

# The Rise of Fake News:

Surveying the Effects of Social Media on Informed Democracy



By Candice Chirwa and Zimkhitha Manyana | Peer Review

## Abstract

Scholarly research has shown that the role of media and information (a crucial variable in the success of democracy) has been eroded by misinformation, propaganda, and controversy. This paper observes that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are critical agents for disseminating news from various news outlets, including the spreading of popular opinion on political discourse. In hindsight, these platforms inform the basis of true freedom of speech, freedom of information, and political participation. However, influential political leaders, such as former United States president Donald Trump, have abused this privilege by pronouncing unfiltered 'fake news' that have led to topical incidences such as the invasion of the Capitol.

Terrorist groups have turned what could have been an activist and liberation platform (considering the online Arab spring revolution) into a mechanism to conduct propaganda and recruitment campaigns. This article aims to explain 'fake news' and the effects it can have on democratic society post-Covid-19. The research was conducted by gathering data from popular press outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, BBC News, CNN, and BuzzFeed. It considers some solutions to mitigate fake news: critical to these is the need for a well-informed society to distinguish facts from falsities and ambiguities. This paper also argues for improving fact-check initiatives in global social networks and for a change in social media value systems from being content- to quality-based.

## Introduction

Democracy is widely and correctly understood as a political system that stipulates that the levers of power should rest with the *demos* and that government ought to be of the people, for the people, and by the people (Britannica, 2021). In this manner, functional democracies depend to a large extent on an attentive and active civil society and 'the last decade or so has seen an explosion of interest in the question of civil society and the role of media and information in democratic politics' (Jacobs, 2011: 1; Graham, 2015: 83). The question is how far this goal is from being achieved through social media; implied in this is the sub-question of whether Facebook and Twitter provide reliable platforms to convey accurate information to their users. Social media has become a dominant source for both spreading information and shaping opinions worldwide. In our fast-paced world, where information is received by the mere tap of a button, there has been a rise of content that intends to distort information or opinion for partisan or financial gains. This phenomenon is termed 'fake news'. Despite the lack of extensive academic research on the phenomenon in its present form, fake news is a real and present threat to democracies worldwide because of its impact on political discourse. The problem arises when massive newsworthy stories like the 6 January 2021 United States (US) Capitol invasion, which stands alongside 9/11 (both wars act against American democracy), are widely covered by numerous news outlets. These stories are either over-covered before unveiling the facts around the story or under-covered when those facts are revealed (The Independent, 2021). Debatably, the US media reports on the invasion might have heightened the actual event and contributed to the spread of 'fake news', sparking animosity and distress. However, this does not ignore the main instigator – former president Donald Trump, who falsely claimed an early election victory to a crowd who was already convinced that his defeat was unfair. This statement fuelled a day of chaos, violence, and an unprecedented loss of lives. In protest mode, pro-Trump supporters unlawfully invaded the Capitol, hallmarking the seemingly wild accusation of an American 'democratic malaise' and luring threats of backsliding into an autocracy (The Washington Post, 2020; AP NEWS, 2021). Therefore, this paper aims to explain the features of fake news and the fake implications news can have on society.

Subsequently, it will consider some solutions to mitigate fake news.

## Researching Fake News

While fake news has been prevalent for several years before the 2016 US presidential election, the topic only recently became interesting to broader scholarly research because it was not pervasive in the political and print news realm before the election. Research into fake news at the academic level is quickly rising and deepening in the wake of the successive elections in the US. Even though the research is expanding and will reach a substantial level in the coming years, this article has in some sense been completed at only the infancy of the new research. The research was gathered from popular press such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *BuzzFeed*. Press sites such as *BuzzFeed News*, which were often considered clickbait websites, have been an invaluable source of statistics on fake news, its propagation, and identifying how it functions.

## Defining Fake News

'Your organisation is terrible,' said president-elect Donald J. Trump, addressing Jim Acosta of CNN. 'You,' the president-elect said, as Mr Acosta and other stunned journalists looked on, 'are fake news' (Grynbaum, 2017). Fake news is a complicated term. Since former US President Donald Trump utilised the term, society has agreed that he used this term for his personal use to malign reputable news organisations that he did not agree with. In a matter of weeks, the term 'fake news' went from an ill-defined term to one with two opposite meanings in the media landscape: pro-Trump and anti-Trump. A writer for the *Columbia Journal Review* in February 2017 declared the term dead. He wrote: 'Fake news, a term for a specific brand of media fabrication...died on Monday. It was less than a year old' (Uberti, 2017). This statement came days after Trump called leaks about his campaign's contact with Russia 'fake news'. Gladstone and Garfield (2017) suggest that the term is still in play. However, scholars and journalists seem to struggle to find a concrete definition for the term. The earliest scholarly definition of fake news post-2016 came from two Economics professors at Stanford University for

