

Facebook, Google warn Singapore against 'fake news' law

SINGAPORE, Asia - Internet giants Facebook and Google on Thursday testified before a parliamentary committee in Singapore as they warned the city-state against introducing new laws to combat "fake news", saying that existing legislation is adequate to address the problem.



[AFP.com](https://www.afp.com)

Their warnings were made to a parliamentary committee which is examining possible measures, including legislation, to tackle false online information which the government says could threaten national security.

Executives from Facebook, Google and Twitter appeared before the committee Thursday, and are among scores of experts, academics and activists called to testify over eight days.

The financial hub is among several countries looking at legislation to rein in fake news but critics have cautioned this could be used to curb free speech. The Singapore government has denied it is trying to restrict free speech.

In a submission given to the committee before testifying, Alvin Tan, Facebook's head of public policy in Southeast Asia, said: "We do not believe that legislation is the best approach to addressing the issue.

"Singapore already has a variety of existing laws and regulations which address hate speech, defamation and the

spreading of false news."

His comments came as Facebook is embroiled in a privacy scandal following revelations that British data analysis firm Cambridge Analytica exploited the personal data of millions of users of the social network.

Facebook's Asia-Pacific vice president for public policy Simon Milner admitted during the hearing that the social media giant could have told users earlier that their data had been breached by Cambridge Analytica between 2014 and 2015.

"That's one of the lessons for us, as to why we're now going to audit all other apps and not just going to take their affirmation... that they have deleted data and not passed it on," he said.

Google also raised concerns about a fake news law, saying in a written submission that "an effective way of combating misinformation is through educating citizens on how to distinguish reliable from unreliable information".

Instead of legislation, it called for "promoting quality journalism to ensure that there is a robust network of fact-checking organisations providing reliable information and debunking falsehoods".

Wrapping up a nearly three-hour exchange with Milner that got heated at times, committee member and law and home affairs minister K. Shanmugam said the government saw the tech giants as "partners".

"We see you as partners, but we do not accept some characterisations of what you think you can do... some areas of concern we need to explore very carefully," he said.

The committee has received views from 164 people on combating fake news. After the hearings, which are scheduled to end next week, it will make recommendations to MPs within months.

Legislation is among the options under examination by the committee, and no details about any possible law have been made public.

"Given the alarming legislative precedents in the city-state, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) shares the deep concern that Singaporean defenders of the freedom to inform have expressed about this proposed law, which they suspect will be yet another tool for censoring dissent," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk.

Domestic media is tightly controlled in Singapore, and the country is ranked 151 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index by RSF. A number one ranking is the best.

Source: AFP

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