The numbers suggest there’s something to it.\textsuperscript{i}

During the seven and a half years that separated Barack Obama’s first inauguration from the day Donald Trump accepted the Republican nomination, the term fake news appeared in newspapers available through ProQuest at a rate of 1.2 articles per day. In the 39 days between Donald Trump’s inauguration and the end of the following month, fake news appeared in about 159 articles per day.

As references to the problem of fake news increased in popular newspapers, the scholarly and trade press urged educators to find a solution. Just nine days after Trump won the election, the Chronicle of Higher Education published a manifesto, “Stop the Spread of Fake News.”\textsuperscript{ii} The American Library Association followed suit with a series of similar articles, many of them suggesting libraries were uniquely well positioned to eradicate the scourge of fake news.\textsuperscript{iii}

But what is fake news?

Definitions have been curiously lacking. The Chronicle manifesto, for example, critiqued Facebook’s handling of fake news without ever defining what fake news was. An editorial in the British Medical Journal, meanwhile, compared the popularity of real news and fake news as though the terms were simple and clear to everyone.\textsuperscript{iv}

Writing in the spring 2017 issue of the Journal of Economic Perspectives, the economists Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow attempted to provide some clarity.\textsuperscript{v} They argued that fake news producers generally evince “two distinguishing characteristics.” First, they neither value nor invest in “accurate reporting.” Second, fake news producers make no effort to build “a long-term reputation for quality” and, instead, seek to maximize short-term profits by “attracting clicks.”\textsuperscript{vi}

The first characteristic helps us distinguish producers of fake news from producers of news that is merely exaggerated, biased, or carelessly reported. Breitbart, for example, is a highly ideological website that frequently publishes sloppy and misleading articles. But there are rarely outright fabrications at breitbart.com. By contrast, a site like Ending the Fed—which famously reposted an article about a (fictitious) papal endorsement of Trump—would be classified as a “fake news” site. According to technology reporter Tess Townsend, much of what’s published or linked to at endingthefed.com is demonstrably false.\textsuperscript{vii}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{screen_capture_from_endingthefed_com_6_29_17.png}
\caption{Report: Obama to Free Gitmo Detainees Who Have Vowed to Behead Americans}
\end{figure}
The second characteristic—success as a function of clicks, not quality—permits distinctions between fake news producers and producers of news that, while demonstrably false, is intended as satire. Most articles in The Onion contain demonstrably false information, but it’s clear that the satirical site’s parent company remains highly invested in building a reputation for the quality of its satire. viii

Models aren’t true or false. They’re more or less useful. And the Allcott/Gentzkow model is useful in part because it’s versatile. It helps make distinctions not just between different kinds of news organizations and websites but also between different kinds of individuals who produce news. This distinction was clearly illustrated in two memorable moments in the 2016 U.S. presidential debates.

The third and final debate happened in the middle of a series of leaks intended to embarrass Hillary Clinton’s campaign. One of the most damaging leaks concerned a speech that Clinton had given to some Brazilian bankers. In that speech, Wikileaks revealed that Clinton had said her “dream” was a “hemispheric common market with open trade and open borders.” ix

What a few years earlier would have passed as a somewhat poetic description of a boringly orthodox economic position was, in the context of the anti-globalist sentiment that dominated the 2016 election, electoral kryptonite. So, when challenged by moderator Chris Wallace to articulate a clear view, it was no surprise that Clinton downplayed the scope and significance of her remarks. She claimed that, far from being a proponent of expansive immigration and free trade, she was making a narrow point about the desirability of “an energy system that crosses borders.” x

Here’s the thing about Clinton’s response: it was almost certainly untrue. Despite her protestations to the contrary, context suggests she had indeed been trying to reassure the Brazilian bankers (who were paying her more than $200,000 to speak to them) that she was a strong proponent of open borders. You couldn’t prove Clinton was lying, though, because what she said was basically consistent with the known facts, and it contained no information that was clearly and demonstrably false.

Contrast that exchange with one from the second debate. A few days before that debate, a video was leaked in which Trump could be heard bragging that, as a star, he could get away with pretty much anything, including sexual assault. With tensions running high, co-moderator Anderson Cooper asked Trump about a tweet he had sent out criticizing a former beauty contestant and encouraging people to “check out a sex tape.” Here, Trump, like Clinton, was forced to respond to potentially damaging information. But, unlike Clinton, Trump gave a response that wasn’t so much probably untrue as it was flat out and verifiably untrue. He said he’d never told anyone to “check out a sex tape.” xi
Unlike Clinton’s highly misleading comment, Trump’s outright denial was straightforwardly contradicted by the known facts. Here and on many other occasions throughout the campaign, Trump himself was a producer of fake news. He seemed not to value even minimal levels of accuracy, and he showed no obvious concern that outright lying would harm his long-term reputation.

