

The global rise of “fake news” and the threat to democratic elections in the USA

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Abstract

Purpose – Since the end of 2016, “fake news” has had a clear meaning in the USA. After years of scholarship attempting to define “fake news” and where it fits among the larger schema of media hoaxing and deception, popular culture and even academic studies converged following the 2016 US presidential election to define “fake news” in drastically new ways. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – In light of the recent elections in the USA, many fear “fake news” that have gradually become a powerful and sinister force, both in the news media environment as well as in the fair and free elections. The scenario draws into questions how the general public interacts with such outlets, and to what extent and in which ways individual responsibility should govern the interactions with social media.

Findings – Fake news is a growing threat to democratic elections in the USA and other democracies by relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people, in order to influence their voting plans and their behavior.

Originality/value – Essentially, “fake news” is changing and even distorting how political campaigns are run, ultimately calling into question legitimacy of elections, elected officials and governments. Scholarship has increasingly confirmed social media as an enabler of “fake news,” and continues to project its potentially negative impact on democracy, furthering the already existing practices of partisan selective exposure, as well as heightening the need for individual responsibility.

Keywords The USA, Fake news, Democratic elections

Paper type Viewpoint

Distinguishing between news and “fake news”

As the World Economic Forum (2013) recently warned, a kind of so-called “digital wildfires,” i.e., unreliable information going viral online (fake news) could be noted as one of the biggest threats faced by governments and societies. The debate surrounding “fake news” has been around for decades – although often defined by different names – and only recently has the term been popularized. The *Miriam-Webster Dictionary* (n.d.) explained that “fake news” has been in use for over 125 years but has recently taken on new meaning. It defined “fake news” as a kind of news that is “frequently used to describe a political story, which is seen as damaging to an agency, entity, or person.” Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) noted the related topics have been “extensively covered” by literature in economics, psychology, political science and computer science. Scholars have, for the past decade, analyzed the ways in which entertainment may have an impact on politics. Particularly, the satirical nature of talk shows, such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*, has drawn into question how entertainment-driven news may impact the political landscape. In his study on entertainment television and politics, Holbert (2005) defined *The Daily Show* as “a program that embodies the fake news subgenre.” He further defined the genre as one which “represents programming where either the program’s central focus



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or a very specific and well-defined portion is devoted to political satire.” This emphasizes a particularly important point that the most common fake stories revolve around politics, and we cannot undermine the impact this has had on societies.

Across democracies, “fake news” has flourished in current political climates, producing misinformation on social media platforms. It has served to diminish the credibility of mainstream news networks, dividing the general public further, both ideologically and on the mere acceptance of the fact, providing credence to ideological claims of “fake news.” Only recently debated, “fake news” has been a component of political strategies since the beginning of modern political practice. The distinction, however, lies in the characteristics of the modern information age, where almost everyone enjoys online access and is able to generate and spread content. Finneman and Thomas (2018) defined the rise of “fake news” as it currently exists as a result of “the rise of the internet as a source of information and the ability for anyone to post content online to reach an audience.” Social media channels like Facebook and Twitter in this regard enable relatively economical, user-friendly ways to propagate materials on a global scale.

Scholars, however, are elaborating on this definition of “fake news,” claiming that there needs to be a broader analysis which takes into account the relationship between fake and hard news (Balmas, 2014). Among some emerging definitions include Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) who defined “fake news” as “news articles that are intentionally and veritably false and could mislead readers” in addition to Finneman and Thomas (2018) who argued that “fake news” “is not, by any reasonable standard, ‘news’ but rather an attempt to deceive through the mimicry of traditional journalism.” Additionally, Johnson and Kelling (2018) defined the term as “content that is deliberately false and published on websites that mimic traditional news websites.” It is this last definition which hints at one of the major issues currently affecting the relationship between “fake news” and the public: social media.

