

# Democracy and Social Stability in the Age of Post-Truth, Fake News, and Social Media

Alex THOMPSON

---

**Abstract:** The following research paper intends to highlight how Democracy and social stability are being affected by the changing factors in our political and technological discourse. The research includes the usage of post-truth, fake news, and misinformation and disinformation in political discourse as well as recent examples that have brought these actions into the public spotlight. The paper will also look at methods that the aggressors are using to spread their message such as troll factories, propaganda, and social media. Lastly, the paper will look at different cases of attacks on Democracy and destabilization of social stability in those countries. These cases include the terrorist attacks on Sri Lanka and their response to control public violence and panic, the 2018 US Intelligence Community response and proposals to stop meddling in US elections such as the midterm election, and proposals on how private sector companies that are in charge of social media platforms need to take measures to delete fake news and de-weaponize their platform for terrorists.

**Keywords:** Post-truth, Fake news, Social media, Misinformation, Disinformation, Filter bubble

---

## Increasing Use of Post-Truth and Fake News in Political Discourse

Post-truth is a growing phenomenon that has become more powerful and influential with technological advances and the acceptance of the public. It is

the process of appealing to the emotions of the audience and making facts and expert opinions secondary to its appeal. Recently, post-truth has become more prevalent and talked about in the past couple of years. Technological advances such as social media has allowed anyone with access to the internet to quickly and efficiently receive information, even if it is illegible<sup>318</sup>.

Before the internet and social media, channels of information and news were confined to traditional forms of media including newspapers, television, and radio. However, these traditional forms have regulations placed on them. Newspapers, although less regulated, are still subject to make changes if accused of inappropriately slandering someone or making claims that are unsubstantiated. Radio and television receive more government regulation<sup>319</sup>.

However new media, with the internet, is regulated less and impacts the political views of people much or more. Traditional media has to compete with new media in terms of the availability, costs, and interests. Unlike traditional media such as newspapers, social media faces lower costs and are able to report in real time about new developments in the news much faster. With the decline of popularity in traditional media, new media such as social media platforms, hold a much stronger hold on the views and interests of the public.

Citizens and voters increasingly use social media to seek out information concerning political parties' stances on a range of issues that appeases their own personal interests. However, social media distributes information faster than political parties can adequately respond and maintain interaction with<sup>320</sup>. To appease the public's opinion and maintain control over their political party they more recently have begun resorting to calling things that they don't agree with 'fake news' and working on changing how citizens view their party.

---

<sup>318</sup> Besley, Tina, Mats Hyvönen, Sharon Rider, and Michael A. Peters, *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity & Higher Education*, 5, Springer, 2018.

<sup>319</sup> Stanyer, J., "The New Media and the Old: The Press, Broadcasting and the Internet," *Parliamentary Affairs* 54, no. 2 (2001): 349–59, Accessed July 19, 2019, doi: 10.1093/parlij/54.2.349.

<sup>320</sup> Peters, Rider, Hyvonen, and Besley, *Post-Truth*, 6.

In addition to post-truth, fake news has also been a major part in the age of misinformation, disinformation, and deception. Fake news has been present in social media and news for a long time even before social media became popular. According to Hendricks, fake news is defined as “invented material that has been cleverly manipulated so as to come across as reliable, journalistic reporting that may easily be spread online to a large audience that is willing to believe the stories and spread the message”<sup>321</sup>. Combining false and undocumented claims, distortions and misrepresentations, fake news persuades the audience to take a wanted opinion or behavior. Fake news aims to be seen as real news and supports itself with manipulated pictures and video footage.

The real goal of fake news is anchored in political or monetary gain and spreading out to a bigger audience. However, the definition has expanded with the focus and debate on President Trump. Rhetoric criticizing and supporting the president has journalists, supporters, and dissenters alike labeling the opposition and things they do not agree with as fake news. This has been seen as a shift from the traditional definition of ‘fake news’, which has now become a label for discrediting and slandering sources and information without much research or evidence.

