



# Technium.

51/2023

2023

A new decade for social changes

**Technium**

**Social Sciences**

Powered by

**PLUS**  
**COMMUNICATION**



## Use of Social Media to Instigate Violence: Users' Role and Challenges in Prevention

Jibon Naher<sup>1</sup>, Matiur Rahman Minar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of CSE, Islamic University of Technology, Gazipur-1704, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup> Deep Learning Engineer, Alteredverse PTE LTD

[jibon.naher09@iut-dhaka.edu](mailto:jibon.naher09@iut-dhaka.edu)

**Abstract.** In Bangladesh, there have been many incidents of violence linked to social media platforms, particularly Facebook. These incidents have been caused by posts that have either intentionally or unintentionally provoked hatred and instigated violence. In this study, we examine seven such incidents that were triggered by religious differences in Bangladesh. By reviewing previous research and case studies, we aim to identify the factors that contribute to the spread of hate speech and misinformation on social media. We also discuss the challenges involved in preventing violent incidents. To reduce the likelihood of such incidents, we propose three recommendations: prioritize news for fact-checking, promote fact-checking among users, and involve users in the fact-checking process. These recommendations can be implemented using existing technology to limit the spread of false information and hate speech on social media platforms. This could ultimately reduce the risk of violent incidents triggered by social media.

**Keywords.** Social media, Facebook, misinformation, violence, Bangladesh, user involvement, Fact checking

### 1. Introduction

The use of social media, especially Facebook, the most widely-used social networking site, has increased significantly, with approximately 37% of the world's population now using the platform [1]. Nowadays, social media has become more than just a communication platform, and people use it for various purposes such as communication, online marketing, knowledge sharing, and studying [2]. However, the misuse of social media platforms, including Facebook, has led to various issues such as scams, frauds, harassment, and gang violence [3]. Online harassment, in particular, is prevalent on social media platforms, with 81% of women and 68% of men in the USA experiencing some form of online harassment, making it the most common form of harassment across all sites [4].

Unfortunately, the effects of harassment often extend beyond the digital realm, resulting in new forms of violence, such as cyberstalking or physical assaults. In some cases, women feel compelled to completely abandon their social media accounts due to the harassment they face online [5]. Gang violence is becoming another concern on the rise in this era of social networking, where conflicts can quickly escalate offline [6]. Young people utilize social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to recruit gang members and plan criminal activity [7]. Fake WhatsApp messages have resulted in several lynchings in India, with the first incident occurring in 2017 and resulting in the deaths of seven people who were beaten [8]. In 2018, an anti-Muslim riot occurred in Ampara, Sri Lanka, which later spread to the Kandy district, where Sinhalese Buddhists attacked Muslims and their property. False stories that were spread on Facebook and WhatsApp triggered the riot, and Facebook was criticized for ignoring government warnings prior to the violence [9].

In Bangladesh, Facebook is extensively used by people of all ages and backgrounds. As of November 2022, the number of Facebook users in Bangladesh has reached 49.3 million, accounting for 28% of the country's total population, where 67.7% are men and 32.3% are women [10]. However, the country has witnessed several instances of mob violence triggered from Facebook activities. The first of such catastrophic incidents which caught huge attention from the media was in Ramu in 2012, where a Facebook post led to an attack on Buddhists by a local mob, resulting in the destruction of over 20 temples [11]. In this study, we investigate several such incidents that were triggered by Facebook posts in Bangladesh, with a focus on the role of the users in the process, from creating the posts to participating in the violence.

While there have been many instances of violent incidents resulting from Facebook posts in Bangladesh, some of which include the killing of Abrar and the Padma rumer [12], for this study we are focusing on religious issue incidents since this is the most common form of mob violence. Misusing technology, especially social media can often lead to religious tension. This can happen because false information, hate speech, and derogatory comments can spread easily through these platforms, leading to violent reactions and attacks against minority religious groups [13]. These incidents highlight the urgent need for using technology responsibly and effective measures to prevent the spread of hate speech and misinformation, which can easily trigger violent reactions and attacks.

