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RESEARCH-IN-BRIEF

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Wie Nutzerwahrnehmungen von 'Fake News' mit der Bewertung
und Verifikation von Nachrichten auf Facebook zusammenhängen

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Abstract: Research suggests that Facebook's reputation as a news source is in decline. One reason for this development might be found in how users perceive their own exposure to alleged 'fake news' – a phenomenon which has been strongly linked to Facebook in public debate. Using a quota survey of German Internet users (n = 743) we investigate how users' self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' and the 'fake news' debate are related to their evaluation and verification of political information on Facebook. Results indicate that the evaluation of Facebook as a news source is independent of users' perceptions of their total amount of exposure to 'fake news' or the 'fake news' debate. However, individuals who feel they encounter many 'fake news' from traditional news sources evaluate Facebook more positively. Contrary to that, those who believe that the 'fake news' they are exposed to originate in alternative sources evaluate Facebook less positively and also engage in verification behaviors more frequently. Moreover, verification is predicted by the overall level of perceived 'fake news' exposure and, most strongly, by exposure to the 'fake news' debate. Findings are discussed in light of recent research on news audience polarization.

Keywords: Facebook, fake news, political information, user behavior, verification, news

Zusammenfassung: Aktuelle Befunde legen nahe, dass Facebooks Image als Nachrichtenquelle schlechter wird. Ein Grund hierfür könnte darin liegen, wie Nutzer ihren Kontakt mit mutmaßlichen „Fake News" erleben – ein Phänomen, welches in der öffentlichen Debatte eng mit Facbeook in Verbindung gebracht wurde. Mittels einer quotierten Befragung deutscher Internetnutzer (n = 743) untersuchen wir, wie Nutzerwahrnehmungen des eigenen Kontakts mit „Fake News" und der Debatte über „Fake News" mit der Bewertung und Verifikation von politischen Informationen auf Facebook zusammenhängen. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass die Bewertung von Facebook als Nachrichtenquelle nicht mit der wahrgenommenen Kontakthäufigkeit mit „Fake News" oder der „Fake-News"-Debatte zusammenhängt. Allerdings bewerten Personen, die den Eindruck haben, vielen „Fake News" traditioneller Nachrichtenquellen zu begegnen, Facebook positiver. Das Gegenteil ist der Fall, wenn Menschen glauben, viele „Fake News" von alternativen Nachrichtenquellen zu sehen. Diese Personen führen auch häufiger Verifikationen von Nachrichteninhalten auf Facebook durch. Das Verifikationsverhalten steigt zudem bei höherem wahrgenommenen

Kontakt mit „Fake-News" und, am stärksten, durch die Rezeption der „Fake-News"-Debatte. Diese Befunde diskutieren wir vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Studien zur Polarisierung des Nachrichtenpublikums.

Schlagwörter: Facebook, Fake News, politische Information, Nutzerverhalten, Verifikation, Nachrichten

1. Introduction

The term 'fake news' has been heavily stressed in recent public debate worldwide. While the term has been used in rather different contexts (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018) the current debate has mainly evolved around disinformation, i.e., fabricated or deliberately manipulated units of information which are newsworthy in the light of contemporary societal affairs and are being spread with the intent to deceive (Wardle, 2018; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2018). Social networking sites (SNSs), and among them especially Facebook, are important platforms for the distribution of such content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). The relationship between 'fake news' and Facebook is not only discussed in academic literature, but is an important facet of recent public discourse on information in the digital age (Warzel, 2018). Simultaneously, news on Facebook have witnessed a decline of user attention since last year (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018).

It can be assumed that the 'fake news' debate has not gone without consequences for users' perceptions of news on Facebook. More specifically, Facebook's declining reputation as a news platform might partially be explicable by users' perceptions of the 'fake news' phenomenon. However, while there is a growing body of research investigating actual effects of political disinformation (e.g., Chan, Jones, Hall Jamieson, & Albarracín, 2017; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Schaffner & Roche, 2017; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017), users' perceptions of their own 'fake news' exposure have remained a blind spot thus far. Against this backdrop, the present research investigates consequences of self-perceived 'fake news' exposure for the evaluation and verification of Facebook news content. We explore these questions using data from a quota survey of German Internet users conducted in September 2017, in the week running up to the German federal election.

