Fake News Consumption

Subjects: Others

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This entry analyzes some of the psychological, partisan and ideological factors that influence the consumption of fake news. For a better understanding of the consumption of fake news, consult the review paper of the authors [1].

Keywords: media consumption ; fake news ; social media ; political ideology

1.Introduction [1]

This review seeks to be an addition to the literature, and its main objective is to analyze the phenomenon of fake news from the perspective of the consumer and to understand the characteristics of fake news articles that motivate their viral spread and which factors are associated with the selection and consumption of fake news in an online environment, in the search to define a profile for the true consumer of online disinformation.

This review focuses on consumer motivations (user/reader) and the structure/presentation of fake news to ascertain the apparent success and proliferation of this type of online disinformation. The factors associated with the dynamics of social media (recommendation algorithms, echo chambers, filter bubbles, malicious social bots) that also contribute a lot to the spread of fake news, were not addressed. With this review, we intend to understand the phenomenon of isolated fake news, in an independent approach to the characteristics of the digital universe to which it belongs. Our goals are to identify the main factors that influence fake news' belief and sharing and to identify differences and similarities between fake news and real news, in order to highlight the relevance of these characteristics for their dissemination. We know that some stories are more likely to go viral than others; that some headlines are more attractive, and that users tend to select information based on their party and ideological identity and on their social and psychological characteristics.

2. The Role of the Structure of Fake News

The way in which the structure (for example, from the images chosen, the format of the titles and the language used in the text) of fake news is presented can help explain the reasons for it becoming viral on social media. This analysis intends to focus only on these aspects of fake news, that is, on its formats, content and standards used. Heath (1996) showed that people have a preference for exaggeration, especially if the news is exaggeratedly bad, so (fake) news that presents accidents, disasters or crimes can generate greater emotional sharing [2][3]. Still, fake political news spreads quickly, like that regarding terrorism, natural disasters, urban legends or financial information [4]. Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrate that false content about politics was not only more widely disseminated, but also reached a larger number of people, compared to other subjects. Without specifying the category of false information, these authors showed that falsehood spreads faster than truthful content, stimulating different feelings in those who read it: disgust, fear or surprise[4]. On the other hand, Humprecht(2019) demonstrated that, unlike the USA and the United Kingdom (where online disinformation is mostly political and partisan), in Germany and Austria, sensationalist stories predominate over political content [5]. In an analysis of the fact-checkers in these four countries, the author found that online disinformation in English-speaking countries tends to target political actors, whereas in German-speaking countries, the main focus is immigrants, holding them responsible for current political, economic or social situations. For example, in Brazil and Portugal, one of the main targets of online disinformation is also corruption and politics [6][7] . Budak (2019) found that the topics covered during the American elections on Twitter by the traditional media are different compared to fake news agencies. Traditional news focused more on policies related to the economy, elections, women or the environment[8]. Budak (2019) shows that the coverage of candidates (Hillary and Trump) from the fake news agency is different from the media. The most frequent words used in detected fake news, such as "sex", "death", "corrupt", "illegal", "alien" or "lie", they refer to sensational or outrageous content, unlike traditional media[8].

The literature has demonstrated, in fact, that the lexicon used by fake news is more informal and simple in detail and in technical production, not only in the title of the piece, but also throughout the text [9]. Several elements taken into account by the producers of fake news, such as simple and impressive messages, with attractive headlines that appeal to the feelings of the public, through clickbaiting, are essential for repeated disclosure[10]. These factors make the story not only more attractive, but also more persuasive [11].In a content analysis, Horne and Adali (2017) found that fake news articles

can be distinguished from real news by their lexical coherence. "Real news articles are significantly longer than fake news articles and fake news articles use fewer technical words, smaller words, less punctuation, fewer quotes, and more lexical redundancy"[9]. The authors report that fake news needs lower levels of education to be interpreted.These characteristics allow us to verify that fake news also plays a persuasive role through mostly heuristic methods. In other words, fake news requires less effort and attention[9][12]. The association of ideas and the reader's interpretations may be less logical and based only on their titles, since fake titles have significantly more words, have too much content and exaggeration (through hyperbolic words) that resemble clickbait [9][13]. Wiggins (2017) considers that the sensationalist and attractive way in which most fake news is presented fits into the peripheral route of persuasion, which "implies focusing on those elements not central to the argument or message, but paying more attention to how the message is presented"[11], as opposed to the central route.

