Combating Online Fiction

*Pramod Bhatnagar

ABSTRACT

Fake news websites deliberately publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation often using social media and seek to be perceived as legitimate often for financial or political gains (Mozur & Scott, 2016). Online fiction has influenced political discourse in multiple countries, including US, Germany, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sweden, China, Myanmar, UK and many more *(Martin & Åsberg, 2017). Early November 2016, two of the world's biggest internet companies faced criticism how fake news on their sites influenced US presidential elections. Google said it would ban websites that peddle fake news from using its online advertising service. Not totally ruling out the possibility of fictitious content on Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg said: "Of all the content on Facebook, more than 99 percent of what people see is authentic. Only a very small amount is fake news and hoaxe" However, he asserted that "the hoaxes that do exist are not limited to one partisan view, or even to politics." Summer 2017, Pew Research Centre and Elton University's Imagining the Internet Centre conducted a large canvassing of technologists, scholars, practitioners, strategic thinkers and others, asking them to react to this framing of the issue. Experts were evenly split on whether the coming decade will see a reduction in false and misleading narratives online. Those forecasting improvement placed their hopes in technological fixes and in societal solutions. Others think the dark side of human nature is aided more than stifled by technology.*

KEYWORDS: Fake News, Google, Facebook, Technology, Websites, Internet

*Dr. Pramod Bhatnagar, Professor, Amity School of Communication, Amity University Haryana

INTRODUCTION

According to Tavernise (New York Times, 7 December 2016) fake news on the internet carry fictitious articles deliberately fabricated to deceive readers, generally with the goal of profiting through click bait. Kertscher (2016) describes fake news fabricated content designed to fool readers and subsequently made viral through the Internet to crowds that increase its dissemination (PolitiFact: 13 December 2016).

Fake news websites deliberately publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation often using social media to amplify their effect. These news websites deliberately seek to be perceived as legitimate often for financial or political gains (Mozur & Scott: 17 November 2016).

Martin & Asberg (May, 2017) say such sites have consistently promoted political falsehoods all over the globe in many countries including Germany, Indonesia and the Philippines, Sweden, Myanmar, and the United States. Prior to the election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, fake news had not impacted the election process and the resultant events to such a high degree (Tavernise, 2016). Early November 2016, two of the world's biggest internet companies faced criticism how fake news on their sites.

Subsequent to the 2016 election, the issue of fake news assumed political shape with supporters of left-wing politics saying that supporters of right-wing politics spread false news, while the latter claimed that they were being "censored" (ibid.).

Besides US, fake news has influenced political discourse in multiple countries, including Germany, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sweden, China, Myanmar, and the United States (Martin & Åsberg, 2017).

Some derogatory postings to Facebook about Eva Glawischnig-Piesczek, Austrian Green Party Chairwoman helped Alexander van der Bellen, who won the election for President of Austria (Stephanie: The Washington Post, 17 December 2016). Brazil faced increasing influence from fake news after the 2014 re-election of President Dilma Rousseff and Rousseff's subsequent impeachment in August 2016 (Connolly, 2016).

In Canada, fake news online drew the attention of Canadian politicians in November 2016. Discussion in parliament contrasted increase of fake news online with downsizing of Canadian newspapers and the impact for democracy in Canada (Bruce, 2016).

The Wall Street Journal noted China's agenda of Internet censorship got strength and looked relevant at the World Internet Conference due to the outgrowth of fake news. The authorities used the issue of fake news as a

rationale for increasing Internet censorship in China in November 2016 (Emily, 2016). In Helsinki (Finland), officials from 11 countries held a meeting in November 2016, to plan the formation of a centre to combat

disinformation cyber-warfare including spread of fake news on social media (Yel, 2016).

France saw an upsurge in amounts of disinformation and propaganda, primarily in the midst of election

cycles. During the 10-year period preceding 2016, the country saw an increase in popularity of news sources (the fachosphere), known as the extreme right on the Internet (Connolly, 2016). In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel lamented the problem of fraudulent news reports in a November 2016 speech, days after announcing her campaign for a fourth term as leader of her country.

In a speech to the German parliament, Merkel warned that such fraudulent news websites were a force increasing the power of populist extremism (Agence France-Presse, 23 November 2016).

India had over 50 million accounts on the smartphone instant messenger   Whatsapp in 2016. On 8 November 2016, India demonetised 500 and 1,000 rupee notes. Fake news went viral over Whatsapp that the note came equipped with spying technology which tracked bills 120 meters below the earth. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley refuted the falsities, but not before they had spread to the country's mainstream news outlets (Zee News, 9 November 2016).

