

Reliance on 'gut feelings' linked to belief in fake news

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People who tend to trust their intuition or to believe that the facts they hear are politically biased are more likely to stand behind inaccurate beliefs, a new study suggests.

And those who rely on concrete evidence to form their beliefs are less

likely to have misperceptions about high-profile scientific and political issues, said Kelly Garrett, the lead researcher and a professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"Scientific and political misperceptions are dangerously common in the U.S. today. The willingness of large minorities of Americans to embrace falsehoods and [conspiracy theories](#) poses a threat to society's ability to make well-informed decisions about pressing matters," Garrett said.

"A lot of attention is paid to our political motivations, and while political bias is a reality, we shouldn't lose track of the fact that people have other kinds of biases too."

Garrett and co-author Brian Weeks of the University of Michigan published the study in the journal *PLOS ONE*. They examined data from three nationally representative surveys that included anywhere from 500 to almost 1,000 participants. Their aim was to better understand how people form their beliefs and how that might contribute to their willingness to accept ideas with little or no evidence to support them.

They looked at how participants responded to 12 questions including "I trust my gut to tell me what's true and what's not," "Evidence is more important than whether something feels true" and "Facts are dictated by those in power."

They used responses to these questions to assess people's faith in intuition, their need for evidence, and their belief that "truth" is political.

"These are characteristics that we expected would be important above and beyond the role of partisanship," Garrett said. "We're tapping into something about people's understanding of the world, something about how they think about what they know, how they know it and what is true."

The researchers compared how participants' approach to deciding what is true was related to their beliefs about hot-button topics. The study included questions about the debunked link between vaccines and autism and the science-based connection between human activity and climate change.

Garrett and Weeks found that people who believe that truth is shaped by politics and power are more likely to embrace falsehoods. On the other hand, those who rely on evidence were less likely to believe those falsehoods.

The researchers also evaluated survey respondents' tendency to agree with seven well-known conspiracy theories. More than 45 percent said they didn't buy that John F. Kennedy was murdered by Lee Harvey Oswald alone; 33 percent agreed that the U.S. government was behind the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and 32 percent said Princess Diana's death was orchestrated by the British royal family.

Previous research has shown connections between belief in conspiracy theories and education level, religious fundamentalism and party affiliation, Garrett said.

In this study, a [belief](#) that truth is political was the strongest predictor of whether someone would buy into conspiracy theories. Garrett also found that those who rely on intuition to assess the truth had a stronger tendency to endorse conspiracies.

"While trusting your gut may be beneficial in some situations, it turns out that putting faith in intuition over evidence leaves us susceptible to misinformation," said Weeks, who worked on the research as an Ohio State graduate student.

Garrett said it's important to acknowledge that our beliefs aren't based

solely upon political predispositions.

"Misperceptions don't always arise because people are blinded by what their party or favorite news outlet is telling them," he said.

The good news, as Garrett sees it? "Making an effort to base your beliefs on evidence is an easy way to help avoid being misled."

It's also possible to influence others in a positive direction, he said, by sharing evidence in a calm, respectful manner when faced with misperceptions. If a Facebook friend, for instance, posts an inaccurate item, a link to a trusted news source or document can be helpful, Garrett said.

"People sometimes say that it's too hard to know what's true anymore. That's just not true. These results suggest that if you pay attention to [evidence](#) you're less likely to hold beliefs that aren't correct," he said.

"This isn't a panacea - there will always be [people](#) who believe conspiracies and unsubstantiated claims - but it can make a difference."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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