

Case 6: The War against Fake News

The 2016 presidential election brought to the forefront the issue of fake news—the publication of false information packaged as news, often with the intention of misleading readers. Some of the most egregious examples were the story about Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump for President of the United States, and the report that ISIS urged American Muslims to vote for Hillary Clinton.⁵¹ The concern over fake news became heightened when *The Washington Post*'s Craig Timberg published a controversial story claiming that the election of Donald Trump received the “support from a sophisticated Russian propaganda campaign that created and spread misleading articles online with the goal of punishing Democrat Hillary Clinton, helping ... Trump and undermining faith in American democracy.”⁵² Timberg's article cited as evidence a report put together by anonymous analysts from the website PropOrNot, which featured a list of over 200 sites deemed to be “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season.”⁵³ Shortly after its publication, the story went viral and it was picked up by news outlets like *USA Today*.⁵⁴ But further investigation by reporters from *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Intercept* (among others) revealed that the central thesis of Timberg's article relied on “the work of a shadowy group that smears some 200 alternative news outlets as either knowing or unwitting agents of a foreign power.”⁵⁵ For example, among the sites blacklisted as “Russian propaganda” were *Truthdig*, which features the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist

⁵¹ Hannah Ritchie, “Read All about It: The Biggest Fake News Stories of 2016,” *CNBC*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/12/30/read-all-about-it-the-biggest-fake-news-stories-of-2016.html>.

⁵² Craig Timberg, “Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ during Election, Experts Say,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-propaganda-effort-helped-spread-fake-news-during-election-experts-say/2016/11/24/793903b6-8a40-4ca9-b712-716af66098fe_story.html?utm_term=.56ffceae8849.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Doug Stanglin, “Reports: Russian Operation Boosted ‘Fake News’ Phenomenon,” *USA Today*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/25/reports-russian-operation-boosted-fake-news-phenomenon/94424206/>.

⁵⁵ Matt Taibbi, “The ‘Washington Post’ ‘Blacklist’ Story Is Shameful and Disgusting,” *Rolling Stone*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/washington-post-blacklist-story-is-shameful-disgusting-w452543>.

Chris Hedges, and other “flagship publications of the progressive left.”⁵⁶ In an ironic twist, *The Washington Post*’s attempt to expose fake news resulted in “far more fake news than it exposed,”⁵⁷ observed journalists Ben Norton and Glenn Greenwald from *The Intercept*.

While the publication of fake news is not a new phenomenon, technological advances, such as the Internet and social media, have had a dramatic impact on the dissemination of false information. Because of social media platforms like Facebook, “[c]ontent can be relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment.”⁵⁸ Given that “62% of adults get news on social media,”⁵⁹ Facebook and Google are taking steps to make sure fake news is eliminated from searches and feeds. For example, Google modified search algorithms to prevent holocaust-denial sites from appearing in search results.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Facebook announced last year that it would partner with fact-checkers who would be “labeling, and burying fake news and hoaxes in its News Feed.”⁶¹ In the future, Facebook will be relying on artificial intelligence with “the capability of sweeping through Facebook posts, searching for keywords, sentences, paragraphs or even the way a story is

⁵⁶ Max Blumenthal, “Washington Post Promotes Shadowy Website That Accuses 200 Publications of Being Russian Propaganda Plants,” *Altnet*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.altnet.org/media/washington-post-promotes-shadowy-website-accuses-200-publications-russian-propaganda-plants>.

⁵⁷ Ben Norton and Glenn Greenwald, “Washington Post Disgracefully Promotes a McCarthyite Blacklist from a New, Hidden, and Very Shady Group,” June 1, 2017, *The Intercept*, <https://theintercept.com/2016/11/26/washington-post-disgracefully-promotes-a-mccarthyite-blacklist-from-a-new-hidden-and-very-shady-group/>.

⁵⁸ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, no. w23089 (2017): 211.

⁵⁹ Allcott and Gentzkow, 212.

⁶⁰ Hannah Roberts, “That Awful Holocaust-Denial Website Is Finally Falling in Google’s Search Rankings,” *Business Insider*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/holocaust-denial-web-site-falls-google-search-results-2016-12>.

⁶¹ Alex Heath, “Facebook Is Going to Use Snopes and Other Fact-Checkers to Combat and Bury ‘Fake News,’” *Business Insider*, June 12, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-will-fact-check-label-fake-news-in-news-feed-2016-12>.

framed.”⁶² Though the packaging of lies as fact has been widely recognized as a serious obstacle to a functioning democracy, journalists and media scholars⁶³ have expressed worries about placing “absolute editorial control in a small set of hands with no apparent recourse and no documented appeals process.”⁶⁴

⁶² Bill Boyarsky, “Will Facebook’s System to Detect Fake News Lead to Censorship?,” *Truthdig*, June 12, 2013, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/will_facebooks_fake-news_detection_system_lead_to_censorship_20170208.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kalev Leetaru, “Facebook’s Fake News Detector and The Myth of Technology as Savior,” *Forbes*, June 12, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2016/12/24/facebook-fake-news-detector-and-the-myth-of-technology-as-savior/#562d40405af8>.