

## Connecticut Debate Association

February 4, 2017

### Daniel Hand, Glastonbury and Wilton High Schools

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#### **Resolved: Internet sites should be required to remove fake news.**

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*Editor's note:* This is quite a mess of a topic. I would suggest you scan at least the headline of each article in the packet to get a feeling for the types of issues involved before starting to read in depth. I also cut more articles than usual to fit more in. I will publish a longer packet with full copies of each article, and copies of articles that did not make the packet, on the CDA website.

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#### **German Government Considers Hefty Fines for Sites That Fail to Address Fake News**

New York Magazine, By Brian Feldman, December 19, 2016

Officials in the German government are considering comprehensive regulations for platforms — like Facebook — that are easily turned into machines for misinformation. According to Deutsche Welle, Social Democratic Party parliamentary chairman Thomas Oppermann has proposed rapid-response teams for people smeared by falsified stories. “Facebook did not avail itself of the opportunity to regulate the issue of complaint management itself,” Oppermann told “Der Spiegel” magazine in an interview published on Friday. “Now market dominating platforms like Facebook will be legally required to build a legal protection office in Germany that is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.”

This would allow victims of fake news and hate messages to contact the platform, prove that they have been targeted and asking for action to be taken. The proposed penalty for platforms that do not adequately respond to service would be €500,000 (\$531,000).

Speaking to Ars Technica, Facebook said:

*We take the issues raised very seriously, and we are engaging with key politicians and digital experts from all parties and relevant ministries interested in this matter. Our announcement last week underlines our efforts to improve our systems. We have announced several new functions that address the issue of fake news and hoaxes.*

The proposal is an interesting measure against a growing issue for large social-media platforms. But there are a number of potential issues. For one thing, €500,000 is chump change to a company like Facebook, which has a market capitalization north of \$300 billion. Second, intent and practice are two different things. Much of the debate surrounding the catchall category of “fake news” concerns what actually constitutes “fake,” rather than “slanted” or “mistaken” versus “willfully untrue.” It’s not difficult to imagine something like this being taken advantage of in the the same way that copyright trolls abuse YouTube’s takedown system.

It may also end up being a moot gesture. Facebook has spent much of the last year testing new interfaces for its News Feed and placing bets on its many other products, like Messenger, and it’s not at all hard to imagine that Facebook in the future will — like Facebook-owned Instagram — disallow external links entirely, or severely limit them. What’s the point of regulating content you can’t control when it’d be easier — and better for your business — to get rid of it entirely?

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#### **Duped by fake news story, Pakistani minister threatens nuclear war with Israel**

By Ben Westcott, CNN, Updated 1:05 AM ET, Mon December 26, 2016

(CNN)A fake news story led to threats of nuclear war between Pakistan and Israel on Christmas Eve.

In an article published by AWDNews on Tuesday December 20, former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon was quoted as threatening to destroy Pakistan if it sent troops into Syria. “We will destroy them with a nuclear attack,” the article quoted Yaalon as saying. There is no evidence Yaalon ever said those words.

Pakistan Defense Minister Khawaja Asif responded to the fake news article on his official Twitter as if it were real. He warned Israel that it was not the only nuclear power. “Israeli (defense minister) threatens nuclear retaliation presuming (Pakistan) role in Syria against Daesh. Israel forgets Pakistan is a Nuclear State too,” Asif wrote late on December 23.

Less than a day later, the Israeli Ministry of Defense responded on Twitter, notifying Asif the Yaalon statement quoted in AWDNews was completely false. “The statement attributed to (former Defense Minister) Yaalon (regarding) Pakistan

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was never said," the ministry tweeted on its account. "Reports referred to by the Pakistani Def Min are entirely false."...

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## **As Fake News Spreads Lies, More Readers Shrug at the Truth**

The New York Times, By SABRINA TAVERNISEDEC. 6, 2016

HAM LAKE, Minn. — One morning last week, Larry Laughlin, a retired business owner, opened his shiny black Dell laptop and scrolled through Facebook. Most of the posts were ordinary news stories from conservative sites: Donald J. Trump's deal with the Carrier company. The political tussle over the recount. But a few items were his guilty pleasures. "I like this guy," said Mr. Laughlin, looking at a post by the conservative commentator and author Mark Dice.

Mr. Dice has promoted conspiracy theories that the Jade Helm military training exercise last year was preparation for martial law and that the Sept. 11 attacks were an "inside job." But Mr. Laughlin likes him for what he said was his humorous political commentary and his sarcastic man-on-the-street interviews.

"I just like the satisfaction," said Mr. Laughlin, who started his own business and lives in an affluent Twin Cities suburb. "It's like a hockey game. Everyone's got their goons. Their goons are pushing our guys around, and it's great to see our goons push back."

