Fake News

Student version (hand-out)

**Exercise title**: Fake News

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**I. Story**

In the past few years, fake news has increasingly become an ever more pressing problem for social media platforms. Individuals, groups and even states with nefarious intentions have tried to affect public opinion through posting misleading news articles, doctored photos and videos as well as unsupported claims, thereby steering debates, influencing elections or discrediting particular individuals or groups. Most recently, such fake news campaigns were observed in the aftermath of the Christ Church shooting in New Zealand and the Notre Dame fire. Fake news items by themselves are harmless, but when they go viral across the internet as a result of unsuspecting social media users or the less-innocent armies of trolls massively sharing them, they can become harmful, for instance when they contribute to the further polarization of groups or damage the reputation of particular individuals. Social media companies, including Twitter, Google, and Facebook, as well as news organizations face increasing pressure to address the spread of fake news.

Social media companies and news organizations have taken steps to deal with fake news, including employing fact checkers and automating the detection of fake news items. Such measures often involve value tradeoffs, diverse stakeholders, and conflicting interests. To design and make decisions about appropriate measures, companies must consider values like freedom of speech, freedom of association, equality, public safety and security, as well as other factors, like company goals, legal obligations, obligations to shareholders, reputation, and financial interests. In the past few years, company policies on these questions have attracted attention from politicians, the public, etc., and the companies are increasingly asked to defend whatever fake news policies they decide to implement.

In this assignment, you will develop and defend a position on an ethical problem related to fake news. To do this, you will use social scientific and ethical concepts and theories.

**III. Assignment**

You will be working in a group of 5 students.

There are 5 topics: Google, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and a news aggregator of your choice (e.g. Flipboard, Digg, Feedly, etc.)

**Your group’s main task**: develop a position in response to the assignment question, develop an argument to support that position, and defend your position against objections.

**Assignment question**: *What is one change that this company should make in its approach to dealing with fake news?*

* This change could be to the company’s fake news guidelines; community guidelines; use of machine learning for flagging and prioritizing content, banning users; it could involve setting up an independent body to review questionable posts, developing their own algorithmic fake news detection system, etc.
* As this question is stated, it is very general. Your group will need to narrow it down and reformulate it as a more specific ethical problem statement.

**IV. Assignment steps:**

* **Step 1**. Getting to know the topics and the problem of Fake News.

Choose your topic (Google, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, or a news aggregator of your choice) and form your group.

Read some of the articles in “General Resources” and the potentially relevant recommended articles for your topic, and look for additional literature (both news articles and articles in academic journals). You may want to divide the readings among group members.

* **Step 2**. Defining a position.

Apply the ethical cycle in order to reach a position on your ethical question. While applying the ethical cycle, find additional resources (news articles, editorials, scientific articles) as needed.

* + Phase 1. Moral Problem Statement.
    - Narrow down an ethical problem with fake news, by answering the questions: what is the problem with the situation, who has to act (the company), and what is the moral nature of the problem? (which norms/values are conflicting here?)
  + Phases 2 Problem analysis
    - Analyze the situation, by identifying stakeholders and their interests, relevant moral values and relevant, uncertain and possibly missing facts.
  + Phase 3 Options for action
    - Come up with various feasible options for action for the agent (company) that has to act.
  + Phase 4 Ethical evaluation
    - Evaluate the different options in each of the ethical frameworks indicated by your teacher. The informal intuition and common sense frameworks can provide a good start, formal frameworks such as Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics can be used, and for this problem in particular, frameworks such as Value Ethics or Mediation Theory could be useful.
  + Phase 5 Reflection
    - Reflect on the outcomes of the evaluations in the different frameworks to come to a well-argued stance on the best option for action. Useful questions for this step include: “Does an ethical framework succeed in selecting those features of a situation that are morally relevant?” and “Does an ethical framework provide reasons that support my intuitive opinion?”. Write down a well-argued choice for the best option for action, structured by the steps of the ethical cycle.
* **Step 3**. Presenting the position

Prepare a 10 minute presentation that explains your position and an argument for your position.

* + You should also prepare to respond to objections to your position/argument, but you need not discuss those objections in your presentation.
  + Your position and argument should be grounded in research on the topic, context, relevant stakeholders and their values, feasibility of your recommendation, etc. (the results of step 2).

Deliver presentation and respond to objections.

* + While in the audience:
    - To get full credit for the presentation, your group should attend the full session of presentations on your topic: your group will be asked to raise an objection in response to one of the other groups’ presentations on the same topic.
    - During the other groups’ presentations, the members of your group should be thinking of helpful questions and objections for the presenting group.
    - Following each presentation, the instructors will randomly select a group from the audience to present one or more of their most helpful/insightful/important objections in response to the presentation.
    - The presenting group will then have the opportunity to reply to the objection raised.
    - (Your group is not required to attend the presentations on other topics.)
  + While presenting:
    - *Each group-member should contribute either to the presentation or to the objection & response session.*
    - Your group should take note of important objections suggested by other groups, which you may want to address in your written report.

**Step 4.** Written report

Prepare a written report (2000-2500 words) which lays out your position, your argument for your position, an important objection to your position, and your response to that objection.

* + (This objection can be one that was raised at your presentation, or it can be an objection your group developed.)

**V. Tips:**

**To deepen your analysis and anticipate objections, you may want to consider the interests and values of various stakeholders. Here are just a few examples:**

*Diverse users:*

* Users under age 18
* Concerned parents
* Users with diverse political views
* Users around the world, including in countries where social media is a primary source of news, countries in a state of unrest, countries where government censorship is a big problem, etc.
* Users who may be vulnerable to discrimination or harassment

*Diverse enterprise actors:*

* Companies that advertise using social media
* Shareholders
* Human content moderators
* Company leaders
* The engineers and scientists who create these social media services
* People whose businesses rely on social media (e.g. someone who has built a business by monetizing their YouTube channel)

*Diverse representatives of societal interests:*

* Government officials at various levels
* Public safety agencies
* Politicians at various levels
* Other community leaders
* Free speech activists

**Background questions you may want to think about:**

* Is fact checking something that should be done by an algorithm (e.g. to unburden human content moderators)? Or should some of these decisions only be made directly by humans?
* Do you think it’s likely that we will ever be able to create algorithms that can make these decisions as reliably as humans? (What does it mean to make these decisions reliably?)

**References**:

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deviancy of social media during the 2016 US presidential election”, *Information, Communication & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1505934>

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  4. Greene L, 2019. “The Future Of Fake News And Its Consequences To Society”. <https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/silicon-states-excerpt-fake-news-future_in_5cc1fe2de4b031dc07ef97b5>

1. **Policy measures/laws for dealing with fake news:** 
   1. Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, Andrea Renda (CEPS - Centre for European Policy Studies and College of Europe), Directorate-General for Internal Policies. PE 619.013- June 2018. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/619013/IPOL_IDA(2018)619013_EN.pdf>
   2. Singapore Fake News Bill 2019. <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/protection-from-online-falsehoods-and-manipulation-bill10-2019.pdf>
   3. Vaswani K, 2019. “Convern over Singapore’s anti-fake news law”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-47782470>
   4. <https://www.ikigailaw.com/the_fake_news_problem/#acceptLicense>
   5. https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/
2. **Other methods of dealing with fake news:**
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6. **Automating fake news detection:**
7. Feamster, Nick. March 21, 2018. “Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Online Content Moderation.” (Blogpost). *Freedom to Tinker* <https://freedom-to-tinker.com/2018/03/21/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-online-content-moderation/>
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***Topic-specific resources:***

**Instagram**

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2. Wolverton, Troy. April 11, 2018. “Twitter investors take aim at fake news, hate speech, and harassment — but the company says it's already doing all it can.” *Business Insider.* <http://www.businessinsider.com/a-twitter-shareholder-proposal-requests-a-report-on-fake-news-and-more-2018-4?international=true&r=US&IR=T>)
   1. See also “Proposal No. 5 Stockholder proposal regarding a report on our content enforcement policies” (Pages 39-41 only.) <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1418091/000119312518114213/d491570ddef14a.htm>
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**Google**

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**Reddit**

1. Couric K, Podcast-54 mins, 2018. “Reddit's CEO on Fake News and Free Speech” <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/stitcher/katie-couric/e/55392132>
2. Marantz A, 2018. “Reddit and the Struggle to Detoxify the Internet”. *The New Yorker.* <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/19/reddit-and-the-struggle-to-detoxify-the-internet>
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**News aggregators**

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2. <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/07/18/1538996/0/en/How-an-Angolan-news-aggregator-is-tackling-the-social-issue-of-fake-news.html>
3. <https://hackernoon.com/deepsee-io-the-solution-to-fake-news-the-ai-social-aggregation-platform-the-internet-needs-273cb95f10c5>
4. <https://medium.com/@timoreilly/the-huffington-post-has-a-fake-news-problem-f68d8e262cec>

**Meta-data**

1. **Overall learning outcomes/competencies**: Moral decision-making skills, Moral judgement skills, Moral sensibility, Moral analysis skills, Moral creativity
2. **Theoretical frameworks used to analyse this case:** Value ethics, value sensitive design, responsible research and innovation, mediation theory
3. **Ethical concepts:** Value trade-offs, autonomy, openness, transparency, mediation of perception.
4. **Keywords**: Fact checking, social media, fake news, community guidelines, algorithm
5. **Level of education**: bachelor, master
6. **Technology domain**: Digital technologies: Social Media
7. **Engineering studies**: All engineering students
8. **Type of education delivery**: synchronous, in real life.
9. **Resources required**: standard (books, texts, flipcharts, post-its, etc)
10. **Length and ECTS**: 50 hours, 2 ECTS.