BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE AND SAFE DIGITAL SOCIETY
(Motion)

1.   Sir, I rise in support of the Motion in the name of Ms Tin Pei Ling.

2.   I thank Members for their thoughtful suggestions on building a safe and inclusive digital society. I will speak on the topic of digital inclusion and Minister Josephine Teo will speak on issues related to digital trust and safety.

3.   With your permission, Sir, may I ask the Clerk to distribute to Members supplementary materials on the topics that Minister Josephine Teo and I will cover today. Members may also access the handout through the MP@SG Parl mobile app.

4.   Sir, let me first address Members' points on the impact of digitalisation on the workforce and on mental health and well-being.

5.   Ms Tin Pei Ling, Mr Sharael Taha and Mr Mark Lee asked about the impact of digitalisation, especially the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on our workforce and our SMEs and our businesses.

6.   The field of AI, generative AI, in particular, is evolving rapidly. Analysts' predictions on the impact of AI on the workforce and industries vary greatly and sometimes, even contradict each other. But there is broad consensus that AI is here and its development will have profound effects on the world and certainly for us on this little red dot.

7.   We should not be overly fearful or be overly anxious of this trend. Instead, we should confidently embrace the possibilities with AI.

8.   The competition is not between "man" and "machine" but which economy and society can better use technology to improve our competitiveness and our lives. Singapore is well placed to harness the power of AI, as we have done in previous waves of technological change.

9.   The Government's approach has always been to support our businesses and workers to adapt to changes so that they can fully benefit from the opportunities that digital technologies can bring.

10.   Some examples include:

   a. How we are using Jobs Transformation Maps (JTMs), which are specific to different sectors, to help employers and workers understand and prepare themselves for future tech-enabled job roles;

   b. SkillsFuture and Workforce Singapore offer programmes to support workers to upskill and reskill to take on new jobs;

   c. For those who wish to transit to tech roles, they can tap on IMDA's TechSkills Accelerator (TeSA) programme.

11.   The Government will continue to work with our tripartite partners, including our Labour unions on this important effort as suggested by Ms Jean See, Mr Sharael Taha and Mr Mark Lee.

12. Dr Wan Rizal raised the issue of the impact of technology on mental health and well-being. This House will have a fuller discussion on this topic during the Motion on "Advancing Mental Health" next month. So, let me just broadly touch on MCI's approach on this issue.

13. MCI recognises that technology and social media use can have grave impact on mental health and well-being. As Dr Wan Rizal, Assoc Prof Razwana Begum, and Ms Nadia Samdin as well as Ms Mariam Jaafar had mentioned, such risks include exposure to harmful online content, such as cyberbullying, self-harm content, as well as excessive and problematic use of social media.

14. To mitigate these risks to Singaporean users, MCI has introduced regulatory measures to enhance online safety for users, which Minister Josephine Teo will touch on later.

15. We also work with partners across the public, private and people sectors to raise awareness amongst Singaporeans on online safety and good practices on using technology in a healthy and balanced manner.

16. For example, we work with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to strengthen cyber wellness education in schools, teaching students to be discerning, safe, respectful and responsible users of the online space. They are also taught the importance of respect and empathy, how they can protect themselves and others online, and to seek help when necessary.

17. Dr Wan Rizal also spoke about the role of parents. We agree that parents play a crucial role in guiding their children's digital journey, especially at the early

stages. We work with partners, such as the Media Literacy Council, to develop resources for parents and caregivers.

18. MCI has also worked with technology companies to launch an Online Safety Digital Toolkit in March last year, which guides parents to make use of the parental controls, privacy and reporting tools, as well as self-help resources on the social media platforms.

19. Collectively, these efforts aim to make the online space safer for all and empower individuals with the know-how to protect themselves and their loved ones. It is an ongoing journey. We will continue to work with partners in this effort.

20. Sir, let me turn to the theme of digital inclusion.

21. Members have made many good points on how digitalisation has brought benefits and opportunities to Singaporeans. Indeed, as a little red dot with scarce natural resources, we cannot afford to unplug from the global digital economy, especially when others are actively pursuing strategies to be more digital, including leveraging emerging technologies like AI.

