

**DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS:
CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Around the world, falsehoods are being deliberately spread online, to attack public institutions and individuals. The aim is to sow discord amongst racial and religious communities, exploit fault-lines, undermine public institutions, interfere in elections as well as other democratic processes, and weaken countries.
2. This Paper will set out:
 - (a) The use of digital technologies to spread falsehoods;
 - (b) The impact of online falsehoods;
 - (c) The objectives of those who spread such falsehoods;
 - (d) The steps being taken by some countries, and technology companies, to address the problem; and
 - (e) What this means for Singapore and what options can be considered.

II. USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO SPREAD FALSEHOODS

3. Digital technologies have been extremely positive enablers. They have, for example, allowed people to connect, receive and share information with others from all around the world. And there have been many other positive developments. Modern life is not imaginable without these technologies. At the same time, these technologies have also been seriously abused.
4. This Paper will highlight some of the abuse that has taken place, through the use of technology to spread falsehoods, to weaken and damage societies.
5. Technology, for example, can support automated bots, known as “social bots”. Software can create accounts on social media platforms that act like and interact with accounts of real persons. These bots can be used to spread spam and online falsehoods on social media networks¹. By sheer volume, they can create a false impression of public support for, or relevance to, a particular story or movement².
6. In addition to social media, online falsehoods can also spread through search engines, email chains, direct links to websites and instant messaging. A study has suggested that during the 2016 United States (US) Presidential Election, 40% of web traffic for false

¹Chengcheng Shao et al, *The spread of misinformation by social bots*, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON (Dec 30, 2017), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1707.07592.pdf>.

²Samantha Bradshaw & Phillip N Howard, *Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers*, Working paper no. 2017.12, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>.

and “hyper-biased” news on websites carrying online falsehoods came through technologies other than social media³.

7. Emerging digital manipulation technologies can also make false information look real. Researchers at the University of Washington produced a realistic video of then-President Obama speaking, using artificial intelligence to precisely imitate how the then-President moved his mouth during speeches⁴.
8. Various strategies have been used to help online falsehoods gain traction. One strategy is the co-ordinated re-posting of the article or post in question. This creates the impression that many unrelated individuals are affirming the information. This shifts the information from the margins to the mainstream⁵. This technique was used to promote conspiracy theories during the 2017 German Federal Election⁶.
9. Another strategy has been to exploit existing rifts within society, including racial, religious or political rifts, to stoke anger and entrench these divisions. Persons with similar ideologies or affiliations are attracted to a particular platform, like a Facebook page or group, where they are then manipulated⁷.
10. In the US, news outlets have reported that a firm linked to a foreign country created hundreds of fake accounts and purchased advertisements to influence the Black Lives Matter movement. This was a movement that arose in response to police shootings of African-American citizens. This firm successfully created an account which drew more than 500,000 followers (more than the official account of the movement)⁸. The aim was said to be to stoke tensions. Such deliberate stoking of tensions will create more problems for the country which was targeted.
11. Similarly, according to the EU East Stratcom Task Force, disinformation campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe also seek to exploit existing divisions, ranging from immigration to political divisions (often along pro or anti-West lines)⁹. The Centre for

³Jonathan Albright, *The #Election2016 Micro-Propaganda Machine*, MEDIUM (Nov 18, 2016), <https://medium.com/@d1gi/the-election2016-micro-propaganda-machine-383449cc1fba>.

⁴Jennifer Langston, *Lip-syncing Obama: New tools turn audio clips into realistic video*, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON (Jul 11, 2017), <http://www.washington.edu/news/2017/07/11/lip-syncing-obama-new-tools-turn-audio-clips-into-realistic-video/>; James Vincent, *New AI Research makes it easier to create fake footage of someone speaking*, THE VERGE (Jul 12, 2017, 2:21PM), <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/12/15957844/ai-fake-video-audio-speech-obama>.

⁵EU East StratCom Task Force, *Means, goals and consequences of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign*, ISPI (Jan 19, 2017), <http://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/means-goals-and-consequences-prokremlin-disinformation-campaign-16216>.

⁶Maks Czuperski & Ben Nimmo, *#ElectionWatch: Final hours fake news hype in Germany*, DIGITAL FORENSIC RESEARCH LAB, (Sep 24, 2017), <https://medium.com/dfirlab/electionwatch-final-hours-fake-news-hype-in-germany-cc9b8157cbf8>.

⁷Issie Lapowsky, *Eight revealing moments from the second day of Russia hearings*, WIRED (Nov 1, 2017, 3:40PM), <https://www.wired.com/story/six-revealing-moments-from-the-second-day-of-russian-hearings/>.

⁸Jason Parham, *Russians posing as black activists on Facebook is more than fake news*, WIRED (Oct 18, 2017, 9:00AM), <https://www.wired.com/story/russian-black-activist-facebook-accounts/>.

⁹*Supra*, fn 5.

European Policy Analysis (CEPA) suggests that the strategies varied depending on the specific country which was targeted¹⁰.

12. For instance, in Ukraine, CEPA's analysis identifies an apparent two-fold approach. First, the Euromaidan protests¹¹ were characterised as an unlawful seizing of power by forces supported by the West. Second, they sought to characterise the regime in Ukraine as "facist"¹². The supposed ultimate goal of these dual narratives was to "destabilize Ukraine psychologically and to advance a conviction that the country is a failed state"¹³. In contrast, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it has been suggested that misinformation campaigns were conducted to create the impression that the US seeks to dominate the world, and that the future holds only conflict. The desired outcome was apparently to reach the conclusion that Russia was the better alternative¹⁴.
13. Another strategy has been to share as many conflicting messages as possible. This is to try and get people to conclude that there are so many different interpretations of events, that it is not possible to determine the truth¹⁵.

III. IMPACT OF ONLINE FALSEHOODS

14. The impact of online falsehoods can be significant.
 - (a) Between June 2015 and August 2017, 126 million US Facebook users were said to have been exposed to more than 80,000 pieces of content from 470 accounts. These accounts were said to be controlled by a foreign country which wanted to achieve a specific outcome in the US Presidential Election. A firm linked to this foreign country is also said to have purchased 3,393 advertisements on Facebook, which 11.4 million American users are estimated to have seen¹⁶. Not all the information from these accounts may have been false. But where the information shared was false, the reach was broad.
 - (b) Between 1 September and 15 November 2016, Twitter identified 36,746 accounts that generated automated, election-related content that were potentially associated with the same foreign country. These accounts generated approximately 1.4 million automated, election-related tweets, which collectively received approximately 288

¹⁰Edward Lucas & Peter Pomeranzen, *Winning the Information War*, CEPA (Aug 2, 2016), https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2773.

