Waning Trust in Real Reporting

As Fake News Spreads Lies, More Readers Shrug at Truth

The Digital Virus Called Fake News

COLLECTIONS

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By JIM RUTENBERG
November 6, 2016

THE LAST YEAR HAS turned the United States into a country of information addicts who compulsively check the television, the smartphone and the good old-fashioned newspaper with a burning question: What fresh twist could our national election drama and its executive producer, Donald J. Trump, possibly have in store for us now?

No doubt about it: Campaign 2016 has been a smash hit.

And to the news media have gone the spoils. With Mr. Trump providing must-see TV theatrics, cable news has drawn record audiences. Newspapers have reached online readership highs that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

On Wednesday comes the reckoning.

The election news bubble that's about to pop has blocked from plain view the expanding financial sinkhole at the center of the paper-and-ink branch of the news industry, which has recently seen a print advertising plunge that was "much more precipitous, to be honest with you, than anybody expected a year or so ago," as The Wall Street Journal editor in chief Gerard Baker told me on Friday.

Papers including The Journal, The New York Times, The Guardian, the Gannett publications and others have responded with plans to reorganize, shed staff, kill off whole sections, or all of the above.

Taken together, it means another rapid depletion in the nation's ranks of traditionally trained journalists whose main mission is to root out corruption, hold the powerful accountable and sort fact from fiction for voters.

It couldn't be happening at a worse moment in American public life. The internet-borne forces that are eating away at print advertising are enabling a host of faux-journalistic players to pollute the democracy with dangerously fake news items.

In the last couple of weeks, Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets have exposed millions of Americans to false stories asserting that: the Clinton campaign's pollster, Joel Benenson, wrote a secret memo detailing plans to "salvage" Hillary Clinton's candidacy by launching a radiological attack to halt voting (merrily shared on Twitter by Roger Stone, an informal adviser to the Trump campaign); the

Clinton campaign senior strategist John Podesta practiced an occult ritual involving various bodily fluids; Mrs. Clinton is paying public pollsters to skew results (shared on Twitter by Donald Trump Jr.); there is a trail of supposedly suspicious deaths of myriad Clinton foes (which The Times's Frank Bruni heard repeated in a hotel lobby in Ohio).

As Mike Cernovich, a Twitter star, alt-right news provocateur and promoter of Clinton health conspiracies, boasted in last week's New Yorker, "Someone like me is perceived as the new Fourth Estate." His content can live alongside that of The Times or The Boston Globe or The Washington Post on the Facebook newsfeed and be just as well read, if not more so. On Saturday he called on a President Trump to disband the White House press corps.

He may not have to. All you have to do is look at the effect of the Gannett cuts on its Washington staff, which Politico recently likened to a "blood bath."

Even before this year's ad revenue drop, the number of full-time daily journalists — nearly 33,000 according to the 2015 census conducted by the American Society of News Editors and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University — was on the way to being half what it was in 2000.

That contraction in the reporting corps, combined with the success of disinformation this year, is making for some sleepless nights for those in Washington who will have to govern in this bifurcated, real-news-fake-news environment.

"It's the biggest crisis facing our democracy, the failing business model of real journalism," Senator Claire McCaskill, Democrat of Missouri and a longtime critic of fake news, told me on Saturday.

Ms. McCaskill said that "journalism is partly to blame" for being slow to adjust as the internet turned its business model upside down and social media opened the competitive floodgates. "Fake news got way out ahead of them," she said.

It does not augur well for the future. Martin Baron, the Washington Post executive editor, said when we spoke last week, "If you have a society where people can't agree on basic facts, how do you have a functioning democracy?"

The cure for fake journalism is an overwhelming dose of good journalism. And how well the news media gets through its postelection hangover will have a lot to do with how the next chapter in the American political story is told.

That's why the dire financial reports from American newsrooms are so troubling. If the national reporting corps is going to be reduced even more during such an election-driven readership boom, what are things going to look like when the circus leaves town?

I surveyed the higher precincts of the industry last week, and what I found wasn't entirely gloomy; there was even some cause for optimism. But there's going to be a lot of nail-biting and some bloodletting on the way to deliverance.

It's pretty much taken as a given that the news audience will largely shrink next year, despite what is expected to be a compelling news environment.

"Is anything in 2017, politically speaking, going to be as sexy as it was in 2016? I'm not going to play poker at that table," Andrew Lack, the chairman of NBC News and MSNBC, told me on Friday.

Still, though he's predicting a ratings fall of 30 percent or perhaps "much more" at MSNBC, he said, "I don't have financial pressure on my bottom line."

That's not only because MSNBC and its competitors earned tens of millions of unexpected election-related dollars this year, but also because they still draw substantial income from cable subscriber fees.

Newspapers are the originators of that subscriber-advertising setup. But as lucrative print ads dwindle, and Facebook and Google gobble up more than two-thirds of the online advertising market, affecting digital-only outlets, too, newspapers are scrambling to build up their subscriber bases and break their reliance on print ads.

Mr. Baker of The Journal said he was confident that newspapers could make the transition but acknowledged a rough interim period that will require cuts and will be even harder to navigate or survive for smaller, regional papers (a practical invitation to municipal corruption).

The cause for relative optimism comes from the performance of some of the more ambitious, well-reported newspaper articles of the last year.

The Times article revealing Mr. Trump's nearly $1 billion tax loss in 1995 drew some 5.5 million page views. That's huge. The Washington Post doesn't share its numbers, but behold the more than 13,000 online comments attached to just one of David A. Fahrenthold's articles about how Mr. Trump ran his charity in ways that clashed with philanthropic moral conventions.

But in this new era, subscriber numbers are more important than fly-by-night readership.

Arthur Gregg Sulzberger, The Times's newly named deputy publisher, pointed to a bright spot in last week's earnings report. Mixed in with a 19-percent drop in print advertising revenue (!) was a 21 percent increase in digital advertising and, more important, the addition of 116,000 new digital-only subscriptions. The Times now has nearly 1.6 million subscribers to its digital-only offerings.

“It shows people are willing to pay for great, original, deeply reported and expert journalism,” Mr. Sulzberger said. “That will allow great journalism to thrive.”

It could be Pollyannaish to think so, but maybe this year’s explosion in fake news will serve to raise the value of real news. If so, it will be great journalism that saves journalism.

“People will ultimately gravitate toward sources of information that are truly reliable, and have an allegiance to telling the truth,” Mr. Baron said. “People will pay for that because they’ll realize they’ll need to have that in our society.”

As The Times’s national political correspondent Jonathan Martin wrote on Twitter last week, “Folks, subscribe to a paper. Democracy demands it.”

Or don’t. You’ll get what you pay for.

The Hoaxes, Fake News and Misinformation We Saw on Election Day

By KATIE ROGERS and JONAH ENGEL BROMWICH
November 8, 2016

FAKE STORIES AND MEMES that crop up during live news events have been a problem on social media for years, but a wild election season has highlighted the news media's slow response to them.

On Election Day, we asked our readers to send in some examples of what they were seeing. Here's what we heard.

Hoaxes

Hoaxes often gurgle up from the bowels of Facebook, as shares from sites that claim to mix satire with the truth, like The Rightists, or sites that don't seem to exist for any particular reason but to fool people, like one called The Denver Guardian.

Here's some of what we saw as Election Day unfolded:

• People behind hoax Twitter accounts were busy. This post about exit poll numbers in Florida did not come from an official CNN account. One fast way to root out impostors is to check the account's history. A cursory glance shows that this account's history contains a message that says, "Let's get banned."

BREAKING: The first Florida exit poll numbers have been released.
Trump 55%
Clinton 39%
Johnson 6%
— CNN (@CNN_PoIitics) Nov. 8, 2016

Another account purporting to belong to Rudolph W. Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City and a supporter of Donald J. Trump, is a fake.

We cannot let Blacks and Hispanics alone decide this election for Hillary!
Everyone deserves a say.

All others, head to polls NOW! #Trump16
— Rudolph Giuliani (@rudygiulianiGOP) Nov. 8, 2016

• Fake sites were going into overdrive. Here's a recent example from The Denver Guardian. On Saturday, that site claimed that an F.B.I. agent connected to Hillary Clinton's email disclosures had murdered his wife and shot himself. The story was fabricated, and The Denver Post published a detailed report explaining that The Denver Guardian was a hoax.

On Tuesday, several readers notified us that a site called the Conservative Daily Post had published a number of false stories, including a report that President Obama and Hillary Clinton had both promised amnesty to undocumented immigrants who vote on the Democratic ticket. Neither person has made this promise to immigrants. The site has also posted a story that declares Word War III is days away. According to the website Politifact.com, the Conservative Daily Post is rated "Pants on Fire," at the opposite end of the spectrum from sites rated "True."

• Fliers were distributed to trick college students. The Bangor Daily News reports that were fliers left on the campus of Bates College, in Maine, telling students that if they wanted to vote in Lewiston, they would have to pay to change their driver's licenses and re-register any vehicle in the city. These sorts of hoaxes are common on college campuses.

Steve Collins @SteveCollinsSJ
Somebody spread this fake "legal advisory" around at #batescollege to try to keep students from
heading to the polls Tuesday. #mepolitics
2:34 PM - 6 Nov 2016

• A mayor posted a message with an incorrect date for Election Day. Jefferson Riley, the Republican mayor of Mansfield, Ga., posted a message on his Facebook page: "Remember the voting days: Republicans vote on Tuesday, 11/8 and Democrats vote on Wednesday, 11/9."

He soon deleted the post.

Jeana Hyde, the city clerk in Mansfield, confirmed that Mayor Riley had made the post on his personal account. She said that while she couldn't speak for the

mayor, she believed that the post had been a joke, "but I really don't know."

"He's a good man; he's a good mayor," she said. "And good people do crazy stuff sometimes."

Needless to say, Tuesday is Electing Day for all Americans, regardless of their political affiliations.

Misinformation

Other falsehoods are spread by seemingly well-meaning entities — corporate accounts and misinformed individuals — who trumpet claims that turn out not to be true.

Here were some Election Day examples:

• An inaccurate guide was distributed to voters. Urban Outfitters on Monday tweeted an Election Day guide that contained wrong information, telling voters that they needed a "voter's registration card" along with their identification to vote. There is not a single state that requires such a card.

The retailer has since corrected its guide.

• Incorrect information was circulating at the polls. Anni O'Connor, 53, of Paradise Valley, Ariz., reported on The New York Times's Facebook page that she overheard a woman in line at her polling place say that all her friends had voted online already. Ms. O'Connor, who had been an independent voter for many years but registered as a Democrat to support Hillary Clinton in this year's primary, said she told the woman to alert her friends that they had not voted.

There is no state in which votes can be submitted online, though a few states make exceptions for military and overseas voters.

• A much-shared tweet about election workers being fired in Florida got some things right, but got key details wrong. Even when people seem eager to help spread the truth, there's often misinformation given out. For instance, look at this tweet from Adam D. Brown, a Republican politician:

Adam D. Brown @aduanebrown
Breaking: Two Florida election clerks have been fired and removed from Miami-Dade county.
Looks like Fraud.... #ElectionDay
12:57 PM - 8 Nov 2016

While Mr. Brown is correct that two Florida election clerks were removed from

their duties on Tuesday, it was in Broward County, not Miami-Dade.

Tonya Edwards, a spokeswoman for the Broward County elections supervisor, confirmed that two clerks had been removed from their duties before noon, and had been replaced by other poll workers.

The clerks were removed, Ms. Edwards said, because "they were not adhering to our election policies and procedures as they were trained."

Asked to elaborate, she said that they had "obstructed and interfered" with the voting process but could not give any more information. She said that the episode had not ended up affecting anyone's ability to vote.

• CNN corrected a tweet from Mr. Trump. The Republican nominee tweeted on Tuesday that Utah officials had reported problems with voting machines across the country.

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump
Just out according to @CNN: "Utah officials report voting machine problems across entire country"
4:28 PM - 8 Nov 2016

Later, Jake Tapper, a CNN anchor, addressed Mr. Trump's tweet during a live broadcast.

"CNN is not reporting that," Mr. Tapper said. "The problem is, the problem's across the county. A county. Not a country, as Mr. Trump tweeted."

• A tweet about a "rigged" voting machine in Philadelphia was shared more than 11,000 times. But it was user error, according to ProPublica's Electionland project.

A Few Tips for Spotting a Fake

On Election Day and in the days afterward, Snopes and BuzzFeed, two operations that vigilantly debunk fake news sites, will be useful.

First, a note: A growing tendency to dive into our own echo chambers and construct our personal versions of the truth on social media has been destructive to the ability to call out misinformation online. A post that contains an opinion you disagree with isn't necessarily "fake" or "inaccurate." We're looking for stories that seem designed to misinform the reader.

Here's a quick primer for spotting fake news:

• Check the account history of the source. One red flag is usually the number of posts and the span of time the account has been active. Is the story one of 50 coming from a Facebook account that was created just last week? It warrants a deeper look.

• Images are often reused from one live event to another to deceive people. Do a reverse-image search with a service like TinEye. The site should tell you if the photo has been used elsewhere.

• Check for context. Distortion is a powerful tactic used by sites designed to mislead the public. Images, videos and text snippets will be chopped, twisted and stuffed into a new headline to fit an inflammatory new narrative.

In one example cited in a recent BuzzFeed study, a site called Freedom Daily wrote fake details around a months-old video to make it seem like two white men had been beaten and set on fire by supporters of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The story was, in fact, a dispute between two co-workers, and BuzzFeed found that it had nothing to do with racially motivated violence.

But it got a lot of shares.

Google and Facebook Take Aim at Fake News Sites

By NICK WINGFIELD, MIKE ISAAC and KATIE BENNER
November 14, 2016

OVER THE LAST WEEK, two of the world's biggest internet companies have faced mounting criticism over how fake news on their sites may have influenced the presidential election's outcome.

On Monday, those companies responded by making it clear that they would not tolerate such misinformation by taking pointed aim at fake news sites' revenue sources.

Google kicked off the action on Monday afternoon when the Silicon Valley search giant said it would ban websites that peddle fake news from using its online advertising service. Hours later, Facebook, the social network, updated the language in its Facebook Audience Network policy, which already says it will not display ads in sites that show misleading or illegal content, to include fake news sites.

"We have updated the policy to explicitly clarify that this applies to fake news," a Facebook spokesman said in a statement. "Our team will continue to closely vet all prospective publishers and monitor existing ones to ensure compliance."

Taken together, the decisions were a clear signal that the tech behemoths could no longer ignore the growing outcry over their power in distributing information to the American electorate.

Facebook has been at the epicenter of that debate, accused by some commentators of swinging some voters in favor of President-elect Donald J. Trump through misleading and outright wrong stories that spread quickly via the social network. One such false story claimed that Pope Francis had endorsed Mr. Trump.

Google did not escape the glare, with critics saying the company gave too much prominence to false news stories. On Sunday, the site Mediaite reported that the top result on a Google search for "final election vote count 2016" was a link to a story on a website called 70News that wrongly stated that Mr. Trump, who won the Electoral College, was ahead of his Democratic challenger, Hillary Clinton, in the popular vote.

By Monday evening, the fake story had fallen to No. 2 in a search for those terms. Google says software algorithms that use hundreds of factors determine the ranking of news stories.

“The goal of search is to provide the most relevant and useful results for our users,” Andrea Faville, a Google spokeswoman, said in a statement. “In this case, we clearly didn’t get it right, but we are continually working to improve our algorithms.”

Facebook’s decision to clarify its ad policy language is notable because Mark Zuckerberg, the social network’s chief executive, has repeatedly fobbed off criticism that the company had an effect on how people voted. In a post on his Facebook page over the weekend, he said that 99 percent of what people see on the site is authentic, and only a tiny amount is fake news and hoaxes.

“Over all, this makes it extremely unlikely hoaxes changed the outcome of this election in one direction or the other,” Mr. Zuckerberg wrote.

Yet within Facebook, employees and executives have been increasingly questioning their responsibilities and role in influencing the electorate, The New York Times reported on Saturday.

Facebook’s ad policy update will not stem the flow of fake news stories that spread through the news feeds that people see when they visit the social network.

Facebook has long spoken of how it helped influence and stoke democratic movements in places like the Middle East, and it tells its advertisers that it can help sway its users with ads. Facebook reaches 1.8 billion people around the globe, and the company is one of the largest distributors of news online. A Pew Research Center study said that nearly half of American adults rely on Facebook as a news source.

Google’s decision on Monday relates to the Google AdSense system that independent web publishers use to display advertising on their sites, generating revenue when ads are seen or clicked on. The advertisers pay Google, and Google pays a portion of those proceeds to the publishers. More than two million publishers use Google’s advertising network.

For some time, Google has had policies in place prohibiting misleading advertisements from its system, including promotions for counterfeit goods and weight-loss scams. Google’s new policy, which it said would go into effect “imminently,” will extend its ban on misrepresentative content to the websites its advertisements run on.

“Moving forward, we will restrict ad serving on pages that misrepresent, misstate or conceal information about the publisher, the publisher’s content or the primary purpose of the web property,” Ms. Faville said.

Ms. Faville said that the policy change had been in the works for a while and was not in reaction to the election.

It remains to be seen how effective Google's new policy on fake news will be in practice. The policy will rely on a combination of automated and human reviews to help determine what is fake. Although satire sites like The Onion are not the target of the policy, it is not clear whether some of them, which often run fake news stories written for humorous effect, will be inadvertently affected by Google's change.

Fake News in U.S. Election? Elsewhere, That's Nothing New

By PAUL MOZUR and MARK SCOTT
November 17, 2016

HONG KONG — FACEBOOK rumors force a well-known politician to publish proof of his heritage. Fake images show a prominent female leader in a hangman's noose. A politician's aide decries violent crime with a Facebook photo of a girl's corpse — an image that turns out to come from another country.

Another day on social media for Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump? Think again.

Those incidents took place in Indonesia and the Philippines, where social media's outsize place in politics is widely acknowledged, even as that role is coming under sharper criticism in the United States.

Well before last week's American election threw Facebook's status as a digital-era news source into the spotlight, leaders, advocacy groups and minorities worldwide have contended with an onslaught of online misinformation and abuse that has had real-world political repercussions. And for years, the social network did little to clamp down on the false news.

Now Facebook, Google and others have begun to take steps to curb the trend, but some outside the United States say the move is too late.

"They should have done this way earlier," said Richard Heydarian, a political analyst in the Philippines, one of Facebook's fastest-growing markets. "We already saw the warning signs of this years ago."

On Thursday, President Obama, speaking in Berlin and standing alongside Chancellor Angela Merkel, criticized Facebook and other social media for disseminating fake news. He became so impassioned that at one point he lost track of the question he was answering.

"If everything seems to be the same and no distinctions are made, then we won't know what to protect," Mr. Obama said.

The impact of Facebook and other social media platforms on international elections is difficult to quantify. But Facebook's global reach — roughly a quarter of the world's population now has an account — is difficult to deny, political experts and academics say.

Some governments are pushing back, sometimes with undemocratic consequences. Ms. Merkel has said she is considering plans to force social networks to make public how they rank news online. Some African countries have banned the use of Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter before elections. Indonesia's government has closed sites that it says promote fake news, though experts say some portals were also targeted for political reasons.

Facebook said on Thursday that the social network was a place for people to stay informed and that what people saw in their news feed was overwhelmingly authentic. The Silicon Valley company previously denied that it failed to deal with misinformation and said it continues to monitor the social network so that it meets existing standards.

"I think the idea that fake news on Facebook, which is a very small amount of the content, influenced the election in any way — I think is a pretty crazy idea," Mark Zuckerberg, the company's chief executive, told a tech conference days after the American presidential election. "Voters make decisions based on their lived experience."

Facebook's power is often stronger overseas than it is in the United States. In many developing countries with populations new to both democracy and social media, experts said, fake stories can be more widely believed. And in some of these countries, Facebook even offers free smartphone data connections to basic public online services, some news sites and Facebook itself — but limits access to broader sources that could help debunk fake news.

One such place is the Philippines, where a spokesman for its populist president, Rodrigo Duterte, shared on Facebook an image of a corpse of a young girl believed to have been raped and killed by a drug dealer. Fact checkers later revealed that the photo had come from Brazil. Despite the debunking, proponents of Mr. Duterte's bloody crackdown on reported drug dealers and addicts still cite the image in his defense, according to political analysts.

Tens of thousands of Philippine Facebook users also recently shared a story claiming that NASA had voted Mr. Duterte "the best president in the solar system." While many commenters on the Facebook post took it as a joke, some appeared to take it seriously. And an image of Leila de Lima, a local lawmaker and a critic of Mr. Duterte, depicted her facing a hangman's noose.

"Facebook hasn't led to empowerment of the average citizen, but empowerment of professional propagandists, fringe elements and conspiracy theorists," said Mr. Heydarian, the Philippines political analyst. "Voices that were lurking in the shadows

are now at the center of the public discourse."

In Indonesia, where Facebook is so popular that some people confuse it with the broader internet, the service has considerable sway.

When Joko Widodo, Indonesia's president, was running for office in 2014, he was accused through social media of being a Chinese Christian and a communist — severe criticism in the deeply Islamic country. The Indonesian politician released his marriage certificate to prove he wasn't Chinese and made a pilgrimage to Mecca just before voting.

"The fake news had a very big impact in our campaign," said Tubagus Ramadhan, who helped Mr. Widodo run his social media campaign during the election.

The online misinformation has not been limited to elections. In Colombia, Facebook users widely shared a crudely altered photo of a pop singer, Juanes, wearing a T-shirt suggesting he opposed a peace deal with the country's largest rebel group. On Twitter, Juanes denied it. Colombia's voters narrowly rejected the deal in a referendum last month.

Si tú me conocieras bien, sabrías que jamás apoyaría algo como esto. Esta imagen es un montaje descarado. pic.twitter.com/BYUooR1vhS
— JUANES (@juanes) July 26, 2016

While Facebook has won plaudits for allowing people in disaster zones to tell friends and families they are safe, it has also been a conduit for dangerous rumors in those situations. At the height of the Ebola outbreak in 2014, a false message widely distributed in Sierra Leone on Facebook and WhatsApp, which is owned by the social network, said bathing in hot water with salt would cure and prevent the spread of the virus.

Even in long-established democracies like Germany, Spain and Italy, false news reports and hate speech on social media have whipped up grass-roots populist movements, which have often targeted the recent influx of Middle Eastern refugees, to garner wider electoral support.

Now, many European politicians are questioning what role social media has had in deciding what voters can and cannot see. They also have forced social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Google to sign up for voluntary — so far — standards to police hate speech online.

In Germany, Ms. Merkel's push to require American social network companies

to publish how they rank news is intended to give voters greater control over what they read online.

"Algorithms must be more transparent," Ms. Merkel has said, "so that interested citizens are also aware of what actually happens with their own media behavior and that of others."

Other politicians, often in more recently established democracies, are going a step further.

In some African countries, including Chad and Uganda, officials cite uncorroborated security threats and fears that false results could be shared online as reasons for shutting down social media ahead of elections.

Christian Echle, director of the Sub-Sahara Africa media program at Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a German political foundation, said such actions were heavy-handed and that social media had played a role in helping voters — many located far from urban centers — to gain access to much-needed information and interact with political candidates.

But, he added, a growing amount of news shared through social media was either false or biased, making it difficult for people in these often fledgling democracies to know which news outlets to trust.

"There's a big, big threat — that social media will deepen existing gaps in these societies," said Mr. Echle, who is based in Johannesburg. "People are still learning how to use social media, so many can easily fall for hoaxes."

Paul Mozur reported from Hong Kong and Mark Scott from London.

Opinion: Fixation on Fake News Overshadows Waning Trust in Real Reporting

By JOHN HERRMAN
November 18, 2016

SOMETHING IS DEEPLY WRONG when the pope's voice, reputation and influence can be borrowed by a source that describes itself as "a fantasy news site" to claim that he has endorsed a presidential candidate, and then be amplified, unchallenged, through a million individual shares.

The attention paid to fake news since the election has focused largely on fabrications and outright lies, because they are indefensible, easy to identify and extraordinarily viral. Fake news is created by the kinds of people who, when asked, might call their work satire, or admit that they're in it for the money or for the thrill of deception. Theirs is a behavior that can and should be shunned, and that Facebook is equipped, and maybe willing, to deal with.

For many people, and especially opponents of President-elect Donald J. Trump, the attention paid to fake news and its role in the election has provided a small relief, the discovery of the error that explains everything. But as the attention has spread widely — even President Obama talked passionately about it on Thursday — it may lead to an unwanted outcome for those who see it not just as an explanation, but also as a way to correct the course. It misunderstands a new media world in which every story, and source, is at risk of being discredited, not by argument but by sheer force.

False news stories posted on fly-by-night websites were prevalent in this election. So, too, were widely shared political videos — some styled as newscasts — containing outright falsehoods, newslike image memes posted by individuals and shared by millions, and endlessly shared quotes and video clips of the candidates themselves repeating falsehoods.

During the months I spent talking to partisan Facebook page operators for a magazine article this year, it became clear that while the ecosystem contained easily identifiable and intentional fabrication, it contained much, much more of something else.

I recall a conversation with a fact checker about how to describe a story, posted on a pro-Trump website and promoted on a pro-Trump Facebook page — and, incidentally, copied from another pro-Trump site by overseas contractors. It tried to

cast suspicion on Khizr Khan, the father of a slain American soldier, who had spoken out against Donald J. Trump.

The overarching claims of the story were disingenuous and horrifying; the facts it included had been removed from all useful context and placed in a new, sinister one; its insinuating mention of "Muslim martyrs," in proximity to mentions of Mr. Khan's son, and its misleading and strategic mention of Shariah law, amounted to a repulsive smear. It was a story that appealed to bigoted ideas and that would clearly appeal to those who held them.

This was a story the likes of which was an enormous force in this election, clearly designed to function well within Facebook's economy of sharing. And it probably would not run afoul of the narrow definition of "fake news."

Stories like that one get to the heart of the rhetorical and strategic risk of holding up "fake news" as a broad media offensive position, especially after an election cycle characterized by the euphoric inversion of rhetoric by some of Mr. Trump's supporters, and by the candidate himself. As the campaign progressed, criticism of Mr. Trump was instantly projected back at his opponent, or at the critics themselves. "No puppet. No puppet. You're the puppet."

This tactic was used on the language of social justice, which was appropriated by opponents and redeployed nihilistically, in an open effort to sap its power while simultaneously taking advantage of what power it retained. Anti-racists were cast as the real racists. Progressives were cast as secretly regressive on their own terms. This was not a new tactic, but it was newly effective. It didn't matter that its targets knew that it was a bad-faith maneuver, a clear bid for power rather than an attempt to engage or reason. The referees called foul, but nobody could hear them over the roar of the crowds. Or maybe they could, but realized that nobody could make them listen.

"Fake news" as shorthand will almost surely be returned upon the media tenfold. The fake news narrative, as widely understood and deployed, has already begun to encompass not just falsified, fabricated stories, but a wider swath of traditional media on Facebook and elsewhere. Fox News? Fake news. Mr. Trump's misleading claims about Ford keeping jobs in America? Fake news. The entirety of hyperpartisan Facebook? Fake news. This wide formulation of "fake news" will be applied back to the traditional news media, which does not yet understand how threatened its ability is to declare things true, even when they are.

