

Not a problem for me: Young men's conceptions of their social media use and false information

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Abstract: There is a lot of misinformation and disinformation in social media. The availability and affordability of new technologies have enabled actors to disseminate false information online relatively easily. As civilians are the main targets of information influencing, almost every social media user is at risk. For young people, the risk may be even higher, because they generally use social media as their primary information source. The problem with false information is that it is usually designed to mimic real information and appeal to the target audience's pre-existing beliefs. The detection of false information is therefore challenging. Hence, this poses a threat to national security: false information may polarise the social debate, further divide groups with differing worldviews, and undermine citizen's confidence in their government. This article focuses on the conceptions of young Finnish men aged between 17 and 18 of false information in social media. We aimed to examine how young men found their ability to distinguish between a reliable news story and a fake one in social media. In addition, we studied if their information evaluation behaviours and other people's views were connected to a belief in their ability to distinguish reliable news stories from fake ones. The empirical data were collected using a survey during annual conscription call-ups, and the quantitative analysis was descriptive. The results indicated that the respondents were generally very confident in their ability to detect false information. Furthermore, those respondents who reported information evaluation behaviours were more confident than those who did not. However, the majority of respondents who did not report these behaviours still thought they could correctly identify reliable news stories. This is problematic in the case of false information and national security, because young people may be insufficiently aware of how hard it actually is to detect fake news. A lack of awareness may therefore make young people even more vulnerable to information influencing.

Keywords: social media, young people, false information, fake news, disinformation

1. Introduction

The Internet and social media are full of false information, which ranges from fake news (Shu et al., 2017), fake reviews (Munzel, 2016), and propagandist blogs (Agarwal and Bandeli, 2018) to deepfakes (Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019). Distributing false information in social media is easy, because users can create whatever content they like without traditional media's editorial control or other filtering or fact-checking (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, 211; Jensen et al., 2010; Livingstone, 2019, 6). At the same time, disinformation tools are evolving and becoming more accessible and affordable (Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019, 14). In other words, civilians can now easily purchase many technologies that once belonged only to nation states (McGeehan 2018, 49). For these reasons, the amount of misinformation and disinformation online has been growing and spreading rapidly throughout the world in recent years (Leeder, 2019, 1; Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019, 8–14; Posetti and Matthews, 2018, 1). In addition, social media users are reluctant to participate in filtering social media content, because only a clear minority act proactively by seeking to correct the false information they encounter in social media (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2019, 8). Hence, spreading false information online is easier than correcting it (De keersmaecker and Roets, 2017). This can pose a serious threat to both individuals and societies (Waltzman, 2017, 1; Shu et al., 2017, 22).

False information can be divided into misinformation and disinformation. The distinction between the two is that misinformation refers to misleading or false information that is not necessarily spread with the aim of deceiving people, whereas disinformation always entails an aspect of intent (Fetzer, 2004, 228; Lazer et al., 2018, 1094). Disinformation is often constructed as appealing to specific groups with pre-existing beliefs and conflicting views. For example, the aim may be to polarise social debate, create gaps between different groups in society, or undermine people's confidence in their government (McGeehan, 2018, 51). Fake news is typically categorised as disinformation, because it is generally intentionally designed to mislead readers (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, 213; Shu et al., 2017, 22). In addition, fake news resembles the format of real news, and is

systematically produced and distributed (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019). The detection of fake news based on its content is therefore challenging (Shu et al., 2017, 22), and it is relatively easy to influence people and manipulate their perceptions in social media (McGeehan, 2018, 51; Waltzman, 2017, 1).

As disinformation campaigns specifically target civilians (McGeehan, 2018, 51), the risk of being deceived concerns most people who use the Internet and social media (Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019, 17). The risk therefore also applies to young people, although they are often described as digital natives who use social media easily and are familiar with the latest technological devices and social media platforms (Boyd, 2014, 177–180). For example, three quarters of 16- to 24-year-old Finns use social media on a daily basis (Statistics Finland, 2020). Regardless of their familiarity and skills, young people may lack the critical knowledge of how to search for more information and assess the accessible information. It is also important to remember that not all young people are equally skilled. (Boyd, 2014, 177–180.) It has also been argued that young people may be even at more risk, because social media is the main information source for many (Leeder, 2019, 6).

In this article, we focus on young men in Finland and their conceptions of their agency in detecting fake news in social media. The aim of our descriptive quantitative analysis is to examine how young men find their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one. In addition, we will study if reported information evaluation behaviours and other people's opinions concerning the trustworthiness of a news story are connected to the belief that one can detect reliable news. The knowledge gained from the results may be used to design more effective awareness-raising campaigns which can enhance national security in the context of social media and false information. In addition, the knowledge will form a background for our future studies concerning young people and the dark side of social media.

