Stemming the spread of misinformation on social media

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The bad news, not that anyone needs more of it: The dangers of COVID-19 could worsen if misinformation on social media continues to spread unchecked. Essentially, what people choose to share on social

media about the pandemic could become a life-or death decision.

The good news? Though there is no practical way to fully stem the tide of harmful misinformation on social media, certain tactics could help improve the quality of information that people share online about this deadly disease.

New research reported in the journal *Psychological Science* finds that priming people to think about accuracy could make them more discerning in what they subsequently share on social media. In two studies that included more than 1,700 participants, researchers found that when people are asked directly about accuracy, they become more adept at recognizing truth from falsehoods than they otherwise would be.

"People often assume that misinformation and fake news is shared online because people are incapable of distinguishing between what is true and what is false," said Gordon Pennycook, with the University of Regina, Canada, and lead author on the paper. "Our research reveals that is not necessarily the case. Instead, we find that people tend to share false information about COVID-19 on social media because they simply fail to think about accuracy when making decisions about what to share with others."

This inattention to accuracy, he notes, is often compounded by what the researchers consider "lazy" thinking, at least as it pertains to considering the truth of news content on social media.

For their research, Pennycook and his team acquired a list of 15 false and 15 true headlines related to COVID-19. The veracity of the headlines was determined by using various fact-checking sites like snopes.com, health information from mayoclinic.com, and credible news sites like livescience.com. The headlines were presented to the participants in the form of Facebook posts. The participants were then

asked if they thought the posts were accurate or if they would consider sharing them.

In the first of the two studies, Pennycook and his colleagues found that people often fail to consider accuracy when deciding what to share on social media, and they are more likely to believe and share falsehoods if they rely more on intuition or have less scientific knowledge than others.

In the second study, the researchers found that simply asking participants to rate the accuracy of one non-COVID-related headline at the beginning of the study-subtly nudging them to think about the concept of accuracy later in the study-more than doubled how discerning they were in sharing information.

These results, which are in line with previous studies on political fake news, suggest that a subtle mental nudge that primes the brain to consider the accuracy of information in general improves people's choices about what to share on social media.

"We need to change the way that we interact with social media," said Pennycook. "Individuals need to remember to stop and think about whether something is true before they share it with others, and social media companies should investigate potential ways to help facilitate this, possibly by providing subtle accuracy nudges on their platform."

More information: Gordon Pennycook et al, Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media: Experimental Evidence for a Scalable Accuracy-Nudge Intervention, *Psychological Science* (2020). DOI: 10.1177/0956797620939054

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