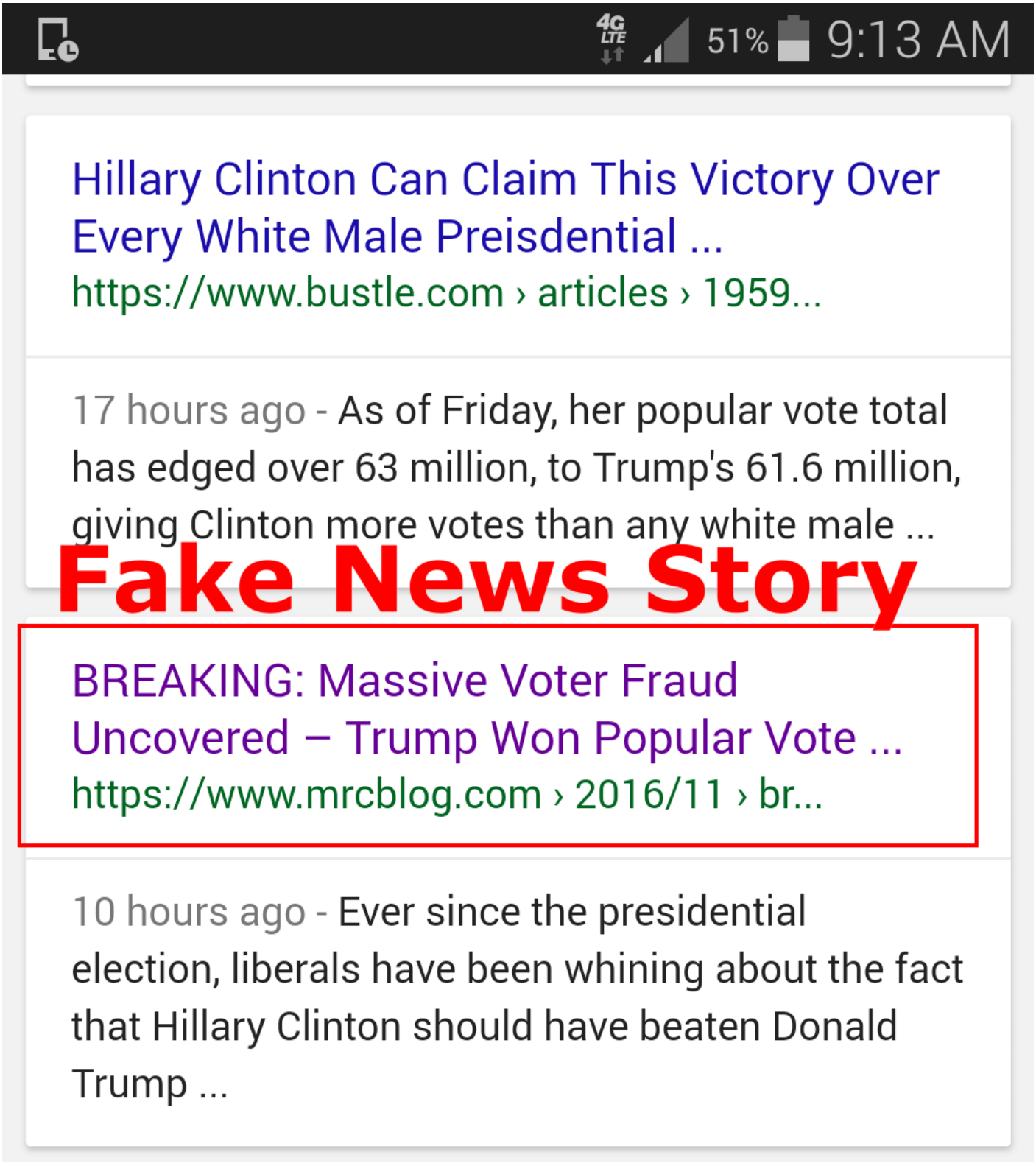
Fake News Ruining Your Election? APIs and Apps Can Help with That

---

The 2016 presidential election continues to be a popular topic of conversation. While many Americans are happy with the outcome of the election, many Americans are not. The presidential election was plagued by controversies largely due to the massive distribution of fake news across the Internet. Fake news was widely distributed across Facebook, Google, and Twitter throughout the presidential election and continues to this day.



