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FAKE NEWS IN AMERICA

The 2016 election for president of the United States was marred by a flood of deliberate misinformation, hacking by foreign troublemakers – predominantly Russian –and other abuses of electronic communications and platforms. The campaign for president and other high officials was also marred by vicious political attacks on the credibility and integrity of the news media and on professional journalists.

The earliest American newspapers during colonial times required a printing license from London, and those licenses were issued only to publishers who 'favored the ruling elite'. Those newspapers served as official or unofficial voices of the royal government – what we might call propaganda. Even that long ago there were conflicts and arguments about the publication of verifiable facts, opinions and misinformation.

Key words: election, fake news, facts, opinions and misinformation.

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Америкадағы жалған жаңалықтар

2016 жылы Құрама Штаттардағы президенттік сайлау кезінде арнайы қасақана бұрмаланған ақпараттар легі артты және шетелдік зиянкестер тарапынан, әсіресе ресейлік және басқа да электронды коммуникациялар мен платформалар оны өз мүддесіне пайдаланыды. Ол президенттің және басқа да жоғары лауазымды тұлғалардың үгіт-насихатына, сондай-ақ бұқаралық ақпарат құралдары мен журналистердің беделіне және тұтастығы мен кәсібилігіне жасалған қатал саяси шабуылдар ықпал етті.

Америкадағы ертеде құлдық кезеңде шыққан газеттердің өзі оны басып шығару үшін Лондоннан лицензияны талап еткен және бұл лицензиялар тек билеуші элитаны қолдаушы баспаларға ғана берілді. Бұл газеттер патшалық үкіметтің ресми немесе бейресми дауысы ретінде қызмет етті, яғни оларды үгіттеу (пропаганда) құралы деп атауға болады. Тіпті бұдан ерте заманның өзінде жарияланған фактілерді, пікір мен жалған ақпаратты тексеру туралы даулар мен пікірталастар болған.

Түйін сөздер: сайлау, жалған жаңалықтар, фактілер, пікірлер және бұрмаланған ақпарат.

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Фейк-новости в Америке

Выборы президента Соединенных Штатов в 2016 году были омрачены потоком преднамеренной дезинформации, хакерскими атаками иностранных нарушителей, преимущественно российских, и другими противоправными действиями в области электронных коммуникаций и платформ. Выборная кампания в поддержку кандидатов на пост президента также отличалась жестокими политическими нападками на авторитет и честность средств массовой информации и профессиональных журналистов. Критика исходила даже от высокопоставленных чиновников.

Если обратиться к истории, то первые американские газеты еще в колониальные времена требовали лицензии на печать из Лондона, и эти разрешения выдавались только тем издателям, которые «одобряли и поддерживали правящую элиту». Газеты служили официальным или неофициальным голосом королевского правительства, распространяя таким образом информацию, что мы могли бы назвать пропагандой. Уже тогда были конфликты и споры по поводу необходимости проверки фактов, мнений и дезинформации.

Ключевые слова: выборы, фальшивые новости, факты, мнения и дезинформация.

A comprehensive study supported by the Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy Initiative examined how misinformation spread during the campaign. The study examined over 10 million tweets from 700,000 Twitter accounts that linked to more than 600 misinformation and conspiracy news outlets. These are the key findings as described by the Knight Foundation (Knight Foundation, 2018):

There was a concentrated 'fake news' ecosystem highly active both during and after the 2016 election.

'Fake news' and disinformation continue to reach millions.

Just a few fake and conspiracy news sites accounted for most of the fake news that spread on Twitter.

Most of the accounts spreading fake or conspiracy news included in the report show evidence of automated posting.

Fake news still receives significantly fewer links than mainstream media sources.

Accounts that spread fake news are densely connected.

A substantial amount of misinformation was spread by both Republican– and Democratic-identified accounts.

The coordinated spread of misinformation by Russia's Internet Research Agency trolls is evident – but other accounts were likely more important in spreading fake news.

In addition, during his 2016 campaign and later as president, Donald Trump repeatedly used the term 'fake news' as a weapon to attack reputable and well-respected news organizations and journalists when he disliked their accurate and truthful coverage. He also has used other insulting language for the press, including 'lying media' and 'enemy of the people'.

