False Information in the Current News Environment

KEY FINDINGS

- **Despite universal acknowledgement of the increase in the amount of false information, journalists disagree on the scope of the problem and associated terminology.**

- **Over 80% of surveyed journalists admit to being tricked by false information at some point in their careers.**

- **There is a lack of consensus and a lack of training on how to cover false information.**

Journalists and media experts agree that the current information ecosystem has changed drastically due to increasing use of social media, the growth of the Internet, and the globalization of information flows. These changes have led to unprecedented access to and spread of information, as well as increased participation in the production of information by citizen journalists. With this increase in information, there has also been an increase in awareness about the circulation of false information.* As a result, the topic of false information is frequently covered by the media, with over 70% of surveyed journalists reporting on the issue of false information in their work. Further, all journalists working on topics ranging from education to health to politics are confronted with false information on a daily basis.

Despite the almost universal agreement regarding these shifts, there remains a broad debate about how these changes have created unique challenges for journalists. The approach to, terminology of, and methodology of covering false information are largely contested. This brief utilizes 22 in-depth interviews with journalists, an original survey of 1,018 journalists, and secondary sources to outline journalists' perceptions of the current information environment, the related terminology, and potential challenges arising from increasing false information. See the Executive Summary for more on the methodology.

ABOUT THESE BRIEFS

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE FUTURES LAB | iftf.org
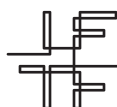
IS FALSE INFORMATION NEW OR CONCERNING?

Do journalists feel that false information is creating new or unique challenges in the current news environment? Several surveyed and interviewed journalists pointed out that false information is an eternal challenge. Many felt that the current focus on false information and increasing use of social media does not create any new challenges in their work; however, there was a fairly broad consensus that there is simply more false information to sort through than previously. Several surveyed journalists said simple journalistic integrity and norms would alleviate any effects of mis- and disinformation, while others acknowledged that the tools of those propagating false information were getting more advanced. A national technology reporter from California summed up many of his colleagues' perceptions of the problem:

> **Long before social media existed there were coordinated spin campaigns mounted against journalists and voters generally all across the world. So the definition of a journalist has always been to untangle the spin that heads their way. The velocity is higher now and the tools are better so there are more actors playing in that field, but it was already a crowded field to begin with.**

Of the interviewed journalists, those who felt that mis- and disinformation were creating unique issues in the field tended to have a greater awareness of computational propaganda and recent disinformation campaigns. Many that specialize in covering disinformation campaigns argued that these efforts have become increasingly sophisticated, creating new challenges for the profession. Several interviewed journalists felt that other journalists do not take the necessary precautions. Issues of concern included: difficulty distinguishing automated (bot) accounts from real social media accounts; the alteration of images and online context, including Google searches; and the production of highly believable "deep fakes," which are advanced false videos created with machine learning. Interestingly, these concerns are not yet universal. One expert interviewed said that many of the journalists she works with are not aware of sophisticated disinformation tactics.

