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# Fake News and The Economy of Emotions

Problems, causes, solutions

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## Abstract

This paper examines the 2016 US presidential election campaign to identify problems with, causes of and solutions to the contemporary fake news phenomenon. To achieve this, we employ textual analysis and feedback from engagement, meetings and panels with technologists, journalists, editors, non-profits, public relations firms, analytics firms and academics during the globally leading technology conference, South by South West, in March 2017. We

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KEYWORD

We analyse the contemporary fake news phenomenon that emerged during the 2016 US presidential election campaign battle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, as pro-Trump fake news stories spread across Facebook. Definitions of fake news abound, including “propaganda entertainment” (Khaldarova and Pantti [2016](#), 893); “using satire to discuss public affairs” (Marchi [2012](#), 253); and content that “blurs lines between nonfiction and fiction” (Berkowitz and Schwartz [2016](#), 4). More comprehensively, Wardle ([2017](#)) deconstructs fake news into seven categories: false connection (where headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content); false context (genuine content shared with false contextual information); manipulated content (genuine imagery/information manipulated to deceive); misleading content (misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual); imposter content (genuine sources are impersonated); fabricated content (100 per cent false, designed to deceive and harm); and satire/parody (with potential to fool but no intention to cause harm) (Wardle [2017](#)). Distilling Wardle’s ([2017](#)) typology, we define fake news as either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context. A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online (Bonnegru et al. [2017](#), 8) where people accept as fact “stories of uncertain provenance or accuracy” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee [2017](#)).

We begin by assessing social and democratic problems with contemporary fake news, and proceed to examine solutions offered by companies such as Facebook. We argue that, at heart, the fake news problem concerns the economics of emotion: specifically, how emotions are leveraged to generate attention and viewing time, which converts to advertising revenue. We further point out the economic and political incentives to produce automated fake news that reacts to what we term online “fellow-feeling”, or group emotional behaviour within social networks. The capacity to better understand feelings, moods and emotions in networked communication is rapidly increasing through adoption of online and biofeedback technologies that perform “emotional computing” (Kleinman et al. [2015](#)), “empathic media”. This technology is gauged through facial coding, and sentiment analysis to enhance user experience to improve engagement. This is analysed in a near-horizon context. We conclude that the fake news problem is a complex one with in causing

# Methods

## Methods

Our case study is the contemporary fake news phenomenon that emerged during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Its seeds were laid in 2010 when Facebook introduced its newsfeed algorithm, Edgerank. This has since evolved into a machine-learning algorithm that prioritises and presents content to users based on factors including what they have engaged with (likes/reactions, comments, shares, views, clicks and pauses), what groups they belong to and the type of content Facebook is currently prioritising. In 2016, populist, mostly pro-Trump fake news stories spread across Facebook, often generating more audience engagement than real news stories (Silverman [2016](#)), creating consternation that Facebook and fake news may have influenced the election's outcome. This prompted Facebook, other telecommunications platforms, legacy and digital news outlets and agencies, and non-profit organisations to find solutions to combat fake news. In January 2017, the UK Parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Committee launched its Fake News Inquiry to identify best solutions.<sup>1</sup> In April 2017, Germany's government planned to legislate for fines of up to €50 million if social media networks refuse to remove fake news, hate speech and other illegal content. As such, this is a politically and socially important case study, with numerous implications for democratic health (outlined later).

Trump's election win confounded most pollsters and mainstream journalists, but analytics company EzyInsights predicted the win from the Trump's campaign's Facebook engagement (El-Sharawy [2016](#)). Through qualitative, thematic textual analysis, we glean insights into the content that engaged Facebook users, using this to help us diagnose what is socially and democratically problematic about contemporary fake news. We focus on captioned images popular on the Facebook page of far-right American news, opinion and commentary website, Breitbart. These are significant to examine for various reasons. Firstly, analysis from EzyInsights of social media engagement for the nine months prior to the US presidential

election found that Trump generated much more engagement on Facebook than other candidates. Images at Breitbart were particularly engaging. Secondly, analysis of the content of the images showed that they were often of a 'k—' as much as they were of a 'k'—engagement does not always reflect the content of the image. This was particularly evident in the case of the election (1



Huberman, and Saldana [2014](#)), we thematically code each image to identify its key message, noting the caption, visual image and Breitbart's accompanying comment and hashtag on Facebook. We found that the emergent themes frequently focused on the candidates' personalities, the news media, the voters and policy issues. While the captioned images merit a separate paper to delve into their rich semiotic and multi-modal construction, due to reasons of space we summarise our qualitative findings with a table that illustrates commonly occurring themes (five occurrences or more) (Table 1). Given our paper's focus, we were particularly alert to whether these themes (1) contribute to the fake news discourse; and (2) stimulate and affectively engage audiences—these aspects are discussed in a later section on social and democratic problems.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

**TABLE 1** Main repeated themes in Breitbart's Facebook Timeline Photos (1 October to 7 November 2016)

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Footnotes

References

We enrich our case study with conversations with technologists, journalists, editors and analytics firms conducted across seven days in March during the Interactive portion of the 2017 South-by-South West (SXSW) event. This globally renowned, annual technology conference, trade fair and festival presents cutting-edge practices and ideas capable of transforming the future of entertainment, culture and technology. Through 17 hour-long interactive panel and solo sessions from journalism, marketing, government and the technology industry, we asked questions, debated and ascertained current thinking and practice among a wide range of interested parties to the contemporary fake news phenomenon (see Table 2).

TABLE (2017)

