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A Case Study of False Information Literacy

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Abstract

An increasing presence of misinformation in all forms of media highlights the necessity for a deeper understanding of false information literacy as a concept within information literacy research. This study evaluates an example of false information literacy, tracing the initial exposure to misinformation, the evaluation of the misinformation using information literacy techniques, and the reinforcement of and dissemination of misinformation. Furthermore, this study interrogates the use of source credibility as a justification for belief in misinformation. This case study contributes to ongoing research on the distortion of information literacy practices to believe in and spread misinformation. More research into false information literacy and its real-world implications is necessary.

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Introduction

In order to effectively combat misinformation, researchers and laypeople must understand current information phenomena. False information literacy is a three-step process. Defined by Elizabeth Zak as “the use of information literacy techniques to believe in and spread misinformation,” false information literacy is a current danger (Zak, 2023). Although false information literacy as a single instance is concerning, it is actually composed of three major steps. Zak further defined false information literacy as “a sequential progression from exposure to justification to dissemination” (Zak, 2026). Despite false information literacy’s significant impact on public understanding and behavior regarding vaccines, climate change, and political polarization, false information literacy remains relatively understudied in scholarly research. Addressing this gap in research, this study seeks to provide a concrete example of false information literacy.

Researchers agree that credibility is an important part of information literacy (Lucaser, 2025; Haider, 2022; Vamanu, 2022; Khanina, 2021; López-González, 2023). Lucaser and Acedera (2025) found that although students may struggle with information literacy, they understand that source evaluation is important for information seekers. Haider and Sundin (2022) found that often credibility is one of the first elements of information that people assess when presented with information. Vamanu and Zak (2022) identified source credibility as a factor in believing correct information. Khanina et al. (2021) explained that critical thinking and skepticism are often underexplored elements of information literacy. While many information seekers understand basic information literacy mnemonics such as the CRAAP test or the RADAR method, they may not use these tools accurately (Tomaszewski, 2025). Many information seekers understand that credibility is essential, but the varying types and signals of credibility can still lead them to be misled. Furthermore, as misinformation becomes increasingly difficult to detect, it can quickly circulate. Simply understanding information literacy methods is insufficient. In order to curtail the spread of misinformation, information seekers must not only recognize credible sources, but also understand the hallmarks of misinformation.

While many may view false information literacy as cognitive phenomena such as confirmation bias or motivated reasoning, it operates at a different level of analysis. Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning are psychological tendencies that shape how individuals interpret information that agrees with their inherent, specific biases. Conversely, false information literacy focuses on the distortion of information practices: source evaluation, credibility assessment, and corroboration, and their application in justifying and disseminating misinformation. Rather than a cognitive predisposition, false information literacy is the use of information practices to reinforce false beliefs.

I conducted a qualitative case study of misinformation exposure, evaluation, and dissemination, using Zak’s three-step model as a lens. After identifying a viral article that discussed misinformation, I analyzed how the exposure to false information occurred, the use of information literacy techniques in justifying the belief in misinformation, and finally, the acceptance and dissemination of misinformation.

This analysis presents the initial exposure to misinformation, the application of information literacy skills to justify a belief in this misinformation, and eventually the acceptance and adoption of misinformation as fact. False information literacy contributes to the dissemination of misinformation within broader online and in-person communities. This paper presents a grounded example of false information literacy in a viral information environment. By presenting this example, the paper seeks to deepen the understanding and impact of false information literacy.

Materials and Methods

I used a qualitative interpretive analysis of publicly archived misinformation content. This single-case study design is used to examine how misinformation is encountered, evaluated through information-seeking practices, and subsequently disseminated within digital environments. In order to trace the steps of false information literacy, I identified an article, evaluated its content and scope, and analyzed how it reflects the steps of exposure, evaluation and dissemination. The article itself, published by Millennium Report, contained misinformation. The article was titled “CORONAVIRUS HOAX: Fake Virus Pandemic Fabricated to Cover-Up Global Outbreak of 5G Syndrome” and was published on March 2, 2020. This article was selected due to the following: its use of a verifiable debunked claim, its publication during a period of heightened uncertainty, and its broad scope. When viewed together, these characteristics make the article a suitable case for examining the steps of false information literacy: exposure, evaluation, and dissemination. Instead of analyzing direct information seeker behavior, this study models an information-seeking process based on existing evidence. The information seeker presented is theoretical.

