



Commentary

Leveraging Institutions, Educators, and Networks to Correct Misinformation: A Commentary on Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook



Emily K. Vraga^{a,*}, Leticia Bode^b

^a George Mason University, United States

^b Georgetown University, United States

In the article “Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the Post-Truth Era,” [Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook \(2017\)](#) explore whether the nature of misinformation has changed alongside shifts in the media and political environment. With growing concern over a “post-truth” world rife with “fake news,” we agree that more needs to be done to develop novel techniques to define, measure, target, and correct misinformation when it occurs.

While [Lewandowsky et al. \(2017\)](#) provide an important first step to consider this question and potential solutions to misinformation, we address four points in this response. First, we examine how much trust in core institutions has declined and whether such institutions can serve as sources of corrective information. Second, we consider the evidence for and against ideological differences in susceptibility to misinformation. We follow this analysis by elaborating on two of the proposed solutions offered by [Lewandowsky et al. \(2017\)](#) to address misinformation at a societal level. We discuss whether media literacy and civic education can serve as a potential solution to a fake-news crisis, and we explore potential pitfalls of this approach. Finally, we expand on their main suggestion that technocognition approaches are best situated to solve this issue.

Institutional Mistrust

A core question [Lewandowsky et al. \(2017\)](#) raise is whether the public still cares about facts, or whether instead a universal reliance on facts has been replaced by in-group loyalties and skepticism of establishments that formerly were the main sources of factual information—especially the mainstream media and the government. While trust in many of these

organizations has been dwindling over the past decades, particularly in the United States ([Pew, 2015a, 2015b, 2017](#); [Swift, 2016](#)), we are uncertain whether this drop is as dire as suggested. For example, while trust in the press overall is at an all-time low ([Swift, 2016](#)), people still trust their local news organizations and the broadcast news environment in general ([Pew, 2016](#)), as well as the news that they watch ([Rasmussen, 2017](#)). Likewise, while conservatives’ trust in the scientific community has declined ([Gauchat, 2012](#)), trust in scientists overall and in many governmental agencies such as the CDC remains relatively high ([Pew, 2015a, 2015b, 2017](#)). And while trust in government has declined, trust in individual members of Congress is consistently higher ([Mendes, 2013](#)). For these reasons, we think the story regarding institutional mistrust is more nuanced than the simple takeaway that trust has decreased. Moreover, leveraging areas where trust endures within these institutions may create strategies for combatting misinformation ([Vraga & Bode, 2017b](#)).

Party Differences?

In investigating the causes of a post-truth world, [Lewandowsky et al. \(2017\)](#) point to several trends: declining social capital, a changing media environment, rising inequality, and increasing political polarization. Related to these trends, they also suggest there may be “political asymmetry” in susceptibility to misinformation, with conservatives more vulnerable to “bullshit” and misinformation about false health hazards (see also [Fessler, Pisor, & Holbrook, 2017](#); [Pfattheicher & Schindler \(2016\)](#); [Sterling, Jost, & Pennycook, 2016](#)).

Author Note

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily K. Vraga, Department of Communication, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., MS 3D6, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States. Contact: evraga@gmu.edu

A robust literature documents differences between liberals and conservatives in terms of their worldview, their personality, and their media habits (Jost, 2017). However, evidence about differing preferences for selective exposure to congruent information is mixed. Some scholars have suggested that conservatives—and especially activist Republicans—are more likely to cluster in echo chambers on Twitter (Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2016; Barbera, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014), on Facebook (Vraga, 2016), in interpersonal discussion (Mutz, 2006), and in news consumption (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Others argue that it is liberals who demonstrate more partisan filtering on Facebook (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Bode, 2016b) and overall on Twitter (Colleoni et al., 2014). However, even if conservatives are more prone to avoid incongruent information or have stronger responses to dissonance-producing situations (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Nam, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2013; Vraga, 2015), this does not necessarily suggest they are more willing to accept misinformation than their more liberal counterparts.

