Singapore will have to chart its own way in Internet governance, says news veteran Patrick Daniel

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SINGAPORE - Not enough is being done to address the abuses and exploitation by bad actors in the Internet space, and yet it will be difficult for the world to come up with rules and regulations that all will accept, given different geopolitical considerations and ideologies about freedom of expression, said SPH Media Trust director Patrick Daniel on Wednesday (March 2).

That is why Singapore will have to be guided by its own circumstances in coming up with an approach to governance, to reap the maximum benefits from the Internet, he added.

Mr Daniel was delivering his second lecture on Stewardship Of The Singapore Media: Staying The Course, as the Institute of Policy Studies' 11th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Focusing on the Internet, he said the challenge of grappling with the dark side of the Internet was "one of the most pressing public policy issues of our time".

The Internet's open access ecosystem, coupled with the light-touch approach to governance taken by countries around the world, has allowed harmful content to proliferate and bad actors to thrive, noted Mr Daniel, who was speaking in his personal capacity.

He highlighted two serious problems: the deluge of wilful misinformation, and growth of scams, fraud and cybercrime.

On the spread of misinformation, Mr Daniel said an episode during the United States presidential election in 2016 illustrates the difficulties of reining in the problem.

A piece of fake news tweeted by a woman at that time had falsely accused Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton of running a child sex ring in Washington. It brought a man from North Carolina to the US capital, where he fired three shots in a so-called bid to rescue the allegedly kidnapped children.

But while the 29-year-old man was arrested, charged and jailed for four years, no action was taken against the 60-year-old woman who posted the fake news.

Citing this, Mr Daniel said: "No matter how false the information, no matter what damage it causes... her freedom of expression was sacrosanct. Like it or not, that is the law in the US."

At the same time, Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act 1996 gives social media giants blanket immunity with respect to third-party content, he added.

Together, these factors have made it hard to check the spread of misinformation online, he said.

He suggested that a fundamental relook of the law was needed to find a moderate middle road to address the problem.

Meanwhile, scams, fraud and cybercrime have become rampant on the Internet, said Mr Daniel.

He cited digital advertising as a case study in how bad the problem has become, and noted that of the US$450 billion (S$611 billion) spent globally on digital advertising last year, 14 per cent of it was ad fraud involving fake websites.

He pointed to how fraudsters have used bots to trick computerised ad exchanges into sending ads to their fake websites.

"Every intermediary in the ecosystem takes his cut... no matter where the advertising ends up. Now you see why, when no one is policing the system, the players themselves have little incentive to fix the problem of fraud," he said, suggesting that industry players will need to do more.

Ultimately, the larger issue is one of governance, said Mr Daniel, who was editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Division from 2007 to 2016, a former deputy chief executive of SPH, and interim CEO of SPH Media Trust.

A broader collaborative approach is needed from all players, he said. "We must collectively deal with the bad actors and restore trust and integrity."

There was a false dichotomy between the real world and the cyberworld, when in reality "we only have one world, we must get the balance right", he said.

But he was not optimistic that a new universal social compact can be found, given the different considerations of the various stakeholders.

"Just the geopolitics alone will scupper any attempt to achieve this. And leave alone the fundamental differences between those whose constitutional bedrock is

untrammelled freedom of expression and those who believe in freedom with caveats and restraints.

"And we haven't even got to those who will never let go of totalitarian control," he said.

He suggested that Singapore should chart its own way forward, and set out three guideposts:

- the approach to Internet governance should be collaborative and balanced and involve not just the Government, but also industry and civil society groups;

- more must be done to build a society that is resilient to adverse Internet influences;

- the end goal is an Internet that is open, secure, trustworthy and inclusive for all citizens and residents.

"It is urgent that we begin to address this as a country and as a society," he said.