DISINFORMATION AND LIES:
The Dangers of Fake News

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NEWS IN REVIEW

IN THIS ISSUE

Disinformation and Lies: The Dangers of Fake News (Duration 21:16)

When a man walked into a New York pizza parlour in December 2016 with an assault rifle and said he was checking out the story that there was a child sex-trafficking ring in the basement, run by former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, the world took notice. It was a fake news story called "Pizzagate," planted online, that went viral. Now it's getting harder to tell truth from fiction on the internet. But why has "fake news" spiked? Some say it's because there's money to be made. Others say it's foreign countries trying to manipulate the outcome of important events such as the U.S. presidential election. Whatever the case, "fake news" has gone viral.

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VIDEO REVIEW

Before Viewing

You are about to view a *News in Review* report and answer questions regarding a fake news story nicknamed Pizzagate. Bradley Graham, the owner of a bookstore called Politics and Prose, was a victim of threats because of the bogus story. This is his explanation of the fake news phenomenon: "Look, on one level, I get what's happening. Many people have less confidence in the conventional sources of information. They're looking for other sources of fact. But what's happened is, to fill this void, you have these entirely fictitious — in the case of Pizzagate — hateful, conspiracy theories that are jumping up. It'd be nice if people began to exercise a little more good judgment and common sense about what to believe."

1. What do you do to ensure that the news stories you are reading or viewing are factually correct and truthful?

2. What sources do you use to learn about current events and the news?

3. Are you prone to believing or refuting conspiracy theories? Why or why not?

Viewing

1. What did Edgar Welch do to draw the world's attention to the growing problem of fake news?

2. What is Pizzagate?

3. Why did the owners of Politics and Prose bookstore receive threats after the Pizzagate story began to spread?

4. What percentage of people believe the fake news stories they are reading (like the one claiming Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS and Donald Trump was endorsed by Pope Francis)?

    ☐ 25 per cent   ☐ 50 per cent   ☐ 75 per cent   ☐ 95 per cent

5. According to Buzzfeed's Craig Silverman, how did the Pizzagate story spread from a tweet to major sites like 4chan and Reddit? What were the implications of this leap?

    _____

    _____

6. a) What role does social media play in our perspective on the news?

    _____

    _____

    b) What role did social media play in the perpetuation of anti-Clinton stories on Trump supporters?

    _____

    _____

    c) How have sites like Facebook narrowed people's perspective?

    _____

    _____

7. According to the Washington Post, how did the Russians amplify the reach of fake news websites during the U.S. election?

    _____

    _____

8. While some feel the motive behind fake news is to spread disinformation, what does Craig Silverman believe is really behind the emergence — and flourishing — of these sites?

    _____

    _____

9. How profitable is the creation and dissemination of fake news?

    _____

10. What does Silverman mean when he refers to confirmation bias?

    _____

    _____

11. What is Facebook doing to try and stop the spread of fake news stories on their social media platform?

12. How did Marco Chacon try to prove that fake news stories were ridiculous? Was he successful?

13. Why does CNN's Christiane Amanpour believe it is imperative for journalists to vigorously defend the facts in what has come to be known as the post-truth world?

14. Why does Donald Trump's use of the expression "incited by the media" cause Amanpour great concern?

15. What needs to be done to help "readers to weigh the facts… in order to determine what is true and what is untrue on the web"?

Gavin Adamson, a journalism professor at Ryerson University, believes that in the not-too-distant future we will be able to **filter out fake news stories** in the same way our email accounts filter out junk mail and spam.

After Viewing

In this *News in Review* report, Christiane Amanpour says:

" In general, the establishment press has lost some of the trust of the public. I would submit that it's for several reasons. One, and most especially, because of the tsunami of fake news that purports to be real news, and therefore compromises the truth, and therefore compromises what people believe to be the media. I would say, also, by the extreme political partisanship, and the tribal corners that

the press has been forced into, in this hyper-political, hyper-partisan landscape. And then I would say one more thing. That we must not just be talking heads. Our credibility is grounded in our experience, and our unique experience, as the eyes and ears of our viewers, our audience, our readers, our listeners — whoever are the consumers and constituents. The people who we owe the basic truth about what's going on around the world. The fact that we're doing less of that on-the-ground reporting, I think, comes back to hurt us. So, I really do hope that this moment is one where there's a call to arms to defend the fact-based landscape. To defend the truth. And to defend, and re-commit, to a much greater, real reportage around the world. In every nook and cranny that we need to be in. **//**

1. Review the quote and explain, in your own words, the three ways in which the mainstream media has lost the trust of the public.

