

A REAL PLAGUE:  
**FAKE  
NEWS**

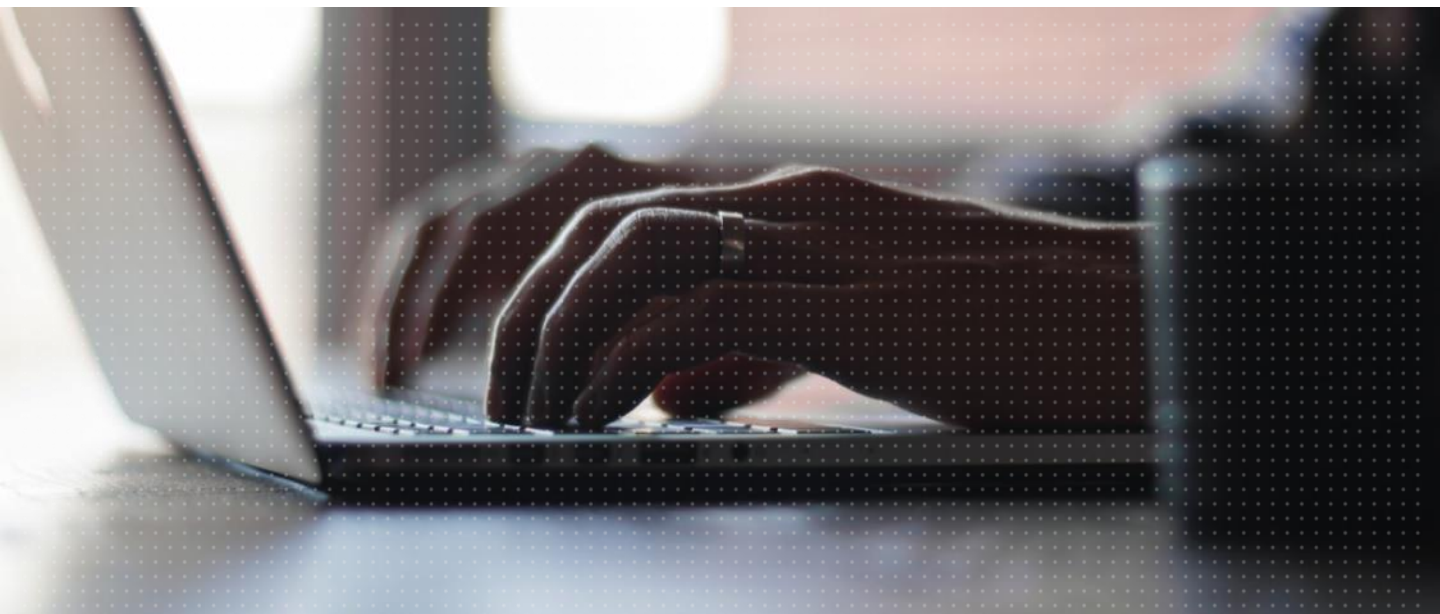


In December 2016, Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate and KRC Research conducted research on civil discourse in America, as we have done regularly in our ongoing investigation of [Civility in America](#) since 2010. In this most recent wave, we also explored a topic that has gained notoriety in recent months: fake news.

Fake news, as defined to respondents, is news that is intentionally written to provide false information to the reader and is typically distributed online. While this global issue is not a new trend, fake news came to prominence in the U.S. during the 2016 presidential election. A [BuzzFeed News analysis](#) found that the top-performing fake news stories about the presidential election on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from real and major news outlets in the three months before election.

Given the contentiousness of the election and the heightened attention to the role of social media and the news media in distributing information, we wanted to gather insight into how fake news was faring in the public square.

The following report includes four of our key findings on Americans' awareness of and experience with fake news, their level of concern and the impact of fake news on civil discourse and behavior in America.



**1 Fake news is public knowledge, but it's not always easy to discern the real from the fake.**

A substantial three-quarters of Americans (75%) have heard the term fake news. Men are significantly more likely than women to say they have heard of it (79% vs. 70%, respectively) and awareness of the term declines with age, although generational differences are not significant.

Awareness of and experience with fake news do not necessarily make people more likely to be able to spot it when they see it. The majority of Americans (74%) agree that it is difficult to determine what news is real and what is not.

