

English Language Fake News: Examining and Predicting Labelled Documents

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Introduction

The problem of fake online news is a persistent concern in contemporary society, impacting politics, the media, and society. While the Internet enables access to a wealth of information, it is also a medium by which disinformation can be easily spread. In particular, major websites with user-generated content have been met with harsh criticism and calls for legal action due to fake news being circulated on their platforms. Large websites with user-generated content can make use of machine learning to quickly identify sources as being potentially suspect or reliable.

In this project, I examine the problem of fake news classification, by analyzing a large dataset of scraped news articles using various Python libraries. Additionally, topic modeling is performed on another sample of the corpus, for both the ‘fake’ and ‘reliable’ labels. Using the large fake news dataset scraped by Maciej Szpakowski (available at <https://github.com/several27/FakeNewsCorpus>), in this project a subset of news articles are sampled from the corpus and text analysis is performed on them. Issues relevant to the dataset are also discussed.

While the term “fake news” is now used by politicians and pundits to dismiss diverging viewpoints, the actual problem of the propagation of disinformation online poses a significant challenge to many sectors and industries.

For regulatory agencies, disinformation concerning consumer products and health reporting presents a pressing problem, directly associated with goals in informing the public. In politics,

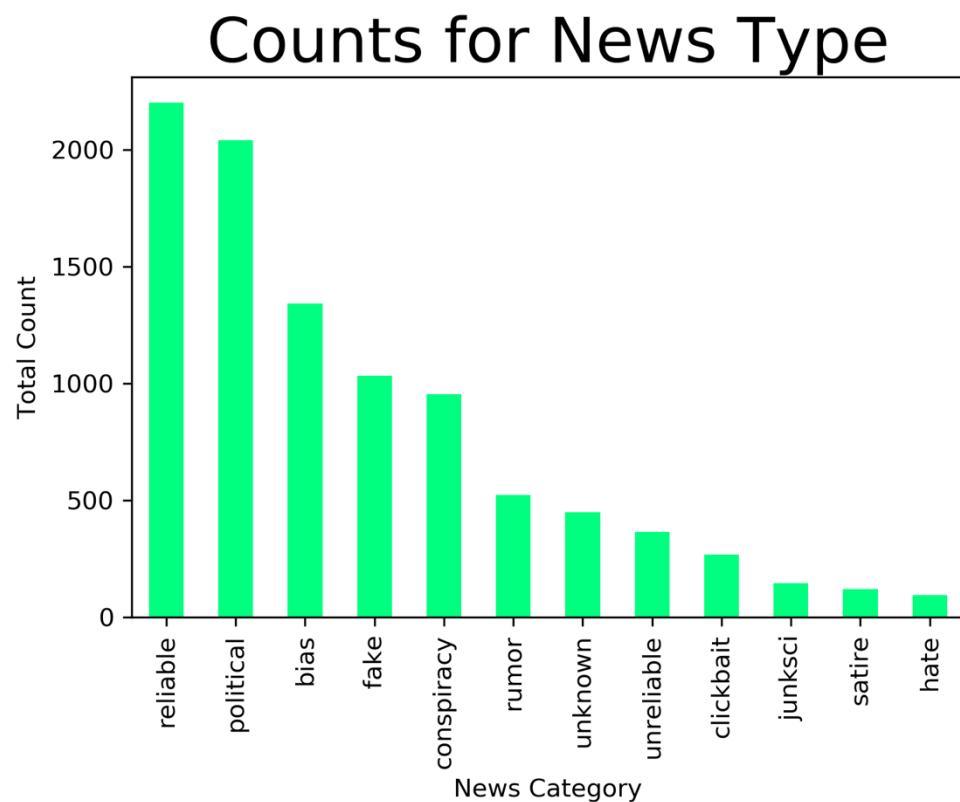
fake news may hold sway in influencing elections.¹ Additionally, companies targeted by disinformation have an express interest in identifying and fighting falsehoods disseminated about them and may be interested in the general climate of online disinformation as a whole. Altogether, an analysis online ‘fake news’ is relevant for many organizations.

Data Cleaning and Pre-processing

Initial sampling and EDA

The corpus used includes over 20 million articles. Because of considerations regarding time and processing power, I first decided to sample 10,000 articles for my analysis. While performing initial EDA on the corpus, it became apparent that all articles were categorized into 12 different news types (Fig. 1).

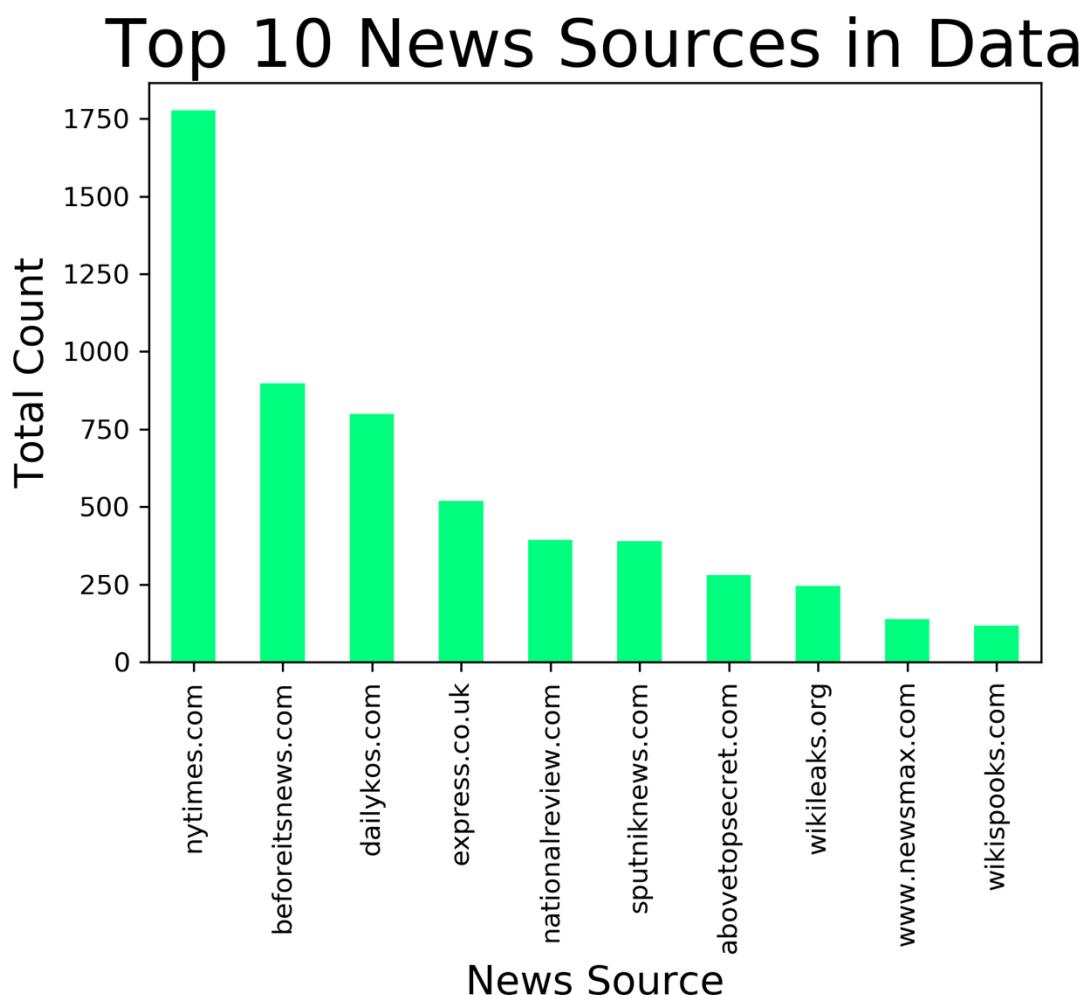
Fig. 1



¹ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (31, No. 2), Spring 2017, 211–236 (Accessed: <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>)

Upon inspecting each of these news types, some issues began to emerge. Namely, all articles from any given source were given a particular label without consideration of individual articles. For example, all articles from nytimes.com were labelled as “reliable,” all articles from “beforeitsnews.com” were labelled as ‘fake’, and all articles from “sputniknews.com” were labelled as “bias”. Figure 2 shows the top ten news sources from particular web domains represented in the dataset.

Fig. 2



While the vast majority of articles from The New York Times can likely be considered reliable, some of the labelling of other various news sources seems to present some issues in the data. For example, all articles from 'dailykos.com' were labelled as 'political' (Fig. 5), all articles from 'express.co.uk' were labelled as 'rumor (Fig. 6)', and all articles from 'sputniknews.com' (Fig. 7) were labelled as 'bias.' Is every single article from each of these sources inherently more political or biased than articles from sources labelled as 'reliable'? Because of the issues presented with the labelling, I decided to resample from the original dataset.

