"It's Not Literally True, But You Get the Gist:"

How Nuanced Understandings of Truth

Encourage People to Condone and Spread Misinformation

Julia A. Langdon,*[a][1] Beth Anne Helgason,*[a] Judy Qiu, [a][2] and Daniel A. Effron[a]

Addresses

[a] Organisational Behaviour Subject Area, London Business School, Regent's Park, UK.

Corresponding author: Langdon, Julia A. (julia.langdon@esmt.org)

---

[1] Present address: Department of Organizational Behavior, ESMT Berlin, Germany.

[2] Present address: Department of Management, ESSEC Business School, France.

* These two authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract

People have a more-nuanced view of misinformation than the binary distinction between "fake news" and "real news" implies. We distinguish between the truth of a statement's *verbatim details* (i.e., the specific, literal information) and its *gist* (i.e., the general, overarching meaning), and suggest that people tolerate and intentionally spread misinformation in part because they believe its gist. That is, even when they recognize a claim as literally false, they may judge it as morally acceptable to spread because they believe it is true "in spirit." Prior knowledge, partisanship, and imagination increase belief in the gist. We argue that partisan conflict about the morality of spreading misinformation hinges on disagreements not only about facts but also about gists. (117 words)

KEYWORDS: Misinformation, fake news, morality, fuzzy-trace theory, gist, verbatim, partisan politics

Tom was tired of his cousin emailing political misinformation, so he started replying with links to a fact-checking website. The cousin kept emailing, but now added a disclaimer: "This is probably not true – but you get the idea." [1]. Apparently, the cousin was willing to tolerate and spread misinformation that he acknowledged was *literally* false because he believed that its *general idea* was true.

In formal logic, statements are either true or false, but truth is more nuanced in both reality and people's minds [2]. The statement "*COVID-19 has killed 5 million Americans"* is literally, or *verbatim*, false; the correct number is 1.13 million [3]. But people may perceive the statement's general idea, or *gist*, as true: COVID-19 has killed many Americans. In this paper, we argue that the distinction between *verbatim truth* and *gist truth* can help explain why people tolerate and spread misinformation – particularly when it aligns with their views. Our central claim is that, like Tom's cousin, people sometimes find it *morally acceptable* to spread misinformation because they believe its gist is true, *even when they realize at the time* that its verbatim details are false. Before discussing evidence for our claim, we briefly review prior work on the relevance of the gist-verbatim distinction to the (mis)information ecosystem.

1.1 Prior Work on the Gist-Verbatim Distinction

We draw the gist-verbatim distinction from *fuzzy trace theory* (FTT), an account of how people process information [4]. According to FTT, when people encounter a statement (e.g., "unvaccinated children are 23 times more likely to get a disease than vaccinated children"), they encode, store, and retrieve the statement's *verbatim details* (i.e., the specific, literal information; "23 times more likely") separately from its *gist* (i.e., the general, overarching meaning; "unvaccinated children are not safe") [4, 5, 6**]. That is, a central tenet of FTT is that separate cognitive processes operate in parallel on verbatim details and gist, although these processes can influence each other in some situations [6**, 7, 8]. A statement's gist, more than its verbatim details, shapes what people pay attention to [9], remember [7], and decide [10,11].

Some prior work has applied fuzzy trace theory to misinformation. Headlines sometimes provide misleading summaries of their corresponding news article [12], skewing people's interpretation of the gist even after they read the details in the full article [13]. People sometimes falsely remember verbatim details that are consistent with a gist they believe; for example, people were more likely to mistakenly think that they had read a certain headline about the Covid-19 vaccine if that headline corresponded with their vaccine attitude [13, 14, 15, 16]. Even the mere presence of a clear gist may encourage people to spread (mis)information (17**, 6**, 7). For example, during a measles outbreak at Disneyland, Facebook users were more likely to share vaccine-related news articles that communicated a bottom-line takeaway about vaccines [18]. Similarly, fake-news articles with language that facilitated readers' ability to extract a clear gist tended to be shared more [19].

