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Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

After the Recommendations: Now for the Hard Part

By Stephanie Neubronner

Synopsis

The multi-pronged national framework to tackle the spread of malicious content online, as proposed by the Select Committee on Online Falsehoods, is commendable. However, challenges in implementation remain.

Commentary

THE RECOMMENDATIONS by the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods were aimed at five broad areas. These are: disrupting the spread of online falsehoods; cultivating an informed public; strengthening social cohesion and trust; encouraging fact-checking; and addressing the threats such falsehoods pose to Singapore's sovereignty and national security.

The recommendations addressed a broad range of issues to prepare the Singaporean populace to handle current and future concerns. New laws, public education, strengthening journalism skills and promoting fact-checking were identified as some of the measures Singapore could adopt in combating the threat of deliberate online falsehoods.

How Far Should Government Be Involved?

The Select Committee acknowledged that a multi-pronged calibrated approach is necessary. This highlights the significance of the threat deliberate online falsehoods pose, and emphasises Singapore's proactive stance in mitigating these issues.

However, besides having strong government-led directives to guard against deliberate

online falsehoods, innovative and ground-up campaigns need to be encouraged. Trust in such processes is crucial to ensuring Singapore's future as an open society.

Swift action was also emphasised as important in preventing the spread of malicious intent online. To this end, the parliamentary Select Committee recognised the need for new laws as well as a variation of approaches to tackle the phenomenon of disinformation and its spread online.

Yet, it remains unclear what a deliberate online falsehood meant and what it entailed. The difficulty in classifying deliberate online falsehoods will be a key challenge to tackle when implementing legislative measures.

In particular, safeguards need to be put in place to ensure legitimate speech is not censored. Likewise, when legal intervention should be implemented, the extent of governmental intervention, as well as the speed at which legislation can be executed, needs to be deliberated further.

Leaving these decisions entirely up to the judiciary to decipher might not be the best way forward. Moreover, permitting the Singapore government greater control to single-handedly disrupt the spread of online falsehoods, which could extend to taking down content and blocking access, could be viewed as being heavy-handed.

Striking a Balance

The Select Committee asserted that the proposed laws to tackle deliberate online falsehoods should not over-reach or gag free speech. This is noteworthy. There is a need to strike a balance between extending government influence to mitigate the spread of deliberate online falsehoods and limiting the effect it will have on the expression of viewpoints. This will require commitment from both the government and the general public.

Additionally, citizens should not be made to feel as if they are constantly being monitored and surveilled. This is important in preventing the erosion of trust and the preservation of personal privacies.

Moreover, to safeguard democratic processes, personal freedom in relation to public interests need to be weighed. For a relationship of trust to prevail, partnerships between the public, civil society, the government, social media platforms and media organisations are necessary.

The Select Committee also suggested the formation of a fact-checking coalition. This could support the goal of tackling online falsehoods. Being able to verify information across different entities and industries will be helpful. Valuable resources and expertise can then be utilised more effectively.

Society must be encouraged to gradually realise and demand only accurate and reliable information. Ground-up initiatives must be established towards this end.

However, the extent to which the government will be involved in this process is still unclear. In the Select Committee's report, it was noted that as compared to countries

where independent fact-checking coalitions existed, trust in Singapore's institutions was high. The government's involvement could also contribute additional resources to support the fact-checking coalition's work.

It is important that sufficient independence be accorded to such an initiative. Singaporeans need to appreciate the importance of fact checking. Overbearing attempts at tackling the threat posed by deliberate online falsehoods could result in additional challenges that Singapore will need to negotiate going forward.

Motivating Individuals to Take Action

Trust in public institutions and amongst people and their communities was cited as key in preventing disinformation from exploiting social fissures and vulnerabilities. Having entirely top-down initiatives may also backfire; these may not convince the public that adequate safeguards have been put in place. Transparency, as well as openness of policy and governance, is crucial and must be safeguarded.

Furthermore, no one entity should have to bear the weight of responsibility and deter deliberate online falsehoods themselves. This is especially so when looking at the complications Facebook, for example, has encountered when moderating content on its platforms.

Recently, Facebook removed a post by the Anne Frank Centre for Mutual Respect, citing nude images of children as having violated its community standards. Facebook's removal of the image suggested its support of Holocaust denial causes and disregarded the importance of learning from history.

Additionally, this incident was not the first time Facebook blocked an iconic image with questionable content that had historical significance. In 2016, the platform removed a photo depicting a naked nine-year-old girl fleeing a napalm strike during the Vietnam War.

The limitations social media platforms have in combating disinformation online highlight the importance of individuals contributing to this effort. A well-informed public that is able to promote a culture of fact checking is however, not yet present in Singapore.

Protecting the Market Place of Ideas

The drive to address online falsehoods should not give rise to concerns that a "market place of ideas" is being stifled. Indeed it should continue to flourish in Singapore. For this, society must have confidence in individuals to make the right decisions.

The public will thus need to be critically literate, possess the relevant skills to discern truth from falsities, and also practise peer surveillance.

Legislative action will take time to take effect, while fact checking is not without its limitations. As such it will be through peer monitoring and surveillance initiatives that netizens can call out inappropriate actions and information, and highlight them to the

authorities so that appropriate corrective steps can be executed in a timely manner. Such processes will help avert disinformation from going viral.

Individuals will need to be brought into the process of national discussions and contribute to the implementation of the recommendations made by the parliamentary Select Committee. Such a process will also help to accommodate the changing needs of society.

A Long-term Endeavour

The Singapore government has announced its in-principle acceptance of the recommendations of the Select Committee on Online Falsehoods. While the proposed recommendations will still be debated in parliament, measures to mitigate potential challenges should be addressed now.

Greater scrutiny of these recommendations should be carried out to ensure a balanced approach is adopted. As there is no “silver bullet” to tackling the threat posed by deliberate online falsehoods, solutions will take “generations” to properly implement.

The pressing question that now needs answering is this: Will Singapore be able to sustain its defences and resist the threat of deliberate online falsehoods while the recommendations are being put in place?

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