

National Library Board's Public Education on Information Literacy: Teaching Citizens to Fight Fake News

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Abstract

The spread of fake news is a real and serious problem facing many countries including Singapore. Education is one way to empower individuals to discern information. The National Library Board's SURE (Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate) programme aims to promote information literacy and encourage Singaporeans to think critically when consuming information. Ultimately, the first line of defence against online falsehoods is a discerning and well-informed citizenry.

Keywords:

fake news, information literacy, critical thinking, discernment, SURE, deliberate online falsehoods

Introduction

Singapore, like many countries in the world, has been grappling with the threats of ‘fake news’ – a catch-all term with varied definitions (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018) yet is “woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution” Wardle (2017). Kovic (2018) broadly defined ‘fake news’ as “non-journalistic written text and/or audio-visual material that deliberately mimics a journalistic style in order to achieve some goal”.

Fake news is making headlines but it is nothing new. Stories about ‘oily man’ sightings in Singapore, which led to the deployment of the Singapore Police to maintain order at Victoria Street in 1954 (Singapore Standard, 1954) and the panic among Singaporean men about a ‘koro’ epidemic, which was a mass hysteria concerning the ‘shrinking’ of the male genitals *wrongly* associated with consuming pork or swine flu (Rozario, 1967) had happened in the past. Outbreaks of deadly riots fuelled by rumours are well-chronicled in Singapore’s history, such as those alleged Malay atrocities against the Chinese in Kuala Lumpur in the aftermath of the 13th May 1969 incident, which led to interracial strife in Singapore (Conceicao, 2007). “News is critical to the health of the body politic. Fake news is a cancer that can grow uncontrollably if not cut out.” (Dealing with cancer of fake news, 2018). With the rise of digital platforms, it is even easier for anyone to share information or misinformation to many people in a short time.

The city-state is “both an attractive target and highly susceptible to the deliberate spread of online falsehoods as Singapore is one of the most open and globally connected countries in the world” (Ministry of Law, 2018). The total mobile subscription in Singapore continues to increase monthly, with 8.46 million subscriptions for a population of 5.61 million in 2017 (IMDA, 2018; Department of Statistics, 2018). According to the report *We are social* (2019), 86% of Singaporeans spend their time online and 76% are active on social media. Singapore is also a vulnerable target due to the nation’s multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious composition. The government needs counter-measures, including legislation to tackle online falsehoods.

Singaporeans’ news consumption and attitudes towards fake news

The emergence of Internet and social media have reshaped the news and media landscape. The growth of digital news consumption on mobile devices is fast becoming a popular way for Singaporeans to get their news (Tandoc, 2018). A majority of Singaporeans (87%) read their news online, with 63% obtaining news from social media. Less than half (43%) turn to print and slightly more than half (55%) watch news on TV. Despite their preference for digital news, not many people (16%) are willing to pay for online access. Turning to social media for news consumption has both positive and negative impacts - the ease and speed of information access which benefit people seeking timely news, also enable the spread of unverified information and fake news. People are relying more on social media to get up to the minute news to stay informed, but the downside is the veracity of such information. That reliable and independent news are limited or fee-based adds to the challenge of ensuring that people should have access to reliable sources of information.

Two government polls on public attitudes towards fake news conducted in May 2017 and February 2018 revealed that most Singaporeans have come across fake news on social media feeds with a dismaying inability to discern truth from falsehoods (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2018). 77% came across online news that they thought were not fully accurate; almost 4 in 10 came across fake news related to Singapore in the past one year; 70% were not always able to discern falsehoods at the time they read the

information. Close to two-thirds were concerned about the spread of fake news and many felt that “more could be done to tackle the problems”. The study showed that Singaporeans are aware and concerned over the presence and reach of fake news.

A study conducted at the Nanyang Technological University in 2017 found that 73% of users ignored fake news they saw on social media. Only a few would engage in corrective action to report the wrong post so that it got removed or post comment about the wrong post. Thus, “while these users do not get misinformed, they risk others being misinformed by doing nothing” (Tandoc, 2017). This alarming finding calls for individuals to be responsible and to be vigilant to sift through what is real and what is not, to prevent the spread of fake news.