Fig. 3

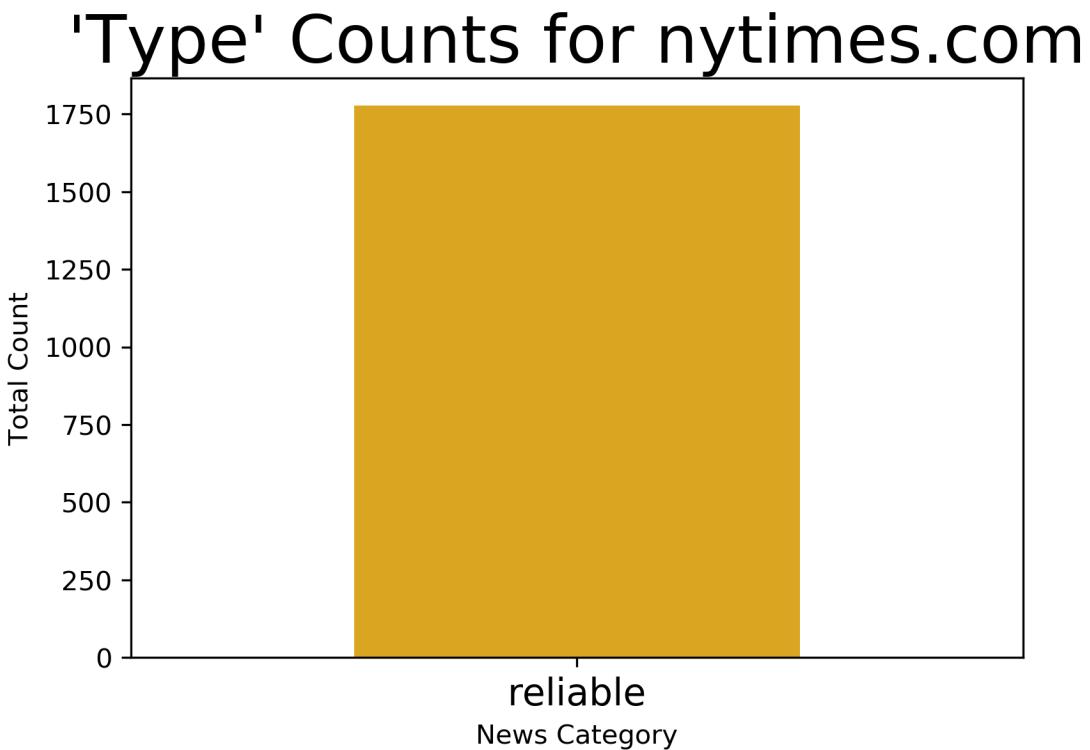


Fig. 4

'Type' Counts for Beforeitsnews.com

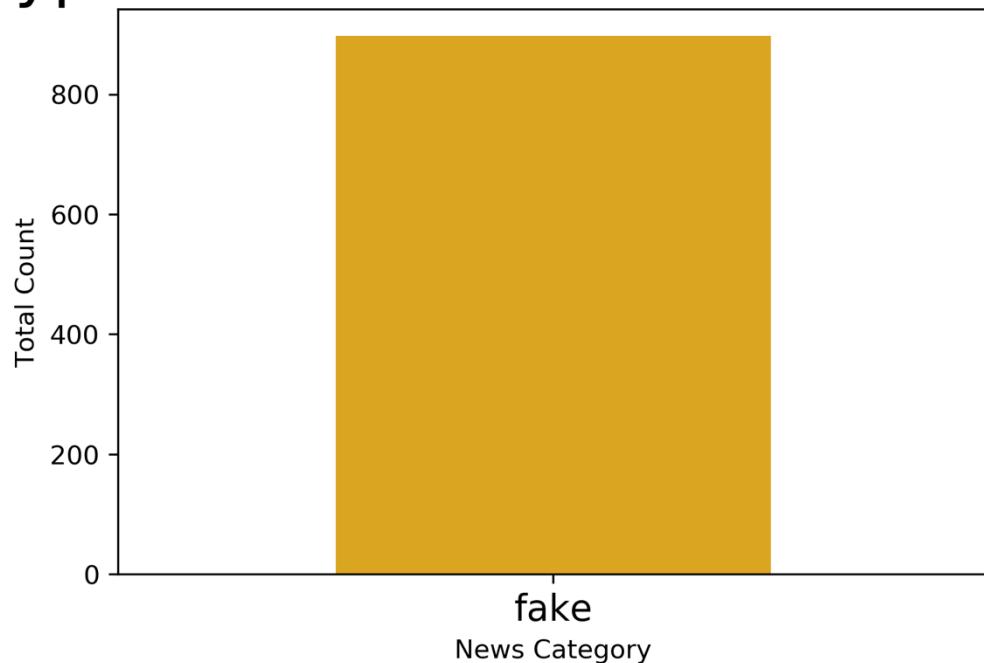


Fig. 5

'Type' Counts for dailykos.com

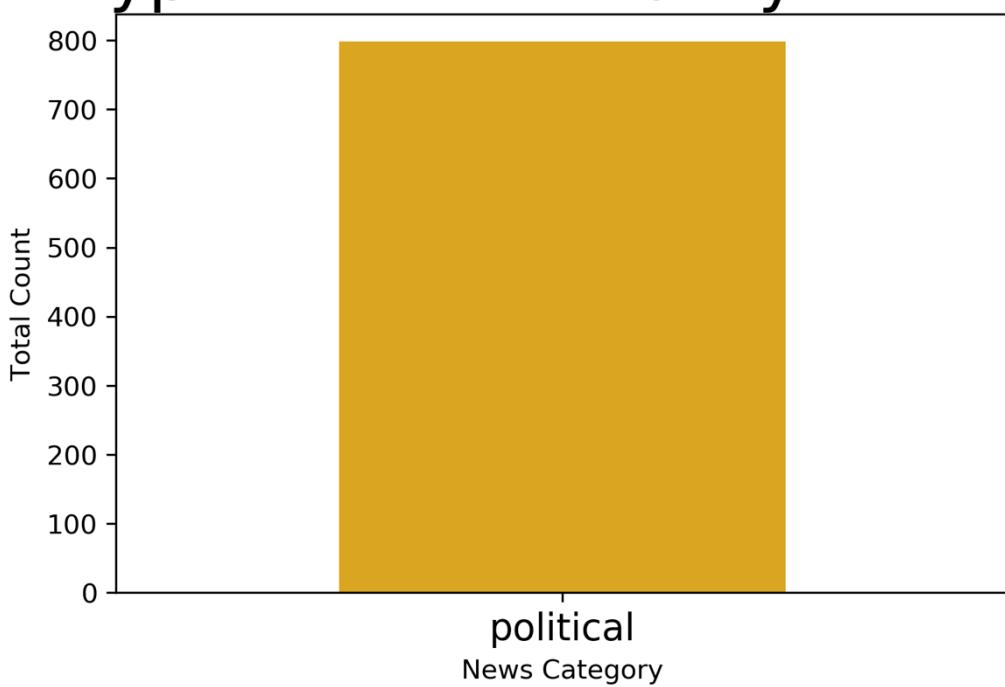


Fig. 6

'Type' Counts for express.co.uk

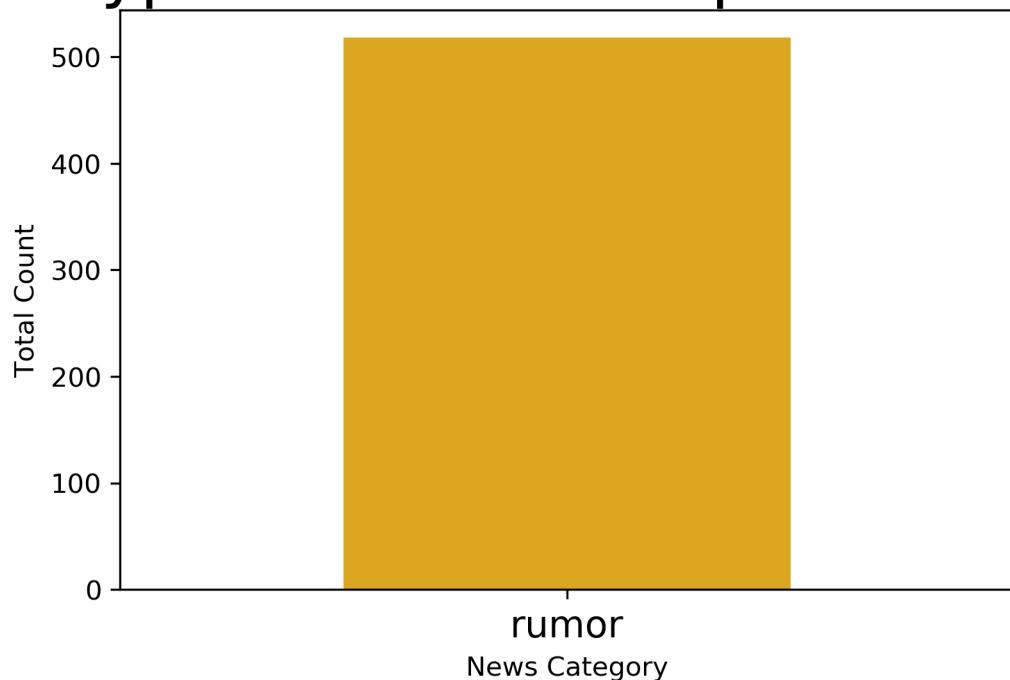
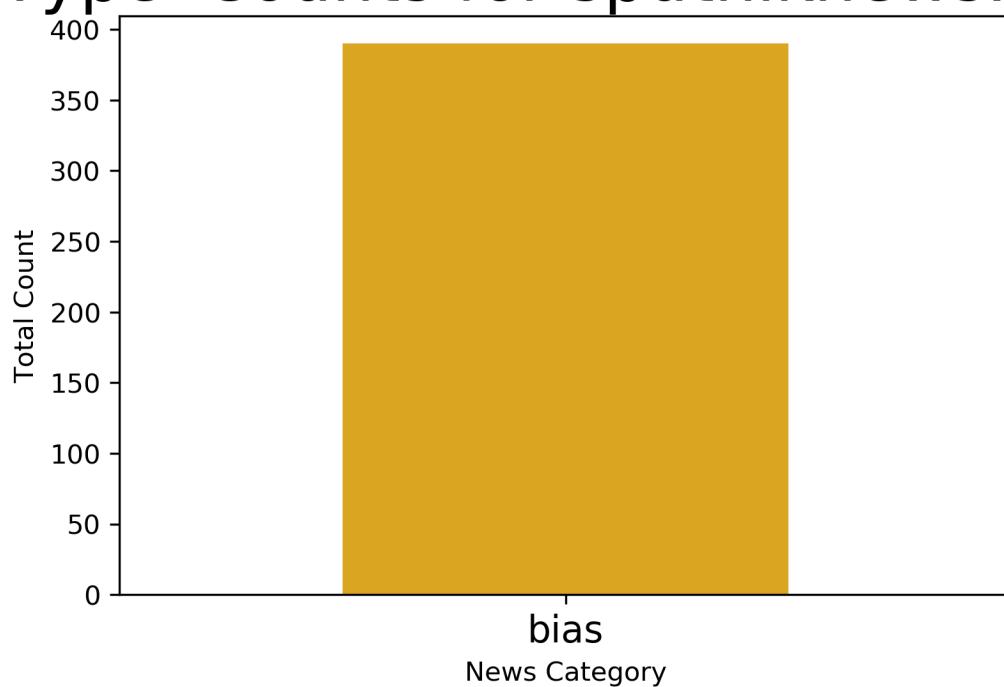


Fig. 7

'Type' Counts for sputniknews.com



Due to the inherent biases in the dataset for the labelled categories ‘junksci’, ‘bias’, etc., it was initially decided to resample the dataset by including data from the two categories ‘fake’ and ‘reliable’. Although there are issues with designating all articles from certain sources with the labels ‘fake’ or ‘reliable’, the sources used with these labels seem to be more consistent than with the other labels -- nytimes.com is, for the most part, reliable, whereas, a major website represented in the data, beforeitsnews.com, is not.

EDA of Sampled Data

The sampled data contains 10,000 articles labelled ‘reliable’ and 10,000 labelled ‘fake’. The majority of these 20,000 articles were from nytimes.com (labelled as ‘reliable’) and beforeitsnews.com (labelled as ‘fake’). There were, however, 141 different online news sources represented in the data (Fig. 9).

Fig 8.

