



How Fake News Threatens Democracy

Luke Hamerton

Introduction

In recent years, the prominence of fake news has significantly increased in our society. Fake news has always existed, but it wasn't until 21st century where fake news managed to pierce the public sphere. A large factor that popularized the term was the 2016 US presidential election where Kellyanne Conway, Trump's senior counsellor, used the term to discredit any news that criticized Donald Trump claiming they were 'alternatives facts'. Since then, the phrase has seen rampant use regarding many forms of news, even being deliberately applied to factually proven news.

A rift has formed between the news and the public, who've started to lose faith with the news ability to provide them with factually correct stories. A lack of trust in the news media is the first step in the downfall of democracy. After all, if a news station is willing to spread false information what else could they hide from us? David Leigh, the former investigations editor for *The Guardian* newspaper discusses how biases in news stations towards specific ideologies can impact the stations reputation amongst the public, making it difficult to determine what news is genuine and what is fake:

'If truths are distorted to comply with an ideological attitude [...] such political framing weakens the credibility of journalistic disclosures in general. People start to feel that "it's all just politics". And it is, of course, only a short step from there to what President Trump's aide once memorably termed "Alternative facts".' (Leigh, 2019, p.158)

As the truth becomes obscured, the definition of what fake news is shifts from it being 'fictitious news designed to deceive' to becoming 'I disagree with this news so it must be fake'. This makes it more difficult to identify real fake news when as everything is being labelled as such, making the phrase lose its intended meaning. McGohnagle states that fake news has become an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different forms of news that may not fit the intended definition stating:

'It [fake news] instantly conjures up a variety of meanings and can thus be used very flexibly. But therein lies the rub. Behind the apparent simplicity of the term lurks a potentially vast range of qualitatively different types of expression. It could cover anything from playful hoaxes to belligerent propaganda or incitement to violence' (McGohnagle, 2017, p.204)

The media plays an important role in the distribution of news in our society, it's essential to maintaining a functional democracy as it gives us power over societies elite. The press allows us to hold them accountable for their actions, without the media existing to identify if the politician is being honest, they would continue spreading fake news to a wider audience further threatening our democracy. The press can also hold people responsible for their past actions, holding powerful people against their actions whether that be corruption or bigotry. The press is omnipresent, in this instant. Fake news can weaken the power that the press has over the elite, by discrediting the news, all its accusations become useless and that is what democracy should fear, the elite becoming more powerful than the press.

One important event that allowed fake news to become as rampant as it did was the popularity of social media during the 2016 election period. Although Obama was the first president to engage with social media, Donald Trump extensively used his twitter account @realDonaldTrump to post about a variety of topics ranging from his views on other politicians to his thoughts on celebrities. Many of his tweets were seen as extremely controversial and unprecedented compared to past presidents use of social media. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic Trump uploaded a tweet that not only undermined the severity of the virus but frequently referred to it as 'China flu' which many people saw as an incredibly racist remark:

'Starting to get VERY high marks in our handling of the Coronavirus (China Virus), especially when compared to other countries and areas of the world. Now the Vaccines (Plus) are coming, and fast!' (Trump, 2020)

Twitter has provided Trump a platform to further spread his 'alternative facts' to a large, devoted following who then spread his misinformation further. Due to him being the President, many of tweets have been seen across the globe. This raises concern as when Trump spreads fake news online the potential for conflict with other countries, such as China in this case become a greater threat to not only public security. The lines between fact and fiction continue to blur making it increasingly difficult for the public to choose who to trust as a source of news. The development of technology in the media scape has allowed fake news to become a global threat to democracy. With its ability to even infiltrate the white house it makes you wonder how future technology may continue to alter the truth potentially resulting in us heading towards a decline into censorship.

Deepfakes

Deepfakes are one of the latest examples of technology that has the ability to generate misinformation. It's a form of synthetic media which utilises AI technology to not only superimpose the face of someone onto the body of someone else but to even simulate their voice. Although this technology has been used to create more humorous videos such as the videos created by the Youtuber Derpfake, who has created multiple deepfake videos comedically swapping the faces of various celebrities with the face of the actor Nicholas Cage.

