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The Psychology of Fake News

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Abstract

We synthesize a burgeoning literature investigating why people believe and share false or highly misleading news online. Contrary to a common narrative whereby politics drives susceptibility to fake news, people are 'better' at discerning truth from falsehood (despite greater overall belief) when evaluating politically concordant news. Instead, poor truth discernment is associated with lack of careful reasoning and relevant knowledge, and the use of heuristics such as familiarity. Furthermore, there is a substantial disconnect between what people believe and what they share on social media. This dissociation is largely driven by inattention, more so than by purposeful sharing of misinformation. Thus, interventions can successfully nudge social media users to focus more on accuracy. Crowdsourced veracity ratings can also be leveraged to improve social media ranking algorithms.

Keywords: fake news, misinformation, truth discernment, political conformity, heuristics, inattention, social

Full text

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