

All the Fake News That's Fit to Print

Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Ben Forney

2017.09.25

Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

“What’s the deal with fake news?” a 2017 Jerry Seinfeld might ask. In the first eight months of the year, US President Donald Trump tweeted the phrase 106 times.¹ Google searches for “fake news” skyrocketed after the US presidential election and have remained high ever since.² British MPs launched an inquiry into fake news in January that didn’t conclude until June.³ Even Pope Francis weighed in on the issue, comparing dishonesty in the media to coprophilia—an abnormal obsession with feces.⁵

But despite all this attention, most people do not have a good understanding of what fake news is, where it came from, and what can be done about it. Fake news gets to the heart of fundamental issues of democratic governance, and its influence on societies around the world is growing. In an age of “alternative facts” and conflicting beliefs, fake news exploits biases and erodes trust in the free media. Left unchecked, it can threaten the very foundations of democracy.

What is it?

Fake news is intentionally erroneous or misleading information, masquerading as legitimate news. Its purpose is to advance an agenda, influence opinion, or turn a profit. This phenomenon can only occur in free societies with a vibrant, open press; it does not apply to the state propaganda of regimes like China and North Korea. In those nations, the only news source is the government, and any dissenting opinions are suppressed. Thus, there is no fake news because there is no alternative “true” news for comparison. This analysis focuses on fake news in those countries where citizens have access to multiple sources of information and the freedom to choose what news they consume.

Fake news is not new. In the United States, fake news is as old as the country itself. In 1777, a series of letters was made public, allegedly written by George Washington. One letter

claimed, “It is impossible we should succeed [in the war effort]... And, I cannot with truth, say that I am sorry for it; because I am far from being sure that we deserve to succeed.” When Washington was president twenty years later, his opponents cited these letters to accuse him of secretly harboring British sympathies.⁶ But the letters, of course, were fake. While their origin is still debated, Washington was so beleaguered with these accusations that he was compelled to publicly disown the documents as a “base forgery” near the end of his presidency.

During the 1828 presidential election between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, supporters of both sides resorted to outright lies and racist slander that make the 2016 election seem genteel. The Cincinnati Gazette wrote: “General Jackson’s mother was a COMMON PROSTITUTE, brought to this country by the British soldiers! She afterwards married a MULATTO MAN, with whom she had several children, of which number General JACKSON IS ONE!!!”⁷[emphasis in original]. For his part, Jackson accused Adams of pimping out American women for the Russian tsar while serving as ambassador.⁸

During the American Civil War, a group of Midwestern Democrats calling themselves Copperheads opposed the administration of Abraham Lincoln and published pamphlets with racist titles like “Abraham Africanus I. His Secret Life as Revealed Under the Mesmeric Influence.” In 1864, the year following the Emancipation Proclamation, they asked: “Does the Republican party intend to change the name of the United States? It does. What do they intend to call it? New Africa.”⁹

Towards the end of the 19th century, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer pioneered sensationalist “yellow” journalism. These men used the power of their media companies to form and sway public opinion, and in the process, enrich themselves. The lurid stories splashed across the front pages exploited readers’ emotions and advanced their own political agendas, including leading America into the Spanish-American War. Hearst’s jingoistic coverage of the sinking of the *USS Maine* in February 1898 stoked nationwide outrage and tipped public opinion in favor of going to war. “DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY” declared Hearst’s *New York Journal*. In actuality, the cause of the incident remains unknown.

In the late 20th century, the explosive rise of talk-radio and the internet further blurred the line between news and editorializing. People suddenly had access to more news and analysis than they could possibly consume. And as the volume of information increased, individuals became more selective about what they read and, by extension, what they believed. The result was the formation of news bubbles—people returned again and again to those sources that confirmed their beliefs about the world. While the news in these bubbles wasn’t necessarily false, it was the origin of today’s polarization and mistrust, for anyone outside the bubble was suspect. As David Foster Wallace presciently observed in 2005, “Short of signing on to a

particular mass ideology and patronizing only those partisan news sources that ratify what you want to believe, it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin.”¹⁰

Why Now?

In recent years, three factors have allowed fake news to become more widespread and destabilizing than in the past: the sheer volume of fake news being produced, social media, and an erosion of trust in experts.

