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# Perceptions of News Sharing and Fake News in Singapore

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**Abstract**

Fake news is a prevalent problem that can undermine citizen engagement and become an obstacle to the goals of civic tech. To understand consumers' reactions and actions towards fake news, and their trust in various news media, we conducted a survey in Singapore. We found that fake news stem largely from instant messaging apps and social media, and that the problem of fake news was attributed more to its sharing than to its creation. Verification of news was done mainly by using a search engine to check and cross-reference the news. Amongst the top three sources to obtain news, there was low trust reported in social media, high trust in local news channels, and highest trust in government communication platforms. The strong trust in government communication platforms suggests that top-down civic tech initiatives may have great potential to effectively manage fake news and promote citizen engagement in Singapore.

**Author Keywords**

fake news; singapore; civic tech; news sharing.

**Introduction**

Fake news has gained increasing global attention since the 2016 US presidential election as the circulation of fake news on online platforms, such as social media, saw an explosive increase [1]. This phenomenon is largely moti-

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vated by political and financial gains and has imposed social costs as consumers' understanding and interpretation of real events are confounded [1, 4]. Our study adopts the definition of fake news as "either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context" [2]. We aim to understand the perceptions of news sharing and fake news in Singapore that, with its unique socio-political scene, serves as a case study that provides interesting insights into the fake news phenomenon.

## Background and Related Work

**Fake News and Civic Tech.** Fake news and citizen engagement have an adversarial relationship where "informational uses of the Internet are positively related to . . . social capital, whereas social-recreational uses are negatively related" [6]. The consequence of fake news in digital media is that of social costs, where consumers may make poorly justified and unwarranted choices based on inaccurate knowledge [1, 4]. The proliferation of fake news hinders civic efforts as it compromises the basic unit of exchange involved in deliberation - that is, information [5]. This puts it at odds with civic tech, which are digital technologies that promote civic efforts. It is this framing of fake news and civic tech that motivates our study.

**Fake News in Singapore.** Singapore is an attractive and vulnerable target to the deliberate spread of online falsehoods as an open and globally connected country, and a multi-racial and religiously diverse society<sup>1</sup>. On 8 May 2019, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was passed to address fake news. The rising attention of fake news in the local scene has motivated various research on the topic. Related studies look into the

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government\\_records/record-details/6797717d-f25b-11e7-bafc-001a4a5ba61b](https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/record-details/6797717d-f25b-11e7-bafc-001a4a5ba61b)

perceptions and motivations of fake news sharing [3] and responses to fake news [7]. While these studies draw parallels to ours, we note that they focus on fake news found in social media, whereas our study investigates fake news in general media. Furthermore, we investigate the broad perceptions of both news sharing and fake news.

## Survey Method

We created an online survey on Google Forms to collect data on the perceptions of news sharing and fake news in Singapore. In the survey, we asked respondents to share about their sources of news, their levels of trust in these sources and their familiarity with fake news. The media items considered include television, radio, word-of-mouth, local news channels, global news channels, streaming networks, social media, instant messaging apps, email, government communication platforms, and work communication platforms. The survey included 24 question items of which three were demographic questions and three were branching questions. The branching questions directed respondents to the next relevant section based on their answer. While this may result in skipped section items, each answered section is assured to be based on the respondent's experience and not their estimation, which enables us to obtain more accurate self-reported data.

### *Procedure*

The survey was disseminated to a local Singapore university through a mailing list that included undergraduate and graduate students. It was also disseminated to students, alumni, and faculty that were part of the university's informal Telegram supergroup, and further shared to personal contacts of the researchers through instant messaging and social media. The survey was made available to anyone with the hyperlink and was fully voluntary. In total, 104 responses were received.

Category	Number
Male	47
Female	28
18-24 y/o	48
25-34 y/o	17
35-44 y/o	7
>45 y/o	3
Students	58
Employed	13
Others	4

**Table 1:** Summary of the participant demographics.

### Participants

Of the 104 responses, only 75 responses had respondents who were currently based in Singapore and were thus included in the data analysis. The details on the participant demographics are provided in Table 1.

### Findings

**News Sharing Behavior.** Out of 75 respondents, 59 reported having shared news online, and 57 reported having come across fake news. Out of the latter 57 respondents, 15 reported having shared fake news online before knowing they were fake.