¹¹These protests began in Nov 2013 to persuade the Ukrainian Government to sign an agreement with the European Union and led to an overthrow of the incumbent Government: Andrey Kurkov, *Ukraine's revolution: making sense of a year of chaos*, BBC NEWS (Nov 21, 2014), www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30131108.

¹²*Supra*, fn 10.

¹³*Ibid*.

¹⁴*Ibid*.

¹⁵*Supra*, fn 5.

¹⁶Testimony of Colin Stretch, General Counsel, Facebook, United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, hearing on "*Social Media Influence in the 2016 US Elections*", (Nov 1, 2017, 9:30AM).

million impressions¹⁷. Twitter has also identified 2,752 Twitter handles of real persons, coordinated by a firm linked to the same foreign country; there were approximately 131,000 tweets from this firm's accounts in that period¹⁸.

- (c) Twitter has also identified two accounts (associated with a foreign news agency) that devoted almost half their advertising spending to advertisements aimed at users in the US. During that period, the two accounts promoted 1,912 tweets. This led to approximately 53.5 million impressions generated by US-based users, and a total of approximately 192 million impressions across all ad campaigns¹⁹.
 - (d) A study found that ahead of the elections in Germany, German voters encountered many false stories online. This included one in four stories on Twitter which supposedly contained misinformation²⁰.
15. Governments, experts and the media have studied and made findings on their countries' recent experiences with online falsehoods. Two observations are particularly relevant.
- (a) First, many online falsehoods were aimed at interfering with elections and referenda (there are differing views on whether the outcomes were indeed affected).
 - (b) Second, there were two types of actors: private individuals and entities, and foreign State actors. State actors appear to have wanted to engineer specific outcomes in elections, and referenda. Private actors seem to have been more motivated by financial considerations. They circulated posts or news articles for views and clicks, and encouraged sensational and shocking headlines which had little or no basis in fact at all.

United States of America (US)

16. Widespread concern has been expressed in the US that the 2016 US Presidential Election saw online falsehoods spread by private actors as well as a specific foreign State.
17. Teenagers working in a small town in Macedonia spread a number of false stories with sensational headlines. This was to earn money through online views²¹. One of the Macedonian teenagers found that groups supporting President Donald Trump had “hundreds of thousands more members” than groups supporting Hilary Clinton²². Thus,

¹⁷Testimony of Sean Edgett, Acting General Counsel, Twitter, Inc., United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, hearing on “*Social Media Influence in the 2016 US Elections*”, (Nov 1, 2017, 9:30AM).

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Lisa-Maria Neudert et al, *Junk News and Bots during the German Parliamentary Election: What are German voters sharing over Twitter?*, COMPROP DATA MEMO 2017.7, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (Sep 19, 2017), http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/09/ComProp_GermanElections_Sep2017v5.pdf.

²¹Samanth Subramanian, *Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex*, WIRED (Feb 15, 2017), <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>.

²²*Ibid.*

to make higher profits, it made more sense to cater the false articles to this larger audience.

18. The US Congress is also investigating alleged interference by Russia in the 2016 US Presidential Election. Senator Mark Warner, Vice-Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has stated that the Russians “employed thousands of paid Internet trolls and botnets to push out disinformation and fake news at a high volume”²³. This was apparently focused on Twitter and Facebook feeds, and led to widespread misinformation on social media.
19. There are many examples of online falsehoods that were being circulated. One piece of misinformation that gained widespread attention was the “news” that Pope Francis had endorsed then-candidate Donald Trump²⁴. Tweets with images in English and Spanish were also spread to encourage Hilary Clinton supporters to vote online, vote by phone, or vote by text²⁵. These are not valid ways of voting in US Presidential Elections and appear to have been designed to reduce valid votes in favour of Hilary Clinton.
20. A rumour that Hilary Clinton and her chief of staff were running a paedophile ring out of a pizza restaurant in Washington DC also went viral, and was believed by some.²⁶ This led to threats and demonstrations against the restaurant and its owners²⁷.
21. There is no agreement yet amongst the US Congress or experts on the impact of these falsehoods on the election²⁸. It is however clear that they caused divisions and anger among Americans, fomented anger against and distrust in the American electoral system²⁹, and fed outrage³⁰.

²³Opening Statement of Hon Mark Warner, Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the United States Select Committee on Intelligence, hearing on “*Disinformation: A Primer in Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns*,” (Mar 30, 2017, 10:00AM).

²⁴Hannah Ritchie, *Read all about it – the biggest fake news stories of 2016*, CNBC (Dec 30, 2016, 2:04AM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/12/30/read-all-about-it-the-biggest-fake-news-stories-of-2016.html>.

²⁵Twitter has noted that re-tweets refuting this misinformation generated significantly greater engagement across the platform compared to the tweets spreading the misinformation – 8 times as many impressions, engagement by 10 times as many users, and twice as many replies: Testimony of Sean Edgett, *supra*, fn 17.

²⁶Mike Wendling, *The Saga of ‘Pizzagate’: The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread*, BBC NEWS (Dec 2, 2016), www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38156985.

²⁷A man misled by the rumour took a rifle to the restaurant and opened fire (fortunately, no one was injured): Mike Wendling, *ibid*.

²⁸However, the Oxford Internet Institute’s Computational Propaganda Research Project found that levels of misinformation during the 2016 US Elections were higher in hotly contested swing states than in uncontested states: Philip N Howard et al., *Social Media, News and Political Information during the US Election: Was Polarizing Content Concentrated in Swing States?*, COMPROM DATA MEMO 2017.8, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (Sep 28, 2017), <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/09/Polarizing-Content-and-Swing-States.pdf>; States where the election was closely contested were the targets of most of the falsehoods: Philip N Howard & Bence Kollanyi, *Social media companies must respond to the sinister reality behind fake news*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct 1, 2017, 00:03AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/sep/30/social-media-companies-fake-news-us-election>.

²⁹*Supra*, fn 7.

