

DEFINING FAKE NEWS

With a plethora of sites claiming to report credible news, Americans sometimes struggle to distinguish between what is real and “fake.”

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They all began in these rooms. A computer lab turned workplace and a classroom filled with awards and a mural. A mixture of the past and the present. Black and white covers fill the walls of one classroom, PC monitors line another.

Eventually they all left the Spark rooms. Now, Kevin Necessary is an editorial cartoonist at WCPO-Cincinnati. Olivia Lewis is at Miami University, double-majoring in journalism and international studies. Two work at The Washington Post. Faiz Siddiqui is a transportation reporter, and Rachel Podnar is a news editor for The Washington Post Express.

As journalists, all of them, regardless of the medium they work in, are dedicated to accurately reporting events to the public. Recently, however, they have seen the truthful pieces they create compete for audiences' attention with deliberately false, misinformative fake news.

According to a Pew Research Center study from December 2016, 64 percent of American adults say made-up news stories have caused a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events.

Two distinct kinds of news stories have been dubbed “fake news:” completely fabricated stories and stories from mainstream news organizations but called “fake news” by President Donald Trump and his administration, says head of the journalism department at the University of Cincinnati Jeffrey Blevins.

“The term ‘fake news’ currently refers to the recent phenomenon of political operatives intent on spreading propaganda or misinformation for political gain,” Blevins says. “As well as commercial interests wanting to attract click-through and use scandalous headlines as click bait,”

By calling both types of stories “fake news,” Siddiqui thinks that the blanket term contributes to the public



finding both equal.

“When you say fake news, it’s imprecise, it’s not very nuanced, it’s not specific, and journalism is all three of these things: precise, nuanced, and specific,” Siddiqui says. “What are we talking about with these things? Are we talking about hoax news, are we talking about propaganda, or are we simply talking about errors that reporters make in the course of their daily reporting?”

Associate Professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kent State University and News Director at the Media Law Center for Ethics and Access Jan Leach distinguishes fake news from hoax news sites as “completely made up.”

Often, according to Buffalo State College Associate Professor of Journalism Annemarie Franczyk, the structure of fake news articles mimic journalistic writing, “usurping a journalist’s own format to promote their own dastardly deeds,” often with an inverted pyramid style of writing, a summary lede and quotes.

Very recently, however, the label “fake news” has been used by some, notably Trump, to describe mainstream news outlets such as CNN and The New York Times. In this context, according to The Ohio State University Associate Professor of Journalism Kelly Garrett, “fake news” is being used “as a synonym for biased news.”

History of Fake News

She stepped into the room full of buzzing energy and excitement. The first word that popped into her head as she scanned the premise was “corporate,” with “an edition of the paper neatly placed on each crisp white table.” Since her first day of journalism in high school, Lewis had admired The New York Times, and she was now finally standing in the offices of the outlet.

Lewis had visited New York in January with other journalism students from Miami University for a program called NYC Media to meet with 20 news media organizations in the city and learn more about the field during the week. The New York Times was their first stop, where they met Editorial Page Editor

Gail Collins and Public Editor Liz Spayd. Collins, says Lewis, believed that a big source of criticism in the media coverage of the 2016 election was the question of bias, causing many to use the term “fake news.”

Despite the increasing prevalence of fake news, the phenomenon has been festering for centuries, since the creation of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-1400s.

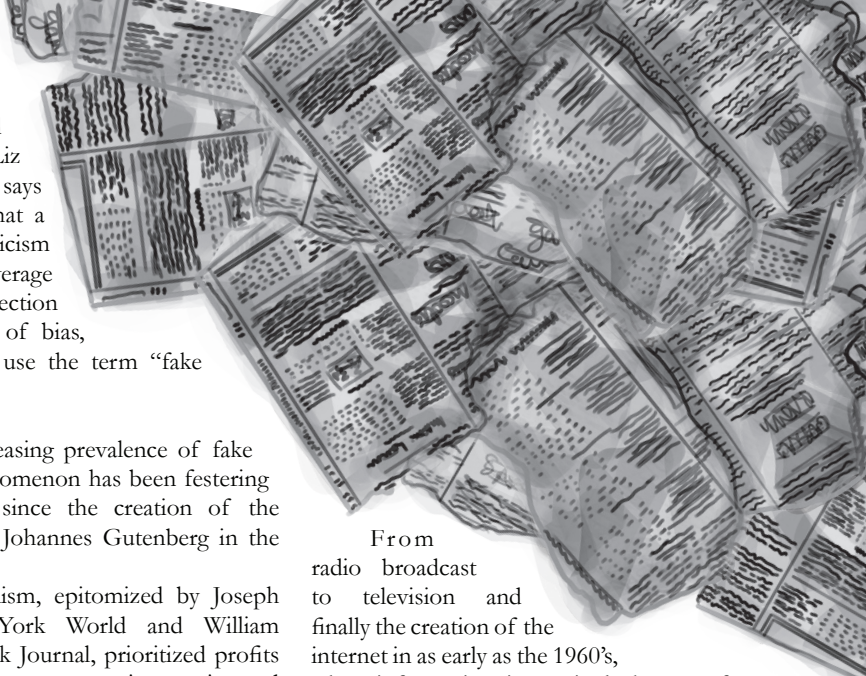
Yellow journalism, epitomized by Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World and William Hearst’s New York Journal, prioritized profits over accuracy, often exaggerating stories and occasionally printing lies.

