

People Who Crave Structure Are More Likely To Declare That Errors In Media Reports Are “Fake News”

By Emily Reynolds

There's been much interest in what drives fake news over the last few years: who exactly shares it, and why? But beyond *actual* fake news — that is, purposefully misleading information spread online to further a particular agenda — recent years have also seen many people labelling genuine journalism as untrustworthy or downright false.

There are obvious ideological drivers to this, with some keen to undermine political opponents by any means necessary. But there might be another reason people are drawn to declaring “fake news!”: a need for order.

Viewing publications as susceptible to honest mistakes or human error implies a world in which information can be distorted for unpredictable reasons; viewing them as deliberately and methodically deceiving readers for sinister reasons, on the other hand, implies some sort of order. It therefore follows that those who crave structure may also be more likely to deem articles false, suggest Jordan R. Axt from McGill University and colleagues in a study in *Psychological Science*.

To test this theory, the team asked participants how much they agreed with statements measuring their personal need for structure (e.g. “I enjoy having a clear and structured mode of life” and “It upsets me to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it”). Participants also reported their political affiliation, from very conservative to very liberal, before receiving information about errors in news reporting.

One piece of writing stated conservative news media was more likely to publish news stories that were later retracted; the other claimed the opposite, citing the liberal media as making more retractions. Participants were randomly assigned to either condition, meaning some saw material consistent with their own ideology (e.g. a Democrat reading that the conservative media makes more retractions) while others saw ideologically *inconsistent* material.

Those who read ideologically consistent material were more likely, as you’d expect, to indicate that media outlets were *intentionally* deceiving readers rather than making honest mistakes. More interestingly, those who had a higher personal need for structure were also more likely to believe something was intentionally faked (for Democrats, this was even true when they read about retractions by the liberal media). Conservatives also had a higher need for structure and a higher level of belief in deception than liberals.

In a further study, participants completed the same measures before being shown a scenario which didn’t mention retractions, but rather stated that researchers had found an “alarming number of potentially misleading or inaccurate stories”. Democratic participants read that these stories had been published by *Fox News*, while Republicans read that they originated on *CNN*. A second version of the study used specific examples: Democrats read about a debunked *Fox News* report on Hunter Biden, while Republicans read about a heavily criticised *Washington Post* article about Trump’s relationship with the Ukrainian president.

In this case, participants’ need for structure was not, overall, significantly associated with their perceptions that the media had intentionally deceived readers. However, when the team looked at Republican and Democratic participants separately, they found that this association did exist among Republicans.

In a final study, participants wrote either about a recent event in their life that was uncontrollable, or about something that had happened that they could control. They were then shown the ideologically consistent scenario suggesting high rates of retractions among news outlets with opposing political views to their own.

Results showed, again, a correlation between need for structure and perception of intentional deception in Republican (but not Democratic) participants. Interestingly, participants who had written about feeling out of control were also more likely to believe the media was purposefully misleading people than those who had written about a controllable event.

This is a particularly important point. If making people feel out of control can drive them to declare news as fake, then perhaps interventions could be developed to *improve* feelings of control among populations thought to be particularly likely to feel less in control: older people, for instance, or those occupying “low status” positions.

Overall, the study suggests that a need for structure has a significant impact on someone’s likelihood to call something fake news — an effect that was particularly strong for Republicans. To mitigate this, the team suggests a goal of “guiding people towards trusting all news sources” — an idea they do admit is somewhat unrealistic.

It does seem unlikely. There will never be consensus around certain political issues, and those occupying different positions on the political spectrum are likely to continue ascribing “truth” and “lies” to fundamentally different viewpoints. Increasing media literacy, as the team suggests, might help: ensuring people know the difference between reporting and opinion, for example. But there’s one more unfortunate truth that the team doesn’t acknowledge — some news sources simply aren’t trustworthy.

– [The Psychological Appeal of Fake-News Attributions](#)

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