What Prompts Suspicions About Information Integrity?
Motives for Fact-Checking Suspect Content

ERIK P. BUCY⬥
Texas Tech University, USA

DUNCAN V. PRETTYMAN
Colorado Technical University, USA

MICHELLE A. AMAZEEN
Boston University, USA

The rise of misinformation in digital news flows has led to a corresponding call for more investigation into the antecedents of news verification—and for improved understanding about who verifies and why. In this study, we conduct a thematic analysis of participants' open-ended responses (N = 2,345 individual thoughts, volunteered by N = 715 participants) to an online survey prompt to explore epistemological influences on user decisions to verify or not verify information they have reason to believe might be false, when given the opportunity to do so. The analysis identifies 8 themes associated with information verification from user responses and then examines how these epistemological motives vary when examined across individual differences that previous research suggests may be impactful. Specifically, we examine the association of themes with procedural news knowledge, news skepticism, and individual motivations for media use (surveillance vs. entertainment). Results show significant differences in the characteristics of searchers compared with non-searchers.

Keywords: information verification, fact-checking, epistemological motives, fake news, misinformation, theme analysis

Falsehoods are not a new phenomenon in Western media. Indeed, fake news stories in one guise or another have circulated since at least the 1700s (Schneider, 2017). Although distortions, deceits, and outright fabrications have been a persistent feature of the information landscape for centuries, only since their mass deployment during the tumultuous 2016 U.S. presidential election that saw Donald Trump win the presidency have they become a topic of particular concern among scholars, journalists, policy makers, and the public. Since this time, democracies the world over have witnessed

Erik P. Bucy: erik.bucy@ttu.edu
Duncan V. Prettyman: dprettyman@coloradotech.edu
Michelle A. Amazeen: mamazeen@bu.edu

the mass emergence of fake news sites, routine lying by political figures for strategic gain, disinformation campaigns targeting unsuspecting domestic populations, and the willful participation of some partisan news organizations in the spread of misinformation (Grabe & Bucy, 2023; Koc-Michalska, Bimber, Gomez, Jenkins, & Boulianne, 2020). The sharp rise of mediated falsehoods[1] is concerning because misinformation challenges the typical user's ability to parse the veracity of news and news-like content while undermining public trust in mainstream media as a reliable basis for democratic decision making (Bennett & Livingston, 2023; Bucy & Newhagen, 2019; Zelenkauskaite, 2022).

Owing to the threat these false accounts pose, media researchers have been roundly investigating the epistemological challenges posed by "polluted information ecosystems" (Grabe & Bucy, 2023, p. 135) and the conceptual frameworks and practical strategies people employ for coping with fake news and information ambiguity (Amazeen, 2024; Blair et al., 2023; Tandoc et al., 2018). Although this research has allowed scholars to compile lists of strategies that journalists, social media moderators, health officials, and other information providers can deploy on the supply side when conveying facts and reporting on politicized distortions, little research has been conducted on why individuals on the receiving end of these misleading messages choose to engage, or not engage, in their own attempts at verification (e.g., Apuke, Omar, & Tunca, 2023; Choi & Lim, 2019; Edgerly, Mourão, Thorson, & Tham, 2020; Wenzel, 2019). Lack of work in this area has led to calls for more investigation into the antecedents of news verification or factors that influence users' decisions to fact-check the information encountered in daily media use (Tandoc et al., 2018).

To gather data for this study, a national survey was fielded that asked respondents to assess the truthfulness of a series of "news headlines" drawn from both fabricated and real news stories, sourced from the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN).[2] The headlines were presented in the form of a 10-item news quiz (see Appendix A).[3] Participants were given the opportunity to verify information before answering and were then asked to list any thoughts that came to mind after reading each headline or during their search for answers. From these thought-listing responses, we identified salient themes articulated by participants to better understand the antecedents of information verification and motivations behind user decisions to verify. We refer to these fact-checking impulses as epistemological motives.

The analysis revealed that themes receiving the most mentions included concerns about information veracity, hostility toward the news or imagined message source, the process of information seeking, and suspicions about manipulative intent. In addition, we documented differences in theme mentions between searchers and non-searchers and described how these two groups vary across a range of individual differences, including demographic traits, media use, news knowledge and skepticism,

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[1] Mediated falsehoods are false accounts, including propaganda, lies, disinformation, and misinformation, disseminated intentionally or unintentionally through media channels (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020).

[2] Housed within the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the IFCN was established in 2015 to track mis- and disinformation while providing a forum for promoting best practices in the fact-checking enterprise (https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/).

[3] Available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website at https://osf.io/m6c7b/.

active versus passive news consumption, and surveillance versus entertainment gratifications for news use.

Information Verification

Information verification is the process of verifying the accuracy and credibility of information encountered in the media environment. Researchers have identified a range of strategies individuals use to verify news claims, including Internet searches, relying on one's own judgment of an information source, reaching out interpersonally to trusted others, querying contacts on social media, consulting traditional media sources—or some combination of these strategies, such as cross-checking (Soe, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wenzel, 2019). However, these behaviors do not explain the motivations driving the decision to verify in the first place. Despite the range of available options for verifying information, many digital news users choose not to engage in any fact-checking even when they have been exposed to false information. The empirical research on why users verify suspect content is so far inconclusive and in some ways contradictory to the assumption that only false information motivates "acts of authentication" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 2745). Experimental studies have shown, for instance, that in highly polarized contexts, users report more intent to verify when they believe a headline is *true*, that is, when it is consistent with their ideological outlook (Edgerly et al., 2020).

Moreover, not everyone who encounters false information is aware of it. When suspicion is raised, it can be a powerful motivator—but not always to fact-check. Instead, encounters with pervasive information ambiguity (Wenzel, 2019) can lead to news avoidance. One analysis using large international samples from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020) found that up to two-thirds of respondents who believed they had been exposed to falsehoods reported attempting to verify information they felt was suspect. However, such impulses are not universal; as reported below, only 38% of our participants reported attempts to verify. Pervasive information ambiguity can take a toll. Rather than further engaging with platforms that are regarded as porous to questionable content and performing what is traditionally regarded as a news function of verifying facticity, some members of the media audience choose instead to disengage from news altogether, perhaps as a coping mechanism for relieving stress (Wenzel, 2019). In light of this discussion, we pose our first research question:

RQ1:   What factors underlie the decision to verify information that individual users suspect might be false?

