

The Growing Threat of **Disinformation:** *And What To Do About It*

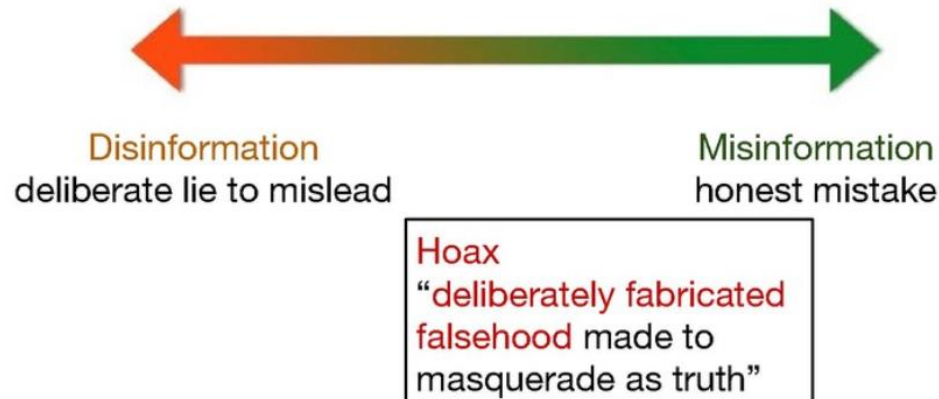
Kip Knight
SVP – H&R Block
June 2017

What I'd Like To Share

- ❑ **What is "disinformation" (aka Fake News)?**
- ❑ What are some examples?
- ❑ What caused an increase in disinformation across the globe?
- ❑ What dangers does disinformation pose?
- ❑ How can you spot disinformation?
- ❑ What can we do to stem the rising tide of disinformation?

“Dezinformatsiya”

Types of false information



The English word disinformation, which did not appear in dictionaries until the late-1980s, is a translation of the Russian дезинформация, transliterated as **dezinformatsiya**. Disinformation differs from misinformation, inaccuracies that stem from error; disinformation is deliberate falsehood promulgated by design.

“Fake News”

- A made-up story with the intention to deceive (often geared to generate clicks)
- Meant to instill fear and confuse audiences, blurring the lines between truth, falsehood and reality
- “The wider problem is fake news has the effect of getting people not to believe real news.”
Michael Lynch, Professor of Philosophy, University of Conn



