

## **Connecticut Debate Association**

**February 4, 2017**

### **Daniel Hand, Glastonbury and Wilton High Schools**

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**Resolved: Internet sites should be required to remove fake news.**

**Resolved: The government should take steps to ensure the accuracy of the news.**

**Resolved: The government should take steps to suppress fake news.**

**Resolved: Steps should be taken to suppress fake news.**

**Resolved: The creation, publishing or promotion of fake news should be illegal.**

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### **Duped by fake news story, Pakistani minister threatens nuclear war with Israel**

By Ben Westcott, CNN, Updated 1:05 AM ET, Mon December 26, 2016

(CNN)A fake news story led to threats of nuclear war between Pakistan and Israel on Christmas Eve.

In an article published by AWDNews on Tuesday December 20, former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon was quoted as threatening to destroy Pakistan if it sent troops into Syria. "We will destroy them with a nuclear attack," the article quoted Yaalon as saying. There is no evidence Yaalon ever said those words.

Pakistan Defense Minister Khawaja Asif responded to the fake news article on his official Twitter as if it were real. He warned Israel that it was not the only nuclear power. "Israeli (defense minister) threatens nuclear retaliation presuming (Pakistan) role in Syria against Daesh. Israel forgets Pakistan is a Nuclear State too," Asif wrote late on December 23.

Less than a day later, the Israeli Ministry of Defense responded on Twitter, notifying Asif the Yaalon statement quoted in AWDNews was completely false. "The statement attributed to (former Defense Minister) Yaalon (regarding) Pakistan was never said," the ministry tweeted on its account. "Reports referred to by the Pakistani Def Min are entirely false."

Asif tweeted again, late on Christmas night, saying their nuclear program was only a "deterrence to protect our freedom." "We desire to coexist in peace, both in our region and beyond," he said.

The large quantities of fake news on the internet has regularly made headlines in the past few months, blamed with affecting real events around the world. Most prominently, fake news has been blamed by the United States Democratic Party for helping President-elect Donald Trump win the 2016 United States election.

In December, one month after losing to Trump, Hillary Clinton called fake news "an epidemic." "This is not about politics or partisanship. Lives are at risk, lives of ordinary people just trying to go about their days to do their jobs, contribute to their communities," Clinton said, speaking at an official event in Washington.

Just days before she spoke, a man was arrested with an assault rifle at Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in Washington, DC, which had been falsely accused in fake news stories of being involved in a child sex operation.

On December 15, Facebook announced it was going to start labeling "fake news" stories.

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### **How to Teach High-School Students to Spot Fake News**

Slate: Future Tense, Dec. 21, 2016, By Chris Berdik

When the AP United States history students at Aragon High School in San Mateo, California, scanned the professionally designed pages of minimumwage.com, most concluded that it was a solid, unbiased source of facts and analysis. They noted the menu of research reports, graphics and videos, and the "About" page describing the site as a project of a "nonprofit research organization" called the Employment Policies Institute.

But then their teacher, Will Colglazier, demonstrated how a couple more exploratory clicks—critically, beyond the site itself—revealed the Employment Policies Institute is considered by the Center for Media and Democracy to be a front group created by lobbyists for the restaurant and hotel industries.

"I have some bright students, and a lot of them felt chagrined that they weren't able to deduce this," said Colglazier,

who videotaped the episode in January. “They got duped.”

One student responded loudly, “Fudge nuggets!”

The exercise was part of “Civic Online Reasoning,” a series of news-literacy lessons being developed by Stanford University researchers and piloted by teachers at a few dozen schools. The Stanford initiative launched in 2015, joining a handful of recent efforts to help students contend with misinformation and fake news online—a problem as old as dial-up modems but now supercharged by social media and partisan news bubbles. The backers of these efforts warn that despite young people’s reputation as “digital natives,” they are woefully unprepared to sort online fact from fiction, and the danger isn’t just to scholarship but to citizenship.

Stanford’s myth busters, led by education professor Sam Wineburg and doctoral student Sarah Cotcamp McGrew, have field-tested 15 news-literacy tasks of varying difficulty, with about 50 more in the works. Can middle-school students spot “native advertising” (ads masquerading as articles) on a crowded news website? Can high-school kids check the authenticity of an alarming image posted on Facebook? Will students investigate the sources of controversial claims? Will they seek corroboration? By and large, according to a report the group published in November, the answer in each case is no.

“Overall,” the report concluded, “young people’s ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak.”

The news literacy initiative is based in the Stanford History Education Group that Wineburg founded in 2002 to train teachers how to use primary sources and help students critically evaluate historical claims. The group also created a free digital curriculum called “Reading Like a Historian” that’s been downloaded more than 3 million times, according to Wineburg.

“We live in a world where our library begins with G,” Wineburg said, for Google, and the Common Core’s push for evidence-based reasoning falls flat if students trust everything that pops up in their Google search results.

Even before a deluge of fibs and fakery swamped our recent election cycle, Wineburg and company realized that readers of online news need many of the same skills used by a good historian, such as identifying the sources of claims and asking questions about their evidence. After all, what shows up in your Twitter or Facebook feed can come from anywhere, and a post-election BuzzFeed analysis suggested the fake stuff spreads faster than real news, thanks to hyper-partisan readers blindly sharing sensational headlines.

“This isn’t just a problem with kids,” said Wineburg. “Reliable information is to democratic functioning what clean air and water are to public health.”

Fortunately, long-neglected civics education seems to be on the rebound in many states, which has helped groups like the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University get their message into K-12 classrooms. The center has run a course for undergraduates since 2007 and has since expanded into secondary schools by hosting summer teacher-training workshops and making course materials available online through its Digital Resource Center. In January, it plans to launch a massive online open course (aka MOOC) called “Making Sense of the News: News Literacy Lessons for Digital Citizens.”

One early K-12 adopter of the Center’s news-literacy lessons was Janis Schachter, a social studies teacher at Northport High School in Long Island, New York. Schachter took one of the center’s first summer trainings and has taught Northport’s news-literacy course since 2011 as an elective that meets New York state’s “participation in government” graduation requirement.

“My students are all about social media. They’ve never known life without it, and it’s where they get all their information,” said Schachter. “Whether that information is from a news organization or from your uncle, it all looks the same to them.”

Gradually, Schachter’s students learn how to sort through it all—to check for multiple, informed, and named sources, and for claims backed by evidence they can independently verify.

“I tell the kids, it’s not fair that we have to do all this work, but the reality of the internet is that we do,” said Schachter, who also stresses that students only need to verify news they plan to act on, whether by voting, protesting, or just spreading the story by sharing it.

Still, learning news-literacy skills is one thing, and the motivation to use those skills is another. If that tantalizing headline in our Facebook news feed fits our political outlook, why do the digging that might undermine it?

The fact that so many of us now get our news in partisan online echo chambers sets up “a perfect storm for fake news,” according to Joe Kahne, an education professor at the University of California, Riverside.

In some good news, a new study Kahne co-authored, based on a national survey of young people ages 15 to 27, found that self-reported media-literacy training did make people significantly less likely to believe a factually inaccurate claim

even if it aligned with their political point of view.

Kahne plans to study news-literacy efforts to discover what specific strategies get young people to value facts, whether they bolster their existing beliefs or contradict them. For now, one popular suggestion by news-literacy educators is to tap teenagers' instinctive aversion to people telling them what to think.

“One of the messages we’ve tried to stress more and more lately with the rise of fake news is this: Do you want to be fooled?” said Jonathan Anzalone, assistant director of the Center for News Literacy. “Wouldn’t you rather make up your own mind?”

Chris Berdik is a freelance science journalist and author of *Mind Over Mind: The Surprising Power of Expectations*.

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

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## **How to Beat the Scourge of Fake News**

By JEFFREY HERBST, *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 11, 2016 4:21 p.m. ET

Facebook and Google can’t do it alone. Better educating consumers is crucial.

This was supposed to be the information age. Instead, we find ourselves in a swamp of disinformation, rumor, innuendo and fake news. To cite a few examples: A false endorsement of Donald Trump by the pope on Facebook went viral, along with a story that Ireland was accepting anti-Trump refugees from the U.S. On Dec. 4 a man was arrested after firing an assault weapon in a Washington, D.C., pizzeria after reading a fake online news story claiming that Hillary Clinton and her campaign chief John Podesta ran a child sex ring in the restaurant’s basement.

What can be done to provide Americans with better news during this wrenching transformation of the information ecosystem? Some want to foist the responsibility on the very tech companies that started the revolution. Yes, they can do a better job by, among other things, developing algorithms that identify and block fake news. And as this newspaper reported last month, Facebook and Google are taking steps to “prevent fake-news websites from generating revenue through their ad-selling services.”

But hoping that the tech companies can be the sole or even primary answer to the question of improving the quality of news is quixotic at best. These companies have achieved commercial success beyond anything seen in human history because they excel at giving consumers exactly what they want.

This is hardly the first time that fake news has been controversial. The “yellow journalism” of the late 19th century featured fake news, false interviews, and an obsessive focus on crime. As William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer engaged in an energetic race to the bottom, many believed that the hyperbole found in the dailies helped determine the American entry into the Spanish-American War and was at least partially responsible for the assassination of President William McKinley. Concerned, at least in part, about the excesses of journalism that he helped spawn, Pulitzer gave the funding for what became the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to help elevate the profession.

Today, those looking for a supply-side solution to the news misunderstand what has happened to the information ecosystem. As the forecaster Paul Saffo has noted, in the past, information was scarce—there were few reporters, it was hard to unearth facts, and difficult to transmit information quickly—so traditional gatekeepers like the national newspapers and the television networks could control the distribution of news. Now that anyone with a smartphone can be a reporter, blogger and photographer with the ability to transmit to the whole world almost costlessly, there is a hyper-abundance of news and no one can control how the information flows.

Therefore, the demand side is where the fake news problem will largely have to be solved. If the customer wants higher-quality news, the algorithms that shape social media will relentlessly ship excellent journalism. The question is how to convince customers to demand high-quality news that may come at a price when they are swamped with low-quality news that is free, and often more entertaining.

Lessons can be drawn from cases where people essentially have begun to move away from hyper-abundant goods to more costly ones because they began to value qualities other than price. For instance, organic food is the fastest-growing segment of the food market despite its expense. Demand for more expensive food did not just materialize. It was the result of long campaigns of persuasion by advocates who were able to make a direct connection between what people ate and health.

At the Newseum, we work to change consumer taste in news by showing citizens that the jeers and jabs of 140 characters may be protected free speech, but they prevent the serious consideration of new ideas. Each year, we teach media literacy to millions of students through our free online NewseumED program. They become better citizens by learning how to discern what is true and what is not on social media by analyzing sources and making evidence-based arguments.

This is one area where the U.S. education system can make an immediate and important impact. Social-studies and journalism programs in secondary schools and colleges should be adapted to improve media literacy and help students become responsible citizens in the digital age. Prompting citizens to become intentional news consumers will also be an excellent way to resurrect civics education.

Journalists, educators and social-media executives must all work to ensure that consumers understand why demanding better news is essential to the future of our democracy. Simply complaining about tech companies won't cut it.

Mr. Herbst is the president and chief executive officer of the Newseum in Washington, D.C.

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## **Fake News: How a Partying Macedonian Teen Earns Thousands Publishing Lies**

MSNBC, DEC 9 2016, by ALEXANDER SMITH and VLADIMIR BANIC

VELES, Macedonia — Dimitri points to a picture on his Instagram showing a bar table decked with expensive champagne and sparklers. It's from his 18th birthday just four months ago — a lavish party in his east European hometown that he says wouldn't have been possible without President-elect Donald Trump. Dimitri — who asked NBC News not to use his real name — is one of dozens of teenagers in the Macedonian town of Veles who got rich during the U.S. presidential election producing fake news for millions on social media. The articles, sensationalist and often baseless, were posted to Facebook, drawing in armies of readers and earning fake-news writers money from penny-per-click advertising.

Dimitri says he's earned at least \$60,000 in the past six months — far outstripping his parents' income and transforming his prospects in a town where the average annual wage is \$4,800. He is one of the more successful fake news pushers in the area. His main source of cash? Supporters of America's president-elect. "Nothing can beat Trump's supporters when it comes to social media engagement," he says. "So that's why we stick with Trump." Even with the presidential contest over and Google and Facebook's plans to crack down on fake news makers, money continues to pour in. Posts about Hillary Clinton are also a hit — but only negative ones.

"I have mostly written about her emails, what is contained in her emails, the Benghazi tragedy, maybe her illness that she had," Dimitri adds, but now he's moved on to headlines like: "Trey Gowdy Revealed His EPIC Plan To Imprison Hillary Now That Election's Over, SHE IS DONE!"

Dimitri's sole aim is to make his stories go viral. His most popular headlines during the election included: "JUST IN: Obama Illegally Transferred DOJ Money To Clinton Campaign!" and "BREAKING: Obama Confirms Refusal To Leave White House, He Will Stay In Power!"

The teenager is unrepentant about any influence his stories may have had on swaying public opinion. "I didn't force anyone to give me money," he says. "People sell cigarettes, they sell alcohol. That's not illegal, why is my business illegal? If you sell cigarettes, cigarettes kill people. I didn't kill anyone."

The same weekend that NBC spent with Dimitri, a gunman opened fire in a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. The shooter told police he was motivated by a fake news story. The pizzeria, Comet Ping Pong, was accused online of hosting a pedophile ring run by Democratic leaders. Asked about the incident this week, Dimitri claimed he wasn't familiar with the story nor the people who had spread it online.

### **A Modern Gold Rush**

The small, rust-belt town of Veles has found itself in the international spotlight after investigations by BuzzFeed and the Guardian traced more than 100 fake news domain names here. The fake news bonanza couldn't have come against a more jarring backdrop. Once part of communist Yugoslavia, the Republic of Macedonia has a population of 2.1 million in a landlocked area about the size Vermont. Blanketed by rugged mountains, parts of the country have enjoyed a tourism surge in recent years. But vacationers won't find Veles in many travel guides. The town of 50,000 is almost an hour's drive down a lonely, crumbling highway from the capital, Skopje.

Visitors are greeted by a distressed mosaic of red-roofed buildings, densely stacked onto a steep mountainside. Industrial smokestacks add to a wintry fog settling over the valley — though even their output has diminished after several recent factory closures. Almost a quarter of Macedonians are currently unemployed — a rate around five times higher than in the U.S. But the burdens that weigh on Veles might also explain why it's become a global hotbed for fake news. High unemployment and a close-knit community meant that when Dimitri and others started making money, word quickly spread and everyone wanted a piece of the action. Most teens here speak fluent English, allowing them to quickly navigate through reams of Western news sites and pinpoint potentially viral content.

Dimitri estimates there are now 300 locals dabbling in fake news, with at least 50 making "decent money," and around a dozen making "a lot." He says he's not quite at the top of the pecking order, but not far off. But he is no scrappy teenager. Dimitri is bright, with an obvious aptitude for business.

He won't show NBC News his profile on Google AdSense, an online advertising service that allows websites to make money, to protect five other teenagers who asked him not to reveal aspects of their shared interests. He's also wary of revealing his full income, worried it will make him a target for thieves, or worse. However, he does show NBC News a digital receipt from Google showing he earned more than \$8,000 from the web giant in September. He says this was just one of several advertising accounts, and claims his most successful streak — in the run-up to the election — saw him rake in \$27,000 in just one month.

When asked for comment about the persistence of fake news even after the election, Facebook directed NBC News to a post from CEO Mark Zuckerberg last month in which he laid out the company's plan to tackle the phenomenon. In an interview with TODAY on Thursday, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg acknowledged "there's a lot more to do."

Google outlined steps last month that it said would restrict advertising on websites that "misrepresent, misstate, or conceal information." The company did not respond to NBC News' requests for comment on this apparently still-flourishing industry.

Dimitri says even after the election, while business is less brisk, his fake news is still highly profitable. Like any business, he's aware of the need to adapt. "This business updates every hour, every ten minutes, every minute," he says. "There are always news ideas, new types of generating new visitors and that's the thing we all want." So while newspapers across the globe are losing advertising revenue, Dimitri's empire of lies is thriving. He says he now employs three 15-year-olds, paying them the equivalent of \$10 per day. As well as buying new laptops and paying cash to boost his posts on social media, he has also invested some of his earnings into real estate — a joint venture with his parents, who are more than happy with his success.

### **The Anatomy of a Lie**

As with many regular journalists, Dimitri starts his day by trawling the web looking for trending topics that he can harness to drive traffic to his websites. He copies his posts from other fake news websites, including many in the U.S., or takes content from mainstream media organizations before peppering them with invented details. He also posts provocative online polls such as: "Should Trump Deport All Refugees?" and: "Do you consider Donald Trump, the Jesus of America?"

Most of this content is published on websites Dimitri has built to look like NBC News, Fox News, the Huffington Post and others. To the untrained eye, fake headlines such as: "BREAKING: Obama Confirms Refusal To Leave White House, He Will Stay In Power!" look genuine. The only giveaway is the imitation URL. From then on, it's a case of throwing as much mud at the wall and seeing what sticks.

"The most-read news articles are usually the ones containing the click-bait words," Dimitri says. "The click bait words, as you know, are, 'Oh my god, breaking news, wow,' and usually something that has never been aired before. Because if the title just says, 'Today this happened, today that happened,' no one will open that."

He and his collaborators post these stories to their Facebook pages dozens of times a day. Again, he would only show NBC News a Facebook page that he runs on his own, which has an impressive 86,000 likes. But he said the six pages run by his collective have amassed more than 3 million likes between them.

"Say you produce ten lies a day, [the audience] is not going to believe ten lies, they are going to believe probably one or maximum two," he says. "Usually the lies about [Clinton's] emails and the lies about Hillary. The anti-Hillary posts were really good."

Stories from USA Daily News 24, a fake news site registered in Veles, Macedonia. An Associated Press analysis using web intelligence service Domain Tools shows that USA Daily News 24 is one of roughly 200 U.S.-oriented sites registered in Veles, which has emerged as the unlikely hub for the distribution of disinformation on Facebook. Both stories shown here are bogus. Raphael Satter / AP

Dimitri says he has set up more than 50 domain names in six months, all in a bid to please Facebook's algorithm and get the maximum number of eyeballs on his posts. He claims in that time his posts have achieved some 40 million page views. "We stay up late and we don't sleep that much — I haven't slept good for a couple of months now," he says. "I have to go to school and then at night I have to work." He and his colleagues see the process as an art. At first they worked on a basis of trial-and-error. Now it comes naturally. "You see what people like and you just give it to them," he explains. "You see they like water, you give water, they like wine, you give wine. It's really simple."

The challenge of engaging readers on social media is one familiar to most journalists. They have a formidable opponent in Dimitri and his peers; analysis by BuzzFeed after the election showed that fake news websites actually performed better than conventional press and television. Dimitri is unequivocal about why the mainstream couldn't compete: "They're not allowed to lie."

### **Partying to the Tune of Fake News**

The influx of money has created a thriving party culture in Veles. On Saturday, one local nightclub was barely keeping up with demand, as dozens of teens and young adults ordered ice buckets filled with large \$35 bottles of vodka. In this new era, the purveyors of fake news are the coolest kids in the schoolyard. "Since fake news started, girls are more interested in geeks than macho guys," says one 17-year-old girl standing at the bar.

The most successful fake-news publishers have "bought themselves houses, apartments, maybe invested in some real estate or in some businesses," according to Dimitri. "They have bought themselves cars, they have bought ... their girlfriends better cars, better places to live," he says. Keen to feed off this gold rush, the nightclub even plans to organize a club night on the same day that Google pays out its advertising money.

Following Google and Facebook's vow to clamp down on fake news, Dimitri says he knows people have lost tens of thousands after their accounts were shuttered. "When they started to shut down webpages, business went down," says 20-year-old Kiko, a bartender at the nightclub. The impact appears to have been short lived, however, judging by the healthy flow of local currency, the Macedonian denar, being shoved into the club's cash registers.

Most people are cagey about admitting any direct involvement in fake news. But Tony, a 40-year-old taxi driver, says that every young person he knows — including his own son — is in on the act. "I've been doing this job for 18 years and I know everyone in the city," he says. "I know kids who are minors, 16 or 17 years old, and they bought BMWs after running these websites." Is he worried about his son making money from selling hoaxes online? "It's better to do this job than to go into the drug business," he says.

Also unperturbed is Veles' mayor, Slavcho Chadiev. "Is it criminal activity? Not according to the law of Macedonia," he says during an interview in his office. "All that money went through the state system and everyone paid their taxes." He isn't bothered by accusations that Veles' teens swayed the U.S. election. In fact, he welcomes the idea. "Not as a mayor, but as a man and as a citizen, I'm glad if Veles contributed to the Republicans' victory and Trump's victory," he says.

Like many Macedonians, he blames recent Democratic administrations in Washington for not doing more to help their country's attempts to join the European Union and NATO. (Greece has blocked these efforts in a dispute over Macedonia's name — the country's official title at the United Nations is the cumbersome Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.) On the flip side, the mayor still remembers fondly when Republican President George W. Bush recognized his country's new title in 2004. What would he do if he encountered one of these fake news tycoons? "I would ask him, 'Are you looking for a job?' Because I have a lack of IT guys," he says, before admitting that the salary of less than \$400 might not be attractive.

Dimitri says his goal is to earn \$1 million, and it's no surprise the young entrepreneur sees Trump as "a small role model." There's only one question that sees doubt creep into Dimitri's cocksure demeanor. When he copies posts from other fake news websites, does he worry he's being used as a pawn to spread propaganda? "When you buy a certain product, you don't know who created it," he says. "You don't know who creates your shoes, and there are rumors that small children in Africa create them." He adds: "Maybe I don't want to find out, because if I find out maybe I'm going to feel bad. Right now I'm feeling OK."

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## **As Fake News Spreads Lies, More Readers Shrug at the Truth**

The New York Times, By SABRINA TAVERNISEDEC. 6, 2016

HAM LAKE, Minn. — One morning last week, Larry Laughlin, a retired business owner, opened his shiny black Dell laptop and scrolled through Facebook. Most of the posts were ordinary news stories from conservative sites: Donald J. Trump's deal with the Carrier company. The political tussle over the recount. But a few items were his guilty pleasures. "I like this guy," said Mr. Laughlin, looking at a post by the conservative commentator and author Mark Dice.

