

A Psychological Perspective on Misinformation: Why Do Individuals Trust Fake News?

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1. Fake News in the Past and Today

News is and has always been part of our daily lives. When we get up, we check news headlines on our phone, listen to updates on the radio, or enjoy a cup of coffee while browsing through the newspaper. Over the last years, more and more of our news consumption has begun to take place online. People read the newspaper online, watch the news whenever they have a break, and listen to a podcast that they can start whenever they like. News, moreover, is not only consumed online, but also more and more via social media. Instead of looking at the website of a newspaper or public television channel to learn about what is happening in the world, people open Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media applications and see a curated mix of news items, texts, and pictures from organizations or people they are connected with, as well as advertised posts. Oftentimes it is on these platforms that people access information about political and social events and news of any kind [1].

Whenever people are in contact with news, they likely encounter misinformation, too. In the months up to the 2016 US election, researchers estimated that each voting age participant in their study saw an average of 5.5 fake news articles within 1.5 months [2,3]. Fake news is defined as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting” [4]. One may further want to distinguish between misinformation (meaning information that is false but not necessarily intended to harm) and disinformation (information that is false and was designed to mislead the recipient) [5]. As, however, the intention cannot be identified with certainty from the outside, we use the term misinformation throughout the chapter. While it may be tempting to think that misinformation is solely associated with the widespread use of social media, this is not necessarily true see, e.g., [6].

A misinformation campaign has been documented as far back as 1274 BCE: Ramses II wanted to pretend that his campaign on the city of Kadesh was successful (which it was not). To spread his version of the story, however, he had to rely on a commissioned poem that was circulated on papyrus as well as on texts that were carved into the stones of royal architectural sites, eventually accompanied by reliefs for the illiterate viewer [7]. Back then, spreading misinformation was a costly and slow endeavor.

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century made the distribution of text much easier, but it was still far away from today's reach via social media, which enables individuals and organizations to spread information (and therefore also misinformation) to a large audience with a few clicks to a large audience. Today, even non-human agents such as algorithms, social bots, etc., can spread information.

Misinformation, therefore, represents a long-lasting problem for past, current, and presumably future generations. As the opportunities to spread misinformation increase to unprecedented levels, the consequences can be serious [6]. Misinformation contradicts individuals' preferences to make well-informed and reason-based decisions [8]. Misinformation can change actions with grave implications. For instance, after being confronted with misinformation, individuals reported lower intentions to use tracking apps to combat the spread of SAR-COV-2 [9]. Fake news also decreases interpersonal trust and trust in democratic institutions [10,11], which are the basis for peaceful human interactions and societal prosperity.

To discuss potential measures to counteract the problem, in a first step we provide selected findings from psychological research to illustrate why people believe in misinformation and may contribute to its distribution by liking and sharing it on social media. While the creation of misinformation is sometimes associated with malintent (this is particularly true, by definition, when we discuss disinformation), this is not necessarily the case when recipients like or share a news item.

2. Why Do People Believe and Share False Information?

When consuming news, people may operate under the assumptions that their communication partners follow the maxim of quality [12]. This maxim holds that communication partners share what they themselves believe to be true. Traditional media channels such as newspapers reassured this belief by self-imposing ethical norms for journalism see, e.g., [13]. However, the maxim of quality and the norms of ethical journalism do not apply to agents that create fake news and harm. As people expect truth i.e., have a truth bias, see [14], they generally do not anticipate lies and deceit and can therefore become easy prey for those who want to manipulate.

Next to the problem of operating with a truth bias, individuals might also be ill equipped to detect misinformation due to the nature of information transmission in social media and everyday life. As articles in newspapers are long, errors and inconsistencies are more easily detectable. On social media platforms, in contrast, articles are mostly displayed as text snippets that leave less room for inconsistencies to occur, which makes it more difficult for users to assess veracity [10].

Another reason for peoples' difficulties in detecting misinformation is the way information is processed. When investigating human information processing, dual-process theories in psychology argue that people have two parallel and

independent processing modes. Epstein et al. [15], for example, refer to a rational system and an experiential system. The rational system operates on a conscious level and is primarily analytical. The experiential system is instead assumed to be more automatic, affect-driven, and reliant on heuristics [15]. Kahneman and Frederick (2002) and Kahneman (2011) [16,17] refer to the decision modes as System 1, which is intuitive, automatic, and effortless, and System 2, which is reflective, slow, and effortful.