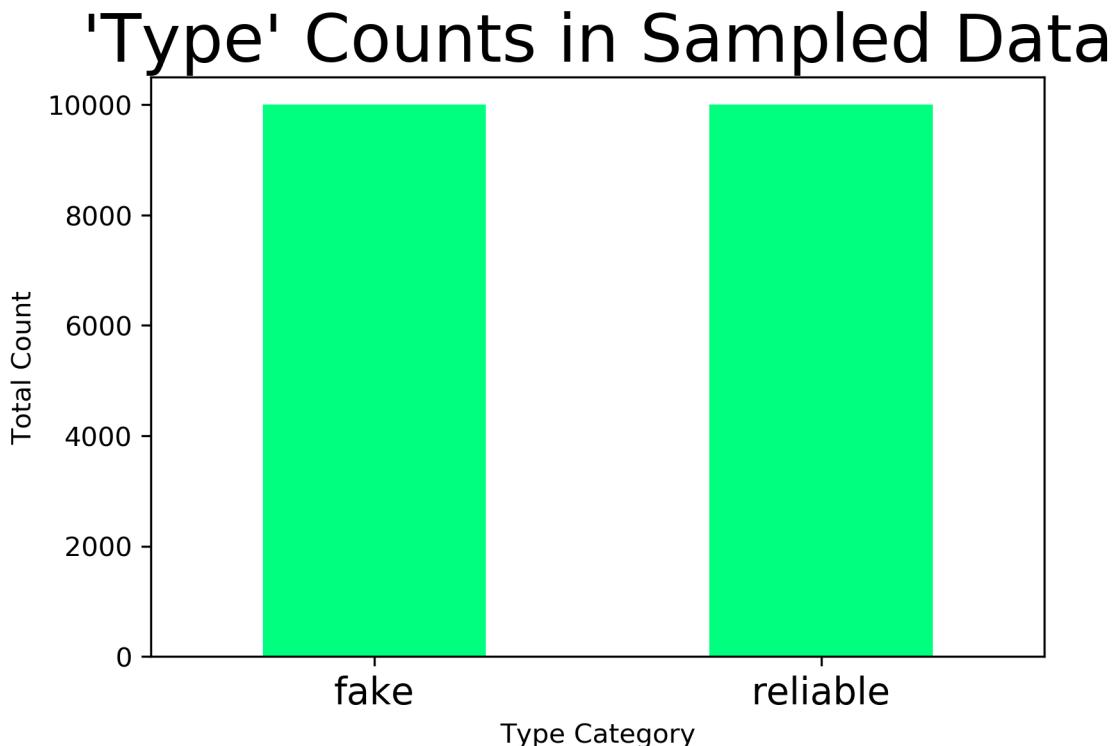
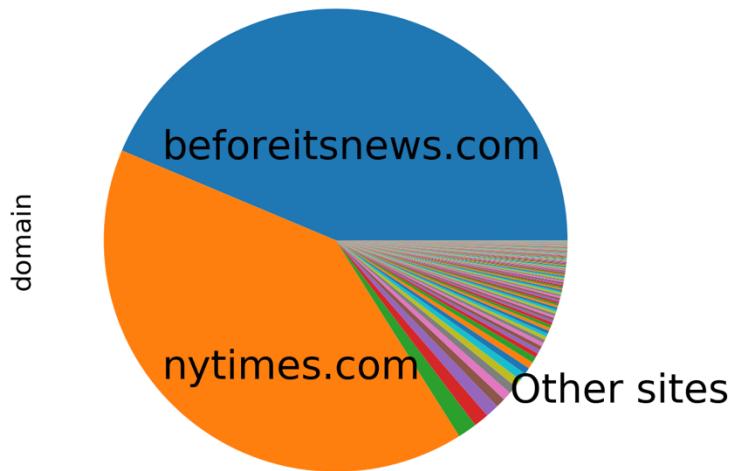


Fig. 9

News Source (domain)



Sentiment Analysis

The nltk Vader Sentiment Intensity Analyzer and TextBlob were used to analyze polarity in the corpora. Documents were labeled 1 (positive) if their score was greater than 0.2 (on the 1 to 1 scale used by both libraries), -1 (negative) if the score was less than -0.2, and neutral if it was between them.

Textblob was also used to calculate subjectivity scores. The scale for subjectivity scores is -1 to 1. Documents were labeled 1 (biased) if their subjectivity score was greater than 0.55, and -1 (unbiased) if the score was less than 0.45, and 0 if the score was between 0.45 and 0.55.

Table 1
Polarity scores

	Label	SIA Polarity Score	TextBlob Polarity Score	TextBlob Subjectivity
Fake News	1	5468	983	1128
	-1	3013	67	5784
	0	5013	7944	3088
Reliable News	1	6721	1175	762
	-1	2581	73	6800
	0	698	8752	2438

The averages of all the scores taken for both the ‘fake news’ and ‘reliable news’ in the sampled data are as follows:

	Textblob Average Polarity Score	Textblob Average Subjectivity Score	SIA Compound Average	SIA Negative Average	SIA Neutral Average	SIA Positive Average
Fake	0.11	0.42	0.22	0.07	0.83	0.09
Reliable	0.10	0.41	0.38	0.06	0.84	0.09

Textblob had very similar scores for both the ‘fake’ and ‘reliable’ articles. In SIA, the ‘fake’ and ‘reliable’ articles had a similar average of ‘negative’, ‘neutral’, and ‘positive’ sentiment.

Not a large difference was found between the ‘reliable’ and ‘fake’ articles. Perhaps more data needs to be used. The most significant finding was that 23% of the articles labeled ‘fake’ had a subjectivity score higher than or equal to .5, whereas only 17% of the articles labeled ‘reliable’ had such a value.

Initial Predictive Modeling – Binary Classification

The data was divided into a training and testing set. A several classifier was trained using scikit-learn, and then used to predict the labels for the testing data. Accuracy varied depending on vectorization approach:

Table 2

		Vectorization Technique		
		Bag of Words	Tf-idf	Tf-idf with two bigrams
Classifier	MultinomialNB()	86.7%	87.2%	90.4%
	LinearSVC()	87.0%	90.8%	91.7%
	XGB Classifier()	87.5%	89.0%	83.3%

The most accurate approach was to use LinearSVC() with tf-idf classification using bigrams. There may be some issues with this model, linked with the data itself. Inspecting the most predictive features revealed, for example, that some of the most predictive bigrams for classification were 'york time' and 'york citi'. This is due to the over-representation of The New York Times as news labelled as 'reliable' in the dataset.

In order to deal with the problem of the over representation of articles from the New York Times in the dataset, the data was resampled to get a more varied distribution of article sources.

Analysis after Resampling

The New York Times and Beforeitsnew.com were vastly overrepresented in the dataset. While there were 141 different domains represented, the vast majority of documents come from one of two domains.

Fig. 10

'Domain' Counts in Initially Sampled Data

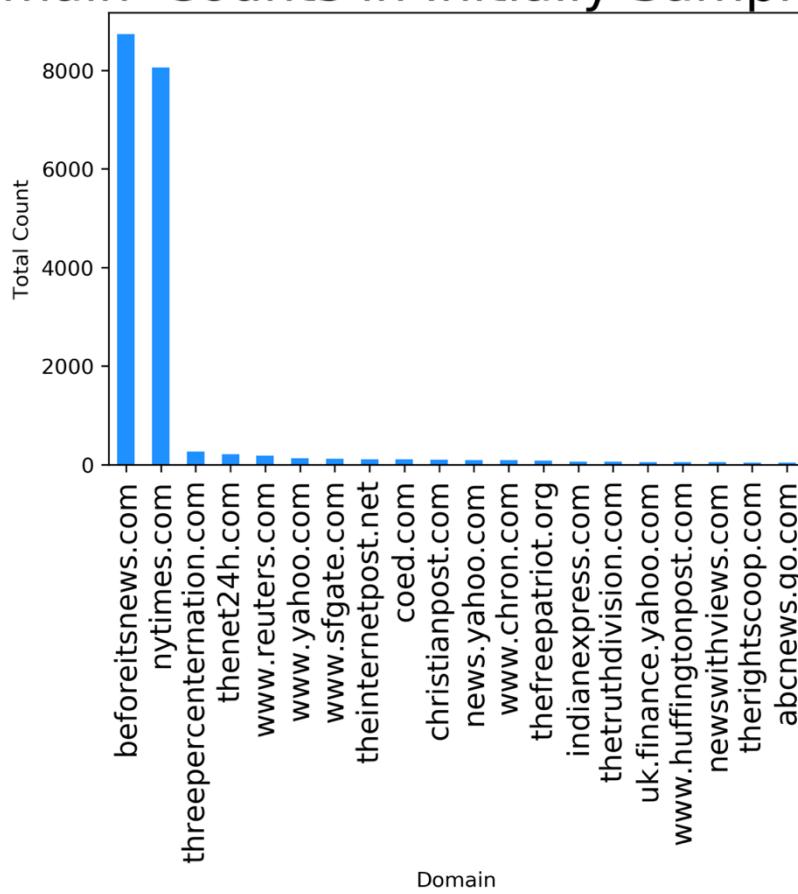
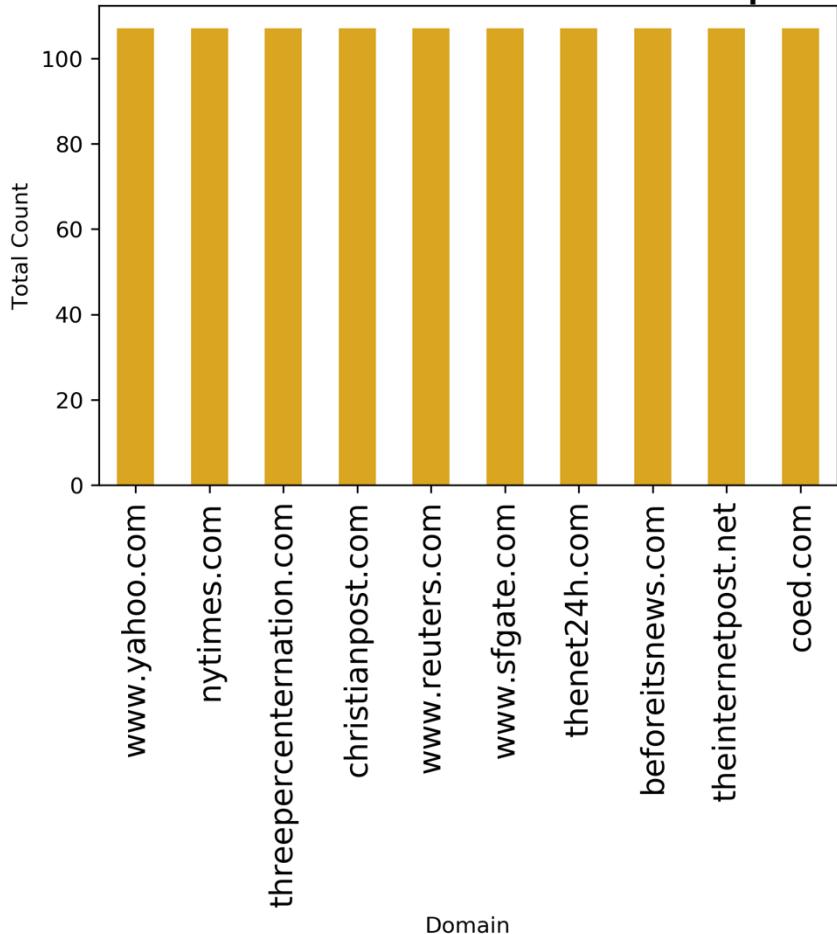


Fig 11.

'Domain' Counts in Undersampled Data



Because the domains were so unbalanced, undersampling was performed to rectify this problem. The top ten sources in the data set were taken and all of the sources were randomly undersampled to the number of documents of the sources with the smallest number of documents. After this, the distribution of domains was more balanced.

Undersampling them left the dataset with only 1070 articles, which is a significant issue. Several classifiers were trained on the newly sampled data, and new accuracies were observed. Again, accuracy varied depending on the vectorization approach:

Table 3

		Vectorization Technique		
		Bag of Words	Tf-idf	Tf-idf with two bigrams
Classifier	MultinomialNB()	77.6%	72.3%	77.6%
	LinearSVC()	86.4%	89.0%	84.1%
	XGB Classifier()	84.7%	87.6%	77.6%

It is clear from looking at the informative features that document source is still playing a large role in predicting whether a given document is ‘fake’ or ‘reliable’. Even after resampling, some of the most informative features for td-idf with bigrams were “new york”, “associ press”, and “thomson reuter”. This indicates that document source is highly relevant in determining whether a document is predicting as being ‘fake’ or ‘reliable’.

