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GENDER BIASES IN FAKE NEWS: HOW IS GENDER  
EMPLOYED IN FAKE NEWS AGAINST FEMALE  
CANDIDATES?

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa  
para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Ciências da Comunicação  
– Internet e Novos Media

Por

Marta Vitorino Moreno Sanches da Gama

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas

(outubro, 2021)



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Sob orientação de Jessica Roberts

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this study is to analyze how gender is employed in fake news against female candidates. Fake news is not an entirely new problem, however the internet has allowed for its extensive and quick diffusion, which presents new challenges. According to Shao et al. (2017) the widespread reach of fake news is a major global risk; in that it may affect election outcomes and threaten democracies. One of the ways an election result may be influenced, is if fake news containing gendered attacks against female candidates is widespread. Women pursuing high-level positions of power normally associated with men have often been the target of prejudice, because their candidacy goes against the gendered social norms still existent in our society (Manne, 2018). This leaves women in politics at a disadvantage from the beginning, given that men and women possessing the same attributes or carrying out the same kinds of actions may be perceived differently by voters or get a different reaction from the public (Manne, 2018).

The 2016 U.S. presidential election, which was a turning point in terms of widespread concern over the impact of fake news in modern democracies, is used as a case study to investigate questions of gender biases in politics, and the portrayals of female candidates in fake news. This study uses a qualitative content analysis of over 100 fake news stories, independently verified as “false” by a fact-checking organization, that mention Hillary Clinton and/or Donald Trump, and that were spread in 2016, in order to identify potential gender-related patterns in the quantity, type or topic of the most shared fake news stories. The results of this study show that fake news content, disseminated during this time period, often played on gender biases already engrained in society to benefit or disparage different candidates. This study contributes to the fight against fake news, by helping show how gender is also being used in the fabrication of fake news content, to manipulate and influence social media users, and potentially impact election results. Existing gender stereotypes regarding political candidates seem to be used in fake news to hinder female candidates.

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## **Introduction**

Today, concern over the impact of fake news, especially regarding politics and elections, is widespread. Fake news, or fabricated information that imitates traditional media content in its form, but not in the way it is organized, processed, nor in the goal with which it is disseminated (Lazer et al., 2018), is not necessarily a new phenomenon. However, a few trends in our contemporary society have allowed fake news to attract larger audiences. The advent of the internet not only made it easier for new sources of content to be produced, but it also made it easier for content to spread virally through social networking sites, and at a much lower cost.

Presently, most people use social media as their main source of news, and when it comes to political or election news specifically, 18% of American adults say that social media is their primary source for this type of information (Mitchell et al., 2020). On top of this, social media users tend to focus on a reduced number of pages, which enables the creation of a sense of strong community ties around the outlets they identify with, which in turn leads to the polarization of public opinion (Schmidt et al., 2017). Misperceptions persist more easily when closely linked with strongly held beliefs, therefore misinformation is intrinsically connected to political polarization (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

Misinformation is a concept similar to fake news, however in this case the intent is not always malicious (Shu et al., 2020). Malinformation is another related term, which refers to false content put out with the intent to harm (Shu et al., 2020). Often misleading content can be characterized as more than one of these definitions during its life cycle. Meaning, misleading content can be initially put out with harmful intentions, and then keep being spread and shared by social media users who are oblivious to its origin and initial goal (Shu et al., 2020).

Fake news end receivers' capacity to assess the veracity of statements can be explained by the notion that information is more easily accepted when it is in line with other elements people view as true to begin with (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). New information, consistent with previously accepted beliefs, is very difficult to be challenged (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). Recurrent contact with the same accounts also increases the validity with which its content is accepted (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012).

The factor that most leads to the propagation of misinformation is polarized audiences, and not the absence of fact-checking content spread on social media (Schmidt et al., 2017). Bennett and Iyengar (2008, as cited by Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020) state that when individuals self-select the news they decide to consume, they tend to avoid information that counters their present beliefs, and look for information that is consistent with those beliefs instead. “Homogenous social networks reduce tolerance for alternative views, amplify attitudinal polarization, boost the likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible news and increase closure to new information” (Lazer et al., 2018, The Historical Setting section, para. 2). Another factor is the technology behind social media, such as algorithms, automation and big data, which can change the scale, range and precision of how information is delivered (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Regardless of the incentive to create fake news, which can vary from financial gain to ideological beliefs (Alcott and Gentzkow, 2017), the spread of this kind of content is seen as a global risk (Shao et al., 2017), given that “if a majority believes in something that is factually incorrect, the misinformation may form the basis for political and societal decisions that run counter to a society’s best interest” (Lewandowsky et al. (2012, p. 107). The challenges and risks posed by fake news are mirrored in the level of attention and effort countries and multi-lateral organizations are putting into curbing this threat. Just recently, in May 2021, in Portugal, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa enacted the Human Rights in the Digital Era Charter. The document foresees the citizens’ rights, liberties and guarantees online, and its sixth article refers specifically to the “Right to Protection Against Disinformation” (Lei n.º 27/2021, 2021, Article 6). It assures Portugal’s compliance with the European Action Plan Against Disinformation, launched in 2018 (European External Action Service, 2018), and aims to “protect society against individual persons or collective bodies, de jure or de facto, who produce, reproduce or diffuse narratives” of this type (Lei n.º 27/2021, 2021, Article 6). Similarly, in the United States, in March 2021, a bill was introduced in Congress, the For the People Act, which aims, among other things, for a national strategy to protect against disinformation campaigns, as well as other kinds of online attacks that could put the security of the country’s democratic institutions at stake (For the People Act, 2021).

Following the 2016 U.S. election, the effect of fake news and the way in which it spreads on social media received more attention. Although Shao et al. (2017) state that the influence of fake news on elections and its capacity to threaten democracies are hard to prove,

one of the major questions raised by the circulation of so much fake news during the electoral campaign was how it affected voters and ultimately the outcome of the election.

Nearly half (44%) of American adults used social networks as news sources during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and over one third of people in the 18 to 29 age group said social media was the most helpful source to learn about the election (Gottfried et al., 2016). Data demonstrating the pervasiveness, believability and resistance to corrections of fake news during this U.S. election is increasing, and points towards social media's strong role in facilitating the spread (Guess et al., 2019).

In 2016, 64% of American adults agreed that fake news stories lead to misperceptions and confusion about the fundamental facts of current events (Barthel et al., 2016). However, throughout the campaign period, the fake news stories attracting the most attention were more widely shared on Facebook, than the most popular stories originating from verified news sources (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

There is evidence that most fake news stories shared during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, and a number of commentators suggest Donald Trump would not have been elected were it not for the influence of fake news (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). People sharing the most fake news during this campaign identified as conservatives or Republicans (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017), which could be due to the fact that the majority of fake news produced during this electoral campaign was positive towards Donald Trump or critical of Hillary Clinton (Guess et al., 2019, as cited by Jee, 2020), and not because conservatives have a greater predisposition to share fake news.

The 2016. U.S. election also ended up being a stage for unparalleled foreign intervention in its democracy (Shane, 2017). In 2017, Facebook officials estimated that among all the election related content posted on the site, less than 0.01% originated from the Russian information attack on the U.S. democracy (Shane, 2017). Nevertheless, the Russian campaign to undermine U.S. election, included the creation of thousands of false social media accounts, imitating that of American citizens, continuously posting and promoting anti-Clinton messages (Shane, 2017).



The content posted against Hillary Clinton often included gendered messages. Research suggests that female candidates, especially those in high profile offices, “face targeted gender attacks” (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 364). In Hillary Clinton’s case, she was often portrayed as “competent, but unlikeable” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 364), and the attacks directed at her were frequently filled with gender biases (Schneider et al., 2010). The negative reaction towards women venturing into realms traditionally dominated by men, and demonstrating behaviors associated with the male sex (like independence and assertiveness), instead of characteristics linked to the female sex (such as being warm and nurturing), has become known as the backlash effect (Schneider et al., 2010).

Women and politics were once defined as mutually exclusive (Randall, 1987). Politics was seen as a public activity led by men, which required traits traditionally associated with the male sex, whereas women were thought to belong to the family and domestic sphere (Randall, 1987). Those who go against gender norms are perceived as less qualified (Bray et al., 2020). Moreover, women in positions of unprecedented political power are often seen as rule-breakers who are not to be trusted to respect law and order (Manne, 2018). People often end up being evaluated in relation to ideal notions of authentic womanhood or manhood, and keeping away from these traditional roles can result in negative reactions towards those who are judged as straying too far from gender ideals (Parry-Giles, 2014). Even when there is evidence of a woman’s leadership capacity, she is still at a disadvantage due to the conflict between her leadership qualities and her gender role (McGinley, 2009).

Psychologists show that when women’s capacities for male-dominated positions are not questioned, they are still unpopular and face social punishment and rejection (Heilman et al., 2004, as cited in Manne, 2018). In the case of Hillary Clinton, she is often attributed the moral role of usurper, because she threatened to conquer a role historically attributed to men (Manne, 2018). Gender biases in politics often can elicit attitudes or behaviors that force us to question the different way in which men and women are regarded. Recently, in April 2021, Ursula von der Leyen, the first female President of the European commission, was left without a chair at a meeting with Charles Michel, President of the European Council, and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who took the two chairs placed in front of the EU and Turkish flags, without questioning the lack of a third chair. Von der Leyen said she felt she had been left standing because she was a woman, and described the situation as proof of the unequal way in which men and women are treated (Boffey, 2021). Similarly, in January

2021, the extreme-right candidate, in the Portuguese presidential elections, André Ventura, criticized a female candidate in the same election, Marisa Matias, for wearing red lipstick, which was quickly seen as gendered attack and not just a futile detail that could be easily dismissed (Freitas, 2021).

The public scrutiny of women competing for high public office is intense, especially regarding their gender performance (McGinley, 2009). Meanwhile, the influence of fake news, the way it impacts political beliefs, and the effects of this kind of media exposure, continues to be documented in elections, especially since 2016 (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This data, together with the backlash effect previously mentioned, raise the possibility of gender bias also playing a role in the prevalence and impact of how fake news is shared and goes viral in democracies and society at large.

As soon as female candidates are seen as competitive, it is likely that they begin to be villainized by public opinion (Heldman, 2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019). Fake news has demonstrated to be a successful tool for this villainization (Stabile et al., 2019). Stabile et al. (2019) analyze prominent fake news stories spread during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign to analyze how fake news can intensify gender biases in the treatment of candidates. Building fake news content that is consistent with previous assumptions makes a story easier to be accepted (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). Fake news content pulls from existing gender prejudices, which already have a negative effect on the way women are portrayed in traditional news outlets, to validate stereotypes about women in politics, and can be used as an instrument to influence the electors (Stabile et al., 2019).

Female candidates often receive attacks on social media based on character issues that are not raised for the male candidates they are running against, which is similar to what happens in verified media outlets (Oates et al., 2019). While more research is required, it is possible to see patterns arise from the research available so far, that allude to the existence of prejudice against female candidates in the online sphere (Oates et al., 2019). Although since 2019 a few cases of research about the possibility of gender playing a role in how fake news is used for or against different candidates have surfaced, there is still not a great deal of empirical investigation done in this area. Both fake news and gender biases have been and continue to be the object of important and sizable research. However, connecting the possibility of one of the largest plights targeting modern democracies, being linked to gender

biases, some of which have been heavily engrained in society, long before fake news became such a predicament, makes this research valuable and important. This study seeks to contribute to the growing understanding and awareness of two factors that can be used to hold back democracy: gender biases in politics and fake news. These two factors combined can have even more substantial implications, making the analysis of both aspects together advantageous.

Specialists in different fields are trying to understand the causes of the spread of fake news online, while social media platforms are beginning to design countermeasures. This study's goal is to identify and understand fake news mechanisms, while contributing to the fight against fake news, by analyzing how gender issues are also being used in the fabrication of fake news content, to manipulate and influence social media users, and potentially impact election results. As Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European commission, said, there is still a long way to go "before women are treated as equals, always and everywhere" (Boffey, 2021, para. 8). If fake news is being used to perpetuate or accentuate inequality, then shedding light on this topic will help to counter this powerful source of prejudice holding back women.

The question that this study will address is: How is gender employed in fake news against female candidates in political elections? This study focuses on the possibility of the proliferation of fake news and the speed at which they are consumed, also playing a role in the spread of gender biases against women, namely those aspiring to high level political office. This research will attempt to answer this question specifically by compiling data on the most shared fake news stories during the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign mentioning either candidate; examining this content while attributing meaning to it by analyzing the patterns arising from the data.

This study's literature review starts by exploring the concept of fake news, followed by an analysis of social media as the key instrument to spread it. The 2016 U.S. presidential election time period will also be reviewed, given that it is a time when fake news was widely disseminated and concern over fake news became more predominant. It also serves as a case study for gender issues, given who the candidates in the presidential tickets of the two main American political parties turned out to be. Lastly, literature on gender in politics will be studied, in addition to gender in fake news specifically.

To begin this study, Lazer et al. (2018) were an important reference to understand the growth of fake news in the online sphere, and the concerns it raises about how individuals and society at large can be manipulated by malicious actors. This source was also useful given that it focuses specifically on politically oriented fake news, which is precisely the type of content collected and analyzed for this research. Another main reference used throughout this research was Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, with their research on fake news and social media use during the 2016 U.S. election specifically. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) examine the economics of fake news, the way in which it was being consumed heading up to the election, and its potential impact on the result. All of these three components were essential to my research. The research done by Allcott and Gentzkow demonstrates that among the fake news stories circulated in the last three months before the 2016 election, content favoring Donald Trump was more than twice the number of that which favored Hillary Clinton, and more than half of American citizens exposed to this content believed it. These findings were key to the initial development of this study given that they demonstrate favorability among fake news content towards the male candidate, and the degree to which these stories are believed by the reader. Kate Manne's analysis of misogyny in "Down Girl" was another very influential reference for my dissertation. Manne's (2018) explanations of how gender and power dynamics are intertwined, were central in supporting my research on how gender can be employed in fake news to hinder female candidates. "Down Girl" also concentrates on misogyny in public life and politics in particular, and how this is used to drive out negatively characterized women who challenge male dominance by seeking positions and roles from which they have been historically barred. According to Manne (2018), the misogyny directed at Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign was predictable, as was the fact that many people would be willing to excuse and disregard Donald Trump's sexual assault and harassment past.

These three references became the basis for this study given that they singlehandedly touch on the three main elements of this research. Lazer et al. (2018) provided insight into the challenges posed by politically oriented fake news, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) examine fake news pertaining to the 2016 election in particular, and lastly, Manne (2018) touches on gendered and misogynistic incidents happening during the 2016 campaign.

For the purpose of this research, an inductive qualitative method will be used to analyze a compilation of fake news stories shared during the 2016 U.S. presidential election

campaign, from which I will make interpretations and generate meaning. The objective is to analyze the patterns that arise from an over-arching examination of all the data collected. For this purpose, all fake news stories identified were allocated to pre-established categories according to character traits or negative conduct associated with each candidate, such as untrustworthiness, illegal conduct, and incompetence.

Differences in the number of times each candidate was targeted in a variety of categories alluding to character-damaging traits and behaviors can be expected to be found. From the onset, it was visible that there were twice as many damaging fake news stories about Hillary Clinton, as there were about Donald Trump. When looking in greater detail at the distribution of the various fake news stories among the pre-established categories, it was found that in the majority of the groupings there were substantially more stories about Clinton than about Trump, as well.

One of the themes under which most fake news stories fell was incompetence, the vast majority of which were about Hillary Clinton. This category was paradigmatic in demonstrating a gender bias given that despite Clinton's notorious experience in previous high-level political offices, fake news stories using this theme still targeted Clinton more. Although in traditional media outlets, Clinton was many times seen as competent, albeit unlikeable (Schneider et al., 2010), this did not happen in the most shared fake news stories in 2016. Contrarily, Donald Trump, who had no previous experience in politics, was only targeted a single time with a fake news story portraying him as incompetent.

The research shows that the individuals or organizations creating fake news, built on gender biases already present in society, often impact the female candidate negatively. Looking at the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a case study, the results of this research show that gender-related prejudices were used in the formulation of fake news narratives which for the most part favored Donald Trump and hindered Hillary Clinton.

The findings in this study indicate support for previous results showing that conservatives are more likely to share stories from fake news domains than liberals, as is the case for Republicans when compared to Democrats (Guess et al., 2019). This study found that twice as many of the fake new stories sampled targeted Hillary Clinton. Taking into consideration that conservatives and Republicans were more likely to share fake news stories in 2016, it is natural that in this study the majority of potentially damaging fake news stories

were focused on Hillary Clinton. However, it is also pertinent to question whether Republicans and conservatives would always be more prone to creating and disseminating fake news stories about the Democratic candidate, rather than the other way around, were it a different election, with different, less glaring candidates.

This study also seems to show that gender biases used in fake news in 2016, seem to be less obvious than what has previously been seen in traditional media outlets. More blatant examples of sexism against female political candidates seen earlier in the press frequently emphasize aspects such as personality, appearance, and family issues. There are no examples of this more evident sexism among the sample of fake news stories analyzed for this research. The gender prejudices that arose in the fake news stories, sampled for this study, seem to be more understated, and therefore you may conclude, possibly more sophisticated. As Manne (2018) states, the question is not whether women are evaluated by sexist or gendered standards, in a more or less explicit way, but rather how much more criticism they face when compared to their male counterparts. This could be the reason why biases in fake news may have been harder to identify as such.

With this analysis the aim of the present research is to shed light on the kind of gender biases being used in fake news, and the way it affects political candidates' public perception, with potential impact on voter decisions. The goal is to participate in the discussion which involves governments, academia, traditional media outlets, social networks, and society at large to understand the evermore corrosive phenomenon of fake news in the digital era, and possibly contribute to a solution or curbing mechanism to attenuate the problem.

## Literature Review

In order to study how gender is employed in fake news against female candidates, this literature review will begin by analyzing the fake news phenomenon. Once this concept is defined, literature on social media as the main means presently used to propagate fake news will also be reviewed, as well as studies of the 2016 U.S. election specifically. Finally, the literature on gender in politics will be reviewed, as well as the recent forthcoming, although still scarce, literature on gender in fake news.

In this study, an assessment of the existing literature on the 2016 U.S. election serves a dual purpose. Not only did that election mark a time when concern over the impact of fake news in modern democracies became more widespread, it is also a valuable case study to investigate questions of gender in politics. There is abundant literature on gender biases in politics and media portrayals of female candidates. However, there is not significant research bringing together the topic of fake news and gender biases.

