

FALLING FOR FAKE NEWS:

Are we lazy or biased?

During the 2016 US Presidential election American voters experienced an unprecedented rise of political fake news stories on social media. Fake news creators use fabricated, highly partisan political content that can be widely spread on social media.

At a time when misinformation can be easily promoted and shared through social media like Facebook and Twitter, it is important to understand what makes people susceptible to believing fake news and why. In their paper *Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than motivated reasoning*, researchers Dr. Gordon Pennycook (Hill and Levene Schools of Business, University of Regina) and Dr. David G. Rand (MIT) examine what cognitive factors that drive belief in, versus rejection of, fake political news, and what potential role analytical thinking plays in people's ability to discern real from fake news.

According to one popular theory, known as the motivated reasoning account, belief in fake news is driven primarily by partisanship – people use analytical

thinking to preferentially believe fake news stories that support their political ideology. In contrast, the classic reasoning account proposes that people believe fake news because they do not engage in enough analytic reasoning to make sound judgements.

In their research, Pennycook and Rand presented American participants with real and fake news headlines that were either pro-Democratic or pro-Republican (and equally so, in opposite directions), along with neutral news stories with no political content. After answering questions to judge their perceived accuracy of the news story, participants completed the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), which is designed to measure a person's tendency to engage in analytic reasoning, rather than relying on intuition or "gut feeling".

Across the two studies with 3,446 participants, the researchers found no evidence to support the motivated reasoning account of belief in fake news. Rather, they discovered that participants with high CRT scores (those who scored higher on analytical thinking ability) were better able to

identify real from fake news even when the headlines aligned with their political ideology. Far from being particularly poor at discerning between real and fake news that aligned with their political ideology, the participants (both Clinton and Trump supporters) were actually *more* accurate (overall) when judging politically consistent headlines.

People fall for fake news because they *fail* to think; not because they think in a motivated or identity-protective way. Rather than using analytic reasoning to *justify* their prior beliefs and to *protect* their political identity, people apparently use analytic thinking to override prior beliefs and values. People need to think more about what they see on social media and analytic thinking could help strengthen and protect individuals from deliberate misinformation and assist them in accurately forming their beliefs despite the prevalence of wide spread fake news.

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Pennycook, G. & Rand, D.G. (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, 188, 39-50.
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