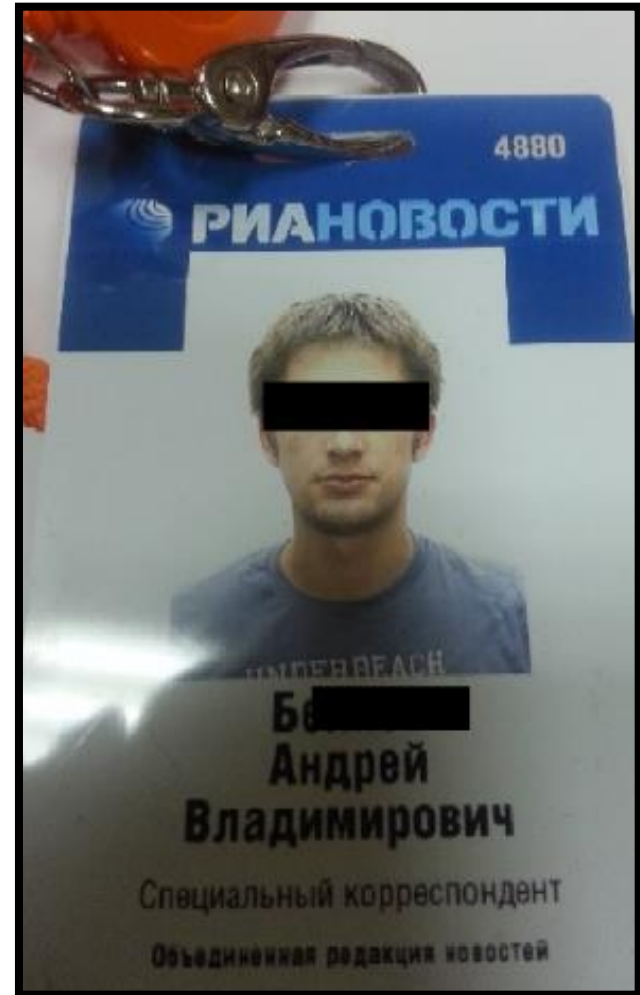
Started by Russians in 1923

- Started by State Political Directorate (GPU) to conduct active operations
- Used during WW2 as well as Cold War
- Included distribution of forged documents, photographs, rumors and fabricated intelligence
- Examples of disinformation campaigns Russians used against US:
 - US supported apartheid in South Africa (1980)
 - US would use nuclear weapons against NATO partners(1982)
 - Operation INFEKTION US invented AIDS (1985)



Internet Research Agency (Russia)

- Employs hundreds of Russians to post pro-Kremlin propaganda online under fake identities, including on Twitter, in order to create the illusion of a massive army of supporters
- Often been called a “troll farm.” aggressively deployed against political opponents at home, Russia’s perceived enemies abroad and anyone else who gets in their way (including reporters).



Internet Research Agency (Russia)

- “Management was obsessed with statistics — page views, number of posts, a blog’s place on LiveJournal’s traffic charts — and team leaders compelled hard work through a system of bonuses and fines.”
- “Over two shifts she had to meet a quota of five political posts, 10 nonpolitical posts and 150 to 200 comments on workers’ posts.”
- “Salaries were surprisingly high for the work; Savchuk’s was 41,000 rubles a month (\$777), or as much as a tenured university professor earns. ”

