Selective Exposure to Misinformation
Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign

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Research questions

How prevalent was "fake news" during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?

- Who visited "fake news" websites?
- How did they end up there?
- Did fact checks reach "fake news" consumers?

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Do we live in echo chambers that reinforce not just our opinions but our factual beliefs?

The rise of "fake news"

"Fake news" distribution

Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

MAINSTREAM NEWS

FAKE NEWS

8.7 million

7.3 million

15 million — 12 million — 9 million — 6 million — 3 million

Feb.–April   May–July   Aug—Election Day

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO
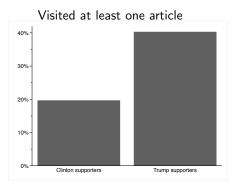
(Silverman 2016)

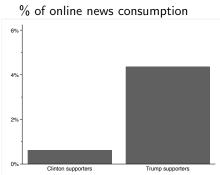# Data overview

- YouGov Pulse panel ($n = 3251$)
  - Sample period: October 21–31, 2016

- Passive web tracking data
  - Sample period: October 7–November 14 ($n = 2525$)
  - Laptop/desktop only (mobile data partial/limited)
  - Captures fact-checking and fake news consumption

- Fake news definition
  - Fact-checked "fake news" + top shared (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017)
  - Excluding "hard news" domains (Bakshy et al. 2015)
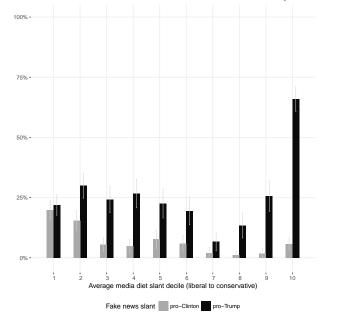 - Classify domains if > 1 article and $\geq 80\%$ pro-Trump/Clinton

Prevalence of fake news

- ▸ 27.4% read an article from a fake news site
- ▸ Mean of 5 pro-Trump articles (out of 5.45 total)
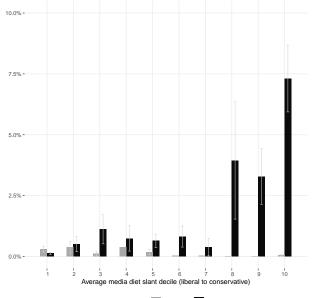- ▸ Total: 2.6% of pages visited on hard news topics

Visited at least one article

% of online news consumption

Fake news consumption by media diet (binary)

Average media diet slant decile (liberal to conservative)

Fake news slant   pro–Clinton   pro–Trump

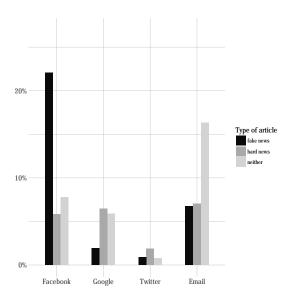# Fake news consumption by media diet (%)

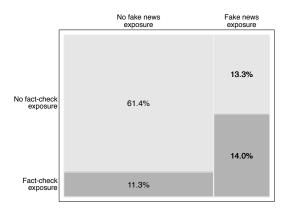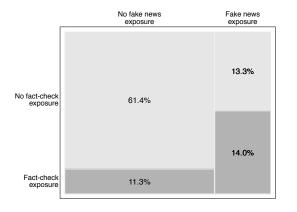# Visits in 30 seconds prior to fake news exposure

Fact-checking vs. fake news

25.3% read a fact-check at least once but....

Fact-checking vs. fake news

25.3% read a fact-check at least once but....

Fact-checking vs. fake news

25.3% read a fact-check at least once but....

No one saw a fact-check of a false claim in a fake news article they read.

Conclusions

- Substantial fake news consumption
- Convincing evidence of selective exposure
- Facebook key vector of transmission
- Fact checks almost entirely ineffective