2. According to Amanpour, how can the mainstream media win back this trust?

THE STORY

Minds On

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg endured a great deal of criticism for his social media platform's inability to address concerns regarding fake news stories popping up on people's newsfeeds. He said that managing the problem was tricky since nearly 1.2 billion people log onto the social network every day and the mountain of content is exponentially greater than that. In spite of this (and in order to make a point), Princeton University sponsored a hackathon to deal with the problem. Within 36 hours, four students developed an app that could verify whether a story was fake or not.

1. Why does Zuckerberg think filtering out fake news stories is so tricky?

2. Why would he not want to simply adopt or create an application similar to the one created by the Princeton students?

Fake news: Nothing new

When fringe websites can get a substantial number of people to believe that a presidential candidate is running a clandestine child sex trade syndicate out of the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, you know you have a problem. That is what happened to bring the issue of fake news to the top of the agenda in 2016 as the political enemies of Hillary Clinton spun a tale involving the presidential candidate and key members of the Democratic Party leading a pedophilia ring out of a Washington restaurant. The headlines came after an armed gunman visited the pizzeria to set the children free. Finding no evidence of child sex trafficking in the restaurant, the man put down his guns and

surrendered to police. Thus, a story packaged to look real, but discernably fake to the reasonable reader, nearly led to disaster.

Fake news is nothing new. During World Wars I and II, the propaganda machines of various governments spun lies about the enemy in order to arouse a sense of emotional desperation, or to motivate people on the front lines and at home to work vigorously to defeat their adversaries. Out of the murky waters of the propaganda era emerged a desire to pursue clarity through unbiased or objective journalism that avoids the trappings of exaggeration and, certainly, blatant lies.

The internet vs. objective journalism

Despite a good run in the post-war era, something happened to turn objective journalism on its head. That something was the internet. Suddenly, message boards, discussion forums and blogs gave anyone with an opinion the opportunity to share their views with a global audience. Traditional newspapers and media outlets were forced to reinvent themselves, with the result being a shift away from journalistic objectivity and toward the new internet-based approach to information sharing. As a result, traditional news agencies were forced to compete with a brand of information sharing that saw the news morph into a combination of politically biased journalism and gossip driven storytelling. With the lines between bias and

gossip sufficiently blurred, the landscape became ripe for fake news stories full of conspiratorial plot twists and salacious details. These stories served one of two purposes: to make profit for the creators and to promote political tribes willing to say anything to demonize their opponents.

Some of the **top fake news stories** of 2016 included: Pope Francis endorses Donald Trump, Marijuana kills cancer cells, Hillary Clinton sells weapons to ISIS.

Profiteers and political adversaries

So, the fake news world is really an environment of profiteers and political adversaries. First, the profiteers: various news agencies have tracked fake news stories to small operations in places like Macedonia (where Buzzfeed found over 100 fake news sites). These fake news creators care little for the truth behind a story; all they want is for people seeing a story pop up on Facebook to click on the link (hence the term: **click-bait**). For every click, the profiteers get advertising revenue from Facebook. Similar plans are in place with Google and this is why both organizations have been subject to heavy criticism regarding the growth of fake news websites. Without the ad revenue from Facebook and Google, the sites would certainly fold in a heartbeat. One way the fake news outlets take advantage of social media and internet search engines is through the use of botnets — automated applications that amplify the

appearance of certain stories on specific feeds. The botnets, in turn, make certain stories trend on social media with Twitter and Facebook followers taking the bait and clicking on the stories. Once again, the more clicks, the more money for the creators of fake news.

The other group that has benefited from the proliferation of fake news stories are the political foes of the United States. Shortly after the 2016 U.S. election, the Washington Post revealed that Russian intelligence meddled in the campaign by amplifying stories that depicted Hillary Clinton in a negative light and Donald Trump in a positive light. They did this through botnets, trolls (humans clicking and commenting on sensational fake stories with the aim of upsetting people or eliciting an angry response from them), social media and right-wing websites — all designed to influence U.S. voters to think in a certain way. Many U.S. politicians see the Russian efforts as a tactic employed to erode people's faith in democracy. Eventually, President Barack Obama expelled 35 Russian diplomats from the U.S. and imposed sanctions on Russia for their cyber efforts.

And so, the differentiating features between what is real and what is fake are now so confused that media consumers have to evaluate just about everything that is put in front of them. This could either mark the beginning of an era of profound laziness, where people will simply believe anything and everything, or an era of rigorous discernment and critical thinking.