While the official definition of fake news still holds, the changes in its usage is important to highlight, as it has become harder to define and determine who is qualified to deem something as fake news. Restricting and making sure that fake news is not spread by citizens and readers is important to the integrity of information spread and keeping people correctly informed on current events. Making the official definition of fake news clear to citizens and helping them understand how to detect it is one of the most important factors in creating a solution to stop fake news from spreading on social media platforms and impacting Democratic processes.

Misinformation and disinformation also contribute to the deception and corruption of truth. Misinformation refers to incorrect facts that a person holds to be true. Often misinformation comes from ignorance, not

---

<sup>321</sup> Hendricks V.F., Vestergaard M, (2019) *Alternative Facts, Misinformation, and Fake News*. In: *Reality Lost*, Springer, Cham.

intentionally made to deceive citizens, journalists, and politicians. Whereas disinformation intentionally seeks to spread incorrect facts, to deceive and to misinform people<sup>322</sup>. Those who claimed Barak Obama was not a US citizen illustrates this distinction. Misinformation represents the people who truly believe that Barack Obama is not a US citizen, while disinformation represents Obama's opponents in the opposing party who intentionally spread deceiving information about Obama with the hope that others will believe it. To be effective, misinformation and disinformation need to incorporate some truth into the fake information that is spread. It may include a mix of allegedly true information, some doubtful or undocumented information, and completely false information.

The goal of a well-crafted piece of misinformation or disinformation is to have impact and believability while taking time to reveal the information as false information. Tools such as social media create more confusion on misinformation and disinformation than compared to traditional forms of media like television, radio, and newspapers. Social media gives anonymity and power to anyone to start up their own blog or post. Anonymity makes it more difficult to understand the motives behind posts that are false as there is no evidence to point to whether the user is trying to intentionally slander someone with false information. However, by tracking a user's post history, the frequency false information is posted, and when an account was opened, it is possibly to determine whether an account was made for the purpose of posting false information. Even with these criteria, it is still impossible to know the motives behind the trolls.

## Methods and Platforms Used by Aggressors

Troll factories and propaganda are two of the biggest factors in disinformation in the age of social media. Propaganda has two main foci when being spread on social media: creating dissent and polarization within countries and spreading the ideas of the aggressing country. Russia is one of the best countries to utilize propaganda for their own gain and in spreading it to

---

<sup>322</sup> Hendrick, 2019,

other countries. According to the Research and Development Corporation (RAND) the techniques that Russia employs include operating Kremlin-supporting news websites, state-funded television, and working with Russia-backed civil society organizations. Russia also has a very powerful and effective social media campaign that combines news tweets, comments, troll and bot accounts on social media, and fake hashtag/Twitter campaigns<sup>323</sup>.

Russian social media uses a combination of bots and trolls to spread the idea of pro-Russian rhetoric and to attack their targets. To be able to recognize the accounts of these Russian bots and trolls, RAND created a fingerprint. The goal of this propaganda is to create polarization within their target country and to create distrust between the citizens of the country and the government. One of their largest targets are the countries that were former Soviet states. Their target is to create hostility and distrust between the citizens that either speak Russian or are ethnic Russian and the government of those countries.

Technological advances and social media created new venues for troll factories and propaganda to flourish. Now there are a variety of platforms that were not highly regulated like traditional media, designed to get users to stay on their platforms. The algorithm of social media websites will cater and cut content that is similar to what the user has been searching for and is interested in, making it more likely to show up in the search results and in their feed<sup>324</sup>. This enables social media to narrow the users point of view and to continue to receive sources that are all similar and/or agree with what the user believes in. This allows users, whose views are not as popular in the public eye, to feel as if the whole world agrees with them and that they must be right<sup>325</sup>.

---

<sup>323</sup> Helmus, Todd C., Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 9, 2018.

<sup>324</sup> Nikolov D, Oliveira DFM, Flammini A, Menczer F. 2015, Measuring online social bubbles, *PeerJ Computer Science* 1:e38 <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.38>.

