

## Fake News, Partisanship and Analytical Thinking

Melissa Hayes, PTC 603-852

Professor Jenna Corrado

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### Introduction

Fabricated news has been around for centuries, however, it wasn't until the 2016 U.S. presidential election that the term fake news seemed to become ubiquitous. President Donald Trump uses the term frequently, the Russians have been accused of trying to use fake news to influence American politics and traditional media outlets have launched fact-checking efforts to counteract it. But what President Trump means by fake news – he once tweeted that “any negative polls are fake news” – isn't the same definition academics have for the term and researchers themselves offer different explanations for what constitutes fake news (Lazer et al., 2018; Marwick, 2018; Narayanan et al., 2018; Walters, 2019). What is clear is that social media has made it easier than ever before to spread misinformation (Silverman, 2016; De keersmaecker and Roets, 2017).

There is some debate over how prevalent the issue of fake news is, who is spreading it, and why it gets shared. This paper explores the relationship between the spread of partisan fake news and analytical thinking. It seeks to answer whether people who have strong partisan beliefs are willing to share fake news stories that support their views, rather than critically analyzing the articles and realizing they are fake. Research shows that Republicans appear to be susceptible to spreading fake news and there could be a few explanations for this, including who they choose to follow on social media (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker, 2019; Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Hardin, 2018). In order to combat the spread of fake news, which has threatened the public trust in traditional media and democracy, it is important to understand the demographics of those spreading fake news and what types of misinformation are being shared. But before exploring the relationship between partisanship, fake news and analytical thinking, it is critical to provide some perspective on what fake news is.

### Fake News is Old News

Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair were both professional journalists who lost their careers for fabricating stories or in other words producing fake news. Their actions made headlines and were even

turned into movies, which gave the general public a glimpse at the dangers of fabricated news long before President Trump popularized the term. That was in the late 1990s and early 2000s, respectively, but fake news has been around much longer than that. A notable example is Orson Welles' famous 1938 radio program dramatization of the novel *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. Despite telling listeners at the start of the program that what they were about to hear wasn't true, many were caught up in the story of an alien invasion in New Jersey, regardless of how far-fetched that seemed (Walters, 2019). These are examples of made up stories, which fit the traditional definition of fake news.

### Defining Fake News

While the partisan stories seem to draw the most attention, fake news extends beyond politics (Walters, 2019). Satirical tabloids, websites like The Onion, clickbait and issue-oriented sites – including hot topics such as vaccinations and climate change – are all examples of things that have been called fake news in recent decades.

Some researchers think it's important to consider intent when determining whether something is fake news, but others argue that is too difficult and could be misleading (Marwick, 2018). Some have sought to avoid using the term whenever possible. Researcher Alice E. Markwick adopts media historian Caroline Jack's term, "problematic information," as a catchall phrase in place of fake news. Meanwhile, other researchers define it for its attempt to mimic and mislead. Lazar et al., in their 2017 exploration of the science of fake news define it as:

Information that mimics the output of the news media in form, but not in organizational process or intent—e.g., lacking editorial norms and processes to weed out the untrue in favor of the true. Fake news is thus a subgenre of the broader category of misinformation—of incorrect information about the state of the world.

Attorney Ryan M. Walters (2019) takes it one step further offering a "consensus definition," for researchers that uses three core components to identify fake news: "a) content holding itself out as a news piece (b) that makes objectively false assertions that given events have occurred (c) in a materially false manner." His definition does not consider intent.

Walters also proposes a fact-checking standard as a method of objectively determining whether something is fake news. The fact-checking process considers whether the information can be substantiated through another source. He notes that there is a difference between fake news and political spin, which is a creative way of framing information in favor of or against a candidate or issue.

While there may not be one agreed upon definition of fake news, one thing that is evident is that many researchers rely on a shared list of fake news publishers and articles, which they use as a basis for their studies (Narayanan et al., 2018; Nelson and Taneja, 2018) or they use fact checking sites to find examples of fake news (Alcott and Gentzkow, 2018; Pennycook and Rand, 2017).

### Declining Trust

Unfortunately for the mainstream media, President Trump and other politicians have begun referring to reporting they don't agree with as "fake news," even when there are facts to back up the reports. This adaptation of the term has led to more people questioning the media, which in turn has created a greater opportunity for fake news sites looking to cash in on website traffic (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). These sites are designed to appeal to a person's desire to read and share information that aligns with their views, which can perpetuate the partisan divide (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017). "Partisanship and post-fact cultures will persist and grow as digital technologies continue to facilitate homophilous networks, which rely on like-minded groups reinforcing shared values," Mihailidis and Viotty conclude.