Building on Allcott’s and Gentzkow’s characterization of fake news producers, we’ll define fake news as stories that a) contain clearly and demonstrably false information and b) are created or shared by entities who neither value nor invest in accuracy and who don’t care what kind of hit their long-term reputation is likely to take when their dishonesty is exposed. When you look at fake news in this way, it seems likely that, more than any other U.S. presidential candidate in history, Trump benefited from fake news. However blatant the fake news Trump produced, his campaign could count on the avid sharing on social media of different fake news extolling his honesty and highlighting the dishonesty of the woman he called “Crooked Hillary.”

While studies suggest that 2016 fake news stories strongly favored Trump, it’s not clear how big a role they played in putting him in the White House. Allcott and Gentzkow ultimately concluded that the impact of fake news was small—almost certainly smaller than the already small margins by which Trump won the decisive Rustbelt states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Others—including Paul Horner, the man responsible for such fake news stories as the one detailing the emergence of a huge pro-Trump Amish lobby—disagree. (A Trump critic, Horner wrote stories to make fun of the gullibility of Trump supporters and, in so doing, now believes he helped Trump win the presidency.)

While Allcott, Gentzkow, and Horner disagree on the impact of fake news on the result of the election, they all appear to believe that, when it came to fake news, voters exposed to fake news were passive recipients. Their assumption seems to be that, regardless of whether or not fake news changed anyone’s outward behavior, it convinced some people to believe things they otherwise wouldn’t.

This is a common assumption to make about fake news. But a strange case from the academic world suggests it’s wrong and that, in the end, fake news is less likely to determine what we believe than it is to reinforce what we believe already.

You probably haven’t heard of Dr. John Lott, but, if you follow America’s gun debate, you may well have heard two of the arguments he popularized, namely that guns are used defensively millions of times
every year and that on almost all of these occasions merely brandishing a gun is enough to deter criminals. Here’s how Lott put it in the 1998 edition of his much-quoted book *More Guns, Less Crime*:

If national surveys are correct, 98 percent of the time that people use guns defensively, they merely have to brandish a weapon to break off an attack.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Shortly after publication, Otis Dudley Duncan, an influential and widely respected quantitative sociologist\textsuperscript{xvi}, wrote to Lott challenging the 98% figure. In his reply to Duncan, Lott attributed the statistic not to “national studies” but to what Northwestern law professor James Lindgren subsequently referred to as a “hitherto unrevealed study”\textsuperscript{xvii} conducted by Lott himself.

In the September/October 2000 issue of *The Crimonologist*, Lott claimed his 1997 study was based on 2,424 households but that all the survey data had been wiped out in “an unfortunate computer crash.”\textsuperscript{xviii} When asked by Lindgren for some basic details about the survey, Lott wasn’t forthcoming. He said he couldn’t remember the students who had made the calls and that he had no way of tracking them down because they’d used their own phones and been paid in cash with money from Lott’s own pocket.

Suspicions regarding the existence of Lott’s survey moved to an email discussion group involving academics interested in gun research. One of the members of this group, an Australian computer scientist named Tim Lambert, delved further into what he regarded as inconsistencies in Lott’s account.\textsuperscript{xix} The dispute found its way into the national press.

Subject to increasing criticism, Lott appeared to catch a break when a former student, Mary Rosh, stepped up to defend him. Rosh was effusive in her praise for Lott, calling him “the best professor” she had ever had. She said that, despite an undeserved reputation as a right-wing ideologue, Lott had always been scrupulously fair in his presentation of controversial issues and had insisted that, for her own good, she branch out and take classes from other professors. Rosh also said that, in contrast to what Duncan and Lambert had experienced, Lott always went “out of his way” to make his data available.
If it seemed Rosh was making precisely the defense of Lott that Lott would have made for himself, that’s because she was. Rosh and Lott were **the same person**—a fact uncovered when Julian Sanchez, a fellow at the libertarian (and pro-gun) Cato Institute, noted that the IP address on Rosh’s comments and the one on Lott’s emails were identical.

*More digging* revealed more deception. A harrowing first-person account of persistent stalking was not an authentic *cri de cœur* from a terrified female Dartmouth student but, rather, a pro-concealed-carry piece repackaged by Lott from an article he’d written months earlier for the *Daily Caller*. A pro-right-to-carry paper had not, despite Lott’s claim, been published in the September 2015 issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Econ Journal Watch*. And 17 glowing reviews of Lott’s books and 10 highly critical reviews of books by Lott’s political opponents had not been written by anonymous Amazon and Barnes & Noble readers but by (you guessed it) **Lott himself**.

![Image](archive.is/9HZ7w)

When all the deception surrounding Lott’s research emerged, you might assume he was forced into the academic shadows. Or perhaps that he suffered a similar fate to former Emory University professor Michael Bellesiles, whose apparent falsification of some data in an anti-gun book had turned him into an *academic pariah*. If so, you would be wrong.

As head of the pro-gun Crime Prevention Research Center and a regular columnist for Fox News, Lott (who holds a PhD from UCLA) remains *the go-to voice* any time the mainstream media wants an academic-sounding pro-gun commentator. And for the relatively small number of academics who share Lott’s pro-gun views, Lott’s research remains influential.

Why?

