The Social and Psychological Causes of Misinformation
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The New Yorker is wrong about misinformation.

Note: This post was rejected for my *Psychology Today* blog on the grounds that their guidelines do not allow "personal disputes".

KEY POINTS

- The major psychological source of misinformation is motivated reasoning, not gullibility.

- Psychological causes interact with social causes such as group identities to produce misinformation.

- Dealing with misinformation requires psychological strategies and social ones such as institutional change.

Manvir Singh reviews my new book *Falsehoods Fly* in *The New Yorker* magazine. By selective quoting, he misleadingly suggests that I think that the primary cause of widespread misinformation is human gullibility. On the contrary, I recognize that social factors such as group identities are major sources of false beliefs and spell out how institutional and political changes are crucial for dealing with misinformation. Social and psychological factors interact to lead people to beliefs that are false and harmful.

Rather than gullibility, I propose that the major psychological cause of the proliferation of falsehoods is motivated reasoning, where people believe claims because they fit with their goals, not because of evidence. Chapter 3 describes how people are prone to motivated reasoning in important aspects of life that include romantic relationships, parenting, medicine, politics, sports, law, religion, and economics. I outline the cognitive, emotional, and neural mechanisms responsible for this incursion of what we want to believe into what we actually do believe. But I also describe the social interactions that encourage motivated reasoning, including people's tendencies to get information from people in the groups to which they belong, and the transmission of emotions among people in groups.

A major source of motivations and emotions are people's identities—how they think of themselves with respect to social groups such as families, ethnicities, and nations. Goals based on group identities influence beliefs about health, climate, political conspiracies, inequality, and war, as subsequent chapters spell out in detail. My inequality chapter, for example, describes the sources of fascist beliefs about mythic pasts, glorious and virile leaders, national and racial superiority, dangerous threats, and inevitable destinies. Misinformation spreads about these ideas because politicians and journalists exploit

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people's susceptibility to motivated reasoning and distorting emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred. Social media, driven by companies' desires to enhance advertising revenue through emotional engagement, have been instrumental in the proliferation of toxic beliefs such as conspiracy theories.

My suggestions for how to stop misinformation include asking these questions:

1. What misinformation can be identified?

2. What are the sources of misinformation?

3. What are the motives of the originators and believers of misinformation?

4. What items of misinformation are subject to factual correction?

5. How can critical thinking be used to identify thinking errors and correct them?

6. How can motivational interviewing be used to change attitudes and behaviors based on misinformation?

7. How can institutions be modified to reduce misinformation?

8. What political actions can be used to mitigate misinformation?

The last two suggestions are social ways of dealing with misinformation that complement psychological and logical approaches.

Behind Singh's confusion is a distinction between "symbolic" beliefs that are cordoned off from action and expectation, and "factual" beliefs that guide behavior. Perhaps this distinction is of some use in explaining religious attitudes, but it should not conceal how people are prone to misinformation in their ordinary, factual lives. Here are just a few examples:

- The idea popular on TikTok (billions of views) that manifestation—envisioning a desired outcome – can help bring about that outcome.

- The trend on TikTok for people to be skeptical about effective birth control methods and turn to ineffective methods such as monitoring menstrual cycles.

- The Lake Wobegon effect that people tend to believe they are above average in intelligence, driving ability, and academic work.

- The astounding popularity and revenue of psychics who claim to be able to use extrasensory methods to answer people's questions.

None of these are expressions of symbolic religion, nor are they the results of mere gullibility. Rather, they illustrate the interactions of social influences such as group

communication and psychological influences such as motivated reasoning, which together put people at great risk of dangerous misinformation.

References

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