

THE DANGERS OF CONFIRMATION BIAS IN NEWS MEDIA AND ITS CORRELATION WITH THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION

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A 2016 survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs for BuzzFeed News found that fake news headlines fool Americans on average 75% of the time. Not only did those fooled find the stories to be credible, they considered them persuasive. Shouldn't Americans have greater media literacy and discernment when it comes to spotting these sensational headlines instead of choosing to share them with their communities online? In this new age of information, discrediting erroneous articles would in theory be easily achieved based upon readily accessible evidence countering any misleading claims. Why is it that misinformation or disinformation is so alluring? And why at times does fake news become more widespread than the facts? The answer: Confirmation bias.

What is confirmation bias?

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out information that agrees with or supports one's already preexisting views. It's present in most aspects of life – politics, government, and even witnessed in the scientific community where scientists might accept certain types of evidence supporting their hypothesis while simultaneously neglecting information that fails to support it (Ohler, 2017). This type of cognitive bias also appears in our news ecosystems and on our social media platforms. In this paper I will discuss how confirmation bias shapes the way people interpret the news and how the spread of misinformation correlates with this bias.

What is confirmation bias?

Confirmation bias didn't evolve overnight. However, with the proliferation and ease of access to information in recent years, there has certainly been an acknowledgeable increase in news media confirmation bias as more people than ever achieve independent access to a multitude of tools such as televisions, computers, cell phones, and other digital devices.

OVERVIEW:

The paper examines how confirmation bias – our tendency to seek information that supports preexisting beliefs – fuels the spread of fake news and misinformation, especially through digital and social media. It explores how emotional appeal strengthens misinformation's impact and how social media algorithms amplify it. It also highlights efforts by platforms like Facebook and journalists to combat fake news, and advocates for widespread media literacy education to help future generations critically assess news credibility, diversify their information sources, and recognize their own cognitive biases to preserve democratic discourse.

The news ecosystem has evolved from the 6 o'clock evening news to a constant 24-hour news machine in a matter of generations, providing a plethora of pockets where any individual can obtain the latest news and information at any hour of the day. To contrast the availability of digital information to that of newspapers or the beginning of broadcasting, one researcher says the latter provided "messages with uniform levels of credibility that are often also very homogenous regarding political stance" (Knobloch-Westerwick, Silvia, et al., 2014). This evolution - while offering many benefits to society - also poses a potential threat when it comes to providing the public with straightforward, reliable fact-based reporting.

Another researcher described it by saying "the "pull" nature of the Internet inherently affords individuals the opportunity to engage with whatever information they choose while ignoring the rest" (Bimber & Davis 2003). One must consider that with the increasing access to digital and social sharing platforms, there will be a correlating rise in low-credibility sources claiming to know the 'untold truth' that other media sources refuse to tell the public. This is fake news in its truest form.

According to a Pew Research study, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter currently serve as the sources of news for many Americans (Zantal-Wiener, 2018) so it's worth taking a moment to note the rise in click-bait style articles appearing on these popular platforms - primarily Facebook - in past years. For example, the U.S. saw an uptick in the development of websites claiming to be 'news outlets' during the emergence of fake news around the 2016 election.

While articles released by these sites lacked credibility, they spread like wildfire across online platforms, often boasting headlines with racist, xenophobic or misogynistic messages that served as confirmation for preconceptions already held by the audiences that chose to engage with that content. The prolific success of this misinformation "suggests that people and the algorithms behind social media platforms are vulnerable to manipulation" (Luca Ciampaglia and Menczer, 2018).

Another mechanism that causes misinformation to appear so attractive to one's conformational biases is its appeal to emotion. More than it appeals to logic, fake news and misinformation has the ability to connect with one's emotions. This is seen in instances which one seeks out information that support their views in a positive/productive manner (i.e. President A has cut taxes, saved Americans millions, the economy is booming) and therefore they feel validated to provide further support in the President's efforts, whether or not these statements are credible. Yet more often than not, confirmation bias is demonstrated in the confirmation of negative and upsetting ideas. Imagine the search results someone would find if they were to search "President A is a terrorist" or "President A is a thief". Whether or not the purported evident is fact-based the information one receives is likely to conform to the notions of that individual, further allowing them to maintain their beliefs and feel validated knowing that someone else is reporting on beliefs they hold to be true.

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Who practices confirmation bias?

Confirmation bias is not partisan nor belonging to certain demographics nor limited geographically. It is both left-wing and right-wing. It's a natural part of our thinking and largely contributes to how we categorize and sort data in our daily lives. Described as 'human' and 'unconscious' (Olfer, 2017), this is yet another reason confirmation bias is particularly dangerous. If someone is unaware of their own practices, how can they actively work to adjust them? According to researchers Luca Ciampaglia and Menczer, the "brain can deal with only a finite amount of information, and too many incoming stimuli can cause information overload" (Luca Ciampaglia and Menczer, 2018). One way to limit information overload? Seeking out news media that already conforms to one's ideas and beliefs.

