

Why #fakenews seduces millions of people

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Published: Sept 5, 2018 7:52 p.m. ET

Fake news is all the more appealing in uncertain and stressful times, psychologists say



MarketWatch photo illustration/Getty Images, iStockphoto

Some 350 American newspapers published coordinated editorials on Thursday taking issue with President Trump's description of the news media.

President Trump's relationship with the media just reached a new level of acrimony.

Last month, some 350 American newspapers published editorials taking issue with Trump's description of the media as "[the enemy of the American people](#)." The Boston Globe reached out to editorial boards to send a message to the White House. "We are not the enemy of the people," Marjorie Pritchard, deputy managing editor for the editorial page of The Boston Globe, [told the Associated Press](#). Trump's tweet referenced what he called "fake news."

But how can people distinguish between the two? Psychologists say people develop defense mechanisms to deal with an uncertain world early in life, but this also draws people to information that seems to confirm their own beliefs and worldview and ignore reports or opinion that contradicts their perceptions. This "confirmation bias" helps [outlandish theories and reports gain traction on social media](#). And that, psychologists say, is where fake news comes in.

'The brain is hard-wired to accept, reject, misremember or distort information based on whether it is viewed as accepting of or threatening to existing beliefs.'

Mark Whitmore, assistant professor at Kent State University

"At its core is the need for the brain to receive confirming information that harmonizes with an individual's existing views and beliefs," said Mark Whitmore, assistant professor of management and information systems at Kent State University's College of Business Administration. "In fact, one could say the brain is hard-wired to accept, reject, misremember or distort information based on whether it is viewed as accepting of or threatening to existing beliefs."

Whitmore presented a paper at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in Philadelphia with his wife, Eve Whitmore, a developmental psychologist with Western Reserve Psychological Associates in Stow, Ohio. They said parents teach children to role play and when these kids reach adolescence they should have developed critical thinking skills that help them distinguish between what is true and false, especially when they read news on social media.

However, many people effectively rationalize the irrational in order to avoid going against what values and ideas that were taught to them by their parents. “Children’s learning about make-believe and mastery becomes the basis for more complex forms of self-deception and illusion into adulthood,” Eve Whitmore said. When people are faced with absurd and conflicting messages, her husband added, “It becomes easier to cling to a simple fiction than a complicated reality.”

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But there are ways to guard against this. “Developing a greater degree of skepticism in children, by encouraging them to ask why and to question, diminishes confirmation bias,” Mark Whitmore said. “All of these strategies have substantial research supporting their beneficial effects.” He said humor and satire helps reduce the anxiety associated with this “confirmation bias” and recommends people expose themselves to different viewpoints and avoid the social-media echo chamber.

Young people who do their own research and choose their own news sources rather than ‘elite-selected media’ are more likely to be more politically active.

Sam Scovill, a sociology doctoral student at the University of Arizona

They’re not wrong. There is [little overlap in the news sources](#) that people on social networks turn to and trust, according to research published last year by the Pew Research Center, and when discussing politics online or with friends, they are more likely to interact with like-minded individuals. Roughly half of Facebook [FB, +0.31%](#) users (53%) and less than half (39%) of Twitter [TWTR, -1.04%](#) users say that there is a mix of political views among the people in their networks.

In fact, young people who do their own research and choose their own news sources are more likely to be more politically active, according to Sam Scovill, a sociology doctoral student at the University of Arizona, who also presented research at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting earlier this month. Scovill said more politically active people do a deep dive beyond “elite-selected media,” more commonly known as mainstream network television, cable channels and newspapers.

In a survey of 2,920 adults, he said people who consumed “elite-selected news” on Facebook and Twitter were more likely to say they voted, but those who sought out their own media sources were more likely to participate in campaigning and political activism. Those who typically got their news from social media were did not have a significant impact on political activism, although those respondents said they were more likely to have “liked” a candidate on Facebook.

“News on social media or elite-selected news media are coming through the choices of others who decide what is important to post on Facebook or what is important to go on the front page of The New York Times,” Scovill said. But he said young people who spend time online get a bad rap and are actually using new forms of activism, “like signing petitions online or doing their own crowdsourcing online and raising funds for things that matter to them, in ways that older generations might not be.”

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