Fake News, Fake Problem? An Analysis of the Fake News Audience in the Lead Up to the 2016 Presidential Election

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Fake News, Fake Problem?
An Analysis of the Fake News Audience in the Lead Up to the 2016 Presidential Election

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TPRC Student Paper Contest Winner

Abstract: In light of the recent U.S. election, many fear that "fake news" has become a powerful and sinister force in the news media environment. These fears stem from the idea that as news consumption increasingly takes place via social media sites, news audiences are more likely to find themselves drawn in by sensational headlines to sources that lack accuracy or legitimacy, with troubling consequences for democracy. However, we know little about the extent to which online audiences are exposed to fake news, and how these outlets factor into the average digital news diet. In this paper, I argue that fears about fake news consumption echo fears about partisan selective exposure, in that both stem from concerns that more media choice leads audiences to consume news that align with their beliefs, and to ignore news that does not. Yet recent studies have concluded that the partisan media audience (1) is small and (2) also consumes news from popular, centrist outlets. I use online news audience data to show a similar phenomenon plays out when it comes to fake news. Findings reveal that social media does indeed play an outsized role in generating traffic to fake news sites; however, the actual fake news audience is small, and a large portion of it also visits more popular, "real" news sites. I conclude by discussing the implications of a news media landscape where the audience is exposed to contradictory sources of public affairs information.

Keywords: fake news, news audience, political communication, 2016 election, social media

Concerns surrounding "fake news" have abounded since the most recent U.S. presidential election. Misleading or flat out false headlines were shared millions of times on the internet throughout 2016 (H. J. Parkinson, 2016), leading many to conclude that "fake news" has become a powerful and sinister force in the online news media environment, with dire consequences for democracy. Apple's CEO, for instance, said that fake news is "killing people's minds" (Glaser, 2017), while Hillary Clinton called the spread of fake news "an epidemic" that "can have real-world consequences" (Zengerle, 2016). As a result, news organizations like BuzzFeed and Slate and tech companies like Facebook and Google have taken steps to stifle fake news production and dissemination (Doctor, 206; Owen, 2016; Smith, 2016; Wang, 2016), while educators throughout the country have begun trying to teach elementary and middle school students ways to tell fake news stories from real ones (Large, 2017; C. Thompson, 2017).

These efforts, and the discourse surrounding them, assume that fake news reaches a broad, susceptible audience, who do not fact check these stories against other sources. Yet the extent to which online audiences are actually exposed to fake news remains unknown, as well as how that exposure compares with their exposure to real news. Has fake news consumption recently increased? Has it overshadowed real news consumption, or replaced it altogether? Currently, worries about fake news far outweigh knowledge about its scope. This paper bridges the gap.

What follows is an analysis of online audience data that examines fake news consumption patterns leading up to the November 2016 election. Findings reveal that visitors to fake news sites comprised a small portion of the overall online news audience. They also reveal a significant, negative relationship between a news site being fake and

the size of its audience, as well as the amount of time audiences were willing to engage with it. What's more, the fake news audience visited established, "real" news sites at a high rate that was strongly correlated with real news site popularity. The findings also demonstrate that visits to fake news sites originated from social network sites (SNSs) at a much higher rate than visits to real news sites, confirming the primary role social media plays in spreading fake news content. That spread, however, appears to be much more limited than many had suspected.

In light of these findings, I argue that the current "fake news" discourse overstates and simplifies its role in the news media landscape. In doing so, it echoes the discourse surrounding another oft-discussed topic within political communication – partisan selective exposure (i.e., "filter bubbles"). Concerns surrounding both stem from the idea that, in an ever-expanding media environment, audiences turn to news sources that align with their beliefs and ignore sources that do not, and that the content from these news sources – whether they be one-sided or altogether false – shape the way audiences see the world around them. Yet, recent studies have found that the partisan media audience (1) is small and (2) also consumes news from popular, centrist outlets (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Weeks, Ksiazek, & Holbert, 2016). This study observes a similar phenomenon playing out when it comes to fake news.

