Overview of Fake News: For Public Organizations

Ashley Bickham  
*University of Central Florida*

Candice Howard  
*University of Central Florida*

Sabrina Lambert Simmons  
*University of Central Florida*

---

Find similar works at: [https://stars.library.ucf.edu/publicsectormedialiteracy](https://stars.library.ucf.edu/publicsectormedialiteracy)

University of Central Florida Libraries [http://library.ucf.edu](http://library.ucf.edu)

This Guide is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Public Administration at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media Literacy: How the Era of Fake News Affects Public Service by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

---

**Recommended Citation**

[https://stars.library.ucf.edu/publicsectormedialiteracy/7](https://stars.library.ucf.edu/publicsectormedialiteracy/7)
Final Guide Portion

PAD 6705

Professor Zavattaro

By

Ashley Bickham, Candice Howard, Sabrina Lambert Simmons

University of Central Florida

Spring 2018
Introduction

The world of media is ever-changing and continues to hold a significant role in today’s society. With significance, comes considerable impact and ultimately, mixed displays of trust. For decades, the media has been a facilitator and source of sharing information among the public. It has evolved into various forms from print media to television, movies, radio, and Internet. With an extensive presence, the media plays a predominant part in the creation and shaping of public opinions/views as well as providing a fundamental link between the government and the people. The responsibility to disseminate information whether good, bad, truthful, or dishonest carries much affect and in return, allows the recipient to hold certain entities accountable.

Fake news, which relates to misleading information and falsities, has become a widespread phenomenon in the past few decades. The rising occurrence of fake news is largely linked to the information age, which has facilitated the development of electronic news sources. Moreover, because fake news misleads people, it raises pertinent questions about media literacy and whether there is a need to educate the public about interpreting the news. According to Dominik Stecula (2016), “The real impact of the growing interest in fake news has been the realization that the public might not be well-equipped to separate quality information from false information.” With this understanding, a strategy involving media literacy training should be implemented. Media literacy is instrumental in aiding consumers with the necessary tools to better judge the legitimacy of a news source and being aware of their own cognitive biases (Stecula, 2016).

It is apparent that there is great benefit in being able to comprehend messages how they tend to be interpreted and most importantly, having the ability to distinguish factual news to fake
news. Once any source of news is shared and perceived by the viewers, there is a period of acceptance and rejection. The outcome is seeing how citizens respond towards particular news and the level of support they display as a result. In this moment, the public’s trust is determined and the degree of such notion reflects how a country is performing and the expectations that follow.

**Literature Review**

**What is happening in our country related to trust in the media?**

In 2018, the country of focus in terms of trust was the United States. “The annual Edelman Trust Barometer showed overall trust in the four institutions it measures – the government, media, business and non-governmental organizations – falling more steeply in the United States than in any of the 28 countries surveyed” (Barkin, 2018). Trust in public institutions is on the decline. There seems to be a disconnect between Americans, public institutions, media and other platforms such as cable news. Americans appear to have limited confidence in its public schools, courts, organized labor and banks -- and even less confidence in big business, the presidency, the political parties, and the media (Montanaro, 2018).

The most prominent loser of trust amongst Americans in 2018 is the media, which continues to decline at unprecedented levels. Although a variety of factors are contributing to the decline of public trust in the media, the constant attacks by President Donald Trump, lack of objective fact-based media stories and inadequate rational discourse are causes that have contributed significantly to its decline. For example, 66% of people surveyed by Gallup have a belief that the media does a poor job at separating fact from opinion (Farhi, 2018).

The country has been discouraged from trusting the media due to the concerns about fake news, Russian propaganda, and misinformation. However, despite the decline in media trust,
most Americans still believe the media and freedom of the press are critical to democracy. When evaluating trust in the media along political lines, Republicans tend to have a higher distrust in the media than Democrats. According to Gallup, “The mistrust of the media is so extreme among Republicans that 40 percent consider otherwise accurate news stories to be ‘fake news’ if stories cast a politician or political group in a negative light” (Farhi, 2018).

