Click wisely: recognizing fake news in politics, history and everyday life

Dr Ana-Maria Cătănuș

Sources

Source A
A Brief History of Fake News

"Sensationalism always sold well. By the early 19th century, modern newspapers came on the scene, touting scoops and exposés, but also fake stories to increase circulation. The New York Sun's 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835 claimed that there was an alien civilization on the moon, and established the Sun as a leading, profitable newspaper."

False and distorted news material isn't exactly a new thing. It's been a part of media history long before social media, since the invention of the printing press. It's what sells tabloids. On the Internet, headline forms called clickbait entice people to click to read more, by trying to shock and amaze us. What's more outrageous to read about than fake things that didn't actually happen? [...]

In the 1890s, rival newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst competed over the audience through sensationalism and reporting rumors as though they were facts, a practice that became known at the time as "yellow journalism." [...]

One of the motivations for 1890s newspapers engaging in yellow journalism is the same as for fake news creators today: Exaggerated news with shocking headlines gets attention and sells papers (or prompts mouse-clicks), promoting the sale of advertising. In the form of traditional news media, most people have learned better than to take outrageous news articles as seriously as they did at the height of the yellow journalism era. [...]

But that clarity simply isn't available when news stories appear out-of-context via social media.

Of course, fake news has also been used as a term to try to discredit news stories that individuals (particularly President Trump) don't like, in order to suggest that they were made up or that they blow out of proportion something that should be trivial (even if other sources can verify their factual accuracy). [...]

Fake news in its modern form is different from the historical forms of journalistic nonsense in traditional media outlets. The speed at which it is spread and the magnitude of its influence places it in a different category from its historical cousins. There are three unique parts to modern fake news that make it different from older varieties of intentionally exaggerated or false reporting: the who, the what, and the how.

Who

Fake news is created and spread by either those with ideological interests, such as Russian agents, or computer-savvy individuals looking to make some money [...] It's not the newspaper publishers this time.

What

It often involves knowing distortion and deception of the news source, not just the content. In one tragic example, a video that was originally part of a public service announcement to help people be vigilant against child abduction in Pakistan, "was edited to look like a real kidnapping ... (and) went viral," leading to deadly attacks on innocent people suspected of kidnapping.

How

Three characteristics of social media's presentation of news make people more likely to fall for fake news.

First, social media act as news aggregators that are "source-agnostic." That is, they collect and present news stories from a wide variety of outlets, regardless of the quality, reliability, or political leanings of the original source. Without a sense of the reputation of the original publisher being clear, it's easy for fly-by-night provocateurs and manipulators to get their fake stories to approach the prominence of the traditional media outlets. If readers can't readily identify who wrote or provided information for a story, it's hard to judge its honesty without elaborate fact-checking, which most people don't do.

Second, many news stories get conveyed to people on social media via their friends or people they follow, along with their implicit or explicit endorsement of the story such as a share, like, or retweet. These tacit recommendations make people more accepting of the messages they get. On social media apps, "Many messages are shared in groups, and when they are forwarded, there is no indication of their origin. (False stories) have often appeared to come from family and friends."

Third, relatedly, social media platforms automatically tag articles with indications of their popularity (the number of views or likes they've gotten, which is further complicated by online robots that can systematically inflate popularity indicators), which also makes people more likely to tune in to a story when those counts are high.

'A Brief History of Fake News' [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Center for Information Technology and Society, University of California, Santa Barbara: https://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/brief-history.

Source B

What is clickbait?

Clickbait is a sensationalized headline that encourages you to click a link to an article, image, or video. Instead of presenting objective facts, clickbait headlines often appeal to your **emotions and curiosity**. Once you click, the website hosting the link earns revenue from advertisers, but the actual content is usually of questionable quality and accuracy. Websites use clickbait to draw in as many clicks as possible, thus increasing their ad revenue.

[...]

Why is clickbait an issue?

