

New internet myths: no truth in a postfactual world?

Citation for published version (APA):

Reips, U. D., & Matzat, U. (2016). New internet myths: no truth in a postfactual world? *International Journal of Internet Science*, 11(1), 1.

Document license:

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Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2016

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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New Internet Myths: No Truth in a Postfactual World?

Ulf-Dietrich Reips¹, Uwe Matzat²

¹University of Konstanz, Germany; ²Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

The attribution of societal power to new technologies

The year 2016 has seen an unprecedented series of political campaigns that made use of the Internet, especially social media. Consequently, the Internet is increasingly being seen as a channel for influencing opinions, and it is being blamed for allowing spin doctors and other shady elements lurking at campaign trails in doing so without the necessity of content being related to facts. “Post-truth” was named the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016, an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Relatedly, language institutions in several other languages followed suit, e.g. “postfaktisch” was also elected word of the year for German. The history of making new technologies responsible for societal developments beyond their actual impact is not new: when books were first printed, the invention of trains was thought to blind people, make them go crazy or cause female passengers’ “uteruses ... fly out of [their] bodies” (Rooney, 2011). Old TV seems to get a break on its couch these days, while a crowd of teenage Internet services is being blamed for shattering the world’s windows. In the current editorial, we take a close look at these “new Internet myths”. We will return to this topic below, after some information about the current issue and the state of the journal.

The International Journal of Internet Science: Indeed an international journal?

When we founded the IJIS in 2006 to offer a forum for substantial empirical research on the use of the Internet for research and on the Internet’s impact on human behavior and society after a decade of pioneering efforts in this area, we aimed at and hoped for an international audience. An international scope was not at all a given at the General Online Research conferences, where we had met and that we often helped organize and enrich by the international outlook. We were the “international guys” in organizing this conference and in its home society, the German Society of Online Research that one of us (UR) co-founded and for which we both organized conferences over many years. IJIS is a peer reviewed open access journal for empirical findings, methodology, and theory of social and behavioral science concerning the Internet and its implications for individuals, social groups, organizations, and society.

As can be seen in Figure 1, according to Web traffic analytics, IJIS’ readers surf onto our Web pages from many parts of the world. A little more than one fourth comes from North America (most from the United States, some from Canada), and roughly one fifth from Europe, with Germany, the UK, and the Netherlands being the origin of most visits. Asia, with India, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Turkey, and Japan leading, makes up more than another fifth of the visits. Australia comes in with 5%, and South America with Brazil being the only country above 1% of the visit’s share joins Africa and Antarctica as part of a group of continents with relatively low frequency of visits to the IJIS.

22.39%		United States
9.03%		Germany
8.66%		India
7.12%		United Kingdom
4.98%		Australia
3.17%		China
2.69%		Canada
2.66%		Indonesia
2.42%		Netherlands
2.25%		Malaysia
1.60%		Philippines
1.47%		Hong Kong
1.12%		Turkey
1.06%		Austria
1.02%		Japan
1.02%		Brazil
0.99%		Iran, Islamic Republic of
0.95%		Italy
0.95%		Poland

Figure 1. Relative origin of visits to the IJIS.net Web pages: top countries in 2016.

The current issue reflects the International Journal of Internet Science’s international authorship in similar ways: all authors are from all three continents on the northern half of the globe. One article was written at UC Irvine in the United States, one at Utrecht University in The Netherlands, one at University of Düsseldorf in Germany, and one by authors from Fudan University and University of Macau in China.

The current issue

We present the following articles that passed our current rejection rate of 86.1% and appear in this issue: *Digitizing a Large Corpus of Handwritten Documents Using Crowdsourcing and Cultural Consensus Theory* by Prutha S. Deshpande, Sean Tauber, Stephanie M. Chang, Sergio Gago, and Kimberly A. Jameson reports on **crowdsourcing** procedures to convert information from a large handwritten archive of ethnographic survey data into a computer addressable database. Rather than manually transcribing the archive's estimated 23,000 pages of handwritten data, the authors develop novel Internet-based crowdsourcing task designs and use an innovative variation of Cultural Consensus Analysis (CCT) to objectively aggregate crowdsourced responses based on a formal process model of shared knowledge. In two experiments they test whether crowdsourced tasks are practical as a method for automating the transcription of the archive's handwritten material and if CCT is appropriate as a model of the transcription challenge in large-scale crowdsourced data collection platforms.

