

Question: Media facilitates search for truth or spreads fake news?

The marketplace of ideas is essential to facilitate the search for truth and uninhibited, robust and wide-open debate on public issues, promote an informed citizenry, and to hold institutions and individuals to account.

A free press should tell the truth. But "What is truth?" "What is fake news?" Who decides what is true? And who should compel the press to tell the truth?

Who is to blame? The media, the audience, the teachers, the parents or the government?

The Pursuit of Truth

From Ancient Greek philosophy to *The Matrix* films, the age-old debate on the definition and very concept of truth has been entertained for thousands of years. To understand whether the media facilitates the search for truth or spreads fake news, we should first understand the meanings of "truth" and "falsehood", their arbitrary definitions deserving of an essay by itself. While it is virtually impossible to establish an absolute definition onto these fascinating conundrums of words, there are a few places to start from.

I. Emerging from the Cave

Plato's allegory of the cave comes to mind when contemplating the idea of true and false. To put it briefly, a man escapes from a cave he has been confined to all his life and enters the outside world. He is blinded by the sun at first, but gradually realizes the existence of an outside world, and returns to the cave to spread the glorious news to the fellow imprisoned men. However, upon his return, his eyes are not adjusted to the cave's darkness, and the prisoners are convinced that the man has been rendered blind by the outside world, thus concluding it is a dangerous place not to be ventured. To the escaped prisoner and us as readers, the truth is there is a fascinating world full of light outside of the cave, and the cave dwellers are the ignorant bunch. In this allegory, it's almost as if there is a clear-cut case of truth versus falsehood. However, it also presents an interesting dilemma—the truth, rather than being an objective fact, was up to interpretation depending on the character. Would Plato have second thoughts on this allegory if the prisoners had access to cable news?

The truth is, life in the 21st century is far more complicated than an allegory created in BCE. What we have that the prisoners do not is an endless vat of information and resources; newspapers, the radio, television, and finally the Internet. In the digital age,

it's become easier than ever in history to obtain information, regardless of whether it's 'true' or 'false'. Information explosion becomes information flood, and soon enough we're scrambling to keep up with all the news at the palm of our hands.

Everybody is a glut for information, and addiction is a lucrative business.

II. Money Makes Fake Stories Go Around

According to *The Spread of True and False News*, a study held by Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Ara, three MIT scholars, tweets containing false news spread “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude.” They further suggest that false stories are 70% more likely to be retweeted and spread than real news. The unfortunate truth is that false news is just usually more eye-catching, with shocking – untrue, sometimes blatantly so, but shocking – titles to capture the idle reader’s attention, so as to entice them to click on said article. This is called clickbait, and if you spend enough time on Facebook you are bound to see some article with a headline similar to “5 daily food items with shockingly high carbs!”, or “These Disney stars look unrecognizable 20 years later!”, or some sentence followed by “You won’t believe what happens next!” Articles like these are specifically designed to garner page views, and it all boils down to ad revenue. The logic is simple: the false headline attracts more attention, the website gets more views, the advertisement reaches more people, profit earned.

But perhaps we should take a step back from the capitalistic point of view, and focus on the more philosophical “why”: why do people fall for clickbait? Why are we intuitively drawn to headlines with shock value, instead of factual information? Part of the magic of clickbait articles lies in their headlines. By utilizing diction such as “shockingly”, “missing out”, “unbelievable”, it riles up anticipation in the reader, feeding into the digitalized mind’s urge on the constant prowl for new information to suckle on.

III. How to Be a Truth Seeker

As previously established, there is no authority to decide on the definitions of truth and falsehood. It is an intricate matter, and placed within the context of the modern press, it becomes infinitely more complicated. Going by the aforementioned logic that fake news is primarily driven by monetary goals, by that logic, truth is upheld by virtue and journalistic integrity alone, the single drive behind spreading the gospel truth, and

each news agency swears by telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It's basic journalistic integrity, after all. At some point, though, you have to wonder: who *is* actually telling the truth? If no definition can be placed upon truth, then is it even possible for the media—for anyone—to tell the truth?

The problem is that truth and falsehood are not always polar opposites. It is an undeniable fact that fake news does exist through the power of misdirecting language, a lack of journalism ethics and gullible minds, but more often than not the audience loves to argue about the finicky details of news articles, especially those within a political context. To a certain degree, it is near impossible for any news agency to present the objective truth all of the time.

For a lack of better wording, truth be told, **truth is defined by the narrative.** The choice is in our hands to pick which angle to observe it from, and the resolution not to fall prey to mindless influence of the media. For starters, fact checking is a common method to source truthful news. Take advantage of the mass of accessible media and information at your disposal. In the 5 minutes that it takes to cross check information from tabloid articles to entering a few keywords into a Google search bar, it could make or break the truth.

The most crucial tool of all, however, is off the Internet, and in our minds. In this day and age where information can easily influence the guileless, it is more important than ever to retain our critical thinking skills. Bias is fatal when it comes to objective truths about the news, and news articles exploit this human nature. Don't judge a news article by its headline, or blindly believe anything you see at first sight.

So, to draw a conclusion: We have crowned a double-edged sword the title of "media". It is true that a massive amount of fake news is being issued constantly, whether that be clickbait articles to acclaimed features pieces, but it is the duality of truth and falsehood that inspires and spurs the journey for the search of truth instead. An endless journey, with endless results, that will continue for ages to come. Just look at the Matrix franchise. Another sequel was released last December after 17 years. Who knows how long this search will go on for, and what other truths will be discovered?

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