

## **Unfriending the Facts:**

### **The Role of Social Media, Social Bots and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era**

**By Matt Traynor**

The most critical issue today relates to the world's most valuable commodity: information. Peter Dahlgren (2018) says that "Democracy is embattled, and while some of the dangers embody direct and visible assailants such as neoliberalism, authoritarian measures, and corruption, others are less immediate and obvious" (p. 20). Dahlgren is referring to the threat that the post-truth era poses to our democratic ideologies and systems that must be carefully considered. The post-truth era has been brought about by the speed at which information is received, the platforms on which data is consumed and the automation of information dissemination. This paper examines and analyzes current literature that discusses the implications of fake news, the role of social media and use of social bots to expedite the spread of false information, with the purpose of formulating strategic and ethical considerations for Canadian public relations practitioners to contemplate when operating in the post-truth era.

Understanding how fake news can be harmful to democracy is imperative and is eloquently stated by Lee et al.:

frequent contest of even the most basic descriptions of social realities in Internet media signify a lack of "trust" among people in the era when informational excess dislodges "cognitive certainty." A decline in both "trust" and "knowledge" (cognitive certainty) is detrimental to democracy, as these two components constitute the civic culture, which is essential to the vitality and survival of democracy. (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1950)

In a day and age where science and technology are revolutionizing the way we think and live, it is hard to believe that a field grounded in logic, is slowly becoming the most significant

detriment to the method of thinking upon which it was founded. Shao et al. (2017) explain that it is “A complex mix of cognitive, social, and algorithmic biases [that] contribute to our vulnerability to manipulation by online misinformation” (p. 2). An exploration of the tactics applied to achieve this manipulation and the environment in which it takes place will begin to illuminate the extent of the issue of fake news and implications of transitioning into a post-truth era.

### **Review of the Literature**

The following review of literature examines the work of Peter Dahlgren, Shao et al. and Lazer et al. These pieces of literature, in the order that they appear, give insights into the post-truth era, explain the implications of social bots and provide a clear understanding of the concept of fake news.

Peter Dahlgren (2018) makes an argument that we are now in a post-truth era which has brought about an epistemic crisis (p. 20). This crisis is a result of new technology that has altered the way we form knowledge, delivering information at a profligate pace. “Secondly, in the present tumultuous juncture of Western democracies, dominated by the populist revolt, traditional distrust of media has turned into an assault on basic Enlightenment premises, eroding shared understandings of reality and compatible discourse” (p. 20). This argument implies that knowledge becomes legitimated through emotion—rather than logic.

Shao et al. (2017) examine how fake news is spread on Twitter through the use of social bots by creating and utilizing the *Hoaxy* platform/the *Botometer* machine learning algorithm (p. 2). It was found that on average fake news websites generate around 100 articles per week (p. 3). Shao et al. found that “super-spreaders of fake news are social bots that

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automatically post links to articles, retweet other accounts, or perform more sophisticated autonomous tasks, like following and replying to other users” (p. 5).

The article by Lazer et al. (2018) gives a clear overview of the issue of fake news. It begins by offering a definition: stating that fake news is purposely fashioned to appear like traditional news, but lacks the procedures to safeguard the credibility of the story (p. 1094). Lazer et al. go on to explain that “Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people)” (p. 1094). More importantly, Lazer et al. discuss the role of social bots and possible steps of action for the future—urging that “A new system of safeguards is needed” (p. 1096). Concluding that while constitutional issues may prevent government policies from helping, there are solid alternatives such as tort laws that will cause platforms to act more responsibly by holding them accountable.

### **Critical Analysis**

It is apparent that the internet has changed the way we consume media, making information more readily available than ever before. In recent years, social media has played an equal role in shifting the media landscape. With regards to the government, the principal difference between social media and traditional media is social media’s ability to gain direct contact with voters, allow campaigns to go viral, advertise without paying for it, tailor messages for the audience, generate fundraising, weigh public opinion, receive feedback, empower people to join together and capitalize on the popularity of social networking platforms (Murse, 2018, para. 1). While this provides politicians with powerful tools to connect to their constituents and more accurately represent their views, it also allows for strategic manipulation through misinformation.

The introduction of social media, the rise of citizen journalists and the creation of social bots, has led to a decrease in the importance of source credibility. Furthermore, past studies have shown, using the theories of cognitive dissonance and selective exposure, that online media consumers tend to ingest content based on their personal views and interests: resulting in the seclusion and divergence of the individual's beliefs due to the unrepresentative nature of this intake process (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1950). Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint what the root cause of the post-truth era is; although, it is certain that the spread of fake news and the reaction to it, is what has issued in this new era of uncertainty.

