

## **S'poreans too passive over fake news, more education needed on calling out falsehoods: IPS study**

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*Today, 23 February 2022*

- **An Institute of Policy Studies report found that people generally do not act to stop the spread of falsehoods among their social networks**
- **This is because many believed intervening would hurt their relationships or social standing if they were wrong**
- **Some felt the fake news problem was not serious, or thought it was the Government's or the media's problem**
- **The study also recommended ways to make media literacy campaigns more effective**

SINGAPORE — When encountering false information, people in Singapore are more likely to ignore it than point out to others that they are spreading falsehoods, either because they are not 100 per cent sure or that any intervention could end up hurting personal relationships, a study has found.

Some people also felt that the problem of fake news was one for the governments or the media to solve, not them, researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) said in a report that looked at how Singaporeans reacted to false information. The findings were released on Wednesday (Feb 23).

Calling for stronger public messaging that everyone can be "fighters against falsehoods", the IPS report concluded that media literacy programmes need to equip people with soft skills to intervene sensitively and actively in their social networks when they encounter such information.

The latest report formed part of a three-phase study by IPS senior research fellow Carol Soon, together with research assistants Shawn Goh and Nandhini Bala Krishnan. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Communications and Information.

The first phase of the study, [released in 2020](#), had polled more than 2,000 respondents to quantify how susceptible Singaporeans are to fake news.

The second and third phases of the report were published on Wednesday.

The second phase involved qualitative interviews with 50 respondents on how they would react and verify information to find out why some people are more immune to falsehoods than others.

The final phase surveyed and conducted an experiment on more than 1,000 respondents to test and gather views about the effectiveness of media literacy campaigns.

In a briefing with media on Wednesday, Dr Soon said that the second phase of the study confirmed the earlier findings on people's reluctance to act on falsehoods.

Her 2020 report found that more than three in four respondents simply ignored false information on their social networking sites or in their instant messaging applications, and did not act to correct them.

“What we also can see from these findings is that for those who want to play a part (against falsehoods), there is a hesitancy, reluctance and fear. And the fear can be attributed to a loss of face or social capital,” Dr Soon said.

The study also found that people regarded institutional actors such as the government, media outlets and digital platforms as “responsible” for addressing the problem. This is especially the case for respondents who were less information-savvy and exhibited less agency in their reaction to fake news.

A few respondents chose not to act because they perceived that fake news had little to no negative impact on them, that it was futile to fight falsehoods, or that it would take too much time or effort.

Others thought that fake news was debunked very quickly in Singapore and “there would always be someone who would alert others about the fake news”, the research team found.

## **WHO IS VULNERABLE**

The findings also pointed to the prevalence of optimism bias because most respondents tended to feel that people belonging to other demographic groups, but not themselves, were more vulnerable to false information.

This stood out against the researchers’ earlier findings that more than two-thirds of Singaporeans were unable to discern between real and fake news.

For example, older respondents tended to feel that the youth were more susceptible than they were due to the younger group's increased exposure to online space and that they lacked critical skills to sort out fact from fiction.

On the other hand, younger respondents felt that their elders were more vulnerable due to their lack of understanding of social media and how to verify information.

“No one said they themselves were susceptible to false information,” the report stated.

Such inaction and apathy against the fake news scourge, as well as the belief that other people are more susceptible than themselves, are key weak links in Singapore’s resilience against falsehoods, the report added.

## **MEDIA LITERACY CAMPAIGNS**

The study did conclude, though, that people with higher education and from higher socio-economic backgrounds were better at accurately recalling information taught in the National Library Board’s media literacy campaign — Sure (Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate) — than other groups of respondents.

The IPS researchers had studied the effectiveness of the Sure campaign specifically in the third phase of their study, though lessons can be learnt for other literacy programmes as well.

For example, the study found that the use of multimedia models tended to work best among respondents. Among several policy recommendations, the researchers suggested introducing fact-checking skills into the school curriculum, as well as to customise different literacy programmes for savvy and less savvy participants.

Dr Soon said: "Based on what we've found, people are at different levels when it comes to how savvy they are. So, we really need to target, tier and tailor the right literacy programmes to different segments of the community."

She also noted that there is an unfortunate gap in such interventions, since campaigns tended to be less effective for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and seniors, who also tended to be more susceptible to falsehoods based on the first phase of the IPS study.

"Literacy programmes such as Sure may have a harder time having the desired impact on these groups of people. So, we really need to work very hard to reach out to these vulnerable communities," Dr Soon added.