

Fake News and the 2018 US Midterm Elections

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Theory of Mass Communication

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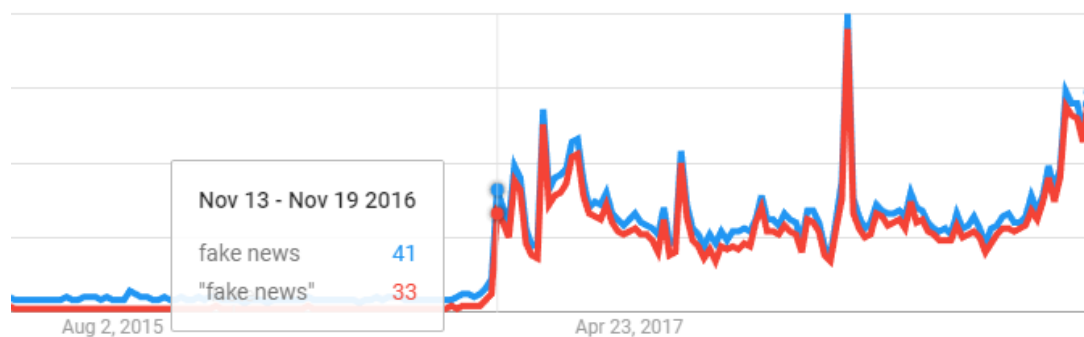
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### **Fake News and the 2018 US Midterm Elections**

“Fake news” has rapidly become an issue relevant to the press and the US public’s ability to make sound voting decisions, made more salient by President Trump’s use of the term, the possibility of foreign election meddling, and the spread of inaccurate and divisive content via the Internet. Trump often uses the term fake news as a tool to discredit news outlets he dislikes and as an agenda-setting tool, though fake news as a concept did not begin with his candidacy. Fake news was identified several years before the 2016 election when the term was used to define websites that produced news distortions, whether that refers to websites monetizing fake news, or websites such as the Onion that satirize current events. But fake news also represents a distrust that the public (media consumers and voters) has developed towards the press, partially due to partisan attacks on critical media and partially due to poorly researched or propagandistic journalism as opposed to fact-based journalism.

In particular, through the widespread power of social media acting as a force multiplier, it is possible that fake news has developed the ability to undermine the US as a well-functioning democracy due to the wide consumption of low-quality information from sources with dubious ethics and unknown objectives crowding out authentic news sources. People need accurate facts about the world around them to make informed decisions, which is why Americans have placed trust in media sources they believe are ethical and able to provide well-researched new stories, neither of which are attributes that fake news often possesses. When members of American society are unable to separate fact from fiction, then the “marketplace of ideas” and social institutions suffer, undermined by shadowy actors and information manipulators with self-serving objectives preying on people’s confirmation biases.

Fake news in the form of rumors and false information has been around for a long time, dating back to the Roman Republic when rumors about Cleopatra and Mark Antony were spread by their political opponents. Before the 2016 election, fake news, in 21st century, referred to TV shows such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, The Onion website, or monetized websites that peddled phony stories in pursuits of clicks. But this change from Nov. 13 to Nov. 19, 2016, when searches for “fake news” suddenly began to uptick due to Trump’s use of the term as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* The time period when “fake news” and fake news became a trending search.

How did fake news become topical to the 2018 midterm elections, and why should the average person care about this issue? Because false information is weaponable and can lead to Real World consequences, including threats of violence. Case in point, Edgar M. Welch, who went to a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., called Comet Ping Pong armed with a rifle. Why? Because he believed that he was rescuing children who were part of a child-sex ring due to a fake news story called “Pizzagate” that has spread across the Internet where fake news proliferates, especially via Fake, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Kang & Goldman, 2016).

