When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits

By Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan

WHEN FACTS DON'T MATTER

How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits

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Executive Summary

In an era when people have more information at their fingertips than ever before, "facts" seem to have lost their gravitas. As easy as it is in the digital age to share and broadcast information, it is just as easy to ignore, discount, or discredit it. Meanwhile, public figures curate and splice data to fit their ideological goals, with tremendous consequences for public perceptions of reality—and for the real, lived experiences of the people affected by subsequent policy decisions.

Looking specifically at Europe and North America, two trends in the political and media environment stand out as having contributed to this new normal. First, the proliferation of expert opinions and media platforms—and the concerning growth of politically motivated "fake news"—means that much of the information people receive about current events and policy debates is unvetted. Without a neutral arbiter of information, it is difficult for publics to know which "facts" to trust. Politicians have taken advantage of this phenomenon, when convenient, to disseminate information that at times is of dubious quality, and at others long since debunked. When these tactics are rewarded with electoral success, a vicious cycle is created, in which competing politicians have less and less incentive to deal in proven facts. Second, wide swaths of the public have lost trust in the traditional messengers of facts and research. The wave of support for politicians touting populist positions seen in Europe and North America in recent years is inextricably linked to anti-elitism, including a disdain for academic institutions and a skepticism of the experts they produce. In this environment, messages conveyed by politicians through emotional appeals may be seen as more authentic than those backed up by research.

As easy as it is in the digital age to share and broadcast information, it is just as easy to ignore, discount, or discredit it.

Underpinning these trends is an additional factor that, while not new, merits renewed attention: fundamental elements of human nature lead people to resist information that contradicts their existing beliefs or personal experiences. Psychologists have long known that people are not purely rational but instead engage in what is known as motivated reasoning—a process by which information is molded to fit their existing views and the values of the group(s) they identify with (whether this is national political party, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or religion, among others). Information contradicting an individual's sense of self or group identity is often rejected more forcefully than other data, regardless of the evidence backing it up.

This dynamic has been seen perhaps nowhere more strongly than in debates about immigration. As large segments of society coalesce around certain accepted beliefs regarding immigrants and immigration, some of which have become a focal point for populist movements, doubling down on "facts" to persuade them otherwise may backfire. Individuals process information at a personal level—in essence, asking "how does this affect me and my community?" Data, meanwhile, deal in averages, such as unemployment rates or effects on gross domestic product, and may therefore seem distant and disconnected from people's daily lives (if they are even read or trusted in the first place).

Focusing solely on supplying alternate information without accounting for how people absorb, process, and remember it is therefore not an effective tool for countering misinformation. Policymakers, media professionals, and other stakeholders concerned with communicating more effectively about complex policy topics may wish to anchor their strategy in a deeper understanding of two things: how human brains

absorb and retain information, and the circumstances under which publics are more likely to believe messages on controversial issues. Key lessons include:

1. *Cost-benefit analyses may miss the point.* The prevalence in immigration debates of arguments based on economic costs and benefits largely ignores the fact that this is just one of multiple lenses through which voters view complex policy issues—and that it may not even be the most important lens. Messages that appeal to people's morals may be more likely to succeed than those based solely on economics. However, liberal politicians sometimes frame values too narrowly (calling for compassion for others, but leaving out religion and family values, for example).

2. *Avoid arguments that may be viewed as personal attacks.* Efforts to change minds by criticizing beliefs outright (even if these beliefs are based on false information) can make people feel defensive and double down on their positions, making it even more difficult to be heard in the long run. Beliefs are intertwined with self—and group—identity. To effectively replace false information with facts, it is best to (1) avoid messages that may be viewed as an attack on group identity, and (2) affirm people's self-worth in another domain to preempt defensiveness.

3. *Give people a way out instead of trying to prove them wrong.* People do not react well to being told they are wrong; instead of trying to disprove widely believed pieces of information, policymakers should help members of the public "save face" by acknowledging their concerns while at the same time showing them how new information has come to light or circumstances have changed.

4. *Avoid repeating false ideas—even to debunk them*. The simple act of repeating misinformation (even to correct it) can increase the likelihood that people misremember it as true. A better strategy may be to focus on creating a new narrative. For example, instead of emphasizing that Barack Obama is not Muslim (thereby repeating the rumor), a more effective tactic may have been to give examples of his Christian upbringing.

5. *Engage credible messengers from across the aisle.* Partisan messengers are easily discredited by those on the other side. People are more likely to hear and absorb unexpected information from messengers within their own circles of identity. Even the simple fact that a policy position has support from multiple political parties can make individuals less likely to dismiss it.

6. *Start building a culture of critical thinking long before an election cycle or crisis.* Waiting until the middle of a political campaign to introduce new facts is often too late. With the stakes high, voters' political positions will already be closely bound up in their personal identities, and there will be little space for thoughtful debate around complex issues or to meaningfully shift views within the electorate. Deeply held beliefs are highly resistant to change. Instead, the best inoculation against misinformation may be to foster a habit of fact-checking and critical thinking among members of the public as part of daily life.

In short, facts do not fall on a blank slate; people interpret new information in the context of their personal experiences and values, and they will more readily absorb arguments that align with elements of personal identity. The flip side is also true: information that disparages an individual or group will be more forcefully rejected, no matter the evidence behind it. Policymakers must therefore grapple with *why* people are so wedded to their beliefs on hot-button issues such as immigration if they are to communicate more effectively with the public and build up a more thoughtful, balanced public debate.

I.   Introduction

Public opinion on immigration has become seemingly impervious to facts. Evidence-based arguments dispassionately weighing immigration's costs and benefits often seem to fall on deaf ears, while emotional appeals (for either greater openness or restriction) seem to resonate with ever wider audiences. Misinformation is at times accidental and at times more deliberate, such as when information is distorted to achieve a specific political objective.

Two major political events in recent years have made the idea that "facts don't matter" almost cliché. The May 2016 UK referendum on leaving the European Union and, later that year, the U.S. presidential election drove home the limits of persuading voters with hard evidence. Emotionally charged arguments about immigration and positions not grounded in rigorous research colored both campaigns. These remained stubbornly imprinted on the electorates' minds, regardless of how many times claims were debunked by fact-checkers or countered by members of elite institutions who would have at one time been respected as "experts." The Oxford Dictionary even declared "post-truth" its word of the year for 2016, reflecting the rising usefulness among English speakers of a term to describe "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[1]

In order to better understand why there is such a gap between what research has shown about migration trends and immigration policy outcomes and what voters believe, this report analyzes social psychology literature on why people are predisposed to embrace certain ideas and reject others. It explores why, under certain conditions, people ignore, discount, or discredit evidence on controversial issues such as immigration, as well as approaches to making the "expert consensus" on these issues resonate with skeptical publics. It concludes with recommendations on how policymakers and researchers can more effectively communicate the costs and benefits of immigration, as borne out by rigorous research.

Box 1.   What Are Facts?

"Facts" are pieces of information that are indisputably the case, that can be proven as true, or that are presented as having an objective reality. But in the realm of politics, even the most solid data are subject to interpretation, and the most "neutral" intermediaries can be viewed as lacking objectivity. As political scientists Kuklinski et al. write: "very few factual claims are beyond challenge; if a fact is worth thinking about in making a policy choice, it's probably worth disputing."

