The Future of Voting in a Misinformed Society

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Produced in Nathan Holic's Fall 2017 ENC 1102

Introduction

American democracy has been repeatedly buffeted by changes in media technology. In the 19th century, cheap newsprint and improved presses allowed partisan newspapers to expand their reach dramatically. Many have argued that the effectiveness of the press as a check on power was significantly compromised as a result (Allcott and Gentzkow 211).

Money, religion, politics, and Lord Voldemort. Growing up, I was taught these topics were forbidden in civilized conversation. Well, maybe not that last one. Nonetheless, these were established rules and for the most part people adhered to them. During the 2016 election, political discussions were around every corner and very few were civilized. This past election marked a new era in politics, bringing with it new threats to democracy. You may remember seeing headlines such as, "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President" or "WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS ... Then drops another bombshell." These are just two out of hundreds of fake news articles that flooded the internet and social media sites during the 2016 election. It felt as if politics, news, and socialization had completely changed overnight. Certainly no one could possibly believe these articles, right? To the contrary, much like the posts from credible news sources, these articles spawned heated arguments in the comments section between complete strangers, friends, and family alike. Some attempted to discredit these articles while others blindly defended them. I couldn't help but wonder where all this would lead. Would people actually vote for Donald Trump under the false pretense that he had the support of the Pope or vote against Hillary Clinton for the ridiculous allegations of arms trafficking to ISIS? As soon as the nation found out that we would be "Making America Great Again" most of the blame was pointed at fake news and the social media site Facebook for facilitating its spread. I began to research how fake news on a social media site could possibly influence a presidential election and as it turns out, it could, and it did. In a survey conducted on over 1,200 US Adults ages 18 and above, it was concluded that 62% of participants receive news from social media and that 15% recalled observing at least one of the fake news articles (Allcott and Gentzkow 213). The primary factor in whether a reader believes a fake news article depends on whether it's consistent with their ideological beliefs (Lewandowsky et al. 112). Due to the criticism following the 2016 election, Facebook has begun to implement measures to flag fake news articles on their site with the help of its users (Mosseri). This is a great step towards combating fake news, but still raises the question, how effective will it be? Furthermore, if voters with established political beliefs are resistant to information that discredits their beliefs, are they a lost cause? Should we instead focus on future voters who have yet to establish their own political beliefs? None of the research I read mentioned future voters or how

they could potentially contend with fake news on Facebook in future elections. Are awareness and pre-exposure warnings enough or should students be taught to investigative research methods in high school to better identify and avoid fake news for themselves?

After compiling research from numerous sources, conducting content analysis and multiple interviews, I have concluded that there is no single perfect method for combating fake news. My research indicates that a combination of pre-exposure warnings and education would be the most effective strategy in combating fake news in future elections and everyday life.

Background

Evolution of Fake News

The internet ushered in new ways for us to communicate. The way we converse with one another as well as the rules that governed appropriate and inappropriate topics changed. Suddenly, no topic seemed to be off limits. People were free to openly discuss whatever they wished. This began in AOL chat rooms and moved to Facebook newsfeeds. No longer were political discussions and opinions private. Realizing there was a whole new method of reaching their audience, news organization began to use these same platforms to publish articles. The creation of social media sites eliminated distribution constraints, allowing distribution of user produced content to reach the masses on a global scale (Manovich 328). However, news organizations weren't the only ones exploiting this technology. Anyone with a computer could produce and publish articles of their own. The price of products such as computers, editing software, and HD cameras are more affordable than ever before, allowing amateurs to produce high quality content rivaling that of professionals. Most of the producers of social media content do so with the hopes of going viral. Viral status pertains to an image, video, piece of information, etc. that is circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another. The producers of viral content can earn millions of dollars from ads and sponsorships (Allcott and Gentzkow 217). Naturally, this led to a boom in user-generated content, all with the goal of attracting as much social media engagement as possible. Social media engagement refers to the amount of views, shares, comments and likes a post receives. Not only do high engagement rates generate profits, they also provide content creators invaluable instant feedback, allowing creators to tailor their content to their audiences (Manovich 330). Perhaps the most effective technique in attracting readers is the use of clickbait-style headlines. Clickbait headlines are similar to traditional news headlines, in that they are designed to attract readers. Where they differ is, clickbait headlines generally have a hyperlink that often leads to dubious content. In the past, news organizations only competed against each other on a local or at the most, a national level. Now, not only do they have to compete with each other on a global scale, but also with an increasing number of internet-based media companies and individual content creators. This led to many news organizations adopting these same strategies to increase their engagement rates. As online news articles began to reach viral status resembling the yellow journalism of the late 1800s, opportunists saw a profitable market in creating fake news. For this paper I will use the same definition for fake news used by Hunt Allcott and Mathew Gentzkow in "Social Media and the 2016 Election." Fake news will be defined as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott and Gentzkow 213). The concept of fake news isn't new by any means; for as long as man has had the written word, you can find accounts of misleading tales, propaganda and rumors. What has changed, is that they now have the ability to disseminate it to millions of people within seconds. Resulting in companies such as "abcnews.com.co" posing as credible news sources and altering actual news stories to sensationalize them (Lewandowsky et al. 111).

