

Even young, tech-savvy people not immune to deliberate online falsehoods, says S Iswaran

The Online Citizen, 25 February 2021

No age group — even the young and tech-savvy — is immune to believing deliberate online falsehoods, said Minister for Communications and Information S Iswaran on Thursday (25 Feb).

Mr Iswaran was responding to a question from Jalan Besar GRC Member of Parliament (MP), Wan Rizal Wan Zakariah on whether the influence of online falsehood differs according to age groups.

The Minister cited the findings of the Institute of Policy Studies last year, which revealed that “more than two-thirds of the participants in the study from all demographics have difficulty differentiating misinformation from real news reports”.

“While different age groups might have different media and information consumption habits, no age group is immune to misinformation,” he said, adding that even highly technologically literate participants, including the young and those with tertiary education, were susceptible to such falsehoods.

“The study underscores the importance of targeted efforts to strengthen digital literacy among different segments of our society. The Government and our partners have several initiatives aimed at this, such as the National Library Board’s SURE — which stands for Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate — programme and the Media Literacy Council (MLC)’s Better Internet campaign,” said Mr Iswaran.

The MLC previously received criticism for posting an infographic listing satire as one of the forms in which fake news can be propagated. It received further backlash for its apology, in which the Council assured that it did not intend to give “the wrong impression” that satire was fake news.

MLC said in Sep 2019 that the infographic was aimed at raising “awareness among youths and the general public about the need to be aware of the ways in which misinformation or fake news can be spread”, adding that it was also meant to “encourage readers to understand the context in which information is presented”.

“We acknowledge that the post and infographic gave the wrong impression that satire was fake news, which was not the intent. We are sorry for the confusion and will review our material,” said MLC.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam noted the same month that MLC had made an error in stating that satire is fake news, as the Government has been “very clear, both in Parliament and outside” that the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) does not target satire.

“Only false statements that objectively would be seen as statements of fact can be caught under POFMA,” he said, stressing that the allegedly offending material has to be examined “objectively”.

“When there is material, it has to be looked at objectively – is it factual, is it false but pretends to be factual, or is it satire, parody, opinion and so on,” Mr Shanmugam added.

Ambassadors of SG Digital Office offer in-person digital and media literacy support to seniors at community centres and libraries, says S Iswaran

Dr Wan Rizal also asked whether there are targeted plans to reach out to seniors in developing their digital and media literacy in combating deliberate online falsehoods.

Noting that seniors in Singapore continue to face challenges in navigating novel and unfamiliar digital technologies, Mr Iswaran said that the digital ambassadors' presence on the ground "significantly increases our engagement with seniors".

The SDO, established in May last year, has taken root in 55 community hubs at community centres and libraries islandwide, "where digital ambassadors teach seniors how to use features on their phones", he added.

Announcing the SG Digital Office on 31 May last year, Mr Iswaran said that initially, the SDO aimed to recruit 1,000 Digital Ambassadors to help seniors go digital.

"The Digital Ambassadors will also reach out to and raise the digital skills of 100,000 seniors by March 2021, up from the current annual target of 10,000 seniors reached through one-to-one skilling efforts.

"We want to quickly include our seniors in these digital efforts, so that they can join other citizens in communicating and transacting digitally. For seniors from lower-income households who wish to learn but are unable to afford the devices, we will provide them with financial support," said Mr Iswaran.