

Political "Fake News" on Social Media: Factors Surrounding Its Spread and Influence

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ABSTRACT

The idea of “fake news” has become a powerful influence politically, much of it spreading via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. No widely accepted definition of “fake news” has emerged as of yet. This study tries to understand how registered voters in Oklahoma are experiencing this phenomenon and what effect it may be having on their political beliefs - using a triangulation of observations, interviews, and a focus group approach. Overall, this study indicates that voters recognize the proliferation of “fake news” on social media and its negative effects, yet do not know how to quantify or address it. While lack of fact-checking and misplaced trust in others was seen as the reason many people unwittingly spread “fake news”, there was a clear belief that being fooled by “fake news” was something that happened to other people.

KEYWORDS

Information behavior, social media, fake news, elections.

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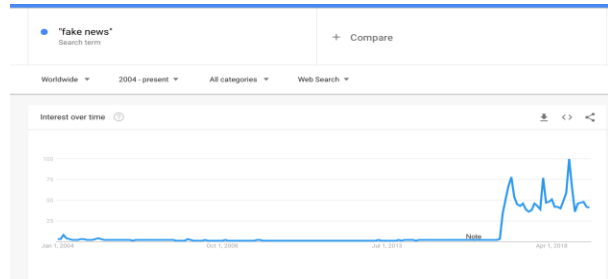
Information science; Information behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of “fake news” has become a powerful influence politically, much of it spreading via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. However, within the information science field we do not understand exactly what “fake news” is or how it spreads, much less what to do to combat it. This research represents an exploratory study to learn more about “fake news,” how registered voters experience it on social media, and what measures they would support to stop it. Although present in Google searches as early as 2004 (Figure 1), the term “fake news” spiked in 2016 during the U.S. presidential election (Allcott, Braghieri, Eichmeyer, & Gentzkow, 2019; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). This qualitative study is designed

Figure 1. Google Trends on "Fake News" in US, 2004 - 2019

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to collect information on how Oklahoma voters experience “fake news” on social media, understand the impact they believe it is having on voters’ behavior, and determine what type of interventions they would support to reduce it. Participants were individuals from both main political parties, with men and women in almost equal numbers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon has been studied most frequently in the fields of journalism and communication, possibly because those are the fields most directly affected by the negative connotation. Though no widely accepted definition of “fake news” has emerged to date, we might begin by clarifying what “fake news” is not. For example, the term does not encompass satirical news sites such as The Onion or The Daily Currant (Berghel, 2017). Neither is it simply a news item that is inaccurate. In many cases, “fake news” refers to “news that one community considers to be ‘fake’ so that one

Figure 2. "Fake News" Articles Published By Discipline



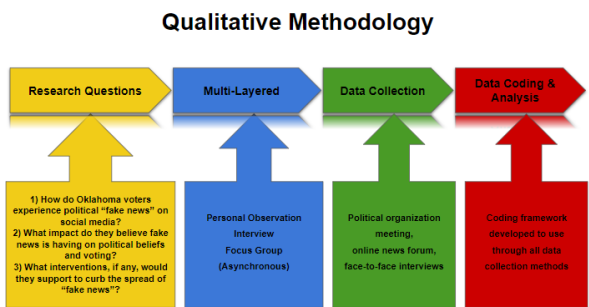
community's 'real news' is another community's 'fake news' with claims and counterclaims repeatedly asserted in spiraling regress” (Cybenko & Cybenko, 2018). In general, “fake news” can be defined as “distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Other broad

definitions emphasize the falsehood inherent in “fake news.” For example, Bakir and McStay (2018) say it is “either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context,” and Lazer, et al. (2018) say it is “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.” Sharma, et al. (2019) have outlined various types of “fake news”: totally fabricated content, misleading framing of information, content presented under false sources, manipulated information or imagery, false connections made between headlines, visuals, or captions with associated content.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach to studying “fake news” was taken in order to understand more fully how registered voters are experiencing this phenomenon and what effect it may be having on their political beliefs. Registered voters in the U.S. state of Oklahoma were selected as the sample population, and participants were residents of the southwest, central, or northwest sections of the state. Data was collected in three different ways: observations, interviews, and a focus group (Figure 1). This triangulation of data collection provided a larger sampling for data analysis. All notes and transcripts were coded using a framework developed specifically for this project in order to answer the three research questions: How do Oklahoma voters experience “fake news” on social media?; What impact do they believe fake news is having on political beliefs and voting?; and What interventions, if any, would they support to curb the spread of “fake news?”

Figure 3. Methodology



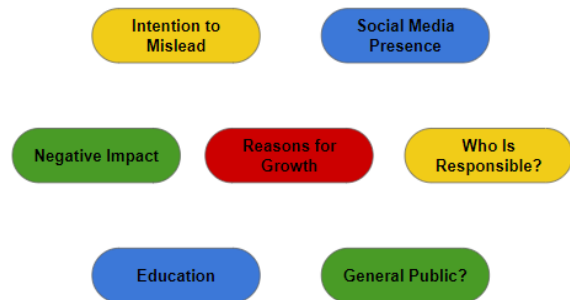
FINDINGS

After coding all of the data and analyzing it for patterns, seven key findings emerged. (See Figure 4). First, the participants believed that “fake news” is something intended to mislead people, but the degree of falseness varied widely, from small inconsistencies to outrageously false stories. Second, though sure “fake news” appears in social media, participants were unsure of its quantity or frequency. Third, participants exhibited a strong belief that “fake news” has negatively influenced political beliefs and voting in Oklahoma. Fourth, lack of fact-checking and unquestioning belief in information shared by trusted others were most often considered the reasons “fake news” was spread. Fifth, participants feel social media platforms are to the blame for the problem of “fake news” with the media in general

holding some responsibility as well. Sixth, in response to what actions should be taken to curb the spread of “fake news”, participants strongly recommended education efforts targeted at elementary through college aged students. And lastly, the participants were unsure how to educate the general public regarding the problem of “fake news”.

Figure 4. Findings

DISCUSSION



Overall, this study indicates that Oklahoma voters recognize the proliferation of “fake news” on social media and its negative effects, yet do not know how to quantify or address it. While lack of fact-checking and misplaced trust in others was seen as the reason many people unwittingly spread “fake news”, there was a clear belief that being fooled by “fake news” was something that happened to other people. No participants admitted to being fooled by “fake news.”

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