This loss of trust in traditional media also has much larger implications. A 2019 Knight Foundation and Aspen Institute report finds that freedom of the press is in danger and that threatens the country's democracy. The report warns:

If citizens believe they cannot rely on media for a truthful account of political activities, doubts about the legitimacy of government and its actions are likely to spread. Disinformation that comes, whether deliberately or not, from political leaders can be particularly corrosive to trust in government.

And the Aspen Institute and Knight Foundation caution that bots and other emerging technologies will make it increasingly more difficult for the public to determine what is true and what is fake online.

The public's trust in the media has been declining rapidly, according to a 2018 Knight Foundation/Gallup survey of U.S. adults. More than nine in 10 Republicans and conservatives said they had lost trust in the media in the last decade. In addition, 75 percent of independents and 66 percent of moderates said their level of trust has dropped. The top reasons for distrusting the media were inaccuracy, bias, "alternative facts or fake news," and slanted reporting. However, there is some hope. Of those who said they lost trust, 69 percent also said it could be restored.

## The Social Media Effect

Social media has made it easier than ever before for people to get caught up in provocative headlines and share them with their networks. Walters offers an explanation for why fake stories spread so rapidly:

If the writer of a fake news piece had a certain audience in mind—for instance those with strong beliefs on a given topic—the piece can draw them in by emphasizing an idea the reader might find plausible even if many would consider it relatively dubious on its face. Some users then spread that fake news to their friends on social media sites, which causes the cycle to continue like an old fashioned chain letter.

During the 2016 campaign, partisan fake news stories were shared millions of times (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Even if the stories sound unbelievable, people are more likely to consider them to be true when they are shared by someone they know (Marwick, 2018; Walters, 2019). And there is evidence that false rumors spread more than true rumors on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, as well. Researchers Shin, Jian, Driscoll, and Bar (2018) followed the lifecycle of 17 popular rumors during the 2012 election and found that the false rumors often resurfaced on partisan news sites and “turned into a more intense and extreme version over time.” False rumors also had a much longer lifespan than true rumors. Perhaps not surprising, their analysis found that Republicans were overwhelmingly spreading negative rumors about President Barack Obama, while Democrats were overwhelmingly spreading negative rumors about GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

Social media can also lend credibility to fake news simply by making it visible. Researchers Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon and David G. Rand (2018) found that people who read a headline one time were more likely to later view it as more accurate than they initially did. Research also shows that young people can be particularly vulnerable to fake news (McGlinn Manfra and Holmes, 2018), as can older people who may not be as digitally savvy. One study found that internet users over age 65 were seven times more likely to share fake news articles than younger adults (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker, 2019).

In a post-2016 election analysis, BuzzFeed News found that fake election news stories generated more Facebook engagement than stories from major news media during the three months leading up to Election Day. The top 20 false stories, from hoax sites or extremely partisan blogs that present themselves as news sites, generated 8.7 million Facebook interactions, including shares, reactions and

comments. Meanwhile, the 20 best-performing election news stories from major media outlets generated 7.4 million interactions, BuzzFeed's analysis found. Earlier in the election cycle, the traditional media sites were outperforming the fake news sites (Silverman, 2018).

### Public Opinion

A Pew Research poll conducted a month after the 2016 election found that 64 percent of U.S. adults believe fake news stories cause "a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events" (Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb, 2016). Although the majority of adults polled said fake news creates confusion, nearly 40 percent were very confident they could recognize it and another 45 percent said they were somewhat confident. About a third of the people polled said they often see fake political news stories online. Nearly a quarter of those polled, 23 percent, said they have shared fake stories either knowing or unknowingly. Another 14 percent said they did so knowing it was fake, while another 16 percent said they realized it was fake only after sharing it. While it's unclear how accurate this self-reporting is, the researchers note that the data provides a sense of the public's perception of fake online content.

A Monmouth University Poll published in April 2018, shows the profound effect fake news – and the use of the term – is having on the American media. The poll found that three-in-four Americans believe traditional television and print media are reporting fake news. Only 25 percent of those surveyed said that fake news only applies to fabricated stories. Meanwhile, 65 percent said the term also applies to editorial decisions and what the media chooses to report.

Despite this perception that fake news is so widespread, researchers Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker (2019) contend that fake news is not as big of a problem as it may seem. Their study found that "sharing articles from fake news domains was a rare activity." Nelson and Taneja (2018) agree, finding that fake news readers are "a small number of heavy Internet users" and that the majority of news consumers stick to established media outlets.

