

Anthony Astorri

Blanton

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Fake News and How It has Invaded the Internet

The current political climate has been a disastrous one to contend with for the past 2-3 years. Problems have been blown out of proportion since the 2016 election and have only seemed to get worse as time goes on. The rise of Donald Trump and the Republican party to control both the House and Senate has led to a dramatic rise in what is now known as “fake news”. The term is used generically by the party to pass off any information which is contrary to their motives or in any way paints them in a bad light as incorrect. The President makes frequent use of this during his tirades on the social media platform Twitter, where he constantly berates the “liberal media” for the fake news they report about him and his administration. This problem has extended towards the common citizen as well, as platforms such as Facebook have been notorious for extending articles containing false information towards its users. It is up to the viewer to learn how to catch fake news, and what constitutes fake news, so they may better protect themselves and others from whatever harm the false information may bring.

The first step to discerning between facts and fake news is to learn the definition of the term. According to an article by Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow titled “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, “We define 'fake news' to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott 213). Their definition also includes articles which originate from satirical websites such as The Onion, which could be

misunderstood to be factual. This is especially true when users browse platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, and these articles are seen with little to no context. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term “fake news” can be traced to the 1890's where several newspapers such as The Cincinnati Commercial Tribune, The Kearney Daily Hub, and The Buffalo Commercial all used 'fake news' in their articles around this time period (Merriam-Webster). There is evidence, however, that fake news could have existed over 500 years ago, when the printing press was created. Historian Jacob Soll traced its origin back to Johannes Gutenberg's revolutionary invention in 1439, as now that anything could be printed, fake stories spread like wildfire. The case could be made that “real” news was hard to verify, as no code of journalistic ethics had been established yet. Fake news does not include the following however, according to Allcott and Gentzkow: “Our definition rules out several close cousins of fake news: 1) unintentional reporting mistakes, such as a recent incorrect report that Donald Trump had removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office in the White House; 2) rumors that do not originate from a particular news article; 3) conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true); 4) satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual; 5) false statements by politicians; and 6) reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false (in the language of Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Stone 2016, fake news is 'distortion,' not 'filtering') (Allcott 214). This goes against what many believe to be fake news, especially Republicans, as many would believe even the smallest lie, would be considered fake news. Even when most of the fake news being reported both in this year and last year come from their party exclusively.

The use of social media has led a rampant and wide spread issue concerning fake news, as the use of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have exploded over the past few years. According to a study by the Pew Research Center in association with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation: 62% of adults currently receive their news from social media, and 18% do so on the regular. Going further, they found 66% of Facebook users get their news from the site, while 59% of Twitter users and 70% of Reddit browsers do the same thing. Curiously, only 26% of those studied reported using more than 1 platform to receive their news, often switching between Twitter and Facebook. Another interesting study observed was the difference between how people go about seeking out their news for the day. On sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube: as many as 63% of all users find their news because they were browsing randomly on the site. Platforms such as Twitter and Reddit are dead even however, with rough half of the user base just browsing, while others actively search out news to stay in the loop. The rise of fake news in social media has led to a rise in the use of fact checking websites, as they provide users with a quick and easy method of determining the validity of an article or other piece of literature they would otherwise find “questionable”. Going back to Allcot and Gentzkow, the two researchers created a database of articles from 3 separate sources. The first source was snopes.com, which I used myself in gathering some of the articles you see on this website, as it is ‘the definitive Internet reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation. They collected every article from 2016 about the Trump and Clinton, and moved on to the site politifact.com, where they gathered even more, and finally moved to Buzzfeed where they received 21 fake news articles gathered by the site, which were widely shared on Facebook. In total, they gathered 156 fake news articles, and then divided them up between pro-Clinton and pro-Trump. Of this group, the two stated: “Our database contains 115

pro-Trump fake stories that were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories shared a total of 7.6 million times" (Alcott 212). A question you might have is: 'where does fake news come from?' An answer to this question can certainly be pointed towards social media, specifically Twitter.

The beauty, but also curse of Twitter is the freedom it gives its users to speak their minds on whatever topic they choose. Kate Starbird of Stanford University uses her work to expose those who propret lies and misdirection using Twitter as their platform. In an article interviewing Starbird, the author, Jonathan Rabinovitz presented a tweet about the terrible Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016. It called the massacre a "false-flag attack" to generate bad rep for Muslims. Starbird uses it to point a finger at how people use social media following disasters, and how people will listen to whatever news breaks first, no matter how factual (Rabinovitz). This leads to a lot of misinformation, which is very apparent following any sort of attack or disaster, such as from the Vegas shooting last year. Fakes news can certainly have disastrous effects, as it leads the public to believe things which either A) never occurred, B) happened but in a totally different context or circumstance, or C) something wildly different from the general opinion about the matter. Another source of fake news can be the ridiculously large base of social media bots which have been wreaking havoc on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Bots are simply coded A.I. entities which pose as actual humans and interact with others so they will share the content they create to others, which creates a spiderweb of information which is inherently false. According to an article in Science Magazine called 'The Science of Fake News', "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. Facebook estimated that as many as 60 million bots 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. 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” (Lazer). This will most likely not be remedied any time soon, as any attempt to destroy bots, will just lead their creators to new avenues of distribution and protection for their infectious creations.

Fake news has become a larger problem in the 2 years since the 2016 election, and the political rise of the Republican party. Fake news has always existed in one form or another for centuries, almost as old as public writing itself. It is up to the viewer in order to determine what is real and what is a fake in a climate which seeks to confuse and misdirect them. This project was a way to bring light to this subject in a way which seemed thoughtful and meaningful. Making a game where the user guessed whether an article is real or fake was a thought I had from the very beginning, along with displaying a message urging and explaining to the viewer what fake news truly is.

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