In the following sections, we discuss seven mob violence incidents that were triggered by Facebook posts related to religious matters in Bangladesh. Then, we analyze two key aspects: the Facebook user's role in the process and the challenges that limit the prevention of such incidents; drawing both from the case studies and previous research. We also provide recommendations on approaches to reduce these challenges. Our contributions in this work include identifying the different role of Facebook users in the initiation and escalation of violence, highlighting the challenges that hinder the prevention of such incidents, and proposing recommendations to tackle these challenges and reduce the likelihood of similar incidents.

## **2. Case studies**

In this section, we discuss seven violence incidents triggered from Facebook activities regarding religious issues from 2012 to 2021, in the reverse chronological order, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** List of violence incidents discussed in this study

Year	Place	Triggered by
2012	Ramu, Cox's Bazar	Facebook image depicting burning Quran
2013	Pabna	Facebook post committing blasphemy
2014	Comilla	Facebook comment defaming Prophet (pbuh)
2016	Brahmanbaria	Facebook post insulting Islam
2017	Rangpur	Facebook post defaming Prophet (pbuh)
2019	Borhanuddin, Bhola	Facebook message hurting religious sentiment
2021	Noakhali	Facebook image defaming Islam

### 2.1. *Ramu (2012)*

In 2012, Ramu Upazila in southern Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh, witnessed a devastating incident that stands as one of the most severe religious attacks in the country, triggered by social media. The catalyst for this incident was a Facebook post that incited a local mob to engage in acts of arson and vandalism against a Buddhist village. This resulted in the destruction of 12 temples, monasteries, and 50 houses [11]. The Facebook post involved the tagging of a local Buddhist named Uttam Kumar Barua, who was falsely associated with an image depicting a burning Quran. The post was created by a fake Facebook user who inserted an anti-Islam website link to make it appear as though the image was shared with Uttam and others. The violence involved the participation of approximately 25,000 individuals and resulted in over 300 arrests [14].

### 2.2. *Pabna (2013)*

In November 2013, there was another incident of Facebook misuse in Bonogram of Pabna district, Bangladesh. A mob attacked a Hindu-dominated neighborhood following reports that Rajib Saha had committed blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammad on Facebook. As a result, at least 26 Hindu homes were vandalized. Later it was discovered that Rajib Saha was falsely accused of making the Facebook post, and the page that was used to incite the attack had no connection with him [15].

### 2.3. *Comilla (2014)*

In the Homna upazila of Comilla, Bangladesh, a violent attack was launched on the Bakhsitarampur and Panchkipta villages by a mob of nearly 3,000 people, resulting in the ransacking of at least 28 Hindu homes and temples. The attack was reportedly in response to two

Hindu youths posting defamatory comments about the Prophet on Facebook. The attack was triggered by a call made from loudspeakers at a Madrasa in Rampur village. The frightened Hindu residents had to flee their homes, and the police detained Utshab Das and Srinibas Das to investigate the incident. More than 11 people were arrested for their alleged involvement in the attack [16].

#### 2.4. *Brahmanbaria (2016)*

In October 2016, a violent mob carried out a synchronized attack on the Hindus in Nasirnagar upazila of Brahmanbaria district in Bangladesh. The attack was triggered by an alleged Facebook post that insulted Islam, and the mob destroyed and set fire to over 100 homes, at least 15 temples, and looted valuables. The Facebook post was supposedly from an account named "Rasraj Das", and police later arrested the person with that name for denigrating Islam through his post on the social media. However, it was later discovered that Rasraj's account had been hacked and purposefully used to post fake images to incite the attack [17].

#### 2.5. *Rangpur (2017)*

On November 10, 2017, there was a violent clash in Thakurpara, Rangpur, which resulted in the death of one person and left 20 people injured, including seven policemen. As a result of the clash, around 30 Hindu homes were burned and vandalized in Horkoli Thakurpara village. This incident was provoked by a Facebook post shared by Titu Chandra Roy from Rangpur, Bangladesh, who was living in Narayanganj at the time. Titu Chandra Roy allegedly posted a defamatory status about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) on November 5, 2017. He was arrested on November 14, 2017, in Jaldhaka upazila of Nilphamari district, and accused of inciting the violence in Thakurpara village. However, Rangpur Superintendent of Police Mizanur Rahman later clarified that there was no status insulting any religion on Titu Chandra Roy's Facebook account, and that false information was spread to incite attacks, arson, and looting against the Hindu community [18].

