FAKE NEWS

and the Manipulation of Public Opinion

Carla Mooney

CONTENTS

Social Media's Role in the Spread of Fake News

Without social media and the Internet, would fake news be the issue it is today? The answer is probably not. That is not to say it would not exist. "The spread of junk news is not a new phenomenon: tabloidization, false content, conspiracy theories and political propaganda all have histories. But social media has drastically changed the scale and speed at which junk news is distributed and consumed,"[36] write researchers Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard in a 2018 paper on media and democracy. If the Internet is the superhighway for the spread of fake news, social media is the vehicle that speeds it from one place to another.

A Powerful Tool

In a very short time, social media has become extremely powerful in spreading information. Founded in 2004, Facebook has more than 2 billion monthly active users around the world. That is more than the population of any nation on the planet. In fact, nearly 30 percent of the world's 7.6 billion people are Facebook users. While not as big as Facebook, other popular social media sites have their own powerful reach. In 2018 YouTube had approximately 1.9 billion active users worldwide, WhatsApp had 1.5 billion users, and Twitter had 335 million active users.

Social media sites have become a major source of news and information for many people. These sites do not generate or distribute news. Rather, users get updates, stories, images, and videos from news outlets, organizations, companies, and celebrities

Social media has become a powerful tool for the spread of news and information. Users get updates, stories, images, and videos from the news outlets, organizations, companies, and celebrities they follow, or see them as they are shared by other users.

that they follow on social media, or see them as they are shared by other users. According to a 2017 Pew Research survey, about two-thirds of American adults get a portion of their news through social media, with 20 percent doing so often. Facebook tops the list of social media news sources, followed by YouTube, and then Twitter. According to the Pew survey, 45 percent of American adults get news through their Facebook page. One reason social media is such a popular source of news is because it is so easy to use. Anyone can post status updates, give opinions, like posts and tweets, and share content. However, because the sites themselves have traditionally done little, if any, vetting of content, it is just as easy to share a falsehood as it is to share a fact. As a result, few safeguards have existed to help users distinguish between facts and fiction online.

Because of social media's powerful reach, the repercussions of spreading false information can be significant. For example, in March 2018 President Donald Trump tweeted about e-commerce

stories that were tweeted by 3 million people more than 4.5 million times. They discovered that false news stories were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than factual reports. In addition, the false stories stuck around longer, carrying into more unbroken retweet chains.

The MIT study focused on *what* was occurring but did not examine *why* it was occurring. Some experts have suggested an explanation. They note that fabricated stories are often more provocative, unusual, and interesting than factual information—and that is the appeal. They attract attention and stoke the urge to share. "False news is more novel, and people are more likely to share novel information,"[40] says Sinan Aral, another researcher who has studied the spread of fake news on social media.

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A simple tweet by a Texas man shows how easy it is for fake news to go viral on social media. On November 9, 2016, Eric Tucker noticed a large group of buses near downtown Austin, Texas. He also heard reports of protests against Trump, who had just won the presidential election. Tucker connected the two and posted pictures of the buses on his Twitter account with the comment, "Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin."[41]

Tucker admits that he did not try to confirm the accuracy of his assumption that the buses were related to anti-Trump protests. In fact, the buses were in town for a business conference. "I did think in the back of my mind there could be other explanations, but it just didn't seem plausible,"[42] he said in an interview. Tucker also noted that because he had only forty Twitter followers, he did not think his tweet would be seen by many people. Several hours later, though, Tucker's tweet was posted on Reddit, where it generated hundreds of comments. By the next morning, other

Living in a Filter Bubble

Social media's ability to personalize what content users see based on their likes and preferences also creates a filter bubble. A filter bubble occurs when users primarily see content on their news feeds that agrees with their existing opinions instead of challenging them. Opposing opinions and articles are filtered out by the platform's algorithm, which decreases the diversity of information that users encounter.