This prior research demonstrates how the gist-verbatim distinction has been applied to understanding misinformation that people may not realize is false. Going beyond this work, we use this distinction to explain why people would tolerate and spread misinformation they *realize in the moment* is (verbatim) false.

1.2 Excusing Misinformation Recognized as Verbatim False

Commentators have observed that public figures regularly get away with dishonesty, and that fake-news spreads fast and far on social media. One reason is that people sometimes *believe* this misinformation to be true [20] — but a meaningful minority of people admit to sharing misinformation they do *not* believe. For example, in demographically-representative surveys of Americans, 14% of respondents admitted that they "share information on social media about politics even though [they] believe it may be false" [21], and 21% of active Facebook users agreed that they had "shared a political news story online that [they] thought AT

THE TIME was made up" [22].[3] Thus, another reason that misinformation spreads may be that people sometimes *excuse* misinformation they do not believe [23]. In other words, even when people recognize misinformation as false, they sometimes judge it as morally acceptable to spread – and when they do, they are more likely to spread it themselves [24, 25, 26] and are less inclined to take action against people who spread it [25, 26, 27].

We propose that people are more inclined to excuse misinformation when they believe it reflects a "broader truth" – that is, when they think its gist is true. To explain, we introduce a taxonomy of three types of misinformation, defined by whether people believe a false claim's gist, verbatim details, or neither. Because such beliefs can vary across individuals, a false claim can be perceived as a different type of misinformation by different people (or as not misinformation at all). How morally acceptable people think it is to spread a false claim will depend on the type of misinformation they perceive (see Figure 1).

The first type of misinformation is the *blatant falsehood*, which has been the focus of most research on moral judgments of misinformation (e.g., [28,29]). Such statements use false verbatim details to communicate gists that are perceived as false. For example, a person who believes vaccines are safe would perceive the statement "*The COVID-19 vaccine has killed a quarter of a million Americans"* as a blatant falsehood because (a) it has not actually killed that number of Americans (false verbatim) and (b) it implies that the COVID-19 vaccine is extremely dangerous (false gist). People generally perceive blatant falsehoods to be morally unacceptable (but see [28]).

