

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

Colin Klein , The Australian National University

Library Association of NSW

5 May 2021



Australian
National
University

Some Personal Background



Since death by anthrax has been ascribed to a toxemia (6), and since toxin has been detected both in vivo and in vitro, our observations raise questions regarding the critical number of organisms per milliliter of blood in relationship to toxin produced in immunized as compared to normal animals. It is possible, since immunization prolongs the time from dose to septicemia, that more organisms and more toxin are produced before septicemia is detected, and therefore the animal dies with a lower level of organisms per milliliter of blood.

FREDERICK KLEIN
BILL G. MAHLANDT
RALPH E. LINCOLN
IRA A. DEARMON, JR.
ALBERT L. FERNELIUS

U.S. Army Chemical Corps, Fort Detrick, Frederick, Maryland

References

1. W. L. Bloom, W. J. McGhee, W. J. Cromartie, D. W. Watson, *J. Infectious Diseases* **80**, 137 (1947).
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9 August 1960



Some Personal Background



Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum

Colin Klein^{1,2*}, Peter Clutton^{1,2} and Vince Polito^{2,3}

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pathways to conspiracy: The social and linguistic precursors of involvement in Reddit's conspiracy theory forum

Colin Klein¹^{*}, Peter Clutton¹^o, Adam G. Dunn²^o

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What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Ingredients of a good conspiracy theory:

1. An accepted narrative which explains some event or practice, plus
2. a group of powerful people working 'behind the scenes',
3. that provides the real explanation of the event/practice, but who
4. work to conceal their own role,
5. in part by propping up the official narrative



What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Some examples

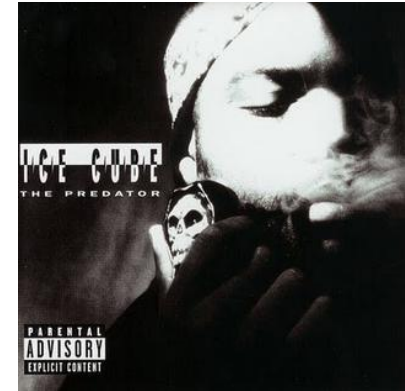
- JFK was assassinated by a shadowy cabal.
- The moon landing was faked.
- 9/11 was staged by the US government
- Russia is blackmailing Trump via secret sex tapes
- AIDS was created in a secret government lab
- Venezuela's economy has collapsed because of CIA intervention
- American Presidents have kept secret files on their enemies
- The CIA helped push crack cocaine into African-American communities
- Most world leaders are shape-shifting reptiles
- ACT property developers secretly shaped the light rail route
- The US government covers up evidence of aliens.
- Spy agencies systematically record all overseas phonecalls.
- The CIA and the Army investigated hallucinogens as mind-control drugs
- Obama is a Kenyan-born Muslim who planned to impose Sharia law
- Powerful billionaires run secret underage sex rings.
- NASA sends sex slaves to mars.
- Hillary Clinton has killed several dozen political rivals



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- **American Presidents have kept secret files on their enemies**
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The Cover-up is Key!

Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories

Michael J. Wood¹, Karen M. Douglas¹, and Robbie M. Sutton¹

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
3(6) 767-773
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DOI: 10.1177/1948550611434786
http://spps.sagepub.com



Table 1. Correlations Between Endorsement of Princess Diana Conspiracy Theories in Study 1

	Official MI6 Campaign to Kill Diana	Dodi and Diana Killed by Al-Fayeds' Business Enemies	Diana Had to Die Prevent Her From Marrying an Arab	Diana Faked Her Own Death
Diana killed by rogue cell of British Intelligence	.749 ***	.614 ***	.670 ***	<i>0.15</i> †
Official MI6 campaign to kill Diana		.660 ***	.622 ***	.206 *
Dodi and Diana killed by Al-Fayeds' business enemies			.607 ***	.253 ***
Diana had to die to prevent her from marrying an Arab				.242 **

Note. Correlations between mutually contradictory items are bolded. All correlation coefficients are Pearson *r*.

