Elderly, those living in 1-3 room flats more susceptible to false info: IPS study

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SINGAPORE — Seniors and those living in one to three-room Housing Development Board (HDB) flats are more likely to believe false information that they come across, according to the first phase of a wide-ranging study by the Institute of Policy Studies on Singaporeans' susceptibility to false information.

The survey, which took in the responses of more than 2,000 Singapore citizens and permanent residents, also found that a high level of education was no guarantee of immunity to false information. In this regard, the study concluded that existing digital literacy efforts need to be reinforced, with more targeted interventions for seniors, as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

"What we found in our study is that age, and socio-economic status, which is determined by their housing type, are important demographic variables that predict people's susceptibility to false information," said senior research fellow Dr Carol Soon, who presented the results of the study to journalists on Thursday (17 December). She also pointed to non-demographic variables such as confirmation bias and an individual's knowledge of how the media and tech landscape works.

The study, conducted by Dr Soon and research assistant Shawn Goh, is said to be the first comprehensive analysis in the country of how an individual's susceptibility to false information is linked to demographic and non-demographic factors. It used a mixed methodology: survey, self-confrontational interviews and experiments.

Two-thirds believed a manipulated article

As part of the study, a manipulated article was embedded within the survey. The headline had been rewritten into something "highly sensational", said Dr Soon, while the article included multiple typos and references to false local authorities. Respondents were then asked if they trusted the article.

The result: only about a third (32.5 per cent) of them did not trust the article. Another 27 per cent said it was a little trustworthy, while 40.6 per cent found it trustworthy or very trustworthy. All respondents were informed at the end of the survey that the article had been manipulated.

Among the key findings: older respondents and those residing in public housing – especially those living in one to three-room HDB flats – were more likely than younger respondents and those living in private housing to trust the article.

People with higher trust in non-legacy media (local online-only news sites) were also more likely than those with lower trust in non-legacy media to say that they trusted the article. Legacy media refers to media outlets that have a very institutionalised structure such as The Straits Times and CNA.

Overall, the study found that trust for all legacy media types was higher than that for non-legacy media, with TV (59.3 per cent) being the most used. The least used legacy media was foreign news publications (21.1 per cent).

Meanwhile, the most used non-legacy media types were social networking sites (58 per cent) and instant messaging platforms (54.5 per cent), with podcasts being the least popular (4.9 per cent).

Separately, Internet messaging platforms and social networking sites were found to be the main channels of false information. Over 60 per cent said they sometimes, often, or very often encountered false information on the former, and 57 per cent said they did so on the latter.

Types of information users

The study identified four main types of information users: the informationally disengaged, the informationally overconfident, the informationally diffident and the informationally savvy.

The first group of users were disinterested in the news and relied on gut instinct when navigating the information landscape. This group had the highest proportion of seniors (32.7 per cent).

The second group tended to over-estimate their ability to discern real information from falsehoods and were less aware of the pitfalls of their cognitive biases. Middle-aged individuals (55.9 per cent) formed the largest proportion of his group, while many had a tertiary education (63.3 per cent).

The third group were the most unsure and lacked confidence in their ability to navigate the information landscape. The majority in this group were middle-aged (44.7 per cent) and had tertiary education (55.3 per cent).

The final group were the most confident about their ability to discern truth from falsehoods, and possessed greatest knowledge about the media and information landscape. This group had the highest proportion of youths (47.2 per cent) and those with tertiary education (80.2 per cent).

Psychological traits

The study also examined the psychological traits of respondents, such as confirmation bias. Some 44.2 per cent said they trusted news that they agreed with, while 27.5 per cent said a piece of news was likely to be false if they disagreed with it.

Furthermore, less than half were confident that they could tell real information from false information, and were also cynical about others' interest and ability to do so. In this regard, digital literacy in terms of knowledge is low - some 66.3 per cent of respondents knew little about how the media and information landscape works.

Only a minority (13.5 per cent) explored alternative views on social networking sites often or very often.

Separately, the respondents most frequently encountered and believed false info relating to topics such as foreign news and lifestyle. Social networks were found to drive the sharing of false information, with close to three-quarters of respondents said they had shared false information on social networking sites and/or instant messaging platforms because the information came from close family and friends.

Family and friends were respondents' most trusted source of information on social networking sites and Instant Messaging platforms. Respondents also typically ignored the false information they encountered.

Policy recommendations

Among Dr Soon and Goh's recommendations: reinforce and broaden current digital literacy efforts.

"One way to do that is to strengthen what we call workman-like skills, where people actually get hands-on practice in discerning and telling apart, false information from real information," said Dr Soon.

In addition, the concept of digital literacy needs to be widened to address macro-level trends and developments. The curriculum for digital literacy programmes should be expanded to include how the tech and media industries work.

The researchers also advocated an ecosystem approach: improve the quality of journalism, especially for non-legacy media; fact checkers to focus on false information relating to more topics such as international or foreign issues, lifestyle, and health and medicine; and leverage trusted media and tech platforms such as search engines to spread corrective information and debunk falsehoods.

Finally, cultivate "network immunity" — leverage interpersonal networks and social networks in debunking false information.

"We need to continually increase people's efficacy in identifying cheap-fakes," said Dr Soon, referring to misinformation that can be produced using simple tools, and which chiefly come in the form of text or images. These were found to be the most prevalent form of false information, with close to six in 10 saying that they sometimes, often, or very often encountered and believed false information in such formats.

"They should never just rely on the headlines: they should read the whole article."