2. Social media, false information and young people's agency

In social media, the evaluation of the credibility of information falls to social media users (Leeder, 2019, 2). The problem is that previous studies suggest that even young people who use social media otherwise fluently have difficulties in evaluating the trustworthiness of information (Wineburg et al., 2016, 4). For example, in a study of college students in the United States, less than 5% of respondents correctly identified all news stories, and almost 40% were incorrectly identified (Leeder, 2019, 4–5). Although detecting false information is challenging, few things have been associated with the ability to discern between fake and real information in previous studies. We will turn our attention to these next.

First, analytical and critical thinking have been linked to the ability to distinguish fake from real news (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Bronstein et al., 2019; Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019, 19). In other words, people are less likely to believe in fake news if they deliberately think about the subject (Bronstein et al., 2019) and critically assess its context (Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019, 19). Analytical thinking helps to distinguish fake from real news, even when the content supports the reader's own political ideology (Pennycook and Rand, 2019).

Second, searching for more information helps to recognise false information. People are less likely to believe in fake news if they search for alternative explanations (Bronstein et al., 2019), examine the rest of the webpage, and spend more time evaluating information (Leeder, 2019, 6–8). In contrast, relying on the top items from a search results list and spending little time in evaluation correlate with incorrect identifications (Leeder, 2019, 8). Searching for more information is connected with information literacy skills. These skills enable users to find reliable information, thus helping in the correct identification of information. With the rapid change related to information systems and the amount of disorganised information on the Internet and in social media, these skills are even more crucial. (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019.)

Although thinking deliberately and searching for more information are important in the correct identification of information, people do not always behave in this way. For example, perceived knowledge has been negatively associated with information searching behaviour (Radecki and Jaccard 1995). In other words, if people think they already know a lot about a subject, they are less likely to seek more information. People are therefore not always able to evaluate their performance accurately (Leeder, 2019, 6–8). For example, according to previous studies, undergraduate students tend to believe that their information searching skills are better than they actually are (Georgas, 2014), and some college students who actually perform well at

detecting false information are sceptical of their abilities, whereas some who perform poorly have overly high self-confidence (Leeder, 2019, 6–8). This tendency is referred to as the Dunning-Kruger effect, which means that unskilled people tend to view their abilities as better than they actually are, in contrast to skilled people, who understand that their skills are limited (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). With social media, this means that those who would benefit most from information searching behaviour may be the least likely to do so. On the other hand, it has been argued that the user’s competence can in reality make the user more aware of manipulative Internet content (Munzel, 2016).

3. Data and method

Our empirical data were collected during the Finnish Defence Force’s conscription call-up period from October to December 2019. In Finland, conscription call-up is obligatory for all men in the year they turn 18, whereas it is voluntary for women (Finnish Defence Forces). We therefore knew beforehand that most of our respondents would be 17- to 18-year-old men. At the call-up event, the respondents received information about our study and were given a link to our online survey. Participation was voluntary, and the survey was anonymous. The survey included questions related to social media habits, the importance of social media, fears and problems concerning social media use, and ideas about encountering false information in social media. Of 123 respondents, 118 were men, two were women, and three failed to respond. As 95.9% of the respondents were men, we decided to focus solely on men, leaving a total of 118 respondents.

We used SPSS 26 software for our statistical analysis. The analysis was descriptive, because our objective was to examine how young men generally viewed their agency when encountering false information in social media. The data were analysed using cross-tabulations. Our dependent variable in the analysis was the respondents’ belief in their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one. Our independent variables included different information evaluation behaviours, such as reading more about the subject from other sources, thoroughly examining the information related to a news story, and the respondents’ thoughts concerning how others’ views influence their belief in a news story’s trustworthiness. All these variables were dichotomous. We also used a variable for how strongly the respondents felt they were in full control of their social media use in elaboration. We performed a Chi-Square analysis to compare the statistical significance of the differences between groups.

4. Results

The data suggest that the respondents generally greatly trusted their skills and abilities in using social media and detecting fake news stories. First, a total of 83.9% of respondents believed they could distinguish between a reliable and a fake news story, while only 16.1% did not (Figure 1). This indicates a high level of confidence among respondents in their ability to detect false information. Concerning the reported information evaluation behaviours, the most common were: considering if a news story was factual or humorous (85.6%); reading more about the subject from other sources (73.5%); and thoroughly examining the information about a news story (67.8%). The least common were: examining a news story’s claims and writing style profoundly (51.7%); and checking the writer’s background information (47.4%). Furthermore, the respondents did not think their evaluations of the trustworthiness of a news story were influenced by others’ views. Only 22.4% reported they believed a news story to be more reliable when a friend or somebody close to them had shared it. In the same way, only 31.4% reported trusting a news story more when it had been widely shared or had received a lot of support. This suggests that the respondents had the greatest confidence in themselves, relying foremost on their own judgement. Statistically, the two variables related to being influenced by others’ views were unconnected to the belief that one could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one.

