Bella Marbaise

Dr. Gin

ENGL 1010—33

14 November 2020

<p style="text-align:center">Fake and Filthy: How Social Media has Ruined American Elections</p>

You've just turned 18 and have registered to vote in the 2016 election. A few days before you head to the polls to vote, you are scrolling on Facebook and a 1998 *People* magazine interview resurfaces on your feed: it's about Republican candidate Donald Trump. You have grown up in a house divided with one of your parents being more liberal on the political spectrum, while the other parent is more conservative. While he may not be your favorite candidate, you like some aspects of his proposed platform. You click on the interview to hear what he has to say because you want to be an informed voter. In the interview, Donald Trump is quoted saying, "If I were to run, I'd run as a Republican. They are the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox news. I could lie and they'd still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific" (Solon). After reading, you are in shock that he could ever have said such a thing and do not care to double check if this is real or not. You have already made up your mind that you will not be voting for him because of what he supposedly said in 1998.

The truth is that Trump did not say this, but *People* magazine stated he did. Facebook is now faced with a dilemma because *People* magazine has been allowed to share this falsified interview on their platform, upsetting users. Their current "business model" is based around the idea that "the truth of a piece of content is less important than whether it is shared, liked and monetized," so Facebook lets the interview stay (Solon). This is not an uncommon occurrence with the platform Facebook and many other social media platforms like Twitter. Accounts,

whether they are operated by regular users or established magazines like *People*, are allowed to post and report news articles that could be true, slightly false, or completely fabricated. This issue was seen to be prevalent in the 2016 Election with the heavy reliance on social media platforms to spread politically motivated, fake news stories to sway voters. Thinking about fake news and its intertwining with social media and the democratic process of voting, does viewing falsified information or news affect voters and what candidate they choose to vote for in presidential elections?

Following his campaign and election in 2016, President Trump claimed to have coined the term "fake news." While this is false, the term that he believes is "one of the greatest of all terms [he has] come up" may be the reason that he was elected President in 2016 (Kirtley). Any information shared, regardless of its platform, is supposed to be objective and be representative of the facts without any biases that could distort the truth. This is where the issue of fake news becomes tricky due to a personal judgement of if something is fake or real. While "a free press should tell the truth," there are questions as to "[w]hat is the truth? Who decides what is true? And who should compel the press to 'tell the truth'" (Kirtley). It becomes a slippery slope attempting to answer these questions, but there are ways to tell if something that has been shared is in fact provably false.

Since the 2016 election, it has been proven that there was an array of fake news spread on a variety of platforms, including Facebook, to try and hijack the election to shift it toward favoring Trump. In his testimony before the Senate in 2018, the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, admitted that some "126 million Americans were shown Russian-backed, politically-oriented fake news stories" and that "Russia-based operatives published about 80,000 posts on the social network over a two year period in an effort to sway U.S. politics"

("Facebook"). Russia also employed bots during the 2016 election to spread falsified information on a variety of platforms like Facebook and Twitter and to engage with users and hopefully convince them to vote in a certain way. Since this testimony, Facebook has faced heavy scrutiny for their actions towards remedying this issue. This issue is not just limited to the 2016 election. Even with the 2020 election, "Russia is using social media to try to undermine the U.S. presidential election, only with more sophisticated tools" like "information laundering" and creating "phony websites" that hire American journalists to write stories without knowing who they are working for (Myre and Bond). The spread of fake news, especially before an election, can potentially affect how voters view the candidates; media platforms need to take substantial steps to curb the spread of fake news on their respective platforms by placing fact-check warnings on posts that could contain falsified information, banning accounts that are frequent posters or sharers of fake news media, and/or utilizing algorithms to ensure user legitimacy.

During the 2016 presidential election and to this day, the phrase fake news seems to circulate on social media and various news platforms to describe "fabricated stories presented as if from legitimate sources" (Pennycook, et al., 4944). However, this concept dates back to the origins of the printing press in 1439. The invention of the printing press allowed for freedom of the press that would "advance knowledge and create a more informed public" (Mansky). While John Adams might not have used the word fake news, he often disagreed with many of the things posted about him and was noted to have "cried that the freedom of the press had been interpreted as the freedom to print every Thing that is Libelous and Slanderous" (Manksy).

