Fake news more likely to thrive online due to lowered fact-checking

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The power and proliferation of fake online news stems not only from its apparent ubiquity but also from a sense of the presence of others that social media sites create, according to new research conducted by Gita Johar, the Meyer Feldberg Professor of Business at Columbia Business School, along with doctoral students Rachel Meng and Youjung Jun. The researchers found that when people are presented with claims whose veracity is ambiguous they are less likely to fact-check the claims when the information is consumed in a group setting.

In their paper, Perceived Social Presence Reduces Fact-Checking, the researchers conducted eight experiments to evaluate how the presence of others affects the way that people evaluate information and, in particular, the extent to which people verify ambiguous claims.

The researchers had participants evaluate a range of different statements on simulated websites to test their hypothesis. In one experiment, participants gave responses (true, false, or flag) for 36 statements described as news headlines published by a U.S. media outlet, such as "Scientists have officially declared the Great Barrier Reef to be dead" or "Undocumented immigrants pay $12 billion a year into Social Security". Throughout the task, half of the participants saw their own username displayed alone on the side of the screen, while the other half saw those of 102 respondents described as currently logged on, presumably completing the same task. People fact-checked fewer statements when they perceived that others were present.

Overall, the studies focused on individuals' scrutiny of, rather than belief in, the information they consume. According to the researchers, perceiving the company of others seemed to influence people's willingness to verify information, not how much they believed it.

The researchers advanced three possibilities for why collective settings may suppress fact checking:

1. Individuals may exert less effort (and hence be less likely to fact-check claims) because they expect to 'free ride' on others;

2. People may abide by social norms that lead them to take the words of others at face value; or

3. Crowds may inherently cause people to feel 'safety in numbers,' which decreases vigilance in general.

The evidence largely supported the third possibility, suggesting that social contexts impede fact-checking by lowering people's guards instinctively. Across eight experiments, participants flagged 35 percent fewer statements on average for later fact-checking on simulated news sites when they believed they were working in a group setting compared to when they believed they were working alone. However, when the researchers had participants first do exercises to momentarily induce a vigilant mindset, those in a group setting fact-checked nearly twice as many statements as those who weren't given such encouragement.

"Animals in the wild hide out and feel safer in herds and, similarly, we feel safer in a crowd," said Johar. "When applied to information consumed on social media, this same instinct results in lower fact-checking."

Fact-Checking in the Current Political Climate

Fake news continues to be a global problem. Since the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee opened its investigation into allegations that Russia hired as many as 1,000 people to create fake news stories, false news stories have rattled the French election and upset the primary process in the Kenyan election. These stories can have a powerful and multiplying effect since the average person spends almost two hours each day on social media sites consuming and circulating news and information.

When it comes to political discourse specifically, personal beliefs play an important role and, not surprisingly, those beliefs tend to follow party lines. For example, in one study reported in the paper, Democrats evaluated liberal candidates' statements as more true and, conversely, Republicans evaluated a conservative candidate's statements as more true. However, participants continued to fact-check political statements less often in a group compared to an individual setting. Political alignment, then, only seemed to affect whether people rated a statement as true, not how much they were willing to verify that statement

More information: Youjung Jun et al. Perceived social presence reduces fact-checking, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1700175114

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