Such attacks contribute to public distrust of the U.S. news media. Other factors in that distrust include the perception that television news and newspapers present biased coverage and the vast number of 'news' and 'public affairs' websites that are not produced by trained professional journalists. At the same time, surveys and polls show that the public has different degrees of confidence in different news outlets. For example, a 2018 survey of 2,009 Americans by Simmons Research found much higher levels of trust in the *Wall Street Journal,* the major U.S. television network news, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* than in 'explicitly partisan' websites. Even so, many of the people surveyed appeared to 'lump them together as untrustworthy' (Benton, 2018).

'Fake news' in early U.S. history

Although the term 'fake news' is recent and although technologies for distributing misinformation have changed dramatically, the history of fake and biased news in America dates back hundreds of years. Media historians trace it back to the 1600s when Great Britain was the world's dominant colonial power and controlled 13 colonies in what is now the Eastern U.S.

The earliest American newspapers during colonial times required a printing license from London, and those licenses were issued only to publishers who 'favored the ruling elite' (Copeland, p. 40, 2001). Those newspapers served as official or unofficial voices of the royal government – what we might call propaganda. Even that long ago there were conflicts and arguments about the publication of verifiable facts, opinions and misinformation.

By the early 1700s, some newspapers were willing to criticize the royal government and its high officials – often at great risk. For example, in 1734 – 42 years before the American colonies declared their independence – a German immigrant printer named John Peter Zenger went on trial in New York City on a criminal charge of 'seditious libel'. That charge meant he was accused of publishing material that was considered disloyal, treasonous or disrespectful of the king and royal officials, regardless of its accuracy or truth. That charge is similar to 'honor and decency' laws in some countries today where criticism of the rulers and government is a crime.

Zenger was the publisher of the *New York Weekly Journal*. His newspaper promised readers 'the freshest advances, domestic and foreign' but also delivered controversy that landed him behind bars for publishing harsh criticisms of the royal governor. The criticism was often written by the governor's political enemies, not personally by Zenger, but there was no dispute that he did publish

the material. However, the jury still acquitted him and he was freed after 9 months in jail.

The party press

Political parties developed in the late 1700s after the American Revolution. It was a period when 'the press gained political importance because of the position it occupied as the most important medium for the distribution of news and views'(Sloan, p. 71, 2011). Newspapers emerged as the mouthpieces of the parties, and most were affiliated with and supported financially by political parties. In many cases, political groups provided cash or loans to start a paper and to buy printing equipment. Often the political funders then appointed one of their own members as the editor.

These influential newspapers were expected to provide politically slanted news, not objective facts. 'No medium offered such a convenient method for reaching party members and voters as newspapers did', media historian Wm. David Sloan wrote:

Clearly editors believed the overriding purpose of the press was to serve a partisan cause. Newspapers were intended to be neither non-partisan nor independent of parties. By 1800 many editors made no pretense of impartiality. 'Objective' news reporting would not have been enough. Advocacy of a cause was imperative (Ibid, pp. 73-74).

It was not until the 1880s that many newspapers stopped formally allying themselves with parties, although their opinion columns and editorials may have continued to favor Democratic or Republican candidates and policies. Some U.S. newspapers still have names that reflect their partisan history, such as the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and the *Herald Republican*, although they are no longer affiliated with political parties.

Today as a matter of ethics and transparency, U.S. newspapers and some TV networks are careful to separate news from opinion and commentary. Newspapers generally do this by designating one or more pages to editorials and opinion columns. Editorials reflect the collective opinion of their editorial board. Columns and commentary should be clearly identified as opinion or analysis, not news.

'*Yellow journalism*'

Truth also fell victim to the wave of 'yellow journalism' that began in the late 1800s. The term refers to the use of sensationalized news and lurid features to increase circulation and to entice readers. The period was marked by aggressive competition among major newspapers and their wealthy owners. 'The phrase was coined in the 1890s to describe the tactics employed in furious competition between two New York City newspapers, the *World* and

the *Journal*' [*Encyclopedia Britannica]* but spread among newspapers competing in other cities to attract readers. Coverage became sensationalistic. Newspaper layouts and illustrations became flamboyant. Journalists relied increasingly on anonymous rather than named news sources. Newspapers were criticized for intruding into the privacy of citizens, for sensationalism and for 'the reckless printing of alleged news that is not news' (Everett & Campbell, p. 238, 2011).

