IPSOS VIEWS

DECODING MISINFORMATION

Why we fall for fake news

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Summary

Misinformation is a global issue that threatens public health, democracy, and social cohesion. At Ipsos, we conducted research to understand the psychological factors that make people prone to believing fake news. Our approach uncovers how elements like emotion, analytical thinking, and the digital landscape influence our ability to discern fake from real information. We also highlight the importance of cultural context, showing that misinformation should be addressed with strategies tailored to specific context rather than a single universal strategy. These insights provide a foundation for policymakers to develop more effective, evidence-based strategies to combat misinformation across countries.

Key Takeaways:

- **Cultural context matters:** The ability to discern between real and fake news, and the psychological factors influencing it, varies significantly across countries, highlighting the need for tailored, culture-specific strategies to combat misinformation.

•Emotions influence judgment: Emotional response to news headlines can sway our initial judgement of their truthfulness. Fostering awareness of emotional biases and encouraging fact-checking before forming conclusions can help improve truth discernment.

•Critical thinking skills are key: Research shows that exerting cognitive functions, particularly inhibition (the ability to pause and think), improves truth discernment. Educational programs should incorporate exercises that encourage analytical thinking, source verification, and emotional awareness.

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The misinformation crisis

In the digital age, the rapid dissemination of information has become both a transformative force and a significant challenge for modern society. Fake news, defined as fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent[1], has emerged as a global issue with profound implications for democracy, public health, and social cohesion. For instance, research has shown that misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic led to tangible health consequences impacting public health efforts, leading to increased vaccine hesitancy and preventable deaths[2]. False claims about unproven treatments, such as the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine, contributed to cases of self-medication, leading to drug shortages and instances of poisoning in some countries. Similarly, misinformation regarding supposed home remedies, including the belief that consuming high concentrations of alcohol could kill the virus, resulted in cases of methanol poisoning and fatalities in places like Iran[3]. On the other hand, denialism and skepticism toward scientifically supported health measures, such as mask-wearing and vaccination[4], delayed public acceptance of effective interventions, exacerbating the spread of the virus and increasing strain on healthcare systems. Beyond its political and social impact, misinformation also poses risks to business and brands, as declining trust in news information affects corporate reputations and consumer perceptions[5].

The scale and complexity of misinformation have grown exponentially due to the development of the digital landscape. Algorithms designed to maximize user engagement can inadvertently amplify sensational or divisive content, if their design prioritizes virality. Moreover, the rapid advancement of generative AI has further accelerated the spread of partisan fake news, with individuals using AI tools to create fake accounts and produce realistic yet misleading content that seamlessly blends into social media feeds[6]. The shift from

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traditional news sources to online media platforms has further complicated the battle against fake news. The increasing prevalence of misinformation in digital media, exacerbated by the rise of AI-generated content, has led to growing public concern about the difficulty of distinguishing real news from fake news[7]. This creates an environment where false narratives (i.e., not based on accurate and/or verifiable facts) can thrive, influencing public opinion and shaping real-world outcomes.

Users are increasingly aware of the risk of fake news but not necessarily of their own vulnerability: a recent Ipsos survey found that 74% of French citizens report regularly encountering deliberately false or misleading information on social media, and 77% give credence to at least one well-known fake news[8].

