

Understanding Fake News

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Abstract: The rise in fake news or the deliberate dissemination of false information mainly through social and traditional media raises serious concerns as to the kind of information the public is receiving. There exists confusion as to what fake news is all about, sources, and how to identify fake news. This paper attempts to demystify fake news, looks at the common media platforms used to share fake news, and highlights the reasons why people disseminate fake news. In addition, the paper analysis the structural and environmental dynamics that have led traditional mainstream media contribute to the rise of fake news. Research indicates that this phenomena has solicited global initiatives and resources for verification of news to address fake news highlighted herein. In conclusion, fake news pose a challenge to news as defined under journalism and mass media studies and practices and it is important that research continues

Key Words: Disinformation, Fake news, Media,

Introduction

What is “Fake News”?

Fake news is any false information that is deliberately meant to be wholly or largely false or misleading, spread through online social media, but occasionally finding its way to mainstream traditional print and broadcast news media. The term may also be used to cast doubt upon legitimate news from an opposing political standpoint, a tactic known as lying press. The false information is often sensational, dishonest and outright fabricated, which is then reverberated through social media. A broader definition of fake news could be false or misleading information published as authentic news, generally understood to be deliberate, however possibly accidental. Fake news has no basis, but is presented as being factual. These stories are not only found in politics, but also in vaccination, stock values, nutrition and other areas of human interest. In summary, fake news embraces everything that is false, erroneous, dubious, and media driven tales that circulate widely and serve to corrupt or warp popular discourse.

Other names

It has been noted that the use of the term ‘fake news’ may not be sufficient to capture the complexity of the corruption of an entire information ecosystem in terms of the different types of misinformation (the inadvertent sharing of false information) and disinformation (the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false). Other common names for fake news include: post-truth, misinformation, disinformation and “alternative facts”.

Social Media and Fake news

The upsurge in the use of internet, websites and social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, as channels of information, is associated with the increase in fake news. The cycle of fake news includes inventors, consumers, spreaders and channels. Inventors of fake news concoct stories to misinform, sway opinions, spread propaganda, incite hate, alter perceptions, etc., through opinions, predictions and blatant fabricated narratives. They go to great lengths to give the impression that they are authoritative sources of news, by stamping their content with the distinctiveness - logos, signatures and stamps - of legitimate news sources. This manipulates the public who then disseminate and share it widely on social media platforms.

Table 1: Facts and myths about fake news

Myths and misconceptions	Truth
It is a new phenomena	Fake news is as old as the history of man
Only found in the social media	Also finds its way into the traditional and mainstream media
Fake news is a myth and exaggerated	It is a reality and a big problem

The effects of fake news are not that serious	Fake news have far reaching such as murders, reputation damage, election loss consequences
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Why do people create false news?

Motivation for creating and spreading fake news vary, and can be summarised under the following 'Ps' - Poor journalism, Parody, to Provoke, Passion, Partisanship, Profit, Political influence or Power, and Propaganda¹. In general, the reasons why people create fake news can be explained as follows:

- Intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person;
- Financial gains by getting people to click on sites so that they are exposed to advertising;
- To persuade others to take action to support or oppose a cause or political candidate;
- To deceive or prank people;
- Increased popularity of social media such as the Facebook News Feed;
- To increase readership and improve rates because 'eye-popping' headlines in social media feeds make it easier for users to share content without evaluating or reading it. This creates a viral storm of sound bites without substance because the vulnerable recipients unknowingly are enlisted as amplifiers and multipliers;
- Confirmation bias-people are more likely to accept information that confirms their beliefs and dismiss information that does not;
- Increased political polarisation and hostile government actors who generate and propagate fake news, particularly during elections.

