

**Speech by Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, at the “Legislation and The Fight Against Disinformation In Southeast Asia” Conference on Thursday, 27 January 2022**

1 Thank you. You would have delved deeply over the last two days, but I will try and bring together the various pieces, and explain how we see the issue of online misinformation from Singapore’s perspective.

2 Over the last few days, you have discussed, and understand the global challenges out there. You know the costs: bad actors turning groups against each other by inflaming tensions along social fault lines like race and religion, and sometimes causing new fault lines. We have seen this through, for example, the COVID-19 infodemic and the fearmongering over vaccines. I am sure you would have talked about the speed at which content is created and circulated online. The volume, intensity and breadth of potential harmful falsehoods can seem daunting and may require new sets of solutions thinking about how we can address issues in a different way.

3 What I hope to explain is our approach and the various strategies. We have three main strategies – like a tripod, you need all three legs to be strong. Only when we have all three do we find ourselves having a significant degree of success.

4 Singapore has been studying the issue of online misinformation for some time. In 2018, we had the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which was set up to examine and report on the problem of deliberate online falsehoods and the strategies to deal with them. The Select Committee comprised Members of Parliament from both incumbent and opposition parties, as well as a nominated MP. Although you have talked about the legislation and regulatory tools over the last few days at the conference, I would like to remind everyone that the Committee at the time felt strongly that legislative tools was only one leg of that tripod. An informed public was a significant second limb – the strength of public institutions and trust in their public institutions. Thirdly, fact-checking – that we needed institutions, processes and expertise in fact-checking.

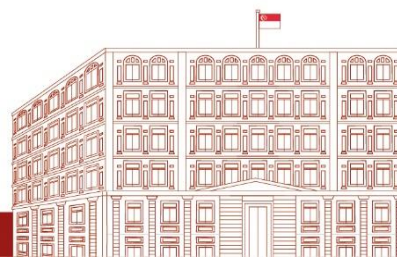
5 This whole-of-society approach, across the public, private and people sectors, would be required to address the issue of online misinformation. Our tools, tactics and approaches within these three broad strategies need to be updated over time to keep pace with developments with technology. Nonetheless, we will have these three strategies with us for the foreseeable future, and we will have to make sure that we allocate time, resources, energy and effort so that we have the right outcomes across all three. I will first talk about legislation, which is the topic of your conference.

### **Disrupt online falsehoods**

6 Our thinking is how can we have a fit-for-purpose legislation to disrupt the falsehood as it spreads online. The Select Committee was unanimous in recommending new legislation to tackle the problem. In 2019, we introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) to ensure that our citizens are not misled or misinformed by online falsehoods that are against the public interest.

7 This legislation allows the Government to issue a direction against the communicator of the falsehood or the platform if two legal requirements are met:

- i. There has to be a falsehood – a factually false statement and
- ii. It is in the public interest to use POFMA to do something about it.



8 Why did we take this approach? We know that we are a small multi-racial and multi-religious country. We believe – and time has also demonstrated – that we are vulnerable to the threat of online falsehoods to create new divisions and to exploit existing divisions. As an open and connected city-state, the connectivity we thrive on, which is part of our survival, means that we can't shut ourselves off in the digital domain. Online falsehoods thrive in that space – whether it is rapidly spreading viral memes or insidious “slow-drip” falsehoods. We have seen in many other cities and states, the use of these falsehoods to breed hate, xenophobia and societal discord. It would be hubris to imagine that in Singapore, we are somehow more immune to these risks. We have to take those lessons from overseas and make sure that we apply them to protect ourselves as appropriate.

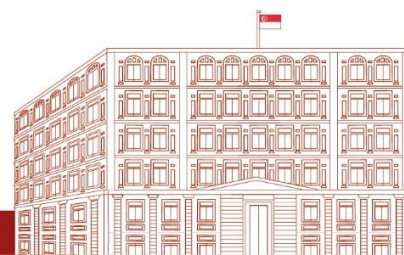
9 In doing so, our approach is to address misinformation with accurate information. POFMA relies primarily on the ability to provide the facts. Corrections that are issued involve a clarification issued by the Government, and it is to be inserted alongside the post containing the falsehoods. The original falsehoods remains and they remain available in full. Public can see the original statement and understand the context of the clarification issued by Government, in parallel with the original. Legislation does provide for access blocking (or “take-downs”), but that is used as a last resort, if there is non-compliance with the correction direction. In some cases, we will issue the order to the social media platform. Here, the clarification or post can be a general notice to users based in Singapore because the information often travels through a variety of feeds or other people's pages or platforms. POFMA Corrections have also been reported by the mainstream media. This is a key part of the strategy – it is that we are adding to the discourse and commentary by the mainstream media that such a correction has been issued. The merits of that correction add to the robustness of the immunity that we are trying to build in the public. The public can read both the falsehood and the facts in the Government's clarification, as well as the commentary around the matter, and make up their own mind. Philosophically, this approach is similar to fact-checking. It informs the public that the website or social media post has been fact-checked and found to contain falsehoods, with a clarification posted by an authoritative source. But this is only one leg of the strategy.

