The Importance of Verifying News on Social Media

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Abstract
The Importance of Verifying News on Social Media Yumi Wilson, San Francisco State University, United States A review of previous and current research on the rise of "fake news" on social media and what is being done to address the problem; the potential negative effects of relying on social media for news (echo chambers, false or inaccurate information, and the lack of an effort by consumers to learn more by going to the actual source of information). This presentation and paper also offer journalists and aspiring journalists some strategies on how to verify news and information found on some of the major social media networks.

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"The purpose of journalism is not defined by technology, nor by the journalists or the techniques they employ," the authors wrote in their book, *The Elements of Journalism*. "The principles and purposes of journalism are defined by something more basic; the function news plays in the lives of people."[1]

Facebook has two billion active users and a majority of those users get news on the site, according to the *Pew Research Center*. "Looked at as a portion of all U.S. adults, this translates into just under half (45 percent) of Americans getting news on *Facebook*."[2] *Pew* also found that 18 percent of all Americans now get news on *YouTube* and 11 percent get news on *Twitter*.[3]

Though executives of *Facebook* and other popular social networks do not view themselves as news publishers, the fact is this: Social networks have become a key channel of communication for news – and this is what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel as the most basic purpose of journalism.

And that is why social networks and even search engines, along with traditional or legacy media outlets, are doing much more to fight fake news.

"Fake news is enemy No. 1 right now," reported Molly Wood in *Marketplace*.[4] "Companies and governments are trying to figure out who should be in charge of spotting misinformation and getting rid of it. MIT researcher Sinan Aral has found that the not-true stuff, what he calls "false news," is not only hard to stop, but also really effective."

"There's a story, for example, suggesting that Barack Obama was injured in an explosion," Aral told *Marketplace*. "That wiped out a $130 billion of equity value in a single day."

At an April 2018 hearing on Capitol Hill, lawmakers questioned *Facebook* CEO Mark Zuckerberg about the company's failure to protect the public from privacy breaches, hacking and fake news. Zuckerberg again apologized to lawmakers for his platform's failure to prevent Russia from hacking into its network during the 2016 presidential election. He also apologized to lawmakers for *Cambridge Analytica's* improper access to the personal data of 87 million users, which was used to target voters in the 2016 presidential election.[5]

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[1] Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. First Revised Edition. Completely Updated and Revised. ed. 2007.

[2] Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, *News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017,* Pew Research Center, September 7, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/, accessed April 13, 2018.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Molly Wood, *Marketplace*, August 27, 2018, https://www.marketplace.org/2018/08/24/tech/one-problem-fake-news-it-really-really-works, accessed August 31, 2018.

[5] Brian Barrett, "How to Check if Cambridge Analytica Could Access Your Facebook Data," *Wired*, April 9, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/did-cambridge-analytica-access-your-facebook-data/, accessed April 15, 2018.

Zuckerberg, however, stopped short of calling his social media company a news media company.

"When people ask us if we're a media company — or a publisher — my understanding of what the heart of what they're really getting at is, 'Do we feel responsibility for the content on our platform?' The answer to that, I think, is clearly yes," Zuckerberg said.

Regardless of how to view social networks, *Facebook*, along with *Apple, YouTube, Spotify* and other companies took a major action in August 2018 by taking "down podcasts and channels from U.S. conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, saying … that the Infowars author had broken community standards."[6]

Jones is a well-known radio host who runs the popular *Infowars* website. *Facebook* told the news media it removed his pages "for glorifying violence, which violates our graphic violence policy, and using dehumanizing language to describe people who are transgender, Muslims and immigrants, which violates our hate speech policies."[7]

Whether *Facebook, Twitter* and other networks sees themselves as media companies or not, multimedia journalist Alex Janin of *Now This* said she believes that it falls on those companies to do more to protect the public.

"They really do have a responsibility to do more … in terms of regulations," says Janin, a multimedia journalist who graduated from the University of Southern California with a B.A. in Broadcast and Digital Journalism. "Not sell ads to companies like *Cambridge Analytica* or allow people to say whatever they want or post whatever they want" is a good start, she added.

Twitter

Twitter, considered the most popular social network among journalists,[8] has been grappling with fake news for years. Indeed, a comprehensive MIT study of every major contested news story in English tweeted by three million users for ten years found that false rumors and fake news reached more people and spread much faster than accurate stories.[9]

"Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information," the authors of the MIT study wrote. "We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more

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[6] Rich McKay, "Apple, YouTuber and others drop conspiracy theorist Alex Jones," *Reuters*, August 6, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apple-infowars/apple-youtube-and-others-drop-conspiracy-theorist-alex-jones-idUSKBN1KR0MZ, accessed August 31, 2018.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Rebecca Lerner, "*Twitter* tops *Snapchat* – among journalists, at least," *Forbes.com*, May 26, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccalerner/2017/05/26/twitter-tops-snapchat-among-journalists-at-least/#458ad7367b79, accessed April 15, 2018.
[9] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science,* March 9, 2018, http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146, accessed April 17, 2018.

likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust."