The impact of social media

In 2016, Facebook user numbers per month reached 1.8bn and Twitter numbered 400m; this was reinforced by a Gallup poll which indicated that there was “a continuing decline of ‘trust and confidence’ in the mass media” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). “Fake news” has become dominant across platforms, and the biggest factor behind “fake news” stories’ success is their high level of social engagement. Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, the public’s engagement with “fake news” through Facebook was higher than through mainstream sources (Silverman, 2016, November 16). A post-election survey conducted by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found for the month before the 2016 election, people reported spending 66 min each day “reading, watching or listening to election news” – 38 percent was on social media. Diehl *et al.* (2016) conducted the first study in 2016 to help demonstrate the relationship between news consumption and persuasion in social media, and since then, studies on this relationship have increased and further extended to the realm of “fake news.”

The relationship between “fake news” and social media is especially important when taken into consideration with the identity factors and political partisanship which govern many of our interactions on these platforms. Social networks connect us with other like-minded people. Our networks of Facebook “friends” or Twitter “followers” generally consist of people who share our values and beliefs. These values may be social, political or economic; the information we share through these networks helps define who we are and what we believe in. Earlier scholarship often saw this characteristic of social media as a positive attribute – they argued that by enabling access to a plethora of opinions and ideas, the general public would become exposed to differing views which would thus either alter their views or enhance their own beliefs through educating them on the opposition (Keele and Wolak, 2008; Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004). In a study conducted by Diehl *et al.* (2016), it was argued that “a large diverse network of social connections should naturally lead to a higher volume of competing or conflicting views, and ultimately more ambivalent attitudes.” However, this study was notably taken up

for those pre-2016 elections, and new scholarship is showcasing a trend toward increasingly selective viewing. Spohr (2017) noted, for example, many theorists argued at the advent of the internet that such a platform would increase exposure to political differences; yet, as he sums up, “this optimistic assumption does not seem to have materialized.”

In fact, studies are showing a rise in what scholarship terms “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles.” Pariser (2011) popularized the term coined as “filter bubbles” to define selective viewing on social media, leading to increased political polarization. With the launch of Facebook and Twitter in 2006, theorists have increasingly concerned with these issues, arguing that online news would enable “like-minded citizens” to form these “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” in which “they would be insulated from contrary perspectives” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). This identity is therefore reinforced through reading similar news stories shared via social networks, confirming our ideas and biases. Herein lies the underlying force that propagates false information and further polarizes societies’ partisan. However, individual preference is not the only issue. Social media algorithms are still actively working against the idea of positive debate. The Dutch website mediawijsheid.nl, which informs citizens about “safe and smart use of (digital) media,” reports that companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter use algorithms to determine what content will be displayed based on previous searches and likes (Leakat, 2018, March 20). It implies some content remains out of sight, while others are constantly displayed, thus an example of the “filter bubbles.” Scholars have argued this “algorithmic curation” results in placing users “in echo chambers of our beliefs” and thus actively contributes to increasing polarization and the spread of “fake news” (Spohr, 2017). Such one-sidedness of information undoubtedly leads to the development of a less critical attitude, which is quite fundamental to the functioning of democracy.

Political polarization and individual responsibility

The impact of social media on a country’s political psyche cannot be underestimated. Increasingly, political polarization is perpetuated by media bubbles, creating environments where individuals are not exposed to conflicting perspectives challenging their beliefs. Spohr (2017) related this to the spread of “fake news,” as platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow for news stories to be published shared “without fact-checking and editorial mechanisms in place.” Additionally, Anand (2017) argued that the political polarization of social media is the fault of “sorting based beliefs,” when “viewers watch news programs and channels whose positions match their tastes and beliefs.” He explained, “we watch what we believe, but what we don’t watch, we don’t believe.” Therefore, individuals create their own media filters through viewing programs aligning with their beliefs due to confirmation bias, a rejection of “valid information that is not consistent with our beliefs.” This self-imposed media bubble is as a result reinforced and perpetuated using algorithmic filters on Facebook and Google to bring users content that aligns with presumed interests based on search histories and personal associations. However, studies have shown that individual choice has more of an effect on exposure to differing perspectives than “algorithmic curation” (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015). The individual’s tendency to exhibit “selective exposure behavior” and “confirmation bias,” as it is often referred to, ultimately increases ideological polarization, and this proves extremely important when analyzing individual responsibility in a culture which perpetuates “fake news.”

