

Written Representation 80

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Received: 28 Feb 2018

Dear Select Committee Members,

WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS – CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES

A. Introduction and Structure of this Feedback

1. My name is Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim. I am a lawyer and a volunteer with charities and community organisations here in Singapore. I am writing this feedback to you in my own personal capacity. The views set out herein are my own and they do not represent the views of the charities or organisations that I am involved with.
2. Admittedly, I am neither a communications nor a technological expert in this area and I believe that there are eminent thought leaders both in the public and private sphere that can shed light on this matter and provide constructive guidelines for the consideration of the Select Committee. However, the deliberations and recommendations by the Select Committee on this important issue will help shape our future and since issues of social cohesion and youth have always been close to my heart, I hereby provide this feedback for your consideration.
3. In doing so, I confirm that I have absolutely no financial or other interest in the subject matter, other than the fact that as a father of three young children, I am concerned about the future of our children's generation in multi-racial Singapore if deliberate falsehoods are easily peddled in our own backyard.
4. My feedback will be structured into three main parts:

- a. my observations on the characterisation of the various kinds of falsehoods, the reasons behind the business of online falsehoods and the trends in relation to Singaporeans' news consumption and sharing;
- b. my thoughts on how the intended approach should be in combating deliberate online falsehoods through leveraging on technology, raising online literacy and possible refinements to our present legislative framework; and
- c. in the context of our multi-religious and multi-racial community, how we should chart our own narrative in combating online falsehoods and at the same time, stem radical, extremist and divisive views within the community. For this part, I will be providing my feedback in the Malay language.

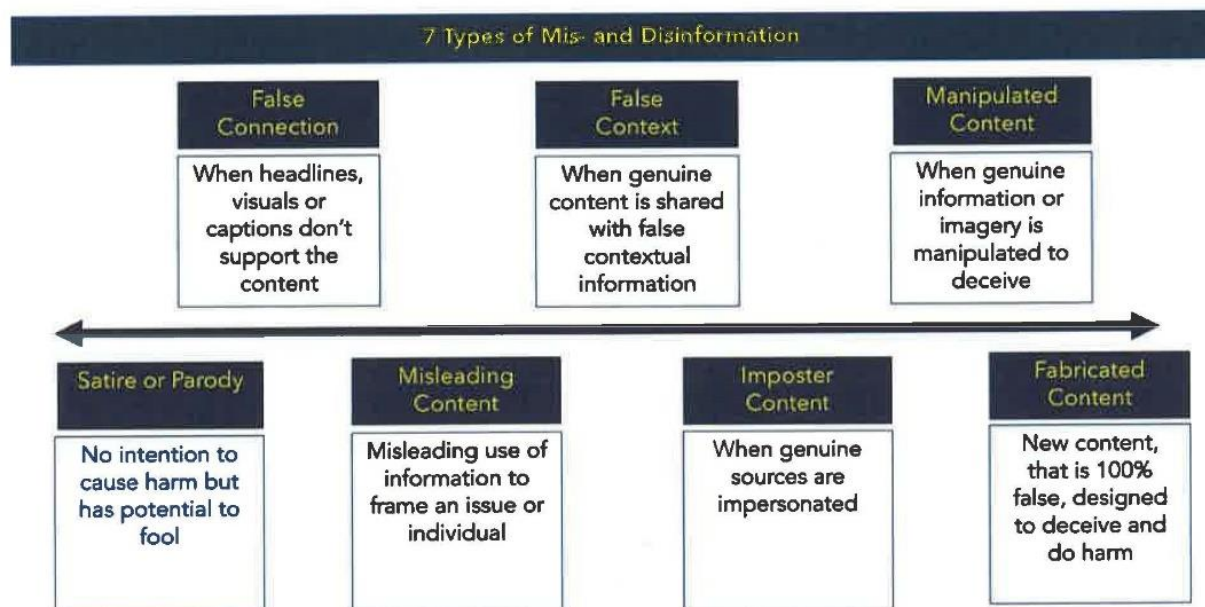
PART ONE – MY OBSERVATIONS

5. In order to formulate the appropriate strategies and approach in combating online falsehoods, we have to consider the following¹:
 - a. the types of content / falsehoods that are being perpetrated;
 - b. the reasons behind the propagation of such falsehoods; and
 - c. the methods of dissemination or distribution of the same.

B. Types of Falsehoods – Disinformation and Misinformation

6. The popular term “fake news” is a mischaracterisation and it fails to convey the subtle nuances of the various degrees of misinformation or disinformation that is out there.
7. I refer to misinformation as the inadvertent sharing of false information. Whilst such actions may be inadvertence or negligence (or even wilful disregard) on the part of the person who shares such information without verification, those same actions may have a devastating impact by leaving an indelible stain on our delicate social fabric. One would usually fault the originator of such misinformation in the first place, but that is not to say that the propagators of the same should be absolved of any responsibility. To borrow a saying from popular culture in the words of Obi-Wan Kenobi “Who’s the more foolish, the fool, or the fool who follows him?”