Nisbet, Cooper, and Garrett (2015) explicitly compared two explanations for differing responses between liberals and conservatives to dissonant science messages. They found strong support for what they term the *contextual thesis*—that both liberals and conservatives responded similarly to messages disputing a favored scientific position—rather than the *intrinsic thesis* that conservatives were uniquely poised to reject scientific evidence. Similarly, Garrett, Weeks, and Neo (2016) found that use of ideological media during the 2012 U.S. presidential election promoted political misperceptions, and that effects were stronger for liberal-favored misperceptions than conservative-favored misperceptions, although this could result from differences in familiarity with the misperceptions. In summarizing evidence on motivated reasoning for scientific beliefs, Kraft et al. argue that emotional attachment to our beliefs and identities drives how we process new stimuli, or the *hot cognition* hypothesis (Kraft, Lodge, & Taber, 2015). As a result, they suggest that “it will be especially difficult to overcome ideological biases in scientific beliefs among the public as long as political elites align the debates among partisan lines rather than emphasizing the necessity of a common understanding of the underlying issues” (p. 131). Along those lines, if the political context were to change, we might expect the distribution of misperceptions across the political spectrum to change as well.

Perceived political asymmetries may also stem from the fact that much of the research has focused on misperceptions held disproportionately by conservatives. For example, research has investigated misperceptions about the presence of WMDs in Iraq (Garrett et al., 2016; Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis, 2003; Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Oberauer, & Morales, 2005; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), the Affordable Care Act (Nyhan, 2010; Meirick, 2013; Pasek, Sood, & Krosnick, 2015), and human-caused climate change (Cook, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017; Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). While these are important misperceptions, they represent a subset of potential misperceptions. We therefore cannot be sure whether conservatives are more likely to believe misinformation or are just more likely to believe the types of misinformation academics

have focused on most. A similar bias has been noted in studies of political consumption, which often had a liberal tilt in its early days (Shah, McLeod, Friedland, & Nelson, 2007).

For these issues, conservatives are likely to hold misperceptions in large part due to the consensus among Republican elites promoting misinformation. When political elites agree on a controversial issue, members of the party tend to adopt similar positions (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Entman, 2004; Zaller, 1992), even when there is limited evidence for their claims (e.g., Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Moreover, this elite consensus is reinforced through conservative media channels (Dunlap et al., 2016; Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Leiserowitz, 2012; Meirick, 2013; Watts et al., 1999). More research should consider the pressures that constrain elites to adopt positions that do not align with existing evidence. If elite consensus on these topics fractures, it is likely to enable group members to update their attitudes.

Media Literacy as a Solution

One potential solution offered by Lewandowsky et al. (2017) involves training the public in information literacy, so they can recognize how misinformation campaigns work (e.g., Cook et al., 2017; van der Linden, Leiserowitz, Rosenthal, & Maibach, 2017) and distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy information (e.g., Walton & Hepworth, 2011). These skills fit nicely with existing media literacy goals, which we outline below.

Scholars have traditionally distinguished between *media literacy* broadly and *news media literacy* more specifically. A commonly cited definition of media literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Potter, 2013, p. 429), whereas news media literacy (NML) emphasizes the knowledge, skills, and beliefs needed to understand how news content is produced, how people make consumption choices, and how to evaluate the quality and veracity of news content (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2017; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Mihailidis, 2011; Potter, 2013). NML beliefs, skills, and activities have been linked to democratic outcomes including political participation, exposure to and value for political disagreement, and political trust (Ashley et al., 2017; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Tully & Vraga, 2017a).

Recently, Kahne and Bowyer (2017) explicitly connected NML knowledge with receptiveness to political misinformation. They concluded that as classroom discussions about media literacy increased, young adults were more likely to be skeptical of misinformation, even when that information supported their ideological viewpoints. Likewise, recent studies about the effectiveness of inoculation campaigns to enhance resistance to misinformation (Cook et al., 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017) may be considered a form of media literacy training. For example, the inoculation training employed by Cook et al. (2017) informed people about the misleading effects of falsely balanced media coverage of climate change. This focus on media strategies and effects aligns nicely with existing definitions of media literacy (e.g., Potter, 2013), suggesting that media literacy

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