Situational Versus Enduring Influences

Although the factors that influence an individual's decision to verify information have not received extensive scholarly attention, the work that has been done points to the existence of two unique sets of antecedents that could impact the decision. The first set can be broadly identified as situational influences. These include such factors as exposure to counter-attitudinal information, discussions of news, misinformation awareness campaigns, political use of social media, reliance on news aggregators and social media, perceptions of source credibility (if noticed), belief that a claim is untrue, and assessments of ideological congruence or incongruence with message content (see Apuke et al., 2023; Choi & Lim, 2019; Edgerly et al., 2020; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). These spurs to verification surface at the time of message exposure but do not affect all users equally.

The second set of antecedents thus far identified include more enduring qualities of individuals, including partisan identity, Right-leaning voting (in the United States), interest in politics, background motivations for obtaining news, such as information seeking and social utility, and demographic factors including age and ethnicity (Choi & Lim, 2019; Edgerly et al., 2020; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020; Soe, 2018). However, there is still much that we do not know about the motivations for information verification. Our research identified three additional influences not well documented in relation to verification that we find to meaningfully differentiate user decisions to investigate questionable content: Procedural news knowledge (PNK), news skepticism, and individual motivations for media use (surveillance vs. entertainment). These constructs are discussed next.

Procedural News Knowledge

Procedural news knowledge (PNK) is a type of media literacy defined as a "developed understanding of professional news operations and procedures" (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019, p. 419). PNK measures knowledge about the practices of media institutions that report the news as well as the ways in which news content is produced. Importantly, PNK predicts the ability to identify fake news and reject and counterargue with suspect content. While there is some debate as to whether media literacy is the best way to address the problem of disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2023), which has both supply-side and demand-side challenges, there is ample research to suggest that media literacy can improve individuals' ability to spot and dismiss misinformation when encountered (Amazeen & Bucy, 2019; Blair et al., 2023; Zelenkauskaite, 2022). Consequently, individuals high in news knowledge should be more inclined to search for answers when confronted with questionable content than those low in news knowledge.

Digital media literacy is also positively related to individuals' online political engagement and exposure to counter-attitudinal views such that individuals who engage in more digital media literacy activities are more frequently exposed to diverse viewpoints (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). Exposure to counter-attitudinal information and the political use of social media have been associated with an increased likelihood of verifying information that one believes to be false (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). On the other hand, experimental studies have found that audiences exposed to a mix of true and false news headlines report stronger intentions to verify when they believe a news headline is true, that is, ideologically consistent with their political beliefs (Edgerly et al., 2020; see also Aslett et al., 2024). Regardless, media literacy, particularly in relation to news understanding, should be positively associated with the decision to verify. Since PNK is a type of media literacy, it is likely that one's level of news expertise will motivate individual decisions to verify when confronted with information that stretches credulity. Therefore we ask the next research question:

RQ2a: Are individual users who attempt to verify information when confronted with suspect content significantly more knowledgeable about mainstream news practices than those who decline to verify?

News Skepticism

News skepticism, defined as the degree to which individuals tend to disbelieve or discount the account of events or pictures of reality presented in mass media (Cozzens & Contractor, 1987), may also influence the decision to verify suspect content. On the narrow question of news authorship, a study of news aggregator sites in South Korea found that how credible individuals believe the press to be overall had no effect on the likelihood of verifying story authorship on these sites (Choi & Lim, 2019). However, a significant negative relationship was found between verification and press credibility such that the less likely users were to verify, the more credible they considered news media to be; that is, they assumed a robust degree of believability and trustworthiness, the core elements of credibility, so verification was unnecessary.

Evaluating confidence in news claims, Koc-Michalska and colleagues (2020) documented the reasons respondents gave for their information suspicions. Credibility of the source was one of the *least* cited reasons. However, among respondents who reported engaging in verification, a commonly cited reason for believing that a claim was false was the source itself, implying a weak reputation or low credibility evaluation. Choi and Lim (2019) argue that assuming high levels of credibility for the press overall might encourage blind or uncritical consumption of news, thus facilitating acceptance of false information as true.[4] On the other hand, attempts to verify can lead digital news users down mis- and disinformation rabbit holes, leading them to "confirm" false assertions by landing on low-quality sites. In a multi-experiment study published in *Nature*, Aslett and colleagues (2024) find persistent evidence that "online search to evaluate the truthfulness of false news articles actually increases the probability of believing them" (p. 548). In a porous media environment besieged by suspect content, information-related risks exist on both sides of the decision to verify.

Given the limited amount of work exploring the relationship between news skepticism and information verification, we ask the following research question:

RQ2b: *Are individual users who attempt to verify information when confronted with suspect content significantly more skeptical of news media than those who decline to verify?*

Motivations for Media Use

According to the uses and gratifications research tradition, individuals use the media for a variety of reasons, such as information seeking, passing the time, escapism or entertainment, all in search of need fulfillment (Sparks, 2015). In the digital era of constant connectivity, socially oriented motivations, including connection, coordination, and social influence, have also become salient (Dhir, Chen, & Nieminen, 2017). Importantly, motivations for using media can influence how individuals interact with digital content, such as surveillance or information-seeking motives promoting additional searching and reading for knowledge gain.

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[4] Given that Choi and Lim's (2019) study examined just one form of verification (authorship) and only in the context of users of South Korean news aggregator sites, it is possible that the direction of the relationship between news skepticism and information verification is unique to the context of their study.