Rather than reconstructing a specific individual’s behavior, this study uses a plausible information-seeking trajectory grounded in existing research on misinformation exposure, evaluation and dissemination. Many people who have believed misinformation later deny having believed it once they are corrected. Furthermore, the element of shame makes people less likely to report finding misinformation (Lewandowsky, 2012; Beauvais, 2022). As a result, the hypothetical information seeker is a heuristic device that demonstrates how false information literacy operates under documented informational conditions. This approach does not predict individual behavior but illustrates the processes through which misinformation may be encountered, evaluated, and disseminated.

I selected the following debunked claim: the claim that 5G was linked to COVID-19 cases. I

used an article as a primary source. In order to align with the information that was available at the time, I used contemporary, timestamped tools such as Reddit and The Wayback Machine, and contemporaneous fact-checking and public health sources as the secondary sources. In order to ensure the accuracy of exposure, verification and dissemination, I triangulated the sources and information provided: comparing the source types to reconstruct a basic information-seeking trajectory from initial exposure to eventual dissemination. Using secondary, timely, publicly available sources allowed me to preserve the information seeker's perspective as adequately as possible (Arora, 2016; Ogden, 2024). I used The Wayback Machine to verify the historical availability, content, and circulation of webpages that were subsequently altered or removed. I analyzed publicly available materials to simulate a typical information seeker's process; no human subjects were directly studied. Instead, patterns were identified through close reading and comparison of sources, informed by Zak's three-step process of exposure, evaluation and dissemination. I analyzed how each source contributed to initial exposure, belief reinforcement and dissemination through close interpretive reading.

In choosing the article for this case analysis, I identified its timeliness. The COVID-19 pandemic was a time of uncertainty and confusion. In early 2020, misinformation was presented alongside information, further undermining the medical establishment. An article that spreads misinformation during a confusing time was a better choice for this study than an article presenting easily disproved information. A lack of information literacy skills exacerbated the danger of misinformation in uncertain times, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Singh, 2022). Even when individuals possessed basic understandings of information literacy, and its corresponding skill set, they were still susceptible to believing misinformation (Alwreikat, 2022). Lloyd and Hicks (2022) found that many information seekers limited their intake of information and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this time period was appropriate for the case study.

Another major consideration of this article's selection was its virality. The article was archived approximately 448 times between March and May 2020 on the Internet Archive (Internet Archive, 2020). This capture is notable due to both its absolute amount and its temporal density: the site was preserved multiple times per day. This was likely due, in part, to elevated levels of user traffic and activity directed toward the particular URL. Specifically, most web pages are archived only a few times; relatively few receive high-frequency captures in a short period of time. Ainsworth et al. (2011) reported that "No more than 31.3% URIs are archived more than once per month" (p. 1). When considering this baseline, the 448 captures in a ten-week period represent an outlier. This evidence shows that the article was viral: it received rapid and widespread circulation before being removed.

The analysis was guided using the three-step framework of false information literacy with specific attention to the article's content within co-parallel online discourse. I now present the findings through the three-step process of false information literacy in order to provide a structured lens for analyzing how participants engage with misinformation. This approach allows us to trace the first

exposure of misinformation to the eventual dissemination of it as fact.

Step 1

The first step to false information literacy is exposure to misinformation. The article “CORONAVIRUS HOAX: Fake Virus Pandemic Fabricated to Cover-Up Global Outbreak of 5G Syndrome” was on a prominent website known for misinformation. Furthermore, it was discussing a rapidly evolving topic: COVID-19. COVID-19 was a relatively unknown virus, and as a result, information about its source, symptoms and treatment was still new and emergent. Authoritative information was both gradual and trustworthy. Furthermore, it was often presented in the context of the rapidly evolving situation. While information was still relatively unknown, misinformation was easily accessible. The title “CORONAVIRUS HOAX: Fake Virus Pandemic Fabricated to Cover-Up Global Outbreak of 5G Syndrome” is attention-grabbing and effective. Many news seekers could have read the article and identified its contents as potentially informative.

The misinformation contained in the article is the following: that the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax, that 5G causes COVID-19, and that the virus was engineered in Wuhan, China. The article also claims that cruise lines are spreading the virus through 5G. These claims are untrue: the COVID-19 pandemic was not a hoax, 5G does not cause COVID-19, the virus was not bioengineered in Wuhan, China, and cruise ships, although contributing to the spread, were not directly causing the spread through the use of 5G (Bodner, 2020; Ito, 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Kertscher, 2020; Uthman, 2020; Vamanu, 2022; World Health Organization, 2025; Yoo, 2025). Furthermore, at the time of this article’s publication, these claims had been publicly flagged as untrue when the article was written and released (BBC, 2020; Cellan-Jones, 2020; Liu, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). The article contains misinformation; however, to an information seeker uninformed about the COVID-19 virus, it presents a series of seemingly valid claims.

