

# Civic Engagement, Fake News and the Path Forward

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Media literacy and understanding the digital information around us are an area of communication that affects all of us. How people are represented in the media, social media and our civic participation affect our representations and understanding of the truth. The author would argue through research and practical examples that civic engagement and associations with a peer group can counteract some of the issues facing digital media today. In an age of the so-called “fake news,” there are tools we can provide for our teams, our employees, and our collaborators to make sure we are all on the same page and dealing with the same set of verifiable facts.

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## Introduction

While many studies have emerged about cognitive dissonance and the effects on behavior, a new opportunity for discussion of the Cognitive Dissonance Theory has arisen with the rise of fake news and the drive for greater media literacy. There is a greater need than ever for a fair representation grounded in facts for ourselves and our communities which can only occur if individuals and society are media literate and demand this accuracy. How we represent truth and facts are evolving and are dependent on our ability to be media literate. Through this research, it is shown that media literacy is directly related to civic engagement and peer influence and that utilizing this knowledge can increase media literacy and can move us forward away from the overwhelming amount of fake news currently flooding our information channels.

## Literature Review

In Festinger’s seminal work on Cognitive Dissonance Theory, he found that not only humans were able to ignore information that conflicted with their pre-established understanding of the material, but he categorized the types of instances where this occurs (Festinger, 2009). One type of cognitive dissonance in particular, which he calls “adding new cognitive elements,” is most relevant to media literacy, civic engagement, and fake news. As in all types of cognitive dissonance scenarios, the person moves to feel more psychologically comfortable by removing the conflict and actively avoiding future scenarios that could create it again. However, when this occurs due to “adding new cognitive elements,” Festinger said the natural drive when faced with discord can be to seek additional information to confirm the belief and reduce the dissonance. At that moment, the person is seeking new information, even if it is tied to confirming an existing belief. But, as Festinger said himself, “the possibilities for adding new elements which would reduce the existing dissonance are broad...” and in many instances, “...the total dissonance is reduce by reducing the importance of the existing dissonance” (Festinger, 2009, p. 22). This means that reconciliation is possible through seeking new information this

moment, though many times the information sought may or may not be sourced credibly, there may be an opportunity or an opening here since the person is looking.

While Cognitive Dissonance Theory has been applied for many years to describe and influence behavior, scholars including Metin have concluded that dissonance research could, in the future, “be applied to reduce stereotypes and prejudice” (Metin & Camgoz, 2011, p. 136). There are many types where sadly stereotyping or emotional prejudices entrench “fake news-style” ideas into consumers of media due to cognitive dissonance, but there is an opportunity to turn this around using the same tools.

In an interesting intersection between media studies and citizenship studies, Baker and Blaagaard discussed the many elements of cognitive dissonance that arises in the world of traditional news and digital citizen media in a more engaged world. The authors said,

...Citizens’ active engagement in, with and through digital media is an intriguing question... With the growing proliferation of citizen newsmaking, more traditional discourses of professional objectivity are met with new expectations of truthfulness and faking. Within the paradigm...rather than professional and impartial reporting it is the personal and subjective imagery and storytelling that are seen as authentic and therefore truthful. (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016, p. 66)

There may be multiple elements to the meaning and interpretation of this quote. First, a great deal of cognitive dissonance arises when what is perceived as truthful shifts as it has with the emergence of digital media and first-person sources and accounts appearing more impassioned and truthful than established and well-vetted and sourced materials from traditional news outlets. A consumer must reconcile this dissonance, many times by seeking out additional information, sometimes by sourcing information from “fake news” sources. Second, if we imagine that the cognitive dissonance has already occurred for consumers of traditional media outlets, then, according to Baker, people are seeking additional information through their peer groups, and by this effort to become more engaged through what they perceive to be credible first-person, authentic sources they may be able to reduce or avoid future dissonance. Engagement is a key element of media literacy from many angles.

Echoed in some of the newer literature from public health, individuals tend to entrench in ideas surrounding public health topics and are not moved by confrontation of facts to the contrary. For instance, a 2018 study found that vaccination use increases or decreases proportionally with the “strategies that their neighbors have adopted or the [neighbors’] perceived net benefits of vaccination” (Ndeffo Mbah et al., 2012, p. 1). This means that what the study calls the individual decision-maker’s “social contact network” can be among the most influential force on behavior. The facts surrounding benefit of public health actions did not influence as much as the peer group. In moments of dissonance, people seek information from individuals and sources they trust, weighting the importance of that source most heavily if in the same physical space or perceived peer group.

## Methods

Methods for examining this phenomenon come from primary research and content analysis. For the primary research, a group of individuals, who had previously read content (not provided by the researcher) about concerns about taking on professional opportunities, were polled about their readiness to approach a future professional opportunity both before and after meeting and discussing with a peer group. If they were persuaded heavily by this meeting and discussion, it should show up in the second set of polling. This was an opportunity to see if sometimes the seeking of additional information from a peer group to reduce dissonance

and increase understanding can appear at a very micro level in a way that could combat false information or reduce beliefs in pieces of information that were not constructive to the individual. In addition, a brief content analysis was conducted on the recent Facebook announcement to stop offering alerts on perceived fake news due to ineffectiveness as an effort to see how this works at a more macro level.

