Don't Tell Me Fairytales: Disinformatzya, Trolls, Fake News

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Introduction

New technology platforms and communication services on like social media, like Twitter, have altered the way people consume information and how often they share their thoughts on any number of issues. People are habitually more inclined to take a break during work hours by visiting social media sites.

The medium for spreading false information has changed from leaflets, radio, and television to tweets, bot automation, and organized fake Facebook groups (Weedon, Nuland, Stamos, 2017). Technology, particularly social media, has reduced the need to be in physical proximity of the targeted audience and increased the speed and scale messages reach the public. Time, distance, national borders, or even government agencies no longer pose a risk to, nor constrain the agent of deception from targeting a population with propaganda intended to distort the truth (Gu et al., 2017; Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017; Waltzman, 2017). The public is susceptible to deceptively false information when that false information is presented as fact. It becomes more challenging, if not impossible, for the public to discern between sourced based reporting, misleading statements, and disinformation without confirming the sender, the event being reported, and the source of information.

Fake News, or the spreading of false information, is no new phenomenon. Propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns have long been chronicled as tools of psychological warfare, in order to support of military strategies or undermine political parties, interest groups in numerous countries throughout history (Mull & Wallin, 2013; Black, 2011). Commonly there is a differentiation between mis- and disinformation, suggesting that false information is spread either unknowingly or on purpose, respectively. In today's digital age, where more and more people receive their information online from Social Media platforms, spreading of Fake News and awareness of it is increasing.

Due to the tremendous impact of Fake News on society and increased user awareness on Social Media platforms, the topic has become an interesting and growing research area. Various sub-topics inside the field of Fake News have been formed over the last years. The purpose of this study is to identify controversial events or topics on microblogging platforms, and to discuss the evolution of mis-, dis- and mal-information, fake news or campaigns, trolls, and digital fairy tales and present a descriptive approach regarding

these emerging digital garbage trends.

Background

Information operations, also known as influence operations, have extended beyond traditional vectors, such as radio, newspaper, television programs, and into the cyber domain with the rise of social media and the Internet. Information operations include the dissemination of propaganda to influence a target audience and collection of tactical information about the audience (Waltzman, 2017). The immersion of information operations into the cyber domain, particularly through social media sites, has resulted in a new method of persuading a target audience. Social media democratized information operations because every user can communicate and exponentially more users. In addition, social media can help quantify and measure the scope of influence on an audience and helps conceal the true propaganda authors through bots, fake personas, and sock puppets (Waltzman, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The concepts used to sow confusion and divisiveness in public opinion has generally remained the same, but the medium and tactics have changed as social media was introduced to the public. The concept of fake news has been a common term used over the last two years and is synonymous with cyber deception, cyber propaganda, political bots, sock puppets, information warfare, cognitive hacking, and confirmation bias (Gu et al., 2017). Actors have deployed bots or political bots as a new medium to engineer political discussion or push pre-determined topics that would elicit reactions from consumers online (Howard, Kollanyi, & Woolley, 2016).

Propaganda and Information Disorder

Fake news is one aspect of a larger concept to manipulate public opinion called propaganda in information operations. Most people tend to associate negative connotations to the term propaganda and believe the term propaganda has historical connections to oppressive regimes, who are fearful of information sharing, individuality, and the free-flow of ideas (Taylor, 2003). This sentiment reinforces the idea that propaganda is based on lies, deception, and false information, and only non-democratic countries engage in the practice. A general definition of propaganda is a neutral practice of spreading ideas, facts, allegations, or anecdotes for the purpose of persuading an individual or group (Taylor, 2003; Merriam-Webster, 2017). Propaganda itself is neither good nor bad; however, the intentions of propagandists determine the moral and ethical judgment on the information delivered to a target audience.

Propaganda has been leveraged in many both military and civilian domains, including brand management, public relations, and advertising groups, which might promote a product based on consumer's location, gender, and past shopping history (Marwick

& Lewis, 2017). Propaganda, in the context of social media, particularly, Twitter, has increased the exposure of information and provided immediate data on how the information influenced a target audience. Social media has reduced the operations and distribution cost of dissemination information compared to traditional means of diffusing information, such as print media and television (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In addition, social media algorithms and platforms, such as Twitter, have empowered users to shape online discussions on societal and political issues and events that users believed need more attention. Tweets and retweets propagated information through the Twitter network and allowed users cycle news feed on everyday events as they happened and bypassed the traditional gatekeepers of information, mainly newspapers, editorial boards, and editors (Chamberlain, 2010; Ferrara et al., 2016; Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017; Waltzman, 2017).