10 We are glad we moved early. POFMA has been helpful in our battle against the COVID-19 infodemic, with the majority of POFMA cases related to COVID-19 misinformation. Moreover, since we adopted this approach in late 2019, we have seen some major social media platforms come up with changes to their product, including interventions such as pro-actively inserting COVID-19 notices (with links to factual sources), in posts containing COVID-related content. We welcome this, and we believe it reflects a similar philosophy to how we have to deal with misinformation.

11 We have had our share of critics. But what's clear now in 2022 is that the presence of this legislation has not curtailed comment, opinion, or the involvement of civil society in public discourse. Those who have received POFMA orders have continued to air their views online. There are legal safeguards. People are free to challenge the use of POFMA in the Courts, and there have been challenges too. We believe in our approach - to counter falsehoods and false narratives circulating online by providing more facts. The public also now actively writes to the POFMA Office to flag out potential falsehoods, and asking to check on an issue – and if appropriate, to issue a correction. This involvement from the public in the process is a reason why we think we made the right step.

### **Nurture an informed public**

12 Let me speak on the second strategy – the second leg in the tripod. We cannot and do not want to rely on POFMA alone. It is a “response” mechanism. In one of the earlier sessions yesterday, participants noted that there has been a shift in how the public consumes news. There is information overload. People have begun to curate the information they receive, cherry-picking



information that confirms their views. So, to properly protect ourselves against misinformation, we need a second key strategy: a public that is well-informed, and well-equipped to sensibly evaluate information.

13 Previous discussions also touched on the need to build trust in public institutions, so that the public will trust the facts coming from them.

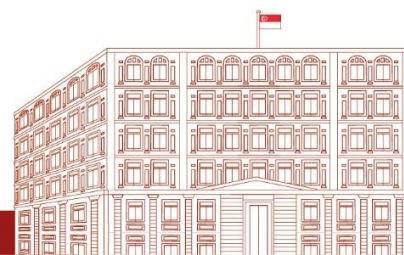
14 The Government has a role to play in the second strategy. To help uphold trust in public institutions, we must make sure that we communicate proactively and put out accurate information in a timely manner. This reduces the space for misinformation, especially during COVID-19. We have used a variety of platforms including government websites, private messaging and social media channels – making sure we access multiple languages to communicate essential information about the COVID-19 vaccines to all segments of our society. For example, Gov.sg is the official online communication platform of the Singapore Government. It also has a WhatsApp account available in multiple languages. The response from the public suggests that we have made the right choice in some of our communication strategies to shore up this second limb. There are currently over 1.2 million subscribers to the WhatsApp account, and 300,000 subscribers on Telegram.

15 We have to and do work with various partners to develop and amplify our public communications, including working with those who develop social media content. The engagement that we have from content creators, media companies, social media platforms can then multiply the reach for public education. A well-informed and discerning public can look at the veracity of information that they encounter online. Thus, it is important to continually strengthen information and media literacy skills among fragments of our population. We have the Digital Media and Information Literacy Framework that informs how we do public education; organisations like our National Library Board that have a large community presence, engaging in programmes to teach students, working adults and the general public to be responsible and informed producers and consumers of information.

16 We need a collective effort involving people from all walks of life. Community groups and individual volunteers all help to engage the public and demonstrate ways to make use of these resources. As discussed earlier, in some cases, people trust the facts when it comes from personal, trusted intermediaries – such as family members or friends. These relationships can help to address the anxieties and concerns in this time of a flood of misinformation, especially those that are sophisticated and play on emotions, fears and passions.

17 We have community movements like the Digital for Life (DfL) movement, where we involve the private and public sectors, as well as mobilise people to build digital readiness and an inclusive society, through ground mobilisation and activities. The movement is much larger than misinformation. It is important to bring people along to promote good habits in areas such as media literacy and mitigating the risks of online harms. This collaboration is not just about the Government making it happen. Organisations such as Google and the National University of Singapore (NUS) have come together to train 1,000 NUS students to mentor 3,000 low-income primary school students. These efforts are multi-stakeholder, bringing many organisations and entities together.