## Results

Individuals polled had read instructions discouraging them from attempting to pursue professional opportunities due to lack of readiness. They had read content that said, “If you are doing an internship that requires you to have certain skills...you should make sure you have [acquired those skills] BEFORE your internship” (Internships, 2017). Many students had taken this to discourage them from applying or pursuing internships, thinking they should not attempt such a thing until they are 100% comfortable already performing tasks expected within a posted internship. This information was later removed from the source where it was provided, but the instructions had clearly affected a number of individuals not yet working in their fields who worried outwardly about readiness and preparedness. As an effort to see how much peer group engagement may influence or combat this information, over 50 individuals were polled about how ready they feel, both before and after discussing for five minutes with a peer group how the work they had done and the materials they had studied could be described to an employer as useful skills in the workforce.

As a result of this brief discussion, favorable responses increased an average of feeling 6% more ready.

Table 1

### *Feelings of Workforce Readiness*

Type of professional role	Feeling ready before peer discussion	Feeling ready after peer discussion
Intern	75.47%	80.10%
Professional	53.83%	61.30%
Volunteer	81.41%	87.36%

The interpretation of the data shows that with no only influencer except a discussion with a trusted peer source, who could have any feeling about readiness, the overall outcome was an increased understanding of actual facts surrounding their particular situation.

It is also found in discussions on media literacy in the tech space, where Facebook just announced an elimination of the disputed articles flags that came out in 2017. Below is the full text of the brief announcement:

Facebook is about connecting you to the people that matter most. And discussing the news can be one way to start a meaningful conversation with friends or family. It’s why helping to ensure that you get accurate information on Facebook is so important to us. Today, we’re announcing two changes which we believe will help in our fight against false news. First, we will no longer use Disputed Flags to identify false news. Instead we’ll use Related Articles to help give people more context about the story. Here’s why. Academic research on correcting misinformation has shown that putting a strong image, like a red flag, next to an article may actually entrench deeply held beliefs—the opposite effect to what we intended. Related Articles, by contrast, are simply designed to give more context, which our research has shown is a more effective way to help people get to the facts. Indeed, we’ve found that when we show Related Articles next to a false news story, it leads to fewer shares than when the Disputed Flag is shown. Second, we are starting a new initiative to better understand how people decide whether information is accurate or not based on the news sources they depend upon. This will not directly impact News Feed in the near term. However, it may help us better measure our success in improving the quality of information on Facebook over time. False news undermines the unique value that Facebook offers: the ability

for you to connect with family and friends in meaningful ways. It's why we're investing in better technology and more people to help prevent the spread of misinformation. Overall, we're making progress. Demoting false news (as identified by fact-checkers) is one of our best weapons because demoted articles typically lose 80 percent of their traffic. This destroys the economic incentives spammers and troll farms have to generate these articles in the first place. But there's much more to do. By showing Related Articles rather than Disputed Flags we can help give people better context. And understanding how people decide what's false and what's not will be crucial to our success over time. Please keep giving us your feedback because we'll be redoubling our efforts in 2018. (Lyons, 2017)

Facebook clearly spells out some of their quantitative findings in their note to their users, saying that there were observed to be fewer shares of false news if not flagged. Similar to the research elsewhere, they reference the entrenching of ideas when confronted, thus creating dissonance, and that by connecting those dissonant ideas to other opportunities for civic engagement, there is something closer to a desired effect achieved.

Given that Facebook only issues statements many times through informal channels or with zero announcement at all, this statement, weighted by information gathering and references to research, shows the thought and importance to the social platform within their organization.

### **Discussion**

The findings of Festinger are important in terms of media literacy because people receiving new information are often times confronted with new ideas that may conflict with existing ideas. Festinger showed that there is a window when new information prompts individuals to seek additional information from outside sources.

There is an opportunity within the ideas of Baker to move the discussion of combating fake news forward in a constructive way. If people are seeking information from individuals, then civic engagement can help to resolve some of the barriers between fake news, entrenchment, and resolution. The active engagement component gives individuals the opportunity to have contact with the most influential type of information source, that of a trusted member of a peer group.

When Metin said combating prejudice or stereotypes through dissonance research, this reasoning could also be applied to resist the appeal of fake news and promote media literacy since much of the information that is purported could be perpetuating stereotypes without the beneficial influence of peer groups.

If Ndeffo Mbah's social contact network is the most influential element, then maybe it is so because of the moment of cognitive dissonance when people seek information. There is a window to be engaged and therefore more media literate through engagement with peer groups.

These findings are reflected also in the content analysis and primary research. Facebook says that peer groups spread 80% of the fake news across their platforms, and their efforts to reduce this include manipulations of this very personal interpretation of the information being received. Similarly, individuals who participated in the primary research dramatically changed their own perception of themselves and their work readiness through this same engaged peer group setting.

### **Conclusion and Future Study**

The opportunity is there for additional research into civic engagement as a method for combating fake news. Drawing upon research from communication studies, media studies, public health, and other disciplines shows consistency among the influences of engaged peer groups on behavior and understanding. This same understanding can be applied to fake news and the promotion of media literacy and greater understanding. How

we represent truth and facts are evolving and are dependent on our ability to be media literate. Through this research, it is shown that media literacy is directly related to civic engagement and peer influence and that utilizing this knowledge can increase in media literacy.

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