**Trust in News Sources.** Based on the 75 responses, the top three sources in which respondents obtained news were: social media (N=54, 72%), local news channels (N=44, 58.7%) and government communication platforms (N=43, 57.3%). Respondents then reported their level of trust for the 11 media items (see Figure 1) on a 1-5 Likert scale (1: strongly distrust, 5: strongly trust). We found a significant main effect of media on level of trust  $\chi^2(10) = 338, p < .0001$ . Interestingly, despite the popularity of social media as a news source, respondents tended to have a low level of trust in them ( $M = 2.73$ ), while we observed a higher trust in local news channels ( $M = 3.77$ ) and government communication platforms ( $M = 4.17$ ). Instant messaging apps were considered the least trustworthy ( $M = 2.15$ ).

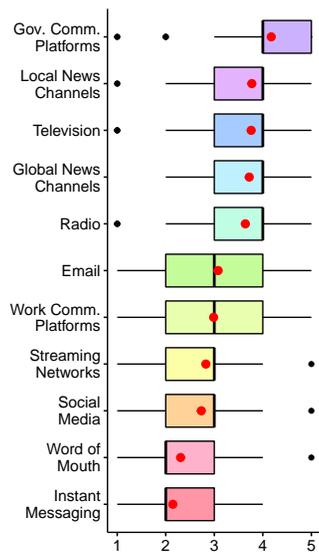
**Motivations for Sharing News.** Based on the branch of 59 responses, respondents reported the top three motivations on news sharing as: the news is relevant to the receiver (N=53, 89.8%), the news is important (N=49, 83.1%), and the news is interesting (N=49, 83.1%). News was shared largely to friends (N=55, 93.2%) and family (N=39, 66.1%) and the most popular mode of sharing was through instant

messaging apps, including WhatsApp (N=47, 79.7%) and Telegram (N=37, 62.7%). Most respondents practiced good news sharing habits by either always (N=15, 25.4%) or frequently (N=28, 47.5%) verifying news before sharing. They do so mainly by using a search engine (N=53, 89.8%) and by checking official government channels (N=52, 88.1%).

**Fake News.** Based on the branch of 57 responses, the top two sources of fake news were reported to be instant messaging apps (N=44, 77.2%) and social media (N=40, 70.2%). Most respondents realised that the news was fake either immediately (N=19, 33.3%) or within the day (N=24, 42.1%) and the most popular method they employed to ascertain the falsity of the news was to use a search engine (N=49, 86.0%). The main action they took upon knowing that the news was fake was to send a correction message to those whom they have shared the news with (N=29, 50.9%). In other cases, they also either sent a warning message to inform others of the presence of the fake news (N=23, 40.4%) or simply did not do anything (N=25, 43.9%).

### Discussion

In agreement with other studies, both instant messaging and social media are considered the main sources of fake news. That most respondents encounter fake news in instant messaging apps and that they rate the sharing of news as a greater problem suggest that communication with personal contacts, such as widely-circulated chain messages, rather than with the public media, such as social media feeds, is the larger issue in Singapore. There is opportunity here for digital literacy education to educate Singapore residents on identifying fake news and the ways to handle them. There is also opportunity to design interventions in instant messaging apps to flag and reduce mass sharing of fake news. While such methods are being considered or have already been implemented in Singapore,



**Figure 1:** Reported levels of trust for different media items on a 1-5 Likert scale (1: strongly distrust, 5: strongly trust). Red dots indicate the average score.

such as fake news awareness campaigns, there remains more to be explored in targeting vulnerable demographic groups and at a larger scale.

The most interesting finding is that of the high level of trust and reliance on government communication platforms, e.g. government websites and hotlines, to provide truthful news and to debunk fake news. This signifies the relatively strong faith that Singapore residents have in the Singapore Government, and may be attributed to the successful ongoing efforts in making transparent government decisions and the readiness of the government in addressing public queries. This suggests a compelling opportunity for top-down civic tech initiatives that involve the government to drive civic efforts and citizen engagement amidst the sea of fake news.

## Conclusion

Despite the growing awareness of fake news in Singapore, it remains an extensive problem. While the study found that most respondents are digitally literate and exercise good news sharing practices such as verifying news before sharing or sending a correction message upon knowing that they have shared a fake news, the mitigation mechanisms to identify fake news or to reduce the spread of them are underdeveloped. We believe that given the problem fake news poses to citizen engagement, efforts in addressing fake news, such as with civic tech, will be worthwhile.

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