



SHARING POSTS: THE SPREAD OF --- **FAKE NEWS** ---

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CHAPTER 3

Why Fake News Matters

Ever since the start of the 2016 election season, legitimate news sources have produced hundreds of articles and opinion pieces on the topic of fake news. Television and radio stations, daily and weekly newspapers, online news outlets, and political and general interest magazines alike have dissected the phenomenon of fake news from every conceivable angle: what motivates people to create fake news, what encourages readers to believe it, and much more. Chief among these articles are editorials and news items that focus on the question of what the rise of fake news means to society. These articles may be the opinions of a single author, or they may quote experts on journalism, the Internet, or politics. But they have at least one thing in common: Nearly all express deep concern about the rise of fake news and the impact fake news is having on the world. As these experts see it, fake news matters enormously—and the prevalence of fake news today presents modern society with compelling and pressing issues that are far from resolved.

Ethical Issues

The basic reason that fake news matters is simple enough: Fake news, at its most fundamental, is a lie. It is a deliberate attempt to misinform and mislead readers, voters, and citizens in general. And lying, most people would agree, is not a virtue. Most major religions encourage their followers to say what is true rather than what is false. “The Lord detests lying lips,” reads the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, “but he delights in people who

are trustworthy.”²⁴ In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul makes much the same argument to his fellow Christians. “Do not lie to each other,”²⁵ he advises them in the letter to the Colossians. Islam, similarly, argues that those who do not tell the truth are not following the will of Allah, and one of the basic precepts of Buddhism is the promise “to abstain from false speech”²⁶—that is, making a vow not to tell lies.

American society in general, moreover, places a very heavy value on truth telling. Those testifying in court are often asked to promise to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Children are routinely instructed not to lie, and old adages such as “Honesty is the best policy” have long been popular in the United States. Indeed, some of Americans’ most cherished stories deal with the importance of telling the truth regardless of the possible consequences. One such tale, familiar to many Americans, describes how George Washington chopped down a cherry tree when he was a boy. His father, angered by the loss of the tree, asked young George whether he was responsible. George considered denying involvement but chose honesty instead. “I cannot tell a lie,” he explained. “I did cut it with my hatchet.”²⁷ Ironically, the story of the cherry tree is itself an early example of fake news; it was made up by a minister named Mason Locke Weems, who included the story in a biography he wrote of Washington. Though the story is false, the image of Washington choosing to tell the truth has inspired generations of Americans to do the same.

The deliberate telling of lies, moreover, has badly damaged the careers of American public figures. In 1998, for example, journalist Stephen Glass lost his job at a national magazine, the *New Republic*, when it turned out that many of the articles he had written were pure fabrications. More recently, Donald Trump’s national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned in early 2017 after it became clear that he had lied about his dealings with the Russian government. While some public figures are not harmed much by reports that they have told lies, many, perhaps most, are called to account when their falsehoods are discovered. In general, Americans do not approve of lies or the people who tell them. One significant objection to the spread of fake news is

Americans generally place high value on truth telling. This is evident in the familiar tale of a young George Washington thinking about lying to his father about having cut down a cherry tree. George ultimately confesses after deciding he cannot tell a lie.



simply that the distribution of deliberate lies is in direct opposition to that value. Telling lies is wrong in this formulation; therefore, fake news is a problem.

Harming Reputations

More specifically, because it tells malicious lies about people, fake news is harmful to the reputations of public figures. A fake news item appearing in early 2017, for example, claimed that

Barack Obama had commissioned a sculptor to create a statue of himself—and ordered that the statue be displayed in the White House even after he left the presidency. “Obama Orders Life-Sized Bronze Statue of Himself to Be Permanently Installed in White House,”²⁸ read the headline on one website that published this bit of fake news. However, the story was entirely fake. Obama did not commission any such statue. Even if he had, he lacked the authority to keep it on display in the White House following the end of his term. The purpose of the news item was to mock Obama and to make him out to be arrogant, pushy, and egotistical.

On the other side of the political aisle, Donald Trump’s reputation has been negatively affected by fake news items as well. Early in Trump’s primary campaign, for example, a fake news site issued an article about Trump’s supposed new campaign logo—a variation of the swastika used as a symbol of Nazi Germany. “Declaring it the ‘best, most luxurious, and most expensive logo that any campaign could have,’” read one version of the article, “Donald Trump proudly unveiled his new campaign logo today.”²⁹ Like the story about Obama and the statue, though, the article about Trump and the swastika was a fabrication designed to suggest something negative about Trump: either that he was ignorant of history or that he was willing and eager to link his campaign to the horrors of Nazi rule.

