

Threat to Singapore's social harmony from online falsehoods raised at Select Committee hearing

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Online falsehoods, if left unchecked, have the potential to chip away at, destabilise and ultimately destroy the social harmony Singapore has painstakingly nurtured over the past few decades, particularly between different races and religions.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a researcher into issues related to social cohesion, made this point in his written and oral representations to the Select Committee tasked to look into the problem of deliberate online falsehoods on Wednesday (Mar 14).

Citing research and surveys, Dr Mathews explained that the existence of harmonious relationships between the different communities in Singapore does not mean that there are no misperceptions or prejudices about different groups in the population. Society, he said, is still not race-blind, and differences still matter in how people perceive and interact with each other at the workplace, and in social settings.

"It is in our everyday lives where deliberate online falsehoods could harm our social cohesion," he added.

Referring to what he termed a "slow-drip" effect, Dr Mathews noted that interference through falsehoods does not only occur in the lead-up to and during elections, and there will always be elements that seek to exploit existing divisions within a society for their own ends.

He cited a local example of how website The Real Singapore had spread a story about a Filipino family complaining about Singaporeans who played music loudly during the Thaipusam religious festival. "I personally witnessed just how quickly netizens took to this story and without questioning the veracity of facts, made comments maligning Filipinos," he said in his written representation.

"It is doubtless that this distorted article would have shaped the opinions of some Singaporeans towards immigrants, Hindus, and an important event in the country's calendar of religious festivals."

Further elaborating on the "slow drip" in his oral representation, he explained there can be "different kinds of attempts" to "slowly raise tensions, bit by bit". "We know there's already some kind of antagonism against different groups, when you look at some websites, and when you have a sudden situation - and a falsehood is made in reference to that - there's a sudden, heated kind of view about it," he said. "Earlier on, maybe the kind of take-up was nonchalant, where people have views, but maybe not so strong, but now you have a sudden exaggeration of those views. So it gets amplified."

People should take responsibility for what they repost or share

The senior research fellow at IPS, who was speaking in his personal capacity, was one of six individuals and groups invited to speak on day one of the public hearings at Parliament House.

Among the suggestions he made were a mechanism that would empower the Government to ban Singapore residents from accessing sites that feature deliberate online falsehoods which threaten Singapore's social harmony.

Furthermore, should owners of the websites contest the ban, there should also be an independent committee to hear appeals. Elaborating on this during his oral representation, Dr Mathews added that this committee should have experts from different fields and areas, "so we can have a balanced look at it".

Stressing the importance of individuals taking responsibility for what they re-post or share online, Dr Mathews also suggested that there could be some "mandated education" for those who repost or share articles that are subsequently flagged as online falsehoods. "This will hopefully raise their awareness to the problems posed by online falsehoods and make them more discerning about future information they read," he said.

But Dr Mathews noted that it is important that this does not lead to a "chilling effect", where few people discuss sensitive issues but instead continue to harbour prejudices without the opportunity to confront them. To that end, he proposed that dedicated websites independently run by community agencies be set up, to allow Singaporeans to clarify their doubts and raise their concerns and anxieties.

In response to a query from committee member Seah Kian Peng, Dr Mathews agreed that the technicalities of such measures could be complex, and operationalising it could be "difficult".

"But in some way, the message goes out that you have to be responsible for what you re-post," he said. "I think over time, people will understand the gravity of the situation and they do know it's something they should be careful about."

Religious groups understand commitment to nation

Representatives of religious organisations who were invited to share their views said that Singapore's current "very good" state of racial and religious harmony has been possible through a backdrop of strong political leadership and members' responsibility towards the nation.

Still, they said this harmony is not to be taken for granted, and suggested ways to tackle deliberate online falsehoods regarding race and religion.

In its written submission, the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), which represents Protestant churches here, said that in multi-religious and multi-racial Singapore, certain forms of fake news can spark conflict among the different faith communities and racial groups. NCCS was represented by Rev Dr Ngoei Foong Nghian and Dr Roland Chia.

"In the wake of the current climate of heightened religious and racial sensitivity, fake news can damage the social fabric of our nation," they said.

Mr Andre Ahchak, who was representing the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, said that the Church believes that the best way to handle misunderstandings or minor falsehoods which do not impact Singapore's safety and religious harmony is through public education.

"It is no longer possible to stop fake news simply by blocking websites or publications because social media utilises person-to-person sharing," he said.

Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, who sits on the Committee pointed out that public education has its limitations, as not everyone can be influenced by it.

Representatives suggest platform, bigger responsibility from social media platforms

Dr Kweh Soon Han, representing the Singapore Buddhist Federation suggested a national-level religious platform or centre, where Buddhists and non-Buddhists can report, feedback and also seek clarifications and updates on Buddhism, in particular, or a national-level multi-religious centre.

"Whichever mode is chosen, the need for Buddhist and non-Buddhist Singaporeans to be able to approach a central agency tasked with these functions can help to identify and isolate any fake news when it sprouts its ugly head and then to nip it at its bud," he said.

Picking on Dr Kweh's point on how those who took Buddhism Studies in school when it was offered as a subject previously were able to learn about the religion in a structured way, another panelist, Mr Pritam Singh, asked if there would be a role for education in schools on various religions practised in Singapore.

While the representatives said it would be an effective avenue, and that education is important to start young, another panelist, Dr Janil Puthuchery, pointed out concerns of not educating in a balanced way, and whether it is feasible to include such lessons, with a time constraint.

Dr Kweh also suggested a "regular diet" of talks in schools from people from different religious communities.

Mr Ahchak also said that the Church has established channels on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp so that its members can receive clarifications swiftly and directly from official sources, and that it keeps a "close eye on the local social media scene".

The representatives also suggested that social media platforms function as media companies instead of intermediaries, and hold themselves to laws that govern the media. In that way, they would need to be involved in correcting or removing fake news carried on their platforms, they said.