The proliferation of fake and hyperpartisan news that has flooded into Americans' laptops and living rooms has prompted a national soul-searching, with liberals across the country asking how a nation of millions could be marching to such a suspect drumbeat. But while some Americans may take the stories literally — like the North Carolina man who fired his gun in a Washington pizzeria on Sunday trying to investigate a false story spread online of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton — many do not.

The larger problem, experts say, is less extreme but more insidious. Fake news, and the proliferation of raw opinion that passes for news, is creating confusion, punching holes in what is true, causing a kind of fun-house effect that leaves the reader doubting everything, including real news.

That has pushed up the political temperature and increased polarization. No longer burdened with wrestling with the possibility that they might be wrong, people on the right and the left have become more entrenched in their positions, experts say. In interviews, people said they felt more empowered, more attached to their own side and less inclined to listen to the other. Polarization is fun, like cheering a goal for the home team.

"There are an alarming number of people who tend to be credulous and form beliefs based on the latest thing they've read, but that's not the wider problem," said Michael Lynch, a professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut. "The wider problem is fake news has the effect of getting people not to believe real things."

He described the thinking like this: "There's no way for me to know what is objectively true, so we'll stick to our guns and our own evidence. We'll ignore the facts because nobody knows what's really true anyway."

News that is fake or only marginally real has lurked online — and in supermarket tabloids — for years, but never before has it played such a prominent role in an American election and its aftermath. Narrowly defined, "fake news" means a made-up story with an intention to deceive, often geared toward getting clicks. But the issue has become a political battering ram, with the left accusing the right of trafficking in disinformation, and the right accusing the left of tarring conservatives as a way to try to censor websites. In the process, the definition of fake news has blurred.

"Fake news is subjective," Mr. Laughlin said. "It depends on who's defining it. One man's trash is another man's treasure."...

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## **How to solve Facebook's fake news problem: experts pitch their ideas**

The Guardian, Nicky Woolf, Tuesday 29 November 2016

A cadre of technologists, academics and media experts are thinking up solutions, from hiring human editors, to crowdsourcing or creating algorithms.

The impact of fake news, propaganda and misinformation has been widely scrutinized since the US election. Fake news actually outperformed real news on Facebook during the final weeks of the election campaign, according to an analysis by BuzzFeed, and even outgoing president Barack Obama has expressed his concerns.

But a growing cadre of technologists, academics and media experts are now beginning the quixotic process of trying to think up solutions to the problem, starting with a rambling 100+ page open Google document set up by Upworthy founder Eli Pariser.

The project has snowballed since Pariser started it on 17 November, with contributors putting forward myriad solutions, he said. "It's a really wonderful thing to watch as it grows," Pariser said. "We were talking about how design shapes how people interact. Kind of inadvertently this turned into this place where you had thousands of people collaborating

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together in this beautiful way.”

In Silicon Valley, meanwhile, some programmers have been battling solutions back and forth on Hacker News, a discussion board about computing run by the startup incubator Y Combinator. Some ideas are more realistic than others. “The biggest challenge is who wants to be the arbiter of truth and what truth is,” said Claire Wardle, research director for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. “The way that people receive information now is increasingly via social networks, so any solution that anybody comes up with, the social networks have to be on board.”

### **Journalists, the public or algorithms?**

Most of the solutions fall into three general categories: the hiring of human editors; crowdsourcing, and technological or algorithmic solutions.

Human editing relies on a trained professional to assess a news article before it enters the news stream. Its proponents say that human judgment is more reliable than algorithms, which can be gamed by trolls and arguably less nuanced when faced with complex editorial decisions; Facebook’s algorithmic system famously botched the Vietnam photo debacle.

Yet hiring people – especially the number needed to deal with Facebook’s volume of content – is expensive, and it may be hard for them to act quickly. The social network ecosystem is enormous, and Wardle says that any human solution would be next to impossible to scale. Humans are also partial to subjectivity, and even an overarching “readers’ editor”, if Facebook appointed one, would be a disproportionately powerful position and open to abuse.

Crowdsourced vetting would open up the assessment process to the body politic, having people apply for a sort of “verified news checker” status and then allowing them to rank news as they see it. This isn’t dissimilar to the way Wikipedia works, and could be more democratic than a small team of paid staff. It would be less likely to be accused of bias or censorship because anyone could theoretically join, but could also be easier to game by people promoting fake or biased news, or using automated systems to promote clickbait for advertising revenue.

Algorithmic or machine learning vetting is the third approach, and the one currently favored by Facebook, who fired their human trending news team and replaced them with an algorithm earlier in 2016. But the current systems are failing to identify and downgrade hoax news or distinguish satire from real stories; Facebook’s algorithm started spitting out fake news almost immediately after its inception.

Technology companies like to claim that algorithms are free of personal bias, yet they inevitably reflect the subjective decisions of those who designed them, and journalistic integrity is not a priority for engineers.

Algorithms also happen to be cheaper and easier to manage than human beings, but an algorithmic solution, Wardle said, must be transparent. “We have to say: here’s the way the machine can make this easier for you.”