 In 1791, the First Amendment was passed under the Bill of Rights to constitutionally guarantee freedom of speech, including speech via the press. This same pro-free speech debate under the protection of the First Amendment continues to this day with the publishing of fake

news articles on social media platforms. "Those deceptive articles" are "protected under the First Amendment and international free expression safeguards. Unless they cross specific legal red lines -- such as those barring defamation or libel -- fake news stories are not illegal, and our government does not have the power to prohibit or censor them" ("The Pro-Free").

The development and growth of social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, allowed for the publishing of news articles, otherwise considered fake, to their users' feeds. Since the government has no legal right to censor these platforms, the accountability for censoring the fake news posts lies on the social media companies. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, in their article, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," claim that from the earliest "cheap newsprint" to the more recent social media, "content can be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment" (211). While they argue that there is a significant value of social media for the spread of political news and information, they gear their article toward exploring how fake news makes it "more difficult for consumers to infer the true state of the world--for example, by making it more difficult for voters to infer which electoral candidate they prefer" through shifting the narrative to favor one candidate over the other (Allcott and Gentzkow 211). To back up this statement, they confirm in their article that "fake news was both widely shared and heavily tilted in favor of Donald Trump," with data that shows that "115 pro-Trump fake stories" were "shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories" were "shared a total of 7.6 million times" (Allcott and Gentzkow 211).

After the 2016 election and the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States, three Ohio State University scientists wanted to "explore whether people who might have changed their votes from Democrat to Republican were affected by fake news" ("The Danger").

Their theory was that people who voted for Obama in 2012 would have voted for Hillary in 2016 unless something, like fake news, was able to change their mind. The findings showed that out of the group of voters who voted for Obama in 2012, 77% voted for Hillary, while 10% voted for Trump and the other 13% either did not vote or voted for a third-party candidate ("The Danger"). All voters were asked to rate how much they believed in three false statements that had been previously spread by fake news media. The three statements were that Hillary Clinton's health was poor during 2016, the Pope endorsed President Trump, and that as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton sold weapons to Islamic jihadists like ISIS ("The Danger"). Their research found that 89% of voters who believed none voted for Hillary, while only 61% of voters who believed one of the statements and 17% of the voters who believed two or three voted for Hillary ("The Danger"). This research supports the argument that hearing or engaging with fake news can sway voters. As the research concluded, "if these percentages of voters--even 17% of former Obama supporters- had voted for Clinton in the states that went from Blue to Red in 2016, instead, it would have changed the outcome of the election" ("The Danger").

The idea of "alternative facts" is one of the major opposition points to the argument that social media companies have the responsibility to censor their platforms In their article, "Alternative Facts, Misinformation, and Fake News," Vincent Hendricks and Maads Vestergaard examine and back-up Kellyanne Conway's proposed "alternative facts." On the day of Trump's inauguration in 2017, a topic of debate was if the crowd at Trump's inauguration was larger than the crowd at Obama's first inauguration. As Trump and the Trump administration claimed, the crowd "was the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe," but this was proven false by comparing photo evidence from the inauguration of Trump in 2017 and Obama in 2009 (Hendricks and Vestergaard 50). After Sean Spicer

attacked the press for their purposeful wrong reporting regarding the size of the crowd, Kellyanne Conway defended Spicer by saying that his statements were "neither a lie nor a falsehood; rather, Spicer was conveying 'alternative facts,'" because "[The White House] can disagree with the facts" (Hendricks and Vestergaard 50).

Kellyanne Conway's argument to the controversy of the spread of fake news, is that there are sometimes "alternative facts" that can deny and disagree with actual, true facts. With this belief, it is likely to assume that Kellyanne Conway would disagree with Facebook and other social platforms deliberately censoring any news articles or posts that seem to be falsified because they could just be containing "alternative facts." Her concept of "alternative facts" is backed by the idea that facts and truths are "difficult to establish" (Hendricks and Vestergaard 52). While the world of journalism has an "obligation" to "the truth," and that "journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account" and try to be "as transparent as possible," truths can change and "scientific truth is tentative" (Hendricks and Vestergaard 53). It seems that Hendricks and Vestergaard would agree with Kellyanne Conway that media companies should not censor their platforms in regards to fake news, because the concept of fake news is objective. One person might believe what is written in an article branded fake news, but that does not mean they are right in their views, just like the other people who do not agree with what is written are not justified in their views either. Thus, media companies have no right to censor or place fact-check warnings on these posts because they do not contain fake facts, they contain "alternative facts."

Many articles have established the idea that something needs to be done about the fake news stories that are being allowed to be posted to and rapidly shared on social media platforms like Facebook. However, there is an argument over what this censorship should look like. In their article, "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake News Headlines

Increases Perceived Accuracy of Headlines Without Warnings," Gordon Pennycook, Adam Bear, Evan Collins, and David Rand argue that the placing of fact-checking warnings on posts that could contain fake news is not effective because "when attempting to fight misinformation using warnings, it is necessary for some third party to examine every new piece of information and either verify or dispute it. Given that it is much easier to produce misinformation than to assess its accuracy, it is almost certain that only a fraction of all misinformation will be successfully tagged with warnings" (Pennycook, et al. 4945). They found that a "political consequence of such a warning: an 'implied truth' effect whereby false headlines that fail to get tagged are considered validated and thus are seen as more accurate," (Pennycook, et al. 4945).

The argument that these three authors make is that some fake news stories will be tagged with headlines, while others may never be tagged, which means that the stories that are not tagged, due to the failure of a platform to recognize them as false or the failure of a third-party fact checking system to find them, are generally accepted by consumers. When users read articles or news stories on a platform like Facebook, the headline is generally what draws them in. If they begin to see fact-check warnings on some, they might not click on those, which is the purpose of the warning. However, there will undoubtedly be stories that miss the tagging and thus users will just generalize that since an article or story does not have the warning they have seen on some, it must be true. Their article is saying that social media companies should do nothing to combat the issue, but rather companies should steer away from placing fact-check warnings on posts unless they are able to ensure that every post that could contain misinformation is tagged by a third-party fact checker.

After the 2016 presidential election, there was an outbreak of "public concern" about fake news spreading prolifically on social media (Grinberg, et al. 374). There were "initial reports that

were alarming because they showed that "the most popular fake news stories in the last 3 months of the presidential campaign generated more shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook than the top real new stories" (Grinberg, et al. 374) After hearing of these initial reports, Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, and Briony Swire-Thompson were inspired to conduct research on three central questions, "(i) How many stories from fake news sources did individuals see and share on social media? (ii) What were the characteristics of those who engaged with these sources? (iii) How did these individuals interact with the broader political news ecosystem" (Grinberg, et al. 374). While their findings showed that "only 1% of individuals accounted for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared," it was concerning to know that the "veracity of information on social media" could have an "impact on voters in the 2016 U.S. presidential election" (Grinberg, et al. 374).

While the results of this research show that the spread of fake news was not as widespread as formerly believed, the authors acknowledge that each social media platform needs to "reduce the spread of misinformation" and they give different ideas of how respective platforms could do this. The authors believe that different media platforms could find ways to "discourage users from following or sharing content" that is from previously established sources that are known to share fake news (Grinberg, et al. 377). Another resolution to the issue could be "adopt[ing] policies that disincentivize frequent posting, which would be effective against flooding techniques" (Grinberg, et al. 377). This would mean that social media companies would need to employ algorithms that deactivate or delete accounts who post lots of content since many accounts, political or not, that share fake news stories are doing so at high quantities. The authors also mention the use of partnering with different third-party fact checkers to "proactively watch

top producers of misinformation and examine content from new sites that emerge in the vicinity of fake news sources in a co exposure network" (Grinberg, et al. 377).

Even if the proven spread of fake news over Facebook and Twitter was smaller than originally thought, the threat of fake news causing voters to vote for a different candidate still stands and must be resolved. As seen in the 2016 election, even the slightest spread of fake news could have potentially persuaded voters to vote for the favored candidate, Donald Trump. While this statement might be hard to prove, it does not matter which candidate the fake news was established to favor. Regardless of if the fake news was meant to deter voters from voting for Hillary Clinton and persuade voters to instead vote for Donald Trump in 2016, social media companies have allowed the issue to continue since 2016, and it could now potentially affect the outcome of 2020 election and elections following. Due to the freedom of the press as protected under the First Amendment in the United States Constitution and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act that protects freedom of expression on the internet specifically, the controversy concerning the censorship of fake news has caused major uproar. I believe that media companies should be held accountable for their platforms being used to spread fake news especially fake news in regards to Presidential candidates before an election. While the developers of these platforms did not create these platforms to be used in this way, their platforms have been wrongfully exploited, and they must find ways to solve this issue.

I do agree that the issue of fake news is more complex than it seems because people are entitled to their own opinions and judgments of a piece of information. There is not a universal opinion that everyone must hold toward any number of topics. However, if something is published that can obviously be proven false, there is no leeway on opinion. As Kellyanne Conway stated, there might be "alternative facts," to any information that either the press did not

release or have been discovered since publishing that could change the way the piece is viewed. I

agree with this sentiment, but news reports like Hillary Clinton's health was poor during her

2016 campaign or Pope Francis endorsed Trump are blatantly false, and there are no "alternative

facts" to support those statements because they are flat-out lies.

I believe that any information posted regarding any aspect of American politics, whether

it be about the candidates in general, the candidate's platforms, or other aspects of the

presidential election, should all undergo a third-party fact checking system. While Pennycook,

Bear, and Rand explored the Implied Truth Effect and the potential danger of placing fact-check

warnings on posts, I believe that the fact-check warnings do more harm than good. I have already

seen Twitter and Instagram implement this tagging on some of their posts, including the

President's posts, to guide users to real facts. This can be seen in one of the President's tweets

from May 26, where he tweeted a lengthy post about his views on mail-in ballots and how they

will lead to a fraudulent election. Twitter tagged the tweet with an exclamation point with text

that read, "Get the facts about mail-in ballots" with an external link. As Pennycook, Bear, and

Rand mentioned, there will certainly be posts that go unnoticed and untagged by these third party

fact-checkers, unless there is an improvement to their system that can show that they are able to

tag 100% of all posts that may contain or do contain misinformation. However, I do not think we

should let the slim chance of some posts not being tagged deter us from tagging posts as a whole.

By tagging posts with fact-checking warnings, social media platforms have the capacity to alert

users to accounts on the platforms or external new sources that could be sharing misinformation

in a ploy to misinform and misdirect voters in a politically-oriented demeanor. Thus, social

media platforms would be taking accountability for any possible sources of misinformation,

without having to place strict guidelines that could conflict with the First Amendment right to free speech or Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act.

Alternative methods to placing fact-check warnings are banning accounts or creating algorithms to ensure user legitimacy. As Grinberg's article suggested, social media platforms could begin to ban accounts if it seems that a large majority of their posts or all of their posts contain some sort of misinformation. By banning these accounts, platforms like Facebook and Instagram would be taking a step past just placing fact-checking warnings, because the posts as a whole would be removed. A warning might stop a user from advancing or caution them before they open, but banning these accounts would eliminate any chance of exposure to fake news. While this is a large step, it could come with flaws. Many accounts could be regular users that are just expressing their right to free speech and could see Facebook banning them as a limit on their freedom of speech, which could backfire on Facebook. However, Facebook would need to have harvested lots of data from the specific accounts, not just one occurrence of the account sharing fake news, to rightly justify their banning of the account. Facebook might even need to change some of their user policies and have users agree to being banned if they are seen to frequently share or post fake news. The last method could be creating algorithms that can detect real accounts from bot accounts. During the 2016 election, Russia was seen to utilize bot accounts to spread fake news stories, so Facebook and other similar platforms could develop a way to detect if the account is being run by a human or by a bot through advanced algorithms. If a bot account is detected, then Facebook could automatically ban that account. This would ensure user legitimacy which would help to prevent foreign threats, like Russia, from hacking into media platforms like Facebook and spreading false information to voters.

The controversy at hand of fake news is much more complex than I originally believed. When I began my research, I believed that the volume and extent of the spread of fake news that occurred prior to the 2016 presidential election was substantially greater than what I actually found. I held the belief that the spread of fake news was largely the reason that Donald Trump was elected President because of the negative press and information that was leaked either through Wikileaks or other social media platforms about Hillary Clinton. One interesting idea I found was that the majority of fake news was shared or reposted by older conservatives. While I did not believe this would add much to the argument, it would be interesting to look at the distribution of which political party tends to share more fake news. While research has shown that fake news might not have as large of an impact as originally thought, I have become more interested in this issue and its resolution. Like most freshmen and a good majority of the student-body at Tulane, I am also a first-time voter. The issue of fake news circulating before an election is that it can potentially influence who I vote for, like it did for the newly-registered voter in 2016 after he heard a fake quote that was attributed to Trump. As an avid user of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, it is possible that I am exposed to fake news if it is circulating prior to when I vote. Even if the chance of being exposed to fake news on social media is quite low, media companies should still tag posts with fact-check warnings, place a ban on accounts that are seen to post or share large volumes of fake news directly or external links to fake news articles, and develop algorithms that can ensure user legitimacy to rule out potential bot accounts so that our presidential elections here in the United States have no chance of being corrupted by fake news media.

Works Cited

Allcott, Hunt and Gentzkow, Matthew. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election."

Journal of Economic Perspectives, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 212- 236. *American*

Economic Association, doi: 10.1257/jep.31.2.211. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

 "Facebook Says Russia-backed Election Content Reached 126 million Americans." *CNBC*, 30

Oct 2017. www.cnbc.com/2017/10/30/facebook-says-russia-backed-election

-content-reached-126-million-americans.html. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Grinberg, Nir, et al. "Fake News on Twitter During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election." *Science*

(New York, N.Y.), vol. 363, no. 6425, 2019, pp. 374-378, doi: 10.1126/science.aau2706.

Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Hendricks, Vincent and Vestergaard, Mads. "Alternative Facts, Misinformation, and Fake

News." *Reality Lost*, 2018, pp. 49-77. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00813-0_4. Accessed

14 Nov 2020.

Kirtley, Jane. "Getting to the Truth: Fake News, Libel Laws, and 'Enemies of the American

People.'" *American Bar.* www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_

rights_magazine_home/the-ongoing-challenge-to-define-free-speech/getting-to-the-truth/.

Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Mansky, Jackie. "The Age-Old Problem of 'Fake News.'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, 7 May 2018,

www.smithsonianmag.com/history/age-old-problem-fake-news-180968945/. Accessed

14 Nov 2020.

Myre, Greg and Bond, Shannon. "'Russia Doesn't Have to Make Fake News': Biggest Election

Threat Is Closer to Home." *NPR*, 29 Sep 2020, www.npr.org/2020/09/29/917725209/

russia-doesn-t-have-to-make-fake-news-biggest-election-threat-is-closer-to-home.

Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

Pennycook, Gordon, et al. "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake

News Headlines Increases Perceived Accuracy of Headlines Without Warnings."

Management Science, 2020, pp. 4944-4957. doi:10.1287/mnsc.2019.3478. Accessed 14

Nov 2020.

Solon, Olivia. "Facebook's Failure: Did Fake News and Polarized Politics Get Trump Elected?"

The Guardian, 10 Nov 2016, www.theguardian.com/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-

election-conspiracy-theories. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.

"The Danger of Fake News to Our Election." *Center for Information Technology and Society at

UC Santa Barbara*. www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/danger-election. Accessed 14 Nov

2020.

"The Pro-Free Speech Way to Fight Fake News." *Pen America: The Freedom to Write.*

https://pen.org/press-clip/pro-free-speech-way-fight-fake-news/. Accessed 14 Nov 2020.