TOPIC GUIDE: FILTERING FALSE NEWS (GERMANY EDITION)

"SOCIAL MEDIA SITES SHOULD FILTER OUT FAKE NEWS STORIES"

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2016, Donald Trump stunned the world when he defeated Democratic rival Hillary Clinton to become the 45th president of the USA. In the aftermath of the result, attempting to explain what seemed like such an upset, BuzzFeed News released a report claiming that fake or hoax news stories with headlines such as 'The pope loves Trump' outperformed legitimate stories in the final months of campaigning [Ref: **BuzzFeed**]. Thus, some commentators have claimed that untrue stories had persuaded undecided voters to vote for Trump [Ref: **Independent**], and highlighted a broader problem facing Western democracy after the Brexit vote: that we have entered an era of 'post-truth' politics [Ref: **New Statesman**]. Yet rather strangely, the German election seemed unaffected [Ref: **Reuters**]. Many see the proliferation of social media sites in the past 10 years as a key component of the problem. Thanks to instant 'likes' and 'shares', once a story is discovered to be fake or untrue, the damage is often already done. As a result, these critics argue that social media sites need to make a more concerted effort to police content and filter out stories that are untrue for the democratic good [Ref: **Guardian**]. However, others claim that the panic over fake news is just a ploy to shut down free speech, with one commentator arguing that applying pressure to companies like Facebook to take down certain types of news is the first step on the slippery slope toward regulating online debate [Ref: **Telegraph**]. In some quarters, the fake news panic is seen as more evidence of the mainstream media failing to do its job of objectively searching for truth, and claim that the electorate are smart enough to decide for themselves what to believe, without news being filtered out online [Ref: **spiked**]. Does fake news online pose any serious threat to the nature of our discourse, or should we trust people to figure out what is and isn't true? Should social media sites filter out fake news stories?

For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

Policing social media?

BuzzFeed claims that the 20 top-performing false election stories from 'hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs' generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions and comments on Facebook in the final three months of the US election campaign, compared to 7,367,000 shares, reactions and comments for the 20 top-performing election stories from 19 major news outlets [Ref: **BuzzFeed**]. Further investigation showed that many of the fabricated stories came from surprising sources: non-partisan teens in Macedonia looking to profit financially [Ref: **BuzzFeed**], as well as politically motivated members of what has been dubbed the 'alt-right', and online messaging boards such as 4chan and 8chan [Ref: **Guardian**]. In the context of a Pew Research report highlighting that 62 per cent of American adults get the majority of their news from social media sites [Ref: **Tech Crunch**], Barack Obama expressed concern that, 'if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems' [Ref: **Guardian**]. And for critics, 'Fake news is an assault on truth' [Ref: **BBC News**], as it interferes with the ability of the public to seriously engage with political discourse, because: 'With facts passé, the next inexorable move is to reduce all news to the same level of distrust and disbelief. If nothing is true, then everything can be false.' [Ref: **Washington Post**] In January 2018, Germany introduced a law that requires social media companies to remove fake news from their platforms within 24 hours of being flagged or face fines up to €50 million [Ref: **Axios**] Whilst few would argue that Macedonian teenagers creating false news stories is a good thing in and of itself, some are concerned that attempts to police social media content will lead to an attack on outlets simply because they do not agree with the mainstream media, thus stifling any dissenting voices and limiting free speech [Ref: **New American**]. Angela Epstein opines in the Telegraph that policing social media because it influences people in a certain way is risky: 'What is at stake is free speech. To regulate is take the first step on the clichéd slippery slope to totalitarian control of online debate.' [Ref: **Telegraph**] This idea was evident in a list of fake news sites compiled by Melissa Zimdars, an assistant professor of communication at Merrimack College, which included sites such as *Breitbart, the Huffington Post and InfoWars* [Ref: **Los Angeles Times**]. As such, critics ask who at Facebook, or other social media sites will decide what is 'true' (and allowed to be read) and what isn't [Ref: **Telegraph**]?

A failing of social media or mainstream media?

