

## **'Overly broad use' of fake news term 'problematic', say IPS researchers**

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The definition of what deliberate online falsehoods should be, as well as the situation in Singapore, were among the key highlights in the written and oral representations by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Carol Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh to the select committee on deliberate online falsehoods.

The written representation, published on the Parliament website on Wednesday (Mar 14), noted that the "overly broad use" of the term fake news is "problematic on many fronts". Without a clear definition, it would be "near futile" to prescribe the most appropriate counter-measures, they said in their personal capacities.

Dr Soon and Mr Goh said academics and industry players characterise "fake news" as one 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".

These, they said, would distinguish fake news from other types of false information such as rumours, parodies, satire, hoaxes, conspiracy theories and poor reporting.

"As such, the select committee's focus on deliberate online falsehoods (instead of just fake news) is a commendable move. This is because deliberate online falsehoods captures the various and evolving types of fabricated false information that have the propensity to cause different types and degrees of harm," they argued.

### **Defining deliberate online falsehoods**

The two IPS researchers were the first to give oral representations on Wednesday, the first day of public hearings at Parliament House.

They were questioned mainly by Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, who is on the select committee, on their written representation, including their suggested classification of deliberate online falsehoods into "low breach" and "high breach" incidents.

Dr Soon and Mr Goh wrote that low breach deliberate online falsehoods have the propensity to create anxiety among the public and cause inconveniences to people. They cited an article on the website, All Singapore Stuff, which published a photo of a purported collapsed rooftop of Punggol Waterway Terraces as an example. Members of the public were quick to call out the false information, including residents there who took to Facebook to refute the claim, and eventually the website's editors deleted the article and published an apology.

"In such low breach incidents, the stakeholders involved are often able to quickly establish the facts and debunk the falsehood," they said. "Furthermore, the timely coverage by both mainstream media as well as online websites help spread the corrections."

It is high breach incidents that pose a more severe threat, however, the IPS researchers said, as these are "coordinated and insidious efforts targeted at disrupting democratic processes in

a country". They added that there are no published or publicly recorded incidents of such nature - to which Mr Shanmugam noted "that doesn't mean there aren't any".

These high breach incidents might also disrupt social and national stability by "deepening and widening existing cleavages in our society", they wrote, citing the example of Indonesia falling prey to such falsehoods leading up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

During the election, issues like Islam under threat and Chinese communism posing a threat to the Indonesian community were under the spotlight and, amid this backdrop, a doctored video of then-incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known also as Ahok) delivering an allegedly "anti-Islam" speech went viral online, they pointed out.

"Such deliberate online falsehoods saw real world consequences, such as the rallies involving hundreds of thousands of Muslims protesting against Ahok and demanding his arrest," the researchers wrote.

### **Why is it a "pressing threat" now?**

Dr Soon and Mr Goh said rumours, conspiracy theories, hoaxes and propaganda that twisted facts to exploit human emotions like fear, anger and anxiety have "existed as long as human communication has".

What makes deliberate online falsehoods a "pressing threat" now is that the digital revolution has lowered the barriers to entry for content producers, increased the ease of content dissemination and sharing by producers and users, as well as the widespread application of automation, they argued.

Additionally, there are factors such as the method of virality and exacerbated filter bubbles and echo chamber effects, they said.

Filter bubbles and echo chambers reinforce people's biases and worldviews and, while these are not new, the algorithms used by social media platforms aggravate the problem, the researchers said.

"Algorithms predict what people like based on what they consume and personalise their information exposure, thereby reinforcing filter bubbles and echo chambers where they are exposed to information and opinions that are consistent with their pre-existing beliefs," they explained.

Another select committee member, Mr Seah Kian Peng, asked the researchers what are the possible pain points for Singapore with regard to deliberate online falsehoods.

Dr Soon said: "Our pain points are our enemy's sweet spots. If we look at the kind of ... falsehoods perpetrated in other countries, it is clearly reflective of the social, political and cultural milieu in that particular country context."

As such, she pointed out that for Singapore, these pain points could be related to race, language, religion and national security, given that the country is a global hub. Mr Goh added that tensions among locals and immigrants due to rising immigration could be another source to consider.