

Tackle fake news with laws and other steps, panel told

Measures suggested include fact-checking services and media literacy programmes

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Tackling fake news will call for a host of measures including fact-checking organisations and media literacy programmes. This is in addition to laws to tackle disinformation, experts told a parliamentary committee looking into the issue.

A total of 10 speakers - the first batch of 79 individuals and organisations to speak over the next three weeks - with backgrounds in research, law, defence studies and religion were quizzed on their written submissions yesterday.

Among them, Singapore Management University law dean Goh Yihan noted gaps in Singapore's existing legislative framework in dealing with the rapid spread of fake news.

Associate Professor Goh, in looking at how existing laws such as the Sedition Act and Telecommunications Act could apply to cases of online falsehoods, concluded that they are currently limited in speed, scope and adaptability. "I have looked at the existing legislation and submitted they are not sufficient to deal with the problem," he said.

Prof Goh said any legislation targeting such falsehoods would have to punish and deter perpetrators, prevent the spread of falsehoods - by way of removal or restricting access - and provide remedy through clarification or apology.

At the same time, legislation cannot be the only solution, he added. "We must balance legislation with education as well as reaching out to different communities," he said.

It was a call made by many of the other speakers yesterday, as they offered ideas on tackling a scourge that Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said was one that could cause Singapore great harm. This is especially given that Singapore is polyglot, multiracial and data-rich - traits that make it a tempting target of organised disinformation campaigns, he added, citing a submission to be made by academic Shashi Jayakumar.

In their submission, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Carol Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh proposed that Singapore tap and reinforce its current legislation. This Mr Shanmugam noted, saying it will be a matter for the Government to decide on.

They also suggested an independent body that advises on the type of online falsehoods to act against, but Mr Shanmugam wondered if it can act quickly enough against the viral nature of such fabrications.

Fact-checking services was a popular suggestion. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies defence and strategic studies specialist Michael Raska suggested an independent centre that inspects fake news sources, similar to what has been done in the Czech Republic. It can monitor fake news sites and track their funding and ties to disinformation networks, he said.

Dr Soon cited the BBC's fact-checking arm, The Reality Check. Students can play a role in fact-checking if it is built into the curriculum.

Other measures include mandatory training for people who have shared falsehoods.

The hearing also tackled the issue of whether potential legislation could stifle freedom of speech.

Committee member Pritam Singh, a Workers' Party MP, asked how such laws might look like, noting that some are concerned about curtailment of speech as "the line between falsehood and opinion is not drawn clearly".

Dr Soon said legislators must balance national security and public order with free speech in the "interests of enabling people to speak up and have meaningful discussions pertaining to governance".

Prof Goh said laws that seek to take down content via executive action must have recourse for the person who made the statement to appeal for it to be restored - because "just as much as the falsehood might cause serious consequences, it might also be that the statement-maker has a reason to put it out, or that it is not actually false".

He added: "The freedom of speech is of course important... but it is by no means absolute. And indeed I think the freedom of speech would be compromised if we allowed falsehoods to be perpetrated."