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Fake News

Have you ever just sat back and wondered how much of the news we hear is really true? Fake news is everywhere. In fact, fake news is not really a new problem. It's been a problem throughout history. Randall Sumpter¹, Associate Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, pointed out that the Gilded Age, for example, had its own set of fake news problems. It was not uncommon for reporters to simply make up stories out of thin air. However, the technology we have today brings with it a whole new set of problems. Social media allows fake news to be spread quickly and to more people. Although social media is not the only source of fake news, it is a tool that can spread it rapidly. Fake news can be found online, from friends and neighbors, in newspapers, magazines, etc. With all of the fake news and alternative facts out there, it can seem pretty hopeless. However, if we are smart news finders, we can determine which news is fake and which news is real. We can be responsible news finders by making sure the publisher is credible², the source tells both sides of the story³, the person who is the source of

¹ Sumpter, Randall S. "Think journalism's a tough field today? Try being a reporter in the Gilded Age." *The Conversation*, 4 Oct. 2018

<https://theconversation.com/think-journalisms-a-tough-field-today-try-being-a-reporter-in-the-gilded-age-103420>.

² Nagler, Christina. "4 Tips for Spotting a Fake News Story." Harvard University, <https://www.summer.harvard.edu/inside-summer/4-tips-spotting-fake-news-story>.

³ Diab, Robert. "Big Fail: The internet hasn't helped democracy." *The Conversation*, 15 Oct. 2018, <https://theconversation.com/big-fail-the-internet-hasnt-helped-democracy-104817>.

the news is qualified, there are credible citations, the writing is current and good quality⁴, we have evidence-based beliefs and opinions, and we are objectively motivated.

One way to determine if news is fake or factual is to make absolutely certain that the publisher is credible. Is the website up to academic citation standards? If there is no author or date of when it was last updated, or if the URL of the website contains “.com.co” or “.com” it may not be considered academic. Some sites will make it look like they’re a valid source by making their source look like one that is already valid. For example, their URL might say “abcnews.com.co” and their web page may even look similar to *ABC*’s website, but it is not a valid website. They may even have links to other websites. Sometimes authors will put random links into their articles to make it look like a credible source, but just because their website has links, doesn’t mean that they have done their research. If there is an author listed, research further into their credibility⁵. URLs that contain “.gov”, “.edu”, or sometimes “.org” are likely to be academic. Sources such as newspapers and US television news networks are also considered to be academic. One considerably inaccurate source of news is social media. Anyone can post anything that is false and it will spread like a wildfire. For example, an article written by journalist Sapna Maheshwari covered an incident that happened in November of 2016. A man named Eric Tucker tweeted about an unusual amount of buses in Austin, Texas. His post read, “Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin”⁶. The buses were not, in fact, bussing in protestors. There was a technology conference being held in Austin that day, and the company had hired

⁴ Nagler, Christina. “4 Tips...”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Maheshwari, Sapna. “How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study.” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html>.

buses to bring people to the conference. Mr. Tucker only had about 40 *Twitter* followers, but his post about Trump protestors being bussed into Texas had been shared at least 16,000 times on *Twitter* and approximately 350,000 times on *Facebook*. How did a man who had 40 followers on *Twitter* start a conspiracy theory that thousands of people believed and became a part of, including the President himself? All he had to do was post, and everything else just fell into place. People do not take the time to fact check on social media, where it is crucial to fact check. Anyone can post anything, and even if people realize that, they are either too lazy to investigate further or just don't care. Something false can spread from a post by a man with 40 followers to a nationwide conspiracy theory. That is why it is imperative for us to get our information from reliable sources. If the publisher is academic, the information is more likely to be true.