Despite disagreement on the impact of false information, many journalists believed that the "fake news" phenomenon is escalating public distrust of the media. One veteran local reporter pointed out that "fake news" as a descriptive term and criticism has been around for decades—citing Norm Macdonald's use of the term on "Weekend Update" on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1990s. However, the majority of respondents linked "fake news" to the months prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Google Trends shows that usage of the terms misinformation and disinformation has been relatively consistent since Google started tracking searches in 2004 (Figures 1A & 1B). However, use of the term "fake news" has increased dramatically in the past two years, echoing survey respondents' impressions (Figure 1C).
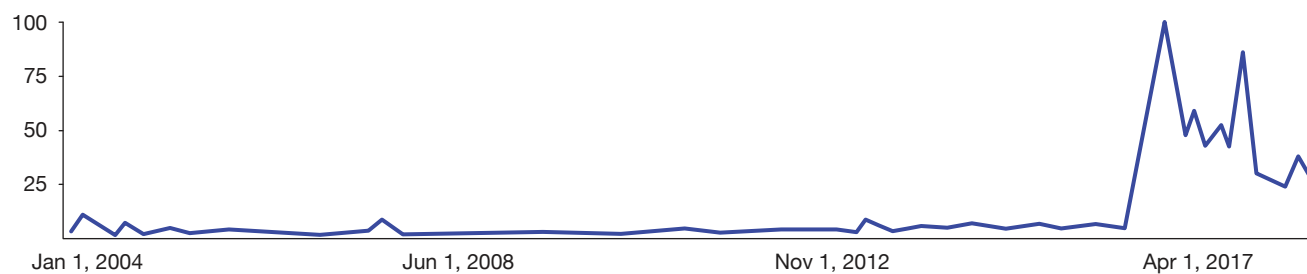
FIGURE 1A
Usage of the term "misinformation:" Google Trends 2004 to present
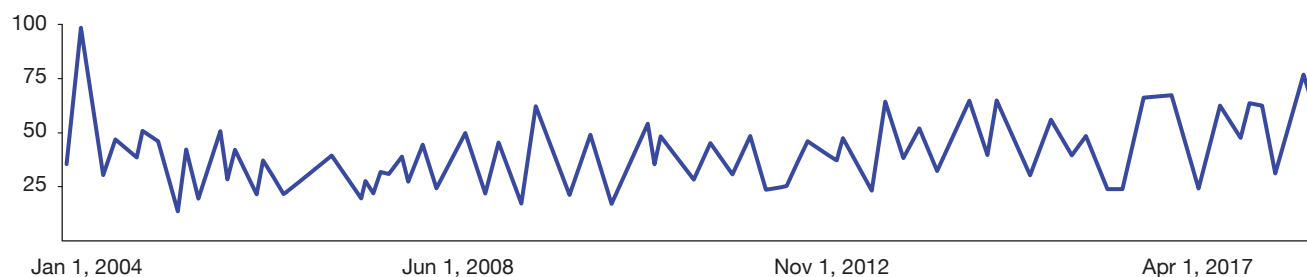
FIGURE 1B
Usage of the term "disinformation:" Google Trends 2004 to present
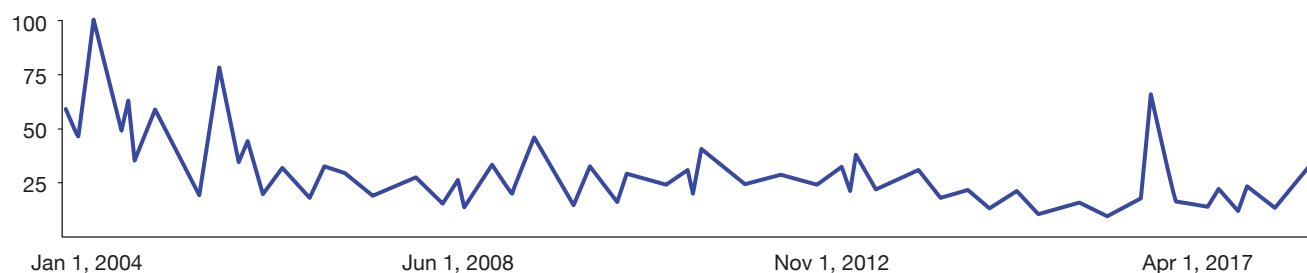
FIGURE 1C
Usage of the term "fake news:" Google Trends 2004 to present

Source: Google Trends https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US

Terminology

The disagreement about the extent of the problem is mirrored in the debate over the associated terminology. In interviews, respondents were asked what the terms misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news" meant to them. Terms were contested, conflated, and, to some, unknown. However, the majority of interviewed journalists correctly categorized misinformation as false information *accidentally* spread by the unsuspecting public, and disinformation as false information *intentionally* spread to achieve political, social, or financial goals. The remainder of interviewed journalists found the terms to be synonyms or similar to "fake news," and one respondent had never heard the term disinformation.

