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New Social Media and Impact of Fake News on Society

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Abstract: Traditional media consists of mostly nameless and faceless people deciding what does and does not get printed and broadcasted. In this new era of internet and variety of social media, creation and consumption of news and information in our society is changing. Rapid transformation of traditional print media into online portals has become a new trend. On the one hand, the online social media has democratized the means of news production and dissemination, but on the other hand, it has become a breeding ground for false and fake news. Increasing use of mobile devices and easy Wi-Fi access to 3G/4G networks, the Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter have turned into powerful platforms for providing news and entertainment. In the USA and India, the President and the Prime Minister are using Twitter to engage with their voters and supporters. Hence the direct interaction of politicians and policy makers with the people using social media is having a strong impact on the functioning of the governments around the world. As a consequence, the online journalism and citizen media is also on the rise. New channels of online communication, such as Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, LINE and many others have also led to rampant increase in the spreading of fake news. This paper uses the traditional empirical-analytical method to analyze the current issues about fake news. Information and data available on reliable public domain websites, such as, FactCheck.Org and others portals are used for formulating research questions. In addition, analysis of issues related to fake news is largely based on data available on various reliable and independent organizations, such as Pew Research Center (USA), Reuters (UK) and European Commission (EC). Author’s own survey conducted in an Executive MBA class conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam is also be utilized. The results from primary and secondary resources are used to highlight cases of fake news on the social media and provide technical guidelines to detect its negative impact on society.

Keywords: Digitalization, Facebook, Fake News, Internet, Social Media
1. INTRODUCTION

In January 2018, Internet celebrated its 35th birthday. It was in early 1980s we got a glimpse of a technology revolution that would change the world. According to Gartner Group (2017) more than 20 billion devices will be connected to the internet by 2020. Mr. Tim Berners-Lee, a British native, better known as the inventor of the World Wide Web (WWW), describes his vision of the internet with the following words “I imagined the web as an open platform that would allow everyone everywhere to share information, access opportunities, and to collaborate across geographical and cultural boundaries.”

In this new century, the social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, but its evolution has been in the works since the late 1980s. It’s hard to believe that social media was merely a blip on our collective memory just 10 years ago. From primitive days of newsgroups, listservs and the early chat rooms, the new social media has changed the way we communicate, gather and share information. It has given rise to a connected global community. Imagine what the world would be like if we went back in time and applied social media concepts to everyday life. Figure-1 given below captures how social media has evolved since 1990s. As a reminder of its past, here are few amusing memes. As an example, back in 1990s, putting a filter on Instagram meant dimming the lights.

![Figure-1: Old fashioned social networks memes](http://www.blogtips.org/the-evolution-of-social-communications)
The traditional media, such as, newspapers and television has been controlled by mostly nameless, faceless people deciding what does and does not get published and broadcast. How is social media distinct from regular or traditional media? In the opinion of its creators, the new social media is more like a personal media. Social media like desktop publishing before it, democratizing the means of production, something all companies should be celebrating, unless of course, they have a monopoly on the means of news production. Unfortunately, in the last few years, this personal media has also given to new phenomenon called fake news.

The dictionary meaning of the word “fake” is- not genuine, a forgery or a counterfeit. It implies intent to deceive. This online phenomenon deserves special attention, because fake news stories are now shared even more widely than the actual news. Some cynics would say, the fake news is what the other person reads. Wave after wave of digital innovations has forced new ways of creating, consuming and curating news. Social media, messaging apps and various email platforms provide a constant stream of news from people we are close to, as well as from total strangers. News stories on social media can now come piecemeal, as links or shares, putting less emphasis or altering the original source or publisher. Since the origin of the fake news is hard to trace, it makes it much more difficult to locate and prosecute those behind such actions. And, the hyper levels of immediacy and mobility have created an expectation that the news will come to us, whether we look for it or not. How our dependencies on mobile devices (Figure-2) have shaped our appetite and attitudes toward the news? What, in other words, are the defining traits of the modern news consumer? The only way to find out is to further explore the role of social media as enabler for fake news.
1.1 Objectives

Direct interaction of people through social media is having a strong impact on the functioning of the societies around the world. As a consequence, the online journalism and citizen media is also on the rise. New mobile technologies and apps, such as, Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, Line and many more have also led to proliferation and spreading of fake news. The main objective of this paper is to explore the challenges posed by the rising tide of fake news via social media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Marshall McLuhan (1964), the first major guru of the medium of television, wrote in his preface to his book “Understanding Media” that “each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading.”