Misinformation, critical thinking and information literacy

“In an era when fake news may not be factually incorrect but may be spun to convey a particular agenda or point of view (media bias), the ability to discern the wider context and interpret the true meaning of the information is more valuable than ever” (Georgiadou et al, 2018). A ‘bleak’ finding in a Stanford study showed gaps among the ‘digital natives’ in critical thinking skills to support decision-making in using information from the Internet (Wineburg, 2016).

Fake news has become a serious global problem and its real impacts remain difficult to measure. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) introduced a conceptual framework to examine the ‘information disorder’ as a complex phenomenon of information pollution. They identified three different types: mis, dis, and mal information and used the dimension of harm and falseness to differentiate each of them. Internet and social media allow anyone to create easily shareable content. Knowing how to verify if the information is credible on the Internet is key to countering fake news.

Librarians traditionally have been teaching people to evaluate a range of information. Libraries are responding to ‘alternative facts and fake news’ (Eva & Shea, 2018) and Alvarez (2016) asserts that “librarians have an opportunity to teach information and media literacy, as well as reframe ideas about navigating the Internet”. The United Kingdom Library and Information Association (CILIP) made a timely revision to its definition of information literacy as “the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society” (CILIP, Information Literacy Group, 2018)

Realising the challenges ahead, a Parliamentary Select Committee was formed in Singapore in January 2018 to study the issues and how Singapore should respond (Ministry of Law, 2018). The committee received submissions from 170 individuals and organisations (Keep it real, 2018), (Hio, 2018). At the Select Committee’s public hearings, the National Library Board (NLB) presented its efforts to inculcate critical thinking skills in the fight against fake news (Yasmine, 2018), (Parliament. Written Representation No. 40, 2018).

From the submissions to parliament, there seems to be a consensus that there ought to be a concerted effort made to educate our citizens on the threats of fake news and more importantly, the ways to combat these. Two examples are quoted below:

“Media literacy and critical thinking are key muscles that our society needs to build if Singapore is to achieve its Smart Nation ambitions, which necessitates a well-informed community capable of evaluating information, using this information for the better, and

engaging in matured social discourse” (Parliament. Written Representation No 119 from Asia Internet Coalition, 2018)

“Public education efforts that comprehensively and effectively explain the gains that can be derived from the spread of online falsehoods should be mounted” (Parliament. Written Representation No 110 from Lim, 2018)

There was recurring call among ‘academics, students and civic society’ for Singapore to have a population of information and media-savvy individuals. NLB was able to share its *raison d’etre* for its approach. With critical thinking skills and information literacy as its foundation, the S.U.R.E. (SURE) messaging aims to get people to question the information they receive. Rather than accepting at face value what is shared, the SURE steps take individuals through a robust process of questioning and fact-checking to help them become discerning consumers of information. The acronym, SURE stands for:

Source: Look at the origins. Are they trustworthy? Make sure the information is credible and reliable.

Understand: Know what you are reading. Search for clarity. Look for facts rather than opinion. Question personal bias.

Research: Dig deeper. Go beyond the initial source. Check and compare with multiple sources

Evaluate: Find the balance. Exercise fair judgement. Look from different angles. There are always two sides to every story.

Background of the SURE campaign

The SURE journey started in 2013 when NLB launched a public awareness campaign to promote the importance of information literacy skills to Singaporeans. The building blocks for information literacy, *Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate*, include skills and strategies that are critical for individuals to discern information they receive. In addition, to make the term information literacy more accessible to the man-in-the-street, the acronym SURE is used as it is simple to remember and also a colloquial expression to mean ‘worthy to be trusted and reliable’ (Tan, Wan & Teo, 2014), (Pek, 2016).