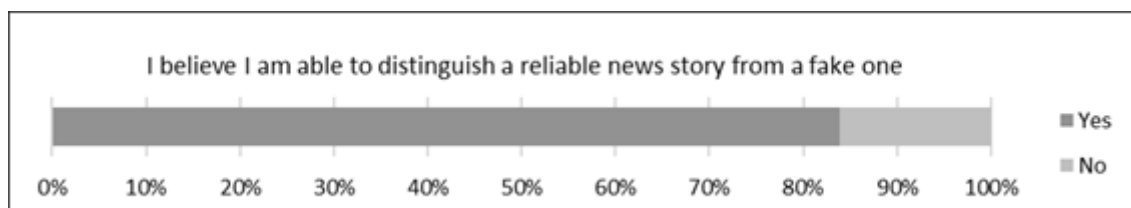


Figure 1. Respondents’ belief in their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one.

There were statistically significant differences between respondents who reported information evaluation behaviours and those who did not in their belief that they could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one (Table 1), apart from checking the writer’s background information. When considering whether a news story was factual or humorous, 89.1% of respondents who reported that they considered the tone of the story thought they could distinguish between a reliable and a fake news story, in contrast to only 52.9% who did not ($p=0.000$). Similarly, 91.9% of respondents who reported that they read more about the subject from other sources thought they could identify a reliable news story, compared with 64.5% of those who did not report that they searched for more information ($p=0.000$). In examining the information related to a news story thoroughly, 92.5% of those who reported such behaviour thought they could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one, in contrast to 65.8% who did not report that they examined the information ($p=0.000$). Finally, 93.4% of respondents who reported examining the news story’s claims and writing style profoundly were confident in their ability to detect a reliable news story, whereas 73.7% of those who did not report doing so still believed they could identify a reliable news story ($p=0.004$).

Table 1. The connection between reported information evaluation behaviours and the belief that one could identify a reliable news story.

I believe I am able to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one	Information evaluation behaviours							
	I consider if a news story is factual or humorous		I read more about the subject from other sources		I examine the information related to a news story thoroughly		I examine a news story’s claims and writing style profoundly	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Yes	89.1%	52.9%	91.9%	64.5%	92.5%	65.8%	93.4%	73.7%
No	10.9%	47.1%	8.1%	35.5%	7.5%	34.2%	6.6%	26.3%
	$\chi^2=14.090, p=0.000$		$\chi^2=13.088, p=0.000$		$\chi^2=13.606, p=0.000$		$\chi^2=8.515, p=0.004$	

In all cross-tabulations N=118.

Briefly, a higher percentage of those who reported information evaluation behaviours believed in their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one than those who did not. However, it should be noted that with all four information evaluation behaviours, the majority of respondents who did not report them also believed in their ability to detect a reliable news story. This suggests that the young men were generally very confident in their ability to detect false information, regardless of whether the confidence was based on their own judgement or a more thorough examination of the news story.

To test the connection between reported information evaluation behaviours and the belief that one could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one, we added a new variable to the cross-tabulations. The respondents were asked on a 7-point Likert scale how strongly they felt they were in full control of their social media use. The responses ranged from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 7, “strongly agree” ($M=5.3, SD=1.409$). We re-categorised the variable as dichotomous. After this, 74.1% felt they were in full control of their social media use, whereas 25.9% felt they were not. When we added this new variable to the cross-tabulations, the connection between reported information evaluation behaviours and the belief that one could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one remained statistically significant only with respondents who felt they were in full control of their social media use (Table 2). This was the case for all four reported information evaluation behaviours.

Table 2. The statistical significances of information evaluation behaviours in respondents who felt they were in full control of their social media use.

Information evaluation behaviours	χ^2	p-value
I consider if a news story is factual or humorous	8.864	$p=0.003$
I read more about the subject from other sources	13.854	$p=0.000$
I thoroughly examine the information related to a news story	16.381	$p=0.000$
I profoundly examine a news story’s claims and writing style	8.602	$p=0.003$

In all cross-tabulations N=118.

This indicates that the initial connection between reported information evaluation behaviours and the belief that one could distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one was not independent. Thus, the connection only remained with the respondents whose overall trust in their social media use was high, which implies that user's overall confidence may play a crucial role in the belief that one can distinguish reliable news stories from fake ones.

