

Experimental evidence of sharing and reporting misinformation in Switzerland, France, and Germany

Summary

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The digital transformation has led to major changes in the information ecosystem. Modern communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram have become important media for information dissemination, blurring boundaries between private and public information channels. Unfortunately, these platforms have also been misused to share inaccurate or inflammatory content. However, studying how misinformation spreads through and across such platforms is notoriously difficult due to scant data. This severely limits an understanding of how misinformation spreads in contemporary societies. Building on a web-service technology we have developed to track sharing of information, we implemented a series of controlled field experiments to research how information veracity and political thinking influences participants' sharing on Personal Messaging-based Platforms. To better understand how participants evaluate information in those decisions, we used non-intrusive behavioral measures that capture whether they report information as fake. We fielded experiments in the French- and Germanspeaking parts of Switzerland and compared results with experiments run in Germany and France. Across all countries, we find no difference in sharing of true and untrue information; at the same time, we find evidence that participants are able to identify and willing to report false information without being asked to do so. This suggests that participants do not share false information at the same rate as true information because they were not able to discern the difference between the two.