2. Relationships between the 'Fake News' phenomenon and users' evaluation and verification of news on Facebook

2.1 Consequences of exposure to 'Fake News'

Before 2018, Facebook's importance as a distribution platform for news content had continuously grown, especially for younger users (Newman et al., 2018). However, research has shown that users'

evaluate Facebook as a news source differently than traditional news outlets. News content from Facebook is evaluated as less credible and less trustworthy than content from print newspapers or television newscasts (Bernhard, Dohle, & Vowe, 2014; Schäfer, Sülflow, & Müller, 2017). Instead, it is valued for being an entertaining time killer (Schäfer et al., 2017). In light of the recent 'fake news' debate, exposure to news items that users perceive to be 'fake news' could have additionally promoted such general skepticism towards political information on Facebook. Our reason for assuming this is that a link between Facebook and the 'fake news' phenomenon has been repeated time and again in recent public discourse about the 'fake news' phenomenon (Warzel, 2018). As an effect of this debate, high self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' could be linked to Facebook by media users. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Higher self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' is related to a more critical evaluation of political information on Facebook.

It is important to note that this hypothesis aims at users' own judgments about 'fake news'. One problem in this regard is that 'fake news' has become a highly ambiguous term in political rhetoric. In the beginning of the public debate, it was predominantly used to refer to political propaganda created by anti-establishment media sources. However, populist political actors successfully conquered the term and used it to describe established mainstream news outlets (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018).

The term's ambiguity in political rhetoric is mirrored by users' understandings of 'fake news.' Focus group interviews by Nielsen and Graves (2017) show that users conceive disinformation from a variety of sources as 'fake news' ranging from propaganda by political actors and malicious advertising to poor journalistic work. When it comes to information with a journalistic appearance, and thus 'fake news' in the narrower sense, there should still be room for variance. Following the populist rhetoric, some users could regard news items from established news organizations as 'fake news' (Schulz et al., 2018) while others could assume that 'fake news' are mainly distributed by so-called 'alternative' media (Müller & Schulz, 2019). For the latter, Facebook is the most important distribution platform (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2018). Thus, individuals who think they are exposed to 'fake news' from alternative outlets should be especially critical about the quality of political information on Facebook:

H2a: Self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' from alternative news outlets is related to a more critical evaluation of political information on Facebook.

However, individuals who believe they are exposed to 'fake news' from established news outlets could be happy about the fact that Facebook provides them with information from alternative sources which they deem to be more reliable. This could result in a more positive evaluation of political information on Facebook:

H2b: Self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' from established news outlets is related to a more positive evaluation of political information on Facebook.

In order to evaluate political information on SNSs, users seem to apply a two-step process: First, they rely on

their own judgment of the source and the message. If these considerations raise doubts about the information encountered on a SNS they stress external sources like search engines to verify the information (Tandoc, Ling, et al., 2018; Torres, Gerhart, & Negahban, 2018). Self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' is likely to increase such doubts. Therefore, it should also affect the frequency with which users engage in verification of political information encountered on Facebook:

H3: Higher self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' is related to more frequent verification of political information on Facebook.

However, authentication behaviors should not only increase when the specific source which posted a news item on a SNS is judged negatively but also when there are more general doubts about the trustworthiness of the platform itself. Since we argue that self-perceived 'fake news' exposure contributes to a less positive evaluation of Facebook as a news platform, we have to take into account that this evaluation might serve as a mediator between self-perceived exposure and verification behaviors. We therefore ask:

RQ1: Is self-perceived 'fake news' exposure indirectly related to the verification of political information on Facebook through the evaluation of this type of information?

Following our argument above, it appears plausible to assume that users who feel exposed to 'fake news' from alternative sources should be specifically motivated to verify political information from Facebook since this is a suspect hub for this type of information. However, it could equally well be argued that perceived exposure to alleged 'fake news' of any kind of sources fosters verification behaviors. Thus, we open-endedly ask:

RQ2: Are self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' from alternative and established news outlets differentially related to the verification of political information on Facebook?