³⁰Nicholas Confessore & Daisuke Wakabayashi, *How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape US Politics*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Oct 9, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html>.

United Kingdom (UK)

22. The UK held a referendum on whether to remain a member of the European Union (EU) in June 2016 (Brexit) and General Election in 2017. There were extensive falsehoods spread which appeared to undermine institutions and incite anti-EU sentiments.
23. Studies have revealed evidence of foreign Twitter accounts posting tweets concerning Brexit in the month leading up to the referendum (although they differ on the extent of the activity)³¹.
24. One false claim made during Brexit was that millions of Turkish people would move to the UK if it voted to remain in the EU, as the UK would not be able to veto accession by Turkey³².
25. Such interference that propagates falsehoods can have the power to influence voters, and thereby affect the outcomes in close elections – elections that can change the entire course of a country, like Brexit seems to have done.
26. During the UK General Election in 2017, a screen-grab of an article with the BBC “Breaking News” logo falsely claimed that the elections would be held over two days³³. It instructed supporters of selected parties to vote on the real election day, and supporters of other parties to vote on the fake election day. It claimed that votes of supporters who turned up on the wrong day would not count.
27. Outside of the elections context, the UK has also had to grapple with false information causing public alarm. In November 2017, rumours online claimed that there had been a terrorist attack on Oxford Street where a lorry ploughed into pedestrians. The rumour went viral, contributing to mass panic and widespread confusion³⁴. British Transport

³¹Vidya Narayanan et al, *Russian Involvement and Junk News during Brexit*, COMPROP DATA MEMO 2017.10, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (Dec 19, 2017), <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/12/Russia-and-Brexit-v27.pdf>; Alexi Mostrous et al, *Russia used Twitter bots and trolls ‘to disrupt’ Brexit vote*, THE TIMES (Nov 15, 2017, 12:01AM), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-used-web-posts-to-disrupt-brexit-vote-h9nv5zg6c>.

³²Roy Greenslade, *Sunday Express admits ‘12m Turks coming to UK’ story was inaccurate*, THE GUARDIAN (Jun 20, 2016, 11:06AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2016/jun/20/sunday-express-admits-12m-turks-coming-to-uk-story-was-inaccurate>; *Turkey poll findings were flawed – clarification*, THE DAILY EXPRESS (Jun 19, 2016, 12:00AM), <https://www.express.co.uk/news/clarifications-corrections/681097/Turkey-poll-findings-were-flawed-clarification>.

³³Mattha Busby et al, *Types of misinformation during the UK Election*, FIRST DRAFT (Jun 21, 2017), <https://firstdraftnews.com/misinfo-types-uk-election/>.

³⁴Aiden Lonergan, *Outrage as Daily Mail report fake news ‘lorry attack’ on Oxford Street based on tweet from 10 days ago*, THE IRISH POST (Nov 24, 2017), <http://irishpost.co.uk/outrage-daily-mail-report-fake-news-lorry-attack-oxford-street-based-tweet-10-days-ago/>; Alix Culbertson, *Oxford Street: What happened to cause ‘terror’ scare in central London*, SKY NEWS (Nov 25, 2017, 12:55PM), <https://news.sky.com/story/oxford-circus-what-happened-to-cause-terror-scare-in-central-london-11142665>.

Police had to clarify that there had been an evacuation of Oxford Circus because of “an altercation” between two men, and not because of an attack by terrorists³⁵.

France

28. In the lead up to the French Presidential Election, there appear to have been coordinated efforts to undermine the campaign of President Emmanuel Macron.
29. Nine gigabytes of data hacked and stolen from President Macron’s campaign team were posted by an anonymous user on an American forum that allows anonymous document sharing (the so-called “Macron Leaks”)³⁶. Supporters of President Macron’s opponent Marine Le Pen shared the leaks just hours before the cooling-off period (during which reporting restrictions are imposed) went into effect in France. President Macron’s campaign alleged that “numerous false documents” had been added to genuine stolen documents on social media “in order to sow doubt and disinformation”³⁷.
30. Social media referred to the documents as purported evidence of President Macron’s tax fraud and other illicit activities³⁸. According to a study of Twitter data, nearly 100,000 users tweeted about the Macron Leaks in the span of a few days³⁹.
31. President Macron’s campaign team identified thousands of hacking attempts originating from outside of France. The team had “strong suspicions” that a foreign State was the “source” of efforts to hack campaign email accounts⁴⁰. According to the US National Security Agency, there had been foreign interference in the French elections⁴¹.
32. There were numerous false stories spread to undermine President Macron. A rumour that then-candidate Emmanuel Macron had a secret offshore bank account was started on an Internet message board. This was subsequently hinted at by Marine Le Pen, his opponent, during a televised debate ahead of the elections⁴². A screenshot of an article with

³⁵*Oxford Circus alert caused by ‘altercation’ between two men, say police*, SKY NEWS (Nov 25, 2017, 5:49 AM), <https://news.sky.com/story/oxford-circus-alert-caused-by-altercation-between-two-men-say-police-11142549>.

³⁶Eric Auchard & Bate Felix, *French candidate Macron claims massive hack as emails leaked*, REUTERS (May 6, 2017, 5:41 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-macron-leaks/french-candidate-macron-claims-massive-hack-as-emails-leaked-idUSKBN1812AZ>; Andy Greenberg, *Hackers hit Macron with huge email leak ahead of French election*, WIRED (May 5, 2017, 7:32 PM), <https://www.wired.com/2017/05/macron-email-hack-french-election/>.

³⁷Andy Greenberg, *ibid*.

³⁸Emilio Ferrara, *Disinformation and Social Bot Operations in the Run Up to the 2017 French Presidential Election*, FIRST MONDAY (Aug 7, 2017, vol 22(8)), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/8005/6516>.

³⁹*Ibid*.

⁴⁰Nicole Perlroth, *Russian Hackers Who Targeted Clinton Appear to Attack France’s Macron*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Apr 24, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/24/world/europe/macron-russian-hacking.html>.

⁴¹Andy Greenberg, *The NSA confirms it: Russia hacked French election infrastructure*, WIRED (May 9, 2017, 12:36 PM), <https://www.wired.com/2017/05/nsa-director-confirms-russia-hacked-french-election-infrastructure/>.