Based on the definition we provided, seven in 10 Americans (70%) say they've read a fake news story. Like awareness, exposure to fake news decreases with age. In this case, however, the oldest respondents in our sample are significantly less likely than their younger cohorts to say they have seen a fake news story.

	Total Americans	Men	Women	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers	Silent/ Greatest Generation
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Have heard the term "fake news"	75	79*	70	78	73	73	71
Have read a fake news story							
Yes	70	70	69	74*	72*	69*	48
No	9	9	9	10	8	8	6
Not sure	22	21	22	16	20	23	47*
Agree it is difficult to determine what news is real and what is not	74	72	78	72	72	75	87*

\*denotes statistically significantly higher than comparative sub-group(s)

Results do not add to 100% because of rounding

**2 Americans blame combination of sources for the distribution of fake news.**

Most Americans don't see themselves responsible for the spread of fake news – only 9% say they have ever shared a fake news story online. When asked to write in who they think is primarily responsible for the distribution of fake news, respondents most frequently name the media, social media, attention seekers and political entities such as political parties and politicians.

**3 Americans register serious concern about the impact of fake news.**

The dissemination of fake news is weighing heavily on Americans. Eight in 10 (82%) say they are concerned about fake news and its impact on the credibility of real news and information, with nearly half (47%) going as far to say they are “very” concerned. This high level of concern is common to both genders and increases with age, but there are several significant differences across sub-group segments. Demographically, the most likely to be concerned are the oldest cohorts in America – the Silent and Greatest Generations – urbanites and suburbanites, and college-educated Americans.

% very/somewhat concerned about fake news and its impact on the credibility of the media	
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	81
Women	82
<b>Generation</b>	
Millennials	77
Gen X	81
Boomers	84
Silent/Greatest Generation	93*
<b>Residential population density</b>	
Urban	83*
Suburban	84*
Small town/Rural	77
<b>Education</b>	
Non-college	80
College degree or higher	86*

*\*denotes statistically significantly higher than comparative sub-group(s)*

Along the political spectrum, the more concerned groups are Conservatives and Liberals, those who voted for president in the 2016 election – specifically those who voted for Clinton – and those who followed the election news closely.

% very/somewhat concerned about fake news and its impact on the credibility of the media	
<b>Political ideology</b>	
Conservative	85*
Moderate	77
Liberal	84*
<b>2016 Presidential election voting status</b>	
Voted for president	85*
Did not vote president	70
<b>Presidential selection</b>	
Clinton	89*
Trump	81
<b>Presidential election news follower</b>	
Followed very closely	89*
Followed closely	87*
Did not follow closely	58

*\*denotes statistically significantly higher than comparative sub-group(s)*

With many Americans unsure as to whether they have read or shared a fake news story, it is no wonder that society is concerned about fake news' impact on news credibility.

#### 4 Fake news contributes to incivility in America.

Fake news is perceived as having an impact on the level of civility in this country. Seven in 10 Americans (71%) think fake news is contributing to incivility in society. This view is consistent across gender and generation. Fake news stirs up emotions such as anger, confusion, anxiety and disengagement, all leading to greater incivility and polarization.

	Total Americans	Men	Women	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers	Silent/ Greatest Generation
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Think fake news is contributing to incivility in society	71	73	69	69	73	71	69

**IN CLOSING**, fake news is an issue for many Americans and is seen as a contributor to societal incivility. Americans know what fake news is and have personally consumed it. But the issue with fake news is that the public finds that it's difficult to tell which news is fake and which is real, and some Americans aren't sure if what they've encountered is even truthful at all. Understandably, Americans are concerned that fake news will affect the credibility of real news that has traditionally served as the foundation of truth-telling in this country and helped to maintain an informed citizenry. Whether actions companies take to cut down on fake news succeed or the prevalence of fake news diminishes in the months to come may soon be determined as a new administration takes hold. But for many Americans, the elimination of fake news may be a step in the right direction for improving the civil discourse and behavior in our public squares.

## About the Research

*A Real Plague: Fake News* is a supplementary report to *Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey* conducted by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, in partnership with KRC Research. This seventh wave of *Civility in America* was fielded online from December 9 to 16, 2016, among a sample of 1,126 U.S. adults 18 years and older, drawn from a national consumer panel. The survey was conducted in both English and Spanish, as determined by the respondent.

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