Fraudulent news has been particularly problematic in Indonesia and the Philippines, where social media has big political influence. According to media analysts, developing countries with new access to social media and democracy felt the fake news problem to a larger extent (Mozur & Scott, November 2016).

Horowitz reported in New York Times (2 December 2016) that during October and November 2016, ahead of the Italian constitutional referendum, five out of ten referendum-related stories with most social media participation were hoaxes or inaccurate.

In Myanmar in 2015, fake stories using unrelated photographs and fraudulent captions were shared online in support of the Rohingya leading to a rise in violence against Muslims in the country. Fake stories from Facebook were reprinted in paper periodicals Facebook and The Internet.

BuzzFeed News documented a direct relationship between fictitious contents and violence against Rihingya people (New York Magazine, 27 November 2016).

In Pakistan, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, the Minister of Defence of Pakistan, threatened to nuke Israel on Twitter after a false story quoting Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Minister of Defens.

The Israeli defence minister said: "If Pakistan send ground troops into Syria on any pretext, we will destroy this country with a nuclear attack" (Goldman Russel in New York Times, 24 December 2016).

Polish historian Jerzy Targalski observed there existed about 20 specific fake news websites in Poland which spread Russian disinformation in the form of fake news (Radio Poland, 18 November 2016).

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) identified Russia Today and Sputnik News as significant fake news purveyors (The Local, 27 July 2016).

In 2015 the Swedish Security Service issued a report identifying propaganda from Russia infiltrating Sweden with the objective to amplify pro-Russian propaganda and inflame societal conflicts.

In UK on 8 December 2016, Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) Alex Younger called fake news propaganda online as a "fundamental threat to our sovereignty". Deputy Leader of the Labour Party Thomas Watson in November 2016 wrote an article for The Independent where he suggested methods to respond to fake news, including Internet-based fact-check societies (Tom Watson in the Independent, 22 November 2016). Fraudulent stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential election popularized on Facebook included a viral post that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump, and another that actor Denzel Washington "backs Trump in the most epic way possible". AlterNet reported that Trump himself had been the source of some of the related misinformation over the years (Alyssa Newcomb, NBC News, and 15 November 2016).

Former U.S. President Barack Obama commented on fake news online in a speech the day before Election Day in 2016, saying social media spread lies and created a "dust cloud of nonsense".

On 9 December 2016, President Obama ordered U.S. Intelligence Community to conduct a total and complete review of the Russian propaganda operation (Chris Sanchez and Bryan Logan in Business Insider).

In his year-end press conference on December 16, 2016, President Obama criticized a hyper-partisan atmosphere for enabling the proliferation of fake news (Dovere & Edward-Isaac in Politico, 16 December 2016).

A Mediaite site reported that the top result on a Google search for "final election vote count 2016" was a link to a story on a website called 70News that wrongly declared Mr. Trump ahead of his Democratic challenger, Hillary Clinton, in the popular vote. Google said it would ban websites that peddle fake news from using its online advertising service. "The goal of search is to provide the most relevant and useful results for our users," Andrea Faville, a Google spokeswoman, said in a statement. "Moving forward, we will restrict ad serving on pages that misrepresent, misstate or conceal information about the publisher, the publisher's content or the primary purpose of the web property," Ms. Faville said. The policy change had been in the works for a while and was not in reaction to the election, she added. Facebook too, has repeatedly faced charges of inviting fake news stories. Many have accused that Facebook influenced the 2016 US elections by allowing doubtful websites run rampant with false and misleading

information. Early 2017, Buzzfeed News studied many fake news posts published on Facebook, and found that the reach of fake posts skyrocketed in 2016, during the lead-up to the presidential election. According to Michael Nunez (New York Times, 14 November 2017) another Buzzfeed investigation 2017 fall found that a group of young Macedonian publishers were running huge networks of popular Facebook pages filled with fake conservative news.

According to Buzzfeed, the networks were "targeted at Trump supporters in the US on websites such as TrumpVision365.com, USConservativeToday.com, and USADailyPolitics.com". "We can't read everything and check everything," Adam Mosseri, head of Facebook's news feed, said in an August TechCrunch interview. "So what we've done is we've allowed people to mark things as false. We rely heavily on the community to report content."   Not totally ruling out the possibility of fake content finding way to Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg said: "Of all the content on Facebook, more than 99 percent of what people see is authentic. Only a very small amount is fake news and hoaxes. The hoaxes that do exist are not limited to one partisan view, or even to politics." Gizmodo reports, Facebook executives conducted a review early 2017 to examine and eliminate any political bias in its contents. According to some insider information, an update was also planned to identify hoax news stories though Facebook issued no statement to this effect. Doubts attributed Facebook silence to avoiding the anger of any political group that the organization denied: "We did not build and withhold any News Feed changes based on their potential impact on any one political party. We always work to make News Feed more meaningful and informative, and that includes examining the quality and accuracy of items shared, such as clickbait, spam and hoaxes". Mark Zuckerberg also said, "I want to do everything I can to make sure our teams uphold the integrity of our products. This includes continuously reviewing updates to make sure we are not exhibiting unconscious bias". A 2016 study (The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online) analyzed 376 million Facebook users' interactions with over 900 news outlets. The study found that people "tend to seek information that aligns with their views".