Present Day Effects

The 2016 election created a perfect storm for fake news to flourish. Two candidates with extremely questionable characters, even by politician standards. Two political parties vying to outdo each other by taking conservatism and liberalism to new extremes. Every facet of media was consumed by election news, providing teens in Veles, Macedonia infinite opportunities to create fake news, generating millions in revenue (Allcott and Gentzkow 217). What boosted the economy of one country, caused a great deal of turmoil in the United States, leading to what some consider the most controversial election in our nation's history. Facebook is just one company taking measures to mitigate the effects of fake news. One method being implemented eliminates the financial incentives to produce fake news on their site by establishing ad policies.

Figure 1: Facebook's ad policy

Another method involves cross-referencing suspicious news articles with third-party fact checkers in a three-step process (Mosseri).

Figure 2: Facebook's three step flagging process

An apparent shortcoming of the flagging method is that it requires a considerable amount of time to complete the entire process, allowing the articles to propagate for days or weeks before they are finally flagged (Friggeri et al. 8).

Literature Review

I conducted extensive research to fully understand every aspect of fake news, utilizing information from multiple sources. The article "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election" served as the catalyst for my research question. It provided empirical data on the effect fake news

had on the election, as well as a brief history of fake news. I modeled some of my interview questions after their survey questions and adopted their definition of fake news. "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production" by Lev Manovich explains the rapid growth and adaptability of user produced content, providing me with background information. In a Facebook newsroom article, "Addressing Hoaxes and Fake News" I learned about the new methods and policies Facebook has implemented to minimize the effects of fake news on their platform. I will be testing the effectiveness of their new pre-exposure warning on future voters in my research. The study titled "Rumor Cascades" by Facebook researchers, examined the cascade effect of fake news posts. Moreover, it examined the impact fact checking had on the spread of those posts, when a link was left in the comments section. This research is what led Facebook to develop their flagging method. I needed to better understand the psychology behind pre-exposure warnings and fake news, which led me to read "Misinformation and its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing." I learned a detailed history of misinformation and the psychological aspects that facilitate its spread and acceptance. Furthermore, Stephan Lewandowsky and his colleagues discuss several methods to mitigate the impacts of misinformation. I wanted to find out how future voters were engaging in politics, so I read the article "Digital Media Shapes Youth Participation in Politics" by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh. I learned a great deal about how students are currently engaging in politics through social media. This includes, for example, "participatory politics," which involves discussion posts, blogs, and video posts, all devoid of the influence of traditional political institutions. This influenced my decision in making future voters the focus of my research, as they have little to no ties or biases towards established political parties. To further develop my interview questions, I needed background information on how students are being impacted by misinformation. In a study conducted by Sam Wineburg, a professor at Stanford University, and colleagues, I learned that students at all levels of education are struggling to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources on the internet. Finally, the journal article "Anatomy of a Fact Check: Objective Practice and the Contested Epistemology of Fact Checking" explores the process professional fact checkers use and the difficulties in applying these methods to politics.

The information in these studies and articles was tremendously useful and insightful. However, they also confirmed the gaps I suspected were present in the current research, validating me in conducting research to further the discussion on fake news and future elections.

Methods

Most of the research regarding fake news and the 2016 election focused on voters with established political affiliations. A recurring conclusion as to why fake news articles are effective, is that they are specifically designed to be consistent with either a Democrat or Republican's political views. Readers are less likely to fact check articles that are consistent with their beliefs and less receptive to information that challenges their beliefs. Therefore, I decided to shift the focus to future voters who have not yet established partisan allegiance. By interviewing high school students and gaining their perspective on fake news, I can better identify which methods will be most effective in helping them to identify and avoid fake news in future elections. The second part of my research involves a key ingredient in the production of fake news: actual news. Based on personal observations, I suspected there had been a significant increase in the amount of political news being produced on social media. I conducted a content analysis of three top news organizations to determine whether or not my suspicions were correct.

