

## **The Fake News Infodemic: The Dangerous Illusion of Truth**

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ENGL 102: Critical Reading, Writing, Research

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May 15, 2023

## **The Fake News Infodemic: The Dangerous Illusion of Truth**

In an age where information is readily available at our fingertips, the line between fact and fiction has become blurred. Reality has become convoluted, and the truth is evolving into an ideology that is subjective rather than objective. The rise of fake news has created a weapon of mass deception that creates a dangerous environment where the truth is often obscured and public trust is destroyed, eroding the very fabric of society. This phenomenon is defined as “factually false information” delivered in the context of a “supposedly true news story “and “deliberately designed to deceive” society (Fake News, 2023, para. 1). The truth is no longer a priority; the number of likes and shares on a post is now the ultimate goal. The prevalence of fake news on social media has wreaked havoc on society, impacting it psychologically, politically, and socially and eroding citizens’ trust in the media. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the destructive impact of social media on the spread of fake news and take legal and regulatory measures to combat its spread to safeguard the reality of truth rather than deception.

The pervasive influence of fake news with the rise of social media has wrought a profound and damaging psychological toll on society by perpetuating misinformation and undermining the collective ability to discern truth from fiction. Sander van der Linden, Ph.D., a professor of social psychology in society at the University of Cambridge, highlights that there

are six “degrees of manipulation” – “impersonation, conspiracy, emotion, polarization, discrediting, and trolling” – which are used to “spread misinformation and disinformation” (Abrams, 2021, para. 10). On one end of the spectrum is misinformation, which is simply false or incorrect information, and on the other end is disinformation which involves misinformation coupled with a “deliberate intent to deceive an audience” (Greifeneder et al., 2021, para. 7). Along with these six degrees, the human psyche inherently has some degree of “confirmation bias,” which is related to the “psychological utility” that consumers receive from the news that “validates” their personal ideologies (George et al., 2021, para. 17). These psychological factors that drive fake news profoundly impact society and perpetuate negative consequences.

Edgar Welch, a father of two daughters and former firefighter, had read and come to believe false rumors on social media that convinced him that a Washington D.C. pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong was home to a “secret pedophilia ring” involving “high-ranking” Democrats (Fisher et al., 2016, para. 2). His inability to comprehend the scope of the situation, coupled with his bias as a father, caused him to storm into the Comet Ping Pong restaurant, terrorizing employees and customers with an assault rifle, all in an attempt to rescue abused children allegedly hidden in tunnels beneath the building (Fisher et al., 2016, para. 1). Before leaving his home, Welch told his daughters, “I can’t let you grow up in a world that’s so corrupt by evil...without at least standing up for you and other children just like you” (Miller, 2021, para. 2). In Welch’s case, he was manipulated at a psychological level with both conspiracy and emotion, that ultimately, coupled with his bias toward being a father, led him to believe that the pizzagate scandal was real and clouded his judgment to take an intense action to “do some good” (Fisher et al., 2016, para. 31). Ultimately, this incident is nothing more than a “tale of a scandal” that never existed and of a fear that spread through social media, psychologically impairing

society through the use of manipulation tactics that destroyed the morals of a father and ruined the reputation of a small business (Fisher et al., 2016, para. 5).

Additionally, the substantial free and unrestricted exchange of information on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic “set fertile grounds” for fear and created an “infodemic” that bred uncertainty regarding the virus (Ghaddar et al., 2022, para. 6). On Twitter alone, among a sample of “673” tweets, “153 tweets (24.8%)” included misinformation, and “107 (17.4%)” included unverifiable information regarding the COVID-19 epidemic (Kouzy et al., 2020, para. 1). For example, in the United Kingdom, fake news, in the form of conspiracy, was spread that covid was spreading due to the “development of 5G technology,” which threatened the reputations of specific “mobile communications (e.g., Vodafone)” and “technology (e.g., Huawei) companies” (Di Domenico, 2020, para. 19). Furthermore, the use of fake remedies, including “alcohol and methanol,” which were promoted on social media through the impersonation of credible entities, led to the “illness” of thousands and an estimated “death toll of 728” people in Iran (Aghababaeian et al., 2020, para. 6). Unlike previous outbreaks, the spreading of disinformation about COVID-19 has been dramatically amplified by social media to the extent that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,” said Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, referring to the fake news that spread “faster and more easily” than the “virus” (United Nations, 2020, para. 1). Through the manipulation of digital communication channels, fake news has had a more significant and lasting impact on the physical world than the fear generated by events such as Pizzagate and the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the cynical power of misinformation to shape public opinion and behavior.