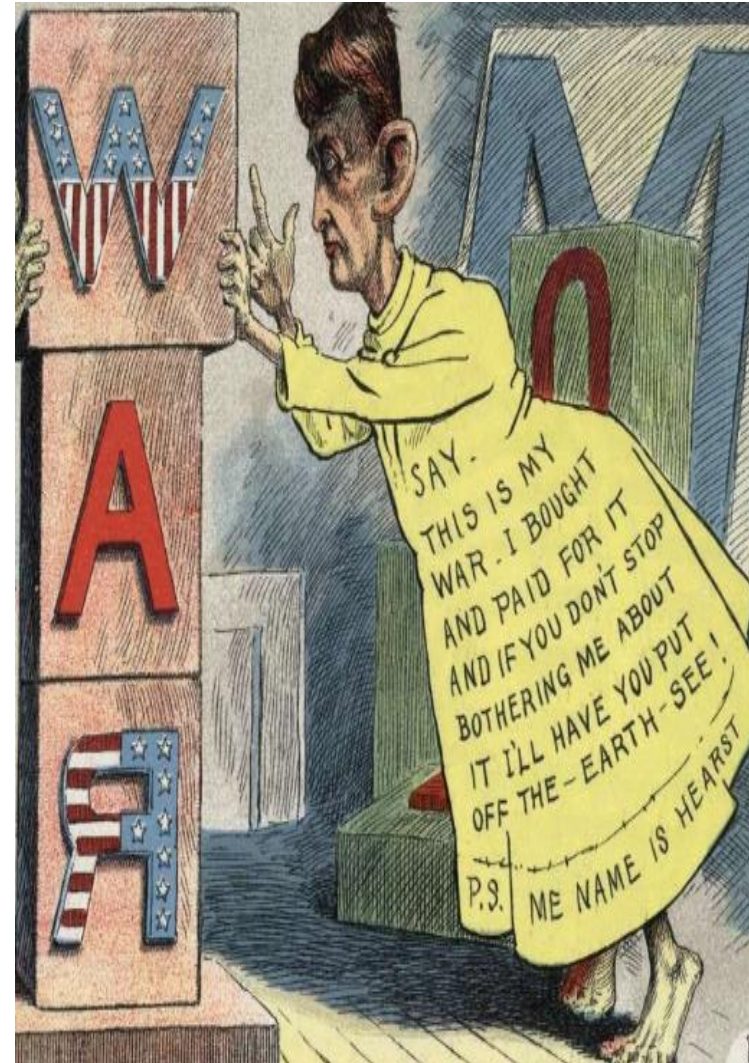


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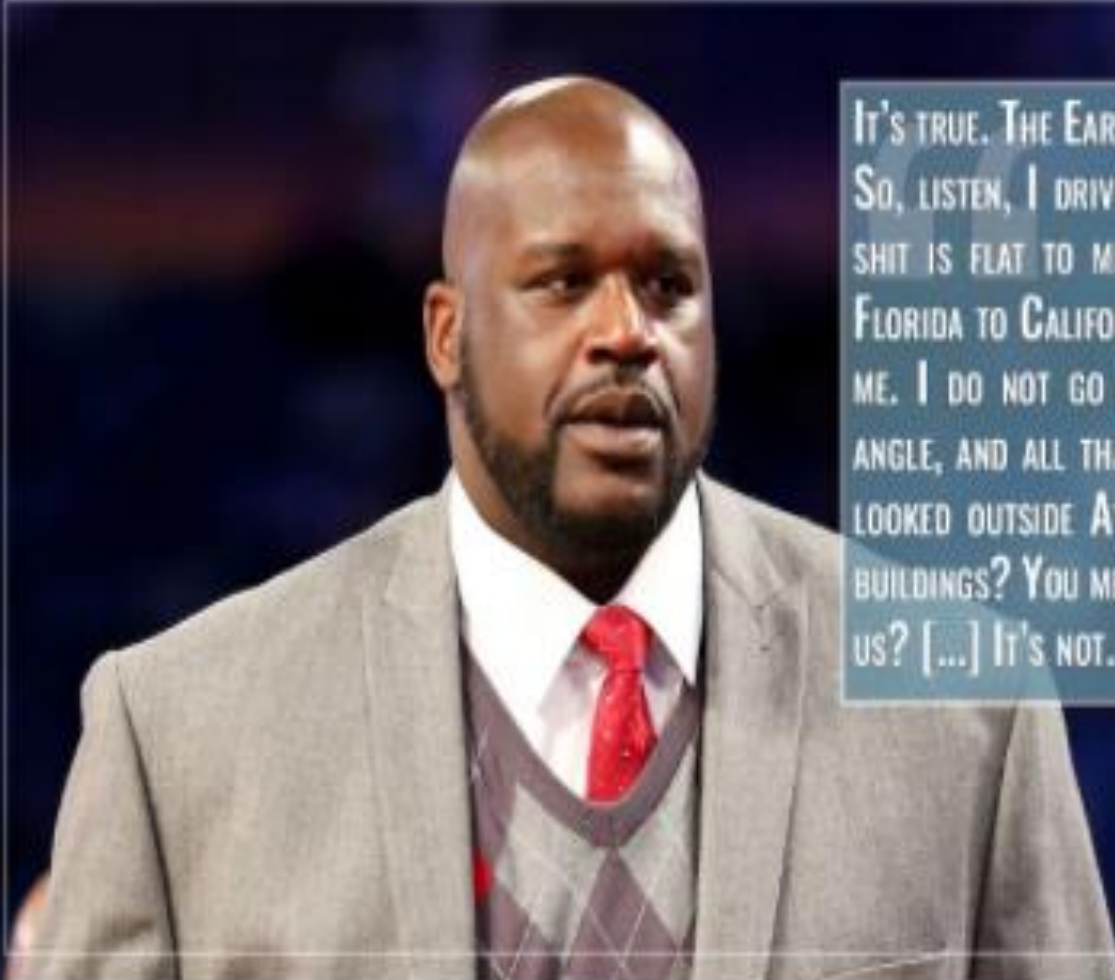
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“Yellow Journalism” (1890’s)

- Started as result of “newspaper war” covering Spanish-American war (San Fran and New York newspapers of Hearst vs Pulitzer)
- Presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and instead uses eye-catching headlines to sell more newspapers.
- Techniques include exaggeration of news events and sensationalism.
- Led to creation of Code of Ethics in Media (started in 1947)



“Flat Earth Society”