Interviews

To assist me in answering the question of how future voters plan to contend with fake news in future elections, I created a questionnaire and conducted short interviews with six high school

students. The questionnaire included ten questions total. The first three asked about their political engagement and intent to vote in the next election. The following six questions dealt with their firsthand experiences and opinions of fake news in the 2016 election. Finally, the last questions tested the effectiveness of the pre-exposure warnings being implanted on Facebook and how they personally plan to avoid fake news. Depending on their answers, I asked a series of short follow up questions and recorded their answer on the back of their respective questionnaires.

Content Analysis

To determine whether news organizations are increasing the number of political news articles they post, I conducted a content analysis of three top news organizations' Facebook pages. I began by selecting a news organization considered to represent one of three categories, Conservative (Fox News), Liberal (CNN) and Neutral (ABC News). Then I selected a random day in 2014 and 2017 with no political or overall significance: June 8th. I measured social media presence by totaling the number of Facebook posts for that day. Of those posts, I counted how many were related to politics. Finally, I calculated overall social media engagement by averaging the shares and likes of each post for that day.

Findings

Interviews

I began my interviews by selecting interviewees who would be eligible to vote in the next election and intended to do so. I continued by having them answer a series of questions. The first question was aimed at finding out if they followed politics, in which four out of six answered yes. Next, I gathered information on their experiences with fake news. All six interviewees believed fake news influenced the 2016 election, with four of them having been deceived by fake news in the past. This comes as a surprise as a study conducted at Stanford University concluded that, "Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak" (Wineburg et al. 4). They all seemed to share feelings of embarrassment upon being informed by friends or family that they were being deceived. An unexpected factor which prevented all interviewees from propagating fake news articles was their self-consciousness. Every interviewee expressed reluctance to share not only known fake news articles, but potentially fake news articles as well, out of fear of being judged by their peers.

The second part of my questionnaire was intended to test the effectiveness of Facebook's new pre-exposure warning, currently being used to flag fake news articles. Stephan Lewandowsky and his colleagues stated that "misinformation effects can be reduced if people are explicitly warned up front that information they are about to be given may be misleading" (Lewandowsky et al. 116). To test this theory, I provided an example of a flagged article and asked if the warning label would prevent them from reading it. All except for one agreed it would. However, even the one who said he would read it said he would only do so for amusement and would not share it. I believe this proves the effectiveness of pre-exposure warnings when they are implemented in a timely manner.

Figure 3: Example of a flagged Facebook article

The last part of my questionnaire asked respondents whether they believed fake news could be avoided in the future and how they intended to face it. Most of the students believed it would be impossible to avoid fake news in future elections. One student believed that "heightened media regulations would be implemented to avoid controversy." All agreed that researching the issues and using sound judgment would be key in mitigating its effects.

Overall, the interviews I conducted prove that future voters are indeed concerned with fake news and intend to avoid it by being proactive. However, my research also indicates that they need guidance to be effective in their approach. The internet can be littered with traps, or, simply put, "[n]ever have we had so much information at our fingertips, the internet is both the world's best fact checker and best bias confirmer" (Wineburg 4). Without proper education in investigative research techniques, future voters may end up contributing to their own consumption of misinformation. I believe it is necessary to teach future voters the same techniques utilized by fact checkers to conduct unbiased research. First, they need to learn to extract the "ruling statement"; this is the portion of the claim that can be fact checked. Once they have the ruling statement, they can trace it back to its source, beginning with a simple Google search and following the breadcrumbs. Finally, for politics they should be taught to utilize a strategy known as "triangulating the truth," essentially consulting an independent source, a conservative source, and a liberal source and seeing where they overlap (Graves 10). These techniques have many benefits and can be applied to multiple facets of an individual's life.

Content Analysis

After compiling the data I collected from my content analysis, I determined that Fox, ABC, and CNN have all increased their Facebook posts by a significant amount. Total posts for a given day increased by upwards of 40%. This shows that many news organizations are making a conscious effort to increase their social media presence.
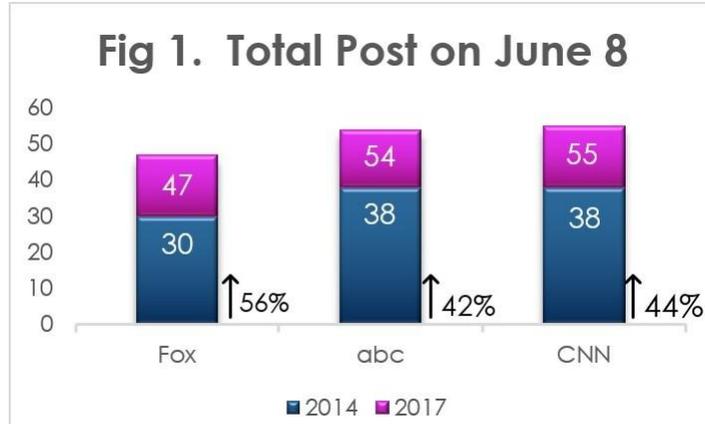
Fig 1. Total Post on June 8