Facebook may try to address the narrow version of the problem, the clearly fabricated posts. Facebook has plenty of tools at its disposal and has already promised

to use one, to bar sites that have been flagged as promoting falsified content from using its advertising platform. But the worst identified defenders make their money outside Facebook anyway.

Another narrow response from Facebook could be to assert editorial control over external forces. Facebook tried this, to a very limited extent, with Trending Topics. Members of the company's editorial staff wrote descriptions of trending news stories, accompanied by links they deemed credible. This initiative collapsed in a frenzy of bias accusations and political fear. But it is easy to imagine a system in which a story, upon reaching some high threshold of shares, or a source, upon reaching some cumulative audience, could be audited and declared unreliable. This could resemble Facebook's short-lived experiment to tag satire articles as such.

A number of narrow measures could stop a fake story about the pope, for example. But where would that leave the rest of the media? Answered and rebutted, and barely better positioned against everything else that remained. It would be a still-dominant news environment in which almost everything there before remained intact, the main difference being that it would have all been declared, implicitly, not fake.

Facebook is a place where people construct and project identities to friends, family and peers. It is a marketplace in which news is valuable mainly to the extent that it serves those identities. It is a system built on ranking and vetting and voting, and yet one where negative inputs are scarcely possible, and where conflict is resolved with isolation. (Not that provisions for open conflict on a platform present any easy alternatives: For Twitter, it has been a source of constant crisis.)

Fake news operations are closely aligned with the experienced incentives of the Facebook economy — more closely, perhaps, than most of the organizations that are identifying them. Their removal will be an improvement. The outrage at their mere existence, and at their promotion on a platform with the stated goal of connecting the world, will have been justified.

But the outrage is at risk of being misdirected, and will be followed by the realization that the colloquial "fake news" — the newslike media, amateur and professional, for which truth is defined first in personal and political terms, and which must only meet the bar of not being obviously, inarguably, demonstrably false — will continue growing apace, gaining authority by sheer force, not despite Facebook but because of it. The company that created the system that resulted in hoax news stories should try to eliminate them, and with any luck it will. But the system stands to remain intact.

Media companies have spent years looking to Facebook, waiting for the company to present a solution to their mounting business concerns despite, or perhaps because of, its being credited with causing those concerns. Some have come to the realization that this was mistaken, even absurd. Those who expect the operator of the dominant media ecosystem of our time, in response to getting caught promoting lies, to suddenly return authority to the companies it has superseded are in for a similar surprise.

Facebook Considering Ways to Combat Fake News, Mark Zuckerberg Says

By MIKE ISAAC
November 19, 2016

SAN FRANCISCO — AFTER more than a week of accusations that the spread of fake news on Facebook may have affected the outcome of the presidential election, Mark Zuckerberg published a detailed post Friday night describing ways the company was considering dealing with the problem.

Mr. Zuckerberg, Facebook's chairman and chief executive, broadly outlined some of the options he said the company's news feed team was looking into, including third-party verification services, better automated detection tools and simpler ways for users to flag suspicious content.

"The problems here are complex, both technically and philosophically," Mr. Zuckerberg wrote. "We believe in giving people a voice, which means erring on the side of letting people share what they want whenever possible."

The post was perhaps the most detailed glimpse into Mr. Zuckerberg's thinking on the issue since Donald J. Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton in the Nov. 8 election. Within hours of his victory being declared, Facebook was accused of affecting the election's outcome by failing to stop bogus news stories, many of them favorable to Mr. Trump, from proliferating on its social network. Executives and employees at all levels of the company have since been debating its role and responsibilities.

Facebook initially tried to play down concerns about the issue, with Mr. Zuckerberg calling the notion that the company swayed the election "a pretty crazy idea" at a technology conference on Nov. 10. In a follow-up Facebook post, he said that less than 1 percent of the news posted to Facebook was false.

But questions continued from outside the company, with some complaining that it was being too dismissive of its capacity to affect public opinion. In a news conference in Berlin on Thursday, President Obama denounced the spread of misinformation on Facebook and other platforms.

Mr. Zuckerberg came to no conclusions in his post on Friday, instead providing a list of possible solutions the company was exploring. One option, he said, could be attaching warnings to news articles shared on Facebook that have been flagged as

false by reputable third parties or by Facebook users. Another could be making it harder for websites to make money from spreading misinformation on Facebook, he said.

Mr. Zuckerberg made it clear that Facebook would take care to avoid looking or acting like a media company, a label it has frequently resisted.

"We need to be careful not to discourage sharing of opinions or mistakenly restricting accurate content," Mr. Zuckerberg wrote. "We do not want to be arbiters of truth ourselves, but instead rely on our community and trusted third parties."

Editorial: Facebook and the Digital Virus Called Fake News

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD
November 19, 2016

THIS YEAR, THE ADAGE that "falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after it" doesn't begin to describe the problem. That idea assumes that the truth eventually catches up. There's not much evidence of this happening for the millions of people taken in by the fake news stories — like Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump or Mr. Trump pulling ahead of Hillary Clinton in the popular vote — that have spread on social media sites.

Most of the fake news stories are produced by scammers looking to make a quick buck. The vast majority of them take far-right positions. But a big part of the responsibility for this scourge rests with internet companies like Facebook and Google, which have made it possible for fake news to be shared nearly instantly with millions of users and have been slow to block it from their sites.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and chief executive of Facebook, has dismissed the notion that fake news is prevalent on his platform or that it had an influence on the election. But according to a BuzzFeed News analysis, during the last three months of the presidential campaign, the 20 top fake news stories on Facebook generated more engagement — shares, likes and comments — than the 20 top stories from real news websites.

These hoaxes are not just bouncing around among like-minded conspiracy theorists; candidates and elected officials are sharing them, too. Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, on Thursday tweeted about people who have been paid to riot against Mr. Trump — an idea propagated by fake news stories. A man who wrote a number of false news reports told The Washington Post that Trump supporters and campaign officials often shared his false anti-Clinton posts without bothering to confirm the facts and that he believes his work may have helped elect the Republican nominee.

Abroad, the dissemination of fake news on Facebook, which reaches 1.8 billion people globally, has been a longstanding problem. In countries like Myanmar, deceptive internet content has reportedly contributed to ethnic violence. And it has influenced elections in Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere. Social media sites have also been used to spread misinformation about the referendum on the peace

deal in Colombia and about Ebola in West Africa.

Facebook says it is working on weeding out such fabrications. It said last Monday that it would no longer place Facebook-powered ads on fake news websites, a move that could cost Facebook and those fake news sites a lucrative source of revenue. Earlier on the same day, Google said it would stop letting those sites use its ad placement network. These steps would help, but Facebook, in particular, owes its users, and democracy itself, far more.

Facebook has demonstrated that it can effectively block content like click-bait articles and spam from its platform by tweaking its algorithms, which determine what links, photos and ads users see in their news feeds. Nobody outside the company knows exactly how its software works and why you might see posts shared by some of your friends frequently and others rarely. Recently, the company acknowledged that it had allowed businesses to target or exclude users for ads for housing, employment and credit based on their ethnicity, in apparent violation of anti-discrimination laws. It has said it will stop that practice.

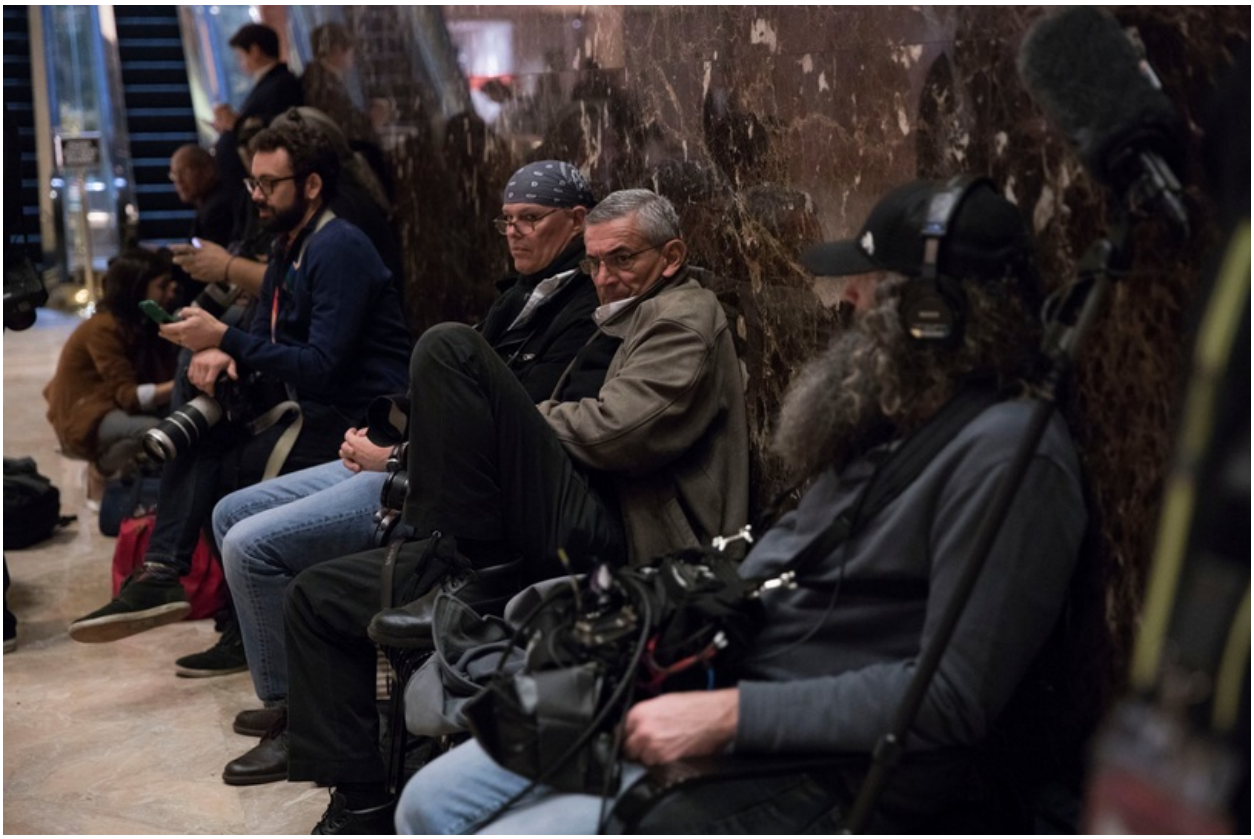
Facebook managers are constantly changing and refining the algorithms, which means the system is malleable and subject to human judgment. This summer, Facebook decided to show more posts from friends and family members in users' news feeds and reduce stories from news organizations, because that's what it said users wanted. If it can do that, surely its programmers can train the software to spot bogus stories and outwit the people producing this garbage.

Blocking misinformation will help protect the company's brand and credibility. Some platforms have suffered when they have failed to address users' concerns. Twitter users, for instance, have backed away from that platform because of abusive trolling, threatening posts and hate speech, which the company hasn't been able to control.

Mr. Zuckerberg himself has spoken at length about how social media can help improve society. In a 2012 letter to investors, he said it could "bring a more honest and transparent dialogue around government that could lead to more direct empowerment of people, more accountability for officials and better solutions to some of the biggest problems of our time."

None of that will happen if he continues to let liars and con artists hijack his platform.

Opinion: Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook Must Defend the Truth



Journalists waited in Trump Tower in New York on Nov. 11. The combination of attacks seeking to delegitimize serious news organizations and a drop in overall trust in the news media has made many people wary of legitimate fact-checking. (Ruth Fremson/The New York Times)

By JIM RUTENBERG
November 20, 2016

FRIDAY NIGHT, THE FACEBOOK co-founder Mark Zuckerberg went on his vast social network to convince an expanding chorus of critics — including the departing president of the United States — that he honest-to-goodness wants to combat the "fake news" that is running wild across his site and others, and turning our politics into a paranoiac fantasy come to life.

"We've been working on this problem for a long time and we take this responsibility seriously," he wrote.

"We've made significant progress, but there is more work to be done," he continued, listing various steps Facebook was taking, like making it easier to report bad information and enlisting fact-checking organizations.

It was heartening to hear, especially after his earlier assertion that it was "crazy" to believe that misinformation on Facebook had affected the presidential election in any real way — despite copious evidence that it was disturbingly in the mix, whether it directly swung the result or not.

But as Mr. Zuckerberg went on to say that Facebook had to be careful not to mistakenly block "accurate content," he added this: "We do not want to be arbiters of truth ourselves," which was why he said Facebook would continue to rely on "our community and trusted third parties."

His statement pointed up how much Facebook struggles to find the balance between its mission to be a free-expression utopia for its 1.8 billion users and its responsibility to protect them from all that is defamatory, dangerous (like terrorist propaganda) and untrue.

But more to the point, it appeared to buy into the notion that truth is relative at a time when that notion has to finally go away. Do you really need an outside arbiter to determine whether a video suggesting — without basis — that Hillary Clinton was involved in John F. Kennedy Jr.'s fatal plane crash in 1999 should be allowed to stand? *Really?*

Truth doesn't need arbiters. It needs defenders. And it needs them now more than ever as the American democracy staggers into its next uncertain phase.

With a mainstream news media that works hard to separate fact from fiction under economic and political threat, Facebook — which has contributed to that economic threat by gobbling up so much of the online advertising market — is going to have a special responsibility to do its part.

Just imagine what things will look like if the unsavory elements that tore through the 2016 election — false narratives, fake news and aggressive efforts to delegitimize traditional journalism — come back into play as Donald J. Trump presses to enact his agenda.

If the past week provided any indication of where politics are going, the next four years are going to require an all-hands-on-deck effort to keep the national conversation honest.

The national security adviser Mr. Trump named last week, Michael T. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general, has subscribed to the conspiracy theory that Shariah law is taking root in the United States (it isn't), contributing to his insistence that

Americans have every reason to view Islam as "a threat."

He recently used Twitter to circulate a fake news item that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was sitting on evidence from Anthony Weiner's laptop that would "put Hillary and her crew away for life."

Mr. Trump's nominee for attorney general, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, has falsely claimed that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants are successfully crossing the border annually.

Then there was the announcement by the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones that Mr. Trump had called to thank him and his radio and internet audience for their support in the campaign.

Add to that the fact that Mr. Trump was the most prominent promoter of the false notion that President Obama wasn't born here, and didn't hesitate to repeat the outrageous suggestion that the father of Senator Ted Cruz was linked to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Then consider what it may look like when Mr. Trump pursues policies regarding Muslim immigrants and undocumented immigrants.

It's not so outlandish to envision Mr. Trump's attempts to sell his plans getting a lift from the likes of Mr. Jones or a fake site out of Macedonia — perhaps claiming that Democrats are working with ISIS to use undocumented immigrants to poison local water supplies or some such.

President Obama seemed to have had something like that in mind when he told reporters in Germany on Thursday, "If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not," and "if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems."

Mr. Obama knows of what he speaks. He had to muddle through the first wave of this.

You might remember how his health care plan was marred by a false accusation that the plan included so-called death panels that would decide who lived and who died based on their "level of productivity to society," as former Gov. Sarah Palin put it (on her Facebook page!).

The false "death panel" allegation was partly based on proposals to reimburse doctors for optional consultations with families over end-of-life care decisions.

The accusations took on such power that even Newt Gingrich signed on to the falsehood despite the fact that he had previously expressed bullish support for end-of-life planning. (He explained himself in a 2009 letter to The New York Times.)

News organizations, including this one, debunked the myth. But the bill's

authors stripped out the provision just the same. And by then the "death panel" fiction had negated any shot at a reasoned, ideological debate — you're joining the Democrats' plan to kill our infirm children and parents?!

As Dan Pfeiffer, who was the president's chief communications strategist at the time, so grimly put it to me last week, "The faux death panels were the canary in the coal mine about the coming death of truth."

Things have advanced since then. Today's fake news is limited only by the imaginations of its inventors and the number of shares it can garner on Facebook or Twitter.

(To wit: The one million shares of the preposterous notion that Mrs. Clinton secretly sold weapons to ISIS. BuzzFeed News — which has excelled at illuminating the fake news problem — highlighted that example in its alarming analysis showing that during the campaign cycle fake news was shared among Facebook users more often than real news was.)

That's why people who care about the truth — citizens, journalists and, let's hope, social media giants like Facebook, too — will have to come up with a solution to this informational nihilism, fast.

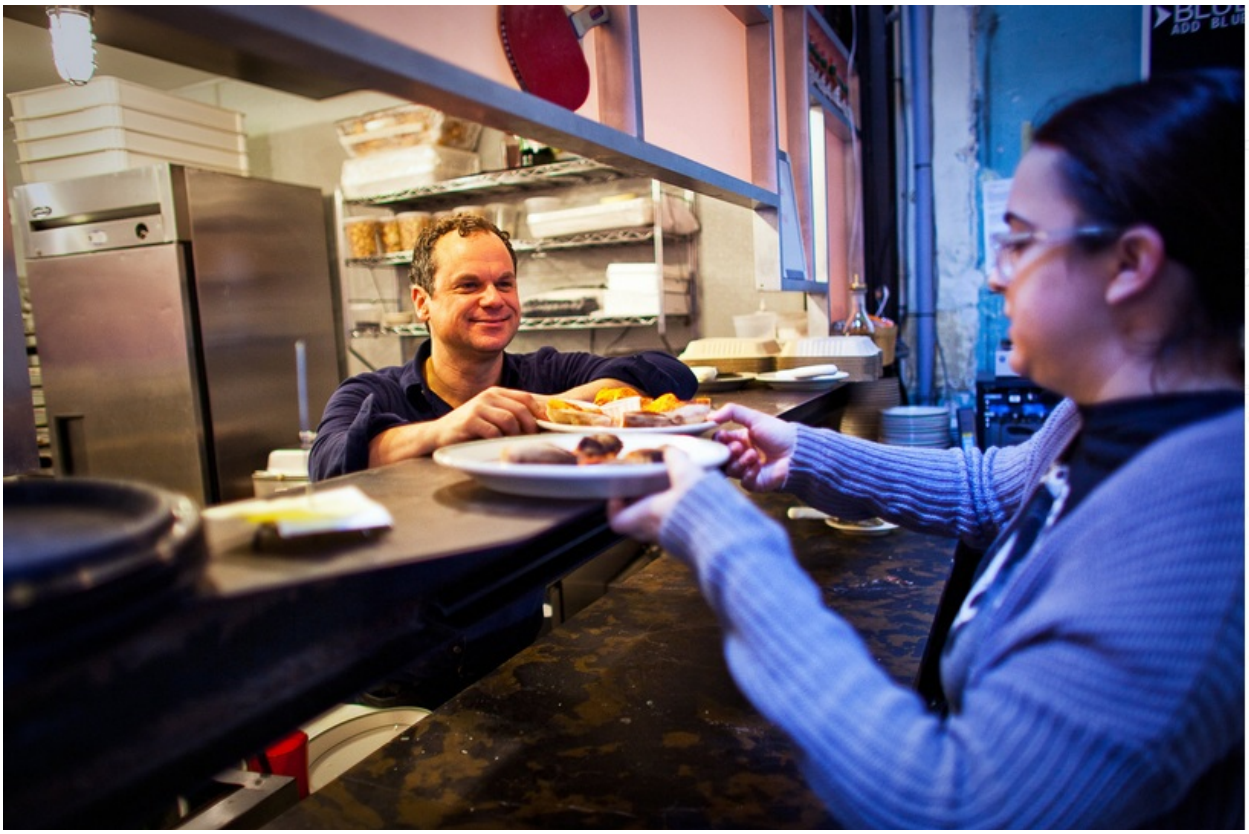
It's easier said than done. The combination of attacks seeking to delegitimize serious news organizations and a drop in overall trust in the news media has made many people wary of legitimate fact-checking. And, as my colleague John Herrman noted last weekend, politicized voices can easily drown honest journalism all too easily on social media.

There is growing talk of an ambitious journalistic collaboration to beat back the tide. Industry thinkers and leaders are coming together online to brainstorm solutions, as Jeff Jarvis, the City University of New York journalism professor, and Eli Pariser, the Upworthy co-founder, have done. (Check them out online.) And I'd say it's high time that television news — with its still-huge audiences — gets into the act with more than just token gestures at fact-checking.

But this much seems clear: The moment calls for some sort of hyperfactual counterinsurgency that treats every false meme as a baby Hitler to be killed in its crib with irrefutable facts.

So hey, Zuck, let's roll.

Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking



James Alefantis, owner of Comet Ping Pong, at his restaurant in Washington, D.C. Fake news websites have called it the home base of a child abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton and John D. Podesta. (Chad Bartlett for The New York Times)

By CECILIA KANG
November 21, 2016

WASHINGTON— DAYS BEFORE THE presidential election, James Alefantis, owner of a local pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong, noticed an unusual spike in the number of his Instagram followers.

Within hours, menacing messages like "we're on to you" began appearing in his Instagram feed. In the ensuing days, hundreds of death threats — one read "I will kill you personally" — started arriving via texts, Facebook and Twitter. All of them alleged something that made Mr. Alefantis's jaw drop: that Comet Ping Pong was the home base of a child abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton and her campaign chief, John

D. Podesta.

When Mr. Alefantis discovered that his employees were getting similar abusive messages, he looked online to unravel the accusations. He found dozens of made-up articles about Mrs. Clinton kidnapping, molesting and trafficking children in the restaurant's back rooms. The articles appeared on Facebook and on websites such as The New Nationalist and The Vigilant Citizen, with one headline blaring: "Pizzagate: How 4Chan Uncovered the Sick World of Washington's Occult Elite."

None of it was true. While Mr. Alefantis has some prominent Democratic friends in Washington and was a supporter of Mrs. Clinton, he has never met her, does not sell or abuse children, and is not being investigated by law enforcement for any of these claims. He and his 40 employees had unwittingly become real people caught in the middle of a storm of fake news.

"From this insane, fabricated conspiracy theory, we've come under constant assault," said Mr. Alefantis, 42, who was once in a relationship with David Brock, a provocative former right-wing journalist who became an outspoken advocate for Mrs. Clinton.

Mr. Alefantis suspects those relationships may have helped to make him a target. "I've done nothing for days but try to clean this up and protect my staff and friends from being terrorized," he said.

Fake news online has been at the center of a furious debate for the past few weeks over how it may have influenced voters in the presidential election. President Obama warned last week that we are "in an age where there's so much active misinformation and it's packaged very well" on social media sites. The criticism has buffeted web companies such as Google and Facebook, whose chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, has promised to work on technology tools to slow the gusher of false digital information.

But Mr. Alefantis's experience shows it is not just politicians and internet companies that are grappling with the fake news fallout. He, his staff and friends have become a new kind of private citizen bull's-eye for the purveyors of false articles and their believers.

For more than two weeks, they have struggled to deal with the abusive social media comments and to protect photos of their own children, which were used in the false articles as evidence that the pizza restaurant was running a pedophilia ring. One person even visited Comet Ping Pong to investigate the allegations for himself.

To combat the fake news tide, Mr. Alefantis has contacted the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the local police, and he has asked Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and

Reddit to remove the articles. Yet the misinformation has continued to spread, growing into a theory known as #pizzagate that has traveled to Ireland. At one point, Comet's staff counted five #pizzagate Twitter posts a minute. As recently as Sunday night, the Twitter message "Don't let up. #PizzaGate EVERYWHERE" was reposted and liked hundreds of times.

"It's like trying to shoot a swarm of bees with one gun," said Bryce Reh, Comet's general manager, whose wife asked him to leave his job because of the threats and vulgar messages they both have received on their social media accounts.

I won't stop tweeting about #PizzaGate until I know for a fact that there aren't children in danger being
covered up by the US government
— Skye (@TradSierraHotel) Nov. 20, 2016

Mr. Alefantis, an artist born and raised in Washington, co-founded Comet Ping Pong 10 years ago as a casual spot for clay oven pizza. The restaurant has kid-friendly features like Ping-Pong tables and a craft room. Famous natives like members of the band Fugazi have held small shows there. The eatery, which seats 120, is a mash-up of red and white checkered tablecloths and modernist murals and paintings from friends of Mr. Alefantis.

Mr. Alefantis mingles with other Washington chefs and his establishment helped him to be named No. 49 in GQ magazine's 50 most powerful people in Washington in 2012. His customers include some high-powered locals, such as Tony Podesta, the brother of John Podesta, whom Mr. Alefantis knows casually. Mr. Alefantis and Mr. Brock, who is the founder of Media Matters for America, a website that tracks press coverage critical of the Clintons and works to debunk misinformation in the conservative press, broke up five years ago.

The misinformation campaign began when John Podesta's email account was hacked and his emails were published by WikiLeaks during the presidential campaign. Days before the election, users on the online message board 4Chan noticed that one of Mr. Podesta's leaked emails contained communications with Mr. Alefantis discussing a fund-raiser for Mrs. Clinton.

The 4Chan users immediately speculated about the links between Comet Ping Pong and the Democratic Party. Some posited the restaurant was part of a larger Democratic child trafficking ring, which was a theory long held by some conservative blogs. That idea jumped to other social media services such as Twitter and Reddit,

where it gained momentum on the page "The Donald." A new Reddit discussion thread called "Pizzagate" quickly attracted 20,000 subscribers.

Patrons at Comet Ping Pong. Several of the restaurant's employees have been barraged with ugly social media comments over the false child abuse allegations. (Chad Bartlett for The New York Times)

Glen Caplin, a former campaign official for Mrs. Clinton, did not comment directly about Comet Ping Pong but said, "WikiLeaks has spawned several conspiracy theories that have been independently debunked." Mr. Podesta did not respond to requests for comment.

Soon, dozens of fake news articles on sites such as Facebook, Planet Free Will and Living Resistance emerged. Readers shared the stories in Saudi Arabia and on Turkish and other foreign language sites.

Last week, one supporter of the Pizzagate theory shot a live video from within the restaurant during a busy dinner shift. Local police, who had parked across the street after Mr. Alefantis filed a report about the fake news stories and threats, told the man to leave.

In a statement, the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department said it was monitoring the situation and is "aware of general threats being made against this establishment." The F.B.I. said it "does not confirm or deny the existence of investigations."

Most troubling for Mr. Alefantis and staff has been the use of children's images, pilfered from the restaurant's social media pages and the personal accounts of friends who had "liked" Comet Ping Pong online. Those photos have been used across dozens of websites. Parents, who declined to talk publicly for fear of retribution, have hired lawyers to get the photos removed.

Musicians who have performed at Comet Ping Pong have been pulled in, too. Amanda Kleinman, whose band, Heavy Breathing, has performed there several times, deleted her Twitter account after the abusive comments became overwhelming. Similar comments have flooded her YouTube music clips.

"We are at a dangerous place in American culture where a good percentage of people aren't distinguishing what is a real news source based on real reporting and fact-checking and only reinforcing pre-existing ideas they have," Ms. Kleinman said.

