

Study shows how savvy Singapore readers assess credibility of info

They use signposts such as source, writing style, balance and timeliness

Lim Min Zhang
and Goh Yan Han

Singapore residents who are less susceptible to fake news are more sensitive to the provenance and motivations behind an article they read, a recent study has found.

Such readers are also likely to spend more time cross-checking what they have read, rather than to rely on the look of a news site or just trusting their gut on an article's veracity.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) researchers had asked interviewees to read an online article containing misinformation about the deadly effects of 5G technology on birds.

The debunked 2018 article claimed that some 300 birds at a park in the Netherlands died because a 5G transmission mast was rolled out in The Hague.

Less savvy readers spent less time checking the article against other sources.

Such readers depended more on the look and feel of the website that carried the article, such as font size, layout and the presence of advertisements.

On the other hand, savvy readers not only fact-checked, but were more attuned to how data and statistics could be manipulated and more conscious of advertisement labels that appeared beside search results.

How Singapore residents verified the news they read was the



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DR CAROL SOON, head of the society and culture department at the Institute of Policy Studies, on why people commonly ignore false information shared by their family and friends.

6 in 10

The proportion of respondents – out of more than 2,000 in the study – who had encountered and believed false information.

subject of the second part of an IPS study published yesterday.

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

The latest findings followed the first phase of the study, which found that nearly six in 10 people, out of more than 2,000 respondents, had encountered and believed false information.

The second phase, a smaller qualitative study, 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, comprised a mix of age groups, gender, ethnicities, education and savviness levels in discerning and trusting information.

During the interview, they were asked to spend five minutes going about their typical news information-seeking routine.

They were then presented with the debunked article and asked what they thought of it, without any indication that it was problematic.

Respondents were free to use the Internet to verify the information. Researchers observed the process and later asked partici-

pants to recount any thoughts and feelings that might have guided their activities.

In a media briefing yesterday, Dr Soon said the researchers identified people who might be more susceptible to false information in phase one of the study.

"Phase two 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 be taught.

But there are ways to productively engage people who share fake news.

These include showing empathy, and considering the perspective of the person who shares the false information.

One can also point friends and family to 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.

mzlim@sph.com.sg
gyanhan@sph.com.sg

People complacent about fake news, say researchers

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

To fight fake news, the public messaging should be that no one is immune and everyone has a part to play, local researchers in a study on how people verify false information have said.

Singaporeans have a sense of complacency that others are more susceptible to false information than them, they noted. Singaporeans are also apathetic about being more proactive in calling out false information circulated in their social networks.

Yesterday, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Carol Soon, who led the study, shared its findings and laid out several policy recommendations that focus on digital literacy efforts.

The researchers also felt there was a need for people to be equipped with the soft skills to correct others sensitively and effectively when these people share false information, as a majority of study participants had said they would just ignore false information from their social contacts.

One reason is that they do not feel false information is a big problem in Singapore, and another is that they feel the Government has the tools to effectively stop the problem, said Dr Soon, who also heads IPS' society and culture department.

She added that the next and very commonly cited reason was that often, people do not want to intervene because they did not want to lose their social capital. They did not want to incur the displeasure or the wrath of people in their social networks.

The study also suggested targeted and tiered digital literacy programmes.

For example, those who are savvier can be given the opportunity to pick up higher-order skills and knowledge, such as how to deal with ambiguous information, while more basic and foundational programmes are offered to others.

The researchers proposed that more digitally savvy seniors be recruited as trusted information nodes in their social circles that other seniors can turn to.

The study found that seniors struggled the most with recalling information learnt about digital literacy, compared with other age groups.

For the younger generation, fact-checking techniques and skills can be included in the Cyber Wellness in Character and Citizenship Education curriculum in secondary schools and junior colleges.

Another set of recommendations focused on the expansion of digital literacy efforts.

The researchers suggested that the digital literacy curriculum include hands-on exercises and adopt a more contextualised approach in teaching how to evaluate sources in different information environments – such as legacy media versus social media.

They said there needs to be increased familiarity and knowledge of fact-checking websites such as <https://www.gov.sg/factually> and Snopes.com so people will be encouraged to use them.

Some participants in the study did not know of these fact-checking websites, while others deliberately chose not to click on them because they thought these could be suspicious sites, said Dr Soon.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg