The Moral Psychology of Misinformation

Daniel Effron

London Business School

Abstract

According to some pundits, we live in a post-truth world, surrounded by fake news, “alternative facts,” conspiracy theories, and dishonesty leaders. One risk of such misinformation is that people will believe it. This talk examines a different risk: that people will sometimes judge misinformation morally permissible even though they do not believe it. As a result, they may be less likely to hold its purveyors accountable and more likely to spread it themselves. I argue that even when people recognize misinformation as false, they will judge it as less unethical to spread if it feels intuitively “truthy.” The talk will focus on two psychological factors that increase “truthiness” and shape moral judgments of misinformation in business, politics, and social media: imagination and repetition. A first set of experiments shows that known falsehoods receive less moral condemnation when people imagine how they might become true if circumstances change, or could have been true if circumstances had been different. These effects were particularly pronounced when people were motivated to excuse the falsehoods. A second set of experiments shows that repeatedly encountering the same fake-news article reduces the moral condemnation it receives – even when people know it is fake. Interventions that increase deliberative thinking have potential to reduce these effects, according to preliminary evidence. I will discuss implications for navigating the post-truth world.