Vera Toepoel and Yanniek Hendriks contribute *The Impact of Non-Coverage in Web Surveys in a Country with High Internet Penetration: Is It (Still) Useful to Provide Equipment to Non-Internet Households in the Netherlands?* Their study focuses on the effect of the **exclusion of non-Internet users in Web surveys** and raises the question whether it is worthwhile to provide non-Internet users with equipment for them to participate in Web surveys. Using data from the LISS panel in the Netherlands the authors show that non-Internet users (“offliners”) differ significantly from the regular Internet users on most socio-demographic variables and on a variety of outcome variables. However, because there are only very few offliners, their inclusion does not cause any major differences in population-generalizing analyses, compared to the Internet group alone. Thus, for populations with high Internet penetration rates it is not worthwhile to provide offline households with Internet access, unless one is particularly interested in doing subset analyses on the offline group. Not including offliners is ethically and scientifically problematic, however.

With their article *cocron: A Web Interface and R Package for the Statistical Comparison of Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients* Birk Diedenhofen and Jochen Musch describe and provide a platform-independent web service and R package that provide functions to conduct **significance tests for the comparison of two or more Cronbach's alpha coefficients** for both dependent and independent groups of participants. To compare two or more measures with regard to their internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients are usually computed for each measure separately. For a valid comparison between Cronbach's alpha coefficients, however, substantive differences need to be distinguished from circumstantial differences that occur due to chance. Popular statistics packages lack the ability to test for statistically significant differences between alpha coefficients. Two graphical user interfaces are offered to provide comfortable access to the much-needed functionality of cocron.

Are there **gender differences in cyberbullying perpetration** (not victimization), and do they get moderated by other factors? With their article *Cyberbullying Perpetration: A Meta-Analysis of Gender Differences* Shaojing Sun¹, Xitao Fan, and Jianxia Du examine this question on a total of 39 articles that reported 100 effect sizes of gender difference in cyberbullying behaviors. A statistically significant gender difference emerges, indicating that more males were involved in cyberbullying perpetration behaviors than females. Moderator analysis shows, however, that the gender difference was not consistent across the levels of several study features (e.g., modality of cyberbullying, regions of samples). It was also revealed that some methodological issues (e.g., measurement of cyberbullying behaviors, self-report rather than behavioral data) remain obvious challenges for researchers in this area. Caution is warranted, because those studies that were rated as having poor study quality showed a larger than average effect size for gender difference in cyberbullying.

Journal impact update: IJIS' 2015 impact at 7.0 or larger, 5-year impact at 14.9

The International Journal of Internet Science continues to see increasingly high popularity, see Figure 2.

