

For the First-Year Writing Program under the Department of Writing Studies

The Negative Effects of Fake News on American Society

Isa L. Guillen

Writing Studies, University of Minnesota

1301 First-Year Writing

20 November 2022

Growing up, my dear grandmother would often post current events or news articles about American politics on her personal Facebook account. As I grew older and wiser, I started noticing that some of these stories did not seem particularly factual. And yet, she must have found them somewhere, right? These falsified news stories she posted were my first exposure to a phenomenon called fake news. Now, there is no doubt that American Society is affected by many issues today. From gun violence to environmental impacts, there is an overwhelming amount of matters that require attention. However, an often neglected aspect of these issues is they regularly stem in part from fake news, which can be defined as the deliberate reporting and spreading of false information. This false reporting style usually focuses on political institutions, political representatives, popular celebrities, and public health issues. Despite the prevalence of fake news in American society, some citizens will still dismiss fake news as a trivial matter to which only the naive or gullible fall prey. This leads to the inevitable question, does fake news, in reality, have a negative impact on American society, to a degree that a general citizen should be concerned? The short answer to this question, is simply, yes. However, it is not until one takes an additional in-depth look at the consequences of fake news, that the gravity of the situation becomes apparent.

Based on its definition fake news is clearly designed to misinform citizens. However, is it truly possible that people believe these “outrageous” stories that come across their paths? Apparently, we give our fellow citizens too much credit. As shown through a study done to examine the 2016 election, “many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). This proves that while some people do have the ability to discern between what is real news and fake news, many in American society do not, thus leading to citizens who are misinformed about important issues such as global politics. For

example, in a study done comparing US citizens to citizens of other countries, each group of participants was asked five basic questions about international politics. In this study, the German participants on average answered 3.6 questions correctly, but the American participants only answered 1.7 questions correctly (Bennet et al., 1996). While these statistics are concerning, they do serve to prove how drastically Americans are misled.

Not only does fake news create misinformed citizens, but those same citizens usually stay misinformed, often through their own choice. Although this may seem counterintuitive, citizens usually do not even know they are choosing to stay misguided. This effect is because of a phenomenon called the “echo chamber.” Essentially, these echo chambers refer to the artificial intelligence gathering algorithms within Google and various other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. While the user is engaging in these platforms, these algorithms are trained to learn what kind of information the user tends to be interested in. Over a long period of time, they curate a personalized feed that only shows stories or information that supports what the user already believes, without correcting any false information (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Youtuber Samantha Bee expands on this issue when she explains how these platforms use what the consumer is interested in to create misinformation traps (*The Semi-Domestic Threat of Cat Misinformation Videos* 2022). Because of these duplicitous algorithmic echo chambers, when a citizen chooses one post, article, or Google search result over another, they are actually choosing to stay misinformed and biased about that topic. This cycle then continues as that same citizen likely will go on to share the misguided information on their own personal platforms, and then become a fake news source for their friends and followers.

Now, one could approach the issue of fake news from a different angle. Sure, maybe it affects individual citizens, but how does fake news hurt American society as a whole? Well, first

and foremost, fake news directly attacks the democratic system. This fundamental system in the United States is based on the ability of its citizens to trust each other's judgment enough to make decisions that affect all of society. For example, even if a citizen does not agree with another citizen, the beauty of democracy is that the two citizens still could depend on being properly informed thus being able to make sound decisions. However, now Americans ought to be concerned about the effect of fake news because it lowers citizens' trust in the voting system in general. For example, in one poll, approximately eighty-eight percent of American voters held concerns that fake news has spread confusion among voters (Reglitz, 2022). Researchers Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand (2021) would agree with this data and even further assert that in the 2020 Presidential Election, about forty percent of voters did not trust that the election outcome was valid or honestly gained. These statistics show that even if the voter himself does not believe the fake news, it still affects his trust in fellow voters and may even discourage him from voting himself. This is harmful to democracy because voter participation is one of the most important ways Americans can demonstrate their freedoms and make a change in their society.

Now voting is not the only crucial part of the democratic system. What about the democratic institutions and political figures located within them? Does fake news's reach include these aspects? Absolutely. False information about these people and institutions whether believed or not changes the way they appear to the public. As much as the United States prides itself in its objective and democratic conventions, perception really does matter, and fake news has a great power to change perception. It creates a sense of lowered legitimacy and hinders citizens from taking their government, its leaders, and other citizens seriously. The spread and prominence of fake news eventually lower people's trust in their national leaders' abilities to discern between truthful and false information, and it makes the leaders look incompetent. "Such a loss of trust in

each other is problematic for democratic institutions since these rely for their acceptance and functioning on citizens seeing them as morally justified” (Reglitz, 2022). In other words, fake news creates an attitude of skepticism towards a person’s fellow citizens and their innate moral integrity, which affect their ability to lead.

As everyone knows, modern American society is mainly split between two political parties, most recently called the Democratic Party, and the Republican Party. While having different-minded parties work together can arguably be part of what keeps the Democratic system accountable, these parties often disagree. Has fake news added fuel to this proverbial fire? Well, take for example this 2017 news story about professional football players kneeling to the national anthem. Here is the headline from Fox News, “Trump Calls Out Kneeling Football Players, Says Disrespectful” (Fox News, 2017). On the other spectrum, here is the headline heralded by CNN regarding a similar story. “Trump Attacks African American Football Players” (Klein, 2018). Unfortunately as shown by these headlines, the levels of political polarization have grown even higher in the last century. This is thanks, in part, to fake news for making it possible for people to personally create an existence, once again through echo chambers, where they are only exposed to stories, true or untrue, which line up with their ideological beliefs.

