

Chapter 3

The Future of Fake News

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the growing issue of fabricated news, specifically looking into the trend toward deep fakes. It extends its discussion to the use of bots and trolls to influence media distribution. It underscores the importance of fact-checking now and in the future, as many media organizations run the risk of propagating false information. It ends with a note on appropriate regulatory actions to consider.

IMAGINE . . .

“The United States is the best country in the world and this year has been a fabulous year. You are receiving our news through your neural links and we look forward to reading your thoughts about our government’s success. The State Neural News Network is the most reliable news source in the country. Don’t believe all of the fake news out there,” said the avatar Maxine Hubert, the 56th President of the United States in the State of the Union address in 2060, on the government-monitored, official State Neural News Network.

INTRODUCTION

As impossible as it seems in 2022, the deep defunding of quality news organizations and the proliferation of technologies empowering the disinformation epidemic may make the presidency of characters such as Maxine Hubert a reality. George Orwell wrote in his book *1984*, “The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth.” The war over what constitutes truth is at the apex and journalists are fighting a steep and slippery battle against fake news.

During Donald Trump’s presidency, he used the term ‘fake news’ more than 2200 times and weaponized the term to rebuke many legitimate news stories and journalists (Factba.Se 2021). During a September 27, 2020 press conference he used the term “fake news” and “fake” twelve times when referring to news stories about him and *The New York Times* investigation that was published right before the

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press conference. *The New York Times* story stated that Trump paid \$750 in federal income taxes the year he won the presidency and his first year in the White House (Buettner, 2020). In his response to a reporter, Trump said, “No. No. It’s fake news. It’s totally fake news. Made up. Fake. We went through the same stories. You could have asked me the same questions four years ago. I had to litigate this and talk about it. Totally fake news” (C-SPAN, 2020). He continued to use the term several times during the press conference as he did in many public statements and Twitter posts. During an October 2019 press conference at the White House, Trump claimed that he came up with the term “fake news,” that most of the media are corrupt, and that they are truly “the enemy of the people” (C-SPAN, 2019). The term had been in popular use regarding websites and digital media stories that were given real-sounding names and visual treatments for some time. Although fake news as a concept has existed for hundreds of years, no US president used it as pervasively and abusively against the press than Trump, causing a historically deep rift between the public and the press.

But what is fake news? After Trump started using fake news during his 2015 presidential candidacy, the term has become an all encompassing, and at the same time nebulous, term for rumors, conspiracy theories, lies, hoaxes, misinformation, manipulated content in many formats. It has also been used by politicians, celebrities and anyone who pretty much wants to deny anything, whether it is true or not. Bots operated by artificial intelligence algorithms, manipulated videos called deep fakes, AI developed audio fakes, and synthetic text generators are all contributing to the expansion of fake news. The growth of these technologies and their use for the proliferation of fake news will drastically change the way journalism is done in the future. The cost of allowing fake news to dilute factual journalism is high, so the news industry can’t afford to fall behind. The press is entrusted in protecting democracy and if the press fails then democracy will fail as well.

How often has the use of fake news been used to stoke discord and even death in real news? An early example of fake news was in 1493 when Christopher Columbus arrived back in Spain and wrote a letter announcing his discoveries to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Archives of the letters at The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History show that Columbus falsely wrote that he took possession of islands that were inhabited by people that didn’t resist at all (Higdon, 29). Columbus also wrote that the natives of the lands were fearful and timid and could be easily conquered and converted into Christians. The letter was published into a pamphlet and distributed. Columbus incorrectly and intentionally reported false information which eventually led to the genocide of Native Americans (Higdon, 29). Other historic events were tragically affected by fake news, such as the moral panic created by fabricated information about the 1692-1693 Salem Witch Trials and rumors about slave rebellions in the mid 1700s (Higdon, 31).

The term fake news is itself a misleading politicized term that opens up the possibility that news from legitimate journalistic sources could be fake. However, fake news stories are stories written by non-journalists and have a false premise, made-up sources or misattributed information. It has become too easy for people to label stories that they don’t agree with as fake news. Start first with removing the word news from “fake news” and call it false or fake content or information. As university professors Gordon Pennycook and David Rand point out in their research on fighting misinformation on social media, there is a category of news that is hyper-partisan but not necessarily fake or false information. Nuanced categorization is needed to break up what has become an unwieldy category of fake news. This chapter will break up these categories along the lines of current and emerging technologies.

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