The campaign took a broad-based approach to promote reliable ways to search for information and the importance of exercising discernment to the masses through talks, roadshows, publicity and digital engagement on Facebook and the website (www.nlb.gov.sg/sure/). While a broad-based approach was used for the public, NLB also took a more targeted approach in collaborating with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to embed IL skills in social studies and history curriculum in schools and conducted IL training for teachers. A variety of IL-related resources was also produced for students and the public. At the end of the 5 years, the evaluation showed that an IL programme directed at specific groups of people and tasks can be more effective in promoting awareness and adoption of the skills.

A new phase for SURE

While the SURE campaign was slated to only last for 5 years from 2013 to 2017, the spread of online falsehoods showed that rather than dialling back efforts, NLB had to redouble its efforts to ensure that there is no let-up in spreading the message of being discerning about information, and skills that ought to be developed in order to tackle misinformation and fake news.

The growing impact of fake news on children, adults and the seniors in the digital age has called for a greater critical approach to equip them with IL skills they need to identify if a news story is real or fake. “Critical information literacy asks librarians to work with their patrons and communities to co-investigate the political, social, and economic dimensions of information” (Fister, 2013) in (Tewell, 2016).

In 2018, NLB revamped its programme, having learned the lessons from the previous campaign-style approach which was aimed at awareness-raising. It was time to go deeper into various profile groups with more targeted messaging and skills building in public education. The new phase of SURE, dubbed SURE 2.0, looks at the various target groups with different needs. Broadly based on life stages, SURE 2.0 defines information needs at each stage of life, and customises messages that will be relevant for the life stage.

“*SURE for School*” is about cultivating skills for independent and lifelong learning. NLB continues to collaborate with MOE to integrate IL into the curriculum and build critical thinking skills through school-based learning and out-of-school programmes such as competitions and projects that target on the application of such skills. The theme for 2018 inter-school Prove It! contest focused on fake news and encouraged students to think critically about the information they read online and learn to discern fact from fiction. The competition rewarded students who have performed well in inquiry, critical thinking and information literacy. Image 1 provides snapshots of the 2018 Prove It! contest. As teachers are critical to this effort, teacher training and teacher toolkits are provided to multiply the efforts to impart IL skills to the students.

Image 1: 2018 Prove It! contest on Fake News



“*SURE for Work*” emphasises the importance of being a competent and information savvy employee who is valued by the employer. It actively promotes the need for IL and continuous learning at the workplace. The ability to produce factually sound and well-researched work is significant in the work environment. The strategy is to work on partnerships with stakeholder groups from organisations, such as training departments, unions and human resource professionals to embed IL programmes in a learning platform which is ideally an organisation-wide initiative.

NLB has worked with key organisations such as the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and public agencies such as Civil Service College (CSC) and People’s Association (PA) to train their stakeholders and leverage their platforms and networks to widen the reach of SURE 2.0. The SURE message is propagated through partners’ social media sites and broadcast channels, while modular IL content is incorporated into their training courses where appropriate. For instance, SURE content on *Smart Nation initiatives* is embedded in the NTUC Employment and Employability Institute’s (e2i) U-Leap elearning app for job seekers and the public.

“*SURE for Life*” is aimed at building responsible and discerning consumers and producers of information. Given the prevalence of scams, the emphasis is on how being undiscerning could result in personal losses like falling prey to scams, to more serious consequences like social unrest because of misinformation.

NLB also taps on the People’s Association (PA), the Council for the Third Age (C3A) and RSVP Singapore to spread the SURE message to the public, especially vulnerable groups such as senior citizens. Examples of content shared are culled from daily experiences such as rumours on fake rice, magical cures, scams, urging Singaporeans ‘to be SURE’ before jumping to conclusions or perpetuating rumours by forwarding information received without verifying the source. Image 2 shows sample infographics produced for the seniors.



Image 2: Infographics for the public and seniors
 (Infographics are available on SURE website: <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/sure>)

Engaging learners with mini-survey, pop-up quiz, game and eLearning

SURE 2.0 looks beyond traditional approaches to IL instruction by using games and activities to pique the interest of participants and help them to realise the importance of being discerning. Rather than ‘teach and preach’, the value in using games is “to encourage discussion, reflection and understanding’ in a learning environment and learners are empowered to make decisions based on their prior knowledge, plan a course of action, consider the outcomes, solve problems, and absorb and consolidate new information”. (Edwards & Hill, 2016).