<sup>325</sup> Philip Seargeant, Caroline Tagg, "Social media and the future of open debate: A user-oriented approach to Facebook's filter bubble conundrum", *Discourse, Context & Media*, Volume 27, March 2019, Pages 41–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.03.005>.

The algorithms create a bubble around the user which is an excellent place for conspiracy theorists and propaganda to flourish. Algorithms that are designed to keep the user on their website is good for the company that owns the site but can cause negative developments in the user's ability to critically judge pieces of content. The bubble causes users to become more focused on information that supports their viewpoint regardless of who was behind spreading the information and making sure that the content is credible. This is how propaganda can gain influence and for fake news to spread. It also harms the discussion and debate of important issues regarding democracy and society. If more and more citizens are getting their news from social media websites, and they are being influenced by algorithms that only give them one side of events, it creates greater polarization amongst citizens when engaging in discussions about politics and current events.

## Dealing with Attacks on Democracy on a Country by Country Basis

Social media has become a double-edged sword for both the aggressors and the defenders. From the positive perspective, information can now spread more quickly, enabling first responders to go to the scene of a crime and deal with attacks and security risks much faster than they ever could before. At the same time, it can also create panic and chaos and give information to attackers.

On Easter, Sri Lanka was attacked with bombings that killed around 200 people. Sri Lanka made the decision to shut down social media owned by Facebook (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) to reduce the amount of fake news and misinformation from spreading and creating violence and panic. Other social media platforms like YouTube were allowed because they were not as widely used as other social media apps e.g. Facebook and WhatsApp. While Facebook has been an effective tool to spread information, validating information in a time of panic and grief can become problematic. Having a platform that has failed in the past to filter and censor

fake news and misinformation can also be extremely dangerous<sup>326</sup>. Fake news and misinformation are especially dangerous in Sri Lanka because the misuse of social media has caused witch hunts and mob violence.

This situation brings up an important debate concerning the impact of social media and social stability. The debate centers around the question of whether fake news and misinformation should be able to have a presence in social media and in the sphere of society. In the case in Sri Lanka, it exemplifies how there is a problem of not having enough expertise to deal with outcomes of attacks around the globe. Additionally, Facebook can run into problems when something happens in a country that has a language which none (or very few) of their employees speak and are unfamiliar with<sup>327</sup>. There needs to be a better program that deals with news and events around the globe for social media companies to be able to deal with fake news, misinformation, and weaponizing of their platform.

Another important event was Russia's interference in the 2016 US election, representing a foreign attack on American Democracy. According to a joint statement by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Director of National Intelligence, there was no change in how and when voters voted or how many votes were counted<sup>328</sup>. Rather they discussed the interference of Russia in the election through propaganda on social media, fake news on politicians and their policies, and spreading Russian sentiments through English speaking news sources like the Russian Times and Sputnik. In response, the Director of National Intelligence mentioned that they will focus on two parts in protecting the integrity of the Democratic system in future elections: First the DNI will work on foreign influencers in national

---

<sup>326</sup> Wong, Julia Carrie, and Kari Paul, "Sri Lanka's Social Media Blackout Reflects Sense That Online Dangers Outweigh Benefits," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2019, Accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/22/sri-lankas-social-media-blackout-reflects-sense-that-online-dangers-outweigh-benefits>.

<sup>327</sup> See for example: Thomas, Elise, "Facebook Keeps Failing in Myanmar", Accessed September 22, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/21/facebook-keeps-failing-in-myanmar-zuckerberg-arakan-army-rakhine/>.

<sup>328</sup> "Joint Statement on Election Day Preparations," FBI. November 05, 2018, Accessed July 27, 2019, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/joint-statement-on-election-day-preparations>.

elections by working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, and other Intelligence Communities to get a better picture of the threat and proactively stopping information loss and cyber threats<sup>329</sup>. Second, they will also work on establishing cyber security guidelines and information about responsible information sharing sites such as social media. The United States approach to dealing with the attack on Democracy is becoming proactive in identify threats before they occur in future elections. Proactivity in a fast-changing field like social media is key to thwarting attacks on Democracy.