The frustration has been compounded by the lack of recourse for Mr. Alefantis, his friends and employees. Yelp blocked the comments sections of Comet Ping Pong's review page after reports of abusive comments and fake news in reviews. YouTube said it prohibits threats, harassment and hate speech and has tools for flagging violations and filing complaints for the site to take further action, but has largely not blocked comments on these videos. Twitter declined to comment, and Facebook did not have any further comment.

After employees and Mr. Alefantis complained to Reddit about how Comet Ping Pong was being targeted on the site, the #pizzagate discussion thread posted a warning that revealing personal information about individuals was prohibited.

"We know that we have more work to do and we take our responsibility to address online abuse seriously," Reddit said in a statement.

Little relief appears in sight. Over the weekend, Comet Ping Pong received dozens of calls from people screaming obscenities and threats. Mr. Alefantis got 50 nasty Instagram direct messages, including one that warned, "This place should be burned to the ground!"

On Monday morning, when Mr. Alefantis picked up his phone, he saw a text from a staff member warning that an individual might protest in front of the restaurant.

"It's endless," he said.

Doris Burke contributed research from New York.

Inside a Fake News Sausage Factory: 'This Is All About Income'

By ANDREW HIGGINS, MIKE McINTIRE and GABRIEL J.X. DANCE
November 25, 2016

TBILISI, GEORGIA — JOBLESS and with graduation looming, a computer science student at the premier university in the nation of Georgia decided early this year that money could be made from America's voracious appetite for passionately partisan political news. He set up a website, posted gushing stories about Hillary Clinton and waited for ad sales to soar.

"I don't know why, but it did not work," said the student, Beqa Latsabidze, 22, who was savvy enough to change course when he realized what did drive traffic: laudatory stories about Donald J. Trump that mixed real — and completely fake — news in a stew of anti-Clinton fervor.

More than 6,000 miles away in Vancouver, a Canadian who runs a satirical website, John Egan, had made a similar observation. Mr. Egan's site, The Burrard Street Journal, offers sendups of the news, not fake news, and he is not trying to fool anyone. But he, too, discovered that writing about Mr. Trump was a "gold mine." His traffic soared and his work, notably a story that President Obama would move to Canada if Mr. Trump won, was plundered by Mr. Latsabidze and other internet entrepreneurs for their own websites.

"It's all Trump," Mr. Egan said by telephone. "People go nuts for it."

With Mr. Obama now warning of the corrosive threat from fake political news circulated on Facebook and other social media, the pressing question is who produces these stories, and how does this overheated, often fabricated news ecosystem work?

Some analysts worry that foreign intelligence agencies are meddling in American politics and using fake news to influence elections. But one window into how the meat in fake sausages gets ground can be found in the buccaneering internet economy, where satire produced in Canada can be taken by a recent college graduate in the former Soviet republic of Georgia and presented as real news to attract clicks from credulous readers in the United States. Mr. Latsabidze said his only incentive was to make money from Google ads by luring people off Facebook pages and onto his websites.

To gin up material, Mr. Latsabidze often simply cut and pasted, sometimes massaging headlines but mostly just copying material from elsewhere, including Mr. Egan's prank story on Mr. Obama. Mr. Egan was not amused to see his satirical work on Mr. Latsabidze's website and filed a copyright infringement notice to defend his intellectual property.

Yet Mr. Egan conceded a certain professional glee that Mr. Trump is here to stay. "Now that we've got him for four years," he said, "I can't believe it."

By some estimates, bogus news stories appearing online and on social media had an even greater reach in the final months of the presidential campaign than articles by mainstream news organizations.

Since then, internet giants like Facebook and Google have engaged in soul searching over their roles in disseminating false news. Google announced that it would ban websites that host fake news from using its online advertising service, while Facebook's chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, outlined some of the options his company was considering, including simpler ways for users to flag suspicious content.

In Tbilisi, the two-room rented apartment Mr. Latsabidze shares with his younger brother is an unlikely offshore outpost of America's fake news industry. The two brothers, both computer experts, get help from a third young Georgian, an architect.

They say they have no keen interest in politics themselves and initially placed bets across the American political spectrum and experimented with show business news, too. They set up a pro-Clinton website, walkwithher.com, a Facebook page cheering Bernie Sanders and a web digest of straightforward political news plagiarized from The New York Times and other mainstream news media.

But those sites, among the more than a dozen registered by Mr. Latsabidze, were busts. Then he shifted all his energy to Mr. Trump. His flagship pro-Trump website, departed.co, gained remarkable traction in a crowded field in the prelude to the Nov. 8 election thanks to steady menu of relentlessly pro-Trump and anti-Clinton stories. (On Wednesday, a few hours after The New York Times met with Mr. Latsabidze to ask him about his activities, the site vanished along with his Facebook page.)

"My audience likes Trump," he said. "I don't want to write bad things about Trump. If I write fake stories about Trump, I lose my audience."

Some of his Trump stories are true, some are highly slanted and others are totally false, like one this summer reporting that "the Mexican government announced they will close their borders to Americans in the event that Donald Trump is elected President of the United States." Data compiled by Buzzfeed

showed that the story was the third most-trafficked fake story on Facebook from May to July.

So successful was the formula that others in Georgia and other faraway lands joined in, too, including Nika Kurdadze, a college acquaintance of Mr. Latsabidze's who set up his own pro-Trump site, newsbreakshere.com. Its recent offerings included a fake report headlined: "Stop it Liberals…Hillary Lost the Popular Vote by Several Million. Here's Why." That story, like most of Mr. Latsabidze's work, was pilfered from the web.

Mr. Latsabidze initially ran into no problems from all his cutting and pasting of other people's stories, and he even got ripped off himself when a rival in India hijacked a pro-Trump Facebook page he had set up to drive traffic to his websites. (He said that the Indian rival had offered $10,000 to buy the page, but that he had reneged on payment after being provided with access rights and commandeered it for himself.)

Then the notice arrived from Mr. Egan in Canada, which prompted the company that hosts Mr. Latsabidze's websites, including departed.co, to shut them down for two days until he removed the offending story.

"It was really bad for me," Mr. Latsabidze recalled. "Traffic dropped and I had to start everything all over again."

Mr. Egan, for his part, said he did not like others making money unfairly off his labor. And he estimated that "probably half" the readers of his stories believe they are true because of the widespread theft by other websites.

"A lot of that was conservative readers who see it picked up on other sites and believe it," Mr. Egan said. "In many cases, they haven't actually read it, they're just reacting to a headline."

Mr. Latsabidze said he was amazed that anyone could mistake many of the articles he posts for real news, insisting they are simply a form of infotainment that should not be taken too seriously.

"I don't call it fake news; I call it satire," he said. He avoids sex and violence because they violate Facebook rules, he said, but he sees nothing wrong otherwise with providing readers with what they want.

"Nobody really believes that Mexico is going to close its border," he said, sipping coffee this week in a McDonald's in downtown Tbilisi. "This is crazy."

All the same, the Mexico-closing-its-border story proved so popular after it appeared on his site that he hunted around on the web for other articles on the same theme. He found a tall tale about Mexico planning to call back its citizens from the

United States if Mr. Trump won. This, too, generated huge traffic, though not quite as much as the first one, which Mr. Latsabidze described as "a really great story."

He insisted he has nothing against Mexicans or Muslims, whose exclusion from the United States is requested by an online petition that often appears on his websites and who are invariably presented in a negative light in the stories he posts.

"I am not against Muslims," he said. "I just saw that there was interest. They are in the news." Nor, he added, is he particularly against Mrs. Clinton, though he personally prefers Mr. Trump.

If his pro-Clinton site had taken off, he said, he would have pressed on with that, but "people did not engage," so he focused on serving pro-Trump supporters instead. They, he quickly realized, were a far more receptive audience "because they are angry" and eager to read outrageous tales.

"For me, this is all about income, nothing more," he added.

The income comes mostly from Google, which pays a few cents each time a reader sees or clicks on advertisements embedded in one of Mr. Latsabidze's websites. His best month, which coincided with the hit bogus story about Mexico closing the border, brought in around $6,000, though monthly revenue is usually much lower.

Mr. Obama, speaking in Berlin last week, assailed the spread of phony news on Facebook and other platforms, warning that "if we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not" and "if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems."

While Facebook does not directly provide Mr. Latsabidze any revenue, it plays a central role in driving traffic to his websites. He initially established several fake Facebook pages intended to steer traffic to his websites, including one supposedly set up by a beautiful woman named Valkiara Beka. This woman, he acknowledged, does not really exist. "She is me," he said.

He discovered, however, that such pages were ineffective compared with legitimate Facebook pages from real people, particularly Trump supporters, because they have so much energy and love promoting stories they like.

Departed.co — named after Mr. Latsabidze's favorite movie, "The Departed," and recently redirected to usatodaycom.com — published dozens of stories daily, many of them similar to one posted on Nov. 17 with the headline, "This Is Huuge! International Arrest Warrant Issued By Putin For George Soros!" The story was not true and had already been published on scores of other fake news sites around the web.

Then there are the stories that have a grain of truth, along with big dollops of exaggeration and extrapolation, like "Dying Hillary Says She Just Wants To Curl Up And Never Leave Her House Again After Defeat." Mrs. Clinton did say the day after her election defeat that she just wanted to curl up with a book. But she was not, as far as anyone knows, dying.

In the prelude to the election, bogus reports about Mrs. Clinton's health and highly favorable ones about Mr. Trump were promoted with gusto by Russian state-controlled news media outlets and legions of pro-Russian internet agitators. This has stirred suspicions that the Kremlin has had a hand in the fake news industry, prompting American researchers to assert in recent studies that the online blurring of the boundary between truth and falsehood is in part the result of Russian manipulation.

But Mr. Latsabidze and others here say they serve only their bank balances, not Russia or anything else.

He insisted that his team operated entirely on its own and that it did not want or need outside help. He said that it took him just two hours to set up a basic website and that anyone with a modicum of computer savvy could quickly start hawking news — real or fake — online.

"I did not invent anything," he said. "It has all been done before."

Mr. Latsabidze, who apparently has broken no laws, said that any crackdown on fake news might work in the short term but that "something else will come along to replace it."

"If they want to, they can control everything," he said, "but this will stop freedom of speech."

For now, the postelection period has been bad for business, with a sharp fall in the appetite for incendiary political news favoring Mr. Trump. Traffic to departed.co and affiliated websites has plunged in recent weeks by at least 50 percent, Mr. Latsabidze said.

"If Hillary had won, it would be better for us," he said. "I could write about the bad things she was going to do," he said. "I did not write to make Trump win. I just wanted to get viewers and make some money."

In the months since he got into the fake news business, Mr. Latsabidze has landed a day job as a programmer with a software company, which he sees as a better future. "This is more stable work," he said.

But he seemed reluctant to quit altogether.

"Are there any elections coming up in the U.K.?" Mr. Latsabidze asked.

He was disappointed to hear that none were scheduled soon. But, advised that France will hold a hotly contested presidential election next April featuring a Trump-like candidate in the form of Marine Le Pen, a far-right populist, he perked up.

"Maybe I should learn some French," he said.

Andrew Higgins reported from Tbilisi, Georgia, and Mike McIntire and Gabriel J.X. Dance from New York.

Man Motivated by 'Pizzagate' Conspiracy Theory Arrested in Washington Gunfire

By ERIC LIPTON
December 5, 2016

WASHINGTON — A MAN fired a rifle on Sunday inside a Washington pizza restaurant that has been subjected to harassment based on false stories tying it to child abuse, the police said. No one was hurt, and the man was arrested.

The man, Edgar M. Welch, 28, of Salisbury, N.C., told the police that he had come to the restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, in northwest Washington, to "self-investigate" what is being called Pizzagate, an online conspiracy theory asserting, with no evidence, that the restaurant is somehow tied to a child abuse ring. He entered the restaurant shortly before 3 p.m. with a rifle and fired it at least once inside, the police said.

The gunfire sharply escalated what had already been a tense period for the restaurant, its employees and the quiet neighborhood since the fake stories began spreading. Dozens of threats against employees had been made via email and social media.

People inside the restaurant fled, and the police locked down the area, ordering patrons of a nearby bookstore and cafe called Politics and Prose to remain locked inside. Officers with rifles and protective gear surrounded the restaurant and apprehended Mr. Welch. Two additional firearms were found, one on Mr. Welch and the other in his vehicle, the police said.

The police closed down a normally busy Connecticut Avenue, which runs in front of the restaurant, for several hours Sunday as they searched the area for other potential threats.

In a statement, Comet Ping Pong's owner, James Alefantis, condemned the people who had been spreading the bogus stories about child abuse.

"What happened today demonstrates that promoting false and reckless conspiracy theories comes with consequences," he said. "I hope that those involved in fanning these flames will take a moment to contemplate what happened here today and stop promoting these falsehoods right away."

Bradley Graham, co-owner of Politics and Prose, said the incident was a worrisome event during an uneasy time for the neighborhood. "This is one of the

things we feared," Mr. Graham said as the police surrounded his bookstore with rifles and weapons drawn. "That this could go from a social media attack to something much more dangerous and physical."

Mr. Graham said he and others had been disappointed that the local law enforcement authorities had not previously responded more aggressively to try to stop the harassment related to the fake claims, particularly after one supporter of the Pizzagate theory shot a live video from within the restaurant during a busy dinner shift.

The misinformation campaign about Comet began when the email account of John D. Podesta, an aide to Hillary Clinton, was hacked and his emails were published by WikiLeaks during the presidential campaign. Days before the election, users on the online message board 4chan noticed that one of Mr. Podesta's leaked emails contained communications with James Alefantis, Comet's owner, discussing a fund-raiser for Mrs. Clinton.

Sabrina Ousmaal, owner of a French restaurant called Terasol, which is across the street from Comet, said that other businesses in the area had also been targeted by threats and that the response from the authorities so far had been insufficient.

"The F.B.I. and the police were notified repeatedly of these death threats and calls, emails, online posts," she wrote in an email Sunday, after the rifle blast. "Nothing was done. I am appalled and horrified. Do people need to die for something to be done?"

Cecilia Kang contributed reporting.

Opinion: Fake News Brings a Gunman to Washington

By ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON
December 5, 2016

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, AS families ate a late lunch at Comet Ping Pong in Washington, D.C., a man armed with a rifle walked in, aiming to "self-investigate" fake stories that the small pizzeria was a front for a child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton.

No one was hurt, but a shot was fired, families and staff fled and a swath of the quiet neighborhood was locked down for hours. The suspect, 28-year-old Edgar Welch of Salisbury, N.C., referenced what's known online as "Pizzagate," a fabricated story on dozens of fake news websites, which puts Comet Ping Pong at the center of bizarre, debunked charges of child trafficking. The hoax has been shared millions of times by Donald Trump supporters on social media including Reddit, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

That an insane online conspiracy theory brought violence to a neighborhood business five miles from the White House is mind-boggling. Even worse is that similar fake stories involving Mrs. Clinton and pedophilia have been promoted by Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, President-elect Trump's choice for national security adviser. A conspiracy-minded Islamophobe forced out as chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency in part for his lack of judgment, General Flynn lent credibility to the provably false charge by tweeting links to fake conspiracy stories cited by Pizzagate trolls. Mike Flynn Jr., Mr. Flynn's son and adviser, and a member of the Trump transition team, was still spreading the Pizzagate lie after Sunday's incident in the capital.

In the days before the election, General Flynn's Twitter account bristled with all-caps exclamations about bizarre Clinton conspiracy theories. On Nov. 2, General Flynn tweeted: "U decide — NYPD Blows Whistle on New Hillary Emails: Money Laundering, Sex Crimes w Children, etc...MUST READ!" He included a link to a fake story on a website called "True Pundit." Two days later, he tweeted a link to another false story, accusing John Podesta, Mrs. Clinton's campaign chief, of participating in satanic rituals. This, from the man who would guide the United States' first response to global threats?

On Sunday night, after the gunfire at Comet, General Flynn's son tweeted,

"Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it'll remain a story. The left seems to forget #PodestaEmails and the many 'coincidences' tied to it." Then, in a flurry of retweets, he spread the latest mutation of the Pizzagate hoax, that the gunman was "planted" to discredit fake news websites.

Comet is owned by James Alefantis, an artist and restaurateur who has never met Hillary Clinton. Mr. Alefantis was once in a relationship with David Brock, a Clinton ally, that ended five years ago. Pizzagate appears to have roots in the WikiLeaks release of Mr. Podesta's emails, one of which referred to plans for a Clinton fund-raiser that involved Mr. Alefantis.

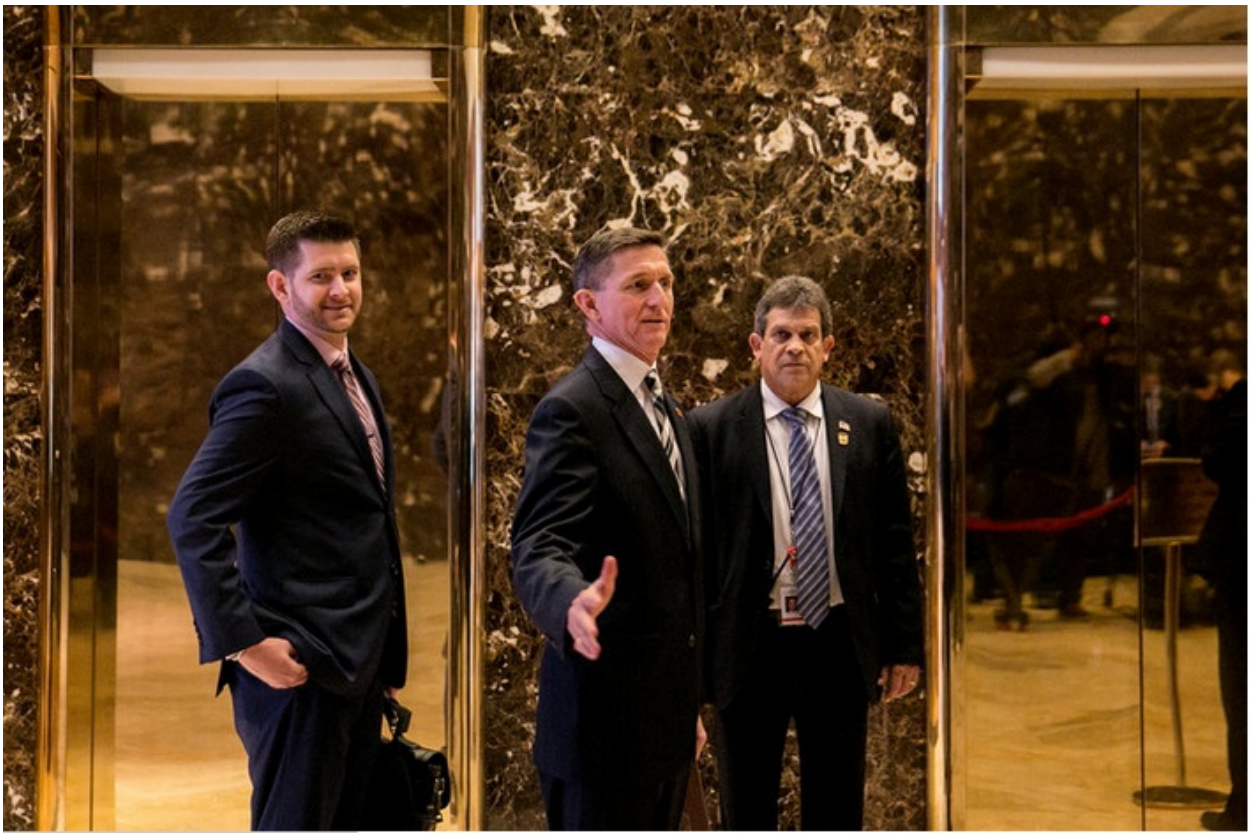
For a month, Comet's owner, 40 employees, even musicians who have performed there have been receiving phone calls and online messages by people threatening to kill them and burn down the business. Photos of the children of Comet customers have been lifted from social media pages and used in made-up stories of child abuse and trafficking.

Comet is a favorite of families: Its pizza has gotten national plaudits, and it has crafts projects for antsy kids to work on. It has Ping-Pong tables and a small concert stage in the back. It's located in a leafy neighborhood that's home to government types and members of Congress, who frequent Comet, too. Until now, about the only controversy surrounding Comet were gripes about loud music, or Ping-Pong balls rolling into Connecticut Avenue during warm summer nights when the tables were set up on the sidewalk outside.

Recently the police ejected a person who was videotaping Comet patrons and workers during dinner. Last week, Mr. Alefantis announced that police and security guards would patrol the concerts. He tried to reassure patrons that the threats against him and his business were just an online phenomenon. Now, thanks in part to Mr. Trump's advisers, fake news just got real.

Mr. Trump says he disavows hate campaigns by his supporters. Now that we're seeing the real-world impact of phony theories spread by General Flynn, does "disavow" mean reconsidering his choice of the general as national security adviser?

Trump Fires Adviser's Son From Transition for Spreading Fake News



Michael G. Flynn, left, and his father, Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, at Trump Tower in Manhattan in November. (Sam Hodgson for The New York Times)

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG, MAGGIE HABERMAN and ERIC SCHMITT

December 6, 2016

WASHINGTON — PRESIDENT-ELECT DONALD J. Trump on Tuesday fired one of his transition team's staff members, Michael G. Flynn, the son of Mr. Trump's choice for national security adviser, for using Twitter to spread a fake news story about Hillary Clinton that led to an armed confrontation in a pizza restaurant in Washington.

The uproar over Mr. Flynn's Twitter post cast a harsh spotlight on the views that he and his father, Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, aired on social media throughout the

presidential campaign. Both men have shared fake news stories alleging that Mrs. Clinton committed felonies, and have posted their own Twitter messages that at times have crossed into Islamophobia.

But their social media musings apparently attracted little attention from Mr. Trump or his transition team before a North Carolina man fired a rifle on Sunday inside Comet Ping Pong, which was the subject of false stories tying it and the Clinton campaign to a child sex trafficking ring.

Hours after the episode, the younger Mr. Flynn, 33, went on Twitter to say that until "Pizzagate" was proved false, it remained a story.

Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it'll remain a story. The left seems to forget #PodestaEmails and
the many "coincidences" tied to it.
— Michael G Flynn (@mflynnJR) Dec. 5, 2016

On Tuesday morning, after the post had attracted national attention and it was reported that Mr. Flynn had a transition team email address, Vice President-elect Mike Pence denied that Mr. Flynn had ever worked for the team, saying on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" that he had "no involvement in the transition whatsoever."

But later in the morning, Jason Miller, a transition spokesman, tacitly acknowledged that Mr. Flynn had worked for the transition, saying in a conference call that Mr. Flynn was now no longer involved.

Mr. Miller did not say what prompted the dismissal of Mr. Flynn, but two other Trump transition officials said it was tied to his Twitter posting.

The move may have cost the younger Mr. Flynn an eventual post in the White House. Until Tuesday, he had planned to join his father on the staff of the National Security Council and had even started the process of getting a security clearance, according to an acquaintance who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid upsetting the Flynns.

Despite the younger Mr. Flynn's abrupt removal from the transition team, there was no indication that Mr. Trump was reconsidering his choice of General Flynn, 57, a former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, to serve as national security adviser.

But beyond the tight circle around Mr. Trump, there were growing concerns in Washington about General Flynn's fitness for the job, fueled by talk of his temperament, his conspiratorial worldview and his own incendiary Twitter postings.

Many Democrats were openly critical from the moment the appointment was announced last month, and several prominent Republican national security officials also quietly voiced concerns. Now, with Mr. Flynn under growing scrutiny, some are beginning to speak publicly.

"The national security adviser should have a moderating effect on the instincts of the president, and it remains to be seen if Mike can do that," Michael V. Hayden, a former director of both the C.I.A. and the National Security Agency, said in a telephone interview on Tuesday.

The role of national security adviser calls for mediating the conflicting views of cabinet secretaries and agencies, and sifting fact from speculation and rumor to help the new president decide how the United States should react to international crises.

It is a job that is likely to take on greater importance for Mr. Trump, who has no experience in defense or foreign policy issues and has a habit of making broad assertions that are not based in fact.

General Flynn, too, has shown similar inclinations both on Twitter and in his previous jobs in the military. At the Defense Intelligence Agency, his staff members even coined their own name for his sometimes dubious assertions: "Flynn facts."

"He has regularly engaged in the reckless public promotion of conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact, with disregard for the risks that giving credence to those theories could pose to the public," Representative Adam Smith of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said on Tuesday.

"Someone who is so oblivious to the facts, or intentionally ignorant of them, should not be entrusted with policy decisions that affect the safety of the American people," Mr. Smith added.

For now, General Flynn appears to be weathering the criticism, which has been far harsher than that directed at other Trump nominees, by keeping a relatively low profile since the election. He has not given interviews — he did not respond to requests for comment — and he has kept his Twitter posts relatively tame, publishing patriotic messages on Veterans Day and more recently praising Mr. Trump's selection of Gen. James N. Mattis, a retired Marine, for defense secretary.

His son, in contrast, showed no such restraint in the weeks before he was fired, regularly posting on Twitter about conspiracy theories involving Mrs. Clinton and her campaign staff well after the election.

He continued to push his support for the fake news about Comet Ping Pong after his messages on Twitter about Sunday's episode began attracting widespread attention. It was not until shortly before 3:30 p.m. Monday that he went silent on

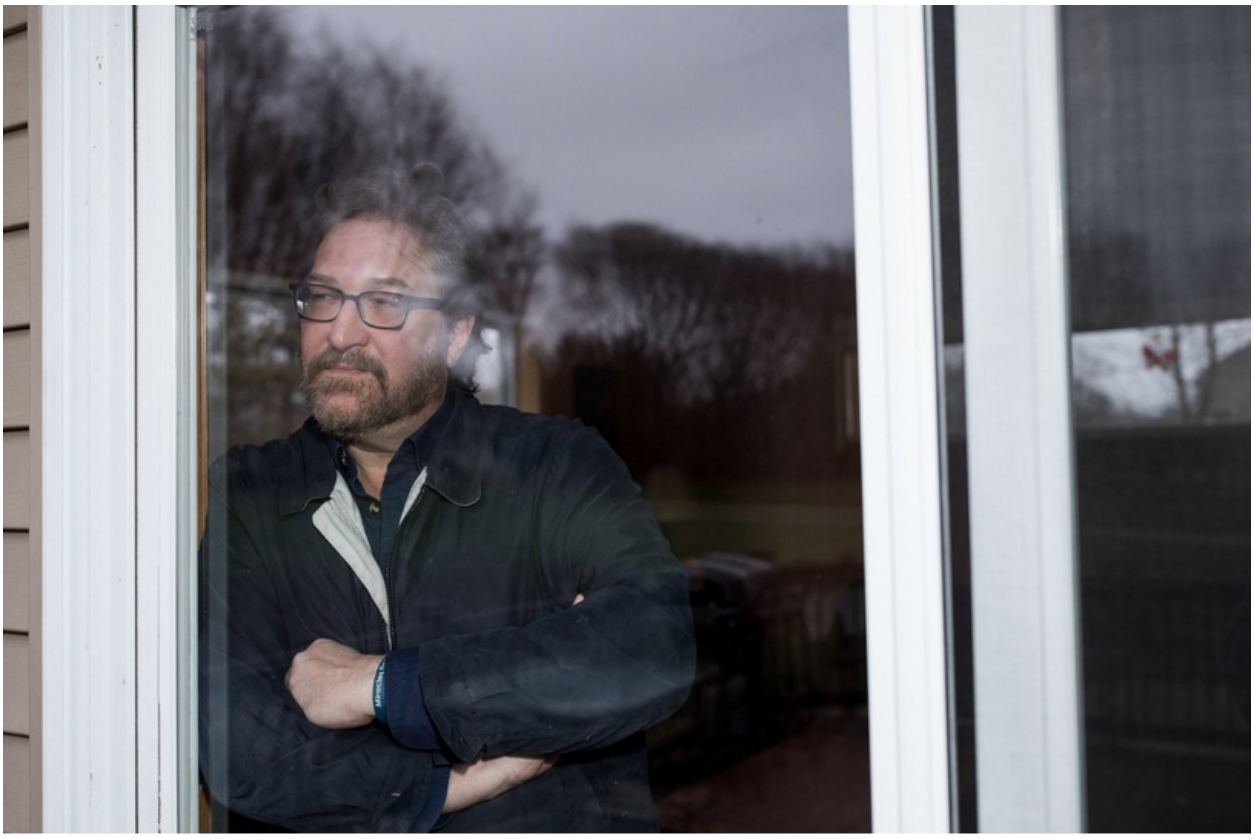
Twitter.