Mr. Dice has promoted conspiracy theories that the Jade Helm military training exercise last year was preparation for martial law and that the Sept. 11 attacks were an "inside job." But Mr. Laughlin likes him for what he said was his humorous political commentary and his sarcastic man-on-the-street interviews.

"I just like the satisfaction," said Mr. Laughlin, who started his own business and lives in an affluent Twin Cities suburb. "It's like a hockey game. Everyone's got their goons. Their goons are pushing our guys around, and it's great to see our goons push back."

The proliferation of fake and hyperpartisan news that has flooded into Americans' laptops and living rooms has prompted a national soul-searching, with liberals across the country asking how a nation of millions could be marching to such a suspect drumbeat. But while some Americans may take the stories literally — like the North Carolina man who fired his gun in a Washington pizzeria on Sunday trying to investigate a false story spread online of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton — many do not.

The larger problem, experts say, is less extreme but more insidious. Fake news, and the proliferation of raw opinion that

passes for news, is creating confusion, punching holes in what is true, causing a kind of fun-house effect that leaves the reader doubting everything, including real news.

That has pushed up the political temperature and increased polarization. No longer burdened with wrestling with the possibility that they might be wrong, people on the right and the left have become more entrenched in their positions, experts say. In interviews, people said they felt more empowered, more attached to their own side and less inclined to listen to the other. Polarization is fun, like cheering a goal for the home team.

“There are an alarming number of people who tend to be credulous and form beliefs based on the latest thing they’ve read, but that’s not the wider problem,” said Michael Lynch, a professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut. “The wider problem is fake news has the effect of getting people not to believe real things.”

He described the thinking like this: “There’s no way for me to know what is objectively true, so we’ll stick to our guns and our own evidence. We’ll ignore the facts because nobody knows what’s really true anyway.”

News that is fake or only marginally real has lurked online — and in supermarket tabloids — for years, but never before has it played such a prominent role in an American election and its aftermath. Narrowly defined, “fake news” means a made-up story with an intention to deceive, often geared toward getting clicks. But the issue has become a political battering ram, with the left accusing the right of trafficking in disinformation, and the right accusing the left of tarring conservatives as a way to try to censor websites. In the process, the definition of fake news has blurred.

“Fake news is subjective,” Mr. Laughlin said. “It depends on who’s defining it. One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

For Mr. Laughlin, conservative sites are a balm for the soul in a liberal world whose narrative of America, he says, seems to diminish him and all that he has accomplished. He was his own legal guardian at 16, after his mother fled his alcoholic father. He built his metal finishing business from scratch after earning an associate degree from a community college. The company he owned employs about 17 people. He and his wife adopted three mixed-race children.

“My struggles in life are just dismissed,” he said, recalling being lectured by one of his children’s liberal friends at a party in his large home. “‘You have a nice house and got it made because you are a white guy.’ There are all of these preconceived notions that I’m a racist, idiot, a bigot, and oh, uneducated.”

He feels alienated from the conventional news media for some of the same reasons. “It’s like an inside joke for people on the left, and we are the butt of the joke,” he said of one left-leaning website. “At some point, we stopped listening.”

Mr. Laughlin likes news that strikes back against that. These days, he takes the most pleasure in watching clips strung together by conservative websites of liberal commentators sneering about how ridiculous Donald J. Trump was as a candidate and how he had no chance at becoming president.

“This is like our sweet release after the election,” Mr. Laughlin said. He said the hyperpartisan environment left him craving intense content. “I’m picking through the fruit and looking for the reddest apple,” he said.

But Mr. Laughlin avoids news that looks false, like a story after the election that Mr. Trump won the popular vote, and said he was careful not to click on such items to deny them advertising revenue. He said he cringed when he heard about the incident in the pizza restaurant. “It adds to the stereotype that we’re all nutters,” he said. “We’ll all get lumped together with this guy.”

Adding to the confusion is the fact that Mr. Trump and some members of his team have promoted false items, too, such as that millions of people voted illegally. A similar story had circulated on the site of the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones some days before. For Clayton Montgomery, 57, a retired state department of transportation worker in Waynesville, N.C., the numbers may not be precisely right, but the broad outlines rang true.

“All of a sudden they got this big push of registered voters,” Mr. Montgomery said, referring to California. “They were all illegals. The same thing in the state of Washington, Los Angeles and Houston, too.”

He said that Mr. Jones, who has called the Sandy Hook massacre a hoax, “can get a little conspiratorial,” but added that he “raises some very logical and important questions.”

Mr. Montgomery has concerns about immigration. He lived for years in South Florida, where he had a painting business that was deeply affected by cheap labor from Hispanic immigrants.

“They can’t say that these people are not taking jobs away from American citizens,” he said. “They come up and they lowball. It hurts a lot of people.”

Another story online alleged that Mexico had a wall along its southern border “with guard towers,” Mr. Montgomery said, to keep “all these other countries from coming in.” (Mr. Laughlin saw that one, too, but pointed out that the photograph that accompanied the story was from Israel.)

Mr. Montgomery pushed back: “Check it out, it’s true!” Mr. Montgomery said he was nostalgic for the news of old,

when Walter Cronkite delivered it. But the reputation of the press has been tarnished, he said, and people are left to navigate the fractured landscape on their own. The online content can be frustrating, with headlines that promise more than the story delivers. He noted one with a headline along the lines of “The wait is over; Hillary’s being indicted.” “But then you click and there’s nothing in there about her being indicted,” Mr. Montgomery said. “It’s almost like looking at a menu in a restaurant. Oh, that sounds delicious, it sounds great, and then it’s this teeny weeny thing you maybe get three bites of.”

Fake and hyperpartisan news from the right has been more conspicuous than from the left, but both sides indulge. BuzzFeed analyses have found more on the right. Some purveyors have said right-leaning items are more profitable. But the left has its share. The fact-checking site Snopes said it found no evidence for a quotation, often attributed to Mr. Trump by the left, that Republican voters were stupid.

That type of insult increases the partisan divide. Paul Indre, a project manager for a hardware goods company in Akron, Ohio, who gets his news from podcasts and television, avoids much of online news. But he understands why people go there in a polarized era.

Mr. Indre, a moderate Republican, said he remained vigilant against fake news. “If I’m in a Trump group and someone will share something that’s fake news,” he said, “I’ll ask them ‘Hey did you check that?’”

But it is often impossible to tell whether “they are just lobbing a bomb, or do they really believe it?” he said. “You have some folks who are a little naïve, who don’t follow the news and believe it. I mean, people do buy The National Enquirer and believe it.”

“But some of it might be revenge factor, getting back at something they are hearing from the left,” he said. “Maybe they are just reacting to something. Maybe we are just in this reactionary period.”

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## **Would Facebook or Twitter Ever Ban President Trump?**

Slate: Technology, By Will Oremus, November 28, 2016

One says it wouldn’t, and one says it would.

Could the president of the United States ever get suspended or banned from a major social network? The answer: It depends on the network.

It’s a hypothetical question, of course—but not merely an academic one, given the president-elect’s track record of using social media to sow conspiracy theories, attack reporters, threaten political rivals, and call for religious discrimination. Facebook and Twitter in particular have already struggled to reconcile their policies on harassment and hate speech with some of the activities of Donald Trump and his political allies. And the two social networks have offered starkly different answers to the question.

Facebook has indicated that it will not apply its normal community standards to posts from President-elect Trump, given their newsworthiness and the widespread popular support for his views. But Twitter told Slate that no one is exempt from its rules—not even the president.

Twitter recently suspended the accounts of several leading pundits and activists from the “alt-right,” a pro-Trump movement that is linked with notions of white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-Semitism. Asked whether Twitter would ever consider banning key government officials or even the president himself, a company spokesperson responded via email: “The Twitter Rules prohibit violent threats, harassment, hateful conduct, and multiple account abuse, and we will take action on accounts violating those policies.” Pressed on whether that meant that, hypothetically, Trump himself could be suspended were he to violate those policies, a spokesperson confirmed: “The Twitter Rules apply to all accounts, including verified accounts.”

That’s a tough line from a company that once declared itself the “free speech wing of the free speech party.” But it’s in keeping with Twitter’s renewed emphasis on enforcing harassment and hate speech policies. Among the potentially relevant clauses are its prohibitions on the promotion of violence; targeted harassment of another user, including incitements to harassment; and direct attacks on people on the basis of “race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease.”

Facebook, meanwhile, has adopted a more permissive stance toward Trump and other public figures, led by CEO Mark Zuckerberg. “When we review reports of content that may violate our policies, we take context into consideration,” a Facebook spokesperson said via email. “That context can include the value of political discourse.” The spokesperson noted that this approach is not Trump-specific.

Still, the Wall Street Journal reported in October that some Facebook employees had pressed for Trump’s Facebook page to be suspended for posts that they believed violated the company’s community standards on hate speech, including posts that called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States. But Zuckerberg decided in December that it

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would be inappropriate to interfere with a major-party candidate's political posts, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Zuckerberg himself clarified his stand in an onstage interview with David Kirkpatrick at the Techonomy conference on Nov. 10. Asked about his decision not to take action against Trump's page, Zuckerberg said:

Our real goal is to reflect what our community wants. That kind of content, we would have thought previously that would make a lot of people feel uncomfortable, and people wouldn't want that. But at the point where the person who's elected president of the United States is expressing that opinion and has 60 million people who are followers, then the question is, OK, I think that that is mainstream political discourse that I think we need to be pretty careful about saying that that's not a reasonable [inaudible].

This marks something of a role reversal for a pair of social networks that have historically taken fundamentally different stances on inflammatory speech. While Twitter earned a reputation as a platform where almost anything goes, Facebook has long sought to maintain a family-friendly atmosphere by removing posts and suspending accounts that appear to violate its relatively strict policies.

Both companies have adjusted their philosophies in recent months in response to mounting criticism. Facebook reversed its decision to block the Pulitzer Prize-winning "napalm girl" photo in September after a backlash. The company said it has begun to take into account posts' newsworthiness in such decisions, in recognition of Facebook's increasingly influential role in the distribution of news and political speech. Twitter, meanwhile, has been adding new tools for users to report, block, or mute harassers and trolls. The company also said this month that it has broadened its interpretation of hate speech and retrained its employees to enforce it more consistently and aggressively.

Twitter might actually be called upon to back up its tough talk.

That doesn't mean Twitter is likely to ever delete a Trump tweet, let alone suspend his account. That he has avoided its censure so far suggests it would take something outlandish even by Trump's standards for Twitter to take action. (For reference, the New York Times in October compiled a list of everyone Trump has insulted on Twitter since declaring his candidacy.) By the same token, it's conceivable that Facebook could decide at some point that it is possible for the president of the United States to cross a line after all. Practically speaking, the sort of post that would get Trump suspended from Twitter may not be so different from the sort that would provoke a reaction from Facebook.

Still, it's telling that the two social networks have staked out opposite positions on this question so far. In Twitter's case, it reinforces the company's recent tough talk on harassment while bolstering its claim to be a democratizing platform, where the lowly and the powerful are subject to the same rules. The risk, for Twitter, is that it might actually be called upon to back up that tough talk.

In Facebook's case, the preferential treatment for Trump is indicative of the company's pragmatic approach to enforcing its own rules, as well as its burgeoning appreciation of its role in politics and the media. But it also further undermines the company's claim to be a neutral platform. Ever since it felt the wrath of conservatives this summer, Facebook has been at pains to present itself as politically evenhanded. But the idea of evenhandedness itself presumes equivalence between the views and actions of different political parties and figures—a presumption that Trump's presidency will sorely test.

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## **How Russian Propaganda Really Works in the West**

Bloomberg News, NOV 28, 2016, By Leonid Bershidsky

Until recently, the phenomenon of Russian government propaganda was only interesting to a small group of Russia experts, news junkies and counter-propaganda fundraisers. It was mainly seen as a tool for keeping Russians supportive of Vladimir Putin. No longer. Thanks to post-U.S. election blame games, and the upcoming election season in Europe, how the Russian state pushes its messages to Western audiences is a hot political topic. It's also woefully misunderstood.

As the Russian journalist Alexey Kovalev, who started this own project to debunk Russian government propaganda, puts it: "The fight against fake news has itself turned into fake news. It's a kind of meta-propaganda."

Take a widely-quoted Washington Post story that relies on an anonymous group of "concerned American citizens" that calls itself PropOrNot and aims to "identify, help counter and eventually deter Russian propaganda." The article cites PropOrNot estimates that "stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times." The PropOrNot report doesn't explain how the group arrived at that number, but it does identify such established left-wing, libertarian and right-wing sites as the Naked Capitalism blog, Zero Hedge and Drudge Report as conduits for Russian propaganda.

PropOrNot uses an unhelpfully broad definition of "Russian propaganda." It includes, for example, stories about the

alleged weakness, aggressiveness or corruption of "the opponents of Russia," a long list that includes "the U.S., Obama, Hillary Clinton, the EU, Angela Merkel, NATO, Ukraine, Jewish people, U.S. allies, the 'mainstream media,' and democrats, the center-right or center-left, and moderates of all stripes." Then, it goes on to describe how the alternative news sites, blogs and social media accounts repost or cite each other's information, amplifying the effects of "Russian propaganda."

That, of course, is how modern-day news distribution generally works. The Washington Post enjoyed the same effect from the uncritical sharing of its unsubstantiated piece despite the protests and critiques it drew from figures such as The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald and Fortune media writer Mathew Ingram.

PropOrNot's list of "tells" that a website is part of the Russian propaganda effort includes what it describes as hyperbolic alarmism, anti-Western conspiracist insinuations, racism, gold-standard nuttury and attacks on the U.S. dollar, 9/11 trutherism, anti-Semitism, anti-GMO paranoia, and generally ridiculous over-the-top assertions, which cite Russian propaganda outlets as "evidence."

The PropOrNot view of what constitutes Russian propaganda is extreme, but the mainstream characterization of Russian propaganda is surprisingly close to it. Last Wednesday, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the need to counter propaganda by Russia and the Islamic State, aimed at the following ills:distorting truths, provoking doubt, dividing member states, engineering a strategic split between the European Union and its North American partners and paralyzing the decision-making process, discrediting the EU institutions and transatlantic partnerships, which play a recognized role in the European security and economic architecture, in the eyes and minds of EU citizens and of citizens of neighboring countries, and undermining and eroding the European narrative based on democratic values, human rights and the rule of law.

Essentially, both PropOrNot and the European legislators are suspicious of the same thing: Narratives that contradict a certain official, accepted, centrist, politically correct line. Those narratives, however, have existed for decades, sometimes generations -- since the days when Russian propaganda had totally different goals than today, focusing on the support of left-wing movements.

Russia's state-owned propaganda TV station, RT, launched its English-language channel in 2005. Sputnik, the multilingual Russian propaganda agency, went online in November, 2014. Both have succeeded in infiltrating the increasingly powerful alternative news universe, delivering Russian propaganda as just one of the ingredients in a heady cocktail. The move was deliberate and RT led the way, changing course about a year after it was formed. As the station's editor Margarita Simonyan described it to the Financial Times' Max Seddon:

I noticed that mainstream western TV channels, especially CNN and ABC, show the same thing. It really ate me up inside. I realized that there are quite a lot of people in the world who don't think that's how it should be, so it probably makes sense to make something for them. Obviously if our audience is Kremlinologists and Russia watchers, then that's very few people.

RT and Sputnik are lavishly funded. RT's 2016 budget, according to the channel itself, is \$247 million. As far as alternative media goes, RT is the 800-pound gorilla. It can pay lavish fees to contributors, shoot professional video anywhere in the world, pay for professional-looking reporting.

The Russian state product is attractively packaged and free. The effect, of course, is that the "crazies" that populate the alternative news sphere, those dismissed by the mainstream, consume pro-Vladimir Putin information with their general diet.

During the U.S. election campaign, I talked to far-right Americans who had long since stopped paying attention to the mainstream media -- but who respected RT and, by extension, Putin because both had infiltrated their alternative universe. The same, of course, is happening in Europe today. Putin is not the main dish Russian propaganda outlets are serving -- he's just a spice that goes well with the alternative diet those who eschew mainstream media seek..

For years, few people paid attention because the fringe was the fringe. Then it turned out there were enough of them to swing a U.S. presidential election. But the suggested methods of fighting Russian propaganda miss the target. PropOrNot has developed a browser plug-in that warns a user that a site is part of the "propaganda network." The European Parliament resolution calls for reinforcing the EU Strategic Communication Task Force, which, among other things, produces the regular Disinformation Digest to debunk Russian propaganda.

Consumers of alternative news sites, however, don't care if Russian propaganda is mixed in with the content they consume because they don't believe EU or U.S. government propaganda is any better. Donald Trump's pick for national security adviser, Michael Flynn, asked about his regular appearances on RT, seemed unable to tell the difference between the Russian state channel and CNN.

The only effective way to counteract Russian propaganda would be to do what RT and Sputnik do so well -- beam messages at the same target audience. But democracies don't have that prerogative: Done openly, it would just look

ridiculous; done surreptitiously, the risk of exposure is great and trust in democratic processes could be undermined. Putin, for his part, is proud. He congratulated RT and Sputnik on the European Parliament resolution, praising their "effective work" and decrying the "degradation of democratic ideas in Western society."

That leaves private, professional media with plenty of homework to do. How did we end up more mistrusted by a large segment of Western readers and viewers than state-funded Sputnik or RT? Did we perhaps follow government narratives too closely and uncritically? These are inconvenient questions, and it's harder to ask them than to get involved in a misguided war on propaganda that ends up stigmatizing legitimate criticism and media diversity. But looking for ways to communicate with the voters of Trump, Marine Le Pen in France and the other nationalist populists is probably one of the most important tasks for the media these days.

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## **Most Students Don't Know When News Is Fake, Stanford Study Finds**

The Wall Street Journal, By SUE SHELLNBARGER, Nov. 21, 2016

Teens absorb social media news without considering the source; parents can teach research skills and skepticism

Preteens and teens may appear dazzlingly fluent, flitting among social-media sites, uploading selfies and texting friends. But they're often clueless about evaluating the accuracy and trustworthiness of what they find.

Some 82% of middle-schoolers couldn't distinguish between an ad labeled "sponsored content" and a real news story on a website, according to a Stanford University study of 7,804 students from middle school through college. The study, set for release Tuesday, is the biggest so far on how teens evaluate information they find online. Many students judged the credibility of newsy tweets based on how much detail they contained or whether a large photo was attached, rather than on the source.

Twitter, Facebook and Google are taking steps to reduce fake news, misinformation, and harassment on the internet after users expressed concerns that false news stories and hate speech fueled divisiveness in the recent presidential election campaign. Photo: Bloomberg News

More than two out of three middle-schoolers couldn't see any valid reason to mistrust a post written by a bank executive arguing that young adults need more financial-planning help. And nearly four in 10 high-school students believed, based on the headline, that a photo of deformed daisies on a photo-sharing site provided strong evidence of toxic conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan, even though no source or location was given for the photo.

Facebook Inc. and Alphabet Inc.'s Google are taking steps to prevent sites that disseminate fake news from using their advertising platforms, and Twitter Inc. is moving to curb harassment by users. But that won't get rid of false or biased information online, which comes from many sources, including deceptive advertising, satirical websites and misleading partisan posts and articles.

A growing number of schools are teaching students to be savvy about choosing and believing various information sources, a skill set educators label "media literacy." A free Stanford social-studies curriculum that teaches students to judge the trustworthiness of historical sources has been downloaded 3.5 million times, says Sam Wineburg, a professor in Stanford University's Graduate School of Education and the lead author of the study on teens.

However, fewer schools now have librarians, who traditionally taught research skills. And media literacy has slipped to the margins in many classrooms, to make room for increased instruction in basic reading and math skills.

Devorah Heitner, author of "Screenwise" and founder of Raising Digital Natives, an Evanston, Ill., provider of consulting services to schools, suggests parents pick up on their children's interests and help them to find and evaluate news on the topic online. Encourage them to read a variety of sources. For small children, Common Sense Media, a San Francisco nonprofit, lists browsers and search sites that are safe for children, including KidzSearch.com and KidsClick.org.

### **Evaluating the Credibility of News Sources**

As part of Stanford University's study of students and online news, it asked middle schoolers which of the four tweets, above, were the most trustworthy. More than half of the 204 students responding trusted Lisa Bloom's tweet more the one from NPR, noting it had the most information. A sample student response: 'The best tweet for information is the first one because it actually shows him resigning in a picture, and it gives a caption saying that he is resigning.'

Parents can instill early a healthy skepticism about published reports. Vincent Tran and his wife Christina allow their three children, ages 10, 8 and 6, to research sports, games and other topics that interest them by googling or by asking Siri or Alexa. Mr. Tran, a Web architect, blocks sites he considers inappropriate for his children and doesn't allow them to use social media.

He notices when they have trouble sorting facts from fiction, and "we spend a good deal of time asking them where they

get their information,” Mr. Tran says. He and his wife also ask them during family dinners about topics they’ve been exploring, “and hopefully challenge them to think,” he says.

By middle school, preteens are online 7-1/2 hours a day outside of school, research shows. Many students multitask by texting, reading and watching video at once, hampering the concentration needed to question content and think deeply, says Yalda T. Uhls, a research psychologist at the Children’s Digital Media Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

### **Evaluating the Credibility of a Source**

As part of Stanford University’s study of students and online news, it asked middle schoolers to give reasons they might not trust the article by a Bank of America executive on financial planning. Almost 70% of 200 students responding didn’t highlight the authorship as a reason for mistrust. A sample response: ‘I wouldn’t trust it because some millennials do have good money habits.’

By age 18, 88% of young adults regularly get news from Facebook and other social media, according to a 2015 study of 1,045 adults ages 18 to 34 by the Media Insight Project.

This risks creating an “echo chamber effect,” because social media tends to feed users news items similar to those they’ve read before, says Walter C. Parker, a professor of education at the University of Washington, Seattle. He advises parents to ask children about what they’re reading online, and let them see you reading news from a variety of sources. Try watching several different TV news programs with them, to compare coverage.

Teens also can learn basic skills used by professional fact-checkers, Dr. Wineburg says. Rather than trusting the “about” section of a website to learn about it, teach them “lateral reading”—leaving the website almost immediately after landing on it and research the organization or author. Also, explain to teens that a top ranking on Google doesn’t mean an article is trustworthy. The rankings are based on several factors, including popularity.

Students should learn to evaluate sources’ reliability based on whether they’re named, independent and well-informed or authoritative, says Jonathan Anzalone, assistant director of the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University in New York. Posts should cite multiple sources, and the information should be verifiable elsewhere, he says.