For the purposes of this report, "facts" are defined as information that aligns with the best available empirical evidence and/or scientific research on an issue and is delivered by credible sources. But in an environment where consensus among experts on politically sensitive issues such as climate change and vaccine safety continues to be challenged—despite a preponderance of evidence—more widespread, societal consensus may never be possible.

Public policy is particularly susceptible to this trap. While it is difficult to claim to be a neurosurgeon without the requisite training, anyone can have an opinion about immigration and assign greater weight to certain pieces of information over others without following any scientific process. As a result, there is an increasing gray area between a descriptive fact that can be proven and confirmed, and a policy position that can have carefully selected supporting evidence both in favor and against it. The world may have entered an era rife with data and evidence, but devoid of the "facts" that build a common foundation for understanding complex issues.

Source: James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, David W. Schwieder, and Robert F. Rich, "'Just the Facts, Ma'am': Political Facts and Public Opinion," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 560 (November 1998): 143–54.

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1   Oxford Dictionaries, "Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 Is...," accessed July 20, 2017, www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/11/15/WOTY-16.

II. Immigration Policy: The War on Facts

Policymakers who hope to impart information about complex policy issues or persuade publics of evidence-based positions face two critical challenges. First, people may lack information about public policies that affect them—including, at times, even knowledge of these policies' existence (policy ignorance).[2] The second and more complex challenge is when people already hold strong views—but these views are based on factually incorrect information (policy distortion).[3] This can result from external sources either omitting relevant information (such as politicians or media telling only half the story) or from stakeholders proactively disseminating objectively incorrect information (see Box 2). Policy distortion is particularly difficult to address when politicians have an incentive to keep erroneous beliefs alive. For example, many nativist and populist politicians are accused of deliberately stoking fear about immigration and crime to support an anti-immigration political platform, while liberal politicians are accused of "white-washing" problems to avoid discussion of the messy reality in which immigration does not hold benefits at all times for all people.

Box 2.   Misinformation, Distortion, or Fake News?

Misinformation falls into two main categories: distortion via omission and distortion by design. In the first category, data and analysis may be offered that are not false per se, but are misleading when presented without nuance or context. This can occur, for example, when information about immigration's costs is summarized as "immigrants use X dollars in benefits," without mention of what they contribute in taxes. Misinformation can also be spread in error if, for example, high-quality evidence is inaccessible (or does not yet exist), or if a mistake is made in analyzing data.

The second category of misinformation covers the spread—often for political reasons—of deliberate falsehoods or "disinformation." This information can either be disproven using rigorous, objective research, or is simply not substantiated by existing evidence. The latter category is the most difficult to confront. Scientific evidence is not designed to entirely rule out alternative scenarios (for example, experiments showing that vaccines are safe do not prove that adverse effects do not exist, just that they are extremely unlikely). This small area of doubt can be weaponized for political purposes. The phenomenon of "fake news," a term that has come to describe the intentional spread of falsehoods through mass media to influence political events, is a type of disinformation. Famous examples include the fabricated "news" spread by Russian groups across social media using fake accounts in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Both categories of misinformation spread easily among consumers who face a seemingly endless array of choices of where to look for policy information, yet have few tools with which to evaluate the credibility and neutrality of each source.

Sources: D. J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs about Politics," *Advances in Political Psychology* 38, no. S1 (February 2017): 127–50; Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 211–36.

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2   "Ignorance" in this context simply refers to its dictionary definition: lack of knowledge or awareness.
3   And, as social researcher Bobby Duffy argues, in practice there is not always a neat delineation between the two; instead there is a "spectrum of false belief from ignorance to misperception." See Bobby Duffy, *The Perils of Perception: Why We're Wrong about Nearly Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018).

There are three points in the policy cycle that are particularly vulnerable to distortion, all having to do with the use of so-called facts: (1) policy debates, when facts are used to explain the pros and cons of different options; (2) political campaigns or referendums, when they are used to persuade publics to support a specific policy or candidate; and (3) during and after crises, when facts are used to soothe (or stoke) public anxiety.

A.   Using Facts to Inform Policy Debates

Even simple facts about immigration are subject to intense debate. When people are asked how many immigrants live in their country, for example, the answers are often overestimated by several degrees of magnitude. This is particularly pronounced in those places with the fewest immigrants.[4] These simple errors, one might assume, could be easily corrected with basic data points. But misinformation becomes harder to counter when the "correct answer" relies on subjective interpretation of complex information. Assessments of the costs of immigration, for example, rely on more than one data point. They involve situating an array of factors—from differing fiscal impacts across regions to the harder-to-measure social costs of rapid change—into a broader context and considering different perspectives; the answer is not the same for every stakeholder. Similarly, the consequences of increasing or decreasing immigration is not cut and dry; rather, the effects vary tremendously depending on whether they are viewed through a national, community, or individual lens.

In the United States, an intense debate has emerged over the relative costs and benefits of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, with each side marshaling an army of warring statistics. Supporters of the program point to refugees' value as tax-paying residents and creative entrepreneurs, while opponents cite the costs of the social, educational, and labor-market supports refugees use during their first years in the country and the burden these service needs can place on local communities.[5] Few experts or politicians speak about the gray area between these two positions: that refugee resettlement can yield long-term economic benefits (on which the research community has reached a consensus),[6] but that it can also spark short-term frictions and costs. It is these more visible, immediate effects that communities are likely to see—and therefore, analysis that acknowledges these costs, and concerns about them, may be more readily accepted than those centered solely on the long-term benefits.[7]

This dynamic is not unique to immigration policy. Public opinion on crime shows similar patterns. A majority of U.S. voters surveyed before the 2016 presidential election, for example, stated a belief that

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4   Political scientists Jack Citrin and John Sides conducted a seminal survey in 2007 in which U.S. respondents estimated foreign-born persons to be 28 percent of the U.S. population, at a time when they were 12 percent. Looking at the European Union, citizens of countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, with far fewer immigrants than other EU Member States, overestimated the foreign-born population to a greater degree. See Jack Citrin and John Sides, "Immigration and the Imagined Community in Europe and the United States," *Political Studies* 56, no. 1 (2008): 33–56. The 2018 Eurobarometer survey shows similar trends. Respondents in 19 of the 28 EU Member States overestimated the immigrant share of the population by at least a factor of two. And in countries with some of the lowest shares of migrants (such as Bulgaria, Poland and Romania), estimates were more than eight times the actual figures. See European Commission, "Special Barometer 469: Integration of Immigrants in the European Union," updated April 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2169.
5   Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Somini Sengupta, "Trump Administration Rejects Study Showing Positive Impact of Refugees," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html.
6   For example, a 2017 U.S. State Department study concluded that there is no adverse long-run impact of refugees on the U.S. labor market. See Anna Maria Mayda, "The Labor Market Impact of Refugees: Evidence from the U.S. Resettlement Program" (working paper 2017-04, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Chief Economist, Washington, DC, August 2017), www.state.gov/documents/organization/273699.pdf. Another 2017 study estimates that refugees pay $21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over their first 20 years in the United States. See William N. Evans and Daniel Fitzgerald, "The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States: Evidence from the ACS" (working paper no. 23498, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, June 2017), www.nber.org/papers/w23498.
7   See also Katherine J. Cramer and Benjamin Toff, "The Fact of Experience: Rethinking Political Knowledge and Civic Competence," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (2017): 754–70.

