

Written Submission in response to the Public Consultations by the Committee Studying Deliberate Online Falsehoods

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We are willing to appear before the Select Committee to give evidence if so required.

1. About the Internet Society Singapore Chapter (ISOC.SG)

The Singapore Chapter of the Internet Society (ISOC SG) is the Singapore arm of the Internet Society, a global cause-driven organization dedicated to ensuring that the Internet stays open, transparent and defined by stakeholders.

Some of the activities conducted by the ISOC SG include:

- o Organizing events and opportunities that bring people together to share insights and opinions
- o Providing reliable information and educational opportunities that include training workshops
- o Engaging policy, governance, technology, and development issues

2. ISOC SG's public Forum on Falsehoods: Fighting Disinformation on the Open Internet

ISOC SG in partnership with NTUC organized an information and discussion session entitled The Forum on Falsehoods Fighting Disinformation on the Open Internet (the Forum) on 23 February 2018 for stakeholders including business owners, journalists, PMETs, academics as well as students. The purpose of the forum was for experts to share their views on how deliberate online falsehoods can be determined, analyse the current laws regulating them, and how they affect organizations.

The Forum also served as a platform for participants to state their views on this public consultation to ISOC SG. These views have been consolidated and summarised for the Committee's consideration along with ISOC's own views in response to the on-going public consultation.

3. Results of Empirical Research

3.1 Prof Ang Peng Hwa

Prof Ang Peng Hwa (NTU) presented the results of field research that he conducted in Kashmir in [2017]

1. Older folk tend to trust printed news from traditional media sources such as newspapers, magazines more than what they read on non-traditional/alternative news sources such as online websites, blogs by users and news posts on social media platforms
2. Blocking of access to media is the most common reaction whenever authorities encounter fake news, often for several weeks.

3. Block of access to media leads to anxiety amongst the public.
4. When media is blocked, the public has no way to verify whether news is fake or not.

3.2 Asst Prof Edson Tandoc

Asst Prof Edson Tandoc (NTU) presented findings from research carried out in Singapore on factors which make people vulnerable to the harmful effects of Fake News:

1. In Singapore, the nature of Fake news most prevalent and perhaps most important to Singaporean based audience is news about Malaysia and business related fake news.
2. Concerns about Fake News are quite high in Singapore.
3. The source of news is an important factor mediating the extent to which information is believed by consumers.
4. The context mediates to a large extent the potency of Fake News. During periods of instability, when the demand for information is high and supply is low, people are vulnerable to believe without critically checking whatever information is available to us.
5. When the public is motivated to process information, because they feel it affects them in an important way, they become critical of what they read and are less vulnerable to fake news.

4. Summary of Concerns Raised

4.1 Concerns about definition

Defining 'Fake News' is contentious. Different actors define it according to what suits their vested interests. For instance, opinion pieces in the newspapers are often claimed to be fake news those who are adversely impacted by such opinions as 'fake news' as they are not facts, but viewpoints. Political satire, fabricated stories, opinions have been considered as Fake News since the time this term was first used in an academic article in 2003. While there is no agreed upon definition, there is broad consensus that Fake News is information couched as facts, intended to deceive those who consume it.

4.2 Concerns about legislation

Participants at the Forum, which included several journalists and former journalists, agreed that any regulations concerning online falsehoods should be couched in specific and narrow terms, as opposed to broad, catch-all terms. ISOC SG supports this view too.

There is a high level of interest and anxiety amongst Singapore's population with respect to Fake News.

5. Recommendations

Any laws and/or policy must give due consideration to the form and substance of news which ought to be regulated with news that is intended to deceive those who consume it as being the subject of regulation.

Knowledge and understanding of how factors influencing how fake news is consumed must influence designing and implementing the regulatory response.

Regulations concerning online falsehoods should be couched in specific and narrow terms, as opposed to broad, catch-all terms.

Deliberate online falsehoods are best addressed by making available vast amounts of accurate information, as opposed to controlling information, or even blocking communication, as this is futile and counter-productive.

President and Vice-President
For the Executive Committee
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