

## Media Studies: 14

“Fake News”, Social Media, Trust (& Politics)

2 / 45

## Outline

- What is “Fake News”?
- Has it always been around?
- Why is it important now?
- How do we spot it?
- What can we do about it?

5 / 45

# What is “Fake News”?

7 / 45

## The ‘fake news’ problem

- Over half (54%) agree or strongly agree that they are concerned about what is real and fake on the internet.
- This is highest in countries like Brazil (85%), Spain (69%), and the United States (64%) where **polarised political situations combine with high social media use**.
- It is lowest in Germany (37%) and the Netherlands (30%) where recent elections were largely untroubled by concerns over fake content.

Reuters DNR 2018, p10

8 / 45

## The ‘fake news’ problem



Reuters Digital News Report 2016-2018

9 / 45

## Definitions (Allcott)

- Allcott and Gentzkow
- “We define “fake news” to be news articles that are **intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers**”. It includes:
  - intentionally fabricated news articles
  - many articles that originate on satirical websites but could be misunderstood as factual

Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*  
Journal of Economic Perspectives—Volume 31, Number 2—Spring 2017—Pages 211–236

10 / 45

## Definitions (Allcott)

### Excluded are:

- 1) unintentional reporting **mistakes**
- 2) **rumors** that do not originate from a particular news article
- 3) **conspiracy theories** (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false)
- 4) **satire** that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual
- 5) **false statements** by politicians
- 6) reports that are **slanted or misleading** but not outright false

Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*  
Journal of Economic Perspectives—Volume 31, Number 2—Spring 2017—Pages 211–236

11 / 45

## Definitions (Reuters Inst.)

Definitions of 'fake news' are **fraught with difficulty** and respondents frequently mix up three categories:

1. news that is 'invented' to make money or discredit others;
2. news that has a basis in fact, but is 'spun' to suit a particular agenda; and
3. news that people don't feel comfortable about or don't agree with.

Reuters DNR 2017, p20

12 / 45

## The 'fake news' 'problem'

"[V]ery few people can accurately recall having seen items in category 1, except in the United States. Indeed, respondents in Germany and France routinely use the English phrase 'fake news', suggesting that this is something that has been largely imported rather than a home-grown phenomenon. On the other hand, the issue of political bias and the limits of free expression are increasingly the subject of heated debate in many countries – even if social media may not be entirely to blame."

Reuters DNR 2017, p20

13 / 45

## 1. Invented News

- In the lead up to the 2016 US Elections...

"the Macedonian town of Veles (pop. 45,000) has experienced a digital gold rush as **locals launched at least 140 US politics websites**. These sites have American-sounding domain names such as WorldPoliticus.com [...] They almost all publish aggressively pro-Trump content aimed at conservatives and Trump supporters in the US."

"Yes, the info in the blogs is bad, false, and misleading but the rationale is that 'if it gets the people to click on it and engage, then use it,'" said a university student in Veles who started a US politics site

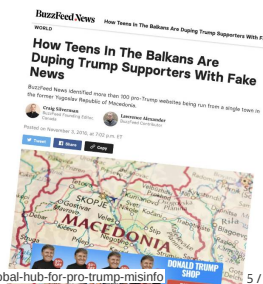
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

14 / 45

## 1. Invented News

- Motivations are not necessarily **POLITICAL/IDEOLOGICAL**

"I started the site for a easy way to make money," said a 17-year-old who runs a site with four other people. "In Macedonia the economy is very weak and teenagers are not allowed to work, so we need to find creative ways to make some money.[...]"



<https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

15 / 45

## 1. Invented News

- Motivations *can* be **FINANCIAL**

Hillary Clinton In 2013: "I Would Like To See People Like Donald Trump Run For Office; They're Honest And Can't Be Bought"

Written by Bill The October 17th 2016



This false story was shared **480,000** time on Facebook.

"The people who launched their sites early in 2016 are making the most money, according to the university student. He said a friend of his earns **\$5,000 per month**, "or even **\$3,000 per day**" when he gets a hit on Facebook."

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo>

16 / 45

## 1. Invented News (2)



- Do reasons matter?
- Articles intended for humour/satire.

