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Headline: Fake news: 'No need for new laws, just refine current ones'

Fake news: 'No need for new laws, just refine current ones'

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SINGAPORE – Writing in the Law Gazette, a law professor argued against the need for new laws to deal with fake news, saying that the authorities should look instead at enhancing the Broadcasting Act and its subsidiary legislation for Internet content regulation.

In particular, they should clarify the class licensing regime, which allows the authorities to demand websites hosting objectionable content be removed, and broaden it to include news aggregators, social media platforms that provide news feeds, and other similar content hosts.

Authors of web content should also be held to some standard of "responsible speech" and an independent fact-checking mechanism, Associate Professor Warren B Chik from the Singapore Management University said.

In a six-page commentary published in the June edition of the Law Gazette, Assoc Prof Chik wrote that there is "no compelling need" for new laws to deal with the scourge of fake news. Refining existing regulations would "draw the least criticism", he added.

There is also no need to differentiate fake news from other forms of false information which are covered by regulations now, he said.

What is more important is to clarify that the relevant Internet intermediaries hosting or providing access to information come under the ambit of existing regulations, which now provide a "confusing" definition of what makes an "Internet content provider", he argued.

Last week, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam had said that laws tackling fake news may be directed towards working with online platforms to detect and dispel falsehoods, as well as taking to task those who perpetrate fabrications.

Assoc Prof Chik suggested that civil society groups comprising librarians, academics, media practitioners and others be formed to help Internet intermediaries with their fact-checking obligations, and to flag sites propagating fake news to the authorities.

Credible fact-checking groups may be appointed by the authorities or through private arrangements.

Such feedback can then be channelled to a dedicated pool of officers who can use the present notice-and-take-down regime more effectively and efficiently, he said.

"(This) is an important self- and co-regulatory approach," he said, noting that the current content-regulatory regime places the responsibility and power only on the Info-communications Media Development Authority.

Another suggestion is to require Internet intermediaries to categorise news separately from opinions by colour-coding or tagging them, for example. Or have a ranking policy for search results, with websites that publish disputable content given a lower rank.

He also proposed that there be blocking of advertisements, and thus a cut in financial incentives, for web-

sites that generate traffic through sensationalising or fabricating "news".

Assoc Prof Chik said that these approaches are "more nuanced" than an outright blocking of websites, and will be better-received by readers while encouraging digital literacy among them. "What is clear is that this will be a long and protracted battle for information integrity and factual accuracy," he said.

ENLIST HELP OF CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

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