When websites use clickbait, they typically value getting clicks over producing quality information. This means they do not care if they waste your time with mediocre content.

[…] Clickbait can be harmful when it's used along with the creation of fake news. The outrageous fake headlines stoke the emotions of readers, who then spread the content on social media. You may wonder what allows clickbait and fake news to keep spreading, despite their poor quality and accuracy. Unfortunately, studies have shown that 6 out of 10 people share headlines on social media without reading the actual article.

Where do you find clickbait?

You can find it almost anywhere on the Internet, which makes it difficult to avoid. Clickbait headlines are common in places like social media and blogs, while many reputable sites like weather reports and news agencies offer ad space to clickbait content. This means you'll have to remain careful before you click a link, even when you're on a quality website.

How can I recognize it?

You can usually spot clickbait through an outrageous headline or image, but it isn't always this easy. Sometimes it's difficult to spot the difference between clickbait and a legitimate headline. After all, every news story wants your attention.

There are a few common elements used in clickbait content, such as vague headlines and images that let your imagination run wild. Clickbait also uses shock and outrage to grab your attention, as well as numbered lists, like **17 Facts You Won't Believe Are True**. Many links use a combination of these elements to lure you into clicking.

Here's a simple way to tell if you're looking at a clickbait article: If the headline tells you how to feel instead of letting you come up with your own reaction, it's probably clickbait.

GCFGlobal.org®, 'What is clickbait?' [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on GCFGlobal.org®: https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/thenow/what-is-clickbait/1/.

Source C

During the Second World War, Polish soldiers of the II Corps bought a young Syrian brown bear cub at a station in Iran. He was officially made a soldier so that the army would provide him with rations and transportation, eventually he was even promoted to corporal.

The bear followed the unit everywhere, helped move crates of ammunition and became quite famous, to this day. He looked impressive, can you imagine bumping into a bear in the middle of a battle, who is carrying shells?

But Wojtek saw the Polish soldiers as his parents, and he was very friendly and cuddly.

After the war he lived at Edinburgh Zoo in Scotland, happily ever after.

That much is true.

Wojtek was and is a very popular bear; he has several statues, a memorial trust, books, documentaries, etc. It is an appealing story, people love talking about it and learning about it, so it is no wonder that the bear regularly shows up all over the Internet.

However, some people don't bother doing a bit of research and just use the first picture they find or the one they find the most impressive to illustrate Wojtek's story with. Unfortunately that means fake, Photoshopped images of our hero show up that are not only silly, they're actually offensive.

Here are several examples of such pictures that go around social media all the time, in all these pictures someone has made it seem as if Wojtek, who fought on the allied side, who was on the side of Polish soldiers, was part of a German unit, almost always German *Fallschirmjäger* (paratroopers).

The pictures make no sense, but you can imagine how insensitive it is to do this to a bear who is much loved by especially the Polish people who are among those who suffered the most during the war. […]

'NOT Wojtek the WW2 bear soldier', 6 December 2020 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Fake History Hunter: https://fakehistoryhunter.net/2020/12/06/not-wojtek-the-ww2-bear-soldier/.

The original photo

Three Wermacht paratroopers sitting in the trench with granade launcher. Monte Cassino (Italy), 1944, Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-577-1917-08 / Haas / CC-BY-SA 3.0 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/df/Bundesarchiv_Bild_101I-577-1917-08%2C_Monte_Cassino%2C_Fallschirm%C3%A4ger_mit_Granatwerfer.jpg.

Doctored photo to include Wojtek the Bear

Although Wojtek was indeed at Monte Cassino, he did NOT help Fallschirmjäger fire mortars, Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg GmbH & P.Floerks [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on Fake History Hunter: https://fakehistoryhunter.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/39c2cfe6914eea9603f7b5c90603c8977.jpg.