In one of the last messages he posted, he shared a post from another Twitter user who sought to spread a conspiracy theory that sprang up on the right-wing fringes after the shooting: that the suspect arrested at Comet Ping Pong, Edgar M. Welch, 28, of Salisbury, N.C., was actually an actor, and that the episode was a hoax cooked up to discredit the claim of a sex trafficking ring at the restaurant.

CONFIRMED: Comet Pizza Gunman Edgar Maddison Welch is an ACTOR pic.twitter.com/HVF9QMXDsd
— Jack Posobiec (@JackPosobiec) Dec. 5, 2016

Matthew Rosenberg and Eric Schmitt reported from Washington, and Maggie Haberman from New York.

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



Larry Laughlin, a retired business owner from Minnesota, said he felt alienated from conventional news media. (Tim Gruber for The New York Times)

By SABRINA TAVERNISE
December 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

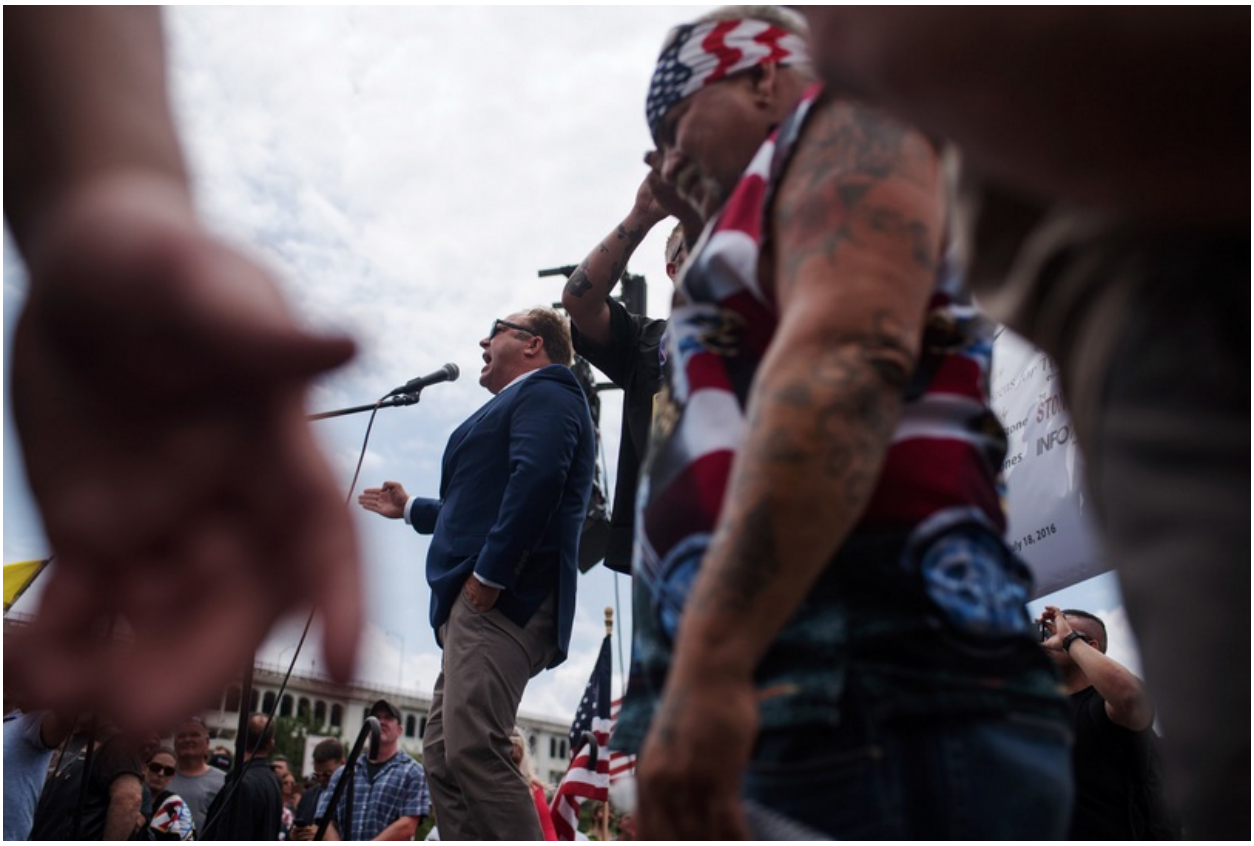
issue has become a political battering ram, with the left accusing the right of trafficking in disinformation, and the right accusing the left of tarring conservatives as a way to try to censor websites. In the process, the definition of fake news has blurred.

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

For Mr. Laughlin, conservative sites are a balm for the soul in a liberal world whose narrative of America, he says, seems to diminish him and all that he has accomplished. He was his own legal guardian at 16, after his mother fled his alcoholic father. He built his metal finishing business from scratch after earning an associate degree from a community college. The company he owned employs about 17 people. He and his wife adopted three mixed-race children.

"My struggles in life are just dismissed," he said, recalling being lectured by one of his children's liberal friends at a party in his large home. "'You have a nice house and got it made because you are a white guy.' There are all of these preconceived notions that I'm a racist, idiot, a bigot, and oh, uneducated."

He feels alienated from the conventional news media for some of the same reasons. "It's like an inside joke for people on the left, and we are the butt of the joke," he said of one left-leaning website. "At some point, we stopped listening."



Alex Jones, a conspiracy theorist, speaking at a rally promoting Donald J. Trump on the first day of the Republican National Convention in July in Cleveland. (Hilary Swift for The New York Times)

Mr. Laughlin likes news that strikes back against that. These days, he takes the most pleasure in watching clips strung together by conservative websites of liberal commentators sneering about how ridiculous Donald J. Trump was as a candidate and how he had no chance at becoming president.

"This is like our sweet release after the election," Mr. Laughlin said. He said the hyperpartisan environment left him craving intense content. "I'm picking through the fruit and looking for the reddest apple," he said.

But Mr. Laughlin avoids news that looks false, like a story after the election that Mr. Trump won the popular vote, and said he was careful not to click on such items to deny them advertising revenue. He said he cringed when he heard about the incident in the pizza restaurant. "It adds to the stereotype that we're all nutters," he said. "We'll all get lumped together with this guy."

Adding to the confusion is the fact that Mr. Trump and some members of his

team have promoted false items, too, such as that millions of people voted illegally. A similar story had circulated on the site of the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones some days before. For Clayton Montgomery, 57, a retired state department of transportation worker in Waynesville, N.C., the numbers may not be precisely right, but the broad outlines rang true.

"All of a sudden they got this big push of registered voters," Mr. Montgomery said, referring to California. "They were all illegals. The same thing in the state of Washington, Los Angeles and Houston, too."

He said that Mr. Jones, who has called the Sandy Hook massacre a hoax, "can get a little conspiratorial," but added that he "raises some very logical and important questions."

Mr. Montgomery has concerns about immigration. He lived for years in South Florida, where he had a painting business that was deeply affected by cheap labor from Hispanic immigrants.

"They can't say that these people are not taking jobs away from American citizens," he said. "They come up and they lowball. It hurts a lot of people."

Another story online alleged that Mexico had a wall along its southern border "with guard towers," Mr. Montgomery said, to keep "all these other countries from coming in." (Mr. Laughlin saw that one, too, but pointed out that the photograph that accompanied the story was from Israel.)

Mr. Montgomery pushed back: "Check it out, it's true!"

Mr. Montgomery said he was nostalgic for the news of old, when Walter Cronkite delivered it. But the reputation of the press has been tarnished, he said, and people are left to navigate the fractured landscape on their own.

The online content can be frustrating, with headlines that promise more than the story delivers.

He noted one with a headline along the lines of "The wait is over; Hillary's being indicted."

"But then you click and there's nothing in there about her being indicted," Mr. Montgomery said. "It's almost like looking at a menu in a restaurant. Oh, that sounds delicious, it sounds great, and then it's this teeny weeny thing you maybe get three bites of."

Fake and hyperpartisan news from the right has been more conspicuous than from the left, but both sides indulge. BuzzFeed analyses have found more on the right. Some purveyors have said right-leaning items are more profitable.

But the left has its share. The fact-checking site Snopes said it found no evidence

for a quotation, often attributed to Mr. Trump by the left, that Republican voters were stupid.

That type of insult increases the partisan divide. Paul Indre, a project manager for a hardware goods company in Akron, Ohio, who gets his news from podcasts and television, avoids much of online news. But he understands why people go there in a polarized era.

Mr. Indre, a moderate Republican, said he remained vigilant against fake news.

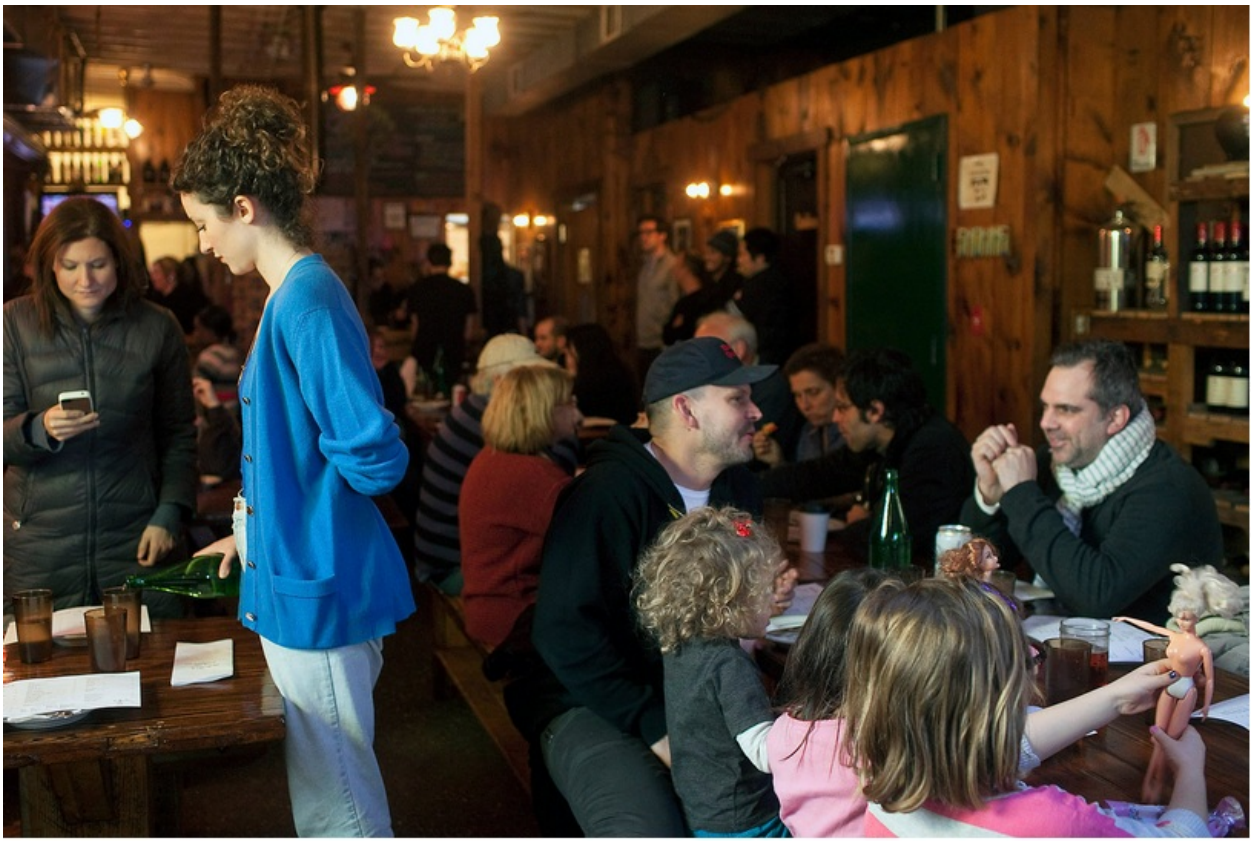
"If I'm in a Trump group and someone will share something that's fake news," he said, "I'll ask them 'Hey did you check that?'"

But it is often impossible to tell whether "they are just lobbing a bomb, or do they really believe it?" he said. "You have some folks who are a little naïve, who don't follow the news and believe it. I mean, people do buy The National Enquirer and believe it."

"But some of it might be revenge factor, getting back at something they are hearing from the left," he said. "Maybe they are just reacting to something. Maybe we are just in this reactionary period."

Talya Minsberg contributed research.

Roberta's, Popular Brooklyn Restaurant, Is Pulled Into Pizzagate Hoax



Roberta's in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn in 2013. The restaurant received two threatening phone calls in the past week. (Dave Sanders for The New York Times)

By ELI ROSENBERG
December 7, 2016

RUMORS LINKING A WELL-KNOWN Brooklyn restaurant to the so-called Pizzagate hoax seem to have emerged in posts on an online message board late last month.

By then, discussions of the hoax, a baseless story that Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign was connected to a child-abuse ring, had moved to a site called Voat after being shut down on a more popular site, Reddit.

A Voat user wrote of finding a reference to Roberta's — a popular pizza restaurant in the Bushwick section — in an email from Mrs. Clinton's private server

released by the State Department. Mrs. Clinton and her husband, former President Bill Clinton, attended a private birthday party for a prominent Democratic donor at Roberta's in 2012.

A discussion ensued as to whether the Roberta's logo, a skeleton holding a pizza paddle, and other, similar images connected the restaurant to the conspiracy. And so Roberta's — a local haunt, a favorite among tourists and a place to get a good charred-crust pie — was suddenly pulled into a national debate over the spread of false information online.

The police said on Wednesday that Roberta's had been targeted for harassment twice in the past week since being linked to the hoax.

The bogus story originally focused on a Washington pizzeria, Comet Ping Pong, which has been subjected to a barrage of threats and unwanted attention since the conspiracy theory began to spread in the days before the election.

One person drawn by the hoax came at the restaurant to live-stream activity there. Others have stood outside holding signs. And this week, a 28-year-old man was arrested after he drove to Washington from North Carolina and fired an assault-style rifle inside the restaurant, the authorities said. The man, Edgar M. Welch, told the authorities he planned to help rescue children after reading the fake news story online.

In the case of Roberta's, commenters on Voat and social media sites mined the restaurant's social media accounts for images that some felt represented expressions of Satanism or the occult: a logo from its wine menu of a skeletal hand holding a wine glass under an upside-down cross, and a T-shirt in which some discerned a crescent moon and a star. One Voat commenter described seeing a "little kid with his hands tied together" embedded in the T-shirt logo.

"The more I dig those emails and new findings," another Voat commenter wrote, "the clearer it gets, most of those so-called elites made a cult out of pizza. Disturbing indeed."

A YouTube user incorporated some of the images into a video linking the restaurant to the Pizzagate hoax.

"The images speak for themselves," the person wrote in a caption accompanying the video, which was posted on Dec. 1. That day, the police in New York said, an unidentified person called Roberta's and told a worker there that she was "going to bleed and be tortured."

The next day, Roberta's received another harassing phone call, the police said. A man called to complain about the restaurant's connection to the Pizzagate hoax after

reading about it online, the police said.

No arrests have been made in connection with the episodes, which were reported by DNAinfo. Workers who answered the phone at Roberta's on Wednesday referred inquiries to the restaurant's communications department, which did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The YouTube video linking Roberta's to the hoax had been watched more than 10,000 times before being taken down on Wednesday. The user who posted it did not respond to messages requesting comment. According to The Washington Post, automated bot accounts on social media have helped spread the hoax.

Not everyone was buying the conspiracy theory about Roberta's on the message boards. One Voat user, saying the restaurant looked pretty great, wrote: "Again, not a shill. I think it just genuinely looks cool."

Facebook Mounts Efforts to Limit Tide of Fake News

By MIKE ISAAC
December 15, 2016

FOR WEEKS, FACEBOOK HAS been questioned about its role in spreading fake news. Now the company has mounted its most concerted effort to combat the problem.

Facebook said on Thursday that it had begun a series of experiments to limit misinformation on its site. The tests include making it easier for its 1.8 billion members to report fake news, and creating partnerships with outside fact-checking organizations to help it indicate when articles are false. The company is also changing some advertising practices to stop purveyors of fake news from profiting from it.

Facebook, the social network, is in a tricky position with these tests. It has long regarded itself as a neutral place where people can freely post, read and view content, and it has said it does not want to be an arbiter of truth. But as its reach and influence have grown, it has had to confront questions about its moral obligations and ethical standards regarding what appears on the network.

Its experiments on curtailing fake news show that Facebook recognizes it has a deepening responsibility for what is on its site. But Facebook also must tread cautiously in making changes, because it is wary of exposing itself to claims of censorship.

"We really value giving people a voice, but we also believe we need to take responsibility for the spread of fake news on our platform," said Adam Mosseri, a Facebook vice president who is in charge of its news feed, the company's method of distributing information to its global audience.

He said the changes — which, if successful, may be available to a wide audience — resulted from many months of internal discussion about how to handle false news articles shared on the network.

What impact Facebook's moves will have on fake news is unclear. The issue is not confined to the social network, with a vast ecosystem of false news creators who thrive on online advertising and who can use other social media and search engines to propagate their work. Google, Twitter and message boards like 4chan and Reddit have all been criticized for being part of that chain.

Still, Facebook has taken the most heat over fake news. The company has been under that spotlight since Nov. 8, when Donald J. Trump was elected the 45th president. Mr. Trump's unexpected victory almost immediately led people to focus on whether Facebook had influenced the electorate, especially with the rise of hyperpartisan sites on the network and many examples of misinformation, such as a false article that claimed Pope Francis had endorsed Mr. Trump for president that was shared nearly a million times across the site.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, has said he did not believe that the social network had influenced the election result, calling it "a pretty crazy idea." Yet the intense scrutiny of the company on the issue has caused internal divisions and has pushed Mr. Zuckerberg to say he was trying to find ways to reduce the problem.

In an interview, Mr. Mosseri said Facebook did not think its news feed had directly caused people to vote for a particular candidate, given that "the magnitude of fake news across Facebook is one fraction of a percent of the content across the network."

Facebook has changed the way its news feed works before. In August, the company announced changes to marginalize what it considered "clickbait," the sensational headlines that rarely live up to their promise. This year, Facebook also gave priority to content shared by friends and family, a move that shook some publishers that rely on the social network for much of their traffic. The company is also constantly fine-tuning its algorithms to serve what its users most want to see, an effort to keep its audience returning regularly.

This time, Facebook is making it easier to flag content that may be fake. Users can report a post they dislike in their feed, but when Facebook asks for a reason, the site presents them with a list of limited and vague options, including the cryptic "I don't think it should be on Facebook." In Facebook's new experiment, users will have a choice to flag the post as fake news and have the option to message the friend who originally shared the piece to tell him or her the article is false.

If an article receives enough flags as fake, it can be directed to a coalition of groups that will fact-check it. The groups include Snopes, PolitiFact, The Associated Press, FactCheck.org and ABC News. They will check the article and can mark it as a "disputed" piece, a designation that will be seen on Facebook.

Partner organizations will not be paid, the companies said. Some characterized the fact-checking as an extension of their journalistic efforts.

"We actually regard this as a big part of our core mission," James Goldston, the president of ABC News, said in an interview. "If that core mission isn't helping

people regard the real from the fake news, I don't know what our mission is."

Disputed articles will ultimately appear lower in the news feed. If users still decide to share such an article, they will receive a pop-up reminding them that the accuracy of the piece is in question.

Facebook said it was casting a wide net to add more partners to its fact-checking coalition and may move outside of the United States with the initiative if early experiments go well. The company is also part of the First Draft Coalition, an effort with other technology and media companies including Twitter, Google, The New York Times and CNN, to combat the spread of fake news online.

In another change in how the news feed works, articles that many users read but do not share will be ranked lower on people's feeds. Mr. Mosseri said a low ratio of sharing an article after it has been read could be perceived as a negative signal, one that might reflect that the article was misleading or of poor quality.

"Facebook was inevitably going to have to curate the platform much more carefully, and this seems like a reasonably transparent method of intervention," said Emily Bell, director at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

"But the fake cat is already out of the imaginary bag," Ms. Bell added. "If they didn't try and do something about it, next time around it could have far worse consequences."

Facebook also plans to impede the economics of spreading fake articles across the network. Fake news purveyors generally make money when people click on the false articles and are directed to third-party websites, the majority of which are filled with dozens of low-cost ads.

Facebook will review those third-party links and check for things like whether the page is mostly filled with advertising content — a dead giveaway for spam sites — or to see whether a link masquerades as a different site, like a fake version of The New York Times. Such sites would not be eligible to display Facebook advertising on their pages.

Articles disputed by the fact-checking coalition will also not be eligible to be inserted into Facebook ads, a tactic viral spammers have used to spread fake news quickly and gain more clicks on their websites.

Facebook said that in these early experiments it would deal with only fake news content; it does not plan to flag opinion posts or other content that could not be easily classified. The changes will not affect satirical sites like The Onion, which often jabs at political subjects through tongue-in-cheek humor.

Facebook must take something else into consideration: its profit. Any action taken to reduce popular content, even if it is fake news, could hurt the company's priority of keeping its users engaged on the platform. People spend an average of more than 50 minutes a day on Facebook, and the company wants that number to grow.

Executives at Facebook stressed the overriding factor right now is not just engagement.

"I think of Facebook as a technology company, but I recognize we have a greater responsibility than just building technology that information flows through," Mr. Zuckerberg wrote in a post on Thursday. "We have a responsibility to make sure Facebook has the greatest positive impact on the world."

Opinion: Facebook's Problem Isn't Fake News — It's the Rest of the Internet

By JOHN HERRMAN
December 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 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 newslike, 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.

Wielding Claims of 'Fake News,' Conservatives Take Aim at Mainstream Media

By JEREMY W. PETERS
December 25, 2016

WASHINGTON — THE C.I.A., the F.B.I. and the White House may all agree that Russia was behind the hacking that interfered with the election. But that was of no import to the website Breitbart News, which dismissed reports on the intelligence assessment as "left-wing fake news."

Rush Limbaugh has diagnosed a more fundamental problem. "The fake news is the everyday news" in the mainstream media, he said on his radio show recently. "They just make it up."

Some supporters of President-elect Donald J. Trump have also taken up the call. As reporters were walking out of a Trump rally this month in Orlando, Fla., a man heckled them with shouts of "Fake news!"

Until now, that term had been widely understood to refer to fabricated news accounts that are meant to spread virally online. But conservative cable and radio personalities, top Republicans and even Mr. Trump himself, incredulous about suggestions that fake stories may have helped swing the election, have appropriated the term and turned it against any news they see as hostile to their agenda.

In defining "fake news" so broadly and seeking to dilute its meaning, they are capitalizing on the declining credibility of all purveyors of information, one product of the country's increasing political polarization. And conservatives, seeing an opening to undermine the mainstream media, a longtime foe, are more than happy to dig the hole deeper.

"Over the years, we've effectively brainwashed the core of our audience to distrust anything that they disagree with. And now it's gone too far," said John Ziegler, a conservative radio host, who has been critical of what he sees as excessive partisanship by pundits. "Because the gatekeepers have lost all credibility in the minds of consumers, I don't see how you reverse it."

Journalists who work to separate fact from fiction see a dangerous conflation of stories that turn out to be wrong because of a legitimate misunderstanding with those whose clear intention is to deceive. A report, shared more than a million times on social media, that the pope had endorsed Mr. Trump was undeniably false. But was it

"fake news" to report on data models that showed Hillary Clinton with overwhelming odds of winning the presidency? Are opinion articles fake if they cherry-pick facts to draw disputable conclusions?

"Fake news was a term specifically about people who purposely fabricated stories for clicks and revenue," said David Mikkelson, the founder of Snopes, the myth-busting website. "Now it includes bad reporting, slanted journalism and outright propaganda. And I think we're doing a disservice to lump all those things together."

The right's labeling of "fake news" evokes one of the most successful efforts by conservatives to reorient how Americans think about news media objectivity: the move by Fox News to brand its conservative-slanted coverage as "fair and balanced." Traditionally, mainstream media outlets had thought of their own approach in those terms, viewing their coverage as strictly down the middle. Republicans often found that laughable.

As with Fox's ubiquitous promotion of its slogan, conservatives' appropriation of the "fake news" label is an effort to further erode the mainstream media's claim to be a reliable and accurate source.

"What I think is so unsettling about the fake news cries now is that their audience has already sort of bought into this idea that journalism has no credibility or legitimacy," said Angelo Carusone, the president of Media Matters, a liberal group that polices the news media for bias. "Therefore, by applying that term to credible outlets, it becomes much more believable."

Conservative news media are now awash in the "fake news" condemnations. When coverage of Mr. Trump's choice for labor secretary, Andrew F. Puzder, highlighted his opposition to minimum wage increases, the writer and radio host Erick Erickson wrote that Mr. Puzder should have been getting more credit for pointing out that such increases lead to higher unemployment. "To say otherwise is to push fake news," he wrote. (The effects actually have been found to vary from city to city.)

Infowars, the website run by the conservative provocateur and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, labeled as "fake news" a CNN report that Ivanka Trump would move into the office in the White House normally reserved for the first lady.

Mr. Trump has used the term to deny news reports, as he did on Twitter recently after various outlets said he would stay on as the executive producer of "The New Celebrity Apprentice" after taking office in January. "Ridiculous & untrue — FAKE NEWS!" he wrote. (He will be credited as executive producer, a spokesman for the show's creator, Mark Burnett, has said. But it is unclear what work, if any, he

will do on the show.)

Many conservatives are pushing back at the outrage over fake news because they believe that liberals, unwilling to accept Mr. Trump's victory, are attributing his triumph to nefarious external factors.

