



How dangerous is fake news really?

Reading time 7 minutes

Fake news and misinformation have become buzzwords in recent years. Their socially corrosive effect is often dramatised. In this BrainCandy, we take a look at the current state of science and examine whether the alarmist rhetoric is actually justified.

Examples:

Russian false reports are said to have enabled Trump's victory over Clinton in 2016. Green politician von Notz explains the party's unsatisfactory performance in the last federal elections with Russian trolls. However, von Notz does not explain why these trolls failed at the BSW (Russian friendly party) of all places.

There are spectacular misinformation cases such as Pizzagate. The Pizzagate incident is a prominent example where Edgar Welch, a North Carolina man, was convinced that a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., was the site of a child sex trafficking ring run by prominent Democrats. On 4 December 2016, he stormed the restaurant with a rifle and fired shots, luckily without injuring anyone.

Politicians are alarmed:

The social media giants from overseas in particular are suspected of jeopardising the social cohesion of European societies or at least accepting the threat by not doing enough to combat the spread of fake news.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission:

"Disinformation is one of the biggest challenges facing our democracies. It undermines trust in our institutions and manipulates our free and fair elections."

Olaf Scholz, German Federal Chancellor:

"The targeted spread of misinformation is an attack on the core of our democratic society. We must be vigilant and strengthen our digital infrastructure to counter these threats."

It's not just politicians and organisations that are experiencing a major problem with fake news. The media are also keen to get in on the act: a Pew survey from 2022 found that 71 per cent of American journalists thought that fabricated information was a "very big problem", compared to 50 per cent of American adults. Note, this is about opinions not facts.

Is fake news being moralised?

My impression is that we have once again landed in the realm of over-moralising an important topic. I am following the discussion closely. Professionally, I deal with the impact of advertising. And the experience I have gained in this field has made me doubt the claimed powerful effect of fake news.

Politicians and organisations usually overestimate the power of advertising. Advertising is said to be able to manipulate us easily. Anyone who is intensively involved with the effects of advertising knows that advertising is a weak force. If it works at all, then mainly as a confirmation and refresher of brand memories. It does not send us as puppets to the nearest EDEKA supermarket to buy the product.

Fake New, a drop in the flood of information

Advertising has to run over many years with regular contacts in order to achieve a measurable effect.



We are exposed to hundreds of messages and pieces of information every day. How likely is it that a few pieces of fake news will actually change our attitudes and behaviour?

If you try to get to the bottom of the matter, you realise that many statements about the high harmfulness of fake news tend to be attitude-based or, at most, based on simple surveys. It follows a simple logic: false information leads to false knowledge and therefore to false behaviour. There are few controlled studies - but here comes the good news: the measured effects are small. So, there is a negative effect, but it is manageable. The collapse of democracy has probably been postponed for the time being.

The main mechanism of action is that people search for information that matches their attitudes and opinions, according to Matthew Baum, Professor of Global Communication at Harvard University.

It is "not always the case that people believe and do wrong things because they have been taken in by misinformation." Conspiracy-minded people consume the right misinformation and feel vindicated. The masses don't realise it.

Eight years after Trump's landslide victory, according to Kelly McBride, a media ethics researcher at the Poynter Institute, "there's no big mystery, so, wow, why did this happen? Nobody was tricked into voting for Donald Trump."



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Justified by the fear of a disinformation boom, fact-checkers and NGOs jumped on the bandwagon to the fight against misinformation take up. But who holds the key to the truth? I'm not going to philosophise about the truth here. But after the experiences of recent years, I'm not so sure that you can simply check facts without personal attitudes colouring the result, especially in the case of NGOs. Well-known fact-checkers, such as Correctiv, have already suffered defeats in court as a result.

At Corona, fact-checkers examined whether the political narrative was supported. Conspiracy theorists and critical scientists were simultaneously silenced under pressure from governments in the USA and Germany. A big mistake, as we now know. Virologist Professor Christian Drosten, a proponent of tough coronavirus measures, has just stated that it is only now possible to prove that there was no pandemic among the unvaccinated. However, medical statistician Vinay Prasad and many other scientists had already come to this conclusion by the end of 2021. Germany has allowed the coronavirus measures to run until 2023. One year longer than our neighbours.

Not only trolls are behind fake news

The most blatant misinformation, which also has consequences come not only from internet trolls, but also from 'prominent and powerful domestic actors and top politicians', says Rasmus Nielsen, Professor at the Department of Department at



the University of Copenhagen. I would have many examples of government politicians as well as opposition politicians that can be clearly proven to be fake news.

But Mrs von der Leyen and Olaf Scholz certainly didn't mean themselves in their statements.

Conclusion

Firstly, I am reassured by the realisation that fake news on social media is currently having a limited effect. Please note that I'm not talking about fake news or straight lies from leading politicians – those certainly have a much higher impact. But this is not what Politicians mean, when they talk about fake news on social media platforms.

The alarmist rhetoric seems unfounded and probably serves more to limit unwelcome business models and opposing attitudes.

I hope that good AI will soon help us to misinformation identify more reliably and without political interests or posturing.

Those who paint big problems on the wall will not be particularly squeamish when it comes to 'fact-checking'.

That's why I prefer to avoid non-transparent and non accountable fact-checkers and politically motivated interventions in the information on offer and train my ability to recognise fake news.

So, remain critical, but also pragmatic: question alarmism, use the various sources of information and train a good understanding of the media in order to recognise the heart of the matter. Think of a well-organised road trip, where the route is just as important as the destination - sometimes a small diversion leads to new, surprising insights.

In my research on fake news, I used both the great ChatGPT o3 mini and the Grok 3 model. Curiously, Elon Musk's model was a little more critical of the effect of fake news on social networks. That made me smile after all.

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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