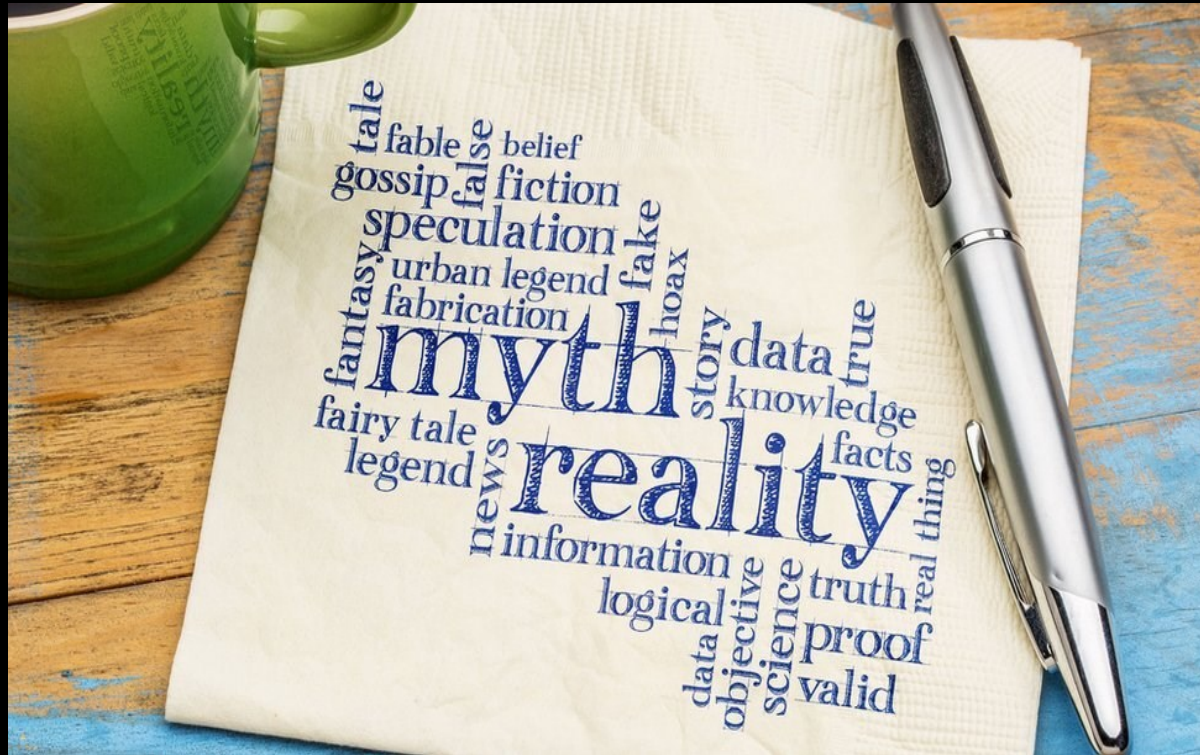


# Cultural Context

# Faking or Breaking News?



*"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."*

Winston Churchill

Fake news is a fairly new term which is being used more and more. I have heard authorities use the term to dismiss reports out of hand.

What is fake news? How can we spot it? What is the motive for creating? Is it harmless fun or dangerous miscommunication?

 **@cjwhat**  
@cjwhat

Follow

This is Houston's airport!!  
#HoustonStrong #HoustonFlood  
#PrayersforTexas



5:39 PM - 28 Aug 2017

197 Retweets 151 Likes





**Jason Michael @Jeggit** · Aug 28

Believe it or not, this is a shark on the freeway in Houston, Texas.

#HurricaneHarvy



5.0K 56K 84K

These two images appeared during the floods in Texas in August 2017. The airport is an artists impression of what JFK airport will look like in the year 2100 if waters continue to rise at the rate expected. The shark tweet was shared 47,000 times.

Seems like harmless fun. But hoaxers have used social media to exaggerate reports of looting during previous disasters and protests - for instance during Hurricane Sandy in New Jersey in 2012 and the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner as saying the rumours "are interfering with efforts by the city of Houston, and its government and news media partners, to provide accurate information to the public".



Picture appeared in a story which claimed Imam "Aswat Turads" of "Ramashan mosque" near Houston refused to help flood victims and said "we are forbidden from helping infidels."