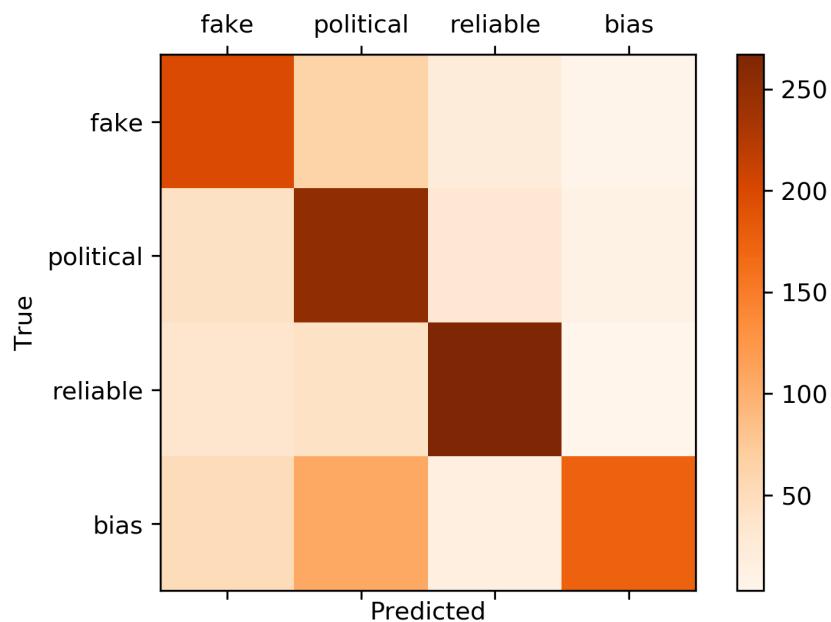
In order to approach this issue in a different manner, words that were directly linked to article source were included as stopwords. This tactic resulted in informative features that were more reflective of journalistic topics, such as “budget forecasters” and “black slaves”; however, accuracy of the classifier (LinearSVC() with tf-idf bigrams) was significantly lower when extending the stopwords (78%).

Multi-class Classifier

Additionally, a multi-class classifier was built to include other classes than ‘fake’ and ‘reliable’ from the initial dataset. The categories of ‘bias’ and ‘political’ were also included, as these are the next largest types represented in the dataset. A multinomial Naïve Bayes, Linear SVC and XGBoost classifier was built, using count_vectorizer(), which yielded 68% accuracy. As the heat maps in Figures 12-14 shows, the classifier most accurately predicted the category of documents that had been labelled as “reliable”.

Figure 12

Confusion matrix of MultinomialNB(alpha=1.0, class_prior=None, fit_prior=True)

**Figure 13**

Confusion matrix of LinearSVC(C=1.0, class_weight=None, dual=True, fit_intercept=True, intercept_scaling=1, loss='squared_hinge', max_iter=1000, multi_class='ovr', penalty='l2', random_state=None, tol=0.0001, verbose=0)

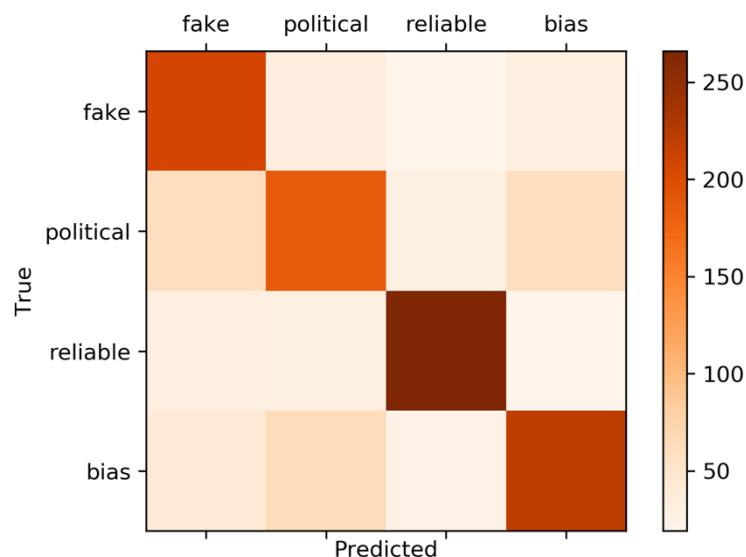
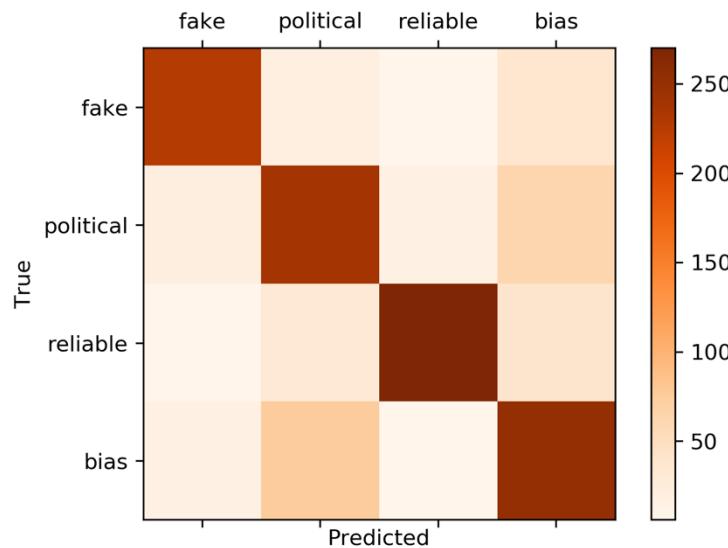


Figure 14

Confusion matrix of XGBClassifier(base_score=0.5, booster='gbtree', colsample_bylevel=1, colsample_bynode=1, colsample_bytree=1, gamma=0, learning_rate=0.1, max_delta_step=0, max_depth=3, min_child_weight=1, missing=None, n_estimators=100, n_jobs=1, nthread=None, objective='multi:softprob', random_state=0, reg_alpha=0, reg_lambda=1, scale_pos_weight=1, seed=None, silent=None, subsample=1, verbosity=1)



The same classifiers were then refit after using tf_idf vectorizer—the heatmaps of each are in figures 15-17:

Figure 15

Confusion matrix of MultinomialNB(alpha=1.0, class_prior=None, fit_prior=True)

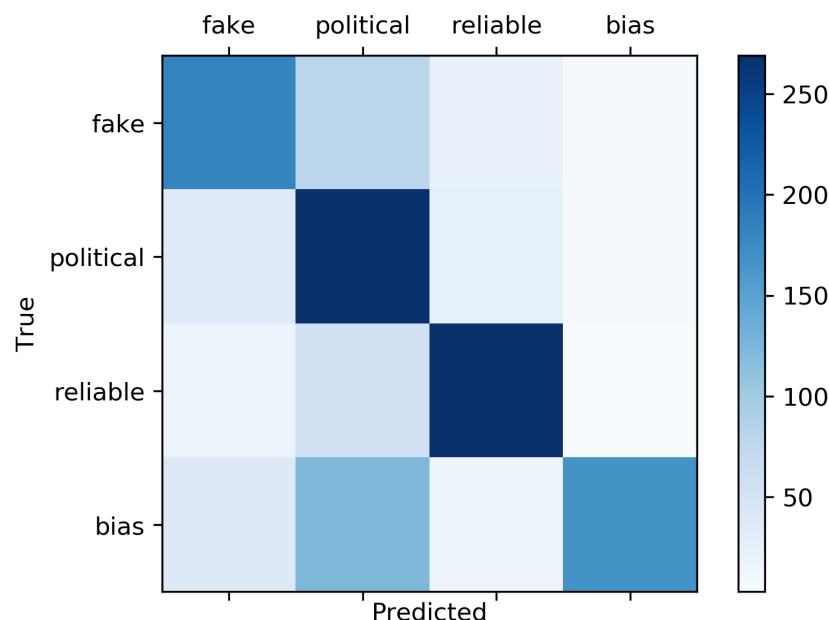
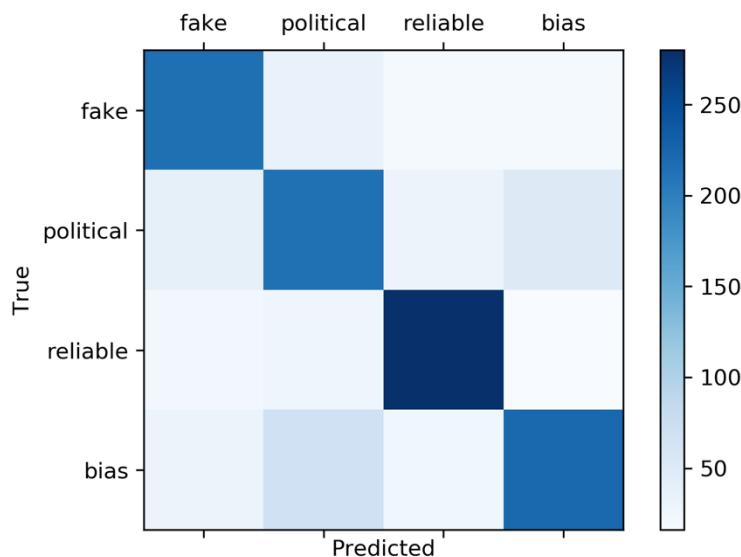
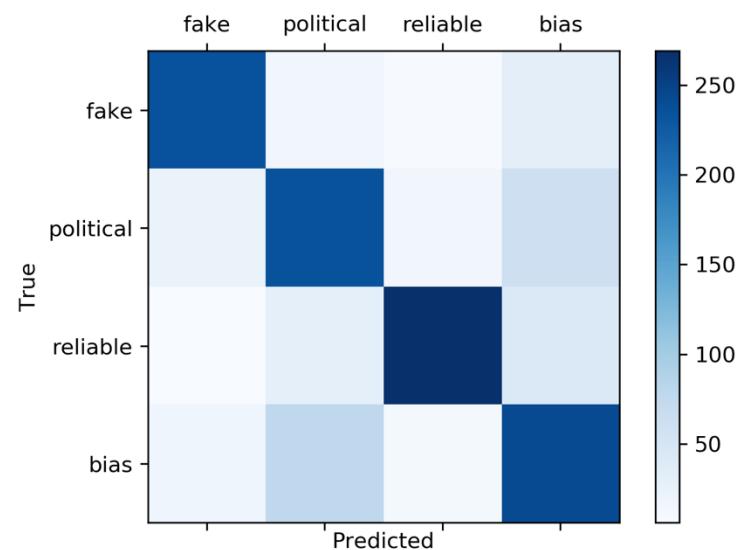


Figure 16

Confusion matrix of LinearSVC(C=1.0, class_weight=None, dual=True, fit_intercept=True, intercept_scaling=1, loss='squared_hinge', max_iter=1000, multi_class='ovr', penalty='l2', random_state=None, tol=0.0001, verbose=0)

**Figure 17**

Confusion matrix of XGBClassifier(base_score=0.5, booster='gbtree', colsample_bylevel=1, colsample_bynode=1, colsample_bytree=1, gamma=0, learning_rate=0.1, max_delta_step=0, max_depth=3, min_child_weight=1, missing=None, n_estimators=100, n_jobs=1, nthread=None, objective='multi:softprob', random_state=0, reg_alpha=0, reg_lambda=1, scale_pos_weight=1, seed=None, silent=None, subsample=1, verbosity=1)



XGBCClassifier() with tf-idf vectorization proved to be the most accurate with 75.7% accuracy.

All categories:

An additional analysis was done including all of the categories from the dataset, rather than the four most popular ones. The confusion matrices for each vectorization and classifier pair are shown in figures 18 to 23.

The results were less useful, due to the size of the sample of the dataset, as some categories had perfect precision and recall, due to their low representation in the dataset.