### Fake News

Fake news can be defined as fabricated information that imitates traditional media content in its form, but not in the way it is structured or processed, nor in the purpose with which it is disseminated (Lazer et al., 2018). It is considered part of a broader concept, Disinformation, which includes content produced with the intent to deceive (Shu et al., 2020). Other related broader concepts include Misinformation and Malinformation. In the former case, the intent is not always malicious and includes cases of urban legends, for example, whereas in the latter, there is an intent to harm, and it includes incidents of hate speech or harassment (Shu et al., 2020). Wardle (2017, as cited in Stefanita et al., 2018) breaks up fake news into seven very specific forms, including:

*the satire or the parody* for the potential to fool the audience; the *misleading content* for the deceitful use of information; the *imposter content* which implies the impersonation of genuine sources; the *fabricated content* which is entirely false and created for deceitful purposes, the *false connection* when visuals, captions or headlines are not in line with the content; the *false context* when authentic content is shared in a false setting; and the *manipulated content* when real information or imagery is transformed in order to deceive. (Stefanita et al., 2018, p. 10)

Often, there are overlapping examples of misleading information which can fit in more than one of the above-described concepts. There are also situations in which the dynamic

nature of the way in which the content spreads causes the same content to exchange among different types of information disorder (Shu et al., 2020). For example, a creator of disinformation can purposefully spread false information on social media, which may lead people who see this content, unaware of its falsehood, to share it in their own circles, adding their own framing (Shu et al., 2020). This is an example of content which started as Disinformation and becomes Misinformation. The opposite is also possible. A piece of satirical news, with humorous intent and carefully identified as such, may be redistributed out of context to mislead its consumers (Shu et al., 2020).

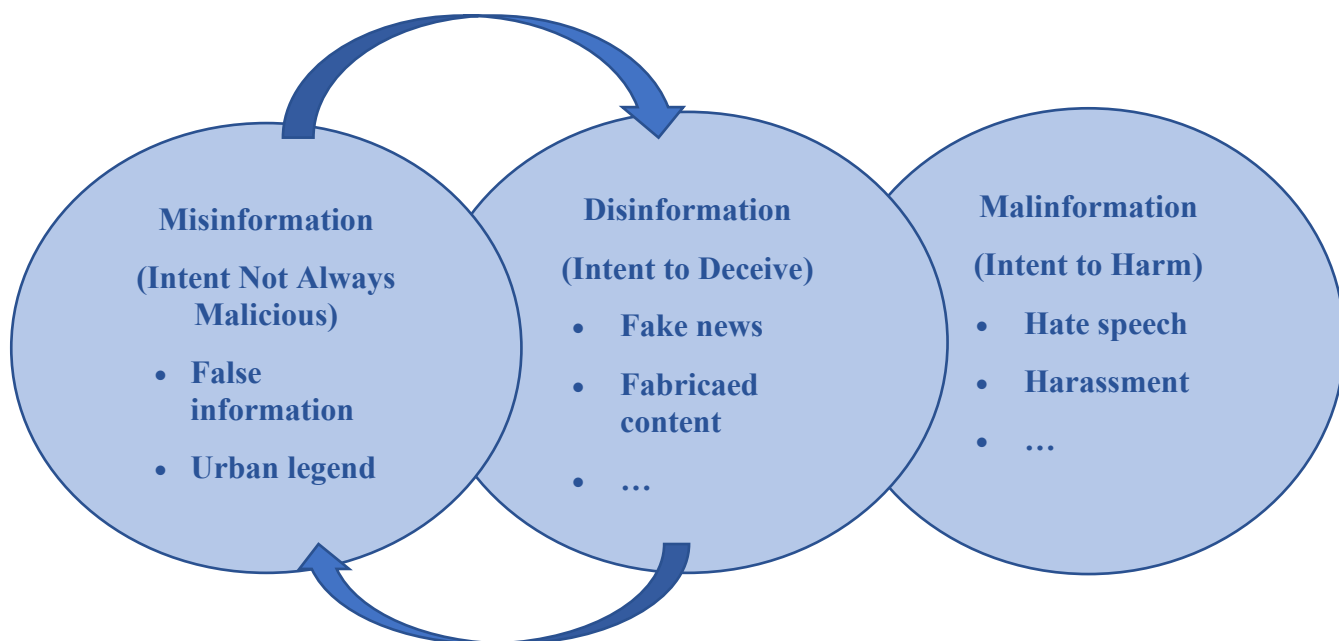


Figure 1. Illustration of relationships among Disinformation, Misinformation, and Malinformation, with examples, showing that Misinformation and Disinformation can be converted mutually. Adapted from “Mining Disinformation and Fake News”, by Shu et al., 2020.

Fake news is not something society has never encountered before. A former Associated Press editor, Edward McKernon (1925, as cited in Rosa, 2019), used the term “fake news” in 1925, to draw attention to the idea that what makes distributing accurate news increasingly difficult is the large number of people, who deliberately disinform the public in order to achieve their own ends. However, the move to the internet has allowed for more widespread and easier dissemination of fake news, posing new challenges. According to Bakir and McStay (2018) the present-day fake news phenomenon is the natural product of many features



stemming from the digital media scene. These include the financial decline of traditional media outlets; the increasingly accelerated news cycle; the quick spread of misinformation and disinformation through content produced by end-users and propagandists; the ever more emotionalized type of online communication; as well as the growing number of people who profit financially from social media platforms and search engine algorithms (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Shao et al. (2017) state that the “massive spread of fake news has been identified as a major global risk and has been alleged to influence elections and threaten democracies” (p. 1). According to Hameleers and van der Meer (2019) these developments pose “a severe threat to democratic decision-making because citizens and politicians can no longer agree on factual information that forms the input for policy making” (p. 228). Clayton et al. (2019) point out that intentionally false content or misleading news stories hinder the possibility of having a well-informed electorate.

Lewandowsky et al. (2012), state that “if a majority believes in something that is factually incorrect, the misinformation may form the basis for political and societal decisions that run counter to a society’s best interest” (p. 107). However, despite the identification of the spread of fake news as a global risk, Shao et al. (2017) consider that its influence on elections and capacity to threaten democracies are hard to prove. But in a scenario of high abstention rates and small margins between parties, even small effects on voters’ behaviors could have a large impact on overall results (Blake, 2018).

According to Alcott and Gentzkow (2017), there are two main motivations for creating fake news content: the first is financial, and the second is ideological. Fake news stories that generate high engagement can generate high advertising revenues, and in these cases the incentive is simply pecuniary. In other situations, fake news producers intend to advance candidates they favor, or hold back those they disapprove of. Shao et al. (2017) corroborate this information, stating that “traffic to fake news sites is easily monetized, through ads, but political motives can be equally or more powerful” (p. 1).

On the receiving end of fake news, there are also multiple motivations that influence an individual’s capacity to assess whether or not there is truth to a statement. Information is more likely to be accepted when it is consistent with other factors people already assume to be true (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). Once a new piece of information, which is in line with

previously recognized material, has been accepted, it becomes very resistant to being countered (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). In fact, this is one of the most difficult problems that fact-checking organizations face. Fact-checking is based on the principle that the end receivers of news “prefer accuracy over content that feels right, reinforces their beliefs, or stimulates affective responses” (Bakir & McStay, 2017, p. 9), which is not necessarily true. Building a coherent story that is compatible with previous assumptions is another factor that leads a piece of information to be more easily accepted (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). Lastly, frequent exposure to the same accounts is also known to increase its validity acceptance (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012).

Regarding how different societal groups react to fake news, Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) state that the audiences sharing the most fake news, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign, identified as conservatives or Republicans. Jee (2020) states that older Republicans were also sharing more fake news when compared with younger or more liberal people. In terms of how men and women interact with fake news, research shows that both genders have the same degree of difficulty in identifying this kind of content (Almenar et al. 2021). Never the less, there are differences when it comes to the topics of fake with which each gender is generally hit (Almenar et al. 2021). According to Almenar et al. (2021) most men tend to receive fake news regarding political issues, whereas women are hit with fake news on different subjects.

Fake news is also part of another concept, “post-truth”, Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year in 2016 (Steinmetz, 2016). Although the word had already appeared at least by the early ‘90s, its usage rose by 2,000% in 2016 according to Oxford’s monitorization of how people are using the English language (Steinmetz, 2016). Post-truth refers to “blatant lies being routine across society, and it means that politicians can lie without condemnation” (Higgins, 2016, para. 3). Higgins (2016) clarifies the difference between post-truth and the cliché that all politicians lie, in that in the latter scenario the public still expects honesty to be the norm. Mathew d’Ancona (2017) argues that with the Brexit<sup>1</sup> referendum in the United Kingdom, the Donald Trump victory in the U.S. elections, and a new political audience, 2016 was the year

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<sup>1</sup> The name by which the campaign for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union became known.

that inaugurated the post-truth era. Truth seems to have lost value, and honesty and accuracy are not a priority in political discourse (d’Ancona, 2017).

There are various mechanisms that enable the viral spread of fake news, and for each one there are different strategies to fight it:

If the problem is mainly driven by cognitive limitations, we need to invest in news literacy education; if social media platforms are fostering the creation of echo chambers, algorithms can be tweaked to broaden exposure to diverse views; and if malicious bots are responsible for many of the falsehoods, we can focus attention on detecting this kind of abuse. (Shao et al., 2017, p. 2)

According to a Pew Research Center survey, 64% of American adults (regardless of partisan affiliation or other demographic traits) agreed that fake news stories lead to misperceptions and confusion about the fundamental facts of current events (Barthel et al., 2016). Many people have difficulty evaluating the quality of information accessed online, often due to the lack of “skills and contextual knowledge required to effectively distinguish between high- and low-quality news content” (Guess, et al., 2020, p. 15536). Many organizations and governments are working to counter this tendency, and the possible consequences of malicious foreign manipulation campaigns, by developing greater digital media literacy among online news consumers (Guess, et al., 2020).

In terms of echo chambers as a mechanism to more easily spread fake news, Törnberg (2018) states that “homogeneous clusters of users with a preference for self-confirmation seem to provide capable green-houses for the seedling of rumors and misinformation” (para. 5). According to Törnberg (2018) misinformation spreads with greater ease when echo chambers exist, meaning that content initially spread among these segregated groups of users tends to have greater reach.

Regarding the impact of social media bots<sup>2</sup>, Vosoughi et al. (2018) contend that these have a determining role in the viral spread of fake news. By using disguised geographic locations and interacting directly (through replies or mentions) with influential users, bots can manipulate social media and deceive users (Vosoughi et al., 2018). According to Vosoughi et

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<sup>2</sup> Shao et al. (2017) define social bots as software-controlled profiles or pages, that can post content and interact with each other and with legitimate users via social connections, just like real people.

al. (2018), social media users are as prone to share fake news content from bots as from humans.

Besides the repeated exposure to fake news enabled by bots, as well as humans, who share this kind of content, research also shows that cognitive processes, such as the confirmation bias<sup>3</sup>, can also make individuals more susceptible to the influence of fake news (Tandoc, 2019). Moravec et al. (2018) state that the dominating factor affecting people's cognition, and capacity to distinguish fake news from verified news, is confirmation bias. People prefer information that is in accordance with their own beliefs (Moravec et al., 2018). Users tend to interact more with news titles that align with their own opinions, and are likely to believe these stories, whereas headlines that challenge their opinions are often ignored, and users are less likely to believe them (Moravec et al., 2018). Another factor contributing to the spread of fake news is its emotional appeal. In 2014, research was conducted on Facebook to study emotion contagion, by optimizing the feeds of nearly 700,000 users (Bakir & McStay, 2018). It was found that when exposed to stimuli with emotional content, people tend to replicate this in their own online behaviors, with the way they engage on social networks (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Fake news tends to generate strong emotions, particularly negative emotions, and headlines are significantly more negative than those in verified news titles (Paschen, 2019). In addition, fake news content also displays considerably more negative emotions, such as disgust and anger, and much fewer positive emotions, such as joy (Paschen, 2019). Fake news can become strongly rooted in the public's minds "especially when it evokes moral outrage" (Konnikova, 2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019, p. 493). The increasingly emotionalized character of contemporary media (Richards, 2007, as cited in Bakir & McStay, 2018) is explained, in part, due to the 'online disinhibition effect'<sup>4</sup> (Suler, 2016), which foresees that "while online, some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person" (Suler, 2004, p. 321).

One of the strategies presently put in practice to curb the effect of fake news are fact-checking organizations. These organizations do not only analyze fake news stories that originate from a financial or ideological motivation. There are situations in which false stories

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<sup>3</sup> "Confirmation bias is a bias against information that challenges one's beliefs and a disregard of opposing information" (Nickerson, 1998, as cited in Moravec et al., 2018, p.5).

<sup>4</sup> One of the main constructs of the cyberpsychology discipline, which is made up of six factors: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority (Suler, 2004).

are disseminated, because humorous content is misinterpreted as fact. In other cases, the information is only partly false, meaning that a quote can be misattributed, an image can be miscaptioned, or information can be consumed out of context, inadvertently leading to misleading conclusions, but it is not necessarily entirely fabricated content. I have adopted the Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) definition because it includes an essential characteristic: intent, be it financial or ideological. Both the creation and dissemination of fake news is done deliberately. The material is not only dubious, but intended to mislead. Other studies that involve the identification, collection and analysis of fake news have resorted to fact-checking organizations such as Snopes, Fact Check, Truth or Fiction, and Lead Stories to compile data, which may include not only verified fake news stories circulating on social media, but also corrections or assessments of public claims made by politicians and candidates that are untrue. While helpful and assuring, fact-checking organizations face challenges. There are over 100 such organizations world-wide, but the vast majority are not-for-profit and face financial problems (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Automated fact-checking solutions are also beginning to be experimented with. Although automation could accelerate the process, building such technology has faced many obstacles. As Graves (2018) points out much of the content covered by human fact-checkers involves a certain judgement and understanding of the context which is unattainable with full automated verification. However, quick advances are being made when verification is focused on simple factual statements, for which there is readily available firm and reliable data (Graves, 2018). For the time being, this technology is already very useful in aiding fact-checkers to identify false claims with their investigation (Graves, 2018). Fake news is largely seen as a social and democratic problem today (Bakir & McStay, 2018), which attacks on three fronts. It facilitates the existence of ill-informed citizens, who then are likely to remain wrongly informed due to echo chambers (Bakir & McStay, 2018), as well as their resistance to corrections (Guess et al., 2019); and who are prone to being emotionally antagonized given the often confrontational or inflammatory nature of much fake news content (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Besides the various examples of fake news discussed, there is also the psychological bias that comes from simple abuse and misuse of the term 'fake news', in order to discredit traditional media outlets putting out verified news stories (van der Linden et al., 2020). Research conducted by van der Linden et al. (2020) in the United States demonstrates that

both liberals and conservatives associate media sources with ‘fake news’, be it left-leaning outlets (such as CNN) or right-leaning ones (such as Fox News). However, there is a greater probability that conservatives connect mainstream news outlets with the term ‘fake news’, leading to lower trust in media and higher belief in conspiracy theories (van der Linden et al., 2020), which can also help explain why conservatives are among the groups that share most fake news (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Even though the peril of fake news can be found across the political spectrum this psychological bias which results in distrust and suspicion toward mainstream media outlets, seems to be more prevalent among conservative audiences (van der Linden et al., 2020).

### **Social Media**

The internet allowed for new media competitors to enter the scene easily and with lower costs. Social media went a step further and allowed content to be disseminated exponentially faster and at an even lower cost. According to the U.S. Congress, the largest internet platform has more than 210,000,000 American users, 160,000,000 of which access the platform daily (For the People Act, 2021). When comparing these numbers to the users of television providers, the difference is striking: the largest cable television provider has 22, 430,000 subscribers; whereas the most watched television broadcast in the U.S., ever, had 118,000,000 spectators (For the People Act, 2021).

Presently, most people use social media as their primary news source. According to a recent Pew Research Center report, 55% of U.S. adults get their news from social media either "often" or "sometimes", which is an 8% increase from 2018 (Suciu, 2019). In terms of political or election news specifically, 18% of American adults say that social media is their primary source for this type of information (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Social media not only helps propagate content, but also brought about the personalization of political information. These platforms can limit which sources users are exposed to, which can lead to a homogeneity bias and a filter bubble, meaning users consume news in individualized and unique information spaces. As Eli Pariser (2011) states, the tendency is for people to receive mainly news that confirms their beliefs, and since past interests determine what users are exposed to in the future, there is less probability to come across unexpected information or sources that can trigger a well-rounded democratic exchange of ideas. Nikolov et al. (2015) point out how easy it is for social media users to find,

follow, and focus almost exclusively on people they tend to agree with, and exclude others, which reinforces the homogeneity bias.

A study by Schmidt et al. (2017) showed that social media users, on Facebook in particular, tend to focus on a limited set of pages, developing strong community structures around news outlets they support and identify with, which has a polarizing effect on public opinion. “Homogenous social networks, in turn, reduce tolerance for alternative views, amplify attitudinal polarization, boost the likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible news and increase closure to new information” (Lazer et al., 2018, The Historical Setting section, para. 2). Similarly, according to Hameleers and van der Meer (2020) “misperceptions primarily persist when tightly intertwined with strongly held beliefs or ideologies, and therefore misinformation is inherently related to political polarization” (p. 228). These are the trends that “have created a context in which fake news can attract a mass audience” (Lazer et al., 2018, The Historical Setting section, para. 2).

In more recent years, however, more studies seem to indicate that the concept of the filter bubble or “technologically deterministic” narratives about online content dissemination are not as strong as previously suggested (Dutton et al., 2017, p. 2). According to Dutton et al. (2017), “internet users are not trapped in a bubble on a single platform” (p.1). Likewise, the concept of echo chambers is also assessed as too deterministic by Dutton et al. (2017). Most people interested in politics pro-actively search for information, and encounter different points of view (Dutton et al., 2017).

According to Barberá (2020) experimental studies on how social media affects political polarization, seem to question the basic premise of the filter bubble argument. Even if most political communication and interactions on social media happen between likeminded people, exposure to different sources and types of information is higher than on other kinds of information vehicles, and social network algorithms “do not have a large impact on the ideological balance of news consumption on Facebook or Google” (Barberá, 2020, p. 35). Barberá (2020) also argues that cross-cutting interactions, meaning information or insights shared by colleagues, family or acquaintances, are more frequent than what is generally believed. Therefore, if social media allows users to increase their access to different opinions and viewpoints, and facilitates interactions among different people, it could be expected that social networks may even contribute to limit the intensity of people’s political beliefs, and

hence diminish the degree of political polarization (Barberá, 2020). Barberá (2020) states “digital technologies are likely to play a limited role in explaining why polarization is on the rise” (p. 44).

In spite of the possibility of social media allowing for cross-cutting interactions more easily, “they also facilitate unfriending<sup>5</sup> mechanisms that may lead to segregated and polarized clusters” (Sasahara, et al., 2021, p. 381). In theory, social networks can be a great example of a tool that enables collective intelligence, yet some of the molds that hold up social media may hinder their role as diversity aggregators (Sasahara, et al., 2021). On social networks, people can customize the content they are exposed to by making use of options such as blocking, unfriending or hiding content shared by certain users (Bode, 2016). According to Sasahara, et al. (2021) polarization can be observed in social media conversations and low diversity is found in online news consumption. Even though unfriending for political reasons is relatively rare (Perrin, 2015), Sasahara, et al. (2021) contend that homophily<sup>6</sup> and social influence<sup>7</sup> can often lead to polarization and segregation. According to Bode (2016) unfriending with a political motivation is more common between social media users who are in fact communicating about politics, with strong ideologies, who are already exposed to a lot of politics on social media, and who observe the greatest political disagreements on their feeds.