### **Distinguishing Between Opinion and News**

As part of Stanford University’s study of students and online news, it asked middle-school students which of the items above would they read to learn the facts. More than 60% of 200 respondents chose the opinion piece or failed to give clear reasons why they chose the news story. A sample response: ‘I would not survive if we had year-round schools. Kids need a break at some point...’

Talk with teens about information they’ve found online and ask, “Why did you click on that?” says Will Colglazier, a history teacher at Aragon High School in San Mateo, Calif., who is helping test Stanford University teaching materials aimed at remedying the problem. “Follow their train of thought,” inviting them to explain the steps that led them to the website. If their reasoning reveals faulty assumptions or a lack of skepticism, “use that as a teachable moment,” he says.

Scott Secor has tried to instill in his three children, ages 20, 18 and 16, a habit of noticing the sources of information they read online and learning about their viewpoint or goals. He encourages them to read deeply before forming an opinion. “A rule of thumb at our house is that if an article on a serious topic is less than 100 words,” the length of some fake-news items, more research is needed, says Mr. Secor, of Raleigh, N.C.

He and his wife Laurie also encourage their children to express their views and respect each other’s opinions if they disagree. “The day’s news is a regular conversation topic at the dinner table for us,” Mr. Secor says. Among subjects they discussed during the recent campaign: How much impact would clickbait have on voters’ perceptions?

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## **Mark Zuckerberg Says Fake News on Facebook Had “No Impact” on the Election**

Slate: Future Tense, by Will Oremus, NOV. 10 2016

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on Thursday defended the social network's role in the U.S. presidential election. False news stories that were shared hundreds of thousands of times on the network, including claims that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump and that Hillary Clinton would be arrested on charges related to her private email server, "surely had no impact" on the election, he said, speaking at the Techonomy conference.

"Voters make decisions based on their lived experience," Zuckerberg went on. The notion that fake news stories on Facebook "influenced the election in any way," he added, "is a pretty crazy idea."

In an extended on-stage interview with David Kirkpatrick, author of *The Facebook Effect*, Zuckerberg noted that fabricated stories made up a small fraction of all the content shared on Facebook. And he suggested that the criticism

Facebook has received for fueling such falsehoods was rooted in condescension on the part of people who failed to understand Donald Trump's appeal. "I think there is a certain profound lack of empathy in asserting that the only reason someone could have voted the way they did is because they saw fake news," Zuckerberg said. "If you believe that, then I don't think you internalized the message that Trump voters are trying to send in this election."

Here Kirkpatrick broke in to ask Zuckerberg what that message was. Zuckerberg demurred, suggesting he'd return to that question after he'd finished his thought. He did not.

Zuckerberg suggested that the clincher to his argument was that, to the extent fake news was shared, it must have been shared by Clinton supporters as well as those who backed Trump. "Why would you think there would be fake news on one side and not the other?"

In fact, fake news was shared by both sides, but a BuzzFeed analysis of 1,137 posts by six significant "hyperpartisan" news sources—three conservative and three liberal—found that mostly or partly false stories on the right outnumbered those on the left by a ratio of two to one. BuzzFeed separately reported on a cottage fake-news industry that had sprung up in Macedonia largely around pro-Trump and anti-Clinton content. People who produced the bogus stories said they had tried pro-Clinton content but found that it was less likely to go viral.

Zuckerberg also took a question about whether Facebook might be contributing to the country's political division by insulating its users in "filter bubbles"—communities of like-minded people who reinforce one another's biases rather than challenging them. There, too, Zuckerberg found the criticism misplaced. "All the research we have suggests that this isn't really a problem," he said. "For whatever reason, we've had a really time getting that out." He cited a Facebook-funded 2015 study that concluded that while Facebook's news feed does tend to show people information that supports their political views, their own choices about what to read play a greater role. That study was itself criticized by some for soft-pedaling its findings. Social media researcher and writer Zeynep Tufekci rebutted it in some depth here.

Zuckerberg noted that Facebook takes fake news and hoaxes seriously and provides users tools to report them. Despite his view that they played no role in the election, he said Facebook would continue to work to address the problem. He also said Facebook will continue to explore ways to expose users to a diversity of views in their news feeds.

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## Why Facts Don't Unify Us

The New York Times: Grey Matter, By TALI SHAROT and CASS R. SUNSTEIN SEPT. 2, 2016

According to the Pew Research Center, the nation is more polarized than at any time in recent history. While some of the issues dividing us boil down to ideology and preference, there is at least one on which hard science should have a strong say — climate change. But do numbers and figures change people's opinions?

Apparently, they do — they result in a deeper divide.

In a recent experiment, described in a paper released on Friday on the Social Science Research Network, we and our colleagues Sebastian Bobadilla-Suarez and Stephanie Lazzaro asked more than 300 Americans several climate-related questions, such as whether they believed that man-made climate change was occurring and whether the United States was right to support the recent Paris agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. On the basis of their answers, we divided participants into three groups: strong believers in man-made climate change, moderate believers and weak believers.

Next we informed participants that many scientists have said that by the year 2100, the average temperature in the United States will rise at least 6 degrees Fahrenheit, and asked them for their own estimates of likely temperature rise by 2100.

The overall average was 5.6 degrees Fahrenheit. As expected, there were significant differences among the three groups: 6.3 degrees for strong believers in man-made climate change, 5.9 degrees for moderate believers and 3.6 degrees for weak believers.

Then came the important part of the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Half of them received information that was more encouraging than what they originally received (good news for the planet and humanity); half of them received information that was less encouraging (bad news for the planet and humanity). In the good news condition, they were told to assume that in recent weeks, prominent scientists had reassessed the science and concluded the situation was far better than previously thought, suggesting a likely temperature increase of only 1 to 5 degrees.

In the bad news condition, participants were told to assume that in recent weeks, prominent scientists had reassessed the science and concluded the situation was far worse than previously thought, suggesting a likely temperature increase of 7 to 11 degrees. All participants were then asked to provide their personal estimates.

Weak believers in man-made climate change were moved by the good news (their average estimate fell by about 1 degree), but their belief was unchanged by the bad news (their average estimate stayed essentially constant).

By contrast, strong believers in man-made climate change were far more moved by the bad news (their average estimate jumped by nearly 2 degrees), whereas with good news, it fell by less than half of that (.9 degrees). Moderate climate change believers were equally moved in both cases (they changed their estimates by approximately 1.5 degrees in each case).

The clear implication is that for weak believers in man-made climate change, comforting news will have a big impact, and alarming news won't. Strong believers will show the opposite pattern. And because Americans are frequently exposed to competing claims about the latest scientific evidence, these opposing tendencies will predictably create political polarization — and it will grow over time.

In the case of information about ourselves — about how attractive others perceive us to be, or how likely we are to succeed — people normally alter their beliefs more in response to good news. In certain circumstances, that will also be true for political issues — as in the case of weak climate change believers. But at times, good political news can threaten our deepest commitments, and we will give it less weight.

These findings help explain polarization on many issues. With respect to the Affordable Care Act, for example, people encounter good news, to the effect that it has helped millions of people obtain health insurance, and also bad news, to the effect that health care costs and insurance premiums continue to increase. For the act's supporters, the good news will have far more impact than the bad; for the opponents, the opposite is true. As the sheer volume of information increases, polarization will be heightened as well.

Essentially the same tale can be told with respect to immigration, terrorism, increases in the minimum wage — and candidates for the highest office in the land. Voters are now receiving a steady stream of both positive and negative information about Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump. Which kind of news will have a large impact will depend partly on people's motivations and initial convictions.

But there's an important qualification. In our experiment, a strong majority showed movement; few people were impervious to new information. Most people were willing to change their views, at least to some extent.

For those who believe in learning, and the possibility of democratic self-government, that's very good news.

Tali Sharot is an associate professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London. Cass R. Sunstein is a law professor at Harvard.

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## **Twitter Suspends 235,000 More Accounts Over Extremism**

The New York Times, By KATIE BENNERAUG. 18, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — Twitter suspended 235,000 accounts that promoted terrorism over the last six months, as part of a continuing effort to keep people from using the social network for extremist causes, the company said Thursday.

“The world has witnessed a further wave of deadly, abhorrent terror attacks across the globe,” Twitter said in a statement. “We strongly condemn these acts and remain committed to eliminating the promotion of violence or terrorism on our platform.”

Twitter's latest action brings the total number of accounts that the company has suspended to 360,000 since it began cracking down on terrorism and violent extremism in mid-2015. While Twitter has long championed free speech on the web and said that it was a “global town square,” its positioning has drawn bullies, racists and extremist groups to the service to spread their messages. That has drawn criticism from government agencies and the Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, among others.

While Twitter is trying to find a way to reconcile its free speech stance with how women and minorities can be targeted on the service, the company has been clearer about combating terrorism. Daily suspensions for violating Twitter's prohibition on terrorism are up over 80 percent since last year, with spikes in suspensions immediately following terrorist attacks, the company said.

Twitter also said it has expanded its teams that review reported violations, and it now moves faster to suspend accounts and make it harder for suspended users to return to the platform. The company has also expanded the number of groups it works with to counter violent extremism online.

Twitter on Thursday separately introduced new features to give people more control over their interactions on the service, including adding a filter to improve the quality of the tweets someone sees by weeding out duplicate messages or automated posts.

Yet Anil Dash, a tech entrepreneur and activist, said Twitter's actions did not solve the service's underlying abuse issues. Even if extremist content and accounts are suspended, people on Twitter can still organize in ways that put

others at risk, such as publishing and widely sharing someone's personal information and home address.

"The news about banned accounts and new tools is really good, but Twitter has been doing those things for a long time," Mr. Dash said. "This has more to do with Twitter's ability to talk about abuse than it is a big change in policy."

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## **Putin Is Waging Information Warfare. Here's How to Fight Back.**

The New York Times, By MARK GALEOTTIDEC. 14, 2016

PRAGUE — Welcome to 21st-century conflict, more Machiavellian than military, where hacks, leaks and fake news are taking the place of planes, bombs and missiles. The Russian interference in the United States presidential election is just a taste of more to come.

How can countries protect themselves from such methods? As with nuclear weapons, deterrence is better than confrontation. The United States and its allies in the West need to find a way to discourage Russia, the leading practitioner of this kind of political warfare, from striking first.

With nuclear weapons, deterrence relies on demonstrating the possession of similar capabilities — and the will to use them. This won't work with political warfare.

It is not as though the United States hasn't dabbled in destabilization and disinformation campaigns. But these tactics are less likely to work in Russia, where the news media is mostly state-controlled, the security apparatus quickly stamps out political threats, and citizens have few illusions about their leaders. (For example, when the Panama Papers revealed that President Vladimir V. Putin's cronies had secret bank accounts, most Russians simply shrugged, unsurprised.) All that such efforts would do is show Russians that Mr. Putin is right to say the West is no better than him.

What Russia's president fears is failure. His macho political persona relies on the conceit that he never gets things wrong, and that he can, with the help of hackers, special forces or brutal allies, outmaneuver the West and consequently regain Russia's status as a global power.

This is why the United States and its allies should pursue a strategy of deterrence by denial. Mr. Putin shouldn't fear retaliation for his information warfare — he should fear that he will fail.

There are several ways to go about this. First, United States institutions need better cybersecurity defenses. Political parties and major newspapers are now targets just as much as the power grid and the Pentagon are. The government has to help provide security when it can — but people have a duty to be more vigilant and recognize that their cybersecurity is about protecting the country, not just their own email accounts. The leaked emails of Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, John D. Podesta, revealed how easily hackers fooled intelligent political operatives with phishing attacks.

Instead of trying to combat each leak directly, the United States government should teach the public to tell when they are being manipulated. Via schools and nongovernmental organizations and public service campaigns, Americans should be taught the basic skills necessary to be savvy media consumers, from how to fact-check news articles to how pictures can lie.

Deterrence can also take the form of limiting the Russians' ability to buy media muscle covertly. Global finance is still gangsters and the spooks' best friend, allowing them to secretly move and spend money. By joining the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's latest and most stringent Common Reporting Standards agreement for sharing financial information, for example, and by putting pressure on American states with notoriously tough secrecy laws, Washington would make it harder for not just corrupt Russians officials but also Moscow's security apparatus to spend money at will in America.

But the United States also needs to declare in advance, and with evident resolve, the kinds of actions it would take in response to certain political attacks. Russia has been taking advantage of the weaknesses and freedoms of the West, so the West should similarly strike back against Russia's vulnerabilities.

For example, punitive measures like sanctions can be a very powerful weapon against the opportunist kleptocrats on whom Mr. Putin relies for support. Media owners whose networks spread disinformation, members of Parliament who cultivate extremists, and oligarchs who allow themselves to be used as Kremlin front men should all be fair game. Treating them like members of an organized crime syndicate would allow Washington to freeze not only their assets, but also those of their families, and bar them from entry.

The West also needs to stand together against the Kremlin's divide-and-rule tactics. NATO members are committed by treaty to defending one another from military attacks, but there aren't similar provisions for cyberattacks or information warfare. Many smaller countries hesitate to play their part in fighting Russian espionage and subversion — whether expelling spies or closing front organizations — because they fear Russia's inevitable retaliation. The United States needs to promise its allies it will support them.

Finally, Mr. Putin's own vanity could be turned into a weapon against him. Every time he overreaches, the American

government should point it out. Every time he fails, we need to say so loudly and clearly. We should tell jokes about him. He can rewrite the record in Russia, but the West does not have to contribute to his mythmaking — and we should stop building him up by portraying him as a virtual supervillain.

All of this requires a new mind-set. It means accepting that Russia has chosen to be at war with us — albeit a special and limited war. Russia needs to be treated as a political combatant.

It also means remembering how much stronger the United States is than Russia, economically, militarily, diplomatically and even politically. Mr. Putin is a geopolitical guerrilla who has adopted a strategy he hopes can play to his own strengths and circumvent the West's. Now the West needs to demonstrate that it has a strategy to combat his adventurism.

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## **Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook Must Defend the Truth**

By Jim Rutenberg, The New York Times, MEDIATOR NOV. 20, 2016

Friday night, the Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg went on his vast social network to convince an expanding chorus of critics — including the departing president of the United States — that he honest-to-goodness wants to combat the “fake news” that is running wild across his site and others, and turning our politics into a paranoid fantasy come to life.

“We’ve been working on this problem for a long time and we take this responsibility seriously,” he wrote. “We’ve made significant progress, but there is more work to be done,” he continued, listing various steps Facebook was taking, like making it easier to report bad information and enlisting fact-checking organizations.

It was heartening to hear, especially after his earlier assertion that it was “crazy” to believe that misinformation on Facebook had affected the presidential election in any real way — despite copious evidence that it was disturbingly in the mix, whether it directly swung the result or not.

But as Mr. Zuckerberg went on to say that Facebook had to be careful not to mistakenly block “accurate content,” he added this: “We do not want to be arbiters of truth ourselves,” which was why he said Facebook would continue to rely on “our community and trusted third parties.”

His statement pointed up how much Facebook struggles to find the balance between its mission to be a free-expression utopia for its 1.8 billion users and its responsibility to protect them from all that is defamatory, dangerous (like terrorist propaganda) and untrue.

But more to the point, it appeared to buy into the notion that truth is relative at a time when that notion has to finally go away. Do you really need an outside arbiter to determine whether a video suggesting — without basis — that Hillary Clinton was involved in John F. Kennedy Jr.’s fatal plane crash in 1999 should be allowed to stand? Really?

Truth doesn’t need arbiters. It needs defenders. And it needs them now more than ever as the American democracy staggers into its next uncertain phase.

With a mainstream news media that works hard to separate fact from fiction under economic and political threat, Facebook — which has contributed to that economic threat by gobbling up so much of the online advertising market — is going to have a special responsibility to do its part.

Just imagine what things will look like if the unsavory elements that tore through the 2016 election — false narratives, fake news and aggressive efforts to delegitimize traditional journalism — come back into play as Donald J. Trump presses to enact his agenda.

If the past week provided any indication of where politics are going, the next four years are going to require an all-hands-on-deck effort to keep the national conversation honest.

The national security adviser Mr. Trump named last week, Michael T. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general, has subscribed to the conspiracy theory that Shariah law is taking root in the United States (it isn’t), contributing to his insistence that Americans have every reason to view Islam as “a threat.”

He recently used Twitter to circulate a fake news item that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was sitting on evidence from Anthony Weiner’s laptop that would “put Hillary and her crew away for life.”

Mr. Trump’s nominee for attorney general, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, has falsely claimed that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants are successfully crossing the border annually.

Then there was the announcement by the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones that Mr. Trump had called to thank him and his radio and internet audience for their support in the campaign.

Add to that the fact that Mr. Trump was the most prominent promoter of the false notion that President Obama wasn’t

born here, and didn't hesitate to repeat the outrageous suggestion that the father of Senator Ted Cruz was linked to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Then consider what it may look like when Mr. Trump pursues policies regarding Muslim immigrants and undocumented immigrants.

It's not so outlandish to envision Mr. Trump's attempts to sell his plans getting a lift from the likes of Mr. Jones or a fake site out of Macedonia — perhaps claiming that Democrats are working with ISIS to use undocumented immigrants to poison local water supplies or some such.

President Obama seemed to have had something like that in mind when he told reporters in Germany on Thursday, "If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not," and "if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems."

Mr. Obama knows of what he speaks. He had to muddle through the first wave of this.

You might remember how his health care plan was marred by a false accusation that the plan included so-called death panels that would decide who lived and who died based on their "level of productivity to society," as former Gov. Sarah Palin put it (on her Facebook page!).

The false "death panel" allegation was partly based on proposals to reimburse doctors for optional consultations with families over end-of-life care decisions.

The accusations took on such power that even Newt Gingrich signed on to the falsehood despite the fact that he had previously expressed bullish support for end-of-life planning. (He explained himself in a 2009 letter to The New York Times.)

News organizations, including this one, debunked the myth. But the bill's authors stripped out the provision just the same. And by then the "death panel" fiction had negated any shot at a reasoned, ideological debate — you're joining the Democrats' plan to kill our infirm children and parents?!

As Dan Pfeiffer, who was the president's chief communications strategist at the time, so grimly put it to me last week, "The faux death panels were the canary in the coal mine about the coming death of truth."

Things have advanced since then. Today's fake news is limited only by the imaginations of its inventors and the number of shares it can garner on Facebook or Twitter.

(To wit: The one million shares of the preposterous notion that Mrs. Clinton secretly sold weapons to ISIS. BuzzFeed News — which has excelled at illuminating the fake news problem — highlighted that example in its alarming analysis showing that during the campaign cycle fake news was shared among Facebook users more often than real news was.)

That's why people who care about the truth — citizens, journalists and, let's hope, social media giants like Facebook, too — will have to come up with a solution to this informational nihilism, fast.

It's easier said than done. The combination of attacks seeking to delegitimize serious news organizations and a drop in overall trust in the news media has made many people wary of legitimate fact-checking. And, as my colleague John Herrman noted last weekend, politicized voices can easily drown honest journalism all too easily on social media.

There is growing talk of an ambitious journalistic collaboration to beat back the tide. Industry thinkers and leaders are coming together online to brainstorm solutions, as Jeff Jarvis, the City University of New York journalism professor, and Eli Pariser, the Upworthy co-founder, have done. (Check them out online.) And I'd say it's high time that television news — with its still-huge audiences — gets into the act with more than just token gestures at fact-checking.

But this much seems clear: The moment calls for some sort of hyperfactual counterinsurgency that treats every false meme as a baby Hitler to be killed in its crib with irrefutable facts.

So hey, Zuck, let's roll.

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## **Behind the Scenes, Billionaires' Growing Control of News**

By Jim Rutenberg, The New York Times, MEDIATOR MAY 27, 2016

At first blush, the secret support that the Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel provided for Hulk Hogan's lawsuit against Gawker is a salacious yarn about money, power, gossip and revenge.

But it is also about something more important: an aggressive bid by the very wealthy to control the American news media at a time when it is in a financially weakened state, struggling to maintain its footing on the electronic frontier's unstable terrain.

Speaking with Andrew Ross Sorkin of The New York Times on Wednesday, Mr. Thiel said he had financed the Hogan lawsuit — which resulted in a \$140 million verdict against Gawker — not only because Gawker Media wrote in 2007, against his wishes, that he was gay, but also because he had determined the gossip site had too often operated with "no

connection to the public interest.”

His verdict rendered, Mr. Thiel had the resources to swap his judge’s gavel for an executioner’s sword. Should the \$140 million verdict stand up to appeal, Gawker Media will most likely cease to exist as we know it. And if too much of Gawker survives, Mr. Thiel, with an estimated net worth of \$2.7 billion, indicates he will keep financing anti-Gawker lawsuits to kill off whatever is left.

Mr. Thiel’s campaign is in keeping with the pledge his favored candidate for president, Donald J. Trump, made to ease barriers to lawsuits against journalists. But it is actually the flip side of the media realm’s new coin. Many of his fellow billionaires have gained control of news organizations by buying them or starting them.

The most striking example can be found in Nevada, where the conservative casino magnate Sheldon Adelson bought The Las Vegas Review-Journal last year. Mr. Adelson is not shy about using his money to influence the politics of his state and country. And the sale was followed by reports of editors suddenly altering articles about Mr. Adelson’s business dealings to put them in a more flattering light, or holding from publication articles about him altogether.

But, as my colleague Sydney Ember wrote on Monday, Mr. Adelson — who denies meddling — also brought welcome financial muscle to the newsroom, allowing it to make new hires and equipment upgrades.

Some in Utah voiced concern when a member of the wealthy and influential Huntsman family, Paul Huntsman, moved to buy one of the state’s two major dailies, the struggling Salt Lake Tribune. Mr. Huntsman’s brother, Jon, is the former Utah governor who ran for president in 2012. His father, Jon Sr. — the chief generator of the family fortune — has had a prominent role with the Mormon Church. As The Associated Press reported, this worries some civic leaders, given that The Tribune stands as an independent counterbalance to the church-owned Deseret News.

Paul Huntsman has pledged to protect the newspaper’s independence, and if he keeps his promise he could be more akin to the relatively new billionaire owners of The Washington Post (the Amazon founder Jeff Bezos) and The Boston Globe (the investor John Henry). Their newsrooms have praised them for delivering badly needed resources — and, in Mr. Henry’s case, starting a whole new life sciences news outlet, Stat — while staying out of the way of the journalism, including The Globe’s coverage of the Red Sox, which Mr. Henry also owns.

