6 in 10 local residents have believed false info: Study

Grace Ho

The Straits Times, 17 December 2020

Nearly six in 10 Singaporeans or permanent residents have encountered and believed false information in the form of text or images, a study has shown.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey also found that no one is immune to false information across all ages, socio-economic status and educational backgrounds, with more than two-thirds of over 2,000 respondents trusting a manipulated "news article" presented to them as part of the study.

Seniors and those living in one-to three-room Housing Board flats were the most susceptible to false information. Those who had lower levels of knowledge about the media and information landscape were also more susceptible.

The study's findings also suggest that digital and information literacy among Singaporeans is generally low, as fewer than a third of respondents successfully recognised signs that the "news article" had been manipulated, among other things.

Trust in local mainstream media, such as online news websites, newspapers and television, is higher than platforms such as social networking sites (SNS) and instant messaging (IM).

IPS yesterday released the findings of phase one of its study, which aims to understand the susceptibility of Singaporeans towards false information.

The study was conducted between November and December last year by Dr Carol Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh.

It found that six in 10 respondents said they sometimes, often, or very often encountered and believed false information in the form of text and images.

More than two-thirds of them also trusted the manipulated "news article", even though its source URL had been changed, it cited false authorities and had multiple grammatical errors.

Only 32.5 per cent said the article was untrustworthy.

Even those who are more savvy - such as younger Singaporeans with tertiary education - were not immune, with 46.9 per cent of them trusting the doctored article.

In terms of spreading false information, the study found that IM platforms and SNS were the main channels for doing so.

Close to three-quarters of respondents said they had shared false information on these channels because the information came from close family and friends.

"In the case of social networking sites, one additional factor may be because people's social media feeds exist in information bubbles," said the study.

It added that the personalised information streams increase people's chances of being presented with false information that reinforces their individual biases.

The study also looked at respondents' trust in media.

It found that most Singaporeans still rely on what IPS calls legacy media - commonly referred to as mainstream media - for news and current affairs.

Television was used most frequently by 59.3 per cent of respondents, followed by websites of local mainstream media such as The Straits Times and CNA (52.2 per cent), and local print newspapers (34.8 per cent).

Trust in these media types was higher than that in SNS such as Facebook, and IM platforms such as WhatsApp.

Up to 74 per cent of respondents said TV news was trustworthy or very trustworthy, followed by print newspapers (70.1 per cent), radio (67.6 per cent) and online websites of Singapore's mainstream media (61.6 per cent).

The study's authors also highlighted several implications of their findings for public policy.

First, there is a need to boost digital literacy by equipping people with tools and skills to assess different elements of information, such as sensationalised headlines, typos, news sources and tone of language used.

Second, there should be more targeted interventions for seniors and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their greater tendency to trust the manipulated news article could suggest a class divide in information literacy, the study's authors said.

Third, the quality of journalism should be improved, particularly for non-mainstream media which may lack the processes that established newsrooms have in place to ensure accuracy.

The authorities can also tap trusted media, as well as tech platforms such as search engines, to spread corrective information and debunk falsehoods.

Finally, it is useful to tap the power of social and community networks to debunk falsehoods.

The study said: "Digital literacy programmes should also look into imparting soft skills relating to intervention, such as how to respond to family members and friends who forward unverified or false information, in a sensitive yet effective manner."