⁴²Eric Maurice, *Fake news takes centre stage in French election*, EU OBSERVER (May 4, 2017, 5:41 PM), <https://euobserver.com/elections/137781>.

President Macron's photograph in an Arabic newspaper affiliated with Al-Qaeda was used to falsely claim that Al-Qaeda supported Macron⁴³.

33. Falsehoods not related to elections have also gone viral in France. After the April 2017 attack on Champs-Élysées in Paris, a video posted online through a tweet by a leader of the UK extreme-right party Britain First, Paul Golding, claimed that "moderate" Muslims were celebrating the terrorist attack. It was actually a June 2009 video of Pakistanis in London celebrating Pakistan's victory in a cricket match⁴⁴. Golding subsequently deleted the tweet.
34. Hurricane Irma, which affected the French overseas territory of Saint Martin in September 2017, also generated a number of false stories that exaggerated the extent of the impact, and undermined confidence in the government's recovery efforts. These included false online reports of a prison escape on the Dutch side of Saint Martin, a price inflation on Air France flights to Paris⁴⁵, the danger posed by sharks lifted by the hurricane, as well as a series of fake videos on the hurricane's impact.⁴⁶ A young woman also attempted to profit from the disaster by spreading falsehoods and soliciting donations for victims of the hurricane.⁴⁷

Germany

35. The Germans seem to have been best prepared for foreign-linked online interference. The German Federal Intelligence Service and the Federal Office for Information Security ramped up protection measures against cyber-attacks close to one year before the Federal Election. Germany's major political parties agreed to refrain from using social media bots in the election⁴⁸. Additionally, the lack of success in shaping the outcome of the French election could have deterred attempts to shape the German elections. On balance,

⁴³Does Al-Qaeda 'support' Emmanuel Macron?, CROSSCHECK (Mar 24, 2017), <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/al-qaeda-macron/>.

⁴⁴Did London Muslims "celebrate" a terrorist attack on the Champs-Élysées?, CROSSCHECK (Apr 22, 2017), <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/london-muslims-celebrate-terrorist-attack-champs-elysees/>.

⁴⁵Adrien Sénécat et al, *Irma : attention aux rumeurs sur la situation à Saint-Martin* (Irma: beware of rumours about the situation in Saint Martin), LE MONDE (Sep 11, 2017, 3:01PM), http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/09/11/irma-attention-aux-rumeurs-sur-la-situation-a-saint-martin_5184022_4355770.html.

⁴⁶Conor Gaffey, *Shark attacks, Category 6 and NYC Underwater: Hurricane Irma has provoked a storm of fake news*, NEWSWEEK (Sep 8, 2017, 6:54AM), <http://www.newsweek.com/hurricane-irma-fake-news-alex-jones-climate-change-661686>.

⁴⁷Anne-Sophie Faivre Le Cadre, *Intox sur Irma: quel est le but de ces vidéos diffusées sur Facebook?* (Misinformation about Irma : what is the purpose of these videos circulated on Facebook?), LE MONDE (Sep 18, 2017, 5:39PM), http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/09/18/intox-sur-irma-quel-est-le-but-de-ces-vidéos-diffusées-sur-facebook_5187419_4355770.html.

⁴⁸Andrea Shalal & Eric Auchard, *German election campaign largely unaffected by fake news or bots*, REUTERS (Sep 22, 2017, 11:21AM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-fake/german-election-campaign-largely-unaffected-by-fake-news-or-bots-idUSKCN1BX258>.

this appears to have helped reduce the extent to which online falsehoods were spread during the election⁴⁹.

36. However, Germany was not completely spared. It has been suggested that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the target of both a foreign disinformation campaign, in an effort to destabilise the EU⁵⁰, and of ideological groups that wanted to discredit her ahead of the election⁵¹.
37. A Political Data Science Team at the Technical University of Munich has said that disinformation campaigns on Twitter during the German elections were conducted by both a foreign State, as well as the so-called alt-right from the US⁵².
38. Outside of elections, efforts have been made to sow anti-immigrant, anti-refugee sentiments in Germany. One example relates to false reports, in 2016, that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl was raped by men of Middle Eastern or North African appearance. This spread widely. It was suggested that she had been kidnapped on her way to school. This led to protests on the streets. The reports were eventually disproved as Berlin's state prosecutor's office clarified that no such attack had taken place⁵³.

Italy

39. Italy held a referendum in 2016 on proposals to significantly overhaul its constitution. Proponents also supported significant changes to the bicameral parliament to strengthen efficiency in governance. This referendum is said to have attracted falsehoods spread by foreign state-linked media, as well as domestic parties opposed to the proposals. Foreign media reportedly spread hoaxes on Facebook to undermine the constitutional proposals of the then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi⁵⁴.

⁴⁹Michael Schwartz, *German Election Mystery: Why No Russian Meddling?*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Sep 21, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/world/europe/german-election-russia.html>.

⁵⁰Georgi Gotev, *Commission: Russian propaganda focused on denigrating Merkel*, EURACTIV (Feb 1, 2017; updated Mar 15, 2017), <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/european-commission-russian-propaganda-focuses-on-denigrating-merkel/>.

⁵¹Ben Nimmo, *Spread it on Reddit: How a fake story about Angela Merkel led to a far-right cluster on Reddit*, DIGITAL FORENSIC RESEARCH LAB (Feb 10, 2017), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/spread-it-on-reddit-3170a463e787>; Alberto Nardelli & Craig Silverman, *Hyperpartisan sites and Facebook Pages are publishing false stories and conspiracy theories about Angela Merkel*, BUZZFEED NEWS (Jan 14, 2017, 12:33PM), https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/hyperpartisan-sites-and-facebook-pages-are-publishing-false?utm_term=.rxaEmY02Na#.xxwEAIQ7J0

⁵²Simon Hegelich, *Who is trolling the German election? Russia, AltRight or both?*, POLITICAL DATA SCIENCE (Sep 14, 2017), <http://politicaldatascience.blogspot.sg/2017/09/who-is-trolling-german-election-russia.html>.

⁵³Stefan Meister, *The "Lisa case": Germany as a target of Russian disinformation*, NATO REVIEW, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm>; Ben Knight, *Teenage girls admits to making up migrant rape claim that outraged Germany*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan 31, 2016, 9:39AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/31/teenage-girl-made-up-migrant-claim-that-caused-uproar-in-germany>.