When tensions erupted in 1898 between the U.S. and Spain – which owned a colony, Cuba, 145 kilometers south of Florida – some American newspapers advocated vigorously in favor of war. The explosion of a U.S. battleship, the Maine, in Havana harbor led to exaggerated press coverage that blamed Spanish authorities for the sinking of the ship. While emotional and biased news coverage was not the cause of the war, newspapers covered it aggressively once the 114-day war started in April 1898.

The term 'yellow journalism'' is still used to describe sensationalized coverage that often makes up 'facts' or exaggerates and distorts actual facts.

Fact-checking in America: 2 models

Today, formal journalistic fact-checking takes two primary forms in America. One is done by nonprofit entities like PolitiFact (www.politifact. com) and the other is done by established news organizations like the *Washington Post*, Associated Press and CNN.

Each has a statement of principles and discloses to the public how it does its work. For example, a CNN director explained how that network verifies photos and videos submitted by so-called 'citizen journalists'. Some of their material is used in broadcasts or quoted in online stories. She explains, 'At CNN we see it as our responsibility to add content and analysis' from such material, cross-check with other social media reports, talk with CNN's affiliated local television stations and talk with subject-matter experts (King, p. 18, 2012).

U.S. journalists and news organizations also use software technology to help them determine whether photos from members of the public, public relations firms and other sources – 'user-generated' photos – are genuine. Among them is the Associated Press, a U.S.-based international wire service that distributes about 3,000 images daily. As the director of photography for the AP explained, 'We try to verify as best we can that the images portray what they claim to portray. We look for elements that can support authenticity'. As for transparency and disclosure to the public, he wrote, 'If we cannot

communicate with the videographer or photographer, we will add a disclaimer that says the AP "is unable to independently verify the authenticity, content, location or date of this handout photo/video"' (Lyon, p. 9, 2012).

This next section of this chapter describes one example of each model, first an independent fact-checking organization and second a major newspaper's fact-checking system.

PolitiFact

PolitiFact, which the *Tampa Bay* (Florida) *Times* established in 2007, describes itself as 'a nonpartisan fact-checking website to sort out the truth in American politics'. In 2018, the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit school for journalists, acquired PolitiFact. Its funding comes from online advertising, media companies and publishers that buy its content, grants and individual donations.

'Fact-checking journalism is the heart of PolitiFact', the organization says. 'Our core principles are independence, transparency, fairness, thorough reporting and clear writing. The reason we publish is to give citizens the information they need to govern themselves in a democracy'. Its ethics policy states:

PolitiFact seeks to present the true facts, unaffected by agenda or biases. Our journalists set their own opinions aside as they work to uphold principles of independence and fairness. As part of that effort, PolitiFact journalists avoid the public expression of political opinion and public involvement in the political process. We don't make political contributions or work on campaigns. We avoid expressing political views on social media. We do share news stories and other journalism, but we take care not to be seen as endorsing or opposing a political figure or position. We avoid snarky commentary. We may participate in the political process as voters, because we also have responsibilities as individual citizens of the United States. But we keep our votes to ourselves as a matter of principle. Our goal is to be open-minded in all of our work

PolitiFact journalists choose which 'facts' and statements to check by reading politicians' speeches, campaign material and press releases. They monitor social media and television and they receive suggestions that readers submit online. In deciding which statements to fact-check, the organization considers these questions:

– Is the statement rooted in a fact that is verifiable? We don't check opinions, and we recognize that in the world of speechmaking and political rhetoric, there is license for hyperbole.

– Does the statement seem misleading or sound wrong?

– Is the statement significant? We avoid minor '"gotchas' on claims that are obviously a slip of the tongue.

– Is the statement likely to be passed on and repeated by others?