To Consider

1. Why is the idea of fake news nothing new?

2. What happened to turn objective journalism on its head?

3. What two groups benefited from the proliferation of fake news?

4. What do you think? Are we entering "an era of profound laziness, where people will simply believe anything and everything, or an era of rigorous discernment and critical thinking"?

THE TOP FAKE NEWS STORY OF 2016

Pizzagate

The story that made fake news a headline in 2016 started with a rumour involving Hillary Clinton and Democratic Party chairman John Podesta using Comet Ping Pong, a popular Washington pizzeria, to ferry children through a network of underground tunnels for the purpose of sex trafficking. The story was born shortly after FBI director James Comey released a fresh batch of emails that then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had sent under questionable circumstances on a private email server. Coinciding with the release of the emails came an innocuous tweet that cited a rumour that Clinton was the leader of a pedophilia ring. The message was retweeted 6,000 times.

Within a week, the rumour morphed into a bizarre story involving a complex child sex syndicate run by Clinton and Podesta, who happened to mention in one of the FBI released emails that he liked to eat pizza at Comet. This led to the birth of the hashtag #pizzagate, with people speculating that Comet must be the place where children were ferried — via a complex system of underground tunnels — to wealthy Washington pedophiles. By the time the U.S. election came, the new version of the story had been retweeted hundreds of thousands of times.

Eventually right-wing, anti-Clinton activists began working to make the story go viral, prompting some citizen journalists to try to provide evidence that the story was true. One such person was former Navy Reserve intelligence officer Jack Posobiec, who broadcast a live stream of activities in Comet Ping Pong in mid-November 2016. Posobiec was kicked out of the restaurant when staff noticed him filming a children's birthday party. However, allies of Posobiec and the #pizzagate story believe his ejection was proof that

something nasty was going on at Comet. Eventually the trending tale made so much headway that it received coverage on larger websites like 4chan and Reddit.

If you think a story may be bogus, **put it to the test**. Go to sites like FactCheck.org or Snopes.com to verify the validity of a story.

"The intel on this wasn't 100 per cent"

As a result of the trending story, the owners of Comet and neighbouring businesses like Politics and Prose received a steady stream of threatening emails and phone calls from late October to late November 2016. But that was nothing compared to what happened on Sunday, December 4, when 28-year-old Edgar Welch of North Carolina walked into Comet with a rifle and a pistol. He was there to expose the child sex ring and release the children. While everyone in Comet scurried for the exits, Welch methodically made his way through the restaurant. He fired his gun a few times, at one point blowing a lock off a door so that he could see what was behind it. He found no captive children and no evidence of sex trafficking tunnels in the basement. Eventually, he walked out the front door, hands in the air, and surrendered to police. When asked later about the information that led him to Comet Ping Pong that day, Welch said that he felt compelled to act but admitted that "the intel on this wasn't 100 per cent."

To Consider

1. a) How did the Pizzagate story start and spread?

   b) Why do you think the story got so much attention?

   c) Why were people determined to see that the story went viral?

2. What do the actions of Edgar Welch tell you about the impact of fake news stories?

⏻ Try This!

Go to your social media feed or a search engine and search for fake news stories.

Post the fake news stories you find on a Padlet (padlet.com) created by your teacher.

Discuss some of the fake news stories as a class with the following questions in mind:

1. Why would people believe these stories?

2. How have the stories' creators made what they have written appealing? How did they get people to take the click-bait?

3. How can a discerning, thoughtful reader see that the stories are false? How can they confirm that these stories are false?
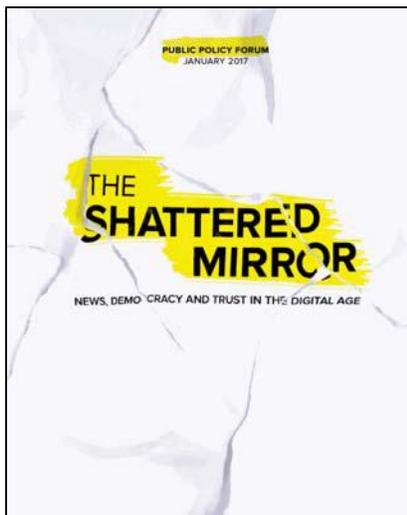
// Real news is in crisis. //

So says the recent report, **The Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age**, commissioned by the federal government. Heritage Minister Melanie Joly ordered the study as part of an overall review of Canada's media landscape. The report delves into some important questions about the function of news media and the impact of fake news, including: "Does the deteriorating state of traditional media, particularly but not exclusively newspapers, put at risk…the health of our democracy?"

Explore the report here: shatteredmirror.ca