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 do you do if your colleague tells you that she is fearful of the Covid-19 vaccine because she was told that it would make her infertile and that it contained microchips for secretly tracking people?

This may sound absurd but a pharmacist in Wisconsin, who was recently arrested for destroying 600 doses 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.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, countries have been tackling it on two fronts – containing the pandemic and fighting misinformation about the virus.

In Singapore, 394 Covid-related scams were reported in January to April last year, cheating victims of at least $1.4 million. Recent vaccination efforts have spawned new scams and fear-mongering about vaccine side-effects.

Such misinformation erodes trust in the vaccine and public health systems. Earlier this month, Minister for Communications and Information S. Iswaran 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 heartening that the Government has also been responding to vaccine hesitancy with non-legislative measures, including mobilising community leaders and volunteers to address people's doubts.

This approach highlights the importance of social networks in fighting misinformation, especially on encrypted messaging apps where legislative measures have limited efficacy.

Singaporeans need to cultivate "network immunity" – building immunity against misinformation through social networks.

Amid the Covid-19 vaccination effort, there is a need for schemes to impart soft skills enabling people to intervene in a sensitive yet effective way when they encounter misinformation. Show empathy when correcting someone, and understand his concerns instead of dismissing them, advise the writers. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

FAMILY, FRIENDS OR FOE?

Our social networks – family, friends and colleagues – exert a powerful influence. When it comes to health behaviour, sociologists have found that social networks can either constrain or enable health outcomes, such as by 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 our study on false information conducted with 2,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents last year, we found that people's social networks influenced various aspects of their susceptibility to false information.

For example, people's social networks were a key driver of the spread of false information. About 75 per cent of our respondents said they had shared false information on social networking sites and instant messaging platforms because the information had come from close family and friends.

This is unsurprising, since respondents' family members also enjoyed the highest trust compared with other groups of people. Almost 45 per cent said family members were trustworthy sources of news information. Indeed, research shows that people are more likely to trust a piece of information or a news source when it is shared or 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 followed the news. More than two-thirds of respondents 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 encountered on social networking sites. Only a small minority would try and rectify the situation, such as by informing the person who posted the false information that it is wrong (17 per cent), or taking the initiative to post a correction on the platform (15 per cent).

Such inaction is problematic as it limits efforts by social media companies, which rely in part on users to flag questionable content to professional fact-checkers. It also leaves the falsehood accessible to the less discerning.

STRENGTHENING NETWORK IMMUNITY

While our study explains why misinformation and rumours spread quickly on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, they also highlight the potential for intervention by social and community networks to stem misinformation and spread accurate information.

So, what more can be done to prepare Singaporeans to play an active role in debunking falsehoods?

A first step to strengthen network immunity is to nudge individuals to take greater ownership of the problem within their immediate social networks. People's current inaction points to a 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 take a leaf from research on the effects of public messaging strategies on social behaviour in 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 level of optimism to confront and overcome it.

For example, public education and messaging efforts relating to Covid-19 and vaccine misinformation should move beyond the current "misinformation-protection" focus to one on "misinformation-intervention".

The new focus should appeal to Singaporeans as fighters against falsehoods who can actively intervene within their social networks, while building on the current messaging emphasis of cautioning people to stay vigilant and protect themselves.

Another way to strengthen network immunity is to equip Singaporeans with both hard and soft skills so that they are empowered to intervene when the opportunity arises.

Existing digital literacy programmes such as those by the Media Literacy Council and the National Library Board impart hard skills like how to recognise false information and provide people with the tools to share accurate information.

However, there is an increasing need for programmes to impart soft skills that enable people to intervene in a sensitive yet effective manner. Examples are respectfully correcting an elderly family member who has forwarded false information, or engaging with a friend who has posted anti-vax content, without offending them.

In the US, non-profit entities such as First Draft have curated a list of critical soft skills. For example, we should show empathy when correcting someone who has shared vaccine misinformation, and understand the person's concerns and anxieties instead of dismissing them.

People may be more receptive to corrections when they are politely informed that they had shared incorrect information via a private message, instead of being called out, or worse, shamed, publicly in Facebook or WhatsApp groups.

Finally, behavioural changes are unlikely to occur overnight, so patient and repeated intervention will be needed. Such best practices are worth incorporating into Singapore's digital literacy programmes.

No one is immune to misinformation. However, everyone has a responsibility to loved ones and society at large in times of a national crisis.

As Singapore continues its vaccination programme, let us at the same time, in our small ways, contribute to building up our network immunity to protect Singapore against Covid-19 and vaccine misinformation.

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