A Brief History of Fake News

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I first learned about fake news in 2014 from my friend and colleague Vera Lux, who saved me from believing this story:

As a result of last year’s presidential election, however, fake news is now part of our popular lexicon. While the term has been applied to many things – including satire, humor, and, if you’re Donald Trump, any media coverage you don’t like – I am interested in the cat coat lady brand of fake news specifically; that is, mostly or completely fabricated stories created to look like real news and published often with the intent to deceive others into believing they are true.

These kinds of fake news items fit Fallis’s definition of disinformation: “misleading information that has the function of misleading.” As such they are very different from what we thought of as “fake news” as recently as just a few years ago – programs that use the trappings and format of mainstream television news to comment on current events, such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, or Saturday Night Live’s Weekend Update segment, or the Onion: i.e., entertainment parodying news. While people have

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certainly mistaken information in the Onion, in particular, for real news (including, recently, my aunt; see illustration), Onion articles are not published with the intent to deceive. Fake news sites, on the other hand, spoof the design, branding and sometimes even names of legitimate news organizations in order to fool readers into thinking their stories are real. They include sites like abcnews.com.co and Now 8 News, and have included sites with names like The Boston Tribune, the Denver Guardian and newyorktimespolitics.com. In the weeks leading up to the election, Facebook users engaged with fictional stories from sites like these hundreds of thousands of times more than stories from legitimate, mainstream news organizations. Stories from these sites were shared by people in positions of power in campaigns, including Corey Lewandowski, one of Trump’s campaign managers, Trump’s son Eric, and Mike Pence, and may have played a part in the outcome of the election.

These sites didn’t come out of nowhere, but they are less the descendants of the Onion than they are of ultra-partisan blogs and clickbait websites, and their success is the direct result of social media’s unique ability to amplify messages, eliminate diversity of opinion, and focus influence.

Where do these sites come from and how do they work?

You have probably heard about the hundreds of fake news websites registered in Eastern Europe, particularly Macedonia, but also Georgia and Romania. Almost all of them were registered in 2016.

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Their publishers usually copy and paste, verbatim, content they find elsewhere online and seed them onto existing Facebook pages for conservative groups and Trump supporters, sometimes using fake Facebook accounts that were purchased in bulk. Some experimented with content created for liberal and Democratic audiences, but found that stories written to appeal to Trump supporters gained the most traction.\(^5\)

Where does this plagiarized content come from? Search for a story from any fake news site, and you will always find it elsewhere. This story on EndingTheFed dated January 6 was published the day before on Breitbart.\(^6\)

By all accounts, overseas websites are merely re-using content from right wing and fake-news sites produced in the West, rushing to cash in on a model that had already proved to be profitable in North America. Californian Jestin Coler owns a company called Disinfomedia and produces 25 fake-news sites including National Report (registered in 2013) and the Denver Guardian. He told NPR he employs up to two dozen writers at a time who get paid based on how much web traffic their stories produce.\(^7\)

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Horner began writing for National Report in 2013 and now runs abcnews.com.co and other websites; he was responsible for the November 2016 story that claimed people were paid to protest Trump events (in the story, he even names the paid protestor Paul Horner). He told the Washington Post, “I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me.” The Washington Post also profiled the producers of LibertyWritersNews, Paris Wade and Ben Goldman, who are originally from Tennessee and now produce their fake news site from California.

All follow the same formula to make money – publish an outlandish story and post it to Facebook. Google AdSense (or other ad networks) automatically display ads on the sites, and traffic driven to them triggers payments for impressions (number of times the ad is displayed to site visitors) or clicks (some of which, of course, are unintentional). Coler, Horner, Wade, Goldman, and anonymous sources from overseas all told reporters they earned thousands of dollars a month in the runup to the election.

Most of the sites that have been identified as being produced overseas are already offline. Now that the election is over and Facebook and Google have passed new rules about vetting websites and using AdSense, some have ceased to become profitable. Some website producers have said they plan to segue their sites into publishing (or plagiarizing) sensational headlines about sports, celebrities, health (already popular for fake news from overseas), or cars. Others redirect to new domains. Jestin Coler said he was unfazed by the new guidelines, saying there are many ad networks to work with other than Google. Even so, National Report looks like it hasn’t produced any new content in a month and the Denver Guardian’s home page is blank. LibertyWritersNews is still active, however, and still populated with ads.

