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Journal of the Australasian Institue of Policing Inc. Volume 10 Number 2 • July 2018

FAKE NEWS

Strategies and implications for policing this global phenomena

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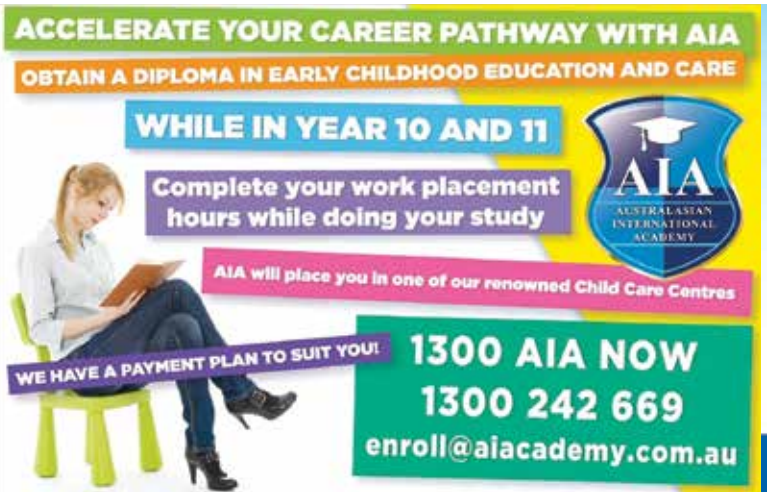

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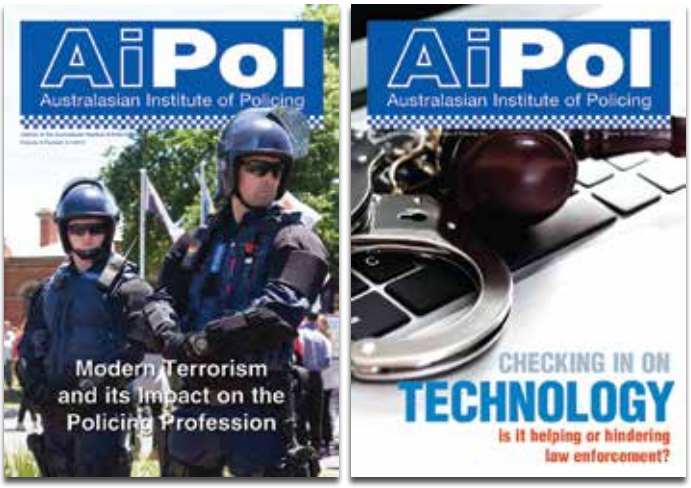
AiPol
Australasian Institute of Policing

Vol. 10, No. 2
July 2018

Published by the Australasian Institute of Policing Inc.
A0050444D ABN: 78 937 405 524
ISSN: 1837-7009



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Editorial

DR AMANDA DAVIES

Editor, Assistant Professor Policing and Security at the Rabdan Academy, Abu Dhabi

It is with pleasure we bring to you this edition of the *AiPol Journal*. As police agencies globally seek to develop mechanisms to address the continual wave of criminal activity which has the potential to disrupt the norms of society there is recognition the sheer volume of information for officers to remain current is in itself a barrier. This situation guides the current journal mission – to offer informed insight into current issues which has been drawn from the extensive volume of literature, both research informed and topical media items. The topic for this edition is Fake News, we hear the term used by world leaders, (Chancellor Merkel, President Macron, Former USA Present Obama) all publicly discussing the issue, it is a term very much on the global and domestic landscape, but what do we know about it? Fake News, is topical and this issue seeks to provide the reader with insights into an explanation of 'what exactly is fake news?' Where does it originate? What is its purpose? What is its impact? How is it spread? How are governments and entities approaching the identification and potential eradication of the creation and distribution of fake news? And what connectivity is there with policing and police responsibilities?

The collection of articles presented here offer perspectives on Fake News viewed through a variety of lenses and research outcomes. *The Science of Fake News* article by David Lazer et al offers a helpful starting point to understand the meaning and reach of Fake News:

> *We define "fake news" to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information.*

… what is positive about the evolving public discussion of Fake News, by politicians and social media entrepreneurs is that the 'issue' is out in the open for the general public to develop their understanding and potential identification of what is and what is not real news

The magnitude of the disruption created by Fake News is reflected in the actions of a number of countries, considering and or developing legislation to determine legal responsibility and the process for filing charges. The article by David Klein and Joshua Wueller offers insight into the legal perspective. The short and very informative piece from *The Guardian* provides a summary of the UK, France and German governments stance on addressing the issue of Fake News.

Of interest is why society's appetite for Fake News exists and the psychological rationale for the viral spread of such misinformation. There is a growing body of literature as to this phenomenon and Erin Brodwin's article offers an insightful introduction into this space.

Whilst we are being increasingly exposed to political comment about Fake News on both the domestic and international media landscape – what is positive about the evolving public discussion of Fake News, by politicians and social media entrepreneurs is that the 'issue' is out in the open for the general public to develop their understanding and potential identification of what is and what is not real news.

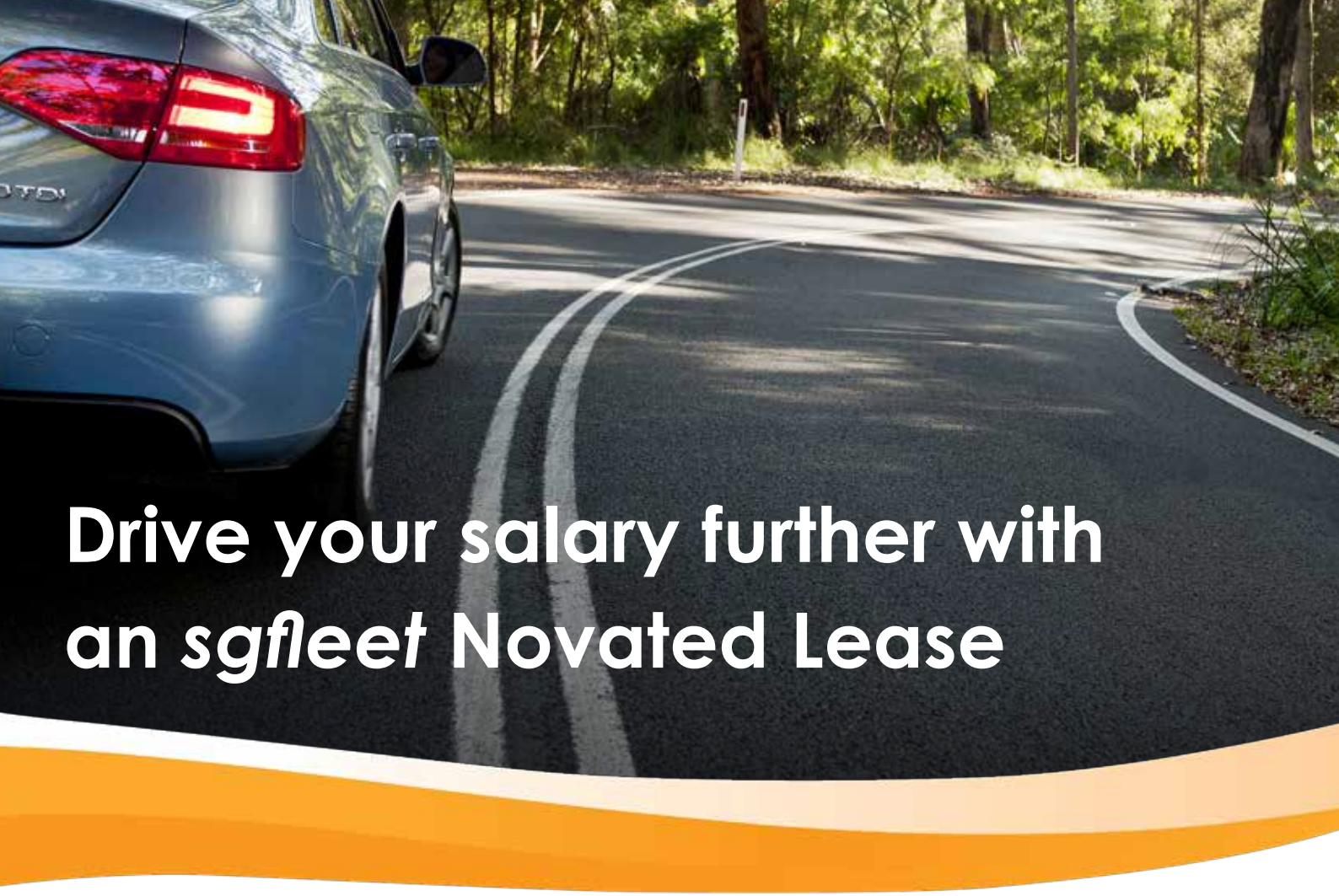
There is no solution yet to comprehensive management of this issue, we are seeing a trend to global collective thinking about the impact on society of Fake News/Misinformation and strategies to identify and eliminate it at its source. Such work is drawing commitment not only from governments, police and law enforcement agencies, as a positive development, the journalism community is working to assist this endeavor. Importantly, there is a collaborative goal to mitigate the potential for manifestation into physical harm – public protests/riots.

As we publish this journal edition, the work continues unabated, particularly in the social media domain – Facebook, Twitter for example, to inform and educate the wider community about Fake News.

I trust you will find the collection of articles of interest and informative.

Update

The article "Modern, motivated, progressive and professional?: Flexible work practices and the retention of female members in SAPOL", published in Volume 6, Issue 1 (Winter 2014) of the journal should now be attributed to and cited as author K. Patterson.



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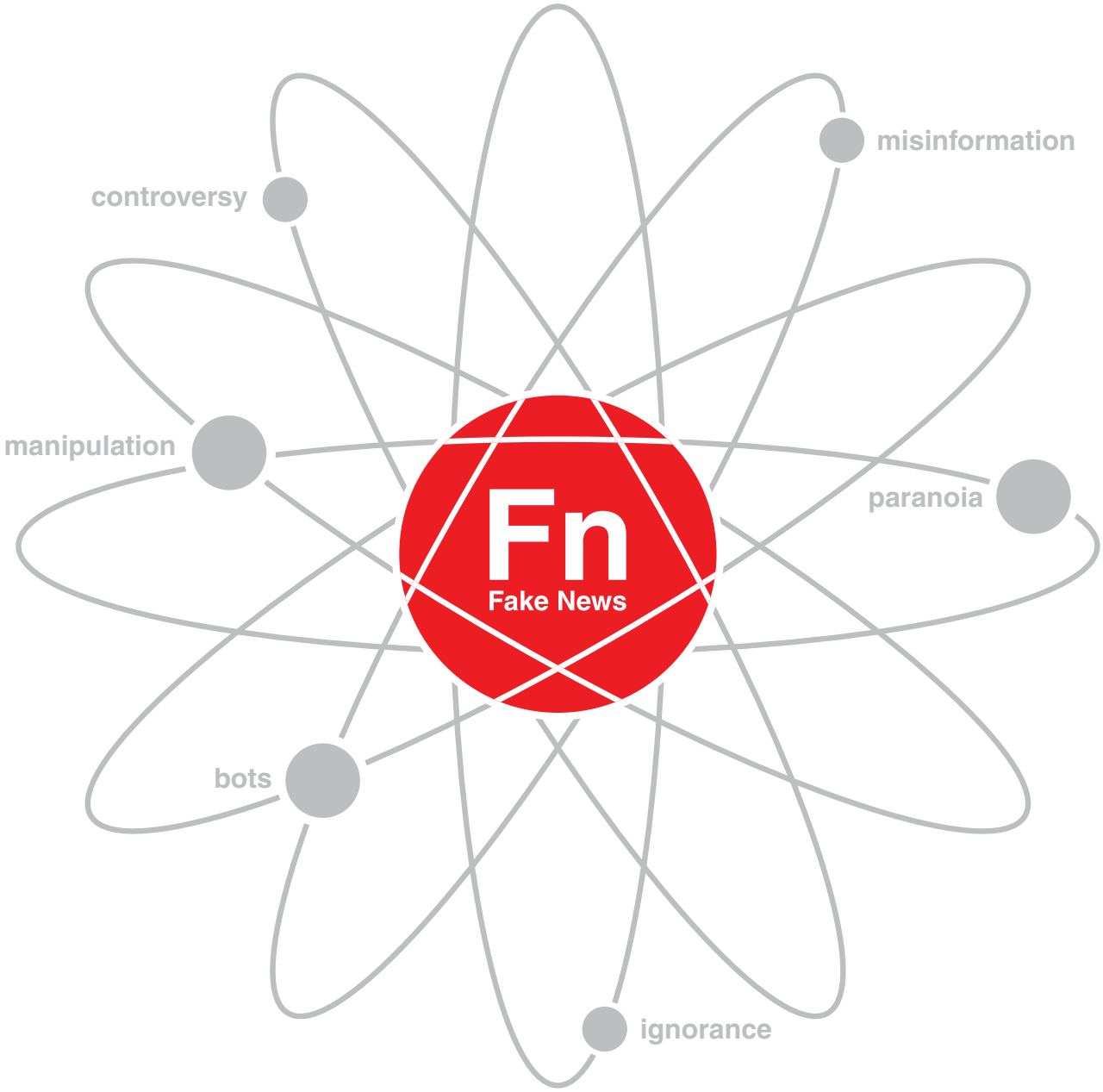

The science of Fake News

Addressing fake news requires a multidisciplinary effort.

By David M. J. Lazer, Matthew A. Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J. Berinsky, KellyM. Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J. Metzger, Brendan Nyhan, Gordon Pennycook, David Rothschild, Michael Schudson, Steven A. Sloman, Cass R. Sunstein, Emily A. Thorson, Duncan J. Watts, Jonathan L. Zittrain

The rise of fake news highlights the erosion of long-standing institutional bulwarks against misinformation in the internet age. Concern over the problem is global. However, much remains unknown regarding the vulnerabilities of individuals, institutions, and society to manipulations by malicious actors. A new system of safeguards is needed. Below, we discuss extant social and computer science research regarding belief in fake news and the mechanisms by which it spreads.

Fake news has a long history, but we focus on unanswered scientific questions raised by the proliferation of its most recent, politically oriented incarnation. Beyond selected references in the text, suggested further reading can be found in the supplementary materials.

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WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

We define "fake news" to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).

Fake news has primarily drawn recent attention in a political context but it also has been documented in information promulgated about topics such as vaccination, nutrition, and stock values. It is particularly pernicious in that it is parasitic on standard news outlets, simultaneously benefiting from and undermining their credibility.

Some—notably First Draft and Facebook— favor the term "false news" because of the use of fake news as a political weapon[1]. We have retained it because of its value as a scientific construct, and because its political salience draws attention to an important subject.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Journalistic norms of objectivity and balance arose as a backlash among journalists against the widespread use of propaganda in World War I (particularly their own role in propagating it) and the rise of corporate public relations in the 1920s. Local and national oligopolies created by the dominant 20th century technologies of information distribution (print and broadcast) sustained these norms. The internet has lowered the cost of entry to new competitors—many of which have rejected those norms—and undermined the business models of traditional news sources that had enjoyed high levels of public trust and credibility. General trust in the mass media collapsed to historic lows in 2016, especially on the political right, with 51% of Democrats and 14% of Republicans expressing "a fair amount" or "a great deal" of trust in mass media as a news source[2]. The United States has undergone a parallel geo- and sociopolitical evolution. Geographic polarization of partisan preferences has dramatically increased over the past 40 years, reducing opportunities for crosscutting political interaction. Homogeneous social networks, in turn, reduce tolerance for alternative views, amplify attitudinal polarization, boost the likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible news, and increase closure to new information. Dislike of the "other side" (affective polarization) has also risen. These trends have created a context in which fake news can attract a mass audience.

PREVALENCE AND IMPACT

How common is fake news, and what is its impact on individuals? There are surprisingly few scientific answers to these basic questions.

In evaluating the prevalence of fake news, we advocate focusing on the original sources—the publishers—rather than individual stories, because we view the defining element of fake news to be the intent and processes of the publisher. A focus on publishers also allows us to avoid the morass of trying to evaluate the accuracy of every single news story.

One study evaluating the dissemination of prominent fake news stories estimated that the average American encountered between one and three stories from known publishers of fake news during the month before the 2016 election[3]. This likely is a conservative estimate because the study tracked only 156 fake news stories. Another study reported that false information on Twitter is typically retweeted by many more people, and far more rapidly, than true information, especially when the topic is politics[4]. Facebook has estimated that manipulations by malicious actors accounted for less than one-tenth of 1% of civic content shared on the platform[5], although it has not presented details of its analysis.

By liking, sharing, and searching for information, social bots (automated accounts impersonating humans) can magnify the spread of fake news by orders of magnitude. By one recent estimate—that classified accounts based on observable features such as sharing behavior, number of ties, and linguistic features—between 9 and 15% of active Twitter accounts are bots[6]. Facebook estimated that as many as 60 million bots[7] may be infesting its platform. They were responsible for a substantial portion of political content posted during the 2016 U.S. campaign, and some of the same bots were later used to attempt to influence the 2017 French election[8]. Bots are also deployed to manipulate algorithms used to predict potential engagement with content by a wider population. Indeed, a Facebook white paper reports widespread efforts to carry out this sort of manipulation during the 2016 U.S. election[5]. However, in the absence of methods to derive representative samples of bots and humans on a given platform, any point estimates of bot prevalence must be interpreted cautiously. Bot detection will always be a cat-and-mouse game in which a large, but unknown, number of humanlike bots may go undetected. Any success at detection, in turn, will inspire future countermeasures by bot producers. Identification of bots will therefore be a major ongoing research challenge.

We do know that, as with legitimate news, fake news stories have gone viral on social media. However, knowing how many individuals encountered or shared a piece of fake news is not the same as knowing how many people read or were affected by it. Evaluations of the medium-to-long-run impact on political behavior of exposure to fake news (for example, whether and how to vote) are essentially nonexistent in the literature. The impact might be small—evidence suggests that efforts by political campaigns to persuade individuals may have limited effects[9]. However, mediation of much fake news via social media might accentuate its effect because of the implicit endorsement that comes with sharing. Beyond electoral impacts, what we know about the effects of media more generally suggests many potential pathways of influence, from increasing cynicism and apathy to encouraging extremism. There exists little evaluation of the impacts of fake news in these regards.

POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS

What interventions might be effective at stemming the flow and influence of fake news? We identify two categories of interventions: (i) those aimed at empowering individuals to evaluate the fake news they encounter, and (ii) structural changes aimed at preventing exposure of individuals to fake news in the first instance.

Empowering individuals

There are many forms of fact checking, from websites that evaluate factual claims of news reports, such as PolitiFact and Snopes, to evaluations of news reports by credible news media, such as the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, to contextual information regarding content inserted by intermediaries, such as those used by Facebook.

Despite the apparent elegance of fact checking, the science supporting its efficacy is, at best, mixed. This may reflect broader tendencies in collective cognition, as well as structural changes in our society. Individuals tend not to question the credibility of information unless it violates their preconceptions or they are incentivized to do so. Otherwise, they may accept information uncritically. People also tend to align their beliefs with the values of their community.

Research also further demonstrates that people prefer information that confirms their preexisting attitudes (selective exposure), view information consistent with their preexisting beliefs as more persuasive than dissonant information (confirmation bias), and are inclined to accept information that pleases them (desirability bias). Prior partisan and ideological beliefs might prevent acceptance of fact checking of a given fake news story.