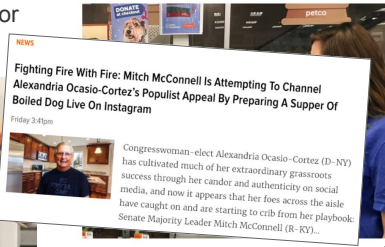
Petco Employee Stocks Gerbil by The Cash Register For Impulse Purchases

Friday 3:05pm

**Fighting Fire With Fire: Mitch McConnell Is Attempting To Channel Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Populist Appeal By Preparing A Supper Of Boiled Dog Live On Instagram**

Friday 3:45pm

Congresswoman-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) has cultivated much of her extraordinary grassroots success through her candor and authenticity on social media, and now it appears that her foes across the aisle have caught on and are starting to crib from her playbook. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)...



## 2. News with 'spin'

- Clinton-Trump Story...

"According to emails released by WikiLeaks, Clinton said in a private speech to Goldman Sachs that **she would like to see more successful business people enter politics**. But she did not mention Donald Trump in any way."

**Hillary Clinton in 2013: "I Would Like To See People Like Donald Trump Run For Office; They're Honest And Can't Be Bought"**

## 2. News with 'spin'

- Mismatch between headline and story content

**Malaysia police slammed for ca...**  
(AP) — Jun 3, 2011

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysian lawyers, police Saturday, accusing them of abusing their power in of 30 foreign women detained for alleged prostitution.

Police raided a high-end nightclub in northern Penang state women from China and one from Vietnam, along with eight reported police officers went undercover at the club for a w

It triggered an outcry after local newspapers carried photos chain and marked with either a tick or an X on their chest a

"The police branded the detained women as though they as Kok said in a statement. "It is sickening that the police wou as a show of power and moral superiority over their detain

**Malaysian Muslims Cattle-Brand Prostitutes**



Malaysian lawyers, politicians and activists lambasted the police Saturday, accusing them of abusing their power in chaining up and marking the bodies of 30 foreign women detained for alleged prostitution.

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/mjms538/actual-news-headlines-vs-fox-news-headlines>

## 2. News with 'spin'

- Change the focus, ignore other things

**Bloomberg** Anywhere | Professional | Solutions

NEWS | MARKETS | PERSONAL FINANCE

Headlines: Middle East | Latin America | U.S. | Asia

**U.S. Dollar Getting Murdered**

By Michael P. Rogan and Corbett Edgings - Apr 28, 2011 4:22 PM ET

The Dollar Index slid to the lowest level since and gold rallied to a record after economic growth Standard & Poor's 500 Index climbed an aim rising earnings and takeovers overshadowed domestic product.

## 'Push Notifications'



### UK General Election 2019

"For the millions of British voters who have news apps installed on their smartphones, push notifications are an important source of information about politics. **While some recipients will tap on the pings and buzzes to read full stories, the majority of push alerts are never acted upon. That means the one-line summaries of the day's breaking news events are frequently all readers get, giving them an enormous amount of power to shape perceptions.**"

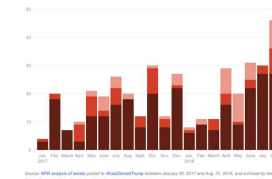
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/12/uk-news-push-alerts-negative-labour-positive-tories>

## 3. News 'I disagree with/dislike'

### President Trump's Description of What's 'Fake' Is Expanding

Trump's Tweets Including The Words 'Fake' Or 'Phony'

■ Fake news ■ Fake stories ■ Phony



Source: NPR analysis of tweets posted to @realDonaldTrump between January 20, 2017 and Aug. 31, 2018, and published by the Daily News Analysis. The data includes retweets and replies.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/02/643761979/president-trumps-description-of-whats-fake-is-expanding>

**Factbase** HOME | SEARCH | TOPICS | ENTERPRISE | BLOG

**Donald Trump**

Words: 7218,082  
Speeches: 1,149  
Tweets: 36,693  
Deleted Tweets: 426

Transcription  
Video Analysis  
Full Platform

**GOVERNMENT**  
**Congress**

### 3. News 'I disagree with/dislike'

- "Rappler" (Philippines)

Politics  
**Duterte Decries 'Fake News' as Critics Warn of Media Crackdown**  
 By Cecilia Yap  
 17 January 2018, 13:42 GMT+9