But billionaires do not become billionaires by being passive about their own interests. In other instances, once wealthy individuals are involved, those interests can appear to take over. Michael R. Bloomberg has built Bloomberg News into a formidable organization. But when its founder seriously contemplated a run for president, Bloomberg News editors steered their reporters away from covering it.

Last month, The Washington Post reported on concerns that some Huffington Post staff members had with the apparent promotion of “The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night at a Time,” the book that its editor in chief, Arianna Huffington, wrote about reversing the trend of sleep deprivation. Some of the coverage included tie-ins to Uber, on whose corporate board Ms. Huffington sits. (The Huffington Post has defended the coverage as appropriate and said that Ms. Huffington would recuse herself from news decisions involving Uber.)

Of course, powerful media executives have long been part of the global fabric. Rupert Murdoch, the News Corporation executive chairman, has been at it for decades, and his influence over his news group has taken on mythical status.

And long before Mr. Murdoch, there was one William Randolph Hearst, who defined what it meant to be a media mogul.

But there is a difference between Hearst and the many billionaires who are trying to control today’s news media, said David Nasaw, the author of the great Hearst biography “The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst.” “Hearst made it abundantly clear — ‘This is my newspaper, these are my views, take or leave it,’” he said. “Hearst put his editorials on the front page, with his picture, and he signed them, for God’s sake.”

Mr. Nasaw, on the other hand, sees Mr. Adelson as “dissembling” when he says he isn’t involving himself in editorial decisions at the paper. And then there are the Silicon Valley moguls, he said, who “try to have it both ways — they try to say, you know, ‘Oh no we’re playing by the rules and we’re not indulging in our personal whims.’”

It was a reference, of course, to Mr. Thiel. Already famous for helping to start PayPal, Mr. Thiel has presented an innovative take on the old practice of media control — devoting his almost unlimited means to lawsuits that promise to shutter a news organization he does not like, as Felix Salmon wrote in Fusion this week.

He is also tied to a dominating new force in news, Facebook, which has spent the last couple of weeks addressing a report in the Gawker-owned technology site Gizmodo that said some staff members kept conservative news items off the Facebook trending list.

Mr. Thiel, an early investor in Facebook and a current board member, attended a meeting the Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg held last week with prominent conservatives, at which Mr. Zuckerberg said the company was committed to preventing such behavior. A lot rides on that commitment.

That's because Facebook has something Hearst never had: power over the distribution of content from most major American news organizations, which increasingly rely on exposure to the huge audience Facebook provides. Facebook has said no one person or even group of people controls what news its algorithmic formulas spit out for individual news feeds.

Facebook is being inundated with questions about whether Mr. Thiel's attempt to shut down a media company through the courts would jeopardize his board seat. Facebook would not comment on his involvement in the Gawker suit. But the news of it could not come at a worse time — for Facebook, and for the rest of us, too.

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## **Facebook, Facing Bias Claims, Shows How Editors and Algorithms Guide News**

The New York Times, By MIKE ISAAC MAY 12, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — Facebook, the largest social media network, published internal editorial guidelines on Thursday, the company's latest attempt to rebut accusations that it is politically biased in the news content it shows on the pages of its 1.6 billion users.

The 28-page document details how both editors and computer algorithms play roles in the process of picking what should appear in the "Trending Topics" section of users' Facebook pages.

Facebook describes a list of processes it uses to display some of the most popular content across the network, including relying on algorithms to detect up-and-coming news trends as well as a team of editors who, much like a newsroom, direct how those topics are presented and decide what should be displayed to people who regularly use the service.

As the guidelines make clear, at practically every point in the process, a human editor is given the leeway to exercise his or her editorial influence.

The document was released just days after a report on the tech news site Gizmodo said Facebook editors had intentionally "suppressed" news topics from conservative publications trending across the network. The report also said editors were able to artificially inflate the importance of other topics by "injecting" them into the Trending section of users' Facebook pages.

Since those claims surfaced, Facebook has been questioned by news sites across the political spectrum and by legislators in Washington. On Thursday, critics urged the company to consider the biases of its editors.

"As long as Facebook is hiring editors who lean left politically, those stories are going to get preferential treatment," Erick Erickson, former editor in chief of the conservative website RedState and founder of another conservative site called The Resurgent, said in an email. "I'd hope that Facebook would take care to consider all views and all news."

The company has continued to deny accusations of political bias and pointed to editorial rules that discourage Trending Topics staff members from taking one viewpoint or another.

"The guidelines demonstrate that we have a series of checks and balances in place to help surface the most important popular stories, regardless of where they fall on the ideological spectrum," Justin Osofsky, vice president for global operations at Facebook, said in a company blog post on Thursday. "Facebook does not allow or advise our reviewers to discriminate against sources of any political origin, period."

The Guardian first reported on Facebook's editorial guidelines.

As Facebook has noted several times this week, algorithms drive much of the decision-making for its Trending Topics, according to the documents. And the company said it has not found evidence that any editor intentionally manipulated the section to suppress conservative content.

But the guidelines, which have never before been made public, give insight into how editors guide and discover news items being shared widely across the social network, and how those editors decide what to promote inside the Trending Topics section.

While algorithms determine the exact mix of topics displayed to each person, based on that user's past actions on Facebook, a team of people is largely responsible for the overall mix of which topics should — and more important, should not — be shown in Trending Topics.

For instance, after algorithms detect early signs of popular stories on the network, editors are asked to cross-reference potential trending topics with a list of 10 major news publications, including CNN, Fox News, The Guardian and The New York Times.

Editors are also entrusted to spot potentially large news stories bubbling up outside Facebook by using an algorithm that trawls more than a thousand automated feeds, up to and including competitors like YouTube and Reddit, along with traditional news sites.

These editors can then introduce those trends into the Topics box, in order to "connect people to conversations on

Facebook about newsworthy events as quickly as possible,” according to Facebook.

One former Facebook Trending Topics editor, who spoke under condition of anonymity because this person had signed a nondisclosure agreement with the company, said it was up to the editors’ discretion to promote newsy topics that were not quite percolating on Facebook.

The guidelines were first created in 2014, according to a Facebook spokeswoman, and have continuously been updated over the last year and a half.

On Tuesday, Senator John Thune, Republican of South Dakota, sent a letter of inquiry to Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive of Facebook, asking the company to further explain its editorial guidelines and to disclose whether there was “any level of subjectivity associated with” the Trending Topics section.

Facebook said it planned to address Senator Thune’s questions, and that it was “continuing to investigate whether any violations took place.”

However, experts warn that fearing bias in human editors and trusting the neutrality of algorithms is a faulty premise. Algorithms are, after all, created by humans and therefore susceptible to the same unconscious biases.

“Imagine going back in time to the 1950s and building a machine-learning algorithm, based on historical data at the time, to decide who would be ‘successful’ in their jobs,” said Cathy O’Neil, a data scientist and author of the forthcoming book “Weapons of Math Destruction,” a study of how algorithms exacerbate inequality. “It would be only white men, because the data it had was picking up the sexism and racism of the time, and the data was informing the definition of success.”

Facebook’s stance, as it made clear on Thursday, is that the best way to handle these issues is with a mix of both human and machine input.

“Every tool we build is designed to give more people a voice and bring our global community together,” Mark Zuckerberg, chief executive of Facebook, said in a post to his Facebook page on Thursday evening. “For as long as I’m leading this company, this will always be our mission.”

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## **Fake news website**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Fake news websites (also referred to as hoax news<sup>[3][4]</sup>) deliberately publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation, using social media to drive web traffic and amplify their effect.<sup>[5][6][7]</sup> Unlike news satire, fake news websites seek to mislead, rather than entertain, readers for financial or other gain.<sup>[8][6]</sup> Such sites have promoted political falsehoods in Germany,<sup>[9][10]</sup> Indonesia and the Philippines,<sup>[11]</sup> Sweden,<sup>[12]</sup> China,<sup>[13]</sup><sup>[not in citation given]</sup><sup>[14]</sup><sup>[not in citation given]</sup> Myanmar,<sup>[15]</sup> and the United States.<sup>[16][17][18]</sup> Many sites originate, or are promoted, from Russia,<sup>[5][16][19]</sup> Macedonia,<sup>[20][21]</sup> Romania,<sup>[22]</sup> and the U.S.<sup>[23][24]</sup>

One pan-European newspaper, The Local,<sup>[unreliable source?]</sup> described the proliferation of fake news as a form of psychological warfare.<sup>[12]</sup> Agence France-Presse reported media analysts see it as damaging to democracy.<sup>[10]</sup><sup>[not in citation given]</sup> The European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2016 when it passed a resolution warning that the Russian government was using “pseudo-news agencies” and Internet trolls as disinformation propaganda to weaken confidence in democratic values.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 2015, the Swedish Security Service, Sweden’s national security agency, issued a report concluding Russia was using fake news to inflame “splintered society” through the proliferation of propaganda.<sup>[12]</sup><sup>[unreliable source?]</sup> Sweden’s Ministry of Defence tasked its Civil Contingencies Agency to combat fake news from Russia.<sup>[12]</sup> Fraudulent news affected politics in Indonesia and the Philippines, where there was simultaneously widespread usage of social media and limited resources to check the veracity of political claims.<sup>[11]</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned of the societal impact of “fake sites, bots, trolls”.<sup>[10]</sup>

Fraudulent articles spread through social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.<sup>[16][17][18]</sup> Several officials within the U.S. Intelligence Community said that Russia was engaged in spreading fake news.<sup>[25]</sup> Computer security company FireEye concluded Russia used social media as cyberwarfare.<sup>[26]</sup> Google and Facebook banned fake sites from using online advertising.<sup>[27][28]</sup> Facebook launched a partnership with fact-checking websites to flag fraudulent news and hoaxes; debunking organizations that joined the initiative included: Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact.<sup>[29]</sup> U.S. President Barack Obama said a disregard for facts created a “dust cloud of nonsense”.<sup>[30]</sup> Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) Alex Younger called fake news propaganda online dangerous for democratic nations.<sup>[31]</sup>

### **Definition**

Some fake news websites use website spoofing, structured to make visitors believe they are visiting trusted sources like

ABC News or MSNBC.[21] The New York Times defined "fake news" on the Internet as fictitious articles deliberately fabricated to deceive readers, generally with the goal of profiting through clickbait.[32] PolitiFact described fake news as fabricated content designed to fool readers and subsequently made viral through the Internet to crowds that increase its dissemination.[33]

The New York Times noted in a December 2016 article that fake news had previously maintained a presence on the Internet and in tabloid journalism in the years prior to the 2016 U.S. election.[32] Prior to the election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, fake news had not impacted the election process and subsequent events to such a high degree.[32] Subsequent to the 2016 election, the issue of fake news turned into a political weapon, with supporters of left-wing politics saying those on the opposite side of the spectrum spread falsehoods, and supporters of right-wing politics contending such accusations were merely a way to censor conservative views.[32] Due to these back-and-forth complaints, the definition of fake news as used for such polemics became more vague.[32]

### **Pre-Internet history**

Prior to the invention of the Internet, unethical news spread in printed media hundreds of years before the existence of web sites.[34][35][36] Yellow journalism, seen as reportage from a standard which is devoid of morals and professional ethics, was pervasive during the time period in history known as the Gilded Age, and unethical journalists would engage in fraud by fabricating stories, interviews, and made-up names for scholars out of whole cloth.[35][34] During the 1890s the spread of this unethical news sparked violence and conflicts.[34] Both Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst fomented yellow journalism in order to increase profits, which helped lead to misunderstandings which became partially responsible for the outset of the Spanish-American War in 1898.[37] According to USA Today, newspapers which have a history of commonly publishing fake news have included Globe, Weekly World News, and The National Enquirer.[37]

### **Response**

#### **Fact-checking websites and journalists**

Fact-checking websites FactCheck.org,[c] PolitiFact.com,[d] and Snopes.com,[e] authored guides on how to respond to fraudulent news.[6][134][135] FactCheck.org advised readers to check the source, author, date, and headline of publications.[134] They recommended their colleagues Snopes.com, The Washington Post Fact Checker,[f] and PolitiFact.com.[134] FactCheck.org admonished consumers to be wary of confirmation bias.[134] PolitiFact.com used tag "Fake news" so readers could view all stories they debunked.[135] Snopes.com warned readers social media was used as a harmful tool by fraudsters.[6] The Washington Post's "The Fact Checker" manager Glenn Kessler wrote all fact-checking sites saw increased visitors during the 2016 election cycle.[137] Unique visitors to The Fact Checker increased five-fold from the 2012 election.[137] Will Moy, director of London-based fact-checker Full Fact, said debunking must take place over a sustained period to be effective.[137] Full Fact worked with Google to help automate fact-checking.[138]

FactCheck.org former director Brooks Jackson said media companies devoted increased focus to the importance of debunking fraud during the 2016 election.[136] FactCheck.org partnered with CNN's Jake Tapper in 2016 to examine the veracity candidate statements.[136] Angie Drobnic Holan, editor of PolitiFact.com, cautioned media companies chiefs must be supportive of debunking, as it often provokes hate mail and extreme responses from zealots.[136] In December 2016, PolitiFact announced fake news was its selection for "Lie of the Year".[139][33] PolitiFact explained its choice for the year: "In 2016, the prevalence of political fact abuse – promulgated by the words of two polarizing presidential candidates and their passionate supporters – gave rise to a spreading of fake news with unprecedented impunity." [33] PolitiFact called fake news a significant symbol of a culture accepting of post-truth politics.[139]

#### **Google CEO comment and actions**

In the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. election, Google and Facebook, faced scrutiny regarding the impact of fake news.[140] The top result on Google for election results was to a fake site.[141] "70 News" had fraudulently written an incorrect headline and article that Trump won the popular vote against Clinton.[1][2][140] Google later stated that prominence of the fake site in search results was a mistake.[142] By 14 November, the "70 News" result was the second link shown when searching for results of the election.[140] When asked shortly after the election whether fake news influenced election results, Google CEO Sundar Pichai responded: "Sure" and went on to emphasize the importance of stopping the spread of fraudulent sites.[143] On 14 November 2016, Google responded to the problem of fraudulent sites by banning such companies from profiting on advertising from traffic through its program AdSense.[27][28][140] Google previously had a policy for denying ads for dieting ripoffs and counterfeit merchandise.[144] Google stated upon the announcement they would work to ban advertisements from sources that lie about their purpose, content, or publisher.[145][146] The ban is not expected to apply to news satire sites like The Onion; some satirical sites may be inadvertently blocked under this new system.[140]

## **Facebook deliberations**

One day after Google took action, Facebook decided to block fake sites from advertising there.[28][140] Facebook said they would ban ads from sites with deceptive content, including fake news, and review publishers for compliance.[145] These steps by both Google and Facebook intended to deny ad revenue to fraudulent news sites; neither company took actions to prevent dissemination of false stories in search engine results pages or web feeds.[27][147] Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg called the notion that fraudulent news impacted the 2016 election a "crazy idea"[148][149] and denied that his platform influenced the election.[150] He stated that 99% of Facebook's content was neither fake news nor a hoax.[151] Zuckerberg said that Facebook is not a media company.[152] Zuckerberg advised users to check the fact-checking website Snopes.com whenever they encounter fake news on Facebook.[153][154]

Top staff members at Facebook did not feel simply blocking ad revenue from fraudulent sites was a strong enough response, and they made an executive decision and created a secret group to deal with the issue themselves.[148][149] In response to Zuckerberg's first statement that fraudulent news did not impact the 2016 election, the secret Facebook group disputed this notion, saying fake news was rampant on their website during the election cycle.[148][149] BuzzFeed reported the secret task force included dozens of Facebook employees.[148][149]

## **Response**

Facebook faced criticism after its decision to revoke advertising revenues from fraudulent news providers, and not take further action.[155][156] After negative media coverage including assertions that fraudulent news gave the 2016 U.S. presidential election to Trump, Zuckerberg posted a second time about it on 18 November 2016.[155][156] The post was a reversal of his earlier comments on the matter where he had discounted the impact of fraudulent news.[156] Zuckerberg said there it was difficult to filter out fraudulent news because he desired open communication.[155] The New York Times reported measures considered and not implemented by Facebook included ability for users to tag questionable material, automated checking tools, and third-party confirmation.[155] The 18 November post did not announce any concrete actions the company would definitively take, or when such measures would be put into usage.[155][156]

National Public Radio observed the changes being considered by Facebook to identify fraud constituted progress for the company into a new media entity.[157] On 19 November 2016, BuzzFeed advised Facebook users they could report posts from fraudulent sites.[158] Users could choose the report option: "I think it shouldn't be on Facebook", followed by: "It's a false news story." [158] In November 2016, Facebook began assessing use of warning labels on fake news.[159] The rollout was at first only available to a few users in a testing phase.[159] A sample warning read: "This website is not a reliable news source. Reason: Classification Pending". [159] TechCrunch analyzed the new feature during the testing phase and surmised it may have a tendency towards false positives.[159]

Fake news proliferation on Facebook had a negative financial impact for the company. The Economist reported revenues could decrease by two percentage points due to the concern over fake news and loss of advertising dollars.[160] The New York Times reported shortly after Mark Zuckerberg's second statement on fake news proliferation on his website, that Facebook would engage in assisting the government of China with a version of its software in the country to allow increased censorship by the government.[161] Barron's contributor William Pesek was highly critical of this move, writing by porting its fake news conundrum to China, Facebook would become a tool in that country's president Xi Jinping's efforts to increase censorship.[161]

## **Partnership with debunkers**

Society of Professional Journalists president Lynn Walsh said in November 2016 that they would reach out to Facebook to assist weeding out fake news.[162] Walsh said Facebook should evolve and admit it functioned as a media company.[162] On 17 November 2016, the Poynter International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)[g] published an open letter on the Poynter Institute website to Mark Zuckerberg, imploring him to utilize fact-checkers to identify fraud on Facebook.[165][166] Signatories to the 2016 letter to Zuckerberg featured a global representation of fact-checking groups, including: Africa Check, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com, and The Washington Post Fact Checker.[165][166] In his second post on the matter on 18 November 2016, Zuckerberg responded to the fraudulent news problem by suggesting usage of fact-checkers.[153][154] He specifically identified fact-checking website Snopes.com, and pointed out that Facebook monitors links to such debunkers in reply comments to determine which original posts were fraudulent.[153][154]

On 15 December 2016, Facebook announced more specifics in its efforts to combat fake news and hoaxes on its site.[167][29][168] The company said it would form a partnership with fact-checking groups that had joined the Poynter International Fact-Checking Network fact-checkers' code of principles, to help debunk fraud on the site.[29][167] It was the first instance Facebook had ever given third-party entities highlighted featuring in its News Feed, a significant motivator of web traffic online.[29] The fact-checking organizations partnered with Facebook in order to confirm whether or not links posted from one individual to another on the site were factual or fraudulent.[29] Facebook did not

finance the fact-checkers, and acknowledged they could see increased traffic to their sites from the partnership.[29]

Fact-checking organizations that joined Facebook's initiative included: ABC News, The Washington Post, Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and the Associated Press.[29] Fraudulent articles will receive a warning tag: "disputed by 3rd party fact-checkers." [167] The company planned to start with obvious cases of hoaxes shared specifically for fraudulent purposes to gain money for the purveyor of fake news.[29] Users may still share such tagged articles, and they will show up farther down in the news feed with an accompanying warning.[167] Facebook will employ staff researchers to determine whether website spoofing has occurred, for example "washingtonpost.co" instead of the real washingtonpost.com.[168] In a post on 15 December, Mark Zuckerberg acknowledged the changing nature of Facebook: "I think of Facebook as a technology company, but I recognize we have a greater responsibility than just building technology that information flows through. While we don't write the news stories you read and share, we also recognize we're more than just a distributor of news. We're a new kind of platform for public discourse -- and that means we have a new kind of responsibility to enable people to have the most meaningful conversations, and to build a space where people can be informed." [168]

### **Proposed technology tools**

New York magazine contributor Brian Feldman responded to an article by media communications professor Melissa Zimdars, and used her list to create a Google Chrome extension that would warn users about fraudulent news sites.[169] He invited others to use his code and improve upon it.[169] Upworthy co-founder and The Filter Bubble author Eli Pariser launched an open-source model initiative on 17 November 2016 to address false news.[170][171] Pariser began a Google Document to collaborate with others online on how to lessen the phenomenon of fraudulent news.[170][171] Pariser called his initiative: "Design Solutions for Fake News". [170] Pariser's document included recommendations for a ratings organization analogous to the Better Business Bureau, and a database on media producers in a format like Wikipedia.[170][171] Writing for Fortune, Matthew Ingram agreed with the idea that Wikipedia could serve as a helpful model to improve Facebook's analysis of potentially fake news.[172] Ingram concluded Facebook could benefit from a social network form of fact-checking similar to Wikipedia's methods while incorporating debunking websites such as PolitiFact.com.[172]

### **Academic analysis**

Writing for MIT Technology Review, Jamie Condliffe said banning ad revenue from fraudulent sites was not enough action by Facebook to deal with the problem, noting this did not prevent from fraud appearing in Facebook news feeds.[38] Dartmouth College political scientist Brendan Nyhan criticized Facebook for not doing more to combat fake news amplification.[178] Indiana University computer science professor Filippo Menczer commented on measures by Google and Facebook to deny fraudulent sites revenue, saying it was a good step to reduce motivation for fraudsters.[179] Menczer's research team engaged in developing an online tool titled: Hoaxy — to see the pervasiveness of unconfirmed assertions as well as related debunking on the Internet.[180]

Zeynep Tufekci wrote critically about Facebook's stance on fraudulent news sites in a piece for The New York Times, reporting that fraudulent websites in Macedonia profited handsomely off false stories about the 2016 U.S. election.[181] Tufekci wrote that Facebook's algorithms, and structure exacerbated the impact of echo chambers and increased fake news blight.[181] Merrimack College assistant professor of media studies Melissa Zimdars wrote an article "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y and Satirical 'News' Sources" in which she advised how to determine if a fraudulent source was a fake news site.[182] Zimdars identified strange domain names, lack of attribution, poor layout, use of all caps, and URLs ending in ".lo" or ".com.co" as red flags.[182] Zimdars recommended checking the "About Us" page, and considering whether reputable news outlets have reported the same story.[182]

Stanford Graduate School of Education at Stanford University education professor Sam Wineburg and colleague Sarah McGrew authored a 2016 study analyzing students' ability to discern fraudulent news from factual.[183][184] The study took place over a year-long period of time, and involved a sample size of over 7,800 responses from university, secondary and middle school students in 12 states within the United States.[183][184] They were surprised at the constancy with which students thought fraudulent news reports were factual.[183][184] The study found 82% of students in middle school were unable to differentiate between an advertisement denoted as sponsored content from an actual news article.[185] The authors concluded the solution was to educate online media consumers to themselves behave like fact-checkers — and actively question the veracity of all sources.[183][184]

Scientist Emily Willingham proposed applying the scientific method to fake news analysis.[186] She had previously written on the topic of differentiating science from pseudoscience, and applied that logic to fake news.[186] Her recommended steps included: Observe, Question, Hypothesize, Analyze data, Draw conclusion, and Act on results.[186] Willingham suggested a hypothesis of "This is real news", and then forming a strong set of questions to attempt to disprove the hypothesis.[186] These tests included: check the URL, date of the article, evaluate reader bias and writer bias, double-check the evidence, and verify the sources cited.[186] University of Connecticut philosophy

professor Michael P. Lynch spoke with The New York Times and said there existed a troubling amount of individuals who make determinations relying upon the most recent piece of information they consumed, regardless of its veracity.[32] He said the greater issue was that fake news could have a negative impact on the likelihood of people to believe news that is true.[32] Lynch summed up the thought process of such individuals, as "...ignore the facts because nobody knows what's really true anyway." [32]

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## **The left's emerging 'fake news' problem**

By Oliver Darcy, Business Insider, Dec. 29, 2016

The tale went something like this: A Jewish couple was forced to pull its child out of school so the family could "flee" town over fears stemming from "fake news" stories blaming them for the cancellation of a Christmas play.