**Ibrahim Hindy**

@Hindy500

Following

That's me in the picture. I've never even been to Texas before.



3:07 PM - 2 Sep 2017

197,192 Retweets 340,547 Likes



2.8K 197K 341K S

A story released by the website America's Last Line of Defence claimed an imam had refused non-muslims from entering his mosque for refuge during Hurricane Harvey in Houston. It appears to have been taken seriously by thousands of people and the site's story was shared more than 126,000 times. Ibrahim Hindy came across the story and was shocked to find his picture in the article. After releasing this tweet the website replaced his picture with another.

The website has the following disclaimer

*"America's Last Line of Defense is a satirical publication that may sometimes appear to be telling the truth. We assure you that's not the case. We present fiction as fact and our sources don't actually exist. Names that represent actual people and places are purely coincidental and all images should be considered altered and do not in any way depict reality.*

*In other words, if you believe this crap you're a real dumbass."*

Even satire can have an agenda. The website seems to want to bring division and created a story which would be taken seriously.

## Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories



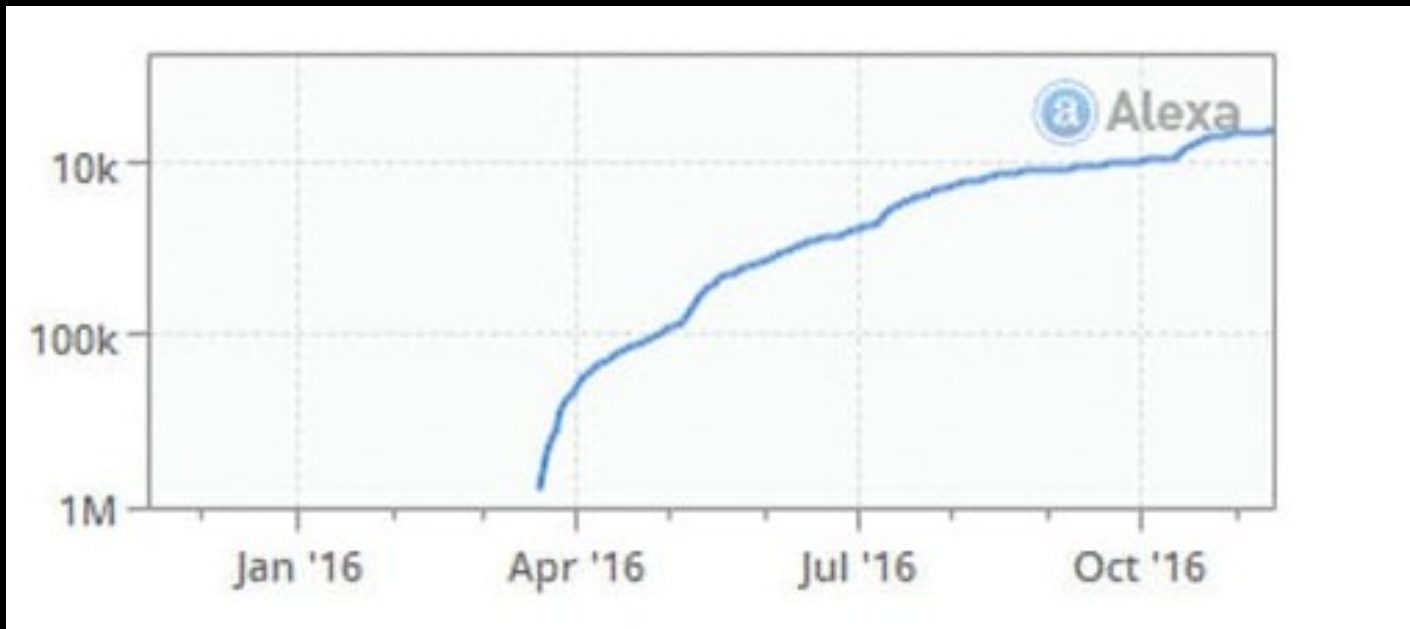
ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO

A [BuzzFeed News analysis](#) found that top fake election news stories generated more total engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined.

In the 3 months before the Presidential election (8<sup>th</sup> Nov 2016) 20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated 8.7m shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.

Within the same time period, the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 major news websites generated a total of 7.3m shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.

# Ending the Fed



## Ending the Fed

The site, which does not publicly list an owner or editor, did not respond to a request for comment from BuzzFeed News. Only registered in in March but its top election content received more Facebook engagement than stories from the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.

