

A **Routledge** FreeBook

FAKE NEWS

AND THE MEDIA



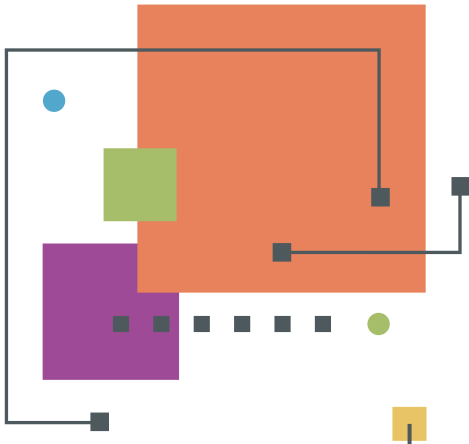


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INTRODUCTION

“Fake news”, awarded word of the year in 2017, is a term that has been created in recent years to describe the rise of information warfare. This now popular form of propaganda and journalism has been spread through the increase of digital channels and social media.

In this FreeBook, we have chosen to explore how fake news has affected different aspects of the world we know today. Chapter one has been taken from *The Social Media Journalist Handbook*, by Yumi Wilson (San Francisco State University, USA), and explores the rise of fake news and its impact on journalism.

Our second chapter, by Brian McNair (Queensland University of Technology, USA), builds upon the first chapter by continuing to discuss the distrust of journalism in the digital age. The author presents fake news not as a cultural issue in isolation but rather as arising from, and contributing to, significant political and social trends in twenty-first century societies.

Following this, we have a chapter by Steve Hill (Westminster University, UK) and Paul Bradshaw (Birmingham City University, UK). They consider the ethical and legal concerns involved with fake news and trolling amid the rise of mobile journalism and social media.

Building on the impacts of online fake news, chapter four, edited by Giovanna Dell’Orto (University of Minnesota, USA) and Irmgard Wetzstein (University of Vienna, Austria), explore how the public became increasingly distrustful of refugees at a time of crisis due to widespread fake news.

Chapter five by Chuck Tryon (Fayetteville State University, USA) addresses ongoing debates about the role of television in representing issues and ideas relevant to American politics.

The next chapter is taken from *President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse: Ramifications of Rhetoric via Twitter*, edited by Michele Lockhart (The University of Texas, USA). It further explores fake news and politics by examining Trump’s use of twitter.

Our penultimate chapter covers fake news in regards to climate change and is taken from *The Psychology of Climate Change* by Geoffrey Beattie and Laura McGuire (Edge Hill University).

Finally, students will learn how to critically think about the media and fake news with a chapter from *Close Reading the Media: Literacy Lessons and Activities for Every Month of the School Year* by Frank Baker.



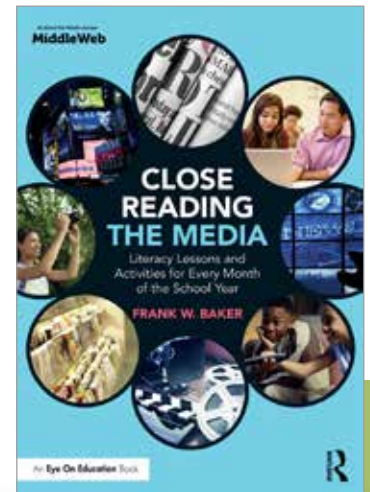
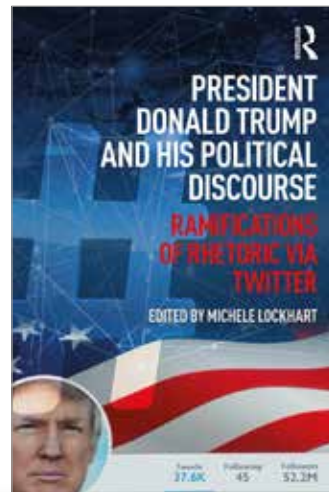
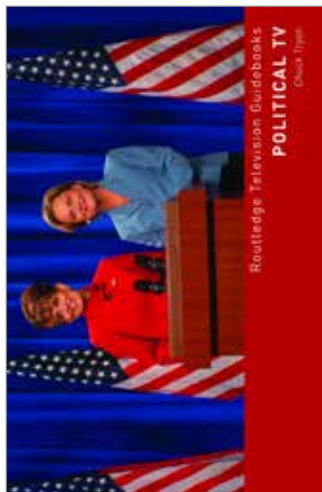
INTRODUCTION

NOTE TO READERS

References from the original chapters have not been included in this text. For a fully-referenced version of each chapter, including footnotes, bibliographies, references and endnotes, please see the published title. Links to purchase each specific title can be found on the first page of each chapter. As you read through this Freebook, you will notice that some excerpts reference previous chapters please note that these are references to the original text and not the Freebook.

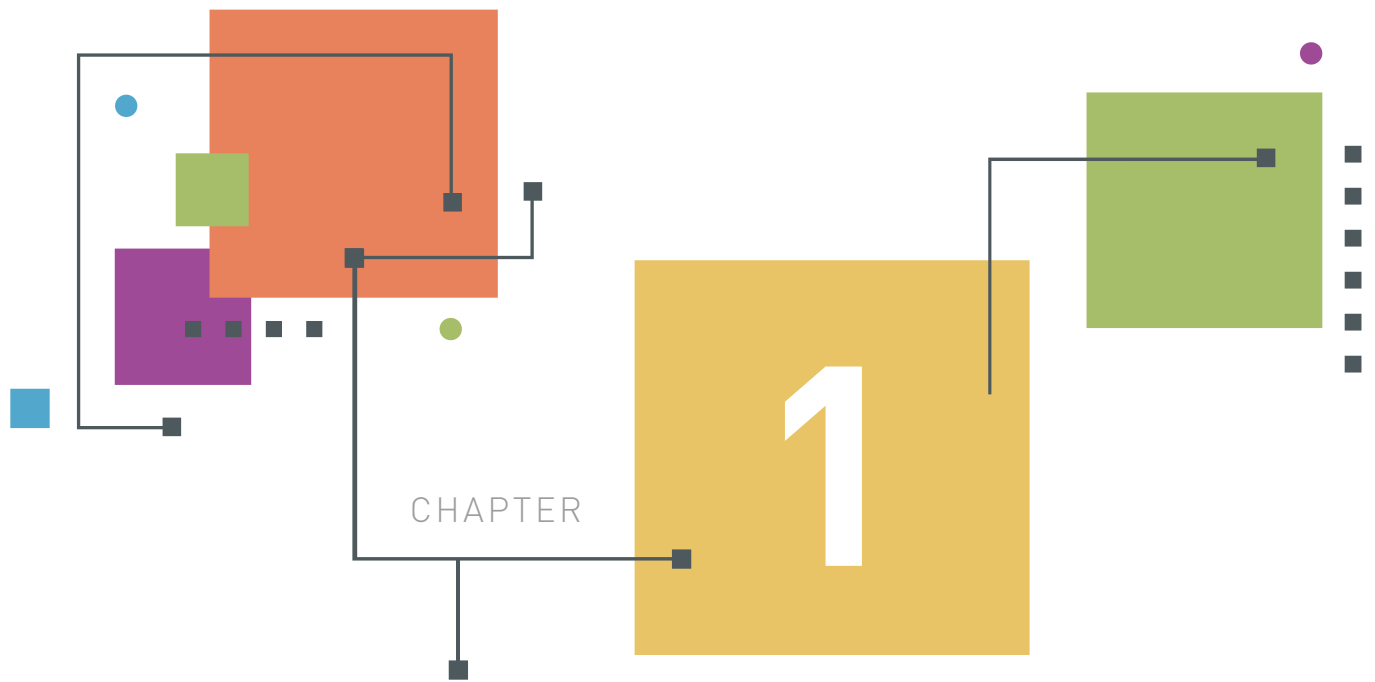
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THE RISE OF FAKE NEWS AND ITS IMPACT ON JOURNALISM



This chapter is excerpted from
The Social Media Journalist Handbook
By Yumi Wilson

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THE RISE OF FAKE NEWS AND ITS IMPACT ON JOURNALISM

Yumi Wilson

Excerpted from *The Social Media Journalist Handbook*

FAKE NEWS

Figure 1.1 • The word, FAKE NEWS, made up of chopped up newspaper. Istock photo by Getty Images.

As stated in Chapter 1, the Hutchins Commission called for a truthful, comprehensive account of the day's events and a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism. Now, as agencies of mass communication, major social media platforms such as Facebook are facing perhaps even more scrutiny than the big news media outlets faced 75 years ago.

Though executives of some of these companies refuse to take on the moniker of news providers, the research shows that social networks have become a key channel of communication for news, defined by Kovach and Rosenstiel as the basic purpose of journalism.

"The purpose of journalism is not defined by technology, nor by the journalists or the techniques they employ," Kovach and Rosenstiel claimed in their book *The Elements of Journalism*. "The principles and purposes of journalism are defined by something more basic; the function news plays in the lives of people."

Facebook has two billion active users and a majority of those users get news on the site, according to the Pew Research Center. "Looked at as a portion of all U.S. adults, this translates into just under half (45 percent) of Americans getting news on Facebook." Pew also found that 18 percent of all Americans now get news on YouTube and 11 percent get news on Twitter.

As a result, many major social media platforms have become agencies that facilitate thought and discussion, advance the progress of civilization or thwart it, which is how the Hutchins Commission described major news media outlets.

Of the greatest concern is fake news.

"Fake news is enemy No. 1 right now," reported Molly Wood in the Marketplace blog. "Companies and governments are trying to figure out who should be in charge of spotting misinformation and getting rid of it. MIT researcher Sinan Aral has found that the not-true stuff, what he calls 'false news,' is not only hard to stop, but also really effective."



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“There’s a story, for example, suggesting that Barack Obama was injured in an explosion,” Aral told Marketplace. “That wiped out a \$130 billion of equity value in a single day.”

ZUCKERBERG AT CAPITOL HILL HEARINGS

At an April 2018 hearing on Capitol Hill, lawmakers had questioned Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg about the company’s failure to protect the public from privacy breaches, hacking, and fake news.

It was the second time that Facebook had been called to Capitol Hill in six months. In fall 2017, executives from Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms were forced to answer questions about Russia’s ability to use those platforms to polarize the American public with incendiary and often untrue ads on everything from police relations and religion to border control, with one account publishing an ad that read, “Satan: If I win, Clinton Wins!”

At the April 2018 hearings, Zuckerberg again apologized to lawmakers for his platform’s failure to prevent Russia from hacking into its network during the 2016 presidential election. He also apologized to lawmakers for Cambridge Analytica’s improper access to the personal data of 87 million users, which was used to target voters in the 2016 presidential election.

Zuckerberg, however, stopped short of calling his social media company a news media company.

“When people ask us if we’re a media company — or a publisher — my understanding of what the heart of what they’re really getting at is, ‘Do we feel responsibility for the content on our platform?’ The answer to that, I think, is clearly yes,” Zuckerberg said.

Zuckerberg, however, has acknowledged the powerful role Facebook plays in informing the public by taking steps to remove content deemed false or even offensive.

In August 2018, Facebook, along with Apple, YouTube, Spotify, and other companies, “took down podcasts and channels from U.S. conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, saying ... that the Infowars author had broken community standards.”

Jones is a well-known radio host who runs the popular Infowars website. Facebook told the news media it removed his pages “for glorifying violence, which violates our graphic violence policy, and using dehumanizing language to describe people who are transgender, Muslims and immigrants, which violates our hate speech policies.”

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In July 2018, just three months before U.S. primary elections, Facebook removed “32 Pages and accounts from Facebook and Instagram because they were involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior. This kind of behavior is not allowed on Facebook because we don’t want people or organizations creating networks of accounts to mislead others about who they are, or what they’re doing.”

Whether Facebook, Twitter, and other networks see themselves as media companies or not, multimedia journalist Alex Janin of *NowThis* said she believes that it falls on those companies to do more to protect the public.



Figure 1.2 • Headshot of Alex Janin. Photo credit: Michele Janin, Alex’s mother.

“They really do have a responsibility to do more ... in terms of regulations,” said Janin, a multimedia journalist who graduated from the University of Southern California with a B.A. in Broadcast and Digital Journalism. “Not sell ads to companies like Cambridge Analytica or allow people to say whatever they want or post whatever they want” is a good start, she added.

At the April 2018 hearings, U.S. Representative Greg Walden, an Oregon Republican, brought up the idea of imposing regulations on Facebook and other social media giants through legislation. “I think it is time to ask whether Facebook may have moved too fast and broken too many things.”

Senator Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat, added: “If Facebook and other online companies will not or cannot fix these privacy invasions, then we will.”



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Fake news and data theft were not the only problems facing Facebook in recent years. The ability to broadcast live on social media, initially perceived as a technological breakthrough, erupted in controversy after dozens of people streamed suicides, rapes, and other violent acts. In one case, a 12-year-old girl streamed her suicide – and after two weeks of complaints, Facebook took it down.

And, just as many newsrooms ultimately did after the release of the Hutchins Commission's findings, Facebook has taken steps to self-regulate its business, including measures to reward those who report data abuse, making ad and ad pages more transparent, including source information on news stories, and taking steps to restrict data access.

Even before the Capitol Hill hearings, Facebook began taking steps to address public concerns about fake and inaccurate news and information on the platform. It also gave a nod to the work of journalists and others who seek truth, transparency, and accountability.

"When it comes to advertising on Facebook, people should be able to tell who the advertiser is and see the ads they're running, especially for political ads," said Ron Goldman, Vice President of ads at Facebook, in an October 2017 press release.

"That level of transparency is good for democracy and it's good for the electoral process. Transparency helps everyone, especially political watchdog groups and reporters, keep advertisers accountable for who they say they are and what they say to different groups."

In her blog post, Lyons said that the company is removing accounts and content that violate their policies, reducing the distribution of false news and the incentives to create it, and giving users more context on the stories they see. Facebook has taken other steps to fight fake news. "False news is a money maker for spammers and a weapon of state actors and agitators around the world," said product manager Tessa Lyons, adding: "Misinformation is bad for our community and bad for our business."

TWITTER

Twitter, considered the most popular social network among journalists, has been grappling with fake news for years. Indeed, a comprehensive MIT study of every major contested news story in English tweeted by three million users for ten years found that false rumors and fake news reached more people and spread much faster than accurate stories. "Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more



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pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information,” the authors of the MIT study wrote. “We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust.”

In January 2018, Twitter revealed that more than 50,000 Russia-linked accounts used its service to post automated material about the 2016 presidential election. Understanding the power and influence of its network, Twitter executives also have taken steps to regulate its platform.

In February 2018, disinformation ran rampant on Twitter during the high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 students. A fake account attributed to Bill O’Reilly (former talk show host on Fox News) claimed that there were two shooters, and/or that the shooter was a comedian. Other tweets falsely accused other people of being the shooter.

And in April 2018, disinformation ran rampant after a woman opened fire at the YouTube headquarters in San Bruno, California, injuring three people before killing herself. Some of the most popular tweets were being written by people inside YouTube, but as it turns out, not all of those tweets were accurate or even real.

Vadim Lavrusik, a product manager at YouTube, tweeted: “Active shooter at YouTube HQ. Heard shots and saw people running while at my desk. Now barricaded inside a room with coworkers.”

Lavrusik’s tweet in itself should be considered a great example of **citizen journalism**, which essentially acknowledges the growing phenomenon of citizens taking an active role in the collection, production, and dissemination of news. Indeed, his earlier tweets were among the first bits of information that informed the public about the shooting.

The problem, however, was that someone hacked Lavrusik’s account and tweeted: “PLEASE HELP ME FIND MY FRIEND I LOST HIM IN THE SHOOTING” – linking to a photo of YouTube video creator Daniel “Keemstar” Keem. There was no indication that Keem was at the scene, according to *Business Insider*.

Twitter has sought to refine its tools and improve the speed of its response to false tweets, hoaxes, and hacking. “In light of the horrific attack at YouTube headquarters this week, we’re sharing more detail on how we’re tackling an especially difficult and

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volatile challenge: our response to people who are deliberately manipulating the conversation on Twitter in the immediate aftermath of tragedies like this,” said Del Harvey, Twitter’s vice president of Trust and Safety.

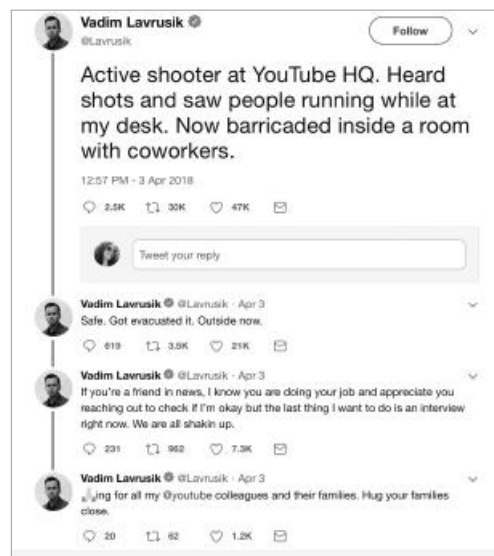


Figure 1.3 • Vadim Lavrusik’s tweets. Twitter.

“People come to Twitter first to learn about news and events unfolding in real-time, and we’re committed to ensuring that the information they receive is credible and authentic,” Harvey explained in a company blog post.

Whether it’s real-time rescue efforts of Hurricane Harvey survivors in Texas, capacity-building with Indian NGOs [non-government organizations] who aid flooded communities, verifying credible voices after major events, or sending prompts to French citizens in the wake of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, our goal is to provide support to people in times of crisis, and show people what matters most.

YOUTUBE

With close to two billion users, YouTube also has come under fire for spreading fake news. In February 2018, a video suggesting that a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida was an actor paid to speak out during the Florida shooting became YouTube’s No. 1 trending video.

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YouTube ultimately removed the video and its executives acknowledged that the video should never have appeared in its Trending section. YouTube also took steps to clamp down on fake channels making money from advertising after it was revealed that ads were appearing next to extremist content.

GOOGLE

Google, which owns YouTube, has also taken steps to fight fake news, changing its algorithm to “surface more authoritative content.”



Figure 1.4 • Donald Trump's tweet on Google and fake news. Twitter

“Today, in a world where tens of thousands of pages are coming online every minute of every day, there are new ways that people try to game the system,” Ben Gomes, Google’s Vice President of engineering, wrote in an April 2017 company blog. “The most high-profile of these issues is the phenomenon of ‘fake news,’ where content on the web has contributed to the spread of blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information.” In August 2018, the White House alleged that Google “systematically discriminates against conservatives on social media and other platforms.”

Google has denied those allegations.

“When users type queries into the Google Search bar, our goal is to make sure they receive the most relevant answers in a matter of seconds,” a Google spokesperson said. “Search is not used to set a political agenda and we don’t bias our results toward any political ideology.”



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SNAPCHAT

In November 2017, Snapchat responded to concerns over fake news on its platform by separating chats and stories from friends on the left and stories from publishers, creators, and others on the right.

“Until now, social media has always mixed photos and videos from your friends with content from publishers and creators,” Snapchat announced in its November 2017 press release. “While blurring the lines between professional content creators and your friends has been an interesting Internet experiment, it has also produced some strange side-effects (like fake news) and made us feel like we have to perform for our friends rather than just express ourselves.”

Meanwhile, researchers at the University of Michigan recently developed an algorithm that “identifies telltale linguistic cues in fake news stories could provide news aggregator and social media sites like Google News with a new weapon in the fight against misinformation.”

THE ECHO CHAMBER EFFECT

An **echo chamber** is defined by *Techopedia* as a “situation where certain ideas, beliefs or data points are reinforced through repetition of a closed system that does not allow for the free movement of alternative or competing ideas or concepts. In an echo chamber, there is the implication that certain ideas or outcomes win out because of an inherent unfairness in how input is gathered.”

Despite the efforts of social network executives to fight fake news, most scholars agree that newsfeeds on most social platforms serve as echo chambers of information and disinformation. That’s because the algorithms used by social networks determine what people see on their newsfeeds based on what they *want* to see. Therefore, if someone likes and shares stories from Infowars.com, for example, they will continue to see stories from that site – despite the fact that some say the site contains numerous inaccurate, misleading, and fake news stories.

In the new world order, a person gets to decide what they want to see. Under the Uses and Gratification Theory, this makes sense. No longer does the mass audience have to wait for a particular TV network or newspaper to tell them what the big stories of the day are. This can be good for some, but truly bad for a society that uses this information to weigh in on issues and even vote.

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ROLE OF BLOGGERS AND CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Beyond powerful algorithms, individuals have a huge role to play in the creation or proliferation of fake news. Journalists, however, are not the only ones reporting breaking news. **Citizen journalists** are becoming a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, some individuals have gained quite the following.

While many welcome the addition of more voices, critics say people with no training or education in journalism may not understand the ethical and legal values that have guided American journalists for decades.

This is one reason why trained journalists play such a critical role in today's fast-changing media landscape, says *San Francisco Chronicle* Business Editor Owen Thomas.



Figure 1.5 • Headshot of Owen Thomas. Courtesy of Liz Hafalia of SF Chronicle.

“Social media is never going to match the professional journalist on the scene,” says Thomas, who supervises *The Chronicle*'s business and technology coverage. “What we found in citizen journalism is ... there's a lot of citizen but not much journalism. The consistency is not there. It's hit or miss.”

Thomas, the former editor-in-chief of *ReadWrite*, a technology news site, also worked as managing editor of *Valleywag*, a popular blog billed as a “tech gossip rag” about Silicon Valley personalities that ran from 2006 to 2015, also believes that the public should be more skeptical of everything they read, see and hear online.

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“Video editing and manipulation that uses artificial intelligence that creates very realistic images ... for example, face swapping,” Thomas explained. “The software can swap one politician’s face for another and create a video where it looks like someone else is speaking. So, all of these technological developments have made me far less optimistic about mass- distributed, citizen-captured video and far more convinced of the value to journalists who are committed to professional objectivity ... because you may not be able to trust the video out there. That was something I didn’t think about a couple years ago.”

Case in point is the story of Eric Tucker. On November 9, 2016, Tucker posted photos of buses on his Facebook and Twitter accounts, telling his friends and followers that he was convinced that anti-Trump protesters were arriving in buses to Austin, Texas. Within hours, Trump’s biggest community on Reddit, “The Donald,” shared Tucker’s unconfirmed hunch as fact.



Figure 1.6 • Tucker’s tweet. Twitter.

The Reddit post was then picked up by numerous conservative groups, and even some news outlets. A Fox News story cited Tucker’s tweet, writing “observers online



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are claiming that, in some cases, protesters were bused to the scenes – a telltale sign of coordination.”

By the time it was all over, Tucker’s tweet was shared at least 16,000 times on Twitter and more than 350,000 times on Facebook. It was even shared in a tweet by President Trump.

While most social media users would love a tweet or post to get this much attention, the problem was Tucker’s report about protesters in buses was false.

Tucker apologized in his November 12, 2016 blog post. “As I have said before, I value the truth,” Tucker wrote. “I will remove the Tweet so more people can have a higher proportion of truth in their lives. I also want us all to refrain from repeating information that is likely untrue so that we can have greater credibility when our evidence is stronger.” He added: “I am not a professional blogger nor a professional journalist. I do hope to find more ways to make a difference. Being involved in political discourse is vital to democracy.”

Tucker’s tweet is an example of how social media has the power to turn one person’s tweet – fake or real – into a major news story, noted the authors of “Audiences’ acts of authentication in the age of fake news: A conceptual framework,” published in September 2017 in the *New Media & Society Journal*. “Unintentional fake news, satirical pieces, and news that is purposely fake have become part of our daily news diet,” the authors wrote. “Deliberately false news items have done everything, from amusing us to confusing us. In a more sinister vein, they have also served to facilitate improperly founded political mobilization.”

FAKE NEWS TO SOME MAY NOT BE FAKE NEWS TO ALL

While those trained in journalism may know what constitutes fake news, not everyone agrees on what constitutes fake news.

“The way some people, including some politicians, use the term fake news is ... anything you disagree with or anything you find uncomfortable,” says Thomas of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. “There’s fake news, fake audio, fake video, fake documents. In the thoroughly digital world we live in, we have to be suspicious and skeptical all the time.”

Thomas adds that some people think that the stories traditional news outlets are producing are fake. “The converse of that is people are being suspicious of fair reporting. Hard-working journalists trying to do their job and trying to present the



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facts as best they can. The fake news phenomenon is very much about the real news being called fake and the fake news being mistaken for real. I don't know how you really solve that."

While social media networks and powerful search engines such as Google have taken steps to control the spread of fake news, the popularity of social media and advances in technology have irrevocably changed the way people consume news and information. Kindles, iPads, and smartphones have made it easy for people to tune into what's happening while they're on the go. Very few people wait for the 6 o'clock news or the arrival of their morning paper anymore.

Thus, the power that the traditional news media once held has diminished. Large news outlets and networks are no longer the gatekeepers of the news, as noted in Chapter 1. Nowadays, a citizen such as Eric Tucker has the potential of becoming a powerful town crier. And under the Agenda-Setting Theory, citizens can also set the agenda of what they consider to be most important to the public.

CONCLUSION

Just as traditional media companies did nearly 75 years ago, many social media networks are confronting public outcry over sensationalism, invasion of privacy, conglomeration, and fake news. And even though many executives from these companies deny they are in the business of news, the fact is this: a growing number of people, especially young people, get their news from search engines, news feeds, mobile alerts, and so on.

As such, traditional media outlets are no longer the gatekeepers of news. While the rise of different voices and perspectives can be seen as good for a democratic society, there are some challenges. Namely, it's become increasingly difficult for the public to ferret out "fake" news.

While most social networks and search engine companies have tried to address these problems, the fact is that the view of traditional newsrooms as gatekeepers of news vital to public discourse has changed dramatically. Nowadays, the audience has the power to decide when they want to receive the news, how to receive it, and from whom. And thanks to highly sophisticated algorithms, the audience often receives news that aligns with their likes, dislikes, and values.

This means that journalists and newsrooms that believe in the importance of truth, accuracy, and balance are having a harder time reaching the mass audience. Part II



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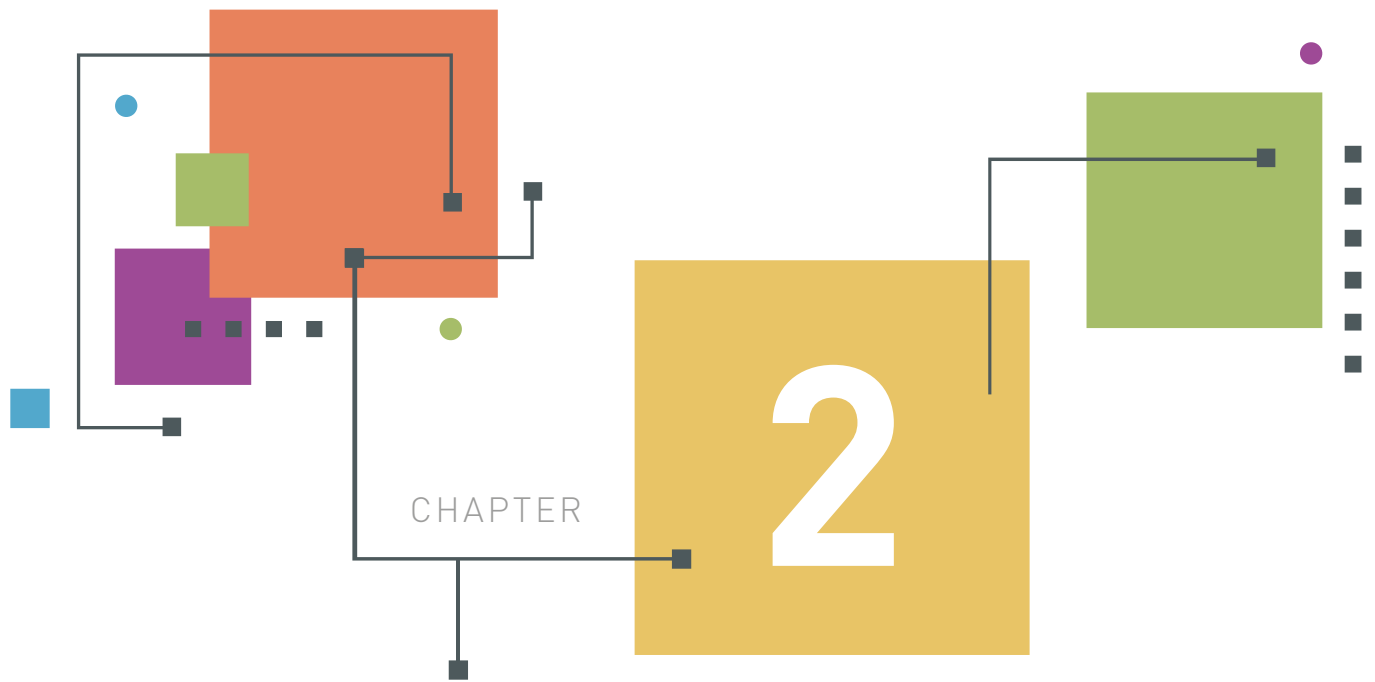
provides journalists with concrete steps to practice social media journalism – everything from how to verify the information they now rely on via social media to how to stand out in a crowded field and inform the public.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

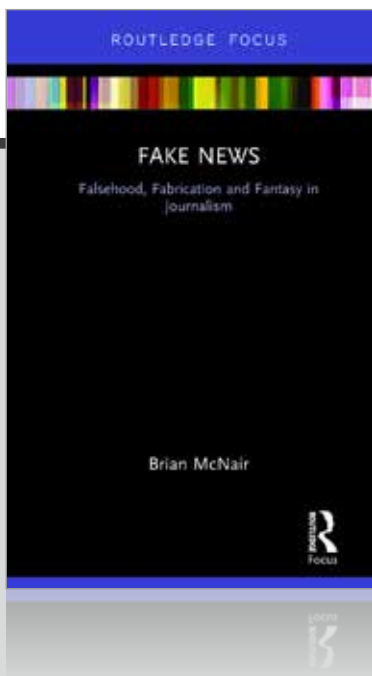
1. Are traditional news outlets still the gatekeepers of news? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Facebook is a gatekeeper of news? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Google has done enough to prevent or curb fake news? Why or why not?
4. Do you think it's the responsibility of social networks and search engines to prevent fake news from showing up in your newsfeed or searches? Why or why not?