Fact checking might even be counterproductive under certain circumstances. Research on fluency—the ease of information recall—and familiarity bias in politics shows that people tend to remember information, or how they feel about it, while forgetting the context within which they encountered it. Moreover, they are more likely to accept familiar information as true[10]. There is thus a risk that repeating false information, even in a fact-checking context, may increase an individual's likelihood of accepting it as true. The evidence on the effectiveness of claim repetition in fact checking is mixed[11].

Although experimental and survey research have confirmed that the perception of truth increases when misinformation is repeated, this may not occur if the misinformation is paired with a valid retraction. Some research suggests that repetition of the misinformation before its correction may even be beneficial. Further research is needed to reconcile these contradictions and determine the conditions under which fact-checking interventions are most effective.

An emphasis on fake news might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of real-news outlets. There is a great need for rigorous program evaluation of different educational interventions.

Another, longer-run, approach seeks to improve individual evaluation of the quality of information sources through education. There has been a proliferation of efforts to inject training of critical-information skills into primary and secondary schools[12]. However, it is uncertain whether such efforts improve assessments of information credibility or if any such effects will persist over time. An emphasis on fake news might also have the unintended consequence of reducing the perceived credibility of real-news outlets. There is a great need for rigorous program evaluation of different educational interventions.

Platform-based detection and intervention: Algorithms and bots

Internet platforms have become the most important enablers and primary conduits of fake news. It is inexpensive to create a web-site that has the trappings of a professional news organization. It has also been easy to monetize content through online ads and social media dissemination. The internet not only provides a medium for publishing fake news but offers tools to actively promote dissemination.

About 47% of Americans overall report getting news from social media often or sometimes, with Facebook as, by far, the dominant source[13]. Social media are key conduits for fake news sites[3]. Indeed, Russia successfully manipulated all of the major platforms during the 2016 U.S. election, according to recent congressional testimony[7].

How might the internet and social media platforms help reduce the spread and impact of fake news? Google, Facebook, and Twitter are often mediators not only of our relationship with the news media but also with our friends and relatives. Generally, their business model relies on monetizing attention through advertising. They use complex statistical models to predict and maximize engagement with content[14]. It should be possible to adjust those models to increase emphasis on quality information.

The platforms could provide consumers with signals of source quality that could be incorporated into the algorithmic rankings of content. They could minimize the personalization of political information relative to other types of content (reducing the creation of "echo chambers"). Functions that emphasize currently trending content could seek to exclude bot activity from measures of what is trending. More generally, the platforms could curb the automated spread of news content by bots and cyborgs (users who automatically share news from a set of sources, with or without reading them), although for the foreseeable future, bot producers will likely be able to design effective countermeasures.

The platforms have attempted each of these steps and others[5,15]. Facebook announced an intent to shift its algorithm to account for "quality" in its content curation process. Twitter announced that it blocked certain accounts linked to Russian misinformation and informed users exposed to those accounts that they may have been duped.

However, the platforms have not provided enough detail for evaluation by the research community or subjected their findings to peer review, making them problematic for use by policy-makers or the general public.

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We urge the platforms to collaborate with independent academics on evaluating the scope of the fake news issue and the design and effectiveness of interventions. There is little research focused on fake news and no comprehensive data-collection system to provide a dynamic understanding of how pervasive systems of fake news provision are evolving. It is impossible to recreate the Google of 2010. Google itself could not do so even if it had the underlying code, because the patterns emerge from a complex interaction among code, content, and users. However, it is possible to record what the Google of 2018 is doing. More generally, researchers need to conduct a rigorous, ongoing audit of how the major platforms filter information.

There are challenges to scientific collaboration from the perspectives of industry and academia. Yet, there is an ethical and social responsibility, transcending market forces, for the platforms to contribute what data they uniquely can to a science of fake news.

The possible effectiveness of platform-based policies would point to either government regulation of the platforms or self-regulation. Direct government regulation of an area as sensitive as news carries its own risks, constitutional and otherwise. For instance, could regulators maintain (and, as important, be seen as maintaining) impartiality in defining, imposing, and enforcing any requirements? Generally, any direct intervention by government or the platforms that prevents users from seeing content raises concerns about either government or corporate censorship.

An alternative to direct government regulation would be to enable tort lawsuits alleging, for example, defamation by those directly and concretely harmed by the spread of fake news. To the extent that an online platform assisted in the spreading of a manifestly false (but still persuasive) story, there might be avenues for liability consistent with existing constitutional law, which, in turn, would pressure platforms to intervene more regularly. In the U.S. context, however, a provision of the 1996 Communications Decency Act offers near-comprehensive immunity to platforms for false or otherwise actionable statements penned by others. Any change to this legal regime would raise thorny issues about the extent to which platform content (and content-curation decisions) should be subject to second-guessing by people alleging injury. The European "right to be forgotten" in search engines is testing these issues.

Structural interventions generally raise legitimate concerns about respecting private enterprise and human agency. But just as the media companies of the 20th century shaped the information to which individuals were exposed, the far-more-vast internet oligopolies are already shaping human experience on a global scale. The questions before us are how those immense powers are being—and should be—exercised and how to hold these massive companies to account.

A FUTURE AGENDA

Our call is to promote interdisciplinary research to reduce the spread of fake news and to address the underlying pathologies it has revealed. Failures of the U.S. news media in the early 20th century led to the rise of journalistic norms and practices that, although imperfect, generally served us well by striving to provide objective, credible information. We must redesign our information ecosystem in the 21st century. This effort must be global in scope, as many countries, some of which have never developed a robust news ecosystem, face challenges around fake and real news that are more acute than in the United States. More broadly, we must answer a fundamental question: How can we create a news ecosystem and culture that values and promotes truth?

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Acknowledgments

We acknowledge support from the Shorenstein Center at the Harvard Kennedy School and the NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks at Northeastern University. D.M.J.L. acknowledges support by the Economic and Social Research Council ES/

N012283/1. D.M.J.L. and M.A.B. contributed equally to this article. Y.B. is on the advisory board of the Open Science Foundation. C.R.S. has consulted for Facebook. K.M.G. acknowledges support by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Fake News: A legal perspective

BY DAVID O. KLEIN AND JOSHUA R. WUELLER

The concept of "fake news" has garnered substantial attention in recent years, evolving from its satirical literary origins into a passionately criticized Internet phenomenon. Whether described as rumors, "counterknowledge," misinformation, "post-truths," "alternative facts" or just plain damned lies, these false statements of fact typically are published on Web sites and disseminated via social media for profit or social influence.

While fake news publishers are regularly taken to task in the court of public opinion, we are unaware of any prior structured discussion of the unique legal issues surrounding the publication of fake news. This article evaluates examples of fake news publications to present a workable definition of "fake news" for purposes of our legal analysis. We then explore many of the legal and regulatory hurdles facing online fake news publishers. This article concludes by discussing some of the legal protections available to fake news publications and publishers of other online content.

What is "Fake News"?

Before defining "fake news," it is important to consider actual examples of fake news and how fake news publishers operate. In one example, which took place shortly before the most recent US presidential election in a series of events now infamously known as "Pizzagate," fake news publishers in Macedonia circulated a false political conspiracy theory that former First Lady, Secretary of State, and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and other prominent Democratic political figures were coordinating a child trafficking ring out of a Washington, DC pizzeria by the name of Comet Ping Pong. The fake news publications were widely shared via Facebook and directed readers to Web sites for purposes of generating advertising revenue. In a bizarre turn of events in December 2016, a man who read the fake news publication drove from North Carolina to Washington, DC and shot open a locked door at the actual Comet Ping Pong pizzeria with his assault rifle as part of a misguided vigilante investigation. He subsequently was arrested.[1]

In another example from early 2017, 20th Century Fox worked with a fake news publisher to create five Web sites, with names such as the Houston Leader, which were designed to imitate traditional online news sources. The Web sites published articles featuring false information about prominent public figures (e.g., Lady Gaga and President Donald J. Trump) and controversial topics of public interest (e.g., mental health and vaccinations) and were shared widely via Facebook. In mid-February 2017, it was discovered (to sharp public criticism) that 20th Century Fox had orchestrated the creation of these fake news publications in an effort to publicize the Fox feature film "A Cure for Wellness," by including plot references to the film and promotional hashtags such as #cureforwellness in the subject articles.[2]

As the above-referenced examples illustrate, the cornerstone of a fake news publication is its falsity—the principal statements of fact communicated in fake news articles are fabricated and untrue. Further, fake news publications are intentionally or knowingly false. Fake news publishers do not reasonably believe that the stated facts are true. Negligent and reckless false publications of fact (including erroneous publications by mainstream media sources), while potentially legally actionable, fall outside the scope of this article. In addition, although print tabloids and news satire television series receive their fair share of legal attention, our fake news legal analysis set forth herein focuses on articles, videos, and graphics shared via the Internet.

The vast majority of fake news articles are written about public figures or controversial current events and shared via social media with the hope of going "viral." By linking social media posts to Web sites that contain banner advertisements and/or other promotional content, many publishers of fake news are able to monetize the resulting Web traffic. In fact, a successful fake news publication can be shared millions of times and generate tens of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue.

For purposes of this article, we define "fake news" as the online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact. Others have defined "fake news" to exclude well-known satirical Web sites such as the *Onion*, which uses humor and exaggeration to criticize social and political issues.[3] While it is true that obvious satire and parody often are legally protected speech, the underlying legal analysis that is applied to reach this conclusion is a complex and fact-specific endeavor better addressed through case-by-case analysis.

It is important to note that, in recent months, a number of politicians and public figures have repurposed the phrase "fake news" to describe reports from traditional news publishers that they dislike or find unflattering. For example, since taking office in January 2017, the new administration has dismissed apparently factual reports from ABC, *BuzzFeed*, CBS, CNN, MSNBC, NBC, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* as "fake news."[4] However, traditional

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1. Craig Silverman, "How the Bizarre Conspiracy Theory Behind 'Pizzagate' Was Spread," BuzzFeed News (Dec. 5, 2016), http://bit.ly/pizzagatefakenews.
2. Liam Stack, "To Lure Moviegoers, 20th Century Fox Dangles Fake News," N.Y. Times, February 16, 2017, at B1.
3. See Hunt Allcott & Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," NBER Working Paper No. 23089 (Jan. 2017), http://bit.ly/allcot-gentzkow.
4. See Donald J. Trump, Twitter, http://bit.ly/trumpfakenews (last visited Mar. 7, 2017).

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news publications fall squarely outside of our definition of "fake news" because they are not intentionally or knowingly false in nature. In an interesting role reversal, one print publication is contemplating filing a defamation lawsuit of its own against a local politician who repeatedly has described the established community newspaper as "fake news."[5]

Civil legal concerns

Fake news publishers most frequently are sued by private individuals or businesses seeking to collect monetary damages or injunctive relief. Some of the more common civil legal claims and associated defenses are described below.

DEFAMATION

No legal claim is invoked more frequently against fake news publishers than the common law tort of defamation. Generally, defamation is the communication of a false statement of fact that harms another person's reputation or character. Spoken, unrecorded defamation is known as slander, while defamatory statements that are written or otherwise recorded are defined as libel.

In the United States, truth is an absolute defense to libel and slander claims. Likewise, pursuant to First Amendment free speech protections, each defamation plaintiff must prove that defamatory statements were published with the requisite intent, which varies depending on the plaintiff's level of public prominence. Harmful, false publications of fact concerning a public figure (e.g., a celebrity or government official) are actionable only if the publisher acted with "actual malice," that is, with either knowledge that the statement is false or reckless disregard for its falsity. Conversely, strictly private figures (e.g., your shy neighbor) do not need to prove actual malice, but rather are required only to prove that defamatory statements were published with negligence. However, if a private figure gains prominence in a specific, limited field or area of controversy, the actual malice standard may apply to such "limited-purpose public figure" for defamatory statements related to that particular field or controversy.[6]

As a practical matter, because our definition of "fake news" is limited to *intentional* or *knowingly* false statements, it is reasonable to conclude that such statements would satisfy the intent requirement for defamation claims. However, courts generally have afforded ample "breathing space" to defamation claims involving satire or parody. False statements in works of parody and satire typically are actionable only if they could be reasonably understood to describe actual facts about the plaintiff or actual events in which the plaintiff participated. For example, in 1999, the *Dallas Observer* published a false online article about a local district attorney and judge that allegedly arrested and detained a young girl with ankle shackles on potential criminal charges for writing a book report about Maurice Sendak's well-known children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. In 2004, the Supreme Court of Texas held that, despite the fact that the subject article was not labeled as a satire or parody, no objectively reasonable reader could conclude that the publication's improbable quotes and unlikely events communicated actual facts about the district attorney or judge.[7]

In addition to the constitutional protections described above, a number of states have enacted statutes to deter strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), which often are filed to silence or intimidate defendants. Some anti-SLAPP laws allow defendants that have lawfully exercised their First Amendment rights in connection with matters of public concern to move for early dismissal of SLAPPs and, in some cases, to recover their attorney fees and costs from SLAPP plaintiffs. While such protections most often are invoked in response to defamation lawsuits, defendants also may be able to "SLAPPback" against abusive claims for intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress and other common law claims that seek to curtail speech on issues of public interest. For example, in 2012, Esquire successfully invoked Washington, DC's anti-SLAPP statute to dismiss claims of defamation, invasion of privacy, and tortious interference with business relations brought in connection with a fake news article published on its Web site.[8]

Further, Section 230 of the federal Communications Decency Act of 1996 (CDA) protects online publishers from defamation claims and other state and local speech-based torts in situations where the subject information was "provided by" another Internet user.[9] Importantly, the CDA does not afford protection to the original author of a defamatory or otherwise tortious publication. While courts generally only have extended CDA protection to online publishers whose Web sites are mere "neutral conduits" of *user-generated content* (such as user profiles, comments, and forum posts), the Electronic Frontier Foundation and other digital rights advocates believe that the CDA may extend to information gathered from third-party Web sites and republished online with minimum alteration.[10]

Despite the various constitutional and statutory defenses to defamation described above, fake news publishers still regularly are sued for libel. For instance, in September 2016, now-First Lady Melania Trump filed a libel lawsuit in Maryland State court against blogger Webster Tarpley for publishing an online article referring to her as a "high-end escort" (among other things). While Tarpley originally denied all wrongdoing and described the lawsuit as "a direct affront to First Amendment principles and free speech," he recently settled the dispute with Mrs. Trump, issued a formal retraction/apology and agreed to pay a "substantial" settlement amount.[11]

Intentional infliction of emotional distress

Similar to defamation, intentional infliction of emotional distress (IIED) is a common law tort that is regularly alleged against

5. Bente Birkeland, "When a Politician Says 'Fake News' and a Newspaper Threatens to Sue Back," NPR (Feb. 17, 2017), http://bit.ly/NPRfakenews.
6. See Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., 418 U.S. 323 (1974); N.Y. Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).
7. New Times, Inc. v. Isaacks, 146 S.W.3d 144 (Tex. 2004).
8. Farah v. Esquire Magazine, Inc., 863 F. Supp. 2d 29 (D.D.C. 2012).
9. 47 U.S.C. § 230.
10. Section 230 Protections, Elec. Frontier Found., http://bit.ly/EFF230 (last visited Feb. 28, 2017); see also Kevin Delaney, "Republication in the Internet Age," News Media & the Law (Summer 2014).
11. Complaint, Trump v. Tarpley, No. V424492 (Md. Cir. Ct. Sept. 1, 2016); Dan Morse, "Melania Trump Reaches Settlement in Libel Lawsuit Against Maryland Blogger," Wash. Post (Feb. 7, 2017), http://bit.ly/trumplibel; Webster G. Tarpley, "Statement Regarding Melania Trump Lawsuit," Tarply.net (Sept. 1, 2016), http://bit.ly/tarpleystatement.

fake news publishers under state law. IIED occurs when a person intentionally or recklessly engages in extreme or outrageous behavior that causes another person to suffer severe emotional distress. However, unlike defamatory statements, which may be actionable for simply being harmful and false, statements supporting IIED claims must be "so outrageous in character, and so extreme in degree, as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency, and to be regarded as atrocious, and utterly intolerable in a civilized community."[12]

In 1983, *Hustler Magazine* published a satirical liqueur advertisement featuring famed televangelist Jerry Falwell. The ad included Falwell's photograph along with a fake interview alleging that Falwell's "first time" was during a drunken incestuous rendezvous with his mother in an outhouse. Falwell sued Hustler for alleged IIED (among other things). In 1988, in *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell*, the Supreme Court held that the "actual malice" standard applicable to defamation cases was equally applicable to IIED claims brought by public figures. The Court reasoned that Hustler's statements amounted to a parody that was not reasonably believable and, therefore, not published with actual malice.[13]

Generally, courts hearing IIED claims since Falwell have given satirical fake news publishers a wide legal berth. For example, in 2007, the Indiana Court of Appeals held that false online claims and fake testimonials concerning an Indiana resident and his water conditioning business were satirical and, therefore, dismissed the plaintiff's IIED claims against the fake news publisher pursuant to the State of Indiana's anti-SLAPP statute.[14]

In contrast, particularly extreme fake news publications remain susceptible to IIED claims, especially when involving private individuals. In one bizarre case, a man took nude photographs of an aspiring male model; "photoshopped" various overtly sexual elements into the photographs; purchased several Internet domain names featuring the model's name; published said nude photos on the aforementioned Web sites and his personal photography site; and identified the model's name, place of residence and employer in the Web sites' respective text and metatags. In 2014, a federal district court in the State of Virginia held that the plaintiff model's IIED claim was sufficient to survive the defendant publisher's motion for summary judgment. Shortly thereafter, the parties settled their dispute out of court for an undisclosed sum.[15]

Despite the various constitutional and statutory defenses to defamation described above, fake news publishers still regularly are sued for libel.

Intellectual property violations

Publishers of fake news and other online content should be aware of the risks associated with the unauthorized use of third-party intellectual property. Most notably, the federal Lanham Act and applicable state unfair competition laws prohibit trademark infringement and false representations of fact in commercial advertising that misrepresent the nature or characteristics of another's goods, services, or commercial activities.[16] Online publishers should refrain from using third-party names, logos and other identifiers in a way that may confuse consumers as to the origin or sponsorship of products or services. This is especially relevant for fake news publishers that use third-party brands for product endorsement or promotional purposes.

Likewise, the creators of written text, photographs, artwork, and other original works of authorship are granted exclusive rights under federal copyright law to reproduce, distribute, display, and create derivative works from such content.[17] To avoid claims of infringement, publishers using third-party materials should be sure to seek out the permission of content owners or consult intellectual property counsel as to whether the legal doctrines of fair use or public domain apply.

Separate intellectual property rights exist with respect to a person's name and likeness. The laws of at least 47 states have acknowledged a "right of publicity," which grants an individual the right to control the commercial use of his or her identity.[18] While the First Amendment and some statutory safe harbors protect the use of an individual's name and likeness in publications concerning matters of public interest, the person's prior written consent may be necessary to exploit his or her right of publicity for purely commercial purposes, such as in connection with advertising. As such, online publishers are advised to obtain consent in writing to the commercial use of an individual's name and likeness, especially if the person is purportedly providing a testimonial or otherwise promoting a product or service.

