

## What is fake news? Its origins and how it grew under Donald Trump

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**Abstract (English):** People searching for the term 'fake news' has increased since the November 2016 US Presidential election. What we saw often here were small groups of people taking advantage of social media interaction and algorithms through creating hyperbolic articles around a major political event: the US Presidential election. Law and regulation: Because it was expensive to distribute information, there were far fewer players. [...]the above barriers to creating fake news were undone: 1. Fake news in the 2016 US Presidential election campaign With the economic barriers removed, 2016 proved a much more fertile breeding ground for fake news than previously, with the narrative of the 2016 election campaign providing a near perfect topical backdrop. Initially he suggested Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of JFK, perpetuated the myth of Obama not being born in the United barriers to entry so low, a fake news publisher could simply set up another website and start the process all over again. Watch | Facebook: Fake news problem is 'very small indeed' 02:04 To back this up, the introduction to a comprehensive study by Stanford University, Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election reads: "For fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads." Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 6, 2017 Since the US election, there have been fears that the proliferation of fake news will spread to Europe in an attempt...

**Full text:** It was at Donald Trump's first press conference as President-elect when the term "fake news " broke out of media discussions and into the mainstream. "You are fake news!" he pointed at CNN's Jim Acosta while refusing to listen to his question. Since then, the now President of the USA has been calling out major media outlets several times a week for being 'FAKE NEWS' via his Twitter feed - particularly CNN and the New York Times. But why is Donald Trump using the term 'fake news' so frequently, and where did it come from? People searching for the term 'fake news' has increased since the November 2016 US Presidential election. After being forced to apologize for its bad and inaccurate coverage of me after winning the election, the FAKE NEWS @nytimes is still lost!

- Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 4, 2017

Where did fake news come from?

Bending the truth for political gain is certainly nothing new - it's propaganda, and the record of its uses stretch back to ancient times. Octavian famously used a campaign of disinformation to aid his victory over Marc Anthony in the final war of the Roman Republic. In its aftermath, he changed his name to Augustus, and dispatched a flattering and youthful image of himself throughout the Empire, maintaining its use in his old age. Fake news also has a history in American politics:

In the 1828 election, Andrew Jackson's people started a rumour that John Quincy Adams had procured an American girl to satisfy the Tsar.

- Tim Stanley (@timothy\_stanley) January 11, 2017

At Jackson's inaugural, a mob stormed the White House in celebration. There were fist fights & thousands of dollars in damage.

- Tim Stanley (@timothy\_stanley) January 11, 2017

20th century propaganda

Fueled by mass communication, propaganda grew in scale and persuasive power during the turmoil of the 20th centuries in a series of major ideological struggles. In World War One, the British government used propaganda very effectively in motivating the population against Germany, which was frequently depicted as "The Hun". The Nazi party used the growing mass media to build a power base and then consolidate power in Germany during

the 1930s, using racial stereotyping to encourage discrimination against Jews. In the ensuing Second World War, the propaganda machine was used relentlessly by all sides across the media spectrum. It even took hold in lighter forms of entertainment: Donald Duck woke up in a dystopian caricatured Nazi world in an effort to sell more US war bonds.

Donald Duck in Der Fuehrer's Face (1943)

This sort of propaganda was largely funded and controlled by governments, but the blatant bias it carried waned as the ideological struggles became less apparent. Added to that, as populations became more used to mass communication, they could more easily see through it.

Enter the Internet and the fake news economy

The rising trend of fake news during 2016 was very different to largely state controlled analogue modes of 20th century propaganda. What we saw often here were small groups of people taking advantage of social media interaction and algorithms through creating hyperbolic articles around a major political event: the US Presidential election.

Propaganda and Internet fake news do, however, hold similarities: both are methods of distorting the truth for emotional persuasion, seeking to drive action. Although this action appears to be political, the motivation in the 2016 US election was not necessarily. Many creators of it were moreover looking for a path to quick dollars by distributing content and gaining an audience that would view advertising.

Before the Internet, publishing fake news and gaining an audience that could be monetised was nearly impossible for three reasons:

1. Distribution and cost: Distributing information on any kind of scale needed a prohibitively expensive logistics operation.
2. Audiences and trust: Building a large audience took much longer, and because it was expensive to acquire and built on trust of information, publishing fake news would be damaging to reputation and thus have economic consequences.
3. Law and regulation: Because it was expensive to distribute information, there were far fewer players. These abided by media law and could be regulated. Publishing fake news would likely end up with the publisher being sued.

