



## In Focus

### Fake News

#### Introduction

The term “fake news” has become increasingly prominent in recent months. Researchers have reported a sharp growth in its use in the media since November 2016, after being largely in abeyance for many years.<sup>1</sup>

Fake news is not a new term. In the 20th Century, its popularity in the printed media rose from the end of the First World War to a peak in 1940—coinciding with the onset of the Second World War. Academic Kalev Leetaru, writing in *Forbes* magazine, suggested that this reflected “the rise of propaganda research and the impact that false information could have on societies” at that time.<sup>2</sup> The current resurgence of the term began soon after the US presidential election on 8 November 2016, when speculation began that false news stories concerning the two main candidates could have had an impact on the outcome of the election.

The stories in question included—among many others—claims that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump for the presidency,<sup>3</sup> that Hillary Clinton’s campaign team were involved in a satanic cult,<sup>4</sup> and, just after the election, that Trump supporters were engaging in racist chants at an election victory party.<sup>5</sup> An analysis by BuzzFeed has claimed that, “in the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more [reader] engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *NBC News* and others”.<sup>6</sup>

Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, researchers at Stanford University in California, have defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false”—particularly with political implications,<sup>7</sup> and especially those that gain “enormous traction” in the popular imagination.<sup>8</sup> It is related, though not identical, to the concept of “post-truth”, which, as Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016, has been defined as a situation where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.<sup>9</sup>

This briefing looks at the possible causes for the increase in concern around fake news, including changes in the nature of the news industry, the processes and algorithms that determine whether a story spreads online, and the deliberate exploitation of the social media system for financial or political gain. It further addresses potential responses for government and the web industry to the phenomenon of fake news. Lastly, it notes how and why some observers have questioned whether fake news is the problem that it might appear in the media.

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#### Background: Changes in the News Industry

According to a number of commentators, the news industry has been in major flux for decades. Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism observes that the dominance of traditional

journalism has been threatened by “the entrance of new media players, falls in advertising revenue and declining share values” for newspaper publishers.<sup>10</sup> The OECD has estimated that between 2007 and 2009, newspaper publishing revenues—particularly from advertising—fell by 21 percent in the UK and 30 percent in the US.<sup>11</sup> The fall in advertising revenue has also been exacerbated by readers’ move to viewing content online: in 2009, the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee heard that a print newspaper reader was “worth” £100 a year—while the average revenue from a website visitor was £2 a year and “probably falling”.<sup>12</sup> The Reuters Institute reports that this fall in revenue has led media companies to cut their staffing numbers, while the workload and scope of responsibilities for remaining staff have grown.<sup>13</sup> It has been reported that journalists are producing three times as much copy as they did 20 years ago, with journalists for online media producing the most—five to ten items a day.<sup>14</sup> It has been argued that journalists are under increasing pressure to produce stories that web readers will click on at the expense of the traditional journalistic value of objectivity.<sup>15</sup> The *Economist* has observed that harnessing people’s anger and fear is a particularly attractive way of meeting this ever-intensifying pressure—that messages of “outrage” will “fl[y] off the shelves”.<sup>16</sup>

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## Social Media: Who Determines What We See?

Social media, especially Facebook, has further influenced the way that news is disseminated and consumed. Facebook users upload content—either their own or links to that produced by others. Any user can upload anything with no editorial checking for accuracy. While Facebook will remove content that has been reported as violating its “community standards”—which have chiefly to do with sexual indecency, violence, hate speech, drugs and intellectual property<sup>17</sup>—there is no commitment to remove a news article for inaccurate reporting. As Allcott and Gentzkow observe, “content can be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. 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*”.<sup>18</sup>

Every post in Facebook is suffixed by “reaction” buttons, which the reader can press to show their emotional response to the content. The more reactions a post garners, the more likely it is to appear in the feeds of friends.<sup>19</sup> Facebook will also suggest commercially produced posts based on the user’s own record of reacting to similar items.<sup>20</sup>

Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, has argued that this leads to stories spreading purely because they arouse an emotional reaction in other readers, rather than because they are true.<sup>21</sup> He stresses that this matters, since a significant proportion of people now regard social media such as Facebook as their primary source of news rather than traditional news media. Estimates vary widely, but researchers think that these make up between 14 and 44 percent of the US public.<sup>22</sup>

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## Deliberate Exploitation of the Social Media System

Sir Tim Berners-Lee has stated that organisations wishing to “game the system to spread misinformation for financial or political gain”<sup>23</sup> can use knowledge of these algorithms for their own ends. For example, it emerged in 2016 that over 100 political news sites were being run by a group of teenagers in a provincial town in Macedonia, publishing highly partisan news stories—many false—that were designed to garner clicks and Facebook reactions and monetise these through advertising. One young man claimed to have made US \$16,000 from the advertising on his sites in August–November 2016.<sup>24</sup> Other investigations have found evidence that a large number of “hyperpartisan” news sites peddling false stories in the US, catering to both Republicans and Democrats, were in fact run by one company.<sup>25</sup>