22. Therefore, our aim has always been to make digital work for all so that every Singaporean can benefit.

23. I am glad that all Members share this belief.

24. Mr Yip Hon Weng, Ms Jessica Tan, Mr Ong Hua Han and Ms Usha Chandradas spoke about some of the challenges that Singaporeans face when going digital. I

can relate to these points. I meet many Singaporeans in similar circumstances in my walkabouts, Meet-the-People Sessions as well as many focus groups.

25.   Therefore, making digital work for all is not just about going digital, but also recognising that some Singaporeans still prefer non-digital options for certain transactions. Our approach is therefore not digital only for all.

    a. An example is CDC Vouchers, which Ms Jessica Tan earlier mentioned. Within a week of the launch, 80% of the 1.27 million Singaporean households have claimed their vouchers. I believe most Singaporeans claimed their CDC Vouchers digitally.

    b. However, those who prefer to use physical vouchers can visit Community Centres to print hard copy vouchers. To better support residents, student volunteers, Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassadors and our Digital Ambassadors are on hand to help.

    c. Singaporeans who need in-person support for Government services can visit one of our seven ServiceSG Centres. The Centres can help with close to 600 Government services and schemes. Last year, close to 400,000 transactions for services such as Singpass applications, CPF and IRAS services were completed at ServiceSG Centres.

26.   Making digital work for all also means supporting all Singaporeans, regardless of their circumstances, to benefit from digitalisation. It is often said that the measure of a society is how it looks after its most vulnerable. We are taking steps to support those who need more help to benefit from going digital.

27. In this regard, we are building on a good foundation.

28. Last year, IMDA released the inaugural Singapore Digital Society report as a stocktake of our efforts. We have made good progress over the years.

29. We are one of the most digitally connected countries in the world. Our digital inclusion efforts are well regarded internationally. Singapore has ranked first on the Inclusive Internet Index from 2018, to the latest report released in 2022.

30. These datapoints show that we are on the right track. But we are not resting on our laurels.

31. I thank Members for their valuable suggestions on how we can better support lower-income households, small businesses, seniors and persons with disabilities with digitalisation.

32. Let me touch on some of our efforts.

33. Mr Sharael Taha stressed the importance of supporting lower-income households with digital connectivity.

    a. IMDA introduced the DigitalAccess@Home scheme in April last year to support lower-income households with subsidised broadband and digital devices through a simplified and streamlined application process. Since then, we have supported about 6,800 households.

b. In particular, together with preceding schemes like NEU PC Plus, we have supported a total of 26,000 households with school-going children with access to digital devices from 2020 to 2023.

c. Currently, 98% of resident households with school-going children have computer access. We will continue to support the remaining 2% through schemes like DigitalAccess@Home. This complements efforts by MOE and schools to support students' home-based learning by providing school-prescribed personal learning devices to secondary school students under the National Digital Literacy Programme. In addition, schools loan computers and internet-enabling devices to students who require them for school work.We will continue to work with schools and our community partners to reach out to all families with school-going children.

d. We also introduced the Mobile Access for Seniors scheme in June 2020 to provide lower-income seniors with subsidised smartphones and mobile data plans along with training. Since 2020, over 11,000 lower-income seniors have benefited.

34. Importantly, industry and community partners play a big part to support digital access for lower-income households. For example, SG Bono, a non-profit organisation refurbishes donated laptops for use by lower-income families, especially those with school-going children. I am particularly glad to know that SG Bono extended this support to madrasah students from lower-income households since 2021.

35.   Mr Vikram Nair spoke about hawkers. It is another group of microbusinesses or Singaporeans that we are supporting through the Hawkers Go Digital programme.

   a.   As of November last year, more than 11,000 stallholders, which is around 60% of all hawkers, have adopted e-payments via the Singapore Quick Response Code (SGQR) platform. Under this programme, SGQR has facilitated an average of 5.1 million transactions worth $42 million per month between June and November last year.

   b.   In addition to SGQR and e-payments, this digitalisation support to hawkers and heartland merchants give them the confidence to come onboard other digital initiatives such as the CDC Vouchers.

   c.   I am very encouraged to see many stories of how these heartland merchants and small businesses have further built on this foundation and gone further to transform their business models and capture the opportunities from e-commerce.