(Chart shows how compared to other sites – within the top 10k)

## CULTURAL CONTEXT

For many years now Sociologists have been studying the 'loss of authority'. This is the gradual and continual erosion of presumed authority of roles and positions in society that once enjoyed authority with little questioning. Institutions and figureheads have lost the widespread levels of respect they had a generation or two ago. This includes groups such as politicians, police and the royal family. It also includes the media.

While some sections of the media have always appealed more to the sensational and populist agenda, other parts of the media were held in high regard for levels of independence, impartiality, factual, investigative reporting. The BBC, largely unique across the world, thanks to its founding governing principles, is still held up by some as a best example of quality news.

While established figures of authority have declined in respect, a new category of opinion leader now command respect. Sometimes this is because of the position they hold, but not necessarily. Opinion formers may receive a lot of media attention because they are knowledgeable in once specific area, because they are controversial or because they were 'in the news' previously for something. Opinion leaders and opinion formers are a source of news themselves, have a following and may not be dependent on the mainstream media to publish their views. Consumer champions such as Martin Lewis, TV doctors such as Xand van tulleken, YouTubers, campaigners and anyone who has developed a following can be an opinion former even if the don't hold an established position or title of influence.

The growth of social media has certainly transformed the landscape. Opinion formers can use these new channels to reach larger audience and with editorial control over what is published. Indeed, we are all news editors with social

media in our hands. What people consider to be newsworthy has therefore change notably. The criteria for success has also moved in one direction – the level of popularity and sharing that is undertaken. Sharing a story because it interesting and, without the level of fact-checking that news media would normally undertake, can lead to erroneous stories gathering momentum. This has become a phenomenon now carrying the label ‘Fake News’.

The rise of celebrity continues to reach new heights. New TV programmes, publications, and products are spawned from the insatiable appetite to know about the lives of celebrities. People who are celebrated for one thing, find that they can now promote and publish ‘other news’ because they have the airtime and following – in broadcast media or social media. Footballers launch underwear products, actresses launch justice campaigns and reality tv stars launch whole new careers on the back of their celebrity status.

Fuelled by social media, the populist agenda has also grown in strength in recent years. The power of the people and their ability to make a loud noise has increased considerably since the advent of the internet. This is the ability to create volume, rather than creating strong argument. If a cause has momentum, the substance seems to play second fiddle. The British Parliament will now consider a debate for any Government petition that secures 100,000 votes and the Government will make a response to any that has more than 10,000.

The success of things is increasingly measured in terms of the size of its following. This always existed in terms of viewing figures and the need for TV and Radio producers to pull big audiences to generate advertising revenue. But there is evidence that the non-commercial broadcasters, such as the BBC, also worry and pander even, to the audience ratings.



The size of a following is much easier to measure and witness in the internet age. YouTubers can now command incomes much larger than the average, just because of the size of their following. Facebook generates a momentum for stories based on the number of likes and shares a story receives.

Generating online followers and interest in your cause has become an artform. Key words are more likely to cause people to click, watch and share. This has resulted in an explosion of what is known as 'clickbait' – the enticing headline that generates clicks without the headline bearing much resemblance to the substance behind it.

Finally, news, and the journalism that generates it, has seen a haemorrhaging of financial investment. Newspaper subscriptions have been falling for years. As circulations drop, income from advertising evaporates. This has resulted in the closure of many regional and smaller papers. Even the larger newspaper owners are still trying to find new revenue models while drastically reducing the number of reporters.

With so much free 'news' available across diverse platforms, people no longer pay for news in the numbers they once did. Even broadcast media has had to reduce the number of reporters and find cheaper ways of generating content. It is now quite common for stories to be produced without needing to leave the news building and for reports to 'copy and paste' from social media. The need for broadcast media to be first with breaking news further exacerbates the pressure to rip content from public generated content, bypassing the procedures previously employed to validate and report.

All of this means that news put before us is not the result of rigorous, impartial, quality journalism. Strong and hidden forces are at work influencing every aspect of the story. Whether a story is commissioned, the amount of time



spent on it, the sources used and the perspective covered are the result of the multitude of forces mentioned. Importantly, this affects all aspect of news-generation, including those institutions which still command respect and are viewed as the most reliable and authentic.



LifeLine  
Church