However, it must be noted that both studies rely on a pre-determined list of known fake news sites and stories, which Lazar et al. warn may result in conservative estimates of how much political fake news people consumed. In addition, Guess, Nagler, and Tucker acknowledge that half of their respondents decided not to share their Facebook profile data, and while researchers could determine how much fake news these users were sharing, they could not measure how much fake news they were exposed to.

## Party Demographics

Guess, Nagler, and Tucker found that conservative voters were more likely to share fake news than Democratic voters, and as previously mentioned, age also played a role regardless of party affiliation. But they note that the higher number of conservatives sharing fake new stories could be attributed to the “pro-Trump slant of most fake news articles produced during the 2016 campaign, and of the tendency of respondents to share articles they agree with.” But demographics may also play a role in why it appears more Republicans are spreading fake news.

There are a number of studies that show Democrats perform better on cognitive ability and intelligence tests (Baron and Jost, 2019). One reason for this could be education. In the past, voters with advanced degrees were more likely to align themselves with the Republican Party. However, the Pew Research Center, which regularly conducts surveys on the demographics of political parties, has found that people with graduate degrees are now leaning more liberal and aligning themselves with the Democratic Party. The Pew Research Center’s 2018 report also found that people without a college degree – a demographic that once leaned more Democratic than Republican – are now equally divided among the parties. These shifts have created the widest educational gap among the party members in more than two decades, the report notes. While Democrats have gained more members with graduate degrees, Republicans have seen an uptick in party members who do not have bachelor’s degrees.

The Democrats remain the party of choice for urban and minority voters and have also seen their female membership increase in recent years. White voters and rural voters continue to lean more Republican, according to the Pew report.

Research has shown that conservatives are more likely than liberals to value tradition, share things with like-minded peers and be persuaded by people who share their views (Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Hardin, 2018). While several studies show that both Republicans and Democrats are more likely to share messages that align with their views, Jost, van der Linden, Panagopoulos and Hardin note research shows Democrats are more willing to expose themselves to opposing viewpoints, while Republicans “maintain homogenous social networks.” By following mostly like-minded accounts, Republicans are more likely to be exposed to and share fake information.

## Partisanship, Fake News and Analytical Thinking

While it is evident that there is a volume of research into fake news and also plenty of debate about the magnitude of the issue, when it comes to the effect fake news has on analytical thinking and

whether partisanship contributes to that, there isn't as much data. Most studies focus on ways to counteract fake news by understanding who is spreading it and why. There are a number of studies that focus on partisanship and the spread of fake news, but they do not consider analytical thinking, which is a person's ability to break down and understand complex issues (Reedy, Wells, and Gastil, 2014; Bail et al., 2018; Shin, Jian, Driscoll, and Bar, 2018). There is, however, at least one study that directly looks at the relationship between analytical thinking, partisanship and fake news.

Pennycook and Rand conducted two studies into fake news that involve analytical thinking. One explores the roles of analytical thinking, motivated reasoning (what motivates someone to make a decision), partisanship and bullshit receptivity (2019), the other considers whether lack of reasoning plays a role in susceptibility to fake news. In both studies they use cognitive reflection tests, which measure a person's ability to move past an initial incorrect response and arrive at the correct response after further reflection, to establish the analytical ability of participants. In the first study (2019), they found that people who scored low in analytical thinking on the cognitive reflection test, were more likely to believe fake news, overstate their knowledge and deem any kind of statement to be profound. This receptiveness to fake information was also associated more with sharing fake news on social media. In comparison, people who scored higher on the cognitive reflection test and were classified as more analytical thinkers were less likely to share fake news on social media.

In their research into susceptibility to partisan fake news (2018), they found that despite previous studies that showed people were more likely to believe false news that supports their views, party affiliation had little to do with acceptance or rejection of fake news among both of their test groups. Instead, analytical thinking played a larger role in how fake news is perceived and shared. "Regardless of the partisanship of the participant or the headline, more analytic individuals were better able to differentiate between fake and real news," the researchers found. While more analytical participants were better able to identify fake news – regardless of party affiliation – it is worth noting that voters who supported Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton had a lower ability to discern real news from fake news in this study. But the researchers conclude that susceptibility to fake news is based more on laziness or a lack of reasoning, than by being motivated by partisanship.