Both ideologically and factually “fake news” was created by and has since served to perpetuate, the increasing political polarization among the general public across nations over the past several decades. In 2016 “post-truth” was named as the *Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year* as “word or expression chosen to reflect the passing year in language.” This was found after “language research conducted by Oxford Dictionaries editors [revealed] that use of the word post-truth has increased by approximately 2,000 percent over its usage in 2015” (BBC, 2016, November 16). Post-truth, an adjective, is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that

appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2016). It is within these circumstances, that “fake news” has gained prominence, disconnected from a singular reality, devoid of objectivity and preying on the emotions of a politically polarized the general public. In 2018, Clinton asserted that “fake news can have real-world consequences” (Wendling, 2018, January 22). Perpetuated by what the USA termed “alternative facts,” “fake news” has validated multiple realities divided by ideology, increasing political polarization among citizens. The production of factually “fake news,” “fake news” that is factually inaccurate, validates the claims of ideologically “fake news,” factual news that is deemed false for ideological purposes, increasing political polarization and making it more difficult for citizens to discern fact from fiction. Without such objective, accurate and credible sources of information, it is impossible for every citizen to share the agreed upon premises necessitated by democratic debate, threatening the legitimacy of any and all democratically elected governments.

Furthermore, such “filter bubbles” which social media spawns and “fake news” encourages continue to have drastic consequences for political partisanship. Recent studies showed that Democrats and Republicans are equally 15 percent more likely to believe “ideologically aligned headlines” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Perhaps more striking in the reality, Bishop (2008) argued that as citizens gravitate toward insulated, like-minded groups, there increase a “growing intolerance for political differences [...] and politics so polarized that [...] elections are no longer just contests over politics, but bitter choices between ways of life.” Borrowed the further elaboration from Gentzkow (2016), claiming that this leads not only to a less discussion but also to a society where people “hold overwhelmingly positive views of their own co-partisans and highly negative views of those on the other side of the political spectrum.” Ultimately, the spread of “fake news” allows for increasing partisan politics and also pressures for individual responsibility in navigating emerging news platforms via social media.

In many countries such as the USA, the political polarization of the general public has been exploited by media companies in an effort to increase profits through sensationalizing news media, serving to perpetuate the dissemination of both factually and ideologically “fake news.” This has been accomplished through targeting audiences utilizing sensational news material not based on importance to an objective reality, but rather the desired subjective reality of their viewership, furthering this idea of the “filter bubbles.” Anand (2017) argued that “the media did exactly what it was designed to do, given the incentives that govern it. It’s not that the media sets out to be sensationalist; it’s business model leads it in that direction.” Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) summarized so by stating that “fake news” arises as a result of it being “cheaper to provide than precise signals;” thus, one of the main motivating factors of “fake news” is that news articles spread on social media generate significant advertising revenue when users click and are redirected to the original site. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2008) further pointed out the danger of polarization, explaining that “competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers.” Ultimately, the major media companies are characterized as capitalist enterprises with fiduciary responsibility to their shareholders, creating legal obligations to generate profit. Since profit is mostly, if not fully generated through advertisement revenue, which increases with ratings, the content of the news is dictated by what generates the highest ratings. In this regard, citizens are treated as consumers, and more importantly, “fake news” continues to drive the media marketplace, resulting in an increased polarization.

