The age of the artificial; the proliferation of 'fake'

By Molly Fitz-Patrick , issued by Red & Yellow   3 Sep 2019

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A threat to democracy, discourse, to truth; 'fake news' has become the buzzword of the last few years. Popularised by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential race, now we see and hear it everywhere. Worse still, we experience it all too often. From misleading clickbait headlines, phoney reviews, worthless 'influencers' to chilling Deepfake technology; misinformation seems to be a hallmark of our times. But, take a glance at history, and you'll discover that it's been with us since the beginning.

The origins of fake news

While many of us fret about the pervasiveness of fake news in 2019, it's been used to sway public opinion, squash resistance and promote or discredit movements for centuries, we just know it by the name 'propaganda'.

During the final war of the Roman Republic, **Octavian used fake news to defeat Mark Antony**. The empire was on the verge of collapse after a century of civil war. Octavian, who would later become Augustus Caesar, started a propaganda campaign against Antony. He managed to get his hands on what was meant to be Anthony's official will and testament and spread it far and wide. Filled with incendiary claims that painted Mark Antony as a traitor, Rome turned against him and his lover, Cleopatra.

Propaganda played a huge role in pushing the Nazi agenda in World War II. There are, thankfully, harmless instances of fake news too. The obvious one is **The Onion**, a satirical "news" site. The difference here, however, is that the intention is to entertain, not to push sales or change opinions.

In 1835, Richard Adams Locke, the editor of the *New York Sun* devised a sneaky, yet creative way to sell more papers. Well-known British astronomer, John Herschel, was in South Africa conducting observations - Locke saw an opportunity to boost his revenue. He fabricated a series of newspaper reports describing extraordinary sights Herschel witnessed when he pointed his telescope towards the Moon; enormous man-bats, goat-like creatures with blue skin and a temple made of sapphires. Newspaper sales shot up, and given that the only means of communication were letters, Locke knew that it would take weeks to be discovered. This kind of 'fake news' still exists (don't forget to check out **The Onion**), although it's very rarely believed. Real fake news presents a far greater danger.

FAKE NEWS!

The Locke's of today have had to get a lot more creative. While he just wanted to sell more papers, many writers and distributors of fake news want to exploit your emotions for their gain, whether personal or political. We're living in a world of **'post-truth' (Oxford's 2016 word of the year)** politics, 'misinformation' and 'alternative facts'. None of these terms are new - their use (or misuse) have just sky-rocketed over the past few years. Many of us attribute them to Donald Trump. This evaluation isn't wrong; as mentioned, it was during the 2016 US presidential campaign that these terms became pervasive. His habit didn't tail off after he was elected either, **an NPR analysis of his tweets** found that he sent out 46 tweets

containing the words 'fake' or 'phoney' in August 2018, breaking his previous record.

> *There are countless examples, both harmless and malicious, of fake news. The term has become so overused that we tend to roll our eyes when we hear it. It's become the catch-all term used to discredit any and all kinds of stories. But the instances of false information and stories have exploded over the last few years. The situation has been exacerbated, naturally, by the free nature of social media. Anyone can publish, share, credit or discredit if they so feel. But news media publications, sites and shows are also guilty of spreading misinformation, tricked by the seeming plausibility of a story. But why? Are we intellectually lazy, gullible or blinded by our biases (political, social etc.)? Psychologists and other social scientists are looking into it, but haven't reached a consensus yet. There are two schools of thought: 1.) we're prone to rationalisation and 2.) we're mentally lazy.*

To demonstrate the real peril of fake news, a **Buzzfeed News** analysis revealed that "In the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post*, NBC News, and others." It's alarming to think that false stories are more likely to be shared just because they have provocative headlines that play into our emotions and/or political leanings.

Another story that highlights the potential danger of fake news is one that happened in Germany. A story about a young girl of Russian origin that had been raped by refugees from the Middle East was circulated widely on social media and covered by Russian and German media outlets. The entire attack had been fabricated, but before that was discovered, hundreds took to the streets, protesting against far-right and anti-Islam groups as well as the 'attack'. Luckily the protests did not turn violent, but they very easily could have. The lesson is that we've got to be more discerning these days, we can't take information at face value.

Fake reviews, fake followers, fake influencers and Deepfake

We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves though, technology has advanced to a point where it's easy to be fooled. On the other hand, luckily, new tech is being developed to counter this. As machine learning gets smarter, we have to become smarter still.

The influencer phenomenon has transformed the way many brands plan their marketing strategies and budgets. As influencer marketing has become more widespread, so have the occurrences of fake influencers. Brands can be tricked by a few thousand followers and an array of high-quality (non-obvious) stock images. Fake follower accounts are programmed to engage with the posts, making it even more difficult for brands to determine what's real and what's not. Even real influencers have fake followers, a report by ICMP revealed that almost half of **Kim Kardashian's followers are fake.**

An American influencer marketing agency, **Mediakix**, ran an experiment where they created a fake influencer, @WanderingGirl to demonstrate how easy it is to be duped.

The account was approached by numerous brands, offering everything from cash to clothing, fancy dinners and expensive vacations at resorts and five-star hotels.

> *Fake reviews are another growing issue; Amazon has become infamous for its enormous fake-review economy. But Facebook, Tripadvisor and other platforms are all implicated in this new phenomenon. As the market becomes more competitive, businesses and sellers become increasingly desperate to improve their sales. Offering someone cash or free products in exchange for a positive review is a simple way of getting more sales and building trust with potential consumers.*

Buying a bogus or poor-quality product may seem more annoying than anything else, but if you've seen the Deepfake video of Barack Obama, you'll be truly terrified of the direction technology is going in. Deepfake uses AI and facial mapping technology to create a truly remarkable phoney video that could deceive even the most discerning eye.
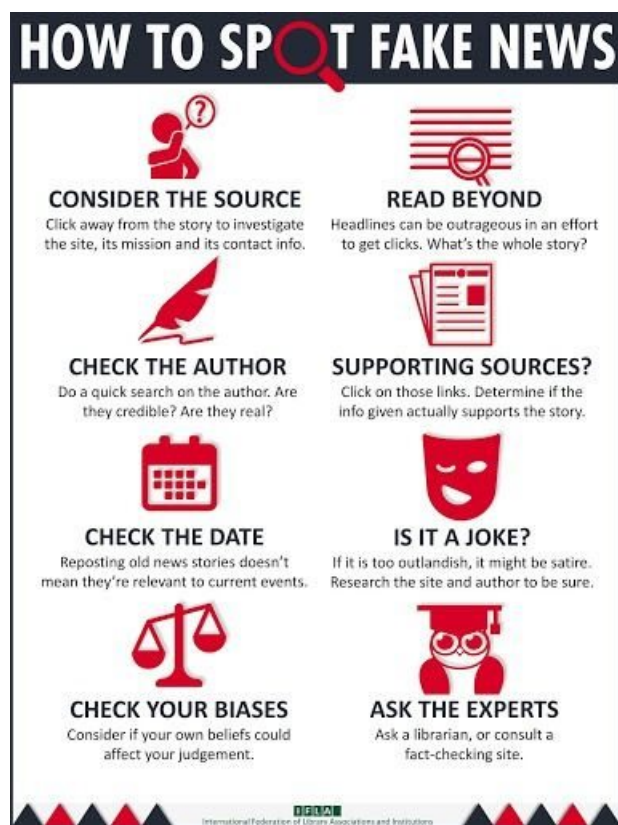
As with fake news, there are many harmless examples, such as Kit Harington, star of HBO's Game of Thrones, apologising

for the way the series ended. Someone who felt the new Lion King didn't quite have the same magic as the 1991 version, used **Deepfake technology to make the characters have their original, cartoon faces**. But Deepfake presents an even bigger threat than fake news. While it takes a lot of work to create a convincing video, the technology is more accessible than the CGI of blockbuster movies and it's improving all the time. New software allows the creator to **change what their subject says, simply by typing it**. And there are even more creepy capabilities; an app called DeepNude can remove the clothes of a fully clothed woman to make nonconsensual porn.

Deepfake presents so many possibilities, and while many of them could be to entertain, the potential to spread disinformation, destroy reputations and incite far-reaching action is disconcerting.

Paranoid yet? While it's good to have a healthy dose of scepticism, don't fall into the Trump trap of declaring anything (especially something you're not keen on) as false. Technology and software are being developed to help identify the fiction among the facts. But we can't only rely on that, it's up to us to critically assess the authenticity of the articles, images and videos we come across. Question their purpose, analyse the context in which you found it and who shared it. We may only be human, but our brains and our humanness are our biggest advantage.

Need some extra help spotting fake news? Check this handy infographic, courtesy of **International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions**.

Further reading:

1. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-exactly-has-really-had-influence/

2. https://www.1843magazine.com/technology/rewind/the-true-history-of-fake-news

3. https://www.npr.org/2018/09/02/643761979/president-trumps-description-of-whats-fake-is-expanding

4. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/09/10/art-of-the-lie?

5. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/18/what-is-fake-news-pizzagate

6. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/19/opinion/sunday/fake-news.html

7. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook

8. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/02/fake-news-facebook-us-election-around-the-world

9. https://thehustle.co/amazon-fake-reviews

10. https://www.businessinsider.com/dangerous-Deepfake-technology-spreading-cannot-be-stopped-2019-7?IR=T

11. https://www.icmp.ac.uk/fake-followers/#All

12. https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2019/07/22/the-best-and-scariest-examples-of-ai-enabled-Deepfakes/#655d29c2eaf1

About the author:

Molly is the Communications Champion at Red & Yellow and deals with all of our social media channels. In her spare time, she writes for fun (go figure), and reads books to broaden her mind.

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