5. Discussion

The aim of our study was to examine how young men assess their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one. Our results indicated that 17- to 18-year-old Finnish men are generally very confident about their abilities and skills in using social media and encountering fake news. The majority thought they could distinguish reliable from fake news, whether this was based on reported information evaluation behaviours or their own judgement.

The analysis revealed that the group who reported information evaluation behaviours and the group who did not differed significantly in their belief that they could identify a reliable news story. This was the case with four out of five information evaluation behaviours. The respondents who reported they evaluated information were more likely to believe in their ability to detect a reliable news story. It is therefore possible that the evaluation of information increases one's confidence. However, the actual behaviour and correct identification of news stories are beyond the scope of this study. Such information evaluation behaviours have been associated with the correct identification of real and fake news in previous studies (Bronstein et al., 2019; Giles, Hartmann and Mustaffa, 2019; Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu, 2019; Leeder, 2019; Pennycook and Rand, 2019). Hence, our respondents' confidence may be based on their actual ability to correctly identify information.

It is also noteworthy that almost three-quarters of respondents felt they were in full control of their social media use. If they are this competent, they may be more aware of the manipulative content of social media (see Munzel, 2016). Our respondents may therefore be more immune to information influencing than the average citizen. Furthermore, young people may now be so accustomed to manipulative and fake content in social media like memes and trolling that it has become a normal part of their lives. Their confidence may therefore be based on familiarity with social media and its content.

Alternatively, it should also be considered that the belief that one can distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one is not always connected to the actual ability to do so. On the contrary, based on previous studies, people tend to view themselves as being more skilled than they actually are (Georgas, 2014; Leeder, 2019). Our respondents may therefore have been overly confident in their abilities. This is especially the case with the respondents who were confident in their ability to detect reliable news stories while not reporting information evaluation behaviours. This is because, based on previous studies, the likelihood of correct identification decreases when people do not search for more information, or think critically and analytically (Bronstein et al., 2019; Giles, Hartmann, and Mustaffa, 2019; Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019; Leeder, 2019; Pennycook and Rand, 2019). As the intention of fake news is generally to mislead people (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, 213; Shu et al., 2017, 22), the detection of false information is somewhat challenging, even for young people (Wineburg et al., 2016, 4).

Therefore, the important question in the context of false information and national security is whether young people are aware that they may sometimes be deceived by false information without noticing. Hence, are young people sufficiently alert to the growing amount of false information in social media? As influencing and manipulating people's perceptions in social media is relatively easy (McGeehan, 2018, 51; Waltzman, 2017, 1), the group of young men who trust greatly in their ability to correctly identify news stories without evaluating the information thoroughly may be even more vulnerable to information influencing. We should remember that disinformation appeals to people's minds and their beliefs, making overly confident young people an easy target. For example, in the context of national security, disinformation has been successfully used to create polarisation between citizens and society (McGeehan, 2018).

To detect fake news and other forms of disinformation in social media, all young people need to adopt a sceptical and investigative approach to information in social media. They therefore need in-depth education on how to efficiently and accurately search for more information (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019). In

addition, it is important to focus on the beliefs and conceptions young people have concerning their abilities when designing education and awareness-raising campaigns. For example, awareness-raising campaigns about detecting false information may not interest young people who are already confident in their abilities, although they too would benefit from education. Campaigns and education should therefore be designed to appeal to young people in order to improve their information literacy skills and critical thinking (see e.g. Bronstein et al., 2019; Giles, Hartmann and Mustafa, 2019; Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019; Pennycook and Rand, 2019). For example, young people could benefit from education settings where they would be offered ways to test their ability to distinguish between reliable and fake news. This way young people could acknowledge the difficulty related to the task and become aware of their own limitations, thus becoming more interested in learning more.

There are several limitations in this study. As already noted, the actual behaviour of the respondents is beyond the scope of our article. The second is the selectiveness of the data, because all the respondents included in the analysis were 17- to 18-year-old young men from Finland. Finally, as the total number of respondents was quite small, it is possible that our results do not represent how young Finnish people in general view their social media use in the case of false information. Irrespective of these limitations, this study serves as a pilot for our future studies, which will include a survey focusing on a more representative sample of Finnish young people. This future research will establish a more thorough examination of young people's agency with false information and the dark side of social media.

To conclude, the young men's great confidence in themselves and their capabilities is an important finding that should be considered when seeking how best to teach young people about information and its credibility. To educate young people, it is crucial to understand that they may already be so confident that they are not interested in learning more about false information and information influencing.

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7. References

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