"Fake news" meant different things to different interviewees. Definitions ranged from fabricated news that could include disinformation or misinformation to a partisan slur used to attack the media or a maligned label for anything a given politician or member of the public does not like. While most respondents referred to "fake news" as a separate phenomenon, they also felt that knowledge of misinformation online and disinformation campaigns, particularly knowledge of them getting covered by journalists, was feeding the fire for those accusing the media of "fake news."

Surveyed journalists used all three terms in their own work. Misinformation was the most commonly used term with over 40% reporting using the term. Roughly 15% used the term "fake news," while disinformation and false news were less frequently used (Figure 2). In open-ended questions, survey respondents often used misinformation and disinformation interchangeably with "fake news" or "lies," reflecting the lack of consensus regarding terminology. Some journalists were concerned about this lack of congruity; one said we "don't have a good set of terminology; [terms are] blindly used and then terms become weapons, overused so people don't realize when it actually matters [or] is important."

FIGURE 2
Which of the below terms have you used in your reporting?
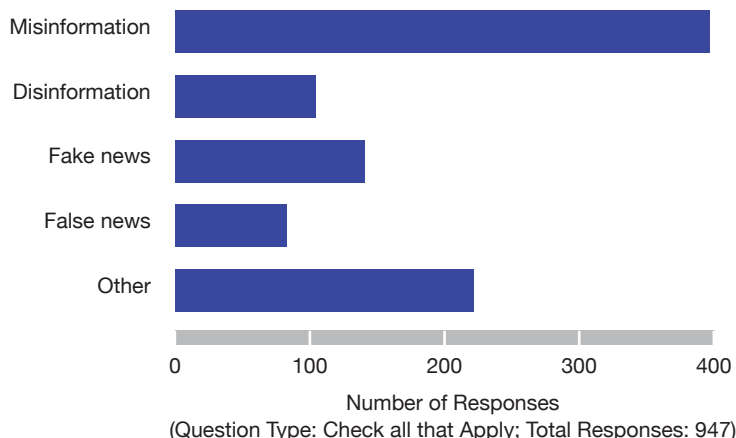
Number of Responses
(Question Type: Check all that Apply; Total Responses: 947)

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future, Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

FILTERING THROUGH FALSE INFORMATION

Throughout the study, surveyed and interviewed journalists agreed that there is more false information in the current news environment than there was previously. Journalists attributed this to disinformation distributed by foreign actors, a gullible and impressionable public that shares stories online without verifying them, and to domestic actors with biases or political and social agendas.

Journalists have a range of approaches to filtering out false information. For some, the process is subconscious. Others only look at "reputable" sources, such as national news organizations, and rely on others' vetting. Many journalists that report on disinformation campaigns, and thus rely on Twitter or other social media platforms for information, had informal checklists to validate or discredit a source. Journalists cited warning signs such as social media usernames with numbers in the username, clip art for photos, and short

account lifespans. Accounts with poor grammar and accounts that only post memes were also concerning to some. When accounts had a majority of retweeted posts without original content, or thousands of tweets over a short period of time with few followers, automation was often suspected. More broadly, respondents were skeptical of information that contained outrageous or sweeping claims, partisan rhetoric, sensationalism, poor quality photos, and low numbers of sources.

Despite being on guard, a large number of journalists reported being tricked by false information. Over 80% of survey respondents admitted to believing false information at some point. While most reported that this occurrence was rare, the journalists interviewed and surveyed said that their fellow journalists were more likely to be tricked by false information than they were. This suggests that the frequency of being tricked is underreported due to social pressure not to admit believing false information. Similarly, not one of the interviewed journalists admitted to using false information in their

FIGURE 3
How often have you been tricked by false information?
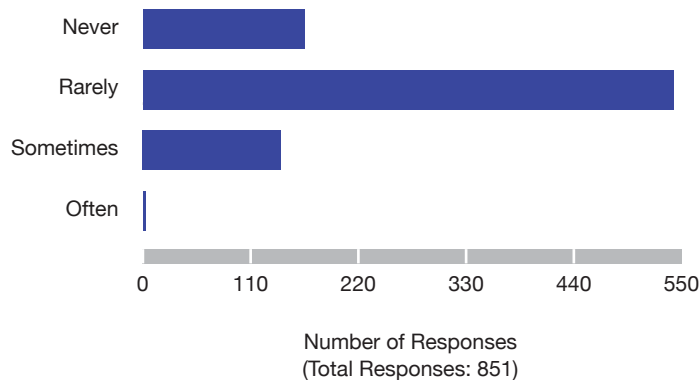
Number of Responses
(Total Responses: 851)

