

Can we save our democracies from hackers?

Written by: Rolf Alter

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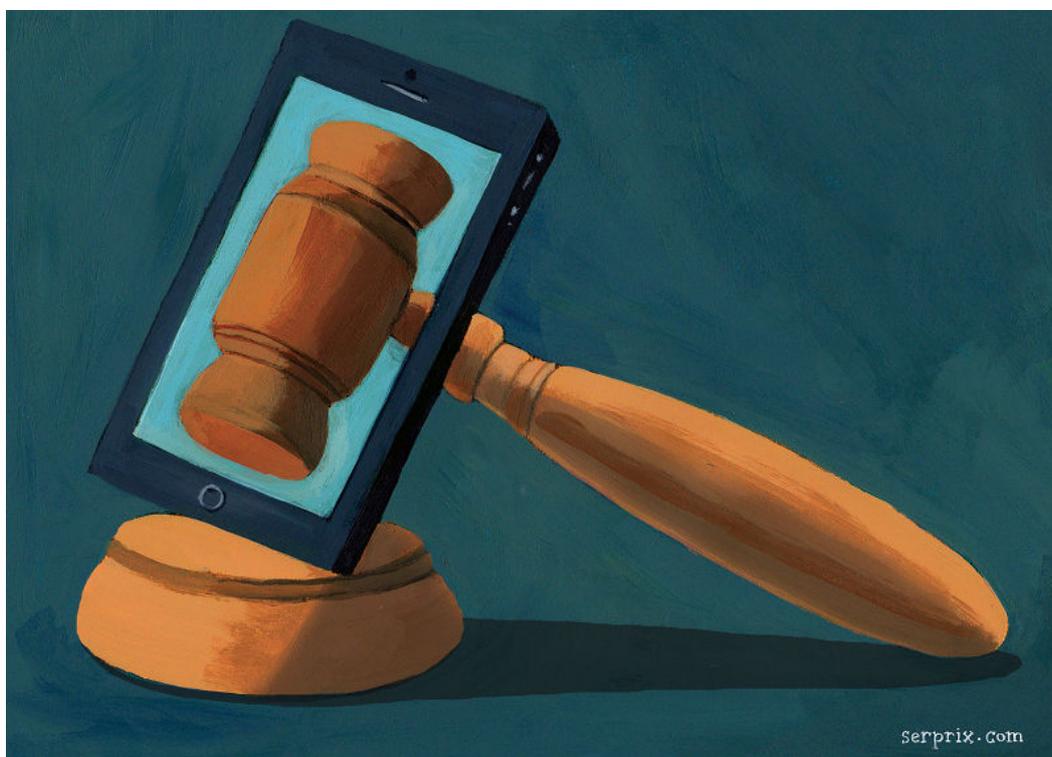
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The first generation of those born into the internet age is already joining the workforce and yet the internet still manages to disrupt. The phenomenon of fake news is one of the by-products of digital transformation and it is worth taking a look at what is new, and not so new, and how it fits in to the rest of what some are calling the “post-truth world”.

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“ransomware”—in the process), and fake news dominating real news headlines, the internet seems more dangerous than ever these days. In fact, the last election cycle, particularly in the US, has revealed new aspects of the relationship between politics and the online world, from the hacked emails of the Democratic National Committee to social media channels filled with fake news stories possibly representing the meddling of foreign states. Add to that presidential tweeting and sagas of private email servers and one begins to see just how much digital issues managed to dominate the campaign cycle. Is this “business as usual” in the new digital paradigm?

If you’re feeling overly disrupted, it may help to keep in mind that every transformative technology has had its impact on democracy—not always in expected ways. With the spread of the telephone, the science of polling took a quantum leap, but the telephone failed to usher in the direct, call-in democracy predicted by period visionaries. Some hoped radio would hail a new era of honesty from politicians too embarrassed to lie directly to their constituents. Radio did herald a new, direct relationship between the public and its representatives, but its immediacy and reach were also used by dictators and demagogues. Television has brought live debates into our living rooms as well as live broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings in many countries. Yet, a 20-second sound bite by a keen politician can frame (or distort) an issue more compellingly than hours of parliamentary transparency.



Déjà vu?

Fake news isn't new. It has been going on for millennia, first in the form of rumour and coming into its own with the invention of the printing press. It has always had pretty much the same goals, to stir people to action or to make money (or sometimes both, as happened with the press war that helped precipitate the Spanish-American War in the 1890s). The first documented example of fake news was an attack ad found on a wall of Pompeii targeting city council candidate Marcus Cerrinius Vatia. "Petty thieves for Vatia!" the message read. Voltaire's "Traité sur la Tolérance" is one of the first statements against fake news and its consequences. In it, Voltaire lashed out against a tragic case in which rumours, lies and false witnesses caused an innocent man to be tortured and killed in the name of religious justice.

Fake news isn't just a high-tech phenomenon. You can find junk news any day at your local news agent in tabloid format. According to the European Journalism Observatory, tabloid papers enjoy the highest circulation in most European countries, usually beating out the quality press by a wide margin. So, it isn't surprising then to learn that, in the final three months of the US presidential campaign, top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as The New York Times and others.

Moreover, there is money to be made from fake news, and lots of it. This lesson wasn't lost on enterprising teens in Veles, Macedonia early in 2016. Over one hundred pro-Trump fake news sites were traced back to the town of Veles, which became a leading centre for the fabrication of fake news stories that flooded social media channels during the US campaign. President Obama himself marvelled at the phenomenon, pointing out how one eighteen-year old earned US\$16,000 between August and November—in a place where the average monthly salary is \$371. The case of Veles seems to have nothing to do with ideology and election outcomes and everything to do with the profit motive. As Wired reports, behind the gold rush are the automated advertising engines at the very core of social media's business models.

Social media platforms are deceptive because they mix news sources from user-selected sites with external posts from friends and paid content. If you know reputable news sources, it doesn't take much sleuthing to determine the legitimacy of a story. For those with low media literacy, making the right call can be challenging. A recent Stanford University study concluded that, although young people are fluent in social media, their "ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak."

What happens when fake news comes from the sources of power themselves? Falsehoods bestowed with the legitimacy of power, that use scapegoats, incomplete logic and the denial of established facts to create belief or confusion, are the ageold strategies of demagogues and dictators. When power seeks to

delegitimise the sources of accurate information, criticism or dissent, democracy is threatened. This is where fake news meets post truth.

What are possible responses? The ultimate responsibility lies with consumers of information. It seems obvious that young people must be taught critical thinking when it comes to evaluating the legitimacy of online information. But also, social media platforms must put in place mechanisms to identify fake news. Citizens must be better able to evaluate the statements

and promises made to them by those in power or seeking it—hard to do with today’s complex policy issues. Countries might do well to seek inspiration from the Dutch Central Planning Bureau or CPB, a strictly non-partisan body that evaluates candidates’ promises and helps to keep campaigns rooted in reality. Our ongoing work in open government, open data, campaign finance reform, integrity and other areas is designed to enhance transparency and accountability .

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Recently, there has been much talk about increasing economic literacy. But it might be crucial at this point to focus on reinforcing civics literacy. To paraphrase Jefferson, an educated public is indispensable for a properly functioning government. A strong understanding of our own governments, their institutions and checks and balances will help citizens to better defend their rights and demand accountability. The rock music group U2 projected a message in their recent concert: “The power of the people is stronger than the people in power.” The internet continues to play an essential role in empowering citizens. We need to become more selective in identifying the quality of information so that the internet can continue to be a potent and democratising force in the world.

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