https://fareedzakaria.com/2018/02/23/democracy-is-decaying-worldwide-america-isnt-immune/

DEMOCRACY IS DECAYING WORLDWIDE. AMERICA ISN'T IMMUNE.

By Fareed Zakaria,
Thursday, Feb. 22, 2018
A few weeks ago, the Economist Intelligence Unit published the 10th edition of its Democracy Index, a comprehensive ranking of nations that looks at 60 measures in five categories, ranging from electoral process to civil liberties. For the second consecutive year, the United States failed to make the top bracket of "full democracy" and was grouped in the second one, "flawed democracy."

It would be easy to focus on the state of American democracy under President Trump, but the more worrying aspect is that the United States' slide is part of a global trend. In this year's report, scores dropped for more than half the world's countries. What Stanford University professor Larry Diamond described 10 years ago as a "democratic recession" shows no sign of ending. The nature of this recession is perhaps best seen by looking at the state of the free press worldwide.

Take Kenya, until very recently considered a hopeful story of democratic progress. Last month, President Uhuru Kenyatta instructed the country's main television stations not to cover an opposition event, and when they refused, he took them off the air. The government then ignored a court order that the stations be allowed to resume broadcasting.

Kenya's violations of press freedom are trivial compared with those of Turkey, which is now the world's foremost jailer of journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Let me underscore that fact. The government that has imprisoned more journalists than any other country is democratically elected. It used to target the media in ways that at least had the veneer of the rule of law, such as issuing a massive tax fine against a critical organization. But that changed after the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016. One year later, a United Nations report found that at least 177 news outlets had simply been shut down.

It might be possible to brush these stories aside as the inevitable backtracking of developing societies. But what then to make of the turn of events in Hungary and Poland, two countries that wholeheartedly embraced democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union? In Hungary, Viktor Orban's administration has used a series of clever tactics to muzzle the free press. The government has effectively taken over public broadcasting, exerting pressure on outlets and installing party loyalists in key positions. It has showered friendly media with advertising money and drastically cut advertising spending in critical platforms. After Orban's government starves, harasses and intimidates independent media, friendly oligarchs buy out the media companies, thus ensuring favorable coverage. Many of these same tactics are now being employed in Poland, which has been a poster child for its stellar political and economic reforms since the fall of communism.

Even in long-established democracies such as Israel and India, we are witnessing systematic efforts to shrink the space and power of independent media that is critical of the government. In Israel, the criminal allegations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which he denies, include his dealings with press barons to ensure favorable coverage. In addition, Netanyahu's efforts to keep public broadcasting weak have earned him condemnation even from right-wing politicians. In India, Narendra Modi's government has launched a highly questionable fraud and money laundering case against NDTV, a powerful and persistent critic of some of its policies. Recently, a journalist who exposed an embarrassing vulnerability in a government database was referred to the police rather than hailed as a whistleblower.

More than 20 years ago, in an essay in Foreign Affairs, I warned that the distinctive problem facing the world was "illiberal democracy" — elected governments that systematically abused their power and restricted freedoms. I subsequently worried that America could head down this path. Most people dismissed the danger because American democracy, they said, was robust, with strong institutions that could weather any storm. Press freedom, after all, is guaranteed under the First Amendment. But consider Poland and Hungary, which not only have strong institutions of their own but also exist within the embrace of rule-based European Union institutions that have explicit constitutional protections for freedom of the press.

In just one year in office, Trump has already done damage. Besides denigrating critical media outlets and lauding friendly ones, he has threatened to strengthen libel laws, strip network licenses and tax the owner of a particular newspaper. His administration has blocked the merger of a news organization he considers biased, while facilitating the merger of an organization with more favorable coverage.

"An institution," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "is the lengthened shadow of one man." Institutions are collections of rules and norms agreed upon by human beings. If leaders attack, denigrate and abuse them, they will be weakened, and this, in turn, will weaken the character and quality of democracy. The American system is stronger than most, but it is not immune to these forces of democratic decay.

This column is adapted from Fareed Zakaria's Daniel Pearl Memorial Lecture at the University of California at Los Angeles.

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-exactly-has-really-had-influence/

Fake news: What exactly is it – and how can you spot it?

