

## Select Committee makes 22 recommendations to deal with fake news threat to Singapore

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SINGAPORE: The Select Committee tasked to look into the problem of combating deliberate online falsehoods has made 22 recommendations to deal with the issue, saying in its report released on Thursday (Sep 20) that Singapore has "been the subject of foreign, state-sponsored disinformation operations".

In the voluminous report, numbering hundreds of pages, the committee detailed the process through which it sought the views of industry players and the public, which include 170 written representations. Oral representations from 65 individuals and organisations were also heard during the eight-day public hearings in March this year.

During a media briefing on Thursday, Senior Minister of State for Transport and Communications and Information Janil Puthuchery said the committee, of which he is a member, is convinced that deliberate online falsehoods are a "live and serious threat" that puts Singapore's national security at risk, based on the evidence and representations put forward.

Through these, it said the findings that relate to Singapore could be categorised into three observations: Foreign disinformation has likely occurred and can be expected to happen again, the country's societal conditions make it "fertile ground for insidious 'slow drip' falsehoods that can cause long-term damage" and the region's tensions and circumstances are a source of vulnerability.

For the first observation, the committee said the evidence showed that disinformation campaigns have been conducted by "various states". It cited S Rajaratnam School of International Studies' (RSIS) Dr Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu who described some indicators of such information warfare conducted here, including an unnamed state's use of news articles and social media to influence the minds of segments of the local population and to legitimise the state's actions in the international arena.

It was also given a confidential briefing by a security agency which provided information that "Singapore has indeed been the subject of foreign, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns".

The report noted that besides disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks are part of a set of tools that external parties rely on to wage a kind of non-physical or "non-kinetic" warfare. And there have been a number of such online attacks against the country, including the one against healthcare provider SingHealth earlier this year, it added.

Reasons for why Singapore remains an attractive target for such disinformation campaigns were also fleshed out. They include the alleged availability of the means and tools for such campaigns in the region that can easily be turned against the country.

"For example, some national security experts pointed out that cyber armies which have been deployed to aid sectarian or political agendas exist in several of our

neighbouring countries, which can easily be repurposed and deployed against Singapore,” the report stated.

#### INSIDIOUS NATURE OF “SLOW DRIP” FALSEHOODS

As for the second observation, the report called out “slow drip” falsehoods as insidious to Singapore society given its multiracial, multi-ethnic nature. National University of Singapore’s Mathew Mathews was cited as saying that “low-level” falsehoods could raise tensions little by little. “Emotions may not be high initially, but falsehoods could make them stronger,” the report stated.

One example cited was the false news spread by now-defunct online site The Real Singapore, purportedly about a complaint by a Filipino family that resulted in a commotion between Hindu participants and the police during a Thaipusam procession in 2015. The story gained traction quickly and led to xenophobic comments online, the report noted.

Another instance cited in the report was the written representation by Prakash Kumar Hetamsaria, who related how another online site, All Singapore Stuff, posted a fake story about a new citizen who was purportedly disappointed with Singapore and thinking of giving up his citizenship, and used his picture to accompany it.

“The article was shared over 44,000 times. Mr Hetamsaria and his family, including his young daughter, were impacted by the xenophobic comments that followed. The falsehood hence also inflamed xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in Singapore,” the committee’s report said.

Thirdly, the committee also received evidence on how Singapore’s regional context can contribute to its vulnerability to harmful falsehoods online.

For one, societal fault lines run across national borders, it said. Nanyang Technological University’s Liew Kai Khiun was mentioned citing an example relating to the crisis faced by Muslims in the Rakhine state of Myanmar and how reports by local media on the crisis would attract comments on their social media pages refuting the reports.

“These denials appeared to come from Myanmar-based user accounts, and were accompanied by comments with Islamophobic overtones, triggering backlash from accounts that appeared to belong to Singaporean Muslim users,” the report said.

The spillover of tensions from the region into Singapore is also a cause for concern, and the committee cited media academic Cherian George’s study of hate propaganda as an example. Dr George’s study found that hate groups in the region and around the world “are far more formidable than anything we have needed to deal with”, and he cautioned that it would be reckless to assume Singapore would not be impacted by the religious and racial policies of its neighbours.

#### “RESPONSE MUST BE MULTI-PRONGED”

Concluding that the phenomenon of deliberate online falsehoods is a “real and serious problem” here and around the world, the committee in its report said Singapore’s response should be guided by the core values and aspirations of its society.

To this end, it said that the response must be “multi-pronged”, such as addressing the capacity of people’s ability to discern falsehoods as well as supporting journalists and fact-checkers in their work. It should also look into supporting the wider digital ecosystem, particularly the role of technology companies, the committee added.

The response should also address the lopsided nature between the growing power of technology and the capacity of society and countries.

“The phenomenon and its problems demonstrate a growing gap between the power of technological developments and the capacity of societies and governments to deal with them,” the report said.

The committee is also of the view that legislative and non-legislative measures are required and “there is no silver bullet”.

“While building the capacity of individuals and other stakeholders through non-legislative measures is crucial, these alone are insufficient to deal with the strength and serious consequences of deliberate online falsehoods,” it said.

That said, the committee is aware that government intervention requires calibration as falsehoods can appear in a broad spectrum of circumstances - from deliberately fabricated content to satire and parodies - as well as varying degrees of impact. Intervention should thus be calibrated to take these factors into consideration, it said.

It is also aware of the “valid and important” concerns involving the impact of such intervention on free speech, and proposed for “calibrated interventions and legal and institutional safeguards”.

With these in mind, the committee recommended 22 measures to achieve the following objectives:

- Nurture an informed public
- Reinforce social cohesion and trust
- Promote fact-checking
- Disrupt online falsehoods
- Deal with threats to national security and sovereignty

“Ultimately, what is desired is a public that is informed and respects the facts, a society that is cohesive and resilient, and a people whose sovereignty and freedom are safeguarded,” the committee said.

In response, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) said it has received a summary of recommendations on how it can strengthen trust between the people and the Government.

These recommendations, it said, revolve around the principles of communication, accountability, transparency and participation in the Government’s policy- and decision-making processes.

The ministry said it already builds capability across the people, private and public sector “so that there can be broader involvement among Singaporeans and organisations to partner the government and each other, to build the Singapore we want to see”.

“These efforts speak to the recommendations received by the Select Committee, and the Government is heartened that we are on the right track,” MCCY said.

“However, we acknowledge that there is always room for improvement and we will strive to do so, as a collective effort with Singaporeans.”

The committee was also asked on Thursday when the Government can be expected to formulate a bill on the recommendations, to which chairman Charles Chong said: “I don’t have a timeframe ... I’m not sure how long (the Government) would take. We look forward to their response.”