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crime had gone up since 2008, despite official government statistics showing the opposite.[8] Here, again, perspective matters. Statistics that look at averages over the previous decade—and whether they have gone up or down—will often not be as meaningful to someone as the experience of one single crime in their neighborhood in the past year.[9] As with debates over the benefits of immigration and refugee resettlement, because people do not live their lives in averages, statistics that fail to speak to their personal experiences can be easily discounted.

What all of these debates have in common is the presumption that one "right" answer exists to questions such as how much something costs or whether a trend has gone up or down over time. Yet in reality, these questions generate highly divergent conclusions depending on the analytical lens, meaning that facts can be used to inform but will not in and of themselves settle policy debates.

> *Because people do not live their lives in averages, statistics that fail to speak to their personal experiences can be easily discounted.*

B.   Using Facts in Political Campaigns

The campaigns leading up to the UK Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election were marked by an unprecedented level of skepticism toward facts and expert analyses.[10] In both, politicians made statements that went against academic or research-based consensus. Donald Trump's use of misinformation was well chronicled throughout his campaign and first years in office.[11] Many of the misleading statements tallied by fact-checkers relate to immigration. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly cited estimates of the size of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States that were much higher than those given by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.[12] President Trump has also repeatedly linked immigration (particularly illegal immigration) and crime in ways that are not supported by evidence.[13] In his official announcement that he was running for

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8   John Gramlich, "Voters' Perceptions of Crime Continue to Conflict with Reality," Pew Research Center, November 16, 2016, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/16/voters-perceptions-of-crime-continue-to-conflict-with-reality/.

9   Public opinion about crime is highly influenced by personal experience, media coverage, and political campaigns, and thus anxiety may increase even when statistics show crime decreasing. See, for example, ibid.

10   This reflects the general wave of anti-elitism and disdain for experts that has accompanied the rise of populism in the United States and Europe. See Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Kate Hooper, and Meghan Benton, *In Search of a New Equilibrium: Immigration Policymaking in the Newest Era of Nativist Populism* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-policymaking-nativist-populism.

11   Between his inauguration in January 2017 and late October 2018, *Washington Post* fact-checkers tallied more than 6,000 false or misleading claims made by President Trump. See Glenn Kessler, Meg Kelly, Salvador Rizzo, and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "In 649 Days, President Trump Has Made 6,420 False or Misleading Claims," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/. False claims and scare tactics are, of course, not limited to the political right. In the early days of the Trump administration, Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders claimed in a tweet that "[a]s Republicans try to repeal the *Affordable Care Act*, they should be reminded every day that 36,000 people will die yearly as a result." The same *Washington Post* fact-checker concluded this was "the kind of scare statistic that lacks credibility and gives politics a bad name." See Glenn Kessler, "The Biggest Pinocchios of 2017," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/12/15/the-biggest-pinocchios-of-2017/.

12   Linda Qiu and Amy Sherman, "Donald Trump Repeats Pants on Fire Claim about '30 Million' Illegal Immigrants," Politifact, September 1, 2016, www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/sep/01/donald-trump/donald-trump-repeats-pants-fire-claim-about-30-mil/.

13   As a *Washington Post* fact-checker writes, "Trump's repeated statements about immigrants and crime underscore a common public perception that crime is correlated with immigration, especially illegal immigration. But that is a misperception; no solid data support it, and the data that do exist negate it." See Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Donald Trump's False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/.

president in June 2015, he said of Mexican immigrants to the United States: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."[14] Conservative news outlets echoed these statements, marshaling questionable statistics to prove that a disproportionate number of unauthorized immigrants commit violent crimes, when studies show the opposite to be the case—unauthorized immigrants are far less likely to commit crimes than native-born individuals.[15]

In the United Kingdom, debates over Brexit also featured high-profile sparring over facts. The Brexit "Vote Leave" campaign, for example, claimed that money that should have gone into the UK National Health Service (NHS) was instead flowing into EU coffers. Their estimate, that the United Kingdom would gain £350 million from severing ties with the European Union, was called a "clear misuse of official statistics" by the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority[16]—yet it was widely believed.[17] Justice Minister Michael Gove went even further, declaring that "people in this country have had enough of experts" when asked why voters should trust the assertions of the Leave campaign over expert analyses of the economic impact of leaving the European Union.[18]

Similar trends have also reverberated elsewhere in Europe, particularly since the peak of the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis. Germany's populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) employed similar anti-immigration rhetoric during the country's 2017 general election. Party leaders cited statistics on demographic growth in Africa to stoke fears of continued migration to Germany, gave high-end estimates of the annual costs to Germany of each asylum application, and linked the increase in migrant arrivals to a rise in crime.[19] Critics of AfD have argued that the party misrepresented statistics to feed public anxiety ahead of the election. But at the same time, critics of mainstream parties accused German leaders of turning a blind eye to problems and presenting an overly rosy picture of integration.[20]

These examples illustrate classic misinformation campaigns as well as distortion by omission. The selective use of facts (to tell only half the story, along with efforts to discredit the other half) is particularly strong in campaigns or referendums when much is riding on public support for a specific policy position.

C.   Using Facts in a Crisis

Recent crises—for example, the 2015–16 refugee flows into the European Union and the looming uncertainty that has accompanied Brexit negotiations—have shown how even well-intentioned

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14   *Time*, "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time,* June 16, 2015, http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/.

15   Studies show that both unauthorized and legally present first-generation immigrants tend to commit fewer crimes than the native born (including second-generation immigrants). One theory is that immigrants are the population with the greatest incentive to avoid run-ins with law enforcement officials. See Raoul Lowery Contreras, "Why Facts Still Matter in Immigration Debate," The Hill, April 25, 2017, http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/immigration/330363-why-facts-still-matter-in-immigration-debate; John Burnett, "Illegal Immigration Does Not Increase Violent Crime, 4 Studies Show," NPR, May 2, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/05/02/607652253/studies-say-illegal-immigration-does-not-increase-violent-crime.

16   Letter from David Norgrove, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, to Boris Johnson, UK Foreign Secretary, September 17, 2017, www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Letter-from-Sir-David-Norgrove-to-Foreign-Secretary.pdf.

17   Jon Stone, "Nearly Half of Britons Believe Vote Leave's False '£350 Million a Week to the EU' Claim," *The Independent,* June 16, 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nearly-half-of-britons-believe-vote-leaves-false-350-million-a-week-to-the-eu-claim-a7085016.html.

18   Henry Mance, "Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016, www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.

19   Jefferson Chase, "Germany's Populist AfD Party Seeks to Reboot Migrant Fears," Deutsche Welle, August 21, 2017, www.dw.com/en/germanys-populist-afd-party-seeks-to-reboot-migrant-fears/a-40176414; BBC News, "Reality Check: Are Migrants Driving Crime in Germany?" BBC News, September 13, 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45419466.

20   Leonid Bershidsky, "Germany Must Come to Terms with Refugee Crime: Rare Statistical Data on Violence by Asylum Seekers Confirm the Far Right's Fears, but Not Its Recipes," Bloomberg, January 3, 2018, www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-01-03/germany-must-come-to-terms-with-refugee-crime.

