Final Assessment - Current Issues In Social Media

Social Media and the Rise of Fake News

Ryan Lebeau 104535367

The term "Fake News" is relatively new, yet has gained a lot of traction in it's short upbringing. Generally, it defines a case that has deliberately misleading claims that are passed off as factual news reports. These reports can be based off of original facts that were engorged to be more noteworthy, or baseless claims in their entirety (Gelfert, 2018). Currently, most fake news is spread through the use of social media platforms (eg. Twitter, Facebook, etc.) since it is simple to create a gripping headline that the masses will read and then continue on in their day, with no fact checking involved. The difficulty in detecting fake news can not be understated either, with professional writers deliberately creating fake pieces, they can be completely undetectable to the average reader.

Social media as a means of reading the current events in the day is a very common practice by many people today. Although, as stated by a recent research paper out of the University of Michigan State (Shu, 2017):

> Social media for news consumption is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its low cost, easy access, and rapid dissemination of information lead people to seek out and consume news from social media. On the other hand, it enables the wide spread of "fake news", i.e., low quality

news with intentionally false information (p. 1)

With The rise of fake news, a large range of specific areas have been affected mainly because there is no limit to what can be concocted with zero facts to support the claims. One of the largest recent events that exposed this use of fake news to influence the general population was the United States of America's 2016 election. With an election that had constant give and takes between the two final candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the utilization of fake news to skew opinions was non-stop. In a journal written by Hunt Alcott and Matthew Gentzcow (2017) it was stated that "the average US adult might have seen perhaps one or several news stories in the months before the election" (p. 213). A large portion of this content was exposed to users through social media platforms such as Twitter, as shown by Nir Grinberg (2019) in his scientific journal publication "previous work has shown concentration of volume both in political conversations on Twitter and in fake news consumption, the extreme levels we observed are notable" (p. 4). Social media platforms like Twitter can easily spread fake news stories and have been proven to on many accounts.

Although the spread of fake news through social media can be seen in political battles, that is not it's only market. The scientific community has to deal with constant fake news in the realm of baseless medical "facts" and misinformation that can be seriously harmful to individuals. R. Merchant and D. Asch stated in a scientific article (2018) that "the unfounded, and yet persistent, beliefs linking autism with vaccination

demonstrates both the health dangers of misinformation" (para. 1). Alongside medical sciences, fake news and misinformation has plagued all walks of life through the use of social media with a perfect example being the Ukranian conflict. Russia's information sector was blasting constant misinformation through all of it's media streams including Twitter to generally confuse the masses on the extent of the situation (Khaldarova, 2016).

This wave of misinformation on social media can be viewed as unethical on many levels, with the largest being a person's sense of security/safety. Taking a plausible hypothetical scenario from what is currently happening around the world can completely expose how dangerous mass misinformation can be. Imagine a person that consumes most of their media content from social media, with 39% of the world's population having an active social media account this is a fair assumption (HootSuite, 2018). If this person were to read an article claiming a fake cure to the COVID-19 virus and then try it themselves, this could cause serious injury to the person or many people in the case that they then further spread the disease thinking they are cured. This recently happened in Iran, where at least 44 people died from alcohol poisoning from a fake coronavirus treatment spread online through social media platforms (Bote, 2020). This real case shows how unethical spreading misinformation can be to a person's health and safety.

Even though it seems that the only way to battle the spread of misinformation on social media is by educating the population about it, there may be a new way that changes everything in the coming years. A recent publication by Yang Liu and Yi-Fang

Brook Wu (2018) shows that the utilization of artificial intelligence can be applied to revealing fake news before it can take off on social media. They theorize that classifying news by its propagation path and analyzing the path as a multivariate time series that would map the users who engaged in spreading the news to limit the amount of fake news that is left online. They claim that their model can "detect fake news with accuracy 85% and 92% on Twitter and Sina Weibo respectively in 5 minutes after it starts to spread" (Liu, 2018). This is also not the only research in the field, as applying popular heuristic searches to analyze social media has been booming over the past few years and the distinction between real and fake news has its own sector in the field of computer vision. So, although the spread of fake news has gained a lot of traction over social media platforms like Twitter, there is an end in sight with being able to accurately predict if a news story is real or fake. When people are being told constantly to fact check articles they have read or even do the most basic of work to look into the background of a story, fake news on social media can easily be defeated.