#### 2.6. *Borhanuddin (2019)*

On October 20, 2019, a clash between religious extremists and police occurred in Borhanuddin Upazilla of Bhola district resulting in four deaths and over a hundred injuries. The violence was triggered by a hate message that had gone viral on Facebook and its messenger, which was intended to hurt religious sentiment. The person who was blamed for the message went to the Borhanuddin Police the night before the attack and reported that his Facebook account had been hacked. Later on, the police discovered that a hacker was responsible for creating and inciting the attack [19].

#### 2.7. *Noakhali (2021)*

In October 2021 hundreds of Muslims protested in the southeastern Noakhali district over the viral social media image of the Quran at the knee of the Hindu deity while the 10-day Hindu festival of Durga Puja was on. Six people were killed in attacks and violence on temples and puja mandals in different parts of the country including Comilla and Chandpur. Police said a puja mandapa in Begumganj in Noakhali district was attacked and set on fire and idols were vandalized inside another temple on Friday. Local Hindu community leaders claim that the man whose body

was found in the pond was killed in yesterday's attack. Three others were seriously injured in the attack and are being treated at the hospital [20].

### **3. The involvement of Facebook users in the violence**

In the context of violence incidents that have been triggered from Facebook, there are three main types of users involved: creating users, sharing users, and reacting users.

*Creating users* are those who actually create the Facebook content with the intent of instigating violence. These users exploit the negative aspects of social networking sites for their own benefit. They may be motivated by a variety of factors, such as hatred, bigotry, or a desire for power. They may also be motivated by financial gain, as in the case of those who create and sell fake news articles.

*Sharing users*, on the other hand, are those who share the content intentionally or unintentionally, thereby making it go viral and reaching a large number of people. The oversharing behavior of users in social media is a major concern as it can have negative impacts on both the user who shared the content and the user who received it. In general, before sharing a piece of content on social media, people often fail to consider the credibility of the content or the potential consequences of sharing it [21].

*Reacting users* are those who are influenced by the digital media content and react to it in their physical lives, which can lead to violent behavior. The spread of false information, hate speech, and derogatory remarks on social media platforms can easily trigger violent reactions and attacks on religious and ethnic minorities [22].

Here are some examples of how these three types of users can be involved in violence incidents:

- **Creating users:** In the Ramu violence incident that occurred in 2012, creating users intentionally posted derogatory content about the Muslim community. This content was then shared by sharing users, and eventually led to violent clashes between Muslim and Buddhist communities.
- **Sharing users:** In the case of the 2017 lynchings in India, sharing users were responsible for sharing fake WhatsApp messages that were customized with locally specific details and real videos attached to fake messages or claims. These messages were then believed by reacting users, who then took violent action against the victims.
- **Reacting users:** In the 2018 anti-Muslim riot in Sri Lanka, reacting users were influenced by the false stories that were spread on Facebook and WhatsApp. These users then took violent action against Muslims and their property.

These incidents demonstrate the need for responsible use of technology and effective measures to prevent the spread of hate speech and misinformation. Social media platforms need to do more to identify and remove harmful content, and users need to be more careful about what they share and believe. By working together, we can help to create a safer online environment for everyone.

### **4. Existing challenges in prevention**

Based on case studies and previous research, we identified three key challenges in preventing the violence triggered from social media, particularly Facebook.

#### 4.1. *Challenge 1: Freedom of speech vs. harmful content*

One of the biggest challenges in preventing violence triggered from social media is the tension between freedom of speech and the need to remove harmful content. Social media platforms like Facebook have a responsibility to protect their users from harmful content, such as hate speech, misinformation, and incitement to violence. However, they also have a responsibility to uphold freedom of speech. This can be a difficult balance to strike, and it is one that social media platforms are constantly grappling with.