EXERCISES

1. Review the Hutchins Commission report with a partner or team. Which comments apply to social networks of today?
2. Review the Bloggers Code of Ethics. Which guidelines seem similar to those in the SPJ Code of Ethics? Please list them and explain why they are similar.



THE DECLINE OF TRUST IN JOURNALISM POST-TRUTH, POST-FACTUALITY AND THE DIGISPHERE



This chapter is excerpted from
*Fake News:
Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*
By Brian McNair

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THE DECLINE OF TRUST IN JOURNALISM

POST-TRUTH, POST-FACTUALITY AND THE DIGISPHERE

Brian McNair

Excerpted from *Fake News*

So what is going on with 'fake news', exactly? Why now, and why so intense the debate about what is in many respects by no means a new phenomenon? This chapter examines the deeper origins of 'fakery' in journalism and the intensifying crisis of legitimacy around fact-based content which has flowered in recent decades. The chapter will be broken into sections examining the factors driving the rise of fake news, which I will suggest are:

- *Philosophical and epistemological* – the rise of relativism and its growing influence on the sciences and the humanities.
- *Cultural* – decline of deference and trust in elites (including journalistic elites) dating back to the 1950s in the west.
- *Economic* – increasing competitive pressure on fact-based media and a resulting tendency to produce content which, though presenting as true, is primarily designed to attract users and generate revenue.
- *Technological* – the explosion of digital media platforms, many driven not by the production of traditional, original journalistic content but by aggregated, plagiarised, fabricated or faked information.
- *Political* – the rise of nationalism, populism and the alt-right as exemplified by the election of Donald Trump to the White House.

POST-TRUTH, POST-FACTUALITY

I am not a great fan of crisis narratives, which tend to the hyperbolic and usually lack historical context. These narratives of cultural pessimism, as we can also view them, tend to ignore or downplay empirical evidence of positive trends in the management and conduct of human affairs to instead assert that the world is heading always and only in a backwards or dysfunctional direction. Associated with such narratives is the tendency to view societal evolution through 'rose-tinted glasses' – things were better in the past and are getting worse all the time. Thus, the rise of twenty-four-hour news in the 1980s was said to have generated "compassion fatigue" and "information overload" (Moeller, 1999).

In the media studies field which I know best there have been perceived crises of journalism and of public communication, among other things (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), associated in the 1990s and beyond with declines in the newspaper sector, perhaps, or changes in the style of political journalism such as those captured by the oft-heard phrases 'dumbing down', 'tabloidisation', 'Americanisation' and 'commercialisation'. These crises have tended to evaporate on close inspection, as it

THE DECLINE OF TRUST IN JOURNALISM

POST-TRUTH, POST-FACTUALITY AND THE DIGISPHERE

Brian McNair

Excerpted from *Fake News*

becomes clear that in many key respects our contemporary political and media cultures are vastly superior to those which existed in the past, as measured both by the quantity and quality of information available to the average citizen in the average democracy.

Yes, there have been media closures and unwelcome trends in journalistic content as various technological and cultural trends worked through established legacy media systems and capitalist culture evolved, but on the other hand there is more information – including journalistic information – available to more people on the planet today than there has ever been. Yes, there are dumbed-down media aplenty and no shortage of trashy tabloid-style publications. These indeed go back to the birth of mass print media in the late nineteenth century and the early press barons. But there are also, due in large part to the impact of the internet in the political economy of media production, vast numbers of deeply serious fact-based content outlets in every industrialised society on the planet, available online to anyone, anywhere, with access to digitally networked communication.

Moreover, it is easier for ordinary people to produce fact-based content of reasonable quality and accessibility for the globalised public sphere and its audience of billions than it has ever been. Newspapers printed on dead trees may be dying out, but journalism and its related cultural forms are certainly not. On the contrary, the opposite is true. More people read more news and journalism from more sources on more platforms than ever. Indeed, it is simply not possible for any individual human being to access, absorb and 'know' all the information that is out there and available to them at any given moment in the day. From the point of view of the networked individual the GPS is infinitely large – that is, unknowable. There is not enough time available in a twenty-four-hour day for anyone to absorb even a fraction of the journalistic information which circulates in the GPS. This is a remarkable fact which we have as a culture quickly come to take for granted.

The evolution of what I call an inflationary public sphere, exponentially larger and more complex than what preceded it in the analogue age, poses challenges for our individual and collective comprehension and evaluation of public information, yes, and the digitally enabled luxury of informational excess has undoubtedly contributed to the fake news phenomenon we explore in this book. But to acknowledge that irrefutable fact is not the same thing as arguing that the volume and velocity of information flow on the internet are, in and of themselves, destroying our civic capacity for rational choice and good governance. But the fake news phenomenon can be regarded as a genuine crisis in a central, key element of the GPS; our capacity

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as media users – as producers and consumers of information on the variety of platforms which comprise the GPS – to trust the information we receive in the form of journalism.

A crisis, as I have written elsewhere (and borrowing on the words of New Labour's principal crisis manager in government between 1997 and 2004, Alistair Campbell), is an event or process which, if not resolved, has the potential to overwhelm a system or the position of an actor within the system (McNair, 2016). The current crisis of trust in journalism which the fake news phenomenon both embodies and intensifies is part of a broader decline of public confidence in so-called 'elites' – those in positions of power (be it political, economic or culturally rooted), authority, prestige and influence over the majority of others. If the crisis of trust in journalistic elites and the loss of authority of elites in other spheres such as politics and academia are not addressed in the coming years, it is quite possible that the entire structure of liberal democracy which has driven global evolution forward since 1945 will collapse in the face of rising authoritarianism and 'post-truth' cultural movements such as that embodied by the alt-right in the United States or in Putin's Kremlin, or will be eroded to the point where it is unrecognisable as the generally progressive, if messy and imperfect polity we see (still). Let me in this chapter, then, start with a consideration of the roots of this broader crisis of elite credibility before turning to its contemporary manifestation in the fake news discourse.

RELATIVISM IN SCIENCE, POLITICS AND CULTURE

I'll begin by acknowledging a degree of irony in the fact that, as a media scholar who has spent much of his professional life critiquing and deconstructing the notion of truth in journalism, I and others like me are now concerned to restore its meaning and influence in the face of a global assault on liberal news media. Let us not forget that the professional journalistic principle of objectivity and the presumption that there can be a single or even absolute truth in journalistic accounts of the world have long since been replaced by more nuanced thinking about the limits of objectivity and the multiplicity of truthful accounts available as explanations of a given newsworthy event. The Glasgow University Media Group, with whom I worked as a PhD student in the 1980s, pioneered that critique with their *Bad News* books, as did Stuart Hall and the Birmingham group, John Hartley and John Fiske and many others from the 1970s onward. These scholars demystified and deconstructed hallowed notions of objectivity, impartiality and journalistic detachment of the type fetishised by the BBC and other public service broadcasters, replacing them with concepts of journalistic discourse as

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value-laden texts, ideologically loaded constructs built around what Roland Barthes called Mythologies (1973). These scholars provided us with the analytical tools to identify and decode the layers of meaning contained in journalistic texts and to resist their seductive appeal to the notion of Truth as an easily recoverable absolute.

The entire political economy school of media scholarship was motivated by a concern to identify and evaluate the impact of power and ownership on journalistic content and to document the influence of dominant ideology on ostensibly objective news. Drawing on Marx's materialist theory of cultural power as an extension of economic class domination, the political economy school of media scholarship viewed journalism as a key instrument of class struggle in societies where hegemonic, consensual approaches to ideological competition were more important than the brute force of earlier eras. The great majority of books and essays by media scholars published since the 1970s in the capitalist world advanced this instrumental model of media power, and it is only recently that alternatives such as my own chaos or competitive paradigm have been accepted within media studies as potentially useful in accounting for the complex, often contradictory, reality of cultural capitalism as currently organised (McNair, 2006; Freedman, 2014).

The shift from a control to a chaos paradigm and the attempts of others to similarly acknowledge complexity in the structure and function of increasingly digitised communication systems come on top of a broader cultural relativism which predates the establishment of media studies in the 1970s and extends beyond social science and the humanities to include the hard sciences of physics, mathematics and astronomy. The notion of relativity is associated most closely with Albert Einstein and the pioneering theoretical physicists of the early twentieth century, who demonstrated such curious features of nature as the possibility for particles to be in two states at once, for time to move at different 'speeds' in different spaces and that the observer always changes the thing observed. We today give expression to these unsettling ideas (many of which have been proven empirically by experimentation) with the aid of such thought experiments as Schrodinger's Cat or the split beam experiment which shows how particles (or waves) of light can be in two places simultaneously. Quantum theory predicts the possibility of 'spooky' action at distance – that is, a quantum event occurring in one region of space time has impacts on another, completely distinct region. Cosmologists such as Stephen Hawking have developed mathematically consistent theories of multiple and parallel universes or the possibility that sometime back in the pre-history of our observable universe, something came out of nothing (Krauss, 2012; Hawking, 2016).

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Very few of us – very few scientists, even, as Richard Feynman once acknowledged – understand the physics behind these ideas or could solve the mathematical equations which describe and validate them, but most of us do now ‘get’ the idea of relativity in nature as Einstein hypothesised it a century ago – the idea that a fixed, immutable ‘reality’ is an elusive, difficult thing to capture – and find it easy to apply the model to human culture. After all, if not even the physical universe can be reduced to a set of facts which are true always and everywhere, how much more relative must be the emotionally, psychologically, idealistically driven structures of human societies? It is no longer contentious to assert that our perception of what is real is determined in part by the perspective we adopt as observers and the cognitive categories we bring to bear on those observations.

This shift has sometimes been characterised, and not always approvingly, as part of the postmodernist movement which dates from the 1950s. Critics of ‘cultural relativism’ have dismissed the idea that we can see things from more than one perspective and called for the reassertion of clear, moral unambivalence with regard to such matters as criminal behaviour, sexual lifestyle choice or literary criticism. But the idea of cultural or epistemological relativity, as I am using it here, is not that there is no truth to be discovered in the journalistic or other authored account of a given event; it is that there is no single truth, no absolute truth separate from the standpoint of the observer. Until we open the box and observe what is inside, Schrodinger’s Cat is both (or neither) dead and alive.

What we see, in society as much as nature, depends to a certain extent on the standpoint from which we look, the angle of view, our status as observers, the equipment and the filters we apply to what we see, the questions we ask. Human beings have the gift of seeing in colour. Dogs and other animals do not. As narrators we may be honest, but we are inherently unreliable, as are the witnesses we enlist to verify and corroborate stories. Memory is fallible, as is logic, perception and the process of inference. Detectives understand this, and so these days do most journalists. By entering a situation to observe and report it, the journalist changes that situation in various ways, just as the lab worker’s thermometer immersed in the glass of fluid will change the temperature ever so slightly, but significantly for the final measurement.

For decades, going back to at least the 1950s, some journalists embraced this radical uncertainty and eschewed the search for detached objectivity in favour of engaged subjectivity, not to falsify or invent the facts of a given situation, but to achieve a

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richer Truth than merely objective reportage could manage. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) was marketed to his American readers as a new form of literary journalism in which the author's aesthetic choices and subjective were crucial to the real-life narrative of a brutal crime. The facts of what happened to the Cutter family in that Kansas farm house were quickly established, and the perpetrators duly paid the price to the prison hangman. But Capote's account went deeper into the histories and contexts of the key players, including those of the killers and the detectives who solved the case. Instead of a 600-word news report he produced a 60,000-word account suffused with emotion, artifice and moral ambiguity. He sought to better understand not just what had happened, but why and what it meant for the society of which he was an important chronicler in the 1960s. And in that effort he deployed many tricks of the novelists' trade, thus launching (in his own estimation at least) an entirely new genre of long-form journalism.

In Cold Blood was not fake news, and nor were the many similarly motivated experiments in journalism of that era and after – Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalism; the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin; the impressionistic narratives of Joan Didion. They were not 'fake', but nor were they objective in the professionally approved meaning of that term. The notion of cultural relativity which informed them can be seen today in online journalistic narratives such as *Serial*, *Making a Murderer* and *S-Town*, in which the unreliability of observer accounts is a given and the truth of what happened remains elusive even as the end credits roll on the final episode. In these 'true' stories there are a range of possible answers to the question 'what happened?'. And depending on the position of an actor within the story, more than one of those answers may be true.

There have in the last two decades been many examples of documentary films shown on TV or in mainstream cinemas to large audiences which highlight the uncertainty surrounding all truth claims and invite the viewer to embrace that fact as the only thing about which we can be sure. Andrew Jarecki's 2003 documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* is a personal favourite of this author, and one could cite many more 'postmodern' or relativist texts which set out to destabilise our sense of certainty in personal recollections, reported knowledge and official discourses. The success of these narratives in the online media marketplace – and the global impact of the Serial-type podcast confirms this – shows that there is a large public appetite for stories which, although in one sense true, are in another sense profoundly unknowable.

As Matthew D'Ancona (2017) notes, this epistemological relativism is essentially different from what we are today calling fake news or 'post-truth'. In the latter, there

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is a conscious and deliberate avoidance or rejection of known facts which have underpinned certain truths. The MMR health scare, which continues to this day in the United States and elsewhere (given endorsement by President Trump himself), began as a case of alleged academic dishonesty but can now be seen as an example of fake news in that those who today believe in the MMR–autism link have access to the knowledge that Andrew Wakefield was exposed as unethical by his scientific peers (and for that reason struck off the medical register in the UK) and that there is absolutely no empirical evidence of any kind which supports the anti- vaccination stance. The people who believe that MMR will give their child autism are the same kind of people who believe in the physical power of crystals and reiki (massage without touching). One might say that religion is also a source of post-truth culture, and always has been, in its rejection of science in favour of myth and faith. But those Christians who reject evolution and believe the world is 7,000 years old and their equivalents in other religious belief systems have long had a special dispensation. When even some respected scientists espouse a belief in God and the supernatural – beliefs which entirely contradict their scientific knowledge – one can hardly be too critical of a Creationist in Alabama or a Mormon in Salt Lake City.

The twentieth century gave expression to many variants on post-truth, going back to the Nazis' endorsement of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or Nietzsche's philosophy of truth as something which is defined by the victor and thus arbitrary (D'Ancona, 2017). But the defeat of the Nazis and the assertion after 1945 of rational, technocratic, evidence-based governance in most of the liberal democracies, most of the time, seemed to usher in an era of faith in facts. Radical postmodernists and cultural relativists continued to influence philosophy and sociology, but there was a wide- spread acceptance amongst publics and elites of the distinction between truth and lies, between myth and reality. Holocaust deniers were one group of disbelievers universally castigated for their insistence that the Nazi death camps did not exist and that 6 million Jews did not die in the European war. Advocates of alternative therapies and New Age philosophies were viewed by the majority as harmless eccentrics, and the conspiracy theories of such as David Icke and the American survivalist movement generated mockery amongst the majority.

These individuals and groups, with their beliefs in a secret 'world government', or the healing powers of crystals, or that Planet Earth is under attack by an alien race of giant lizards disguised as respectable politicians, or that Elvis Presley is alive and well and living in a small town somewhere can be viewed as precursors of what we are today calling post-truth or post- fact culture. This is a culture in which belief is

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arbitrarily related to evidence and facts are eclipsed by faith. In such a cognitive environment facts do not matter as much as emotions in the determination of what is true and what is false. As Paul Simon put it half a century ago, we believe what we want to believe and disregard the rest.

But if there are precedents, it is a distinguishing (and disturbing) feature of post-truth culture and the current fake news phenomenon that such beliefs have become established in the mainstream of political discourse, as exemplified by the rise of Donald Trump, propelled as he was by figures such as Alex Jones of *Infowars*, alt-right conspiracy theorists and neo-Nazi and white supremacist elements. On June 1, 2017, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change negotiated by his predecessor and signed up to by some 200 of the world's nations. During his campaign Trump had declared that anthropogenic climate change was a "hoax" invented by the Chinese government for its own nefarious ends, thereby endorsing the hitherto marginal school of climate change denialism. After many years of debate and research, the belief that human activity was driving global warming had been accepted by the great majority of the world's governments and scientific establishments, as well as by many influential figures in the corporate worlds (and the general public). The movement towards a consensus on climate change and the associated policies for mitigation of global warming had been based on extensive scientific research, with opposition confined to the margins of scientific and political debate. Trump's June 1 statement was an explicit rejection of that mass of evidence in favour of pseudoscience and polemic. Trump also endorsed the thesis of English doctor Andrew Wakefield that there was a link between MMR and autism (noted earlier). On both of these issues, Trump aligned himself with groups who bluntly rejected the over-whelming weight of scientific evidence.

CULTURAL DEMOCRATISATION – DECLINING DEFERENCE AND THE CRISIS OF TRUST IN ELITES

Underpinning President Trump's post-truth perspectives on these matters was a deep mistrust of what he called disparagingly 'elites'. In particular, this was a distrust of experts. One might connect this development to a steady decline in the deference afforded political and other elites seen in the western world since the 1950s. As televisual media and popular culture exploded in the aftermath of World War II, so did the readiness of mass publics to accept without question whatever their 'betters' declared was good for them. Whether in relation to the British monarchy and aristocracy or the upper classes who largely monopolised the power institutions

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of capitalism, pre-war public deference towards elite groups was eroded by the rise of social democracy and the central place of the people within it. Elites became more accountable and were required to be more transparent, a process encouraged by a more critical and invasive media. This was on one level a process of political and cultural democratisation, progressive in its implications for good governance. It also led, in the eyes of many observers, to growth in public cynicism and disillusionment with government and declining trust in the authority of the expert. As the media grew more emboldened in their coverage of elite sex and corruption scandals or such long-running real-life soap operas as the dysfunctional marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, the public became less willing to grant these elites the deference to which they felt themselves entitled in earlier times. Debunking and humiliating elites became a spectator sport played out in the popular media of many countries, and the commercial appeal of such stories encouraged more and more explicit exposes.

Journalists such as the *Guardian's* Polly Toynbee have been warning for years that the steady advance of hyperadversarialism and cynical political journalism would lead to declining trust in both media and politicians:

Journalism has become obsessed with the processes of government, but incurious about any complex problem that cannot be blamed upon some hapless minister. Journalism of left and right converges in an anarchic zone of vitriol where elected politicians are always contemptible, their policies not just wrong but their motives all self-interest. Intense circulation wars have created a vicious press pack which ultimately might make the country ungovernable.

THE ECONOMICS OF FAKERY

It is in this sense that we can consider economic factors as one root of the contemporary fake news phenomenon. Pressured to succeed in evermore competitive news markets, many journalistic organisations have over a period of decades increasingly emphasised the sensational in their content. Some titles, like the *Daily Sport* in the UK and the *National Enquirer* in the United States, produced content which, while claiming to be real news, was in fact, fiction – which is to say, fake (McNair, 2009). It is significant that Donald Trump revealed the *National Enquirer* – with what Bloomberg describes as “a readership that has long accepted the blurring of truth and

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fiction” – to be one of his favourite sources of news and that it endorsed his run for the presidency in 2016. According to its editor-in-chief Dylan Howard,

“[O]ur readers have a great affection and fondness for Donald Trump. It’s a readership that is disenfranchised. They do not like the political establishment. They see Donald Trump as someone who will champion their cause, just like the *National Enquirer* has championed their cause for many decades.”

Another of Trump’s preferred news sources, Fox News, also has a record of making outrageous assertions undercover of its ‘Fair and Balanced’ journalism (a brand which the company abandoned finally in June 2017), including supporting Trump’s Birther slander on Barack Obama. According to *mediamatters4america*, Fox News devoted more than fifty items to the Birther story up to 2011, occupying two hours and twenty minutes of airtime. Of these, 84% of pro-Birther claims were unchallenged and often endorsed by Fox anchors such as Eric Bolling, Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly.

THE POLITICS OF POPULISM

The question remains, however: How did these relatively marginal expressions of anti-elitism and post-truthism, confined to the pages of supermarket tabloids and cable news channels for so long, come to be the defining intellectual trend of our time? The answer, I suggest, resides in two other sets of factors.

First, it seems by now to be indisputable that substantial public dissatisfaction with the conduct of governance in the western democracies has transformed what was an already declining deference towards elites into full blown anti-elitism. Large sections of the population in countries such as France, Germany, the UK and the United States have come to see government as detached from their concerns and motivated by interests other than those of the people who have voted for and expect to be represented by them. We might consider the global financial crash of 2008 to be one trigger for this trend and the success of jihadi terrorism in attacking western publics since 9/11 as another. With regard to the latter, if the response to 9/11 by the US government and its allies was broadly supported as a legitimate military action, more recent times in which there have been more, if less destructive, attacks in European and American cities carried out by ISIS have bred fear and anger not just towards Muslims and migrants, but to the politicians who have, it is alleged by such as Trump, avoided confronting the reality of Islamist terror in preference for political

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correctness. When Obama refrained from referring to Islam in his denunciations of the most recent atrocity and when British and European leaders followed the same approach in the well-meaning name of not demonising Muslims, they created an opportunity for figures such as Trump, Nigel Farage in the UK, Le Pen in France and their counterparts elsewhere to condemn elite prevarication. In a post-fact culture of declining respect for evidence-based policy, these figures were able to exploit underlying racisms and xenophobias, as well as the genuinely held fears of reasonable people about the capacity of the liberal state to protect them from Islamist terror.

Populism began to grow in influence and authority, culminating in the election of Trump to the presidency. The elites have let you down, was the message of the alt-right in America and the Brexiteers in Britain. As a result, they say, millions of undocumented migrants are knocking on the doors of the EU or coming across the US–Mexico border, threatening your lives and draining your public services. Even if the data did not and do not support these claims, the relentless, highly visible activities of ISIS encouraged support for populist nationalism on a scale not seen since the 1930s.

POST-TRUTH CULTURE AND THE DIGISPHERE

Making that political process possible, or more rapid, was the emergence since 1995 of the internet and the current technologies of social media and social networking.

Twenty-four-hour news culture has been a feature of advanced capitalist life since the launch of CNN in 1980, and many observers have written about its impacts on journalistic practice and political agendas. When the internet emerged in the 1990s, another layer of always-on-ness was introduced to news and political culture, augmented by the qualitatively new capacities for user–producer interactivity and public participation which the digisphere provided. If, in the pre-internet age a marginal conspiracy figure such as David Icke or Alex Jones would have had a presence in print, or perhaps local cable TV, reaching a correspondingly smaller audience, the online platforms which emerged in the 2000s gave them genuinely global reach, with the capacity to intervene in the globalised public sphere quickly and without constraint.

Blogging began in the late 1990s (McNair, 2006), and social networking in the early 2000s. Facebook launched in 2004, and Twitter in 2007. They and other social media platforms quickly grew into massive transnational corporations, engaging billions of

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people in new forms of public speech and new forms of dissemination of others' public speech. The gatekeeping functions of 'legacy' print and broadcast media were eroded; their business models disrupted as advertising migrated online. Traditional structures of elite–mass political communication were challenged by horizontally structured social media.

Politicians were slow to recognise and utilise these tools, but by 2008 Barack Obama had won an election on the back of an effective Facebook presence. In 2016 Donald Trump fought his campaign largely through Twitter, bypassing the mainstream media and communicating directly with his popular base. He also drew on the support of online alt-right news providers such as *Breitbart.com* who disdained the mainstream and revelled in iconoclastic anti-elitism. Former *Breitbart* editor-in-chief Steve Bannon became his campaign manager and a leading adviser in the Trump White House. Peter Osborne writes that with his unprecedented use of Twitter, Trump created an entirely new form of political communication (Osborne and Roberts, 2017). As of this writing, Trump's Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, had around 40 million followers.

Jeh Johnson, Barack Obama's director of Homeland Security until January 2017, declared his view that the internet had greatly increased Russia's capacity to deploy fake news and other forms of cyber-warfare against the United States. Gu et al describe how the internet may enhance the reach and impact of fake news content:

The modern internet user is overloaded with information and generally shows a very short attention span. This influences how headlines and images are created and used in fake news – they're designed to grab a user's attention at [a] glance. This is essential and is in line with the theories of public opinion manipulation. The headlines are designed to supposedly inform the user of some significant fact in as sensational a manner as possible. These facts also happen to conform to the mindsets of their reader, making them feel like they're part of a tribe and reinforcing/confirming their ideas and biases. In the realm of political opinion manipulation, this tends to be in the form of highly partisan content. Political fake news tends to align with the extremes of the political spectrum; "moderate" fake news does not really exist.

In their valuable report these authors describe content marketing, data analytics and opinion monitoring tools available for sale on the internet in many countries and regions, including China, Russia, the EU and the Middle East. Although the use of



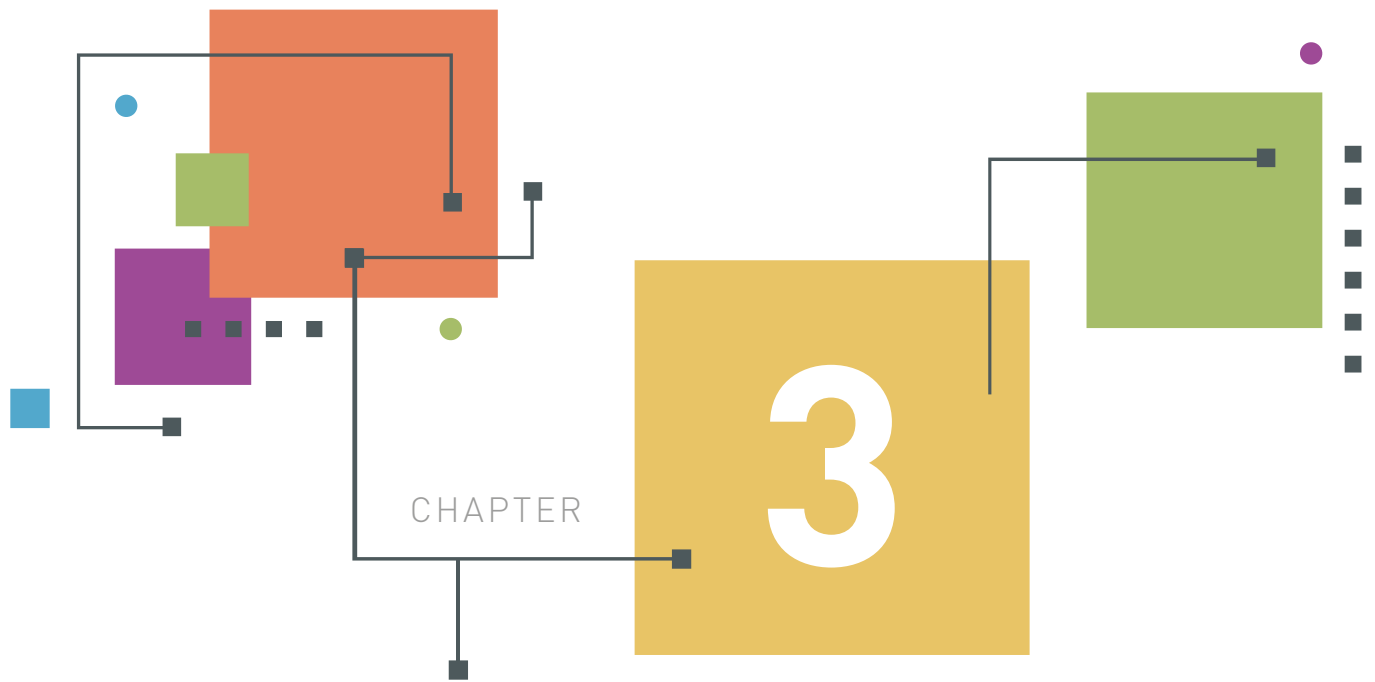
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these techniques is often perfectly lawful and even ethical – marketing of commercial goods and services has long been an accepted part of capitalist culture – they are also available for the viral dissemination of fake news and cyber-propaganda messages. There are, in this sense, positive and negative applications of digital network technology. Similarly, one might say that if the internet ushered in a more diverse and decentralised public sphere of global reach and accessibility, it has also created the pathways down which fake news and other malicious forms of content can spread.



FAKE NEWS AND TROLLING



This chapter is excerpted from
*Mobile-First Journalism:
Producing News for Social and Interactive Media*

By Steve Hill and Paul Bradshaw

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FAKE NEWS AND TROLLING

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Excerpted from *Mobile-First Journalism*

The Karri Twist, an Indian restaurant in South London, became infamous for the most bizarre reason. An article claimed the restaurant was using human meat as an ingredient and bodies were stored in a freezer on the premises.

If it all sounds like a joke, the owners of the Karri Twist weren't laughing. 'When people started calling asking me if we were selling human meat, I couldn't believe it', recalled employee Shinra Begum (BBC News 2017). 'I was completely shocked when I eventually found the article online and being shared all over Facebook', stated Begum. 'We even had a member of the public come in and say it was lucky we had shutters over our windows because he would have bricked them in' (BBC News 2017).

The story was a hoax. Yet the anonymity of internet communication and the speed with which rumours can spread makes social media a fertile ground for gossip, rumour and speculation. This chapter looks at both fake news and the trolling of journalists – two online threats that are not as unconnected as they first appear. Both distort the public debate and can even threaten democracy. The victims of fake news and trolling can feel powerless to prevent it.

Many early users regarded the internet, or cyberspace as it was known, as a type of utopia. They celebrated unrestricted freedom of speech that was very different to that offered in mainstream media. Cyberspace is a 'a world of complete freedom and anonymity, and where users say and do what they like, uncensored, unregulated, and outside of society's norms' (Bartlett 2016).

Internet freedom of expression, where anyone can publish content without censorship, has plenty of supporters. The sending of repeated abusive messages, often known as 'flaming' was a feature of early Usenet newsgroups – these text-based community message boards predate the launch of the World Wide Web. 4Chan (4chan.org) is regarded as the modern web equivalent to Usenet. Pretty much anything goes on its anonymous message boards and users meet to plan hacking and doxing attacks, although unlike Usenet 4Chan has some limits.