Facebook has been slow to admit it has a problem with misinformation on its news feed, which is seen by 1.18 billion people every day. It has had several false starts on systems, both automated and using human editors, that inform how news appears on its feed. Pariser’s project details a few ways to start:

#### **Verified news media pages**

Similar to Twitter’s “blue tick” system, verification would mean that a news organization would have to apply to be verified and be proved to be a credible news source so that stories would be published with a “verified” flag. Verification could also mean higher priority in newsfeed algorithms, while repeatedly posting fake news would mean losing verified status.

Pros: The system would be simple to impose, possibly through a browser plug-in, and is likely to appeal to most major publications.

Cons: It would require extra staff to assess applications and maintain the system, could be open to accusations of bias if not carefully managed and could discriminate against younger, less established news sites.

#### **Separate news articles from shared personal information**

“Social media sharing of news articles/opinion subtly shifts the ownership of the opinion from the author to the ‘sharer’,” Amanda Harris, a contributor to Pariser’s project, wrote. “By shifting the conversation about the article to the third person, it starts in a much better place: ‘the author is wrong’ is less aggressive than ‘you are wrong’.”

Pros: Easy and cheap to implement.

Cons: The effect may be too subtle and not actually solve the problem.

#### **Add a ‘fake news’ flag**

Labelling problematic articles in this way would show Facebook users that there is some question over the veracity of an article. It could be structured the same way as abuse reports currently are; users can “flag” a story as fake, and if

enough users do so then readers would see a warning box that “multiple users have marked this story as fake” before they could click through.

Pros: Flagging is cheap, easy to do and requires very little change. It would make readers more questioning about the content they read and share, and also slightly raises the bar for sharing fake news by slowing the speed at which it can spread.

Cons: It’s unknown whether flagging would actually change people’s behavior. It is also vulnerable to trolling or gaming the system; users could spam real articles with fake tags, known as a “false flag” operation....

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## **The Fake News Scare Is, Itself, Fake News**

Forbes, DEC 26, 2016 by Jordan Shapiro

Don't worry about fake news. The whole scare is, itself, fake news. Don't believe a word of it.

Could it be that the news media is still trying to distract us from their own poor performance? After all, if inaccuracy makes a thing “fake,” then all the pundits’ and pollsters’ pre-election day predictions were pretty bad offenders.

I’m particularly looking forward to this last one (allowing everyday users to “report stories as fake”); there’s a lot I’d like to report. For example, I have friends and relatives who are not really happy in their romantic relationships but keep posting photos of “date night” in order to convince us (and, presumably, themselves) that everything is peachy. There are certified narcissistic materialists in my network who keep posting semi-spiritual memes about gratitude and positivity which seem completely out of resonance with the sense of dark emptiness I feel when I’m in their presence. And parents keep posting anecdotes and photos of their children which suggest that their families have significantly fewer temper tantrums and meltdowns than I experience on a daily basis.

See, the real problem is not falsehoods or inaccuracies, but rather that everything about the popular landscape of digital media currently encourages us to see the world the way we want it to be. Combine that with an education system which pays little more than lip service to critical thinking—a system that’s barely cognizant of the fact that a skills-based approach to training inherently promotes specialization and, therefore, narrow-mindedness—and you end up with a population that’s been encouraged to live with poor vision. You know the platitude: when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Democracy's biggest threat is not tyrants, but rather citizens who are satisfied with their own limited view of reality. That’s why, when Plato wrote Republic, he put education at the center of the *politeia*—*πολιτεία* (citizenship, government). He recognized the need for critical thinking. Plato called it Philosophy—*Philei Sophia*— which literally means “love of wisdom.” He knew that for a society to function, it needs to cultivate the children into adults who are passionately in love with the quest for truth, the quest to discover that each current reality is nothing more than a fallacy, a shadow, a reflection, a pale imitation of the real deal.

This sort of conviction for critical thinking—in the 21st century, maybe we need to call it critical media literacy—feels especially difficult in a world where all of our media is social. It’s easier to point fingers at others. After all, our daily timelines define us and our news streams are intricately tangled up with personal identity narratives. Challenging the information in front of our eyes becomes tantamount to questioning our own sense-of-self. And any serious engagement can cause a nervous breakdown.

Critical thinking is painful. Plato equated it with walking out of a dark cave and staring directly into a bright light. That’s what it feels like when you’re willing to question your most sacred beliefs no matter how much it hurts. It’s a kind of masochistic intellectual flagellation. Sounds horrible, but Plato promised it was worth it. Afterward, the contentment we get from constant spectacle will be replaced with true pleasure—essential pleasure.

Today, we mistakenly point to “fake news” when the real problem lies within us. Algorithmic curation is just the newest technology in a long historical line of shadow-stimulants that excel at numbing us into complacency. The issue is not the reality that’s presented to us, but rather our incapacity to challenge it.