**Trust in public institutions?**

An essential element of good governance is trust in public institutions. With the existence of such trust, there is a substantial foundation of governance and positive reflection of a well-working society. However, when there is a level of citizen distrust in the government and its public institutions, there is visible lack of support and functionality within a given county. Richard Edelman recently stated, “The United States is enduring an unprecedented crisis of trust” (Edgecliffe-Johnson & Bond, 2018).

Despite the rebounding economy, low unemployment rate and record high stock market, public trust in institutions continue to plummet with the trust in government plummeting the most amongst the general U.S. population (Pylas, 2018). The lack of faith in government has significantly contributed to the lack of trust in public institutions with a majority of Americans lacking the belief that the system is helping them. Deep political divisions in Washington have contributed to the lack of trust in public institutions, causing more Americans to trust private business than the U.S. government.

The increasing prevalence of fake news raises pertinent questions about trust in the media and trust in public institutions. Kavanagh and Rich (2018) argue that over the past several decades there has been an erosion of trust in and reliance on objective facts regarding political issues and public policy. Much of this has been nurtured by the emergence of 24-hour news
cycles and social media platforms. While these channels continuously provide updates on breaking news and developing stories, they also create falsities and generate misleading information. Ultimately, fake news is symptomatic of truth decay, which reflects a declining trust in previously respected sources of factual information.

**Trust in nonprofits?**

Trust in nonprofit organizations is also on the decline due to fake news stories regarding public donations and nonprofit spending. Salary levels in nonprofit organizations have come into question, which diminishes public trust and growing disenchantment. Nonprofit organizations support important issues and when these institutions fail, the breach of public trust is devastating to the entire nonprofit sector. When fake news causes nonprofit organizations to fail, such as recent news articles that provided misinformation or fake news regarding Planned Parenthood, the individuals the organization serve are negatively impacted and public trust is eroded.

Today, there are over one million nonprofit organizations in the United States that play a tremendous role in the lives of many Americans. However, the public has begun to perceive nonprofit organizations as untrustworthy and corrupt. One of the most publicized scandals involved the mishandling of donations by the Red Cross after the September 11th terrorist attacks, in which the organization improperly funneled donated funds to other operations (Mead, 2008). Although, many nonprofit organizations properly funnel donations in accordance with their intended purposes, previous scandals and the use of fake news continue to negatively impact public trust in nonprofit organizations.

**What is "fake news" and how is it often defined?**

“Fake news” was originally a phrase that described false news stories on social media channels. In mid-2016, a small cluster of news websites began originating on social media
channels and was deemed fake news by social media organizations and journalists. In January 2017, President-elect Donald Trump began using the phrase repeatedly on Twitter (Wendling, 2018). Today, fake news has moved into the mainstream political landscape and is often used to describe a news story in which politicians disagree. President Donald Trump “even gave out ‘Fake News Awards’ to reporters who had made errors or poor predictions” (Wendling, 2018).

Today, a Google search of fake news will provide millions of instances, which have become a complex problem. The term has plagued Americans to the point where it has become difficult to determine real news from disinformation, which has caused distrust in the media and public institutions. Fake news, which refers to misinformation that is spread through various media, is a phenomenon that has become widespread in the present-day. Bradley (2017) defines fake news as a type of hoax or deliberate spread of misinformation, whether through traditional news media or social media channels, with the express purpose of misleading for financial or political gain. In recent years, fake news has been an increasingly evident occurrence as was witnessed notably with Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential Election.

To further understand fake news, we must be aware of various forms of fake news or misleading information (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). There are six forms to bring attention to based on the aforementioned article and they are as follows: clickbait, propaganda, satire/parody, sloppy journalism, misleading headings, and biased/slanted news.

**Clickbait**

“Clickbait stories use sensationalist headlines to grab attention and drive click-throughs to the publisher website, normally at the expense of truth or accuracy” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). Clickbait is changing the way online news is delivered. Misleading headlines that trick readers into clicking on online news articles are becoming more common. Publishers
and media outlets are using clickbait techniques, such as sensational headlines, to drive more people to their site to increase advertising revenues although the headlines are misleading. Columbia Journalism Review highlighted the case of Slant, an online magazine, which paid writers “$100 per month, plus $5 for every 500 clicks on their stories” (Frampton, 2015). This business model is becoming more common as journalist use sensational headlines for dumb down stories to garner more clicks to earn a living (Frampton, 2015). The clickbait business models contribute to the ‘fake news’ narrative which has significantly affected trust in the media.