Nor are politicians the only public figures whose reputations have been damaged by fake news. In 2015, for example, a fake news site reported that singer Miley Cyrus had been found dead in the bathtub of her home in Hollywood, California. The report implied that the cause of death was an overdose of prescription pain medication. But the news was false; as fact-finding website Snopes explained, “Miley is alive and well.”³⁰ Another celebrity, movie star and television personality Whoopi Goldberg, was dogged in early 2017 by rumors that she had insulted the widow of a US Navy man killed during a raid on the Middle East. Goldberg supposedly said that the widow was “just looking for attention. These military widows love their 15 minutes in the spotlight.”³¹ In fact, Goldberg

“These military widows love their 15 minutes in the spotlight.”³¹

—Fabricated quote attributed to comedian Whoopi Goldberg by a fake news site

Politicians are not the only public figures whose reputations can be damaged by fake news. A widely circulated 2015 story falsely claimed that singer Miley Cyrus (pictured) had been found dead in her bathtub—a victim of a drug overdose.



had made no such comments, and the story had originated on a fake news site. As with the stories about Obama, Trump, and Cyrus, the point of the story was simply to cast Goldberg in a damaging light.

Effects on Politics

In addition to being unethical, fake news undermines traditional standards of political discourse. The bulk of fake news items,

after all, are negative: They seek to portray political candidates and others in the worst possible light. Since the point of fake news is to drive web traffic toward certain sites, that makes sense. Many fake news providers have found that negative headlines are more effective than positive or neutral headlines in getting people's attention. Even among legitimate news outlets, stories of tragedy, corruption, and disaster tend to have a wider readership than stories about successes. As an old journalistic saying puts it, "If it bleeds, it leads."³² The prevalence of negative fake news articles about public figures, then, should come as no surprise.

But it can be difficult to live in a world awash in negativity. Nearly all politicians engage, at least at times, in a practice called negative campaigning, which means spending time and money highlighting their opponents' flaws rather than playing up their own strengths. Negative campaigning can be effective, but it comes at a cost. Though research findings vary, several studies have suggested that a relentlessly negative tone to a campaign depresses voter turnout—and could have even more damaging effects on political participation. "Negative campaigning may undermine the legitimacy of the entire political process," reports one study. "Viewers may learn from the mudslinging and name-calling that politicians in general are cynical, uncivil, corrupt, incompetent, and untrustworthy."³³ Fake news, in this way, is much like a steady barrage of negative campaigning and may disengage voters from the political system.

Moreover, fake news allows for little if any nuance. Fake news items insist that political figures are either good or evil—usually evil—and almost always portray them as self-serving rather than genuinely interested in serving the public good. The situation is made worse because most people only click on fake news items that tend to support and confirm their political biases. Thus, Republicans experience a steady diet of false news items attacking Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, or former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, while Democrats see fake news that lambastes Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, or current Senate majority

"Negative campaigning may undermine the legitimacy of the entire political process."³³

—Authors of a study on the effects of negative campaigning

leader Mitch McConnell. As Obama laments, “We start accepting only information, whether it’s true or not, that fits our opinions.”³⁴

Reading fake news items can push people to see only the worst in the opposing party and its candidates. As a result, fake

“We start accepting only information, whether it’s true or not, that fits our opinions.”³⁴

—Then-US president Barack Obama

news tends to increase political polarization by widening the differences in opinion that exist in any democratic society. This polarization leads to a breakdown in meaningful communication between people who disagree. In a world where the opposition is evil by definition, it becomes difficult for lawmakers from one party to work with—or even associate with—lawmakers from the opposition. As

the negativity and hostility of fake news items drive people apart, political gridlock becomes normal—and the chance of bipartisan action essentially disappears. Few people would argue that this is a positive development for society.

And as partisanship increases, the impact of fake news increases as well. Fake news items play into the assumption, held by many, that lawmakers from the opposing party are out to destroy America. Someone predisposed to hate and distrust Hillary Clinton, for example, is primed to accept false accounts that Clinton’s campaign was funded in part by drug runners from Mexico—a widely circulated rumor originating on a fake news website in 2016. In the same way, a voter already convinced that Donald Trump is the worst president the nation has ever seen will have little trouble believing fabricated claims that Trump eliminated funding for a suicide hotline for veterans—a fake news item from Trump’s early days in office. In this way fake news helps feed the cycle of suspicion and hostility. It is a significant part of the problem.

