

Mr Vikram Nair:

To ask the Minister for Communications and Information how does the Government plan to ensure that the public has access to accurate and timely information in crisis situations like the haze when there can be much misleading or unverified information and views being circulated.

Mr Baey Yam Keng:

To ask the Minister for Communications and Information what is the Government doing to address the issue of some websites spreading false information and hoaxes during the recent haze situation, including false claims about the PSI levels, which may mislead the public and cause unnecessary panic.

Ms Tan Su Shan:

To ask the Minister for Communications and Information (a) how effective is the Media Literacy Council as a social media watchdog; and (b) whether the Media Literacy Council can provide an interactive avenue for the community to seek advice, redress or a course of action on potentially harmful misinformation.

Answer

Dealing with Misinformation

1 The Government depends on media organisations as well as its own websites to provide information to the public. Our planning for communications during a crisis assumes that the public will need access to timely, accurate and useful information that will help them organise their own actions, such as during the haze episode. These preparations do not commence only during an emergency, but take place during peacetime. For example, the National Environment Agency's mobile app and its website provide up-to-date information on air pollution levels even before the haze occurred. The government also organised daily briefings to the media, and disseminated important messages and health advisories through Facebook pages and Twitter feeds managed by relevant ministries and agencies. We also worked with broadcasters to display up-to-date PSI readings on TV and screen public education videos on the haze.

2 The haze episode has demonstrated the mettle and resilience of the Singapore spirit. There were many examples of Singaporeans pulling together and helping each other. There were many silent heroes and benefactors. My constituency itself was visited by a gentleman who handed 6,000 masks to the grassroots leaders, for us to distribute to the low-income households. He did not want to identify himself, but he just wanted to contribute and he came forward.

3 Regrettably, every crisis also sees a minority who see fit to spread rumours, distortions and false information. Their impact today is far greater, because circulated virally online and through text messaging, they reach many more people than they could have in the past. As a result, they have caused unnecessary anxiety and introduced doubt in the minds of the public.

4 For example, on 19th June at 10 pm, when NEA updated on its website that the 3-hour PSI stood at 321, an unknown individual circulated an altered screenshot, alleging that NEA had reported the figure as 393. This was a calculated and mischievous act, intended to undermine public confidence in the NEA. On the same day, The Real Singapore published an article that was falsely attributed to our fellow parliamentary colleague, Ms Irene Ng. An unknown individual had impersonated Ms Irene Ng to comment on the Government and Singaporeans' reactions to the haze. It later emerged that even that

article was plagiarised from another netizen's Facebook comment. On 22nd of June, blogger Ravi Philemon alleged that his unnamed friend said that 9 million masks will be brought into Singapore but none will be for the public. This was even as the SAF and People's Association staff and grassroots volunteers were working hard into the early morning to ensure that 1 million masks would be distributed from warehouses to community centres and ready for distribution to households the next day. Another unknown individual accused Tan Tock Seng Hospital of jacking up the price of its N95 masks to profit from the crisis. This was untrue, as the price the hospital charged was exactly the same as what it was before the haze occurred. On 25th of June, when Singapore experienced rain and hail over the western part of Singapore, an individual chose to allege, without foundation or basis in fact, that Singapore was receiving acid rain.

5 Members of the public alerted various government agencies to seek clarification on these claims which they had received. Madam Speaker, it is easy to cast doubt through innuendo, insinuation and conspiracy theories. If nothing is done, eventually the public will think that there must be some truth to them. We therefore decided to actively declare these rumours to be false, before they take root and cause further alarm or harm. These were also compiled and placed in a section of the haze microsite called "Cut Through The Haze". For more generic issues, we have the "Factually" microsite on the GOV.SG website. We have received positive feedback on such initiatives, and will continue in this endeavour.

6 Madam Speaker, government agencies at least have the ability to issue their own statements to rebut false claims, and the public and media organisations do take note of the government's statements. Private citizens who are the subject of such falsehoods have a much more difficult task at hand. Ms Tan Su Shan has asked about the avenues of recourse available to victims of misinformation to seek advice or redress, and specifically whether the Media Literacy Council (MLC) could take on this role. The MLC's primary role is public education, with the hope that it can ultimately result in the building of a responsible and safe online environment. This can only happen through the shared responsibility between content providers who can help to ensure the veracity and accuracy of information on their sites, and the larger Internet community who can help to correct any misinformation if they are aware of the facts, while refraining from spreading untruths or rumours online.

7 The MLC has a difficult task. I know, because the Government has previously encouraged the online community to come together to build a safe and responsible online environment. The idea of an Internet Code of Conduct was rejected by prominent members of the online community like Ravi Philemon, and even the formation of the MLC was greeted with scepticism. Yet, when public anxiety was highest during the days when the haze was at its worst, where were these prominent members of the online community who believed that the Internet should be left alone? Were they helping to clarify and reject online rumours, or were they helping to spread them or even create them?

8 I am nevertheless optimistic that these egregious rumours are the actions of the minority. In fact, the haze episode also saw many members of the online community coming forward to provide crowdsourcing apps to locate shops where masks were available, or to share air-conditioned rooms with those who do not have them. Minister Ng has shared some of these examples, including the example of Mr Jeremy Chua, who formed a Facebook page SG Haze Rescue calling for the donation of excess masks. His effort resulted in a donation of more than 200 masks within a day and offers of help from more than 120 people. They show that there are many good-hearted Singaporeans who know how to harness the Internet positively. The Government will continue to support the MLC to promote media literacy and foster a safe and responsible online environment.