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Title	Research on the Causes and Governance Strategies of False News in the Social Media Era
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/55045/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-382-5_91
Date	2025
Citation	Wang, Yuanjie (2025) Research on the Causes and Governance Strategies of False News in the Social Media Era. <i>Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research.</i> , 912. pp. 953-962. ISSN 2731-8060
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It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-382-5_91

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Research on the Causes and Governance Strategies of False News in the Social Media Era

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Abstract. The emergence of social media has provided a platform for the general public to express their opinions, but it has also lowered the threshold for news release, making false news a type of news that is difficult to completely eliminate in social media. False news not only undermines the credibility of the media and hits the news industry, but also misleads public opinion, disrupts social order, and causes serious harm to society. This article selects 100 pieces of news from “Top 10 False News of the Year” released in *Journalist* from 2013 to 2022 as research samples, and explores the trends in the initial media, topic types, and sources of false news. The emergence of false news lies in the trend of commercial interests, the lack of professional literacy of media personnel, and the inadequate regulatory mechanism. We suggest addressing the phenomenon of false news by introducing advanced algorithms, improving professional literacy, and strengthening laws and regulations.

Keywords: False news, fake news, social media, governance strategies

1 Introduction

In March 2023, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released *Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet*. According to the report, as of December 2022, the number of internet users in China reached 1.067 billion, an increase of 35.49 million compared to December 2021, and the internet penetration rate reached 75.6%. The most active application in the internet is social media. Social media platforms have not only become the main channel for communication and information sharing among people in modern society, but also an important way to spread hot news events. The continuous growth in user numbers indicates that people have become accustomed to using social media as an important part of their daily lives to obtain information. Traditional social life is limited by time and space, and the social media of the Internet era has broken this constraint, especially in the mobile internet era, which allows people to engage in cross distance social interactions anytime and anywhere, online and networked their social relationships in real life, thus creating a new way of social interaction. At the individual level, users can manage and utilize their network resources through various types of social media

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P. Dou and K. Zhang (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 International Conference on Social Sciences and Educational Development (ICOSSED 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 912,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-382-5_91

platforms, obtain information, and interact with others. At the level of enterprises, organizations, or government agencies, the increasing popularity of social media can provide users and the public with more convenient services to obtain public needs and suggestions. Social media has become the main channel for the public to obtain news and has penetrated into all aspects of life.

Social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, Tiktok and RED have changed the way people get information and communicate, and have become the main media of information dissemination. The convenient information sharing mode provided by these platforms has greatly improved the speed and breadth of information dissemination, but also provides an opportunity for the spread of rumours. Especially in emergency situations, social media platforms will generate a large amount of false news ahead of traditional media, which can pose a significant threat to social stability, economic markets, and public sentiment. Due to the anonymity and openness of the internet, users have unlimited opportunities to share and express their opinions on news content, which has also spread a large number of negative online false news. The change in the news dissemination ecology has accelerated the dissemination speed of false news. The rampant false news not only undermines the credibility of the media and hits the news industry, but also misleads public opinion, disrupts social order, and causes serious harm to society. Therefore, in the era of social media, preventing and cracking down on false news is an important issue for the news dissemination industry

2 Sample Analysis of False News

Since entering the 21st century, Journalist magazine has selected China's "Top 10 False News of the Year" every year. This article selects 100 pieces of news from "Top 10 False News of the Year" released in Journalist from 2013 to 2022 as research samples. According to the principles of social statistics, elements such as initial media, topic types, and information sources are classified and coded.

2.1 First Release Medias of False News

Among the 100 false news articles, the paper media accounted for the highest proportion of initial releases, with a total of 3 articles. 7 articles were from radio and television media, and 90 articles were from social media. From a time period analysis, in the past five years, online media has gradually become the main source of false news. The emergence of social media has changed the single mode of communication, no longer just for media to collect, produce, and publish news, but for everyone to become a producer of news. Firstly, the identities of the communicator and the audience are no longer a single role. The audience can register their personal accounts on social media, publish and reprint information on social platforms, which provides an opportunity for criminals to use social media to fabricate and marry information, create false news, and attract the attention of the audience and increase traffic. Traditional media's first false news will no longer

appear in 2022. All the fake news of that year was first published on social media. In recent years, the proportion of new media such as Weibo and WeChat that first published false news has gradually decreased. On the contrary, the proportion of Tiktok, AAuto Quicker and RED that first published false news has become higher and higher. This also reflects the changes in social media in recent years. The details are shown in Figure 1.

