

# Sharers rather than authors more important on social media

March 20 2017, by David Bauder

---



Social network diagram. Credit: Daniel Tenerife/Wikipedia

The person who shares a news story on social media is more important than the story's actual source in determining whether readers believe it, a study by the Media Insight Project has found.

In a previous study, consumers said they paid greater heed to where the [story](#) originated. But the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the American Press Institute, set up an experiment that found something different.

News organizations are keenly interested in research that tracks consumer habits in a rapidly changing media world. Facebook was the top non-television source for election news cited by both supporters of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in last fall's presidential campaign, according to the Pew Research Center. Businesses grew to churn out false stories that [people](#) would share online.

The Media Insight Project survey showed a post on a Facebook-like social network with a health story about diabetes. The Associated Press was labeled as the story's author in the post shown to half of the participants while for the other half, the story was said to be from a fictional source, DailyNewsReview.com. Half of the participants saw the story was shared by a public figure they had previously said they trusted, such as Oprah Winfrey or Dr. Oz. For the other half, the story was shared by a famous person they said they didn't trust.

Fifty percent of participants said the health story got the facts right when it was shared by the person they trusted, while only 35 percent said the same thing when they didn't trust the sharer, the study found. The pattern was nearly identical when people were asked if they thought the story was well-reported.

Participants also said they were more likely to pass the article along to their own friends when it had been shared by a trusted source.

By contrast, the original source—AP or the fictional site—made little difference to readers' perceptions about the article.

For example, 52 percent of people said they believed that the article attributed to the AP had the facts right if it had been passed on by a trusted figure. But only 32 percent of people said the same thing when the AP piece was shared by someone less trustworthy.

"If there's somebody I like and agree with, they can have a big influence not only in what I look at but in whether I believe it or not: 'I trust them and I convey that trust to the news that they share,'" said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute.

While about half the people who participated in the project's experiment could remember later who shared the diabetes article, about two in 10 were able to identify the AP or DailyNewsReview.com as the author.

The study didn't measure non-famous Facebook friends, like your uncle or college buddy, but the implications are clear. People are increasingly getting news from their [social media](#) feeds, and the beliefs of their "friends" determine what they see regularly just like an editor who makes decisions about what goes into a newspaper.

Michael Virga, an electrical technician from Colorado Springs, Colorado, participated in the AP survey and said he was more likely to trust articles posted on social media by people he knows. But he's also learned to be careful after investigating some material on his feed that turned out not to be true, and it upsets him to see friends share fake news.

"I just don't look at something and take it at face value," Virga said. "Especially now, because you've got too many people getting their news from the web. It's frustrating sometimes when you want accurate information."

Following postelection concerns about the extent of fake news,

Facebook announced measures to make it easier for users to call attention to false news stories they see on their service, and is working with news organizations and fact checkers to examine suspicious stories. Some critics have suggested Facebook's decision to identify stories as false rather than remove them is an indication they're not going far enough.

Facebook said it also supporting media literacy efforts.

"This is an issue that cuts broadly across the social media and news industries, and we are working together to help people better understand the sources and authenticity of information before they share with their friends or family," said Justin Osofsky, Facebook's vice president of global operations and media partnerships. "It's important we give people the tools to make smart decisions about content, with the goal of helping create more informed communities across the digital ecosystem."

The project's findings indicate that [news organizations](#) must pay closer attention to how its articles spread through social media, Rosenstiel said. They might also want to consider something that may seem counterintuitive, like sharing [news](#) by competitors in the hope that they will reciprocate, he said.

Readers "are not just your audience anymore," he said. "They're your ambassadors."

Social [media](#) outlets need to better police what is spread on their sites, he said.

"If you build the freeway, you have the responsibility to make sure the freeway is safe," he said. "You shouldn't just say that if there are potholes, drivers should try to avoid them."

The poll of 1,489 adults was conducted Nov. 9-Dec. 6, 2016 with funding from the American Press Institute. It used a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Respondents were first selected randomly using address-based sampling methods, and later interviewed online or by phone.

**More information:** Media Insight Project: [mediainsight.org/](https://mediainsight.org/)

© 2017 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Sharers rather than authors more important on social media (2017, March 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-03-sharers-authors-important-social-media.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.