Science & Technology

Are We Really All Suckers for Fake News?

A new study sheds light on the need for greater media literacy.

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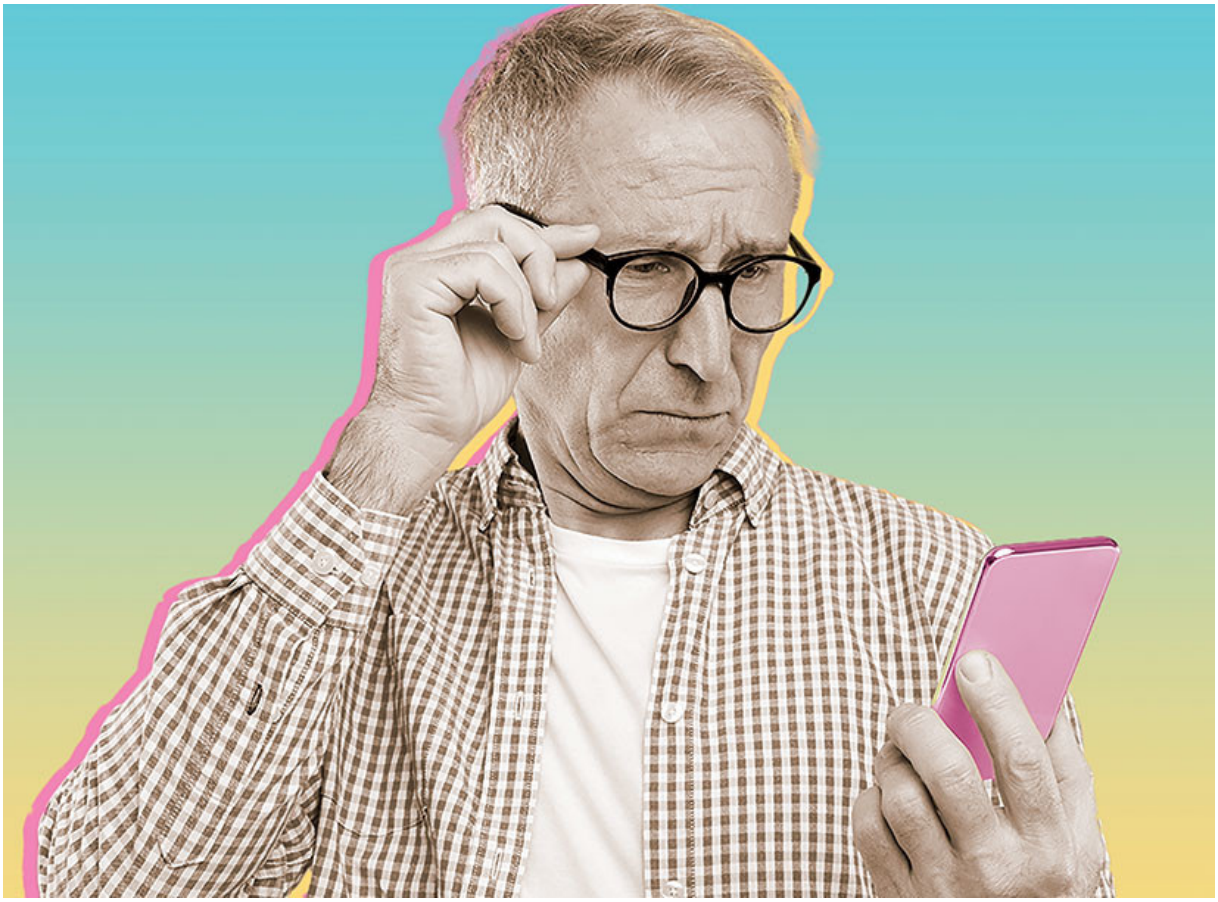


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The spread of fake news online has been called one of the greatest threats to democracy, with fabricated stories regularly racking up hundreds of thousands of

views on social media. Some say that the onslaught of misinformation is fueling political polarization and dysfunction, since these materials are often designed to inflame partisan passions.

But new research by economists Andrea Prat of Columbia and Charles Angelucci of MIT shows that the vast majority of Americans can reliably discern real news stories from fake ones and that a bigger threat to democracy may be lack of access to reliable news sources. In a series of laboratory experiments involving nearly fifteen thousand participants, Prat and Angelucci found that only a small percentage of adults are routinely fooled into believing that fabricated articles are true. Moreover, they discovered that Republicans and Democrats are only slightly more likely to believe fake news articles that smear the other side — a finding that the authors say belies the notion, widely held among pundits, that Americans no longer share a common view of the facts.

“The debate on political news has centered around ‘the death of truth’ and the existence of ‘parallel narratives,’ sometimes leading to urgent calls for drastic reforms,” such as new limitations on online speech, the authors write in *American Economic Review*. “Our work casts doubt on this narrative.”

But the researchers do conclude that a person’s ability to spot fake news is significantly influenced by their demographic characteristics. For example, they find that older, college-educated, and high-earning Americans are up to 18 percent more likely to detect fake news stories than younger, less-educated, and poorer individuals.

And this finding, Prat says, indicates that new efforts to improve media literacy and political engagement across all segments of the US population are necessary. “The key message is that there is brutal information inequality in US society,” he says. “Some people are informed; others are not. And this doesn’t correspond to the country’s ideological divide. Rather, it runs along socioeconomic lines.” Prat says that subsidizing access to serious journalism, such as by providing people vouchers, could help. “As a society, we’re devoting enormous resources to fighting misinformation and fake news. We should also be devoting resources to making sure that everybody gets access to real news.”

This article appears in the Fall 2024 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*How susceptible are Americans to fake news?*"

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