The second type of misinformation is the *palter*, which uses true verbatim details to convey a gist that is perceived as false. For example, a person who believes vaccines are safe would perceive the statement "*At least 20,000 people have died after receiving the COVID-19*
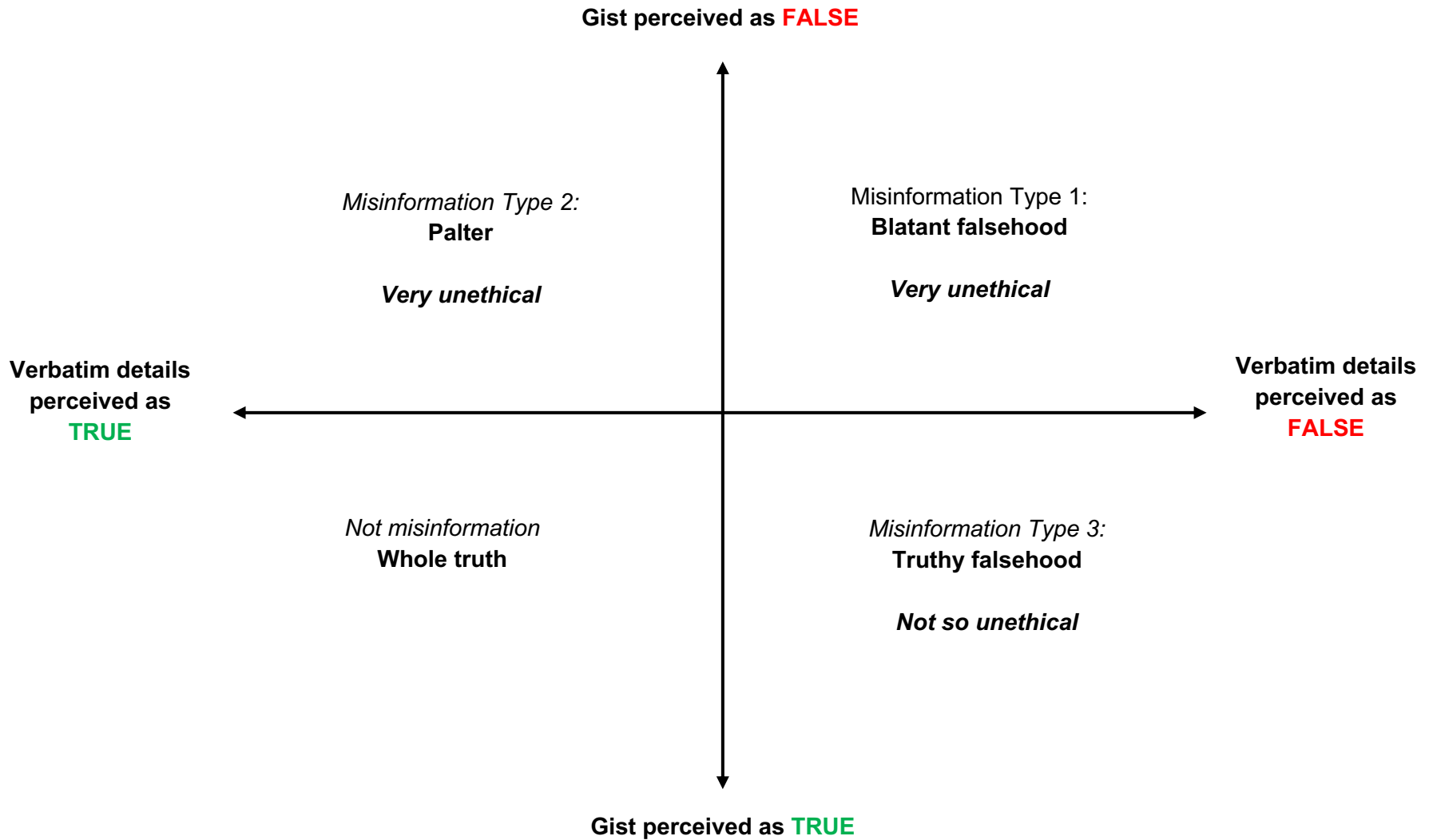
---

[3] These results may underestimate the prevalence of intentional misinformation sharing because some respondents may not admit that they do it, or overestimate the prevalence because some respondents may count satire as false information.

vaccine" as a palter because (a) it describes an accurate statistic (true verbatim), but (b) they would dispute the implication that the COVID-19 vaccine has caused these deaths and is thus extremely dangerous (false gist). People judge palters as similarly unethical to blatant falsehoods [30].

The third type of misinformation is what we term a *truthy falsehood*, which contains false verbatim details, but conveys a gist that is perceived as true. For example, a person who believes that vaccines are safe would perceive the statement, "*Not a single death has been linked to the COVID-19 vaccine*" as a truthy falsehood if (a) they knew that the AstraZeneca vaccine has been linked to death as a rare side effect [31] (false verbatim), but (b) they agreed with the statement's implied broader truth that COVID-19 vaccines are generally safe (true gist). Our research suggests that people judge truthy falsehoods as *less* unethical than blatant falsehoods. For example, social media users thought it was less unethical to falsely claim that guns kill 500 Americans daily when they believed the gist of this statement – that gun violence kills *many* Americans – despite acknowledging that it was literally false [26**] (Study 6).

