

Is media-driven 'pseudo-reality' the future of U.S. politics?

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(Phys.org) -- In the hyperpolarized world of the 2012 election, misinformation among Americans remains widespread, a new University of Wisconsin-Madison study finds.

One in five Americans, for example, still believe that President [Barack Obama](#) is a Muslim, while almost seven in 10 Americans mistakenly think [Sarah Palin](#) was the first to say "I can see Russia from my house."

Obama is a Christian, of course, and the "seeing Russia from my house" quote originated from a "Saturday Night Live" skit with Tina Fey impersonating Sarah Palin.

"Politically, we may be moving more and more toward a world where our beliefs are shaped not by what is really true, but instead by the pseudo-realities created by talk shows and political pundits," says Dietram A. Scheufele, the John E. Ross Professor of Life Sciences Communication at UW-Madison and an expert in public opinion research.

Commentators have long blamed the highly polarized political climate in the U.S. for [misperceptions](#) among voters. And for misperceptions of Obama's faith this may be true, the new UW-Madison study shows. Even after controlling for the effects of a host of demographic and media use factors, Republicans had a 50 percent higher probability (or were about 11 percentage points more likely) than Democrats to believe that Obama is Muslim.

The gap between conservatives and liberals, however, was much wider among the most informed voters, the Wisconsin researchers found. Conservatives with higher levels of general [political knowledge](#) (as identified through a battery of true/false knowledge questions) actually had a slightly greater likelihood of identifying Obama as a Muslim than less knowledgeable conservatives. Among liberals, misperceptions decreased dramatically as levels of general political knowledge increased.

"The fact that misperceptions about Obama's [religious beliefs](#) are higher among less-informed liberals than more knowledgeable liberals poses a problem for the president," says lead co-investigator Dominique Brossard, a UW-Madison professor of Life Sciences Communication and an expert in media, science and policy. "It shows that he is facing an uphill battle against these misperceptions, even among some of his own constituencies."

Political leaning made no significant difference in respondents' beliefs about the origins of the "I can see Russia from my house" statement, with almost three quarters of the American population across all ideological groups falsely attributing the statement to Sarah Palin.

And based on the new Wisconsin study, much of the blame goes to news media, including late night comedy, such as the "Colbert Report" and "The Daily Show." After controlling for other factors such as demographics and media use, the analysis shows that heavy viewers of late night TV comedy shows had a probability of believing that Palin was the first to say "I can see Russia from my house" that was almost 8 percentage points higher than that calculated for lighter viewers.

Similarly, heavy traditional news media users were 12 percentage points more likely than light users to think Sara Palin was the first to say "I can see Russia from my house." But there is a silver lining: Online news

consumers were more likely to get their facts straight. Heavy users of online [news media](#) were 12 percentage points less likely than lighter online news users to falsely attribute the statement to the former Alaska governor.

"In contrast to beliefs about President Obama's religion, misperceptions of what Palin said about her proximity to Russia cut across partisan and ideological fault lines," said UW-Madison communication arts professor Michael Xenos, one of the co-investigators and an expert on the effects of political entertainment media. "Apparently some impressions are so good," adds Xenos in reference to Tina Fey's portrayal of Sarah Palin, "that people of different partisan outlooks and various levels of political knowledge can be taken in."

Some commentators may interpret these findings as just another indictment of the dysfunctional "lamestream" media spectacle that surrounds modern elections. And there may be some truth to that, say the UW-Madison researchers who conducted the study: "Most citizens observe the political theater in Washington indirectly through the lens of mass media. And our findings show that misinformation about what politicians say or do can become fact in voters' minds if it is just repeated often enough in news [media](#)."

The one upside is that there seems to be little partisan bias to the misperceptions about Sara Palin, at least. In fact, even journalists seem to have a hard time telling Tina Fey and Sara Palin apart. Last year, for example, Fox News had to apologize for accidentally using a stock photo of Tina Fey in a story about Sarah Palin's potential presidential bid.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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