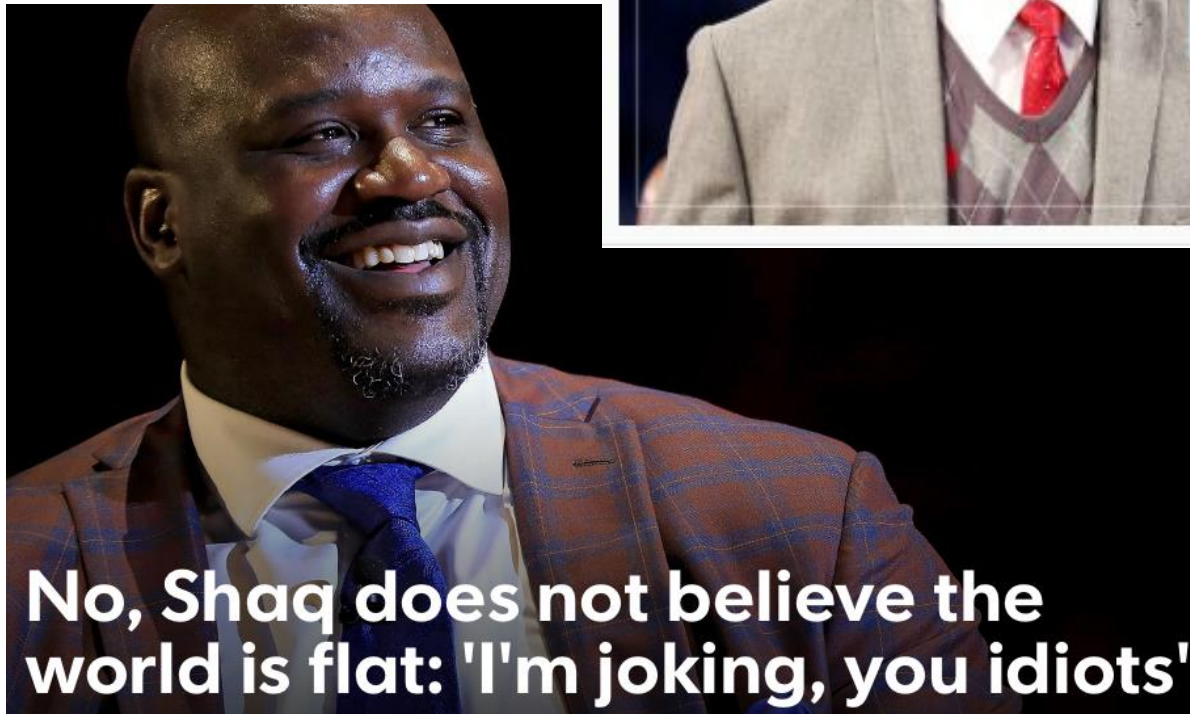
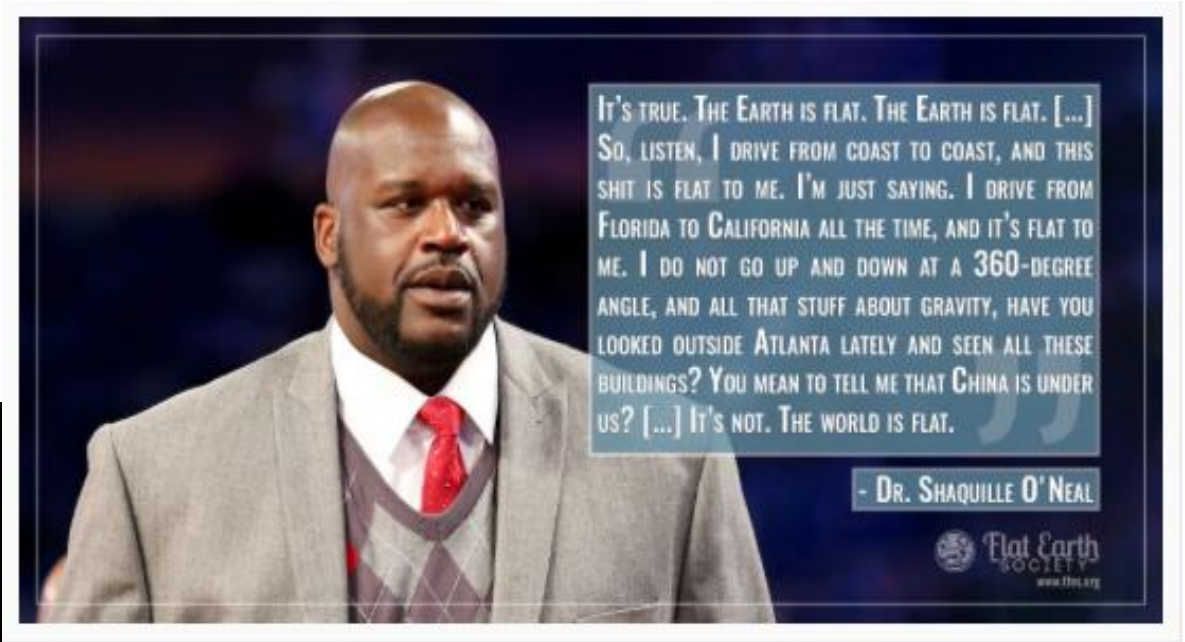
A photograph of Dr. Shaquille O'Neal, a Black man with a beard, wearing a grey suit jacket, a white shirt, a red tie, and a grey and purple argyle vest. He is speaking and looking slightly to the right of the camera.

