

Voter overconfidence makes the effects of fake news worse, research finds

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Overconfidence among voters makes the negative effects of fake news even worse, new research from Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Vienna) has found.

According to the study – which looked at overconfidence and fake news, and the way they affect how people gather information and make choices in a group, such as in a democracy – overconfidence acts as a barrier to groups making good decisions as well as accessing information.

The research was undertaken by Melis Kartal from WU Vienna's Department of Economics.

In conducting her research, Kartal leveraged a model which purports that individuals often hold inflated views about their own competence (overestimating the quality of the news they receive and the accuracy of their opinions, for example).

Less competent individuals are particularly vulnerable to fake news, as they are prone to overconfidence. Kartal hypothesised that people who are more prone to encountering fake news, struggle to differentiate between real and fake information, and have difficulty forming accurate opinions are also more likely to be unaware of their own limitations and believe they are competent.

They are, therefore, more likely to make decisions based on misinformation.

Kartal and her co-author use theoretical analysis methods as well as experiments involving human participants to show that overconfidence exacerbates the adverse effects of widespread misinformation.

Reflecting on the findings of the study, Kartal, co-author of the paper, says:

“The findings of this research are important not only for elections but for other instances of civic and political participation. Our results point to the importance of institutions in informing voters, and upholding democratic practices and principles.”

The paper, Fake News, Voter Overconfidence, and the Quality of Democratic Choice, was published in American Economic Review.

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For more information, a copy of the paper, or to speak to WU Vienna's Melis Kartal, contact Jonny Stone at jonny@bluesky-pr.com or call 01582 790704.