



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**F**aking News: *Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth* examines the rise of fraudulent news, defined here as demonstrably false information that is being presented as a factual news report with the intention to deceive the public, and the related erosion of public faith in traditional journalism. The report identifies proposed solutions at the intersection of technology, journalism, and civil society to empower news consumers with better skills and tools to help them process the torrents of information they see online.

The proliferation of false information and rising distrust in the established news media, due in part to a deliberate

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campaign of denigration, pose a looming crisis for American democracy and civic life. A series of factors—soaring levels of mistrust of journalism and the media, an explosion of new online news outlets, rapid changes in patterns of information consumption, sharp ideological divides that dictate which media outlets are trusted by whom, daily attacks on the press by the president of the United States and his allies, and stumbles by the media itself in an era of cutthroat competition and instantaneous transmission of information—combine to call into question existing methods for disseminating and validating the news for and by an information-hungry but skeptical public. At a time of domestic political upheaval, sharp policy divisions, and intensifying international conflicts, the spread of disinformation and the related—yet distinct—problem of distrust of the media pose a fundamental threat to the quality of our public discourse and to our political system, sound policy outcomes, and national cohesion.

If left unchecked, the continued spread of fraudulent news and the erosion of public trust in the news media

pose a significant and multidimensional risk to American civic discourse and democracy, building gradually over time. These developments have already conspired to create a trust deficit in which many Americans credit few, if any, sources of news. This diminished trust could have far-reaching implications for American governance and society, undermining the news media’s role as the fourth estate and an important check against infringements of civil liberties. The experience of societies around the world that have grappled with these challenges in varying contexts suggests that even those implications that now seem farfetched should not be excluded from consideration. Such challenges include: the increasing apathy of a poorly informed citizenry; unending political polarization and gridlock; the undermining of the news media as a force for government accountability; a long-term risk to the viability of serious news; an inability to devise and implement fact and evidence-driven policies; the vulnerability of public discourse to manipulation by private and foreign interests; an increased risk of panic and irrational behavior among citizens and leaders; and government overreach, unfettered by a discredited news media and detached citizenry.

*Faking News* looks at how the spread of fraudulent news has been facilitated by Facebook, Google, and Twitter, and the ways each company is responding to the problem. The report also discusses how traditional journalism has in part contributed to the breakdown of public trust in the media—through partisan reporting, the blurring of fact and opinion, a lack of transparency around policies and procedures, and even honest mistakes, among other reasons—and what newsrooms are doing to rebuild that trust and improve the accuracy and transparency of their reporting processes. Civil-society-led initiatives, including professional fact-checkers and news literacy education programs round out PEN America’s examination of proposed solutions to the fraudulent news crisis. The report also explores the implications of these approaches for freedom of expression, recognizing that in some areas difficult trade-offs exist between allowing the unhampered transmission of

ideas and information, and preventing public discourse from being mired in falsehoods.

The report's key findings include:

- The recognition of fraudulent news as a threat to free expression should not be employed as a justification for broad new government or corporate restrictions on speech, measures whose effects would be far more harmful to free speech.
- Technology and social media platforms have a significant role to play in curbing the spread of fraudulent news, but approaches like cutting off advertising revenue or adjusting algorithms to target fraudulent news must be strictly limited to purveyors of demonstrably false, intentionally deceptive information and should establish an appeals mechanism for those who believe that their websites should not have been targeted in these efforts. Platforms should also instruct personnel involved in identifying purveyors of fraudulent news to err on the side of inclusion when deciding which sites to de-emphasize in algorithms or block from ad services, in order to protect robust political discourse and users' access to information.
- For all of the major technology and social media companies, one of the best defenses against the

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spread of fraudulent news on their platforms is to help equip users with tools and skills to evaluate the information they see and consume. They should explore ways to feature news literacy information on their platforms, and should support, through funding and partnerships, news literacy initiatives and independent fact-checking projects.

- Technology and social media companies must be more transparent and work harder to maximize the amount of information they share (while respecting users' privacy), so that researchers can investigate how well their approaches to curbing fraudulent news are working, fact-checkers can identify ways to improve their work and its impact, and the public

can understand more about how information is presented to them on the platforms.

- News organizations can signal accountability and help assuage distrust around reporting practices and editorial decisions by ensuring that their websites provide easily accessible information outlining their standards, practices, and policies—including how they address errors, provide adequate fact-checking, and make use of a public editor or ombudsperson.
- News organizations should improve the labeling of content and graphics, especially online, to ensure that news items are visually discernible from opinion, analysis, sponsored content, and paid advertisements. Newsrooms should also establish or clarify their headline-writing standards to ensure that headlines are not misleading or overly sensational. Headlines that fail to deliver on the content they promise risk alienating readers and sowing greater distrust and suspicion of media biases.
- News literacy programs are among the most promising approaches to addressing the long-term harms posed by fraudulent news, because they hold the potential to reshape Americans' attitude toward, and evaluation of, the news media. There will always be efforts to spread false news online as long as there is financial or political gain to be had from doing so. But if there is a concerted, widespread, systematic effort to educate people, especially younger generations, about how to be savvy and responsible news consumers, the toxic effects of fraudulent news may be substantially lessened. Public officials, educators, librarians, and the public should press for the adoption of news literacy courses as a core part of school curricula, and should make the case for their value as a benefit to the entire country and the health of our democracy.

