Spreading of Fake News on Social Media: A Literature Study

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Abstract: The aim of this research article is to demonstrate the way fake news has altered the mainstream journalism. The current paper studied several literatures available to examine how social media platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter have been used during U.S. Presidential Election 2016 for the growth of fake journalism. The growth of fake news has created vexation for many political analysts as they think such trend may hamper democracy. Fake news websites simply propagate false news and views to change people's viewpoints. Social media in response to several criticisms have created algorithms and adopted other measures to control fake news.

Keywords: Presidential Election, Facebook, Twitter, Lazarfeld, Fake Journalism, Click-bait.

Introduction

The rise of fake news sources, unsubstantiated claims, and alternative truths created a major challenge for resource persons like teachers, librarians as well as students regarding the formation of ideas, decisions, and positions of information sources. People seem to believe whatever they read on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites (Loertscher, 2017, p.44). The social media sharing has driven the desire to see new news not only in each day but in each hour. The continuous rush to be the first to share something among one's peers can lead people to share a news item after seeing only a headline and photo (Dempsey, 2017, p.6).

The volume of fake news disgorged onto the 2016 Presidential Election was of historic proportion and may have had some influence on the outcome. On November 2016, General Michael T. Flynn tweeted 6 days before the election "U decide—NYPD Blows Whistle on New Hillary Emails: Money Laundering, Sex Crimes w Children, etc...MUST READ! https://t.co/O0bVJT3QDr".The URL leads to the site True Pundit (truepundit.com), a hyper partisan conservative outlet that publishes stories that are patently false. True Pundit claimed that Hilary Clinton was involved in a child sex ring that was operating out of the basement of a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. On Twitter, this meme tagged was tagged as #Pizzagate (McDermott, 2017, p. 27). The day before the election, the Facebook page of the Louisiana mayor also posted many imaginary, frauds and made-up stories. Among the items that were posted in the final 48 hours of the campaign was Hillary Clinton Calling for Civil War If Trump Is Elected, Barack Obama Admits He Was Born in Kenya, FBI Agent Who Was Suspended of Leaking Hilary's Corruption Is Dead (Benton, 2016, p. 38), Wilileaks "confirmed" that Secretary of State Clinton put U.S. weapons into the hands of Islamic State terrorists (All the news that causes fits, 2016, p.5). A Fake News website called the Boston Tribune

ran a story that the federal government was secretly tracking Americans using computer chips in credit cards. Such sham news were so sensationalised that they went viral. Another bogus news site named the Political Insider had thousands of people sharing a false story that Hillary Clinton had been caught selling weapons to ISIS. In October 2016, the Free Thought Project got more than 28,000 Facebook users to share its made-up claim that U.S. Marines were heading to Europe to battle Russia (Stoffers, 2017, p.6). These types of news are often sensationalized without proper checking. Many people spend their time online for making huge amount of money. They can generate lots of money via online ads if they drive large numbers of users to their websites. So, they may not care what the content even says or how misleading the headline can be, as long as it's attracting eyeballs to their paid-per-click pages (Dempsey, 2017, p.6).