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communication strategies can backfire.[21] When immigrant men were accused of assaulting women in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve 2015, government officials and the media faced a test: how do you communicate sensitive information to the public without stoking fears or prejudices? By all accounts, they failed. The media and officials were criticized for initially remaining silent and then downplaying the scale of the attacks and the role of migrant men in them in order to avoid feeding negative sentiment against refugees. As details of the attacks emerged, the perceived cover-up generated a huge backlash—eroding public trust in elected officials and fueling the very concerns about newly arrived immigrants and refugees they had sought to avoid.[22]

In the face of emotional responses to events, facts themselves may prove insufficient to sway opinion. After the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, news that one of the perpetrators may have entered the European Union posing as a Syrian refugee stoked public fear and elevated security concerns about refugees. Perhaps the greatest effects, counterintuitively, were seen not in Europe but in the United States—even though admissions through the U.S. refugee resettlement program are highly vetted and bear little resemblance to the chaotic, unmanaged arrival of asylum seekers and migrants at EU borders. Governors from 31 U.S. states seized upon this event, issuing a public vow to block the settlement of Syrian refugees in their cities and towns.[23] In response, research organizations and refugee advocacy groups used public information campaigns in an attempt to quell public fears with facts. Researchers painstakingly documented the rigorous screening process for refugees being considered for resettlement, and the White House even released infographics explaining that "refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States."[24] This information, however, failed to change the views of those opposed to refugee resettlement—either because it was discounted by skeptical audiences or because it did not reach them—and questions about the security and vetting of refugee admissions became a prominent issue in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Concerns about refugees have figured prominently in the rhetoric of politicians in Europe as well. Geert Wilders, leader of the populist Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, for example, responded to the Paris attacks by claiming the West was "at war" with Islam,[25] rhetoric he carried through into the spring 2017 Dutch elections.[26] While the PVV saw more modest gains than expected in the elections, the campaign had a significant effect on the tone of the public immigration debate in the Netherlands, reorienting the

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21 Ideally, policymakers should be able to provide the public with information about the expected outcomes of an intervention or policy action, shedding light on the probability and severity of adverse outcomes, and the segments of the population they would affect. This is especially relevant in situations where publics have a decision to make (for instance, a policy vote or behavioral change). See, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Manual* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/manual/index.asp.

22 Eventually, the German parliament responded by passing a law that made it easier for noncitizens to be deported if convicted of sexual assault. See Rick Noack, "Leaked Document Says 2,000 Men Allegedly Assaulted 1,200 German Women on New Year's Eve," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/10/leaked-document-says-2000-men-allegedly-assaulted-1200-german-women-on-new-years-eve/.

23 These declarations were more symbolic than practical, as refugee allocation in the United States is decided at the federal level, not by the states. See Mary Troyan, "After Attacks in Paris, Governors Refuse to Accept Syrian Refugees," *USA Today*, November 16, 2015, www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/11/16/alabama-refuses-syrian-refugees-paris-terror-attack/75857924/.

24 See, for example, Kathleen Newland, "The U.S. Record Shows Refugees Are Not a Threat" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, October 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-record-shows-refugees-are-not-threat; Joseph Cassidy, "8 Misguided Arguments on Refugees and Terrorism," Wilson Center, October 17, 2016, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/8-misguided-arguments-refugees-and-terrorism; The White House, "The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States" (infographic, the White House, Washington, DC, November 20, 2015), https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states.

25 Reuters, "Paris Attacks Boost Support for Dutch Anti-Islam Populist Wilders," Reuters, January 11, 2015, www.reuters.com/article/us-dutch-politics-paris-shooting/paris-attacks-boost-support-for-dutch-anti-islam-populist-wilders-idUSKBN0KK0AD20150111.

26 Fernande Van Tets, "Far-Right Outcast Geert Wilders Vows to 'De-Islamise' the Netherlands after Taking Lead in Dutch Polls," *The Independent*, February 12, 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/geert-wilders-netherlands-dutch-election-freedom-pvv-far-right-donald-trump-a7576456.html.

conversation to focus on issues of identity and national belonging.[27] The strategy of overstating risks by tapping into and exacerbating people's fears can be effective in preventing or blocking policy proposals in the short run—in line with the goals of many anti-immigration political movements. But the challenge for mainstream policymakers is that these narratives can hinder rather than induce constructive action and creative policy solutions over the longer term.

III.   Drivers of the Problem: The Human Mind

Policymakers use two common approaches to counter misinformation. One is to rebut it by emphasizing fact-based arguments—highlighted in political speeches, for example, or targeted information campaigns. The other is to proactively correct it by pointing out errors. But these approaches often have limited success in changing people's minds because they discount fundamental facts about how human brains collect, consume, process, interpret, and remember information.

A.   Why People Resist New Information—Regardless of the Evidence

Psychological experiments have shown that individuals tend to gravitate toward information that confirms their existing views and to reject information that does not fit.[28] According to social psychologists, people's brains fit new information into established and rigid mental frameworks or schemas—organizing principles about aspects of the world based on personal identities, ideological worldviews, and moral codes. If new information falls outside these schema, it is simply tuned out.

This tendency to seek out and absorb information that supports a desired conclusion or affirms existing beliefs is called motivated reasoning, and it is the most common way people process political information.[29] This is particularly the case on highly polarized topics, such as immigration.[30] For example, if people have been primed to believe that immigrants displace native-born workers, they will seek out facts that confirm this and are prone to discount evidence to the contrary. A newspaper article or academic report on the benefits of immigrant workers is unlikely to sway such skeptics. People who already believe that immigrants steal jobs are unlikely to come into contact with materials espousing the opposing view, and if they do, there is a high likelihood the argument will be dismissed out of hand or quickly forgotten.

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27   Demetrios G. Papdemetriou and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, "The Dutch Elections: How to Lose and Still Shape the Direction of a Country—and Possibly a Continent?" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, March 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/news/dutch-elections-how-lose-and-still-shape-direction-country-and-possibly-continent; Tjitske Akkerman, *The Impact of Populist Radical-Right Parties on Immigration Policy Agendas: A Look at the Netherlands* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/populist-radical-right-parties-immigration-netherlands.

28   This tendency, called confirmation bias, can sometimes be a rational response to new information. For example, if someone sees something defy the law of gravity, healthy skepticism is appropriate. People should not change their overall views due to one new piece of information; they should assess new data in light of previously held knowledge. See Tali Sharot, *The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals about Our Power to Change Others* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2017); Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–109.

29   As Jonathan Haidt argues: "conscious reasoning functions like a press secretary who automatically justifies any position taken by the president." See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 106. See also Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007); Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98.

