

IPS survey: Most S'poreans fall for falsehoods because they came from family & friends

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It can be tough to tell what is false information in our fast-paced and hyper-connected world.

In a study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), over 2,000 people were surveyed to understand how likely Singaporeans were able to be influenced by false information.

The survey was conducted between Nov. 1, 2019, and Dec. 31, 2019 via face-to-face interviews.

Around six in 10 said they "sometimes", "often" and "very often" came across and believed false information that was spread in the form of text and image.

Here's what the study by Senior Research Fellow and Head of Society and Culture, Carol Soon, and Research Assistant, Shawn Goh, found:

1) Anyone can fall prey to false information

As part of the study, participants were given a manipulated "news article" and asked to read and assess if it was trustworthy.

Some ways that information in the manipulated "news article" was changed were altering the URL of the article, re-writing the headline to be highly sensationalised, inserting multiple grammatical errors, and even citing false local authorities such as "The Ministry of Health and Hygiene".

Over 66 per cent of participants in the study trusted the manipulated "news article".

These are some groups that were more susceptible to false information than others:

- Seniors and those living in public housing, particularly those living in one- to three-room HDB flats
- Those with a high-level of trust in online-only news sites
- Those with high confirmation bias (or the tendency to look for information that support one's beliefs, while ignoring information that does not confirm these beliefs)

Those who were less susceptible to false information were usually confident about their ability to distinguish between falsehoods and real information, and had a better knowledge of the media and information landscape.

2) Four types of information users were identified

Through the study, four types of information users were identified:

1. Informationally Disengaged: Those who were disinterested in the news and relied on gut instinct when navigating the information landscape
2. Informationally Overconfident: People who over-estimated their ability to discern real information from falsehoods and were less aware of the pitfalls of their cognitive biases
3. Informationally Diffident: Individuals that were most unsure and lacked confidence in their ability to navigate the information landscape
4. Informationally Savvy: This group was most confident about their ability to discern truth from falsehoods, and possessed the greatest knowledge about the media and information landscape

The study also found that even amongst respondents that were considered to be "informationally savvy", 46.9 per cent trusted the manipulated "news article" they were given during the study.

3) 75% of respondents have shared false information on social media

The study also found that 75 per cent of the respondents said that they have shared false information via instant messaging platforms and/or social networking sites as the information case came from close family and friends.

Social networks enabled the sharing of false information.

Most of the respondents surveyed frequently forward news and current affairs to their friends and family through social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) and instant messaging platforms (WhatsApp).

Those who were surveyed also trusted the information that was shared by their friends and family on the above-mentioned platforms, and were more likely to believe falsehoods they came across on social media.

The top two reasons why people shared false information were because the information was eye-catching and seemed important, and because it came from close family and friends.

The study also found that respondents had a higher level of trust for media on television and print newspapers, as compared to social networking sites.

Participants also believed they were less likely to encounter falsehoods via print newspapers, TV, and radio.

4) Respondents typically ignored false information that was encountered

The three topics that people frequently came across and believed false information about were related to:

1. International or foreign issues
2. Lifestyle
3. Health and medicine

While three of four respondents said that they came across falsehoods on platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, they were likely to ignore such information.

However, a better alternative would be for those who encounter false information to report such information to help stop the spread of misinformation.

Policy recommendations from the study

In addition to understanding the susceptibility of Singaporeans to falsehoods, the study also proposed various policy recommendations to tackle the issue.

Some suggestions include:

- More targeted digital literacy interventions for seniors and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as 1- to 3-room HDB flat dwellers
- Expanding the curriculum for digital literacy programmes to include how the tech companies and media industries operate
- Improve the quality of journalism, especially for non-traditional media, such as online-only news sites