IT'S TRUE. THE EARTH IS FLAT. THE EARTH IS FLAT. [...] SO, LISTEN, I DRIVE FROM COAST TO COAST, AND THIS SHIT IS FLAT TO ME. I'M JUST SAYING. I DRIVE FROM FLORIDA TO CALIFORNIA ALL THE TIME, AND IT'S FLAT TO ME. I DO NOT GO UP AND DOWN AT A 360-DEGREE ANGLE, AND ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT GRAVITY, HAVE YOU LOOKED OUTSIDE ATLANTA LATELY AND SEEN ALL THESE BUILDINGS? YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT CHINA IS UNDER US? [...] IT'S NOT. THE WORLD IS FLAT.

- DR. SHAQUILLE O' NEAL

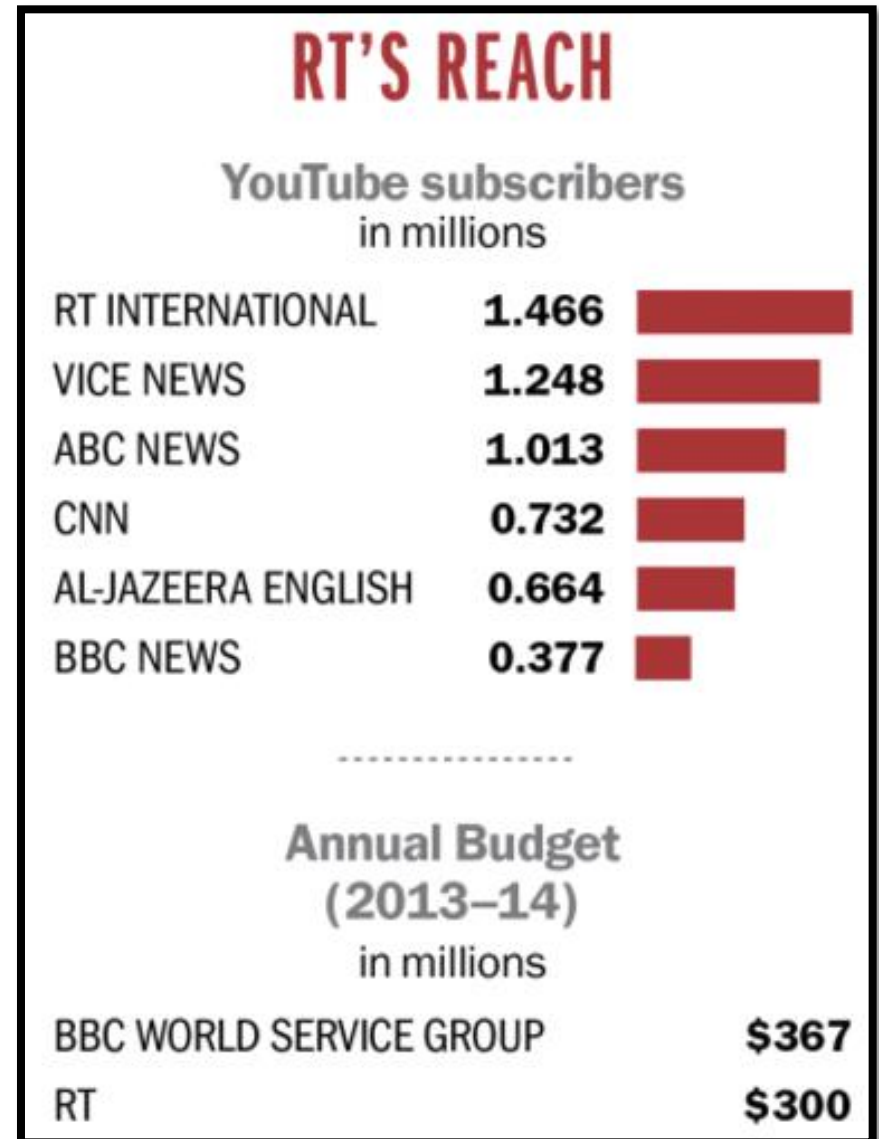


“Flat Earth Society”



Russia – “We’re Back!”

- This past election cycle, Russian hackers targeted the U.S. political system, digging up embarrassing information and spreading it as widely as possible.
- Russian trolls posed as angry U.S. supporters of one or another political campaign while outlets like RT leapt to enlarge the divisions that other parts of the propaganda machine had helped create.



The New York Times Magazine

A nighttime photograph of a multi-story office building in St. Petersburg, Russia. The building is illuminated by warm streetlights, and its windows are lit from within. In the foreground, there are dark trees and a street with a blue parking sign. The sky is a deep blue, suggesting dusk or dawn.

The Agency

From a nondescript office building in St. Petersburg, Russia, an army of well-paid “trolls” has tried to wreak havoc all around the Internet — and in real-life American communities.

By ADRIAN CHEN JUNE 2, 2015

9/11/14 Columbian Chemical Plant (Louisiana) Fake Disaster

This was a highly coordinated
disinformation campaign:

1. Dozens of fake accounts that posted hundreds of *tweets* for hours
2. *Fake screenshots* from CNN
3. Fully functional *clones of the websites of Louisiana TV stations and newspapers.*
4. *YouTube video* tailor-made for the project.
5. *Wikipedia page* created for the Columbian Chemicals disaster, which cited the fake YouTube video.
6. Complemented by *text messages* to actual residents in St. Mary Parish.





Anna Russell

@AnnaRussell



Greg Spicy

