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This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook

A BuzzFeed News analysis found that top fake election news stories generated more total engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined.

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BuzzFeed / Getty Images

In the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, NBC News, and others, a BuzzFeed News analysis has found.

During these critical months of the campaign, 20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.

Within the same time period, the 20 best-performing election stories from 19 major news websites generated a total of 7,367,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook. (This analysis focused on the top performing link posts for both groups of publishers, and not on total site engagement on Facebook. For details on how we identified and analyzed the content, see the bottom of this post. View our data here.)

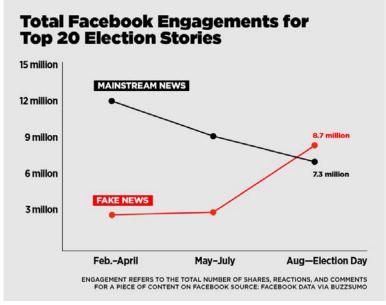A Wall Divides Latin America — But Not The One You're Thinking Of
by Karla Zabludovsky

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Up until those last three months of the campaign, the top election content from major outlets had easily outpaced that of fake election news on Facebook. Then, as the election drew closer, engagement for fake content on Facebook skyrocketed and surpassed that of the content from major news outlets.
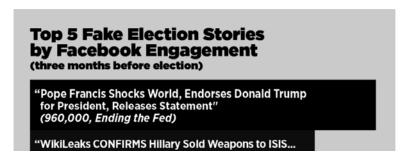

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"I'm troubled that Facebook is doing so little to combat fake news," said Brendan Nyhan, a professor of political science at Dartmouth College who researches political misinformation and fact-checking. "Even if they did not swing the election, the evidence is clear that bogus stories have incredible reach on the network. Facebook should be fighting misinformation, not amplifying it."

A Facebook spokesman told BuzzFeed News that the top stories don't reflect overall engagement on the platform.

"There is a long tail of stories on Facebook," the spokesman said. "It may seem like the top stories get a lot of traction, but they represent a tiny fraction of the total."

He also said that native video, live content, and image posts from major news outlets saw significant engagement on Facebook.

Of the 20 top-performing false election stories identified in the analysis, all but three were overtly pro-Donald Trump or anti-Hillary Clinton. Two of the biggest false hits were a story claiming Clinton sold weapons to ISIS and a hoax claiming the pope endorsed Trump, which the site removed after publication of this article. The only viral false stories during the final three months that were arguably against Trump's interests were a false quote from Mike Pence about Michelle Obama, a false report that Ireland was accepting American "refugees" fleeing Trump, and a hoax claiming RuPaul said he was groped by Trump.

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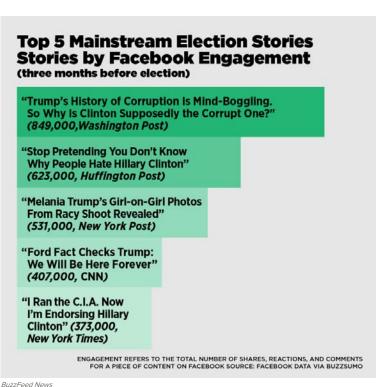**Meet Ian Grillot, The Hero Of The Kansas Bar Shooting**

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(789,000, The Political Insider)

"IT'S OVER: Hillary's ISIS Email Just Leaked &
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(754,000, Ending the Fed)

"Just Read the Law: Hillary Is Disqualified
From Holding Any Federal Office"
(701,000, Ending the Fed)

"FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email
Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-
Suicide" (567,000, Denver Guardian)

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS
FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO

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Top 5 Mainstream Election Stories
Stories by Facebook Engagement
(three months before election)

"Trump's History of Corruption Is Mind-Boggling.
So Why Is Clinton Supposedly the Corrupt One?"
(849,000, Washington Post)

"Stop Pretending You Don't Know
Why People Hate Hillary Clinton"
(623,000, Huffington Post)

"Melania Trump's Girl-on-Girl Photos
From Racy Shoot Revealed"
(531,000, New York Post)

"Ford Fact Checks Trump:
We Will Be Here Forever"
(407,000, CNN)

"I Ran the C.I.A. Now
I'm Endorsing Hillary
Clinton" (373,000,
New York Times)

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS
FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO

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This new data illustrates the power of fake election news on Facebook, and comes as the social network deals with criticism that it allowed false content to run rampant during the 2016 presidential campaign. CEO Mark Zuckerberg said recently it was "a pretty crazy idea" to suggest that fake news on Facebook helped sway the election. He later published a post saying, "We have already launched work enabling our community to flag hoaxes and fake news, and there is more we can do here."

This week BuzzFeed News reported that a group of Facebook employees have formed a task force to tackle the issue, with one saying that "fake news ran wild on our platform during the entire campaign season." The *Wall Street Journal* also reported that Google would begin barring fake news websites from its AdSense advertising program. Facebook soon followed suit.

These developments follow a study by BuzzFeed News that revealed hyperpartisan Facebook pages and their websites were publishing false or misleading content at an alarming rate — and generating significant Facebook engagement in the process. The same was true for the more than 100 US politics websites BuzzFeed News found being run out of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

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