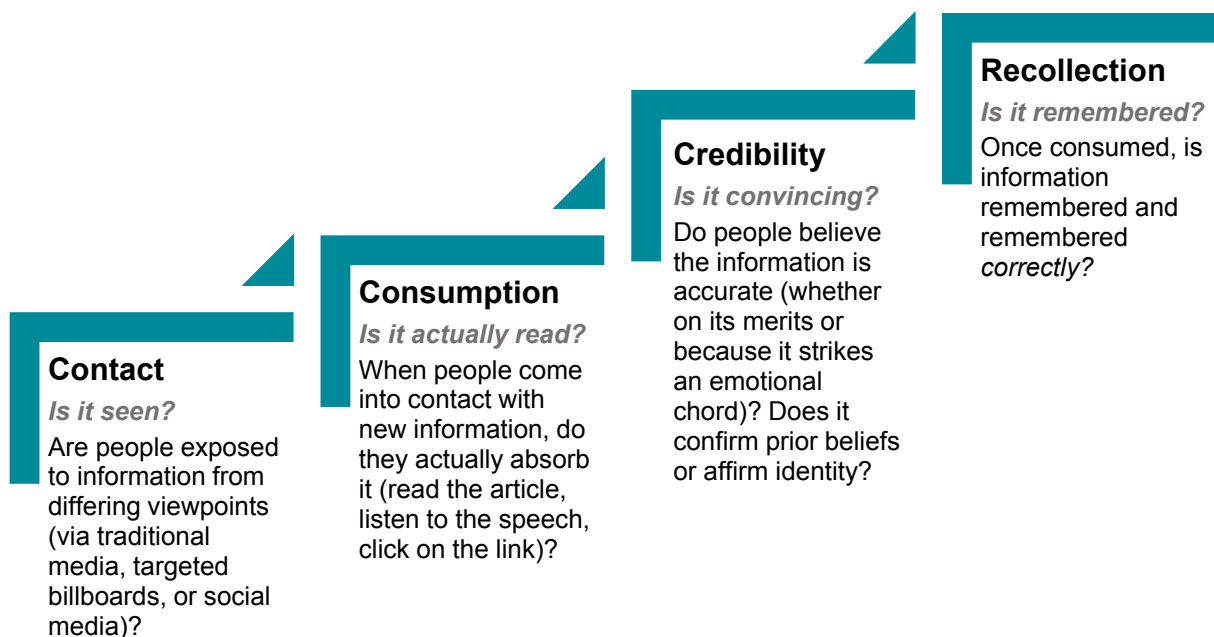30   D. J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs about Politics," *Advances in Political Psychology* 38, no. S1 (February 2017): 127–50; James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 57–79.

Once strong beliefs are in place, they are easily reinforced. This occurs, for instance, through selective exposure to media, but also because of the way memory works. People tend to remember news that aligns with their pre-existing worldview, and to doubt or discount statements that contradict it.[31] The bottom line is that facts are not delivered into a vacuum—they fall into an existing ecosystem of beliefs that are accorded far greater weight than new data. The problem for policymakers is that even when they try to deliver new information that *should* change minds, or at least add to existing reservoirs of knowledge, it can fall on deaf ears.

In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, for instance, the NHS attempted to rebut several claims that more immigration would make the NHS "unsustainable" with a nice array of facts showing just the opposite.[32] Yet the image of the United Kingdom at a "breaking point," unable to withstand the burden of new arrivals, persisted. Why did these facts fail to persuade? Bias colors each stage of how people encounter and interact with new information. The process, shown in Figure 1, can be broken down into four stages: (1) exposure to new information (a poster quoting Nigel Farage or NHS statistics posted on social media, for example); (2) willingness to consume the information (once people see the headline, do they click on the link or read the article?); (3) an assessment of its credibility (to what extent does it tally with or contradict what they believe to be true); and (4) the ease with which the new information is remembered (a shocking anecdote is more memorable than bland numbers). Information that is absorbed then becomes part of the body of beliefs and knowledge against which future content is assessed.

Figure 1. The Four Steps of Information Consumption

Contact

Is it seen?

Are people exposed to information from differing viewpoints (via traditional media, targeted billboards, or social media)?

Consumption

Is it actually read?

When people come into contact with new information, do they actually absorb it (read the article, listen to the speech, click on the link)?

Credibility

Is it convincing?

Do people believe the information is accurate (whether on its merits or because it strikes an emotional chord)? Does it confirm prior beliefs or affirm identity?

Recollection

Is it remembered?

Once consumed, is information remembered and remembered *correctly?*

Source: Compilation by the author.

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31   See Lord, Ross, and Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization."
32   They pointed out that the system actually benefits from 130,000 European-born doctors and health-care workers, that a higher proportion of working-age migrants pay into the system (compared to natives), and that newcomers are more likely to be young and in good health. Immigration is actually a red herring: the real burden on the health-care system is an aging population. See Charlie Cooper, "EU Referendum: Immigration and Brexit—What Lies Have Been Spread?" *The Independent*, June 20, 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-immigration-and-brexit-what-lies-have-been-spread-a7092521.html.

The schemas into which people fit new information are powerful because they are intimately tied to who a person is and how they define themselves. Information will appear more credible and more memorable if it resonates on a personal level—particularly if it affirms their identity in a positive way. On the other hand, political statements that tap into people's insecurities about their identity—for instance, politicians calling voters with legitimate questions about immigration "xenophobic"—exacerbate the tendency to dismiss new information. Because the consumption of information is so personal, efforts to "prove" to people who hold competing viewpoints that they are wrong rarely works. Instead, it can activate their defenses, making it more difficult to be heard.[33]

For policymakers seeking to communicate with their constituents on emotionally charged topics, it is thus important to understand that voters will reject information more forcefully if it challenges their core beliefs and identities. As a result, attempts to correct misinformation with facts alone are prone to backfiring, as the brain processes politically charged information differently than more mundane facts. The messenger is a critical part of the equation as well. Just as people react more favorably to information that affirms their identity, they are more likely to believe information delivered by someone with whom they have something in common, such as a party affiliation. This means that they will likely reject corrections that come from across the political aisle, at times conflating ideological challenges with personal insults.

> *Information will appear more credible and more memorable if it resonates on a personal level.*

A final consideration is *how* politicians appeal to people's sense of identity. Politicians and experts often take it as a given that voters are primarily motivated by economic concerns. This is why it came as a surprise, for instance, that many UK voters dependent on EU subsidies supported Brexit—voting against their apparent self-interest. The post-referendum analysis in many corners was that voters were somehow "duped" by misinformation. But, in fact, voters do not simply weigh the economic costs and benefits of different policy options before making a decision; they also prioritize their group identity, values, and morals.[34] These intangible drivers of voting behavior are often poorly understood. Even when liberal politicians do appeal to morality, they tend to emphasize only one aspect—helping others, including by fighting for greater equity—but research by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt shows that this does not capture the full picture. Conservative politicians, Haidt concludes, tend to offer a more comprehensive moral vision, appealing to loyalty (patriotism), fairness (proportionality), and authority (including respect for traditions).[35] Political messages that do not reflect the fullness of people's moral codes, or that contradict these codes, will have limited resonance.

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33 In addition, scientists have observed that humans are able to see flaws in other people's arguments far better than in their own, which is another reason why poking holes in someone's arguments rarely changes their mind. See Hugo Mercier, "The Argumentative Theory: Predictions and Empirical Evidence," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 9 (September 2016): 689–700.

34 Moral interests—such as religious and family values—may be just as important to voters, and social psychologists argue that human brains may be wired to give them preference. See Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

35 The six pillars of the Moral Foundations Theory are care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. Haidt explains that "Democrats often pursue policies that promote *pluribus* at the expense of *unum*"—in other words, liberals are moved most by the care/harm and liberty/oppression pillars, which translate into ideals of social justice and compassion for vulnerable groups. They tend to ignore appeals rooted in loyalty, authority, and sanctity, which are highly motivating to conservatives.

Box 3. Political Campaigns: Making it Personal

Politicians in both the United States and Europe make direct appeals to voters' identities to garner support for specific political positions, though not always successfully. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's communications about the country's response to the 2015–16 refugee crisis initially succeeded in leveraging identity to maintain support for her policies. She deflected criticism over welcoming more than 1 million refugees by commending the German public's generosity in helping newcomers despite the hardship. By directly connecting her policy goal to the spirit of *Willkommenskultur*, or "welcome culture," she mobilized supporters by making people feel good about their political identity.