"The left refuses to admit that the fundamental problem isn't the Russians or Jim Comey or 'fake news' or the Electoral College," said Laura Ingraham, the author and radio host. "'Fake news' is just another fake excuse for their failed agenda."

Others see a larger effort to slander the basic journalistic function of fact-checking. Nonpartisan websites like Snopes and Factcheck.org have found themselves maligned when they have disproved stories that had been flattering to conservatives.

When Snopes wrote about a State Farm insurance agent in Louisiana who had posted a sign outside his office that likened taxpayers who voted for President Obama to chickens supporting Colonel Sanders, Mr. Mikkelson, the site's founder, was smeared as a partisan Democrat who had never bothered to reach out to the agent for comment. Neither is true.

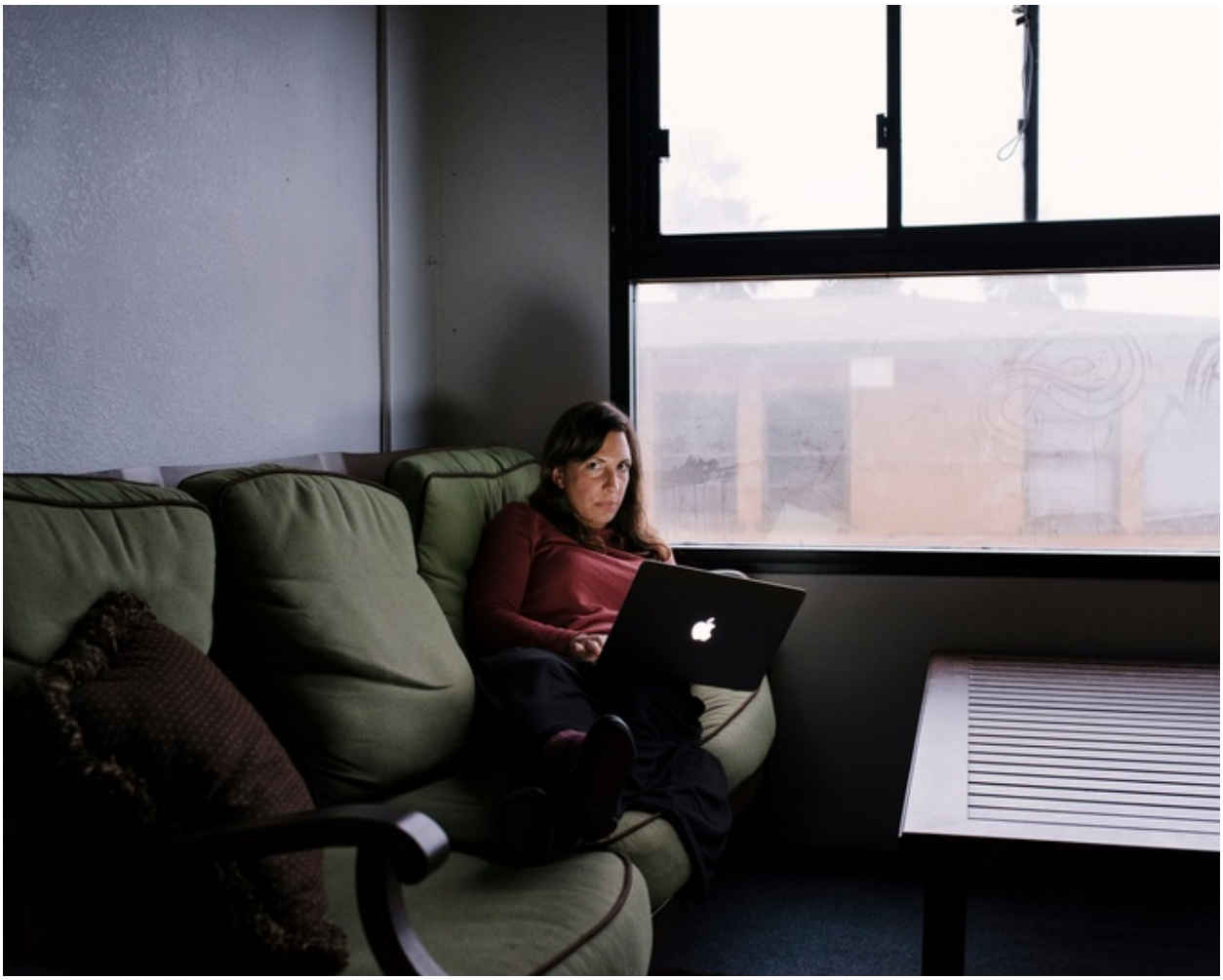
"They're trying to float anything they can find out there to discredit fact-checking," he said.

There are already efforts by highly partisan conservatives to claim that their fact-checking efforts are the same as those of independent outlets like Snopes, which employ research teams to dig into seemingly dubious claims.

Sean Hannity, the Fox News host, has aired "fact-checking" segments on his program. Michelle Malkin, the conservative columnist, has a web program, "Michelle Malkin Investigates," in which she conducts her own investigative reporting.

The market in these divided times is undeniably ripe. "We now live in this fragmented media world where you can block people you disagree with. You can only be exposed to stories that make you feel good about what you want to believe," Mr. Ziegler, the radio host, said. "Unfortunately, the truth is unpopular a lot. And a good fairy tale beats a harsh truth every time."

For Fact-Checking Website Snopes, a Bigger Role Brings More Attacks



Brooke Binkowski, the managing editor of Snopes, in its office in San Diego. The idea that the website's work would slow down after the presidential election has proved unfounded. (John Francis Peters for The New York Times)

By DAVID STREITFEL
December 25, 2016

SAN DIEGO — THE last line of defense against the torrent of half-truths, untruths and outright fakery that make up so much of the modern internet is in a downscale strip mall near the beach.

Snopes, the fact-checking website, does not have an office designed to impress,

or even be noticed. A big sign outside still bears the name of the previous tenant, a maker of underwater headphones. Inside there's nothing much — a bunch of improvised desks, a table tennis table, cartons of Popchips and cases of Dr Pepper. It looks like a dot-com on the way to nowhere.

Appearances deceive. This is where the muddled masses come by the virtual millions to establish just what the heck is really going on in a world turned upside down.

Did Donald J. Trump say on Twitter that he planned to arrest the "Saturday Night Live" star Alec Baldwin for sedition? Has Hillary Clinton quietly filed for divorce? Was Mr. Trump giving Kanye West a cabinet position? And was Alan Thicke, the star of "Growing Pains," really dead?

All untrue, except for the demise of Mr. Thicke, which was easily verifiable.

"Rationality seems to have fallen out of vogue," said Brooke Binkowski, Snopes's managing editor. "People don't know what to believe anymore. Everything is really strange right now."

That is certainly true at Snopes itself. For 20 years, the site was dedicated to urban legends, like the purported existence of alligators in New York City sewers, and other benign misinformation. But its range and readership increased significantly during a prolonged presidential election campaign in which the facts became a partisan issue and reality itself seemed up for grabs.

One way to chart Snopes's increasing prominence is by measuring the rise in fake news about the site itself. If you believe the internet, the founder of Snopes, David Mikkelson, has a longer rap sheet than Al Capone. He was supposedly arrested for committing fraud and corruption and running a pit bull ring. In the wake of a deal that Snopes and others made this month to start fact-checking for Facebook, new slurs and allegations poured forth.

The underlying message of these spurious attacks is that the movement to fact-check the internet is a left-wing conspiracy whose real goal is to censor the right, and therefore must be resisted at all costs.

"Smearing people just because you don't like what they're saying often works to shut them up," Ms. Binkowski, 39, said. "But at Snopes you learn to grow a thick skin. I will always push back. At least until someone shows up at my workplace and kills me."

Mr. Mikkelson, a former computer programmer, met his first wife, Barbara, in a folklore discussion group on the internet. They called their website Snopes in tribute to the venal family in William Faulkner's novels.

Their first group of posts, back in 1995, tackled questions about Disneyland, such as whether there really was a secret restaurant at the park. (There was.) It was a time when the nascent web was seen as a force that would deliver enlightenment and truth to all.

Starting about two years ago, Snopes made an effort to professionalize itself. It added a dozen staff members just in time to become the go-to debunking site for an election full of venom. The number of unique users jumped 42 percent over 2015, peaking at nearly 2.5 million the day after the election.

Just about everyone at Snopes thought things would calm down after the votes were in. "The fake news wasn't from Trump so much. It was from people who hated Hillary Clinton," Ms. Binkowski said. "Once the election was over we figured it would go away."

She scheduled a vacation, and thought she would spend more time writing about such things as how no one has a water bed anymore. Mr. Mikkelson, 56, went on a lengthy honeymoon in Japan and China.

But the role of fake news and misinformation in Mr. Trump's surprise win quickly reached a fever pitch, prompting questions about the extent to which Facebook, where many of these bogus stories were shared, had influenced the election. Reluctantly, the social media giant was forced to act.

The plan is for Facebook to send questionable links to a coalition of fact-checking sites, including Snopes. If the links are found to be dubious, Facebook will alert users by marking stories with a "disputed" designation.

Mr. Mikkelson, speaking from Washington State, declined to claim this new initiative was a potential turning point in the quest for truth on the internet, or even in the history of Snopes.

"I said, 'O.K., we'll give it a try,'" he said. "It doesn't really involve us doing anything we wouldn't already be doing." As for Facebook, he thinks it had to do something but had few good options. Blocking content outright, for instance, would be a public relations minefield.

Even when he is in this country, Mr. Mikkelson is a bit elusive. His voice mail box is full, but he is in no hurry to clear it out. In the wake of a contentious divorce from Barbara, he now owns half of Snopes. The other half is owned by the principals of Proper Media, a digital media firm.

All of Snopes's revenue — Mr. Mikkelson says he doesn't know what it is — come from ads. Facebook is not paying for its services. Nor is the billionaire George Soros funding the site, although that is sometimes asserted in anti-Snopes stories.

Mr. Mikkelson seems more amused than outraged by the spectacle that is the internet, even when it takes aim at him.

"We don't have any inflated sense of self-importance at Snopes," he said. "People are always telling us, 'You're deviating from your mission.' My response is: 'We don't have a mission. We just do what we do.'" But he conceded that something had gone wrong with the early utopian dreams for the internet.

"Making everyone equal as an information source doesn't work very well in practice," he said. Then he laughed, something he does frequently.

Ms. Binkowski, a former radio reporter who still freelances about border issues, thinks there is a mission.

"Not to be ideological or Pollyannaish, but you have to believe this work makes a difference," she said. "Otherwise you'd just go back to bed and drink." Although there are other benefits to working at Snopes: "I really like telling people they're wrong."

The Snopes writers generally take a long-term perspective on fake news. The practice itself they see as ancient. The difference now is that the stories circulate faster and people can make money spreading them, which gives its purveyors a whole new motivation.

There is also a cultural shift, said Kim LaCapria, who lives on Long Island and writes many of the Snopes political posts.

"It used to be that if you got too far from the mainstream, you were shunned for being a little nutty," she said. "Now there is so much nutty going around that it's socially acceptable to embrace wild accusations. No one is embarrassed by anything anymore."

The remedy, she and Ms. Binkowski feel, is more traditional journalism.

"People aren't necessarily getting the media literacy they need, so they're just kind of panicking," Ms. LaCapria said.

Mr. Thicke's death underlined this. In addition to those asking direct questions, thousands of users searched Snopes for confirmation of the actor's demise.

"People think the death of a 69-year-old from a heart attack must be a hoax. That is how muddy the waters are now," Ms. LaCapria said. "They are afraid, even with such an easily verifiable thing, to trust anyone."

But there are also those who trust too much, and they are a much larger group. The bios at the end of posts on Snopes are often whimsical, so Ms. LaCapria wrote that she got her job "due to an executive order unilaterally passed by President Obama during a secret, late-night session."

A joke — but her own mother took it at face value. “You’ve known me for 36 years. Of course it’s not true!” Ms. LaCapria told her. “It’s very easy for us to be tricked, all of us.”

Opinion: The Age of Fake Policy

By PAUL KRUGMAN
January 6, 2017

ON THURSDAY, AT A rough estimate, 75,000 Americans were laid off or fired by their employers. Some of those workers will find good new jobs, but many will end up earning less, and some will remain unemployed for months or years.

If that sounds terrible to you, and you're asking what economic catastrophe just happened, the answer is, none. In fact, I'm just assuming that Thursday was a normal day in the job market.

The U.S. economy is, after all, huge, employing 145 million people. It's also ever-changing: Industries and companies rise and fall, and there are always losers as well as winners. The result is constant "churn," with many jobs disappearing even as still more new jobs are created. In an average month, there are 1.5 million "involuntary" job separations (as opposed to voluntary quits), or 75,000 per working day. Hence my number.

But why am I telling you this? To highlight the difference between real economic policy and the fake policy that has lately been taking up far too much attention in the news media.

Real policy, in a nation as big and rich as America, involves large sums of money and affects broad swaths of the economy. Repealing the Affordable Care Act, which would snatch away hundreds of billions in insurance subsidies to low- and middle-income families and cause around 30 million people to lose coverage, would certainly qualify.

Consider, by contrast, the story that dominated several news cycles a few weeks ago: Donald Trump's intervention to stop Carrier from moving jobs to Mexico. Some reports say that 800 U.S. jobs were saved; others suggest that the company will simply replace workers with machines. But even accepting the most positive spin, for every worker whose job was saved in that deal, around a hundred others lost their jobs the same day.

In other words, it may have sounded as if Mr. Trump was doing something substantive by intervening with Carrier, but he wasn't. This was fake policy — a show intended to impress the rubes, not to achieve real results.

The same goes for the hyping of Ford's decision to add 700 jobs in Michigan —

or for that matter, Mr. Trump's fact-challenged denunciation of General Motors for manufacturing the Chevy Cruze in Mexico (that factory mainly serves foreign markets, not the U.S.).

Did the incoming administration have anything to do with Ford's decision? Can political pressure change G.M.'s strategy? It hardly matters: Case-by-case intervention from the top is never going to have a significant impact on a $19 trillion economy.

So why are such stories occupying so much of the media's attention?

The incoming administration's incentive to engage in fake policy is obvious: It's the natural counterpart to fake populism. Mr. Trump won overwhelming support from white working-class voters, who believed that he was on their side. Yet his real policy agenda, aside from the looming trade war, is standard-issue modern Republicanism: huge tax cuts for billionaires and savage cuts to public programs, including those essential to many Trump voters.

So what can Mr. Trump do to keep the scam going? The answer is, showy but trivial interventions that can be spun as saving a few jobs here or there. Substantively, this will never amount to more than a rounding error in a giant nation. But it may well work as a P.R. strategy, at least for a while.

Bear in mind that corporations have every incentive to go along with the spin. Suppose that you're a C.E.O. who wants to curry favor with the new administration. One thing you can do, of course, is steer business to Trump hotels and other businesses. But another thing you can do is help generate Trump-friendly headlines.

Keeping a few hundred jobs in America for a couple of years is a pretty cheap form of campaign contribution; pretending that the administration persuaded you to add some jobs you actually would have added anyway is even cheaper.

Still, none of this would work without the complicity of the news media. And I'm not talking about "fake news," as big a problem as that is becoming; I'm talking about respectable, mainstream news coverage.

Sorry, folks, but headlines that repeat Trump claims about jobs saved, without conveying the essential fakeness of those claims, are a betrayal of journalism. This is true even if, as often happens, the articles eventually, quite a few paragraphs in, get around to debunking the hype: many if not most readers will take the headline as validation of the claim.

And it's even worse if headlines inspired by fake policy crowd out coverage of real policy.

It is, I suppose, possible that fake policy will eventually produce a media backlash

— that news organizations will begin treating stunts like the Carrier episode with the ridicule they deserve. But nothing we've seen so far inspires optimism.

The Upshot: The Real Story About Fake News Is Partisanship

By AMANDA TAUB
January 11, 2017

IN HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS as president Tuesday, Barack Obama warned of the dangers of uncontrolled partisanship. American democracy, he said, is weakened "when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character are turned off from public service, so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent."

That seems a well-founded worry. Partisan bias now operates more like racism than mere political disagreement, academic research on the subject shows. And this widespread prejudice could have serious consequences for American democracy.

The partisan divide is easy to detect if you know where to look. Consider the thinly disguised sneer in most articles and editorials about so-called fake news. The very phrase implies that the people who read and spread the kind of false political stories that swirled online during the election campaign must either be too dumb to realize they're being duped or too dishonest to care that they're spreading lies.

But the fake-news phenomenon is not the result of personal failings. And it is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Rather, Americans' deep bias against the political party they oppose is so strong that it acts as a kind of partisan prism for facts, refracting a different reality to Republicans than to Democrats.

Partisan refraction has fueled the rise of fake news, according to researchers who study the phenomenon. But the repercussions go far beyond stories shared on Facebook and Reddit, affecting Americans' faith in government — and the government's ability to function.

In 2009, Sean Westwood, then a Stanford Ph.D. student, discovered that partisanship was one of the most powerful forces in American life. He got annoyed with persistent squabbles among his friends, and he noticed that they seemed to be breaking along partisan lines, even when they concerned issues that ostensibly had nothing to do with politics.

"I didn't expect political conflict to spill over from political aspects of our lives to nonpolitical aspects of our lives, and I saw that happening in my social group," said Mr. Westwood, now a professor at Dartmouth.

He wondered if this was a sign that the role of partisanship in American life was changing. Previously, partisan conflict mostly applied to political issues like taxes or abortion. Now it seemed, among his acquaintances at least, to be operating more like racism or sexism, fueling negative or positive judgments on people themselves, based on nothing more than their party identification.

Curious, Mr. Westwood looked at the National Election Study, a long-running survey that tracks Americans' political opinions and behavior. He found that until a few decades ago, people's feelings about their party and the opposing party were not too different. But starting in the 1980s, Americans began to report increasingly negative opinions of their opposing party.

Since then, that polarization has grown even stronger. The reasons for that are unclear. "I suspect that part of it has to do with the rise of constant 24-hour news," Mr. Westwood said, "and also the shift that we've unfortunately gone through in which elections are more or less now a permanent state of affairs."

To find out more about the consequences of that polarization, Mr. Westwood, along with Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford professor who studies political communication, embarked on a series of experiments. They found something quite shocking: Not only did party identity turn out to affect people's behavior and decision making broadly, even on apolitical subjects, but according to their data it also had more influence on the way Americans behaved than race did.

That is a sea change in the role of partisanship in public life, Mr. Westwood said.

"Partisanship, for a long period of time, wasn't viewed as part of who we are," he said. "It wasn't core to our identity. It was just an ancillary trait. But in the modern era we view party identity as something akin to gender, ethnicity or race — the core traits that we use to describe ourselves to others."

That has made the personal political. "Politics has become so important that people select relationships on that basis," Mr. Iyengar said. For instance, it has become quite rare for Democrats to marry Republicans, according to the same Westwood/Iyengar paper, which cited a finding in a 2009 survey of married couples that only 9 percent consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs. And it has become more rare for children to have a different party affiliation from their parents.

But it has also made the political personal. Today, political parties are no longer just the people who are supposed to govern the way you want. They are a team to support, and a tribe to feel a part of. And the public's view of politics is becoming more and more zero-sum: It's about helping their team win, and making sure the other team loses.

Partisan tribalism makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true.

"If I'm a rabid Trump voter and I don't know much about public affairs, and I see something about some scandal about Hillary Clinton's aides being involved in an assassination attempt, or that story about the pope endorsing Trump, then I'd be inclined to believe it," Mr. Iyengar said. "This is reinforcing my beliefs about the value of a Trump candidacy."

And Clinton voters, he said, would be similarly drawn to stories that deride Mr. Trump as a demagogue or a sexual predator.

Sharing those stories on social media is a way to show public support for one's partisan team — roughly the equivalent of painting your face with team colors on game day.

"You want to show that you're a good member of your tribe," Mr. Westwood said. "You want to show others that Republicans are bad or Democrats are bad, and your tribe is good. Social media provides a unique opportunity to publicly declare to the world what your beliefs are and how willing you are to denigrate the opposition and reinforce your own political candidates."

Partisan bias fuels fake news because people of all partisan stripes are generally quite bad at figuring out what news stories to believe. Instead, they use trust as a shortcut. Rather than evaluate a story directly, people look to see if someone credible believes it, and rely on that person's judgment to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

"There are many, many decades of research on communication on the importance of source credibility," said John Sides, a professor at George Washington University who studies political communication.

Partisan bias strongly influences whom people perceive as trustworthy. One of the experiments that Mr. Westwood and Mr. Iyengar conducted demonstrated that people are much more likely to trust members of their party. In that experiment, they gave study participants $10 and asked how much they wanted to give to another player. Whatever that second player received would be multiplied, and he or she would then have a chance to return some of the cash to the original player.

How much confidence would the participant have that the other player would give some of the money back? They found that participants gave more money if they were told the other player supported the same political party as they did.

Partisanship's influence on trust means that when there is a partisan divide among experts, Mr. Sides said, "you get people believing wildly different sets of facts."

The fake news that flourished during the election is a noticeable manifestation of that dynamic, but it's not what experts like Mr. Iyengar and Mr. Westwood find most worrying. To them, the bigger concern is that the natural consequence of this growing national divide will be a feedback loop in which the public's bias encourages extremism among politicians, undermining public faith in government institutions and their ability to function.

Politicians "have an incentive to attack, to go after their opponents, to reveal to their own side that they are good members of the tribe, that they are saying all the right things," Mr. Iyengar said. "This is an incentive for Republicans and Democrats in Congress to behave in a hyperpartisan manner in order to excite their base."

That feeds partisan bias among the public by reinforcing the idea that the opposition is made up of bad or dangerous people, which then creates more demand for political extremism.

The result is an environment in which compromise and collaboration with the opposing party are seen as signs of weakness, and of being a bad member of the tribe.

"It's a vicious cycle," Mr. Iyengar said. "All of this is going to make policy-making and fact-finding more problematic."

He already sees it affecting politicians' partisan response to Russia's election interference, for instance: "The Republicans are going to resist the notion that there was an intervention by the Russians that may have benefited Trump, because it is an inconvenient act. Whereas the Democrats are obviously motivated to seize upon that as a plausible account of what occurred."

Mr. Westwood agreed. When Russia intervened in the American election, "for a lot of voters it was to help defeat Hillary Clinton, so it's not surprising that many Republicans see that as righteous."

"To be cliché, the enemy of my enemy is my friend," he said.

Already, partisan bias is undermining confidence in the last election. "We saw some symptoms of that in this last campaign," Mr. Iyengar said. "You begin to have doubts about the legitimacy of the election. And you begin to view the outcome as somehow contaminated or tainted. And you had all of Trump's comments about how he would not concede if the election went to Clinton, and then you had all the people demonstrating."

Now, "you have quite a few people who are willing to call into question an institution for centuries that has been sacrosanct," Mr. Iyengar said.

Mr. Westwood was even more pessimistic. "The consequences of that are insane," he said, "and potentially devastating to the norms of democratic

governance."

"I don't think things are going to get better in the short term; I don't think they're going to get better in the long term. I think this is the new normal."

Opinion: 'Kompromat' and the Danger of Doubt and Confusion in a Democracy

By AMANDA TAUB
January 15, 2017

WASHINGTON — SINCE THE emergence of an unverified dossier with salacious claims about President-elect Donald J. Trump, Americans have debated the ramifications of the arrival of "kompromat" as a feature of American politics.

But those debates — for example, over the ethics of publishing the dossier — have often framed this practice as little more than a political form of blackmail, and one particular to Russia.

In fact, kompromat is more than an individual piece of damaging information: It is a broader attempt to manufacture public cynicism and confusion in ways that target not just one individual but an entire society.

And although this practice tends to be associated with Russia — the word kompromat is a portmanteau of the Russian words for "compromising" and "information" — it is a common feature of authoritarian and semiauthoritarian nations around the world.

Specific leaks may take aim at powerful individuals, but in the longer term, kompromat serves the interests of the powerful, which is why it is often a tool of autocrats. By eroding the very idea of a shared reality, and by spreading apathy and confusion among a public that learns to distrust leaders and institutions alike, kompromat undermines a society's ability to hold the powerful to account and ensure the proper functioning of government.

When Katy E. Pearce, a professor of communications at the University of Washington in Seattle, began studying access to technology in Azerbaijan, she expected to focus her research on how it could be a positive tool for promoting political freedom. But she changed her tack after encountering widespread fear of the ways that the government could use technology as a tool of repression.

"When I was interviewing people, it kept on coming up and coming up," she said. Kompromat is "a very cheap and easy way for the regime to demonstrate its power, and to harass people in a very visible way," she added.

That was a danger and a deterrent for the young activists she spoke to. But individual targets of kompromat are not its only victims, Professor Pearce said. It

also harms society by diminishing public trust.

Thomas Rid, a professor of security studies at King's College London, wrote on Twitter that disinformation campaigns have "often deliberately blended accurate and forged details" to sow distrust and confusion.

If the news media and public figures publicize lies, they lose their credibility as trustworthy sources of information. "There's no reliable truth to rest upon," Professor Pearce said. "Every piece of information you get is 'possibly true, possibly false.'"

Degrading that trust can be deeply damaging. While in Russia in 2015, I was struck by how many of the people I met saw the world through a lens that I began to call the "prudent hypothetical." They reacted to all information, whether from official sources or thirdhand rumors, as if it might be true. I came to realize that it was a self-protective impulse, a way to prepare for any potential outcome in an unpredictable, unreliable world.

But they were also careful not to rely on that information, lest it turn out to be a fabrication. They trusted only the facts they had verified themselves, and only the people to whom they had close personal ties.

I had seen the same thing in Guatemala several years earlier. There, spreading lies and salacious gossip to discredit one's enemies is referred to as a "campaña negra," or a black campaign, rather than kompromat. But the result was the same: Public trust had been so eroded that lies were equally capable of destroying the honest and rehabilitating the criminal.

When it appeared that Yasmín Barrios, the judge presiding over the trial of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala's former dictator, might convict him of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013, a campaign of coordinated leaks and rumors portrayed her as a corrupt agent of foreign governments, willing to discredit her country in exchange for personal gain. Leaks and rumors attacked Judge Barrios personally, but by extension, they also undermined the credibility of the justice system in which she worked.

For example, the news media reported that the judge had been seen dining with "foreign women" at a restaurant in Guatemala City, and suggested that this was evidence of foreign influence on her rulings. In fact, the "foreigners" were Judge Barrios's Guatemalan mother, her neighbor, and a nun who was a friend of the family. But the rumors had their desired effect: They discredited not only Judge Barrios but also the genocide trial.

The Guatemalans I met knew that the stories they heard through the news media

might be part of disinformation campaigns. But lacking better options, many still saw the world through the lens of the prudent hypothetical, viewing everything as possible and nothing as certain.

When General Ríos Montt was eventually convicted, many saw him as a victim of foreign machinations rather than a perpetrator of genocide and crimes against humanity. (His conviction was later vacated on procedural grounds.)

Professor Pearce said she saw parallels between the use of kompromat overseas and recent news in the United States.