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. Italics indicate *p* < .10.



The Cover-up is Key!

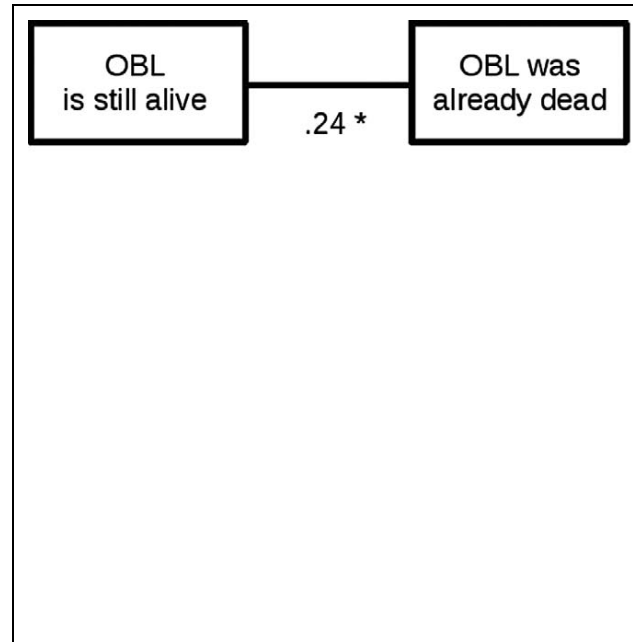
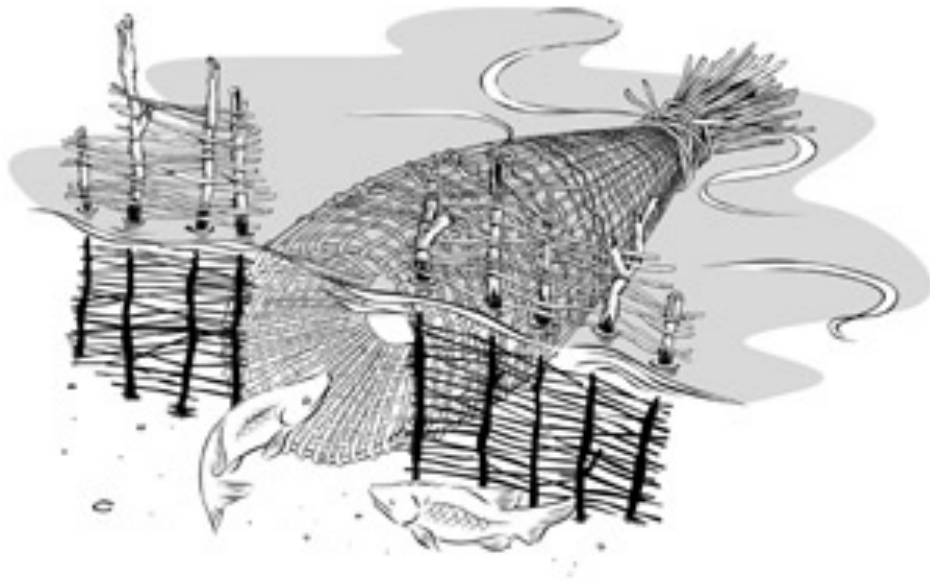


Figure 1. Illustration of the observed correlations in endorsement of Study 2 items. The two conspiracy theories display a significant zero-order correlation (above) but have no significant direct relationship when belief in a cover-up is taken into account (below).

The one-way ticket



GORDON RAMSAY SEX DWARF EATEN BY BADGER

SUNDAY Sport EXCLUSIVE

LOOKALIKE: Gordon Ramsay

AN Itty-bitty porn star who hit the big time as a Gordon Ramsay lookalike has been found dead in a BADGER'S SET!

Last week, *Sunday Sport* revealed how diddy Percy Foster, 35 — who is the spit of the foul-mouthed TV chef — was appearing in adult movies.

But with the world at his feet and producers beating a path to his door, it's all over for pint-sized Percy.

His tiny corpse was found deep in an underground chamber by Ministry of Agriculture experts ahead of a planned badger gassing programme near Trwsgwyn, west Wales.