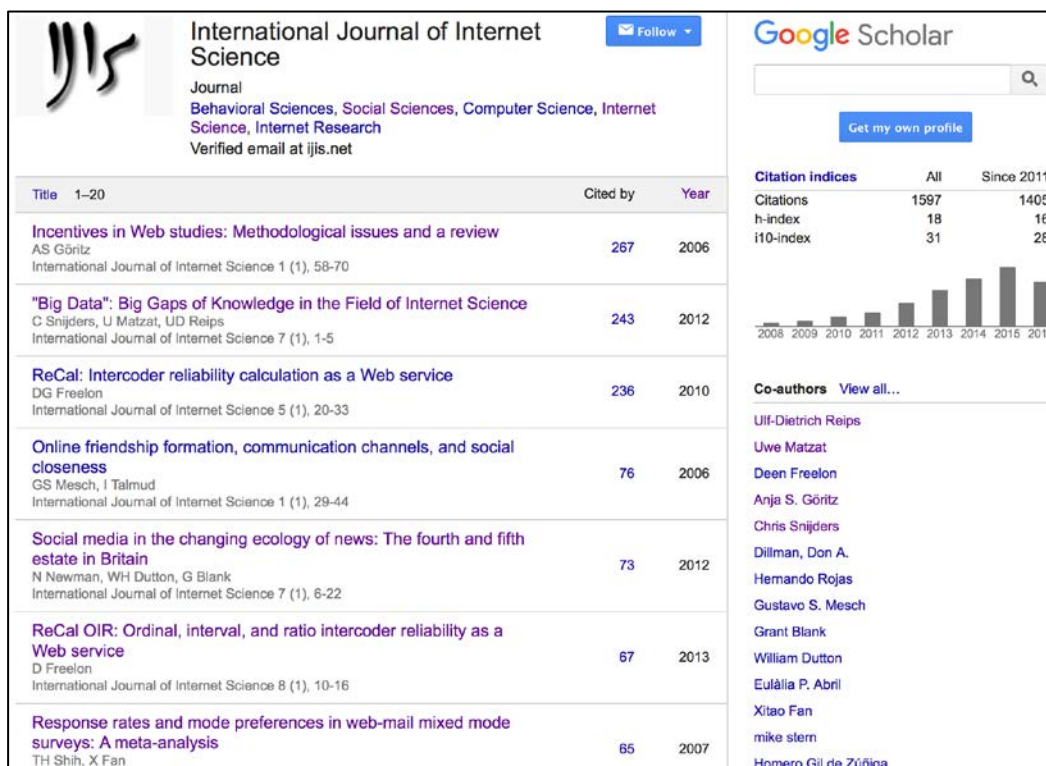


Figure 2. Google Scholar impact information for the IJIS, as of December 30, 2016.

Our journal page on Google Scholar Citations (see Figure 2) at <http://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=OCYy1o4AAAAJ> allows one to track citations to the journal and its articles, see related statistics, link as an author, and enter one's e-mail address for automatic notifications. When we calculated the impact in late December 2011 Google Scholar showed 198 citations (Reips, 2011), in June 2013 there were 441 (Reips & Matzat, 2013), in mid June 2015 then 1011 (Reips & Matzat, 2015), now there are 1597. The five most frequently cited items are by Göritz (2006), Snijders, Matzat and Reips (2012), Freelon (2010), Mesch and Talmud (2006), and Newman, Dutton and Blank (2012), with 267, 243, 236, 76 and 73 citations, respectively. Coincidentally, the latter article on the increasing impact of the “5th estate”, i.e. Internet communication, is the topic of concern in the present editorial.

The ISI journal impact is calculated as the average number of citations in a year given to those articles in a journal that were published during the two preceding years (Impact factor, 2011). The most current journal impact that can be calculated is thus the one from 2015. We therefore need to count all citations in 2015 to citable items (articles, editorials, book reviews etc.) that appeared in the International Journal of Internet Science during the years 2014 and 2013. To estimate impact factors for the International Journal of Internet Science we processed the 1597 references Google Scholar returns. For the seven articles that have appeared in either 2013 or 2014 Google Scholar finds a total of 46 citing references in 2015. The most frequently cited article, Freelon (2013), was cited 28 times in

2015: by Benvenuti, Kooijmans, Versendaal, and van der Veer (2015), Cook, Walker, Weaver, and Sorge (2015), Diah, Zin, and Iida (2015), Dirkin and MacLeod (2015), Einwiller and Steilen (2015), Garaizar and Reips (2015), Granado (2015), Harris, LoDolce, Dembek, and Schwartz (2015), Hayden, Namasivayam, and Ward (2015), Hazen, Overstreet, and Boone (2015), Jones (2015), Kilgo (2015), Krause, Meyers, Irlbeck, and Chambers (2015), Lafi Youmans (2015), Lontok, Zhang, and Dougherty (2015), Murray et al. (2015), O'Hare et al. (2015), Phillips, Kivisalu, King, and O'Toole (2015), Ray (2015), Reips (2015), Sacco (2015), Secundo, Magnier-Watanabe, and Heisig (2015), Sevin and Björner (2015), Simon Rosenthal, Rosenthal, Moore, and Smith (2015), Suskin (2015), Templier et al. (2015), and Wiedmann (2015). Leenheer and Scherpenzeel (2013) was referenced eight times, by Bethlehem (2015a), Bethlehem (2015b), Cornilleau, Cousteaux, and Legleye (2015), DiSogra and Callegaro (2015), Lugtig, Glasner, and Boevé (2015), Mohammadian, and Bricka (2015), Revilla, Cornilleau, Cousteaux, Legleye, and de Pedraza (2015), and van Ingen, Utz, & Toepoel (2015). Nimrod (2013) was cited five times in Dao, Nguyen, Venkatesh, and Phung (2015), Kaufman (2015), Nie, Sousa-Poza, and Nimrod (2015), Suphan, Meckel, and Schultheis (2015), and Zurawski (2015). Hanel and Schultze (2014) was referenced in Bernhard, Porten-Cheé, and Schultze (2015), Klein Kranenburg (2015), and Marschall, Israel, Schiefer, and Schultze (2015). Lissitsa and Chachashvili-Bolotin (2014) was cited in Lissitsa (2015) and Lissitsa and Chachashvili-Bolotin (2015). Furthermore, our 2014 editorial (Reips & Matzat, 2014) was cited once in 2015, by Geeta, Totad, Reddy, and Shobha (2015). The non-peer-reviewed supplement by Steinmetz et al. (2014) was cited by Andreadis (2015) and Askitas, Zimmermann, Guzi and De Pedraza (2015), increasing the total number of journal impact relevant citations to 49.