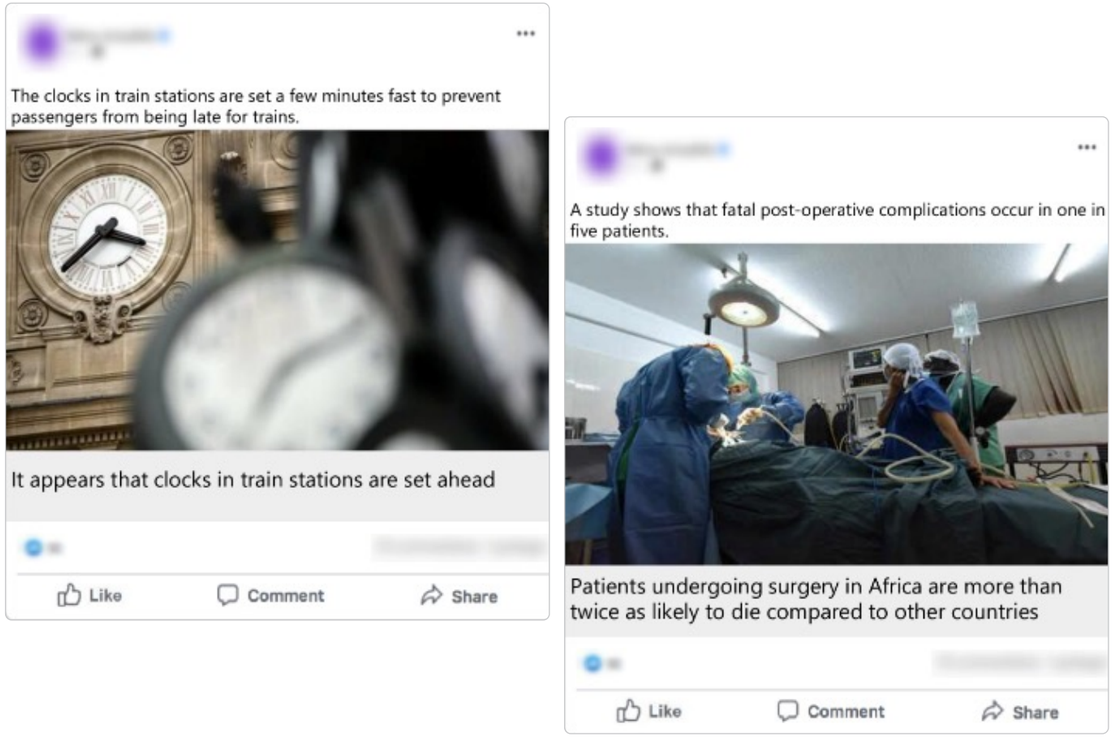
Misinformation doesn't just spread outright lies; it often involves distorted truths and biased narratives that subtly shape public opinion. This can reinforce existing biases, decrease trust in institutions, and influence decision-making. Therefore, even minimal exposure to misinformation can have a significant long-term impact on society[9]. Understanding the factors that affect media truth discernment (MTD) — the ability to distinguish between real and fake news — is crucial for addressing the misinformation crisis. We delve into how socio-demographic and psychological factors can influence MTD, drawing on data from a large-scale study across four countries. By understanding the factors that affect MTD, we aim to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and media organizations to combat misinformation and foster informed societies.

Understanding media truth discernment

At Ipsos, in collaboration with LaPsyDÉ, our academic partners from Université Paris Cité, we designed a comprehensive study to identify the factors influencing media truth discernment across diverse cultural and age groups. This research draws on insights from a survey of 8,800 participants across France, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. By exploring behaviors, attitudes, and contextual influences, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals evaluate the truthfulness of information in an increasingly complex media landscape.

To assess how well participants could distinguish between real and fabricated information, we selected real and fake news headlines spanning diverse themes such as health, culture, and social issues. Real headlines were drawn from reputable mainstream media, while fake ones were sourced from fact-checking websites. To keep judgments unbiased, headlines were presented in the style of mainstream social media posts, without source names or engagement metrics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sample of fake news headline (left) and real news headline (right)



To understand how well participants could distinguish real news from fake news, we used an approach called Signal Detection Theory[10], a scientific approach widely used to study decision-making. This method allowed us to separate two key aspects of truth discernment:

- **Discrimination accuracy** – how well someone can tell real news from fake news.
- **Response bias** – a tendency to assume most headlines are either true or false, regardless of their actual content.