Whether people rely more strongly on System 1 or System 2 depends on situational and personal variables (e.g., time pressure and/or individual preferences). However, when it comes to the processing of everyday information such as news, the experiential and intuitive System 1 may be faster in proposing reactions [16] and System 2 may be too slow and effortful in eventually correcting the wrong impression e.g., [18]. Consistent with this assumption, Bago et al. [19] show that participants who engaged in more reflective reasoning (i.e., where the rational System 2 was dominant) were also better at telling true from false news. In a different line of work, the authors showed that reliance on emotion, associated with System 1 processing, increased the likelihood that misinformation is believed to be true [20]. If people (a) do not have a preference for reflective reasoning, (b) are not prompted by situational cues to engage in effortful processing, or c) prefer to rely on emotions or are nudged to do so, it appears likely that they will use System 1 to process news, meaning that they rely on cognitive shortcuts (i.e., a rule of thumb). Oftentimes, these shortcuts may lead to outcomes that would have resulted from System 2 processing, too, but in a context where deceit and manipulation are present, certain shortcuts may impede truth judgments. By way of example, we here discuss four shortcuts and their potential shortcomings in the context of truth judgments: the repetition–truth effect, the truthiness bias, the negativity bias, and the confirmation bias or partisanship.

2.1. Repetition–Truth Effect

Prior exposure to news may critically influence how we perceive it during a subsequent encounter. Indeed, repeated exposure to a piece of information (compared to seeing it only once) increases the belief that the information is true see e.g., [21]. This phenomenon is called the repetition–truth effect [22] or the illusory truth effect [11,23].

Hasher et al. [24] asked participants to listen to a set of true and false but always plausible statements on three successive occasions. Some of the statements were presented repeatedly, whereas the rest of the statements were presented only once. Participants were then asked for truth ratings, and results show that repeated statements were more likely to be judged as true compared to statements presented only once. Presumably, hearing or reading a piece of information again increases the ease with which the item can be processed, making it appear familiar. Familiarity (or the ease of processing itself), in turn, can be used to judge whether a statement is

true. Research shows that individuals consistently and strongly rely on the ease of processing to judge truth even in the presence of valid declarative information that speaks to the contrary [25]. This heuristic strategy may result in valid judgments as long as true things are repeated again and again, whereas false things are not [12]. However, in post-truth times where disinformation is created to manipulate beliefs and is, as research shows, eventually distributed faster and further compared to true information [26], the ease of processing may falsely indicate truth.

Pennycook et al. [11] tested the repetition–truth effect in the realm of misinformation. Working with news headlines, the authors showed that headlines that participants had seen before and that were therefore easier to process were subsequently more likely to be judged as true. This was the case for both true and false news, and also when participants were explicitly warned and not warned about fake news. This means that if news is repeatedly presented, it is more likely to be judged as true—even if it contains a low level of overall believability or is labeled as contested by fact checkers [11,25].

2.2. Truthiness Bias

News is often accompanied by pictures Newman and Zhang 2020 [27]. These pictures may further illustrate or explain the content, and are thus probative, or they may only be decorative and are thus non-probative (e.g., a picture of Windsor Castle in a report on Queen Elizabeth II’s health). Interestingly, even though it is non-probative, the presence of a decorative picture may impact judgments of truth. Showing participants a picture of a famous person accompanied with the statement that this person was dead or alive, for example, and then asking participants whether this was true resulted in higher truth ratings [28]. This truthiness bias is not contingent on positive messages (e.g., the famous person is alive), but works for negative messages as well [28].

Pictures may increase perceived truth, especially when people do not know whether something is true or false. In such situations of ambiguity, individuals may rely on associations, feelings, and their processing through System 1. Non-probative, decorative pictures may also facilitate conceptual processing of the information [27], thus increasing fluency. Furthermore, pictures may help people to generate pseudo evidence, meaning that whatever statement people see, they might selectively interpret information in the picture as consistent proof [28]. Combining a misinformation headline with a picture [27] may therefore increase perceived truthfulness and deceive recipients.

Aside from truthiness effects, adding pictures to statements may also boost the intention to like and share the information, thereby distributing the information further on social media [29].

2.3. *Negativity Bias*

Individuals are more likely to attend to, process, and remember negative information compared to positive (negativity bias) [30,31]. Moreover, negative information is also more salient and diagnostic compared to positive information [32]. All of these aspects may impact judgments of truth if information is framed negatively rather than positively.