With the rising use of social media as a tool for misinformation, fake news, and use as a platform for terrorists, private companies must hold greater responsibility over what happens on their platform. Currently social media acts as a global community for people to connect and spread information. However, since social media is used around the world, there is greater responsibility in the global community. Fake news, misinformation, videos by attackers and terrorists need to be monitored and taken down especially in more extreme circumstances. The responsibilities of private companies now include monitoring, creating clear guidelines on what is defined as fake news, and restricting fake news and propaganda. Companies need to create clear guidelines on what constitutes as fake news to help misunderstandings and conflicts that may arise from content creators and journalists that want to create satirical content. It would also help citizens report fake news to moderators for the content to be reviewed and either restricted or deleted.

A team of computer science and engineering majors have also come up with additional ways to detect and monitor fake news. They propose using a data-driven approach to analyze posts and articles to detect early on whether a post is qualified as fake news. One of their suggestions was to create a database of fake news benchmarks that could be shared and

---

<sup>329</sup> Andrews, Jonathan, "Joint Statement from the ODNI, DOJ, FBI and DHS: Combating Foreign Influence in U.S. Elections," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, October 19, 2018, Accessed July 27, 201, .<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/1915-joint-statement-from-the-odni-doj-fbi-and-dhs-combating-foreign-influence-in-u-s-elections>.



expanded upon so that future researchers and moderators would be able to recognize fake news early on and stop it from having an effect on the citizens of the public<sup>330</sup>. For future research they also suggest finding ways to detect visual fake news, such as manipulating video footage of public figures, synthesizing high quality videos, and deepfakes<sup>331</sup>.

To illustrate a recent example in the United States, a video of Democratic Senator Nancy Pelosi that had previously been taken, was slowed down to make the viewers believe that she was drunk<sup>332</sup>. Replications of this video stayed up for quite a while on social media sites and is just one example of one of the many ways that visual content can be used to spread fake news on social media sites. Apart from detecting and monitoring fake news, there is the question on how fake news needs to be dealt with. In the same way fake news is spread and gets a reaction, there needs to be a method of taking it down and fixing incorrect messages. If for example, the source was from a company, then there should be an edit and a reupload with the edit. If the source came from a non-official source, then the best way to resolve the issue is by taking it down and sending a message to the creator explaining why it was taken down, what they can do to fix the post, and who they can contact to dispute the validity of their takedown.

## Conclusion and Takeaways

In the new technological age of information people are able to access a much wider variety of information now than ever before. However, as

---

<sup>330</sup> Shu, Kai, Amy Sliva, Suhang Wang, Jiliang Tang, and Huan Liu, "Fake News Detection on Social Media," *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 19, no. 1 (2017): 22–36, Accessed July 19, 2019, doi: 10.1145/3137597.3137600.

<sup>331</sup> Deepfake: a doctored image, video, or audio using artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques; see also Frue, Kiesha, "What is a Deepfake and Why Should You Care?," Accessed September 22, 2019, <https://towardsdatascience.com/what-is-a-deepfake-and-why-should-you-care-763f667321d0>.

<sup>332</sup> "No, This Is Not a Real Video of US House Speaker Pelosi Slurring Her Words Onstage – the Footage Has Been Doctored to Slow down Her Speech," AFP Fact Check, May 24, 2019, Accessed July 29, 2019, <https://factcheck.afp.com/no-not-real-video-us-house-speaker-pelosi-slurring-her-words-onstage-footage-has-been-doctored-slow>.

shown in the cases of Sri Lanka and the United States, social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube can be misused and cause harm to the integrity of Democracy and manipulate the social stability of citizens. One of the biggest hindrances in working toward the deletion of fake news and reinstating the integrity of Democracy is working with private sector companies to de-weaponize their platforms for terrorists and aggressive nations.