Consequences of fake news

Fake news is a bigger problem than previously thought, with potentially far-reaching consequences. The effects of fake news can be evaluated in the light of:

- On journalism as a profession***
 - Salient danger associated with "fake news" is that it devalues and delegitimises voices of expertise, authoritative institutions, and the concept of objective data—all of which undermine society's ability to engage in rational discourse based upon shared facts.
 - The promotion of "safe news" at the expense of difficult or challenging news stories.
 - The need for credible sources to allocate ever-diminishing resources to debunking inaccurate information (which poses both financial and reputational costs).
- On the public in general***
 - Causes moral panic or mass hysteria.
 - Damages public trust.
 - Increasingly polarised along ideological lines, and this affective polarisation tends to trigger motivated reasoning—an unconscious, biased way of processing information which makes even smart people believe in falsehoods that support their ideological and partisan predispositions.
 - Fake news entrenches stereotypes, generalisations and inequality in society.
 - People have been killed when false rumors have spread through digital media about child abductions.²

How has mainstream media contributed to the flourishing of fake news?

Some of the media's own failures and challenges that have contributed to the rise of fake news include:

- ✓ Media that itself is occasionally part of the establishment elite, and unable to properly connect with the frustration and anger of people and communities has given room for people to seek alternative sources of unverified information.
- ✓ News in its traditional format has become unfashionable - communications revolution provides people with different ways to access information and they create their own filters for information they like or don't like.
- ✓ The media business no longer makes money out of news - display and classified advertising have moved online and so far no convincing solution has been found to the problem of filling the ever-widening gaps in editorial budgets. A few newspapers have created online paywalls.
- ✓ There is less money being spent on investigative journalism and investment in human resources – decent jobs, training and quality – is falling.
- ✓ As a result, media increasingly follow the agenda of political and corporate elites and there is a dearth of public interest journalism that holds power to account. This may explain in part why some mainstream media have become disconnected from their audience.

¹Wardle, Claire (February 16, 2017). "[Fake news. It's complicated](http://www.firstdraftnews.org/)". Firstdraftnews.org.

²Vidhi Doshi, "India's Millions of New Internet Users are Falling for Fake News – Sometimes with Deadly Consequences," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2017.

Structural factors contributing to the rise of fake news

- The democratisation of information exchange, thanks to social media platforms and digital content production technologies (like Photoshop). Anyone is now able to produce credible “noise” that is difficult to distinguish from high-quality information.
- The demand for “fake news” as a natural byproduct of faster news cycles and increasing consumer demand for shorter-form content.
- The widespread disagreement over what comprises “fake news.” Merely labeling something as “fake news” can itself be considered propaganda, making it all the more important that journalists cite sources and “show their work.”
- Press-branding campaigns that attempt to distinguish between traditional journalism or respectable new sources of media and propaganda or outright lies have not been an effective means of reestablishing the authority of the press. This is primarily due to social reasons to prioritize peer-determined “truth” over previously authoritative voices, the psychological realities of tribalism, the power of confirmation bias, and the dopamine surges associated with outrage.
- Traditional gatekeepers are less effective or visible. For example, traditional news organisations lack the institutional authority they once enjoyed. (This is also true for many other historically influential and authoritative voices, including medical professionals, scientists, religious leaders, and academic institutions.)
- Current gatekeepers are more likely to view news production and dissemination as a business enterprise than as providing a public service. Additionally, the public perception of mass media as a corporate, profit-driven entity has further diminished its authority.
- Ownership of news distribution has shifted from traditional content creators to digital distributors. Digital distribution allows for highly efficient micro-targeting and limited exposure of users to challenging content. In contrast, when content creators were also responsible for distribution, diverse content was often bundled together for a mass audience, fostering the development (either voluntarily or serendipitously) of a common set of shared facts. Digital distribution also tends to favour popularity, engagement, and “shares” over expertise and accuracy.

Types of Fake News

There are different types of fake news as follows:

1. Satire or parody - no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.
2. False connection - when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.
3. Misleading content - misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual.
4. False context - when genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
5. Impostor content - when genuine sources are “impersonated” with false, made-up sources.
6. Manipulated content - when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive”, as with a “doctored” photo.
7. Fabricated content - news content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

Below is a summary showing the relationship between types of fake news and the reasons why people generate fake news.