Furthermore, According to the US Intelligence Community (IC), fake news is sometimes a product of asymmetric tactics by foreign actors, such as the Russian FSB (formerly the KGB),

who use fake news to influence the American public in the same way as Cold War-era propaganda, or what Philip Howard from Oxford University calls “computational propaganda” (Foreign influence, 2018). What’s most alarming about the IC’s assertions is that these foreign actors are using American social media companies as part of their “meddling” efforts, particularly via Facebook, which sold millions in advertising to Russian investors during the 2016 election (Leonnig et al., 2017). Facebook CEOs admitted that its user base is now being used “in unforeseen ways with societal repercussions that were never anticipated,” with the spread of fake news and the creation of partisan echo chambers being the side effect (Breland, 2018).

These foreign influencers, according to the FBI, have targeted US voters via memes produced by so-called “troll farms,” which were tied to Russian investments into Fakebook according to a 2017 *Washington Post* article, “How Russian trolls got into your Facebook feed,” so this issue has also become a national security concern, especially since 67% of Americans get their news via social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017) while 42% of journalists conduct their research via social media (Cison, 2017), meaning that disinformation and misinformation entering into the American informational echo system can lead to an ideologically polarized public as a result of information exposure via social media relationships (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Furthermore, one in three of these adults will come across fake news and believe some aspect of it, meaning that real news gets crowded out, affecting the concept of “the truth” that defines the public’s shared reality (Penny, Cannon & Rand (2017). The byproduct is that fake news has transcended merely poorly researched stories, disinformation or misinformation, but criticism of political figures is now considered to be a form of fake news by some members of the public.

To make such a determination, this paper will also examine the following **Hs/RQs**:

**Hypotheticals:**

H1: Fake news, like all advertising, propaganda, and other forms of opinion manufacturing, has a more profound effect on voting decisions than most voters realize.

H2: Fake news misinforms voters, detracting from their ability to make sound voting decisions.

H3: Fake news has “Balkanized” voters into echo chambers and ideological subgroups, making political compromise more difficult, undermining the US as a functioning democracy.

H4: The president, political parties, and ideologically driven news media have “weaponized” fake news, to the degree that Democrats, Republicans, and independents cannot agree upon a common “reality.”

**Research questions:**

RQ1: How did fake news affect US voter opinions in the 2018 midterm elections?

RQ2: What role did social media have with propagating fake news during the 2018 midterm elections?

RQ3: Can research participants tell the difference between “real news” (i.e., news based on research, and sound, ethical journalism) and fake news?

RQ4: How can fake news be countered?

**Literature review**

Fake news has been an academic focus of study since the 2016 elections, when fake news became a topic due to Donald Trump’s use of the word and the rise of fake news relating to information distortion, disinformation and misinformation, as a form of propaganda. But what exactly is fake news and how does it relate to the voting public? In a study that examined the

fake news consumption of liberals and conservatives, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) described fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers (p. 213). Narayanan et al. (2018) called fake news “extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary” that could be described as “polarizing political content and misinformation.” The inability for media consumers to detect the difference between credible and satirical news stories demonstrates why audience members consume fake news (Bedard & Schoenthaler, 2018). According to Cunha et al. (2018), web search research showed that the perceived associative properties of fake news changed before and after the 2016 election, from The Daily Show and the Onion to Donald Trump, CNN. Flintham et al. (2018) found that the line between satirical fake news and factual information has been blurred by social media. Delving into selective exposure theory, the tendency for media consumers to choose media that appeals to their political views has increased the spread of fake news (Guess & Reifler, 2018). In 2016, only 51% of Democrats and 14% of Republicans expressed trust in the media, demonstrating a historical low in public faith in traditionally-trusted news outlets. This loss of trust is partially due to geographic partisan polarization, and partially due to high volumes of fake news exposure that one in three adults received before the 2016 election (Baum, Menczer, Pennycook, & Sloman, 2018). This ease of acceptance of inaccurate information is a result of fake news outperforming real news for several reasons: (a) prior exposure to fake news leads to increased believability and repetitive consumption of it; (b) this repetition leads to the “illusory truth” effect” since inaccurate information becomes easier to accept over time; (c) fake news tends to be partisan, making it easier to reject articles that clash with an individual’s political views and easier to accept fake news that does not (Penny, Cannon & Rand (2017).