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## **Facebook’s Problem Isn’t Fake News — It’s the Rest of the Internet**

The New York Times, By JOHN HERRMAN, DEC. 22, 2016

Last Thursday, after weeks of criticism over its role in the proliferation of falsehoods and propaganda during the presidential election, Facebook announced its plan to combat “hoaxes” and “fake news.” The company promised to test new tools that would allow users to report misinformation, and to enlist fact-checking organizations including Snopes and PolitiFact to help litigate the veracity of links reported as suspect. By analyzing patterns of reading and sharing, the

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company said, it might be able to penalize articles that are shared at especially low rates by those who read them — a signal of dissatisfaction. Finally, it said, it would try to put economic pressure on bad actors in three ways: by banning disputed stories from its advertising ecosystem; by making it harder to impersonate credible sites on the platform; and, crucially, by penalizing websites that are loaded with too many ads.

Over the past month the colloquial definition of “fake news” has expanded beyond usefulness, implicating everything from partisan news to satire to conspiracy theories before being turned, finally, back against its creators. Facebook’s fixes address a far more narrow definition. “We’ve focused our efforts on the worst of the worst, on the clear hoaxes spread by spammers for their own gain,” wrote Adam Mosseri, a vice president for news feed, in a blog post.

Facebook’s political news ecosystem during the 2016 election was vast and varied. There was, of course, content created by outside news media that was shared by users, but there were also reams of content — posts, images, videos — created on Facebook-only pages, and still more media created by politicians themselves. During the election, it was apparent to almost anyone with an account that Facebook was teeming with political content, much of it extremely partisan or pitched, its sourcing sometimes obvious, other times obscured, and often simply beside the point — memes or rants or theories that spoke for themselves.

Facebook seems to have zeroed in on only one component of this ecosystem — outside websites — and within it, narrow types of bad actors. These firms are, generally speaking, paid by advertising companies independent of Facebook, which are unaware of or indifferent to their partners’ sources of audience. Accordingly, Facebook’s anti-hoax measures seek to regulate these sites by punishing them not just for what they do on Facebook, but for what they do outside of it.

“We’ve found that a lot of fake news is financially motivated,” Mosseri wrote. “Spammers make money by masquerading as well-known news organizations and posting hoaxes that get people to visit to their sites, which are often mostly ads.” The proposed solution: “Analyzing publisher sites to detect where policy enforcement actions might be necessary.”

The stated targets of Facebook’s efforts are precisely defined, but its formulation of the problem implicates, to a lesser degree, much more than just “the worst of the worst.” Consider this characterization of what makes a “fake news” site a bad platform citizen: It uses Facebook to capture receptive audiences by spreading lies and then converts those audiences into money by borrowing them from Facebook, luring them to an outside site larded with obnoxious ads. The site’s sin of fabrication is made worse by its profit motive, which is cast here as a sort of arbitrage scheme. But an acceptable news site does more or less the same thing: It uses Facebook to capture receptive audiences by spreading not-lies and then converts those audiences into money by luring them to an outside site not-quite larded with not-as-obnoxious ads. In either case, Facebook users are being taken out of the safe confines of the platform into areas that Facebook does not and cannot control.

In this context, this “fake news” problem reads less as a distinct new phenomenon than as a flaring symptom of an older, more existential anxiety that Facebook has been grappling with for years: its continued (albeit diminishing) dependence on the same outside web that it, and other platforms, have begun to replace. Facebook’s plan for “fake news” is no doubt intended to curb certain types of misinformation. But it’s also a continuation of the company’s bigger and more consequential project — to capture the experiences of the web it wants and from which it can profit, but to insulate itself from the parts that it doesn’t and can’t. This may help solve a problem within the ecosystem of outside publishers — an ecosystem that, in the distribution machinery of Facebook, is becoming redundant, and perhaps even obsolete.

As Facebook has grown, so have its ambitions. Its mantralike mission (to “connect the world”) is rivaled among internet companies perhaps by only that of Google (to “organize the world’s information”) in terms of sheer scope. In the run-up to Facebook’s initial public offering, Mark Zuckerberg told investors that the company makes decisions “not optimizing for what’s going to happen in the next year, but to set us up to really be in this world where every product experience you have is social, and that’s all powered by Facebook.”

To understand what such ambition looks like in practice, consider Facebook’s history. It started as an inward-facing website, closed off from both the web around it and the general public. It was a place to connect with other people, and where content was created primarily by other users: photos, wall posts, messages. This system quickly grew larger and more complex, leading to the creation, in 2006, of the news feed — a single location in which users could find updates from all of their Facebook friends, in roughly reverse-chronological order.

When the news feed was announced, before the emergence of the modern Facebook sharing ecosystem, Facebook’s operating definition of “news” was pointedly friend-centric. “Now, whenever you log in, you’ll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups,” the announcement about the news feed said. This would soon change.

