

Information Overload Helps Fake News Spread, and Social Media Knows It | Scientific American

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Consider Andy, who is worried about contracting COVID-19. Unable to read all the articles he sees on it, he relies on trusted friends for tips. When one opines on Facebook that pandemic fears are overblown, Andy dismisses the idea at first. But then the hotel where he works closes its doors, and with his job at risk, Andy starts wondering how serious the threat from the new virus really is. No one he knows has died, after all. A colleague posts an article about the COVID “scare” having been created by Big Pharma in collusion with corrupt politicians, which jibes with Andy’s distrust of government. His Web search quickly takes him to articles claiming that COVID-19 is no worse than the flu. Andy joins an online group of people who have been or fear being laid off and soon finds himself asking, like many of them, “What pandemic?” When he learns that several of his new friends are planning to attend a rally demanding an end to lockdowns, he decides to join them. Almost no one at the massive protest, including him, wears a mask. When his sister asks about the rally, Andy shares the conviction that has now become part of his identity: COVID is a hoax.

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