

“That’s fake news.”

On November 2, 1920, Pittsburgh’s Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing company transmitted the United States’ first scheduled radio broadcast.¹ By 1940, nearly 90 percent of American families had a radio in their household, and millions huddled around their receivers nightly to hear the same news programs.² Amidst these changes, in 1934, the Equal Time rule was created, requiring radio news broadcasters to allow opposing political candidates equal time on-air (and later, TV).³ Today, the rule still stands, but the way Americans get their news has been overhauled by the worldwide web, which is far less easy to monitor than broadcast radio. 2025 was the first year in history in which more Americans got their news from social media (54%) than from TV broadcasts (50%).⁴ And with billions of private users worldwide who can all influence public opinion, can anyone truly ensure the democratic spread of information? There is no way to allocate equal time on the internet, and blatant misinformation can be far more harmful than a biased broadcast.

Mass media reporting and the spread of news information are two processes that have changed drastically, and not necessarily in cooperation with one another. For many Americans, social media *is* their modern news cycle. A 2024 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 85% of U.S. adults surveyed use YouTube, 70% use Facebook, and 50% use

¹“History of Commercial Radio,” Federal Communications Commission, modified October 17, 2023
<https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/history-of-commercial-radio>.

² Bruce Lenthall, “*An Excerpt from Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture*” (University of Chicago Press, 2007): 12

³ EBSCO, “Equal Time Rule.” EBSCO Research Starters.
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/equal-time-provision>.

⁴ Nieman Lab Staff, “For the First Time, Social Media Overtakes TV as Americans’ Top News Source,” *Nieman Lab*, June 16, 2025,
<https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/06/for-the-first-time-social-media-overtakes-tv-as-americans-top-news-source/>.

Instagram.⁵ In theory, this shift towards bottom-up information sharing can support a democratic society by making political information more accessible.⁶ However, many have begun to wonder if social media poses new threats to democracy: promoting fake news, extremism, self-harm, and violence against others.⁷

All social media platforms are maintained by algorithms. An algorithm ranks, compares and combines various user-provided signals, also referred to as engagements, to predict the most engageable content.⁸ Content deemed engageable, both real and fake news, is then made more visible to more users of the platform.⁹ And if a social media algorithm is tasked with maximizing user engagement above all else, what is that algorithm willing to promote? One well-known fake news story that surfaced during the 2024 election even made it to the Sept. 10 presidential debate between Trump and Harris on ABC, where Trump accused Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio of “eating the pets of the people who live there.”¹⁰ In the weeks before this debate, these rumors spread widely online, but they were quickly confirmed as false by city officials.¹¹ This new era of information sharing necessitates new methods of intervention, especially considering

⁵ “Social Media Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Namig Abbasov, and Galib Bashirov, “The Double-Edged Sword: Political Engagement on Social Media and Its Impact on Democracy Support in Authoritarian Regimes,” *Political Research Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2025): 419–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129241305035>.

⁷ Odette Yousef, “What’s Being Done to Stop Violent Extremist Networks That Are Targeting Kids Online,” *NPR*, August 7, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/08/07/nx-s1-5460987/whats-being-done-to-stop-violent-extremist-networks-that-are-targeting-kids-online>.

⁸ Kathryn Ervin, “Everett Library: Misinformation on Social Media: Social Media Algorithms,” *Everett Library*, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://library.queens.edu/misinformation-on-social-media/algorithms>.

⁹ Smitha Milli, Micah Carroll, Yike Wang, Sashrika Pandey, Sebastian Zhao, and Anca D. Dragan, “Engagement, User Satisfaction, and the Amplification of Divisive Content on Social Media,” *PNAS Nexus* 4, no. 3 (2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf062>.

¹⁰ Julia Reinstein and Hannah Demissie, “Trump Pushes False Claim That Haitian Migrants Are Stealing and Eating Pets,” *ABC News*, September 11, 2024, <https://abcnews.com/Politics/trump-pushes-false-claim-haitian-migrants-stealing-eating/story?id=113570407>.

¹¹ Alexandra Hutzler, “Fact-Checking JD Vance’s Claims about Haitian Migrants in Springfield, Ohio,” *ABC News*, September 20, 2024, <https://abcnews.com/Politics/fact-checking-jd-vances-claims-haitian-migrants-springfield/story?id=113844705>.

that every minute, TikTok users upload an estimated 16,000 videos, Snapchat users send an estimated 3.3 million snaps, and there are about 5.9 Google searches conducted worldwide.¹² Computational social scientists, political psychologists, and digital anthropologists have been collaborating in recent years with social media giants like Instagram and Facebook to understand how personalized, algorithm-curated news information, real and fake, translates into users' IRL (in-real-life) behavior. This research supports legislation like the Kids Online Safety Act, which would require technology companies to implement protective policies for children.¹³ KOSA was passed by the Senate in 2024 and is currently garnering support in the House of Representatives.¹⁴

¹² "Data Never Sleeps 12.0." *Data never sleeps 12.0*, 2024, <https://www.domo.com/learn/infographic/data-never-sleeps-12>.

¹³ "Bilirakis Announces Kids Online Safety Act to Protect Children and Teens from Online Harms," press release, December 5, 2025, [https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-announces-kids-online-safety-act-protect-children-and-teens-online#:~:text=The%20Kids%20Online%20Safety%20Act%20\(KOSA\)%20is,%20**Safety%20controls**%20%20Stalking%20and%20exploitation](https://bilirakis.house.gov/media/press-releases/bilirakis-announces-kids-online-safety-act-protect-children-and-teens-online#:~:text=The%20Kids%20Online%20Safety%20Act%20(KOSA)%20is,%20**Safety%20controls**%20%20Stalking%20and%20exploitation).

¹⁴ "ATTORNEY GENERAL SUNDAY URGES CONGRESS TO PASS KIDS ONLINE SAFETY ACT," February 11, 2026, <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/taking-action/attorney-general-sunday-urges-congress-to-pass-kids-online-safety-act/#:~:text=Online%20Safety%20Act-,Attorney%20General%20Sunday%20Urges%20Congress%20to%20Pass%20Kids%20Online%20Safety.and%20regulations%20surrounding%20online%20safety>.