Figure 18

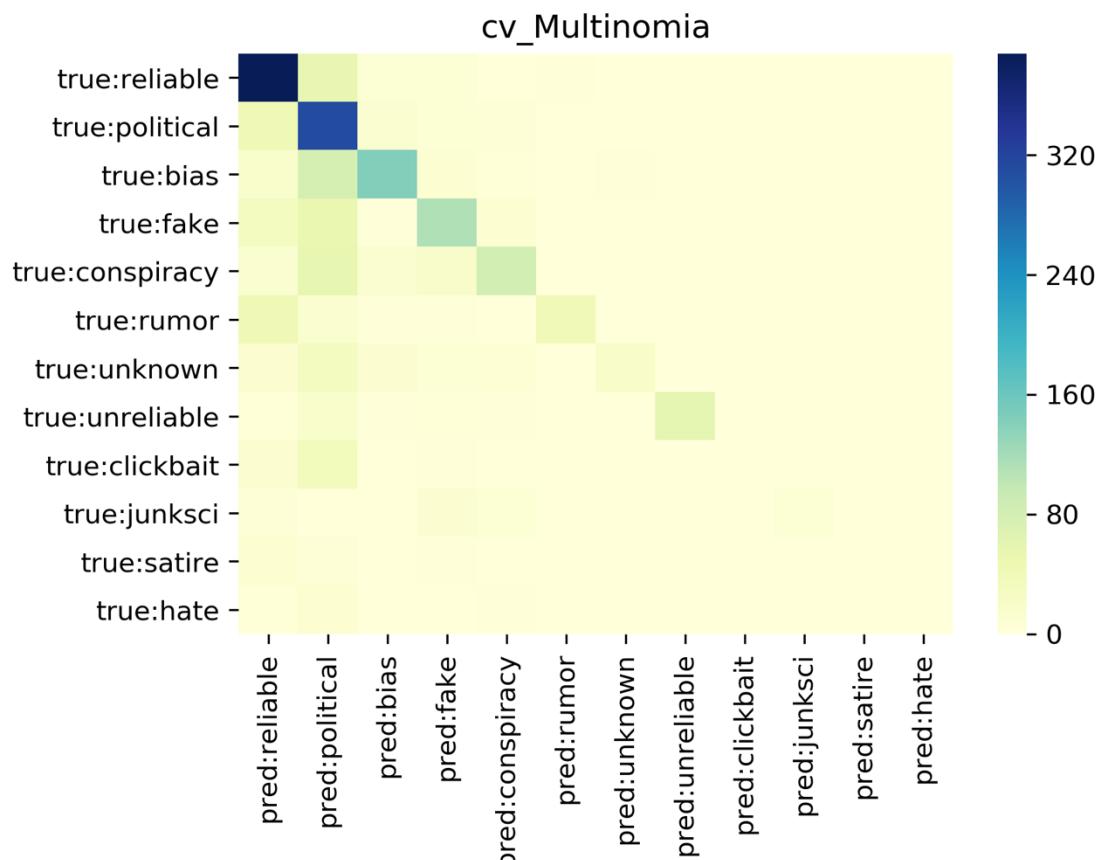


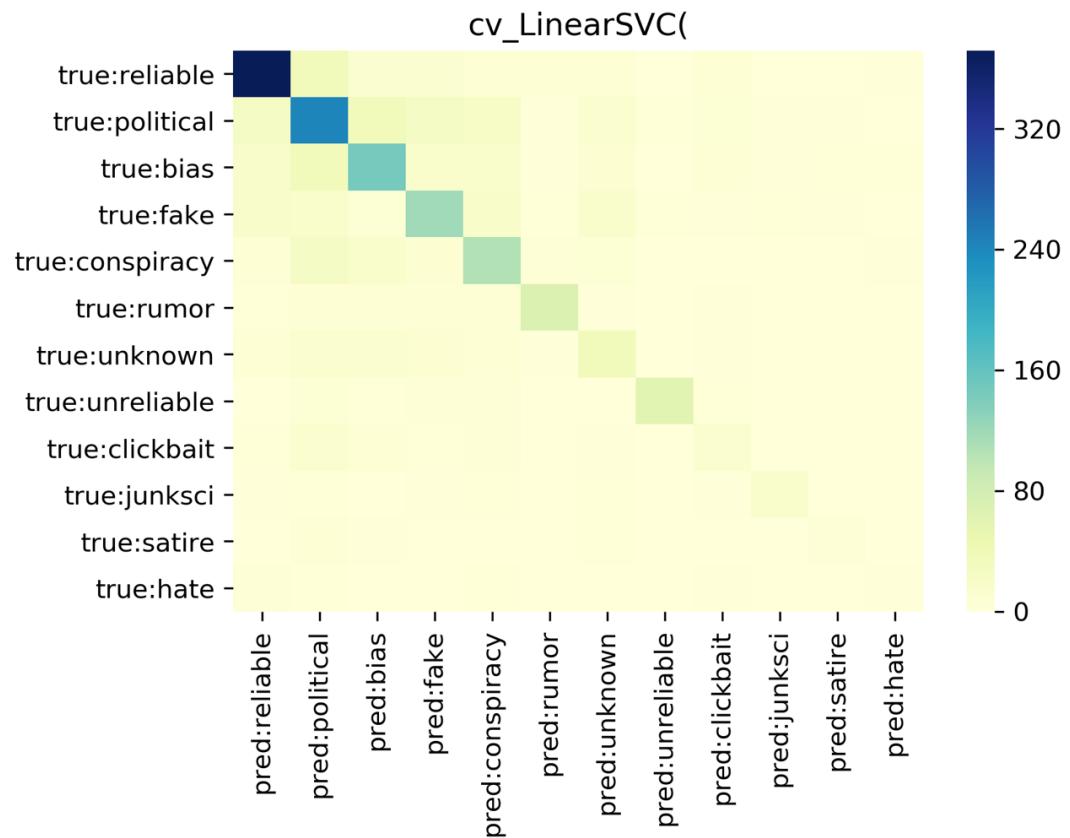
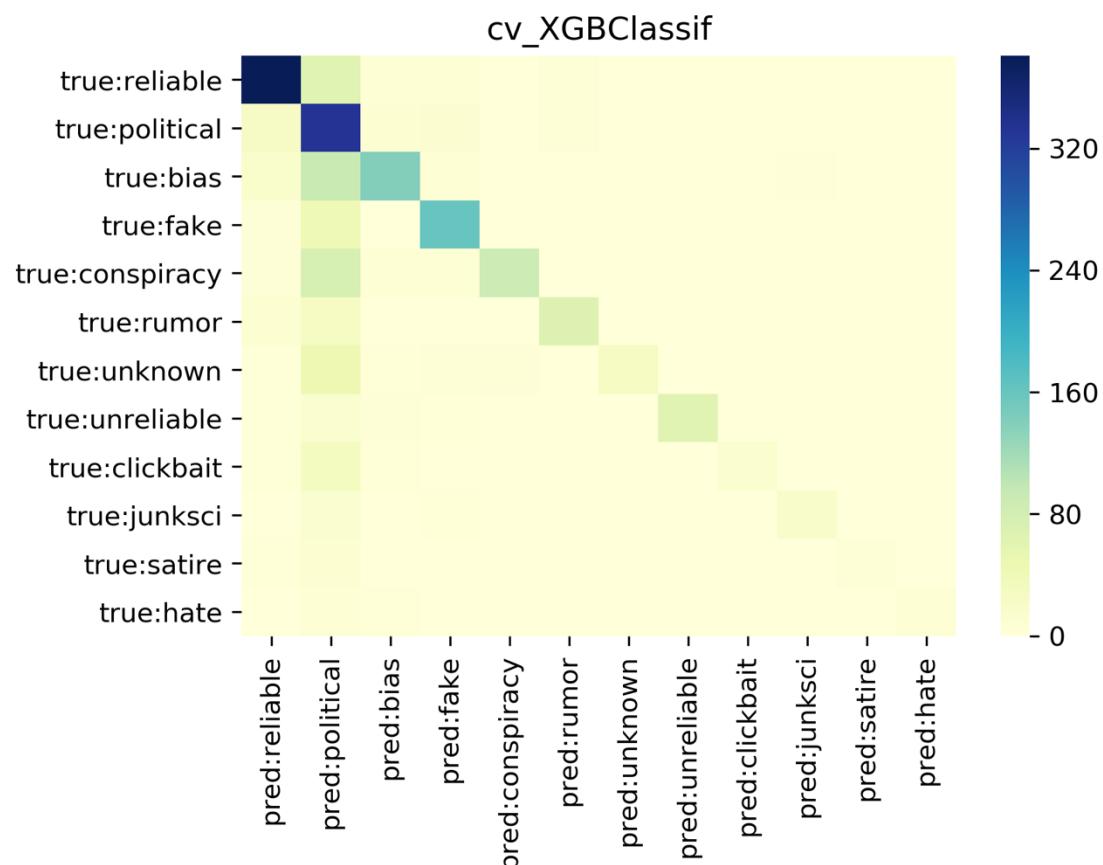
Figure 19**Figure 20**