– Would a typical person hear or read the statement and wonder: Is that true?

PolitiFact says: 'We select statements about topics that are in the news. Without keeping count, we try to select facts to check from both Democrats and Republicans. At the same time, we more often fact-check the party that holds power or people who repeatedly make attention-getting or misleading statements'.

Its review process includes interviews, consultations with experts and a published list of sources that the PolitiFact journalists used. Its reporters always try to contact whoever made the statement undergoing review. PolitiFact says, 'We emphasize primary sources and original documentation. We seek direct access to government reports, academic studies and other data. It's not sufficient for us to get something second-hand. We don't rely on what a campaign or elected official tells us – we verify it independently'.

After the reporting is complete, a reporter and three editors discuss how to rate a statement for truthfulness. Together they discuss these questions, according to PolitiFact:

– Is the statement literally true?

– Is there another way to read the statement? Is the statement open to interpretation?

– Did the speaker provide evidence? Did the speaker prove the statement to be true?

– How has PolitiFact handled similar statements in the past?

These are the rating categories PolitiFact uses for what it calls the 'Truth-O-Meter' to categorize the relative accuracy of statements it reviews:

TRUE – The statement is accurate and there's nothing significant missing.

MOSTLY TRUE – The statement is accurate but needs clarification or additional information.

HALF TRUE – The statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

MOSTLY FALSE – The statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression.

FALSE – The statement is not accurate.

PANTS ON FIRE – The statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim. [The term 'pants on

fire' comes from an English idiom: 'Liar, liar, pants on fire'].

The Washington Post

The Washington Post describes its fact-checking as seeking 'the truth behind the rhetoric'. The project started as a column during the early part of the 2008 presidential campaign and became a permanent feature of the newspaper in 2011. The goal was to: 'truth squad' the statements of political figures regarding issues of great importance, be they national, international or local. But we are not limited to political charges or countercharges. We also seek to explain difficult issues, provide missing context and provide analysis and explanation of various 'code words' used by politicians, diplomats and others to obscure or shade the truth (Kessler, 2017) .

As for its principles, the newspaper differentiates between fact-checking and opinion-checking, saying, 'We are interested only in verifiable facts, though on occasion we may examine the roots of political rhetoric'. It says it focuses its attention on the most important issues to voters and on 'statements that are newsworthy or concern issues of importance. We understand that everyone makes mistakes, especially when speaking extemporaneously. We will strive to be dispassionate and nonpartisan, drawing attention to inaccurate statements on both left and right'. In addition, it says its judgment is harsher for statements in a prepared text than for statements made in live interviews 'on the grounds that the politician and staff had time to discuss the (inaccurate) statistic'. The newspaper prohibits Fact Checker staff from taking part in partisan political activity and donating to candidates and advocacy groups.

The *Washington Post* awards from 1 to 4 'Pinocchios' to misstatements, lies and distortions. The name 'Pinocchio' comes from a fictional character in an 1883 Italian novel, 'The Adventures of Pinocchio'. The main character is a wooden puppet whose nose grew longer every time he told a lie. Here is the rating scale the newspaper uses:

1 Pinocchio – Some shading of the facts. Selective telling of the truth. Some omissions and exaggerations, but no outright falsehoods. (You could view this as 'mostly true'.)

2 Pinocchios – Significant omissions and/or exaggerations. Some factual error may be involved but not necessarily. A politician can create a false, misleading impression by playing with words and using legalistic language that means little to ordinary people. (Similar to 'half true'.)

3 Pinocchios – Significant factual error and/or obvious contradictions. This gets into the realm of 'mostly false'. But it could include statements which are technically correct (such as based on official government data) but are so taken out of context as to be very misleading. The line between 2 and 3 can be bit fuzzy and we do not award half-Pinocchios. So we strive to explain the factors that tipped us toward a 3.

