Govt moots Select Committee to study deliberate spread and impact of online falsehoods

The panel, if appointed, will examine and report on the phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online, among other issues.

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The Government will be asking Parliament to appoint a Select Committee to study the problem of deliberate online falsehoods and to recommend how Singapore should respond.

The Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) and Ministry of Law (MinLaw) issued a Green Paper titled "Deliberate Online Falsehoods: Challenges and Implications" on Friday (Jan 5), setting out the reasons for appointing the panel.

A Green Paper is a preliminary discussion or consultative document issued before the formulation of Government policy.

If appointed, the Select Committee will examine and report on the phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online, the motivations and reasons for the spreading of such falsehoods, and the types of individuals and entities, both local and foreign, which engage in such activity.

It will also look at the consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to institutions and democratic processes, and how Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods.

This includes the principles that should guide Singapore's response, and any specific measures, including legislation, that should be taken.

Deliberate online falsehoods can take on different forms, according to Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Carol Soon. This ranges from sensational headlines without supporting text and rumours on instant messaging apps to sophisticated doppelganger news websites, such as fake CNN and ABC News pages.

"We have to be very specific with the definition, especially on the point of intent to deceive and cause harm," she said. "The issue of harm, such as harm to whom and to what, should be addressed."

But in defining the term, Professor Lim Sun Sun from the Singapore University of Technology and Design also stressed the importance of distinguishing between fact and opinion.

"Unless people stray into the territory of deliberately fabricating news, and deliberately fabricating falsehoods and untruths, then it is merely an opinion on some instance of public interest and would not constitute a deliberate online falsehood."

Singapore 'should not wait for an incident to occur'

According to the Green Paper, digital technologies have been "extremely positive enablers", but have also been seriously abused.

It highlighted the example of automated bots, or "social bots", where software can create accounts on social media platforms that act like and interact with accounts of real persons. These bots, it said, can be used to spread spam and online falsehoods on social media networks, and by sheer volume, they can create a false impression of public support for, or relevance to, a particular story or movement.

It added that governments, experts and the media have studied and made findings on their countries' recent experiences with online falsehoods, and pointed out two observations that are particularly relevant: First, many online falsehoods were aimed at interfering with elections and referendums, and second, there are two types of actors.

Foreign state actors appear to have wanted to engineer specific outcomes in elections and referendums, while private individuals and entities seem to have been more motivated by financial considerations.

Citing incidents from around the world, the Green Paper noted that online falsehoods pose "real and serious challenges", and Singapore "should not wait for an incident to occur."

"We have to learn from the experiences of other countries what the risks are, and what can be done about them," it said. "We should be prepared ahead of time."

Highlighting examples from around the world, the Green Paper noted that widespread concern has been expressed in the US that the 2016 US Presidential Election saw online falsehoods spread by private actors as well as a specific foreign state.

One example of this is 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, it said. 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 the proposed reforms and discredit then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

It added that Singaporeans were exposed to deliberate online falsehoods on the now-defunct local website, The Real Singapore, which attracted more than 2 million unique monthly visitors a month.

"Singapore is both an attractive target and highly susceptible to the deliberate spread of online falsehoods," it said, noting that Singapore is one of the most open and globally connected countries in the world, and is an international hub for trade, finance, travel and communications. Singapore is also vulnerable because it is multi-racial and one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world.

"Actors who wish to harm Singapore will find deliberate online falsehoods an effective way to undermine Singapore."

A motion will be moved at the Parliament sitting on Wednesday (Jan 10), to appoint the Select Committee. Should it be appointed, it will be chaired by Deputy Speaker of Parliament Charles Chong. It will also comprise seven Government MPs, an Opposition MP and a Nominated MP.

The public will be invited to make submissions to the Select Committee, once Parliament approves its formation. The committee can also hold public hearings to engage in-depth with witnesses on key issues. It will present its report to Parliament after it completes its work.