

# **Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election**

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# Abstract

- Social media was an important but not dominant source of news in the run-up to the election, with **14 percent** of Americans calling social media their “**most important**” source of election news;
- Of the known false news stories that appeared in the three months before the election, those favoring Trump were shared a total of **30 million times** on Facebook, while those favoring Clinton were shared **8 million times**;
- The average American saw and remembered **0.92** pro-Trump fake news stories and **0.23** pro-Clinton fake news stories, with just **over half** of those who recalled seeing fake news stories believing them;
- For fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a **single fake article** would need to have had the same persuasive effect as **36 television campaign ads**.

# Introduction

Recent evidence shows that:

- **62 percent of U.S. adults** get news on social media;
- the most popular fake news stories were more **widely shared on Facebook** than the most popular mainstream news stories.
- Many people who see fake news stories report that they **believe** them.
- The most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Silverman 2016).

Putting these facts together, a number of analysts and commentators have suggested that Donald Trump would not have been elected president were it not for the influence of fake news spread through social media.



# Data

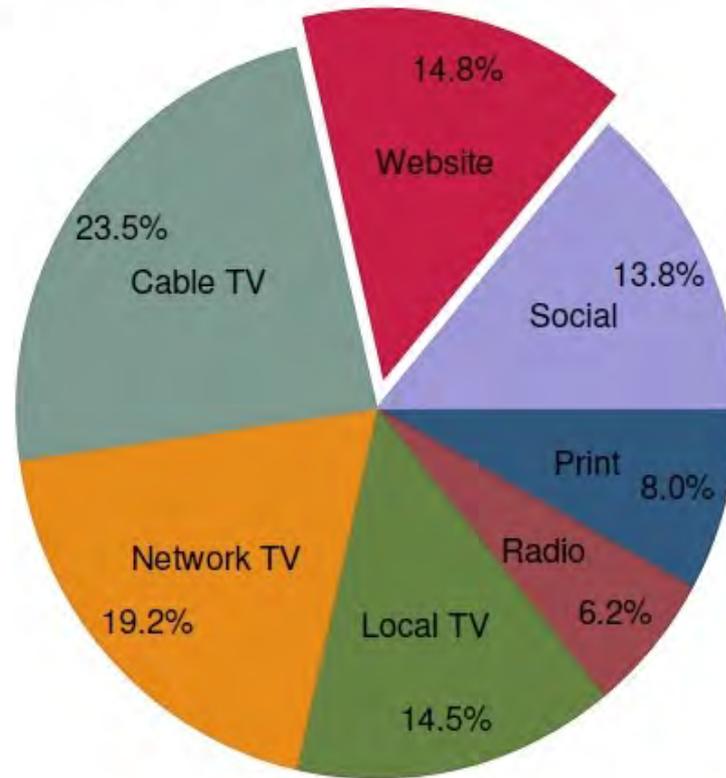
- Two data sources used on referrals to websites covering U.S. news.
  1. The first is Alexa (alex.com), which gathers traffic data from browser extensions used by a sample of “millions of internet users,” as well as directly from websites that use Alexa measurement services. Data obtained by Alexa data is for late October through late November 2016
  2. The second is comScore, which gathers data from another panel of approximately two million internet users. comScore provides longer historical data and is more established, but it has less coverage of lower-traffic websites.

Table 3: Rates of seeing and believing fake news relative to placebo fake news

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		<u>Recall seeing</u>		<u>Recall seeing and believed</u>		
	Fake	Placebo	Fake-Placebo	Fake	Placebo	Fake-Placebo
Share of population	0.153***	0.141***	0.012	0.079***	0.083***	-0.005
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.007)
N	8,456	3,624	12,080	8,456	3,624	12,080
95 pct confidence bound	.171	.1632	.0288	.0924	.1012	.009