To be sure, this article does not dispute that U.S. voters have grown more politically polarized or that they increasingly disagree on basic facts. These observations are an accurate description of the current political climate (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016; Doherty, Kiley, & Jameson, 2016; Doherty, Kiley, & Johnson, 2016; Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Eva Matsa, 2014). However, the discourse currently surrounding fake

news presents a three-step process wherein an increase in fake news production leads to widespread fake news consumption via social media, which results in an increase in political confusion. My findings dispute the second part of that sequence: although SNSs do indeed play a significant part in spreading fake news, the actual reach of fake news is very narrow. This suggests either that fake news plays a marginal role in the spread of political discord, or that its impact does not occur in the straightforward way in which it is currently discussed. Alternatively, rather than a cause, fake news may just be a symptom of a journalism's rapidly growing credibility problem. In short, by revealing the small size of the fake news audience, this paper argues that current concerns about fake news overstate its scope and simplify its role in the political news media environment.

The fake news crisis

As recently as 2012, scholars used "fake news" as a term that referred to "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" – late night television shows that blurred the line between news and comedy (Borden & Tew, 2007; Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013; Day & Thompson, 2012). Now, the term more commonly refers to false or misleading information made to look like a fact-based news story (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Ha, 2017), in order to "influence public opinion or cull digital advertising dollars" (Uberti, 2017). The sudden shift in the term's meaning stems from a confluence of events leading up to the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president: The increasingly central role of SNSs for news consumption (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016), the Russian propaganda effort to produce and spread fake news stories during the 2016 presidential campaign (Timberg, 2016), and the habit of some political elites to legitimize fake news stories by passing them along to their followers using social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter

(Flood, 2016). Taken together, these circumstances have contributed to a media environment where sensational headlines are easier to find than they are to verify. As a result, two-in-three U.S. adults now believe fake news causes confusion about current events and issues, as well as basic facts (Barthel et al., 2016).

However, the recent outbreak of fake news stories (the "great fake news panic of 2016" (Uberti, 2016)), is a flare up of an old phenomenon, not the start of a new one. Fake news has been around for as long as news itself, with frighteningly real consequences. Six centuries before stories appeared about Hillary Clinton selling weapons to ISIS, a preacher in Italy spread anti-Semitic rumors that Jews had kidnapped and murdered a missing child, leading to arrests, tortures, and burnings at the stake (Soll, 2016). The printing press brought with it an increase in the availability of real news, along with the spread of stories about sea monsters, witches, and sinners who caused natural disasters (Soll, 2016). As time went on, fake news became an ordinary part of the media ecosystem. In the eighteenth century, a peak of European fake news production, a London newspaper ended an article with the footnote, "Half of this article is true" (Darnton, 2017).

When Europeans began settling in America, they brought fake news with them. In fact, misleading and manipulative reporting played a central role in American journalism long before the emergence of the objectivity that currently defines it. In de Tocqueville's study of early U.S. democracy, he noted wearily that journalists distorted the truth to build "support of his own views" (Tocqueville, 2012; Uberti, 2016). For example, to discourage sympathy for Native Americans after the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin got a Boston newspaper to publish a completely false news story about Native

Americans working alongside the British to murder and scalp hundreds of children along the American frontier (R. G. Parkinson, 2016). Sensational, phony headlines were used throughout America's history not just to whip up anger for political purposes, but also to increase circulation: in 1835, *The New York Sun* garnered many new subscribers when it ran a series about the discovery of alien life on the Moon (Soll, 2016; Uberti, 2016). The current fake news crisis fits into a "long history of misinformation" (Darnton, 2017).

So fake news is not new, but has it gotten worse? Many think so. As *The New York Times'* President and CEO put it, "Fake news is not new… and yet what's happening now feels different" (M. Thompson, 2016). Because news consumption increasingly occurs via SNSs, there is growing concern that news audiences no longer notice the sources of the headlines that they see in their newsfeeds, muddying the distinction between credible and sensational sources. This failure of news literacy to catch up with changing patterns of news consumption is used to explain why so many believe that the flood of pro-Trump fake news stories during 2016 helped win him the election (Dewey, 2016). Audiences clicked on and shared anti-Clinton articles that aligned with their political beliefs, without considering the credibility of the publisher (Davies, 2016).

