

IPS study finds low digital literacy level in S'pore; 6 in 10 respondents believed false info

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SINGAPORE - 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 found that no one is immune to false information regardless of age, socio-economic status and educational background, with more than two-thirds of over 2,000 respondents trusting a manipulated "news article" presented to them as part of the study.

Of these, nearly half of the respondents that the IPS classified as "informationally savvy" trusted the article and did not spot signs that it had been manipulated.

The study also found that digital and information literacy among Singaporeans was generally low.

Trust in local mainstream media, such as online news websites, newspapers and television, is higher than non-traditional platforms like social networking sites and instant messaging.

The IPS on Thursday (Dec 17) released the findings of phase one of its study, which aims to understand the susceptibility of Singaporeans towards false information.

Phases two and three of the study, which are still in progress, will explore how Singaporeans process and verify information, as well as assess the effectiveness of digital literacy programmes.

Here are the key findings of the survey, which was conducted between November and December 2019 by IPS senior research fellow Dr Carol Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh:

1. No one is immune to false information

Close to 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 a "news article" that the IPS had manipulated for the purpose of the study, even though it had changed the source URL, cited false authorities, and included multiple grammatical errors.

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.

Seniors and those living in public housing, particularly those in one- to three-room HDB flats, were the most susceptible to false information.

Respondents with high trust in online-only news sites, and those with high confirmation bias, were also found to be more susceptible; while those with greater knowledge about the media and information landscape were less so.

2. High level of use and trust in mainstream media

Most Singaporeans still rely on what the 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 the online 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 in those of non-legacy media, including social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and instant messaging (IM) platforms such as WhatsApp.

Seventy-four 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 mainstream media (61.6 per cent).

"Print newspapers follow a fixed production cycle where the longer process enables more robust fact-checking and verification to be done," the study explained.

3. People's social networks drive the sharing of false information

IM platforms and SNS were the main channels of false information, the study found.

More than 60 per cent of respondents said they sometimes, often, or very often encountered false information on IM platforms, while 57 per cent said they did so on SNS.

Yet, close to three-quarters of respondents said they had shared false information on SNS and IM platforms because the information came from close family and friends.

One possible explanation for why false information appears more believable on these platforms, said the study, is because information is likely to be shared by trusted persons such as family members, close friends, or opinion leaders.

"In the case of social networking sites, one additional factor may be because people's social media feeds exist in information bubbles that result from their information curation."

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

Another worrying trend, it noted, is that most respondents verify information by asking their family members, friends, or colleagues first (62 per cent), before using a search engine (50.1 per cent) and checking with news sources (47.4 per cent).

4. Policy implications

The study cited several policy implications.

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 and errors, news sources, and tone of the language used.

"People need to be educated with a very specific type of knowledge - knowledge about the how the news media and information landscape operates - in order for them to become less susceptible to false information," it said.

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 suggests a possible class divide in information literacy, it said, citing research which has shown that students from families of lower socio-economic status tend to be less confident and capable of navigating the online space.

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 and tech platforms such as search engines, to spread corrective information and debunk falsehoods.

Finally, given the role played by interpersonal networks in spreading information, it is useful to tap the power of social and community networks to debunk falsehoods.

Said the study: "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."