Although the increase in citizens’ polarization is not always attributed to social media use, Schmidt et al. (2017) found that it is likely that the factor that most leads to misinformation diffusion is the polarization of users on certain topics, and not the lack of fact-checking. Although the efforts of fact-checkers can sometimes be successful, people tend to reject corrections that go against their initial views (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). According to Bennett and Iyengar (2008, as cited by Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020) when individuals self-select the news they decide to consume, the tendency is to avoid information that goes against their present beliefs, and search for information consistent with those beliefs

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<sup>5</sup> Removing someone from a list of designated friends on a person's social networking website” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

<sup>6</sup> “Homophily, literally ‘love of sameness,’ is a sociological theory that similar individuals will move toward each other and act in a similar manner” (Britannica, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> “The tendency of becoming more similar to somebody as a result of social interaction” (Sasahara, et al., 2021, p. 382).



instead. Often, being able to keep existing beliefs is more important than the need for factual correctness (Taber & Lodge, 2006, as cited by Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

The content social media users are exposed to is not necessarily a well-rounded view of society and politics, chosen and organized by news editors according to certain norms and processes, but rather the reinforcing of their beliefs and preferences based on social media algorithms that are created precisely to distribute more of what each individual is likely to want to see, creating echo chambers (polarized groups). The technologies behind social media, including algorithms, but also automation and big data, can change the scale, range and precision of how information is delivered today (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

The way in which social bots affect the spread of fake news on social media platforms has also been the object of substantial research. Given that social media is designed to prioritize engaging posts over trustworthy posts, these platforms can easily be abused to influence public opinion thanks to the low cost of producing fake news websites and high volumes of social bots (Shao et al., 2017) that will spread and artificially inflate engagement with fake news stories on social media. However, a major MIT study which analyzed Twitter for a 10-year period found that humans, not bots, are mainly responsible for disseminating fake news, and that this kind of content spreads faster and penetrates further than verified information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Social media networks are also irregular, in comparison with traditional media outlets, in that information can be distributed, shared and hyperbolized among users without going through editorial processes or abiding by such norms. As Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) state, there is no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking or providing editorial judgement. In fact, “an individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN or the *New York Times*” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 211). As opposed to traditional news outlets, where the audience knows who is putting out the content, with social media the author is often unidentifiable and therefore difficult to hold accountable.

Social media might even be considered a new form of warfare. Prier (2017) analyzed social media as a tool for obtaining and spreading information, which can ultimately be adopted as a tool of modern warfare. “Social media creates a point of injection for propaganda and has become the nexus of information operations and cyber warfare” (Prier, 2017, p. 52). According to the “2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation”, “around

the world, government actors are using social media to manufacture consensus, automate suppression, and undermine trust in the liberal international order” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019, p. 1). Social media is being used by many authoritarian regimes to produce computational propaganda<sup>8</sup> and use it as a tool of information control, to suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opinions, and drown out opposing opinions (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

According to Bradshaw and Howard (2019), cyber troops<sup>9</sup> make use of various forms of computational propaganda, such as using political bots to amplify hate speech, illegal harvesting of data, and micro-targeting, or deploying armies of ‘trolls’ to harass political protestors or journalists online, shape public opinion, and set political agendas. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) argue that in an environment where there are vast quantities of information, but users’ attention levels are limited, computational propaganda is becoming ever more common. A few sophisticated state actors are even using computational propaganda for foreign influence operations (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Bradshaw and Howard (2019) point out that social media, once seen as a force for freedom and democracy, “has come under increasing scrutiny for its role in amplifying disinformation, inciting violence, and lowering levels of trust in media and democratic institutions” (p.21). Although social media platforms have been deploying new features to combat the spread of fake news, research by Avaaz (2019) reveals that Facebook’s measures have been mostly unsuccessful in the attempt to reduce the reach of disinformation.

One of the difficulties is that social media companies are often evaluated by shareholders according to the number of active users, and monitoring their platforms too strongly may inadvertently substantially reduce that number (Shane, 2017). Although these companies use technical means as well as analysts to detect fake accounts, these profiles are often only removed in response to complaints, due to the magnitude of these sites<sup>10</sup> (Shane, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> Researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute define computational propaganda as targeted political propaganda and the use of bots to distribute political messages on social media (Bolsover & Howard, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Bradshaw and Howard (2019) define cyber troops as government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online.

<sup>10</sup> Facebook has 2.7 billion monthly active users as of the second quarter of 2020 (Statista, 2020). Twitter has 330 million monthly active users, as of the first quarter of 2019 (Statista, 2019).

In December 2016, Facebook announced some of the steps it was taking to address fake news on its network and improve users' experience (Facebook, 2016). Some of those measures included making it easier for a user to report fake news; a program to work with third-party fact checkers that can result in fake stories being identified as "disputed"; and reducing spammers' financial gains (Facebook, 2016). Later, in November 2019, Facebook reiterated that helping protect elections is one of its top priorities, and named some of the changes that had been implemented within the last three years (Facebook, 2019). Rebecca Stimson, Head of UK Public Policy at Facebook, announced that the site had "introduced greater transparency so that people know what they are seeing online and can scrutinize it more effectively; ... built stronger defenses to prevent things like foreign interference; and ... invested in both people and technology to ensure these new policies are effective" (Facebook, 2019, para. 6).

A study by Clayton et al. (2019) assessed the efficiency of potential strategies that could be used by social media to counter fake news, and indicated that when people receive a general warning about misinformation on social media platforms, or when specific stories are accompanied by a "disputed" or "rated false" tag, fake news is identified as less accurate. According to Clayton et al. (2019) these effects do not tend to vary depending on the headlines being congruent with a reader's initial political stances. However, Clayton et al. (2019) found that the "disputed" or "rated false" tags did not affect the way in which unlabeled false or true stories were perceived. Clayton et al. (2019) also found that potential social media users being exposed to a general warning decreased belief in the accuracy of true headlines, suggesting that further research is needed to understand how to counter fake news without compromising belief in true information.

### **2016 U.S. Election**

Since the 2016 U.S. election, concern over the effect of fake news spread via social media has grown. Social media was not a new tool for campaigns in 2016, but it had greater use than in previous elections (Magleby, 2019). Pew Research Center data demonstrates that 44% of Americans adults used social media networking sites as sources of information for the 2016 presidential campaign, with 35% of 18-29 year-olds saying that social media was their most helpful source to learn about the election (Gottfried et al., 2016). In 2016, all the candidates used social media. However, according to Magleby (2019), the one who used

social media most effectively was Donald Trump, and the frequency with which he used Twitter during the campaign and after the election was unprecedented.

Evidence supporting the prevalence, believability and resistance to corrections of fake news during the 2016 U.S. election is growing, and suggests social media plays a strong role in enabling its spread (Guess et al., 2019). During this election campaign “the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories; [and] many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p.212). In fact, during the critical last three months of the election, the top fake news stories about the election garnered more engagement on Facebook than the top election stories originating from 19 major news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *NBC News*, among others (Silverman, 2016). When looking even more closely to the days immediately before and after the U.S. election, fake news was shared nearly as much as real news on Twitter (Collins, 2017). Guess et al. (2019) examined the characteristics which led to sharing fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, and found that conservatives were more likely to share stories originating from fake news domains (which were mostly in favor of Donald Trump), than liberals or moderates. Likewise, Republicans in this study shared more stories from fake news domains than Democrats (Guess et al., 2019). “This is consistent with the pro-Trump slant of fake news articles produced during the 2016 campaign” (Guess et al., 2019, p. 2). According to Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) “the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton” (p.212). Guess et al. (2018) estimated that one in four Americans visited a fake news website from October 7 to November 14, 2016. However, fake news consumption was mostly concentrated among a small part of the population – 60% of visits to fake news sites came from 10% of the people with the most conservative online information intake patterns (Guess et al., 2018).

Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) conclude that for fake news to have had enough of an impact to be able to change the election’s outcome, one, single fake news story would have needed to have as much reach as 36 TV campaign advertisements. Even if it is considered that fake news did not influence the 2016 election, extensive sharing of false information masked as news “does not bode well for the factual foundations on which citizens form opinions” and a country’s democratic stability (Bakir & McStay, 2018, p. 6). However, Bakir and McStay (2018) point out that the level of public concern was so high at the time, that within two days

of the election Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg felt the need to publicly refute the claims about fake news on his social network having influenced the election. Moreover, 11 days after the election, Facebook changed its position, and announced how it planned to combat fake news, including the announcement of the development of new features, such as third-party verification by fact-checkers, technology to detect misinformation, and warning labels on stories identified as false (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) noted that various political commentators agree that Donald Trump would not have won the 2016 election if it were not for the influence of fake news. During the 2016 U.S. election “fake news was both widely shared and heavily tilted in favor of Donald Trump” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). The database that Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) used for their study, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, includes 115 pro-Trump fake stories that were shared on Facebook 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton stories that were shared 7.6 million times. A study on the influence of fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. election shows that while “top influencers spreading traditional center and left leaning news largely influence the activity of Clinton supporters, this causality is reversed for the fake news: the activity of Trump supporters influences the dynamics of the top fake news spreaders” (Bovet & Makse, 2019, p. 1). The results from this study are consistent with the conclusions reached by Guess et al. (2018, 2019), as well as Alcott and Gentzkow’s (2017) findings, in that the fake news stories most shared during the 2016 presidential campaign were done so by people who identified as conservative and Republicans, and these stories tended to favor Donald Trump.

Despite the significant partisan difference in the sharing of fake news, Guess et al. (2019, as cited by Jee, C., 2020) suggest this could also result from the fact that most fake news generated during the 2016 U.S. election campaign tended to be in favor of Donald Trump or against Hillary Clinton, rather than because conservatives have a greater tendency to share fake news. The 2016 U.S. election also turned out to be a time of “unprecedented foreign intervention in American democracy” (Shane, 2017, para. 3). According to Shane (2017) there was a Russian information attack on the U.S. election, which included not only hacking and leaking Democratic e-mails, a range of negative stories about Hillary Clinton published in Russian traditional media outlets, but also experimentation on social media. Facebook and Twitter were turned into “engines of deception and propaganda” (Shane, 2017, para. 5). Russia created thousands of forged Facebook and Twitter accounts, passing them off

as American citizens, that regularly posted and promoted anti-Clinton messages (Shane, 2017). According to Facebook this kind of misuse affected only a small part of its platform (Shane, 2017). Facebook officials estimated that of all the U.S. election related content posted on the site, less than 0.01% originated from cyber warfare like the Russian campaign (Shane, 2017). However, almost a year after the election, Facebook disclosed that a Russian-based operation had bought \$100,000 in advertisements to stimulate political and social discord during the 2016 campaign, and eventually agreed to make the content of 3,000 such ads available to the American congress (Levin, 2017). During the 2016 campaign, Russia sponsored ads spread contentious views on topics such as immigration and race (Levin, 2017).

A declassified report published by the American National Intelligence report states that:

Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order but these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, Key Judgements Section, para. 1)

According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2017), Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a campaign to influence the 2016 U.S. election, with the goal to “undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency” (Key Judgements Section, para. 2). The same report concludes that the Russian government had a clear preference for Donald Trump, and therefore sought to boost his chances of being elected by demeaning Hillary Clinton by “publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, Key Judgements Section, para. 2). Facebook and Twitter both state that they have studied what happened in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in order to avoid foreign interference in future elections (Shane, 2017).

Although it is hard to prove that fake news alone made a difference in the election result, Gunther et al. (2018), conclude in an un-published study, that fake news had a substantial impact on voting decisions of strategic voter groups. According to Gunther et al. (2018), about 4% of President Obama's 2012 voters were persuaded to vote for Donald Trump by believing in fake news stories. Given the small margins by which Donald Trump won some key battleground states, this impact may have been just enough to result in Hillary Clinton's Electoral College loss (Gunther, et al. 2018). Shao et al. (2017) point out that the

states that were more actively affected by bots spreading misinformation during the 2016 U.S. election, were precisely the ones that had more unexpected election results.

Similarly, it is also difficult to establish the degree to which gender biases impacted voters' ultimate decisions. As Sabato et al. (2017) state, voting is as much a rational act, as it is an emotional one. More than 50% of all voters believed that Hillary Clinton was not only qualified for the job at hand, but also had the necessary temperament for the position, while more than 60% said Donald Trump did not have either of these attributes (Sabato, et al., 2017). However, Trump still received about 20% of the latter group's votes (Sabato et al., 2017), which seems to indicate the depth of the emotional and perhaps biased side of the voting decision.

### **Gender in Politics**

Feminist theory has impact on most of society's structures and systems, by questioning traditional beliefs about human nature as well as what it means to be male or female (Tong, 2001). According to Tong (2001), modern feminism, which began in the early 1800s, evolved in three components, suffrage; equal access; and the current one focuses on global equality. This includes access to the possibility of holding high-level political office.

According to Grosz (2010), initially Feminist theory analyzed how certain assumptions discriminated against women and enabled the development and dissemination of ways in which women were harmed or hindered. It arose precisely from the acknowledgement that existing societal models were inadequate to justify women's roles and positions in the past, and that there was room for change (Grosz, 2010).

The evolution of women's participation in politics in western countries is an example of how certain societal models held women back, and prevented women from participating in this realm of society. Randall (1987) asserts that women and politics were once defined as mutually exclusive. Whereas politics were understood as a public activity dominated by men and requiring characteristics traditionally associated with men, women were linked to the family and domestic sphere (Randall, 1987). According to Randall (1987), it took two generations of feminists from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s to begin challenging this perception.

When women's competence became more evident, they simultaneously become more threatening, resulting in multiple forms of backlash, moralism and resentment (Manne, 2018). Women in professional roles face a dilemma between being perceived as competent or likeable. Both attributes are important, but the traditional female roles (being warm and nurturing) are often at odds with qualities necessary for professional success (independence and assertiveness), which means that women are often seen as likeable, but incompetent, or as competent, but unlikeable (Schneider et al., 2010). By not being likeable when seen as highly capable, women are being penalized for being too capable or qualified (Manne, 2018).

Manne (2018) analyzed prejudice against women "aspiring to masculine-coded power positions" (p. 271), as is the case of high-level offices in politics. According to Manne (2018), these situations involve "moral prejudgment in line with widely disavowed" (p. 271) gendered social norms, that still exist. The same behaviors in a man or a woman are viewed differently from the onset, due to a gendered division of labor that makes the very same actions carried out by a woman versus a man seem different (Manne, 2018). Sometimes, even small violations of patriarchal norms or expectations can be "blown out of all proportion, and taken to indicate something damning about a woman's character" (Manne, 2018, p. 54). Manne (2018) states that misogyny does not necessarily have to be directed at all women. It can be aimed more selectively at those who are outspoken and "perceived as insubordinate, negligent, or out of order" (Manne, 2018, p. 50). Women in positions of unprecedented political power are also susceptible to being perceived as rule-breakers who are not to be trusted to respect law and order (Manne, 2018). Therefore, it is natural that victims of misogyny "tend to include women entering positions of power and authority over men" (Manne, 2018, p. 51). On the other hand, people whose behavior is in agreement with gendered expectations are seen as good leaders (Bray et al., 2020). Those who go against these norms are perceived as less qualified (Bray et al., 2020).

Not every woman in politics or in powerful positions is the target of distrust, criticism, or disapproval, but when this does happen it tends to escalate fast (Manne, 2018). According to Manne (2018), when it does begin, "the suspicion and criticism tend to encompass every possible grounds for doubt about her competence, character, and accomplishments" (p. 262). A woman who has done nothing wrong may be the target of moral suspicion simply for disrupting patriarchal standards, which may result in her being seen as "dangerous, suspicious, risky, or deceptive" (Manne, 2018, p. 271). Manne (2018) contends that Hillary



Clinton was seen as not respecting outdated but still strongly entrenched ranks and social hierarchies, where only men could aim for the highest political office.

Contrary to what conventional wisdom might predict, given Donald Trump's sexist and misogynistic behavior and remarks leading up to the election, there was strong support for Trump among white women (Junn, 2017). In fact, Trump garnered the majority (52%) of the white women's vote (Junn, 2017), and over 40% of all women who voted in the 2016 election supported the Republican candidate (Setzler & Yanus, 2018). Research indicates that ambivalent sexism<sup>11</sup> strongly influenced women's vote in 2016 in favor of Trump (Fraser-Yokley, 2018). According to Cassese and Holman (2018), a person's belief in certain gender roles and the legitimacy of the power differences between them, provides insight and explanations into voter results, regardless of their gender per se. Cassese and Holman (2018) state Trump's unequivocal attacks on Hillary Clinton's gender proved to be quite effective in triggering hostility towards someone questioning traditional gender differences.

Parry-Giles (2014) analyzed the news media's representation of Hillary Clinton spanning her time as First Lady, Senator and presidential candidate. He begins by stating that a person is often evaluated according to ideal notions of authentic womanhood or manhood, and transgressions from these gender roles can result in negative feelings towards those who are judged as straying too far from gender ideals (Parry-Giles, 2014). McGinley (2009) agrees and states that "women in leadership positions and doing jobs that are traditionally male are judged much more harshly than men" (p. 713). Even when there is clear proof that a woman is a good leader, she is still at a disadvantage due to the conflict that arises between her leadership qualities and her gender roles (McGinley, 2009). Manne (2018) contends that Clinton is often attributed the moral role of usurper, because "she threatens to take men's historical role" (p. 271). "Women have historically been viewed as 'unnatural' political actors and 'incompetent leaders', culminating in assumptions that they are less 'viable' political contenders" (Parry-Giles, 2014, Authentic Womanhood and Authentic Manhood section, para. 5).

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<sup>11</sup> Ambivalent sexism includes a set of beliefs and codes legitimized by women, as well as men (Cassese & Holman, 2018), which can trigger either hostility when the traditional gender hierarchy or power differences are questioned, or benevolent attitudes resulting from heterosexual intimacy and interdependence (Glick & Fiske, 2001, as cited in Gaunt, 2013).

Falk (2010) corroborates this same idea, and states that “resistance to women’s full political integration has grown out of a misconception that women are novel and unnatural in the political sphere” (p. 3). Falk (2010) concludes that this is a consequence of the lack of extensive awareness about many women who have led political lives in the past. The absence of this knowledge has forbidden women to “stand on the shoulders of predecessors” (Falk, 2010, p.3). According to Falk (2010), the way traditional media cover (and sometimes ignore) women candidates also contributes to the perception that they are new and do not belong in politics. Gender expectations and consequences are still visible today. Bray et al. (2020) state that women are perceived less favorably than men when competing for leadership positions. McGinley (2009) argues that “women’s identities as aspiring political leaders continue to be problematic and require women to negotiate a double bind: if they are too feminine, they are deemed incompetent. If they are too masculine, they are considered not likeable” (p. 710). According to Heldman (2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019, p. 494), “framing women as frail or sick is one way that women candidates are portrayed as not up to the task of leading.” Parry-Giles (2014) argues that the media helps reinforce gender boundaries through their reliance on traditional definitions of authentic womanhood and manhood in their judgments of political authenticity. Taking the case of Hillary Clinton as an example, Parry-Giles (2014) contends that although she was often celebrated for her progressive gender performances, most of the time she was criticized for her “violation of tradition, undermining a sense of her authentic womanhood” (Parry-Giles, 2014, Authentic Womanhood and Authentic Manhood section, para. 5).