There is a clear clash of cultures between internet freedom of speech and the restricted communication of mainstream mass media. What we produce as professional journalists is regulated by both laws, e.g. libel, and voluntary ethical codes of conduct, such as those from the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). It is this unresolved conflict that is at the heart of the debate over fake news, trolling and the role of social media in democratic society.



FAKE NEWS AND TROLLING

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Excerpted from *Mobile-First Journalism*

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

John H. Johnson (cited Attkisson 2018) has a broad definition of fake news that includes:

1. News that is entirely false
2. News that is slanted and biased
3. Pure propaganda
4. Stories that misinterpret and misuse data
5. Imprecise and sloppy reporting

This broad definition reflects the fact fake news comes in many different flavours. At one extreme, President Donald Trump has accused respected news organisations such as the *New York Times*, BuzzFeed and, most frequently, CNN, of producing fake news. Yet what he is saying is that these organisations produce news reports that scrutinise his administration. This is precisely what good journalism should be doing as part of its role in the fourth estate.

At the other extreme, there are fake news stories that are generated solely to mislead the consumer. These stories can be extremely convincing and journalists can be caught out.

'Fake media tried to stop us from going to the White House. But I'm president, and they're not', said Donald Trump at a rally in July 2017 (Grynbaum 2017). Trump constantly referred to CNN as being garbage journalism.

Veteran media commentator Ray Snoddy (cited Harrison 2017) states:

'... mainstream media' has changed from a general description into a term of abuse. We've seen trust in media ebb and flow over many years but there's been nothing like this before. There is now a completely different way of self-manufacturing and distributing news outside of the mainstream.

This attack on the mainstream media from politicians, and it's not just Trump, is strategic and is viewed as a way to win votes. Yet it poses a threat to journalism. The politicians' aim is to convince supporters that only they can be believed and that mainstream media should never be trusted.



FAKE NEWS AND TROLLING

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Excerpted from *Mobile-First Journalism*

Here are three fake news headlines:

- Nine Italian nuns pregnant after offering shelter to North African immigrants.
- Scientists in Saudi Arabia say women should be categorised as mammals, not humans.
- KFC accused of kicking out girl, 3, scarred in pit bull attack.

What makes for the best fake news articles? 'When it comes to the fake stuff, you really want it to be red meat', states the founder of National Report, a fake news outlet, who goes by the pseudonym Allen Montgomery (Murtha 2016). He highlights the importance of reflecting a 'hot button issue' – something that is politicised or will anger people. He states:

It doesn't have to be offensive. It doesn't have to be outrageous. It doesn't have to be anything other than just giving them what they already wanted to hear.

(Murtha 2016)

Plenty of theory suggests we are most susceptible to fake news when it is supporting our own political bias or prejudice. No professional journalist should be involved in producing fake news. Verification is at the heart of journalism and professional codes of conduct. Where journalists make mistakes they correct errors as soon as possible and in a transparent way. We will take a look at some journalist errors later on in this chapter.

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2016

Fake news has been manufactured on a giant scale. Facebook admitted in November 2017 that 150 million Americans may have seen content created by Russian operatives, much of it supporting Donald Trump. Senator Dianne Feinstein stated: 'What we're talking about is the beginning of cyber warfare' (White 2017).

A study by BuzzFeed (Silverman 2016) found the most shared fake story was: Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president.

The story had picked up 960,000 Facebook engagements by November 2016 – this is the number of likes, shares and comments. What we don't know is exactly how many of these comments were saying that the headline was garbage, but fake news is certainly influential.



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Excerpted from *Mobile-First Journalism*

The BuzzFeed report states:

In the final three months of the US presidential campaign [of 2016], the top performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the top stories from major news outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News, and others.

(Silverman 2016)

Fake news seeks to:

- Make money (through online advertising or other commercial messages);

and/or

- Influence politics, e.g. propaganda that influences how people vote in elections.

Once released, fake news is amplified and shared virally via social media and will spread rapidly around the world. Sometimes even mainstream media news websites accidentally report fake news as fact.

The speed with which false information can spread via social media is immense.

Kevin Rawlinson (2016) states:

Within minutes or hours, a claim can morph from a lone tweet or badly sourced report to a story repeated by dozens of news websites, generating tens of thousands of shares. Once a certain critical mass is reached, repetition has a powerful effect on belief.

Rawlinson says that rumour can appear true to readers 'simply by virtue of its ubiquity'.

HYPERPARTISAN NEWS

Hyperpartisan political blogs and independent news outlets have risen in prominence. These news sites often mimic the appearance of mainstream media brands and will promote their political stories on Twitter and especially on political forums on Facebook.

Facebook's algorithm during the 2016 US election prioritised news based on the most shares or comments, rather than reliability. Hyperpartisan sites created stories with outrageous or controversial headlines in a bid to get more shares and appear high up the newsfeed. Facebook has now changed its algorithm and hyperpartisan sites have had their stories demoted.

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Figure 3.1 • Alex Jones of Infowars protesting in Dallas

Two of the most influential hyperpartisan political sites in the USA are the right-leaning Breitbart (breitbart.com) and Alex Jones' Infowars (infowars.com). Both have attacked mainstream media for alleged bias against Donald Trump. Infowars ran a bizarre campaign in 2017 to 'expose' CNN as 'terrorist media' and to 'fight MSM' (mainstream media) (Infowars 2017).

Academic Yochai Benkler states that a right-wing network of hyperpartisan sites anchored around Breitbart:

developed as a distinct and insulated media system, using social media as a backbone to transmit a hyperpartisan perspective to the world. This pro Trump media sphere appears to have not only successfully set the agenda for the conservative media sphere, but also strongly influenced the broader media agenda, in particular coverage of Hillary Clinton.

In this respect, hyperpartisan sites can influence mainstream reporting. Benkler noted that Breitbart's influence extends way beyond its own users and success fully influenced mainstream media to frame the debate around immigration in terms of terror, crime and Islam. This worked to benefit Donald Trump.

If there was a British equivalent of Breitbart it would be The Canary (thecanary.co). The left-leaning news site was a cheerleader for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

BuzzFeed News found during the first two weeks of the 2017 UK general election campaign, left-leaning sites 'are consistently and repeatedly going more viral than mainstream UK political journalism' (Waterson 2017).



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It is a simplification to say hyperpartisan news is automatically fake news. What unites these sites is a commitment to report stories that they believe that mainstream media ignores. In this respect, they see a role of expanding media plurality and provide a platform for alternative voices. Kerry-Anne Mendoza, Canary editor, states the site's aims:

Today, a handful of powerful moguls control our mainstream media. As such, its coverage is largely conservative. But we have created a truly independent and viable alternative. One that isn't afraid to challenge the status quo, to ask the hard questions, and to have an opinion.

[Canary n.d.]

Their skilled use of social media optimisation when promoting stories on social media has meant their stories are often widely shared.

In some respects they share the traditions of journalism, e.g. they usually seek to break exclusive stories and expand the public debate. But with a strong commitment to a particular political cause their reporting is by definition one sided. Indeed, this may be the primary reason for their popularity.

CAUSES OF FAKE NEWS

There are two key concepts that run through online communication:

- A. Freedom of expression.
- B. Anyone can publish – i.e. they can set up a website, blog or social media account and publish content to the Web.

When the Web launched in the early 1990s many celebrated the democratisation of media. You no longer needed an expensive printing press or to own a TV station to publish content. This enhanced the range of voices and opinions that could be heard.

Around the year 2000 we saw the launch of free and simple to use blogging platforms, most notably Blogger.com in 1999 and Wordpress.com in 2005.

This led to an explosion in personal blogs and the launch of independent news sites, most notably the Huffington Post in 2005 and BuzzFeed a year later.

Easy to use blog technology allows anyone to publish online content. Therefore, the Web is far more democratised than traditional media. A new wave of democratisation



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occurred as technology, such as mobile camera equipment, became cheaper than before. The third wave of democratisation came with the launch of live video streaming services such Periscope in 2015 and Facebook Live in 2016. It is now possible for anyone with a smartphone to set up his or her own TV station or do a live broadcast from the street.

Quality control is clearly a factor when anyone can publish. Andrew Keen in his classic text *The Cult of the Amateur*, published in 2007, with great foresight predicted:

... all this is that democratized media will eventually force all of us to become amateur critics and editors ourselves. With more and more information online unedited, unverified and unsubstantiated, we will have no choice but to read everything with a sceptical eye.

(Keen 2007)

Keen was writing before recent concerns about fake news. He continues: 'Most of us assume that the information we take in can be trusted ... But when the information is created by amateurs it rarely can be.'

He took a polarised position, crudely summarised as – professional journalism is good, amateur journalism is bad. This is clearly a simplification. Professional journalists embed UGC from social media where it is newsworthy. The 'us' (mainstream media) and 'them' (amateur) rivalry has evaporated, more so than he could imagine.

But Keen was offering an important warning for the future. Social media platforms are confusing environments where breaking news from mainstream media sources appear side-by-side with news from bloggers, hyperpartisan sites and gossip shared by friends. Users don't know what news to trust as at first glance fake sites look identical to those from mainstream providers. Perhaps we don't care where news comes from these days?

FILTER BUBBLES AND VIRTUE SIGNALLING

Social media algorithms aim to provide personalised newsfeeds – that is to say, based on our past reading, they attempt to predict what news we will find most relevant. News shared by our friends tends to appear more prominently in our feed. Algorithms also take into account the type of content we have liked, commented on or shared in the past. Perhaps most importantly, paid-for posts get the most prominence.



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Paid-for adverts and posts are the new battleground in politics. Facebook has always taken commercial advertising. Companies take out adverts targeting users based on their gender, age, location, who the user is a friend with, relationship status and political affiliation and hobbies. This allows for much more tailored targeting of consumers than provided by other advertising methods – such as display adverts in a newspaper or TV adverts.

Political parties have now got in on the act, except they are trying to sell policies and influence elections, rather than selling cans of beans. Tim Ross and Tom McTague say that British political parties can target tiny batches of voters – as low as 1,000 in marginal constituencies in the UK. In 2015 the Conservatives spent £1.2 million on Facebook advertising alone. They were running 350 adverts promoting then Prime Minister David Cameron, each with slightly different messages and all carefully targeted at specific age groups, gender and locations (Ross and McTague 2017). Of course, users won't necessarily know they are being selectively targeted to see specific adverts or paid-for social media posts.

There are some positives. In an era of information overload where content is everywhere, these algorithms attempt to automatically extract the most useful content. However, unlike reading a newspaper or watching TV news, this is content based on our existing political bias and personal tastes – it's perhaps best described as news-u-like. This can lead to filter bubbles where people only read news or opinions that reinforce their own pre-existing beliefs.

We are often friends with people with similar outlooks on life. Perhaps you supported the UK's membership of the European Union? A YouGov poll in 2016 (Goulard 2016) showed that 75 per cent of those aged 18–24 voted to remain in the EU during the June 2016 referendum. Many people were shocked to discover that outside their social media filter bubble not everyone in the UK agreed.

Laura Marcus (2012) states:

The net actually makes it easier to avoid people you don't agree with or who may challenge your view ... However, all social networks tend to be homogenous. Why should the net be any different?

While some Twitter users like to have 'adversarial friendships', it's more common to engage with 'like-minded individuals', states Marcus.

Matthew d'Ancona (2017) writes that technology is 'herding us into like minded political tribes'. He states that they 'congregate with the like-minded and to ignore



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information or analysis that conflicts with our presumptions'. He adds: 'It is a bleak irony: the greatest source of information constructed in human history is being used to tamp down what we know and think already.'

But not everyone agrees. Yochai Benkler believes the concept of the filter bubble is an oversimplification. He suggests there are differences between how supporters on the right and left of politics consume and share news, even when they used the same technology platforms – a term he calls 'asymmetric polarisation'.

Benkler (2017) states:

Our analysis challenges a simple narrative that the internet as a technology is what fragments public discourse and polarizes opinions, by allowing us to inhabit filter bubbles or just read 'the daily me'.

The concept of virtue signalling is often seen on Facebook and Twitter during political discussions. Essentially, this is all about showing off to others about how virtuous you are, i.e. what a good and considerate person you are. James Bartholomew (2015) states:

Sometimes it is quite subtle. By saying that they hate the Daily Mail or UKIP [The UK Independence Party], they are really telling you that they are admirably non-racist, left-wing or open-minded

He says that the great thing about virtue signalling is that it does not require actually doing anything virtuous: 'It does not involve delivering lunches to elderly neighbours or staying together with a spouse for the sake of the children. It takes no effort or sacrifice at all.'

The creation of filter bubbles and the rise of people virtue signalling reminds us that the online and offline communication can be very different. It pays to be sceptical when handling social media content.

INFORMATION SEGREGATION

Does online communication act to expand or limit the range of opinions and diversity of news? If you think social media can limit our news diet, you may believe in a concept known as information segregation.

In the past our news diet was limited by geographic access (e.g. the newspapers that were sold in our area) or cost (payment for newspapers and media channels). Today



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we enjoy access a vast range of international media sources offering a wide range of news and opinions.

Mainstream media provide us with what we call 'broad brushstroke' coverage, e.g. a newspaper will serve up a broad range of news topics, such as home news, international, business and sport. The weekend newspapers often have an additional culture section.

The web is not limited by space and is great for deep and narrow news. So we can explore our topics of interest – known as 'vertical' channels. So fans of niche sports, such as table tennis or perhaps handball that may rarely get coverage in newspapers, can find dedicated news websites. So, on the face of it, we have much wider choice in our news diet than before.

The Economist (2011) states:

there is much to celebrate in the noisy, diverse, vociferous, argumentative and stridently alive environment of the news business in the age of the Internet.

Flaxman et al. (2016) state that the use of internet tools – social media and web searches – can lead to more choice.

Increased choice and social networks lead to greater exposure to diverse ideas, breaking individuals free from insular consumption patterns ... substantial fraction of ties in online social networks are between individuals on opposite sides of the political spectrum, opening up the possibility for diverse content discovery.

Flaxman states that, taken together, 'web search and social networks reduce ideological segregation'.

But while it possible to read widely, many of us have restricted news diets. Many people only consume news from social media. Why is this the case? In an age of information overload, users perhaps naturally become more selective about the news sources they consume. Ellie Rennie (2018) states:

As moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has shown, polarisation is a mix of our evolutionary groupishness – our desire to build self-narratives that correspond with grand political narratives in order to bind ourselves to others.



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Humans seek out information that makes them feel sure of themselves. Rennie adds: 'News delivery via social media works on a business model that exploits the same need for self-validation that Haidt has identified.'

Users should seek out alternative perspectives to avoid information segregation that could ultimately weaken decision-making and the democratic process.

TRUST IN JOURNALISM

We've identified what fake news is, why it is a threat and how it can spread rapidly via social media algorithms that have no concept of what is true or false. Journalists now, more so than ever, need to prove to the public they can be trusted. *The Elements Of Journalism*, the classic text on media ethics by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2014), lists ten key principles that are worth remembering

as we contend with the rise of fake news:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification (fact checking and accuracy).
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve an independent monitor of power
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must present the news in a way that is comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news as well – even more so as they become producers and editors themselves.

The Missouri School of Journalism describes what it calls the tenets of good reporting (Timokhina 2012):

- Be accurate.
- Avoid biases.
- Present multiple viewpoints or perspectives.
- Pursue the truth.
- Use factual data, yet develop people skills.



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- Maintain community ties and ‘connect the dots’.
- Be open and transparent.
- Evoke emotion.
- Think visually; have vision.
- Integrate new developments and technology.

The key elements of truthfulness, accuracy, multiple perspectives and independence from those whom you write about are essential traits of good journalism.

Journalists must be open and transparent about where and how they obtain their information. It is good practice in online stories to link through to your source material, if it is available online. If you make a mistake, admit to it and print a clear correction.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The debates regarding fake news and trolling highlight a clash of cultures. Social media companies are relatively unregulated, in comparison to content providers. The latter work under legal and ethical codes about what they can publish.

The right to freedom of expression is sacrosanct for those who believe in the ‘anything goes’ ethos of cyberspace where users publish what they want with no limits. This contrasts with mainstream media where freedom of expression has limits. Editors act as gatekeepers – they control the release of news into the public domain and also act as quality controllers.

Aiden White (n.d.) states that journalism is ‘about constrained expression, not free expression’. As private citizens on social media we ‘are not obliged to be truthful, honest, transparent, or decent and public-spirited’. He states that this right to “self-regarding” free expression underpins much of the communication on social media. This is very different to serious journalism that is “other regarding” i.e. promotes truth-telling, accuracy and a responsibility to others.

Critics of mainstream media may regard the newspaper role of editors as gatekeepers negatively. Gatekeepers are said to have acted to limit the range of voices that are heard and in some cases have prevented important information appearing in the public domain. Some celebrate the more open and free nature of social media discourse where news is created and shared among users often with no fact checking or quality control at all.

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FALSE BALANCE

Most journalists are taught the need to be fair and balanced in news reporting – this normally involves including at least two sides of any debate. This is generally very sound advice, but what do you do when your own research tells you that one side is simply wrong. Do you allow their factually wrong version of events airtime? Or are you acting as censor of content?

CNN's Christiane Amanpour (2016) said that journalism needs to be 'truthful, not neutral'. She states:

There is a difference here. Truthful is bringing the truth. Neutral can be creating a false equivalence between this side and that. I really want you to know that I go out of my way to bring you the truth.

She says that facts exist and being neutral, in some cases, can create a false moral equivalence to two sides. Here are two examples of this.



Figure 3.2 • Christiane Amanpour of CNN – AIB Television Personality of the Year 2015 By Association for International Broadcasting

CLIMATE CHANGE

A classic example of times where there may be false balance is during debate over climate change. The vast majority of respected scientific sources believe the climate system is warming, even if they debate the extent to which it is occurring, cause and impact. However climate change deniers often present 'alternative facts' to say it doesn't exist.



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BREXIT

Broadcast news has a duty to be impartial, unlike newspapers in the UK. This meant covering the EU Referendum of 2016 was a nightmare, with BBC News being criticised for giving false equivalence to both sides of the debate. James Harding, its director of news and current affairs, said some were concerned it was giving the 'same treatment to respected experts as to know-nothings and lightweights'. But he concluded: 'The fundamental charge – that BBC reporting resulted in a false balance in which fanciful claims got the same billing as serious insights – is not true' (Harding 2016).

INDEPENDENCE

In 2015, the *Daily Telegraph's* chief political correspondent, Peter Osborne, resigned over the newspaper's lack of coverage of a tax story relating to the banking giant HSBC. Osborne claimed journalists were self-censoring to avoid upsetting the bank, which at the time was a prominent advertiser in the newspaper. He described it as a 'form of fraud on its readers' (cited Plunkett and Quinn 2015). He claimed the traditional distinction that exists in newspapers between the advertising and editorial departments had collapsed. The paper denied the claims.

Osborne (cited Plunkett and Quinn 2015) states:

It has been placing what it perceives to be the interests of a major international bank above its duty to bring the news to Telegraph readers. There is only one word to describe this situation: terrible.

Aside from advertisers, government bodies and the PR industry also seek to influence the news agenda.

ADVOCACY JOURNALISM

Journalists need to be independent, this is core to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's ten principles. However advocacy journalism or campaigning journalism, as it is sometimes known, subverts this core principle. The popular news site Vice (vice.com) regularly includes such journalism. It may be the case that the journalists themselves are participants within the story, e.g. volunteering as political activists etc.

Supporters of this type of journalism say it often covers issues that are publicly important, is often investigative and often seeks to give a voice to the voiceless. The aim is often to hold power to account and bring about change.



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But poor advocacy journalism ignores inconvenient truths or distorts the facts to promote a particular agenda. At its worst it can replicate a hyperpartisan blog and fake news.

Mathew Charles (2013) states that advocacy journalism focuses on a 'shift away from objectivity towards the arguably more ethical practice of attachment'. He adds that, with advocacy journalism: 'The neutral and detached reporter, who remains outside of events and reports only facts, becomes a campaigner immersed in a story to call for and foster real social change.'

Tadhg Kelly (2014) warns that this style of reporting appeals to audiences who prefer the subjective to the objective. He states:

Successful journalism is often about the advocacy of narratives because the audience has long flocked to the subjective over the objective, to emotion and identity and expression of belief over information.

He adds that readers may say that they want objective news, 'but when they vote with their clicks they tend to do so with their hearts'.

Advocacy journalism certainly has a role in the modern media landscape. It often appeals to journalists who have strong political beliefs, although they need to be wary of allowing their passion and personal bias to rule over factual reporting.

TAKING ON THE TROLLS

The rise of trolling – the posting of abusive messages – presents similar philosophical, regulatory and technical challenges as dealing with fake news. For some, the right to troll is a celebrated part of freedom of expression online, much like the spreading of fake news. The argument goes that, if you don't like it, you only need to close your social media accounts and uninstall your apps.

But there is an irony with trolling. While the trolls justify their actions under principles of freedom of speech, they seek to silence the voices of their victims – whether they are journalists or social media users. A Pew Research Center survey (Duggan 2014) found 40 per cent of people have been bullied on the Web, and the majority of those people (66 per cent) say it most recently happened on a social network; 73 per cent of people reported seeing someone else being harassed online.



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- Doxing – This is where the victim is harassed by having private information – such as their home address, phone number, private photos, etc – published on message boards.
- Bots – Trolling can occur using fake social media accounts that are controlled by bots – short for robots, this is software that runs automated tasks.
- Diversity – Female journalists and those from ethnic minorities are more likely to be subjected to online bullying.

Dick Costolo, CEO of Twitter, admitted in a leaked memo in 2015 that the company ‘sucks at dealing with trolls and abuse’ (Metz 2015). Twitter highlights the ‘challenge of stamping out unacceptable behaviour without eroding the character of an inherently unruly and combative community’ (Metz 2015).

JOURNALISTS SUBJECTED TO ABUSE

The *Guardian* conducted a wide-ranging study on online abuse in its own comment sections and found ‘articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about’ (Gardiner et al. 2016). While the majority of opinion writers at the *Guardian* are ‘white men’, it was ethnic minority journalists and women who received the bulk of abuse. The Gamergate controversy of 2014 highlighted how female journalists writing in male-dominated sections of the media (in this case, games journalism) can be vulnerable to attack. Gamergate sought to highlight unethical practice in games journalism, but it took on misogynistic overtones as female games journalists received the most abuse.

It can be difficult to understand why people troll, yet it is remarkably common. The anonymity of online communication, whether real or imagined, emboldens the perpetrators. Jamie Bartlett, author of *The Dark Net*, (2016) cites John Suler who studied the behaviour of participants in early internet chatrooms:

He [Suler] found that participants tended to be more aggressive and angry online than offline. He suggested this was because, when protected by a screen, people feel that real-world social restrictions, responsibilities and norms don’t apply.

Bartlett highlights how anonymous online communication can allow people to explore and experiment with their own identities. Yet it also allows them to ‘act without fear of being held accountable’. It is very rare for trolls to be prosecuted in the UK for their actions. The Malicious Communications Act 1988 covers the sending or delivery of



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letters or other articles for the purpose of causing distress or anxiety. However, many believe the law is inadequate for the modern era.

DEALING WITH TROLLS AS A JOURNALIST

TrollBusters (troll-busters.com) was set up by journalist Michelle Ferrier. In the mid-2000s, she was driven to quit her job for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal* after receiving barrages of racist hate mail. Fearing for her life, she moved to another state and even bought a gun for protection.

TrollBusters employs vetted volunteers who respond to incidents as they happen. The aim is to overwhelm the feed by posting supportive comments on social media. This tactic is used to prevent ‘pile-on’ behaviour where trolls join each other during attacks. This highlights that trolls often launch coordinated attacks, even though they are generally viewed as being loners.

Amy Gahran (2015) says of the trolls:

Their demeaning, dismissive, insulting and even threatening comments can completely derail a conversation, chilling the expression of a diversity of voices.

Journalists who are on the receiving end of abuse are advised to differentiate between criticism about ideas (i.e. what they write or produce) and between all out harassment. Criticism of ideas may well be offensive, but legal. These types of users can be ignored or blocked if there is a problem.

The latter, harassment, can have racist or sexist overtones. Where there are threats of physical harm it should be reported to the police.

SOLUTIONS

A range of solutions are proposed to limit the impact of fake news and trolling on the online public debate.

FACT CHECKING

Dedicated fact-checking sites will verify suspect content – whether this is speeches from politicians, mainstream media reports or conspiracy theories:

- FactCheck – factcheck.org
- Full Fact – fullfact.org



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- Politifacts – politifact.com
- Snopes – snopes.com

Snopes is perhaps the most well-known fact-checking site. It began by interrogating urban myths – such as the recurring claim that the moon landings were staged. Its 50 Hottest Urban Legends (snopes.com/50-hottest-urban-legends) is a frequently updated list of questionable stories currently doing the social media rounds.

REGULATING THE SOCIAL MEDIA PROVIDERS?

The social media sites, after years of denial, are aware they have a problem. The European Commission has called for much tighter controls on the tech giants to combat fake news and online harassment. Specifically they have argued that Facebook should be classified as a media publisher rather than a technology platform.

Why does this matter? By classifying it as a media company it can then be regulated in line with traditional TV, radio and newspapers – so they would need to obey established media laws about what they can and cannot publish. This poses practical and ethical challenges to the companies.

THE CASE FOR REGULATION

Currently, moderators at the social media companies are to a limited extent filtering content. They remove videos of beheadings by terrorist groups and will close their accounts. Facebook in 2016 reversed its decision to remove an iconic Vietnam War photo known as 'napalm girl', which features nudity. It stated: 'While we recognize that this photo is iconic, it's difficult to create a distinction between allowing a photograph of a nude child in one instance and not others' (Levin et al. 2016).

So there is an argument that social media companies are making editorial decisions by determining what will appear. They are also similar to media companies as they sell advertising.

Josh Constine (2016) states that Facebook writes community standards and act as editors by pulling content (such as nude photos) that break its rules. He adds:

Facebook writes the code that applies these algorithms and policies like a technology company, but it also makes editorial decisions about what to prioritize and permit, like the editor of a media company.



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Facebook has sought to reduce fake news. It experimented with warning a user if the truthfulness of content they are planning to share has been disputed. It also educates the public on how to spot fake news. However, others say the companies will only take their role in the public debate seriously if they are regulated.

As Margaret Sullivan (2016) writes:

Yes, social media platforms are businesses. They have no obligation to call their offerings 'news' or to depict their judgments as editorial decisions ... Given their extraordinary influence, they do have an obligation to grapple, as transparently as possible, with extraordinary responsibility.

THE CASE AGAINST INCREASED REGULATION

Freedom of speech campaigners argue the online world is distinct from main stream media and shouldn't be regulated. From a practical perspective, it is hard to see how a social media company could view or edit every post before submission. Mark Zuckerberg in August 2016 claimed he runs a tech company, not a media company. He used the distinction that it does not produce content, but it simply delivers it. Perhaps more than anything, the company doesn't want to get into the time-consuming and ethically problematic business of attempting to determine what is or isn't fake news. He states (2016):

We need to be careful not to discourage sharing of opinions or to mistakenly restrict accurate content. We do not want to be arbiters of truth ourselves, but instead rely on our community and trusted third parties.

Patrick Walker, Facebook's head of media partnerships, said in December 2016: 'We believe it's essential that Facebook stay out of the business of deciding what issues the world should read about. That's what editors do.' (Heath 2016).

From a state of near denial, the social media companies are taking their responsibilities more seriously. They know that if they don't do something they may well face being regulated out of business.

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CONCLUSION

The twin concepts of freedom of expression and the fact that anyone can publish run deeply through internet communication. Limiting either of these freedoms, poses significant challenges.

The debate around fake news has become highly politicised. Politicians and their supporters accuse respected traditional media outlets of producing fake news, when they are just doing their jobs – namely holding the powerful to account.

EXPERT INTERVIEW

Aidan White Founder and President, Ethical Journalism Network



Figure 3.3 • Aidan White

Fake news is the deliberate fabrication of information with the intention to deceive. When journalists make mistakes, and of course they do occasionally, they are under an obligation to correct them. Professional journalists don't seek to mislead or produce articles that are intentionally false.

Fake news is also not satire like you see in *Private Eye* magazine. The aim of satire is not to deceive people, it exists to entertain. Fake news is potentially much more sinister than this. In many cases it is political, it intends to change how people vote or otherwise act. It can also be used to encourage people to buy products or take certain positions. It disturbs the idea of democratic pluralism. Fake news creates uncertainty in people's lives.

Social media sites are unwilling to take responsibility for the content that appears on their platforms. Facebook, Google and Twitter have got immensely rich off a business model that makes no distinction between journalism as a stream of information which is in the public interest and other material – commercial messages, abusive messages or pornography.