History of Media Influence during Election

During the proliferation of fake news in the age of Donald Trump, the news about actor Alec Baldwin's death exposed the problem regarding fake news is getting worse and worse. Times headline: "Baldwin: Gone at 58" drew lots of clicks. The fake news about his death appeared via third party advertising code. Keywords in the article sent signals to the ad server. In the digital world, attention is currency. So, fake news makers choose sensational information to drag more and more online revenues. Spreading falsehoods for personal gain and amusement is nothing new. Humans have been doing that since our ancestors were grunting at each other in caves millions of years ago. But the democratization of the internet in the 1990s meant everyone would get to participate regardless of their agendas: political activists, foreign propagandists, hackers, spin doctors, publicity hounds, and news outlets desperate for ad dollars. As internet matured no proper planning has been made to check and control the fake news. That's why the proliferation of fake news is so acute, that it is becoming tough to stop the growing threat it has been creating to our democracy and nation (Webb, 2017, p.51). In the 1940s, the sociologist Paul Lazarfeld and his colleagues explored the way media affected political views by comparing people's opinions (measured by surveys) to news and advertisements they were exposed to. The investigators expected to find evidence that media messages had immediate, powerful and institutive effects on people's political views. Instead, they found that opinions were largely stable and invariant to media messages (Uscinski, 2017, p.54). Lazarfeld's studies during the presidential campaign of 1940 discovered the relative poer of personal influence on changing votes in comparison to influence of media. It was realised that media and interpersonal communication were not in competition, but rather intimately connected. This gave rise to the hypothesis of the two-steps, whereby certain ordinary people among the politically savvy, self-confident and gregarious coined "opinion-leaders" passed on what they garnered from media to others in their intimate circles (Katz, 2015, p.1023). During the broadcast era, same finding was revealed. There was very little relationship between people's intended choices and the messaging they encountered. Whatever change occurred, happened in the form of people aligning their candidate preferences with their underlying party affiliation. External events and economic conditions have remarkable impact on the way of messaging. One can't say that news, advertisements, and campaigns have no effects during election but those effects were less direct and lower in magnitude that it was assumed (Uscinski, 2017, p.54).

Facebook as Fake News Carrier

Facebook has a fake news problem. It has emerged as the world's most popular place to share. Facebook has created the world's most efficient delivery system for fake news. In North America about 170 million people use Facebook every day. According to a survey done by Pew Research Center, nearly half of all adults in U.S. stated that they received get their news mainly from Facebook. Nearly one-fourth of Americans stated that they have shared a fake news story. Thus fake news shared on Facebook had created a significant public confusion about all current events (Guynn, 2016, p.03B). Many people blamed Facebook for spreading partisan and largely pro-Trump "fake news" like Pope Francis's endorsement of Trump or Hilary Clinton's secret life-threatening illness (Farrell, 2017, p.B9). Facebook has created a platform for the active dispersal of such lies. Such lies travel really well and fast. The "endorsement" of Pope's with heading "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President" got 868,000 Facebook shares (Benton, 2016, p. 39). Fake news was a political hot potato that not only generated during US Presidential Election in 2016, but also in Donald Trump's first 100 days as U.S. president. In a November interview with Washington Post, Paul Horner (Facebook-focused fake-news writer) said that Trump is in White House due to his news. His followers would believe anything he posts. They don't even cross check his news with real facts (Lee & Fan, 2017, p. 13). According to a BuzzFeed New Investigation, more than 100 news sites that made up pro-Trump content had been traced to Macedonia (Itkowitz, 2016). Craig Silverman, media editor at BuzzFeed (buzzfeed.com) had done extensive research and coverage of the fake news phenomenon. According to Craig the explosion of propaganda was made possible due to two giant internet companies: Google, with AdSense program, and Facebook (McDermott, 2017, p. 27).

Fake Journalism

The 2016 election was widely influenced by the fake news. In the social media scenario partisans extensively circulated fabricated news and conspiracy theories. Pew researchers report that more than 60 percent of adults in the United States now use social media for some or even most of their news consumption. That viral spike of false reporting at the end of the race is a grave concern. A well-informed voting public is an essential component of a functioning democracy (All the news that causes fits, 2016, p.5). The growing trend of fake news is not only witnessed in United States.
The United States is a leader in Internet Technology. But it may well be a laggard when it comes using internet technology for political mischief. The online fake news stories continued to be a hot-button issue in political scenario but still Facebook executives disapprove the notion that fake news on social network might have swayed voters. According to some political analysts the warning signs of fake news were witnessed few years back. In other countries apart from U.S. the trend of growing fake news was seen. Take the example of Philippines, where a spokesman for its president Rodrigo Duterte shared an image of girl on Facebook. The girl was believed to have been raped and killed by a drug dealer. Later, fact checkers revealed that the photo came from Brazil (Kerstetter, 2016). The recent political scandal in South Korea is regarded the worst political scandal in the history of politics. Such fake news had created a new stage of Yellow Journalism (Lee & Fan, 2017, p. 13). More and more people are getting addicted to such online news generated through mutant sources due to their distrust of mainstream media. According to

