

Not sure if something is fake news? Ask ST

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Have you come across a report about an investment scheme that sounds too good to be true? Or perhaps you have seen a video or photo from a source that cannot be verified. Ask The Straits Times, and it will help you to pin it down.

ST is pitching in to help its readers distinguish between real and fake news amid a spate of online scams, impersonations and websites passing themselves off as news organisations.

Readers can write to the askST platform about reports, videos or photos they find dubious. Reporters will look into these claims. Readers can also flag content that they have found to be false; the paper may consider publishing their findings.

ST editor Warren Fernandez, who is also editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/ Tamil Media Group, said: "Fake news is a growing problem, with dubious copies of ST reports or even government notices being passed off as real, and some people are falling for these and sharing them.

"We want to do our part to help our readers call these out and stop them from being passed on."

Besides helping readers check the veracity of reports, ST has also spearheaded other initiatives aimed at tackling fake news.

For example, on July 31, it conducted its first workshop for the public on how to deal with inaccurate information. Participants of the one-day masterclass, called The Straits Times Media Analysis Course, picked up tips on how to critically analyse news reports and identify fake news.

Readers can refer to advertisements in ST or go to www.stskills.sg for more details on the course.

In recent weeks, readers have alerted the newsroom to fake websites masquerading as ST and other titles published by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), such as The Business Times and Lianhe Zaobao.

These sites or reports carried the same mastheads and even fonts used by the titles. Some of the fake reports featured famous figures, including celebrities and politicians, to fool the public into putting their money into various investment schemes.

Last week, the Monetary Authority of Singapore cautioned the public about a website soliciting investments in bitcoin by using fabricated comments attributed to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The website was designed to look like it was linked to SPH.

Besides fake reports, there has been a spate of online scams in the past month.

For example, on Tuesday, the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore issued an advisory on its Facebook page and website alerting the public to a tax refund scam circulating via WhatsApp.

The public was advised to avoid responding to or circulating the scam e-mail with the header "Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore-Refund-Online-Confirmation".

The scam e-mail included the taxman's official logo and instructed the receiver to download and complete a tax refund form from a link provided, before submitting it.

Scammers who aim to pass themselves off as government bodies prey on people's trust in the authorities, said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Carol Soon.

"Looking up the source of a piece of information no longer suffices. Individuals should develop the habit of verifying information, even when the source seems official, and cross-check against more sources," said Dr Soon, who is also vice-chairman of the Media Literacy Council.