To effectively analyze the current media landscape, it is vital that we have a clear understanding of what fake news is. Lazer et al. (2018) define fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (p. 1094). As the issue of fake news has recently become of growing global concern, it is essential to investigate how fake news spreads.

Firstly, the role of automated accounts, called bots, are bolstering the ability of a few to spread fallacious messages to many. Bots “can magnify the spread of fake news by orders of magnitude” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1095). It is estimated that 47 per cent of Americans receive news from social media (p. 1096). To understand how bots operate, Shao et al. (2018) outline the key manipulation strategies used by these automated accounts: bots are vigorous in augmenting the spread of fake news early on, bots focus on prominent users through replies and mentions and bots masquerade their geographic location giving the impression that they are in the vicinity of the user (p. 11). As social media is the major medium for fake news and its dissemination, it is vital that social media platforms are urged to develop policies that discourage fake news and may allow for mediation as these counterfeit stories are identified.

In response to bots and the spread of fake news, social media platforms have taken limited action, as expected, due to the constitutional issue of freedom of speech. However, a pressure is being applied by the public and government agencies to increase overwatch and regulation in an effort to hold organizations accountable for the spread of fake news. In fact, D'Souza writes about the effort's companies are making and the frequency at which they have to intervene:

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey told the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee in September that the company is removing 214 per cent more accounts for platform manipulation than last year. He says the company is also identifying and challenging as many as 10 million suspicious accounts a week. (D'souza, 2018, Social Cleanup)

It is also reported by D'Souza that Facebook has followed in the footsteps of Twitter and has begun to adapt its algorithms to deadlock fake news accounts, thwart suspicious pages from posting content and eliminate questionable accounts.

As the issue of fake news and the fear of its speculated ability to alter opinion has become more prevalent, the question of concern is: does it have a substantial impact in reality? To address the real-world effect that fake news has on individuals, many researchers have focused on election mobilization and voter bias or opinions. Examining the 2016 United States Presidential election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) infer, based on their data and the results of past studies, that the exposure of fake news during the election would have changed fewer votes than Trump won by (p. 232). Therefore, Allcott and Gentzkow's research could be interpreted to mean that fake news has a minimal effect on consumers retention of ill-informed content and, more importantly, the ability to manipulate beliefs and alter political stance. However, Allcott and Gentzkow do state that there are many limitations to their research and that more comprehensive studies need to be conducted to fully understand the impact that fake news has on consumers over time.

On the other hand, excluding the implications of fake news, Jones et al. (2017) examine the ability of social media messaging to mobilize voters (p. 1). The study found that there was a significant increase in voting within friend groups of those who received the message – directly increasing the voter turnout by around 90,000 people (p. 7). The most important finding of Jones et al. is that a single message on Facebook has the power to mobilize not only the intended subject of the message but their friends as well. The observed spillover effect has substantial implications to not only voter mobilization, but to the way information propagates through social networks. Meaning, that information that travels through friends or contacts has the ability to lead to action or a shift in cognition. Therefore, it can be assumed that the spillover effect plays a significant role in the spread of fake news.

### **Considerations**

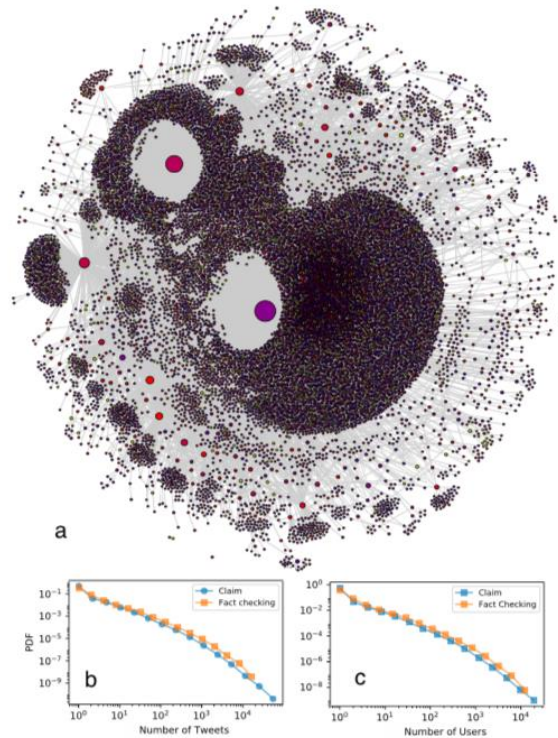
Being a government public relations practitioner in the post-truth era will undoubtedly have its challenges with regards to a number of issues. The dynamic and turbulent media landscape of the post-truth era will raise ethical, strategic and political concerns with regards to effective public relations. “In the political context [the post-truth era] refers to “a process whereby objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals” (as cited in Dahlgren, 2018, p. 15). While emotional appeals may become more effective in engaging with newer generations, moral and ethical credibility should not be sacrificed in the process. Therefore, careful consideration of how to balance emotional appeal with factual substance will be required to construct appropriate messaging that does not jeopardize democracy.

