

WHY DO PEOPLE FALL FOR FAKE NEWS? PATTERNS IN NEWS CONSUMPTION AND DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

Fake news is continuously challenging the world of journalism. Its proliferation aided by quick dissemination via social media has proven to be detrimental to the public discourse. Fake news, in its various definitions and concepts, has robbed the journalistic field of being one of the sole contributors to public knowledge. Confusion surrounding the information obtained has left some to become sceptical of the news media. With the spread of fake news increasing particularly through social media, the study intends to identify factors that lead to one's understanding and decision-making in news consumption. The study suggests four factors that drive one's understanding and decision-making in news consumption. They are Confirmation Bias; the Illusory Truth Effect; Algorithms; and Sharebaits. This study adopts a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews with four fake news experts from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the United States. Findings contribute to ongoing literature on the fake news phenomenon usurping the public discourse. From the perspective of news producers, the imposition of technological advancement in journalistic practice brings forth advantages and disadvantages and is also inevitable. Thus, it is suggested that news outlets need to emphasize accuracy and correctness in their everyday reporting to sustain themselves as credible news outlets and uplift the role of journalism in the future.

Keywords: *Fake news; social media; Confirmation Bias; Illusory Truth Effect; Algorithms; Sharebait*

1.0 Introduction

The core function of news is not only to inform the public but provide truthful and reliable information. It is argued that people tend to take information from reputable sources at face value because trust is higher when news comes from a reputable news organisation [1]. For example, a study on Malaysian youths and social media usage suggests that youths are more likely to follow news and information from trusted sources [2].

In the digitalised world we live in, news consumption via online platforms has become a norm whereby one may obtain news from online news portals or multitudes of social media platforms from Twitter to TikTok. The digital sphere has challenged journalism, particularly legacy news organisations as a mixture of truthful, reliable information is distributed and shared via social media platforms along with non-reliable and untruthful information – that which is widely known as fake news. It is suggested that the needs for information-seeking often are in conflicts with the type of information available which increasingly makes platforms vulnerable to conspirators and purveyors of fake news who take advantage of the anonymity provided therein [3]. Fake news is argued to hinder collaborative problem-solving and at times becomes a problem that exacerbates other problems [4].

Fake news is one of the most contentious socio-political issues in recent years. The impact of fake news may vary, some are refuted immediately while others may become detrimental to society with immediate effect. Websites that purposefully reported hoaxes and fake news proliferated across the internet. The proliferation of fake news is common on social media. Fake news is made for various reasons which include generating more money and for political motivation [5]. Therefore, the term fake news has been characterized by many aspects of truth and factuality, particularly in journalism and political communication [6].

Nonetheless, fake news is not something new. It has existed for centuries and with advancements in technology, the term has taken many forms. It is argued that news can only present a narrow slice of reality to its readers depending on journalistic practices, news values, and audience demand [7]. The term fake news was found in the 1275 Statute of Westminster for the wide spreading of false news which was then considered a political crime [8]. Fake news brings two major challenges. Firstly, it is used to describe information that is masqueraded as news. Secondly, the term fake news is being used in politics to discredit legacy news media [6]. The latter can be seen during Trump's administration when Trump discredited legacy news media such as CNN in favour of Fox News.

Discourse on fake news is wide. It ranges from ordinary news to health and politics. One study conducted among Malaysians suggests fake news is not only news with wrong facts but also stories where news outlets or politicians only highlight facts that support their argument [9]. It is contended that the term fake news is part of information disorder [10]. The complexity of fake news requires researchers to identify types of content which are created and shared with the mass population. A previous study contends three types of information disorders are misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. Additionally, studies have defined misinformation as objectively incorrect information and are closely related to misperceptions in which people's beliefs about factual matters are not supported by clear evidence and expert opinion [11]. Further, misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are closely associated and may be used synonymously under the bigger arm of fake news. However, one previous study has analyzed and identified the distinctness of the three terminologies. The description for each is as follows:

Misinformation: Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm

Disinformation: Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country

Mal-information: Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country [12]