4 Pinocchios – Whoppers [meaning big lies].

'Fake news' over time in America

Here is a sampling of fake news stories in the U.S. as compiled by the International Center for Journalists. These examples, which drew widespread attention when they were published or broadcast, illustrate the wide range of purposes that fake news serves, including: political advantage, satire, promotion of nationalism, entertainment, economic advantage. The descriptions come from the center's publication titled *A Short Guide to the History of 'Fake' News and Misinformation* [Posetti & Matthews, pp. 2-12, 2018].[1]

1835 – The Great Moon Hoax

The *New York Sun* published 6 articles about the discovery of non-existent life on the moon, claiming to recount the findings of astronomer Sir John Herschel.

1938 – War of the Worlds radio drama

The War of the Worlds radio drama fooled many unwitting listeners into believing that Earth was being attacked [by aliens from another planet], foreshadowing 21st-century responses to news satire. 'No one involved with *War of the Worlds* expected to deceive any listeners, because they all found the story too silly and improbable to ever be taken seriously'.

1955-1975 – The Vietnam War

U.S. briefings on the war staged at the end of every day at a Saigon hotel were dubbed 'Five O'clock Follies'. The U.S. propaganda campaign, sometimes called the 'Optimism Campaign', employed the 'domino theory' as a fear tactic to suppress opposition to the war – if one country came under communist influence or control, its neighboring countries would soon follow.

1983 – April Fools interview

Associated Press reporter Fred Bayles interviewed pop culture historian and Boston University Professor Joseph Boskin, who tried to tell him the origins of April Fools were murky. Bayles kept pushing, so Boskin 'created a story' about a jester who became king. Boskin expected Bayles would catch on, but the story was published – the news hoax succeeded.

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[1] Posetti & Matthews, pp. 2-12, 2018.

1996 – The Daily Show begins

The news satire and self-described 'fake news' TV program kicked off in the USA, giving way to the rise of satirical news as a genre that became 'some sort of corrective to, and substitute for, mainstream journalism'.

1998 – The Onion begins publishing online

The US-based news satire website started publishing online, with many of its stories later mistakenly taken as fact, as 'fake news takes over Facebook feeds'.

2003-2011 – The Iraq War

In the run-up to the 2003 U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq, the *New York Times* published a series of articles including an account in 2001 that was 'never independently verified' of a camp where 'biological weapons were produced'. Reporter Judith Miller's articles containing misinformation about weapons of mass destruction are said to be among those that had 'the greatest consequences for America' and were cited by [President George W.] Bush administration officials as one of the reasons to go to war with Iraq. It has been argued that the *New York Times* 'presented the notion of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as fact'… Debate continues about the newspaper's predisposition at the time to believe its sources without sufficient due diligence and thereby open itself up to manipulation by purveyors of disinformation.

2004 – **The** *New York Times issues apology over reporting of weapons of mass destruction*

'Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more skepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper. Accounts of Iraqi defectors were not always weighed against their strong desire to have Saddam Hussein ousted'. This was the reflective critique of The *New York Times'* editorial board about the paper's coverage of weapons of mass destruction: 'We consider the story of Iraq's weapons, and of the pattern of misinformation, to be unfinished business. And we fully intend to continue aggressive reporting aimed at setting the record straight'.

2005 – The Colbert Report begins

The satirical late-night television talk program headed by a fictional [TV] anchorman began. The 'striking emergence' of such shows in the USA has been called a 'long-term generational phenomenon'. The show's impact on politics, along with other 'fake news' programs like *The Daily Show*, goes further than other satirical shows like *Saturday Night Live,* by blurring the lines between real and fake coverage, making satire less obvious: 'much of what passes for serious coverage…has become a simulation of reality'.

2016 – Polls: United States

In the days immediately before and after the U.S. election, 'people shared nearly as much 'fake news' as real news on Twitter... Additionally, Facebook says an operation, likely based in Russia, spent US $100,000 on thousands of U.S. ads on the social network over a 2-year period, which included the election. A New York Times investigation, and research from cybersecurity firm FireEye, said that Russian operators made Facebook and Twitter profiles of 'fake Americans' and used Twitter bots to post 'anti-[Hillary] Clinton' messages.

2017 – Attempted deception of Washington Post journalists

The Washington Post, detecting deception from a confidential source, broke its promise of anonymity and exposed the fraud on its front page. This was a clear attempt by a malicious 'fake news' proponent to deceive journalists.

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