It makes sense to see these sites as partly the children of supermarket tabloids like the National Enquirer, The National Examiner, and the Weekly World News. It’s easy to dismiss these publications as ridiculous, but their relationship to traditional journalism is actually stronger than you might imagine. The National Enquirer reporters broke a number of stories that became popular in the mainstream media. Many other stories were written by scouring the mainstream media for leads and expanding them, with speculation and sensationalism, into larger stories. Even outrageous stories about events like alien abductions were usually not completely fabricated; instead, writers found sources who really believed in the events they described and experts who would vouch for their plausibility. However the tabloids did make some things up, also. The National Examiner published what they called “Top of Head” stories, which was a euphemism for a story that was pure fiction, but historian Paula Morton claims these were phased out in the 1990s.

In his book Newslore, Russell Frank wrote about news-based folklore: verbal and visual jokes that require knowledge of political news to “get.” In this genre he includes fake news generators and Photoshopped pictures spread via email forwards, like this one of President Bush holding a children’s book upside down (image available from https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2002/11/02/15409181.php).

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“Newslore is subversive,” Frank writes. “It violates the rules of deference and discretion when it comes to authority figures, bodily functions, and social conflict in a way that ... is, at bottom, quite moralistic: its target is hypocrisy.”¹¹ Like the producers of newslore, fake-news writers see their work as offering commentary on how information is produced and consumed. Like newslore, fake news critiques a news cycle that focuses on the centers of power and ignores the thoughts and opinions of the non-elite. It taps into the suspicion that the powerful are withholding information or masking truth for their own gain. “While much newslore is grounded in skepticism...much of it feeds on credulousness,” Frank writes. “It is because we disbelieve the noble version of President Bush offered to us ...that we are susceptible to the most preposterous caricatures.”¹²

Frank looked for updated newslore just as his book was going to press, in 2008. Despite the ongoing presidential election, he says he found little evidence of new verbal and visual jokes. Instead, he was surprised to find more items related to political rumor – rumor of the type that surrounded John Kerry’s candidacy in the 2004 election and which was accompanied by a fake-news photo designed to deceive. The image combined a photo of John Kerry on a speaker’s platform at an anti-war rally in 1971 with a photo of Jane Fonda speaking at a different anti-war rally in 1972, and the headline and caption were manufactured to look like it appeared in a contemporary newspaper. The photo was a damaging visual created to bolster rumors about Kerry’s service and cast his postwar activities in the worst possible light. But it was, at least, somewhat related to fact – the photo does show Kerry at an anti-war protest, he and Fonda did attend the same anti-war protest (though not this one), and there is a photo that captures both of them there – it is just not as effective as the composite photo.¹³

This is the type of newslore that Frank felt was gaining traction in 2008. Not jokes, but rumors and manufactured stories to bolster them. “Rumors, though related to folklore, particularly legends, lack an artistic dimension,” Frank wrote. “They’re not clever. They are more fake news than commentary on the

¹² Ibid., 195.
¹³ Ibid.
real news – which makes them more dangerous.” Chief among these was, of course, the rumor Obama was not born in the United States, a rumor which was so persistent, the President released his birth certificate in 2011, after Donald Trump gave the story new life. But there was also the rumor he was a Muslim and was sworn into office on a Koran, that Hugo Chavez provided financial backing for his candidacy, and that he is the anti-Christ. These rumors were spread via email and sometimes cited or alluded to mainstream media sources for their origin – not unlike the way the doctored Kerry photo used visual cues from mainstream media to bolster its legitimacy. For example, the original Chavez rumor cites a Fox news story for its source; in another instance, an email that spread a false Obama quote about wealth distribution ascribed the quote to an interview in the Wall Street Journal. It is a relatively short leap from falsely citing real news stories (which can be easily fact-checked) or vaguely referencing unnamed news sources (which are cues the story is a hoax or legend) to creating sources that look and sound like news and just say whatever you want them to say.

In the 2012 book *Web of Deceit*, Eli Edwards says the rumors about Obama’s heritage and religion “are a symptom of how the demonizing of people who look or seem different from ‘us’ has taken hold on the internet and through social media, making it increasingly difficult to address and debunk rumors outright.” One thing I find interesting is how closely tied the 2016 election fake news is to white nationalism. Wade and Goldman got their start writing fake news for white supremacist sites in 2015. Justin Coler says he started writing fake news stories in 2013 to “highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right.” The rumors and fake news that spread in the years leading up to the 2016 election, from Obama being a Muslim to Sharia law being implemented in Dearborn, often targeted people of different races and religions and trafficked in the same kind of disinformation spread by white nationalist groups. They spread first via email forwards and then via social media.

For example, Pizzagate started as a Facebook rumor that was Tweeted by a white supremacist Twitter account and then picked up by a conspiracy theory message board before it was mentioned on a fake-news site. The rumor then further spread to other fake-news and conspiracy websites, including the white-supremacist Daily Stormer, embellished on Twitter and 4chan along the way. We all know this story had real-world consequences, with actual shots being fired in a DC business in December of last year, when a follower of the rumor came to investigate.