Other speech-related torts

In addition to the examples provided above, fake news publishers have faced claims for false light invasion of privacy, fraud, tortious interference, unfair/deceptive trade practices, and a variety of other civil causes of action. The applicability of these claims to publishers of fake news and other online content—and the various constitutional and statutory defenses associated therewith—depend largely on the specific factual circumstances of each case.

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12. See Restatement (Second) of Torts § 46 cmt. d (Am. Law Inst. 1965).
13. Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell, 485 U.S. 46 (1988).
14. Hamilton v. Prewett, 860 N.E.2d 1234 (Ind. Ct. App. 2007).
15. Tharpe v. Lawidjaja, 8 F. Supp. 3d 743 (W.D. Va. 2014); Peter Vieth, "Soccer Coach Settles Case Against Photographer," Va. Law. Wkly. (May 30, 2014), http://bit.ly/fakenewsIIED.
16. 15 U.S.C. § 1125(a); see also Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code §§ 17200–10; N.Y. Gen. Bus. Law § 349.
17. 17 U.S.C. § 106.
18. See, e.g., Cal. Civ. Code § 3344.1; N.Y. Civ. Rights Law § 50.

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Government regulation and criminal concerns

In addition to the sampling of civil legal issues described above, fake news publishers are, on occasion, accused of crimes and violations of other governmental regulations, including those explored below.

Unfair and deceptive trade practices

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and state Attorneys General are given broad discretion to investigate questionable trade practices and take appropriate enforcement action. Businesses and individuals found to have engaged in consumer fraud or deception can be permanently enjoined by a court from continuing such conduct in the future and may be ordered to pay civil penalties and provide consumer redress (e.g., disgorgement of related profits to the government for the public's benefit).

For example, in April 2011, the FTC filed lawsuits in federal district courts throughout the country against 10 fake news publishers for allegedly using the names and logos of major news organizations for purposes of deceptively promoting an acai berry weight-loss product. Through settlement agreements, the defendants ultimately agreed to pay millions of dollars to the FTC, halt their allegedly deceptive practices and add certain marketing disclosures to their respective Web sites.

Criminal libel

A remnant of 17th Century British common law, approximately 15 US states and territories still have criminal libel statutes on their books. The exact characteristics of the crime of libel vary from state to state, but the elements of criminal libel often mirror the elements of civil defamation.[19]

In 1964, the Supreme Court in *Garrison v. Louisiana* held that the heightened "actual malice" standard outlined in *New York Times v. Sullivan* applies to both criminal and civil libel cases. The Court reasoned that "it can hardly be urged that the maintenance of peace requires a criminal prosecution for private defamation."[20] Crucially, however, evidence suggests that a number of states have continued to enforce their criminal libel statutes with sporadic results. For example, one study of Wisconsin's criminal libel law describes three men who were charged with criminal libel for distributing 200 satirical fake news fliers on April Fools' Day in 2001. Each chose a different legal strategy. The first pleaded guilty and was sentenced to jail time, probation and fines. The second pleaded guilty, but negotiated a reduced sentence of community service and fines. The third man pleaded not guilty and was acquitted of criminal libel. No major news publication reported on the case.[21] In another matter, police officers searched the home and seized the computer and other written materials of a fake news publisher in 2003 in connection with an alleged violation of Colorado State's criminal libel statute.[22]

In many instances, criminal libel charges have been reduced or dismissed entirely when defendants question the constitutionality of the subject statute. In light of the continued activity in this space, fake news publishers are advised to seek legal counsel in the event that they are investigated or charged for criminal libel.

Most cyberbullying laws prohibit online harassment and bullying of minors at public schools, while others … criminalize all online transmissions of lewd, indecent, or obscene material to or about a person for purposes of harassment and the infliction of emotional harm.

Cyberbullying

Following several tragic suicides in response to online harassment and bullying, many states and localities have enacted cyberbullying laws. Most cyberbullying laws prohibit online harassment and bullying of minors at public schools, while others (such as the State of New Jersey's cyber-harassment statute) criminalize all online transmissions of lewd, indecent, or obscene material to or about a person for purposes of harassment and the infliction of emotional harm.[23]

Much as criminal libel laws, many criminal cyberbullying laws have been found to be contentbased restrictions that violate the First Amendment. For example, in the fall of 2011, six students in the State of North Carolina were arrested and charged with cyberbullying after posting to Facebook and commenting on an allegedly falsified, sexually themed screenshot of a classmate's text message conversation. In June 2016, the Supreme Court of North Carolina determined that the law was unconstitutional, holding that the government had criminalized content-based speech (namely, private, personal, or sexual information pertaining to a minor) in a manner that was not narrowly tailored to the State's asserted interest.[24]

The trend of deregulation

In 2012, the Supreme Court in *United States v. Alvarez* invalidated the

19. See A. Jay Wagner & Anthony L. Fargo, Int'l Press Inst., "Criminal Libel in the Land of the First Amendment," 37 n.76 (2015) (citing criminal libel statutes in Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah, the Virgin Islands, Virginia, and Wisconsin).
20. Garrison v. Louisiana, 379 U.S. 64 (1964) (citations omitted).
21. David Pritchard, "Rethinking Criminal Libel: An Empirical Study," 14 Comm. L. & Pol'y 303, 327-28 (2009).
22. Mink v. Suthers, 482 F.3d 1244 (10th Cir. 2007) (dismissing the blog publisher's constitutional claims on lack of standing and mootness grounds for failure to establish a credible fear of criminal prosecution). Subsequently, the General Assembly of the State of Colorado repealed the State's criminal libel statute. Colo. Rev. Stat. § 18-13-105 (repealed 2012).
23. See, e.g., N.J. Stat. Ann. § 2C:33-4.1.
24. State v. Bishop, 787 S.E.2d 814 (N.C. 2016).

federal Stolen Valor Act of 2005, which criminalized falsely representing oneself as having been awarded military medals or decorations. Favoring counter-speech and refutation over government regulation of false speech, the Court held that interest in truthful discourse alone was insufficient to sustain the criminal statute at issue.[25]

Some legal scholars describe the Alvarez ruling as delineating a "constitutional right to lie."[26] While the FTC and Attorneys General have broad discretion to aggressively pursue unfair and deceptive trade practices claims against fake news publishers, defendants in other cases have had increasing success in raising First Amendment defenses to criminal and regulatory claims involving restrictions on false speech.

Other enforcement concerns

Not all regulations affecting fake news publishers are strictly legal in nature. Many advertising networks, social media companies, and other Internet partners enact and enforce their own restrictions relevant to the publication of fake news.

Web site and search advertising restrictions

As described above, fake news publishers often monetize their articles by partnering with advertising networks (e.g., Google AdSense and Media.net) and marketing affiliate programs (e.g., Amazon Associates) that may place banner advertisements on their Web sites. Further, some publishers supplement their social media traffic by purchasing Internet search advertising, such as Google AdWords.

In response to sharp public criticism of the fake news phenomenon, many Internet advertising companies have updated their program policies to deny services to fake news publishers.[27] For example, in November and December 2016, after reviewing 550 suspected fake news Web sites, Google permanently banned approximately 200 AdSense publishers for alleged violations of the updated AdSense Program Policies, which forbid the use of "misrepresentative content" on publisher Web sites.[28]

Accordingly, publishers of fake news Web sites and other online content should carefully review each partner advertising network and marketing affiliate program's policies and guidelines to ensure their compliance with all applicable content requirements and restrictions. Online publishers whose accounts are suspended by Google or another advertising partner (often without warning and with little or no stated justification), or that are otherwise notified of program policy violations, may consider consulting Internet marketing counsel to take proper remedial action, which may include Web site content revisions and/or submission of appeal correspondence.

Social media account policies

As mentioned above, social media is the lifeblood of fake news. Social media platforms allow publishers to disseminate viral fake news media to mass audiences more efficiently and affordably than traditional marketing methods.

Advertisers may purchase ads to appear in Facebook users' News Feeds. However, Facebook recently updated its Advertising Policies to prohibit ad content containing false information. Fake news publishers that violate this policy may have their accounts suspended or deleted entirely at Facebook's discretion.[29]

In addition, in February 2017, Facebook rolled out new tools for users in France and Germany to self-report suspected fake news publications. Articles confirmed by fact-checking partners to be fake news are tagged as such across the social media platform and penalized in users' News Feed results to prevent the content from spreading. Facebook is expected to implement similar fact-checking efforts in the United States. While Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, seems averse to banning fake news publications outright, articles identified as fake news stand to have their reach (and earning potential) drastically reduced by Facebook's latest efforts.[30]

In a recent high-profile case, an actual photograph of Anas Modamani (a Syrian refugee living in Germany) taking a selfie with German Chancellor Angela Merkel was transformed into a fake news publication. Mr. Modamani's selfie photo was placed alongside photos of three other men, with the German headline "Homeless Man Set Alight in Berlin. Merkel Took a Selfie with One of the Perpetrators." After the false image began circulating on Facebook, Mr. Modamani sought an injunction from a German court that would have required Facebook to block its reproduction and circulation. On March 7, 2017, the court denied the injunction, ruling that Facebook had not manipulated the content itself and, therefore, could not be held legally responsible.[31]

Best practices

As detailed above, fake news publishers are faced with a variety of serious legal and regulatory concerns. However, publishers who choose to navigate the legal risks associated with fake news may be able to take certain proactive steps to help protect themselves and minimize their legal exposure.

Notices and disclaimers

When determining whether a person of reasonable intelligence would construe a false statement as describing actual facts, courts often consider whether the subject publisher readily identifies itself as a source of fiction, parody, or satire. Fake news publishers may consider mitigating legal risk by working with experienced Internet marketing counsel to craft appropriate notices and disclaimers, which should be placed conspicuously on their Web sites and social media pages. If applicable, fake news publishers also may wish to include an appropriate copyright notice on their

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25. United States v. Alvarez, 567 U.S. 709 (2012) (invalidating as unconstitutional the Stolen Valor Act of 2005, 18 U.S.C. § 704(b)).
26. Noah Feldman, "The Constitutional Right to Lie," Bloomberg View (June 29, 2012), http://bit.ly/righttolie.
27. AdSense Program Policies, Google, http://bit.ly/adsensepolicy (last visited Mar. 7, 2017) (prohibiting Web sites with "misrepresentative content"); AdWords Policies, Google, http://bit.ly/adwordspolicies (last visited Mar. 7, 2017) (prohibiting representations that are not "accurate, realistic, and truthful"); Program Guidelines, Media.net, http://bit.ly/medianetguidelines (last visited Mar. 7, 2017) (prohibiting "fake news" Web sites); Associates Program Policies, Amazon Associates, http://bit.ly/associatespolicy (last visited Mar. 7, 2017) (prohibiting Web sites with "libelous or defamatory materials").
28. Scott Spencer, Google, "How We Fought Bad Ads, Sites and Scammers in 2016," The Keyword (Jan. 25, 2017), http://bit.ly/keywordblog.
29. Advertising Policies, Facebook, http://bit.ly/FBadpolicies (last visited Mar. 7, 2017).
30. Gwenaelle Barzic & Sudip Kar-Gupta, "Facebook, Google Join Drive Against Fake News in France," Reuters (Feb. 6, 2017), http://bit.ly/reutersfakenews; Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook (Nov. 19, 2016), http://bit.ly/zuckerbergfakenews.
31. Melissa Eddy, "German Court Refuses to Block Facebook Users from Reposting a Refugee's Selfie," N.Y. Times, March 8, 2017, at B5.

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respective Web sites, original articles, artwork, and other creative materials to inform the public that the subject works are protected by copyright (as discussed below).

Copyright protection

Owners of sufficiently original and creative literary and visual art works may consider filing applications for federal copyright registration. While not mandatory, obtaining federal copyright registration enables a copyright owner to sue for copyright infringement in the event of a copyright dispute and may entitle the owner to recover attorney fees and statutory damages of up to $150,000 per infringed work. It is important to note that for purposes of copyright registration, it is irrelevant whether the facts set forth in a work of authorship are true or false.[32]

While multiple issues of printed newspapers and other periodicals can be bundled together for group copyright registration as a collective work, online articles published one at a time must be registered separately. Many Internet publishers find this distinction—combined with the lengthy processing time for standard copyright applications (currently six to ten months) and relatively short lifespan of most online news stories—to be prohibitive to registration of each individual online publication. However, publishers of fake news articles or other online works that are the subject of a pending or prospective copyright dispute can take advantage of the Copyright Office's special handling option, which typically reduces the copyright application processing time to only five business days.

Web site terms and conditions

And privacy policies In the Internet age, Web site operators should require their users to agree to abide by the applicable Web site Terms and Conditions (sometimes called Terms of Use or Terms of Service) as part of the registration process in order to enjoy the publisher's online services. When drafted properly, Terms and Conditions form a legally binding contract between the Web site owner/operator and each user and include appropriate notices, restrictions, liability disclaimers, governing law, and other important legal guidelines.

Further, each Web site that collects personally identifiable information (PII) from end users is required by law to have a Privacy Policy. Privacy Policies should let users know what PII the publisher collects, how it uses that information, to whom the publisher may disclose that PII, the security measures taken to protect that information and whether the Web site uses "cookies" to track user activity. Because many of the previously mentioned third-party advertising networks and affiliate marketing programs use cookies, pixel tags, and other technology for behavioral targeting, tracking, and reporting purposes, a well-drafted Privacy Policy is essential.

Media liability insurance

A variety of media liability insurance policy options exist for writers, including online publishers. While the scope of coverage varies, a number of underwriters offer media liability insurance policies that provide protection in connection with many legal claims faced by online publishers, including defamation, intellectual property infringement and violations of the right of publicity. In light of the substantial risk of legal liability associated with the dissemination of fake news, publishers are well-advised to purchase appropriate media liability insurance coverage.

Conclusion

While conducting research for this article at the New York Public Library, we noticed staff members busily hanging posters on the library's walls. Entitled "How to Spot Fake News," the infographic on the posters was published in eleven languages by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which encourages libraries to "battle" fake news through education and critical thinking and describes fake news publishers as "charlatans, liars and forgers."[33]

The recent proliferation of fake news has roused the ire and condemnation of fact-checkers and traditional news publishers across the globe. Many believe that fake news undermines our faith in the mainstream media and the very foundation of our democracy. Others claim that fake news publications unethically exploit social media "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" through which many Internet users obtain their news. In response, California State lawmakers have introduced legislation to commission new high school "media literacy" curriculum standards to help young people distinguish fake news from its traditional counterpart.[34] One epidemiologist has even drawn parallels between the propagation of fake news stories *via* the Internet and the evolution and transmission of infectious diseases.[35] Needless to say, fake news publishers will not soon win any Peabody Awards or popularity contests. As media attention and public condemnation of fake news continues to intensify, we predict that more lawmakers, regulators, courts, and private citizens will explore legal and regulatory solutions that balance the societal importance of truth-seeking with the constitutional right to speak freely (and, at times, to lie).

This article presents a definition of fake news for purposes of legal analysis and provides a nonexhaustive survey of the many legal and regulatory issues that face fake news publishers. Because every publication is different, online publishers are advised to speak with an experienced Internet marketing and intellectual property attorney about minimizing their unique legal risks before publishing fake news.

About the authors

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32. Compendium of U.S. Copyright Office Practices § 310.2 (3d ed. 2014).
33. Karolina Andersdotter, "Alternative Facts and Fake News—Verifiability in the Information Age," IFLA Blogs (Jan. 27, 2017), http://bit.ly/IFLAblogs.
34. Melanie Mason, "Fake News 101? Lawmakers Want California Schools to Teach Students How to Evaluate What They Read on the Web," L.A. Times (Jan. 11, 2017), http://bit.ly/fakenewslaw.
35. Adam Kucharski, "Post-Truth: Study Epidemiology of Fake News," 540 Nature 545 (2016).

There's a fascinating psychological explanation for why fake news goes viral

BY ERIN BRODWIN

Jun 27, 2017, 2:18 AM

A few days after Donald Trump was elected, 35-year-old Eric Tucker saw something suspicious: A cavalcade of large white buses stretched down main street near downtown Austin, Texas.

Tucker snapped a few photos and took to Twitter, posting the following message: *"Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in."*

Tucker was wrong — a company called Tableau Software was actually holding a 13,000-person conference that day and had hired the buses. But as the *New York Times* noted last year, it hardly seemed to matter.

The erroneous post got shared more than 350,000 times on Facebook and 16,000 times on Twitter, mostly by right-wing Americans drawn to the idea that people on the left had orchestrated an anti-Trump conspiracy. Trump even appeared to join in.

Tucker subsequently acknowledged his error in a new tweet. But a week later, the truthful post had only gotten retweeted 29 times, according to the debunking website Snopes.

Why did the false tweet get so much more attention? A new study published June 26 in the journal Nature looks into why fake posts like Tucker's can go so viral.

Economists concluded that it comes down to two factors. First, each of us has limited attention. Second, at any given moment, we have access to a lot of information — arguably more than at any previous time in history. Together, that creates a scenario in which facts compete with falsehoods for finite mental space. Often, falsehoods win out.

Diego F. M. Oliveira, the study's lead author and a post-doctoral fellow at Indiana University and Northwestern University, tested this idea by creating a theoretical model for the spread of information. The model was loosely based on epidemiological models that public health researchers use to study the spread of disease. Oliviera's team had bots or "agents" produce messages containing new memes — essentially fake news — on sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook, and re-share messages created or forwarded by their neighbouring bots in a network.

"Quality is not a necessary ingredient for explaining popularity patterns in online social networks," Oliveira wrote in his paper, adding, "Paradoxically, our behavioural mechanisms to cope with

… most people only focus on real news for short amounts of time, so adding fake news to the mix leads to more competition for our attention.

information overload may … increase the spread of misinformation and make us vulnerable to manipulation."

In other words, the study suggests that most people only focus on real news for short amounts of time, so adding fake news to the mix leads to more competition for our attention. Every few minutes, we make quick decisions about which facts to accept and which to discard. In the process, we may end up disregarding factual information simply because there is so much of it out there.

According to the authors of the study, the fact so many people get news from their social media feeds could also make it harder to distinguish truth from fiction. It's tough to vet the source of a social media post, and a recent study suggests that people base their evaluation of a piece of information more on the person who shared it than the organisation that produced it.

Those who saw Eric Tucker's tweet about the buses had no way to know whether the vehicles in Tucker's photos were actually linked to anti-Trump activity.

"I'm … a very busy businessman and I don't have time to fact-check everything that I put out there, especially when I don't think it's going out there for wide consumption," Tucker told the Times.

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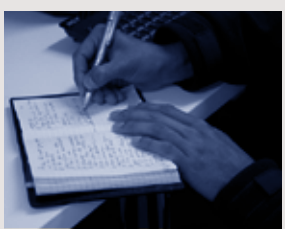

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Fake News – and what *(not)* to do about it

JAN MELISSEN

Fake news comes thick and fast, on national issues and in international politics. The public reaction to it varies from great concern and offence to a sense of being entertained. One of the main problems with fake news is that fabricated stories look real – that is their key distinguishing feature. They are believed, shared and circulated by people, thus making fake news what it is, "legit" for consumers-cum-multipliers of news. The role of technology in our societies has changed the nature, scale, speed and direction of disinformation. Digital technologies have turned fake news into a new form of 21st century propaganda. Apart from the challenge of making sense of what fake news is, one can observe a worrying tendency to counter it before understanding it.

