

# INTERVIEW

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## “False News Stories”: Why Fact-Checks are a Weak Corrective – Researcher Explains

### Interview with Florian Zimmermann

- **New experiment shows: Fake stories keep shaping people’s beliefs after debunking**
- **Interview with Florian Zimmermann, EPOS Economic Research Center**

Bonn, Mannheim, 17.06.2026 – **In public debates, false news stories, sometimes generated by AI, continue to influence what people believe, even after being proven untrue. To find out how effective corrections should be designed, researchers examined how storytelling, as opposed to simple quantitative information, affects people’s beliefs. The findings underline that stories with vivid details trigger “mental simulations” that resist debunking. Since AI-generated deepfakes, such as photos, videos, or audio files, are particularly compelling stories, the researchers argue that “counter-stories” engaging the same communication channels need to be part of the antidote. These are insights of a new study by the EPOS Economic Research Center at the Universities of Bonn and Mannheim, published in the discussion paper “Learning from False Stories”.**

**Mr. Zimmermann, why are false stories so hard to correct?**

**Florian Zimmermann:** In our study, we show that false stories shift people’s beliefs substantially. When people read or listen to a false story, which contains evaluative or emotional content, they vividly picture what is happening, a process we call “mental simulation”. It seems that the brain replicates what is being described in a way similar to a real experience. This changes how people think about the information they have just learned and persists even after debunking.

False quantitative information, presented as neutral factual claims, does not have such a lasting effect. According to our findings, people are more confident in beliefs formed after reading false stories compared to false statistics, even though these beliefs are further away from the rational benchmark. We also observed that at least some people seem completely unaware that they are influenced by false stories.

**Could you give us a real-life example of a false story that was hard to debunk?**

Sure, let us take the allegations of voter fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, for example.

# INTERVIEW

They were largely sustained by detailed stories – claims about specific election officials, precincts, voting machines, and suitcases of ballots – rather than by statistical evidence, which pointed in the opposite direction. Independent reviews, court rulings, and recounts debunked the specific claims. Yet, many people in the U.S. continued to believe the election had been compromised.

## **If official debunking does not work, how should falsehoods and deepfakes be corrected?**

Our findings suggest that quantitative rebuttals are not enough to correct story-based falsehoods, because they work via a different cognitive “channel”. Effective corrections may need to match the format of the falsehood they target – mental simulation. According to our research, counter-stories that engage the same imaginative and emotional channels may be more effective than dispassionate fact-checks. They could be part of corrective interventions. With the rise of AI-generated content, such as photos, videos, or audio files, which make it easy to package falsehoods as vivid, emotionally compelling stories, we think there is an urgent need to find effective antidotes.

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The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp757>

Find the list of all discussion papers of the CRC here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers>.

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### **The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) Transregio 224 EPoS**

Established in 2018, [the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS](https://www.crctr224.de), a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

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