

### **Why Do People Fall for Fake News?**

**Truth 'discernment'** is the extent to which misinformation is believed 'relative' to accurate content. It is typically calculated as belief in true news minus belief in false news. It captures the overall accuracy of one's beliefs.

**Overall belief**, or the extent to which news – regardless of its accuracy – is believed, is calculated as the average or sum of belief in true news and belief in false news. Factors that alter overall belief need not impact people's ability to tell truth from falsehood.

#### **Reasoning**

#### **Reasoning aspect**

Across numerous recent studies, the evidence supports that people who are more **reflective** are less likely to believe false news content – and are better at discerning between truth and falsehood – regardless of whether the news is consistent or inconsistent with their partisanship.

Furthermore, experimentally manipulating participants' **level of deliberation** demonstrates a causal effect whereby deliberation reduces belief in false (but not true) news, regardless of partisan alignment (and has no effect on polarization).

It seems that people fail to discern truth from falsehood because *they do not stop to reflect sufficiently on their prior knowledge (or have insufficient or inaccurate prior knowledge) – and not because their reasoning abilities are hijacked by political motivations.*

#### **Political Motivations**

#### **Semantic aspect**

A popular narrative is that people engage in '*identity-protective cognition*' when faced with politically valenced content, and this leads them to be overly believing of content that is consistent with their partisan identity and overly skeptical of content that is inconsistent with their partisan identity.

People are somewhat better at discerning truth from falsehood when judging politically concordant news compared with politically discordant news.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that political identity and politically motivated reasoning are **not the primary factors driving the inability to tell truth from falsehood in online news.**

## **Heuristics**

## **Formal – structural aspect**

Fake news is often geared toward *provoking* shock, fear, anger, or moral outrage. This is important because people who report experiencing more emotion (positive or negative) at the outset of the task are more likely to believe false (but not true) news. Feelings of familiarity likely contributes to increased belief in false claims.

Participants are more likely to believe information provided by people whom they view as being credible and a large literature from political science has robustly demonstrated the impact of elite messaging, in particular, on public opinion. Furthermore, social feedback provided by social media platforms (e.g., 'likes') also increases belief in news content, particularly for misinformation.

## **Believing versus Sharing Fake News**

Participants who were asked about the accuracy of a set of headlines rated true headlines as much more accurate than false headlines.

*Sharing intentions for false headlines were much higher than assessments of their truth*, indicating that many people were apparently willing to share content that they could have identified as being inaccurate.

## *The confusion-based account*

## **Reasoning aspect**

Posits that people genuinely (but mistakenly) believe that the false claims they share are probably true. Consistent with this proposal, of the false headlines that were shared, 33% were both believed and shared when participants were asked directly about accuracy.

## *The preference-based account*

## **Semantic aspect**

Is rooted in the idea that people place their preference for political identity (or related motives such as virtue signaling) above the truth, and thus share politically consistent false content on social media despite recognizing that it is probably not true. Of the false headlines that were shared, 16% of the headlines were shared despite being identified as inaccurate.

## *The inattention-based account*

## **Formal – structural aspect**

Argues that people have a strong preference to only share accurate content, but that the social media context distracts them from this preference. Consistent with this account, asking participants to rate the accuracy of each headline before deciding whether to share it decreased sharing of false headlines by 51% – suggesting that inattention to accuracy was responsible for roughly half of the misinformation sharing in the experiment.

Work on social media behavior often emphasizes the importance of the 'attention economy' where factors relating to engagement (likes, shares, comments, clicks, etc.) are selected for sharing of low-quality news content on Facebook.

## ***What Can Be Done? Interventions To Fight Fake News***

**Fact-checking and inoculation** approaches are fundamentally directed toward improving people's underlying knowledge or skills.

***Reasoning aspect***

### ***New Approaches for Fighting Misinformation***

Recent research shows that a simple **accuracy prompt** – specifically, having participants rate the accuracy of a single politically neutral headline (ostensibly as part of a pretest) before making judgments about social media sharing – improves the extent to which people discern between true and false news content when deciding what to share online in survey experiments.

This approach has been successfully deployed in a **large-scale field experiment on Twitter**, in which messages asking users to rate the accuracy of a politically neutral news headline were sent to thousands of accounts who recently shared links to misinformation sites. This subtle prompt significantly increased the quality of the news they subsequently shared.

***Formal – structural aspect***