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“Sociology, Maslow’s Pyramid and Fake News”

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1. Introduction

As Mooney (2018) clearly presents “fake news” was rampant during the 2016 president elections in the United States and continues to stay in the headlines and opinion articles about corporate technology monopolies, the negative impact of social media, the viral spread of conspiracy theories, Russia propaganda, and on-line privacy. All those issues are part of fake news phenomenon.

This essay aims to frame fake news as a current social issue and fulfill the requirements for the “Contemporary Social Problem” course. The essay is divided in four parts: a) a historical context of fake news, b) the various definitions of fake news from current available academic literature, d) the relation between sociology, Maslow pyramid and fake news and d) to summarize and conclude.

2. Fake News: summary of historical context

It is reasonable to assume that fake news is not an 21st century issue. Mislead of facts, biased data/information, and false arguments applied to discredit values and beliefs have always been part of society (Posseti & Matthews 2018). On the other hand, the technology and scale behind the current phenomenon make it much more socially complex (Uberti, 2016).

In the France of the 17th century, a newspaper called “Canard”, which used to sell fake news on the streets of Paris (Darnton, 2017). Fake news was also spread in Germany in the 19th century (Mcgillen, 2017).

Burkhardt (2017a) creates a historical division of fake news in four periods: Pre-printing press era, post-printing years, mass media and internet age. The same author points that in the pre-printing period, fake news was basically information ownership (where knowledge was also power). The French “Canard” mentioned above is an example of post printing era. In the mass media years, the radio show “Broadcasting the Barricades” broadcasted fake news as a parody in 1926, alarming the unknowing population (Burkhardt, 2017a).

Lastly, the digital age (today), fake news has been spread and widely shared, with most known episodes (in the United States) being the “Pizzagate conspiracy” and Pope’s endorsement of Donald Trump candidacy in 2016.

3. Definition of Fake News: a working in process

Watson (2018b) mentions that the “fake news” term was first created in the late 19th century by Merriam Webster. Prior to this period, fake news was mainly used to designate false news. Meneses (2018) notes that “fake news” does not have the same meaning as “false news”. The author argues that both have similar but never equal meaning. For Meneses (2018) the key difference is the intention with the falsehood is produced and spread. False news is directly linked with journalistic error, lack of competence and irresponsibility, while fake news is related to “false information” that is deliberately intended and intentionally misleading (Meneses, 2018). The author also concludes that false news has always existed, different from fake news, that only has been firmly around for the past 20 years. The neologism is the result of technological advancement, the digitalization and social media. Nicholson (2018) expresses, at a TED talk in Boca Raton, that social media platforms are the key to the scale of fake news.

However, there is clear no academic consensus of fake news. Farkas and Schou (2018) remember that President Donald Trump was the politician, especially during the White House race of 2016, who made it popular the term. Mr. Trump basically started repeatedly using to label all journalism that did not favor in campaign or point of view. Lazer et. all (2018) indicate that since 2016 presidential elections, fake news has been mostly used to promote ideologies or to make money in different parts of the world. Estulin (2015) would classify fake news as the modern social engineering of the masses.

Habgood-Coote (2019) argues that terminology has been used incorrectly by scholars and the media, affirming that the term fake news does not have a stable meaning and is highly dependent on innumerable contexts. On top of that, the author considers the terminology “absurd” and unnecessary, given to the multiplicity of definitions and because of that serves as propaganda that could potentially jeopardize democracy. Cock Bunning (2018) reminds that the European Commission’s report did choose to use only the terminology of “disinformation”. Ireton and Posetti (2018) evaluate that the choice of disinformation (made by the European Commission) covers a broader spectrum of false or fraudulent information, with a deliberate intention to deceive, in different formats, in which fake news fits.

The author makes the point, as well, that most of the literature puts the concept of fake news as corresponding to the format of a news story. Corner (2017) points that the world is currently witnessing a “shift to post-truth, trading, heavily on assumptions about an “era of truth” that apparently people enjoy”.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) conclude that most of the authors consider fake news to be an article that mimics the format of a new story or report, with fake content that was designed with the intent to deceive the audience. Fallis and Mathiesen (2019) defines fake news as something associated with counterfeiting, imitating the real. Lazer et all (2018) adds that fake news seeks to be credible and gain legitimacy by mirroring the format of the real media, in order to manipulate and deceive the reader and make the fake content look real. Meneses (2018) also points that the main goal of fake news is to go viral. For the reason, fake news can take the form of a news feed post (in the case of Facebook or Instagram) or a tweet (in the case of Twitter, just as real news is presented on social media. Silverman (2016) confirms that fake news links to websites that mirror real new sites.

Fallis and Mathiesen (2019) consider that fake news falsifies what is genuine and true. However, Rini (2017) believes that fake news does not have to be one hundred percent false. As the author implies, it distorts and manipulates the truth. Walters (2018) contests the deliberate intention to deceive. Jaster and Lanius (2018) argues that young people from Macedonia (that created and disseminated fake news during the 2016 US presidential campaign) did not care about the truth. The authors comment that those young Macedonians publish any story for financial gain. Pepp et al (2019) defines fake news as something that simply does not match editorial criteria and journalist practices, regardless of the producer's intent. Attkisson (2018) corroborates this definition in her TEDTalk at the University of Nevada.

