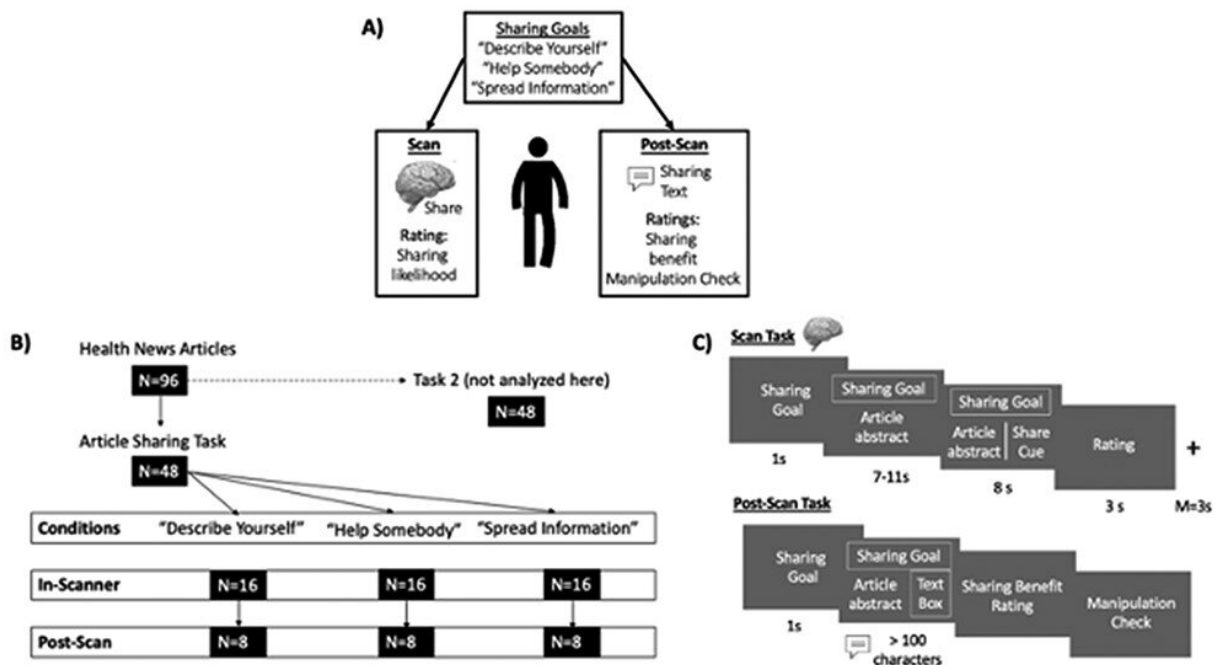


# What makes news get shared widely? The answer is in your head

May 23 2023, by Hailey Reissman



(A) The data overview. (B) Random assignment of N articles to condition for each participant in the scan and post-scan tasks. Arrows represent random sub-selection of articles from the preceding sample. (C) Scan- and post-scan task schemata and timing. The post-scan task was self-paced and required participants to write sharing texts (minimum 100 characters). Credit: *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* (2023). DOI: 10.1093/scan/nsad013

Why do some social media posts get shared widely, while others go

unnoticed?

Research from the Communication Neuroscience Lab at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania has shown that social media users are likely to [share](#) posts that contain information that they feel is relevant to themselves or to the people they know.

In other words, people share posts that they believe to have value—either to themselves or to their relationships with others.

A new study from the lab has found that merely encouraging people to consider the value led to increased activity in the areas of the brain associated with sharing decisions and increased a person's motivation to share an article.

"A lot of prior research on what makes posts go viral has focused on identifying the characteristics of messages that are shared often or not shared often," says lead author Christin Scholz, Assistant Professor in Persuasive Communication at the University of Amsterdam and Annenberg graduate. "We're looking at the neural mechanisms of sharing decisions. Targeting those mechanisms could be a way to encourage the spread of high quality health information."

During the study, led by senior author Emily Falk, Professor of Communication, Psychology, and Marketing and Director of the Communication Neuroscience Lab, participants were instructed to consider sharing articles about healthy living from The New York Times while their [brain activity](#) was measured by [functional magnetic resonance](#) imaging (fMRI).

Inside the fMRI scanner, participants were asked to think about sharing an article with a specific goal in mind: to either "help somebody" (use the article to relate positively to others) or to "describe yourself" (use the

article to present yourself positively to others). As a control, participants were assigned the neutral "to spread information" goal.

"In all areas of life, people want to present themselves in a positive light or to relate positively to others," Scholz says. "Our method encourages people to identify ways in which they can fulfill these motives through the sharing of health articles. If they are successful, they should be more likely to decide to share the article."

After reading the headline and summary of a health-related article, participants were asked to consider what they might say or write to another study participant if they were to share the article with them, keeping in mind their assigned goal. Finally, participants rated their likelihood to share the article in real life.

Thinking about sharing in terms of how it might help someone else not only increased activation in [brain regions](#) associated with self-related thinking, value-related thinking, and social-related thinking (particularly mentalizing—the act of imagining what others are thinking), but also increased a person's self-reported willingness to share an article.

"I think we're only scratching the surface in terms of how you could encourage people to share high quality health information," Scholz says. "A health communicator might want to focus on being accurate and clear and not have to worry about whether their content is emotional to get clicks. We're trying to find ways to focus on the would-be sharer, to help them find personal meaning in sharing content that can benefit others and society."

The study, "Invoking self-related and social thoughts impacts online information sharing" was authored by Christin Scholz, Elisa C. Baek C'19 (University of Southern California), and Emily B. Falk and published in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*.

**More information:** Christin Scholz et al, Invoking self-related and social thoughts impacts online information sharing, *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/scan/nsad013](https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsad013)

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