
Impact on Fake News

Does the reliance of digital news on social media create new forms of journalism?

The twenty-first century has seen technological advances like no other time before. In the span of twenty and so years the world saw technology moving from recently created computers that used dial-up Internet, to devices that can take pictures and film videos -now up to 4K-, access the Internet, hold multiple apps, and in essence act as computers, and still fit in people's pockets. The practicality of cellphones, tablets, and even computers, has made people willing to use such devices; every day the practicality increases and people's reliance on them becomes stronger. For those reasons, it is natural that means of communication and disseminating information would shift to digital platforms as well, where people are active most of the time.

The rise of digital news was greatly influenced by technological advances and now has established its place. It is extremely attractive to the population to have access to any information they may possibly want at all times. Television news still hold the first place in news platform, but major news broadcasting companies, such as CNN, Fox News, ABC news, all have websites where their content can be found and also streamed live. Newspaper companies, which have seen huge print circulation declines with only last year showing that the "weekday circulation fell 7% and Sunday circulation fell 4%", have caught up on the digital news business; well-established corporations such as The New York Times and The Washington Post have had to move efforts into shifting to digital platforms. Digital news is now the "second [...] most prominent news platform" (Lu & Matsa, 2016).

It's not all attributed to technological advances, but also to the generations that are now beginning to consume news. Millennials (1980 to mid-1990s) have been exposed to the digital advances from a young age and Generation Z (mid-1990s to early 2000s) are digital natives, and both generations will soon be taking over most of the news readership; elderly people still buy newspapers, but as their generation leaves the newer ones become the predominant consumers. This means that the shift is permanent and can only increase from here on.

The solid base of digital news existent nowadays has made it possible for it to spread over the network. News companies are not the only news disseminators anymore -they share that job with social media outlets.

Numbers for social media as news source are higher than ever before and higher than ever expected. In the United States, "Mobile is becoming a preferred device for digital news" (Lu & Matsa, 2016), which could influence the numbers of people looking for news on social media,

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ones often accessed on one's phone. Also according to Lu & Matsa (2016), 62% of adults get news on social media, with Facebook and YouTube leading as the two most common social media sources for news. Facebook links people to news publications very often. In the United Kingdom, the influence hasn't been far off; according to the Digital News Report 2016, 33% of the population uses social media as its news source.

Such trends are leading a significant part of the population to feel involved in the process of news creation. Citizen journalism is a new form of journalism fueled by the ease of posting, sharing, and disseminating information brought by the new role of social media. Now, not only journalists from news companies are given the power to report information, but regular citizens as well. The process is simple: people can post videos, pictures, or even articles about an event, issue, situation, and social media makes it even simpler. Anyone can take a video of a police officer beating up a man during a protest, post it on social media, get thousands of shares, thus engaging on the practice of citizen journalism. This practice works very well to give people power on reporting what they see.

But not all are aware of this power. Not all are aware that by sharing any type of content on social media, which is not personal, can become a form of citizen journalism. People have become so used to posting, sharing, that not all understand that the content they create can have power. Because of the ubiquitous presence of social media on today's societies, it's just become a "habit" to share events on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Not only some people are not aware, but, as Singal (2016) said "Misinformation spreads within seconds of being posted and can't be stuffed back whence it came".

This can sometimes create fake news. Journalists have been engaging in a form of journalism that was highly present in the early 1990s in the name of yellow journalism, and has recently sprung to life again as fake news. The fake news epidemic is all around the United States and was a major issue of discussion now, with experts worrying about the effects and how people can be educated to distinguish fake news from real news. And journalists are not the only ones fabricating "sensationalized, exaggerated, and sometimes outright false stories" (Stoffers, 2017), but whole websites are created for posting fake news. It becomes easier with software such as Wix Sites or Weebly, where anyone can create a website in the matter of minutes; according to Stoffers (2017), because of anonymity, anyone can start a news site and pass it off as legitimate. In the United Kingdom, September 2015, news broke out that the prime minister has committed "obscene act with a dead pig's head", according to the daily mail. Later on, the own journalist who co-published that information admitted that "she did not know whether her huge, scandalous scoop was even true" (Viner, 2016). The problem has reached the point where some journalist don't even care anymore if they are sharing the truth or not.