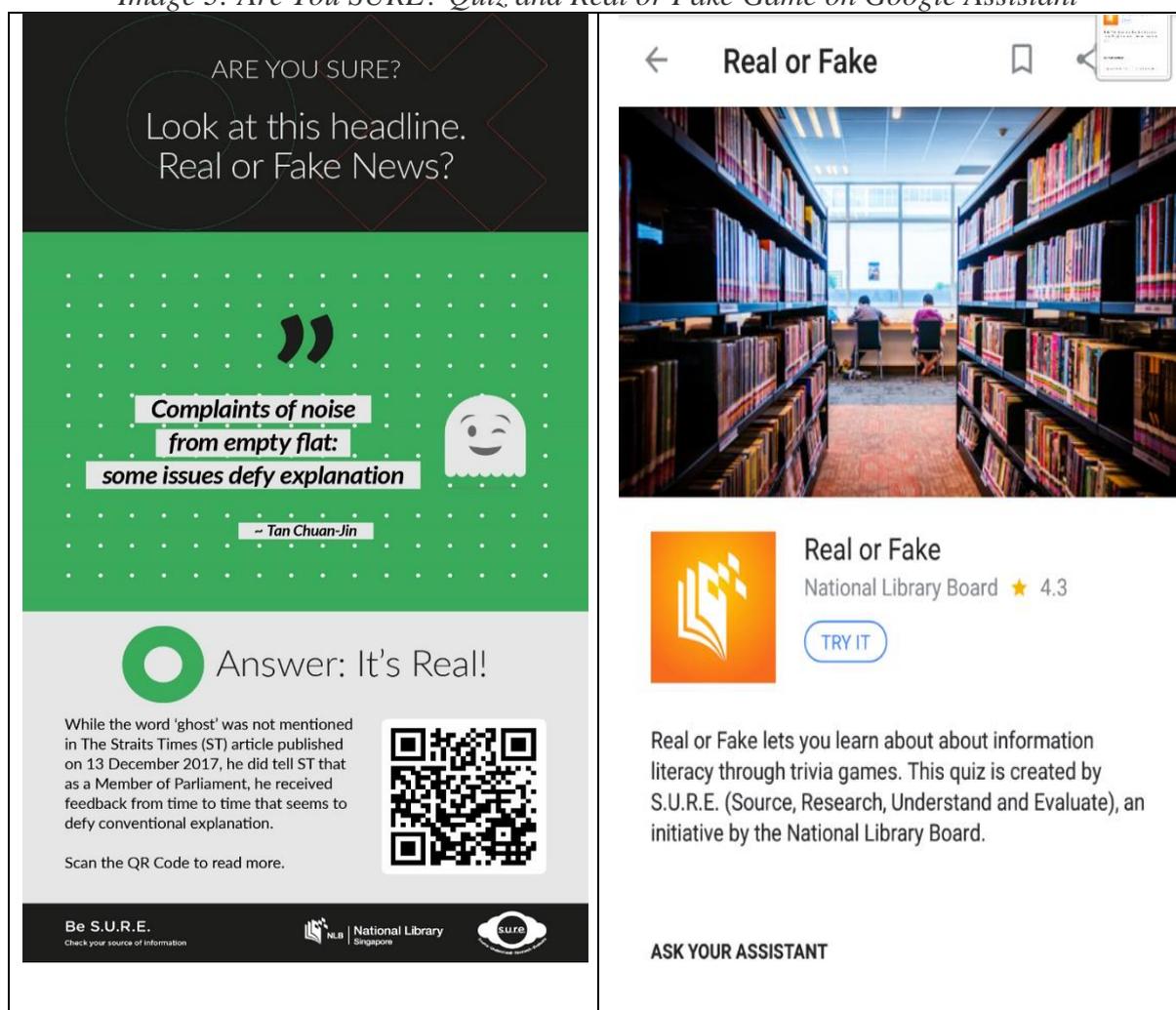
Digital learning platforms are used to boost interactivity with ‘personalised experiences’. Learner-response tools such as Mentimeter and Kahoot! are mobile-friendly and easy to use in mini-surveys, quizzes and games. The gamification of learning helps to engage and encourage learners to learn. Although the learner is required to have a smart device with internet connection to participate, it is not a challenge in the Singapore context, given the high ownership of mobile devices among Singaporeans. These quizzes allow both trainers and learners to have instant feedback through the results, which are useful as formative assessment as there can be follow-up discussion.

