

Committee of MPs to consider online falsehoods issue including the need for legislation

Seow Bei Yi

The Straits Times, 5 January 2018

A rarely-used parliamentary process is being kickstarted to garner public feedback over the issue of "fake news" online - and to decide if Singapore should introduce laws to combat them.

In what experts welcome as a "more open and consultative" move, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam will be moving a motion in Parliament next Wednesday to appoint a Select Committee to discuss online falsehoods.

It will take submissions from the public and hold public hearings to gather feedback, before reporting to Parliament with its recommendations, which will be published as well.

If appointed, it will be chaired by Deputy Speaker Charles Chong and comprise seven MPs from the ruling People's Action Party, one member from the opposition and one Nominated MP. These members have to be nominated by a Committee of Selection, which is led by Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin.

This is a softer stance than that articulated by Mr Shanmugam previously. Last June, he said that new legislation to tackle fake news is likely to be introduced this year.

"A Select Committee process provides a platform to study the problem carefully, to talk to experts and other stakeholders, and to involve members of the public," said a Government spokesman.

The law ministry (MinLaw) did not say why it is not proposing that laws be enacted immediately this year.

First Green Paper in three decades

It is uncommon for the Government to set up a select committee to examine policy issues. The last time was 22 years ago, in 1996, when a Select Committee looked into the healthcare subsidy of government polyclinics and public hospitals.

On Friday, MinLaw and the Ministry of Communications and Information also issued a Green Paper, which is a discussion paper containing proposals on an issue for public discussion. The last time one was issued was three decades ago, in 1988.

The 21-page document said that Singapore should be prepared ahead of time for the "real and serious challenges" posed by online falsehoods.

It said that there is a high risk of foreign interference through such falsehoods, and added that Singapore is an attractive target, being among the most open and globally connected countries in the world. It is also vulnerable, being a multi-racial and religiously diverse society, said the paper.

The paper added that while discourse and debate should remain open, "dissemination of deliberate falsehoods, particularly if this is done covertly, attacks the very heart of democracy" by preventing constructive discourse.

With Singapore's strict rules against foreign interference in its politics, through existing laws such as the Political Donations Act and Societies Act, the same rules should apply to cyberspace, the paper said.

It noted the role of technology as well, such as automated bots that act like and interact with accounts of real people, spreading spam on social media networks.

It then gave examples of how other countries have been hit by falsehoods - many of which aim to interfere with elections and referenda.

In the lead-up to the French presidential election, data stolen from President Emmanuel Macron's campaign team were posted by an anonymous user on an American forum.

His campaign later alleged that "numerous false documents" had been added to genuine stolen documents on social media "in order to sow doubt and disinformation".

Such cases have led to countries and technology companies taking steps to address the spread.

Last year, Germany enacted an Act that requires social networks with more than two million German users to take down illegal content - including hate speech - within 24 hours of it being reported.

Experts welcome committee

Calling the formation of a committee a positive step, Mr Benjamin Ang, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said the deliberate spread of destabilising falsehoods online is a multi-faceted problem "that no single ministry or agency can handle alone".

But he cautioned that "heavy use of legislation in response to news can be counterproductive" as it may end up drawing more attention to the fake news.

On the Government's change of tack to hold further consultation instead of introducing new laws directly, Professor Lim Sun Sun, of the Singapore University of Technology and Design, said: "I think that there is interest to make the process more open and consultative because the online space is everyone's."

She added that the committee's public hearings and consultation process will help people understand the influence that falsehoods may have on society.

Dr Carol Soon, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, also highlighted that "when developing a legislative response, it is important to consider the context, a country's specific challenges, and how we can leverage existing laws".

Political analyst Felix Tan added that this move shows the changing nature of public policy making in Singapore.

"I think it's becoming more open and gives people a voice in policy-making, rather than being done in a top-down manner," he said. "The push-back from the public has been quite strong in recent years... The Government is putting out a more consultative approach to engage the public."