Without the benefit of mind reading, we can’t be sure. But it seems unlikely that any academic who entered the gun debate with a genuinely open mind simply found Lott’s pro-gun data so much more persuasive than the “anti-gun” data from major studies by the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute of Health that they came to view Lott as the definitive source on gun research.

No, if pro-gun academics continue to believe in the value of Lott’s research, it’s more likely they do so for a very simple reason: **they want to**.

There are two big take-aways from the Lott case.
The first is that we are all susceptible to fake news. If academics, the men and women who are trained to override their personal biases and view all data dispassionately, believe research produced by someone who has fabricated reviews, publication credits, and (probably) data, then of course the rest of us will at times believe stories written by someone who fabricates events.

The less obvious but arguably more interesting take-away is that none of us approach fake news as blank slates, only to find ourselves buffeted this way and that by the fake news du jour. On the contrary, what we already believe strongly influences which fake news stories we'll accept as true. Just as pro-gun academics are more likely to believe Lott’s (probably) falsified pro-gun data than they are Professor Bellesiles’ (probably) falsified anti-gun data (and vice-versa), we are far more likely to believe fake news that reinforces our views than we are to believe fake news that challenges our views. On this point at least, the data is clear.

None of this should be surprising. As the work of researchers like Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Haidt has shown, our beliefs grow out of our emotions. In this context, Haidt refers to “reason” as the “press secretary of the emotions.” It’s as though in “reason” we have our own Sean Spicer, someone who’ll make the case that the things we believe are determined not by our emotions but by impassive intellectual deliberation. The difference between our “Spicey” and Trump’s former press secretary is ours isn’t there to make the case to our critics; he’s there to make the case to us.

So a question that arises is whether fake news is even a problem. If for the most part fake news isn’t acting on us in ways that make us believe things we otherwise wouldn’t, does fake news merit such angst? Is it really worth writing all those articles calling on educators to rise up and stamp it out?

Yes.

Because there are significant dangers, both political and personal, associated with the persistence of fake news.

One of the biggest political dangers is that leaders inclined to authoritarianism will exploit the uncertainty created by fake news to deflect legitimate criticisms. Indeed, this has already happened with President Trump. At a January 2017 press conference, Trump refused to answer tough questions from CNN because he said CNN was producing “fake news.” He likely made this accusation because CNN was (accurately) reporting that U.S. intelligence officers had briefed him about the existence of an inflammatory Russian dossier. But in the exchange with a CNN reporter, Trump turned the concept of “fake news” on its head. In his new formulation, fake news wasn’t false information that looked real but, rather, real information that could be dismissed as false.

One of the biggest personal dangers is, counterintuitively, increased anxiety. Throughout the election season, many Americans expressed anxiety that their preferred candidate would lose. To alleviate that anxiety, likeminded friends frequently shared sources suggesting their fears were overblown. But sharing reassuring sources did nothing to make the outcome they feared less likely. And, what’s more, it didn’t even reduce their anxiety. That’s because when we do things purely to relieve our anxiety, we are engaging in a form of what psychologists call “avoidance behavior,” and that, research has shown, provides temporary relief but ultimately makes our anxiety worse.

One reason for this phenomenon is that while we focus on symptoms, we are leaving the underlying problem, which causes the symptoms in the first place, unaddressed. Another reason is that when we
avoid a problem we send a message to our brain that the problem we don’t want to confront must be big and scary.

The bigger and scarier we feel a problem is, the more we will be tempted to use fake news as a balm. And fake news stories are particularly tempting. Reality is always messy and complex, and so no good-faith attempt to illustrate that reality can be tidy or simple. Fake news stories, by contrast, are fundamentally unmoored from reality and so can give us the artificially simple representation of the world we crave. Fake news is the informational equivalent of highly refined sugar. Consuming it feels good in the moment, but too much of it will make us sick.

So what can educators do to end the creation and spread of fake news? If there’s a solution, it won’t be a sexy one. It will likely start with a recognition that the problem of fake news is ultimately not a new problem stemming from rapid technological change but, rather, a longstanding problem related to human desire. In other words, the fake news problem didn’t suddenly appear when Macedonian teens realized they could earn money by making up stories and sharing them on social media. xxix No, what we are now calling the “fake news problem” is little more than a 21st-century rehashing of a longstanding information literacy problem: our intense desire to define the world in such a way that we are free to believe what we want.

Consequently, the solution to the problem of fake news probably won’t come in the form of tweaks to Facebook algorithms or a new tool that identifies the telltale patterns of made-up articles. It is more likely to be found in the traditional venues of the library and the classroom. There, we will find educators engaged in a struggle to help students find, evaluate, and use information more effectively. To the extent educators succeed, students will end up savvier news readers. But even more importantly, they’ll learn what Sir Francis Bacon meant in 1620 when he wrote:

> The human understanding, once it has adopted opinions, either because they were already accepted and believed, or because it likes them, draws everything else to support and agree with them. xxx

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**WORKS CITED**

i Figures are taken from search of newspaper content in ProQuest (5/21/2017).


vi ibid: 218-19.