Commenting on this finding Janna Anderson and Lee say this makes many vulnerable to accepting and acting on misinformation. "Misinformation is not like a plumbing problem you fix. It is a social condition, like crime, that you must constantly monitor and adjust to" (19 October 2017).

Tom Rosenstiel reports when BBC Future Now interviewed a panel of 50 experts in early 2017 about the "grand challenges we face in the 21st century" many named the breakdown of trusted information sources. "The major new challenge in reporting news is the new shape of truth," said Kevin Kelly, co-founder of Wired magazine.

"Truth is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers. For every fact there is a counter fact and all these counteract and facts look identical online, which is confusing to most people."

A Pew Research Center study conducted just after the 2016 election found 64 per cent of adults believe fake news stories cause a great deal of confusion and 23 per cent said they had shared fabricated political stories themselves – sometimes by mistake and sometimes intentionally.

In summer 2017, Pew Research Center and Elon University's Imagining the Internet Centre conducted a large canvassing of technologists, scholars, practitioners, strategic thinkers and others, asking them to react to this framing of the issue. Experts were evenly split on whether the coming decade will see a reduction in false and misleading narratives online. Those forecasting improvement placed their hopes in technological fixes and in societal solutions. Others think the dark side of human nature is aided more than stifled by technology. The question posed to all of them was: In the next 10 years, will trusted methods emerge to block false narratives and allow the most accurate information to prevail in the overall information ecosystem?

Or will the quality and veracity of information online deteriorate due to the spread of unreliable, sometimes even dangerous, socially destabilizing ideas?

Out of some 1,116 who responded 51 per cent said that the information environment will not improve, and 49 per cent said the information environment will improve.

The 51per cent who said things will "not improve" over all cited two reasons:

a. The fake news ecosystem preys on some of our deepest human instincts: Humans' primal quest for success and power and their "survival" instinct will continue to degrade the online information environment as manipulative actors will use new digital tools to take advantage of humans' inbred preference for comfort and convenience.

b. Our brains cannot match the pace of technological change: The rising speed, reach and efficiencies of the internet and emerging online applications will magnify these human tendencies where fake information crowds out reliable information with widespread information scams and mass manipulation in civic life.

The 49 per cent of the experts who expected things to improve generally believed:

a. Technology will help fix these problems: The rising speed, reach and efficiencies of the internet, apps and platforms will rein in fiction and misinformation campaigns and better methods would create and promote trusted, fact-based news sources.

b. It is human nature to come together and fix problems: Misinformation and bad actors have always existed but have eventually been marginalized by smart people and processes. As well-meaning actors

c. will work together to find ways to enhance the information environment, better information literacy among citizens will enable people to judge the veracity of material content.

REFERENCES

[1] Ali Watkins; Sheera Frenkel (30 November 2016). Intel Officials Believe Russia Spreads Fake News. BuzzFeed News, 1 December 2016.

[2] Bartolotta, Devin (9 December 2016). Hillary Clinton Warns About Hoax News On Social Media, WJZ-TV.

[3] Bump, Philip (14 November 2016). Google's top news link for 'final election results' goes to a fake news site with false numbers. The Washington Post.

[4] Carlos Merlo (2017). Millonario negocio FAKE NEWS, Univision Noticias.

[5] Cheadle, Bruce (17 November 2016). As fake news spreads, MPs consider importance of Canada's local papers. CTV News, the Canadian Press.

[6] Chen, Adrian (27 July 2016). The Real Paranoia-Inducing Purpose of Russian Hacks. The New Yorker.

[7] Chris Sanchez; Bryan Logan (9 December 2016). "The CIA says it has evidence that Russia tried to help Trump win the US election", Business Insider.

[8] Chung-Yan, Chow (November 26, 2016). How the Google and Facebook era drove news back to yellow press excesses. South China Morning Post

[9] "Concern over barrage of fake Russian news in Sweden", The Local, 27 July 2016.

[10] Connolly, Kate; Chrisafis, Angelique; McPherson, Poppy; Kirchgaessner, Stephanie; Haas, Benjamin; Phillips, Dominic; Hunt, Elle; Safi, Michael (2016-12-02). Fake news: an insidious trend that's fast becoming a global problem. The Guardian.