Misinformation Matrix








FIRSTDRAFT		MISINFORMATION MATRIX					
	 SATIRE OR PARODY	 FALSE CONNECTION	 MISLEADING CONTENT	 FALSE CONTEXT	 IMPOSTER CONTENT	 MANIPULATED CONTENT	 FABRICATED CONTENT
POOR JOURNALISM		✓	✓	✓			
TO PARODY	✓				✓		✓
TO PROVOKE OR TO 'PUNK'					✓	✓	✓
PASSION				✓			
PARTISANSHIP			✓	✓			
PROFIT		✓			✓		✓
POLITICAL INFLUENCE			✓	✓		✓	✓
PROPAGANDA			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 1: Claire Walde, First Draft 2017

Sources of fake news

The key venue of fake news is social media. This is because social media is not held to account the same way that mainstream media is, when it comes to upholding and sharing accurate, reliable information. The challenge is for readers to interrogate what they're reading rather than simply believing anything that aligns with their values. Some popular sites of fake news include "The Onion", a satirical publication with a readership of 4.3 trillion, Facebook, and Monticello. Several other fake news sites try to pass themselves off as real, either by never disclosing their satirical nature or hiding the disclosure deep within their websites.

So how do you tell it is fake news?

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has developed the following guidelines to assist in recognising fake news³:

1. Consider the source- to understand its mission and purpose.
2. Read beyond the headline - to understand the whole story.
3. Check the authors - to see if they are real and credible.
4. Assess the supporting sources - to ensure they support the claims.
5. Check the date of publication -to see if the story is relevant and up to date.
6. Ask if it is a joke - to determine if it is meant to be satire.
7. Review your own biases - to see if they are affecting your judgment.
8. Ask experts -to get confirmation from independent people with knowledge.

Other tips include:

9. If other stories from this source are incredulous – the headlines may be factual but the rest of the stories sound sensational.
10. If it predicts a future disaster or reveals cure for a major illness - for example that the world's water is running out, etc.
11. If the website carries a disclaimer, as legitimate sites do not need disclaimers.
12. If the story is a little too funny, interesting or makes you angry. Many false news stories purposely play on our fears and anxieties, knowing that to do so will make people follow their emotions and not their brains.
13. If a poll is featured – polls form the basis of many a news article, and very often they are totally legitimate. However, polls can also be misleading depending upon how the questions are phrased, number of people surveyed and how they were selected, who conducted the poll or results taken out of context.
14. Be wary of stories that rely on anonymous sources.

What do you do to stop the spread of fake news?

- Post or share stories you know to be true, from sources you know to be responsible.

³ "How to Spot Fake News". IFLA blogs. January 27, 2017.

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- Help shape the media you want - pay for journalism you value. Support for fake news sites will produce and lead to the proliferation of that kind of information and journalism.
- Appreciate the role of the community, businesses and organisations wield “enormous power” to channel advertising or sponsorship money to platforms they trust and respect, and not to sites that attract views by promoting hate or divisiveness.
- Appropriate legislation- by passing laws that strike a balance between weeding out fake news that is deliberately misleading, malicious and used to profit off others, while allowing journalists get on with their jobs.

How can journalists address the challenge of fake news?

As already mentioned, fake news poses a serious challenge to journalism as a profession. The rise of fake news only reaffirms the future of reliable journalism and calls for journalists to be the beacons of accurate and reliable information, to maintain legitimacy in the digital age. The following tips can help journalists to do so:

- ✓ Observe and stick more closely to professional standards and ethics, to avoid publishing of unchecked information.
- ✓ Avoid relying on anonymous sources; cultivate viewpoint diversity.
- ✓ Take a distance from information which may interest some of the public but which is not in the public interest.
- ✓ The media should be careful that external post-publication corrections do not become a substitute for internal processes of quality control. Journalists have to do better and “get it right” in the first place, or forfeit the possibility of a society to have believable media⁴.
- ✓ Media houses should embark on educational and informative sessions to engage readers and help them make sense of news, by for example, hosting experts to discuss the issue in question.
- ✓ Individual media houses should work with other media organisations to see how to flag stories that could be misleading, as has been done in other countries, such as France.

A Summary of Research findings on the prevalence of fake news globally

The reliance of news consumers upon social media fuels fake news⁵. Whilst developed countries record 87 percent digital access, significant improvement has been recorded in developing countries around the world from 45 percent in 2013 to 54 percent in 2015.