Melissa Zimdars, a communications professor at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts, people had been grown so distrustful of institutional media that they had turn to alternative news sources. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that only 18 percent of people have a lot of trust in national news organizations; nearly 75 percent said news organizations are biased. The news media to be profitable rely more on "click-bait" headlines. Sometimes it became tough to distinguish "click-bait" stories from fake stories (Itkowitz, 2016). Some pay-per-click websites produce such badly produced stories to generate more and more advertising money. The profit driven media houses ends up in providing distorted news. Researchers of Fake Journalism had witnessed for staying in power nexus media houses use thinly veneered fact-based news. Journalism is not practiced by following essential rudiments and responsibility. Voting citizens accept these fake contents on Facebook and Twitter feeds as real contents. Benton (2016) stated that it's the ideology that drives one to incline towards fake news. But a lot of fake news is driven purely by the economic incentive structure that has been created by Facebook. The fake stuff when it is connected with a Facebook user's preconceived notions or sense of identity, its spread like wildfire. Moreover, fake news is much cheaper than real news (p.38). According Paul Mihailidis, (who teaches media literacy at Emerson College in Boston) most of the people didn't know that the shared news was fake, whereas others don't care. They saw fake news as a way to advocate their values. Mihailidis also added that the way people consume news is also changed in this new media scenario. People scrolled through Facebook and they hardly cross-check their reading information. The notion of deep reading had been replaced by deep monitoring. When they see a catchy headline, they share the news on their timelines (Itkowitz, 2016).

Measures for Diminishing Fake News

According to BuzzFeed News, during the crucial final three months of the 2016 Presidential Election campaign, the fabricated political information and digital tall tales actually surpassed mainstream news sources in readership (All the news that causes fits, 2016, p.5). Craig Silverman of BuzzFeed in his Analysis on Fake News stated that these fake stories resonated with people. People saw them, share them, give comment or like. These activities had created tremendous velocity on Facebook. Silverman further added the pro-Trump or anti-Clinton stories really performed well on Facebook. The vast reach of Facebook is unprecedented in human history. Every month nearly 2 billion people are logging the system. Initially, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg did not take the misleading news phenomenon on his site seriously. According to him, news and media are not the primary things people do on Facebook. So, it's odd for him when people insist of calling Facebook or Media Company as news (McDermott, 2017, p. 27-28). Facebook denied that fake news could have seriously affected the election. Recently, the social media giant declared to work with fact-checking organizations such as Snopes and Polifact to identify problematic news stories and flag them as disputed, so that people know that they are questionable. It will also penalize suspect stories so that they are less likely to be on users' news feeds. In several essays, Tim O'Reilly, the head of O'Reilly Media stated that Facebook and other similar organizations required avoiding individual judgments about the content of web pages. He also suggested for creating algorithms that would not only select engaging material but also winnow out the false information from the truth (Farrell, 2017, p.B9).

Since the election of 2016, Facebook has taken a lot of heat for not doing enough to remove fake news report. On December 15, 2016, Facebook declared that it carried many experiments to stem the flow of fake news. It planned to make it easier for its users to report a hoax and for fact-checking organizations to flag fake articles (Guynn, 2016, p.03B). In the aftermath of the election, Twitter and Facebook executives acknowledged that their algorithms, designed to surface the stories users are most likely to engage with regardless of accuracy, have been at times a public disservice. The social media giants took measures to isolate or remove some purveyors of fake news, but the industry needs to do much more to combat the dissemination of fake news at the source. The algorithms are designed to keep eyeballs on content and increase active users (All the news that causes fits, 2016, p.5). Such algorithm has been created by Google that can also comb through metadata for "signals" suggesting that pages that pages are likely to have valuable content, without ever having to understand the intrinsic content of the page. This could be applied for truth (Farrell, 2017, p.B9). Facebook's algorithm would identify websites that repeatedly spread fake news and penalize their stories (Farrell, 2017, p.B9).

