/apology-hoax-news-punggol-waterway-roof-collapse>.

<sup>167</sup> Loh, R. (2016, March 24). Ex-TRS editor jailed for demonising foreigners. *The New Paper*. Retrieved from <http://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/ex-trs-editor-jailed-demonising-foreigners>.

<sup>168</sup> Chelvan, V. P. (2016, March 8). Former TRS editor Ai Takagi pleads guilty to manufacturing articles for profit. *Channel NewsAsia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/former-trs-editor-ai-takagi-pleads-guilty-to-manufacturing-artic-8158490>.

<sup>169</sup> Koh, V. (2015, May 3). Govt orders shutdown of The Real Singapore. *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/mda-suspends-licence-socio-political-website-real-singapore>.

<sup>170</sup> Chong, E. (2016, March 23). Former TRS editor Ai Takagi, who is 8 weeks pregnant, jailed 10 months for sedition. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/former-trs-editor-ai-takagi-who-is-8-weeks-pregnant-jailed-10-months-for>.

<sup>171</sup> Lee, P. (2016, June 28). TRS co-founder Yang Kaiheng jailed 8 months for sedition. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/trs-co-founder-yang-kaiheng-jailed-8-months-for-sedition>.

<sup>172</sup> Lee, M. K. (2015, April 7). Student who posted fake PMO announcement on Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death given stern warning. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/student-who-posted-fake-pmo-announcement-on-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-given-stern-warning>.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Philomin, L. (2015, April 7). Teen avoids charges for faking report of Lee Kuan Yew's death. *TODAYonline*. Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/teen-who-posted-fake-announcement-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-issued-stern-warning>. Italicise publication name?

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|  |  |  |  | his friends how easy it was to perpetuate a hoax <sup>173</sup> . |  |
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<sup>173</sup> Lee, M. K. (2015, April 7). Student who posted fake PMO announcement on Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death given stern warning. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/student-who-posted-fake-pmo-announcement-on-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-given-stern-warning>.