Online sites have responsibility to give accurate info: Observers

This is especially so during crises, as rumours spread fast and cause anxiety

By TESSA WONG

BLOGGERS and websites have a responsibility to give accurate information, especially in times of crisis, observers said in response to Government criticism of those who spread false information during the recent haze.

On Monday in Parliament, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said some had caused unnecessary anxiety with their inaccurate posts. He cited examples in his reply to MPs' questions on misleading and unverified information online on the haze which could be harmful.

These included a screenshot showing wrong PSI information; blogger Ravi Philemon quoting his friend, alleging that N95 masks being brought into Singapore were not for the public; and The Real Singapore website falsely attributing an article to PAP MP Irene Ng.

Many observers agreed it was right to call out such behaviour.

Like many other connected societies, Singapore is not immune to false information spreading swiftly and having serious consequences, they said.

"In a national crisis, to put out false rumours is as severe as a bomb hoax: it can cause public panic," said MP Zaqy Mohamad, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Communications and Information.

While Singaporeans are generally discerning about what they read online, "in times of uncertainty or crisis, discernment may very well give way to the search for misinformation that confirms or validates how they make sense of a difficult situation", said Mr Eugene Tan, Nominated MP and associate professor at Singapore Management University.

Prominent websites and bloggers can have thousands of readers, making it easier for rumours to spread easily from person to person.

"There's a risk when untruths become more credible as (they are) repeated online by several sources," said MP Baey Yam Keng, vice-chairman of the GPC for Communications and Information.

Readers expressed similar views on The Straits Times Facebook page.

"As an opinion leader (with) many followers... there is a need to think twice before posting anything online," said a Mr Edmund Mong.

The onus is on bloggers and websites to exercise "some measure of editorial judgment and not just pass on any rumour", said Professor Ang Peng Hwa, director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre. If a post turns out to be false, "the responsible thing is to take it down or correct it immediately".

The Government can also be quicker in disseminating comprehensive information, said former nominated MP Calvin Cheng. While it made an effort during the haze to to clear up misperceptions about the haze by using websites such as Emergency 101 and Factually, these came out a few days after the haze reached record levels, he noted.

But others argued that the intention of the posting also matters in deciding how culpable one is in spreading false information.

While Mr Philemon's erroneous post risked stirring panic and causing unhappiness, some observers, such as blogger Siew Kum Hong, felt he did it out of a desire to inform. He did not "seek to sensationalise" the unverified information, said Mr Siew.

On the other hand, they said the article that The Real Singapore website attributed to Ms Ng appeared to be borne out of mischief.

The identity of the website's editors is unknown, but the site claims to be 50 per cent news, and runs articles mocking Singapore, its institutions and leaders without much backing.

Former nominated MP Zulkifli Baharuddin said that while those out to make mischief should be punished severely, "it's different if someone passed on information based on ignorance".

Under the Telecommunications Act, people who transmit a message known to be false or fabricated can be fined up to $10,000, jailed for three years, or given both punishments. The penalties are higher if it is a bomb hoax.

Some have urged that this law be used only as a last resort.

Nominated MP Tan Su Shan suggested setting up an independent fact-checking panel to act as an ombudsman, with powers to call out netizens who publish false information and discipline them.

"The Government can sometimes come across as heavy-handed, which ends up lessening people's trust. It may be better to have a non-partisan panel, one with buy-in from all citizens," she said.

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