



The Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill and other recent legal rulings mark a crucial turning point on the liability of technology companies for online safety, especially for teenagers and children. ST FILE PHOTO

TechTalk

Online safety rules must be matched by public education

More needs to be done to ensure users have basic know-how to stay safe online

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For *The Straits Times*

Last week, Singapore passed new laws requiring providers of online communication services, such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, to put in place safeguards to prevent users from accessing harmful content. The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), the sector's regulator, will be able to issue takedowns and direct Internet service providers to block services in question.

The Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill and other recent legal rulings mark a crucial turning point on the liability of tech companies for online safety, especially for teens and children. Tech companies are responding to being held accountable for the source of online harms. For example, Instagram announced in the same week that users in Britain and the European Union will see new automated age verification tools on the platform as part of a major safety update to protect children.

Even as the Bill has been passed into law, two key issues must be addressed. First, definitions of harmful content need further clarification. Second, processes must be put in place to ensure that the legal definitions keep up with prevailing community standards and technological changes.

The online safety Bill requires providers of online communication services to mitigate the harmful effects of egregious content, such as posts that advocate self-harm, suicide, child sexual exploitation or terrorism, and materials that may incite racial or religious tensions or pose a risk to public health. There is substantive work for academics, civil society groups and industry representatives to collectively establish community standards for what each of these harms constitutes. There is also room for different stakeholders to come to a common understanding on how to deal with content that is "lawful but awful", such as online body-shaming, which may be just as harmful to an individual as posts that advocate suicide

and self-harm.

The nomenclature used to label different kinds of online harms should also be harmonised to ensure that they are more value-neutral and accurate. For instance, terms such as "revenge porn" may carry the connotation of "victim blaming". Similarly, certain terms when entering public discourse may have the unfortunate effect of trivialising or diminishing harms and thereby desensitise the public to their ramifications – for example, sexting. Many of these terms may also have foreign origins that are rather different from Singapore's and are therefore shaped by their sociocultural contexts with regard to how they are used and perceived.

In short, there is still room for clarifying what constitutes an online harm and to establish community standards on harmful content that are sensitive to Singapore culture and social norms. Norms will invariably evolve in the face of cultural and technological shifts, and such regulations must also be continually refreshed to reflect prevailing issues.

Regulatory levers alone will not suffice for an issue of such complexity and widespread societal implications, as they will always be outpaced by the development of new digital technologies. Also, it would be naive to think that industry players will prioritise safety over

profitability and accountability to their shareholders. As a result, users also need to take the initiative to protect themselves and loved ones from online harms.

In Singapore, there is a significant gap between the relatively high incidence rate of encounters with online harms and the relatively low community consciousness about online safety. A survey conducted by the Sunlight Alliance for Action in January 2022 of 1,049 Singaporeans and Singapore permanent residents found that close to half of respondents (47 per cent) have encountered online harms, but 57 per cent of respondents are unaware of avenues for seeking help. Also, 42 per cent of respondents who have experienced online harms said they will not act because they think it will not make a difference.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that people should feel disempowered if they face difficulties when interacting with and through technological platforms. After all, the digital infrastructures that they use are designed and run by large, faceless companies. In instances of service lapses or online harms, users must negotiate reporting mechanisms that are highly automated, with little hope of human intervention. Furthermore, there is little transparency around the algorithms that determine how content is served on social networks' sites, thereby diminishing consumers' sense of agency.

Besides perceptions of

powerlessness, another cause of inaction is lack of consumer knowledge. For example, social media services such as YouTube have in place parent filters.

There are also parental control apps to block access to websites and limit the time of device usage. But a worldwide study by Kaspersky involving 11,000 respondents, namely adults who live with their children aged seven to 12 years, found that only half of parents use parental control apps.

Similarly, an Institute of Policy Studies survey released in December 2020 of more than 2,000 Singaporeans found that most people ignore false information when they encounter it on social networking sites and instant messaging apps. The act of ignoring could be due to a sense of apathy or lack of knowledge on what action they can take. In order for the safeguards stipulated by the new law to work, we need to build knowledge among users in the actions and avenues of recourse they can take when they come across online harms.

We believe a two-pronged approach is needed to elevate community awareness and action.

The first way is to involve everyone in basic online safety training. More needs to be done to provide resources and tools to ensure that all users in Singapore have the basic know-how to stay safe while online. Tech companies are best placed to educate consumers on how to protect themselves with the tools they have put in place.

A complementary tailored approach to digital literacy programmes should also be deployed so that parents of young children and seniors more susceptible to online scams are prioritised for learning opportunities. This targeted approach must be sharpened, given the growing reach and complexity of online harms. With new online safety laws in place, resources should be directed to elevate the baseline community consciousness about online safety so that no users are left to their own defences when they encounter online harms.

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