Advertising is driving social media-fuelled fake news and it is here to stay

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Screenshot of the fake news.

The rise of fake news, once only the preserve of certain types of tabloids

has now become a dominant feature of social media and a subject of major [concern](#) for mainstream media.

CNN has even [started](#) the process of educating its readers on how to spot [fake news](#). Ironically, however, the article sits above a strip of "paid content" which are clickbait advertorials provided by an Israeli organisation [Outbrain](#). The pictures and titles in a large number of cases completely [misrepresent](#) what the advertising is actually about.

Given that the main role of fake news is to drive advertising revenue, the difference between using Outbrain advertising and presenting outright fake news to drive traffic may be just a matter of degree.

It turns out that a great deal of the recent fake news targeted at Trump supporters [appears](#) to be originating in Macedonian town of Veles. An industry has developed there of creating sites with names like [DonaldTrumpNews.co](#) and [USADailyPolitics.com](#) that feeds pro-Trump fake news which in turn generates large revenues from traffic generated in large part through Facebook shares.

Although Google, Facebook and to a lesser extent Twitter, are enabling fake news to spread also providing the incentives through advertising revenues, it is in their financial interests to turn a blind eye to the practice. After all, it is algorithms making the decisions of what shows up in news feeds and they can always claim they are working on "tweaks" of their decision making software to prevent fake news from trending.

Fake news however is not just coming from humans. Researchers Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara [published](#) from the University of Southern California looked at tweets hash-tagged about Clinton and Trump over a recent period of 4 weeks. They found that out of 20.7 million tweets, 20% of them were generated by artificial bots. Bots

represented 15% of the 2.8 million distinct users involved in sending the tweets.

It is hard to tell whether fake news and its promotion on social media really impacts people's opinions other than simply confirming opinions of groups that have already decided on their respective in-groups. It is not certain that fake news and social media created these divisions in the first place or simply created the demand.

Fake news, especially those surfaced in tweets have even been accepted by mainstream media. Fox News reported the story that Michelle Obama had deleted supportive tweets when she heard that Clinton was being investigated by the FBI. Although presenter Sean Hannity later retracted the allegation, its untruth was downplayed.

Whilst the financial motivations for news is to drive website traffic and advertising, it is unlikely that there will be any turning back from stories that have to compete with fiction. Again, Google and Facebook's algorithms created the "filter bubble" where users are only shown news that they agree with and will want to read. The fact that this behaviour has been exploited by people concocting news is just how advertising drives behaviours.

Although it may be tempting to think that news from reputable media organisations is more reliable, they are still influenced by partisan opinion and the pressures to advertise and generate traffic and sales. Looking at the front pages of the New York Times, Washington Post, CNN and Fox News clearly highlighted the political preferences of the organisations and the particular perspectives taken by reporters and opinion writers.

Ultimately, there is no protection from fake news other than to adopt a skeptical view of all news and take the truth of it on balance of

likelihood and confirmation from multiple reputable sources.

This situation is not of itself new. French philosopher Michel de Montaigne commented about the turmoil and divisions of France in the 16th Century [saying](#):

"Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in the many errors that the human fancy has produced? Is it not better to suspend your convictions than to get mixed up in these seditious and quarrelsome divisions?"

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