Three billion-plus users can now voice their opinions through the internet. The result has been a cacophonous melee of judgments and assertions. Never in human history has such an enormous volume of information been available to the general public, and never has such a large proportion of it been intended to deceive. Scientific journals with dubious standards allow pseudo-research to be passed as fact. Personal blogs with no reputable credentials can attract thousands of followers, simply by repeating what people want to hear or preying on their fears. Governments can recruit online armies to invent, distort, and support claims that further their national interests.

In 2015, *The New York Times* documented large scale, systematic attempts to flood internet message boards with pro-Russian propaganda via “troll armies.”¹¹ These “armies” consisted of average Russian citizens with a decent command of English. They would apply for the job through an ordinary newspaper ad and write about pre-approved topics on websites and chat rooms. By using multiple online aliases, it gave the false impression that a large number of people were reading and supporting stories that championed the Russian government.

During the 2016 US presidential campaign, individuals around the world, unconnected to any government or political parties, began to contribute their own stories to the growing body of fake news. The *Times* profiled one man from Tbilisi, Georgia who wrote pro-Trump fake news articles and posted them on his website from his apartment. One of his stories made the outrageous claim that Mexico would shut down the border with the US if Trump were to be elected. From May to July 2016, it was Facebook’s third most trafficked fake news article. The author revealed that he was not motivated by a desire for anarchy or because he was a passionate devotee to any candidate: “For me, this is all about income, nothing more.” By using Google’s advertising service to generate revenue from visits to his site, he earned up to \$6,000 per month.¹²

Social media enables these kinds of stories to reach a wide audience. Twitter is the simplest platform for the propagation of fake news, as legitimacy is measured by the number of one’s followers, rather than the depth of one’s expertise. Quasi-famous individuals with a few thousand followers can present rumors and conspiracy theories as facts. And for those

without a public persona, followers can simply be purchased. For less than twenty dollars, an individual can buy a thousand “bots” (autonomous accounts) to follow and retweet their posts.¹³ To the casual user, this may look impressive. A tweet that has been shared a thousand times must be true, right?

In one fascinating case, *The New York Times* analyzed a tweet by 35-year-old Eric Tucker of Austin, Texas. He had only 40 Twitter followers when he posted three pictures of buses parked near an anti-Trump rally on November 9, the day after the presidential election.¹⁴ Without checking to see who those buses belonged to (a software company holding a conference), he assumed they were full of paid protesters sent to swell the ranks of the rally. The tweet read: “Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin.” Within days, the images had been shared more than 16,000 times on Twitter, 350,000 times on Facebook, and had spawned countless fake news articles, leading to an indirect reference by the President-elect of the United States. When Tucker realized his error, he deleted the tweet and reposted it, this time stamped with the word “FALSE.” But after a week, this new version had only been shared 29 times. The failure of the corrected version to go viral exemplifies the problem of the salacious nature of fake news: while truth may be in the public’s interest, scandals are what interest the public.

Facebook is by far the biggest outlet for fake news traffic. Their News Feed feature directs more readers to news sites globally than any single search engine. Each time a user clicks on a link or “likes” an article in the feed, their actions are fed into an algorithm that determines which stories will be promoted in the future.¹⁵ But unlike traditional media editors, the News Feed does not separate real content from fake, instead focusing only on those stories which draw the most views. According to one analysis, in the run up to the 2016 presidential election, fake news stories had more Facebook “engagements” than mainstream media stories.¹⁶ Prior to the election, pro-Trump stories dominated the fake news market. The most “engaged” fake story on Facebook was entitled “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement.” It received 960,000 shares, reactions, and comments, beating the top mainstream media story (an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* with only 849,000 engagements). After the election, anti-Trump fake news and conspiracy theories proliferated from the left. Today, partisan Facebook groups such as Occupy Democrats continue to share both real and fake news to their millions of followers, further blurring the line between fact and fiction.¹⁷

With Twitter, Facebook, and other various outlets shoveling dubious information at people 24 hours a day, one might reasonably argue that the answer to fake news is to simply turn it all off and listen to only the most reliable voices. Rather than read a sensationalized article condemning a politician’s speech, why not read the speech itself and form your own opinions?

Instead of blindly agreeing with a politician's interpretation of climate change, why not read a climate scientist's paper?