Although the Trump dossier purported to be a warning about kompromat elsewhere, she said, it could also be seen as a form of kompromat itself. She listed the parallels to what she had seen in her research: Its content is damaging but unverified. Its distribution was multilayered, with a website — in this case, BuzzFeed — publishing the unverified material and other outlets amplifying its impact by reporting on the ensuing controversy.

The document also fostered uncertainty and division. Masha Gessen, a Russian journalist, wrote in a recent opinion column in The New York Times that the release of the dossier had allowed Mr. Trump to say that "there was no such thing as truth, only a battle of opinions proffered by different actors, each of whom strives to be loudest." For some Americans, the dossier sowed concern about Mr. Trump's vulnerability to Russian influence. Others saw its publication as evidence that Mr. Trump was the victim of a disinformation campaign.

That may ultimately be to Mr. Trump's benefit if better-supported allegations against him arise in the future.

Americans were similarly divided in their views on the hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computer system. When Russian hackers leaked emails stolen from the committee, some saw it as evidence that Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee, was a victim of foreign machinations, while others viewed the documents' content as confirmation that Mrs. Clinton was unreliable and dishonest. The leaks distracted from more substantive campaign issues and fueled public distrust and rancor.

Many people in the United States traditionally see the leak of confidential documents by whistle-blowers, like Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers, as a way to hold the powerful to account. We tend to believe that transparency serves the public good, and secrecy the interests of the powerful.

Such a belief presumes that there is a fixed quantity of hidden information out there that the news media is or is not revealing. But in a kompromat society,

incriminating material, real and fake, will be manufactured as needed to serve a political purpose.

To smear a president, undermine a judge or sow distrust in an institution or process, all someone needs to do is create a set of documents salacious enough to attract discussion, persuade some corner of the web to publish them and then wait for the resulting controversy to be reported as news.

That does not hold the powerful to account. And worse, it undermines the institutions that are supposed to do so.

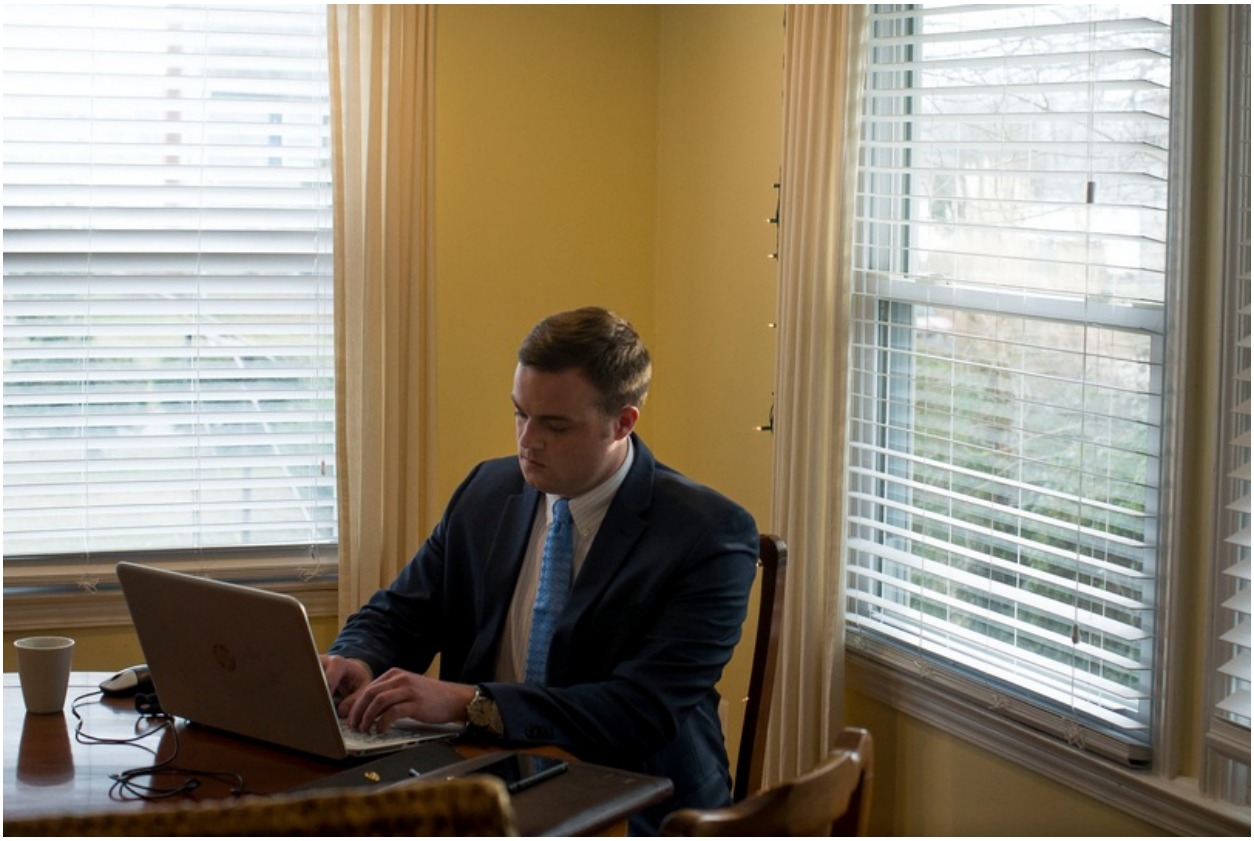
In the United States, Professor Pearce said, "grabbing on and holding to the truth is becoming more challenging." If kompromat becomes a more widespread tactic, public trust will erode even further.

"A lot of the things that are good about the U.S. are because we have this kind of truth-based scaffolding," she said. "I don't want to live in an environment where I'm having to really be skeptical of everything, like people in authoritarian regimes have to be."

"Living like that is horrible," she said. "It is exhausting."

Max Fisher contributed reporting from London.

From Headline to Photograph, a Fake News Masterpiece



Cameron Harris in his home office in Annapolis, Md., on Monday. He created a fake story about an electrical worker who stumbled upon stacked boxes of ballots pre-marked for Hillary Clinton. (Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times)

By SCOTT SHANE
January 18, 2017

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — It was early fall, and Donald J. Trump, behind in the polls, seemed to be preparing a rationale in case a winner like him somehow managed to lose. "I'm afraid the election is going to be rigged, I have to be honest," the Republican nominee told a riled-up crowd in Columbus, Ohio. He was hearing "more and more" about evidence of rigging, he added, leaving the details to his supporters' imagination.

A few weeks later, Cameron Harris, a new college graduate with a fervent interest in Maryland Republican politics and a need for cash, sat down at the kitchen

table in his apartment to fill in the details Mr. Trump had left out. In a dubious art just coming into its prime, this bogus story would be his masterpiece.

Mr. Harris started by crafting the headline: "BREAKING: 'Tens of thousands' of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio warehouse." It made sense, he figured, to locate this shocking discovery in the very city and state where Mr. Trump had highlighted his "rigged" meme.

"I had a theory when I sat down to write it," recalled Mr. Harris, a 23-year-old former college quarterback and fraternity leader. "Given the severe distrust of the media among Trump supporters, anything that parroted Trump's talking points people would click. Trump was saying 'rigged election, rigged election.' People were predisposed to believe Hillary Clinton could not win except by cheating."

In a raucous election year defined by made-up stories, Mr. Harris was a home-grown, self-taught practitioner, a boutique operator with no ties to Russian spy agencies or Macedonian fabrication factories. As Mr. Trump takes office this week, the beneficiary of at least a modest electoral boost from a flood of fakery, Mr. Harris and his ersatz-news website, ChristianTimesNewspaper.com, make for an illuminating tale.

Contacted by a reporter who had discovered an electronic clue that revealed his secret authorship of ChristianTimesNewspaper.com, he was wary at first, chagrined to be unmasked.

"This topic is rather sensitive," Mr. Harris said, noting that he was trying to build a political consulting business and needed to protect his reputation. But eventually he agreed to tell the story of his foray into fake news, a very part-time gig that he calculated paid him about $1,000 an hour in web advertising revenue. He seemed to regard his experience with a combination of guilt about having spread falsehoods and pride at doing it so skillfully.

At his kitchen table that night in September, Mr. Harris wondered: Who might have found these fraudulent Clinton ballots? So he invented "Randall Prince, a Columbus-area electrical worker." This Everyman, a "Trump supporter" whose name hinted at a sort of nobility, had entered a little-used back room at the warehouse and stumbled upon stacked boxes of ballots pre-marked for Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Harris decided.

"No one really goes in this building. It's mainly used for short-term storage by a commercial plumber," Prince said.

In case anyone missed the significance of the find, Mr. Harris made it plain: "What he found could allegedly be evidence of a massive operation designed to

deliver Clinton the crucial swing state."

A photograph, he thought, would help erase doubts about his yarn. With a quick Google image search for "ballot boxes," he landed on a shot of a balding fellow standing behind black plastic boxes that helpfully had "Ballot Box" labels.

It was a photo from The Birmingham Mail, showing a British election 3,700 miles from Columbus — but no matter. In the caption, the balding Briton got a new name: "Mr. Prince, shown here, poses with his find, as election officials investigate."

The article explained that "the Clinton campaign's likely goal was to slip the fake ballot boxes in with the real ballot boxes when they went to official election judges on November 8th." Then Mr. Harris added a touch of breathlessness.

"This story is still developing," he wrote, "and CTN will bring you more when we have it."

He pushed the button and the story was launched on Sept. 30, blazing across the web like some kind of counterfeit comet. "Even before I posted it, I knew it would take off," Mr. Harris recalled.

He was correct. The ballot box story, promoted by a half-dozen Facebook pages Mr. Harris had created for the purpose, flew around the web, fueled by indignant comments from people who were certain that Mrs. Clinton was going to cheat Mr. Trump of victory and who welcomed the proof. It was eventually shared with six million people, according to CrowdTangle, which tracks web audiences.

The next day, the Franklin County, Ohio, board of elections announced that it was investigating and that the fraud claims appeared to be untrue. Within days, Ohio's secretary of state, Jon Husted, issued a statement to deny the story.

"A Christian myself, I take offense to reading such unbelievable lies from a publication alleging Christian ties," Mr. Husted said.

There was nothing especially Christian about his efforts, Mr. Harris admits; he had simply bought the abandoned web address for $5 at ExpiredDomains.net. Within a few days, the story, which had taken him 15 minutes to concoct, had earned him about $5,000. That was a sizable share of the $22,000 an accounting statement shows he made during the presidential campaign from ads for shoes, hair gel and web design that Google had placed on his site.

He had put in perhaps half an hour a week on the fake news site, he said, for a total of about 20 hours. He would come close to a far bigger payday, one that might have turned the $5 he had spent on the Christian Times domain into more than $100,000.

The money, not the politics, was the point, he insisted. He had graduated from

Davidson College in North Carolina in May, and he needed to pay his living expenses. “I spent the money on student loans, car payments and rent,” he said.

By the time he launched his fraudulent story on ballot fraud, he had found minimal success with “Hillary Clinton Blames Racism for Cincinnati Gorilla’s Death,” a reference to the sad tale of Harambe, the gorilla shot after he grabbed a little boy visiting the zoo. He had done better with “Early Morning Explosion in DC Allegedly Leaves Yet Another DNC Staffer Dead,” spinning off conspiracy theories around the earlier shooting death of a Democratic National Committee staff member.

Later, he would tell gullible readers “NYPD Looking to Press Charges Against Bill Clinton for Underage Sex Ring,” “Protesters Beat Homeless Veteran to Death in Philadelphia” and “Hillary Clinton Files for Divorce in New York Courts.” Eight of his stories would merit explicit debunking by Snopes.com, the myth-busting site, but none would top the performance of the ballot box fantasy.

President Obama thought the fake news phenomenon significant enough to mention it as a threat to democracy in his farewell speech in Chicago last week. “Increasingly,” he said, “we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it’s true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.”

That was exactly the insight on which Mr. Harris said he built his transient business: that people wanted to be fed evidence, however implausible, to support their beliefs. “At first it kind of shocked me — the response I was getting,” he said. “How easily people would believe it. It was almost like a sociological experiment,” added Mr. Harris, who majored in political science and economics.

By his account, though he voted for Mr. Trump, his early preference had been for Senator Marco Rubio. Mr. Harris said he would have been willing to promote Mrs. Clinton and smear Mr. Trump had those tactics been lucrative. But as other seekers of clicks discovered, Mr. Trump’s supporters were far more fervent than Mrs. Clinton’s.

In late October, with the inevitable end of his venture approaching, Mr. Harris sought an appraisal for the web domain that by then had vaulted into the web’s top 20,000 sites. An appraiser said that given the traffic, he could probably sell it for between $115,000 and $125,000.

But Mr. Harris made a costly mistake: He decided to wait. Days after the election, denounced for making the peddling of fake news remunerative, Google announced that it would no longer place ads on sites promoting clearly fabricated

stories.

A few days later, when Mr. Harris checked his site, the ads were gone. He checked with the appraiser and was told that the domain was now essentially worthless.

All was not lost, however. He had put a pop-up on the site inviting visitors to "join the 'Stop the Steal' team to find out HOW Hillary plans to steal the election and what YOU can do to stop her!" and collected 24,000 email addresses. He has not yet decided what to do with them, he said.

Asked whether he felt any guilt at having spread lies about a presidential candidate, Mr. Harris grew thoughtful. But he took refuge in the notion that politics is by its nature replete with exaggerations, half-truths and outright whoppers, so he was hardly adding much to the sum total.

"Hardly anything a campaign or a candidate says is completely true," he said.

Lately he has picked up Mr. Trump's refrain that mainstream news organizations are themselves regular purveyors of fake news. Last week, when BuzzFeed released what it called an "explosive but unverified" dossier suggesting that Russia had planned to bribe and blackmail Mr. Trump, Mr. Harris wrote on Twitter:

Cam Harris @camharris_us
"Explosive but unverified"
That could describe every fake news headline ever.
9:20 PM - 10 Jan 2017

He did not mention his own expertise in the field.

10 Times Trump Spread Fake News

Donald J. Trump demonstrating from his office in Trump Tower how he sends Twitter messages through his smartphone. (Josh Haner/The New York Times)

By SAPNA MAHESHWARI
January 18, 2017

IN THE HEATED DISCUSSIONS over the effects of fake news on democracy and civil society, Donald J. Trump has often taken center stage.

He has used false claims to attack his political opponents, question the legitimacy and loyalty of the Obama administration and other Democrats, and undermine the news media, the federal government and other institutions that many of his supporters do not trust.

The practice has paralleled his rise from reality TV star to holder of the nation's highest elected office, according to an analysis of his social media activity.

When discussing some of his claims, Mr. Trump has cited as evidence articles posted through Breitbart News, manipulated YouTube videos and celebrity gossip publications like The National Enquirer.

Mr. Trump has also tweeted links from right-wing blogs like WND.com and TheRightScoop.com that often promote sensational conspiracy theories and contain little original reporting.

His sourcing highlights the bounty of misinformation accessible on the web and its power in a deeply divided America — especially when endorsed by someone of Mr. Trump's influence and visibility.

He offered this explanation for his actions while discussing an altered YouTube video he had tweeted as part of an unsubstantiated claim that a protester at one of his rallies had ties to the Islamic State: "I don't know what they made up; all I can do is play what's there," Mr. Trump said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"All I know is what's on the internet."

Below are examples from the last several years of Mr. Trump's penchant for making fraudulent claims and backing them up with information gleaned from unsubstantiated sources.

The Affordable Care Act and 'Death Panels'

ObamaCare does indeed ration care. Seniors are now restricted to "comfort care" instead
of brain surgery. Repeal now!
9:13 AM - 28 Nov 2011

In November 2011, Mr. Trump proclaimed that the Affordable Care Act would "ration care," linking to an article on TheRightScoop.com. The story cited an anonymous caller's comments on a conservative radio talk show as proof the act established so-called death panels that would determine whether or not elderly patients received care.

The notion of death panels was deemed the "Lie of the Year" in 2009 by the fact-checking website Politifact, which traced its rise to comments made by Sarah Palin on Facebook. The additional claims in the story Mr. Trump shared were debunked by the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and the Department of Health and Human Services, according to Snopes, another fact-checking website.

President Obama's Holiday Message

What a convenient mistake: @BarackObama issued a statement for Kwanza but failed
to issue one for Christmas.
11:02 AM – 28 Dec 2011

Mr. Trump took to Twitter to share a story from TheGatewayPundit.com, a conservative blog, which falsely claimed that Mr. Obama had issued a statement for "the fake holiday" Kwanzaa but not for Christmas. (Mr. Obama's Christian faith has been questioned by political opponents; some have sought to assail the legitimacy of his presidency by falsely claiming he is a Muslim.) After the political blog Talking Points Memo refuted the story, Mr. Trump shared it again on Twitter, starting his post with "I'm right, TPM is wrong."

President Obama and his wife wished Americans a "merry Christmas" on Dec. 24, 2011, in a video address shared on Twitter, YouTube and the White House website. Earlier that month, Mr. Obama said he hoped Americans had "the merriest of Christmases," as his family lit the National Christmas Tree in front of the White House, and separately said that "the story of Jesus Christ changed the world" in remarks at the "Christmas in Washington" concert. The statement on Kwanzaa was in line with those made by George W. Bush through 2008.

Birtherism

An 'extremely credible source' has called my office and told me that
@BarackObama's birth
certificate is a fraud.
4:23 PM – 6 Aug 2012

In March 2011, Mr. Trump started raising questions about President Obama's birthplace and birth certificate on television, on shows that included ABC's "The View" and NBC's "Today." The notion had been debunked and pushed to the realm of conspiracy theorists after Mr. Obama released his short-form birth certificate from the Hawaii Department of Health in 2008.

Mr. Trump also promoted his claims through Twitter, citing "an 'extremely credible source'" that called his office and allegedly told him the certificate was a fraud, as well as linking to posts on blogs like WND.com and FreedomOutpost.com. While Mr. Trump was roundly denounced for continuing to push the conspiracy theory, it solidified his connection to the largely white Republican base that was so instrumental in his election victory in November.

Secret Oil Deal to Control Gas Prices

Mr. Trump has also made claims without supporting material of any kind. He once shared political views through a YouTube video series, "From The Desk Of Donald Trump," sounding off on the Republican Party and Mr. Obama, but also on topics as varied as Andy Roddick's talent and the state of the desk itself. ("Many people have been asking about my desk and the fact that I have so many papers on my desk," it began.) He tweeted links to the posts with the hashtag #trumpvlog throughout 2011 and 2012.

In April 2012, Mr. Trump posted a segment in which he said, "I have no doubt in my mind that President Obama made a deal with the Saudis to flood the markets with oil before the election so he can at least keep it down a little bit."

He added: "After the election it's going to be a mess. You're going to see numbers like you've never seen if he wins." He repeated this allegation about a secret deal on CNBC in June of that year, which Fox published under the headline "Trump: Obama's Secret Saudi Oil Deal to Win Re-election."

Linking Autism to Vaccinations

Autism rates through the roof–why doesn't the Obama administration do something
about doctor-inflicted autism. We lose nothing to try.
9:19 AM – 22 Oct 2012

Starting in 2012, Mr. Trump has repeatedly expressed his personal belief that autism is linked to childhood vaccinations, saying it in interviews, on Twitter, and even during a Republican debate.

On the show "Fox & Friends" in April 2012, Mr. Trump was asked about the rising number of children with autism diagnoses and said, "I have a theory and it's a

theory that some people believe in, and that's the vaccinations." Later in the segment, one host noted most doctors disagree and that studies do not show a link, which Mr. Trump acknowledged, adding, "It's also very controversial to even say, but I couldn't care less." He said he had seen changes in children firsthand to support his belief.

Plenty of studies, including a recent one that involved almost 100,000 children, have shown there is no scientific evidence linking vaccinations to autism, and that there is no benefit to delaying vaccinations. Instead, children who are not vaccinated on the regular schedule can be at risk for infectious diseases for a longer period. One doctor told Scientific American that "misinformation on the internet often frightens parents away from following" the vaccination schedule recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the only one endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In 2015, a measles outbreak in California, which started at Disneyland, was partly attributed to diseases spread by children who were not vaccinated.

In October 2012, Mr. Trump took to Twitter to ask why President Obama's administration was not intervening. He then wrote in March 2014, "If I were President I would push for proper vaccinations but would not allow one time massive shots that a small child cannot take - AUTISM."

Questioning Unemployment Data

The underemployment being quoted as 14.9% is way low–real number could be 20%.
2:24 PM – 13 Jul 2012
Think of it—20% of our country is essentially unemployed.
2:25 PM – 13 Jul 2012

Mr. Trump has a long history of casting doubt on the unemployment data and figures on "underemployment," a measure that also includes people working part time for lack of full-time jobs and others who have given up looking for work. In mid-2012, he remarked on Twitter that an underemployment rate of 14.9 percent was "way low," and could actually be 20 percent. A couple of months after that, he said on CNBC that "the real unemployment number is over 17 percent, when you add back the tremendous numbers of people that gave up looking for jobs and all of

the other things they do to manipulate them."

Just as I said last October, census workers cooked the job numbers for Obama right before the election
12:18 PM – 19 Nov 2013

In November 2013, Mr. Trump, on Twitter, linked to a column from The New York Post headlined, "Census 'faked' 2012 election jobs report." The story was quickly criticized by The Columbia Journalism Review for "turning a nugget of news into a blockbuster conspiracy exposé." It noted that the column was largely premised on the misbehavior of a worker who left the Census Bureau in 2011, well before the election.

In December 2014, Mr. Trump tweeted a story from WND.com, a conspiracy-minded conservative site, with the headline "Donald Trump: Obama's Jobless Figures 'Phony.' Economists agree." The story cited comments Mr. Trump made on "Fox & Friends" alleging that the actual unemployment rate was almost 18 percent, an estimate supported by John Williams, an independent economist who has a newsletter called "Shadow Government Statistics." It says it "exposes and analyzes flaws in current U.S. government economic data and reporting."

Mr. Williams, in the WND story, estimated November unemployment at 23 percent. Trump later repeated that figure during a campaign speech at Liberty University in January 2016, a number The Washington Post showed to be false.

President Obama and the Boston Marathon Bombing

Obama's $1T+ deficit budget expanded welfare & green cronyism & it cut domestic bomb prevention in half
4:17 PM – 17 Apr 2013

Mr. Trump shared a link from TheRightScoop.com on Twitter, claiming the president's budget "cut domestic bomb prevention in half." The post relied on a story from The Daily Mail, which based its claim on an estimate from a former official at the Department of Homeland Security who resigned in 2005.

Separately, Mr. Trump tweeted, "Is the Boston killer eligible for Obama Care to bring him back to health?" He went on to circulate a post based entirely on that tweet from Newsbusters.org, a blog from the Media Research Center, which states

its goal as "documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias." Outside of the fact that federal law requires any patient requiring emergency treatment to be treated regardless of insurance status or ability to pay, the attack occurred in Massachusetts, where the health insurance program under Mitt Romney served as a model for the Affordable Care Act.

Ted Cruz's Father

Mr. Trump made comments in a Fox News interview last May accusing Senator Ted Cruz's father of associating with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Trump's remarks — made on the day of the Republican primary in Indiana — came after The National Enquirer claimed it had photographic proof that Mr. Cruz's father, Rafael Cruz, was "palling around" with Mr. Oswald before the shooting. Mr. Cruz's campaign called that report error-filled and condemned Mr. Trump for campaigning "on false tabloid garbage."

The fact-checking website Politifact noted that "several historians of the period told us they've never seen Cruz's name come up in connection with Oswald."

Protester Was Member of ISIS

USSS did an excellent job stopping the maniac running to the stage. He has ties to ISIS. Should be in jail!
6:41 PM – 12 Mar 2016

Mr. Trump claimed at a rally last year that a man who charged him at another event was linked to the Islamic State, yet no government agency suggested the man was connected to ISIS or terrorism. He repeated the allegation in a tweet, linking to a video that claimed to show the man. It was overlaid with Arabic text and music and appeared to have been created as a hoax.

When asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" about the lack of evidence tying the man to ISIS and the video hoax, Mr. Trump did not seem deterred.

"He was dragging a flag along the ground and he was playing a certain type of music and supposedly there was chatter about ISIS," he responded. "What do I know about it?"

Voter Fraud

In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct
the millions of people who voted illegally
3:30 PM – 27 Nov 2016

After winning the presidential election but losing the popular vote, Mr. Trump took to Twitter to claim that he actually received more votes than Mrs. Clinton "if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally." The notion was popularized by Infowars, a website replete with conspiracy theories that include questioning the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

The overwhelming consensus from people who oversaw the general election in states around the country was that the amount of voter fraud in 2016 was next to none.

The Upshot: Researchers Created Fake News. Here's What They Found.

By NEIL IRWIN
January 18, 2017

BEFORE THE TERM "FAKE news" became an all-purpose insult for news coverage a person doesn't like, it had a more specific meaning: stories invented from whole cloth, designed to attract social shares and web traffic by flattering the prejudices of their intended audience. Think of untrue claims like the Trump endorsement by Pope Francis or the investigation of the Clinton Foundation for running a pedophile sex ring.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, there was even some speculation that these types of stories were enough to swing the result toward Donald J. Trump. Sundar Pichai, the chief executive of Google, raised that possibility, and one author of made-up viral news told The Washington Post that "I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me."

Some new research from two economists throws at least a bit of cold water on the theory that false news was a major influence on the election result. They offer some hard data on how pervasive voters' consumption of fake news really was during the 2016 election cycle. The research also reveals some disturbing truths about the modern media environment and how people make sense of the incoming gush of news.

Hunt Allcott of New York University and Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford commissioned a survey in late November hoping to discern just how deeply some of the fake news embedded itself with American voters. The two asked people, among other things, whether they had heard various pieces of news that reflected positively or negatively on one of the candidates — of three varieties.

