

# The Virginia NEWS LETTER

## Fighting Fake News: The First Line of Defense is YOU!!!

by Wyatt Andrews

Last November, just after the election of Donald Trump, investigative journalists unearthed three astonishing facts about the spread of fake news—facts that the rest of us had not seen coming and had no reason to suspect.

### Real Facts About Fake News

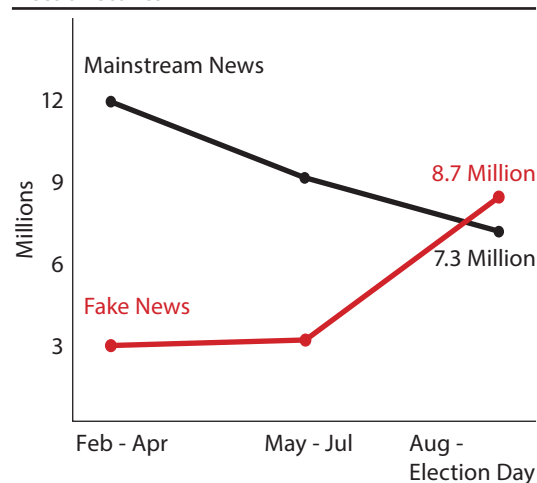
First, in the last month before Election Day, the engagement (shares, reactions and comments) of fake news stories on Facebook exceeded the engagement of real news written by mainstream news organizations. The media editor of BuzzFeed News, Craig Silverman, reported that the “20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.” This compares to the 7.3 million engagements earned by “the 20 best-performing (true) election stories from 19 major news websites.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, the fake “Pope-Endorses-Trump” story outperformed anything written by The Associated Press or The New York Times.<sup>2</sup>

Second, several reporters found a fountainhead of fake news websites originating in Veles, Macedonia, a city roughly the size of Charlottesville, 70 miles north of the Greek border.<sup>3</sup> There, they found a nest of Russian spies, right? No. It was more a collection of mischievous teenagers and 20-somethings, most of them proud of their now proven skill at fooling gullible Americans on such a large scale.



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Figure 1: Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories



Note: Engagement refers to the total number of shares, reactions and comments for a piece of content on Facebook

Source: Facebook Data Via Buzzsumo

Third, although one day we might learn that Russia encouraged or helped fund the Veles troll farms, the biggest and most direct influx of cash came from us. With every click. The reporters learned that the Veles fake news machine was funded by Facebook and Google because of the way revenue is shared with all websites that hold social media advertising accounts. Facebook and Google have publicly promised to find and defund the fake news sites, but the effectiveness of the defunding campaign isn't yet



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clear. Meanwhile, the trolls bragged about making \$60,000 each during the campaign, a rich man's salary in Veles. NBC.com featured the bar scene in Veles on the night the Google payments cleared: shots all around—for all those damaging shots fired into our election conversation.<sup>4</sup>

### What Can We Do

Google, Facebook and Twitter must now decide either to grapple with or avoid the hard questions and new responsibilities they hold as the largest news distributors in human history. The main question—at what point should these companies take down fake news (or the secret and divisive political ads or the expansion of hate speech) when any line they draw might also be considered censorship?

While this debate plays out and while Congress discusses the potential regulation of social media, we have new responsibilities as citizens to stop being consumers who blindly accept the new age of falsehoods.

Because some of the fakery is disguised very well, how do we protect ourselves from believing and sharing fake news? Here are some pointers.<sup>5</sup>

### Train Your Algorithm

Last year, a Facebook executive was speaking to my students via the internet and described the Facebook News Feed algorithm as “dumb”—not a word I was expecting for such sophisticated technology. What she meant was that the algorithm is designed only to guess at what you want next, based on what you've chosen before. It is not trying to deliver the spectrum of politics or public affairs—it's calculating with narrow focus only what you want.<sup>6</sup>

Think of it this way: you are what you click. If your news feed only shows dog videos, that's because you click mostly on animals. If you want all sides of political thought, you need to train the algorithm. Establish a pattern of clicking on diverse points view, so that the algorithm recognizes intellectual diversity as what you want. That, *and* the puppies. Either way, it's time to school your machine.

### Notice The Clickbait Format

No other way to say this: fake news often stands out for just being cheesy. OMG! With lots of exclamations!!! Blaring all-caps, “MUST READ!!!” That style of exaggerated look-at-me headlining is never going to come from The Associated Press or The Wall Street Journal. Sadly, the clickbait style is successful at reeling in our more gullible citizens. In our new role as responsible social media citizens, it's time to demand more of

ourselves and resist the urge to click needlessly. Otherwise we are generating revenue for those committed to fooling us.

### Find and Confirm the Source

However, if a headline proves irresistible, take the time required, literally a few seconds, to see if the news posted comes from a reputable source. Despite the online news and social media revolution, most *original news* still comes from newspapers or wire services like The Associated Press, and that includes most of the news covered by the broadcast and cable TV networks. If you click before sharing and that click leads you to a newspaper, wire service or network news website, the information is typically based on fact. If you see a designation like USAPatriot.com, chances are you've just toured the basements of Eastern Europe.

### What If You Are The Story

For many of you in public service, the issue is not made-up news; rather the problem is incorrect, unverified news that a local reporter or blogger is under pressure to post *now* with or without a comment from you that might make this oh-so-urgent story more accurate. For inexplicable reasons, too many reporters today are under pressure to post first, verify later. The truth is, there's no excuse for this. The best advice for those in the public eye is to use Twitter as soon as possible to explain your point of view on the issue at hand. If a news outlet was factually incorrect about a story, call them to account using Twitter.

The advantage to Twitter is that everyone in the news business uses it for instant information. The careful and not-so-careful reporters will all see your reaction in real time, you will reach everyone at once, and those who've gotten the story wrong will have been called out, with everyone who matters watching. This also puts pressure on the honest and not-so-honest to report your point of view—and in your words—because all they have in hand is your Twitter statement.

As a former newsman, I urge you *also* to engage directly with responsible reporters who did not rush to social media with less-than-accurate reporting. Hiding behind Twitter statements as a default media policy is not in your interest, because over time, everyone will notice you are hiding.

### In The Meantime

We have to recognize that as social media citizens, we should point at least one accusing finger at ourselves. Facebook and Google might have financed the fake news industry, but their executives weren't the ones at home clicking and sharing and falling for all that nonsense. That was us.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wyatt Andrews is the first professor of practice in the University of Virginia's Department of Media Studies. Wyatt joined the faculty in 2016 after a 41-year career in television news, the last 34 years of which he spent working at CBS News. While at CBS News, he was a National Correspondent but at various times, was the White House, Supreme Court and State Department Correspondent. His foreign posts for CBS News included Tokyo and Moscow. He also worked in local television news in Richmond, Orlando, and Miami.

A 1974 graduate of UVA, Wyatt got his start in journalism through WUVA News, the student-owned-and-operated radio station on Grounds. He was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, but grew up as a proud Navy brat in Norfolk. He and his wife Amy have been married for 34 years. They have four adult children including one attending UVA, and reside in Crozet.

### Endnotes

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- 2 Hunt Allcott & Matthew Gentzkow. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2): 211-236 (Spring 2017).
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