Twitter has helped individuals, groups, corporations, and governments to amplify their propaganda on particular issues because of the echo-chamber effect and trending features on Twitter. Followers can respond directly, negatively or positively, or retweet a message to showcase their agreement with a particular point of view. The sender's message aims to trigger critical thought, response, and elicit a change in behavior from its readers while at the same time, promote their original viewpoint. Propaganda aims to compound the recipient's biases with information confirming their pre-determined beliefs. The propaganda message persuades them to react in a manner aligned to the objectives of the propagandist, which is practiced in both the military and civilian industries (Francis 2016; Waltzman, 2017).

Television news still maintains a slight edge over online platforms for how people consume their news (Gottfried and Shearer, 2018). This could increase the amount of misinformation and disinformation to which people are exposed. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) have looked at the issue of fake news and have suggested the term fails to represent the full issue of distorted information properly and that the term itself has been misrepresented by political leaders and others to fit their agenda and not its original meaning. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) have come up with the term information disorder, which they suggest better encapsulates the issues involved how information is conveyed to the public. There are three different types of Information Disorder. The different types show how false information is always an issue to the public from being "false to having "intent to harm." Information is power, as is the distortion of that information, as shown in figure 1.
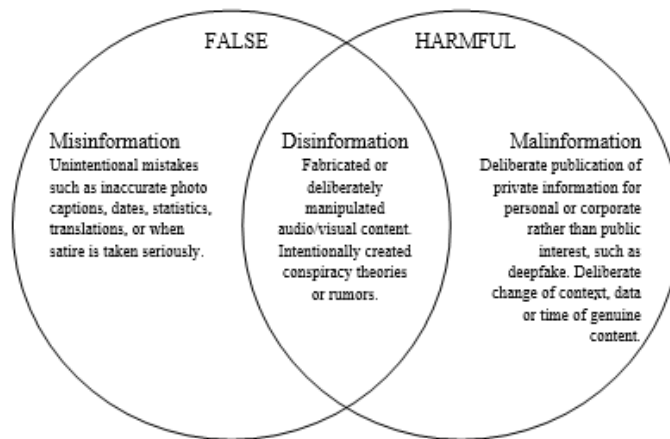
Figure 1. Types of Information Disorder

Information is power as is the distortion of that information. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) Figure 1 shows the differences between disinformation and misinformation, which make up Information Disorder. Both terms share the basic meaning of spreading "false information." The differences between the two terms are whether the spreading of questionable information is done "intentionally or not." Disinformation is when false information is spread on purpose. Misinformation, which was picked as the 2018 word of the year by Dictionary.com, is when false information is spread by mistake. Max de Haldevang further explains that disinformation looks at how others act and misinformation looks at the users themselves. This is mostly because the role of disinformation involves intent and the objective of twisting information to pull over on people where that is not an issue with misinformation. (de Haldevang, 2018). Figure 2 explains the seven forms of information disorder.
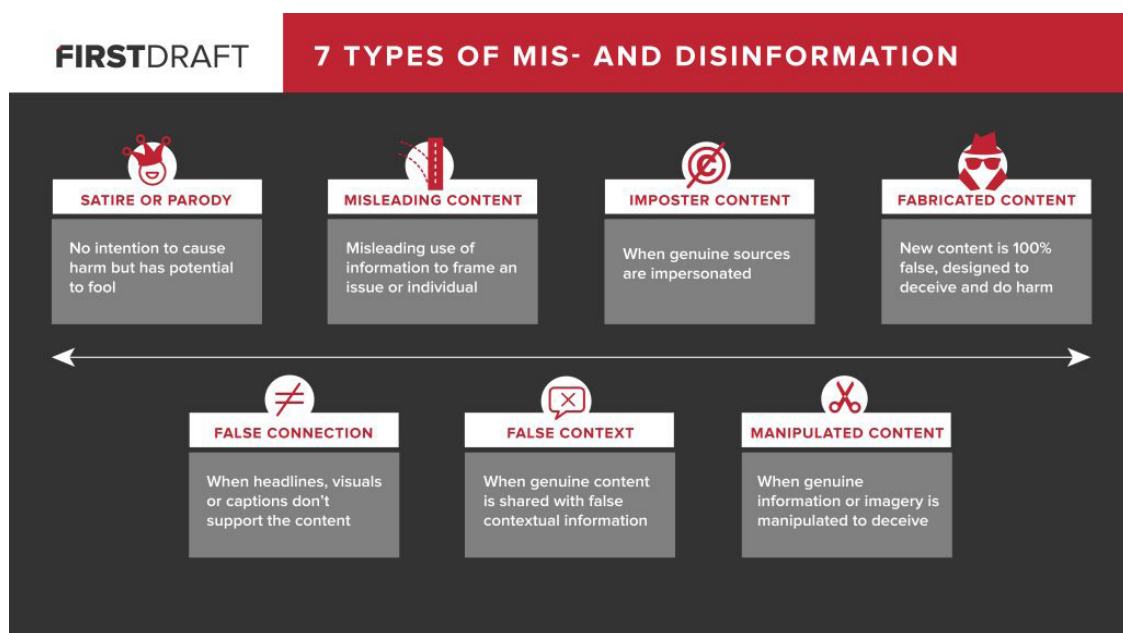

