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.

Mistrust 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