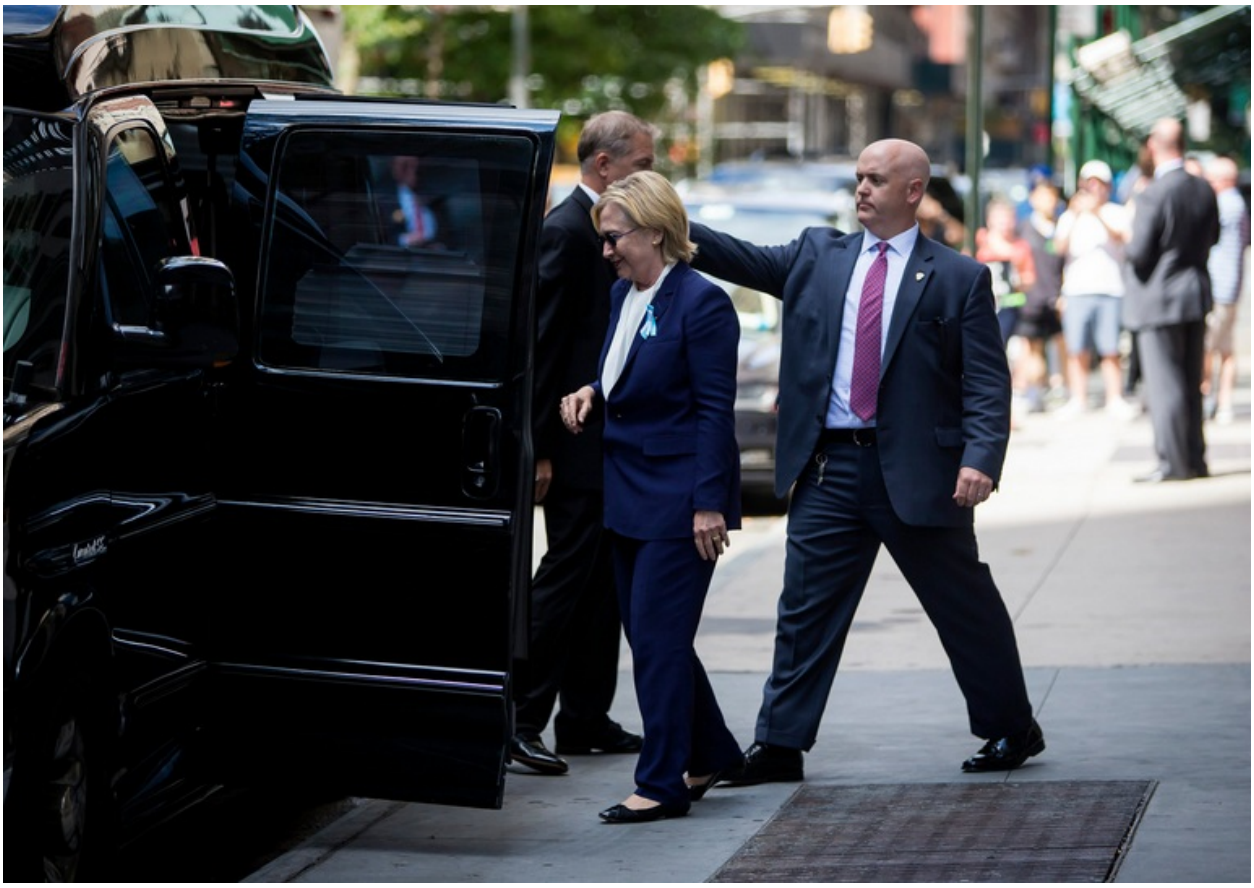
There was completely true news: Hillary Clinton called some Trump supporters a "basket of deplorables," for example, or Mr. Trump refused to say at a debate whether he would concede the election if he lost.

There was fake news, as identified by fact-checking sites like Snopes and PolitiFact — big things like the Pope Francis story and smaller items, like Mr. Trump threatening to deport the "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda to Puerto Rico.

The third category was most interesting. The researchers created "fake fake" news. That is, they invented some headlines that were the type of thing fake sites produce, but had never actually been published during the campaign. One of these placebo headlines was that "leaked documents reveal that the Clinton campaign planned a scheme to offer to drive Republican voters to the polls but then take them to the wrong place," and its inverse in which it was the Trump campaign scheming to take Democrats to the wrong polling place.

There is some good news in that more people reported having heard, and believed, the true statements than the false statements. Only 15.3 percent of the population recalled seeing the fake news stories, and 7.9 percent recalled seeing them and believing them.

The more interesting result: Those numbers are nearly identical to the proportion who reported seeing (14.1 percent) and believing (8.3 percent) the placebos, the "fake fake" news stories. In other words, as many people recalled seeing and believing fake news that had been published and distributed through social media as recalled seeing fake news that had never existed and was purely an invention of researchers.



Hillary Clinton on Sept. 11, 2016, the day she stumbled and needed help after a memorial ceremony. That news was real, but not all news surrounding the election was. (Eric Thayer for The New York Times)

That's a strong indication about what is going on with consumers of fake news. It may be less that false information from dubious news sources is shaping their view of the world. Rather, some people (about 8 percent of the adult population, if we take the survey data at face value) are willing to believe anything that sounds plausible and fits their preconceptions about the heroes and villains in politics.

"False remembering is incredibly correlated with people's priors," Mr. Gentzkow said. "One way to think about it is we know our memories are very imperfect. And if you ask me if I saw something, I'm partly asking myself how likely it is that I saw it. People are doing inference."

Mr. Allcott and Mr. Gentzkow do some math around how influential each fake news story would need to have been on people who read it to have meaningfully affected the election results. They conclude that a single news article would need to

have been as persuasive as 36 television campaign ads to have been the difference between a Trump victory or loss.

But there's a bigger, and perhaps more worrying, implication of this research. It suggests that the most straightforwardly fraudulent forms of fake news are a small part of what is shaping how people understand the world. People's hunger for information that suits their prejudices is powerful, and in the digital media age, a pile of it emerges to satisfy that demand.

White House Pushes 'Alternative Facts.' Here Are the Real Ones

By NICHOLAS FANDOS
January 22, 2017

WASHINGTON — KELLYANNE CONWAY, counselor to President Trump, said on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that the White House had put forth "alternative facts" to ones reported by the news media about the size of Mr. Trump's inauguration crowd.

She made this assertion — which quickly went viral on social media — a day after Mr. Trump and Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, had accused the news media of reporting falsehoods about the inauguration and Mr. Trump's relationship with the intelligence agencies.

In leveling this attack, the president and Mr. Spicer made a series of false statements.

Here are the facts.

In a speech at the C.I.A. on Saturday, Mr. Trump said the news media had constructed a feud between him and the intelligence community. "They sort of made it sound like I had a 'feud' with the intelligence community," he said. "It is exactly the opposite, and they understand that, too."

In fact, Mr. Trump repeatedly criticized the intelligence agencies during his transition to office and has questioned their conclusion that Russia meddled in the election to aid his candidacy. He called their assessment "ridiculous" and suggested that it had been politically motivated.

After the disclosure of a dossier with unsubstantiated claims about him, Mr. Trump alleged that the intelligence agencies had allowed a leak of the material. "Are we living in Nazi Germany?" he asked in a post on Twitter.

Intelligence agencies should never have allowed this fake news to "leak" into the public. One last shot at me.
Are we living in Nazi Germany?
7:48 AM - 11 Jan 2017

Mr. Trump said of his inauguration crowd, "It looked honestly like a million and

a half people, whatever it was, it was, but it went all the way back to the Washington Monument."

Aerial photographs clearly show that the crowd did not stretch to the Washington Monument. An analysis by The New York Times, comparing photographs from Friday to ones taken of Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration, showed that Mr. Trump's crowd was significantly smaller and less than the 1.5 million people he claimed. An expert hired by The Times found that Mr. Trump's crowd on the National Mall was about a third of the size of Mr. Obama's in 2009.

Mr. Trump said that though he had been "hit by a couple of drops" of rain as he began his address on Inauguration Day, the sky soon cleared. "And the truth is, it stopped immediately, and then became sunny," he said. "And I walked off, and it poured after I left. It poured."

The truth is that it began to rain lightly almost exactly as Mr. Trump began to speak and continued to do so throughout his remarks, which lasted about 18 minutes, and after he finished. Speaking later on Saturday in the White House briefing room, Mr. Spicer amplified Mr. Trump's false claims. "This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration — period — both in person and around the globe," he said.

There is no evidence to support this claim. Not only was Mr. Trump's inauguration crowd far smaller than Mr. Obama's in 2009, but he also drew fewer television viewers in the United States (30.6 million) than Mr. Obama did in 2009 (38 million) and Ronald Reagan did in 1981 (42 million), Nielsen reported. Figures for online viewership were not available.

Mr. Spicer said that Washington's Metro system had greater ridership on Friday than it did for Mr. Obama's 2013 inauguration. "We know that 420,000 people used the D.C. Metro public transit yesterday, which actually compares to 317,000 that used it for President Obama's last inaugural," Mr. Spicer said.

Neither number is correct, according to the transit system, which reported 570,557 entries into the rail system on Friday, compared with 782,000 on Inauguration Day in 2013.

Mr. Spicer said that "this was the first time in our nation's history that floor coverings have been used to protect the grass on the Mall. That had the effect of highlighting any areas where people were not standing, while in years past the grass eliminated this visual."

In fact, similar coverings were used during the 2013 inauguration to protect the grass. The coverings did not hamper analyses of the crowd size.

Mr. Spicer said that it was "the first time that fencing and magnetometers went as far back on the Mall, preventing hundreds of thousands of people from being able to access the Mall as quickly as they had in inaugurations past."

The Secret Service said security measures were largely unchanged this year. There were also few reports of long lines or delays.

Michael S. Schmidt contributed reporting.

Opinion: 'Alternative Facts' and the Cost of Trump-Branded Reality

By JIM RUTENBERG
January 22, 2017

WHEN DONALD J. TRUMP swore the presidential oath on Friday, he assumed responsibility not only for the levers of government but also for one of the United States' most valuable assets, battered though it may be: its credibility.

The country's sentimental reverence for truth and its jealously guarded press freedoms, while never perfect, have been as important to its global standing as the strength of its military and the reliability of its currency. It's the bedrock of that "American exceptionalism" we've heard so much about for so long.

Disinformation was for dictatorships, banana republics and failed states.

Yet there it was on Saturday, emanating from the lectern of the White House briefing room — the official microphone of the United States — as Mr. Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, used his first appearance there to put forth easily debunked statistics[1] that questioned the news media's reporting on the size of the president's inaugural audience (of all things).

Mr. Spicer was picking up on the message from his boss, who made false claims[2] about news coverage earlier that day as he declared a "running war" with the news media during a visit to the Central Intelligence Agency, whose most solemn duty is to feed vital and true information to presidents as they run actual wars.

It was chilling when Mr. Trump's assertion that reporters were "among the most dishonest people on earth" became an applause line for the crowd gathered to hear him speak in front of the memorial to fallen agents at C.I.A. headquarters.

Still more chilling was when the White House senior adviser Kellyanne Conway appeared on "Meet the Press" on Sunday to assert that Mr. Spicer's falsehoods were simply "alternative facts."

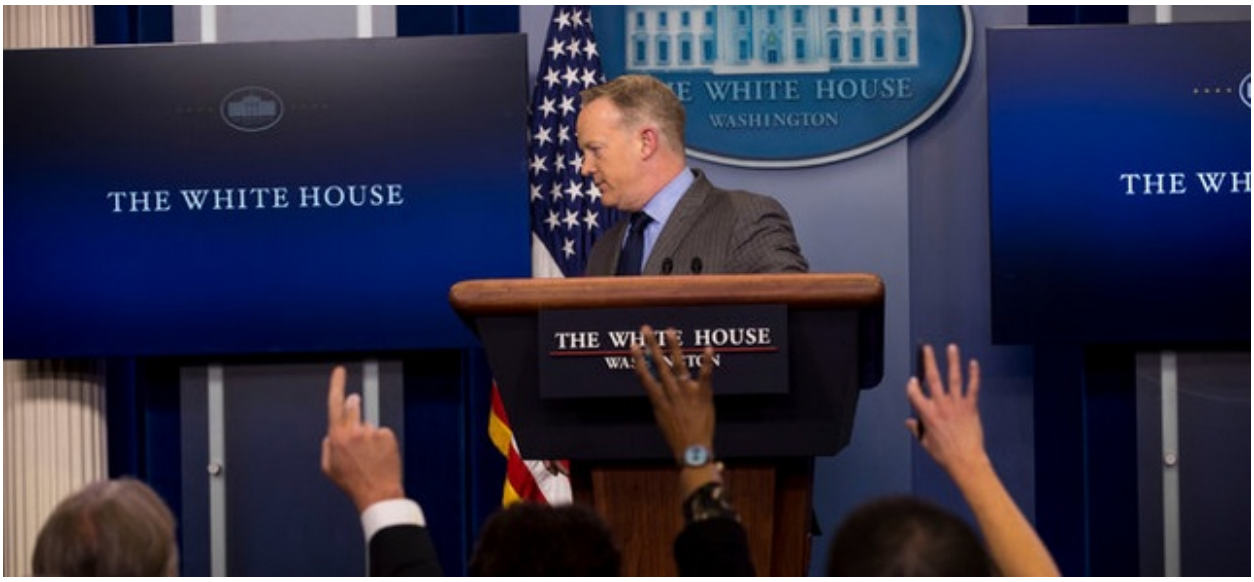
Ms. Conway made no bones about what she thought of the news media's ability to debunk those "alternative facts" in a way Americans — especially Trump-loving Americans — would believe.

"You want to talk provable facts?" she said to the moderator, Chuck Todd. "Look — you've got a 14 percent approval rating in the media, that you've earned. You want to push back on us?" (She appeared to be referring to a Gallup poll figure

related to Republicans' views.)

And really, there it was: an apparent animating principle of Mr. Trump's news media strategy since he first began campaigning. That strategy has consistently presumed that low public opinion of mainstream journalism (which Mr. Trump has been only too happy to help stoke) creates an opening to sell the Trump version of reality, no matter its adherence to the facts.

As Mr. Trump and his supporters regularly note, whatever he did during the campaign, it was successful: He won. His most ardent supporters loved the news media bashing. And the complaints and aggressive fact-checking by the news media played right into his hands. He portrayed it as just so much whining and opposition from yet another overprivileged constituency of the Washington establishment.



Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, leaving a briefing on Saturday. He used his first appearance to put forth easily debunked facts. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

But will tactics that worked in the campaign work in the White House? History is littered with examples of new administrations that quickly found that the techniques that served them well in campaigns did not work well in government.

And if they do work, what are the long-term costs to government credibility from tactical "wins" that are achieved through the aggressive use of falsehoods? Whatever they are, Mr. Trump should realize that it could hurt his agenda more than anything else.

There's a reason George W. Bush's adviser Karen Hughes told the newly promoted Bush press secretary, Scott McClellan, in 2003, "Your most important job, in my view, will be to make sure the president maintains his credibility with the American people."

"'It's one of his greatest strengths,'" Mr. McClellan quoted Ms. Hughes as saying in his autobiography, "What Happened."

Mr. McClellan's book chronicles how Mr. Bush staked that credibility on the false rationale for the Iraq invasion — that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction — and ultimately lost the confidence of Americans, hobbling him for the rest of his presidency.

But the damage wasn't isolated to Mr. Bush's political standing. To this day, the American intelligence community must contend with lingering questions about its own credibility — to wit, taunts from Moscow (not to mention from Mr. Trump) that assessments pointing to Russian meddling in the presidential election are questionable. After all, wasn't it wrong about Iraq?

There's a big difference in importance between the size of Mr. Trump's inaugural audience and the intelligence that led to war, no question. And, as the former Bush White House press secretary Ari Fleischer noted in a conversation with me on Sunday, it's way too early to say whether Mr. Spicer's weekend performance will be the norm.

The Trump team's emotions were raw over the weekend, Mr. Fleischer noted, after a mistaken pool report was sent to the rest of the White House press corps, claiming that Mr. Trump had removed a bust of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office. Zeke Miller, the Time magazine journalist who had written the report, quickly corrected it and apologized when the White House alerted him to the error.

"It rightly leaves the people inside feeling that 'reporters were opposed to us all along for being racist and the first thing they did was imply we were,'" Mr. Fleischer said.

Still, the weekend's events did not arrive in a vacuum. There was the report last week in The Washington Post that the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, known for high standards of accuracy, was selling a commemorative book about Mr. Trump riddled with questionable notions, such as that Hillary Clinton deserved more blame than Mr. Trump did for the so-called birther campaign questioning Mr. Obama's citizenship. (After that report, the museum said it was removing the book pending an investigation into whether it met standards for

accuracy.)

The administration's decision to eradicate nearly any reference to "climate change" on the White House website could be expected given Mr. Trump's promises to overturn his predecessors' climate policies. But it set off concerns among climate scientists that it would extend to valuable government data — fears that also apply to the sanctity of other administration-controlled data. (Mr. Fleischer, for one, noted that career bureaucrats would blow the whistle on any moves to manipulate government data.)

Then there is the central information center of any White House: the pressroom.

On Thursday, Jim Hoft, the founder of The Gateway Pundit, said the White House was giving his site an official press credential. The Gateway Pundit promoted hoaxes such as one alleging that protesters in Austin, Tex., were bused in by the liberal donor George Soros. (The originator of that story told The New York Times that his assertions were not supported by fact.)

The White House has not confirmed that it will credential Gateway Pundit, but Mr. Hoft's announcement stoked anxiety among traditional reporters that the new administration will pack the pressroom with sympathetic organizations willing to promote falsehoods — or, perhaps, "alternative facts." It's one thing if that creates a false feedback loop about the size of an inauguration crowd — and quite another if it does so about a more important national security matter, as the CNN chief national security correspondent, Jim Sciutto, said over the weekend.

Mr. McClellan, the Bush press secretary, warned in an interview with me on Sunday that Mr. Spicer might come to regret it if reporters started to doubt the veracity of what he told them.

"There will be tough times ahead — there are for every White House — and that's when that credibility and trust is most important," Mr. McClellan said. But more important, he said, when you're at the White House lectern, "you're speaking for the free world to some extent, and what ideals are you holding up for that free world?"

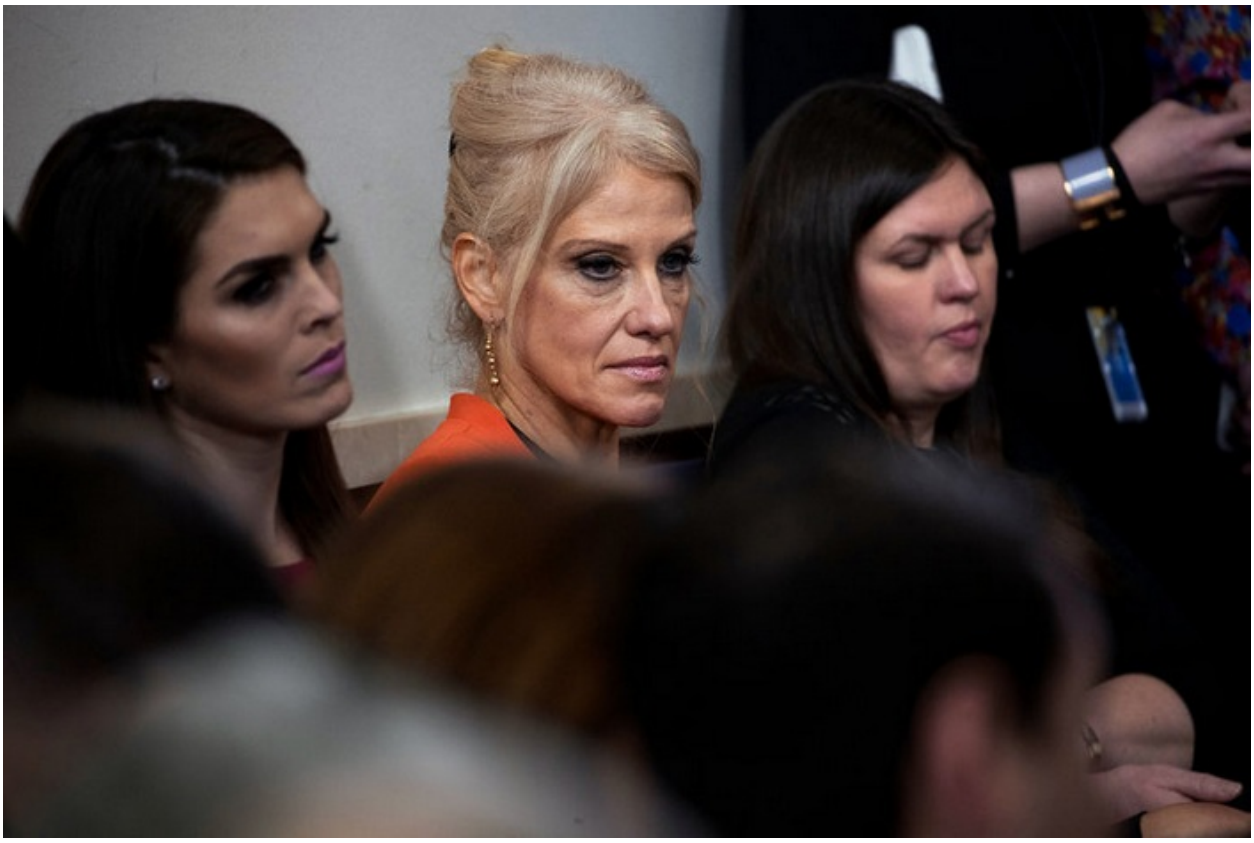
There's nothing exceptional about the ones that aren't true.

[1] Mr. Spicer said that 420,000 people had used Washington's Metro system on Friday and that 317,000 had used it on the day of Barack Obama's inauguration four years ago. Metro officials reported 570,557 subway system entries on Mr. Trump's Inauguration Day, compared with 782,000 on Mr. Obama's.

[2] Mr. Trump accused journalists of fabricating tensions between him and intelligence officials, but he repeatedly criticized them, at one point accusing them of

leaking information as “one last shot at me” and asking, “Are we living in Nazi Germany?”

News Analysis: In a Swirl of 'Untruths' and 'Falsehoods,' Calling a Lie a Lie



Kellyanne Conway, an adviser to President Trump, used the phrase "alternative facts" to describe assertions by the White House. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

By DAN BARRY
January 25, 2017

Words matter.

And from the moment he became president, Donald J. Trump has unleashed so many of consequence that the public has barely had time to parse their full implication. Words about the dishonest media, the end of Obamacare, the construction of that border wall with Mexico — this is an abbreviated list, and he hasn't even completed his first week in office.

Amid the verbal deluge, President Trump this week repeated an assertion he made shortly after his election: that millions of ballots cast illegally by undocumented

immigrants cost him the popular vote. If true, this would suggest the wholesale corruption of American democracy.

Not to worry: As far as anyone knows, the president's assertion is akin to saying that millions of unicorns also voted illegally.

But such a baseless statement by a president challenged the news media to find the precise words to describe it. This will be a recurring challenge, given President Trump's habit of speaking in sales-pitch hyperbole and his tendency to deride any less-than-flattering report as "fake news."

The words needed to be exactly right. "And the language has a rich vocabulary for describing statements that fall short of the truth," said Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information. "They're 'baseless,' they're 'bogus,' they're 'lies,' they're 'untruths.'"

Rarely are these words, each with its own nuance, applied directly to something said by a president, though others have also dissembled (like Bill Clinton on whether he had sex with an intern). "This is the very unique situation that we find ourselves in as journalists and as a country," said Joshua Benton, the director of the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University. "We have an administration that seems to be asserting a right to its own facts and doesn't seem to be able to produce evidence to back those claims."

Still, carefully chosen words can capture that. "A whole vocabulary has come bubbling up that would not have been used five years ago," Mr. Nunberg said in an interview. "People are going to have to sit down and decide: Are we going to want to go over the moral consequences of telling an untruth? The mere fact of it being untrue? Or the fact that it's bogus, baseless or groundless?"

Some news organizations used words like "falsely" or "wrongly" — adverbs that tend to weaken the impact — in framing what the president said. Some used "with no evidence," or "won't provide any proof," or "unverified claims," or "repeats debunked claim."

The New York Times, though, ultimately chose more muscular terminology, opting to use the word "lie" in the headline. After initially using the word "falsely," it switched to "lie" online and then settled on "Meeting With Top Lawmakers, Trump Repeats an Election Lie" for Tuesday's print edition.

People noticed, and debated its use. That is because, from the childhood schoolyard to the grave, this is a word neither used nor taken lightly. It stands apart from most other terms in the linguistic ballpark of untruths, including "falsehood," which Chuck Todd, the host of "Meet the Press," recently used to counter the

Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway's Orwellian phrase, "alternative facts."

To say that someone has "lied," an active verb, or has told a "lie," a more passive, distancing noun, is to say that the person intended to deceive. In addition, Mr. Nunberg said, "a certain moral opprobrium attaches to it, a reprehensibility of motive."

The question of intent has informed National Public Radio's approach to covering Mr. Trump's many disputable claims: that he saw thousands of people in Jersey City cheering as the World Trade Center collapsed on Sept. 11, for example, or that the news media had made up a feud between him and the country's intelligence agencies, despite his own tweets likening those agencies to Nazi Germany.

On NPR's "Morning Edition" on Wednesday, Mary Louise Kelly explained that she had looked up the definition of "lie" in the Oxford English Dictionary. "A false statement made with intent to deceive," Ms. Kelly said. "Intent being the key word there. Without the ability to peer into Donald Trump's head, I can't tell you what his intent was. I can tell you what he said and how that squares, or doesn't, with facts."

Michael Oreskes, NPR's senior president for news, supported the decision. In an article on the NPR website, Mr. Oreskes said that "the minute you start branding things with a word like 'lie,' you push people away from you." The inherent risk, he suggested, was that news organizations would be seen as taking sides.

Editors at The Times also consulted dictionaries. And they had some prior experience with the matter, having approved the use of the L word once before in reference to Mr. Trump.

In September, when he grandly announced the findings of a yearslong so-called investigation into what nearly everyone else never doubted — "President Obama was born in the United States, period" — The Times published a Page 1 article with the headline "Trump Gives Up a Lie but Refuses to Repent."

Dean Baquet, the executive editor of The Times, said that he learned of Mr. Trump's latest comments in a text message from an editor on Monday night. After consulting with other top editors, he decided that the use of "lie" was warranted.

For Mr. Baquet, the question of intent was resolved, given that Mr. Trump had made the same assertion two months earlier through his preferred mode of communication, the tweet: "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."

(Nota bene: The tweet actually contains what might be considered two untruths — or falsehoods, or erroneous assertions, or bogus claims — since Mr. Trump's victory was no landslide, but among the closer elections in American history.)

Mr. Baquet said he fully understood the gravity of using the word "lie," whether in reference to an average citizen or to the president of the United States. He emphasized that it should be used sparingly, partly because the term carries such negative connotations, and partly so that it does not lose potency.

"On the other hand, we should be letting people know in no uncertain terms that it's untrue," Mr. Baquet said, referring to the president's assertion of a voter-fraud epidemic. "He repeated it without a single grain of evidence, and it's a very powerful statement about the electoral system."

Mr. Baquet said that emails from readers seemed split on the appropriateness of the word's use. Meanwhile, Mr. Benton, of the Nieman Journalism Lab, applauded its use as a noun in the Times headline ("Trump Repeats an Election Lie"); in this construction, he said, "the lie can exist as a reality distinct from the speaker's intention."

Over all, the tension between the Trump administration and much of the mainstream media is — what's the word?

Troubling, according to Sara Brady, a crisis-communications specialist based in Florida. She says that a complete breakdown of the already fractious relationship affects everyone.

"The media run the risk of being disrespectful to the president of the United States," she said. "But the problem is: If he doesn't get called out in some way, we as Americans are never going to know what's true and what's not."

In other words: Words matter.

Kellyanne Conway Admits 'Bowling Green Massacre' Error

By JOE COSCARELLI
February 3, 2017

KELLYANNE CONWAY, THE ADVISER to President Trump who coined the phrase "alternative facts," is facing another round of criticism and fact-checking after she falsely spoke of a "Bowling Green massacre" by Iraqi refugees. She acknowledged and corrected her statement Friday morning on Twitter.