Further, Claire Wardle a fake news expert identifies seven types of misinformation and disinformation which are satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content [13]. While most scholarly works on fake news adopt its definition from the news provider's viewpoint, a study conducted with audiences from several countries by Reuters Institute defined fake news from the audience's perspective. It is suggested from the study that fake news is not merely false news but also poor journalism, political propaganda, and misleading forms of advertising and sponsored content [14]. The term fake news has been co-opted by politicians which includes news that is not true or unflattering [4]. Additionally, fake news is seen as news one does not believe that which includes news from some established news media, and the statements of politicians who lie, spin, and exaggerate [14]. Therefore, what is considered 'fake news' takes on many aspects and complexity.

Several social media platforms have been used to spread fake news. Among them are Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram [15]. Fake news may confuse people due to the impersonation of identities and websites that may seem credible. People are more likely to share false news supporting their pre-existing views, mainly if it is negative. They are more likely to spread false news that exposes negative aspects of

an individual, community, or policy issue if they negatively affect that topic [4]. When people form opinions based on a summary of information without critical thought to the matter, it will make the public more susceptible to fake news. The more we are exposed to fake news, the more likely we share the fake news with others [16].

The issue of trust in news media is not uncommon. Unfortunately, the introduction of social media and other new affordances brought forth by the digital age has increased the challenges faced by news organisations in gaining audience trust. This is partly due to the fact that in the digital age, everyone can be a publisher and share anything for free. Social media is argued to play an important part in distributing information and increasing public involvement [17]. As a result, the general public may have difficulty distinguishing between fake and true news. The big amount of disinformation and misinformation masquerading as news and disseminated through social media harm journalism's credibility. The general public is also affected by the spread of fake news which leads to a lack of trust in journalism by the public at large.

While it is essential to ensure that audiences have the ability to spot fake news, it is also important to know the reasons why some people are more prone to consume and believe certain news over others. This situation is crucial with the rise of fake news which is spread on social media. Previous studies have been conducted to analyse the motivation for the sharing of unverified news among Malaysians [18], [19]. This research aims to identify one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed via social media. Specifically, the study would like to identify the reasons people fall for fake news. It will be based on the conceptualisation of fake news by several key studies which are Wardle [13], Wardle and Derakhshan [12], and Nielsen and Graves [14]. Foregrounding fake news as its base and building on the past identified studies, this study aims to answer the following research question:

What are the factors that lead to one's understanding and decision-making in news consumption?

2.0 Literature review

Social media has many benefits as a platform that provides information to its users. Over the last decade, social media have created ways to incorporate the delivery of news in application that delivers news to people based on user profiles. This news is personalized as the platform collects user information and continuously monitors the users' online activity. News distribution via social media platforms varies from traditional news since it is disseminated at a quicker rate and enables interactivity between news consumers. Additionally, unlike traditional media, the news is pushed to the audience which is aided by algorithmic curation. Algorithms allow websites to deliver personalized content based on a user's profile. It works automatically in delivering news to users on social media. Users' information enables social media sites to identify audiences who might be fascinated by a particular content. Understanding consumers' interests enable social media to provide them with content that keeps them interested at all times thus prolonging users' time on the social media platform.

Due to the emergence of share bait, users are more likely to share an article without reading the content first. This is representative of how people consume knowledge in the information era on social media. It is argued that humans play a vital role in the spread of fake news and misinformation [20]. People tend to share fake news that supports their pre-existing ideas, especially if it is negative. They are more inclined to share any fake news that highlights negative traits of a person, group, or policy problem if they too have a negative attitude about those. Thus, emotionally triggered readers are likely to share articles read without fully reading the articles because the headlines align with their beliefs on a particular issue. Fake news has the ability to create an emotional response that will affect one's beliefs and actions [21].

When individuals feel strongly about a topic and their emotions are triggered, their belief in fake news will increase [4].

A high percentage of survey respondents in Croatia and Serbia use and consider social media as a source of relevant information [22]. Meanwhile, one previous study on Malaysian youth and social media usage suggests youths are connected to social media due to the platform's function as a form of connectivity, information-sharing, education, and entertainment [23].