Political elites could be instrumental in distinguishing fact from fiction for less politically savvy citizens, but can just as easily make matters worse. When politicians pass fake news stories along on their own social media profiles, they give their followers the impression that these stories are credible and vouched for. For example, after the election, former Arkansas governor and Republican presidential nominee Mike Huckabee shared a link to a fictitious article about "liberal, Jewish Northwestern students who were

trying to smear Trump and his supporters" to his two million Facebook followers (Flood, 2016). The article was a manipulation of an actual incident where Northwestern freshmen painted swastikas onto a chapel months before the election (Silverstein, 2016). In another instance, former national security adviser Michael Flynn, as well as his son, tweeted out links to a fake news story that tied Hillary Clinton to a child sex ring (Blake, 2016), leading a man to bring an assault rifle to the pizza parlor that was supposedly involved (Ha, 2017). And since his inauguration, President Trump has made false claims about voter fraud and media companies he disapproves of, making him not only a potential beneficiary of fake news but also "a seasoned practitioner of it" (M. Thompson, 2016). By making false claims or passing along fake news stories, political elites diminish the public's ability to fact check the news at an especially precarious moment when the media environment is overflowing with contradictory content.

Russia appears to have noticed and capitalized on the current news media confusion. The country launched a sophisticated propaganda campaign in the lead up to the U.S. presidential election that included a team of people creating a network of websites and social media accounts to spread false, negative portrayals of Hillary Clinton (Timberg, 2016). Independent researchers as well as U.S. intelligence who investigated the Russian operation found that by creating and spreading fake news stories, "Russians exploited American-made technology platforms to attack U.S. democracy" in an attempt to hack the election in Donald Trump's favor (Bennett, 2017; Timberg, 2016). Though it is difficult to measure the impact of Russia's campaign, there is wide consensus that fake news as a whole sowed confusion among the electorate (Barthel et al., 2016) and perhaps even cost Hillary Clinton the White House (H. J. Parkinson, 2016; Read, 2016).

Those who support this conclusion blame Russia (as well as a small number of Americans who produced anti-Clinton fake news to capitalize on online ad revenue (Dewey, 2016)) for creating such influential fake news stories, but they also blame SNSs for providing the tool used to spread these stories to a wide and susceptible audience. A majority of U.S. adults report getting news on social media platforms (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016), making them an obvious mechanism for fake news producers to cast a wide net with their content. By sharing fake news on SNSs, the argument goes, these publishers warped the internet's most democratic asset – it's ability to lower the barrier for producing and disseminating media – into a tool for undercutting democracy itself:

> The internet has broken down the traditional distinction between professional news-gathering and amateur rumor-mongering. On the internet … a fake news site designed to look like a real Colorado newspaper … can reach a wide audience as easily as real news organizations like the Denver Post, the New York Times, and Fox News (Lee, 2016).

Yes, fake news sites *can* reach as wide an audience as established, credible news organizations. But do they? The heads of Facebook and Google appear to think so. Both companies recently cut off advertising revenue to fake news sites in an attempt to discourage their production (Doctor, 206). They have also partnered with 17 news organizations in to create a tool for debunking fake news stories in the lead up to the French presidential election, which indicates that fears of fake news have extended outside the U.S. (Chang, 2017). Meanwhile, Slate has created a web browser app that allows users to flag fake news because "the scale at which it is now being produced and consumed is unprecedented" (Oremus, 2016). Yet, at this point, few empirical analyses have confirmed or denied this conclusion. On the other hand, a good deal of research into

a related area of political communication – partisan media, or "filter bubbles" – offers reason for skepticism when it comes to the reach of fakes news.

Partisan Selective Exposure

In today's political climate, citizens are more polarized than ever (Bump, 2016). In the U.S., majorities of both the Democratic and Republican parties hold very unfavorable views of each other that stem from feelings of fear and anger (Doherty, Kiley, & Jameson, 2016). Many suspect the root of this increasingly acrimonious partisanship is that, in a seemingly limitless news media environment, citizens have restricted their political news consumption to sources that align with their ideologies (Dilliplane, 2011; Jones, Ferraiolo, & Byrne, 2011; Levendusky, 2013; Stroud, 2011).

This belief stems from the theory of *selective exposure*, a foundational concept in communication and media studies that states that people choose media that reinforce their existing attitudes and interests (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Within political communication, this phenomenon has been referred to as "partisan selective exposure" (Stroud, 2010), "filter bubbles" (Baer, 2016; El-Bermawy, 2016; Pariser, 2011), "echo chambers" (Garrett, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2009), and the "red/blue media divide" (Harrison, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Keegan, 2016). This theory offers an appealingly straightforward explanation of the mechanism by which citizens grow more polarized.