Download

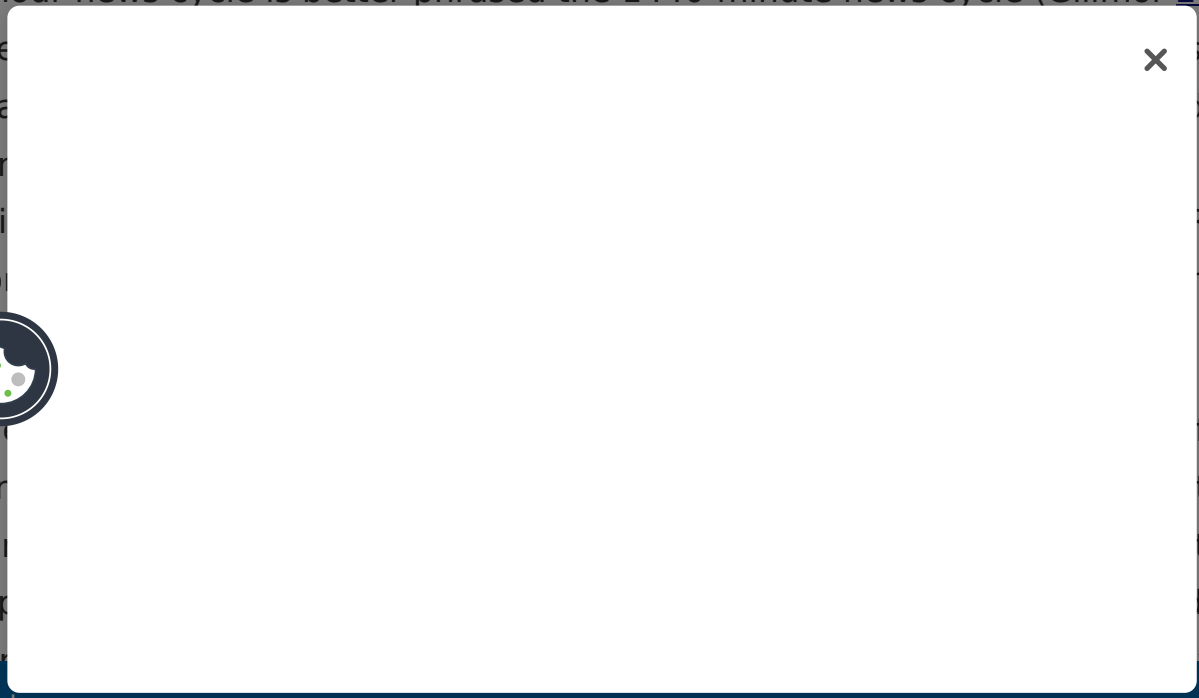


Fake Today's systematic, political populations through (2006), In this article

focus of persuasion and influence efforts, given their professional commitment to accuracy, facticity and, in some cases, impartiality and objectivity. Thus, information imparted via news (or what looks like news) confers credibility and truth to the content. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen PR firms spinning, or sometimes wholly fabricating, news stories for their clients (Miller and Dinan [2008](#); Leveson Inquiry [2012](#)). Whether for economic or political gain, fake news in some form has long been with us, the product of professional persuaders. However, the digital media ecology has proliferated, democratised and intensified the scale of fake news. We argue, below, that the contemporary fake news phenomenon is a logical outcome of five features of the digital media ecology: the financial decline of legacy news; the news cycle's increasing immediacy; the rapid circulation of misinformation and disinformation via user-generated content and propagandists; the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse; and the growing number of people financially capitalising on algorithms used by social media platforms and internet search engines.

Firstly, journalism has suffered from declining paying audiences, and hence revenue, for over a decade. Audiences have become disloyal to legacy news brands, and less willing to pay for news given the proliferation of free news online (Reuters Institute [2016](#)). Shrinking paying news audiences reduces revenue from cover prices and from advertisers. While total digital advertising spending has grown in recent years, legacy news organisations have not benefited. Rather, most digital advertising revenue (65 per cent in 2015) goes to five technology companies—four of which (Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Twitter) integrate news into their offerings (Pew Research Center [2016](#)). As legacy news outlets have struggled to profit across the past decade, they have been closing and reducing staff (Pew Research Center [2016](#); McStay [2016a](#)).

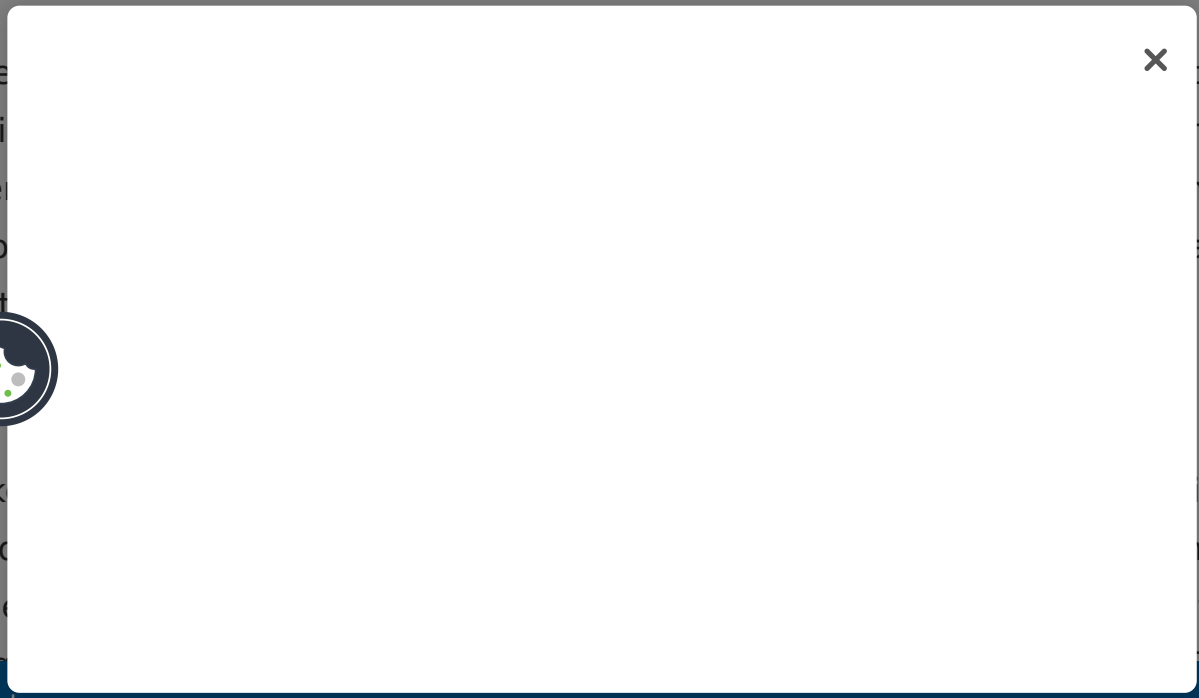
The second feature of digital media culture favouring fake news is the drive for immediacy: the 24-hour news cycle is better phrased the 1440-minute news cycle (Gillmor [2009](#)) given the advent of breaking news platforms. This drive for immediacy has led to thinner, less edited news stories, and a focus on 'clickbait' headlines. Journalists and PR practitioners are often under pressure to produce 'breaking news' stories, and this can lead to errors and misinformation. The creation of 'fake news' sites and the sharing of 'fake news' stories on social media platforms has also contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This is a significant problem for the public and for the integrity of the news industry.