Thus, when judging the morality of spreading misinformation, people may care more about whether they perceive its gist to be true than whether its verbatim details are true. They tend to think it is unethical to communicate a gist they perceive as false, regardless of whether the details of the message are true (palter) or false (blatant falsehood), but that communicating a true gist using false details does not seem so bad (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Moral judgments of falsehoods depend on how true people perceive the verbatim details and the broader gist

Gist perceived as FALSE

Misinformation Type 2:
Palter

Very unethical

Misinformation Type 1:
Blatant falsehood

Very unethical

Verbatim details perceived as TRUE

Verbatim details perceived as FALSE

Not misinformation
Whole truth

Misinformation Type 3:
Truthy falsehood

Not so unethical

Gist perceived as TRUE

This taxonomy suggests that people are more likely to excuse misinformation that they recognize as verbatim false if they can be convinced that its gist is true. We next review three factors that may reduce moral condemnation of falsehoods by increasing belief in the gist, turning "blatant falsehoods" into "truthy falsehoods."

1.2.1 Prior knowledge. People judge verbatim falsehoods as less unethical when the falsehoods are consistent with their prior knowledge [32]. For example, participants thought it was less unethical for someone to falsely claim on their CV that they had worked at a particular company, like Pixar, when they knew that the individual had worked at firms in the same industry, like Warner Studios. When the false claim was consistent with participants' prior knowledge, they perceived the claim's gist as truer, resulting in more lenient moral judgments of the liar.

1.2.2 Imagination. Verbatim falsehoods also seem less unethical when people imagine how they *could have been* or *might become* true [26**,27]. For example, people were more likely to tolerate the falsehood "*guns kill 400 Americans daily*", despite being told and acknowledging that the real death rate is far lower, when they imagined that "*guns will eventually kill 400 Americans if gun laws don't change*". When participants imagined how a falsehood might become true in the future, they thought its gist (*guns kill many Americans*) seemed truer in the present, and thus thought the falsehood deserved less moral condemnation [26**].

1.2.3 Partisanship. When verbatim falsehoods are told by a political ingroup (vs. outgroup) member, people are more likely to believe the gist, and believe that the gist is what the liar intended to convey. In one study, British Labour and Conservative voters read politically neutral falsehoods (e.g., "*The number of thefts in the UK has increased by a third since 2002*") that were labelled as false. When the politician who told the falsehood was ostensibly from their own party, participants thought the gist was truer (e.g., *"There is too much crime in the U.K."*), even though they acknowledged that the falsehood was verbatim false. They were also more

likely to believe that the speaker intended to communicate the gist, rather than the verbatim details, of the falsehood, and therefore was less deserving of punishment [33]. When Donald Trump claimed, "global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive," Trump supporters were less likely than Clinton supporters to think that Trump meant this statement literally [34]. Partisan perceptions of gist may help explain why partisans are more tolerant of misinformation when it comes from their political ingroup versus outgroup [24*, 35, 36, 37]. A verbatim falsehood is not so unethical if you think the person who told it intended to convey a gist that you believe to be true.

In short, prior knowledge, imagination, and partisanship all shape people's perceptions of misinformation's gist. Even when people recognize misinformation as verbatim false at the time, they are more willing to excuse the falsehood when they believe it conveys a truthful gist. This focus on the gist mentally transforms a statement from a blatant falsehood to a truthy falsehood (see Figure 1). One reason these moral judgments are consequential is, as noted, because the less unethical people think a verbatim falsehood is, the more likely they are to spread it themselves [24, 25, 26].

1.3. Discussion

People have a nuanced view of misinformation that extends beyond the binary distinction implied by the terms "fake news" and "real news." Even when people understand that the verbatim details of a claim are false, they may think the claim speaks to a "broader truth." This observation may explain why people are sometimes willing to tolerate misinformation spread by others – or even why they would knowingly share it themselves. The reason is not simply that contemporary citizens now think truth is less important than they once did. The reason is also not always just that people are ignorant of the facts [38,39], unaware that they are being manipulated [40,41], or inattentive to accuracy [38, 42]. Indeed, the studies of moral judgments we have reviewed made the (verbatim) falsity of misinformation highly salient to participants, who confirmed that they did not believe the relevant misinformation [25, 26, 27, 32,

33]. Sometimes, people may tolerate and even spread misinformation because they perceive it as a "truthy falsehood."