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future,
Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

FIGURE 4
How often are other journalists you know tricked by false information?
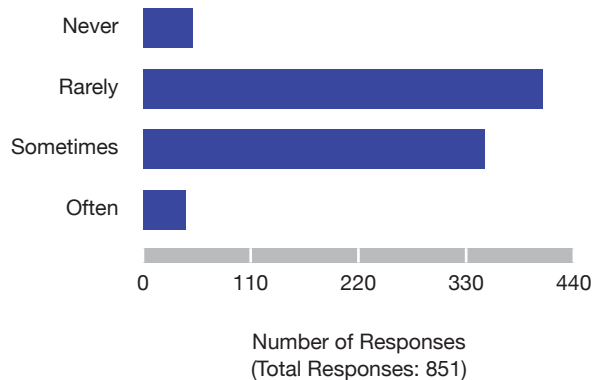
Number of Responses
(Total Responses: 851)

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future,
Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

reporting; however, many alluded that other journalists do so on a regular basis. Interviewees also said they have seen other journalists unknowingly retweet bots or post information about a news event that later turns out to be false.

Almost universally, respondents reported unease over using social media for sources or professional use in the current news environment. There is a tension between using social media and exposing oneself to false information and attacks, and using it as a necessary platform for their profession. Many said that revelations about the disinformation attacks surrounding the 2016 election had led them to more carefully curate their newsfeeds. Curation tactics included blocking users and only following reputable, verified accounts. Additionally, respondents said that there has been a decline in social media reliant practices. Such practices include pulling tweets directly into articles, and reporting on topics simply because they are trending. Regardless of these concerns, the vast majority of respondents still use social media, with less than 8% saying

that they don't use social media at all. Despite common claims that Twitter is a journalist's lifeline, Facebook outpaces Twitter as the most used social media platform for surveyed respondents (Figure 5). Of those that reported using social media, 84% said they check it more than once a day.

Journalists and experts familiar with disinformation campaigns described the process of false information circling on 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit as being in "embryonic form," before eventually going viral on Facebook and Twitter. When asked about which platforms were most concerning for the spread of false information, respondents named Facebook (67% extremely concerned) and Twitter (52% extremely concerned). YouTube and Reddit, with 4chan and 8chan following, were also extremely concerning to a significant number of respondents. As for Medium, journalists were most concerned about the spread of false information through social media posts (64% extremely concerned). Over 40% of journalists were also extremely concerned about print, video, images, and blog posts.

There was a broad consensus on what issue areas are particularly vulnerable to false information. In general, issues that are "high stakes" or key social issues were identified as prone to false information. Topics that are emotional or that prey on the public's fears or biases are fertile ground for the spread of false information. In particular, elections and immigration, including anti-minority rhetoric, were the most mentioned political topics. Vaccines, climate change, and scientific findings in general were also frequently mentioned as problematic areas. Finally, local politics, death hoaxes, and celebrity news were mentioned by some interviewed journalists as well.

FIGURE 5
What social media platform do you use most?
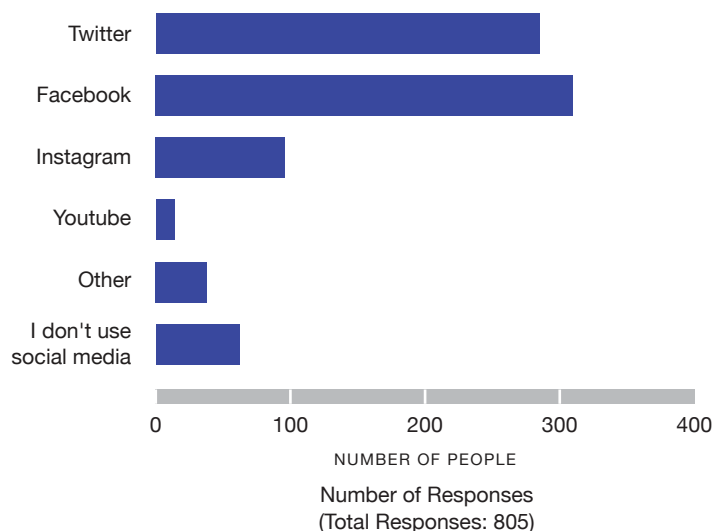
NUMBER OF PEOPLE