Facebook has cracked down on 30 thousand fake accounts in France ahead of the country's pivotal Presidential election. Facebook said the accounts were spreading fake news stories, spams, misinformation or other deceptive content. In a blog post, the Facebook security manager Shabnam Shaik declared that it's the priority of Facebook to remove all accounts that are spreading fake news. Another spokesperson of Facebook told to CNNtech that Facebook had targeted these fake accounts as they to bring a "Full Stop" to fake news initiator. Prevention of fake accounts would help in stopping hoaxes, spam, political trolling and fake news (Kottasova, 2017). Apart from targeting 30,000 fake accounts, Facebook partnered with newsrooms to debunk false claims and ran full-page ads in French newspaper with a guide for spotting fake news. Facebook also applied same strategy to the U.S., Germany and U.K. to prevent propagation of fake news during election campaign (Fiegerman, 2017). Facebook also removed financial incentives for spammers and planned to pay closer attention to other signals such as the articles which are red by Facebook users but not shared. On November 2016, Facebook barred fake news sites from using its ad-selling services (Guynn, 2016, p.03B). Recently, Facebook introduced a third-party verification system for questionable articles, and Google has started labelling some stories with a "Fact Check" tag. To these measures could add certain amount of vertification, still they are not sophisticated enough to solve the problem (Webb, 2017, p.51).

A company named NewsWhip was hired during French Presidential election to track down all social media content that went viral. NewsWhip also helped newsroom to flag fake news. According to data provided to CNNTech, NewsWhip looked at 200 most engaged stories on social media about two French presidential candidates in the two months before the election. Out of the total posted stories, about 10% of were fake (Fiegerman, 2017). To cope with fake news the German cabinet had approved a plan to impose fines on social media. Germany's Minister of Justice and Consumer Protection, Heiko Mass emailed CNNMoney that the social networks are responsible when their platforms are misused for propagating crime and fake news. In Germany, social media like Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks will be fined as much as 53 million dollars if they failed to remove hate speech and fake news posts within 24 hours after they flagged by users. Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft and YouTube made public promise on May 2016 to review flagged content quickly. The social media also promised to remove any reported violent, illegal or racist post (Kottasova and Schmidt, 2017).

Facebook and Twitter algorithms prioritize posts with high "engagement" — popular ones and links that their customization code predicts as user click on it. All over the web, user's past digital behaviour resulted in targeted ads, some of which resemble news stories. Content recommendation companies like Outbrain and Taboola place sponsored links on publishers' websites for a fee but are only marginally effective in policing fake news and propaganda. In contradiction, all these companies make money off clicks and they have mountains of data to differentiate provocative headlines from the serious one (Webb, 2017, p.51).

Conclusions

The year 2016 has witnessed remarkable data about fake news. Facebook and Twitter accounts got torrents of false and conspiracy-laden headlines. Though many political analysts blame social networks for their inabilities to check such false propagation, but other believe fake political news doesn't affect people's voting decision rather it supported their belief systems. It is true that fake news from social media had drastically changed American's political attitude than before. In the past many false news travelled during election campaign, but with social media such false information travel faster and farther than before. One can't stop fake news just only by imposing censorship on popular social media. The real filters are "we" — the users. If users want to receive all news and views through only one single feed, then nothing can be done to stop such biased and fake news. We need to check for real facts and truth. Facebook or any other social media platform can't alone decide what news and stories are true and what are not. According to many political analysts fake stories delivered via social media had created a new level of news forgery. Fake news websites are multiplying day by day on online media scenario. Some of these websites do possess professional getup and designs. Others do have official sounding names and formats. Such websites have created alteration in mainstream journalism as they play a great role in real-world events. Whereas as social media giants such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube are struggling with how to handle outburst of false news views, users are struggling to differentiate between facts and fake news. Though, one can recognise online fake news simply by following these guidelines: considering the source; checking the author; reading beyond the headline; checking the credibility; checking the date; and finally considering this can be joke.

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