By contrast, entertainment motivations, such as escapism, diversion, and relaxation, generally promote more passive media consumption (Sparks, 2015). People seeking out media for entertainment purposes are often looking to regulate their mood or "get away" from the drudgery of life for a moment—or, in some cases, extended periods of time, as is the case with binge viewing of online video or streaming platform series (Rubenking, Campanella Bracken, Sandoval, & Rister, 2018). Thus, motivations for media use may be a third factor that likely influences whether individuals choose to verify information they have suspicions about. From this discussion, we pose the following research question:

RQ2c: *Are individual users who attempt to verify when confronted with suspect content significantly more likely to report surveillance motivations and, by contrast, less likely to report entertainment gratifications from media use than those who decline to verify?*

Method

To answer these questions, an online survey was fielded in the summer of 2017 to a nationally stratified sample of Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (U.S. adults) who were paid $1.25 to complete the study (N = 715). Numerous academic studies have validated MTurk as a reliable source of data, particularly when samples are systematically stratified (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Sheehan, 2018).[5] The average age of the study participants was 39 years, 51% were female, 77% identified as White, 40% had a four-year degree, 43% were single or never married, and 47% identified as a Democrat. Median time to complete the survey was 15 minutes.

To prompt thinking about fake news and information verification, a series of 10 questions drawn from fabricated and real news stories in circulation at the time of the study were presented in the form of a news quiz early in the survey to ensure that participants were not fatigued from answering questions. Half of the questions were in multiple-choice format, with distractor choices adapted from fake news stories, while the other half were true/false. Six questions were fact-based with an identifiable or true answer, while the remaining four were not (with correct answers of false or none of the above). As mentioned above, the questions were drawn from the IFCN website. Topics ranged from lifestyle and nature to science and U.S. politics (see Appendix A).

Participants were first invited to see whether they could "distinguish fake news from real news" by selecting the correct answer for each news headline question. To provide the opportunity to verify questionable information, they were informed that they could "use the open Web" to search for answers if they liked. No time limit was imposed for taking the quiz. A majority of participants (62.1%, N = 444) reported not searching for answers online even though they had the opportunity to do so, while 37.9% (N

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[5] Research has indicated MTurk is a valuable tool providing more representative and diverse subject pools than student samples. Replication studies using MTurk samples demonstrate that participants respond to stimuli in ways consistent with previously published research using probability-based samples (Berinsky et al., 2012; Sheehan, 2018). Age and gender quotas, along with quality control items, were implemented to balance the distribution of participants and ensure that they paid adequate attention.

= 271) did report searching. On average, the search group answered significantly more questions correctly (M = 6.60, SD = 1.75) than the non-search group (M = 4.47, SD = 1.61), t(713) = 16.66, p = .001.

Following the news headline questions, participants were asked to list any thoughts that came to mind while answering or searching for answers and the process they followed to arrive at their answers. Specifically, the instruction stated: "We are interested in what you were thinking about while you were taking the quiz. You might have had thoughts that were favorable about the process you undertook to find the answers, unfavorable, irrelevant, or a combination of all three reactions. Any case is fine; simply list what it was that you were thinking while trying to answer the questions."

Additional questions were asked about native advertising, media use and perceptions, participants' understanding of news operations, and demographic information.[6] At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and given the correct answers to the news quiz. Because our interest here is to provide insight into user motivations to verify information presented as news, the data analyzed for this study focused on the open-ended answers that participants offered in response to the thought-listing prompt.

Altogether, participants generated 3,741 written responses describing their effort to answer the news quiz questions. Not all were relevant or comprehensible, even as fragments, and were removed from further consideration as "non-applicable" (n = 792). In line with the thought-listing literature (e.g., Shapiro, 1994), we included statements for analysis that stood alone as a self-contained comment or observation and formed a sensible idea—often, but not always, limited to a single sentence or fragment. From this, we identified 2,949 stand-alone thoughts that were suitable for analysis. As revealed in our coding, not all concerned the veracity of information presented but addressed a broad range of impressions related to the content, the rise of fake news and clickbait messaging, or suspicions about manipulative intent.

Participant responses were then subjected to a theme analysis following the approach outlined in studies of qualitative discourse, notably Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013) and Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016). Theme analysis is an accessible and flexible method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns," motifs, or recurring themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Unlike more comprehensive and theoretically constrained approaches, such as grounded theory or discourse analysis, which carry inherent theoretical assumptions (e.g., that language does not merely reflect social reality but also creates it), theme analysis is "*only* a method of data analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58, emphasis in original) and was deemed appropriate for the task at hand. As a technique, theme analysis is suitable when known concepts (such as misinformation, verification, and user motivations) guide the larger project and findings can be linked to broader conceptual frameworks or phenomena; while inductive, it is not completely unstructured.

A theme in discourse can be defined as the main idea conveyed in a text at a level deeper and broader than the manifest content. For example, a statement such as "Facebook is a kind of cesspool" or a question such as "Why do people read this garbage?" conveys not only observations about social media and low-quality information but also a broader theme of hostility toward suspect content. To assess the diversity

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[6] For analysis of the other sets of questions, see Amazeen and Bucy (2019).

of themes about news verification in thought-listing responses, we followed an inductive analytical approach from general categorization to specific theme identification. This process involved a collaborative back-and-forth throughout the coding process. Themes were identified in the discourse during regular meetings where participant responses were interpreted for meaning, then grouped, narrowed, named, and finalized. Because the theme identification process was iterative and collaborative, consistent application of theme definitions (see Table 1) was primarily ensured through discussion, example sharing, and mutual agreement.[7]

Table 1 lists the 12 major themes derived from the coding process and includes examples taken from participant responses. The themes, arranged from highest to lowest number of mentions, were as follows: Veracity concerns, message hostility, information seeking, story familiarity, cognitive overload, political spin, irrelevance, entertainment value, plausibility, self-assessment, manipulative intent, and content interest. Two additional categories identified in coding were classified as space-filling commentary since they did not rise to the level of meaningful response: Redundant description of the questions themselves ($n = 181$) and meta-commentary about answering the news quiz ($n = 413$).[8] A negligible catch-all of remaining comments, an Other category ($n = 8$), was also omitted from the analysis. This left 2,345 comments suitable for thematic analysis.

Since certain themes were related, we collapsed four into associated groupings for parsimony: Plausibility was paired with veracity concerns; irrelevance with message hostility; political spin with manipulative intent; and, content interest with entertainment value. Collapsing themes to reduce excessive dimensionality is a common practice in qualitative analysis of textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This left eight major themes, as shown in Figure 1.