Social media comes in when disseminating the information to the masses. Although well-

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established, well-known news outlets do make mistakes sometimes, it is not likely for them to publish fake stories; these stories are rather coming from independent websites, blogs, extremely biased sources, small news publishers, or people who just want to make money, and then shared on social media repeatedly. Facebook, being the largest social platform for the sharing and publishing of news, is highly responsible for the fake news epidemic. Especially with the algorithms that make one's feed tailored to him/her, extremely biased news can end up in people's feed and be shared simply for fitting that person's views.

Soon, following the trends seen right now, journalism will become completely arbitrary and anyone will be able to post "news" to be considered true. Journalists are already turning to social media to gather information, find the latest news, basically engaging and supporting the process of social media platforms acting as news platforms, so little separates many of these journalists from citizens simply sharing information.

Not the same applies to countries where free speech and free press are highly limited. In China, they have no access to rebroadcasting or receiving content from global channels. International websites are sometimes available to Chinese citizens, but the content may be blocked at the will of the government, if it goes against the Communist Party. Hong Kong remains rather independent, even if under Chinese control, with an "editorially-dynamic media" (BBC,2016), but risks interference at any time. In Venezuela, the media has been under strict censorship since the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) took over -often referred to as Chavistas, Chavez's followers, by the Venezuelan people. In fact, "President Nicolas Maduro has done his utmost to silence independent media" (BBC, 2016).

In those countries, people either don't have a voice or it is highly limited. It is detrimental for the society that free press doesn't exist, for not all become aware of the true issues existent in the country and how the government is behaving. There is no dependence of digital news on social media, for people can barely access social media and post whatever they please. Citizen journalism is extremely limited, being left only for the very brave who truly want to change their reality. What does arise from the lack of social media presence and limitations on free speech is fake news.

Because the government is controlling the news, as it is in China, or creating the news, as it is in Venezuela, they hold the power over what gets disseminated to the public. The government, therefore, can always guarantee that the news reaching the citizens are ones that portray the situation of the country and the government in a positive light. The news then become deceiving, exaggerated, and sometimes plain fake.

The role of social media on digital news needs to be delineated and globally understood. Citizen journalism can be helpful or detrimental, but what causes the difference is the extent to which

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one is aware of his/her power as a citizen journalist, and how one uses this power. Fake news has been around for a while, back when newspapers just wanted to sell more copies, and that probably won't change anytime soon -it is more of a question on human nature. Something that can be done is educating people to recognize the difference between false and truthful information. Social media companies can also put efforts into trying to limit the spread of illegitimate news, which they have been asked to do, but responded saying that they will not limit the free speech within their platforms.

It does come down to the question of free speech and the fact that people are entitled to expressing their opinion, no matter how outrageous, biased, or deceiving it is. In the court case of *New York Times v. Sullivan*, the court declared that untrue statements can be published if there's no malice in doing so. The case, however, was based on published misinformation, not intentional fake information; sharing fake information even without the intention of hurting any party involved can still be detrimental. But even with society's awareness of the extensive effects of blasphemy, those who do share false stories still have the right to do so -just because it is morally wrong does not mean it's illegal.

In those countries that free speech is, technically, illegal, the discussion shifts immensely. There is no free press, which in many cases results in highly manipulated and distorted news, since the state oversees news platforms and makes sure they portray the state's views in a positive note. "Fake news", in those cases, are different in nature to fake news in countries with free press.

Those examples show that limiting speech is not the solution, but it cannot be said that making all speech free is also not the solution, for there is a way to educate people in countries such as the United States or England to recognize and don't spread, or even create, false stories; the other way around, the citizens never have a choice. Governmental action can cause more damage than good, as the examples of taking away people's voices can show. For favorable outcomes, it becomes clear that a collective effort is the best solution at this point, where society as a whole will begin to recognize the issue on the table and choose to actively fight against it.

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