2.2 Consequences of exposure to the 'Fake News' debate

Not only direct experiences with news items that are judged to be 'fake news' could be influential for the evaluation and verification of political information on Facebook. Also, the amount of exposure to the public debate about 'fake news' could have an effect. Different authors have stressed the notion that the public discourse about media innovations might have an important impact on users' dealing with new media (e.g., Müller, 2016; Neuberger, 2005). In our case, this could mean that the more frequently an individual is exposed to messages problematizing 'fake news' distributed via SNSs the more skeptical this individual should become towards political information on Facebook. Research indicates that exposure to the public discussion about 'fake news' reduces individuals' trust in news media in general (van Duyn & Collier, 2018). For Facebook, which holds a very prominent position in the public debate about 'fake news,' such an effect should be specifically strong. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4: Higher self-perceived exposure to the debate about 'fake news' is related to a more critical evaluation of political information on Facebook.

H5: Higher self-perceived exposure to the debate about 'fake news' is related to more frequent verification of political information on Facebook.

3. Method

In order to test our hypotheses we conducted a quota survey of German Internet users in the run-up to the 2017 federal elections in Germany. The study was realized in the week before the election date (September 24th 2017) between September 12th and September 19th 2017. The questionnaire was distributed via e-mail and was answered online.

3.1 Sample

Participants were recruited from an online-access panel of an ISO-certified commercial research company. Using a quota procedure, the sample was intended to reflect the German electorate above 18 years in its basic demographic characteristics. The resulting sample consisted of $N = 1,346$ participants (age: $M = 49.92$; $SD = 15.91$; 50.7% female; 44.7% with the highest German school degree 'Abitur'). This means that highly educated respondents were slightly over-represented in the final sample as compared to the German population (31.9 % with 'Abitur').

Participants answered a questionnaire on their political information behavior, media perceptions, and political attitudes within which the measures for the present study were embedded. At the beginning of the block on information behavior, respondents were instructed that all questions within that block aimed at "news on current affairs and political events of the day." Respondents who stated that they had no

Facebook account or "never" received political information through Facebook did not receive questions regarding political Facebook content. Consequently, all analyses in this article are based on a sub-sample of respondents who indicated to receive political information through Facebook at least sporadically ($n = 743$; age: $M = 46.32$; $SD = 16.48$; 52.6 % female; 45.9% with 'Abitur').

3.2 Measures

Evaluation of Facebook as a source for political information. Participants' evaluation of political information on Facebook was assessed via four items on a seven-point Likert-type scale from 1 = "does not apply at all" to 7 = "fully applies." The items comprised of a list of adjectives ("credible", "precise", "trustworthy", "complete") that were collapsed in a mean index ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 1.37$; Cronbach's α = .94).

Verification of political information from Facebook. Measures that individuals take to verify suspect false news were assessed using four items that reflected different verification behaviors ("check whether the source is reliable," "check whether other sources confirm the information given," "check whether the provided information is the latest on the issue," "check whether images have been put in a false context"). Respondents had to indicate how frequently they engage in these different verification behaviors on a six-point scale from 1 = "never" to 6 = "very frequently." A mean index was calculated from the four items for further analyses ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 1.27$; Cronbach's α = .92).

Exposure to 'fake news' and the 'fake news' debate. Self-perceived frequency of exposure to 'fake news' ($M = 2.69$; $SD = 1.07$) and reports about 'fake news' ($M =$

2.95; *SD* = 1.04) within the last three months before the survey were assessed with two single-item measures on a five-point scale from 1 = "never" to 5 = "daily." Before giving their answers, respondents were provided with a detailed explanation of 'fake news' ("Lately, you hear a lot about so called 'fake news.' This term is used to describe pieces of intentional disinformation that look like professional news reports.") and reports about 'fake news' ("We would also be interested in how often you have encountered media coverage about 'fake news' in the last three months. Very important: By this, we do not mean 'fake news' items themselves but reports *about* 'fake news.'"). Moreover, we asked respondents to assess on a six-point scale from 1 = "never" to 6 = "very frequently" how often the 'fake news' they encountered online originated from "well-known news organizations such as newspapers or TV stations" (*M* = 2.49; *SD* = 1.33) or from "special or alternative news outlets that you can mainly find online" (*M* = 3.68; *SD* = 1.28).

