

Two-day conference on fake news begins

Joanna Seow

Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam will deliver the keynote address today at a conference on countering the rise of fake news.

Media publishers, journalists and policymakers are coming together to examine topics such as fact checking, media literacy and regulations at the two-day event beginning today.

Titled "Keep it Real: Truth and Trust in the Media", the forum is jointly organised by The Straits Times and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of the English, Malay and Tamil Media group of Singapore Press Holdings and editor of The Straits Times, said: "The proliferation of fake news in recent times has made it increasingly difficult for all of us to distinguish between

what is real and unreal, true or false, fact or alternative fact.

"So we at The Straits Times are happy to collaborate with the World Association of Newspapers on this timely forum, which brings together media players, media thinkers and media users to discuss how societies might respond to this phenomenon."

Greater connectivity has aided the spread of fake news and alternative facts, which has emerged as a

problem around the globe.

Just last Saturday, Singapore government website gov.sg debunked a claim being circulated on WhatsApp and social media that a person's Central Provident Fund savings would be transferred by default to his nominee's Medisave account upon death, instead of being issued in cash.

Other recent instances of hoax news included a claim that a childcare centre was feeding children rotten fruit, and another that the

roof of a block at Punggol Waterway Terraces had collapsed.

Ms Lynn McDonald, High Commissioner of Canada, and Mr Ian Wilson, president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, said: "The fake news phenomenon affects us all. Addressing this issue requires strong, ongoing collaboration between governments and the private sector."

Participants today will hear talks on the Internet being used as a weapon and on the impact of misinformation on politics, among other topics. Speakers include editors from The Straits Times, Philippines news site Rappler and news agency Reuters, as well as representatives from Google News Lab and

German non-profit investigative organisation correctiv.org.

Other partners of the event include the Canadian High Commission, Facebook, Google, German political organisation Konrad Adenauer Foundation, National Library Board and Singapore Management University.

The event, held at Singapore Management University's new School of Law Building, is open to the public and tickets can be purchased at the door. Tickets cost \$125 for the public and \$100 for Wan-Ifra members. Only cash payment will be accepted for walk-in registrations.

joseow@sph.com.sg

Students popping 'smart pills' to lift grades

Observers say more are turning to drugs meant to treat psychiatric, sleep disorders

Calvin Yang

In the US thriller film *Limitless*, a struggling writer whose career is heading nowhere pops a mysterious drug, which unlocks his untapped cognitive abilities, turning him into a financial genius and literary whiz.

Hoping to gain a similar edge, some young people here, from undergraduates to secondary school students, are using "smart drugs" to help with last-minute cramming. Students as young as 16 are buying and taking drugs such as modafinil to get better exam grades.

And they are finding it easier to obtain such drugs. Some students share them with their peers. It is also possible to get the drugs on online platforms, such as Carousell, and messaging services like Telegram.

Some sellers offer free samples, delivery services and even back-to-school promotions. A blister pack of 10 pills may cost between \$15 and \$35, depending on the potency.

Such drugs – used to treat disorders such as excessive daytime sleepiness or conditions like attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – are touted to boost concentration, decision-making and memory power in healthy people.

One website selling modafinil – used to treat people with narcolepsy and other sleep disorders – targets Singapore students "who are mercilessly subjected to an intense education curriculum". It added that, with modafinil, students can "study more in less time". The seller said his youngest buyer is in Secondary 4.

Pills containing modafinil are marketed under names such as Modalert and Modvigil. One pill, which costs about \$1.50, can keep a person awake for several hours. Other cognitive enhancers include methylphenidate, marketed under formulations such as Ritalin and used to treat those with ADHD and narcolepsy.

Observers believe more students are misusing these "smart drugs". Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist in private practice, said more students who do not have clinical conditions that require treatment are approaching doctors for the drugs. He said it can be dangerous to buy these drugs off the streets or over the Internet and to use them without supervision.

Some studies have shown that these cognitive enhancers can produce mental gains in normal people, but they can also cause side effects such as heart problems, severe rashes, headaches, irritability, difficulty in breathing and insomnia.

Psychologist Daniel Koh from Insights Mind Centre said the lack of rest may slow down reaction time, affect moods and the immune system, or result in a breakdown. "The body and mind cannot be constantly stimulated and not allowed to relax," he said.

