Mitigating Spillover Effects of a General Warning on Accuracy Judgements of True News Headlines

Delaney R. Todd
University of Puget Sound

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The current study sought to analyze whether the inclusion of the generic source (e.g., blog post, academic journal, etc.) of headlines posted on social media sites influenced people’s accuracy judgments of true and false news headlines regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and whether that source information would help mitigate the previously demonstrated spillover effect that warning users of the potential for false news information on social media reduced people’s accuracy ratings of both true and false news headlines. Participants completed questionnaires each containing 6 true and 6 false headlines. Half of the participants first saw a general warning as described above. Additionally, participants either did or did not receive source information for each headline. Three generic sources were used: Blog Post, Politically Affiliated National News Source, or Medical Journal. Participants were able to accurately distinguish between true and false headlines across all conditions and the presentation of a general warning significantly decreased accuracy judgments for both true and false headlines. Although the mere inclusion of headline sources did not significantly affect accuracy judgments as has been previously reported, source had a significant impact on participants’ accuracy judgments such that headlines associated with Medical Journals were rated as significantly more accurate than headlines attributed to Blog Posts or Politically Affiliated National News Sources regardless of whether the headlines were true or false.

Two three-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess whether participants were able to distinguish between true and false headlines, how being exposed to a general warning affected participants’ accuracy judgments of true and false headlines, and how the inclusion of the general nature of headline sources affected participant’s accuracy ratings of true and false headlines. Alpha level was set to 0.05 for all analyses.

The first analysis treated true/false and within-subjects variable, and warning and source as between-subject variables with two levels (warning/no warning; source/no source). Ratings for true headlines were significantly higher than for false headlines, F (1, 70) = 221.53, p < 0.05, and the presentation of a general warning significantly reduced accuracy ratings for both true and false headlines, F (1, 70) = 4.88, p < 0.05 (See Figure 4 below). The effect of including source on accuracy ratings did not approach significance, nor did any of the interactions.

The second ANOVA analyzed accuracy ratings of true and false headlines only for participants who received source information. This analysis treated source type as a within-subjects variable with three levels, and demonstrated that the type of source attributed to each headline had a significant effect on participants’ accuracy judgments, F (2, 36) = 5.814, p = 0.01, regardless of whether the headline was true or false, such that headlines attributed to Medical Journals received significantly higher overall ratings (M=4.35) than headlines attributed to the presumably less reputable source types (Blog Posts and Politically Affiliated National News Sources; Ms for both i = 3.75; see Figure 5 below).

Two three-way ANOVAs for mixed designs were conducted to assess whether participants were able to distinguish between true and false headlines, how being exposed to a general warning affected participants’ accuracy judgments of true and false headlines, and how the inclusion of the general nature of headline sources affected participant’s accuracy ratings of true and false headlines. Alpha level was set to 0.05 for all analyses.

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Discussion

The current study replicated the findings from Clayton et al. (2019) who demonstrated that average accuracy ratings for both true and false headlines decreased following the presentation of a general warning, indicating that warnings concerning the potential for false news on social media may reduce confidence in true news information.

We did not replicate the findings from Heinbach et al. (2018) who demonstrated that the mere inclusion of headline sources increased accuracy ratings overall. This may be because those authors did not systematically vary the nature of sources. In the current study, the type of source attributed to the headlines in the source conditions had a significant effect on participants’ accuracy judgments independent of whether the headline was true or false, and headlines attributed to Medical Journals were viewed as more accurate than headlines attributed to Blog Posts or Politically Affiliated National News Sources.

The data did not yield evidence for an interaction effect between type of source and the true/false variable which indicates that the type of source attributed to each headline did not significantly improve participants’ ability to distinguish between true from false news headlines, and participants gave higher ratings to headlines attributed to a Medical Journal regardless of whether the headlines were true or false.

The current findings imply that accuracy judgments of news headlines may be correlated with the type of source attributed to the headlines and its associated level of credibility, and that people may be more willing to view a headline as accurate when it is attributed to a credible source type.

Assuming that accuracy is correlated with source credibility, the results demonstrate the importance of including the generic nature of headline sources to mitigate the overall decrease in confidence towards headline accuracy associated with a general warning concerning the potential for false news information on social media.

Conclusions

Because the type of source had a significant effect on how accurate participants believed a headline to be, the inclusion of the generic nature of a headline source may be a useful tool to help minimize the effects of false headlines.

Tagging headlines with both the exact source of the information as well as the general nature of the source may help people distinguish true from false news information if headlines associated with reputable sources tend to be true.

Future studies should seek to further explore strategies to help minimize people’s belief in misleading news information while augmenting their perceived accuracy of true news information.

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References


