From Credibility Issues to Collusion with Russia: The Dangers Posed by the Spread of "Fake News" and What We Can Do About It

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Introduction

"Fake news" is not a new phenomenon, but recent events in the U.S. have demonstrated how dangerous misinformation can be. Shortly before the 2016 General Election, a rumor on Twitter, dubbed "Pizzagate," alleged that then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton ran a child sex trafficking ring in tunnels under a Washington, D.C. pizzeria. Prompted by such accounts, Edgar Welch, a resident of North Carolina, drove hundreds of miles to investigate the restaurant.[1] Armed with an AR-15 assault rifle, Welch fired several shots inside the establishment.[2] Although this conspiracy theory has been debunked by Snopes,[3] its web presence persists.[4]

Fact checking and reliable routes for doing so regardless of socioeconomic status are necessary. These tools are crucial as our political climate has become more contentious and the public, more reactive.

Depending upon the source and momentary utility, "fake news" can refer to various phenomena. Current definitions range from completely fabricated stories to misleading headlines and undeclared bias.[5] Related terms, such as misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, often overlap. Misinformation refers to giving incorrect information, regardless of whether it was done with intent; disinformation is intentionally spreading incorrect information; and propaganda is the use of information, true or false, in a tendentious way to

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[1] Marc Fisher, John Woodrow Cox & Peter Hermann, *Pizzagate: From Rumor, to Hashtag, to Gunfire in D.C.*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Dec. 6, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?utm_term=.74eb8bce624c.

[2] *D.C. Comet Ping Pong Pizza Shooter Edgar Welch Reaches Plea Agreement*, KCBY (Mar. 15, 2017), http://kcby.com/news/nation-world/comet-pizza-shooter-edgar-welch-reaches-plea-agreement.

[3] *Chuck E. Sleaze*, SNOPES, http://linkis.com/www.snopes.com/x908S (last visited Apr. 23, 2017).

[4] *#Pizzagate*, TWITTER, https://twitter.com/search?q=%23pizzagate&lang=EN (last visited Apr 23, 2017).

[5] Elle Hunt, *What is Fake News? How to Spot it and What You Can Do to Stop it*, THE GUARDIAN (Dec. 17, 2016), https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate.

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evoke a particular attitude or response.[6] Further complicating the definition, however, is the use by President Donald Trump of the term "fake news" to describe entire news networks[7] and news stories that are critical or portray him negatively.[8]

The term "fake news" is itself problematic because of its oxymoronic nature. The term "fake" is meant to negate the meaning of the word it describes, so "fake news" signifies the negation of truthful information. Because news media's main purpose is to provide the truth to its consumers, its most important quality, integrity, is also negated. This undermines the press and potentially threatens democracy itself because of the importance of free press in a democracy.[9] Overly broad use of the term "fake news" also contributes to rendering it essentially meaningless.[10] For example, President Trump's notion that all polls not in his favor are "fake news" sends the message that merits and sources of information polls are irrelevant and that "fake" means "negative for President Trump."[11] Even more problematic is the growing opinion that if a piece of writing requires a correction, however minute, the entire piece is "fake news."[12]

In addition to semantics issues, the Trump Administration's irresponsible use of the term poses multiple threats. At best, it diminishes the credibility of our President and the office itself, as well as international opinions of the

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[6] *Propaganda, Disinformation & Misinformation*, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, http://guides.lib.wayne.edu/c.php?g=401320&p=2729574 (last visited Apr 23, 2017).

[7] *See* Donald Trump's tweet stating that The New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN are "fake news" and "the enemy of the American People!" References on his Twitter feed to mainstream news media as "fake news" continued at the time of this writing. Donald Trump, TWITTER (Feb. 17, 2017), https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/832708293516632065 ?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2017%2F02%2F17 %2Fbusiness%2Ftrump-calls-the-news-media-the-enemy-of-the-people.html (last visited Apr 23, 2017).

[8] Callum Borchers, *'Fake news' has now lost all meaning*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Feb. 9, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/09/fake-news-has-now-lost-all-meaning/?utm_term=.2f6c61a9c475; Jessica Taylor, *Trump Administration Goes to War with the Media Over Inauguration Crowd Size*, NPR (Jan. 21, 2017), http://www.npr.org/2017/01/21/510994742/trump-administration-goes-to-war-with-the-media-over-inauguration-crowd-size.

