FAQ: What are organised misinformation campaigns, and why should Singaporeans care?

Kevin Kwang
Channel NewsAsia, 5 January 2018

The Ministry of Law on Friday (Jan 5) announced it would be asking the Parliament to appoint a Select Committee to study the problem of deliberate online falsehoods and recommend how it should respond – both in guiding principles and actual measures.

Law Minister K Shanmugam, in a notice to move the motion in Parliament when it sits on Jan 10, said the committee shall comprise Deputy Speaker of Parliament Charles Chong as chairman, seven members from the ruling party, one from the Opposition and one nominated member, to be decided by the Committee of Selection.

This is a first step towards finding tools to tackle organised disinformation campaigns, as seen employed in the United States, France and Sweden, among others highlighted by the Green Paper titled “Deliberate Falsehoods: Challenges and Implications” that was issued by the Law Ministry and Ministry of Communications and Information on Friday.

But is Singapore a victim of such campaigns? Why should Singaporeans care about this issue, if the country has other laws such as the Computer Misuse and Cybersecurity Act (CMCA) in place?

We shed light on some of the more commonly asked questions:

Q: What are organised disinformation campaigns?

A: These campaigns typically make use of technology to spread falsehoods online and attack public institutions and individuals, according to the Government’s Green Paper. The aim, it said, is to “sow discord among racial and religious communities, exploit fault lines, undermine public institutions, interfere in elections as well as other democratic processes and weaken countries”.

That said, Mr Benjamin Ang, a Senior Fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies’ Centre of Excellence for National Security, called on the Select Committee to refine the definition because there are “many different shades of deliberate online falsehoods” and each requires a tailored response.

“Otherwise, there is a risk of unintended consequences because heavy responses can actually strengthen conspiracy theories,” he told Channel NewsAsia in an email.

Senior research fellow at NUS' Institute of Policy Studies Carol Soon reiterated this point, saying that deliberate online falsehoods occupy a wide spectrum, and come in different forms and types. "We would want to differentiate those that are deliberate from those that are not," she said.

Q: What are some real-life examples of these campaigns?

A: The most obvious and reported on example is that of the 2016 US Presidential Election. The Green Paper cited a Wired report from February last year detailing the operations of how teens in a small Macedonian town helped spread a number of false stories with sensational headlines aimed at earning money through online views.

They found that groups supporting President Donald Trump had “hundreds of thousands more members” than those supporting his political rival Hillary Clinton, so it made more financial sense to cater their stories to the former.

“There is no agreement yet amongst the US Congress or experts on the impact of these falsehoods on the (2016) election,” the Green Paper stated. “It is however clear that they caused divisions and anger among Americans, fomented anger against and distrust in the American electoral system and fed outrage.”

Another example is in Indonesia.

The paper cited the 2017 gubernatorial election that saw “provocative content and hate speech” spread to incite tensions along racial and religious lines, and subsequent news reports revealed how a “fake news factory” was involved in the protests against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or Ahok. An online syndicate known as Saracen was said to have charged tens of millions of rupiah to publish and spread fake news and hate speech against a person or people, the Indonesian police said then.

Q: Are there any examples in Singapore itself?

A: The now-defunct online news website The Real Singapore (TRS) was held up as a cautionary tale in the Green Paper, which noted how the Internet has provided a new way for those who wish to spread falsehoods to “do so with greater ease and reach than before”.

The former editor and owner of TRS, Ai Takagi and Yang Kaiheng, both plead guilty to sedition charges in 2016, after publishing articles aimed at fanning anti-foreigner sentiments among Singaporeans. They were sentenced to 10 months’ and eight months’ jail, respectively.

Q: Why should Singaporeans care?

A: There are three reasons why Singapore is both an attractive target and highly susceptible to the spread of online falsehoods:

It is one of the most open and globally connected countries in the world, and most Singaporeans can read and access materials in English. They are also well connected to the rest of the world, with the majority of Singaporeans (53 per cent, specifically), getting their main source of news online including through social media. It is also a multi-lingual society and therefore “open to messages targeted at particular segments of society, by using specific languages and channels”.

It is vulnerable as it is multiracial and one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world.

It is an attractive target to attack as it is a “key strategic node for international finance, trade, travel and communications and a key player in ASEAN”, and what it says and what positions it takes on global and regional issues matter.

“This makes Singapore an attractive and valuable target. If Singapore can be made to bend to the will of one or other foreign power, than that can help advance the interests of a foreign power in the region,” the Green Paper stated.

RSIS’ Ang added that many countries have recognised disinformation campaigns as a national security problem, and Singapore is not immune to them.

“In fact, as we have become such an open, connected society, we are at least as vulnerable as any other democratic nation,” he cautioned.

Ultimately, the Government is of the view that Singaporeans hold a wide range of opinions and viewpoints on a variety of issues ranging from education, housing, transport or politics, and discussion and debate on these matters do take place openly.

“Such vigorous exchange informs Singaporeans and enables us to express views on matters of national interest, and to shape the path of the nation,” said the Green Paper.

“It is important that such discourse and debate be open, and not be based on deliberate falsehoods. We should guard against developments that can undermine, discredit, or debase such debate and discourse.”

If the dissemination of deliberate online falsehoods are allowed unchecked, “people’s faith in the country, democracy, and its institutions will be undermined”, it added.

Q: How tough a problem will this be to tackle?

A: “It’s not going to be an easy problem to tackle.”

That’s the opinion of Professor Lim Sun Sun, head of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), who told Channel NewsAsia that it’s an issue that needs to be tackled from several fronts.

These include public education, and how it is very important that the public are well educated on the political economy behind online falsehoods, Prof Lim said.

“Why it is that particular agencies can profit from propagating online falsehoods? And how, as individual media consumers, we should learn to be more discerning in terms of the news sources that we rely upon,” she pointed out.

To that end, she felt the choice of a Select Committee is a “very good move”.

“Because the hearings of the Select Committee are going to be made public, there’s going to be tremendous educational value for the general public in terms of understanding the whole problem of online falsehoods and the kinds of implications it can have for Singapore’s racial and social harmony as well as political stability,” the SUTD professor said.