

All hands on deck to counter deliberate online falsehoods

While the state needs a strong hand, community efforts are key to dealing with the issue

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For *The Straits Times*

Last week, the Select Committee released a report on its recommendations for countering deliberate online falsehoods. The recommendations focused on disrupting online falsehoods, countering threats to national security and sovereignty, nurturing an informed public, promoting fact-checking, and reinforcing social cohesion and trust.

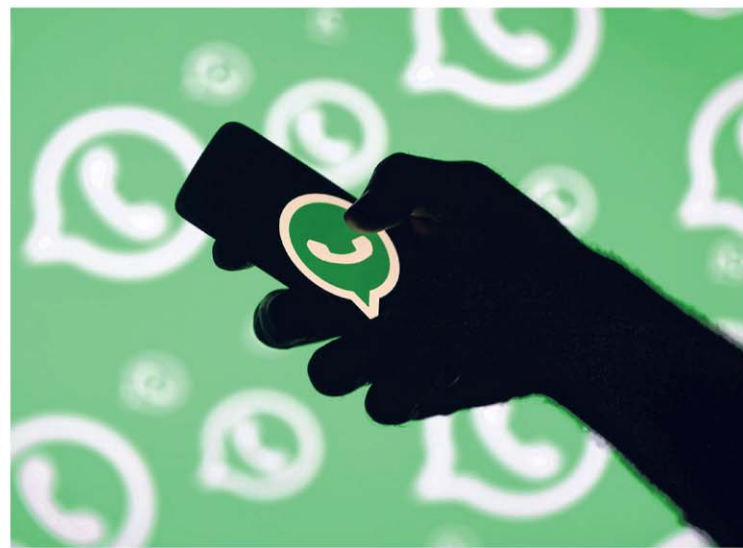
The virulent effects of the problem, as observed in the region and internationally, bring to mind what had happened in 2003. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) broke out in Singapore when a young woman who had been infected by the virus abroad set off a series of transmissions upon her return.

In less than three months, the outbreak was swiftly contained by the Singapore Government. The outcome was 238 cases of infection and 33 deaths. Worldwide, over 8,000 infections were reported, with Sars claiming the lives of 774 people.

What has Sars got to do with deliberate online falsehoods?

The containment of the outbreak saw the rapid roll-out of stringent measures, including the blanket screening of incoming travellers, home quarantine, school closures, distribution of thermometers to over one million households, and the isolation of suspected and probable cases.

In the containment and prevention of Sars, the Government had played a strong and visible hand. However, the community too played an



Falsehoods producers are becoming more adept at using closed-group communication platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat and Line to disseminate falsehoods among social networks, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

important part. Workers took their temperatures at the workplace; students were taught good hand-washing techniques in schools; and across the island, citizens were vigilant about infection control.

Similarly, when it comes to countering deliberate online falsehoods, the Government's hand is not enough and should not be the only solution.

GOVERNMENT'S STRONG HAND

The 22 recommendations set out by the Select Committee include preventive measures, such as developing a national framework to bolster public education efforts, establishing a demonetisation regime to cut off revenue flows to falsehoods producers, and helping to grow start-ups that develop platforms and products to improve the online information ecosystem.

The report also identified possible containment measures – coming up with a national-level strategy and coordinated approach to counter state-sponsored disinformation operations,

implementing early warning mechanisms, and safeguarding election integrity.

But while the Government plays an important part in taming the scourge of deliberate online falsehoods, it is not enough. Three developments – in production, platforms and the product – demonstrate why.

One, the production and use of “deepfakes” to dupe individuals are on the rise.

“Deepfake” is an artificial intelligence-powered technique that combines images and videos from different sources to make a person appear to say or do things he never did or say. Experts predict that we may cease to be able to tell fabricated videos and audios from real ones within two to three years.

Second, falsehood producers are becoming more adept at using closed-group communication platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat and Line to disseminate falsehoods among social networks.

Some may lead to consequences like embarrassment and public relation scrambles, such as the

audio hoax message circulated on WhatsApp that Diego Maradona had suffered a heart attack during the World Cup. Other falsehoods, however, can kill, such as several men in India who were beaten and lynched on suspicion of being child abductors.

Third, the products of disinformation campaigns, which include deliberate online falsehoods, are evolving. Information released by Facebook and the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab in August pointed to greater finesse among disinformation producers.

No longer explicitly false, the content of popular posts that were part of disinformation campaigns deals with themes such as supporting hard-line immigration policies, denouncing gun control, feminist movements and promoting offline chaos through setting up Facebook events.

While the content is not verifiably false, it pitches communities and citizens against one another. And when mixed with falsehoods, it forms a potent mix.

Hence, while calibrated regulations aimed at disrupting deliberate online falsehoods will have some utility, it will be hard for legislation to keep pace with rapidly evolving techniques, platforms and perpetrators.

CITIZENS AS FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE

During the Sars outbreak, public education initiatives resulted in people becoming more informed about the need to observe good hygiene and doing their part to stem the spread of the virus.

What was also notable was how people in the community helped one another in various ways – volunteers conducted temperature checks at public events and helped those quarantined at home, and individuals and organisations made generous donations to help healthcare workers and victims.

Hence, while the Select Committee's report has given a lot

of focus to what the Government could do, it would be unfortunate and counter-productive if the public concludes that the problem of deliberate online falsehoods will be solved by the Government and industry players, and neglects to take personal responsibility in preventing and containing deliberate online falsehoods.

While the Select Committee has encouraged ground-up initiatives for public education and fact-checking, what happens at a more primal level needs to be addressed.

The report highlighted several approaches for public education efforts, such as expanding the curriculum for schools and to different segments of the community. Besides including components on the motivations and agendas of falsehoods producers and their techniques, the curriculum should also include topics relating to human cognitive biases which influence how we process information.

At a recent talk organised by Digital Asia Hub, Chatham House and Berkman Centre on disinformation, a member of the audience asked me: “What can we learn from history to combat false information?”

The gist of my response to her was this – history has shown us that while technology has changed, human beings have not; we are still bound by and act upon our prejudices. As the information ecosystem becomes increasingly complex, we need to confront our own biases and how they affect the way we process information about the society we live in. Such an approach will also complement efforts to strengthen cohesion and trust.

In the coming months, the Government will be working with different stakeholders to develop specific measures, legislative and non-legislative, to tackle the problem. While the various measures laid out in the Select Committee's report are a commendable slate of recommendations, let us not forget that at the end of the day, individuals like you and me are at the front line. The battle is not just for others to fight, but ours as well.

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