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People-powered correction

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Reviewing the misinformation problem and how to solve it

Although misinformation is not new (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Porter & Wood 2019), its visibility as a problem and general concern about its prevalence have both increased in recent years (Mitchell et al. 2019). The rise of social media partially explains this renewed emphasis on the problem that misinformation presents.

We define misinformation as information ‘considered incorrect based on the best available evidence from relevant experts at the time’ (Vraga & Bode 2020, 138). Notably, this includes both misinformation (incorrect information created or shared as truth) and disinformation (incorrect information created or shared nefariously) as our definition focuses on the information itself rather than the intent of the person creating or sharing the misinformation.

Moreover, misinformation (the information itself) is distinct from the misperceptions (or individual beliefs on the topic) that it can spur (Nyhan & Reifler 2010) – and these misperceptions can lead to problematic behaviors based on mistaken beliefs about what is safe, appropriate, or normative. There are numerous examples of the deleterious effects of misperceptions: for example, belief in conspiracy theories can reduce intentions to vaccinate (Jolley & Douglas 2014; Schmid & Betsch 2019), mistaken beliefs that indoor tanning or e-cigarettes are safe promotes intentions to engage in these behaviors (Tan et al. 2015), and hearing false candidate rumours can shift preferences and voting intentions (Weeks & Garrett 2014; Thorson 2016).

Although misinformation is not unique to social media, social media is often blamed for promoting its spread. One noteworthy study found that ‘falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information’ (Vosoughi et al. 2018, 1147). Many have pointed to the qualities of social media that could explain why misinformation is so powerful online: the lack of established gatekeepers, less prominent signals for high-quality information, monetary incentives to promote viral spread, and malicious actors, to name a few (Broniatowski et al. 2018; Southwell et al. 2019). These features play on individuals’ blind spots, including motivated reasoning, a preference for novel and emotional content, and growing distrust of elite institutions or groups (Edelman 2020; Lewandowsky et al. 2017; Vosoughi et al. 2018).

To combat this problem, a variety of solutions have been proposed. A non-exhaustive list of these includes bolstering public education and news literacy efforts (Lewandowsky et al. 2017),
encouraging users to think about information’s accuracy (Fazio 2020; Pennycook et al. 2019), promoting reliable and credible information (Chadwick 2020), decreasing the ability to spread information in general (whether it’s true or false; see Porter 2020), and government regulation of misinformation or of the platforms used to spread it (Kim 2020). While each of these solutions holds promise, each has limitations that prevent it from being a silver bullet.

For example, many have proposed that public education can play a significant role in mitigating the problem with sustained media literacy campaigns. Familiarity with and knowledge of media literacy has shown some positive effects, helping people identify misinformation, resist conspiracy theories, and express scepticism of online information (Amazeen & Bucy 2019; Craft et al. 2017; Kahne & Bowyer 2017; Vraga & Tully 2019). Indeed, Finland’s K–12 emphasis on media literacy, in which students are consistently encouraged to read information critically across all aspects of their curriculum, is often touted as a prominent success story (Henley 2020). It is worth noting, however, that Finland may be the exception to the rule. In addition to investing significantly in these efforts, Finland is a highly literate and homogenous society (Mackintosh 2019) and top in the world in media trust (Newman et al. 2019). Similar efforts in other contexts may, therefore, be less successful. Moreover, because most media literacy efforts occur in the classroom, they fail to reach most of the population, especially older adults who may be most at risk of seeing and sharing misinformation (Guess et al. 2019). Media literacy campaigns can take place outside an educational environment, but attempts to design media literacy messages to appear on social media platforms have had only mixed success in helping people recognise misinformation (Tully et al. 2020a) or promoting reception of expert corrections (Vraga, Bode, et al. 2020) and may potentially spill over to harm evaluations of credible news (Clayton et al. 2019).

Closely related to media literacy interventions are attempts to inoculate people to misinformation. Theoretically, explaining the logical flaws in misinformation may help people recognise those same techniques in other spaces. There is some empirical evidence that logical corrections of misinformation are effective both before people see misinformation and in response to misinformation (Cook et al. 2017; Schmid & Betsch 2019; Vraga, Kim, et al. 2020). Promisingly, a game that teaches people misinformation techniques has shown promise in creating resistance to misinformation online without harming credible information (Roozenbeek et al. 2020). However, more work is needed to consider how to make these interventions scalable, as well as to consider their longevity.