Analysis and Findings

By far, the most prevalent theme (27.4%) overall was expressed in concerns over the truth value and facticity of the headlines or stories. Participants who responded to the prompt by articulating these veracity concerns sharply questioned what they were reading and whether the stories were plausible. The second-most prevalent theme (20.1%) captured participants' anger toward what they viewed as frivolous content, which we labeled message hostility. By contrast, the entertainment value of the stories was a far less prominent consideration (7.8%). The third major theme (17.1%) reflected suspicions about the manipulative intent or political nature of many of the headlines. Together, concerns about veracity, coupled with feelings of message hostility and suspicions about manipulative intent, likely discouraged most participants from any fact-checking. Information seeking, or participants' descriptions of their search for

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[7] Owing to assumptions about objectivity and manifest meaning, Braun and Clarke (2013) maintain that intercoder reliability calculations are "not an appropriate criterion for judging qualitative work" (p. 279). Nevertheless, intercoder reliability was performed on 10% of the sample ($n = 234$ comments) as an added quality control check. Across themes, the results indicated an acceptable-to-high level of agreement, Krippendorff's α = .82.

[8] Examples of meta-commentary and redundant description included: "This is a disturbing survey," "I wanted to get the answer right," and "How did someone get stuck in a toilet trying to get a phone?"

answers and discovery of relevant information, only appeared as the fourth-most mentioned theme (10.2%). Story familiarity, cognitive overload, and self-assessment received the fewest mentions.

Table 1. Themes Emerging From Coding of the Open-Ended Responses.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Comments
Veracity concerns (*n* = 533)	Questioning the truth of the stories or headlines, or speculating on their plausibility, i.e., whether they could be true.	- "These stories are crazy." - "How could someone believe this?" - "I was surprised at how real some of the stories seemed."
Message hostility (*n* = 364)	An adverse or vehement reaction to the stories or headlines, beyond merely unfavorable.	- "[I'm feeling] anger that we have to deal with fake news." - "Dismayed." - "Why do people read this garbage?"
Information seeking (*n* = 274)	Mentioning the steps involved in fact-checking or verifying the information presented.	- "It was helpful to search the web." - "I found that I had to Google most of the answers." - "Snopes is a useful tool to research facts."
Story familiarity (*n* = 195)	Expressing familiarity or lack of familiarity with the stories or headlines.	- "I hadn't heard about some of these stories." - "Have I seen this before?" - "Whether I had heard any information about the news item on social media."
Cognitive overload (*n* = 156)	Describing the difficulty or effort involved in the task of verifying the stories or headlines.	- "This is trickier than I thought." - "I felt that this was a lot of work." - "Some things are easy to identify as false."
Political spin (*n* = 149)	Recognizing a political slant or partisan bent to the stories or headlines.	- "These seem slightly political." - "Who the hell would support Trump?" - "I'm still glad Hillary is not president."
Irrelevance (*n* = 132)	Regarding the stories or headlines as irrelevant, unimportant, or trivial.	- "A lot of these subjects are unimportant." - "These stories aren't really relevant." - "I'm more concerned about fake news on subjects that are actually important."
Entertainment value (*n* = 123)	Appreciating the humorous or playful aspect of the stories or headlines.	- "I found some of the stories funny." - "[I was] amused." - "How silly some of this is."
Plausibility (*n* = 115)	Discussing the plausibility of the stories or headlines without questioning their veracity.	- "Some of these stories could be true." - "I was surprised at how real some of the stories seemed." - "I'm sure some of these must be true."
Self-assessment (*n* = 111)	Reflecting on one's self-expertise or ability to detect fake news.	- "I was questioning my ability to distinguish fake news from real news." - "I feel that I am good at spotting fake [stories]."

		-	"I was thinking I did not really know the true facts concerning the items presented."
Manipulative intent (n = 106)	Suspecting an attempt to manipulate rather than just provide information.	-	"This is just clickbait."
		-	"This is propaganda."
		-	"[This is] just for attention and clicks."
Content interest (n = 87)	Expressing interest or intrigue in the stories or headlines.	-	"I felt curious."
		-	"These are some intriguing questions."
		-	"Very interesting topics."
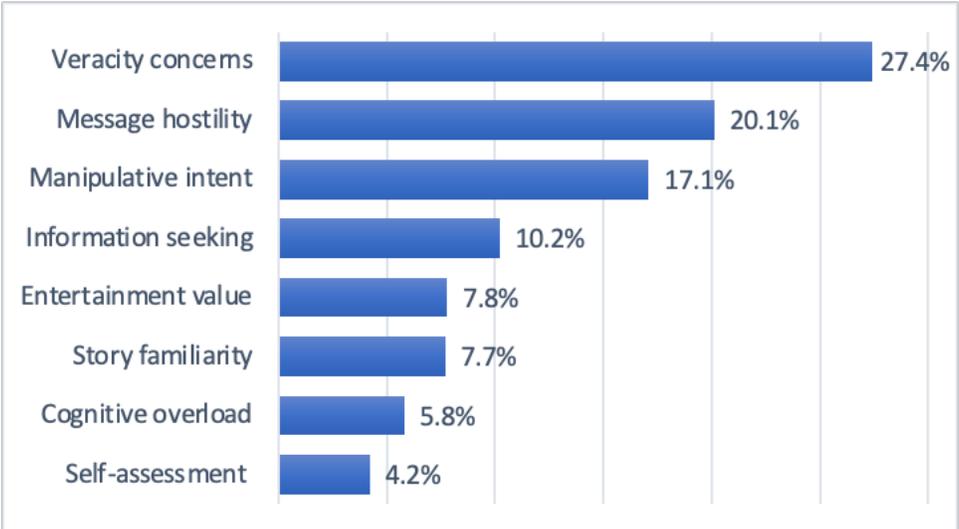
Figure 1. Total theme mentions across all participants.
Note: Theme mentions are shown in percentages. Total number of codable comments = 2,345.