Conservative news outlets had earlier seized on local reporting that indicated some parents believed a Pennsylvania elementary school's production of "A Christmas Carol" had been shuttered over the Jewish parents' alleged complaints over its line "God bless us, everyone."

The idea the performance was canceled over the famous line — which the school denied — caused outrage and, as the story went, left the Jewish family so worried for their safety that they decided to skip town.

It hit all the desired notes for left-leaning publications and personalities. It demonized outlets like Breitbart and Fox News while supposedly putting on display the real-life consequences of "fake news."

It was everywhere.

The only problem? The story wasn't true.

The Anti-Defamation League investigated it and, after speaking with the family, determined they had not fled town over fears of retribution. What they had done was go on a "previously planned vacation for the holidays."

"News reports alleging that a Jewish family has 'fled' Lancaster County are untrue and damaging," said Nancy Baron-Baer, a regional director for the ADL.

It was a garish instance of the left gleefully jumping on a thin news story that reinforced a political point, only to later learn its basic premise was incorrect.

And it wasn't an isolated incident. It was the latest in a trend of left-leaning media outlets running with a story riddled with misinformation, incidentally walking into a "fake news" trap they have vigorously cautioned against since President-elect Donald Trump won the November election.

### **'Heal thyself'**

Since Trump's unexpected victory over Hillary Clinton, the 2016 Democratic nominee for president, many in the media have focused on the prevalence of "fake news" and how it could have swayed some individuals to vote for the Republican businessman.

Conservatives have met the narrative with extreme skepticism. They argue that, while not fabricated out of thin air, much of the news reported by the so-called mainstream media is inaccurate or, as they characterize it, its own form of "fake news."

For instance, many incidents in which minorities said they were harassed by Trump supporters in the immediate aftermath of the election were given significant attention by the media and treated with little skepticism.

Only after such stories went viral was it revealed that some of the accusers had fabricated tales of abuse. By then, it was too late. The stories had already exhausted their time in the news cycle, and corrections almost never achieve the viral reach of an original post. Those false claims often diminish the credibility of legitimate hate-crime reports.

Another example: Last week, many news organizations published stories about a man who claimed he was kicked off a Delta Air Lines flight solely because his speaking Arabic made other passengers uncomfortable. The story went viral.

Many outlets, however, negated to note an important fact: The individual in question was a YouTube prankster known for pulling similar viral stunts. Only after the prankster's claims were disseminated across all corners of the internet did his past enter the picture in a meaningful way. Delta eventually denied his claim.

In recent days, such incidents have caused some observers to scrutinize those on the left.

"It baffles me how anyone on the left combatting 'fake news' can turn a blind eye to the clickbaiting within its own ranks," CNN host Jake Tapper tweeted toward the end of last week. "HEAL THYSELF."

And it wasn't just Tapper. Some on the left also expressed concern with the trend of false stories being circulated in their political sphere.

Rob Flaherty, a former member of Clinton's rapid-response team, told Business Insider that he did "worry a bit about

progressive media," particularly when it needs to maintain credibility if it wants to challenge Trump in the White House.

"There's a lot of places on the left that twisted reality for what I presume were clicks at various points in the election," said Flaherty, who has made his public concerns on the topic known often since the election. "They never hit the influence of the right's fake-news ecosystem, but you still run into a not-insignificant amount of people — regardless of the candidate they supported — who believed things about Hillary or Bernie [Sanders] or Trump for the matter that just weren't true, or at least were very selective tellings of what was true."

"We need left criticism of mainstream assumptions now more than ever," Flaherty said. "I just don't want the information underpinning it to be untrue."

### **'Chasing the viral dragon'**

Not everyone is convinced, however, that the aforementioned examples of misinformation were driven by ideology. Instead, the other view goes, the misleading stories were the natural result of today's fast-paced news environment in which news outlets are competing with others for clicks and shares.

"It's about chasing the viral dragon," said Matt Waite, a professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska and developer of PolitiFact, a fact-checking website.

"If you wait for facts to ruin a good story, then you won't be in on the pageview bonanza, and your bosses want to be in on the pageview bonanza," Waite added. "So, post goes up, facts come later."

Amanda Terkel, the Huffington Post senior editor who authored the website's story on the Jewish couple fleeing town, also dismissed the notion that politics were to be blamed for the circulation of misinformation.

Terkel said it was wrong to conflate fake news articles that are wholly fabricated with stories that end up being incorrect because the reporter was operating on limited information.

"There is a difference between reporters misinterpreting a source or needing to correct a story versus what's now happening with fake news," she told Business Insider.

"There will always be corrections, clarifications, and additional reporting needed in stories as new facts come out," Terkel said. "To conflate that with fake news doesn't help the problem of real fake news."

### **'Facts are secondary'**

Individuals on the right are far less forgiving. They firmly believe that the dissemination of such news items occurs not to inform audiences but to play up a left-leaning narrative.

If a story fits the preferred narrative, they say, the story is treated with far less skepticism and allowed to pass through into the ether. If it doesn't, it undergoes a vigorous fact-checking process that waters down its claims.

"False stories on Facebook are worrisome," Maggie Gallagher recently wrote for National Review, the nation's premier conservative magazine, "but the mainstream media's own distortion of truth is worse."

Sean Davis, a cofounder of The Federalist, a right-leaning online magazine, went as far as to tell Business Insider it's "obvious" the media isn't interested in the truth. He contended that journalists often aim to "indoctrinate, rather than educate."

"From presenting blatant hoaxes as real news, to covering up the real motives of radical Islamic terrorists, to tarring Trump voters as racists and Christians as idiots, media made it abundantly clear in 2016 that actual facts are secondary to promoting the preferred narratives of the left," Davis said.

So what's the solution? Perhaps newsroom diversity is key.

"Conservatives have blind spots, liberals have blind spots, but working together they can keep each other accountable," said Alex Griswold, an editor at Mediaite.

Griswold, for instance, suggested that it was difficult for members of the media to "police" fake news on the left because the press corps is largely made up of liberals. Alternatively, when it comes to fake news on the right, "there aren't many conservatives in the media to fall for it."

"There are basically no reporters who would believe Hillary Clinton killed a DNC staffer, because basically no reporters have that visceral a hatred for Clinton," he said, referring to a conspiracy theory circulated in 2016 by fringe far-right websites.

"But more than a few would buy into the idea that Trump/Putin rigged the vote in Wisconsin," Griswold continued. "As a result, only one of those zany views ended up being parroted by the mainstream and established media."

If newsrooms included reporters with more varied political perspectives, he argued, more stories would undergo greater scrutiny, a necessity in the current rapid-fire news environment.

This idea has been championed by others as well.

"Want to fix journalism?" a headline on a National Review article recently asked. "Start by bringing diversity of thought to newsrooms."

It's not just conservative journalists making the argument. Members of the mainstream press have identified newsroom diversity as an issue to address as news outlets grapple with how they misunderstood the wave that Trump rode to the White House.

The New York Times' executive editor, Dean Baquet, recently conceded that his newspaper doesn't "get religion." Carrie Brown, a professor at the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism, also blamed a "lack of diversity in the newsroom" for some of journalism's recent shortcomings.

And the chorus will most likely only grow louder after the recent string of misreported stories.

"I think last week was a wake-up call," Griswold said. "There's nothing wrong with the media deciding to take on 'fake news.' But when reporters fall for false or hoax reports — and the perception is that only the hoaxes that benefit the left are being passed on uncritically — we end up lacking the credibility we need to inform the public."

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## **The Fake News Scare Is, Itself, Fake News**

Forbes, DEC 26, 2016 by Jordan Shapiro

Don't worry about fake news. The whole scare is, itself, fake news. Don't believe a word of it.

Could it be that the news media is still trying to distract us from their own poor performance? After all, if inaccuracy makes a thing "fake," then all the pundits' and pollsters' pre-election day predictions were pretty bad offenders.

I'm particularly looking forward to this last one (allowing everyday users to "report stories as fake"); there's a lot I'd like to report. For example, I have friends and relatives who are not really happy in their romantic relationships but keep posting photos of "date night" in order to convince us (and, presumably, themselves) that everything is peachy. There are certified narcissistic materialists in my network who keep posting semi-spiritual memes about gratitude and positivity which seem completely out of resonance with the sense of dark emptiness I feel when I'm in their presence. And parents keep posting anecdotes and photos of their children which suggest that their families have significantly fewer temper tantrums and meltdowns than I experience on a daily basis.

See, the real problem is not falsehoods or inaccuracies, but rather that everything about the popular landscape of digital media currently encourages us to see the world the way we want it to be. Combine that with an education system which pays little more than lip service to critical thinking—a system that's barely cognizant of the fact that a skills-based approach to training inherently promotes specialization and, therefore, narrow-mindedness—and you end up with a population that's been encouraged to live with poor vision. You know the platitude: when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Democracy's biggest threat is not tyrants, but rather citizens who are satisfied with their own limited view of reality. That's why, when Plato wrote Republic, he put education at the center of the *politeia*—*πολιτεία* (citizenship, government). He recognized the need for critical thinking. Plato called it Philosophy—*Philei Sophia*— which literally means "love of wisdom." He knew that for a society to function, it needs to cultivate the children into adults who are passionately in love with the quest for truth, the quest to discover that each current reality is nothing more than a fallacy, a shadow, a reflection, a pale imitation of the real deal.

This sort of conviction for critical thinking—in the 21st century, maybe we need to call it critical media literacy—feels especially difficult in a world where all of our media is social. It's easier to point fingers at others. After all, our daily timelines define us and our news streams are intricately tangled up with personal identity narratives. Challenging the information in front of our eyes becomes tantamount to questioning our own sense-of-self. And any serious engagement can cause a nervous breakdown.

Critical thinking is painful. Plato equated it with walking out of a dark cave and staring directly into a bright light. That's what it feels like when you're willing to question your most sacred beliefs no matter how much it hurts. It's a kind of masochistic intellectual flagellation. Sounds horrible, but Plato promised it was worth it. Afterward, the contentment we get from constant spectacle will be replaced with true pleasure—essential pleasure.

Today, we mistakenly point to "fake news" when the real problem lies within us. Algorithmic curation is just the newest technology in a long historical line of shadow-stimulants that excel at numbing us into complacency. The issue is not the reality that's presented to us, but rather our incapacity to challenge it.

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## How to Spot Fake News

By Eugene Kiely and Lori Robertson, November 18, 2016, FactCheck.Org

Fake news is nothing new. But bogus stories can reach more people more quickly via social media than what good old-fashioned viral emails could accomplish in years past.

Concern about the phenomenon led Facebook and Google to announce that they'll crack down on fake news sites, restricting their ability to garner ad revenue. Perhaps that could dissipate the amount of malarkey online, though news consumers themselves are the best defense against the spread of misinformation.

Not all of the misinformation being passed along online is complete fiction, though some of it is. Snopes.com has been exposing false viral claims since the mid 1990s, whether that's fabricated messages, distortions containing bits of truth and everything in between. Founder David Mikkelson warned in a Nov. 17 article not to lump everything into the "fake news" category. "The fictions and fabrications that comprise fake news are but a subset of the larger bad news phenomenon, which also encompasses many forms of shoddy, unresearched, error-filled, and deliberately misleading reporting that do a disservice to everyone," he wrote.

A lot of these viral claims aren't "news" at all, but fiction, satire and efforts to fool readers into thinking they're for real. We've long encouraged readers to be skeptical of viral claims, and make good use of the delete key when a chain email hits their inboxes. In December 2007, we launched our Ask FactCheck feature, where we answer readers' questions, the vast majority of which concern viral emails, social media memes and the like. Our first story was about a made-up email that claimed then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wanted to put a "windfall" tax on all stock profits of 100 percent and give the money to, the email claimed, "the 12 Million Illegal Immigrants and other unemployed minorities." We called it "a malicious fabrication" — that's "fake news" in today's parlance.

In 2008, we tried to get readers to rid their inboxes of this kind of garbage. We described a list of red flags — we called them Key Characteristics of Bogusness — that were clear tip-offs that a chain email wasn't legitimate. Among them: an anonymous author; excessive exclamation points, capital letters and misspellings; entreaties that "This is NOT a hoax!"; and links to sourcing that does not support or completely contradicts the claims being made.

Those all still hold true, but fake stories — as in, completely made-up "news" — has grown more sophisticated, often presented on a site designed to look (sort of) like a legitimate news organization. Still, we find it's easy to figure out what's real and what's imaginary if you're armed with some critical thinking and fact-checking tools of the trade.

Here's our advice on how to spot a fake:

Consider the source. In recent months, we've fact-checked fake news from abcnews.com.co (not the actual URL for ABC News), WTOE 5 News (whose "about" page says it's "a fantasy news website"), and the Boston Tribune (whose "contact us" page lists only a gmail address). Earlier this year, we debunked the claim that the Obamas were buying a vacation home in Dubai, a made-up missive that came from WhatDoesItMean.com, which describes itself as "One Of The Top Ranked Websites In The World for New World Order, Conspiracy Theories and Alternative News" and further says on its site that most of what it publishes is fiction.

Clearly, some of these sites do provide a "fantasy news" or satire warning, like WTOE 5, which published the bogus headline, "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement." Others aren't so upfront, like the Boston Tribune, which doesn't provide any information on its mission, staff members or physical location — further signs that maybe this site isn't a legitimate news organization. The site, in fact, changed its name from Associated Media Coverage, after its work had been debunked by fact-checking organizations.

Snopes.com, which has been writing about viral claims and online rumors since the mid-1990s, maintains a list of known fake news websites, several of which have emerged in the past two years.

Read beyond the headline. If a provocative headline drew your attention, read a little further before you decide to pass along the shocking information. Even in legitimate news stories, the headline doesn't always tell the whole story. But fake news, particularly efforts to be satirical, can include several revealing signs in the text. That abcnews.com.co story that we checked, headlined "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The Pledge Of Allegiance In Schools Nationwide," went on to quote "Fappy the Anti-Masturbation Dolphin." We have to assume that the many readers who asked us whether this viral rumor was true hadn't read the full story.

Check the author. Another tell-tale sign of a fake story is often the byline. The pledge of allegiance story on abcnews.com.co was supposedly written by "Jimmy Rustling." Who is he? Well, his author page claims he is a "doctor" who won "fourteen Peabody awards and a handful of Pulitzer Prizes." Pretty impressive, if true. But it's not. No one by the name of "Rustling" has won a Pulitzer or Peabody award. The photo accompanying Rustling's bio is also displayed on another bogus story on a different site, but this time under the byline "Darius Rubics." The Dubai story was written by "Sorcha Faal, and as reported to her Western Subscribers." The Pope Francis story has no byline at all.

What's the support? Many times these bogus stories will cite official — or official-sounding — sources, but once you look into it, the source doesn't back up the claim. For instance, the Boston Tribune site wrongly claimed that President Obama's mother-in-law was going to get a lifetime government pension for having babysat her granddaughters in the White House, citing "the Civil Service Retirement Act" and providing a link. But the link to a government benefits website doesn't support the claim at all.

The banning-the-pledge story cites the number of an actual executive order — you can look it up. It doesn't have anything to do with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Another viral claim we checked a year ago was a graphic purporting to show crime statistics on the percentage of whites killed by blacks and other murder statistics by race. Then-presidential candidate Donald Trump retweeted it, telling Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly that it came "from sources that are very credible." But almost every figure in the image was wrong — FBI crime data is publicly available — and the supposed source given for the data, "Crime Statistics Bureau – San Francisco," doesn't exist.

Recently, we've received several questions about a fake news story on the admittedly satirical site Nevada County Scooper, which wrote that Vice President-elect Mike Pence, in a "surprise announcement," credited gay conversion therapy for saving his marriage. Clearly such a "surprise announcement" would garner media coverage beyond a website you've never heard of. In fact, if you Google this, the first link that comes up is a Snopes.com article revealing that this is fake news.

Check the date. Some false stories aren't completely fake, but rather distortions of real events. These mendacious claims can take a legitimate news story and twist what it says — or even claim that something that happened long ago is related to current events.

Since Trump was elected president, we've received many inquiries from readers wanting to know whether Ford had moved car production from Mexico to Ohio, because of Trump's election. Readers cited various blog items that quoted from and linked to a CNN Money article titled "Ford shifts truck production from Mexico to Ohio." But that story is from August 2015, clearly not evidence of Ford making any move due to the outcome of the election. (A reminder again to check the support for these claims.)

One deceptive website didn't credit CNN, but instead took CNN's 2015 story and slapped a new headline and publication date on it, claiming, "Since Donald Trump Won The Presidency... Ford Shifts Truck Production From Mexico To Ohio." Not only is that a bogus headline, but the deception involves copyright infringement.

If this Ford story sounds familiar, that's because the CNN article has been distorted before.

In October 2015, Trump wrongly boasted that Ford had changed its plans to build new plants in Mexico, and instead would build a plant in Ohio. Trump took credit for Ford's alleged change of heart and tweeted a link to a story on a blog called Prntly.com, which cited the CNN Money story. But Ford hadn't changed its plans at all, and Trump deserved no credit.

In fact, the CNN article was about the transfer of some pickup assembly work from Mexico to Ohio, a move that was announced by Ford in March 2014. The plans for new plants in Mexico were still on, Ford said. "Ford has not spoken with Mr. Trump, nor have we made any changes to our plans," Ford said in a statement.

Is this some kind of joke? Remember, there is such thing as satire. Normally, it's clearly labeled as such, and sometimes it's even funny. Andy Borowitz has been writing a satirical news column, the Borowitz Report, since 2001, and it has appeared in the New Yorker since 2012. But not everyone gets the jokes. We've fielded several questions on whether Borowitz's work is true.

Among the headlines our readers have flagged: "Putin Appears with Trump in Flurry of Swing-State Rallies" and "Trump Threatens to Skip Remaining Debates If Hillary Is There." When we told readers these were satirical columns, some indicated that they suspected the details were far-fetched but wanted to be sure.

And then there's the more debatable forms of satire, designed to pull one over on the reader. That "Fappy the Anti-Masturbation Dolphin" story? That's the work of online hoaxer Paul Horner, whose "greatest coup," as described by the Washington Post in 2014, was when Fox News mentioned, as fact, a fake piece titled, "Obama uses own money to open Muslim museum amid government shutdown." Horner told the Post after the election that he was concerned his hoaxes aimed at Trump supporters may have helped the campaign.

The posts by Horner and others — whether termed satire or simply "fake news" — are designed to encourage clicks, and generate money for the creator through ad revenue. Horner told the Washington Post he makes a living off his posts. Asked why his material gets so many views, Horner responded, "They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore."

Check your biases. We know this is difficult. Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that

confirms their beliefs and discount information that doesn't. But the next time you're automatically appalled at some Facebook post concerning, say, a politician you oppose, take a moment to check it out.

Try this simple test: What other stories have been posted to the "news" website that is the source of the story that just popped up in your Facebook feed? You may be predisposed to believe that Obama bought a house in Dubai, but how about a story on the same site that carries this headline: "Antarctica 'Guardians' Retaliate Against America With Massive New Zealand Earthquake." That, too, was written by the prolific "Sorcha Faal, and as reported to her Western Subscribers."

We're encouraged by some of the responses we get from readers, who — like the ones uncertain of Borowitz's columns — express doubt in the outrageous, and just want to be sure their skepticism is justified. But we are equally discouraged when we see debunked claims gain new life.

We've seen the resurgence of a fake quote from Donald Trump since the election — a viral image that circulated last year claims Trump told People magazine in 1998: "If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They're the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific." We found no such quote in People's archives from 1998, or any other year. And a public relations representative for the magazine confirmed that. People's Julie Farin told us in an email last year: "We combed through every Trump story in our archive. We couldn't find anything remotely like this quote — and no interview at all in 1998." Comedian Amy Schumer may have contributed to the revival of this fake meme. She put it on Instagram, adding at the end of a lengthy message, "Yes this quote is fake but it doesn't matter."

Consult the experts. We know you're busy, and some of this debunking takes time. But we get paid to do this kind of work. Between FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, the Washington Post Fact Checker and PolitiFact.com, it's likely at least one has already fact-checked the latest viral claim to pop up in your news feed.

FactCheck.org was among a network of independent fact-checkers who signed an open letter to Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg suggesting that Facebook "start an open conversation on the principles that could underpin a more accurate news ecosystem on its News Feed." We hope that conversation happens, but news readers themselves remain the first line of defense against fake news.

On our Viral Spiral page, we list some of the claims we get asked about the most; all of our Ask FactChecks can be found here. And if you encounter a new claim you'd like us to investigate, email us at [editor@factcheck.org](mailto:editor@factcheck.org).