## **Methods**

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods for its data gathering via a SurveyMonkey survey form that was then disseminated via the Internet on Facebook, Reddit, and Discord. The survey was separated into several sections that are a combination of fifty qualitative and quantitative questions. The first section asked questions on the participant's demographics, their gender, age, income, and other data relevant to their media consumption, which affects their fake news consumption in turn as demonstrated by Guess and Reifler (2018). The second section gathered information on their political preferences. The third section asked questions on their media habits, The fourth section and fifth questions were specific to (1) identifying fake news, and (2) a subjective interview on the participant's views on fake news, which, if previous research holds true, will vary based on demographics and political preference.

## **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to research the potential effect of fake news on voters and the 2018 midterm election, which were already plagued by episodes of fake news during and after the voting, such as unsubstantiated of voter fraud, e.g., Democrats using disguises to vote multiple times. The questions that were posed to the participants were designed to find any correlation between political views, political leanings and preferences, and their views on fake news and their ability to recognize it when they see it.

## **Participants**

There were 47 total participants (n=47) who took part in this study, answering various part of it. Of these respondents, 23 answered questions on demographics, which was determined by six questions on their gender, age, marital status, household income, education level, and racial or ethnic identity. As shown by Table 1, when it came to their gender, 9 (39.13%) were

female, 13 (56.52%) female, and 1 (4.35%) were Non-CIS binary. Most of the demographic-answering participant, 18 (78.62%), were in their twenties and single (Table 2), 18 (78.26) while 5 (21.74%) were married (Table 3), showing that the survey was skewed toward college-age participants, whose household income also varied, but the majority of the (n=23) participants earned above the national average, with 16 (69.56) earning between \$50,000 to more than \$150,000 per year, perhaps as a reflect of their education level since most of the participants (n=23), 19 (82.61) also had a bachelor's and/or a master's degree. Furthermore, whites, 18 (78.26%), were the largest represented racial/ethnic identity group.

Table 1

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	39.13%	9
Male	56.52%	13
Non-CIS binary	4.35%	1
TOTAL		23

Table 2

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
18 to 24	43.48%	10
25 to 34	34.78%	8
35 to 44	13.04%	3
45 to 54	4.35%	1
55 to 64	4.35%	1
65 to 74	0.00%	0
75 or older	0.00%	0
TOTAL		23



Table 3

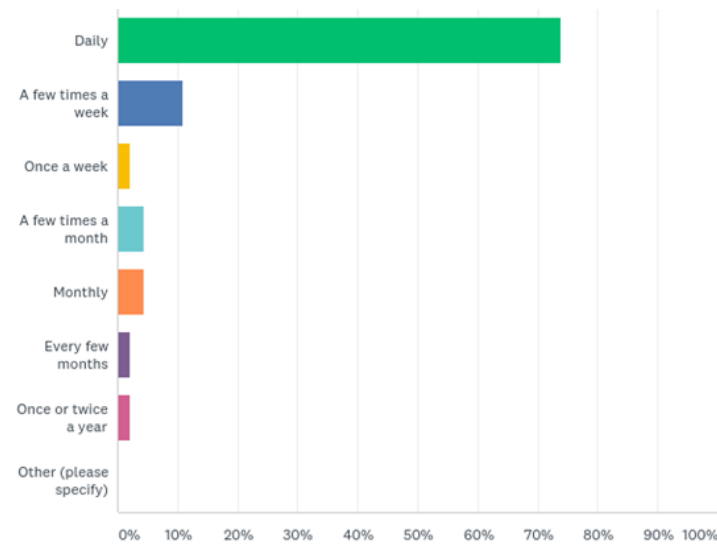
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Single	78.26%	18
Married	21.74%	5
TOTAL		23