Some people involved in fake news are rather cynically motivated by economic self-interest to generate anything-goes stories in disputes fought out on the internet, or to mobilize like-minded 'netizens' helping their cause. Fake news means different things to different people. It can have a destabilizing effect on societies that being are undermined from within, and with mind-blowing velocity and intensity of news circulation. Most challenging, fake news has the potential to pose a threat to international stability.

Disinformation and dialogues of disrespect

Fake news reverberates above all within so-called 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles', in which algorithms tailor information to unwitting news consumers. Such algorithms constitute the back-end politics of fake news. Echo chambers come in many shapes and sizes. Both online and offline the Western world arguably functions more or less like a filter bubble. Another sizeable echo chamber, the global community of Catholics, was taken by surprise during the 2016 US election campaign: "Pope Francis Shakes World: Endorses Donald Trump", which generated 96,000 engagements on Facebook. Fake news has the capacity to *confuse* campaign-style national political debates.

In international politics it can cause interference in a poisonous mix with calculated insults by leaders that impact public opinion and the ongoing conversation between states. Here are two of many examples: "Hillary Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS" was of course a fake Facebook post. Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaité has never been a KGB agent and incest is not a norm in modern Europe, both suggested by fake news originating in Russia. And as to insults: it hardly greased the wheels of US-Philippines relations when President Rodrigo Duterte referred to the US Ambassador in Manila as a "gay son of a whore". And it did not inject trust in Mexican-US relations when US President Trump, speaking alongside his counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto, confirmed to reporters that Mexico was going to "pay for the Wall". Nor did it help the US relationship with Australia when Trump hung up on Malcolm Turnbull, during his first conversation with the Prime Minister of a country that has fought side by side with the US in every armed conflict since World War I.

Fake news is the bedfellow of what could be called the dialogue of disrespect, and this combination constitutes a fertile breeding ground for political myths. The "post-knowledge society" in which expertise is under fire has not come like a bolt from the blue. In 1958, Cold War hysteria led to the widespread belief that the Soviet Union was technologically superior to the West, and – fast-forward more than half a century – in 2018 climate change is rhetorically equated to weather or winter.

Social confusion

The World Economic Forum (WEF) warned as early as 2013, in the eighth edition of its *Global Risks* report, that "digital wildfires can wreak havoc in the real world". Technological developments are blending with geopolitical risk and systematic disinformation potentially undermines global governance and the legitimacy of international institutions. In the time-span of less than five years we can see how perceptions of digital media are in flux. In the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring" they were said to empower people and harbour the promise of social mobilization and political transformation.

Today, with some 15 per cent of tweets generated by bots, people on the internet feel increasingly unsure as to whether they are actually talking to a human. The creation of the Internet was underpinned by trust, but millennials do not necessarily see things that way anymore, let alone their digitally native younger siblings. Fake news plausibly demonstrates "a breakdown of social morality and a confusion in the value system". These are fitting words from novelist Yu Hua in his book *China in Ten Words*, reflecting on the rapid rise in popularity of the words "copycat" and "bamboozle" in China. They might equally apply to the proliferation of fake news in the West.

The difference between false news and fake news lies in its stylization.

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Printed fake news looks real and new technologies make it much harder to determine that pictures have been purposely doctored to mislead audiences for political purposes. "Weaponized" communication is affecting governmental public diplomacy. After the initial euphoria about social media empowering 'the people', it was only a matter of time before the power of algorithms drew the attention of a growing number of governments.

At the second International Conference on Digital Diplomacy hosted by the Israeli Ministry of Affairs in Jerusalem (#DDConf2017) in December last year, questions about diplomatic communication powered by algorithms took centre stage. The same is the case at The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp (#DiploCamp) at the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, 1-2 February 2018, which coincides with the publication of this Clingendael Alert.

In international relationships algorithms give governments the tools to penetrate digital people-to-people networks in both friendly and hostile foreign environments. It is hardly surprising that astute governments perceiving the digital sphere as an arena in which geopolitical rivalries are played out were among the first to embrace the use of algorithms in diplomacy. Outside the West, this includes usual suspect authoritarians like Russia, but also Iran, and Sudan. In China, which aims to become the world's artificial intelligence superpower, junior diplomats have data science on their training curriculum. On the edge of Europe, Turkey is unfolding as a self-confident powerhouse using digital tools and fake news to both mobilize its diaspora and persecute political opponents in Europe and North America.

Clampdown on news

For many people in the non-democratic world institutionalized fake news is old news: systematic disinformation is part of political culture, a fact of life. In many countries the population knows that the makers of fake news are the same people as those who control fake news: the government. Spreading undesirable news digitally in the domestic environment is being outlawed in various countries and offenders risk being locked up. The Turkish authorities are reported to have arrested 311 people over social media posts about the recent military operation in northern Syria. Across borders, authoritarian powers both large and small are becoming increasingly skilled in following digital trails and hunting down political opponents across the globe.

In some countries "no news" is still preferred to fake news. The absence of any meaningful domestic news in Myanmar about the Rohingya crisis is a terrifying example. Other authoritarians try to shut down digital platforms that criticize the abuse of power. Rappler, a social news network in the Philippines with 3.5 million Facebook followers, currently faces the withdrawal of its licence by the government. President Duterte is accusing the platform of being run by foreigners, which is illegal under Philippines law. And in the "free" West we see the President of the United States using his discretion to label media like The New York Times and CNN as fake news.

The political contestation of undesirable facts is on the rise and the jury is still out as to whether this trend has reached the high-water mark. But for some Western countries traditional propaganda rather than fake news appears to be the principal headache. Australia is more concerned about China's influence in mainstream media, purchasing ads and favourable articles, and about Australian Chinese-language media.

In Europe governments have stepped in, with Germany and France introducing legislation to help ban fake news. Chancellor Merkel and President Macron opened 2018 with an offensive against the lacklustre deletion of illegal posts and hate speech by tech giants Facebook and Twitter. It is unclear where things are going in a world of simultaneous polarization and convergence of traditional media and social media.

On the positive side, it is safe to predict that future media will look different, and we can already discern the outlines of new models. One example: "OhMyNews" is a South Korean citizens' news organization with 65,000 contributors that is operated by professionals following standard journalistic procedures like editing and fact-checking. In the current siege-like media landscape, with the open question of who is surrounding whom in the global info-sphere, this Korean example is a hopeful sign pointing to possible new media models.

Meta-literacy

What to do about systematic disinformation in the digital sphere? New forms of news writing are emerging and we therefore need to take a fresh look at how to read. Citizens in a media landscape in which news can no longer be separated from the algorithms that drive it, and devices enhancing the "spreadability" of news, need new, different forms of literacy. Meta-literacy requires greater critical awareness of the context in which information is produced as well as the habit of reading news that does not affirm one's beliefs. It equally stands to reason that in a digital world in which "everybody is a journalist", people who write news for potentially large audiences would benefit from the toolkit of the professional journalist.

The fight against digital disinformation has become multifaceted. Where such anti-fake news initiatives (ranging from legal solutions and governments taking on the tech giants to myriad fact-checking initiatives) focus on news as an artefact, they should not overlook the important receiving end of fake news. Fake news exposure, which can be seen as the fast-food variant of investigative journalism, is not enough and may have undesirable side effects.

The Field Guide to Fake News, showing the results of a digital cookbook project (fakenews.publicdatalab.org), proposes an alternative approach: we need to understand "not just the strategies and formats of fakeness, but the politics and composition of the media and information environments of the digital age". Instead of giving the makers of fake news the attention they crave, the authors argue, we need to look above all at the consumers of news. As stated at the beginning of this argument, fake news is ultimately turned into news by readers and viewers who are mesmerized by negative and provocative headlines. Media consumers-cum-producers turn fiction on the town square of the global village into news – simply by believing, liking, sharing, reposting, forwarding and retweeting it.

No quick fix

In international politics fake news has real consequences, and so has countering fake news in 20th century tit-for-tat style. Probably with an eye to the 2019 EU Parliamentary elections, the European diplomatic service's EastStratcom Task Force has recently committed an additional €1 million to expose Russian propaganda

online. Giving this European online "mythbusting" initiative the benefit of the doubt, one might suggest that the Twitter handle @EUvsDisinfo contributes to greater awareness of Russian practices among EU citizens. But isn't the whole exercise about something European citizens on all sides of the political spectrum already know? Does the EEAS realize that people *outside* of one's own filter bubble could see such pronouncements as counter-propaganda?

At best this initiative looks like a quick fix that fails to address underlying problems. At worst it is a classic case of preaching to the converted. Fighting Russian fake news with Cold War-style tools does not make things any better. Did it cross the minds of the mandarins of EU diplomacy that official initiatives like this one are perhaps not in sync with the zeitgeist? There are no quick fixes for what is fundamentally a problem of human behaviour. It is understandable that the EU is in a hurry, but fake news can only be understood by looking into the ways in which it is circulated and believed online.

In the digital age everything starts with the ordinary individual – neither empowered hero nor hate speech villain – and that applies equally to finding solutions for the problem of fake news. In the variegated patchwork that is required to counter fake news, there is a greater need for practices like fact-checking than in the pre-digital age, and it is important to expose destabilizing narratives based on deliberately hurtful disinformation. Powerful actors like tech giants have a job to do, but there is rightly also a call for the taming of excessive corporate power and arrogance. International organizations have a role to play, but should be conscious of their contested legitimacy in the societies of their member states. Governments need to be aware that 'the law' is not enough to fix a social illness, and in our collective memory it is hard to dissociate propaganda and lack of freedom of speech from state power.

Civil society involvement in fighting fake news deserves more emphasis, and greater resilience of persons – as the smallest units of our society – starts with the systematic introduction of meta-literacy in education. This probably remains the best antidote to fake news.

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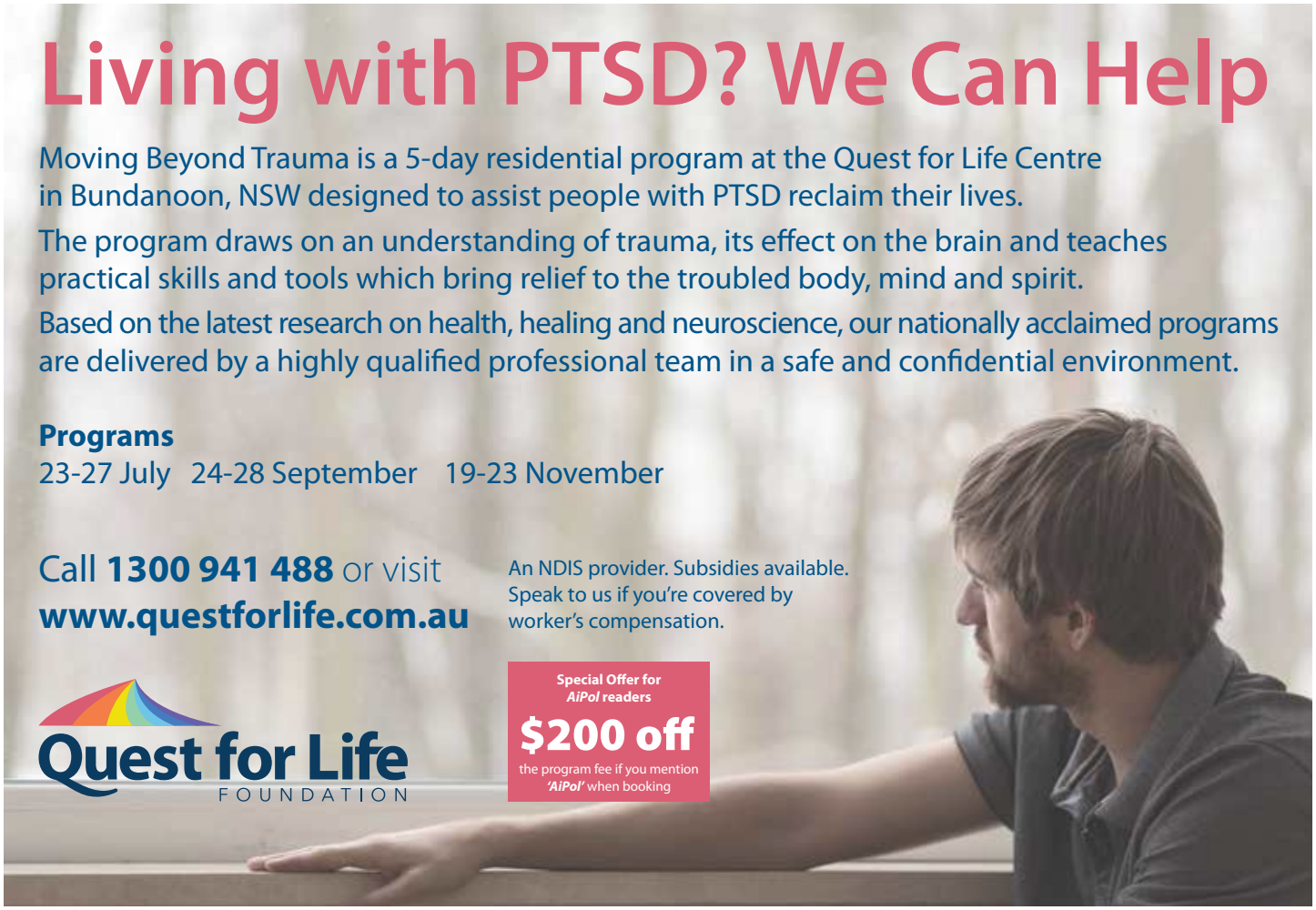

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Measuring the reach of "Fake News" and online disinformation in Europe

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The production, consumption, and dissemination of online disinformation has become a serious concern in many countries in recent years. Against the backdrop of increased online news use, and growth in the use of social media to find news (Newman et al. 2017), governments, policymakers, and other stakeholders have started to take formal steps towards assessing and tackling this issue. However, with the partial exception of the United States (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018), we lack even the most basic information about the scale of the problem in almost every country.

The purpose of this RISJ factsheet is to provide top level usage statistics for the most popular sites that independent fact-checkers and other observers have identified as publishers of false news and online disinformation in two European countries: France and Italy. We focus specifically on sites that independent fact-checkers have shown to publish demonstrably false news and information, whether for profit or for ideological/political purposes. This constitutes a more clearly defined subset of a wider range of issues sometimes discussed using the broad, vague, and politicized term "fake news". We examine France and Italy as two particularly important cases, as both are widely seen as facing serious issues with for profit and ideologically/politically motivated online disinformation.

Based on a starting sample of around 300 websites in each country that independent fact-checkers have identified as publishers of false news (which, on this basis, we refer to as "false news sites"), we focus on measuring these sites' reach, attention, and number of interactions on Facebook. We provide context by comparing these figures with equivalent data for a small selection of the most widely-used French and Italian news brands.

We find that:

- None of the false news websites we considered had an average monthly reach of over 3.5% in 2017, with most reaching less than 1% of the online population in both France and Italy. By comparison, the most popular news websites in France (Le Figaro) and Italy (La Repubblica) had an average monthly reach of 22.3% and 50.9%, respectively;
- The total time spent with false news websites each month is lower than the time spent with news websites. The most popular false news websites in France were viewed for around 10 million minutes per month, and for 7.5 million minutes in Italy. People spent an average of 178 million minutes per month with Le Monde, and 443 million minutes with La Repubblica—more than the combined time spent with all 20 false news sites in each sample;
- Despite clear differences in terms of website access, the level of Facebook interaction (defined as the total number of comments, shares, and reactions) generated by a small number of false news outlets matched or exceeded that produced by the most popular news brands. In France, one false news outlet generated an average of over 11 million interactions per month—five times greater than more established news brands. However, in most cases, in both France and Italy, false news outlets do not generate as many interactions as established news brands.

This factsheet offers only a preliminary measure of the reach of the most popular identified false news websites in Italy and France. Further research is needed to understand the reach and influence of online disinformation in these and other countries.

Approach

We use data from comScore and CrowdTangle to measure the use of both news and false news outlets. comScore is a web analytics company that uses a combination of panel-based and server-side measurement to provide data on the use of the most widely-used websites within particular countries.[1] CrowdTangle is a web tool that compiles engagement data for specified Facebook accounts by accessing the Facebook API.[2]

For both France and Italy, our starting point was lists of unreliable websites compiled by independent factcheckers and other observers. For France, we used the Décodex—a database of around 1000 websites compiled by Le Monde's Décodeurs project in the course of their fact-checking.[3] In Italy, we combined lists

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1 See: www.comscore.com.
2 See: www.crowdtangle.com.
3 See: www.lemonde.fr/verification/.

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from three different sources.[4] Two of these lists were retrieved from independent fact-checking websites—BUTAC and Bufale.[5] The third list came from Bufalopedia,[6] a website co-created by Paolo Attivissimo, a prominent journalist who describes himself as a "hoax buster".[7] These are the best available, independently-compiled lists of websites that have repeatedly published demonstrably false information, whether for profit or motivated by other reasons.

For comparative purposes, we also included two prominent Russian news sites which have featured in European policy discussions around disinformation, namely Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik. These Russian state-backed organisations are clearly different from sites that engage in for-profit fabrication of false news, but both independent fact-checkers and the EU's European External Action Service East Stratcom Task Force have identified multiple instances where these sites have published disinformation.[8]

Not all of the outlets included on the initial lists were relevant for our purposes. Here, we are concerned with outlets that consistently and deliberately publish "false news", which we have defined elsewhere as "for-profit fabrication, politically-motivated fabrication [and] malicious hoaxes" designed to masquerade as news (Nielsen and Graves 2017). This does not represent the entire wider ecosystem of misinformation and disinformation, which can also be said to include, for example, some forms of satire, advertising, hyperpartisan content, and poor journalism. But it captures key categories of disinformation that are nonetheless important to document the reach of.

In France, the Décodex database divides websites into four categories: (1) satirical websites, (2) websites that have published a significant amount of false information, (3) websites whose approach to verification is questionable, and (4) news websites.[9] To filter the list, we excluded all but category 2. In Italy, the lists were also categorized, allowing us to exclude satirical websites. The remaining websites were mostly similar to category 2, as this was the original purpose of the lists. Both Russia Today and Sputnik were listed as category 3 in the Décodex, and, as they are funded by the Russian government, they are different from the other sites. They are therefore displayed separately on the figures below (Russia Today does not have an Italian edition, so only Sputnik was included in Italy).

To align the lists with the data that comScore is able to provide, we excluded a number of other websites. We removed entries that referred to standalone Facebook accounts, Twitter accounts, and YouTube pages, as well as outlets that are part of hosting networks like WordPress, Blogger and AlterVista. Some of these may be prominent and widely-used, but our aim here was to track the use of false news websites specifically (and their associated Facebook pages). Some of the remaining sites were simply too small (in terms of monthly reach) to be tracked by comScore for the whole of 2017, or were not tracked for other reasons, and were therefore removed.

Following this process, we were left with 38 false news websites in France and 21 in Italy, allowing us to estimate average monthly reach and average monthly time spent for many of the most popular online disinformation sources in 2017.[10] We present data here for the top 20 false news sites yielded by our search in each country.

Our main focus here is on the direct use of false news websites. But in both countries, and for each outlet, we are able to supplement this on-site usage data with off-site use on Facebook, by using CrowdTangle to estimate the average number of monthly interactions (the total number of comments, shares, and reactions generated by particular Facebook accounts[11]). Interactions do not measure reach directly (and sometimes people share stories with satirical intent, knowing and making explicit that they know them to be false). But they are a key driver of the so-called "organic reach" of posts, and in the absence of better data, academics use interactions as a meaningful indicator of users' engagement with sites on social media (Gonzalez-Bailon, Kaltenbrunner, and Banchs 2010). As with comScore, some Facebook accounts are not widely-used enough to be tracked by CrowdTangle, so five French outlets and nine Italian outlets are necessarily excluded from the top 20 in each country. We focus on Facebook because it is the most widely used social media site—far more than, for example, Twitter—and has been one of the main platforms for false news and disinformation in the United States.

