Fake News Prompts Civil Unrest and Threatens Homeland Security

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Fake News Has Real Consequences: How Fake News Causes Civil Unrest & Threatens Homeland Security

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Abstract

This essay investigates the links of fake news as it relates to civil unrest, homeland security, and threats to public safety. The goal is to explore how social media gave rise to fake news and how fake news has led to random acts of violence and civil unrest in the United States. The essay also explores the increased distrust of mainstream media outlets and the broader implications of fake news as it relates to disrupting governments from abroad.
Area of Interest

The area of interest for this essay is the cause-effect-relationships of fake news and homeland security. There is interest in analyzing how fake news stories by non-accredited news sources lead to civil unrest and endanger the lives of American citizens.

Research Questions

Have false news stories cause civil unrest and random acts of violence?

Have false news stories had international and national implications as it pertains to homeland security?

Discussion

As advancements in communication become more available, so has the ability for individuals to distribute news that is unchecked, unverified, and lacking fact. Many publishers of false news publicize stories, not necessarily because they believe what they are sharing, but because they can monetize on their publications; so long as it appears on the surface to sound true and align with the beliefs of conspiracy theorist. Such stories endanger the lives of story subjects and have the potential to threaten the security of a country’s homeland.

On December 4, 2016, law enforcement officers from the northwest Washington D.C. area responded to Comet Ping Pong Pizza after North Carolinian, Edgar Welch, was reported to have fired one or more shots inside the restaurant. The man told police he had come to the
restaurant to “self-investigate” claims that former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager, John Podesta, were running a child sex ring and using the pizza restaurant as a front for the illegal activity. The story began with a message on the social media networking website ‘Twitter’ posted on October 30th. Just two days prior to the “tweet”, a vernacular commonly used to describe a message posted on the social networking site, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) announced they were reopening an investigation into the emails of Hillary Clinton and John Podesta. A person, whose name remained unverified at the time of this essay, stated in the tweet that new emails found on American politician Anthony Weiner’s computer confirmed that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta were engaged in an international child enslavement ring. The tweet also included a shared post from the social media networking website ‘Facebook’ profile of Carmen Katz which stated,

My NYPD source said its [sic] much more vile and serious than classified material on Weiner’s device. The email DETAIL the trips made by Weiner, Bill and Hillary on their pedophile billionaire friend’s plane, the Lolita Express. Yup, Hillary has a well-documented predilection for underage girls, and Mr. Weiner just could not bear to see those details deleted. We’re talking an international child enslavement ring.”

An internet search revealed that on October 31, 2016 the Facebook post and tweet were shared by websites younewswire.com, 4chan.com, reddit.com, and several websites supporting the election of President-Elect Donald Trump. Simultaneously, right-wing bloggers, activist, and popular podcast host began broadcasting the accusations as truth. As the rumors began to spread, several internet users searched emails previously leaked by the self-proclaimed non-profit
organization, WikiLeaks for proof of Clinton and Podesta’s involvement and the location of the
sex ring. Many email readers found several references to “pizza” in John Podesta’s email and
connected the word to a slang definition found in the urban dictionary. It should be noted that at
the time of this essay, a search of the term pizza in the urban dictionary states pizza is, “A code
name for rough sex, commonly used by bored couples at a formal affair. No one knows what
pizza means, so it can be used around anyone.” Searches concluded that John Podesta and email
recipients were speaking in code. One email came from Comet Ping Pong Pizza owner James
Alefantis inviting John Podesta to his restaurant for a fundraiser being hosted by his restaurant.

A search of hashtags and post of other users using the Twitter and Facebook content
platforms Tweet deck and Hootsuite revealed that around the same time emails were being
evaluated by email searchers, users began sharing photos from Alefantis’s Instagram account.
One photo depicted Alefantis’s God daughter with her hands taped to a ping pong table located
in the restaurant. Another photo depicted a room conspiracy theorist believed to be a basement
the illegal activity was secretly taking place. A later investigation revealed the space depicted in
the photo was a commercial space Alefantis considered leasing. It also revealed the Comet Ping
Pong Pizza restaurant did not have a basement on the premises. Meanwhile, websites like
wearechange.org continued to circulate the rumor as news.
By November 4, 2016, Alefantis began receiving threatening phone calls. According to a search of Twitter and Instagram, the hashtag #pizzagate first appeared on November 7, 2016. A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) to identify messages about a specific topic or genre. Hashtags are most commonly used on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram.

