

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

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Like the Sorcerer's Apprentice from Disney's *Fantasia*, many people in today's society are experiencing a rapidly rising tide. Our rising tide—which can feel at times like a tidal wave—is composed of information, rather than water. Much of the information is true and helpful, and most of us have better tools than ever before to find and access helpful information nearly instantaneously and often for free. For most of us, most of the time, a huge portion of the information tidal wave is true but useless, even though the benefits to society of the rising information tide itself are enormous.

The excellent review article by Lewandowsky and his colleagues in this edition of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* focuses us on the flip side of this rising tide: misinformation. As is the case with factually correct information, most people have more and more ready access to misinformation than ever before. Some of this misinformation is the product of ignorance, and some of it the product of intentional efforts to deceive. Some of it is largely harmless—best called “false but harmless” information—but other false information can have serious or even fatal consequences if acted upon. Parents who withhold vaccines from their young children due to (misinformed) concerns about autism provide one current example.

If setting the record straight (i.e., correcting people's mistaken notions) were easy to do, over the long term, misinformation would pose a rapidly diminishing threat to people and society, as the facts would quickly win out in the marketplace of ideas. Unfortunately, this is not the case. For a variety of reasons—some inherent in the workings of our society, and some inherent in the workings of human cognition—some misinformation can be quite “sticky” (i.e., quick to take hold), and once it has shaped our understanding of the underlying issue, it can be quite difficult to correct. The Lewandowsky et al. article does a tremendous public service by identifying and unpacking these processes and highlighting options for *debiassing* or correcting misperceptions that have taken hold.

However, because debiasing is not easy—indeed, it often requires a concerted and sustained communication effort (or as I have said elsewhere: simple clear messages, repeated often by a variety of trusted sources)—it is in society's best interest to become more sophisticated in differentiating harmless false

information from harmful false information. Seriously harmful false information likely warrants a societal response; harmless misinformation likely does not.

Recent research by my colleagues and I (Ding, Maibach, Zhao, Roser-Renouf, & Leserowitz, 2011) provides an example. The evidence has convinced the vast majority of the world's climate scientists that the climate is rapidly changing, and that human activities are a primary cause. Yet, an intentionally fabricated—and now widely held—myth suggests that no such agreement exists. This widely held myth is problematic in that it undermines public understanding of climate change in ways that reduce public commitment to deal with the threat. A societal response to correct that misperception is clearly warranted.

Research that clarifies the nature of harmful versus harmless misinformation—and that further illuminates our options for effectively inoculating people against and debiasing people from harmful misinformation—has great potential to benefit society. Hopefully, the magnitude of this opportunity will attract some of the best and brightest minds in psychology and other social sciences.

## Reference

- Ding, D., Maibach, E., Zhao, X., Roser-Renouf, C., & Leserowitz, A. (2011). Support for climate policy and societal action are linked to perceptions about scientific agreement. *Nature Climate Change*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1038/NCLIMATE1295.

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