**Propaganda**

“Stories that are created to deliberately mislead audiences, promote a biased point of view or particular cause or agenda” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). Propaganda is commonly found in international related news stories. The Russian government often use propaganda to influence Western beliefs, strengthen foreign policy and power among Western populists. On March 2, 2018, Russia presented a video that simulated a nuclear strike on Florida to boost its military force. Describing the missile as invisible, Russia used the video during a 2-hour address to Russian citizens. The U.S. and its allies later deemed the video as propaganda. Propaganda can come in many forms; oral, written and nonverbal which creates challenges for the media to combat. It is clear that international governments such as Russia will continue to use propaganda for its agenda. Therefore, it is the media's responsibility to inform viewers when the news is propaganda to increase or maintain public trust in the media.

**Satire/Parody**

“Lots of websites and social media accounts publish fake news stories for entertainment and parody” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). Many online, print and social media outlets are great for entertainment but are not sources of news. Viewers often believe these
outlets are legitimate news sites without realizing they are for entertainment purposes only which contributes to the decline in public trust in the media. In October 2017, FreedumJunkshun.com had to issue an apology to its readers for publishing a satirical fake news article that falsely claimed an American soldier killed in Niger was a deserter (Funke, 2017). Although the site is classified as a “parody” fake news site, viewers believed the misinformation that ended up garnering 1,300 engagements on Facebook before being removed (Funke, 2017). Satirical fake news articles impact public trust in the media because the line between legitimate news and satire is often blurred making a fake news story too real, which deteriorates trust in the media.

Sloppy Journalism

“Sometimes reporters or journalists may publish a story with unreliable information or without checking all of the facts which can mislead audiences” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). The sharing of fake news, which has plagued the web, is all too common in social media. Unreliable sources fueling fake news reports should be a concern for journalists around the world. After the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, unreliable information spread like wildfire, which at times controlled the gun debate. Without pushback on these unreliable sources, sloppy journalism could have significantly affected recent gun laws in Florida, which now bans individuals under the age of 21 from purchasing a gun. Unreliable sources and sloppy journalism had a severe impact on public trust in the media in the wake of the Parkland school shooting. The public began to distrust news outlets and Parkland survivors, such as David Hogg, who fake news labeled an actor working with Democrats to take away gun rights. Due to the mistrust, prompted by sloppy journalism, Parkland survivors stepped away from the computer screens to advocate face-to-face with the public to prevent another tragedy.
**Misleading Headings**

“Stories that are not completely false can be distorted using misleading or sensationalist headlines. These types of news can spread quickly on social media sites where only headlines and small snippets of the full article are displayed on audience newsfeeds” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). Misleading headlines to garner attention impacts public trust in the media. Headlines that take quotes out of context are used to skew versions of the truth, which is a disservice to readers. Misleading headlines that exaggerate or fabricate stories bend the truth to sell subscriptions and increase traffic to online sites. These headlines make it difficult for the public to decipher what news is true versus entertainment or opinionated news. The inability to decipher real news vs. fake news continues to decay trust in the media, public institutions and nonprofits.

**Biased/Slanted News**

“Many people are drawn to news or stories that confirm their own beliefs or biases and fake news can prey on these biases. Social media news feeds tend to display news and articles that they think we will like based on our personalised searches” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017). Biased or slanted news has been a challenge for urban communities. African Americans, Hispanics and Muslim communities believe the news ignore their causes and often portray them negatively when an event occurs. The perception of certain ethnic groups that the media provides to the public has sowed mistrust in society. Biased or slanted news portrays Muslims as terrorists, Mexicans as job stealers and African Americans as thugs or criminals. These portrayals often cause conflict and mistrust in public media. Distrust in the media is a symptom than a cause of biased or slanted news. To improve public trust, media outlets,
nonprofits, and public institutions must highlight biased or slanted news to underscore its message and gain public support.

