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## Press Release

### **Facebook Must be Independent from the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act to Safeguard Freedom of Speech**

DigitalReach urges Facebook to stay independent from the government of Singapore's use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) as the company can be part of initiatives to crack down on free speech.

On November 23, 2019, an online news site, The States Times Review, posted an article titled "Whistleblower arrested for exposing PAP candidate Christian evangelist Rachel Ong Sin Yen" as a link on Facebook with a caption that read "Singapore is a multi-culture society with a majority Chinese population in the Malay peninsular. The people live harmoniously together despite their religious and racial differences, but there are always a few religious extremists in the ruling party dictatorship trying to remove the secular status of the country." The Singapore government said that the post contained "scurrilous accusations" and demanded Facebook to publish a correction notice on the post. In response, Facebook later added the correction notice that is only visible to audiences in Singapore that is read "Facebook is legally required to tell you that the Singapore government says this post has false information."

Facebook's actions help suppress free speech and press freedom in the country. Facebook's provided an accompanying statement which read, "As required by Singapore law, Facebook applied to a label to these posts, which were determined by the Singapore government to contain false information." This runs counter to the company's claim to be supportive freedom of expression and the press. If the social media companies cannot stay independent from state influence and do whatever they are ordered, that means effectively supporting political repression and even becoming complicit in exporting human rights suppression.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), nicknamed "the fake news law", is one of the repressive laws that can be used to suppress freedom of speech in Singapore. Under its provisions, the government can consider any content it does not like as fake, false, or misleading without a clear definition. Content that is simply critical of the government is particularly susceptible. The fact that the state can tell social media companies to remove any content considered as fake information from its platform means that the law can be easily used to silence any individual or entity the government does not favor.

Freedom of speech means that an individual or a community is able to articulate their opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal sanction, while freedom of the press means that communication and expression through media is the right to be exercised freely without interference of state. In a truly democratic environment, the government must be able to accept criticism exercised under the nature of freedom of speech and freedom of the press as it is a public institution.

In Singapore, freedom of speech has been heavily suppressed and press freedom is also under serious threat. Individuals or entities that criticize the state face various forms of explicit and implicit threats. The state also controls all local mainstream media agencies. Alternative independent media face

difficulties in doing their jobs. Given the situation, DigitalReach is concerned that POFMA can be weaponized by the People's Action Party (PAP) during the upcoming general election. If the government can tell social media platforms to remove or give a correction notion on any criticism about them stated by opposition candidates or political critics, social media companies then effectively help the PAP to preserve its power. This comes in addition to acting against freedom of speech and press freedom if done without careful assessment in accordance with universally-accepted human rights principles.

The only way that Facebook can be independent in order and support freedom of speech and freedom of the press is to not comply with the government's order under POFMA. The removal of content must be fact-checked by independent sources with neutral political views or Facebook itself with the reason that it does not follow the company's universal Community Standards. Putting a correction notion because of the law simply due a government not liking a narrative runs against freedom of speech and freedom of the press. This is an action that violates human rights.

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