

Not simply a metaphorical fight against fake news, but a real battle **First day of hearings makes clear fake news is no longer a simple issue**

Tham Yuen-C

The Straits Times, 15 March 2018

The battle against fake news took a literal turn yesterday on the first day of hearings by the Parliamentary Select Committee set up to look into the problem.

While many see the fight as a metaphorical one, Assistant Professor Michael Raska of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies urged the committee to see it for what it is: A real war.

The expert in military innovations, information conflicts and cyber warfare said that information wars are already part of the established cyber warfare strategy of countries, and are often waged on a permanent basis.

Singapore's policymakers need to see it in this context to properly counter the threat, he said.

He was among six people and groups who had their written submissions and suggestions scrutinised by the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods - Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures yesterday.

The Public Hearing Room in Parliament House became a temporary "war room" of sorts as the committee comprising ministers and MPs, and those invited to explain and elaborate on their written submissions, discussed and examined the different strategies that could be used to defend Singapore against this new kind of threat.

Dr Raska's oral evidence got technical in places, but served to drive home just what could be at stake.

Information wars have allowed foreign governments and organised groups to divide, disrupt and conquer using just words, the Internet and social media - and without having to fire one bullet.

Deliberate online falsehoods, he warned, can "create similar political effects as through the use of force".

To make things worse, he said, he is not sure that Singapore is prepared for such warfare.

Launching attacks on social media falls far short of armed conflict, which means sophisticated weapons count for little. This challenges Singapore's concept of deterrence based on using military might to scare off possible attackers, he explained.

He described how countries like China, North Korea, Russia and the United States have doctrines on information wars, but added that "it doesn't have to be a particularly great power. It can also be any state in the region that relies on this method and tools".

His evidence also helped bring into sharp focus Singapore's vulnerability as a multiracial and multi-religious society.

Of particular concern to several of the others who spoke at the hearing was how disinformation, distortion, rumours and untruths can be used to exploit fault lines between races and religions - thus tearing society apart.

Representatives from the Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches of Singapore and the Buddhist Federation said they have had to step up efforts to counter deliberate online fabrications about their religions.

Roman Catholic Archdiocese communications director Andre Achak said: "It is a continuous battle, day in and day out."

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Matthew Matthews said the harmonious state of affairs that exists now between the different races and religions here should not be taken for granted. While existing fault lines have been well managed through a combination of legislation and social policies, and most Singaporeans endorse multi-cultural living, stereotypes and prejudices are still held by a sizeable proportion of the population, he noted.

He warned that a daily dose of online falsehoods - for example fabricated reports on particular ethnic or immigrant groups and their loyalty to Singapore, their potential to commit crimes or lack of contribution to society - could wear down the good relations through a "slow-drip effect" and leave certain groups susceptible to manipulation by hostile powers.

Citing a survey question by IPS and OnePeople.sg, which asked people how they would feel towards various communities in the aftermath of a terror attack, he said that nearly two out of five non-Muslim respondents said they would view Muslims with suspicion if the attack was planned by a foreign Muslim organisation.

This can alienate Muslims here and make them "easy bait" for "groups from elsewhere who want to further prey and make them feel that the rest of society is against them", said Dr Matthews.

A related issue was brought up by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, who noted that research has found that online falsehoods appeal viscerally to people, especially when they have to do with their group identity.

He said: "The purpose of deliberate online falsehoods is you start out with people in the middle ground, you appeal cleverly to their ethnic identities, you appeal to their racial identities, then you target them politically and try and move them along the political spectrum to harden their attitudes."

The committee was only into the first of its eight-day public hearings, and the search is on for solutions. But the hearings clearly highlighted another dimension to the issue. When deliberate falsehoods in the virtual world can undermine government processes and tear societies apart, sparking conflict in the physical world, fake news is no longer a simple issue of deciding what is real and what is not.