

Information Age Ethics and Fake News

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The most divisive American election in living memory has concluded, though the drama is far from over. Many people find this drama to be extremely entertaining, while others find it quite concerning. One of the most concerning aspects of this election has been the rise of fake news. Fake news is a news article or blog post that was written with the intent to mislead the reader by use of lies or conspiracies. Stanford University conducted a study on fake news and found fake news stories in support of both candidates of the U.S. 2016 general election. Trump supporters, however, believed the pro-Trump articles nearly 4 times as often as the pro-Clinton articles and, by volume, there were far more pro-Trump articles than pro-Clinton (Allcott, 2017). Additionally, this study has concluded that, despite the stories heavily leaning in Trump's favor, they did not hold sway in the results of the election. Even if the presence of fake news didn't affect the election, its existence is still unethical. By extension, the publishing of fake news is unethical. Since fake news relies heavily on the likes of Facebook and Google for it to spread and gain ad revenue, Facebook and Google have an ethical responsibility to do what they can to stop its spread. This paper will explore the ethical issues of writing a fake news story, the cycle of news sharing and the morality behind sharing something known to be fake, and finally the moral responsibility of Google and Facebook (and those like them) to stop the sharing where they can.

Technology is advancing faster than ever, the internet likely being the greatest recent achievement. With the internet came social media, Facebook being the most popular today, claiming sixty one percent of all social logins (Lardinois, 2015). Sixty two percent of Facebook's users reporting they get their news from the site. (Allcott, 2017). It is because of this new style of distribution that fake news has become so prevalent. Before social media, in order to write a news story one had to own a newspaper or a network. Today, all one must do is have a

website and a decent following on social media with no editors, investors, or third-party watchdogs ensuring the truth is being told. Essentially it can be a world without rules or standards. Many people choose to publish and share lies in order to outrage readers, gain followers, and make money from ad revenue. Kantianism would consider this behavior unethical for two reasons. Firstly, if this practice were made universal and every news outlet followed this practice, our society would be vastly misinformed and our democracy would not function. Secondly, this behavior uses people as a means to an end, which Kantianism finds unethical. The end would be popularity and ad revenue, and the means is the people. This differs from other news outlets which also make money from advertisements because they are not taking advantage of people to do it. They are not feeding on people's biases or prejudices to gain followers.

Once the fake news article is written and published on some website, it is then shared on Facebook, Twitter, etc. From here, it is up to the website's followers to share the story and spread it to the rest of us. This is also where Google comes in. Google may not be a social media site, but it is the most visited site in the world (The top 500, 2016) and it contains a news page. Google doesn't write its own news, but it does link to the most popular news stories of the day. Occasionally, these news stories are completely fake and are usually published by sites with less journalistic integrity than should be demanded. Additionally, Google will return search results from these sites when certain keywords are searched. For example, when "Obama born in Kenya" is searched, many of the first page results are from birther-conspiracy websites. Facebook is much more indirect, but achieves the same result. This result has been called an "echo chamber" because it allows people to confirm their own biases and never have their beliefs challenged. Is Google and Facebook's distribution of fake information unethical in the same

way writing the fake information is? Kantianism would say that it is ethical to distribute this information because the universality of sharing all information is a good thing. Additionally, people are not being used as a means to any end by distributing the information because Google and Facebook gain nothing by allowing fake information to be shared. Utilitarianism may have an argument against this practice since it may be for the greater good to stop it, but the vast effort it would require may begin to outweigh the benefits. However, it is unethical for one person to click “share” while also knowing the information to be false. This is argued using virtue ethics because it is not virtuous to lie. Sometimes a story is shared without knowing it is a lie, and this is where the problem grows very dire. When prominent people read fake news then go on television to talk about it, it then reaches a new medium that is typically more trusted than the internet (Tavani, 2011).

What should be done about this issue and does Google and Facebook have a responsibility to cease “publication” of fake news? Many argue they do have a responsibility, but are cautious in how it is achieved. Most agree that Google should not alter their search algorithms to return results that are more in line with the truth, however their news page should only return results from reputable news sites. Additionally, Facebook should allow users to “flag” articles they think are “deliberately false, these will then go to third-party fact checkers” to be confirmed as false and then a “disputed tag that stays with them across the social network” (Wendling, 2017). This method should solve the Kantian issue of universality because if every article gets fact-checked by third-parties, it would have a positive result. Additionally, this practice would be using people as an end instead of a means because the service is to help people identify false information. By this logic, and using this method, Facebook and Google do have an ethical responsibility to stop the spread of fake news.

To conclude, by Kantian standards as well as virtue ethics it is immoral to knowingly write and publish lies on a website, especially if the website is considered to be news. It is also unethical to click “share” if you know this information to be false. Google and Facebook have an obligation to stop the spread of fake news, but it should be done cautiously as not to encounter other ethical issues. A “fake” stamp on shared news articles would be an effective way to slow the spread of lies and propel the spread of the truth. Many third-party fact-checkers already exist and should be more than willing to partner with such an effort, so the amount of work being asked of Google and Facebook would not be unreasonable. Additionally, it is the people who would conduct the initial screening so even the third-party fact-checkers would not be asked to do much more than they do now.

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