@GregSpicy



Follow

Follow

Chemical The explosion occurred at the
Louisiana #ColumbianChemicals Co. Chemical plant
located in Centerville, St. Mary Parish, LA.



Teresa Holland

@TezHolland

Follow

@SenJeffMerkley Jeff, Hope it wasn't a
terrorist attack in Louisiana, was it?
#ColumbianChemicals



3:07 PM - 11 Sep 2014



Obama: 'We will degrade,
ultimately destroy' ISIS

"Difficult speech" for Barack Obama:
President promises U.S. airstrikes will



Plant Explosion in Centerville Caused
Panic

The plant explosion at Columbian Chemicals Company, Centerville,

- Need some European examples

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Who Can We Turn To For The Truth?



- **The rapid proliferation of online news and political opinion outlets, and especially social media—raise concerns about the vulnerability of democratic societies to fake news and other forms of misinformation.**
- The shift of news consumption to online and social media platforms has disrupted traditional business models of journalism, causing news outlets to shrink or close.
- **Long standing media institutions have been weakened. Meanwhile, new channels of distribution have been developing faster than our abilities to understand or stabilize them.**

The Digitally Connected World

- 3.4 billion internet users (and growing).
- 500M tweets are sent each day.
- 7 hours of footage uploaded to YouTube *every second*
- With 2 billion active accounts, Facebook is the largest “country” in the world.
- Majority of American Twitter and Facebook users get their news from these platforms.
- 60% of American Twitter users rely on the service to follow news events as they happen in real time.



When Your Beliefs Are Challenged

- ❑ We love to hear things that confirm what we think, what we feel and what we already believe.
- ❑ When confronted with information that contradicts our beliefs, your natural reaction is not to sit back and reflect ...rather, you double down on your existing beliefs.
- ❑ The more you interact with certain content on social media, the more algorithms feed you more of that same content.



