

# Topic Guide: Fake News

*The following guide has been written by LSE students taking the [MC424 module](#), Media and Communications Governance, offered by the Department of Media and Communications.*

*Introduction by Ariel Riera and Aneta Perehinets*

It is hard to ignore the growing influence of fake news in social and political life. While definitions of fake news remain contested, intentionally and verifiably false information is increasingly being used to generate clicks in the platform economy.

In the US alone, OpenSource identified 30 websites that published ‘entirely fabricated information’ and generated enough visitors to be measured by comScore (Nelson & Taneja, 2018:15-16). Independent organisations found 38 false news websites in France and 21 in Italy (Fletcher et. al., 2018:3). Even though these sites have fewer visitors than established media outlets (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017:232), social media based dissemination and small heavy users increase their average reach.

Propaganda or misleading information is not new but what is different is that digital platforms are emerging as primary sources of news consumption with content being algorithmically curated and targeted. Anonymity, the use of bots and algorithms makes it harder to assess the authenticity of information in the digital world, unlike traditional media where biases become apparent over time. New typologies are thus being articulated to understand the problem. Clare Wardle posits that there are three forms of fake news: ‘mis-information’, ‘dis-information’, and ‘mal-information’. Both ‘mis-information’ and ‘dis-information’ refer to false information which is shared or distributed, but ‘mis-information’ refers to ‘information whose inaccuracy is unintentional’, while ‘dis-information is ‘deliberately false or misleading’. Finally ‘mal-information’ refers to ‘genuine information [that] is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere’. While these classifications are useful, it is important not to understand these as mutually exclusive classes, as many instances blur the distinction between them.

As ‘media manipulators’ misuse the participatory culture of digital media for strategic amplification and framing (Marwick and Lewis 2017:33-38), a range of technological solutions can curb the dissemination of fake news.

## Technological Solutions

*By Dayoung Yoo, Evie Ioannidi, Sameena Khalfan, Jiamin Fu, Hao Chu, Aneta Perehinets*

It is important to make the reporting of fake news, hate speech, harassment, and bots easier. A novel way of achieving that would be to connect third-party fact checking articles to disputed articles. The articles from the fact-checking websites would have to be embedded in algorithms, so that they appear when a user engages with disputed content. This goes further than simply saying they are disputed by third-party fact-checkers, which was shown not to work as well and even to encourage further sharing (Schwartz, 2017).

Another proposition is to introduce greater transparency through technological measures. This can include platforms prominently displaying media brands so users can know and judge the source when they read and share. It can also include block chain technology, where concerned governments can incentivise or pressure intermediaries to adapt these measures.

The idea behind it is [to create a credible system of content ranking that rewards users \(with Crypto-tokens\) for their feedback to ensure quality information](#). Using the wisdom of the crowd, users and even advertisers can rate content and upvote/downvote them as accurate/inaccurate publicly. For example Blockchain startup Userfeeds has developed a platform aimed at combatting fake news through the use of reputation schemes (Butcher 2017). Unilever and IBM are in the process of constructing a blockchain digital ad buying system as part of pan-industry measures to put pressure on hosting intermediaries (Dignan 2018). Such approaches that work with the peer to peer network and the participatory culture of digital media respect and value users' agency, their choices and judgment.

### Self Regulation

*By Ruchi Hajela, Korina Georgiou, Takafumi Horiuchi, Aigerim Toleukhanova, Benyathip Laorrojwong, Ariel Riera*

It is necessary to strengthen the code of practice for journalists and emphasise issues around transparency and accuracy. Reporters Without Borders and the European Commission's High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation report have formulated detailed guidelines. Poynter, IPSO, and IMPRESS have already proposed ethical codes (IMPRESS 2017, Poynter 2018). They recommend that journalists be committed to the transparency of their sources, except in special cases, and be willing to commit enough time to fact-checking. They add that media companies should invest further resources and guarantee time for fact-checking. All newsrooms should be equipped with appropriate professional tools to verify audio-visual and text-based material online.