Next, we parsed themes by whether participants searched for answers. Here, a more nuanced pattern emerged, especially concerning the prominence of hostile reactions to questionable content among non-searchers and thoughts about information seeking among searchers. Searchers were much more likely to raise issues surrounding the need to verify information and to express a sense of cognitive overload in dealing with the effort to verify the news headlines than non-searchers; at the same time, they found more entertainment value in them. Interestingly, non-searchers were more likely to mention concerns about veracity or information plausibility—but did not make the effort to verify. Non-searchers were also more likely to say that certain news claims sounded familiar. Figure 2 depicts the prevalence of theme mentions based on whether participants searched for answers.
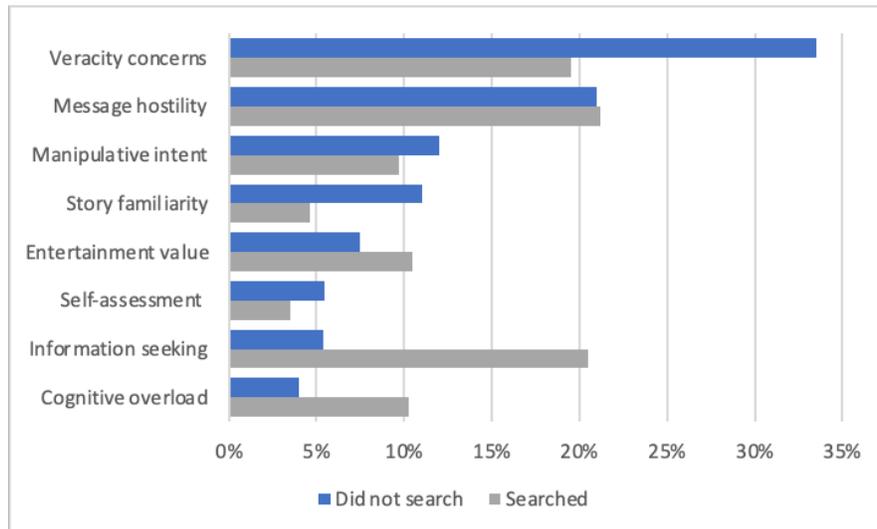
Figure 2. Theme mentions based on whether participants searched for answers.
Note: Theme frequencies are shown in percentages. The base number of comments varied by group:
Searched for answers, *n* = 970; did not search, *n* = 1,375.

Figure 3 regroups the themes by the level of PNK. Here, participants' correct responses to a series of questions about mainstream news operations were used to sort reactions. The PNK measure included 10 multiple-choice questions with clear, correct answers. Questions included knowing, for example, that most U.S. media are for-profit businesses, that public broadcasting does not rely primarily on advertising, and that Google News does not have reporters who gather information (for the full list of items, see the supplemental materials in Amazeen & Bucy, 2019). The composite measure was constructed by summing the correct number of responses to all 10 questions (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct). Just over a quarter of participants (26.8%) answered six or fewer questions correctly while two-thirds (65.7%) answered eight or fewer correctly (*M* = 7.46, *SD* = 1.97).

A median split was performed on participant knowledge scores, and responses were grouped by high and low news knowledge holding. The high group consisted of those answering eight or more questions correctly (57%, *n* = 407) while the low group consisted of those answering seven or fewer questions correctly (43%, *n* = 308). Figure 3 presents the frequency of theme mentions by levels of PNK. Overall, among both low and high PNK groups, the most common themes were veracity concerns (31% and 25.5%, respectively) and message hostility (20% and 21.9%, respectively). Notably, those less knowledgeable about mainstream media saw more entertainment value in the headlines.
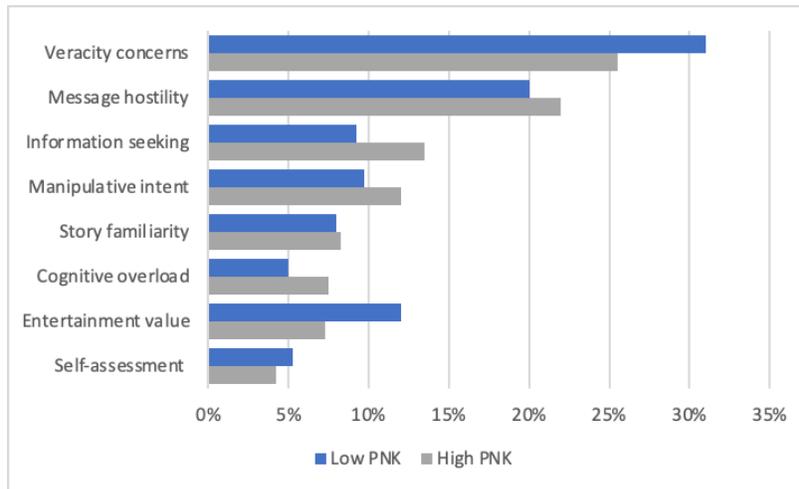
Figure 3. Theme mentions by level of PNK.

Next, theme mentions were grouped by participants' level of news skepticism. Skepticism was measured with three items: "I don't see what the news does for me," "I feel it is useless to read or watch the news," and "I do not want to waste time reading or watching the news" (Cronbach's α = .829). Items were measured using a 5-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Again, a median split was performed and responses categorized into high and low groupings (*Mdn* = 2.0). The high group consisted of those averaging a score of 2 or higher (53%, *n* = 374), while the low group consisted of those averaging less than 2 (47%, *n* = 332). Figure 4 presents the results. The two most common themes across groups were again veracity concerns and message hostility. Participants high in skepticism expressed more hostility in response to the headlines, while those low in skepticism had more to say about information seeking and regarded the headlines as more entertaining.
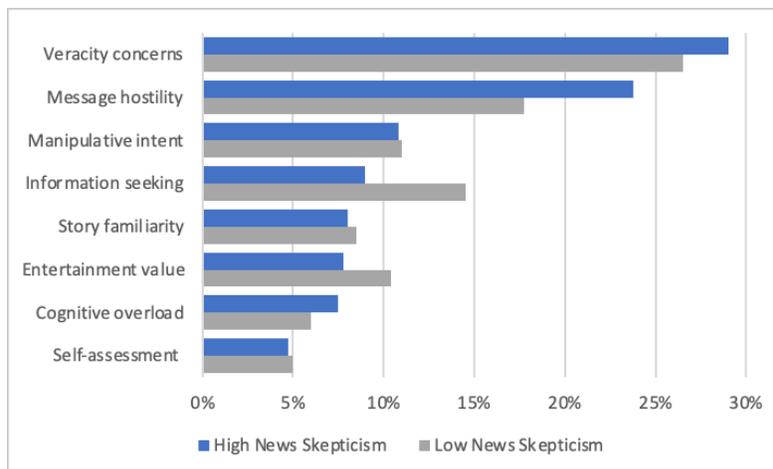

Figure 4. Theme mentions by level of news skepticism.

