

Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing

September 18, 2012

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Evidence shows that vaccines do not cause autism, that global warming is actually occurring, and that President Obama was indeed born in the United States. Why then do people still — often passionately — believe the opposite to be true? In this report, Lewandowsky (University of Western Australia) and colleagues review recent psychological science detailing common sources of misinformation, processes for evaluating the validity of new information, and strategies for combating the effects of misinformation.

Cognitively, it is much easier for people to accept a given piece of information than to evaluate its truthfulness. This stacks the deck in favor of accepting misinformation rather than properly rejecting it. When people do take the time to thoughtfully evaluate the truth of information, they tend to focus on only a few of its characteristics: Is the new information consistent with other things they believe to be true? Does it “make sense”? Does the information come from a credible source? People also look to others to help them validate information, which means the more widespread a piece of misinformation, the harder it becomes to debunk it.

Researchers have found that misinformation is “sticky” and is often resistant to correction. Retractions are often ineffective and can sometimes backfire, strengthening incorrect beliefs. Although correcting misinformation can be difficult, the authors provide several tips for people trying to set the record straight.

The authors suggest replacing misinformation by presenting simple and brief messages that focus on the new, correct information rather than on the incorrect information. When correcting misinformation, provide an alternative — but accurate — narrative of events to fill in the gap left when information once thought true is found to be false. Individuals' pre-existing attitudes and worldviews can influence how they respond to certain types of information, so those trying to counteract misinformation should consider the specific views and values of their target audience.

Misinformation is prevalent in our society and can be hard to discredit. By better understanding the sources and causes of misinformation, we can not only learn to avoid its introduction but also learn to successfully correct it.

About the Authors ([PDF](#), [HTML](#))

Editorial: Knowing Our Options for Setting the Record Straight, When Doing So Is Particularly Important

By Edward Maibach

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