8. At the more deliberate and sinister end of the spectrum, is disinformation, the wilful creation of falsehoods meant to evoke emotions and provoke reactions in order to advance a certain agenda. Some analysts trace the term disinformation from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, used by Soviet planners in the 1950s for the dissemination of false reports intended to mislead public opinionⁱⁱ. Disinformation is, I think, more difficult to identify and even harder to combat because it may not necessarily be composed of outright lies or fabrications, but it may be cloaked with mostly true facts, “stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message, and is always part of a larger plan or agenda”ⁱⁱⁱ.
9. According to certain observers, there are seven different types of misinformation and disinformation:



(Source: Wardle, Claire. *Fake News. It's Complicated.*)

10. In a workshop conducted by the Yale Law School and the Floyd Abrams Institute for Freedom of Expression (attended by twenty-one diverse participants from academics, technology conglomerates, news organisations, sociologists and news organisations), three corollary harms of “fake news” were noted^v:
- a. The problem of increasing fragmentation and politicization;
 - b. The promotion of “safe news” at the expense of difficult or challenging news stories; and

- c. The need to allocate ever-diminishing resources to debunking accurate information (which poses both financial and reputational costs).
11. The further danger associated with “fake news” is that it “devalues and delegitimizes voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data”^{vi}.
12. It is important to understand the types of online falsehoods into the various categories of misinformation and disinformation because this may be able to guide the Select Committee to propose recommendations on appropriate sanctions or interventions depending on the varying degrees of complicity or liability in a particular situation considered together with the degree of harm being posed, whether actual or potential harm.
13. I now turn to the motivations behind the dissemination of deliberate online falsehoods.

C. The Business of Peddling Falsehoods

14. The approach taken by online sites is to be “first and fast”. However, such first-and-fast approach may ultimately result in false or fake news being spread. The motivation behind publishing online falsehoods is due to the economics of online publishing and publishers sacrificing journalistic and verified content by preferring to low quality content that can be cashed into advertising dollars.
15. I look back on the experience of the founders of the now defunct The Real Singapore website who were charged under the Sedition Act. It was reported that they had raked in almost S\$500,000 in online advertising earnings and that during the final four months before the site closed down, the founders were earning about S\$42,000 each month. At its peak, the site raked in almost S\$55,000 one month. For readers of the site, the lucrative aspect of the business in terms of the advertising dollars is not readily apparent.
16. Although the founders of the site in an interview with Mothership.sg claimed that they had started the website with the intention of bringing more freedom of speech to Singaporeans, one of them admitted that “he really did care about making money, and that it eventually

became a key focus of his — especially with the pressures of affording his university studies, pointing out to us as an aside that his parents told him they were not able to pay for it all for him, despite him being their only child”^{vii}.

17. Another aspect that we should be mindful is the power of lobbyist behind specific agenda (either commercially or politically-driven) that may fund the propagation of disinformation or misinformation online and through social media influencers.
18. We also have to look at how algorithms on social media sites should be geared to misinformation or disinformation. In this regard, I highlight the recent example of David Hogg, the 17-year old who survived the shooting in a high school in Parkland, Florida. Following the tragic event, he was outspoken in his criticism of the lack of gun control regulations and the gun lobbyist in the US. Soon after that interview, conspiracy videos of him appeared on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, claiming that he was a crisis actor, which is not true at all. For a brief period, YouTube awarded the top spot on its Trending section to the conspiracy video. As one observer states^{viii}:

“It takes a special sort of heartlessness to create a conspiracy video about a teenage survivor of one of the deadliest school shootings in US history. But it takes a literally heartless algorithm to ensure that thousands, or even millions, of people see it.”

D. Understanding the Trends of News Consumption in Singapore

19. Singapore has a high internet penetration of 81%. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, in terms of news consumption, a large proportion of Singaporeans obtain their news from online sources (including social media) and Facebook and WhatsApp are the preferred social media and messaging apps^{ix}:

SOURCES OF NEWS

 TV
57%






 Radio
27%

 Print
53%

 Social media
61%

 Online (incl. social media)
85%

TOP SOCIAL MEDIA AND MESSAGING

Rank	Brand	For news	All
 1	Facebook	55%	77%
 2	WhatsApp	38%	80%
 3	YouTube	26%	70%
 4	Instagram	9%	42%
 5	Facebook Messenger	8%	33%

(Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017⁶)

20. Hence, it is more likely that online falsehoods are shared through Facebook and WhatsApp. It is thus important in Singapore's context to see how we can raise awareness and heighten vigilance especially on these popular platforms.

PART TWO – MY THOUGHTS

21. We should have a multi-faceted approach in combating deliberate online falsehoods:
- a. engaging the industry players, tech companies and websites through (i) greater accountability and transparency, (ii) mutual cooperation and (iii) leveraging on new technology;
 - b. refinements to our legislative framework; and
 - c. promoting responsible journalism and platform for alternative viewpoints to be shared in a safe environment and building up our social resilience in terms online literacy and awareness of online falsehoods.

