

Communication researcher shows free will is key to combat online extremism

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Douglas Wilbur '14, a visiting Ph.D. scholar in the Department of Communication at UTSA, has published a study that shows how researchers can craft message campaigns to protect individuals from

adopting extremist views.

According to his research, when people are explicitly told that they are free to accept or reject propagandistic claims, the likelihood of choosing a moderate view increases. This was a result of a survey of attitudes that tested counter-propaganda strategies, which stressed a person's autonomy, and then measured sentiments after exposure.

The study was recently published in *Social Influence* with collaborators at the University of Missouri.

"It's ironic, if you think about it. Empowering individuals to make choices when they encounter extremist messaging appears to help people resist such claims," Wilbur said. "What this research showed is consistent with other findings. You tend to see a trend where people will make the right choice."

The Pew Research Center found that two out of every three Americans say social media has a [negative impact](#) on what occurs within the U.S. The primary reasons listed in that same survey were misinformation and hate speech.

To combat propaganda in the past, strategists have relied on attitude inoculation theory. Analogous to how physical vaccines inoculate people against a virus, communication messages use psychological inoculation through exposure to both negative messages but also techniques to resist such attacks. As a result, people train and build their psychological immunity to resist future persuasion attempts. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that it's difficult to apply to large groups.

With that limitation in mind, Wilbur tested two counter-propaganda strategies for boosting peoples' resistance to extremist propaganda. One is based on self-determination theory, or DPT, which argues that people

are curious, active, and health-seeking as long as their psychological needs are met. Primarily, in this approach, the individual needs to have agency and control over their actions. Similarly, the other strategy tested relies on psychological reactance theory, or PRT, which assumes that people have strong negative reactions when they feel their freedom is threatened.

Wilbur recruited close to 400 participants online and told them they would read extremist messages. Respondents were randomly assigned to either a neutral control condition, a DPT approach ('it is your choice to agree or not'), or the PRT condition ('don't let them manipulate you'). They then read and rated their agreement of two anti-immigrant extremist messages. After exposure, both campaigns produced lower agreement to the extremist messages when compared to the control condition—regardless of [political affiliation](#).

Wilbur elaborated that the benefits of these agency-based campaigns is that they can be built beforehand and are not message-specific. These proactive strategies and the resulting advantages are a departure from previous approaches that Wilbur himself used during his military tour in Afghanistan. There, he served as a communications officer and was tasked with blocking Al-Qaeda recruiting efforts, yet the existing communications methods at his disposal were slow and reactive.

"Al-Qaeda would put out a video to recruit. Then we would have to discredit it, but this would take time to get a counter-product (opposing argument via pamphlets or videos) out there," Wilbur recalled.

His approach aims to disrupt the radicalization process among vulnerable population groups.

"If we could prime people to think they have autonomy, then yes, they would be more likely to resist propagandist messages," Wilbur said. "We

can even build messages about the COVID-19 vaccine—campaigns that tell people that they can chose whether to take the vaccine or not. You want to stress freedom."

More information: Douglas Wilbur et al, Autonomy supportive and reactance supportive inoculations both boost resistance to propaganda, as mediated by state autonomy but not state reactance, *Social Influence* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/15534510.2021.1908910](https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2021.1908910)

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