Enter The Modern "Echo Chamber"

- Social networks are bad at helping you empathize with people unlike you, but good at surrounding you with those who share your outlook.
- The new information ecosystem does not challenge biases; *it reinforces them!*



FAKE NEWS INVASION



Analysis by BuzzFeed found that fake news stories drew more shares and engagement during the final three months of the US Presidential campaign than reports from the New York Times, the Washington Post and CNN.

Social Media Multiplier Effect

- In an October 2015 study for the Quilliam Foundation found in a one-month period, the group released nearly **1,150** “propaganda events”—batches of related videos, articles, photos, and essays—originating from **35 different media-production units**.
- This cascade splashed through tens of thousands of accounts associated with ISIS, strewn across more than a dozen social-media platforms.



Social Media Multiplier Effect

- A smartphone app ISIS created allowed fans to follow along easily at home and link their social-media accounts in solidarity.
- J. M. Berger, a fellow with George Washington University's Program on Extremism, counted as many as **40,000 tweets** originating from the app in a **single day** as black-clad militants bore down on the city of Mosul (a key to ISIS capturing it without much of a fight).



Social Media Multiplier Effect

- **Contrary to popular intuition, both fake and real information, including news, is not often “viral” in the implied sense of spreading through long information cascades** (*Goel, Sharad, et al., 2015*).
- The vast majority of shared content does not spread in long cascades among average people.
- It's often messages from celebrities and media sources—accounts with high numbers of followers—that increase the reach of a message the most.
- Thus, traditional elites may not be the largest sharers of fake news content but may be the most important node capable of stemming its spread (*Greenhill and Oppenheim*).



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Why Vote Leave's £350m weekly EU cost claim is wrong

The leave campaign continues to stand by the controversial figure despite the facts proving it to be indefensible



BUSINESS APR 11 2017, 1:21 PM ET

SEC Cracks Down on Fake Stock News

by BEN POPKEN

SHARE



"Fake news" can sway not just elections, but the stock market. Now the SEC is cracking down.

The stocks and securities regulator charged 27 firms and individuals Monday with fraudulently promoting stocks through secretly paid-for articles on top financial websites. The sites included Forbes.com, Yahoo Finance, Seeking Alpha, Motley Fool, Benzinga, and Wall Street Cheat Sheet. None of the sites were named in the complaint.

- Need some European examples

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HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS



CONSIDER THE SOURCE

Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.



READ BEYOND

Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?



CHECK THE AUTHOR

Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?



SUPPORTING SOURCES?

Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.



CHECK THE DATE

Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.



IS IT A JOKE?

If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.



CHECK YOUR BIASES

Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.



ASK THE EXPERTS

Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

**Maybe the better question is:
”*How do you spot REAL news?*”**

■ Lesbos, Greece
OCT. 7, 2015

- Need some more “best practices” used in Europe

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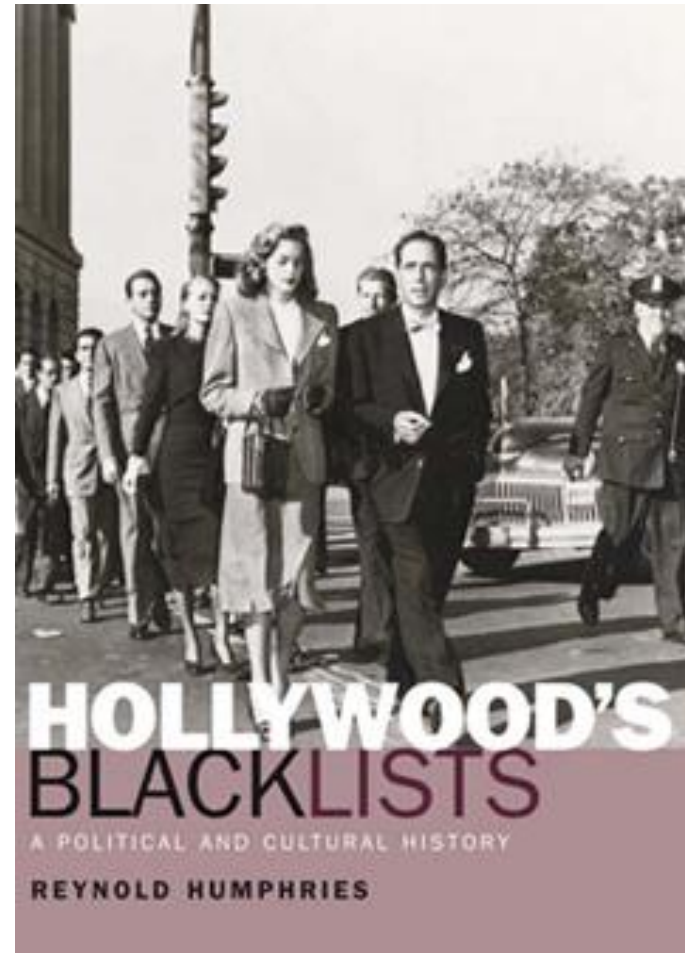
Partial List of Fake Website (there are 100's)