In January 2018, *Twitter* revealed that more than 50,000 Russia-linked accounts used its service to post automated material about the 2016 presidential election.[10] Understanding the power and influence of its network, *Twitter* executives also have taken steps to regulate its platform.

In February 2018, disinformation ran rampant on Twitter during the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 students. A fake account attributed to Bill O'Reilly (former talk show host on Fox News) claimed that there were two shooters, and/or that the shooter was a comedian. Other tweets falsely accused other people of being the shooter.11

And in April 2018, disinformation ran rampant during a shooting at *YouTube* in San Bruno, California that left four people, including the shooter, dead. Some of the most popular tweets were being written by people inside *YouTube*, but as it turns out, not all of those tweets were accurate or even real.

Vadim Lavrusik, a product manager at *YouTube*, tweeted: "Active shooter at *YouTube* HQ. Heard shots and saw people running while at my desk. Now barricaded inside a room with coworkers."[12]

Lavrusik's tweet in itself should be considered a great example of **citizen journalism**, which essentially acknowledges the growing phenomenon of citizens taking an active role in the collection, production and dissemination of news.
The problem in this case, however, was that someone hacked Lavrusik's account and tweeted: "PLEASE HELP ME FIND MY FRIEND I LOST HIM IN THE SHOOTING" — linking to a photo of *YouTube* video creator Daniel "Keemstar" Keem." There was no indication that Keem was at the scene, according to *Business Insider*.

Twitter has sought to refine its tools and improve the speed of its response to false tweets, hoaxes and hacking. "In light of the horrific attack at *YouTube* headquarters this week, we're sharing more detail on how we're tackling an especially difficult and volatile challenge: our response to people who are deliberately manipulating the conversation on *Twitter* in the immediate aftermath of tragedies like this," said Del Harvey, *Twitter's* vice president of Trust and Safety. [13]

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[10] John Swaine, "*Twitter* admits far more Russian bots posted on election than it had disclosed," *The Guardian,* Jan. 19, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jan/19/twitter-admits-far-more-russian-bots-posted-on-election-than-it-had-disclosed, accessed April 15, 2018.

[11] Nicole Lee, "Twitter's fake news problem is getting worse," *engadgetlcom*, February 18, 2018, https://www.engadget.com/2018/02/17/twitter-s-fake-news-problem-is-getting-worse/, accessed April 15, 2018.

[12] Rob Price, "Someone hacked a YouTube employee's Twitter account to spread misinformation about the shooting," *Business Insider*,
http://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-employee-twitter-hacked-spread-hoax-office-shooting-2018-4, accessed July 20, 2018.

[13] Del Harvey, "Serving the public conversation during breaking events," *Twitter* company blog, April 5, 2018, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/Serving-the-Public-Conversation-During-Breaking-Events.html, accessed July 23, 2018.

YouTube

With close to two billion users, *YouTube* also has come under fire for spreading fake news. In February 2018, a video suggesting that a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida was an actor paid to speak out during the Florida shooting became *YouTube's* No. 1 trending video.

YouTube ultimately removed the video and its executives acknowledged that the video should never have appeared in its Trending section. *YouTube* also took steps to clamp down on fake channels making money from advertising after it was revealed that ads were appearing next to extremist content.[14]

Google

Google, which owns *YouTube*, has also taken steps to fight fake news, changing its algorithm to "surface more authoritative content."[15]

In August 2018, the White House alleged that *Google* "systematically discriminates against conservatives on social media and other platforms."[16] *Google* has denied those allegations.

Snapchat

In November 2017, *Snapchat* responded to concerns over fake news on its platform by separating chats and stories from friends on the left and stories from publishers, creators and others on the right.

"Until now, social media has always mixed photos and videos from your friends with content from publishers and creators," *Snapchat* announced in its November 2017 press release.[17] "While blurring the lines between professional content creators and your friends has been an interesting Internet experiment, it has also produced some strange side-effects (like fake news) and made us feel like we have to perform for our friends rather than just express ourselves."

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[14] Stuart Lauchlan, "YouTube clamps down on 'fake news' channels cashing in," April 10, 2017, https://diginomica.com/2017/04/10/youtube-clamps-fake-news-channels-cashing/, accessed July 20, 2018.

[15] Daisuke Wakabayashi, *As Google Fights Fake News, Voices on the Margins Raise Alarm,* New York Times, September 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/technology/google-search-bias-claims.html, accessed February 1, 2018.

[16] Tony Romm, "Trump's economic adviser: 'We're taking a look' at whether Google searches should be regulated," *Washington Post,* August 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/08/28/trump-wakes-up-googles-himself-and-doesnt-like-what-he-sees-illegal/?utm_term=.831391a3d5b0&wpisrc=nl_most&wpmm=1, accessed August 31, 2018.

[17] *Snapchat* press release, November 29, 2017, https://www.snap.com/en-US/news/post/introducing-the-new-snapchat/, accessed April 16, 2018.

