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Intuitive theories of persuasion shape engagement in discussion of polarizing topics

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Abstract

Misinformation promoting scientific misconceptions can spread rapidly in ways it once couldn't, and discussions of this trend now appear to shape nearly all discourse about polarizing topics (e.g., politics, science denial). What effects might this recent trend have on peoples intuitive theories of how others learn and assimilate new evidence? Furthermore, how do these theories shape engagement in discussion of polarizing issues? To shed light on these questions, we conducted a series of exploratory studies (Experiments = 4; N = 1176) which demonstrate two key results. First, people do not think that misinformation is more likely to influence people's beliefs than accurate statistical information, contrary to our predictions. Second, and importantly, we found that the more likely someone is to say information (whether accurate or inaccurate) can change other peoples beliefs, the more likely they are to debate important social issues in an effort to correct their misconceptions.