In the ensuing years, as more people spent more time on Facebook, and following the addition of “Like” and “Share” functions within Facebook, the news feed grew into a personalized portal not just for personal updates but also for the cornucopia of media that existed elsewhere online: links to videos, blog posts, games and more or less anything else published on an external website, including news articles. This potent mixture accelerated Facebook’s change from a place for keeping up with family and friends to a place for keeping up, additionally, with the web in general, as curated by your friends and family. Facebook’s purview continued to widen as its user base grew and then acquired their first smartphones; its app became an essential lens through which hundreds of millions of people interacted with one another, with the rest of the web and, increasingly, with the world at large.

Facebook, in other words, had become an interface for the whole web rather than just one more citizen of it. By sorting and mediating the internet, Facebook inevitably began to change it. In the previous decade, the popularity of Google influenced how websites worked, in noticeable ways: Titles and headlines were written in search-friendly formats; pages or articles would be published not just to cover the news but, more specifically, to address Google searchers’ queries about the news, the canonical example being The Huffington Post’s famous “What Time Does The Super Bowl Start?” Publishers built entire business models around attracting search traffic, and search-engine optimization, S.E.O., became an industry unto itself. Facebook’s influence on the web — and in particular, on news publishers — was similarly profound. Publishers began taking into consideration how their headlines, and stories, might travel within Facebook. Some embraced the site as a primary source of visitors; some pursued this strategy into absurdity and exploitation.

Facebook, for its part, paid close attention to the sorts of external content people were sharing on its platform and to the techniques used by websites to get an edge. It adapted continually. It provided greater video functionality, reducing the need to link to outside videos or embed them from YouTube. As people began posting more news, it created previews for links, with larger images and headlines and longer summaries; eventually, it created Instant Articles, allowing certain publishers (including The Times) to publish stories natively in Facebook. At the same time, it routinely sought to penalize sites it judged to be using the platform in bad faith, taking aim at “clickbait,” an older cousin of “fake news,” with a series of design and algorithm updates. As Facebook’s influence over online media became unavoidably obvious, its broad approach to users and the web became clearer: If the network became a popular venue for a certain sort of content or behavior, the company generally and reasonably tried to make that behavior easier or that content more accessible. This tended to mean, however, bringing it in-house.

To Facebook, the problem with “fake news” is not just the obvious damage to the discourse, but also with the harm it inflicts upon the platform. People sharing hoax stories were, presumably, happy enough with they were seeing. But the people who would then encounter those stories in their feeds were subjected to a less positive experience. They were sent outside the platform to a website where they realized they were being deceived, or where they were exposed to ads or something that felt like spam, or where they were persuaded to share something that might later make them look like a rube. These users might rightly associate these experiences not just with their friends on the platform, or with the sites peddling the bogus stories but also with the platform itself. This created, finally, an obvious issue for a company built on attention, advertising and the promotion of outside brands. From the platform’s perspective, “fake news” is essentially a user-experience problem resulting from a lingering design issue — akin to slow-loading news websites that feature auto-playing videos and obtrusive ads.

Increasingly, legitimacy within Facebook’s ecosystem is conferred according to a participant’s relationship to the platform’s design. A verified user telling a lie, be it a friend from high school or the president elect, isn’t breaking the rules; he is, as his checkmark suggests, who he represents himself to be. A post making false claims about a product is Facebook’s problem only if that post is labeled an ad. A user video promoting a conspiracy theory becomes a problem only when it leads to the violation of community guidelines against, for example, user harassment. Facebook contains a lot more than just news, including a great deal of content that is newslite, partisan, widely shared and often misleading. Content that has been, and will be, immune from current “fake news” critiques and crackdowns, because it never had the opportunity to declare itself news in the first place. To publish lies as “news” is to break a promise; to publish lies as “content” is not.

That the “fake news” problem and its proposed solutions have been defined by Facebook as link issues — as a web issue — aligns nicely with a longer-term future in which Facebook’s interface with the web is diminished. Indeed, it heralds the coming moment when posts from outside are suspect by default: out of place, inefficient, little better than spam.

John Herrman is a David Carr fellow at The New York Times.

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## **Fake News: How a Partying Macedonian Teen Earns Thousands Publishing Lies**

MSNBC, DEC 9 2016, by ALEXANDER SMITH and VLADIMIR BANIC

VELES, Macedonia — Dimitri points to a picture on his Instagram showing a bar table decked with expensive champagne and sparklers. It's from his 18th birthday just four months ago — a lavish party in his east European hometown that he says wouldn't have been possible without President-elect Donald Trump. Dimitri — who asked NBC News not to use his real name — is one of dozens of teenagers in the Macedonian town of Veles who got rich during the U.S. presidential election producing fake news for millions on social media. The articles, sensationalist and often baseless, were posted to Facebook, drawing in armies of readers and earning fake-news writers money from penny-per-click advertising.

