Illustrations depicting the Great Moon Hoax.

Fact-Checking Won't Save Us From Fake News

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Fake news.

We've used this phrase so many times in the past two months that it's almost lost meaning — partly because it can mean so many different things. Depending on who you talk to, "fake news" may refer to satirical news, hoaxes, news that's clumsily framed or outright wrong, propaganda, lies destined for viral clicks and advertising dollars, politically motivated half-truths, and more.

Whatever definition you pick, fake news is worrying media folks. Stories meant to intentionally mislead are an affront to journalism, which is supposed to rely on facts, reality and trust.

Note: This document has been edited.

As such, news about fake news has boomed. So have proposed solutions. Already we've seen lists of fake news sites; browser extensions that identify fake news sites, flag questionable Facebook posts and calls for social media companies to take responsibility for allowing fake news to thrive.

Fact-checking is key to journalism — it's a skill and a service that's instrumental in providing information to the public. My first job in journalism was as a fact-checker and, later, a research editor; as a journalist I've had many fact-checkers save me from dumb mistakes. I even wrote a book on how to do it well: "The Chicago Guide to Fact-Checking." Fact-checking politicians' statements or articles after they've been published — which is a close relative of the type of fact-checking that goes on behind the scenes in journalism — has been instrumental in holding politicians accountable. I know what fact-checking can do, and how important it is. But to combat fake news, it's simply not enough.

Don't get me wrong — fact-checking is a start, and some of it may even help. But for all the hand-wringing, hot takes and congratulatory posts about the latest fact-checking heroics, fake news continues to do what it does best: adapt. Google and Facebook may block well-known abusers from advertising networks, but the fake newsmakers will just launch new sites. Facebook is partnering with fact-checkers, but the groups that will do the work — ABC News, The Associated Press, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact and Snopes — already face partisan criticism.

Fake news purveyors have even co-opted the term "fake news." In early December, conspiracy theorist Alex Jones published his own list of fake news sites. At the top are *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

The stakes are high: Fake news has consequences. Take Pizzagate, a conspiracy claiming that a pizza parlor in Washington, D.C., houses a child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton. In early December, a man went to the restaurant armed with an AR-15 rifle, ostensibly to free imprisoned children. He fired the weapon, although he didn't hit anyone. Then, he saw that there was no evidence of the ring and surrendered.

Facebook and Google keep giving users more of what they want to see through proprietary algorithms. This may be great for entertainment, but it doesn't help when it comes to news, where it may just strengthen existing bias.

Despite the consequences, some readers don't seem to care. In a recent poll from Pew Research Center , 88 percent of respondents said fake news is a source of at least some confusion.

But 23 percent admitted to sharing fake news, and 14 percent said they shared a story they knew was fake.

I'm as distressed as any journalist is to watch fake news spread, even as available facts can disprove it. But if facts don't matter, what does? The history of news — and the power structures that control its spread and consumption — may offer clues on how to wrangle fake news in a way that fact-checking alone can't.

Step one is to consider that fake news may be a fight not over truth, but power, according to Mike Ananny, a media scholar at the University of Southern California. Fake news "is evidence of a social phenomenon at play — a struggle between [how] different people envision what kind of world that they want."

Ideological fake news lands in the social media feeds of audiences who are already primed to believe whatever story confirms their worldview, said Angela Lee, a journalism and emerging media professor at the University of Texas at Dallas. Readers also share stories for the LOLs. "You don't only share things because they are true," Lee said. "You share things that entertain you, that start a conversation between you and your friends."

Stories such as Pizzagate aren't meant to inform, but to seed doubt in institutions, distract and flood newsfeeds with conflicting and confusing information. And if fake news isn't about facts, but about power, then independent fact-checking alone won't fix it — particularly for readers who already distrust the organizations that are doing the fact-checking.

So how can we strip power from fake news? How do we prevent the next Pizzagate?

The history of news is filled with examples of how powerful groups have worked to control information. History also provides examples of how newsmakers and readers have reacted to false stories. In the 14th through 16th centuries in Europe, for example, kings, the church and international merchants ran the earliest organized news networks. With this power came control. These groups were "so concerned with accuracy and corroboration that you can see very early an unstated code of journalistic ethics being developed," said Andrew Pettegree, a professor of modern history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

These powerful figures needed accurate information in order to make informed decisions. As Pettegree writes in "The Invention of News": "Lives, fortunes, even the fate of kingdoms could depend on acting on the right information."

But at the time, newspapers focused on foreign news; news writers weren't too keen on turning clear-eyed reports locally, for fear of angering the powerful groups that supported the publishers. Instead, local news came from political pamphlets, newsletters and word of mouth.

By the 17th century in Europe, as postal routes diversified, merchants gained a greater hold on the news — particularly entrepreneurs with money to spend. But even with this shift in power, there were consequences for reporting false information. In the Netherlands, for example, the legal system fined and even banned publishers who put out fake reports, said Arthur Der Weduwen, a doctoral candidate in history at St. Andrews who is researching early Dutch newspapers. Authorities banned one publisher, a "real troublemaker" named Gerard Lodewijk van der Macht, four times. Each time he moved to a new city and started over.

