

## CMSC 304 Computer Ethics

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### Bookkeeping

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- Choice of readings for upcoming lecture
  - The LWT episode uses off-color humor, but is very informative
  - If that will bother you, read the article
  - Only 3 readings/videos
- Topics tonight

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### Social media and misinformation

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- We are increasingly dependent on social media for news
  - 53% of adult Americans get at least some news there
  - 42% of ages 18-29 get news there preferentially
  - Still swamped by other sources
- Historically, we have relied on journalists to provide news that is accurate, if possibly biased
  - The idea of unbiased news sources is relatively new
- Information that spread on social media has no such checks

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>

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### The trouble with "Fake News"

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- The term has been weaponized to mean "news I don't like"
  - Half of Americans think any news critical of a politician is fake by definition <!!>
  - The divide is sharply partisan
- The term implies that something is "news" at all
  - When something is just made up, it is fiction
- Often "grossly biased, misleading and hyper-partisan, [or] omitting important information,"<sup>[1]</sup> rather than **false**
- Preferred term: Misinformation (or 'countermedia')

<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2020/06/17/who-shares-most-fake-news-new-study-checks-fact>

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### Types of misinformation

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deepfakes</li> <li>• Clickbait</li> <li>• Propaganda</li> <li>• Biased news</li> <li>• Poor journalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News satire</li> <li>• News parody</li> <li>• Fabrication</li> <li>• Manipulation</li> <li>• Advertising/PR</li> </ul>
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### How big a problem is it?

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- Most people **think** it's a serious problem
- Many people "very concerned"

**More than 70% of US news consumers are concerned about "fake news"**

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: I think "fake news" is a big problem today.

■ Strongly agree  
 ■ Somewhat agree  
 ■ Somewhat disagree  
 ■ Strongly disagree  
 ■ Don't know

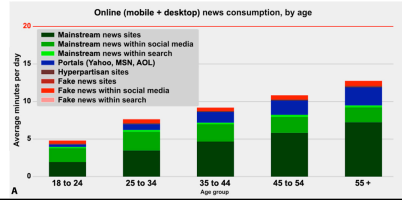
Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	44%
Somewhat agree	29%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	9%
Don't know	6%
<b>Net agree</b>	<b>73%</b>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>

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### How big a problem is it?

- However, the actual **prevalence** of false news is quite low
- No more than 1 minute/day or 1% of overall news consumption
- 0.7% consume more fake than real news
- Much less when more news is consumed



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### So why be concerned?

- People may be more inclined to believe misinformation, and it may have more of an impact than 'real' news
- Misinformation may support existing harmful beliefs
- Widespread example: COVID vaccines

Acceptance of a Covid-19 vaccine is associated with ability to detect fake news and health literacy

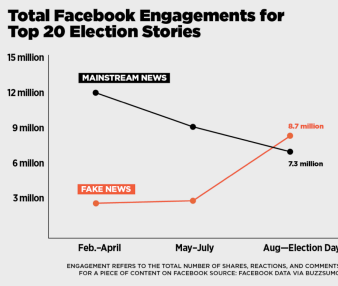
I Montagni <sup>1</sup>, K Ouazzani-Touhami <sup>1, 2</sup>, A Mebaraki <sup>3</sup>, N Texier <sup>3, 4</sup>, S Schüick <sup>3, 4</sup>, C Tzourio <sup>1</sup> CONFINS group

- Locations where Twitter misinformation occurred associated with spikes in infections and deaths

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### Engagement with misinformation

- Even if misinformation isn't too much of the news out there, it may be more widely shared – greater social media engagement
- People spend an average of 64 seconds on fake news articles compared to 42 seconds on verified news stories



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### Where does misinformation spread?

- Mostly Facebook
- “[A] team of researchers ... found Facebook to be the referrer site for untrustworthy news sources over 15% of the time. By contrast, Facebook referred users to authoritative news sites only 6% of the time.
- This pattern of differential Facebook visits immediately prior to untrustworthy website visits is not observed for Google (3.3% untrustworthy news versus 6.2% hard news) or Twitter (1% untrustworthy versus 1.5% hard news).”

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### What about media bias?