Burrow

And expert CSI teams had to use fingertip technology to remove his body from the six-foot-deep burrow.

Sources close to the investigation said Percy was clothed but parts of his corpse had been "partially gnawed" by animals.

It is not yet clear how Percy died, though suicide has not been ruled out.

Movie producer Dexter Yamankeb said: "Percy was a little guy with big problems. He was doing well but he was under pressure. 24/7, like everyone in this goddamned business."

A friend of Gordon Ramsay said he had not "fcking heard" about tragic Percy's death. An inquest has been opened and adjourned.

TRAGIC: Percy's tiny corpse is hidden by itkie forensic tent

SETT UPON: Badger feasted on little star



Evidence and Trust

It is easy to say: "Think for yourself!" But we are all deeply dependent on the testimony of others for what we know.

We have to trust other people to know almost anything!

It is that trust that conspiracy theories exploit



Why do people believe?

Three kinds of explanation:

Individual explanations: focus on individual traits and experiences. Explain why this person believes *rather than* that person.

Social explanations: focus on social structures. Explains why people in this kind of society *rather than* that one are more willing to believe.

Narrative explanations: focus on stories. Explains why people believe this conspiracy theory *rather than* not



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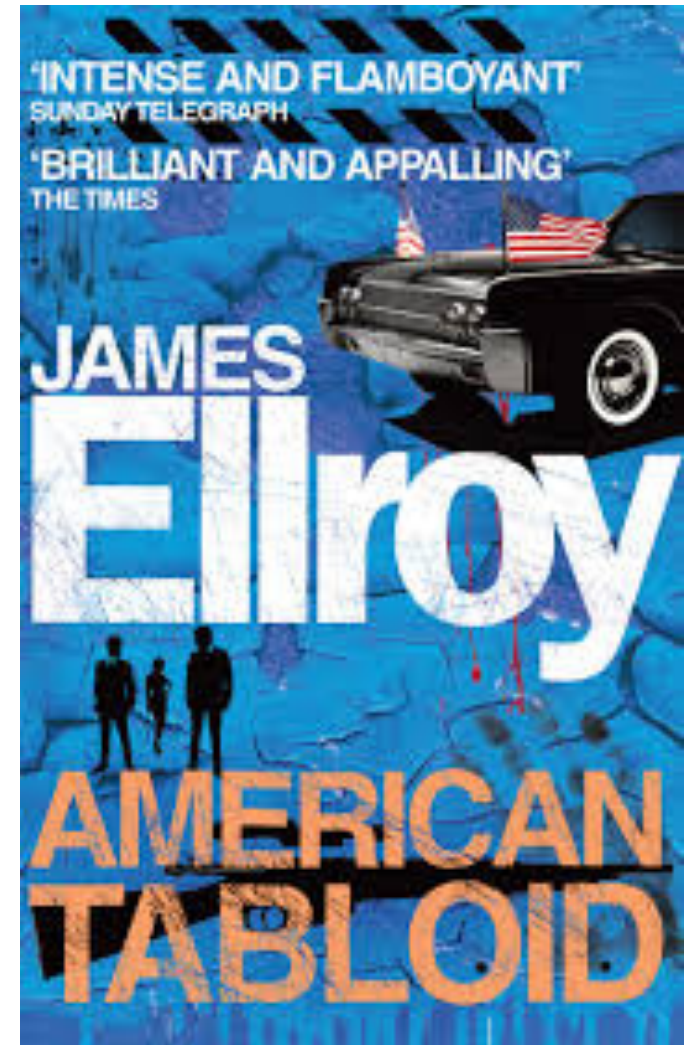
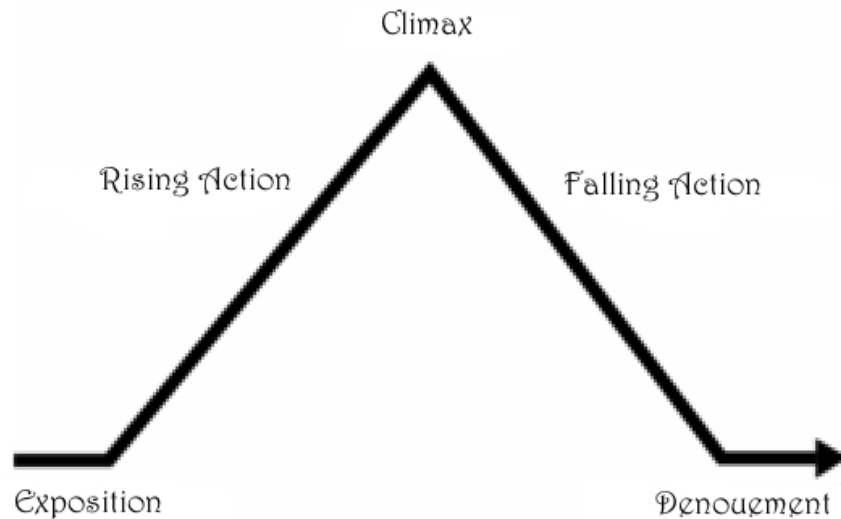
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Narrative explanations