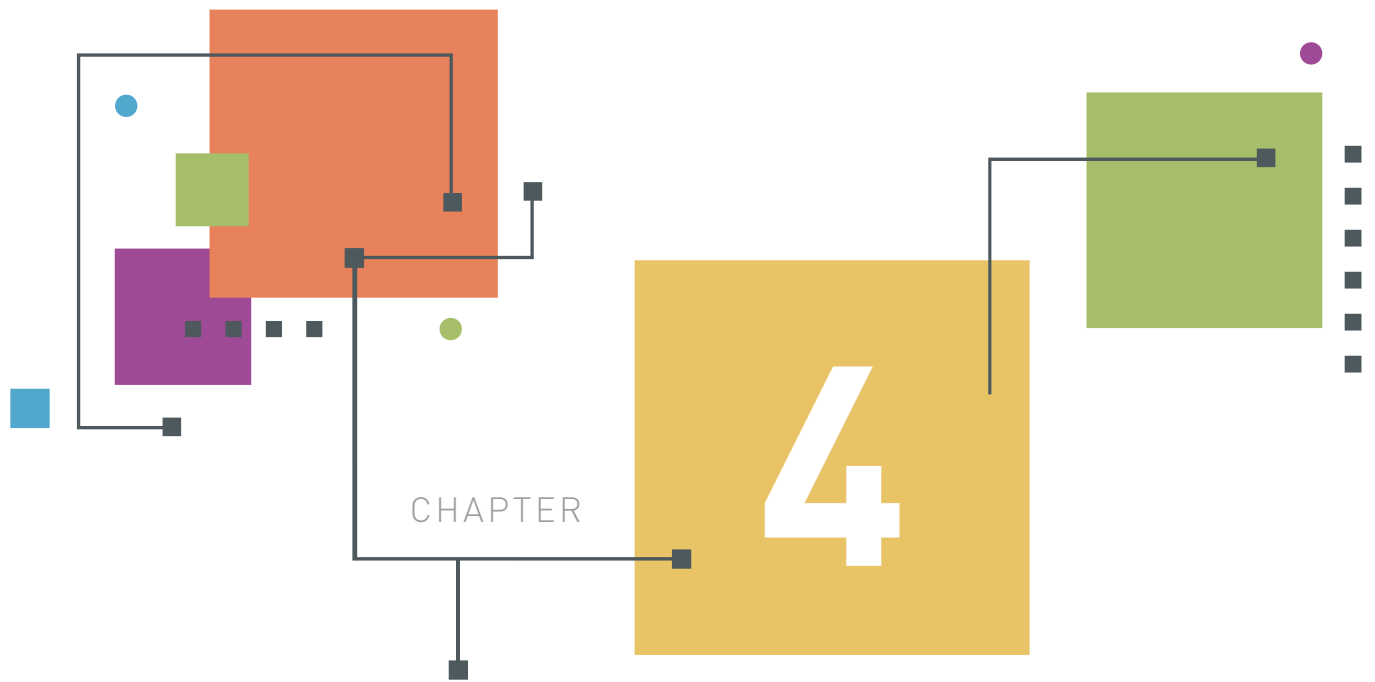


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Steve Hill and Paul Bradshaw

Excerpted from *Mobile-First Journalism*

Their only interest is whether the content generates clicks and advertising. So they will resist anything that stops them doing this. I don't like laws generally. When it comes to communications I prefer voluntary self-regulation. But if the social media companies don't accept self-regulation they are inviting governments to do something. Within ten years it is highly likely antitrust laws will break them up, much like the oil companies were in the early 20th century because they had too much power.



ONLINE FAKE NEWS, HATEFUL POSTS AGAINST REFUGEES, AND A SURGE IN XENOPHOBIA AND HATE CRIMES IN AUSTRIA



This chapter is excerpted from
*Refugee News, Refugee Politics:
Journalism, Public Opinion and Policymaking in Europe*

Edited by Giovanna Dell'Orto and Irmgard Wetzstein

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INTRODUCTION

The right to nondiscrimination is a crucial element in the realization of human rights. Unfortunately, from a civil society perspective, ZARA, Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit (“civil courage and anti-racism work”), an NGO that documents and fights against racist incidents in Austria, is faced with an uphill battle as fear of “the other” remains pervasive. In recent years, hate, especially against refugees, has begun to sprout and intensify. The initial praise of the “welcome culture” in Austria after the increase in refugee arrivals in August 2015 quickly disappeared, replaced by fear-mongering, false narratives, and a right-wing populist agenda aimed at inciting hatred.

Austria has faced similar situations before, such as when the war in neighboring Yugoslavia in the 1990s forced 2.3 million citizens to flee their homes. By June 1993, Austria had accepted 67,000 refugees, and, similar to the current situation, rising levels of xenophobia and racism started to threaten social cohesion. The right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) started its “Austria First” popular petition with overwhelming success. In the following years, four Roma people died and many more were injured in a letter bomb series motivated by racism. In 1999, asylum seeker Marcus Omofuma suffocated on the plane back to his home country, because police officers taped his mouth to silence his protest against deportation.¹ It was in this environment that a group of university students came together in 1999 and set up an anti-racism hotline where people could call in and report racist incidents they faced. Due to the very high demand, the students founded an organization to ensure this service. Since then, ZARA has dealt with more than 10,000 racist incidents that have been reported to its counseling unit, and expanded its role by initiating public awareness campaigns and organizing training and workshops.

A significant amount of ZARA’s counseling time is taken up by racist incidents spread online, which quadrupled between 2010 and 2016, adding up to one third of all cases in 2016. The target groups have also expanded. Politicians, journalists, critical commentators, civil society organizations, and basically any-one demanding solidarity, participatory rights and humane treatment for refugees and/or other marginalized groups are regularly confronted with a wave of hate and aggression. For ZARA, it often seems like a whole army of sworn-in “hate-posters” are just waiting for someone to express a “dissident opinion” (from their point of view) to attack them with sexist, racist, and menacing messages. This chapter documents and analyzes such contemporary challenges, which are particularly revealing in this book’s context of the role of media and communication, because rising incidents

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appear to be linked to a massive increase in online hate speech and “fake news” against refugees and migrants.

ONLINE HATE AGAINST REFUGEES

In dealing with different forms of cyber hate, ZARA's counseling unit follows the definition used by the Anti-Defamation League and the Council of Europe. The term “cyber hate” summarizes activities spreading insulting, discriminatory, inflammatory, and threatening content using social media or other online tools. Statements published online inciting or inflaming hatred toward, or being injurious to, certain groups are assessed as hate speech. When becoming aware of cyber hate cases, ZARA's counseling unit first assesses whether the online post breaks national law. In Austria, the legal grounds most commonly applied in these cases are incitement to hatred (Sec 283 of the Austrian criminal code), insult (Sec 115, para 1), racist insult (Sec 117), threat (Sec 107), and attempts to glorify and identify with National Socialism (Prohibition Act of 1947). If the incriminating statement was posted on a social media platform (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) or on a newspaper webpage, ZARA sends a request for deletion to the hosting company. Requests for removal are also sent if the statements are not assessed as being potentially illegal under Austrian law, but tendentious and against the terms of use of the hosting companies, which sometimes go beyond national laws. Severe cases are also forwarded to public authorities, for example, the public reporting office for acts glorifying and identifying with National Socialism. If reported by a concerned person or victim of hate speech, the counseling unit also provides information on the judicial situation and suggests further measures to counter the harmful spread of such content. All steps taken by the ZARA counseling unit and all cases are documented. Statistics on the documented cases are reported in the annual ZARA Racism Report, and selected cases are also anonymously presented in more detail.

Through these activities, ZARA has gained expertise in the developments, forms, and peculiarities of racist cyber hate in Austria, including the massive increase in online hate speech against refugees from fall 2015 onward, often building upon already widespread Islamophobia and with fake news aiming to incite hatred. This phenomenon was accompanied by the promotion of an anti-refugee atmosphere by some policymakers, political parties, and newspapers. Reports about policy efforts, civil society activities, personal commitments and (traumatic) experiences of refugees were successively replaced by reports about political failures, overburdened public institutions, and scenarios of complete system breakdowns, creating the

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dominant “crisis” narrative (as further discussed in Chapter Fourteen). From the beginning, anti-refugee hate was characterized by aggressive and brutal language, often going so far as to deny refugees the simplest human rights and showing no compassion at all. The cases of online hate against refugees documented by ZARA for 2015 include posts expressing explicit fantasies of violence against refugees (cases 19, 20, and 23 in *Racism Report 2015*), calls for National Socialist methods of annihilation, for example, deportation into concentration camps (case 20), and online (and offline) attacks against persons planning to house asylum seekers (case 21). For the ZARA counseling unit it therefore became necessary to create a new category, *anti-refugee hate*, to document recorded online cases.

In 2015, coinciding with the rise of anti-refugee hate, the social and political extent of the problem of cyber hate was not just noticed by NGOs any- more, but also by journalists and policymakers, leading to an amendment of the Austrian Criminal Code on incitement to hatred (Sec 283), which came into effect on January 1, 2016 and now covers “refugees” as a group to be protected against hate speech and hate crimes. However, this did not stop online hate against refugees – such as user comments on one extremely biased Facebook group to a news article about a 14-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in the Danube (case 15, *Racism Report 2016*), including “the poor Danube, who gives a shit about the child he was just scum. And God punished him” and “the next terror tourist for drowning please.” The group members expressed no compassion at all and a shocking degree of contempt for this teenager’s life, and incited each other to post more and more abominations. Despite all attempts to restrict cyber hate, these online attacks against refugees keep spreading in 2017, without an end in sight.

FAKE NEWS AND HATEFUL LIES ABOUT REFUGEES

Beside such direct attacks, spreading lies, tall tales, and fake news about refugees is another form of cyber hate against refugees. Spreading lies about refugees’ unfair advantages or about violent assaults by refugees attempts to create the impression that in Austria refugees are privileged by the state and a big security problem. While, as other chapters discuss, the rise of fake news and the public mistrust in mainstream media are not unique to Austria, the examples below illustrate anti-refugee fake stories circulating in the country – one authored by a Facebook user and one by a widely circulating yellow-press newspaper.

In 2015 ZARA documented a Facebook post (case 16, *Racism Report 2015*) that went viral among certain users on Facebook. In an alarming and reproachful tone, the

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user described the experience of her friend and the friend's son at a hospital in Upper Austria where, after a medical incident, they were denied any further medical treatment beyond the initial lifesaving measures. The author attributed this denial to the huge number of asylum seekers looking for treatment at the hospital and she closed her post with angry slurs against all immigrants. In a very short time, the post was shared by more than 5,000 users and caused a virtual outrage. The hospital, when becoming aware of this fake story, openly denied its validity, and the mother and son the story allegedly was about denied being treated badly by the hospital and clarified that they didn't even know the user spreading the fake story. The story was then deleted by the user but without any clarifying statement.

Also, the rumor of politically prescribed cover-ups when it comes to refugees is part and parcel of a story published by the Tyrolean edition of the newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* from January 2016 (case 24 in the *2016 Racism Report*) that generated a lot of comments. Titled "Asylum seekers – are police covering up crimes?" the article insinuates that police reports don't include all cases of violations by refugees and that there might be a "gag order" to cover up crimes committed by refugees. As proof for this, the authors cite several incidents the newspaper is aware of but that have not been included in any police reports, including one about a first-aid worker attacked in an asylum camp by an asylum seeker. According to another newspaper, *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, and research by a Vice author who also asked for a statement from the employing aid organization, the first-aid worker wasn't injured in an asylum camp or by an asylum seeker, but by a drunken Tyrolean at a tent festival. The newspaper changed the online version of the article and deleted the case without any clarification, but with an added whiny comment by the author about his journalistic duty to also report about the negative side of immigration. The original article, however, was distributed by many social media users, including politicians and political parties.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS AND AMPLIFIERS OF ANTI-REFUGEE FAKE STORIES AND CYBER HATE

The creation and distribution of these fake news stories aiming to discredit refugees profit from a network of right-wing political parties, policymakers, and tendentious media outlets in Austria. One major producer of fake stories about refugees is the website *unzensuriert.at* ("uncensored"), which recently also introduced a branch in Germany. Designed to look like a serious news portal, it publishes original articles, although without stating the author and with a clear political agenda. According to

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research by the platform *stopptdierechten.at* ("stop the far right"), the web page was founded in 2009 by the then national assembly speaker from FPÖ, and organized by other leading party members, but was never an official publication of that party. Currently, in the imprint of the webpage, the operators explicitly distance themselves from its founder and the FPÖ. For *stopptdierechten.at* the party link, however, is still obvious, not just regarding the involved persons but also the content.

This FPÖ link is also continuously reactivated by party members themselves. Its leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, who in late 2017 became Austria's vice-chancellor, and other party members have shared articles by *unzensuriert.at* on their own social media platforms, and the website's long-time editor, Alexander Höferl, was promoted to head of communications at the now FPÖ-led Ministry of the Interior. As researchers Bente Gießelmann and Teresa Frankenberg (2016: argued, "The FPÖ's method of inciting hatred against refugees has, in the last few months, consisted (and previously also consisted) of repeatedly issuing apparently 'uncovered' hoax reports about alleged incidents, cash benefits or damage which were ascribed to refugees, complemented by a fundamentally racist tone." Once published, the fake stories remain online, even in the few cases when they have been deleted from the politicians' Facebook page, generating fierce debates among readers, and Facebook followers often end up in a cacophony of reciprocally intensifying racist, sexist, and homophobic posts.

This two-way method of increasing readership by sharing articles is also effective for another source of fake, or at least poorly investigated, stories about refugees. The largest and very influential tabloid in Austria, *Kronen Zeitung*, regularly publishes tendentious articles on "incidents" involving refugees, which mostly make them look bad. These articles are regularly picked up and shared by right-wing groups and politicians. In an interview with the magazine *Fleisch* ("meat" – described as a lifestyle magazine by the editors; Huber, 2016), the chief editor of the online version of the *Kronen Zeitung*, Richard Schmitt, talked about the benefits of this method – articles shared on Facebook by Strache generated a high number of likes and re-shares, and Strache received more views when pushed by the newspaper, Schmitt said.

CONTENT AND CONSEQUENCES OF CYBER HATE AND FAKE NEWS

The Facebook groups of rightwing politicians, interlinked with media outlets like FPÖ TV, *unzensuriert.at*, *Kronen Zeitung*, etc., form a self-contained information environment that creates a coherent picture of a country that has little to do with reality. Social media, with their automatic algorithmic preselection of what information is

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distributed to their users, technologically support this cognitive encapsulation of users, as Wetzstein (2016) argued. Those information “bubbles” or “echo chambers” do not challenge readers in any way, but mainly confirm their own attitude and worldview. For Wetzstein (2016: 72), this “(unconscious) processing of information in terms of (self) confirmation” may be an explanatory framework for the polarization of the refugee debate in social media and for the rejection of established media. For readers already encapsulated in these filter or information “bubbles,” fake stories can create the image of a country and society in shambles, with chosen political parties and actors as glorious saviors. This is the political benefit and destructive power of fake stories accompanied by online hate speech in Austria. As Wetzstein pointed out, distributors of fake stories present themselves in their structures and dramaturgy as news outlets offering serious information. At the same time, they deny other media sources any credibility. This is further pushed by right-wing policymakers sharing these articles as stories no other media wants or is allowed to publish, giving them the role of taboo breaches. And the implied aim of most of those stories is the creation of an inferior *other* to which the self can be established as superior (cfr. Spivak, 1985 on post-colonial racism). With regard to refugees, such practices can be used to sidetrack lapses, for example, by framing sexism or antisemitism as a problem now imported by refugees, as noted in Chapter Four.

This dehumanization then morally legitimizes withholding basic human rights. Online hate speech and fake stories are ways of taking away the refugees’ human traits and insinuating animalistic behavior. With this, online hate establishes a basis for violent assaults against refugees, refugee shelters, and people supporting refugees, as happened in 2015 when a married couple planning to house asylum seekers was attacked with firecrackers at their home in Carinthia (case 21, *Racism Report 2015*).

When their plan to house refugees became public, they received a lot of back-lash, including by the mayor of their hometown. He made unfounded statements about security worries connected to the settlement of refugees. Several users in social media started to publish hate posts against the couple, including statements like “We’ll finish them off” and “Shall we go and beat them?” The couple later was attacked with firecrackers at their home, leading to injuries and in the end to their abandoning their plan to house asylum seekers. Regarding the inflammatory comments published online, a criminal hearing was held in December and one writer was convicted and received a three-month suspended sentence. The judge reproached the accused regarding the firecracker attack, but pointed out that other people could be motivated to carry out such acts by these kinds of online posts.

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Another effect of the proliferation of online hate speech is that it led to a kind of “normalization of (online) hate.” Users of social media are becoming more and more familiar with these expressions of hate, fantasies of violence, and open aggression. While for many online hate still is something repugnant, for others it may confirm their own fantasies and function as motivation to act beyond the Internet. This normalization of online hate, lowering the threshold for action, may lead to an increase in hate crimes in general.

MEASURES AND INITIATIVES AGAINST ONLINE HATE

Among increased public awareness of the phenomenon of cyber hate, a number of countermeasures have been initiated by journalists, human rights activists, and politicians. Several attempts have been made to counter the exaggerated “refugees = perpetrators” image, by offering all sorts of data and information (see among others ZARA’s “facts instead of hate” initiative). Some politicians and members of the government, especially former state secretary for diversity, public employment, and digitalization Muna Duzdar, together with civil society organizations, started the initiative #GegenHassimNetz (“#Against Cyber Hate”). Since ZARA has been dealing with the phenomenon from the start, it has a key role in the process and could quickly implement the information portal “CounterACT! – active against online hate and incitement to hatred” (www.counteract.or.at), which helps users effectively act against cyber hate. In 2017, ZARA started to establish and run the counseling unit against cyber hate (Beratungsstelle #GegenHassimNetz) on behalf of the Austrian Federal Chancellery, offering a low-threshold service for users concerned by online hate speech, cyber mobbing, and other forms of violence (<https://beratungsstelle.counteract.or.at/>).

CONCLUSION

The negative consequences of online hate and fake stories about refugees should not be underestimated. They can cause severe damage to social life and democratic decision-making. They can undermine core human rights, and first indications of this can already be observed. The attacks mentioned above, as well as the establishment of the first restrictions in movement are alarming examples of the negative consequences. Due to this, civil society is crucial, but cannot solve this alone. Policymakers have to provide adequate conditions to support people and organizations dealing with cyber hate. ZARA therefore advocates among others these policy recommendations for Austria:

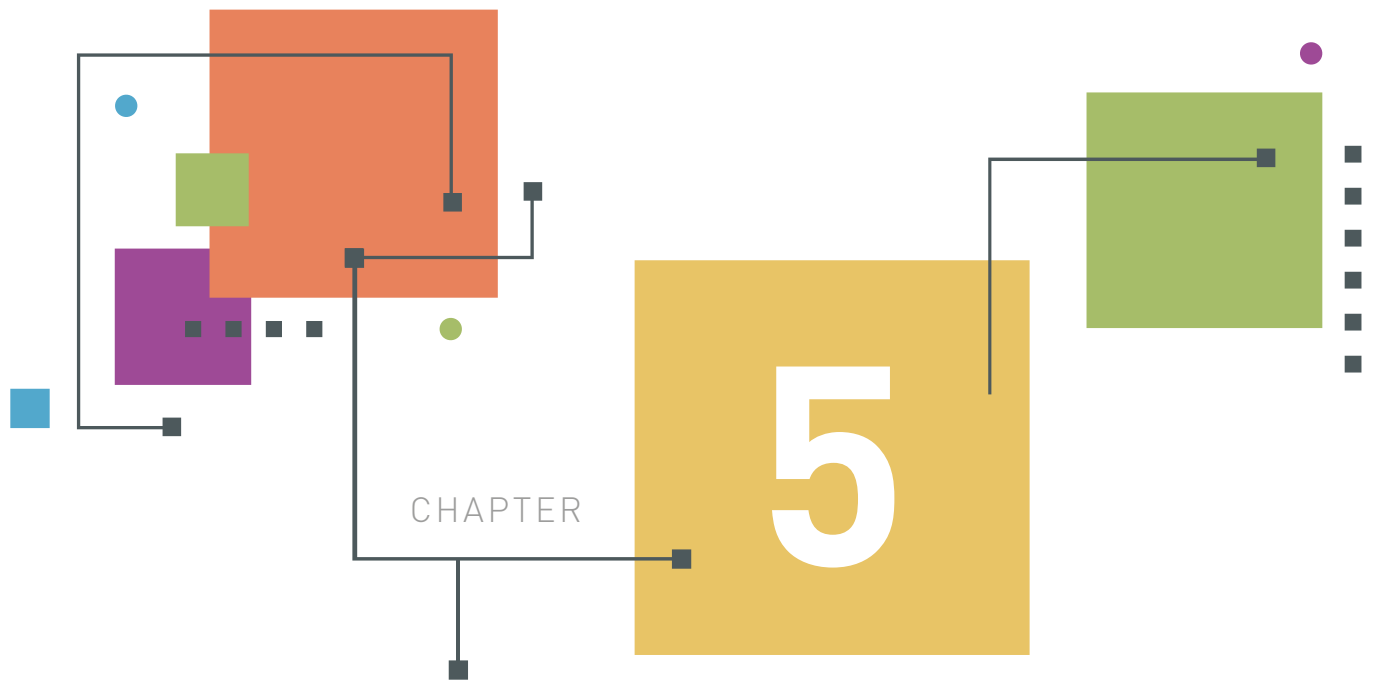


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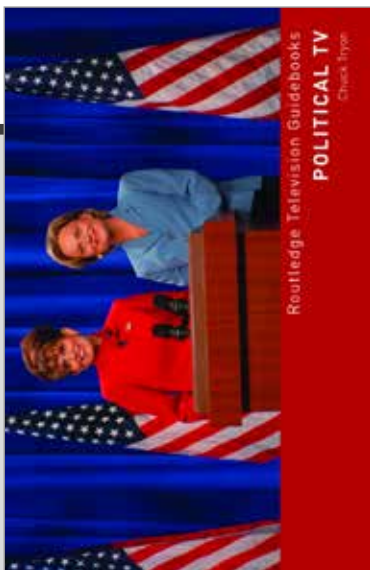
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- Intelligible regulations, penalties with repelling effects, and training for executive authority and justice system staff.
- Securing and consolidating counseling services run by civil society organizations offering low-threshold support that are trusted by the victims of cyber hate.
- Advancement and support of nationwide and target group-specific sensitizing training and education on the topic of cyber hate.
- Providing structures and resources to implement measures to monitor the mandatory deletion of illegal content by the Internet industry.
- Establishment of monitoring and analysis mechanisms to produce knowledge for the development of countermeasures.



FAKE NEWS AND POLITICAL SATIRE



This chapter is excerpted from
Political TV

By Chuck Tryon

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FAKE NEWS AND POLITICAL SATIRE

Chuck Tryon

Excerpted from *Political TV*

In the previous chapters, we considered the role of news and advertising in shaping political culture. Specifically, the news chapter focused on the branding practices of cable news channels and their role in constructing political authority—of determining not just what counts as news but also who should be consulted as an expert on pertinent social, political, and economic issues. This chapter examines the role of so-called fake news shows in challenging these claims to authority. By mocking the tropes of political news, especially as it has evolved in the post-network era, fake news shows have played a vital role in equipping audiences to engage with the news in a more critical fashion. In fact, by so relentlessly mocking many of these techniques, fake news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* made it difficult to take traditional news at face value. While these shows have often been analyzed correctly as brilliant examples of media analysis that make use of what Jonathan Gray has called “critical intertextuality” to challenge political authority, it is also worthwhile to consider them as a product of a specific historical moment. Jon Stewart’s tenure at *The Daily Show* began in the late 1990s, when cable news was becoming an increasingly dominant force within the political media culture, while Stewart himself became a vital media critic at the height of the Bush administration when it was using the political media, particularly Fox News, to prop up its case for war in Iraq. Meanwhile, Stewart’s late-night counterpart, Stephen Colbert, mercilessly satirized the “truthiness” found on many primetime political pundit shows, the reliance on belief rather than factual information as a gauge of truth. In both cases, elements of the shows, including set design, graphics, and even the construction of segments replicate the techniques common to cable news shows, especially the Fox News shows *The O’Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*. In this context, I am writing this chapter in a moment of profound transition in the genre of fake news as Colbert and Stewart’s departures from the late-night Comedy Central lineup have upended what had been a remarkably stable and consistent genre that reliably both challenged and participated in the culture of political media. Thus, in many ways this chapter serves as a historical account of fake news with the goal of contextualizing Stewart and Colbert’s shows in a longer narrative of fake news shows and of thinking about how this genre can serve as a flexible format for challenging political authority as it evolves over time.

The Comedy Central fake news block has been celebrated as a kind of antidote to the failures of political news. In particular, the Stewart–Colbert lineup was touted for its ability to engage youth audiences who otherwise were characterized as being turned off by politics. More crucially, watching fake news ironically seemed aligned with political knowledge. In other words, people who watched shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The*



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

Colbert Report almost invariably were more prepared to answer basic current events questions correctly than people who watched other kinds of news programming. Unlike political news shows, Comedy Central's formidable late-night lineup appealed to a comparatively younger audience. In fact, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, the median age for a *Daily Show* viewer was 36, while the median age for *The Colbert Report* was 33. By comparison, viewers of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360* had a median age of 47, while viewers of *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *The O'Reilly Factor* had median ages of 53 and 54, respectively. Notably, surveys also have revealed that *The Daily Show*, in particular, has gained a reputation for being a reliable news source. In fact, a 2007 Pew study found that 47 percent of the content on *The Daily Show* was dedicated to political content, a number that was comparable to cable news shows, while *Time Magazine* famously declared that Jon Stewart was the "most trusted" news anchor on American television. Later, in 2012, viewers of *The Daily Show* performed significantly better on a basic news quiz than people who watched any of the three cable news channels or listened to right-wing commentator Rush Limbaugh's radio show. These numbers should not indicate that audiences for fake news were getting their political news solely from Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert. In fact, many of the show's jokes would not likely generate laughs for viewers who were unaware of the references they were making. Instead, fake news provided viewers with a wide range of viewing strategies that could enable them to make sense of stories that may have been somewhat arcane and complex. In particular, Stewart and Colbert were incredibly adept at mocking the ways in which powerful people and institutions use the media to reinforce power, providing viewers with what Jeffrey P. Jones has called a "citizen surrogate," who can channel all of the outrage and frustration that viewers might feel about the political media culture. When confronted with examples of deceptive or faulty reporting, Stewart's righteous indignation and Colbert's unflappable mockery provide us with a source of pleasure, media figures who have earned our trust. Finally, these shows benefited significantly from the fact that Comedy Central proved remarkably flexible in allowing viewers to share or embed clips on blogs and social media websites, a strategy that not only allowed viewers to catch the show (or segments from it) on their own schedule but also enabled the shows to more readily enter into cultural and political conversations, as media critics were able to cite the shows as insightful, and often very funny, forms of media analysis.

FAKE NEWS AND INTERTEXTUALITY

By satirizing cable news discourse, in part by embodying it, fake news shows were able to make use of a technique that Jonathan Gray has called "critical intertextuality." The



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concept of intertextuality refers to the idea that texts of whatever medium constantly refer to, depict, or make use of other texts. Drawing from the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, Gray argues that “texts are always talking to each other ... and any new text as utterance will find its meaning only by adding its voice to the already-existent dialogue.” This dialogue can entail references to older texts, that is, remakes or retellings of older versions of the same story. Or it can entail stars who appear across multiple films or TV shows or directors whose past work may have a distinct style. Thus, a viewer might interpret a show made by *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Scandal* producer Shonda Rhimes based on aspects of her previous work. Or they might enjoy a *Simpsons* episode based on its parody of domestic comedies such as *The Flintstones* and *The Honeymooners*. As these examples suggest, making sense of a television show then involves a more active form of reading, as we view a text in light of previous episodes of that show, or even other TV shows or movies. In this sense, intertextuality provides a powerful means for viewers to “work through” the raw material of the news, even while in some cases, becoming part of the larger news narrative that was being criticized. As Gray notes, these intertextual strategies can produce promotional or officially sanctioned readings, or in some cases they can produce readings that challenge the original text. Thus, a fake news show such as *The Daily Show* might take a clip from Fox News that is meant to criticize Hillary Clinton, but instead of endorsing that reading, Stewart could, instead, show how the clip uses faulty evidence, overblown rhetoric, or emotional language. Political comedy, especially the fake news shows that engage so readily with the news stories of the previous day, provides a powerful example of this form of critical intertextuality, allowing viewers to develop strategies for reading the news.

FAKE NEWS AND POLITICAL CYNICISM

The role of fake news within a wider political culture has been contested not only within the news media itself but also within media studies scholarship. One of the more significant strains of scholarship on fake news has been whether or not these shows have an effect on their audience, as measured by behaviors such as viewers’ attitudes towards politics or their likelihood of voting or by whether or not fake news shows make people more or less informed about politics. Perhaps the most frequent criticism of *The Daily Show* was the belief that it contributed to an increasing cynicism among younger voters, making them less likely to vote or to engage in other forms of political activity. For example, a study by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris claimed to identify a “*Daily Show* effect,” in which they found that their subjects viewed



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candidates for office more negatively after watching the show. Others, such as Roderick Hart and Johanna Hartelius, claim that the show's primary function is to tutor younger audiences in the "language" of cynicism. However, Stewart's critique of political discourse is born out of what appears to be a sincere desire for a better political system. As Jeffrey P. Jones explains it, "*The Daily Show* is nothing if not a nightly criticism of discourses of power and an attack on the complicity of news media in constructing and circulating such discourses." Thus, one of the continual tasks of *The Daily Show* has been to point out the ways in which the news media—particularly cable news—have failed in their engagement with and analysis of power and functions instead to highlight these limitations in order to encourage more transparent political dialogue. Similarly, as Amber Day explains, fake news "enables and articulates a critique of the inadequacies of contemporary political discourse, while demonstrating an engaged commitment to the possibility of a more honest public debate." The show frequently offers lessons in rhetorical analysis, pointing out the ways in which news channels repeatedly fail in their role as government and corporate watchdogs. Stewart's cynicism can therefore be seen as a logical response to a wider political culture characterized by a deeply cynical engagement with its citizens.

A more convincing objection is that fake news shows are both economically and ideologically complicit with the discourse they criticize. While fake news shows have engaged in powerful forms of political parody, these shows are essentially dependent upon the excesses of political media they criticize. *Baffler* writer Steve Almond, for example, argues that Jon Stewart plays the role of a "humble populist" fighting against a political elite even while taking home a multimillion-dollar check from Viacom, one of the largest entertainment companies on the planet. Almond even goes as far as suggesting that Stewart and Colbert, through their comedic attacks on political discourse, might have dissipated energies that would have been better directed at more visible forms of opposition, such as public protests. However, Almond's arguments reinforce the perception that watching political satire shows precludes any other form of activity. In fact, people who consume fake news are far more likely to engage in other forms of political activism.