**How does “fake news” affect the public sector?**

Fake news is misleading and misinforms the public, which has become a prominent issue in the public sector. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are powerful tools that have been used by politicians and foreign governments to manipulate the public. Fake news influences public opinion, which affects public policies. When first introduced to the public, the internet was a way to democratize public access to information (Burkhardt, 2017). Today, this information is being used in the public sector to smear reputations of politicians, sway public opinion and mislead the unwary (Burkhardt, 2017). In the era of fake news and digital information, the role of the public sector is changing. With the vast amount of public data digital companies such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter rely on, the government role has changed to increase its digital footprint and become more digitally literate in order to develop policies that protect public data.

Fake news affects the public sector by distorting truth, which ultimately affects negatively on how the public perceives issues. This is a matter of grave concern because the public relies heavily on news sources to shape their opinions on various issues. Facts play a crucial role in enabling the public to make an informed decision about any matter, be it health concerns, politics, business, or social issues. However, when public perceptions are grounded in fake news, this means that the public cannot efficiently engage with key issues of the day, because their perceptions and analysis are misguided. In this way, fake news affects the public by misleading people about issues or situations, which often leads to negative outcomes.
Furthermore, in today’s information age, the public primarily depends on electronic news sources for their information needs. Nonetheless, it is these electronic media channels that serve as channels through which fake news is often disseminated. As Rubin and Carmichael (2018) state, authenticity is critical to public and customer perceptions of product or service brands, therefore plays a vital role in enabling a corporation to remain competitive.

**What role does persuasion play in all this?**

The media is essentially the world’s leading form of mass communication. As previously stated, such communication is depicted through the Internet, radio, television, and in large part by social media. These platforms for sharing information to the public has been around for many, many decades and continues to evolve. As we have highlighted, the sharing of information tends to be that of fake news versus news that is merely factual and trusted. While fake news is not new, it has become predominantly more popular throughout the years. With new avenues of getting information to the people, particularly through social media, it has been made “difficult to tell whether stories are credible or not” (“Explained: What is Fake News?,” 2017).

Fake news uses persuasion to convince the audience of the message being relayed. Persuasion is, therefore, a key element of fake news. As Chadwick (2017) states, “although fake news consists of fabricated and misleading information, the reason why people often accept such news as genuine is because it is convincing.” Moreover, fake news often passes for legitimate professional journalism and conforms to journalism’s genre. The element of persuasion is seen in that fake news may not be written in a sensational style, is properly punctuated and contains links to authoritative sources.

Increasingly in today’s society, the “news has become less about informing people about facts, and more about telling people what their opinions should be” (Kessler, 2013). The media
holds substantial power in influencing people to believe what they hear and see. It ultimately prevails at manipulating individuals’ attitudes and opinions through the way that the media presents information. While some may view this to be unintended, there tends to be a reason or plan behind the news that is shared. Nonetheless, it is up to the public to investigate the credibility of sources and believe in what they perceive to be right.

Further Discussion

Trust in the media continues to decline due to fake news and misleading information. The lack of objective fact-based media, inadequate rational discourse and constant attacks on the media by President Donald Trump, has had a significant impact on media trust. The public is having difficulty disseminating fact-based news from fake news, especially along political lines, with a large number of Republicans having a higher distrust in the media than Democrats. Trust in public institutions, which is an essential element of good governance, is also declining due to the concerns about fake news, Russian propaganda, and misinformation.

According to Pan Pylas (2018), “Edelman highlights the decline in faith in media, saying it is exacerbated by Trump's "discomfort" and his bypassing of traditional presidential communications with his fondness for Twitter. Media is now the least trusted institution globally.” Fake news, which was originally a phrase that described false news stories on social media channels in mid-2016, has made it difficult to determine real news from disinformation, which has caused distrust in the media and public institutions. Due to the power of persuasion, fake news often passes for legitimate professional journalism, which continues to erode trust in the media, public institutions and nonprofit organizations.

Fake news plays a key role in shaping popular sentiments. Unfortunately, this often causes the public to take a stand on issues, while not grounded in factual information because
public perception is based on fake news. Fake news is therefore viewed as detrimental to efforts that aim to achieve a well-informed public on key issues of the day. If public perceptions are grounded in fake news, it follows that their ability to play a responsible role in influencing public policy is curtailed. In the long-run, because public opinion will not be grounded in factual information, public confidence in institutions that serve as pillars of society is also eroded.

