

Response to Topic #4

Fake news has existed for a very long time. The Cambridge dictionary defines fake news as “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke”.¹ During the cold war, propaganda was extensively used to change the perceptions of the citizens on both sides of the war across the Iron Curtain but with the advent of technology and the interconnectivity that the internet provides, the sophistication of these attacks has increased manifold over the years. Opening a blog and spreading misinformation is much easier than printing pamphlets and distributing it to people. It can be done independently of the physical location of the person(s) spreading this misinformation. This makes controlling this information very challenging without giving unconstitutional power to any controlling authority.

One might be tempted to suggest a blanket ban on content that “might” look suspicious. This would cause tremendous damage to all information. Even though it might look like there is just one truth, this is rarely the case. Investigative journalism often reveals different facets of a story which might look fake the first time someone reads the headline. There is also the case

¹ "Definition of "fake News" - English Dictionary," Fake News Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary, accessed March 19, 2018,

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fake-news>

where a fake news is written so well that even trained eyes fail to spot them. One such incident was when Dow Jones headlines reported that Google was buying Apple.²

Fake news often changes key facts but derives itself from a true story which makes it very difficult to decide between its trustworthiness. The authors of these sites are constantly evolving their attack vectors to avoid the usual techniques used by search engines to prevent their listings from showing up. Some state-sponsored actors are using tremendous resources to develop sophisticated methods to increase the damage caused. This has led to a decline of trust in mass media.³

Fake news can only be combated by blocking the news. This raises a critical question: who decides what content is blocked? There is a technical, legal and ethical aspect of this question. Technically speaking, these new articles often have clickbait titles, use a lot of link to sites which have similar trustworthiness and can often be separated into a network of interconnected pages. There is ongoing research to discover click page links and flag them. Similar grammar checking tools can also flag a lot of sites as scammer are often known to use

² Jaclyn Peiser, "Google Buying Apple? Sorry, That Was Just a Test," The New York Times, October 10, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/business/media/dow-jones-google-apple.html>

³ Darrell M. West, "How to Combat Fake News and Disinformation," Brookings, December 18, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018,

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/>

bad grammar to weed out all but the most gullible people to save them time.⁴ Google has recently changed their page ranking algorithm to help with fake news too. These should capture the lowest hanging fruits in this case which will help to clean up some of the bad information.

The legal and ethical question arises with blocking the content and the First Amendment right and some of the rights that exist in various countries related to freedom of speech. Once a party is allowed to block information while citing it as fake news, free of speech is lost. The state can often find a way to silence protesters but strategically removing information. News can only be labeled as fake news after a thorough investigation. While generating a piece of news is extremely cheap, verifying the same is very resource intensive. Automated systems have already been fooled in extremely obvious tasks like differentiating a stop from a go signal which is trivial to a human being. Hence human intervention will be required to stop this rapid spread of misinformation which is not only changing perceptions but also leading to a distrust of mass media.

Media outlets have gained credibility from their history of credible news. This credibility is what prevents them from reporting misinformation. There is no such obligation to fake news sites. Hence they need to be stopped by the reader or an intermediary actor. This enforcing authority needs to be objective which is not possible without spending an extraordinary amount of resources. State-controlled media is a bad idea which can be seen from countries which have used this system. Some of the most effective methods to stop this misinformation campaigns is

⁴ "Definition of "fake News" - English Dictionary," Fake News Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary, accessed March 19, 2018,

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fake-news>

education. Reinforcement bias prevents people from looking for information which contradicts their beliefs. Search engines return results for queries that a user types and this prevents a person from being able to differentiate true from fake news.

One of the most compelling reasons for fake news is revenue that these sites generate. Given the click bait nature of fake news, sites can rack in a lot of money. If companies which have these revenue services that offer sites money to sites based on views are most strict on whitelist sites for these problems, there can be a significant reduction in the volume of fake news.

Sophisticated attacks can be prevented by looking at social media live feeds and mining for statistically unlikely word groupings but other than that, because of the complexity and the resources invested in their attacks, there is very little that can be done without giving state enforcers and ISPs powers which would not violate First Amendment rights.