

Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

Fake news and anti-corruption

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In recent years, the growing prevalence of false information spread predominantly via social media has become a major threat to public trust in both mainstream and independent media outlets. This phenomenon is increasingly referred to as fake news.

However, the term fake news not only refers to the dissemination of incorrect information in support of a typically partisan political agenda but is also often employed to discredit factually accurate news reporting. The changing media landscape makes false information more credible while simultaneously weaponising a term – “fake news” – that can be used to attack reputable independent journalists. The use of the term should therefore be treated with some caution.

While the effects of fake news have yet to be fully understood, they should still be seen as a cause for concern among anti-corruption activists. Since anti-corruption activism relies strongly on trust in independent media outlets, as well as the use of social media as a means of communication, the impact of fake news in undermining this trust is a real threat. In addition, anti-corruption activists might find themselves targeted by fake news campaigns, damaging their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

While the scale of the threat should not be exaggerated, anti-corruption activists should consider strategies to guard against fake news.

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Query

Please provide an overview of the influence of fake news on anti-corruption activism. How does fake news relate to corruption? To what extent does fake news undermine anti-corruption efforts?

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What is fake news?

While the concept *fake news* has been used at several points in history, its use has increased rapidly over the past five years. This growing prominence of the term raises the question of what impact fake news has on society. This Helpdesk Answer looks at how fake news affects anti-corruption efforts.

While the term is used throughout this paper, it should be reiterated that its use is itself highly problematic. In recent years, the term *fake news* has been used to discredit news reports, news outlets and individual journalists. This Helpdesk Answer will thus first attempt to disambiguate the term before turning to the implications for anti-corruption efforts.

Fake news in the 21st century

While the term is extensively used, it is not always clear what people mean when they use the term fake news. Several commentators point out that fake news has been used as means of political contestation since antiquity, and that the concept it

¹ Referring to internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and sharing of content through virtual networks.

Main points

- The term “fake news” can both refer to the intentional dissemination of incorrect information as well as to efforts to discredit accurate reporting
- The phenomenon of fake news is associated with declining public trust in the media and public institutions
- As a strong and independent media sector is an important component of anti-corruption activism, the effect of fake news in undermining public trust is concerning
- Measures to tackle fake news include detecting and debunking it, removing its associated economic incentives and supporting fact-based journalism

is not at all novel (Dempsey 2017). In the widest sense, fake news refers to false information that is deliberately spread in the public sphere. In recent years, several scholars have highlighted the importance of social media¹ in spreading fake news (Bounegru et al. 2017; Haigh et al. 2017; Lazer et al. 2017; Persily 2017).

Interestingly, in the 21st century, one of the first documented instances in which the term fake news was applied was satire: John Stewart labelled content of the TV show *The Daily Show* as “fake news” (Baym 2005; Colletta 2009). Fake news was also the term used for misinformation spread in the context of the Ukraine conflict, starting in 2014. Here, Ukrainian activists accused the Russian Federation of spreading false information about the political turmoil in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. In turn, they started an active campaign to counteract this fake news (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016; Haigh et al. 2017). Most prominently, however, was the use of the term in the context of the 2016 US presidential election. Several commentators labelled misinformation spread in the context of the election as fake news. Presidential candidate Donald Trump also used the term extensively in political speeches to discredit news reports unfavourable to him (Peters 2016).

A typology of fake news

These three recent examples underline the need to differentiate the various meanings of the term fake news. Different scholars thereby look at the intent behind the creation of false information, as well as the way that it is spread (Tandoc Jr et al. 2018).

Looking at the 2016 US presidential election, Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as “articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”, thus choosing a rather broad definition. Bounegru et al. (2017) make a further distinction, arguing that false information only becomes fake news if it is widely spread and “picked up by dozens of other blogs, retransmitted by hundreds of websites, crossposted over thousands of social media accounts and read by hundreds of thousands”.