Thus, the **currently official 2015 journal impact calculation is $49 / 7 = 7.0$** . This figure as calculated above is a conservative estimate, because more citing articles published in 2015 are not yet known and therefore couldn't be included in the present analysis. Combining impact analyses of past years with this one, we arrive at a **5-year journal impact of 14.9**, indicating strong lasting impact. Overall, we are happy to report that the International Journal of Internet Science's impact remains steadily on a comparatively very high level for a journal in the social and behavioral sciences.

A final note regarding impact calculations: keep in mind that such calculations are error prone and are not to be taken overly seriously – after all, one of the most highly cited “authors” on Google Scholar is “et al.”, <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=qGuYgMsAAAAJ&hl=en>

Technology fear now and then

“The older generation warns against a new technology and bemoans that society is abandoning the “wholesome” media it grew up with, seemingly unaware that this same technology was considered to be harmful when first introduced.” wrote Bell (2010). Early on Internet myths had appeared with this new technology that, for example, enthusiastically portrayed the Internet as *the* way to unite and harmonize the world or as a medium filled with crime and (mental) health risks. Bell: “CNN reported that “Email ‘hurts IQ more than pot,’” the Telegraph that “Twitter and Facebook could harm moral values” and the “Facebook and MySpace generation ‘cannot form relationships,’” and the Daily Mail ran a piece on “How using Facebook could raise your risk of cancer.” Not a single shred of evidence underlies these stories, but they make headlines across the world because they echo our recurrent fears about new technology.” So how about postfactual influence via social media?

We believe “postfactual” types of messages indeed appear more often on the Internet as part of media campaigns that try to get their own stories viral. They use what Gardiner (2015) in Wired calls “clickbait”, media pieces that don't deliver on their headline's promise. However, despite some claims, e.g. by Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica that they can massively manipulate via Facebook (Swift, 2016), there is no evidence supporting the claims. To the contrary, the few scientific studies conducted show only tiny effects. A prominent example – widely discussed because of ethically questionable research methods – Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock (2014) from Cornell University worked with the Facebook data team to conduct a study in which they manipulated the news feed of nearly 700,000 Facebook users for a week in 2012 to gauge whether emotions spread on social media. Compared to all the fuss about their study's limited ethics it largely went unnoticed that “the effect sizes from the manipulations are small (as small as $d = 0.001$)” (p. 8790). Not true, $d = 0.2$ is considered small. In fact, they were so tiny that it compares to a drop in the ocean. Similar for a study of stimulating voting behavior of Facebook users through manipulated political mobilization messages (Bond et al., 2012): Tiny effects and the unsurprising finding that any campaigning has some (again: tiny) effects. Consequently, until we see real facts about sizeable effects, we hold on to attributing media scare to technology fears rather than blaming unwelcome societal developments onto influences of the Internet, even in times of lots of postfactual “clickbait” messages. The editors of the International Journal of Internet Science welcome high quality manuscripts that address these issues in more detail.

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