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## CONTEXT COLLAPSE IN NEWS

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### Introduction

Social media is becoming a much more dynamic power, affecting how news is consumed, shared, and created (Morejon, 2012), including fake news and disinformation (Silverman et al., 2016). Recent reports show that an increasing number of people consume news via social media on a regular basis. According to a Pew Research Centre survey (2016), 62% of US adults obtain news via social media. Sixty-six percent of Facebook users reported reading news stories on the site, while nearly 59% of Twitter users reported the same. Similarly, the Reuters Institute (2016) suggests that 51% of people in UK with online access often use social media as a news source. Thus, it is important to understand social media as an environment for news consumption.

However, the literature offers little systematic guidance in this regard and we lack sufficient knowledge on how a social media environment affects users' perceptions and consumption of news. This paper aims to empirically and theoretically interpret emerging news-reading practices and the complex interplay of spatial and temporal conditions in social media.

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## **Research question**

*How can we describe news consumption within social media, and how does this environment affect users' perceptions and understanding of news?*

We aim to respond to this research question by explaining how a social media environment, specifically the Facebook newsfeed, is changing readers' consumption and experiences of news. Fundamentally, this environment is characterized by what we refer to as a context collapse in news consumption.

First, in an attempt to clarify and conceptualize the changing dynamics of news consumption within social media, we apply the theory of context collapse. Second, context collapse will be discussed and empirically investigated by considering how satire is experienced, shared, and interpreted by social media users. Finally, the potential implications of context collapse in social media news stories, especially concerning the distribution of fake news and the misinterpretation of the facts, are discussed. This will contribute new knowledge about how social media, as a merger of news and news-related content from multiple sources, affects users' perceptions and understanding.

## **Theory: Context collapse in news consumption**

Context collapse in news consumption suggests that the ways in which individuals interpret news stories, particularly fake news and satire that is incorrectly viewed as real news due to a lack of context, are becoming more complicated. To explain peoples' news consumption via social media, we make use of a well-known concept, context collapse (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), which was initially used to explain the effects of social media on the social context. We suggest that social media technologies collapse multiple news stories from various news outlets into a single context, making it difficult for people to interpret these news stories.

This collapse, hence, refer to a flattening out of multiple distinct sources of online news in one's social network. Hence, news stories from different media outlets with different aims become part of a singular stream of news stories, which is particularly true for the Facebook newsfeed. This may distort the readers' assumptions about a news source. A newsfeed in social media makes space and place more invisible for the reader because of a lack of contextual cues. Hence, this lack of materiality in such surrounding is therefore luring people into instant engagement with news stories that may turn out to be fake or satire

While the design of newspapers has traditionally focused on how to tailor content to their target audiences (Frost, 2013), this effort is now in the hands of social media platforms. The Facebook newsfeed, for example, presents every newspaper and story in the same way, with the same type of design package, whether it is a thorough *New York Times* news story, a fabricated news story from a fake news outlet, or a satire piece from *The Onion*. The problem for users is that when they interpret the news, all the stories are presented in the same context and look very similar. This collapse of context, in terms of visual design and related stories makes it difficult for readers to

evaluate the credibility of news stories and separate accurate news stories from fake news stories.

### **Satire and news**

Satire is at its most useful when it is closely connected with the news. In particular, satire may be understood as a form of alternative news journalism intended "to interrogate power, parody to critique contemporary news, and dialogue to enact a model of deliberative democracy" (Baym, 2005, p. 261). On the other hand, satire that is misinterpreted as real news on social media may harm the public debate. Recently, Wardle (2016) labelled satirical news as "parody content," categorizing it as the type of misinformation that circulated the 2016 US Presidential Election. Similarly, Rubin et al. (2015) differentiate between three types of fake news: a) fabrication, b) hoaxing, and c) satire. They suggest that normally, "truth-biased" readers may shift to a "lie-biased" perspective when reading satirical news, but they admit that more research is needed regarding the relationship between satire and fake news.

### **The study and findings**

To show the implications of context collapse, we empirically analyse and discuss how satirical news that goes viral can be misinterpreted on social media. In order to find satirical content that has been interpreted as real or factual news on social media, we applied Snopes ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)), a well-known American fact-checking service. For two decades, Snopes has been identifying and debunking hoaxes, fakes, satires, and click-bait websites on the Internet. We scanned all cases in Snopes's database that were tagged as "satire" to find satirical news stories that had been interpreted as real or factual news but were later debunked or fact-checked by Snopes. The time restriction for this scan was January 2014 to October 2016. This timespan allowed us to identify a potential increase in satirical content over time and also see the breadth in the types of cases over the last two years.

In total, we found 151 stories from 80 original news sources. All these stories were originally reported to Snopes by people who questioned whether the news stories were true or false. In all the cases, Snopes described the stories as satire, meaning that they were false stories. We scanned all cases in Snopes's database and analysed the comments on and discussion about the most shared Facebook stories.

We find that context collapse in news consumption is not only changing the kind of news stories people read and how they read them but also the ways in which many people interpret news. The present conceptualization of a context collapse in news may guide future research on media and journalism.

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