The distinction between gist and verbatim truth has important implications for research on misinformation. When people rate misinformation as "inaccurate," it is unclear whether they perceive the misinformation as verbatim false, gist false, or both. We speculate that perceptions of verbatim truth influence accuracy judgments more than perceptions of gist truth, but that decisions to share information may depend more on perceptions of gist than of verbatim truth. This possibility could help explain why people who say it is important to share only accurate information end up sharing news they are capable of identifying as inaccurate [38]. Sometimes, they may neglect to think about both gist and verbatim truth; other times, though, they may judge the news as inaccurate because they perceive its verbatim details as false, but share it because they perceive its gist as true. This possibility awaits future testing, but it is consistent with the finding that people express greater moral tolerance of misinformation when they think its gist is true, even when its verbatim falsity is highly salient [25, 26, 32, 33], and that moral judgments of misinformation predict sharing intentions [24, 25, 26].

Our analysis has troubling implications for partisan conflict surrounding misinformation. It is hard enough to resolve disagreements about whether a claim is literally and precisely true. It is much harder to resolve disagreements about whether a claim's gist is true, because general claims are harder to falsify than specific ones. Partisans may also disagree about how literally the claim was intended to be taken [34] or even about what gist(s) the claim conveys [6**]. For these reasons, even when partisans can agree on specific facts, they may disagree about whether a given claim constitutes misinformation—in part because they believe different gists.

We have only begun to investigate how perceptions of gist truth influence people's willingness to tolerate and spread misinformation, so future work could disprove some of our specific claims – but, as Tom's cousin would say, you get the idea.

References

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review,
have been highlighted as:
* of special interest
* * of outstanding interest

[1] Tom: Excellent analysis. I have a cousin in the South [Comment on the article: "Why Trump Supporters Don't Mind His Lies"], N. Y. Times 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/28/opinion/sunday/why-trump-supporters-dont-mind-his-lies.html#commentsContainer&commentsContainer%29%28accessed.

[2] Cooper B, Cohen TR, Huppert E, Levine EE, Fleeson W: **Honest behavior: Truth-seeking, belief-speaking, and fostering understanding of the truth in others**. *Acad. Manag. Ann.* 2023, **17**:655–683. https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2021.0209

[3] World Health Organization: United States of America Situation. 2023, https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us (accessed August 22, 2023).

[4] Brainerd CJ, Reyna VF: **Gist is the grist: Fuzzy-trace theory and the new intuitionism**. *Dev. Rev.* 1990, **10**:3–47. https://doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(90)90003-M

[5] Reyna VF, Corbin JC, Weldon RB, Brainerd CJ: **How fuzzy-trace theory predicts true and false memories for words, sentences, and narratives**. *J. Appl. Res. Mem. Cogn.* 2016, **5:**1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2015.12.003

[6] ** Reyna VF: **A scientific theory of gist communication and misinformation resistance, with implications for health, education, and policy**. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* 2021, 118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912441117
Using the distinction between verbatim and gist representations, the author explains how misinformation shapes decision-making through gist representations. This paper uses this distinction and theorizing to explain paradoxes in health behaviors and provides recommendations to how we might solve them.

[7] Broniatowski DA, Reyna VF: **To illuminate and motivate: a fuzzy-trace model of the spread of information online.** *Comput. Math. Organ. Theory.* 2020, **26:**431–464. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10588-019-09297-2.

