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<div align="center">Breaking (Fake) News: (Not) Everything on the Internet is True!</div>

In the last decade social media has exploded into normative culture, increasing Internet usage and the amount of information people are exposed to daily. With this constant exposure to information, it is extremely important that the information and news people are accessing is truthful and reliable. Recently, there has been an emergence of "fake news" and it has infected social media and other media outlets. David Lazer, a political and computer science professor at Northeastern University, has defined "fake news" in Robinson Meyer's article titled "Why It's Okay to Call It 'Fake News.'" Lazer suggests that "fake news" is: "content that is being put out there that has all the dressings of something that looks legitimate. It's not just something that is false – it's something that is manufactured to hide the fact that it is false" (Meyer). Meyer discusses many aspects of this fake news phenomenon including what it is, what effects it may have on society, and how to stop the spread. As Lazer described above, fake news is not reporting errors; fake news is deliberately dressing up lies to appear real. With internet usage exploding amid the social media era, it is not surprising that a vast majority of fake news is spread online. Trending news spreads faster than fire, whether it is real or fake, and containing that fire when it is spreading harmful fake news is becoming an ever-increasing issue. How to contain the blaze of the intentional distribution of fake news is a question many want an answer to; nevertheless, the solutions may lie with those who hold the greatest influence in society. Accountability for reporting and sharing truthful news has eroded to the point where people do

not trust what they read. Fundamentally, this is an issue that needs to be addressed because without trust, our nation has nothing uniting people, only topics unnecessarily dividing them.

When reading the definition of fake news, it seems like it should be obvious to the reader whether what they are reading is real or fake. However, the fake news phenomenon affects many types of news and can be challenging to decipher if the news came from a trustworthy news source. In Meyer's article, Lazer expands on his initial definition of fake news by comparing the types of fake news to a sort of zoo. Lazer compares 'animals' in the zoo to the "rumors, hoaxes, outright lies, and disinformation from […] governments" that are the basis of fake news (Meyer). This expansive definition covers a wide range of fake news from hoaxes, which can be elaborate and cause serious damage, to seemingly harmless rumors. 'Harmless' rumors are dangerous to serious journalism because catchy titles about celebrity gossip are much more interesting than titles dealing with legislative or environmental issues. Entire webpages and magazines are devoted to spreading rumors about celebrities that have little to no truth to them. Reading fake news harms people especially when the content has no basis in truth because it is likely people will not investigate the content, so they simply assume that it is true; consequently, people are absorbing fake news and are not completely aware of it. Such practices can reduce critical thinking about what people are reading, and they will start to accept everything they read as the truth. Meyer presents a perfect example of fake news disguised as legitimate news where local news station WTOE 5 published a story on their website about Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016. Though, according to Meyer, there was only one problem with this story: "[t]here is not a station called WTOE 5 in the United States, but the plausibility of the name allowed the falsehood to spread (That one fake story had roughly three times more Facebook engagement – that is, likes, shares, and comments – than any *New York*

Times story published in 2016)" (Meyer). At the end of this example, Meyer comments about how much engagement this completely fake story had compared to reader's engagement with one of the most famous newspaper currently published in the United States. Alarmingly, a fake news story generated more online activity than the real news did. People engaged with the hoax, dangerously drawing more attention to it. Even when people discovered the story was fake and brought other's attention to the hoax, this only further increased reader's engagement and spread the fake message further. People attempting to purposely spread fake news can easily plant fake headlines beside real ones, and many would not read further to discover whether what they were reading was true. With more discoveries of fake news, it has started to create deep mistrust between online sources and their readers because they cannot trust what they are reading to be true anymore.

Trust is at the heart of journalism, and when fake news spirals out of control, it infects the trust that journalists have worked hard to build between the public and themselves. Trusting the news outlets to be responsible for what they are releasing to the public is a leap of faith people must take when they are reading the news. This trust was tested in a poll by a communications marketing firm, called Edelman, which Uri Freidman used as a statistic to illustrate how much trust people in America have in their government in the article. "Trust Is Collapsing in America." Edelman's poll found that "[o]nly a third of Americans now trust their government 'to do what is right' – a decline of 14 percentage points from last year" (Freidman). 'To do what is right' is a subjective phrase that to some may mean restoring the economy or to others may mean securing the border. Since this poll is very subjective, individuals can interpret it differently, and yet two-thirds of Americans polled can agree that they do not trust their government. This statistic is also surprising because within a single year the amount of trust dropped by fourteen points. Such a