Results

France

By examining comScore data from 2017, we can see that all of the false news sites in the French sample have a comparatively small reach (see Figure 1). On average, most reached just 1% or fewer of the French online population each month in 2017. The most popular, Santé+ Magazine—an outlet that has been shown by Les Décodeurs to publish demonstrably false health information—reached 3.1% (this equates to around 1.5 million people). This was more than double that of well-known Russian outlets like Russia Today (1.5%) and Sputnik News (1.4%), which despite their international prominence, are used only by a small minority. All were less widely-used than our selection of the most popular and prominent French news websites, such as Le Figaro (22.3%), Le Monde (19%), and the online news website of the French public service broadcaster, FranceInfo (14.7%).

Reach figures can mask underlying fragmentation patterns. The reach of some false news sites may be small, but this may still be concerning if those that use these sites are simultaneously

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4 We also gathered sources from two recent articles from the New York Times. (www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/europe/italy-electionfake-news.html) and BuzzFeed (www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/one-of-the-biggest-alternative-media-networks-in-italy-is) on disinformation in Italy. However, the outlets mentioned in these articles were already contained in at least one of the three lists.
5 See: www.butac.it and www.bufale.net.
6 See: https://bufalopedia.blogspot.co.uk.
7 See: http://attivissimo.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-me.html.
8 See: www.stopfake.org/ and https://euvsdisinfo.eu/three-things-you-should-know-about-rt-and-sputnik/.
9 See: www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/01/23/l-annuaire-des-sources-du-decodex-mode-d-emploi_5067719_4355770.html.
10 Average monthly figures refer to the mean of individual monthly figures for January, April, July and October 2017.
11 Some news outlets maintain multiple Facebook news accounts. We consider only the single most popular news account that publishes news in the relevant language.

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avoiding news from more credible sources. However, it would appear that the audience overlap between false news sites and news sites is often quite high. For example, if we consider desktop use only (comScore is not able to provide figures for mobile overlap in France or Italy), we see that 45.4% of Santé+ Magazine users also used Le Figaro in October 2017, and 34% used Le Monde. This aligns with previous research showing, despite their size, audiences for niche outlets often overlap with the audiences for more popular mainstream brands (Webster and Ksiazek 2012).

We see a broadly similar pattern when we look at the total average time spent per month with each website (Figure 2). In 2017, French users spent a total of just under 10 million minutes per month with the websites of Santé+ Magazine, with similar figures for Russia Today and Sputnik News. The website of Égalité et Réconciliation—a French political organization founded by former French Communist Party member Alain Soral—also features relatively prominently (5.8 million minutes). These numbers are large in one sense, but much lower than the average time spent per month with news websites. For example, people spent around 170 million minutes with Le Monde online each month during 2017.

One of the reasons that total time spent is a useful measure is that, unlike reach, it is cumulative. In other words, it is possible to add up the total time spent with each false news outlet and compare it to the time spent with news. When we do this, it is interesting to note that although people spent just under 50 million minutes per month with Le HuffPost, even this exceeds the combined time spent with all 20 false news sites in our sample. In France, the gap between false news sites and news sites is larger in terms of time spent than in terms of reach. This is reflected in the fact that, in October 2017, the average time spent per visit was higher for news sites in most cases. This suggests that many of the visits to false news sites are fleeting.

Of course, website use is only one side of the story. Many assume that the on-site web reach of is information outlets is dwarfed by their off-site reach on social networks like Facebook. We

Figure 1. Average monthly reach of prominent French news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

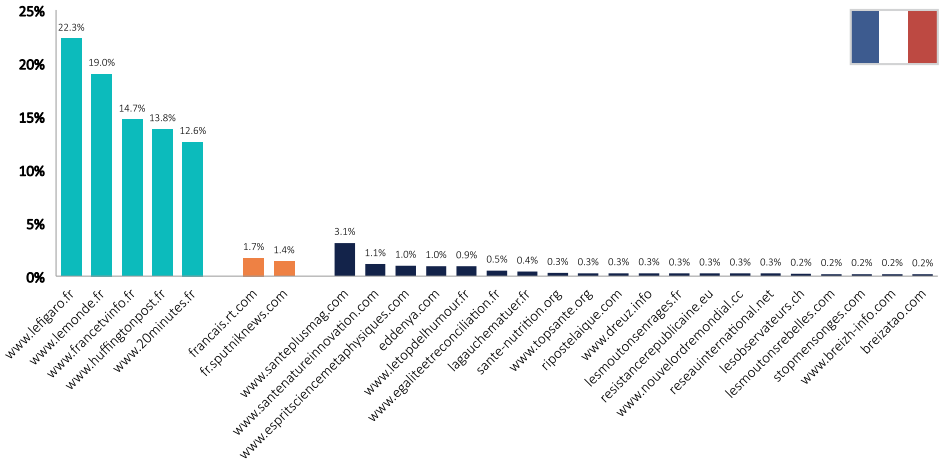


Figure 2. Average monthly time spent with prominent French news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

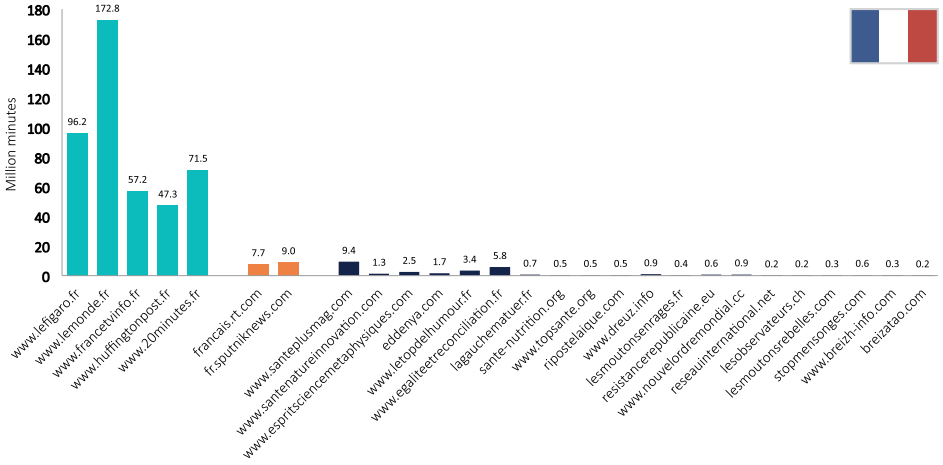
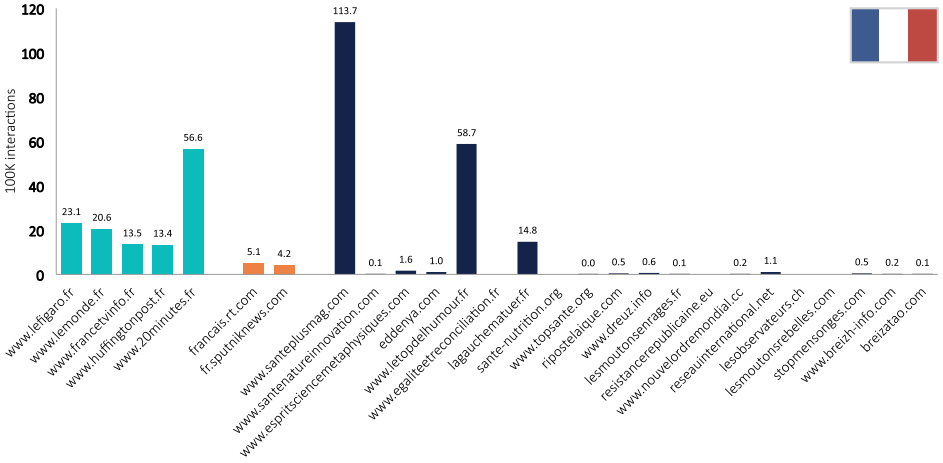


Figure 3. Average monthly Facebook interactions for prominent French news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)



are unable to measure average monthly Facebook reach in the same way as web reach (only Facebook has access to such data), but we can still examine relative differences by looking at the average number of Facebook interactions (shares, comments, reactions) each outlet received in 2017.

When we do this (see Figure 3), we see that a handful of false news outlets in our sample generated more or as many interactions as established news brands.11 La Gauche m'a Tuer, a right-wing blog, produced an average of around 1.5 million interactions each month, a figure broadly comparable to

Figure 4. Average monthly reach of prominent Italian news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

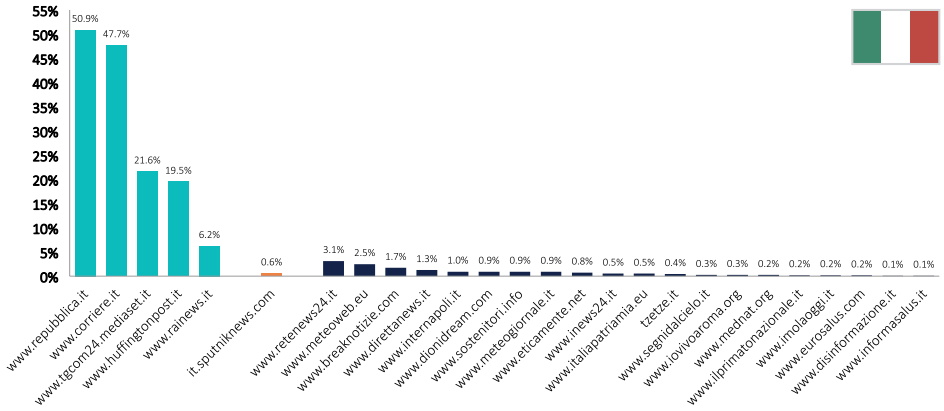


Figure 5. Average monthly time spent with prominent Italian news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

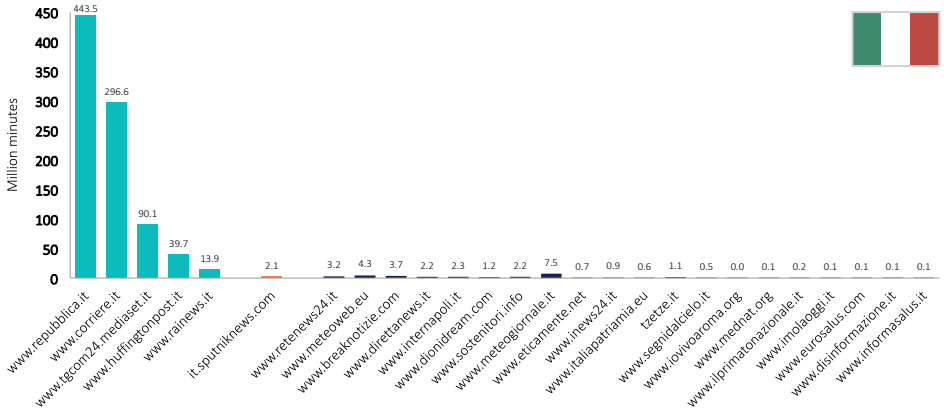
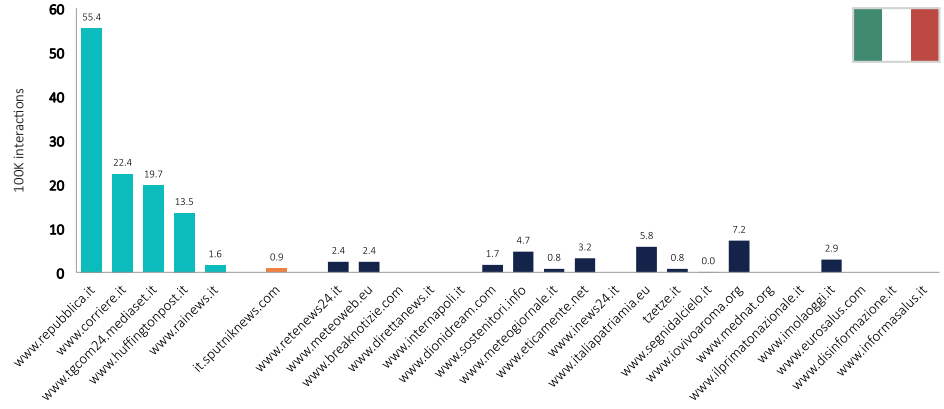


Figure 6. Average monthly Facebook interactions for prominent Italian news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)



FranceInfo (1.35 million) and Le HuffPost (1.34 million). Le Top de L'Humour et de l'Info (a site that publishes humour, but also what others have identified as false information) generated just under 6 million monthly interactions, similar to 20 Minutés—the most interacted-with news brand of the five. Santé+ Magazine—the most popular false news outlet in France by this and every other measure—received nearly as many interactions (11.3 million) as the five news sites combined.

These outlets, however, are the exception rather than the rule. Most of the false news outlets in our sample did not generate as many interactions as news brands. Some do not even have a branded Facebook page (though this does not stop their articles being shared by Facebook users). Taken together, the data suggests that in most cases false news outlets do not have a comparatively large reach via Facebook, but also that there are a handful of outlets that outperform or match news brands. This last point should not be dismissed lightly, given the huge gaps between news brands and false news outlets in terms of reputation and resources, as well as the vastly greater amount of online content produced by the news organizations.

Italy

In Italy, the most widely-used false news website in our sample—Retenews24—reached 3.1% of the online Italian population (just over 1 million people) on average each month (see Figure 4). As in France, most of the other sites were typically accessed by 1% or fewer. The reach of the Italian edition of Sputnik News was also low, used by an average of 0.6% of the online population each month.

It is important to keep in mind that the most popular online news sites in Italy—including La Repubblica and Il Corriere della Sera—are much more widely used than those in France, reaching approximately 50% of the online population (compared to around 25% in France). This means that relative to the popularity of some news sites, the reach of Italian false news sites is smaller. However, it is also true that some prominent offline outlets—such as Rainews—are not widelyused online.

Like in France, there is also evidence of sizeable audience overlap between false news sites and news sites in Italy. To take one example, in October 2017, 62.2% of Retenews24 users also visited the website of Il Corriere della Sera, and 52.3% used La Repubblica.

If we consider time spent, we see that none of the outlets in the Italian sample exceeded an average of 7.5 million minutes per month on average (see Figure 5). Most had an average total monthly time spent of around 2 million minutes or fewer. The best performing outlet was Meteo Giornale—ostensibly a weather site, but also one that has been shown to publish false information about supposedly imminent asteroid strikes and

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SPEAKERS INCLUDE:

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Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection

The Hon Angus Taylor MO
Minister for Law Enforcement and Cyber Security

Dr Isaac Kfir
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the like. Again, this is roughly half the equivalent figure for Rainews, but very far behind the figures for La Repubblica (443.5 million minutes) and Il Corriere della Sera (296.6 million minutes).

Again, the difference between the top news brands and false news sites is larger in terms of time spent than in terms of reach. In almost all cases, the average time spent per visit was higher for La Repubblica and Il Corriere della Sera than for false news sites. In this sense, reach figures may overstate the level of actual engagement with the content if visits to false news sites are very brief.

Finally, we can consider the average number of monthly Facebook interactions (see Figure 6). As in France, some false news outlets outperformed news brands in this regard. Eight of the 20 false news outlets in the Italian sample generated more interactions per month than the news website of the Italian public broadcaster, Rainews. The most interacted-with false news outlet was Io Vivo a Roma (720,000 interactions), a site that publishes local news about Rome in addition to what others have identified as disinformation. With the exception of Rai, the news sites we included outperformed the false news outlets. All produced an average of well over one million interactions per month, while La Repubblica generated over 5.5 million. In contrast to France, there was no single outlet in our sample that outperformed all of the news sites we considered.

Discussion

Here, we have provided what is to our knowledge the first evidence-based analysis of the reach of "fake news" and online disinformation in Europe, focusing on the two important cases of France and Italy. We have shown that many of the most prominent identified false news websites in these countries are far less popular than major established news sites. However, the difference between false news sites and news sites in terms of interactions on Facebook is less clear-cut. Particularly in France, some false news outlets generated more or as many interactions as news outlets. In Italy, false news outlets were some way behind the most interacted-with news outlets, but some were able to produce more interactions than the Italian public service broadcaster Rai.

We believe that online disinformation is an important issue that the public, publishers, platform companies, policymakers, and other stakeholders should pay serious attention to. But overall, our analysis of the available evidence suggests that false news has more limited reach than is sometimes assumed. This is in line with what independent evidence-based analysis has found in the United States (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018). Whether these findings can be replicated in other European countries is a question for further research. We would expect significant variation depending, in part, on the media and political context of each country, and on the degree to which commercial and/or political motives are likely to encourage the production and promotion of disinformation.

We hope future research will shed additional light on the reach of online disinformation in various countries, and that this factsheet will provide a useful point of reference. Let us therefore highlight some important limitations of this first step in measuring the reach of "fake news" and online disinformation in Europe. The first concerns our primary focus on website use. This is an important dimension, but it is possible that the Facebook reach of the false news outlets listed here may be much higher than that implied by the interaction figures, especially if users share stories independent of the main site, spread them via private messaging apps, or share visual disinformation with no links. Also, due to our reliance on comScore, there may be prominent social-only outlets that we have not tracked (and that independent fact-checkers have not yet identified). (However, our analysis does suggest that we should not simply assume that all false news outlets perform well on Facebook.)

This leads us on to the second limitation, namely our source selection. Our aim was to draw on the best available source lists, but it is possible that these lists do not include some prominent false news websites. We took the decision to exclude sites that trade in other forms of content, such as satire, hyperpartisan opinion material, and poor journalism. And because our focus is on content presented as news, we do not consider wider issues of, for example, extremist content and hate speech. These are important to consider if we want to understand disinformation as a whole. Many of Le Monde's debunking case studies, for example, show that much false news has its origins in satire. And especially in Italy, some domestic political actors are widely seen as important producers and distributors of disinformation. Our focus on the 20 most popular false news websites also means that we have not considered the potentially 'long tail' of false news access. If there are many other sites that publish false news, and the degree of overlap between their audiences is low, it may be that their combined reach is greater than that implied by the low individual reach figures. This matters even more if false news sites are reaching people that news sites do not.

Finally, our use of average figures may mask the reach and impact of individual false news stories and the role of disinformation around specific events or issues. More generally, a glance at the detailed tables in the Appendix shows that there is sometimes a large degree of monthly variation in terms of reach, attention, and Facebook interaction. This is clearly a dynamic and complex issue that calls for additional, more detailed analysis. Our averages suggest that many articles from false news sites do very poorly in terms of online reach and in terms of interaction on social media. But these sites may also still produce the occasional story that, for whatever reason, goes viral on social media and becomes widely viewed. (This does not necessarily mean that the claims made are widely believed.) Similarly, disinformation may well be more widespread around specific events or issues than it is on average and in general. Indeed, regardless of how much we know about exposure, we currently know little about the impact that false news has on people's attitudes and beliefs, which is often the underlying concern.

