

What fake news about spiders can teach us about the global spread of (mis)information

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Black widow. Credit: Sean McCann

It's no secret that the internet and social media fuel the rampant spread of (mis)information in many areas of life. Now, researchers reporting in *Current Biology* on August 22 have explored this phenomenon as it applies to news about spiders. The verdict? Don't blindly trust anything you read online about these eight-legged arthropods—or anything else for that matter—and always consider the source.

"The quality of spider information in the global press is rather poor—errors and sensationalism are rampant," says Stefano Mammola of the National Research Council, Verbania Pallanza, Italy, and University of Helsinki's Finnish Museum of Natural History. "Spider-related information in the press flows through a highly interconnected global network, and the [spread of misinformation](#) is driven by a limited number of key factors, the sensationalistic tone of an article being particularly important."

Mammola said he was inspired to do the study initially based on general disappointment about the quality of spider-related newspaper articles in Italy. "Many articles on spiders in the Italian press are full of errors, alarmistic, or even fake news, or a combination thereof," he says.

So, he and dozens of colleagues including Catherine Scott of McGill University and Angela Chuang of University of Florida wanted to see whether this was a global problem. They put together an impressive team of experts to collect all the data, representing 41 languages and 81 countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the project also offered a way to explore important questions on a global scale at a time when spider fieldwork had been halted without leaving home to do it.

Their analyses found that the level of sensationalism and misinformation drops when the "right" expert—namely an expert on spiders rather than a medical doctor or other professional—is consulted by journalists doing the writing. The data they amassed also showed the importance of events

and news coverage on a local scale, as small-town stories can quickly hit the international news.



Spiders in the news. Credit: Jagoba Malumbre-Olarte / CC BY-SA

"I was particularly surprised by the fact that even very local-scale events—say, the story of a farmer bitten by a spider in some remote village in Australia—published by a regional newspaper can quickly become broadcast internationally," Mammola says.

"This implies that improving the quality of the information produced in these local nodes could have a positive effect reverberating across the information network—a typical example of a 'think globally, act locally' management strategy," they write.

Misinformation about spiders has many real-world implications. Some notable cases have led to school closures due to alarmist responses to false widow "invasions," they report. In another instance, a man lit his house on fire while blowtorching (harmless) spider webs from his backyard. The tone and quality of "news" stories about spiders shape our perception and ideas about them, with implications for us and for spiders' wildlife conservation.

They now want to explore more about how poor-quality information on spiders relates to the persistence of arachnophobic sentiments in the population. They also want to understand better how differences in cultural, social, and other factors influence differences in the way spiders are represented and talked about across various countries and regions. Ultimately, they may even expand the work beyond [spiders](#).

"It would be nice to explore media representation of a broader selection of organisms, including animals that are venomous but not stigmatized in the same way, like bees, but also other feared venomous animals, such as snakes," Mammola said.

"A similar exercise would allow comparing if the levels of misinformation and sensationalism are the same across a broad spectrum of taxa, testing the prediction if a negative framing by the traditional and [social media](#) translates to a lower chance of being prioritized for conservation, and vice versa."

More information: Stefano Mammola, The global spread of misinformation on spiders, *Current Biology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cub.2022.07.026](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2022.07.026). [www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(22\)01127-7](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(22)01127-7)

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