Besides determining if the publisher is academic, another way to help us tell if news is fake or not is to see if the source tells both sides of the story. A credible source should at least acknowledge that there is a counterargument. An issue brought up by Matthew Hindman, Associate Professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs, is that an internet monopoly could be influencing the way people vote and see issues today. Robert Diab, Associate Professor at Thompson Rivers University, stated, "Hindman's work points to a future where a few sites exert an outsized influence over public debate, raising a host of concerns". Hindman stated that just under one half of one percent of news traffic is local news, while sources such as *Facebook* have a huge internet platform⁷. If there is truly an internet monopoly, this means that people aren't hearing both sides of any story. This monopoly could heavily influence the American people one way or another by not allowing them to hear more than one side of any argument. An

⁷ Diab, Robert. "Big Fail: The internet hasn't helped democracy." *The Conversation*, 15 Oct. 2018, <https://theconversation.com/big-fail-the-internet-hasnt-helped-democracy-104817>.

internet monopoly sets the stage nicely for the possibility of fake news. If everyone has built up a reliance on those few sources, they could easily publish fake news and people would have no problem believing it. Not to mention that one of the big sources mentioned was *Facebook*. The previously mentioned Eric Tucker said it himself, "I'm . . . a very busy businessman and I don't have time to fact-check everything that I put out there, especially when I don't think it's going out there for wide consumption"⁸. If we get our news from *Facebook*, we are getting news that most likely has not been vetted or proven to be true. We are getting the opinions of people who can post whatever they want, whenever they want. We rarely ever hear both sides of the story.

Another technique we can use when determining if news is factual or fake is knowing about the person who is the source of the news. What position or degree do they hold? Are they even qualified to say what they are saying? The *Enoch Pratt Free Library* gives us some tips on how to determine if news is fake or real, and the first thing they suggested was to look into the creator or the source of the news to determine if they are qualified⁹. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has created a way to determine if news is fake or not by determining if the source is valid or not. "Researchers from MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab (CSAIL) and the Qatar Computing Research Institute (QCRI) believe that the best approach is to focus not only on individual claims, but on the news sources themselves"¹⁰. Knowing that looking into the source of the news is one of the best ways to determine if the news is fake or not, MIT has come up with a new way to locate fake news. They have taken information from human fact checkers as well as reliable sources and plugged them into an algorithm to determine

⁸ Maheshwari, Sapna. "How Fake News..."

⁹ "Fake News: How to Spot it." Enoch Pratt Free Library, <https://www.prattlibrary.org/research/tools/index.aspx?cat=90&id=4735>.

¹⁰ Conner-Simons, Adam. "Detecting Fake News at Its Source." MIT News, 4 Oct. 2018, news.mit.edu/2018/mit-csail-machine-learning-system-detects-fake-news-from-source-1004.

if the news is fake or real. This machine run system was found to be actually quite accurate, showing that it could be 65% accurate in determining if a source was mostly correct. It is still a work in progress, but it can be a very helpful tool and is meant to be used to aid traditional fact checkers, not to replace them¹¹. It is much easier to determine if news is fake by looking at the source rather than the article, and this method has made things even easier. Chances are, if a source has had fake news on it before, it is going to again. It is extremely important to look into the author or source of the news. Are they someone who is qualified to be an accurate news source? Have they spread fake news before? If we know the source of our news is factual, we can refer to that source often. Finding real news just got easier.

Another easy way to tell if news is real is to check the citations. For starters, check to see if the source has quotes and citations. If it is obvious there is not any cited information, that source is less likely to be an accurate one. Journalism is all about getting the facts. If there is a lack of citations, chances are they didn't do their research¹². Next, make sure the citations are valid. Nagler asserted the following: "By checking cited sources, you can confirm that the information has been accurately applied and not altered to meet the author's point of view." In an article written by Randall S. Sumpter, an Associate Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, he told about the Gilded Age, a time where fake news was everywhere. Publishers were battling to get more readers, and so fake stories were often pulled out of thin air. Many people did it, and no one seemed to get in trouble for it. Sumpter compared that to our day, as the age of digital news media: "Today's news environment shares some parallels with the 19th-century news world. Digital media have changed how fast and how accurately stories are

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nagler, Christina. "4 Tips..."

written and edited. Continuous news cycles, shrinking newsroom staffs and the multiple, simultaneous demands for content have produced what Washington Post writer Paul Farhi referred to as the ‘Era of Error.’¹³ Journalists are competing to get the best story out there first, so there is less focus on editing and more focus on good stories. Fabricating evidence is not uncommon. There have even been examples where stories were simply made up. They were pulled out of thin air, with no evidence to back them up. That is why it is crucial to make sure our sources have citations, and that those citations are accurate.

