

Forum examines scourge of digital crimes

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As cities progress in their digital journeys and develop more complex ways of living, the nature of digital crimes will become tougher to address.

But overcoming this challenge is not impossible, noted the chief executive of the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), Mr Lew Chuen Hong, yesterday.

He was responding to a question from the floor at the Singapore Perspectives conference on how the legal framework can be updated for digital crimes that have affected ordinary bank users, in the light of the recent phishing cases involving OCBC Bank. The bank is in the spotlight after nearly 470 customers lost at least \$8.5 million in fraudulent fund transfers last month, after scammers posed as OCBC and sent SMSes to victims with links to phishing sites.

Mr Lew did not address the OCBC cases directly, but he sketched out several approaches that Singapore is taking to tackle digital crimes.

He stressed that resilience in people has to continue to be developed, especially in more at-risk groups here such as the elderly. "Resilience cannot be just a centralised structure or centralised measures put in place," he said, adding that the most vulnerable people should be best protected and given basic skill sets.

International cooperation is also important, he pointed out, as it helps the authorities identify perpetrators for digital crimes, given how they might be based elsewhere.

Mitigation measures that act as defensive moves have been introduced here to combat digital crimes too, Mr Lew said. He cited how all incoming international calls must be prefixed with "+65" to alert the public to a potential scam call.

The IMDA chief touched on another government measure to address a challenge from modern technology – Singapore's fake news law, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Pofma).

Fake news in the digital age is extremely corrosive, and Pofma allows the authorities to have a "right of reply" that lets individual users decide for themselves what they wish to believe.

Both Mr Lew and Professor Carlo Ratti from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who also took part in the forum, discussed how digitalisation can accentuate risks in society, even as it makes people's lives better.

For instance, technology allowed the coming together of a mob that became incensed and stormed the Capitol building in the United States last year, said Mr Lew.

The echo chambers and digital tribes created by online spaces can lead to fragmentation in society, said Prof Ratti, who specialises in urban technologies and planning.

He said that physical spaces can be an "antidote" because they force people to interact with those who are different from them. "You are confronted with diversity in a space of inevitability, where you must confront even things that are different from you, ideas that are different. All those things actually in the digital space are so easy to avoid. You can just simply filter them out."

Forum moderator Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, raised the concern of a digital divide as cities develop technologically.

To this, Mr Lew underscored the importance of upskilling. He said training and upskilling are critical to ensure that people are not left behind. "They're the only way in which you can equalise the opportunities because you cannot equalise outcomes directly. You must equalise the opportunities that are available, and the skill sets they have."

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