“Fake news” and the 2016 US presidential election

By the time of the 2016 US presidential election, Pew Research Center found that 77 percent of adults who used the internet used social network sites compared with 16 percent in 2006 (Perrin, 2015, October 8). Clearly, the environment surrounding the 2016 election was fundamentally different from any other in the American history. The populace of the USA had become increasingly divided over the past few decades and it also made “fake news” transforming as a popularized term. “Fake news,” as Finneman and Thomas (2018)

asserted, “soared” during the election, it would always lead to the result of increased distribution access and a decline in trust in the mainstream media. Issues such as “filter bubbles” are especially relevant during the election, as partisan politics continue to divide the nation along the ideological lines. Such an election held in 2016 is a typical example of the effects “fake news” that can have on a population and highlights the ways in which it is disseminated and consumed, allowing for a better understanding of the possible effects “fake news” may have in the future.

Importantly, the 2016 US presidential election shows that the great importance of ideology in “fake news.” In 2014, a Pew Research Center (2014, June 12) survey result found that “Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades.” This is evident by the fact that “92 percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat and 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.” More recently, in 2016, Pew Research Center (2016, April 26) found that increasingly over the past two decades, “highly educated adults – particularly those who have attended graduate school – are far more likely than those with less education to take predominantly liberal positions across a range of political values.” “Based on an analysis of their opinions about the role and performance of government,” they found that, “more than half of those with postgraduate experience (54 percent) have either consistently liberal political values (31 percent) or mostly liberal values (23 percent),” while “fewer than half as many postgrads – roughly 12 percent of the public in 2015 – have either consistently conservative (10 percent) or mostly conservative (14 percent) values.” Thus, “fake news” would have a disproportionate impact across ideological divides, and this can be seen in the number of pro-Trump vs pro-Clinton “fake news” stories. In a study conducted by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), they accumulated a database of “fake news” stories and reported that within this database, i.e., 115 fake stories to be pro-Trump were shared on Facebook 30m times while pro-Clinton ones only amounted to 41 and were shared 7.6m times. Essentially, differences in ideology have further translated into clear differences in dissemination and consumption of “fake news.”

The then US President Obama stated in the current, politically polarized climate that “everything is true and nothing is true.” Acknowledging the presence of “alternative facts,” he said, “ideally, in a democracy, everybody would agree that climate change is the consequence of man-made behavior, because that’s what 99 percent of scientists tell us [...] and then we would have a debate about how to fix it.” Previously, he explained, “you’d argue about means, but there was a baseline of facts that we could all work off [however] now we just don’t have that” (Remnick, 2016, November 28). In other words, that 1 percent of scientists can be regarded as representing factually “fake news” that provides the necessary doubt to facilitate validity to the ideological claim that climate change is fake or a hoax. This disagreement ultimately negates the possibility of democratic debate. Another relevant example is the US President Trump’s use of “fake news” to discredit the investigation into the collusion that allegedly took place between the President Trump campaign and the Russian Government. In February 2017, President Trump issued a tweet stating that “Russia talk is FAKE NEWS put out by the Dems, and played up by the media, to mask the big election defeat and the illegal leaks!” (Trump, 2017, February 27). Using “fake news” as a sensationalist distraction, President Trump tried to discredit the coverage of the Russian collusion investigation, claiming it was a diversion away from the poor electoral performance of the Democratic Party in 2016. The portrayal of “liberal media” as “fake news” is a prominent theme in the rhetoric of President Trump and his mouthpieces in right-wing media and not just used to discredit the media over single issues. Ideologically, “fake news” insinuates the mainstream “liberal media” only covers the issues suiting their interests. During his political rally in Cedar Rapids, in June 2017, President Trump roused the audience through his claims that “phony NBC [...] will never show the crowds” that turn

out for his political events, joking that the “liberal media” turns off the camera as soon as he says something they do not like (Carlson, 2017, June 22).