Two Sets of Facts

The divisiveness associated with fake news, however, leads to even bigger issues. Throughout American history people have often expressed sharply differing opinions. That is natural for any country, especially one as populous and diverse as the United States. But it is also valuable for a nation to have a range of opin-

Improving the Free Press

Not everyone agrees that fake news is an enormous problem. Some observers argue that the negative effects of fake news are overblown. As these people see it, fake news may benefit mainstream journalists and publishers in the long run. The argument is that fake news will motivate mainstream news outlets to improve their product so legitimate sources are easier to distinguish from fake news. By emphasizing fact-checking, writer Jay McGregor asserts, traditional news outlets can make it clear that accuracy is essential to good journalism. Thus, fake news gives legitimate news organizations the chance to reinvent themselves for the better.

Others look to history. The world, these experts note, has dealt again and again over the years with hoaxes and disinformation campaigns, and yet civilization has not crumbled. It is even possible to see fake news as a symbol that the system is working. Americans are largely free to speak their minds and publish what they like, and putting up with malicious news articles may be a small price to pay for safeguarding those freedoms. “To my mind,” writes business leader Michael Rosenblum, “Fake News is not really a problem. It is rather a function of a free press . . . and that is no bad thing.”

Michael Rosenblum, “Fake News Is Not a Problem—It Is an Opportunity,” *Huffington Post*, November 28, 2016. www.huffingtonpost.com.

ion on any given subject. When people listen to alternative perspectives, they are given the opportunity to learn and grow. Even if they do not come to change their positions on any given issue, their own opinions are made stronger by considering the viewpoints of others. As one commentator writes, “Healthy, productive discussions are necessary to foster growth, tolerance, and understanding.”³⁵ Certainly differences of opinion can lead to excessive hostility, even violence; but on the whole, honest disagreement tends to strengthen the country rather than weaken it.

Today Americans continue to express differing opinions on an enormous range of subjects. At the same time, though, they are increasingly disagreeing even about the basic facts that underlie those opinions. A recent example comes from sports. In the spring of 2017, Baltimore Orioles outfielder Adam Jones, who is African American, said that fans in Boston’s Fenway Park had yelled racial slurs at him during a game pitting the Orioles against Boston’s team, the Red Sox. Several other African

American players later confirmed that they, too, had been victimized by racial taunts when their teams visited Boston; one, pitcher C.C. Sabathia, noted that Boston was the only Major League city in which he had ever experienced such abuse. In response to Jones's report, the Red Sox announced that it would crack down on racist language. Indeed, the following day the team expelled a fan for life after he used a racial slur in referring to a black musician from Kenya who had sung the national anthem.



Americans often disagree—even about seemingly straightforward facts. Baltimore Orioles outfielder Adam Jones (pictured) claimed Boston Red Sox fans had yelled racial slurs at him during a 2017 game. Although other African American players confirmed similar treatment, a prominent former Red Sox player publicly accused Jones of lying.

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HOW TO IDENTIFY FAKE NEWS

CHECK THE URL

Fake news sources often have names that *almost* match the names of legitimate news sources. Is the URL actually www.cbs.com, for example, or something just a little different?

HOW DOES THE SITE LOOK?

Does the site look as if someone spent time on it, or does it look slapdash? Is the content edited or full of errors?

USE COMMON SENSE

Fake news often makes truly outlandish claims. If an article seems hard to believe, it may well be fake.

SET ASIDE YOUR POLITICAL BIASES

Fake news is most effective when it confirms the reader's own biases. Be especially cautious when reading negative news items about people you dislike.

LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE

Fake news sites usually do not provide evidence for their claims. If they do, there is usually no online trace of the evidence cited in the story.

TRUST THE EXPERTS

Fact-checking websites do a commendable job of determining whether news stories are true or false. If Snopes or PolitiFact says an item is fake, it probably is.

CHECK THE AUTHOR

If the author's name cannot be found elsewhere online, that may be because no such person exists and the article is fake.

IS IT ONE OF A KIND?

If there are few other examples of the story on the Internet, the item may well be faked. Also be suspicious if all the other examples use the same wording.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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