Are Singaporeans vulnerable to fake news? 5 key themes from the public hearings on deliberate online falsehoods

Over three days last week, a group of men and women huddled in the new public hearing room in Singapore's Parliament House to discuss the issue of disinformation. A total of 24 speakers - from countries as far away as Ukraine to closer to home, Indonesia, as well as from Singapore - shared their experiences and research. They also shared suggestions on how the Republic can deal with the "threat of our times". Here are five key themes that emerged during the hearings, as well as through separate interviews with Insight.

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1. S'poreans vulnerable to fake news?

Fake news is as attractive to consume as alcohol, sex and chocolates, with the truth coming a distant second, said Dr Carol Soon of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

"Why do falsehoods gain traction? It is because they tend to be sensational and emotional," the senior research fellow told Insight.

People are psychologically wired to seek out untrue information that reaffirms their beliefs, Dr Soon told the Select Committee on fake news.

As with many who presented their findings, she said Singapore's "pain points" are likely to be issues about race, language and religion. Falsehoods can be deployed for insidious purposes, such as wreaking havoc between different communities, said Dr Soon.

Similarly, National University of Singapore's Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat spoke about how falsehoods that are spread in Malay or Mandarin are a concern as language is closely linked to religion.

Meanwhile, many speakers showed that falsehoods affect all parts of the political spectrum.

Dr Kevin Limonier of the French Institute of Geopolitics at the University of Paris 8 discussed a map of how people of varying ideologies and languages shared a similar type of false content on social media.

While Dr Soon's research showed that those on the extremes of the political spectrum were more vulnerable, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said: "My concern is not so much with people with strong political beliefs. It's more group identity based on racial and religious lines, and that's where I would be focusing on when we come to what we need to do."

IPS researcher Mathew Matthews said that even among people whose beliefs were not strongly held, fake news can "amplify" these over time and with repeated exposure - the "slow-drip effect".

But one academic said there is no evidence that fake news can fundamentally change views. Mr Morteza Shahrezaye of the Bavarian School of Public Policy said fears of orchestrated attempts to transform political opinion on social media are exaggerated.

Whether Singaporeans are susceptible to disinformation or not, media literacy efforts should be part of measures to combat fake news, said many speakers.

2. Warfare with no bullets being fired

When defence specialist Michael Raska was on a taxi here in 2016, the driver said something unexpected. Recalls Dr Raska of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS): "He openly said that while he is Chinese Singaporean, essentially, our hearts and minds are connected with China."

This was during the Terrex incident, when nine Singapore Armed Forces Terrex infantry carrier vehicles were seized by Hong Kong Customs officials. They were returned last year. "I don't know if his conclusion came from fake news, but it could be an example that fake news can change your identity and shape it to a particular direction," Dr Raska told Insight.

The use of disinformation to promote political aims is not new, and could be used by countries to intrude on another nation's sovereignty and win conflicts without a single bullet, said Dr Raska.

Head of RSIS' Centre of Excellence for National Security Shashi Jayakumar described the scourge of falsehoods as "the threat of our times" that could be more dangerous than terrorism. Singapore could be a "sandbox for subversion" due to its smart nation push, he said. "Any state actor (seeking) to influence Singapore can use the means that are already here, the infrastructure of our smart nation, our social media penetration, our broadband usage and so on."

RSIS' Dr Gulizar Haciyakupoglu testified to the committee in a closed session that there were signs such efforts have been deployed against Singapore in recent months, with a country putting its narrative through news articles and social media to influence minds and legitimise its actions.

In another private hearing, Dr Damien Cheong also shared how a state-sponsored campaign can destabilise the government and society of a target country, describing how Singaporeans would be unknowingly involved in spreading disinformation.

Such campaigns have taken a toll on countries that contend with alleged Russian interference, such as France, Latvia and the Czech Republic, speakers pointed out.

Ukraine, for example, was unprepared for Russian disinformation in support of pro-Russian separatists, contributing to Crimea's annexation, said Kyiv Mohyla School of Journalism executive director Ruslan Deynychenko. He told Insight: "You have to be aware that it might happen. I and my friends, no one believed it was possible that we could ever have military conflict with Russia. We had nothing to fight about, and suddenly war happened."

3. Free speech v protecting society

Does government action to curb disinformation impinge on freedom of speech? Or does it, in fact, protect it? This was vigorously discussed in the first week of hearings by the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods.

Director of the European Values think-tank Jakub Janda noted that government action could "clash with various concerns over freedom of speech", making it tough for governments in many countries to implement such action. While he believes civil society should play a primary role in curbing falsehoods, he added that the authorities should also have the mandate to conduct investigations and alert the public to disinformation efforts - particularly in major incidents targeting a country's internal security or the integrity of elections. This sits alongside potential legal frameworks it could adopt, he said.

