

# Social Media vs. Ethics

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Dear Ms. Cennamo:

The widespread use of social media has become a cause for elation in the sense that it brings people together on a wider scale, but simultaneously has brought a sense of worry in the age when the accuracy and timing of information is of critical importance. Recently, there has been an influx of false information masquerading as truth that has been flooding the internet, pulling many unwary users into its midst with negative real-world effects. I am interested in this topic because these consequences affect the daily lives of many people on a large scale that cannot be ignored.

Through my research, I have discovered that, while misinformation *is* spreading at an alarming rate, this is by no means a new event and that there is a way for us to be able to disambiguate. Even if we are not able to develop it into a habit ourselves, we must be able to train the future generations to be receptive but also wary of information, as well as to abide by a code of ethics that can produce reporters with more integrity and audiences that can hold them accountable. Additionally, I have seen that many of the people who flock to misinformation on the internet are people who are not familiar with the concept of challenging what they perceive to be authority—that many of them are people who have been trained to some degree to find one source and trust it indefinitely. This is also something that must be curbed if we are to eventually hold our news sources accountable, and only that much more important if news sources gradually lean more towards social media rather than traditional sources such as television or newspaper.

I will take the time to acknowledge those who assisted me with my survey for this paper.

Sincerely,

*India V. Greenidge*  


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*The widespread usage of social media has become a cause for elation in the sense that it brings people together on a wider scale, but simultaneously has brought a sense of worry in the age when information is of critical importance. Recently, there has been an influx of false information masquerading as truth that has been flooding the internet, pulling many unwary users into its midst with negative real-world effects. The easy access to information as well as the capacity for users to create this information opens the door for misinformation to be spread under the pretense of ambiguity.*

*We have already encountered some of the negative effects of the spread of misinformation in our history, yet it has been halted by the scope of its transmittal. Today, social media enables us to access more information than ever before at a much faster rate. This means that when misinformation spreads, panic can ensue quickly and in large numbers. Despite this probability, more people are turning to getting their news from social media specifically for the portability and the ability to choose which media aligns with one's moral compass. This bodes well for those who are apt at deciphering "fake news," but for the layman, it invites the aforementioned chaos.*

*Ultimately, it is up to the users to be able to discern which methods are right for them and which news sources deserve their attention. As long as journalism is an industry that pays, there will always be a possibility for people to take advantage of others and feed on their fears. We as a people must become more savvy to the world around us, even if it means taking that extra minute out of the day to check one's sources.*

## Introduction

The advent of social media has brought us into a new age of information. Whereas previously the spread of information required either the sacrifice of time or the sacrifice of scope of audience, now we live in an era in which all human knowledge is available at our fingertips. The internet has allowed us the capability to spread this knowledge at a whim, while modern handheld technology such as smartphones and networking capabilities via Wi-Fi give us access to the information whenever we please. However, with this ability to access this information combined with our fast-paced society, we leave ourselves susceptible to *misinformation*.

As journalism moves from the age of newspapers and television to internet articles, we must adapt to a new standard of information sharing and integrity. As it stands currently, there are numerous groups arising from misconceptions borne on the expansion of our access to information and our lack of knowledge on what to do with it. Through a survey as well as an analysis of several of these aforementioned groups, we will explore this evolution and its effects on society, as well as determine what best can be done about it.

## Ethics

### The History of Ethics

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines ethics as the “discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong.” (Singer) The earliest known instance of a code of ethics being produced for the public is a column from ancient Babylon known as the Code of Hammurabi, from which the often erroneously cited adage “an eye for an eye” comes. The most well-known origin in Western history is of the Ten Commandments presented to Moses in the Bible, though many still credit Greek philosophers such as Aristotle with the concept of ethics as we know it.

The word itself is derived from the Greek “ethos,” meaning “habit” or “custom.” (Singer) While many people use “ethics” interchangeably with “morality,” the two are not synonymous. Morality attempts to cover what is objectively right and what is objectively wrong, while ethics argues *why* a given concept or action should be considered right or wrong. It can be broken down into several different branches: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. It is also present in all societies, being the driving force behind why many cultures do various things with varying and sometimes similar ideas on what the outcome should be and why.