**Potential Solution**

The proliferation of fake news and misleading information continues to be on the rise and is not expected to decline anytime soon. In fact, sharing of such news won’t ever go away. With this reality in mind, it is extremely vital for people to be equipped with the proper tools in order to not be deceived by various media outlets. In a time where the deliverance of misinformation is of deep concern, being media literate is of great importance. There is a definite lack of media literacy competency and “unfortunately, the skill of media literacy is a narrow one that is possessed mostly by people in the media” (Cepeda, 2016). Esther J. Cepeda (2016) proceeds to state that “our ability to harness the power of the free flow of information is threatened by media illiteracy” and ultimately, this depends on our own mindfulness of this apparent problem and how we choose to educational respond to it.

Much of the growing risks of media illiteracy is the manipulation and misrepresentation of information that the media pushes onto people, especially the younger population. Being educated on media literacy allows for better judgement of source credibility and differentiating between what is true and what is viewed as fake news. In an article published by Laura Spilsbury (2018), she brings attention to “a study published last year by the Stanford Graduate School of Education testing middle school, high school, and college students’ media literacy suggested most young people don’t have a good understanding of what constitutes “fake news” vs. real
news”. Furthermore, the following was discovered in the study (of more than 7,800 students) for which Spilsbury highlights:

· 82 percent of middle school students couldn’t tell the difference between sponsored articles and real news stories.

· Most of the high school students didn’t bother to verify where photos online came from and blindly accepted the photos’ stated contexts.

· Many high school students couldn’t tell the difference between a real news article and a real-looking fake news article on social media. In fact, in one particular example, more than 30 percent of high school students tested thought a post claiming to be from Fox News was more reliable than one actually from Fox News.

· Out of the Stanford college students that were tested, more than 80 percent couldn’t identify biased content from independent news sources supported by groups like lobbying firms as being less reliable than a mainstream news source.

It is evident that media literacy is critical and a major necessity to reverse the negative impact the media has on today’s society. Being media literate places an individual in that much of an advantage among others and perhaps, can essentially aid in catching falsely shared information or reducing the spread of fake news altogether.

**Conclusion**

The effect of fake news on the public sector is considerable. Despite the improvement in the economy (e.g., lower unemployment, high stock market), public trust in government and public institutions is declining at a record pace. The lack of faith in government and deep political divisions have made it difficult for the government to gain public trust and break through the 24-hour news cycles or social media platforms.
Trust in nonprofit organizations is on the decline due to fake news stories. Salaries of top executives that oversee nonprofit organization have come into question, diminishing public trust. When public trust is diminished, donations become scarce, and charitable institutions fail, which further erodes public trust. Today, there are over 1 million nonprofit organizations in the United States. When the Red Cross was embroiled in a donation scandal, public trust was significantly impacted. To improve public trust, nonprofit organizations must adequately funnel donations and communicate immediately with the public when fake news is shared.

Today, there are various forms of fake news. However, six particular forms of fake news have made a considerable impact on public trust. Clickbait, the first form of fake news, is used to drive clicks and build advertising revues at the expense of public trust. Propaganda, the second form of fake news, is often used by foreign governments to influence other nations. Satire/Parody, the third form of fake news, often blur the line between real news and entertainment resulting in deterioration of public trust. Sloppy Journalism, the fourth form of fake news, uses unreliable sources to fuel policy and influence society. Misleading headlines, the fifth form of fake news, sensationalized headlines to spread fake news quickly across social media platforms. Biased/Slanted news, the sixth form of fake news, tend to display news and articles that are biased against specific ethnic groups.

Identifying what may be perceived as real news is not always as transparent as one thinks. Therefore, it is of much importance to understand how various forms of media (television, magazines, Internet, etc.) work in order to not mistake fake news as real news. This is where media literacy plays a significant and vital role. Being media literate fosters the ability to break down shared information/news and thus, effectively comprehending messages that are delivered. Media literacy fundamentally holds a key element in not falling victim to fake news,
and the negative influences and opinions the media attempts to inflict on a daily basis. It is, however, the people’s responsibility to become educated and protect oneself from such misguidance because as it has been made evident, the media is not going anywhere.
References