A useful framework to classify different types of fake news is provided by Verstraete et al. (2017). By classifying fake news into five categories – satire, hoax, humour, trolling and propaganda – they provide a much more nuanced classification. All of their categories represent a type of intentionally spread false information, but they

Table 1: *Typology of fake news, taken from Verstraete et al. 2017*

		Intent Deceive ²⁸ ← → Not Deceive	
Payoff ↑ Financial ↓ Not Financial	Financial	<i>Hoax</i> Example: Macedonian Teenagers	<i>Satire</i> Example: The Onion
	Not Financial	<i>Propaganda</i> Example: Controversy Re: Hillary Clinton's Health <i>Trolling (Lulz)</i> Example: Jenkem Episode	<i>Humor</i> Example: Twitter parody accounts ²⁹

differ in two regards: whether the intention is to deceive, and whether the payoff is primarily financial (Table 1).

These distinctions are useful when considering both the effect of fake news as well as how best to respond to fake news as a policy problem. Fake news that is intended to deceive people can present a problem for anti-corruption efforts and requires a policy response. Verstraete et al. note, however, that while their framework is helpful, the intent and motive behind those spreading false information can sometimes be hard “if not impossible” to discern. Equally, fake news arguably also encompasses information that is partially accurate and only partially false, which makes fake news sometimes harder to identify and counteract (Verstraete et al. 2017).

Fake news and social media

Much of the recent prominence of fake news in public discourse has been ascribed to the way that false information can spread via online media channels and social media in particular. Indeed, Bounegru et al. (2017) view the rapid spreading of false information as an integral part of the definition of fake news. However, other scholars have also looked at the role social media plays in this context.

Haigh et al. (2017) highlight the importance of social media in spreading fake news in the context of the Ukraine conflict. They label this process as “peer-to-peer propaganda”, arguing that the nature of propaganda changed due to the involvement of blogs and social media. In outlining proposals on how to counteract such alleged propaganda, the authors also stress the importance of social media.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Wooley and Howard (2017). Documenting results of a large research project, they analyse “computational propaganda”² in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine and the United States. They underscore the importance of social media in sharing political news and information, “especially during elections”. In fact, they find cases of computational propaganda in all of the countries they studied, though Ukraine is found to be the most extreme example. Wooley and Howard specifically highlight the importance of automated accounts (bots) which are instrumental in spreading propaganda, especially when supported by human “trolls”. They point out that while computational propaganda was identified in all countries surveyed, it took different forms. Bots were, for instance, particularly prevalent in Russia.

While Wooley and Howard generally avoid using the term fake news, as highlighted above, as propaganda often features false information and Wooley and Howard describe many instances that other observers would label as fake news.

Lazer et al. (2017) also stress the importance of social media in spreading fake news. They emphasise an important feature of social media that has been discussed more broadly in the debate surrounding fake news: the tendency of social media to lead to so-called echo chambers.

Since users are often in touch with those who share their opinions and even cut ties with those who do not, they often find themselves in a political bubble that leads to selective exposure and confirmation bias. While not a problem in itself, this has been found to lead to a polarisation of attitudes, and therefore decreasing the chances of reaching a societal consensus. Additionally, when people seek discussions only with other people who share their own values, they “become less likely to trust important decisions to people whose values differ from their own” (Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar 2016, p. 24). Moreover, information overload and limited individual attention spans can “prevent social networks from discriminating between messages on the basis of quality” and thus lead to false or inaccurate information spreading more rapidly. Bots often support this spread of information (Lazer et al. 2017).

The 2016 US presidential election played an important role in popularising the term fake news. Following the election, a contentious debate erupted regarding how influential fake news was on the election result, in terms of the extent to which fake news dominated social media and

² “The use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading

information over social media networks” (Wooley and Howard 2016)

influenced voting behaviour. Commenting on the debate, Persily (2017) finds that the effect of fake news on social networks and search engines transformed them from being a democratising instrument to a threat to democratic norms. Persily points to the commercial interests that helped the spread of fake news in 2016. He notes that some websites were specifically spreading fake news appealing to supporters of Donald Trump to increase their revenue from advertising (Persily 2017).

A fairly sober view on the issue is provided by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) who gathered data on the spread of fake news in the election. They found that pro-Trump fake news spread more easily than misinformation that damaged Trump (in other words, favourable to his political opponent, Hillary Clinton). These fake news reports did have a fairly good response rate, meaning they were read by a lot of people. Yet, they were not found to be effective in convincing voters to vote one way or the other.