<u>The echo chamber effect</u>

An **echo chamber**[18] is defined by *Techopedia* as a "situation where certain ideas, beliefs or data points are reinforced through repetition of a closed system that does not allow for the free movement of alternative or competing ideas or concepts. In an echo chamber, there is the implication that certain ideas or outcomes win out because of an inherent unfairness in how input is gathered."

Despite the efforts of social network executives to fight fake news, most scholars agree that newsfeeds on most social platforms serve as echo chambers of information and disinformation. That's because the algorithms used by social networks determine what people see on their newsfeeds based on what they *want* to see. Therefore, if someone likes and shares stories from Infowars.com for example, they will continue to see stories from that site – despite the fact that some say the site contains numerous inaccurate, misleading and fake news stories.

In the new world order, a person gets to decide what they want to see. Under the Uses and Gratification Theory, this makes sense. No longer does the mass audience have to wait for a particular TV network or newspaper to tell them what the big stories of the day area. This can be good for some, but truly bad for a society that uses this information to weigh in on issues and even vote.

<u>Role of Bloggers and Citizen Journalists</u>

Beyond powerful algorithms, individuals have a huge role to play in the creation or proliferation of fake news. Journalists, however, are not the only ones reporting breaking news. **Citizen journalists** are becoming a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, some individuals have gained quite the following.

While some welcome the addition of more voices, critics say people with no training or education in journalism may not understand the ethical and legal values that have guided American journalists for decades.

This is one reason why trained journalists play such a critical role in today's fast-changing media landscape, says *San Francisco Chronicle* Business Editor Owen Thomas.

"Social media is never going to match the professional journalist on the scene," says Thomas, who supervises The *Chronicle*'s business and technology coverage. "What we found in citizen journalism is … there's a lot of citizen but not much journalism. The consistency is not there. It's hit or miss."

Case in point is the story of Eric Tucker. On Nov. 9, 2016, Tucker posted photos of buses on his Facebook and Twitter accounts, telling his friends and followers that he was convinced that anti-Trump protestors were arriving in buses to Austin, Texas.

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[18] Definition of echo chamber, https://www.techopedia.com/definition/23423/echo-chamber, accessed July 20, 2018.

By the time it was all over, Tucker's tweet was shared at least 16,000 times on *Twitter* and more than 350,000 times on *Facebook*.[19] It was even shared by President Trump.

While most in social media users would love a tweet or post to get this much attention, the problem was Tucker's report about protesters in buses was false.

Tucker apologized in his Nov. 12, 2016 blog post, adding: "I am not a professional blogger nor a professional journalist. I do hope to find more ways to make a difference. Being involved in political discourse is vital to democracy."

Tucker's tweet is an example of how social media has the power to turn one man's tweet – fake or real – into a major news story, noted the authors of "Audiences' acts of authentication in the age of fake news: A conceptual framework," published in September 2017 in the *New Media & Society Journal*.[20]

"Unintentional fake news, satirical pieces, and news that is purposely fake have become part of our daily news diet," the authors wrote. "Deliberately false news items have done everything, from amusing us to confusing us. In a more sinister vein, they have also served to facilitate improperly founded political mobilization."

Fake news to some may not be fake news to all

While those trained in journalism may know what constitutes fake news, not everyone agrees on what constitutes fake news.

"The way some people, including some politicians, use the term fake news is … anything you disagree with or anything you find uncomfortable," says Thomas of *The San Francisco Chronicle.* "There's fake news, fake audio, fake video, fake documents. In the thoroughly digital world we live in, we have to be suspicious and skeptical all the time."

Conclusion

Many social media networks have become the providers of news, unwittingly or not. As such, they, along with just about everyone else, become the Gatekeepers of news and information.

While hearing from a wide array of viewpoints is a good thing for a democratic society, the challenge is this: How do we determine what is accurate? How do we know something is fake? While it's great that social networks and search engines are doing more to fight fake news, educators, journalists and the public must do more to understand on how a story is researched, sourced and reported before they hit the send

[19] Sapna Maheshwari, "How fake news goes viral: a case study," *New York Times,* Nov. 20, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html, accessed May 24, 2018.

[20] Edson C Tandoc, Jr, Richard Ling, Oscar Westlund, Andrew Duffy, Debbie Goh, and Lim Zheng Wei, "Audiences' acts of authentication in the age of fake news: A conceptual framework," *New Media & Society Journal,* Sept. 21, 2017, https://doi-org.jpllnet.sfsu.edu/10.1177/1461444817731756, accessed May 11, 2018.

or share button, stated so eloquently by news reporter Kelsey Samuels during her TEDx Talks in 2017.

"We're starting to use news we're using media to reinforce our personal biases instead of adjusting our beliefs to fit the evidence in front of us so what is our Savior," said Samuels, adding "everyone has become their own gatekeeper" for news and information. "How do we stop the spread of fake news? How do we stay grounded in reality instead of a world that we make up in our heads? I think the first step is self-reflection. It's everyone taking a step back and asking themselves what if I am the problem?"