E. Transparency and Accountability

22. It should be made incumbent upon social media and online news websites to be transparent on its funding and/or political affiliations, if any, as this may provide readers with the necessary information to discern the agenda or slant behind their news reporting.

23. In this regard, the United Kingdom which has also formed a Parliamentary Committee to tackle fake news online, will be looking at legislation to regulate online advertisements so as to make it less profitable for such sites to use fake news to attract more hits and therefore advertising income. Perhaps we should be considering a similar approach.
24. In the United States, the Honest Ads Act, which require disclosure of the party funding the advertisement, will cover online advertisements as well by requiring digital companies to take steps to release information on who was targeted by the ads and the buyers of such advertisements.
25. Presently, there is no transparency on the funding / financial backer or the persons behind several online sites whose articles have been shared and disseminated freely on social media sites like Facebook and WhatsApp.
26. To have such transparency, in my view, would not limit any freedom of expression or speech but actually provides a full accountability to the consumers of the product – the news consumer. I draw an analogy to any other consumer goods, where the ingredients and nutritional factsheet are clearly spelt out for discerning consumers to read and make their own informed choice. The same can be done for websites operating with media licenses in Singapore, either by way of disclosure of their annual reports or a searchable database on ACRA on the company and the persons behind the websites.

F. Cooperation of Industry Players

27. As with all things, any changes to the legislative framework or approach, can only be effective, if the relevant industry players play their part as well. Technology companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have all committed to eradicate false information and will be reporting hate speech and flagging disputed information. These are usually found in the terms and conditions of use of the social media platform themselves.
28. Whilst such voluntary commitments are welcomed, it is equally important for such companies to re-consider the role that social media should be playing in our lives which is to foster and maintain good relationships with family and friends. Answering this call, Mr Mark

Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, only recently this year announced that Facebook will be introducing sweeping changes to its newsfeed encompassing photos, videos and articles that are shared amongst its users. Facebook will re-focus its attention to bringing meaningful interactions between families and friends and less of content driven by advertisers and media companies. As such, users will see fewer viral videos and news articles shared by media companies.

29. We should utilise social media to strengthen our ties and not tear us apart. This purpose of social media can also form part of a media literacy campaign amongst Singaporeans.

G. Disrupting the Business of Fake News Through Blockchain

30. Another innovative approach is to use blockchain technology to fight online falsehoods.
31. Userfeeds is a Warsaw-based startup utilising a blockchain-platform approach towards news, aimed to combat so-called “fake news” by providing an economic incentive to rank content well. Maciej Olpinski, the co-founder and chief executive of Userfeeds, said⁴:

“In our view, the only way to fix these problems is to modify incentives that make it economically viable to produce and spread these types of content”.

32. By doing so, it changes the financial motivations behind the publication of news and may be something for the authorities to evaluate its feasibility before considering any application within the local context.
33. Another example is Belgian bank-insurer KBC Group, which was formed as a result of a merger between two Belgian banks (Kredietbank and CERA Bank) and a Belgian insurance company (ABB Insurance). KBC uses blockchain to enable readers to verify the authenticity of a piece of news. Journalists, investors or customers can upload the document to a certain website and if the document does not originate from KBC, or if it is not the most recent version, they will be notified that the document is not authentic.

34. Viviane Huybrecht, General Manager Corporate Communications at KBC Group explained that this blockchain verification tool was developed after she heard about how a fake press release in November 2016 concerning a French building company, Vinci which claimed there had been a massive fraud and that the CFO had resigned leaving a multi-billion-euro deficit. This caused Vinci's shares to dive immediately and by the time Vinci corrected the false press release, their share price had already fallen, wiping billions of euros from the company's market value^{xii}.
35. The risk of such falsehoods being propagated about Singapore's financial standing or any of its statutory boards or government-linked companies would severely affect investor confidence and the consequences may be dire. Perhaps for all Government-linked news through agencies or other statutory boards, Gov.Tech can develop similar authentication mechanism through blockchain and if successful, this can be extended to all official news relating to Government policies or statements.
36. The Factly at the Gov.sg website can be revamped to also include an authentication platform or tool where any news can be verified on the blockchain. If the technology can be made customer-friendly and developed to include fact-checking or verification of Facebook postings, WhatsApp messages, then the public can readily access such information knowing full well that there is a trusted verification or authentication tool to assist them. In Europe, there are already state sanctioned fact-checking websites (e.g. factcheckeu.org for the EU and pagellapolitica.it in Italy).
37. Such a site can also serve as a vital information collation centre and it can possibly prevent a piece of false information from going viral and doing further damage. Additionally, if there is any criminal or penalty provisions for future legislations in relation to the sharing of falsehoods (either misinformation or disinformation), the fact that the person had utilised the verification tool on the website may go some way to show that he had attempted to exercised or discharged some form of responsibility in verifying the information. This may show some mitigating circumstances on his or her part.