Another case in which fake news is believed to have made an impact on voters' choices is the referendum in the United Kingdom on leaving the EU, the so-called Brexit referendum. As a recent interim report by the UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2018) demonstrated, fake news was especially notable in so-called "dark ads" published on Facebook by campaigns lobbying for the UK to leave the EU. These adverts are personalised to specific user groups and as such only visible to these groups. Several of these ads used targeted misinformation to sway a specific group to vote against British membership in the EU.

While the extent of the influence of fake news and dark ads on the outcome of the Brexit referendum is contested, dark ads spreading fake news are

particularly troubling. This is because, as they are only visible to the target group, opposing parties in an election are unable to respond to the information that was shared. This makes it difficult to hold those posting these ads to account for the (mis)information they are spreading (Helberg 2018). As dark ads are a convenient vehicle for false information, they threaten accountability in the context of political advertising.

The future of fake news

A recent report published by the Brookings Institution highlights the use of fake news in Russian information warfare, linking the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine to the presidential elections in the US in 2016 and in France in 2017 (Polyakova & Boyer 2018). In this view, fake news is just one part of the playbook of information warfare – the continuation of politics by other means. As such, we can distinguish it from the commercial fake news that Persily (2017) and others have studied. Polyakova and Boyer scrutinise future technological developments that have the potential to transform the nature of fake news. They suggest that:

- Artificial intelligence (AI) will make fake news content ever harder to recognise, as distribution networks could be optimised in a way that human curated content could not be.
- Big Data and micro-targeting are likely to make fake news even more effective, since these tools can be adjusted to ever more specific target audiences.
- The amount of so-called deep fakes is likely to increase. This is fake content created by machine-learning enabled AI. This will in future make it possible to fake voice and video recordings to the extent that fake recordings are undistinguishable from real ones. With such technology, it would be able to put any words into someone's mouth without the possibility to discern whether she or he really said it.

While deep fakes are not yet commonplace, many observers expect them to be widely used in the near future. Examples can be found online already (Romano 2018). These troubling developments have the potential to fundamentally change the nature of fake news.

The number of studies on the effect of fake news are increasing and nascent scholarship on the issue is far from having reached conclusive results. We will turn to the question of the effect of fake news below. First, we will discuss the role of media freedom and social media in countering corruption to assess how fake news can affect anti-corruption efforts.

Media freedom, social media and countering corruption

The role of a free press in controlling corruption

A free press and critical media have long been recognised as one of the most important “integrity pillars” needed to counter corruption. Journalists play an important role in researching and publishing news stories about corrupt officials and in holding governments to account. The crucial contribution of independent media has been extensively documented by anti-corruption scholars.

Ahrend (2002) provides early evidence on the effect of press freedom on corruption. Using Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press Report, he shows that a better press freedom score correlates positively with a better control of corruption. His tests suggest that there is a causal relationship between the two, with corruption not negatively affecting press freedom itself. He also finds press freedom to have a secondary effect as a proxy for

civil society’s ability to hold governments to account.

These results are substantiated by Brunetti and Weder (2003), who argue that “an independent press is probably one of the most effective institutions to uncover trespassing by government officials”. Using a large cross-sectional dataset, they come to the same conclusions as Ahrend (2002).

Crucially, both studies are based on an understanding of corruption as a principal-agent problem: a free press supports the ability of the principal (citizens) to oversee the actions of the agent (public officials). Press freedom can thus reduce information asymmetries between the two and provide a potential solution to the principal-agent problem of corruption.

These findings were confirmed in a more sophisticated econometric analysis by Chowdhury (2004), who uses a variation of panel analyses, including the use of instrumental variables, to demonstrate that both democracy and press freedom have a positive effect on the control of corruption. He suggests, however, that this effect might both be limited and exhibit a considerable time lag. Additional evidence is provided by Freille et al. (2007), who conducted a modified extreme bound analysis, as well as disaggregated data on press freedom. While their results are not conclusive, they also argue that a more independent press leads to less corruption.

Interestingly, they find that, conversely, lower press freedom leads to higher corruption, but only in certain circumstances: their analysis shows that a restrictive legal framework and regulations hindering press freedom do not lead to higher corruption levels. Economic and political restrictions on media freedom, on the other hand,

show a clear correlation with higher levels of corruption.