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and ability to weigh its credibility. These rights also relate to how news audiences digest the content conveyed by media outlets and online platforms.

The power of fraudulent news lies ultimately in the minds of news consumers. Accordingly, measures to address the crisis of truth should first and foremost center on enabling and equipping people to derive, discern, and digest information in ways that guard against the influence of fraudulent news. Based on our examination of the range of approaches to fraudulent news that have been employed by governments, social media outlets and technology companies, news organizations, research institutes, and nonprofit groups, PEN America has identified six prongs of response that are critical to stemming the current crisis and averting the most dangerous harms:

#### **For Policymakers, Educators, Educational Institutions, and Education Leaders**

**Educate** the public and future generations by mounting a massive effort to create informed consumers of news across all platforms and mediums:

- Adopt news literacy education as a core part of school curricula.
- Conduct research on the most effective forms of news-related public education and empowerment.
- Engage teacher training programs and graduate education schools to equip teachers to teach news literacy.
- Leverage print, digital, television, and other media platforms with the reach to inform youth and citizens at large on news literacy.

#### **For Technology and Social Media Platforms and Other News Intermediaries**

**EQUIP** the public to distinguish fact from falsehood and to assess the credibility of information:

- Identify purveyors of fraudulent news—clearly and narrowly defined as the purveyors of demonstrably false information that is being presented as fact in an effort to deceive the public—and take steps to ensure that they are not able to sustain themselves and profit from access to advertising services on your platforms.
- Establish an appeal mechanism for owners of web pages or sites that are blocked from ad services or

who suspect that their site has been de-emphasized in a platform's algorithms, so that the grounds on which the page was blocked or deprioritized can be reviewed and, if appropriate, reversed.

- Develop additional strategies to ensure that fraudulent news is not presented to users in sections of platforms classified as “news” or that otherwise suggest that the information is credible (like Google’s “best answer” feature).
- Invest further in technologies to more quickly and comprehensively identify efforts to artificially boost content through the use of bots or other means, and flag these efforts in a manner that’s visible to users.
- Strengthen and expand partnerships with independent fact-checking organizations to feature their work, make it easily accessible to users, and collaborate to reduce duplication of effort in fact-checking particular items.
- Support news literacy initiatives through funding and partnerships.
- Develop additional ways to offer users content that may differ from their own beliefs or views, in ways that are transparent to users and sustain their control over what they see.
- Appoint independent ombudspersons to respond to concerns raised by users, the public, and policy makers, and empower them to explain publicly (and, when necessary, critique) the platform’s response to issues of public importance.
- Work in collaboration with academic researchers and civil liberties advocates to identify ways to share more information with researchers about the spread of fraudulent news on specific platforms and the efficacy of efforts to address it, consistent with appropriate privacy protections for users, and free expression rights for news media outlets.
- Allow employees to speak more openly with journalists about the challenges faced in combatting the spread of fraudulent news.

#### **For News Outlets**

**EXEMPLIFY** the values and tenets of credible news gathering and dissemination:

- Continue to emphasize transparency of operations as a high priority, including finding new ways to be more open with readers about the journalistic and editing processes and the handling of errors.
- Clearly label different types of content as reporting, commentary, opinion, analysis, etc.
- Establish, reinstate, and augment ombudsperson functions to underscore transparency, commitment to professionalism, and accountability to readers.
- Prioritize reporting on the harms posed by the spread of fraudulent news and the ways individuals can help.
- Engage proactively in civic and education initiatives to improve media literacy, including outlet audiences and communities.

#### **For News Outlets, Social Media Platforms, Educators, Research Institutes, and Civil Society**

**ENGAGE** directly with diverse groups of citizens to better understand the drivers that influence their interest and trust in the news media:

- Support and conduct research to better understand the drivers of media distrust, the strategies that can foster an appetite for a broad range of news sources, and the skills to evaluate those sources among news consumers.
- Consider diverse readerships when covering polarizing topics or mounting campaigns to combat fraudulent news.
- Involve authoritative voices from across the political spectrum in efforts to defend press freedom and the role of truth.
- When offering fact-checking, emphasize transparency and objectivity of operations, including

explanations of what is chosen to be fact-checked, the verification process, and the reasoning behind sometimes evolving conclusions.

#### **For News Organizations and Civil Society**

**EXPOSE** those who deliberately purvey fraudulent information or baselessly foment distrust of what is true:

- Prioritize reporting on the purveyors of fraudulent news, the methods they use to manufacture and spread it, and the approaches under way to curb its spread.

#### **For Policymakers, News Outlets, Social Media Platforms, and Civil Society**

**EMPOWER** individuals with a set of recognized rights that can help counter practices that interfere with informed news consumption:

- Publicly reject all efforts to denigrate the news media or undercut the legitimacy of their work and reaffirm commitment to freedom of the press.
- Explore ways to better protect journalists from being compelled to disclose sources, especially with respect to sensitive national security and criminal justice stories.
- Support efforts by diverse groups of news consumers to mobilize in defense of their own rights to receive and impart information.
- Educate news consumers to enforce their rights and fulfill their responsibilities.
- Publicly express support for press freedom and respect for journalists.
- Oppose government efforts that would impinge on free expression by penalizing online platforms for failing to remove fraudulent news from their platforms, or by otherwise requiring platforms to act as arbiters of fact.