H. Responsible Journalism and Informed Citizenry

38. Of note, in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017 is that Singaporeans have clear brand recognitions of the news provider where the conventional media sites like Channel NewsAsia and The Straits Times are known for accurate and reliable news sources but the other sites are mainly known for entertainment. Hence, it is important for the conventional media sites to build on this branding and be the go-to news provider for accurate and reliable news.
39. However, a low percentage (23% and 29%) of the respondents in the Report, believe that the media is free from political and business influence. This may affect top-of-mind awareness for the conventional media sites when it comes to seeking news on alternative viewpoints or complex issues.
40. We cannot exclude viewpoints that we disagree with from society. By shutting out those viewpoints, they will only manifest themselves through other avenues - by emerging in the form of a satirical meme, a misleading photo sent through WhatsApp message or a trolling comment on a Facebook post; and those are just the mildest forms of manifestations.
41. Therefore, there is a need to inculcate a vibrant environment of journalism which provides for alternative views to be aired responsibly and fairly. The founders of The Real Singapore started the site thinking that they can be a platform for such expression of views. Whilst their intention may be genuine at first, the failure to manage and/or exercise appropriate journalistic professional standards, have caused xenophobic sentiments to be propagated from that site and fester into the hearts of some of its readers. As part of the licensing requirements or perhaps as part of a code of governance or best practices, there should be a firm declaration of commitment towards identifying and eradicating online falsehoods by all online news sites or social media platforms.
42. Needless to say, there are always practical difficulties in sieving out such online falsehoods:
 - a. the volume of material is exponentially greater on social media and Facebook or Twitter would grind to a halt if it checked everything before publication;
 - b. material posted can be by proxies, social bots or fake or automated accounts; and
 - c. the material in question may contain disinformation which is not difficult to identify as it is neither clearly 'fake' nor untrue.

43. Ultimately, the task is not to be borne by any single governmental agency or news publications. We need to crowdsource this responsibility. The key would be to empower our fellow Singaporeans to have greater awareness and online media literacy on how to spot such falsehoods. At the same time, we need to provide and identify better and more reliable sources of information that people can trust. We can do this by providing such information in schools and through media campaigns for the masses, in all vernacular languages. The campaigns should also be segmented into age groups and the different social media platforms to ascertain which approach works best.
44. As Mr Charlie Beckett, director of the London School of Economics Truth, Trust and Technology Commission cautioned^{xiii}:

“You can help identify better information and expose false material, but in the end the flows of information on the internet can only be influenced, not controlled.”

I. Social Resilience Through Real Interactions

45. There is a risk that people see more content that reinforces their own thinking if they end up frequently interacting with posts and videos that reflect the similar views of their friends or family; thus creating “echo chambers” which by themselves create divisions of ideologies within a society. The answer to this must lie outside the realm of cyberspace where real interactions, between Singaporeans of different races across all social divide, have to be cherished and nurtured.
46. In this regard, we have seen in the December 2017 IPS Study on Social Capital in Singapore, that suggests a sharp division amongst social class. The study researchers’ call for more policies that encourage greater mixing along class lines to mitigate this trend, cannot come any sooner.
47. Together with greater social integration, we have to build a more resilient society, a society that can pick up and understand what is false - misinformation / disinformation. Apart from legislative changes and support from digital and technology companies, we still need to

increase our media-literacy education and help foster an online culture where truth is valued and protected.

J. Expansion of the Legislative Framework

48. We presently have a Telecommunications Act, where knowingly transmitting a false message could lead to a fine and jail term - and the Protection from Harassment Act and Sedition Act, which already go some way towards curbing online falsehoods. This was seen in a previous case where founders of an online site, The Real Singapore were jailed for a series of seditious articles.
49. The Broadcasting Act also empowers IMDA to demand the “take down” or removal of websites on broad grounds which now may include the dissemination of falsehoods, particularly disinformation. In this regard, I support the calls by our academic on further refinements to the subsidiary legislation of the Broadcasting Act and the internet content regulations^{xiv}. Our own defamatory laws also go some way to tackle any falsehoods that are circulated online. However, there should be more protection for online falsehoods spread locally from foreign entities or sponsors. As such, changes to the legislative framework may seek to supplement the arsenal of protective measures that we already have.
50. In Singapore, we already have legislation that prevents foreign interference in our local politics. The Political Donations Act prevents parties and candidates contesting elections from accepting foreign funding. The Societies Act permits only Singapore citizens to be members of political associations. Such associations must not have any foreign connection contrary to our national interest. The Public Order Act empowers the Police to refuse permits for public assemblies directed towards political ends if they are organised by or involve foreign actors. I thus support the suggestion that it is perhaps timely for such legislation to be extended to the realm of cyberspace.
51. Other countries are also considering changes to their legislative framework to combat online falsehoods. The opponents of such changes point to the curtailment of freedom of speech and expression.