Finally, the 2016 US presidential election indicated ideologically “fake news” as validated by the presence of factually “fake news.” This can be understood perhaps most famously in that of the accusation involving Russia producing factually “fake news” aimed at influencing the legitimacy of the US elections and its democratic process. In her article, “Russia has Weaponized Fake News to Sow Chaos,” Reston (2017, May 12) pointed out that “since Trump’s election, experts report, the Kremlin has doubled down on its dissemination of fake news,” utilizing a “loose network of hackers and state media outlets, Twitter bots, and bloggers” to pump “out a steady stream of digital disinformation.” In addition, factually “fake news” is also produced and disseminated by members of the US Government, primarily President Trump. “PolitiFact” kept saying that, “since the *Tampa Bay Times* started *PolitiFact* in 2007, no other major politician has a worse record for accuracy, with more than 70 percent of [President Trump’s] claims rated Mostly False, False, or Pants on Fire” (Drobnic-Holan, 2016 December 13). Leonhardt and Thompson (2017, December 14) similarly criticized “President Trump’s political rise was built on a lie,” and that after meticulously documenting his lies, they found that he told a falsehood every day for the first 40 days of his presidency.

The 2016 US presidential election saw the rise of “fake news” and ultimately the effects it can have on the US populous. Social media created platforms for dissemination and consumption, spaces which fundamentally adhered to the increasing division of partisan politics. “Filter bubbles” were employed and factually “fake news” was used as a tactic for political gain. Quite a great number of commentators have gone as far as to suggest that Trump should have not become president were it not for the influence of “fake news” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Despite the effects of “fake news” on the 2016 election still needing extensive research, one cannot underestimate the new power wielded by “fake news” on the US psyche. In this, scholarship is increasingly turning to this pivotal moment in the American history, in order to analyze the growing influence of “fake news” on the democratic process and on the continued fracturing of partisan politics.

Where do we go from here?

Ultimately, the effects of “fake news” can have detrimental consequences for the government of a polity and its democratic process. To be simple, the entire political process of democracy is based on reliable information. With large-scale and widespread dissemination of “fake news,” this crucial foundation has been more or less violated. As a result, citizens are not always able to form well-considered opinions and hence make rational political decisions. Such a result is an increasing correlation between viewing “fake news” and attitudes of inefficacy, alienation and cynicism toward politics (Balmas, 2014). One of the dangerous consequences that factually “fake news” has on the US democracy is that people often confuse or conflate the two distinct types of “fake news,” factual and ideological, providing validity to ideological claims of “fake news.” This has left the populace in the USA unwilling to trust the mainstream media and becoming more politically polarized, resulting in individuals adhering to alternative sets of facts, or worse, not knowing what to believe. “Fake news” at this point diminishes the possibility of democratic debate and the subsequent legitimacy of the democratic process. It also presents a destabilizing capacity which effects citizens’ trust in policies, governments or even in democracy as a whole. Perhaps more debilitating, such destabilization would lead to the result in tensions between citizens and in citizen–media interactions. Bishop (2008) argued in his popular book “fake news” creates communities that act as feedback loops where we are “hearing our own thoughts about what’s right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read [...] and the neighborhoods we live in.” Such political polarization creates immense consequences for the success of democracy, as individuals are utilizing the destabilizing properties of “fake news” to propel partisan politics.

This validation of ideological “fake news” without questioning confuses the general public. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, “a majority of the United States adults – 62 percent – get news on social media, and 18 percent do so often” (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016, May 26) This is taken into account alongside another survey found that “about two-in-three adults in the United States (64 percent) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.” This trend is equally prevalent among both the Republicans and Democrats and is also “shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations, and most other demographic characteristics.” Perhaps most interesting, the same survey found that although many Americans recognized the confusion that may be brought about by “fake news,” most reported that they were at least somewhat confident in their ability to discern a fabricated news story fact from completely made up: 39 percent reported that there were “very confident,” 45 percent were “somewhat confident,” 9 percent were “not very confident” and only 6 percent were “not at all confident” (Barthel *et al.*, 2016, December 15).