A fourth feature of contemporary media is that it is increasingly emotionalised (Richards 2007). This is especially so online, as, for various reasons, including anonymity, people are less inhibited online (see Suler's [2016] "online disinhibition effect"). This is fertile ground for the rise of targeted media content and news contexts (such as filter bubbles in the form of Facebook news feeds) that elicit affective reactions.

A fifth feature of the contemporary digital media ecology is the growing number of people profiting from online behavioural advertising. For them, fake news acts as clickbait, namely Web content designed to generate attention and online advertising revenue at the expense of quality or accuracy, relying on sensationalist headlines or eye-catching pictures to attract click-throughs and shares. Journalists traced a significant amount of the fake news upsurge on Facebook during the 2016 US presidential election campaign to computer science undergraduates and teenagers in Veles, Macedonia who launched multiple US politics websites (estimates range from dozens to 140) with American-sounding domain names like USA Daily Politics.com, World Politicus.com and Donald Trump News.co (Kirby 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016; Gillin 2017). The fake news stories generated large, engaged audiences, earning some students thousands of euros daily through digital advertising (Kirby 2016). Most of the Veles locals created fake news stories for money rather than propaganda (Tynan 2016): their experiments with left-leaning content simply under-performed compared to pro-Trump content on Facebook. Other profit-oriented fake news genres also proliferate, including health and well-being sites (Silverman and Alexander 2016); and sites where US celebrities praise a small, US town for its helpful people and promising blockbusters filming nearby, apparently micro-targeting these town residents to gain advertising clicks (Gillin 2017).

## Contemporary Fake News: Social and Democratic Problems



The fake news phenomenon is: (1) its production is often done in echo chambers and provocative nature of analysis of frequent... Wrote... That fake news, even that well-informed... may have influenced... tion... checks World... In this article

amassing 960,000 Facebook shares, likes and comments (Price [2016](#); Silverman [2016](#)).

Although one study concludes that, for fake news to have changed the election's outcome, a single fake article would need to have been as persuasive as 36 television campaign

advertisements (Allcott and Gentzkow [2017](#)), such was the level of public concern that, two days after the election, Facebook's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mark Zuckerberg, felt compelled to publically rebut the charge that fake news on Facebook influenced the election.

However, his position rapidly changed, as we show later.

Even if fake news did not influence the election, widespread recirculation of falsehoods posing

as news does not bode well for the factual foundations on which citizens form opinions, and the nation's consequent democratic health. While some fake news stories are recognisable as

satire (Berkowitz and Schwartz [2016](#)), others are variants of well-known news brands, and more difficult to recognise as fake. For those who think they can always recognise fake news,

it would be instructive to play human computation game Factitious<sup>3</sup> (Game Lab, Jolt), which challenges players to quickly identify true or false articles from news, advertising, opinion or

fake (Datu et al. [2017](#)). Certainly, a study by Stanford History Education Group ([2016](#), 4) of 7800 responses from US middle school, high school and college students on their ability to

assess online information sources concludes that they "are easily duped".

Our analysis of Breitbart's Facebook Timeline Photos for the five weeks prior to the US election confirms their use of disinformation. With 16 images, the most frequent theme is that Hillary Clinton is crooked and corrupt (21 per cent of the 75 images) (see Table 1). One variant of this theme focuses on the Clinton Foundation, a charitable organisation aiming to improve human life globally. For instance, a head-and-shoulder shot of a silhouette of a woman's head is captioned, "Sec of State Hillary Clinton approved the transfer of 20 per cent of US uranium to Putin's Russia as 9 investors in the deal funneled \$145 million to the Clinton Foundation. NYT & Clinton Cash" (Breitbart [2016c](#)). We classify such statements as deliberately misleading

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Echo Chamber. The second most frequent theme is that the Clinton Foundation is corrupt, leading citizens to believe that the Clinton Foundation is a front for Obama's



exist where information, ideas or beliefs are amplified and reinforced by communication and repetition inside a defined system where competing views are underrepresented (Sunstein 2001). Algorithmically created echo chambers, or “filter bubbles”, arise when algorithms applied to online content selectively gauge what information a user wants to see based on information about the user, their connections, browsing history, purchases, and what they post and search. This results in users becoming separated from exposure to wider information that disagrees with their views (Pariser 2011). A closely related psychological phenomenon is confirmation bias, or people’s tendency to search for, interpret, notice, recall and believe information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (Wason 1960). Empirically demonstrated consequences of algorithmically created filter bubbles and human confirmation bias are limited exposure to, and lack of engagement with, different ideas and other people’s viewpoints (Bessi et al. 2016; Quattrociocchi et al. 2016). This may occur without people even being aware of the process: for instance, US college students are largely unaware of how gatekeepers of news sources that use personalisation algorithms (Google and Facebook) track user data and apply editorial judgements to deliver personalised results (Powers 2017).

El-Sharawy (2017) explains from his company’s study of Facebook engagement in the 2016 US presidential election that Trump’s campaign team encouraged the two opposing filter bubbles that developed on Facebook: prominence of very right-wing versus mainstream media in users’ newsfeeds. This is backed up by our own analysis of Breitbart’s Facebook Timeline Photos which shows that they repeatedly slurred mainstream media as “rigged” in favour of Clinton (six images): for instance, “Establishment media are Hillary Clinton campaign workers”, accompanied by “#rigged” (Breitbart 2016b). Breitbart also repeatedly promoted its own news brand on Facebook with product shots of its logo and office (five images) (see Table 1). Together, these themes encourage readers to disbelieve mainstream media and remain in their Breitbart filter bubble.





Production  
Methods  
Fictional  
Contemporary  
Proposed Solutions  
Media Economics and Digital Advertising: A Solution Lies Within the Problem  
The Near-horizon: Automated Fake News and Manipulation of Fellow-feeling  
Looking at the most common themes within the 75 Breitbart Facebook images, rather than focusing on policies, the most frequent themes focus on the candidates' personality, with 16 captioned images attacking Clinton's personality as crooked and corrupt; and another six images portraying Trump as a winner (see Table 1). Where policies are presented, these are as simplistic end goals and claims. For instance, Trump's anti-corruption policy is presented by an image of Trump speaking at the podium, captioned, "it's time to drain the swamp" (Breitbart [2016d](#)).