Figure 21

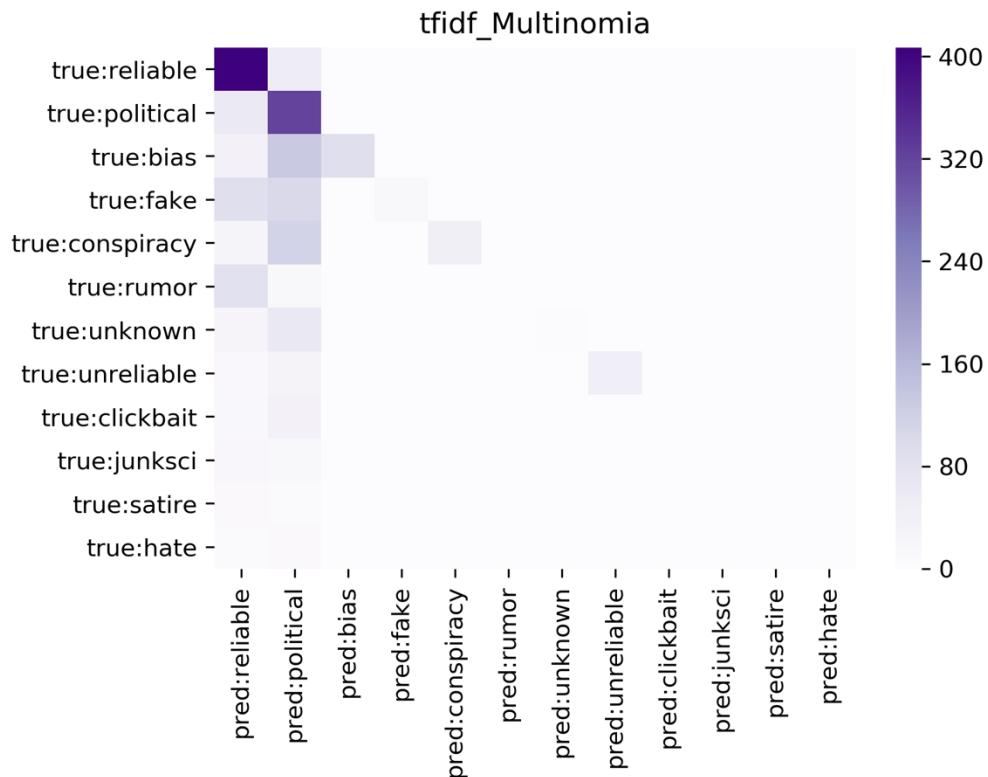


Figure 22

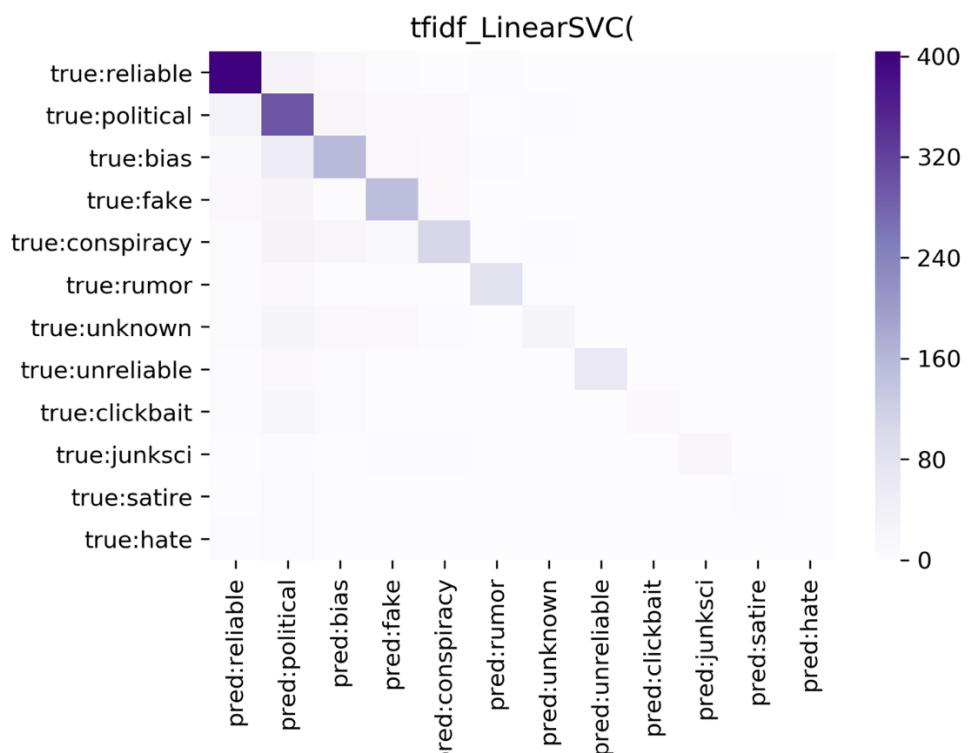
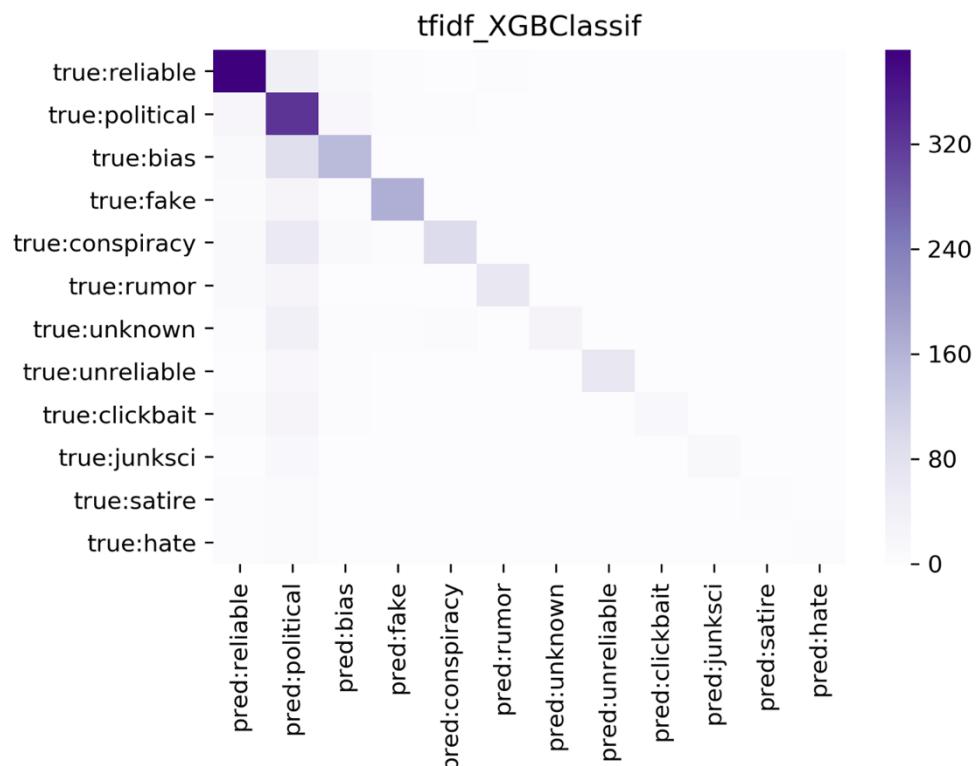


Figure 23

Topic Modeling

Both Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) and the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) were applied to the data altogether, and then separately for the data labelled “fake” and data labelled “reliable”. The results for data labeled “reliable” with LSI showed a topic associated with Bush, the American presidency, and war; a topic associated with religion and Christianity, and a topic associated with diet and health. Other topic seemed to be similar to these topics.

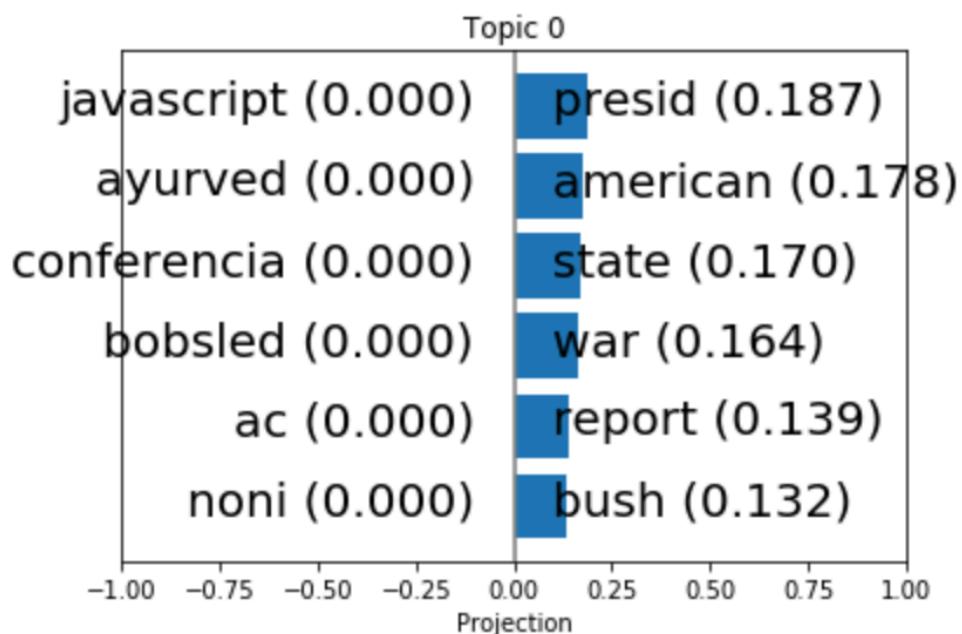
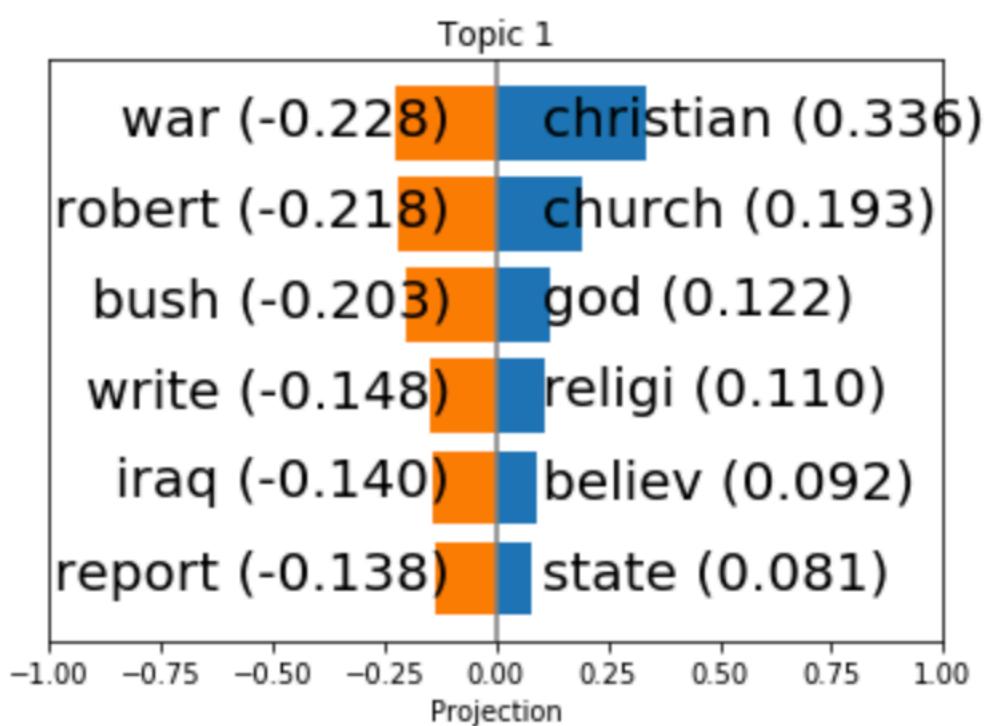
Figure 24**Figure 25**