Figure 1. Photo shared by James Alefantis on social media website Instagram depicting God daughter with arms taped to ping pong table. Source: James Alefantis Instagram Account: https://www.instagram.com/jimmycomet/
In an interview with Fox News Network anchor Megyn Kelly, James Alefantis stated that after the social media post were shared by conspiracy theorist, several people would enter the restaurant and order food in a manner that he described as odd and with skepticism. He also noted that beginning on or around November 16, 2016, several people began coming to the business and appeared to use their cell phones to capture video of employees and groups of children patronizing the restaurant. Following the shooting incident on December 4th, Washington Metropolitan Police Department spokeswoman Aquita Brown said, “During a post-arrest interview this evening, the suspect revealed that he came to the establishment to self-investigate ‘Pizza Gate’ (a fictitious online conspiracy theory),”

**Figure 2.** Photo shared by James Alefantis on social media website Instagram of commercial space he considered renting. Source: James Alefantis Instagram Account: [https://www.instagram.com/jimmycomet/](https://www.instagram.com/jimmycomet/)
Stories such as this represent a growing problem in the mainstream media wherein stories are not vetted or verified prior to being broadcasted to the public. It also represents how the invention of social media and modern methods of communication has led to a growing epidemic of bloggers, content generators, and non-experienced individuals proclaiming themselves as legitimate news organizations. Even more concerning is the propensity for individuals to draw their own nexus and conclusions based on random searchers of social media and internet content based on their predetermined beliefs. Without any factual basis, individuals have developed the habit of taking parts of information they gather from the internet and molding it into a form of mixed ideas that appear to be legitimate information.

According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 62 percent of people surveyed in the United States get their news from social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit (Pew, 2016). Of the 62 percent, only 2 percent of all U.S. adults get their news from Reddit, the study suggests. Among Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, other websites like YouTube and Tumblr received high marks. At 44 percent, Facebook showed to be the most popular source for news among the social media platforms.
The study also suggested an individual’s age also determines which social media platform they use for news. Researchers found younger users tend to look for news on Instagram while individuals who possess a higher education degree tend to look for news on LinkedIn (Pew, 2016).

In an age where content creators are looking for “likes”, popularity, and a way to monetize on their post, websites who choose not to spend money going through the same accreditation processes as mainstream media organizations are sharing information that they call news even though they do not hold themselves to the same standards as credible journalist or reliable news sources. Some of the information shared on these websites are to sway voters, gaining partisan favor, or providing false evidence to serve interest groups. Websites such as
Fake News Consequences

these pose a real danger to reality and can cause unwarranted civil unrest and nationwide instability.

One such example is the incident involving Michael Brown, an African American male in Ferguson Missouri who was shot and killed by Ferguson, Missouri Police Officer Darren Wilson. According to the New York Times timeline review, on August 9, 2014 Missouri resident Michael Brown was walking in the middle of street when Ferguson Police Officer Wilson ordered Brown to the sidewalk. A few seconds later, Brown and the officer became entangled in a physical struggle through the open driver-side window of the police vehicle. Most eyewitness accounts claim Officer Wilson shot Michael Brown while the officer was still in the vehicle. The same majority also claim that at some point Officer Wilson exited his vehicle and fired at Michael Brown. However, these claims were in dispute. Throughout the reporting of the incident the New York Times, along with other news agencies, contend that how the encounter began is in dispute. Few witnesses reported seeing Michael Brown approach the officer’s driver side window and assault the officer. Witnesses who did provide evidence of the incident only shared videos depicting an obscured view of Michael Brown along with the sounds of gunfire. Additional videos only showed Michael Brown laying in the street after the shooting. Some of the videos had already been shared on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter before being surrendered to police and ignited tension across the nation. Mainstream media outlets across the nation shared the content along with the narratives that suggested Michael Brown had his hands up and was surrendering to Officer Wilson prior to being shot.
By August 10th, angry residents took to the streets and demanded justice for the black man who was falsely reported on social media to have had his hands up as a sign of surrender prior to being gunned down by the white police officer. “Hand up, don’t shoot!” became the protesters rally cry and by nightfall, looters began to destroy businesses and set fire to police resources. More than 30 people are arrested and two polices are injured (Brown, 2015). Before national reporters could reach Ferguson, Missouri, pictures and videos of the protest and the police militarized presence began to circulate on Twitter. Patrick Ruffin, a digital analytics strategist with echeloninsight.com share a graph on Twitter depicting the rapid growth of tweets using the hashtag #Ferguson. His graph showed that the number of tweets reached nearly 4,000 from zero only nine hours after the incident occurred.