An analysis of the 2008 U.S. election campaign revealed that “women face unique constraints when trying to be successful in traditionally masculine domains” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 363). Schneider et al. (2010) argue that “an assertive, powerful female whose characteristics and behavior violate expectations created by the core of female stereotype threatens societal conventions of how women ought to behave and results in backlash” (p. 363). A 2010 study found that when participants saw female politicians as power-seeking, they were also seen as being unsupportive and uncaring, which did not happen with power-seeking male politicians, who, instead, were seen as being more assertive and stronger (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Interestingly, participant gender had no influence on any of this study’s outcomes (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). The authors concluded that a power-seeking

image or having expressed power-seeking intent can bias both male and female voters against female politicians (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

Although all political candidates are subject to attack from supporters of their opponents, women running for high profile offices appear to face targeted gender attacks (Schneider et al., 2010). When studying the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Schneider et al. (2010) argue that the gendered attacks Hillary Clinton faced were a reflection of the likeability vs. competence issue, and she was consistently portrayed as competent, but unlikeable. Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, on the other hand, was frequently seen as likeable, but incompetent (Schneider, et al. 2010). Some of the examples of gendered messages used to attack Hillary Clinton, identified by Schneider et al. (2010), include derogatory remarks about her physical appearance<sup>12</sup>, sexually offensive insinuations<sup>13</sup>, and belittling observations or comparisons to what is generally seen as the traditional female role within a heterosexual couple's relationship or family<sup>14</sup>. Media coverage with gender biases noticeably hinders women in politics, "causing them to lose support and be seen as less effective" (Bates, 2015, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019, p. 492).

According to research conducted by Paul and Smith (2008), who surveyed voters in Ohio prior to the 2008 election, "the presence of a woman candidate opponent for president may aid the [male] competition" (2008, p. 466). In this survey, the five likely presidential candidates assessed were John McCain, John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, Elizabeth Dole, and Hillary Clinton. Each of the men did better against a female nominee, as opposed to a male one (Paul & Smith, 2008). Voters were also a lot more likely to defect from a female nominee from their own party, to a male nominee from the opposing party, compared with the exact opposite situation (Paul & Smith, 2008).

Cassino (2018) concluded that men who find that they are no longer fulfilling a major component of their gender identity, or perceive that their masculinity is under threat, are likely to change their political behavior. The 2016 American National Election Pilot Study

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<sup>12</sup> "In the window of a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant was the announcement of the 'Hillary Special' which consisted of '2 fat thighs with 2 small breasts and a left wing'" (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 364).

<sup>13</sup> A "poster asks the question, 'What is Hillary?' Beneath the question is a square box with an inverted triangle in the top half, a small square over the tip of the triangle, with letters across the square, 'C.U.N.T.'" (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 364).

<sup>14</sup> "Neil Cavuto of Fox News' *Your World*, declared with a shrill voice that 'Men won't vote for Hillary Clinton because she reminds them of their nagging wives'" (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 365).

showed that 40% of Republican men felt they faced “a great deal” or “a lot” of discrimination because of their gender (Cassino, 2018). This belief has led these men to fight back, often through politics, and in 2016 the potential economic and social threats pushed American men against Hillary Clinton (Cassino, 2018).

Both state and national-level experiments conducted in the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. election led to the conclusion that men’s potential individual threat of losing income relative to their wives, and the overall perceived societal threat from institutions, like the media, being biased against men and in favor of women, led men to support Donald Trump to the detriment of Hillary Clinton (Cassino, 2018). Cassino (2018) goes further and infers that an ever more conservative Republican Party isn’t a coincidence, but rather, at least in part, a reaction to changing gender norms, which is likely to continue.

By 2016, Hillary Clinton had acquired vast political experience, and therefore gender-based biases questioning her qualifications could hypothetically no longer be an issue. But studies by psychologist Madeline Heilman and L.A. Rudman show that when “women are not doubted as viable competitors for male-dominated roles, they are widely disliked and subject to social punishment and rejection” (Manne, 2008, p. 252). Rudman offers the following explanation: people are motivated to maintain gender hierarchies, by applying social penalties to women who compete for masculine-coded positions (Manne, 2008). Rudman et al. (2012) showed that this effect is mediated by what is known as the “dominance penalty,” where women in such positions, who are competent, confident, and assertive, are perceived as extreme in masculine-coded traits like being arrogant and aggressive (Rudman et al., 2012). Therefore, “women competing with men for male-dominated roles are doubly likely to be punished and rejected” (Manne, 2008, p. 254). Hayes and Lawless (2016), on the other hand, state that although many political scientists argue that female candidates face a more difficult campaign environment than men do, “the twenty-first-century political scenario has become more equalitarian, and therefore gender has a more insignificant role, which does not mean sexism and discrimination are altogether absent” (Hayes & Lawless, 2016, p. 6).

According to a study titled “A Paradox in Public Attitudes. Men or Women: Who’s the Better Leader?”, Americans believe women have the right characteristics to be political leaders (Taylor et al., 2008). In this study, the public rated women as superior to men in various characteristics highly valued in leaders, such as: honesty, intelligence, decisiveness,

being compassionate, outgoing, and creative (Taylor et al. 2008). However, a mere 6% of these respondents said that, overall, women make better political leaders than men, compared to 21% who said men make better leaders (Taylor et al., 2008). Taylor et al. (2008) conclude the fact that the majority of respondents (69%) said that women and men make equally good political leaders is a sign of the deep change occurring in what is seen as women's role in society. However, when asked what could explain the slow movement towards gender parity in top political positions, 51% of the respondents said a major reason is that Americans simply are not ready to elect a woman to high office; 43% said that women who are active in politics are held back by men, and 38% said a major reason is that women are discriminated against in all areas of society, politics included (Taylor et al., 2008).

The findings of these two surveys seem to offer conflicting results about the public's attitudes towards gender and leadership. On the one hand, respondents express the belief that gender discrimination against women and resistance to change are the main barriers preventing women from reaching high political office (Taylor et al., 2008). On the other hand, respondents gave women better classifications than men on most of the leadership traits asked about (Taylor et al., 2008). The study goes further and tries to evaluate the existence of a hidden gender bias against women in the voters' assessment, but there is no evidence that such a bias exists (Taylor et al., 2008). Taylor et al. (2008) advance a couple of explanations for this apparent paradox. It could be that women's difficulties reaching top leadership positions are not a product of the public's gender stereotypes, but rather the result of the obstacles encountered on the way (Taylor et al., 2008). A few studies show that "women do about as well as men once they actually run for office, but that many fewer women choose to run in the first place" (Taylor et al. 2008, p. 7). Another possibility is that "party leaders are reluctant to seek women candidates" (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 7).

According to Butler and Preece (2016) gender differences in the political process may be seen as early as the recruitment within a candidates' own party. Women are often underrepresented on electoral ballots due to gender disparities in deciding who is recruited by political party elites (Butler & Preece, 2016). However, recent studies suggest that even in situations where women and men are recruited at similar rates, women seem to be less interested in running for office (Butler & Preece, 2016). According to Butler and Preece (2016), women often expect that party leaders will give them less strategic and financial support than a male candidate. So even when women candidates are recruited, they don't trust

that party elites will use their political and social capital to support them, which may sometimes explain women's lack of response to political recruitment opportunities (Butler & Preece, 2016).

Hayes and Lawless (2016) argue there is a difference between examples of sexist behavior and systematic gender bias in political campaigns, and go on to conclude that these two realities of political life can exist simultaneously, meaning: although sexism sometimes happens, women do not face a systematically biased campaign atmosphere. According to Horowitz, Igielnik, and Parker (2018), in the United States, Republicans and Democrats have very different views on the topic of gender and representation in high political offices. While 64% of Democrats agree that gender discrimination is one of the main reasons why women are underrepresented in politics, only 30% of Republicans think the same (Horowitz et al., 2018). Women are also more doubtful that voters are ready to elect female candidates now, than they were in 2014: in 2018 57% of women believed that voters not being ready to elect female leaders was one of the main reasons why women were underrepresented in high political offices, compared to 41% in 2014 (Horowitz et al., 2018).

### **Gender Employed in Fake News**

Research on the use of gender bias in fake news is beginning to surface, although it is still scarce. According to a study by Heldman (2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019), once female candidates are seen as competitive, they tend to be villainized. Stabile et al. (2019) argue that fake news “has proven to be an effective mechanism of the villainization” (p. 495). In a study titled “Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: Gendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics”, Stabile et al. (2019) analyze two<sup>15</sup> widely shared fake news stories during the 2016 election campaign to evaluate how gender biases in the treatment of candidates may be not only present, but intensified by fake news. According to Stabile et al. (2019), fake news stories draw on existing gender biases, which already affect women negatively in traditional news outlets, to validate stereotypes about women in politics, and “can be operationalized to influence the electorate” (p. 492).

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<sup>15</sup> The two fake news stories analyzed were: first, what became known as “Pizzagate”, which alleged that Clinton was running a child sex trafficking organization from a basement in Washington, D.C.; and second, the “The Hillary Health Scare”, which claimed that Clinton had debilitating health issues and therefore was not fit for office (Stabile et al., 2019). According to Stabile et al. (2019), the first one shows Clinton violating traditional gender norms of nurturing and children protecting women, whereas the second one plays on the traditional characterization of women lacking the physical makeup to be in a leadership position.

Oates et al. (2019) consider that “female candidates are frequently marginalized and attacked on character and identity issues that are not raised for their male counterparts” (p.1) on social media, which goes along with the way in which female candidates are portrayed in traditional media. Analyzing women candidates in the U.S. 2020 primaries, Oates et al. (2019) conclude that female candidates have trouble getting serious attention on social media to begin with, and when they do, they are often attacked on issues regarding their personality, which were not brought up for the male candidates. Oates et al. (2019) suggest more research is needed, but it is possible to see patterns emerge from the research available so far that point to the “existence of bias against female candidates in the online space.”

In 2019, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)<sup>16</sup> awarded 12 grants to study Facebook’s impact on democracy worldwide. In these projects, Facebook data will be used by investigators to better understand the impact of social media on politics and society, with a focus on the dissemination of fake news. Although there is concern about how search engines and algorithms exhibit gender biases (Noble, 2018), the role of gender is not addressed in any of the projects being funded by SSRC.

There seems to be insufficient research to understand how fake news exploits gender issues to influence elections, which demonstrates the need to research the weaponization of fake news to target female candidates, in particular, by exploiting gender stereotypes.

## **Conclusion**

The reviewed body of literature for this study defines the concept of fake news and analyzes its impact and prevalence. It also examines social media as one of the main means by which fake news is disseminated and has the capacity to reach and influence platform users, without ever having been subjected to editorial norms or processes. Concern over these issues has grown, especially since the 2016 U.S. election, which has been the object of plenty of research in terms of how fake news and social media can influence voters and ultimately impact democratic results. This election has also been studied in terms of analyzing gender norms in politics, and how gender biases can have an impact on the portrayal of female candidates in the media. Hillary Clinton’s depiction in the media, since the onset of her public

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<sup>16</sup> The SSRC is an independent, international nonprofit led by Alondra Nelson, a Columbia University Professor of Sociology and inaugural Dean of Social Science for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

life and not just the 2016 election, has also been widely used to analyze issues of gender in politics. Even though most literature on this topic finds that women in politics face a more difficult campaign atmosphere than men do, some investigators find that in today's political scenario gender does not play such a significant role.

The existing literature demonstrates that there is wide concern over the impact of fake news and social media in today's democracies. Similarly, there is extensive research on the impact of gender biases on how female candidates are portrayed in the media. Although information that analyzes these two concepts together has begun to surface, there still seems to be a gap in terms of understanding how gender is employed in fake news, even if not explicitly, against female candidates.



## Method

The scientific paradigm for my dissertation is interpretivism, more specifically, falling under a social constructivist theory. Social constructivism anticipates that people develop subjective meanings from their experiences, which lead the researcher to look for the complexity of views (Creswell, 2009). These subjective meanings are shaped by individuals' interactions with others and through historical and social norms (Creswell, 2009). According to this world view, the researcher's goal is to interpret the meanings others have of the world, and inductively develop a theory (Creswell, 2009).

This approach was selected given that it is more appropriate when intending to study complex and multifaceted social processes, using mostly qualitative methods (OER Services, n.d.), and an inductive logic, as opposed to positivism which resorts to quantitative methods to analyze more objective, cause-effect realities, using a deductive approach (Business Research Methodology, n.d.). Interpretivism stems from the notion that social reality is not objective, "but is rather shaped by human experiences and social contexts (OER Services, n.d.), making it the best suited logic to understand and analyze something as dynamic as fake news, its interpretations, readings and potential consequences.

My research will focus on identifying and understanding fake news mechanisms, and analyzing how gender is also being used to mold this kind of content, and potentially influence its consumers. Given the subjective nature of the content being analyzed, and the almost certain influence of values and personal characteristics, such as political views, on the impact the content may have on its consumers, the social constructivist approach seemed like the most appropriate. Through an inductive qualitative method, as is traditional with the social constructivist theory, I will be able to make interpretations and generate meaning from the data collected, by analyzing a compilation of fake news stories shared during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign.

The qualitative content analysis was developed in the 1920s, in the United States, with the goal of focusing on systematic analyses of large quantities of data arising from the mass media, which was growing at the time (Flick, Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004). Until then, only quantitative procedures were used for this kind of research, which led to criticism because, among other reasons, this procedure was limited to textual content, and left out other underlying meanings (Flick et al., 2004). A qualitative content analysis, on the other hand,

allows the researcher to conduct a broad contextual study that collects additional material beyond the text, including information about the subject, socio-cultural background, or the target audience (Flick et al., 2004). Steve Stemler (2001) defines content analysis as “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (p. 1). As stated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a qualitative content analysis can have three different approaches (conventional, directed, or summative), and one of the main differences among the three are the coding structures. In this case, the approach will be summative, because the analysis involves counting and comparing content, which will then allow for an interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Application**

Content analysis can be helpful in examining trends in documents, and it can also provide a practical basis to detect patterns in public opinion (Stemler, 2001). These are two of the very goals of this research: to observe potential gender-related patterns in fake news stories, as well as possibly identify gender biases in the way these stories impact or help shape public opinion. The goal is not to analyze each story individually, but rather the patterns that arise from an over-arching examination of the complete sample. This method is also especially appropriate for this study, given that its goal is precisely the “systematic examination of communication material” (Flick et al., 2004, p. 266) to “explore underlying meanings of messages” (Wildemuth, 2017, p 319). Fake news stories will be the communication material examined, in order to understand the underlying use of gender in this type of media message.

### **The Researcher’s Role**

Considering the literature review conducted for this study, my research may be biased towards verifying the existence of gender prejudice in fake news, and possibly overemphasize its effect on public opinion. However, the goal of this study is not to make any claims about the influence of gendered attacks in fake news stories, but to assess the presence and content of such attacks. Conferences I have attended on the issue of gender equality, and other relevant readings done in the area of gender and media show that this situation has been well documented in other kinds of mass media, especially in the political arena, and therefore I expect the same is likely to be true in fake news spread on social media.

## **Sampling Strategy**

The material being examined is a sample of “purposively selected texts” (Wildemuth, 2017, p. 319), as is customary with this method. Initially, the study intended to focus on identifying and coding the top 100 most spread fake news stories, during the 2016 U.S. election, into identified categories of similar meanings or values. However, after various search attempts, and contacts with organizations that potentially could compile this information, finding this data proved difficult, and therefore the fake news stories to be analyzed were collected from Snopes, the oldest and largest independent fact-checking site in the United States.

Snopes fact-checks a wide variety of different kinds of content, from the analysis of potentially digitally manipulated images, to clarifying the text of a Congressional bill, and therefore uses different methods for different fact-checking processes (Snopes, 2019b). Overall, each topic is attributed to a member of the Snopes editorial staff, who does the initial research and works on the first draft of the fact check (Snopes, 2019b). When possible, research begins with an attempt to contact the initial source, as well as individual people or organization who are likely to have knowledge or expertise on the topic, and a search for news articles, peer-reviewed scientific journal articles, government agency statistic sources, among other printed information relevant for the topic (Snopes, 2019b).

The items selected by Snopes com to analyze and fact-check are those that their greatest number of readers are asking or searching about, at any particular moment, regardless of partisan issues (Snopes, 2019a). In order to determine the level of reader interest, Snopes (2019a) uses numbers resulting from the terms entered in its search engine, e-mail submissions, interactions with their social media accounts, as well as trending topics on Google and social media networks.

After compiling all the 2016 stories analyzed by Snopes that referred to Hillary Clinton and/or Donald Trump, only those that were categorized as “false”, were considered. The stories that were considered misattributed, miscaptioned, a mixture of true and false information, taken out of context, unproven, misinterpreted humor, or only mostly false were not analyzed. There are 151 stories that fit these criteria, 75 focused on Hillary Clinton, and 76 related to Donald Trump. It was intended that the 100 stories which sparked the most social media engagement would be contemplated for the in-depth analysis described ahead.

However, I was unable to access the exact numbers of social media engagement for each of these stories. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, it was decided that if the stories were chosen and analyzed by Snopes, this means that they gained enough prominence, relevance and traction, making their respective fact-checking imperative.

The sample described above includes various formats of fake news. Content published in fake news sites that tries to mimic traditional media outlets' online presence were included, as were social media posts originally put out by accounts posing as media outlets, or screenshots of images that seem to include the framing and logo of traditional, verified media. There are also examples of meme-like images shared on social media, that often stem from content originally put out in a different manner. Because of the dynamic nature of fake news, it is difficult to pinpoint the various formats a particular piece of fake news may have had, from initial production to end consumer. Fake news can often end up being condensed into a meme, or an image with limited and simplistic text overlay, given that it is easily spread on social media, for quick and effortless intake. Such an image, with what would be newsworthy political information, may not initially conform to the strictest definition of fake news (such as that put forth by Lazer et al. (2018)), due to its simplistic format. However, as traditional media outlets adapt to social media platforms, they also often put out content that could, at first, resemble a meme, in terms of its format. This is especially true for Instagram, where users are mostly drawn to images and less to the accompanying text. Therefore, if the end user is consuming the content as news, will take it in as news, and will pass it along to others as news, for the purpose of this study, it is considered fake news.

Researching fake news proved to be challenging in that there are no formal compilations or databases of fake news stories. The content is vast, it spreads quickly, and it is often difficult to identify potentially important contiguous information such as the origin of the stories, volume of shares, audience reach, as well as type of accompanying hashtags, comments, or reactions provoked. When studying how social media can pose a disadvantage for women specifically, Oates et al. (2019) stated that “the volume and pace of information flow online make it difficult to track the differentiated treatment for female candidates on social media in real time” (p. 1). In this case, Oates et al. (2019) used artificial intelligence together with traditional political communication theory, in order to compile data.