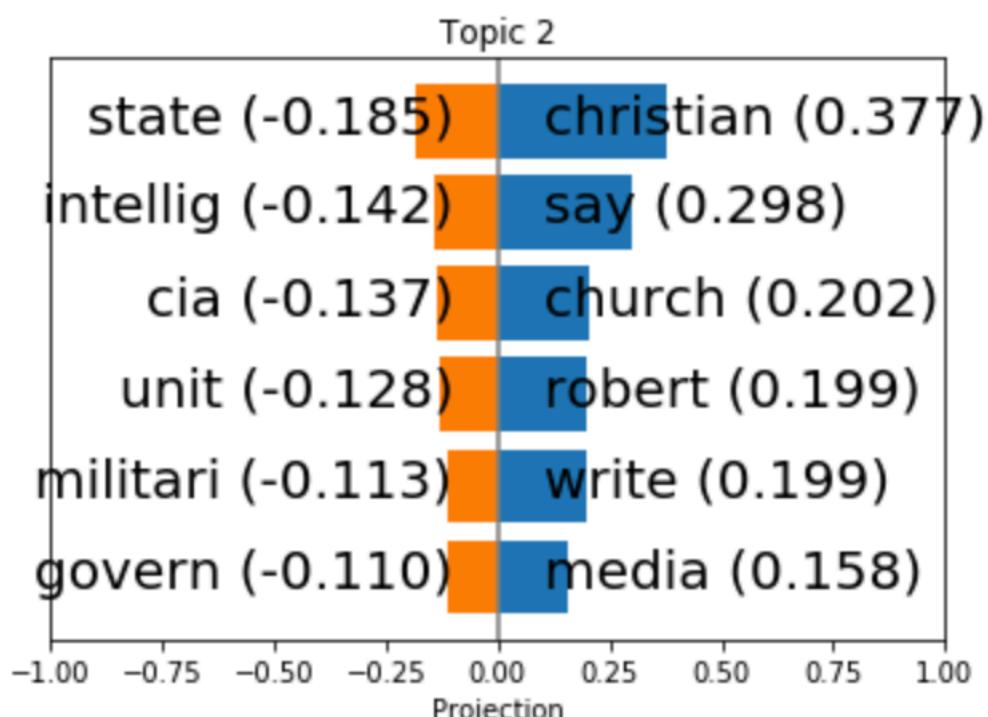
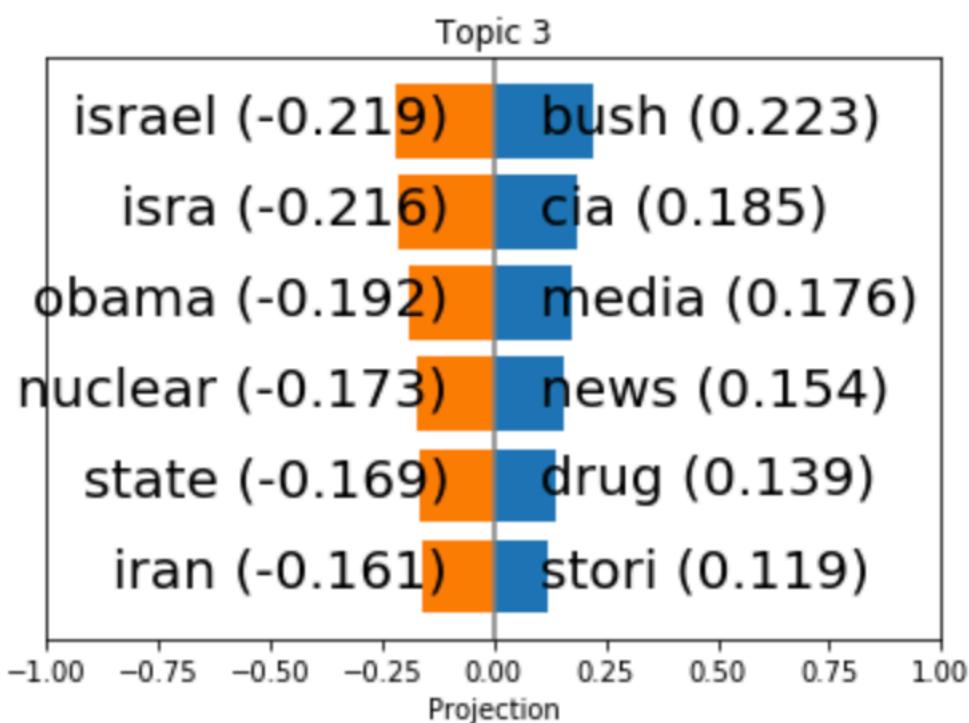
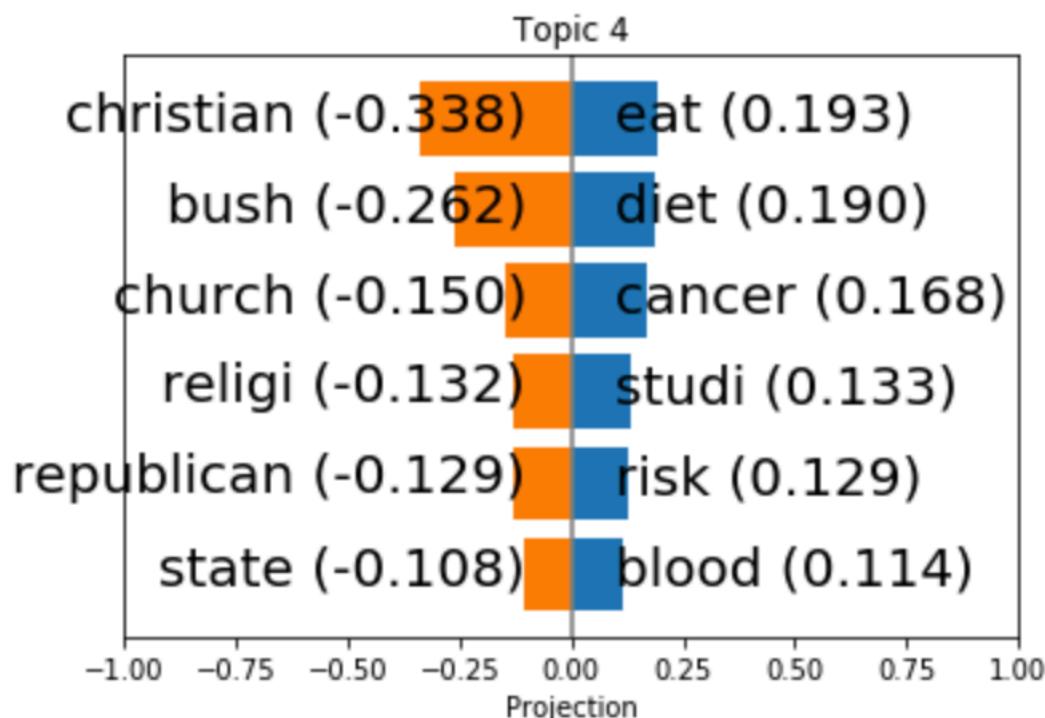
Figure 26**Figure 27**

Figure 28

Using LDA, the topics were slightly different. With lambda set to 0.2 in pyLDAvis, the top five topics had the following top five terms:

Table 4

LDA Topics for Data Labelled 'Reliable'	
Topic	Top Five Terms
1	bush, war, nuclear, intellig, cia
2	god, church, jesu, pastor, love
3	trump, abort, court, feder, vote
4	islam, muslim, isi[s]. palestinian, polic
5	eat, diet, food, cancer, diseas

In comparison, for the data labelled 'fake', the LDA topics were as follows:

Table 5

LDA Topics for Data Labelled 'Fake'	
Topic	Top Five Terms
1	god, love, thing, book, feel

2	law, war, militari, polic, govern
3	gold, bank, trade, silver, debt
4	republican, vote, senat, trump, democrat
5	research, market, product, industry, technolog

Interestingly, the terms in the “reliable” data were more linked to specific named entities, such as “trump” and “bush”; “christianity” and “islam” appeared in separate topics. On the other hand, the religion-associated topic in the “fake” data was less specific. Additionally, the “fake” data had a topic that was clearly about investment in gold and silver, while the “reliable” data did not.

The LSI topics from the “fake” data also reflect this general pattern:

Figure 29

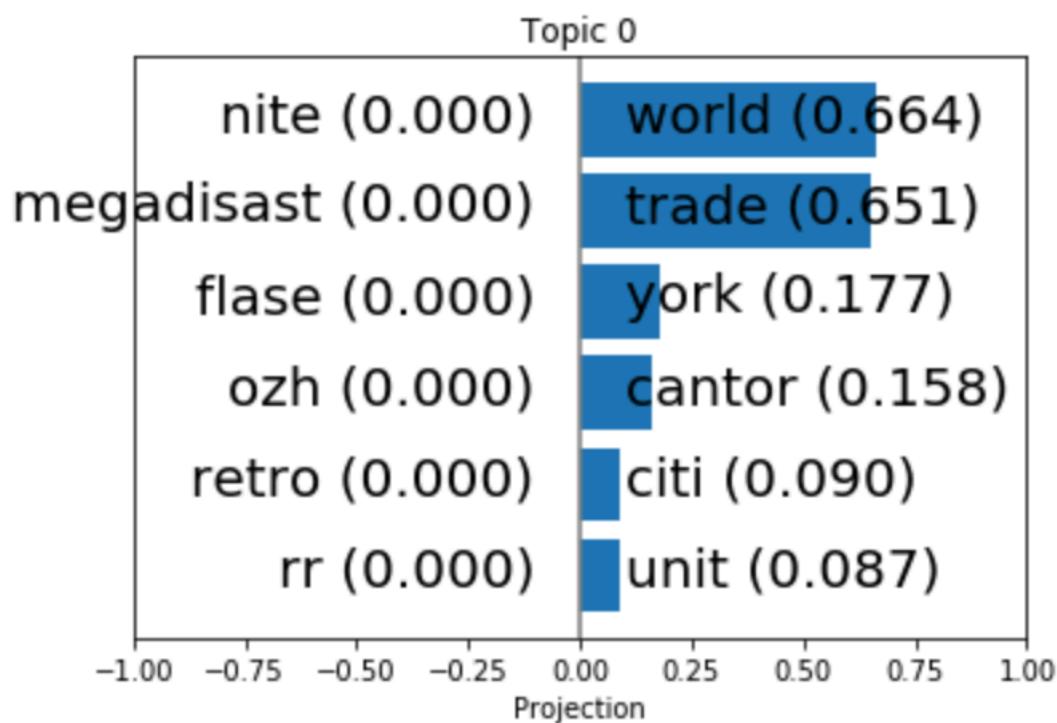


Figure 30

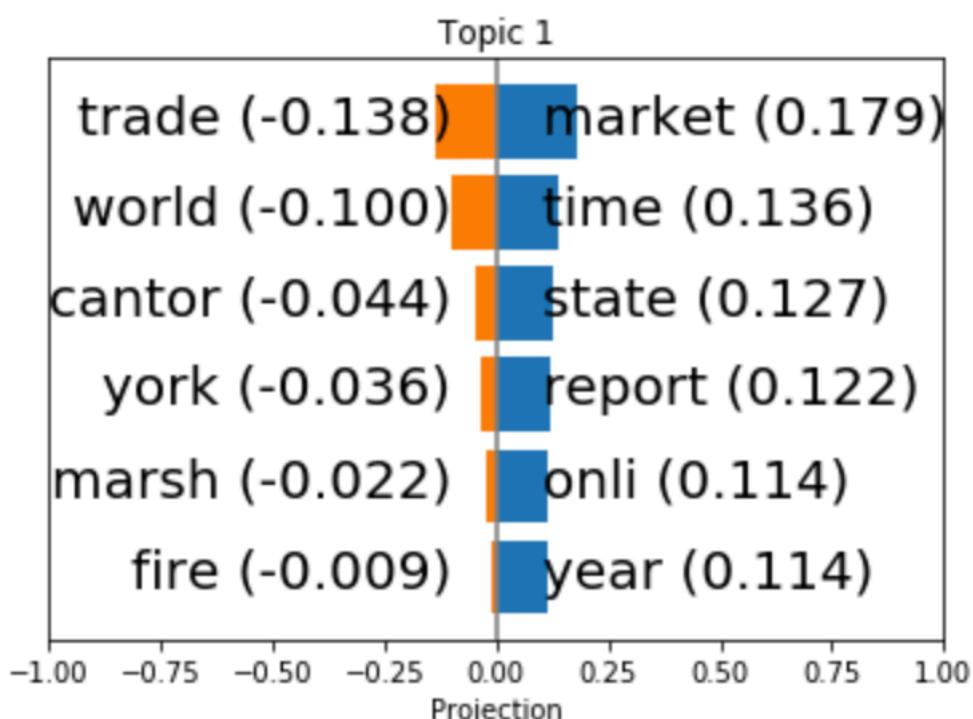


Figure 31

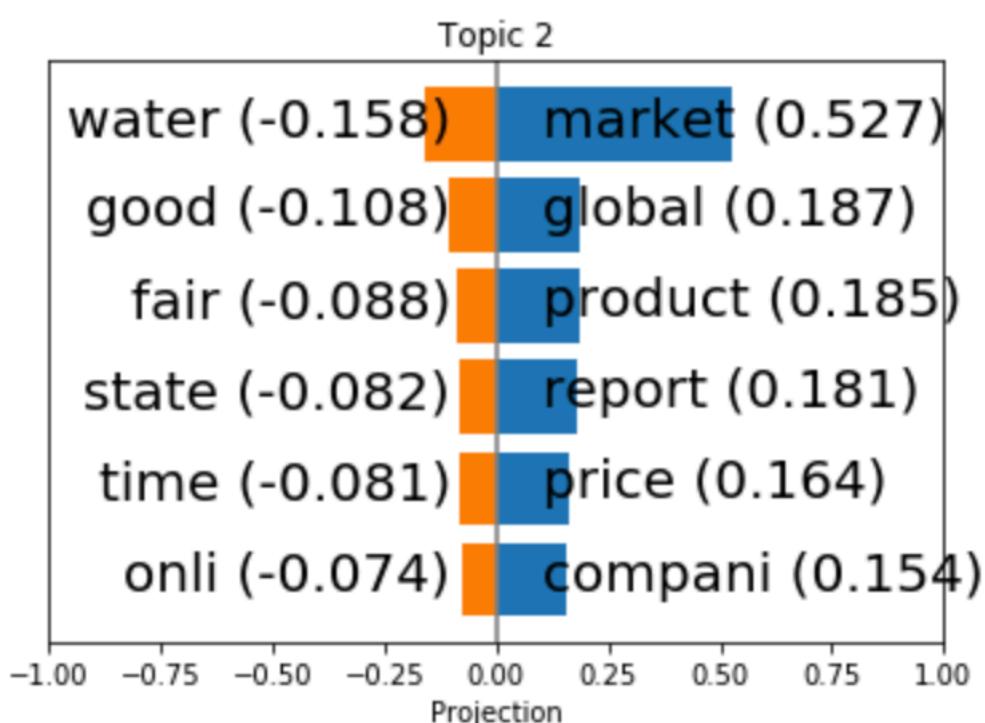


Figure 32

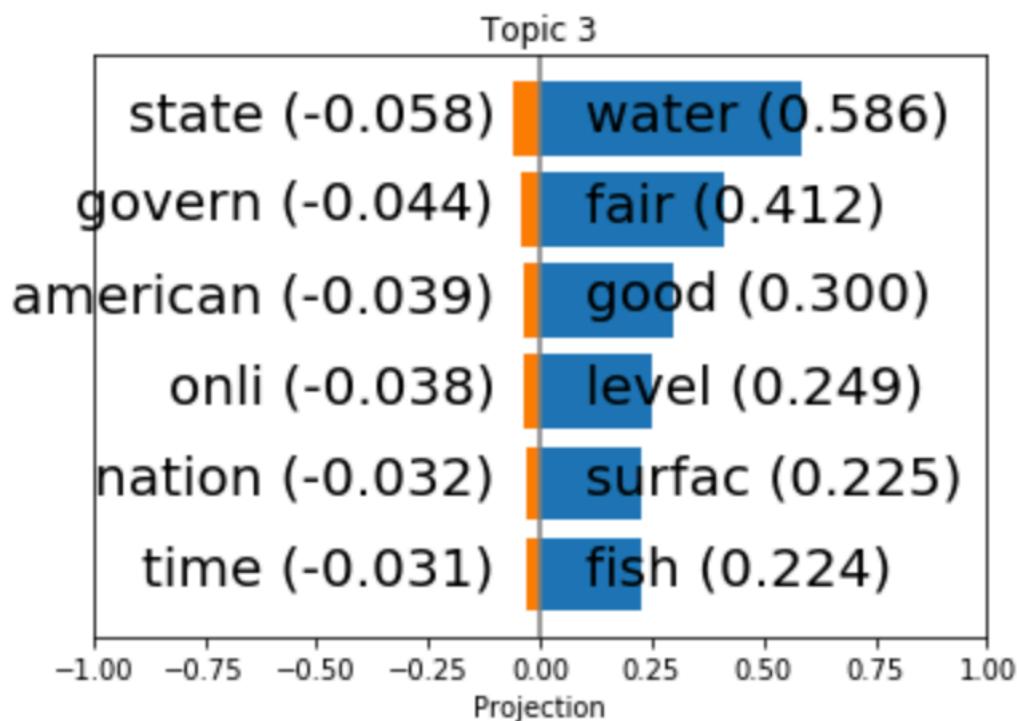


Figure 33

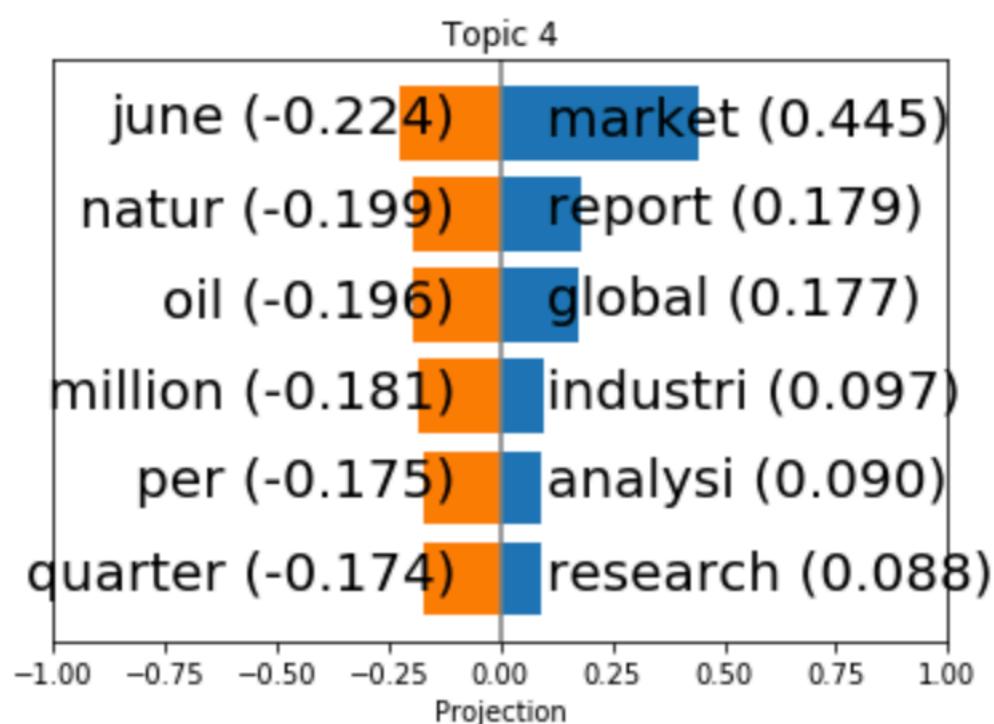
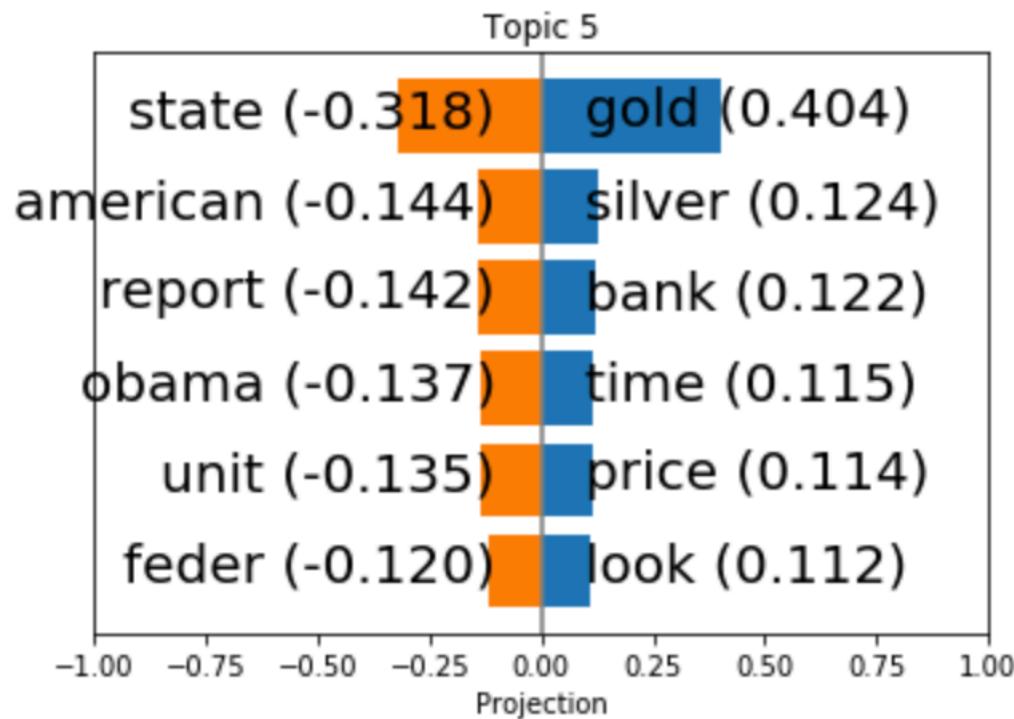


Figure 34

Conclusion

The most significant finding from the sentiment analysis of documents labelled ‘fake’ or ‘reliable’ from the dataset was that 23% of the articles labeled ‘fake’ had a subjectivity score higher than or equal to .5, whereas only 17% of the articles labeled ‘reliable’ had this high of a subjectivity score. It seemed that the TextBlob subjectivity score was more important than the polarity score in distinguishing between ‘reliable’ and ‘fake’ documents.

In the predictive analysis, various classifiers using different vectorization techniques were fairly accurate in determining whether a document from the testing data was labelled as ‘fake’ or ‘reliable’. An inspection of the most informative features indicated, however, the terms linked to document source were particularly important in determining which class a given document belonged to. This indicates that words linked to what source an article came from may be more important than other words in determining whether it will be classified as ‘fake’ or “reliable”.

Lastly, several classifiers were built to predict the four labels of ‘fake’, ‘reliable’, ‘bias’, and ‘political’, found in the dataset. The classifiers consistently performed best at predicting the ‘reliable’ label for documents in the testing data. The same classifiers were used to predict all of the labels in the sampled dataset. The results were less helpful because some of the categories were very underrepresented using previously made sample.

A next step for this project would be to consider using significantly more data. While this is time intensive in terms of processing, it may yield much more useful results for the multi-class classification.

An important takeaway of this project is that it is somewhat difficult to unlink fake news detection from human labeling. For example, even after the resampling and significant inclusion of other sources than the New York Times and beforeitsnews.com, some of the most predictive features in the most accurate classifier were “reuters”, and “ap”. Before the resampling, the most predictive bigrams were “new york”, “main story”, and other bigrams often repeated in New York Times articles. If all articles from a given source are labelled as “fake”, “bias”, or “junksci”, a machine learning classifier may actually be more or less predicting the source, if certain phrases repeat in articles from a given source, than words and phrases that are inherently distinctive to fake or reliable news.

Topic modeling results from LDA showed that data labelled “reliable” in the dataset was focused on specific political leaders and current events, whereas the “fake” topics were more general. Additionally, the “fake” data topic modeling showed a topic that was linked to investment in gold and silver, which was absent in the data labelled “reliable”. Additionally, the “reliable” data had two separate topics linked to religion, whereas the top terms of the “fake” dataset topic on religion were more general and not linked to a specific religion.

A major takeaway of this project is the importance of source in identifying fake news. The machine learning models keyed into words that occurred in specific sources, and since all documents in a given source had the same target label, the prediction seemed to be at once predicting the label (i.e., “fake” or “realiable”) and the source that a document came from. Many fact checking organizations and resources today are prone to labelling entire sources as reliable or unreliable, without considering individual documents. This may have ramifications in machine learning identification of disinformation, as there appears to be some overlap in identifying whether a source is “fake” and identifying a given source, as the classifier keys into

specific words from sources labelled as entirely “fake” or “reliable”. Thus, organizations may want to be aware of the fact that the labeling and perceived validity (or non-validity) of entire sources affects not only social opinion but can be relevant to machine learning as well.