Or perhaps we should define fake news as the process of intentionally producing false stories for rhetorical reasons, in order to persuade people to shift perspectives. Which would make most of the advertising industry guilty. After all, you don't NEED that new iPhone. Beats headphones don't actually sound better. And most of those gifts you got for Christmas—the stuff you've been coveting all year—in the long run, won't make you feel more beautiful, satisfied, or content. Every product placement, talk show interview, and biopic is a culprit. In some ways, the media has always been an amalgamation of useful little white lies strung together to impact your perception of reality.

Of course, there are certainly false stories—what Mark Zuckerberg calls, "misinformation." Hoaxes. Misdirection. Intentional lies. Some are even more nefarious than The National Enquirer and The Onion. But fake news is not worthy of the attention it has gotten following the outcome of 2016 Presidential election. The whole thing is what Alfred Hitchcock called a "MacGuffin."

While well-meaning people run around trying to protect children (and gullible adults) from so-called "fake news," anyone in the United States who actually leans totalitarian must be ecstatic. They know that a "fake news" MacGuffin is an ideal first step toward squashing the First Amendment. Once the citizenry accepts the conceit that some news is "real" (and therefore, good) while other news is "fake" (and therefore, bad) they'll voluntarily submit to censorship. Freedom of the press can easily be replaced by sanctioned propaganda.

Of course, on the wide-open internet, propaganda is not about controlling the content, but rather about controlling the protocols and processes for delivery. That's why, in a November 19th post, Mark Zuckerberg already explained that Facebook is working on building "better technical systems" to detect "misinformation." He and Sheryl Sandberg plan to solve this problem by creating algorithms which can control what we see with increasing precision. Am I the only one who finds that line of thinking problematic? We need to improve ordinary people's capacity to judge the quality of news, to understand where it came from, not to continue further down the path we're on: hiding the genesis of ideas behind ever more seductive user-interface decisions.

To be fair, Zuckerberg's intentions are good. But I'm not sure he really understands that the robot curators, with their fervent commitment to data analytics, are actually the problem. He wrote, "we are exploring labeling stories that have been flagged as false by third parties or our community." And he promised new feedback mechanisms that would allow everyday users to "report stories as fake."

## Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say

The Washington Post, By Craig Timberg November 24

Editor’s Note: The Washington Post on Nov. 24 published a story on the work of four sets of researchers who have examined what they say are Russian propaganda efforts to undermine American democracy and interests. One of them was PropOrNot, a group that insists on public anonymity, which issued a report identifying more than 200 websites that, in its view, wittingly or unwittingly published or echoed Russian propaganda. A number of those sites have objected to being included on PropOrNot’s list, and some of the sites, as well as others not on the list, have publicly challenged the group’s methodology and conclusions. The Post, which did not name any of the sites, does not itself vouch for the validity of PropOrNot’s findings regarding any individual media outlet, nor did the article purport to do so. Since publication of The Post’s story, PropOrNot has removed some sites from its list.

The flood of “fake news” this election season got support from a sophisticated Russian propaganda campaign that created and spread misleading articles online with the goal of punishing Democrat Hillary Clinton, helping Republican Donald Trump and undermining faith in American democracy, say independent researchers who tracked the operation.

Russia’s increasingly sophisticated propaganda machinery — including thousands of botnets, teams of paid human “trolls,” and networks of websites and social-media accounts — echoed and amplified right-wing sites across the Internet as they portrayed Clinton as a criminal hiding potentially fatal health problems and preparing to hand control of the nation to a shadowy cabal of global financiers. The effort also sought to heighten the appearance of international tensions and promote fear of looming hostilities with nuclear-armed Russia.

Two teams of independent researchers found that the Russians exploited American-made technology platforms to attack U.S. democracy at a particularly vulnerable moment, as an insurgent candidate harnessed a wide range of grievances to claim the White House. The sophistication of the Russian tactics may complicate efforts by Facebook and Google to crack down on “fake news,” as they have vowed to do after widespread complaints about the problem.

There is no way to know whether the Russian campaign proved decisive in electing Trump, but researchers portray it as part of a broadly effective strategy of sowing distrust in U.S. democracy and its leaders. The tactics included penetrating the computers of election officials in several states and releasing troves of hacked emails that embarrassed Clinton in the final months of her campaign.

“They want to essentially erode faith in the U.S. government or U.S. government interests,” said Clint Watts, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute who along with two other researchers has tracked Russian propaganda since 2014. “This was their standard mode during the Cold War. The problem is that this was hard to do before social media.”

Watts’s report on this work, with colleagues Andrew Weisburd and J.M. Berger, appeared on the national security online magazine War on the Rocks this month under the headline “Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy.” Another group, called PropOrNot, a nonpartisan collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds, planned to release its own findings Friday showing the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns. (Update: The report came out on Saturday).

The researchers used Internet analytics tools to trace the origins of particular tweets and mapped the connections among social-media accounts that consistently delivered synchronized messages. Identifying website codes sometimes revealed common ownership. In other cases, exact phrases or sentences were echoed by sites and social-media accounts in rapid succession, signaling membership in connected networks controlled by a single entity.

PropOrNot’s monitoring report, which was provided to The Washington Post in advance of its public release, identifies more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season, with combined audiences of at least 15 million Americans. On Facebook, PropOrNot estimates that stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.

Some players in this online echo chamber were knowingly part of the propaganda campaign, the researchers concluded, while others were “useful idiots” — a term born of the Cold War to describe people or institutions that unknowingly assisted Soviet Union propaganda efforts.

The Russian campaign during this election season, researchers from both groups say, worked by harnessing the online world’s fascination with “buzzy” content that is surprising and emotionally potent, and tracks with popular conspiracy theories about how secret forces dictate world events.

Some of these stories originated with RT and Sputnik, state-funded Russian information services that mimic the style and tone of independent news organizations yet sometimes include false and misleading stories in their reports, the researchers say. On other occasions, RT, Sputnik and other Russian sites used social-media accounts to amplify misleading stories already circulating online, causing news algorithms to identify them as “trending” topics that

sometimes prompted coverage from mainstream American news organizations.

The speed and coordination of these efforts allowed Russian-backed phony news to outcompete traditional news organizations for audience. Some of the first and most alarming tweets after Clinton fell ill at a Sept. 11 memorial event in New York, for example, came from Russian botnets and trolls, researchers found. (She was treated for pneumonia and returned to the campaign trail a few days later.)

This followed a spate of other misleading stories in August about Clinton's supposedly troubled health. The Daily Beast debunked a particularly widely read piece in an article that reached 1,700 Facebook accounts and was read online more than 30,000 times. But the PropOrNot researchers found that the version supported by Russian propaganda reached 90,000 Facebook accounts and was read more than 8 million times. The researchers said the true Daily Beast story was like "shouting into a hurricane" of false stories supported by the Russians.

This propaganda machinery also helped push the phony story that an anti-Trump protester was paid thousands of dollars to participate in demonstrations, an allegation initially made by a self-described satirist and later repeated publicly by the Trump campaign. Researchers from both groups traced a variety of other false stories — fake reports of a coup launched at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and stories about how the United States was going to conduct a military attack and blame it on Russia — to Russian propaganda efforts.

The final weeks of the campaign featured a heavy dose of stories about supposed election irregularities, allegations of vote-rigging and the potential for Election Day violence should Clinton win, researchers said.

"The way that this propaganda apparatus supported Trump was equivalent to some massive amount of a media buy," said the executive director of PropOrNot, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid being targeted by Russia's legions of skilled hackers. "It was like Russia was running a super PAC for Trump's campaign. . . . It worked."

He and other researchers expressed concern that the U.S. government has few tools for detecting or combating foreign propaganda. They expressed hope that their research detailing the power of Russian propaganda would spur official action.

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael A. McFaul, said he was struck by the overt support that Sputnik expressed for Trump during the campaign, even using the #CrookedHillary hashtag pushed by the candidate.

McFaul said Russian propaganda typically is aimed at weakening opponents and critics. Trump's victory, though reportedly celebrated by Putin and his allies in Moscow, may have been an unexpected benefit of an operation that already had fueled division in the United States. "They don't try to win the argument," said McFaul, now director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. "It's to make everything seem relative. It's kind of an appeal to cynicism."

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied interfering in the U.S. election or hacking the accounts of election officials. "This is some sort of nonsense," Dmitry Peskov, press secretary for Putin, said last month when U.S. officials accused Russia of penetrating the computers of the Democratic National Committee and other political organizations.

RT disputed the findings of the researchers in an e-mail on Friday, saying it played no role in producing or amplifying any fake news stories related to the U.S. election. "It is the height of irony that an article about "fake news" is built on false, unsubstantiated claims. RT adamantly rejects any and all claims and insuations that the network has originated even a single "fake story" related to the US election," wrote Anna Belkina, head of communications.

The findings about the mechanics of Russian propaganda operations largely track previous research by the Rand Corp. and George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

"They use our technologies and values against us to sow doubt," said Robert Ortung, a GWU professor who studies Russia. "It's starting to undermine our democratic system."

The Rand report — which dubbed Russian propaganda efforts a "firehose of falsehood" because of their speed, power and relentlessness — traced the country's current generation of online propaganda work to the 2008 incursion into neighboring Georgia, when Russia sought to blunt international criticism of its aggression by pushing alternative explanations online.

The same tactics, researchers said, helped Russia shape international opinions about its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Syria, which started last year. Russian propaganda operations also worked to promote the "Brexit" departure of Britain from the European Union.

Another crucial moment, several researchers say, came in 2011 when the party of Russian President Vladimir Putin was accused of rigging elections, sparking protests that Putin blamed the Obama administration — and then-Secretary of State Clinton — for instigating.

Putin, a former KGB officer, announced his desire to "break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams" during a 2013 visit to the broadcast center for RT, formerly known as Russia Today.

“For them, it’s actually a real war, an ideological war, this clash between two systems,” said Sufian Zhemukhov, a former Russian journalist conducting research at GWU. “In their minds, they’re just trying to do what the West does to Russia.”

RT broadcasts news reports worldwide in several languages, but the most effective way it reaches U.S. audiences is online.

Its English-language flagship YouTube channel, launched in 2007, has 1.85 million subscribers and has had a total of 1.8 billion views, making it more widely viewed than CNN’s YouTube channel, according to a George Washington University report this month.

Though widely seen as a propaganda organ, the Russian site has gained credibility with some American conservatives. Trump sat for an interview with RT in September. His nominee for national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, traveled to Russia last year for a gala sponsored by the network. He later compared it to CNN.

The content from Russian sites has offered ready fodder for U.S.-based websites pushing far-right conservative messages. A former contractor for one, the Next News Network, said he was instructed by the site’s founder, Gary S. Franchi Jr., to weave together reports from traditional sources such as the Associated Press and the Los Angeles Times with ones from RT, Sputnik and others that provided articles that often spread explosively online.

“The readers are more likely to share the fake stories, and they’re more profitable,” said Dyan Bermeo, who said he helped assemble scripts and book guests for Next News Network before leaving because of a pay dispute and concerns that “fake news” was crowding out real news.

In just the past 90 days — a period that has included the closing weeks of the campaign, Election Day and its aftermath — the YouTube audience of Next News Network has jumped from a few hundred thousand views a day to a few million, according to analytics firm Tubular Labs. In October alone, videos from Next News Network were viewed more than 56 million times.

Franchi said in an e-mail statement that Next News Network seeks “a global perspective” while providing commentary aimed at U.S. audiences, especially with regard to Russian military activity. “Understanding the threat of global war is the first step to preventing it,” he said, “and we feel our coverage assisted in preventing a possible World War 3 scenario.”

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## **We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here's What We Learned**

NPR, All Things Considered, Laura Sydell, November 23, 2016

A lot of fake and misleading news stories were shared across social media during the election. One that got a lot of traffic had this headline: "FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide." The story is completely false, but it was shared on Facebook over half a million times.

We wondered who was behind that story and why it was written. It appeared on a site that had the look and feel of a local newspaper. [denverguardian.com](http://denverguardian.com) even had the local weather. But it had only one news story — the fake one.

We tried to look up who owned it and hit a wall. The site was registered anonymously. So we brought in some professional help. By day, John Jansen is head of engineering at Master-McNeil Inc., a tech company in Berkeley, Calif. In the interest of real news he helped us track down the owner of [denverguardian.com](http://denverguardian.com).

Jansen started by looking at the site's history. "Commonly that's called scraping or crawling websites," he says. Jansen is kind of like an archaeologist. He says that nothing you do on the Web disappears — it just gets buried — like a fossil. But if you do some digging you'll find those fossils and learn a lot of history.

The "Denver Guardian" was built and designed using a pretty common platform — WordPress. It's used by bloggers and people who want to create their own websites. Jansen found that the first entry ever for the site was done by someone with the handle [LetTexasSecede](https://www.facebook.com/LetTexasSecede). "That was sort of the thread that started to unravel everything," Jansen says. "I was able to track that through to a bunch of other sites which are where that handle is also present."

The sites include [NationalReport.net](http://NationalReport.net), [USAToday.com.co](http://USAToday.com.co), [WashingtonPost.com.co](http://WashingtonPost.com.co). All the addresses linked to a single rented server inside Amazon Web Services. That meant they were all very likely owned by the same company. Jansen found an email address on one of those sites and was able to link that address to a name: Jestin Coler. Online, Coler was listed as the founder and CEO of a company called Disinfomedia. Coler's LinkedIn profile said he once sold magazine subscriptions, worked as a database administrator and as a freelance writer for among others, International Yachtsman magazine. And, using his name, we found a home address.

On a warm, sunny afternoon I set out with a producer for a suburb of Los Angeles. Coler lived in a middle-class neighborhood of pastel-colored one-story beach bungalows. His home had an unwatered lawn — probably the result of

California's ongoing drought. There was a black minivan in the driveway and a large prominent American flag. We rang the front doorbell and a man answered, his face obscured by a heavy mesh steel screen. I asked for Jestin Coler. The man indicated that's who he was. But when I asked about Disinfomedia, he said, "I don't know what to tell you guys. Have a good day."

We left Coler our contact information thinking he wasn't likely to talk. But a couple of hours later he had a change of heart. He sent us an email and we set up an interview. Coler is a soft-spoken 40-year-old with a wife and two kids. He says he got into fake news around 2013 to highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right. "The whole idea from the start was to build a site that could kind of infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction," Coler says.

He was amazed at how quickly fake news could spread and how easily people believe it. He wrote one fake story for NationalReport.net about how customers in Colorado marijuana shops were using food stamps to buy pot. "What that turned into was a state representative in the House in Colorado proposing actual legislation to prevent people from using their food stamps to buy marijuana based on something that had just never happened," Coler says.

During the run-up to the presidential election, fake news really took off. "It was just anybody with a blog can get on there and find a big, huge Facebook group of kind of rabid Trump supporters just waiting to eat up this red meat that they're about to get served," Coler says. "It caused an explosion in the number of sites. I mean, my gosh, the number of just fake accounts on Facebook exploded during the Trump election." Coler says his writers have tried to write fake news for liberals — but they just never take the bait.

Coler's company, Disinfomedia, owns many faux news sites — he won't say how many. But he says his is one of the biggest fake-news businesses out there, which makes him a sort of godfather of the industry. At any given time, Coler says, he has between 20 and 25 writers. And it was one of them who wrote the story in the "Denver Guardian" that an FBI agent who leaked Clinton emails was killed. Coler says that over 10 days the site got 1.6 million views. He says stories like this work because they fit into existing right-wing conspiracy theories.

"The people wanted to hear this," he says. "So all it took was to write that story. Everything about it was fictional: the town, the people, the sheriff, the FBI guy. And then ... our social media guys kind of go out and do a little dropping it throughout Trump groups and Trump forums and boy it spread like wildfire."

And as the stories spread, Coler makes money from the ads on his websites. He wouldn't give exact figures, but he says stories about other fake-news proprietors making between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a month apply to him. Coler fits into a pattern of other faux news sites that make good money, especially by targeting Trump supporters.

However, Coler insists this is not about money. It's about showing how easily fake news spreads. And fake news spread wide and far before the election. When I pointed out to Coler that the money gave him a lot of incentive to keep doing it regardless of the impact, he admitted that was "correct."

Coler says he has tried to shine a light on the problem of fake news. He has spoken to the media about it. But those organizations didn't know who he actually was. He gave them a fake name: Allen Montgomery.

Coler, a registered Democrat, says he has no regrets about his fake news empire. He doesn't think fake news swayed the election. "There are many factors as to why Trump won that don't involve fake news," he says. "As much as I like Hillary, she was a poor candidate. She brought in a lot of baggage."

Coler doesn't think fake news is going away. One of his sites — NationalReport.net — was flagged as fake news under a new Google policy, and Google stopped running ads on it. But Coler had other options. "There are literally hundreds of ad networks," he says. "Early last week, my inbox was just filled every day with people because they knew that Google was cracking down — hundreds of people wanting to work with my sites."

Coler says he has been talking it over with his wife and may be getting out of the fake-news racket. But, he says, dozens, maybe hundreds of entrepreneurs will be ready to take his place. And he thinks it will only get harder to tell their websites from real news sites. They know now that fake news sells and they will only be in it for the money.

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## **Fake News Is Not the Real Media Threat We're Facing**

The Nation, By David A. Bell, DECEMBER 22, 2016

What the conservative media machine does is much more dangerous.

From all the recent hand-wringing about "fake news," you would think that the hand-wringers had never stood in a supermarket checkout line, surrounded by 72-point headlines about alien abductions and miracle cures. Fake news has been around as long as real news, as any historian of early modern Europe can tell you (Renaissance readers gobbled up stories about women giving birth to rabbits, and men from Africa with faces in their chests). Social media has certainly

transformed how fake news circulates, speeding up its circulation and extending its reach and impact. The temptation to blame many of our current ills on it—and by extension, on Mark Zuckerberg—is understandable. But the hand-wringing has in fact distracted attention from a much more important problem involving the American media. That problem is not fake news but the continuing delegitimization of real news by American conservatives. This delegitimization has been taking place for a long time (as *The Nation*'s Eric Alterman has meticulously reported, and as even some conservative media figures have admitted), but during the past year it has taken a frightening new turn. If the mainstream American news media are to have any hope of avoiding potentially catastrophic results—both for themselves and for American democracy—they need to change how they report on American politics, and on the ideological apparatchiks they continue to describe, misleadingly, as “journalists.”

Anyone masochistic enough to tune into Rush Limbaugh regularly will soon recognize a strange pattern in his rants. Limbaugh has an extremely long list of enemies, all of whom he paints as mortal threats to the American republic. But there is one absolutely constant enemy, whom he mentions in every single broadcast, without fail. It is not Hillary Clinton, or Barack Obama. It is not the “Democrat party.” It is not even the federal government. It is the mainstream news media, whom he accuses of extreme liberal bias and hatred of America. In every single show, contempt oozing out of his voice, he flagellates mainstream media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, or the major broadcast networks. He collectively labels them “drive-bys,” comparing them to drive-by shooters. And his strategy has been followed by virtually the whole of the conservative media machine, from fellow radio hosts like Mark Levin and Michael Savage, to television personalities like Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly, to pundits like Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham. If some hapless liberal caller to a conservative radio show, or some hapless liberal guest on a Fox News program, dares to support an argument by invoking a story from *The New York Times*, he or she is likely to be met with contemptuous laughter. In this milieu, the Times has no more credibility than *The National Enquirer* at a scientific conference on extraterrestrial life. A conservative radio talk-show host, Charlie Sykes, who opposed Trump in the election, puts it this way: “We have spent 20 years demonizing the liberal mainstream media.... At a certain point you wake up and you realize you have destroyed the credibility of any credible outlet out there.”

It is important to recognize that if the conservative media machine has delegitimized real news for their audiences, it is not in the service, at least not primarily, of peddling so-called “fake news.” There is a real dividing line between figures like Limbaugh and Hannity on the one hand, and conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, who describes the Sandy Hook massacre as a hoax, and claims that Barack Obama is literally a demon (yes, literally). Generally, the Limbaughs and Hannitys will not even come out and state forthrightly that Obama is a Muslim, although they hint at it, and their audiences almost certainly take this idea for granted. They do not accuse Hillary Clinton of abducting children to serve as sex slaves. Again, what is now being labeled “fake news” is not the real story.

Limbaugh, Hannity, and their ilk are not commentators. They are ideologues.

What the conservative media machine does, in tandem with its delegitimization of real news, is much more dangerous. Its leaders take any story that, however glancingly or speculatively, throws doubt upon the patriotism, honesty, or competence of public figures they dislike, and immediately cast it as the greatest outrage in American history. They return to it as often as possible, greeting every new revelation, however tiny or questionable, as a smoking gun. Just for the Obama administration alone, the list of such scandals is almost endless: “Operation Fast and Furious”; the IRS auditing scandal; the supposed “ransom” paid to Iran as part of the nuclear deal; the loans made to the Solyndra solar panel company; alleged misdeed involving the Secret Service, the General Services Administration, and the EPA; Benghazi (Benghazi!); and of course Hillary Clinton’s e-mail. Anyone relying on *The New York Times* for news over the past eight years would have seen little of genuine importance in most of these stories, and little to challenge the conclusion that Barack Obama has presided, by historical standards, over a virtually entirely scandal-free administration. Anyone relying on Rush Limbaugh or Fox News would have seen in them a pattern of corruption and malevolence unmatched in American history, and one which the untrustworthy mainstream media deliberately covered up. This is not “fake news.” It is a blatantly ideological distortion of real news. But, as Charlie Sykes has noted, because of the delegitimization of real news sources, the machine’s audiences simply do not, for the most part, believe it when any mainstream media outlet seeks to correct the distortions.

The machine has been operating in this way for many years, as Alterman and others have detailed. But since the election, the delegitimization of real news has taken a new, dangerous twist. It has now become clear that faithful followers of Limbaugh, or Fox News, will not only immediately discount any mainstream-media story that reflects badly on politicians or policies they like, no matter how well sourced and substantiated; they will consider the story itself yet another reason to support those politicians and policies, and will quite possibly believe the opposite, simply as a matter of principle. Polling data suggests that even during the election, the revelations about Trump’s failure to pay federal income taxes, and then the Access Hollywood tape, failed to significantly affect his support within the Republican base. The stories were unquestionably true, but that was less important than the fact that they were reported in the mainstream media (broken, in fact, by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, respectively). By

definition the stories demonstrated the power and extent of the dark liberal conspiracy against America, making Trump's victory even more important for the Republican base.