36.   Mr Yip Hon Weng, Mr Ong Hua Han and others spoke about the Seniors Go Digital programme and asked about the progress.

   a.   The Seniors Go Digital programme was set up to equip seniors with basic digital skills so that they too can be part of a digital society and enjoy the benefits of going digital. At the time of the programme's inception in 2020, the need was particularly pressing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, we have conducted training for over 280,000 seniors.

b. Seniors' adoption of digital skills has improved over time. For example, in 2022, 86% of seniors knew how to find information online, a 29% increase from just three years ago in 2019.

c. I am always inspired by our seniors who gamely picked up digital skills even though it can be challenging at the outset. This is a testament to their spirit of lifelong learning and the dedication of SDO's Digital Ambassadors, our Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassadors as well as family and friends who patiently guide our seniors on their digitalisation journey.

d. Singaporeans who want to learn digital skills can visit one of the 37 SG Digital Community Hubs islandwide and they can visit one of the more than 200 roving counters in our workplaces, healthcare institutions and community spaces.

37. Another aspect is designing services inclusively, with the needs of specific groups in mind. Ms Nadia Samdin and Mr Ong Hua Han spoke about supporting persons with disabilities. In particular, I would like to thank Mr Ong for his feedback on behalf of the deaf and the visually impaired communities, and for his thoughtful suggestions.

a. We are making progress towards our goal of making all high traffic Government websites fully accessible to persons with disabilities by 2030. We have increased the percentage of high traffic Government websites which are fully accessible from 61% in 2022 to 73% last year.

b. Mr Ong Hua Han mentioned that we have introduced sign language interpretation for key national events and critical public announcements to improve access to information of national importance. Today, 61% of free-to-air TV programmes carry subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. We are working with Mediacorp to achieve our target of 70% coverage of free-to-air TV broadcasts accessible through sign language interpretation, captioning or subtitling by 2030.

38. Ms Nadia Samdin raised the importance of supporting persons with disabilities with assistive technology and learning digital skills.

   a. Persons with disabilities who need assistive technology, such as a specialised keyboard and mouse, can tap on the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s Assistive Technology Fund, which provides individuals with a means-tested subsidy of up to 90% of the cost of assistive technology devices, subject to a lifetime cap of $40,000. The fund can be used to acquire, replace, upgrade or repair those devices.

   b. They can also receive assessment and training in the use of these devices at Tech Able, which is an assistive technology centre jointly managed by SG Enable and the disability social service agency, SPD, at the Enabling Village. The Digital Enablement Programme, which Ms Nadia Samdin mentioned, is a Digital for Life (DfL)-funded programme which supports persons with disabilities with essential digital skills for a world of hybrid work. As of March 2023, the programme has supported 200 training places.

39.   I agree with Mr Ong Hua Han that industry partners, especially those providing essential services, must play their part to enhance the accessibility of their services.

    a. We are lowering the adoption barriers for industry partners through providing resources and tools. SG Enable provides e-accessibility training and consultancy services for companies to learn how e-accessibility features can be incorporated into their digital services.

    b. The GovTech Accessibility Enabling Team (ALLY) has developed Purple ALLY, a free and open-sourced testing tool for digital teams to check how they can make their digital products or services more accessible.

    c. Mr Ong also asked if we can ensure that future digital infrastructure designers and programmers are exposed to digital accessibility. We will continue to work with our Institutes of Higher Learning on this. For example, students in the Diploma in Design at Ngee Ann Polytechnic design electronic devices to support users with disabilities as part of their curriculum. We will continue to work with Institutes of Higher Learning to incorporate some of these considerations into their curriculum.

40.   I encourage industry partners to make use of these resources and do more to make their services accessible to all Singaporeans.