While invoking feelings of pride can be effective, using shame as a political tactic often backfires. In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton dismissed many of Donald Trump's supporters based on their beliefs, saying they could be put into a "basket of deplorables" because of the racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic (among other) undertones of their rhetoric. This strategy backfired. Explicitly linking voting positions with negative personal character traits likely served to alienate some voters who may have been on the fence and gave ammunition to her opponent.

Sources: Gavin Hewitt, "Germany: Moral Leader or Misguided?" BBC News, September 8, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34185970; David Ignatius, "In Attacking Trump, Did Clinton Strengthen Support for Him?" *The Washington Post,* November 14, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/11/14/in-attacking-trump-did-clinton-strengthen-support-for-him/.

B.   Why It's Difficult to Correct False Information Once People Have Been Exposed to It

As the example of NHS funding statistics during the Brexit campaign shows, debunking falsehoods or rumors is difficult once they have entered the public arena. First, as noted above, people tend to hold tightly to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence. Second, hearing information again and again (even from people trying to debunk it) makes it stick in people's minds, and they tend to forget relevant details as time passes (including the source or veracity of the information).[36]

Psychological research on fluency—the term for how easily information can be absorbed and recalled—shows that if people can remember something easily, they are more likely to remember it as being true.[37] An experiment that looked at the spread of rumors in the period before the 2010 U.S. health-care reform legislation, the *Affordable Care Act*, was passed found that the simple act of repeating a rumor (in this case, the falsehood that then-President Obama wanted to create "death panels") increases its power.[38] This was shown to hold true even when factually correct information was presented alongside the rumor in order to debunk it. Other experiments show that the simple act of making a campaign slogan more visually appealing or easier to read increases its chances of being remembered—regardless of its

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36 Over time, information stored in the brain is gradually separated from the context in which it was originally learned. See Sam Wang and Sandra Aamodtjune, "Your Brain Lies to You," *The New York Times,* June 29, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/opinion/29iht-edwang.1.14069662.html.

37 Berinsky notes that while this is usually achieved through repetition, even the color and font of ad text can be effective if it renders information easier to remember. See Adam J. Berinsky, "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation," *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2017): 241–62.

38 The term "death panels" was coined by Sarah Palin, former governor of Alaska, during the 2009 debates on U.S. health-care reform. She claimed the Democratic bill would judge a person's "level of productivity in society" to determine whether they are "worthy" of health care, despite there being no evidence for this claim in the text of the legislation. See Angie Drobnic Holan, "Sarah Palin Falsely Claims Barack Obama Runs a 'Death Panel,'" Politifact, August 10, 2009, www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/aug/10/sarah-palin/sarah-palin-barack-obama-death-panel/.

content.[39] Research into this phenomenon, called illusory truth, has consistently shown that repetition of information increases the likelihood of it being remembered as true, even if people already possess expertise that should enable them to debunk the rumor.[40] So a campaign poster linking immigrants and crime may stick in an individual's mind even if they have just read a research-based article demonstrating the absence of such a link—and that seeing the poster multiple times can strengthen this effect.

Time also has an effect on people's ability to recall information. After receiving a correction to a piece of misinformation, people become less sure about what is correct and what is false after several weeks or months have passed. This is partly because people have trouble remembering where they got their information—a phenomenon known as source amnesia.[41] So they may remember hearing a statement that immigrants commit more crimes than the native born, for example, but do not remember whether this came from a trusted source or not. This suggests that the commonly used "myth-busting" strategy— for example, glossy leaflets with side-by-side comparisons of myths and facts—can backfire, because the very act of discrediting the incorrect information involves repeating it. This can be exploited in politics to spread misinformation: Politicians know that if their message is initially memorable, and it is repeated often enough, its impression will persist long after it is debunked.

If people can remember something easily, they are more likely to remember it as being true.

Third, correcting misinformation can, under certain circumstances, backfire and exacerbate its power. A leading study in this field documented a series of experiments on people's memories of why the United States went to war in Iraq, finding that corrective information presented in news reports not only failed to reduce misperceptions, but actually *increased* the strength of misinformation among ideological groups already predisposed to believe such positions.[42] One explanation is that, when presented with a correction, many people seek to strengthen their own arguments (in ways they might not otherwise have explored). While the evidence is mixed on how widespread this backfire effect really is,[43] the bottom line is that it is possible—and thus part of the complex cycle of how information is consumed and spread.

IV. Drivers of the Problem: Media Fragmentation and Fake News

Beyond the social psychology of how individuals process information, there is another set of variables that helps explain why research-based evidence on immigration may not resonate with members of the public: the media environment and a growing lack of trust in established experts.

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39 Christian Unkelbach, "Reversing the Truth Effect: Learning the Interpretation of Processing Fluency in Judgments of Truth," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 33, no. 1 (January 2007): 219–30.

40 Lisa K. Fazio, Nadia M. Brashier, B. Keith Payne, and Elizabeth J. Marsh, "Knowledge Does Not Protect against Illusory Truth," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 144, no. 5 (2015): 993–1002.

41 Wang and Aamodt, "Your Brain Lies to You."

42 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–30.

43 Subsequently, the original researchers teamed up with another pair of scholars to try to replicate the findings and found statistically insignificant effects.

The modern media landscape and the prevalence of "fake news" exacerbate some of the potentially negative effects of the psychological processes described above. In many societies, the average person now has access to a wide array of unvetted information, some of which is tailored to fit specific viewpoints. At the same time, the credibility of "vetted" sources (such as research conducted by academics) is under attack. It has never been easier to cast doubt on facts by questioning the legitimacy of their source, for example, by suggesting that bias has colored an academic's writing.[44] While individual biases can and should be interrogated, what is new is the propensity to elevate anecdotal examples of flawed science to an indictment of scientific inquiry itself.

The proliferation of sources of information creates three main challenges. First, there is no trusted arbiter of information. In previous decades, there were fewer channels through which information could be delivered to the general public, meaning that information was more curated and filtered (for better or for worse). One or two trusted TV anchors delivered the news, print material went through established review processes, and books in libraries were largely written by the academic elite. The democratization of information, including via the internet, has vastly expanded dissemination channels while lowering the barriers to entry. Virtually anyone can self-publish and share their views widely (for instance, through social media and other nontraditional channels), while consumers of information can self-select their sources of news. On one hand, this trend has created opportunities for underrepresented voices to be heard, but on the other, it has helped create echo chambers in which people can easily avoid views different from their own.

> *While individual biases can and should be interrogated, what is new is the propensity to elevate anecdotal examples of flawed science to an indictment of scientific inquiry itself.*

Public policy in a democratic nation depends on the opinion of the voting public. Politicians thus encourage citizens to develop strong opinions, particularly on hot-button issues such as immigration. This inclusive approach to political debates means that individuals can argue vehemently about the merits of a specific policy without being able to explain in detail how the policy works.[45] As technology and the media industry have changed, nonexperts may also now widely disseminate their views without being held to research standards—placing the onus on other members of the public, rather than the academy or the media, to assess their content for veracity and bias.[46]

The idea that the media should be "neutral" has inadvertently exacerbated this problem. Many media outlets feel compelled to give equal time (and thus equal legitimacy) to all sides of an issue, rather than risk accusations of bias by giving more weight to those with expertise or knowledge on a particular subject. Ironically, this drive to eliminate bias by presenting "the other side" and admitting that issues often involve some degree of uncertainty (even if very small) has resulted in less reputable or data-driven

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44   See also Daniel Engber, "Is Science Broken? Or Is It Self-Correcting?" Slate, August 21, 2017, https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/science-is-not-self-correcting-science-is-broken.html.