Even more striking are the reactions to the new revelations about Russian interference in the election. Limbaugh, with his usual keen instinct for turning his opponents' tactics against them, has played off the recent mainstream media obsession and labeled the story "fake news." Of course, from Limbaugh's perspective, any story broken by The New York Times should be considered fake news until proven otherwise. Most other conservative media stars have reacted in the same way, and as a result, a distressingly large number, not just of Republican voters but of the Republican office-holders in thrall to them, have been entirely incapable of taking seriously even the possibility that a foreign power deliberately interfered—perhaps decisively—with an American election. Indeed, one poll has shown that since the election, Vladimir Putin has actually gained popularity among Republicans. The liberal hand-wringing about "fake news" has helped the conservative media machine, in this regard, because it has provided yet another useful, and widely used catch phrase with which to discredit the mainstream media.

The implications of this shift for the incoming Trump administration are frightening. Even entirely blatant corruption, and blatant violations of the Constitution are likely to be dismissed as "fake news" by the conservative media machine. Reports in the mainstream media will be denounced as part of a nefarious plot by liberals to destroy the administration (and, by extension, America), and could well intensify Trump's support. Criticism by Democrats, and attempts to hold Trump accountable, will be treated as grievous attacks on American democracy, justifying extraordinary—and perhaps extra-constitutional—responses.

Unfortunately, up to now the mainstream media has shown absolutely atrocious instincts in responding to this phenomenon. Above all, they have simply failed to acknowledge and report adequately on the role that the conservative media machine now plays in American politics, and the way it has delegitimized real news. Consider the fact that in the month before the election, The New York Times mentioned Rush Limbaugh in eleven stories. Eight of these were opinion columns of one sort or another, and one was a magazine story on Hillary Clinton. Just two were news stories, neither of which focused on Limbaugh himself. But Limbaugh has about 13 million listeners. While his influence has waned somewhat over the past few years, conservative politicians still quail in fear of his disapproval. He has more influence on American politics than nearly all American elected officials. He played a non-negligible role in the presidential election—in large part because of his ability to convince his listeners to distrust any revelations about Donald Trump that appeared in The New York Times. Did he not deserve more coverage than the Times gave him?

Unfortunately, the mainstream media still tends to treat figures like Limbaugh, Hannity, and Coulter as "conservative commentators," as if they were nothing more than slightly rabid versions of William Safire, or right-wing counterparts to Nicholas Kristof and Maureen Dowd. The term suggests a tidy equivalence between left and right, in which each side has its own flock of columnists, radio hosts, and television personalities. But Limbaugh and company are not "commentators," who might have an ideological slant, but who can also be expected to think through each issue they tackle on its own terms, with due attention to verifiable facts. They are ideologues, who concoct their broadcasts and columns with the sole goal of advancing the fortunes of their own ideological camp in what they openly describe as an apocalyptic conflict to save America. They make no pretense of thoughtfully weighing the pros and cons of the issues they discuss, and never—ever—acknowledge that the other side could have a point.

It is long past time that the mainstream media acknowledge that whatever equivalency once existed in American political life between liberals and conservatives has long since disappeared. The point is not so much that the conservative movement has turned extreme, although of course it has. The point is that the conservative media machine, and a majority of Republican officeholders, up to and including the president-elect, now form part of a coherent, united ideological apparatus that has fought with enormous success to capture the principal levers of power in this country, and that attempts systematically to discredit and demonize anyone who opposes it. It has become an illiberal (in every sense of the word) political party of a sort the United States has never before known, one that bears striking similarities to fascist and communist parties that operated within democratic societies in the 20th century. And the members of it who work in broadcast studios and so-called newsrooms are not journalists. They are the party's media arm, full stop. They should be treated as such.

Under Trump, even blatant corruption and violations of the Constitution are likely to be dismissed as "fake news" by the conservative media machine.

The mainstream media today is unfortunately in a very weak position vis-à-vis this party. Nothing that appears in the Times or on CNN can now make much of an impact on the people who live within the party's steel-walled ideological bubble—including a very large proportion of Trump voters. As noted, new revelations, however damning and sensational, are more likely to intensify their support for Trump than to weaken it. But reporting on this party as a party, as an ideological apparatus, can still have an effect. Figures like Limbaugh and Hannity benefit enormously from the perception among their listeners that they are just commentators. In a grotesque, and enormously effective, act of

projection, they denounce liberals for being what they themselves actually are: a ruthless ideological movement that cares nothing for verifiable facts. This self-representation is not challenged nearly enough by the mainstream media, which continue to portray these figures as journalists and commentators, rather than as ideological apparatchiks—indeed, as members of a conservative Nomenklatura. At the very least, the mainstream media should be identifying them as such, and fighting back far more vigorously against the conservative media machine’s delegitimization of real news. It should be reporting on Limbaugh and Hannity, Savage and Levin, Ingraham and Coulter, as often as it reports on the Republican “Freedom Caucus,” and it should respond systematically to their delegitimization of real news. When so-called conservative “commentators” attack The New York Times, the gray lady should not act as if responding to them is beneath her dignity. This tactic has not worked, to say the least. The Times should be covering the charges as part of the ideological battle now being waged in America, and it should be responding to them. So should The Washington Post, and CNN, and the rest of the mainstream media. If they don’t, then in the end, they could be signing their own death warrants.

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## **German Government Considers Hefty Fines for Sites That Fail to Address Fake News**

New York Magazine, By Brian Feldman, December 19, 2016

Officials in the German government are considering comprehensive regulations for platforms — like Facebook — that are easily turned into machines for misinformation. According to Deutsche Welle, Social Democratic Party parliamentary chairman Thomas Oppermann has proposed rapid-response teams for people smeared by falsified stories. “Facebook did not avail itself of the opportunity to regulate the issue of complaint management itself,” Oppermann told “Der Spiegel” magazine in an interview published on Friday. “Now market dominating platforms like Facebook will be legally required to build a legal protection office in Germany that is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.”

This would allow victims of fake news and hate messages to contact the platform, prove that they have been targeted and asking for action to be taken. The proposed penalty for platforms that do not adequately respond to service would be €500,000 (\$531,000).

Speaking to Ars Technica, Facebook said:

*We take the issues raised very seriously, and we are engaging with key politicians and digital experts from all parties and relevant ministries interested in this matter. Our announcement last week underlines our efforts to improve our systems. We have announced several new functions that address the issue of fake news and hoaxes.*

The proposal is an interesting measure against a growing issue for large social-media platforms. But there are a number of potential issues. For one thing, €500,000 is chump change to a company like Facebook, which has a market capitalization north of \$300 billion. Second, intent and practice are two different things. Much of the debate surrounding the catchall category of “fake news” concerns what actually constitutes “fake,” rather than “slanted” or “mistaken” versus “willfully untrue.” It’s not difficult to imagine something like this being taken advantage of in the the same way that copyright trolls abuse YouTube’s takedown system.

It may also end up being a moot gesture. Facebook has spent much of the last year testing new interfaces for its News Feed and placing bets on its many other products, like Messenger, and it’s not at all hard to imagine that Facebook in the future will — like Facebook-owned Instagram — disallow external links entirely, or severely limit them. What’s the point of regulating content you can’t control when it’d be easier — and better for your business — to get rid of it entirely?

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## **Facebook’s Problem Isn’t Fake News — It’s the Rest of the Internet**

The New York Times, By JOHN HERRMAN, DEC. 22, 2016

Last Thursday, after weeks of criticism over its role in the proliferation of falsehoods and propaganda during the presidential election, Facebook announced its plan to combat “hoaxes” and “fake news.” The company promised to test new tools that would allow users to report misinformation, and to enlist fact-checking organizations including Snopes and PolitiFact to help litigate the veracity of links reported as suspect. By analyzing patterns of reading and sharing, the company said, it might be able to penalize articles that are shared at especially low rates by those who read them — a signal of dissatisfaction. Finally, it said, it would try to put economic pressure on bad actors in three ways: by banning disputed stories from its advertising ecosystem; by making it harder to impersonate credible sites on the platform; and, crucially, by penalizing websites that are loaded with too many ads.

Over the past month the colloquial definition of “fake news” has expanded beyond usefulness, implicating everything from partisan news to satire to conspiracy theories before being turned, finally, back against its creators. Facebook’s fixes address a far more narrow definition. “We’ve focused our efforts on the worst of the worst, on the clear hoaxes spread by spammers for their own gain,” wrote Adam Mosseri, a vice president for news feed, in a blog post.

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Facebook's political news ecosystem during the 2016 election was vast and varied. There was, of course, content created by outside news media that was shared by users, but there were also reams of content — posts, images, videos — created on Facebook-only pages, and still more media created by politicians themselves. During the election, it was apparent to almost anyone with an account that Facebook was teeming with political content, much of it extremely partisan or pitched, its sourcing sometimes obvious, other times obscured, and often simply beside the point — memes or rants or theories that spoke for themselves.

Facebook seems to have zeroed in on only one component of this ecosystem — outside websites — and within it, narrow types of bad actors. These firms are, generally speaking, paid by advertising companies independent of Facebook, which are unaware of or indifferent to their partners' sources of audience. Accordingly, Facebook's anti-hoax measures seek to regulate these sites by punishing them not just for what they do on Facebook, but for what they do outside of it.

“We've found that a lot of fake news is financially motivated,” Mosseri wrote. “Spammers make money by masquerading as well-known news organizations and posting hoaxes that get people to visit to their sites, which are often mostly ads.” The proposed solution: “Analyzing publisher sites to detect where policy enforcement actions might be necessary.”

The stated targets of Facebook's efforts are precisely defined, but its formulation of the problem implicates, to a lesser degree, much more than just “the worst of the worst.” Consider this characterization of what makes a “fake news” site a bad platform citizen: It uses Facebook to capture receptive audiences by spreading lies and then converts those audiences into money by borrowing them from Facebook, luring them to an outside site larded with obnoxious ads. The site's sin of fabrication is made worse by its profit motive, which is cast here as a sort of arbitrage scheme. But an acceptable news site does more or less the same thing: It uses Facebook to capture receptive audiences by spreading not-lies and then converts those audiences into money by luring them to an outside site not-quite larded with not-as-obnoxious ads. In either case, Facebook users are being taken out of the safe confines of the platform into areas that Facebook does not and cannot control.

In this context, this “fake news” problem reads less as a distinct new phenomenon than as a flaring symptom of an older, more existential anxiety that Facebook has been grappling with for years: its continued (albeit diminishing) dependence on the same outside web that it, and other platforms, have begun to replace. Facebook's plan for “fake news” is no doubt intended to curb certain types of misinformation. But it's also a continuation of the company's bigger and more consequential project — to capture the experiences of the web it wants and from which it can profit, but to insulate itself from the parts that it doesn't and can't. This may help solve a problem within the ecosystem of outside publishers — an ecosystem that, in the distribution machinery of Facebook, is becoming redundant, and perhaps even obsolete.

As Facebook has grown, so have its ambitions. Its mantralike mission (to “connect the world”) is rivaled among internet companies perhaps by only that of Google (to “organize the world's information”) in terms of sheer scope. In the run-up to Facebook's initial public offering, Mark Zuckerberg told investors that the company makes decisions “not optimizing for what's going to happen in the next year, but to set us up to really be in this world where every product experience you have is social, and that's all powered by Facebook.”

To understand what such ambition looks like in practice, consider Facebook's history. It started as an inward-facing website, closed off from both the web around it and the general public. It was a place to connect with other people, and where content was created primarily by other users: photos, wall posts, messages. This system quickly grew larger and more complex, leading to the creation, in 2006, of the news feed — a single location in which users could find updates from all of their Facebook friends, in roughly reverse-chronological order.

When the news feed was announced, before the emergence of the modern Facebook sharing ecosystem, Facebook's operating definition of “news” was pointedly friend-centric. “Now, whenever you log in, you'll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups,” the announcement about the news feed said. This would soon change.

In the ensuing years, as more people spent more time on Facebook, and following the addition of “Like” and “Share” functions within Facebook, the news feed grew into a personalized portal not just for personal updates but also for the cornucopia of media that existed elsewhere online: links to videos, blog posts, games and more or less anything else published on an external website, including news articles. This potent mixture accelerated Facebook's change from a place for keeping up with family and friends to a place for keeping up, additionally, with the web in general, as curated by your friends and family. Facebook's purview continued to widen as its user base grew and then acquired their first smartphones; its app became an essential lens through which hundreds of millions of people interacted with one another, with the rest of the web and, increasingly, with the world at large.

Facebook, in other words, had become an interface for the whole web rather than just one more citizen of it. By sorting

and mediating the internet, Facebook inevitably began to change it. In the previous decade, the popularity of Google influenced how websites worked, in noticeable ways: Titles and headlines were written in search-friendly formats; pages or articles would be published not just to cover the news but, more specifically, to address Google searchers' queries about the news, the canonical example being The Huffington Post's famous "What Time Does The Super Bowl Start?" Publishers built entire business models around attracting search traffic, and search-engine optimization, S.E.O., became an industry unto itself. Facebook's influence on the web — and in particular, on news publishers — was similarly profound. Publishers began taking into consideration how their headlines, and stories, might travel within Facebook. Some embraced the site as a primary source of visitors; some pursued this strategy into absurdity and exploitation.

Facebook, for its part, paid close attention to the sorts of external content people were sharing on its platform and to the techniques used by websites to get an edge. It adapted continually. It provided greater video functionality, reducing the need to link to outside videos or embed them from YouTube. As people began posting more news, it created previews for links, with larger images and headlines and longer summaries; eventually, it created Instant Articles, allowing certain publishers (including The Times) to publish stories natively in Facebook. At the same time, it routinely sought to penalize sites it judged to be using the platform in bad faith, taking aim at "clickbait," an older cousin of "fake news," with a series of design and algorithm updates. As Facebook's influence over online media became unavoidably obvious, its broad approach to users and the web became clearer: If the network became a popular venue for a certain sort of content or behavior, the company generally and reasonably tried to make that behavior easier or that content more accessible. This tended to mean, however, bringing it in-house.

To Facebook, the problem with "fake news" is not just the obvious damage to the discourse, but also with the harm it inflicts upon the platform. People sharing hoax stories were, presumably, happy enough with they were seeing. But the people who would then encounter those stories in their feeds were subjected to a less positive experience. They were sent outside the platform to a website where they realized they were being deceived, or where they were exposed to ads or something that felt like spam, or where they were persuaded to share something that might later make them look like a rube. These users might rightly associate these experiences not just with their friends on the platform, or with the sites peddling the bogus stories but also with the platform itself. This created, finally, an obvious issue for a company built on attention, advertising and the promotion of outside brands. From the platform's perspective, "fake news" is essentially a user-experience problem resulting from a lingering design issue — akin to slow-loading news websites that feature auto-playing videos and obtrusive ads.

Increasingly, legitimacy within Facebook's ecosystem is conferred according to a participant's relationship to the platform's design. A verified user telling a lie, be it a friend from high school or the president elect, isn't breaking the rules; he is, as his checkmark suggests, who he represents himself to be. A post making false claims about a product is Facebook's problem only if that post is labeled an ad. A user video promoting a conspiracy theory becomes a problem only when it leads to the violation of community guidelines against, for example, user harassment. Facebook contains a lot more than just news, including a great deal of content that is newslite, partisan, widely shared and often misleading. Content that has been, and will be, immune from current "fake news" critiques and crackdowns, because it never had the opportunity to declare itself news in the first place. To publish lies as "news" is to break a promise; to publish lies as "content" is not.

That the "fake news" problem and its proposed solutions have been defined by Facebook as link issues — as a web issue — aligns nicely with a longer-term future in which Facebook's interface with the web is diminished. Indeed, it heralds the coming moment when posts from outside are suspect by default: out of place, inefficient, little better than spam.

John Herrman is a David Carr fellow at The New York Times.

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## **How to solve Facebook's fake news problem: experts pitch their ideas**

The Guardian, Nicky Woolf, Tuesday 29 November 2016

A cadre of technologists, academics and media experts are thinking up solutions, from hiring human editors, to crowdsourcing or creating algorithms.

The impact of fake news, propaganda and misinformation has been widely scrutinized since the US election. Fake news actually outperformed real news on Facebook during the final weeks of the election campaign, according to an analysis by BuzzFeed, and even outgoing president Barack Obama has expressed his concerns.

But a growing cadre of technologists, academics and media experts are now beginning the quixotic process of trying to think up solutions to the problem, starting with a rambling 100+ page open Google document set up by Upworthy founder Eli Pariser.

The project has snowballed since Pariser started it on 17 November, with contributors putting forward myriad solutions, he said. “It’s a really wonderful thing to watch as it grows,” Pariser said. “We were talking about how design shapes how people interact. Kind of inadvertently this turned into this place where you had thousands of people collaborating together in this beautiful way.”

In Silicon Valley, meanwhile, some programmers have been battling solutions back and forth on Hacker News, a discussion board about computing run by the startup incubator Y Combinator. Some ideas are more realistic than others. “The biggest challenge is who wants to be the arbiter of truth and what truth is,” said Claire Wardle, research director for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. “The way that people receive information now is increasingly via social networks, so any solution that anybody comes up with, the social networks have to be on board.”

### **Journalists, the public or algorithms?**

Most of the solutions fall into three general categories: the hiring of human editors; crowdsourcing, and technological or algorithmic solutions.

Human editing relies on a trained professional to assess a news article before it enters the news stream. Its proponents say that human judgment is more reliable than algorithms, which can be gamed by trolls and arguably less nuanced when faced with complex editorial decisions; Facebook’s algorithmic system famously botched the Vietnam photo debacle.

Yet hiring people – especially the number needed to deal with Facebook’s volume of content – is expensive, and it may be hard for them to act quickly. The social network ecosystem is enormous, and Wardle says that any human solution would be next to impossible to scale. Humans are also partial to subjectivity, and even an overarching “readers’ editor”, if Facebook appointed one, would be a disproportionately powerful position and open to abuse.

Crowdsourced vetting would open up the assessment process to the body politic, having people apply for a sort of “verified news checker” status and then allowing them to rank news as they see it. This isn’t dissimilar to the way Wikipedia works, and could be more democratic than a small team of paid staff. It would be less likely to be accused of bias or censorship because anyone could theoretically join, but could also be easier to game by people promoting fake or biased news, or using automated systems to promote clickbait for advertising revenue.

Algorithmic or machine learning vetting is the third approach, and the one currently favored by Facebook, who fired their human trending news team and replaced them with an algorithm earlier in 2016. But the current systems are failing to identify and downgrade hoax news or distinguish satire from real stories; Facebook’s algorithm started spitting out fake news almost immediately after its inception.

Technology companies like to claim that algorithms are free of personal bias, yet they inevitably reflect the subjective decisions of those who designed them, and journalistic integrity is not a priority for engineers.

Algorithms also happen to be cheaper and easier to manage than human beings, but an algorithmic solution, Wardle said, must be transparent. “We have to say: here’s the way the machine can make this easier for you.”

Facebook has been slow to admit it has a problem with misinformation on its news feed, which is seen by 1.18 billion people every day. It has had several false starts on systems, both automated and using human editors, that inform how news appears on its feed. Pariser’s project details a few ways to start:

#### **Verified news media pages**

Similar to Twitter’s “blue tick” system, verification would mean that a news organization would have to apply to be verified and be proved to be a credible news source so that stories would be published with a “verified” flag. Verification could also mean higher priority in newsfeed algorithms, while repeatedly posting fake news would mean losing verified status.

Pros: The system would be simple to impose, possibly through a browser plug-in, and is likely to appeal to most major publications.

Cons: It would require extra staff to assess applications and maintain the system, could be open to accusations of bias if not carefully managed and could discriminate against younger, less established news sites.

#### **Separate news articles from shared personal information**

“Social media sharing of news articles/opinion subtly shifts the ownership of the opinion from the author to the ‘sharer’,” Amanda Harris, a contributor to Pariser’s project, wrote. “By shifting the conversation about the article to the third person, it starts in a much better place: ‘the author is wrong’ is less aggressive than ‘you are wrong’.”

Pros: Easy and cheap to implement.

Cons: The effect may be too subtle and not actually solve the problem.

#### **Add a ‘fake news’ flag**

Labelling problematic articles in this way would show Facebook users that there is some question over the veracity of an article. It could be structured the same way as abuse reports currently are; users can “flag” a story as fake, and if enough users do so then readers would see a warning box that “multiple users have marked this story as fake” before they could click through.

Pros: Flagging is cheap, easy to do and requires very little change. It would make readers more questioning about the content they read and share, and also slightly raises the bar for sharing fake news by slowing the speed at which it can spread.

Cons: It’s unknown whether flagging would actually change people’s behavior. It is also vulnerable to trolling or gaming the system; users could spam real articles with fake tags, known as a “false flag” operation.

#### **Add a time-delay on re-shares**

Articles on Facebook and Twitter could be subject to a time-delay once they reach a certain threshold of shares, while “white-labeled” sites like the New York Times would be exempt from this.

Pros: Would slow the spread of fake news.

Cons: Could affect real news as much as fake, and “white-labelling” would be attacked as biased and unfair, especially on the right. Users could also be frustrated by the enforced delay: “I want to share when I want to share.”

#### **Partnership with fact-checking sites, such as Snopes**

Fake news could automatically be tagged with a link to an article debugging it on Snopes, though inevitably that will leave Facebook open to criticism if the debunking site is attacked as having a political bias.

Pros: Would allow for easy flagging of fake news, and also raise awareness of fact-checking sources and processes.

Cons: Could be open to accusations of political bias, and the mission might also creep: would it extend to statements on politicians’ pages?

#### **Headline and content analysis**

An algorithm could analyze the content and headline of news to flag signs that it contains fake news. The content of the article could be checked for legitimate sourcing – hyperlinks to the Associated Press or other whitelisted media organizations.

Pros: Cheap, and easily amalgamated into existing algorithms.

Cons: An automated system could allow real news to fall through the cracks.

#### **Cross-partisan indexing**

This system would algorithmically promote non-partisan news, by checking stories against a heat-map of political opinion or sharing nodes, and then promoting those stories that are shared more widely than by just one part of the political spectrum. It could be augmented with a keyword search against a database of language most likely to be used by people on the left or the right.

Pros: Cheap, and easily combined with existing algorithms. Can be used in partnership with other measures. It’s also a gentler system that could be used to “nudge” readers away from fake news without censoring.

Cons: Doesn’t completely remove fake news.

#### **Sharer reputation ranking**

This would promote or hide articles based on the reputation of the sharer. Each person on a social network would have a score (public or private) based on feedback from the news they share.