In addition, people who are already ideologically aligned are more likely to believe the news that helps them prove their points. This is explicitly shown in a study that reported that “Democrats and Republicans are both about 15% more likely to believe ideologically aligned headlines, and this ideologically aligned inference is substantially stronger for people with ideologically segregated social media networks” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 214). This is problematic because as was stated before, these communities perpetuate the stories amongst themselves leading to an extensive group of people that are purposely misinformed. This report

proved that people who align with a specific party are more susceptible to believing fake news, and then spreading that information to others, thus strengthening the already toxic political polarization in America.

Obviously, not all news is fake, or at the very least, there are news sources still trying to produce quality content. With all of this false information being interspersed with the truth, it is not surprising that citizens will start having doubts about any news they consume in general, even from reputable sources. This could be seen in the 2016 election when “consumers ... [became] more skeptical of legitimate news producers, to the extent that they become hard to distinguish from fake news producers” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 221). When this happens to many citizens on an expanded and societal scale, it can produce a domino effect that has an impact on the quality of professional reporting as, “reduced demand for high-precision, low-bias reporting will reduce the incentives to invest in accurate reporting and truthfully report signals” (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 221). In essence, fake news removes any sliver of motivation that reporters may have left to do the hard grunt work of finding the actual facts and statistics. This means that even those news outlets that have long held a reputation for honest reporting can succumb to the temptation to only report what their viewers want to hear.

Last but certainly not least, at the root of the matter, what is fake news doing to the whole concept of “truth”? When a person is consistently required to filter any information he or she intakes through their own innate discretionary systems, it does not take long for that person to begin to question their own inherent sense of truth and belief system. As one study found, “Fake news is increasingly affecting societal values, changing opinion on critical issues and topics as well as redefining facts, truth, and beliefs” (Olan et al., 2022). This can explain why propaganda and fake news is a such widely used tactic of communist governments because it creates a

weakness that can only be solved with the absolute power of such a strong government. People start neglecting to fact-check their leader, and instead just believe him or her point blank, leading to something called belief perseverance (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022). One grave example of the consequences of belief perseverance would be the infamous insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2022. The people that participated in this crime took what their leader, former president Donald Trump, claimed about the election at face value, and acted accordingly. This whole event goes to show how a society in which people are left constantly doubting what they believe can be easily vulnerable to outside forces coming in claiming the truth, and this is itself a threat to American society.

Considering all this, fake news is clearly not a trivial matter. Fake news is in fact prevalent today in American society, and as proven by my sweet grandmother and her Facebook account, it has negative impacts that need to be addressed. These include the way it creates and sustains misinformed citizens, the way it severely hurts the democratic system, and finally the way it creates distrust in any news outlets and personal filtering systems. These issues have many implications both for current-day America as well as many for future generations, some of which probably will not be realized until much later. Americans need to be aware of the dangers of fake news, and they need to be educated in the ability to discern between reputable sources and biased sources starting early in life through parental guidance and the public school systems. This is where organizations such as the News Literacy Program come into play. This organization's whole purpose is to create a more "new-literate" America, and they provide education in discernment (*News literacy project 2022*). Many other organizations such as the News Literacy Program exist, and citizens should take advantage of them. Only then can there be any hope to

overcome the impacts of fake news and over time begin to restore trust in fellow citizens, the media, and ourselves.

References

- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-235.
- Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2018). Fake News and The Economy of Emotions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 154-175.
- Bennett, S. E., Flickinger, R. S., Baker, J. R., Rhine, S. L., & Bennett, L. L. (1996). Citizens' knowledge of foreign affairs. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(2), 10-29.
- Fox News. (2017, September 26). *Trump calls NFL kneeling 'disgraceful,' disrespectful to veterans*. Fox News. Retrieved November 14, 2022, from <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-calls-nfl-kneeling-disgraceful-disrespectful-to-veterans>
- Jackson, J. W., & Hinsz, V. B. (2022). Group dynamics and the U.S. Capitol insurrection: An introduction to the special issue. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 26(3), 169–177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000193>
- Klein, B. (2018, August 10). *Trump Stokes attacks on NFL players who protest | CNN politics*. CNN. Retrieved November 14, 2022, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/10/politics/trump-tweets-on-nfl-protests>
- News literacy project*. News Literacy Project. (2022, November 18). Retrieved November 19, 2022, from <https://newslit.org/>

- Olan, F., Jayawickrama, U., Arakpogun, E., Suklan, J., & Liu, S. (2022). Fake news on Social Media: The Impact on Society. *Information Systems Frontiers*,
- Pennycook, Gordon, D.G. Rand. "Examining false beliefs about voter fraud in the wake of the 2020 Presidential Election." *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 2, no. 1 (2021). DOI: 10.37016/mr-2020-51
- Reglitz, M. (2022). FAKE NEWS AND DEMOCRACY. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, 22(2), 162.
- YouTube. (2022). *The Semi-Domestic Threat of Cat Misinformation Videos*. *YouTube*. Retrieved November 19, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ9EqTztscw>.