Lack of trust in mainstream media is commonplace, particularly in authoritarian nations in which the government controls media content. Advancement in technology has added challenges to news organizations to increase their viewership. This results in the amount of sensationalized or click-bait news to grab public attention. This causes distrust among the audience as it reduces the journalism quality, although it increases viewership.

Personal biases and beliefs are the two factors that affect how people believe the news and rarely verify facts from official sources. Though some people were sceptical of social media, the lack of media literacy particularly in identifying between real and fake news made them susceptible to the latter. The likelihood of more sharing of the news on various social media platforms adds to the perception that the information may be true. One previous study contends that citizens are prone to several cognitive biases that make them less-than-ideal verifiers of information [24].

Many people fall into fake news because they lack the ability to assess information in new media contexts critically. According to a recent survey of American students' media literacy, the majority of people fail to explain the possible biases of political tweets. It is also difficult to differentiate between a news report and advertising that resembles news [7]. Meanwhile, 44% of people in Indonesia cannot detect fake news, and only some do fact-check [15]. A study conducted in Malaysia suggests three-quarters of the country is confident of their ability to spot fake news yet 50% admitted to having been taken in by fake news - they have discovered stories to be fake after they believed them to be true [9].

Next, people who assume they are informed about an issue are also less willing to pursue new information. The tendency to overestimate the abilities, known as the Dunning–Kruger effect, has extensive outcomes since identifying the information accepts their incompetence. According to psychologist David Dunning, those who require more significant information-seeking activity are the ones who are least inclined to do so [25]. A previous study contends that respondents showed greater intent to verify when they encountered information from a source whom they considered credible or a headline they perceived to be congruent with their political identity, and thus perceived to be more truthful. It is argued that when people are motivated to verify a message, they are primarily engaging in confirmatory validation [24].

The Media Dependency Theory is a media-audience analysis theory derived by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. It carries two propositions which argue the following:

- 1) the greater the number of social functions performed for an audience by a medium, the greater the audience's dependency on that medium;
- 2) people rely more on the media, particularly in times of instability or uncertainty in a society [26].

One previous study on the motivation of fake news consumption utilises the Self Determination Theory as one of three theories that guide users' media consumption [18]. The Media Dependency Theory guides this research since the theory highlights three types of effects (i.e. cognitive, affective and behavioural) due to audience dependency on media. The complexity that surrounds fake news and its ecosystem makes understanding news consumption difficult. A high level of media literacy skills is needed

among news consumers so that they can gauge the authenticity of the information received. Nevertheless, it is also important for scholars to understand the reasons behind their news consumption. This is due to the fact that the more we encounter fake news, the more likely we are to share it [16]. With Media Dependency Theory as its base, this study intends to identify factors that influence one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed.

3.0 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach whereby semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with media experts. Through purposive sampling, four experts were selected. They consist of a Media Psychology Professor based in the United States; the head of an Indonesian anti-hoax organisation who conducts fact-checking; a reporter based in Malaysia who conducts fact-checking for a news organisation; and finally, a Media Analyst based in the United States. These experts were recruited using LinkedIn and other digital platforms several months prior to the conducted interview sessions.

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Some interviews were rescheduled to suit the respondents' time while others were conducted in several sessions depending on the availability of respondents. Due to geographical constraints and COVID-19 restrictions, all interview sessions were held online. Various experts from different areas were chosen to provide diverse perspectives since they operate in different regions of the world. Knowledge and experience in tackling fake news from these experts would enrich the findings of this study.

Secondary research adopted for this study is through archival research. The rise of new media has enabled wider opportunities and platforms for information search. The data gathered covers between 2010 and 2021 to keep the information relevant to the condition today. The research identified several keywords for secondary data which are: misinformation, media literacy, and fake news. Information obtained was analysed and grouped into themes. The findings of the study are presented in the next section.