Dimitri says he's earned at least \$60,000 in the past six months — far outstripping his parents' income and transforming his prospects in a town where the average annual wage is \$4,800. He is one of the more successful fake news pushers in the area. His main source of cash? Supporters of America's president-elect. "Nothing can beat Trump's supporters when it comes to social media engagement," he says. "So that's why we stick with Trump." Even with the presidential contest over and Google and Facebook's plans to crack down on fake news makers, money continues to pour in. Posts about Hillary Clinton are also a hit — but only negative ones...

Dimitri's sole aim is to make his stories go viral. His most popular headlines during the election included: "JUST IN: Obama Illegally Transferred DOJ Money To Clinton Campaign!" and "BREAKING: Obama Confirms Refusal To Leave White House, He Will Stay In Power!"

The teenager is unrepentant about any influence his stories may have had on swaying public opinion. "I didn't force anyone to give me money," he says. "People sell cigarettes, they sell alcohol. That's not illegal, why is my business illegal? If you sell cigarettes, cigarettes kill people. I didn't kill anyone."

The same weekend that NBC spent with Dimitri, a gunman opened fire in a Washington, D.C., pizzeria. The shooter told police he was motivated by a fake news story. The pizzeria, Comet Ping Pong, was accused online of hosting a pedophile ring run by Democratic leaders. Asked about the incident this week, Dimitri claimed he wasn't familiar with the story nor the people who had spread it online.

### **The Anatomy of a Lie**

As with many regular journalists, Dimitri starts his day by trawling the web looking for trending topics that he can harness to drive traffic to his websites. He copies his posts from other fake news websites, including many in the U.S., or takes content from mainstream media organizations before peppering them with invented details. He also posts provocative online polls such as: "Should Trump Deport All Refugees?" and: "Do you consider Donald Trump, the Jesus of America?"

Most of this content is published on websites Dimitri has built to look like NBC News, Fox News, the Huffington Post and others. To the untrained eye, fake headlines such as: "BREAKING: Obama Confirms Refusal To Leave White House, He Will Stay In Power!" look genuine. The only giveaway is the imitation URL. From then on, it's a case of throwing as much mud at the wall and seeing what sticks...

He and his collaborators post these stories to their Facebook pages dozens of times a day. Again, he would only show NBC News a Facebook page that he runs on his own, which has an impressive 86,000 likes. But he said the six pages run by his collective have amassed more than 3 million likes between them.

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## **We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs**

NPR, All Things Considered, Laura Sydell, November 23, 2016

A lot of fake and misleading news stories were shared across social media during the election. One that got a lot of traffic had this headline: "FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide." The story is completely false, but it was shared on Facebook over half a million times.

We wondered who was behind that story and why it was written... We tried to look up who owned it and hit a wall. The site was registered anonymously. So we brought in some professional help... Jansen found that the first entry ever for the site was done by someone with the handle LetTexasSecede. "That was sort of the thread that started to unravel everything," Jansen says. "I was able to track that through to a bunch of other sites which are where that handle is also present."

The sites include NationalReport.net, USAToday.com.co, WashingtonPost.com.co. All the addresses linked to a single rented server inside Amazon Web Services. That meant they were all very likely owned by the same company. Jansen found an email address on one of those sites and was able to link that address to a name: Jestin Coler. Online, Coler was listed as the founder and CEO of a company called Disinfomedia...

He was amazed at how quickly fake news could spread and how easily people believe it. He wrote one fake story for NationalReport.net about how customers in Colorado marijuana shops were using food stamps to buy pot. "What that

turned into was a state representative in the House in Colorado proposing actual legislation to prevent people from using their food stamps to buy marijuana based on something that had just never happened," Coler says.

During the run-up to the presidential election, fake news really took off. "It was just anybody with a blog can get on there and find a big, huge Facebook group of kind of rabid Trump supporters just waiting to eat up this red meat that they're about to get served," Coler says. "It caused an explosion in the number of sites. I mean, my gosh, the number of just fake accounts on Facebook exploded during the Trump election." Coler says his writers have tried to write fake news for liberals — but they just never take the bait.

Coler's company, DisinfoMedia, owns many faux news sites — he won't say how many. But he says his is one of the biggest fake-news businesses out there, which makes him a sort of godfather of the industry. At any given time, Coler says, he has between 20 and 25 writers. And it was one of them who wrote the story in the "Denver Guardian" that an FBI agent who leaked Clinton emails was killed. Coler says that over 10 days the site got 1.6 million views. He says stories like this work because they fit into existing right-wing conspiracy theories.

"The people wanted to hear this," he says. "So all it took was to write that story. Everything about it was fictional: the town, the people, the sheriff, the FBI guy. And then ... our social media guys kind of go out and do a little dropping it throughout Trump groups and Trump forums and boy it spread like wildfire."

And as the stories spread, Coler makes money from the ads on his websites. He wouldn't give exact figures, but he says stories about other fake-news proprietors making between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a month apply to him. Coler fits into a pattern of other faux news sites that make good money, especially by targeting Trump supporters.