### Ethics and Journalism

In journalism, ethics is often used to describe the morality with which journalists convey their information. After all, all workers in a society—perhaps even all people—are expected to maintain a certain degree of integrity. A doctor is expected not to intentionally overdose a patient; a retail worker is expected not to steal from the company; and a journalist is expected to convey the truth to the public. This integrity is integral to society, as human civilization is built and nourished on trust. However, despite this call to truth, journalists—like doctors who have been convicted for malpractice and retail workers who have been caught stealing product—can still be found guilty of breaking this trust.

Information has been exchanged throughout humanity since man developed language and was capable of understanding his neighbor. America's freedom of speech also makes it one of the few countries in which its press is specifically protected by its Constitution. However, almost since its inception, journalism has preyed on mankind's tendency for sensationalism. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote a complain about his portrayal and distrust in the newspaper, which he had once championed as a vehicle of freedom of expression. Throughout the Civil War and beyond, journalists would use this freedom of speech and its new vehicle to spread their opinions, along with political scandals and any other methods they could use to draw their readers' attention. In the 1800s, aggressive investigative journalism began to take root as newspaper publishers competed with one another for who could attract the most readers, giving little to no heed to the consequences of their actions. In 1920, Walter Lippmann, one of the founders of *The New Republic* magazine, became one of the world's most widely respected columnists for his sharp critique of ethical journalism.

Around the same time that Lippmann published his book, the radio became a common facet of American households, offering a new source with which the public could get their information and more competition for traditional journalists. Television followed shortly after World War II, and the government became more active in regulating the content which was distributed to the general public. However, these mandates did little to stop the spread of harmful content to the public, namely information that was heavily sensationalized (such as the "Red Scare," in which citizens were called to panic over the presence of possible communists in their neighborhoods) as well as racist, sexist, and a plethora of other hateful reports that incited violence toward minority groups. A poll was conducted in 1956 asking Americans for their opinions on reporting in the news, with two-thirds of Americans claiming that the newspapers were fair. (McCutcheon)

From the birth of television and its top news networks, trust in the media has steadily begun to decline. In 2004, the world's most popular social media platform Facebook was launched. Though initially created to keep people in touch with one another, it provided another platform through which information could be shared. Moreover, it could be shared in real-time. Behind Facebook would come other social media sharing sites such as Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter, all of which allow their users to pick and choose which news sources are credible and which are not. The platforms, however, do not exclude their users from falling into the sensationalist trap.

In today's society, even with the capability to fact-check on the spot, many of us fall prey to sensationalist and biased news reports. Our fast-paced lifestyles and inherent trust of authority coupled with our propensity to believe whatever confirms our biases causes us to lose sight of when we are being fed misinformation. While many older generations would simply chide their younger counterparts and tell them to shut off the computer and walk away, the answer is not so simply. The consequences of this misinformation spread via social media can be very real, very far-reaching, and inevitably very dangerous.

## The "Fake News" Era

### [The 2016 Election](#)

In 2016, Hillary Clinton and reality star billionaire Donald Trump both ran for President of the United States of America. Clinton's campaign preyed on the evolving attitudes toward women in positions of power, with her gender taking up most of her platform while those who opposed her filled their timelines with articles about her email scandals; they also attempted to bring into question her ability to lead, with

many using her husband former President Bill Clinton's affair as "evidence." Meanwhile, Donald Trump and his associates used their campaign platform and social media (most notably his Twitter) to spread skewed and sometimes entirely fictitious information about minorities, preying on misconceptions and biases of the Republican audience. In November of 2016, Trump won the election and was sworn in as President in January of 2017.

Almost from the moment of his swearing in to the present, social media has been alight with opinions and articles shared almost as soon as they are seen. His Twitter account, through which he is known to post almost every day, is often active and appears to be the source of much of social media's criticisms. Some of his more dubious statements have been easily refuted by a comparison between his written—or typed—word on Twitter and reality; despite these comparisons being made and called out, Trump and his associates have continued to cry foul when it comes to how they are portrayed in the media. The first and most notable case of this is of Trump's inauguration speech, in which the President exaggerated the numbers of people who showed up to witness it. This prompted one of his counselors, Kellyanne Conway, to coin a term for his word versus the word of the general public: "alternative facts," which gradually became colloquialized as "fake news."