Conspiracy theories as a type of shared narrative with distinctively narrative features



Narrative explanations



“A story therefore enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of how things happen, but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*....

Narrative explanations



“A story therefore enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of how things happen, *but rather to familiar patterns of how things feel....*”

Narrative explanations

do you know much about covid conspiracies? my housemate just sent me this:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanp-nciano/2021/05/23/report-wuhan-lab-staff-hospitalized-covid-19-symptoms-virus-origins/?sh=b9287454bd94>



Report: Wuhan Lab Staff Hospitalized With Covid-Like Symptoms Before Confirmed Outbreak, New ...

forbes.com



Narrative explanations



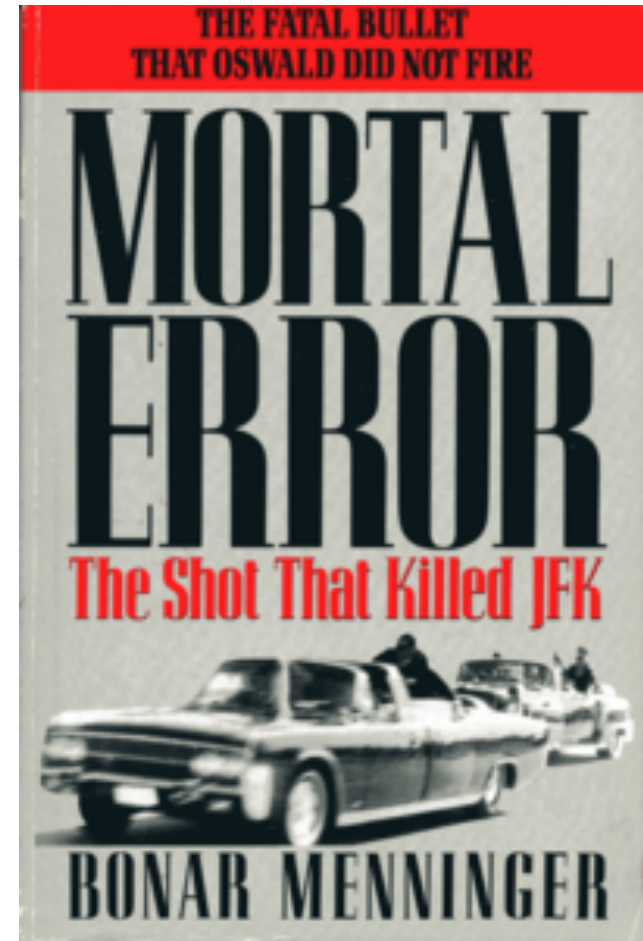
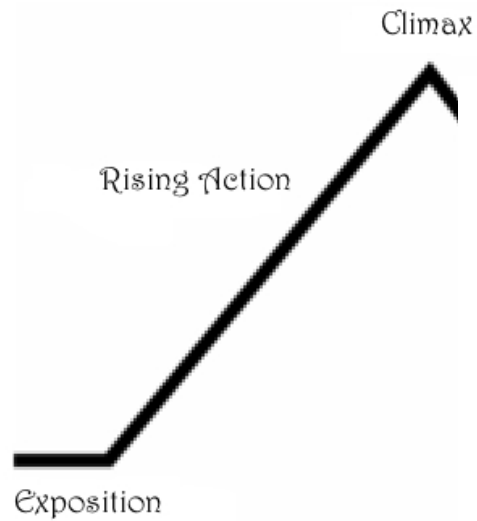
“A story therefore enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of how things happen, **but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*....**”