There is another study that focuses on cognitive ability, but the researchers were focused on finding a way to counteract the spread of fake news, rather than looking to understand the role of analytical thinking. De keersmaecker and Roets (2017) considered why simply correcting misinformation isn't enough to change the views of people who believe fake news. Like Pennycook and Rand, they

found that cognitive ability is a key factor in what people believe. De keersmaecker and Roets found that when presented with factual information to counteract the misinformation people with higher levels of cognitive ability adjusted their attitudes toward the fake news more than people with lower levels of cognitive ability. Those with higher levels of cognitive ability ended up with opinions closer to those of the study's control group, which was not presented with misinformation.

While analysis of known partisan fake news articles on social media shows that these stories were able to reach millions of people before the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Silverman, 2016), it's difficult to pinpoint the effect these stories had on this population. There isn't sufficient research into the issue. However, there is research that shows spreading one-sided stories on social networks can increase political polarization (Bail et al., 2018). While this research did not include fake news articles, it did find that when participants were subjected to articles about partisan beliefs opposite their own, it did not cause them to change their views, instead it strengthened their existing partisan beliefs. Bail et al. found that Republicans were "substantially more conservative" after being exposed to opposing views. They reported that while Democrats "exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes," the increase was not statistically significant as it was with Republican participants.

In another study, researchers seeking to understand how inaccurate beliefs are formed explored how voters develop their political views (Reedy, Wells, and Gastil, 2014). The researchers used three ballot measures in Washington State to study whether news or campaign messages combined with political knowledge was a major factor, or if voters are more prone to follow their deep-seated values. They found that partisanship and voters' values were the biggest contributing factors behind distorted beliefs. Interestingly, the researchers did not find any evidence that exposure to political information, such as ads, changed participants' beliefs. However, they did find evidence that voters are systemically misinformed and that these erroneous beliefs influence voters' core values, which affects how they vote.

People tend to be biased against things they disagree with, including politics (Stone, 2019). This bias can create stronger partisan identities, increase the dislike for other political parties, and can predict beliefs about factual issues. Stone notes that this dislike could also be caused by false information that is perceived to be true.

Another factor that has been studied and is worth mentioning is the role emotions can play in how people process fake news. Research shows that anger encourages partisanship when viewing



uncorrected misinformation, however feelings of anxiety led to beliefs that were less partisan (Weeks, 2015). Weeks' research confirmed findings of previous studies that show people who are anxious pay closer attention to information they are presented with, are more likely to weigh both sides of an argument, and they are less likely to make a decision based on partisanship or a prior ideology. Meanwhile, he found that people who are angry are less likely to consider new information and more likely to process inaccurate claims about politics in a partisan manner consistent with their party affiliation. However, the angry test subjects were willing to abandon their partisan arguments when presented with strong arguments for why claims were false.

Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson also found a correlation between anxiety and people changing their views. The research explored why people continue to support a candidate after learning something negative about them and whether there is a tipping point when their support will wane. They found that there is a point when enough negative information will cause a voter to change their views, but when a person reaches this point they are more anxious, which could cause them to better evaluate the information they are presented with. However, the researchers add that voters with just a small amount of anxiety may not change their evaluation of a candidate. Understanding the effect emotion has on analytical thinking could be an interesting issue to explore in subsequent studies.

### Conclusion

Researchers seem invested in exploring ways to combat the spread of fake news on social media. In order to determine the best counter measures, a number of studies have been conducted to analyze who is sharing fake news and how fake news is spread. The existing body of research makes it clear that partisanship plays a role in the spread of fake news and rumors. As expected, people are more likely to believe information that aligns with their views and that is shared by someone in their social circle. Education may also be a factor in the spread of fake news. Research shows that Republicans appear to be more susceptible to fake news at a time when more highly educated voters are aligning themselves with the Democratic Party. But more studies are needed to further explore this correlation.

There has been little research into the effects fake news has on analytical thinking and whether people can be driven by partisanship despite their cognitive abilities. A team of researchers has used cognitive reflection tests, which traditionally have been used to gain insight into superstitions and conspiracy theories, to measure analytical abilities and belief in fake news. Researchers Pennycook and Rand (2019) note that there is a lack of research in this area, but say their study provides evidence that

general skepticism may be a way to determine who falls for fake news. “Indeed, fake news may be a case where the mere propensity to think in a skeptical and analytical way is a meaningful determinant of belief, and perhaps, social media engagement,” they offer. They conclude that their findings show training and education could be used to reduce the number of people who fall for fake news, but they acknowledge that more research is needed. Indeed, more research is needed to answer the question of whether people would put their analytical abilities aside to share fake news because of their partisan leanings. The existing research does not appear to sufficiently address this issue.

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