Another approach was the one taken by Stabile et al. (2019), where a dataset of news articles and tweets published during the months surrounding the 2016 election were chosen. Stabile et al. (2019) chose two negative fake news stories about Hillary Clinton (“Pizzagate”<sup>17</sup> and Clinton’s health issues), a verified news story about Donald Trump (“Pussygate”<sup>18</sup>), and a corresponding collection of tweets for each story. Stabile et al. (2019) identified and counted keywords typifying the stories and then compared the data among the three stories. The tweets were “collected through a keyword-based crawling technique—where identified key terms were tracked and tweets filtered—using a method of Twitter Streaming API” (Application Programming Interface) (Stabile, et al., 2019, p. 495).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to examine the fake news stories, titles were transcribed fully, while the rest of the story remained available in the respective Snopes link. Although an analysis of the complete write out of the story could be useful, the additional value created may not justify the additional time required, as Wildemuth (2017) indicates.

One main dependent variable will be analyzed in this study: the tone and focus of fake news stories. It will be broken up into various units of observation. In a qualitative content analysis, individual themes or issues relevant to the research are usually used as the units of observation (Wildemuth, 2017). These units will be designated according to a deductive approach, meaning that the codes or categories arise from previous relevant research and literature (Choo & Lee, 2014). In this case, coding will focus on allocating each individual story to a different category:

- Incompetent behavior;
- Physically unfit/unhealthy;
- Against traditional gender/family roles or religious values;
- Untrustworthy;
- Illegal conduct;
- Inappropriate sexualized behavior; and

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<sup>17</sup> A fake news story circulated about Hillary Clinton operating a child sex ring in tunnels under the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington, DC, circulated in the months leading up to the 2016 election (Stabile et al., 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Real news story about Donald Trump triggered by the release of an Access Hollywood tape in which Trump is heard saying of women that you can do anything with them, including, “Grab ‘em by the pussy” (Stabile et al., 2019).

- Racially/culturally offensive.

These categories arose from the research conducted for the literature review, which shows that there is significant prejudice against women seeking power positions traditionally attributed to or occupied by men (Manne, 2018). The same actions carried out by men or women are interpreted differently (Manne, 2018), and the study of this kind of behavior and reactions led to the designation of these categories. Manne (2018) finds that women in positions of extraordinary political power are perceived as rule-breakers, who should not be trusted with respecting law and order. This finding led to the establishment of the untrustworthy and illegal conduct categories. Research also shows that a person is often judged according to ideal concepts of true womanhood or manhood, and transgressions from these gender roles often give rise to negative reactions towards those who wander too far from gender archetypes (Parry-Giles, 2014). This information led to the against traditional gender/family roles or religious values category.

Parry-Giles (2014) also suggests that women are seen as unnatural and incompetent political leaders. McGinley (2009) agrees, and states that if women show more traits traditionally associated with a feminine side, like being warm and nurturing, they are seen as incompetent. These studies brought about the incompetent category. Finally, research shows that portraying women as fragile and sick is another way female candidate are depicted as not being apt for leadership positions (Heldman et al., 2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019). This notion led to the creation of the physically unfit/unhealthy category. Fake news stories that reflected simply bi-partisan issues, endorsements, or that focused on the behavior of the candidates' supporters, rather than their own, were left out. The coding process was also used to produce a description of the fake news stories, according to source, month published, and estimated number of people reached, when available.

During this careful examination and interpretation, a protocol was used to help condense the raw data into categories and themes. My notes included information on the primary material, the fake news stories, as well as on the original source of the fake news content. Although the sources are unreliable due to the very nature of fake news, identifying the source in my notes was also helpful in trying to understand the potential intended outcome of the fake news story being produced.

After transcribing, reading and observing all the data, the more detailed analysis process began with support from the coding process that allowed for the material to be organized into the above listed categories, and develop general meaning from the data (Creswell, 2009). Although predetermined codes had already been established, more codes emerged during the data analysis.

In order to deliver the study's results, including a detailed discussion of several topics, the description will be represented as a qualitative narrative, that will include quotes from fake news stories, as well as images, when relevant. The titles of fake news stories will be presented in comparison tables, according to the established categories, which can be consulted in Appendix A. The table includes not only the title of the story, but also the link to the *Snopes* website where more information about each fact-checking story can be accessed, as well as which of the two presidential candidates the story is about, and is color-coordinated according to the category into which it fell. After all fake news stories had been attributed to one of the candidates, and allocated to a certain category, I began interpreting the data based on the meanings that arose. Based on the data collected and organized according to the established method, and the resulting meanings, I then demonstrated what has been learned.

### **Validating Findings**

In order to validate findings, I will provide several perspectives on each theme, and be sure to include existing discrepant information that may run against the very same themes, as suggested by Creswell (2009). The accuracy was also enhanced through peer examination. A second coder was asked to code and categorize a subset of the stories to determine intercoder reliability. After the initial attempt, we achieved 67 percent agreement on codes, so we returned to the codes and the dataset, and coded another subset of stories, at which point intercoder agreement of 93 percent was achieved.

## Data Analysis

### Results

As previously mentioned, a search for all fake news stories published during 2016, analyzed and categorized as “false” by Snopes, and that referred to one of the U.S. presidential candidates, resulted in a sample of 151 fake news stories. The number of fake news stories for each candidate was very similar: 75 made reference to Hillary Clinton, and 76 to Donald Trump, however the differences began to arise even before these stories were assigned to the different pre-determined categories.

Of the 151 stories, 78 fit the coding categories for one candidate or another. The other 73 stories (48%), were mostly about issues that are simply partisan divergences and have no evident gender connotation; or stories were about the behavior of candidates’ supporters rather than the candidates themselves, or about political endorsements. Among the 78 fake news stories that referred to the two main candidates and fit the seven pre-established categories, there were twice as many about Hillary Clinton (53 in total) as there were about Donald Trump (25 in total). Considering that in the initial breakdown of fake news stories, the number for each candidate is quite even, (75 stories about Hillary Clinton and 76 about Donald Trump), it is also interesting to note that the majority of fake news stories associated with Donald Trump were actually about his supporters and endorsements, or bipartisan issues that could potentially have affected any Republican candidate, regardless of gender or personal attributes, rather than about the candidate himself.

When looking at the breakup of the various stories according to the pre-established categories, in five of the seven groupings, there were considerably more fake news stories about Clinton than about Trump, as shown in Table 1. In one category – inappropriate sexualized behavior – the number of stories about each candidate was equal.

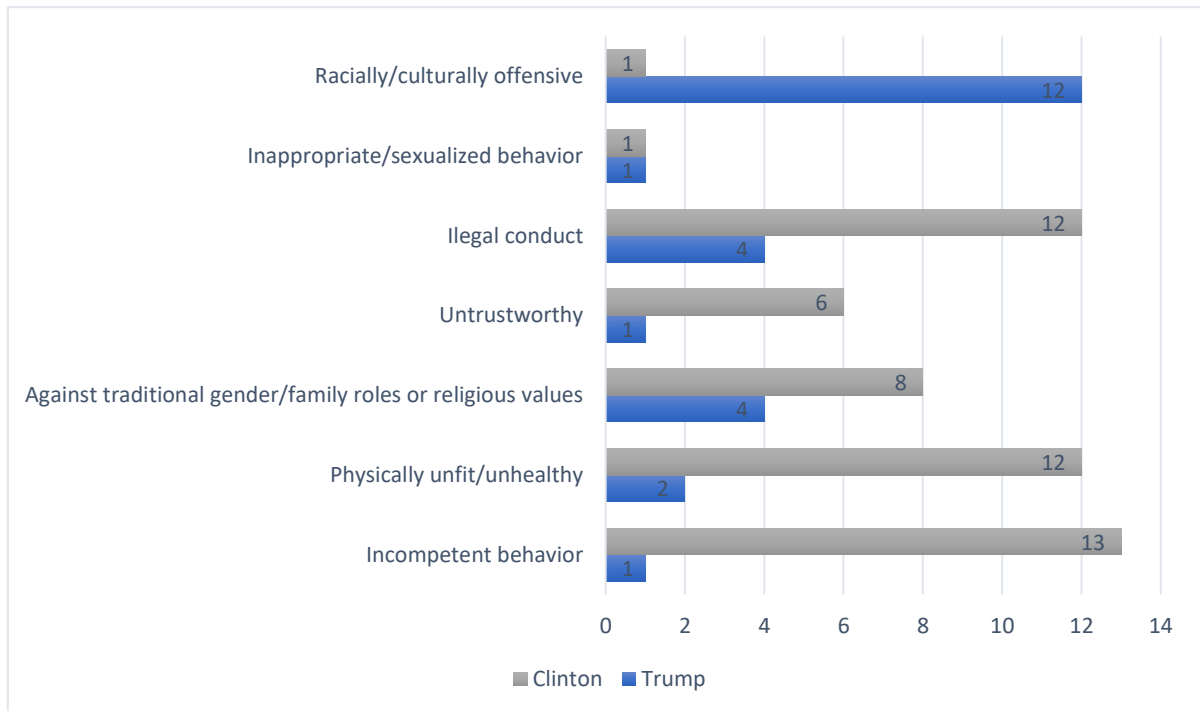
The category that generated the most results was illegal conduct, and stories in this category targeted Clinton 12 times, while Trump was targeted four times, totaling 16 stories. The categories to which the next greatest number of fake news stories were attributed were incompetent behavior and physically unfit/unhealthy, each adding up to 14 stories. In the first case, Clinton was the target of 13 of the 14 stories. In the latter category, Clinton was the subject of 12 of these stories. There were 12 stories associated with the category against traditional family/gender roles or religious values, of which eight pointed at Clinton, and four



at Trump. Only seven stories fit under the untrustworthy category, but a clear majority (six out of seven) referred to this character trait in Clinton.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of fake news stories according to pre-established coding categories.*



### **Incompetent behavior**

One of the categories which the most fake news stories fell under was incompetent behavior, 93% of which targeted Hillary Clinton. Although she had a strong track record of experience and competence in high-level political roles, from her time as First Lady, to Senator, and later Secretary of State, fake news stories using this attack targeted Clinton more. Although in traditional media, Clinton is often depicted as competent, albeit unlikeable (Schneider et al., 2010), this did not happen in the most shared fake news stories in 2016. Donald Trump, on the other hand, with no previous experience in politics, and whose

companies had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy<sup>19</sup> protection several times before, was only targeted once with a fake news story around incompetent behavior.

Some of these stories questioned Clinton's competence in positions she held previously, alluding to a lack of success or accomplishments in her career, which is exemplified by the following items.



Figure 2. Hillary Clinton fake news meme circulated on Facebook. Adapted from *Hillary Clinton Has Run No Positive Political Ads?* by D. Evon, 2016l. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clintons-positive-political-ads/>

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<sup>19</sup> A chapter 11 debtor (normally a corporation or partnerships) usually proposes a plan of reorganization to keep its business open and pay creditors over time (United States Courts, n.d.).

This fake news story circulated on social media in 2016, in the form of a meme which claimed that Clinton's campaign was entirely invested in producing negative information about her opponent, Donald Trump, while not being able to list a single accomplishment of her own, implying that none existed.

Another fake news story alluding to Clinton's alleged incompetence began circulating after the final presidential debate in October 2016, claiming that she revealed the existence of a four-minute response window for an American president to launch nuclear weapons. This narrative began circulating on Twitter, often in the form of a meme:

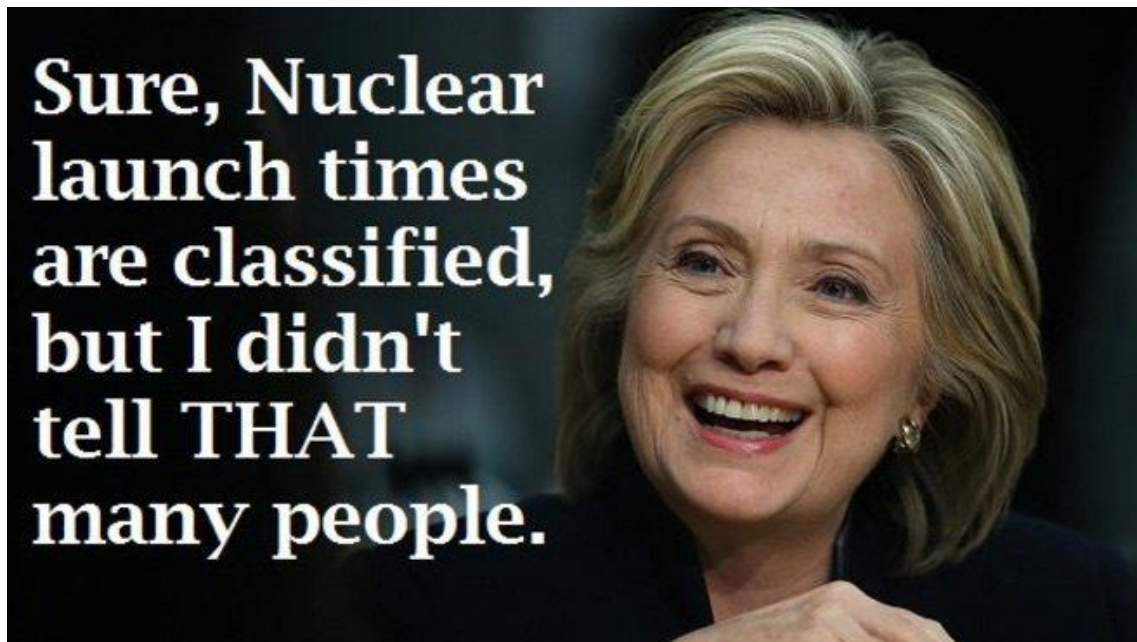


Figure 3. Hillary Clinton fake news meme circulated on Twitter. Adapted from *Did Hillary Clinton Leak a Classified 'Four-Minute' Nuclear Response Window?* by K. Lacapria, 2016c. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/clinton-four-minute-nuclear/>

As pointed out by the Snopes analysis of this story, the majority of people saying that Clinton had disclosed classified information cited no specific information to substantiate that claim. If the information were classified, obtaining such confirmation would be difficult (Lacapria, 2016c).

Many other fake news stories that fell under this category referred to her apparent need to have additional assistance during the presidential campaign debates, of which the following text circulated online is an example:

One podium seems to have been outfitted with a special light that the other didn't have and it appears that the light was functioning as a teleprompter to give Mrs. Clinton answers that she couldn't keep in her addled old brain. (Evon, 2016k, para. 6)

The only story about Donald Trump that fit this category tried to portray him as academically incompetent, by making reference to a forged Harvard rejection letter (Evon, 2016g). The fabricated image of a scanned rejection letter from 1964 (reproduce in Appendix B) had already circulated earlier, but became more prominent in May 2016, when the Harvard Republican Club announced that it was not going to endorse Trump (Evon, 2016g).

### **Physically unfit/unhealthy**

Another 14 stories fell into the physically unfit/unhealthy category. Eighty-six percent of the fake news stories in this category targeted Hillary Clinton. In 2016 only two fake news stories questioning Donald Trump's health received enough attention to be analyzed by Snopes, whereas for Hillary Clinton, 12 stories were analyzed.

Although Trump, at age 70, was, at the time, the oldest man to ever assume the American presidency, there were many fewer stories about his health status. The two analyzed by Snopes referred to a brain tumor and a heart attack. In August 2016, entertainment website *NTMY* published a false story reporting that Donald Trump had dropped out of the election due to a brain tumor that was discovered during a colonoscopy (Evon, 2016i). This could be an example of misinformation (where there is no intent to harm) becoming disinformation, given that *NTMY* states that it publishes both political news and satire news (Evon, 2016i).

The various stories analyzed in this category for Hillary Clinton, a slightly younger woman, statistically expected to live longer and survive illness, included claims of vascular dementia, Parkinson's disease, the use of a defibrillator, seizures, and incontinence. Stories calling the candidates' health into question sometimes derived from digitally manipulated images, video clips, or specific campaign pictures wrongly interpreted as proof of a health condition while lacking credible evidence, as seen in the following item.

Hillary Clinton was seen wearing an object on her back under her green duster jacket



There's definitely something there.

One explanation is that the object is a defibrillator.

A



B



Figure 4. Image circulated on social media supposedly showing Hillary Clinton wearing a defibrillator. Adapted from *Hillary Clinton Wears a Defibrillator?* by D. Evon, 2016f. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-defibrillator/>

This photograph of Clinton speaking at a campaign event was published and shared on social media as alleged evidence that she was wearing a defibrillator. This picture was taken from a video shot in February 2016, and with the exception of the red arrows that were added, according to Snopes (Evon, 2016f), this image was not altered or manipulated in any way.



Careful analysis conducted by Snopes concluded that although there is a visible lump under Clinton's right shoulder, this does not match the photograph of the defibrillator juxtaposed in the same image (Evon, 2016f). The defibrillator features two rectangular items, yet Clinton is shown with only one item on her shoulder, and it also requires a large object to be worn near the waist, which is not visible (Evon, 2016f). On the contrary, according to Snopes (Evon, 2016f), what can be seen is that Clinton was wearing a wireless microphone, which requires a wireless transmitter, explaining the noticeable lump just below her right shoulder.

### **Against traditional gender/family roles or religious values**

The category against traditional gender/family roles or religious values included 12 stories. Once again, the majority (67%) of fake news stories in this category, was about Hillary Clinton.

One of the fake news stories that attempts to portray Hillary Clinton as neglecting children within family roles was initiated with an image that included a quote falsely attributed to Clinton, allegedly from her book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*, originally published by the "Shocking Hillary Clinton Quotes" Tumblr Page.