Further, social media sites are very popular as news and information sources in the developing world. Eighty six percent of Middle Eastern Internet users rely upon social networks, compared to 82 percent in Latin America, 76 percent in Africa, 71 percent in the United States, 66 percent in Asia and the Pacific, and 65 percent in Europe.

A Forbes survey conducted in April 2018 found that more people in Turkey (49%) than anywhere in the world, were most likely having experienced it. Mexico (43%) and Brazil (35%) came ahead of the US at 31 percent, while Germany at 9 percent was the lowest, performing slightly better than the United Kingdom at 15 percent.⁶

In 2017, up to 51 percent of all Americans and 62 percent of adults were found to rely upon social media sites, in contrast to 22 percent relying upon print news. It was also found that the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories, and that many people who saw the fake news stories believed them.

Organisations such as Cambridge Analytica are believed to have used data-mining and image-manipulation techniques to influence more than 200 elections around the world, including Kenya's elections in 2013 and 2017.

⁴ 2018 UNESCO: Journalism, “Fake News and Misinformation”: A handbook for Journalism Education and Training.

⁵ How to combat fake news and disinformation, Darrell M. West Monday, December 18, 2017

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/> Retrieved November 5, 2018

⁶ Where Exposure To Fake News Is Highest [Infographic] – Niall McCarthy, Contributor- Data journalist covering technological, societal and media topics – (2018) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/06/14/where-exposure-to-fake-news-is-highest-infographic/#32bb043f4a4d>

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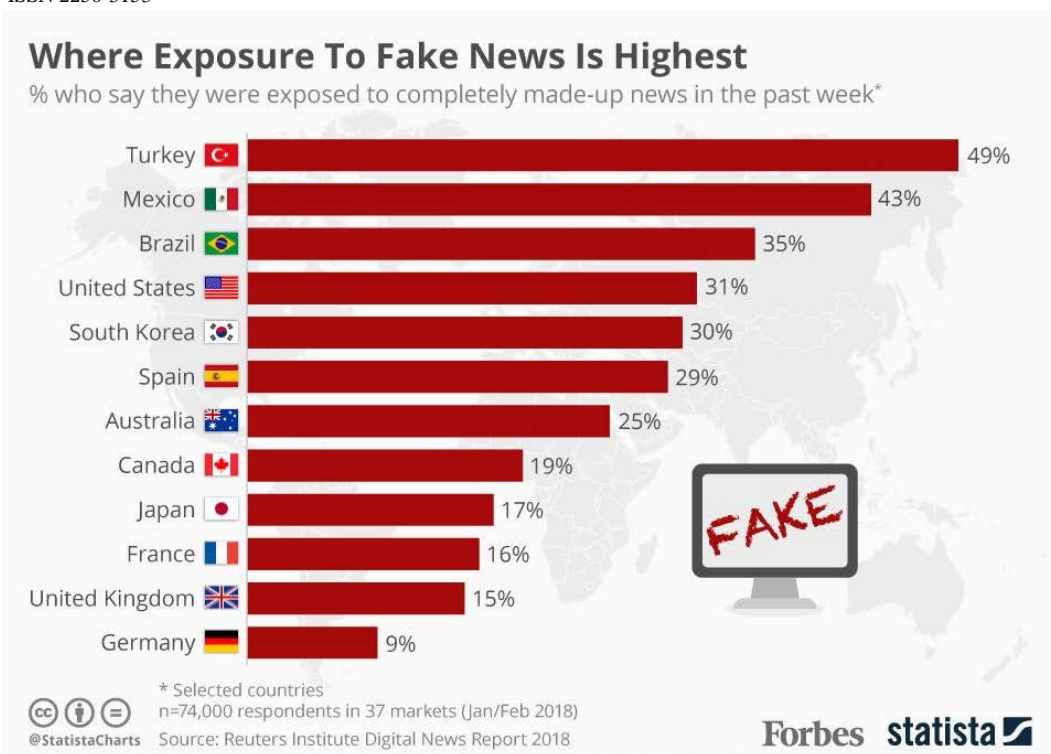


Figure 3: Exposure to Fake News Infographic - Source Forbes (2018)

Fake news in Kenya

The issue of fake news shot into the limelight in Kenya in April 2017⁷. In the run up to the 2017 election, a lot of fake news and misinformation spread in Kenya to the extent that the Communications Authority of Kenya and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission issued guidelines to regulate the content shared.

