

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

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Summary

Civilians are the main targets of information influencing. False information is used to polarise social debate, radicalise groups with differing worldviews, and undermine citizen's confidence in their public institutions. The availability and affordability of new technologies have enabled actors to disseminate false information online relatively easily. False information is usually designed to mimic real information and appeal to the target audience's pre-existing beliefs. Since social media channels have few constraints on content creation and publishing, citizens are themselves responsible for editing content. Fake news, fake reviews, propagandist blogs and deepfakes are all examples of how information literacy skills are becoming ever more important at countering novel ways to produce false information.

Almost every social media user is at risk of making decisions based on deceptive information. For young people, the risk may be even higher, because they generally use social media as their primary information source. Despite familiarity with social media, young people might lack critical literacy skills to search for more information and think critically about the subject. It is commonly understood that young people are the most frequent users and early-adopters of new social media channels. The effects of information influencing would therefore magnify among youth.

This presentation focuses on the conceptions young Finnish men aged between 17 and 18 have of their ability to identify false information in social media. The empirical data (N=118) was collected using a survey during Finnish Defence Force's annual mandatory conscription call-ups. We asked young men to assess their ability to distinguish between a reliable news story and a fake one in social media. In addition, we studied if their reported information evaluation behaviours and having a sense of control of social media usage were linked to their confidence in identifying false information. The quantitative analysis was descriptive.

The results indicated that the respondents were generally very confident in their ability to detect false information. 83.9% of respondents believed they could distinguish between a reliable and a fake news story and almost three-quarters of respondents felt they were in full control of their social media use. 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. For example, 73.7% of respondents reported that they did not examine the news story's claims and writing style profoundly, but despite of it still believed in their ability to distinguish a reliable news story from a fake one.

Are young men as skilled as they believe or are they overly confident of their abilities? Based on previous American studies on the topic, people tend to view themselves as being more skilled to detect fake news than they actually are. Hence, also our respondents may be insufficiently aware of how hard it actually is to detect fake news. This could be at least partly explained with the Dunning-Krueger effect which means that unskilled people tend to view their abilities as better than they actually are. If young people are not as skilled as they think they are, this lack of awareness of their actual ability can make young people even more vulnerable targets for information influence operations. We highlight that it is important to note that young people may be reluctant to learn more about false information and information influencing due to high confidence in their current abilities. Campaigns and education should be designed to appeal to young people and challenge their beliefs in order to improve their information literacy skills and critical thinking. Future research should aim to test how often and how successfully young people in Finland practice information evaluation behaviours to identify false information on social media.

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

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