The events of Pizzagate and the stigma around COVID-19 serve as an essential reminder in modern society that sensationalism and blind acceptance of falsehoods have taken precedence in a world where the rise of fake news has psychologically impaired society. Consequently, social media platforms, as well as Google, have taken proactive actions to fight the spread of fake news by intensifying “collaborations with fact-checking organizations” and promoting the sharing of “reliable health information from acknowledged experts” in the attempt to “alleviate the risk” of a “strong negative impact” on people’s trust in scientific data (Di Domenico, 2020, para. 19). For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) has collaborated with “major social media platforms” such as “Facebook, Twitter, and Google” to ensure that individuals searching for terms related to the coronavirus are directed to “reliable sources” such as the “WHO website, their ministry of health, public health institute, or center for disease control,” thus mitigating the spread of fake news and misinformation about the pandemic (Zarocostas, 2020, para. 9). Although this solution may not be a panacea for all societal challenges, including incidents like Pizzagate, the collaboration of major digital platforms to provide reliable sources of information is a positive step forward in addressing the overwhelming volume of information on social media. This collaborative measure can mitigate the potential for negative impacts on public trust in scientific data and aid in disseminating accurate information in society.

The insidious prevalence of fake news in modern society has dealt a devastating blow to democratic principles, irreversibly undermining the very foundation of democracy and threatening the well-being of political institutions. In the last decade, digital media platforms have grown out of their “mere communication functions” and inherently become political governance organizations (Unver, 2017, para. 1). This form of politics was “prophesized” to usher in greater understanding between people and better represent “disenfranchised segments of

the population” (Unver, 2017, para. 2). However, the golden age of social media has witnessed greater political polarization and confusion through the mass oversupply of information and the proliferation of fake news. The golden age of social media has brought about a new phenomenon, “digital wildfires – the spread of fake news and unreliable information,” which has become one of the greatest threats to democracy (Fighting ‘digital,’ 2022, para. 1).

The 2016 U.S. presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is widely regarded as one of the most contentious elections in the country’s history, with investigations by both Congress and the FBI concluding that the spread of fake news was used as a tactic to influence the “outcome of the election” (Center for Information, 2016, para. 1). In the months leading to the election, the top 20 fabricated news garnered more online interaction on Facebook, totaling “8.7 million engagements,” compared to the 20 most accurate news articles, which only received “7.3 million engagements” (Kurtzleben, 2019, para. 8). Additionally, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, admitted that approximately “126 million Americans” were shown Russian-backed, “politically oriented” fake news stories during the 2016 presidential election (Center for Information, 2016, para. 4). Thus, the widespread dissemination of fake news was an efficient strategy that created distrust in American democracy and its leaders, leading to a loss of faith in the U.S. government and its interests. In 2016, confidence in political institutions reached an all-time low of “69%,” with only “30%” of Americans expressing confidence in the integrity of the election (Reinhart, 2020, para. 4). Furthermore, of 32 countries included in a Gallup poll, the U.S. ranks among the lowest in terms of confidence in the electoral process, with an average of “59%” of Americans unconfident in the democratic process (Reinhart, 2020, para. 7).

