

Select Committee concludes hearings on fake news after 8 sessions marked by tense exchanges

Tang See Kit

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The final Select Committee hearing on deliberate online falsehoods ended on Thursday (Mar 29), with Deputy Speaker and the committee's chairman Charles Chong describing it as having "extensive involvement and robust engagement" in his closing remarks.

Over eight days in the past three weeks, 65 individuals and organisations from diverse backgrounds appeared before the 10-member parliamentary committee to present their views. The participants included representatives from media companies and technology firms, members of civil society groups, local and overseas academics, as well as students.

The committee received a total of 170 written representations.

The longest session occurred on Tuesday, stretching from 10am to nearly 10pm, with the hearing dominated by a debate between panellists and the representatives of non-mainstream media and local rights groups. But the longest segment occurred on the final day, with Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam crossing swords with historian Thum Ping Tjin.

There were several tense exchanges, and the discussions threw up a wide spectrum of views on the phenomenon of online falsehoods, how technology has worsened the problem, how Singaporeans are affected and how it should be tackled.

New laws: yes or no?

One issue that drew the most divergent views was whether new legislation is needed to combat fake news.

Those that disagreed argued that current laws are sufficient, while some expressed concern that any introduction of new legislation could curtail freedom of speech. These included local and foreign academics; tech giants Facebook, Google and Twitter; local rights groups and non-mainstream media representatives.

UK defence and disinformation analyst Ben Nimmo, for instance, said that legislation should be the "very last resort" while Hong Kong-based media studies professor Cherian George cautioned that introducing an anti-disinformation law against racial and religious insult could backfire.

Others, like Singapore Management University's law professor Eugene Tan, took up positions toward the middle of the spectrum. Assoc Prof Tan called for a refresh and tweaking of the current legislative framework.

Some urged for targeted measures. Telcos Singtel and StarHub want more legislation to cover tech companies, while National University of Singapore's Assistant Professor Mohamed Elmie Nekmat suggested laws to hold online content distributors accountable.

Sitting at the other end of the spectrum, NUS law professor Thio Li-ann said that a law regulating deliberate online falsehoods may be justified on the grounds of “public order”.

She added that not all forms of speech are equally worthy of protection. Given the harm that online untruths have on democratic institutions and processes, they belong to a category of speech that does not warrant protection, she argued. A law regulating such falsehoods should therefore not be seen as an incursion of free speech, she said.

SMU’s law school dean Goh Yihan pointed out gaps in the existing legislative framework, saying that they “run up against limitations of scope, speed and adaptability” when dealing with fake news. Assoc Prof Goh, however, stressed that legislation must be balanced with other solutions, such as education.

And such alternative suggestions, ranging from efforts to boost media literacy to the setting up of an independent body, were aplenty.

For instance, public policy analyst Gillian Koh mooted the idea of an independent body to monitor and flag online content related to elections in Singapore, specifically those designed by foreign actors.

There were calls (by researchers Carol Soon and Shawn Goh, and socio-political website The Online Citizen’s co-founder Andrew Loh) for independent bodies to advise on the type of online falsehoods to act against. Channel NewsAsia and Singapore Press Holdings also wanted an independent, transparent fact-checking “council, committee or body” to identify, assess and react to online falsehoods quickly.

A trio of non-mainstream media journalists advocated for the Freedom of Information Act to allow Singaporeans to put in requests for Government data.

But despite the wide-ranging views, speakers agreed that deliberate online falsehoods are a threat that needs to be tackled.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a researcher on issues related to social cohesion, pointed out that online falsehoods, if left unchecked, have the potential to chip away, destabilise and ultimately destroy Singapore’s social harmony.

National security expert Shashi Jayakumar said that organised fake news and disinformation campaigns could already be influencing and undermining Singapore society, while Nanyang Technological University’s Asst Prof Michael Raska raised the scenario of how countries with inferior military could weaken Singapore by exploiting issues that cause tensions among groups.

But Dr Koh, while acknowledging the risks of falsehoods and agreeing that there is no purpose for them in a democracy, argued that citizens should be given “a process of deliberation” when it comes to content that are less clear-cut, such as opinion pieces “layered on some falsehoods”.

“You declare it is false, but people still need to be persuaded,” she said. “There will be citizens that will need to be convinced in their hearts and minds firstly that it is false.”

“Let me finish”

Throughout the eight days, there were lengthy verbal sparring sessions that had moments of heightened tension.

Mr Shanmugam on Mar 22 crossed swords with Facebook executive Simon Milner. The discussion was supposed to include representatives from Twitter and Google but Mr Milner, who is Facebook's Asia-Pacific vice-president of public policy, got the lion's share of questioning given the revelations about the data breach involving Cambridge Analytica.

The three-hour to-and-fro, which Mr Milner described as a "tough Q&A", saw the Facebook executive admitting that the social media giant should have informed its users earlier of the breach.

Another lengthy session took place on Tuesday when committee member Edwin Tong went head-to-head with Mr Terry Xu and Ms Kirsten Han, the current and former editors of TOC.

Exchanges over TOC's articles about the suicide of 14-year-old Benjamin Lim and Ms Han's references to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report stretched the public hearing, which was at times interspersed with frequent utterances of "let me finish", to a gruelling five hours.

But the longest hearing came on the final day when Mr Shanmugam grilled Dr Thum over the interpretation of historical events such as Operation Coldstore and the Hock Lee Bus riots.

It was interrupted midway when blogger Han Hui Hui was removed after disrupting the proceedings.

The session, which lasted almost six hours, also saw both parties tussling over their perspectives on a wide variety of texts, including books from Lenin and Malayan Communist leader Chin Peng as well as Dr Thum's own thesis and papers.

What happens next?

In his closing remarks, Mr Chong said that the wide-ranging evidence that the committee received "have given (it) much to think about".

"We are grateful to everyone who has written to us and everyone who has given oral evidence," said the committee chair.

Mr Chong added that when Parliament reconvenes after its mid-term break, the committee will meet again to "reflect on the evidence and work on the report".