
Popularity of Fake News in the United States

Of late, the term fake news has frequently been used to describe political stories which are seen as damaging to an entity or person. However, it is by no means restricted to politics and can also pertain to general news that is untrue. The printing and dissemination of specious news is hardly a new phenomenon, but the popularity of the term fake news is. This may be in large part due to repeated use by Donald Trump and new connotations associated with the term.

President Trump has sought to use the media as his foil and has used the term liberally on unflattering stories during his time in office. He has an alliterative way with nicknames, loves branding of all kinds, and his occasionally garbled use of language has become part of the zeitgeist. The term fake news has in fact become so ubiquitous that it was named the word of the year for 2017 by both the Collins English Dictionary and the American Dialect Society. Fake news as defined by the American Dialect Society can mean "disinformation or falsehoods presented as real news" and "actual news that is claimed to be untrue".

Fake news consists of deliberate misinformation and is written with the intent to mislead or to gain financially or politically. The relevance of fake news has increased with the expansion of technology, since the need for views and ratings has increased. For media outlets, the ability to attract viewers to their websites is a necessity in order to please advertisers that pay for advertising on their websites. If publishing a story with false content, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership, online sharing, and Internet click revenue, will attract viewers, it may be worthy producing in order to benefit advertisers and ratings. Easy access to online advertising revenue, increased political polarization, and the popularity of social media, have all been implicated in the spread of fake news, which have come to provide competition for legitimate news stories. Politicians have also been implicated in generating and propagating fake news, particularly during elections. Fake news also undermines serious media coverage and makes it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories.

According to Ben Zimmer, chair of the American Dialect Society's New Words Committee and language columnist for the Wall Street Journal, when president Trump latched on to fake news early in 2017, he often used it as a rhetorical bludgeon to disparage any news report that he happened to disagree with. This obscured the earlier use of fake news for misinformation or disinformation spread online, as was seen on social media during the 2016 presidential campaign. According to Zimmer, Trump's version of the term fake news has become a catchphrase among the president's supporters, seeking to expose biases in mainstream media, but it also developed more ironic uses and has begun to be used as a sarcastic put down.

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Usage of the term has risen by 365% since 2016 and the term has become synonymous with Trump who has used the phrase repeatedly to criticize the media, particularly during his Twitter rants, and what he perceives to be inaccurate reporting. "So much Fake News is being reported. They don't even try to get it right, or correct it when they are wrong. ... The Mainstream Media is crazed that WE won the election! ... and they knew exactly what I said and meant. They just wanted a story. FAKE NEWS!" Claims that potentially damaging stories were fake news, and enquiries into the proliferation of such stories were a major part of the news agenda in 2017.

Fake news either as a statement of fact or as an accusation, has been inescapable this year, contributing to the undermining of society's trust in news reporting. Given the term's ubiquity and regular usage by President Trump, it is clear that fake news is very real news.

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