Lastly, we looked at theme mentions by gratifications desired from consuming news, namely entertainment compared with surveillance motives. These two motivations represent the classic division in media use in uses and gratifications research (contact the authors for a list of items in these measures). For each motivation scale, a median split was performed, and the upper bound of the split was used to illustrate differences (i.e., the comparison is between high entertainment motives and high surveillance motives). Figure 5 presents the results. Those with high surveillance motives were more likely to mention the top three concerns—information veracity, message hostility, and manipulative intent—while those driven more by entertainment gratifications mentioned information seeking and the headlines' entertainment value more.
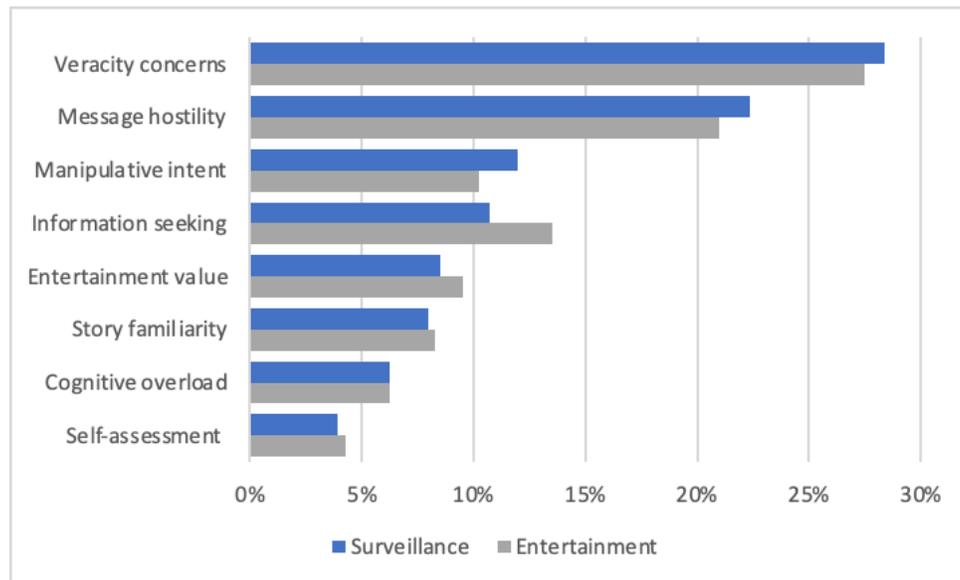

Figure 5. Theme mentions by motivations for consuming news.

Searchers Versus Non-Searchers

The final part of the analysis considers the difference between searchers and non-searchers on a set of key measures and media traits. Table 2 presents a wide-ranging set of comparisons between searchers and non-searchers on demographic items, media consumption style (active vs. passive), average scores for the PNK test and news headlines quiz, and the perceived threat from fake news. In addition, measures of news skepticism, perceptions of information overload, and motivations for using news are considered. In general, searchers are slightly older and female, more active news users, more savvy about mainstream media, and have greater surveillance motivations for engaging with news than non-searchers. Figure 6, illustrating the media use habits of searchers compared with those of non-searchers, shows searchers to be more avid consumers of news across every platform measured except television and radio.

Table 2. Profile of Searchers Compared With Non-Searchers on Key Measures and Media Traits.

| User Trait	Searchers	Non-Searchers	Significance Test
Gender	M = 37.3%, F = 62.7%	M = 56.6%, F = 43.4%	X^2 = 25.02 (1), p < .0001
Age	M = 41.1, SD = 13.3	M = 37.0, SD = 12.6	$t(711)$ = 4.14, p < .0001
Income	Mdn = $40k–$49.9k	Mdn = $40k–$49.9k	n.s.
Education	52% (4-year degree)	53.3% (4-year degree)	n.s.
Ideology	M = 2.51 (Mod–Lib)	M = 2.54 (Mod–Lib)	n.s.
Active news use	M = 5.47, SD = 0.77	M = 5.14, SD = 1.11	$t(713)$ = 4.39, p < .0001
Passive news use	M = 5.42, SD = 0.87	M = 5.13, SD = 1.11	$t(712)$ = 3.67, p < .0001
News knowledge	M = 7.91, SD = 1.61	M = 7.14, SD = 2.13	$t(712)$ = 5.05, p < .0001
News quiz score	M = 6.60, SD = 1.75	M = 4.47, SD = 1.61	$t(713)$ = 16.66, p < .0001
Perceived fake news threat	M = 4.83, SD = 1.45	M = 4.78, SD = 1.50	n.s.
News skepticism	M = 2.93, SD = 1.02	M = 2.85, SD = 0.99	n.s.
Information overload	M = 2.89, SD = 0.78	M = 2.83, SD = 0.83	n.s.
Surveillance motives	M = 5.41, SD = 0.91	M = 5.19, SD = 1.09	$t(706)$ = 2.79, p < .005
Entertainment motives	M = 3.93, SD = 0.78	M = 4.11, SD = 1.36	$t(706)$ = −1.75, p < .10
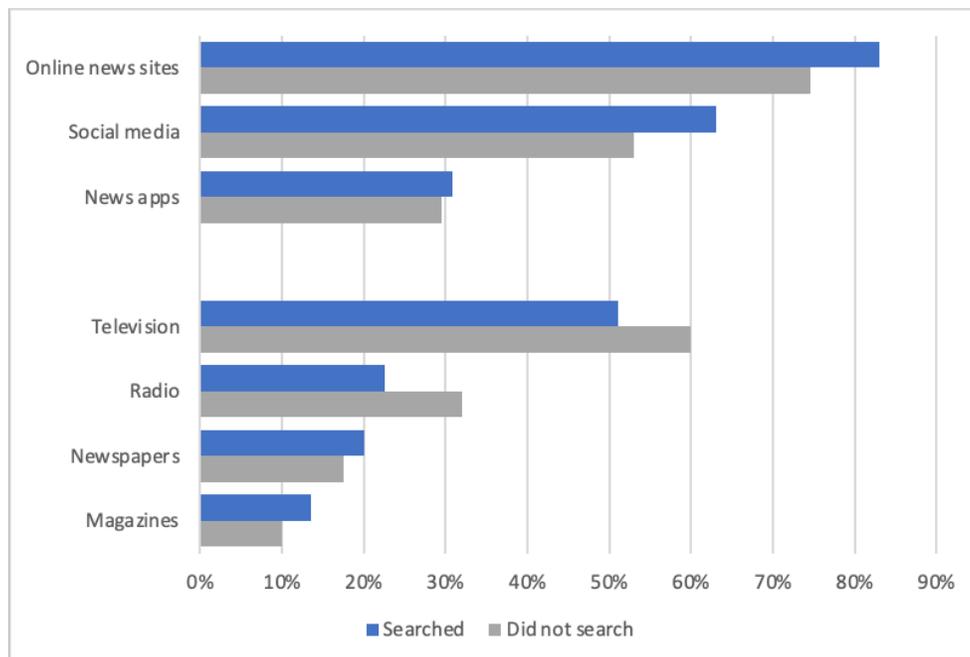
Figure 6. Media reliance among searchers and non-searchers.