Traditional approaches to measuring media truth discernment, such as simple accuracy scores (i.e., the proportion of correctly identified real and fake news) or self-reported confidence in judgments, often fail to distinguish between actual discernment ability and response biases. For instance, individuals who are generally skeptical may judge most headlines as false, leading to a high accuracy in detecting fake news that do not necessarily reflect better discernment. By contrast, Signal Detection Theory allows for a more nuanced analysis by separating discrimination accuracy from response tendencies, providing a more reliable assessment of truth discernment across different populations.

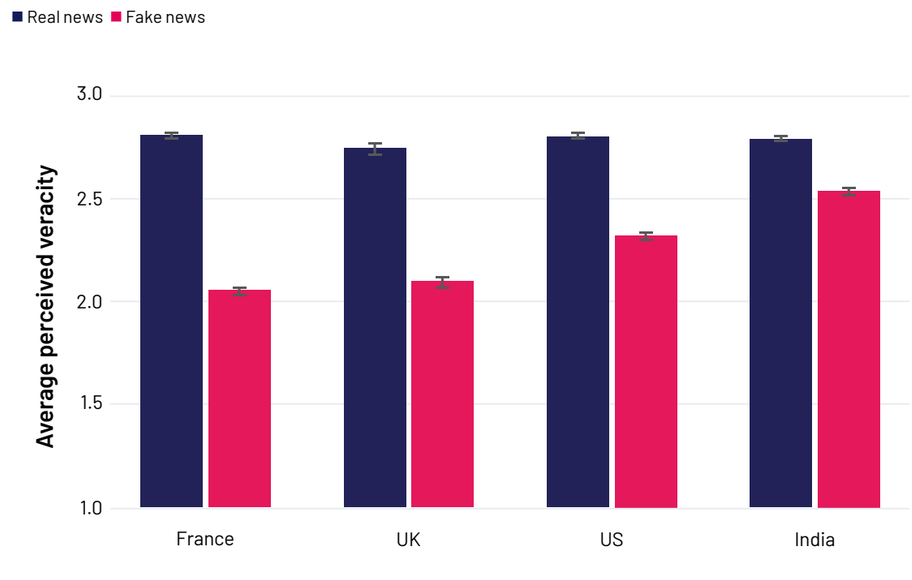
(Mis)trusting news headlines

Our experiment prevented participants from relying on the trustworthiness of the source sharing these headlines and on social approval metrics (e.g., number of likes and comments). Yet, across all four countries, participants evaluated real news as more true than fake news (see Figure 2), which demonstrates that, despite the challenges of misinformation, people have a high baseline capacity for truth discernment.

However, the way people approach headlines is not purely neutral; a truth response bias was observed in all countries, meaning participants were more likely to label headlines as true, regardless of their actual content. This probably reflects the base rates in daily life where most references are mundane and plausible enough to be held true by default[11].

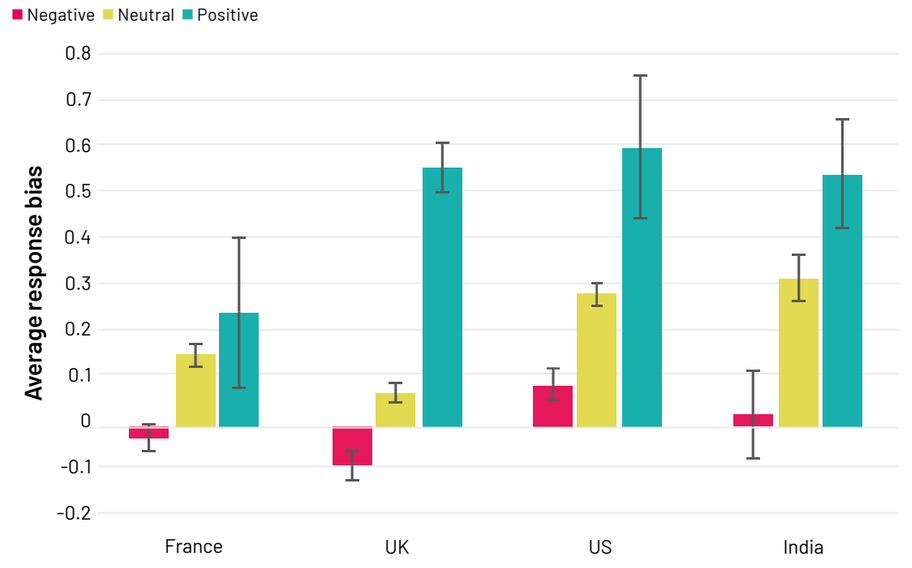
While people generally tend to assume that headlines are true, our findings suggest that emotional reactions to news content also play a significant role in shaping truth discernment. Specifically, when individuals experience positive emotions in response to a headline, they are more likely to judge it as true. Conversely, negative emotional reactions appear to promote a more critical evaluation, reducing the likelihood of a truth bias (see Figure 3). Positive emotions can foster trust and reduce critical thinking, while negative emotions appear to promote more discerning analysis. Therefore, combating misinformation could involve encouraging critical evaluation of content, independent of initial emotional reactions. Promoting thoughtful engagement and emotional detachment, especially with emotionally charged material, may be crucial for cultivating more discerning media consumption habits.