Pros: Easy to populate a system quickly using user feedback.

Cons: User feedback systems are easy to game, so fake news could easily be upvoted as true by people who want it to be true, messing up the algorithm.

#### **Visible design cues for fake news**

Fake news would come up in the news feed as red, real news as green, satire as orange.

Pros: Gives immediate visual shorthand to distinguish real from fake news. Could also be a browser plug-in.

Cons: Still requires a way to distinguish one from the other, whether labor-intensively or algorithmically. Any mistake with an algorithm, say one that puts Breitbart articles in red, would open Facebook up to accusations of bias.

#### **Punish accounts that post fake news**

If publishing fake news was punishable with bans on Facebook then it would disincentivise organizations from doing so.

Pros: Attacks the problem at its root and could get rid of the worst offenders.

Cons: The system would be open to accusations of bias. And what about satire, or news that's not outright fake but controversial?

### **Tackling fake news on the web outside Facebook**

News is shared across hundreds of other sites and services, from SMS and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, to distribution through Google's search engine and aggregations sites like Flipboard. How can fake news, inaccurate stories and unacknowledged satire be identified in so many different contexts?

### **Fact-checking API**

A central fact-checking service could publish an API, a constantly updated feed of information, which any browser could query news articles against. A combination of human editing and algorithms would return information about the news story and its URL, including whether it is likely to be fake (if it came from a known click-farm site) or genuine. Stories would be "fingerprinted" in the same way as advertising software.

People could choose their fact-checking system – Snopes or Politifact or similar – and then install it as either a browser plug-in or a Facebook or Twitter plug-in that would colour-code news sources on the fly as either fake, real or various gradations in between.

Pros: Human editors would become less necessary as the algorithm learns, and wouldn't have to check each story individually. Being asked to choose a fact-checker might encourage critical thinking.

Cons: Will be labor-intensive and expensive, especially at first. It could be open to accusations of bias, especially once the algorithm takes over from the human input. Arguably only those already awake to the problem would choose to opt in, unless a platform like Facebook or Google assimilates it as standard.

### **Page ranking system**

Much like Google's original PageRank algorithm, a system could be developed to assess the authority of a story by its domain and URL history, suggested Mike Sukmanowsky of Parse.ly.

This would effectively be, Sukmanowsky wrote, a source reliability algorithm that calculated a "basic decency score" for online content that pages like Facebook could use to inform their trending topic algorithms. There could also be "ratings agencies" for media; too many Stephen Glass-style falsified reporting scandals, for example, and the New York Times could risk losing its triple-A rating.

Pros: Relatively easy to construct using open-sourcing, and could be incorporated into existing structures. Domains that serially propagate fake information could be punished by being downgraded in rank, effectively hiding them.

Cons: Little recourse for sites to appeal against their ranking, and could make it unfairly difficult for less established sites to break through.

### **Connect fake news to fact-checking sites**

Under this system, fake news would be inter-linked (possibly through a browser plug-in) to a story by a trusted fact-checking organization like Snopes or Politifact. (Rbutr already does this, though on a modest scale.)

Pros: Connects readers with corrections that already exist. Facebook or Google could use a database like Snopes in its algorithm.

Cons: Unless this kind of system gets hardwired into Facebook or Google, people have to want to know if what they're reading is fake.

On current evidence, many people feel comfortable when presented by news which doesn't challenge their own prejudices and preferences – even if that news is inaccurate, misleading or false.

What many of these solutions don't address is the more complex, nuanced and long-term challenge of educating the public about the importance of informed debate – and why properly considering an accurate, rational and compelling viewpoint from the other side of the fence is an essential part of the democratic process.

"There's a feeling that in trying to come up with solutions we risk a boomerang effect that the more we're debunking, the more people will disbelieve it," said Claire Wardle. "How do we bring people together to agree on facts when people don't want to receive information that doesn't fit with how they see the world?"

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## **SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS**

The New Yorker, By Nicholas Lemann November 30, 2016

There's an easy solution and a hard one to the problem of fake news—and the easy solution isn't all that easy.

What we are now calling fake news—misinformation that people fall for—is nothing new. Thousands of years ago, in

the Republic, Plato offered up a hellish vision of people who mistake shadows cast on a wall for reality. In the Iliad, the Trojans fell for a fake horse. Shakespeare loved misinformation: in “Twelfth Night,” Viola disguises herself as a man and wins the love of another woman; in “The Tempest,” Caliban mistakes Stephano for a god. And, in recent years, the Nobel committee has awarded several economics prizes to work on “information asymmetry,” “cognitive bias,” and other ways in which the human propensity toward misperception distorts the workings of the world.

What is new is the premise of the conversation about fake news that has blossomed since Election Day: that it’s realistic to expect our country to be a genuine mass democracy, in which people vote on the basis of facts and truth, as provided to them by the press. Plato believed in truth but didn’t believe in democracy. The framers of the American Constitution devised a democratic system shot through with restrictions: only a limited portion of the citizenry could vote, and even that subset was permitted to elect only state and local politicians and members of the House of Representatives, not senators or Presidents. In guaranteeing freedom of the press, the framers gave a pass to fake news, since back then the press was mainly devoted to hot-blooded opinion. They felt protected against a government that came to power through misinformation, because the country wasn’t very democratic, and because they assumed most people would simply vote their economic interests.

Only in the twentieth century, as the United States became a complex modern society with mass media and professional journalism, did people begin to worry about the fake-news problem, and when they did they usually came down either on the side of restricting democracy or restricting the media. (As American democracy came to include a greater number of people—former slaves, immigrants, and women—élites, including liberal élites, began to find it more worrisome.) Walter Lippmann began “Public Opinion,” published in 1922, with a long quotation from Plato’s cave parable, and wound up abandoning the idea that the press or the public could discern and then pay attention to the truth. Instead, he wanted to create “political observatories”—what we’d now call think tanks—that would feed expert advice to grateful, overwhelmed politicians, relegating both the press and the public to secondary roles in government policymaking.

In the nineteen-twenties, when radio was as new and vastly influential as the Internet is today, the United States decided not to create a government-funded news network like the British Broadcasting Corporation, but instead to turn broadcasting over to private industry and to regulate it heavily. The American news world that many people are nostalgic for had only three networks, which were required to speak in a nonpartisan voice and to do money-losing public-service journalism in return for the renewal of their valuable government licenses. That world disappeared when Ronald Reagan deregulated broadcasting, in the nineteen-eighties. When cable television and the Internet came along, they were structured on the more libertarian idea that everybody should have a voice and everybody should have free access to all forms of information, including misinformation. It shouldn’t be surprising that a lot of people, both creators and consumers of journalism, prefer fake news to real news.

So what should we do about journalism’s role in non-reality-based politics? The easy part—which won’t be all that easy, because of the current economic troubles of journalism—is to expand the real-news ecosystem as much as possible, by training people in how to do that work and by strengthening the institutions that will publish and broadcast it. (Along with this goes enhancing the smaller ecosystem for correcting fake news: snopes.com, PolitiFact, factcheck.org, and so on.) The hard part is figuring out what to do about the proliferation and influence of fake news. It’s a sign of our anti-government times that the solution proposed most often is that Facebook should regulate it. Think about what that means: one relatively new private company, which isn’t in journalism, has become the dominant provider of journalism to the public, and the only way people can think of to address what they see as a terrifying crisis in politics and public life is to ask the company’s billionaire C.E.O. to fix it.

Our government has many ways of dealing with the natural tension between public opinion and reliable information: think of the Federal Reserve Board, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the federal judiciary. People grouse about these institutions—one can caricature them, and people do, as élitist or as inexcusably political—but, on the whole, they work. Most countries, including the United States in the past, have found their way to some parallel structure for real news. Many countries are stricter about enforcing diversity of private media ownership than we are, and they find ways to give an economic advantage to the better news organizations while still maintaining public-service requirements to shape the behavior of private companies that use public airwaves.

It’s facile and unhelpful to assume that government’s role in journalism can be either nothing or absolute control for propaganda purposes. There is a big difference between state media (like the odious Russia Today) and public media (like the BBC). Most developed countries with press freedom have far more public media, including multiple government-funded broadcast-news channels, than we do. National Public Radio is one of the very best American news organizations, but it has minimal government funding; the Public Broadcasting System is also mainly privately funded, and it doesn’t maintain a large network of national and international correspondents the way NPR does.

It's sad that, in the wake of the election of a President who doesn't hesitate to tell his followers things that simply aren't true, we are not even talking about any of this. If people really think that something should be done about the fake-news problem, they should be thinking about government as the institution to do it.

Nicholas Lemann joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1999, and has written the Letter from Washington and the Wayward Press columns for the magazine.

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## **Fake News: A New Name For An Old Problem**

The Huffinton Post, 12/21/2016 02:03 pm ET

It's been just over a month since Donald Trump's victory, and as the media is still in the midst of its post-election autopsy, a super villain has emerged: fake news.

Yes, the new consciousness of fake news is everywhere. Each week brings a steady stream of think pieces on our new "post-fact" reality, and Hillary Clinton herself has called for a bipartisan fight against the fake news "epidemic." And this month, Politifact named fake news its "2016 Lie of the Year."

It's become the new way to explain our national divide, a split so vast it goes beyond political beliefs. Reporting for *The New Yorker* on the Trump campaign trail in July, George Saunders identified "two subcountries" that "draw upon non-intersecting data sets and access entirely different mythological systems."

According to the prevailing narrative, the great enabler of the rise of fake news is social media. Look no further than Michael Flynn, Donald Trump's pick for national security adviser, who has repeatedly shared fake news and conspiracy theories on Twitter. The Trump transition team even fired Flynn's son for doing the same. It's easier than ever to spread misinformation.

There is a social media lesson here. But it's that social media tools are, after all, just that: tools. The same tools that can build understanding and connection and give voice to the voiceless can, yes, also be used to spread misinformation. But the greater lesson is that by putting all the blame on social media, we can be distracted from the fact that, though the term "fake news" might be new, the underlying phenomenon is not. And it didn't start with social media, or even in the age of social media. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our social media tools.

In fact, fake news has been with us, in different guises, since long before anyone ever had the chance to tweet it. And our understanding of the current fake news problem, and our ability to combat it in the future, depends on our willingness to expand our study and skepticism of news that, for various reasons, has the power to misinform – and have serious consequences.

Yes, much of the fakery springs from sources well outside the mainstream media, like the Macedonian teenager who realized he could make a lot of money slinging Trump-slanted propaganda.

Pizzagate is not the first, or the most consequential, example of fake news having real-world consequences.

But a wider look reveals that it's not just rogue outsider mercenaries spreading fake news. As in the classic horror movie scene, many of the calls are coming from inside the house.

In recent history, a major example of fake news is Judith Miller and the selling of the Iraq war. There's an old saying in journalism: "too good to check." Sometimes a story you hear is just too good, suspiciously good. You don't want to dig into the details, because there's a risk: start asking questions and the whole story might fall apart. And it's a good description of a lot of Miller's Iraq War reporting. To their credit, many of Miller's colleagues at the time actually did try to check the stories. But even so, the Times continued printing Miller's stories on the front page, credulously reporting the government's claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, beating the drums for war. And those same stories were repeated and amplified, not on social media but on the house organs of the media establishment, the Sunday morning shows. We know how that turned out. So, Pizzagate is not the first, or the most consequential, example of fake news having real-world consequences.

And we're still living with the consequences of this outbreak of fake news back in 2002-2003 — not only in the Middle East, but every time we check our phones for the latest updates, switch on the TV news or scan our Facebook feeds. What can we believe? This article I'm reading—who wrote it, and why?

Journalism has no Hippocratic Oath, no injunction to "do no harm." Yet again and again, we see individuals and institutions chip away at the public trust and reverence for facts that are the foundation of the entire proposition. Whatever we want to call it now, fake news has always been with us.

It's been said many times in the wake of Trump's election that there's never been a more important time for thorough, uncompromising reporting, and this is true. But it will take more than simply blaming social media for its powers of distribution, or sniping about those on the other side of the ideological divide who get their news from sources different from our own.

We'd do well to reacquaint ourselves to another old saying in journalism: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

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## **How to fix the fake news problem**

CNN, By Brian Hughes, November 16, 2016

Brian Hughes is a professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. He writes and researches on the topics of extremism, new media and the Middle East. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

After Donald Trump's startling presidential victory, many are wondering if an abundance of misleading or simply made up news stories gave President-elect Trump the edge he needed to win. Critics are calling on media companies to regulate the spread of phony news reports. Already, platforms like Facebook and Google have announced plans to curtail fake news by revising their algorithms and user policies. But will such changes really improve the trustworthiness of online news?

First, some perspective: The 2016 election was a stunningly low-turnout race, which ended in an ambiguous, electoral-but-not-popular victory for President-elect Trump. Fake news may have been, at most, a necessary but insufficient cause for the election's outcome. Take away one FBI press conference, or add a last-minute Clinton rally in Wisconsin, and things might have gone very differently. If fake news did move the needle in Trump's favor, it was only one of many factors affecting the outcome of a race between two of the least popular candidates of all time.

Where Donald Trump got his real power

Make no mistake. Fake news is a problem. The next Democratic challenger will have to contend with fake news, as will subsequent Republicans and independents. And when even Macedonian teenagers are getting in on this racket, you can be sure it's not going away. Fake news presents a profound challenge that transcends ideology, striking at the core of representative democracy: a sober, informed electorate.

Something does need be done. But it would be a mistake to pressure Facebook and Google into acting as censors. We've already seen how such an approach can backfire. Manipulation, such as Facebook altering its Trending Newsfeed to hide conservative sources, only leads to higher levels of public distrust. That in turn empowers purveyors of fake news. If users feel they are being denied relevant (or juicy) content, they will simply seek it out from sites with no such editorial standards.

The solution to this problem isn't less content; it's better curation. In the 1950s, the FCC regulated the television industry with a program it called the "Fairness Doctrine." The thinking went like this: With only three networks to choose from, viewers needed reliably balanced news and opinion. So, if a television station aired one perspective on a controversial topic, it was obliged to air an opposing view.

As a country, we should look at the possibility of adopting a digital equivalent to the Fairness Doctrine. Social media like Facebook work best when they're effectively monopolies. So do companies like Google, which depend on collecting user data to target search results and advertising. It's called the network effect: The more people who use a social network, the more indispensable it becomes.

Big Data analytics like Facebook's social graph are notorious for their ability to identify consumer niches. It should therefore be possible to individually program our news feeds for balance and accuracy. If services like Facebook and Google are allowed to become news-aggregating monopolies, it's only reasonable to expect them to serve the public good as well as the bottom line.

After an election this contentious, some partisan second-guessing is to be expected. But the problem of fake news goes beyond Democrats wondering what might have been. Fake news pours gasoline on a country already inflamed with political and even ethnic and racial hostilities. The last thing we need going into the next four years is more confusion and misunderstanding. It might not be Facebook or Google's fault that we're in this mess, but they are uniquely positioned to help us get out of it.

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## **The Real Story About Fake News Is Partisanship**

The New York Times, Amanda Taub, JAN. 11, 2017

In his farewell address as president Tuesday, Barack Obama warned of the dangers of uncontrolled partisanship. American democracy, he said, is weakened "when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character are turned off from public service, so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent."

That seems a well-founded worry. Partisan bias now operates more like racism than mere political disagreement, academic research on the subject shows. And this widespread prejudice could have serious consequences for American

democracy.

The partisan divide is easy to detect if you know where to look. Consider the thinly disguised sneer in most articles and editorials about so-called fake news. The very phrase implies that the people who read and spread the kind of false political stories that swirled online during the election campaign must either be too dumb to realize they're being duped or too dishonest to care that they're spreading lies.

But the fake-news phenomenon is not the result of personal failings. And it is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Rather, Americans' deep bias against the political party they oppose is so strong that it acts as a kind of partisan prism for facts, refracting a different reality to Republicans than to Democrats.

Partisan refraction has fueled the rise of fake news, according to researchers who study the phenomenon. But the repercussions go far beyond stories shared on Facebook and Reddit, affecting Americans' faith in government — and the government's ability to function.

### **The power of partisan bias**

In 2009, Sean Westwood, then a Stanford Ph.D. student, discovered that partisanship was one of the most powerful forces in American life. He got annoyed with persistent squabbles among his friends, and he noticed that they seemed to be breaking along partisan lines, even when they concerned issues that ostensibly had nothing to do with politics.

"I didn't expect political conflict to spill over from political aspects of our lives to nonpolitical aspects of our lives, and I saw that happening in my social group," said Mr. Westwood, now a professor at Dartmouth.

He wondered if this was a sign that the role of partisanship in American life was changing. Previously, partisan conflict mostly applied to political issues like taxes or abortion. Now it seemed, among his acquaintances at least, to be operating more like racism or sexism, fueling negative or positive judgments on people themselves, based on nothing more than their party identification.

Curious, Mr. Westwood looked at the National Election Study, a long-running survey that tracks Americans' political opinions and behavior. He found that until a few decades ago, people's feelings about their party and the opposing party were not too different. But starting in the 1980s, Americans began to report increasingly negative opinions of their opposing party.

Since then, that polarization has grown even stronger. The reasons for that are unclear. "I suspect that part of it has to do with the rise of constant 24-hour news," Mr. Westwood said, "and also the shift that we've unfortunately gone through in which elections are more or less now a permanent state of affairs."

To find out more about the consequences of that polarization, Mr. Westwood, along with Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford professor who studies political communication, embarked on a series of experiments. They found something quite shocking: Not only did party identity turn out to affect people's behavior and decision making broadly, even on apolitical subjects, but according to their data it also had more influence on the way Americans behaved than race did.

That is a sea change in the role of partisanship in public life, Mr. Westwood said.

"Partisanship, for a long period of time, wasn't viewed as part of who we are," he said. "It wasn't core to our identity. It was just an ancillary trait. But in the modern era we view party identity as something akin to gender, ethnicity or race — the core traits that we use to describe ourselves to others."

That has made the personal political. "Politics has become so important that people select relationships on that basis," Mr. Iyengar said. For instance, it has become quite rare for Democrats to marry Republicans, according to the same Westwood/Iyengar paper, which cited a finding in a 2009 survey of married couples that only 9 percent consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs. And it has become more rare for children to have a different party affiliation from their parents.

But it has also made the political personal. Today, political parties are no longer just the people who are supposed to govern the way you want. They are a team to support, and a tribe to feel a part of. And the public's view of politics is becoming more and more zero-sum: It's about helping their team win, and making sure the other team loses.

### **How partisan bias fuels fake news**

Partisan tribalism makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true.

"If I'm a rabid Trump voter and I don't know much about public affairs, and I see something about some scandal about Hillary Clinton's aides being involved in an assassination attempt, or that story about the pope endorsing Trump, then I'd be inclined to believe it," Mr. Iyengar said. "This is reinforcing my beliefs about the value of a Trump candidacy."

And Clinton voters, he said, would be similarly drawn to stories that deride Mr. Trump as a demagogue or a sexual predator.

Sharing those stories on social media is a way to show public support for one's partisan team — roughly the equivalent of painting your face with team colors on game day.

"You want to show that you're a good member of your tribe," Mr. Westwood said. "You want to show others that Republicans are bad or Democrats are bad, and your tribe is good. Social media provides a unique opportunity to publicly declare to the world what your beliefs are and how willing you are to denigrate the opposition and reinforce your own political candidates."

Partisan bias fuels fake news because people of all partisan stripes are generally quite bad at figuring out what news stories to believe. Instead, they use trust as a shortcut. Rather than evaluate a story directly, people look to see if someone credible believes it, and rely on that person's judgment to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

"There are many, many decades of research on communication on the importance of source credibility," said John Sides, a professor at George Washington University who studies political communication.

Partisan bias strongly influences whom people perceive as trustworthy. One of the experiments that Mr. Westwood and Mr. Iyengar conducted demonstrated that people are much more likely to trust members of their party. In that experiment, they gave study participants \$10 and asked how much they wanted to give to another player. Whatever that second player received would be multiplied, and he or she would then have a chance to return some of the cash to the original player.

How much confidence would the participant have that the other player would give some of the money back? They found that participants gave more money if they were told the other player supported the same political party as they did.

Partisanship's influence on trust means that when there is a partisan divide among experts, Mr. Sides said, "you get people believing wildly different sets of facts."

#### **Beyond fake news: how the partisan divide affects politics**

The fake news that flourished during the election is a noticeable manifestation of that dynamic, but it's not what experts like Mr. Iyengar and Mr. Westwood find most worrying. To them, the bigger concern is that the natural consequence of this growing national divide will be a feedback loop in which the public's bias encourages extremism among politicians, undermining public faith in government institutions and their ability to function.

Politicians "have an incentive to attack, to go after their opponents, to reveal to their own side that they are good members of the tribe, that they are saying all the right things," Mr. Iyengar said. "This is an incentive for Republicans and Democrats in Congress to behave in a hyperpartisan manner in order to excite their base."

That feeds partisan bias among the public by reinforcing the idea that the opposition is made up of bad or dangerous people, which then creates more demand for political extremism.

The result is an environment in which compromise and collaboration with the opposing party are seen as signs of weakness, and of being a bad member of the tribe.

"It's a vicious cycle," Mr. Iyengar said. "All of this is going to make policy-making and fact-finding more problematic."

He already sees it affecting politicians' partisan response to Russia's election interference, for instance: "The Republicans are going to resist the notion that there was an intervention by the Russians that may have benefited Trump, because it is an inconvenient act. Whereas the Democrats are obviously motivated to seize upon that as a plausible account of what occurred."

Mr. Westwood agreed. When Russia intervened in the American election, "for a lot of voters it was to help defeat Hillary Clinton, so it's not surprising that many Republicans see that as righteous."

"To be cliché, the enemy of my enemy is my friend," he said.

Already, partisan bias is undermining confidence in the last election. "We saw some symptoms of that in this last campaign," Mr. Iyengar said. "You begin to have doubts about the legitimacy of the election. And you begin to view the outcome as somehow contaminated or tainted. And you had all of Trump's comments about how he would not concede if the election went to Clinton, and then you had all the people demonstrating."

Now, "you have quite a few people who are willing to call into question an institution for centuries that has been sacrosanct," Mr. Iyengar said.

Mr. Westwood was even more pessimistic. "The consequences of that are insane," he said, "and potentially devastating to the norms of democratic governance."

"I don't think things are going to get better in the short term; I don't think they're going to get better in the long term. I think this is the new normal."