45   Cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach have called this tendency of people to think they know much more than they actually do "the illusion of explanatory depth." They point out that this is not a problem in certain areas of life—anyone can operate a toilet without understanding the mechanics behind why it works—but this tendency becomes particularly problematic when people develop entrenched positions on things such as immigration policy without being able to cogently explain the pros and cons of either side. See Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

46   As Francis Fukuyama writes, "In a world without gatekeepers, there is no reason to think that good information will win out over bad." See Francis Fukuyama, "The Emergence of a Post-Fact World," Project Syndicate, January 12, 2017, www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-emergence-of-a-post-fact-world-by-francis-fukuyama-2017-01.

information gaining more currency.[47] This is especially problematic at a time when no authoritative source of news can play referee in cases of disagreement. A seminal 2010 study points out that when news stories pit two sides of an argument against each other, viewers are significantly more likely to stay wedded to their pre-existing opinions as both sides are presented as equally valid.[48] In this environment, a healthy skepticism of experts and new evidence has become a logical response to a cacophony of competing arguments.

The natural nuances of academic research—in which it is impossible to make almost any assertion with 100-percent certainty—have also been used in efforts to devalue it. In 2015, a *New York Times* article reported that a team of social scientists had undertaken a massive effort to reproduce the findings of 100 studies across three leading psychology journals—but were unable to reproduce half of the reported results.[49] This admission became fodder for right-wing analysts, who used it to cast doubt on science writ large. Radio host Rush Limbaugh, for example, seized upon this example of "the fraud of peer-review science" and concluded that "the vast majority of what you hear [from these journals] is all bogus . . . and the purpose is to affect human behavior."[50] What was lost in these critiques is a far more mundane fact: small tweaks to study design can make the difference between whether findings are replicable or not, and irreplicability does not immediately make a study's findings invalid in their original context.[51] The unfortunate result is that these attacks may curb what is actually a needed reexamination of scientific processes. Researchers *should* be more vigilant in examining biases and questioning study design, but they may have less incentive to be transparent about mistakes in an environment where science itself is being called into question.

The second major challenge that has accompanied the proliferation of information sources is that the growth of "fake news" has eroded the fragile trust between the public and the media. Beyond cherry-picking convenient facts or leaving out valuable context, fake news involves the deliberate planting of distortions and falsehoods—usually by actors who wish to influence politics. Online platforms such as Google and Facebook have belatedly acknowledged that Russian actors engaged in widespread efforts to influence public opinion in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. elections through systematic disinformation.[52] UK Prime Minister Theresa May referred to these efforts as an attempt to "weaponize information."[53] Media platforms are exploring technological solutions to address this, both by providing individuals the tools to better evaluate information and by making it harder for fake news to reach them in the first place.[54] Google, for example, launched a "fact-check" label on its search results in 2017, which aimed to help

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47 A classic example is the media coverage over the past 15 years of the widely discredited research linking the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. The decision by both U.S. and UK media to present both pro-link and anti-link perspectives had the unintended consequence of lending legitimacy to concerns about vaccines that have never been borne out by evidence—with real consequences for the public. "In such cases, 'balanced' coverage can be irresponsible, because it suggests a controversy where none really exists." See Curtis Brainard, "Sticking with the Truth: How 'Balanced' Coverage Helped Sustain the Bogus Claim that Childhood Vaccines Can Cause Autism," *Columbia Journalism Review,* May/June 2013, https://archives.cjr.org/feature/sticking_with_the_truth.php.

48 And as mentioned in the previous section, people are already looking for a reason to hold onto their pre-existing beliefs. See Nyhan and Reifler, "When Corrections Fail."

49 Benedict Carey, "Many Psychology Findings Not as Strong as Claimed, Study Says," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/science/many-social-science-findings-not-as-strong-as-claimed-study-says.html.

50 Rush Limbaugh, "Peer Review Science Exposed as Fraud," The Rush Limbaugh Show, August 28, 2015, www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/08/28/peer_review_science_exposed_as_fraud/; ibid.

51 This is especially the case in the social sciences, including psychology, in which perfect lab conditions rarely exist. If a study aims to measure racial attitudes, for example, its findings will differ significantly if it is conducted in Amsterdam and later replicated in San Francisco. See Benedict Carey, "New Critique Sees Flaws in Landmark Analysis of Psychology Studies," *The New York Times,* March 3, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/science/psychology-replication-reproducibility-project.html.

52 Mike Isaac and Daisuke Wakabayashi, "Russian Influence Reached 126 Million through Facebook Alone," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html.

53 Rowena Mason, "Theresa May Accuses Russia of Interfering in Elections and Fake News," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2017, www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/13/theresa-may-accuses-russia-of-interfering-in-elections-and-fake-news.

54 David M. J. Lazer et al., "The Science of Fake News: Addressing Fake News Requires a Multidisciplinary Effort," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1094–96.

users "distinguish between fact and fiction,"[55] but the tool was withdrawn in 2018 due to concerns about quality.[56] Facebook has also experimented with various methods of keeping fake news in check. Initially, the social media platform began using red flags to mark news that has been fact-checked and found false, but it quickly abandoned this practice when it became clear that the flags attracted attention and actually led people to share debunked information *more*. They are now making links to posts deemed fake news visually smaller in the hopes that users will pass over them while scrolling.[57]

Ultimately, such tools are only a small piece of the puzzle. They are more likely to affect the behavior of individuals actively questioning the information they are seeing (who are in the minority), rather than those seeking to validate their existing beliefs. A study on fake news consumption in the month preceding the 2016 U.S. presidential election found that only half of respondents who consumed fake news visited a fact-checking website, and that exactly zero encountered a fact-check that specifically rebutted one of the demonstrable falsehoods they had read.[58] If this is the case more broadly, fact-checkers may essentially be preaching to the converted.

> *People's confidence in information—even if it has been shown to be false—may grow if others believe it.*

The final challenge that has accompanied the shift in the media landscape is that information can gain credibility not because it has gone through a rigorous review process or has evidence to support it, but simply because it is widespread and because other people believe it. This can be especially influential in cases of cognitive dissonance, the mental discomfort people may experience when they hold competing or contradictory beliefs. When grappling with how to reconcile such beliefs, people's confidence in information—even if it has been shown to be false—may grow if others believe it. Social media's global reach has brought together like-minded communities that would otherwise have been more isolated by geography—with the result, in some cases, of creating the appearance of consensus around political ideas that are not backed up by research. These echo chambers can be extremely powerful: online platforms offer low barriers to entry and can enable contentious claims to go unchallenged.

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55   One feature was a "publisher knowledge panel," which would show the topics the publisher commonly covers, major awards they have won, and claims they have made that have been reviewed by third parties. See Justin Kosslyn and Cong Yu, "Fact Check Now Available in Google Search and News around the World," The Keyword, April 7, 2017, www.blog.google/products/search/fact-check-now-available-google-search-and-news-around-world/.

56   Daniel Funke, "Google Suspends Fact-Checking Feature over Quality Concerns," Poynter, January 19, 2018, www.poynter.org/news/google-suspends-fact-checking-feature-over-quality-concerns.

57   Lulu Chang and Eric Brackett, "Facebook Outlines Plans for Combating False News," Digital Trends, June 21, 2018, www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/facebook-fight-fake-news/.