Pop-up quizzes on fake news are also put up on digital screen at the National Library lobby to draw onlookers to play the game. Recently, a quiz game on the Google Assistant platform called “Real or Fake” was developed. Using voice commands or text inputs, players can guess if the featured news headlines were real or fake. A review of the Real or Fake quiz game is found here:

“*Real or Fake* – a lot of libraries now consider themselves an active player in the fight against Fake news. The National Library Board in Singapore does this with the S.U.R.E (Source, Research, Understand and Evaluate) campaign and has a game on Google Assistant for users to try their skills to determine if a piece of news headline is Fake news or not. It’s a simple game, you get to choose either local news or international news. Users are challenged with four news headlines and must decide if they are fake news or not. The game was more entertaining than I expected” *Review of Real or Fake game (Tay, 2018)*

NLB is also extending trainer-led learning to an online learning module on combating fake news which will be available to public officers by the end of the year. Learners can enjoy the convenience of bite-size learning on fake news anytime and anywhere if they are unable to attend face-to-face training.

Image 3: Are You SURE? Quiz and Real or Fake Game on Google Assistant



Since 2018, the SURE programme has reached 200,000 people through public education efforts. These includes participants at outreach programmes, trainers and advocates who attended SURE workshops and talks, unique visitorships to the SURE website as well as students who are introduced to the SURE principles in schools).

Working adults who attended the SURE workshops picked up techniques to sieve out reliable sources of information at work and sort them from those that are less reliable. For example, one participant, Mr Sazali bin Zainal, who serves as President of the Singapore Industrial and Services Employee's Union, found the workshop useful as union leaders frequently received information forwarded by members. By learning how to assess the credibility of the information, Mr Sazali says he is now able to pro-actively alert his union members of false information and messages. (Ministry of Communication and the Information, 2018, November, 2). Other comments from workshop participants included:

'The inject of scenarios improve the delivery of the session as audience learn better from the interaction.'

'Great sharing on ways to verify if a news is real or fake.'

'Very useful session but I would also like to know how to tackle fake news spread around WhatsApp.'

Conclusion

In September 2018, the government accepted the recommendations of the Select Committee on *Deliberate Online Falsehoods* for a multi-prong approach to combat fake news problems in Singapore (Government accepts recommendations in principle, 2018), (Parliament, 2018). The government is working with stakeholders to roll out non-legislative and legislative measures recommended by the Committee. These counter-measures are aimed at: (i) nurturing an informed public, (ii) reinforcing social cohesion and trust, (iii) promoting fact-checking, (iv) disrupting online falsehoods, and (v) dealing with threats to national security and sovereignty.

One recommendation under the thrust of nurturing an informed public is the implementation of a "national framework of desired skills and outcomes to guide public education efforts in building information and media literacy among Singaporeans (Parliament, 2018) and effectively "educate the people and equip them with the skills to discern truth from fake news" (Lim, 2018). With regard to this, SURE 2.0 has had a head start in the efforts to provide a broad-based programme to equip the public with the skills and resources to assess the veracity of information and discern facts from opinions, or even worse, misinformation that is deliberate.

It is important to keep up with the evolving nature of fake news and educate people to be discerning with information. Experience gained through the collective engagement with students, workforce and community will inform future work as SURE 2.0 pursues and adapts IL programme to developing trends in the media landscape as well as aligns with the national framework. It is also through collaborations with academics, experts, public and private organisations that the nation will make progress in arming the people as first line defence in the war on fake news.

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