

## When truth loses

Fake news, also known as false news, has been a much-discussed phenomenon since the epochal Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President, yet has resurfaced in a major way in the past week with news of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data crisis. This crisis has raised troubling questions about the harvesting of the personal data of millions, and their use in influencing those two defining political events of 2016.

A recent article in *Science* analyses the prevalence of false news and delves into the reasons for its proliferation. The results of the research, which studied 126,000 stories tweeted by approximately three million people more than 4.5 million times between 2006 and 2017, might leave cynics unsurprised: The MIT researchers found that false news spreads “farther, faster, deeper, and more widely” than true news. Yet what might surprise even cynics is that this difference was not due to bots and automatons, but to the efforts of human tweeters. The persons tweeting false stories typically have fewer followers, follow fewer people, and have been on Twitter for a relatively short time. The study also found that false news diffused to between 100 and 100,000 people routinely, whereas truth only reached up to 1,000 people. Many more people retweeted false news than truth. True news took six times as long as falsehood to reach just 1,500 people. They also found that falsehood was 70% more likely to be retweeted. The key reasons behind this, according to the authors, are the emotions inspired by the two types of news. While they found that false news inspired surprise and disgust, truth caused sadness, anticipation, joy and trust. Evidently, the former set is more powerful. Perhaps not coincidentally, psychological analysis was extensively employed by Cambridge Analytica, the data company that exploited the personal data of social media users to target certain demographics with political messaging designed to influence their voting behaviour.

In the same issue, *Science* published another study which discusses the role of bots and deliberate amplification of fake news. In an email to *The Hindu*, author Fillipo Menczer of Indiana University, clarified, “The MIT study focusses on one of these factors, namely the novelty of false news. Other factors include cognitive, social, and algorithmic biases that make people vulnerable to manipulation — engagement-based ranking, limited attention, selective exposure, confirmation bias, echo chambers...” Mr. Menczer highlighted the supplementary materials section of the MIT work which shows that when the contribution of bots is factored out, the spread of false news is suppressed more than that of true news. Therefore, while humans do have an active role in spreading false news, the role of bots as an amplifying factor cannot be discounted.

What these studies suggest is that understanding how and why false news spreads, establishing fact-checking sites and spreading awareness among people not to get taken in by “novelty” value when retweeting or spreading stories could be the key to reducing the spread of false news.

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