Unfortunately, there are people who wish to utilise deepfake technology for more nefarious purposes. The ability to make it appear that someone said something that they didn't is a terrifying concept especially in the realm of politics. In a partnership with BuzzFeed, Jordan Peele created a deepfake which swapped his face with that of former president Barack Obama creating a fake PSA on the concerns of deepfakes. In this video Peele impersonated the former president warning us on how deepfakes can be used to deceive the public:

'We're entering an era in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time even if they would never say those things [...] This is a dangerous time. Moving forward, we need to be more vigilant with what we trust from the internet' (Peele, 2018)

This shows us the true potential of what deepfakes can do and while this example had a more benevolent purpose it was still created with the intention of deceiving you. This is exactly how deepfakes can create fake news, by having enough footage of someone and a good impressionist you could potentially create a deepfake of anyone. This threatens democracy greatly as it continues to destroy the trust between the public and the news. The rising concern over deepfake technology is that by being AI generated they are constantly improving over time. It could get to an extent where contemporary facial detection technology will be unable to differentiate a deepfake from an actual person. In an official blog post, Microsoft's Tom Burt and Eric Horvitz discussed the concerns of deepfakes becoming more advanced:

'We expect that methods for generating synthetic media will continue to grow in sophistication. As all AI detection methods have rates of failure, we have to understand and be ready to respond to deepfakes that slip through detection methods' (Burt and Horvitz, 2020)

Deepfakes greatly impact the trust within democracy itself as people lose faith in each other when trying to determine what is fact and what is fiction. Looking at the Obama/Peele deepfake again, if the video didn't end with it being confirmed fake viewers may assume it was an actual PSA endorsed by Obama. By blindly accepting that what we are watching is the truth may further damage democracy and with this comes the opportunity for authoritarianism to gain control of the masses. Chesney and Citron discuss further for how a lack of trust allows authoritarianism to take control of the public through the use of deepfakes:

'The combination of truth decay and trust decay accordingly creates greater space for authoritarianism. [...] If the public loses faith in what they hear and see and truth becomes a matter of opinion, then power flows to those whose opinions are most prominent--empowering authorities along the way' (Chesney and Citron, 2019, p.1786)

Deepfakes perfectly capture the idea of facts becoming nothing but a matter of opinion, when it becomes impossible to identify the truth amongst nothing but lies then we are forced to forge our own conclusions no matter how accurate they really are.

Deepfakes & Politics

It should come as no surprise that the impact that deepfake technology can have on real world politics is a horrifying thought and sadly, we have already begun to see this happen. One of the earliest examples of a political deepfake was back in 2018 where a video created by the Belgian socialist party (Sp.a) depicting Donald Trump giving his opinion on the Paris climate change agreement. While the deepfake itself was easily identified as a fake it didn't stop many people from believing it be real. So how could something clearly fraudulent cause so much more uproar? Perhaps the issue isn't with the deepfake itself but the idea that we live in time where it's possible to create a deepfake. In an article by *The Guardian* about the Trump deepfake they wrote:

'deep fakes don't need to be undetectable or even convincing to be believed and do damage. It is possible that the greatest threat posed by deep fakes lies not in the fake content itself, but in the mere possibility of their existence [...] the greatest threat isn't that people will be deceived, but that they will come to regard everything as deception. (Schwartz, 2018)

The paranoia of not knowing if what you are watching is real or not can be overwhelming especially when you can no longer trust your own senses. This can be linked back to the whole concept of fake news as a whole as it's not just the matter of reading the fake news it's also the issue of believing that any and all other forms of news have the ulterior motive to deceive. This could largely explain why alternative news sources have become more prominent in recent years as people feel that they are unlikely to be lied to by smaller, less mainstream news sources compared to massive country wide corporations.

Conclusion

To conclude, fake news directly threatens our democracy by infiltrating the public sphere in an attempt to make us lose faith with the press's ability to not only provide us with credible news, but also removes any power they had over holding people account for past events. Deepfakes represent the next generation of fake news making it a huge concern for the future of all democracy. The ability to make anyone say anything whether they are an actor, or a president weakens the power of the press allowing societies elites to rise above controversies and critique. If our capabilities to identify these deepfakes don't improve they will continue to deceive us until we fall into a sea of disinformation and censorship trapping us in an Orwellian-esque dystopia.

Bibliography

BURT, T. and E, HORVITZ, 2020. New Steps to Combat Disinformation. *Microsoft*. 1 September 2020. Available at <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2020/09/01/disinformation-deepfakes-newsguard-video-authenticator/> (Accessed 10 November 2020)

BUZZFEEDVIDEO, (2018). *You Won't Believe What Obama Says in This Video!* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eL0&ab_channel= BuzzFeedVideo (Accessed 6 November 2020)

CHESNEY, B. and D, CITRON, 2019. Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security. *California law review*, 107(6), 1753-1820

LEIGH, D., 2019. *Investigative journalism: a survival guide*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan

MCGONAGLE, T, 2017. "Fake News": False fears or real concerns? *Netherlands quarterly of human rights*, 35(4), 203-209

SCHWARTZ, O., 2018. 'You thought fake news was bad? Deep fakes are where truth goes to die'. *The Guardian*, 12 November 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/nov/12/deep-fakes-fake-news-truth> (Accessed 7 November 2020)

TRUMP, D. (2020) 7 September. Available at <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1302961482716639233> (Accessed 9 November 2020)