⁵⁴Jacopo Iacoboni, *The Russian propaganda against Renzi: and Grillo's web backs it up*, LA STAMPA (Nov 11, 2016, 11:45AM), <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/11/esteri/lastampa-in-english/the-russian-propaganda-against-renzi-and-grillos-web-backs-it-up-aJrmPmt1Y17Xv5UbgmJaL/pagina.html>.

40. Online news sites linked to one of the Italian parties are said to have inundated the lead up to the referendum with falsehoods⁵⁵. They sought to undermine the proposed reforms and discredit then-Prime Minister Renzi. These news sites spreading falsehoods were reportedly also used to generate advertisement revenue for the party's leaders.
41. For instance, a video falsely claiming to show thousands protesting against then-Prime Minister Renzi and the referendum was viewed 1.5 million times. It was actually a rally supporting the referendum⁵⁶.
42. Italy has also suffered public health scares due to falsehoods. Earlier this year, opponents of vaccines in Italy spread false claims that vaccines were a scam by pharmaceutical companies. They alleged that the intention was to weaken children's immune systems and that some vaccines could kill. They pushed discredited claims that the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella could be responsible for the rise in autism⁵⁷.
43. This led to an anti-vaccine movement in Italy. The Italian health ministry reported in March 2017 that cases of measles had tripled in Italy in the first 10 weeks of the year compared to the previous year. The ministry blamed the spread of discredited stories for the spike⁵⁸. The Italian Government had to strengthen its vaccination requirements for school-age children to counter the measles outbreak. This led to anti-vaccine protests⁵⁹.

Sweden

44. Online falsehoods are a serious concern for the Swedish government, especially as Sweden will be holding its General Election this year. According to the Swedish civil contingency secretariat (MSB), “[f]alse information about subjects including [the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)], immigration and terrorism, is spread on a daily basis in Sweden”⁶⁰.
45. Foreign disinformation is a key threat. Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Lofven has said that there have been clear attempts at influencing, for example, Sweden's security politics⁶¹. Last month, Sweden's defense minister, Peter Hultqvist, and his Danish

⁵⁵*Ibid*; Alberto Nardelli & Craig Silverman, *Italy's most popular political party is leading Europe in fake news and Kremlin propaganda*, BUZZFEED NEWS (Nov 29, 2016, 10:46PM), https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/italys-most-popular-political-party-is-leading-europe-in-fake?utm_term=.ybz79K2gzj#.niyZBoz4yk.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷ Jason Horowitz, *In Italian Schools, Reading, Writing and Recognizing Fake News*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Oct 18, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/europe/italy-fake-news.html>; Angus MacKinnon, *Italian health minister accuses documentary of 'fake news' on cancer vaccine*, THE LOCAL (Apr 20, 2017, 9:14AM), <https://www.thelocal.it/20170420/italian-health-minister-accuses-documentary-of-fake-news-on-cancer-vaccine>.

⁵⁸ Angus MacKinnon, *ibid*.

⁵⁹ Jason Horowitz, *supra*, fn 57.

⁶⁰ *Concerns over barrage of fake Russian news in Sweden*, THE LOCAL (SWEDEN) (Jul 27, 2016, 8:42AM), www.thelocal.se/20160727/concern-over-barrage-of-fake-russian-news-in-sweden.

⁶¹ *How Sweden's getting ready for the election-year information war*, THE LOCAL (SWEDEN) (Nov 7, 2017, 12:48PM), www.thelocal.se/20171107/how-swedens-getting-ready-for-the-election-year-information-war.

counterpart, issued a joint statement on the danger of foreign misinformation to their countries⁶². The falsehoods often appear designed to create division and reduce trust and credibility, including in the media⁶³.

46. For example, during a national discussion on whether Sweden should enter a military partnership with NATO, the country was reportedly “flooded” with false online claims that sought to raise alarm about what Sweden would face if it did enter the partnership⁶⁴.
47. In another case, a foreign television channel reported on a letter purportedly from Sweden’s Minister of Justice, which suggested that Ukraine had sought to influence a war crimes case before the Swedish courts, and Sweden was prepared to take into account Ukraine’s interest. The letter has been discredited as fake, including by the Swedish government⁶⁵.
48. Online falsehoods in Sweden have distorted the impact of immigration, a key policy issue. One online report falsely claimed that the Swedish government was “on verge of collapse as illegal immigrants surge into the country”⁶⁶. Some online news reports suggested that there were “no-go zones” in Sweden, where the authorities did not have control, and often did not enter. These claims misrepresented what a Swedish police report had said⁶⁷. Another online news article falsely claimed that a young girl had been raped by a man “of Somali background”. The fake article was designed to look like it was published by an established newspaper, when it was not⁶⁸.

Indonesia

49. Closer to home, Indonesia has also seen its share of online falsehoods and hoaxes. In the 2017 gubernatorial election, provocative content and hate speech were spread to incite tensions along racial and religious lines. This was believed to be fuelled by Saracen, an

⁶²Sweden and Denmark Call Russian Fake News a Threat, BLOOMBERG POLITICS (Aug 31, 2017, 5:55PM), www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-29/trump-says-u-s-post-office-should-charge-amazon-much-more.

⁶³Gordon Corera, *Swedish security chief warning on fake news*, BBC NEWS (Jan 4, 2018), www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42285332.

⁶⁴Neil MacFarquhar, *A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Aug 28, 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html?_r=0.

⁶⁵*Fake letter “likely to be part of wider campaign”*, RADIO SWEDEN (Sep 13, 2015, 4:18PM), sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6255194; *supra*, fn 63.

⁶⁶Kurt Nimmo, *Sweden on verge of collapse as illegal immigrants surge into the country*, INFOWARS (Oct 20, 2015), www.infowars.com/sweden-on-verge-of-collapse-as-illegal-immigrants-surge-into-the-country/; *Facts about migration and crime in Sweden*, GOVERNMENT OFFICES OF SWEDEN, www.government.se/articles/2017/02/facts-about-migration-and-crime-in-sweden/.

⁶⁷*Crimes in Sweden, Part III: Does Sweden Have ‘No-Go Zones’ Where the Police Can’t Enter?*, SNOPEs, www.snopes.com/sweden-crim-no-go-zone-police/; *Facts about migration and crime in Sweden*, GOVERNMENT OFFICES OF SWEDEN, www.government.se/articles/2017/02/facts-about-migration-and-crime-in-sweden/.