Themudo (2013) makes a slightly modified argument. He uses data on civil society strength in combination with data on press freedom. His longitudinal and cross-national analysis shows that civil society plays a vital role in controlling corruption. However, he argues that civil society is dependent on press freedom to fulfil this role. Themudo calls this the “public pressure mechanism”, which leads to strong civil society having a marked impact on corruption in countries with high press freedom, but no significant impact in countries with low press freedom.

With his focus on the role of civil society, Themudo’s work is in line with a number of other anti-corruption scholars such as Grimes (2008a; 2008b) and Mungiu-Pippidi (2010; 2015) who argue that civil society is a key factor in countering corruption and also stress the importance of a free press in this context. These represent a group of scholars looking at corruption as primarily a collective action problem rather than solely a principal-agent problem. In this sense, media freedom and an active civil society can help to foster collective action needed to tackle corruption.

Overall, there is a robust base of evidence that free and independent media play a key role in countering corruption. Both quantitative and anecdotal evidence strongly suggest this. It should be noted, however, that all papers that examine the connection between press freedom and the control of corruption employ data provided by the Freedom House Freedom of the Press report. While these scores are fairly reliable, they are the result of expert assessments. It is hardly surprising that all quantitative studies find a positive correlation between control of corruption and

press freedom, given that they rely on very similar data.

Social media as a tool for anti-corruption activism

Similar to the notion that press freedom is a crucial instrument in countering corruption, several scholars argue that social media plays a part in successful anti-corruption strategies. In a theoretical study, Bertot et al. (2010) argue that social media has the potential to support anti-corruption efforts by increasing government transparency. This is done through sharing news and connecting citizens via social networks as well as by promoting contact between governments and their citizens. A year after the Bertot et al. study, the UNDP (2011) published a report giving several examples of social media platforms used for anti-corruption purposes. The report argues that social media can be used for gathering information on corrupt practices (crowdsourcing), information sharing (for example, through Facebook groups) and community outreach programmes.

These qualitative studies are exemplary of a range of studies that linked social media to better quality democracy and saw them as a vehicle to support democratisation movements. Protest movements in Moldova, Iran, Ukraine and in the context of the Arab uprisings in 2010/11 were often cited as evidence for the power of social media to mobilise citizens and ignite Facebook or Twitter “revolutions”. In the specific context of anti-corruption work, some quantitative studies supported this general hypothesis. Jha & Sarangi (2014) show quantitative evidence linking internet access and social media use to lower corruption levels. Their analysis remains on a cross-sectional level, but proves to be robust using several controls for corruption.

Starke et al. (2016) use three data points to make the argument that media freedom, better internet access and online service delivery by governments enhance the ability of citizens to expose corruption and are thus positively correlated with the control of corruption. They show that this effect increases over the years (2003-2013) and attribute this to the development of information and communication technology (ICT) and the increased use of social media.

Kossow and Kukutschka (2017) likewise argue that ICT access, and social media in particular, have a positive effect on the control of corruption. Analysing data from a global cross-sectional dataset, they find strong evidence to support this hypothesis. However, they go further, contending that civil society can actively employ social media to control corruption. Kossow and Kukutschka argue that social media use and internet access enable citizens to connect to each other and to share information, and thus become informed and empowered to act against corruption.

The advent of fake news and abuse of social media as a means of disseminating propaganda cast doubt on these optimistic prognoses about the ability of social media and the internet to act as a driver for democracy and anti-corruption. The next section examines how fake news can undermine both press freedom and trust in social media, and thus cripple their potential positive contribution to anti-corruption efforts.

The impact of fake news on (anti-)corruption

Perspectives on the effects of fake news on society and on citizens' behaviour are far from unanimous. Moreover, as we have noted, the term fake news is itself controversial and needs to be deployed with conceptual clarity.

Having said that, several studies address the effects that fake news might have on trust in the media and public institutions. This section assesses the potential impact of fake news on corruption and anti-corruption activism, particularly in light of the role that an independent press and social media play in curbing malfeasance.