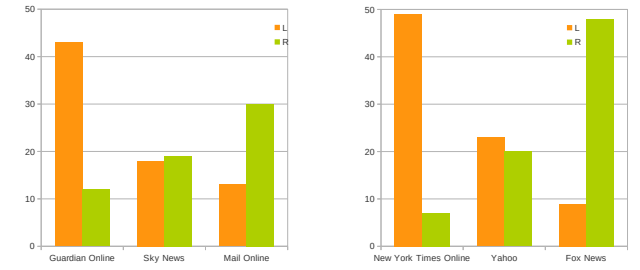
Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte branded news website Rappler Inc. a "fake news outlet", but denied he influenced the Securities and Exchange Commission's order to shut down the news agency known to be critical of his government.

23 / 45

### The 'fake news' 'problem'

- "[V]ery few people can accurately recall having seen items in category 1, except in the United States. Indeed, respondents in Germany and France routinely use the English phrase 'fake news', suggesting that this is something that has been largely imported rather than a home-grown phenomenon. On the other hand, the issue of political bias and the limits of free expression are increasingly the subject of heated debate in many countries – even if social media may not be entirely to blame."

### 'Polarisation'



Reuters DNR 2017, p38

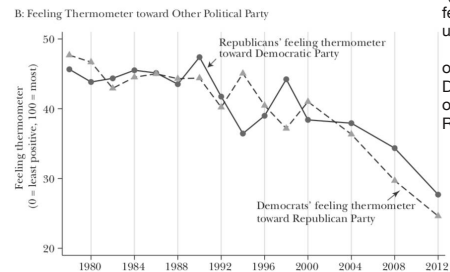
25 / 45

### 'Polarisation'

average "feeling thermometer"

(100="very warm or favorable feeling", 0="very cold or unfavorable feeling")

of Republicans toward the Democratic Party and of Democrats toward the Republican Party



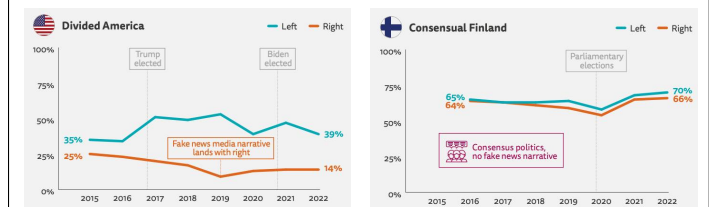
Allcott and Gentzkow, p216

26 / 45

### News Market Tendencies

- Q1F. Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?
- Q5b. Which of the following brands have you used to access news ONLINE in the last week? Please select all that apply.
- Base: Total sample: UK = 2112.
- Note: Respondents who answered don't know to Q1F were excluded.

### 2022 - US & Finland

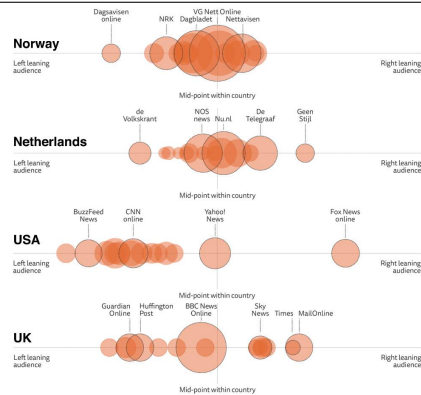


Q6\_2016.1. Thinking about news in general, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? - I think you can trust most news most of the time. Base: Left/Right from 2015-22 samples: USA = 400/500, Finland = 400/400.

2022 Digital News Report, p16

28 / 45

## News Market Tendencies



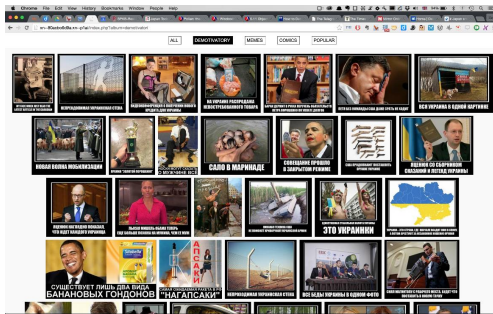
## Current Significance

- Recent evidence shows that:
  - 1) 62 percent of US adults get news on social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016);
  - 2) the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories (Silverman 2016);
  - 3) many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016); and
  - 4) the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Silverman 2016)

## Internet Research Agency

- Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) began targeting US voters for misinformation as early as 2012, **using some of the techniques it had deployed on its own citizens and those of neighboring countries in Eastern Europe**. The Twitter dataset contains posts in a variety of languages. Some of the accounts were also "re-purposed" in their targeting. For example, **some were shifted from operating in Indonesian for an Indonesian audience to operating in English for a US audience** (see Appendices for additional data). While the IRA targeted a few different countries and language communities, the vast majority of its output was written in Russian and English.