Figure 2. Seven Forms of Information Disorder

Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation (disinformatzya) are frequently used within the propaganda phenomenon. Misinformation is incorrect information or the act of intentionally misinforming, but displayed in a way that provokes a particular result from the reader, unlike propaganda, which might be based on fact. Ignorance and lack of knowledge are typically the reasons behind a misinformed statement, even though the statement and sender's intention might not be to deceive the reader. Disinformation is a similar concept where false information deliberately spreads, especially when supplied by a government, agent of a government, or third party onto the mainstream news media with the aim of influencing the reader's policies (Desai, Mooney, & Oehrli, 2017; Wardle, 2017). Twitter and other social media platforms are a terrific medium of broadcasting disinformation because senders can cater messages to specific audiences who share common characteristics and interests.

Fake News

Fake news has risen significantly since the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The Guardian reported that Collins Dictionary, which reviews billions of words in their "Collins corpus", said that usage of the term, fake news, increased by 365% since 2016 (Flood, 2016). Fake news opens up to the concept of "post-truth," which is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Wang, 2016).

Fake news can also be defined as fictitious news manipulated to appear as credible news designed to deceive the reader. Fake news should not be confused with satiric headlines, conspiracy theory reports, false statements by politicians, inaccurate reporting, and reports that are misleading, but not outright false (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Misinformation and propaganda are constantly practiced in everyday settings such as advertising, diplomacy, and persuasive literature, yet for the most part, are not intended to deceive the reader deliberately. Some researchers, such as philosopher and ethicist, Sissela Bok, believe that it is more important to unearth the intentions of the sender and if they are trying to deceive the audience (Brennen, 2017). Whether a message is a fact or fiction is merely a byproduct of their intentions and only helps to establish the message's validity (Brennen, 2017). Therefore, one of the main issues with classifying messages as the fake is determining if the sender intentionally manipulated information within a message. Fake news is certainly not a new concept and recently received more attention because of the amount of fake news online that is exacerbated by social media platforms. The social media platforms generated artificial popularity of a fake message that tends to be politically controversial or divisive (Cook et al., 2014; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Schreckinger, 2016).

Fake news sites are not only popular in America, but also in various countries such as Turkey. A Turkish guy has inspired from an American fabricated news site theonion.com, and he founded a similar platform in Turkey, called zaytung.com, which is quite popular in Turkey. In the beginning, the founder of Zaytung has begun to write self-fabricated news as a hobby. Today, Zaytung has more than 100,000 authors, increases its income every year, keeps itself on the agenda, and creates an anti-depressant effect against the depressing news. Zaytung differs from other news sites with its content and the way it is presented. At first glance, it seems very difficult to understand whether the news, which seems to be based on a reasonable and genuine basis, are real or imagined, taking into account the rules of news writing in a very serious manner. But as you continue to read the news, a humorous fiction emerges hidden under this serious style. Although this humorous fiction is the result of a creative mind or imagination, it feeds its content significantly from real events and facts.