⁶⁸Lee Roden, *Swedish newspaper victim of fake news story about ‘Somali rapist’*, THE LOCAL (SWEDEN) (Nov 6, 2017, 12:57PM), www.thelocal.se/20171106/swedish-newspaper-victim-of-fake-news-story-about-somali-rapist.

organised syndicate that profited from false stories. In August 2017, Indonesian police arrested leaders of Saracen⁶⁹.

50. In September 2017, a rumour went viral that the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute (YLBHI) was attempting to revive communism in Indonesia. The YLBHI's event was in fact, a closed-door discussion on the 1965-1966 communist purge in Indonesia. Anti-communist sentiments were stoked, and calls to disrupt the event eventually culminated in a clash between anti-communist protestors and the police⁷⁰.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THOSE WHO SPREAD FALSEHOODS

51. The key objective of foreign States that spread online falsehoods will be to destabilise the target countries. They will seek to exploit existing fault-lines within a society and heighten tensions. They will do this particularly during elections when emotions run high, making it easier to exploit and divide. They will also seek to sway the electoral outcome towards candidates whose policies are more favourable towards them.
52. In the US, three national intelligence agencies have claimed that Russia undertook an influence campaign in the US Presidential Election. The intelligence agencies assessed that Russian activities were intended to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, and undermine Hilary Clinton and affect her electoral chances⁷¹. The messaging strategy included the use of social media platforms and paid social media users ("trolls")⁷².
53. Senators Richard Burr (a Republican) and Mark Warner (a Democrat), of the US Senate Intelligence Committee, have publicly stated that members and staff of the Intelligence Committee trust the conclusions of the intelligence agencies⁷³. Their report states that the activities "demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort"⁷⁴.
54. Europe's experiences appear to be similar. The EU East Stratcom Taskforce says that there has been a pro-Russian disinformation campaign, used as a "non-military measure for achieving political goals". The aim of the campaign has been to "weaken and destabilise the West"⁷⁵. In November 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May

⁶⁹Francis Chan, *Indonesian police uncover 'fake news factory'*, THE STRAITS TIMES (Sep 17, 2017, 5:00AM), www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-police-uncover-fake-news-factory.

⁷⁰Agnes Anya, *'Fake PKI news' behind anti-communist chaos: LBH-YLBHI*, THE JAKARTA POST (Sep 18, 2017, 3:35PM), www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/09/18/fake-pki-news-behind-anti-communist-chaos-lbh-ylbhi.html.

⁷¹Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*, DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE (Jan 6, 2017), http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Julian Borger, *Top Senate intelligence duo: Russia did interfere in 2016 election*, THE GUARDIAN (Oct 4, 2017, 10:12PM), www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/04/senate-intelligence-committee-russia-election-interference.

⁷⁴*Supra*, fn 71.

⁷⁵ *Supra*, fn 5.

observed that Russia was trying to “weaponise information”. She added that Russia was attempting to “sow discord in the West and undermine [their] institutions” by “deploying its state run media organisations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images”⁷⁶.

55. Meanwhile there are also private actors who spread online falsehoods. These actors are often driven by profit. Every webpage we view, every link we click on from banners and advertisements, generates revenue. This also applies to social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Individuals who want to earn more money generate content that attracts more viewers. Often, this is sensational and controversial content to entice a wider audience.
56. The teenagers in Veles, Macedonia who generated false articles during the US Presidential Election (see paragraph 17 above) stated that they did so for financial gain. One teenager said that he earned nearly US\$16,000 in four months from running two websites. In contrast, the average monthly salary in Macedonia is US\$371⁷⁷.
57. Similarly, Saracen had a thriving following before it was shut down by the Indonesian police (see paragraph 49 above). The group’s Facebook page had more than 800,000 followers. The group members reportedly earned up to Rp72 million⁷⁸.
58. That said, there were plausibly also other non-financial motives behind Saracen’s activities. For instance, the Indonesian Government suspected that the group’s activities, which were “destructive and could potentially destroy the country’s unity”, were driven by “political motives”⁷⁹.
59. The number and range of recent incidents involving online falsehoods in various countries show a serious, growing problem. State and non-State actors are seeking to exploit fault-lines within societies to advance their agendas. They seek to create racial and religious discord, which creates conditions conducive for extremism. They endeavour to entrench divisions within a society and undermine cohesion, so that the target country, sapped of its national will, is less able to defend its interests. They also work to generate desired election outcomes to advance their interests.
60. The digital technologies we have today enable these States and individuals to target and spread falsehoods easily. Such campaigns can affect democratic processes and governance. They can also erode trust and cohesion in a society. It is necessary to seriously consider the nature of these campaigns, and consider what steps should be taken to counter them.

⁷⁶The Rt Hon Theresa May MP, *PM speech to the Lord Mayors Banquet 2017*, GOV.UK (Nov 13, 2017), www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet-2017.

⁷⁷*Supra*, fn 21.

⁷⁸Gemma Holliani Cahya, *Police grill suspected Saracen treasurers*, THE JAKARTA POST (Oct 5, 2017, 7:45 PM), www.thejakartapost.com/amp/news/2017/10/05/police-grill-suspected-saracen-treasurers.html.

⁷⁹*Ibid*.

V. STEPS BEING TAKEN BY SOME COUNTRIES, AND TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES, TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

61. Countries around the world and technology companies have begun taking steps to address online falsehoods.
62. In Germany, the Network Enforcement Act was enacted last year. It requires social networks that have more than 2 million German users to take down illegal content within 24 hours of it being reported. “Illegal content” includes hate speech and defamation⁸⁰. Where falsehoods are used to further hate speech, it can be removed through this legislation. Failure to do so could result in fines of up to 50 million euros (approximately SGD 79.5 million).
63. In the US, Senators have proposed the Honest Ads Act, even as they study other measures. Those who take out political advertisements on television, radio or print are required to disclose who funded the advertisement. This proposed Act seeks to level the playing field for advertisements taken online. It will require digital companies to take steps to release information on who was targeted by the ads and the buyers of the advertisements⁸¹.
64. On 3 January 2018, France’s President Emmanuel Macron announced that he would introduce draft legislation to address the spread of false information. He indicated that the proposed law will require websites to make public the identity of those who sponsor content on their websites, and will cap the amount of sponsored content. Emergency procedures could be introduced during elections to allow judges to remove content, close user accounts, or block websites that publish false information during these periods⁸².
65. On 5 January 2018, the BBC reported on the Swedish security chief, Anders Thornberg’s views on the impact of disinformation and online falsehoods⁸³. Thornberg gave several examples of fake news articles that sought to create division and undermine trust, including one that claimed that Muslims had vandalised a church. The latter was spread, using bots, which were from outside Sweden. He pointed out the national security implications when a foreign actor uses such disinformation campaign.
66. His view was that such tactics were working – he said that “[i]f they want to make uncertainty in our country, they are doing that”.
67. The BBC report also quoted a senior official in the Swedish civil contingency secretariat (MSB) as saying: “What we are doing is looking at what information could affect the

