

How partisan hate leads people to believe falsehoods

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Researchers now have a better idea of why people who rely on partisan news outlets are more likely to believe falsehoods about political opponents.

And no, it isn't because these consumers live in media "bubbles" where they aren't exposed to the truth. Instead, it has to do with how partisan media promote hostility against their rivals.

Using data from the 2012 and 2016 [presidential elections](#), researchers from The Ohio State University found that Americans who consumed more partisan media had stronger negative feelings than others toward political opponents.

This dislike was linked to greater belief in misperceptions about those from the "other side."

"Partisan news outlets promote a feeling of animosity toward the other side and that animosity can help explain inaccurate beliefs," said R. Kelly Garrett, lead author of the study and professor of communication at Ohio State.

"As people grow increasingly hostile towards those with whom they disagree, our study found they are more likely to believe false information about them."

The findings suggested that the link between partisan media use, hostility

and belief in falsehoods was more pronounced among Republicans than among Democrats. Garrett said this finding was "provocative," but that this data alone isn't enough to prove that association.

But the findings, published online this week in the *Journal of Communication*, do offer a grim warning.

"If this (partisan) hostility translates into a willingness to believe anything that members of your party tell you, regardless of [empirical evidence](#) or claims made by those not belonging to the ingroup, then the U.S. political situation is dire," the study authors wrote.

Two surveys were designed and implemented by Garrett and his colleagues.

During the 2012 presidential election campaign, 652 Americans were interviewed online three times: near the beginning and middle of the campaign and right after the election.

During each wave of the study, the participants were asked about how often they used partisan news outlets to get information about the [presidential candidates](#), Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney. They also rated how favorably they felt about each candidate on a scale of 0 to 10.

They also rated on a scale of 1 (definitely false) to 5 (definitely true) whether they believed four statements about Obama and four statements about Romney that were false but had been reported in partisan media outlets.

One of the statements about Obama was that he is a socialist and one about Romney was that he believes Mormon Church leaders (Romney is Mormon) should play a defining role in national affairs.

Results showed that the more that any individual Republican in the study consumed conservative media outlets, the more that he or she disliked Obama and the more that he or she believed falsehoods about Obama.

There was no similar finding among Democrats who used liberal media, but Garrett cautions against making too much of that finding.

It is possible, for example, that the differences between Republicans and Democrats could be connected to the falsehoods chosen for this study.

The study of the 2016 election involved 625 respondents who were also interviewed three times during the course of the election season. But in this case, the researchers focused on just one issue in which partisans on both sides had closely matched misperceptions: Russian interference in the election.

Investigations at that time showed evidence of Russian hacking into email accounts of the Democratic Party, but there was no conclusive evidence one way or the other about any coordination with the Trump campaign.

The researchers asked participants if the investigation had confirmed coordination between Russian intelligence and the Trump campaign (a liberal falsehood) or confirmed no coordination (a conservative falsehood). They could also choose that there was no conclusive evidence at the time, which was the true statement.

The results were similar to the first study. Those who consumed more conservative media showed greater dislike than others of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and were more likely to believe the misperception that investigators had cleared Trump of coordination.

Again, there was no similar finding among those who consumed more

news from liberal media outlets.

"The fact that we found the same difference between liberal media use and conservative media use in 2016 as we did in 2012 is provocative," Garrett said.

"It merits more careful scrutiny. We think these results provide a useful step forward. But it would be a mistake to treat this issue as settled."

Garrett said the study helps fill the void left when research showed that most people aren't viewing only news that supports their side.

"We used to think that if we could just expose people to all the information out there, the truth would emerge. The problem is that we now have a lot of evidence that people don't live in bubbles—they may consume more media from one side, but they aren't avoiding everything else," he said.

"Our results suggest an alternative reason why partisan media viewers believe misperceptions."

The findings also suggest that partisan [media](#) can help promote belief in falsehoods about political opponents without even mentioning the misperceptions themselves.

"Encouraging hostility toward [political opponents](#) has the same effect," Garrett said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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