41.   At the same time, I commend the spirit of Mr Ong's remarks and suggestions. All of us, as a society, can do more to make our digital services and products more inclusive. As a first step, it is oftentimes understanding where each other is

coming from and how we can take pragmatic steps to achieve that. In that regard, I would certainly love to invite Mr Ong to address and speak to many of our community partners on this aspect. We will reach out after this Sitting.

42. This brings me to my next point. The Government cannot do this on our own. I am glad many Members – Ms Hany Soh, Mr Ong Hua Han, Ms Usha Chandradas and others – emphasised that this is a whole-of-nation effort. The Government, corporates, communities and individuals must come together to support different groups who need help on their journeys.

43. The Digital for Life movement launched in 2021 is an important part of this collective effort. And it is making encouraging progress, bringing together 3P partners – the public sector, private sector and people sector – for this common cause.

    a. Over 140 DfL partners have reached out to more than 270,000 beneficiaries.

    b. Partners have also come forward to generously contribute some $14 million to the DfL Fund, which supports digital inclusion efforts, including ground-up projects from the community.

44. I am heartened that there are many who are willing to step forward to support their fellow Singaporeans. I encourage more partners to step forward and work together with us. For example, Ms Usha shared examples of how we can better involve members of the arts community in our digital inclusion effort. We will certainly reach out to them.

45. Sir, we have made good progress to enhance access to digital connectivity and services.

46. But access alone is not enough. After all, what good is connectivity and a digital device if we do not have the skills to use them for our benefit?

47. Ms Mariam Jaafar spoke about AI literacy and Mr Sharael Taha spoke about how we must give all Singaporeans, especially students from lower-income families, opportunities. I agree with them.

    a. MOE launched the Transforming Education through Technology plan in September last year to further strengthen students' development of digital literacy and technological skills, starting with AI literacy. Yesterday, MOE has also responded to questions from Members on opportunities for our students to learn about AI.

    b. Together with MOE, we introduced the Code For Fun (CFF) programme to expose students to coding and computational thinking. Since 2020, it has been mandatory for all upper primary school students to go through CFF or a comparable coding programme. As technology continues to evolve, IMDA and MOE will review the CFF programme to ensure that it is relevant and up to date. We are working towards introducing new content on AI and data literacy in the refreshed curriculum for 2025.

48. Outside schools, there are many opportunities for students, young people and members of the public to explore new technology.

a. For instance, community partners like SGBono and VIVITA have been collaborating with the Bedok Social Service Office to bring tech experiences closer to children from less privileged backgrounds who typically would not have such opportunities. Earlier, Members raised many good initiatives in the community.

b. For the general public, we have programmes like ExperienceIT and MakeIT at our libraries. These showcase emerging technologies and innovations, such as AI, machine learning and 3D printing, through informative displays and hands-on activities. So, please check out these exhibits and showcases at your nearest library.

49. At the same time, we recognise that some of us may not be ready to take on the more advanced digital skills. We may want to focus first on building the fundamentals to go online safely and use digital services and tools confidently in our daily lives.

50. To support this, IMDA will launch Digital Skills for Life, or DSL, today. In the handout distributed, Members will find a factsheet with more details on DSL. Unlike existing frameworks to equip Singaporeans with digital skills for the workplace or specific sectors, DSL outlines the digital skills to enable Singaporeans to carry out day-to-day tasks online.

51. We have referenced overseas examples and got inputs from experts.

52. But more importantly, we heard from Singaporeans themselves.

a. We learned from our insights from reaching out to more than 280,000 seniors through the Seniors Go Digital programme over the last three years and I would like to especially thank the 16,000 learners who were part of the pilot last year for their valuable feedback.

53. The DSL framework covers five competencies.

a. Firstly, setting up and using smart devices, how to operate the basic functions on our devices.

b. Secondly, exploring information online. Through the Internet, we can access limitless information and new opportunities. But we need to know how to search, view and retrieve this information safely for our use.

c. Thirdly, communicating online with others.

d. Fourthly, transacting online for greater convenience – accessing banking and Government services, booking healthcare appointments, just to name a few examples.

e. And importantly, fifth, being safe, smart and kind online – understanding how to keep ourselves safe from scams and false information and how to build a positive presence online.

