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FAKE NEWS

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“SOCIAL MEDIA SITES
SHOULD FILTER OUT
FAKE NEWS STORIES”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Alt-right](#)

[Post-truth politics](#)

[Propaganda](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In November, Donald Trump stunned the world when he defeated Democratic rival Hilary Clinton to win the 45th presidency 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 highlight a broader problem facing Western Democracy after the Brexit vote, that we have entered an era of “Post-truth” politics [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Many see the proliferation of social media sites in the last ten years, as a key component of the problem; because of 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?



THE FAKE NEWS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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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 percent 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](#)] 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. With the problem 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:

THE FAKE NEWS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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[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.” [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

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[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

[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

BACKGROUNDERS

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[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 medias 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

[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



FAKE NEWS:

“Social media sites should filter out fake news”



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IN THE NEWS

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[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

[Edward Snowden: fight fake news with truth, not censorship](#)

Newsweek 13 December 2016

[John McDonnell says inquiries in to fake news are an “assault” on independent media](#)

BuzzFeed 10 December 2016

[“Lives are at risk” Hilary Clinton warns against fake news](#)

Time Magazine 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 Angeles 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

[The moral code of social media](#)

Moral Maze *BBC Radio 4* 17 November 2012



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ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

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FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**