Critics suggest that the fake news controversy post-Brexit and the US election, is the culmination of longer-standing neglect on the part of social media. They argue that Facebook in particular, has simultaneously taken credit for its role in enabling friction-free conversation for pro-democracy movements across the globe, and yet denied any moral responsibility for its role in distributing misinformation, which has contributed to a 'poisoning' of democracy [Ref: **Guardian**]. Moreover, it is suggested that social media, unlike mainstream media resources such as newspapers, has no gatekeeper to protect objectivity, and separate news from opinion. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that false stories can create a much larger impact than they would have in the past, due to the interconnectivity that the internet provides [Ref: **Guardian**]. Yet, others counter that the crisis of objectivity is a much broader problem, and the mainstream media are not free from blame either. 'It is the Western World's own abandonment of objectivity, and loss of legitimacy in the eyes of its populace, that has nurtured something of a free for all on the facts and news front' as one commentator observes [Ref: **spiked**]. Furthermore, for the past two decades, Western news reporting has openly called into question its own definitiveness, declaring objectivity undesirable and instead offered its increasingly technical or emotional take on what might, or might not, have happened [Ref: **The Week**]. These critics note that in the wake of fake news, it is more important than ever that traditional media plays its part in winning the battle of ideas, and helping people make political decisions [Ref: **The Times**].

Making up our minds

'What we are now calling fake news – misinformation that people fall for – is nothing new' [Ref: **New Yorker**] according to writer Nicholas Lemann. For example, religious authorities in the 15th century worried that the invention of the printing press would lead to heresy warping the minds of the public [Ref: **spiked**], and some argue that: 'fake news and viral conspiracy theories have been with us since the dawn of time, and fake email chains went viral long before Mark Zuckerberg got his first dial-up line, let alone started Facebook' [Ref: **The Week**]. If this is the case, why is fake news so contentious now? One answer, posited by some, is that the fake news debate is simply an expression of a paternalistic and censorious attitude towards the public, with the proliferation of news on the internet not the negative it is said to be by critics, due to the fact that 'it implicitly calls on the citizen to use his own mental and moral muscles, to confront the numerous different versions of the world offered to him, and decide which one sounds most right.rsquo; [Ref: **spiked**]. Despite this, others disagree, highlighting the fact that the technology behind social media is something entirely new, making fake news on social media a completely novel and distinct problem. The algorithms that generate social media newsfeeds for example, are produced by people who think they know, and often do know, the kind of things we like - and direct this content to us [Ref: **New Yorker**]. For critics of fake news, this can create enclaves of like-minded people, turning social media into a mechanism for distributing propaganda to the audiences most likely to believe it [Ref: **New Yorker**]. With everything considered, is the panic surrounding fake news simply the response of an elite reeling at undesirable democratic decisions, or is it a genuine threat to reasoned debate? Should social media sites filter out fake news stories, or are attempts to do so censorship? And ultimately, in the digital age, can the public be trusted to decipher the real from the fake?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

In light of fake news and advocacy journalism, we must be savvy news consumers
Larry Atkins **Huffington Post** 6 December 2016

This analysis shows how fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook
Craig Silverman **BuzzFeed** 16 November 2016

FOR

Fake news is changing the way we see the world. We have to face up to what that means
Tom Watson MP **Independent** 22 November 2016

Obama is worried about fake news on social media – and we should be too
Nicky Woolf **Guardian** 20 November 2016

How fake news goes viral: a case study
Sapna Maheshwari **New York Times** 20 November 2016

Click and elect: how fake news helped Donald Trump win a real election
Hannah Jane Parkinson **Guardian** 14 November 2016

AGAINST

The crushing anxiety behind the media's fake news hysteria
Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry **The Week** 12 December 2016

War on fake news part of a war on free speech
Ron Paul **New American** 12 December 2016

Fake news and post-truth: the handmaidens of Western relativism

Brendan O'Neill **spiked** 25 November 2016

The panic over fake news on Facebook is just the latest liberal ploy to shut down free speech [↗]
Angela Epstein **Telegraph** 18 November 2016

IN DEPTH

Russia has launched a fake news war on Europe. Now Germany is fighting back [↗]
Simon Shuster *TIME* 9 August 2017

Algorithms can help stomp out fake news [↗]
Kaveh Waddell **Atlantic** 7 December 2016

Solving the problem of fake news [↗]
Nicholas Lehmann **New Yorker** 30 November 2016

The real problem behind fake news [↗]
Will Oremus **Slate** 15 November 2016

KEY TERMS

Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.

