

## Select Committee's recommendations comprehensive, but not a silver bullet to tackle fake news, say experts

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SINGAPORE: Combating the threat of fake news will require a multi-generational, all-in effort and this is reflected in the recommendations put forth by the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods (DOFs), experts said.

The 279-page report included 22 recommendations grouped into five categories: To nurture an informed public, reinforce social cohesion and trust, promote fact-checking, disrupt online falsehoods, and deal with threats to national security and sovereignty.

The committee proposed several legislative measures, such as the enactment of new laws and criminal sanctions to disrupt the money-making aspect of online falsehoods, and holding tech companies responsible for the content they host.

Several non-legislative measures were also recommended, such as strengthening of the journalism practice and ramping up public awareness and information literacy across all segments of society.

National security expert Shashi Jayakumar said that those who will grow up as digital natives, in particular, will play an important role in combating fake news, especially as Singapore advances into its Smart Nation plans.

"The future of our Smart Nation is really in their hands and if we don't have this digital resilience, we're going to be blown from here," Dr Jayakumar said.

"All kinds of influence can take hold within Singapore so in our Smart Nation push, we must have this underlying old school, real-world resilience," he added.

Dr Mathew Mathews, who conducts research on social cohesion, said that the fight against DOFs requires a concerted effort between Government and people.

"The recommendations called for ground-up initiatives to better educate the public beyond merely Government-led initiatives," Dr Mathews said.

"This shows that the Government acknowledges that DOFs are a problem it cannot tackle alone. Society must now be proactive as well and come together to combat this problem at different levels," he added.

Constitutional law expert Thio Li-ann welcomes the mix of legislative and non-legislative measures and said this is a first step towards tackling the issue.

However, there should be greater scrutiny into details such as the degree of Government involvement in recommendations such as fact-checking initiatives, she said.

"It's a question of balance. Excessive governmental involvement must be constructed as heavy-handed intervention. In terms of fact-checking, there is a need for multi-party involvement to inspire trust, (like) the idea of the independent auditor," Dr Thio added.

## STEELING THE PUBLIC AGAINST FALSEHOODS IS KEY

Law don Eugene Tan said that the public will form the "veritable bulwark" and the first line of defence against DOFs, hence the recommendations to nurture an informed public are the most important.

Having said that, inoculating the public will likely be the most challenging recommendation, Associate Professor Tan said. "But so long as we can have the majority of the population being able to discern truth from falsehoods, it's a battle half won," he added.

Dr Jayakumar agreed and said that the legislative recommendations form a less important aspect of the report.

"It's really (about) the inner resilience of the people ... the inner core in terms of how we can steel ourselves, and educationally in terms of critical thinking to withstand quite insidious campaigns which may well play out not just over years but decades," he said.

He added that it is also timely for Singapore to have the discussion on dealing with false information. The United Kingdom, France and Germany have gone through the same discussions, and Singapore can look at what other countries are doing to apply it here, he said.

## NOT A CURTAILMENT ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION YET

While the committee said that stopping falsehoods with its recommended measures is not censorship but to ensure that the freedom of speech can be meaningfully exercised, some experts say that this will depend on the details of the eventual proposed legislation.

Prof Tan said that as the recommendations are, there is no curtailing any freedom in Singapore.

"If anything, we will need to promote responsible freedom of speech and expression. It can help ensure that bad speech and falsehoods are decisively exposed for what they are," he said.

However, there is a need to balance the interests of protecting the home front while also ensuring constitutional freedoms and societal values are not diminished, he said.

"Unfettered power poses as grave a threat as deliberate disinformation," he said. So, the need for judicial oversight before a significant power is exercised is crucial and must constitute a key plank of any proposed law, Prof Tan said.

Dr Mathews agreed and said the committee has taken note of this and that some of the measures will be done under judicial oversight.

"So this should give us some confidence that any implementation of laws to deal with DOFs will ensure that there isn't the effect where people feel stifled in sharing their opinions," he said.

Dr Thio said that it is generally accepted that the freedom of expression is a fundamental right, and it accepts limits on free speech that are regarded as defamatory, seditious or obscene.

Deliberate misinformation does not serve free speech, which is needed to facilitate the robust exchange and critical assessment of ideas, she said.

"If you propagate lies and I fall for it and, for example, vote for or against an issue on the basis of a lie, then you have harmed my freedom to participate in political debate and to make informed choices because you have misinformed me," she said.

"The issue is whether you think deliberate online falsehood as a form of expression deserves protection or warrants curtailment," she added.

Media studies professor Lim Sun Sun said that it is difficult to tell whether there will be a curtailment of freedom of expression without specific details of the proposed legislation.