THE FUTURE OF FACTS: HOW CAN WE SAVE POLITICAL JOURNALISM AND WHAT HAPPENS IF WE FAIL?

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Require media outlets to report how often they publish inaccurate information.	Require social-media users to give informed consent before data is sold.	Require digital-skills training in schools.

Fake news and misinformation have played a role in several historical turning points, but the scale and impact they have achieved with the advent of the internet and social media gives the problem a new dimension. While news consumers and media companies have always been involved in the distribution of fake news and efforts to curtail it, tech companies have only recently entered the scene. A multi-stakeholder approach is needed to help people avoid being misguided by fake content – an approach that includes digital-skills education, innovative practices from news companies and journalists, and changing the incentives of internet companies.

Misinformation strikes back

Fake news is nothing new. The German term Lügenpresse— "Lying Press", was originally coined during World War I to refer to enemy propaganda.[1] It was later used by the Nazis to weaken their opposition and accuse the foreign press of spreading misinformation about the regime. More recently, in 2014 the anti-immigrant Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) movement used it to accuse the media of hiding crimes committed by refugees and immigrants. In the 2017 Parliamentary Elections, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) used the term in their campaign to accuse media of being biased against them.

Today fake news comes in different shapes, involves different actors, and travels faster than it ever has before thanks to the internet and social media. It promotes misinformation in the public

1. Griffing 2017

debate and deeply affects the way journalism and media are viewed. As traditional media outlets have lost credibility, new media platforms have increased in number and prominence. Fake news is not the core of the problem of polarisation, but paired with social media it serves as a catalyst for the amplification of information intended to misinform readers, benefitting populism and radical discourse.

This state of affairs is most damaging to consumers of news, who are left confused and unsure of whom to trust in an information environment where nothing seems neutral. When accessing new media platforms, users face a barrage of advertising enticements, branding efforts, sponsored social media, commercials and other efforts to grab their attention.[2] We know from scientific research that this leads users to often share without thinking and doing so without reading more than the headline of the article. This environment often misguides users to believe fake content may be real.

How should we confront old challenges in new this new digital form, and ensure that all actors play a responsible role in delivering credible facts instead of fake news?

Will fact checking save us?

The media has changed in the past few decades. The 'click-bait' business model incentivises news outlets to publish first and ask questions later, all the while 'selling' news stories with eye-grabbing, salacious, sometimes-exaggerated headlines. This

practice is problematic in an environment where information in its different formats—whether in the form of a news article, a statement from a public figure, or even a tweet or WhatsApp message—spreads faster now than it did before. Controlling the impact of misinformation has become a challenge.[3]

Fact checking has been proposed and sometimes used as a method of correcting false statements and pointing out to unreliable sources of information. But corrected facts do not receive the same space as the original fake news it aims to correct—and even when they do, the public does not seem to give the corrected information equal attention.[4] Hence, fact checking alone is not enough to solve the credibility crisis of journalism and unlikely to stop fake news from spreading.

Who is responsible for sharing false information?

Traditional media is losing credibility for several reasons—lack of accuracy, misleading headlines, sensationalised content, among others. While it may be true that news outlets are engaging in these poor practices, the distrust of the media intensified after attacks from far-right and -left wing movements. For these reasons, journalists are often seen as responsible for the rise of "alternative facts". However, in an era where everyone has a voice online and there is a low barrier to entry, non-journalists also have the power to spread news—to say nothing

of the role of bots in sharing misinformation on social media.

From its original source to the final consumer, news media and tech platforms play an important role in how information spreads. Both industries are responsible for ensuring a healthy public debate based on real facts rather than hoaxes.

Action steps: how do we save the facts from becoming irrelevant?

The fact that misinformation finds its way through the public debate means that this is not a problem with one single solution.[5] Here is how we fight misinformation:

1. News Media

Media companies and journalists need to be accountable to the public in their role as traditional gatekeepers of information. The rise of new platforms and technologies created an environment in which facts are broadcast in real time by many different sources. With the rise of fake news, media companies have lost credibility as unbiased sources of information.

Best practices for journalists:

-Write more contextual headlines. This avoids sensationalism and confusing the reader and increases credibility of journalists.

-Avoid "infotainment", or framing the facts to entertain rather than inform. This relates to the clickbait strategy, which often tailors content to the reader's

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2. Wu 2016

3. Borel 2017
4. Maheshwari 2016

5. Borel 2017

emotions to attract more clicks and sustain their business models.

-Avoid using other articles as sources for stories to avoid repeating false information.

-Avoid presenting false balances between two points of view. For instance, putting extremist positions on the same level as reasonable ones pushes public debate more towards the former.

Policy implications:

-Policymakers attempts to regulate media can easily be misconstrued as censorship. However, a reasonable approach would be to require media outlets or third-party watchdogs to submit periodic inspections on how often they have published information that later proved inaccurate. While avoiding being framed as censorship, this approach could nudge media outlets to act more responsibly in the future.

2. Tech companies and Social Media platforms

Search engines such as Google and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter act as intermediaries between users and the news. The design of these platforms and search engines influences the way people consume information and interact with it. Algorithms optimise searches and determine the content that people are exposed to, creating biases towards consuming some types of content over others. These practices create filter bubbles and echo chambers where people with the same beliefs close the doors to different ideas.

Best practices for tech and social media companies:

-Embrace transparency. This includes information on advertising decisions as well as the algorithms that determine which peers a user will see content from.

-Give users the choice to receive more diverse content than would otherwise be available to them.

-Allow users to control how their data is used, including how it is sold to advertisers.

Policy implications

-Strengthening current data-protection laws to include a requirement that users give explicit and informed consent before their data is sold could help to hold companies accountable for how they sell users' data for business purposes. These companies should be required to It is desirable that they inform users about how their data is being used and why they see a specific ad or piece of content.

3. Readers/Users

As the final consumers of news, readers play a central role in fighting misinformation. Fact checking helps in increasing awareness about fake news, but there must be a constant learning process that eventually will diminish the influence of misinformation in the shape of public opinion.

Best practices for media consumers::

-Filter information sources based on their quality and take time to read and reflect

before issuing an opinion or sharing content.

-Seek information outside social media, diversify sources and engage with people who have different points of view.

Policy implications

-Legislation requiring digital skills training in schools could help train a new generation of young people to thrive and be discerning consumers in the information environment in which they will live. Some countries are already implementing Digital Skills courses for young people. As the so-called "digital natives" start acting politically, it is important that digital skills are part of their educational repertoire, in order to avoid this and other challenges that may come with regards to misinformation online.

What happens if we fail?

Populists embody characteristics that meet the criteria of the mass media by breaking taboos, producing scandals, arousing emotions, and simplifying complex ideas. In this sense, the compatibility between the components of populism and the interests of mass media are clear.[6] By choosing which content will be conveyed based on emotional appeal, a structure of conflict, and simplicity, journalists define what will be on the agenda of public debate—and often populists get more headlines than other actors. This amplifying effect is intensified by social media, and

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6. Diehl 2017

is especially problematic in an environment of misinformation and fake news.

Populists benefit from the use of social media as it is an unfiltered platform from which they can speak directly to their audience. This helps them communicate their political agenda without intermediaries and allows them to benefit from the media's proclivity to publish sensational stories. This way, they bypass the traditional gatekeepers and get to the centre of the public debate.

In an era when the lines between real facts and fake news are blurred and misinformation entrenches polarisation and radical solutions to old problems, fighting its causes is central if we want to build a stronger democracy in the future—helping to shape a healthy public sphere based on reliable facts rather than fake news.

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