With the turn of phrase in place, many far-right Republicans fled to the safety of this wordplay, using it to draw attention from attitudes and behaviors that would have one been considered reprehensible while simultaneously dismissing the needs and concerns of other citizens who do not share the same political views. In addition, the accusation of biased news reporting sent a wave of mistrust toward traditional and longstanding news sources such as FOX and CNN and opened old wounds between journalists and their public. The re-emergence of this distrust manifested in a way that society had never seen before: with social media at the helm. With their ratings and credibility at stake, FOX and CNN have reverted back to the ways of inflammatory and subjective journalism, echoing the early days of the newspaper.



Figure 1: Two screen-captures of President Trump's most recent Twitter feed. Note the frequency between posts.

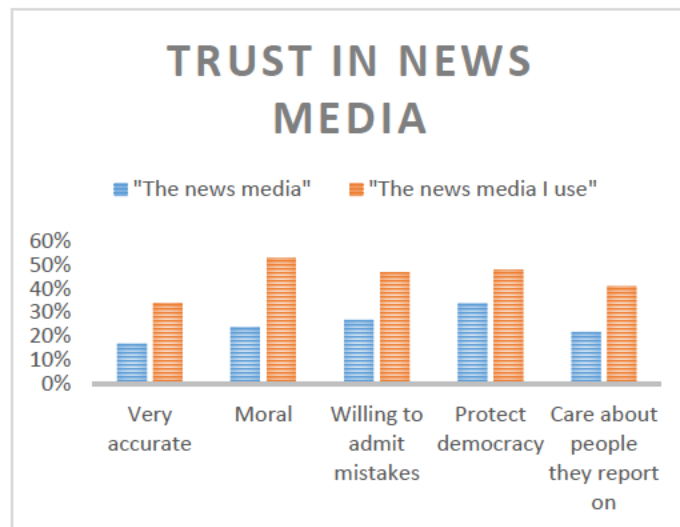
### [Social Media News Against Traditional News](#)

In a survey conducted among Facebook users, less than half continue to rely on traditional news sources. Despite reliance on traditional news, they preferred to stay away from certain news sources such as FOX and CNN while considering sources like NBC and BBC to be more credible. When asked about their feelings toward social media news, they responded negatively, with one even stating that while she

acquired her news from social media daily, she could not trust sources like the popular international communication application WhatsApp because “people create fake news.” (Chase)

Others interviewed claimed that they preferred getting their news via social media because it allowed them to see events in real-time and to pick and choose which sources were beneficial. One commented:

*“I don’t trust any television news networks. There is a tendency to focus on getting things out quickly and tapping into whatever biases that will make more viewers watch. This can lead to reporting that lacks depth, nuance, and good faith. I value sources that have few high-power stakeholders.” (Nyanin)*



Social media makes it easier for many viewers to be able to pick apart which sources have a bias well before they invest their time into trusting them. The wide expanse of the internet and nearly endless pool of sources also allows viewers to avoid those sources while still getting the information they desire. Access to the internet has allowed many people to cross-check the information they come across with various media, as opposed to traditional news sources such as television in which they would have to take whichever journalist reports at face value. Ultimately, regardless of what media one uses, all are susceptible to shortcomings. A poll taken in May 2017 found that most people trust their

chosen news sources but do not trust the media itself abstractly. (McCutcheon) Most users would state that their chosen form of media is “moral” and “reliable,” and when confronted with any evidence otherwise, would be quick to refute it. By the same token, these users will also disparage other news sources and question the credibility of such when they feel called to do so.

As distrust continues to brew with traditional news sources and social media garners more attention with society, it leaves many susceptible to the true “fake news”: sensationalist pieces posted on social media. Many bloggers and web news sites are paid per click, and often they resort to inflated news articles in order to garner more attention, relying on the concept that their users can and should fact-check their information and that it is not their responsibility as often freelance journalists to do so. Some of them have been known to prey on those who cannot or do not take the time to fact-check the information given; the results of these are usually conspiracy theorists and outlying cult-type groups.