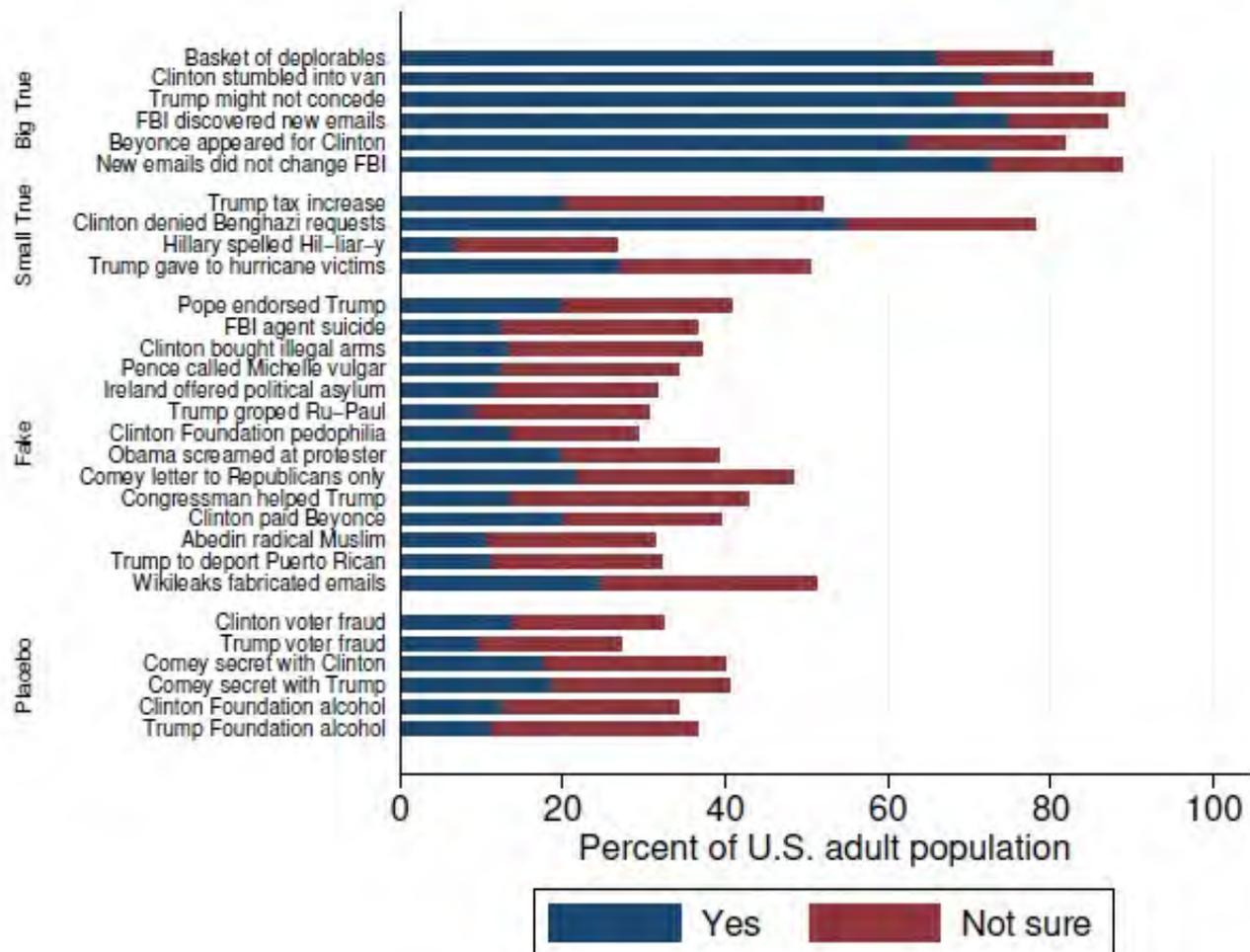
Notes: This table presents the share people who recall seeing (columns 1-3) or recall seeing and believed (columns 4-6) news headlines. Columns 1 and 4 include only Fake headlines, columns 2 and 5 include only Placebo headlines, and columns 3 and 6 present differences between the previous two columns. Observations are weighted for national representativeness. Standard errors are robust and clustered by survey respondent. \*, \*\*, \*\*\*: statistically significant from zero with 90, 95, and 99 percent confidence, respectively.

Figure 1: Most important source of 2016 election news



Notes: Our post-election survey asked, “which of these sources was your most important source of news and information about the 2016 election?” This figure plots responses. Observations are weighted for national representativeness.

Appendix Figure 1: Percent of U.S. adult population that recalled seeing election news, by article



Notes: This figure presents the share of respondents that responded “Yes” and “Not sure” to the question, “Do you recall seeing this reported or discussed before the election,” for each of the 30 headlines listed in table 1. The headline categories written vertically are as defined in Section 2.3. Observations are weighted for national representativeness.

Thank you..  
Questions?