

# True stories can win out on social media, study finds

February 2 2023, by Jeff Grabmeier

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Some past research has suggested that falsehoods travel more quickly online than the truth and are more popular with the public, but a new study gives a more hopeful view.

Researchers found that posts on the social media site Reddit that included news articles fact-checked as true received more engagement and positive reaction than posts with news labeled as false.

In one measure, Reddit posts linking to true [information](#) received nearly twice as many upvotes—the equivalent of "likes"—as posts that were marked as false.

That contrasts with a widely reported 2018 study of Twitter users that found false stories diffused more rapidly and widely than those that were true.

While the results of the Twitter study were troubling, this new research cautions against "painting with too broad a brush" about how people act on social media, said Robert Bond, lead author of the study and associate professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"We found that the true information received a lot more attention and engagement on Reddit than false information," Bond said.

Bond conducted the study with Kelly Garrett, professor of communication at Ohio State. An early-view, uncorrected version of their accepted study was published online on Jan. 27 in the journal *PNAS Nexus*.

"The findings that Twitter users were more likely to share false information may have less to do with [human nature](#) and more about how people behave on different [social media](#) platforms," Garrett said.

Twitter and Reddit differ in many ways, including their technical attributes, [social norms](#) and people they serve, the researchers noted. That may be a key for differences in how users of the two platforms respond to true versus false information.

One important difference is that Twitter has a short message format, with many messages generating no reaction at all, and with very few extended discussions. In contrast, Reddit has complex, threaded discussions, and users often engage in sustained conversations.

For this study, the researchers examined all political posts on Reddit between 2016 and 2018 that included a link to a news article. They specifically looked for posts with a comment linking to one of three fact-checking organizations: PolitiFact, Snopes or the Washington Post Fact Checker. All posts included a news article that one of these organizations had labeled as true, false or mixed.

This resulted in a dataset of 10,308 posts that included links to 10,785 comment threads that could be classified as being true or false, according to the fact-checkers. These posts received about 8.3 million comments from about 783,000 unique comment authors.

The results clearly showed more engagement with posts including true information.

Posts in which the fact-checked information was true received an average of 929 comments, versus false posts, which received 581 comments on average.

Posts that linked to true information also led to longer conversations—an average of 323 hours, versus 234 hours for those labeled false.

Findings showed that commenters were faster at posting fact checks for false stories than for true stories. And the researchers found that after a fact-checking comment was posted, the commenting rate for posts with false information dropped off more quickly than posts that were labeled as true.

The researchers did a second analysis that further showed the importance of fact-checking to how Reddit users reacted.

Reddit is organized into what are called subreddits for different communities. That means that the same news article could be posted in different subreddits—and some of the posts could include the fact check, while others did not.

The study examined engagement with posts that did not include a comment with a fact check—even though a fact check was available.

"Among threads that did not receive a fact check, we found little substantive difference in engagement. Posts with [false information](#) received about as much engagement as posts with true information," Bond said.

"That suggests Reddit users were responding to fact checks and were more engaged with those they knew were labeled as true."

This study can't say why true stories were more popular on Reddit than they were on Twitter, Garrett said. But there are some plausible reasons why that may be. For one, each subreddit has clear rules about what are acceptable posts and moderators who monitor what is posted and can take down posts that violate rules.

"Reddit is a community that has watchdogs, both the moderators and other users. They often look for untrue information and correct it, and the community is responsive to those corrections," Garrett said.

"That's a very encouraging sign and a pretty stark contrast to what was found in the Twitter data. We saw vibrant conversation around true stories on Reddit. And that's great news."

**More information:** Robert M Bond et al, Engagement with fact-checked posts on Reddit, *PNAS Nexus* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad018](https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad018)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: True stories can win out on social media, study finds (2023, February 2) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-true-stories-social-media.html>

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