Online safety rules must be matched by public education

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The Straits Times

Last week, Singapore passed new laws requiring online service providers to prevent minors from using inappropriate content and interpersonal communication services such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram to post inappropriate or harmful content.

The new laws also aim to reduce the amount of harmful content on the internet by making it illegal for users to distribute, publish or possess any material that is likely to cause harm or distress to others.

The move comes in response to growing concerns about the impact of online platforms on mental health, particularly among young people.

The new laws include provisions that require service providers to remove harmful content as soon as it is reported, and to take steps to ensure that the content is not able to be accessed again.

The Singapore government has also announced plans to introduce a new online safety commission to oversee the implementation of the new laws.

In Singapore, there is a significant gap between the relatively high incidence rate of online harms and the relatively low community consciousness about online safety.

In 2020, the Singapore Police Force recorded 47,000 cases of online harms, of which 47 per cent were reported by residents. However, only 57 per cent of respondents who have encountered online harms are aware of avenues for seeking help.

In the survey, 47 per cent of respondents said they had encountered online harms such as threats, harassment, or attempts to solicit personal information. Of those, only 47 per cent had reported the incident to the police or a trusted adult.

In order to address this gap, the Singapore government has announced plans to introduce a new online safety commission to oversee the implementation of the new laws.

The commission will be responsible for developing a comprehensive strategy to address online harms, including the development of guidelines for service providers and the establishment of a support network for victims.

In addition, the government will also be providing online safety education to schools and communities to help prevent online harms.