However, Dr Ben Nimmo, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, an American think-tank, said: "I am very wary of any legislative proposal, anywhere in the world, which would allow politicians to order the social platforms to change the content of their platform, because the precedent for countries which are hostile to democracy would be very, very alarming."

He was responding to Select Committee member Pritam Singh, who asked if he was proposing using laws to deal with fake social media accounts when he suggested governments should work with platforms to shut down such accounts.

Researcher Morteza Shahrezaye of the Technical University of Munichsaid systems like Germany's, where social media platforms are required to take down illegal content after being notified, could be vulnerable to manipulation as political opponents may systematically flag posts they do not agree with.

Discussing the varying responses, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, also a member of the committee, said it is a "question of which philosophy you prefer". There is a balance to be struck between somebody's right to propagate falsehood and a society's right to make sure that there is peace and harmony, he said.

The right to express views needs to be protected, including from deliberate online falsehoods, he said. He added that dealing with fabrications, in fact, safeguards and enhances free speech. Spreading disinformation, such as via bots, to mislead others is "the very antithesis of free speech", he said.

4. New legislation the way forward?

Whether a new law is the way to go to combat disinformation drew mixed reactions from speakers.

Some, like Singapore Management University law dean Goh Yihan, pointed to gaps in existing laws and called for new legislation allowing the Government to quickly remove or prevent access to online falsehoods.

He told Insight: "The purpose of legislation is always twofold - one, you can use it to get someone to do something like an apology; second, it sends a message as to what is the right kind of conduct online."

Germany achieved this message by its recent Network Enforcement Act, which holds tech companies to account, said Dr Shashi Jayakumar of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

"It is a reminder to the big companies, Facebook in particular, that their community standards are not the same as law. The key thing in the German saga was to emphasise the networks have to comply with national law. That itself is very important," he said.

But some speakers noted the difficulties of enforcing a law against fake news.

After all, fake news is difficult to define since it can be mixed with truths, said Dr Ben Nimmo of the Digital Forensic Research Lab of the Washington-based Atlantic Council.

Disinformation could also consist entirely of one-sided material, which would be a breach of journalism standards. But that would not be considered false, Dr Nimmo told the committee on Thursday.

"There are so many grey areas here. Just the preamble to your legislation is going to be the size of the Oxford English Dictionary," he said.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam disagreed, arguing that "there are items which are completely manufactured and totally untrue, which are legally very easily identifiable". He added that any new laws need not be the sole solution and there could be others with "differentiated outcomes".

This need for a nuanced view on legislation was shared by most speakers, including Dr Goh, who told Insight this may not be the best method.

It must be balanced with judicial oversight and complementary to other non-legislative means, he said, adding: "Sometimes, you can't just take down things that have gone viral. What might be more effective is to spread the truth as well. You can use legislation to compel one to do that, but often times, it will be regular people who fight against falsehoods by spreading the truth out of their own volition."

5. Debunking from the ground up

At the peak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, people from all walks of life asked what they could do to guard their country from foreign disinformation.

Following a Facebook post that suggested a get-together to discuss solutions, a website was created.

This was the origin of Stopfake.org, a project aimed at verifying information and refuting propaganda in the Ukraine, its co-founder Ruslan Deynychenko told Insight. He was among foreign experts at last week's hearings. Although Stopfake.org started out with journalists and IT specialists, among others, who wanted to do something for their country at a time of the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine, it grew to become an "information hub" analysing Kremlin propaganda, says its website.

"One of the achievements of debunking the story is that regular news organisations started to be more responsible... They try to fact check before publishing," said Mr Deynychenko.

Ground-up efforts like this can help combat falsehoods, noted experts during last week's hearings.

Besides potential legislation, such efforts, along with the need to strengthen media literacy, were among counter-measures suggested.

Highlighting that the best fact-checking platforms in some countries are run by citizens, journalists or a coalition of both, academic Shashi Jayakumar said Singapore could consider establishing a body that uses grassroots participation to counter disinformation. "In many instances, it is the citizenry and journalists who are better placed to act, and to act quickly," he said.

Fact-checking efforts with schools' and students' help could also have the effect of enhancing media literacy, said Dr Carol Soon of the Institute of Policy Studies. She added that non-government entities like the mainstream media can play a role in fact-checking as well. However, this should complement, and not substitute, government-led efforts.

But some, like Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat of the National University of Singapore, argued that too much emphasis on educational measures to counter falsehoods could "downplay the importance of legal measures".

"Regulations and education-based efforts are both necessary to establish short-term protection towards building long-term resilience to safeguard society from online falsehoods," he said.