Engaging Minds, Debunking Lies: Using Moral Foundations To Fight Misinformation

Mishra, Aadi (School: The Waterford School)

Political polarization creates echo chambers where misinformation thrives. When misinformation aligns with political ideologies, it reinforces biases and obstructs progress on issues like climate change, health, and global conflicts. While research has focused on identifying and limiting misinformation, little research has tested how to penetrate echo chambers with fact-checked information. My project addresses this research gap by testing whether framing fact-checked information using moral foundations increases engagement, even within political echo chambers. Using Moral Foundations Theory, I framed fact-checked headlines using five moral foundations—authority, sanctity, loyalty, care, and fairness. Framing refers to presenting information that emphasizes different moral foundations. Since moral foundations are perceived more innate than political ideology, this approach tests if moral framing can increase believability and engagement (sharing and clicking on online information). I conducted two experiments: 1) a controlled experiment with 1,012 respondents across seven countries and 2) a real-world test where morally framed headlines reached over 67,000 people, with 2,300+ clicking to view fact-checked information. Results show that moral framing significantly increased engagement. Specifically, liberals engaged more with care and fairness frames, while conservatives engaged more with sanctity and loyalty frames. Believability mediated the influence of moral framing on engagement. These findings suggest that reframing fact-checked headlines using moral foundations can be an effective in combating misinformation and bridging political divides. This approach can improve public dialogue on critical issues such as vaccination, healthy eating, and climate change.

Awards Won: