29 Viral "Fake News" Lists and the Limitations of Labeling and Fact-Checking

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During the 2016 presidential primary season, I gleefully shared an article on Facebook alleging that Aaron Rodgers, who is the quarterback for the Green Bay Packers, attended a rally for presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders. The article spread like wildfire among my online friends group, many of whom are also overlapping fans of both the Packers and Bernie Sanders

Unfortunately, this article turned out to be from a fake news website, United Media Publishing. I was fooled by fake news. I implicitly trusted my many friends on social media sharing the story. The headline made me excited and hopeful about the primary election, and it did a good job of confirming what I wanted to believe as true about Rodgers: that he's a cool dude who shares my political views.

I share this anecdote to demonstrate just how easy it is to be "duped" by fake news. I have a Ph.D. in communication studies and I am a critical scholar, so you might think I would have been more careful. However, I do not (or at least did not) analyze each and every bit of information I come across online, especially on platforms I use for "fun," and I don't think I'm alone in this habit. Some evidence suggests many of us share or retweet without actually reading what we are sharing or retweeting,[1] which is definitely true in my instance of sharing fake news. The fact that I'm highly educated in the ways of critically analyzing media—and the fact that I see other highly educated people share similarly questionable sources—points to online misinformation as being more complicated than a lack of education, critical thinking skills, or digital media literacy.

Despite fake news being part of a complex problem involving the production, distribution, and reception of various kinds of information, the majority of current "solutions" to fake news deal primarily with reception and with individuals. Viral "fake news" lists, any one of the dozens of fake

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news library guides, browser plug-ins, debunking articles, pop-ups providing article information or context, and online media literacy quizzes, all attempt to get individuals to better understand online information. We tend to advance these kinds of "solutions" to problems partially because, as danah boyd argues, we exist in a neoliberal context that privileges and emphasizes individual agency.[2] It also *seems* easier to get individuals to change rather than, say, global media platforms. Just as environmental issues are too often addressed by encouraging consumers to buy energy efficient lightbulbs and reusable bags, while letting the largest polluters go unregulated, misinformation is too often addressed by encouraging individuals to analyze and fact-check sources, while letting a handful of companies continue to irresponsibly control global flows of information with little to no oversight.

Unless we remove more of the barriers for individuals to make sense of online information in this complex and cluttered media environment, these individualized solutions will, at best, prove ineffective and, at worst, exacerbate our misinformation problem.[3] I say this not to begrudge the goals behind these efforts—creators of these guides and consumer technologies looked for ways to help in the realms in which they operate, they looked for ways they could actually *do something*, just as I did—but rather to push us toward making more systemic changes with how and who produces and distributes our information.

This chapter thus details my entry into addressing the problem of fake news through a viral Google Doc, "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical 'News' Sources." I tell this story not because I believe this Google Doc has had a great impact on fighting online misinformation, but rather because its failures reveal the limitations of individualized, reception-focused efforts.

Viral "Fake News" Lists

While teaching Intro to Mass Communication in the fall of 2016, I became increasingly concerned by the types of sources my students were citing in their papers and in class discussions. Many of them were citing the same types of specious websites that I inadvertently shared the previous summer. When we entered into our journalism unit of the course, I decided to

create a guide for helping them identify and analyze sources, titled "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical 'News' Sources." The guide contained everything from political yet generally reliable websites like Think-Progress to junk science websites like Natural News and fake news websites like United Media Publishing.

The morning before my lecture, I posted my in-progress guide to Facebook asking for input and suggestions for inclusion from my friends. When one friend asked to share the guide on a newsfeed to solicit further input, I switched the privacy setting from "friends" to "public." Within an hour it was shared almost two thousand times. Before I changed the original post's settings back to private a day later (after I started getting hateful comments on the post), it was already shared over twenty-five thousand times, although that number would grow to be significantly higher. In fact, it became one of the most shared "stories" about fake news in the fall of 2016 (and the basis for several other "most shared" stories about fake news during the same period by media outlets like NPR and *New York* magazine).[4]

I never intended my Google Document to be a stand-alone public resource, and I quickly worked to better organize and explicitly label the included websites upon receiving (rightfully) angry e-mails from Think-Progress, Upworthy, and Red State, among others, after they were inadvertently characterized as "fake news" in the press. You see, unbeknownst to me, I had inadvertently walked into a "maelstrom of controversy."[5] My Google Doc had been picked up by the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York* magazine, and as more news sources wrote about it, it became known as a list of fake news sites.[6] Indeed, it did contain quite a few fake news sites, but my resource was an attempt to capture a variety of online sources rather than just fake news. My Google Doc spread much as how fake news spreads: it tapped into an issue of growing concern, it "confirmed" either the reliability or unreliability of certain "news" sources (depending on one's personal beliefs), and it was reported on by some legitimate news organizations without vetting me or the Google Doc (and then other news organizations reported on it based on those reports). Somehow the resource went from an in-class activity to a "fake news list," and then from a "fake news list" to a research data set containing almost a thousand websites and part of digital media literacy resources created by libraries and schools around the country.[7]

The Limitations of Individualized "Solutions" to Fake News

Identifying and labeling websites as producers of fake news is complicated by the fact that there is not a clear way to address sources that we may not immediately categorize as fake news, but that also produce some of the most circulated false stories. For example, Sean Hannity's website, which I consider neither journalism nor a fake news site, published a story with the headline "Donald Trump Sent His Own Plane to Transport 200 Stranded Marines," and it generated over eight hundred thousand shares. The problem? This never happened,[8] yet the story was also picked up by a number of other websites, including Breitbart. Similarly, *The Independent* published a story about CNN accidentally airing hardcore pornography instead of an episode of *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*.[9] This story was then used as the source material for Fox 25 Boston and numerous other news and entertainment websites reporting the same thing (figure 29.1). The problem? This entire story was based on two hoax tweets. No one bothered to confirm the details in the story; instead, subsequent new stories were based on the original, which was based on false information.

As has become all too clear, even reputable news organizations and media entities regularly report on Google Docs, tweets, and blogs without

Figure 29.1
This manipulated image circulated on Twitter as "evidence" that CNN accidentally aired pornography.

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necessarily digging into their credibility, and then other news organizations and media entities report on those stories that were based on Google Docs, tweets, and blogs (assuming the original stories to be accurate). This kind of information infidelity, and other practices plaguing contemporary news media, not only feeds public distrust of mainstream news organizations, and of information generally, but also gives support to accusations that the "real" news can be considered "fake news."[10] The media literacy strategy of checking additional news sources to confirm the details of a story is not a great option when so much of our mediasphere is polluted by fake news and faulty reporting. These confusing webs of misinformation entangling a variety of information sources also support an important point made by journalist Cory Doctorow: "We're not living through a crisis about what is true, we're living through a crisis about how we know whether something is true."[11]

Labeling fake news does not help us address *the problems of actual news*. In fact, labeling fake news may even de-emphasize the ways that different types of information sources interact and overlap, as demonstrated by these previous examples. Plus, attempting to label thousands of "news" websites is like playing a Sisyphean game of whack-a-mole: as soon as one source is analyzed, it may disappear and reappear as something else entirely. Labeling fake news and other types of online information is also unhelpful unless the person reading the labels views *the labeler* as credible or trustworthy. If readers disagree with the labeler or an applied label, it may just reinforce their existing beliefs about the source and the information circulated by it.[12] I received numerous e-mails to this effect; people said my resource supported their trust in websites like 100 Percent Fed Up and the *Washington Free Beacon* rather than challenged it.

Although I did receive thousands of messages of appreciation and suggestions for additions to my guide, I also received a barrage of insults and not-quite-threats to my safety (figure 29.2). Instead of contacting me directly to ask for removal from my resource, websites like Zero Hedge and Natural News attempted to discredit me as a "crybully professor" and "leftist totalitarian."[13] Other websites followed the same discrediting strategy, as exemplified by headlines like "Revealed: The Unhinged Feminist behind the Defamatory Hit List of Targeted Conservative Websites," "Bogus Hit List Is Removed after Radical Liberal Is Exposed, but Crying 'Fake News' Will Be New Weapon," and "Media Pushes Loony Leftist Professor's List of 'Fake

LIST OF 'FAKE NEWS' BY PROFESSOR MELISSA
ZIMDARS INCLUDE DRUDGE, BREITBART,
ZEROHEDGE, INFOWARS AND THIS WEBSITE AS
GOOGLE, FACEBOOK CHANGE POLICY ON ADS...
DIDN'T THE MSM MEDIA RAN A LOT OF FAKE NEWS
ON TRUMP DURING ELECTION? FROM RIGGED
POLLS TO FAKE SCANDALS? REMEMBER :)

POSTED ON NOVEMBER 16, 2016   UPDATED ON NOVEMBER 17, 2016

Figure 29.2
A headline from 70news.wordpress.com, which was one of the top Google news
results in November 2016 when searching for popular vote election results.

News' Conservative Sites."[14] These websites referred to me as a communist
infiltrator, super snowflake, fake professor, truth czar, and somehow both
an "elitist" (I have a Ph.D. and live on the East Coast) and a "nobody" (I
earned my Ph.D. from a state school in the Midwest and teach at a small
liberal arts college). Natural News and other websites also published my
contact information (and the contact information for my colleagues and
employer) and encouraged their readers to let me know what they thought
about being called a "moron" (despite the fact that I never referred to any-
one as a moron).[15]

This backlash demonstrates, fundamentally, how communication
works. Individuals actively "decode" media texts and other forms of com-
munication based on their own frameworks of knowledge, social contexts,
and relationships to production and technological infrastructures, among
other factors.[16] It is thus unsurprising that my guide helped some people,
while others did not care about it, did not find it useful, or fully rejected it
and me. My analysis and labeling, and later attempt to create a kind of tax-
onomy or continuum of online information, was appreciated by some and
viewed as "the biggest threat to freedom of speech" by others.[17]

Many of the problems with labeling fake news articles and websites par-
allel the problems and limitations with fact-checking. Just as many readers
of my list—or the websites that covered it—did not trust me, many do not
trust fact-checking organizations or news outlets debunking rumors and

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conspiracies. For example, conservative "news" organizations frequently accuse Snopes not only of being liberally biased, but also of spreading outright lies. The Daily Caller, a conservative "news" website of questionable reliability, consistently publishes headlines like "Fact-Checking Snopes: Website's Political 'Fact-Checker' Is Just a Failed Liberal Blogger" and "Snopes Caught Lying about Lack of American Flags at Democratic Convention."[18] Fact-check organizations even feel compelled to evaluate other fact-checkers while fact-checking false claims about their own fact-checking, such as when FactCheck debunked a meme saying it had "exposed" Snopes.[19]

In the book *Reality Bites*, Dana Cloud argues that fact-checking "misses the forest in the trees." Its narrowness of focus on "just the facts" may debunk, for example, specific aspects of Hillary Clinton's e-mail scandal, but it does not necessarily help people make sense of or address concerns over whether Clinton is a trustworthy or ethical person. By focusing on specific, incorrect bits of information rather than engaging with the complexities of truth and falsehood, how "knowledge functions in service of power," and "who gets to shape facts for public sense making," fact-checkers miss the point.[20] Thus, instead of fact-checking, Cloud argues we should be engaged in frame-checking, where we try to understand how and why information is being framed in particular ways, how it's being used, or what emotions it inspires or values it references.

There are other problems with fact-checking, too, such as its potential to amplify misinformation.[21] Fact-checking also does not consider why people knowingly share information that is false.[22] Furthermore, fact-checking most often takes place after something has already been shared thousands of times,[23] and there is no guarantee that fact-checked information will reach the same audience as the original misinformation or that it will change anyone's mind. The fact-checking process and partnerships between organizations and tech companies may also lack transparency, be plagued by plagiarism, or exist solely to profit from search engine optimization, and "facts" themselves can be manipulated for a variety of reasons.[24] While fact-checking can serve an important function, particularly in terms of holding politicians accountable for what they say or acting as a resource for people trying to make sense of information, it is too often held up as the solution to fake news despite these kinds of issues and others.[25]

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Moving beyond Individualized "Solutions" to Fake News

We have access to more sources of information than we ever have before, and we're having a hard time making sense of it all.[26] It can be difficult to identify fake news—just as it can be difficult to tell the difference between advertorials and editorials in magazines, between video press releases and nightly news segments on television. It's difficult to delineate between these forms of media precisely because they're designed to be that way. Making fake news a more challenging problem, perhaps, is the fact that in the digital era we now need to know the differences between native advertising, sponsored posts, contributor or community posts that neither undergo fact-checking nor are read by an editor, punditry-style "news," and poorly executed or obscure satire. And we need to do this while keeping track of a seemingly unlimited number of information sources that all look the same when presented to us in our social media feeds (each has a head-line, accompanying image, and usually a story lede or description).

Thus, the problem of misinformation is not going to be overcome by social media platforms releasing public service announcements in news-papers about "spotting fake news" or promoting digital media literacy and fact-checking.[27] It's not going to be overcome by researchers promoting "critical thinking" as the most important solution in our current media context.[28] It's not going to be overcome by individuals and organizations taking it upon themselves to label, fact-check, or debunk misinformation. All of these solutions are far too focused on what individuals should read or do rather than on the underlying problems with contemporary journal-ism, the dominance of tech companies over our information systems and their general lack of public accountability, and governmental policies, in the United States at least, that are nonexistent, outdated, or exacerbating the problems of misinformation.

To address fake news and other forms of online information, we need reinvigorated local journalism, and more public funding for local media.[29] We need to assert more public control over communication systems and redistribute revenue from companies like Google and Facebook to public service news organizations.[30] We need publicly funded social media alter-natives.[31] We need to push back against faulty claims of "free speech" that downplay the necessity of content moderation on social media platforms while allowing conspiracy sources to thrive.[32] We need to place less faith

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in "more speech" as a counter to false information in a "marketplace of ideas."[33] Ideally, we need to dismantle the capitalist systems underlying all of these issues and so many more. But, in the meantime, we need to understand that the proliferation of fake news and other kinds of misinformation is not caused by any one problem, and it will not be "solved" by any one "solution," especially ones that place the onus of responsibility on individuals.

Notes

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