Ms. Conway made the comment during an appearance on MSNBC's "Hardball" on Thursday night as she discussed with the host, Chris Matthews, the executive order by Mr. Trump that suspended immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries.

"I bet it's brand new information to people that President Obama had a six-month ban on the Iraqi refugee program after two Iraqis came here to this country, were radicalized and were the masterminds behind the Bowling Green massacre," she said. "Most people don't know that because it didn't get covered."

In fact, no "Bowling Green massacre" ever happened.

Ms. Conway did not specify whether she meant an attack in Kentucky, Ohio or Downtown Manhattan, for that matter. But the closest circumstance to what she described occurred in Bowling Green, Ky., in late May 2011.

Two Iraqi citizens, Mohanad Shareef Hammadi and Waad Ramadan Alwan, were indicted on federal terrorism charges. According to a Justice Department news release from January 2013, the two men had attempted to send weapons and money to Al Qaeda in Iraq with the aim of killing American soldiers there.

Both defendants pleaded guilty to the federal charges, and Mr. Hammadi was sentenced to life in prison, while Mr. Alwan, whose fingerprints were found on an undetonated improvised explosive device in Iraq, was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison, with a life term of supervised release.

Assistant Attorney General Lisa Monaco said at the time, "These two former Iraqi insurgents participated in terrorist activities overseas and attempted to continue providing material support to terrorists while they lived here in the United States. With today's sentences, both men are being held accountable."

Not long after Ms. Conway's comments were debunked Thursday night, a clip of her interview went viral online, leading to ridicule and some humorous suggestions

as to what she could have been referring to (namely, sports).

On Friday morning, Ms. Conway admitted she had put out wrong information. "Honest mistakes abound," she wrote on Twitter — and pointed to missteps the news media had made in covering the Trump administration. As for her overshadowed assertion that President Barack Obama had instituted a six-month ban on the Iraqi refugee program after the Bowling Green arrests, that is not quite true either: While the Obama administration slowed the visa process, some Iraqi refugees were admitted to the United States in every month of 2011.

Ms. Conway did clarify that, yes, she had been referring to the case of Mr. Hammadi and Mr. Alwan, linking in a tweet to an ABC News article from November 2013. A clarification that undermined her claim that the story "didn't get covered."

It did.

Opinion: The Massacre That Wasn't, and a Turning Point for 'Fake News'

By JIM RUTENBERG
February 5, 2017

THERE WERE SO MANY instant internet spoofs making fun of Kellyanne Conway's now-famous "Bowling Green Massacre" that it's hard to pick a favorite. Gun to my head, I'd say mine was the Twitter meme that showed a brass plaque dedicated to the names of the poor souls left for dead on Bowling Green's grassy killing field. It was blank.

That's because there was no massacre there. No one died. No one even stubbed a toe. But there's a good chance you know that by now: that the supposed terrorist attack in Bowling Green, Ky., that Ms. Conway, a top presidential adviser, invoked on MSNBC last week to justify President Trump's contentious travel ban never happened. (And, no, the reason you had never heard of it was not because the Dishonest Media ignored the alleged carnage at the time of its non-happening, as Ms. Conway alleged.)

The very fact that you probably know all this means that the "Bowling Green Massacre" may go down in the record of the Trump presidency as the first break in the "fake news" clouds that have cast such gloom over our fair and once (relatively) true republic.

The same internet that enabled false stories to run unchecked through news feeds during the election year dispatched new white blood cells that attacked Ms. Conway's "alternate facts" with "true facts" (a redundant term that I guess we're stuck with for now). Their most effective attack was traditional reporting, in many cases from news organizations that have doubled down on fact-checking, joined by newfangled memes that accentuate the truth.

The Massacre That Wasn't showed that while Facebook, Google and Twitter take steps to combat nefarious hoaxes, they are already playing host to an organic correction movement led by ordinary users who are crowdsourcing reality.

It's early. Vigilance, and continuing improvements throughout the news business, remain necessary. But the tale of the "massacre" could be the start of something new.

Ms. Conway's mention of the supposed attack — she was trying to justify Mr. Trump's order that closed the border to citizens from seven predominately Muslim

countries — slipped past the MSNBC host interviewing her, Chris Matthews. The corrective story broke the way stories have broken since God invented newspapers: A guy walked into a bar.

In this case, the guy was Joe Sonka, a staff writer for the Insider Louisville website. He was having a beer at a bar called the Backdoor when "someone texted me that Conway said something insane," Mr. Sonka told me.

As a reporter — and onetime liberal blogger — in Kentucky for several years, Mr. Sonka knew what Ms. Conway seemed to be referring to when he went home to check it out. In 2011, the federal authorities arrested two Iraqi refugees who were later given prison sentences — one for life and one for 40 years — for plotting to send money and weapons to Al Qaeda in Iraq from their new homes in Bowling Green. The episode led to a slowdown in Iraqi immigration as the Obama administration reworked vetting procedures.

The authorities never charged the men — one of whose fingerprints turned up on a roadside bomb in Iraq — with planning an attack on American soil.

So at 9:34 p.m. on Thursday, Mr. Sonka wrote on Twitter: "@KellyannePolls says that 2 Iraqi refugees 'were the masterminds behind the Bowling Green massacre.' (There was no such massacre.)"

It made like a Trump tweet and roared through the broader news media sphere.

"That tweet got 2.4 million impressions," Mr. Sonka said. "Pretty crazy."

There was fast follow-up by Vox, The Washington Post, CNN and Fox News (among many others); on conservative websites including Newsmax and Breitbart; and, finally, in multiple references on "Saturday Night Live" — the ultimate sign that something has truly broken through.

In the end, social media and journalistic scrutiny aligned with comedy to right a wrong pretty definitively. That it happened so organically showed that false "facts" might not always be the stubborn things so many people fear they are becoming.

To understand how deep those fears go, just look at how "1984," by George Orwell, has climbed up the best-seller lists nearly 70 years after its debut. A "1984" stage adaptation is even heading to Broadway. (How about a Hamiltonesque musical: "2 and 2 make 5? Don't give me that jive!")

As the New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani put it recently, Orwell's classic seems "all too familiar," capturing "a world in which the government insists that reality is not 'something objective, external, existing in its own right.'"

Mr. Trump renews those fears every time he taps out social media messages like one he posted on Facebook on Thursday complimenting an article about a "Trump-

esque" travel ban Kuwait was imposing on five nearby countries. As it happens, this was untrue, as even Sputnik International, the Russian state-supported news service that helped promote the story, acknowledged.

Then there are the regular Trump Tweets calling CNN or The Times "fake news."

The Bowling Green episode made such a splash because it played directly into concerns that the Trump administration would use untrue assertions to rally support for its agenda while denigrating as "dishonest" all the valid reporting pointing out the falsehoods.

But even before the Bowling Green story fell apart so spectacularly, there were signs that what had worked well during the presidential campaign last year might not succeed when it comes to the real-world work of government.

All the accusations of "fake news" and "dishonest media" couldn't erase images of crying relatives stranded at airports — or the reporting on the legal questions surrounding Mr. Trump's immigration order that led a judge to temporarily suspend it.

No one in the administration could disappear the readouts from the president's tense call with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of Australia leaked to The Washington Post. Nor could they reverse the effects of the reporting, some of it in The Times, about the potential business conflicts of his Army secretary nominee, Vincent Viola, who withdrew his name Friday night because of them.

Ditto for the blowback over the whole Bowling Green yarn. Ms. Conway went on to admit her error, first on Twitter (where else?) and later in an interview with Howard Kurtz of Fox News, saying it was overblown because "I misspoke one word." (By that, she meant, apparently, that she should have said "Bowling Green terrorists" rather than "Bowling Green massacre.")

And Ms. Conway was right when she wrote that "honest mistakes abound."

After all, The Washington Post admitted over the weekend that several details in a column about internal White House strife over the president's executive order on immigration were in dispute. A few days before that, WJBK-TV of Detroit walked back a report about a woman who died in Iraq supposedly after Mr. Trump's new policy blocked her entry to the United States.

Yet by the end of the weekend, it was Ms. Conway's credibility that was receiving the most scrutiny (which she described as unfair and coming from "a lot of the haters" in her interview with Mr. Kurtz).

Some, like the New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen, were calling

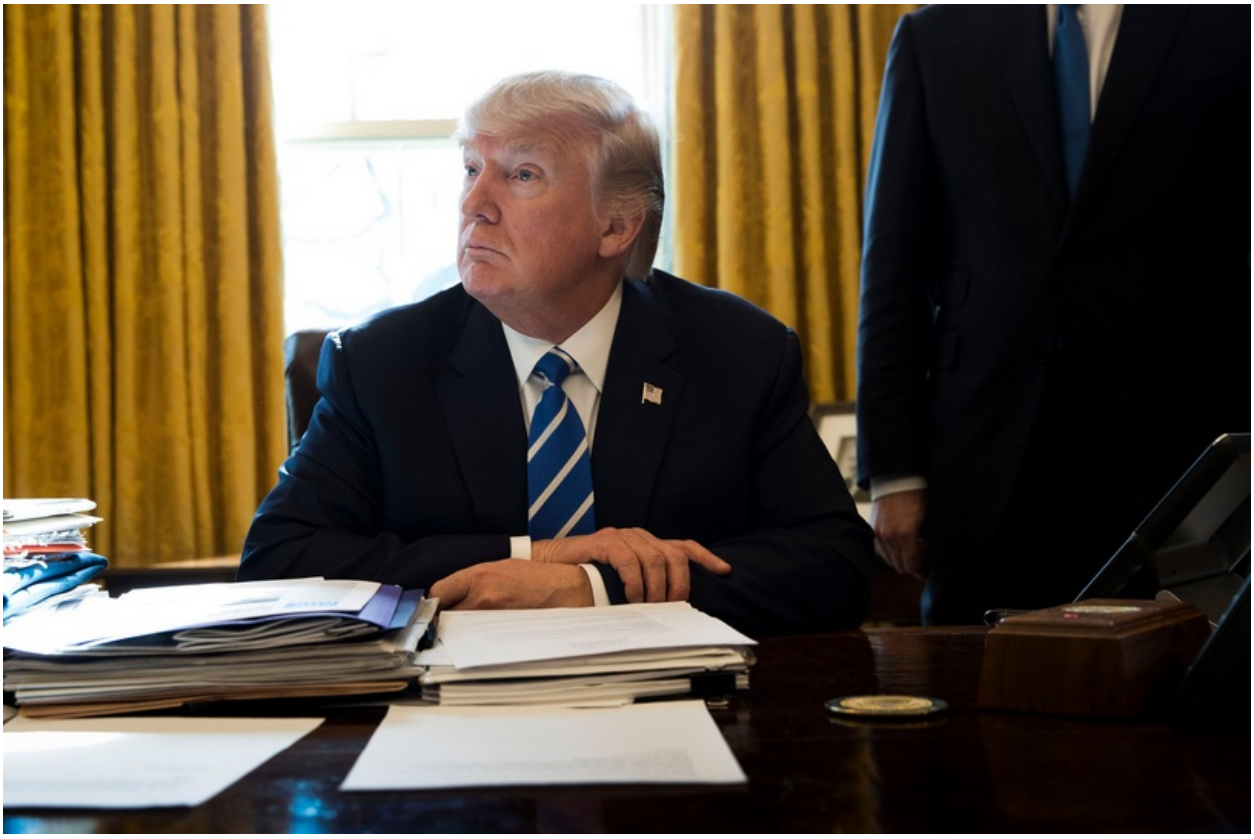
upon the television networks to stop booking her. And CNN declined to have her as a guest on Sunday — in part because the Trump administration offered her in lieu of Vice President Mike Pence, but also because of what the network told me were "serious questions about her credibility."

It would be a positive development if Ms. Conway embraced the idea that the term "honest mistakes" can apply to reporters, too, as it would be if everybody — including journalists — doubly committed to getting the facts right, without hysteria or misfires. Too optimistic?

Well, if you had asked me a few days ago what I was planning to write about, I wouldn't have said it would involve praising Twitter for keeping the national debate reality-based — and fun.

Eventually, the Bowling Green memes led to mock street memorials with signs like "Never Remember." They had made it IRL, or "In Real Life," which, the new administration is learning, has a way of sneaking up on you.

Opinion: Am I Imagining This?



President Trump in the Oval Office this week. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

By ROGER COHEN
February 10, 2017

FACT-BASED JOURNALISM IS A ridiculous, tautological phrase. It's like talking about oxygen-based human life. There is no other kind. Facts are journalism's foundation; the pursuit of them, without fear or favor, is its main objective.

But in this time of President Trump's almost daily "fake news" accusations against The New York Times, and of his counselor Kellyanne Conway's "alternative facts," and of untruths seeping like a plague from the highest office in the land, there's increasing talk of "real" or "fact-based" journalism.

That's ominous. Fact-based as opposed to what other type? To state the obvious, fake news websites fed by kids in Macedonia to make a buck are not journalism. These sites use fabricated stuff in journalism's garb to further political ends.

There's a targeted "Gaslight" attack on journalists designed to make them doubt their sanity. It's emanating from the White House and aims to drag everyone down the rabbit hole where 2+2=5.

Velocity trumps veracity. That is the puzzle and the menace of our age.

Speed and disruption have more psychological impact than truth and science. They shape the discourse. The debunking of a fake news story is seldom as powerful as the story itself. Trump says "X." Uproar! Hordes of journalists scurry to disprove "X." He moves on, never to mention it again, or claims that he did not say it, or insists that what he really said was "Y."

People begin to wonder: Am I imagining this? They feel that some infernal mechanism has taken hold and is dragging them toward an abyss. The president is a reference point; if he lies, lying seeps deep into the culture. Americans start to ask: Will we ever be able to dislodge these people from power? What are they capable of?

Simon Schama, the British historian, recently tweeted: "Indifference about the distinction between truth and lies is the precondition of fascism. When truth perishes so does freedom."

The enormity of the defiling of the White House in just three weeks is staggering. For decades the world's security was undergirded by America's word. The words that issued from the Oval Office were solemn. It was on America's word, as expressed by the president, that the European continent and allies like Japan built their postwar security.

Now the words that fall from Trump's pursed lips or, often misspelled, onto his Twitter feed are trite or false or meaningless. He's angry with Nordstrom, for heaven's sake, because the department store chain dropped his daughter Ivanka's clothing line! This is the concern of the leader of the free world.

Unpresidented!

I was struck by how Paul Horner, who runs a big Facebook fake-news operation, described our times in The Washington Post: "Honestly people are definitely dumber. They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore — I mean, that's how Trump got elected. He just said whatever he wanted, and people believed everything, and when the things he said turned out not to be true, people didn't care because they'd already accepted it. It's real scary. I've never seen anything like it."

We've never seen anything like it because when hundreds of millions of Americans are connected, anyone, clueless or not, can disseminate what they like with a click.

Horner came up, during the campaign, with the fake news story that a protester at a Trump rally had been paid $3,500. It went viral. We've had fake news accounts of how Hillary Clinton paid $62 million to Beyoncé and Jay Z to perform in Cleveland, and how Khizr Khan, the father of the Muslim American officer killed in Iraq, was an agent of the Muslim Brotherhood. Fake news — BREAKING! SHOCKING! — swayed the election.

Now we have President Trump suggesting that the real fake news is his negative polls — along with CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post and any other news organizations that are doing their jobs: holding his authority to account and bearing witness to his acts. Stephen Bannon, Trump's man of the shadows, thinks the media should "keep its mouth shut." We won't.

Sometimes I try to imagine what Trump's Reichstag fire moment might be. In February 1933, a few weeks after Hitler became chancellor, fire engulfed the parliament in Berlin — an act of arson whose origin is still unclear. A recent New Yorker article by George Prochnik quoted the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig on Hitler's savage reaction: "At one blow all of justice in Germany was smashed."

From a president who loathes the press, who insults the judiciary, who has no time for American ideals of liberty or democracy, and whose predilection for violence is evident, what would be the reaction to a Reichstag fire in American guise — say a major act of terrorism?

We can only shudder at the thought.

Facts matter. The federal judiciary is pushing back. The administration is leaking. Journalism (no qualifier needed) has never been more important. Truth has not yet perished, but to deny that it is under siege would be to invite disaster.

20th Century Fox Used Fake News to Publicize 'A Cure for Wellness'

By LIAM STACK
February 15, 2017

MAKING THE MOST OF the fractured political and media landscape, 20th Century Fox created a group of fake news sites as part of a viral marketing campaign for its new film "A Cure for Wellness." The sites displayed ads for the movie and slipped references to its plot alongside made-up stories about divisive topics like abortion, vaccines and President Trump.

Fox used at least five fake news sites designed to look like local news media — The Sacramento Dispatch, Salt Lake City Guardian, Houston Leader, NY Morning Post and Indianapolis Gazette — to stir online outrage and drum up interest in the movie, which was produced by New Regency Productions and is to come out this week.

It used other fake sites to promote the film as well, including one designed to resemble HealthCare.Gov and another for a fake bottled water company. Regency Enterprises and 20th Century Fox acknowledged their role in the fake news operation in a statement on Tuesday.

"A Cure for Wellness is a movie about a 'fake' cure that makes people sicker," the statement said. "As part of this campaign, a 'fake' wellness site, healthandwellness.co, was created and we partnered with a fake news creator to publish fake news."

A Fox spokeswoman, Daria Vogel, declined to answer follow-up questions on Tuesday, including whether the companies were using any other fake news sites to promote their film or whether they had used similar methods to promote movies in the past. The company is owned by Fox Entertainment Group, which also owns Fox News Channel and Fox Business Network.

"A Cure for Wellness" was directed by Gore Verbinski and stars Dane DeHaan and Jason Isaacs, who in the past have both made jokes online about the phenomenon of fake news. The film opens on Friday and has received mostly negative reviews. One critic, Joe Dziemianowicz of The Daily News, described its plot as "preposterous gothic nonsense."

The five sites known to be part of the fake news campaign were taken down after the story was reported by BuzzFeed News on Tuesday. Users who entered their

URLs were redirected to the film's official website, but archived versions of some of their articles remained available online.

The stories they published hit the viral sweet spot that has made fake news such an online force, even though most of them were not related to the movie. Some were shared thousands of times on social media by users who appeared to believe that they were factual news stories, and others were reposted by partisan websites like Red State Watcher.

A partial list of headlines published by the movie studio's campaign:

- "Utah Senator Introduces Bill to Jail, Publicly Shame Women Who Receive Abortions"
- "BOMBSHELL: Trump and Putin Spotted at Swiss Resort Prior to Election"
- "LEAKED: Lady Gaga Halftime Performance to Feature Muslim Tribute"
- "Trump Refuses to Provide California Federal Support in Midst of Natural Disaster, Cites Sanctuary Cities"
- "California Legislature to Consider Tax Rebates for Women Who Get Abortions"

Lynn Walsh, the president of the Society of Professional Journalists, said in an email that corporations had a responsibility to engage in "the ethical and responsible sharing of information no matter the intent or purpose."

"In this country, we have the right to speak and publish information freely, and that's a good thing," Ms. Walsh said. "But if someone or a company is publishing incorrect information and trying to make it pass as actual news, we think that content should be properly labeled and very explicit that it is not true and does not contain actual facts."

Those are guidelines that 20th Century Fox and New Regency Productions did not follow.

"This absolutely crosses the line," added Bonnie Patten, the executive director of the consumer watchdog TruthinAdvertising.org. "Using a fake news site to lure consumers into buying movie tickets is basically a form of deceptive marketing."

One story published as part of their campaign claimed that Mr. Trump had issued a 90-day ban on the vaccine for the measles, mumps and rubella. The report was published on The Houston Leader and debunked by the fact-checking website Snopes, which called the site "one of a series of fake news sites that masquerade as real news sites by emulating the appearance of big-city newspapers."

Another story falsely reported that the American Medical Association had recognized a form of Trump-related anxiety or depression, "Trump Depression

Disorder," that it claimed affected one third of the country. It urged readers "to tweet #cureforwellness to raise awareness of the growing epidemic."

Some of the film's fake marketing websites remained active on Tuesday night, including the health and wellness website and the website for the fake bottled water company, which claimed to source its product from a Swiss village (that does not exist). The website designed to resemble HealthCare.gov (it is called HealthCureGov.com) also remained active.

Ms. Vogel, the Fox spokeswoman, declined to explain why those websites had not been disabled. A phone call to the purported office of healthandwellness.co went unanswered, and emails to six people listed as its "managing editors" bounced back as undeliverable.

Sapna Maheshwari contributed reporting.

Europe Combats a New Foe of Political Stability: Fake News

By MARK SCOTT and MELISSA EDDY
February 20, 2017

BRUSSELS — THEY SCAN websites and pore over social media, combing through hundreds of reports a day. But the bogus claims just keep coming.

Germans are fleeing their country, fearful of Muslim refugees. The Swedish government supports the Islamic State. The European Union has drafted rules to regulate the ethnicity of snowmen.

In their open-plan office overlooking a major thoroughfare in Brussels, an 11-person team known as East Stratcom serves as Europe's front line against this onslaught of fake news.

Created by the European Union to address "Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns," the team — composed of diplomats, bureaucrats and former journalists — tracks down reports to determine whether they are fake. Then, it debunks the stories for hapless readers. In the 16 months since the team has been on the job, it has discredited 2,500 stories, many with links to Russia.

In a year when the French, Germans and Dutch will elect leaders, the European authorities are scrambling to counter a rising tide of fake news and anti-European Union propaganda aimed at destabilizing people's trust in institutions.

As officials play catch-up in the fight against sophisticated hacking and fake news operations, they fear Europe and its elections remain vulnerable at a critical moment: The region's decades-old project of unity hangs in the balance, challenged by populist forces within the bloc and pressures from Russia and beyond.

"If you look at how European media, and even big American media, are covering the issue now, I would say that it is those few people on that team who have been able to raise awareness," said Jakub Janda, a deputy director with European Values, a think tank based in Prague, who has worked with East Stratcom.

Many false claims target politicians who present the biggest obstacles to Moscow's goal of undermining the European Union. Others seek to portray refugees from the Middle East as terrorists or rapists, fomenting populist anger.

In France, the head of the En Marche! party said last week that Russian news channels had targeted the presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron, who belongs to

the party and is running on a pro-European Union platform. Richard Ferrand, the party's secretary-general, said the campaign's databases and websites had been hit by "hundreds, if not thousands," of attacks from inside Russia.

The East Stratcom team is the first to admit that it is outgunned: The task is overwhelming, the volume of reports immense, the support to combat them scant.

The team tries to debunk bogus items in real time on Facebook and Twitter and publishes daily reports and a weekly newsletter on fake stories to its more than 12,000 followers on social media.

But its list of 2,500 fake reports is small compared with the daily churn across social media. Catching every fake news story would be nearly impossible, and the fake reports the team does combat routinely get a lot more viewers than its myth-busting efforts.

East Stratcom is purely a communications exercise. Still, team members, most of whom speak Russian, have received death threats, and a Czech member of the team has twice been accused on Russian television of espionage.

The team in Brussels is not the only force in Europe fighting the problem. Similar groups are being created from Finland to the Czech Republic to disprove online hoaxes, state agencies are improving online security to counter potential hacking attacks and European news media outlets are expanding fact-checking teams to counter false reports.

One of the biggest problems policy makers across Europe say they face is a lack of tech specialists. Germany recently passed a cybersecurity law that called for a rapid response team to combat hacking attacks. Officials quietly acknowledged, though, that they would need three teams, if they could only find people to staff them.

"There are concerns shared by many governments that fake news could become weaponized," said Damian Collins, a British politician in charge of a new parliamentary investigation examining the phenomenon. "The spread of this type of material could eventually undermine our democratic institutions."

Despite the regionwide push to counter false reports, experts question whether such fact-checking efforts by governments and publishers will have a meaningful effect. Fake reports can easily be shared through social media with few, if any, checks for accuracy.

"Most people just don't care about where their news comes from," said Mark Deuze, a professor at the University of Amsterdam. He added that "nep news," Dutch for "fake news," has been growing ahead of the country's national elections next month. "People are exposed to a ridiculous amount of information online."

Officials are also anxious about hackers' attempts to infiltrate the email accounts of candidates and politicians to steal compromising information.

Much like their American counterparts, security experts warn, European politicians remain highly vulnerable, though national intelligence agencies are now strengthening lawmakers' security protocols.

In Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel is facing tough competition ahead of elections in September, the country's domestic intelligence service already has reported a sharp rise in so-called phishing attacks in recent months aimed at political parties and members of the country's Parliament.

They attribute these efforts to the hacking group known as Fancy Bear, or APT 28, which American intelligence agencies linked to the hacking of the Democratic National Committee before the presidential election. Both American and German intelligence officials believe the group is operated by the G.R.U., the Russian military intelligence service.

The German government is weighing potential hefty fines for tech giants like Google and Facebook, whose platforms allow false stories to be quickly circulated. The companies insist that they cannot be held responsible because they do not generate the stories.

Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence service, said that although there was no "smoking gun," Russia was likely to be involved in the increase in online misinformation aimed at destabilizing German politics.

"What makes cyberattacks so sexy for foreign powers is that it is nearly impossible to find a smoking gun," Mr. Maassen said in an interview with Phoenix TV Feb. 12. "It is always possible to cover your tracks and operate undercover."

American tech giants also have stepped in after they were accused of not doing enough to counter false reports on their platforms, accusations that Facebook, Google and other companies deny. They are now funding initiatives in the United States, France and elsewhere to flag fake news online and remove posts if they are found to violate companies' terms of use or local laws.

"This isn't just about debunking falsehoods," said Jenni Sargent, the managing director of First Draft News, a nonprofit that is partly funded by Google and expanding rapidly in France ahead of the country's elections, as well as across Europe and beyond. "What we're trying to do is to deal with the content as opposed to the source."

Such efforts across Europe have gained momentum since the United States' presidential election.

Soon after Donald J. Trump's victory in November, David Alandete gathered his team in the El País newsroom in downtown Madrid with one goal in mind: to respond to fake news.

Like many journalists, Mr. Alandete, the Spanish newspaper's managing editor and a former United States correspondent, had seen waves of false reports during the presidential campaign, many directed at Mexico — a country that accounts for roughly half of El País' online readership.

"Trump winning was a major turning point for us," Mr. Alandete said. "Many of our readers were asking whether they could even travel to the States."

Populist parties and distrust of traditional news media outlets have been growing in Spain, like other cash-strapped European countries. Such movements have spurred an explosion of fake or misleading news, aimed at either promoting certain political views or undermining others' credibility.

To counter such reports — and, in part, to cater to its Mexican readers — El País began expanding its fact-checking efforts late last year. That includes assigning five more reporters to debunk false reports online and starting a blog, called "Hechos," or "facts" in Spanish, to dispel the worst offenders.

Not all of El País's myth-busting targets, though, have been about politics.

In its first blog post, published last month, the newspaper's reporters reviewed false claims that the Portuguese soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo had abandoned his sports car after hurting one of his hands while driving. The post, according to Mr. Alandete, was viewed more than 200,000 times — making it one of El País's most-read online articles that week.

"Many people don't trust institutions anymore," Mr. Alandete said. "We see fake news coming from everywhere."