FAKE NEWS IN THE NETWORK AND MULTICHANNEL ERAS

Although Comedy Central's late-night political comedy block has been the most memorable and enduring version of fake news, there are a number of important precedents that helped to define the genre. One important precedent was the work of the guerilla filmmaking collective, Top Value Television (T VTV), a San Francisco-based



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

group that embraced cheap, portable video technology to produce a number of “do-it-yourself” videos, several of which sought to mock the political spectacle, often by using deliberately crude effects such as abrupt cuts, hand-drawn titles, and natural lighting. The two most significant examples of this were their video productions that documented the 1972 Republican and Democratic conventions, *Four More Years* and *The World’s Largest TV Studio*. Both videos focused less on the spectacle that was elaborately staged by the political parties for the consumption of TV audiences watching at home than on the production of that spectacle by the producers and workers who helped to manufacture it. *The World’s Largest Studio*, for example, devoted scenes to workers building the stage and preparing the Miami arena where the convention would take place. More crucially, the videos illustrated how the reporters themselves were complicit with producing the spectacle, rather than criticizing it. In *The World’s Largest TV Studio*, for example, Dan Rather gleefully explains that for a reporter, attending a convention “is like being a kid in a candy store.” Meanwhile, in *Four More Years*, reporters are unwilling to criticize the staging of the convention, acknowledging that the affair is completely “packaged” but that as a news network, they have a “responsibility” to cover it. *Four More Years* also called attention to the limitations of network-era journalism that placed emphasis on objectivity and balance. When asked about his view of journalism that might support a specific point of view, one CBS reporter immediately demurs, saying, “I’m not a fan of advocacy journalism. I’m here to tell what happens.” Thus, TTVV helped to establish some of the conventions of fake news, most notably a critique of the real news of its era, in this case, the objective network-era news that helped to reinforce the political spectacle. TTVV also cultivated some of the guerilla techniques that Michael Moore, The Yes Men, and others would use to remarkable effect. In addition, the videos also helped to illustrate how fake news could satirize the news through mocking its techniques for manufacturing narratives about politics.

More recent models for the fake news genre include two shows by documentary raconteur Michael Moore, who produced two magazine-style comedic news shows, *TV Nation* (1994–1995), which originally aired on NBC before being picked up by Fox, and *The Awful Truth* (1999–2000), which appeared on the cable channel Bravo. Moore, best known at the time for his agitprop documentary *Roger and Me*, used a comedic news magazine style to cover stories that were not receiving attention from the commercial media. The news magazine style evoked syndicated soft news shows such as *A Current Affair*, *Inside Edition*, and *Hard Copy* that arose as cheap infotainment programming during the multichannel era. Moore’s show featured segments hosted by younger comedians, including Karen Duffy and Janeane



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Garofalo, and many segments focused on issues such as income inequality and corporate crime. In one episode, for example, Moore challenged CEOs to go to one of their factories and make or use one of the products created by their company, a guerilla technique in which the filmmaker sought to catch powerful people off guard. Another segment featured Moore visiting Cobb County, Georgia, home of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who had campaigned on cutting taxes. Moore, however, highlighted Gingrich's skill at passing pork-barrel legislation that would bring back federal money to his district. Moore did this by vainly attempting to wave cars off of a taxpayer-subsidized highway and by trying to close down schools and a senior center that had also received federal funds. Perhaps the most inspired stunt on *TV Nation* was Crackers the Corporate Crime Fighting Chicken, a costumed mascot who was introduced as a parody of McGruff the Crime Dog, to call attention to corporate crime. In his first appearance, Crackers confronted New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani over tax breaks the city gave to First Boston Bank, even after the company had moved its offices out of New York. Later, Crackers visited a suburb of St. Louis where he shed light on a battery factory that may have been improperly disposing of toxic materials that were then seeping into drinking water.

Although *TV Nation* achieved respectable ratings and critical acclaim, even winning an Emmy Award for outstanding informational programming in 1995, the show was moved from NBC to the Fox Network before it was quietly cancelled. However, its most lasting effect may be its role as a pre-cursor for *The Daily Show*, which was launched on Comedy Central with host Craig Kilborn. Like *TV Nation*, early episodes of *The Daily Show* made extensive use of satirical field reports in which "correspondents" would seek out guests who were engaging in absurd behaviors. Although the show's first few seasons under Kilborn tended more toward apolitical absurdist comedy, *The Daily Show* readily adopted *TV Nation*'s skillful parody of the news magazine format. More crucially, it helped to foster the recognition of humor's pedagogical power, its ability to help disrupt social and political discourses that viewers might take for granted. Moore's show proved to be too subversive for broadcast television, especially for networks such as NBC and Fox that were dependent on high ratings and on programming that would not risk alienating sponsors; however, his influence on future fake news shows is undeniable. As Jeffrey P. Jones points out, Moore's use of "the news-magazine format gave license to engage in investigative reporting, while the fake gave license to satire it." While Moore's shows provided a valuable service in critiquing the conservative revolution led by Newt Gingrich and other House Republicans, his most vital role was to map out some of the potentials associated with fake news.



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REAL TIME WITH BILL MAHER

While Michael Moore adopted the news magazine format to challenge political norms, Bill Maher reworked the political panel show to challenge the authority of public affairs shows such as *Meet the Press* or *The McLaughlin Group*. Maher's original show actually premiered on Comedy Central, but he was eventually hired as a late-night host for ABC as an attempt to counterprogram late-night talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Maher's ABC show lasted for several seasons until he made unpopular remarks less than a week after the September 11 terrorist attacks, in which he sought to counter a popular narrative about the hijackers who flew planes into the World Trade Center, claiming that they had not been "cowards." Although Maher was not defending the hijackers, his show, *Politically Incorrect*, quickly became the target of boycotts by a number of influential groups, resulting in the show getting cancelled. Notably, Maher was actually responding to—and reinforcing—comments by conservative cultural critic Dinesh D'Souza, while Arianna Huffington can also be seen in the background agreeing with Maher's claims. The comments were incorrectly interpreted as an attack on the bravery of U.S. soldiers, and Maher sought to clarify that the "we" he was describing was, in fact, alluding to the U.S. military policy. Maher eventually relaunched his show on HBO in 2003, renaming it *Real Time with Bill Maher*. Appearing on HBO gave Maher additional freedom to present positions that were not necessarily popular in the political mainstream and provided HBO with a culturally relevant and engaging show.

Maher's HBO show also permitted Maher to become more recognized as a significant political observer, allowing him to bring on more prominent guests, including actors, musicians, authors, and politicians. *Real Time with Bill Maher* typically features three primary segments: an opening monologue that follows the format of late-night talk shows, a panel of four guests who discuss the week's news stories using a comedic lens, and a final segment known as "New Rules," in which Maher engages in a political rant, offering unofficial "rules" for political discourse. As Jeffrey P. Jones has noted, Maher's HBO show has given him "an uncensored political stage" where he can satirize the representatives of political authority.

The central feature of all of Maher's shows has been the panel. Maher has typically sought to include a diversity of voices from both the worlds of politics and popular culture in order to generate humorous, but thoughtful political discussions about current issues. The panel often served as a device for making sense of Washington's



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political culture, of using dialogue to sort out explanations for why American voters seemed to vote in ways that were against their financial or personal interests. In this sense, the show serves as an important example of what Jones has called the use of a “common sense vernacular” to make sense of a wider political culture. For example, immediately after the 2014 midterm elections, Maher bluntly sought to remind his viewers that elections have consequences. Focusing on the issue of climate change, Maher connected a scientific report that further emphasized the link between human activity and increasing carbon concentrations in the atmosphere and the related problem of rising sea levels. He went on to cite a range of quotations from climate change deniers who had been elected to Congress. For example, Iowa Senator Joni Ernst reinforced the idea that there was still scientific debate about the causes of climate change, stating, “I have not seen proven proof that it is entirely man-made. I don’t know the science behind climate change. I’ve heard arguments from both sides.” Similarly, Alaska Senator Dan Sullivan claimed, “The jury is still out on climate change.” While Maher initially reads this as an example of the stupidity of the American voters—and of the people who have been elected to represent them—Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders quickly challenges this frame, stating that the elected officials are not dumb. Instead, he notes that making statements against climate change are in the interests of politicians who receive large donations from individuals and organizations that benefit from lax environmental regulations: “They get huge sums of money from the Koch brothers and the fossil fuel industry and they are not going to stand up to the people who contribute to their campaigns.” Thus, although Maher starts the discussion with one assumption about political behavior, other guests on the show could complicate the argument and add additional context.

Maher was also attentive to the harmful effects of certain forms of political discourse, especially when that language might be used to support policies that would limit personal freedoms and opportunities, especially for his youthful audience. This focus became explicit during the 2014 Congressional elections when Maher sponsored a contest to “Flip a District.” In this contest, Maher invited fans of the show to nominate their representative to become the target of a weekly negative campaign on *Real Time*. Maher would also visit the district to campaign against the “winner” of the contest. Maher eventually created a bracket of 16 nominees, allowing his audience to help choose the district that would hopefully get flipped. The eventual target of Maher’s campaign was Wisconsin Representative John Kline, who was largely chosen because of his position on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. Maher’s contest was read by the political press primarily as an attempt to change the result of one district, presumably with the hope of making Congress more



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progressive or Democratic, with one *Politico* reporter gloating when Maher was unable to change the outcome of the race. However, instead of reading Maher's playful meddling as an attempt to defeat an incumbent candidate, his actions should instead be understood as pedagogical, as an attempt to raise awareness about political issues—such as student loan debt and women's issues—that the host wished to address in a more public forum.

In fact, Maher repeatedly couched his participation in the “Flip a District” campaign in entirely oppositional terms, explaining that he would not be endorsing a candidate, and adding playfully, “our purpose—and our attitude—is completely negative.” From one perspective, this statement might be read as just another example of a political comedian fostering more cynicism towards Washington politics. However, Maher's involvement in the “Flip a District” campaign was, in fact, much more complicated. First, endorsing a candidate via his late-night talk show would have put him at risk of violating campaign finance law for illegal coordination. But Maher also hoped to use his platform to bring awareness to important issues. The contest also helped to “nationalize” the issue of Congressional elections by illustrating that the policies and legislation supported by one locally elected official could have an effect nationwide.

Finally, rather than focus on someone who could be an easy punch line, Maher chose instead to emphasize a politician whose blandness made him even more dangerous and powerful and therefore a more harmful participant in a “dysfunctional” political system. The campaign against Kline highlighted his support for predatory for-profit colleges, which, Maher joked, have a dropout rate “worse than celebrity rehab.” The high dropout rate, combined with the incredibly high interest rates on many student loans, left many poor and non-traditional students with massive, crippling debt and little education to show for it. Thus, although the “Flip a District” contest was widely read by political pundits as a “failure” because the incumbent won, its larger pedagogical purpose was far more important because it helped to bring greater scrutiny to the for-profit diploma mills, a topic that Maher's HBO colleague John Oliver also addressed in one of his comedic investigative reports. While Maher couched the contest in purely negative terms, his actions showed a keen awareness of how the political system operates and how it can work against the interests of voters, in large part because it protects incumbents from facing competitive races. By further nationalizing a number of Congressional races, Maher was able to remind viewers of how candidates in other political races could still exercise influence on our daily lives.



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POINTING OUT THE ARTIFICE: *THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART*

The most pivotal and influential fake news show has been *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. While *The Daily Show* was often blamed for exacerbating political cynicism, Stewart's position as a cultural critic was grounded in a sincere set of expectations about what the political media should

Instead of merely dismissing politics as a source of mockery, *The Daily Show* helped to illustrate how the political media could foster a more vibrant critique or examination of political institutions in order to ensure they would better serve the needs of the public. As Stewart explained during the final episode of his show, he saw the show's mission as helping viewers to detect the "bullshit" that is being used to manipulate or mislead the public. Explaining that "bullshit is everywhere," Stewart went on to discuss the ways in which political and corporate leaders could deceive people using a variety of rhetorical strategies, including complex language, false controversy, and other techniques. At the same time, *The Daily Show's* use of parody provided audiences with a series of critical reading strategies that served a larger pedagogical purpose. In much the same way that Bill Maher taught audiences to think about political discussion differently, Jon Stewart worked to undermine the discursive practices that propped up political authority. Like Michael Moore's shows, *The Daily Show* began as a parody of overblown news magazine shows that were associated with the derogatory label "infotainment," wedding that with the late-night talk show genre to create an irreverent, if somewhat apolitical commentary show. When Jon Stewart took over in 1999, the show became increasingly dedicated to politics, a focus that became even more explicit during the chaos of the 2000 election, in which the winner was not declared until several weeks after election day, an incident that made the show's "Indecision 2000" coverage seem all the more prescient. As a result, the show seemed to transition from a parody of news magazine shows into a satire of cable news programming.

Most episodes follow a deceptively simplistic structure that weds the tropes of nightly newscasts with the format of a late-night talk show to create a hybrid format that serves to parody the failures of political discourse, especially as politics is represented through cable news. In fact, the show's humor depends heavily on contextual references that serious fans of the show are much more likely to recognize. Because Stewart's show has been so widely analyzed, I will highlight a small number of tactics that Stewart used to promote his form of media criticism. First, Stewart used the gag "Chaos on Bullshit Mountain" as a device for repeatedly highlighting the ways in which Fox News perpetuated false narratives about national politics. Other long-running segments included Jon Stewart's incisive satire of the Bush administration's promotion

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of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, *Mess O'Potamia*. Finally, *The Daily Show* mocked the pretensions of cable news punditry through the use of artificially inflated titles, including senior black correspondent, usually played by Larry Wilmore, or senior women's correspondent, Samantha Bee, in order to parody the assumption that a single person can speak for an entire demographic group of people.

Many of the show's techniques for criticizing Fox News were exemplified in a series of segments in which Stewart referred to Fox News and the Republican spin machine as "Bullshit Mountain." The first mention of Bullshit Mountain took place on August 19, 2012, as Stewart responded to Fox News's attempts at damage control after a surreptitiously recorded video showed Mitt Romney describing 47 percent of the U.S. population as dependent on the government. Stewart frames the segment by describing Fox News as "Romney campaign headquarters" before outlining three strategies the network used to control the response. First, he uses a montage to show Fox News hosts tried to dismiss the video by pointing out that it was posted on a left-wing website and that the video had been discovered by a Democratic activist. Stewart characterizes this technique as "attacking the messenger," a move that allowed them to avoid engaging with the content of the video. Second, he uses another montage to illustrate how several Fox hosts tried to re-interpret Romney's comments. Finally, he quotes several pundits who actually defended the 47 percent formulation, with Sean Hannity, among others, asserting that Romney was telling the truth.



Figure 5.1 • Jon Stewart attacks Fox News on The Daily Show



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Stewart then “drills deeper” into the “bullshit” Fox News promoted, quoting a segment from *Hannity*, which suggested that 49 percent of U.S. citizens lived in households that received what Hannity referred to as a “handout,” adding that this was the percentage of the public that Obama was “enabling.” By highlighting this language, Stewart shows how Hannity is engaging in the process of scapegoating and in the deceptive use of data, pointing out that the statistic included people on Social Security and Medicare. Stewart then reminds his audience that a number of corporations, including Exxon Mobil, AT&T, and General Electric, had received tax breaks and government subsidies totaling in the billions of dollars. Thus, in the course of a single segment, Stewart was able to depict multiple strategies that Fox News had used to try to spin Romney’s unfiltered comments.

But even while Stewart mercilessly mocked Fox News’s unapologetic partisanship, he reserved much of his outrage for CNN, in no small part because CNN arguably could have occupied the role of an objective and engaging news source. Instead, Stewart grew frustrated by CNN’s practice of blowing dramatic stories out of proportion, while ignoring other, more pertinent concerns, as when he mocked CNN’s non-stop coverage of the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight 370. During one segment, Stewart opened by playing a clip of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper soberly describing the flight’s disappearance before showing a number of increasingly absurd clips of CNN anchors using unnecessary graphics to depict the airplane and the course it followed. From there, he showed clips of commentators offering increasingly absurd theories for why the plane had disappeared, many of them taken from social media, most notably Don Lemon, who asks at one point whether the plane might have been swallowed by a black hole, a version of the Bermuda Triangle, or even, most inexplicably, that the fantasy show *Lost* had somehow become real. These clips required little commentary, but Stewart also made a point to note that CNN’s ratings actually doubled due to their coverage of the missing plane, an observation that showed how ratings were driving CNN’s decisions about what stories to cover, whether they were relevant or not.

He also attacked the news network for substituting dramatic visuals—holograms of reporters, digital graphics of virtual Iowa voters, and splashy maps—for genuine reporting. Finally, Stewart also criticized individual hosts, such as Tucker Carlson, Rick Sanchez, or Don Lemon, whom he saw as deflating or dumbing down political news reporting. In particular, Stewart blasted Lemon for his tendency to sensationalize, as he did in a January 27, 2014 segment that showed a live report on a snowstorm in which Lemon drove around the streets of Manhattan from what he



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called the Blizzard Mobile, with Stewart retorting, “Settle down, Batman, it’s a Ford Explorer.” Although other cable networks sometimes relied on sensationalized news coverage, Stewart often singled out CNN for its desperate attempts to hype what amounted to a non-story with the result that Lemon himself became the story.

THE DAILY SHOW INTERVIEWS: DELIBERATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, CRITIQUE

The final segment of *The Daily Show* typically consisted of an interview with a guest. Like most late-night shows, Stewart often interviewed celebrities promoting a new movie or TV show; however, he also frequently provided a forum for journalists, politicians, and authors. Notably, *The Daily Show* also addressed the time constraints associated with the broadcast television schedule by taping extended interviews with certain guests that could then be posted to the show’s website. In fact, these extended interviews often dive deep into policy details and political philosophy, even without any clear commercial purpose, by encouraging viewers to continue to engage with the show online. For the most part, interview segments are often treated as a “natural” or transparent part of a late-night show; however, Geoffrey Baym argues that Stewart’s interview style deserves special attention, in part because of Stewart’s effort to use his interviews in order to “enact a more deliberative model of political exchange,” one that is aligned with the values of civility and conversation, even when Stewart disagrees with his guest. These values of civility are often grounded in Stewart’s implicit desire that media and government institutions fulfill their responsibilities.

Stewart’s interview with CNBC host Jim Cramer after the financial meltdown of 2008 is a powerful example of this form of institutional critique. Stewart saw the interview as a means of obtaining some form of accountability from Cramer, who had made a number of investment recommendations of companies that were making risky investments. During the segment, Stewart openly criticized Cramer’s profession, pointing out that it helped intensify false expectations about get-rich-quick stock market schemes. In defending himself, Cramer pointed to the audience for CNBC and explained that there was a market for shows that hyped stocks, to which Stewart angrily responded, “There’s a market for cocaine and hookers, too.” Although Stewart’s comment was admittedly harsh, it also illustrated Stewart’s belief in accountability and his concern that financial news shows could serve to exploit casual investors who couldn’t afford to lose money in the marketplace.

Similarly, on April 29, 2015, Stewart interviewed disgraced *New York Times* journalist Judith Miller, who had been widely blamed for publishing articles that helped the



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Bush administration to make the case that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, reporting that helped to justify the Iraq War. At the beginning of the interview, Stewart politely acknowledges that he blames Miller, in part, for enabling “the most devastating foreign policy mistake we’ve made in, like, 100 years.” The colloquial tone mollifies the adversarial stance that Stewart takes towards Miller. Throughout the interview he goes on to counter many of her attempts to defend her reporting, particularly her assertion that many other reporters and politicians on both sides of the aisle had been fooled:

Miller: It took persuading, and they persuaded a lot of Democrats— Hillary Clinton, John Kerry. The intelligence was what it was.

Stewart: Turns out, idiocy is bipartisan, but that’s not exculpatory that it captured Democrats and Republicans

Miller: The intelligence was what it was. People like me didn’t make it up.

Stewart: No but the intelligence was not what it was and not everyone got it wrong.

Although Stewart adopted an adversarial tone throughout much of the interview, he concluded with something closer to a somber acknowledgement that critics of the war likely would never get a satisfactory explanation for the factors that led to war: “These discussions always make me incredibly sad because they point to institutional failure at the highest levels and no one will take responsibility for them.” Thus, in much the same way that Stewart used adversarial techniques to frame a critique of harmful economic reporting, he used similar methods to serve as an institutional critique of the news media’s failures in reporting on the evidence used to justify the war in Iraq.

Although most media critics identify Stewart as progressive, he was also willing to confront Democrats whom he perceived to be responsible for failing in their responsibilities. One of Stewart’s most focused adversarial interviews was with Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of health and human services under Barack Obama, and the public figure most responsible for the rollout of the website for the Affordable Care Act (ACA), colloquially known as Obamacare. During the interview, Stewart demonstrates many of the website’s glitches that initially made signing up for Obamacare unnecessarily difficult. He also repeatedly addressed a logical inconsistency within the legislation that allowed businesses to request a one-year delay in signing up, while individuals who requested a similar delay would have to pay a fine, a question that Sebelius persistently avoided. The interview with Sebelius, therefore,



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was consistent with similar interviews by Stewart of a wide range of public figures, whether politicians or media personalities, in which Stewart would seek accountability for the broader institutional failures that led to the Iraq War, economic collapse, and the glitchy rollout of the ACA. As a result, Stewart's interviews, like the rest of his show, could serve as an important device for questioning political authority.

THE COLBERT REPORT

Like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* used the fake news genre to offer an institutional critique of the abuses of political power. Debuting in October 2005, just a few months after George W. Bush had been re-elected president, the show featured Stephen Colbert as a pompous, and often poorly informed, conservative news anchor who satirized Fox News pundits such as Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. Thus, the show explicitly functioned as a form of satire, one that requires at least some familiarity with the genre of political punditry. Like other fake news programs, *The Colbert Report* typically consisted of two segments that featured commentary on the day's headlines followed by an interview. Through his character, Colbert sought to personify the excesses of political punditry as a way of undermining it. As Colbert himself said in an interview for *Slate*, "I embody the bullshit." That is, instead of simply calling attention to institutional, political, and media failures, Colbert used his character to satirize the excesses of the political media to their logical limits. Like most satire, Colbert's performances had a pedagogical purpose, most frequently by pointing to the ways in which the institutional, legal, and informational aspects of the political news media were serving us poorly.

"THE WØRD"

One of Colbert's most densely satirical segments was "The Wørd," which featured the host offering a commentary on a specific topic—built around a word or phrase—while satirical bullet points were projected on a screen. The segment was designed to parody Bill O'Reilly's nightly "Talking Points Memo" commentary, in which he would pontificate about an issue. These segments, especially in early seasons of the show, would serve as an ironic counterpoint to truth claims, especially when those claims are based on popular opinion or emotion rather than some larger truth. As a result, "The Wørd's" sidebar comments performed the work of undermining the authoritative tone taken by political pundits like Colbert by calling attention to how their truth claims are constructed. For example, during the July 31, 2006 episode of the show,



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

Colbert introduced the concept of Wikiality, a mashup of the terms Wikipedia and reality. The term was built around the core principle of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which anyone can edit. The show's sly intertextuality and its commentary on the truth were established from the beginning. As the sequence opens, Colbert addresses the camera, stating, "I'm no fan of reality," while a graphic on the other side of the screen reads, "It has a liberal bias," a phrasing that echoes a popular remark from Colbert's 2006 speech at the White House Correspondents Dinner. Colbert then launches into a tongue-in-cheek attack on traditional encyclopedias that might contain uncomfortable truths about America's history, asking rhetorically, "Who is Britannica to say that George Washington had slaves? If I want to say he didn't, that's my right." Colbert deliberately blurs the distinction between free speech rights and concerns about the validity of truth claims, dramatizing the ways in which partisan cable news outlets have used free speech rights as a protection against criticism. From there, Colbert explains his (again ironic) admiration of Wikipedia, initially joking about its excessive attention to trivialities, by pointing out they had a longer entry on him than on Lutheranism, but more pertinently on the fact that "anyone" can edit a Wikipedia entry. Colbert then proposes the idea that he could work to convince the public that the African elephant population is increasing—a claim that is distinctly untrue—and if enough people support the idea, then it would become true and "would be a real blow to the environmentalists." This time, Colbert's comments are accompanied by the phrase "An Inconvenient Tusk," a pun on the recently released environmental documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, featuring former Vice President Al Gore, which had been widely credited with revitalizing conversations about and activism around the issue of climate change but had also been attacked repeatedly in the conservative media. As his framing of "Wikiality" suggests, Colbert is not specifically criticizing Wikipedia's editorial policies as much as he is using the website as a metaphor for describing the ways in which an idea's popularity is a measure of its truthfulness and the politicization of knowledge, in which personal beliefs supplant existing scientific information.

This satirical critique of politicizing knowledge becomes even more forceful when Colbert "compliments" the Bush administration's information management for its ability to create confusion about whether Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Noting that the number of people who believed that Hussein had WMDs grew from 38 percent of the population in 2003 to over 50 percent in 2006, Colbert remarks that Bush has succeeded in "bringing democracy to knowledge," with the message in the sidebar dryly adding, again in an echo of a notorious Bush administration phrase, "definitions will greet us as liberators."

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Although Colbert's "Wikiality" treatise has received less attention than his similar neologism, "truthiness," it was equally crucial in helping to articulate both the Colbert character and the show's complex engagement with how truth is constructed. Subtle intertextual references, many of them displayed in sidebar messages, provide the political, social, and cultural contexts that give specificity to Colbert's broader claims about the use of popularity as a criterion for measuring the validity of a factual statement. Thus, in much the same way that Jon Stewart called attention to the failures of cable news in informing the public, Colbert calls attention to the media culture that allows that to happen.



Figure 5.2 • Stephen Colbert's "The Word" segment on *The Colbert Report*

COLBERT SUPER PAC

Although *The Colbert Report* is most frequently celebrated for its satire of political punditry, the show also served to inform audiences about political issues. One of the more powerful examples of this pedagogical function was Colbert's series of episodes on campaign financing, which featured Trevor Potter, a former chairman of the Federal Elections Committee and General Counsel for the 2008 John McCain



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

presidential campaign. The series served to educate audiences on the ways in which the 2010 Supreme Court case, *Citizens United vs. the Federal Elections Commission*, opened up the floodgates for unlimited corporate donations to political campaigns. The episodes familiarized viewers with the concepts of PACs (political action committees) and Super PACs, while also demonstrating how the lack of regulations governing campaign donations could ultimately poison the political process by allowing unfettered election spending. Colbert did this by creating his own Super PAC, Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow (ABTT), and by interviewing Potter about what he could (and couldn't) do with it.

Colbert's satirical analysis of campaign financing began during an episode on March 30, 2011, during the Republican primaries for the 2012 Presidential election, when Colbert expresses a desire to get a PAC. Potter eagerly explains the benefits of starting a PAC, noting that individuals are limited in terms of how much they can donate directly to a campaign, but by creating a PAC, groups who have shared interests can pool their money to back a candidate. He adds that PACs cannot coordinate directly with the campaigns they support, so that "even if they don't want you to do ads, you can't ask them." Potter then helps Colbert to fill out the paperwork, which consists of just a couple of pages, a detail that illustrates how easy it is to form a PAC. Just a few weeks later, Colbert and Potter addressed concerns from lawyers for Comedy Central's parent company, Viacom, that worried they would be making what is called an in-kind contribution to Colbert's PAC by providing him with airtime for his show and by paying the staff that produces Colbert's show, news that prompts Colbert to pretend to shred his PAC forms. Potter then informs him that he can create a Super PAC—"a PAC that got eaten by a radioactive lobbyist," Colbert jokes—which *would* allow a corporation to spend unlimited money and resources. Colbert then refills the form and Potter explains that the FEC hasn't created a new Super PAC form, so he provides him with a standard, one-page cover letter. When he learns that there are no restrictions on how much he can raise, Colbert punctuates the point, saying, "Unlimited amounts? Oh, I like the sound of that." Throughout this process, Colbert was, in fact, receiving donations, although he made no clear statement on how the money would be used.

In September 2011, Colbert took his satirical lesson in campaign financing a step further when he created a shell corporation, which could funnel money into ABTT. By creating the shell corporation, donors who wished to remain anonymous could give money to the corporation, which would, in turn, donate the money to the Super PAC. When Colbert asks Potter how this process is different than money laundering, Potter cheerfully replies, "It's hard to say." Again, the segment reveals the lack of



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

transparency produced by the *Citizens United* decision and illustrates the real challenges that voters might have when confronted by manipulative political advertisements produced by groups with no official connection to a candidate.

Finally, Colbert and Potter—with a little help from Comedy Central colleague Jon Stewart—helped to call attention to the fiction of non-coordination. In January 2012, just before the South Carolina Republican primary, Colbert announced his intentions to run for “President of the United States of South Carolina,” which also happened to be Colbert’s home state. When Colbert makes this announcement, Potter dutifully explains that Colbert cannot run for office and keep his Super PAC “because that would be coordinating with yourself,” and that Colbert could instead get someone to run it for him. Jon Stewart steps in and agrees to run ABTT, and Potter again provides an official document for Colbert and Stewart to fill out, with Stewart wryly observing that the form is double-spaced, again suggesting the lack of serious regulation or oversight. Before completing the form, Stewart then jokes that he and Colbert may become business partners (“We’re about to open that combination bagel place and travel agency, From Schmear to Eternity”), and Potter assures them that being business partners is not a concern, as long as they don’t “coordinate.” They ask if there are any concerns about Stewart running ads on Colbert’s behalf, about whether Stewart may “accidentally” overhear Colbert’s plans while watching his show, or about hiring Colbert’s staff, and Potter assures him that none of these activities is a serious issue.

During this process, ABTT paid for and ran a negative advertisement against the Republican frontrunner, accusing him of being a serial killer by taking literally Romney’s terse assertion that “corporations are people, my friend,” and then pointing out that as CEO of Bain Capital, Romney had been responsible for shutting down dozens of companies. Because Colbert could not get on the South Carolina ballot, he also encouraged people there to select Herman Cain, who had suspended his political campaign, when voting, with the result that Cain actually finished fifth in the primary, garnering over 5,000 votes.

In interviews, the “real” Colbert has disclosed that they began this series in part because of a genuine curiosity about how campaign finance worked, and once they began discovering what was permissible under political fund-raising rules, it felt as if he and his writers had gone “down the rabbit hole and we couldn’t believe the wonderland of possible corruption on the other side,” adding later that he and his research team “never found a rule we couldn’t circumvent.” Notably, Colbert’s Super



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PAC series went beyond contributing to the wider conversation about campaign financing. During the Super PAC's existence, he managed to raise over a million dollars, and after expenditures on a small number of political ads, had over \$700,000 left in ABTT, which he donated to a Hurricane Sandy relief fund, Habitat for Humanity, and two organizations focused on campaign finance reform, the Campaign Legal Center and the Center for Responsive Politics.

