

Americans share fake news to fit in with social circles, find researchers

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Both conservative and liberal Americans share fake news because they don't want to be ostracized from their social circles, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Conformity and social pressure are key motivators of the spread of [fake news](#)," said lead researcher Matthew Asher Lawson, Ph.D., an assistant professor of decision sciences at INSEAD, a business school in France. "If someone in your online tribe is sharing fake news, then you feel pressure to share it as well, even if you don't know whether it's false or true."

The research was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

The proliferation of fake news contributes to increasing political polarization and distrust of democratic institutions, according to the Brookings Institution. But fake news doesn't always proliferate due to dark motives or a call for action. The researchers began studying the issue after noticing people in their own social networks sharing fake news seemingly without [malicious intent](#) or ideological purpose.

"Political ideology alone doesn't explain people's tendency to share fake news within their [social groups](#)," Lawson said. "There are many factors at play, including the very basic desire to fit in and not to be excluded."

One experiment analyzed the tweets and political ideology of more than 50,000 pairs of Twitter users in the U.S., including tweets sharing fake or hyper-partisan news between August and December 2020. (Political ideology was determined through a network-based algorithm that imputes ideology by looking at the types of accounts Twitter users follow.) The number of tweets between pairs of Twitter users in the same social circles was measured. Twitter users were less likely to interact with each other over time if one of them shared a fake news story and the other did not share that same story. The same effect was found regardless of [political ideology](#) but was stronger for more right-leaning participants.

A second experiment analyzed 10,000 Twitter users who had shared fake

news in the prior test, along with another group that was representative of Twitter users in general. Twitter users who had shared fake news were more likely to exclude other users who didn't share the same content, suggesting that [social pressures](#) may be particularly acute in the fake news ecosystem.

Across several additional online experiments, participants indicated a reduced desire to interact with [social connections](#) who failed to share the same fake news. Participants who were more concerned about the [social costs](#) of not fitting in were also more likely to share fake news. While fake news may seem prolific, prior research has found that fake news only accounts for 0.15% of Americans' daily media consumption, and 1% of individuals are responsible for 80% of fake news sharing. Other research found that election-related misinformation on Twitter decreased by 73% after Donald Trump was banned from the platform.

Many complex factors contribute to people's decisions to share fake news so reducing its spread is difficult, and the role of social media companies isn't always clear, Lawson said.

"Pre-bunking" methods that inform people about the ways that misinformation spreads and highlighting the importance of the accuracy of news can help reduce the spread of fake news. However, finding ways to ease the [social pressure](#) to conform in online spaces may be needed to start winning the war on misinformation, Lawson said.

More information: Tribalism and Tribulations: The Social Costs of Not Sharing Fake News, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0001374](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001374). [www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rele ... s/xge-xge0001374.pdf](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rele...s/xge-xge0001374.pdf)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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