

Interventions against misinformation also increase skepticism toward reliable sources, finds study

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Efforts to tackle false information through fact-checking or media literacy initiatives increase the public's skepticism toward "fake news."

However, they also breed distrust in genuine, fact-based news sources, shows a University of Zurich-led study using online survey experiments in the US, Poland and Hong Kong.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*.

Studies have shown that few people actually come across false information in their day-to-day lives. And yet, concerns about the harm "fake news" may do have increased in recent years. High-profile events such as the Capitol Riots, vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have fueled these concerns.

At the same time, [fact-checking](#) initiatives are on the rise. Major news platforms like BBC and CNN have incorporated fact-checking into their regular offerings, while media literacy campaigns have flourished, with programs designed to educate the public on how to make sense of what is true and false.

A study conducted by the Universities of Zurich, California and Warsaw now shows that these efforts have given rise to an unintended paradox: The very tools used to combat misinformation are fomenting distrust in all news, including from reliable sources.

Interventions foster a broader sense of doubt

The researchers conducted three online survey experiments involving 6,127 participants in the US, Poland and Hong Kong to test the effectiveness of three corrective strategies currently used to combat misinformation—fact-checking, media literacy initiatives and dedicated news reporting—and compared them with three alternative strategies.

The idea of the redesigned strategies was to foster a critical—yet not overly skeptical—engagement with information. For instance, rather

than focusing on whether news is either true or false, one of the redesigned strategies emphasized understanding political biases in news reporting.

The study revealed that the traditional tools as well as the alternative strategies used to debunk myths foster a broader sense of doubt among the public, even toward legitimate information. The redesigned strategies did not significantly outperform traditional tactics in improving the public's ability to distinguish fact from fiction, although they were slightly better at doing so.

Weighing up potential gains and harms

"Public discourse on [fake news](#) not only increases skepticism toward [false information](#) but also erodes trust in reliable news sources, which play a key role in functioning democracies," says first author Emma Hoes. According to the UZH [political scientist](#), the potential gains from reducing misperceptions must be carefully weighed against the broader implications of heightened skepticism.

"This is particularly the case in many Western democracies, where reliable, fact-based news is fortunately still much more common than misinformation," she says.

Hoes and her fellow researchers therefore call for a deeper overhaul of current approaches to misinformation and the need to develop nuanced strategies: "The path forward is to educate the public on discerning facts with a critical eye, but without leading them to dismiss otherwise reliable information and sources outright."

More information: Emma Hoes et al, Prominent misinformation

interventions reduce misperceptions but increase scepticism, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-024-01884-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-01884-x)

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