18 The Media Literacy Council (MLC), with members from business, academia, and social and community organisations, encourages the public to become discerning media users. Resources, such as handbooks and infographics, are available on the MLC's website, guiding people in learning how to deal with misinformation in these online spaces.



19 Ultimately, this has to translate into a community effort, including efforts by agencies to reach out door to door. We should not underestimate the importance of academic and the academic sector in public education.

20 For example, the Centre for Trusted Internet and Community (CTIC) at NUS, started in 2020, conducting research on how societies discern online harms and how to build responsible public discourse as well as inculcate a culture that prioritises facts over misinformation. The Centre develops technologies and tools, like the LetsCheck online platform where users can check Twitter claims about COVID-19 using reputable scientific sources or official news media . The Centre also hosts an online repository of commentaries by subject matter experts.

### **Growing the fact-checking ecosystem**

21 This leads me to the third strategy – encourage the growth of a fact-checking ecosystem. Fact-checkers play a key role in tackling misinformation and is a growing industry in various countries. It is often not obvious to the public, but those of us gathered here today know that high quality fact-checks are extremely resource intensive. It is challenging for fact-checkers to work alone, given the resource constraints to develop capabilities, build databases, keep up with trends and information that’s out there.

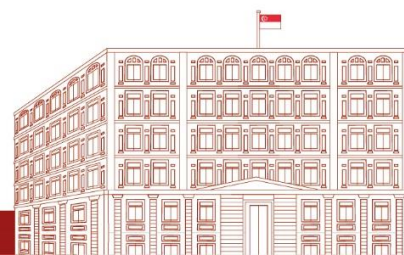
22 In fact, fact-checkers need to collaborate with each another, and with other stakeholders, to synergise efforts in fighting misinformation. I am pleased to see that the Asian Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN) has brought together fact-checkers and stakeholders from sectors such as media, academia to connect, share best practices and exchange knowledge, information and expertise.

23 Today is an important day in shoring up this third strategy, and we hope to see more collaborations between fact-checkers and other organisations – especially between fact-checking organisations and tech companies. We see a lot of potential in such collaborations because tech companies have the resources to provide and create capabilities to detect falsehoods on their platforms. They could also provide trusted fact-checkers with access to data for more robust identification of falsehoods.

24 Some companies have developed chatbots/in-app factchecking services with third-party factcheckers. As Abhas Tripathi mentioned during his session yesterday, companies are also developing product interventions and behavioural nudges to counter confirmation bias and “System 1 thinking”. Tech companies can and should also amplify the work done by fact-checkers on their platforms, given that most people who saw the original falsehood may not see the fact-check or clarification.

25 But there is a dimension in which they struggle – because there is a sensitivity to local context and local values that the tech companies or the social media platforms cannot do on a tech driven basis, especially if they are located in other jurisdictions. For this, they need local fact-checkers working with the community to make judgement calls on some of these issues taking into account local value and local context.

26 We look forward to the development of a robust and mature fact-checking ecosystem in Asia in the future. In the meantime, for Singapore, we are encouraged to see Black Dot Research as a pioneer in the local fact-checking scene, partnering with multiple stakeholders (e.g. media, schools) to promote fact-checking in Singapore. Black Dot Research has told me that they have published around 500 factchecks since Jan 2019 and are working with schools to conduct training on fact-checking and to evaluate education curriculum in this area. They also have a radio segment on national broadcaster CNA938, covering key fact-checks of the week. They are also supporting ground-up fact-checking initiatives from the community to contribute to the ecosystem, in particular



acting as mentors for a university team . We look forward to more of Black Dot Research's contributions in this space.

27 In some ways, Singapore has have been an early mover in regulating and combatting online misinformation through various strategies. But the strategies and narratives of misinformation are also changing, and becoming more sophisticated. They are refining their targets, and so we then subsequently need to refine our approach. Governments in the region and across the world are updating their regulations and strategies to tackle misinformation. We also need to continue to learn from their experience too.

28 I hope that my sharing about our three strategies has provided some insight on our approach for a whole-of-society involvement to address the issue of online misinformation. My thanks to the AFCN, led by Black Dot Research, for organising the conference with many fruitful discussions on this subject. I hope to be able to meet with as many of you in person to discuss this issue in future.

29 Thank you.