54. These are all practical skills that can make a real difference to Singaporeans' day-to-day lives.

55. Let me share one example.

    a. A few years ago, I met an elderly lady at the SG Digital Community Hub at Heartbeat@Bedok. She was asking our Digital Ambassador many questions on how to use her smartphone and I saw her taking copious notes down on a small, little notepad.

    b. She was probably around her late fifties and early sixties, speaking in Mandarin. When I asked what she was learning, her answer both surprised and inspired me. She said that she was a victim of an online scam and she lost some money. She was there to learn how to make sure that this would not happen to her again.

    c. So, instead of being fearful and withdrawing, she wanted to confront the issue head on by learning how to safeguard herself.

    d. There are many seniors like that. The Digital Ambassador at the Hub patiently walked her through practical cybersecurity tips that would be useful for all of us. For example, how to create a stronger password instead of just using the default password "Password" which scammers could easily guess.

    e. I was most heartened by her resilient spirit and willingness to learn, and we want to support Singaporeans like her with the right tools, resources and competencies to pick up the skills they need.

56. To do so, we are collaborating with partners under the DfL movement to develop resources in line with the DSL framework.

    a. Interested learners can access in-person learning at the SG Digital Community Hubs where Digital Ambassadors and Silver Infocomm Wellness Ambassadors will walk alongside less-digitally savvy Singaporeans on their journeys.

    b. Learners can also learn at your own pace and access videos and guidebooks on the Digital for Life Portal.

    c. Those who are keen to help their family and friends pick up skills can use these resources to teach them.

    d. The digital resources in English will be rolled out progressively from this month, and resources in Mandarin, Malay and Tamil will be available by the first half of this year.

57. Sir, let me say a few words in Mandarin.

58. "数码技能益终身"是一项自下而上的运动，我们希望看到更多伙伴和组织的加入，大家群策群力，共同取得成功。

59. 我们会把有关内容及其他教材放上网，让合作伙伴免费使用。这是我们对全世界数码化进程的一个小贡献。

    a. 我们的合作伙伴在举办数码技能培训时，可参考这些资源。

b. 他们也可以通过创意的方式辅助学习，进一步推广"数码技能益终身"运动。例如，把一些教材做成游戏，让孩子的学习变得有趣生动；或者用方言制作音频和视频，为乐龄人士介绍五种基本的技能。

c. 我们希望大家善用这些资源，让更多国人能够受惠。

60. 数码技能益终身"框架是帮助国人展开数码旅程的一个起点。

a. 就如我们学习写字时，必须从一笔一画开始学起，掌握数码技能也必须从最基本的学起。有了稳固的基础，那么，随着数码科技的进步，我们也就更有把握学习新技能，与时并进。

b. 我们会定期检讨这个框架，以确保框架涵盖的内容能满足现有需求。

61. Sir, let me conclude.

62. Over the years we have made great strides to build our vision of an inclusive and safe digital society. We have a strong "hardware" foundation in terms of access to devices and broadband connectivity. We are strengthening our "software" layer by building up Singaporeans' skills and competencies to navigate the online space safely and confidently to fully benefit from exciting digital opportunities.

63. However, as many Members have spoken passionately about, we must aspire to go beyond the "hardware" and "software", and nurture our "heartware" on how we treat one another and to foster a kinder online space for all:

a. Where we make an effort to listen with the aim to understand, instead of shouting to press across our point;

b. Where we make an effort to respect another person's viewpoints and find common ground even if we disagree on certain issues;

c. Where we make an effort to offer a kind word, instead of joining in to spread negativity.

64. In our physical world, we are comfortable to let our loved ones walk freely down the street, trusting that they will have pleasant interactions with people and not have to look over their shoulders for threats. We trust that there are norms which govern how we conduct ourselves and interact with one another.

65. We must aspire to bring this to the online space as well where our seniors will be able to go online safely without anxiety; where our children can go online confidently without having the fear of cyberbullying or encountering harmful online content

66. But it is all up to us to keep our digital streets safe. Each one of us can play our part to build a safer, more inclusive and kinder digital society.

67. With that, Sir, I support the Motion.