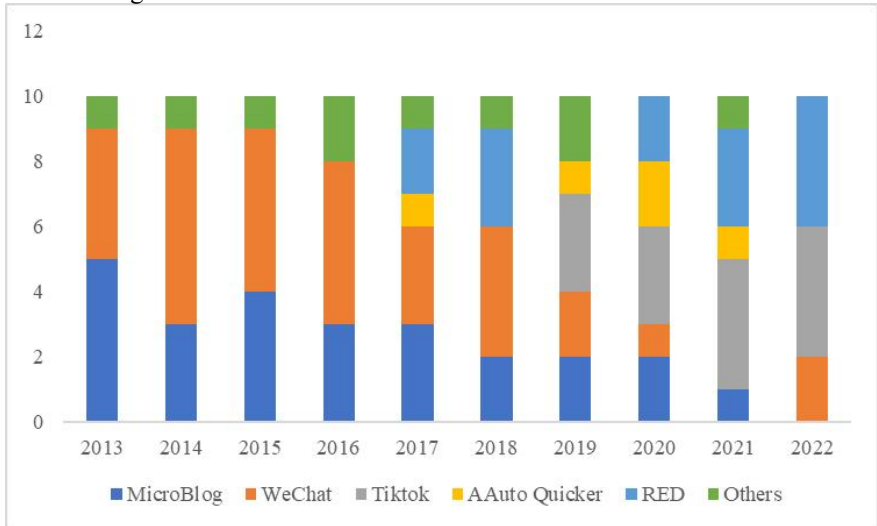


Fig. 1. Distribution of first release medias of false news (figure credit: original)

2.2 Topics Distribution of False News

We categorize the topics of false news into five categories: political economy, social life, cultural and entertainment, medical education, and major events. Among the 100 samples of false news, the number of political and economic false news is relatively small, and this phenomenon has persisted for many years. Social life issues have always been a key type of news that people pay close attention to. Due to the close relationship between social life issues and people's lives, and the low cost of fraud, the frequency of false news in social life has always been high, and the overall trend is on the rise, making it a hot topic of false news. On the contrary, false news in the field of sports and entertainment is on the contrary. Due to the gradual decline in demand for sports and entertainment related information, false news in the field of sports and entertainment is decreasing year by year. The development of topic types in false news is shown in Figure 2.

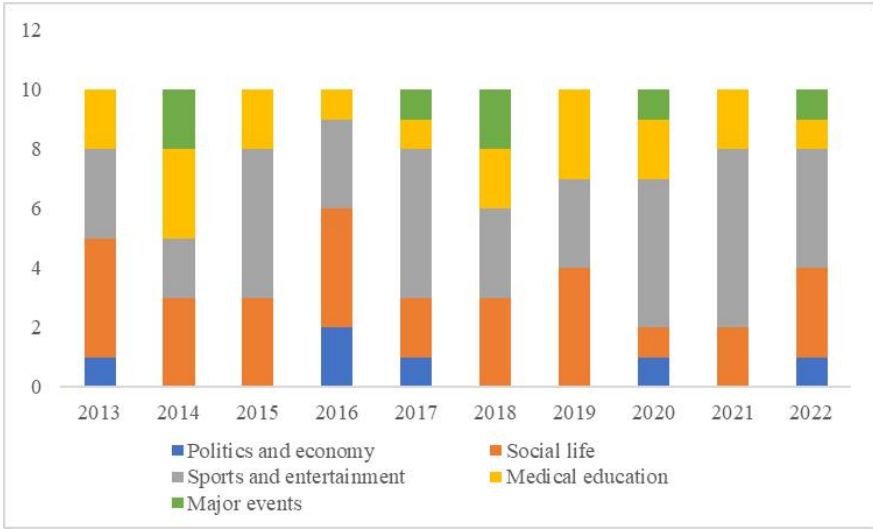


Fig. 2. Topics distribution of false news (figure credit: original)

2.3 Information Sources of False News

False news covers almost every aspect of social life, making it difficult to distinguish between true and false. After extensive dissemination, it is easy to cause negative social impacts. Some false information originates from overseas media and social media platforms; Part of the information comes from unscrupulous merchants who seek to stigmatize their competitors; There are also some false information from marketing accounts. In recent years, the frequency of false news without sources has been very low, accounting for 6% of false news samples. The frequency of false news from a single source far exceeds that of false news from no source. False news from a single source is on the rise and will be a key focus in the future. Anonymous sources of information are a relatively common type of information source, and the number has shown a decreasing trend in recent years. Although the overall number of false news from overseas sources is not large, there are signs of an increase, which is a focus that we need to pay attention to.

