

Fake news and filters aren't fooling internet users

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William Dutton is director of MSU's James and Mary Quello Center in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences. Credit: Michigan State University College of Communication Arts and Sciences

Despite what some politicians argue, fake news and biased search

algorithms aren't swaying public opinion, finds a Michigan State University researcher.

Commissioned and funded by Google, William Dutton, director of MSU's James and Mary Quello Center in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences, and researchers from Oxford University and the University of Ottawa, [conducted a survey](#) of 14,000 [internet users](#) in seven nations: United States, Britain, France, Poland, Germany, Italy and Spain.

"The role of [search](#) in the political arena is of particular significance as it holds the potential to support or undermine democratic processes," Dutton said. "For example, does online search enable citizens to obtain better [information](#) about candidates for political office and issues in elections and public affairs, or do the processes underlying search bias what citizens know in ways that could distort democratic choice?"

While there are country-specific findings, universally, concerns about [internet](#) searches undermining the quality and diversity of information accessed by citizens are unwarranted, the study found.

Indeed, search plays a role in how internet users obtain information about politics, but there are several factors that come into play, Dutton said.

"The results from our study show that internet users interested in politics tend to be exposed to multiple media sources, to discover new information, to be skeptical of political information and to check information, such as that seen on [social media](#), by using search," he said. "These findings should caution governments, business and the public from over-reacting to alarmist panics."

Key findings:

- The argument that search creates "filter bubbles," in which an algorithm guesses what information a user wants based on their information (location, search history), is overstated. In fact, internet users encounter diverse information across multiple media, which challenges their viewpoints.
- Most users aren't silenced by contrasting views; nor do they silence those with whom they disagree.
- News about [fake news](#) has created unjustified levels of concern; people use search to check facts and the validity of information found on social media or the internet.
- Cross-nationally, there are consistent patterns of media use, but people in France and Germany use search engines less and rely more on traditional media. In Italy, residents use search more frequently. Out of the seven countries in the study, internet users in Poland trust search the most to keep them informed and in Spain, users are particularly prone to use the internet to check facts. In the United Kingdom, people use search less, placing more trust in broadcast media.

Most research on [internet searches](#) has focused on one platform, such as Twitter or Facebook, Dutton said. The MSU study is one of the first to concentrate on the wider context of a person's informational and social networks and the wide range of [media](#) people consume.

The study can be downloaded from the [Social Science Research Network](#).

Provided by Michigan State University

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