

Knowing how data works can dispel wrong conclusions

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A better understanding of how data works can help people avoid making wrong and uninformed conclusions about technology, said experts during a forum on technology and liveability yesterday.

Societies also stand to better reap the benefits of digital tools with an increased awareness of how data works, they added.

Mr Liu Feng-Yuan, chief executive and co-founder of artificial intelligence firm BasisAI, made these points when discussing the upcoming update to WhatsApp's privacy policy, which was raised at a forum yesterday.

The announcement by the Facebook-owned instant messaging service earlier this week prompted a swift backlash, leading WhatsApp users to abandon the platform to join other services like Telegram and Signal.

Some users of WhatsApp erroneously believed that the platform and its parent company Facebook could share the data collected, read their messages and listen in to their calls when the changes take effect on Feb 8. WhatsApp has clarified that the policy update will not affect the privacy of users' messages with friends or family in anyway.

Speaking on the second day of the four-day Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Mr Liu said: "One observation I



BasisAI CEO Liu Feng-Yuan said with greater understanding, people can have a discussion about specific privacy concerns.

have is that I wish people would just be a lot more knowledgeable about how the technology works."

He added that with greater understanding, people can then have a proper discussion about the specific privacy concerns that they have, instead of sweeping, broad issues.

Dr Woo Jun Jie, a senior IPS research fellow, said that there was complexity and sometimes irrationality in the way people give out their information, and called for trust to be built between users and the collectors of data. He noted that while some people were resistant to divulging information to contact tracers out of concern for privacy, they did not think twice about giving their entire life details to private companies like Facebook.

Dr Woo and Mr Liu were among the five speakers at yesterday's forum, which also discussed the need to meaningfully use modern technology to solve problems faced by everyday citizens.

Professor Ang Peng Hwa, from the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, cited a personal grouse about the high frequency of red traffic lights

as an example. Some form of AI could be used to solve this problem, suggested Prof Ang.

Mr Liu said that while there are sophisticated algorithms already at work to ensure the efficiency of traffic flow on roads, with up-and-coming technology like 5G and real-time communication between autonomous vehicles and traffic lights, this could be improved.

Also on the panel was Taiwan's Digital Minister Audrey Tang. She gave a presentation about how Taiwan managed to successfully keep its Covid-19 situation under control through efforts such as using a platform to crowdsource information on where to get masks as well as using effective public campaigns to counter disinformation.

The forum was moderated by the chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities, Dr Cheong Koon Hean.

Before ending the panel, Dr Cheong asked the speakers for their thoughts on concerns about the widening of a digital divide as societies advance technologically.

The experts said there were no easy answers to address this issue, given how multifaceted the problem is, but they acknowledged that no one should be left out.

"As we push towards using technology... for liveability, we need to address how do we handle those who are left behind," said Prof Ang.

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