3. Who are Fake News consumers?

The belief, consumption and dissemination of fake news may be related to several aspects: for example, the growing distrust in the media[14][15] , the users' level of education [16][17], age and gender [18][19][20], party affiliation and ideological identity[21][22][23], with the availability and time dedicated to social media[24] or with our cognitive ability [25][26].

Too much time spent on social media increases the user's exposure to false or illegitimate content, especially if the user has a very active political identity or participation [27]. The exposure can also become repeated, making the content more familiar and easily accessible, which can induce a belief [28]. Even though this exposure is later denied by fact-checkers, the user can continue to believe in its content [29](Pennycook et al. 2018).

Despite this, Halpern et al. (2019) concluded that the use of social media is not related to the belief in fake news. The authors argue that more connected users may have greater knowledge in selecting quality information, exposing themselves less to this type of disinformation [27]. It should be noted that some studies have found that the fake news audience is smaller than the real news audience [21][30].Regarding the American election period, in 2016, Guess et al. (2019) even mention that some warnings about the echo chambers had been exaggerated, since they estimated that only one in four Americans visited disinformation websites during the elections [30]. In addition, the audience that consumes fake news is not only limited to filter bubbles and echo chambers, since this audience is also exposed, on social media, to real news [24].

In Italy and France, in 2017, most fake news sites reached less than 1% of the online population per month, even though the engagement generated by some fake news on Facebook has exceeded the engagement generated by the most popular real news.

However, this was not the case in most situations [31]. Fake news has a smaller audience than mainstream media, and the levels of distrust in these traditional media sources are lower. Still, online disinformation is currently a political weapon and Facebook is one of the main means of spreading fake news [32][33], while it remains the preferred social network for accessing news. What justifies these results?

The consumption of fake news may be related to the user's availability to use social media. Nelson and Taneja (2018) demonstrated that the selection of information and TV programming has to do with the time available and our schedules, and not exactly with the preferences of the public[24]. Users with more time available for the internet not only tend to look for other alternative means[34] , but are more exposed to all types of information, especially the most popular ones. The time spent on Facebook and Google is positively correlated with the consumption of fake news[24]. Additionally, the user's level of education can influence the belief in and dissemination of fake news. More educated people, especially young people, are less likely to share false information[16] . Flynn et al. (2017) found that the level of education can be a tool in combating the spread of disinformation online[17]. Nevertheless, Manalu et al. (2018) found that users aged between 15 and 30 years are more susceptible to believe in fake news, because they are more exposed.

The Digital News Report 2019 points out that young people are not so predisposed to "to work hard for their news", and prefer "easy" and "fun" access [33]. Some studies [35][36]have already shown that school and college students have a hard time distinguishing between false and true information. Contrary, in a study that sought to analyze the profiles of users who believed in fake news, it was shown that it is older people and those who are more outgoing and friendly who trust fake news[18].

Munger et al. (2018) concluded that the elderly have a greater preference for clickbait headlines, that is, titles that are designed with the objective of attracting the attention of the reader to click on content of "doubtful value or interest" [10]. Consumption can also vary due to gender differences: women are more likely to share false information, although it is men who prefer to consume news through social media [18].

These demographic variables can also be related to the belief and spread of false rumors. Lai et al. (2020) found that women are more likely to believe rumors. The same is true of less literate or educated individuals[37] . However, the traits related to the personality of each person can also be related to the belief in false rumors, such as people with high values

of neuroticism and extroversion[38][37].

From a psychological perspective, several studies[39][40][25][26] found that analytical and intuitive thoughts can interfere with the evaluation of false or true information. According to Pennycook and Rand (2017), the most intuitive individuals are more spontaneous, perform quickly with little attention or intellectual reflection, which turns them more likely to believe in "bullshit" , since the majority of the public is limited to reading the headlines [41].

Related to this aspect, [25][42][39] point out, for example, that liberals tend to be more analytical than conservatives. Conservatives rely more on intuition, so conservatives may be more likely to consume fake news or to believe in "bullshit". Jost et al. (2003) analyzed the social behavior associated with conservatism and found that ideologically right-wing people, in the social sense, have a greater tendency to reject complex topics and are more dependent on implicit reasoning[43].

Tetlock (1983) had previously found that conservatism is associated with a more closed mind, which offers resistance to complexity and change, drawing lessons from the world around it through quick judgments, sometimes based on stereotypes [44].

The belief in fake news can be greater in people prone to delusion, with psychotic thoughts or who follow unusual opinions or ideas such as being aware of conspiracy theories or paranormal phenomena [45].

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