

Written Representation 69

Name: Submission made on behalf of roundtable discussion between Singapore Press Holdings, the National University of Singapore, the Singapore Management University, the Media Literacy Council, Mothership, the Asia Internet Coalition, Twitter, Facebook, Rajah & Tann and others.

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Dear Chairman,

My name is Alan Soon and I am the Founder of Splice Newsroom.

Last Wednesday, I moderated a workshop on Online News Literacy for around 15 participants from the academic and student community, the media and publishing industries and technology companies. Participants include representatives from the Singapore Press Holdings, the National University of Singapore, the Singapore Management University, the Media Literacy Council, Mothership, the Asia Internet Coalition, Twitter, Facebook, Rajah & Tann and others.

The participants shared about their respective research and approaches towards deliberate online falsehoods and misinformation, proposed principles and initiatives to addressing the issue, and critically analysed existing global approaches and their applicability to Singapore. We later discussed the nature and risks of deliberate online falsehoods, and whether existing legislation is sufficient to address these risks. We also examined the role of media literacy and the community in aiding the effort against false news.

We hope that you will find the notes from our workshop helpful in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely,
Alan Soon

Summary

Participants broadly agreed that existing laws are sufficient to deal with deliberate online falsehoods and misinformation, and that there is no need to introduce further legislation. They also agreed that government and the community must do more to enhance digital literacy in Singapore. They acknowledged that there are fault lines in Singaporean society characterised primarily by race, language and religion and that existing laws, alongside media literacy, are critical in addressing these issues. They recognized that National Security concerns underlie the intent to introducing new laws, but warn that these do not impinge on speech and public discourse. Finally, participants warned that if legislation is introduced, there should be clear definitions and limits on its application and enforcement.

Why is the government considering legislation?

- The Singapore Government is concerned about the speed and viral nature of unverified information, and how it may undermine society and exacerbate existing societal fault lines, primarily characterized by race, language and religion.
- The Singapore Government perceives this as a national security issue, and is concerned about the threat of foreign interference in local politics and in particular, Singapore's upcoming general elections in 2 years.
- The Government's intent is to safeguard political stability and its people.

Is further legislation required?

- There are already least 9 laws and one UN regulation on terrorism that can be used to address false news. It is yet unclear why new legislation is required given the extensive and expansive nature of existing legislation.
- Legislation is a blunt tool to use on "false news", given its subjectivity and the difficulty to define "false news".
- Requiring immediate removal of "false news" through legislation potentially deprives government and society of the opportunity to build critical thinking around information.
- We should consider focusing on public policy responses rather than legal responses.
- Should we be delegating authority and responsibility to the government to "make the final call" and determining what is true or false?
- Consider the impact on the journalism community in Singapore. Should journalists be concerned about being targeted for making an error in reporting or creating satire?

What is the role of media literacy?

- Media literacy is critical in the fight against deliberate false news online and misinformation. It should be our first line of defence.
- Equipping Singaporeans with the ability and skill to discern fact from fiction is critical. • Media literacy and critical thinking are key muscles that our society must build to be an informed community and society. Defining what is true

and false for society, rather than nudging or prompting them to arrive at these conclusions themselves, may work on the short term, and address short-term threats. However, we need to play the “long game” and focus on media and critical thinking to ensure that our people are equipped with the right skills in this information age.

- We need to do more to enhance media and digital literacy. We are good at functional literacy, but not so good at critical literacy.
- We might consider:
 - Formalizing a media and digital literacy in schools. Incorporate media and digital literacy into our school curriculum. Allow the practice of a more hands-on and pragmatic approach to learning about media and digital literacy through case studies and questioning of existing assumptions.
 - Rolling out more public service announcements and campaigns to promote media and digital literacy. We could do this in partnership with industry leaders who have product, policy and community engagement expertise.
 - Strengthening the Media Literacy Council, by giving it more resources for public education and research to conduct more effective public education campaigns to help people better distinguish deliberate falsehoods from credible news themselves.

What is the role of the community?

- While participants acknowledged the merits of self-regulation, they also recognized that Singapore needs to re-examine its focus on education, and consider how to create better educated consumers of information who can make discerning choices and support news credibility.
- We also need to find a way to give more credibility to our news organizations and industry. Mainstream media has had questions raised about its credibility.
- The community must consider supporting education initiatives and programs to promote media and digital literacy in the neighbourhoods, schools and community clubs.
- Industry leaders, civic groups and educators can work more closely with policymakers to educate them on developments in and impact of technology on the community, given the dynamic nature of technology and society.

Participants

- Asia Internet Coalition (Jeff Paine)
- BlackDot (Nicholas Fang)
- Facebook (Andy O’Connell, Damian Yeo)
- Google (represented by Abigail Goh, as observer from Vriens & Partners)
- Institute of Policy Studies (Shawn Goh, as observer)
- Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (Dr. Adrian Kuah)
- Media Literacy Council (represented by Prof. Lim Sun Sun & Alvin Tan)
- Mothership (Martino Tan)
- National University of Singapore Law School (Chester Su)
- Rajah & Tan (Rajesh Sreenivasan)

- Singapore Management University (Associate Prof. Eugene Tan, participating in his personal capacity) • Singapore Press Holdings (Jonathan Matthew Roberts)
- Singapore University of Technology and Design (Prof Lim Sun Sun)
- Splice Newsroom (Alan Soon)
- Twitter (Kathleen Reen)