4.0 Findings

Four factors have been identified on how social media influence one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed. They are confirmation bias, Illusory Truth Effect, Algorithms, and Sharebait. Each of the factors is explained in turn:

4.1 Confirmation bias

Findings from interviews conducted suggest news consumers' decision-making and understanding of events are based on confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is defined as the predisposition to only consume news, or what appears to be news, that confirms our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs [27]. It is argued that people reason to support their case to be consistent with confirmation bias [24]. Confirmation bias causes people to follow those who share their opinions. This is exemplified by one respondent:

I think in the last half a decade maybe a little bit more, we're seeking out a confirmation of an opinion we already hold whether that opinion is well-founded or not. And that's both sides, I mean it's all sides of the spectrum. It's not just one side of the political, or social spectrum, or another. All sides of the spectrum do that. I catch myself doing it myself. I find myself at times only consuming particularly when it comes to social media and or even cable news, only consuming stuff that I pretty much know is going to agree with me or

going to further cement the biases that I have. I find myself doing that all the time so it's not a surprise at all but other people do it as well. So, occasionally what I'll do is I will force myself to look at opinions that I know I will disagree with. (Respondent 1)

This finding supports a previous study that contends that confirmation bias is an important element supporting the diffusion of false news via digital platforms [27]. Meanwhile, another study argues the need for an intervention to remind the audience of the importance of thorough verification or checking their biases to promote accurate assessments of truth [24].

The second factor that leads to news consumers' decision-making and understanding of events is the Illusory Truth Effect.

4.2 Illusory Truth Effect

Secondly, audiences are subjected to the illusory truth effect. The illusory truth effect is also called the repetition truth effect which is a condition in which the more audiences are exposed to certain information repeatedly, the more likely the information is to be believed. Thus, repeated information is perceived to be more truthful than new information [28]. One interviewed respondent mentioned:

To me, if I was going to make a news source, I would hope that the headline would represent what would be in that article, which again based on our question here and what we know, that's not normally the case. Furthermore, it's worse for the consumer, because again, people are so busy. 95% of those people - I'm paraphrasing here with that - probably aren't even going to click on that article. They're going to see that article, and again, I'm not stating a fact but let's just say the Coronavirus vaccine causes death in babies. Again, totally a factual statement but people would see that there's that demographic of people that would see that and not even click on the article. So even if that article was something rebutting that statement, people would see that article and be like, "Oh my god! See, this is why we're not doing it", and again, that's not a jab at people that don't want the vaccine or anything like that. I'm just saying people would see that and they'd go to their friends be like, "Yeah, did you see that article about that vaccine and babies dying? That's crazy". It's stuff like the problematic headlines which again goes to how I rate the news. (Respondent 4)

If influential individuals constantly spread misinformation or lies for a long period, they will be able to convince others to believe them. Therefore, if misinformation or fake news is spoken frequently enough, there are higher chances that people will believe the information in the long run. For example, in the United States, Trump supporters have realized that they must continuously lie for others to accept and believe their statements. The result of Trump's election exemplifies that a long period of exposure to consistent misinformation or fake news is detrimental. It is argued that Trump was often labelling mainstream media as 'fake news' because the mainstream media were reporting unfavourably on him [29]. The riot that occurred at Capitol Hill by Trump's supporters is one example of the effects of fake news. This condition is worrying because the condition projected by the Illusory Truth Effect impacts any level of an individual. One study contends the Illusory Truth Effect can occur amongst those who are knowledgeable in the matter. This is due to the fact

that even though participants may have the knowledge, they may fail to rely on their stored knowledge in light of fluent processing experience [30]

4.3 Algorithms

Algorithmic curation involves an automated selection of what content should be displayed to users, what should be hidden, and how it should be presented. The use of algorithms has become inevitable from social media to online news. It is argued that the increased prominence of algorithms as decision-making tools and their utilisation across multiple domains have shaped our knowledge practices [31]. It has been argued that the consumption of news has become mostly incidental [32]. With the advancement offered through algorithms, news obtained via social media is curated to the preference of news consumers based on previous content read. Unlike traditional media, the gatekeeping role of the news media is transferred from the role of the editor or producer to algorithmic calculations set by social media platforms. One respondent explains:

So, people say that Facebook is more lenient towards conservative, right-leaning views, whereas people on the right say the exact opposite. And why people feel that way is exactly because of how the algorithms act. They essentially show what people want to see to increase engagement. So again, it creates a massive think tank of whether that news is accurate or not. That's obviously a downfall of the social media landscape because there's no way it doesn't filter out what's fake news, what's kind of in-between like opinion and analysis, and what's factual. (Respondent 4)

Algorithms do not possess permanent epistemic authority because the rendering of their unseen processes into valid forms of knowledge is based on settings set by their creators [33]. The elaboration provided by Respondent 3 above indicates the role of social media platforms in setting up the algorithm to suit their needs. It is argued that Doxa in journalism is subjected to the influence of many, one of which includes algorithm setting [32]. Additionally, a past study has argued that there is a lack of diversity in the type of news feeds on social media which are algorithm-driven [34]. Therefore, one's understanding and decision-making of news are highly influenced by the type of algorithm that one has been exposed to.

4.4 Sharebait

The fourth finding is popularity, also referred to as sharebait. Sharebaits are contents that are likely to be shared. Shareable contents include Top 10 lists – of places to visit or things to do as well as headlines that contain catchy words and phrases. Sharebaits, also commonly referenced as click baits tend to produce catchy headlines to draw attention to the story [35]. It is argued that the emergence of share bait has enabled users to share an article without first reading its content. According to one respondent:

When you scroll through your social media, headlines like these might tempt you to click. This is because people are more inclined to share an article than read it as share bait has become popular (Respondent 3)

This is representative of how people consume knowledge in the information era on social media. One respondent exemplifies:

It's a kind of self-developed behaviour. It's like people when choosing a restaurant. They will definitely choose the one with lots of cars parked outside, because they will think, "if there are a lot of people visiting this restaurant, it's the best restaurant." It's similar to posting on social media. The more reactions, the more comments, and the more people tend to believe the news. "There are so many comments in this post, there is no way it can't be false," that's a problem. (Respondent 2)

The popularity of sharebait has become a problem in addition to reliance on the mass to receive news via their social media (imbalance in the representation). People are more likely to share news without reading the content first, partly due to sharebait in which news content consists of sensational headlines. The more sensational the headline of the news is, the more likely that the news will be shared. As a result, fake news will spread rapidly on social media platforms.

This section has highlighted four factors of social media's influence in shaping one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed.

5.0 Discussion

Based on expert interviews conducted in this research, confirmation bias, the Illusory Truth Effect, algorithms, and sharebait are found to be contributing factors that shape how social media influence one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed. Social media along with algorithms have a significant influence in exposing news consumers to information on issues that aligns with their views. They make customized suggestions based on massive amounts of data about consumers' past preferences. News is pushed to consumers through algorithmic processes. Personalisation of news through algorithmic equations is challenging journalistic practices and narrowing consumers' diverse news availability. Thus, algorithms act as silent gatekeepers in the type of news content consumed by others. This will lead to more echo chambers as algorithms hinder individuals from getting information that could help change their beliefs on a certain matter.

One's belief in fake news is influenced to some degree, by the popularity of the source in which one consumes. Findings suggest audiences perceive the credibility of an algorithm as similar to journalists [36]. Additionally, social media with the help of algorithms, drive news consumers to read contents which are compatible with their beliefs. It is then exacerbated by confirmation biases, which affect one's comprehension of news. Confirmation bias causes people to follow those who share their opinions. This could lead to the polarization of thoughts and opinions of the mass. One previous study argues the need for an intervention to remind the audience of the importance of thorough verification or checking their biases to promote accurate assessments of truth and motivate verification [24]. Findings from this study identified sharebait as one of the contributing factors to shaping one's understanding and decision-making of news consumed. Sharebait has its pros and cons. While the sharing of news content adds to awareness of a particular issue and new knowledge to some, the act may also be detrimental when news consumers share untruthful information. In a revised edition of newsworthiness, shareability has been identified as one newsworthy element [37] due to the rise of social media. Yet, many questions remain ambiguous. For instance, would a piece of information be considered newsworthy if its content is untrue and could cause a detrimental impact on the general population? The situation remains complex.

