

Personal biases an obstacle to the truth

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Alcohol, sex - or the truth?

For many people, fact-checking and truth come a distant second, according to a literature review on misinformation published by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Carol Soon last year.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday, with a slight chuckle: "But I don't see how truth can compete with alcohol, or opiate, or love, or sex, or chocolate. Very difficult, right?"

Dr Soon, who was speaking in her personal capacity, responded: "The devil is in the details. I think we need to see how we market truth."

The exchange underscores a theme that emerged yesterday, as Mr Shanmugam and media academics grappled with the challenges of battling disinformation. Over two hours, he and Dr Soon explored the personal biases that make online fabrications so insidious. These biases present a serious obstacle to the truth, they agreed, noting, among other things, the tendency for people to seek out and favour information that confirms pre-existing beliefs.

The 2017 IPS report had contained the quote: "Individuals get a rush of dopamine... when they find confirming data, similar to when they eat chocolate, have sex or fall in love. Thus, people tend to focus on information that supports their confirmation bias."

Dr Soon yesterday noted that attempts to correct falsehoods - which at times leave a greater impression - must thus be done quickly and designed in an appealing way. "(These corrections) have to be as sexy as the falsehoods, unfortunately."

Mr Shanmugam and Dr Soon also went through the dangers of falsehoods that threaten public order and national security "if they are able to effectively exploit existing cleavages, say, among communities", as she put it. He said: "There are people who think we are a post-racial society. The point is not to forget that we are not quite there."

When Dr Soon spoke of research showing that people more susceptible to biases tend to be those on extreme ends of the political spectrum, he responded: "My concern is not people with strong political beliefs, it is more group identity based on racial and religious lines."