In order to push sites up the rankings of social media pages, thereby increasing their reach, some producers of fake news have also created fake viewers, or “bots”, which are fake social media accounts

that post reactions to stories or share them on, in order to increase their spread.<sup>26</sup> This is frequently done to increase advertising revenue, but there have been accusations that bots have been used to influence political discourse in cases as varied as the UK referendum on EU membership, the 2014 elections in India and a number of elections in the US.<sup>27</sup>

Witnesses to the US Senate Intelligence Committee have claimed that a number of news websites were alleged to have worked with Russian-backed operatives to disseminate stories favouring Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election. It has further been alleged that these stories were disseminated at times intended to distract from unfavourable coverage Mr Trump was receiving in the mainstream media.<sup>28</sup> However, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has denied allegations of Russian interference in the US election.<sup>29</sup>

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## Potential Responses

### Regulation

There is currently no specific mechanism in the UK for dealing with fake news stories spread online through social media. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) applies to “newspapers and magazines” and their associated websites only, rather than to purely online publications, and then only to publications that sign up to its voluntary standards.<sup>30</sup> Inaccurate news in the broadcast media is dealt with under the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, which requires “due accuracy and due impartiality of news output” from organisations engaged in television and/or radio broadcasting (including their websites).<sup>31</sup> The House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee launched an inquiry into fake news in January 2017, calling for evidence touching on all the issues mentioned in this briefing and more.<sup>32</sup>

The European Commissioner responsible for digital media, Andrus Ansip, said in January that, while the Commission “believe[d] in self-regulatory measures”, if “some kind of clarifications” were needed at a regulatory level then the Commission would be prepared to make that happen.<sup>33</sup> However, there are concerns that this would have a negative effect on individuals’ freedom of speech over social media.

### Education and Awareness Raising

Professor Bill Dutton of the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University, has argued that “one of the only useful approaches” to dealing with fake news would be “to educate users about the need to critically assess information they are sent through email and by their friends and followers on social media”.<sup>34</sup> Tools for self-education already exist, such as a set of questions set out by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which can be asked of any article or report.<sup>35</sup> There are also websites that detect problematic information,<sup>36</sup> while a number of lists of fake news sites exist.<sup>37</sup>

### Industry Responses

It has been reported that the social media and web search industries are already taking steps to reduce the prevalence of fake news in people’s feeds.<sup>38</sup> Since March 2017, Facebook has begun showing pop-up warning signs to users when they are about to read or share content that comes from a site thought to produce fake news,<sup>39</sup> and has changed the way it chooses “trending” (that is, popular and worthy of promotion to readers) topics by prioritising topics “being covered by several publishers” rather than simply the topics garnering the most clicks.<sup>40</sup>

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## Counter-Argument—Is “Fake News” Fake News?

Some observers have claimed that the popularity and influence of fake news have been overstated. Professor Dutton argues that fake news is nothing new: conspiracy theories and a distrust of official narratives have been part of American life for decades, for example. He reasons that, in times of heightened tension and conflicting reports, from war to election rallies, it is only natural for claims to be disseminated that ultimately turn out to be incorrect or incomplete.<sup>41</sup>

He also cautions that some of the proposed solutions could “lead straight to more centralised censorship, or to regulation of social media as if they were broadcast media, newspapers, or other traditional media”.<sup>42</sup> The *Guardian* has written that fake news is “becoming a [...] phrase for anything people happen to disagree with”,<sup>43</sup> while the *Spectator* has called it a “catch-all excuse” for the mainstream media to explain why voters in both the US and the UK have been making choices antithetical to “elite” preferences.<sup>44</sup> In these circumstances, the *Guardian* has warned that the pressure for social media companies to remove stories considered to be fake news could result in “the suppression of alternative voices” and “the weeding out of viewpoints that are in conflict with established interests”.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kalev Leetaru, [‘Did Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg Coin the Term “Fake News”?’](#), *Forbes*, 17 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Snopes.com, [‘Nope Francis’](#), accessed 4 April 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Lee, [‘Marina Abramović Mention in Podesta Emails Sparks Accusations of Satanism’](#), *Guardian*, 4 November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Qiu, [‘No Evidence to Support Claims of “We Hate Muslims” Chant at Trump Victory Rally’](#), *Politifact*, 9 November 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Silverman, [‘This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook’](#), *Buzzfeed*, 16 November 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, [‘Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election’](#), March 2017, p 4.

<sup>8</sup> CBS News, [‘What’s “Fake News”? 60 Minutes Producers Investigate’](#), 26 March 2017, accessed 4 April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, [‘Word of the Year 2016 Is...’](#), accessed 10 April 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Philipp Rotwilm, [‘The Future of Journalistic Work: Its Changing Nature and Implications’](#), 2014, p 4.