Figure 2: Average perceived veracity for real news and fake news across countries. Minimum and maximum theoretical values range from 1 to 4. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals



Source: Ipsos

Figure 3: Average response bias for emotional valence across countries. A positive value indicates the tendency of responding "true", regardless of news headlines content. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals



Source: Ipsos

Who believes in fake news?

Our findings highlight that people showing stronger conspiracy beliefs (e.g., agreement with statements such as *"Secret groups control people's minds without them knowing"*) exhibit a weaker ability for truth discernment. Conspiracy beliefs are associated with cognitive tendencies, such as confirmation bias, that may lead individuals to give more credence to information aligning with their own pre-existing views[12]. This tendency could make them more likely to accept unverified or sensational claims, potentially reducing their ability to critically assess certain types of news content. This can create a "snowball effect": initial conspiracy beliefs make individuals more receptive to misinformation, which in turn deepens their commitment to alternative narratives. Over time, recursive dynamics — such as increased social isolation, heightened distrust of mainstream sources, and selective exposure to conspiracy content —accelerate and entrench these beliefs, a phenomenon described as Rabbit Hole Syndrome[13]. This makes conspiracy thinking progressively harder to challenge or reverse, as individuals become increasingly embedded in a worldview resistant to external correction. A 2018 Ipsos study[14] showed that a significant proportion of respondents in 27 countries agreed that they *"live in their own bubble on the internet, mostly connecting with people like themselves and looking for opinions they already agree with."*

Whatever their media habits, beliefs or interests, participants who demonstrated a stronger tendency to think carefully and analytically rather than relying on intuitive thinking, measured through a problem-solving test[15], were better at distinguishing real news from fake news. This pattern held true across all four countries, highlighting the importance of pausing to evaluate information critically over instinctive or emotionally driven responses. However, analytical, mindful thinking involves more than just cognitive ability; it reflects a deliberate habit of questioning initial impressions and critically examining information, a tendency that helps insulate individuals from misinformation[16].

Systematic misperceptions further illustrate why misinformation persists. Research shows that people do not misjudge information randomly; rather, their perceptions are shaped by cognitive biases, media consumption habits, and levels of institutional trust. The Ipsos Perils of Perception 2024 study[17] highlights this phenomenon, revealing that individuals consistently misestimate key societal statistics — such as crime rates and economic inequality — often exaggerating threats while underestimating broader social progress. These biases reinforce the challenge of misinformation, as individuals tend to interpret and share information in ways that align with their preexisting beliefs rather than objective evidence. To counteract these tendencies, it is essential to design environments that promote reflective thinking. Providing tools for source verification, such as verified news labels, and offering contextual information about the origins of a claim can help individuals make more informed judgments, particularly when faced with complex or controversial issues.