In the case of Bangladesh, Facebook ignored a request from the government to block accounts spreading misinformation about the Rohingya Muslim minority. This misinformation eventually went viral and triggered violence against the Rohingya [23]. This is just one example of how social media can be used to spread harmful content and incite violence. The same thing happened in the mob violence of Sri Lanka in 2018 [9].

#### 4.2. *Challenge 2: User behavior*

Another challenge in preventing violence triggered from social media is user behavior in sharing social media content. People often share content without thinking about the consequences. They may not fact-check the content or consider the potential harm it could cause. This is especially true when people are sharing content that they find interesting or appealing [22]. In the case of the Noakhali violence in Bangladesh, people shared misinformation about the Rohingya Muslims on Facebook. This misinformation led to violence against the Rohingya. This is one example of how user behavior can contribute to violence triggered from social media.

#### 4.3. *Challenge 3: Fake news detection*

Finally, one of the biggest challenges in preventing violence triggered from social media is the difficulty in detecting fake news in real time. Although machine learning technology is constantly evolving, it is not advanced enough to detect and warn users in real-time before they share potentially harmful content on social media [24].

Social media companies use a variety of moderation techniques to try to prevent the spread of fake news, such as automation tools, paid human moderators, and partnerships with third-party fact checkers. However, these techniques are not fully effective. There is still a need for better ways to detect fake news in real time. Also, prioritization of sensitive news for fact checking can reduce the effect of such news, which is not yet present in many moderation tools [25].

### 5. **Recommendation**

We propose three recommendations that can be implemented using current technology to mitigate the risk of violent incidents triggered by social media. These recommendations aim to address the challenges associated with the viral spread of harmful content.

- *Recommendation 1: Prioritizing news for fact-checking*

One way to reduce the spread of misinformation and hate speech on social media is to prioritize certain types of news or posts for fact-checking. This can be accomplished by analyzing the content and identifying specific keywords or topics that are more likely to contain false information or hate speech, these platforms can flag such posts for closer scrutiny. For example, social media platforms could prioritize posts that contain certain keywords, such as "war," "crisis,"

or "riot". They could also prioritize posts that are shared by fake accounts or have been flagged for spreading misinformation or hate speech in the past. By prioritizing these posts for fact-checking, social media platforms can reduce the spread of misinformation and hate speech before it has a chance to go viral, ensuring they are addressed promptly.

- *Recommendation 2: Encouraging users to fact-check before sharing*

Another way to reduce the spread of misinformation and hate speech on social media is to encourage users to fact-check before sharing. Social media platforms have a unique opportunity to educate and raise awareness among their users about the importance of fact-checking before sharing content.

This can be done through educational campaigns or pop-up messages that remind users to verify the accuracy of the information they are about to share [22]. For example, social media platforms could create educational campaigns that teach users how to identify misinformation and hate speech. They could also create pop-up messages that appear before a user shares a post, reminding them to fact-check the content before sharing. By emphasizing the responsibility of users to fact-check before sharing, social media platforms can foster a culture of critical thinking and discourage the dissemination of false information and hate speech. This approach empowers users to be more mindful of the content they share and helps break the cycle of viral misinformation.

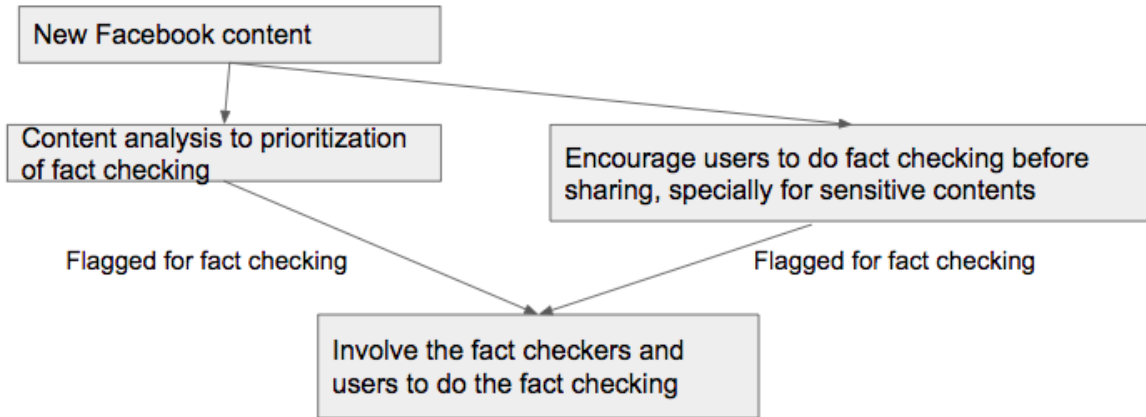
- *Recommendation 3: Including users in the fact-checking process*

