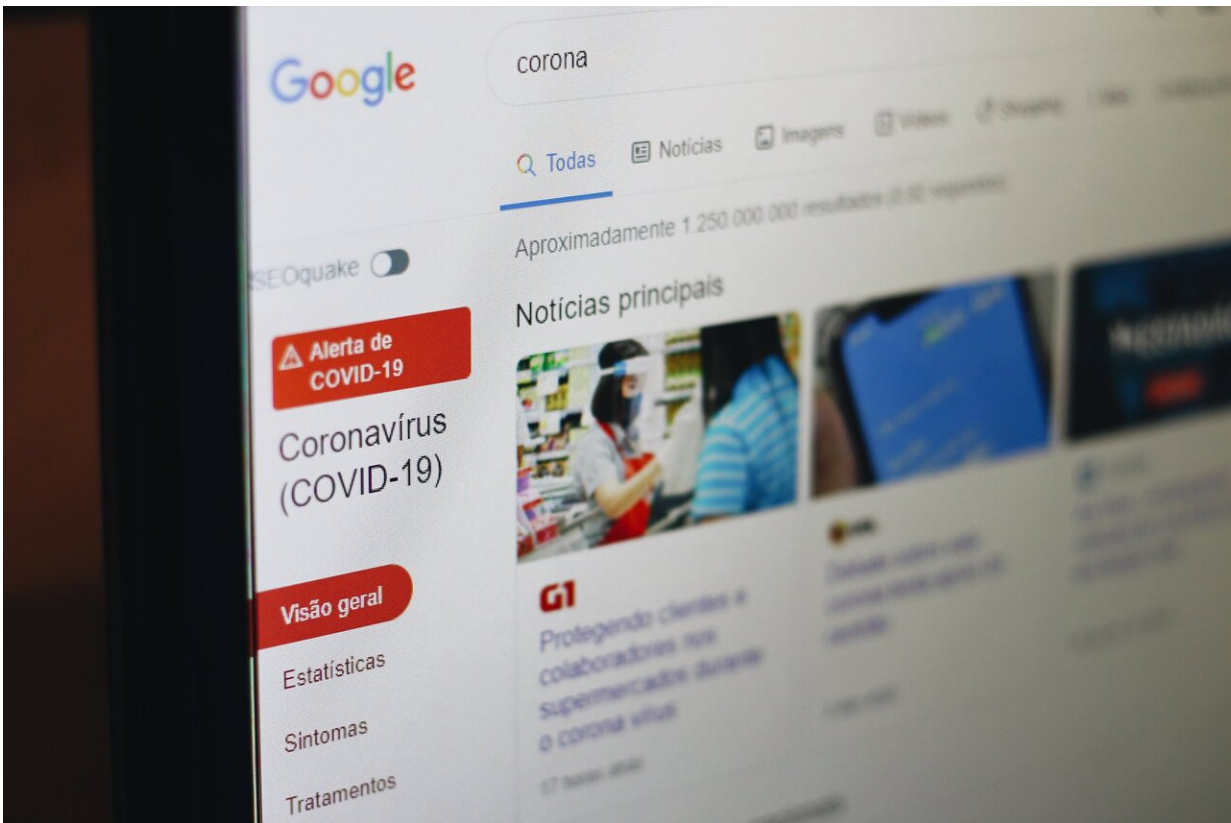# Study explores how readers at partisan news sites respond to challenging news events

June 23 2021

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Researchers from Bentley University have been exploring how readers at partisan news sites respond to news events that challenge their worldview.

In a forthcoming paper in the journal *ACM Transactions on Social Computing*, they report results of a study that examines reader comments on stories surrounding the 2017 Roy Moore Alabama senate race at two partisan news sites: A left-leaning news site (Daily Kos) and a right-leaning news site (Breitbart). They consider the alleged sexual misconduct of Mr. Moore as a challenging news event for the right-leaning readers; and the subsequent nomination of Mr. Moore as the Republican candidate as a challenging news event for the left-leaning readers.

Their analysis identifies the obstacles that readers face as they try to make sense of news events they find challenging. The comments they contribute show that some readers question the motives of different actors in the story, others provide erroneous arguments to diffuse the story, yet others engage in personal attacks. The researchers describe these as breakdowns that prevent a group from acknowledging the new event.

The study adds to our understanding of political discourse and polarization. "We are still trying to understand the causes of disinformation and political echo chambers. Our study provides a window into how deliberation can break down in closed groups," says Dr. Sandeep Purao, one of the lead researchers.

"The processes underlying social representations are difficult to examine. The reader comments allow us this opportunity," says Dr. David Murungi, a professor who also participated in the study. "The reader comments tend to be complex. Although we can judge them to be problematic, it is often hard to name what the problems are," says Dr. David Yates, another professor who participated in the study.

The results of the study are being published in the journal *ACM Transactions on Social Computing*. The team continues to empirically

investigate the problem of disinformation and political discourse, and is moving to explore potential solutions to combat misinformation.

More information: Sandeep Purao et al, Deliberative Breakdowns in the Social Representation Process, *ACM Transactions on Social Computing* (2021). DOI: 10.1145/3450143

Provided by Bentley University