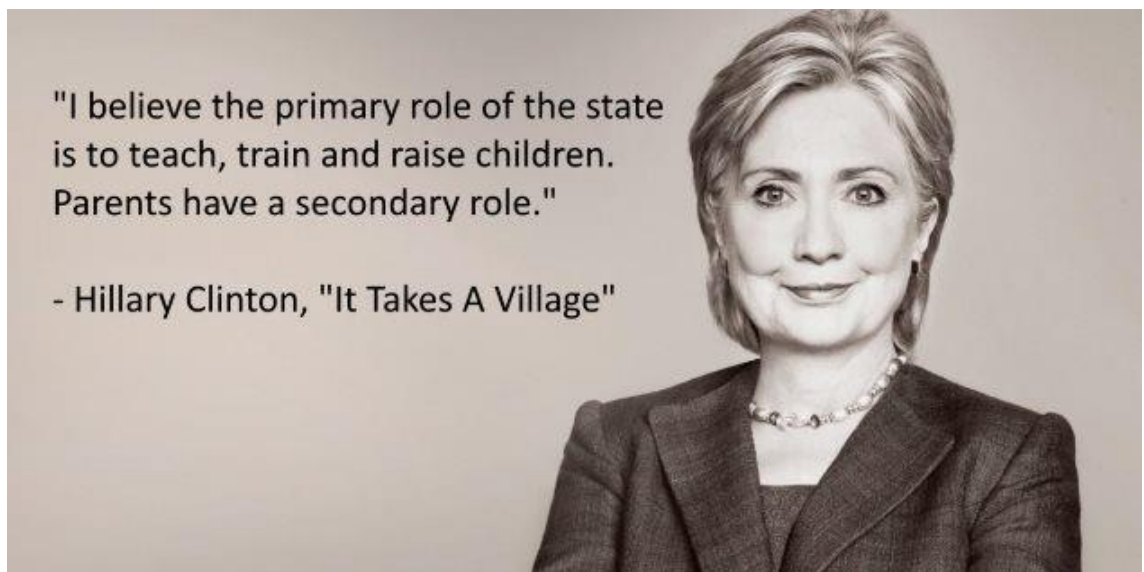


Figure 5. Image with a false Hillary Clinton quote. Adapted from *Hillary Clinton Said Children Should Be Raised by the State?* by D. Evon, 2016d. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/clinton-takes-village-quote/>

Another fake news story targeting Clinton that fell into this category attempted to portray her intruding upon Christians' religious values. This story originally appeared on the internet in 2015, after Clinton delivered the keynote address at the annual Women in the World Summit in New York City, and resurfaced in August 2016. In 2015, the website *Shoebat.com* warned that:

Hilary Clinton just said that Christians must deny their Faith through the enforcement of laws, by stating that the Christian belief in being pro-life, and anti-abortion, must change, ... and that this should be done through laws and 'political will.' If Christians must change Christian teachings in regards to abortion, then what Hilary Clinton is essentially saying is that Christians must deny their Faith. (2015, as cited in Emery, 2016b, para. 7)

As for Donald Trump, although once again, significantly fewer fake news stories targeted him in this category, there were still a few fake news stories about him that fell into this grouping. In 2015, the *Internet Chronicle* published a story (which was circulated much more widely only later, in March 2016) claiming that he pressured his ex-wives into undergoing abortions, possibly with the goal of simultaneously showing the candidate disregarding traditional Christian values, and mistreating family. The *Internet Chronicle* stated that "Saturday, Donald Trump's ex-wives came forward with shocking stories of the bombastic Republican presidential candidate's multiple abortions, alleging he coerced them into aborting when they wanted to keep their babies" (2015, as cited in Evon, 2016e, para. 2).

Another fake news story about Trump that was categorized as against traditional gender/family roles or religious values began with a fake news story published in entertainment website *Free Wood Post*, which claimed that Donald Trump had disparaged Jesus, by saying he could save Americans without a silly cross (Evon, 2016c). This is clearly an example of misinformation becoming disinformation, given that *Free Wood Post* is an entertainment publication, focusing on political satire (Evon, 2016c).

Despite the existence of fake news stories negatively targeting Trump in this category, the number is substantially lower than that for Clinton, especially considering the non-traditional family of Donald Trump resulting from three marriages, and five children by three different women. However, this was the only category where Clinton had only 50% more stories than Trump. Besides inappropriate sexualized behavior where both candidates garnered the same number of fake news stories, and racially/culturally offensive – the only

category where Trump had more results than Clinton – in every other category Clinton was targeted at least 50% more frequently than Trump.

### Untrustworthy

In the untrustworthy category, 86% of the fake news stories were aimed at Hillary Clinton. This may be a result of Clinton often being attributed the moral role of usurper, because “she threatens to take men’s historical role” (Manne, 2018, p. 271). In doing this, Clinton demonstrates that she is an assertive and powerful woman, whose actions go against the expected female stereotype. As Manne (2018) states, women in positions of extraordinary political power are perceived as rule-breakers, who should not be trusted with respecting law and order. Most fake news stories about Hillary Clinton that fell under this grouping tried to show inconsistencies and changes in opinions over time, or differences between stances that she holds privately versus publicly, in an attempt to attribute lack of truthfulness to her political stances. As an example, one of these stories tried to demonstrate that Clinton’s true personal view on marriage equality was different from her public standpoint on the issue. An e-mail chain disclosed by WikiLeaks, in October 2016, allegedly demonstrates that Clinton is privately against marriage equality, while publicly stating otherwise. This was heavily shared on social media, although according to Snopes, there is no part of this e-mail chain that supports the idea that Hillary Clinton privately opposed gay marriage, while publicly supporting it (Lacapria, 2016b).



Figure 6. Image with tweet referring to non-existent content in e-mails revealed by WikiLeaks. Adapted from *Does Hillary Clinton Still Secretly Oppose Marriage Equality?* by K. Lacapria, 2016b. Retrieved from Snopes.

<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-secretly-opposes-equality/>



Another fake news story that tried to portray Hillary Clinton as untrustworthy and demonstrating inconsistent stances or opinions over time, arose from an article published on *The Rightists* website (Evon, 2016n). This story claimed that during a speech in 2013, Hillary Clinton had said that she would like to see Donald Trump run for president. According to Snopes, Clinton gave a speech at Goldman Sachs in 2013, that was published in Wikileaks (although it was never verified by her campaign), saying “I would like to see more successful business people run for office” (Evon, 2016n, para. 6). However, *The Rightists*’ story and the accompanying image used this speech as a basis, and then proceeded to add various fake quotes, including naming Donald Trump and many of his alleged characteristics and attributes that would be beneficial in public office (Evon, 2016n).



Figure 7. Image with a false Hillary Clinton quote. Adapted from *Did Hillary Clinton Say 'I Would Like to See People Like Donald Trump Run for Office?'* by D. Evon, 2016n. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/people-like-donald-trump/>

The one fake news story about Donald Trump categorized as untrustworthy originated from an online rumor stating that Donald Trump paid 2008 Republican Vice President candidate and former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin \$10 million for her endorsement, in order to gain support among evangelicals (Evon, 2016b). This story was initially published in *Satira*

*Tribune*, which describes itself as a satirical news outlet (Evon, 2016b). Although Palin did support Donald Trump for President, there was no compensation offered (Evon, 2016b), which might make her endorsements seem dubious and dishonest.

### **Illegal conduct**

The category which drew in the greatest number of fake news stories was illegal conduct. This category follows the rationale associated with the untrustworthy category but takes it one step further to portray the candidates as actually being associated with illegal behavior or criminal actions. In this case, 75% of the stories were about Hillary Clinton.

In 2016 there were many stories circulating about the relationship between the Clinton Foundation and foreign entities. One of these stories falsely claimed that Hillary Clinton, while Secretary of State, approved a deal to transfer control of 20% of U.S. uranium deposits to a Russian company as an exchange for donations to the Clinton Foundation (Emery, 2016a). Such allegations were first published in a book called *Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich*, by Peter Schweizer, editor-at-large at the right-wing media company Breitbart. These were later repeated by the Trump campaign, in 2016, and eventually began to circulate on social media in the final months of the campaign through the following image.

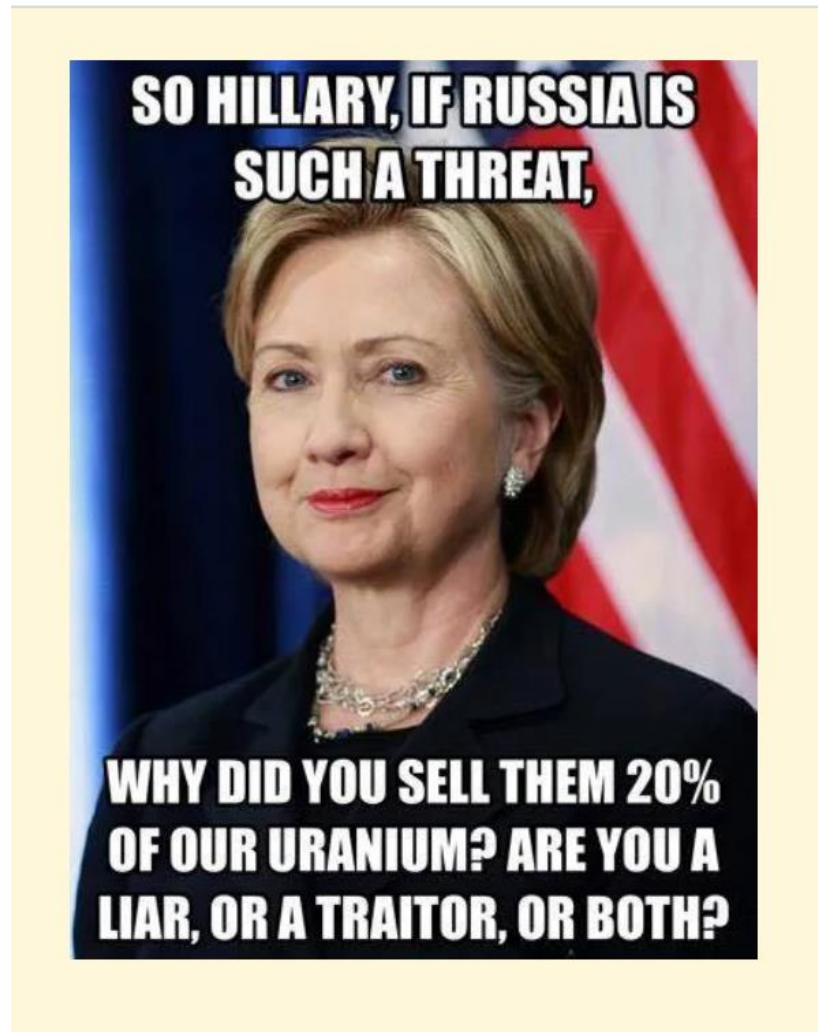


Figure 8. Image of Hillary Clinton suggesting Hillary Clinton gave 20% of U.S. uranium to Russia. Adapted from *Did Hillary Clinton Give 20% of United States' Uranium to Russia in Exchange for Clinton Foundation Donations?* by D. Emery, 2016a. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-uranium-russia-deal/>

Stories associating Donald Trump with illegal conduct included accounts of him being arrested, and descriptions of him as a con artist. An example includes the image of former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg next to an alleged quote which refers to Trump as a “con artist” and a “cheat” (Evon, 2016j).



Figure 9. Image of Michael Bloomberg accompanies by derogatory quote about Donald Trump. Adapted from *Did Michael Bloomberg Say Donald Trump Is a 'Con Artist' and a 'Cheat'?* by D. Evon, 2016j. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/michael-bloomberg-donald-trump/>

### **Inappropriate sexualized behavior**

The category with the smallest number of fake news stories was inappropriate sexualized behavior. This was also the only category to include an equal number of stories about each candidate. In fact, the only fake news story about Donald Trump in this category that was considered for analysis by Snopes, was first published in questionable websites in March 2016 (Lacapria, 2016a). This means that the surfacing of an audio file of Donald Trump boasting about the unwanted way he pursues women, in October 2016, had no influence on the possible surge of fake news stories around this idea. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, having had no known past from which to base fake news related to inappropriate sexualized behavior, was still the target of such a story.

In October 2016, the *TDT Alliance* website and its Facebook page, “Fox News The FB Page,” posted an article reporting that WikiLeaks had published a photograph showing Hillary Clinton grabbing a man’s genitals while on stage (Evon, 2016m). Snopes (Evon, 2016m)

verified that *TD Alliance* is a fake news web site that does not publish factual stories, and its shill Facebook group, named “The Fox News FB Page,” is not affiliated with the real Fox News. According to Snopes (Evon, 2016m), the photograph in question (but not the Fox News framework in which it is included) is real. However, it is not of Hillary Clinton, but rather actress Florence Henderson during a production of “Broadway Backwards 4” (Evon, 2016m).



Figure 10. Image of Fox News TV screen simulation allegedly showing Hillary Clinton reaching for a man’s genitals on stage. Adapted from *WikiLeaks Releases Candid Photos of Hillary Clinton Grabbing a Man’s Crotch*. by D. Evon, 2016m. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-grab-crotch/>

### **Racially/culturally offensive**

The last category to be analyzed was racially/culturally offensive. This was the only category where Trump was targeted more than Clinton and by a large margin. Donald Trump accounted for 92% of the results in this category.

In August 2016, a fake news website published a story saying that Donald Trump called Barack Obama an extremely offensive and racially demeaning name, of which there is no record (Palma, 2016). Although there was extensive coverage of Donald Trump’s remarks and opinions on ethnicity at this time, including the fact that he garnered support from white supremacists, there is no proof that he called the first African-American president a highly incendiary racial epithet, which would have likely dominated the news cycle, if true (Palma,



2016). In another case of a racially/culturally offensive story, fake news website *TMZHipHop.com* (which has no connection to the *TMZ* entertainment news website) published an article reporting that Donald Trump had said anti-slavery activist Harriet Tubman's face belongs on a food stamp card and not the U.S. \$20 bill (Evon, 2016h). Not long after it was announced that Tubman would replace Andrew Jackson on the U.S. \$20 bill, a series of rumors and deceitful information started circulating about the topic, including this story about Trump's alleged comment (Evon, 2016h). While Donald Trump did openly say he was against the decision to update the \$20 bill, suggesting that Tubman get placed on the U.S. \$2 bill instead, he never stated that the abolitionist should be placed on food stamps (Evon, 2016h).



Figure 11. Image of Donald Trump looking surprised and sarcastically at picture of projected U.S. \$20 featuring Harriet Tubman. Adapted from *Donald Trump Says Harriet Tubman Face Belongs on Foodstamps*. by D. Evon, 2016h. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/donald-trump-tubman/>

Despite a completely different rhetoric on issues of race and ethnicity in her political past and during the campaign, Hillary Clinton was still targeted by one story in this category. In January 2016, an alleged photograph of Hillary Clinton in blackface, next to her husband in a hillbilly outfit, at a '70s Halloween party at Yale, began circulating on the internet (Evon,

2016a). According to Evon (2016a), the facial features of the people in this picture are physically different from what the Clintons looked like when they were at Yale (starting with Hillary Clinton's eye color), as can be seen by the picture comparison done by Snopes. As Snopes states, if this picture were in fact of the Clintons, it would not have taken 45 years to surface, given their high-profile public lives and political careers.



Figure 12. Image of alleged Hillary Clinton in blackface with Bill Clinton at a costume party, and a comparison of what the Clinton's looked like in their 20s. Adapted from *Did Hillary Clinton Wear Blackface at a Costume Party?* by D. Evon, 2016a. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-blackface-photo/>

## **Discussion**

As described in the method section, the data for this research came from categorizing individual fake news stories (circulated in 2016 and categorized as “false” by Snopes) according to different pre-established topics. The categories arose from the initial literature review, which encompassed topics such as fake news, the 2016 U.S. election, and gender in politics, and all referred to damaging character traits or negative actions allegedly carried out in the past by the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates.

Previous research has shown that conservatives are more likely to share stories from fake news domains (which in the 2016 campaign tended to favor Donald Trump and hinder Hillary Clinton) than liberals, and the same goes for Republicans compared with Democrats (Guess et al., 2019). Therefore, if conservatives and Republicans were sharing more fake news stories in 2016, it seems logical that more than twice as many (68%) of the fake news stories allocated to the various pre-established categories targeted Hillary Clinton. Only 32% of the fake news stories distributed among the character-damaging categories referred to Donald Trump. This is also consistent with the finding that exposure to fake news was heavily concentrated in small parts of the population, representing people with the most conservative information-consumption habits (Guess et al., 2018). So, if the people who were most exposed to fake news can be characterized as having a tendency to consume more conservative material, it is expected that these will also be the people sharing the same fake news to which they were exposed.

Two factors seem to contribute to the higher preponderance of character-damaging fake news against Hillary Clinton. First, there was a greater pool of negative fake news about Clinton to begin with. Both academic research and American intelligence agencies state that most fake news developed during 2016 tended to favor Donald Trump and hinder Hillary Clinton (Guess et al., 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). Second, the people that shared more fake news were likely more inclined to share negative fake news about Hillary Clinton, given their conservative and Republican background.

One explanation for there being a greater pool of fake news stories about Hillary Clinton from the onset, is that, as Parry-Giles (2014) states, transgressions from ideal notions of gender roles can result in disapproving viewpoints towards those who are judged as drifting too far from gender norms. Despite Hillary Clinton’s strong history in politics and proven



qualifications she became a greater target for the fabrication and sharing of negative fake news stories. Women in high-level leadership positions (historically seen as male roles) are evaluated in a more severe manner than men (McGinley, 2009). Even when there is proof of a woman's leadership skills, she still faces a drawback due to the conflict that arises between those qualities and her gender roles (McGinley, 2009).

In the analysis of 2016 fake news stories that fell into the incompetent behavior category, the vast majority of results targeted the female candidate, Hillary Clinton. Past research showing that even when there is a proven track record of a woman's capacity as a leader, she will still be at a disadvantage due to the perceived incompatibility between her leadership qualities and her gender role (McGinley, 2009), is in line with the verification that Clinton was portrayed as incompetent in fake news, despite her strong career in politics.

Bray et al. (2020) assert that people whose behavior is in agreement with gendered expectations are seen as good leaders. This, of course, benefits men, who are already expected to display assertive characteristics in society. The traits required to be successful in politics, and important for becoming a good leader are already associated with men or masculine gender roles. On the other hand, women who display these attributes, are seen as going against the norm, and end up being perceived as less qualified (Bray et al., 2020).

The results of this analysis corroborate Parry-Giles's findings, that "women have historically been viewed as 'unnatural' political actors and 'incompetent leaders', culminating in assumptions that they are less 'viable' political contenders" (Parry-Giles, 2014, Authentic Womanhood and Authentic Manhood section, para. 5). These assumptions are a fertile starting point from which to fabricate fake news content, that will be more easily assimilated and not questioned, given that the bias about women in politics being incompetent is already rooted in society.

Similarly, in the category of physically unfit/unhealthy, Hillary Clinton was the target of the vast majority of the fake news stories analyzed. Although neither of the candidates disclosed information about their medical history, there were significantly more fake news stories portraying Clinton as unhealthy. The results uphold Heldman's findings (2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019), about how women being depicted as fragile and unhealthy is a form of conveying the idea that women are not prepared for leadership positions. Portraying women as sick or weak can be seen as a strategy to hinder the female candidate, while benefitting the

male opponent. Given that most fake news shared in 2016 tended to be done by a more conservative part of the population, and favor Donald Trump (Guess et al., 2019), it makes sense that Clinton was the focus of the large majority of stories on the topic of health or physical weakness, despite being statistically expected to outlive her male counterpart based on her gender, and being slightly younger.

Regarding the against traditional gender/family roles or religious values category, the reason why stories that portrayed candidates as either going against traditional gender and family roles, or religious values, were grouped together is because “values inherent in religious beliefs (perhaps inadvertently) propagate an un-equal status quo between men and women through endorsement of ideologies linked to benevolent sexism<sup>20</sup>” (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014, p. 387). As Mikołajczak and Pietrzak (2014) assert, religions often serve as a way of establishing and prioritizing values that are frequently associated with prizing stability and avoiding uncertainty. This attachment to tradition and simultaneous evasion of uncertainty can influence how people react to individuals who comply, or on the contrary violate social norms (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014). In this context it is likely that a woman seeking high level office would be seen as violating social norms, breaking with tradition, opening the door to uncertainty, and hence going against religious values. The fact that white Christians, representing 26% of the American electorate, gave Donald Trump 80% of their votes corroborates this notion (Sabato et al., 2017). Moreover, Trump received 50% of the Catholic vote, as well as 55% of those who attend church at least once a week (Sabato et al., 2017).