When users are surrounded by people and information that already agree with their views, it strengthens their confirmation bias. Confirmation bias makes it more likely for them to believe information that matches their existing beliefs. As a result, they spend little time attempting to confirm it. At the same time, when new information opposes existing beliefs, they are more likely to discard it as fake, whether it is or not. Confirmation bias affects the ability to process information and determine whether it is true or false. It is one of the reasons why many people can easily spot fake news when they do not agree with it, but fall for it when it supports their point of view.

social media accounts linked to the post. By the morning of November 10, Tucker's initial Twitter post had been retweeted and liked more than five thousand times. Later that day, conservative blogs posted stories that incorporated Tucker's tweet and photos, calling him an eyewitness in Austin. On November 11, local television and newspapers reported that the buses were in town for the business conference, and Tucker tweeted that he might have been wrong. Still, his initial tweet continued to be shared thousands of times on Facebook and other social media sites.

Disinformation After a Disaster

The ability of social media to reach a large number of people very quickly is not always bad. When a public emergency occurs (for example, a terrorist attack, a wildfire, or flooding) social media can be used to get lifesaving information to a lot of people in a very short time. In Florida, first responders and government officials

used social media to communicate and coordinate their efforts during Hurricane Irma in 2017. Florida's tourism office sent targeted messages on Facebook to nearly three hundred thousand people believed to be visiting the area, warning them to take precautions. Governor Rick Scott worked with Google to make sure Google Maps quickly updated for road closures because of the storm. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration used Twitter to post frequent updates about the path of the storm.

However, social media can also be used to spread fake news and disinformation, which can disrupt efforts to help people in need and cause additional distress for those who have already experienced a traumatic event. In the hours after a March 2017 terror attack killed six people and injured dozens more in London, some people searching for missing loved ones turned to social media. They posted photos, hoping that someone in the area had information on their whereabouts. However, several of the photos were fake, mainly posted by users hoping to generate more retweets and activity on their social media accounts. For example, one Twitter user posted a photo of someone she claimed was her younger brother. She said he had Down syndrome. The photo turned out to be a fake. The fake post received seventeen thousand retweets.

In a study published in 2018, researchers at the University at Buffalo examined how good Twitter's most active users were at detecting fake news during public emergencies. They examined more than twenty thousand tweets made during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. They looked at four false rumors—two from the marathon and two from the hurricane—and examined what Twitter users did with the false information. Users generally handled it in three main ways: they tried to confirm the information, they spread it without question, or they cast doubt upon it. The researchers found that 86 to 91 percent of users spread the false news by retweeting it or liking it. Only 5 to 9 percent of users attempted to confirm the news, often by retweeting it and asking if it was accurate. Between 1 and 9 percent cast doubt on the original false tweet, often saying that it was not accurate.

In the immediate chaos that followed the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, many people turned to Twitter for updates and information. One researcher later determined that falsehoods were retweeted far more often than factual reports.

Even after the information had proved to be false, less than 10 percent of the users who spread the fake news deleted their retweets, and less than 20 percent sent out a new tweet to correct the information in the false retweet. "These findings are important because they show how easily people are deceived during times when they are most vulnerable and the role social media platforms play in these deceptions,"[43] says the study's lead author, Jun Zhuang, an associate professor in the university's School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. However, although Twitter users were more likely to spread fake news during a disaster, the researchers found that the social media platforms themselves often moved quickly to correct any fake news items on their networks as soon as they discovered them.

Algorithms

Why does fake news spread so quickly on social media? One reason might be how social media platforms work. They rely on

SOURCE NOTES

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ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

AP Fact Check
www.apnews.com/tag/APFactCheck

This website is the fact-checking hub of the Associated Press news agency. It monitors and explains the veracity of public statements made by political figures.

Center for Media Literacy
22603 Pacific Coast Hwy., #549
Malibu, CA 90265
www.medialit.org

The Center for Media Literacy is an educational organization that provides media literacy education to help citizens learn to develop the skills needed to analyze, evaluate, create, and participate in today's media.

Center for News Literacy
www.centerfornewsliteracy.org

Located at Stony Brook University, the Center for News Literacy creates programs to educate college and high school students and the general public about news literacy.

FactCheck.org
www.factcheck.org

This website is affiliated with the Annenberg Foundation at the University of Pennsylvania. It evaluates the truth of statements made by public figures, especially politicians.

Media Bias/Fact Check
https://mediabiasfactcheck.com

This website lists various media sources and their political leanings, sorted into categories such as conspiracy, satire, fake news, and more.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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INDEX