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Biases in Media Consumption and Fake News

Introduction

In today's digital age, information spreads faster than ever before, making it difficult to distinguish between credible reporting and misinformation. From the endless stream of short-form videos on TikTok to the instant search engines provided by Google, most people today have an unprecedented amount of information available at their fingertips. The term "fake news" has become a mainstream phrase, often misunderstood and misused, and its impact on the public's understanding of media is significant. For people like me, those pursuing journalism, the challenge of providing accurate, fact-checked information has become more critical. Despite the continued efforts of true journalists and researchers, misinformation continues to spread widely; this is largely due to the way individuals process information. This paper explores how cognitive biases influence media consumption and contribute to the spread of misinformation, focusing on confirmation bias, repeated exposure, in-grouping, and anchoring bias. Gaining insight into these psychological processes is crucial for strengthening media literacy and emphasizing the role of accurate fact-checking.

Literature Review

Psychological research shows that individuals rely on mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to process large amounts of information quickly. While these shortcuts are efficient, they can also lead to systematic errors in judgment. According to the consensus statement titled *Using Psychological Science to Understand and Fight Health Misinformation*, by the American Psychological Association (APA), misinformation is more likely to be believed when it aligns with an individual's existing beliefs or is repeatedly encountered (American Psychological Association, 2023, p. 10). An individual's constant search for validation of principles highlights

the role of cognitive biases in shaping their belief system. The comfort of knowing one's opinions are widely agreed upon is increasingly becoming more important than the objective point of view. One of the most significant biases in media consumption is confirmation bias; the tendency to seek out and favor information that supports an individual's preexisting beliefs. The APA notes that individuals are more likely to engage with information that reinforces their worldview, making it easier for misinformation to persist. People also tend to be more susceptible to believing information from in-group sources; these are groups that we identify with or feel a sense of belonging to (American Psychological Association, 2023, p. 8-9). Even when information is false, if the source is familiar, it can be mistaken for accurate information.

One of the greatest challenges researchers have identified is that simply presenting accurate information does not always change the public's opinion. Once misinformation has been accepted as truth, individuals may reject corrections because they refuse to reconsider beliefs they already hold. The APA explains that misinformation often becomes intertwined with a person's identity, or religious and political beliefs, making corrections feel like a personal attack rather than a mere factual update (American Psychological Association, 2023, p. 10). As a result, misinformation can continue influencing opinions after it has been disproven. Demonstrating that combating misinformation requires all of society to have an understanding of the psychological processes that shape how people evaluate information.

"Anchoring" bias plays a role in how individuals interpret information. This bias occurs when people heavily rely on the first pieces of information they encounter, using them as a reference point for future judgments. As explained by Kendra Cherry, MSED, in her fact-checked article titled *How Anchoring Bias Affects Decision-Making*, on Verywell Mind.com, initial information, such as a headline, can significantly influence how subsequent details are understood (Cherry, 2025, par. 2). This use of anchoring bias enables readers to only consume a

basic understanding of their chosen stance to share without any attempt to pursue more knowledge on the topic, stunting further discourse.

Similarly, the exposure effect demonstrates that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases an individual's preference for it. In the Simply Psychology article, *Mere Exposure Effect in Psychology: Bias and Heuristics*, Charlotte Nickerson clarifies that in media contexts, this effect shows that frequently encountered information or sources may be perceived as more credible, even when they are not (Nickerson, 2023, par. 1-2). Together, these concepts show how biases contribute to the persistent spread of incorrect information.

Application of Psychological Concepts

Cognitive psychology provides a foundation for understanding how biases affect information processing. Confirmation bias demonstrates how individuals filter and store information based on previously existing beliefs. This means that, rather than objectively analyzing new information, people tend to reinforce their prior assumptions (American Psychological Association, 2023, p. 13). The spread of this misinformation can be better understood through the reinforcement of these beliefs. Social Media platforms often reward engagement through likes, shares, and comments. When users receive positive reinforcement for sharing emotionally charged or attention-grabbing content, they are more likely to continue doing so, regardless of accuracy. Over time, this creates learned behaviors that severely contribute to the widespread leak of incorrect information. Another psychological response that plays a large role in “fake” media consumption is emotion. Information that evokes strong emotional responses, such as fear, anger, or excitement, is far more likely to be remembered and shared between users. “Negative stimuli become less negative with exposure; positive stimuli become less pleasing.” (Nickerson, 2023, “Initial Meaning”). Eventually, individuals become overexposed to fake information, further reinforcing what they believe to be true.