Declining trust in media

The most common effect that observers attribute to the increased presence of fake news (and to the inflationary use of the term) is declining trust in media. In its latest report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO (2018) suggests a general trend of declining trust in news media around the world. The report ascribes this to active efforts to undermine trust in traditional media, as well as to changing business models that rely heavily on online distribution.

Ironically, the democratising power of social media discussed above actually seems to contribute to declining trust in traditional media: as social media contributors are supposedly independent, they are often perceived by citizens as being less biased and uncaptured by corporate interests. Fake news content thrives in a situation in which people do not value traditional media and are willing to accept alternative sources of news as equally, if not more, trustworthy. This, ultimately, also reflects a general distrust in the objectivity of news media and journalism.

But just how big is this problem? A Pew Research Center survey conducted in late 2016 found that 32 per cent of US adults regularly see fake news online, with 23 per cent saying that at some point they have contributed to the distribution of fake

news by sharing it online, either knowingly or unknowingly.

At the same time, only 15 per cent state that they do not feel confident to recognise fake news if they encounter it. In any case, most Americans find fake news to have an impact: 64 per cent say that fake news stories spread confusion about basic facts on current issues and events. This suggests that there is at least some degree of confusion about what is true and what is not (Barthel et al. 2016). In combination with a general distrust in the media, these results are a little alarming.

An earlier, qualitative study by Marchi (2012) found that young Americans are increasingly sceptical about journalistic objectivity in general. The author sees reasons for this in the changing patterns of news consumption among young people: since they consume information through social networks like Facebook and from a variety of sources like blogs, they tend to exhibit less trust one single “authoritative” mainstream news source. Since Marchi’s study was written in 2012, this pattern might have changed as, by now, social networks are also heavily used by older generations and news consumption has changed more generally.

Overall, it is difficult to quantify how strongly this decreased trust in news media affects the anti-corruption potential of an independent press and of social media. Given the large body of scholarship referenced above, it seems reasonable to assume that lower trust in media also diminishes the potential of journalists to hold governments to account by uncovering and writing about corruption.

There is some anecdotal evidence that supports this. Most notably in the United States, President Donald Trump has labelled various news outlets

corrupt on a number of occasions in an apparent effort to undermine their credibility. If even presumably respectable media outlets and political institutions are branded as corrupt, who can still be trusted? Such attacks devalue accusations of corruption, making it harder for citizens to distinguish between credible allegations and political mud-slinging.

Recently, the Malawian President Peter Mutharika dismissed reports accusing him of corruption as fake news and part of a smear campaign. The fake news serves as a means of warding off all accusations and undermining investigations which had been led by the country’s Anti-Corruption Bureau (Banda 2018). Similarly, a Malaysian law making publishing fake news illegal could cause a problem for anti-corruption campaigners. The law is said to be aimed partially at obstructing reporting about an embezzlement scandal involving the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (Lahiri 2018). Since Malaysia’s attorney general cleared Najib of any wrongdoing, any news outlet reporting the scandal could be fined according to the new law, since further coverage of the scandal could be classified as fake news (Lahiri 2018).

The fact that fake news contributes to a growing suspicion of the media leads to a vicious cycle in which it becomes possible to use the term to discredit unfavourable news reports. In other words, the changing media landscape makes false information more credible while simultaneously weaponising a term, “fake news”, that can be instrumentalised to attack reputable independent journalists.

This is also true for news shared through social media. Since most fake news stories are shared through social media, there is a growing scepticism

in the credibility of any news reports posted on social media.

In general, while the extent of the problem should not be blown out of proportion, declining trust in media outlets and social media platforms does constitute a challenge for those who want to use news media or social media to counter corruption.

Decreasing trust in institutions

In many cases, however, fake news affects more than just the media. False information can also cast doubt on the integrity of the people or institutions who are targeted by a particular fake news story.

Research on this effect of fake news is still limited. Yet, based on several opinion polls following the 2016 US presidential election, Gaughan (2017) finds that false information about potential voter fraud influenced public opinion on the US electoral system. Despite there being no evidence of wide-scale voter fraud, “a majority of Americans now question the integrity of the nation’s election system” (Gaughan 2017, p. 58).

