# Fake News on Social Media

Date: 2019

From: Gale Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection

Publisher: Gale, a Cengage Company

Document Type: Topic overview

Length: 1,821 words

Content Level: (Level 5)

Lexile Measure: [1550L \/]

Full Text:

Media experts define *fake news* as factually false information, delivered in the context of a supposedly true news story, that is deliberately designed to deceive readers or viewers. In twenty-first century contexts, the term has been used to describe Internet and social media disinformation campaigns. The distinction between *misinformation* and *disinformation* has a critical impact on public understanding of fake news. "Misinformation" typically describes falsehoods of fact that are spread either purposely or accidentally. Satire is an example of purposeful misinformation, while unintentional journalistic inaccuracies offer an example of accidental misinformation. "Disinformation," on the other hand, always refers to information specifically designed to mislead or deceive consumers to influence their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. Thus, fake news is disinformation, not misinformation.

While fake news emerged as a high-profile social and political issue in 2016, the concept itself is not new. Some journalism experts believe that the earliest precedents for the deliberate public circulation of disinformation date back to the age of the Roman Empire and that fake news has been a feature of the American media since the country's inception. Yet, the twenty-first-century fake news phenomenon differs from the concept's past character, as modern technologies can both create convincing illusions of truth and facilitate the instantaneous global spread of deceptive stories.

Many media and legal experts have raised concerns that US policies, processes, and legal statutes are inadequate and outdated for regulating fake news in the Internet age. In many cases, organized purveyors of fake news use paid social media–based advertising to spread false stories. Because twentieth-century lawmakers did not anticipate digital and online media, existing regulations have limited applicability in dealing with the issue. For example, under US law, foreign interests are not permitted to finance campaign ads that specifically endorse or censure particular political candidates. However, as of February 2019, there were no US laws that prohibited foreign actors from using Internet-based media to circulate disinformation that indirectly supports one candidate's platform over another's. The notorious disinformation campaign coordinated by Russia to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election offers a well-known example of such a case.

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| Main Ideas   * *Fake news* refers to factually inaccurate information designed to appear like legitimate news. As a form of disinformation, fake news shared on social media is intentionally deceptive and aims to influence readers' beliefs or behaviors. * Although disinformation is not a new phenomenon, the laws and practices developed to combat disinformation in print, radio, and television are inadequate for addressing disinformation on digital and social media. * The creation and dissemination of fake news via social media during the 2016 US presidential campaign season has been linked to Russian intelligence efforts to influence the US election outcome. * Social media companies have come under fire for their failure to monitor, manage, or stem the circulation of fake news and conspiracy theory sites, leading many to argue for stricter government regulation. * Since the 2016 election, President Donald Trump has repurposed the phrase "fake news" as a political epithet, attaching it to factual news coverage that criticizes his presidential performance or disagrees with his policy positions. * Educators, journalists, and other stakeholders argue that the best defense against fake news is to emphasize digital and Internet media literacy skills among the news-consuming public. |

## The Role of Tech Companies

According to experts on contemporary fake news, Internet search engines and social media sites have fallen victim to organized groups that deliberately create and spread disinformation online. These groups, informally known as "troll farms," exist in many places but are said to be particularly active in Russia. Unproven allegations claim that Russian leader Vladimir Putin (1952–) directed military intelligence to invest in troll farms after witnessing the impact of social media during the 2012 Russian elections that returned Putin to the presidency.

Social media is particularly vulnerable to facilitating the spread of fake news, since the algorithms used to generate targeted content can easily be exploited by troll farm actors. Online agitators exploit political tensions on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, spreading disinformation designed to elicit strong emotional responses from users on both sides of the political spectrum. Their work typically focuses on specific, divisive, and controversial issues, such as immigration, and aims to inflame existing disagreement among members of the voting public to further polarize public opinion. Dividing the public into opposing segments serves to make the voting tendencies of each group easier to manipulate.

Social media's structure supports this strategy because it gives users the ability to insulate themselves from differing political opinions, thus sequestering themselves in so-called *echo chambers*, or spaces in which they do not encounter alternative viewpoints but only hear views similar to their own repeated back to them. Social media experts note that such echo chambers create the illusion that a given user's viewpoint is the dominant political opinion, even if the user holds what are, in reality, fringe beliefs.

Many observers believe this type of organized interference influenced the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election. President Trump has repeatedly denied all prior knowledge of Russian disinformation campaigns in the lead-up to the vote and on Election Day, stating that any such interference did not sway the election results. A 2018 study conducted by Ohio State University casts doubt upon the latter claim, suggesting that an intensive fake news campaign perpetrated by Russian troll farms on the day of the election likely had a substantial impact. The study examined Democratic defections—those who had voted for Barack Obama (1961–) in 2012 but did not vote for Hillary Clinton (1947–) in 2016—and showed a strong relationship between belief in three prominent fake news stories and defection. Another study published in the journal *Science Advances* in January 2019 shed further light on the issue by revealing that, in 2016, Facebook users over the age of sixty-five shared links to fake news at about seven times the rate of younger users. Researchers underscored, however, that over 90 percent of Facebook users in their test group shared no links affiliated with fake news outlets in 2016.

