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Case #1 - Facebook and Fake News

Question: "What is the problem with fake news and what should Zuckerberg do about it?"

Fake News - it is a term we often hear tossed around by big media giants in the likes of CNN, MSNBC, and Buzzfeed, as well as President Trump. The term first became popular when Trump had called CNN "fake news" during one of his first press conferences right after his underdog Presidential Election victory over Hillary Clinton. He ridiculed the media for spinning 'fake' and/or sensational hit pieces in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of his win, his voter base, and his policy platform. Since then, the main stream media has taken the term for a joy ride - using "fake news" in headlines for various controversial topics from Russian collusion in the 2016 election, to even conspiracies about the Parkland shooter in Florida just last week. Fake news, by definition, is "yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional print and broadcast news media or online social media" [2]. Lately, the biggest headlines regarding fake news target Russian internet trolls who apparently stirred up trouble by creating a variety of hoaxes and false narratives that got passed around online. These stories wound up everywhere from conspiracy theory/anti government Facebook pages to the mainstream media. People were deceived into believing these headlines, and through the power of social media, it went viral and influenced the public's opinion of various topics.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, argued in a press conference following the 2016 election that fake stories were posted on both sides of the political spectrum. He asserted "Why would you think there would be fake news on one side and not the other?" [1]. The whole idea behind fake news is that it is meant to distract people and influence their opinions: it plays into people's confirmation bias. Facebook has the potential to "offer partisans in both directions: a limitless, on-demand narrative fix, occasionally punctuated by articles grounded in actual world events, when those suit their preferences" [1]. Fake news does not limit itself to conspiracy pages on Facebook, however. The mainstream media is just as guilty, if not more guilty, of participating in the same yellow journalism they claim to be so against. CNN has been caught numerous times fabricating stories just for the sake of boosting their own ratings. James O'Keefe, a conservative political activist, is spearheading a movement called Project Veritas, who's purpose is to expose lies and deceit in the media. In one of his hidden camera recordings, he managed to capture CNN anchor Van Jones admitting, "The Russia thing is just a big nothingburger" [3]. Fox News is no innocent angel either - they have been repeatedly caught skewing polling statistics and data on air in order to manipulate the opinions of their viewers. They are also often cited as being one of the most politically biased mainstream news sources, and put on their own emotional flair to their stories. Case in point: there is a lot of money backing sensationalist news. People are going

to want to listen to media outlets that validate their own opinions, and rarely open their minds to a different lens or worldview. News corporations are incentivized to publish more "fake" and biased news in order to draw bigger crowds. This positive feedback loop boosts the ratings and views of the network publishing the stories, and hence they make more money.

This sensationalizing of the media is arguably just as bad as a conspiracy theory article being shared millions of times on Facebook. Social media has a big impact, and the fact that a blatantly false article being shared that many times is direct evidence of how many people hold that same belief. However, the mainstream media has just as big of an impact as Facebook. Millions of viewers tune in every hour to hear the latest stories from around the country. The media is guaranteed a captive audience around the clock. If Fox and CNN can guarantee returning viewers for every pro and anti Trump story they air, both networks will make millions. The same can be said for Facebook. People sign up to use Facebook as a product that not only connects us with one another, but serves as a media outlet, which Facebook even admits is its end goal: "On January 16, 2014, Facebook introduced "Trending", an algorithm that pushed a list of popular topics that were deemed of interest across Facebook into users' News Feed where members could select from a list of trending stories they might be interested in" [1]. Facebook's Trending algorithm curates results directly from articles and links that were previously clicked on. It is completely based on past browsing history and attempts to predict what a viewer would be interested in next, and they are positioning themselves to be a "leading online hub for conversation about public events and news" [1]. Prominent news companies from across the political spectrum have presences on Facebook. It serves as one of their best platforms for outreach, and continues to do so especially as people ditch their cable TV subscriptions for on demand streaming with their mobile devices. News sites are motivated to be on Facebook because social media plays such a huge role in so many people's lives, and there is no better way to captivate an audience by sharing sensationalist pieces to generate ad revenue. Facebook is a guaranteed money maker for both players, and it shows no signs of stopping.

So what should Mark Zuckerberg do about it? There is honestly no solution. He runs a private company, and as a result he has two jobs: deliver a working product and make shareholders money. If the best way to make shareholders money is to continue letting crazy conspiracy theorists share their outlandish stories, that's a problem with the people sharing the fake news - not Facebook itself. Even if Facebook were to eliminate the curation algorithm that displays content relevant to what a person previously looked at in an effort to reduce the amount of fake news shared, it is still going to be on the site. Permanently banning these conspiracy pages that promote fake news is a completely different ethical conversation of its own. For starters, it violates the First Amendment rights of Facebook's users. Just because a story is not truthful does not mean people should not have the right to view it. That is a choice that individuals must make themselves. In addition, even if Facebook were to ban certain sensationalist content from its site, who is to say Facebook would not discriminate against the content in which it banned? What if there is an agenda being pushed and only one side of the argument gets silenced, while the other side is given a free pass? Facebook is the world's largest social network, and they have an incredible amount of power in their hands. The events of the

last two years demonstrated Facebook's considerable power to connect and influence across the globe. At the stroke of a few keys, Facebook can limit any headline or topic of their choosing. Furthermore, who determines what is truly considered "fake news"? In my view, any source that publishes stories with a shred of bias is "fake", mainly because the facts have been twisted or skewed to appeal to a particular audience. If any news source that participates in sensationalizing media, shouldn't that also fall under the umbrella of "fake news"? The mainstream media is therefore just as guilty as conspiracy theorist pages.

One might argue that as Zuckerberg's private product, Facebook has the legal right to limit the content that is viewed on its page. It is, after all, a service; one which the users are bound by Facebook's terms of service agreement and usage policies. Using Facebook is completely voluntary. Nobody is forcing anyone anywhere to use it, nor is anyone telling others what to read, believe, et cetera. If Facebook really wanted to ban all "fake news", that is their prerogative. Zuckerberg can say he wants to limit the available content, and as a private entity Facebook has every right to do so. This will likely be an ongoing debate for years to come, but the two most likely scenarios are the following: either Facebook continues to allow fake news and it is up to the reader's discretion whether to believe it or not, or Facebook takes authoritarian means to crack down on posted content and restrict the First Amendment and free speech on its platform in the name of protecting the integrity of the product.

However, the most effective solution does not lie within Facebook, or Mark Zuckerberg, or policymakers in DC. The solution lies with us - the public. The last two years have felt like a reality TV show. The line between news and entertainment has been erased. People find entertainment value in sensationalist headlines. That's the only reason why we have validated fake news in the first place. What needs to happen is a cultural shift - one where we expect journalists to uphold their integrity with truthful, verifiable reporting and accurate sourcing; one where we distance ourselves from sensationalist media in order to deprive those publishing fake news the audience that consumes it and the revenue that accompanies it. And finally, if news companies want to combat fake news, they should start with an internal reflection of what it means to be the information beacons they represent.

Sources:

[1] Facebook Fake News in the Post -Truth World (Harvard Business Case Pack)

[2] "Fake News." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_news.

[3] Posted By Tim Hains On Date June 27, 2017. "American Pravda: 'Project Veritas' Catches CNN Producer Admitting Russia Story Is "Mostly Bullshit," "About Ratings"." *Video | RealClearPolitics*, www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/06/27/ american_pravda_project_veritas_catches_cnn_producer_admitting_russia_story_is_bullshit_ab out_ratings.html.