Screenshot of a fake news story listed on Google News (Android) on 11/19/16. - Clinton is winning the popular vote by 2M+ votes over Trump at this time.

The 2016 presidential election has made it abundantly clear that we now live in the era of "post-truth," a term that was selected by Oxford Dictionaries as the 2016 word of the year. Oxford Dictionaries defines post-truth as "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Fake news is one of the driving factors of the post-truth era. The advent of the Internet, communications technologies, and social media platforms have allowed for the quick dissemination of information which has exacerbated the problem of fake news. Today, a single blog can post a fake news story that is automatically indexed by search engines like Google. The post is then quickly spread by users on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. The platforms then use algorithms to distribute the news across their networks quickly.

Facebook and Google have been receiving a lot of criticism regarding the rapid proliferation of fake news throughout their platforms. Both companies recently acknowledged the problem of fake news announcing that fake news sites and blogs will be banned from using their advertising networks.

Mark Zuckerberg recently published a statement about the misinformation spread across the Facebook platform. In the post, he outlines some of the steps the company is taking to prevent the spread of fake news such as stronger detection via improved classification, easier fake news reporting tools for users, and third-party fact-checking.

Twitter has also been criticized for allowing fake news to be distributed by the platform. However, rampant trolling is a larger problem than fake news for Twitter, and has been for some time. The presidential election brought out the trolls en masse. In an effort to improve the trolling problem, Twitter

recently announced it would suspend accounts that spout hate speech and are abusive to Twitter users.

In the wake of the presidential election and onslaught of fake news, several chrome extensions have been created; Fake News Alert and B.S. Detector. The developers of these extensions both claim that their goal is to alert users if they're viewing content on fake news sites or sites with questionable sources. The developer of the B.S. Detector has open sourced the extension and provided a list of the sites the extension flags as questionable.

There are also numerous APIs available that can help alleviate the problem of fake news and unwanted content on community sites. The Cleanspeak API by Inversoft is one such API. *ProgrammableWeb* reached out to Inversoft founder and CEO Brian Pontarelli and Inversoft executive vice president Brad Dupee who explained how the Cleanspeak API works and how it could help community sites like Facebook and Twitter with unwanted content such as fake news.

Pontarelli explained that the Cleanspeak API is capable of inspecting content of nearly any type including audio, video, image, and text. The API stores and analyzes user content under the hood of websites and applications filtering out profanity, fake news, and other unwanted user generated content. Developers can also use the Cleanspeak API to add moderation and reporting system capabilities to community sites and applications. Pontarelli says that Inversoft works with companies that have large communities such as game sites that generate billions of pieces of content per month.

"Twitter has done some very simplistic fundamental things where they put control in the hands of users; where users can block or mute words or

concepts. I don't think that solves the problem," says Dupee. "The real problem is people are being allowed to post these hateful messages like White supremacists and things like that."

It is unclear if Twitter has taken any steps towards reducing the amount of fake news being distributed by users. One of Twitter's greatest qualities is real-time communication; users can use Twitter to alert other users about important events happening live and discuss events as they unfold real time like the 2016 presidential election. There is a dark side to this type of rapid communication however. Users are able to spread fake news at lightning speed using Twitter.

"It's not just fake news; it's the people posting it. The news can be out there, but this stuff gets spread by people who actually believe it, and that's the big problem," says Dupee. "With the platforms like Twitter, any piece of content can be posted on the Internet; there are no rules. The notion is that people are now taking that news and spreading it, and it's like gasoline on a fire when it comes to Twitter. In no time it's in front of the world."

Part of the problem is that these social media companies rely heavily on algorithms to disseminate fake news and other unwanted content. While technology can help solve most of the fake news and trolling problems permeating in sites across the Internet, some of these problems require human intervention as well. Community platforms need to tap into the great resource that is their users and create an authority system where credible users can help with fact checking and flagging users who spout hate speech, bully other users, and conduct themselves in other inappropriate ways. Community platforms can use APIs like the Cleanspeak API to add reputation management, moderation, and reporting capabilities to their platforms.

"There's a lot to do with the credibility of the source, not even just the writing itself, but also the credibility of the people who are spreading this stuff around," says Dupee.

Fake news and trolling are problems that these companies and many other community sites have been experiencing for some time. There’s no silver bullet for solving these problems. However, with the help of technology and human intervention, perhaps fake news and trolling will be lesser problems by the time the next presidential election comes around.