52. In Singapore, we are fortunate to have Courts with a balanced view on this.
53. The Honourable Justice Quentin Loh in the decision of Public Prosecutor v Yue Mun Yew Gary [2013] 1 SLR 39, in holding that an offence under section 267C of the Penal Code cannot be one of a strict liability, weighed the needs for civic discourse and considered the balance between the individual's right to free expression and the public's right to be free from harm, and stated at [38]:

Given the political context of the present case, I have been particularly mindful of the need to give sufficient weight to the value of free expression. A free and open discourse is indispensable to the proper functioning of any democracy, and provisions like s 267C may potentially have an adverse chilling effect on this vital civic conversation. That is not what s 267C was meant to achieve. Hence in my judgment s 267C cannot be a strict liability offence. The Prosecution must prove the *mens rea* beyond a reasonable doubt. Having said that however, **free expression cannot be so unfettered as to allow individuals at the fringes of society to cause harm under the guise of expression.** While the personal and public benefits of free expression would sufficiently recompense for inevitable encounters with the rude, the obstinate, the obtuse and even the offensive, it is no part of the constitutional bargain that citizens must bear violence or disobedience to law and order – or the threat thereof – as the price of free expression. **Those who incite violence and disorder do not contribute to the national conversation** – indeed, the effect of such provocation is to subvert the free exchange of ideas and to replace reason with violence. That has no place in a democratic society based on the rule of law. As such, the balance between the individual's right to free expression and the public's right to be free from harm must tilt towards the latter. It is also imperative that the courts who have discretion over sentencing exercise their power for the protection of the public and society as a whole”.

(Emphasis added)

54. In that case, on National Day, 9 August 2010, at 2.57pm, the Respondent posted a comment on the “Wall” of Temasek Review’s Facebook page with a link to an assassination video and he made some remarks to copy the same actions here.

55. I agree with the approach by the Courts towards the balancing of individual's rights and the public's collective interest. To protect the individual's rights, the prosecution has the burden of proving the mens rea beyond a reasonable doubt. An individual should not be afraid to express his right to expression and speech if his/her contribution adds to the national conversation and is beneficial or constructive. If the content of the communication is non-violent, non-seditious and non-racist, then there is nothing to fear as there will be scope for civic discourse in a responsible and fair manner.
56. For any legislation relating to the dissemination of misinformation or disinformation online, the scope should not just be in relation to the intention to incite violence per se, but also to cause hatred or incite seditious sentiments. The offences cannot be of strict liability as that would stifle freedom of expression and may have the unintended effect of causing the negligent to be guilty as well. However, if such negligence borders on the gross negligence or wilful disregard, then this is a situation which should attract some form of liability or responsibility on the part of the perpetrator. Generally, it should be targeted at the perpetrators of the disinformation (the more severe type of falsehoods).
57. Imposing such laws is not unconstitutional and does not bar the individual's right to freedom of speech and expression. In fact, under Article 14 (1) (a) the Constitution, every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression. At the same time, this is not an absolute or unfettered right. Under Article 14 (2) (a) of the Constitution, Parliament may by law impose on the rights conferred by Article 14 clause (1) (a), "such restrictions as it considers necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or to provide against contempt of court, defamation or incitement to any offence".
58. Our delicate multi-racial and multi-religious society, means that we have to keep on working and be vigilant to preserve the harmony amongst all races and religions in Singapore. Thus, we have to look into laws that will deter such peddlers of deliberate online falsehoods from disrupting such harmony.

59. I stand with the majority of Singaporeans who believe we have to take a tough stance on removal of deliberate falsehoods. A government survey in 2017 concluded that over 90% of Singaporeans are supportive of stronger laws to ensure the removal and correction of fake news. Just as much as we have zero tolerance on drug abuse, we should adopt the same zero tolerance for any hate speech, anti-racial or religious actions on the online sphere. Parties (whether individuals or corporate bodies) who either know or ought to have known (on an objective basis) that the distribution of any misinformation or disinformation could lead to the incitement of violence, hate, seditious sentiments, should be penalised. The aggravating factor could be the use of disinformation to propagate a certain agenda.
60. In *Public Prosecutor v Tang Koon Huat* [2017] SGDC 221, a case which concerned a retired polytechnic lecturer, who created a Facebook page to incite violence against Caucasians, District Judge Matthew Joseph held at [28] the following:

“A moment on Internet, is forever on Facebook. In a multi-racial and multi-cultural society like Singapore where peace and harmony among our people and mutual respect and tolerance can never be taken for granted and also in a rapidly changing world where values are constantly being challenged, the price to be paid is incalculable for our tiny nation of Singapore, if the courts do not impose deterrent sentences to rein in irresponsible and extreme online postings. The courts will also not shy away from imposing appropriate sentences that must reflect the public interest.”

