Collective Intelligence, Cognitive Bias and Crowd Spin Doctoring – Fake News in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Research has shown that individuals on social media tend to lean towards information that confirms preexisting beliefs and steer away from information that calls these beliefs into question. This tendency to discount contrary facts questions whether fact-checking tools alone can fight the growing occurrence and spread of fake news. This study proposes an alternative approach to combat fake news by focusing on the underlying belief structures that lend credence to narratives, fake and otherwise. To accomplish this, the study adopts the lens of rhetorical theory to diagnose the discursive relationship between reported news and socially constructed beliefs. We use evidence from Alabama’s controversial 2017 Senate race to demonstrate the approach. The study concludes with implications for building tools to detect the relationship between belief structures and the decision to accept or reject news reports.

Keywords
Fake News, Rhetoric, Social Media, Discourse

Highlights

• The underlying facts of the allegations surrounding Judge Roy Moore’s candidacy for the U.S. Senate were not subjected to argumentation or dispute.
• Fact-checking sites used logically (or ‘logos’) based argument criteria to evaluate and identify fake news stories that emerged in the wake of these allegations.
• Discourse on right (Breitbart) and left (Daily Kos) leaning news outlets largely used “ethos” (individual character and authority) and “pathos” (emotion) based argument criteria to adjudicate the case for or against Moore’s candidacy.
• Gaps in ethos and pathos considerations were produced largely by differences in area of focus relative to two domains (e.g. focus on judge’s family life (Breitbart) vs. focus on the judge’s hostile political views (Daily Kos)) and not differences in principle. (The allegations were viewed in a negative light by both sides.)
• Spin (or determining what “facts” to focus on) was found to be more salient in social discourse than determining the authenticity of these “facts”.

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