The disturbingly simple answer is that many people have lost their faith in experts. Following the 2008 financial crisis, segments of the political left and right began to question the wisdom of the economists, politicians, scientists, and civil leaders who created the conditions for the financial crisis and the inequalities of globalization. Alternative candidates promoting nationalistic or traditionalistic policies gained traction throughout the developed world. People responded positively to them because they highlighted the flaws in the global system and offered a prescription to fix them. Today, these democratically elected heads of state, from Putin to Trump, are openly skeptical of science, globalization, and the efficacy of the liberal international order. Their criticism of the elites that built and maintained this order plays an important role in public discourse. However, their inability to distinguish elites from the experts on whom we rely to craft well-informed policies has sowed unfounded mistrust.

In an age where nearly everyone can interact on social media, where any blog post, video, or meme can go viral, where those without any knowledge of a particular subject can partake in discussions in chat rooms and comment sections, many people have come to the conclusion that their opinions are as valid as an expert's analysis. Experience, degrees, and intellectual integrity no longer correlate with the level of trust one instills. Instead, trust is now formed by the validation of one's initial convictions. "I can trust you, because you think like me," is the polarizing banner under which fake news thrives. We value the confirmation of our beliefs over the realization and correction of our errors. An individual's right to form and express their own opinions does not negate the need for experts when formulating policies or engaging in intelligent debate. Expertise and education must be valued in a free and robust society.

Where is it headed?

The fake news problem will get worse before it gets better. Improvements in technology will make it easier for fake news sites to generate not just stories, but fabricated pictures and recordings to go with them. Computer algorithms known as generative adversarial networks (GAN) are capable of creating new images by compiling similar data that it "learned" before.¹⁸ For example, based on its knowledge of what a cat looks like, "a generator network tries to create pictures of fake cats that look like real cats."¹⁹ The technology is still in the early stages of development, but in the future, it will likely be possible to create a picture or video that "verifies" a fake story.

Moreover, fake news will remain cheap to produce and expensive to combat. Efforts to disprove fake stories are complicated by the social dynamics of modern technology. For many people, the news they share on social media is not just a means to inform others about an issue, but a way to express support for and identity with a specific political group or cause.

Disseminating inflammatory information, true or false, shows their followers where they stand, and breaking ranks with one's faction can be difficult.²⁰ Calling out a friend or acquaintance who spreads fake news is not easy, for they risk being seen as a traitor to the cause. In a polarized society like America today, solidarity with the group is valued over objectivity or even accuracy, a development that exacerbates the alienation of moderate, centrist voices. As polarization increases, the opposition is seen as not just misguided, but malicious. And in this toxic environment, some people will double down on their beliefs, even when proven wrong. If society reaches a point where the majority can no longer agree on the very nature of truth or the tools by which it can be obtained, the foundations for democracy itself fall apart. Fortunately, in America, the checks and balances inherent in the system are strong, and this doomsday scenario is still difficult to imagine.

But fake news is not just a US phenomenon. In fact, it is that much more dangerous in those countries with less stable democratic roots and traditions. In December 2016, after reading a fake news article in which the Israeli defense minister threatened Pakistan with a nuclear strike, Pakistan's defense minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, tweeted a warning to Israel about nuclear war between the countries.²¹ The confusion was soon cleared, but the potential threat was obvious. Fake news now has the power to influence, however temporarily, state-to-state relations. As fake news becomes more sophisticated, nations could face enormous disruptions and potential military conflict before the truth is eventually ascertained.

The August 2017 Kenyan presidential election is another prime example. Leading up to the election, a barrage of high quality, well organized fake content began appearing online in support of the incumbent, Uhuru Kenyatta. The pace at which these fake news stories emerged was unprecedented. In this young, social media savvy country, the influence of these unsubstantiated stories was profound. As one resident explained:

“Fake news is not a new phenomenon, it's just that it's taken on a new form; it's just becoming more sophisticated. More than two decades ago, we would have fake news in the form of leaflets that are spread outside Nairobi. However, now, because it's the era of social media, and information travels really fast, you just are able to get the information faster, but at the same time you are able to get the corrections faster.”²²

On August 8th, Kenyatta was reelected by a margin of 1.4 million votes. His win was subsequently annulled by the Kenyan Supreme Court for “irregularities.” Quantifying the influence of fake news on voter behavior is nearly impossible. But as with the 2016 US presidential election, in Kenya, there was clear correlation between positive fake news coverage and electoral success.