If fake news circulates, uncorrected, in closed communities; if people are indoctrinated to disbelieve truthful facts by damaging the reputation of mainstream news; and if that fake news is deliberately affective and inflammatory, we are moved ever further from Habermas' archetypal democratic ideal of a public sphere that ultimately seeks consensus through enabling all to speak rationally, through listening to others' viewpoints and agreeing the best way forward (Habermas [1984](#)). Even if one rejects such idealism, adopting a position closer to Mouffe's ([2005](#)) framework of agonistic pluralism, with winners and losers in a potentially emotional, identity-based political struggle and debate, if losers lose based on what they perceive to be the winners' false claims, then ensuing social discontent with the democratic outcome decreases the legitimacy of the winners' decisions taken based on their claims.

Production  
As The CEO, Mark Zuckerberg's presidential election news feeds as "most used" by Facebook, Zuckerberg,

them; lack of engagement was problematic because the less that people engage with content, the less likely their newsfeed would surface it. What Facebook did not want, however, was to become “arbiters of truth ourselves”, because it believes in “giving people a voice, which means erring on the side of letting people share what they want whenever possible” (Zuckerberg 2016b). Instead, Facebook preferred to “find ways for our community to tell us what content is most meaningful” (Zuckerberg 2016a). However, within 11 days of the US presidential election, Facebook’s position changed from declaring that Facebook’s impact was minimal, to specifying how it planned to combat fake news. Unusually, it revealed features under construction comprising: elevating the quality of “related articles” in the news feed; third-party verification by fact-checking organisations; stronger technical detection of misinformation; easier user reporting of fake news; warning labels on stories flagged as false; listening to advice from the news industry; and “disrupting fake news economics” (Zuckerberg 2016b).<sup>4</sup> We evaluate these solutions below.

## Elevate Quality of “Related Articles” in News Feed

In response to a question at SXSW about whether Facebook should reshuffle its algorithm to reduce filter bubbles, El-Sharawy (2017) states: “Facebook should take total responsibility—it is their problem—but I don’t know what they should do.” Prior to the fake news furore, earlier in 2016 Facebook was criticised by conservatives for using human editors to suppress conservative news stories in its Trending Topics. Initiating wider debates about Facebook’s role in news distribution, journalists condemned Facebook for its absence of public mission in its commercial focus on giving users only what they found pleasing (Carlson 2017). Facebook’s difficulty is that it needs to acknowledge that it is more than just a neutral pipes platform, but as explained earlier, it does not want to be accused of censorship. Nonetheless, since mid-December 2016, Facebook has been testing its algorithms to see if it can make fake news stories appear lower in its News Feed. Similarly, to combat the problem of Google ranking

false news, Google over-indexes on quality (Liu et al. 2017).

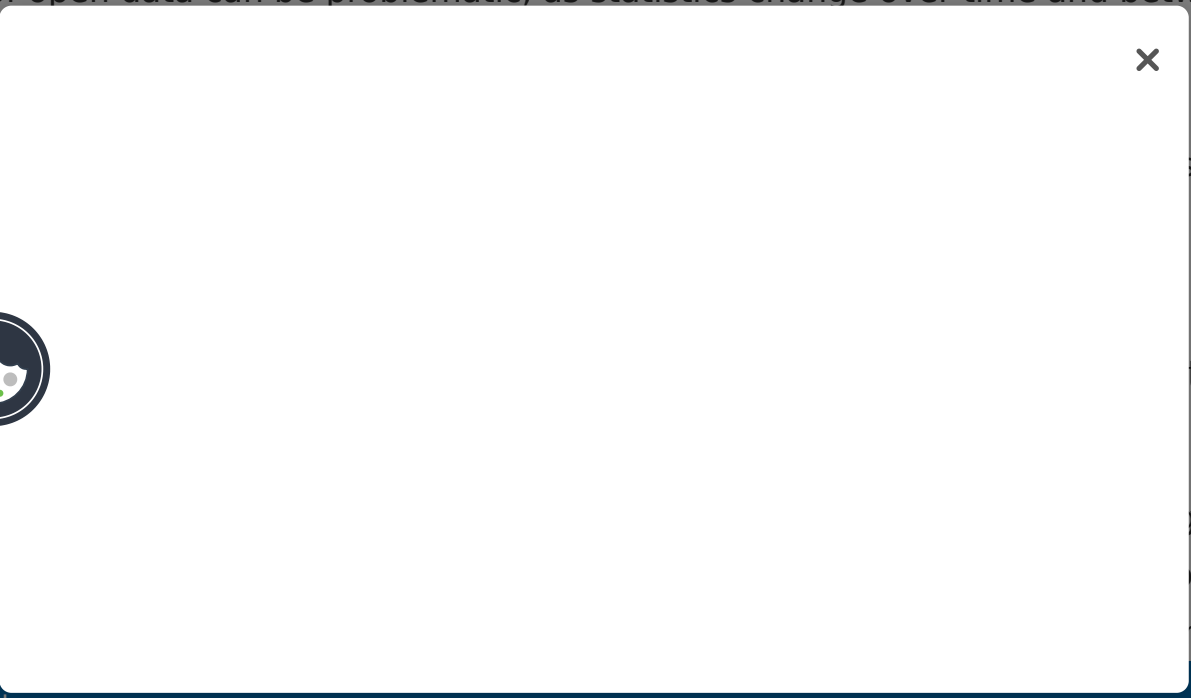
Third-party verification by fact-checking organisations

The fact-checking process involves determining the accuracy of the content. This confirms or contradicts the information with several fact-checking organisations. ABC to fact-checking organisations. These are flagged as fake news.

debunk (for instance, suspicious stories getting maximum attention), marking the story as “disputed” when Facebook users attempt to share it (Mosseri [2016](#)). Eric Carvin (Social Media Editor, Associated Press) hopes that, at minimum, this may make users feel embarrassed to share the story. The news organisations involved in fact-checking also write a debunk story (Bridges et al. [2017](#))

Experiments in automated fact-checking are also being conducted. Automation accelerates the fact-checking process and expands the audience quantity and type for fact-checked news (Adair et al. [2017](#)): expansion of audience type is important as typical conspiracy theory audiences are different to those who consume fact-checked news (Bounegru et al. [2017](#), 46). For instance, UK-based fact-checking organisation, Full Fact, is building statistics that finds patterns of claims, thereby producing data that can be used to train machine learning (Babakar and Moy [2016](#)). In another experiment explained by Bill Adair (Knight Professor of Journalism and Public Policy, Duke University), Duke University’s Share the Fact widget (developed with Google and Jigsaw) identifies the person being fact-checked, the statement, conclusion and name of fact-checker, and visually creates a widget that goes in the fact-checking article and can be shared. This allows Google to recognise and highlight fact-checked articles while also creating a database of fact checks and a structure that can be used for voice search engines such as Amazon Echo (Adair et al. [2017](#)).

