Trust critical to bolstering public confidence during crisis: Panel

Lye Min Zhang

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of public communication, as well as the need for institutions such as the media to build up trust with their audiences, said panellists during a discussion on World News Day yesterday.

Public communication is often considered as a pillar of response to outbreaks, and having credible news organisations is critical to this, said Professor Dale Fisher, group chief of medicine at the National University Health System. Dr June Tay, head of the digital media programme at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and The Straits Times editor-in-chief Warren Fernandez.

The session, titled Tackling Covid-19: Getting It Right And How To Do It, was held at The Straits Times newsroom and streamed online. The session was moderatned by the Singapore University of Social Sciences and Nominated MP Victor Lye.

Professor Fisher, an infectious diseases expert, said a lack of good risk communication and community engagement could lead people to do their part to curb the spread of disease.

"People are almost always the case of management, infection prevention and control, testing, epidemiology and the epidemiology that we have to follow," he said. "But the biggest issue is always risk communication, which is the most critical.

"And if you get that wrong, this leads to a failed response," he said. Professor Fisher, who chairs the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network reviewing committee for the World Health Organisation, said the pandemic has been a way of doing things outside the usual rules and procedures.

"What the pandemic has done is to create and the world is a more open and flexible world," he said. "And that is the most important step.

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"We did that with some trepidation as it has commercial implications, but what we found was our subscriptions actually went up, and that’s a way to see that people do take the information, he added.

Dr Tay, from NUS’s School of Science and Technology, said that Covid-19 has brought not just risks and challenges, but also opportunities to digital spaces.

Responding to a question from the audience about how people can adopt certain jobs are online and the advent of the digital economy, Dr Tay said it was important to harness this opportunity and the "human touch" to more effectively communicate to audiences.

"If we are to see that digital solutions can be very exciting, they are able to engage the audience and show their personality. So, we really have to think about how we do things in different ways," she said.

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