Having made subjective sense of historical events, by arriving at a stable attitude toward them, the audience is liable to feel that it has made objective sense of them, by understanding how they came about. Having sorted out its feelings toward events, **the audience mistakenly feels that it has sorted out the events themselves: it mistakes emotional closure for intellectual closure.**”

— Velleman 2003

Narrative explanations

Without closure, less appealing...



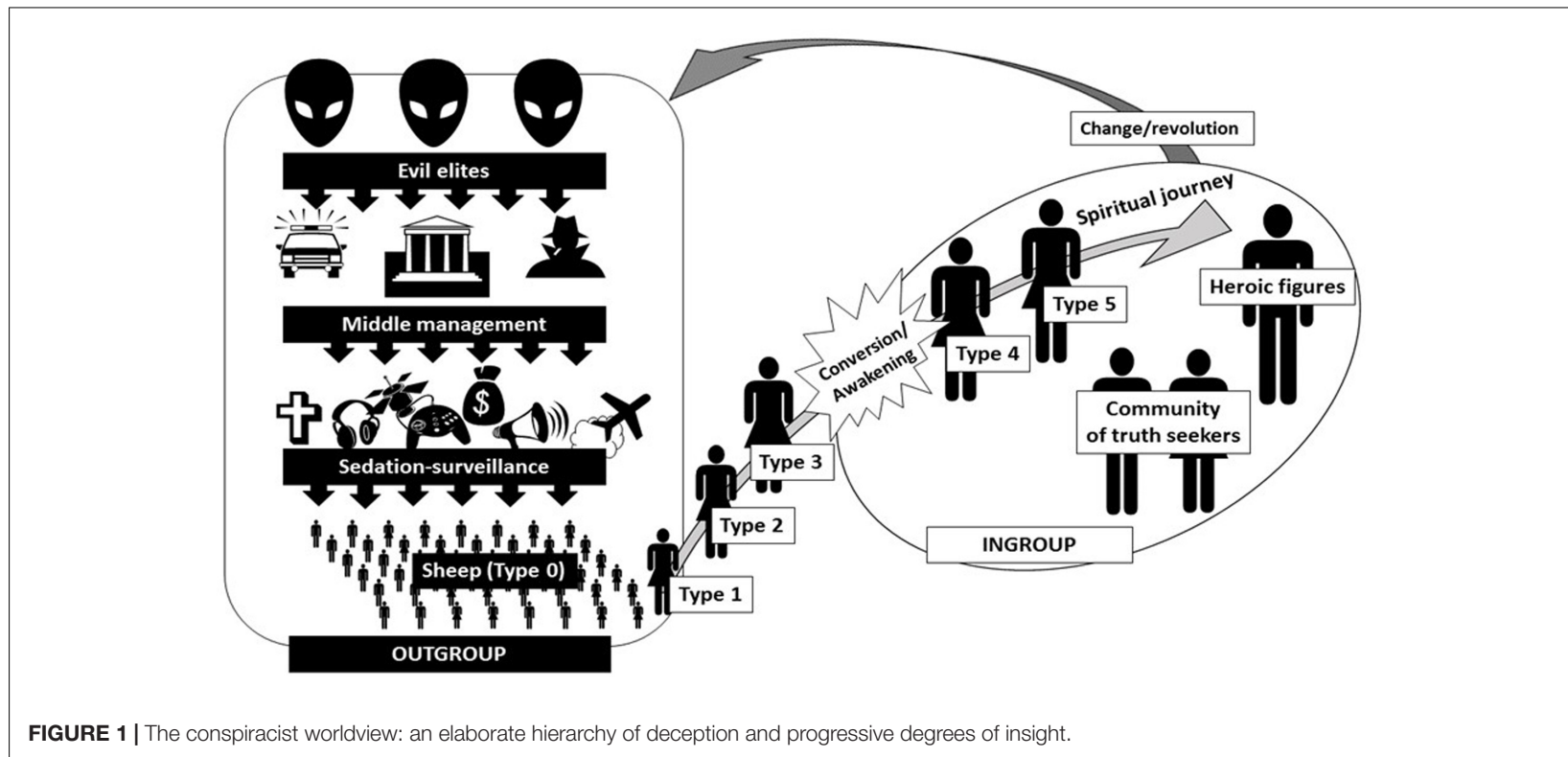
Ideological Narratives



Revelatory Narratives



Revelatory Narratives



Franks et al 2018

Revelatory Narratives

It is easy to say: "Think for yourself!"
But we are all deeply dependent on the testimony of others for what we know. We have to trust other people to know almost anything.

Revelatory narratives are attractive in part because they imply self-sufficiency.