Another way to make sure we are getting real facts from a credible source is to check the maturity and quality as well as the date of the text. If the text sounds professional, uses good grammar and spelling, cites its sources, and contains current information it is more likely to be valid. Many invalid sources will have multiple spelling errors, excessive punctuation, and/or the use of all caps. Some sources even share something that happened years ago and is no longer relevant¹⁴. That is the mark of an inexperienced author, or an author who is trying to spread fake news. Think about doing research for a paper or project for school. The most academic information is what we want to use in a project. The information that looks and sounds academic is certainly more likely to be correct than the information that looks and sounds like a teenager wrote it. We wouldn’t use information that looks like a teenager wrote it in our project because we want to sound professional and to be taken seriously. Now, let’s switch scenarios and say that we are scrolling through social media and come across a post that uses all of the before mentioned aspects. It has multiple spelling errors and it uses excessive punctuation, all caps, and shares an issue from years ago to make a point. We wouldn’t use this information in a research

¹³ Sumpter, Randall S. “Think Journalism’s...”

¹⁴ Nagler, Christina. “4 Tips...”

paper, yet we share it on social media. It is important to use the same caution when we are on social media as when we are researching. The same rules apply to fake news anywhere, no matter where it's found. Although it seems blatantly obvious when some facts are wrong on social media, an article by Lisa Fazio, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Vanderbilt University, states that often times people don't see the obvious mistakes. She referred to this as the "Moses Illusion". For example, when asked how many of each animal did Moses take on the Ark, most people simply answer "two". They don't say anything about the fact that it was Noah, not Moses, who built the Ark, even though most people know those Biblical stories. People pass over the most obvious errors all the time¹⁵. Dr. Kristy Hess, a head communications lecturer at Deakin University, stated that "Facebook is not held to account the same way that mainstream media is when it comes to upholding and sharing accurate, reliable information"¹⁶. There plenty of errors out there, but we might not see them all the time.

Aside from checking the credibility of the source, it is a good idea to check the background of the news source. What do they believe? Do they have any biases? Opinions can often get in the way of finding fact. People tend to believe something if it's what they want to hear rather than if it is true. During the Presidential elections between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, there were a lot of listeners tuning in to the Rush Limbaugh Show. Rush Limbaugh runs a strictly republican radio talk show, so he only shares facts and opinions that coincide with what republicans believe. During the elections, Rush shared plenty of facts and information in favor of Donald Trump. However, smart news receivers also found some other sources to get information

¹⁵ Fazio, Lisa. "Why you stink at fact checking." *The Conversation*, 29 March 2018
<https://theconversation.com/why-you-stink-at-fact-checking-93997>.

¹⁶ "How to tell the difference between real and fake news." Deakin University,
<http://this.deakin.edu.au/society/how-to-tell-the-difference-between-real-and-fake-news>.

from. There are plenty of sources out there that are in favor of the democrats. Naturally, they only share information that support their beliefs as well. This doesn't mean that these biased sources don't have some good, factual information, but their biases determine what information they receive and choose to share. They are only going to cover something if it aligns with their opinion. According to the *Cornell University Library*, biases can determine "what [sources] choose to cover, to whom they choose to talk, and what they imply in the way they arrange the facts they collect"¹⁷. In a perfect world, news sources would only share factual information and disregard any biases. But since this world is not perfect, we are left with a maze of sources and information bombarding us and making us more lost with every turn. Most sources have a bias, and it is imperative that we, as news receivers, are smart. We must get both sides of the story. We must determine for ourselves what is true or not. We can not simply get all of our information from one, biased source.