61. Underscoring the need for online literacy and responsibility amongst our citizens, as stated above, the Court’s further remark at [31] is relevant:

“It would be remiss on my part if I did not mention as a poignant observation, that this case has a disappointing ring to it. At the same time, it also points to the lurking danger that the Internet can be, if one is careless or impudent or lacking in self-control. Parents, young people and even working adults should reflect deeply on the wider implications of this case. The accused was a Polytechnic lecturer at the material time. He had also received awards for his commitment to teaching. At the age of almost 62 years and being an educator with over 30 years of teaching experience, one would have expected him to “know better.” He did not know better. He taught

many, yet he did not teach himself the perils of posting extreme content on the Internet. Either the accused was consumed with rage, or he was callous or he just did not care for the consequences of his actions. That was his sad downfall. While the accused had the freedom of choice and expression, he did not have the freedom to choose the consequences of his actions or the outcome. This is a subtle distinction that many fail to appreciate and find out only when it is too late. As has been said, to have a right to do a thing, is not at all the same as to be right in doing it”.

(Emphasis added)

62. Any legislation to tackle such actions inciting violence or hatred, causing racial or religious unrest or seditious sentiments, through the usage of online falsehoods should not just look at the actions themselves but the consequences and ramifications of such actions (whether intended or not) and we should send a strong signal that such actions shall not be tolerated and be dealt with seriously.
63. This is particularly important in maintaining and preserving our racial and religious harmony in Singapore.
64. On the financial aspect, investor relations and confidence issue, we should also look at revising the relevant legislation to encompass offences caused by deliberate online falsehoods that may lead to severe financial or reputational harm to Singapore or any of our key institutions, even though such falsehoods do not incite violence or hatred, cause racial or religious unrest or seditious sentiments. A stiff penalty on the responsible corporate officers or fine or financial compensation by the corporate entity, should be a deterrent factor.

PART THREE – OUR COMMUNITY

K. Berita Palsu dalam Masyarakat Berbilang Kaum Singapura

65. Singapura telah lama membina sebuah masyarakat berbilang kaum dan agama yang harmoni, dan sudah menjadi tanggungjawab kita untuk bekerjasama dalam memelihara cara kehidupan kita bagi generasi yang akan datang.

66. Walaupun kita mengalu-alukan rakyat yang mempunyai kepelbagaian dalam pemikiran, berbeza dalam pendapat atau kecenderungan politik, namun teras dan nilai-nilai bersama kita sebagai sebuah masyarakat berbilang kaum tidak boleh dikompromi.
67. Justeru kita tidak boleh membiarkan tindakan yang boleh memecah-belahkan masyarakat kita yang boleh tercetus daripada berita palsu online ataupun khabar angin yang sengaja diwawarkan untuk mencapai sesuatu agenda. Ucapan online yang berbau perkauman dan benci tiada tempatnya di Singapura dan saya menyokong sebarang pindaan yang boleh melindungi keharmonian kaum kita.
68. Dalam pada masa yang sama, tidak salah untuk bertukar pendapat dan bersuara bagi membuat perubahan yang positif di dalam masyarakat. Tetapi ucapan yang tidak beralas sama padahnya dengan ucapan yang tiada berbatas.
69. Jadi apabila menegur atau bersuara, kita
 harus dengan berbudi bahasa,
 harus tetap berhemah dan
 harus terus berhormat.

L. Menggunakan Blockchain untuk Mengesahkan Ajaran Islam Yang Sah

70. Pengesahan penting bagi kita masyarakat Islam Singapura kerana selain daripada berita palsu, kita mungkin terdedah pada informasi atau ajaran agama yang berlandaskan konteks dari negara luar (yang mungkin tidak sepadan dengan konteks kita di Singapura). Informasi itu juga mungkin diterima daripada pihak-pihak yang tidak bertauliah dan tidak diiktiraf, atau daripada negara asing atau asalnya mungkin kurang pasti.
71. Seringkali kita menerima maklumat, video, gambar atau mesej melalui media sosial seperti WhatsApp dan Facebook, tentang sesuatu perkara umpamanya hadith atau keadaan umat Islam di serata dunia. Jika kita tidak meneliti kesahihan maklumat atau konteks di mana informasi atau dari mana asalnya informasi tersebut, ada risiko yang maklumat itu mungkin tidak sesuai dalam konteks pengajaran agama kita di Singapura. Ini boleh memecah belahkan masyarakat Islam sendiri dan mengakibatkan pendirian dan pemahaman yang lebih radikal dan tidak sesuai dengan kehidupan kita sebagai masyarakat berbilang kaum.

72. Oleh itu, seperti yang disarankan di atas, pihak MUIS mungkin boleh menimbang kemungkinan untuk menggunakan teknologi blockchain bagi orang ramai mengesahkan sebarang dokumen yang dicetak oleh MUIS. Pejabat MUIS juga boleh membina sesuatu wadah yang “mesra ummah” untuk menjadikan informasi sah supaya lebih “accessible” bagi sesiapa pun dan menggunakan social bots untuk menerima dan menjawab soalan agama yang boleh diajukan oleh masyarakat. Dalam pada masa yang sama, khidmat seperti berikut boleh dapat meleraikan kemusykilan agama pada sesuatu isu dengan secepat mungkin; “sebelum nasi menjadi bubur”. Dengan adanya wadah tersebut, kita juga boleh mengekang pemahaman radikal daripada menular dalam masyarakat Islam kita.