Table 4

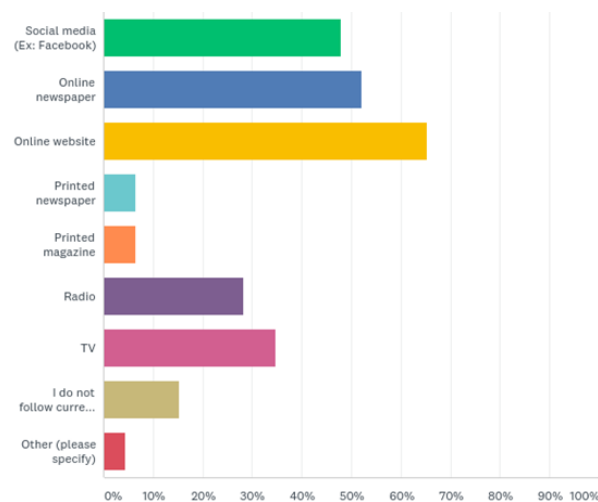
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than \$20,000	4.35%	1
\$20,000 to \$34,999	13.04%	3
\$35,000 to \$49,999	13.04%	3
\$50,000 to \$74,999	30.43%	7
\$75,000 to \$99,999	4.35%	1
\$100,000 to \$149,999	17.39%	4
\$150,000 or More	17.39%	4
TOTAL		23

### Frequency of media use

Of the participants (n=46) who answered media usage questions, the majority of them, 34 (73.91%) indicated that they use some form of it on a daily basis (See Figure 1), with online media sources playing the largest role, with social media, 22 (47.83%), online newspapers, 24 (52.17%), and online websites, 30 (65.22%) playing the largest roles (see Figure 2.)



*Figure 1.* Frequency of media use. Most participants indicate daily use.



*Figure 2.* Media source.

Fakebook, 27 (58.70%), and Twitter, 16 (34.78%), was reported as being frequently used, but Instagram, 14 (30.43%), and Reddit, 11 (23.91%), were the other social media platforms with a high frequency of use. The majority of participants, 32 (69.57), check social media more than once a day, indicating the potential for high exposure to fake news, an observation that the participants themselves may have suspected since more than half, 28 (54.35%) responded that,

yes, their media sources have influenced their voting on issues or their preference for a political party.

### **Fake news or real news?**

A series of images and headlines, some of them fake, some real, were presented to the participants (n=27) to determine their ability to recognize misleading content. The following table will demonstrate which images were deemed fake or real, using fact checking websites, the percentage of participants that were correct in their replies, and examples of responses that participants gave to determine if the image was fake or real (See Table 5).

Table 5

	Fake or real?	Answered fake	Answered real	Why?
Image 1	Fake	23 (85.19%)	4 (14.81%)	R1: "Sensationalized." R2: "Biased source." R3: "No citations."
Image 2	Fake	23 (85.19%)	4 (14.81%)	R1: "Username not appropriate." R2: "Peter Griffin is a cartoon character."
Image 3	Real	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	R1: "Verified source." R2: "The [AP] is a highly credible news source." R3: "Why would the residents have abandoned their cars if they were escaping from the fire?"
Image 4	Real	26 (96.3%)	1 (3.7%)	R1: "Verified source." R2: "ABC news is pretty credible."
Image 5	Fake	24 (88.89%)	3 (11.11%)	R1: "Graphic quality is bad and doesn't link to where she says this quote." R2: "There is no source." R3: "No source, hearsay, and #voter2018 shows bias."
Image 6	Real	22 (81.48%)	5 (18.52%)	R1: "Outlandish statements,

				<p>clickbait style quotes.”</p> <p>R2: “The Guardian is a legitimate news outlet.”</p> <p>R3: “I’m actually not totally sure about this one, it looks like it might be real but the headline is clearly meant to be a little outrageous.”</p>
Image 7	Fake	20 (74.07%)	7 (25.93%)	R1: “The image looks photoshopped because of how flat the words are.”
Image 8	Real	13 (48.15%)	14 (51.85%)	<p>R1: “I don’t know what it is so I wouldn’t assume it was right.”</p> <p>R2: “There’s no source; it’s just an image with a statement on it. It’s possible that this claim is true, but I’d have to be able to verify it before calling this “real news.”</p>
Image 9	Real	27 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	R1: “Verified source, recognizable name, no clear bias shown, official looking news format.”
Image 10	Fake	21 (77.78%)	6 (22.22%)	R1: “Especially controversial issue on burning flags, clear bias shown with the group only identified as “dems,” they would be more specific if they were a more respectable news source.”

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