

IN THE NEWS

Like the rest of us, these social scientists are wrestling to sort out facts, errors, and fibs – in our world’s 24-hour stream of news, gossip, and social media.

Racial attitudes have long been categorized by scholars as sticky.

“There’s a lot of evidence that they form early and that they’re hard to change,” says political science researcher Dr. Andrew Engelhardt.

“But they aren’t fixed in stone.”

Engelhardt has found that White Democrats are becoming more cohesively positive towards Black Americans, while White Republicans become more negative.

The size of these shifts, he says, cannot be accounted for by an influx of younger people into the Democratic Party or by people changing parties because of their racial attitudes. “People within political parties are actually changing their attitudes.”

The biggest change has occurred among Democrats. It’s why, he says, Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 involved a larger number of White Americans. “White Democrats have a stronger belief in structural racism now than they did in prior years.”

His findings are part of a study published in the British Journal of Political Science, and covered by NPR and The New York Times.

What drives the change he’s tracking? While common wisdom holds that racial attitudes cause political conflict, Engelhardt says the reverse is also true – “Partisanship affects racial attitudes.” Specifically, he says, the rhetoric employed by liberal and

conservative media and the political elite is shifting racial attitudes.

Engelhardt recently compared broadcast transcripts from left-leaning Rachel Maddow and right-leaning Bill O’Reilly between September 2008 through December 2016 – more than 4,000 hours of airtime. To handle the large dataset, he analyzed a sample of about 30,000 paragraph-like sections and then designed artificial intelligence algorithms to continue that assessment over the remaining transcripts.

In his analysis of words-become-data, he

sought to identify racially conservative and liberal themes. The study period included historic racially charged events, such as the 2014 killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri.

Engelhardt found that Maddow’s reporting focused attention on police behavior, racial profiling, and systemic issues. O’Reilly, conversely, focused on the protests, rather than the impetus for those protests, with comments that suggested distrust and resentment of protestors’ motives.

While a viewer often can, on a gut level, instantly identify political bias, Engelhardt says, “It’s not until we actually test things, that we know how far off our gut is, or not.”

In the weeks after Maddow episodes discussing race and racial inequality,



**ANDREW
ENGELHARDT**

Engelhardt has also found that Gallup opinion polls showed greater public concern for these issues. But in the weeks after O'Reilly episodes discussing the same, opinion polls showed less concern. "How they were talking about race seemingly impacted levels of public concern."

Day in and day out, influential conservative and liberal media figures use different language to discuss race. "Repeated exposure can connect race and values in viewers' long-term memory," Engelhardt says.

"The words and phrases that media elites use – they're not innocuous. People are sitting on their couches getting this information that can boost positive attitudes or lead to negative attitudes too."

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Mark Twain understood the power of bad information.

"A lie," Twain allegedly said, "can travel around the world and back again while the truth is lacing up its boots."

Sorting out truth from mistruth in this era of spin and fake news has consequences for individuals and for society, says psychology researcher Dr. Chris Wahlheim.

Mistakes are inevitable in delivering the news. In recent years the term "alternative facts" debuted, further challenging news consumers who just want to know what's real.

Responsible news organizations attempt to correct errors. But what's the best way to do that?

"There's been debate about that," says

Wahlheim, who directs UNCG's Memory and Cognition Lab.

Some researchers say reminding someone of past incorrect information when you provide them with a correction might accidentally solidify their memory of the incorrect information. "Bringing to mind old incorrect information can make it more accessible, more familiar."

But Wahlheim and his graduate student Timothy Alexander recently published a study in their field's flagship journal, *Psychological Science*, with different results.

In the study, subjects saw a set of news website statements that included some misinformation, followed by another set of statements in which the misinformation was corrected.

The researchers found that restating the original incorrect information and labeling it as erroneous helped subjects recall the new, corrected information more easily.

"Retrieval of past events – that are similar to what's currently being perceived but also include differences – can help people remember a new experience better," says Wahlheim. A sensitivity to changes to past information is part of an important mental process, he notes. "People use past experiences to anticipate the future."

Ultimately, Wahlheim's research may lead to improved strategies for news providers that prioritize accuracy, and for people who want to be more savvy news consumers. The work is already getting attention – last year it was covered by *Forbes*.

As for that memorable quote often attributed to Mark Twain, it's a common misquote. Satirist Jonathan Swift is the more likely source. Remember that.

by Tom Lassiter • learn more at
go.uncg.edu/engelhardt | go.uncg.edu/wahlheim

**CHRISTOPHER
WAHLHEIM**