

Why we're susceptible to fake news, how to defend against it

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Thought processes and belief systems that people develop early in life to help protect against the anxiety and stress of an uncertain world may help explain why some individuals fall victim to what has come to be known as fake news, but psychologists can offer some strategies to defend against it, according to a series of presentations at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

"At its core is the need for the brain to receive confirming information that harmonizes with an individual's existing views and beliefs," said Mark Whitmore, Ph.D., assistant professor of management and information systems at Kent State University's College of Business Administration. "In fact, one could say the brain is hardwired to accept, reject, misremember or distort information based on whether it is viewed as accepting of or threatening to existing beliefs."

The key to people's accepting fake news as true, despite evidence to the contrary, is a phenomenon known as confirmation bias, or the tendency for people to seek and accept information that confirms their existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring that which contradicts those beliefs, he said.

Many of these beliefs and biases are formed early in life when children begin to distinguish between fantasy and reality, according to Eve Whitmore, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist with Western Reserve Psychological Associates in Stow, Ohio, who also presented at the session. Some of these beliefs can be based in fantasy, and that can lead

to what she calls nonsensical thinking.

"From the beginning, parents reinforce to their children the skill of pretending in order to cope with the realities inherent in culture and society," she said. "Children's learning about make-believe and mastery of it becomes the basis for more complex forms of self-deception and illusion into adulthood."

Parents commonly encourage young children to engage in pretend play. Through this pretend play, children often practice little life scenarios, like playing house, that help to reinforce cultural norms and beliefs and aid in assimilation as they age. The flip side is that children also learn that sometimes it's OK to make believe things are true, even though they know they are not, according to Eve Whitmore.

In adolescence, people develop critical thinking skills and some begin to question what they were taught as children, perhaps religious beliefs or even the belief that authority figures such as parents or government leaders are always right. But going against one's parents' beliefs can cause friction within the family, and, despite evidence to the contrary, some are willing to rationalize those false beliefs in order to avoid upsetting their parents, she said.

It may begin as a conscious decision, but as rationalization piles on top of rationalization over the years, these processes can become unconscious. As people reach adulthood, many of these false beliefs and biases formed as children, instead of being given a good critical examination, are simply accepted and continue to influence how a person perceives his or her world, according to Mark Whitmore.

"In this way, childhood beliefs persevere throughout a person's life and serve as a framework for processing information in adulthood," he said. "In attempting to confirm preconceived ideas, a person may resort to

both fiction and reality in order to preserve these beliefs."

The rise of the internet and social media has only compounded the problem of fake news, according to Mark Whitmore, upending the traditional news model where an individual receives information from a small number of outlets.

"In today's media environment, the channels are multiple, and the messages are often simultaneous and contradictory," he said. "The receiver is often faced with paradoxical and seemingly absurd messages. It becomes easier to cling to a simple fiction than a complicated reality."

Psychology offers a few evidence-based strategies for defending against the pull of [fake news](#), according to Mark Whitmore. One key to avoiding the pull of confirmation bias is reducing the anxiety that makes it so appealing.

"One positive defense strategy is humor. Watching late night comedy or political satire, while not actually altering or changing the source of the stressor, can help reduce the stress and anxiety associated with it," he said. "Another is sublimation, where you channel your negative feelings into something positive, such as running for office, marching in a protest or volunteering for a social cause."

He also recommends that people cultivate an open mind by deliberately exposing themselves to different points of view. This can help them moderate their viewpoints and make them less extreme, he said.

Critical thinking is also key. People must learn to question what they are told and this should begin in childhood, said Mark Whitmore.

"Developing a greater degree of skepticism in [children](#), by encouraging them to ask why and to question, diminishes confirmation bias," he said.

"All of these strategies have substantial research supporting their beneficial effects."

Session 2021: "Sense-Making and Defensive Strategies of Receivers," and "Where It All Begins," Symposium, Friday, Aug. 10, 8 a.m. PDT, Room 206, Level Two—South Building, Moscone Center, 747 Howard St., San Francisco, Calif.

Presentations are available from the APA Public Affairs Office.

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