In a recent report published by Pew Research Group (2017), roughly 93% of people in USA get their news online (either via mobile or desktop). The online space has become a digital home of both legacy and new, “born on the web” outlets. Digital advertising revenue continues to grow, with technology companies, such as, Google, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and
YouTube leading the charge. There are many examples of profit making from online news. During Presidential election in USA, the teenagers in Veles (Macedonia), for example, produced stories favoring both Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton that helped them earn tens of thousands of dollars (Subramanian 2017). Paul Horner, a news junky, produced pro-Trump stories for profit, despite claiming to be personally opposed to Trump (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Following the 2016 election in the USA, specific issues have been raised about the effect of false stories or “fake news” circulated on social media. In the last few month the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal involving 87 million Facebook users have become a hot issue. It is alleged that the personal data of US citizens was used to influence voter opinion on behalf of politicians who hired them (Solon, 2018). Following the discovery, Facebook apologized amid public outcry and fallen stock prices. Recent evidence from various studies conducted in USA shows that:

1) 62% of adults in USA got news from the social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016)
2) Most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than on the other popular mainstream news media (Silverman 2016)
3) Many people who see or read fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016) and
4) In 2016, most discussed fake news stories in USA tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Silverman 2016)

In October, 2017, the news about Las Vegas massacre which killed at least 59 people and injured more than 500 people, started pouring in the Google and Facebook displaying false reports on the unfolding tragedy, underscoring the failure of the internet's largest news platforms to manage misinformation. Facebook searches for the name of the misidentified suspect generated a number of fake news, and the social network’s “Trending Topic” page for the shooting directed the users toward more false reports, including stories by Russian propaganda site Sputnik with headlines such as “FBI Says Las Vegas Shooter Has Connection With Daesh Terror (ISIS) Group.”

Sputnik later removed this article and replaced it with a story making the opposite claim -“FBI Says Las Vegas Shooter Has No Connection With Daesh Terror (ISIS) Group” without acknowledging its original false story” (Kathleen Chaykowski, 2017). Later it was found that the shooter was actually Mr. Stephen Paddock, a US citizen and a habitual high-stakes gambler who
lived in a retirement community in Mesquite, Nevada, about 82 miles away from the shooting scene.

![Image of The Indian Express article](https://www.travel-impact-newswire.com)

**Figure-3: ISIS Claims Las Vegas Shooting**

(Source-https://www.travel-impact-newswire.com)

According to veteran reporter Imtiaz Muqbil (2017), the media coverage of this tragedy has also raised serious questions about the fake-news industry in India and other Asian countries and journalistic professionalism. According to several news channels in India, the so-called “ISIS” supposedly claimed responsibility for Las Vegas shooting. A leading newspaper, Indian Express (Figure-3) fell into the trap and unquestioningly ran the headline “ISIS claims Las Vegas Shooting.” The headline also stayed on the Indian Express website for nearly 7 hours before being replaced.
In a similar incident in June 2017, where “ISIS” claimed responsibility for a deranged-gambler shooting at a Manila casino in Philippines also turned out to be a fake news. As these ISIS claims are pretty much a work of fiction, it paved the way for deeper investigation of all its past claims, as well as the functioning of the entire ISIS network. Indeed, there appears to be a desperate attempt to link the shooting to Muslims, even though authorities said they hadn’t found any evidence of a connection with ISIS (Imtiaz Muqbil (2017)).

In 2017, the Reuter Digital Report provided new insights about digital news consumption based on a YouGov survey of over 70,000 online news consumers in 36 countries, including the USA and UK. This report focused on the issues of trust in the era of fake news, changing business models and the role of news platforms, especially the role of new social media. This report indicated that only a quarter (24%) of respondents thought that the social media does a good job in separating fact from fiction, compared to 40% for vouching for the traditional news media. The qualitative data from this survey also suggested that users felt the combination of a lack of rules combined with viral algorithms are encouraging ‘fake news’ to spread quickly. The same survey also found wide variations in trust across 36 countries. The proportion that says they trust the news is highest in Finland (62%), and lowest in Greece and South Korea (23%). In most
countries, the survey found a strong correlation between distrust in the media and perceived political bias. This is particularly true in countries with high levels of political polarization, such as, the United States, Italy, Hungary, Malaysia, India and Thailand.

Figure-5: Fake News- Korean Elections

(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_Newspapers.jpg)

Asian countries have not been immune from the fake news phenomenon. The run-up to the South Korean presidential election (Figure-5) and the Indonesian gubernatorial elections last year were dominated with fake news, causing both governments to mull legal measures to clamp down on the trend. And a string of episodes have also exposed worries about the extent to which fake news can potentially have a dangerous impact on the real world politics. As reported by Russel Goldman in New York Time (2016), a hoax story reported in December 2017 spread the threats of nuclear war between Pakistan and Israel. It caused panic in the streets of Pakistan.