58   The study identified a pool of people who read one or more fake news articles containing information rated "false" by fact-checkers, and found that none of these people went on to read the fact-check in question. See Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the Consumption of Fake News During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign," European Research Council, January 9, 2018, www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf.

V. Conclusions: What Policymakers Can Do

In polarized societies, it is hard to win policy arguments with facts alone. Attempts to counter the spread of misinformation and distortions are complicated by the nature of public policy, human psychology, and the media landscape.

The issues at the heart of many policy debates exist in a gray area—there is rarely 100 percent certainty on, for example, the costs or benefits of immigration—yet the modern political and media landscape has narrowed the space for nuance. By the time members of the public are exposed to information, they have already been "primed" by an onslaught of partisan messages. The ubiquity of new media outlets and the concomitant loss of a widely agreed upon set of respected sources of information have allowed for the easy dissemination of unvetted opinions. Many of these messages are designed to tap into voters' core identities. And because people are already predisposed to believe one side over another, attempts to "correct" their views can actually strengthen them.

Political positions are often inextricably intertwined with personal and group identities.

Countering misinformation thus requires much more than just providing alternate information—it requires understanding how people will process it, and in particular how it might interact with their core beliefs about who they are. Political positions are often inextricably intertwined with personal and group identities, making them highly resistant to corrections. The drive to preserve one's sense of self goes beyond politics and often makes it nearly impossible to change beliefs even in the face of relatively clear-cut facts.[59] Leading with data-based arguments can therefore be counterproductive if not informed by an understanding of the emotional environment into which these facts land.

To apply these lessons, policymakers seeking to communicate more effectively about complex issues such as immigration may wish to adjust the content and packaging of their messages.

1. *Take steps to understand what drives the intended audience, acknowledging that this may differ from what policymakers or academics find persuasive.* Policymakers often place the overwhelming emphasis of immigration-related messaging on cost-benefit calculations, but economics alone do not drive a significant portion of the electorate. Studies have shown that many voters respond to appeals based on values, but that politicians tend to draw on an overly narrow conceptualization of morality. For example, liberal politicians tend to emphasize social justice and equality while giving less attention to loyalty and responsibility—and their messages, as a result, fail to resonate with more conservative audiences.

2. *Tap personal experiences to get facts to stick.* Psychology research has unambiguously shown that processing information is not always a purely logical affair: people rely on intuition and gut instinct to guide them. They are more likely to absorb information when it strikes an emotional chord or aligns with their life experiences, as people interpret new information through the lens of their personal histories. This means that messages need to make an emotional as well as intellectual connection if they are to stick. It also means that

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59   This is related to "solution aversion;" on any issue where people's cherished beliefs and identities are in play, they tend to alter their view of reality to be as flattering as possible. See Chris Mooney, "The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science," *Mother Jones*, May/June 2011, www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/denial-science-chris-mooney/.

policy information can be "primed" in order to have a bigger impact; reminding people of their desire to be good citizens, for example, can make them more willing to seek accurate information. Messages that remind people of social differences or are interpreted as threats to their group, on the other hand, can trigger motivated reasoning and shut out new information.[60]

3. *Tread carefully when criticizing positions that may be intertwined with group identity.* Because humans are hardwired to discount or discredit new information that contradicts deeply held beliefs, the larger the gap between the new data and the existing belief, the smaller the chance of the critique being heard. Efforts to convince voters to change their minds that rely on heavy-handed criticisms of beliefs they hold dear will trigger defensiveness and rejection. More successful communications give voters a way out—for example, instead of trying simply to prove voters wrong, a message could help them "save face" by acknowledging their previous position while at the same time showing them how new information has come to light or circumstances have changed.

4. *Avoid debunking false information without creating a new narrative.* Correcting misinformation with scientific facts is not only ineffective, it can even increase the likelihood that people misremember the object of the correction as true.[61] News or research organizations that produce fact sheets debunking false information may inadvertently reinforce these beliefs simply by repeating them.[62] One way to avoid this pitfall is to create a new narrative instead of debunking an inaccurate one.[63] The bottom line is that when debunking myths, facts should not be simply inserted into a vacuum; they must be woven into a compelling narrative members of the public can use to make sense of the new information.[64]

5. *Engage credible messengers from across the aisle.* Rumors and unfounded assertions are common in politics and highly resistant to correction, in part because points made by partisan messengers are easily discredited by those on the other side. One effective way to break this cycle is to deliver information from unexpected sources. Members of the public who hear new information from a politician who shares their views may be more likely to consider and absorb points that diverge from the party line. Because of this, politicians may want to invest in winning over their opponents rather than only targeting the voting public. Research shows that when publics know there is significant disagreement among parties (high polarization), they are more likely to stick with their own party's position; by contrast, the existence of varied opinions within the same party makes people more willing to seek the truth rather than simply affirm their pre-existing position.[65] There is therefore value in working with colleagues who come from different parts of the political spectrum but have a shared interest in creating a more nuanced narrative around issues such as immigration.

Creating more open and more regular channels of communication between the public and their elected leaders will prove important as a counterbalance to the election-time onslaught of policy information. Policymakers, however, do not hold all the levers to correcting misinformation. A broader societal conversation is needed around how news and evidence are consumed. Political leaders, educators, researchers, and media professionals should take steps to encourage critical thinking among the public

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60 Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler, "The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions."
61 Christina Peter and Thomas Koch, "When Debunking Scientific Myths Fails (and When It Does Not): The Backfire Effect in the Context of Journalistic Coverage and Immediate Judgements as Prevention Strategy," *Science Communication* 38, no. 1 (2016): 3–25.
62 Wang and Aamodt, "Your Brain Lies to You."
63 For example, rather than emphasize that Obama is not Muslim (as has been asserted by some of his critics), some researchers have suggested it may be more effective to stress that he embraced Christianity as a young man. See ibid.
64 Christopher Graves, "Why Debunking Myths About Vaccines Hasn't Convinced Dubious Parents," *Harvard Business Review*, February 20, 2015, https://hbr.org/2015/02/why-debunking-myths-about-vaccines-hasnt-convinced-dubious-parents.
65 Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler, "The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions."

and to help them identify misleading argumentation techniques as a matter of routine, rather than in the midst of crisis.

Fact-checking websites have been shown to have limited impact because, for the most part, they do not reach the people who read and believe the false claims they debunk. Instead, consumers of information need to develop habits of assessing the veracity of what they read and identifying ideological bias— whether in sources that align with or contradict their own beliefs. Educators can play a big role in creating a climate of critical thinking that encourages people to seek out more than soundbites and to question the information they come across. If, in doing so, people spend more time trying to work through the complexities of policy proposals, they might realize the wider implication of the issue at hand and moderate their views.

The desire to win arguments and the tendency to seek out information that reaffirms one's core identity are evolutionary traits that are hardwired into the human brain. Yet policymaking in democratic societies relies on the engagement of an electorate able to access and think critically about new information, and to adjust their views accordingly. Data and facts still have the power to promote a more informed electorate and a more effective policy process, but simply supplying high-quality information is no longer sufficient. Communicators need to work to better understand the political and emotional context in which information lands, and adapt their use of evidence to support a more nuanced debate of issues such as immigration to which there are rarely clean-cut, right-or-wrong answers.

Policymaking in democratic societies relies on the engagement of an electorate able to access and think critically about new information, and to adjust their views accordingly.

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