

# Singapore launches public hearings on 'fake news'

SINGAPORE - Singapore on Wednesday launched public hearings on possible legislation to combat "fake news" which critics said could be used to curtail free speech.



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A 10-member parliamentary committee was set up in January to tackle false online information which the government says could threaten national security.

The wealthy city-state is among the countries looking to introduce legislation to rein in fake news but critics have cautioned this could be used to exert further control over the media.

## Deliberate online falsehoods

Some 164 people have written to the committee, including academics, technology and social media companies such as Facebook and Google, and civil activists to give their inputs.

The committee will call 79 individuals and organisations to testify over eight days after which it is expected to make recommendations to lawmakers within months.

"Deliberate online falsehoods are a serious global problem... It is a complex problem, affecting us in many different ways,"

said committee chairman and parliamentary deputy speaker Charles Chong at the opening of the hearing.

Several academics were called to testify on the first day, including cyber-conflict expert Michael Raska, who noted that cyber attacks and false information online could have the same political impact as a military strike.

"How does Singapore deter (these attacks) and respond militarily? These attacks can happen far away where a conventional response is not viable," he said.

## **Protect free speech and enhance free speech**

Singapore already has tough laws in place to prevent the incitement of racial and religious discord, as well as legislation covering libel, public protests and dissent.

The possibility of more regulation in what is seen as a curb on free speech has some big technology companies worried.

But the Singapore government has said curbing what it calls online falsehoods is necessary and denied it was aimed at curtailing free speech.

"In fact, one of the purposes of dealing with deliberate online falsehoods is to protect free speech and enhance free speech," Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam, who is on the committee, said during Wednesday's hearing.

Singapore is ranked 151 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index by non-profit group Reporters Without Borders.

**Source:** AFP via I-Net Bridge.

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