## Агентство интернет-исследований Internet Research Agency



## Current Significance

Report for US Senate carried out by Oxford Univ. researchers (Dec 2018)

Computational Propaganda Research Project

**The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018**

Philip N. Howard, *University of Oxford*  
 Bharath Ganesh, *University of Oxford*  
 Dimitra Liotsiou, *University of Oxford*

John Kelly, *Graphika*  
 Camille François, *Graphika*

## Current Significance

"Russia's **Internet Research Agency (IRA)** launched an extended attack on the United States by using computational propaganda to misinform and polarize US voters. This report provides the first major analysis of this attack based on data provided by social media firms to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI)."

"Over 30 million users, between 2015 and 2017, shared the IRA's Facebook and Instagram posts with their friends and family, liking, reacting to, and commenting on them along the way."

"The most far reaching IRA activity is in **organic posting**, not advertisements."

## US Elections

- Russia's IRA activities were **designed to polarize the US public** and interfere in elections by:
  - campaigning for African American voters to **boycott elections or follow the wrong voting procedures** in 2016, and more recently for Mexican American and Hispanic voters to distrust US institutions;
  - encouraging extreme right-wing voters to be more confrontational; and
  - spreading sensationalist, conspiratorial, and other forms of junk political news and
  - misinformation to voters across the political spectrum.

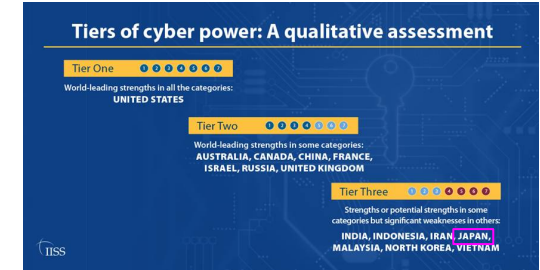
35 / 45

## Japan Characteristics

- Uniquely [...] Facebook (26%) is only the third most popular social network in Japan behind YouTube (46%) and Line (32%).
- For news, Facebook (9%) is beaten into fourth place by Twitter (12%).
- Part of the explanation for this comes in a survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) in 2014, which showed that the Japanese are **reluctant to use real names in social media**, preferring anonymity online. This tendency has also affected the popularity of LinkedIn, which is used by only 1% of respondents.

Reuters DNR 2017, p120

## Cyber Capabilities

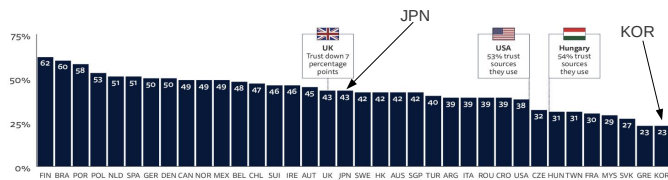


Cyber Capabilities and National Power: A Net Assessment  
<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2021/06/cyber-capabilities-national-power>

37 / 45

## Trust in media

Q6 2016 1/6. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.  
**I think you can trust most news most of the time/I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time**  
 Base: Total sample in each market.



Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, p21

38 / 45

## How do we spot it?

- Growth in **fact-checkers**.

**POLITIFACT**  
USA



AFP Factual



Africa Check (RSA)



Fact Crescendo (India)



Faktograf.hr (Croatia)



Newtral Spain



RAPPLER Philippines

39 / 45

## What next?

**A political party has masqueraded as a fact-checker. What's next?**



<https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/a-political-party-has-masqueraded-as-a-fact-checker-whats-next/>

"The move by the U.K. Conservative Party's press office to make its Twitter account **look like a real fact-checking site** holds implications for fact-checkers' credibility and presents social media companies with a new test of how to respond to such plays."

40 / 45

## How do we spot it?

- And a fact-checker **checker!!**
- **IFCN** - International Fact-Checking Network
- Issues a **set of principles** that fact-checking organisation should abide by:
  - Nonpartisanship and Fairness
  - Transparency of Sources
  - Transparency of Funding & Organization
  - Transparency of Methodology
  - Open & Honest Corrections Policy



<https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/know-more/the-commitments-of-the-code-of-principles>

41 / 45

## How do we spot it?

- 1) **Inspect the dates**  
False news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates that have been altered.
- 2) **Check the evidence**  
Check the author's sources to confirm that they are accurate. Lack of evidence or reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.
- 3) **Look at other reports**  
If no other news source is reporting the same story, it may indicate that the story is false. If the story is reported by multiple sources you trust, it's more likely to be true.
- 4) **Is the story a joke?**  
Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humour or satire. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.
- 5) **Some stories are intentionally false**  
Think critically about the stories you read, and only share news that you know to be credible.

<https://thulfact.org/toolkit/>

42 / 45

## How do we spot it?

- 1) **Consider the photos**  
False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context. You can search for the photo or image to verify where it came from.
- 2) **Be sceptical of headlines**  
False news stories often have catchy headlines in all caps with exclamation points. If shocking claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they probably are.\*
- 3) **Look closely at the URL**  
A phony or look-alike URL may be a warning sign of false news. Many false news sites mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the URL. You can go to the site to compare the URL to established sources.
- 4) **Investigate the source**  
Ensure that the story is written by a source that you trust with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from an unfamiliar organisation, check their 'About' section to learn more.
- 5) **Watch for unusual formatting**  
Many false news sites have misspellings or awkward layouts. Read carefully if you see these things.

\* For more on BS headlines with question marks see: **Betteridge's Law** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betteridge's\\_law\\_of\\_headlines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betteridge's_law_of_headlines)

43 / 45

## What can we do?

- Do 'platforms' (FB, Twitter etc) actually care?

Facebook blocks 115 accounts ahead of US midterm elections  
Oct 2018

Facebook said it blocked 115 accounts for suspected "coordinated inauthentic behavior" linked to foreign groups attempting to interfere in Tuesday's U.S. midterm elections.

"They don't care": Facebook fact-checking in disarray as journalists push to cut ties  
Dec 2018

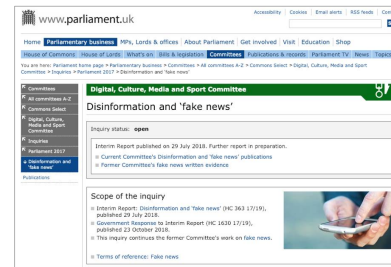
Journalists working as fact-checkers for Facebook have pushed to end a controversial media partnership with the social network, saying the company has ignored their concerns and failed to use their expertise to combat misinformation.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/dec/13/they-dont-care-facebook-fact-checking-in-disarray-as-journalists-push-to-cut-ties>  
<https://apnews.com/19a5ab9ba76466b6594d9af9e59be>

44 / 45

## What can we do?

Governments around the world have reacted in a variety of ways, for different reasons...



<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/fake-news-17-19/>

45 / 45

## What can we do?

- Various states have introduced laws:
  - Germany: NetzDG (Network Enforcement Act)**
- "requires online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to remove illegal content – or face **fines of up to €50m**. But the law has been controversial in Germany with some saying it could lead to **inadvertent censorship or curtail free speech.**"

46 / 45

## Useful for some people...

### For example, in Malaysia...

- 2 April 2018: Anti-‘fake news’ Law (AFNL) passed before general election. Hastily drawn up, no feedback from opposition parties, media professionals, academics, or civil society. Rushed through parliament with only five opposition MPs allowed to voice their opinions.
- “vague, general definition of ‘fake news’” - “allows for tough penalties”  
Max. jail term 6 years + fine of MYR500,000 (apx.US\$128,000).
- Media academic Gayathry Venkiteswaran: “For most observers, **the obvious reason behind this rushed law is to keep the scandalous 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) wealth fund and other financial misappropriations out of the electorate’s focus.** This is a punitive law that fails to provide any clarity on the meaning or parameters of ‘fake news’, but criminalises a wide array of speech online and offline”

## Summary

- What our expectations of ‘news’?
- How much do we know / understand about news and journalism?
- What is the role of the state in all this?

**ENDS**