their work on its effect on the election. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow define fake news as ‘stories that have no factual basis but are presented as facts’ (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). *Politifact* defined fake news as ‘made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word’ (Holan, 2016). Finally, *The New York Times* ‘narrowly defined’ fake news as ‘a made-up story to deceive, often geared toward getting clicks’ (Tavernise, 2016). All these definitions have several differences. All agree on a basic definition that conceives fake news as including made-up content. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), additionally, make the definition include deception or manipulation instead of only lies presented as facts.

Additionally, *Politifact* and *The New York Times* limit fake news to online settings when it clearly can exist in other mediums. A feature of fake news not included in any of these definitions is fake news in hyper-partisan publications. Fake news has been dominant on Facebook pages that are incredibly biased towards one political ideology and pass off opinion pieces and fake news as real news. The goal of these pages is to play one side of the spectrum and enrage followers enough to share their content. Their secondary goal is to provoke a reader to click on the link, and their primary goal is to grow their audience and dominate newsfeeds with purely ideological headlines often based on little fact (Herrman, 2016).

It is important to note that fake news is not new. It has existed at least since before the Middle Ages. Utilised in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the *Donation of Constantine* is a well-known ruse of the Middle Ages that included a forged declaration from the Roman Emperor Constantine giving Pope Sylvester I spiritual power over all the churches, control of their property, and control of the Western Roman Empire (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the life of fake news is tied closely with the media standard of objectivity and fact-based reporting. Before objectivity and factual reporting, fake news was commonly spread in partisan publications. The Internet has significantly lowered the resources a person needs to create a news outlet. Newspapers and magazines need expensive printing presses and delivery methods. Radio needs the broadcasting rights to one of a limited number of stations, and television needs cameras, the technology

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to broadcast, and a channel. However, on the Internet, potential news outlets need very few resources. If the outlet uses a pre-existing web publishing platform like WordPress, the only cost is the labour necessary to write and post pieces and a cheap custom domain. With virtually non-existent financial barriers to entry, any outlet can publish content on the Internet where readers can consume it within minutes.

Fake news directly affects political discourse because it expands the debate by demanding responses to rumours, conspiracies, and lies. Fake news can easily affect anyone. After the Arab Spring of 2011, social media was perceived as a valuable and powerful device for mass activism and liberation movements (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). However, this enthusiasm took a left turn five years later when Donald Trump became president of the US (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The challenge here was with his obsession with publicising baseless or wildly exaggerated numbers on Twitter. The former president publicly claimed that 700 000 manufacturing jobs had been created during his term, whereas a *Politifact* fact-check found that the number was instead closer to 450 00 before the pandemic and a net loss of 237 00 owing to the pandemic-generated recession (CNN, 2020).

Furthermore, Trump spread an erroneous and risky claim that 99% of Covid-19 cases are ‘totally harmless’. He topped this with an unsubstantiated tweet on mail-in voting, falsely claiming that foreign countries would print these ballots (The MIT Press Reader, 2020). During his term, Trump openly unleashed a torrent of misinformation, and dismally his supporters undoubtedly believed in his lies.

## Fake News in Democratic Society Post-Covid-19

It has been argued, then, that social media and mainstream media post-Covid-19 can be politically biased, distort facts, and misinform the public to tap into the public mood at that time. This is especially true when influential leaders use this space to inform on pertinent state issues. Deliberative democracies require informed citizens who can distinguish between facts and falsehoods. Friedman (2010: 117) maintains that:

[T]he quality of democracy is, therefore, closely bound up with civil society's prospects. The more citizens are able, through organisations that are independent of government, to voice their needs and beliefs to other citizens and public decision-makers, the more public decisions are likely to become a consequence of a process in which the outcome reflects the voice of the majority that flows from that contest.

Otherwise, it becomes difficult to hold political leaders accountable for their actions and decision-making processes. Social media has possibly compromised actual reporting on real issues by publicising snippets of news from several accredited sources, interpreted and portrayed inaccurately (Wilding, Molitorisz, and McKewon, 2018). Since vast numbers of individuals in modern society have easy access to the Internet, social media has become a platform for many people to get updated with current news across the globe. In a survey conducted in Canada, two-fifths of respondents received their news from social media, specifically Facebook, whilst one-fifth of them collected their daily news from other non-traditional sources (Shearer and Matsa, 2018). The Pew Research Center (2021) reported that Facebook stands out as the number one news source for about a third of Americans. Furthermore, about half of the US adults from this survey said they got news from other social media outlets. This has proven problematic, considering the misleading information on these platforms about the recent 2020 election and the Covid-19 pandemic. What is more worrisome is that many Americans continue to rely on these sites for news (Shearer and Mitchell, 2021).

False news campaigns on social media are visible in the US, but they are on the rise in Europe and across

the developing world (Vaidyanathan, 2018). In the African context, these spaces have been criticised for undermining democracy during the two dozen national elections held in 2019 in the region. In Nigeria, candidate Atiku Abubakar was reported by Laretta Onochie, an aide to President Buhari, for allegedly handing out cash and food boxes at a political rally – 'Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts,' she wrote (BBC Africa, 2019). The photo was found to be two years old and was taken at an event organised by the Kokun Foundation. Facebook has arguably been a catalyst for coordinated misinformation campaigns. However, Facebook itself called out rival disinformation campaigns by the French and Russians to mislead and influence users in the Central African Republic ahead of the 2020–21 election (The Guardian, 2020). Facebook subsequently suspended several networks connected to organised fake misconduct.

In South Africa, 'fake news' has disturbed vaccination rollout: for example, Minister Blade Nzimande said, 'what complicates the fight against COVID-19 is that while people are facing the real threat of losing lives, fake news and misinformation are causing them to be paranoid, and to doubt the usefulness of vaccines and other public health interventions' (SA News, 2021). He urged South Africans to educate themselves more about the virus and avoid tagging along with 5G myths that have led to the destruction of cell phone towers in other parts of the country. As a result of these trends, Nanjira Sambuli, from the World Wide Web Foundation, argued that 'democracies are at risk on this continent, and unfortunately, social media platforms are fast becoming the sites of aggravation' (Madawo, 2019: 1; BBC News, 2019: 1).

On the one hand, the introduction of social media in Africa has brought many economic and political benefits. On the other, it has equipped terrorist groups with an instrument for recruitment and propaganda (Menkhaus, 2013; Cox, Marcellino, Bellasio, Ward, Galai, Meranto, Paoli, 2018). This is a challenge found hard to untangle because the opportunities brought by the digital age are commendable, particularly when it comes to intensifying citizen engagement in the political arena. The question is: how can these positives be reconciled with the unavoidable concept of 'digital authoritarianism'? For instance, Uganda was suddenly put under a complete Internet shutdown ahead of the East African nation's election in January

2021, Chad was restricted to a sixteen-month social media ban from March 2018 (Global Risk Insight, 2021), and only 11 of Africa's 54 states were classified as 'free' by Freedom House in 2018. The conceivable argument for such harsh regulations is to prevent the spread of 'fake news' and misinformation ahead of an election. Yet, freedom of speech, media and information is compromised.

African governments have often prohibited the media from reporting on the mismanagement of crises in the region. It is widely known that several African states have been struggling to handle the Covid-19 pandemic. The reasons stem from a lack of adequate medical equipment, under-developed healthcare facilities, and other financial strains. Similarly, it can be argued that the media and civil society have been silenced from reporting on the spread of the virus and governments' capacities to deal with it. In some governments' defence, it is possible to deliberately label legitimate news coverage on the coronavirus as 'fake news'. The alarming fact is that criminal charges have been laid against reporters asking critical questions about governments' handling of Covid-19 in some of these countries (Democracy Works Foundation, 2020).

Fake news, propaganda, and disinformation go against the true nature of civic popular participation and journalism in a democracy. The role of media and information contributes significantly to the sustainability of a good quality democracy, a political system that 'presents a stable institutional structure that realises the liberty and equality of citizens and that strives to satisfy citizen expectations through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms' (Morlino, 2004: 12; 2011: 195; Graham, 2015: 62). Fundamentally to the latter is an 'independent and pluralistic media of communication, and a vigorous network of voluntary associations of all kinds, through which citizens can act to manage their affairs and influence public policy' (Beetham, Carvalho, Landman, and Weir, 2008). These act as crucial agents to ensure the responsiveness of government policy and public oversight on service delivery, particularly in the peripheral areas of society.

Since its origin, journalism was created to serve people, to be a tool through which the populace could be aware of facts and be informed participants in the political

process. According to the American Press Institute, the purpose of journalism is to 'provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments' (Dean, 2013). The academic and activism spaces advocate for news literacy and generally go against sources outside the main networks (CNN, SkyNews, News24, eNCA, BBC, Al-Jazeera), prominent newspapers, and a few websites. However, former President Trump once posted a tweet exclaiming:

'I have asked Secretary of State @SecPompeo to closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers. 'South African Government is now seizing land from white farmers.'" (ABC News, 2018: 1)

Reading this tweet astounded most South Africans whilst thousands of users agreed that white farmers were indeed under attack. Less than 150 characters posted on social media coming from the president of the US account gave 'truth' to the lie that South Africa's white farmers have been facing genocide at the hands of South Africa's Black government: a lie that has become a rallying cry for the far-right, racists, and white nationalists worldwide. However, this is a debate for future research. The fact of the matter is that fake news is incredibly easy to spread on social media. The discussion on land expropriation is a minor issue in the grand scheme of things. To be sure, fake news is not only present in America and South Africa; it exists around the world.

In 2017, French voters were deluged with fake news stories on their social media feed just ahead of their presidential election. Interestingly enough, studies show that fake news in France came from sources exposed to Russian influences (Farand, 2017). Likewise, the German government was concerned that the then-upcoming elections were under threat due to the presence of fake news by 'a man who lives in Crimea' (Beuth, Brost, Dausend, Dobbert and Hamann, 2017). Fake news is a real threat to democracies, and it seems that it could potentially be used as a political weapon.

However, measures have been put in place to counter misinformation in various countries. In Asian states, spreading false news, especially false news related to

the Covid-19 pandemic, has been criminalised. The World Health Organisation enforced the EPIN-WIN fact-checking service and a health alert on WhatsApp and a chatbot on Facebook Messenger. The United Nations (UN) is also quite adamant about cutting down on 'fake news', and the union's development plan supports the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, which consists of 100 fact-checkers from over 45 countries in the International Fact-Checking Network (The Conversation, 2020).

### Some Suggested Solutions

There are several ways to mitigate fake news. Initially, Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook, asserted that fake news on Facebook did not affect the 2016 US presidential election (Zuckerberg, 2016). However, Facebook subsequently began tackling the problem. Facebook started asking users to rate the truthfulness of content (Robertson, 2016). Google has also taken similar steps to label search results and provides details on the fact check, unlike Facebook (Mantzaris, 2017). Both implementations seem to be successful since they put the onus for fact-checking on other sources and do not remove fake news stories.

The news media can also take steps to mitigate fake news. An easy step for the media to implement would be to run a side-by-side news analysis. Adding another analysis with a different (and perhaps opposing) viewpoint could make sceptical consumers trust reputable news sources more as they could find something they agreed with. A significant obstacle to tackle is that even though Google and Facebook can block fake news websites, and the news media can run side-by-side analysis, neither can definitively reduce fake news. Most people do not have the training to be sceptical of fake news. Education has to teach students news literacy as well as critical thinking skills. It is essential that consumers of media can recognise the difference between journalism and other kinds of information and between journalists and other information purveyors. Consumers must scrutinise the news that they consume on social media. Younger generations especially, considered digital natives, should be experts in using the Internet and social media. If we do not educate students on news literacy, the fake news problem will only get worse: digital natives will, in the coming decades, make up a majority of the voting population.

Social media platforms (news corporations, opinion leaders, influencers) should revise their systems approach, and instead of promoting the viral effect of unworthy content (to create monetised traffic) through social sharing and click-through rate, these platforms should promote content quality. The quality of content shared and engaged on should be incentivised more than viral and often untrue content. If this space follows this route, it could quickly spread the awareness of 'fake news' and share devices on how to spot misleading information. This same space can also gather independent professional reviewers who can make up a global digital fact-check network which can assist with labelling and sharing identified 'fake news' (alerting users to avoid content of a specific nature) and mainly focusing on breaking news on a global scale.

### Conclusion

Democracy not only requires but demands informed voters. Without literate news consumers, informed voters would not exist. Fake news went viral during the 2016 US presidential election because of social media and the Internet's lack of gatekeeping measures. These factors have made fake news a real danger to democracies because of its ability to impact debate. More research is needed to tie these specific theories and effects to fake news, but the connections are clear. Despite that, there are some early and asymmetrical but practical solutions; the most crucial of them is educating students in news literacy to help the future voting generation fight fake news. This will win the real oncoming battle before it begins.

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