However, empirical studies of partisan selective exposure have been mixed. Though some have found evidence of "filter bubbles" (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2014), others have concluded that audiences of all political identities congregate on more popular, ideologically-centrist news media (Gentzkow & Shapiro,

2011; Weeks et al., 2016). Instead of exclusively pursuing ideologically aligning news sources, online audiences tend to focus on what's popular. For example, they look for media that has has been "liked" or "favorited," or has made a site's "most read" list (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Yang, 2015). On SNSs, popularity cues in the form of social endorsements reduce partisan selective exposure "to levels indistinguishable from chance" (Messing & Westwood, 2014, p. 1042), leading to cross-cutting as well as like-minded political discussions (Heatherly, Lu, & Lee, 2016). Advocates of this line of reasoning argue that audiences equate popularity with quality (Webster, 2014; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), and are thus likely to see the popularity of a news story as evidence of its importance and accuracy (Asch, 1951; Mutz & Young, 2011).

There are also characteristics of the online media system that increase the likelihood audiences will be more exposed to more popular content. Though no one outside of Facebook and Google know exactly what goes into the algorithms that determine their link placements, it is understood that content popularity plays an important role. As a result, a headline from a brand name in news media that already has millions of followers (e.g., CNN) is likely to get pushed out to audiences more often and more forcefully than a headline from a niche partisan news site. Webster and Ksiazek call this phenomenon "the persistence of popularity" and argue that because of it, "most niche media will be doomed to obscurity" (2012, p. 52).

This begs the question: If the "persistence of popularity" has prevented media audiences from self-segregating into ideological filter bubbles, might it have the same effect when it comes to fake news? After all, partisan media and fake news are alike in

important ways: both are likely be obscure brands compared to those producing more general, centrist news; and both are likely to only appeal to a subset of the overall news audience. Even if a fake news story goes "viral," and is shared many times on SNSs, it is still likely to be shared by and with media audiences who will also come across news stories from brand name, establishment sources, simply because those sources have the resources and built-in followings to more effectively push their content out to the public. In light of these similarities, I hypothesize that:

H1. Visitors to fake news sites will comprise a small portion of the overall news audience, and will also spend less time with fake news than they do with real news.
H2. The fake news audience will also consume news from established news brands.

Studies of the fake news audience, while limited at this point, have found that visitors fake news sites come overwhelmingly from social media platforms like Facebook (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; H. J. Parkinson, 2016; Silverman, Hall, Strapagiel, Singer-Vine, & Shaban, 2016). Therefore, I also hypothesize that:

H3. Visitors to fake news sites will originate from SNSs more often than visitors to real news sites.

Data

My data come from comScore, a web analytic company that reports monthly estimates of online audiences. comScore data have been used in past analyses of digital audience behavior (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Nelson & Webster, 2016; Taneja & Wu, 2013). The data are collected from a panel of about one million people ages two and older, who load comScore tracking software on their desktop computers. That software tracks the URL's the user visits and the time they spend looking at each address. comScore fuses these data with server-based counts of traffic that come from tagging

websites ("comScore Media Metrix Description of Methodology," 2013). Each month, comScore uses weights to make projections about the online behavior of the total US online audience. In October 2016, comScore recorded a total internet audience of about 232 million unique visitors. Of those, about 162 million visited online news sites, as classified by comScore.

Defining Fake News

For this analysis, I compared 30 fake news sites with 24 real news sites. The real news sites included a mix of newspapers, broadcast, and digital-first publishers, all of which are established brands within the news media sphere (e.g., Yahoo-ABC News, CNN, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Fox News, and BuzzFeed). The fake news sites were more difficult to determine, because "fake news" within the context of the 2016 election lacks a clear and concise definition. I referred to a list of fake news outlets compiled by OpenSources, a research team led by media professor Melissa Zimdars. OpenSources has a six-step process for analyzing news websites that includes examining the site's domain name, its "About Us" section, the sources its stories draw on, the writing style, the site's aesthetic, and its social media presence. OpenSources classifies the sites on this list using a series of tags like "fake," "satire," "hate," and "clickbait." If a site provides accurate news with a distinct political slant, for example, it is tagged as "political." If a site promotes conspiracy theories (e.g., the Sandy Hook massacre was staged, intelligence community leaks are the result of a U.S. "Deep State") it is tagged with "conspiracy." And if a source "entirely fabricates information," it is tagged as "fake." The OpenSources team often used multiple tags for individual sites: for

example, Drudge Report was tagged as "political" and "bias," while viralliberty.com was tagged as "fake," "bias," and "clickbait."

The OpenSources list is constantly being updated, but currently includes 941 sites. For the purpose of this study, I wanted to focus solely on sites that met the most literal definition of "fake news," meaning they completely fabricate news stories. To do so, I only included the 126 sites OpenSources had tagged as "fake." However, comScore requires at least 30 visitors from its panel to visit a site before it is included in its panel. Of those 126, only 30 met that threshold in October of 2016. As a result, the total number of sites in the sample was 54.

Analysis

To address H1, I examined visitation (measured by unique visitors) and engagement (measured by average minutes per visitor) for real and fake news sites over time, in order to observe any changes in audience behavior in the year leading up to and immediately following the presidential election. To do this, I compared the monthly average visitors to real news sites with the monthly average visitors to fake news site between January of 2016 and January of 2017. I then compared the monthly average time spent with real news sites with the monthly average engagement time spent with fake news sites between January 2016 and January 2017.

Then, focusing exclusively on October 2016 data, I ran a series of Point-Biserial Correlation analyses to observe whether a news site being fake was significantly related to it audience size (measured by unique visitors), its audience engagement (measured by average minutes per visitor), and the frequency by which its visitors originate from Facebook (measured by the percent of visits coming from Facebook). Point-Biserial

Correlations are used when correlating a dichotomous variable with a continuous variable. In this instance, the dichotomous variable is whether or not a news site is fake, while the continuous variables are the audience size, engagement, and rate of visitors originating from Facebook. Point-Biserial Correlations follow the same assumptions as Pearson correlations. Observing these correlations allowed me to more rigorously address H1 and H3.

Finally, I looked at cross visitation patterns to see what percentage of visitors to fake news sites also visited real news sites in October 2016, in order to get at H2. Doing so allowed me to understand if the fake news audience exists in a "filter bubble" or if they have a more varied news diet.

Results

As Figure 1 reveals, the number of monthly visitors to an average real news site was more than 25 times larger than the number of monthly visitors to an average fake news sites throughout 2016, including the months leading up to and immediately following the presidential election. The audience size for an average real news sites was about 9 million unique visitors, while the audience size for an average fake news site was only about 350,000, meaning the average fake news site attracted only about 4% of the average real news site. Even when the real news audience dropped suddenly, immediately following the election, it still boasted millions more unique visitors than the fake news audience. What's more, the drop seems to have only lasted a month, as it grew nearly back to its November peak in January 2017. These results support H1.

Figure 1 about here.

Online audiences tended to also spend more time with real news than with fake news. As Figure 2 shows, online audiences spent about 9 minutes per month with an average real news site, while they only spent about half of that on average with an average fake news site. It is interesting to note that engagement with real news increased following the election, while engagement with fake news decreased.

Figure 2 about here.

I then performed Point-Biserial Correlation analyses to see if a news site being real or fake was significantly related to its audience size, engagement, and the source of its traffic. The results, as shown in Table 1, reveal a strong, negative relationship between a news site being fake and it having both a smaller audience and lower levels of engagement, again corroborating H1. The results also reveal that visitors are significantly more likely to navigate to fake news sites from the SNS Facebook, supporting H3.

Table 1 about here.

Finally, I examined the rate at which the fake news audience also visits real news sites. As Figure 3 shows, there appears to be quite a bit of overlap between real and fake news audiences. On average, 40 percent of the visitors to fake news sites in the sample also visited Yahoo-ABC, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and ABC News. What's more, the percentage of the fake news audience that visited real news sites was very strongly correlated (.9) with the overall popularity of the real news site. So, although a small portion of the fake news audience visited the least popular real news sites in the sample – Aljazeera (0.7%) and BBC (1.5%) – about half of the fake news audience visited the most popular sites in the sample – *The New York Times* (40%) and Yahoo-ABC News (50%). This suggests that, rather than confined to an echo chamber, the fake

news audience instead exposes itself to news content that a vast majority of the online audience also consumes. This supports H2.

Figure 3 here.

Discussion

The research director at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism recently observed that, when it comes to fake news, "We do not really know what is going on: how much is there, produced by whom, who uses it, why, and how much does it influence them?" (Nielsen, 2017). This paper has attempted to answer some of these questions.

In doing so, it has found that the fake news audience is tiny compared to the real news audience, and has been that way since at least the beginning of 2016 up until and immediately following the U.S. 2016 presidential election. The data analysis also revealed that a site's audience size and engagement are significantly and negatively related to it being a source of fake news. These results echo Allcott and Gentzkow's fake news analysis, which concluded that, "even the most widely circulated fake news stories were seen by only a small fraction of Americans" (2017, p. 21). And, similar to prior studies of political news audiences behavior (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Weeks et al., 2016), this paper finds that the news audience is unlikely to segregate into echo chambers. Instead, the results reveal that the fake news audience also visits real news sites at a high rate that is strongly correlated with real news site popularity. Taken together, these findings indicate that the discourse surrounding fake news has overstated the size and isolation of its audience.

More broadly, these findings are consistent with recent studies of the online media ecosystem that observe that, for better or worse, digital media production and consumption is far less democratic than many originally thought. As Napoli points out, discourse surrounding the internet for the past dozen years has centered on "the long tail" – the idea that the advent of the digital age would bring audiences "a much greater array of content options… and – crucially – a much greater array of content options would be consumed" (Napoli, 2017, p. 342). In other words, the internet would be accompanied by an endless supply of media choice, which would lead audiences away from the head of the tail where they formerly congregated (largely due to a lack of other options) to the ends of the tail where they would find the niche media that most aligned with their preferences (Anderson, 2008). However, examinations of online audiences have found that the long tail does not pan out in observed media behavior (Elberse, 2008; Hindman, 2008). Instead, people still overwhelmingly flock to the most popular, well-known media, while only a small portion look at more obscure offerings (in addition to, rather than instead of, the popular content). Even as SNSs shine a spotlight on media that may have otherwise gone unnoticed – as this analysis shows appears to be the case when it comes to fake news – online audiences are still much more frequently exposed to more popular, well-known brands. In short, by demonstrating that the fake news audience is small and composed of people who also visit more popular, brand-name news sites, this study joins a growing number that conclude "the promise of the long tail has failed to materialize" (Napoli, 2017, p. 342).

However, just because news audiences look at both real and fake news does not mean that real news corrects the misperceptions perpetuated by fake news. Exposure with

political news is one thing, interpretation another. In fact, corrections frequently fail to change false or unsubstantiated beliefs, and might actually strengthen them, a result Nyhan and Reifler call "the backfire effect" (2010, p. 308). One limitation of this study is that it could not assess the way that audiences reacted to the fake news they were exposed to. Yet, the fact that the fake news audience did not decrease in the past year, despite a large portion of it being exposed to real news, suggests this audience might not realize these fake news outlets are spreading lies. Instead, this audience may visit real news sites just to see "how the rest of the world 'falsely' understands current events" (Nelson, 2017). This interpretation suggests that fake news does not change minds; it just confirms beliefs. If this is indeed the case, it means that real news in its current form will not bring citizens back to reality, even if it drowns fake news out or replaces it altogether.

Perhaps the problem facing news media audiences is not an abundance of fake news, but a lack of trust when it comes to real news. Only about a third of Americans currently have confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" – the lowest level of trust since Gallup began asking the question in 1972 (Swift, 2016). News organizations were concerned with waning public trust before the election, but since then these worries have only amplified (Kantar, 2016). The results of this study suggest that the current crisis facing political journalism is not how to deal with fake news, but instead how to persuade audiences that *real* news is more credible – even when it tells them things that run counter to how they would like the world to be.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Audience size of real and fake news sites from Jan. 2016 through Jan. 2017 (as measured by unique visitors, in thousands)

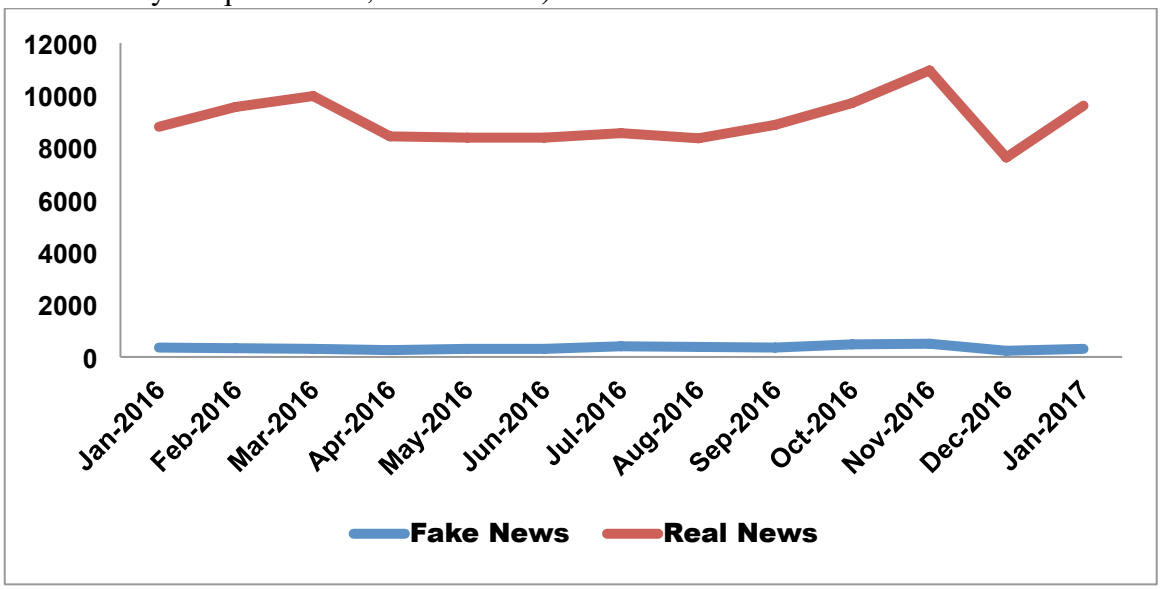


Figure 2. Engagement with real and fake news from Jan. 2016 to Jan. 2017 (as measured by average minutes per visitor)

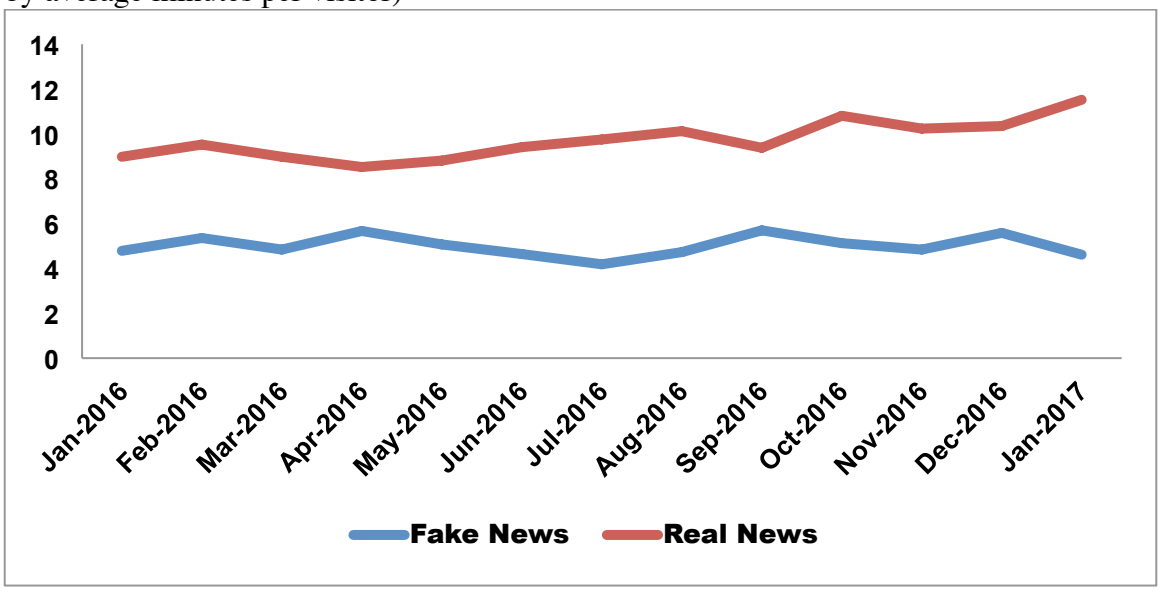
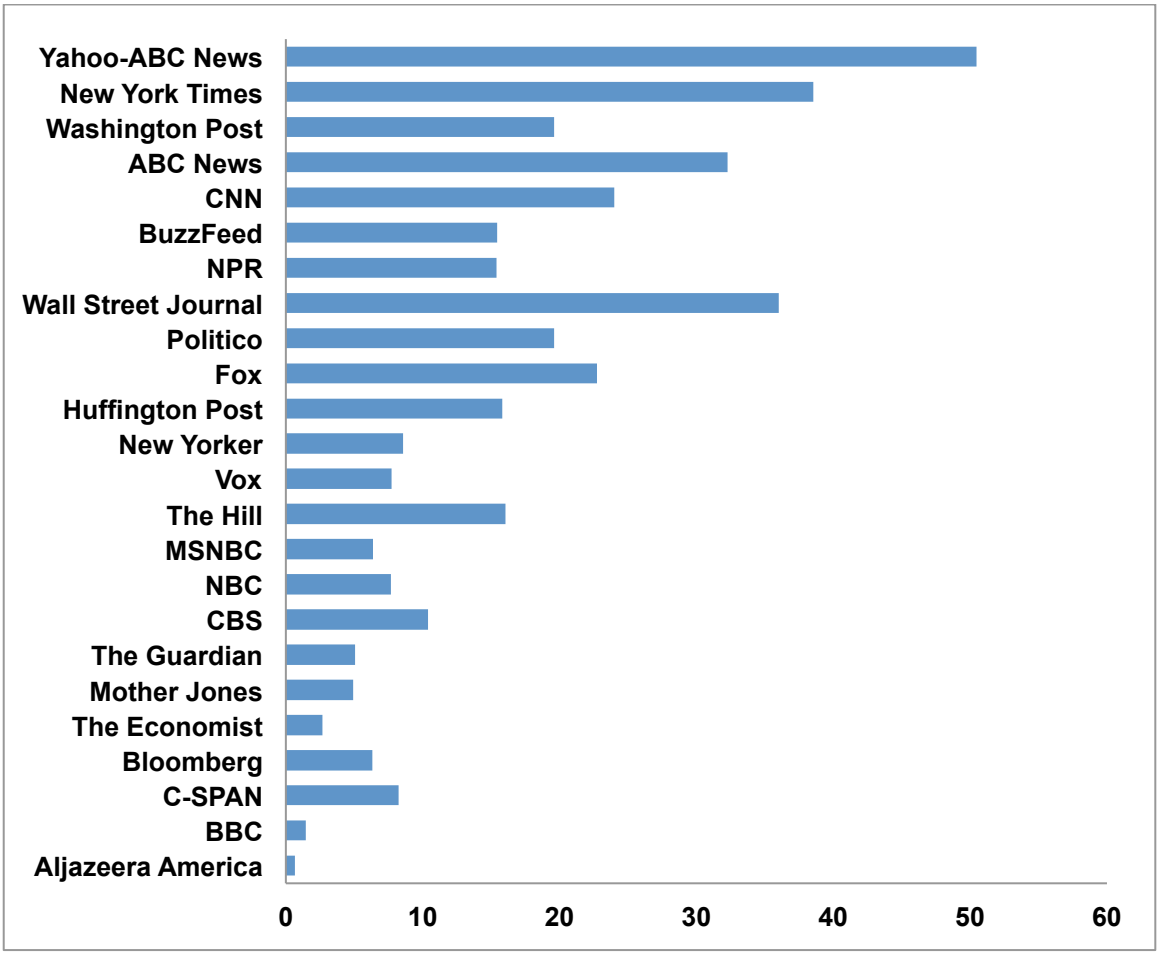


Figure 3. Percentage of visitors to fake news sites who also visited real news sites* in October 2016.



*Real news sites ranked in ascending order by unique visitors per month.

Table 1. Point-Biserial Correlation Results

	Unique Visitors	Average Minutes per Visitor	% of Visits from Facebook
Fake News	-0.5445*** (-4.689)	-0.376**	0.6184*** (5.675)
df	52	52	52
N	54	54	54

t-values in parentheses; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.