The psychological concept of in-grouping helps explain the development of “echo chambers” on social media. Individuals naturally gravitate toward groups that share their beliefs and values, creating online spaces where similar viewpoints are repeatedly reinforced. This pattern, often driven by homophily (“birds of a feather flock together”) and contributing towards greater polarization (“us versus them”), actively discourages engagement among people with opposing perspectives. “Only five of 55 studies found no evidence of echo chambers, and all five studies were based on self-reported rather than digital trace data” (American Psychological Association, 2023, p.17). This study demonstrates the high number of individuals who have adapted to relying on biases and reinforcement from like-minded peers to avoid seeking the truth and considering fault in their beliefs.

Anchoring bias connects to decision-making by illustrating how initial information shapes perception. “Even arbitrary numbers can lead participants to make incorrect estimates. In one example, participants spun a wheel to select a number between 0 and 100. The volunteers were then asked to adjust that number up or down to indicate how many African countries are in the U.N. Those who spun a high number gave higher estimates than those who spun a low number. In each case, the participant used that initial number as the anchor point for their decision” (Cherry, 2025, par. 3). Occasionally, even when corrections are presented, the initial impression may persist, making it harder to correct misinformation fully.

These psychological concepts also influence the daily work of journalists. Professional journalism is built upon verification and fact-checking before publication. However, these practices often conflict with the speed at which information spreads online. False information can circulate across social media platforms within minutes, while accurate reporting often takes hours or days to verify. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about the virus and its treatments spread rapidly throughout social media. In the American Psychological

Association's article, "How to reverse the alarming trend of health misinformation," Abrams notes that misinformation can spread more quickly during mass health crises because uncertainty creates an opportunity for false claims to fill gaps in people's understanding (Abrams, 2024, "How false information thrives"). Audiences may accept the initial false information and reject later corrections because of confirmation bias, making the hard work of researchers and journalists even more vital.

In recent years, the challenge of reporting news accurately has become increasingly more difficult, especially during breaking news events. Early reports are frequently based on limited information and may later be updated as more evidence becomes available. Unfortunately, anchoring bias causes many people to place greater weight on initial reports than on later corrections or clarifications; the original narrative may continue influencing public opinion.

For journalists, understanding psychology is becoming just as important as understanding ethics. Recognizing how audiences process information can help reporters write more clearly, avoid unintentionally reinforcing misinformation, and communicate corrections in ways that are more likely to be accepted. As someone pursuing journalism, I believe these existing biases demonstrate that reporting is not simply about presenting facts. Journalists also require an understanding of how those facts will be interpreted by different audiences.

Critical Thinking and Reflection

The role of cognitive biases in media consumption raises important ethical and societal concerns. Journalists are tasked with presenting accurate, well-researched information, yet their efforts are often undermined by the psychological tendencies of their audiences. Although fact-checking is a tedious process, its effectiveness depends on individuals who are willing to reconsider their beliefs. Culturally, misinformation can lead to an increase in polarization. When individuals of similar views rely on different sources of information, they may develop

conflicting understandings of reality. This division could hinder productive dialogue between people with differing mindsets and weaken trust in other credible media institutions.

With the rise of clickbait culture and short-form content, the importance of responsible reporting is more important than ever. The pressure to produce content at such a quick rate can often conflict with the ability to do thorough fact-checking, making it even more difficult to combat misinformation effectively. Journalists and researchers play a critical role in maintaining the integrity of information, and their work is often underappreciated. Even the most carefully researched articles may be misinterpreted or misunderstood if the audience is unwilling to question their assumptions. Looking ahead, I believe media literacy should receive greater emphasis in communities. Teaching people how cognitive biases influence decision-making could help them become more critical consumers of information. Rather than relying solely on technology companies to remove misinformation, society should focus on helping individuals recognize their own biases and evaluate information more thoughtfully. Several questions remain for future consideration: how can journalists present information in ways that reduce the impact of cognitive biases? What strategies can be used to improve public trust in credible sources? Additionally, how can education systems better equip their students with the critical thinking skills needed to navigate today's complex media landscape?

Conclusion

Cognitive biases play a major role in how individuals consume and interpret media. Confirmation bias, repeated exposure, in-grouping, and anchoring bias all contribute to how misinformation is believed and spread. These psychological processes show that fake news is about false information and how people naturally process and respond to repeated, emotionally charged content. Understanding these biases is essential for improving media literacy and

strengthening journalistic practices. Applying psychological insight can aid in reducing the spread of misinformation and support more informed, critical engagement with media.

This research ultimately raises larger questions about the relationship between human psychology and modern media. If people are naturally more inclined to believe information that confirms what they already think, how much responsibility should an individual have for recognizing misinformation, and how much of the responsibility falls on journalists and the media platforms that share incorrect information? The app algorithms that repeatedly show users similar content to what they have previously engaged with may make these biases more difficult to overcome. Questions about how to combat the spread of fake news also arise; is simply learning about cognitive biases enough to change behavior? A stronger awareness of both psychological biases and media practices can encourage individuals to seek out reliable sources and become more critical participants in an increasingly complex media landscape.

References

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