Step 2

The second step of false information literacy occurs when an information seeker uses information literacy techniques to evaluate other sources that may reinforce misinformation. Research shows that when an information seeker is exposed to misinformation, it is increasingly difficult to correct their beliefs in favor of correct information (Lewandowsky, 2012). Kan et al. (2021) describe this as a “continued influence effect” which results in corrections to the misinformation being less effective. In the context of false information literacy, an information seeker who reads an article containing misinformation may be less susceptible to believing correct information. In many cases, they may subconsciously seek to avoid accurate information in favor of pursuit of and belief in the misinformation.

Having encountered “CORONAVIRUS HOAX: Fake Virus Pandemic Fabricated to Cover-Up

Global Outbreak of 5G Syndrome,” an information seeker may then search for other sources that appear credible but reinforce the alleged 5G link to COVID-19. This may include websites, articles, and social media posts that contain misinformation about 5G and COVID-19 (5gfree.org, 2020a; Mercola, 2020; Shilhavy, 2020). However, due to the inflammatory nature of the misinformation contained in the article, the information seeker may be less inclined to engage with journals or sources that are mainstream. An individual may give greater attention to information that appears to support the initial misinformation. In this case, they may consider seeking information that might support the supposed link between 5G and COVID-19.

When evaluating the article, an information seeker may explore credible-appearing sources that discuss 5G and COVID-19 as a potential cover-up (5gfree.org, 2020a; 5gfree.org, 2020b). They may also explore seemingly-legitimate websites that discuss 5G and its supposed link to COVID-19. An information seeker exposed to the article may then identify other sources that seemed credible. In many cases, these sources would appear credible because they adopt typical markers of authority, including medical or scientific terminology and references to experts or research. Even basic identifiers of legitimacy such as professional website design or organizational branding would lend credibility to a source. These cues would lend credibility even if the underlying claims conflict with scientific consensus. An appearance of corroboration across organizations and social media users would further reinforce these perceptions of credibility, leading information seekers to reinterpret repeated, baseless claims as independent confirmation of fact. Unfortunately, in early 2020, organizations claimed that 5G technology was potentially harmful. While these organizations did not directly link COVID-19 and 5G technology, they still supported unfounded claims that 5G is inherently harmful, and could weaken a person’s immune system (Children’s Health Defense, 2020; World Doctors Alliance, 2020; Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, 2020). In many cases, these organizations’ claims were often juxtaposed with other conspiracy theories about COVID-19. This may reinforce the misinformation, and further convince the individual that the medical establishment could not be trusted in discussing COVID-19. An information seeker could then interpret the information as corroboration by medical professionals challenging medical consensus.

Furthermore, other sources on Reddit claiming to be doctors or nurses may also contribute to the dissemination of misinformation: although these sources may sound credible, in many cases it is impossible to check a source’s legitimacy on Reddit (COVID-19 and 5G, 2020; Reddit, 2020; Reddit, 2020). Although Reddit is not a reliable source for verified information, an information seeker may view these threads as informative, reinforcing their beliefs in the misinformation. After consulting these sources, the information seeker may interpret the misinformation as scientifically supported and corroborated. Once reinforced by these sources, the false claims may be more likely to be perceived as scientifically supported, strengthening the reader’s original misconceptions rather than correcting them.

Step 3

The third step of false information literacy is when an information seeker who has encountered misinformation actively disseminates misinformation within their networks. In the case of “CORONAVIRUS HOAX: Fake Virus Pandemic Fabricated to Cover-Up Global Outbreak of 5G Syndrome,” an information seeker may share the article with their social networks, both on and offline. While specific share counts for this article are difficult to identify due to platform transitions, restrictions, and lack of public data, research shows that this specific theory was viral. Early 2020 conspiracy theories linking 5G and COVID-19 had substantial online engagement: 398,000 tweets mentioned 5G and COVID-19 misinformation themes, and posts discussing 5G and COVID-19 obtained 45,000 total interactions (likes, comments, and shares) on public Facebook profiles during this time period (Langguth, 2023; Temperton, 2020). The level of engagement with this misinformation shows its capacity to reach large audiences. Unfortunately, the misinformation presented in the article remains publicly accessible, and is still believed by many information seekers. This final step demonstrates that the third step of false information literacy entails taking an active role in perpetuating the circulation of the misinformation.

