Let’s build immunity against vaccine falsehoods

Social networks are super spreaders of misinformation. Singaporeans can help in the Covid-19 war by learning soft skills such as how to intervene, diplomatically.

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For The Straits Times

What does your colleague tell you when she is fearful of the Covid-19 vaccine because she was told that it would make her infertile and that it contained memberships for secret society members?

This may sound absurd, but a pharmacist in Wisconsin, who was recently arrested for destroying and dosing of Covid-19 vaccines by leaving them out of the refrigerator to spoil, had been promoting these false beliefs via text messages before his arrest. Major cities in the US and other countries have been tackling on two fronts — containing the pandemic and fighting misinformation about the vaccines.

In Singapore, 394 Covid-related scammers have been arrested since January this year, while April last year, 100 victims of at least S$1.6 million. Recent vaccination offers have spawned new scams and phishing attacks, targeting vaccine side effects.

Singaporeans trust the vaccine and public health systems. Earlier this month, Minnies for Communications and Information 5, her boss said the Government is monitoring misinformation relating to the vaccine and “will not hesitate to use the full force of the law” when needed.

That said, it is reassuring that the Government has been responding to vaccine hesitancy with non-legislative measures, including mobilising community leaders and volunteers to address people’s doubts. But misinformation about vaccines still exists and highlights the importance of social networks in fighting it, especially on encrypted messaging apps. Many messages and resources have limited efficacy.

Singaporeans often use “network immunity” — building immunity against misinformation through social networks.

FAMILY, FRIENDS OR FOE?

Our social networks — family, friends and colleagues — exert a powerful influence. When people’s health behaviour, sociologists have found that social networks can either constrain or enable health outcomes, such as influencing people’s willingness to adopt lifestyle changes and improve well-being.

Social networks play an important role in the spread of misinformation as well. In a study on false information conducted with 2,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents last year, we found that people with strong social networks are much more likely to share false information than those with weaker social networks.

For example, people’s social networks are the primary source of the spread of false information. About 71 per cent of our respondents and their family members say that false information they learned from other people, including from their family and friends.

This is unsurprising, since respondents’ family members also enjoyed the highest trust compared with other groups of people. Almost 41 per cent said family members were trustworthy sources of information. Indeed, research shows that people are more likely to trust a piece of information or a news source when it is shared and endorsed by trusted individuals. Moreover, people’s social networks were a key part of how they responded to false information. The most common method people used to verify information was by asking their family members, friends or colleagues who forwarded the news. More than two-thirds said they had done so frequently.

People also typically ignored the false information that they came across. In fact, 75 per cent of respondents said they had ignored the false information they encounter on social networking sites. Only a small minority would try and rectify the situation, such as informing the person who posted the false information that it is wrong (7 per cent), or taking the initiative to post a correction on the platform (1 per cent).

Such inaction is problematic as it limits efforts by social media companies, which rely on user reports to make content decisions. People’s inaction also increases the perception that the problem is one for others, such as social media companies, the Government or other individuals, to solve. Policymakers and practitioners promoting digital literacy can avoid.

A lack from research on the effects of public messaging strategies on social networks, health communications and energy conservation studies. In particular, how a message is framed can influence people’s attribution of the responsibility of a problem, sense of agency to engage the problem, and levels of compliance to confront and overcome it.

For example, public education information efforts on smoking in Covid-19 and vaccine matters are more effective when they,