Fake or False News?

How Can You Spot it?

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The term "fake or false news is one that has been used frequently since 2016 and is now quite commonplace. It has become a subject in its own right – it makes news and is written about in the news, and impacts upon society and particular groups such as those in the information sector, research or academia, journalism, communication etc.

Keywords

Introduction

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What is Fake News?

There is no clear or consistent definition of fake news, yet it is not a new phenomenon

(Allan et al, 2018 and Bennett, 2018). Fake stories have been around for a long time and the term false news is over 300 years old. For example in the English Civil War 1642–1651 both the Parliamentarians ("Roundheads") and Royalists ("Cavaliers") produced pamphlets making unfounded claims against the other side. King Charles the 2nd in 1674 issued 'A Proclamation to Restrain the Spreading of False News, and Licentious Talking of Matters of State and Government'.

The Collins English Dictionary defines fake news as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting" whilst the Cambridge English dictionary defines it as "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke" Clearly, many words are used to describe the concept from misinformation to propaganda, alternative facts – take your choice, but its function appears to be intended to misinform or influence the reader. Its content can include bias, be fabricated or may comprise elements of both fact and fiction.

In 1995 at a European G7 Ministerial Conference on the information society, the Chair concluded, "Progress in information technologies and communication is changing the way we live: how we work and do business, how we educate our children, study and do research, train ourselves, and how we are entertained. The information society is not only affecting the way people interact but it is also requiring the traditional organizational structures to be more flexible, more participatory and more decentralized" (European Commission, 1995). Since then we have seen the continuing development of the Internet and the emergence of email, social media, and other means of communicating and sharing information locally, nationally and globally (Goodair, 2015) These developments, of which fake news, is the most recent adds to

the challenges already faced by libraries, media, governments in managing the accuracy of information flow and access to verified sources.

Before the internet, it was much more expensive to distribute information, building up trust took years, and there were much simpler definitions of what constituted news and media, making regulation or self-regulation easier. Libraries and text books were key resources for all, from the journalist to the academic.

However, the rise of social media has broken down many of the boundaries that may have prevented fake news from spreading so quickly and to a wider audience. It is important to recognise that we do not only learn about the world through 'reliable and traditional sources'; we learn through a host of informational cues – street corner conversations, gossip, through signage and posters and abandoned newspapers in restaurants, in train carriages and through social media and email and text messages. Our common forms of communication today enable anyone to create and disseminate information, whether it is fact or fiction. Facebook and Twitter allow people to exchange information on a much greater scale than ever before, while publishing platforms like WordPress allow anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. Hence the obstacles to creating fake news have been done away with.

Whilst fake news is mentioned regularly in the media the actual prevalence of it is hard to estimate as evidence is hard to gather. For example Facebook have estimated that 60 million bots maybe infesting its platform, and by the simple acts of liking and sharing posts, social bots (automated accounts impersonating people) can magnify the spread of fake news (Emerging Technology, 2017).

What is it that drives fake news?

Clearly, since the invention of the printing press there have been political, economic and social motivations for creating fake or highly distorted news. Well known instances include Orson Welles 1938 adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel 'The War of the Worlds' broadcast on radio which used fake news flashes to convince listeners into thinking that Martians had landed at Grover's Hill New Jersey. (Wikipedia, 2018).

In the First World War – British Press, encouraged by the Government of the day published various false stories about German atrocities, an example of state-sponsored misinformation designed to influence public opinion. Recent political campaigns particularly, the American Presidential have become synonymous with More recently Silverman and Alexander in Buzzfeed an American news website articles reported the presence of commercially driven content in a where fake news is used by people to earn money from social media sites.

UK and European Actions

In the UK and Europe fake news has caused concern. The UK government in January 2018 announced a plan to establish a new unit to counter "fake news". A Downing Street spokesperson for UK Prime Minister Theresa May told journalists.

"We are living in an era of fake news and competing narratives. The government will respond with more and better use of national security communications to tackle these interconnected, complex challenges".

"We will build on existing capabilities by creating a dedicated national security communications unit. This will be tasked with combating disinformation by state actors and others. It will more systematically deter our adversaries and help us deliver on

national security priorities". (BBC News, Jan 23, 2018)

In January 2017 a UK Parliamentary Committee for Culture, Media and Sport established an inquiry into 'fake news': the growing phenomenon of widespread dissemination, through social media and the internet, and acceptance as fact of stories of uncertain provenance or accuracy. In June 2017 due to the general election the Committee completed this inquiry with a successor inquiry being re-established; 2017-19: Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee Fake news inquiry. In July 2018 the Committee published an Interim Report. The UK Government's response to this interim report has been disappointing -the Members of Parliament who worked on the UK's "fake news" inquiry are dismayed with the Government's response after it accepted only three of the 42 recommendations made (Walker, 2018).

At the same time the European Commission set up a High Level Expert Group (HLEG) to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake new and disinformation spread on line. (European Commission, 2018).

The HLEG recommended that a "Code of Practice" be issued that commits online platforms and advertisers to take a number of measures to prevent fake news being both uploaded and disseminated "with a view to producing measurable effects by the end of 2018". In September 2018 representatives of online platforms and the advertising industry presented their individual roadmaps on how they would implement the self-regulatory Code of Practice on online disinformation. These roadmaps include actions showing that platforms plan to extend their tools against disinformation to all EU Member States ahead of the EU elections.

The European Commission in early 2018 commissioned a Flash Eurobarometer survey on Fake News and Online Disinformation. The aim was to measure the perceptions and concerns of 26.576 European citizens around fake news. Early results indicated that fake news exists across the EU with 83% of respondents believing that fake news represent a danger to democracy and in the view of respondents' journalists (45%), national authorities (39%) and the press and broadcasting management (36%) should be the main responsible for stopping the spread of fake news. (European Commission, 2018).

What is the Information Sector's Perspective?

Libraries as we know them today are collections of books, journals, electronic resources, databases and other sources of information for people to use for business, leisure, education, research etc. Social media is a tool that many libraries use to disseminate information on a regular basis. Librarians in their training are taught to verify sources and evaluate information so that they can provide users with verified sources and reliable information.

The key issue for the library and information sector is how to apply that training to fake news. However, this does raises questions such as what is the role of an arbiter of information and how independent can you be? What does a library service do when users complain about books or resources being bought or not because they do not fit with users' viewpoint or accuse the service of censorship? And this can apply to posts on any form of social media.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has been active on the role libraries have in digital literacy and in its Statement on Digital Literacy (2017) it describes the contribution of libraries and

librarians in helping individuals harness the potential of digital tools such as using online services, internet searching, podcasts, social media and so on.

With growing awareness of fake news IFLA in 2018 issued the following statement

> *The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is deeply concerned about the phenomenon of 'fake news', and in particular the policy responses that aim to address it. This statement contains recommendations to governments and libraries, and will be accompanied by a toolkit of resources.*

As IFLA States 'Libraries have an institutional and ethical commitment to help users access reliable and authentic information. This role is as important as ever in an era when "fake news" is a seemingly growing phenomenon. At the individual level, active library efforts to build relevant media and information literacy can also help support citizens to evaluate critically the credibility and appropriateness of information source.'

At a political level it called on Governments to

- Refrain from passing laws which will have a disproportionate impact on freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, notably through broadly or vaguely defined 'bans' of 'fake news', or other restrictions of access to digital resources and the Internet.
- Ensure that Internet platform regulation does not create incentives to restrict free speech in an unwarranted fashion.
- Show restraint in referring to "fake news" to avoid legitimising it as an excuse for censorship. (IFLA August 2018)

This call was approved, along with other points about information literacy, freedom of speech and other related issues, by the IFLA

Council in August 2018 so it is too early to say if it has had any impact (IFLA Statement on Fake News, 2018). As IFLA state 'Critical thinking is a key skill in media and information literacy, and the mission of libraries is to educate and advocate its importance. Discussions about fake news has led to a new focus on media literacy more broadly, and the role of libraries and other education institutions in providing this.'

To assist libraries and educational establishments IFLA produced an infographic, available in many languages, on how to spot fake news (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. IFLA Infographic on fake news

Research Libraries UK (RLUK) is a consortium of thirty seven key research libraries in the UK and Ireland. The main aim of RLUK is to shape the research library agenda, and contribute to the wider knowledge economy through innovative projects and services. RLUK submitted evidence to the UK Parliamentary

Fake News Inquiry commenting upon the role of libraries and information literacy, and access to information as a human right. Libraries in their view have a key role in defending truth and helping users discriminate between reality and lies.

> *Libraries have long had a key role in educating people how to use all types of information. These include developing information and media literacy, and digital literacy skills. Libraries support people to critically examine and evaluate information, and to evidence their learning and knowledge including citations. RLUK member libraries, and libraries across higher education in the UK offer training in these skills to researchers, students and staff. The need to increase investment in ensuring everyone has information literacy skills has never been greater. Everyone must be empowered to make informed decisions through access to information and skills, as outlined in the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development to which RLUK is a signatory*

> *(Research Libraries UK, 2018).*

The UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals information literacy group working with INFORM, an independent research consultancy that promotes the importance and benefits of information literacy, submitted evidence to the fake news inquiry. Their submission focused on the need for education and discussed the question 'How can we educate people in how to assess and use different sources of news?'

"A major part of any solution is a much greater emphasis on the teaching of critical thinking in secondary schools. These abilities do not currently feature prominently in the curriculum, and there is much evidence to suggest that school-students are ill-equipped

when evaluating the information that they are confronted with. The findings of a very recent, large-scale study in the US showed that "overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak. Our "digital natives" may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped" (Stanford, 2016). Poor habits picked up in early years deserve to be addressed, before they become ingrained for life. In the UK, Ofcom (of which more below) reported that, "28% of 8-11s and 27% of 12-15s assume that if Google lists a website then they can trust it" (Ofcom 2016). Ofcom in 2015 also found that 10% of children believe information they find on social media to be 'all true', the previous survey found that only 4% held this belief - a 150% rise on the previous year (Shenton, Pickard, 2014). A number of initiatives have emerged to address the issue in UK secondary school settings. One example is the Evaluating Online Information and Sources booklet and its Proforma Tool11 (understanding the trusting self), which are means for developing an agile, personal model of information literacy. This tool, devised in 2014, has been used in schools at various levels and was recently re-tested on sixth formers with excellent results (Walton et al, 2016). This tool led to a transformation in student behaviour and thinking from passive recipients of online information to active questioners of everything they read. Research associated with the deployment of the tool not only shows that people have varying capabilities (from very high to very low) to discern information but also that this capability can be increased with the appropriate teaching and support" (InformALL & CILIP, 2018).

It is accepted that academic Libraries have a commitment to their users to provide high quality, accurate information resources, however there are issues and problems that Rick Anderson the Associate Dean for Collections and Scholarly Communication J. Willard Marriot Library University of Utah explores the five problems that academic libraries grapple with – these are in his view

Problem No. 1: 'truth' and the academy

Problem No. 2: inevitable selectivity

Problem No. 3: selecting and promoting interpretations

Problem No. 4: the necessity of studying lies

Problem No. 5: What does 'alternative' mean

And he states "As is so often the case, the problem of fake news appears simple on the surface but becomes more complex and treacherous the more one tries to engage with it. Where does all of this leave us, as librarians, with regard to our responsibility towards our patrons and the larger polity? (Anderson, 2017).

Conclusion

Whilst the issue of fake or false news is debated in the media and at governmental levels it is hoped that through these discussions that the contribution of libraries, and other educational establishments in providing training and resources on information literacy is recognized and built upon.

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