However, Coler insists this is not about money. It's about showing how easily fake news spreads. And fake news spread wide and far before the election. When I pointed out to Coler that the money gave him a lot of incentive to keep doing it regardless of the impact, he admitted that was "correct."

Coler says he has tried to shine a light on the problem of fake news. He has spoken to the media about it. But those organizations didn't know who he actually was. He gave them a fake name: Allen Montgomery.

Coler, a registered Democrat, says he has no regrets about his fake news empire. He doesn't think fake news swayed the election. "There are many factors as to why Trump won that don't involve fake news," he says. "As much as I like Hillary, she was a poor candidate. She brought in a lot of baggage."

Coler doesn't think fake news is going away. One of his sites — NationalReport.net — was flagged as fake news under a new Google policy, and Google stopped running ads on it. But Coler had other options. "There are literally hundreds of ad networks," he says. "Early last week, my inbox was just filled every day with people because they knew that Google was cracking down — hundreds of people wanting to work with my sites."...

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## **SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS**

The New Yorker, By Nicholas Lemann November 30, 2016

There's an easy solution and a hard one to the problem of fake news—and the easy solution isn't all that easy.

What we are now calling fake news—misinformation that people fall for—is nothing new. Thousands of years ago, in the Republic, Plato offered up a hellish vision of people who mistake shadows cast on a wall for reality. In the Iliad, the Trojans fell for a fake horse. Shakespeare loved misinformation: in "Twelfth Night," Viola disguises herself as a man and wins the love of another woman; in "The Tempest," Caliban mistakes Stephano for a god. And, in recent years, the Nobel committee has awarded several economics prizes to work on "information asymmetry," "cognitive bias," and other ways in which the human propensity toward misperception distorts the workings of the world.

What is new is the premise of the conversation about fake news that has blossomed since Election Day: that it's realistic to expect our country to be a genuine mass democracy, in which people vote on the basis of facts and truth, as provided to them by the press. Plato believed in truth but didn't believe in democracy. The framers of the American Constitution devised a democratic system shot through with restrictions: only a limited portion of the citizenry could vote, and even that subset was permitted to elect only state and local politicians and members of the House of Representatives, not senators or Presidents. In guaranteeing freedom of the press, the framers gave a pass to fake news, since back then the press was mainly devoted to hot-blooded opinion. They felt protected against a government that came to power through misinformation, because the country wasn't very democratic, and because they assumed most people would simply vote their economic interests.

Only in the twentieth century, as the United States became a complex modern society with mass media and professional journalism, did people begin to worry about the fake-news problem, and when they did they usually came down either on the side of restricting democracy or restricting the media. (As American democracy came to include a greater number of people—former slaves, immigrants, and women—élites, including liberal élites, began to find it more



worrisome.) Walter Lippmann began “Public Opinion,” published in 1922, with a long quotation from Plato’s cave parable, and wound up abandoning the idea that the press or the public could discern and then pay attention to the truth. Instead, he wanted to create “political observatories”—what we’d now call think tanks—that would feed expert advice to grateful, overwhelmed politicians, relegating both the press and the public to secondary roles in government policymaking.

In the nineteen-twenties, when radio was as new and vastly influential as the Internet is today, the United States decided not to create a government-funded news network like the British Broadcasting Corporation, but instead to turn broadcasting over to private industry and to regulate it heavily. The American news world that many people are nostalgic for had only three networks, which were required to speak in a nonpartisan voice and to do money-losing public-service journalism in return for the renewal of their valuable government licenses. That world disappeared when Ronald Reagan deregulated broadcasting, in the nineteen-eighties. When cable television and the Internet came along, they were structured on the more libertarian idea that everybody should have a voice and everybody should have free access to all forms of information, including misinformation. It shouldn’t be surprising that a lot of people, both creators and consumers of journalism, prefer fake news to real news.

So what should we do about journalism’s role in non-reality-based politics? The easy part—which won’t be all that easy, because of the current economic troubles of journalism—is to expand the real-news ecosystem as much as possible, by training people in how to do that work and by strengthening the institutions that will publish and broadcast it. (Along with this goes enhancing the smaller ecosystem for correcting fake news: snopes.com, PolitiFact, factcheck.org, and so on.) The hard part is figuring out what to do about the proliferation and influence of fake news. It’s a sign of our anti-government times that the solution proposed most often is that Facebook should regulate it. Think about what that means: one relatively new private company, which isn’t in journalism, has become the dominant provider of journalism to the public, and the only way people can think of to address what they see as a terrifying crisis in politics and public life is to ask the company’s billionaire C.E.O. to fix it.

Our government has many ways of dealing with the natural tension between public opinion and reliable information: think of the Federal Reserve Board, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the federal judiciary. People grouse about these institutions—one can caricature them, and people do, as élitist or as inexcusably political—but, on the whole, they work. Most countries, including the United States in the past, have found their way to some parallel structure for real news. Many countries are stricter about enforcing diversity of private media ownership than we are, and they find ways to give an economic advantage to the better news organizations while still maintaining public-service requirements to shape the behavior of private companies that use public airwaves.

