iPS Institute of
Policy Studies

Report on the IPS-MLC Workshop for a Better Internet

12 March 2019
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

By Shawn Goh

Organised as a follow-up to the Better Internet Conference 2019, the IPS-MLC Workshop for a Better Internet was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on 12 March 2019. It aimed to provide a more intimate platform to bring academics and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) together to address the challenges posed by digitalisation. A total of 52 participants attended the workshop.

Participants at the IPS-MLC Workshop for a Better Internet.

Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Vice-Chairperson of the Media Literacy Council (MLC), began the session and explained how the workshop discussions would help spur more research on the digital space that are relevant and applicable to NGOs from the social service sector.

By the people, for the people: Engaging with digital literacy on the ground

The first session featured representatives from NGOs in the social service sector who gave their reflections on the key takeaways from the Better Internet Conference 2019.

Ms Lily Yip, Head of Pre-School at the Association for Persons with Special Needs (APSN), talked about APSN's efforts in equipping people with disabilities (PWDs) with media and digital literacy skills, and addressed some of the current gaps in this area. She said the first step is to improve PWDs' access and ability to participate in the digital space by leveraging assistive technology. While teaching certain literacy skills like discerning online falsehoods may be too sophisticated for some PWDs, Ms Yip said APSN works with partners to develop programmes that address other aspects of media and digital literacy for PWDs. These include working with Singtel Group to develop cyber-wellness content for PWDs to practise safe and respectful use of the online space, as well as working with allied health professionals like psychologists to teach PWDs how to deal with online harassment. Finally, by sharing the story of one of her clients who is non-verbal but expresses himself through his photography, Ms Yip stressed that technology and digital platforms are important in allowing PWDs to express themselves, communicate and participate in society. PWDs can access and participate in the digital space as long as they are given the right resources and support.

Next, **Mr Sunny Chan**, Chairman of Cyberguide Programme & Volunteer Training Centre at RSVP Singapore, spoke about RSVP's work and the challenges it faced when working with seniors. Mr Chan said RSVP offers various subsidised IT programmes that aim to empower seniors with digital skills at many levels, ranging from basic smartphone use and digital banking, to being competent at Windows and Macintosh computer operating systems and even coding. He stressed that it is important to be patient when working with seniors as they are only beginning to be exposed to the digital age. It is also important to provide seniors with regular practise sessions after their training for them to apply and reinforce what they have learnt. However, Mr Chan added that one related challenge is striking a balance between having sufficient training hours and overly long training hours, as the latter can be taxing for seniors. Thus, RSVP is looking into implementing interactive self-paced training programmes that seniors can access at their own pace and be able to receive virtual assistance from a trainer. Mr Chan concluded with some of RSVP's future goals, which include targeting "younger seniors" in their 40s and 50s who can pick up IT skills quicker, and promoting inter-generational learning where grandchildren play a more prominent role in helping their grandparents pick up digital skills.

Ms Pauline Phoon, Managing Partner of SOOS OIO, a social enterprise working with youths in the digital space, spoke about SOOS OIO's strategies and challenges in reaching out to youths. In addition to giving school talks on gaming addiction and cyberbullying, SOOS OIO uses what some might consider as "unorthodox" approaches to reach out to youths — through gaming. For instance, one of their programmes, called TeleTrip, aims to teach skills such as teamwork, social communication and strategic thinking to youths in the gaming community.

Ms Phoon added that TeleTrip leverages youths' seriousness in gaming to instil positive habits and to address the problem of social isolation faced by the gaming community. However, she also stressed the importance of asking deeper questions of why youths choose to retreat into the online space. She explained that feelings of apathy and lack of hope among youths today may cause them to disconnect socially from the offline world and retreat online instead, and urged practitioners to be mindful of these issues in their work.

(From left to right) Ms Pauline Phoon, Dr Carol Soon, Mr Sunny Chan and Ms Lily Yip during the first session of the workshop.

Among the various questions raised during the Q&A session, a participant asked how SOOS OIO uses games to reach out to youths while ensuring that youths do not end up being addicted to gaming. In response, Ms Phoon said SOOS OIO uses insights from applied psychology and game design theory to break down a game and help youths be more cognisant of how various elements of the game are designed to trigger addictive tendencies in them. SOOS OIO is also in the midst of consolidating these materials into a booklet. She added that the TeleTrip programme is intentionally designed such that the objective of every component is clearly communicated to the youths. For instance, mealtimes are framed as a time for the youths to strategise the gameplay with their teammates, and debriefing sessions after every game are conducted for them to communicate with one another and assess what can be improved. Through a consciously designed programme, youths are nudged towards achieving an objective through their gameplay instead of playing games mindlessly. This is similar to the concept to play therapy, where positive habits are being instilled in youths through play, she said.

Connections on the ground: Leveraging technology for a cause

The second session saw academics and experts in the field speak about the roles played by social service organisations and other stakeholders in an increasingly digitalised world. They also shared insights on how to bridge the gaps between the research community and the social service sector in order to conduct more impactful research in the future.