South Korea has also been affected by fake news. During the 2017 protests and impeachment proceedings of President Park Geun-hye, fake news was rife amongst those who supported the president. They disseminated fake articles from phony media outlets in an effort to prove that the allegations against Park were part of a left-wing conspiracy. The primary medium through which this news traveled was Kakao Talk, the popular messaging app. Among the stories shared were claims that Donald Trump had spoken out against her impeachment, that the Chinese had mobilized 60,000 exchange students to join the protests, and that North Korea was masterminding the whole thing.²³ For those who joined these fake news groups, they could expect to receive up to 1,000 messages a day.²⁴ Ultimately, the Korean people and its institutions overcame the problem this time. However, fake news will remain a threat as long as segments of the population mistrust the government and mainstream media.

Calling it out

Fake news will continue to spread and its influence will continue to grow if nothing is done to combat it. Passing legislation that restricts fake news is controversial, and could impinge upon the values of free speech that distinguish democratic governments from authoritarian regimes. But if governments cannot hold accountable those who spread rumors or false reports, then it is the responsibility of both private companies and individuals to combat misinformation.

Technology is both facilitator of and remedy for fake news. The algorithms used by Twitter, Facebook, and Google to promote websites and posts have enabled bots and troll armies to skew outcomes and sustain false stories. Google's ad service allows sites that contain fake news to profit from lies. Search engine results promote a click-bait culture, defined by outrageous headlines and lurid photos. These algorithms can and should be changed to reflect the new threat caused by fake news. Allowing it to go unchecked risks alienating users and could erode the public's trust in their company's services. Facebook and Google have already taken steps to address this issue by strengthening the ways in which users can report fake news websites to the company.²⁵

But tech companies are not solely to blame for the proliferation of fake news. Citizens of free societies are responsible for the views they hold and the information they share. People in countries like North Korea are not burdened with this responsibility, for their sole source of news is the regime. Their system is predicated on the people's ignorance and submission to an oppressive ruler. By contrast, those in liberal, democratic countries today have never had greater freedom to access information. But with this greater freedom comes even greater responsibility. Members of free societies have the imperative to think critically about the news they consume. *Their* systems rely on the people's ability to separate facts from falsehoods in order to choose a leader that best serves their interests. This does not require advanced degrees or even a deep understanding of the issues. But it does require a few critical thinking skills and the willingness to use them.

The fight against fake news begins in the classroom. Every student should be taught the fundamentals of logic and reasoning in high school. Earlier this year, two professors from the University of Washington conducted a course to teach such skills. Entitled “Calling Bullshit,” the aim of the ten-week lecture was “to help students navigate the bullshit-rich modern environment by identifying bullshit, seeing through it, and combating it with effective analysis and argument.”²⁶ The course analyzed the ways that untruths are propagated in politics, media, and science, and offered a few simple ways to spot fake news and other “bullshit” we encounter each day. Acquiring these skills should be the goal of all secondary education. The fact that such a class exists in the first place highlights profound deficiencies in the way our current education system prepares students for the complexities of modern life.

The professors made one overarching point: acceptance without questioning leaves you vulnerable to misinformation. Even trustworthy news outlets and reputable scientific journals can make mistakes. Like democracy itself, free media is messy. It is often flawed, misleading, and at times, false. But despite these problems, a free press has significant advantages over the propaganda of closed and repressive regimes. In a free, democratic system, not *all* news is fake. Mainstream media outlets that have built their reputations from years of experience should not be dismissed out of hand, despite the political slant of their coverage. Likewise, independent journalists, bloggers, and columnists can provide new perspectives or overlooked facts if their reporting is honest and accurate. The solution is not to limit the amount of information available, but to consume and share it responsibly. Skepticism, even of experts, is healthy, but a free society can only exist when facts are valued over convictions.