<sup>11</sup> Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and David Levy, ‘The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy’, in David Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds), [‘The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy’](#), 2010, p 6.

<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [‘The Future of Local and Regional Media, evidence session of 16 June 2009’](#), cited in John Lloyd, ‘The Press We Destroy’, in David Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds), [‘The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy’](#), 2010, p 83.

<sup>13</sup> Philipp Rotwilm, [‘The Future of Journalistic Work: Its Changing Nature and Implications’](#), 2014, p 7.

<sup>14</sup> Tamara Witschge and Gunnar Nygren, [‘Journalism: A Profession Under Pressure?’](#), *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 2009, pp 38–43.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p 39; and Philipp Rotwilm, [‘The Future of Journalistic Work: Its Changing Nature and Implications’](#), 2014, p 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Economist*, [‘The Business of Outrage’](#), 15 October 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Facebook.com, [‘Community Standards’](#), accessed 4 April 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, [‘Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election’](#), 2017, p 2.

<sup>19</sup> Kim Komando, [‘Don’t Click “Like” on Facebook Again Until You Read This’](#), *Fox News Tech*, 27 February 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Greg Finn, [‘Facebook’s “Suggested Post” Ad Helps Push Page Content, No Connection Required’](#), *Marketing Land*, 26 October 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Berners Lee, [‘Three Challenges for the Web, According to its Inventor’](#), *Web Foundation*, 12 March 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, [‘Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election’](#), 2017, p 1; [HL Hansard, 8 February 2017, col 1727.](#)

<sup>23</sup> Tim Berners Lee, [‘Three Challenges for the Web, According to its Inventor’](#), *Web Foundation*, 12 March 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Samantha Subramanian, [‘Inside the Macedonian Fake News Complex’](#), *Wired*, 15 February 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Silverman, [‘This Is How Your Hyperpartisan Political News Gets Made’](#), *Buzzfeed*, 28 February 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Scott Pelley, [‘How Fake News Becomes a Popular, Trending Topic’](#), *CBS 60 Minutes*, 26 March 2017.

<sup>27</sup> *PBS Newshour*, [‘Cracking the Stealth Political Influence of Bots’](#), 26 October 2016.

<sup>28</sup> ABC7 Eyewitness News, [‘Russia Used Tech, Fake News to Influence US Election, Expert Tells Senate Intelligence Committee’](#), 30 March 2017; and Will Worley, [‘FBI “Investigating Role of Breitbart and Other Right-Wing Websites in Spreading Fake News with Bots”’](#), *Independent*, 21 March 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Shaun Walker, [‘“Read my Lips—No”: Putin Denies Russian Meddling in US Presidential Election’](#), *Guardian*, 30 March 2017.

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- <sup>30</sup> Independent Press Standards Organisation, '[Editors' Code of Practice](#)', accessed 6 April 2017.
- <sup>31</sup> Ofcom, '[Section Five: Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy](#)', accessed 10 April 2017.
- <sup>32</sup> House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee '["Fake News" Inquiry Launched](#)', 30 January 2017.
- <sup>33</sup> David Bond and Duncan Robinson, '[European Commission Fires Warning at Facebook over Fake News](#)', *Financial Times* (£), 30 January 2017.
- <sup>34</sup> Bill Dutton, '[Don't Panic Over Fake News](#)', Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 20 November 2016.
- <sup>35</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, '[How To Spot Fake News](#)', accessed 10 April 2017.
- <sup>36</sup> Eric Ravenscraft, '[BS Detector Lets You Know When You're Reading a Fake News Source](#)', Lifehacker, 17 November 2016.
- <sup>37</sup> Such as the frequently updated [Media Bias/Fact Check](#) website.
- <sup>38</sup> Bill Dutton, '[Don't Panic over Fake News](#)', Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 20 November 2016.
- <sup>39</sup> Elle Hunt, '["Disputed By Multiple Fact-checkers": Facebook Rolls Out New Alert to Combat Fake News](#)', *Guardian*, 22 March 2017
- <sup>40</sup> *Telegraph*, '[Facebook Takes Aim at "Fake News" with New "Trending" Formula](#)', 26 January 2017.
- <sup>41</sup> Bill Dutton, '[Don't Panic over Fake News](#)', Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 20 November 2016.
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Jonathan Allbright, '[Stop Worrying about Fake News. What Comes Next Will Be Much Worse](#)', *Guardian*, 9 December 2016.
- <sup>44</sup> James Delingpole, '[2017 Will Be One Long Vampire Scream from the Liberal Elite](#)', *Spectator*, 31 December 2016.
- <sup>45</sup> Jonathan Allbright, '[Stop Worrying about Fake News. What Comes Next Will Be Much Worse](#)', *Guardian*, 9 December 2016.

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