

# Fake news shifts to S'pore govt Covid-19 policies, mainstream news helps correct misinformation: Study



During the earlier stages of the pandemic, Covid-19 misinformation related to science and health accounted for more coverage by mainstream news outlets. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - Fake news related to the pandemic is no longer focused on science and health issues.

Instead, such reports spread half-truths and confusion about government policies that were adopted to combat Covid-19. And mainstream news outlets have been shown to play an increasing role in fighting this type of misinformation.

This is according to the findings of a recent study by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) that was released on Monday (July 12). The study additionally showed that reports correcting misinformation on government measures provided more complete explanations than those addressing misinformation on science and health issues.

The study, which received funding from the Ministry of Health, showed that during the earlier stages of the pandemic, Covid-19 misinformation related to science and health accounted for more coverage by mainstream news outlets.

In the pre-outbreak stage in Singapore, defined as Jan 1 to 22, 2020, about 55 per cent of the reports correcting Covid-19 misinformation were on science and health matters, while reports addressing misinformation on government policies accounted for about 11 per cent.

By the second stage of the outbreak - defined as April 5 to April 30, 2020 - things had changed. Reports correcting misinformation on health and science fell and made up about 9 per cent of the articles, while those for government policies rose to 42 per cent.

"This is reflective of how the Government instituted several measures in response to the outbreak, enforcing stricter measures as the crisis worsened," the NTU researchers said in a report published in the Health Communication academic journal.

But, unfortunately, this is also reflective of how misinformation and confusion tend to accompany such government measures, which signals the importance of immediate clarification and correction, they added.

"In this case, the findings point to the important role of the mainstream news media in helping the Government clarify and debunk wrong information about critical measures being implemented to control the outbreak," said the researchers.

Professor May Lwin, the lead author of the study, said that mainstream news media "can play a crucial role in the timely dissemination of misinformation correction and prevent people from being hoodwinked and acting on potentially harmful misinformation".

This is due to mainstream media's social importance, wide reach, and role as a credible information source to the public during uncertain times, she said.

“It is important to combat the propagation of misinformation, which can undermine key public health communication efforts and worsen the strain on public health systems,” said Prof Lwin, who is also chairman of NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

The NTU study had looked at more than 2,000 news reports by mainstream outlets here from Jan 1 to April 30 last year, focusing on 164 that covered fake Covid-19 news.

Of these, about 85 per cent were from The Straits Times, 24 per cent from CNA, 18 per cent from The New Paper, 13 per cent from Today, and less than 1 per cent from The Business Times.

The study also found that the news reports covered more news based on completely made-up information about Covid-19 in the pre-outbreak period – 87 per cent of the reports were on these. But by the second wave of the outbreak, this had fallen to 48 per cent.

The made-up information included false claims alleging that an MRT station was closed for disinfection due to Covid-19 when it was operational.

There was, however, a rise in news reports addressing coronavirus claims that mixed authentic information and made-up details. In the pre-outbreak stage, it was nearly 13 per cent. But by the second wave of the outbreak, it had jumped to close to 52 per cent.

Such misinformation with half-truths included a WhatsApp post about a food delivery rider being fined \$300 for wearing a cloth mask when the rider was, in fact, approaching a police officer for help.

Prof Lwin explained that the rise of Covid-19 misinformation containing half-truths could have been due partly to the sheer amount of information being shared and reshared on the pandemic, with social media users adding details along the way.

But some of these details might have been inaccurate, even though those sharing them might have been well-meaning, she said.

Then, there could be shared Covid-19 information that is relevant to other countries but irrelevant to Singapore.

A third but more malicious reason could involve attempts to deliberately make fake news appear more real by adding some element of truth to the information, such as to mislead and scam people, said Prof Lwin.

Most mainstream news reports – about 62 per cent – used more complex explanations with more information to debunk fake news with half truths.

But for misinformation that relied totally on fabricated details, most, or about the same proportion, used simpler reasoning and merely labelled the claim as false.

Most fake news on government measures, or 58 per cent, was also addressed by news reports with complex explanations. For misinformation on science and health, most of the reports, or about the same proportion, simply stated the claims as untrue.

“It can be argued that such a collaborative role of the press on nation-building is particularly salient in the context of a pandemic, and, in the case of Singapore, highly reminiscent of how the mainstream media covered the Sars epidemic,” said the NTU researchers.

“Close collaboration between the press and the state might, however, also come at the expense of having necessary checks and balances, especially in contexts where governance is marked by inefficiency, corruption, and lack of transparency.”

Still, a recent survey of over 2,000 people here - commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University - found that trust in media has increased amid lingering concerns over misinformation during the pandemic.

The survey, done in collaboration with NTU, showed that 50 per cent of people here said they could trust most of the news content that they consume, up from 42 per cent during the same period last year, before the Covid-19 pandemic hit Singapore.