

Programme to tackle fake news less effective on seniors, lower socio-economic groups: IPS Study

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SINGAPORE: A study has found that an existing literacy programme helping Singaporeans discern between real news and fake news is less effective on certain groups, such as seniors and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This shows a need to tailor and tier such programmes for different segments, said the Institute of Policy Research (IPS) team behind the study on Singaporeans and false information.

Findings from the last two of three phases of the study were released on Wednesday (Feb 23).

Dr Carol Soon, who led the team, said there were “quite clear demographic differences” when it came to the efficacy of the [National Library Board's S.U.R.E.](#), or “Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate”, framework.

For starters, seniors were least likely to find the framework useful, clear, helpful and applicable in daily life compared to younger respondents, regardless of the form it took – as an infographic, video or PowerPoint.

Seniors also performed the most poorly at accurately recalling what the framework was about, the study said.

At the same time, those with higher education or from higher socio-economic backgrounds – such as those who lived in private housing or had a monthly household income above the national medium – were better at recalling the framework's lessons than other groups.

Dr Soon said these findings are “better enriched” considering [earlier results from the first phase](#) – that those who were more susceptible to false information tended to be older residents, or those living in smaller public flats.

“Essentially, it tells us not only is there a gap in terms of their ability to discern real information from false information. There is also, what I call, an intervention gap.

“People who are already vulnerable are even more vulnerable because existing certain existing modalities do not work as well for them,” said Dr Soon.

“We really do need different strokes for different folks, and a one-size fits all approach to educating the public certainly will not work.”

Instead, there is a clear need to have “a more tailored approach to designing literacy programmes”, she said.

This could mean offering those who are savvier the chance to pick up “higher-order skills and knowledge”, such as dealing with ambiguous information.

One example would be incorporating fact-checking lessons in existing cyber-wellness programmes in schools, especially for secondary and tertiary-level students who are already digitally competent.

At the same time, more basic or foundational programmes could be tailored for those “who may need to start smaller”, such as seniors and those who are less educated.

SOME RELUCTANT TO CALL OUT FAKE NEWS

While the first phase of the study was on Singaporeans’ susceptibility to fake news, the second phase looked how respondents processed and verified information.

Findings from this phase included how respondents turned to “signposts such as source, style, balance and currency” to assess an article’s credibility and trustworthiness.

Respondents also recognised that individuals play a role in fighting fake news – though some were reluctant to call out fake news sent to them, partly because they did not want to offend their social contacts, the study said.

The third phase, involving more than 1,000 respondents in a survey and experiment, analysed the effectiveness of existing interventions.

Its findings included how presenting the S.U.R.E framework on PowerPoint scored the highest in perceived clarity, usefulness and respondents’ gain in knowledge, compared to videos and infographics.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from these two phases, researchers also made other recommendations.

For one, they suggested using more multimedia modalities, such as PowerPoint, to deliver content. While this is usually limited to classroom settings, the combination of graphics, text and a “talking head” to explain things could be adapted to other settings too, it said.

It also recommended strengthening the S.U.R.E framework, by incorporating more advanced techniques to certain steps or providing clearer instructions.

As for calling out fake news online, Dr Soon said: “We reiterate the need to imbue people, not just with the hard skills when it comes to responding to false information, but also the soft skills that are required.”

In addition, the study noted that Singaporeans’ “inaction and apathy towards taking a more proactive role” in calling out fake news in their social networks is a “key weak link”.

There is also a sense of complacency among Singaporeans that others are more susceptible to fake news than themselves, it said.

“Moving forward, public messaging to strengthen Singapore’s resilience against false information should appeal to Singaporeans that no one is immune to false information, but everyone should and can play a role in these fighting falsehoods.”