The *New York Times*, for example, is a newspaper that tends to have a more liberal bias. Maya Averbuch and Kirk Semple, journalists for the *New York Times*, wrote the following about President Trump in their article "As Trump Assails Caravan, a Clash Between Migrants and Mexico Police":

Throughout the week, Mr. Trump has railed against the caravan on Twitter, threatening Honduras and other Central American nations with the suspension of foreign aid unless they stop the northward march... In an apparent attempt to rally his base, Mr. Trump, in his Twitter posts, has invoked the same kind of anti-immigrant fears that he used during his 2016 campaign, warning of an "onslaught" of criminals¹⁸.

¹⁷ "Fake News, Alternative Facts, and Misinformation: Learning to Critically Evaluate Media Sources". Cornell University Library, 16 Nov 2018 https://guides.library.cornell.edu/evaluate_news/antidotes.

¹⁸ Averbuch, Maya and Kirk Semple. "As Trump Assails Caravan, a Clash Between Migrants and Mexico Police." The New York Times, 19 Oct. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/world/americas/caravan-mexico-guatemala.html>.

After reading that information, I am influenced to believe that Trump is not known for his kindness, charity, or acceptance. He was portrayed in this article as someone who deploys soldiers to those who don't do what he tells them to. He has threatened and railed those in the caravan. He "invoke[s]... fears" towards the immigrants, rather than helping them.

On the other hand, the *New York Post* is a newspaper that is known to have a conservative bias. Natalie Musumeci, a writer for the *New York Post*, covered the same story as Averbuch and Semple in her article entitled "Second migrant caravan forming at Guatemala-Mexico border". She quoted President Trump as well: "'To those in the Caravan, turnaround, we are not letting people into the United States illegally," the commander-in-chief tweeted. "Go back to your Country and if you want, apply for citizenship like millions of others are doing!'"¹⁹ Musumeci purposely reminds us that President Trump is the commander-in-chief. He is the President of the United States. This tweet implies that Trump knows what is right for our country. He simply wants the immigrants to enter our country legally. They are free to live in the United States of America, but they have to do it right. They have to become U.S. citizens.

From those two examples, it is apparent that the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* have very different opinions of Trump and his behavior towards the immigrants. Averbuch and Semple use words like "railed", "threatening", and "invoked... anti-immigrant fears" to accompany the facts they have found, rather than just stating the information. President Trump did say that he would suspend foreign aid and that he would deploy American troops if Mexico didn't block the migrants, that much is true. However, they chose this specific information for a

¹⁹ Musumeci, Natalie. "Second migrant caravan forming at Guatemala-Mexico border." *The New York Post*, 26 Oct 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/10/26/second-migrant-caravan-forming-at-guatemala-mexico-border/>.

reason, and they presented it in such a way that makes Trump look like the type of person that loves to invoke fear in the hearts of immigrants. They could have mentioned that Trump also said on *Twitter* that immigrants could apply for citizenship in the United States legally, but they left that part out. Averbuch and Semple didn't just state the facts, they also gave us their opinions. Musumeci gave us her opinion as well, although she seems to have a different opinion than Averbuch and Semple do. It is implied in her article that Trump is inviting those in the march to be a part of the United States, given that they enter legally. She even called him "commander-in-chief", saying, in a way, that she supports him. She respects him, even. He is the leader of our country. Notice how she left out the threats that Averbuch and Semple made it a point to mention. These two articles cover the same event, yet they are unequivocally different. Both give us factual information, yet both are biased.