While everyone shares possible guilt associated with contributing to the spread of fake news and misinformation, researchers suggest some are guiltier than others. A study conducted by Princeton University found that "people 65 years of age and over are seven times more likely to share fake news than those aged 18-29." (Popken, 2019)

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This is partly because major technological advancements emerged after many members of this generation had reached adulthood, leaving them with fewer opportunities to develop strong media literacy skills. Americans “now in their 60s and beyond, lack the level of digital media literacy necessary to reliably determine the trustworthiness of news encountered online” (Popken, 2019). Popken’s assertion provides context for how media literacy “builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry necessary for citizens of a democracy”, according to the Center for Media Literacy.

What are the consequences of continuing to share misinformation?

As discussed earlier, no one is completely free of the subconscious practices of confirmation bias, being that it “can lead even the most experienced experts astray” (Nichols, 2017). A specific way in which confirmation bias may disguise itself is in the form of echo chambers. Echo chambers are media environments in which people experience only news and information that supports their existing views without being challenged to think differently, according to an article by Journalism in the Digital Age.

The presence of online echo chambers has seen a substantial rise due to the advanced developments of social media and information sharing platforms. Take YouTube, for example. If you search for conspiracy theories, you’ll be met with a wide range of videos promoting various political and governmental claims. YouTube will then record your search history and continue recommending similar content, reinforcing your exposure to and engagement with others who share and validate those beliefs. Despite the fact these videos may hold little to no credible value, you are validated in the sharing of this misinformation simply because it aligns with your own confirmation bias as well as your like-minded peers.

Another of the hazards of confirmation bias is that by only seeking out and interpreting information that already conforms to your preexisting beliefs, you are limiting yourself from additional information that may have been imperative in the understanding of new, factual ideas and concepts. According to an article published by Pace University, “psychologists agree that confirmation bias and overconfidence phenomenon are contributing to the division” (DelGrosso). If the U.S. continues to willfully neglect its confirmation bias, society runs the risk of a deeper divide between left-wing and right-wing media outlets. And the existence of such a divide only works to hinder future successes and progress that would otherwise be overcome were it not for each side believing themselves to be wholly correct.

What ways are news and media outlets working to combat the spread of misinformation?

In recent years, journalistic organizations and news media outlets have begun combatting the spread of misinformation and fake news before it reaches the viewer. For example, in 2018 Facebook launched an initiative to address the spread of misinformation on its platform after facing criticism for its role in the dissemination of false information during the 2016 election. So far, it appears the initiative is having some positive effect.

A study conducted by Stanford found that “user interactions with false content rose steadily on both Facebook and Twitter through the end of 2016. Since then, however, interactions with false content have fallen sharply on Facebook while continuing to rise on Twitter, with the ratio of Facebook engagements to Twitter shares decreasing by 60 percent” (Allcott, Hunt, et al., 2018). Other large platforms have also begun to take up certain practices in stopping of misinformation in efforts to stop the spread.

What steps are journalists taking to curb the spread of misinformation?

Journalists have begun to stop concerning themselves with ‘telling both sides to every story’. In stories of hate and violence, it’s necessary to share the words of those made victims, but not essential to give voice to those that cause the violence. This may sound apparent but it isn’t always so immediately apparent, as is demonstrated in the Washington Post’s article concerning Nick Sandmann and political protest that has now resulted in a major lawsuit.

In an interview by Laura Hazard Owen, she speaks with danah boyd, founder of research institute Data and Society, who highlights the particular ways in which extremists may try and disguise their intentions, saying they “have learned how to use irony and slippery rhetoric to mask themselves as conservatives and argue they are the victims” (Hazard Owen, 2018).

Boyd goes on to discuss how giving voice to both sides only works to further the spread of misinformation. For the audiences who agree with this information, it further validates for them that their beliefs are correct. All of this works entirely against the mission and goals of those reliable news outlets who seek to bring the truth to their viewers.

Best practices for addressing one’s own confirmation biases

In a PBS Digital Studios education clip, Myles Bess proposes viewers exam where the majority of their media intake comes from and consider how that may shape a certain world view. Do they have one media outlet you prefer over others? Has it become the top source they depend on? He asks the viewer to consider how a broadening of sources may alter one’s view and bring added facts that had not previously been presented.

Second, an article by Common Sense Media argues that parents and educators should take actions and advocate for the instruction of media literacy for younger ages. Digital media literacy can play a key role in recognizing biases and “media literacy helps kids learn how to determine whether something is credible”. According to statistics provided by the Bureau of Labor, 69.7% of high school graduates enrolled in college in October 2016. Of these students we can only anticipate that around half will obtain four-year degrees. If students are not being taught adequate media literacy in K-12, this will result in a large fraction of Americans going without quality media literacy training and being left vulnerable to manipulative actors framing certain stories in intentionally deceptive formats.

As our world becomes more technology dependent, it’s been suggested that the US must “insist our schools teach media literacy and digital citizenship as a matter of course” while many children are receiving their education, because “whether children are consuming or producing media, they should be able to distinguish entertainment from journalism, and opinion from factual presentation” (Ohler, 2017). Moving forward, citizens should be encouraged to seek information from diverse sources, collect the facts, and formulate ideas of their own. Ignoring the existence of one’s confirmation bias could result in ignoring facts relevant to a greater understanding of one’s community and one’s world.

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