Covariates. In order to control for covariates, we also measured the frequency of Facebook use on a ten-point scale from 1 = "never" to 10 = "several times a day" (*M* = 5.98; *SD* = 2.97). Respondents' political interest was assessed with three Likert-type items (e.g., "I am getting informed about politics on a daily basis") on a seven-point scale from 1 = "do not agree at all" to 7 = "fully agree." These items were merged in a mean index (*M* = 5.06; *SD* = 1.59; Cronbach's α = .88). Additionally, we measured perceived opinion hostility of news media with five items (e.g., "Most news media reports reflect other people's opinions rather than mine") on the same seven-point Likert scale (*M* = 4.33; *SD* = 1.52; Cronbach's α = .90).

4. Results

Results of two OLS linear regressions (see Table 1) indicate different patterns of relationships for the two dependent variables. The evaluation of Facebook as a news source is unrelated to perceived exposure to 'fake news' or the 'fake news' debate. Thus, H1 and H4 have to be discarded. However, individuals' perceived amount of exposure to 'fake news' from alternative sources results in more negative evaluations of Facebook as a source for political information. The opposite is the case for exposure to 'fake news' from established sources, which is related to more positive evaluations of Facebook as a news source. This supports H2a and H2b.

For verification behaviors, the picture is somewhat different. Here, higher self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' and the 'fake news' debate are both significantly related to more frequent verification. The same is true for perceived exposure to 'fake news' from alternative sources. This supports H3 and H5.

With RQ1, we asked for indirect effects of 'fake news' exposure on verification through the evaluation of political information on Facebook. Since there is no significant relationship between the evaluation of political information on Facebook and overall 'fake news' exposure, this can only be tested for 'fake news' exposure from specific sources. Results reveal a significant positive relationship between evaluation and verification frequency. Indirect effects for both established (*B* = 0.024; SE = 0.008; *p* = .006; LBCI = 0.007; UBCI = 0.040) and alternative sources (*B* = -0.016; SE = 0.008; *p* = .036; LBCI = -0.030; UBCI = -0.001)

Table 1. Linear regression models explaining the evaluation of Facebook as a source for political information and verification of political information from Facebook

	Evaluation of Facebook as a source for political information	Verification of political information from Facebook
Exposure to the 'fake news' debate	0.04 (0.06)	0.20 (0.05)***
Exposure to 'fake news'	-0.01 (0.07)	0.15 (0.05)**
Exposure to 'fake news' from established news sources	0.19 (0.04)***	0.00 (0.04)
Exposure to 'fake news' from alternative news sources	-0.13 (0.04)**	0.17 (0.04)***
Evaluation of Facebook as a source for political information		0.13 (0.04)***
Frequency of Facebook use	0.09 (0.02)***	0.03 (0.02)*
Political interest	0.13 (0.04)***	0.15 (0.03)***
Hostile news media perception	0.04 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.03)
Formal education (0 = no Abitur; 1 = Abitur)	-0.25 (0.11)*	-0.03 (0.09)
Age	-0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender (0 = male; 1 = female)	0.07 (0.10)	0.03 (0.09)
R^2	.14	.24

Note. Values are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * $p ≤ .05$; ** $p ≤ .01$; *** $p ≤ .001$

proofed robust using 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. However, results for the total effects (established sources: $B = 0.024$; SE = 0.035; $p = .494$; LBCI = -0.044; UBCI = .0091; alternative sources: $B = 0.153$; SE = 0.037; $p ≤ .001$; LBCI = 0.082; UBCI = .0226) indicate that the direct relationships outweigh the indirect ones.

Concerning RQ2, we cannot observe a significant relationship between perceived exposure to 'fake news' from traditional news sources and verification behaviors on Facebook. However, perceived exposure to 'fake news' from alternative sources increases verification.