drop could be caused by some social phenomenon, like fake news, that would make people more distrustful of their government. Fake news can be manipulated and purposely used to manifest mistrust, especially in the political realm where slander and lies are constantly being spread by either side. Andrew Stuttaford, a journalist for the *National Review*, wrote an article called "The Propagandist and the Censor" where he explores the ramifications on trust caused by fake news. He notices that when a socially powerful person, like a high-ranking politician or celebrity, discredits news by calling it fake news, "[they hijack that term] that was already resonating with the public [and only make it] stronger. It is not just an attack on the story, but on its source – and on what's left of its authority. CNN? No better than Facebook" (Stuttaford 19). Hijacking the term fake news is dangerous and plants mistrust. These socially powerful people, who are abusing their power and purposely misusing the term fake news, are destroying the trust people have in their media sources. Discrediting reputable media sources, like CNN, is harmful because in the past journalists worked endlessly to present truthful stories; nevertheless, in the present, journalists still report truthful stories, except now their stories are being discredited as fake, so they must fight against these allegations. Readers trust media sources like CNN, and if that trust is being sabotaged to the point where media sources are not trusted at all, then, as Edelman's poll discovered, people trusting their government less is a very plausible next step. Trust builds over time and yet can be broken in a very short amount of time. Without trust between media outlets and the public, the public cannot know what information is true or false. A toxic society of mistrust will be created, and the nation may never be able to recover if actions are not taken to reverse the harm done by the spreading of fake news and news that is falsely identified as fake.

  Understanding what fake news is and how it is harming the nation are the first two steps in rebuilding the trust that was broken. The next steps are creating and enforcing action plans

that will prohibit a phenomenon like this from happening again. However, many do not agree on what those action plans should be, nor do they agree on who should have the power to enforce those plans. Some believe that the media outlets, whether they are more traditional like TV stations, or more contemporary like websites or social media platforms, should be spearheading the creation and enforcement. Others, like the government in Germany, believe that the government should be protecting their citizens from the dangers of fake news and that the governments themselves need to spearhead the operations. Germany has an action plan that has criminal consequences for posting fake news, but criminalizing fake news begins with defining what can be considered fake. In Stuttaford's article he provides a definition by saying that news can be "criminally fake if it amounts, say, to an insult, malicious gossip, or defamation— including defamation of a religion or ideology" (Stuttaford 18). In order to combat with fake news, it must be defined so that all the different media outlets can be held to the same standards and regulations. Laws cannot be enforced if there are not shared standards, but like all laws, laws criminalizing the spread of fake news can be subject to bias. Within Stuttaford's article, there is also mention of how Germany was criticized by some because they attacked and punished news that was questionably fake, but that was not the real problem. The real problem was that the news contradicted the political views of some of the powerful politicians in Germany, and that news was being punished. This raises another question about who should have the power to declare when news is fake. Definitions, like Stuttaford's above, are extremely subjective, and those in power making decisions about the criminality of content must be aware and attempt to account for that subjectivity when they are enforcing the law. Beyond the government enforcing laws, an alternative solution could be that news media should be forced to constantly filter their content appropriately. In Meyer's article, he presents an idea for another solution stating: "The

fight against misinformation is two-fold […] First, powerful individuals and popular Twitter users have to lead the fight against fake news and bad information" (Meyer). By holding the people in power accountable, the flow of fake news can be somewhat filtered or at least viewed more critically than it is now. Especially on social media platforms, the people who will have the most influence in fighting fake news will be those who have the greatest social power. If socially powerful people lead the charge to change how people trust their media sources, then enforcing governmental regulations can be more effective. When regulations are in place and society's social leaders lead the movement for change, then slowly the negative effects of fake news will be reversed and trust between the media sources and the public will be rebuilt.

Considering all the negative effects fake news is having on our society, many are trying to create productive solutions that solve the issue of fake news. Whether those solutions are enforced by the media outlets, the government, or the socially powerful people, change must be made so that the public does not continue to lose trust in the media. If people understand what fake news is, then they can better protect themselves from inadvertently spreading it or believing what it says. Hopefully, by acknowledging fake news and what it is doing to society we can begin exploring and enforcing solutions that will slow the spread of fake news. Once conversations concerning how to reverse the negative effects of fake news have started, then exposing fake news and celebrating the news that has always been honest is next. We do not have to let fake news infect our lives and destroy our society's trust; we can take control of our media and decide how we want to transmit news to our fellow members of society.

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