

The reputational penalty: How fact-checking can penalize those who spread misinformation

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Abstract

Whether or not political leaders pay a price for spreading misinformation has profound implications for democracy. In this paper, we identify the conditions under which corrections of misinformation can penalize those who spread misinformation. We focus on abortion, a highly salient and polarizing issue that stands as a hard test for the persuasive capacity of fact-checks. Across three studies, we observe fact-checks improving accuracy and degrading attitudes toward political figures who spread misinformation. We take that as evidence that, if a fact-check follows, those who spread misinformation can pay a “reputational penalty.” However, we do not find that fact-checks affect policy attitudes. In Study 3, we show that the reputational penalty applied to political figures depends on participants’ pre-treatment familiarity with the figure. These results have important implications for understanding how fact-checks can hold leaders accountable for misinformation. Fact-checks can penalize leaders for spreading misinformation—provided those who spread it are not well-known.