Discussion

This study explored the factors that influence user decisions to verify suspect information drawn from real-life examples in circulation on digital media platforms using theme analysis of a thought-listing prompt that followed a news headline identification task. Findings suggest there may be important differences between individuals who choose to verify the information they encounter and those who do not and provide several insights into the factors that may influence that decision.

Overall, the most common responses participants had to the thought-listing prompt concerned the veracity of information encountered, followed by expressed feelings of hostility and manipulative intent. That these three themes constituted almost two-thirds (64.6%) of the thoughts generated by participants indicates the level of uncertainty, frustration, and distrust that many in the news audience feel about the state of the digital media environment. Not only are users concerned about the truthfulness of the information they encounter, and recognize manipulative intent, they are also turned off by the lack of trustworthiness of assertions made in the guise of news and resent having to shoulder the burden of verification, which traditionally has been the editorial function of mainstream media. As research on news avoidance has shown, these negative emotional responses can drive audiences away from news altogether (Toff, Palmer, & Nielsen, 2023; Wenzel, 2019).

Among non-searchers, the most common thoughts expressed by far were those addressing the truthfulness and plausibility of the information encountered in the news headlines. Veracity concerns made up more than a third of all thoughts expressed by non-searchers. Although non-searchers seemed to be concerned about the veracity of the information they were presented with, they apparently did not feel a strong need to verify that information; among the eight themes identified, thoughts related to information seeking made up only 5.4% of non-searchers' total comments. One way to explain this discrepancy between a concern about the truthfulness of information and lack of motivation to resolve that concern is to view the decision to not verify as a kind of self-protection mechanism against the confusion and sense of overload that exists in the digital space when users take on or simply contemplate the onus of editorial responsibilities (see Bucy & Newhagen, 2019).

Consistent with the limited capacity models of information processing, individuals possess a finite amount of cognitive resources for processing information at any one time; maximizing these resources produces a frequent and easily rendered state of cognitive overload (Lang, 2009). By trafficking in pervasive ambiguity, the contemporary digital media environment routinely places a high cognitive load on individuals (Bucy & Newhagen, 2019; Wenzel, 2019)—even before they attempt to verify information, a task that is both cognitively demanding and emotionally draining (Edgerly et al., 2020). Thus, by choosing not to verify information, even when suspicious of it, non-searchers may be defending against overload and preserving their limited processing resources for other, more interesting or plausible, information. This observation is supported by the fact that comments related to cognitive overload made up only 4% of all thoughts generated by non-searchers compared with more than double that amount for searchers (10.3%).

Among searchers, a majority of expressed thoughts clustered around three themes: Expressions of message hostility and irrelevance (21.2%), observations about information seeking (20.6%), and veracity

concerns (19.4%). This suggests that the decision to verify among searchers is at least partly motivated by their frustration with and anger about potential disinformation. Previous research has shown that feelings of anger and frustration can motivate individuals to seek out more information about salient news topics, especially related to politics (Arpan & Nabi, 2011); thus, it is not unreasonable to suggest that anger can similarly motivate people to seek out information that verifies the truthfulness of the information they encounter. However, the fact that thoughts articulating a sense of message hostility were expressed by searchers' and non-searchers' equally (21.2% and 21.1%, respectively) indicates that hostile reactions to the (fake) news headlines may not be a primary motive for searchers' verification behavior.

If message hostility *was* the motivation for searchers' verification behavior, we would expect non-searchers to convey a noticeably lower percentage of thoughts related to hostility rather than a nearly identical percentage. A better explanation for searchers' verification behavior could be that they are motivated by a need to reduce uncertainty. As with most people, digital news users possess varying levels of tolerance for uncertainty; the greater your capacity to live with uncertainty, the less likely you are to seek out new information to resolve it, and vice versa (see Kramer, 1999). Therefore, it is possible that searchers may possess a lower tolerance for uncertainty than non-searchers and thus are more likely to verify information. The fact that a large portion of non-searchers' thoughts constituted concerns about information veracity and yet only a small portion (5.4%) were related to information seeking fits the idea that non-searchers are more comfortable with uncertainty (i.e., they may have concerns about the truthfulness of questionable content but seem comfortable with not verifying it).

In addition to looking at the most common themes expressed by searchers and non-searchers, we also compared these two groups on a number of key measures and media traits. The analysis found that searchers and non-searchers differ in many interesting ways. In terms of demographics, searchers tended to be more female and slightly older; however, searchers and non-searchers did not significantly differ in terms of income, education, or political ideology. We also found that searchers are more avid media users overall; they reported significantly higher active *and* passive news use than non-searchers. Searchers also scored higher in news knowledge than non-searchers and did better on the news headlines quiz. These findings are in line with previous research, which suggests that higher levels of news use and news knowledge may make it more likely for an individual to verify information (Choi & Lim, 2019; Soe, 2018).

