Is watching believing? In spreading politics, videos may not be much more persuasive than their text-based counterparts

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It might seem that video would be a singularly influential medium for spreading information online. But a new experiment conducted by MIT

researchers finds that video clips have only a modestly larger impact on political persuasion than the written word does.

"Our conclusion is that watching video is not much more persuasive than reading text," says David Rand, an MIT professor and co-author of a new paper detailing the study's results.

The study comes amid widespread concern about online political misinformation, including the possibility that technology-enabled "deepfake" videos could easily convince many people watching them to believe false claims.

"Technological advances have created new opportunities for people to falsify video footage, but we still know surprisingly little about how individuals process political video versus text," says MIT researcher Chloe Wittenberg, the lead author on the paper. "Before we can identify strategies for combating the spread of deepfakes, we first need to answer these more basic questions about the role of video in political persuasion."

The paper, "The (Minimal) Persuasive Advantage of Political Video over Text," is published today in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The co-authors are Adam J. Berinsky, the Mitsui Professor of Political Science; Rand, the Erwin H. Schell Professor and Professor of Management Science and Brain and Cognitive Sciences; Ben Tappin, a postdoc in the Human Cooperation Lab; and Chloe Wittenberg, a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science.

Believability and persuasion

The study operates on a distinction between the credibility of videos and their persuasiveness. That is, an audience might find a video believable, but their attitudes might not change in response. Alternately, a video

might not seem credible to a large portion of the audience but still alter viewers' attitudes or behavior.

For example, Rand says, "When you watch a stain remover ad, they all have this same format, where some stain gets on a shirt, you pour the remover on it, and it goes in the washer and hey, look, the stain is gone. So, one question is: Do you believe that happened, or was it just trickery? And the second question is: How much do you want to buy the stain remover? The answers to those questions don't have to be tightly related."

To conduct the study, the MIT researchers performed a pair of survey experiments involving 7,609 Americans, using the Lucid and Dynata platforms. The first study involved 48 ads obtained through the Peoria Project, an archive of political materials. Survey participants either watched an ad, read a transcript of the ad, or received no information at all. (Each participant did this multiple times.) For each ad, participants were asked whether the message seemed believable and whether they agreed with its main message. They were then shown a series of questions measuring whether they found the subject personally important and whether they wanted more information.

The second study followed the same format but involved 24 popular video clips about COVID-19, taken from YouTube.

Overall, the results showed that video performed somewhat better than written text on the believability front but had a smaller relative advantage when it came to persuasion. Participants were modestly more likely to believe that events actually occurred when they were shown in a video as opposed to being described in a written transcript. However, the advantage of video over text was only one-third as big when it came to changing participants' attitudes and behavior.

As a further indication of this limited persuasive advantage of video versus text, the difference between the "control condition" (with participants who received no information) and reading text was as great as that between reading the transcript and watching the video.

These differences were surprisingly stable across groups. For instance, in the second study, there were only small differences in the effects seen for political versus nonpolitical messages about COVID-19, suggesting the findings hold across varying types of content. The researchers also did not find significant differences among the respondents based on factors such as age, political partisanship, and political knowledge.

"Seeing may be believing," Berinsky says, "but our study shows that just because video is more believable doesn't mean that it can change people's minds."

Questions about online behavior

The scholars acknowledge that the study did not exactly replicate the conditions in which people consume information online, but they suggest that the main findings yield valuable insight about the relative power of video versus text.

"It's possible that in real life things are a bit different," Rand says. "It's possible that as you're scrolling through your newsfeed, video captures your attention more than text would. You might be more likely to look at it. This doesn't mean that video is inherently more persuasive than text—just that it has the potential to reach a wider audience."

That said, the MIT team notes there are some clear directions for future research in this field—including the question of whether or not people are more willing to watch videos than to read materials.

"Some people may prefer watching video to reading text," notes Tappin. "For example, platforms like TikTok are heavily video-based, and the audience is mostly young adults. Among such audiences, a small persuasive advantage of video over text may rapidly scale up because video can reach so many more people. Future research could explore these and other ideas."

More information: Chloe Wittenberg et al, The (minimal) persuasive advantage of political video over text, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2114388118

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