In light of existing challenges due to the complex ecosystem surrounding fake news, knowledge of how the media works is vital for all – not only news providers but also news consumers from all demographics. Increasing digital literacy and critical thinking ability will assist individuals to determine

what is true and what is not. Critical thinking allows the opportunity for people to overcome their cognitive biases. Since news is a social construct and is subjected to various interpretations, issues reported may be skewed in one direction or another. Through reading and observation, one should be aware if the news read is slanted towards a particular view. Therefore, critical thinking is essential for greater comprehension of the matter.

Media literacy should be taught to all levels of society. Various sectors from governments to consumers must work collaboratively to find a solution to fake news and that includes making educational institutions emphasize media and specifically, news literacy. Educational institutions should emphasise the importance of media literacy for all students within their institutions. Improved media literacy is a potential solution to combat fake news and misinformation whereby studies have shown efforts targeted to audiences outside of classroom settings have been effective at improving media literacy skills and knowledge, contributing to more thoughtful news consumption [11]. Additionally, from the aspect of educational journalism, courses could emphasize not only media literacy but also news literacy so that more journalism students who will become future journalists are aware of issues within fake news that are impacting journalistic credibility and journalism as an industry.

Individuals should always view information obtained critically and identify if it is a news form or an opinion piece. The nature of social media will continue to enable quick information dissemination. Individuals must keep up with the pace offered by social media and thus, media literacy becomes a vital skill for all. Fake news on the Internet is a major source of concern for all parts of society, including the government, politicians, organisations, corporations, and citizens. Keeping media literacy in mind can help one navigate the media landscape rightly.

Concerns about the impact of fake news have caused moral panic about the deterioration of the quality of information by news consumers [38]. When asked to provide examples of fake news, participants in eight focus groups and surveys conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, and Finland referenced poor journalism as one of the characteristics of fake news [14]. Poor journalism is associated with sensationalised or unreliable reporting in genres such as celebrity, health, and sports news [14]. While celebrities and sports may be classified under soft news, health news is important for the general public. Journalists have a duty to ensure their news reports are truthful and credible, especially on matters of public concern.

6.0 Conclusion

The media dependency theory argues that people are likely to rely more on the media in times of uncertainty in society. For the stability of society, it is vital that the public consumes truthful and reliable information. This study aims to identify the factors to one's understanding and decision-making in news consumed with fake news as its foreground. It has identified four factors that led to one's susceptibility to fake news which are confirmation bias, illusory truth effect, algorithms and sharebait. Increased fake news leads to the rise of credibility issues in journalism. The credibility of journalists and journalism as a vocation will be detrimental if news consumers continue to associate fake news with poor journalism. Technological advancement will continue to provide advantages and disadvantages to journalistic development. As new developments in technology are developed, identifying fake news may become more complex. It will continue to challenge journalism and news practitioners. One method to address the challenges of fake news is to build a media ecosystem centred on standards-based journalism. Traditional media upholds journalistic principles and strives to be ethical, objective, and balanced, resulting in high levels of trust. However, these ethical principles are regularly ignored or violated on social media. Therefore, any news media be it traditional or new media that strives to sustain its operation need to ensure that it complies with ethical reporting. Divisions of what constitutes ethical reporting are many but largely based on two pivotal factors

which are accuracy and correctness in news reports produced. The imposition of technological advancements such as algorithms will continue to shape the news media industry. To compete and stay relevant as a trustworthy source of news outlet, placing a greater emphasis on accuracy and correctness are vital for any news organisation to sustain itself into the future.

This study is not without its limitations. The challenge of this research is to contact numerous experts that are credible and well-read on issues pertaining to fake news via LinkedIn. The low response rate was a challenge in addition to the fact that the platform LinkedIn sets a limited number of messages that can be sent. Therefore, these experts must first be added to the 'connection' section of LinkedIn before sending out any messages for interviews. Findings from this research add to the ongoing literature on fake news and journalism. Specifically, it expands the literature on challenges in journalistic practice in light of changes in media technology affecting journalism.

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