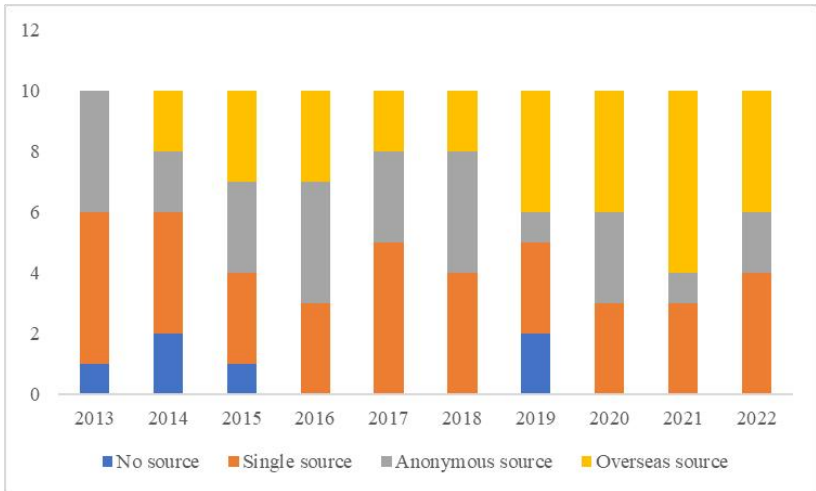


Fig. 3. Information sources distribution of false news (figure credit: original)

3 Causes of False News in the Social Media Era

3.1 Improper Commerce Profit

Due to the virtuality and interactivity of the online environment, there is a mixed bag of online news, and virtual machine news is rampant. In the face of interests, some gatekeepers of online news use the audience to achieve certain commercial goals, distort facts to guide public opinion, and the audience is used without realizing it, unconsciously becoming a tool for unscrupulous media. In addition, the laws and regulations related to online information crimes in the country have not yet been improved, and the proliferation of false news on the internet has become a bottleneck in the dissemination of online news. In the media ecosystem filled with commercialism, monetization of traffic has become a goal pursued by various media, and the professional ethics, ethics, and social responsibility of some media have gradually been eroded. Under the influence of traffic thinking, some media intentionally create and disseminate false news to cater to the curiosity of the public, competing for public attention. Some self-media, in order to obtain traffic, capture hot topics and release information that is difficult to distinguish between true and false. At the same time, other self-media and even some mainstream media forward information without verifying it, spreading false information. In the post truth era, the public generally lacks the ability to discern information and is easily misled by self-media. At this point, mainstream media should play their authoritative role and not fall into the profit vortex of traffic worship. In the current situation of increasingly fierce competition among various media, some news media or news professionals, driven by their interests, personally fabricate false news.

3.2 Insufficient Professional Ability

Social media has transformed the potential and limited sources of information and silent audiences in the traditional media era into active and unlimited disseminators. As the main body of the news and communication industry moves towards diversification, the threshold for the news and communication industry has become increasingly low. According to national regulations, only by obtaining an internet news and information service license can internet news and information service activities be carried out within the scope of the license, including editing and publishing services, reprinting services, and dissemination platform services. However, many amateur media and self-media do not have an internet news and information service license, but instead spread news in the name of spreading information. Unlike traditional media news workers with professional backgrounds, social media practitioners come from various sectors of society, many of whom have not received standardized and systematic news professional training, limited professional skills, and a lack of professional ethics in pursuing news authenticity and objectivity. The updating and iteration of digital technology has led to changes in the requirements and content of news work. If professional news workers cannot improve themselves in a timely manner, it will be difficult to keep up with the pace of the times, and their professional knowledge and abilities in news gathering, writing, and editing will be disconnected from reality. Traditional media news release requires layers of scrutiny from editors, chief editors, and chief editors, while the strong timeliness of online information requires rapid news release, resulting in a compressed review process for editors. Lack of professional literacy is a problem that must be addressed in the flood of information.

3.3 Inadequate Regulatory Mechanism

In terms of regulation and punishment, China's laws have failed to effectively crack down on publishers who intentionally spread false news. Insufficient punishment and punishment provide an opportunity for false news on the internet. In recent years, the overall quality of online news has declined rather than increased, and false news has been repeatedly prohibited. This reflects the oversight of media review and regulation. At present, China's network news management system is not perfect, and the laws and regulations for punishing false news are not sound, and the implementation is not in place. The rise and development of social media have made the original management system no longer in line with the current situation of network information management. Social media platforms lack strict management and review, leading to the generation and dissemination of false news. In order to rectify various chaos on social media, China has issued documents such as the "Regulations on the Management of Internet News and Information Services", and regularly carries out special rectification activities to clean up illegal accounts. Although this has to some extent improved the ecological environment for news dissemination, many amateur media and self-media will change their appearance and make a comeback after being banned. The improvement speed of China's news regulatory system cannot keep up

with the pace of change. The cost of producing and disseminating false news in violation of laws and regulations is low, and the punishment is not strict, which weakens the public's legal awareness and concepts, making those who spread false news recklessly online. The imperfect regulatory mechanism, insufficient punishment, media practitioners falsifying, and public carnival participation have brought about a vicious cycle of false news.