In 2017, William Yang Wang from University of California (USA) introduced LIAR, a new dataset for automatic fake news detection. Compared to prior datasets, LIAR is much larger,
which enabled the development of very sophisticated statistical and computational approaches to fake news detection. LIAR’s authentic, real-world short statements from various contexts with diverse speakers, especially the politicians, make the research on developing broad-coverage fake news detection possible. Mr. Wang showed that combining meta-data with text, significant improvements can be achieved for fine-grained fake news detection. Given the detailed analysis report and links to source documents in this dataset, it is also possible to explore the task of automatic fact-checking over knowledge base in the future.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses traditional empirical-analytical method to analyze the current issues based on the limited data available on open access repositories about fake news.

3.1 Research Questions

Information available on public domain portals and websites is used for formulating two research questions mentioned below.

1. Is the fake news a new phenomenon?
2. Can the spread of fake news be contained on social media?

Results and discussion related to these two questions is based on data made available by Pew Research Center (USA), Reuters Institute (UK), European Commission (EC) and other entities, including, author’s own survey conducted in a Executive MBA (EMBA) at National Economic University in Hanoi, Vietnam. In addition, existing data available on various reliable and independent internet portals is also used to highlight cases of abuse of social media in USA, India, Thailand and elsewhere in the world and provide few technical guidelines to detect and avoid the negative impact of fake news.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In the year 2016, almost no one was talking about fake news on social media and other online news portals. A Google Trends search for the term shows that it barely registered before October, 2016. Now you can hardly turn on the real news without worrying about its authenticity. Since the beginning of 2017 the fake news has become a real and a very serious media issue. Among the challenges the media faces today, combating fake news should rank as a relatively straightforward one, compared with thornier issues such as bias, sensationalism, and the problem of objectivity. But lumping these together under the banner of fake news makes them all harder to resolve.
According to Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 most Americans suspect that made-up news or fake news is having an impact. About two out of three (64%) adults in USA say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. This sense is shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations and most other demographic characteristics. Although Americans (Figure-6) see fake news as causing a great deal of confusion in general, most are at least somewhat confident in their own ability to identify when a news story is almost completely made up. About four-in-ten (39%) are very confident, while other 45% are somewhat confident. Only 9% are not very confident, and 6% are not at all confident. This is similar to American’s general faith in their ability to tell when online information is trustworthy. The same survey also showed that some Americans say they have contributed directly to the distribution of fake news by sharing it themselves. About a quarter (23%) say they have never shared such stories, while roughly equal proportion say that they have shared made-up news knowingly and unknowingly.

In a more recent survey of 38 countries conducted in 2017, the Pew Research Center study (Figure-7) found that the general public around the world overwhelmingly agree that the news media should be unbiased in their coverage of political issues. When asked how their own country’s news media are doing on reporting different political issues fairly, people were far more mixed in their sentiments, with many saying that the media does not deliver. This partly answers the first research question listed above.

Figure-6: Many American believe that fake news is sowing confusion

(Source: Pew Research, December, 2016)
And of course, in many countries, there are sharp political differences in views about the media—
with the largest gap among the Americans. While access to digital technology is increasingly
common, the use of the web generally, as well as social media in particular, for getting news still
varies considerably across countries. In 14 of the 38 countries studied, at least half of the adults
used the internet to get their news.

![Bar chart](image)

Figur-7: Public opinion about news media

(Source: Pew Research, Spring, 2017, Global Attitude Survey, Q.41 & 42c)

The same survey also found that digital technology is inducing news habits across the globe,
though their pattern is still far from universal. Overall, a global median of 35% get news daily
through social media, with the highest levels in South Korea (57%), Lebanon (52%) and
Argentina (51%). Across all the 38 countries, young people—those between 18 to 29 are more
likely to get news online than adults of 50 years and older. In 11 countries, the age gap was
found to be 35% and greater. It was also found that people in poorer countries just as likely to
use social media for news as those in wealthier countries.

4.1 Classroom Survey EMBA, Hanoi, Vietnam

In April 2017 the author conducted a brief survey or exercise in an Executive MBA (EMBA)
evening class at National Economic University in Hanoi, Vietnam. The sample size of 39
students divided in 5 groups may not be large enough, but the 5 questions about the use of mobile devices provided an important insight into the use of social media by the young executives working for various multinational companies in Hanoi. This paper-pencil survey conducted in the class had following 5 questions:

### 4.2.1 Survey Questions

Interview each member in your group (5) and collect quantitative data for each question and write down your group’s average number for each question.