While government public relations practitioners will play an integral role in reinforcing democratic principles through truthful messages that foster trust, government regulations will

likely be needed to combat the use of social bots and the spread of fake news. The implementation of such regulation will be a delicate procedure. Any law that is too forceful in its approach will be considered to be in contradiction to the right to free speech.

Social bots will continue to pose an obstacle to practitioners as they will spread false stories and need to be a priority for regulatory policies. Bots can increase the likelihood that a fake news story goes viral, making them effective and dangerous tools. Shao et al. investigated and illustrated the relationship between bots and virality of fake news stories (see Figure 1 below). It was found that “while the majority of [fake news] articles go unnoticed, a significant fraction go viral” (Shao et al., 2017, p. 3).

**Figure 1: Virality of fake news (Shao et al., 2017, p. 4)**



Considering the role of bots and applying it to what we already know about the internet and the spread of information, troubling realizations become apparent. “Finding and extracting relevant information that one can trust can be difficult in a fast-moving informational environment, but still more challenging is to develop knowledge” (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 22). Developing knowledge takes time and consideration. However, the speed and manner in which the internet presents news to consumers results in a lack of focus and minimal reflection that, undoubtedly, facilitates the spread of fake news (p. 22). Therefore, practitioners must themselves follow and urge policy implementation that protects the virtues of honest ethical communication; whether it is to their advantage or not. Shao et al. (2017) suggest the use of CAPTCHAs to help platforms detect whether a user is automated or human (p. 12). An alternative to this could be to “enable tort lawsuits alleging, for example, defamation by those directly and concretely harmed



by the spread of fake news” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1096). Tort based laws would raise concerns of liability for the social platforms and would give them more of an incentive to intercede in order to avoid being named in lawsuits of this nature.

It is clear that social media is the keystone of the post-truth era. The current situation that “we are faced with [is] an emerging political culture of distrust that undermines shared assumptions about social reality and the pathways to legitimate knowledge” (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 26). Politicians and government public relations practitioners must address this reality head-on and do all that they can to preserve democratic principles and ideals: the consequences of inaction could be substantial.

### **Conclusion**

Fake news presents the greatest threat to democracy in this post-truth era. “We are witnessing historical changes in the processes of production of knowledge, characterized by high velocity and dizzying excess, as well as the developments of new forms of digitally derived knowledge” (p. 26). Practitioners need to be aware of the dangers of creating content that is not based on reality and need to be more ethically considerate than ever before. As well, politicians, organizations and the public must make this issue a priority and find ways to prevent others from using social bots and social platforms to spread fallacies for political gain.

While Lazer et al. (2018) state that constitutional issues and censorship are why implementation of governmental policy is probably not the best way to regulate social media platforms (p. 1096), there is an argument to be made. In its inception, the constitutional right to freedom of speech was created to enable and protect democracy. However, in the post-truth era, freedom of speech without limitation could inhibit the democracy it was enshrined to empower. While most of the literature reviewed was specific to the United States, Canada has its own duty

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to protect its founding principles of democracy. While the freedom of expression is often seen to be boundless, in Canada it is not without limitation: “Perjury, counselling suicide, and creating child pornography are all forms of expression, but they have been limited through designation in the federal Criminal Code as criminal offences” (Walker, 2018, Freedom of Expression). Furthermore, any language or expression that encourages hatred is prohibited by the Criminal Code of Canada (Criminal Code).

As Canada moves forward as a nation during this post-truth era, a critical assessment will have to take place. The fact is that fake news undermines democracy. Given current trends, extensive research and calculated action will be required to address this reality. Proposed solutions will need to continue to protect an individual’s freedom of speech and will need to limit the malicious dissemination of information intended to mislead citizens—to ensure that a healthy democracy survives.

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