But this gate of information exchange was unlocked around 2007, with the beginnings of the social media revolution. The creation of social networks like Facebook and Twitter allowed people to exchange information on a much greater scale than ever before, while publishing platforms like WordPress allowed anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. In short, the above barriers to creating fake news were undone:

1. Distribution and cost: The costs of publishing (via WordPress) and distributing (via social networks) approached zero.
2. Audiences and trust: Given these much lower costs, reputations are far more expendable.
3. Law and regulation: With much lower costs, far more operators were involved in exchanging information. The trickle of regulated (at least by law) information exchange through the gate became a tidal wave - and one that is impossible to regulate in full.

Fake news in the 2016 US Presidential election campaign

With the economic barriers removed, 2016 proved a much more fertile breeding ground for fake news than previously, with the narrative of the 2016 election campaign providing a near perfect topical backdrop. The event would be discussed globally, while the debate was polarised in numerous ways, allowing for greater polemic against either candidate.

Donald Trump has been seen as a key ingredient. His campaign waved an anti-establishment banner, undermining the "dynasty" candidate Hillary Clinton by repeatedly calling her "crooked", and proclaiming that he wanted to "drain the swamp" of Washington.

I will Make Our Government Honest Again -- believe me. But first, I'm going to have to #DrainTheSwamp in DC.

<https://t.co/m11MAQPnIb>

- Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) October 18, 2016

He also courted conspiracy theories. Initially he suggested Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of JFK, perpetuated the myth of Obama not being born in the United States ( which he later conceded ) and repeatedly claimed climate change as a hoax . Such a wildcard candidate attracted massive media attention, itself fueled by a series of controversial policy suggestions - like building a border wall between Mexico and the US or 'a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States.'

A headline from a conspiratorial website

Trump's unpredictability and his fueling of distrust of his opponents led to a growth in fake news that was supportive of him. In an atmosphere where you never know what might happen next or what to believe, you're going to be more receptive to hyperbole and truth distortion.

"Pope backs Trump", "Hillary sold weapons to ISIS", "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead"

- these fake headlines all went viral on Facebook in the run up to the election, gaining such high engagement that BuzzFeed published an analysis on how they had outperformed real news on Facebook.

However, others have also blamed the rise of social media and the so-called "filter bubble", the phenomenon of showing users things that they like or tend to agree with, and hiding those that they don't. Critics say this distorts a neutral playing field meaning that the most incendiary stories get the most attention.

Websites could be set up, an audience bought on a Facebook page, then fake news distributed on the page. If the headline was strong enough, it could go viral, and potentially bring in thousands of dollars worth of revenue on for the publisher. If Facebook found the site to be fake, it could degrade the domain in its algorithm. But with the barriers to entry so low, a fake news publisher could simply set up another website and start the process all over again.

The five types of fake news actually influential?

After November 9th, the network of sites publishing fake news were being decried loudly by media outlets. Many flatly announced that Facebook, and the fake news shooting through newsfeeds within, had won the election for Trump.

While often used statistics - 62 per cent of Americans using social networks as a source of news, and 44 per cent primarily using Facebook - could be used to reinforce that fake news has real influence, they are really quite general figures. We simply don't know what the large interaction numbers that are attributed to fake news really mean in an "influence" sense: what does a Facebook Like mean in this context, for example.

If we also consider that large proportions of the audiences on fake news pages, and indeed the engagements thereon, are likely to be either not from the United States or indeed fake themselves, we can go some way in debunking the notion of influence without too much effort.

Watch | Facebook: Fake news problem is 'very small indeed' 02:04

To back this up, the introduction to a comprehensive study by Stanford University, Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election reads: "For fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads."

Fake news as we have come to know it on Facebook is more of a menace than a game changing influencer .

However, the term has now jumped from the referral of a small scale menace into one often used to referred to the established mainstream media, accounting for thousands of professional journalists.

What is happening now?

Some claim that the term has now been co-opted by politicians and commentators to mean anything they disagree with - making the term essentially meaningless and more of a stick to beat the mainstream press with than a phenomenon in itself. Donald Trump said recently that "any negative polls are fake news".

Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting.

- Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 6, 2017

Since the US election, there have been fears that the proliferation of fake news will spread to Europe in an attempt to swing elections in France and Germany, where far-right groups such as the Front national and Alternative fur Deutschland are looking to make gains.

MPS are also set to hold an inquiry into fake news, although its influence in the UK is unclear.

Facebook and Google have promised to crack down on misinformation, although they have been criticised for failing to accept their place in its spread. These include working with independent fact-checking organisations and labelling suspicious stories as such.

Credit: By James Carson

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