While a promising avenue, fact-checking has problems. According to Alexios Mantzarlis (Director, International Fact-Checking Network/Poynter Institute), of the approximately 120 fact-checking organisations worldwide, most are charitable and face financial challenges, typically running on less than \$100,000 per year. Automated fact-checking faces numerous obstacles. Mantzarlis points out that claims can be very nuanced, making them hard for a machine to evaluate. Mevan Babakar (Digital Products Manager, Full Fact) notes that the quality of open data can be problematic, as statistics change over time and between



countries. Fact-checking also faces issues of accuracy and perhaps most importantly, the fact that it assumes that people will change their beliefs or stimulate new ones. The targeting of Fake News is often seen as false and easily recognised as fake news (to be mental



problem: the economics underpinning the spread of fake news and the propagandistic

intentions of professional persuaders.

Methods

Even if users are seen as integral to solving the fake news problem, there are three

Fake News: Historical and Contemporary Context

psychological perception issues with the solution of flagging. Firstly, if people hear something

Contemporary Fake News: Social and Democratic Problems

a lot, they perceive it as true, even for facts that contradict prior knowledge (Fazio et al.

2015). Thus, as Lisa Fazio (Vanderbilt University) explains:

Media Economics and Digital Advertising: A Solution Lies Within the Problem

a second reading of something (for instance, a falsity) makes us more likely to think

The Near-horizon: Automated Fake News and Manipulation of Fellow-feeling

it is true. This makes it difficult when trying to dispute these false stories, as you

don't want to repeat the false story to make it appear as true in people's heads.

Conclusion

(Bridges et al. 2017)

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Secondly, people often forget the source of presented facts, including that they came from an

FUNDING

unreliable source (Henkel and Mattson 2011). Fazio explains the consequences of this for

flagging: "if a headline is marked false, we may remember the headline but not the false tag"

(Bridges et al. 2017). A third problem is that prior beliefs influence how people remember

References

corrected facts. This was demonstrated in the 2003 Iraq War, in studies on whether people

remembered the wrong information or the correct information in inaccurate news that was

subsequently corrected (Lewandowsky et al. 2005). Thus, flagging stories as false may not

improve people's stock of correct knowledge (Bridges et al. 2017).

## Listen to Advice from the News Industry

A further strategy proposed by Facebook is to listen to advice from the news industry, from which four types of innovation have been forthcoming.

Firstly, journalists have proposed tweaking algorithms on news sites to break people out of

their filter bubbles by suggesting them to read the news of the other side, or that

would not be a feature that

shows filter bubbles to read (Wilson

2016). However, filter bubbles

would be a feature that filtered material

they did not see.

Secondly, news sources (John

Bridges, 2017) have proposed a solution to the problem of

journalists' filter bubbles, a rapidly turns

these into filter bubbles.

transparency to bring truth

**A third innovation is to give people more direct interactions with their political representatives, to recalibrate what information they trust. For instance, the US app Countable breaks down news and legislative bills into simple English, and enables people to immediately communicate their position on any bill or issue with their lawmaker. Andrea Seabrook (Managing Editor, Countable) explains:**

**If we can get people to often and easily engage, then at the end of the political cycle, we will have decoupled people from the narrative that politicians will tell them what is the truth about the election. People will be able to see for themselves, by the time they next vote in 2018. (Seabrook and MacLaggan [2017](#))**

However, such solutions, while potentially impactful in rebuilding engagement between politicians and voters, are nascent experiments. While they may encourage reporting on only what is actionable, there is no guarantee that this new format will be successful among users brought up on a fake news diet.

A fourth journalistic innovation is collaborative journalism to reduce the costs of fact-checking. Responding to concerns about upcoming French elections in April and May 2017, First Draft created collaborative journalism project Cross Check, where French newsrooms check each other's accuracy. Running from February to May 2017, it allowed at least 17 French regional and international media companies to power a website where the public could report suspicious content, or ask questions for Cross Check's media partners to respond to. Various data and tools were contributed by different media partners, including Facebook which supports the vetting platform through dedicated tools and media literacy efforts to explain the verification process and keep audiences updated with confirmed and disputed election information (Bridges et al. [2017](#)). That forthcoming elections have been singled out as needing this sort of initiative is no doubt a response to the rising tide of populism across Europe.

As remains to be seen, political and commercial solutions. Since the 2016 election, it remains to reduce the costs of advertising. (Mosseri [2016](#)). Perhaps a solution, and it was based on fake news. It is



# Media Economics and Digital Advertising: A Solution Lies Within the Problem

Methods

Fake News: Historical and Contemporary Context

Rather than simply relying on social networking sites to find the “right” algorithm while

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negotiating censorship accusations; on Facebook users to exercise rational judgement in

Proposed Solutions

recognising, flagging and sharing fake news; and on resource-poor journalists to experiment

Media Economics and Digital Advertising: A Solution Lies Within the Problem

with breaking people out of their filter bubbles while committing to fact-checking; we suggest

that the role of digital advertisers in proliferating fake news also needs scrutiny. After all,

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many of the fake news websites of the 2016 US presidential election were ultimately created

Conclusion

not for propaganda, but for money.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

## Digital Advertising Enables Fake News Sites to Profit

### FUNDING

There is a longstanding relationship between the press and its need for advertising revenue.

Footnotes

Underpinning this is the fiscal value of audience attention, as the rates that publishers charge

References

advertisers depend upon the size and nature of the audience they can deliver. Unfortunately,

as explained earlier, the societal shift towards digital media, and its economic model, has not

favoured legacy news organisations. Conversely, the new economic underpinnings enable

fake news sites to flourish.

It is the way digital advertising is paid for and served that favours fake news sites. Whereas in

print news, advertisers and agencies working on their behalf carefully choose their news

outlet, advert format and whether an adjacent story might damage a brand, such

consideration is often not possible online because of the nature of online behavioural

advertising. While advertisers may buy direct from an online news publisher, behavioural

targeting techniques are more commonly used. This is the practice of tracking people’s online

behaviour. The principle

behind this is attention.

