Feature article: Fake News

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The phenomena of fake news garnered considerable public interest in the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential Elections. Highly partisan or fabricated content is deceptively presented as genuine news. One is bound to be hit with misleading news and content when searching for any news related to a politically hot or popular issue which may contain half-truths, deliberate misinformation or plain lying that reinforces a particular political stance or opinion.

Social media is the platform of choice for the dissemination of fake news that not only serves as the enabler of the problem but serves as the foundation upon which the entire misinformation ecosystem rests and markets itself. Interestingly, the very tool that people always see enthusiastically as enabling democracy has ended up hurting it.

The possibility of anyone creating a YouTube video, blog or a tweet on any matter of public interest, lead to increased decentralization and democratization of news and information. The experiment, unfortunately, boomeranged as social media became the top delivery network serving the fake news industry.

As I searched for answers, I turned to an Ivy League Professor who taught Journalism Ethics to students. I asked him the most troubling question ringing in my head, “Why now”? After all, lies, propaganda, falsifying information had been existent since communication itself. He said, “To be clear, the phenomena is older than Donald Trump. The problem lies with present-day reporting competing in their thousands to draw the readers’ attention”. He explains how challenging it can be for journalism students to remain focused on accuracy to build trust with readers rather than just drawing clicks.

As for the consumer, he said, “everyone has to be media literature in this digital age”. Since everyone is now on Facebook or Twitter, then whether we accept it or not, “we are the media”, explained the professor, and that puts the onus of responsible use on us.

However, the situation is far worse than it seems. Fake political news spreads more broadly, deeper, faster and further as the outlets mix it with non-essential and junk content that makes it more difficult to distinguish quality and valuable content. Provocative content, unsurprisingly, captures the most attention and is rewarded in the form of clicks, shares, and likes.

The second Professor I interviewed, had extensively researched the phenomena. He said, “fake news is not looking to communicate, what it actually tries to do is to make the average reader feel in a particular way, which would lead them to accept what they are reading to be true”. The professor’s comments and the implications of his suggestion shook me.

He agreed that people now have to take responsibility and become more savvy consumers, which requires them to “watch who they are listening to, check the sources, how does the organization who is sharing the information work?” He said. Essentially, we have to know why the particular news group or organization is letting me know that, to evaluate it.

Fake news is not merely dangerous because of non-factual content. The danger lies in its ability to exploit human psychological weaknesses and tendencies. Each of us is prone to cognitive biases that we must become aware of. To rediscover the right way of thinking requires us to become aware of our actions and which, in turn, requires self-consciousness, to help us remain rational and moral, and to develop in us a sense of reciprocity through which we relate to the beliefs and desires of others (Collier, 1995)

 The journalism of peace is one that opposes rhetorical slogans, sensational newlines, and falsehoods, while essentially seeking to spread the truth. Good journalism exists, but it requires us to become active readers and listeners. We must learn to have empathy and listen to the other source and not avoid something solely because it does not resonate with our own viewpoints. To avoid becoming self-absorbed, we must know how to empathize with the struggles and joys of our fellow human beings.

# References

Collier, J. (1995). The Virtuous Organization. *A European Review, 4*(3), 143-149. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8608.1995.tb00245.x