Ms Janice Richardson, Founder of Insight and creator of the Safer Internet Day, gave some pointers on how to conduct effective public education and awareness raising in digital literacy and digital citizenship. Ms Richardson said effective awareness raising involves a cyclical process, starting with a needs analysis and identifying a definable goal. Next, it is important to develop the means and resources for implementation, such as by conducting teacher and ambassador trainings. This should be followed by getting individuals who have benefitted from the education to advocate the importance of the issue to others within their community. Finally, evaluation should be done to reassess and inform the needs analysis, thus bringing the awareness raising to full circle. Using the European Union's coordination model to share knowledge, practices and challenges relating to digital literacy development as an example, Ms Richardson also highlighted the unique position that the social service sector occupies, and the advantages that come with being in this position. She said civil society and NGOs in the social service sector are often more responsive than governments and more likely to be able to work with their counterparts on an equal level. Thus, NGOs in the social service sector should leverage this flexibility and connect with diverse stakeholders like international organisations, industry, research centres and academia.

Dr Kelly Mendoza, Senior Director of Education at Common Sense Education, gave an overview of the different areas of work for Common Sense. It is an independent non-profit organisation that helps kids thrive in a world of media and technology through its work in four areas. Common Sense Media helps parents make informed decisions about exposing their children to certain types of content by rating and reviewing apps, books, movies and games. It puts out information in a digestible format for parents, and use Search Engine Optimisation as well as partnering with content producers like Netflix to ensure that its ratings and information are easily accessible. Common Sense Education provides free digital literacy and digital citizenship curriculum to educators, and currently has a total of 7,000 registered educators using these materials for lessons and learning. Common Sense Kids Action works with policymakers and other advocates like business leaders to drive policies relating to kids' digital experience at both the state and the national level. Its lobbying efforts recently helped pass a bill in California that protects children's online privacy and data. Finally, Common Sense Research conducts independent longitudinal research on issues relating to media use among kids and technology addiction.

Both **Dr Justin Patchin**, Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Cyberbullying Research Centre, and **Dr Jiow Hee Jhee**, Programme Director of Criminology and Security at the Singapore Institute of Technology, spoke about the importance of doing applied research that would benefit practitioners by assessing what works and what does not on the ground. Dr Patchin said it is important to critically assess what might be widely accepted as "conventional wisdom", for instance the assumption that gaming is bad for youths, and called for more applied research to better understand the problem of gaming addiction. He added that applied

research should also play a part in debunking sensational media headlines, such as sweeping statements like "majority of teenagers are sexting", especially when research shows otherwise. This is because sensational headlines may give teenagers the impression that sexting is normal among their peers and prime them to engage in such behaviours.

(From left to right) Dr Kelly Mendoza, Dr Jiow Hee Jhee, Dr Carol Soon, Dr Justin Patchin and Ms Janice Richardson during the second session of the workshop. Photo courtesy of the Media Literacy Council.

Dr Jiow shared some of his research on parental mediation strategies to manage children's video gaming habits, and explained how applied research can help bridge the gap in understanding between parents and children. For instance, parental mediation can become a source of conflict between parents and children when parents are overly concerned about their children spending too little time on studies due to excessive gaming, and do not understand their children's aspirations of becoming a pro-gamer. He also pointed out that more applied research needs to be done on new developments in gaming, such as the emergence loot box addiction in games that may cause children to develop gambling tendencies by playing these games. Reiterating his point for more applied research to be done to understand what works in the community in terms of cyber-wellness and problematic video gaming, Dr Jiow also stressed for NGOs in the social service sector not to be overly concerned about "not having a large enough sample size" to work with academics like himself, as there is always value in conducting small scale qualitative research.

Picking up on the discussion on gaming addiction among children, a participant asked during the Q&A about the value of digital play in an increasingly digitalised society, and whether parents should encourage children to gain some exposure in gaming. Ms Richardson replied

that European countries encourage the use of "serious games" like simulation games to help children better understand climate change for instance, which is more constructive than passive online consumption. However, she added that game providers and creators need to do more to implement class licensing systems that will allow every student to access these games without paying huge fees. In his reply, Dr Jiow said parents need to consider the type of games they are comfortable exposing their children to, as parents are often more comfortable with educational games than recreational ones. However, he pointed out that recreational games do offer certain lessons and skills that children can learn as well. Reiterating SOOS OIO's approach in using games to engage youths, Ms Phoon added that it is important for parents to be clear with the objective of using games as they are not neutral tools. Even educational games can become addictive if not managed properly, she said.

To conclude the workshop, Dr Soon asked the panel about how experts and academics like themselves change people's attitudes in their work to better the Internet, and how they achieve buy-in from relevant stakeholders and partners. Dr Patchin said researchers should stay true to the empirical findings of their research and the data will speak for itself. In situations where research findings challenge popular assumptions, however, Dr Jiow said it is important to understand that people have certain value systems that might hinder them from accepting counterintuitive findings. Thus, it is important not to come across as imposing ideas on people, but instead offer a different story that would resonate with people and let them decide for themselves. Drawing from her experience with Common Sense, Dr Mendoza said having a multi-pronged approach is crucial. This includes rolling out campaigns to raise awareness, partnering with industry leaders and even popular culture icons to disseminate the message, as well as engaging people in the community and equipping them with the skills to become ambassadors and community leaders for the cause.

Shawn Goh is a Research Assistant at IPS.

*****