Furthermore, they are

effective processes that sit

between

FIGURE



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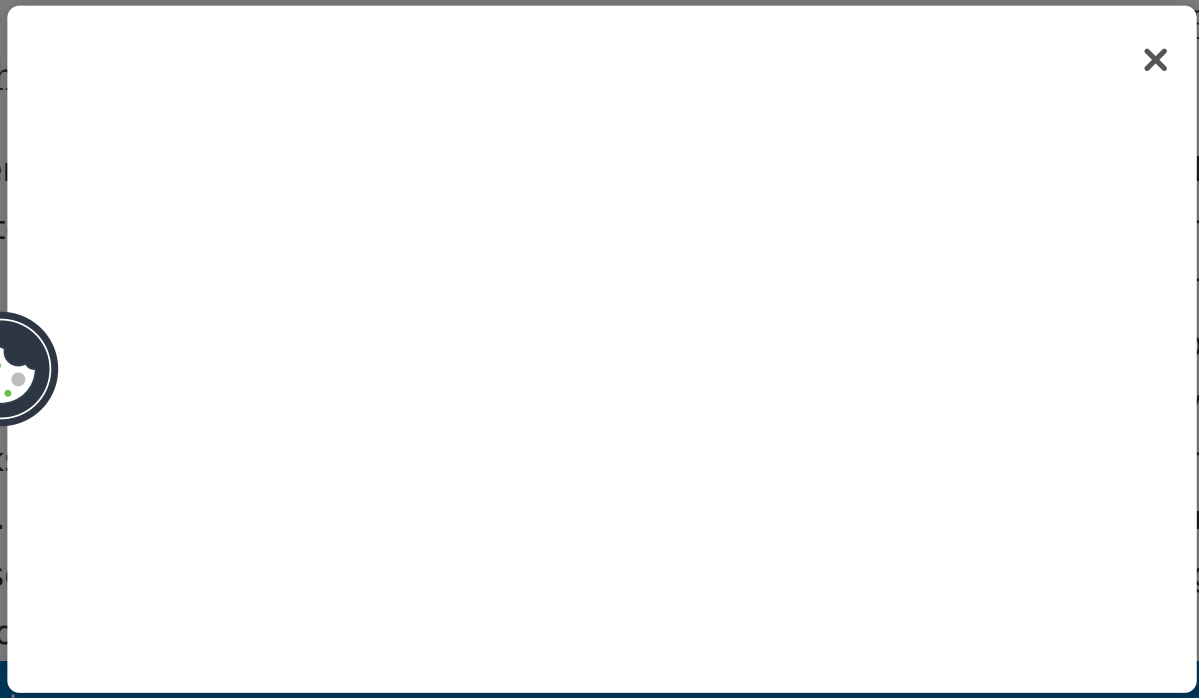
Ad networks (such as Doubleclick) are thus able to offer advertisers a massive range of websites to exhibit their advertisements, allowing them to reach potentially large, but also profiled, audiences. For sense of scale, Google's Doubleclick ad network spans over two million websites that reach over 90 per cent of people on the internet. Small and large publishers alike benefit because ad networks give publishers a way to profit from their advertising spaces without having to go to the effort of selling individual slots to advertisers.

On top of this, programmatic techniques (called "programmatic" by the advertising industry) allow additional data to be used to further target the advertising. Programmatic allows advertisers to target consumers automatically based on certain metrics obtained through algorithms. It differs from behavioural advertising in that it draws on a wider variety of sources than data from ad networks to target audiences (such as first-party data from the brand advertising or third-party data about potential audiences). It also provides opportunity to use automated means to create (as well as target) advertising: information about the audience can be used to personalise the design of advertising for identified audiences.

Critical to our concern with fake news is that although advertising served by ad networks maximises an advertisement's reach to whomsoever and wherever a desirable person might be, advertisers relinquish control over where their advertising is displayed. Such automation of the ad space buying process has resulted in advertisers having less understanding of the websites and pages they are appearing on. Indeed, adverts for brands such as Honda, Thomson Reuters, Halifax, Argos, John Lewis, Disney, and the Victoria and Albert Museum have appeared on content promoting Islamic State (ISIS) and neo-Nazi content. This is because the behavioural and programmatic advertising profiles the person rather than the website they are looking at. Similarly, if the user looks at a fake news site, the adverts will appear there.

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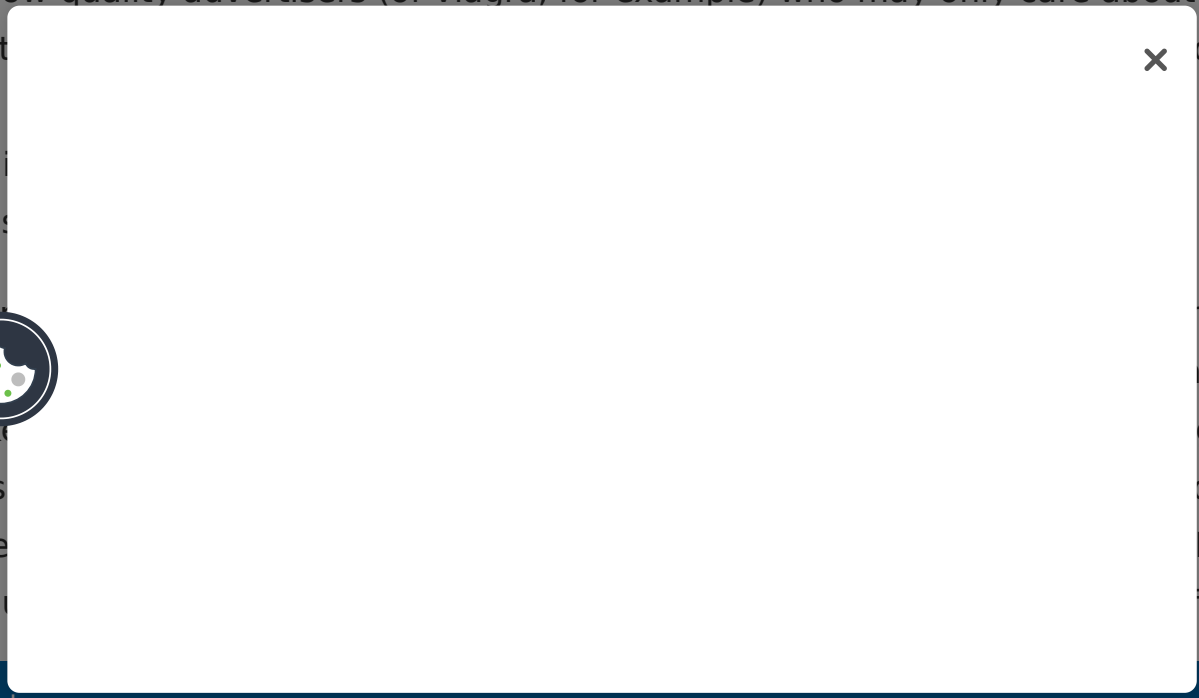


ad networks need to be involved to prevent fake news sites that have been ejected from one ad network from simply moving to another, as currently happens (Bounegru et al. [2017](#); Silverman et al. [2017](#)).