Q1. How many emails each group receives every day?

Q2. How many messages (SMS) each group send/reply every day?

Q3. How many hours the group members together spend watching You Tube or similar video streaming channel?

Q4. How do you get your daily news?
   a. Internet portals (Goggle, Yahoo, etc.,)
   b. Social Media
   c. Online News Papers
   d. Printed News Papers

Q.5 Are the group members exposed to fake news in Vietnam?   Yes / No

![Figure-8: Hanoi EMBA Survey- Use of Mobile devices](image)

Figure-8: Hanoi EMBA Survey- Use of Mobile devices
The results of this survey are shown in Figure-8. The group’s responses to questions 1-3 are very much close to what was expected. For question number four, the answer clearly indicates that most college students get their news from the first 3 channels (a, b & c). The answer to the last question about the fake news in Vietnam is also not surprising. Every member in the 5 group indicated that they are exposed to fake news on daily basis. Further inquiry into this question also revealed that state controlled media in Vietnam is also responsible for the spread of the fake news.

### 4.2 Pros and Cons of using Social Networks

In their seminal works of the early 1990s, both Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens predicted that one manifestation of late modernity would be a popular suspicion of media experts and expertise. Since then, the rise of the individual’s ability to have their voice heard through mass social media has eroded traditional patterns of media authority. On the one hand, the democratization of news is largely welcomed, as it has enabled new critical voices to emerge and new discourses to develop, especially among groups that have historically been voiceless. However, it has also created an environment of confusion- a crowded space of competing voices where volume, integrity and quality are often out of balance. This confusion has allowed those with power to obfuscate, especially when the weight of evidence is against them. Very recently, we have seen former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove claiming that the public is ‘tired of experts’, while US President Donald Trump’s rampage on Twitter is often used to sideline inconvenient facts and opinions published in the mainstream media.

It has been also proven that the social media has some beneficial effects on its users. It is attributed to many factors but following three positive aspects have lead to its rampant usage.

1. Increasing self confidence
2. Enhancing pleasure through shares
3. Self-empowerment

On the other hand, people are also raising issues about the ill effects of social media. In a recent interview billionaire and ex-president of Facebook Sean Parker admitted that he helped build a monster (Rob Price, 2007). Facebook depends entirely on its ability to satisfy the innate curiosity of humans about other humans; in particular, it satiates their need to know what their friends (real or otherwise) are doing and offers engaging content to each member based on their taste as inferred from their friend’s tastes. Any given member is engaging with the social network
primarily because of their self-interest, not because of an interest in contributing to the network. Members curate content for their friends knowing their friends will see it; they will judge their friend’s reactions and rate their friend’s content, which establishes reputation and self-image.

Loren Brichter, the designer who created the slot-machine-like pull-down-to-refresh mechanism now widely used on smart phones, said, "I've spent many hours and weeks and months and years thinking about whether anything I've done has made a net positive impact on society or humanity at all. Pull-to-refresh “is addictive. Twitter is addictive. These are not good things” (Lewis, 2017).

In this context, the spread of propaganda and misinformation (Figure-9) online is a global problem that has yet to be fully solved, according to every Google and Facebook executive. We can clearly see that Google hesitate to accept the fact they are a major source of fake news. In October 2017, the Facebook said that Russian-backed US election related content on their platform reached 126 million Americans; Twitter also found that 36,000 Russian accounts were active during the election; and Google said pro-Russian groups purchased many advertisements on its platform.
FactCheck.org is one of the several organizations located in USA which is closely working with Facebook to help identify and label fake or satirical stories, which are flagged by readers on their platform. It has identified more than 100 websites in USA alone that are actively engaged in spreading fake news. Some of them are- DailyFeed.News, Morning Herald, Consinfo, The Trumppers, Newslo/Politicops.com, USPOLN or U.S. Political News, Freedom Crossroads, USA Politics Today, Clear Politics, The Federalist Tribune and many more.

4.3 Fake news trends in Thailand

Thailand has more than 46 million registered Facebook users. Therefore, of the total Facebook accounts in the world, 2% are logging on from Thailand. This number represents a huge percentage of Thai population. Hence Facebook has become an essential part of daily life for most Thai people. 51% of Facebook users in Thailand are men, while 49% are women. There are 14.8 million users aged 18 to 24; 13.7 million aged 25-34; and 7.3 million aged 35-44. There has
been evidence of fake news stories getting a lot of traction on Thai social media, at times even outperforming actual news stories. In 2016, users in the country (Figure-10) saw a big bomb alert, but no details about when or where in Bangkok the bomb “explosion” occurred. News that “reported” the explosion linked back to an outdated story on Bangkok Informer website about the 2015 Erawan Shrine bombing (Natt Gatun, 2016). One Thai TV reporter, Peerapong Anutarasoot is doing his best to stop such hoaxes from catching on. He has created a TV program that urges viewers to verify information before sharing it. Viewers are also asked to report anything suspicious they see to the program. Mr. Peerapong and his staff verify the facts and then present the results on the show (Khemmapat, 2017). Excepting for the threat of using the Computer Crime Act (2007), nothing much is being done by the government to deal with menace of fake news in Thailand.