A study conducted by Portland and Geopollin Kenya during the election period of 2017 found that 49 percent of Kenyans received news about the general election through social media, but that the levels of trust in the accuracy of the information was very low compared to more traditional news sources such as TV, radio and newspapers.

The research found that fake news was a problem in the Kenyan elections, with 90 percent of respondents having seen false or inaccurate information and 87 percent of them having perceived the information as being deliberately false. Portland concluded that the false news was so widespread that it was limiting people's ability to make an informed voting decision.

In Kenya, the number of mobile subscriptions by January 2018 was at 41.0 million. Similarly, mobile phone penetration in Kenya is at 90%.⁸ Between 2016 and 2018, the 10 most downloaded apps in Kenya were found to be Uber, Instagram, Facebook, Branch, Facebook Messenger, True caller, Tala, Facebook Lite, WhatsApp and Opera Mini.⁹ This points to the increasing number of persons accessing unsolicited and solicited information from the Internet, as opposed to traditional mainstream news sources.

A study of websites by the Media Council of Kenya showed that "websites emerged as the biggest sources of fake news at 35 per cent compared to Facebook and Twitter at 31 and 19 per cent respectively, and bloggers at 10 per cent."¹⁰ Some of the notorious websites active in fake news dissemination during the period of this electoral campaigns and identified by the journalism industry regulator in Kenya MCK, included, Spotonews. Info, ConnectKenyans.com, Boseautoservice.com, Moneytechnews.com, Eazymoneytips.com, Hivisasa.com and kenyacrazymedias.com.¹¹

⁷GeoPoll: The Reality of Fake News in Kenya

⁸State of the Internet in Kenya 2017 Report Published by the Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE). February 2018.

⁹ www.nendo.co.ke

¹⁰ <http://mediaobserver.co.ke/index.php/2018/06/11/cyberspace-and-proliferation-of-fake-news/>

¹¹ <http://mediaobserver.co.ke/index.php/2018/06/11/cyberspace-and-proliferation-of-fake-news/>

Fake news and women

A study done¹² in 2017 in the US found that whilst women were found to spend more time than men, on social media, the probability of sharing political fake news was higher in males than in females. According to the research, in the US, democrat-female voters were less likely to share political fake news than male independent voters.

For women in politics and those in the media, fake news rides on the fact that “women sell” content, whether in photos or as subjects or objects of juicy stories, hence profit drivers for fake news generators. It rides on societal misogyny and gender stereotypes.

Conclusions

Fake news is still a burning issue and thus offers fertile ground for further research given the dynamic nature of media, especially new media and the digitization on traditional media houses. Few studies have focused on effects of fake news on women in politics and media and this paper recommends attention to such gender perspectives.

¹²Sociology of Fake News: Factors affecting the probability of sharing political fake news online - Manuel Goyanes & Ana Lavín - Media@LSE Working Paper #55