For Gaughan, fake news is one of the three main causes for this development, next to hyperpolarisation and the partisan control of election administration. He notes that traditional media have lost their function as the gate-keepers of information, since the internet makes alternative news sources available and even enables ordinary citizens to create and fabricate news items themselves. In this environment, initially fringe and inaccurate reports on electoral fraud featured prominently in the news cycle, not least since they were endorsed by then-candidate Donald Trump and members of his team (Gaughan 2017). The majority of Americans did not fall for the false information that was spread. Nevertheless, these stories were effective at casting

doubt on the integrity of a key institution of American democracy, the electoral system. They were not the main reason to bring Americans to question their electoral system, since a majority did not believe fake news. But, in a context of hyperpolarisation and partisan control of election administration, fake news contributes to existing doubts.

This effect is also familiar to those following events in Ukraine. Here, fake news has targeted the new government and key members of the reform movement after the 2014 revolution. This misinformation campaign led many people to question the integrity of activists and of the new government, and has contributed to a media environment in which people find it hard to distinguish between factual and fictitious news stories.

In Ukraine, where corruption already undermines citizens’ trust in public institutions, these developments threaten to make governance even harder. Anti-corruption activists at NGOs and officials at anti-corruption bodies in the country have been targeted by fake news stories, with the apparent objective to diminish the public’s faith in them (The Economist 2017; Wijesinha 2017).

Both of these examples exemplify the potential of fake news to erode trust in institutions. This can potentially undermine democratic norms and practices, as well as the ability of citizens, civil society representatives and anti-corruption actors within government to tackle corruption.

Agenda setting

A final effect that can be ascribed to fake news is its ability to set the political agenda. At least in theory, false information spread via news outlets and social media could dominate the news cycle and put issues on the agenda that would not otherwise

have been discussed in the media. Conversely, they might make it harder for accurate and pressing news stories to make the headlines. The example provided by Gaughan (2017) illustrates this effect: despite no serious evidence for wide-scale voter fraud, fake news put the question of electoral integrity firmly on the news agenda.

How significant is this agenda-setting power of fake news? Vargo et al. (2018) try to answer this question by providing an analysis of a large dataset on global news reports, the GDELT Global Knowledge Graph. They present data on the spread of fake news, analysing if content from clearly identified fake news websites influence different online media. They also looked at how fake news influenced partisan media.

Their results are somewhat sobering. Looking at data from three years (2014-16) they did not find that fake news controlled the overall online media. They even noted the power of fake news “to be steady or slightly declining” (Vargo et al. 2018, p. 2043).

Conversely, they find partisan media to be intertwined with fake news: fake news websites seem to pick up topics pushed by partisan media and, especially in the election year 2016, US partisan media seemed to be far more responsive to fake news than before. Given the rise of overtly partisan media in the US, this is, of course a cause for concern.

The agenda-setting power of fake news can influence the work of anti-corruption activists. Fake news can displace the topics they work on, forcing them off the news agenda. Deliberate, politically motivated campaigns can also put fake stories on the agenda that, if they are related to corruption, can trivialise or drown out real news reports on corruption scandals.

It is still perhaps too early to judge the full effect of fake news on anti-corruption work, though the impact might be contained as traditional media gets better at identifying fake news, at least in their current state. As it was highlighted above, there is however a real danger that fake news might become more difficult to identify with the advent of technological possibilities such as deep fakes (Polyakova and Boyer 2018)

Addressing the problem of fake news

The previous section discussed three ways in which fake news could affect anti-corruption activism and corruption more generally: decreasing trust in media, loss of faith in public institutions and its agenda-setting power. The extent of these effects in preventing anti-corruption journalists, activists and officials from controlling corruption is very hard to quantify and the existing research is far from conclusive.

Several studies present potential solutions to the threat imposed by fake news. While this Helpdesk Answer cannot fully map all possible mitigating strategies, the next section provides an overview of the main ideas proposed to tackle fake news and reduce its impact on public discourse and the media landscape.