Fake news has become such a trending topic in the news and social media for several reasons. Today, anyone can research free online tutorials on how to create a message board, or websites for very little overhead cost and generate advertising revenue from the site. Further, the increased use of social media as a source of news and an increase in the number of social media users in 2016 has allowed fake news to spread uninhibited from restrictions or regulation. Since the early 2000s, there has been a steady decline in the trust of media to report accurate and fair news fully, according to Gallup polls (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The decline of trust in their reported trust in the media is sharply different along political party lines. Republicans had a significant drop in 2016 and more apparent compared to Democrats in the polls. Researchers, Allcott and Gentzkow, hypothesized that the decline of trust in the media might be both a cause and byproduct of the popularity of fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Gottfried and Shearer, 2016).

Trolls

Most anecdotal reports on the creators of fake news have surmised that the actors were located in various parts of the world. The multi-national actors contributed to the online feed of false information, for example in the period of presidential election in the U.S. Buzzfeed and the Guardian identified over 100 pro-Trump websites that originated out of Veles, Macedonia, where local teenagers created at least 140 US politics websites (Davies & Silverman, 2016; Silverman & Alexander, 2016; Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The political websites mimicked the names of credible news sources, such as USConservativeToday.com, DonaldTrumpNews.co, USADailyPolitics.com, and some of the largest websites had a Facebook presence. The content of these sites was primarily sourced or plagiarized from right-wing sites in the United States (Davies & Silverman, 2016; Silverman & Alexander, 2016). The local Macedonian teenagers

attempted to promote fake news related to pro-Bernie Sanders or leftist opinions. The content posted on these fake news sites related to Trump outperformed by the number of views, shares, and likes in comparison to the opposition, particularly on Facebook (Silverman & Alexander, 2016).

Sometimes the disinformation is shared by trusted media platforms which widen the effect size of the information pollution. A website originated from the U.S., Disinfomedia's most widely shared fake news story posted on an affiliated website, the Denver Guardian, was an article stating that an FBI agent who was tasked with investigating Hillary Clinton's private email server was found dead in an apparent murder-suicide. The story was completely false but shared over half a million times on Facebook alone (Mikkelson, 2016; Sydell, 2016).

Other owners of fake news sites have been unmasked through investigative news reporting. Paul Horner ran a successful fake news website called the National Report for several years. The National Report produced numerous fairytales. The website published a story regarding a 2013 report that President Obama used the money to keep a Muslim museum open during the federal government shutdown. The story became one of the websites most circulated stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Services offering to produce fake news have created new underground marketplaces to manipulate public opinion. Research by TrendMicro security firm identified English-speaking marketplaces for fake news-as-a-service in nation-states such as Russia, China, and parts of the Middle East (Gu et al., 2017). The Russian propaganda model enlisted paid trolls, online users who deliberately attempt to elicit an emotional response from readers, to generate fake news. Trolls diffused fake news through fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LiveJournal, and vKontakte, the Russian equivalent to Twitter and Facebook (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Trolls were on duty twenty-four hours per day, in twelve-hour shifts, with daily quotas of 135-posted comments of approximately 200 character, according to a former Russian troll (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

A troll or a propagandist spreading false information might be motivated by several factors including financial gain, political or religious ideology and beliefs, and notoriety among online peers (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The list of factors is not limited to only these few but can include a wide range of motivators. Some propagandists have found fake news propagation offers an incentive because of online advertising's business model that generates short-term revenue for the number of user-clicks to a website. The incentive created a fake news industry that generated news-grabbing headlines on websites. Anyone with some technical knowledge and small financial backing could publish false headlines and narratives that reward the website owner and influences

emotion and behavior responses from readers (Silverman & Alexander, 2016; Tynan, 2016; Sydell, 2016).

In addition, motivating factors differ for propagandists in a civilian and military context. Military propagandists develop series and packages of detailed plans when conducting influence operations that may utilize false narratives. The difference in the military context is that soldiers are motivated by a unified mission which agreed upon a set of parameters to engage a target audience. The military propagandists have an overarching sense of nationalism and patriotism dedicating their efforts towards their belief in a righteous cause. The motivating factors in the civilian context range from personal grievances with a government to conspiracy theorists rallied around a common alternative political ideology (Markwick & Lewis, 2017).

Fact-Checking Networks as a Solution

As the number of fabricated news sites increases, people are taking measures to avoid being fooled. For this reason, there are sites developed in order to confirm the accuracy of the news. Weeks' (2015) online experiment with randomly selected, English-speaking U.S. adults found misinformation corrections were effective, even in the presence of partisan motivations and emotional experiences (Weeks, 2015).