THE COLBERT BUMP: SATIRIZING PUBLIC AFFAIRS INTERVIEWS

If Colbert's satirical persona could be used to mock punditry, it presented an unusual challenge when it came to interviewing guests. Colbert's strategies for interviewing guests can be illustrated through his interactions with Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren. The Warren interview is a textbook example of Colbert's skill at feigning disagreement with a guest, even while providing her with a platform to promote her political philosophy. At first, when Warren appears on the show, Colbert takes credit for the fact that she was recently elected to the Senate, an accomplishment that he attributes to the "Colbert bump," the positive attention a guest ostensibly receives from appearing on his show. From there, Colbert invites Warren to explain the thesis of her new book, which she does, at first, by describing her working-class background. At this point, Colbert cuts her off, in a contrived attack: "Don't try to out-humble me. My father was an Appalachian turd farmer." Warren then deftly uses this transition to explain that her success was due to the resources that the government invested in children, such as funding for education, before she goes on to point out that this focus began to change in the 1980s. Colbert again interrupts her, asking rhetorically, "You mean when [Ronald] Reagan came in, and it was 'morning in America?'" Colbert's question subtly mocks conservative Reagan worship, while again allowing Warren to further unpack her thesis about the deregulation of Wall Street and the moral implications of the government bank bailout. Finally, as Warren begins to make the argument that Wall Street executives who violated the law should have gone to jail, Colbert again pre-tends to challenge her, asking her to "name one law they broke," a question that Warren easily answers. Thus, although the satirical Colbert character disagrees with Warren, the interview questions are clearly designed for her to be able to respond in such a way that she can articulate her message about progressive economic policy.

Similarly, Colbert could use his overconfident but ignorant persona to promote scientific literacy. In particular, one of Colbert's most frequent guests was *Cosmos* host and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, with whom Colbert would feign a combative



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relationship, even while touting his impressive credentials as a researcher and educator. In one segment, Colbert initially invited Tyson to describe his experiences meeting Carl Sagan, which allowed the astrophysicist to describe how Sagan had been an early mentor for him. Colbert then turned to a discussion of the Big Bang, again affecting an oppositional tone to create a straw man argument that Tyson can easily deflect. As a result, Colbert could, by performing ignorance, actually serve as one of the most useful voices for promoting scientific literacy within popular culture.

JOHN OLIVER AND HUMOR AS POLITICAL ACTIVISM

The conclusion of *The Colbert Report* and Jon Stewart's departure from hosting *The Daily Show* have raised significant questions about the future of fake news. Both shows had a profound influence on the wider political culture and have frequently been praised for their role in providing audiences with tools for reading political news more critically. But the success of these shows helped to prove that there was a significant niche for this type of political humor, and while the late-night political comedy block was a significant component of Comedy Central's brand, other cable channels have embraced the genre as a means of attracting a younger, politically savvy audience. With that in mind, HBO hired former *Daily Show* Senior British Correspondent John Oliver. Oliver's show has departed somewhat from the fake news formula perfected by Stewart and Colbert that overtly mocks news genres. Instead, Oliver deploys what might be called a type of weekly comedic investigative report on an important social, cultural, economic, or political issue. Thus, rather than mocking that week's headlines, Oliver instead does extensive research that will allow him to unpack a complex idea.

Like a number of comedians and actors, *The Daily Show* also provided British comedian John Oliver with a platform for developing his wry commentary on the news. In fact, Oliver often uses his Britishness as a posture that allows him to denaturalize tropes of American identity, even while emphasizing his choice to become a United States citizen, a background that proved especially poignant when Oliver did a segment of his show on the fact that U.S. territories, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Northern Marianas Islands, do not have voting rights. Oliver then points out that over 98 percent of the residents of these territories are members of racial or ethnic minority groups and draws from a 2010 documentary, *The Insular Empire*, to show that denying statehood to these territories was a deliberate strategy rooted in racist and orientalist ideologies. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, which launched in April 2014, cultivated a distinct approach to fake



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news, one that enables more in-depth analysis of specific issues that shape U.S. politics. Unlike its late-night comedy predecessors, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, which broadcast four nights a week, *Last Week Tonight* airs only once a week on Sundays, allowing Oliver and his team of writers a full week to develop a detailed analysis about a pertinent social or political topic. However, unlike the Comedy Central fake news shows, which faced a rigid structure of three seven-minute segments divided by advertising breaks, John Oliver could take full advantage of HBO's position as a premium cable channel that was not reliant on advertising revenue or even a rigid programming schedule. Like Bill Maher, Oliver could produce segments that ran longer than those seen on a commercial television station, and many of Oliver's segments could easily run for fifteen or twenty minutes without interruption. More crucially, because HBO was less dependent on advertising revenue, Oliver did not have to worry about the risk of offending potential sponsors, whether for his own show or for other shows on the network. Of course, even with this lack of concern about advertisers, it is important to recall that HBO is owned by Time Warner and part of a massive media empire that is focused exclusively on maximizing profits, raising questions about the possible limitations of the fake news genre, even when it resided outside the more explicitly commercial world of ad-supported television.

Like Colbert and Stewart, Oliver used his show to inform audiences about the harmful effects of issues such as corporate personhood and unlimited campaign spending, calling attention to what he saw as undemocratic policies. On June 29, 2014, the night before the *Hobby Lobby* ruling, John Oliver's monologue on his HBO show, *Last Week Tonight*, directly addressed the ramifications of the verdict and the absurdity of extending the individual rights of speech and religion to corporations. As Oliver developed his argument, he joked about the "religions" of several prominent chain restaurants, joking that Einstein Bros. Bagels is "obviously" Jewish before acknowledging that the chain not only serves bacon but also is open on Saturdays. He joked that Ben and Jerry's must be Buddhist, but then added that "they're not too Buddhist" lest they start serving flavors like "cookies and nothingness." He then characterized Taco Bell as Hindu because "there is no beef in there." In each case, Oliver mocks the branding of fast food franchises using ethnic or cultural stereotypes, while his remarks about Taco Bell also call attention to a scandal, in which it was revealed that their taco meat, indeed, contained little actual beef. Oliver's argument doesn't end there, however. He goes on to deconstruct the complaint—whether this objection comes from liberals or conservatives—about seeing one's tax dollars used to support an activity they oppose. Through montage,

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he shows a peace activist complaining about her tax dollars going to support Israel's defense while another grumbles about paying for other people's birth control, the issue that was at stake in the *Hobby Lobby* case. He then quotes a Fox News commentator who takes this complaint to absurd extremes, arguing, "I'm sure that Pam in Kansas doesn't want her tax dollars being spent on certain things, especially Mexican prostitutes." By using montage to take this complaint to its logical extreme, Oliver is able to portray these anti-tax expressions as both illogical and part of a wider ideology that places partisan identifications over a sense of national unity. Later, he weaves back in his references to fast food franchises by again treating the Wendy's and Burger King brands to make a point about women's pay and the absurdity of treating corporations as people with the same rights of free expression and freedom of religion. Finally, the monologue culminates with an attack on GM, pointing out that a faulty safety feature in some of their cars has likely resulted in the deaths of 13 people and pointing out that in that circumstance, humans likely wouldn't "get away with just a fine" over a Photoshopped shot of GM's logo strapped to an electric chair. As a result, Oliver's segment about the *Hobby Lobby* verdict riffs from the specific Supreme Court case to a wider discussion about corporate "rights." He subtly mocks the practices of corporate branding that attempt to put a benign face on massive corporations. He also touches on the healthiness of fast food by dropping a reference to the scandal over the meat content in Taco Bell's menu.



Figure 5.3 • John Oliver's investigative comedy tackles net neutrality



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Chuck Tryon

Excerpted from *Political TV*

Like the segments from *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*, John Oliver's monologues often circulate well beyond their original broadcast on television. As a result, they can be mobilized to support a wide range of political causes or arguments. In fact, in one notable case, Oliver offered a detailed, but again deeply funny, explanation of the implications of the upcoming FCC hearing on net neutrality, the idea that Internet providers could not offer preferential access to content online. Oliver uses his monologue to describe the challenges of making communications policy less boring while also establishing the importance of preserving net neutrality. Notably, he finished the sketch by calling on his viewers to go to the FCC comments page on net neutrality, which he linked to from HBO's website and from the YouTube page where the video was stored, and to leave comments. The result was that literally thousands of viewers went to the FCC website, causing it to crash briefly. Thus, although Oliver did not explicitly satirize news discourse, his show has provided a vital, comedic force in shaping and commenting on political culture.

THE NIGHTLY SHOW

When Stephen Colbert left Comedy Central to go to CBS, it marked the end of a significant cultural and political moment. Stewart and Colbert had spent more than a decade mocking the discourses of cable news. Thus, replacing Colbert presented a significant challenge. Comedy Central ultimately tapped Larry Wilmore, the longtime Senior Black Correspondent on *The Daily Show*, who had also been a writer and producer for *The Bernie Mac Show* and *In Living Color*. Initially, the show was slated to be titled *Minority Report*, an explicit reference to Wilmore's African-American identity; however, the show was eventually retitled as *The Nightly Show*. Notably, while Wilmore has embraced many of the tropes associated with his fake news predecessors, the show followed more readily in the comedic news comedy tradition associated with Bill Maher's shows *Politically Incorrect* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*. In fact, like Maher, Wilmore has made the panel the centerpiece of his show, frequently characterizing the show as the televisual equivalent of a "barbershop," in which no subjects are considered off-limits, as long as guests on the show remain respectful, a position he reiterated frequently while promoting the show's debut in January 2015. Wilmore also took over as the only active African-American host of a late-night talk show, a detail that *Village Voice* writer Inkoo Kang highlighted in his review of the show. As Kang pointed out, Wilmore's "laidback persona" belied his political authority on issues of racial violence.



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The Nightly Show initially began with a seven-minute monologue on a specific issue (the state of public protests, money in politics, the tension surrounding black fatherhood, the anti-vaccine movement). After the opening monologue, Wilmore then orchestrates a conversation about that issue with three or four panelists, including activists, authors, politicians, and comedians, some of whom are regular contributors to his show. Like Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* panels, Wilmore typically includes panelists that represent diverse points of view, a strategy that reflects his framing of the show as a barbershop. Notably, *The Nightly Show's* panel format placed less emphasis on what *Variety* referred to as "glamour booking," the practice of casting celebrity guests and instead focusing on guests that will contribute to the show's conversational vibe. Wilmore, however, makes a deliberate effort to include a larger percentage of African-American panelists. Initially, the final major segment of *The Nightly Show* was meant to be the show's signature: the rapid-fire question-and-answer bit called "Keep it 100," in which Wilmore asks his guests a provocative question, challenging them to answer completely honestly. Guests who were judged to have answered authentically, by both Wilmore and his studio audience, are awarded with a "Keep it 100" sticker. Guests who didn't were bar-raged with tea bags for offering a "weak tea" response. The tone for this segment was established in the premiere episode when Wilmore directly asked Senator Cory Booker if he aspired to run for president. When Booker demurred, Wilmore showered him with tea bags. While this segment initially felt gimmicky, it could in some cases provoke some remarkably candid responses, such as campaign finance reform activist Zephyr Teachout's admission that she would not reject support from the Koch Brothers if she thought it would ensure that she would win a race for governor. However, in keeping with the expansive approach to fake news afforded by the web, *The Nightly Show* eventually began posting most "Keep it 100" segments online, in part as an enticement to draw viewers to their web content. Further, as the show has evolved, Wilmore has returned to the more classic structure in which he will usually do monologues for the first two segments, while cutting down the panel to one seven-minute section. The result has been a show with a somewhat more explicit editorial voice, one that could comment on important social and political issues, rather than a loosely structured panel show that relied on panelists who often seemed to struggle to come up with topical jokes on the spot.

In some cases, *The Nightly Show* panel format served the show well, allowing Wilmore to orchestrate a forum around important issues. In fact, in one of his most successful early episodes, Wilmore skipped the opening monologue, devoting an entire episode to the state of black fatherhood, with four African-American male guests including



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hip-hop artist Common and *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, among others. The episode was, in part, a response to the ongoing crisis of police violence against African-American men that had begun to receive increasing attention on the news. During this panel, Wilmore and his guests turned over the remarkable statistic that 72 percent of African-American children are born out of wedlock. Blow, for example, pointed out that the statistic should be read in terms of the so-called War on Drugs and the related expansion of the prison industrial complex, while Common pointed out that the category of “unwed mothers” does not mean that the father is completely absent from the life of the child.

One of Wilmore’s most powerful monologues dealt with the mass murder of nine African Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by white supremacist Dylann Storm Roof. After a brief clip montage, in which Wilmore introduced viewers to the news of the shooting—including an interview with a survivor who quoted Roof as saying that he’d come to the church to shoot black people—Wilmore pauses to acknowledge the limits of fake news in dealing with the aftermath of mass violence: “Now I have to tell you guys, we weren’t going to talk much about this at all. I mean, seriously we’re a comedy show, right?” From there, Wilmore begins to establish one of the major themes of his monologue: a critique of Fox News for pushing the argument that the shooter’s motivations were unclear. Wilmore does this by stating what would appear to be the obvious conclusion: “I think we can all agree that this was a racially motivated attack. It couldn’t be clearer when it comes out of the killer’s mouth, right? But even with all that evidence—and on a day like today—Fox News just makes my fucking head explode.” Wilmore, drawing from the discourses of political exasperation, then presents a series of clips taken from Fox News in which their anchors present Roof’s motives as unclear or as an attack on the Christian faith. Wilmore then offers an interpretation of how some of Fox News’s strategies function as a means of creating uncertainty about the responsibility for the shooting. Specifically Wilmore points out that one Fox guest commentator, a black preacher, E.W. Jackson, repeats the news channel’s talking points that the shooting could have been motivated by religion, rather than race. This assertion leads Wilmore to speculate that the use of a black preacher, whom he refers to as “the Fox brother,” might be designed to “confuse” viewers about the motivations behind Roof’s actions as a way of preserving a more comfortable narrative about race. Finally, Wilmore reminded viewers about the history of violence against blacks at places of worship, specifically evoking the bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, church during the Civil Rights movement, as well as the history of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, where one of its



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pastors was killed in the 1800s because he planned a slave rebellion. Thus, Wilmore provided important contextual information about the shooting, about the history of violence against blacks in places of worship, and a quick lesson on Fox News's attempts to craft another possible narrative for why the shooting took place.

Many of these observations were reinforced during the panel, with panelists, including Joshua DuBois, thoughtfully explaining the ideological underpinnings that prevent Fox News from acknowledging that Roof was motivated by race. DuBois further emphasized the fact that the AME church, in particular, had a policy of welcoming guests into their congregation, making the violence even more appalling. Meanwhile, Christina Greer, an assistant professor of political science at Fordham University, powerfully insisted that media pundits use precise language when describing the shooting, pointing out that Roof's actions should not only be considered both a hate crime and an act of domestic terrorism but also a political assassination because one of the congregants who was killed had been a leader in the South Carolina legislature. The panel also rejected the common rationale of attributing a mass murderer's actions to mental illness. Wilmore neatly summarized this cognitive dissonance when he stated that "racism trumps nostalgia" when it came to South Carolina's use of the flag. The panel was also attentive to the fact that Roof had posted a photograph of himself wearing a jacket with patches depicting flags associated with Rhodesia, an unrecognized state in Southern Africa run by a predominantly white government, and Apartheid-era South Africa. Greer again provides context for the symbols and pushes the point that Roof's appropriation of these racist symbols were not significantly questioned by his friends and family. As a result, *The Nightly Show* managed to devote nearly 20 minutes of time to detailed analysis of a culture that contributed to the violence that took place in Charleston. Wilmore continued to pay attention to the cultural and institutional embrace of the Confederate flag in future episodes of the show, culminating in an interview with political activist Bree Newsome, who scaled a flagpole to remove the flag from the South Carolina state capitol grounds, a moment that provided an important symbolic achievement for many people. Although Wilmore's relaxed "barbershop" style may produce less heat than Jon Stewart or Steven Colbert, his analysis of the ongoing issue of racial violence served a valuable pedagogical role, especially given Wilmore's high-profile position as part of Comedy Central's late-night political comedy block.



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Excerpted from *Political TV*

CONCLUSION

Fake news has played a vital role in its tireless scrutiny of political discourse. With Stewart and Colbert concluding their long-running shows, however, the genre appears to be in a significant moment of transition. As Bill Carter lamented, Stewart's departure meant "losing the most focused, fiercest, and surely funniest media critic of the last two decades." Although Stewart has sometimes been faulted for contributing to a political culture driven by outrage, much of Stewart's indignation has served an important purpose in challenging cable to provide more responsible political coverage. Meanwhile Colbert, by inhabiting the persona of the arrogant but ignorant pundit, helped to make primetime news commentary shows seem increasingly absurd, especially when those shows relied on "truthiness," rather than truth. To be sure, these satirical observations may have done little to change our political culture (despite the best hopes of some media critics). Just days before Stewart was wrapping up his show, he could still play a montage of Republican politicians stridently rejecting a treaty with Iran while admitting seconds later that they actually hadn't read the treaty. Both Stewart and Colbert proved indispensable during the early years of the Iraq War, often by deconstructing the faulty justifications used to promote it. However, these shows did far more than simply fact-check political discourse. They pointed out and, in the case of Colbert, embodied the rhetorical postures and unstated assumptions that upheld the Washington consensus.

Colbert's power as a critic of Washington's political culture was never more visible than during his 2006 address at the White House Correspondents Dinner, an annual event in which the city's political leadership and the White House press corps meet for a banquet, an event that has become known as "nerd prom." Although Colbert's comments about Bush received the most attention, his satirical "compliments" to the DC press are even more significant. Turning to some of the most powerful members of the press, praising them for their role in not questioning Bush's claims: "Over the last five years, you people were so good—over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out." Colbert doubled down on this criticism, further pushing the idea that the press had, for the most part, served as stenographers for the Bush administration during the Iraq War: "But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put them through a spell check and go home." Thus, Colbert, like Stewart, proved to be a powerful media critic, removing the curtain on



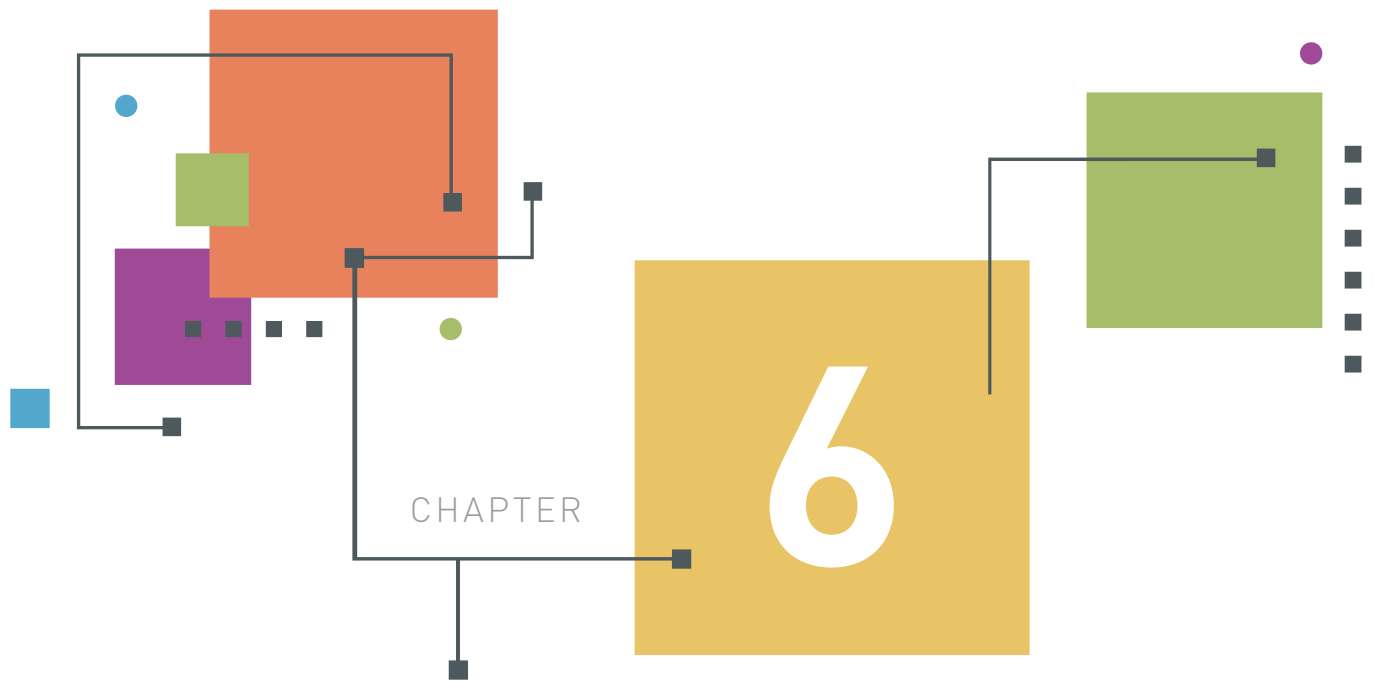
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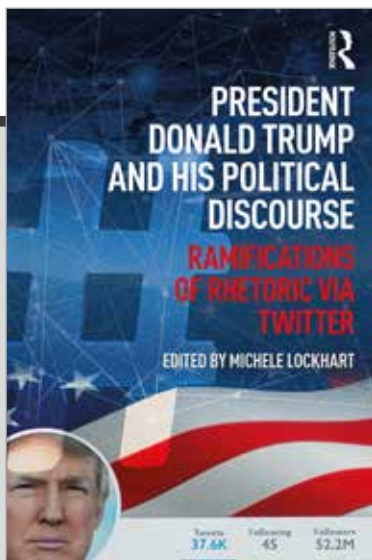
the failures of the Washington press and on the politicians who manipulated it. During an era of mass deception, they provided not only a way of reading the media but also nurtured a community of viewers who shared their indignation about political media culture.

The current generation of news comedy—John Oliver and Larry Wilmore, in particular—seem less motivated by satirizing the press than by using the podium of news comedy to engage in forms of social and institutional critique. Wilmore, for example, has been attentive to the ways in which police brutality against black citizens has become a national concern. Oliver, by comparison, has used his model of institutional critique to get his viewers engaged on issues they might otherwise ignore or take for granted, such as the voting rights of U.S. citizens living in island territories or the use of taxpayer money to pay for sports arenas. Thus, by making politics accessible, fake news shows play a valuable role in encouraging political participation. Some of these activities may seem trivial, as when Stephen Colbert invited his audience to edit Wikipedia pages, but in some cases, these actions can have political consequences, as when John Oliver prodded his viewers to contact the FCC. As Jeffrey P. Jones has argued, news comedy shows “have made politics pleasurable, but not just through laughter. Rather, those pleasures also occur through the deeper levels of identification and activity they provide for viewers as citizens.” Similarly, as Liesbet van Zoonen argues, citizenship involves more than being informed. Instead, it entails “everyday talk and actions, both in the public and private domain. Citizenship ... is something that one has to do, something that requires performance.” News comedy shows have played a vital role in this process, not just by entertaining and informing but also by provoking viewers to become more involved in political conversation and activity. News comedy shows aren’t making us cynical, as some would argue. They are exposing the underlying cynicism of the political process itself and imagining healthier and more beneficial alternatives.



SETTING THE “FAKE NEWS” AGENDA

TRUMP’S USE OF TWITTER AND THE AGENDA-BUILDING EFFECT



This chapter is excerpted from
*President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse:
Ramifications of Rhetoric via Twitter*

By Michele Lockhart

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SETTING THE “FAKE NEWS” AGENDA

TRUMP’S USE OF TWITTER AND THE AGENDA-BUILDING EFFECT

Rod Carveth

Excerpted from *President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse*

Perhaps no president or presidential candidate has engaged in what Kellyanne Conway labeled as “alternative facts” as Donald J. Trump. Be it claiming that his inaugural crowd was the largest in history, or that he graduated at the top of his class at Wharton Business School, Trump has had a rather tenuous (often disconnected) relationship with the truth. Yet, despite the frequency with which Trump has played fast-and-loose with the facts—Daniel Dale wrote in *Politico* that from September 15 to October 18 Trump stated 253 “inaccuracies”—he pulled off the election win.

One would think that as President, Donald Trump might be more careful about his claims, many of which he disseminates on Twitter. Perhaps the most outrageous claims occurred on Saturday, March 4, 2017, when he tweeted that while he was President, Barack Obama had wiretapped his phones in Trump Tower. Trump provided no evidence for the charge, instead doubling down on his claim by requesting the Congress to investigate his charges. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey later testified before Congress about Trump’s claims on March 20, 2017, and refuted those claims.

How can we understand why Trump would make such bold claims about a former U.S. president? In the 1960s, historian Richard Hofstadter wrote about the “paranoid style” in American politics. Hofstadter proposed that the “paranoid style” consisted of individuals as feeling persecuted, and often engaging in conspiracy theories. Trump exhibits both characteristics. For example, Trump has suggested that the media are “out to get him” by engaging in “fake news”—stories that are either highly distorted or made up. In addition to feeling persecuted by the media, Trump has promoted various conspiracy theories, such as the claim that 3–5 million individuals cast their ballots fraudulently, which is why he lost the popular vote by 2.86 million votes.

This chapter first reviews Hofstadter’s thesis about the paranoid style in American politics. The next section reviews some of the evidence of Trump’s feelings of persecution and engaging in conspiracy theories both during his presidential campaign and his early presidency. The third section examines the genesis and outcome of Trump’s “ultimate alternative fact” of his being wiretapped. The chapter ends by exploring what this incident means for this emerging era of alternative facts in the age of Trump.

HOFSTADTER AND THE PARANOID STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Richard Hofstadter’s essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” was originally published in *Harper’s* in 1964 at the height of the Cold War. Much of Hofstadter’s

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essay outlined the history of U.S. conspiracy movements, focusing on the recurring themes present in these movements. A chief theme that Hofstadter identified was the notion of the paranoid style, which he defined as “a way of seeing the world and expressing oneself” (Hofstadter 1964, 4).

According to Hofstadter, a paranoid style is characterized by the person espousing it feeling persecuted. In addition, those characterized as having a paranoid style see the world around them as being changed in a negative fashion from the way it used to be. This perception unleashes both fear and anger in individuals in such a way that their discussion about the world tends to be characterized by rhetoric that is “overheated, oversuspicious [sic], overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic” (4). It is not surprising, therefore, that this rhetorical style lends itself to conspiracy theories—“the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (4). Consequently, since “what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise, but the will to fight things out to a finish” (31).

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE PARANOID STYLE

Social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979 (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and expanded upon by others (e.g. Brown and Turner 1981; Abrams and Hogg 1990). Social identity is defined as an individual’s self-conception as a member of desired social groups (Tajfel 1974). In other words, the social identity is constructed by how people define themselves according to the characteristics of the social group to which they belong.

According to social identity theory, when an individual joins a group, her sense of self-identity is extended to incorporate the group identity. The “social identity” of the group then becomes part of the group member’s personal identity. Individuals see themselves part of a group rather than just connected to individuals in the group. Consequently, much of the sense of who we are derives from our connections with social groups.

One key assumption of social identity theory is that society is made up of social categories that contribute “a system of orientation for self-reference; they create and define the individual’s place in society” (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 33). As a result of this system of orientation, a person develops the perception that she shares the same social reality with other members of her category (Hogg and Abrams 1988). Thus,

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members of a social category believe that they have some characteristic, or characteristics, that set them apart from other groups. The result is that those members compare themselves as members of an “in-group” in opposition to “out-groups.” Such comparisons increase the social identity of the in-group, leading to an enhancement of an individual member’s sense of well-being, self-worth, and self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Abrams and Hogg 1990).

Communication between members of an in-group and an out-group is marked not only by cognitive processes—such as the knowledge of group membership—but also by affective processes such as “shared feelings of acceptance-rejection, trust-distrust, and liking-disliking that characterize attitudes toward specific groups in a social system” (Brewer and Kramer 1985, 230). As a result, in-group members are viewed in favorable terms, whereas those in the out-group are perceived negatively because they are perceived to possess more undesirable traits.

Importantly, in-group members also tend to perceive out-group members as all alike, a phenomenon known as “out-group homogeneity bias” (Linville et al. 1989, 166). The flip side of this process is known as the “in-group differentiation” hypothesis, or the view that individuals tend to perceive members of their own groups as showing much larger differences from each other than those of other groups. To sum up, in social identity theory, the group membership is not something foreign which is tacked onto the person, but is a real, true, and vital part of the person.

TRUMP AND THE PARANOID STYLE

It is clear that from the outset that the Trump campaign for the presidency adopted the paranoid style. Trump, whose previous political experience was being a leader of the conspiracy-driven “birther movement”—the attempt to delegitimize the presidency of Barack Obama by alleging that he was not born in the U.S.—made the primary goal of his campaign to win again. This is evident from his opening statement announcing his presidential run:

“Our country is in serious trouble. We don’t have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don’t have them. ... When do we beat Mexico at the border? They’re laughing at us, at our stupidity. And now they are beating us economically. They are not our friend, believe me. But they’re killing us economically. ... When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending

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people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. ...”

(Time 2015, para. 10)

“Sadly, the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again.”

(para. 76)

As you can see here, Trump has adopted important themes in his announcement that not only define his campaign but also illustrate his use of the paranoid style.

The first element of the use of the paranoid style is Trump’s reference to the forces out there (“them”) who are undermining the American way of life (“us”) as evidenced by Trump’s assertions that “We don’t have victories anymore.” In other words, the American way of life symbolized by capitalism and competition is under assault.

Trump then needs to identify the ‘them.’ Trump first describes the enemies outside of the U.S., such as the Mexicans, who are portrayed as rapists and criminals. Trump then makes reference to the enemies within the country, who are the politicians “controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully” (Time 2015, June 16). Trump thus asserts that there is a major attack on the U.S. way of life and there is only one way to combat it.

“Now, our country needs— our country needs a truly great leader, and we need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote ‘The Art of the Deal’” (para. 39). In other words, America used to be great, but both internal and external forces have lessened its greatness, to the extent that only a person not part of either system can Make America Great Again: Donald Trump.