Dr Thomas Lee of The Resiliency Clinic has encountered a handful of students over the years who admitted storing up methylphenidate for exams. Methylphenidate is listed as a controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

Dr Lee said: "They pretended that they were taking the medication daily but secretly accumulated the supply to take during exams and tests. Sometimes, they shared them with or supplied them to their friends."

In a joint reply on methylphenidate, the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and the Central Narcotics Bureau said medication containing the substance needs to be registered with the HSA, and can be prescribed only by a registered medical practitioner.

"Prior approval from HSA is required for each import of therapeutic products that contain controlled drugs," they added.

Anyone who imports or supplies, without prior approval, a health product with methylphenidate may be jailed for up to two years and/or fined up to \$50,000.

Modafinil, while not a controlled substance, is not registered for use as a therapeutic product here, the HSA noted. It said that, if convicted of unauthorised sales, a person can be fined up to \$50,000 and/or jailed up to two years.

Jalan Besar GRC MP Denise Phua, who heads the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, urged students to refrain from resorting to these drugs to perform better in their studies.

"It is smarter to stick to natural strategies such as having enough sleep, healthy food, lots of physical exercise and adopting good study skills – strategies that are all tested and backed by research," she said.

calyang@sph.com.sg

Fun-packed day at Safra Jurong open house



Engineer Lee Seng Juau, 38, helping his daughter Ruo Xuan, six, fill a field pack, while his wife, Madam Michelle Hoo, 38, and older daughter Xin Yee, eight, look on. The family was at the Safra Jurong open house yesterday, where a campaign was launched to rally Singaporeans to show their appreciation to past and present national servicemen for their contributions. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI SEE HOME B3

Firms see ST Run as a way for staff to bond

Ho Cai Jun

Forget family gatherings or birthday parties. For local construction and infrastructure company Samwoh, The Straits Times Run is a way to forge better relationships between its staff and their families.

This is the second year running that the building material supplier has signed up for the July 16 run.

Mr Daniel Tan, co-chairman of Samwoh's recreation club, said: "The ST Run is quite a high-profile run and it's part of our employee engagement efforts."

"This is one way that we can strengthen our family culture at Samwoh."

"If we have a stronger bond, we can work better together and leverage each other's strengths."

The event is also an opportunity for its employees to "de-stress and achieve a good work-life balance",

said Ms Bernice Ong.

The property development executive added: "It's a very good time to bond with your colleagues in a very casual setting."

"Usually, we work on different tasks, so we don't really have the time to chit-chat on more casual topics."

The 32-year-old, who will be participating in this year's 5km fun run with her nephew, has also met people with similar interests through the run. The piloxing practitioner found a new fitness classmate after speaking to her colleague's relative at last year's race.

High-precision manufacturer Beyonics also stressed the importance of team bonding, and views the ST Run as an "excellent opportunity to improve the health, wellness and culture of the company".

So far, 94 of its employees have signed up for the run.

Said chief executive officer Scott Smith: "Corporate wellness equals



the company's success. We can interact and bond, which is an essential attribute while working together as a team.

"We get to know each other better, spending time together outside of working hours."

Both companies have also signed up for the corporate tentage package for the annual run, a new feature introduced this year.

Priced from \$2,500 upwards for a 6m x 6m tent, there will be a total of six hospitality tents at the Padang.

Companies can include food and drinks at \$8 a head.

Said Mr Smith: "The welfare of our people is important to us. We care and reward their perseverance. They deserve a private and comfortable rest area after their hard work."

Mr Tan, whose firm Samwoh is targeting 150 participants this year, said: "We want our staff to feel they are part of this activity, that they are doing it with Samwoh."

"It shows that we are doing this as a team and as a family. Without the tentage, they'll just come, take a photo, run and that's it."

Registration for the ST Run has been extended till June 28. Interested participants can sign up at www.straitstimesrun.com. Interested companies that want to purchase the corporate tentage with hospitality can call 6248-5777 or e-mail info@straitstimesrun.com

caijun@sph.com.sg



Samwoh employees at last year's ST Run. The firm is participating in the event for the second year running. PHOTO: SAMWOH CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT