

How Does Fake News Threaten Society?

John Allen



**ISSUES
TODAY**



About the Author

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Solutions to the Fake News Epidemic


In an appearance before Congress on October 23, 2019, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg faced heated questions about fake and misleading political ads on his platform. At one point Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democrat from New York, asked if she could run Facebook ads making false claims that a Republican had voted for the Green New Deal, an environmental plan strongly opposed by nearly all Republicans. Zuckerberg replied that she probably could. “Do you see a potential problem here with a complete lack of fact-checking on political advertisements?” Ocasio asked. Shifting uncomfortably, Zuckerberg answered, “I think lying is bad, and I think if you were to run an ad that had a lie, that would be bad.”⁴⁴ He went on to suggest that there was value in letting voters see for themselves that a candidate was lying. Zuckerberg seemed reluctant to have Facebook referee the rival claims made in political ads. Many voices in Congress and the media, however, have demanded that Facebook and other social media companies take action to weed out deceptive ads and fake news on their platforms.

An Urgent Responsibility

A majority of Americans agree about stopping fake news. An October 2018 HuffPost/YouGov survey found that 59 percent of respondents believe the social media giants have an urgent responsibility to stop the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. About half of those surveyed believe the companies are not doing

enough in that regard. Democrats were more than twice as likely as Republicans and Trump supporters to favor stricter content standards on social media. As the next presidential election approached, many people worried that fake news stories and ads like those posted by Russian trolls in 2016 could influence the outcome.

Faced with criticism about fake and misleading political ads, Twitter and Facebook have responded in very different ways. On October 30, 2019, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey announced that his company would no longer accept any political ads. Dorsey said that in his opinion the reach of a political message should be earned by likes and retweets, not paid for with campaign funds. Many observers noted that the ad ban arose on Trump's favorite social media outlet. By contrast, Zuckerberg decided that Facebook would change its policy, which had banned misinformation in political ads. The company would now accept ads from politicians and political parties even when they contained apparent lies or deceptions. For Zuckerberg, the issue was free expression. "I don't think it's right for a private company to censor politicians or the news in a democracy," he said. "Like the other major internet platforms and most media, Facebook doesn't fact-check political ads. And if content is newsworthy, we won't take it down. . . . I believe we should err on the side of allowing greater expression."⁴⁵

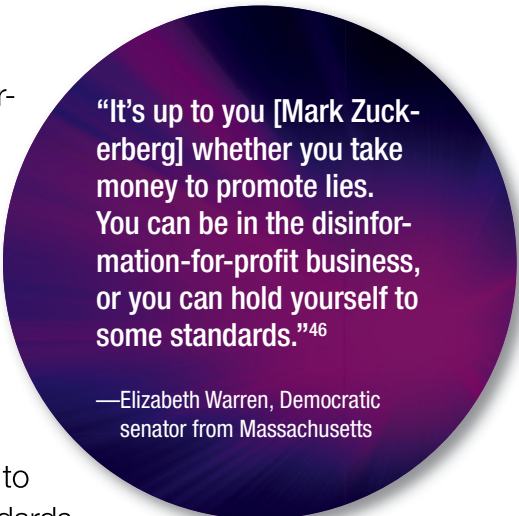


"Like the other major internet platforms and most media, Facebook doesn't fact-check political ads. . . . I believe we should err on the side of allowing greater expression."⁴⁵

—Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook

Zuckerberg's decision brought a storm of disapproval. Even employees at Facebook spoke out against the new policy. Progressives and left-wing pundits warned it would give Trump and the Republican Party a free hand to spread political lies and smears. To make a point, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren (one of

the Democrats seeking to be the party's presidential nominee), bought an ad on Facebook in which she falsely claimed Zuckerberg had endorsed Trump in the 2020 election. Later she addressed the Facebook CEO in a tweet: "It's up to you whether you take money to promote lies. You can be in the disinformation-for-profit business, or you can hold yourself to some standards. In fact, those standards were in your policy. Why the change?"⁴⁶



"It's up to you [Mark Zuckerberg] whether you take money to promote lies. You can be in the disinformation-for-profit business, or you can hold yourself to some standards."⁴⁶

—Elizabeth Warren, Democratic senator from Massachusetts

Fighting Fake News on Social Media

Legally, Zuckerberg and Facebook are under no obligation to check the truth of material that appears on the site. This holds true for all social media companies. In the interest of free speech, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 provided internet firms and social media platforms the license to host misinformation as long as they did not endorse it. In other words, these companies cannot be sued or sanctioned for hosting fake news—whether news stories, mischievous bots, or deepfake videos.

Nonetheless, public outrage about fake news—especially after Russia's disinformation campaign in 2016—has led to change. Social media companies, including Facebook and Twitter, have stepped up efforts to combat fake news and false information on their platforms. Twitter places a blue check mark beside accounts that are verified as authentic. Typically these are accounts considered to be of public interest in areas such as government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, and business. Yet the sheer volume of posts and tweets makes it difficult to slow down the fake news epidemic. For example, an estimated 500 million tweets are sent each day, rendering editorial control all but impossible. Nevertheless, social media firms are trying new approaches that show promise for fighting fake news.

One method is to counter fake news with the truth. In December 2016 Facebook launched a program to partner with fact-checkers who scoured the platform for misleading or false content. Today that effort has grown to include forty-three fact-checking organizations around the world, operating in twenty-four different languages. Articles are flagged for possible inaccuracy by human users or by special algorithms that analyze language patterns. Facebook's algorithms scan billions of stories and posts every day in order to flag fake news before it can go viral. Fact-checkers then research certain disputed claims and write a concise paragraph to rebut any false content. Users who posted the original story are notified about its status as a fake. Those who try



In October 2019, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified to Congress in a hearing about disinformation on the Facebook platform. Many legislators and others believe Facebook, as well as other social media companies, have a responsibility to act against deceptive ads and fake news on their platforms.

to repost articles that have been fact-checked receive a pop-up message containing the fact-checker's concerns. Researchers at Stanford University and New York University found that users have encountered fewer fake news stories on Facebook since 2017. Nonetheless, observers fear that fact-checkers are fighting a losing battle. "It's like bringing a spoon to clear out a pig farm," says P.W. Singer, senior fellow at New America, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, DC. "Facebook is never going to be able to hire enough people, and the artificial intelligence is never going to be able to do all of this on its own."⁴⁷

Some sites use crowdsourcing, or the combined knowledge of a large group, to assess false or misleading claims. Users can police the sites themselves, posting corrections to fake news as soon as it is spotted. The Democratic National Committee has created so-called Geek Squads to identify and correct misleading claims about its candidates on social media. There are also widely consulted fact-checking sites such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and FactCheck.org that track fake news websites and stories on social media. A recent study from the University of California, Riverside, shows that simply flagging false news stories on social media can help prevent their distribution. For example, a fake story claiming that French president Emmanuel Macron asked Twitter to suspend Trump's account for harassing others was flagged on Facebook with the tagline "Disputed by Snopes.com and Politifact."⁴⁸ The researchers found that the label significantly reduced sharing of the fake news story.

Detecting and Eliminating Bots

Another way to deal with fake news is to identify and eliminate bots, or automated accounts that spread misinformation and bogus news stories. Bots are programmed to add likes, post comments, and follow social media as though they were real users. They can also push fake stories to the top of people's news feeds and search results. Social media firms look for telltale signs to detect bots, such as sudden spikes in account activity or thousands

Fact-checking sites such as Snopes, PolitiFact, and FactCheck.org track fake news websites and stories on social media. Websites such as these can provide a valuable resource for citizens trying to determine whether a news story is accurate or not.



of likes compared to few or no comments. A surge in followers with newly created accounts also indicates a bot invasion. Some social media companies now require real-name registration, with users providing their legal name in order to start an account. If a company receives complaints about a particular user with an apparently fake name, it may require proof of identity, such as a driver's license.

Efforts to eliminate malicious bots picked up speed prior to the 2018 midterm elections. Facebook disabled 583 million fake profiles in the first quarter of 2018, some within minutes of the accounts being registered. Also in 2018, Twitter announced a plan to lock or remove nearly 10 million suspicious accounts per week. Instagram deletes accounts that employ apps to like or comment

The Government Should Regulate Fake News

If social media companies are unwilling to police fake news on their platforms, the government must step in. This is the view of Jessica Levinson, who is a professor and the director of the Public Service Institute at Loyola Law School, Los Angeles. Her work focuses on election law and governance issues.

Politicians can and do post lies on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. And those companies do not have to delete those lies.

In the abstract, it feels like such lies should be easy to disprove. People will simply point out the lie, and the truth will come out. In the abstract, people will not base their opinions and votes on false information they read on social media.

But we don't live in the abstract. We live in reality. And in reality, what you read on social media can affect your views and votes. . . .

Because media corporations appear to have no appetite to regulate this political speech, it may be up to the government to ensure that our marketplace of ideas is not corrupted by lies and deceit.

Jessica Levinson, "Facebook Has a Political Fake News Problem. Can We Fix It Without Eroding the First Amendment?," NBC News, October 24, 2019. www.nbcnews.com.

automatically. When political figures or celebrities on social media suddenly notice a severe drop in their number of followers, it often means an army of bots has been purged.

Artificial intelligence is another effective weapon against bots and fake news. AI programs use machine learning to identify fake accounts through repeated phrases or canned responses to posts. Often fake news can be identified by aggressive or emotional language that contrasts with the more reserved style of traditional news reporting. AI programs can even detect deliberately controversial comments aimed at disrupting a user group or twitter feed.

Experts warn that the AI-driven bot wars on social media are about to become even more sophisticated—and more danger-

The Government Should Not Regulate Fake News

Eliminating fake news is not the job of the government or courts. Instead, says Sandeep Gopalan, it can be accomplished through free speech and an open exchange of ideas. Gopalan is the pro vice chancellor for academic innovation and a professor of law at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He argues,

Overwhelming distrust of the once credible news media has blurred the lines between real news and falsehoods. . . .

These problems cannot be tackled by anti-fake news laws. Courts cannot become fact-checkers and governments cannot be trusted to become arbiters of the truth through police powers. . . .

Ultimately, legal tools should be limited to problems they can solve. Fake news is not one of these problems. The marketplace for ideas will ensure that true news trumps fake news.

People who consume information without critical thought cannot be rescued by law and free speech should not be sacrificed in an attempt to combat fake news. Leave the laws alone.

Sandeep Gopalan, "Free Speech Cannot Be Sacrificed to Strike Fake News," *The Hill* (Washington, DC), April 6, 2018. www.thehill.com.

ous. A new AI system called GPT-2 is able to write artificial news stories that draw on current events and complex foreign policy questions. The system, built by a California-based tech firm called OpenAI as part of its research into future possibilities for artificial intelligence, can also generate photographic images to accompany the stories. Although the articles have little connection to reality, they are almost impossible to detect as fakes. For example, a GPT-2 bot could create fake news stories about the United States imposing an embargo on China, using names of real trade officials on both sides. Before the deceit was discovered, stocks could plummet and global tensions skyrocket. Foreign trolls doubtless are working on similar systems for future use. As

Sarah Kreps and Miles McCain write in *Foreign Affairs*, “Disinformation is a serious problem. Synthetic disinformation—written not by humans but by computers—might emerge as an even bigger one. Russia already employs online ‘trolls’ to sow discord; automating such operations could propel its disinformation efforts to new heights.”⁴⁹

“Disinformation is a serious problem. Synthetic disinformation—written not by humans but by computers—might emerge as an even bigger one.”⁴⁹

—Sarah Kreps and Miles McCain,
reporters for *Foreign Affairs*

Fake News and Censorship

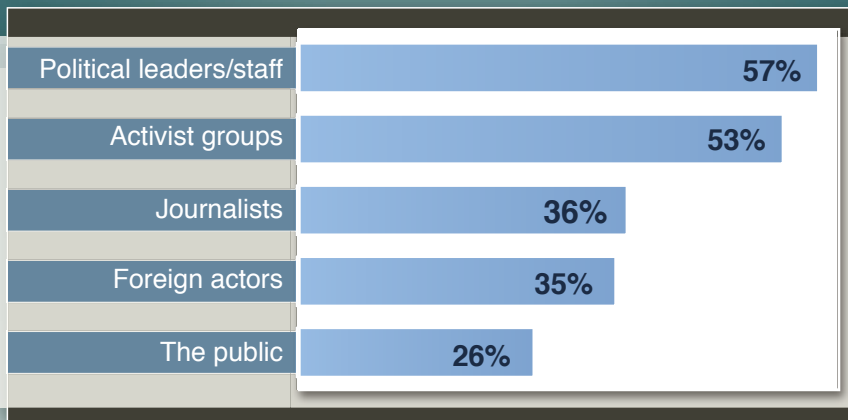
Partisans on both the left and right worry about the effects of disinformation and fake news on social media. Across the political spectrum, people claim to support efforts by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other companies to eliminate fake news. But many also fear that these efforts may lead to outright censorship. Particularly among conservatives, there is concern that political bias may guide what social media sites consider to be fake news or false statements.

Conservatives frequently complain that fact-checking sites are unreliable and almost always slanted toward the political left. They note that fact-checkers often turn to other media sources to gauge the truthfulness of statements. Yet journalists are known to make mistakes themselves, as shown by the lengthy list of corrections each day in the *New York Times*. Another objection is that fact-checking sites often check opinions on policy issues instead of facts. As editorial writer Mark Hemingway contends, “It’s basically a way for a bunch of reporters with no particular expertise to render pseudoscientific judgments on statements from public figures that are obviously argumentative or otherwise unverifiable. Then there’s the matter of them weighing in with thundering certitude—pants on fire!—on complex policy debates they frequently misunderstand.”⁵⁰

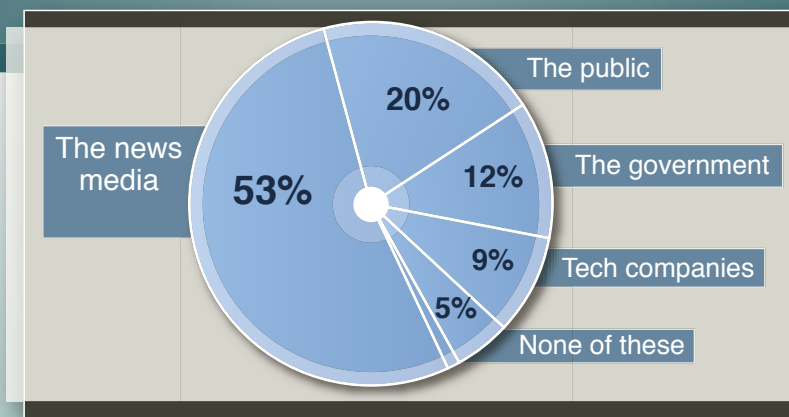
The News Media and Fake News

According to a June 2019 poll by the Pew Research Center, Americans blame politicians more than they blame journalists for creating false or misleading stories. However, more than half of Americans believe it is mostly the media's responsibility to fix the problem.

% of US adults who say _____ create a lot of made-up news and information



% of US adults who say _____ have the most responsibility in reducing the amount of made-up news and information



Source: Pew Research Center, "Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs to Be Fixed," June 5, 2019. www.journalism.org.

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A savvy reader should always be on the lookout for fake news or misleading information on the internet or social media. Here are a few rules to follow in order to verify that information is legitimate, unbiased, and up to date.

- Always consider the source of the story. Investigate the website, its purpose, and its sponsors.
- Look beyond the headline. A startling headline may be designed purely to get clicks.
- Check background information on the author. Consider if the person is an expert on the topic or an experienced journalist.
- Check the date of the story. Old articles may no longer be relevant or accurate.
- Consider your own biases. See if they are affecting your response to the story.
- If a story seems questionable, consult a fact-checking site or a librarian for more help.
- Examine photos and other images closely to see whether they have been manipulated.
- With outrageous stories, consider that they may be satire or intended as jokes.
- To avoid spoofing from fake news sites, bookmark favorite news sites for quick access.
- When accessing a new site, type the name into the search engine window instead of into the address field. This helps avoid being fooled by a typosquatting ruse.
- Before accessing a site, hover the mouse over a questionable domain name to see if the site looks legitimate.
- On sites related to health or science, check to see whether the information is based on scientific research or expert testimony.
- Note whether the site is focused on selling something or offering some service.

American Press Institute (API)—www.americanpressinstitute.org

The API is a national nonprofit educational organization affiliated with the News Media Alliance. One of the API's main areas of focus is so-called accountability journalism, leading a community of fact-checkers that helps build trust and knowledge among the public rather than only combating the claims of political actors.

Brookings Institution—www.brookings.edu

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to conduct and present in-depth research on ideas for solving societal problems on the local, national, and international level. Among the many articles on its website is “How to Combat Fake News and Disinformation.”

Cato Institute—www.cato.org

The Cato Institute is a public policy research organization dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, and free markets. Its scholars and analysts conduct independent, nonpartisan research on many policy issues. The Cato website features an analysis of the fake news problem titled “Fake News Is Troubling—but Censorship Is Far Worse.”

Columbia Journalism Review—www.cjr.org

The *Columbia Journalism Review*'s mission is to be the intellectual leader in the rapidly changing world of journalism. It is the most respected voice on press criticism, and it shapes the ideas that make media leaders and journalists smarter about their work. It provides quick analysis and deep reporting on the tech companies and social media platforms that are shaping the media.

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