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MIT

Fake News: Why We Fall For It and What To Do About It

Why do people believe and share misinformation, including entirely fabricated news headlines ("fake news") and biased or misleading coverage of actual events ("hyper-partisan" content)? The dominant narrative in the media and among academics is that we believe misinformation because we want to – that is, we engage in motivated reasoning, using our cognitive capacities to convince ourselves of the truth of statements that align with our political ideology rather than to uncover the truth. In a series of survey experiments using American participants, we challenge this account. We consistently find that subjects who perform better on the Cognitive Reflection Test are better able to identify false or biased headlines - even for headlines that align with individuals' political ideology. We also find that when examining actual Twitter behavior, more reflective individuals share information from higher quality news. These findings suggest that susceptibility to misinformation is driven more by laziness and lack of reasoning than it is by partisan bias or motivated reasoning. We then build on this observation to examine interventions to fight the spread of misinformation. Our results suggest that reasoning is not held hostage by partisan bias, but that instead our participants do have the ability to tell fake or inaccurate from real - if they bother to pay attention. Our findings also suggest simple, cost-effective behavioral interventions to fight the spread of misinformation.

BIO

David Rand is Associate Professor of Management Science and Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, an affiliate of the MIT Institute of Data, Systems, and Society, and the director of the Human Cooperation Laboratory and the Applied Cooperation Team. Bridging the fields of behavioral economics and psychology, David's research combines behavioral experiments run online and in the field with mathematical and computational models with to understand people's attitudes, beliefs, and choices. His work uses a cognitive science perspective grounded in the tension between more intuitive versus deliberative modes of decision-making. He focuses on illuminating why people believe and share misinformation and "fake news," understanding political psychology and polarization, and on promoting human cooperation. David received his B.A. in Computational Biology from Cornell University in 2004 and his Ph.D. in Systems Biology from Harvard University in 2009, was a post-doctoral researcher in Harvard University's Department of Psychology from 2009 to 2013, and was an Assistant and then Associate Professor of Psychology, Economics, and Management at Yale University prior to joining the faculty at MIT.

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