It’s facile and unhelpful to assume that government’s role in journalism can be either nothing or absolute control for propaganda purposes. There is a big difference between state media (like the odious Russia Today) and public media (like the BBC). Most developed countries with press freedom have far more public media, including multiple government-funded broadcast-news channels, than we do. National Public Radio is one of the very best American news organizations, but it has minimal government funding; the Public Broadcasting System is also mainly privately funded, and it doesn’t maintain a large network of national and international correspondents the way NPR does.

It’s sad that, in the wake of the election of a President who doesn’t hesitate to tell his followers things that simply aren’t true, we are not even talking about any of this. If people really think that something should be done about the fake-news problem, they should be thinking about government as the institution to do it.

Nicholas Lemann joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1999, and has written the Letter from Washington and the Wayward Press columns for the magazine.

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## **Would Facebook or Twitter Ever Ban President Trump?**

Slate: Technology, By Will Oremus, November 28, 2016

One says it wouldn’t, and one says it would.

Could the president of the United States ever get suspended or banned from a major social network? The answer: It depends on the network.

It’s a hypothetical question, of course—but not merely an academic one, given the president-elect’s track record of using social media to sow conspiracy theories, attack reporters, threaten political rivals, and call for religious discrimination. Facebook and Twitter in particular have already struggled to reconcile their policies on harassment and hate speech with some of the activities of Donald Trump and his political allies. And the two social networks have offered starkly different answers to the question.

Facebook has indicated that it will not apply its normal community standards to posts from President-elect Trump,

given their newsworthiness and the widespread popular support for his views. But Twitter told Slate that no one is exempt from its rules—not even the president.

Twitter recently suspended the accounts of several leading pundits and activists from the “alt-right,” a pro-Trump movement that is linked with notions of white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-Semitism. Asked whether Twitter would ever consider banning key government officials or even the president himself, a company spokesperson responded via email: “The Twitter Rules prohibit violent threats, harassment, hateful conduct, and multiple account abuse, and we will take action on accounts violating those policies.” Pressed on whether that meant that, hypothetically, Trump himself could be suspended were he to violate those policies, a spokesperson confirmed: “The Twitter Rules apply to all accounts, including verified accounts.”

That’s a tough line from a company that once declared itself the “free speech wing of the free speech party.” But it’s in keeping with Twitter’s renewed emphasis on enforcing harassment and hate speech policies. Among the potentially relevant clauses are its prohibitions on the promotion of violence; targeted harassment of another user, including incitements to harassment; and direct attacks on people on the basis of “race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease.”

Facebook, meanwhile, has adopted a more permissive stance toward Trump and other public figures, led by CEO Mark Zuckerberg. “When we review reports of content that may violate our policies, we take context into consideration,” a Facebook spokesperson said via email. “That context can include the value of political discourse.” The spokesperson noted that this approach is not Trump-specific...

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## **Mark Zuckerberg Says Fake News on Facebook Had “No Impact” on the Election**

Slate: Future Tense, by Will Oremus, NOV. 10 2016

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg on Thursday defended the social network's role in the U.S. presidential election. False news stories that were shared hundreds of thousands of times on the network, including claims that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump and that Hillary Clinton would be arrested on charges related to her private email server, "surely had no impact" on the election, he said, speaking at the Techonomy conference.

"Voters make decisions based on their lived experience," Zuckerberg went on. The notion that fake news stories on Facebook "influenced the election in any way," he added, "is a pretty crazy idea."

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## **Twitter Suspends 235,000 More Accounts Over Extremism**

The New York Times, By KATIE BENNERAUG. 18, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — Twitter suspended 235,000 accounts that promoted terrorism over the last six months, as part of a continuing effort to keep people from using the social network for extremist causes, the company said Thursday.

“The world has witnessed a further wave of deadly, abhorrent terror attacks across the globe,” Twitter said in a statement. “We strongly condemn these acts and remain committed to eliminating the promotion of violence or terrorism on our platform.”

Twitter’s latest action brings the total number of accounts that the company has suspended to 360,000 since it began cracking down on terrorism and violent extremism in mid-2015. While Twitter has long championed free speech on the web and said that it was a “global town square,” its positioning has drawn bullies, racists and extremist groups to the service to spread their messages. That has drawn criticism from government agencies and the Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, among others.

While Twitter is trying to find a way to reconcile its free speech stance with how women and minorities can be targeted on the service, the company has been clearer about combating terrorism. Daily suspensions for violating Twitter’s prohibition on terrorism are up over 80 percent since last year, with spikes in suspensions immediately following terrorist attacks, the company said.

Twitter also said it has expanded its teams that review reported violations, and it now moves faster to suspend accounts and make it harder for suspended users to return to the platform. The company has also expanded the number of groups it works with to counter violent extremism online...

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