

BUZZFEED DISCOVERS WE'RE NOT THE RUBES IT HAS CLAIMED, BUT INSISTS WE STILL HAVE A FAKE NEWS PROBLEM

Back in December, I called out BuzzFeed for a bogus news story about fake news. Based on a poll it commissioned, it claimed that 75% of people believe fake news. That's not what the poll showed. Rather, it showed few people recalled headlines BuzzFeed had IDed as fake, but those who did believed it. It also showed that people recalled and believed "real" news more than they did fake.

[T]he poll showed that *of the people who remember a given headline, 75% believed it. But only about 20% remembered any of these headlines (which had been shared months earlier). For example, 72% of the people who remembered the claim that an FBI Agent had been found dead believed it, but only 22% actually remembered it; so just 16% of those surveyed remembered and believed it. The recall rate is worse for the stories with higher belief rates. Just 12% of respondents remembered and believed the claim that Trump sent his own plane to rescue stranded marines. Just 8% remembered and believed the story that Jim Comey had a Trump sign in his front yard, and that made up just 123 people out of a sample of 1809 surveyed.*

Furthermore, with just one exception, people recalled the real news stories tested more than they did the fake and with one laudable exception (that Trump would protect LGBTQ citizens; it is "true" that he said it but likely "false" that he means it), people

believed real news at rates higher than they did fake. The most people – 22% – recalled the fake story about the FBI Agent, comparable to the 23% who believed some real story about girl-on-girl pictures involving Melania. But 34% remembered Trump would “absolutely” register Muslims and 57% remembered Trump’s claim he wasn’t going to take a salary.

BuzzFeed is back with another poll. Here’s what Craig Silverman claims this poll shows.

The online survey of 1,007 American adults found roughly the same percentage of American adults said they consumed news in the past the month on Facebook (55%) as on broadcast TV (56%). Those were by far the most popular sources of news, followed by print newspapers (39%), cable news (38%), “social media (generally)” (33%), and newspapers’ websites (33%).

But a significant gap emerged when people were asked how much they trust the news they get from these sources. Broadcast TV once again scored the highest, with 59% of respondents saying they trust news from that source all or most of the time.

In contrast, only 18% of respondents trust news on Facebook all or most of the time – and 44% said they rarely or almost never trust news on Facebook.

And unlike the last time Silverman read a poll, that is what the poll actually shows: people say they get “news” from Facebook but don’t really trust it, in contradistinction from the “news” they get from broadcast TV. In case you’re wondering (because BuzzFeed didn’t include this in its narrative of whether people read and trust news), 23% of people get “news” from

online only publications like this one and like BuzzFeed; 35% trust it most or all of the time. Given how much BuzzFeed has been claiming that we have a “fake news crisis” driven by Facebook, you’d think they’d find low trust rates for Facebook to be great news. “Golly, people aren’t the rubes we’ve been getting clicks telling you they are, sorry.”

But BuzzFeed doesn’t do that. Instead, it returns to overstating what its last poll showed (though not quite as badly, this time), to suggest that people may *believe* Facebook, even if they don’t trust it .

But other research suggests that trust is not the same as belief – and that beliefs can be shaped even by distrusted sources. A recent online poll conducted by Ipsos for BuzzFeed News found that on average about 75% of American adults believed fake news headlines about the election when they recalled seeing them. The headlines tested were among those that received the highest overall engagement (shares, reactions, comments) on Facebook during the election, which means they received a large amount of exposure on the platform. A research paper published this week also found that just over half of people who recalled seeing viral fake election news headlines believed them to be true.

So while American adults say they don’t trust a lot of the news they see on Facebook, that apparently doesn’t stop many of them from believing it.

As a threshold matter, note that BuzzFeed’s pollster, Ipsos, appears not to have defined “news,” “trust,” or (the last time) “belief.” I guess it is unsurprising that someone claiming we have a “fake news” crisis believes there are essential terms, because fetishizing “news” is a key part of pitching “fake news” as something new.

But even though BuzzFeed introduced both apples and oranges in its bowl of fruit, I do find the numbers taken in conjunction instructive. Had BuzzFeed actually done the math I did last time – showing that recall rates for fake news are actually low so the poll did not, in fact, show that “many” people believe fake news – it might consider the possibility that when people read stuff on Facebook they don’t find to be credible, they don’t retain it. BuzzFeed measured different things, but the 18% of people who believe everything they read on Facebook is not far off from the 8-16% of people who remembered and believed fake news headlines from Twitter.

If you want a crisis, I’d say look to cable news, which is where 38% of people say they got their news, with half trusting it most or all the time. It appears more disinformation gets disseminated and retained that way than via Facebook. But as a very old problem, I guess that wouldn’t give BuzzFeed the same clicks as the Facebook fake news panic does.