

What a Fool Believes – The Actual Impact of Fake News

By Sean McCormick

Before 1990, if you wanted to create a widely read fake news story, you would go broke attempting to share it with everyone. That is, unless your last name was Hearst or Pulitzer. Newspapers and broadcast networks were cumbersome and expensive to establish and maintain. Spreading disinformation is hardly new. Some accounts have been documented as early as 1274 BC, featuring Ramesses II, the “victor” of Kadesh (Loktionov, 2016). Along came the World Wide Web and anyone with an internet connection could become a broadcaster. As we continue to pave this Information Superhighway, the Truth often becomes roadkill in the form of what’s now commonly referred to as “fake news”. So, what’s the big deal? The satirical newspaper/website The Onion has been cranking out falsehoods since 1988. The first headline of theirs that I recall reading was: “Stretch of Highway Learns It Was Adopted”. This paper will attempt to determine whether modern, digitally distributed fake news is actually harmful or not. If so, can anything be done about its proliferation?

While there is no record of Sir Francis Bacon actually saying, “knowledge is power”, he did say, “*ipsa scientia potestas est*” (knowledge itself is power), which is close enough. Throughout recorded history, different characters have fudged some facts, usually for some sort of self-aggrandizement or to cast doubts about a competitor. Prior to Gutenberg’s contribution of the printing press, misinformation was either word of mouth or condemned to handwritten one-offs with very limited distribution. Author Joanna Burkardt, in her research on the history of fake news, wrote about Pietro Aretino, an Italian satirist in 1522. Aretino not only blackmailed former patrons with their previous correspondence, his satirical writings

“planted the seeds of doubt in the minds of their readers about the people in power in Italy and helped to shape the complex political reality of the time” (Burkardt, 2017). Sound familiar? Religious institutions got in on the game as well. In 1755, the Lisbon Earthquake was exploited by the Catholic Church, claiming in mass-distributed pamphlets that the disaster was retribution against sinners. This led to “the famed Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire to attack religious explanations of natural events and also made Voltaire into an activist against fake religious news” (Soll, 2016). While the impact of foisting religious propaganda on the public is difficult to quantify and could be debated at length, the effect that Aretino’s messaging had on the Italian power structure seems far more tangible.

Cui bono? Cui cares?

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, an enormous amount of energy has been put into the identification and classification of what constitutes fake news in the digital age. There is an 85MB, 216-page, freely downloadable document called, A Field Guide to Fake News, assembled by Public Data Lab. It is a mind-bending collection of graphs and research. It identifies the basic tenants of fake news, analyzes its origins, displays the vectors taken to reach the public and showcases the profiles of those who propagate it. Despite its thoroughness, the Field Guide doesn’t speculate on the damage, if any, caused by fake news’ existence. Yet it does indicate there is an incredibly endless supply of falsehoods being posted every hour. Why is so much effort being put into the lying game? Our afore-mentioned Italian jokester, Aretino, might not be surprised by the answer. Money. Moolah. Dinero, or in Aretino’s case, Lira. Digital ad revenue has become a huge and incredibly competitive industry in the Digital Age. While they still exist, those tired old banner ads (that most people block, anyway) have been superseded by a more profitable and obnoxious technique known as “content-

recommendation ad units.” Those are blocks of images usually found underneath an actual article labeled, “Recommended for You” with clickbait captions like: “Amazon doesn’t want you to find this site” or “Nipple stickers are the new glitter boobs.” The subhumans who conspire in this industry answer to no one other than the free market. As long as their material is reaching actual eyeballs, the actual content of said material is of little consequence. So long as it is law-abiding. Some fake news websites like Huzlers.com, which have such thought-provoking fare as, “SEX ROBOTS THAT CAN COOK, CLEAN EFFICIENTLY WILL BE AVAILABLE BY 2019”, mention they are “fauxtainment” at the very bottom of their “About” statement. Yet, people still comment on the stories as if they are on the level. These sites are also riddled with the previously mentioned content-recommendation ad units. Again, like a stuck vinyl record, I ask, “Who cares, who’s hurt by all this?” There have been phony newspapers like the Weekly World News (who can forget dear Bat Boy?) for decades. Most people have traditionally had enough snap to laugh or look the other way at such twaddle.

Perhaps what we should actually care about is not so much as a what, but a where. Back in 2016, in Veles, Macedonia, young, low-income, computer-savvy folk discovered there was significant ad revenue potential in setting up pro-Trump fake websites. “These Macedonians on Facebook didn’t care if Trump won or lost the White House. They only wanted pocket money to pay for things—a car, watches, better cell phones, more drinks at the bar” (Subramanian, 2017). Hillary Clinton even gave the denizens of Veles a shout-out during a bizarre interview during the 2017 Code Conference. A lot of these fake stories made their way to mainstream eyeballs via social media applications, mainly Facebook. Facebook accounts with American names could be purchased for 50 cents (Subramanian, 2017). A fake, American-seeming profile starts sharing fake, pro-Trump stories to pro-Trump Facebook groups and, voila: lazy Facebook users get their confirmation bias fix, and Boris in Macedonia

gets a new pair of Nike kicks thanks to Google AdSense revenue.

I'm still far from feeling panicky about the existence of fake news. Alex Jones can work himself up to an onscreen aneurism, calling shooting survivors "actors" while selling wildly marked-up supplements to his more gullible viewers and the world keeps turning. Russia has its own version of Fox News called Russia Today, or RT (which, as of this writing, is about to go dark in the U.S. in a few hours). They've aired ads that showed then-President Obama morphing into Ahmadinejad, and provide platforms for Wikileaks' Julian Assange, US Green Party candidates, and Larry King. Russia's contribution (hacked emails, thousands of fake Twitter accounts, and phony Facebook profiles sharing partisan nonsense) to the U. S. 2016 election outcome has been debated at length, but none of my research has indicated any conclusive proof that their deluge of misinformation actually got Trump elected. Several conclusions I've read go a bit like this, "In the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, it was alleged that fake news might have been pivotal in the election of President Trump. We do not provide an assessment of this claim one way or another" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). I personally believe it would be safer to say that voter apathy was the overall winner in 2016.

Despite all the clickbait and partisanship, being able to understand the motives and techniques behind modern publications of falsehoods is imperative, as there can be grave geopolitical consequences if incorrect information is acted upon. As long as our representative democracy here in the USA recognizes and upholds the current interpretations of the First Amendment of the Constitution, it appears we will be forever saddled with fake news. Social media sites claim they are modifying their policies, but who wants them becoming the arbiters of Truth? Fortunately, we are still a good distance off from being completely unable to discern fact from fiction.

Our free press will have to be agile, innovative, and able to cope with dwindling budgets and sky-high expectations. Guardian writer Ross Barkan feels, “there will be a media after Trump. If it’s further crippled, it will have little to do with him and everything to do with money. That’s the only reality that counts” (2018). As America has handled polio by way of inoculation, our educational institutions can be an early safeguard, where preventive measures through thoughtful curricula can help preserve the concept of Truth.

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