

Repeated Exposure to News Headlines Makes Behavior Seem Less Unethical

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From frequent smartphone notifications to repetitious TV news programs, we often experience repeated exposure to various news headlines as we go about our daily lives. When the news provides stories of wrongdoing, that repeated exposure may influence our own sense of morality, making those narratives seem more true and less unethical, according to new research in *Psychological Science*.

“Reading about a wrongdoing multiple times makes it seem less wrong—even if you just saw it in passing hours or days earlier,” said Raunak Pillai (Vanderbilt University) in an interview with APS.

Pillai, Lisa K. Fazio (Vanderbilt University), and Daniel A. Effron (London Business School) examined this moral-repetition effect through a study of 607 online participants. Over the course of 15 days, participants received text messages containing eight news headlines about fictional corporate misconduct. Each headline was sent between two and 15 times.

On day 16, participants reported how unethical and unusual they perceived the behavior described in the headlines to be, as well as how angry the described behavior made them feel and how much they believed the headline.

Pillai and colleagues found that participants reported perceiving the behavior described in frequently

repeated headlines as less unusual than the behavior in previously unseen headlines and reported feeling less angry in response to headlines they had read before. Exposure frequency also influenced how ethical participants perceived the behavior to be: Participants rated as less unethical those wrongdoings they felt less angry about and perceived as less unusual.

Additionally, participants perceived repeated headlines as truer than new headlines, and they rated headlines they believed to be truer as slightly less unethical, although this second effect did not remain significant when the researchers controlled for anger and norm perception.

“We speculate that truth perceptions may constitute a novel mechanism behind the moral-repetition effect. Perhaps to preserve belief in a just world, people are more motivated to rationalize real (vs. fictional) wrongdoings,” the researchers wrote.

The moral-repetition effect became significantly smaller over time, Pillai and colleagues noted, with the majority of the effect on unethicity ratings occurring after just two viewings of the same headline.

“Our results clarify that the size of the moral-repetition effect does depend on the number of repetitions but that increasing the number of repetitions has a progressively smaller effect on moral judgments,” the researchers explained.

These findings also extend previous laboratory research on the moral-repetition effect into the real world, where people may be exposed to descriptions of wrongdoing over a period of days or weeks, they added.

“Ultimately, our results reveal how repeated exposure to viral content can affect how we judge morality and truth. The more we hear about a wrongdoing, the more we may believe it—but the less we may care,” Pillai and colleagues wrote. “Repeated encounters can make news of the wrongdoing seem truer but the wrongdoing itself seem less wrong.”

Although this study focused on the effects of reading about wrongdoings, Pillai said that in future work he would like to investigate how repeatedly consuming information through videos, images, and other formats popular on social media could influence people’s perceptions of morality.

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Reference

Pillai, R. M., Fazio, L. K., & Effron, D. A. (2023). Repeatedly encountered descriptions of wrongdoing seem more true but less unethical: Evidence in a naturalistic setting. *Psychological Science*, 34(8), 863–874. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976231180578>