[11] Dovere, Edward-Isaac (16 December 2016). "Obama: Trump's victory threatens America's core". Politico.

[12] "Facebook Fake News Writer Reveals How He Tricked Trump Supporters and Possibly Influenced Election". The Hollywood Reporter, 18 November 2016.

[13] Frenkel, Sheera (20 November 2016) This Is What Happens When Millions Of People Suddenly Get The Internet. BuzzFeed News.

[14] Gilbert, Ben (15 November 2016). Fed up with fake news, Facebook users are solving the problem with a simple list. Business Insider.

[15] Goldman, Russell (December 24, 2016). Reading Fake News, Pakistani Minister Directs Nuclear Threat at Israel. The New York Times.

[16] "Google and Facebook target fake news sites with advertising clampdown". Belfast Telegraph, 15 November 2016.

[17] Gunaratna, Shanika (15 November 2016). Facebook, Google announce new policies to fight fake news, CBS News.

[18] Jacobson, Louis (14 November 2016) No, Donald Trump is not beating Hillary Clinton in the popular vote. PolitiFact.com.

[19] Kertscher, Tom (13 December 2016). "PolitiFact's Lie of the Year 2016: Fake news", Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

[20] Kate Connolly; Angelique Chrisafis; Poppy McPherson; Stephanie Kirchgaessner; Benjamin Haas; Dominic Phillips; Elle Hunt (2 December 2016). Fake news: an insidious trend that's fast becoming a global problem - With fake online news dominating discussions after the US election. The Guardian.

[21] Kirchner, Stephanie (14 December 2016). Menace of fake news is rattling politicians in Austria and Germany. The Washington Post.

[22] Kragh, Martin; Åsberg, Sebastian (5 January 2017). Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case. Journal of Strategic Studies.

[23] LaCapria, Kim (2 November 2016). Snopes' Field Guide to Fake News Sites and Hoax Purveyors. Snopes.com.

[24] Lewis Sanders IV (11 October 2016). Divide Europe': European lawmakers warn of Russian propaganda. Deutsche Welle.

[25] Newcomb, Alyssa (15 November 2016). "Facebook, Google Crack Down on Fake News Advertising". NBC News.

[26] Paul Mozur; Mark Scott (17 November 2016).Fake News on Facebook? In Foreign Elections, That's Not New. The New York Times.

[27] Rauhala, Emily (17 November 2016). After Trump, Americans want Facebook and Google to vet news. So does China. The Washington Post.

[28] Read, Max (27 November 2016. "Maybe the Internet Isn't a Fantastic Tool for Democracy After All", New York Magazine.

[29] Ribeiro, John (14 November 2016) Zuckerberg says fake news on Facebook didn't tilt the elections, Computerworld.

[30] "Russian propaganda effort likely behind flood of fake news that preceded election". PBS

[31] NewsHour, Associated Press, 25 November 2016.

[32] "Russian propaganda campaign reportedly spread 'fake news' during US election". Nine News, Agence France-Presse, 26 November 2016.

[33] Soll, Jacob (December 18, 2016). The Long and Brutal History of Fake News. Politico.

[34] Silverman, Craig (15 December 2016) Facebook Is Turning To Fact Checkers To Fight Fake News, BuzzFeed News.

[35] Spread of Fake News Provokes Anxiety in Italy, The New York Times.

[36] Strohm, Chris (1 December 2016. Russia Weaponized Social Media in U.S. Election, FireEye Says, Bloomberg News.

[37] Sydell, Laura (23 November 2016), We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here's What We Learned, All Things Considered, National Public Radio.

[38] Tavernise, Sabrina (7 December 2016). As Fake News Spreads Lies, More Readers Shrug at the Truth. The New York Times.

[39] Tynan, Dan (24 August 2016). How Facebook powers money machines for obscure political 'news' sites - From Macedonia to the San Francisco Bay, clickbait political sites are cashing in on Trumpmania – and they're getting a big boost from Facebook. The Guardian.

[40] Waterson, Jim (8 December 2016) MI6 Chief Says Fake News And Online Propaganda Are A Threat To Democracy. BuzzFeed News.

[41] , The Independent.

[42] Weisburd, Andrew; Watts, Clint (6 August 2016). Trolls for Trump - How Russia Dominates Your Twitter Feed to Promote Lies (And, Trump, Too),

[43] Wemple, Erik (8 December 2016). Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg says people don't want 'hoax' news. Really?. The Washington Post.

[44] Woolf, Christopher (December 8, 2017). Back in the 1890s, fake news helped start a war. Public Radio International.