

# Chapter 11

## Fake News and Information Warfare: An Examination of the Political and Psychological Processes From the Digital Sphere to the Real World

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### ABSTRACT

*Fake news—false information passed off as factual—is an effective weapon in the information age. For instance, the Russian government perfected techniques used in its 2007 Estonian and 2008 Georgian cyber campaigns to support Donald Trump’s successful candidacy in the 2016 United States presidential election. In this chapter, the authors examine fake news and Russia’s cyberwarfare efforts across time as case studies of information warfare. The chapter identifies key terms and reviews extant political science and psychological research related to obtaining an understanding of psychological cyber warfare (“psywar”) through the proliferation of fake news. Specifically, the authors suggest that there are social, contextual, and individual factors that contribute to the spread and influence of fake news and review these factors in this chapter.*

### INTRODUCTION

The proliferation and viral spread of fake news - false information passed off as factual – is a global problem, accelerated by information and communications technology that enables near-instant and easily disguised messaging. In the United States, fake news is best known as one of myriad controversies surrounding the 2016 Presidential Election. Candidate Donald J. Trump accused the professional or

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“mainstream” news media of perpetrating a false picture of reality. Using the label “fake news,” he effectively argued that Americans ought not to trust such information sources as The New York Times or CNN. Meanwhile, Trump profited from the proliferation of false reports from less reputable but friendly sources, for example, National Enquirer headlines such as “Hillary: Six Months to Live!” (Graham, 2018) And not least, there is online deception perpetrated by Russia intended to influence the American electorate in favor of Trump (ODNI, 2017).

Fake news is not a new phenomenon. In 1896 William Jennings Bryan began his own newspaper to express his views because “There seems to be an epidemic of fake news.” (in LaFrance, 2017). Historian Eric Burns observes, “The golden age of America’s founding was also the gutter age of American reporting.” (Dickerson, 2016) What is new is the diffusion of fake news, fueled by the ease with which information broadly and accurately spreads across new media. The information age has opened the gates for more participants and more intense forms of manipulation than ever. Fake news spreads rapidly through social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) by individuals who created it solely to make money from advertising revenue (e.g., Sydell, 2016, November 23) or to harm the credibility of high-profile individuals such as former US Democratic Presidential Candidate, Hillary Clinton (e.g., Silverman, 2016, November). Pope Francis has compared fake news to the snake in the Garden of Eden (Horowitz, 2018). There are real-world consequences. Democracy itself is undermined. Individuals take action, including violent action, in response to the stimulus of the media sphere.

The objective of this chapter is to illuminate socio-psychological dynamics in fake news. What makes fake news effective? Does labeling a news story as “fake” reduce its effectiveness? This chapter reviews constructs that are key to mapping the problem domain and studies providing foundational insights into factors affecting susceptibility to real or fraudulent influence. This chapter investigates two cases of psywar from the same source: Russian Government interference in Western Democracies (Estonia and the United States). There are both contextual factors and individual differences that contribute to the spread and influence of black propaganda online. This includes how information is received and shared, involving elements that are social –such as people’s online interactions and context; technological - the affordances of technology that affect social interaction; and individual – such as the attributes one brings to the engagement. This chapter considers factors in the media sphere other than fake news that may shape and reinforce its effects. It concludes with recommendations for future research on this topic.

## **BACKGROUND: KEY TERMS IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA**

What is going on? One might argue that Americans in 2016 were ready to believe just about anything. Comedian Stephen Colbert had over a decade before coined the word “truthiness” to refer to “the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). After the 2016 election, the late Senator John McCain expressed alarm at “the growing inability, and even unwillingness, to separate truth from lies.” (John McCain, 2017). In a post-truth world, objective truth does not matter, and what is truthful or factual is opinion-based and therefore purely in the eye of the beholder. America had become “untethered from reality,” a “fatasyland,” Kurt Andersen wrote in *The Atlantic* (2017, December 28). Now more than ever, Americans are confused about even “basic facts” and 64% of Americans say that fake news has caused confusion (Mitchell et al. 2016).

Indeed, Kurt Andersen (2017, December 28) blames the social context that let this evil enter. Andersen argues that American academics and counterculture from the 1960s onward promoted relativism that

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