Entangled in a Web of Fake News

False information, or “fake news” as we have grown accustomed to saying, has become a burning topic since the 2016 presidential campaigns in the U.S.; but the coronavirus pandemic seems to have resulted in an escalation of the debate. Fake news is the creation and sharing of false information through the web and, most notably, social media. The phenomenon of fake news raises many complex and morally charged questions.

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For example, who is or should be responsible for assessing the accuracy of news stories: journalists, communication platforms, or the readers themselves? Should media platforms be allowed to publish and/or relay fake news? Is it a matter of freedom of speech, i.e. are we free to lie? And what is truth, or rather, who decides what is true and what isn't?

These questions have given me a lot of food for thought these last few years, and I am very happy *XRDS* has chosen to address the topic of fake news in spite of its very complex and

controversial nature.

In our most recent issues, I have talked quite a bit about responsibility; our responsibility as professionals in the domains of computer science and technology design. However, I believe the concept of fake news raises the question of the responsibility of technology users (to which we, of course, also belong). So, after discussing our responsibility as makers of technology, I would like to talk a little bit about our responsibility as users.

As I was writing these words, it had only been a week since Twitter

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announced they were testing a new feature on Android: A prompt is triggered when a user tries to retweet an article that they haven't previously opened in the application [1]. I find Twitter's attempt to make their users aware of their role in the spreading of (potentially) fake news very interesting. For one thing, it assumes a significant portion of fake news are believed and shared by users because people do not read these pieces fully. Users' carelessness is thus assumed to be a significant factor in the spreading of fake news. I was surprised to find this assumption seems to be based on actual research, which has found we often satisfy ourselves with reading headlines before sharing content on Twitter [2]. In a digital environment in which journalists and media creators are pushed to create clickbait content, such carelessness—if we can call it so—on the part of users appears dangerous indeed. (Though we can question whether users alone should be blamed, or whether media organizations and contributors should be held accountable for intentionally formulating misleading headlines?) I am curious

to see whether this new Twitter feature will pass the test and become mainstream. It could set a precedent in our handling of fake news, and significantly modify the user's behavior and attitude toward sharing information via social media. I am mainly wondering whether users will accept the feature or reject it as too controlling and condescending? But should the feature prove effective against the (unintentional) sharing of fake news, would it actually manage to significantly reduce the scope and impact of misinformation?

Fake news unfortunately comes in more forms than just (accidentally or intentionally) misleading headlines. New technology seems to be taking the game to a whole other level. For instance, artificial intelligence has made it much easier to forge audio and video statements [3]. We can therefore expect it will become harder and harder for us, users of social media and online news, to assess the accuracy of the information we find there.

This reminds me of an incident from my school years—I must have been around 13 at the time. My geography teacher showed us a documentary claiming the 1969 moon landing was a hoax. (Apparently, this very controversial documentary was also shown in American schools, and is discussed in a 2019 *Slate* article [4].) I remember being totally confused after watching the film—it looked so convincing! My teacher then had us discuss the design elements that made it look so “true,” and warned us against trusting somebody's word just because their name was associated with a fancy title on the screen. What I took away from that experience is the basics of information literacy: always check multiple sources.

However, as the amount of daily information being delivered to us has increased exponentially since my school days, I am wondering to what extent is this still doable—and a reasonable expectation—in practice. Not only is time scarce, but also energy and cognitive resources. And maybe this is why fake news is so easily spread nowadays. The sheer amount of information, real and fake, is reducing our ability to be reflective and to be criti-

cal. At the same time, it seems the issues we are expected to discuss have themselves increased in complexity, increasing the demands on our level of information and expertise in multiple domains including science, politics, history, and ethics. And so, as we simply cannot be experts in every single domain, on every single topic, we have to be aware of, and accept that, we can be fooled. And I think an important question for us, users of technology, is how to behave responsibly in this new, unsettling context we are living in.

In this issue of *XRDS*, we do not seek to provide answers to the many questions surrounding the phenomenon of fake news. Rather, we hope the articles featured will feed your reflection and make you want to explore these questions further. I would like to extend a warm thank you to Numair Khan, the feature editor in charge of this issue, who has really gone out of his way to bring it together. I hope you will enjoy it and find it useful.

—Diane Golay

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