

SPEECH OF HON. DEEPAK BALGOBIN

**MINISTER OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY,
COMMUNICATION AND INNOVATION**

**DIGITAL LITERACY/MISINFORMATION DEEP DIVE
BY META - FACEBOOK**

Wednesday 24th November 2021

Hennessy Park Hotel, Ebène, 11 00hrs

- **Ms Nomonde Gongxeka-Seopa, Head of Public Policy for Southern Africa Region, Meta**
- **Mr Kojo Boayke, Public Policy Director, Meta, who is present via video-conference,**
- **Miss Sandrine Valere, Permanent Secretary of my Ministry**
- **Dear Guests and friends,**
- **Representatives from the Press,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning to you all and welcome.

I am pleased to be with you this morning for the opening of this important workshop as we welcome an official delegation from Meta, from South Africa and also from the UK via video-conference. This is indeed the first time that we are officially collaborating with Meta for the organisation of such an event in Mauritius.

I seize this opportunity to thank the whole team, with whom we have been in touch, especially during the last few months and for their much-needed support and guidance regarding the various issues which have been raised on Facebook lately.

Well, I must say that it is matter which I have taken up personally, as the number of complaints pertaining to Facebook were alarmingly increasing. The **Mauritian Cybercrime Online Reporting System (MAUCORS)** of the National Computer Board and which falls under the aegis of my Ministry, has

recorded more than **1600** incidents related to Facebook since January 2021 till date. In addition, the Cybercrime Unit of the Mauritius Police Force has recorded 218 complaints related to Facebook.

The concerned authorities dealing with the Facebook incidents, which is the **Computer Emergency response Team (CERT-MU)** and the **Cybercrime Unit**, work in collaboration to tackle these complaints. And one of the main issues which has constantly being flagged, was the relatively long time taken by Facebook to remove contents which were causing prejudice to Mauritian users.

In July this year, I took the initiative to write to the CEO of Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, to raise the matter at higher levels and the latter has delegated the South African and the UK Office to establish communication with the Mauritian authorities. Since then, we have had several online meetings and fruitful discussions and this is how we have commonly decided to hold a series of workshops and informative sessions with various stakeholders in Mauritius.

The main aim was:

- a) Reducing the spread of false news, harmful contents and misinformation,
- b) Reducing hate speech / incitement to violence which may trigger civil unrest, social disorder and economic hardships,
- c) And showing to the Government of Mauritius and its people the steps taken by Facebook to tackle misuse of the platform.

Today, is the first of a series of workshops which will be organised by Meta with the collaboration of my Ministry to tackle the various misinformation campaigns, for example, as it is the case for the COVID-19 pandemic and also to propose a comprehensive approach to help address information crisis and fake news on the social network platform.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this very difficult time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen the mushrooming of misinformation and fake news everywhere, whether on social media, websites or TV channels. Last year, during the first wave of the pandemic, we witnessed quite a high number of cases of fake news being reported in relation to infections caused by the corona virus.

Ironically, fake news spread more easily than genuine news. This is a global problem affecting societies across the world. Staying quiet and doing nothing is not the solution to growing fake news and misinformation. Because the damages that misinformation and fake news can cause to society at large are dramatic.

In fact, the diffusion of false information on a daily basis, this creates a false sense of truth that some people come to believe in. Having created false images in their minds, such people harbour unjustified fears which can only make them distrust the authorities and vent out their qualms on social media.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Very often, fake profiles are employed to post objectionable or immoral contents with the objective of targeting a specific person or group. Our country being a multi-racial one. Such harmful contents, especially those with communal tones, posted on social media, can ignite dangerous conflicts having unimaginable and irreversible consequences.

These malicious activities have been and are still putting us, Government and citizens to task, in attempting to resolve the harm being caused and prevent it from occurring again. Believe me, from the perspective of a Government caring for the integrity of its citizens, these efforts are very painful. This is why we have made an urgent appeal to Facebook to join forces and fight against the misdeeds of those ill-doers. And we are very thankful to the team which Facebook has dispatched to assist us in the process.

As a responsible Government, and a responsible Minister of ICT, we have established a mechanism involving the concerned authorities in Mauritius and Meta to handle complaints and actions were taken during the last few years. But in most cases this process was lengthy.

Taking down misinformation such as fake news or hate speeches that can cause **real** harm to users in the **real** world is a situation which is not in our hands.

You can imagine how viral fake news for example can become. We need to restore confidence in the cyber dialogue.

But how do we achieve that?

Let me share a few clues.

- The official information issued by authorities are to be disseminated through all channels of communication like TV, radio, social media, newspaper, etc.
- Media groups to fact-check any information they gather from people on social media.
- To develop means for social media platforms to set up fact-checking solutions that employ AI tools and to weed out fake profiles.
- To strengthen the legislation to avoid situations of misuse of fake profiles.

It is our duty as a Government to find means to roll back when the wrong has been done. We have, with the help of the **Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Bill**, which has just been passed in Parliament a couple of days back, set the ground for addressing the issues of fake profiles and giving out false information.

In order to strengthen our collaboration with META for a quicker and more effective response, both parties agreed on this series of workshop which is being held today and tomorrow. The objective is to better understand their mechanism and enhance the knowledge of multilateral institutions and various stakeholders, while raising awareness for a better use of the social network platform.

Next year, we will target other groups like children and teenagers, who are the most active on Facebook.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude, I wish to thank once again Meta for their collaboration and we are honoured to have you among us for these two-day workshops.

On behalf of the Government of Mauritius, let me reassure you that you have our full support and we look forward for a strong, long lasting and an enhanced partnership.

I will end my speech here and I wish all participants fruitful deliberations during this interesting workshop.

I thank you for your attention.