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.01.2019.p8505>

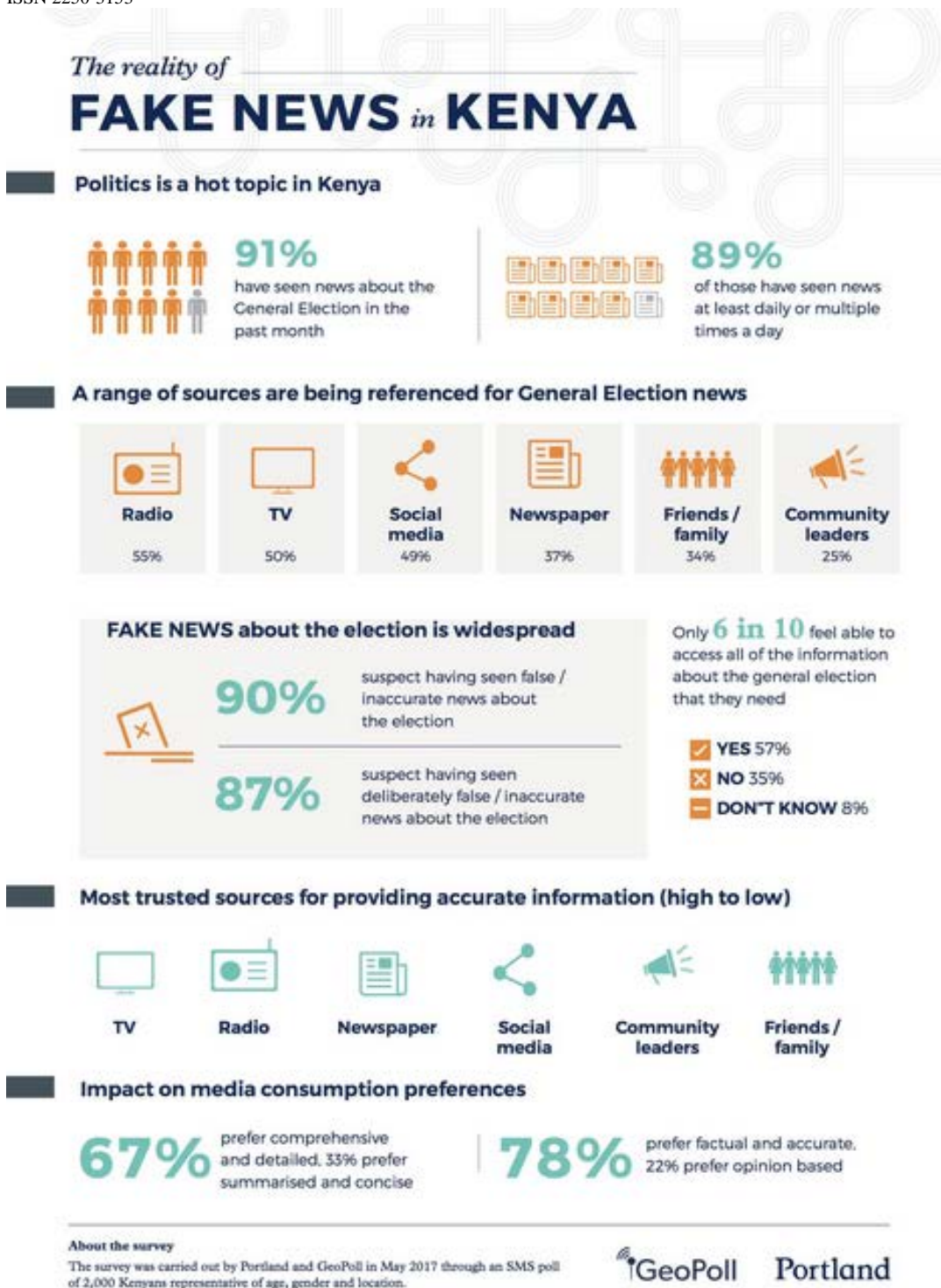


Figure 2: Fake News stats in Kenya - Source: Portland & Geopoll

One leading media establishment in the country, The Standard Media Group, has in the recent past been compelled to set up news updates verification alternatives for audiences to know if news is factual and true by texting a short message service code 22840 on their mobile phones. A number of media houses are also rapidly adopting the trend. Facebook also intervened by warnings of the spread of fake news and a tool designed to help the public spot it.

Table 2: Most Common Sources of Fake news

Politics	The most widely shared fake news stories in the US in 2016 were political, touching on the
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	persons of the top presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. London-based propaganda think tank, <i>Cambridge Analytica</i> , admitted to playing a role in the upsurge of fake news during that period. ¹³
Public Offices	Public offices have also been targeted by fake news, ranging from corruption, to controversial court rulings in judgments, amongst others. For example, the Judiciary of Kenya has fallen victim of this with fake communiqués and statements emerging in public, some purportedly signed in the name of the Chief Justice, David Maraga, complete with a legitimate looking letterhead and stamp. ¹⁴
Contemporary Social Issues	Fake news has a negative impact on public beliefs about various social issues, which include health and vaccines; environment and climate change; culture and religion, among many others.
Prominent Persons	Fake news targets prominent personalities, politicians, senior civil servants and celebrities, among others, spreading falsehoods revolving around monetary scandals, personal integrity, and sometimes death of such persons. South African retired cleric, Desmond Tutu, Kenyan comedian, Churchill Ndambuki, and former president, Daniel Moi, are a few examples of this form of falsehood.
Mainstream Media	Fake news penetrating the digital space have impacted the way mainstream media operates, mainstream media themselves having been the target and purveyors of false information. ¹⁵ Besides, governments, sections of the public or rivaling groups have also at times mobilised ‘digital hate squads’ to quiet non-conforming, or critical media (persons and houses) by disseminating fake news about them.