In 2018 technology industry executives were called to appear before US Congress to answer questions regarding possible Russian troll farm activity on their platforms and other consumer protection issues related to their operations. Twitter chief executive officer Jack Dorsey (1976–), Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg (1969–), and Facebook chief executive officer Mark Zuckerberg (1984–) testified in open sessions. Their largely inconclusive testimony was criticized by some as evasive and by others as exhibiting a lack of awareness of their companies' roles in the proliferation of disinformation online. Many observers noted that the problem will likely persist regardless of any government action.

Another complicating factor with regard to social media's role in the dissemination of fake news is the unresolved debate over whether these sites are *publishers* or *platforms*. As publishers, such sites can be held legally responsible for the content their users post, but as platforms, they cannot. Facebook, which has been heavily implicated in allegations of Russian interference, has made contradictory claims about its status. The company has described itself as a "platform" to the public while identifying itself as a "publisher" in court proceedings. Legal experts generally agree that the publisher-versus-platform issue will require a definitive resolution one way or the other to control the spread of fake news on social media.

Even without a clear solution to the publisher-versus-platform issue, lawmakers continue to mull options that might help stem the flow of disinformation. Some politicians have called for laws that would require social media platforms to actively seek out and suspend users suspected of participating in organized disinformation campaigns. Related proposals would see tech companies become legally liable for false and defamatory information posted on their platforms through changes to state-level laws. A third suggestion would have Internet service providers assume legal responsibilities for identifying and halting the spread of false or otherwise manipulated data. Internationally, officials from many other countries have made similar proposals, with some of the more extreme actions making the willful spread of disinformation a criminal act punishable by imprisonment. Free-speech advocates, however, oppose both US and international proposals, contending that such laws would be tantamount to governmental support of free-speech violations.

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| Critical Thinking Questions   * How well-developed are your digital and social media literacy skills? Are you confident that you could distinguish a link to fake news from a link to legitimate news? * What are the potential dangers, if any, of a president or other leader suggesting that legitimate news organizations or stories are fake? Explain your answer. * In your opinion, should websites that aggregate news or allow users to share news coverage with their networks should be legally classified as publishers or as platforms? Explain your answer. |

## Weaponizing Information

Fake news has become a highly politicized issue since the 2016 US presidential election. President Trump has consistently dismissed his media critics as purveyors of fake news, effectively weaponizing the term and turning it into an epithet used to demean media sources with perceived partisan biases. Trump's consistent attacks on the media appear to have swayed public sentiment on the issue, with a 2018 Monmouth University poll finding that 77 percent of Americans believe that major legacy media outlets (including newspapers and television news broadcasters) report fake news at least occasionally, if not regularly. Yet, the same poll also found that Trump himself has lower levels of public trust than any of the news and information outlets he denounces.

Trump's repurposing of the label "fake news" has led to a tendency among some public officials, journalists, and media personalities to characterize virtually any negative content about them or their policies as fake news. Observers note that this tactic has resulted in some media professionals and government officials dismissing all journalism with which they disagree as fake news even if it contains no factual misinformation. Policymakers note that journalists, private enterprises, politicians, and members of the public all have important roles to play in the fight against the influence of fake news. Introducing financial disincentives for propagating the spread of fake news and improving digital literacy among members of the news-consuming public are both consistently cited as important, actionable steps that could diminish the political impact of disinformation.

As of 2019, fake news continues to have far-reaching implications for US politics and public life. For instance, investigators found that Cesar Altieri Sayoc Jr. (1962–), who was arrested on suspicion of mailing a series of pipe bombs to prominent Trump critics in the weeks leading up to the 2018 congressional midterm elections, demonstrated extremely partisan views and had been active in sharing fake conspiracy theories on social media. Fake conspiracy theories were also a factor in another October 2018 domestic terror incident, in which a gunman killed eleven people after opening fire at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Law enforcement officials believe the suspect, Robert Bowers (1972–), was motivated to action by antisemitic conspiracy theories that originated online and were subsequently reported by at least one mainstream media outlet, Fox News.

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**Source Citation** (MLA 8th Edition)

"Fake News on Social Media." *Gale Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection*, Gale, 2019. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/OBOYIA996440220/OVIC?u=ken26415&sid=OVIC&xid=42b9b554>. Accessed 8 Sept. 2020.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|OBOYIA996440220