


# Chapter 1

## Understanding Online Falsehood From the Perspective of Social Problem

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The perspective of social problem has been used to analyze a variety of disconcerting phenomena over the years. These run the gamut from unemployment and drug addiction to sexual assault and child labor. Meanwhile, digital technology has now cemented itself firmly as a dominant social phenomenon. As its by-product, it has engendered online falsehood—often manifested as fake news or rumors—that easily becomes viral on the internet. Yet, research has not examined the phenomenon of online falsehood through the lens of social problem hitherto. Therefore, this chapter seeks to explain how the issue of online falsehood has now turned into a problem for the digital society. With a social constructionism paradigm, the chapter draws on the literature about the construction of social problems. A typology of online falsehood is also proposed. The chapter concludes with an urgent call to combat online falsehood.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Online Falsehood**

Unprecedented advances in new media technologies have revolutionized how people create and consume information in this digital age (Hamari et al., 2016; Westlund & Färdigh, 2015). They have given rise to new avenues for dissemination and collection of information. In particular, traditional word-of-mouth

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is now complemented by electronic word-of-mouth, an umbrella term that refers to all types of online messages created by Internet users (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Westlund & Färdigh, 2015).

While truckloads of online information are continuously being created, their quality can vary intensely from fact to fiction (Hornik et al., 2015). This is mainly because they are neither always created by domain experts nor guaranteed to be scrutinized by vigilant gatekeepers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, online falsehood is known to sprout as a digital weed on the fertile soil of technology (Mazer et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2014).

Online falsehood encompasses the phenomenon whereby unfounded and unverified online messages leave behind their digital footprint in the form of texts, pictures or videos on the Internet. What is worrying is that such dubious messages are often mistaken as facts, and in turn cause people to take actions that they would not have taken otherwise. For instance, the hoax that consuming iodized table salt would help minimize the harmful effects of a possible radiation leak at the Fukushima nuclear plant in the wake of the Japanese earthquake in March 2011 caused people to stockpile salt (World Health Organization, 2011). Likewise, the doomsday rumor in China resulted in public fears that starting from 21 December 2012, there would be three consecutive days of darkness on the earth. As people prepared to deal with the prolonged darkness, candles went out of stock (Wang, Zhao, & Huang, 2014). Understandably, such hoaxes are not easily separable from truths. If people end up believing the former at the expense of the latter, a social disaster is definitely on the cards.

## **From Personal Issue and Social Issue to Social Problem**

Since time immemorial, the human civilization has been witnessing several disconcerting issues that run the gamut from gender-workplace diversity (Herring, 2009; Skaggs et al., 2012) and divorce (Milardo, 1987; Kalmijn, 2015) to drug addiction (Leshner, 1997; McGinty et al., 2015) and unemployment (Atkinson et al., 1986; Llorente et al., 2015). These issues are characterized by their potential to impair the quality of social life. Superficially, it would seem that these are instances of individuals' personal issue.

While personal issues are those that individuals tackle themselves and/or within a small set of peers (Fry & Bloyce, 2017), social issues involve values denounced by the wider society as a whole (Manis, 1974; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004). Social issues refer to overarching dilemmas that tend to have an adverse impact on the general welfare of the society (Kruger, 2012). For instance, while one person losing a job can be a personal issue, a high unemployment rate that affects millions of people is likely to generate a social issue. Even though various social issues can pop up at the heart of the living society, their level of severity and impact could vary depending on the societal context.

Understandably, not all social issues turn into social problems. The distinction between the two coupled with how the former translates into the latter has long been a topic of much academic debate (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988, Spector & Kitsuse, 2000). Scholars generally agree that a social problem indicates a state of affairs within the larger society that is assumed to depart from the expected ideal. Examples of social problems include crime, poverty, racial tension, and religious strife (Haines, 1999; Kitsuse & Spector, 1973; McKinney, 2015). A social problem is called so not necessarily because the prevailing condition is objectively wrong. Rather, the prevailing condition is perceived as being wrong subjectively by the vast majority of the masses (Shermis & Barth, 1978).

The difficulty in defining a social problem has long been commonly acknowledged. Nonetheless, there exist at least three factors that contribute to a social issue translating into a social problem (Eglitis et al., 2016; Kitsuse, & Spector, 1973; Schneider, 1985), First, a social issue becomes a social problem

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