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In media we trust

Surprisingly, the amount of news participants consumed, whether a lot or very little, was not related to their ability to discern real news from fake news. This suggests that exposure to information alone is not sufficient to enhance truth discernment. Instead, a primary factor influencing this ability is trust in information sources. Individuals who place more trust in online media sources, such as websites and social media platforms, displayed lower accuracy in distinguishing between real and fake news headlines. Conversely, participants who reported greater trust in traditional media outlets, including newspapers, television, and radio, demonstrated higher accuracy in differentiating between factual and fabricated news. However, given that all news headlines in our experiment were presented in a popular social media post format with source information removed, participants could not rely on their usual information sources to evaluate credibility. This suggests that a third factor may underlie the observed relationship between media trust and truth discernment.

One plausible explanation is media literacy. Individuals with higher media literacy — those who actively question sources, cross-check information, and recognize media biases — may be more inclined to trust traditional media due to its stricter editorial standards. Conversely, those with lower media literacy may place greater trust in online media, as they struggle to differentiate credible journalism from unverified digital content.

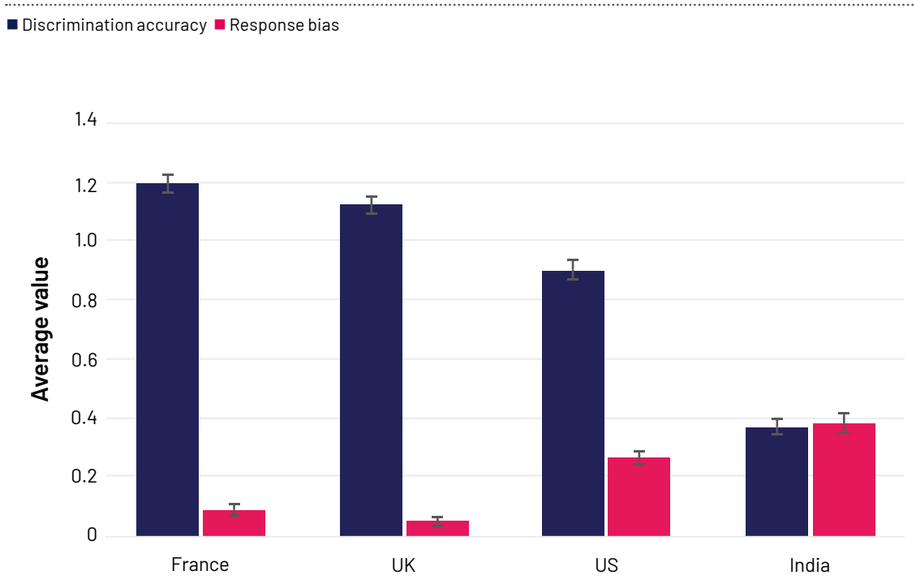
Thus, truth discernment is not simply a matter of how much news one consumes, but how critically one engages with it. Encouraging skepticism toward unverified sources, fostering cross-checking habits, and raising awareness of media biases can help individuals navigate today's complex information landscape. As misinformation continues to spread rapidly, developing critical evaluation skills is essential to ensuring that trust in media leads to informed audiences.

The world is not flat

Our study highlights significant differences across countries in both discrimination accuracy and response bias. For instance, French citizens exhibit a stronger ability to discriminate real and fake information than Britons, Americans or Indians. Likewise, participants from India and the US show a stronger truth bias, i.e., a tendency to believe that news is true by default, compared to those from France and the UK (see Figure 4).

Most importantly, the factors influencing truth discernment vary from one country to another. While some patterns are consistent, others depend heavily on cultural context. One example is the role of digital communication platforms in shaping truth discernment. Certain platforms were linked to lower truth discernment in some regions but higher in others. For instance, the use of encrypted messaging apps was associated with poorer discrimination accuracy in some countries but better accuracy in others. This contrast may reflect the different roles that these platforms play in each country's information ecosystem. In some regions, private messaging services function primarily as closed-group communication tools, where misinformation can spread with limited external fact-checking. In others, they serve as broader information-sharing networks, where they are more commonly used for news distribution, including official government and fact-checking initiatives.

