

Govt's commitment to a safer cyberspace for kids

By **Nor Ain Mohamed Radhi** - December 17, 2024 @ 7:30am



Child safety activist Dr James Nayagam says we now refer to social media and everything on phones as an 'e -babysitter', and that cyberspace has become the new environment for children. - NSTP file pic

KUALA LUMPUR: The recently passed amendments to the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588) are a testament to the government's commitment to ensuring the safety of children in an increasingly digital world .

It was hailed as a critical step toward safeguarding digital spaces, where threats such as cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, and trafficking are on the rise.

Experts in both child protection and criminology said it strengthened the legal framework to combat online crime.

Child safety activist Dr James Nayagam said, as an advocate for children, he had dealt with issues such as cyberbullying, cyber grooming, paedophiles and cases of children who have committed suicide due to cyberbullying.

"Now we refer to social media and everything on phones as an 'e-babysitter'.

"So, the childminder has taken the form of social media and what ever else is available online.

"Cyberspace has become the new environment for children and unlike the physical playground, where children might spend an hour or two, kids now spend around six to eight hours in cyberspace ."

As such, he said the government had to take action. "They 're starting with the recently passed amendments to ad dress the situation.

"Because it has reached a point where something must be done, or we're going to lose control.

"It's not about completely ban ning things, but holding service providers accountable for the ma terial they offer."

With the amendments passed in Dewan Rakyat, Nayagam said the important questions to ask now we're when the implementation would take place, how would it be done, who and how would it be monitored.

"How serious are we about tack ling these problems? If we are truly committed, we will see results. If not, it will just remain a statement — something that sounds good, but doesn't lead to real change."

Criminologist Datuk Shahul Hamid Abd Rahim said the government's approach, through the amendment, was moving in the right direction, especially as Malaysia faced rising concerns about the online safety of children.

"The amendments to the Communications and Multimedia Act show a commitment to addressing pressing issues like cyberbullying, online exploitation, and harmful content.

"However, the approach must be supported by stronger enforcement mechanisms, awareness campaigns tailored to parents and schools, and partnerships with tech companies operating within the country."

He said the amendments had the potential to address the challenges of cyberbullying, online exploitation, and harmful content if implemented effectively.

For Malaysia, he said the following factors were critical; cultural sensitivity, technological resources and public engagement.

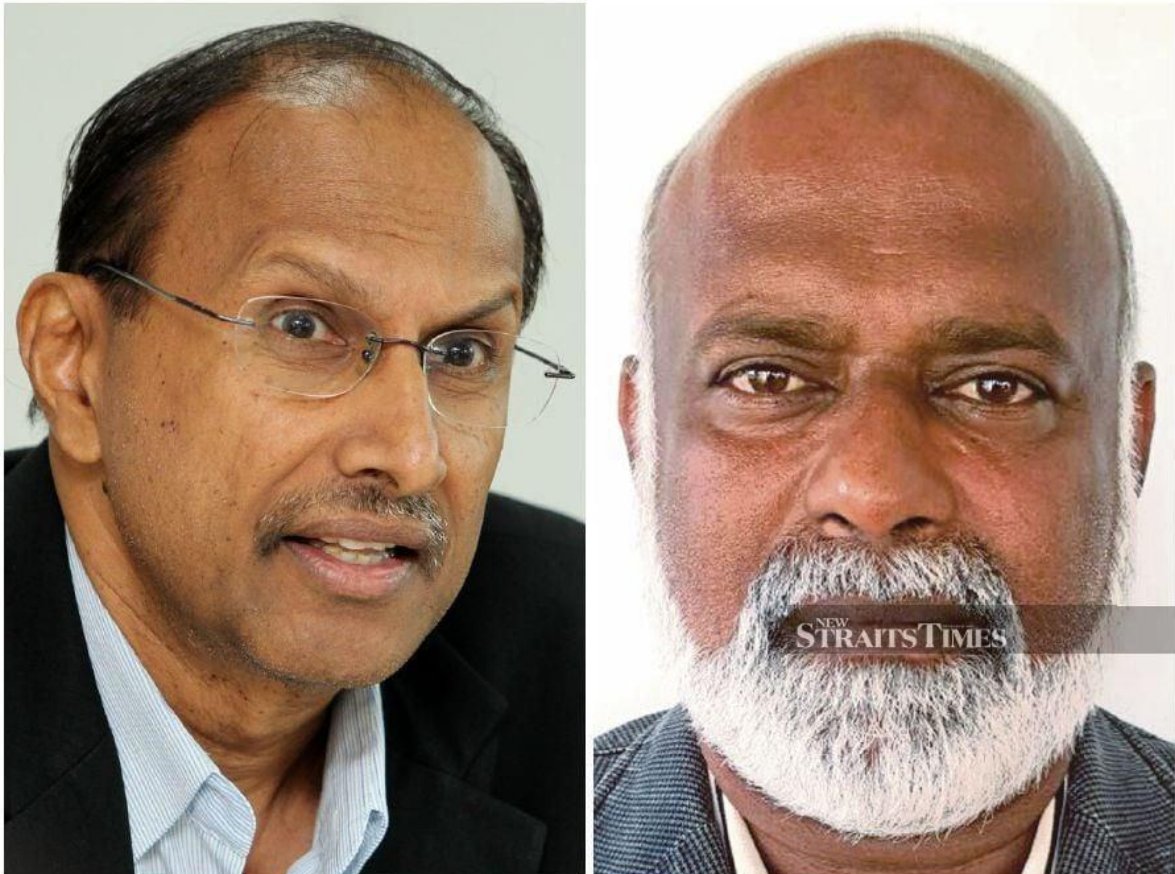
"Cultural sensitivity is in recognising how Malaysian societal norms and values influence online behaviour, particularly regarding harmful content.