### Information Gone Rogue

So what happens when misinformation spreads? We would assume that in the age when information is available at one’s fingertips within seconds of thinking about the question, it would be easy for people at large to check their sources and ensure that what they are reading is verifiable. It turns out that this is not the case. As mentioned previously, social media is not immune to lack of integrity when reporting. Often this misinformation preys on biases and fears as well the general distrust in traditional media and the government; these groups form echo chambers of irrational thoughts, from the concept of outer space being a projected simulation by the US government to the idea that school shootings are staged events.

While people believe that the internet runs much like Las Vegas—whatever happens there, *stays* there—this could not be farther from the truth.

### *The Alt-Right*

The recent years have given rise to groups that have taken their half-checked internet biases out into the real world with real-world consequences. Trump's presidency saw the introduction—or rather, emergence—of various attitudes toward minorities that had long been thought to be inhumane. Out of these mindsets was the alt-right born, a group of white nationalists concerned with preserving their idea of Western civilization: namely, whites only. Many believe that multiculturalism is synonymous with white genocide based on statistics drawn from areas densely populated with minority groups and their general negative attitudes toward race relations. According to the 2016 U.S. Census Estimates, non-Hispanic whites make up roughly 61.3% of the overall population—a far cry from genocide. (United States Census Bureau) Headed by Richard Spencer and fueled by news via former Trump advisor Steve Bannon, the alt-right has been known to push monologues that people of color have contributed nothing to society, a notion which echoes the ideals by the staunchly white supremacist website Stormfront.

Social media has given these groups time and space to exchange ideas within the protection of anonymity. Thus, having amassed a number of followers in secret and under the banner of a president who refuses to outright decry them, the alt-right continues to push their ideals.

### *Misconceptions on Origins*

The alt-right is by no means the only group who attempts to glean aspects of supremacy from misinformation. With pseudoscience becoming more and more palatable among the internet consumers and conspiracy theorist outliers, people of color have flocked to self-appointed heads of cults who use a combination of pseudoscience and abridged Western theology to justify their ideals.

The common notion that black Americans are the descendants of Egyptians prevailed through the early 2000s and to the present, with its heads preying on the black community's ignorance of its origins and its history as well as its deeply rooted desire to belong. Records dating back to the slave trade show that many, if not all, of the slaves were taken from West Africa from countries that are now Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria, Liberia, and others; almost no slaves were taken from Northern Africa, where Egypt lies. With little knowledge about those cultures and a strong desire to feel superior in a land and time that demanded inferiority, many black people have taken to fabricating portions of their history to involve Egypt, which is one of the most well-known civilizations in Africa (though certainly not the only one).

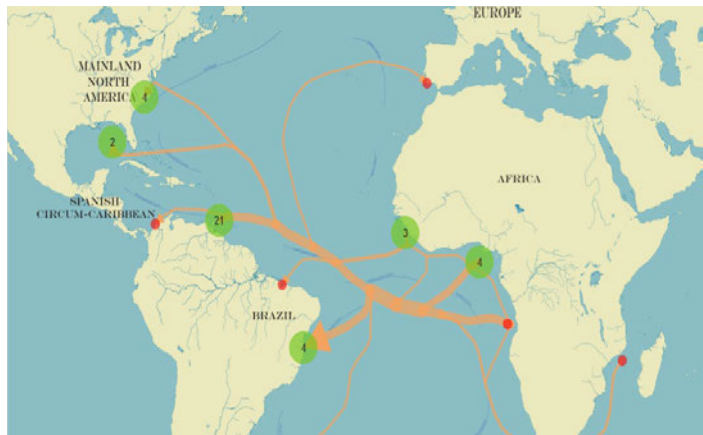


Figure 3: A map showing the transatlantic slave trade embarkation and disembarkation routes. (The TransAtlantic Slave Trade Database)

In addition to the Egypt theory, several groups have arisen stating that black Americans were actually the original Hebrews mentioned in the Christian Bible, and that the transatlantic slave trade was meant to mirror the slavery of the Hebrews to the Egyptians. Another, even more historically inaccurate theory

states that black Americans are not the descendants of the slaves, but are the true Native Americans. This is one of the most harmful outcomes of the spread of misinformation as it not only invalidates the true history of black Americans, but indirectly attempts to erase the identity of Native Americans. This information is typically spread via comments in social media, though a few churches have arisen in devotion to “the original Hebrews.”

