

IPS study shows how savvy Singapore readers fact-check fake news articles

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SINGAPORE - When asked to read an online article containing misinformation about the deadly effects of 5G technology on birds, the most discerning Singapore readers spent more time cross-checking with other sources than those who were less information savvy, a recent study has found.

The debunked 2018 article on website Health Nut News claimed that some 300 birds at a park in the Netherlands died because a 5G transmission mast was rolled out in the Hague. Fact-checking website Snopes found that no 5G test had occurred during the time of the starling deaths.

The study noted that individuals, who were found to be more immune to fake news, were more attuned to how data and statistics could be manipulated, and more conscious of advertisement labels that appeared besides search results.

They were less likely to rely on their instincts to determine whether the article was trustworthy.

On the other hand, those with less interest in the fact-checking process depended more on the look and feel of the website that contained the article, such as font size, layout and the presence of advertisements.

How 50 Singapore residents verified the news they read was the subject of the second part of an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study published on Wednesday (Feb 23).

The study, funded by the Ministry of Communications and Information, was conducted by senior research fellow and head of the society and culture department at IPS Carol Soon, and research assistants Shawn Goh and Nandhini Bala Krishnan.

The latest findings followed the first phase of the study, which focused on Singaporeans' susceptibility to false information and was published in December 2020. It found that nearly six in 10 people, out of more than 2,000 respondents, had encountered and believed false information.

The second phase, a qualitative study with a smaller sample size, looked at Singaporeans' news and information-seeking practices online and their responses to false information, to understand why some people were more immune to fake news.

Fifty interviews were conducted virtually or in person, between July and October 2020. The interviewees, who also took part in the first phase of the study, were a mix of age groups, gender, ethnicity, education levels and how savvy they were in discerning and trusting information.

During the interview, they were asked to spend five minutes doing their typical news information-seeking routine. They were then presented with the Health Nut News article and asked what they thought of it, without indicating that it was problematic.

Respondents were free to use the Internet to verify the information. Researchers observed the process and later asked participants to recount any thoughts and feelings that might have guided their activities.

In a media briefing on Wednesday, Dr Soon said they identified people who might be more susceptible to false information in Phase 1 of the study.

"Phase 2 enabled us to take a more intimate look at the practices that people who are more immune to false information - meaning people who are more informationally savvy - have."

For example, they make a strong distinction between news that they receive from official sources, and reports from their social circles, she said.

They are more likely to assess factors such as the underlying motivation or the possible agenda of the communicator. "They are also more likely to engage in external validation, and more importantly, they assume greater responsibility and ownership in fighting the problem of false information," she added.

To cope with the deluge of information, people relied heavily on what they felt were trusted sources, such as The Straits Times and CNA, and they often performed "rapid surveillance" by scanning news headlines.

Study participants turned to signposts such as source, writing style, balance and timeliness to assess the credibility of a piece of information. News sources perceived to be affiliated with the government were seen as trustworthy and accurate.

Balanced news reporting and neutrality added to the perception of credibility. Consumers appreciated information that offered them different perspectives of an issue, for example the pros and cons of a policy, said Dr Soon.

She said one of the reasons that people commonly ignore false information shared by their family and friends was not knowing how to intervene.

"They hesitate to take action because they do not want to lose social capital, they do not want to incur the wrath of others and harm relationships," she added, noting that soft skills should also be taught.

Tips from non-profit group Pen America, mentioned in the study's report, include showing empathy and considering the perspective of the person who shares the false information.

One can also offer others the tools to perform their own fact-checking, and be proactive about sharing factual information from credible sources, such as the World Health Organisation and trusted fact-checkers.

The study included a third phase, which surveyed more than 1,000 respondents to analyse which mode of teaching the National Library Board's "Sure" framework for improving information literacy is the most effective.

PowerPoint slides, explained by a librarian speaking virtually, is deemed as more interesting, clearer and more useful than using a video or an infographic.