Finally, social media platforms can leverage the collective intelligence of their users to identify and flag false information and hate speech (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2022, Stjernfelt & Lauritzen, 2019). This can be done by implementing reporting features that allow users to flag posts they suspect contain false information or hate speech to review by moderators. Additionally, social media platforms can create communities of fact-checkers who work collaboratively to identify and verify the accuracy of content.

Currently, several fact checking companies approved by International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in Bangladesh are working to do fact checking coming either from a user's request or their own interests. By creating a more inclusive and participatory environment, social media platforms can tap into the diverse perspectives and knowledge of their users to combat misinformation and hate speech effectively. This approach not only helps distribute the responsibility of content moderation but also fosters a sense of ownership and shared accountability among users.

Diagram 1 illustrates the flow of these recommendations. Once a user creates a new content, algorithms are implemented to detect and classify content that require fact-checking. Simultaneously, users are encouraged to engage in fact-checking before sharing sensitive content. In cases where the content is flagged either by the platform's content analysis algorithm or by users themselves, a community of fact-checkers assesses the flagged content. These fact-checkers verify the accuracy of the content and identify any instances of misinformation or hate speech. While each of these steps requires detailed planning for effective implementation, we strongly believe that this structured and organized approach allows for a systematic evaluation of flagged content, ensuring greater accuracy and reducing the dissemination of false information and harmful speech.

**Diagram 1.** Flow of the recommendation after integration on the system



## 6. Recommendation

This study focuses on violence incidents that occur as a result of social media, particularly Facebook, and the challenges associated with preventing these incidents. Previous research and case studies show that a major contributor to these incidents is the users who share content without considering the potential consequences. To address this problem and the other challenges associated in preventing these incidents, we suggest three recommendations that can be implemented with existing technology. The first recommendation is for social media platforms to prioritize certain types of posts or news for fact-checking by using content analysis to identify keywords and topics that may contain false information or hate speech. The second recommendation is to encourage users to fact-check before sharing content through educational campaigns or pop-up messages. Finally, the third recommendation is to include users in the fact-checking process by creating reporting features and communities of fact-checkers. Although these recommendations may not completely resolve the issue, we strongly believe they can decrease the risk of violence incidents and create a more cooperative and clear environment. It is necessary for social media platforms, users, and policymakers to work together to tackle this issue and ensure that social media is used positively for communication and interaction, rather than a source of hatred and violence.

Institutional Review board approval was not needed for this work.

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to paraphrase. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## References

- [1] Kemp, S. (2023, February 19). The Latest Facebook Statistics: Everything You Need to Know — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. DataReportal. Retrieved May 5, 2023, from <https://datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats>