5. Discussion

This study examined relationships between users' perceptions of their own 'fake news' exposure and their evaluation and verification efforts of news content from Facebook. In doing so, it contributes to explain how Facebook as a news source is affected by the ongoing debate about online disinformation. Results suggest that, in terms of shaping tangible behaviors such as verification of suspect 'fake news' encountered on Facebook, the public debate on this issue might be even more meaningful than self-perceived levels of exposure. Interestingly, such verification behaviors are

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more frequently conducted by users who evaluate Facebook as a news source more positively. The reason for this might be seen in the fact that a more positive evaluation of Facebook as a news source is related to more frequent news exposure via Facebook which in turn increases the chances for verification behaviors.

When it comes to explanations for Facebook's reputation as a news source, the kind of news content that is deemed to be 'fake' is an important factor. Among users who assume established news media to promote 'fake news', Facebook even profits from higher exposure to such content. However, the opposite is the case for users who suspect 'fake news' to originate from alternative sources. These users also tend to verify political content from Facebook more frequently – even if we account for the fact that their decreased evaluation of Facebook as a news source reduces verification frequency.

These differential results have to be seen against the background of a developing news audience polarization. Recent research has shown that news audiences in many countries are increasingly divided into convinced users of traditional news sources and a group that has low trust in traditional news media and prefers alternative sources (Müller, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2019; Schultz, Jackob, Ziegele, Quiring, & Schemer, 2017). Believing that 'fake news' originate from established news media can be read as a symptom of low trust in these outlets. This has been linked to the recent rise of populism in the political sphere (Müller & Schulz, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018). The present results indicate that against the background of the 'fake news' debate, users with high trust in

traditional news media perceive Facebook as a rather problematic outlet for news whereas Facebook has a much better reputation among those who prefer alternative news content.

Future research in this domain should study the involvement of Facebook and other online news platforms in a longitudinal perspective: Will the indicated trend towards news audience polarization along the lines of political populism persist? And if so, how will these different audience groups use SNS in the future? If the idea vindicated that Facebook and other SNS increasingly become special-interest news platforms for users seeking information from alternative sources this had direct consequences for the infamous "filter bubble" hypothesis. While extant research found no convincing support for algorithmically shaped "filter bubbles" (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Haim, Graefe, & Brosius, 2018), fragmentation of information environments might as well emerge from users' platform choices – if these choices became a matter of political partisanship. To keep up with these developments continuous research that combines a longitudinal tracking of users' online information behavior with a panel survey on their media and platform perceptions as well as their political preferences and attitudes will be necessary.

The present study is limited in this respect due to its cross-sectional nature. From the data alone, we cannot conclude that Facebook's reputation as a news source has indeed changed longitudinally. However, external research suggests that this might be the case (see, e.g., Newman et al., 2018). We also have to be careful with drawing causal inferences. With the present data, we could only observe correlations between

self-perceived exposure to 'fake news' and the 'fake news' debate and the evaluation and verification of political information on Facebook. While it seems likely that exposure to the 'fake news' phenomenon has affected the individual handling of Facebook news posts, there might also be effects in the different causal direction that contribute to our significant results. Thus, longitudinal research is necessary to unequivocally establish empirical causality. However, we are dealing with a time-bound phenomenon which might not be examinable in the future if the 'fake news' debate receded. Therefore, in lack of longitudinal evidence it still appears important to analyze the present cross-sectional data at this point in time.

Concerning the evaluation of Facebook as a news source, it is important to acknowledge that this variable not only depends on the public debate about Facebook and phenomena like 'fake news' but also on the different compositions of information that Facebook users may have on their screens as a consequence of their individual network and their message engagement. Thus, future studies should include measures of the individual users' information repertoires within Facebook. Moreover, it has to be kept in mind that we did not measure actual exposure to 'fake news' and the 'fake news' debate but relied on respondents' self-assessments of exposure. However, this should not be considered a methodological shortcut. Rather, we assumed that from a psychological point-of-view it is more meaningful for the evaluation of Facebook as a news source, whether an individual feels to be exposed to a lot of 'fake news' from a specific group of sources. For a hazy phenomenon like 'fake news,' this seems to be an adequate empirical approach.

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