

THE STRAITS TIMES

Many in Singapore confident they can spot fake news but may not actually be able to: Study



About half of the people polled here - 48 to 53 per cent - said they could tell if a piece of information on social media is true or false. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - There is a disconnect between how confident people here are in spotting fake news and their ability to actually do so amid the Covid-19 pandemic, according to findings from a study released on Friday (Jan 28).

About half of the people polled here - 48 to 53 per cent - said they could tell if a piece of information on social media is true or false.

However, about seven in 10 - 69 to 76 per cent - admitted that they have unknowingly shared fake news, according to the study by the Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Centre for Information Integrity and the Internet (IN-cube).

This is dangerous because confident people might end up believing information they come across that they do not have the ability to figure out is true or not, said Associate Professor Edson Tandoc Jr, director of IN-cube.

Another implication of the findings, said Assistant Professor Edmund Lee, IN-cube's assistant director, is that digital literacy here can be improved.

"This speaks to the need to educate people on how to find credible information," said Prof Lee.

The IN-cube study sought to understand Internet use in Singapore over time and polled between 420 and 1,610 Singapore residents online, aged 21 and above. The surveys were conducted in December 2020, July 2021 and December 2021.

On why some people share fake news without realising it, Prof Lee said that it could be due to how fake news tends to stir people's feelings.

For instance, scientific evidence is often conveyed in a very factual, even boring way, such as showing that vaccines work. This does not usually trigger emotions in people.

But people who are not on their guard may get emotional over fake news on how vaccines could cause side effects, making them want to share it.

Another reason why some people share news, even if they are unsure of its veracity, is that they have a "better safe than sorry" attitude, said Prof Tandoc.

Based on earlier focus group studies, this was more apparent among interviewees from the baby-boomer generation.

They forward the news to others to warn them because they believe the news will interest their family and friends.

This might be driven by a desire to maintain or improve social connections with others, said Prof Tandoc.

Between 51 and 60 per cent of the people surveyed also knowingly share fake news, the study found.

Prof Tandoc explained that this could be because people think the bogus information is funny and believe their friends will find it entertaining and hilarious. This was found to be the case among young adults, such as millennials, in focus group studies.

The pandemic could have also affected how people consume news.

The study found that people did not use social media as much as the local news sites of newspapers and television to get the news.

For instance, Facebook was used by between 32 and 37 per cent of those polled to read the news, while that for WhatsApp was between 26 and 30 per cent. This is lower than the 38 to 46 per cent for newspaper sites and 39 to 45 per cent for TV sites.

Surveys on Internet use during the pandemic

| | Dec 2020 | July 2021 | Dec 2021 |
|--|----------|-----------|----------|
| Fake news | | | |
| Can tell if information on social media is true or false | 49% | 52% | 50% |
| Unknowingly shared fake news* | 71% | 75% | 69% |
| Knowingly shared fake news* | 57% | 60% | 51% |
| Was called out for sharing fake news* | 55% | 60% | 50% |
| News consumption | | | |
| Read local newspaper sites | 39% | 46% | 43% |
| Read local TV news sites | 40% | 45% | 42% |
| Read local print newspapers | 31% | 27% | 28% |
| Watch news on local TV | 41% | 42% | 40% |
| Listen to local radio news | 30% | 33% | 30% |
| Read alternative online-only local news sites | 25% | 28% | 22% |
| Read news on Facebook | 36% | 36% | 32% |
| Read news on WhatsApp | 30% | 28% | 27% |

NOTE: *Percentage of those who indicated "rarely", "sometimes", "often" or "always"
 Table: THE STRAITS TIMES • Source: NTU

"What we're seeing is something we've known all along - that during times of crises and difficult times, people turn to news. And what's encouraging with the results is that they turn to legitimate news sources for information," said Prof Tandoc.

"But whether this is the new normal, we have to wait and see. I'm not that optimistic because increased interest in news is driven by the current pandemic."

Before the pandemic, studies done by NTU showed that the trend was the reverse.

For instance a poll of 1,000 people in December 2019 found that the No. 1 source of news was Facebook, with 55.9 per cent of people saying that was where they read the news. This was followed by WhatsApp at 52.7 per cent.

However, reading local TV news sites was lower at 47.2 per cent, while that for local newspaper sites was 44.9 per cent.