Op-Ed: Older people spread more fake news, a deadly habit in the COVID-19 pandemic
Recent studies indicate that a social media user’s age is the strongest predictor of engagement with fake news.

(Nicolas Asfouri /AFP/Getty Images)

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On Wednesday, Facebook took down a video posted on President Trump’s official page in which he falsely claimed that children were “almost immune” to the coronavirus. The video, which violated Facebook’s policies specifically on health misinformation around the coronavirus, had been viewed nearly half a million times before it was removed. Twitter, likewise, blocked a tweet with the same video that was posted by the Trump
Well before the coronavirus outbreak, fake news spread rapidly on social media platforms. The consequences of misinformation are even more deadly in a pandemic. Some false information comes from legitimate sources, making it harder to separate fact from fiction. And it’s particularly dangerous for older users of social media, who are also at the greatest risk of dying from the virus.

Researchers have found that falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth. Recent studies also show that age is the strongest predictor of engagement with fake news. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Facebook users over 65 shared nearly seven times as many articles from fake news sites as young users. Old age predicted shares even when accounting for partisanship, education and overall posting activity.

Scientists and journalists speculate that cognitive decline might be the cause, but this doesn’t fully explain why older adults click share. Our research suggests that social changes and digital illiteracy also put older adults at risk for spreading misinformation.
Some abilities — such as episodic memory — peak in our 20s and 30s, then decline. As a result, older adults may forget contextual details, like whether a story was published by the Wall Street Journal or Daily Buzz Live (a fake news site). But not everything goes downhill with age.

For example, both young and older adults believe repeated claims because they feel “fluent,” or easy to understand. Scrolling past a fake headline several times creates an illusion of truth that can mislead young adults just as much as older adults.

But other cognitive processes improve with age and counteract these vulnerabilities. Older adults accumulate a lifetime of knowledge about the world, which can protect them from misinformation. Repeating false statements such as “the fastest land animal is the leopard” is liable to fool young, but not older, adults. They stick with what they know and, if anything, can better discern real from fake headlines outside of a social media environment.

In addition to assumptions about cognitive declines, some think loneliness and isolation among the elderly contribute to their sharing behaviors online. But older adults are not the loneliest age group, with loneliness peaking in the late 20s, mid-50s, and late-80s.
partners. Thus, older users may not question stories in their newsfeeds, thinking “my close friends and family wouldn’t spread fake news.”

Indeed, general trust increases with age, while the ability to spot liars declines. Older adults also prioritize interpersonal goals, such as entertaining their audience, over accuracy when conveying information. Combined, these social shifts may increase the appeal of false content, especially among older adults who are new to the internet.

A decade ago, only 8% of Americans over 65 used a social media site. Today, that figure is up to 40%. These older users probably have less experience with sensationalized content, like clickbait titles. They also tend to conflate native advertisements, designed to feel like “real” stories, with news articles and fail to spot manipulated images. This gray digital divide may explain a curious paradox — older adults are vulnerable online, yet resistant to consumer fraud offline.

This problem may worsen as disinformation tactics become increasingly sophisticated. Propagandists now use artificial intelligence to create deepfakes, videos depicting events that never happened. Meanwhile, the U.S. population is graying rapidly and older citizens vote at a rate higher than any other age group. Their susceptibility to fake news — both as sharers and receivers — is troubling.

Fortunately, there are ways for older adults to reduce social influence and fill in gaps in their digital literacy. They need to exercise skepticism, even when news comes from a trusted friend. They can also protect themselves by taking free courses in evaluating news and learning the basics of social media. Of course, before taking proactive steps, older adults need to be aware that a serious problem exists.