[8] Reyna VF, Broniatowski DA, Edelson SM: **Viruses, vaccines, and COVID-19: Explaining and improving risky decision-making.** *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 2021, **10**: 491-509. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2021.08.004

[9] Nolte J, Löckenhoff CE, Reyna VF: **The influence of verbatim versus gist formatting on younger and older adults' information acquisition and decision-making**. *Psychol. Aging.* 2022, **37:**197. https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000676

[10] Blalock SJ, Reyna VF: **Using fuzzy-trace theory to understand and improve health judgments, decisions, and behaviors: A literature review**. *Health Psychol.* 2016, **35:**781. https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000384

[11] Corbin JC, Reyna VF, Weldon RB, Brainerd CJ: **How reasoning, judgment, and decision making are colored by gist-based intuition: A fuzzy-trace theory approach**. J. *Appl. Res. Mem. Cogn.* 2015, **4:**344–355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2015.09.001

[12] Bauskar S, Badole V, Jain P, Chawla M: **Natural language processing based hybrid model for detecting fake news using content-based features and social features**. *Int. J. Inf. Eng. Electron. Bus*. 2019, **11:**1–10. https://doi.org/10.5815/ijieeb.2019.04.01

[13] Ecker UK, Lewandowsky S, Chang EP, Pillai R: **The effects of subtle misinformation in news headlines.** *J. Exp. Psychol. Appl*. 2014, **20:**323. https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000028

[14] Greene CM, de Saint Laurent C, Hegarty K, Murphy G: **False memories for true and false vaccination information form in line with pre-existing vaccine opinions.** *Appl. Cogn. Psychol*. 2022, **36:**1200–1208. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.4002

[15] Hwang Y, Jeong SH: **Gist Knowledge and Misinformation Acceptance: An Application of Fuzzy Trace Theory**. *Health Commun*. 2023, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2023.2197306

[16] Traberg CS, van der Linden S: **Birds of a feather are persuaded together: Perceived source credibility mediates the effect of political bias on misinformation susceptibility.** *Personal. Individ. Differ*. 2022, **185:**111269. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111269

[17] ** Wolfe CR, Eylem AA, Dandignac M, Lowe SR, Weber ML, Scudiere L, Reyna VF: **Understanding the landscape of web-based medical misinformation about vaccination.** *Behav. Res. Methods*. 2023, **55:**348–363. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-022-01840-5. Using data from real web pages presenting vaccine information, the authors assessed whether these pages presented misinformation, had an overarching gist, used narrative, and employed emotional appeals.

[18] Broniatowski DA, Hilyard KM, Dredze M: **Effective vaccine communication during the disneyland measles outbreak.** *Vaccine*. 2016, **34:**3225–3228. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2016.04.044

[19] Broniatowski DA, Hosseini P, Porter E, Wood TJ: The Role of Mental Representation in Sharing Misinformation Online, 2023, [Preprint]. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/htkr7

[20] Ecker UK, Lewandowsky S, Swire B, Chang D: **Correcting false information in memory: Manipulating the strength of misinformation encoding and its retraction**. *Psychon. Bull. Rev*. 2011, **18:**570–578. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-011-0065-1

[21] Littrell S, Klofstad C, Diekman A, Funchion J, Murthi M, Premaratne K, Seelig M, Verdear D, Wuchty S, Uscinski JE: Who knowingly shares false political information online? *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 2023, https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-121

[22] Buchanan T: **Why do people spread false information online? The effects of message and viewer characteristics on self-reported likelihood of sharing social media disinformation**. *PloS one* 2020, *15*(10), e0239666. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239666

[23] ** Effron DA, Helgason BA**: The moral psychology of misinformation: Why we excuse dishonesty in a post-truth world**. *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* 2022, **47:**101375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101375
This paper reviews three factors that make people more willing to excuse falsehoods they recognize as verbatim false: partisanship, imagination, and repetition.

