

Government launches websites to bust myths

By RACHEL CHANG

IN A bid to cut through the swirl of rumour and distortion online, the Government has quietly launched a few “myth busting” initiatives.

The first is a new section on its www.gov.sg website called “Factually”. Since May, it has collected a series of primers on hot topics like the national reserves, certificates of entitlement and procurement processes.

They aim to give bite-sized answers to questions that have arisen over controversial decisions, such as the one in March to give

\$1.1 billion to bus operators to ramp up services.

Taking things one step further, the Housing Board (HDB) two weeks ago started a new website known as HDB Speaks.

A first for government agencies here, its sole purpose is to address topics of controversy, like the affordability of resale HDB flats. One was recently been sold for more than \$1 million.

Replete with bright graphics and written in a conversational style, it is a far cry from HDB’s more sober main website, and aims to be a place where people can “get the facts on the myths

about HDB” – its tagline.

Both initiatives are works-in-progress, said the agencies in charge.

A Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (Mica) spokesman said that Factually “is intended to be a convenient, central and credible platform” for a summary of key facts on certain policy decisions.

It is not meant to be a comprehensive source, and information on specific policies can be found on ministry or statutory board websites, he said.

There are currently only 14 primers in the Factually section.

The first was posted in mid-May, and the latest two weeks ago.

The Straits Times understands that it takes considerable time for the relevant agencies to compile the information for Mica.

This is also why Factually has not gone fully “live” as a stand-alone website, like HDB Speaks, nor been widely publicised.

HDB Speaks, on the other hand, contains a wealth of talking point issues divided between “evergreen” ones, like why HDB cannot get rid of the cash-over-valuation practice, and “online buzz” ones that make the headlines, like whether or not flats have shrunk.

New media analysts said these were smart moves for the Government to make in an oft-hostile online space, but noted that success depends on how able they are to gain traction with online opinion leaders, and keep up with cyberspace’s fast pace.

Mr Aaron Ng, a new media and communications lecturer at the National University of Singapore, said that the half-truths and distortions circulating online come from “the lack of first-hand information”, which Factually and HDB Speaks attempt to correct.

But it must be timely, he warned. “There are fewer chances

of things spiralling out of control if they are on-the-ball when clarifying with facts,” he noted. “A stitch in time saves nine.”

Singapore Management University social media specialist Michael Netzley said that “top-down” information provided by government agencies will not make much of a dent unless they are then picked up and used in online conversations.

“Peers listen to peers. People today are generally less interested in what you say about yourself and more interested in what others say about you.”

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