- [2] Hunt, D. P., Atkin, D., & Krishnan, A. (2012). The Influence of Computer-Mediated Communication Apprehension on Motives for Facebook Use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(2), 187–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.678717>
- [3] Tripathi, V. K. (2017). Youth Violence and Social Media. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 52(1–3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2017.1352614>
- [4] Statista. (2023, February 7). U.S. online harassment environments 2020, by gender. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/334074/online-harassment-environments-gender/>
- [5] Hopkins, S., & Ostini, J. (2015). Domestic violence and Facebook: harassment takes new forms in the social media age. *The Conversation*, 30, 1-3.
- [6] Elsaesser, C., Patton, D. U., Weinstein, E., Santiago, J., Clarke, A., & Eschmann, R. (2021). Small becomes big, fast: Adolescent perceptions of how social media features escalate online conflict to offline violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 122, 105898. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105898>
- [7] Patton, D. U., Eschmann, R., Elsaesser, C., & Bocanegra, E. (2016). Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence outreach workers know about social media and urban-based gang violence in Chicago. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 591–600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.052>
- [8] Apoorvanand. (2017, July 6). What is behind India’s epidemic of ‘mob lynching’? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/7/6/what-is-behind-indias-epidemic-of-mob-lynching>
- [9] Morris, D. Z. (2021, June 8). Facebook Accused of Ignoring Government Warnings Before Mob Violence in Sri Lanka. *Fortune*. <https://fortune.com/2018/04/22/facebook-ignored-sri-lanka-hate-speech/>
- [10] Facebook users in Bangladesh - November 2022. (n.d.). NapoleonCat. Retrieved May 5, 2023, from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-bangladesh/2022/11/>
- [11] Sarkar, A. (2022, September 28). Violence in Ramu: 10 yrs on, justice still pending. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/violence-ramu-10-yrs-justice-still-pending-3130746>
- [12] Ali, M. S. (2020). Uses of Facebook to Accelerate Violence and its Impact in Bangladesh. *Global Media Journal*, 18(36), 1–5. <https://www.globalmediajournal.com/peer-reviewed/uses-of-facebook-to-accelerate-violence-and-its-impact-in-bangladesh-88539.html>
- [13] Minar, M. R., & Naher, J. (2018). Violence originated from Facebook: A case study in Bangladesh. arXiv preprint arXiv:1804.11241. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1804.11241>
- [14] Bangladesh. (2021, July 3). A devil’s design. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-253751>
- [15] Topu, A. H. K. (2013, November 3). Hindus attacked in Pabna. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/hindus-attacked-in-pabna>
- [16] Correspondent, S. (2014, April 28). Hindu houses attacked on Facebook rumours. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/hindu-houses-attacked-on-facebook-rumours-22087>
- [17] Hinduexistence. (2016, November 8). Brahmanbaria proves Facebook as a Jihadi tool in Bangladesh to destroy Hindus! Struggle for Hindu Existence. <https://hinduexistence.org/2016/11/08/brahmanbaria-proves-facebook-as-a-jihadi-tool-in-bangladesh-to-destroy-hindus/>
- [18] Correspondent, O. (2017, November 11). Mayhem over Facebook post. *The Daily Star*.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/mayhem-over-facebook-post-1489402>

[19] Report, S. (2019, October 20). 4 KILLED, 100 INJURED. The Daily Star.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/clash-in-bhola-4-killed-100-injured-1816540>

[20] Report, S. (2021, October 15). Violence, vandalism in districts: Man killed in Noakhali; home minister warns perpetrators. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/violence-vandalism-districts-man-killed-noakhali-home-minister-warns-perpetrators-2199106>

[21] Wang, Y., Leon, P. G., Acquisti, A., Cranor, L. F., Forget, A., & Sadeh, N. (2014). A field trial of privacy nudges for facebook. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557413>

[22] Mathew, B., Dutt, R., Goyal, P., & Mukherjee, A. (2019). Spread of Hate Speech in Online Social Media. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3292522.3326034>

[23] Jazeera, A. (2021, October 19). Hundreds protest in Bangladesh over deadly religious violence. Religion News | Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/19/bangladesh-hindus-protest-deadly-religious-violence>

[24] Jahanbakhsh, F., Zhang, A. X., & Karger, D. (2022). Leveraging Structured Trusted-Peer Assessments to Combat Misinformation. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-computer Interaction, 6(CSCW2), 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555637>

[25] Zhao, Z., Zhao, J., Sano, Y., Levy, O., Takayasu, H., Takayasu, M., Li, D., Wu, J., & Havlin, S. (2020). Fake news propagates differently from real news even at early stages of spreading. EPJ Data Science, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00224-z>