This research constitutes what we hope will be a first step on the road to understanding more about the reach of false news and disinformation in Europe. It is clear that much more research into this area is needed, not least because the landscape is constantly evolving. We hope such further research will provide practical and policymaking responses to problems of online disinformation with a more robust base of evidence.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Alexios Mantzarlis, Claire Wardle, and Cameron Hickey for their very helpful comments and suggestions. The research was supported by Google UK as part of the Digital News Initiative (CTR00220), as well as the Digital News Report (CTR00150)

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Table 1. Reach, attention, and Facebook interactions for prominent French news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

www.lefigaro.fr	20.1	23.7	21.5	23.9	22.3	152.8	77.0	73.2	81.9	96.2	29.7	23.2	21.8	17.7	23.1
www.lemonde.fr	17.3	21.8	17.9	18.9	19.0	221.2	167.5	170.3	132.2	172.8	20.1	24.8	19.3	18.1	20.6
www.francetvinfo.fr	11.4	17.5	16.1	13.6	14.7	55.8	65.7	55.7	51.6	57.2	5.8	14.6	19.0	14.7	13.5
www.huffingtonpost.fr	16.1	14.4	11.8	12.8	13.8	62.7	44.5	39.4	42.7	47.3	16.1	17.2	10.5	9.7	13.4
www.20minutes.fr	11.5	13.5	12.3	13.0	12.6	71.2	96.8	55.1	62.7	71.5	68.2	53.7	51.8	52.8	56.6
www.rt.com	2.0	1.8	1.3	1.6	1.7	8.7	7.4	6.4	8.3	7.7	4.6	5.5	5.2	5.0	5.1
fr.sputniknews.com	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.3	1.4	9.9	9.6	7.0	9.3	9.0	3.0	5.9	3.7	4.3	4.2
www.santeplusmag.com	5.8	2.2	2.6	1.9	3.1	18.6	6.5	7.9	4.4	9.4	120.7	132.5	110.0	91.7	113.7
www.santenatureinnovation.com	1.4	1.2	1.0	0.9	1.1	1.7	0.7	1.9	0.8	1.3	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
www.espritsciencemetaphysiques.com	0.7	1.4	1.0	0.8	1.0	1.2	3.4	2.8	2.7	2.5	1.9	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.6
eddenya.com	1.0	0.5	1.3	1.0	1.0	1.8	0.8	2.2	1.8	1.7	0.7	1.1	0.6	1.5	1.0
www.letopdelhumour.fr	0.9	0.7	1.2	0.9	0.9	3.1	5.0	3.3	2.0	3.4	61.1	44.9	63.3	65.6	58.7
www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	6.9	7.2	2.7	6.4	5.8	-	-	-	-	-
lagauchematuer.fr	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.9	0.9	0.7	16.9	13.1	13.2	15.9	14.8
sante-nutrition.org	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.4	0.1	0.9	0.5	-	-	-	-	-
www.topsante.org	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.5	-	-	-	-	-
ripostelaique.com	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.5
www.dreuz.info	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	2.3	0.4	0.7	0.9	0.4	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6
lesmoutonsenrages.fr	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
resistancerepublicaine.eu	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.6	1.2	0.6	-	-	-	-	-
www.nouvelordremondial.cc	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.8	0.6	1.7	0.9	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2
reseauinternational.net	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	1.1	1.3	1.2	0.9	1.1
lesobservateurs.ch	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	-	-	-	-	-
lesmoutonsrebelles.com	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.3	-	-	-	-	-
stopmensonges.com	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.5
www.breizh-info.com	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.2
breizatao.com	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

Table 2. Reach, attention, and Facebook interactions for prominent Italian news sites, and some of the most popular false news sites (2017)

www.repubblica.it	49.3	48.8	48.9	56.5	50.9	472.0	421.7	412.5	467.9	443.5	67.3	45.9	52.9	55.5	55.4
www.corriere.it	45.5	48.1	46.3	50.9	47.7	336.7	261.3	244.7	343.8	296.6	33.1	21.0	19.5	16.0	22.4
www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	20.1	21.1	22.8	22.5	21.6	91.5	71.5	100.1	97.2	90.1	22.5	16.2	21.9	18.4	19.7
www.huffingtonpost.it	20.5	19.2	18.4	19.9	19.5	44.8	33.1	34.6	46.2	39.7	16.8	12.5	12.8	11.8	13.5
www.rainews.it	6.8	6.4	4.7	7.0	6.2	19.4	14.1	9.4	12.8	13.9	2.2	1.4	1.6	1.3	1.6
it.sputniknews.com	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.6	1.9	2.3	1.8	2.3	2.1	0.8	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.9
www.retenews24.it	4.2	5.1	2.7	0.5	3.1	6.4	3.5	2.1	0.6	3.2	3.2	3.3	2.1	1.0	2.4
www.meteoweb.eu	3.4	3.2	1.9	1.5	2.5	7.5	4.9	3.0	1.7	4.3	5.4	1.2	1.7	1.2	2.4
www.breaknotizie.com	1.6	1.9	1.5	1.8	1.7	3.0	3.5	4.9	3.5	3.7	-	-	-	-	-
www.direttanews.it	1.5	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	3.3	2.8	1.2	1.5	2.2	-	-	-	-	-
www.internapoli.it	1.7	0.4	0.8	0.9	1.0	6.0	1.2	0.7	1.1	2.3	-	-	-	-	-
www.dionidream.com	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.9	2.0	1.1	0.9	0.9	1.2	2.5	1.8	1.3	1.2	1.7
www.sostenitori.info	1.8	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.9	3.9	2.7	1.4	0.8	2.2	5.2	5.9	3.6	4.1	4.7
www.meteogiornale.it	0.9	0.2	1.7	0.8	0.9	19.6	1.2	5.0	4.3	7.5	1.3	0.5	1.0	0.5	0.8
www.eticamente.net	1.7	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.8	1.5	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.7	3.7	2.3	3.1	3.6	3.2
www.inews24.it	0.7	0.4	0.2	0.8	0.5	1.5	0.9	0.3	0.9	0.9	-	-	-	-	-
www.italiapatriamia.eu	0.2	0.4	1.2	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.4	1.4	0.2	0.6	4.3	4.2	7.6	7.1	5.8
tzetze.it	0.3	0.5	0.7	0.2	0.4	0.8	1.6	1.8	0.3	1.1	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.8
www.segnidalcielo.it	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.4	0.9	0.5	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	< 0.0
www.iovivoaroma.org	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1	< 0.1	< 0.1	< 0.1	< 0.1	10.1	5.6	7.2	5.8	7.2
www.mednat.org	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	< 0.1	< 0.1	< 0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-
www.ilprimatonazionale.it	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	-	-	-	-	-
www.imolaoggi.it	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.2	< 0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	3.6	1.9	3.2	2.9	2.9
www.eurosalus.com	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-
www.disinformazione.it	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	< 0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-
www.informasalus.it	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-	-

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The genuine problem of Fake News

M. MITCHELL WALDROP

PNAS November 28, 2017. 114 (48) 12631-12634; published ahead of print November 16, 2017.
https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1719005114

Intentionally deceptive news has co-opted social media to go viral and influence millions. Science and technology can suggest why and how. But can they offer solutions?

In 2010 computer scientist Filippo Menczer heard a conference talk about some phony news reports that had gone viral during a special Senate election in Massachusetts. "I was struck," says Menczer. He and his team at Indiana University Bloomington had been tracking early forms of spam since 2005, looking mainly at then-new social bookmarking sites such as https://del.icio.us/. "We called it social spam," he says. "People were creating social sites with junk on them, and getting money from the ads." But outright fakery was something new. And he remembers thinking to himself, "this can't be an isolated case."

Of course, it wasn't. By 2014 Menczer and other social media watchers were seeing not just fake political headlines but phony horror stories about immigrants carrying the Ebola virus. "Some politicians wanted to close the airports," he says, "and I think a lot of that was motivated by the efforts to sow panic."

By the 2016 US presidential election, the trickle had become a tsunami. Social spam had evolved into "political clickbait": fabricated money-making posts that lured millions of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube users into sharing provocative lies—among them headlines claiming that Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton once sold weapons to the Islamic State, that Pope Francis had endorsed Republican candidate Donald Trump, and (from the same source on the same day) that the Pope had endorsed Clinton.

Social media users were also being targeted by Russian *dysinformatyea*: phony stories and advertisements designed to undermine faith in American institutions, the election in particular.

Fabricated social media posts have lured millions of users into sharing provocative lies. Image courtesy of Dave Cutler (artist).

And all of it was circulating through a much larger network of outlets that spread partisan attacks and propaganda with minimal regard for conventional standards of evidence or editorial review. "I call it the misinformation ecosystem," says Melissa Zimdars, a media scholar at Merrimack College in North Andover, MA.

Call it misinformation, fake news, junk news, or deliberately distributed deception, the stuff has been around since the first protohuman whispered the first malicious gossip (see Fig. 2). But today's technologies, with their elaborate infrastructures for uploading, commenting, liking, and sharing, have created an almost ideal environment for manipulation and abuse—one that arguably threatens any sense of shared truth. "If everyone is entitled to their own facts," says Yochai Benkler, codirector of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, echoing a fear expressed by many, "you can no longer have reasoned disagreements and productive compromise." You're "left with raw power," he says, a war over who gets to decide what truth is.

If the problem is clear, however, the solutions are less so. Even if today's artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms were good enough to filter out blatant lies with 100% accuracy—which they are not—falsehoods are often in the eye of the beholder. How are the platforms supposed to draw the line on constitutionally protected free speech, and decide what is and is not acceptable? They can't, says Ethan Zuckerman, a journalist and blogger who directs the Center for Civic Media at

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And it would be a disaster to try. "Blocking this stuff gives it more power," he says.

So instead, the platforms are experimenting in every way they can think of: tweaking their algorithms so that news stories from consistently suspect sites aren't displayed as prominently as before, tying stories more tightly to reputable fact-checking information, and expanding efforts to teach media literacy so that people can learn to recognize bias on their own. "There are no easy answers," says Dan Gillmor, professor of practice and director of the News Co/Lab at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. But, Gillmor adds, there are lots of things platforms as well as science communicators can try.

Tales Signifying Nothing

Once Menczer and his colleagues started to grasp the potential extent of the problem in 2010, he and his team began to develop a system that could comb through the millions of publicly available tweets pouring through Twitter every day and look for patterns. Later dubbed Truthy, the system tracked hashtags such as #gop and #obama as a proxy for topics, and tracked usernames such as @johnmccain as a way to follow extended conversations.

That system also included simple machine-learning algorithms that tried to distinguish between viral information being spread by real users and fake grass-roots movements— "astroturf"—being pushed by software robots, or "bots." For each account, says Menczer, the algorithms tracked thousands of features, including the number of followers, what the account linked to, how long it had existed, and how frequently it tweeted. None of these features was a dead giveaway. But collectively, when compared with the features of known bots, they allowed the algorithm to identify bots with some confidence. It revealed that bots were joining legitimate online communities, raising the rank of selected items by artificially retweeting or liking them, promoting or attacking candidates, and creating fake followers. Several bot accounts identified by Truthy were subsequently shut down by Twitter.

The Indiana group eventually expanded Truthy into the publicly available Observatory for Social Media: a suite of programs such as Botometer, a tool for measuring how bot-like a Twitter user's behavior is, and Hoaxy, a tool for visualizing the spread of claims and fact checking.

People prefer to consume news or entertainment that reinforces what they already believe. And that, in turn, is rooted in well-understood psychological phenomena such as confirmation bias—our tendency to see only the evidence that confirms our existing opinions and to ignore or forget anything that doesn't fit.

In retrospect, this kind of exploitation wasn't too surprising. Not only had the social media platforms made it very cheap and easy, but they had essentially supercharged our human instinct for self-segregation. This tendency, studied in the communication field since the 1960s, is known as selective exposure[1]: People prefer to consume news or entertainment that reinforces what they already believe. And that, in turn, is rooted in well-understood psychological phenomena such as confirmation bias—our tendency to see only the evidence that confirms our existing opinions and to ignore or forget anything that doesn't fit.

From that perspective, a Facebook or Twitter newsfeed is just confirmation bias backed with computer power: What you see when you look at the top of the feed is determined algorithmically by what you and your friends like. Any discordant information gets pushed further and further down the queue, creating an insidious echo chamber.

Certainly, the echo chamber was already well established by the eve of the 2016 election, says Benkler, who worked with Zuckerman on a postelection study of the media ecosystem using MediaCloud, a tool that allowed them to map the hyperlinks among stories from some 25,000 online news sources. "Let's say that on Facebook, you have a site like End the Fed, and a more or less equivalent site on the left," he says. Statistically, he says, the groups that are retweeting and linking to posts from the left-leaning site will also be linking to mainstream outlets such as the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* and will be fairly well integrated with the rest of the Internet.

But the sites linking to End the Fed (which describes the US Federal Reserve Bank as "a national counterfeiting operation") will be much more inward-looking with statistically fewer links to the outside and content that has repeatedly been "validated" by conspiracy sites. It's classic repetition bias, explains Benkler: "If I've seen this several times, it must be true."

Exposing the Counterfeits

Attempts to excise the junk present platforms with a tricky balancing act. On the one hand, the features being exploited for misinformation—the newsfeed, the network of friends, the one-click sharing—are the very things that have made social media such a success. "When I ask Facebook to change its product, that's a big ask," says Gillmor. "They have a huge enterprise based on a certain model."

Then too, the platforms are loath to set themselves up as arbiters of what is and isn't true, because doing so would invite a severe political backlash and loss of credibility. "I have some sympathy when they say don't want to be media companies," says Claire Wardle, director of research at First Draft, an international consortium of technology companies, news organization, and researchers formed in 2015 to address issues of online trust and truth. "We've never had anything like these platforms before. There's no legal framework to guide them."

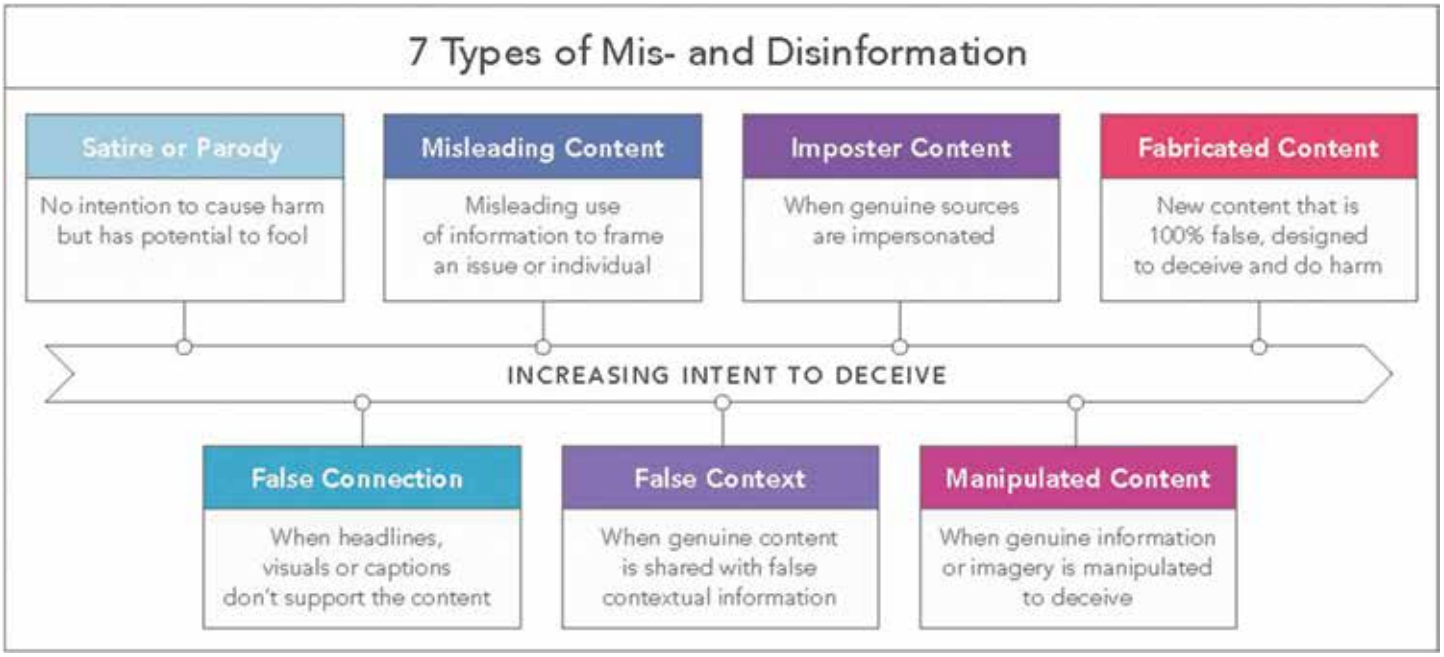

Figure 2: "Fake news" has become common parlance in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. But many researchers and observers believe the term is woefully loaded and of minimal use. Not only has President Donald Trump co-opted the term "fake news" to mean any coverage he doesn't like, but also "the term doesn't actually explain the ecosystem," says Claire Wardle, director of research at an international consortium called First Draft. In February, she published an analysis[7] that identified six other tricks of the misinformation game, none of which requires content that's literally "fake." Image reproduced with permission from Claire Wardle, modified by Lucy Reading (artist).

On the other hand, an uncontrolled flood of misinformation threatens to undermine the platforms' credibility, too. "So they're under huge pressure to be seen doing something," says Wardle. Witness the shift made by Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg, she says, from dismissing the influence of fake news as "a pretty crazy idea" just days after the election to announcing[2] three months later that the integrity of information would be one of Facebook's top priorities going forward. Or witness the discomfort felt by representatives of Facebook, Twitter, and Google at an October 31 Senate hearing. If the platforms were so wonderfully high tech, the senators wondered, why couldn't they do a better job of vetting the fake news and Russian-backed ads seen by millions—or at least post the kind of corrections that newspapers have been running for generations?

The representatives were noncommittal. But in fact, says Wardle, "all those companies are investing a huge amount to time and talent to come up with AI technology and such to solve the problem."

Not surprisingly, the platforms are close-mouthed about their exact plans, if only to slow down efforts to game their systems. (Neither Facebook nor Google responded to requests for comment on this story.) But through public announcements they've made their basic strategy clear enough.

First is minimizing the rewards for promoting misinformation. A week after the election, for example, both Facebook and Google announced that they would no longer allow blatantly fake news sites to earn money on their advertising networks. Then in May 2017, Facebook announced that it would lower the newsfeed rankings of low-quality information, such as links to ad-choked sites that qualify as clickbait, political or otherwise. But then, how are the newsfeed algorithms supposed to recognize what's "low quality"?

In principle, says Menczer, the platforms could (and probably do) screen the content of posts using the same kind of machine-learning techniques that the Indiana group used in Truthy. And they could apply similar algorithms to signals from the larger network. For example, is this post being frequently shared by people who have previously shared a lot of debunked material?

But in practice, says Menczer, "you can never have absolutely perfect machine learning with no errors." So, Facebook and the rest would much rather live with loose algorithms that yield a lot false negatives—letting junk through—than risk using tight algorithms that yield false positives, i.e., rejecting items that aren't junk, which opens them up to the political-bias accusations or even ridicule. Witness the embarrassment that Facebook endured last year, when rules designed to flag child pornography led it to ban (briefly) the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a naked, nine-year-old Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack.