Number of Responses
(Total Responses: 805)

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future,
Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

COVERING FALSE INFORMATION

Perhaps the most contentious byproduct of increasing false information in the current news environment is the debate over how to cover false information. Most agree that disinformation campaigns that undermine democracy or could have a huge impact on society should be investigated and reported on. But the way to approach false information when the stakes are lower is less clear and can become a slippery slope. Interviewed journalists pointed out that the media should not debunk things just for the sake of debunking. Highlighting insignificant fake stories can decrease the credibility of the media. One respondent lamented, "Ironically, it prompts viewers to accuse us [of] being 'fake news' by pointing out the existence of purposefully false information being distributed."

Others pointed out that reporting on "fake news" draws extra attention to false information and to hateful discursive ideology. Determining what is significant and what is insignificant is increasingly difficult. There was no consensus among interviewed journalists on how to determine if false information is newsworthy. Further, ignoring false information and not reporting on it also carries its own risks, such as allowing false information to go unchecked without being challenged. One survey respondent summed up many of the challenges in covering false information:

> **First, engaging with false information unwittingly aids in spreading it, even if the purpose behind the engagement is to dispel misinformation. Second, attempts to label misinformation as such, by writing stories about it, are sometimes seen by better-informed people as an exercise in garnering more clicks, and therefore, news outlets, unless they are very well known, can suffer by losing trust of such readers. Third, on a personal level, writing about this stuff while seeing the incessant spread of misinformation can feel like a losing battle, and can be very demotivating.**

Given the tricky terrain, journalists are split on how to approach false information in their work. Over 50% of surveyed journalists said that they think it can be counterproductive or harmful to cover false information (Figure 6).

In contrast, 37% thought it was not ever harmful to cover false information (Figure 6). Several journalists expressed sentiments like "Sunlight is the best disinfectant," or said that it was not counterproductive, because "When you're calling out lies, that is a public service."

FIGURE 6
Have you ever felt that it is counterproductive or harmful for you or other news outlets to report on false information?

I haven't thought about it 10.33%

Yes 53%

No 36.67%
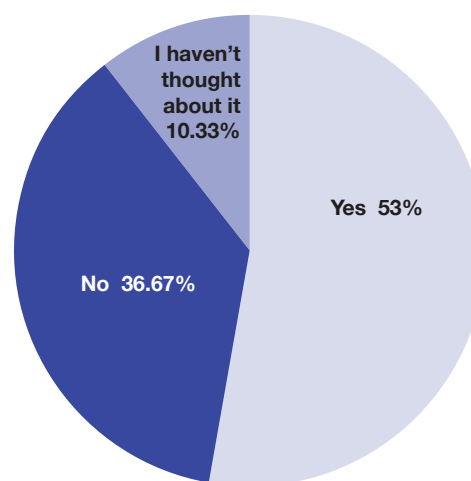
Total Responses: 900

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future, Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

Others shared stories of when their work or others' work actually played into the hands of those spreading false narratives. One journalist shared how her coverage of a story in a mainstream outlet gave the people propagating the false story credibility, because they pointed to the mainstream media's engagement. Others expressed that reporting on conspiracy theories could easily give them "oxygen," and that "The more often a myth is repeated the more people tend to believe the myth is true," regardless of whether or not it has been debunked. Another journalist said that focusing on false information was "distracting resources from reporting the actual news." Additionally, many agreed that reporting on false information undermines the media's credibility. Whether to report on it or not has become a significant internal struggle. One reporter shared:

> **When we write about teen suicide, we are spreading that or [when we write on] far right anti-Semitic politics, it improves their Google rankings. And I don't see a plausible alternative…you have to report on it for society in a way that is deep and detailed and compelling. We need to help society understand it more.**

Coverage of false news coupled with the current incentive structure in the news environment is also concerning for many. Journalists described how they have seen others in their field put false stories in headlines to attract clicks. In a fast-paced world where many readers only scan headlines, this can inadvertently spread false information as credible. One survey respondent said:

> **People do not READ! Thus, if you write a headline about FAKE NEWS—they will most likely see it as real and then continue to spread around wrong information.**

Another survey respondent said:

> **The problem I see: The most damaging "fake news, misinformation, [and] disinformation" comes from my peers more than anywhere (or from anyone) else. Biased, opinionated reporting is rampant, while second- and third-party sourcing spreads unconfirmed gossip as fact.**

Reporting guidelines for false information are not widespread. Only 2 of the 22 interviewed journalists had been a part of formal conversations or trainings on how to report on false information. Some mentioned how guidelines for reporting on phenomena that can have deleterious spill-over effects, like teen suicide and mass shootings, could serve as the template for guidelines on false information. One survey respondent said he or she would appreciate:

> **A guide that is accepted by a majority of major outlets. You could model it after how mental health experts helped the media learn to report on suicide in a way that doesn't inspire copycats.**

While this is a significant area for further research, organizations like Data & Society have made great strides to detail the problem and possible approaches.[1]

RECOMMENDATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This brief has highlighted the lack of consensus regarding the challenges posed by misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news." The terms themselves are often ill-defined or conflated, suggesting a need for a broader discussion or set of guidelines contextualizing them in the current news environment. Further, there is a significant gap in awareness about the sophistication and power of disinformation campaigns among working journalists. Those reporting on disinformation, as well as experts in the area, tend to understand the potential pitfalls and risks of being targeted by false information; however, others do not even acknowledge that the terrain of information flows and technology has shifted. An awareness campaign that highlights the ways in which computational propaganda and sophisticated actors can reach journalists would be helpful in closing that gap.

Perhaps the most contentious debate in this space is when to and how to report on false information. Understanding when it is appropriate to cover false information and how to avoid giving it "oxygen" or inadvertently lend it credibility are still not well understood across the field of journalism. Guidelines for coverage, like those that Data & Society have developed, should be more widely spread and discussed within the profession through journalism classes, professional associations, and within newsrooms.

Future research is needed to delve deeper into the issues outlined here. How much false information do journalists spread? What incentive structures are leading journalists to knowingly highlight false information in ways that may be counterproductive to debunking it? Further, exploring the issue of false information and "fake news" internationally is critical. While the sample of journalists referenced here was primarily based in the United States and the United Kingdom, some did mention that the issues referenced are even more dire abroad, where the media is less mature and governments may be more likely to use false information as an excuse to impose censorship or undermine democratic norms. Reports on the United States from abroad, particularly from areas that are hard to cover like warzones, are particularly susceptible to false information, poor sourcing, and perverse incentives that lead to the spread of misinformation.

ENDNOTES

* This brief will use the term false information to refer to information that is factually incorrect including mis- and disinformation. Borrowing from Wardle and Derakhshan, misinformation refers to "information that is false, but not produced with the intention of causing harm," and disinformation refers to "information that is false and deliberately produced to harm a person, social group, organization, or country." Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan. 2017. "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking." Council of Europe, pg 20. 64% of respondents were male and 36% were females.

1. Phillips, Whitney. 2018. "The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online." *Data & Society. Available at https://datasociety.net/output/oxygen-of-amplification/*

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

Institute for the Future is the world's leading futures thinking organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California.

DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE LAB

The **Digital Intelligence Lab** at Institute for the Future is a social scientific research entity conducting work on the most pressing issues at the intersection of technology and society. We examine how new technologies and media can be used to both benefit and challenge democratic communication.

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE
201 Hamilton Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94301
www.iftf.org