Backlash to yellow journalism after its reign in the late 19th century led to objective journalism. Pulitzer himself would end up establishing the famous Pulitzer Prize to reward “the most disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by any American newspaper during the preceding year.” Adolph Ochs purchased a struggling newspaper called The New York Times in 1896, stating that it would be a “clean, dignified, trustworthy and impartial” newspaper in a time of sensationalism.

Coinciding with the cultural changes during the 1950s, media organizations evolved from what historians termed “lapdog” mindset to be a more observant “watchdog.” The questioning of authority, says Indiana University Media School Assistant Professor Gerry Lanosga, affected many domains of life including the press.

The Washington Post’s coverage of former President Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal during the early 1970s completed this transition, and though the public was initially distrustful of the press during the investigation, once Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward’s stories proved true journalists gained more respect.

The evolving technological innovations added more platforms for voices to contribute.



From radio broadcast to television and finally the creation of the internet in as early as the 1960’s, when information increasingly became free of its original geographical location, allowing “regular people,” says Lanosga, “to participate in that spread of information.”

“There’s always been new media that’s been introduced in successive ways in the history of communication,” Lanosga says. “In a lot of ways the history of news is a history of technology.”

At her college publication in Ball State, Podnar found that the staff would put all the content from the day’s paper online in the evening each day. The content would often mirror exactly what was found in the print publication, from headlines to photos.

“There was just no understanding of what online was. And it’s not like other newspapers were doing that much better in 2012,” Podnar says. “People are always trying to get better at online but that’s the huge thing, the switch to putting things online all the time and everybody doing that.”

With the evolution of technology came cable news and talk radio, allowing more people to pick and choose which facts to pay attention to, says Assistant Professor of Public Relations at Indiana University Nicholas Browning. The issue became more prevalent with social media as it allowed even more people to choose an outlet for news.

There isn’t any kind of real authoritative voice in media anymore: anybody can publish. Anybody can put up a website, anyone can say they’re a reporter.

- Kevin Necessary, WCPO Editorial Cartoonist

WAKING UP TO

According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study, 64 percent of U.S. adults say fake news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.

infographic erinn aulfinger, lauren wilson



56 percent of adults use a cell phone to get news, so it's important to use reputable news apps like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.



Google and Facebook are not reputable news sites, but after recent criticism, both companies are working towards preventing the spread of clickbait and fake news.



Reading a newspaper is one of the best ways to combat stumbling across fake news. There is no click bait in newspapers, and readers can't share a link to a printed story with all of their followers in a matter of seconds.

FAKE NEWS

Three Ways to Spot Fake News

1. Check the Source

Reputable news sources are more likely to break stories that are true. Also, pay attention to website domains: .co can be added to similar domains as more reputable sources to disguise their identity.

2. Look for Duplicates

An important breaking news story is going to be covered by multiple reporters and newspapers.

3. Determine Probability through Writer

No news source or story is completely unbiased. Make sure to pay attention to wording, diction and sourcing to determine if a story is credible.

5%

of adults ages 18-19 get news from a print newspaper and 20 percent of all adults get news from a newspaper;

imes

sources npr.org, pew research center,
americanpressinstitute.org

82%

of 256 East students surveyed said they had encountered fake news on social media. 83 percent of 248 East students surveyed said they had encountered fake news regarding the 2016 presidential election.

Communication is 24/7 now, says Smith, with a copious amount of sources and information that people can't always absorb. Information can be unfiltered and unedited when it reaches the public, resulting in content that is not always accurate.

"People see the media as biased, and despite our best efforts to counter that perception, there is still bias in the media," Leach says. "People aren't always objective and there has been way too much reliance on things that erode trust."

These things include using anonymous sources and giving opposing sources equal weight to get all sides of the story even if their information may not be as valid, Leach adds.

Necessary, who graduated from East in 1998, has seen the rise of social media since he was in Spark.

"There isn't any kind of real authoritative voice in media anymore: anybody can publish," Necessary says. "Anybody can put up a website, anyone can say they're a reporter. And you actually have that."

According to the Newseum Institute and First Amendment Center Chief Operating Officer Gene Policinski, people are having to readjust to "receiving news in a new way and understanding how to vet it" the same way they did when mass circulation newspapers, radios and TVs were introduced.

"We learned as a society that certain news operations were more trustworthy than others, the gossip magazines versus the serious daily newspapers versus the really serious niche magazines that may have had a point of view," Policinski says. "We learned to parse those over 100 and some years. The social media phenomenon is only a handful of years old."

A Polarized Nation

During the 2016 Presidential Election, 65 percent of Americans got their news from digital sources, including 28 percent from news websites or apps and 18 percent from social media sites, according to the Pew Research Center. A quarter of American adults also said they learned about the presidential election via late night comedy shows, slightly higher than the 23 percent of Americans who got their news from national print newspapers.

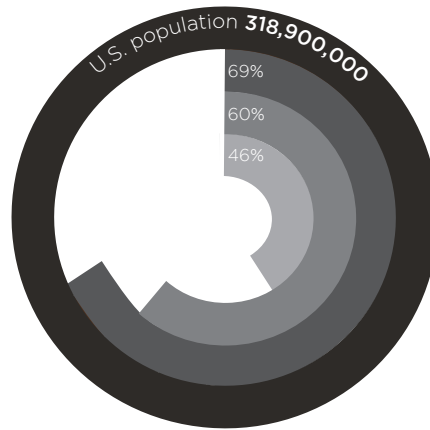
"I think the media got too wrapped up in covering characters and not campaigns and ignoring most policy," Leach says. "[Which] contributed to people's misinformation and difficulty making a decision on who to vote for."

According to a January 2017 study by economists Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford University and Hunt Allcott of New York University, social media was an important but not dominant source of news prior to the 2016 presidential election.

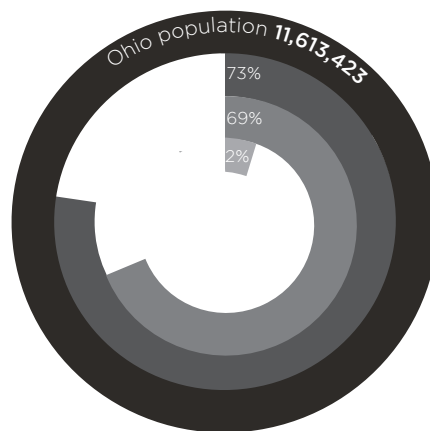
Pro-Trump fabricated stories were shared 30 million times three months before the

Presidential Election Breakdown

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- U.S. Population
- Eligible Voters (by age) in the U.S.
- Number of People who Voted in the U.S.
- Eligible Voters who are Registered in the U.S.



- Ohio Population
- Eligible Voters in Ohio
- Number of Eligible Voters (by age) in Butler County
- Number of Voters in Butler County who Voted

sources census.gov, nytimes.com, electproject.org

election, quadruple the number of pro-Clinton fabricated stories, said to the study. However, the most popular fabrications, such as Pope Francis endorsing then-candidate Trump, were seen by only a small fraction of Americans.

It's important to note, according to Garrett, that the people sharing fake news articles may not actually believe them. Though he's still studying the phenomenon, he said that, "the early patterns of what I'm seeing don't give me a lot of reasons to expect that people who use social media like Facebook were likely to believe a lot more falsehoods."

Siddiqui encountered the effects of fake news when reporting on a story concerning "pizzagate," when a North Carolina man drove to D.C. and fired in a restaurant that some fake news sites had reported was where then-Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton ran a child sex ring in the restaurant's bathrooms. The man later surrendered to the police when he realized there was no evidence for the hoax story, says Siddiqui.

Instead of "directly convincing people that these stories were true," according to Garrett, fake news more likely affected the election by "allowing people to share their emotional reactions to the campaign."

"They say, 'I just don't like this candidate and this is one more example of why I don't like this candidate and why other people shouldn't like the candidate either,'" Garret says. "It's possible it had an effect but not in the simple way that we tend to talk about; it's not that a lot of people were fooled in a profound way."

Garrett doesn't see fake news itself as "being fundamental to what this election was about," and believes that the results can be explained without it.

Even so, confirmation bias, which is the tendency for people to choose to believe what is already consistent with their attitudes is a prevalent problem with social media, according to University of California, Los Angeles Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences Professor and Psychology Today writer Joseph Pierre.

Algorithms that create social media feeds for sites like Facebook present users "with a biased selection of the news tailored to their preferences. Their brains are consuming information with 'confirmation bias on steroids.'" The "filter bubbles" created by these algorithms may result in people living in "echo chambers," only exposed to opinions they already agree with.

"It creates an environment where we're not challenged and it becomes harder for us to look at different types of news and discern what credible journalism is from not credible journalism," Browning says. "We largely don't know about it and are unwilling to challenge ourselves with information that we confront and that's how fake news propagates."

Social media does not have a “predefined role,” says Browning. “It is what we make it.” And what users have made it into is a “polarized space” and a potential for a distorted view of reality dependent upon someone’s social connections and feed.

When Podnar began using Facebook her freshman year of high school, she says that users were mostly sharing pictures and statuses and “news sharing wasn’t necessarily the first thing that people did.” She adds that sites like Upworthy, Elite Daily, Mashable and BuzzFeed exist because of social media.

How to Correct the Fake News Problem

According to the December 2016 Pew Research Center study, 42 percent of Americans think social networking sites and search engines have a great deal of responsibility in preventing completely made-up news from gaining attention; 45 percent of Americans think government, politicians, and elected officials have that role; and 43 percent of Americans think members of the public have that role.

In 2016, Google took down nearly 80 million ads that misled or deceived users according to Keyword, the destination for news updates from Google.

Facebook updated its Facebook Audience Network Policy in November 2016 to include fake news sites in not displaying advertisements that included misleading or illegal information. However, Smith notes that there is “a limited amount of time and effort that goes into it because it costs money.”

For journalists, Lanosga says they will continue to strive for verification in their stories and hold the government accountable because the basic journalistic principles still apply.

“We should be pushing the administration to be accountable for the information it puts out in the same way that we’ve done for many years,” Lanosga says. “For instance, if the administration is making [stats] about job numbers [we should verify that]. It is a two way street, but it’s going to be very challenging for journalists in the next few years.”

Even in opinion, Necessary says that his editorial cartoons can be backed up by either news he has read or sources he has spoken to.

For instance, Duke Energy was unhappy with a cartoon he drew about a Duke Energy power plant that was in danger of leaking chemicals into the Ohio River; however, Necessary had based his cartoon off of a reporter’s story.

“I was able to say ‘I based this entirely off long term reporting from one of our reporters,’” Necessary says. “And I think that’s why in terms of opinion journalism, you have to be able to back things up, you can’t just be making speculations and I think that’s where a lot of fake news comes in is because people are just making stuff up.”

Browning hopes that eventually, verifiable news sites will succeed over the “outlandish ones” and that hoax news sites that serve as “mouthpieces” for political agendas will lose advertising and go out of business. Still, he also hopes this time will be a moment of reflection for journalists in refocusing their efforts on better serving the public.

“[There may be] appreciation for actual facts in the long run if we come to identify that as an agreed upon problem,” Browning says. “It may be that this proliferation of fake news has kind of been a slow outgrowth of the decline in quality journalism in certain sectors.”

Media literacy for the general public, or the ability to evaluate media, will continue to be at the forefront for differentiating between credible news and hoax news. In the same Pew Research Center study, a majority of American adults are confident in their ability to spot fake news; however, the study shows self-reported information that cannot capture if the levels of confidence are truly warranted.

“You have to go in with a certain skepticism in that everything that gets printed isn’t necessarily true,” Smith says. “[If] you see something that you have doubts about, it’s worthwhile to check it out, to look for other sources, to see if somebody else is saying it.”

One way to differentiate hoax news sites from credible news sites is that in credible news sources, corrections will often be in stories after its original publication, says Lanosga.

“If a reputable news organization published a story that is based on some false information, has some factual errors in it or it is just outright false, a reputable news organization is going to

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- Faiz Siddiqui, Washington Post Reporter

33%

of 239 East students surveyed read the news with close attention to the source

correct that material and take that story down,” Lanosga says. “From that standpoint, you can kind of distinguish this idea of fake news.”

Ultimately, however, Garrett believes that the problem of fake news stems from the increased lack of trust between Americans. Now more than ever, he says, “Democrats are willing to say that Republicans are stupid, evil, malicious and would do anything to advance their own cause, and Republicans would say the exact same things about Democrats.”

“Until we get passed that I don’t know how we’re going to get past arguments about what’s true and what’s not,” Garrett says. “Because if you think the other side’s willing to do anything to get their way then of course you’re going to doubt when someone presents information that you don’t agree with.”

Finding ways to restore trust between Americans and in journalism may seem impossible, but Policinski believes that doing so is vital to protecting “all of our freedoms and our system of government.”

“I need accurate information in order to make judgements so I vote one way or another; the ultimate power of the self governed is to vote,” Policinski says. “So I see this as a threat to the institutional side of self governance in a way, and I don’t think that’s too grandiose a view of lowering confidence in the people that bring us that information full time. It’s not healthy for democracy.”

While many people, even among journalists, have different opinions concerning how to solve the conundrum of fake news, Siddiqui says that it is imperative to redefine what exactly constitutes fake news instead of using it as a blanket term.

“I don’t just go around calling a train transportation [as a transportation reporter],” Siddiqui says. “I call a train a train, I call a cab a cab, I call a bus a bus, and I think we need to do the same thing with this term.”