Figure 4: Average discrimination accuracy and response bias across countries.
A higher discrimination accuracy indicates a better media truth discernment ability.
A higher response bias indicates a higher tendency to respond "true" regardless of news content



Source: Ipsos

Moreover, the impact of socio-economic status (SES) on truth discernment also differs across countries. In France, the UK, and India, individuals with higher SES tend to have better discrimination accuracy, likely reflecting differences in education, access to high-quality information, and exposure to critical thinking frameworks. However, in the US, SES had no significant effect on truth discernment. This suggests that in the American context, factors other than income and education may play a stronger role in shaping truth discernment.

Our findings also reveal gender disparities in the ability to distinguish real from fake news. In France, the UK, and the US, women outperformed men in truth discernment, while in India, no significant gender differences were found. These findings indicate that truth discernment varies across cultural contexts, likely emerging from a combination of institutional trust, educational norms, media environment, and broader cognitive tendencies. However, our study does not aim to provide a definitive explanation for these cultural differences; rather, it highlights their presence and underscores the importance of considering local nuances when designing interventions against misinformation. Strategies that work in one country may not be effective in another, highlighting the need for localized solutions when addressing the spread of misinformation.

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Addressing the misinformation challenge

Addressing misinformation requires a collaborative effort across different sectors, from policymakers and educators to media organizations and individuals. One of the most effective ways to combat misinformation is through media literacy education, which equips individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information sources and recognize misleading content[18]. Encouraging thoughtful engagement with news, rather than reacting impulsively, can also help people become more discerning consumers of information.

Educational programs can also incorporate tools to enhance analytical thinking and promote emotional awareness, helping younger generations navigate misinformation-laden environments with confidence. In this regard, our academic partner LaPsyDÉ, in collaboration with French academic publisher Nathan, conducted preliminary research demonstrating that training executive functions, particularly inhibition (the ability to pause and think), significantly improves the ability to discern fake news in middle-school children. Strengthening these cognitive skills could serve as a valuable intervention to mitigate the influence of misinformation.

Beyond public policy and education, brands and businesses have a vested interest in promoting trustworthy information, as misinformation can directly impact consumer perceptions and corporate reputation. Companies can take proactive measures by ensuring transparency in their own communications and aligning with credible sources when sharing information. Partnering with fact-checking organizations, supporting digital literacy initiatives, and advocating for responsible media consumption can strengthen brand trust and demonstrate corporate responsibility.

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Ultimately, combating misinformation requires a continuous and collaborative effort across sectors. By fostering critical thinking, promoting responsible information-sharing, and supporting initiatives that enhance cognitive resilience, whether through education, corporate responsibility, or platform accountability, we can work toward a more informed and trustworthy information landscape.

Conclusion

Misinformation poses a significant threat to society. While its effects on behavior are complex and may not always manifest in direct, measurable changes, misinformation can shape broader public discourse, influence trust in institutions, and contribute to long-term shifts in perception. Our research investigated the psychological mechanism behind believing in fake news, providing guidance for establishing interventions to mitigate the misinformation's impact.

Our findings highlight that media truth discernment is influenced by:

Cognitive abilities

Emotional responses

Cultural context

Media consumption habits

Individuals who engage in analytical thinking are better at identifying misinformation, whereas those who rely on intuitive reasoning or consume information primarily through social media exhibit lower discernment.

Emotional reactions — especially positive emotions — can increase susceptibility to misinformation, while skepticism toward unverified sources and trust in high-quality journalism improve accuracy.

We also found that misinformation resilience varies significantly across cultural and demographic groups, reinforcing the need for tailored interventions.

It is crucial to recognize that misinformation is a vast and multifaceted issue. Addressing it requires a comprehensive understanding of its dissemination channels, psychological and social mechanisms, and diverse impacts on individuals and society as a whole.

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