⁸⁰David Lumb, *German enacts law limiting online hate speech*, ENDGADGET (Oct 2, 2017), <http://www.engadget.com/2017/10/02/germany-enacts-law-limiting-online-hate-speech/>.

⁸¹Colin Lecher, *Senators announce new bill that would regulate online political ads*, THE VERGE (Oct 19, 2017, 1:31PM), www.theverge.com/platform/amp/2017/10/19/16502946/facebook-twitter-russia-honest-ads-act/.

⁸²*Macron to target fake news, social media meddling*, RFI (Jan 4, 2018, 10:39AM); *Macron plans law to fight ‘fake news’ in 2018*, REUTERS (Jan 4, 2018, 1:39AM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-macron/macron-plans-law-to-fight-fake-news-in-2018-idUSKBN1ES1J>.

⁸³*Supra*, fn 63.

well-being of our population, the functionality of our society or could affect negatively our fundamental values - freedom of speech, democracy and individual rights.” The report also referred to the role of Swedish society in confronting the threat of disinformation, the support by media organisations of independent fact-checking, and the government’s desire for primary school children to be taught how to spot false information.

68. Efforts by technology companies are also important in addressing the challenges. Facebook for example, has used artificial intelligence to detect and delete bots, fake accounts and pages⁸⁴. This led to the removal of 30,000 Facebook accounts during the French Presidential Election. Facebook has begun posting “related articles” below news links to stories that are suspected to be false news. This allows users to obtain more context to a story⁸⁵.
69. Google too has taken steps to modify its search ranking systems to prevent falsehoods from entering the top results for particular search terms⁸⁶. Google and Facebook also ban sites that peddle false stories from their advertising networks⁸⁷.
70. While these steps are welcome, deliberate online falsehoods continue to be a problem. For example, misinformation continued to go viral in the wake of recent high-profile events such as the Las Vegas mass shooting⁸⁸. Google ads carrying misinformation have also recently appeared on fact checking websites⁸⁹. Similarly, Facebook recently announced that it was replacing the disputed tags function which existed for some countries. This was because the disputed tags “may actually entrench deeply held beliefs – the opposite effect of what [Facebook] intended”⁹⁰.
71. One point of view is that “[t]echnology should be able to reduce the spread of certain types of news (such as that which is shared without being read first), and to show where news is disputed. However, the long history of fake news, the political, social and

⁸⁴Adam Entous et al, *Obama tried to give Zuckerberg a wake-up call over fake news on Facebook*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Sep 24, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/obama-tried-to-give-zuckerberg-a-wake-up-call-over-fake-news-on-facebook/2017/09/24/15d19b12-ddac-4ad5-ac6e-ef909e1c1284_story.html?utm_term=.ebb9af280833.

⁸⁵Josh Constine, *Facebook fights fake news with links to other angles*, TECHCRUNCH (Aug 3, 2017), <https://techcrunch.com/2017/08/03/facebook-related-articles/>.

⁸⁶Rory Cellan-Jones, *Google search changes tackle fake news and hate speech*, BBC NEWS (Apr 25, 2017), www.bbc.com/news/technology-39707642.

⁸⁷Romain Dillet, *Google and Facebook ban fake news sites from their advertising networks*, TECHCRUNCH (Nov 15, 2016), <https://techcrunch.com/2016/11/15/google-and-facebook-ban-fake-news-sites-from-their-advertising-networks/>.

⁸⁸Kevin Rose, *After Las Vegas Shooting, Fake News Regains Its Megaphone*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Oct 2, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/business/las-vegas-shooting-fake-news.html>.

⁸⁹*Google Serves Fake News Ads in an Unlikely Place – Fact-Checking Sites*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Oct 19, 2017).

⁹⁰*Facebook will ditch disputed flags on fake news and display links to trustworthy articles instead*, TECHCRUNCH (Dec 20, 2017), <https://www.google.com.sg/amp/s/techcrunch.com/2017/12/20/facebook-will-ditch-disputed-flags-on-fake-news-and-display-links-to-trustworthy-articles-instead/amp/>.

economic motivations for producing it, and the ease of self-publishing online, mean that technology will only ever partly address the problem⁹¹”.

VI. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SINGAPORE AND WHAT OPTIONS CAN BE CONSIDERED

72. Paragraphs 59-60 above identify some of the risks that online falsehoods could pose to Singapore.
73. Political and social discourse can often be seriously influenced by deliberate falsehoods spread online. We should guard against this; of opinions and viewpoints being intentionally manipulated through deliberate falsehoods.
74. Further, the risk of foreign interference is also high.
75. Singapore is both an attractive target, and highly susceptible to the deliberate spread of online falsehoods:

- (a) Singapore is one of the most open and globally connected countries in the world.

We are an international hub for trade, finance, travel and communications. More goods, services, finance, people, and data flow into and through Singapore than most countries.

Most Singaporeans can read and access materials in English. They are well connected to the rest of the world, including through the latest digital technology. Most Singaporeans - 91% of Singaporean households and 84% of Singaporeans - have Internet access. Majority, 53% of Singaporeans, get their main source of news online (including through social media)⁹².

Apart from the use of English, Singapore is also a multi-lingual society. Therefore we are also open to messages targeted at particular segments of society, by using specific languages and channels.

- (b) Singapore is also a vulnerable target because we are multi-racial and one of the most religiously diverse societies in the world⁹³.