The difference in how a female versus a male candidate was attacked by fake news in this category, can be explained by a study by Okimoto and Brescoll. Participants in their 2010 study tended to see power-seeking female politicians as unsupportive and uncaring, which did not happen with power-seeking male politicians (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Manne (2018) agrees, stating that “women are disproportionately required to be caring” (p. 266).

Characteristics important for female political candidates, such as being assertive and strong, are at odds with traditional values associated with womanhood. Women aspiring to high level

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<sup>20</sup> Benevolent sexism is described by Mikołajczak and Pietrzak (2014) as benevolent attitudes toward women, arising from the notions that women are morally superior to men and require male protection. Although it may be perceived as benevolent both by the perpetrating and the target individuals it stems from the same gender ideology as hostile sexism, and can often have negative consequences (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014).

power positions and professional success are seen as distancing themselves from traditional female roles, such as being warm and nurturing (Schneider et al., 2010), characteristics more important for the role of a mother and a family setting. Therefore, it is natural that fake news focusing on stories that exemplify a candidate swerving away from traditional gender or family roles, and religious values, target women disproportionately. According to Manne (2018) “defection from the role of an attentive, loving subordinate” (p. 49) is likely the most natural foundation for hostility and antagonism towards women.

Parry-Giles (2014) contends that a person is often evaluated according to ideal notions of authentic womanhood or manhood, and transgressions from traditional gender ideals result in backlash. These fake news stories seem to mirror reactions registered by participants in previous studies of power-seeking female politicians. As McGinley (2009) stated, regardless of the existence of proof of a woman’s leadership capacity, she is still at a disadvantage due to the conflict that arises between the perceptions of her ability to lead and her ability to conform to traditional gender roles. In Parry-Giles’ (2014) analysis of Hillary Clinton specifically, it is inferred that although she was frequently celebrated for progressive gender performances, she was also often criticized for violating tradition, and “undermining a sense of her authentic womanhood” (Parry-Giles, 2014, Authentic Womanhood and Authentic Manhood section, para. 5).

When looking at fake news stories falling under the untrustworthy category, once more Hillary Clinton was the object to the greater part of these. Any small or perceived violations committed by a woman may instantly be:

Blown out of all proportion, and taken to indicate something damning about a woman’s character. She may be represented as breaking promises, telling lies, or renegeing on her side of the bargain – and hence as deeply untrustworthy, duplicitous, irresponsible, and so on. (Manne 2018, p. 54)

As Manne (2018) states, Clinton is often seen as a usurper, because she endangers men’s historical role. Clinton is willing to compete for positions that historically have been largely reserved to men. The results signal that by daring to do so, Clinton seems to attract more fake news stories that portray her as unreliable and untrustworthy. Women in positions of extraordinary political power are perceived as rule-breakers, who should not be trusted with respecting law and order (Manne, 2018). Having already been in very high-level political

positions before, and willing to compete for the highest office in the United States, would therefore be a strong reason to see her as an untrustworthy rule-breaker.

Regarding fake news stories about illegal conduct, the fact that Clinton was targeted by more items in this category could result simply from the fact that she was more heavily involved in politics for the previous 30 years. However, despite the fact that Donald Trump was new to politics until he announced that he would be running in the 2016 primary elections, he was far from being an anonymous citizen and had been in the public eye for decades as a business magnate. The background and current professional activity of Hillary Clinton's husband Bill were used to allegedly tie Hillary Clinton to illegal activity and became a source of fake news content hindering her. Nearly half of the fake news stories alluding to illegal conduct by Hillary Clinton were tied to the Clinton Foundation<sup>21</sup>. Male candidates, on the other hand, are traditionally aided and lifted up by their wives on the campaign trail (Van Horn, 2010). Van Horn (2010) finds that candidates' wives have been having an increasingly more active level of participation, and evermore important and prominent role in the campaigns. In fact, it can be argued that:

the candidate's wife serves as an effective spousal surrogate by speaking to her husband's authenticity as a human being and as a candidate. By providing evidence of his authenticity, she may be offering his candidacy the unspoken and intangible elements that bolster his image and supercede the character flaws or policy issues that are frequently debated in campaigns. (VanHorn, 2010, p. 9)

There is less comparable experience to pull from on female candidates' spouses in the United States, given that Hillary Clinton was the first woman to secure a major party presidential candidate nomination, in June 2016. Gender aside, Bill Clinton was a very qualified presumptive First Spouse, albeit one who also brought with him a long history of political attacks against him.

Whether the negativity that impacted Hillary Clinton due to her spouse's past is related to gender or not is difficult to determine. However, the past of Donald Trump's spouse could also have generated negative fake news content towards him. There are many inconsistencies in the different accounts Melania Trump has provided over the years about how she came to

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<sup>21</sup> The Clinton Foundation was established by Hillary Clinton's husband and former President of the United States, Bill Clinton. The foundation works on issues directly or with strategic partners from the business, government, and nonprofit sectors to create economic opportunity, improve public health, and inspire civic engagement and service (Clinton Foundation, n.d.).

the United States, and gaps in her immigration story. Nevertheless, there are no fake news stories analyzed by Snopes that so much as mention Melania Trump, let alone her immigration process.

When looking at inappropriate sexualized behavior, and taking into consideration the low incidence of results in this category, as well as an identical number of stories for both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, it could be argued that there is no potential gender-based difference at play here. However, upon closer consideration, even in this situation there might be a gender disadvantage for the female candidate. The research that Stabile et al. (2019) conducted demonstrated that women candidates can experience a hostile response for violating gender norms that have kept them out of the realms of power. Men, on the other hand, receive no backlash for negative behavior that is consistent with the “gender norms of male entitlement and sexual dominance” (Stabile, et al., 2019, p. 499).

In October 2016, Donald Trump was caught on tape making vulgar remarks, talking about grabbing women inappropriately. Even so, this did not influence the creation of negative fake news stories related to inappropriate sexualized behavior. This seems to be an example of this type of behavior being excused or ignored by society when perpetrated by men. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 20% of women who disclose an incident of sexual victimization excuse or justify the situations they have been in, by suggesting “male sexual aggression is natural, normal, ... or the victim's fault” (Weiss, 2009). By analyzing 944 victim accounts, the study found that gender stereotypes have influence on victims' perceptions of their own unwanted sexual situations (Weiss, 2009).

The last category to be analyzed was racially/culturally offensive and 92% of the stories in this category were about Trump. Donald Trump had used nationalist, anti-immigration, and racist rhetoric on the campaign trail, which according to some scholars tapped into racist resentment and anti-immigrant sentiments in the population, explaining the vote for him.

Donald Trump's election to the presidency brought the authoritarianism narrative and waves of a fascist past back to the center of American politics (Giroux, 2017). According to Bonikowski (2019), he explicitly embraced racist discourse, and made use of three elements of radical-right rhetoric on the campaign trail: anti-elite, nationalism, and authoritarianism. Donald Trump “appealed to ethnically, racially, and culturally exclusionary understandings of American identity” (Bonikowski, 2019, p. 113). There are many examples of how Trump's

rhetoric ignited this nationalist sentiment. He referred to Mexican immigrants as criminals, criticized the parents of a Muslim American soldier who had lost his life in combat, and supported conspiracy theories about President Obama’s place of birth, in this last case long before the campaign even started” (Bonikowski, 2019).

Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, “celebrated ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, ..., and advocated active engagement in international affairs” (Bonikowski, 2019, p. 119). According to Bonikowski (2019), consistent with what is the traditional Democratic political rhetoric, Clinton’s discourse demonstrated inclusive civic nationalism<sup>22</sup>.

Having this in mind, the fact that the overwhelming majority of fake news stories, allocated to the racially/culturally offensive category, referred to Donald Trump may simply be an example of actual news influencing fake news topics, rather than the existence of any gender issue influencing this result.

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<sup>22</sup> Civic Nationalism is associated with “voluntary dispositions, such as subjective identification with a given nation, commitment to its political values and formal citizenship” (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2019, p. 4). Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, includes “fixed attributes, such as race, ethnicity, native-born status and national ancestry, as well as deeply socialized cultural traits like religious beliefs” (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2019, p. 4).

## Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze if and how gender is employed in fake news against female candidates in political elections. Based on a qualitative content analysis of selected fake news stories shared during 2016 and referencing one of the two candidates in the American presidential election, it can be concluded that organizations or individuals disseminating fake news, for strategic, ideological or simply monetary goals, rely on the use of gender biases (which are often already engrained in other aspects of society), in fake news against female candidates. Taking the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a case study, results indicate that gender-related prejudices were used to construct fake news narratives which for the most part favored Donald Trump and hindered Hillary Clinton.

Results in this study suggest support for previous findings showing that conservatives are more likely to share stories from fake news domains than liberals, and the same goes for Republicans compared with Democrats (Guess et al., 2019). This study found that twice as many of the fake new stories sampled for this research targeted Hillary Clinton, meaning that only about one third of the fake news stories referred to Donald Trump. Given that conservatives and Republicans were more likely to share fake news stories in 2016, it is natural that in this study the majority of potentially damaging fake news stories were focused on Hillary Clinton.

It would be fair to question whether Republicans and conservatives would always be more prone to producing and/or spreading fake news stories about the Democratic candidate, than the other way around. However, what this research indicates is that the liberal candidate not only was the target of the vast majority of character-damaging fake news, but also that these were gendered attacks, based on biases about the different roles women and men have or should have in society. As Schneider et al. (2010) state, political candidates, in general, face attacks from their opponents' supporters, but women running for high level office face gendered attacks.

Stabile et al. (2019) state that fake news stories pull from gender biases present in society, which are already damaging for female candidates in traditional news outlets, to validate stereotypes about women in politics. These "biases in the treatment of candidates based on gender may be evident in or exacerbated by the promulgation of fake news" (Stabile et al., 2019, p. 491) and can often be used to influence voters. When fake news themes are in

line with previously held beliefs, this content can become strongly ingrained in people's minds and prove challenging to correct (Konnikova, 2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019). As Moravec et al. (2018) conveyed, people prefer information that is in accordance with their own beliefs, and are partial against information that challenges them. This cognitive process, known as confirmation bias, explains how fake news is often easily believed, when its content contains stereotypes already heavily engrained in society, such as gender biases about women in politics.

One of the gender biases already existent in society, which this research demonstrates was used in fake news stories to hinder Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential campaign, is the issue of likeability vs. competence, where female politicians are often seen as likeable but incompetent or competent but unlikeable (Schneider, et al., 2010). Schneider et al. (2010) argue that in the 2008 campaign Hillary Clinton consistently faced gendered attacks in traditional media that portrayed her as competent, but unlikeable. However, in 2016, this study clearly demonstrates that the fake news attacks targeting Clinton sought to portray her as incompetent. Despite Clinton's strong track record and experience in demanding political positions, fake news stories focusing on incompetent behavior were more directed at Clinton than Trump.

This study also illustrates that society's predisposition to view women as more physically frail or unfit, was used in fake news to hinder the female candidate. Many fake news stories during the 2016 campaign in the United States, alluded to health fragility concerns. However, the vast majority of these were about Hillary Clinton. Although neither candidate released medical history records, and Donald Trump, at age 70, was at the time the oldest man to ever become American president, there were disproportionately fewer fake news stories about his health status than hers. Depicting women as weak and unhealthy is one of the ways in which women are shown as being unprepared for leadership positions (Heldman, 2018, as cited in Stabile et al., 2019). This research shows that this holds true in the way gender biases are used in fake news.

Many fake news stories in this study also referred to instances where the candidate seemed to go against traditional gender and family roles, or religious values. Once again, the majority of these fake news stories was about Hillary Clinton. Religions often encourage the prioritization of values associated with stability and the avoidance of uncertainty, and



therefore can influence the way people react to people who comply, or, on the other hand, violate social norms (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014). In this context it is easy for a woman pursuing high level office to be seen as violating social norms and tradition, opening the door to uncertainty, and therefore going against religious values.

Previous research shows that people tend to see power-seeking female politicians as unsupportive and uncaring, which does not happen with power-seeking male politicians (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). A person is often evaluated according to ideal notions of authentic womanhood or manhood, and transgressions from traditional gender ideals result in backlash (Parry-Giles, 2014). Many fake news stories analyzed in this study show Clinton deviating from traditional gender or family roles, and religious values, demonstrating that this prejudice is also heavily used in fake news to target women. There are fake news stories negatively targeting Trump around this issue, but the number is substantially lower, especially considering his non-traditional family.

This research also suggests that fake news stories depict female candidates as more untrustworthy, in comparison to a male candidate. Women in positions of extraordinary political power are perceived as rule-breakers (Manne, 2018). The predisposition to associate women in extremely high leadership positions with untrustworthy behavior already existed in society. This study shows that this perception is utilized in the fabrication of fake news against women seeking high power offices, whose actions go against the expected female stereotype.

The topic which drew in the greatest number of fake news stories was illegal conduct, and once again the great majority of stories was about Hillary Clinton. Women with or aspiring to unprecedented political power are often seen as not to be trusted to respect law and order (Manne, 2018). On the other hand, people whose behavior is in agreement with gendered expectations are seen as good leaders (Bray, et al., 2020), which is the case with male candidates aiming for top leadership positions. This research demonstrates that fake news content is created in line with these gender biases, negatively impacting female candidates.

There was an equal number of stories focusing on inappropriate sexualized behavior for each candidate. In this case, considering Trump's own comments surrounding this type of conduct, the study concludes that even in this situation there is a gender disadvantage for

women. This research shows that fake news stories around this subject are in line with previous findings where female candidates are shown to experience backlash for violating gender norms, whereas men do not experience repercussions for negative behavior that follows “gender norms of male entitlement and sexual dominance” (Stabile, et al., 2019, p. 499). The seemingly lack of fake news around this topic, involving Trump, is an example of how this type of behavior is exempted or overlooked by society when carried out by men.

Fake news content portraying the candidates as being racially or culturally offensive was the only topic that generated drastically more stories for Donald Trump than for Hillary Clinton. Bearing in mind that Trump used nationalist, anti-immigration, and racist rhetoric during the campaign, it was concluded that this was simply an example of fake news mimicking topics broadcast in verified news, and not the influence of any gendered issue.

Overall, considering the many themes of fake news targeting the American presidential candidates in 2016, this research strongly demonstrates that fake news content builds on gender biases already existent in society to negatively impact female candidates. Information is more likely to be accepted when it is consistent with other factors people already assume as true (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012), which explains the effectiveness of fake news stories building on gender biases heavily engrained in society for years, to hinder or help one candidate or another. Developing a story that fits previous assumptions makes information easier to be accepted (Lewandowsky, et al., 2012).

Fake news building on other elements that are already perceived as true is not only easier to believe, but also harder to correct. As Lewandowsky et al. (2012) state, compatibility with previous information decreases the chances of fake news being successfully corrected. Rejecting such knowledge as false would force the receptor to face various inconsistencies arising thereafter (Festinger, 1957, as cited in Lewandowsky, et al., 2012). In the situation of fake news stories that builds on historic gender biases, rejecting this content would likely force the recipients of the news to reevaluate their beliefs and views about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in society, both in public and family life. Information that differs from previously held beliefs provokes negative feelings (Festinger, 1957, as cited by Lewandowsky, et al., 2012), and is also processed less easily than messages that are in line with a person’s beliefs (Winkielman et al., 2012, as cited in Lewandowsky, et al., 2012).

This study illustrates that in some cases fake news stories seem to build on backlash reactions to power-seeking female politicians, registered in previous studies that focused on mainstream media. However, this is not always the case. For example, in traditional media, Hillary Clinton was often portrayed as competent, although unlikeable (Schneider et al., 2010). Due to this prejudice which women in politics often face, it is hard to be considered both competent and likeable. In fake news, on the other hand, this research shows that Hillary Clinton was often portrayed as incompetent. Fake news corresponds to gender stereotypes and biases alive among the public, and not necessarily those which are being transmitted through mainstream news stories. Therefore, although women seem to face gendered attacks in both mainstream traditional media and fake news, the biased portrayals are not always based on the exact same gender assumptions.

The data in this research contributes to a clearer understanding and recognition of how gender biases are used against and affect female candidates running in high-office political elections. Results can be taken into account when planning campaigns for women politicians, strategizing against gender prejudices and how these spread on social networks, with ever-growing numbers of users.

While the limited sample of fake news stories this study drew on limits a great generalizability of the results, this research provides insight into the use of gender biases in fake news. This study exposes how the main gender stereotypes existent in various realms of society are further validated and disseminated through fake news, often with the possibility of influencing voters.

The charismatic nature of the two candidates in the 2016 election, and their notoriety in the American society, long before running for President, could be used to explain the quantity and type of fake news content they were targeted with, regardless of their gender. It could be argued that it is difficult to separate what is a result of gender, and what is a result of the representation Americans had built of these two very public figures over time. Tackling this limitation would require analyzing more cases of women in American presidential elections, which can now be done by comparison with the 2020 election, given Kamala Harris' presence on the Democratic ticket.

Another pertinent question that arises is whether the female candidate being on the Republican side would make a difference. Taking into consideration that conservatives tend to

share more fake news, would they be more cautious or wary of doing so, given that it would be their candidate that would be hindered, or would gender biases still speak more loudly? This issue will be interesting to research in a future election for high level office with a Republican woman on the ticket. It is true that Sarah Palin, as a Republican candidate for vice president, was the object of gendered attacks in the press in 2008, but fake news was not so prevalent at that time. Additional studies are required to determine whether being a Republican or Democratic candidate for high level political office has an impact on how gender biases are instrumentalized in fake news.

It is interesting to note that gender biases used in fake news in 2016, seem to be less overt than what could be expected, or what has been observed in mainstream media in the past. More explicit examples of sexism against women carried out earlier in the press often focus on personality, appearance, and family issues. The sample of fake news stories analyzed for this research does not include any examples of this more blatant or obvious sexism. There were no stories focusing on Clinton's domestic life, or the role she plays within her family. She was not accused of being too emotional. There were no comments about the tone or pitch of her voice<sup>23</sup>. There was no discussion about her looks or physical appearance. The gender biases that emerged in fake news seem to be more subtle, and possibly more sophisticated. As Manne (2018) states, the question is not whether women "are judged by sexist or more or less explicitly gendered standards, but how much moral criticism they face, and how much damage this does to their moral reputation in relation to male counterparts" (p. 104). For this very reason, the biases in fake news may have been harder to identify as such. On the other hand, assuming society has evolved to detect and reject evident gender biases, it can be theorized that users may have continued to engage with content containing understated prejudice, not entirely aware of the inherent partiality and misogyny behind it. Conversely, similar content would not have been equally popular or produced the same level of engagement, if it included manifest prejudice against women.