Hilbig [33,34] showed that framing an identical piece of information negatively compared to positively results in a higher likelihood of the statement being judged as true. For instance, after learning that “XX% of marriages are divorced within the first 10 years”—compared to the equivalent information of “100—XX% of marriages last for at least 10 years”—participants perceived the statement as more likely to be true. Focusing on the downsides compared to the upsides might be particularly compelling and could therefore result in people being more likely to trust negatively framed information. Further research has replicated and extended the negativity bias in judgments of truth e.g., [35,36]; for instance, the bias appears to be more pronounced in the here and now, meaning when statements refer to a spatially close place (the country people live in) rather than to a more spatially distant place [36].

A particularly effective way to create a negative frame is through the use of negation. Negation is a semantic operator that frames a conceptually positive concept in a negative way [37]. Statements such as “XX% of marriages do not last for at least 10 years” are more likely judged as true compared to the equivalents of “100—XX% of marriages last for at least 10 years”. Additional studies explain this effect by showing that negation may increase the realm of possible states in which a statement could be true [37]. Rephrased in the words of Tolstoi in his 1877 novel *Anna Karenina*, every unhappy family is unhappy in their own way, whereas all happy families are alike [38]. As negating a positive concept (e.g., happy) increases the number of situations to which a statement may pertain (e.g., there are so many different ways to be not happy), the base rate likelihood of being true may be higher for negated compared to non-negated content.

Creators of misinformation may aim to intentionally increase the chances that statements appear as true by intuitively or deliberately framing content negatively compared to positively. They may highlight the number of disagreements versus agreements, or mention the percentage of people who do not have access to health insurance versus the percentage of people who have access.

2.4. *Confirmation Bias, Partisanship, and Cognitive Reflection*

People like to selectively expose themselves to information, news, and people that confirm their attitudes and beliefs [39,40]. People are more likely to spend time and engage with content if it is in line with their preferences; they prefer information that confirms what they already believe (see [40,41]).

When it comes to news and truth judgments, a message is more likely to be perceived as true when it is compatible with other things a person knows [42], and people may, furthermore, be motivated to persuade themselves to believe what they want to be true [18]. People have a “tendency to seek out, notice, and favor information that is consistent with one’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” [39], and if people encounter information that is in line (or concordant) with their political positions, they are presumably also more motivated to believe this information to be true partisan bias [43]. Concordant news items might therefore create blind spots for deception detection. People may continue to process concordant information intuitively and without effort (System 1), and if this processing is not interrupted (e.g., because something seems incoherent or out of place), falseness may be difficult to detect and truthfulness simply assumed [42].

Pennycook and Rand [23] investigated the impact of motivated reasoning and cognitive reflection on the detection of misinformation. They compiled data from 14 studies to investigate to what extent partisanship impacts truth ratings for concordant versus discordant actual news posts from social media (true and false). In addition, across studies, participants’ cognitive reflection was assessed to measure analytical thinking. The authors show that partisanship is associated with overall belief in the news headlines (meaning belief in both true and in false headlines). Furthermore, concordant (versus discordant) news items are more likely to be judged as true. However, this effect is smaller than the effect of veracity: “true but politically discordant news is typically believed much more than false but politically concordant news—politics does not trump truth” [23,44]. The authors furthermore looked not only at overall belief but also at truth discernment. Truth discernment reflects the difference between the number of true items correctly identified as true (hits) and the number of false items incorrectly identified as true [45]. Described differently, truth discernment reflects people’s ability to distinguish between true and false news [23]. Surprisingly, results show that people are better at discernment when judging concordant versus discordant information.

Studies, furthermore, have shown that people with high (versus low) scores on the cognitive reflection test also show higher levels of truth discernment. Cognitive reflection seems important in telling truth from tales, and the authors argue that people’s ability to detect misinformation might be endangered in situations where they are more likely to process information using System 1. Strengthening or activating reasoning, making people “think better even without thinking more” [46], can help people to pause and reflect on their prior knowledge, which may result in more informed and better judgment when it comes to telling truth from tale [45,47].

3. What Can News Providers, Social Media Platforms, and Individuals Do to Combat Misinformation?

Distinguishing fake from true news is difficult when people operate under the assumptions that mostly true information is communicated and when they process information rather effortlessly and intuitively. Some of the research reviewed here so far suggests that misinformation may be more likely detected when people process information under System 2 (compared to System 1). How can news providers and social media platforms create an environment in which people are more likely to stop and reason before they engage with news items?

One potential change in the environment could be to ask truth questions before users engage with news items. Pennycook et al. [48,49] tested this strategy in several studies. They assigned participants to an accuracy or a sharing condition and showed all participants true and false news items. In the accuracy condition, participants were asked to judge the truthfulness of the news items. Results suggest that participants perceived true statements as more likely to be true when compared to false statements. In the sharing condition, participants were asked to indicate their intention to share the news item. When sharing news, participants differentiated less between true and false news. This may suggest that judgments of truthfulness and sharing are disconnected; put differently, people may share independently of judging truth.