Consumer Culture

A second element of the strategy is to help users evaluate what they're seeing. Until recently, says Zimdars, social media tried to democratize the news—meaning that the most egregious political clickbait would show up in the newsfeed in exactly the same way as an article from the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. And that confusion has consequences, according to a 2017 survey[3] carried out by the Pew Research Center: people are much less likely to remember the original source of a news story when they encounter it on social media, via a post, versus when they access the news site directly.

In August, however, Facebook announced that publishers would henceforth have the option to display their logos beside their headlines—a branding exercise that could also give readers a crucial signal about whom to trust.

Since 2014, meanwhile, the Trust Project at Santa Clara University in

continued on page 39

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California, with major funding from Google, has been looking into trust more deeply. Via interviews with users that explored what they valued, the researchers have developed a series of relatively simple things that publishers can do to enhance trust. Examples include clear, prominently displayed information about the publication's ownership, editorial oversight, fact checking practices, and corrections policy as well as biographical information about the reporters. The goal is to develop a principled way to merge these factors into a simple trust ranking. And ultimately, says Wardle, "newsfeed algorithms could read that score, and rank the more trustworthy source higher."

Labeling is hardly a cure-all, however: in a study[4] published in September, Yale University psychologists David Rand and Gordon Pennycook found that when users were presented with a newsfeed in which some posts were labeled as "disputed" by fact checkers, it backfired. Users ended up thinking that even the junkiest unflagged posts were more believable—when it was really just a matter of the checkers' not having the resources to look at everything. "There is some implicit information in the absence of a label," says Rand—an "implied-truth" effect.

Journalism professor Dietram Scheufele, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, thinks that a better approach would be to confront confirmation bias directly, so that the newsfeed would be engineered to sometimes include stories outside a user's comfort zone. "We don't need a Facebook feed that tells us what is right or wrong, but a Facebook feed that deliberately puts contradictory news in front of us," he says, although there is no sign that Facebook or any other platform is planning such an initiative.

We don't need a Facebook feed that tells us what is right or wrong, but a Facebook feed that deliberately puts contradictory news in front of us

This leads to the final and arguably most important piece of the strategy: help people become more savvy media consumers and thus lower the demand for dubious news. "If we don't come at this problem strongly from the demand side, we won't solve it," declares Gillmor.

No one imagines that media literacy will be easy to foster, however. It's one thing to learn how the media works and how to watch out for all the standard misinformation tricks, says Wardle. But it's quite another to master what Buzzfeed reporter Craig Silverman calls emotional skepticism, which urges users to slow down and check things before sharing them.

Menczer argues that the platforms could help by creating some friction in the system, making it harder to share. Platforms could, for example, block users from sharing an article until after they'd read it or until they had passed a captcha test to prove they were human. "That would filter out a big fraction of the junk," he says.

There's no evidence that any platform is contemplating such a radical shift. But Facebook, for one, has been pushing news literacy as a key part of its journalism project[5]. Launched in January, it aims to strengthen the company's ties to the news industry by funding the education of reporters as well as collaborating on innovative news products. Classes in media literacy, meanwhile, are proliferating at every grade level—one much-publicized example being the University of Washington's Calling Bullshit course, which teaches students how to spot traps such as grossly misleading graphics or deceptive statistics. In Italy, meanwhile, the Ministry of Education launched a digital literacy course in 8,000 high schools starting October 31, in part to help students identify intentionally deceptive news.

Another recent study from Rand and Pennycock[6] also offers some reason for optimism. The researchers gave their subjects a standard test of analytical thinking, the ability to reason from facts and evidence. When the researchers then showed their subjects a selection of actual news headlines, Rand says, "we found that people who are more analytic thinkers are better able to tell real from fake news even when it doesn't align with their existing beliefs." Better still, he says, this difference existed regardless of education level or political affiliation. Confirmation bias isn't destiny. "If we can teach people to think more carefully," Rand says referring to dubious news content, "they will be better able to tell the difference."

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I know there are a lot of important charities out there that need our help, but I would like to let every person living on this planet know that we all need the Police and our Emergency Services 24/7 and they have got one of the most dangerous jobs ongoing every day with a big risk that one day they might not come home.

I'm putting my Ex Police Commissioners Car from Queensland on display at the Shannons Car Museum 7723 Goulburn Hwy, Kialla near Shepparton for everyone to have a look at and inspect.

I would like to honour all current Members and the Fallen Members by placing a Gold Coin in the tins provided and pick up your blue ribbon or window stickers provided.

My Police Car will be on display from September until the end of October, so please call in and support this special fundraising cause.

Denis McAvoy (Squad 27 of 1987)

Putin was 'good' and Obama was 'bad':

Former Russian trolls reveal online work to create 'fake news'

CHRIS BROWN

CBC News · Posted: Mar 07, 2018 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: March 7

Employees at nondescript St. Petersburg office building wrote stories or posted comments.

When St. Petersburg journalism grad Vitaly Bespalov answered an online ad for a writer in 2014, he thought the gig at Russia's Internet Research Agency might help his fledgling career. As he quickly learned, what he really signed up for was a job as a paid internet troll.

"They pose as people who are not really them," he told CBC News at his apartment in St. Petersburg. "By the second or third day, it was clear where I had landed and what this was actually."

Last month, U.S. special prosecutor Robert Mueller indicted 13 Russian nationals who worked at the so-called "troll factory" in St. Petersburg, accusing them of interfering in the 2016 U.S. election. The allegations include fabricating news and using false identities to sow discord in the United States ahead of the vote.

Bespalov left long before that period — after just three months on the job.

"It was really bothering me what I was doing. I knew I had stayed to get more information [on the operation] but this feeling of disgust stayed with me."

He says he's sharing his story now with the hope that it makes people more aware of how the "fake news" business works and in the hope that the operation will be shut down.

Bespalov says he was one of roughly 200 employees at the nondescript, low-rise St. Petersburg office building, far removed from the dazzling palaces of the czars that are the city's major tourist attractions.

Soon after Vitaly Bespalov began working at Russia's Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg in 2014, he realized what he'd really signed up for was a job as a paid internet troll. (Pascal Dumont/CBC)

Trash-talking Ukraine

He says he worked on a floor devoted to trash-talking Ukraine.

"I had to find 20 articles from Ukraine and rewrite them with the same tone as they would be written by our mass media."

Russian state media routinely denies its direct involvement in the conflict while denigrating those who support Ukraine's government.

In 2014, Ukrainian protesters helped overthrow the country's pro-Russian leader, triggering Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Bespalov says any stories the troll factory could produce that made Ukrainian soldiers look bad were encouraged, especially items involving dead children.

"One example: we saw a news story that some militiamen were hiding in the school and suddenly it was being shelled. Some children died.

"We simply took and wrote that Ukrainian soldiers shot the children and killed them. That's it. No hesitation," Bespalov says.

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The stories were posted to a fake news site that had a Ukrainian internet address but was secretly run out of the St. Petersburg location, with the idea of making it appear as though many Ukrainians sided with the Russia view of the conflict.

Different targets

The troll facility allegedly had several different areas devoted to different regions of the world. Bespalov says a team on the top floor was dedicated to posting fake news on Facebook sites.

Another group at the troll factory wrote stories and comments for news sites inside Russia. Marat Minidyarov, 30, says he ended up with that group.

Minidyarov says in late 2014 he was working at the St. Petersburg youth hostel and met a guest who told him about a place he could make good, quick money.

After a brief interview, Minidyarov says he was hired.

'Never had your own opinion'

"Every morning there was a list and the topics about what you were supposed to write," he told CBC News in St. Petersburg. "You never had your own opinion, you wrote [what] was written there.

"Putin is always good, always good, always good," he says. "And Obama was bad. The world was black and white."

His job was to write in the comments section of Russian news sites and counter anything negative about the Russian government.

"One hundred and thirty-five comments a day. Twenty people a shift. Two shifts day and night. Can you imagine how many comments are coming every day on the internet?"

Both former trolls say they were paid well — about $1,000 Canadian a month — all of it in cash.

U.S. authorities have indicted Yevgeny Prigozhin and allege he owned and operated the troll farm. Often referred to as Putin's chef, he's the food caterer for the Kremlin and other Russian ministries. Prigozhin denies any connection to the troll operation.

The Kremlin's official response to the trolling allegations is that there's no connection between the facility and the Russian government.

Neither Minidyarov nor Bespalov say they ever saw Prigozhin — or witnessed any direct link with the Kremlin.

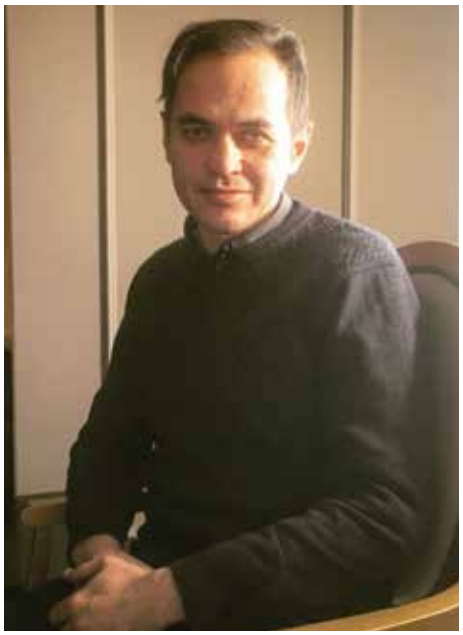
"It's hidden," says Minidyarov, "so you can't say for sure. But when I switched on my TV, it was absolutely the same news [on state television]. So why is it the same?"

Bespalov says he is certain that however deeply buried that link is, the troll farm was doing the bidding of the Russian government.

"[Putin] doesn't see this as problem. In his ideology and view of the world, this is an equivalent step to the so-called 'negative actions' that the West is doing against Russia."

A Facebook posting by a group called Being Patriotic is shown above. A U.S. federal grand jury indictment says the Facebook group was created by Russians who promoted and organized two political rallies in New York, including one on July 23, 2016, called Down With Hillary! (Jon Elswick/ Associated Press)

Bespalov says any stories the troll factory could produce that made Ukrainian soldiers look bad were encouraged, especially items involving dead children.



Marat Minidyarov worked at the St. Petersberg troll farm in 2015. (Pascal Dumont/CBC)

Harassment and intimidation

Both men say they have been harassed and intimidated. Bespalov was mocked on a Russian news program and portrayed as being a hard-partying opposition supporter. The program played video of him wearing a T-shirt of an opposition candidate and dancing in a nightclub.

In late February, Minidyarov says police tracked him down at a friend's

apartment and brought him in for questioning over an allegation of making a bomb threat. He says the allegation was entirely bogus.

Bespalov says the troll factory was just beginning to have an impact before he left. Its greater influence came later, when the English language department was set up.

"In the Western audience, I think they are not used to these black games. They are more naive."

About the author

Chris Brown
Moscow Correspondent
Chris Brown is a foreign correspondent based in the CBC's Moscow bureau. Previously a National Reporter in Vancouver, Chris has a passion for great stories and has travelled all over Canada and the world to find them.

The Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg was in business from 2013 until at least 2017 in this building. A security guard told CBC News the building is now '80 per cent empty.' Russian media report the troll operation has moved to a new location. (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

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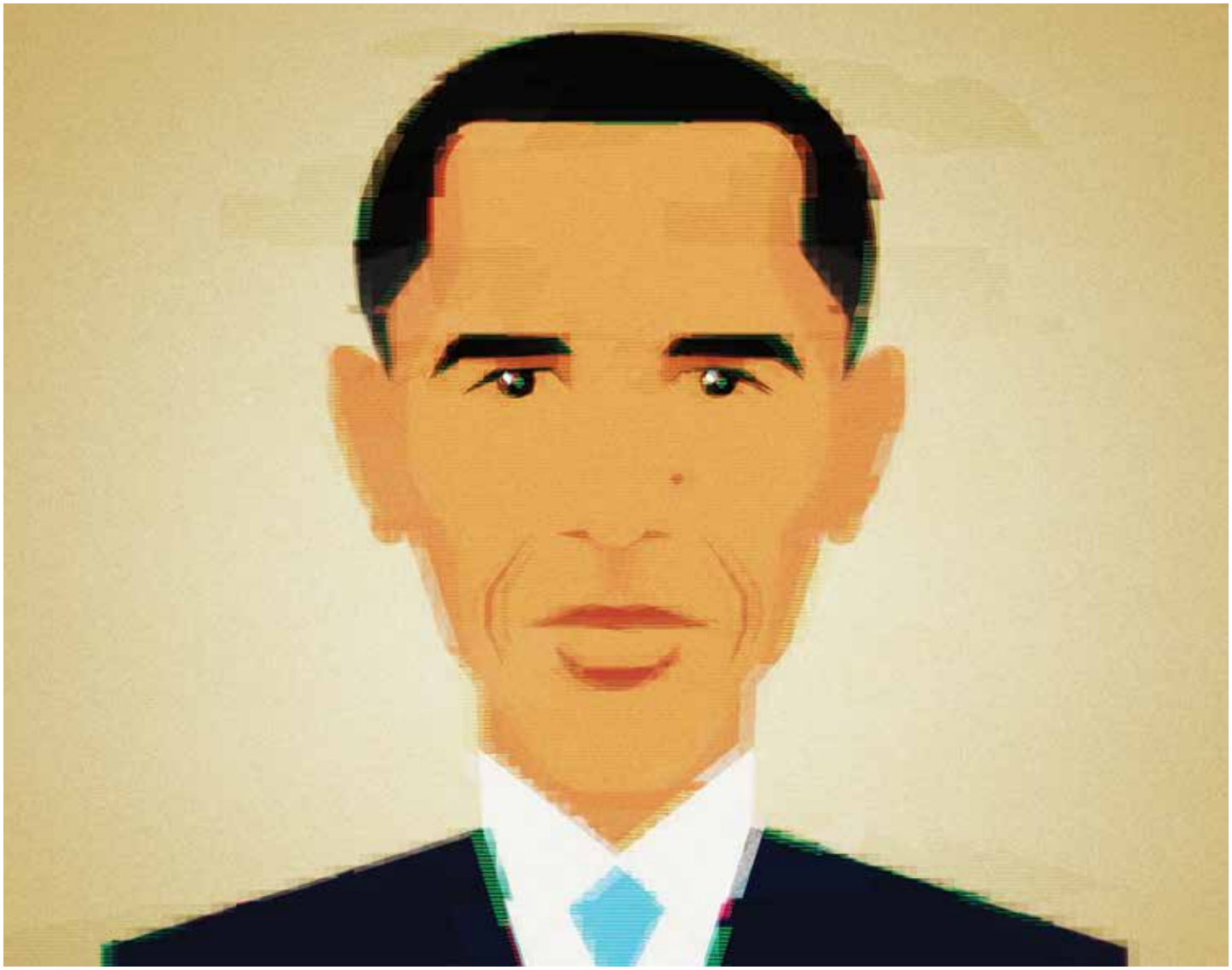

Jordan Peele's simulated Obama PSA is a double-edged warning against Fake News

This deepfaked warning against deepfakes almost makes its point too well.

BY AJA ROMANO

@ajaromano Apr 18, 2018, 3:00pm EDT

Jordan Peele just used deepfakes — the nightmarish dystopian tool we last saw being used to generate fake celebrity porn — to deliver the deepest fake of them all.

The *Get Out* director teamed up with his brother-in-law, BuzzFeed CEO Jonah Peretti, to produce a public service announcement made by Barack Obama. Obama's message? Don't believe everything you see and read on the internet.

"It may sound basic, but how we move forward in the age of information is going to be the difference between whether we survive or whether we become some kind of fucked-up dystopia," Obama tells viewers in the BuzzFeed video. He also declares that *Black Panther's* villain Killmonger was "right" about his plan for world domination, "Ben Carson is in the Sunken Place" — a reference to one of the heartiest memes from Peele's Oscar-winning Get Out screenplay — and Trump is a "dipshit."

As anyone who's familiar with deepfakes has guessed by now, "Obama" in this video is actually Peele himself, doing his famous interpretation of the former president.

The algorithmic machine learning technology of deepfakes allows anyone to create a very convincing simulation of a human subject given ample photographic evidence on which to train the machine about what the image should look like.

Given the sheer amount of media coverage around Obama, it was fairly easy for BuzzFeed's video producer Jared Sosa to create the simulation — though to get the simulation right still required 56 hours of training the machine, according to BuzzFeed's report on the video.

"Deepfakes" is the term coined by a Reddit user who made a script for the process and released it onto a subreddit he made, also called deepfakes.

Another user took that script and modified it into a downloadable program, FakeApp. But although the term came to the world's attention in conjunction with celebrity porn, the first complex face-capturing tools used to demonstrate the techniques deployed by FakeApp were originally applied to manipulating political figures.

We're entering an era in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time.

A 2016 research experiment saw the technique being applied to world leaders like George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin, and Obama. Subsequent research applied the technique just to Obama — and the researchers were immediately wary of the monster they'd created.

"You can't just take anyone's voice and turn it into an Obama video," Steve Seitz, one of the researchers, stated in a press release. "We very consciously decided against going down the path of putting other people's words into someone's mouth."

Barely six months later, deepfakes was born. And as Peele and BuzzFeed have proven, you clearly can just take anyone's voice and turn it into an Obama video — provided the voice is convincing enough.

Though Reddit ultimately banned all faked porn generated via deepfakes, the Pandora's box of fake reality generation has been opened, and anything — from Obama to Nicolas Cage — is fair game.

Given all this context, it's arguable that Peele's contribution might not actually be helping people understand how serious the potential for reality distortion is, so much as giving them a taste of how fun this tech might be to play around with.

Still, in the age of "fake news," Peele and Peretti clearly felt the message was timely. "We're entering an era in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time," the PSA begins.

