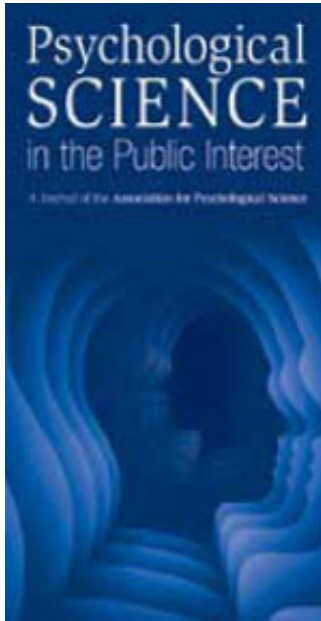


Messy Misinformation

September 24, 2012



Childhood vaccines do not cause autism. Global warming is confirmed by science. And yet, many people believe claims to the contrary. This political season may be a good time to ponder the question, “Why does misinformation stick?”

According to an upcoming report published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, perhaps the most important factor is that rejecting information is cognitively more difficult than simply accepting it.

When we do take the time to thoughtfully evaluate incoming information, we tend not to evaluate all of it, preferring instead to focus on only a few general characteristics: Does the information fit with other things I believe in? Does it come from a credible source? Do others believe it?

Misinformation is especially sticky when it happens to conform to a preexisting political, religious, or social point of view. Because of this, ideology and personal worldviews can be especially powerful antidotes to truth.

But all is not lost. Those hoping to set the record straight have some options, such as making sure that the information you want people to take away is simple and brief. Ultimately, research has shown that attempts at “debiasing” can be effective in the real world when they are built upon evidence-based strategies.