In the early United States, the story is a little different, said Andie Tucher, a historian and journalist at Columbia University. At first, political parties controlled the press, using it in partisan fights. Then, in the 1830s, the first American commercialized papers emerged. These penny presses claimed to be independent from politics, and they published real news next to "humbugs" like the Great Moon Hoax, which claimed that an English astronomer had discovered

fantastical beasts living on the moon.

Illustrations depicting the Great Moon Hoax. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Such stories were entertainment. They "were not meant to deceive" but to give readers who weren't used to having newspapers cater to them "a way to bond, to discuss, to have arguments with each other — to feel smart," Tucher said.

Commercialization shifted power again — from the political parties to readers and advertisers. The readers wanted fun, enticing stories, which the advertisers supplied for profit.

But the news increasingly fractured over the following centuries, so much that a concise, clear narrative is hard to discern, Tucher said. Multiple powerful figures tugged back and forth over information; with each new technology, newsmakers had to adapt.

And then came the internet. We can't blame it for all our woes, but it has made for a fast and loose free-market news system. Optimists suggest this market self-corrects — the Invisible Hand of Fact-Checking. "There is a participatory ethic that runs through the internet — the marketplace model of free speech, which says, well, eventually the truth will come out," Ananny said. "That's what the internet is based on. If there's a problem, add more speech. And that's not what

this historical moment calls for. It calls for skepticism. For waiting. For pause."

When I asked the historians whether one type of fake news — the version that mimics real news with the intent to deceive, which spreads rapidly online — is a new strain, they said yes.

"Nothing prepared me for the 2016 development of deliberately circulated, utterly false stories," Pettegree said.

In today's fractured media landscape, there are many groups with power that could be smarter in wielding it. Let's consider three: the media, tech platforms and readers. Of course, none is a monolith. But let's start with a broad view.

Media outlets keep trying to debunk fake news. This won't work, particularly for readers who have already decided that the traditional press *is* fake news — and, fair or not, partisan. Research suggests that the more partisan a topic, the more likely people who identify strongly with one side will double down on their argument even if they are presented with facts that counter it.

Maybe, instead, the media should do a better job of distinguishing real news from fake news, to regain readers' trust. Click-based advertising has left us adrift in a sea of inaccurate, sensational headlines, even at legitimate news outlets; this makes it easier for dramatic fake news headlines to survive. Aggregation has us spreading stories with no original research or corroboration, and it makes everyone look bad when outlets fall for fake bait. Over the holidays, a heartwarming story about a Santa Claus who visited a child's deathbed went viral. Three days later, the Knoxville News Sentinel, which originally published the story, retracted it, but not before it had spread to CNN, Fox, USA Today and more.

Maybe the news should stop trying so hard to entertain.

Political reporting could improve by refusing to force false balance — an attempt at impartiality and objectivity that can backfire. Science reporters have known this for a long time: Stories about vaccines or climate change shouldn't give equal

space to deniers who think that vaccines cause autism or that climate change is a hoax. There may be two sides to these fights, but they don't have equal data and facts, which show that vaccines are generally safe and that climate change is real. The same should go for stories about politics: Presenting politicians' statements and simply letting readers decide what's true doesn't work when one side is lying.

Refocusing coverage may help. According to Emily Thorson, a political scientist at Boston College, there is one area where people *will* change their minds when faced with the facts: policy, particularly when it isn't perceived to be partisan. By covering policies rather than candidates' antics, the press may be able to persuade with facts after all.

"There is a tendency to blame voters, but it's really hard to find [policy] information. It's hard to figure out what the candidates' policies would actually mean for your life because the media spent so much time on horse-race coverage, what they did or didn't say, or whether they were lying," Thorson said. "Academics have been saying this about journalism for a long time, but I think it was especially magnified in this campaign."

As for tech, fact-checking and blocking fake news sites from advertising dollars is a start, but it's not enough. Facebook and Google keep giving users more of what they want to see through proprietary algorithms. This may be great for entertainment, but it doesn't help when it comes to news, where it may just strengthen existing bias. "Facebook was not designed for this purpose," said Claire Wardle, research director at First Draft News, a network of newsmakers and academics who provide resources on checking and verifying stories on social media. "It has become the civic town hall, but it was never designed to be."

Tech's role isn't only about stifling fake news on social media. Some companies and academics are building algorithms that can help fact-check portions of the web. Here, the key will be not only computer programming, but also transparency in terms of how those algorithms are constructed and building trust by showing how a fact-check is sourced, said Dhruv Ghulati, co-founder of the fact-checking system Factmata.

As for readers, we're the ones consuming all this news. Our clicks feed ads and show media companies what sorts of stories go viral — which can lead to more of

those types of stories. Social media has also effectively turned us all into publishers. Each time you like a Facebook post, your connections become a new audience. And it has your implicit signature of approval. We can think before we click: Who is providing this news? Do they have incentives to lie? And if we see our connections spreading lies, how might we confront them?

"We should have the sense of responsibility that anything you click on will affect other people," Lee said. "I always tell my students: 'Click like you mean it.'"

But whether we can collectively organize to break the cycle of fake news may depend on how high the stakes climb — and how willing we are to push back against it. "I don't want to sound alarmist, and I don't mean to sound pessimistic, but in some ways the way a cycle changes is that people get really tired of it. They get sick of how it makes them carry on public life," Tucher said. "Enough people decide they aren't going to do it anymore."