

Commentary: Go beyond addressing deliberate online falsehoods to encourage a thinking society

The Select Committee on deliberate online falsehoods began its hearings on Wednesday (Mar 14). Channel NewsAsia's Bharati Jagdish discusses how we as consumers of information can elevate our understanding of information to become a thinking society.

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When you saw the post on social media a few years ago alleging that a local supermarket was selling "halal" pork, what did you do?

Some instinctively shared it. Others might have taken a minute to consider its veracity and decided against it.

Perhaps it's time we are all encouraged to do so.

These days it's becoming harder to tell what's real and what isn't.

Sophisticated machinery, bots and fake accounts converge to create manufactured information that often seems legitimate.

Many examples of deliberate online falsehoods have been cited in the last few months as Parliament debated the issue and a Select Committee was formed to examine it. Public hearings on the issue began on Wednesday (Mar 14).

In their Green Paper, the Ministry of Communications and Information and Ministry of Law gave several examples of falsehoods that have been deliberately spread online, "to attack public institutions and individuals".

"The aim is to sow discord amongst racial and religious communities, exploit fault-lines, undermine public institutions, interfere in elections as well as other democratic processes, and weaken countries," it said.

One overseas example was a rumour that former US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her chief of staff were running a paedophile ring out of a pizza restaurant in Washington DC. The rumour had gone viral, and led to threats and demonstrations against the restaurant and its owners.

In Italy, a 2016 referendum on proposals to significantly overhaul its constitution is said to have attracted falsehoods spread by foreign state-linked media, as well as domestic parties opposed to the proposals.

Online news sites linked to one of the Italian parties are said to have inundated the lead-up to the referendum with falsehoods, and sought to undermine proposed reforms and discredit then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

Researcher Dr Mathew Mathews in his oral and written representations to the Select Committee on the first day of public hearings on deliberate online falsehoods pointed out how deliberate online falsehoods by elements seeking to exploit existing divisions within our society for their own ends, could harm social cohesion.

He cited a local example of how website The Real Singapore had spread a story about a Filipino family complaining about Singaporeans who played music loudly during the Thaipusam religious festival.

Dr Michael Raska of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore pointed out that the use of disinformation campaigns aimed at political, racial and religious fracture points can offset an attacker's military inferiority adding that the use of social media has become as vital as conventional military warfare.

Clearly, disinformation can have a significant impact.

This is why in the coming months, as policies, laws and regulations are shaped, it isn't just the Government that needs to be working on the issue.

Developing a healthy skepticism

Each of us, as consumers of information, needs to be sensitised to such deliberate falsehoods.

According to the Ministry of Education, information literacy, which helps students discern the authenticity of digital information, is "infused into a variety of academic subjects" like English, History and Social Studies. It is also taught in the cyber-wellness syllabus for primary and secondary schools, as part of the Character and Citizenship Education curriculum.

Similar efforts are gaining momentum in other countries too.

Hopefully, this will lead to students being equipped with the critical thinking and analytical skills that will lead them to have a healthy scepticism of information they are exposed to.

It may get harder to tell truth from fiction as falsehoods also cover doppelganger news websites such as fake CNN news pages. This requires even more discernment.

To check veracity, experts have recommended reviewing multiple sources, using Google's reverse image search to check whether photos are legitimate and among other things, looking up domain records to see if a news outlet is unfamiliar.

Checking the elements within a story such as whether the sources are named, who they are, whether opposing opinions are provided, whether the story is too good to be true or too ridiculous to believe have been suggested too.

Clear definitions – for all of us

While we exercise a healthy scepticism, we need to have clarity on what encompasses deliberate online falsehoods.

The term that has been most commonly bandied about lately - "fake news" - seems to cover everything from disagreements with the media, differences of opinion, mistakes, rumour, conspiracy theories, hoaxes and propaganda.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Carol Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh, in their written representation to the Select Committee, noted that the "overly broad use" of the term fake news is "problematic on many fronts." They added, "as such, the

select committee's focus on deliberate online falsehoods (instead of just fake news) is a commendable move."

They pointed to news that is "deliberately fabricated with the intent to deceive, motivated by economic gains or political influence and assumes the disguise or trappings of an authoritative news source".

Some netizens have questioned whether efforts to clamp down on deliberate online falsehoods are the Government's way of silencing dissent. Will this mean that the only thing that will win in this information war is "government propaganda"?

The authorities seem to be aware of these concerns, which is why policies and legislation are likely to be defined clearly to prevent abuse.

Considering that any type of deliberate falsehood can cause anxiety and has the potential to destroy societies, people on the ground need to understand these definitions too in order to be able to call out deliberate online falsehoods appropriately.

Beyond true or false

Laws and regulations can reduce the clutter and protect a society, but ultimately the onus is on thinking individuals to be able to evaluate the remaining information onslaught that could persist in spite of measures taken by the authorities.

This is an opportunity to also equip ourselves with tools to better analyse and develop the ability to form informed opinions about information in general, beyond true or false.

For instance, we need to acknowledge that fact is different from opinion.

If an expressed opinion doesn't sit well with you, launching a vituperative attack by calling it a falsehood or "fake news" is certainly not warranted.

Information is far from binary, that is, real or fake.

That's just the first layer.

Aside from authenticity, information analysis encompasses context, bias, viewpoints, agendas – both the information providers' and our own.

We may all be presented with the same set of information but how each of us processes it or comes to conclusions about it could differ greatly.

The goal is not for all of us to come to the same conclusions. Rather, it is for each of us to come to informed conclusions bearing in mind the various layers.

Multiplicity of sources

Any media literacy programme can only give us the tools to do this for ourselves. A didactic or protectionist approach, regardless of who initiates it, will not work to create a thinking audience – which should be our goal.

I have friends who declare that they've stopped consuming mainstream media because it is nothing but government propaganda. These are individuals who are also harsh critics of government policy.

There's nothing wrong with being critical, but in order to criticise something intelligently, surely you need to know what it is exactly you're criticising. Some of their criticism is based on inaccurate information or perceptions of policies.

That's where it gets dangerous – forming opinions without knowing the facts or possibly based on misinformation from unreliable sources.

By no means does being vigilant against sources of deliberate online falsehoods mean only trusting one or two information sources.

Today, information sources have become more diverse. Some experts say more credible alternative news sources should be encouraged in any society in order to create a culture of debate and for consumers of information, a culture of informed analysis and discussion.

But instead of availing ourselves of multiple sources, many end up living in their own echo chambers, exercising our own confirmation bias.

While the multiplicity of sources can serve to confound, if reliable, it can also serve to inform and encourage plurality of opinions, helping people gain access to not just knowledge but a sense-making of knowledge.

Question everything

As far as possible, we need to take advantage of the situation to help ourselves and future generations develop such skills. Don't just read what social media platform algorithms curate for you.

The key is to adopt a critical stance when evaluating any argument and question everything whether it feeds our own worldview or not.

Technology has also empowered individuals to create information for audiences. This is why these efforts should go further to inform not just consumption, but creation as well.

Participating in open discussions of current issues, not just in school but encouraging it at home could help us develop the sensibilities required to do this in an intelligent and balanced manner.

It's a start to learning how to process diverse information sources and how to form our own information-gathering and opinion-formation skills.

Here is an opportunity for all of us, while working to address the weaponisation of information through deliberate online falsehoods, to make information a source of power to create a thinking society that enriches public discourse and in turn, the way we live, not just online, but offline as well.