Searchers and non-searchers did not significantly differ in their perceptions of fake news as a threat, news skepticism, or feelings of information overload (see Table 2). They did differ in their motivations for media use, however. Counter to previous studies, which suggested that entertainment motives were significantly associated with verification and that surveillance motives were not, we found that searchers were significantly *more* likely to have surveillance motives for news use and less likely to be driven by entertainment motives although this latter difference only approaches significance. The contrast between our findings and other research in this area suggests that the relationship between verification and motivations for media use may be more complex than initially thought. Indeed, a third variable, as yet unaccounted for, may be affecting the relationship. Future studies should explore this possibility in more depth.

Lastly, we found that searchers have a broader media repertoire than non-searchers. Searchers rely on more and different types of media than non-searchers. Intriguingly, searchers, more than non-searchers, rely more on both online news sites *and* social media, the latter of which are greater conduits of mis- and disinformation than traditional media. However, based on other findings about searchers, it is reasonable to infer that they are more careful and attentive in these spaces than non-searchers.

News Knowledge, News Skepticism, and Motivations for Media Use

Interestingly, individuals with low PNK expressed a greater percentage of thoughts (31%) questioning the veracity of the information they encountered than those with high PNK (25.5%), perhaps because the latter group of news experts, driven by a stronger sense of information efficacy, was more inclined to search for answers. Expressions of message hostility between these two groups were about equal (20% and 21.9%, respectively). Additionally, we found that high news knowledge holders expressed more thoughts about information seeking, more concerns about manipulative intent, and were less entertained by the news headlines than those with lower knowledge scores. All of these findings are in line with our expectations.

The second media trait we considered was news skepticism. Past research has found that verification and news skepticism are related such that attempts to verify information can lead to increased skepticism (Choi & Lim, 2019) and confirmation of partisan beliefs from encountering low-quality news sources (Aslett et al., 2024). In terms of motives for verification, participants regardless of skepticism level foregrounded thoughts about veracity and message hostility; however, weak skeptics expressed tertiary concerns about information seeking and saw more entertainment value in the headlines than strong skeptics. Participants regardless of skepticism level recognized an equal amount of manipulative intent in the headlines.

The third antecedent we examined concerned desired gratifications from media use, namely, surveillance of the news environment versus entertainment motivations. Either could impact the decision to verify. Once again, participants regardless of orientation foregrounded thoughts about veracity and message hostility. For participants motivated more by entertainment gratifications, tertiary concerns related to information seeking and the steps they took to verify suspected claims. These findings resonate with previous research showing how entertainment motives for media use are positively related to verification (Choi & Lim, 2019; Yu, 2021). Tertiary concerns for participants motivated more by surveillance gratifications related to the headlines' manipulative intent.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all studies, this project is not without limitations. To determine search behavior, we relied on a single self-report measure to separate participants into searchers and non-searchers. If verifying information in the digital age is now considered a socially desirable behavior, participants could have overreported looking for information in response to our verification question. Because the vast majority of participants reported *not* searching for information, we believe this is not the case. Nevertheless, with participant consent, keystroke tracking software that automatically captures online activity could provide a

much more precise indicator of searching behavior and allow more nuanced analyses of user attempts to verify suspect content—how many searches are initiated before answering, what sources are consulted, whether users get diverted down misinformation rabbit holes by links within stories or algorithmic suggestion, how long they spend searching before answering, and so on.

While a thematic analysis of participants' open-ended responses to a news verification task provides a rich set of data to work with, the nature of the data also limits the generalizability of our findings. For instance, while we were able to statistically analyze some of the key differences between groups, the sample itself was not random, thus the generalizability of our findings is limited. As such, the results presented here are more suggestive than definitive. Yet, as with all qualitative research, the goal of this study is not to achieve representativeness but to identify patterns of individual experience and arrive at a deeper understanding of how, in this case, participants justify and explain their decisions about whether to authenticate claims from a confused and cluttered information environment.

Moreover, these findings provide a number of potential avenues for further research. In particular, further studies should be conducted on the relationship between cognitive overload and user decisions to verify suspect information. In this study, non-searchers expressed fewer thoughts related to cognitive overload than searchers. Assuming verification is a demanding task, it is possible that non-searchers chose to avoid searching for information as a self-protective mechanism, to conserve scarce processing resources. Future research should explore the relationship between cognitive overload and verification more directly to tease out the mechanisms involved in promoting or inhibiting the decision to verify.

Another avenue for further research would be to explore the search strategies that users engage in when confronted with different types of suspect content, whether they prefer to rely on partisan sources, widely recognized news brands, or sponsored results at the top of their search results page. Also of interest would be whether users attempt to triangulate information sources to achieve a greater sense of certainty or reach out to friends and trusted others for confirmation. Given the number of motivations for verification that this analysis was able to identify, follow-up studies could also test these in larger-scale data collections within the uses and gratifications tradition to develop a reliable typology of verification motives that could be useful in the development of tools to foster greater information literacy within the news audience.

Epistemological Motives

To elaborate on the reasons why users might engage in search, epistemological motives are audience-based goals that relate to fact-checking, information verification, and identification of suspect content. They are concerned with maximizing accuracy and minimizing uncertainty to reach the requisite level of confidence needed to take effective action in complex social, political, and economic environments or with just navigating the complexity of everyday life. If surveillance motives satisfy the need to know, epistemological motives satisfy the desire to be *accurately informed*, a goal that may only hold relevance to media users who can tell the difference between fact-based and suspect content.

Epistemological motives are provoked by spaces that lack systems of verification, or professional standards, and place the burden of truth determination on the individual user, a role that situates the user

not just as a content consumer but also as a copy desk editor. As this study has found, it is a role that users may not be eager to embrace nor have the time or inclination to pursue. As the flow of digital information spaces becomes increasingly polluted, the need for epistemological motives intensifies as a bulwark against the rising tide of propaganda. Future studies should sort out the typical user's interest and ability in performing these vital editorial functions; they are likely to find, as we did, widespread disinterest in expending the effort to run down suspect claims.

While the epistemological problems associated with compromised information ecosystems are unlikely to recede any time soon, building resilience within the news audience can be assisted with greater awareness of the factors that help users navigate their daily experience with news (and news-like) content.

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