**Figure 4.** Chart illustrating the rise in “tweets” using the hashtag #Ferguson following the shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson. Source: Patrick Ruffin Twitter status: https://twitter.com/PatrickRuffini/status/499754709377642496
The false news reporting and subsequent protest prompted a statement to be issued by the President of the United States, Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder on August 12, 2016 regarding the Michael Brown incident. Shortly after, in a speech given by President Obama at the Congressional Black Caucus Awards Dinner he stated, “Too many young men of color feel targeted by law enforcement, guilty of walking while black, or driving while black, judged by stereotypes that fuel fear and resentment and hopelessness.” (Obama, September 2014) in response to continued civil unrest in Ferguson Missouri over the false news reported on the Michael Brown incident. Following the announcement on November 24, 2014, by the grand jury that they would not seek an indictment of Officer Darren Wilson, protest broke out again in Ferguson, Missouri and other cities across the United States, including Los Angeles, Oakland, Albuquerque, New York, St. Louis, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland, Seattle, and Atlanta (BBC, 2014). Protesters and pundits promoted the rally cry of “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot.”, continuously reinforcing the false news story that Michael Brown had his hands up in surrender prior to being shot by the police officer. Emergency services across the nation were stretched as they tried to address violent protest, burning buildings, and vulnerable infrastructure; all while maintaining normal daily operations.

In a report published by the Justice Department on March 4, 2015, investigators concluded that witness accounts stating Michael Brown surrendered with his hands up didn’t support the prosecution of Wilson. More specifically, the Justice Department decided not to pursue charges against Officer Wilson because, per the report, the evidence and accounts by witnesses suggested that Wilson shot Michael Brown multiple times as the black teenager continue to advance towards the officer. Physical and forensic evidence contradicted the
accounts of witnesses who were adamant Michael Brown had his hands up in the air as Officer Wilson shot him (U.S. Justice Department, 2009). However, the effects of the false news have extended to every shooting of a black person by a police officer despite the unveiling of the facts. Protest and rallies continue to erupt today with the belief that the false story promoted through social media about the Michael Brown incident, along with the rally cry, “Hands Up, don’t shoot!” still has merit. And the narrative that police officers disproportionately kill more blacks than any other race persist despite FBI data proving otherwise (Washington Post, 2015).

**Causes of Fake News**

In both previously described incidents, there was a quick rush to judgement as even mainstream media outlets picked up these stories without vetting the sources or ascertaining the validity of the information. This quick rush to judgement not only leads to misguided frustration and endangers people’s lives, but tears at the credibility of mainstream media. Fake news sources seem to flourish because of a distrust of mainstream media sources. According to the earlier mentioned study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 75 percent of U.S. adults believe that news organizations keeps political leaders from doing things they shouldn’t do while 21 percent believe news organizations keep political leaders from doing their job. However, only 24 percent of U.S. adults believe news organizations deal fairly with all sides of the political spectrum while 74 percent believe news organizations tend to favor one side over another (Pew, 2016).

Mainstream media outlets have been more blatant in their attempts to report the news based on party lines. Thus, there appears to be a desire for new sources of news and information.
Fake news outlets can report information in a way that appears to be authentic and appeal to the ideas and opinions that are consistent with what the reader or viewer wants to believe. If the viewer disagrees with the information being presented to them, they can dismiss it as false and go to another source that aligns more with their opinions about topics that interest them. In a recent Gallup Poll, 32 percent of Americans surveyed say they have a “great deal” or “a fair amount” of distrust in mainstream media. The 32 percent marks a new all-time low for mainstream news media organizations (Jones, J. 2016).