Both of these articles have proper citing of high quality sources. They quote sources such as President Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Mexican officials, and immigrants involved in the march. The *New York Times* and the *New York Post* are both considered to be credible, and there is a good reason. There are multiple quotes and citations from multiple credible sources. They have their facts straight. But what we must consider is the fact that a source can be credible and still have a bias. That is the reason we, as news receivers, must be smart. We must find multiple credible sources that don't all have the same bias if we want to get the whole story. We must be aware of the biases and know that they are opinions hidden behind the facts. Ben Yagoda, an author and former professor of English and journalism at the University of Delaware, offered that confirmation bias is the most damaging form of bias. He defines confirmation bias as the effect that happens when we look for evidence to support or

confirm what we already think is right. We don't accept any evidence that goes against what we believe or supports another claim²⁰. According to Yagoda, "Confirmation bias shows up most blatantly in our current political divide, where each side seems unable to allow that the other side is right about anything"²¹, as shown in those two articles. Their bias affected what facts and evidence they were looking for. Those journalists weren't finding the facts and then writing an article about it, they were writing an article and looking for facts to support their opinions.

Finally, it is important to have evidence-based laws, policies, and beliefs because if there were nothing to keep us from spreading fake news, there would be no way to tell which news was real or not. Bob Butler, the operator of Butler Media, said the following about fake news: "What makes fake news so dangerous is [that] the people writing it... are not restrained by the truth."²² A lot of people aren't going to share the truth simply because it is the truth. Some people are more motivated by their own confirmation bias than by the truth. The opposite of evidence-based is subjectively motivated. A person may spend years of his life trying to prove something that never happened because he really wants it to be true. Another person may do anything to make his bias seem true, including create fake evidence. Evidence-based laws, policies, and beliefs are the fortifications against false evidence produced by subjectively motivated people.

An example of something produced by subjectively motivated people is technology-generated fake news. Technology-generated fake news is more a threat now than

²⁰ Yagoda, Ben. "The Cognitive Biases Tricking Your Brain." The Atlantic, Sept 2018
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/cognitive-bias/565775/#annotations:s_ZVIPffEei2e29iVUNkfg.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Butler, Bob. "The Importance of Fact Checking." Young African Leaders Initiative,
<https://yali.state.gov/importance-fact-checking>.

ever. Photoshop and audio/video manipulation tools allow images and videos to be tampered with and portray falsities. Jason Altmire, an author and former congressman, brought up the following: "...audio and video manipulation techniques... can make it appear a politician has made a statement they haven't, and social media bot technology... can create and sustain realistic news stories of events that never occurred."²³ Not only the news we read and hear can be false, even the pictures we see and the videos we watch can be tampered with. It is crucial that, as citizens of the United States of America, we are well-informed about matters such as politics and the news. Our beliefs can change the future of the country. What we vote for is the future, and when false evidence sways our opinions, the future can be swayed as well. Not only is false evidence created by those who have strong biases, but it is particularly dangerous to those who receive the false news and have strong biases as well. A citizen who is well-informed, open-minded, and objectively motivated is a citizen who is capable of creating evidence-based opinions. In order to combat fake news, more of that type of citizen is needed.

Fake news is everywhere. It has been around for a long time, and it is not going anywhere anytime soon. Not only is it a real problem, but it has accelerated immensely because of social media. Social media allows fake news to be spread at a rapid pace by millions of people. In order to get through all of the fake news and find the truth, news finders must be able to determine which news is real and create evidence-based opinions. People who can determine which news is real are people who make sure the publisher is credible, the source tells both sides of the story, the person who is the source of the news is qualified, the source has credible citations, and the writing is current and good quality. Those who create evidence-based opinions are aware of bias,

²³ Altmire, Jason. "The importance of fact-checking in a post-truth world." The Hill, 8 Sept 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/405429-the-importance-of-fact-checking-in-a-post-truth-world>.

and they are objectively motivated when creating their opinions. The importance of evidence-based opinions, laws, and policies can not be understated. They are the greatest tools to go up against fake news. Become someone who finds the facts and has an evidence-based opinion, and you will have a strong defense against fake news.