Detect and label fake news

One of the first measures taken against fake news were steps to identify false information when it is published and label it accordingly. In March 2017, Facebook started putting tags such as “Disputed by 3rd Party Fact-Checkers” on news stories found to be untrue by independent fact-checking organisations in the United States. This is intended to heighten awareness of users and, at the same time, stop fake news from spreading so rapidly

through social networks. This process is of course fairly laborious; individual stories need to be checked and reviewed, no mean feat given the rapid rise in the number of fake news stories generated. Automated detection of fake news stories is theoretically possible, but as Rubin et al. (2015) highlight, this remains a difficult endeavour: language patterns need to be clearly identified, and since fake news is often close to satire or even use the same language as accurate news, technical constraints make this hard to realise.

While this measure is seen as a relatively simple step to counter fake news, it also seems to have at least some effect. Pennycook and Rand (2017) find that tagging news sources as disputed significantly reduces the chance that readers perceive them to be accurate. Users perceived untagged news sources as more accurate than tagged stories, regardless of whether the untagged reports were actually factually accurate or not. It is therefore worth noting that tagging can also backfire, as it has the effect of increasing the credibility of fake news if they are not labelled as such. Pennycook and Rand (2017) also highlight that the effect they find is only modest. They call for additional strategies to effectively counter fake news.

Debunking and countering fake news

Another prominent strategy to counter fake news is efforts to debunk them. These are usually websites operated by independent organisations, aimed at countering fake news by revealing their falsehoods and inconsistencies.

A prominent example of this is the Ukrainian Stop Fake project, which started in 2014. Gathering fake news stories in the Ukrainian context, the organisation started to publish these stories on their own website and showing evidence that

proved that these were fake (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016; Haigh et al. 2017). Similar websites have been established in the US in recent years, as well as in other countries that were affected by fake news (Vargo et al. 2018; Woolley & Howard 2017).

Countering and debunking fake news are important and necessary steps to make it clear that these “news” sources spread false information. Yet, they are not always effective. Vargo et al. (2018) argue that fact checkers find it difficult to make themselves heard in the media cacophony. Additionally, the endless repetition of fake news also increases their perceived veracity (Pennycook et al. 2018).

Finally, debunking is a very complex and sensitive process. Based on a meta-analysis, Chan et al. (2017) argue that debunking needs to include corrective information that allows people to update their mental model justifying misinformation. Merely pointing out fake news is rather ineffective for debunking. As an alternative strategy they suggest that corrective information should be highlighted. Rather they suggest highlighting the corrective information is much more effective. Simply stressing the item as fake news and pointing out its inaccuracy will not work. The effectiveness of debunking as a strategy against fake news is thus unlikely to be effective in itself. To increase their impact, Lazer et al. (2017) call for debunking efforts to be bi-partisan. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive overview of suggestions for coping with debunking-related problems.

Removing economic incentives

As highlighted above, fake news can be categorised according to the incentive that stands behind the publication of a false news story. Several fake news items in the context of the 2016 US election were

published by websites that were created to make money. These hoaxes can at least partially be countered by removing the economic incentives behind them. Verstraete et al. (2017) highlight the efforts of Google to ban websites publishing fake news from receiving ad revenue. They argue that this step can be effective against a certain type of fake news: those that can be identified and have monetary incentives. However, removing ad or other revenue is unlikely to help against propaganda and might discourage satirical content.

Making facts matter

Another measure that observers suggest to counter fake news is positive messaging about the importance of facts and the strengthening of fact-based journalism.

Jonathan Albright (2017) calls on news organisations to get ahead of the curve. Instead of merely reacting to fake news stories, they should make an effort to be the first to publish news and establish indisputable facts. He calls for the use of data to analyse media networks and fake news networks alike to find out when information is needed and how people can be best reached. In a similar spirit, Lazer et al. (2017) call for better cooperation between the media and academia. Academic research needs to be communicated better so that it is “digestible by journalists and public-facing organisations” (ibid, p. 9). They also call for collaborations between researchers and the media to exchange expertise. Stronger and more sustainable journalism is expected to help to make media more resistant to fake news.

While none of the above-mentioned strategies provide a silver bullet against fake news, a combination of measures might be helpful. For anti-corruption activists, it is worthwhile

considering these strategies and, in some cases, adopting them. Fake news is unlikely to incapacitate anti-corruption efforts, but given its effect on undermining independent media and devaluing allegations of corruption, it should be taken seriously by anti-corruption players.

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