Fake News: Historical and Contemporary Context

As such, to tackle the fake news problem at its economic heart, we recommend that governments consult with self-regulatory bodies that represent ad networks, advertising agencies and advertisers (e.g. Internet Advertising Bureau and International Advertising Association). The possibility here is twofold in that: (1) governments can pressurise advertising associations that largely enjoy self-regulatory status; and (2) advertising associations are well placed to educate their members, especially advertisers. Given that the advertising chain requires publishers, ad networks and advertisers to function, if advertisers place financial pressure on the system, there is scope to reduce the income of both fake news publishers and the ad networks that host them. For instance, on clicking on fake news website "abcnews.com.co" with the Ghostery add-on, it reveals two active ad networks: Viglink<sup>5</sup> and ShareThis.<sup>6</sup> Both consider themselves to be respectable companies: Viglink has venture capital backing from Google and ShareThis has funding from leading venture capital firms (such as Draper Fisher Jurvetson), and is already connected to the Digital Advertising Alliance which is an association that claims to promote responsible privacy practices. In general, these ad networks are not outliers, but seek to lead, and be part of, the mainstream advertising community. Pressure can be applied on these to be more discriminating.

There is merit in the point of Silverman et al. ([2017](#)) that if fake news sites are rejected by mainstream ad networks, they will eventually gravitate to less discriminating ones. However, we posit that with greater transparency in the system for advertisers, non-fake news publishers and advertisers are likely (or can be encouraged) to stop using the less discriminating ad network. This would eventually leave less discriminating ad networks with mostly low-quality advertisers (of Viagra, for example) who may only care about the likelihood



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# The Near-horizon: Automated Fake News and Manipulation of Fellow-feeling

Methods

## Fake News: Historical and Contemporary Context

Given the rapid onset, scale and nature of the contemporary fake news problem, it is important to consider near-future possibilities. In the context of fake news, this includes the ability to manipulate public sentiment via automated fake news. This distinct possibility arises because the success of fake news comes from its creators having financial self-interest in “feeling-into” online conversations and creating headlines to resonate with specific groups (such as pro-Trump supporters). There is a clear and relatively simple opportunity to marry technology that detects online emotion via the language and words that individual and groups post, with automated news, namely news headlines and body copy written by computers.

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## FUNDING Understanding and Knowing How to Manipulate Public Moods

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Fake news creators are already “feeling-into”, and profiting from, collectives from afar. For instance, Macedonian fake news providers exploit the beliefs, desires and concerns of specific US audiences. They can do this because online social media communities (such as on Facebook) already encourage echo chambers to form, be this via filter bubbles, confirmation bias or both. Earlier, we noted the rise of “empathic media” (McStay [2016b](#))—namely technologies that gauge emotions, intentions and life contexts to maximise appropriateness of feedback and content. Of most relevance to our concerns with fake news is analysis of emotions in words and images. Such sentiment analysis is widely used to search and cross-reference social media data and news articles for insights into social feeling towards a given issue that would be valuable to a client organisation (such as marketers).

The next step from understanding public moods is knowing how to manipulate them. A well-

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reasonable to posit a positive feedback loop that amplifies an affective tone. Fake news already represents an increase in emotional charge, but automated news has the potential to intensify this situation.

Fake News: Historical and Contemporary Context

Automated journalism (or “algo-journalism”) is increasingly used by legacy news agencies such as Associated Press to provide detail-heavy news that does not require (expensive)

human interpretation or analysis (McStay [2016a](#)). Algo-journalism is typically used to distil and report key features of complex texts such as investment holdings, billing records and

sports statistics, with data storytelling provided by companies such as IBM Watson and Narrative Science. In 2016, The Washington Post experimented with software bots to generate

more insightful stories with a stronger editorial voice on stories about election wins and electoral trends. These work by editors creating narrative templates and stock key phrases

that account for various potential outcomes which the software bot then matches and merges with structured data—in the case of the US election, via data clearinghouse VoteSmart.org,

but also “Associated Press data, historic data and polling” (Andrews et al. [2017](#)). Given how

simple fake news storylines are compared to election coverage, there is no reason why fake news stories could not be generated by algo-journalism.

Automated Insights also create automated journalism, although algorithmically rather than template-based. Joe Procopio (Chief Innovation Officer, Automated Insights) explains that

algorithms “determine the tone [our emphasis]. It gives us insights as to what the most important part of the story is ... We do all this algorithmically to get the reader the most

important things they need from that story” (Andrews et al. [2017](#)). Other users of algo-journalism are the Norwegian News Agency. While currently using it to deliver coverage of

local sports fixtures that otherwise would go unreported, the news agency envisions that it would use algo-journalism for any repetitive stories that use regularly updated data.

According to Helen Vogt (Director of Product Development, Norwegian News Agency), algo-journalism