This disconnection can be explained by inattention to accuracy (presumably due to intuitive and effortless information processing). The authors conducted further studies in which they created a combined condition: they asked participants to rate perceived accuracy for one news item before deciding whether or not to share it. Here, participants were less likely to consider sharing false news compared to the control group that was not prompted to evaluate accuracy before sharing [48]. The authors conclude that making accuracy more salient by asking people to focus on it reduces the likelihood that false information is shared.

This strategy can be applied in multiple ways. Users could be asked occasionally to rate the accuracy of a single, non-political headline before engaging with online content [48]. This approach would also allow platforms to collect crowd ratings on news items or news outlets that they could then use to find and fight misinformation [50,51]. Another strategy to increase more careful information processing could be to attach warnings to news items that fact-checkers have found to be false [23]—again, this would have the potential to increase the likelihood of reason-based decision making, as it would increase the salience of accuracy [50].

If these interventions could reduce the sharing of misinformation, much would be won—for news providers, social media platforms, and users alike. However, individuals might not even engage with the majority of news that they are exposed to on social media, but simply skim it, without clicking on the link to the full article [23].

Further strategies [23] are therefore required to generally reduce the amount of misinformation on these platforms.

4. Building a Truth Toolbox to Navigate Information in Everyday Life

In the previous section, we highlighted strategies that news providers and social media platforms could use to create a better environment to curtail the spread of misinformation. Individuals may also apply some of the recommendations to increase their own abilities to critically approach and navigate information in the 21st century. Here, we illustrate potential strategies based on the research discussed above. We provide recommendations by means of four different questions, and further research may further test these and add to collections of potential measures to combat misinformation [52].

4.1. Question 1: Do I Believe the Piece of News to Be Accurate?

Before engaging with news content on social media, people may create a small boost, (see [53]) for themselves by actively asking whether they believe that a piece of news is accurate. This measure might prevent them from falling for a misinformation item, but also from liking or sharing it [48].

4.2. Question 2: Is There a Reason for Undue Familiarity?

When coming across a news headline that seems true, people may ask themselves why they think it is true. Does it feel familiar? Have they heard the message before? And if yes, do they remember where they came across that piece of information? In general, familiarity can serve as valid cue for truth, but having read a message over and over again can increase felt truth even though the message is false [11,25]. People may test against their impression of familiarity by checking the sources [5] and seeing whether the news is corroborated by different news outlets. They could further engage in lateral reading, meaning that they check other websites to test the credibility of the source of the news item that they are trying to evaluate [5,54].

4.3. Question 3: Is the News Plausible Even When Disregarding Potential Pictures?

Decorative but non-probative pictures may increase a news item's truthiness. To counteract, people may double check the news' content whenever it is accompanied by a non-probative picture.

The truthiness effect, furthermore, seems to be attenuated when people have high prior knowledge [27]. If no prior knowledge is available, people could check the source of both the news and the picture and investigate whether they can find similar support for the claim on different platforms to increase their own knowledge.

Warnings could seem a plausible strategy to prevent people falling for misinformation, but research indicates that while warnings may increase the accuracy

when judging claims, they may not reduce the truthiness effect happening due to pictures [27]. Instructing people to ignore pictures may work, but this may be difficult to implement when reading news online [27]. Hopefully, the awareness of the truthiness effect of pictures may nevertheless help people to look at ambiguous information twice and will thereby increase people's chances to detect misinformation.

4.4. Question 4: Is the News Framed in a Way That Increases Truthiness?

A news headline may further be framed in a negative way to grab the readers' attention or to deliberately increase the chances that the messages is judged as true [55]. When encountering a headline that may seem very compelling, people may choose to reframe the message as a test. When reading "XX% of people are not satisfied with their looks", they might translate this to "100—XX% are satisfied with their looks" and investigate whether such a change in framing would still sound compelling. Furthermore, they could again test the information by looking at additional and different sources.

5. Conclusions

Societies have faced, are facing, and will face misinformation. While the distribution of misinformation has been slow and effortful in the past, the internet and social media have accelerated the speed with which news can be distributed and increased the number of people it can reach. This tendency is worrisome, as misinformation may lead to health-endangering behavior and erode trust in society and democracy. Measures to reduce misinformation and its spread are required. Furthermore, people's abilities to detect true and false information need to be strengthened so that they can better navigate online platforms and the landscape of news in the 21st century.

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