Yet no conspiracy has ever been uncovered by amateur sleuthing...

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2021/05/23/report-wuhan-lab-staff-hospitalized-covid-19-symptoms-virus-origins/?sh=b9287454bd94>



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What can you do?

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What can you do?

Priming accuracy is a good start

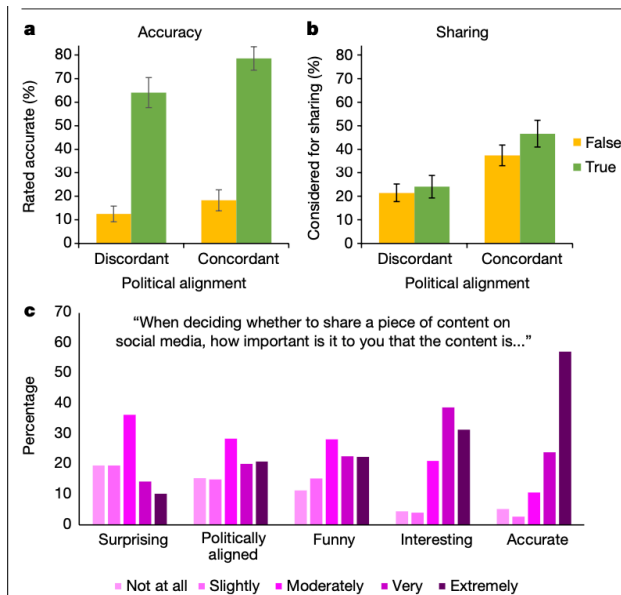


Fig. 1 | Sharing intentions are much less discerning than accuracy judgements—despite an overall desire to share only accurate content. In study

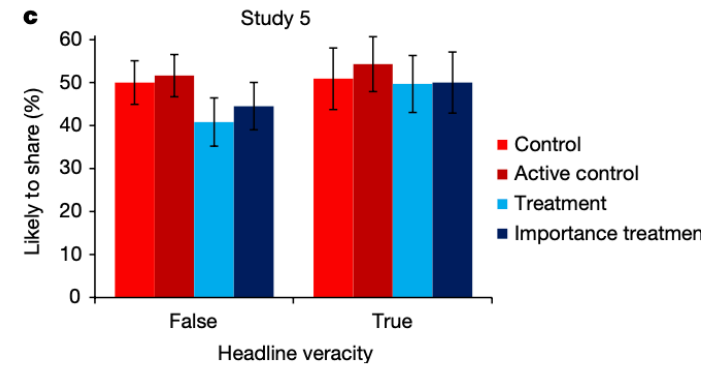


Fig. 2 | Inducing survey respondents to think about accuracy increases the veracity of headlines they are willing to share. a–c, Participants in

Pennycook et al 2020



Thanks!

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