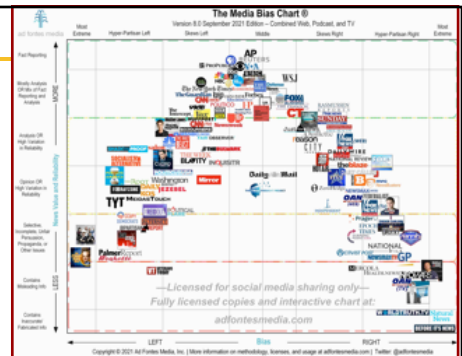
- Often when we say fake news what we mean is extreme bias
- Extreme conservatives and liberals spread the most misinformation
  - Facebook: 26% and 17.5%
  - Twitter: 32% and 16.4%
- Biased news can be a mix of analysis, opinion, and evaluation but present actual correct facts

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/21/fake-news-most-fake-news-spread-by-extreme-right/>

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### Bias

- The “media bias chart”
  - <https://adfontesmedia.com/intro-to-the-media-bias-chart/>
- Note: with a few exceptions, more partisan sources are also more opinion/less factual



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### Partisan divide in who sees a problem

- Republicans express far greater concern than Democrats about the issue and place far more blame on journalists
- Republicans about three times as likely as Democrats to blame journalists for creating made-up news and information
- About half of Republicans (49%) say they come across it “often,” compared to Democrats (30%)
- Republicans are nearly three times as likely as Democrats to say journalists create a lot of it (58% vs. 20%)

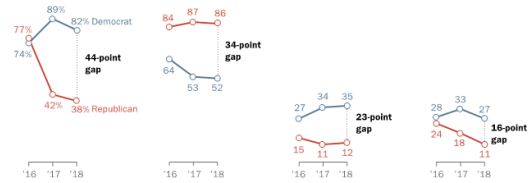
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### What people think of news media

#### Stark partisan divides remain in the American public's views of the news media

% of U.S. adults who say ...

- Media criticism of political leaders keeps them from doing things they shouldn't
- News organizations tend to favor one side
- Information from national news organizations is very trustworthy
- National news media do very well at keeping them informed



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### Mistrust in media is itself serious

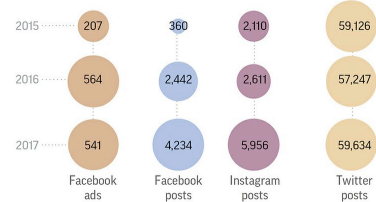
- Information is necessary for flow of democracy
- If there's too much disagreement, tendency is to “tune out” entire topics
- Belief that others are working from false viewpoints prevents discussions
- The “echo chamber” effect

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### Propaganda

#### Russian fake posts and ads on social media

Monthly average of Russian-backed fake social media accounts targeting the U.S. public



SOURCE: Computational Propaganda Research Project

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### Are misinformation consumers blameworthy?

- No:
  - Generally we don't blame people for being deceived
  - Even people who propagate misinformation typically have good intent
- And yes:
  - Fact-checking sources exist
  - Echo chambers are largely voluntary
  - Spotting misinformation requires effort but is feasible
- People are not as good at spotting misinformation as they think they are

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### Are social media sites blameworthy?

- No:
  - Social media sites are not **publishers**, they are **platforms**
  - Making them responsible for misinformation could have a chilling effect on their willingness to host public discourse
- And yes:
  - Checking the flow of misinformation is possible
  - Requires better algorithms, human moderators, and a different concept of engagement
- Put simply – misinformation gets clicks

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### Should SM sites be forced to improve?

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- Misinformation can have real, problematic consequences
- Labeling/removing misinformation is arguably a feasible problem
- What if Facebook (etc.) are required to label misinformation and propaganda?
  - By content?
  - By source? (Should known purveyors be banned? Tagged?)
- Facebook already censors content on the platform fairly heavily (violence, etc.) – is this different?

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### Discussion: Legislating free speech

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- Say Facebook and other similar sites **will be** required to reduce the amount of misinformation present by blocking or tagging it.
- Write a complete policy:
  - What kinds of misinformation will be affected?
    - Propaganda? Hyperpartisan content? Flat-out fabrications? Other?
  - How should moderation be performed?
  - How will people appeal?
- What are the pros and cons of requiring your specific policy?

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