"Technological resources are ensuring local authorities like the Malaysian Communications And Multimedia Commission are equipped with the latest tools to monitor and act against harmful activities online.

"In terms of public engagement, it is crucial to educate children, parents, and educators about digital risks and how to report them. Effective public service announcements and collaboration with schools can amplify the impact.

"Without addressing these areas, the amendments may fall short in curbing the growing dangers children face online."

Shahul Hamid said in the long term, the amendments could transform Malaysia's digital ecosystem into a safer environment for children. He stressed that their success would depend on balancing safety with key principles, namely children's privacy and online freedom.



(L-R) Child safety activist Dr James Nayagam; and Criminologist Datuk Shahul Hamid Abd Rahim. - NSTP file pic

"In terms of children's privacy, there is a need to strike the right balance between monitoring online activities and respecting children's privacy. Overly invasive measures could spark backlash or mistrust in government initiatives.

"As for freedom online, Malaysia must ensure that regulations to protect children do not unintentionally restrict freedom of expression or access to valuable online resources.

"Over-regulation could hinder the growth of the digital economy or innovation in the tech sector."

He said if executed carefully, these amendments could enhance Malaysia's standing as a nation committed to protecting children in the digital age, while also respecting fundamental freedoms and rights.

He pointed out that consistent monitoring and periodic reviews of the law would be needed to adapt to the ever-evolving online landscape.

On Dec 9, the Dewan Rakyat passed the Communications and Multimedia (Amendment) Bill 2024.

The Bill was approved through a bloc vote, with 59 members of parliament in favour, 40 against, one abstention, and 122 absent.

The amendment outlines punishments for offences against children under 18, with a maximum of five years imprisonment, a fine of RM500,000, or both.

The amendment also inserts a new subsection; Clause 91(c) into Section 233 of the Act, which imposes higher penalties for offences involving children under 18, classifying such acts as arrestable offences.

The new subsection also stipulates an additional fine of RM5,000 for each day or part of a day that the offence continues after conviction.

Clause 91(a)(i) proposes replacing "offensive " with "grossly offensive " in Section 233(1), while Clause 91(a)(ii) introduces new offences related to fraud and deceit targeting individuals.

Earlier, Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil, while tabling the bill for its second reading, said the amendments were aimed at creating a safer and more sustainable Internet ecosystem for all users.

He said the amendments also sought to protect the nation from cyber threats, including paedophilia, child pornography, grooming, online fraud, cyberbullying, and online gambling.