
The Spread and Recognition of Fake News for Students

Introduction

The goal of this study is to research the spread of and recognition of fake news for college students. For the purpose of this study, the spread of fake news is generally defined as sharing of inaccurate, biased, or otherwise not credible “news” articles, reports, and sources. Fake news is not a new concept, however, the platforms where fake news and bias is spread is ever changing and new. Propaganda will always exist and it eventually made its way to the internet, which is now the fastest way for the spread of fake news. With social media and the Internet evolving everyday, there are many ways to not only obtain news, but to rapidly report and share it. There are many branches of social media being used in today’s world, specifically, sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the most recent Snapchat.

Even though the younger generations are more tech savvy there is still an epidemic of fake news. Misinformed youth leads to a misinformed future. These new social platforms make it incredibly easy to spread and disseminate information and modern technology makes it easier to create sources for fake news that have a sense of credibility surrounding them, regardless of whether or not they are actually credible. With the ease it takes for information to gain a massive reach, disinformation has become not only widespread, but also convincing to the audiences it reaches. This paper will cover the studies done to support the overall goal of this study. The sections that are supporting the research done are: media and fake news, students and sharing fake news, effects of fake news, students and media literacy, and detection and solutions.

Media and Fake News

Fake news has been spread since the development of written language, from political propaganda written of papyrus to satirical plays, and from yellow journalism to government propaganda during the World Wars (Emanuelson 2018). Social media plays a huge part in the spread of these stories. According to Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa. 61% of Millennials get political news on Facebook rather than traditional sources like TV (Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa 2015). In the last decade, or even in the last five years, news reach has changed dramatically, from print to radio to television to internet to who knows what’s next.

The low cost, easy access and rapid information dissemination of social media bring benefits for people to seek out news timely (Shu 2017). Fake news spreads faster by citizens sharing the

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content on social media platforms. In the three months leading up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, over 156 misleading news articles got an astonishing 37 million shares on Facebook (Tsipursky 2018). Vosough, Roy, and Aral believe that what makes a good fake news story is as follows, “False news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust,” (Vosoughi, Roy, Aral 2018). Fake news can be categorized as: “intentionally deceptive information; large-scale hoaxes; jokes taken at face-value; slanted reporting of real facts; and stories where the truth is contentious” (Emanuelson 2018).

Students and Sharing Fake News

Students look to social media more and more for their daily news. In a 2015 Pew Research Center report on millennials’ use of social media, researchers reported that social media is the new television for the younger generations and the top spot for political news intake. About 61% of millennials report getting political news on Facebook. That is a much larger percentage than any other news source (Little 2018). Most ways of identifying fake news focused on fact checking (Shu 2017).

Recent social and psychology studies show the importance of using social media data when uncovering the links to consumers believing fake news. Confirmation bias reveals the effects of consumers preferring to believe information that aligns with their existing views, which leads to posting information that is not necessarily true. The Echo Chamber Effect is an effect that suggests people tend to listen to others who are like-minded. This causes grouping and communities on social media (Shu 2017).

Motivations behind fake news can vary from financial gain through advertising to influencing political views. No matter the motive behind fake news, the success of any propaganda campaign will ultimately be based on how much it affects the real world and how the world reacts (Andorfer 2018). Effects of Fake News Some of the effects of fake news can be incredibly detrimental to a society as a whole. One of the largest factions of society that is affected by fake news is in modern politics and economics.

According to Waldman, there are several major effects of fake news in the media. An increase in fake news leads to confusion about what the truth is and leads to a decrease in public awareness of issues. Also, the more falsities are portrayed as truths by the media, the less impactful the actual facts become. Also, fake news creates a highly polarized society and can create heavy social divides (Waldman 2018). Fake news does not only consist of politics. Dr. Brittany Seymour is an assistant professor of oral health policy at Harvard University. She believes that viral misinformation threatens public health. With over 80% of people searching for

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health related information online, misinformation poses a public health threat, vaccines being a top example (Vogel 2017).

In 2014 one of the largest measles outbreaks occurred in over a generation. Seymour says that, “We’ve been able to trace that, in part, to parents who found scary information on the Internet and opted not to vaccinate their children” (Vogel, 2017, pg. 7). Also, the controversy around the fluoridation in water led to a 2014 study with severe limitations that claimed the chemical lowered children’s IQ’s. Seymour goes on to say that within a span of a few hours the article had created a panic with the public and people took to social media. The article was covered in popular media news across the Internet, generating thousands of views and shares (Vogel 2017).

Students and Media Literacy

A Stanford University study in 2016 revealed that Generation Z is lacking media literacy. The study consisted of more than 7,804 students from middle school through college finding that 82% of middle school respondents were unable to distinguish between a real news story and an ad labeled ‘sponsored content’ (Tomar 2018). Tomar points out that student’s ability to analyze facts is crucial and the absence of these skills has caused fake news and the rapid spread of it. Also, students and young adults that do not scrutinize sources do not consider potential bias (Tomar 2018).

This inability to recognize bias fuels the fire of fake news and the spread of it. Robert Byrd, a professor of journalism at the University of Memphis, believes that, “Media literacy should be a part of a K–12 curriculum and students need to learn early on how media works” (Little, 2018, pg. 21). This age group is prevalent since according to Dogtiev, Snapchat is used by 83% of Americans aged 12 - 17 (Dogtiev 2018). Not news only, but advertising, public relations, and film and television. Curriculums could be taught in classes or as part of social studies or other courses (Little 2018). Therefore, students would be more likely to recognize fake news when they reach a college level.

Detection and Solutions

Algorithms known as bots are being deployed more frequently to try and manipulate information, disrupt social media communication, and gain users attention (Burkhardt 2017). Technology is beginning to appear to assist in identifying fake news, but need more development. New software is being created to recognize fake news without human intervention. However, with technology created to identify fake news, there will also be technology created to get around those programs (Burkhardt 2017).

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In response, various technology companies and social media networks are considering implementing various drastic changes to their platforms to help users identify what is fact and what is fiction (Royster 2017). The government is starting to recognize that fake news is something that must be actively fought and various agencies are setting up services to debunk stories that they consider to be false. They are also considering imposing regulations and punishing sites that do publish misinformation (Andorfer 2018). Furthermore, colleges and universities are helping students become more media literate; therefore, they are able to distinguish the differences between advertisement and information, activism and journalism, and propaganda and proper citations (Tomar 2018).

Conclusion

Fake news is being created and spread now more than ever before with the use of the Internet and social media.

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