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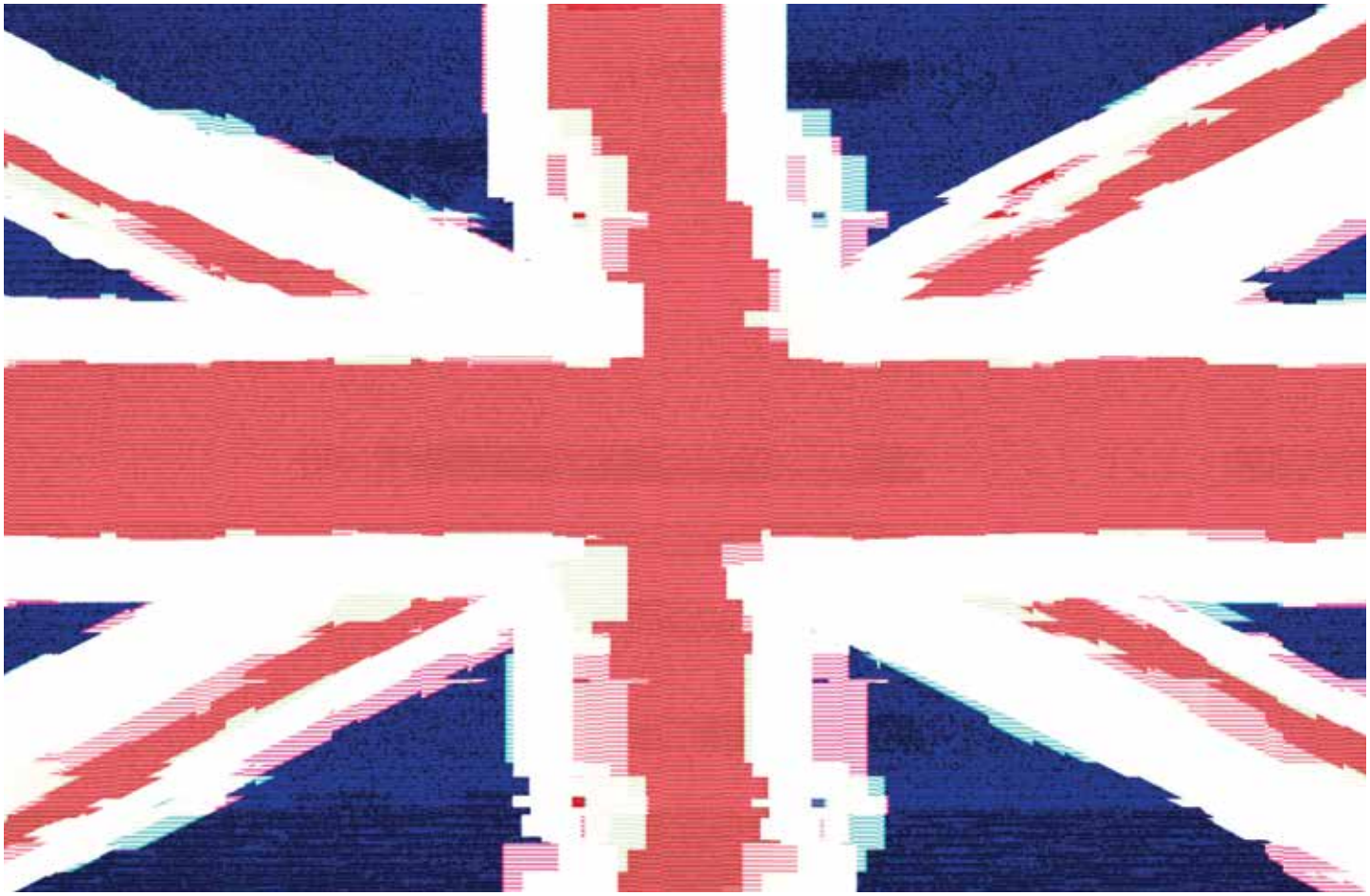

Should the UK adopt European-style Fake News laws?

Jan 4, 2018 The Weekly

France, Germany and Ireland propose tough new rules designed to remove or block hateful posts and fabricated content

While Theresa May has warned social media giants to shape up or face fines, France, Germany and Ireland are instituting new laws to target fake news.

Thousands of propaganda accounts on social networks are spreading "lies invented to tarnish political officials, personalities, public figures, journalists", the French President Emmanuel Macron said yesterday.

Macron wants France's media watchdog CSA to have the power to fight destabilisation attempts by TV stations controlled or influenced by foreign states, attempts by TV stations controlled or influenced by foreign states, which AFP calls a "veiled" reference to Moscow-backed RT and Sputnik.

The French President also plans to unveil legislation to increase transparency about sponsored social media content.

Germany already has a law that allows for fines of up to 50m euros (£45m) for social media platforms that fail to remove fake news and hateful posts within 24 hours of notification, according to *The Guardian*.

Ireland's Fianna Fail introduced a bill in December to tackle the rise of fake accounts and "orchestrated, anti-democratic online campaigns" on social media, the *Irish Examiner* says.

Ofcom, the UK media regulator, has said that businesses such as Google and Facebook should be classed as publishers, instead of conduits for information, "raising the prospect that they could eventually face more regulation," the Guardian says.

Social media posters could also find themselves on the end of a defamation claim, but so far there's no specific UK law to tackle fake news.

Britain's Department for Culture, Media & Sport select committee has threatened Facebook and Twitter with sanctions if they continue to stonewall parliament over requests for information about possible Russian interference in the Brexit vote, *The Daily Telegraph* reports.

"There has to be a way of scrutinising the procedures that companies like Facebook put in place to help them identify known sources of disinformation, particularly when it's politically motivated and coming from another country," Damian Collins, chair of the Department for Culture, Media & Sport select committee told *The Guardian*.

Nelson Alexander

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Misinformation for profit

HARLEY COMRIE

18 Jan 2018

Fake news has been at the forefront of public debate since November 2016, when it was discovered that thousands of fake news articles may have affected the outcome of the US federal election. Journalists discovered that many of the articles, and the 'American-sounding' websites that hosted them, had been created by teenagers from the small Macedonian town of Veles. Those teenagers, in typical fashion, didn't care about politics; they created misinformation for profit. Fake news earned them up to US$5,000 a month from Google AdSense advertising.

The rise of the misinformation-for-profit industry has international implications.

In July 2016, hundreds of people converged on a National Housing Authority office in the Philippines after a fake news article claimed that the government was offering free housing. Such events are commonplace in the Philippines—the country has one of the worst fake news problems in the world. Filipinos spend more time on the internet and social media than people in any other nation, thanks in part to receiving free limited internet access courtesy of Facebook.

'Onlining' (the practice of using the internet to earn income) has been a common job in the Philippines for close to a decade. Entrepreneurial Filipinos run the businesses, sending out fake friend requests on Facebook and filling our email inboxes with spam. Now they also create fake news.

Successful fake news businesses in the Philippines often receive between 100,000 and 500,000 site visits a month. That translates into a significant amount of money. I've found hiring adverts on the Facebook pages of fake news creators, suggesting there's growth in the misinformation-for-profit industry.

The profitability of fake news is entirely linked to social media. Almost every fake news website has an associated Facebook page feeding it visitors, and 'likes' are commonly in the range of 100,000 to 1 million. Around 90% of traffic to fake news websites in the Philippines originates from Facebook.

As Facebook noted in its recent submission to the Australian Senate's inquiry into the future of public interest journalism, most fake news is financially motivated. Websites earn more money from advertisements when they're clicked on by people in the United States or Australia than by people in Eastern Europe or Asia.

Creating fake news targeted specifically at Australia would be commercially viable for Filipino fake news businesses. English is an official language of the Philippines, labour costs are low and our advertising market pays well. If Filipino fake news creators care about profit, and they do, they'll eventually turn their focus in our direction. That could inflict significant harm on our institutions.

Our social media usage is growing year on year, and that means we're becoming increasingly vulnerable to misinformation for profit.

Fake news often breaks several civil and criminal laws—such as defamation, intentional infliction of emotional distress, fraud, deceptive trade practices, cyberbullying and criminal libel—causing damage to private citizens, businesses and governments. Misinformation for profit also undermines democratic decisions and processes because it affects people's beliefs about the state of the world.

Australians are getting their news from social media more than ever before. A recent survey found that social media is only marginally less popular than television as a news source. Our social media usage is growing year on year, and that means we're becoming increasingly vulnerable to misinformation for profit.

Most young Australians can't identify fake news online, and those who can may not be as critical of it as we'd wish. People have their own world views and a tendency to demand information that fits neatly within those bounds.

Fake news is often highly partisan and can fulfill an inherent longing for ontological security—a coherent self-identity.

Unfortunately, the need for information that reinforces ontological security can sometimes trump the need for information to be legitimate. To think critically, people have to be motived. If they aren't, they may simply accept what is false as true.

Fake news creators also employ tactics to manipulate emotions to generate attention, and therefore revenue. The 'economy of emotions' partially explains why fake news is so profitable during elections, as we saw in 2016 in the US.

Australia hasn't yet been a major target of fake news creators. But we shouldn't mistake the absence of attack for the absence of threat. We have good reason to be concerned. Australia has featured in many fake news stories targeted at audiences in the Philippines. Such articles can damage or undermine our international image and threaten the democracies of our Asia–Pacific neighbours.

Australia is beginning to address the issue. The Senate inquiry on public interest journalism and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's inquiry into digital platforms are a good start, but frank and fearless advice is worthless if it's not followed by bold action.

About the author

Harley Comrie is a former ASPI research intern.

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Sharing Fake News could land you a fine of AED1 million

The TRA has urged all UAE residents not to publish or spread fake news on social media

The UAE's Telecommunications and Regulatory Authority (TRA) has issued a statement urging all UAE residents not to publish or share fake news on social media as the action is punishable by law.

Taking to Twitter, the regulatory body said: "Remember that not everything you read on social media is true, some are just rumours that can cause harm to others or to the state. We ask you to always verify the source and to use the official accounts of the government to verify the news."

It also highlighted Article 29 of Federal Law No 5 of 2012, which states that "those proven guilty of sharing information, news, statements or rumors on a website or any computer network or information technology means with intent to make sarcasm or damage the reputation, prestige or stature of the State or any of its institutions or its president, vice-president, any of the rulers of the Emirates, their crown princes, or the deputy rulers of the Emirates, the State flag, the national peace, its logo, national anthem or any of its symbols" will face "temporary imprisonment and a fine not in excess of one million dirhams."

The social platforms covered by the act include email, SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

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Artificial Intelligence can check the spread of fake news but can never replace human journalists

BY WAM

Wednesday, April 04, 2018

While Artificial Intelligence, AI, is making inroads into journalism, human journalists will not be replaced by robots. AI will mainly be used to assist humans in adapting to the latest technology trends to better suit the needs of new age media, said an expert.

Lisa Gibbs, Director of News Partnerships of The Associated Press, was addressing the audience at the 17th edition of the Arab Media Forum being held at the Madinat Jumeirah in Dubai.

Held under the patronage of Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the two-day event discusses impactful media trends in the region and beyond.

Speaking about the role of 'Artificial Intelligence and the Future of the Press', Gibbs noted that Artificial Intelligence in newsrooms will enable it to scale up content, automate certain types of stories and authenticate and fact check leads that emerge out of social media.

Urging media organisations to invest more towards developing algorithms that can help machines learn to perform certain automated tasks, she said, using the full potential of technology will allow its journalists to dedicate time for developing relevant and meaningful personalised content that resonates with readers.

AP, she says, has been investing in similar start-ups especially those that are into machine learning and can analyse data and convert them into text.

Describing the role of AI in AP newsrooms, Gibbs says technology is being used to collate information and come up with more mechanical content such as earnings report and sports scores, and that it has helped the organisation to scale up the number of stories.

"Compared to 300 earnings reports, using AI, we are able to produce 3,800 reports every quarter. We have achieved this by investing in new startups that can turn data into text," she said, adding that the world of text automation really allows the newsroom to produce a high volume of stories. AP, she says, is also working on creating video content using key words and texts.

Another use of AI, she says, is to convert original news content written by a journalist into various forms. "Today a journalist spends time to write multiple versions of the same story for print, online, social media etc. If we could get machines to do this job, journalists can spend time on reporting relevant news stories," she adds.

Commenting on future trends, she says a robot will never be able to replace a good journalist. "We don't believe that human journalists can be replaced with robots. Let journalists do what they are good at and let machines do what they are good at."

Fake News, hacking threat to democracy now on 'unseen scale', report says

BY PATRICK WOOD

Posted 29 May 2017, 10:02am

The internet and social media pose an unprecedented threat to Australia's democratic systems and an urgent response is needed to safeguard against attacks, according to a new report.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) report drew on case studies from the US and found technology had enabled malicious foreign forces to potentially influence elections on a "scale and scope previously unseen".

"Two critical elements of the democratic process are under assault," said the report's author, Zoe Hawkins.

"The security of our election infrastructure — think hacked voting machines — and the integrity of our public debates — think fake news.

"The technical vulnerabilities of elections is an increasingly attractive target for malicious actors as systems become increasingly digital."

The fake news problem

ASPI's report, Securing Democracy in the Digital Age, focuses heavily on the recent US presidential election and Russian influence.

It found that in the days just before the 2016 election, Facebook users' engagement with fake news actually surpassed engagement with mainstream news.

It also found automated "bots" were rife on Twitter, publishing a torrent of tweets in support of both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump.

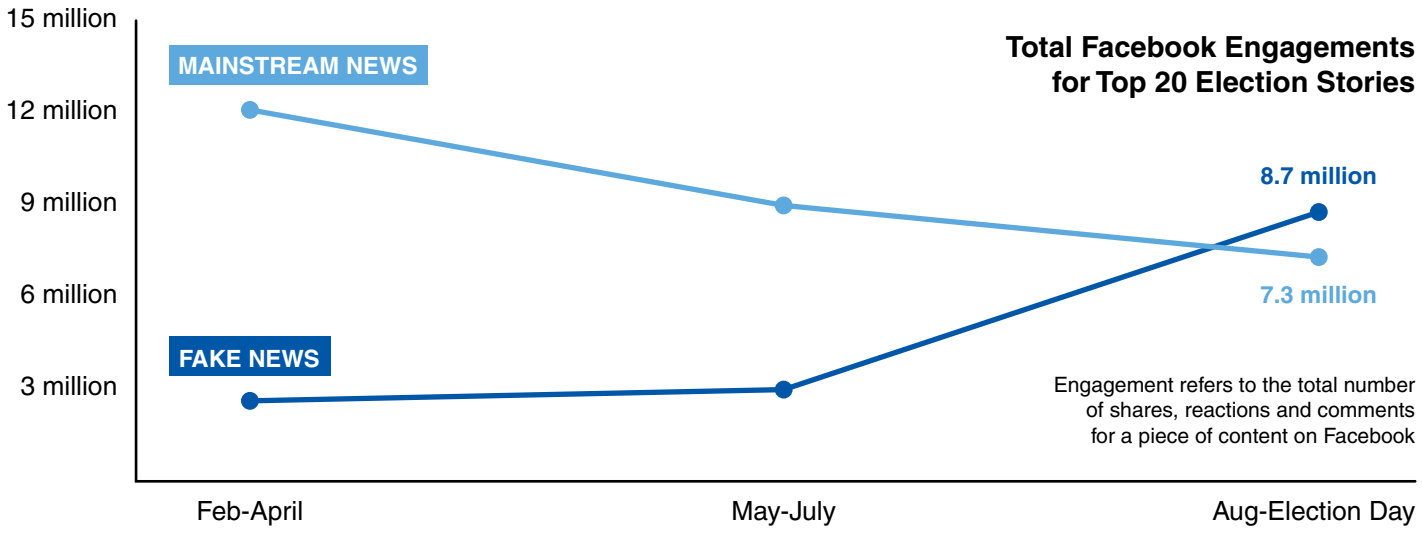
More than a third of pro-Trump tweets were found to be automated, while almost a fifth of pro-Clinton tweets were from bots.

"The question about the integrity of voting booths in particular has been around for quite a while," ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre director Fergus Hanson said.

"I think what was the big surprise in the US election in particular was the infiltration and use of fake news, for example, and efforts to manipulate public opinion that we hadn't seen on a scale like that before.

US intelligence agencies have concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an "influence campaign" in 2016 to undermine faith in the democratic process and specifically denigrate Mrs Clinton.

ENGAGEMENT WITH MAINSTREAM AND FAKE NEWS



Source: Craig Silverman, 'This analysis shows how viral fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook', *BuzzFeed News*, 17 November 2016

Infographic: Fake news gained increasing influence in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election (Supplied: ASPI)

"I think what really took people by surprise was the extent and the level at which this sort of order came from."

Information security recommendations

- Increase dialogue with private sector: Support and incentivise industry innovations, such as fact-checking technology.
- Bring political organisations into the tent: Educating and supporting the cybersecurity of political organisations is a step towards national election security.
- Consider whether existing legislation is sufficient: Developing clarity on the distribution of responsibility for election security will improve processes.
- Educate the public on identifying reliable information sources: Work with the private sector to stem influence of information operations.

Source: ASPI Securing Democracy in the Digital Age report

ASPI's report found that for a long time the concern around hacking threats focused on infrastructure — taking out an electricity grid, opening a dam or disabling air traffic controls — but it was the more subtle influence that needed greater focus.

"Public trust in the reliability and integrity of the electoral process is the foundation of the social contract between the governing and the governed in liberal democracies," the report reads.

"So citizens must be able to trust that the computer systems responsible for handling the execution of an election will deliver an accurate result."

How can we protect ourselves?

A healthy scepticism of what is seen online is a start, according to Mr Hanson.

"[We need] to be very cognisant of these threats that are coming down the pipeline that we are seeing in other countries around the world and taking steps early here in Australia to protect against them," Mr Hanson said.

Beyond that, ASPI makes a series of recommendations for protecting against future threats.

"While every national context is different, several high-level policy considerations need to be taken up in all democracies," the report reads.

Specifically, it urges greater investment in security systems for existing electoral infrastructure and increasing public awareness of existing cybersecurity measures to keep faith in the election process.

It also makes four key recommendations around combatting fake news, including looking at the scope of existing legislation and educating the public on how to identify reliable information.

"This multifaceted vulnerability isn't going to disappear overnight, and it's a challenge that all modern democracies should consider and address," the report reads.

New standards for journalists to fight Fake News

Wednesday April 4 2018

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and leading broadcasters launched a drive against fake news Tuesday with a new set of trust and transparency standards for journalists.

The Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which hopes to be able to certify outlets and news sources with high standards of ethical norms and independence, is being backed by Agence-France Presse, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Global Editors Network.

RSF head Christophe Deloire said the idea was that search engines and social media platforms would give preferential treatment in their algorithms to media outlets that met the standards.

He hopes that it will lead to the setting up of a "trusted media label" in a world increasingly assaulted by fake news.

The drive with the EBU, the world's top alliance of public broadcasters, aims to set news standards from individual bloggers to large international media groups.

"In the new public arena in which false information circulates faster than real news, the defence of journalism requires reversing this trend by giving a real advantage to all those who reliably produce news and information, whatever their status," Deloire said.

"We have devised a self-regulatory mechanism based on a global analysis of the news and information, one that makes it possible to combine ethical with economic concerns.

"We are convinced that our initiative will help to foster integrity in the public debate while guaranteeing the broadest pluralism and independence," he added.

Media 'white-list'

Deloire insisted that "white-listed" outlets would not only get greater online visibility but they were also likely to attract more advertising revenue.

The system would also help with public funding for the media, he said.

The move comes as Brussels is working on a Europe-wide plan to tackle fake news online, worried by Russian meddling in elections across the continent.

Germany has already passed a law threatening social networks with fines of up to 50 million euros ($60 million) if they do not remove bogus reports and hateful posts promptly.

France is also working on legislation to stop such material spreading in the run-up to elections.

AFP's global news director Michele Leridon said the "battle against the proliferation of misinformation and false news goes to the very heart of our mission... to provide news that is 'accurate, impartial and trustworthy'."

The agency is a partner in range of projects tackling fake news and is a member of the EU's group of experts working on the issue of disinformation.

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New Year of Wuxu, Happy Year of the Dog

TASMANIAN CHINESE BUDDHIST ACADEMY OF AUSTRALIA

Left to right: Reincarnated Being Vajra Sheng Yuan and his teacher Ms. Shan Deng performed a piano duet; Wrest Point Hotel manager Mr. Alfred Merse, partner Ms. Nakamura and Mr. Dennis Zheng pictured with Master Wang; Opposition leader the Hon. Rebecca White MP, dotted the lions' eyes.

Left to right: Ms. Adriana Taylor, Commissioner of Huon Valley Council, and Mr. Beres Taylor, enjoying the night with Liberal candidate Ms. Sue Hickey MP, and partner Alderman Peter Bull; the Academy's members from Hobart, interstates and overseas came together for a group photo.

Left to right: All guests came together for a group photo, welcoming the New Year of Wuxu; Master Wang pictured with the administrative staff of the Wrest Point Hotel after the Chinese New Year prayer for good fortune ritual.

Left to right: Young members of the Academy performed Dharani sword; guests sang 'Auld Lang Syne' to conclude the banquet.

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