Understanding the lifecycle of fake news in a digital age

Experts discuss the origins and spread of fake news stories in the internet era

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President Donald Trump popularized the term "fake news" during his 2016 presidential campaign when he used it to label the content of numerous news outlets such as CNN and Buzzfeed.

Trump's use of "fake news" is one explanation for the popularity of the term, but his use of the term is oversimplified — "fake news" can describe a wide variety of articles, ranging from The Onion writing about Anthony Weiner sending an "Apology Sext to Entire Clinton Campaign," to Alex Jones of InfoWars claiming Lady Gaga was ready to perform a satanic ritual at the Super Bowl.

Claire Wardle, strategy and research leader at First Draft News, said the first step to understanding fake news is knowing the difference between misinformation and disinformation – misinformation being "the inadvertent sharing of false information," and disinformation being "the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false."

Specific names are helpful, if not essential, when discussing fake news.

In his article for BuzzFeed News, "This Is How Your Hyperpartisan Political News Gets Made," *Buzzfeed News* media editor Craig Silverman asked why two articles about Kellyanne Conway from entirely different sites, one liberal and one conservative, looked almost identical.

"Using domain registration records and Google Analytics and AdSense IDs, BuzzFeed News determined that both sites are owned by American News LLC of Miami," Silverman said.

Silverman found that American News LLC is tied to several sites that post clickbait articles. These sites are usually monetarily focused, putting traffic-generating content ahead of the truth.

But fake news is not just a U.S. phenomenon.

The origins of fake news

A town in Macedonia that gained attention during the election for being, "the registered home of at least 100 pro-Trump websites," said Samanth Subramanian of Wired.

It is unclear how much these websites affected election, but it is clear why so many of these sites and articles came to the forefront of our attention — money. "Boris," the main subject of Subramanian's article, dropped out of high school to run pro-Trump websites. It paid off, too.

"Between August and November, Boris earned nearly $16,000 off his two pro-Trump websites," Subramanian said. "The average monthly salary in Macedonia is $371."

Some believe the most unsettling origin of fake news stories are intentional misinformation campaigns. Essentially, these are social media campaigns that rely on profiling all individual members of a targeted group, we'll say voters in a presidential election, and give them bits of information that are tailored to them.

TYPES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Satire or parody:
No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool

False connection:
When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content

Misleading content:
Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual

False context:
When genuine content is shared with false contextual information

Imposter content:
When genuine sources are impersonated

Manipulated content:
When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive

Fabricated content:
New content is false, designed to deceive and do harm

That means that all of a person's likes, comments, friends and countless other data points could be gathered by one of these companies to feed them tailored propaganda.

This tactic was used by Cambridge Analytica (CA), a data analytics firm hired by the Trump campaign.

Essentially, CA's job was to attempt to individually profile every American voter using data gathered from social media, internet history, ad interactions and many more data sets.

CA isn't the only organization

gathering information from internet histories, just as it wasn't the only distributor of propaganda.

Jonathan Albright, assistant professor of communications at Elon, said he wanted to figure out exactly where it was coming from.

"For the most part, I'm looking at fake news from a system-level perspective," Albright said in research published by Medium. "I found evidence that many factors are overlooked in the fake news debate. These include ad tracking technology, content delivery and web hosting providers, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn and that misinformation tends to flow from smaller sites in the hyper-biased political news sphere into social media platforms."

As previously mentioned, Cambridge Analytica (CA) used internet data points gathered from individual voters to create personality profiles on each different person. From there, advertising could be targeted on a level mostly unprecedented in U.S. politics.

How does it spread?

When it comes to targeted fake news campaigns, it is not so much about people falling for it as it's about people having it fed to them strategically.

This is a good lens through which to look at the fake news seen today. Fake news takes advantage of social media and search history "echo chambers" by being sensational. It uses language that preys on people's existing prejudices.

Breitbart, a well-known fake news publication, has plenty of headlines that do just this. Take for example, "Planned Parenthood's

Body Count Under Cecile Richards Is Up to Half a Holocaust." This is an article written by former senior editor Milo Yiannopoulos about undercover videos of Planned Parenthood employees. The article itself is filled with inaccurate or misleading statements about the business model of Planned Parenthood. All of this is done to fire up pro-life individuals in order to get more shares and push Breitbart's ideology.

At the end of the day, it's tough to say what the best course of action is for those who believe fake news is a systematic problem.

"I don't think there is an easy fix," Albright said. "What's currently happening is a problem that will never really disappear."

Fact checking to the rescue

Alexios Mantzarlis, faculty and director at Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network, said he doesn't think we should sit back and watch the problem grow. He thinks we should put a stronger emphasis on fact checking.

In his article, "Journalism can't afford for corrections to be next victim of 'fake news' frenzy," Mantzarlis wrote about the threat to fact checking posed by the term "fake news."

In this instance, a newspaper was fact checking its own work after publishing an unfortunate, but mostly innocuous error.

"The Texas newspaper's top headline on Feb. 21 incorrectly indicated that Lt. Gen. McMaster would be replacing Vice President Mike Pence — rather than the outgoing National Security Adviser Michael Flynn," Mantzarlis said.

The error must have been hor-

rifying to the newspaper, but it seems more comedic than problematic when looking back. That's the opinion of Mantzarlis — not so much of some commenters.

"Hey, did anyone think of proofreading your headline today before the paper went to press?" reader Barbara Tyler said. "I am pretty sure Trump did not replace his vice president. Fake news at its best. Sometimes I wonder why I continue to subscribe to your paper."

This sort of outlook goes hand in hand with why fact checking is so important to Mantzarlis.

Fact checking seems to work, too – to a certain extent. In another article, "Fact-checking changes minds but not votes, according to new research," Mantzarlis discussed the findings of a study Royal Society Open Science.

The study worked by asking people to assess several different statements used during the presidential campaign. Some were factual, others were not, some were attributed, others were not. From there, participants were asked to assess the statements after seeing a fact-check either confirming or denying it.

"The results are clear: Regardless of partisan preference, belief in Trump falsehoods fell after these were corrected," Mantzarlis said.

This study did not show that fact-checking has a measurable impact on ballot choices, but that it does hold weight against misinformation.

John Robinson, adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former editor of the Greensboro News and Record, said he thinks that fact checking is an imperfect solution.

"There are two responsibilities," Robinson said. "One is on the news consumer to make sure that they are getting factual information and absorbing it and understanding what the information is as best [they] can. The other side of it is the people who are presenting the information. There's a lot of responsibility to go around."

President Donald Trump speaks at a campaign rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina. At the time, Trump was still locked in a battle to become the Republican party's nominee.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FAKE NEWS

Spot it: Understand warning signs
- Sloppy or lazy website layouts
- Sensational/partisan language
- Lack of sources
- Overwhelming advertisements

Fact Check:
- Search for quotes to verify context/accuracy
- Use a credible source
- Find original source of article's info — is it reliable?
- Search for the story on Google — does the info that pops up align?
- Determine credibilty of author
- Use Snopes and AllSlides to see if the article is biased or not factual

What's Next?
- Take a note of the website — remember to either avoid it or be extra careful around it in the future
- If found on Facebook, report it — the company has promised to fight fake news
- Practice fact checking - learn what sites are best sources of facts