The problem with such a conspiracy theory, however, is that those who don’t believe Trump can make America great again are necessarily part of the attempt to destroy America, and, thus, they must be at least symbolically destroyed. For example, after Trump won, he interviewed former GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney for the position of Secretary of State. Romney had been a firm and vocal critic of Trump during the presidential campaign, so his being under consideration for the Secretary of State position generated a lot of national attention. While under consideration, Romney appeared to repudiate many of the things he had said about Trump during the campaign when he stated after a dinner with Trump that the president-elect had

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“a message of inclusion and bringing people together, and his vision is something which obviously connected with the American people in a very powerful way” (Collins 2016, para. 10).

Ultimately, Trump did not pick Romney as Secretary of State, but not before letting Romney twist in the wind for about two weeks, a move seen by many as a form of payback for Romney’s disloyalty (Collins).

TRUMP VERSUS THE PRESS

During his last day of campaigning, Donald Trump declared, “We’re not running against Crooked Hillary. We’re running against the crooked media.” He argued that the “corrupt media never shows the crowds” at his rallies as a method the media used to diminish the impact of his campaign. What Trump mostly referred to is the fact that at all rallies there is a “pool” camera for the national media. The goal of the cameraperson in charge of the head-on pool camera is to shoot the candidate walking onto the stage, shoot the candidate while he or she is presenting the speech, and to shoot the candidate leaving the stage. But, Trump also ignored the fact that many national and local media disseminated videos and pictures of the crowd sizes, as well as reported on them (Graves 2016). The fact that the media did show the crowds, however, did not deter Trump from continuing to level the charge.

These attacks against the media had been building during the course of his campaign. After being asked a question about his past misogynistic comments by then Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly during the first GOP debate, Trump later commented in an interview, “There was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her ... whatever” (Yan 2015, para. 4). In another example of his assault on the media, a couple of months later Trump physically mocked The New York Times reporter, Serge Kovalski, who has arthrogryposis, a con- genital condition affecting the joints. Trump denied he mocked Kovalski, saying he never met Kovalski. Kovalski refuted the claim, noting he had interviewed Trump numerous times (Haberman 2015). The most troubling of Trump’s attacks against the media occurred during a rally in which he targeted NBC reporter Katy Tur. After assessing the increasingly hostile crowd reaction, the Secret Service escorted Tur to her car (Bellstrom 2016).

For a person who had achieved virtual 100% name recognition because of his past as a media celebrity, including his long stint as host of *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, Trump’s choice to attack the media as an enemy of America was a clever

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strategic choice. Attacking politicians was an issue given that he would need to work with Republicans to get legislation passed. To go to war with lobbyists was somewhat problematic as Trump himself had lobbyists working for him. Engaging in a battle with business would almost be doing battle with himself.

But, Trump was quite familiar with the media landscape, and knew that the news media were highly competitive. That allowed him to exploit the media in two ways. First, the news media increasingly had been splitting along ideological lines, with Fox News and The Wall Street Journal on the right and MSNBC and The New York Times on the left. Trump could exploit that ideological rift by siding with the conservative media and then charging other media with being biased, a charge continually repeated by conservatives since the Nixon Administration.

Second, as Patterson and McClure (1976) and Patterson (1980) have documented, the news media have continually focused on the “horse race” aspect of political campaigns—that is, who is ahead and who is behind. Toward that end, the media spend a great deal of resources on polling, and then continually report on the findings of those polls. The horse race coverage of politics drowns out coverage of other aspects of the campaign, such as issues and character. This was important to Trump because while he had a memorable campaign slogan—Make America Great Again—his positions on issues lacked the kind of depth Hillary Clinton had.

Patterson (2016) found 41% of all coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign focused on the horse race, whereas only 10% focused on issues. Another 17% focused on controversies such as the Hillary Clinton email scandal and the Access Hollywood tape demonstrating Donald Trump making misogynistic remarks about women. Consequently, issues got very little coverage in the campaign.

By employing an “us” (the people and conservative media) versus “them” (special interests and liberal media) strategy, and knowing that the media would be focusing more on process (who was ahead and who was behind) versus content (campaign issues), Trump was able to at least somewhat neutralize the power of the press during the 2016 election. For example, as much as Trump complained that the news media were trying to “rig” the election in Clinton’s favor, Clinton actually received 62% negative coverage over the course of the election versus 38% positive. By contrast, Trump received 56% negative coverage versus 44% positive (Patterson 2016).

The election of Trump, therefore, became a repudiation of the “crooked media.” His supporters delighted at how the “fake news media” had been wrong in their election

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polling projections—actually, the polls had been fairly accurate on a national basis although off on some state polls. Despite the reality of his receiving less negative campaign coverage than Clinton, Trump kept portraying the press as an enemy that was keeping Trump from making America great again. It was a campaign theme that continued to resonate with his followers.

The media represent important sources of information on which to base this social comparison process. Media research has suggested that being exposed to frequent and positive media portrayals of in-group members is one way of positively comparing the in-group with the out-group. As a result, individuals will

- i. actively seek out media portrayals of in-group members, and actively avoid portrayals of out-group members;
- ii. seek out positive media portrayals of in- group members; and
- iii. avoid negative media portrayals of in-group members. Seeing positively portrayed in-group characters will increase identification

with the in-group, enhance personal self-esteem, and exacerbate negative assessments of the out-group. When individuals do not find appropriate in-group representations in the media, they may seek out alternative sources of social identity support or demand increased representation.

The Pew Research Center has conducted research on news consumption and political ideology finds that viewers tend to consume news media in line with their political perspectives. Conservatives will get their news from Fox News, talk radio, and conservative publications like The Wall Street Journal. By contrast, liberal news consumers received their news from CNN, National Public Radio (NPR), and The New York Times.

Conservatives and liberals are different in other ways in terms of their news consumption behavior. Conservatives were more tightly clustered around a small number of news sources, particularly Fox News. In addition, 66% said their close friends share their conservative political views. By contrast, liberals got their news from a greater variety of news sources. In addition, liberals were more likely to follow issue-based groups, rather than political parties or candidates, on social media, and more likely than conservatives to block or “defriend” someone on a social network because of politics (Mitchell et al. 2014).

In the 2016 election, a full 40% of Trump voters relied on Fox News for their information about the campaign. Clinton voters got their information from a greater

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variety of sources with CNN at 18%, MSNBC at 9%, and Facebook at 8%. On social media, conservatives relied on the Drudge Report and Breitbart, whereas liberal went to the Huffington Post and BuzzFeed News (Gottfried et al. 2017). What these findings show is that Trump voters were in more of a conservative news ‘echo chamber’ than Clinton voters were in a liberal news ‘echo chamber.’

Perhaps one of the most striking findings from Pew is that there is a significant gap between Democrats and Republicans over the statement that news media criticism helps keep leaders in line. Nearly, nine of ten Democrats (89%) agreed with that statement, whereas only 42% of Republicans did, a 47-point difference. What is striking about that finding is that a similar Pew poll conducted in January 2016 found 74% of Democrats and 77% of Republicans agreed with the same statement (Barthel and Mitchell 2017). While the constant attack by Trump that the media were dishonest or ‘fake news’ may not have been the sole cause of this gap, it strains credulity to suggest that it wasn’t a major factor.

TRUMP, OBAMA, AND TWEETING ABOUT THE “DEEP STATE”

As indicated earlier, the twin objectives of the paranoid style are to frame a perspective in line with the desired interpretation of that perspective and then to silence the opposition. During the course of the campaign, and ramping up after the election, Trump furthered what is known as the “deep state” controversy—the notion that there exist clandestine networks within the government that is seeking to undermine and de-stabilize the Trump Administration. As proof of the “deep state,” Trump and his allies point to the number of leaks that have appeared, which have embarrassed the president and his administration.

The notion of the deep state has been generally applied to foreign governments, such as Turkey and Egypt. Loren DeJonge Schulman, former official in President Obama’s National Security Council and senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, objected to the use of the term “deep state” applied to U.S. politics: “A deep state, when you’re talking about Turkey or Egypt or other countries, that’s part of government or people outside of government that are literally controlling the direction of the country no matter who’s actually in charge, and probably engaging in murder and other corrupt practices” (Davis 2017, para. 14). Thus, the deep state theme suggests a dangerous conspiracy, perhaps one designed to overthrow a legitimately elected government.

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Almost as soon as Trump became inaugurated, the conservative media, led by Fox News host Sean Hannity and conservative radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Alex Jones began to fan the flames of the “deep state” theory—that “Obama holdovers” were secretly gathering information on, and leaking that information to, a news media whose purpose was to bring down the Trump administration. These conservative critics charged as evidence of such a deep state conspiracy information that suggested that there was collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian efforts to influence the presidential election. By early March, just six weeks into the Trump administration, Donald Trump himself engaged in perpetuating the “deep state” theory.

In the early morning hours of March 4, 2017, while away at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Florida, Donald Trump posted a series of tweets accusing his predecessor, former President Barack Obama, of wiretapping him during the 2016 elections. Trump tweeted that he “just found out that Obama had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!” (Diamond et al. 2017, para. 2). Trump then posted three more tweets which linked Obama’s ‘wiretapping’ to President Nixon and the Watergate scandal, an incident that cost Nixon the presidency.

Trump did not provide evidence to support his tweets—in fact, Politifact would later claim Trump’s assertion rated a “pants on fire” falsehood—but that did not stop the story from spreading quickly on social media. Within hours of the tweets, stories began to emerge that a warrant had been issued for President Obama’s arrest. The story was false, of course, but it illustrates three important things about Trump’s base:

- i. it is very social media savvy;
- ii. it hates President Obama; and
- iii. it does not let facts get in the way of telling a good story.

Though the White House staff kept quiet during the day, President Obama managed to issue a statement through his spokesperson Kevin Lewis that “No White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice (DOJ). Neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false” (Levy 2017a, para. 8). Clearly, the former president was not going to let the charge by Trump stand unanswered.

The next day, White House press secretary Sean Spicer issued a statement Trump requested that congressional intelligence committees look into whether the Obama

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administration illegally investigated anyone in the Trump campaign and that “neither the White House nor the president” would comment further until congressional intelligence committees finished those investigations.

Another White House spokesperson, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, appeared on ABC’s *This Week* to affirm the president’s position. Sanders stated that she thought Trump based his allegations on sources “that have led him to believe there was potential.” About the notion that former President Barack Obama had ordered Trump to be wiretapped, Sanders declared, “Everybody acts like President Trump is the one that came up with this idea.... There are multiple news outlets that have reported this” (ABC News 2017, para. 111) although she left unclear as to what those sources actually were. Politifact was also rated Sanders claim about multiple news sources reporting the claim as being false.

While Spicer was issuing this statement, *The New York Times* reported that James Comey was asking the Justice Department to publicly deny Trump’s accusations out of concern that the president’s tweets might make it look as though the bureau itself had acted improperly. Meanwhile, on NBC’s program *Meet the Press*, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper appeared and declared that no wiretap activity was mounted against Trump while Clapper oversaw the national security apparatus, which was until January 20, 2017.

During the following day’s press briefing (Tuesday, March 7), reporters asked Spicer whether he had personally seen any evidence whether Trump Tower had been wiretapped. Spicer deflected the question by stating, “That’s probably above my pay grade.” He then asserted what would become a common refrain: “The president believes that the appropriate place for this to be adjudicated is for the House and Senate Intelligence Committees.” Spicer did reveal that James Comey had not been asked by Trump if Trump Tower had been wiretapped. When asked if Trump had “any regrets” about making the accusation, Spicer quickly retorted, “No. Absolutely not” (Thrush and Haberman 2017, para. 19).

On March 10, 2017, the House Intelligence Committee formally requested that the Justice Department turn over any documentary evidence by Monday, March 13 related to possible instances of the Obama administration electronically eavesdropping on Donald Trump. In the White House briefing following the committee announcement, ABC News reporter Jonathan Karl asked Spicer whether President Trump would apologize to President Obama if his wiretap-ping accusation proves to be unfounded. Spicer pushed back on the question stating, “I’m not getting into a

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series of hypotheticals, prejudging the outcome of a report or an investigation that hasn’t occurred yet. I think once it’s done, we’ll respond appropriately” (Smith 2017, paras. 5–6).

The story began to change a bit the next Monday, March 13, when during the White House press briefing, Spicer suggests that Trump didn’t mean that Obama literally wiretapped him: “If you look at the president’s tweet, he said very clearly quote – ‘wiretapping’ – end quote” (Hains 2017, para. 18). Spicer suggested the media about reading too literally into Trump’s claim of Obama’s involvement: “He doesn’t really think that President Obama went up and tapped his phone personally” (Hains 2017, para. 17). Spicer added, “The president used the word wiretap in quotes to mean broadly surveillance and other activities during that. There is no question that the Obama administration, that there were actions about surveillance and other activities that occurred in the 2016 elections” (Diamond 2017, para. 6). In other words, Spicer declared that Trump didn’t necessarily mean there was a physical tap on his phones. Belying that interpretation by Spicer is that two out of Trump’s four tweets on the subject do not include the quotation marks. Furthermore, in one tweet, Trump made specific reference to his “phones” (Diamond 2017, para. 8).

That same day, the DOJ requested more time from the House Intelligence Committee to provide possible evidence related to Trump’s wiretapping claim. The Committee granted the DOJ until March 20 to comply with the request. Two days later, Trump appeared as a guest on Fox News’ Tucker Carlson Tonight, where Carlson questioned Trump about the wiretap investigation. One of the questions Carlson asked Trump was how Trump found out that Trump Tower was wiretapped. Trump responded, “Well, I’ve been reading about things. I think it was January 20, a New York Times article where they were talking about wiretapping.” Trump added, “I think you’re going to find some very interesting items coming to the forefront over the next two weeks” (Levy 2017b, para. 4). As this interview shows, when pressed on details, Trump deflected and promised new revelations to come. In this way, Trump attempted to change the news agenda.

The problem for Trump was that, as Politifact noted, The New York Times article did not report that President Obama ordered that Trump be wiretapped. What the article did say is that there had been intelligence investigations into some of the people in Trump’s circle. In addition, that day, the leaders of the House Intelligence Committee—Devin Nunes, a Republican from California, and Adam Schiff, a Democrat from California—proclaimed that there was no evidence that Trump Tower

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had been wiretapped by anyone in the Obama administration. Nunes announced, “I don’t think there was an actual tap of Trump Tower” (Cillizza 2017b, para. 3). Nunes did go on to say,

“So now you have to decide... are you going to take the tweets literally? And if you are, then clearly the president was wrong. But if you’re not going to take the tweets literally, and if there’s a concern that the president has about other people, other surveillance activities looking at him or his associates, either appropriately or inappropriately, we want to find that out.”

(para. 4)

Nunes was furthering the narrative proposed by Spicer two days earlier that Trump should not be taken literally in terms of his tweets—that President Obama did not wiretap Trump, but had Trump and Trump’s friends, family and associates surveilled.

The leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee—Richard Burr, a Republican from North Carolina and Mark Warner, a Democrat from Virginia— released a joint statement which asserted, “Based on the information available to us, we see no indications that Trump Tower was the subject of surveillance by any element of the United States government either before or after Election Day 2016” (Johnson et al. 2017, para. 2). Spicer pushed back during that day’s press briefing, dismissing the statements of the two committee chairs as not being based on investigative work (Baker and Savage 2017). Warner countered after the press briefing through his spokeswoman that “The bipartisan leaders of the Intelligence Committee would not have made the statement they made without having been fully briefed by the appropriate authorities” (para. 21). Spicer, who would not have made such statements without the approval of the president, was calling into doubt the bipartisan conclusion of the Senate Intelligence Committee. It appears that Spicer once again was presenting alternative facts.

Spicer further claimed that Trump believed he had been wiretapped based on Fox News commentator Andrew Napolitano’s suggestion that President Obama used Britain’s Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) to spy on Trump (Baker and Erlanger 2017). Using GCHQ, President Obama “was able to get it and there’s no American fingerprints on this” (Miller 2017, para. 7). Spicer’s charge set off a firestorm of activity. Fox News anchor Shepard Smith stated, “Fox News knows of no evidence of any kind that the now president of the U.S. was surveilled at any time, in any way. Full stop” (Sterne 2017, para. 5). Clearly, Fox News was distancing itself

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from the British spy link as far as possible. Furthermore, GCHQ called Spicer’s comment “utterly ridiculous” and “nonsense.” A spokesperson for British Prime Minister Theresa May proclaimed that the British government received assurance from the White House that these allegations would not be repeated. The United Kingdom’s newspaper, the Telegraph, reported that the White House apologized to the United Kingdom.

Yet, the same day at a joint press conference with visiting German chancellor, Angela Merkel, Trump joked, “as far as wiretapping, I guess, by this past administration, at least we have something in common” (Delaney and Turkel 2017, para. 4). Merkel did not appear to be amused, as the episode echoed memories of past revelations that European Union heads of state had been surveilled by U.S. intelligence agencies. In 2013, a German newsmagazine revealed that a document apparently from a U.S. National Security Agency database indicated Merkel’s cellphone was first listed as a target as far back as 2002.

March 21 featured a pivotal moment in the investigation by the House Intelligence Committee when chairperson Nunes went to the White House to meet a source at a secure location to view information regarding possible “incidental” surveillance of Trump associates. “Incidental” surveillance occurs when people are observed during the surveillance of a targeted individual. The problem with incidental surveillance is that the names of those non-target individuals might be revealed, a process called “unmasking,” and leaked to the press. Nunes was concerned that members of the Trump team may have been mentioned in surveillance of targeted Russian officials. The unusual thing about Nunes’ behavior is that he went to the White House to view the information that the source was providing. Congress has its own secure sites. Consequently, speculation emerged that Nunes was possibly giving advance warning to the White House about findings in the investigation (Barrett 2017).

The next day, Nunes held a solo news conference where he proclaimed that he had credible information that the U.S. intelligence community incidentally collected the personal communications of Trump transition team members, and possibly the president. Nunes then charged that the intelligence community widely disseminated that information among the intelligence community although he refused to disclose the source of the information. He disclosed that he had informed the president of the discovery (Barrett 2017). Nunes stressed that the communications were unrelated to Russia. He also said he believed the surveillance was conducted legally through the employment of a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrant. Nunes added

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that information collected was not related to Russia. Nunes held his news conference without consulting with his committee’s ranking member, Adam Schiff. Schiff then held his own news conference to declare that Nunes’ actions were inappropriate. Schiff added, “[Nunes] will need to decide whether he is the chairman of an independent investigation into conduct which includes allegations of potential coordination between the Trump campaign and the Russians, or he is going to act as a surrogate of the White House, because he cannot do both” (Memoli 2017, para. 4).

When Nunes’ office was asked about the reason why he went to the White House and not to a secure location at Congress, Nunes spokesperson Jack Langer issues a forceful reply:

Chairman Nunes met with his source at the White House grounds in order to have proximity to a secure location where he could view the information provided by the source. The chairman is extremely concerned by the possible improper unmasking of names of U.S. citizens, and he began looking into this issue even before President Trump tweeted his assertion that Trump Tower had been wiretapped.

(Wright 2017, para. 3)

But, perhaps the most important event of the day occurred when Trump was asked whether he felt “vindicated by Chairman Nunes.” Trump replied, “I somewhat do. I must tell you I somewhat do. I very much appreciated the fact that they found what they found. But I somewhat do” (Miller et al. 2017, para. 5). This statement is critical because it represents a turning point in the controversy. From that point forward, Trump moved off the charge that President Obama had wiretapped him.

By March 30, after nearly a month of focus on his tweets about President Obama, Trump shifted his focus to the broader investigation about Russian interference in the U.S. election. That day, Trump called FBI Director Comey to ask if Comey could “lift the cloud” of the Russian investigation because it was hampering his ability to “make deals for the country” (Apuzzo and Schmidt 2017, para. 6). Comey responded that the investigation was proceeding as quickly as possible. Trump pressed Comey as to whether Trump himself was under investigation. Comey informed Trump that the FBI was not “personally investigating” Trump. The president replied, “We need to get that fact out,” urging Comey to make a public statement clearing Trump, an action that Comey did not subsequently do (Apuzzo and Schmidt 2017, para. 21). Six weeks later, Trump would fire Comey because he would not back away from the Russian

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investigation. Ironically, that action resulted in a special prosecutor, former FBI Director, Robert Mueller, being appointed.

Nunes soon faced ethics complaints filed against him because of his visit to the White House and subsequent news conference. He originally dismissed them, stating the multiple “left-wing activist groups have filed accusations against me with the Office of Congressional Ethic, charges Nunes claimed were ‘entirely false and politically motivated’” (Cillizza 2017a, para. 6). By April 6, however, Nunes announced that he was stepping down as leading the House Intelligence Committee’s investigation. Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Texas, was then elevated to being chair of the investigation. For all intents and purposes, the Obama-Trump wiretap controversy faded into the background (Barrett 2017).

In the end, Donald Trump had an accusation about the behavior of his predecessor, an accusation that had no basis in fact. To Trump’s followers, the accusation sounded as if it could be true. Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness” to refer to false assertions that had the characteristics of being ‘truthy’ in that the assertions felt true. Given that to many Trump supporters, President Obama was capable of almost anything criminal or unethical, charging him with illegal surveilling a political rival felt right.

Trump then was able to reinforce the “truthiness” of his claim with the help of Sean Spicer and Devin Nunes. When Nunes announced that Trump associates could have been incidentally mentioned (emphasis added) in surveillance of Russian targets, Trump announced he was vindicated and moved on. He had “proved” he was right—without any evidence to support his position (emphasis added). Furthermore, since Trump had already established that the news media were “fake news” and not to be believed, then no one could tell his followers anything differently. Therefore, when the DOJ later revealed that no evidence existed that President Obama had “wiretapped” Trump, Trump and his followers had so bought into the bogus charge that its lack of truth had no effect.

AGENDA BUILDING

The events we see as news stories in the mass media representations of the events, not the events themselves. These representations (news) are selected, constructed, and evaluated by journalists and their editors. Lippmann observed, “the news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself” (Lippmann 1922, 341). McCombs and Shaw hypothesized that the issues on media

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agenda determines, to some degree, the issues on the public agenda. Media coverage provides “salience cues” to the audience which issues are important. For example, issues receiving extensive news coverage are considered more important than those issues receiving less coverage (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Early agenda-setting research largely adopted a “mirror-image” perspective about media effects focusing on the overall match between the relative frequency of the news media’s coverage of a set of issues, on one hand, and the relative salience of the same set of issues among the public, on the other (1972). The results of these studies have generally supported this perspective (McLeod et al. 1974; McCombs and Stone 1976; Shaw and McCombs 1977). Initial studies of agenda setting examined how the media agenda affected the public agenda in the voting process. Later work began exploring the agenda- setting function on other issues. For example, Shoemaker et al. (1989) found that the more the media emphasized the negative aspects of drug use, the more the public considered drugs as a problem. Researchers also found that the relationship of the media and the public could be interactive. Gonzenbach (1992), in exploring the drug issue between 1985 and 1990, found that the press mirrored and had an immediate impact on the public agenda, but that the public agenda also filtered back into the press agenda which, in turn, reinforced subsequent public opinion

The thirty-plus years of agenda-setting research has revealed the agenda- setting process to be far more complex than originally conceptualized. Media usage patterns, the nature of the issues involved, and audience characteristics have all mediated the impact of agenda setting. Consequently, researchers have sought out other concepts that complement or supplant the theory. For example, there are times in which the media themselves create issues that would not naturally be part of the public agenda. This process is known as agenda building. Agenda building goes beyond agenda setting, occurring when news stories rivet attention on a problem and make it seem important to the public. As one example, Lang and Lang applied the concept of ‘agenda building’ to their study of the news coverage of the Watergate crisis. They said, “agenda building is a collective process in which media, government, and citizenry reciprocally influence one another in at least some respect” (Lang and Lang 1983).

Two central concepts of agenda building are scarcity and subjectivity. Scar- city refers to the limits that news organizations have to cover the news—the amount of space in the newspapers, the amount of time in a newscast, the number of personnel an organization can devote to news gathering, etc. Therefore, in order to gain a place on

SETTING THE “FAKE NEWS” AGENDA

TRUMP’S USE OF TWITTER AND THE AGENDA-BUILDING EFFECT

Rod Carveth

Excerpted from *President Donald Trump and His Political Discourse*

a scarce news agenda, issues must “compete” with one another for coverage. Subjectivity refers to the fact that the importance of issues is not inherent in the issue itself, but how groups and the media define its importance, oftentimes in terms of its being “marketable.”

An issue usually becomes part of the agenda-building process when it is at the center of some conflict, especially when it involves some policy differences. These conflicts contain three aspects to them: scope, intensity, and visibility (Cobb and Elder 1983). Scope refers to the number of people involved in the conflict. Intensity is characterized by how involved the participants are in the conflict. Visibility refers to how many people become aware of the conflict.

Two final integral concepts to agenda building are triggers and initiators. Triggers are unforeseen event that initiators use to connect to the conflict to get the issue on the media agenda. Cobb and Elder note that some of the most noteworthy issues on the public agenda began as a small or even local conflict that was skillfully redefined to become a conflict of national importance (1983). As was seen in the episode about the “wiretap” charges, Trump was able to masterfully build his agenda on to the media’s agenda.

What Trump has done is to control with agenda-building process with his use of Twitter. When Trump issues a tweet, often early in the day, the media will cover it. At first, the media covered Trump’s tweets because Trump is the first president to utilize Twitter for making public statements. In essence, Trump’s using Twitter was a novelty. But, as both Trump and the news media learned, the tweets became a method by which issues could be built as part of the public agenda. The difference from the process that Lang and Lang (1981) described is that while it took months for an event such as Watergate to get built onto the public agenda, in an era characterized by the prevalence of social media, getting an item to be built onto the public agenda takes a matter of minutes.

CONCLUSION

In July 2017, several political polls assessed President Trump’s approval rating. Across the polls, his approval was between 36% and 40%. On July 16, Trump issued the following tweet: “The ABC/Washington Post Poll, even though almost 40% is not bad at this time, was just about the most inaccurate poll around election time!” (Morin 2017, July 16, para. 2) This tweet was illustrative of both Trump’s attitudes toward the press and his loose relationship with facts. First, the ABC/Washington

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Post poll had Trump’s approval rating at 36%, not almost 40%. More important, the ABC/Washington Post poll was no more inaccurate than other polls at election time. Other polls, such as NBC/Wall Street Journal, had Clinton winning by 3–4 points over Trump (Abramson 2017, July 16). The ABC News/Washington Post poll also noted that there was a loss of voter enthusiasm for Clinton after FBI Director Comey’s reopening of an investigation into Clinton’s personal email server. The poll noted, “The change in strong enthusiasm for Clinton is not statistically significant and could reflect night-to-night variability. Still, it bears watching” (ABC October 31, 2016). The poll may have missed an important trend in the election although it should be noted that by the end of a political campaign, most people have made up their minds. Swings in enthusiasm among undecided voters are more difficult to assess.

Trump put out a tweet that was factually wrong on two counts—how his approval number was almost 40% and how the ABC/Washington Post poll was the most inaccurate poll in the election. But, the inaccuracies of the tweet are less important than the attack against the media. The poll number was low, but, Trump argues, it’s an inaccurate poll (emphasis added) and, thus should be ignored, though, all polls at the time—except for the highly unreliable Rasmussen poll—had Trump’s approval rating at no higher than 42%. In case people missed Trump’s point, Trump followed with the following tweet: “With all of its phony unnamed sources & highly slanted & even fraudulent reporting, #Fake News is DISTORTING DEMOCRACY in our country!” (Rucker 2017, July 16, para. 5). The argument has now shifted from

- i. the poll number is bad, but it is from an inaccurate poll and it is being reported by the “fake” news media to
- ii. the news media that is “distorting” democracy in the U.S.

A July 25, 2017 Reuters’ poll demonstrated that Trump’s strategy was playing with his base—the Trump voter in-group. In terms of job performance, overall 58% disapproved of Trump’s performance, while 35% approved. Among Independent voters were similar results—57% disapproved and 32% approved. But there were stark differences in terms of political ideology. Republicans recorded 74% approval and 23% disapproval, while the numbers were nearly reversed for Democrats, 85% disapprove and 12% approve. An even more marked contrast came from Trump versus Clinton voters. Those who voted for Clinton gave Trump a 93% disapproval rating versus only 5% approval. On the other hand, those who voted for Trump rated him at 84% approval and only 13% disapproval (Reuters 2017, July 24). Thus, Trump clearly has been able to cement the approval of his base. That may have come at

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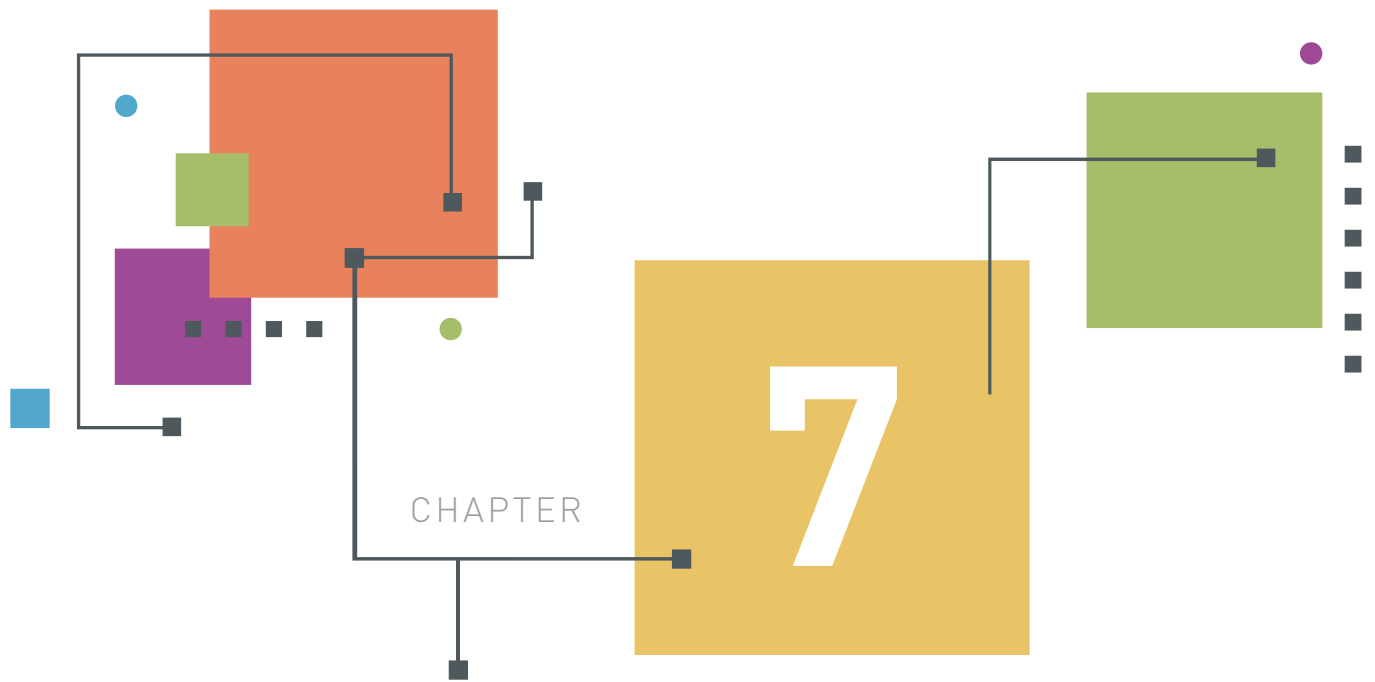
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some cost, though, as Clinton voters are at least as polarized in terms of their disapproval of Trump. Furthermore, the attacks against the media have further divided Republicans and Democrats.