Source D

The Roman penalty *Damnatio Memoriae* — literally, "condemnation of memory" — was considered one of the worst punishments that could be imposed on a political, religious, or criminal offender in the Roman state. In order to inflict maximum shame

on a person and his family, the offender would suffer the indignity of being removed from history, and therefore memory. [...]

In the minds of many in the modern world, the practice is most associated with the Soviet Union. Those who fell out of favor with Stalin in particular were simply deleted from all mention in the historical record. Images of the individual suffering this ignominy were removed from the photographic record, in an early version of the concept of photoshopping.

When the ashes of Zhao Ziyang were buried last month in a cemetery north of Beijing, the world was reminded that China, too, treats those who commit political heresy to a similar fate.

That Zhao, the reformist general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, was not buried at Babaoshan in western Beijing, the traditional final resting place of Chinese leaders, is hardly surprising. For more than 30 years, Zhao has been written out of Chinese history for showing sympathy and support to the student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Because of that sin, and for refusing to back the military action that ended the demonstrations on June 4, 1989, killing untold numbers of civilians as well as soldiers, the generation that has since grown up inside China knows hardly anything about Zhao. He remained under house arrest from June 1989 until his death in 2005. [...]

Bonnie Girard, '*Damnatio Memoriae* in China: Zhao Ziyang Is Laid to Rest', 13 November 2019 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on The Diplomat: https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/damnatio-memoriae-in-china-zhao-ziyang-is-laid-to-rest/.

Source E
How a cyber attack transformed Estonia

[...] Unveiled by the Soviet authorities in 1947, the Bronze Soldier was originally called "Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn". For Russian speakers in Estonia, he represents the USSR's victory over Nazism. But for ethnic Estonians, Red Army soldiers were not liberators. They are seen as occupiers, and the Bronze Soldier is a painful symbol of half a century of Soviet oppression.

In 2007 the Estonian government decided to move the Bronze Soldier from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the city.

The decision sparked outrage in Russian-language media and Russian speakers took to the streets. Protests were exacerbated by false Russian news reports claiming that the statue, and nearby Soviet war graves, were being destroyed.

Russian speakers rose up on the streets in protest at the statue's move – and cyber attackers followed behind.

On 26 April 2007, Tallinn erupted into two nights of riots and looting. 156 people were injured, one person died and 1,000 people were detained.

From 27 April, Estonia was also hit by major cyber-attacks, which in some cases lasted weeks.

Online services of Estonian banks, media outlets and government bodies were taken down by unprecedented levels of internet traffic.

Massive waves of spam were sent by botnets and huge amounts of automated online requests swamped servers.

The result for Estonians citizens was that cash machines and online banking services were sporadically out of action; government employees were unable to communicate with each other on email; and newspapers and broadcasters suddenly found they couldn't deliver the news.

Liisa Past was running the op-ed desk of one of Estonia's national newspapers at the time and remembers how journalists were suddenly unable to upload articles to be printed in time. Today she is a cyber-defence expert at Estonia's state Information System Authority.

"Cyber aggression is very different to kinetic warfare," she explained. "It allows you to create confusion while staying well below the level of an armed attack. Such attacks are not specific to tensions between the West and Russia. All modern societies are vulnerable." [...]

The 2007 attacks came from Russian IP addresses, online instructions were in the Russian language, and Estonian appeals to Moscow for help were ignored.

The physical destruction wrought by the riots was followed by a devastation of the country's networked institutions. But there is no concrete evidence that these attacks were actually carried out by the Russian government.

On condition of anonymity, an Estonian government official told the BBC that evidence suggested the attack "was orchestrated by the Kremlin, and malicious gangs then seized the opportunity to join in and do their own bit to attack Estonia".

Hostile states often count on copycat hackers, criminal groups and freelance political actors jumping on the bandwagon. [...]

Damien McGuinness, 'How a cyber attack transformed Estonia', 27 April 2017 [accessed 20 October 2022]. Available on BBC: https://www.bbc.com/news/39655415.