

# 17126 Facebook's fake news problem, explained

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News stories are supposed to help ordinary voters understand the world around them. But in the 2016 election, news stories online too often had the opposite effect. Stories rocketed around the internet that were misleading, sloppily reported, or in some cases totally made up.

Over the course of 2016, Facebook users learned that the pope endorsed Donald Trump (he didn't), that a Democratic operative was murdered after agreeing to testify against Hillary Clinton (it never happened), that Bill Clinton raped a 13-year-old girl (a total fabrication), and many other totally bogus "news" stories. Stories like this thrive on Facebook because Facebook's algorithm prioritizes "engagement" — and a reliable way to get readers to engage is by making up outrageous nonsense about politicians they don't like.

A big problem here is that the internet has broken down the traditional distinction between professional news-gathering and amateur rumor-mongering. On the internet, the "Denver Guardian" — a fake news site designed to look like a real Colorado newspaper — can reach a wide audience as easily as real news organizations like the Denver Post, the New York Times, and Fox News.

Since last week's election, there has been a fierce debate about whether the flood of fake news — much of it prejudicial to Hillary Clinton — could have swung the election to Donald Trump. Internet giants are coming under increasing pressure to do something about the problem.

On Monday, Google announced that it was going to cut fake news sites off from access to its vast advertising network, depriving them of a key revenue source. Facebook quickly followed suit with its own ad network.

At the same time, CEO Mark Zuckerberg has signaled reluctance to have Facebook become more active in weeding out fake news stories. He described it as "a pretty crazy idea" to think fake news on Facebook could have swayed the election. He says Facebook will look for new ways to stop the spread of fake news, but he also argues that "we must proceed very carefully" and that Facebook must be "extremely cautious about becoming arbiters of truth ourselves."

The importance of this issue is only going to grow over time. More and more people are getting their news from the internet, putting more and more power in the hands of companies like Google, Twitter, and especially Facebook. The leaders of those companies are going to be under increasing pressure to use that power wisely.

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