Figure 10: Thailand-Facebook’s false bomb attack alert
4.3 Efforts to deal with fake news in Europe

Leading the efforts to combat the spread of fake news, the European Commission (EC) has recently launched a public consultation to gather the views of a wide range of stakeholders on fake news. EC is due to respond to the public consultation by February 2018. This first in the world consultation process will be complemented with a Eurobarometer public opinion survey to be launched in early 2018 to measure and analyze the perceptions and concerns of the European citizens about fake news. In addition, the companies, such as, Google, Facebook, Twitter and others who are operating in EU are being forced to take their own steps to curb fake news. Or they would do what China has been doing- bar or ban all foreign social media.

4.4 Tips for analyzing news sources

There are many ways to tackles the menace of fake news on social media. One way is to carefully look up the website URL or web address on Facebook. Do the headlines and posts rely on sensational or provocative language or “click-bait” in order to attract attention and encourage likes, click troughs, and shares? Do the headlines and social media descriptions match or accurately reflect the content of the linked article? To the general public, following guidelines given in 2016 by Nick Robins-Early, a world news reporter for the Huffington Post can be very helpful in spotting a fake story.

1. Read past the headline.
2. Check what news outlet that published it.
3. Check the date and time of publication.
4. Who is the author?
5. Look at what links and sources are used.
7. Beware confirmation bias.
8. Search if other news outlets are reporting it.
9. Think before you share.

As an answers to second research question, the most practical piece of advice is the number 9 on the list-Think before you share. That is because fake news sites rely on readers to share and engage with their contents in order for them to spread. In extreme cases, these fake articles can balloon out of control and have unintended consequences for those involved in the stories. With dwindling newsroom staff and shrinking financial resources, the journalists increasingly rely on online sources for stories and breaking news. As such, there is an even greater imperative for all editors and the users of social media to follow this checklist to avoid falling victim to fake news.
5. CONCLUSION
The crisis about fake news on various social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, You-Tube, Instagram and several popular communication apps including WhatsApp, LINE, Messenger and many others are worth studying for many reasons. In this new era most us are always connected to the internet and this is how we receive, sift and filter the daily news. Overtly and by implication, the online news portals and social media has much to teach us about current events, such as, human trafficking, the fight for women’s equality, the environment crisis, and myriad of political, social, economic and cultural issues. And as a global platform, social media has made leaps in the last two decades, becoming a rich terrain for visual analysis by using big data analytics. Social media scholars are now digging into this vast terrain to examine the effect of fake news in our society. In this new era “always connected to the internet”, the role of friends and family is also amplified. However, a large number of Americans, Europeans, Australians, Japanese, Koreans, and Indians still revere strong ties to print media and traditional news organizations. Although the internet and WI-FI connectivity has increased many fold, the digital news era is still very much in its adolescence. As mentioned in previous sections, Facebook's first president, Sean Parker, has been sharply critical of the social networks, accusing them of exploiting human "vulnerability." "God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains," he said."And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever," he told Axios, an US based online media company. "And that's going to get you to contribute more content, and that's going to get you more likes and comments," he further said. His comments are part of a wave of tech figures expressing disillusionment and concern about the products they helped build. Roger McNamee, another investor in Facebook and Google, told The Guardian, a UK based newspaper that "The people who run Facebook and Google are good people; whose well-intentioned strategies have led to horrific unintended consequences. The problem is that there is nothing the companies can do to address the harm unless they abandon their current advertising models."

Rosenstein, the Facebook “like” co-creator, believes that there may be a case for state regulation of “psychologically manipulative advertising”, saying the moral impetus is comparable to taking action against fossil fuel or tobacco companies. “If we only care about profit maximization,” he says, “we will go rapidly into dystopia.” Social media scholars are now digging into this vast digital terrain to examine the ill effect of fake news in our society. But we can’t miss the larger picture. Internet penetrations and WWW is expanding. Fake news is also affecting social fabric and dynamics, including politics, policies and global politics. With more than 20 billion devices connected to internet by 2020, the challenges posed by social media and fake news will continue to grow.
REFERENCES