Donald Trump has appropriated the term fake news, often to refer to stories he disagrees with

James Titcomb

- James Carson

19 MARCH 2018 • 3:08PM

"Fake news" was not a term many people used 18 months ago, but it is now seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy, free debate and the Western order.

As well as being a favourite term of Donald Trump, it was also named 2017's word of the year, raising tensions between nations, and may lead to regulation of social media.

And yet, nobody can agree on what it is, how much of a problem it is, and what to do about it. Here's everything you need to know.

The origins of fake news

Governments and powerful individuals have used information as a weapon for millennia, to boost their support and quash dissidence.

Octavian famously used a campaign of disinformation to aid his victory over Marc Anthony in the final war of the Roman Republic. In its aftermath, he changed his name to Augustus, and dispatched a flattering and youthful image of himself throughout the Empire, maintaining its use in his old age.

In the 20th century, new forms of mass communication allowed propaganda's scale and persuasive power to grow, particularly during wartime and in fascist regimes.

This sort of propaganda was largely funded and controlled by governments, but the blatant bias it carried waned as the ideological struggles became less apparent. Added to that, as populations became more used to mass communication, they could more easily see through it.

Enter the internet and social media

Before the internet, it was much more expensive to distribute information, building up trust took years, and there were much simpler definitions of what constituted news and media, making regulation or self-regulation easier.

But the rise of social media has broken down many of the boundaries that prevented fake news from spreading in democracies. In particular it has allowed anyone to create and disseminate information, especially those that have proven most adept at "gaming" how social networks operate.

Facebook and Twitter allowed people to exchange information on a much greater scale than ever before, while publishing platforms like WordPress allowed anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. In short, the barriers to creating fake news have been undone.

Russia, the US election and Trump

On January 18, Trump unveiled the winners of his much-touted "Fake News Awards", escalating his already persistent attacks on a number of major US media outlets.

The brash Republican president announced the ten "honorees" using his preferred medium of Twitter, linking to a list published on the Republican Party's website that crashed minutes after his big reveal.

However, hoaxes and falsehoods have been associated with the internet since its early days, but it is only in the last two years that organised, systematic misinformation campaigns, often linked to governments, have emerged, and their effect on democracy and society scrutinised.

Last year's US election has been seen as providing a fertile breeding ground for fake news. Some credit Donald Trump's anti-establishment rhetoric and distrust of the mainstream media. Others blame widening partisanship, which meant readers were more prone to believe and share stories that fit their beliefs.

The rise of social media itself has also been seen as central. Sites like Facebook are accused of creating "filter bubbles", the phenomenon of showing people things that they like or tend to agree with, and hiding those that they don't.
Critics of Facebook and Twitter say the sites are purpose built for spreading misinformation, with the reach of a story dependent on its ability to go viral - something that often depends on sensationalism and emotional reactions more than truth itself.

Headlines such as "Pope backs Trump", "Hillary sold weapons to ISIS", "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead" went viral on Facebook in the run up to the election, garnering thousands of shares.

But fake news goes beyond the US. According to Freedom House, 30 governments identified this year pay "opinion shapers" to promote propaganda online.

What exactly is fake news?

One of the problems of actually doing anything about fake news is that it comes in multiple variants, from different actors and with different motives. These include but are not limited to:

- **Commercially-driven sensational content:** Stories that are not ideologically driven, but very often have absolutely no grounding in fact. Their key goal is to drive web traffic and, as a result, generate advertising income. Pop-up websites run by Macedonian teenagers fall into this category.
- **Nation state-sponsored misinformation:** The goal here isn't revenue, but influence. Outlets in Russia or elsewhere might produce content to swing public opinion, sow division or give the illusion of support for a particular candidate or idea, either domestically or abroad. Fabricated stories can often be mixed with true or sensationalised ones.
- **Highly-partisan news sites:** These can conflate fact and opinion, are nakedly supportive of one political viewpoint or party, and often position themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media.

- **Social media itself:** Swarms of Twitter bots posting doctored or misleading photos, adverts on Facebook paid for by Russian intelligence outfits, videos on YouTube claiming terrorist incidents are hoaxes. These are not links outside of social media but are part of the social networks themselves.
- **Satire or parody:** Light-hearted publications such as The Onion and Daily Mash have existed well before fake news was seen as a problem.