[9] Danielle Kurtzleben, *With 'Fake News,' Trump Moves From Alternative Facts To Alternative Language*, NPR (Feb. 17, 2017), http://www.npr.org/2017/02/17/515630467/with-fake-news-trump-moves-from-alternative-facts-to-alternative-language.

[10] Borchers, *supra* note 8.

[11] *Id.*

[12] *Id.*

U.S.[13] At worst, President Trump may have used "fake news" in collusion with Russia to influence the 2016 Presidential Election.[14] The Senate Intelligence Committee recently revealed that up to 1,000 paid trolls tampered with search engines so that they would list Russian propaganda at the top of search results.[15]

Web-based Solutions

The public should be able to trust news sources or, at the very least, be able to easily check purported facts. False "news" stories like Pizzagate can and do have real-world consequences, such as Welch's misinformation and subsequent armed investigation.[16] It can be dangerous when real news sources are discredited and propaganda is cited to support a political agenda.[17]

62 percent of adults in the U.S. get news from social media,[18] and social media is about four times as likely to provide "fake news" traffic compared to established news sites.[19] However, the ACLU posits on its website that regarding "fake news," society is the problem, not social media.[20] It asserts that two other societal problems are responsible: the fact that people in general have not

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[13] *A President's Credibility.* WALL STREET JOURNAL (Mar. 21, 2017), https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-presidents-credibility-1490138920?mg=id-wsj.

[14] Matthew Rosenberg, Emmarie Huetteman & Michael S. Schmidt, *Comey Confirms F.B.I. Inquiry on Russia; Sees No Evidence of Wiretapping,* THE NEW YORK TIMES (Mar. 20, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/20/us/politics/intelligence-committee-russia-donald-trump .html; *See also* Rudy Panko, *Pizzagate Arrests Coming? Police Nab VIP Pedophile Connected to Clintons,* RUSSIA INSIDER (Feb. 15, 2017), http://russia-insider.com/en/pizzagate-arrests-com ing-police-nab-vip-pedophile-connected-clinton/ri18932.

[15] Tom LoBianco, *Senate Russia hearing: Rubio divulges hack attempts,* CNN (Mar 31, 2017), http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/politics/senate-intelligence-committee-hearing-russia/.

[16] *See* Marc Fisher, John Woodrow & Peter Hermann, *Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C.,* THE WASHINGTON POST (Dec. 6, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html?utm_term=.e15e4a556728.

[17] Robert Orttung & Christopher Walker, *Authoritarian regimes retool their media-control strategy,* THE WASHINGTON POST (Jan. 10, 2014), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/authoritarian-regimes-retool-their-media-control-strategy/2014/01/10/5c5bfa6e-7886-11e3-af7f -13bf0e9965f6_story.html?utm_term=.d0272513cbef.

[18] Joseph Lichterman, *Nearly half of U.S. adults get news on Facebook, Pew says,* NIEMAN LAB (May 26, 2016), http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/05/pew-report-44-percent-of-u-s-adults-get-news-on-facebook/.

[19] Jeff Desjardins, *Chart: The Fake News Problem,* VISUAL CAPITALIST (Feb. 10, 2017), http://www.visualcapitalist.com/fake-news-problem-one-chart/.

[20] Jay Stanley, *Fixing Fake News,* ACLU (Dec. 12, 2016), https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-future/fixing-fake-news.

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yet adapted to discern truth from fiction online; and the anti-intellectualist rejection of mainstream news sources by a significant portion of the public.[21]

Although the responsibility to solve society's problems does not fall entirely on the shoulders of social media, some news outlets are exploring web-based solutions to help curb the problem as much as possible without infringing upon First Amendment or privacy rights.[22] None of these solutions is comprehensive, but each has the potential to curb the spread of misinformation.

