

Why Do People Share Fake News? A Sociotechnical Model of Media Effects | Georgetown Law Technology Review

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In 2017, Peter Daou launched “Verrit,” a partisan news site targeted to Democratic voters disappointed with the results of the 2016 election. The site consists of single quotations, facts, and statistics, each formatted as a graphic and labeled with a unique “identification code” to indicate authenticity and accuracy. For instance, a Verrit article titled “Where Is the Outcry Over Republicans Sabotaging Health Care for Children?” leads with a Pearl S. Buck quote, “The test of a civilization is in the way that it cares for its helpless members,” helpfully verified with the number 0443076, and followed by a stack of infographics, tweets, and news articles supporting the title’s proposition. The site explains:

Each “verrit” is marked with an identification code and contextualized with supporting material. The purpose of the code is to confirm that the content originated at Verrit.com. To authenticate a verrit, enter the code in the search bar. No result = fake.

The site met with immediate mockery upon launch, with Abby Ohlheiser of the *Washington Post* describing it as “something that’s useful for Clinton supporters who like to argue online about politics.” Verrits are rarely, if ever, shared in the wild, which makes it unlikely that people would go to the trouble of creating fakes. But Verrit is built upon a series of premises: first, that when confronted with “correct” information, people will change their political opinions; second, that what is “correct” and what is “incorrect” are objective truths; and third, that people share political viewpoints online in an attempt to inform others, or at least convince others with different opinions. All of these presumptions are debatable.

Verrit, like Snopes, Politifact, and a host of other fact-checking sites, reflect fundamental misunderstandings about how information circulates online, what function political information plays in social contexts, and how and why people change their political opinions. Fact-checking is in many ways a response to the rapidly changing norms and practices of journalism, news gathering, and public debate. In other words, fact-checking best resembles a movement for reform *within* journalism, particularly in a moment when many journalists and members of the public believe that news coverage of the 2016 election contributed to the loss of Hillary Clinton. However, fact-checking (and another frequently-proposed solution, media literacy) is ineffectual in many cases and, in other cases, may cause people to “double-down” on their incorrect beliefs, producing a backlash effect.

This paper uses active audience approaches to media consumption to investigate and critique the phenomenon known as “fake news.”

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