List of fake news sites

Name	Notes	Sources
70 News	a Wordpress -hosted site that published a false news story, stating that Donald Trump had won the popular vote in the 2016 United States presidential election; the fake story rose to the top in searches for "final election results" on Google News	[9][10]
ABCnews.com.co	Owned by Paul Horner . Mimics the URL, design and logo of ABC News .	[11][12]
American News	Published a false story claiming actor Denzel Washington endorsed Donald Trump for president. The fictional headline led to thousands of people sharing it on Facebook, a prominent example of fake news spreading on the social network prior to the 2016 presidential election.	[13][14][15]
Before It's News	Cited by US President Donald Trump at his 2016 campaign rallies. Before Its News and Infowars were described as "unabashedly unhinged 'news' sites" in 2014 by the Washington Post following its promotion of conspiracy theories relation to Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 . ^[16]	[17][16]
bizstandardnews.com	Its stories have been mistaken as real-news then shared and cited as real-news. ^[18] Its disclaimer says the stories "could be true" because "reality is so strange nowadays." But the disclaimer also says it's "a satirical site designed to parody the 24-hour news cycle." ^[19] Its name is similar to the unrelated real-news daily newspaper called Business Standard .	[18][20][21][22][23][24]
Bloomberg.ma	Designed to imitate Bloomberg.com . Was used to issue a false report announcing that Twitter had received a USD \$31 billion takeover offer, the false report resulted in an 8% stock price spike of Twitter. Site now defunct.	[25][26]

Let's Start With What Doesn't Work

- ❑ Creating a “blacklist” of fake news websites
 - ❑ Too easy to create new ones to take their place
 - ❑ Many websites already have mixture of correct and incorrect information – what do you do with these?
 - ❑ Potentially run into First Amendment issues – who's to judge what “truth” is?



What We Should Consider

- 1) Regular and on-going review of web content (by humans as well as algorithms) by platform hosts (such as Facebook)
 - ❑ Flag or remove offensive content (especially terrorist related)
- 2) Hold Google more accountable for how AdSense is used (and misused)
 - ❑ Have them get rid of the violators (such as in Macedonia)
- 3) Make it easier for users to flag offensive content
 - ❑ Using resources such as Snopes
- 4) Educate the public on what "fake news" is and what to do
 - ❑ Not a matter of intelligence...rather a matter of knowing what to look out for



Shots Fired

As WikiLeaks released several batches of e-mails in October 2016, partisans claimed they confirmed Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS.



How Snopes Evaluates A Claim

CLAIM

E-mails released by WikiLeaks confirm Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS. [See Example\(s\)](#)

RATING



WHAT'S TRUE

In a July 2016 interview, Julian Assange (founder of WikiLeaks) contended that leaked e-mails painted a "rich picture" of Hillary Clinton's hawkish tendencies with respect to the Libyan intervention and referenced ISIS as the eventual beneficiary of weapons provided for that intervention.

WHAT'S FALSE

No WikiLeaks e-mails confirm that Hillary Clinton directly and knowingly "sold weapons to ISIS."

Summary

- ❑ We are in the midst of a communication revolution which makes it easy for others to manipulate what we read, see and hear as "news"
- ❑ This in turn can put a number of important interests and values at risk (such as free elections, public safety, honest marketplaces, etc.)
- ❑ There is an urgent need to educate the public on ways in which they can identify "fake news"
- ❑ We need to act on these threats now...they will only get bigger and more deadly in the future!