

Eroding Trust and Distorting Public Understanding

Recently, I came across several social media posts containing misinformation about the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO). As someone who serves as an officer of the AAO, I felt a responsibility to respond. Rather than engage in a public argument with the author of the posts, I chose to share accurate information and clarify the facts in a respectful manner. While doing so, I found myself wondering what motivates someone to knowingly spread misinformation in the first place. Specifically, what personal benefits might a person perceive from posting false or misleading information on social media? Curious about the answer, I did some reading and reflection.

Social media has dramatically changed the way we communicate, share ideas, and form opinions. Unfortunately, it has also created an environment where misinformation can spread quickly and widely. Understanding why people engage in this behavior is important if we hope to address it effectively. Looking at the motivations behind misinformation is not intended to excuse or endorse it. Rather, it helps us understand the perceived incentives that may drive some individuals to act this way.

What I found is that the motivations are often surprisingly predictable. For some, the incentive is financial. Social media platforms reward attention, and sensational or provocative content often attracts more engagement than carefully researched facts. Increased views, clicks, and shares can translate into advertising revenue, sponsorship opportunities, and other financial rewards.

For others, the motivation may be influence and visibility. A dramatic claim can quickly attract followers and elevate someone's profile within a particular online community. The attention generated by such content can create the perception of authority, opening doors to media exposure, speaking opportunities, or leadership roles within like-minded groups.

There can also be psychological and social rewards. Likes, shares, and comments provide immediate feedback and validation. In some cases, posting information that reinforces a particular narrative can strengthen a person's sense of belonging within a group. The approval received from others can become a powerful incentive, even when the information being shared is inaccurate.

Finally, misinformation may be used as a tool to advance personal or ideological goals. Some individuals view it to influence public opinion, rally support for a cause, or undermine

opposing viewpoints. Whether the objective is political, professional, or personal, misinformation may be seen as an effective means of achieving a desired outcome.

As I reflected on the posts that prompted my own response, I was struck by the fact that these benefits are largely short-term and perceived rather than lasting or meaningful. While misinformation may generate attention, influence, or even financial rewards, it often comes at a significant cost.

Individuals who knowingly spread misinformation risk damaging their credibility, losing the trust of their audience, facing platform sanctions, or even encountering legal consequences. More importantly, the broader impact extends far beyond the individual. Misinformation erodes trust, distorts public understanding, and makes it more difficult for people to make informed decisions. In organizations such as the AAO, where our mission includes education and advocacy, the spread of misinformation undermines our ability to serve both our members and the public.

In the end, my experience reminded me that misinformation rarely spreads without some perceived benefit to the person posting it. Understanding those incentives does not justify the behavior, but it does help explain it. By recognizing the motivations behind misinformation, we can better respond with facts, professionalism, and a continued commitment to providing trustworthy information. Ultimately, protecting public understanding depends not only on correcting falsehoods, but also on maintaining the trust that misinformation seeks to erode.

-Michael Sherman, GLAO Trustee and AAO Secretary-Treasurer.