[24] * Joyner L, Buchanan T, Yetkili O: **Moral leniency towards belief-consistent disinformation may help explain its spread on social media**. *Plos One*. 2023, **18:** e0281777. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0281777
The authors show that people judge disinformation that is consistent with their personal beliefs as less immoral and are willing to spread it further.

[25] Effron DA, Raj M: **Misinformation and morality: Encountering fake-news headlines makes them seem less unethical to publish and share.** *Psych. Sci.* 2020, **31**: 75-85. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619887896

[26] ** Helgason BA, Effron DA: **It might become true: How prefactual thinking licenses dishonesty.** *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol*. 2022, **123:**909-940. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000308
This paper reports our first evidence that people may tolerate misinformation they recognize is verbatim false because they believe its gist is true. Its findings show that when people imagine how a falsehood might become true, they think the gist of the falsehood is truer, and therefore, the falsehood is less unethical to tell.

[27] Effron DA: **It could have been true: How counterfactual thoughts reduce condemnation of falsehoods and increase political polarization**. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull*. 2018, **44:**729–745. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217746152

[28] Levine EE: **Community standards of deception: Deception is perceived to be ethical when it prevents unnecessary harm**. *J. Exp. Psychol. Gen*. 2022, **151:**410. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001081

[29] Lupoli MJ, Levine EE, Greenberg AE**: Paternalistic lies**. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Decis. Process.* 2018, **146:**31–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.01.001

[30] Rogers T, Zeckhauser R, Gino F, Norton MI, Schweitzer ME: **Artful paltering: The risks and rewards of using truthful statements to mislead others**. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 2017, **112:**456. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000081

[31] Levenson M: British Man Died of Rare Blood Syndrome Linked to AstraZeneca's Vaccine, N. Y. Times. 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/20/health/doctor-death-astrazeneca-covid-vaccine.html

[32] Langdon JA, Effron DA: Lies Seem Less Unethical When They Fit the Facts, 2024. [Unpublished Manuscript]

[33] Helgason BA, Langdon JA, Effron DA, Qiu J: Gist and Verbatim Truth in Partisan Disagreement about Misinformation, 2024. [Unpublished Manuscript]

[34] Hahl O, Kim M, Zuckerman Sivan EW: **The authentic appeal of the lying demagogue: Proclaiming the deeper truth about political illegitimacy**. *Am. Sociol. Rev*. 2018, **83:**1–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417749632

[35] Galak J, Critcher CR: **Who sees which political falsehoods as more acceptable and why: A new look at in-group loyalty and trustworthiness**. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol*. 2022. **124:**593-619. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000264

[36] Mueller AB, Skitka LJ: **Liars, damned liars, and zealots: The effect of moral mandates on transgressive advocacy acceptance**. *Soc. Psychol. Personal. Sci*. 2018, **9:** 711–718. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617720272

[37] Lawson MA, Kakkar H: **Of pandemics, politics, and personality: The role of conscientiousness and political ideology in the sharing of fake news**. *J. Exp. Psychol. Gen*. 2022, **151:** 1154. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001120

[38] Pennycook G, Epstein Z, Mosleh M, Arechar AA, Eckles D, Rand DG**: Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online**. *Nature.* 2021, **592:** 590–595. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03344-2

[39] Walter N, Cohen J, Holbert RL, Morag Y**: Fact-checking: A meta-analysis of what works and for whom**. *Polit. Commun*. 2020, **37:** 350–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1668894

[40] Basol M, Roozenbeek J, Van der Linden S: **Good news about bad news: Gamified inoculation boosts confidence and cognitive immunity against fake news.** *J. Cogn.* 2020, **3**. https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.91

[41] Lewandowsky S, Van Der Linden S: **Countering misinformation and fake news through inoculation and prebunking**. *Eur. Rev. Soc. Psychol*. 2021, **32:** 348–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983

[42] Pennycook G, Rand DG: Lazy, not biased: **Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning**. *Cognition*. 2019, **188:** 39–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011