
Fake News And Increasing Of Their Popularity

Fake news are false stories with untrue or fake information which are spread on the internet, or using other media, in order to mislead people with lies or incomplete stories. Some people might call this false news, propaganda, disinformation, yellow journalism or conspiracy theories. Fake news may be new, but actually the only new thing about it is the platform being used. The internet is the latest means of communication being used to spread lies and misinformation, which has an enormous potential to do harm. These stories are shared for a monetary gain via advertising. The goal for fake news creators is for the news to go viral so a lot of people visit their website. This leads to more social shares, which means more page views, which results into greater profits. In other cases, the goals can vary from the criminal to the political. Regardless of the intention, the success of any propaganda campaign will eventually be based on how much it affects the real world. Having now explored the definition of fake news, this assignment will delve deeper into the subject matter discussing how such news is being spread and its impact on society. This assignment will also look at possible solutions in reducing the spread of fake news and will discuss whether this is currently on the increase.

The majority of fake news is created and spread by lay people. Fake news was popularized as a catchphrase by Donald Trump after the 2016 presidential election and since then fake news is still increasing. Young people are the most vulnerable to believing fake news because they accept facts without questioning. One way which is increasing popularity and spread of fake news is when posts are shared in order to gain popularity over social media, resulting in twisting of information, possibly also threatening democracy. Apart from billions of humans using social media, there are also robots, or bots residing within the virtual world. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms have become home to millions of social bots that spread fake news. These bots have the capabilities to search and retrieve information that has not been validated yet on the web. Bots would then spread fake news either by using trending topics or else by hashtags in order to reach a broader audience, which then leads to a better propagation of the fake news (The Regents of the University of California, 2019).

Fake news present major risks to people, industries and governments, leading to democratic impacts or bullying and violence against innocent people, amongst others. Paul Horner, a 38-year-old Internet entrepreneur designed fake websites of CNN, ABC and NBC. These websites were designed to look like the actual news sites. A few of the most viral fake news stories about the US election in 2016 were that "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President," "The Amish in America Commit Their Vote to Donald Trump; Mathematically Guaranteeing Him a Presidential Victory," "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apartment Murder-Suicide," and "Donald Trump Sent His Own Plane to Transport 200 Stranded Marines" (Dice, 2017: 3). There were rumours that these stories were posted either to hurt Hillary Clinton or to help Donald Trump, or to increase political division, but this wasn't the case. These stories were only posted for satire purposes because his motivation wasn't political, it was only financial. Most fake news and satire websites simply want to attract more viewers to their website to generate online advertising revenue (Dice, 2017).

Some fake news can be spread with the objective to manipulate and influence people, hence

the importance of double-checking the source of information and not jumping to conclusions whether a person is guilty or not, and not rely solely on social media. False accusations can lead to a lot of damage and can have real-life impacts, such as social media harassment and targeting individuals with insults and threats. Such situations have already occurred in India and Mexico. Ricardo Flores, from Mexico, was a victim of a rumour circulated on social media and on WhatsApp messaging services, about a pair of child snatchers roaming around in an SUV. Ricardo Flores and his uncle happened to be driving to a nearby village in an SUV while this rumour was being circulated. The presence of the two strangers aroused the suspicions of villagers, who approached and accused the men of being kidnappers. Witnesses said Flores and his uncle were dragged from the car, tied up and beaten. In India, a similar situation occurred where viral reports about child kidnappers sparked a series of lynching. WhatsApp took out full-page advertisements in Indian newspapers, along with radio spots and internet ads, providing easy tips to spot false statements (McDonnell & Sanchez, 2018).

Controlling the spread of social media articles is difficult, given that at any one point in time several people can share multiple posts, hence the difficulty in controlling the spread of fake news. This is leading to increased noise and confusion of fake news. In order to prevent further spreading of fake news, every individual should verify the authenticity of the article prior to spreading it. Mr Nicki Kayser, partner in charge of the capital markets and banking group at Linklaters Luxembourg, is hopeful that greater understanding of the problem can lead to better solutions. He says:

“Fake news is not new, it has been around for centuries, but the technical tools that exist today, coupled with increasing distrust of the mainstream media, have proved to be logarithmic multipliers of the potential of false information. Technical and content-based solutions may not enable us to control the phenomenon completely, but at least they can mitigate its impact on our societies.”

(Kayser as cited in Linklaters, n.d.)

Both Facebook and Google are trying to take actions against fake news. Facebook is using third-party fact-checkers, like PolitiFact and Snopes, and also gave its users the ability to annually report fake news posts through disputed labels. Facebook has also introduced a beginner-friendly guide to spotting fake news, which directs readers to relevant resources in the Facebook Help Center. On the other hand, Google is also flagging and down-ranking fake news in its search results (Summers, 2017).

Some countries are working against fake news by introducing anti-fake news laws. Malaysia was among the first countries to introduce this law, before the May 2018 election. The Malaysian anti-fake news law states that anyone found guilty of spreading fake news could be sent to jail for six years and also fined as much as 500,000 ringgit which is around 105,000 euros (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2019). In the Malaysian context fake news can be whichever material generated by anyone, anywhere in the world, that affects Malaysia including pictures and audio. Under such law, the government could prosecute someone even without presenting any evidence of wrongdoing as a result of such spreading of fake news. In certain situations, police were permitted to make warrantless arrests and they would still be backed up by the Malaysian law (Bevins, 2018).

Singapore has also introduced similar laws even though there were objections from opposition

politicians. Facebook, Twitter, Google or any other social media found to be posting fake news about Singapore could be fined up to 1 million Singapore dollars, while individuals could be jailed for up to 10 years (Agence France-Presse, 2019). Another country that followed is Thailand, where very recently a fake news center was opened to monitor online content. The center is set up with officers monitoring charts, tracking the latest fake news and trending hashtags on Twitter. If they suspect something is false, they will flag it to relevant authorities to issue corrections through the center's social media platforms and website and through the press (Tanakasempipat, 2019).

Even though several attempts are being made to identify implementable solutions against fake news, this still remains a challenge. For example, sharing of fake political news through Facebook is still on the increase ahead of the 2020 presidential election in the US, as identified by an advocacy group in San Francisco (Associated Press, 2019). Mr. Aliaume Leroy as cited in Linklaters (n.d.), an open-source investigative journalist with BBC Africa Eye as well as a member of the Bellingcat investigation team, says "With a bit of time, curiosity, persistence, and critical eye to keep questioning yourself, it is a first and very important step to debunk false information". Five ways identified by the Anti-Defamation League (2019) in reducing the sharing of fake news are: to consider the source before sharing a story, to read beyond the headlines, to triple check news sources, to use a few reliable news sources regularly and to check the author and the date of the article. One can also determine whether a news is real or fake by looking for unusual URLs that can appear real or close to a legitimate news source but aren't and assess whether the news article is suspicious. Once such local Maltese website is "bis-serjeta.com", where one can identify that it is fake news from its URL and authors' name and also while reading, satire is noticed throughout the article (Bis-Serjeta', 2019).

Throughout this assignment, the topic of fake news and its ever increasing in popularity was discussed. Fake news has always been present however, this phrase has been coined and become more popular after the US Presidential election in 2016. Several attempts are being made to reduce the spread of fake news. However, it is practically impossible to abolish this from happening in the virtual world, as this is generating a lot of money and it is difficult to trace the origination of such news. Generating further awareness in the general public about this phenomenon can reduce further spreading of such news. Different countries are trying to identify or identified ways in which this could be further controlled as discussed throughout this assignment. Having said this, it is important to note that not all fake news has harmful intentions but can also be a satirical form of writing.