M. Mengesahkan Berita Dalam Islam

73. Sememangnya sebagai seorang Muslim kita harus ada sifat mengesahkan sesuatu berita dan tidak menularkan fitnah. Di dalam Al-Quran [Surah Al-Hujarat ayat 6] “Wahai orang-orang yang beriman! Jika datang kepada kamu orang yang fasiq dengan sesuatu berita, maka selidiklah kebenarannya. Supaya kamu tidak menimpakan sesuatu kaum dengan perkara yang tidak diingini dengan sebab kejahilan kamu (tentangnya) sehingga kamu menjadi orang-orang yang menyesal terhadap apa yang kamu lakukan”.

74. MUIS dalam suatu khutbah Jumaat juga menyatakan: “Pada zaman teknologi yang mana informasi bergerak bebas dengan kurang kawalan. Setiap apa yang kita ucapkan dan catat di dalam laman sosial dan sebagainya, dengan mudah dapat dibaca oleh ribuan insan lain. Bahkan, ia boleh disebarkan dengan cepat, dan dapat diketahui mereka yang tidak pernah kita kenali. Keadaan seperti ini membuatkan apa yang diperintahkan oleh Allah s.w.t. di dalam surah al-Hujuraat tadi menjadi satu perkara yang lebih kritikal pada hari ini, serta perlu diperhatikan dan diteliti”.^{xv}

75. Fitnah bukan sahaja dalam menyebarkan sesuatu berita tetapi juga dalam menokok-tambah dan mengapi-apikan keadaan. Saya ingin menyarankan bahawa kita harus memupuk dalam masyarakat Islam kita supaya ada sifat yang bersangka baik dan rajin mengesahkan berita dahulu sebelum “terjun botol”. Pendekatan ini boleh dilakukan melalui suatu media kempen atau pendidikan melalui syarahan-syarahan agama atau kelas-kelas madrasah tetap mahupun madrasah mingguan. Ia boleh diadakan seperti kempen dadah itu haram, atau gaya hidup yang sihat – yang kesemuanya mencerminkan nilai-nilai jati diri seorang Muslim. Mungkin

dengan penekanan agama dalam isu ini, ia boleh membantu mengekang penularan berita-berita palsu yang boleh membawa padah pada negara, masyarakat dan agama kita.

76. Sebagai contoh, pada akhir Februari 2018, menular sebuah artikel online di mana sebuah masjid telah dilaporkan mengadakan upacara menyambut Hari Tahun Baru Cina dan dilaporkan sebuah acara tarian dan nyanyian telah diadakan. Terdapat pelbagai artikel online yang telah dikeluarkan oleh sebuah website yang cuba mengetengahkan isu ini. Berdasarkan laporan media tersebut, ini mencetuskan pelbagai reaksi negatif online yang berpendapat bahawa acara tarian tidak sesuai diadakan di masjid. Ramai yang tanpa mengesahkan duduk perkara telah membuat pelbagai komen dan spekulasi di ruang Facebook. Ini tidak membantu dan boleh mengapi-apikan lagi keadaan. Ia juga mungkin boleh dipandang serong oleh sesetengah orang masyarakat lain yang mungkin kurang faham akan isu tersebut dan sensitiviti masyarakat kita dalam keadaan ini. Setelah beberapa hari kemudian, pihak-pihak berkuasa termasuk lembaga pentadbiran masjid tersebut telah mengeluarkan kenyataan untuk meminta maaf dan menenteramkan keadaan.
77. Oleh kerana isu-isu seperti ini boleh membabitkan agama atau kaum, kita harus waspada supaya tidak ada mana-mana pihak yang boleh cuba mengambil kesempatan untuk melagakan masyarakat kita seperti batu api. Seberapa banyak pun sumber tenaga dan kewangan yang kita gunakan untuk melakarkan pindaan perundangan dan pendekatan untuk mencari cara penyelesaian dalam hal ini, kita hanya mampu untuk berpaut pada tenaga dan kerjasama masyarakat bersama.
78. Kesimpulannya, seperti apa yang saya pernah nyatakan dalam sesuatu artikel online^{xvi}:

“Kuncinya adalah untuk membina sebuah masyarakat yang bukan sahaja berdaya tahan sosial tetapi memupuk budaya online di mana kebenaran dan kepercayaan dijaga rapi. Di mana kaca tidak akan dikelirukan dengan permata. Di mana kebenaran ditegakkan dan kemungkarannya dan kebatilan dihapuskan. Di mana kepalsuan tidak akan mudah dipercayai seperti bau busuk tidak berbangkai.”