Social media has been created to give a voice to the opinions of those that cannot be heard and to share information with others. But the misuse of these tools requires solutions to be provided by the companies that are behind social media. It cannot be stated enough how much of an impact social media sites have on political discourse and rhetoric and their implications on how future elections and discussions regarding politics will continue.

Private companies need to be held responsible and accountable for what is posted on their platform as well as who posts the content. One possible solution might be to remove anonymity amongst its users, so that people will no longer be able to hide behind their user name, and would have to face consequences for posting fake news and disinformation. With social media's popularity it is the duty of social media to promote media literacy and promote a strong way to find what sources are credible and define what fake news is.

Another proposed solution, would be for social media sites to band together and create a campaign to define fake news, to educate its users about what it is, how to detect it and determine whether the sources are credible. Ad posts created by social media companies would be beneficial in mending the issues that have arisen through social media. More jobs to counter fake news posts and terrorist propaganda would reduce the amount of traffic that these posts would receive and limit the amount of impact they would have on the users.

Finally, it is imperative to work on creating clear guidelines and definitions of the terms and type of content that is not allowed on social media websites. Some gray areas of content include educational content on fake

news and terrorism on sites like YouTube and parody content that take a satirical point of view such as the Onion. Creating clear guidelines will stop conflict from arising amongst users that want to be educational or do not want their free speech impeded by the companies of the social media sites. These represent just a few ideas on how to fix the issues that social media is now facing and hopefully with the insight gained through this paper, it will create a discussion on improving media literacy and creating a discourse on social medias impact on society.

## Bibliography

- Andrews, Jonathan. "Joint Statement from the ODNI, DOJ, FBI and DHS: Combating Foreign Influence in U.S. Elections." Office of the Director of National Intelligence. October 19, 2018. Accessed July 27, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/1915-joint-statement-from-the-odni-doj-fbi-and-dhs-combating-foreign-influence-in-u-s-elections>.
- Besley, Tina, Mats Hyvönen, Sharon Rider, and Michael A. Peters. *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity & Higher Education*. Springer, 2018
- Helmus, Todd C., Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman. *Russian Social Media Influence Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018.
- Hendricks V.F., Vestergaard M. (2019) *Alternative Facts, Misinformation, and Fake News*. In: *Reality Lost*. Springer, Cham "Joint Statement on Election Day Preparations." FBI. November 05, 2018. Accessed July 27, 2019, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/joint-statement-on-election-day-preparations>.
- Nikolov D, Oliveira DFM, Flammini A, Menczer F. 2015. Measuring online social bubbles, *PeerJ Computer Science* 1:e38 <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.38>
- "No, This Is Not a Real Video of US House Speaker Pelosi Slurring Her Words Onstage – the Footage Has Been Doctored to Slow down Her Speech." AFP Fact Check. May 24, 2019. Accessed July 29, 2019. <https://factcheck.afp.com/no-not-real-video-us-house-speaker-pelosi-slurring-her-words-onstage-footage-has-been-doctored-slow>.
- Shu, Kai, Amy Sliva, Suhang Wang, Jiliang Tang, and Huan Liu. "Fake News Detection on Social Media." *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter* 19, no. 1 (2017): 22–36, Accessed July 19, 2019. doi: 10.1145/3137597.3137600.

- Stanyer, J. "The New Media and the Old: The Press, Broadcasting and the Internet", *Parliamentary Affairs* 54, no. 2 (2001): 349–59. Accessed July 19, 2019, doi: 10.1093/parlij/54.2.349.
- Wong, Julia Carrie, and Kari Paul. "Sri Lanka's Social Media Blackout Reflects Sense That Online Dangers Outweigh Benefits." *The Guardian*. April 22, 2019. Accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/22/sri-lankas-social-media-blackout-reflects-sense-that-online-dangers-outweigh-benefits>.