### Flat-earth Theory

The ongoing battle between journalists for their audience’s attention leaves the latter unsure of where to turn in their time of making big decisions. Many fall prey to conspiracy theorists, resulting in an overall distrust of *any* information that has been considered “the norm.” Flat-earth theory is the re-emergence of the theory that the earth is flat, a belief that builds itself from a combination of religion and the after-effects of the rumors that all space exploration has been a hoax. Common questions posed by these believers tend to be why the curvature of the earth cannot be seen by the naked eye as well as the accusation that no one at all has ever been to outer space. More modern theories have evolved to answer counter-queries, such as the idea that the visible aspects of our solar system are holograms projected by the US government and that the “edge” of the earth is made inaccessible by an insurmountable ice wall. (Wolchover) Numerous scientists have arisen to try to combat this misinformation; even YouTubers such as atheist and science fan Cosmic Skeptic have attempted to battle this mindset with education. However, it seems that many people who follow this belief are adamant that anything they had learned prior has been lies, and that only their stringent resources on the internet are the truth.

### Anti-vax

One of the most dangerous aspects of misinformation comes in the form of challenges to medical authority. While it is true that one should never invest all their trust in one authority, at least a modicum of trust should be owed to those who devote their lives to the wellbeing of others. Unfortunately, untrustworthy news sources and well as doctors with dubious motives have given rise to the concerns of those known as the anti-vax. This refers to people who believe that vaccines do more harm than good to the public, most notably that the ingredients present in them are said to cause autism in young children.

The mindset that vaccines should not be trusted is not new, dating all the way back to England in the 1800s when Edward Jenner developed his first vaccine for smallpox. Today, many deaths have been prevented from polio, measles, and more thanks to early childhood vaccinations and the ensuing herd immunity. Despite this, many people have become wary of the ingredients used in vaccines thanks to a paper posed by Dr. Andrew Wakefield, which claimed that autism, a mental condition defined by difficulties with communication, was caused by vaccines. After the ensuing panic, Wakefield’s license was revoked and numerous studies were published showing no link between autism and vaccines. This did little to quell the paranoia from parents, and they flooded social media with their pleas to government to allow their children to remain unvaccinated. Celebrity Jenny McCarthy is known for her work campaigning against vaccines. Some parents have begun to withhold vaccinations for their young children, some claiming religious exemption.

## **Conclusion**

Social media is not going away any time soon. In fact, it may soon completely replace traditional news sources as technology and communication continue to advance. Journalism can only be held accountable to the extent that they are not being funded, and certain aspects of public information need to be credible.

With that being said, the onus ultimately falls on the viewers to make that decision to check their sources, regardless of how credibly they appear to be. The fast-paced nature of our society may rarely allow us time to think, but we need to be prepared to do so when challenged. We must not fall prey to our biases and push ourselves to partake of content which does not directly align with our beliefs to keep from falling into manipulative traps.

In addition we need to be wary of what we choose to share on social media. Thankfully, many social media networks allow their users to filter content that may be “fake.” Facebook contains a tab that allows users to hide information they do not wish to see and to report articles that they deem as false and possibly inflammatory; Reddit’s community is widely known among Internet denizens for not only fact-checking, but for employing a vast array of talents of its users to sleuth out the truth. However, the responsibility again falls on the viewers to be able to discern what is real and what is “fake news.”

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## Appendix

The following were the questions asked to participants of the survey for this report:

1. How often do you check the news?
2. What do you consider your primary source for information about current events?
3. What do you consider to be the most pressing matter at this time?
4. Please list at least one source that you consider to be credible, especially as it pertains to your answer for question 3.
5. What sources do you consider to not be credible? Why?
6. How often do you get your information on current events from social media?

In response to these questions:

1. **100%** are able to and do check the news frequently, on average twice per day.
2. **60%** utilize digital/social media for their news coverage; **40%** use traditional media, such as television or NPR radio.
3. **60%** consider social media to not be credible, while **20%** consider traditional media to not be credible; the remaining **20%** claimed that no media can be considered credible.