

Chapter 8

The Fundamental Roles of Technology in the Spread of Fake News

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ABSTRACT

Following the 2016 United States Presidential Election, fake news has been the subject of much discussion, research and, ironically, news. This chapter examines how technology enables the creation and spread of fake news stories through the democratization of creation tools, by exploiting the increasing difficulty of discerning between amateur and professional content through digital publication, and, arguably most significantly, through the indiscriminate curation of content through algorithms. These three technological factors together have exponentially compounded the spread of fake news by enabling creators with new opportunities for profit and influence and weakening readers' ability to effectively assess the value of the content they consume or share.

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2016 United States presidential election, fake news has been the subject of much discussion, research and, ironically, news. While scholars, pundits, and the public have held much discussion and debate over the practical impacts fake news has had on world events, including the 2016 election, few will deny that technology has been pivotal in the ability of fake news to reach an expansive audience. This chapter aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how new technologies have enabled fake news creators to find unexpected levels of success by creating new mediums for publishing, exploiting biases and other weaknesses of modern readers and viewers, and weakening our ability to discern between what is real, presented in good faith and what is made with the intent to deceive and manipulate.

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BACKGROUND

The term “fake news” is simple, ineloquent, and sometimes malleable in its various interpretations. Often, individuals or organization might adjust its meaning to suit their needs during a given moment—as a short phrase for indicating discontent with the quality of a journalist or a news outlet, for example. The concept is not necessarily new, and for many the phrase has become a catchall for media criticism that some would categorize as filtering, bias, or propaganda. Prior to 2016, the phrase was most frequently used to describe satirical news, such as that from American comedy programs like *The Colbert Report* and publications like *The Onion*.

In his review of published books on fake news and the concept of “post-truth,” Corner offered this succinct yet powerful explanation (2017):

A change does indeed seem to be occurring but the more tightly that the focus is placed on the political sphere, perhaps the less the sense of shock that should be delivered by the phrase given the long and amply documented history of strategic deception here. ‘Fake news,’ however, seems a snappy identifier of a kind of a fraudulent media product. (p. 1100)

The adoption of the term in our common vernacular comes in tandem with the incursion of false information into our news feeds and search engine results as malevolent content creators use new technologies to assist in the diffusion of misleading news content for profit and influence. These motivations are not unique to the modern, digital communication era. What is new are many of the technologies bolstering these efforts and enabling innovative and effective tactics while simultaneously creating new challenges for readers who are often ill-equipped or unmotivated to navigate a new media paradigm where digital content is produced at a break-neck pace to gather as many clicks and ad views as possible.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter will examine how technology enables the creation and spread of fake news stories through the democratization of creation tools, by exploiting the increasing difficulty of discerning between amateur and professional content through digital publication, and, arguably most significantly, through the indiscriminate curation of content through algorithms. These three technological factors together have exponentially compounded the spread of fake news by enabling creators with new opportunities for profit and influence and weakening the reader’s ability to adequately assess the value and integrity of the content they consume and/or share.

This chapter will provide specific examples of how technology directly or indirectly affected the spread of fake news stories. The analysis shows that often these effects are secondary and unintended within social media and online publishing. Fake news is a side effect of the relatively rapid implementation of new media platforms online, the use of new and unregulated tools for targeted content dissemination and monetization through advertising, and the public’s embrace of digital content consumption and creation.

For the purposes of this chapter, let us use the phrase “fake news” as partially defined by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). The authors defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (p. 313). Arguably, the term should also include not just written

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