The site teyit.org used in Turkey is one of the fact checking (confirmation) sites serving news confirmation purpose. teyit.org works to ensure that internet users can access the right information by making verifications in many areas from common known mistakes, suspicious information on the agenda of social media, from the claims brought by the media to the agenda. Thus, it enables citizens and non-governmental organizations using the Internet as their primary news source to learn which information is right and which is wrong on the online platforms. teyit.org aims to give the habit of critical thinking and increase the literacy of new media. teyit.org proves that it is impartial in its work, has acted fairly, that its resources, financial structure, and organization are transparent, that its methodology is shared publicly and that it publishes its correction policy. By proving this policy to the independent board of directors and the independent evaluator, it has been entitled to place the IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network) emblem on its site.

Conclusion

Over the past three years, the media and the public have witnessed the impact of a modern-day propaganda campaign designed to exhaust your critical thinking and annihilate to the truth which is known by several terms such as fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Fake news appears like real news but attempts to twist the facts to not only fit an ideology but also to play on the emotions of the viewers. The term

fake news is the most prolific and generic, all-consuming version of the for-profit and revised-truth phenomenon. Misinformation and disinformation are additional terms frequently used within this phenomenon.

As the term fake news took over the airwaves, some have claimed the term has been overused and no longer retains its original meaning, but is instead better described as information disorder. Originally, fake news distorted real information and made it look like actual news. Over time, that original meaning of fake news has been reframed by those who simply do not like the facts and the issues as a way of casting the news as a hoax, or a conspiracy. The media, perhaps for better or for worse must be mindful of the language they use when reporting on issues. The media creates debate over the implication of untruth and misinformation by parsing the words on the issues which may overshadow the issue of informing the public on the facts.

Misinformation is seen as being out there in the world-anything from rumors to deliberate propaganda to unintentional errors but usually done without looking at the messenger's intent (Illing, 2017). By contrast, disinformation considers the intent of the person, making false claims by attacking the truth. In addition, another new term, information disorder, has slowly gained traction and has been used to explain the overarching concept of manipulated information and the process behind it.

The media's role, at large, has always been to report on stories with verified facts. However, today, outside groups such as the partisan media, political leaders and pundits, and social media celebrities spread fake news to the public on a daily basis. The public is connected, signed on, and checked out to the dangers of what they are hearing and seeing in the media. An uninformed public represents a clear and present danger, not only to the American people but also to the very foundation of its democracy. The danger lies in fake information, potentially "changing people's behavior," specifically the way they think and act on issues and which may reshape the outcome of those issues. For example, fake information could change how you vote in an election and has affected people's views on the safety of vaccines (Illing, 2017).

Fake news did not alter the media landscape but rather heightened a partisan divide already firmly established between mainstream news and opinion media, particularly that is delivered in the format of conservative news. Fake news helps both types of media formats reach their respected audiences but may limit their world view. When Fox News airs fake news and disinformation, they are not providing their viewers with the best information available, but rather merely cherry-picked information that often helps the network but maybe not that of their viewers.

The mainstream media must push back against their conservative counterparts by not just fact-checking their claims but also taking the fight to them and using their methods

to undermine their position with the viewers. The value a network has in reframing news into emotional context is to ensure its viewers stay hooked onto their version of the truth.

For generations to come, the media will hold the factual records documenting the rise and perhaps the fall of fake news. Only after we re-learn to be critical thinkers and appreciate the truth, as it is, will we be able to understand the dangers of the post-truth era fully. It is critical for society to have an informed public and not take for granted the ability to be critical thinkers by questioning information and searching for more answers. Society cannot be ruled by emotions alone nor allow emotions to influence or determine the results and guide society away from the facts. The attack on the truth causes the mainstream media to spend hours setting the record straight, which reduces the time they can report on other stories, which in turn causes the public to be denied information critical to being properly informed and may affect our democracy. In a post-truth world, scientific facts and evidence-based conclusions are allowed to be refuted to fit a narrative rather than reality. The public needs to be made aware that the information they are receiving from those they elected to represent them as well as some within the media itself, are purposefully being manipulated in order to disrupt, distort and attack our democratic norms in an effort to further their own agendas.

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