Platform self-regulation goes hand in hand with policy interventions. Firstly, platforms should focus on promoting media literacy by educating users in interactive ways about how to assess the content they find there. An instructive example can be drawn from the collaborative project announced by Poynter called MediaWise which aims to help teenagers to identify facts from fiction online (The Poynter Institute 2018). At least 50 percent of teenagers participating in the project are from low-income, underserved communities.

Then, given that the previous flagging system did not work because it could increase the attractiveness of the misleading news articles (Schwartz, 2017), platforms should implement other systems of signaling content. This could include showing aggregate levels of trust as voted by users, or related content around disputed articles and being transparent about how this is decided. It is necessary to make cooperation with stakeholders such as third party fact-checking organisations an essential part of business.

### Legal Solutions

*By Jack Marks, Sami Lam, Xinyue Feng, Lu Lu and Xiaotan Zhu*

As the problem is linked to the circulation of information, direct regulatory action from governments can be seen as censorship and as impinging on freedom of expression. Helberger, Pierson and Poell (2017) propose that the legal solution of 'cooperative responsibility' is the way forward in this scenario.

They argue that all stakeholders - users, platforms and governments - should jointly share responsibility. They also highlight the problem that cooperative responsibility inevitably causes the problem of 'many hands': there are too many stakeholders to pass blame to. Thus, it must be clearly defined that which stakeholder takes which responsibility. Users should be

responsible for their actions; intermediaries should be responsible for not reacting to issues on time; and governments should be responsible for the chaos caused by the lack of a regulatory framework. Users engaged in misinformation, when detected by platforms, should be informed when they have been misinformed. Users engaged in disinformation, when detected by platforms, should face some form of penalty. These penalties could range from minor penalties such as brief suspension of account, to fines, to prosecution under national libel laws.

Furthermore, intermediaries should not simply respond to complaints passively, and they should have a clear, transparent self-regulatory framework that are available to all other stakeholders, which is, according to Gillespie (2017), the ‘governance by platforms’.

Aimed at combating fake news in social networks with an emphasis on the liability of social media platforms, some jurisdictions have instituted legislation to formalise reporting obligations and the procedure for handling complaints about unlawful content. The Network Enforcement Act in the Federal Republic of Germany (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz - NetzDG) mandates that social media platforms must remove or block access to content that is manifestly unlawful within 24 hours of receiving the complaint; remove or block access to all unlawful content immediately, this generally being within 7 days of receiving the complaint. The regulatory offence may be sanctioned with a fine of up to €500,000 or €5 million , depending on the case.

## **Recommendations**

We have several recommendations to put forward based on our research. We believe that block chain technology should be investigated further and tested by external researchers so that it can eventually be implemented as a pan-industry solution through advertisers who do not want their ads to [be associated with problematic content](#). Instituting a mechanism of reporting back to advertisers what is presented with their ads will inevitably make tech companies actively monitor and take action on problematic content.

Our second recommendation would be to urge platforms to adopt the third-party fact-checking mechanisms we referenced above. This can either be done upon clicking the link or in the ‘post editor’ of the platform, in the process of sharing an article. In Media ReDesign’s open source *Design Solutions for Fake News*, contributors have suggested news organisations across the spectrum sign up to become a fact checker. Platform users then select the fact checker they most agree with, encouraging critical thinking and user choice.

Our third recommendation would be to urge Facebook to make their reporting mechanisms more clear. Facebook does allow users to flag fake news but the function is buried in a menu maze that it’s hard to find; we suggest bringing it to the surface. The same would be helpful for Twitter search, Google News, Google search, Bing search, and other platforms. These last two solutions can be implemented more quickly, even if only as a short-term fix before arriving at a more complex, multidimensional solution, which we believe cannot be purely technological in nature.

In addition to codes of practice and ethical standards for platforms and journalists, it is necessary to explore legal frameworks to regulate the 'fake news' ecosystem. Systemic issues include the manner in which filtering mechanisms distribute prominence and content. The ‘personalization algorithms used by online services such as Facebook and Google display

users similar perspectives and ideas and remove opposing viewpoints on behalf of the users without their consent' (Bozdag & Van den Hoven, 2015: 249) resulting in a 'filter bubble'. Enabling users to have more control over the filtering mechanism will allow transparency.

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