Conclusion

Truth and knowledge are, and should be, respected in democratic countries. We are living in an era when we have access to the world’s collective wisdom literally in our pockets. And yet we are increasingly using these resources to confirm our own biases, rather than to help us think critically. The problem with President Trump’s 106 tweets about fake news is that he is conflating mainstream media biases against him with the trolls, amateur bloggers, conspiracy theorists, and malignant governments who pedal outright lies. Unprecedented and dangerous, this undermines the people’s trust in experts and in the free media, without which a nation can slide into autocracy. In those media outlets Trump decries as “fake,” there are many journalists committed to upholding high ethical standards. Of course, they sometimes fall short. As Trump expressed it: “Many journalists are honest and great - but some are knowingly dishonest and basic scum. They should be weeded out!”²⁷

In the frenetic pace of 24-hour news, journalists in the mainstream media will make mistakes or purposefully gather biased evidence in an attempt to please their editors or push an agenda. David Graham of *The Atlantic* refers to this as Sloppy News²⁸ – its hallmarks being not

properly checking a source, reporting only some of the facts while suppressing others, and openly pandering to biases. But sloppiness is not falseness. Sloppiness can be tidied up. Respectable news outlets can check the facts of their reports, admit shortcomings, and make corrections. News does not always have to come from the mainstream media, but it does have to be accurate, well sourced, and verified before being disseminated to the public. These are the standards that mainstream media should, and largely do, uphold. Despite the president's claims, a reporter for *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* is not the same as a blogger who churns out fake news stories from their basement. While the former may be imperfect, the latter is perfectly wrong.

So will the world succumb to groupthink, abandoning logic and critical analysis for comforting lies and conspiracies? There is some evidence for hope. A Pew Research study found that 78 percent of adults in the US believe that public libraries can help them find “trustworthy and reliable” information.²⁹ Among Millennials, those 18 to 35, support for libraries was as high as 87 percent. It is possible that the uproar over fake news will fade away, as the stubbornness of facts reasserts itself. But we can ill afford to be complacent. The same Pew study found that 61 percent of adults believe that receiving training on how to find trustworthy information would help them make better decisions. This finding underscores the need for courses like “Calling Bullshit” and the importance of classical, liberal arts education in general. How we train the next generation in critical thinking will determine whether free, open societies will endure.

* This study was supervised by Dr. Kim Jinwoo, Director, Office of Strategy and Analysis.

-
- ¹ <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>
 - ² <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%20-y&q=fake%20news>
 - ³ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry2/>
 - ⁴
 - ⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/07/pope-compares-fake-news-consumption-to-eating-faeces-coprophia>
 - ⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/10/the-fake-news-that-haunted-george-washington/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.554910b8d0a0
 - ⁷ <http://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/571892>
 - ⁸ <https://relicrecord.com/blog/venomous-presidential-election-1828/>
 - ⁹ https://archive.org/stream/lincolncatechis3518newy/lincolncatechis3518newy_djvu.txt
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/04/host/303812/>
 - ¹¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0
 - ¹² https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/25/world/europe/fake-news-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-georgia.html?_r=0
 - ¹³ https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/fake-twitter-followers-becomes-multimillion-dollar-business/?_r=0
 - ¹⁴ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html?_r=0
 - ¹⁵ <https://medium.com/amp/p/e86511488de>
 - ¹⁶ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?bffb&utm_term=.myQ3xLaA8#.urzvxAOpo
 - ¹⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/liberal-fever-swamps/530736/> For an example of a fake news story shared on Occupy Democrats, see: <http://www.snopes.com/three-wisconsin-counties-admit-they-padded-votes-for-trump/>
 - ¹⁸ <https://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21724370-generating-convincing-audio-and-video-fake-events-fake-news-you-aint-seen>
 - ¹⁹ <https://blogs.nvidia.com/blog/2017/05/17/generative-adversarial-network/>
 - ²⁰ <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/20/opinions/fake-news-stories-thrive-donath/index.html>
 - ²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/24/world/asia/pakistan-israel-khawaja-asif-fake-news-nuclear.html>
 - ²² <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2017/08/fake-news-shape-kenya-elections-170805081741474.html>
 - ²³ <http://www.dw.com/en/fake-news-in-korea/a-38550660>
 - ²⁴ <https://koreaxpose.com/rumor-fake-news-south-korea/>
 - ²⁵ <http://www.techradar.com/news/fighting-fake-news-how-google-facebook-and-more-are-working-to-stop-it>
 - ²⁶ <http://callingbullshit.org/>
 - ²⁷ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/585286465183178752>
 - ²⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/why-bogus-stories-persist-because-they-work/533589/>
 - ²⁹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/30/most-americans-especially-millennials-say-libraries-can-help-them-find-reliable-trustworthy-information/>