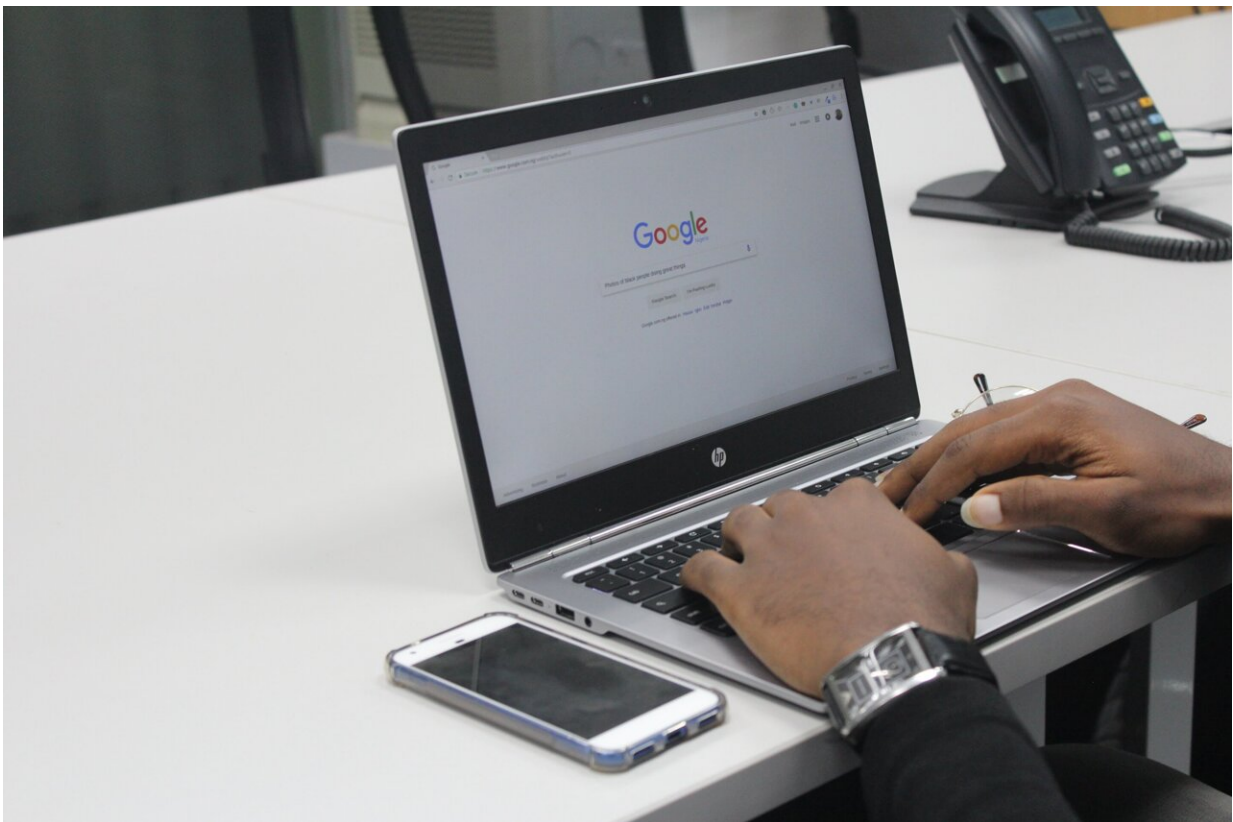


Evaluating truthfulness of fake news through online searches increases chances of believing misinformation: Study

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Conventional wisdom suggests that searching online to evaluate the veracity of misinformation would reduce belief in it. But a new study by

a team of researchers shows the opposite occurs: Searching to evaluate the truthfulness of false news articles actually increases the probability of believing misinformation.

The [findings](#), which appear in the journal *Nature*, offer insights into the impact of [search](#) engines' output on their users—a relatively understudied area.

"Our study shows that the act of searching online to evaluate news increases belief in highly popular misinformation—and by notable amounts," says Zeve Sanderson, founding executive director of New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP) and one of the paper's authors.

The reason for this outcome may be explained by search-engine outputs—in the study, the researchers found that this phenomenon is concentrated among individuals for whom search engines return lower-quality information.

"This points to the danger that 'data voids'—areas of the information ecosystem that are dominated by low quality, or even outright false, news and information—may be playing a consequential role in the online search process, leading to low return of credible information or, more alarming, the appearance of non-credible information at the top of [search results](#)," observes lead author Kevin Aslett, an assistant professor at the University of Central Florida and a faculty research affiliate at CSMaP.

In the newly published *Nature* study, Aslett, Sanderson, and their colleagues studied the impact of using online search engines to evaluate false or misleading views—an approach encouraged by [technology companies](#) and government agencies, among others.

To do so, they recruited participants through both Qualtrics and Amazon's Mechanical Turk—tools frequently used in running behavioral science studies—for a series of five experiments and with the aim of gauging the impact of a common behavior: searching online to evaluate news (SOTEN).

The first four studies tested the following aspects of online search behavior and impact:

- The effect of SOTEN on belief in both false or misleading and true news directly within two days an article's publication (false popular articles included stories on COVID-19 vaccines, the Trump impeachment proceedings, and climate events)
- Whether the effect of SOTEN can change an individual's evaluation after they had already assessed the veracity of a news story
- The effect of SOTEN months after publication
- The effect of SOTEN on recent news about a salient topic with significant news coverage—in the case of this study, news about the COVID-19 pandemic

A fifth study combined a survey with web-tracking data in order to identify the effect of exposure to both low- and high-quality search-engine results on belief in misinformation. By collecting search results using a custom web browser plug-in, the researchers could identify how the quality of these search results may affect users' belief in the misinformation being evaluated.

The study's source credibility ratings were determined by [NewsGuard](#), a browser extension that rates news and other information sites in order to guide users in assessing the trustworthiness of the content they come across online.

Across the five studies, the authors found that the act of searching online to evaluate news led to a statistically significant increase in belief in misinformation. This occurred whether it was shortly after the publication of misinformation or months later.

This finding suggests that the passage of time—and ostensibly opportunities for fact checks to enter the information ecosystem—does not lessen the impact of SOTEN on increasing the likelihood of believing false [news](#) stories to be true. Moreover, the fifth study showed that this phenomenon is concentrated among individuals for whom search engines return lower-quality information.

"The findings highlight the need for media literacy programs to ground recommendations in empirically tested interventions and search engines to invest in solutions to the challenges identified by this research," concludes Joshua A. Tucker, professor of politics and co-director of CSMaP, another of the paper's authors.

The paper's other authors included William Godel and Jonathan Nagler of NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics, and Nathaniel Persily of Stanford Law School.

More information: Kevin Aslett, Online searches to evaluate misinformation can increase its perceived veracity, *Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-023-06883-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06883-y).
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