At the other end of the spectrum, many people point to social media (rather than individuals or societal structures) as being responsible for addressing misinformation. Suggestions in this category include platforms detecting misinformation and then taking action to mitigate it – either by removing it from the platform entirely, de-amplifying it so fewer people see it, or providing educational efforts to platform users to lessen the effects of misinformation (Pennycook & Rand 2019). Platforms have begun taking concrete steps to address misinformation in their spaces, especially on health issues like vaccination, where there is clear scientific consensus and the potential for public harm. Pinterest announced that they would populate searches for vaccine information with links to highly credible health organisations (Ozoma 2019), while Facebook announced that it would reduce the ranking of groups that share vaccine misinformation, reject advertisements that contain vaccine misinformation, and connect people searching for vaccine information to ‘authoritative information’ (Facebook 2019), although others have questioned the success of these efforts for advertisements (Haskins 2020). However, it is effectively impossible for social media platforms to identify every piece of false content, and it risks ethical overreach for them to decide how to address such content (Bode 2020).
Observational correction

Partly as a consequence of the limitations of these strategies to correct misinformation, we propose one more: that of observational correction. Observational correction occurs whenever people update their own attitudes after seeing someone else being corrected on social media (Vraga & Bode 2017).

There are several key features of this definition that set it apart from other types of correction and may make it more successful than traditional formats for correction. First, it focuses on the community seeing an interaction on social media in which both misinformation and correction are offered, rather than considering the individuals (or organisations) sharing misinformation. Second, the community observes the correction simultaneously with or immediately after the misinformation (we therefore cannot speak to whether observational correction can occur when someone was exposed to the misinformation absent correction initially and only later sees a corrective response).

Most importantly, observational correction is not limited to one particular source. Our previous research outlines three potential ways in which observational correction can occur. First, corrections can come from algorithms driven by the platforms themselves – most notably, through Facebook’s related stories algorithm (e.g. Bode & Vraga 2015, 2018; Smith & Seitz 2019). Newer examples of platforms responses – like showing messages to people who liked, reacted to, or commented on COVID-19 misinformation on Facebook (Rosen 2020) or adding fact-checks to manipulated information on Twitter (Roth & Achuthan 2020) – would fall under this domain of algorithmic correction. Future research should explore which of these mechanisms are most successful in responding to misinformation on the platform, but theoretically, these approaches may have merit when applied correctly.

Second, corrections can come directly from expert organisations. Our research shows that corrective responses by expert organisations reduce misperceptions, and engaging in these types of corrections do not hurt, and may in fact help, organisational credibility (Bode et al. n.d.; Vraga & Bode 2017; Vraga, Bode, et al. 2020). More research, however, is needed to understand the boundaries of who is considered an expert on a topic. For example, does simply including the title ‘professor’ in a social media handle imbue that user with sufficient credibility to function as an expert when offering a correction (e.g. Vraga, Kim, et al. 2020)? What level of existing organisational prominence or trust can be leveraged when offering corrections? And to what extent does a perception of expertise depend on the individual characteristics of the person viewing the correction?

Third, corrections can come from other social media users. This is where the true populist power of social media comes into play. Although user correction does reduce misperceptions, multiple corrections are sometimes necessary to have an impact, and corrections should provide links to expert information (for example, from the Centers for Disease Control, the American Medical Association, or a fact-check) on the topic to be effective (Vraga & Bode 2017, 2018). In other words, to mitigate misinformation, social media users should indicate the information is false, even if someone else has already done so, backing up their arguments with links to an expert organisation.

One might think the tone of the correction would affect its persuasiveness. However, the tone of user corrections does not appear to affect their effectiveness – at least on those observing the correction, rather than those being corrected (Bode et al. 2020). When users are uncivil in their responses, they are equally effective as when they are civil; likewise, expressing empathy and affirmation for why a user may be confused or sharing misinformation does not increase or limit the efficacy of such a response for the social media audience. Given that incivility can have
Numerous other deleterious effects on democratic society (Mutz 2006), a civil or understanding tone is still likely the best approach when offering corrective responses.