Baptista (2020) defines fake news as a type of online disinformation, with totally or partially false content, create intentionally to deceive and/or manipulate a specific audience, through a format that imitates a news or report, through false information that may or may not be associated with real events, with a an opportunistic structure to attract readers attention and to persuade them to believe in falsehood, with the goal to obtain more clicks, shares, greater advertising revenue and ideological gain.

As learned on the AIU sociology course from a theory developed by David McClellan, people tend to seek “affiliation”. Affiliation, as presented during the course, is a strong desire to be liked and stay on good terms with most people. The “affiliation” desire is a potential trickster to generate “likes” on clear falsehoods.

4. Sociology, Maslow pyramid and fake news

Plummer (2010) firmly states that the role of the sociologist is to help connect theory with practice; to think critically about society, question the status quo, and open up dialogue to positively advance society. Mills (1959) concludes that at the core of sociological thought is the “sociological imagination”. The author defines sociological imagination as the ability to see personal troubles as public issues and to consider the impact of broader social and historical contexts on personal situations. At the same publication, Mills (1959) reminds us that the role of social scientists and educator is to work towards the fulfillment of universal democratic values. Those values are not only inherent to the application of sociological imagination but also are the value of truth and fact, the role of reason in human affairs, and human freedom.

Mooney (2018) provides us a way to think broadly about why so many individuals were exposed to and susceptible to believing in fake news. In addition, the author states that the sociological imagination is an intellectual tool to make sense of personal and social reality in general. For Mooney (2018), sources of recorded information are one way the society shares and creates human reality and represents itself. In particular, news and other popular information sources play a major role in shaping our understanding of current events and the world. That's the reason the issue of fake news is at the soul of modern society.

Heiner (2002) defines that social problems are socially constructed. The article mentions that an issue might be long standing but only be considered as a social problem when heightened attention is given to the matter. This may happen when the issues start to affect powerful and privileged groups in a greater way than before and is given more attention in the mainstream media. The subjectivist approach explains why issues of propaganda and sensationalized information have long been around, but why fake news is now in the public opinion eye as a social issue (Mooney, 2018).

Caplan et al (2108) conclude that both liberals and conservatives agree that fake news is a social problem, although those two ideological groups have different takes on the exact nature of the problem as an attempt to de-legitimize facts, a debunking of the mainstream media, or cover for censorship. Moynihan (1983), in his Washington Post column, wrote: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts”.

However, no matter the sociological perspective of fake news, the reality is that people simply do not trust the traditional media. *The polling firm Gallup produced a report called “American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy.*

Based on the findings, there is a widening gulf between American aspirations for and assessments of the news media. In general, the American people render deeper and increasingly polarized judgments about the news media and how well it is fulfilling its role in our democracy.

For the 2020 American Views survey, Gallup polled more than 20,000 U.S. adults and found heavy pessimism and further partisan entrenchment about how the news media delivers on its democratic mandate for factual, trustworthy information. Many Americans feel the media’s critical roles of informing and holding those in power accountable are compromised by increasing bias. As such, Americans have not only lost confidence in the ideal of an objective media, they believe news organizations actively support the partisan divide.

As Chang (2020), during a of TEDx Wrigleyville says: “without trusted news sources, it’s easy for people to fall for made-up stories, or for politicians to dismiss cold, hard facts that make them look bad”.

The central figure of the Wrigleyvill TEDx presents a potential solution based on the Maslow pyramid (a concept presented at the AIU Sociology course). As Hitt, Miller and Colella (2008) present, the Maslow is a concept in psychology that says: people must have their basic needs met before they can dedicate energy and attention to their psychological needs, like belonging and esteem, and eventually reach what Maslow called self-actualization, or fulfillment of your full potential.

For example, if I someone doesn’t have a roof over my head, it’s hard to build intimate relationships. And without healthy relationships, it’s going to be hard to reach full potential.

Chang (2020) main point is: is journalism actually making people's lives better? The author claims that information is power. If people need information to get through the day—like finding healthy food for your family, or a safe place to stay the night—that's critical. Based on her views, if journalism wants to create a strong foundation of trust with general audience (and gain ground against fake news), it should dedicate most of the energy to making sure these needs are met first. She mentions that sometimes it does. But that's unfortunately more of the exception than the rule. Chang concludes that the hierarchy of information needs helps the journalism avoid a trap that support fake news. It makes focus on delivering information that has a purpose.

As example, when COVID-19 hit, Ms. Chang surveyed community groups early on to see how could help. With a flood of stories about the pandemic every day, people said they needed to cut through the noise to get access to resources quickly. Hence, she spent weeks gathering all the ways people could get aid—like money, food and health care—into a single database, that's easy to search and available. That's focus on the hierarchy of needs and not on the “polarized” and “fake news” side of the issues.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this essay addresses three main points: first of all, fake news is not a 21st century phenomenon but has gained volume, scale and momentum with the technological tools. Secondly, the academic arena has not been able to be reasonably consistent with the definition of fake news. It is certainly a working in process with all the challenges that the topic presents. Third (last but not least), it has clearly that fake news is a contemporary social issue with many dimensions. One dimension is the lack of trust on the traditional media. A potential way forward to minimize fake news and increase media trust is to apply the Maslow pyramid.

Hence, the current fake news phenomenon maps out a complex landscape that reflects aspects of many social forces as well historical economic, political, psychological, technological and cultural factors (Caplan et al, 2018).

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