Figure 5. Chart illustrating U.S. adults see the news media as performing its watchdog function – but overwhelmingly say that news organizations are biased. Source: Pew Research Center, May, 2016, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016”
Broader Implications

Because access to the internet is so vast and can be used as a tool to share information from anywhere around the world, the idea that a foreign actor can share fake news to influence a nation’s opinion of an incident, trust in their government, or hatred towards an individual is highly probable. Fake news can also cause nation leaders to react irresponsibly. Today, there is great debate as to whether the country of Russia is attempting to influence other nation’s response to incidents by providing false news. Some recent developments that could be the result of fake news are the recent annexation of Crimea where Russian President Vladimir Putin...
suggested the people of Crimea wanted a referendum to join Russia. Was this fake news staged by Russian expats residing in Crimea to support the partial takeover of Ukraine? Or take for the example the downing of Egypt Air Metrojet Flight MS804. Although unsuccessful at swaying the international community, Russian Journalist Dmitry Konstantinovich Kiselyov initially blamed the crash on an alleged secret pact between the United States and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Vladivostok, 2015). If believed, such news could have caused an upheaval with international consequences.

Another challenge to homeland security advisors and newsreaders are web based news agencies and mainstream media that historically have never been challenged until there is clear negligence in reporting. They tend to mix some factual stories with some fictitious ones. In some cases these agencies will create hybrid news stories where one story can contain a mix of fact and fiction. These “hybrid” sources appear legitimate as most of their reporting seems to align with trusted sources like the Associated Press. However, when all the sources are unchecked, the hybrid reporting has the potential to cause war and tension between countries.

Such a scenario almost played out on December 20, 2016. AWD news reported “The former Israeli Defense Minister has threatened to “destroy” Pakistan-after Pakistan said on Thursday it will send Sunni fighters to Syria” (AWD, 2016). According to the report, the threat came from former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon after he believed the Pakistani government had expressed interest in sending troops to Syria to fight against DAESH. Assuming the comments were true, on December 23rd, Pakistan Defense Minister Khawaja Asif responded via the social media platform, Twitter, reminding Israel that they too were a nuclear power.
Within hours, the Israeli Ministry of Defense returned to Twitter to notify Asif that the alleged statements of Yaalon quoted in AWDNews was false. The news story, which was shared several times on social media, prompted 3 days of tension between the nuclear armed Pakistan and nuclear armed Israel states. AWD has recently been added to the list of untrustworthy news sources.

**Figure 7.** Screenshot of AWDNews story instigating statements made by Israel to Pakistan Source: http://awdnews.com/political/israeli-defense-minister-if-pakistan-send-ground-troops-into-syria-on-any-pretext-we-will-destroy-them-with-a-nuclear-attack

**Legal Barriers in the United States**

In many states, there is a felony murder rule which states that if a death occurs during the commission of any felony, the person(s) in commission of the felony can be charged with murder regardless of their intent. Perhaps, law makers could revisit the Supreme Court’s 1919 decision...
in the case of Schenck v United States where it was ruled unanimously that the First Amendment does not protect dangerous speech. But the burden of the court would be to determine whether a content creator publicized information known to be false and unreasonable. There’s also the issue of who is truly responsible: The person who created the fake news story or the owner of the server who allowed the content to be published on their website. Arguably, enacting such a law for reporting fake news without a nexus to a felony crime could potentially be a violation of the creator’s First Amendment right. Furthermore, attempting to enforce such a law when the news is shared from outside the United States territory would be difficult, if not impossible, to adjudicate. As such, fake news resulting in violence cannot be treated the same as an illegal act that results in death.

**Conclusion**

Mainstream news media outlets need to reevaluate how they vet and report information coming from social media sources. Social media websites also have a responsibility to safeguard the standards placed upon mainstream media outlets. Media outlets who go through the processes of spending money to be vetted, accredited, and edited should be given priority for monetization, optimization, and viewing. Mainstream media is rewarded for producing quality content and social media websites benefit by way of increased users for giving priority to accurate content.

Lastly, media outlets should do a better job of reporting the mood of community members. If viewers, listeners, and readers feel that the news is reporting daily their thoughts, they will be less likely to distrust media reports that conflict with their reality. It also removes the burden of mainstream media outlets reporting only what political officials want them to report. It also lowers the likelihood of community members feeling as though they must exaggerate their
stories to have their interested be represented. Fake news is not new, but it has become more problematic with the invention of new ways to distribute it.
References

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