

Instagram Told Me So: An Analysis of Fake News

Choice overload causes many to make no choice at all.

Instead, people seek the easiest outlet. With 78.4% of American internet users regularly on social media,¹ the doomscroll—like a popcorn bucket within arm’s reach at the movie theater—is effortless, requiring no active thought to access. In 2025, over half of Americans at least sometimes got their news from social media.² The intersection of convenient technology, choice paralysis, and artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly diminishing the public’s self-accountability in consuming truthful news.

Disinformation—the deliberate spread of falsehoods—is no new phenomenon. The “yellow journalism” of the 1890s left readers vulnerable to newspapers’ political agendas and messages.³ Now, people generate countless falsehoods with “deepfake” AI—and its prevalence is clear, with 93% of the public consuming AI content in some form.⁴

Repeated algorithmic exposure to realistically generated content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok creates illusory truth effects.⁵ The more it is seen, the more it is subconsciously believed. Algorithms do not care about people; the Hearstian feedback loop of

¹ Kemp, Simon. “Digital 2025: The United States Of America — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights.” *DataReportal*, 25 February 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-united-states-of-america>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

² St. Aubin, Christopher, and Jacob Liedke. “Social Media and News Fact Sheet.” *Pew Research Center*, 25 September 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/?cb_viewport=tablet. Accessed 21 February 2026.

³ U.S. Office of the Historian. “U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895-1898.” *Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/yellow-journalism>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

⁴ Chapekis, Athena, et al. “What Web Browsing Data Tells Us About How AI Appears Online.” *Pew Research Center*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/data-labs/2025/05/23/what-web-browsing-data-tells-us-about-how-ai-appears-online/>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

⁵ Ahmed, Saifuddin, et al. “Social Media News Use Amplifies the Illusory Truth Effects of Viral Deepfakes: A Cross-National Study of Eight Countries.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2024, pp. 778-805. *Taylor & Francis Online*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08838151.2024.2410783#abstract>.

social media values only engagement. 25 states have passed media literacy laws;⁶ however, the unintended consequence is that today's teenagers—digital natives—are increasingly suspicious of information they find online. This attitude snowballs into the opposite problem: mistrusting legitimate news sources due to an overabundance of convincingly faked creations. Media awareness, combined with choice paralysis, makes for a disengaged youth—unwilling to leave social media, yet cynical because what appears on the screen is no longer human. Many develop an undiscerning eye for reliability rather than scrutinizing sources. Ignorance can be cured, but apathy is terminal.

As such, illusory truth must be overcome by capturing reality. Photovoice is a research method breaking the algorithm's digital alienation—individuals documenting their lived experiences, sharing their own insights.⁷ These methods bring a jaded, algorithm-dependent viewer base back to inarguably human perspectives in journalism, reintroducing accountability in media consumption and sparking newfound interest in truth.

Journalists must be as transparent as possible about these types of processes, calculating for built-up resistance to factual integrity. Before, videos and photos were credible ways to show legitimacy; now, AI complicates matters. If audiences cannot rely on what they see, they should trust the process behind the news presented. PEN America suggests “prebunking”; preemptively providing audiences with essential facts and context, simultaneously combating bad actors who spread disinformation in response to breaking news. Journalists can then slow down, consult experts, and responsibly source and cite updates. The University of Cambridge notably used this to address common COVID misconceptions during the early pandemic through a game called *Go*

⁶ Media Literacy Now. *U.S. Media Literacy Policy & Impact Report*. January 2026, https://medialiteracynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/MLN_Policy_Impact_Report-1.2026.pdf.

⁷ Johns Hopkins University. “Photovoice.” *Johns Hopkins Center for Health Equity*, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-health-equity/photovoice>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

Viral! that reached over 400,000 people by May 2021.⁸ Acknowledging and directly countering fake news needs to happen on the same social media platforms used to disinform. Visibly labeling real news, with well-known methodologies and Coalition for Content Provenance and Authority-compliant (C2PA) authentication,⁹ is a crucial step toward rebuilding trust in an AI-saturated environment.

As always, good intentions are not enough. We must repair breaches in trust; constantly planning ahead, reporting for the humanity AI cannot grasp.

⁸ University of Cambridge. “‘Pre-bunk’ tactics reduce public susceptibility to COVID-19 conspiracies and falsehoods, study finds.” *University of Cambridge*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/pre-bunk-tactics-reduce-public-susceptibility-to-covid-19-conspiracies-and-falsehoods-study-finds#:~:text=UNESCO%20deployed%20infographics%20across%20social,to%20stoke%20outrage%20and%20fear>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

⁹ Coalition for Content Provenance and Authority. *C2PA*, <https://c2pa.org/about/>. Accessed 21 February 2026.

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