Not all gendered attacks against women in politics come from men. As discussed in the literature review, it has been established that many white women voted for Donald Trump in

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<sup>23</sup> Many political commentators described Hillary Clinton's voice as "shrill" at her victory speech in March 2016 when she became the Democratic party presumptive nominee (Manne, 2018). The possibility of this being due to the quality and timbre of her voice, or rather an example of sexism, resulted in an intense week-long debate (Manne, 2018).

the 2016 U.S. election, despite his history of sexual harassment and demonstrations of misogyny. However, given that men tend to be exposed to a greater quantity of fake news on political issues than women (Almenar et al., 2021), it would be interesting to study if this influenced the fact that there were a lot more character-damaging fake news stories targeting Hillary Clinton than Donald Trump.

To further understand how gender is used in fake news against female candidates, more studies could help comprehend how these biases are evolving in society. Which gender norms still hold up, and which are evolving to no longer produce strict expectations regarding women's behavior and positions in the public realm? As stated before, if gender biases are becoming less obvious, it would be curious to study how damage to a woman's moral reputation arising from unexplicit gendered attacks, differs from damage to a man's reputation. For example, although among the fake news stories selected for this research there was only one about inappropriate sexualized behavior that targeted Donald Trump, this story may have even benefitted him. As Dignam and Rohlinger (2019) say, Trump's political escalation was seen by many as an opportunity to push back against feminism, and therefore true accusations of sexual misconduct or fake news stories involving him in such a situation may not only not have had a negative effect on his reputation, but could actually become an advantage. Shortly before the 2016 election, The Red Pill Forum<sup>24</sup> online moderator explained in a post titled "Sexual Assault' Is Why I'm Endorsing Donald Trump for President of the United States.", "When somebody accuses a powerful or famous figure like Trump of 'sexual assault,' I don't look the other way. I don't denounce them or their behavior. Instead, I run towards them, because there is no truer signal which side somebody is on, than when they're given a bogus accusation by the establishment. This is our beacon to find allies in the war" (redpillschool, 2016, as cited by Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 589). Resistance to gender equality, as is demonstrated by this post on the Red Pill Forum, is not unheard of, but it has become more pervasive online (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). In fact, men's rights activists online advocate that feminism has led to the oppression of men, by reducing their social, political, and economic opportunities (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). This seems like

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<sup>24</sup> The Red Pill Forum, created in October 2012, is a notorious forum on Reddit, which is largely known as a setting for misogynistic discussions, including the disdain of feminist ideologies, in order "to expose the 'true nature' of feminisms oppressive to men and to help men reclaim their 'rightful place' in society" (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019, p. 595).

fertile ground not only to create and spread more fake news stories depicting women carrying out negative or shameful behaviors, but also a privileged space for rhetoric excusing, or even applauding similar behavior for men.

Future studies on fake news and its spread through social media will encounter an added challenge. While the difficulty to access spreading data on social media platforms is a concern, the growing popularity of ephemeral social media content like Instagram live, Facebook stories, and TikTok may make future studies even more difficult (Vosoughi et al., 2018). It would also be interesting to study how women in politics can overcome these stereotypes. Although some gender biases seem less prevalent, others are still strongly present in society, as is shown by the findings brought out in this study. What can society do to counter what are likely often unconscious biases? This study seeks to shed light and awareness on the existence and prevalence of these biases. Being more mindful of these prejudices, their instrumental use in media, and the potential impact on elections will hopefully have a positive contribution on people being more aware of these biases, and the unconscious resistance to corrections.

Bray et al. (2020) state that television characters can influence audiences' beliefs about gender norms and roles, and how they should operate in society. According to Smith et al. (2017, as cited in Bray et al. 2020), for the most part, traditional gender biases still endure in contemporary television characters. Lauzen (2017, as cited in Bray et al., 2020) contends that female characters are often portrayed as inferior or subordinate to the male one, frequently being constrained to settings of wife or mother. This helps reinforce the notion that a woman's role in society is unnatural outside of the family setting. However, on-screen representations of women seem to be starting to change, (Lauzen, 2017, as cited by Bray et al., 2020), and Generation Z may be "growing up in a media environment with changing depictions of gender roles" (Bray et al., 2020, p. 6).

Bray et al. (2020) suggest media content with evolving representations of gender roles "may normalize, and socialize Generation Z and Millennials to expect and accept, agentic women television characters" (p. 6). This, together with the indication that Generation Z and Millennials have similar views on gender issues, and agree that more women in politics is good for society (Parker et al., 2019), may lead to the mitigation of unconscious gender biases, which are manifested in many forms, including fake news content.

Static and outdated gender roles and expectations impact small, everyday choices as well as high-stakes decisions, with determining outcomes, such as in the case of a political election. The example analyzed in this study is only one way in which we as a society can work to recognize, challenge and diminish gender biases that affect our assessments of others.

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## Appendix A

### Fake news Stories Analyzed by Snopes in 2016 About U.S. Presidential Candidates

#### Categories

	Against traditional gender/family roles or religious values
	Illegal conduct
	Inappropriate sexualized behavior
	Incompetent behavior
	Physically unfit/unhealthy
	Racist/culturally offensive
	Untrustworthy

Title	URL	Month	Notes/origin	Candidate
After Colonoscopy Reveals Brain Tumor, Donald Trump Drops from Race	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ptr6TM">https://bit.ly/3ptr6TM</a>	August	NTMY News - site that publishes political satire	Trump
An image serves as photographic proof that Hillary Clinton is incontinent	<a href="https://bit.ly/3E11WzE">https://bit.ly/3E11WzE</a>	June	Shared on social media	Clinton
Benjamin Netanyahu Confronts Hillary Clinton	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GenuuI">https://bit.ly/3GenuuI</a>	April	video shared on social media	Clinton
Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria Home to a Child Abuse Ring Led by Hillary Clinton	<a href="https://bit.ly/3aZvLnF">https://bit.ly/3aZvLnF</a>	November	Reddit user	Clinton
Department of Homeland Security Chairman Officially Indicts Hillary Clinton for Treason	<a href="https://bit.ly/3C67SHf">https://bit.ly/3C67SHf</a>	November	Fox News' Bret Baier	Clinton
Does Hillary Clinton Still Secretly Oppose Marriage Equality?	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZePo8B">https://bit.ly/2ZePo8B</a>	October	Wikileaks	Clinton
Donald Trump Arrested? Virus Warning	<a href="https://bit.ly/3E5S5J4">https://bit.ly/3E5S5J4</a>	November	Shared on social media	Trump
Donald Trump bashed Jesus, saying that he could save America without some "silly cross.	<a href="https://bit.ly/3nj9iI5">https://bit.ly/3nj9iI5</a>	February	entertainment site <i>Free Wood Post</i>	Trump
Donald Trump Blames Muslims for Death of Jesus	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GmI3Fo">https://bit.ly/3GmI3Fo</a>	March	entertainment web site <i>The Evening Harold</i>	Trump
Donald Trump Buys Children	<a href="https://bit.ly/30LhNE5">https://bit.ly/30LhNE5</a>	October	comedy sketch shared on social media as real story	Trump
Donald Trump Called Canadians 'Snow Mexicans'	<a href="https://bit.ly/3pp95G0">https://bit.ly/3pp95G0</a>	June	Twitter satirical image	Trump
Donald Trump Called President Obama a 'Lying N****r'	<a href="https://bit.ly/3b4VVWl">https://bit.ly/3b4VVWl</a>	September	<i>HotGlobalNews.com</i>	Trump
Donald Trump called Serena Williams his 'Black American woman friend'	<a href="https://bit.ly/3itTH7n">https://bit.ly/3itTH7n</a>	July	several web sites such as <i>Vanguardngr.com</i>	Trump
Donald Trump Died of a Heart Attack	<a href="https://bit.ly/3b3VQ5k">https://bit.ly/3b3VQ5k</a>	October	Fake news generator	Trump
Donald Trump Hires 'Clueless' Star for Outreach Program	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ngDXpC">https://bit.ly/3ngDXpC</a>	July	National Report, a well-known purveyor of fake news.	Trump

<b>Donald Trump Kicked a Crying Baby Out of a Political Rally</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B1lpM9">https://bit.ly/3B1lpM9</a>	August	misleading headlines	Trump
<b>Donald Trump Made Donations to NAMBLA</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3nexeN6">https://bit.ly/3nexeN6</a>	August	bot programmed by Reddit pranksters	Trump
<b>Donald Trump paid Sarah Palin \$10 million for her endorsement.</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3C8LVHh">https://bit.ly/3C8LVHh</a>	February	entertainment web site <i>Satira Tribune</i>	Trump
<b>Donald Trump Pledged to Rename New Mexico</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2Z11JZl">https://bit.ly/2Z11JZl</a>	February	web site <i>FM News</i>	Trump
<b>Donald Trump Said He Would Deport All Nigerians</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/30SZYTR">https://bit.ly/30SZYTR</a>	January	Shared on social media	Trump
<b>Donald Trump said that "Portuguese people are the same as Spanish, but with worse wine."</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vyPWm5">https://bit.ly/3vyPWm5</a>	May	Facebook prank website	Trump
<b>Donald Trump Says Harriet Tubman Face Belongs on Foodstamps</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/30R8Xov">https://bit.ly/30R8Xov</a>	August	web site <i>TMZHipHop.com</i>	Trump
<b>Donald Trump told Phil Donahue that he was an atheist in 1989.</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/30G4OUb">https://bit.ly/30G4OUb</a>	March	Shared on social media	Trump
<b>Donald Trump tweeted image of his genitals following penis-related banter at debate.</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vCH4f7">https://bit.ly/3vCH4f7</a>	March	dubious web sites	Trump
<b>Donald Trump was never accused of racism before he ran for president in 2016.</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ptUj0v">https://bit.ly/3ptUj0v</a>	May	Shared on social media	Trump
<b>Donald Trump: Utah Is a 'Boring, Small State' with 'Strange People'</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3niwZ3p">https://bit.ly/3niwZ3p</a>	August	Shared on Facebook	Trump
<b>Donald Trump's Ex-Wives Speak Out on 'Forced Abortions'</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3jpKKfe">https://bit.ly/3jpKKfe</a>	March	web site Internet Chronicle	Trump
<b>Donald Trump's Harvard Rejection Letter</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3BaaBOq">https://bit.ly/3BaaBOq</a>	August	Image shared on social media	Trump
<b>Donald Trump's Parents Wore Ku Klux Klan Attire</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/30TbY7N">https://bit.ly/30TbY7N</a>	September	Image shared on social media	Trump
<b>Hillary Clinton 'Accidentally' Gave ISIS \$400 Million</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ngRBZD">https://bit.ly/3ngRBZD</a>	November	disreputable web sites	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton and #DraftOurDaughters</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3iqdIRI">https://bit.ly/3iqdIRI</a>	October	Fabricated tweets	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Arrested by FBI</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vCYHeT">https://bit.ly/3vCYHeT</a>	April	multiple web sites	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Bought \$137 Million Worth of Illegal Arms</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ngScKR">https://bit.ly/3ngScKR</a>	October	<i>WhatDoesItMean</i> web site	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Bribed for Her Iraq War Vote</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZcZwzq">https://bit.ly/2ZcZwzq</a>	March	web site US Uncut	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Cancels Event After 'Bizarre Eye Movements'</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3m7RuAt">https://bit.ly/3m7RuAt</a>	September	Youtube video	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Cut Her Tax Bill by 'Donating' \$1 Million to Herself via the Clinton Foundation</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ncVUVW">https://bit.ly/3ncVUVW</a>	October	Social Media meme	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Describes Her Major Accomplishments as Secretary of State</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vJat7C">https://bit.ly/3vJat7C</a>	October		Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Diagnosed with Vascular Dementia, Has One Year to Live</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GeJKo4">https://bit.ly/3GeJKo4</a>	September	Viral video	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Disbarred</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3b22dWH">https://bit.ly/3b22dWH</a>	March	Rumors	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Files for Divorce in New York Courts</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZfpSiS">https://bit.ly/2ZfpSiS</a>	November	Entertainment site Christian Times Newspaper	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Has a Seizure on Camera</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vz4cv0">https://bit.ly/3vz4cv0</a>	July	Rumors	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Has Run No Positive Political Ads?</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3b1IqPH">https://bit.ly/3b1IqPH</a>	October	Facebook image	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Is Actually Dead and Has Been Cloned</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3npFIX4">https://bit.ly/3npFIX4</a>	September	"Ascension with Mother Earth and Current	Clinton

			State of Affairs” blog	
<b>Hillary Clinton Leaked a Classified ‘Four-Minute’ Nuclear Response Window</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vFd5Dh">https://bit.ly/3vFd5Dh</a>	October	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Medical Records ‘Leaked’</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3G91LEx">https://bit.ly/3G91LEx</a>	August	Twitter account titled @HillsMedRecords	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Paid Actor to Impersonate Military Member</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3CiNBhg">https://bit.ly/3CiNBhg</a>	June	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Said ‘I Would Like to See People Like Donald Trump Run for Office’</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2XBF0Y1">https://bit.ly/2XBF0Y1</a>	October	entertainment web site <i>The Rightist</i>	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Said Children Should Be Raised by the State</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B7vvOj">https://bit.ly/3B7vvOj</a>	February	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Said Christians in America Must Deny Their Faith</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B83sxY">https://bit.ly/3B83sxY</a>	August		Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Seriously Injured in a Secret Plane Crash</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3jrNfOt">https://bit.ly/3jrNfOt</a>	September	Wikileaks	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Throws a Tantrum with Matt Lauer</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3psXF3W">https://bit.ly/3psXF3W</a>	October	Rumors	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton to Be Indicted on Federal Racketeering Charges</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3CiNFxG">https://bit.ly/3CiNFxG</a>	May	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Told ‘Seventeen’ She Didn’t Want Her Daughter Marrying a Black Man</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GgkzBQ">https://bit.ly/3GgkzBQ</a>	September	Social Media meme	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Touts Sharia Law as ‘Powerful New Direction’ for Women</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B4dsIH">https://bit.ly/3B4dsIH</a>	August	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Used a Teleprompter During the Presidential Debate</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ioIWEEn">https://bit.ly/3ioIWEEn</a>	September	alt-right conspiracy web sites	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Used Green Screen to Make a Fake Crowd in Nevada</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GgkzTR4">https://bit.ly/3GgkzTR4</a>	September	Youtube video	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Used Hand Signals to Rig Debate</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3vBkdR0">https://bit.ly/3vBkdR0</a>	September	alt-right web site True Pundit	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Used Model from Syphilis PSA</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3E4PDCI">https://bit.ly/3E4PDCI</a>	May	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton was reported dead on 11 September 2016, but was replaced by a body double.</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3b3Zooa">https://bit.ly/3b3Zooa</a>	September	convicted felon H. Turner’s disreputable site <i>SuperStation95</i>	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Was Responsible for the Waco Massacre</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B5XAFu">https://bit.ly/3B5XAFu</a>	September	conspiracy theory web sites	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Wears a Defibrillator</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3aYqtJk">https://bit.ly/3aYqtJk</a>	September	Rumors	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Went Topless in the 1960s</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3jrhSr">https://bit.ly/3jrhSr</a>	October	recirculated on the internet	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Wore ‘Secret Earpiece’ During Commander-in-Chief Forum</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3C83qaU">https://bit.ly/3C83qaU</a>	September	Circulated online	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Wore Blackface at a Costume Party</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3G9V4BX">https://bit.ly/3G9V4BX</a>	January	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton Wore Secret Earpiece During First Presidential Debate</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZnXtIB">https://bit.ly/2ZnXtIB</a>	September	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton: Supreme Court Exists to ‘Change and Shape the Law’</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3GeISzO">https://bit.ly/3GeISzO</a>	October	Social Media meme	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton’s ‘Sudden Move’ of \$1.8 Billion to Qatar Central Bank Stuns Financial World</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZgotJy">https://bit.ly/2ZgotJy</a>	October	fake new site <i>WhatDoesItMean.com</i>	Clinton
<b>Hillary Clinton’s approved to transfer control of 20% of U.S. uranium deposits to Russian company</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3m7bhQy">https://bit.ly/3m7bhQy</a>	February	Shared on social media	Clinton
<b>Jay Z Rapped the Words ‘Middle Finger to the Lord’ at Hillary Clinton Rally</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2ZcUWRK">https://bit.ly/2ZcUWRK</a>	November		Clinton
<b>Khizr Khan’s ‘Deep Legal and Financial Connections’ to Hillary Clinton</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3E7jDhe">https://bit.ly/3E7jDhe</a>	August	Breitbart	Clinton

<b>Maryland Doctor Who Treated Hillary Clinton for Blood Clot on Brain Mysteriously Dies</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3B9K3wG">https://bit.ly/3B9K3wG</a>	October		Clinton
<b>Michael Bloomberg Said Donald Trump Is a ‘Con Artist’ and a ‘Cheat’</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3m2Q22c">https://bit.ly/3m2Q22c</a>	September	Shared on social media	Trump
<b>Mother Teresa Tought Hillary Clinton a Lesson on Abortion</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3m5NPTv">https://bit.ly/3m5NPTv</a>	January	Catholic journal Crisis Magazine	Clinton
<b>New York Police Raid Hillary Clinton’s Property</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/2XCgXIP">https://bit.ly/2XCgXIP</a>	November	Clickbait web sites	Clinton
<b>Person Who Leaked Hillary Clinton’s Medical Records Found Dead</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3G91iIL">https://bit.ly/3G91iIL</a>	September	Rumors	Clinton
<b>Physician Confirm Hillary Clinton Has Parkinson’s Disease</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3ptOxMI">https://bit.ly/3ptOxMI</a>	September	"Dr. Drew" Pinsky speculation	Clinton
<b>Pope Forbid Catholics from Voting for Hillary Clinton</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3E3zXiU">https://bit.ly/3E3zXiU</a>	October	web site <i>Tell Me Now</i>	Clinton
<b>WikiLeaks Releases Candid Photos of Hillary Clinton Grabbing a Man’s Crotch</b>	<a href="https://bit.ly/3iolB4z">https://bit.ly/3iolB4z</a>	October	<i>TD Alliance</i> fake news site	Clinton



## Appendix B

### Fake Donald Trump Harvard Rejection Letter

HARVARD COLLEGE | Office of Admissions and Financial Aid  
Cambridge 38, Massachusetts



Donald J. Trump  
8514 Midland Parkway  
Queens  
NY 11432

1st April, 1964

Dear Mr. Trump,

The Committee on Admissions has completed its Regular Decision meetings, and I am very sorry to inform you that we cannot offer you admission to the Class of 1968. I wish that a different decision had been possible, but I hope that receiving our final decision now will be helpful to you as you make your college plans.

Past experience suggests that the particular college a student attends is far less important than what the student does to develop his strengths and talents over the next four years.

We very much appreciate the interest you have shown in Harvard College. We hope that you will accept the best wishes of the Committee for success in all your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chase Peterson".

Chase Peterson

Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid

WAD/lm

cc: to Cambridge Address

Fake Donald Trump Harvard rejection letter shared on social media. Adapted from *Donald Trump's Harvard Rejection Letter*. by D. Evon, 2016g. Retrieved from Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/donald-trumps-harvard-rejection-letter/>