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POFMA: Why and How

By Xue Zhang

SYNOPSIS

POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act) has come into force for almost three years since 2 Oct 2019. Why do we need POFMA? What and how actions have been taken under POFMA? And what can we do as netizens? This commentary discusses these issues.

COMMENTARY

A press release dated [4 September 2022](#) publicised that Singapore's Minister for National Development had instructed the POFMA Office to issue a Correction Direction to *The Alternative View* for its Facebook post implying that the Housing and Development Board (HDB) profited from the sale of the Central Weave @ AMK Build-to-Order (BTO) flats.

As a legislation, [POFMA](#) came into effect on 2 October 2019, after being passed by the Parliament and assented to by the President. Also known as [Singapore's fake news laws](#), POFMA aims to prevent electronic communication of misinformation and disinformation, and to safeguard against the use of online platforms for communication of falsehoods and information manipulation.

Serious Consequences of Online Falsehoods – The Need for POFMA

With the rapid development of information and communication technologies, online falsehoods, such as rumours, deliberate distortions, and untruths, are spreading more quickly and widely, and with greater negative impacts, especially over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the [POFMA statistics](#), as of 30 June 2022, out of the 38 POFMA cases, 21 (55%) were COVID-19 related.

For example, fake news on [COVID-19 cases in schools](#) might cause anxiety in parents, and lead to erosion of public trust and confidence in the government. Misleading information about [COVID-19 vaccinations](#) may cause public fear, alarm, and threats to public health. Untruth about a [COVID-positive lady](#) who allegedly suffered a miscarriage after a purported 4-hour wait at KK Women's and Children's Hospital could damage public trust in the reliability of our healthcare system, and professionalism of our healthcare workers.

Falsehoods could create misunderstanding and confusion about critical political and/or social issues, inflame or intensify social conflict, and weaken Singapore's social resilience, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Actions Taken under POFMA

Based on the [POFMA statistics](#), as of 30 June 2022, 69 Correction Directions, 13 Targeted Correction Directions, five General Correction Directions, one Access Blocking Order, four Declared Online Locations and three Access Disabling Orders had been issued or declared.

Actions have been taken by the respective government ministries to investigate the cases, to correct the falsehoods spread online, and to clarify the facts to the public. Besides the [press releases](#) published by the POFMA Office, full facts of the cases have also been elaborated to the public in detail on the Singapore Government fact-checking website [Factually](#).

Further actions have also been taken to ensure that the directions and declarations are complied with. For example, in cases where recipients did not comply with the Correction Directions, Targeted Correction Directions were issued to the related media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) which published the falsehoods. For Declared Online Locations which did not comply with the requirement, the POFMA Office ordered the related media platform (Facebook) to disable the Singapore users' access to them.

Does POFMA Curtail Freedom of Speech?

Critics have argued that POFMA could [curtail public freedom of speech](#). Singapore's [Ministry of Law](#) has clearly pointed out that POFMA "targets falsehoods, not opinions and criticisms".

As stated unequivocally by the [POFMA Office](#), Correction Directions require recipients to insert a link to the Government's clarification against the original post without removing the original post. Readers can read for themselves both the correction of facts and the original post and decide what is the truth.

Moreover, the recipient can submit an [application form](#) to the relevant Minister to vary, cancel, or suspend the POFMA correction or declaration. Within two working days after the date of receipt, a notice of the Minister's decision should be issued. If the application is refused, the recipient can appeal to the High Court within 14 days after the Minister's decision. One example reported in the media on 8 October 2021 was when [the Court of Appeal partially allowed the Singapore Democratic Party \(SDP\)'s](#)

[appeal against the Correction Directions](#) issued by the Minister of Manpower under POFMA.

POFMA seeks to correct misinformation and disinformation spread online, but not to restrict public freedom of speech. With its enforcement, the public are still allowed to make their own judgements, to form their own perspectives, and to express their own feelings.

What Should We Do as Netizens?

There are many falsehoods being created and spread over the Internet through various channels and platforms. It is impossible for the government to investigate and instruct the POFMA Office to issue Correction Directions to all of them. The directions under POFMA [can only be issued](#) if a falsehood has been or is being spread in Singapore through the Internet, and it is in the [public interest](#) to issue such a direction.

As netizens, we should not depend on POFMA to correct every instance of online falsehoods. Instead, we should exercise our personal responsibility and individual accountability to make sure that our opinions are informed by facts and not falsehoods.

Creating and posting fake news or misleading information must be avoided. Receiving a large amount of useful information every day from multiple channels, including both mainstream and social media sources, has enriched people's knowledge and learning, as well as understanding of contemporary challenges and opportunities. The benefits of technology must not be undone by the misuse of technology.

When information is received online, before clicking "like", reposting it, and/or sharing it, a quick self-check is necessary – "Is the source of the information credible and/or authoritative?", "Is the information presented objectively or not?", "Is the information supported by evidence?", and "Is the photo/video edited?"

We must not spread online falsehoods. We do not want to be the victims of misinformation and disinformation. We can use technology intelligently and for the common good. Think, and think again, before you click!

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