⁹¹Martin Moore, *Written Submission to: Inquiry into Fake News, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee*, CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND POWER, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON (Mar 2017), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/CMCP-Consultation-Submission-for-CMS-Select-Committee-Fake-News-Inquiry.pdf>.

⁹²Nic Newman et al, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*, REUTERS INSTITUTE AND UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/DIGital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf.

⁹³Pew Research Center, *Global Religious Diversity*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Apr 4, 2014), <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/>.

Race and religion are fault-lines that have torn many societies apart. Yet, we have succeeded in becoming a rare and precious example of a multi-racial and multi-religious society, where people live together harmoniously. This is not by chance. The Government and the different communities have worked hard together to make this happen.

Racial and religious harmony cannot be taken for granted; matters pertaining to race and religion will always remain sensitive. Maintaining the harmony amongst our racial and religious groups will often require the Government to make difficult decisions on such issues. Discussions on these issues should be for Singaporeans to have, and should be had on the basis of facts, and without foreign interference.

Comments by foreigners on the status and treatment of racial communities in Singapore are not new. As a Chinese majority state surrounded by Malay majority neighbouring states, the status of the various communities in Singapore is under close scrutiny by others.

- (c) Singapore is in itself an attractive target to attack.

Singapore is a key strategic node for international finance, trade, travel and communications, and a key player in ASEAN. What Singapore says and the position that Singapore takes on global and regional issues matter.

This makes Singapore an attractive and valuable target. If Singapore can be made to bend to the will of one or other foreign power, then that can help advance the interests of a foreign power in this region.

- 76. As the experience elsewhere shows, the Internet and social media provide new and easy means through which falsehoods can be spread deliberately. Actors who wish to harm Singapore will find deliberate online falsehoods an effective way to undermine Singapore. They can, for example, try to exacerbate and whip up communal tensions through such falsehoods, particularly amongst different racial and religious groups. These messages could be selectively targeted using specific languages and channels.
- 77. There will be foreign actors who wish to destabilise Singapore. We have to ensure that our national security is not compromised.
 - (a) We have strict rules against foreign interference in our politics. The Political Donations Act prevents parties and candidates contesting elections from accepting foreign funding. The Societies Act permits only Singapore citizens to be members of political associations. Such associations must not have any foreign connection contrary to our national interest. The Public Order Act empowers the Police to refuse permits for public assemblies directed towards political ends if they are organised by or involve foreign actors.

- (b) The same rules should apply to cyberspace. People's lives are greatly intertwined with the digital world. Many receive and share information primarily through the Internet and social media.
78. Attempts at exerting foreign influence in Singapore are not new. This has happened to us even before the advent of the Internet, through newspapers.
- (a) For instance, in the 1970s, the *Singapore Herald* was used as a tool of foreign interference. The newspaper adopted a virulently anti-Government line and conducted a campaign to mislead Singaporeans, especially the English-educated. Although the newspaper was losing money heavily, it continued to be funded by sources that remain murky. The supposed shareholders and creditors included a former Chief Minister of the Malaysian state of Sabah, a Hong Kong businesswoman, and a foreign bank. All of them did not seem bothered by the heavy losses on their supposed loans and investment. When the Singapore Government intervened, the foreign bank foreclosed on its loan. The *Singapore Herald* folded up and ceased publication in May 1971. Its permit to print and publish was not renewed on expiry.
 - (b) There was also the case of *The Eastern Sun*, which closed down voluntarily in 1971 following the Singapore Government's revelation that it had received HK\$8 million from a Communist intelligence agency in Hong Kong. In return for soft loans at the very low interest rate of 0.1%, the newspaper had agreed to toe its paymaster's line that there would be no opposition to the donor country's agenda on major issues. *The Eastern Sun* was closed down voluntarily in 1971 following this revelation.
79. The advent of the Internet has provided a new modality for those who wish to spread falsehoods to do so with greater ease and reach than before. Recently, Singaporeans were exposed to deliberate online falsehoods on a local website, *The Real Singapore*. This website attracted over 2 million unique monthly visitors every month. The website's editors were convicted for sedition for six articles which were designed to stir up racial and religious tension. One such story included a claim that a Filipino family had complained about a group of Singaporeans playing musical instruments during the annual *Thaipusam* procession in 2015 which led to a commotion between Hindu participants and the police. The promoters of the website were also profiting from such false and sensational stories by drawing eyeballs to increase their income from online advertising on their site.
80. Singaporeans hold a wide range of opinions and viewpoints on a variety of issues, be it on education, housing, transport, healthcare, or politics. These issues are close to Singaporeans' hearts. Discussion and debate on these matters take place openly. Such vigorous exchange informs Singaporeans and enables us to express views on matters of national interest, and to shape the path of the nation.

81. It is important that such discourse and debate be open, and not be based on deliberate falsehoods. We should guard against developments that can undermine, discredit, or debase such debate and discourse. The dissemination of deliberate falsehoods, particularly if this is done covertly, attacks the very heart of democracy. It seeks to mislead, to crowd out truth, and prevent constructive debate and discourse. If this is allowed unchecked, people's faith in the country, democracy, and its institutions will be undermined.
82. It is also important to ensure that discussions and debates on national issues take place free of foreign interference. We should learn from the experiences of other countries, and engage others who have different perspectives and views. But we cannot allow ourselves to be covertly manipulated by others, and it must also be clear that after all the discussions, Singapore's future must be decided by Singaporeans alone.

Formation of Select Committee

83. Online falsehoods pose real and serious challenges. The incidents around the world demonstrate the serious nature of the issues. Singapore should not wait for an incident to occur. We have to learn from the experiences of other countries what the risks are, and what can be done about them. We should be prepared ahead of time. There needs to be a wide-ranging conversation about our response to these challenges as a country and a society.
84. The Government therefore intends to ask Parliament to appoint a Select Committee to examine and report on:
 - (a) The phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online;
 - (b) The motivations and reasons for the spreading of such falsehoods, and the types of individuals and entities, both local and foreign, which engage in such activity;
 - (c) The consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to our institutions and democratic processes; and
 - (d) How Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods, including:
 - i. The principles that should guide Singapore's response; and
 - ii. Any specific measures, including legislation, that should be taken.
85. The public will be invited to make submissions to the Select Committee on these issues, once Parliament approves the formation of the Select Committee. The Select Committee can also hold public hearings, to engage in-depth with witnesses on key issues.