  This is not to mention news stories from mainstream outlets that turn out to be hoaxes or mistakes, but had genuinely good intentions behind them when published.

And of course, there's Donald Trump, who constantly refers to outlets such as CNN and the New York Times as "fake news". His administration also coined the term "alternative facts" when presented with evidence of low turnout at Trump's inauguration.

These different definitions and motives make it incredibly difficult to effectively counter fake news. Some types, such as commercially driven fake websites, have been countered by cutting off advertising, but this does not affect misinformation campaigns, for example. Warnings on potential fake news stories have been introduced by Facebook, but this does little to combat content that exists on the site itself.

At a glance | The rise of fake news

30 countries that pay pro-government commentators:

Azerbaijan	Bahrain	Belarus
China	Cuba	Ecuador
Egypt	Ethiopia	The Gambia
Iran	Kazakhstan	Kenya
Kyrgzstan	Malaysia	Mexico
Morocco	Myanmar	Philippines
Russia	Rwanda	Saudi Arabia
Sudan	Syria	Thailand
Turkey	Ukraine	United Arab Emirates
Uzbekisatn	Venezuela	Vietnam

Has it had an influence?

It is hard to tell. Facebook's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg initially said the idea that misinformation on Facebook influenced the election was a "crazy idea", but has backtracked, saying he regrets the comments.

The sheer scale of Facebook and Twitter - 2bn and 330m users respectively - and the hours spent on them each week suggest many eyeballs have come into contact with fake news stories or misinformation campaigns.

According to a study from Stanford University, fake news websites received 159 million visits during the month of last year's US election, and other research has shown the most widely-shared news stories during the election were fake. The majority were also pro-Trump.

There is less evidence of fake news taking off in the UK during the Brexit vote or this year's general election, although there is evidence that bots have been used in both.

However, there is a difference between reach and influence. The latter is a very difficult thing to measure, and this has been true of media for years - how much does the media drive beliefs, and how much does it reflect beliefs?

One less measurable effect may have been that the sheer quantity of fake news stories may have reduced trust in mainstream media - if scepticism about what people read online increases, they may not know what to think. In these situations, people tend to stick to their prejudices.

What is being done about it?

After widespread criticism that the companies are failing to deal with fake news, Twitter, Facebook and Google have all announced measures to crack down on misinformation online.

Facebook, which has faced the most scrutiny, says it is enlisting fact checkers to flag disputed stories, cutting off advertising revenue to fake news sites, and better reviewing adverts on the site. Twitter says it has become better at dealing with bots, and Google has promised better algorithms to police YouTube.

However, critics continue to argue that not enough is being done, and that the tech companies are reluctant to take action, for fear of being seen as biased, or of being seen to accept that they are publishers. Facebook is now viewed as the most powerful media platform in the world, but repeatedly says it is not a media company.

However, the matter may get taken out of their hands amid heightened political fears. Theresa May has accused Vladimir Putin's Russia of "planting fake stories" to undermine the West. Politicians in both the UK and US have launched investigations into Russian election meddling.

How do you spot it?

Spotting fake news isn't easy: a Stanford study last year found that students were shockingly bad at distinguishing between different types of material online, whether paid for, fake or legitimate.

Facebook has a useful list of ways to spot fake news, which include checking other sources and a site's URL.

Facebook's tips for spotting fake news

1. **Be sceptical of headlines.** The headlines of fake news stories are often catchy, and contain lots of capital letters and exclamation marks. If claims in the headline sound unbelievable, they may well be.
2. **Look closely at the URL.** Many false news stories mimic authentic news sources by making small changes to the URL. You can go to the site to compare the URL to established sources.
3. **Check the source.** Ensure the story comes from a source with a reputation for accuracy. If the story comes from a site you have not heard of, check their "About" section to learn more.
4. **Watch for unusual formatting.** Many false news stories often contain spelling and grammar errors, as well as an awkward looking layout.
5. **Check the photos.** False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos. Sometimes the photo may be authentic, but taken out of context. You can do an internet search of the image to find out where it came from.
6. **Check the dates.** Fake news stories may contain timelines that make no sense, or event dates which are wrong or have been altered.
7. **Check the evidence.** Check the author's sources to confirm they are accurate. Lack of evidence, or a reliance on unnamed experts may indicate false news.
8. **Look at other reports.** If no other news source is reporting the same story, it could indicate that it is false.
9. **Is the story a joke?** Sometimes false news stories can be hard to distinguish from humourous articles. Check whether the source is known for parody, and whether the story's details and tone suggest it may be just for fun.
10. **Some stories are intentionally false.** Think critically about the stories that you read, and only share articles which you know to be credible.