One solution involves fact-checkers who inspect flagged stories and attach tags that web users see when they look at or try to share a news story deemed "fake."[23] Facebook recently implemented this strategy, which helps to prevent users from unwittingly sharing "fake news."[24] Independent fact-checkers from various organizations tag "fake news," and a warning pops up when users try to share the story.[25] This function will not, however, prevent someone from choosing to share a story after they have been alerted.[26]

Another possibility is to develop web browser extensions that warn users when they access a "fake news" site.[27] *Le Monde*, a French newspaper, has done this but admits that it is an imperfect solution.[28] For example, potential users would have to be aware of – and concerned about - the problem, and they would need to have some measure of trust for the left-leaning newspaper.[29]

Media Literacy Strategies

Education-based solutions are perhaps better in that they do not rely on the media to be responsible for its own content. If someone applies critical thinking skills when consuming news media, it does not matter if a "fake news" story slipped through the fact-checking filter. A recent Stanford University Study evaluated middle school, high school, and college students on their

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[21] *Id.*

[22] Mike Wendling, *Solutions That Can Stop Fake News Spreading*, BBC (Jan. 30, 2017), http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38769996.

[23] *Id.*

[24] Ian Paul, *Facebook starts warning U.S. users when they're sharing fake news*, PC WORLD (March 23, 2017), http://www.pcworld.com/article/3184018/internet/facebook-starts-warning-us-users-when-theyre-sharing-fake-news.html.

[25] *Id.*

[26] *Id.*

[27] Wendling, *supra* note 21.

[28] *Id.*

[29] *Id.*

ability to assess reliability of online information.[30] One researcher, Professor Sam Wineburg of the Stanford Graduate School of Education, reported finding a "troubling inability to weed out unreliable information."[31] The research group is currently testing curricula that will assist educators in tracking and fostering digital media literacy.[32]

Educational efforts may be helpful for those who attend a school that incorporates a successful curriculum, but it is worth considering who would be less likely to benefit from such a program. A digital media literacy gap already exists between socioeconomically privileged and disadvantaged students.[33] Implementing media literacy programs in a way that does not consciously include primary and secondary students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, would serve to exacerbate this divide.

Mariam Pera, Senior Grant Writer for Loyola University Chicago and former American Library Association Researcher, understands the importance of ensuring access to low-income students. She states, "About [a third] of the country does not have access to internet at home. My thought to use media literacy programming in libraries around the country (school and public) would ensure that any student in the public education system would be able to learn these skills at school, and hopefully have that supplemented in their local public library."[34]

Conclusion

The policies and actions of President Trump's administration demonstrate how crucial it is for students of public interest and leadership to be able to identify governmental actions that erode public awareness. Being an informed voter and constituent is essential if we are to hold our leaders accountable. In order to be an informed voter, reliable and accessible information is needed. False information in the news and inaccurate claims of "fake news" against reputable sources greatly impedes this. The U.S. is currently dealing with an

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[30] Stanford History Education Group, *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning* (Nov. 22, 2016), https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20 Summary%2011.21.16.pdf.

[31] Tim Walker, *Who Stands Between Fake News and Students? Educators*, NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION TODAY (Dec. 16, 2016), http://neatoday.org/2016/12/16/fake-news-stu dents-educators/.

[32] *Id.*

[33] Ben Adler, N*ews Literacy Declines with Socioeconomic Status*, COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW (Mar. 6, 2014), http://archives.cjr.org/news_literacy/teen_digital_literacy_divide.php.

[34] Telephone conversation with Mariam Pera, (April 23, 2017, 4:25 CST).

erosion of democratic values. An unpopular President, who was elected largely by,[35] and has openly affirmed his "love" for "the poorly educated,"[36] is committing ethical violations that threaten our reputation and our security. Evidence suggests that he and his associates may have colluded with Russia to influence his own election to our highest position of leadership.[37] Now is the time for those of us with the knowledge and fortitude to actively seek and implement solutions that will prevent occurrences such as these in the future and keep the public informed.

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[35] Nate Silver, *Education, Not Income, Predicted Who Would Vote For Trump*, FiveThirtyEight (Nov. 22, 2016), http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/education-not-income-predicted-who-would-vote-for-trump/.

[36] Tessa Stuart, *Watch Trump Brag About Uneducated Voters, 'The Hispanics'*, Rolling Stone (Feb. 24, 2016), http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/watch-trump-brag-about-uneducated-voters-the-hispanics-20160224.

[37] Kailani Koenig, *Schiff: 'More Than Circumstantial Evidence' Trump Associates Colluded With Russia*, NBC (Mar. 22, 2017), http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/schiff-more-circumstantial-evidence-trump-associates-colluded-russia-n737446.