

BROOKINGS

What science tells us about how to combat fake news

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Fake news is everywhere. With its natural companion, alternative facts, we are barraged with stories that simply defy reality, whether it be the size of the crowd on Inauguration Day or assertions that vaccines cause autism despite a scientific consensus that states otherwise. These falsities demonstrate textbook social psychology. They have sticking power that is hard to overturn. Why?

In a 2011 study published in the journal *Media Psychology*, psychologists Melanie Green and John Donahue give a small window into the human psyche that explains why fake news is so powerful. The authors asked two questions: (1) How do we respond when we learn someone has misled us, and (2) do we change our beliefs and attitudes when we find out that something we read is fake?

The researchers used random assignment to place people in one of four conditions. Everyone was asked to read a narrative. One group was informed from the beginning that the narrative was false. The second and third groups were told—only after reading the story—that the narrative was false and informed that the problem was either (1) an accidental error, or (2) intentional deception. The fourth and final group was not given any reason to doubt the veracity of the story.

The findings shed light on the impact of fake news. All readers who learned that they were provided with false information responded negatively to the information source. But,

despite learning after the fact that this information was false and even being upset when they learned this, readers continued to be influenced by the contents of the narrative. The story changed participants' attitudes and this attitude change persisted even after they learned that they had been deliberately mislead.

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This finding is important for all of us living in a seemingly post-truth society. It suggests that once a story is out in the open, it may be too late to retract it or blunt its influence. Fact checkers can meticulously tally the number of “Pinocchio” points for each deceitful article, but this tally is inherently limited in its ability to undo the attitude changes evoked when readers first encounter a story. How, then, can we neutralize the influence of fake news?

Using psychological science as a base, there might be a way around the problem. Post-hoc reviews of inaccurate information will rarely, if ever, be able to negate the damage fake information has already made. But there is a way to preemptively discredit those known for sharing inaccurate information and the stories they spin before their messages are broadcast to the public.

As a best practice, we should resist the temptation to publish statements and tweets before we fact check. Rather than focusing on the facts of each statement after they are delivered to the public, journalists can preserve the integrity of the news by delaying the presentation of questionable statements until they have the ability to credit or discredit them. This would allow news headlines to clearly label the accuracy of supposed news.