Along with the rise of fake news, “cheap speech,” the act of sharing thoughts “inexpensively” on social media, poses unique dangers for American democracy and for faith

and confidence in American elections (Hasen, 2022, para. 7). For instance, after the 2020 election, former President Donald Trump took to Twitter more than 400 times in the “three weeks post-election” to attack its legitimacy and spread rumors that it was stolen (Hasen, 2022, para. 8). This ability to spread fake information on a mass scale through social media platforms allowed “like-minded conspiracy theorists” to find one another, convert people to believing the false claims that the election was stolen, and ultimately organize the infamous insurrection of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Hasen, 2022, para. 3). Consequently, about “49%” of Americans attribute the decline in “interpersonal trust” to a broken “political culture” that fosters cynicism and suspicion about the ability to distinguish fact from fiction (Rainie et al., 2019, para. 3). Therefore, as stated by Donovan, the research director of the Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School, “the difference between 2016 and Pizzagate” and the Capitol insurrection is not the “themes...but the scale” at which fake news impacts people, forever changing the landscape of American democracy (Miller, 2021, para 3).

The uncertain fate of American democracy in the age of social media poses a formidable challenge that needs to be combatted with legal measures to equip voters with the resources necessary to make informed decisions and repudiate electoral deceit that will persist on any platform designed to undermine the bedrock of democracy. Implementing such legal measures in society could have prevented the mass spread of conspiracy and fake news impacting the 2016 and 2020 elections and the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol. For instance, two Senate bills against fake news have been filed to respond to the growing threats of disinformation. One of them is called “SB 547 by Sen. Grace Poe,” which seeks to amend the “Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees” to further promote professionalism in information dissemination among “public servants” by ensuring that they do not become “sources of

misinformation” as evidenced by Donald Trump after the 2020 election (Fighting, 2022, para. 10). Furthermore, another bill that was filed in the Senate was “S.B. 1296 by Sen. Jinggoy Estrada,” which seeks to criminalize the creation and dissemination of fake news, as evidenced by Russia in the 2016 election, by amending the “Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012” (Fighting, 2022, para. 10). Although one could argue that these legal measures could violate the First Amendment right of Freedom of Speech, it is crucial to recognize that disseminating false information on social media platforms can have far-reaching and detrimental consequences in society. As such, regulating such speech can be seen as a necessary measure to protect the safety and security of democratic institutions without infringing on the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. Today, the most apparent danger to American democracy is not government censorship but the loss of voter confidence and competence that arises from the sea of disinformation and contempt.

The proliferation of fake news challenges the very nature of truth and knowledge, as it undermines trust in relationships and exacerbates ideological divisions. According to Matthew Asher Lawson, Ph.D., an assistant professor at INSEAD, a business school in France, “conformity and social pressure” are key motivators of the spread of fake news; if someone in your “online tribe” is sharing fake news, then you feel pressure to share it as well (American Physiological Association, 2023, para.1). For instance, if a news story is consistent with someone’s worldview and helps them to “protect their social identity,” it can be advantageous for them to share it (Kahan, 2017; Schaffner & Luks, 2018). Moreover, in these situations, people place less value on accuracy, as “news veracity” does not matter when the objective is to impress one’s outlook on others (Van Bavel et al., 2021, para. 6). For instance, the proliferation of fake news in society does not discriminate in social or political classes/groups, for both

conservatives and liberals spread fake news because they do not want to be “ostracized from their social circles” (American Physiological Association, 2023, para. 4). The “benefits” that members enjoy being a part of a group/tribe often come with rules they are obligated to follow, which constrain their behavior by the “norms and procedures” of the group (Lawson et al., 2023, para. 5). Specifically, these social norms are rules and standards that group members understand, which “guides and constraints” human behavior without the “force of laws” (Lawson et al., 2023, para. 8). One famous historical example is the mass spread of Nazi propaganda that conformed an entire nation to dehumanize Jewish people. Jews were progressively denied the capacity for “fundamentally human mental experiences” and rejected “moral consideration” during this period, with dozens of Nazi speeches, articles, pamphlets, and posters used to deride and dehumanize their very existence (Landry et al., 2022, para. 7). This progressive denial in society facilitated the systematic atrocities against the Jewish population and was used to justify the abominable violence inflicted on them (Landry et al., 2022, para. 4). Fake news has been deeply ingrained into the fabric of interpersonal relationships and social bonds throughout history, eroding the diversity of thought and expression and bending the nature of human behavior to align with group standards and social influences.