Discussion

False information literacy highlights how individuals not only view misinformation, but consume, internalize and propagate it. Using this viral article, the current research shows how quickly false claims can circulate, especially during periods of unrest and uncertainty.

The first step, initial exposure, shows the value of context to misinformation susceptibility. In 2020, COVID-19 was a relatively new virus. Because reliable information was scarce, and new discoveries were emerging, the situation became a breeding ground for misinformation. This confusion was not the fault of the medical and scientific establishment. Instead, it was a result of the unprecedented pace surrounding the developments. Unfortunately, these circumstances only fueled distrust in the medical establishment and gave rise to conspiracy theories. The situation was further worsened when some political leaders embraced and amplified these unfounded claims. The article’s title, which uses sensational language, its citing of an unnamed authoritative figure, and its use of conspiratorial framing made it particularly effective at capturing attention. Its virality likewise lent credibility to the content, an alternative explanation.

The second step, reinforcement using information literacy skills, demonstrates the role of behavior in justifying belief in misinformation. Specifically, an individual will seek out information that confirms their now-existing beliefs. They may also become distrustful of the sources that would correct the misinformation. This can result in selectively engaging with sources that appear credible but ultimately reinforce false claims. In this case study, alternative health organizations, conspiracy-oriented websites, and anonymous online discussions provided a network of seemingly corroborating

evidence. These sources appeared credible through markers such as professional presentation and claims of expert authority, which signal legitimacy to audiences already skeptical of mainstream institutions and medicine. In this case study, misinformation becomes embedded not only through repetition but through perceived validation across multiple platforms and voices.

The third step, dissemination, shows the individual as an active participant in distributing misinformation. Social media platforms, as well as physical assembly, play a significant role in this stage. By facilitating rapid sharing of emotionally charged content, misinformation may be amplified. This documented engagement with and spread of conspiracy content demonstrates how misinformation achieves large-scale visibility through a variety of user interactions. Information seekers' sharing of this information often reinforces the earlier steps, and establishes these information seekers as credible sources of misinformation. While individuals share this misinformation, they contribute to its exposure among others, and the credibility of the misinformation. This highlights the deeper danger of misinformation systems, in which information seekers may be both recipients and agents in its distribution.

These findings have broader implications for information literacy and communication. While methods such as the CRAAP test and the RADAR method emphasize source evaluation, credibility assessment, and accuracy checks, this case study suggests that these approaches may be insufficient in misinformation-saturated environments. When seemingly-credible sources of misinformation reinforce fears or beliefs, they can contribute to the solidification of belief in false narratives. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, and contemporary times, individuals do engage in information seeking, but their efforts are directed toward confirmation rather than challenge. This demonstrates a necessity for an expansion of information literacy frameworks that identify emotional reasoning, cognitive bias, and social dynamics of information and misinformation spread.

The spread of misinformation poses significant challenges for current public health efforts. While false claims about COVID-19, its origins, spread, and 5G technology sowed distrust in medical and scientific institutions, this often corresponded to resistance to public health measures. This resistance and distrust, although unfounded, can often result in people making health choices that directly contradict medical recommendations. Although health misinformation about COVID-19 is prominent, current health misinformation has expanded in scope and is contributing to current health crises such as the resurgence of measles.

This study distinguishes between effective information literacy practices and their application to defend misinformation. Information literacy is an effective skill; however, this analysis shows that information literacy strategies may be applied in ways that are shaped by bias and selective exposure. False information literacy is a distortion of information literacy skills, rather than a failure. We must further understand its use within conditions that alter interpretative outcomes.

Conclusion

This case study has some limitations. Because the analysis focuses on a single article, it cannot accurately represent the diversity of misinformation. The discussion of information seeker behavior, because it is inferential and theoretical, is not based on direct observation of any individuals. Instead, it is reliant on current research to support claims of information seeking behavior. However, with tools such as the Wayback Machine, I was able to isolate the historically significant information. Further research must explore multiple case studies, and false information literacy in other mediums such as video or visual.

Rather than functioning through isolated actions, false information literacy is a sequential process that contributes to the persistence and presence of misinformation. These insights indicate that Zak's term false information literacy can be applied effectively in understanding the structure of misinformation dissemination by examining the relationship between exposure, evaluation, and proliferation. This paper also highlights the necessity of further research into understanding false information literacy through social media platforms and diverse informational concepts.

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