Why do people believe fake news?

People process information with a bias towards reinforcing their existing opinions. Kahne and Bowyer found young people’s existing political preferences influenced their degree of belief in misinformation presented on social media. Nyhan and Reifler found that correcting misinformation will often cause

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14 Ibid., 189.
16 McCoy, “‘New Yellow Journalists.’”
17 Sydell, “‘We Tracked Down.’”
people to believe it more, which they call a backfire effect.\textsuperscript{20} Kuklinski et al confirmed this and concluded that “in general, citizens tend to resist facts.”\textsuperscript{21}

Garrett found that, in the 2008 election, email forwards were largely responsible for the acceptance of false rumors because they were “especially persuasive.” In a social network, like the network of people linked by your email contacts list or your Facebook page, a person is more likely to a) see a rumor, b) believe it and c) pass it on. The more rumors a person encounters, the more likely he or she is to believe them, and the more rumors someone believes, the more political email he or she forwards. This is why social networks like these create feedback loops that reinforce particular political beliefs, even those based on misinformation. Garrett found that the web itself didn’t promote rumor belief – using email did, and was sanguine about the idea that this would apply to Facebook as well.\textsuperscript{22}

It does. The Wall Street Journal constructed “Blue feed Red feed” by pulling Facebook posts from sources with a certain threshold of followers determined to be conservative or liberal.\textsuperscript{23} None of the posts I looked at were entirely fake news – instead, like this item that linked to an article in the “US Herald,” they followed the tabloids’ style of using a minor story from a mainstream news outlet, giving it a misleading headline, exaggerating the substance of the story, and using it to draw an inflammatory conclusion. Many included lines like this one does encouraging others to share or like the content – knowing this would raise the writer or publisher’s revenue from the story.

The blue feed definitely included questionable sources, such as Reverb Press and Addicting Info. But it also included stories from respected media outlets like Salon, Slate and the New Republic. The only

legitimate source I saw in the red feed was William Buckley’s National Review. Fake news is far more prevalent on the right than the left. I looked at 50 randomly-chosen sites categorized as “fake” on Dr. Melissa Zimdars’ list of “False, Misleading Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical ‘News’ Sources.” Nearly half (24) were right-leaning, 12 were defunct, and only 1 had a left-directed bias. Surprisingly, several were neutral, like the Boston Leader, which fooled even me.

What can we do?

Metzger presents two models for evaluating the credibility of information. The first is the checklist model, and it is definitely the most common model librarians offer for evaluating sources. Checklist models recommend users consider factors such as the professionalism of the platform, the expertise and motivation of the author/producer, and the depth, breadth and currency of the information. However, studies have shown that, in practice, users take most of their evaluative cues from how a website looks and do not address other issues on a checklist properly or at all.

A second model is contextual, which involves first choosing sources from a narrowed information pool that is better suited to the information need (for example, using a library database of peer-reviewed articles instead of Google for research for a paper), comparing sources that cover the same information to reveal the nuances of a topic, and finding more than one source to corroborate a piece of information. In a contextual model, multiple sources help the information seeker evaluate the sources in relation to one another and use this to inform conclusions about each.

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Debunkers like Snopes, Politifact and FactCheck.org are helpful for individual stories, but can’t always reveal the bias that distorts a nugget of truth into propaganda. Metzger recommends institutions adopt services or tools that will vet sources and teach users how to use them, and there are some browser extensions you can install that will annotate sources in your Facebook feed and online. Online sources like Zimdars’ list can be useful for teaching users about the reliability of websites. Libraries have also offered workshops and created physical and online guides to help people identify fake news.

In 2000, Kuklinski et al wrote, "There are two conditions that a democratic polity must meet to avoid bankruptcy. First, its citizens must have ready access to factual information that facilitates the evaluation of public policy...Second, citizens must then use these facts to inform their preferences." Unfortunately, they found we fail on both points. This gives us a political situation perfect for exploitation by even the most unsophisticated operators, which is indeed what happened in the last election. My friend Vera thinks the new awareness of fake news will cause people to demand better vetting of sources. But I am more worried. The Trump administration has already co-opted the term fake news in order to further discredit the media we should trust the most. CNN and the New York Times were prevented from attending a White House press briefing in February. Rex Tillerson dismantled the press pool that travels with the Secretary of State and took only a reporter from the Independent Journal Review to Asia with him, a source Media Bias/Fact Check describes as highly right-biased. Deliberately eroding trust in the mainstream media and denying it access to political elites is a deeply troubling development that no amount of checklists or debunkers or library workshops can combat – only resistance.

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