So why does observational correction work when other corrective responses often fail? One explanation relates to the distance between the person updating their attitudes and the correction. Observational correction is about people who see an interaction, rather than those who take part in it directly. People merely observing a correction may not be as determined to engage in motivated reasoning to protect their identity and are therefore more flexible in updating their beliefs (although there is at least some evidence to the contrary; see Bode & Vraga 2015).

Second, people are particularly sceptical of information shared on social media and thus may be more receptive to corrections that leverage expert sources. Indeed, 89 percent of Americans say they at least ‘sometimes’ come across made-up news and information (with 38 percent saying ‘often’), and these numbers are higher among those who prefer social media for news (Mitchell et al. 2019). This scepticism may increase reliance on expertise, either from user corrections that highlight expert sources or from experts themselves. When facing information overload – as is common on social media – heuristic processing and relying on source cues regarding credibility may become even more important in shaping processing (Metzger et al. 2010; Tandoc 2019).

Moreover, the fact that these corrections occur on social media – where exposure to news and information is often incidental to social purposes motivating online exposure (Bode 2016) – may also facilitate correction.

Third, the immediacy of the correction likely contributes to the success of observational correction on social media. In tests of observational correction, exposure to the misinformation occurs simultaneously with or immediately after exposure to the corrective information. Therefore, the misinformation is not able to linger and impact attitudes, reducing motivated reasoning in the face of corrective information and belief echoes of the misinformation (Thorson, 2016). Future research could use eye tracking to determine attention patterns – for example, whether people first look at the misinformation or the correction, their relative attention to the misinformation versus the correction, or how often they shift their attention between the misinformation and correction posts. The size, position, and memorable content attached to each are also likely to play a role.

Fourth, although this is outside the realm of what we have tested directly, correction imposes an indirect cost for sharing misinformation. Through observational correction, people see this cost – it may be embarrassing or harmful to one’s reputation to share information that is then called out as false. If people believe sharing misinformation will have negative consequences such as these, it should theoretically produce disincentives for sharing misinformation in the first place. Because even small nudges to encourage people to think twice about sharing false information can have important impacts (Fazio 2020; Pennycook et al. 2019), this is a useful potential consequence of observational correction.

How is observational correction populist?

Therefore, there are several reasons why observational correction might work. But the biggest potential benefit of observational correction is that it presents not only a scalable way to address misinformation on social media but also one that is populist in its reliance on ordinary users. Observational correction does not rely on elite external actors – experts, platforms, fact-checking journalists, or others – but can occur from people in the communities being impacted by misinformation themselves. This means that social media users – everyday people – can play a major role in shaping the information environment of which they are a part. While this
arguably has value in and of itself, it may also result in greater receptivity to user corrections than other actions designed to address misinformation.

Identifying and removing inaccurate content from social media is also virtually impossible at scale, given the massive quantity of information that passes through such platforms on a daily basis. Even successfully identifying a very high percentage of misinformation would still result in many thousands of pieces of inaccurate content persisting on social media (Bode 2020). While the scale is not ‘fixed’ with observational correction, it can be more effectively addressed, at least hypothetically. Given that one in three people around the world use social media (Ortiz-Ospina 2019), a virtual army of correctors exists to launch into action upon seeing misinformation posted.

Of course, user correction is only populist – and effective and scalable – if a wide range of people on social media platforms participate. Notably, observational correction is not as uncommon as people may assume. A recent study we conducted found that 23 percent of Americans report having corrected someone else on social media in the past week with regards to COVID-19, and 34 percent report having seen these corrections occur (Bode & Vraga 2020), which aligns with earlier work suggesting that 32 percent of Americans reported publicly flagging or reporting made-up news (Mitchell et al. 2019). Importantly, both those engaging in correction and those observing the correction are from a wide variety of backgrounds – including those from both sides of the partisan aisle. This is important: correction is not siloed within specific groups of people but can be found across broad swaths of the public. Moreover, corrections coming from others ‘like us’ are more likely to be trusted (Margolin et al. 2018; Tandoc 2019), meaning that anyone can experience correction, and such corrections are likely to be effective.

