What Works – and What Doesn't – to Discredit Harmful Rumors and Correct Misinformation

Adam J. Berinsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"Fake news" has become big news. President Trump has regularly accused others of inventing news, while he himself has spread rumors based on little or no factual information. For instance, he has claimed on various occasions that millions of illegal immigrants voted in the November election, and that he lost in New Hampshire because thousands of Massachusetts residents were bused into the state to cast illegal votes against him.

Rumors like these have long pervaded American politics. In recent years alone, both the "birther" rumors suggesting that President Obama was not born in the United States, and the "truther" beliefs that the Bush administration either allowed or was behind the 9/11 attacks struck a chord with some members of the U.S. public. The persistence of rumors like these is troubling for a democratic society, because dissemination of misleading and untrue information fosters distrust of institutions and may prevent Americans from meaningfully engaging in the civic arena. My research addresses what can be done to counter this threat to democracy.

Fake News in a Politically Polarized Climate

Increasing partisan polarization has further accelerated the growth of these sorts of political rumors among both Democratic and Republican partisans. Republicans were more likely to accept rumors surrounding Barack Obama's citizenship or religion, while Democrats were more likely to believe in 9/11 conspiracies. Strong partisan overtones to political conspiracies make such rumors so hard to quell, even in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. With the rise of unified Republican control of the federal government, it seems likely that false rumors will increasingly spread on the left.

One important line of political science research on rumors and conspiracies focuses on the issue of rumor debunking. How can the media and other information providers combat the spread of misleading political information? Previous research in this field suggests that attempts to counter these sorts of rumors often fail. Why? Ironically, the mere repetition of rumors by those seeking to debunk them may in fact reinforce the false rumors. What is more, individuals who accept a rumor as true may in fact become more entrenched in their false beliefs when exposed to new sources of information.

Testing Different Approaches to Debunking Rumors

My research suggests that presenting new information from partisan sources may be effective at correcting misinformation – specifically when the rebuttal comes from politicians who speak against their own interests.

In 2010, I conducted a pair of experiments on rumors surrounding the debate over the Affordable Care Act. I focused on the so-called "death panel" rumor, which falsely claimed that elderly and sick individuals would be allocated health care based on their supposed worth to society. While demonstrably false, these rumors were widely disseminated by several conservative politicians and media figures, and embraced by many members of the emerging Tea Party. In fact, polls done by the Pew Center and YouGov in 2009 and 2010 found that around 30 percent of U.S. respondents believed the death panel rumor to be true, and roughly another 20 percent were unsure if it was true.

To test different strategies of correcting misinformation about the "death panel" rumor, I exposed respondents to several pieces of information. Some respondents were told only about the rumor itself, while others were exposed to the rumor but were also provided different corrections to it. In the "authoritative"

correction treatment, respondents were provided quotes from experts affiliated with the American Medical Association and the American Association of Retired Persons attempting to discredit the rumor. In the "partisan" correction treatments, respondents were exposed to a quote from either a Democratic or Republican lawmaker similarly attempting to debunk the rumor.

These different kinds of attempted corrections had very different effects. Quotes from "authoritative" sources debunking death panels managed to change some minds, but did not shift public opinion in the long term. Within a week, people exposed to this information did not differ from the respondents who were given no information at all about the death panel controversy. Corrections attributed to a Democratic politician had a similar effect.

On the other hand, when I followed the death panel rumor with a quote from a Republican politician, the debunking worked. All the respondents – Republicans and Democrats alike – were far more likely to reject the veracity of death panels when a Republican source said the rumor was false. What is more, a week later, the particular citizens exposed to the quote from the Republican remained more likely to reject the death panel rumor – even though no overall shift in public opinion persisted due to that correction.

Lessons for Effective Myth-Busting

My research underlines that politicians and organizations must be cautious when trying to correct rumors and misinformation, which run rampant in the news and social media. Although many advocacy groups may be inclined to shy away from partisan rhetoric, I find that non-partisan corrections do not work and may only reinforce the rumor. Even more worrisome, an attempt to correct this rumor, favored on the right, with information from a Democratic source actually led to lower overall support for the Affordable Care Act.

All told, the lessons of my study are clear. Just as important as how a rumor is debunked is who does the debunking. Politicians who support good public policy by speaking against their partisan interests – here Republicans speaking out against the death panel rumors – are viewed as credible sources by citizens across the ideological spectrum. This means that media outlets and public leaders who want to fight false rumors need to look for the right authority to get the corrective message out. Ironically, in our politically polarized time, supporters of truth may be able to harness the power of partisanship as a force for good.

Read more in Adam J. Berinsky, "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation," *British Journal of Political Science* 47 (2015): 241-262.