News stories are often described as so good you couldn't make it up, which is often what makes them great news stories. But it's worth expressing scepticism about everything: *could this really happen*?

https://www.marketwatch.com/story/how-biased-is-your-news-source-you-probably-wont-agree-with-this-chart-2018-02-28

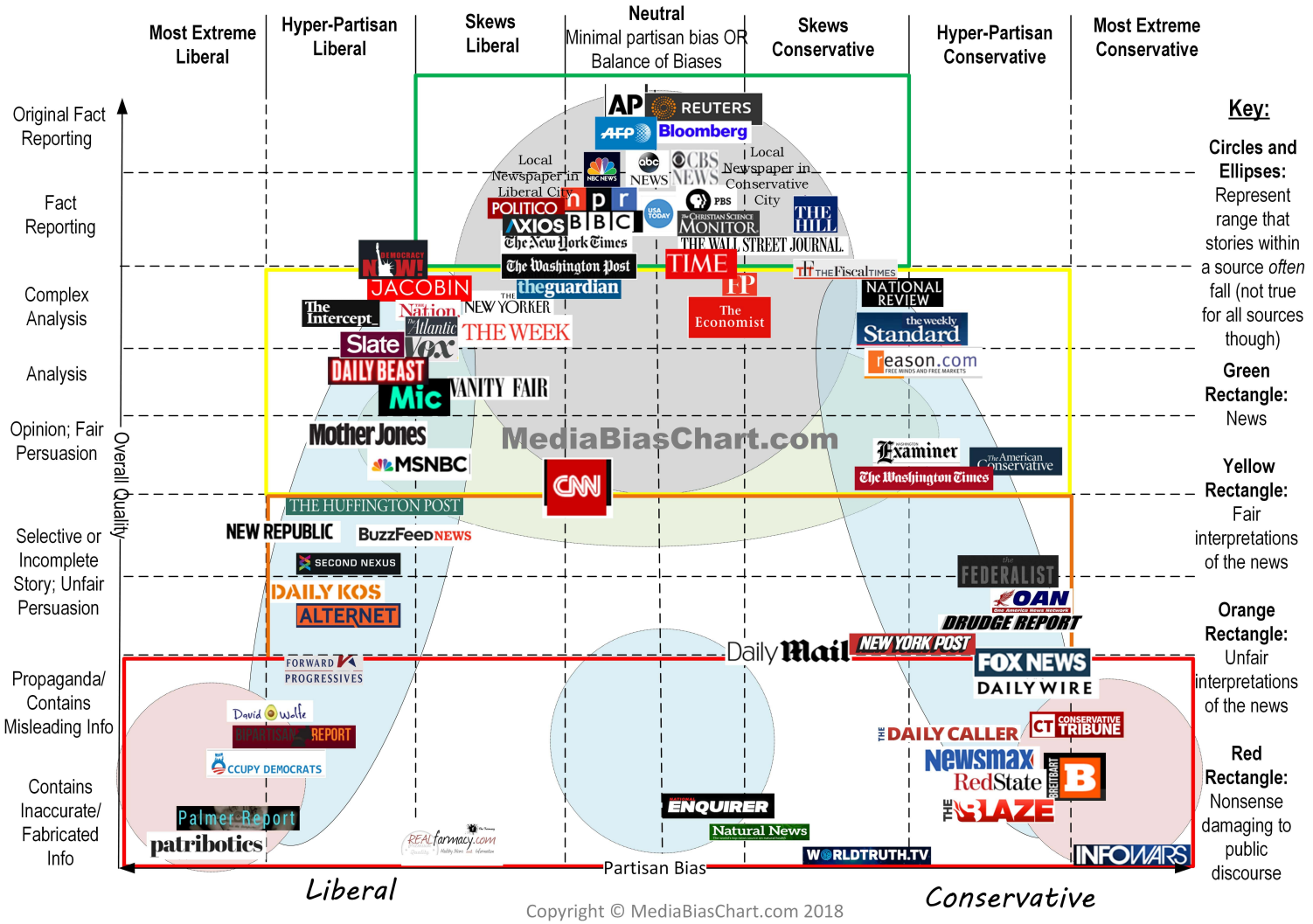
How biased is your news source? You probably won't agree with this chart

Published: Mar 10, 2018 12:37 p.m. ET

By

SHAWNLANGLOIS
SOCIAL-MEDIA EDITOR

Are we even aware of our biases anymore?
If you look at this chart and are convinced your "extreme" source belongs in the middle, you just might be part of the problem plaguing America today.