Even with great confidence, individuals find it difficult to discern “fake news” from the real ones. In 2016, there was a study conducted by Stanford University students at the elementary, high school and college levels tested students’ ability to discern real news articles from “fake news” articles. Its findings obviously pointed out a thing that while past regulation relies on publishers, editors and subject experts, the advent of the internet practically eliminates the need for this. Though many people assume youngsters “fluent in social media” are “equally savvy about what they find there,” the study concluded the opposite. Researchers, therefore, pointed out that “more than 80 percent of students believed that the native advertisement, identified by the words ‘sponsored content,’ was a real news story.” Most alarming scenario was that “over 30 percent of students argued that the fake account was more trustworthy because of some key graphic elements that it included” (Donald, 2016, November 22). Such a study draws serious questioning regarding the value placed on social media and its influence on reporting, ultimately showing how accessibility can more or less translate into drastic consequences for democracy.

In a long run, the most damaging effect of having “fake news” is its negative consequences on liberal democracy. Edsall (2017, March 2), in an op-ed in *The New York Times*, justified his view the delegitimization of the democratic process in the USA brought about by “fake news” could be signaling a coming “democratic failure or transitioning toward a hybrid regime.” This regime would keep “the trappings of democracy, including seemingly free elections, while leaders would control the election process, the media, and the scope of permissible debate, [resulting in] a country that is de facto less free.” The future of democracy in an age of “fake news,” as a result, does not seem to be promising. Since then, media has been an underestimated value to democracy, and citizens are becoming increasingly aware of its impact on worldviews. Apart from to highlight sources of news on social media platforms or better articulations of sources on television news, it seems any attempt to prevent factually “fake news” would result in an act of censorship, while inaction would result in the further dissemination of misinformation. With more information being learned through news studies, there can be no doubt the detrimental effects “fake news” has on both societies and democracy – the question scholars, governments and citizens now must wrestle with is how to combat the issue.

Many options, but no solution

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) summarized the problem when they wrote that “it is both privately and socially valuable when people can infer the true state of the world.” Scholars are continuing to suggest new ways to address “fake news” in the media. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) argued that social planners should increase information about world affairs while simultaneously increasing incentives for consumers to “infer the true state of

the world.” Others proposed the responsibility falls on technology companies to redesign algorithms that encourage “fake news” and “filter bubbles.” Still, some still insisted that it is absolutely one of the government’s duties to properly regulate “fake news,” creating laws that would make willfully authoring and/or distributing false and deceptive news stories punishable. In the USA, there currently exist 27 states with fraud statutes in place. Whether such statutes will pass muster at the constitutional level remains to be seen. The argument follows that while the retention of such laws may conflict with the currently dominant interpretation of the First Amendment, retention, as expected, could be helpful to a kind of better-functioning democracy and meanwhile civil society. The question thus remains if we, the audience, are responsible for filtering what we read and/or share or whether the responsibility falls on the government of a polity.

Increasingly, yet, social commentators are calling upon the individual to take more responsibility in filtering news. Matahari Timoer, a member of the Jakarta-based internet watchdog ICT Watch said, “our digital life has entered a dark age, that is why we need people to do their part as a lantern to light up and fight this dark period” (BBC, 2017, April 8). Spohr (2017) also encouraged people obtaining information needs to be “a conscious act of seeking out diverse sources.” In a seminal book entitled “Public Opinion,” Lippmann (1922) similarly stated, “we are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.” Since “fake news” continues to threaten our democratic process and further divides the populace, it has become increasingly critical to have counter-attack such an issue from an institutional level to an individual one. Regardless of algorithm changes or by government law, responsibility still, to an extent, falls on most of the people. As many now conclude, the only way to combat both factual and ideological “fake news” is by educating the general public with the necessary information to come to their own deductive conclusions, increasing an individual’s ability to discern fact from fiction.

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