Fake News
and
American Democracy

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Communication Studies
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The Public’s Reliance on Social Media for News

According to the Pew Research Center:
• 62% of US adults get news on social media
  • 18% get it often
    • Reddit 70%
    • Facebook 66%
    • Twitter 59%
    • Tumblr 31%
Public’s Use of Other Media for News

• Local TV 46%
• Cable TV 31%
• Nightly Network TV 30%
• News Websites 28%
• Radio 25%
• Print Newspapers 20%
Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

**Mainstream News**

- Feb.–April: 12 million
- May–July: 9 million
- Aug.–Election Day: 8.7 million

**Fake News**

- Feb.–April: 3 million
- May–July: 7.3 million

Engagement refers to the total number of shares, reactions, and comments for a piece of content on Facebook. Source: Facebook data via Buzzsumo.
What is meant by “Fake News”?

Defined by the Columbia Journalism Review as “misinformation crafted to influence public opinion or cull digital advertising dollars.”

Operationally “fake news” refers to stories that are presented as real, but are actually fictitious (a lie, disinformation).

A lie—when one states/writes something that they know is false

Disinformation—false or misleading information spread in a way calculated to deceive target audiences
Examples of “fake news”
Top 5 Fake Election Stories by Facebook Engagement
(three months before election)

“Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement”
(960,000, Ending the Fed)

“WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS... Then Drops Another BOMBSHELL! Breaking News”
(789,000, The Political Insider)

“IT’S OVER: Hillary’s ISIS Email Just Leaked & It’s Worse Than Anyone Could Have Imagined”
(754,000, Ending the Fed)

“Just Read the Law: Hillary Is Disqualified From Holding Any Federal Office”
(701,000, Ending the Fed)

“FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide”
(567,000, Denver Guardian)

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO
FBI Insider: Clinton Emails Linked To Political Pedophile Sex Ring

Posted on October 31, 2016 by Sean Adl-Tabatabai in News, US // 22 Comments
Not Just on the Right

• Donald turned around, spoke to Melania and her face turned from a smile to sadness.
• Turns out a prayer started at that same moment, so it may have been less about what Donald said and more about the moment
What is NOT fake news?
Stories With Which We Disagree?

NOT Fake News

Donald J. Trump ✔️
@realDonaldTrump

Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting.

4:01 AM - 6 Feb 2017

36,966 Retweets 164,681 likes
Stories From Anonymous Sources

NOT Fake News

Donald Trump:

“They shouldn’t be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody’s name. Let their name be put out there. Let their name be put out. ‘A source says that Donald Trump is a horrible, horrible human being’ – let ‘em say it to my face.”
Inaccurate Stories?

NOT Fake News

• On January 20, 2017, Time White House reporter, Zeke Miller, incorrectly reported that a bust of Martin Luther King had been removed from the oval office. Zeke quickly issued a correction. In the hours that followed, he sent multiple emails and tweets taking responsibility for his mistake, and apologized in person, on email and on Twitter. During further conversations over the weekend, he asked a White House advisor to pass along his apology to the president as well.

• On January 24 Donald Trump labeled the MLK bust story fake news.
Facts that don’t fit our current beliefs

NOT Fake News

• The carbon dating of artifacts
• The safety of Genetically Modified Organisms
• The innocence of vaccinations
• The prevalence of lead in drinking water
• That 2.8 million more votes for Clinton than Trump
• The number in audience at inauguration
How to Distinguishing Between Real and Fake News?
Too weird to be true?

Probably Fake News!
Unbelievably shocking story?

Probably Fake News!
Involves a conspiracy with many actors?

Probably Fake News!
Comes from only a limited number of sources and is not picked up by mainstream media?

Probably Fake News!
Contradicted by the consensus of experts?

Probably Fake News!
Comes from questionable sources?

Probably Fake News!
The “About” description on the source’s website says “satire”?

Most Likely Fake News!
What are the questionable sources?

• ABC.com.co (something after the .com or .org)
• Anything that sounds like a newspaper, but isn’t
  • Boston Tribune, Empire Herald,
    BurrardStreetJournal, World News Daily Report
Look at a list of fake news sources in Wikipedia
Revealed as “false” by fact checkers?

Most Likely Fake News!
Reliable, Non-Partisan Fact Checkers

• Snopes.com (A David Mickelson project)
• FactCheck.org (Annenberg Public Policy Center)
• Politifact.com (Tampa Bay Times)
• OpenSecrets.org (Center for Responsive Politics)

Most major papers (NYT, Washington Post, LAT) and networks
Written by Russians?

Very Likely Fake News!
Appears on Breitbart.com or other Alt-Right websites?

Very Likely Fake News!
Why is Fake News Produced?

(1) Make Money
  • Driving viewers to website = dollars for website hosts
  • Audiences seek information that confirms existing beliefs
  • Audiences seek the novel
More Why?

(2) Pernicious Motives
• Polarize the populace
• Diminish trust in leaders & institutions
• Destroy Democracy
• Prepare Americans for tyranny
What are the Consequences of Fake News?
Threatens Good Decision Making

• Decisions ought to be based on facts not falsehoods
• Fake News “facts” are irrelevant to deliberation
• Fake News subverts good decision making
Fake News

• Can create feelings of anger, depression, and hatred without a good reason
• Can threaten civility--polarization
• Can destabilize confidence in institutions
• Can lead to voter withdrawal (disenfranchisement)
• Has already led to violence (PizzaGate)
Abuse of Fake News Designation

• Makes the label meaningless
• Delegitimizes all media
• Destroys the shared knowledge of “facts”
• Since all deliberation and compromise are based on agreement to the facts, it problematizes democracy
Bottom Line

• Undermining confidence in leaders and institutions means people turn away from government as a solution to problems

• Lack of faith in institutions means people receptive to other forms of governance
Washington Post

• 40% of Americans have lost faith in Democracy
• Poll was taken in October 2016
World Values Survey

• 2/3rds of American millennials do not consider it essential to live in a country governed democratically
• 1 in 6 say it would be good if the military ruled the country
Fake news risks reinforcing and expanding these views
Your Responsibility

• Be critical of the news—especially that on social media
• Regularly consult many sources of news
• Expose fake news
• Share with your family & friends
• Teach your students and peers
• Be on guard against attacks on democracy