The prevalence of fake news breeding conformity in society’s psychological, political, and social spheres has ultimately eroded citizens’ trust in the media. While not a new issue, it has persisted over time and has worsened to the point where only “32%” of Americans trust the media (Jones, 2018, para. 8). The sad truth is that citizens have lost faith in the media, and it is clear that the once-revered profession has failed to provide objective and accurate information. Individual journalists are now seen as influential people who push agendas not always in the public interest (Fink, 2018, para. 4). The Media is often perceived as being manipulated by



“powerful people” who want to push their agendas rather than serve the public (Fink, 2018, para. 9). Additionally, the content of false news stories, such as “cynical and tabloid-style” coverage focused on scandals, can erode society’s confidence and trust in news organizations (Ognyanova et al., 2020, para. 7). This particular style which has boomed in the digital age has proven to garner adverse reactions with “sensationalized coverage” and “clickbait” to entice people to click on stories online (Brants, 2013, para. 9). The truth is no longer a priority; the number of likes and shares on a post is now the ultimate goal of media institutions in the golden age of social media. Consequently, the very existence of online misinformation resembling a “journalistic product” can diminish the “credibility of legitimate” news (Ognyanova et al., 2020, para. 6). Additionally, fake news can instill misleading beliefs in people who “subsequently” make their decision based on those false beliefs (Domenico et al., 2021, para. 11). For instance, fake news can tarnish corporate reputations for firms, with large multinationals, such as Pepsi and New Balance, facing boycotts of their products because of online misinformation (Domenico et al., 2021, para. 8). It is, therefore, crucial to take steps to combat the spread of fake news not only to heal the psychological, political, and social spheres of society but also to regain citizens’ trust in the media and journalism.

The widespread rise of fake news on social media is a critical challenge that many believe needs to be addressed by digital literacy and education. Several nonprofit organizations and governments are pursuing methods to counteract the impact of fake news by improving the “digital media literacy” of news customers (Guess et al., 2020, para. 8). For instance, American universities increasingly teach media literacy to undergraduate students (Jazyńska, 2017, para. 3), and similar efforts are also being proposed for kindergarten to grade 12 students (Guess et al., 2020, para. 6). Similarly, the “National Association of Software and Service Companies” and

WhatsApp announced plans to train nearly 100,000 people in India through in-person events and posts on social media to spot misinformation (Guess et al., 2020, para. 2). However, while digital literacy is undoubtedly essential in navigating the online world, it is not the panacea for combating fake news. A study by MIT Sloan researchers found that “digital literacy helps people” identify misinformation, but it “does not necessarily stop them from spreading it” (Brown, 2022, para. 4). In the end, society must implement digital literacy in conjunction with other legal and regulatory solutions to impact the spread of fake news on social media.

The rise of fake news has created a weapon of mass deception that creates a dangerous environment threatening the foundational principle and morality of truth. Fake news has impacted the psychological ability of society to discern fact from fiction, undermined the very foundation of democracy, shattered interpersonal relationships and social bonds, and ultimately eroded citizens’ trust and faith in the integrity of the media. Therefore, society and the government must recognize social media’s destructive impact on the widespread dissemination of fake news and take legal and regulatory measures, in conjunction with digital literacy, to combat its spread. The recent settlement between “Fox News and Dominion Voting Systems for \$787 million,” the largest defamation settlement in U.S. history, illustrates a crucial step towards holding media platforms accountable for spreading false information as well as establishing the precedent of clear consequences for disseminating false news (Bennett & Loffman, 2023, para. 8); this settlement ultimately serves as an endorsement of the principle of truth and democracy for generations to come. There is no better time than the present to address and combat the fake news infodemic that is creating a façade of truth behind the curtains of fabrication and deception.

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