4 Governance Strategies of False News in The Social Media Era

4.1 Introduce Advanced Algorithms

Most users browse news on social media through push. Therefore, push algorithms are crucial for the governance of false news. We can use machine learning algorithms to establish a model that only recognizes the authenticity of articles based on text content. Learn from trustworthy and untrustworthy news samples, and then make predictions based on both models. Nowadays, the main auditing method for social media platforms is a combination of manual and machine methods. Because relying solely on technology to screen or filter false information has certain limitations. And manual auditing can supplement the auditing mechanism to a certain extent. The sentence and semantic parts involved in news content are beyond the reach of technical means, so manual review is necessary to a certain extent. For a newly uploaded information, artificial intelligence can be used for technical review, followed by manual review of the text content. In 2018, Google made technical adjustments to its search engine by adding new indicators to the system's ranking, and downgraded the ranking of low-quality content and false information. Social media can use algorithm technology to filter low credibility news reports and push news information released by authoritative media to the audience; You can set the ranking of news search presentation. When users search for relevant news information on social media platforms, the search engines on social media will present the most reliable and official news information published by the official news media at the forefront; Intelligent robots can also be used to filter false news, intelligently monitor false news appearing on social media platforms, and further curb the spread of false news. At the same time, social media can establish a detection website to publicly display the detection results of suspicious information in real-time. This method can enable users to obtain more timely and authentic information more accurately.

4.2 Enhance Professional Literacy

In the era of social media, news information is also a form of real-time communication and interaction with users. Therefore, to a certain extent, news practitioners will incorporate a certain degree of emotional color in order to gain users' psychological recognition. In order to attract more attention and response to news reporting, media practitioners will strengthen the contradictions in information. This approach not only deepens people's stereotypes about a certain person or thing,

but also to some extent intensifies social conflicts. Therefore, media professionals should adhere to the principles of fairness and objectivity when reporting news information, avoid adding embellishments or shifting personal will, and minimize the occurrence of sensational content and exaggerated language as much as possible. We also need to strictly demand ourselves, improve our professional literacy, and strengthen professional training to reduce the occurrence of reverse news. Different social media platforms also have different information dissemination characteristics, such as Weibo and WeChat, which have a higher degree of openness. Mainstream media will make a judgment and check based on the platform's user response when tracking and reporting Weibo information. But compared to Weibo, WeChat has a higher level of privacy, requiring the other party to agree to the request to add friends before information can be collected and understood. In this less open and small-scale dissemination model, the ability of practitioners to identify false news will be reduced to some extent. Therefore, mainstream media should be more rigorous when using WeChat channels for news information. So, practitioners need to have good discernment skills. For information on social media platforms with high openness, it is important to integrate resources from all parties for precise editing. For information on social media platforms with high concealment, more in-depth investigation should be conducted before editing and dissemination.

4.3 Improve Regulatory Mechanisms

The government can establish a News Ethics Committee to supervise the news industry, and also regulate the media industry by formulating mandatory laws and regulations. If false news on the internet has an impact on society, relevant punishment measures can be taken in accordance with laws and regulations. To prevent and respond to false news, the government must play a leading role, strengthen regulatory mechanisms, improve laws and regulations, and form a binding and deterrent force. The continuous upgrading of social media platforms and the continuous expansion of netizens have brought certain challenges to the legislation and management of relevant institutions. Overall, in recent years, moral misconduct such as false news on social media has not directly caused serious consequences, making it difficult to define its behaviour. The binding force of laws and regulations is weak, and most netizens have not been punished for violating laws and regulations on the internet. At present, a series of laws and regulations related to internet news information introduced in China are still not comprehensive and detailed, and the enforcement efforts are also insufficient. The government should promptly revise and improve laws and regulations based on the constantly changing characteristics of online information dissemination. On the one hand, it is necessary to improve the information disclosure system and increase the intensity of authoritative information disclosure. When false news appears, accurate news should be released in a timely manner to break rumours and avoid further fermentation of public opinion. On the other hand, judicial authorities need to increase their supervision of false news, hold violators accountable in accordance with relevant laws, and make the public realize that the online world is not beyond the law. Social media should also be a public

space that adheres to code of conduct. Relevant code of conduct should be established, and penalties for false news should be increased. Crackdown on false news should be strengthened, not only in terms of fines and detention, but also in terms of education and warning for these behaviour subjects. Their social accounts should be permanently closed, and they should not be re applied, and false news should be dealt with from the source.

5 Conclusions

Authenticity is the life of news. False news not only hinders the development of journalism, but also causes various harm to society. False news on social media reflects complex social phenomena caused by various factors. Preventing and responding to false news is a long-term project that requires joint efforts from all sectors of society. The media platform introduces artificial intelligence algorithms for authoritative push and review. Media professionals enhance their media literacy through learning and training, and resolutely eliminate the production of fake news driven by interests. At the same time, the government has improved its regulatory mechanism and increased the punishment of false news. Only in this way can false news lose its soil for survival.

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