"In the past, national evening news programs, local evening news programs, and the front pages of print newspapers were dominated by fact-reporting stories," says the chart's creator, patent attorney Vanessa Otero. "Now, however, many sources people consider to be 'news sources' are actually dominated by analysis and opinion pieces."
She released the first version of the chart back in 2016, and she's updated it several times since. Over the past year, it's gone viral, with thousands of educators at both the high school and college levels using the compelling visual. She says she's "shocked" by all the attention it's received and still gets requests every day.
Otero also talked about why such bias is so troubling.

"I think the extremes are very toxic and damaging to the country," she explained to MarketWatch. "These extreme sources play on people's worst instincts, like fear and tribalism, and take advantage of people's confirmation biases."

And with that, let the backlash over the latest version begin.

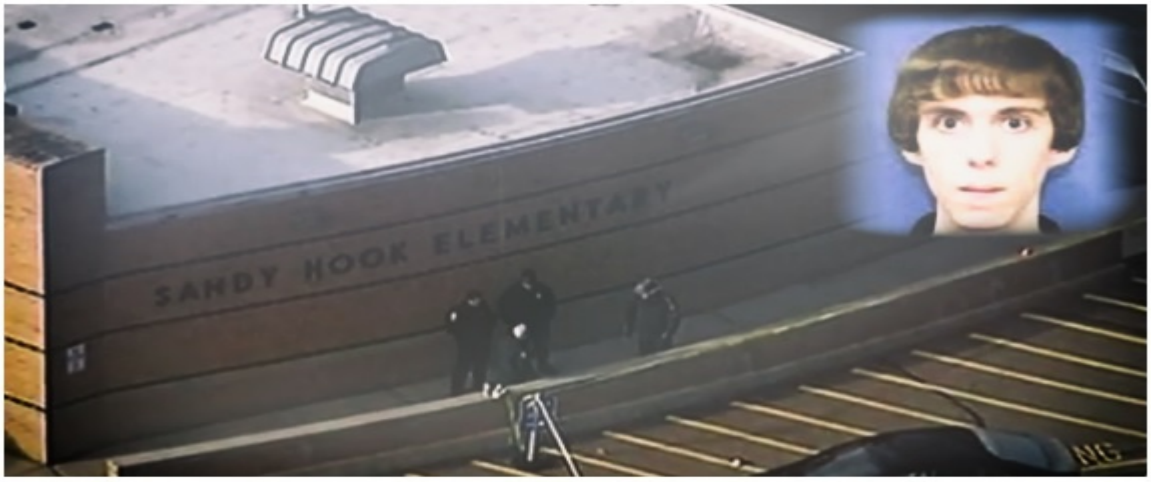
Obviously, to many conservatives, Fox News, home to the guy Carter Page describes as this generation's "Edward R. Murrow," has no business on the fringe. And the fact that CNN's bordering the neutral zone is sure to rankle Trump fans. Then there's Infowars, which Otero deems "nonsense damaging to public discourse." Infowars, after the chart first surfaced, responded with one of its own:

Infowars, run by Alex Jones, wrote that the chart is an example of the “dying dinosaur media’s extreme liberal bias” and that it unfairly “demonizes” independent media. Here’s just one example of how Infowars shows off its independence:

MEGA MASSIVE COVER UP: RETIRED FBI AGENT INVESTIGATES SANDY HOOK

Retired Navy Seal says Sandy Hook doesn't add up

Infowars.com - JULY 7, 2015 1085 Comments



‘‘If you have just a couple sources that you think are in the middle but none exist either to the right or left of them, or up or down from them, you may be on the wrong track,” Otero said, adding that MarketWatch will make the next update.
But where?