Figure 4: Graph of overall Facebook posts

In addition to overall posts, the percentage of political posts have also increased by over 100%, reaching as high as 162%. In 2014, political posts accounted for around 30% of a news organization's posts; by 2017, they accounted for nearly half of their posts. These calculations were taken on days with no significant political activity and could be even higher on days of important political activity.
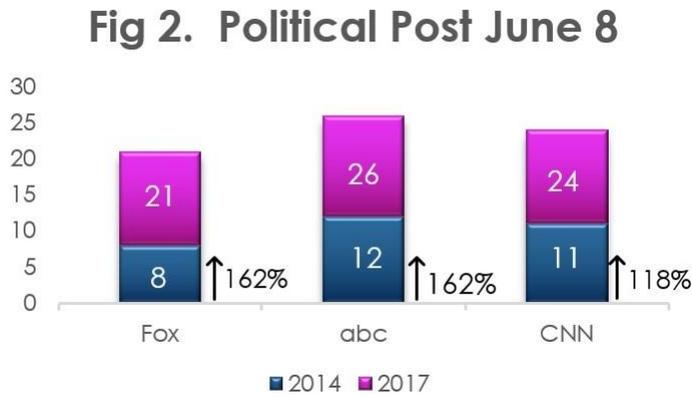
Fig 2. Political Post June 8

Figure 5: Graph of political posts

The organizations' overall social media engagement measured by average likes and shares received by each post has doubled and even tripled in some cases. This could be a result of the increase in their political posts, coupled with growing public interest in politics.

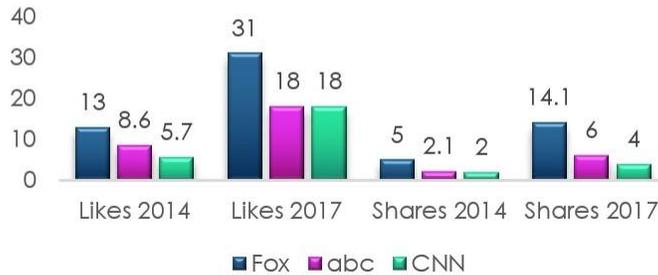## Fig 3. Avg Like/Shares (meassured in k) June 8

Figure 6: Graph of social media engagement

Overall, this equals more material for the creators of fake news to exploit, by providing more articles that could potentially be altered into fake news. Additionally, if news organizations continue to produce clickbait-style political posts, they will make it harder for readers to distinguish between their ads and fake news ads.

Conclusion

The findings presented in my research are but small steps toward mitigating the effects fake news has on democracy. I took special care to address each of the questions presented in this paper. While my research was thorough, I was met with certain limitations. To begin, my pool of interviewees was constrained to my surrounding neighborhood. This resulted in less diversity than what I would've hoped for. Additionally, this limited the number of interviews I was able to conduct. Another limitation I faced was time and resources. My content analysis was only able to cover one day per year of consideration. Moreover, I was unable to analyze the comments under each post, as the sheer amount would have been more than one person could effectively analyze. With that being said, my research provides quantitative and qualitative data on the threats posed by fake news, as well as the best methods to counter these threats. By providing future voters with proper fact checking techniques, they will be able to successfully navigate their way through the endless amounts of misinformation found on the internet. When used in conjunction with the technological safeguards being implemented by companies such as Facebook, the result will be well-informed voters.

I would encourage future researchers looking to expand on the research I have done, to explore the development and implementation of an investigative research program in high schools. Furthermore, the increased interest shown by high school students in politics should be examined more closely. Is this a direct result of their exposure to politics on social media? If so, should political discussions in classrooms be encouraged? Perhaps by encouraging these discussions at a young age in a civilized environment, the hostility often associated with such discussions could be lessened.

The issue of fake news is far more complex than I had anticipated when initially began my research. Its ability to adapt over time and take advantage of technological advancements, adds to its resiliency. The techniques I proposed in this paper will also need to adapt and change over time, if they are to remain effective. Political or otherwise, misinformation is a problem that should be met proactively instead of reactively.

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