N. Conclusion

79. Across the world, there is an increase in exclusivist teachings, religious radicalism and racist and xenophobic sentiments purportedly committed in the name of religion and nationalistic fervour. I fear that this creates an environment which is conducive for the divisive. We all must do our part and stop anyone from using deliberate online falsehoods from within or abroad to disrupt our social fabric and multi-racial harmony.
80. In the midst of nationalist sentiments and extremist teachings growing abroad that seek to exploit differences and cause rifts between groups of society, it is heartening to know that this issue is commonly shared as a priority across the political divide in Singapore. It is an opportune time for Singapore to re-assess whether our present legislative framework is resilient enough to protect us from the adverse impacts brought by the distribution of disinformation and misinformation, especially in the context of our multi-racial and religious society.
81. I thank you all once again for this opportunity to provide my feedback.

Dated this 28th February 2018

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(English Translation of paragraphs 65 to 78)

K. Falsehoods within a Multi-Racial Society in Singapore

65. Singapore built a harmonious multi-racial and multi-religious society since long ago, and it has become our responsibility to work together to preserve our way of life for the next generation.
66. While we welcome Singaporeans who think differently or have different opinions or political leanings, our fundamentals and shared values as a multi-racial society, however, cannot be compromised.
67. Therefore, we must not allow actions that can divide our society, which can arise from online falsehoods or rumours spread on purpose to achieve a particular agenda. Racist speeches or hate speeches found online have no place in Singapore and I support any amendments that can protect our racial harmony.
68. At the same time, it is not wrong to exchange views and speak out in order to bring about positive change in society. However, insensitive speeches have the same negative consequences as unfettered speeches.
69. Hence, when we criticize or say something, we

should be courteous,
should remain civil and
should be respectful.

L. Using Blockchain to Verify Correct Islamic Teachings

70. Verification is important for our Muslim community in Singapore because, apart from falsehoods, we may be exposed to information or religious teachings that are based on the context of foreign countries (which may be unsuitable to our context in Singapore). Such information may also come from those who are neither certified nor accredited, or from foreign countries or from unsubstantiated sources.
71. We often receive information, videos, photos or messages via social media like Whatsapp or Facebook, about certain matters like the *hadith* (the collection of sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad) or the situation of the Muslim community around the world. If we do not check the authenticity of the information, or the context of the information or the source of that information, there is a risk that the information may not be suitable to the context of our religious teachings in Singapore. This can divide the Muslim community itself and result in a radical viewpoint and understanding that is incompatible with life in our multi-racial society.
72. Therefore, as suggested above, perhaps MUIS can consider the possibility of using blockchain technology to help the public verify that a document is printed by MUIS.

MUIS can also build a platform that is *ummah-friendly* (Muslim community-friendly) to make genuine information more accessible to everyone, and use social bots to receive and answer religious questions posed by the community. At the same time, such services can help resolve any religious queries on a particular issue expeditiously; before it's too late. With this platform, we can also prevent radical beliefs from spreading in our Muslim community.

M. Verifying News in Islam

73. As Muslims, we should have the habit of verifying any news and not spread lies. The Al-Quran [*Surah Al-Hujuraat* Chapter 49 verse 6] states that "O you who believe! If a troublemaker brings to you any news, do investigate whether it is true. Lest you harm people due to your ignorance (about it) and subsequently regret what you have done."
74. During a Friday prayer sermon, MUIS also states that: "In today's technological world where information spreads like wildfire, everything that we say or post on social media sites and so on, can easily be read by thousands of people. In fact, it can spread quickly, and even those who do not know us personally can come to find out about it. Such situations make Allah's decree in *Surah al-Hujuraat* earlier to be extremely critical in the present, and it is something that we have to pay close attention to and study."
75. Misinformation is not just about spreading news but also the act of exaggerating and inflaming a situation. I suggest that we encourage our Muslim community to think good of others and always verify any news first before making hasty decisions. This can be done through a media campaign or education efforts via religious lectures or during classes at the full time madrasahs or weekend madrasahs. It can be done in a similar way to the anti-drug or healthy lifestyle campaigns – campaigns that reflect the values of a Muslim. This emphasis on religion in this issue will perhaps help prevent the spread of falsehoods that can harm our country, community and religion.
76. For example, at the end of February 2018, an article spread online stated that a mosque was reported to have organized an event to celebrate Chinese New Year, and it was reported that there was dancing and singing. Several online articles were published by a website that tried to highlight this issue. Based on media reports, this caused many negative reactions online that felt that it was inappropriate to have dancing activities at the mosque. Many people who did not verify the situation made various comments and speculations in Facebook. This did not help the situation and could have made it worse. This may also be viewed negatively by some people from other communities, who many not fully understand the issue and our community's sensitivities about this situation. A few days later, the authorities including the mosque's management board issued a statement to apologize and to calm the situation.
77. Since these issues can involve religion or race, we must be careful so that no group can exploit any opportunity to incite our community to fight each other. No matter

how much energy or funds we use to amend the law or seek solutions to resolve this issue, we can only depend on the strength and cooperation of the community.

78. In conclusion, as I have stated previously in an online article:

“The key is to build a society that is not only socially resilient, but also inculcate an online culture where truth and trust is closely guarded. Where glass is not mistaken for diamonds. Where truth is championed while shenanigans and lies are eradicated. Where falsehoods are not easily believed just like a foul odour without a carcass.”