Global Efforts to Combat Fake News

Numerous efforts are now underway to limit the prevalence and potential disruptiveness of online misinformation by helping the public to critically evaluate news sources. Since early 2016, Facebook has launched a number of efforts to address false news, click bait, and sensationalism, including a partnership with fact-checking organisations and a network of researchers called the News Integrity Initiative.¹⁶

Google announced in November 2016 that it would restrict its AdSense ads on sites that “misrepresent, misstate, or conceal information about the publisher, the publisher’s content, or the primary purpose of the web property.”¹⁷

Twitter is in the process of launching “Advertising Transparency Center” and coming up with new policies that will provide details about all ads carried on its platform, place clear visual markers on political advertisements, disclose how political ads are targeted, and strengthen policies regarding political advertising.¹⁸

In June 2017, Germany enacted a law against posting on social media of hate speech, child pornography, terror-related items and false information, and which makes it possible to punish social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with fines of up to 50 million euros (\$58 million) if they fail to remove such illegal content.

The Malaysian Parliament, in April 2018 approved a law punishing the propagation of partially or totally false information with prison sentences of up to six years and fines of \$130,000.

In France, two controversial draft laws are under discussion with the aim to guard against manipulation of information during an electoral period.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy-9iciNF1A> , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpbeOCKZFfQ>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuUX6fsPVg> ,

¹⁴ <http://mediaobserver.co.ke/index.php/2018/06/11/cyberspace-and-proliferation-of-fake-news/>

¹⁵ <http://mediaobserver.co.ke/index.php/2018/06/11/cyberspace-and-proliferation-of-fake-news/>

¹⁶ Silverman, C. 2016. “Facebook is Turning to Fact-Checking to Fight Fake News”. BuzzFeed News.

¹⁷ Love, J. and K. Cook. 2016. “ Google, Facebook, Move to Restrict Ads on Fake News Sites”. Reuters

¹⁸ Falck, B. 2007. “New Transparency for Ads on Twitter”. Twitter Blog.

Brazil is examining some 14 draft laws related to fake news, which provide for, among other things, jail sentences of up to three years for the diffusion on the Internet of false information related to “health, security, the national economy, the electoral process or all other subjects of public interest”.¹⁹

In May 2018, Kenya enacted the *Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018)*²⁰ to check cybercrimes and computer related offences, and enable timely and effective detection, prohibition, prevention, response, investigation and prosecution of computer and cybercrime. One of the major areas that the new law targets is the publishing and dissemination of fake news, which if proven, attracts a hefty fine of Kshs.5 million or/and ten years in jail. This section of the law is however one of those being contested in court as unconstitutional, and is temporarily suspended.

Some resources for verification of news

- ✓ Journalists’ Resource website
- ✓ First Draft Partner Network
- ✓ Poynter Institute
- ✓ Ethical Journalism Network
- ✓ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
- ✓ UNESCO
- ✓ The Floyd Abrahams Institute for Freedom of Expression
- ✓ International Media Organizations such as AFP and BBC
- ✓ Freedom House
- ✓ Facebook - News Feed
- ✓ Africa Check
- ✓ Pesacheck
- ✓ Communication Authority of Kenya
- ✓ Media Council of Kenya

¹⁹<http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2018/07/fighting-fake-news-with-the-law/> (Accessed on 20.9.18)

²⁰ Kenya Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018)

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²⁰³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy-9iciNF1A>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpbeOCKZFfQ>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuUX6fsPVg>,
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