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Headline: Shanmugam sets out strategies in battle against fake news

#### REGAIN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

For us to survive this onslaught of fake news, we, the proponents of real news, must become more authentic in our work, more diligent in our work, and regain the public confidence which was ours. Until we do that, fake news is going to haunt us.



**MR MAHFUZ ANAM**, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, Bangladesh, during a session on how news organisations should deal with fake news.

#### DANGER OF MISINFORMATION

There have been many attempts to use online misinformation to smear Muslims as a group and turn non-Muslims against Muslims. This is done both by people who are Islamophobic, as well as people who want to make the Muslim community more exclusive – terrorists, who want to create more anger against the Muslim community and turn the non-Muslims against moderate Muslims, and turn the moderate Muslims towards the more extreme ideologies.



**HOME AFFAIRS AND LAW MINISTER K. SHANMUGAM**, during his opening address on how misinformation spreads hate in a community.

#### ABILITY TO DISCERN IMPORTANT

It is important that regulation must not weaken the ability of any society to be able to discern for themselves. Governments cannot do the thinking for the people.



**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EUGENE TAN** from the Singapore Management University School of Law, on the need for media literacy.

#### FREEDOM OF SPEECH

I don't believe that a computer-generated bot has the right to free speech – it's manipulated speech... We have to realise that there may be times that we look at what may be perceived as a bit of a loss of freedom of speech.



**MS NEJILLA KORRIS**, who heads social media consulting firm InterVeritas, on subsidising freedom of speech with combating misinformation.

#### NEWS VS INCORRECT INFORMATION

I choose not to incorporate 'news' in discussing misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and satire... Because this term doesn't have any meaning and it also defames journalism. It is not news – it is just incorrect information.



**MS IRENE JAY LILU**, who leads Google News Lab in the Asia-Pacific, on why she does not use the term 'fake news'.

# Shanmugam sets out strategies in battle against fake news

Media literacy must be strengthened even as S'pore prepares new laws, he says

Seow Bei Yik and Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

The battle against fake news needs to be fought on several fronts.

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam made the point yesterday as he underlined the importance of strengthening media literacy, even as Singapore prepares to introduce new legislation next year to curb fabricated stories.

He, however, felt platforms like Google and Twitter "bear significant responsibility" in tackling inappropriate content, including fake news, while the media plays a key role in being a trusted source of news.

Mr Shanmugam set out these battlefronts in his opening address at a conference on fake news, at which he announced pending laws against such falsehoods. The two-day forum is organised by The Straits Times and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

To help shape the new laws, Singapore officials visited Germany and Britain. Germany proposed laws in April to punish social networking sites if they do not swiftly remove content such as hate speech or defamatory fake news.

In Britain, a parliamentary committee had been looking into online fake news, and whether new laws should be created to hold social networks responsible for inappropriate content.

But beyond laws, Mr Shanmugam told reporters, "the key is to build a



(From left) ST editor and panel moderator Warren Fernandez with Rappler CEO Maria Ressa, Reuters managing editor Jason Subler and Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan at the forum yesterday. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

more resilient society, a society that can pick up and understand what is fake".

"In that context, education is extremely important. And also the ability of civil society, people, to respond to fake news," he said.

The Education Ministry and Ministry of Communications and Information will help ramp up media literacy in the population, he added.

For the media, he said it is important to ensure journalism standards are robust as its role as a trusted news source is being challenged.

Meanwhile, firms like Google and Twitter have made a commitment to tackle misinformation, such as by removing hate speech, he added.

But the Government still has a key role to play, he said, noting: "It must stand ready to deal with misinformation that impacts society."

"Echo chambers" online amplify the negative impact of false narratives, and with 91 per cent of Singapore residents surveyed last month supporting stronger laws to remove or correct fake news, legislative action "seems a no-brainer", he said.

Highlighting that misinformation can be used to spread hate or used for profit, Mr Shanmugam stressed that Singapore remains "particularly vulnerable" to foreign influences harnessing fake news for their own ends.

The country also faces the risk of misinformation exploiting racial and religious fault lines, and rumours on social media and communication platforms like WhatsApp that confuse and promote distrust.

"If the distrust becomes deep rooted, people will have serious

doubts about institutions, about governance, and you then get a fractured polity," he said.

The need for education and trust was also raised at a panel discussion.

Critical steps must be taken to educate people and build up trust in the country's media, said Associate Professor Eugene Tan, a Singapore Management University law don.

The panel, on truth and trust in the digital age, was moderated by The Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez, who is also editor-in-chief of the English, Malay and Tamil Media Group at Singapore Press Holdings.

Prof Tan said: "It is important that regulation must not weaken the ability of any society to be able to discern for themselves. Governments cannot do the thinking for the people."

With fake news here to stay, people need to be taught how to react to attempts at misinformation, said the panellists.

"Governments always believe in their ability to do wonders... but we should bear in mind that there are inherent limits to what they can do when it comes to fake news," said Prof Tan.

The two other panellists – Ms Maria A. Ressa, chief executive officer of Manila-based online news site Rappler, and Mr Jason Subler, a managing editor of Reuters – also stressed that governments cannot fight fake news alone. Equipping people with media literacy skills must be a key strategy, they said.

Another tactic is to strengthen confidence in the media, they added, as plummeting trust in traditional media has driven people to look for news on alternative platforms that may carry information that is untrue or erroneous.

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