A July 2017 NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist poll showed that 91% of Republicans trusted the media either not much or not at all, whereas 56% of Democrats trusted media a good amount or a great deal (Taylor 2017, July 3).

What Trump has done through his paranoid style is to attract a significant loyal base of people who believe that Trump is leading a charge to restore America to the way it was before—when it was great, and when it was winning—but is being hampered by a “deep state.” In addition, although there is no evidence of such a conspiracy, the media reports demonstrating that fact are ignored because it is “fake news.”

Thus, Trump has crafted a stunningly effective strategy to mobilize his electoral base. No matter how wild his claims, Trump’s base stubbornly believes him. That base also rejects any attempt to criticize “their” president, agreeing with Trump that it is a deep state conspiracy to subvert a democratically elected president. Unfortunately, it may be Trump himself who is distorting democracy in the process.



FAKE NEWS

THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



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The Psychology of Climate Change
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THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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Excerpted from *The Psychology of Climate Change*

The year 2017 was in many ways critical for climate change and for us all. On January 20, Donald J. Trump, considered to be a climate change denier, was elected the 45th president of the United States, and later that year, the Fourth National Climate Assessment Report was published by the US Global Change Research Program. Two monumental events for the 'debate' on climate change. Trump said that he would cancel the Paris Climate Agreement within 100 days of taking office; he signed an executive order in March 2017 that reversed the Clean Power Plan that required states to regulate power plants; he described anthropogenic climate change as 'a hoax'.

The Fourth National Climate Assessment Report was yet another report that bolstered the scientific consensus on climate change, but this one was 'the authoritative assessment of the science of climate change,' with a focus on the *United States*. The fact that the focus was the United States was very important. One major psychological issue with climate change is that it is often perceived to be primarily about *other* places and *other* times, and not of direct concern to us living in the here and now. The belief is that it will affect more distant locations (sometimes called 'spatial bias') and not our own, and that it will affect future generations rather than this one (this is called 'temporal bias'). Indeed, in one recent research study, the present authors (Beattie et al, 2017) found that although people (students and employees of a university) thought that they had a 48.1% probability of being *personally* affected by climate change (in other words, the chances are against it), they thought *other people* had a 65.3% probability of being affected by climate change (in other words, the chances are for it). The respondents also reckoned that 82.8% of future generations would be affected (they're really going to get it – probabilistically speaking).

Large sections of the population of the United States seem to assume that they will be immune to the whims of climate change (if it exists at all), and Donald Trump, in his election campaign, tapped into these beliefs, reinforced them and led them. They seem to believe that it doesn't really concern them (except perhaps in terms of what they might have to pay in the light of the Paris Climate Agreement). Many, including the new president himself, described it as a 'hoax,' and this message played very well in his campaign in those states which had been decimated by the decline of the coal industry. He tweeted on November 1, 2012, 'Let's continue to destroy the competitiveness of our factories & manufacturing so we can fight mythical global warming. China is so happy!,' and on February 15, 2015, he tweeted, 'Record low temperatures and massive amounts of snow. Where the hell is GLOBAL WARMING?'



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'Where the hell is global warming when you need it?' became a recurrent slogan (from a tweet from Donald Trump on May 14, 2013). Perhaps the man on the bus had seen the tweets; perhaps he didn't need to.

'Right here, right now,' was the answer from the Fourth National Climate Assessment Report. This report read:

Global annually averaged surface air temperature has increased by about 1.8° F (1.0° C) over the last 115 years (1901–2016). This period is now the warmest in the history of modern civilisation ... it is extremely likely that human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century ... in addition to warming, many other aspects of global climate are changing, primarily in response to human activities. Thousands of studies conducted by researchers from around the world have documented changes in surface, atmospheric and oceanic temperatures; melting glaciers; diminishing snow cover; shrinking sea ice; rising sea levels; ocean acidification; and increasing atmospheric water vapor.

(USGCRP, 2017: 10)

The upshot of these changes for the United States are well documented in the report; it explains how there has been an increase in extreme weather events with heavy rainfall increasing in intensity and frequency, a higher frequency of heatwaves, an increase in the frequency of large forest fires in the western United States in Alaska and reduced snowpack affecting water resources in the western United States. The report warns that 'assuming no change to current water resources management, chronic, long-duration hydrological drought is increasingly possible before the end of this century.'

This is a balanced and authoritative scientific assessment, but science, of course, works on the principles of scientific testing and prediction and probability. Very few things in life are actually certain. So the report says, 'It is *extremely likely* that human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.' Science is based on probabilities, and the report, therefore, goes to the trouble of explaining these key probabilistic terms with a glossary. They explain that 'likelihood' is the 'chance of occurrence of an effect or impact based on measures of uncertainty expressed probabilistically.' They also explain that 'extremely likely' means that it has a 95%–100% chance of occurring.



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Scientists understand the full significance of this. But, of course, critics, cynics, extreme optimists, those with a vested interest, the president of the United States (at this time in our history) seize on these probabilistic terms. 'It's not certain,' they say. 'Why should we change our behaviour, our values, our culture, our economic position in the world for something that is just *likely*? Okay, extremely likely. This doesn't mean that it's going to happen *for sure*. If we change our coal and oil industries, I'll tell you what, we're going to surrender our economic position to China, and that is *for sure*.' The year 2017 was a year of non-science, and 'fake news' and discussions that weren't.

Towards the close of the year, things started heating up. President Trump was on vacation, again, at his Mar-a-Lago resort in West Palm Beach, Florida, for an 11-day Christmas break. The sun was shining. They don't call it the Sunshine State for nothing. On the first morning of his vacation, he was predictably enough back on his own golf course. It seems that this was his 85th day on a golf course since becoming president, according to NBC News. Whilst the rest of the world was worrying about the ongoing nuclear stand-off with North Korea's Kim Jong-un and President Trump's recent boasts about the size of his nuclear button ('I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!'), the president reassured us that he would be 'working very hard' on preparing a 2018 agenda that would include both infrastructure plans to 'Make America Great' again and unspecified 'actions' against North Korea. 'I'll be working very hard,' he said again. We were urged not to worry by this 'stable genius' of a president, as he was soon to describe himself – a stable genius who had everything under control.

CONSISTENCY AND INCONSISTENCY

But consistency, of course, was never his strong point. In October 2014, President Trump tweeted: 'Can you believe that, with all of the problems and difficulties facing the US, President Obama spent the day playing golf.' Before entering the White House, at a campaign rally, he assured the American people that 'I'm going to be working for you, I'm not going to have time to go play golf.' But that was then. He played three times as much golf as his predecessor Barack Obama and that other great golfing president George W. Bush, who stopped playing altogether in 2003 in response to widespread criticism about his conspicuous leisure time during the Iraq War. President Trump enjoyed the golf in the bright sunshine with a few golfing pros and the odd senator. Perfect. The weather did everything that was expected of it that Christmas and New Year. And not just in Florida. A cold snap hit the north-east coast



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of the United States. Dogs froze to death in their kennels. Could life get any better for Donald J. Trump?

'In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year's Eve on record. Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but not other countries, was going to pay TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against. Bundle up!' he tweeted gleefully on the December 28.

Trump had always been a climate change denier, although 'always,' again, is a relative term here. In 2009, he was a signatory on an open letter which had been addressed to President Obama and published in the *New York Times* that encouraged positive governmental action on climate change. But his subsequent climate change denial was a big part of his 'Make America Great' campaign. Climate change was a Chinese conspiracy to damage American industry. It was a total hoax- fake news. The message played well to the masses, particularly in those states whose heavy industry had been most affected by foreign competition. In December 2017, the Trump administration dropped climate change from a list of global threats in the new national security strategy that the president unveiled. Then the cold snap occurred. Just look at the news to see what happening in the north-east states of the great USA, he was saying.

And then it just got a whole lot better. In the New Year, Florida had its first snowfall in nearly three decades. Frozen iguanas were dropping from the trees. Homeowners in the Sunshine State were warned to leave them alone until they defrosted. One could even imagine Trump sticking a picture of a frozen iguana on his laptop. The most powerful man in the world had evidence that climate change was a total hoax. That iguana did it for him. You can't fake a frozen iguana. When you have to defrost iguanas in Florida, that tells you all you need to know about global warming, he perhaps thought.

President Trump seems to have inconsistent views on climate change (and inconsistent views on so much else besides) and is prone to serious conceptual confusions – for example, about the difference between 'climate' (the bigger picture across time) and 'weather' (the smaller, more localised picture, with a whole series of fluctuations and changes). On November 1, 2011, he tweeted 'It snowed over 4 inches this past weekend in New York City. It is still October. So much for Global Warming.' Indeed, he is so confused on this most basic issue that Kendra Pierre-Louis, writing in the *New York Times* on December 28, 2017, thought it necessary to offer him an analogy in terms that he might understand. She wrote,



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Weather is how much money you have in your pocket today, whereas climate is your net worth. A billionaire who has forgotten his wallet one day is not poor, any more than a poor person who lands a windfall of several hundred dollars is suddenly rich. What matters is what happens over the long term.

Trump on his golf course without his wallet was still the billionaire he always was, and the drinks for his buddies were still on him.

In her *New York Times* piece, Pierre-Louis moved from bulging wallets to melting snowmen and explained to the president and others who were also reassured by the cold snap that

“while climate scientists expect that the world could warm, on average, roughly 2 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century – depending on how quickly greenhouse-gas emissions rise – they don’t expect that to mean the end of winter altogether. Record low temperatures will still occur; they’ll just become rarer over time.”

There will always be snowmen, she was saying; they’ll just be rarer.

But, of course, there may be more to the psychology of climate change, and climate change denial in particular, than mere political (or financial) expediency, and some basic conceptual confusions about weather and climate, including personality. President Trump, of course, has a very distinctive personality. Many have commented on this. Indeed, so distinctive that 60,000 mental health professionals, including prominent members of the American Psychological Association, broke with tradition (and the ethical rules governing their profession) to offer a clinical diagnosis of the president. He clearly appears to be highly egocentric and narcissistic, a man who routinely attempts to gain personal advantage in the micro-politics of everyday interaction. He has even managed to turn the handshake – a universal symbol of equality and cooperation which dates back at least as far as Ancient Greece – into something competitive and self-serving. His ‘clasp-and-yank’ handshake has taken many of its recipients by surprise (Beattie 2016). But he’s not just an egocentric narcissist, extremely sensitive to any criticism or apparent snub, who tries to gain an advantage in all aspects of life; he is also undoubtedly an optimist, as are many successful entrepreneurs (see Beattie 2017). Indeed, Crane and Crane (2007) identified ‘optimism’ and ‘work ethic’ as the two most important characteristics that distinguish



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successful entrepreneurs. Of the two, optimism was the more important. Optimists tend to look on the bright side of life, but from a psychological point of view, the most important thing about optimists is that they take credit for the good things that happen to them in their lives but don't blame themselves for the bad things that occur. They seem to think intuitively that the negative things in life tend to be the result of many factors (other people, the situation, the time of day, the economy), and they make their attribution accordingly. They are not so analytic, or thoughtful, when it comes to the positive events they encounter ('Of course, the project was successful. I was in charge!'). They think that good things are just around the corner and as a consequence tend to be very resilient. Optimists bounce back after failure. It may be recalled that Trump declared himself bankrupt four times before achieving billionaire status.

This all seems very positive, and Martin Seligman in *Authentic Happiness* has argued that optimism is very important for health and well-being. But there is always the danger of being overly optimistic, of thinking naively that everything will be okay in the end, of not seeing the warning signs about the economy, world terrorism or climate change, as the American author Barbara Ehrenreich noted in her book *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. This over optimism may well influence how Donald Trump processes information, as we will see in Chapter 4, and is particularly important for how he might attend to and process bad news, such as the scientific consensus on climate change. By analysing dispositional optimists (such as Donald Trump), we may learn a great deal about the role of cognitive biases in the development of people's views on climate change.

We have already mentioned the apparent vacillation of Trump on climate change, but it is a particular sort of vacillation with two mutually contradictory viewpoints held with apparent equal force and conviction. But which statement or action represents his real *underlying* attitude to climate change and which is said for political effect? Was it his attack on Obama in the case of the pro-climate change letter to the *New York Times* – does he really deep down inside believe in climate change? Or was his labelling of climate change as 'a hoax' indicative of his genuine belief? Can we, in fact, distinguish expressed and consciously held attitudes from something that runs a bit deeper like implicit and unconscious attitudes that are not readily available to introspection? Do underlying implicit attitudes actually exist? And if they do, how can we measure them? How important might these be to the discourses of climate change and to our everyday behaviour?

Some of these considerations might help us uncover and explain aspects of the psychology of climate change and that curious state of affairs where the great



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climate scientists of the world are jumping up and down and warning of an approaching apocalypse whilst huge swathes of the population stay calm, relaxed and sanguine in their thinking and approach.

Donald Trump is an odd sort of president, and one day, we will surely look back and wonder how his transformation into the most important person on the planet could ever have happened. But he is an odd president at a critical and dangerous time for us all, both in terms of world events (North Korea, Iran, Israel, Russia) and climate change. He keeps repeating the same messages over and over again – ‘Crooked Hillary,’ ‘Lock Her Up,’ ‘Fake News,’ ‘Total Hoax’ – based on that simple advertising proposition of repetition, repetition, repetition. And (if the truth be told) it is sometimes hard not to look at an image of Hillary Clinton without that repetitively associated word ‘crooked’ popping into our heads. So it might well be in the future with ‘climate change’ and ‘hoax.’ That is a major fear.

We can learn a lot from Donald Trump about expressed attitudes and implicit attitudes, about conceptual confusions, about cognitive biases, about over-optimism, about associative networks that operate below the level of consciousness, about repetition and the mind, about the role of images in thinking, about communication and conflicted thoughts, about psychological flaws that we need to correct. That is why we have used Donald Trump as a peg for this little book on the psychology of climate change. A peg, after all, is a very vivid image and, to our minds, preferable to a dead iguana, at least in terms of its effect.

WORLDS APART

President Trump is also a good bookmark – a reminder that we all don’t think alike when it comes to climate change. There is clearly a great divide between scientists and the public generally on climate change, as we have seen. But there is an equally significant divide amongst the public themselves, between believers and non-believers, between Republicans and Democrats, between certain political parties in the United Kingdom, between the right-wing and left-wing press and between Donald Trump and Al Gore—the two great icons on each side of the climate change debate. Both Trump and Gore, it must be said, have used language hardly appropriate for building consensus and understanding amongst the public. Trump’s tweets speak for themselves, of course. Al Gore, unfortunately, has used equally inflammatory language. In a 2011 *Rolling Stone* interview, the former Vice President said, ‘In one corner of the ring are Science and Reason. In the other corner: Poisonous Polluters



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and Right-wing Ideologues.’ This is hardly the kind of language we need to bridge this cultural divide and promote a shared understanding.

There are clearly deeply held cultural, political and religious beliefs that divide the two groups. It’s not *just* a question of science and scientific knowledge. This point was recently made by Stephen Pinker in conversation with Bill Gates who said,

One of the biggest enemies of reason is tribalism. When people subscribe to an ideology, they suck up evidence that supports their preconceptions and filter out evidence that goes against them. Contrary to the belief of most scientists that denial of climate change is an effect of scientific illiteracy, it is not at all correlated with scientific literacy. People who believe in man-made climate change don’t know any more about climate or science than those who deny it. It’s almost perfectly correlated with left-wing versus right-wing orientation. And a move towards greater rationality would unbundle them and let evidence inform what the optimal policies ought to be.

(Reported in the *New York Times* January 27, 2018).

The statistics on this divide fuelled by ideological position are striking. Andrew Hoffman in his book *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate* reports that in 1997, 47% of Republicans and 46% of Democrats thought that climate change was already happening, in other words virtually identical percentages. By 2008, the figures had diverged dramatically, with fewer Republicans holding this view (down to 41%) but with far more Democrats than previously expressing this position (up to 76%). By 2013, the respective figures were further apart still: 50% and 88%, respectively. Hoffman says that the cause of this polarisation on ideological grounds after 1997 was the Kyoto Protocol, which was the first international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions which was supported by the Clinton administration. Media attention on the political and economic implications of climate change rose dramatically in the years following. McCright and Dunlap (2011) reported that there were 166 documents critical of the science of climate change in 1997 alone. One hundred and seven climate change denial books

were published between 1989 and 2010. Most of these, according to Hoffman, were linked to conservative think tanks, and somewhat tellingly, 90% did not go through a peer-review process (the very bedrock of science itself).



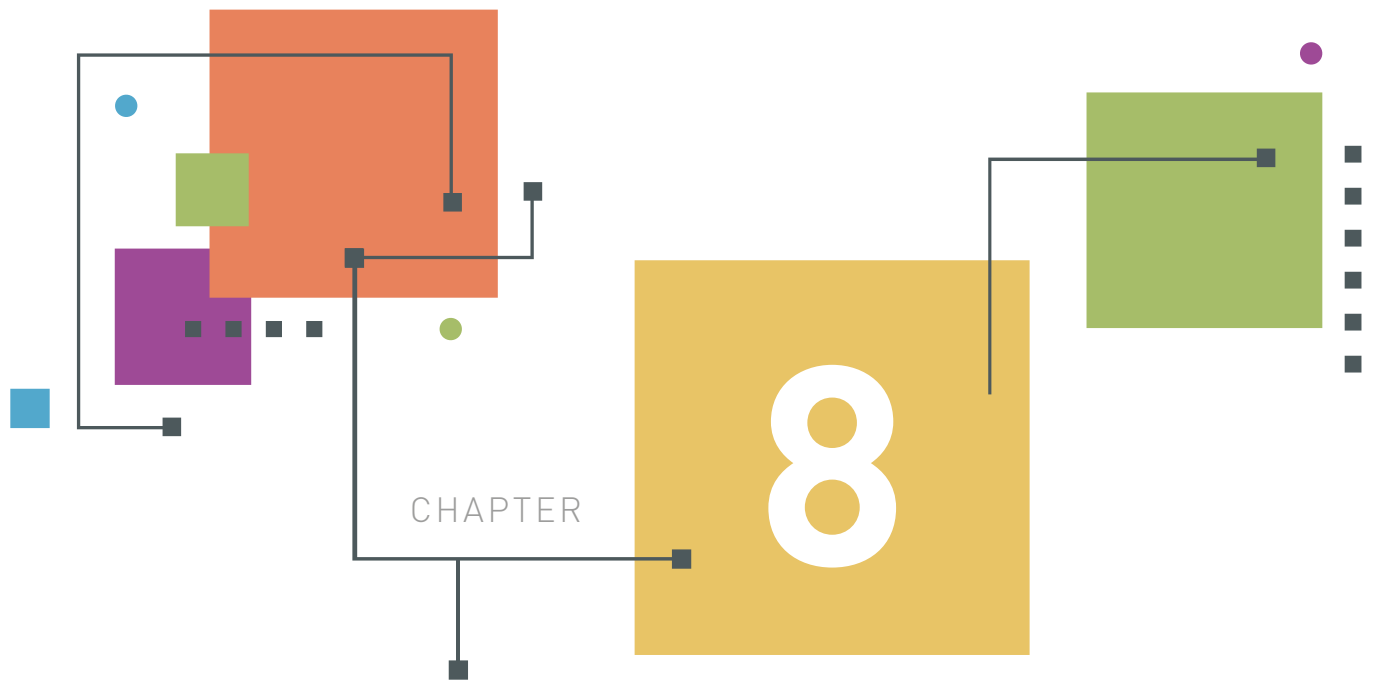
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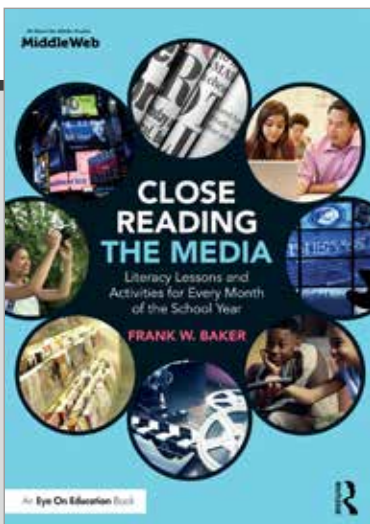
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Hoffman's book reminds us of the complexity of this whole issue and how economic (and political) factors and psychology are intimately connected, and that psychology, of course, is part of the world and not separate from it. The Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions had major implications for the energy sector and industry in the United States, and a counter-campaign was mounted. This brings us into murkier waters where we will swim in Chapter 6 when we consider how the science linking smoking and cancer, and linking human activity and climate change were both turned into 'scientific debates,' which allowed both viewpoints to flourish and stay literally worlds apart.



STUDENTS NEED HELP DETECTING FAKE NEWS



This chapter is excerpted from
*Close Reading the Media:
Literacy Lessons and Activities for Every Month
of the School Year*

By Frank W. Baker

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STUDENTS NEED HELP DETECTING FAKE NEWS

Frank Baker

Excerpted from *Close Reading the Media*

BACKGROUND

Fake news. Alternate facts. Click bait. Parodies posing as real journalism. Today, media consumers are being routinely exposed to *deliberately* manipulated headlines in the news. And while some will argue that false or exaggerated new stories are as old as journalism itself, today's instant communication tools – email, blogging, and social media like Facebook, Twitter and SnapChat – make it possible to compose, publish, and sway mass opinion in the time it once took to ink a press.

And lots of us are fooled, including our students, because we don't stop and question the source of the information. All too often we're anxious to forward "news" and we click before making sure that the news isn't wrong or deceptive.

In a speech in Germany, shortly after the 2016 U.S. general election, President Obama said:

If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not, and particularly in an age of social media when so many people are getting their information in sound bites and off their phones, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems.

THE RISE OF "FAKE NEWS"

The discussion about "fake news" intensified in the weeks before and after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, including a disputed BuzzFeed report suggesting that fake political news dominated real news in social media during the campaign. Other articles told stories of fake-news creators in foreign countries attempting to influence the U.S. election.

One former fake-news producer in the U.S., Paul Horner, claimed to the *Washington Post* that he had "unintentionally" swayed the election by creating fake stories that appeared to be coming from major media companies, such as ABC and CNN, and disseminating them across Facebook. Examples included stories saying "that Obama was invalidating the election results and banning the national anthem at sporting events."

"Honestly, people are definitely dumber," Horner told the *Post*. "They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore ... It's real scary. I've never seen anything like it." (www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/11/17/purveyor_of_fake_news_says_he_targeted_trump_supporters_influenced_election.html.)



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A January 2017 report from a pair of researchers at Stanford and New York University seemed to validate another Horner assertion that once individuals pledged to a candidate or cause, they become more susceptible to deceptive news reports that confirm their allegiance.

The two economists jointly surveyed a sample of Americans to measure the effects of fake news (some of which they made up themselves). A *New York Times* article describing the study summed up the findings: “People’s hunger for information that suits their prejudices is powerful, and in the digital media age, a pile of it emerges to satisfy that demand.” (www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/upshot/researchers-created-fake-news-heres-what-they-found.html; Study: <http://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>.)

Following the 2016 election, as critics began lambasting social media companies for allowing the circulation of fake-news attacks, both Google and Facebook announced plans to crack down on the sources. But a story in *Fortune* magazine questioned whether the problem was fixable, given First Amendment issues and a human tendency to share “what we want to believe.” (<http://fortune.com/2016/11/17/fake-news-problem>.)

LOOKING BEYOND FAKE POLITICAL STORIES

“Click bait” is a phrase now being used for news stories that are designed to get you to read them, even though they may be outrageous in their claims.

While some fake-news purveyors may have a political purpose, quite often the goal is simply to deliver you (and, by implication, your students) to their advertisers. We can see constant examples of what’s called “native advertising” as we trawl websites each day – including some of the most prestigious news and information platforms. Click on a headline and you’re suddenly reading a newsy-sounding story pitching a product – or you’re staring at display ads tailored to your known interests (determined by tracking software on your device) – or both.

At the sites of CNN, the *New York Times*, and other more-trusted online sources, it’s true that the headlines may appear in an area marked “Paid Content.” But how discerning are students about these distinctions?

In a 2016 study, Stanford Graduate School of Education professor Sam Wineburg found that “82 percent of middle school students could not distinguish between a



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native ad sponsored content and a real news story.” (<http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2016/11/22/teens-vulnerable-to-fake-digital-news-stories>.)

ACTIVITY: SORTING OUT REAL NEWS FROM FAKE NEWS

If I were addressing this problem in a 21st-century classroom, I think I would start by asking students: *what is news and who delivers it?* Can your students distinguish between purposeful, legitimate news and the other stuff out there? This seems a good place to start.

- Ask students to bring two examples to class – a story they believe is real news and a story they believe is fake. They may find them in news- papers and magazines or print them from the Internet. Make two piles and choose several examples (three might be good) from each category for class exploration. Research your choices in advance so you know the real facts about each.
- Mix the examples you’ve selected and project them one at a time, with- out indicating which pile they originated from. Have students, through polling or a show of hands, indicate “fake” or “real” for each example.
- Return to the first example and have students (as a whole or in small groups) consider the following critical thinking questions, drawn from the work of media literacy educators and organizations:
 - At a glance, does the headline or story seem believable or not so believable?
 - Who created the message? (author, producer)
 - Who is the message intended for? (audience, demographic)
 - What techniques does the producer use to make the message credible or believable?
 - What details might be omitted and why?
 - Where might we go to check the accuracy of this information?
- Students might then work in groups. Assign each group a story and have them use the Internet in an attempt to authenticate the story using the guiding questions. Or teachers (prepared in advance) might reveal facts about each story’s credibility in a general discussion. The activity might end with reactions from students who selected the particular stories that were studied. Were they fooled?



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DECIPHERING WHAT'S TRUE OR NOT IS HARDER THAN EVER

With social media's popularity as a news source, it's more important than ever that we equip students with the media literacy/critical thinking skills to distinguish fact from fiction. Admittedly, it's a challenging task. But our civil society depends on a well-informed citizenry – including tomorrow's voters.

PRIMARY RESOURCES

- I highly recommend that teachers explore this *New York Times* Learning Network article (January 19, 2017) sharing many lesson ideas and resources: "Evaluating Sources in a 'Post-Truth' World: Ideas for Teaching and Learning About Fake News." www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/learning/lesson-plans/evaluating-sources-in-a-post-truth-world-ideas-for-teaching-and-learning-about-fake-news.html.
- *A Finder's Guide To Facts*, written by NPR's Steve Inskeep, provides a series of questions students can ask to determine if a news story is fake: <http://npr/2gtmrP8>.
- *How to Spot Fake News* offers a detailed discussion by the editors of the non-profit FactCheck.org: <http://bit.ly/2tBi5uD>.
- Organizations such as the Center for Media Literacy, The News Literacy Project, and the National Association of Media Literacy Education can provide guidance and more ideas about ways to evaluate truthfulness and accuracy, including lesson plans.
- Another helpful resource is the 2016 Stanford History Education Group study, *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*, which includes examples of student tasks that were used to gauge the online reasoning capacity of nearly 8,000 diverse students: <http://stanford.io/2gkkfXe>.
- This account by a high school teacher describing his "fake news" lesson points out some of the nuances of approaching this topic: <http://bit.ly/2Sbuqzmz>.

The Stanford Study has a helpful task in which students are asked to analyse the home page of Slate.com to determine what is news, and what is an ad, etc/ You can use it or create your own version with a different site. <http://frankwbaker.com/mlc/standford-fake-news-study>.



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USE FACT-CHECKING WEBSITES

If you and your students doubt what you're reading is legitimate, there are now some excellent go-to websites that are reliable and trustworthy. These fact-checking websites are particularly useful in investigating politicians during speeches, interviews, and in social media and advertising:

- FactCheck.org is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.
- The *Washington Post* Fact Checker examines statements and policy and politics for veracity and applies the Pinocchio Test to assign levels of accuracy: www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker.
- Politifact.com from the *Tampa Bay Times* won a 2009 Pulitzer Prize for its work. It now supports state-level sites and a sister site PunditFact.com, which checks up on TV commentators. Both sites use the Truth-O-Meter to rate statements on a scale from True to "Pants on Fire" (Lie).
- Snopes.com has been fact-checking fake news, social media gossip, urban legends, and false claims since the early days of the public Internet (1995).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT "NATIVE" ADVERTISING

South Park Lampoon of Native Advertising Highlights Important Issues:
<http://adage.com/article/digitalnext/south-park-lampoon-native-advertising-highlights-issues/302756>

FTC Says Native Ads Must Carry Clear Disclosures:
www.mediapost.com/publications/article/265362/ftc-says-native-ads-must-carry-clear-disclosures.html

What Are the Implications of Ads that Know Our Search Histories?
<http://theatlantic.com/2tmUy10>