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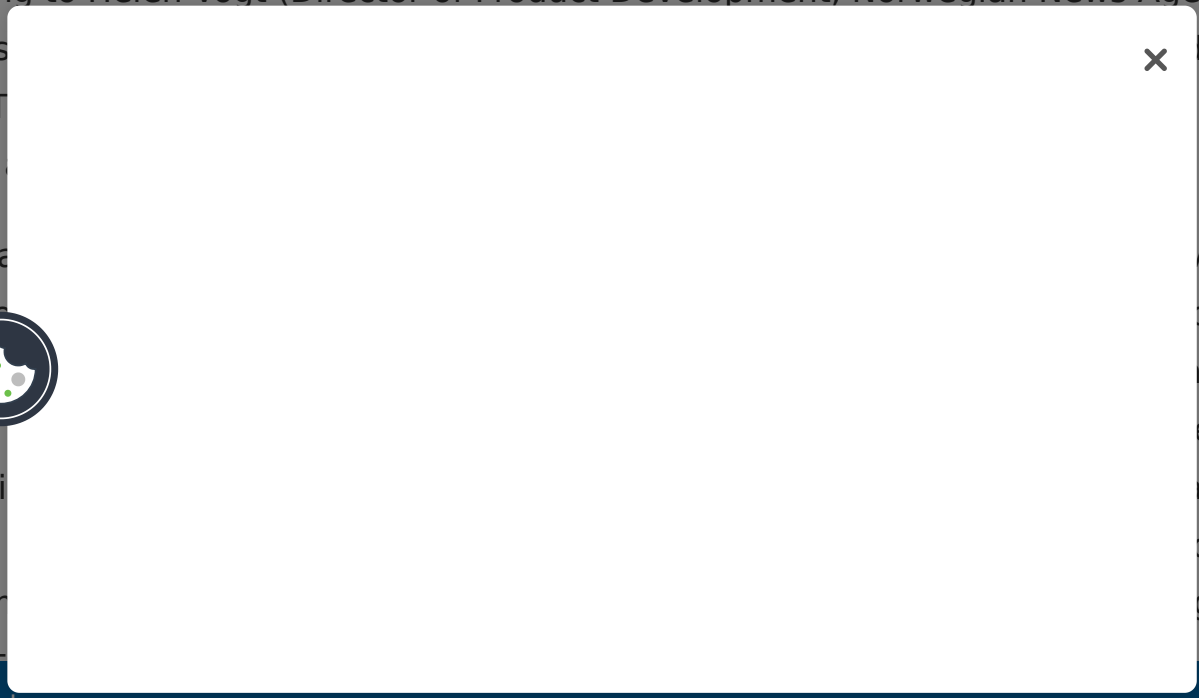
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# The Potential for Empathically Optimised Automated Fake News

Introduction

Contemporary fake news already operates in the context of “feeling-into” online collectives, filter bubbles, confirmation bias and echo chambers. The opportunity for computer-generated fake news, weaponised and optimised to resonate with social media users, seems entirely feasible given the current state of sentiment analysis and automated journalism, as well as the affective tenor of the Trump presidential campaign. The process would be to: understand key trigger words and images among target groups; create fake news and measure its engagement (via click-throughs, shares, likes and effectiveness of message elements); and then have machines learn in an evolutionary capacity from this experience to create stories with more potency to increase engagement and thereafter advertising revenue. The feedback process also has implications for use of aggressive propaganda and information wars (at the time of writing, US journalism and US senate intelligence inquiries were concerned about Russia’s attempts to influence elections abroad, including the United States and Europe). We suggest that the commercial and political phenomenon of empathically optimised automated fake news is on the near-horizon.

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## Conclusion

Fake news is not a new phenomenon, but the 2016 US presidential election showed us a new iteration, driven by profit and exploited by professional persuaders. While a laudable variety of solutions to the deeply socially and democratically problematic contemporary fake news phenomenon have been proposed, each faces specific obstacles to achieving widespread implementation and impact. While we recognise the need for all these solutions to take root, our recommendation, to focus on digital advertising, addresses the contemporary phenomenon of empathically optimised automated fake news. A key challenge for regulators take immediate action on digital advertising is that there is no silver-bullet solution, because content that cannot be filtered out by algorithms and guards against the spread of fake news, as a large and powerful government cannot pre-empt this, by following a narrative of empathically optimised fake news. While digital advertising is a potent and

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# DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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2. Available at [https://www.facebook.com/pg/Breitbart/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=10152968700630354](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Breitbart/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10152968700630354).

3. See <https://factitious.augamestudio.com/#/>.

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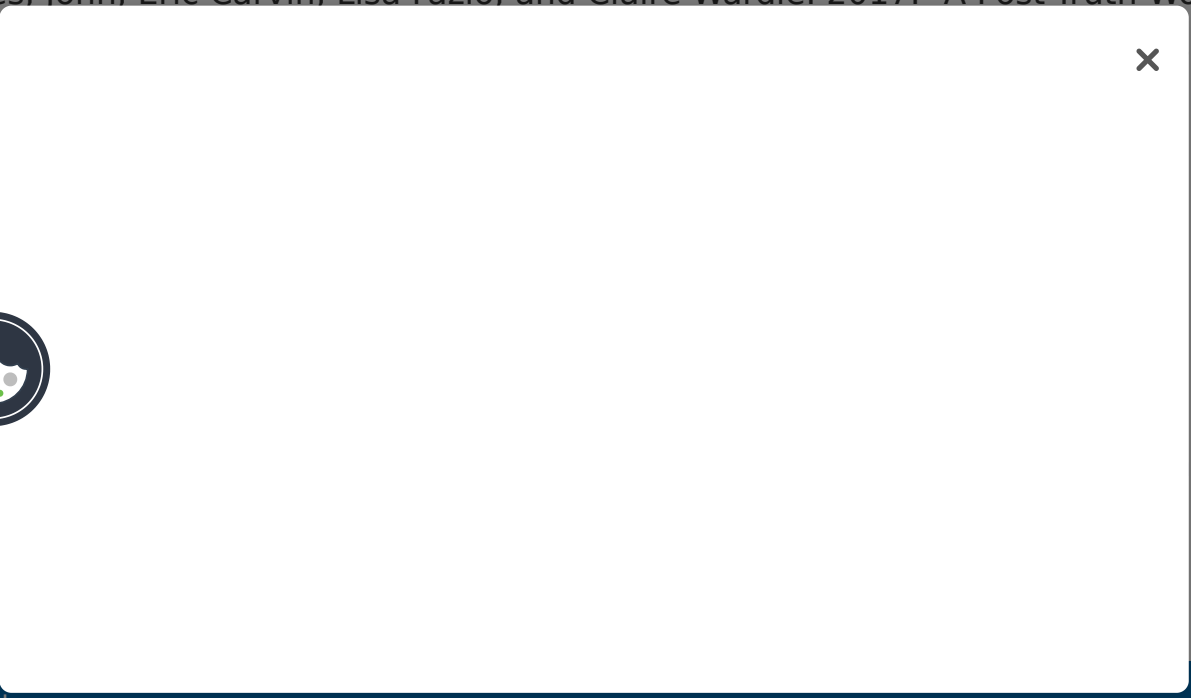
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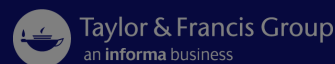
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