Alt-right [↗]

Post-truth politics [↗]

BACKGROUNDERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

Ahead of election, Germany seeks fake news antidote [↗]
Mark Scott *Politico* 31 August 2017

Fake news: too important to ignore [↗]
Amol Rajan **BBC News** 16 January 2017

Why in the post-truth age, the bullshitters are winning [↗]
Laurie Penny **New Statesman** 6 January 2017

The fake news scare is itself, fake news [↗]
Jordan Shapiro **Forbes** 26 December 2016

Fake news – why people believe it and what can be done to counter it [↗]
Simeon Yates **The Conversation** 13 December 2016

When all news is fake, whom do we trust? [↗]
Ruth Marcus Watson **Washington Post** 12 December 2016

Why the fake news debate gets it wrong [↗]
Steven Rosenbaum **Forbes** 12 December 2016

Trump supporters say fake news is just as big of a problem on the left [↗]
Stephanie McNeal **BuzzFeed** 7 December 2016

Fake news an insidious trend that's fast becoming a global problem [↗]
Kate Connolly, Angelique Chrisafis, Poppy McPherson et al **Guardian** 2 December 2016

Three ways Facebook could reduce fake news without censorship [↗]
Jennifer Stromer-Galley **The Conversation** 2 December 2016

Here's the truth: fake news is not social media's fault [↗]
Roy Greenslade **Guardian** 23 November 2016

How to report fake news to social media [↗]

BBC News 22 November 2016

For the new yellow journalists opportunity comes in clicks and bucks 🔗
Terrence McCoy **Washington Post** 20 November 2016

The failure of Facebook democracy 🔗
Nathan Heller *New Yorker* 18 November 2016

As fake news takes over Facebook feeds, many are taking satire as fact 🔗
Nicky Woolf **Guardian** 17 November 2016

'Post-truth' named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries 🔗
Guardian 15 November 2016

Real News 🔗
The Times 15 November 2016

Facebook's failure: did fake news and polarized politics get Trump elected? 🔗
Olivia Solon **Guardian** 10 November 2016

ORGANISATIONS

Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

German study shows fake news appetite with far-right blog 🔗
BBC News 1 August 2017

Merkel backs German law to stop fake news 🔗
Alayna Treene & Sara Fischer **Axios** 6 April 2017

Facebook, Twitter and Google could face 'fake news' questions from MPs 🔗
Sky News 15 January 2017

Facebook to roll out fake news tools in Germany 🔗
BBC News 15 January 2017

Conspirator in chief: 14 fake news stories created or publicized by Donald Trump 🔗
Salon 14 January 2017

'You are fake news': Trump attacks CNN and BuzzFeed at press conference 🔗
Guardian 11 January 2017

Germany, France begin legal fight against fake news 🔗
Sara Fischer **Axios** 4 January 2017

Edward Snowden: fight fake news with truth, not censorship 🔗
Newsweek 13 December 2016

John McDonnell says inquiries into fake news are an 'assault' on independent media 🔗
BuzzFeed 10 December 2016

"Lives are at risk" Hillary Clinton warns against fake news 🔗
TIME 8 December 2016

Pope Francis compares fake news consumption to eating faeces 🔗
Guardian 7 December 2016

Merkel warns against fake news driving populist gains 🔗
Yahoo 23 November 2016

Want to keep fake news out of your newsfeed? College professor creates list of sites to avoid 🔗

Los Angles Times 15 November 2016

62 percent of U.S. adults get their news from social media, says report ⧉

Tech Crunch 26 May 2016

AUDIO/VISUAL

What is the truth about post-factual politics? ⧉

Battle of Ideas 23 October 2016

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