Likewise, our study found people generally endorsed correction as a valuable practice on social media. Not only do 68 percent of people agree that people should respond when they see someone sharing misinformation, 56 percent of people say they personally like seeing such corrections. While majorities of the public may believe that the news media hold primary responsibility for reducing made-up news and information broadly (Mitchell et al. 2019), this does not negate public support for a community solution to the problem on social media. Nascent social norms promoting user correction on social media may be emerging, which could make it even more populist in nature. If the public increasingly believes such corrections are appropriate or valued, and perceives that other people are engaging in correction, it lays the groundwork for injunctive and descriptive norms that may powerfully affect behaviors (Ajzen 1985, 2011; Cialdini et al. 2006), allowing more people to feel comfortable correcting others on social media.

Areas for future exploration

While existing research provides the groundwork for a populist solution to misinformation on social media, much work remains to be done in the space. First, more research is needed to examine the sources of misinformation and correction and how their credibility, proximity, relevance, and expertise affect how people perceive the information they share. User corrections, for example, may be more effective when they come from people we know personally or have close ties with (e.g. Margolin et al. 2018) or may be more effective from users with credibility or expertise cues in their name or post (for example, someone who claims they are a doctor, a scientist, or a professor) (Vraga, Kim, et al. 2020).

Likewise, user corrections may be more effective for some groups of people than for others. Given rising levels of scepticism towards elite institutions, news organisations, politicians, and
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scientists (Edelman 2020), user corrections from ordinary people may reach audiences who are sceptical of authority. Some evidence for this claim comes from research suggesting that user corrections were seen as equally credible to algorithmic corrections on Facebook among those higher in conspiracy ideation (Bode & Vraga 2018). Given the extensive research highlighting the importance of source cues in credibility and persuasion (Metzger et al. 2010; Petty & Cacioppo 1986), more research is needed into how myriad sources intersect (i.e. the source of the misinformation, the source of the correction, any additional links within the posts) when people see misinformation and correction online.

Second, more research is needed to understand who is most likely to engage in observational correction. As noted earlier, more people tend to ignore misinformation on social media than to respond to it (Bode & Vraga 2020; Tandoc et al. 2020), meaning that even user correction is not truly populist. Yet not enough is known about why some people respond to misinformation while others do not. Our initial research suggests that more educated people were more likely to say they had corrected others with regards to COVID-19, whereas older adults were less likely to say they had done so (Bode & Vraga 2020), although previous research had not found differences by education or age in terms of responding to ‘fake news’ on social media (Tandoc et al. 2020). In other research, we found that people who were misinformed about a topic were more likely to say they would respond to a misinformation post on the subject, suggesting that those who are most willing to respond may be the least equipped to reduce misperceptions (Tully, Vraga, & Bode 2020b, working paper). Clearly, much more research is needed to discover who is willing to correct others and the circumstances that may facilitate or deter correction.

Research is also urgently needed into what can be done to motivate people to correct others. Our research suggests user correction can be effective, but it requires people to be willing and able to engage with one another on social media. While research has not yet examined how to motivate corrections on social media specifically, several behavioral theories offer promising avenues to pursue. Notably, the theory of planned behavior highlights the importance of social norms – in conjunction with attitudes and perceived behavioral control – in spurring behavior (Ajzen 1985, 2011). Therefore, interventions that highlight public support for and engagement in correction represent a promising technique for encouraging more people to consider engaging in such corrections themselves (e.g. Cialdini et al. 2006). Likewise, user correction may be facilitated if combined with algorithmic correction; social media companies might consider prioritising user comments that include links to expert sources, elevating the visibility of such corrections.

In addition, most work has focused on either Facebook or Twitter, although other platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube are also significant disseminators of misinformation. Indeed, initial studies suggest that incorporating video correction (Young et al. 2018) and graphics (Amazeen et al. 2018) enhances debunking efforts. Understanding what elements of observational correction successfully transfer between platforms and how corrections may need to be adopted to better fit the affordances of a given platform are essential.

Conclusion

Therefore, observational correction represents a flexible, robust, and community solution to misinformation on social media that appeals to populist ideals. Rather than depending on elites to combat the problem of misinformation, motivating ordinary users to respond to misinformation as they see it provides not only the scalable response needed but also one that can appeal to people regardless of their position or beliefs.
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